

DAVID HOFFMAN MOMA HISTORY INTERVIEWS

INTERVIEW WITH: BEAUMONT NEWHALL (BN)
INTERVIEWER: CARL COLBY (CC)
LOCATION: BY TELEPHONE TO SANTA FE, NM
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BN: Alfred—we were very close to Alfred Barr, and Alfred recognized my interest in photography, both as a practicing photographer and a historian. And he just suddenly asked me if I'd like to—after I'd been there a year, a little less than a year, [he] asked if I'd like to do a photographic exhibition [[Photography 1839–1937](#)]. And they had a budget of \$5,000, and I could go abroad.

CC: Mm-hm.

BN: And it was just fantastic. And I asked him what kind of show do you want? And he said, that's up to you. That was very typical of Alfred. He had tremendous trust in his people that were brought before him, and challenge. He really challenged me, and I accepted the challenge to do the first big exhibition. Now, photography had already been shown.

CC: The history of photography.

BN: Well, not the history.

CC: No, but your first exhibition that you put together was the history of photography.

BN: Yes, well, it was no—a little misconception. It was historical in nature, but it was not—there were more contemporary photographs of—at least half as many contemporary photographs as photographs that previous generations had shown, but it was historical in nature, and the history part became the most popular.

CC: What did it—? How far back did it reach? Did it cover about 50 years at that time?

BN: No, it covered everything from 1837 up to 1937.

CC: So, it included pictures of the Civil War and French pictures and [Matthew B.] Brady and everyone?

BN: Oh yes, a lot before—I'll look at the catalog with this show; there's one in the department.

CC: What did you think of that? That was quite a bold move on your part.

BN: Well, I was young and I was bold, at the time. [Laughter] I wrote the whole book between Thanksgiving Day and St. Patrick's Day.

CC: God, he must have looked at you a little bit aghast when you said history of photography. But, as you say, he must have had great trust in you, though.

BN: He did; he did. He was an extraordinary man. If you haven't seen it, please read—

CC: I will.

BN: —the tribute to him.

CC: Oh, the memorial tribute. It's a terrific tribute. It's very—

BN: That expresses my feelings about it. He was *tremendously* important to me, and I guess, looking back, I was important to the Museum's approach.

CC: Mm-hm. Well, what about the relationship between yourself and Barr and someone like [Alfred] Stieglitz, for instance? He was active with his gallery [291], obviously, and other things quite early on. Did he look at you with a little bit of suspicion, or—?

BN: Well he thought I was out of my mind to attempt such a thing. I was, you know 21, or 26, 29 years old. He thought that I was still wet behind the ears, and so he wouldn't cooperate at all.

CC: He wouldn't. So he was sort of the grand master, but you pretty much shied away from him though? He wouldn't—?

BN: He just wouldn't cooperate. He wouldn't even let me borrow his photographs from other collections.

CC: Didn't he see the Museum though as a potentially great popularizer of photography and of the other arts? I mean, he was obviously quite interested in painting and sculpture also; he had that gallery early on and all.

BN: Oh dear, that's such a long story.

CC: Is it very competitive? Was it a competitive—?

BN: It was definitely competitive, he felt it was competitive. He felt that it was he who had really started modern interest in modern art in this country, which is true.

CC: Mm-hm.

BN: But he disliked the whole attitude of the Museum. He disliked the intense publicity that—

CC: Oh, I see; so suddenly these Young Turks were taking over the territory, and—?

BN: He disliked the patina of the fashionable world with cocktail parties and so forth.

CC: Mm-hm. When you applied for that library job, did you have a great faith in the institution? Or did you think, well, I'll give this a go? I mean, did this look to be a pretty terrific thing that was building?

BN: Okay, there's two aspects to that. I have to answer it in two ways. Number one, and the most important of all, is, I had lost—this is the depth of the depression. And my first job was up in Philadelphia at the Museum and I had lasted three months and they had no money to pay me. And my next job was at the Metropolitan. I had lasted 18 months when, for financial reasons it was suggested that I continue my studies. [Laughing] And I went back to Harvard to work for my PhD degree, and I was looking for jobs of course.

CC: Mm-hm.

BN: And a friend of mine, who I hope you will interview also, Henry Russell Hitchcock.

CC: Yes, we'd like to interview him.

BN: Yes, I hope he's up to it. But, at any rate, he told me, because he was close to the Museum, and he had done—guest curated, with Philip Johnson, the architectural show [[Modern Architecture: International Exhibition](#)]—

CC: Right.

BN: —which was very, very important. And he told me that they were looking for a librarian. And I had no real library experience, but I had catalogued slides at the Fogg Art Museum [INAUDIBLE: 0:06:34] and to my surprise, the [INAUDIBLE: 0:06:39] hired me. But the Museum itself, that is, it was not this particular situation [INAUDIBLE: 0:06:49] *shall* I go to the Metropolitan or The Museum of Modern Art or to Boston, or whatever. I was trying, just exactly as Alfred was, to be a museum person, and eventually director. Most of the people in my class became directors.

CC: Mm-hm.

BN: [INAUDIBLE: 0:07:12] that was not what drew me to the Museum. What drew me to the Museum was this opportunity to get a job.

CC: Right.

BN: What happened was wonderful. That the Museum was such a small, cohesive group at the time, that nobody followed job descriptions. We all just pitched in.

CC: Sure.

BN: We helped each other put on shows.

CC: So you helped install and all kinds of other things.

BN: I put the “Fur-Lined Tea Cup” [[Object](#)] on exhibit. [Laughs]

CC: Oh really?

BN: [Laughing] It was a task force, and we were all young and very enthusiastic.

CC: What did Paul Sachs think, let's say oh, five years after it started or in the mid-thirties. Did he—? Would you have corresponded with him, or would he ever visit? Did he think you were pretty much on track?

BN: No, I had no—

CC: Correspondence with him?

BN: Correspondence, no. I had no communications with him at all.

CC: What about your contemporaries who had also studied under Paul Sachs? Were they looking to you and to Alfred as an example of how to run their own museums, and what to do, that you had an awful lot of good ideas? Were you, in a sense, trend-setting for them?

BN: Well first of all, I have to make it quite clear to you that in those days, those of us who were helpers, really, of Alfred, had no contact with the Trustees whatsoever.

CC: Oh, I see.

BN: They were just people upstairs somewhere to get the money.

CC: So you very rarely saw, let's say Mrs. Rockefeller, Abby Rockefeller?

BN: No.

CC: You had very little communication with them?

BN: Very little at all.

CC: Did you feel that they were quite supportive of him, that he was in a sense living in kind of under a period of grace in a way, that he was being tolerated? Or that he was really giving them the guidance?

BN: You see, I don't really know how to answer that question.

CC: Because you really weren't involved with that.

BN: I was not involved.

CC: So you rarely had to address the—you never addressed the Trustees or told them what you were doing?

BN: Never.

CC: Did they all come to your show, though, in '36?

BN: Oh, I'm sure they did.

CC: Did they think photography was art? Or were they going to leave that question up to you and Alfred?

BN: I think that they left that pretty much up to us. I think that they were—let's put it on the other side of the story, that I had never had any criticism from [them], not at all. And I don't remember any particular accolades. It was a very successful show.

CC: The public—

BN: It was fantastic. The *Herald Tribune* was going at that time, [and they] devoted an editorial to what they called the camera obscura, because we had a full-sized camera that people could walk into.

CC: Oh, terrific.

BN: The mystery inside the camera, essentially, but nothing to it. [Laughing]

CC: Oh, that's wonderful.

BN: It was a very dramatic show. We were great show people.

CC: It sounds that way.

BN: Yes.

CC: Did Stieglitz come to the show?

BN: I don't know whether he came to the show or not.

CC: You must have attracted an awful lot of attention though of the budding photographers of the time though, that at least somebody was finally celebrating photography.

BN: That's right. No question about it.

CC: So you just suddenly started getting calls and letters and visits from people that you'd always wanted to meet?

BN: I don't remember that particularly. But then, of course, the exhibition traveled across the country. It was shown at eight other museums.

CC: Well, one of the things that we appear to have seen through the, let's say the 50 years of the Museum up till now, or more than 50 years, is that it started as very much a family group, really. As you say, the Trustees were paying for it, but it was you and Alfred and your group that was really having a terrific time of it and doing good work and enjoying yourself, almost like a club or a family atmosphere. And then later it began to become a bigger club—

BN: That's right.

CC: And more rules and regulations, and then an institution, and then now a big institution and god now... Especially after the War, in our little—that we've studied till now, we've interviewed about 30 people, and we've done a lot of reading. We look to those years, '40 to '45, as being sort of a whole shift. People came back after the War and they just felt the place had totally changed. It had become institutionalized, it was doing popular shows.

BN: Yes, the Trustees interfered.

CC: You think they really put their hand in then?

BN: Oh, yes; no question about that. And then when Nelson Rockefeller took charge he was sending his organization people around to straighten us out. We were putting on propaganda shows for his Latin American connection.

CC: Right.

BN: The whole thing had changed.

CC: Did it start to become a little distasteful to you by that time, or—?

BN: Well—

CC: Because there was also, as I know—

BN: I don't think I'd say "distasteful," but a little disappointing.

CC: Did you see the direction of it changing, obviously dramatically, when they invited Edward Steichen, so you just bowed out, you did not want any part of having to share anything with [him]?

BN: You've got it right.

CC: Another vision, right?

BN: Absolutely.

CC: You had the wherewithal to know that you had your vision and he had his, and there wasn't any way that—

BN: I'm glad that you've got that, because this has been put down as personal activities that you wouldn't have at all.

CC: No, I think you both had—I mean anybody who at the age of 26 is able to mount a show and has the boldness to mount a show called *History of Photography*, I think he knows what he's looking at. But 10 years later, for someone else to say, well I think I want to do it *this* way—

BN: That's right.

CC: I think that's very difficult for anyone to do.

BN: That's right.

CC: John Szarkowski, obviously he spoke very highly of you, and he wanted to make sure that we did speak to you. Interviewing him, we found that he has an awful lot of the energy and the Will Rogers charm, and he's a terrific character really. Would you say that he has the same almost religious feeling towards photography and towards popularizing the art, and do you think he's a champion in the old mold in the sense of—? Would Barr have appreciated him, perhaps?

BN: I think so, yes, I think so.

CC: I just want to know, in your mind, has the whole place gone to hell?

BN: Oh no.

CC: Or is John doing a pretty good job of it?

BN: He's doing a fine job. Oh no, I don't have any ill feeling whatsoever. I think that—

CC: We like him. He seems to be a very genuine character.

BN: Yes, and personally I think he picked up the pieces that had been dropped by Steichen, and got it back on something more in line with my thinking about it.

CC: If you were to paraphrase that a bit, what would you say would be the Newhall-Szarkowski line, or your aesthetic as opposed to the Steichen? I know you could write a book on it, and you did.

BN: If you want a quote, if you want it just in a word, I think that it's the difference between recognizing photography as a form of artistic expression versus the photo-journalistic attitude of informing and communicating events in the world.

CC: Mm-hm. I see.

BN: [*The Family of Man*](#) is basically an enormous picture story. In the world of photojournalism, documentary, it was a landmark.

CC: So it's a big *Life* magazine spread.

BN: That's right.

CC: But it's not [Eugène] Atget or—?

BN: No, it's not what I felt should be at the Museum. And as you pointed out, I had unfortunately the hunch that I couldn't work with it but I was very fortunate at the beginning. That other job [Director of the George Eastman House] was at Rochester.

CC: Yes. Do you think now, especially in the last five to 10 years particularly, photography has become almost a boom industry? I mean, now it's leveling off a bit, but five years ago, particularly, I mean, everybody was collecting pictures and it was just people who [had] overnight successes. Do you think the Museum had something to do with that?

BN: It couldn't help it. It couldn't but help it.

CC: Does that put extra pressure on photography and those who—? I mean, are you becoming now, something that used to be much more of a familiar art? Is it now—? Are the market pressures—? Is that a terrible sort of thing to happen?

BN: Well, you see, now I'm outside of the museum world and I don't face the problem. It would have been very difficult to match the prices and purchasing for the collection. On the other hand, there's more money around.

CC: Yes.

BN: I think it sort of levels off. I think one aspect you haven't asked me about that is to me very important is my history, my book.

CC: Mm-hm.

BN: I think it's remarkable that The Museum of Modern Art has kept that history in print ever since 1937, and the fact that now it's—probably now it's a Book of the Month Club.

CC: Yes. Well, it's pretty remarkable, considering, a book that reflects photography as seen 45 years ago is still downstairs and people are still buying copies.

BN: That's right.

- CC: I remember that book as one of the first books I saw about photography, you know. It's a guide, and it's almost like looking at a [Bernard] Berenson or the Barr earlier things.
- BN: Well Alfred's *What is Modern Art?* [*What is Modern Painting?*] has also been kept in print.
- CC: One last thing. We wanted to amplify, not simply by rote, but in different departments, try to get various oh, champions, or commentators, or particularly artists, or photographers for the Photography Department, in addition to speaking to you, and hopefully we can bring you into New York as you can speak not only well on photography, but you've given us a very splendid evocation of the time and of Alfred and what you were up against. Can you think of any particular photographers, let's say, or other commentators who might be able to speak on the Department, or on the Museum and on photography and the influence the Museum has had?
- BN: Oh, that's a good question.
- CC: We thought—John, obviously we spoke to John and we want to include him. But he had mentioned Ansel Adams as being particularly favorable and interested in the Museum and its work.
- BN: That's a good idea, because Ansel was tremendously important in the founding of the Department. He was the vice chairman of the Department, and he and I and my late wife, Nancy, were the principal people in the 1940 creation of a department. You must realize that the original exhibition was not departmental. There was no department of photography. That grew out of the success of the show.
- CC: Oh I see. So the Department was created on the success of the show.
- BN: That's right.
- CC: How about that trip to Europe? That must have been pretty interesting, that buying—the one you took before the show.

BN: Yes.

CC: You must have found some interesting things.

BN: Yes, I was very lucky in contacting some of the pioneer collectors of 19th century material.

CC: Well, if you can think of any other people, we'll be back in touch with you. We just wanted to give photography a fair shake and get someone like Ansel let's say or a couple of other people just to help flesh out the picture. Because you can speak on the Museum at large, obviously, but there might be a couple people who could just give us that little.

BN: Yes, I think Ansel could talk about the photographic aspect. He was not particularly interested in modern art. He saw it as an important place, and important for photography. And he did some teaching there during the war years when I was overseas.

CC: Oh I see. Was it always—? Was it ever tough to keep in bed together, in a sense, photography and modern art? Would people come who appreciated and loved the photographs, not just the public but photographers too, and then turn their noses up at the art, and vice versa? Was it—?

BN: Oh, a few, but it was not—

CC: But you never felt uncomfortable about it.

BN: No, there was plenty of adverse criticism on the part of the photographic community.

CC: Mm-hm. But because you regarded photography as art and not simply or necessarily photojournalism, then you had good reason to be in a place called The Museum of Modern Art; right?

BN: That's exactly my [INAUDIBLE: 0:22:48], my thinking, yes.

CC: Yes. Well, I think it's been—I think if anything, you've been vindicated, and certainly, people now—it's interesting, people will look at something that purports

to be photojournalistic, even a Donald McCullin picture or something like that, and they'll read it, in the sense through the eyes of an artist. They want to see it as a piece of art. They don't want to see it as—I mean they work to seeing it as art; they don't want to just regard it as photojournalistic.

BN: No.

CC: And even if you talk to, for instance, McCullin himself, or read what he said about his own things, he remarks that a picture of a person with their hand outstretched, or a little boy in Belfast, you really can't tell what the hell side he's on and who's right and who's wrong. You have to look at the picture. And the picture has its own reality and its own emotion.

BN: Yes.

CC: And I think that it's very rare that a photograph acts as simple propaganda. Oftentimes, you return back to the plastic virtues of it.

BN: I think it'd be very interesting, following through—I mean, it's an interesting conversation.

CC: Yes, it's very interesting. What we'll do is—well, number one; you don't plan to be coming to New York at all in the next few months then? Or passing through?

BN: I don't know but I've not been asked to come. I can't afford to come unless I'm asked to come.

CC: Okay, well, if possible, I'm going to try to convince my higher-ups to perhaps arrange sometime in—well, at a time that would be convenient with you, but we plan to be doing our filming in a staggered fashion from about the middle of April to the middle of June. So, sometime [in] May, June. So if you were amenable to coming to New York for a couple of days at that time, perhaps we can work it out. I'll notify John and we'll talk to our higher-ups and see if that could all be arranged. Because we really do want to tell as complete a story as possible, and you're definitely part of the puzzle here.

BN: Well, I appreciate that.

CC: Also, you're in one of my favorite states, so I really would rather go out there. But, I don't even want you to tell me what it looks like or whatever. We've got three feet of snow here.

BN: We've got three feet of mud.

CC: Where are you exactly?

BN: You know Santa Fe?

CC: You're in Santa Fe then? You're outside of it?

BN: Yes, about five miles south of Santa Fe in [INAUDIBLE: 0:25:42].

CC: Boy, sounds terrific. Okay, well, we'll be in touch then.

BN: Let's talk about the possible trip.

CC: Okay.

BN: I'm teaching, you know, Tuesdays and Thursdays at the University.

CC: Mm-hm.

BN: But after the 14th, I'm free.

CC: After the 14th of May?

BN: Yes.

CC: Okay.

BN: Although I do have a date in San Francisco on the 20th, I'm doing a lecture there; it's not the 20th, it's the 26th.

CC: 26th, okay, so, after the 14th of May you're free, but then you have a lecture on the 26th of May in San Francisco. Okay, we'll be in touch with you then though in the next couple of weeks and we'll see what we can do.

BN: Okay.

CC: I appreciate it very much. Thank you very much for speaking.

BN: I want to make a notation. I didn't catch your name.

CC: It's Carl, C-A-R-L, Colby, C-O-L-B-Y.

BN: Yes.

CC: And my telephone number in New York is 212-734-3187.

BN: Okay.

CC: And our production company is named Varied Directions. The actual home office, will be surprising to you, is next door to the Maine Photographic Workshop up in Rockport.

BN: Oh yes.

CC: You know that little outfit up there?

BN: Oh yes. Okay.

CC: Okay, thank you very much.

BN: Right-o.

CC: Bye bye.

END OF INTERVIEW at 0:27:31