DAVID HOFFMAN MOMA HISTORY INTERVIEWS

INTERVIEW WITH:	**DAVID ROCKEFELLER (DR)**
INTERVIEWERS:	**CARL COLBY (CC); RUTH CUMMINGS (RC)**
DATE:	**1983**
TRANSCRIBER:	**JANET CROWLEY, TRANSCRIPTION COMPLETED AUGUST 29, 2018**

DR: You were nice enough to say that you had come to have an affection for her [Abby Aldrich Rockefeller] just on the basis of reading what you did in Mary Ellen Chase's book [*Abby Aldrich Rockefeller*], which I think was a very sensitive and perceptive and understanding book, so I'm pleased that you did feel as you did. She was first of all, as a person, someone who was a very devoted wife and mother, and she put those obligations as number one, but she also had a very inquiring mind. She was interested in a great diversity of things. She liked people a great deal and liked to be with people. She had been brought up as the daughter of a United States senator who—they lived in Washington quite a bit, and she saw many people from different parts of not only the country but the world. And she had a great artistic sense in that she instinctively liked beautiful things and was interested in beauty wherever she found it, whether it was in nature or in man-created objects. And I think one of the remarkable things—I'm not sure exactly where this came from, maybe her father in part, but it must have been more than that—she really had this enormous *range* of interests in beautiful things, and collected everything that she saw that she thought was lovely.

CC: Do you remember the fifth-floor gallery that she had?

DR: Seventh.

CC: Seventh floor?

DR: Seventh floor. I remember it very well, and we have some photographs of it. If you haven't seen them, you ought to. Yes, she, of course—I was a young boy in the twenties; I was born in 1915. I graduated from Lincoln School in 1932, and Lincoln School is here in New York, so that actually, I was around the house during the time that she was talking to people like Alfred Barr and Mrs. [Mary

Quinn] Sullivan and Mrs. [Lillie P.] Bliss and Conger Goodyear and all of the others, Stephen Clark, who were the ones that played a major role with her. And I sat in on lunches and meetings, sometimes getting a little bored because I was too young to really know what they were talking about, but nevertheless, a certain amount of it did seep through. And certainly, my own interest in a diversity of lovely things came from what I was surrounded with, plus Mother's own native enthusiasm for that kind of thing. Just exactly how she got interested in contemporary art and at the same time in primitive and folk art, I'm not really exactly sure, and what I can't remember is whether she herself saw the Armory show, which you remember created such a sensation. I think it was 1911, if I'm not mistaken.[1] She might have, and it would be interesting to—there must be a way of finding out whether she did. Certainly, whether she went to it or not, I don't think there's any doubt that it had an influence on her interests. But she was very open to people who came to her with ideas that she thought were good, and clearly, what she came to feel was that here was this great city with wonderful museums and a tremendous cultural life, which had no institution that was focusing on what was being done contemporaneously. And I think she felt that was a mistake. She got to know a number of people in art galleries, I guess. One of the ones that I think of most is Mrs. [Edith] Halpert in the Downtown Gallery, who certainly—

CC: There was a great story about that, too, that we read in one of the books, where Mrs. Halpert had had an exhibition of early American masters, [Winslow] Homer, et cetera, and had asked to have a Homer lent to her. And your mother lent a Homer anonymously, she [Halpert] didn't know where it came from. And the Homer was on the wall, and she bemoaned the fact that here was a Homer and a number of other terrific older American masters, and now I have [William] Zorach, [Ben] Shahn, and other people, and who's the idiot who would buy the Homer and not buy the Zorach? And she [Abby] came out and said, "I am that idiot." [Laughter] And took a good look at the newer things, and then—

DR: And started buying them. A great pride of her collection and interests came from that group of the first half of the 20th century American artists, the ones you mentioned are certainly some, but a whole range of them; [John] Marin and

[1] 1913.

Georgia O'Keeffe and [Charles] Demuth and so on. And she had examples of all of them. She also got interested through Mrs. Halpert in folk art, as you know. And it's interesting that the two sort of developed together through the same person. There were a number of other galleries and people, and I wish that I knew more about which they all were; Kraushaar is another name that I remember, a gallery that—

RC: Was it, Arthur Davies having advised Mrs. Bliss on her collection?

DR: Yes, and of course she had a lot of Davies, many of which we now have. In fact there are six of them in the room down two from here that you might look at before you go out, plus a portrait of Mother that was recently done [INAUDIBLE: 0:07:02] if you'd like to see. Yes, certainly Arthur Davies played a role, and Mother came to know quite a number of the living contemporary artists, both domestic and foreign. I remember meeting [Henri] Matisse with her and Diego Rivera, just to pick two. But she knew quite a lot of them. So her interests were broad. Father did not share her enthusiasm for the more contemporary forms, and it was that reason that she built the gallery on the seventh floor. And he was very tolerant of her having things there, but didn't particularly want them to come down [laughing]—

RC: [Laughing] That was more than hinted at in the book.

DR: —below.

CC: Seeping down into the other places.

DR: Yes, exactly.

CC: Upsetting the unicorns.

DR: That's right. But, she had loads of fun with it. She changed the exhibitions quite frequently. She did have sometimes one-man shows; I think she had one for Davies and probably for a number of others.

RC: That's quite marvelous. So she would invite not only her friends but other groups over to see, or how public was her own gallery?

DR: It wasn't public, certainly, but she would invite friends and friends of friends, and if there were artists who were interested, I'm sure she was very open to their

coming. But it was in no sense open to the public. But I think she felt that there was a real need for talented artists who were living at the time and who were not well known to be exhibited in a public place, and obviously, that's what led to the forming of the Museum. And Mrs. Bliss and Mrs. Sullivan were the other two with whom she met most, and they really were the three ladies who formed the Museum. And they got the advice of people like Mr. Stephen Clark and Mr. Conger Goodyear who were already collectors and had, as you know, both of them, major collections; Mr. Goodyear in Buffalo and Mr. Clark here in New York. They both had very important Matisses and [Paul] Gauguins and [Vincent] van Goghs. And of course, Mr. Clark had that marvelous Seurat that's now unfortunately in the Metropolitan. [Laughing]

CC: I remember one thing particularly from the Mary Ellen Chase book, [which] was that she [Abby] said that she always bemoaned the fact that there was such a gap between an artist's—when he created something and when he was appreciated, and that her impetus really may have been that she wanted very much to close that gap because she saw people suffering and not being looked at.

DR: Yes, I think that was a very real factor in her interest in doing it. Just who introduced her to Alfred Barr, I'm not quite sure. He certainly entered the picture early on. Of course, he had gone to Princeton and then got his Ph.D. at the School of Design at Harvard.

RC: Isn't it Professor [Paul] Sachs that may have made—?

CC: Paul Sachs.

DR: Paul Sachs probably was the one.

RC: That maybe introduced.

DR: She knew—and you know, she was on the Visiting Committee of the Fogg Museum for a number of years.

RC: Oh, so then she may have seen the gallery that Eddie Warburg and Lincoln Kirstein—

DR: It could be that that was—in fact, now that you mention it—

CC: The Harvard Coop.

DR: She was a great friend of both Paul Sachs and Edward Forbes; they were co-directors at the time. And then there was also Mr. [John Alexander] Pope, who was an expert in Oriental art; I think I'm right it's Mr. Pope. And through that, she got involved more in the oriental side, as well. But that interest of hers in Harvard, in the Fogg Museum, clearly did play a role and it could well be that it was through them that she met Alfred Barr. It would be interesting to find out, and I'm sure you could through the Fogg, what years she was on that Visiting Committee.

CC: That would be interesting because then you'd know when she met Alfred.

RC: What her contact was; yes.

DR: That's right.

CC: And Paul Sachs was running the museum curators' course and grooming future curators—

DR: That's right. He and Edward Forbes, you know, they were very different. Mr. Forbes was a very old-line Bostonian blue-blood. Forbes, as you know, is right up there with the Cabots and the Lowells. And Mr. Sachs, of course, came from a Jewish background, very wealthy; Goldman Sachs, actually. And it was an interesting, surprising in a way, combination. But I think they were a very good combination. And she got a lot from both of them. I wish I were sure—I'm not sure if Mr. Pope is the right name. It would be interesting also to find out who Mr. Warner—I have a feeling, Langdon Warner was a professor of oriental art at the Fogg, and I think he advised her a good deal on some of her oriental purchases, which developed to a considerable extent from the trip that she and Father took to the Far East in 1921 for the dedication of the Peking Union Medical College in Peking. And on that trip, they were away three months, and they went to China, Japan, and Korea, and became exposed to all the wonderful things there are there, and this, too, had a very strong influence. And a lot of the things that she collected were oriental, and of course the garden that she built in Maine, which in many ways was sort of the one creative expression of Mother's as distinct from collecting and enjoyment, that she did. Because she worked with a wonderful

lady named Mrs. Max Farrand, Beatrix Farrand, who was a landscape architect and who did the professional side of the garden, and Mother sort of had the broad concepts. And it was a mixture of very beautiful English borders with a Chinese wall that was like the ones she had seen in the Forbidden City in Peking, and a line of tomb figures from Korea, and interesting Buddhas and so on.

CC: That's up in Seal Harbor?

DR: In Seal Harbor. It might also be useful for you to look at—I have some books of photographs of that and of the Eyrie, and indeed, of the houses, which would give you a little feeling of the range of interests that she had. I mean, her interest in contemporary art was very real and very major, but it was really only a very segment of her interests in the arts.

RC: The fact that she could even embrace the new as she did, with coming—the contemporary was—

DR: To an *extraordinary* degree.

RC: [It] was probably due to the fact that she was so comfortable and had so many other interests that the forms, even if in your subconscious, you can kind of form a bank—

CC: One begets another.

RC: A bank of gestalts that help you accept the new.

DR: I think that's true.

RC: And she certainly had that exposure, you were saying, from travel and everything.

DR: Yes, a lot of things. But she was more open than one would expect a person of her background and experience to be, and she was willing to look at and assess and enjoy a tremendous range of things, including things that were completely unfamiliar to her. Father, on the other hand, was much more traditional in his tastes. He hadn't had the background, either. But, on the other hand, he was very tolerant of her interests and ultimately gave the land for both the Museum and the garden.

RC: We were particularly struck by also the fact that when she began the Museum, particularly that summer of ’29, there were interesting letters going back and forth between Alfred Barr and your mother as to what the composition of the opening exhibition would be. And it was interesting because Barr was intent on having an American show, and she thought, very savvy in a political sense, really felt, well if we have an American show, they’ll simply ask, “Where are the other Americans?” And if you choose now, the ones who aren’t included will rebel. And also that there was another American show to be seen in that same building at the same period of time, which would have been more current artists, so that may have caused a problem. So she—there was an interesting exchange.

DR: I don’t remember that but I remember the show very well. It was [Georges] Seurat, Gauguin, [Paul] Cezanne—

RC: Van Gogh.

DR: And van Gogh [*Cezanne, Gauguin, van Gogh, Seurat*]. And it was a very dramatic show. I can really still remember it, even though I was only 14.

RC: Do you remember the gawks and the gasps?

DR: Yes.

RC: Was that the tenor of that? [Laughing] It’s so hard for people to—

DR: Yes, there was no question that even—I mean, those pictures which today everyone accepts, did—

RC: Beautiful, that’s the most comfortable.

DR: It’s fabulous. But, it was somewhat shocking to me. I mean, I hadn’t basically been exposed to those.

CC: Would friends of yours ask, “What’s your mother doing?” Or, other people say, “How could she like that sort of thing?”

DR: I’m sure they did. I don’t particularly remember that. [Laughing] But I do remember there was one Cezanne of trees, forests, that was hung initially upside down. [Laughter] This created tremendous mirth on the part of everyone, that it shows how ridiculous it must be if it could be hung upside down.

RC: [Laughing] They really couldn't read it. It was so new, they really couldn't read it. I mean, I'm sure the people who were installing that were trying.

DR: Probably, but, [laughing] I just happen to remember that particular episode; it was much publicized at the time.

CC: What was it later on that impelled yourself and your brother, Nelson Rockefeller, and others, to become actively involved in the Museum?

DR: Well, Nelson of course, was seven years older than I was, and therefore, he was graduating from Dartmouth just at the time that the Museum was formed, whereas I was still in high school. And he was very close to Mother, as I was, but when he graduated, I think that he was tremendously taken by the idea of what Mother was doing. He was a friend of Eddie Warburg's and a number of other people who were involved, Jock Whitney, and so on, who were involved. And he became very actively involved right from the beginning. Mother did not ever want to play a personal role of leadership in the sense of being chairman or president. I think the most she ever was was a vice president, and [even] that [she was] one of three or four. She preferred to play a role in the background. I think father probably preferred that, too. But in any case, Nelson did become more active sooner, and in that, of course, was president at two different times, as you probably know, just before the War and again just after the War. But he and Mother worked very closely on it. My own interests really did, in contemporary art, I mean—I went to see a lot of the shows, and I was intrigued, but puzzled and often not too happy about things. I remember going to the show of Dada and Surrealist art [*Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism*]; it was 1936, and being, shocked is maybe the wrong word, but I mean, it didn't seem to make sense to me.

CC: "Fur-lined tea cup." [*Object*]

DR: It seemed silly. Well, I have a lot of them that I am very, very fond of and own some of them today, but at that point, I was still not really enthusiastic. But during my Harvard days, in '35, I guess, I took a course in the history of art, one section in ancient art and one in art of the Renaissance and since—and visited a lot of museums, so that I got a background of, a survey course in art which, on top of seeing the things that the family had, was very helpful. But it was really

not until Mother died in 1948 and I was asked to take her place on the Board of the Museum that I started getting more actively interested in contemporary art and started buying some. So, whereas Nelson had really been very actively interested back in the thirties, and started buying contemporary things like Matisse and [Pablo] Picasso and [Georges] Braque, I went a somewhat different route. My wife was very much involved in it. We started first with 18th century English things, and then gradually got into Impressionists, and only more recently started buying some more contemporary things. But you can see a little mixture around.

CC: We spoke to your son, also, a few days ago.

DR: Good.

CC: And to Blanchette, and he particularly—we asked him about the question of public service in terms of your family and the heritage of the family in the sense that, if you have certain means, then you're required to perform in a certain way, in order to dispose your responsibilities well. And he said very strongly that that's a very strong trait in your family. And it was interesting for us to see that your mother would start with something like that, and rather than simply go with it for a short time and give it some support, she gave it an awful lot of support.

DR: Mm-hm.

CC: And then the rest of your family began to follow through very well on it, and once started, finished. I think it's important for people to know that and to have a sense that this is a commitment that once taken is fulfilled.

DR: Well, I think Mother certainly felt that very much herself. But maybe that particular aspect was almost more deeply felt by Father who felt that with opportunity goes responsibility and that therefore, if one was fortunate enough to have more of the worldly goods than other people that we want also to make good use of them for the benefit of other people. I think that has been an inheritance that all of us have felt and felt made sense, and I think that the next generations have felt it, too.

RC: Certainly. And we also, when speaking to your son, he said now there's so many —maybe there always were—opportunities to do service. And he said his rule of

thumb is that—we asked him, well, is it just the passing of the baton, or are you really interested in this? And he said, yes, I can only do best what I'm interested in. And I think it's also important for the public to understand that there's always been a real working at it. We've understood form all of your family that we've spoken to and from our reading, that it wasn't just writing a check or giving blanket support to something; there's always been an active role. And we've perceived—what's very interesting is, having spoken to Mrs. Blanchette Rockefeller and then your son, who are both on the Board, the different points of view, that even within one family—

DR: Mm-hm.

RC: That there's that openness to interpret the spirit of the Museum.

DR: Yes.

RC: And that's kind of our interesting end to the film that we'll come up with, this kind of bouquet of responses to, well, how is it doing now and who would like to see it go where?

DR: I think it is interesting that the three members of the family, one member by marriage, Blanchette, and David and myself, are all on the Board at the moment, and all interested, probably from somewhat different perspectives, actually.

RC: Could we ask you about your perspective?

DR: Sure. You mean why I'm interested or in what sense?

RC: You've covered some of that, I think, why you're interested, but we've been asking everybody—

CC: The interest, for instance, in contemporary.

RC: What your feelings are for that issue of is the Museum dealing with the contemporary art? Is it still modern in the sense of the word, or is it just a place where it has a wonderful collection and that's good enough, and let the galleries or other areas deal with the contemporary scene?

CC: We spoke to Bill Rubin for instance and he felt that what separates out The Museum of Modern Art from others is that it has this remarkable collection, and

that if it was to compete with many of the other institutions now and public spaces and galleries and the rest of it, for the newest work, it could really only do so much. You could only do what others do. But—

DR: Well, in a sense, its very success at having put together what I would think is certainly the greatest collection worldwide of the art of the 20th century—well, I think you could almost say, if you include the whole scope of the 20th century, I don't know another museum that has a better overall collection. But having done that and given the fact that it takes a lot of space, it creates a different kind of problem than the Museum had when it was formed and it had no collection. And I do think that we now have a dual responsibility; one, to give the perspective of that whole range, which is such a very rich one and such a varied one, but on the other hand, not to just stop at a given point. And perhaps that's one of the dilemmas that we have today, that I think we have an obligation to fulfill both roles. And I would feel that the Museum would lose a great deal if it said, well, as of 1984, we will not buy any more and just show all of the beautiful things we have. I don't think it would be nearly as interesting or valuable a place. The great problem is to find talented curators who have the vision and the imagination that Alfred Barr did in his day.

RC: That's a tall order, isn't it?

DR: I think one has to recognize that the first at least 30 years, he played the dominant role in what the Museum bought. And it was his genius at seeing who was good that was coming along that made the collection as great as it is.

CC: What would you say his best qualities were? What sort of man was he?

DR: Well, I was devoted to him and knew him very well from my early childhood. He was both incredibly sensitive and artistic in his ability to look at things and analyze the qualities and merits that made them good. But he was also a very gentle and warm person, who had a variety of interests. In fact, one thing that perhaps made us be drawn to one another at an early stage was that he was very interested in natural history, particularly in birds, and I happened to collect beetles. And that interest in common perhaps made us sympathetic to one another, even though we had a lot of other interests that were different. He was a tremendously intellectual person. I think that his intellectual and artistic

qualities were undoubtedly more developed than his administrative qualities. He wasn't particularly interested in administration and not especially good at it, which meant that as time went on in the Museum, it was logical that he should have focused his energies on curatorial duties rather than administrative duties. But he was, I think, a giant in his field in the sense that he was a scholar who knew the history of art from the earliest days. He wasn't *just* interested in contemporary art. He came to it with this very broad background. But at the same time, had that instinct and intuition to see what was beautiful in things that were totally different from anything that had been produced before, and to make a selection. And that's, of course, where he was so good at building the Museum's collection.

CC: Especially generation to generation, it's very unusual to find someone who—William Rubin said that a good curator is someone who can span one generation, and a great one is one who may be able to span two, and a genius really is someone who can still see things for three generations, [and] still have the eye to pick up that which is so unusual. He must have been quite an extraordinary person, though, because I even read he knew all about the great battles of the world.

RC: Military history.

DR: You could constantly find areas of knowledge that you would never suspect. Of course, he came from a very puritanical Scotch Presbyterian background, which again is surprising in that you don't particularly associate a lot of contemporary art with puritanism. [Laughing]

RC: But his modus operandi, really—the art became his religion. Because we've even heard people say—

DR: I think that's true.

RC: He was absolutely a missionary—

DR: Mm-hm.

RC: But art was the religion he was proselytizing. I think it was Eddie Warburg [who] said that he [Barr] really didn't have a glandular response to art. And Bill Rubin talks of art, when it gets him here [points to a part of her body, possibly her

heart], and he has problems with some art that doesn't; it really makes things move inside. But that Alfred, with his synoptic view of art and what he wanted the Museum to do in that regard, was just open to be open and had to collect what he had to collect.

DR: I think that's true. I think he approached it both from an extraordinarily intellectual and academic point of view, but also had a very fine artistic sense of appreciation, which is quite different from the other. It's rare to have that combination.

CC: Do you think the Museum particularly—for next year when it opens and is really so grand in its realization, it will be, being able to show most of its collection at one time—do you think all of that was really part of the dream that your mother may have had, and this is really a great fulfillment of her interest to see something like that become so accomplished?

DR: I think she would have been thrilled at what has happened. I really do. I think that she was the sort of person who was very young in spirit, and I think if she had lived a lot longer that she would have wanted the Museum to change and evolve. And I think she would have been very pleased at the way it has evolved, even though it's quite different today than it was when she was alive.

CC: Richard Oldenburg bemoaned the fact that—he felt that Alfred Barr was really like a disciple and it was a very small group, and now it's being head of the Vatican. [Laughter] I mean, it's such a *huge* organization now.

RC: [Laughing] He's like the Pope.

CC: With many cardinals, and what? 325 galleries in New York.

DR: Well, it's true. And of course, the very fact [that] there are all of these galleries and museums, and around the world as well as in New York, to a degree is a tribute to what The Museum of Modern Art did. But it also means that it's less unique than it was.

RC: Well, imitation is the sincerest form of flattery. [Laughing]

DR: Exactly, though I don't think that's necessarily bad.

RC: When we were speaking with Blanchette, she said she's a little protective of—right.

DR: But it certainly makes it more difficult for the trustees and curators to keep on, out at the outer cutting edge of innovation.

CC: Absolutely.

RC: Right. Sure.

DR: I think, on the whole, it's done very well in that regard, but it obviously is no longer *the sole* leader in taste formation that it certainly was during the period of a good many years.

RC: Just—for example, the fact of Conran's and Pottery Barn, good design has been accepted.

CC: We spoke to Arthur Drexler. It's very hard for him to have Good Design shows now; most everywhere you look—

RC: People don't know. They *will* know after this film. There's a *lot* of things that we absolutely take for granted, [that] started—

DR: Well, I think that is certainly one of the remarkable achievements of the founders that right in the very beginning they conceived of this as being much more than just painting and sculpture. And as I remember, the Design Department started very early on. I never remember *exactly* what year.

RC: Philip Johnson came with his own secretary and set up shop. [Laughing]

DR: That's the Architecture Department, but I meant the Design.[2]

RC: Right, oh but the Design—

CC: With Edgar Kaufman.

DR: And what year was that?

CC: The *Machine Art* show was in '35, 36.[3]

---

[2] Dept. of Industrial Design: 1940-46 Eliot Noyes; 1946-1949 Edgar J. Kaufmann Jr. Dept. of Architecture and Design: Philip Johnson 1949-54; Arthur Drexler 1956-1987.
[3] 1934.

DR: So it's very early, I mean, within five or six years. And the Film Library was right in the early days, too.[4]

CC: We spoke to Eliza Parkinson Cobb, and she remembers going out and getting objects. They had a show, *Useful Objects Under $5* [*Useful Household Objects under $5*]. So everyone went out to buy an ashtray or a toothbrush or whatever that showed good design.

DR: I remember that very well. It's an exciting place and I must say that I have certainly greatly enjoyed my years of association. I've been a trustee now since Mother died; 35 years. And I was chairman for 10 years.

CC: It's become much more difficult to run, because it's gotten so big, and with such great responsibilities?

DR: Well, yes, because it—in the early days, with a small staff, it didn't require—it wasn't like running a business, which today it is. A very big budget and a very large number of people, and all the administrative and institutional problems that any business has. Then, of course, it's expensive and fundraising has become a big aspect of it.

RC: We're going to be able to show that that area is where they're being very creative, too, a leader for museum—

END OF INTERVIEW at 0:38:51

[4] 1935.