

DAVID HOFFMAN MOMA HISTORY INTERVIEWS

INTERVIEW WITH: GRACE M. MAYER (GM)¹
INTERVIEWERS: CARL COLBY (CC); HARVEY ARDMAN (HA)
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CC: Modern photography, et cetera, though that would be part of it. And almost the story from the inside out, telling the beginning 10 years and then working our way up chronologically as to what the Museum represented at that time.

GM: Apparently a fad; it was entirely different from the corporate entity that it is today.

HA: Yes, that's right.

GM: I mean, you have no idea how different it was. For instance, I put on an exhibition [[Steichen: The Photographer](#)] with René d'Harnoncourt, and the day it opened, arrived a large bunch of yellow roses with his card in his own handwriting. In other words, he didn't say to the secretary, "Get something for this woman." He went out and he bought the yellow roses and he wrote, "Hurrah, Love, René." And that couldn't happen today, you see.

CC: What about the selection of shows and that sort of thing? How did that happen?

GM: There were meetings, just as there are now.

CC: Was it more adventurous, in a sense?

GM: I think so.

CC: Why? Because people weren't—?

GM: People weren't as aware. As a matter of fact, when I first came to work in a museum, which was at The Museum of the City of New York, you could shoot a cannonball down the main gallery and not touch anyone. Now you can hardly

¹ Also present is an unidentified woman (W).

edge your way into any institution. The Metropolitan on Sunday is like the subway crush.

HA: That's right.

CC: Is it, culture in general wasn't all that popular? People weren't all that cognizant of it?

GM: They certainly didn't go to museums the way they do now.

HA: When did you begin work here in the Museum?

GM: Here?

HA: Yes.

GM: I came down temporarily in 1957, and then came in '58.

HA: I don't mean to this office, I mean into the Museum itself.

GM: Yes. Oh, this office, I've only been in, thank god, for two months.

CC: What about your first visits to the Museum itself?

GM: I was thrilled.

CC: When you first came—

GM: Well, it was in the Heckscher building at that time.

HA: You visited the shows in the Heckscher building?

GM: Yes.

CC: What was the attitude about those shows then, among your friends and—?

GM: Oh, everyone thought it was terribly exciting, very thrilling, and it was very much the in thing to do, just as it is today.

HA: So if you came in '57, then you were two years after [*The Family of Man*](#) exhibit.

GM: Yes.

HA: I see.

GM: I wish I had been here for *Family of Man*.

HA: Yes.

GM: As a matter of fact, there's one photograph of [Edward] Steichen lying prone and he always said to me, "I wouldn't have been that tired if you had been with me," [laughter] which I considered quite a compliment.

CC: What about photography in general? Was it a pretty upward road at that time in order to establish photography to look at as an art?

GM: Well, of course, Steichen was one of the people who originally fostered that in the days of the Photo-Secessionists as long ago as that.

CC: The photo?

GM: The Photo-Secession, which was [Alfred] Stieglitz's organization.

CC: I see.

GM: And it was Steichen who introduced modern art to this country, so particularly appropriate that he should have been here. He introduced [Henri] Matisse, [Constantin] Brancusi, [Paul] Cezanne, [Pablo] Picasso, all those people, to Stieglitz, who in turn presented them, which was courageous on his part.

CC: You mean Steichen introduced the men, the people?

GM: Yes.

CC: Not the paintings, the people?

GM: Well, the people didn't come here, mostly, it was their work, which Steichen, being in France, you see, saw there. And it included Americans like John Marin and so on.

CC: What was your impression of [Alfred] Barr when you first met him?

GM: I thought he was one of the most awesome and magnificent human beings I've ever known. I still think so. [Laughter]

CC: What was it that—? If you were to describe him more fully, how would you? What was it about him in particular; his intelligence? His perception?

GM: It was a presence.

- HA: You mean he was kind of a larger-than-life character or there was some kind of aura about him?
- GM: No, he was very modest and retiring, but it came through. You knew you were in the presence of greatness. Of course, with René d'Harnoncourt, he was six seven and he was as big as he was big.
- HA: Right. To talk about Barr a little bit more, on a personal basis, what was he like? I mean, what sort of person was this?
- GM: Entirely wonderful. Once I got something in my eye, and the doctor put a patch on it. And Alfred passed me in the street and he stopped and almost cried. And I said, "Well, it's only temporary; it'll be gone by tomorrow." And the next day, he says, "How is your eye?" So I mean, there was a great personal rapport.
- CC: Did you feel at the time of the Heckscher building when the exhibits were being put up, was it really an enclave in that time? There really were very few other places to see those pictures? Or were there a number of galleries, et cetera, that you could see?
- GM: There were a lot of galleries like Macbeth, which was the first gallery for American art, and of course, [INAUDIBLE: 0:05:55], and there was Seligmann, and so on.
- CC: So were there a lot of places to see the pictures?
- GM: There were galleries, but they were all pretty empty. At that time I knew Howard Devree, who was the art critic on the *Times*. And he used to take me on Saturdays to these various shows and try to educate me. It was very necessary, because I don't think I knew the difference between an oil painting and a photograph at that time. [Laughter] Maybe I still don't.
- HA: That sounds very unlikely to me.
- CC: Do you think it took some time for people to be acclimated to the Museum and what it was doing? Or were people pretty accepting quickly?
- GM: My parents' generation, for instance, hadn't any idea what was going on. They would have been absolutely lost in an exhibition like that. They were used to going to the Metropolitan, seeing the Egyptian wing, you know, that sort of thing.

HA: Mm-hm.

CC: So suddenly here were all these more modern pictures and—

GM: Yes, which meant nothing to them.

CC: Was it thought of as something—a real break from the past? Or just a continuity of what you'd seen before? I mean, did people attempt to bridge the two, or was it? It was more than a protest. I mean, in other words, why they would accept modern art, what was intriguing about it?

GM: Well, after all, the Photo-Secession had a gallery known as 291, and it was at 291 that all these things were happening in the early 1900s. It was 1908 that they started introducing the European talent.

CC: So there was a small group of people who knew, and then it just got gradually—?

GM: Like Mrs. [Agnes Ernst] Eugene Meyer. They were married in 1910 and she had been known as “the girl from the sun” prior to that time because she worked on the *Sun* newspaper and because she was so beautiful.

HA: That's a pretty nice nickname.

CC: What about the press, the attitude of the newspapers, et cetera? Were they pretty accepting at the time, or was there a lot of scuffling between—?

GM: There were some awfully good critics who accepted things.

CC: Mm-hm, Henry McBride; someone like that?

GM: Yes, well, he was wonderful.

CC: His quotes that I've read are very good. He seemed to be quite supportive of what was going on.

GM: Elisabeth Luther Cary on the *Times*.

HA: What about Steichen? What kind of a man was Steichen?

GM: The most tremendous personality I've ever met.

HA: How so? Could you describe him for me? I don't know.

GM: Well, he was six two and he was majestic, and before he grew a beard he looked like Abraham Lincoln. When he grew a beard, he looked like Michelangelo's *Moses*.

CC: I've seen the picture of him with the beard.

HA: He's very impressive with the beard.

GM: He grew the beard after his wife died, you see, his second wife, so that people wouldn't come up to him in the street and say, "Oh you poor man," and so on.

HA: What was he like to work with?

GM: Magnificent. I remember his daughters said, "Don't let him wear you out." And I thought, how could he wear me out? I soon found that they were quite right, entirely possible. He was utterly unbelievable, as far as work was concerned. Nothing was too much. He would go all day long without any food, without any rest, without stopping for a moment, and into the night.

CC: Was he more interested in getting the better pictures from the past, or was he busy cataloguing and getting pictures of the present more; or was it everything?

GM: Well, I think that he anticipated the future. For instance, the first time he saw a Jackson Pollock, when everyone said the man was dripping paint all over the canvas, he said, "My god, what fury!" I mean, he recognized it immediately.

HA: So he had a vision.

GM: Yes. And for instance, you know the "Museum Watch;" [[Wristwatch Face](#)] you've seen it.

HA: Mm-hm.

GM: Well, when that was brought to him on the drawing board, he immediately said, "That will be a great success." And he was right. And he never said, "I told you so." [Laughter]

CC: Which is commendable.

GM: No, he never rubbed it in. One of the things he said that I thought was fascinating—let's see, how did he put that? Everybody is ignorant, but along different lines. [Laughter] Isn't that a wise thing? Because I said, "How can

anyone be that stupid?" and that was his answer. And he could always come up with that type of reply.

HA: He had these epigrams, evidently, little sayings that he'd come up with.

GM: Yes.

CC: In your own ranking of things or if you had a little pantheon of people that you consider key for the Museum and its creation, its birth, besides Barr and Steichen, would you name anyone else who you consider?

GM: René d'Harnoncourt. And Monroe Wheeler. That was really a fantastic group.

CC: Combination of talents.

GM: Yes, and they worked together so beautifully.

HA: They liked each other?

GM: They loved each other.

HA: Did they also like each other?

GM: Yes, and they respected one another, and it was perfectly beautiful. It was Camelot; I mean, it really was.

HA: Do you think Camelot is gone now? Is the current Museum so different from that?

GM: Yes, to me.

HA: How would you compare today's Museum with the one you're talking about, with the Camelot you knew?

GM: Well, it's much colder today.

HA: Is that because of size, or what?

GM: Yes, it probably has something to do with it. After all, there was a time when you could see the whole Museum at once. You'll never be able to do that again. Do you think so?

HA: And so now the staff is much larger than it was, and a lot of people don't know each other.

GM: Oh, well, there were times when René was with us when the staff got to almost 400. What is it now? Do you know?

W: I know it's probably hovering around 500, give or take.

GM: René knew when the carpenter's boy had measles. You know?

HA: So it was very personal in those days.

GM: Yes.

HA: In a way that it's not today. Well, are there things about the Museum today that are improvements over the way it was? Long silence. [Laughter]

GM: That's a difficult question to answer. Comparisons are odious. [HA laughs] Of course it has an international standing today, but it did then, too.

CC: I guess it was very ripe for its time though, too, in terms of the acceptance of people and people wanting to go to a place like that, to the Museum.

GM: Yes.

HA: In your day, would you say that the Museum was an adventurous place?

GM: Yes, very.

HA: Was there a lot of risk taking?

GM: Very. For instance, you know [Tony] Schwartz, the sound man?

HA: Yes.

GM: Well, after all, Steichen gave him [an evening](#) here, and everybody thought that that was very outré to have an evening for someone who made sounds like dripping water and so on.

HA: His daughter [Michaela "Kayla" Schwartz-Burridge] is an intern upstairs right now, Tony Schwartz's daughter.

GM: Oh, really?

HA: Yes.

GM: I didn't know that.

HA: Yes, she's a—

GM: In which department? Yours?

HA: That's right. She's a college student now and she's helping us with the film.

GM: Well, I knew her when she was being wheeled around. [Laughter] Oh, I'd love to see her.

W: [INAUDIBLE: 0:14:30]

HA: Do you think the Museum is still adventurous?

GM: Yes, but not as adventurous, because everyone else has become more adventurous than they were then.

HA: Well then maybe the role of the Museum should be changing from what it was.

GM: Well of course it should. But for instance, things like [Jean] Tinguely and the machine eating itself [[*Homage to New York: A Self-Constructing and Self-Destroying Work of Art Conceived and Built by Jean Tinguely*](#)], I mean, that was considered absolutely far out. [Laughter] Today it would just be accepted as a normal thing.

HA: That's true. People are wracking their brains on how to be adventurous.

GM: They didn't have to wrack their brains then, because everything was new. [phone rings] Excuse me. It has to ring twice. [Tape break at 0:15:25] That was about a meeting with my favorite photographer, Harry Callahan.

CC: Oh, really? That's very impressive.

GM: Yes, another one of Steichen's discoveries. As was Paul Caponigro. I mean, all the men who are on top today, Steichen found. Robert Frank. *The Americans* was positively fantastic, when it came out. Steichen immediately saw that it was the greatest picture in the United States ever made by any photographer.

CC: A lot of the other photographers, they gave parts of their collection or part of their work to the Museum?

GM: Steichen used to buy them for five dollars apiece because that was what Stieglitz paid him in the early days. He thought he was robbing him, but it was sort of an accolade. And so Steichen continued that.

CC: So it was like a matter of honor, really.

GM: Yes.

CC: I mean, you're included in the collection.

GM: Lots of people never cashed the check; they framed it. [Laughter] Getting into the Museum was considered the top; you couldn't go much further.

CC: Was it tough, do you think, making photography acceptable to the general public to be looked upon as art, or was that coming along pretty easily? Did you find you had an easier road than let's say, the painting and sculpture people?

GM: No, I think painting and sculpture had an easier road than photography, as an art form.

CC: Mm-hm. You mean, you'd find people who were interested in the pictures, but not—?

GM: Photography is young, compared to the other arts. It only started around 1839.

HA: That's right. That was the title of the first big photography show, as I recall, *Photography from 1839 to 1939* [[Photography 1839–1937](#)].

GM: That was Beaumont Newhall's big show in the beginning, and it turned out that his history was based—it was based on his history.

CC: When did Steichen come along after [Beaumont] Newhall, then, exactly?

GM: Steichen came along right after the War in '47. And you see, Newhall was to be curator under him, and he didn't want to be under anyone, so Steichen got him the job at George Eastman House.

CC: Right.

GM: And Steichen stayed here until '62.

CC: What kind of shape was the collection in when Steichen first arrived? Were there many pictures here?

GM: It was beginning to be impressive.

HA: Newhall laid a good foundation?

GM: Excellent.

CC: And how would you say is the present, with the metaphorical door closed?
[John] Szarkowski and the present day, have they picked up the ball quite well from Steichen's period?

GM: Oh yes.

CC: So it's been a good transition through—?

GM: Yes.

HA: You're happy with what Photography has done here?

GM: Yes, very. After all, it leads the world in photography, I think.

CC: Are the shows that you even see, like the [Eugène] Atget show and others, are they shows that you think would please Steichen?

GM: Very much so. After all, he showed Atget when he first came, at an exhibition of Atget and Stieglitz [[Photography Recent Acquisitions: Stieglitz, Atget](#)].

CC: Mm-hm. So Steichen and since then, they've been quite accepting of most modes of photography, and it's really good taste that—?

GM: Well, Steichen accepted everything from photojournalism to abstract photography and back again. He had an abstract photography show [[Abstraction in Photography](#)] in the early 1950s.

CC: So in a way, the Museum, and Steichen particularly, was a champion for photography.

GM: Yes. And he started that role in the days of the Photo-Secession. And he and Stieglitz parted company in 1914, you see.

CC: Mm-hm. Could you tell us a little bit about—because we wouldn't want to start the story just cold. Put it this way. We know a bit about the Painting and Sculpture story and the Film story previous to the Museum involvement and the beginnings of that. But for Photography, would you say there was a germinating

influence in terms of Stieglitz and 291, and then it drew out of that into—? It began with Newhall. Where did he get his impetus? Let's put it that way. There was a very active 291 and Photo-Secession scene.

GM: Newhall believed in photography right through the whole thing, as did Steichen.

CC: If there were antecedents, put it that way, to Newhall and the Museum's participation in photography, what would they have been?

GM: That's a hard question to answer. We'll think about that for a long time.

CC: I don't mean historical, necessarily, but you had told me, for instance—

GM: My parents, for instance, would have said, "Sell me a photograph," because everybody thought they could photograph, you see. Not everybody could paint.

HA: But everybody could work a camera, though.

CC: That's what I meant about the easy feeling, yes.

GM: I've made one glorious contribution to photography; I've never made a photograph. [Laughter]

HA: You've never taken a picture yourself?

CC: Well that makes you a very good critic of everyone else's.

GM: Not even a snapshot.

HA: Have you purposely avoided doing this, or—?

GM: I have too much respect for the medium. [Laughter]

CC: That's good; that's really good. What I meant about the antecedents, though, were only in terms of, if they had to look someplace to begin things, they would have looked obviously to the Photo-Secessionists and—?

GM: Well, there was a great show in Germany in Stuttgart in 1929 called *Film und Foto*; you've probably heard of it. And of course, the greatest photographic show is, *Family of Man*, obviously.

CC: Mm-hm.

HA: What was the greatest show, the most remarkable photographic show that you participated in personally?

GM: I suppose possibly the FSA [Farm Security Administration] show [[The Bitter Years: 1935–1941](#)] that we had.

CC: The ones that included the Walker Evans pictures.

GM: Walker Evans and Dorothea Lange and so on.

CC: When was that show?

GM: Just before—around the time Steichen left, around '62, wasn't it?

CC: Uh-huh. It was a remarkable time because I met some photo enthusiasts and dealers here who had part of the collection—well, they have pictures from that period and they wanted to do a whole document, a whole book on FSA and all the pictures that were taken around that time. It was really extraordinary.

GM: Steichen did a small booklet on the FSA show, and it was very interesting because quite a few of the men came, you see, so that they hadn't seen each other since the days of the original thing, until they met at this salute to it. It was very touching.

HA: A very emotional time?

GM: Yes.

CC: The shows I would also have liked to have seen were the [Road to Victory](#) show and the *Power in the Pacific* [[Power in the Pacific: Battle Photographs of our Navy in Action on the Sea and in the Sky](#)].

GM: *Power in the Pacific*.

CC: That must have been incredible.

HA: I would think so.

GM: Well they were the first shows using the technique that Steichen used, making the photo that we show as an architectural entity

CC: Blow-ups and things.

GM: As well as something else.

CC: By blowing up the imagery?

GM: As he had done for *The Family of Man*.

HA: I see.

GM: [INAUDIBLE: 0:24:54], you see.

HA: Yes. Yes, that it was a logical combination of that.

GM: And it was entirely new.

CC: So in a way, they did for photography what Barr and the Painting people were doing for painting and sculpture in terms of placing, making catalogues for the exhibition, installing the show in a very brilliant way.

GM: Yes.

CC: Because Steichen is often mentioned in that way, as being a master of installation.

HA: Uh-huh. He developed new ideas and new techniques of installation.

CC: Well, we just wanted to say hello and meet you.

GM: It's really nice of you and thank you for coming.

CC: Well, thank you. You're giving us a lot of ideas.

GM: I hope that something came of it. [Phone rings]

CC: I think so.

HA: Something good. [Phone rings]

GM: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW at 0:24:53