INTERVIEW WITH: SIDNEY JANIS (SJ)

INTERVIEWER: LYNN ZELEVANSKY (LZ)

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LZ: Yes, I mean, who was collecting and what institutions were offering support, and what kind of support.

SJ: Very little.

LZ: That's what I gathered.

SJ: __

LZ: That's what I gathered. You began as a writer, didn't you?

SJ: Yes, as a collector.

LZ: Okay, as a collector. As a collector of stuff other than abstract expressionism?

SJ: In 1926 there was no abstract expressionism.

LZ: Right. Okay.

SJ: We began collecting, the first picture we bought, which was Matisse, and over the years bought things that held up to the quality of that Matisse that we had bought. And after something like twenty years of collecting, I began to write.

LZ: Mm-hm. Did you have a background in art? Why did you start collecting?

SJ: Well, it's a long story. And I think that The Museum of Modern Art in their book on the Janis collection gift to the Museum that they published ten years ago,

LZ: Okay, will have a lot of that information?

SJ: Answers __[0:01:20]

LZ: Okay. Let me ask you specifically, then, about abstract expressionism. You began by collecting it before you wrote about it; is that correct?

SJ: Let me see. [pause] That really isn't correct. We began collecting it after we opened our gallery. Remember, we opened our gallery in '48. Abstract expressionism really didn't exist then as a term, as a name, although Pollock began his first stain paintings in '46. But Rothko didn't begin until 1950,

LZ: Right.

SJ: '49, and Franz Kline also, '49 and '50. So for the time we opened our gallery, there wasn't really a New York School or an abstract expressionist school. De Kooning and Pollock came with us in 1951. We began putting on one-man shows of their work, yearly. And gradually, Rothko and Kline and Motherwell and Guston and others joined the gallery. By the time abstract expressionism was known and critics were writing about it, it might have been ten years after our gallery was opened. And it also was referred to as the New York School.

LZ: Right. Yes.

SJ: Abstract expressionism got its impetus from the artists in exile. And you'll find that __[0:03:00]

LZ: Right, right.

SJ: And the exchange of ideas that went, the artists in exile, Duchamp and Breton, Ernst and Mondrian and Léger, were various, and they had, they met at parties and so forth, and they met the young American artists, Pollock and so on. And their ideas rubbed off on these younger artists.

LZ: Who was collecting the abstract expressionists at the time that you began showing their work? Were there many collectors?

SJ: Oh, you could count them on almost one finger, really.

LZ: [laughing] One finger?

SJ: Yes. The Museum of Modern Art, Alfred Barr had a small budget, you know, with which to collect, a couple hundred dollars was his maximum that he could pay. And I don't remember whether Alfred Barr, well, nothing was bought the first –

the first two – I remember this distinctly. The first two years we were in business, nothing __.[0:04:09] With Picasso __ or with American artists. At the very offset of 1948, we were putting on exhibitions of Kandinsky and Léger and Klee and people like that. In the early '50s, we put on one-man shows that were later to be called abstract expressionism. And from time to time we would hang their things, juxtapose them to the works of older artists, older European artists. So there isn't very much to report in the first years of, the end of the 1940s. By mid-fifty, we had done exhibitions every year, and a few collectors came along, one from Chicago, and maybe one or two from New York, but they really weren't active collectors. They were getting their toes wet, but a Pollock picture the size of a wall, was priced at $2,500.

LZ: Right.

SJ: And didn't sell.

LZ: This was in the mid '50s?

SJ: Yeah, in the mid '50s.

LZ: So, Leo Castelli said that the abstract expressionists started making money when you took over. But it doesn't sound like that's the case.

SJ: Not immediately, no. Pollock borrowed money from us, and de Kooning, too. We had to do something. At one time, one of the artists said to me, "Why don't you buy my work, and then I'll have some money to live on?" I said, "Well, if we did that, we would be in direct competition with you, because the things that we would buy, we would offer for sale. And the things that you are working on now, wouldn't sell." So we lent them money instead. And that was a more constructive thing to do. And by about the latter part of 1950s, we had a good experience with de Kooning, and later with Franz Kline, and their shows began to sell.

LZ: This was in the mid to late '50s, you would say?

SJ: I would say after '56.

LZ: After '56.

SJ: Yes, if you pull a number out of a hat, after ’56. And by the time, by the early ‘60s, they were making big money. Because I wasn’t bashful about asking or raising their prices every year. And so, when we say, respecting prices, some of the artists reached as high as thirty, not more, Franz Kline, and de Kooning, reached a level of around $30,000. Let me see now. Jackson Pollock died in

LZ: ’56.

SJ: ’56? He died poor.

LZ: Yeah.

SJ: No sales. Lee came in, Lee Pollock, Krasner, came in about six months before Pollock died and said, “You know, Jackson isn’t doing any work. And you’re asking $1,500 for that big picture, and we want to do something about it. It’s too cheap.” I said, “Well, we’re not selling it at $1,500, but I’ll do whatever you say.” “So move it up to $2,000.”

LZ: Did it sell at $2,000?

SJ: I can answer to that. The man who was thinking about it at $1,500 didn’t buy it because he didn’t have a wall big enough for it. And

LZ: Is that Number One at the Modern?

SJ: Oh no, that was 26 feet. No, it was a picture about twelve feet wide and about three feet high. __.[0:08:35] Another person who had priced it at $1,500 and came back six months later and it was $2,000, and she raised a terrible fuss. She was buying it for $2,000, and she was being taken for a ride.

LZ: [laughing] Yeah.

SJ: I’d like to have it back today for a million.

LZ: Right, I’m sure that’s true.

SJ: So, the abstract expressionists had no affluence, really, in the ‘50s, not until the late ‘50s, later ‘50s. And Pollock died in ’56. There’s another reason why, and I’ve written about it, and that is, Pollock died in ’56. It was a kind of a romantic death, you know, __[0:09:23] death. And it brought to attention the fact that there was a group of painters who were working and all of the painters, de Kooning

included, sort of rode in on Jackson's coattails when it came to pricing their works. Because Lee Pollock and we immediately raised the price. The Museum was considering the one that you mentioned, at the Met, that one. I'll tell you the story on it. The Museum of Modern Art had an option to buy that picture at $8,000, and the committee wouldn't go for it.

LZ: This was Number One? The painting Number One? Or is it Autumn Rhythm at the Met?

SJ: That's the one I mean, the one at the Met, that we sold to Hale __[0:10:20] years ago. The Number One, I bought, is another story.

LZ: Okay.

SJ: And when Alfred came back after Jackson died, and I said, "You know, Lee has moved up the price again, it's now $30,000." And he almost dropped dead. [LZ laughs] Nothing happened. And we sold it to Hale, who was the curator of American art at the Metropolitan at that time, very much in tune with the painters because he lived in Easthampton and __.[0:10:57] And Pollock lived there and de Kooning, and so he was buying those artists and paying a good price. And we got our $30,000 __.

LZ: Eugene Thaw told me that Lee Krasner had to take back another Pollock for $12,000 in order to get the Met to take the *Autumn Rhythm* for $30,000.

SJ: That's right. __ trade __.[0:11:24] They owned the black and white, a big black and white, and they didn't want to have two, and so they sent it back. And we sold it to someone else. But they paid the $30,000. Most of the credit that we gave them __. They probably bought that black and white one from us for $1,500. On the other picture that's at The Museum of Modern Art, that I gave The Museum of Modern Art, I sold that picture to Ben Heller. He was an early collector.

LZ: I thought Ben Heller had.

SJ: And we sold it to him for $8,000, and he paid over a period of time. He was very conservative about his paintings. And that was the highest price that we got for a Pollock during his lifetime. And I eventually bought it back from Heller at, I think

it was $350,000, and I gave it to The Museum of Modern Art. And they consider that the most important picture __.[12:35] So, that was the story on that.

LZ: Was the idea of an American art, that this was an American art, was that an important idea in the beginning?

SJ: No, it wasn't important at all. There was no such thing as American art. Never had been. With isolated artists like Harnett here, Copley there, Eakins in another place, you know, there was no "American art." The artists who were influenced by the Armory show, like Sheeler and Demuth and people like that, they were single artists working alone and doing nothing. Sheeler was a photographer; he made his money doing photography; Demuth made his money in illustration.

LZ: But was there a sense that this was American art in the sense of finally writing the great American novel, that this was great American painting for the first time on a large scale?

SJ: Yes, but that came after the artists in exile infiltrated our culture; you know?

LZ: Yes.

SJ: And it really burst upon the scene, I would say, somewhere between '45 and '50. Right about 1950, most of the __ artists had reached their __[0:14:20], including Newman and Still. I was in California in 1945 and '46, and Clyfford Still was doing very ordinary kind of deserted landscapes, cliffs and things of that sort, not recognized as such __. But later on, some of these artists began dating their pictures like the French did __.

LZ: I know Still did that. I know Still is notorious for having done that.

SJ: Still, because Still was teaching at, it was California School of Art, and I was in San Francisco __.[0:15:08] And I spent some time with Still and Rothko, and they were both [tape break?] And Rothko was doing surrealist things, you know, sort of amorphic, linear things. And Still was doing these sort of cliff landscapes, you know, Indian __. He didn't call it that. Then later on, those 1946, '47, were dated '43, and others were dated '46 and '47. [LZ laughs]

LZ: How supportive was The Museum of Modern Art to the abstract expressionists? And how important was whatever support they gave?

SJ: Well, I think Alfred personally was very supportive, but there was a committee there. Everything had to go through the committee, and the committee of trustees, like Conger Goodyear, people like that, and Sam Lewisohn, they were brought up with impressionist and early paintings of Picasso's generation. And how could they be influenced to buy something as strange as American art, in the face of what Picasso and Léger and Braque were doing; you know? So there was a natural, built-in resistance. And Alfred Barr was younger, and he was ahead of them in his days. But we have the same thing today. There's a great __[0:16:53] with so much pluralism, you know. A museum director, a lot of them have an older board of trustees to convince, and to come and show them some of the work of two or three years ago, Schnabel and people like that, you had an Eskimo's chance of getting them to accept any of it.

LZ: Yes. I see. So it really was functioning the same way then.

SJ: Exactly. Even more so, much more so. The museum, Albright art gallery, I was just reading, __[0:17:30] They bought a Picasso in 1906, a very classic Picasso, a girl holding a mirror, in kind of Ingres tradition, and the trustees at the Albright Knox were up in arms against that picture for years. They didn't want to hang it. A picture that we look at today and it's just as classic as anything that was done in the 19th century. It wasn't in the eyes of these people, who were buying Monet.

LZ: Right. So when did the Museum really start to feel – when did the abstract expressionists become acceptable?

SJ: Well, you can't hardly pinpoint that because I wasn't at the Museum. I only know that when Alfred Barr came in, he used to visit us on Saturdays, and later on with Dorothy Miller, and they would pick up a Franz Kline here, or a __[0:18:30] there, never a carload of pictures, always the same old picture with hold, long pause and long hesitation before it was acquired. But I would say that the '50s, by the '50s, Alfred probably was working with a little more freedom than in the '40s.

LZ: What was the impact of the critical dialogue that surrounded the work? I'm thinking about Rosenberg and Greenberg. What was the impact of that in terms of – did that affect the work and did it affect the sales at all? Did it have any effect at all on general acceptance of the work?

SJ: Well, it didn't have any effect on sales because the sales were so nominal. It's hard to say. I was all the time was interested in what was being published in art, and I think that the man that really did more – you probably have a record of __[0:19:50] -- and that was the art critic on the *New Yorker* by the name of Coates.

LZ: Coates, Robert Coates.

SJ: Robert Coates. When Robert Coates wrote something, __. And he was __. [0:20:08]

LZ: And he was supportive of the abstract expressionists, generally.

SJ: Quite. And he wrote for about five or six or eight years for the *New Yorker*, and then he retired. And he was very receptive to what the young artists were doing. And he gave them __. There's another man who did writing for *PM*, I think kind of a leftist paper, and that was __[Channon? 0:20:40]. I can't think of his first name now. His widow still lives on Central Park West; she's an art dealer. And Shannon [?] used to write for, after the *PM* he wrote for the paper like the *Post*, some paper, I don't know what it was called. I remember one day he came in and he said to me, "You know, my editors are giving me hell because they think that I'm in your pay because I'm covering your gallery. And I told them they'd have to tell Janis not to put on those good shows." He died many years ago. Then there's another fellow, before that, who was really dear to them all because he got started at the time of the Armory show. (Oh, Jimmy; is it on? Is he coming up? Did you test it? Okay, well, thanks a lot for doing it.) It was Henry McBride. Henry McBride was a friend of all the French artists. He knew Duchamp personally and Walter Ansberg. And he was, wrote for the *Sun* for many years. He was a __,[0:22:20] a beautiful writer. He knew about the theater, and the ballet, and literature. He was, you know, a well known, cultured gentleman. He lived to be about 96. And he came to the gallery at the openings of our exhibition in 1948, I remember. Very receptive to our shows and kept me, you know, __[0:22:50] for the next 50 years. So, that's the answer to your question. He was really the first – there was no abstract expressionism at the time. At the time of Coates, there was. Greenberg wrote for sort of esoteric papers, and with a small readership, *Partisan Review* and a few more.

LZ: Right. Was there a point at which, if you weren't in – I always hear this spoken of rather elusively, that there was a point at which if you weren't in Greenberg's favor, you wouldn't be able to show in certain places, or, that he had a lot of power in those terms?

SJ: Yes, and he wielded it, too. He was quite set on his things. And he had a big influence __[0:23:45] collectors, I think. But he wasn't well read because he didn't really write for, in publications that had big circulation, you know.

LZ: I see. But you think he did influence collectors. Or is this later on? Are we talking about later now? Like late '50s.

SJ: Oh, at the very beginning, no; no one could influence collectors. Later on, you know, in the '50s and in the '60s, he became, if he said something, people listened to him. He wasn't always right, but that's okay.

LZ: Yeah. Irving Sandler, in the book, *The Triumph of American Painting*, he says that as soon as the early '50s, that soon, when a certain kind of, if it wasn't financial success, at least media notoriety hit the abstract expressionist community, that all these petty jealousies started to flare up, and it sort of destroyed the community. And that the artists themselves, the successful artists themselves felt a certain amount of guilt because of their anti-bourgeois stand.

SJ: Not that early. [0:24:55] I used to go to all of the Eighth Street dances they had once every two weeks or something like that. And that was in the, before I opened my gallery. It was in the middle '40s, after the exiles left. They began meeting at Eighth Street, the gallery, I think it was called Eighth Street Studio; Club.

LZ: The Club.

SJ: Some of the artists __[0:25:35] were there, and gave talks on art, the ones who could talk. And we had these evening parties, and all of the artists came, and they were very friendly. There was great camaraderie. That was before 1948, so that was before, and after 1948, so that was before they were recognized. If petty jealousies entered into it, I think they were only superficial. Pollock and de Kooning always had scraps. But they were friendly scraps; you know? They were vying for number one. And they'd get half drunk and they'd wrestle around,

you know, and hurt each other, and then call the truce. But they admired each other. Anyway, they weren't jealous of each other. Was Picasso jealous of Matisse? I suppose he was, or vice versa. It's hard to say. __[0:26:40] the work of any of the artists concerned.

LZ: What about the kind of ideology that was behind the abstract expressionists? You know, the famous letter that Gottlieb and Rothko wrote to the *Times*, and that the only subject matter that's worthwhile is subject matter that's tragic and timeless. And the sense that artists do, I mean, even today, artists take an anti-bourgeois stand. I mean, sometimes they're kidding themselves about it, but that stand seems to be a prerequisite.

SJ: They wrote that letter quite later. __.[0:27:14]

LZ: Yeah.

SJ: They wrote that after they went with the gallery, and probably after they left the gallery. They left the gallery in '61, when we did in our Pop show.

LZ: No, this letter was much earlier than that.

SJ: Well, Gottlieb was always writing letters.

LZ: Uh-huh; yeah. But did that kind of philosophy, the underpinnings of the work, did that affect their feelings about success? Did that make it difficult for them to accept? I have the sense that there's a catch-22 in this whole thing, that you can't live without being successful, but maybe you can't live with being successful either.

SJ: I can't answer that. I know that there's always a defensive argument on the part of the vanguard artists, you know, because they weren't – they accepted themselves but they weren't accepted on the outside. And they did these things from time to time and they defended their position against all incriminations against them. So I really don't get into that ideology too much. The artists themselves were concerned about making their way economically; that was the most important thing. And later on, they were making it economically, and some of them repeated what they had already done, you know, this works and why not. There's a big temptation there, on the part of an artist who doesn't __[0:29:00] and feels that he must eventually pander to a certain taste in order to maintain

his income. But I'm not really prepared to discuss that situation. What other quotes have you got there?

LZ: Well, I don't have any other.

SJ: I think the Sandler thing is very __.[0:29:23] He has a sharp eye and he was always, you know, for years very; it's interesting. Maybe twenty years.

LZ: Yeah, I'm sure. I have a question for you that has to do with your position in the whole thing. Right now, I mean, I've worked as a critic for I guess about five years.

SJ: You write for the art magazines?

LZ: I wrote for *ArtNews* for, just doing regular reviews, up until a year and a half ago.

SJ: After Tom Hess left.

LZ: Yes, it was after. I wish it weren't, but it was.

SJ: Tom Hess did a good job. He recognized de Kooning early. He was friendly when he recognized de Kooning before de Kooning became abstract.

LZ: Mm-hm.

SJ: He was one of the few.

LZ: What about today? Critics are under a certain amount of pressure not to buy art. I mean, plenty of them do, but it's generally frowned upon. The idea is that if you write about art, you shouldn't be buying it, because of the temptation to write about the people you're buying, to enhance all of your.

SJ: There's a long story on that. I mean, many years ago, that, especially when I was writing the book on abstract and surrealist art, many of the artists that I had selected independently, after the book came out said, "Look. You like my work. Why don't you take my picture as a a gift." And I said, "I can't do that." [interruption] Excuse me. [0:31:05, tape break]

LZ: Okay, we were talking about the relationship of writing and collecting and whether they were

SJ: One influenced the other? I think it's inevitable that collectors will read something favorable about an artist which they might be influenced to buy because of a favorable comment. Or the fact that it's reproduced in a magazine in color.

LZ: But we were talking about, you were saying, you said you did a show, or you did the book about surrealism and the Surrealists wanted to give you paintings.

SJ: Oh yes.

LZ: And you said you couldn't do that.

SJ: Well, I simply said to the abstract and surrealist artists that offered, and many of them did: "Listen, you like my work, it's in the book, I'd like you to have the picture," to make a gift of it. I said, "I can't do that," because if I did that, then, and we didn't hang it, and if the artists friends came to visit us we'd have to scramble around and hang it and all that, and so I think. That was one reason. The other reason was, of course, and a much more important one, was the fact that I didn't want to set a precedent. It gets around that, you know, Greenberg took pictures.

LZ: Oh yes?

SJ: I remember one time Motherwell was there, he just forgot about it. But I don't think it's a good idea. Greenberg didn't have a steady income, and you know, he sold off his pictures, I suppose, over the years. And I think that, for an author or a critic, when you start it, __.[0:32:45]

LZ: Yeah.

SJ: It's not a good idea because eventually it reflects on one's character. You know?

LZ: As far as the abstract expressionists that you represented are concerned, did they leave the gallery as a result of Pop art coming in?

SJ: Definitely. Pollock and Franz Kline were dead; they never would have left, I know that. But de Kooning didn't leave. But the other, Gottlieb and Motherwell made a whole new propaganda around the thing; they didn't want to be associated with Johnnys-come-lately. And they were perfectly happy to be hung side-by-side with Léger and Braque.

LZ: [laughing] Yes.

SJ: But __[0:33:35]

LZ: What about Rothko?

SJ: He went along with them.

LZ: And Newman? Did you represent Newman?

SJ: No.

LZ: You didn't represent Newman.

SJ: Rothko went along with Motherwell and, and Guston, too. They simply said that they couldn't take it, and they thought we were going downhill.

LZ: Mm-hm. And they felt that it didn't, I mean, that concept of the subject as being tragic and timeless, that Pop art didn't reflect that same belief, I guess.

SJ: Well, this is certainly contrary to the abstract expressionism work,

LZ: Right.

SJ: __[0:34:20] in the New York School at that time. But I think it was short-sighted on their part. In the first place, as I said one weekend that I spent with Gottlieb when this kind of thing was happening, "But Adolph, you don't have anything to worry about. Your things are $10,000 and their things are $1,000. There's no competition there."

LZ: Right. Right. Where did they go? Who did they go to?

SJ: They spread around to different places. I think Marlborough got one or two of them.

LZ: They certainly got Rothko.

SJ: Not immediately __.[0:34:57] But, oh, Rothko left the gallery at that time, with the group, but he said that he was going to do, he can do it himself. Why should he -- We were getting as high as $30,000 for the big Rothkos. Why should he give $10,000 commission, when he can have the whole thirty? So I said, "Well Mark, you know what's going to happen? It'll take your time away from your painting.

You're going to lose out on all your pictures. You'll also __ discouragement when you start handling collectors." That's exactly __.[0:35:35]

LZ: I'm sure.

SJ: That's exactly the way it happened. __Then when Marlborough came along and offered him a million dollars for them, a certain number of pictures, he was very happy to take it.

LZ: What year did they leave the gallery?

SJ: '62, 1962. And it's ironic that selling the Pop, the artists are getting a lot more than the abstract expressionists.

LZ: Today, yes.

SJ: Look at Johns.

LZ: Yeah, yeah.

SJ: But I think that the abstract expressionists deserve the international recognition that they have. I think that Pollock is the most important image-maker of the 20th century, and certainly in American art. And Rothko and de Kooning, fine; they're top international figures.

LZ: I don't have any more questions. If there's anything else you think that I should know about .

SJ: No, there isn't, and you'll have to excuse me because I've got to meet

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END OF INTERVIEW