

INTERVIEW WITH: PHILIP JOHNSON (PJ)
INTERVIEWER: LYNN ZELEVANSKY (LZ)
LOCATION:
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BEGIN Sound Recording #2000.28

LZ: Let me put it to you this way. To cut to the chase, was the Museum slow on abstract expressionism?

PJ: No.

LZ: No, you don't think so?

PJ: Oh, on the contrary. Alfred Barr wanted ___ Museum ___

LZ: Yeah.

PJ: But Alfred Barr was interested in the very early days, and that's when I bought my first Rothko and my first Kline ___. But he was very interested in Pollock long before I was.

LZ: Right. And I know you sort of had to buy a Rothko for a museum, at a certain point, if the museum was going to have it, because they couldn't get

PJ: If they were going to have one ___.

LZ: Yeah.

PJ: ___

LZ: Yeah. But in terms of trustee opposition, is that something – do you think that they were hampered by that?

PJ: ___ No. ___ coming to me the way he did ___ Jasper Johns ___

LZ: Right. Was Johns resisted also, in the same way?

PJ: ___

LZ: Yeah, right, of course.

PJ: ___ crazy ___

LZ: Right, yeah, yeah.

PJ: ___ me to get that and also with the German ___ made me get it ___

LZ: Mm-hm, mm-hm.

PJ: Alfred was always ___. Now the trustees, as you know, ___. ___ Alfred ___. ___ institution ___ [0:01:45]

LZ: Yeah. Yeah, that's an interesting point. In terms of purchases.

PJ: In terms of purchases, ___ general ___

LZ: And certainly nobody bought a Pollock earlier than MoMA did because *Shewolf* came into the collection in '44.

PJ: ___

LZ: Yeah, very early on. But I guess the question is, I guess the extent and the nature of that support. For example, there wasn't an exhibition devoted to abstract expressionism until *The New American Painting* came, and it didn't come to New York until '59. And I know that the artists, of course, were unhappy about that, but there's a question about whether you could ever do enough for artists, too. [0:02:35]

PJ: Well, I'm prejudiced. According to me, he did everything he could.

LZ: Yeah.

PJ: ___. And you're right, there was ___.

LZ: Right.

PJ: ___

LZ: Right, yeah, ___

PJ: American ___

LZ: Right, right.

PJ: ___ American ___ and cubism ___ were all against ___. And me, including me. I didn't ___

LZ: Oh really?

PJ: ___ like that

LZ: Yeah, which is the

PJ: And then we had a show ___ Pollock ___

LZ: Marilyn ___

PJ: ___ large painting

LZ: Right. She did that show.

PJ: And that was just called art. ___ didn't say ___. ___ a piece of marble that scale. ___ didn't like the scale ___. ___ considering Picasso avant-garde ___. But I remember Alfred ___ [0:03:50]

LZ: Well, let me ask you something else. In terms of Dorothy Miller, I find that it's almost seamless, her opinions and Barr's opinions. It's virtually seamless. I can't tell where one began

PJ: I can't either. ___

LZ: So it was always like that.

PJ: ___.

LZ: Was she a powerful person inside the Museum?

PJ: No, she was Alfred's ___.

LZ: Right.

PJ: ___ she represented him and of course that's very strong,

LZ: Right.

PJ: But she herself never ___

LZ: Right. Right. That is the impression I have.

PJ: She ___.

LZ: I think so. I actually have an interview that I did with her when I was a graduate student in 1985, which has a few little interesting things. But I think that it is, I think she's not well enough at this point.

PJ: She became more influential later, as the later shows went out. ___. All the early ___.[0:04:55]

LZ: Right. And I mean, I actually found some telling correspondence where he's writing to her in Europe and saying, sort of desperately, 'I need three people to recommend for this, three contemporary Americans to recommend for something, quick.' [laughing] You know. So I mean I think that she definitely had opinions, but it is very difficult to tell. And the American shows themselves, which started in '42 and went to '63,

PJ: Did they start in '42?

LZ: They started in '42 with a show called *Americans 1942: 18 Artists from 9 States*.

PJ: ___

LZ: No New Yorkers. Yes, that was the first one.

PJ: ___

LZ: Yes, well I guess it was the enthusiasm for the WPA, perhaps,

PJ: Yes.

LZ: That would have dictated that.

PJ: ___

LZ: Yeah, yeah. And do you have a sense of the importance of those exhibitions?

PJ: Not that one. ___?

LZ: Yeah.

PJ: ___ [0:06:06]

LZ: And it was generally appreciated both inside and ___

PJ: By everybody. It was a public ___. Because there was enough that they could get, enough ___ appreciate ___ more extreme ___

LZ: Yes.

PJ: ___ very clever ___

LZ: It was probably the only way to do an

PJ: The only way it could ___

LZ: To get advanced American art in, at that point, was to bury it.

PJ: ___

LZ: Yeah, yeah.

PJ: ___

LZ: Yes.

PJ: ___ a show like that. ___

LZ: Yes.

PJ: In those days, that was the way to get ___. ___. ___.

LZ: Yes, it is very hard. And I'm sure whatever she felt, she ran everything by Barr anyway.

PJ: ___

LZ: Yeah. So it's virtually invisible.

PJ: ___

LZ: Yeah. I don't want to take up too much of your time, and I think that those are, I mean,

PJ: ___

LZ: Right. Okay, well, if there's anything else you can think of.

PJ: I will. I certainly ___

LZ: Thank you very

END Philip Johnson at 0:07:24