

## DAVID HOFFMAN MOMA HISTORY INTERVIEWS

**INTERVIEW WITH:**                **WALTER N. THAYER (WT)**  
**INTERVIEWERS:**                **CARL COLBY (CC); RUTH CUMMINGS**  
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**TRANSCRIBER:**                **JANET CROWLEY, TRANSCRIPTION COMPLETED**  
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WT: The late sixties as a trustee. And my knowledge of what happened before that is hearsay from—I've known the people involved for 20 years, but I don't know those early days at all. You're talking about the thirties, and I guess Alfred Barr is probably the most reliable source of that early information. I don't know what Rockefellers—I don't know whether David, with how much he was involved at that time, and their mother, of course, was I guess responsible for The Museum of Modern Art, in the economic sense. But I don't know that, very [much], other than—

CC: Well, there was a—through the Whitneys, and particularly John Whitney, there was the formation of the film—helped very much in the formation of the Film Department.

WT: Yes, very much in the formation of the Film Department in the early days. And I don't know much of the details of that. My association with Mr. Whitney began in the early 1950s. And this was—we're talking about before that, back in the *Gone with the Wind* and David Selznick days, and so on. But he was responsible in large measure for getting, oh, a number of the motion picture companies to contribute film, to become involved, and to participate in the organization of that at that time. There are people around who know that story much better than I.

RC: What I'd like to ask you then is, when you came in 1960—we've been trying to chart the different phases of the Museum, from when it started like a very family affair almost, to a kind of extended club, and then by the sixties it really had grown into an institution. Or do you have recollections of it as different? And then compared with the way it is now.

WT: Oh no, no, no, no. It was a substantial institution in the 1960s, and I was— shortly after I became a trustee, I got tagged with being the chairman of a drive to raise 20-some million dollars, and that took five years. And that followed on the heels of a drive that Gardner Cowles had spearheaded for a number of years. Incidentally, I had lunch with him today, and he's a person whose identification with the Museum goes back many years. He's 80. And I think he was a member of the Museum way back when. And his recollection would be very helpful to you, and he should be on your list. He lives in Florida. He has an apartment here, but he's—and he has an office in the—at 30 Rock. He's mostly in Florida these days, but he comes up once or twice a month for a few days.

CC: Is he the publisher?

WT: He is the former publisher of *Look* magazine, yes. He's not involved with the— John Cowles in Minneapolis, Senior, is his brother, and it's his nephew who's just gotten himself in problems with the family out there in the newspaper.

CC: Is there a Charles, Charlie Cowles, also?

RC: He runs [a] gallery, from Seattle?

WT: Charles Cowles is—runs a gallery downtown.

RC: He's from Seattle, isn't he, originally; the west coast?

WT: I don't think Charles Cowles is of this Cowles family. If so, I'm not aware of it. I don't believe so.

CC: So you came in in that period. Was there a—let's [say] even if we jump up to the relatively the present day, one of the things we've gotten from some of the Trustees—well, we talked to different ones: Donald Marron, Beth Straus, various people. But really, the inevitability of having to—well, the way to survive now as a modern museum is to—really, you cannot be dependent on a few individuals giving you lots of money now. You have to engage [tape break at 0:04:30, phone call] Museum, let's say, even financially, economically, first, and then over to the—this was a necessary move?

WT: The expansion?

CC: Yes.

WT: Well, when you consider the fact that a very large percentage of the paintings in the Museum are never on exhibition, [and] this more than doubles the exhibition space. So from that point of view, it's extremely helpful. Expensive. I think that the scheme that was developed to build the Tower and let the Tower carry the burden of the expense is a good one. And it's done that. And as the Tower gets occupied and people start to live there, and the benefits start to flow through, it will be a tremendously important source of continued revenue for the Museum. So from that point of view, it's very helpful indeed. It could not have been done without this kind of a device. It took a lot of doing to get that, with special legislation in New York and Albany, but it was achieved, and it seems to be working very well. I guess the Museum could conveniently use twice as much space as it will have, because still, a very large part of the Museum collections just will not be on exhibition. So yes, it was necessary. I think it makes sense. I think it will attract more people to the Museum. There will be better facility. There are going to be some good dining facilities. It will be an easy museum to visit and get around in, and yes, I think it's going to be very helpful. That ought to attract more members, therefore more support. But true, the day when two or three people could keep an institution like this going, is gone. It will not happen. And the life blood has to be large membership.

RC: One of the things that we were trying to dispel, [or one of] the notions that we're trying to dispel in the film, was that it's not the Rockefeller museum. Certainly, the Rockefellers did build it through many years, but now, though it's still a private institution—

WT: Well, one of the important things about the Museum, and I learned this the hard way when I was chairman of their fund drive, is that people associate it, then and many still do [now], with the Rockefeller family. And for many years, they were indeed the principle support. And I once, for my sins, was the financial chairman for Governor Rockefeller when he ran for office. And it's very hard to raise money for something the Rockefellers are associated with, whether it's a candidacy or a museum or whatever. Who wants to contribute to the Rockefellers? It's the wrong way around. [Laughing] And so, from that point of view, it's difficult. Now, as time goes by, that becomes less and less important. And sure, Blanche Rockefeller is still the President of the Museum, and David

is on the Board, but their era is more or less gone. And the base has widened very substantially.

RC: We're going to be seeing some of the corporate-connected trustees, because really now, the individuals have been supplanted by corporate patrons, which is an inevitability, possibly.

WT: Yes.

RC: How do you feel—?

CC: Also, corporate—it's people who are, let's say, the chairmen or whatever of corporations, they have great banking or financial experience. They know not only how to raise money, or they may have a bit themselves, but they know how to manage it and they know how to run an institution, rather than, are they the wife of someone who just happens to be interested in art. And that may be part of the inevitable switch, to giving it a firm—well, that the trustees be like a corporate board of directors, really, and being able to give sound advice as an institution of that size now.

WT: Well, if you've talked with Don Marron you get a flavor of—Don has been a tremendous help to the Museum. He's been the chairman of the Expansion Committee, and he's been the guy that sparks most effectively the development of this building program. Yes, this is terribly important. And you can't afford to be sloppy, and you have to run it in a business-like way.

CC: Is part of the dispelling of the Rockefellers also other individuals or companies feeling that they now can have—not that they can take the Rockefellers place, but that in the public eye, they can begin now to have a say or [tape break at 0:09:45, phone call]

WT: It's going to be an oval building.<sup>1</sup>

CC: Oval?

RC: Oval?

WT: Yes, between 53<sup>rd</sup> and 54<sup>th</sup> on Third Avenue.

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<sup>1</sup> Thayer is referencing Philip Johnson's "Lipstick" building.

CC: Oh yes, that, right next to CitiCorp.

WT: Across the street from CitiCorp.

CC: Very, very large and—

WT: 33 floors. We're looking at it because we think we may move from here. Our last view is about to be destroyed by the Equitable building that's coming up here.

CC: Oh, I see.

RC: Apparently, even though he [Philip Johnson] didn't get the commission for the new Museum building, the Tower, he's still going to live there and have a great view of his buildings.

WT: Well, it was very difficult. With three architects on the Board, to select one that was on the Board, there was a conscious decision made to go outside the Board, what with Ed Barnes and Philip [Johnson] and [Gordon] Bunshaft. How are you going to take one and not the other?

CC: But to go back to the flavor of the support of the Museum now, do you see it very dependent now on corporate support and corporate donations?

WT: I think more and more it depends on corporate support, and of course the Museum brings to the corporate community a tremendous asset. I think it's more and more highly regarded in that manner, and it's used more. And the corporate membership turns in a lot of benefits. I know the people here like to go to the Museum, and they are, by reason of the fact that we're a corporate member, they have membership cards, and it's nice. And I think this use of The Museum of Modern Art—I don't know how applicable this is to the Metropolitan Museum or The Museum of Natural History, or the Whitney, but it surely is true of The Museum of Modern Art that the corporate community has a growing interest and it has been growing remarkably over the last 10 or 12 years.

CC: Are you also involved with the Whitney Museum?

WT: No, I'm not. That is not John Hay Whitney. I'm a great fan of the Whitney Museum but I'm not personally involved.

CC: How could you explain their—? Or do you see it troubling as, their association with IBM and IBM having a gallery or a Whitney branch there?

WT: And at the Philip Morris building, and in Stamford, and downtown in New York? I think they're very smart. I think it's a marvelous thing. And The Museum of Modern Art may come to that someday. I'd like to see them do it. I think it's a tragedy to have the amount of art in storage that is there, and when it could be displayed in different parts of the country.

CC: And it really helps the Whitney in the sense of—

WT: Oh it gives it exposure, sure.

CC: And they don't have to pay for the space? So it's really a terrific way to have almost a permanent exhibition going on.

WT: Well Philip Morris has done a wonderful job in that respect. And George Weissman has set a real pattern for a lot of people.

CC: Mm-hm.

RC: Along with the advantages of corporate sponsorship, we've gleaned a sense of frustration from some curators in that for particular shows, particularly if they're not going to be great crowd-pleasers, they don't have the money; the money is not forthcoming. How do you, as a trustee, answer to both, certainly the public—?

CC: Is there a down side, in the end—?

RC: To the people who are disgruntled.

CC: Let's say, to the propensity to have a blockbuster or to attract a huge crowd by having a [Henri de] Toulouse-Lautrec or a [Pablo] Picasso [exhibition] or—as opposed to, let's say—

RC: A more scholarly or maybe a more vanguard exhibition, [where] people don't know if it's going to be a success or not.

WT: Well, if you think that the corporate membership, participation, [and] contribution has any effect whatsoever on the kind of exhibitions that are on at The Museum of Modern Art, you haven't yet interviewed Bill Rubin. [Laughter] And you will

find that he—it just is not true. There's an Exhibitions Committee, but this is done *solely* on the basis of what they think the great art exhibits will be. There's actually the perfect example of it: Bourgeois [[Louise Bourgeois](#)]. I mean, you know.

CC: Right.

WT: And Picasso was—we would not have had the Picasso exhibition [[Pablo Picasso: A Retrospective](#)] had it not been for Bill Rubin. He was a friend of Picasso's and he got Picasso's widow to participate. And this could never be recreated, that exhibition. But this is Bill Rubin; he's something else.

RC: Right. So then, given Bill Rubin and knowing his bent for adding in to the big body of work that the Museum has, as opposed to being on that cutting edge, which was a role—probably both roles were what Alfred Barr envisioned. But maybe now with Rubin in the director's seat, so to speak, though he's not the director, do you find at all a conflict then in the original purpose of the Museum not being fulfilled?

WT: Not at all; no. Alfred Barr was, at that time, was way ahead of his time in recognizing and supporting art of that day that was not popular at all. And Alfred Barr educated a lot of people. Bill Rubin is not really—they're different characters entirely. Bill has very strong convictions about the kind of art that's shown at the Museum. He's probably one of the great scholars of the world. I mean, attending a Painting and Sculpture Committee meeting at which they review the art that the Museum wants to buy or has purchased or has been given to it: you may not give art to The Museum of Modern Art, whatever it may be, unless it's approved by the Painting and Sculpture Committee, and Bill Rubin is there to tell you what to do. That doesn't mean to say they always do it.

CC: Yes.

WT: But he's a tremendous influence on them.

RC: Is it the similar supporting of the curatorial staff as it seems like it's always been, pretty much. Alfred was out front and people followed.

WT: Well, yes. But there is, now, Kynaston McShine. I don't know whether you've met him.

RC: Mm-hm; yes.

WT: Kynaston is very interested in contemporary art. And Bill Rubin lets him have his go. And I'm sure that a lot of artists come into The Museum of Modern Art that Bill Rubin isn't happy about, but Kynaston thinks as tremendously important as contemporary art today. And so Bill has that flexibility, and I think that the people who work for him in the Museum would say that he's fair and tries to be, but his standards are very, very high.

CC: So you're actually happy to have a very strong curatorial team of staff because it just—I mean, if you were going to be pretty set in your way, if you're going to be very determined and forceful in terms of doing the best for the Museum, you certainly want the feedback from the experts there. It only—it has to be that way, otherwise it loses its—

WT: Riva Castleman in Prints has got to be one of the best in the world in that field.

CC: Yes. We spoke to her and she was great.

WT: Marvelous.

CC: It looks really very good. We're going to also not only tell that early story, which is very interesting and quite romantic on the whole beginnings, but when we get to the present time, we're not going to limit ourselves to only speaking to the staff or to the Beaumont Newhalls and the people who were a part of the Museum, but we're also going to go to the outside and we've gotten some great comments already from people like Robert Hughes, the art critic; Mark Stevens, Lawrence Alloway, [Paul] Goldberger.

WT: I think you're going to have—

CC: I mean, all kinds of people. We're even planning to interview Clint Eastwood or Martin Scorsese and people who you wouldn't think of immediately but who have been greatly influenced by the Museum or who are now doing things for the Museum and participating in fields like photography and prints and films, which, to most other museums, there hasn't been that attachment. I think it will make a quite wonderful portrait because it'll start very small and then as the pyramid gets bigger, it'll sort of explode into this constellation of people who were influenced by it and who grew up there.



- WT: Who's going to do the narration?
- CC: Well, we plan to mostly use—we're going to script it in the next month or so in terms of subject areas that we want to cover and how we want the story to be told. And then we're going to a number of these individuals who—we have about 50 people that we've seen or that are going to be seeing, in total about 50 or 60, and select from them about 25 or 30 people to make those comments at that time. And not to say that we're putting words in their mouth, but we've talked to them already and they've said this, let's say, and we transcript the interviews we do with them, and then we remember that Philip Johnson said so-and-so, and Bill Rubin said this, and then we sort of—it becomes a chorus, really. It's told by the participants, and it's not rambling because we've asked them specific questions and to cover specific territory and to say specific things about various individuals. And then it becomes really their story. Because if you use a narrator, we've found, in something like this, an hour long, even though it may be a very intelligent point of view, it's still that one point of view and it becomes a little bit rote. You think that you're just hearing it as gospel rather than there be some differences of opinion and some controversy almost.
- RC: We wanted to get a sense of dialogue and of people remembering things and their hopes and aspirations.
- CC: Particularly when you get people reminiscing it's quite interesting, because somebody will emphasize something perhaps very emotional, and someone else will be more—
- WT: What access do you have to film clips? Because god knows, there have been miles of them.
- CC: We've had a lot of good stuff. We went through the Library and there are some terrific things of, oh, everything from automobile show [[8 Automobiles](#)] to [Machine Art](#), to—
- RC: To an interview with [Robert] Rauschenberg, some very good [clips], to recreate those—
- CC: And even the early things of the thirties.
- WT: There must be some early things that are just staggering.

CC: Very funny things, and—

RC: Transporting paintings, [like] the Moving Day Comes to the Museum, they're carrying paintings.

CC: People like Mike Wallace doing interviews back in the early sixties, and just a lot of comical things, and at the same time, very interesting things of, particularly Barr and Dorothy Miller and all the early people. And then we're going to bring it up to the present day by, as I say, have all these various people commenting on the place, and we'll even get comments from the ordinary person who will walk in and what do they have to say about the place: Europeans and tourists, visitors. I think it'll open it up. And what we hope to do is to really just reintroduce people to the Museum, frankly. It'll come out at that time when the Museum is going to again have a grand opening. It'll be really a valentine to the Museum of its earlier days, and it'll speak frankly about the pride of success yet also the caution, the reflections of the various trustees and participants as to what direction are we going in. And there might even be some controversy or differences of opinion as to where you're headed, but I think that's healthy because then it—well, Beth Straus we spoke to and a couple of other people who said that if you recognize it yourself, if you know that you've been a success to some extent, but then you also are thinking about all of the ramifications of it, to the public, they recognize that as honesty and integrity, and I think that comes across well. It's—the Museum is kind of thinking about itself.

WT: It's going to be hard to make this exciting, I think.

CC: To people who know, it sounds like just sort of an inside story and it could be a lot of old dead air.

WT: Well, you don't have any—a lot of scintillating people to deal with.

CC: Well, we've gotten some pretty lively characters who we feel are pretty, uh—

RC: For the early days to evoke I think we will capture people who will be the evocation of Abby Aldrich Rockefeller and how special this original group of people were to kick this whole thing off. It was a special time, and Alfred Barr, and—

- CC: And who was Alfred Barr. I mean, there are even people, believe it or not, at the Museum, I don't think that know very much about him.
- RC: And once you've got them there, I think people will be interested to say, okay, now I understand from whence it came. And then be interested in, well, how is it doing now. And we're not answering that. I mean, we're interested in the different people's points of view and in fact that brings me to—I'd like to hear from you, you mentioned the idea of branches as something that you would see. Any other thoughts about its direction in the future, or gripes or, you think it's doing fine? What's your assessment of it right now, or ways you'd like to see it go?
- CC: Things like, for instance, saying that about the Whitney, and saying that, that to you, that's a healthy sign, that means something because it's another step in how a museum might see itself in 20 years or in 50 years, as to what closer collaboration with the very people that support it rather than being an ivory tower or a mausoleum of—because I think the Modern has been very instrumental in even doing things like having restaurants and film departments and that kind of thing. I mean, if you think about the Museum of Natural History or whatever, 50 years ago, it just didn't have that sort of thing. People didn't regard museums that way. People used to say, why do you have automobiles in a museum? Things like that. Whereas now, something like a design show, you almost take it for granted that there's a reason for it to be there.
- WT: Well, I think the Museum has a great opportunity and I hope that it'll realize that potential when this building is finished. Does the name Barbara Jakobson mean anything to you?
- RC: She's one of the Trustees.
- CC: Yes, she's been mentioned.
- WT: She's a good one to talk to. She's very controversial.
- RC: That's good. We're trying to get, because, for instance—
- WT: [Smiling] Don't tell her I said so.
- CC: What's her particular—?

- WT: I'm a great defender of Barbara's. She knows more about contemporary art than anybody on the Board. And if one walks downtown in Soho with Barbara, as I've done many times, everybody in the streets knows her. She knows the artists and she knows—she goes to not only the galleries but she goes to their studios. And she knows the field, thoroughly. And she's a very helpful, I think, a very helpful factor, but she's not the most popular person on the Board.
- RC: And why is it? Would you characterize the Board's feeling as being, it's fine what we've got and let's not go too far in the future? I know Alfred Barr always said, you have to keep a respectable distance from the forefront.
- WT: Well, there's a great legend about the impressionist paintings and the days of Alfred Barr and the paintings that were so great in the thirties, forties, and so on. And the fact that it was a museum of modern art then, sometimes you wonder how modern it is today, in terms of keeping pace with what's going on in the art world. And Kynaston's very good at this. There are a number of people, I think, that are not happy about some of the modern art, contemporary art that is around today. And so I think this is a big problem it faces, The Museum of Modern Art, as to what exactly it is, what its identity is. It was a museum of modern art in the thirties, for sure. Is it today? Some people would question that.
- RC: And is your own personal feeling, in terms of its direction, should it say that we have the best collection of modernist art from the first half of the century and that's just fine?
- WT: I think it's the finest collection of art of its time in the world. And when I say "its time" I'm talking thirties, forties; yes. It clearly is not of contemporary art.
- RC: Does that bother you?
- WT: It bothers me. But it doesn't bother a lot of people at the Museum.
- RC: So if there was a vote to be taken, your feelings would be in the minority, I guess; right? Is that, the prevailing feeling is that—?
- CC: You would come down on the side of the activists.
- WT: I'm very interested in contemporary art. I love the Picassos and the art of that period, but I'm extremely interested in what is going on today. I don't think that

interest is shared by too many people on the [Board]. By some of the younger people, yes; by Barbara, clearly; by Kynaston McShine, yes. Donald Marron is deeply involved in contemporary art, knows a great deal about it.

RC: What about John Parkinson? Does he come off as having a particular bent?

WT: I don't know what John's convictions are about contemporary art. He's a great asset to the Museum on the business side, and pays careful attention to—he's chairman of the Finance Committee. He paid very careful attention to that end of the operation, that he could, very helpful; a great asset to the Museum.

RC: It's interesting, too; of course, we spoke to his mother, Mrs. [Elizabeth Bliss Parkinson] Cobb, and there's third generation involvement there. It's very nice, that link, too.

WT: Yes.

CC: That's very interesting, though. As you can tell, we don't want to make it a contentious personality clash, or we're not—we don't care that Bill Rubin doesn't get along with Bill Lieberman, or, it's not a personality business, there's no name-calling. But if there are ideological conflicts or certain visions that don't quite mesh and the reasons why, that's okay. That, to us, is healthy and it's alright because it's just part of the nature of the beast, really. As you say, it was The Museum of Modern Art, no question about it. It has the best collection of 20<sup>th</sup> century [art], no question about it. But does it have it now? Well, should it have it, and what should it have? And those are all very legitimate questions. And if the Museum brings them up, and you know, you may be surprised. I mean, you may not think a million or two million people are interested in any of this, but I think they are. Because, if they get hooked on the early story, which I think they will—if they get hooked on Alfred Barr and Abby Rockefeller and Lillie Bliss and all of that and what came afterwards, and Philip and *Machine Art* and all that outrageous stuff back then when people were really—they'd go in and hoot and holler when they'd go the Museum or go in the Film Department too, and hoot and holler in looking at Russian movies and all. Now, a lot of that is taken for granted, and if anything, people want it to push a little bit further. So, if you call it yourself, then, if you say, well, 'I'm concerned with that myself,' in terms of the films, say.

RC: Especially artists, they picket and say, 'Ah, The Museum of Modern Art, they're not modern.'

CC: Then they know that it may be a new building and it's a new whatever, but that they are also—they've got their eye out for—

RC: And that people who are into modern art are concerned about these identity questions.

CC: It's a healthy attitude. It's not locked in, and it's not—you don't just open it and cut the ribbon and say 'This is the greatest thing of the past,' and then that's it.

WT: Well, you have an interesting assignment.

CC: Yes.

RC: We've found that the people, and really this film, as we've said, will be people. It's not the definitive history of the Museum as [written by] Russell Lynes, who was very dense with his information, or knowledge-wise accurate in that sense, but to give a sense of its life blood, which fortunately, is still there, from what we can assess. So hopefully—

WT: Have you interviewed Aggie Saalfeld? Is she on your list?

CC: No.

RC: No.

WT: Well, she should be. She also knows the contemporary art field very well, and she's very respected on the Board. She's on the younger side and she's going to be a very influential—

CC: Scofield?

WT: Saalfeld. Double A-L-F-I-E-L-D.

RC: And Barbara Jakobson.

CC: And Barbara Jakobson. We'll try to see them both. Yes, it was refreshing to talk to Donald Marron, for instance because he [has] a real "go" mentality and it's just a fresh look because also you're looking at somebody who doesn't have that generational connection or the old line, old family connection.

WT: Right.

RC: Right. He's totally fresh.

CC: He has a very up-to-date, today view of art and what art means to him and why he's collecting.

WT: Yes. Don—

RC: And he even used the word, yes, we have to take some risks, and that was really refreshing to hear.

WT: Yes.

RC: Because everybody else is protecting—it's fine, but it's a very interesting mix of all these concerns.

CC: Well, it's a good cross-mix too because here's somebody, a corporate person, really, saying that about—

WT: Well, we need a few more Don Marrons on the Board.

CC: Okay.

RC: That's good.

CC: Thank you.

**END OF INTERVIEW at 0:32:03**