

DAVID HOFFMAN MOMA HISTORY INTERVIEWS

INTERVIEW WITH: EDWARD M. M. WARBURG (EW)
INTERVIEWERS: HARVEY ARDMAN (HA); RUTH CUMMINGS (RC);
CARL COLBY (CC)
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HA: About the Museum, how it got started, the stories of the early years of the Museum, the really exciting early years, and what it is today.

EW: The gospel according to whom?

HA: That's a really good question. And what we're going to try to do—

EW: No two people agree.

HA: I know that. And we hope to have the disagreements.

EW: Alright, you've got it. [Laughter]

HA: We want to have all versions of the truth that are interesting. The ones that aren't interesting we don't want to have.

EW: Well, I can get you started, but I don't know if I can get you very far. And I'm full of ridiculous anecdotes.

HA: You started out with modern art back in the Harvard Society for Contemporary Art.

EW: Contemptible art, yes.

HA: What was that all about?

EW: That was Lincoln Kirstein, who had just gotten the true story. [Laughter] No, you don't get the true story from Lincoln. Lincoln has a fantasy that's beyond all belief. [Laughter] Am I near enough?

HA: You're fine. You don't have to worry, I've got you.

EW: Lincoln Kirstein's father was head of Filene's, my brother-in-law was head of Abraham & Straus. It turned out we both were—Lincoln and I were going to be in the same class, you must be nice to each other. That was enough to antagonize us immediately. [Laughter] But eventually we did get together in our freshman year, and in the bull sessions down in the freshman dorms, came the question of what do you do about being a patron of the arts. A musician gets his compositions, the symphony that he's been working on for three years, possibly played by the Boston Symphony, and they pay him a royalty for the one performance, if they play it at all. And that pays for nothing.

HA: Right.

EW: The artist who does the scenery and the décor or has an exhibition of paintings or whatever he is—the publicity for it and the cocktail party that goes with it wipes out any profit of the four pictures he sells, and he doesn't get anywhere. The dancer, if they believe in dancing, has one outlet, Radio City, at that time. What's the answer? How do these all get together? And Lincoln said, "Well, have you ever seen the ballet?" And I said, "No, I've never seen a ballet." "Well," he said, "I have. I've been over to see the Diaghilev, and if we could only get one guy by the name of [George] Balanchine; he's the only one who's got any prospect of a future in this game. If we can get him to come to America, then everybody could get a cut of the box office and we could get all of this coordinated." Lovely theory. Alright, in the fall, Lincoln met me in the country; called up and asked if he could come out and see me, and I said sure, of course he could. And he came out and he said, "Balanchine said he's ready to come over. And I'll pay his round-trip ticket, but he wants to bring his business manager. Will you pay for the business manager?" Stupidest statement I ever made is the one word "yes." And I got [Vladimir] Dimitriev, and Lincoln got Balanchine. Dimitriev, as soon as we came near a moment where there was a possibility of maybe employing these kids and maybe earning something, Dimitriev would pull us by Balanchine and himself, and say, "It's impossible; we cannot work for this amount of money." Well, it finally dawned on me that the one thing that I wanted which I didn't want—Lincoln suggested that I wanted—was on my birthday on June 5th, that my parents give me as a birthday present a performance of the ballet up in White Plains. We built a platform on the lawn in front of the house; the grass has never

grown back. And we had spotlights from the roof. My father walked around in an opera cape, feeling that this was completely decadent and wrong and all the rest of it, and why did you send me to the Fogg Art Museum if I was going to end up this way? [Laughter] And okay, the opening number was Serenade; a piano in the bushes, and as you know, it opens up with a whole group of them standing with their hands uplifted this way, and that was all that was needed for the clouds to open and a rain storm to come. [Laughter] Whereupon my mother said, and Lincoln jumped into the gap and said, "We will repeat the performance tomorrow night." My mother said, "You will repeat the performance? That's all very well, but how am I going to get a buffet together again tomorrow night?" Well, the guests were mostly, you know who they'd be, Virgil Thompson and all the rest of them, the various of the art world, and they ate themselves out of house and home, and then it was Saturday night, and where do you get Sunday another buffet? Well, mother somehow managed, and we did have the performance, and it was a—alright, it was the first performance. It was good. [Tape break] And there was bits of Mozartiana and various other things that started. Back to the school. We took in anybody in the school. We took in Eugene Byers' daughter because she was rich. The fact that she was built wrong to be a ballet dancer made no difference at all. [Laughter] And we had nobody of any quality except some very young kids. We joined up with various groups. Finally, Mirovich, who was the manager of the Don Cossack Choir and Chalyapin, "great man, great man;" we got as far as Harrisburg before he ran away with every cent that the box office yielded. And I was subpoenaed by god knows how many different—it was a transcontinental tour [that] we were meant to have and I was the nearest thing to an asset within miles. [Laughter] We came back and [Edward] Johnson at the Met took us on to do the ballets for the opera. There was a great moment there where Balanchine, who still hadn't learned very much English, was approached by Zachser[?] who was the director from The Ring, and he said, "Do you know [Richard] Wagner's opera the Rheingold?" And Balanchine said, "Da." He said, "In the opening scenes in the Metropolitan, the Rhein-maidens swim 90 feet above the ground. They are hung by their middle harness. I want that they should be ballet girls; one should be black haired, one should be brown haired..., whatever the other one is; there are three of them. He said, "They should be musical so they know how to swim. They should understand German

so they know when to swim. But above all, Mr. Balanchine, they must not vomit.”

[Laughter] It was that kind of a thing. We’d all dreamt that there might be an evening of a great thing. Well, let me just get back a little bit to the—people sent in ideas for ballets. They usually were yards of ticker-tape representing capitalism, none of these things ever worked. But then, you got together Balanchine, [Igor] Stravinsky and [Pavel] Tchelitchew, and it didn’t make a damn bit of difference what it was, it worked. There was a magic between them. And they spoke Russian to each other, and you never knew where you were, you didn’t know how much it was going to cost, you didn’t know anything about anything, but you said, “This is it,” and you were right, it was *it*. I said to Pavel Tchelitchew, “I hope you don’t consider it crude of me, seeing I’m financing this, what is the third act going to be?” And he said, “She climbs up this mountain in the back of the stage to the very top, and there is a precipice. And she turns around and she lets her hair down!” “Well,” I said, “we’re in.” [Laughter] I mean that’s—I was, really I was. Well, we put on a ballet at the Metropolitan Museum with Stravinsky conducting, the New York Philharmonic in the pit, Tchelitchew doing all the décor, and Balanchine doing the choreography, and our kids doing the dancing. The tickets were so expensive; there wasn’t a brain in the house. The only thing distinguished about the evening was probably—you know, everybody else goes out and has a tour of Hartford and Philadelphia and god knows what. You appeared before Olin Downes who considers it a sacrilege for anybody to *move* when music is being played. You know? [Laughter] And he’s the dance critic. [Laughter] And the only thing that was distinguished was the intermissions. Everybody said, “My dear, it’s divine; wonderful; heaven;” you know, all that. [Laughter] And before the performance began, I went down to notify the maestro, dear Igor, “Maestro, will you please conduct?” “I am not conducting.” I said, “Really? Why not?” And he said, “I have seen the program. The program says ‘Apollon, music by Igor Stravinsky.’” “Yes.” “It is wrong! It is ‘Apollon by Igor Stravinsky.’” So I said to the assistant conductor, “Would you mind taking over the podium?” Oh boy, was he beat to the door by Igor. [Laughter] He goes up and he took over the whole thing. Ah, in the early days, we started the Harvard Society for Contemporary Art. Mrs. [Mary Quinn] Sullivan, Mrs. [Lillie P.] Bliss, [and] Mrs. [Abby Aldrich] Rockefeller came up to see what we were doing and thought it was terribly nice. It was all, frankly, in

terms of ideas, it was all Lincoln. In terms of money it was all me. In terms of who was somebody's mother, it was all John Walker. Those were the three of us. He knew the genealogy of everybody, and he could get us into collections and into dealers and everything else. We were the first ones to put on shows of Sandy [Alexander] Calder, of Bucky [Buckminster] Fuller, and everything else. It was terribly fair. We did our homework at the desk, guarding the pictures, which was over the Harvard Coop. And we found out that it was much easier to have labels on pictures because people ask us questions, otherwise we would never get our work done. [Laughter] So when we showed a show of—who the hell would it be? [Joan] Miró, I decided to name the pictures, "The Absence of Mary Smith," and things like that, you see. [Laughter] And these old lorgnetted babes would look at this thing and say, "Hm, yes." And leave us alone, you know? And walk away. [Laughter] Alright. Lincoln *loved* to join things so he could resign. [Laughter]

HA: Sounds right. [Laughter]

EW: We had asked Alfred Barr; no. The three ladies came and asked Paul Sachs. They wanted to do the same thing *en gros* in New York; who would he suggest? And he said, Alfred Barr, who was doing grad work there, teaching at Wellesley. And Alfred Barr we had selected as our faculty advisor. And Alfred had returned the compliment to us when he went down there. By this time he had gotten Jere Abbott to join him. And he had put us on the Advisory Committee with Nelson [Rockefeller] and god knows how many other people. Well, this was sort of a farm league for the future trustees of the Museum. But Lincoln immediately got Ben Shahn to do something against Mr. [John D.] Rockefeller and Mr. [Thomas W.] Lamont and Mr. [J.P.] Morgan and everybody else from whom they expected to get great sums of money. This was a [Nicola] Sacco and [Bartolomeo] Vanzetti mural. And Nelson was very good about it, but just the same, Lincoln decided to resign in protest about something and he disappeared. Lincoln had one other interest, and that was Gaston Lachaise. And he got George L. K. Morris and he got me and he got a few others to back him, and a head of me was done by Lachaise.

RC: You did a show, didn't you, of Lachaise?

EW: No, The Museum of Modern Art did [[Gaston Lachaise: Retrospective Exhibition](#)].

RC: But then weren't you somewhat responsible for that show? Or was that done much later?

EW: No, I wasn't responsible for it; I lent a lot of objects to it because I was responsible for Lachaise. [Laughter] If I didn't buy something regularly, he would not eat. And I admire Lachaise, but he's very angry. He also did this.

RC: Is that what you do exercises with?

EW: Just this exercise. A beautiful thing.

HA: Yes it is, magnificent.

EW: But that was when he was still under the Paulanship influence. Okay; what was The Museum of Modern Art like? The Museum of Modern Art from the time that I knew it on was dominated by Alfred Barr. Now, I don't know what you want to do about Alfred Barr.

HA: We'd like to talk about him and what kind of a man he was. We're very interested to hear what you—

CC: Go ahead and don't even ask a question.

HA: Right, no questions. Tell us about Alfred Barr.

EW: Alfred Barr, I don't know why he wasn't Jewish. [Laughter] He was terribly interested in the extraordinary example of an artist who flourished in 1914 to 1917, but really never got anywhere, and this is a very good example of his abstract period; we *must* have it. And he catalogued things. And you didn't enjoy pictures down a vista. You studied them in sequence showing an evolution of something. He was a *cataloguer*, in a way. He was an enormous scholar, and he devoted as much time to how the letters Men, M-E-N, were written on the men's room as he did to an exhibition. And he got loused up by it. [Phone call from 0:17:45 to 0:18:00]. And he [phone rings again]

CC: Lincoln said he was like [Bernard] Berenson, as if he catalogued everything; it was like he learned the lesson of Berenson, or whatever.

EW: Well, I don't know where he learned it from, but the thing about it [was] he was a completely non-glandular experiencer of art. I don't think he got a kick out of anything in that sense.

RC: People have said that.

CC: He was analytical.

EW: He was didactic. I think the books he's written on it are the best things written on anything. He sweat like a pig over every possible juxtaposition and the little details that bothered him were just unbelievable.

CC: He was like a preacher rather than—

EW: Yes, very much a religious man.

HA: But art was his religion.

EW: Yes. And, but, I mean, the thing about it is, I had the *Blue Boy* of Picasso. The Tate put on a Picasso show. Alfred was asked to select the American Picassos. He chose not to select mine. Open season, okay, I understand. But when I came back from having been to the Tate and seen the exhibition and seen the only reproductions they were selling at the desk were the pictures of my *Blue Boy*. [Laughter] You see? I said to Alfred, "Just as a matter of interest, for god sakes, why didn't you choose the *Blue Boy*?" He said, "It was too pretty; it would have seduced the public." Well, I don't go along with that kind of thought. I mean, I don't get it.

CC: Because that's what got you interested in art in the first place, right? Is the emotional pull.

EW: Sure.

HA: He wanted to make it hard for the people.

EW: Oh sure. And we got along very well because he had a funny kind of a thing that he was surprised by humor. You'd tell him something, you know; he had that pickle face. [Laughter]

RC: We've got to at least get that on film.

HA: Absolutely! [Laughing] We have to get that on film. That's fabulous!

EW: But I mean aw hell, what the hell. It was all so complicated. Then we went up into the Heckscher Building and we had exhibitions and it became a thing where the Trustees thought it would be wonderful—let's get our [Paul] Cezannes together; let's get our [Paul] Gauguins together, let's get our [Georges] Seurats together. And then came a terrible moment; Alfred injected a painting that no one had in their collection. [Laughter] You know, this *couldn't* be any good; *none* of us have collected it. And gradually he tried to broaden our vision.

RC: What was the painting? Who was the artist?

EW: I don't remember.

CC: But it was their ball game. It was the Trustees' ball game in the beginning?

EW: Well, ye-e-e-s, yes, yes, pretty much. There was hardly a name in New York City that wasn't in it. One of the things that killed me about it was, they used to have the meetings in the top floor of the Museum, and they had a table with a drawer that went all the way through. And Sam Lewisohn sat opposite me, and he had three hairs here, on his nose. And he twiddled them. [Laughter] And this somehow induced sleep. [Laughter] And Sam would go wildly to sleep, and somebody would ask, "Agreeable? All in favor please say aye." And I'd go zip, with the drawer, and hit him in the gut, and he'd go, "A-oh-aye, aye, yes; aye." [Laughter] But it was cozy in those days.

RC: It sounds like—

HA: It was a club.

EW: It was a club; it was cozy. Every night was opening night at an amateur theatrical show. The catalogue wasn't ready. The labels hadn't been put on. The paint wasn't dry on the walls. Everybody was in a state of things, and we opened to one success after another. Except when the Trustees interfered and we got a Maurice Sterne [[Maurice Stern: Retrospective Exhibition](#)], we flopped. That's Sam Lewisohn, Maurice was buddies with him.

CC: So Alfred was good at this.

EW: Yes. Look, the history will record him as being the greatest. I mean, there's no question about it. But it's a different kind of a greatness. I'd love to see him—a

John Russell type of approach to the thing, in which you teach people to enjoy art, and not somebody to go and decide whether it is the third version of the second version and whether they don't have a bigger one or something else somewhere else.

CC: He made it all too academic.

EW: He did.

RC: Well he set out the course, I mean, while he was there.

EW: Yes, but he also had a concept of a museum with film and—which hadn't been done before. I mean, you've got to realize, at that time—I think I'm right in this statement—I don't think there was a [Vincent] van Gogh in a public museum.

HA: We came across a clipping from a Milwaukee newspaper that said, "Maniacs Paintings to be Exhibited at the Met Museum."

EW: Oh sure. I mean, they were still very much under the—The Armory and [Alfred] Stieglitz, and then, sort of, MoMA.

CC: What was the atmosphere here? Pretty controversial? Did people think you were crazy to be promoting these pictures and liking these pictures?

EW: Well, I had the great Lachaise of the woman standing, Madame Lachaise always, but I mean, standing this way at the doorway. And my mother walked into it and said, "I take it as a personal insult," and walked out again. [Laughter] I mean, there was that kind of stuff. There was a world that didn't understand. Then it became *much* worse, which is what it is now, and that is, "Isn't it all too *marvelous*." Absolutely it's "in." And you go out to dinner and you see the right names and the wrong pictures on every wall. [Laughter]

CC: Absolutely. Lincoln even said, he goes to a Park Avenue, Fifth Avenue, any address; he goes up the elevator. Every time he stops at a floor they've got a bad [Henri] Matisse or a bad, you know, [Édouard] Vuillard, or a bad this or that. He thinks of it as just money. Was he all that anti the money aspect, that it created its own giant market and all? Or was it more a question of taste for him?

EW: [Laughing] As long as he had me, he didn't worry about the money. [Laughter] That was the tragedy of the thing. Then, I don't know where Lincoln got the

money from, because his father and mother kept him on a pretty short rein, and then they both died. And I guess that's where he got the money. And I want to say that any art education I ever got academically was from Lincoln. He was more articulate, more understanding and more patient. He was extraordinarily patient about saying—I said, “Why in god's name everybody has the *Rape of Europa* up in the [Isabella Stuart] Gardner collection, as one of the great works of art,” I said, “It's the most uncomfortable picture I've ever seen. She's slipping off the rear end of the bull, and nobody's comfortable; it's a very unpleasant picture. And so what that the colors are fine. I just think it's an awful concept. And I don't know why it gets all the big hand and all the—Chandler [Rathfon] Post and everybody else raves about it.” And then he broke it down and showed me why, and I think now—I don't think I'd ever like the *Rape of Europa*, I don't think I like the picture, but I think I understand it. I think I understand a lot of things that happen. Well, all this world, with Philip Johnson—I got him his first job, to do my apartment before he was an architect.

HA: He did your apartment?

EW: Yes. It looked like a dairy. [Laughter]

HA: Before or after?

EW: When you went in the bathroom you didn't expect to find the usual fixtures, you expected to find a separator. [Laughter]

RC: It was all stainless steel and uncomfortable, right?

EW: It had pigskin leather.

HA: Oh yes, very Bauhaus.

EW: Yes, and I got mat burns on my elbows, very uncomfortable. [Laughter] No, I don't know. Well, anyhow, what do you want?

HA: Well, you're giving us what we want.

CC: How about as the thirties went on, how did it begin to separate out? Did Barr become just a little bit too high priest or whatever?

EW: Barr became impossible and was relegated to being curator of the paintings.

RC: How did he become impossible?

EW: Because he tried to take on too much. He was interfering in everything. He was trying to run the Film Library, trying to run the Library, trying to run the acquisitions of paintings and drawings, and he was getting in everybody's hair. Nobody worked for him. And finally we said: Listen. Sit down, take it easy, and just write, and be the curator of painting.

RC: But then René d'Harnoncourt brought him back in.

EW: Well, René d'Harnoncourt was the wonderful liaison officer between him and the Board. An adorable man, and it was completely out of his field. I mean, he was an anthropologist. But he got along with Alfred, and they respected each other, and that was it. And he kept the staff from going nuts, and Alfred quiet. But I mean, when you look at the Board with Rockefellers, Paleys, Stephen Clark; I mean, it was the works.

HA: There was evidently some very bad blood between Stephen Clark and Alfred Barr.

EW: Yes. Well, I mean, Alfred would come and say, "Can I see your collection? I'd like to tell you which I'd like you to reserve to leave to the Modern." Well, he would leave out the favorites of everybody's collection, you know, and that didn't make for friends. And he did that with Clark.

HA: So he liked the wrong pictures, as far as Clark was concerned?

CC: Barr had the audacity and the arrogance, I guess, to come and judge everybody's eye.

EW: Yes. And who the hell said that he was going to get them anyhow?

HA: In Clark's case, he didn't.

CC: They're Clark's pictures.

EW: Yes.

CC: How about as things progressed, do you look at it as very bemused now? Do you think that it's a big institution and to hell with it?

EW: Well, the thing about it, they have a glorious tactlessness. When I became a Regent of the State of New York, I resigned as being on the Board of the Modern because the Modern gets its charter from the Regents. Nelson thought nothing about that, being the governor of the state, but I had to get off. Then I came, 19 years later, I came back. But this time it was in the hands of [William] Paley and things, and there wasn't anything to stop them putting me back on the Board. But they made me honorary, which is a terribly nice way of keeping you upstairs. And I said to Blanchette [Rockefeller], "Tell me, can I help make a quorum?" "No." "Can I vote?" "No." "Can I join in the discussion?" "Well, if it's not contentious." [Laughter] "Well," I said, "Well, Jesus, what the hell do you want me at the meetings for?" "Well, I thought you'd be interested." And I said, "I can read that from the notes, the minutes that are sent around." And that kind of thing got me crazy. And now it's too damn fashionable, and the openings are all—everybody goes there the way they used to go to the opera, dressed in extreme costumes and everything else. And no one looks at pictures, and no one cares very much. I'm always happiest with the staff. I'm not happy with the—

RC: And you're happy with the current staff? Are you in touch with people or aware of what they're—?

EW: Yes, we all gather. I went on the staff of the Met after that, and there I really was happy, and then they did the very thing—they made me honorary there, too. So now I'm a complete eunuch. [Laughter]

RC: You're still a young Turk. I remember, in Russell Lynes' book [*Good Old Modern: An Intimate Portrait of The Museum of Modern Art*] there's a chapter heading—

EW: The young Turks.

RC: Conger Goodyear or the Trustees liked the young Turks, that you were so fabulous and that all took—and now everybody's spectacular and it doesn't hold any water any more. The shock of the new, there isn't any.

EW: Whatever you want me to do, I'll do. Jump through hoops and everything else for dear old MoMA. But I'm in a spot, I've got a guy coming at 3:30 today.

HA: Oh, that's alright.

RC: That's fine.

HA: What we really wanted to do is what we did. We talked to you, we got a sense of who you are and how you talk, and you're going to be terrific.

EW: I am! [Laughter]

HA: Yes.

EW: My modesty is something *extraordinary*.

HA: Yes. In a couple of months we're going to call you up and we're going to want to bring our cameras.

EW: Fine.

RC: Can I ask one more favor of you?

EW: Please.

RC: Would you mind my taking a Polaroid for our director who is up in Rockport, Maine so we can show all the people we've been talking to? [Laughter] And you could do Alfred Barr's face, that was funny. [Laughter]

EW: Do you want me next to my portrait?

RC: Oh yes, sure.

EW: Which one's got the [INAUDIBLE: 0:33:07]? [Laughter]

END OF INTERVIEW at 0:33:09