

**THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM**

**INTERVIEW WITH: OLIVE BRAGAZZI (OB)**

**INTERVIEWER: SHARON ZANE (SZ)**

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**BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE 1**

SZ: Olive, tell me where and when you were born, and just something about your background.

OB: I was born in Massachusetts in June of 1916. My parents had been actors in Boston, so we were kind of upper-middle-class, I guess. I had an older sister who was ten years older; there were just the two of us.

SZ: Where in Massachusetts?

OB: I was born in North Stoughton, then we moved any number of times. I went to high school in Brockton. I graduated from high school in Brockton.

SZ: Brockton is a suburb of Boston?

OB: Well, at that time it was a separate city, a shoe manufacturing city. Now it's a bedroom of Boston, I guess. I haven't been back there for years.

SZ: So your parents were actors.

OB: Yes.

SZ: How interesting.

OB: We grew up with a lot of music. There happened to be a theater company in Brockton, a repertory company, so we went to the theater every Saturday, I think. It was just routine; we always went to the theater.

SZ: Is Bragazzi your maiden name?

OB: No. Lawson.

SZ: So you were born Lawson.

OB: Yes. Yes, right. I went to school and high school, then that was the Depression.

SZ: What was the Depression like? You said you were upper-middle-class, so . . .

OB: Oh, but very much affected by it. Yes. It was very difficult. Then my parents separated -- my father left -- and we had a very bad time financially. But otherwise we had a good time. [Laughing]

SZ: When you were a kid you went to public school?

OB: Sure.

SZ: Did you go into Boston to do cultural things?

OB: Yes, when I was very small. But later on, because my sister was so much older, and she by that time lived in Boston, I would go in on the weekend. She lived at the Y. I did a lot of things in Boston, with Vera.

SZ: The museum?

OB: Yes. Museums, but again, a lot of theater. That was really where the interest was. Theater and music, more than museums.

SZ: Did you play an instrument?

OB: No.

SZ: Did you sing?

OB: No.

SZ: You just liked it.

OB: I just liked it, yes.

SZ: And theater. Did you act?

OB: Oh, I was in the little theater group, yes.

SZ: But at that time the theater in Boston, a lot of it, was out of town for New York, right? Things would pass through?

OB: Yes. Yes, but a lot of theater. There was a lot going on. Then I got interested in painting, I think partly because I had an art teacher in high school who thought I was talented and wanted to get me into art school in Boston. But it didn't promise much of a financial future, and my mother, who had been alone since my father left, recognized the fact that I had better be able to earn a living. So I went to secretarial school.

SZ: After high school.

OB: After high school.

SZ: You graduated high school in. . .

OB: . . . '34.

SZ: So that was really the depth.

OB: Yes. That was really the pits.

SZ: No discussion of college because. . .

OB: No money. No. No possibility of going to college. It was just impossible.

SZ: Did you always have enough to eat?

OB: Not really. No. It's hard to remember exactly. There are sensations I have and things that come back to me under certain circumstances, in my later life, that recall the circumstances at that time. So after secretarial school I worked in the public library.

SZ: Secretarial meant what at that time? You went for how long?

OB: A year. A whole year. It was a year, yes.

SZ: And you learned what?

OB: Oh, everything that we needed, you know. Pitman shorthand, typing, some bookkeeping, which came in handy when I decided to come to New York intending to work at The Museum of Modern Art. I applied there, but then there was no opening, so I applied at the Metropolitan where there was an opening. All these skills, you see, made it possible for me to get a job. So I worked very briefly at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

SZ: So you went to secretarial school for a year, then you worked in the library.

OB: Yes. That was during school, and some after. Then I went to Champaign-Urbana, Illinois and the university, briefly, again; I left to get married.

SZ: You left the Boston area.

OB: Yes. We went to Champaign-Urbana. Then I left there to get married. That was during World War II. Then I followed my husband around, and we came back to New York.

SZ: So you came to New York after the war.

OB: No, the war wasn't over.

SZ: So you decided you wanted to work at a museum.

OB: The Museum of Modern Art.

SZ: What made you decide that?

OB: Oh, I was fascinated by it. The reputation of it at that time, it made it spectacular. If you had an interest in art, that was where you would want to be. It was the liveliest place in the art field, anywhere in the world, I think.

SZ: So what had happened with your facility with art? You hadn't really followed up on it? Done anything with it?

OB: No, I had always painted. We lived in Chicago for a while, and one of the things I did besides volunteer work in the hospitals was some kind of -- it's very vague. . . . some place that produced paintings that were sold, probably, in the five-and-ten; routine things that I just turned out for the fun of it, and to earn some money.

SZ: And when you came to New York, had you been to New York before? Had you been to The Museum of Modern Art?

OB: Yes. Oh, yes.

SZ: Do you remember your first visit to the Museum?

OB: No.

SZ: Or a previous visit?

OB: No, not in particular. No.

SZ: But you had been, so you had. . .

OB: Yes, I had a general. . . but it was more what I had read than actually being there, that made it so attractive. Because it caused a lot of controversy, and in the circles that I generally moved in, it was seen as, you know, really off-the-wall. It was extremely attractive. . .

SZ: ...for that reason.

OB: Exactly. Oh, yes. Yes. Because what else in art creates that kind of controversy? At that time there was nothing. Art was old stuff, European mostly, Oriental certainly, in the Boston Museum. But this was history. The Museum of Modern Art was making history.

SZ: Well, could that lead me to infer that you were sort of a modern woman?

OB: Oh, very much so. Yes. I had been brought up to be independent, to make my own way, not to be dependent on a man. So that was part of it, I think. I wanted to be on my own. I realized by that time that I didn't have the ability to be a painter. It was extremely difficult, being a woman, to find the motivation and the impetus to devote yourself to being a painter. I had realized that. So the closest thing to it, to the stimulation and the motivation that I could find in another area in art seemed to be promised by The Museum of Modern Art.

SZ: So when they had no openings you went to the Met. And there was an opening where? At the Met?

OB: Oh, in the accounting department. In the bookkeeping department. I've often thought they probably never recovered. I didn't have a clue.

SZ: So how long were you there?

OB: Oh, I think probably no more than a few months. Then I got the call that there was an opening at The Museum of Modern Art, so I went down there.

SZ: It was an opening as what?

OB: They had a kind of secretarial pool. I think there were probably no more than three or four who worked for various departments, and this Nika Pleshkova had been working for Alfred [H. Barr, Jr.]. I think they were extremely fond of each other, but I think she was not as critical of her work. I remember she said he said to her one time, of some letters she had typed up for him, "Don't you ever read the letters before you give them to me to sign?" But she had many other capabilities -- languages and a strong art background in various things. So even though I was not a full-time secretary for Alfred. . . He didn't warrant one because he was at that time in the little office behind the library. [Note: Alfred H. Barr, Jr. was Director of the Museum, 1929-1943; Advisory Director, 1943; Director of Research Department of Painting and Sculpture, 1944-1947; and Director of Museum Collections, 1947-1967.]

SZ: He had been demoted. So you came after '43.

OB: Yes. Yes.

SZ: Do you remember the year you came?

OB: No. No.

SZ: I can look it up.

OB: But only by telling. . . and I don't even think the records at the Museum show accurately. . . The personnel records were not kept that well. But I know the Collections Department, of which Alfred then became Director, was formed after I

had been there a year or so. [Note: The Department of Museum Collections was formed in 1947.]

SZ: So you must have come right when he got the. . .

OB: It was probably '45 or early '46. Something like that, but I'm not very good at dates.

SZ: That's okay. So tell me, do you remember anything about when you came? Who interviewed you, or. . . ?

OB: Yes, I think probably Allen Porter interviewed me and hired me.

SZ: Do you remember anything about him from that time?

OB: Oh, yes. He was a wonderful character, gay, but explained to me that he had had an operation and could no longer have sex. [Laughing].

SZ: He did this at your interview?

OB: No. We became very good friends. Allen's major attraction was that he was a good friend of Greta Garbo. So when she would come to see him -- his office was on the fourth floor and I was on the fifth -- when it was known that she was in the building, suddenly there were more errands that had to be done on the fourth floor, by everybody, just to see her, you know. Allen was a marvelous character. So, as I say, he was on the fourth floor. The library, [Alfred], the film library. I don't remember Iris Barry. I don't know whether I ever met her or not. [John] Abbott I remember, and when Greta Daniel came. . . . I don't know whether she was there when I first went to the Museum or not, in the design department. Then on the fifth floor was Philip Johnson, Edgar Kaufmann, René [d'Harnoncourt]. René was the head of a department that had some funny name. It didn't seem to . . . .

SZ: Oh. The Department of Manual Industry.

OB: Something, wasn't it? Yes. It didn't seem to relate much to art. Ione Ulrich [Sutton], Dorothy Dudley, Sarah Newmeyer was public relations. Oh, and at that time women who saw themselves as executive types wore hats. They wore hats to work, all day. So you knew who was in charge.

SZ: Who were some of those women at the Museum?

OB: Sarah Newmeyer and Ione I remember both wore hats. I can't think of anybody else. Yes. [Laughing]. They were both characters, mostly Sarah Newmeyer. She was marvelous, breezy, a great character.

SZ: So tell me a little bit about the atmosphere in the early days, when you got there. What it was like. I guess the war was just ending.

OB: Yes. The war had ended by the time I got to the Museum. The thing I remember sensing but not understanding was the tension surrounding Alfred, because he was still so much an authority figure. When I was, say, taking dictation from Philip [Johnson], and a call came that Alfred needed me, I was out of there and it was understood, by everybody in the Museum, that when Alfred needed something he got it. So it created an atmosphere that to me was very mysterious, because I had no idea about his having been demoted, or about Stephen Clark or any of these events. So all I had was trying to find out from conversations. Christl Ritter was René's secretary. She'd worked at Stieglitz. We became very close friends. She and her husband and Tony [Bragazzi] and I. Tony's my husband -- was. So I picked up a lot of information along the way, but there was no other way because it was all kind of undercover, all these things that happened.

SZ: So you were a floating secretary.

OB: I was a floating secretary, assigned to Alfred.

SZ: Basically assigned to Alfred.

OB: That's right. But he didn't warrant a full-time secretary.

SZ: At that time he was supposedly. . .

OB: He was writing. He was theoretically writing. Oh. And Bill [William S.] Lieberman was there, and he and Bill were very close. Bill and I became very good friends, and Bill's mother.

SZ: So basically you were assigned to Alfred. When Allen Porter hired you, had you had met Alfred, too?

OB: I don't really remember whether I was introduced to Alfred at that time, or by Nika. I don't really remember.

SZ: But then you said because Alfred didn't need you full time, you also worked for. . .

OB: Oh, yes. I took dictation from, I guess, everybody. Yes. Particularly I remember Philip [Johnson] and Edgar [Kaufmann, Jr.]. René had his own secretary. He had Christl. And Dorothy Dudley. I think probably Dorothy Lytle and Monawee Allen were working in the registrar's department. And people like Elodie Courter I didn't work with. So generally the people I worked with were Philip and Edgar.

SZ: So did you know much about architecture before that?

OB: Oh, no. I didn't know anything then. No. I had no idea what Philip was involved in at that time, particularly. It was all just routine work for me. I did whatever was required. The only thing I really benefited from and learned from was working with Alfred.

SZ: So tell me something about that.

OB: Well, all kinds of random things come to mind, not in any order. He was mad about birds, and when he was back up on the fifth floor. . . Oh, and [James Johnson] Sweeney was there, in Painting and Sculpture, when I went to the Museum. Then when Alfred was back on the fifth floor there were times, long silences, when he was dictating, when he would sit and think everything through. More than once he would

suddenly jump up, and because there were no buildings beyond his office on the north side of the Museum, he would suddenly spy a hawk, grab me by the arm and say, "Look, look," and tell me what kind of hawk it was. It was a tiny speck in the sky. But all his enthusiasms would come out. The letters he would write to *The New York Times*, or the Transit Authority at that time, or the Fifth Avenue Bus Company. You know about the buses; they didn't run properly. He had these sudden enthusiasms of things he felt had to be righted, and he would set about righting them. So it was very lively. As far as the art went, I would sometimes go around to the galleries with him, or with him and Dorothy Miller. Things that he would ask the dealers to send to the Museum on approval would very often hang at the end of the hall, between his office and mine. So [we had] conversations about works of art, about things he was involved in, the whole. . . Oh, there was the whole arrangement with the Metropolitan Museum while I was working with him, many things that the Museum was involved in organizing and settling, and so on.

SZ: Do you remember anything about that arrangement? What transpired with that? I think it was with the Whitney too, right? [Note: On Sept. 15, 1947 an inter-museum agreement was signed by the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art and The Museum of Modern Art. Under the terms of the agreement, The Museum of Modern Art agreed to "sell to the Metropolitan Museum of Art paintings and sculptures which the two Museums agree have passed from the category of modern to that of 'classic'." The agreement was terminated in February 1953.]

OB: Yes. But as I remember the proposal with the Metropolitan, I think it was one of those things that sounded great on paper but you had a kind of nagging feeling that it wasn't perhaps going to work. Like everything else, it was extremely carefully worked out in theory, and meetings within the Museum, some discussion, certainly, as to how this would work. The concept, generally, was a good one because it was probably always the struggle about being The Museum of Modern Art; what did it signify, what was the future? How do you continue to be a museum of modern art? Where do you sign a cut-off line? So I think all of this was in the air, difficult to work out and difficult to work out in practical terms.

SZ: Did he feel strongly about it, though?

OB: Yes, I think it was part of his whole philosophy. You know, the theory of the river; that The Museum of Modern Art was ongoing. This was a way, I think, he saw to keep it modern, to keep it moving, to not become enamored, say, of these masterpieces that were being accumulated. The Whitney arrangement I don't remember so clearly.

SZ: Do you remember how he felt when the whole thing did not work out?

OB: I have an idea in a subconscious way this had always been a possibility. I don't know when it was decided that it wasn't working. I don't really have specific memories of being directly involved. But you see, I resigned from the Museum -- and again, I'm so bad with time and years, so there was a period when I was cataloguing Bill Burden's collection, but not as an employee of the Museum. I had left the Museum.

SZ: And why did you do that? You did that to do that?

OB: No, I did it because I was really unhappy about the way employees were being treated. There was a particular episode with, I believe, Ione Ulrich. But the staff, I felt, was not being properly treated. There was a huge gap between the people on the top and the people who were doing the work. I remember having long conversations with René, and I was really extremely unhappy. Also, I am not cut out for a 9:00 to 5:00 job, and I was finding it more and more of a drag. I really needed to be on my own. I wanted to paint, and Alfred helped me to go to Yaddo for a summer. I got pregnant and everything kind of [laughing] was in a state of flux. So it was after I left the Museum that Alfred inveigled me into cataloguing Bill Burden's collection. Then I formed a curatorial service for private collectors. I did that for years.

But in '58, remember, the fire. We were living in White Plains and I heard about it on the radio. My son was three, and as soon as my husband came home from work I immediately came down and worked with David Vance, the assistant registrar and Dorothy Dudley -- everybody, you know. We worked all night. From then on, I was in

and out of the Museum. I handled a lot of the insurance. I worked with Dorothy Dudley and worked with the insurance people.

SZ: You mean over the fire?

OB: After the fire, yes. Yes.

SZ: As a free-lancer.

OB: Yes. Yes, I guess. Part-time anyway. How it was handled I don't remember. So again I was really more directly at the Museum than I had been for a couple years before that, three years or so before that. I think that must have been when some of the people like Jasper Johns -- and Dorothy [Miller] was doing her American *show* [*16 Americans*, December 16, 1959-February 17, 1960, MoMA Exh. #656]-- and all these new people were becoming known. Alfred's enthusiasm for them and his recognition of the quality and value of their work was really extraordinary. I remember Jasper Johns' work. Even within the Museum there was a lot of doubt about what the hell these people were doing [laughing]. Dorothy hung [Frank] Stella's black paintings. It was very lively. The Museum had the quality of taking risks and taking chances, and identifying the work that we know now was classical American art. [Mark] Rothko. Yes.

SZ: Well, didn't Alfred have some trouble with some of that?

OB: Well, I wasn't working that closely with him. It was simply that I was there, and because we were friends I'd be not directly but indirectly part of some of the discussions that were going on. What do you mean?

SZ: I don't know. I thought there was some issue with some of the earlier abstract expressionist stuff; that he was not sure about it.

OB: Yes, but this was after. . . Yes. Yes. That's true. I'm not sure he was as secure about some of the abstract expressionists. He was perhaps not psychologically as comfortable with that kind of free-thinking. But I remember yes, there were instances

where [there were] these very, very deep examinations, where he brought everything he believed somehow into feeling works of art and into some of the work of the abstract expressionists. I think he really struggled over it. Yes.

SZ: You were talking about the tension surrounding Alfred, and you just talked a little bit about René. Maybe you could talk some more about René, because you obviously knew him pretty well. And how you saw the two of them together.

OB: Yes. Also, even though Alfred had brought in people like Philip and Edgar -- and how Monroe Wheeler came to the Museum I'm not sure, I don't think it was directly through Alfred. . . He was always somewhat critical of them. Even though they were friends and they all benefited enormously from the relationship with Alfred, it was not always comfortable by any means. And even René. It's hard to believe that anybody [laughing] could have anything except the warmest, fondest feelings for René d'Harnoncourt. Alfred was always critical. His values were not always everybody else's. But he and René, I think, were probably as close as he was with anybody. Certainly René was most understanding, more understanding I would say, of Alfred's personality quirks than any of the others. Monroe, I think, and Alfred were perhaps the least compatible. Monroe Wheeler.

SZ: And that manifested itself how?

OB: Oh, you know. Monroe was in charge of Publications, and the Museum publications were very, very much a part of Alfred's view of the overall function of the Museum. They didn't always agree on either the subject or, say, who was to do a particular exhibition catalogue or... It was just a general kind of lack of compatibility that created a certain amount of tension. But essentially Alfred probably wanted to make the decisions about everything. It was just his way of working.

SZ: Right. But then the trustees had hired René to do some of that, at least. Right?

OB: Yes. Again, I don't clearly remember what the situation was before René became Director of the Museum, so I don't really remember. It was subsequent to that that I was more aware of the relationship between Alfred and René, and René's position in

the Museum and his success in working with people and keeping the peace [laughing], which he was very, very good at. So I think with René as Director there was perhaps less dependency on Alfred, you see, as ultimate decision maker -- although everybody still bowed to his wishes, I would say.

SZ: Well, I'm trying to think. While you were still employed there full-time, essentially you did the same thing until you left?

OB: Well, when the Collections Department was formed, I became secretary of the Collections, as well as working with Alfred, but he had then a secretary. So it changed somewhat.

SZ: Which meant what for you?

OB: Oh, I arranged the trustees' meetings. I made the arrangements for the works of art that, say, were brought from the dealers and collectors or wherever, to be shown at the trustees' meeting, at the Collections' Committee meetings. I took the minutes. I prepared the minutes. But, you know, again, I belonged to Alfred so what he wanted I saw was done. It added a lot of responsibility and took away some of the actual secretarial work with him, but the various secretaries didn't always stay. There was Marie Alexander. . . They would work for a while. There was Jean Wightman. But none of them were there for the whole period of time until I left, so there was always making arrangements for hiring somebody, or somebody left. That kind of thing. But I also worked very closely with Dorothy Miller's secretaries and with Sara Mazo. The whole Collections Department. We all worked very closely together. Sara and Marianne Winter, who was Dorothy's secretary. So it was really a very, very congenial group. A lot of stress, certainly, when an exhibition was being planned. Dorothy went around with her hair falling down half the time [laughing]. Everybody was a character. When I went to the Museum there was absolutely no kind of corporate sense to it. There was always room for personalities and oddities.

**END TAPE 1, SIDE 1**

## BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE 2

SZ: You said you took the minutes at the Collections. . .

OB: Yes. For the Collections Committee.

SZ: So you must have had a sense of some of the trustees and what the issues might have been there. Is there anything about that you can remember?

OB: Yes. I don't remember specific episodes or meetings, particularly, or even individuals. Another person who was always around, of course, who was extremely involved was Jim [James Thrall] Soby, from the very beginning of my employment at the Museum. A very important character. Before Sweeney, he had been head of Painting and Sculpture, but that was before I was there. But he was a strong influence and, I think, very helpful in trying to persuade trustees, say, about works of art, as was Dorothy Miller. Dorothy and Mrs. [Peggy] Guggenheim were very close, and Mrs. Guggenheim would come and pick up Dorothy and they would go off in her limousine. I think Dorothy was extremely influential. She and Jim Soby provided, I think, qualities that Alfred lacked. Where he became impatient and was not, you know, socially graceful, shall I say, as Dorothy... so that he was extremely fortunate in having people who would kind of supplement. That was true, I think, with the dealers, as well. He and Dorothy worked very closely together and kind of complemented each other.

Before a Collections Committee meeting or a trustees' meeting there was always a period of time when Alfred would sometimes write to individuals, to present a case, say, about an artist or a particular work. But the meetings themselves could be extremely stressful, and I would know how much a certain artist or a certain work meant to Alfred, meant to the collection, meant to the Museum, and then to listen to the reactions on the part of some of these people was almost unbearable. You'd just want to slap them. It meant that, then, you would see a major work that was not going to come on the market again, that was not going to be available again, be turned down, with no possibility of any change of mind. It was really very difficult, and

because we all cared so much for Alfred and had so much confidence in his critical ability, you not only had to bear your own sense of loss, of frustration, but also kind of try to make it easier for him. I drafted a lot of the letters for him to then go over, explaining to a collector, say, or explaining to a dealer what had happened. Then also to write the minutes in a way that wouldn't make it obvious that these trustees were idiots [laughing]. But it was a challenge, I must say. Some of those meetings were extremely difficult. Bill Lieberman was also extremely helpful, because he, too, had the ability -- and still has the ability -- to persuade. He was very, very useful, and he went to endless dinner parties, and relieved Alfred of some of the social events where he [Alfred] was extremely uncomfortable.

SZ: So what was his relationship with Alfred like?

OB: Well, Bill was extremely respectful and affectionate. They really were extremely fond of each other. I hesitate to say in a kind of father/son relationship, but because of the difference in age and the difference in position that was part of it. I think Bill had perhaps expectations of following in Alfred's footsteps to a degree, which didn't work out. But that's nothing I really knew about directly. But they were very close and worked. . . Alfred kind of looked after Bill, because Bill at one point. . . Oh, and then the Print Department came into being somewhere along in there. Maybe in the late '40s. [Note: the Department of Prints was established in 1949.] So Bill and Dorothy Lytle ran the Print Department. Bill, at one point, was sent on a trip to Europe -- I forget for what purpose -- and he didn't come back [laughing]. So that was very upsetting. Alfred thought we should keep in touch with Bill's mother, who was extremely upset and had no idea where Bill was. I would go over; she lived here on the West Side, in the seventies somewhere, and I would go over and we would have lunch or wander around the neighborhood. We just got to be friends. So there were all kinds of ramifications of all these relationships.

SZ: You mean he just sort of disappeared from the screen, as they say?

OB: Yes. Yes. He was simply not in touch, so nobody knew what was going on. I helped out also in the Print Department during that time. So I was generally. . .

SZ: You were all over.

OB: Wherever something was needed, from Alfred's point of view. I think I kind of filled in.

SZ: And Marga [Scolari] Barr. Did you know her very well?

OB: Not very well at that time, no. I got to know her later, as a matter of fact, when I was organizing Alfred's papers at the Museum. Not organizing very well, I must say. It was not well done and not well organized. But I did get to know Marga. Yes, but more at that time. Oh, she was a kind of figure and would appear periodically. Alfred had colds and flu, so I would go up to the apartment to work with him. But Marga was teaching, so I didn't really run into her that much. So I didn't know her. I wish I had known her better.

SZ: Did a lot of your social life revolve around the Museum and these people in those days?

OB: Somewhat. My husband had lots of things going on, so we had friends that were friends of his and interests of his.

SZ: What did he do?

OB: He was a humorist, and wrote gags for comedy shows, for all kinds of things. He also ran a business office, a filing equipment business, which he eventually bought. But, along the way, we were always involved in movie things or all kinds of wild things. Friends from the Museum -- Christl and Louis and John and Nika and all these people -- were also friends. So it was a mix. It was a mix, yes. But the Museum was also. . . Most of my clients in the curatorial service I provided were mostly some connection to the Museum -- the Burdens, the Hochschilds and those people.

SZ: So what does that mean, curatorial service? You did what kinds of. . . ?

OB: Everything, the same as being the curator in a Museum. I did everything -- catalogued, took care of insurance, took care of loans, reproductions. I have a four-volume book here on David and Peggy Rockefeller's collection, privately printed, that I worked on [Note: *The David and Peggy Rockefeller Collection*. Volumes I-IV. Privately printed, 1984]. Everything that needed to be done for a major collection.

SZ: So in doing that you were in and out of the Museum is what you're saying, over the years.

OB: Yes. Yes.

SZ: Back in for the fire. Tell me maybe just a little bit about that; what that was like when you got down there.

OB: Oh, God. [Laughing] Unbelievable. Unbelievable. It was certainly one of the most upsetting episodes in my life, walking into that Museum. But Jean Volkmer the conservator, the Conservation Department, the Registrar's department. . . Of course, by the time I got there it was maybe 6:00 or so, 7:00 pm. Dorothy Dudley was absolutely exhausted. So by 10:00 or so, since I was there, she felt she could leave. She got in a cab and collapsed. But the destruction of the works of art was like nothing you could imagine. Nothing you could imagine.

SZ: Meaning what? You had to look at them?

OB: Well, of course. I worked with them. We moved. We tried to salvage what we could, to figure out how, where, how to work. Certainly nobody there had ever had any experience in fire damage, so it was a matter of not only the ghastly experience itself but trying to be coherent enough to remember what you did know and bring it to bear on the situation, and figure out what was the best way of setting things up. Also, you know, there was a matter of security, because the whole place then had to be. . . You had to be sure that the proper responsibilities were taken, to be sure the situation didn't get out of hand, [determine] where the authority lay for the decisions that had to be made. We were all used to working together and had complete confidence in each other and each other's abilities. So it was very much team work,

trying to figure out how to take care of things, to save as much as possible of the things that had been damaged. But the images, since so much of what one does in a Museum is visual, the blistered paint and the shreds. . . . These things, visually, I will never forget.

SZ: So, it's sort of like you belong to the place in some way, right?

OB: Yes, yes. It is. I don't know whether you develop that kind of sense under other circumstances. Undoubtedly. But since, essentially, that was where I spent most of my professional life, in that field, I don't have any other experience. But it certainly does create a relationship unlike anything else I've ever experienced. I doubt, say, that people at Merrill Lynch or Chase Bank -- although I was certainly in and out of the Chase Bank. Also it's focused in one place.

SZ: Now tell me, you said you were brought back from time to time, over the years, to the Museum, to do certain things, doing Alfred's papers, for instance. Tell me about that.

OB: Yes. I don't even remember exactly whose decision it was or how it came about. It was just obvious, I guess, that some kind of organization had to be made and some kind of division made between the things that were really Museum-related -- although that made it clearer than anything else that there was no division. Alfred and the Museum were one, so to decide what were personal papers and what should be microfilmed for the Archives of American Art, say, was all very unclear. The major problem was that there was nobody making any decisions. There was nobody who had thought through how this should be handled. So I had no one to whom I could go to say, "Look, this is what I think might be done." I really felt it was a muddle. It really was not well handled at all, and I was brought in without being given any kind of sense of direction. As I say, I was really not accountable to anybody.

SZ: Who had brought you in?

OB: I don't even remember how it came about. I don't even remember who called me to ask if I would do this. I don't remember who was Director at the time, because there

were two or three Directors there with whom I really never had any close contact. So I felt badly about that forever. Rona [Roob] has gone over all the papers and made some sense out of it. I didn't. It was really very frustrating -- and wonderful [laughing] -- to go through all this material, absolutely marvelous, but with always the sense that I was not clear about what I was doing, which is very bad. But all the things he'd been interested in, involved in, the people he had correspondence with all over the world. Wonderful, wonderful papers.

SZ: And other projects that you went back to the Museum to do?

OB: No, there weren't. Not specific things. I was simply in and out because, say, the registrar's records, since, as I say, the people whose collections I was looking after were mostly connected to the Museum one way or the other. I always had access to any records I needed, besides the library, so in that way I was in and out but not projects for the Museum, particularly.

SZ: So you didn't know or have a relationship with Dick [Richard E.] Oldenberg, for instance?

OB: No, no.

SZ: So that time span really was. . .

OB: No, at that time I was. . .

SZ: And Alfred. Did you know when he got sick?

OB: Yes. I never went to Connecticut to see him because others who did go would tell me, and I knew it wouldn't do him any good and it certainly wouldn't do me any good. So I never went to see him. Nor did I go see Jim Soby when he was ill, either.

SZ: And I guess by the time René died, also, you were really out of it.

OB: Yes. I was not directly involved in any projects at the Museum.

SZ: Did you enjoy your time there?

OB: Oh, very much so. Yes. Yes, yes. And learned an enormous amount of information. I learned how to do research, I learned from Dorothy Dudley and I worked with Dorothy on the publication of her "bible" [Note: Dorothy H. Dudley, Irma Bezold, and others. *Museum Registration Methods* Washington, American Association of Museums, 1958]. That was the only way I could be successful in what I was doing; because of what I learned at the Museum, the connections I had there and the fact that everybody there was always so helpful and willing. The conservators. . . So whenever I had a problem, something I couldn't figure out, say -- although I then studied and worked with the Kecks [Sheldon and Caroline], I went to Winterthur for a week. I've continued to learn in order to run a curatorial service. I had to know what I was doing. But it began, you see, with the Museum, not just the people and the information but the sense of the importance of what each department was doing; the whole sense of values. So that's why it's been such a pleasure. Also, I think, as far as Peggy and David Rockefeller -- particularly David -- their sense of my responsibility and that they could depend on me came partly because I had been depended on at the Museum. So I think it's all a whole cycle of always going back to what I gained from The Museum of Modern Art.

SZ: And the people you still stay in touch with from those years?

OB: Oh, yes. As I say, I'm still in touch with Nika and Mimi Catlin.

SZ: Now who is Mimi Catlin?

OB: Mimi, I think, worked for Alfred perhaps before Nika, and then Mimi went off, because Mimi was German and had languages. She went off to Nuremberg to translate, during the [Nuremberg] trials. When she came back, it was about the time the Collections Department was being formed so she worked in that department with me. Then she left to get married and she married Mortimer Levitt. She lives over on the East Side and 82nd Street. I can't think of her name. But most of them died. Christl died. Yes. Others I don't know. I always kept in touch with Monroe. We had

some wonderful times [laughing]. Those two, just great. Monroe and his partner, the author, Glenway Wescott. Yes. They were a pair.

SZ: Well, thanks, Olive. That's great.

**END TAPE 1, SIDE 2**

**END INTERVIEW**