

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

INTERVIEW WITH: **BETSY B. JONES, CURATOR OF THE COLLECTION IN PAINTING AND SCULPTURE (BJ)**

INTERVIEWER: **SHARON ZANE (SZ)**

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BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE 1

SZ: Tell me how you got interested in art and how you got to The Museum of Modern Art.

BJ: I majored in history at college but I wasn't very good at anything. I liked art, took studio art courses...at Smith College. I did not like the history of art very much; I didn't really enjoy reading about art. It was long afterwards--while I was working here, in fact--that I discovered the writings of Meyer Schapiro and began to enjoy reading about art.

SZ: That was a big famous course, too.

BJ: I took 5,000 years [014]. It was a good course. My recollection was I slept through most of it, and as soon as the lights went up...but I may not have. I found my notebook and found I'd drawn a few pictures and things like that--beyond the objects. Anyway, I've always been interested in art. So when I graduated, I went back to where my parents were living then, in Portland, Oregon, and needed to get a job and applied at the local art museum, which was in a transitional period at that moment, having no director, and at the local public library as a kind of backup. On the same day I was offered a job at both places, one for the princely sum of \$100 a month, or \$125 at the library. So I went to the museum instead, since I preferred that, even though I was going to get paid as much. So I worked at the Portland Museum for four years, and then decided I wanted a change, and I came to New York, looked around

for a job, and applied at The Museum of Modern Art, among other places, and was hired in the summer of 1952, where I became sort of a halftime secretary--halftime to Dorothy Miller and halftime to Bill Lieberman, who had just been made head of the print room at that point. The print room had been more-or-less created at that time.

SZ: The Portland Museum of Art wasn't strictly a museum of modern art?

BJ: No, it was not. It had a lot of Oriental and...it had an interesting small modern collection. It had a patron, Sally..., a single lady who lived in Paris and bought a very nice [Constantin] Brancusi and several other things. Then there was another set of collectors called the Drafts, who had very nice...a few Picassos and things like that. It was, of course, a great revelation to see the collection in The Museum of Modern Art, which I had seen in visits from college, but to see why so-and-so was so good--why a lot of people like Juan Gris, and I had seen groups of few things or such scrappy things, it was sometimes hard to understand it, but seeing this collection of course made a great deal of sense to me, made their accomplishments make sense.

SZ: So you were familiar with it, because you would come down.

BJ: I had made a couple of visits to New York while I was in college. I was in college at a time when several vacations we had to stay on campus, Easter vacations; it was partly during the war, and you were not encouraged to travel, so I didn't. Then I had family, relatives, in Buffalo. I never went home until the summertime. I lived in Seattle at that time, and it was too far to go. So on occasion, once or twice, I came to New York. I didn't come here regularly, but I did see the Museum. One of my classmates and someone I stayed with, her mother was an art critic for the Art digest--Maude Kemper Riley, her name was--and she was especially interested in...she had a friend named Boris Marco who was a Surrealist artist that the Museum of Nonobjective Art, as it was known as then, had. So naturally we went to that museum as well. So I think visits here were not frequent.

SZ: So your choosing to work here had as much to do with it being a museum, not just a modern museum.

BJ: That's right. I applied for a lot of jobs around New York, including the Metropolitan and Architectural Record and the New Yorker magazine. I had in mind that I might not work in a museum and wanted to see what else there was to do. Anyway, the Museum offered me a job and I needed money, so I took it--however little the money was.

SZ: You said that to start, you were working parttime for Dorothy Miller and parttime for Bill Lieberman. Tell me a little bit about each one of them then. Bill was obviously very young at that point.

BJ: Yes, but he already had a considerable reputation. He was not around a lot. He had his own schedule. The print room was really run by Dorothy Lytle, and Bill was kind of in and out. He had a secretary, a German girl, Marianne whatever-her-name-was. She had once been Alfred Barr's secretary and then went down to be Bill's secretary. She used to get very upset, because the same people would call over and over again to talk to Bill, and she'd say, "But they've called six times," and he'd say, "Never mind, Marianne, one day I'll be in when they call and I'll have to talk to them." But he had been under some very...actually, he'd been collecting and just knew everybody, lots of collectors, and I think he wanted a promotion of some sort. Years later, René d'Harnoncourt said he could give him the title Curator of Collectors. He wanted to be Curator of Collections, I think. I don't know that René said that to Bill, but we all heard it.

SZ: It's lived on [laughing]?

BJ: Yes. But he was very good with collectors and knew lots of people. Dorothy [Miler]

was away during the summer I was hired, so she found me when [she] got back. She was just a marvelous person, very lively, working tremendously hard, always overworked. She had a file of unanswered letters about that thick on her desk that she called her "agony" file; things just kept getting piled up. I had written a very nasty letter to the trustees of the Portland Museum before I left about the current director, a man named Thomas Colt, because we all objected to the way he was managing the place. So the time came for the Museum to get a letter of recommendation from my previous employer, and I gave my immediate superior but of course they asked for the director. He wrote apparently such a terrible letter about me that his secretary refused to type it. She said she would not type the letter. So it was modified and sent. I've never seen the letter; it's somewhere in my personnel file here. But Dorothy...one day Thomas Colt came to Dorothy's office to borrow something, and she said, "We're so glad to have Betsy"--I hadn't heard about the letter at that point--and his face got very red, as it often did anyway, he got embarrassed very easily. He had a very bad reputation among art museum directors; in fact, I don't think he was allowed to join the famous organization of art museum directors, because there was something that was a little bit bad that he did. So she very deliberately made the point of telling him, "You didn't approve of her but we think she's great." Long after that I realized what she'd done. Anyway, I was very grateful to her. She worked very hard. She knew lots of artists. She was putting on her "Americans" shows; in fact, "15 Americans" was on.

SZ: That was '52.

BJ: Yes. One of my jobs was to check the galleries every morning before we opened to make sure all the labels were still up and to check for the condition of pictures and make sure that nobody had damaged anything in-between. That wasn't really part of the collections, but I did see the exhibition. I remember in the Clyfford Still gallery, I think might have been...I don't know how often Clyfford Still had been seen in American museums at that point--not very often, I don't think--but I know when Dorothy got back in the fall she was just in a terrible state because the press had

received at least that part of the show very badly. She got very badly treated, I think in the New Yorker in particular. She wanted Alfred to write her...Alfred was preparing mostly a letter to the trustees, because the trustees were quite easily swayed by bad press.

SZ: It didn't set well.

BJ: No--at least with some of them, I should say. And of course there were good ones, like Philip Johnson and Jim Soby, who said, "Bad press in this case is good press." But there were a lot of conservative ones. Stephen Clark was still a trustee--I think he was still living then. God, did I ever see him? I don't think I did. Anyway, Conger Goodyear.... I began to think that these people were dead because I never really saw them. There were some other trustees. I think Nelson Rockefeller would have been receptive, and Eddie Warburg would have been very good about it. But there other trustees [that were not], and Dorothy was feeling very anxious about that. Sort of the first order of business when she got back was to start defending herself, at least getting the trustees to understand that the show was good and not to read what they read in the press.

SZ: How did you react to it?

BJ: I thought it was a great show. And of course it was just stunning to me, because I don't think I'd ever seen a Clyfford Still before. [Mark] Rothko, I think, was born or at least grew up in Portland, but he was really unknown. The Portland Museum had no paintings by him. He was completely unknown in Portland, except by reputation. Some people knew him, but there were no...I didn't know his work very well from originals. I was aware of [Jackson] Pollock. I think Pollock was in that show, too; I think he had a gallery in that show.

SZ: And [Frederick J.] Kiesler, I think, was in it.

BJ: Kiesler, yes. His was a fascinating room. I can't remember what that piece was called; it entirely filled the gallery, one great structure [Galaxy].

SZ: And Jasper Johns, I know, was in it.

BJ: No, he came later, about 1960. The Museum wouldn't buy a Johns until....

SZ: No, he told me he had seen that show.

BJ: Probably he did. He had his first show at Castelli around '58.

SZ: And then I think in '61 was his first show here.

BJ: No, "Americans 1963" maybe. I don't know. It could have been.

SZ: He was in the "16 Americans" show.

BJ: Yes, and that was in 1959 or '60. "Americans 1963" was the next one. I remember that in checking the galleries, I had to look at the Number 10, which was the Museum's very beautiful Rothko, and I just remember being seduced by the picture, day after day of looking at it. I'd gone from being interested in it without being swept off my feet to being drawn to the picture. It was a very interesting experience, to be able to see something over and over again. Usually, of course, I was looking at them for things that were wrong; I was supposed to be looking at them to make sure that nobody had damaged them or that they weren't falling apart, because I'm pretty sure we had no air conditioning then--at least they were putting air conditioning in when the fire [in 1958].... Anyway, we had to worry about paintings. We also had no conservation staff either. So we always had to send things out to the Kecks if they really got bad.

SZ: While we're on this topic--maybe you'll know the answer to this question, at least for the later shows that she did--how much, if at all, did Dorothy consult with Alfred on the choices, who was going to be included and what works? Or was it really her?

BJ: I can't really tell you, but my impression is that she chose the artists that she wanted. Lots of the dealers would tell her about people--she had to find out about them somewhere or other--but I think if someone was very good, then she would get Alfred to come and look and say, "This one is really superior." But if it were someone that she were a little iffy about she might also ask his opinion. But generally I think they were her decisions. They were very closed, they talked all the time, so who knows how often she tried things out on him to see what his reaction was. But I think he really expected her, and wanted her, to make her own choices. I've heard people suggest that he more-or-less told her what to hang, but I'm sure that was not true. Because the shows were so varied, they were very different. Some of the earlier ones, like "Americans 1942," had a very bizarre group of artists. I think Dorothy sort of hit her stride with "15 Americans." The shows, in my opinion, got a lot better. Maybe the art just got a lot better, I don't know. But they talked a lot, she and Alfred. I'm sure that she tried things out on him. If she thought he was lukewarm about something, that probably would have affected her choice, unless she were really convinced. But I think it was she who...Morris Graves, it was she who saw Morris Graves. They bought more Morris Graveses in one, I think they got six--that was before I came--which they had never done. Of course, they had so little money; purchase funds were just like that. So that was a very daring thing for them to do, to propose purchasing six works by one artist. The same thing was true of Jasper Johns not much later, to buy four. Alfred wanted to buy four Jasper Johns, and I think, let's see, what were their names, the Sculls, were persuaded to pay for one of them, and Elizabeth [Bliss] Parkinson bought one...no, we used her fund, I guess. And I can't

remember now, was Larry Aldrich...I can't remember if he has a credit on one of them or whether he wasn't on the scene. And then of course, particularly Ralph Colin objected to the Flag at the committee meeting. He thought that it might be seen to be unpatriotic. About that time, I can't remember, there was an artist who had a show at a Madison Avenue gallery. I want to say his name is Malcolm Morley, but it isn't; I think I confuse him with somebody else. Anyway, it had American flags in it, and he got in a lot of trouble, because I think it was considered that he was desecrating the flag. And Alfred Ginsberg was wearing the American flag on his pants, so everybody was very worried about how the American flag might be treated. Alfred had of course anticipated this, so he said at the meeting that he had spoken with Mr. Johns, who assured him that he had only the deepest respect for the American flag. Nevertheless, Ralph Colin insisted that the picture be brought before the trustees, because they would get the rap if the patriotic organizations were angry. But before it went in anyway, Philip Johnson said, "Never mind, Alfred, if the trustees don't buy it, I'll buy it for you. I'll get it, then I'll give it to you." And indeed, the trustees decided that it was not to be bought. So Philip bought it, and true to his word later gave it to the Museum, along with a lot of other things. But I think that was the second time that a large group of more than one or two were bought at one time. Where were we? In 1952.

SZ: But what you were doing here changed over time, obviously.

BJ: Yes. There was a position called secretary of the museum collections, which was sort of an administrative position. At that time, Alfred was in charge of all the collections, and every curator of a collection, that's what the heads of each department were called at that time, would come to Alfred to say, "I'd like to buy such-and-such," and all the curators would submit their acquisitions before the whole committee. Actually, they began to submit selections, because there was just not enough time. There was a position called Secretary of the Museum Collections, which did the minutes of the committee or set up the meetings, published the list of acquisitions which was used

by the Registrar for all the acquiring procedures. That was held by a woman who I just saw last night called Laetitia Howe, from Boston, and she suddenly came into a whole lot of money and decided not to work anymore. So I succeeded her in that job and remained in it, essentially, for the rest of my career at the Museum.

SZ: So that meant that you really sat in on....

BJ: ...the committee meetings, yes. It could be quite interesting. There were lots of struggles. Alfred was really in charge, and if Alfred wanted it, the committee voted it. There was hardly any argument. The Flag was a real exception--although he had had, before I came there, the Rothko that I spoke of had been very much objected to by Stephen Clark, who never liked the picture and was very.... Alfred and Stephen Clark just never got along. I think Alfred very much hoped that Clark would give his collection to the Museum, I'm sure he did, but they were just such different personalities. I never met Clark, but I remember that Alfred told me that one of the reasons that Clark didn't like him was...Clark, I guess, worked on Wall Street.... He lived on the East Side, and he would get up at the crack of dawn and walk all the way down to Wall Street and probably come home in the middle of the afternoon. In any case, when he got to his desk and called Alfred he would find that Alfred wasn't there. He wasn't there at nine, and he wasn't there at ten, and he wasn't there at eleven. He just thought that was disgusting. Alfred was an insomniac, and he usually worked very late at night and was not an early started. Anyway, they were just two totally opposed types, and I think they just never, never hit it off. I'm sure Alfred was very disappointed when Clark gave his stuff to the Met and Yale, but I think it was not to be...there was nothing he could do about it.

SZ: What was your sense of how it worked, because at that time it was one selection committee for all the departments. Was there competition?

BJ: There wasn't really competition, because Painting and Sculpture really dominated the

other departments. I think that they...sometimes for exhibitions. That was a whole separate thing, run by Monroe Wheeler--Exhibitions and Publications. For exhibition space there certainly was competition, and the other departments certainly resented the fact that a lot more space got devoted to painting and sculpture exhibitions than to...you see, there was a separate department just for painting and sculpture exhibitions, whereas there wasn't for photography exhibitions or anything else, so obviously they were the big things. Then each department got its own gallery where it put up its own collection, and then eventually, a gallery where it could show its own things. But that didn't happen for a long time, so there were always battles. That was a different committee, thought. I don't know what happened in the committee on exhibitions. I don't know how the decisions were made. I know that Alfred was always very critical of Monroe Wheeler, who was the director of Exhibitions and Publications. I always gathered that when Alfred was fired in 1943 he thought that Nelson Rockefeller was somewhat behind it, and Nelson Rockefeller also hired Monroe Wheeler, and Alfred always believed that Nelson intended to have Monroe become director. That was [313]. And Alfred, I think, never really trusted Monroe. He was interested in everything that happened in the Museum, even though he had gone into Coventry and had had to come out again, but there was absolutely nothing...if he had been able to, he would have been interested in the design of the ladies' washroom. Every detail of every function of the Museum he was interested in--how the letterhead was designed, the chairs that were used in the offices, the chairs in the lounge--everything. He was omnivorous in his interest and range of concerns. And of course these had been his responsibilities from the start, so it was very hard to relinquish them to other people.

SZ: So how did that work? There was Alfred and René and then Monroe.

BJ: René was brought in not as director for the first five years or something like that; I've forgotten what his position was called.

SZ: First he was director of manual...I can't remember.

BJ: Yes, it was something else. But I think by the time I got here he was already director.

SZ: It was in '49 [that he was made director].

BJ: Yes, because [I came in '52]. So that René was really in charge. I don't think Monroe...Alfred just always carped about Monroe. Monroe was one of those people who knew everybody, socially and in the art world everywhere. He knew everybody and he was very interested in, I think, the social side of it. In fact, he used to do a series of lectures--he had very elderly parents whom he had to pay to keep alive, and the Museum salaries were extremely modest and he had no family money at all, so he had a series of lectures, which were all about artists he had personally known--not about art so much, I think, as about the artists. He once put on a little show of postures by Epstein that Epstein's widow had given us, and one of them was the head of Rosalind Turich. She lived in New York, and I thought it would be sort of interesting to have her come in and look at it. I got sort of cold feet and I said, "God, what will I say to her? I think I'll get Monroe." I said, "Monroe, Rosalind Turich's coming in. Could you come down and talk to her? I want to show her this piece." In about two minutes they had found several friends in common. It didn't take a minute before they were talking over all of their old friends. But she did say something interesting about the head. She said that while she sat for it she felt that Epstein was working from the inside out, that somehow he managed to build the inside of her head and then worked out.

SZ: So she had a feeling for it.

BJ: She did, she liked it a lot, and she found the sessions very, very interesting. I think Alfred also felt that he [Monroe] was not serious, or not as serious as he ought to be, so that probably added to his...I don't know, they were always polite, certainly very

civil, but there was always this edge. And of course he was always getting to do René to do things that he felt ought to be done, but I think he really appreciated very much that René was the director and he was not. I think in a lot of ways he was glad that René had to...because actually a lot of people thought he [Barr] was the director anyway, and they always thought he was the director, and he was the name that was associated with the Museum. He was listened to; it was not that he was...when he pulled himself back, he was listened to because he was so very persuasive--not persuasive in the way that, say, Bill Rubin was persuasive; he was not a voluble talker at all. Rather, he was very much to the point. But people really felt that he always had the arguments and they were always very persuasive, so that it was often very hard to disagree with him, even though they wanted to do something else, some of the people.

SZ: Did you see that? You must have seen that in the collections committee.

BJ: Well, yes. René was always ex-officio, but he hardly ever came, because there was nothing for him to say, really. Some difficulties began to arise when Bill Seitz was hired, because Bill Seitz was, of course, himself an artist as well as a scholar. Lots of the acquisitions that the Museum made had to be done by gift. If Alfred saw a painting that he liked in a gallery, the first thing, really, that Alfred wanted to know is, did this artist have a patroness or somebody who would give it to us. Because the purchase funds were just nonexistent; there just really was no money at all. Or shall we say there was money for the things that he felt were really essentially, but there were others that he felt would be nice to have, but he would not have gone out of his way to secure them. I've lost my train of thought.... Bill Seitz. Bill would look at a painting that was being presented and he'd say, "Well, first of all, there are a lot of other American artists that we ought to have. If we're going to have him, then we ought to have others." He was always...he was a thorn, I think, because at some time he complained that you ought to be acquiring other people, he did not recommend other artists, either, he did not come forward, and that was probably because he

thought he'd better not. I think he and Alfred got along very well, but I think he was very disappointed in the....

SZ: In the amount of input that he had. Is that the same for Peter Selz?

BJ: Yes. Peter was always at sort of a disadvantage right from the start here, I think, mostly because people thought of him as a scholar of twentieth-century German art rather than America. I don't know, he never cut the mustard in the end. His opinions were not sought after and not respected, and he took strong opinions. He immediately hated Pop art and said so. Alfred rather liked Pop art. I can remember his coming back from I guess the first [Claes] Oldenburg show at Richard Bellamy's gallery--was it called the Green Gallery?--anyway, carrying the Double Hamburgers, which he had just bought and brought back to the Museum. He'd never heard of Oldenburg before, had never seen his work, but he was always very receptive. You know, there were lots of...his famous observation that if one in ten looks good, in twenty years, that will be good. That was his idea, that you can't see long-time with a hundred-percent vision, so he was perfectly willing to make a lot of mistakes, and he did make a lot of mistakes, at least they look like...in later years he'd say, "Gosh, that wasn't a very good picture, or that artist wasn't very good." I should say "it wasn't a very good picture" because one of the things that I think he really did that I noticed doesn't seem to be done very much now is that he really thought about the picture to buy from an exhibition. He worked very hard and made notes on which one he really thought was the better before...even with artists about whom he knew nothing, and made his judgments. On the basis of his track record, I'd say, I thought they were pretty good.

SZ: What part did Jim Soby play in this--any?

BJ: Jim was of course the authority on the Surrealists, and he was the sort of Dr. Watson to Sherlock Holmes. He always was very supportive of Alfred, absolutely, down the

line, and never let him down, I think. I don't know what happened when Alfred was fired and Jim came in, but surely they knew what they were doing and Alfred approved of Jim's taking over as director of the department. He was just a very acquiescent assistant, in a sense, but full of wit and charm, and he wrote very well on the artists that he was interested in, wrote very good pieces in the Saturday Review and so on, a lot of places. I think that he was a kind of gentleman collector, in a sense, a gentleman scholar. I think he was a serious-minded guy, too, and he had been very much in on the beginnings of the modern period at the Wadsworth Athenaeum, which in many ways was...Chick Austin, the director there, was in many ways ahead of Alfred, because he started sooner, and they did wonderful exhibitions. Jim was very much a part of that scene, too. He was a native of Hartford.

SZ: On the collections committee, the acquisition, committee, trustees, particularly strong trustees?

BJ: Ralph Colin sticks in my mind. he was not an obstructionist at all, and he was always very serious about it, and even if he didn't agree...the Flag is the only time I really remember his putting up resistance. But he often would say he didn't like the thing very well. He liked [Jean] Dubuffet, he collected many of them, so when we got Dubuffets he was very much...he had good [Joan] Mirós and other things; he had a very good collection, actually. Let's see, who else?

SZ: What about Walter Bareiss?

BJ: Walter came a little bit later. People sort of hoped that Walter was going to be in a kind of the new Jim Soby in a way, somebody who could run the committee and so forth, but he had a lot of ties to German and he was going back and forth--his family's firm was still in operation in Munich, I think. I didn't think of him as a very strong voice. Peter Rubell was another trustee who came very faithfully. Sometimes he'd really disagree, but in a kind of thin, rubbery voice; he wasn't a forceful person. For a while

there we had John Senior, Jr., who had cornered the market in [Piet] Mondrian for a while, and then suddenly I think he divorced one wife and married another and got rid of all his Mondrians and took up the cello or something. Alfred told me that he was the chinchilla king of America. Who else was on the committee?

SZ: It changed, because you basically stuck with that, right, until you left?

BJ: Yes. I didn't really know the people who were there when I left--[S. I.] Newhouse and Agnes Gund, those people I didn't really know at all. Blanchette Rockefeller was there right from the beginning, too, and so was Eliza Parkinson; both of those people were on the committee. Eliza Parkinson was always very amusing, and she always had something funny to say. If she didn't like it...I can't quote her, but she was quite witty about why she didn't like something. But she'd say, "If Alfred wants it, I think we should get it."

SZ: And Mrs. Rockefeller, how was she?

BJ: She was quite quiet. She had started on the advisory committee at the Museum, and I remember that Alfred told me once that she'd come to see him and he'd say, "I'll take you down to the door and I'll get you a cab," and she'd say, "No, I'm going to use the bus." Alfred told me that her husband was such a pinchpenny that he would not allow her to use a taxicab. She just went straight across [town]. He was just staggered that she was riding on the buses. So she was a very shy person for a very long time, and very quiet, but she kind of grew into the job of being president and became quite a force, I think, in favor of the staff. I think that she was interested in the staff's needs more than William S. Paley, for instance, or...I can't remember who before her. She bought the Guest House over on 52nd Street to put her modern art in because her husband didn't like it, and Alfred helped her to buy a lot of that, gave her advice--Rothkos and...did she have a Still? I can't remember--anyway, bit, modern pictures, which she eventually gave to the Museum, I think. She gave one of them

before she died, but some of them I think she left to the Museum afterwards. She always had something to say, but I would not say that she ever stunned you with her penetration. But none of the committee...I think they really just deferred to Alfred. If he spoke in favor of something, there were very few who were going to speak against it.

SZ: Did you see a change when Bill Rubin was brought into control of...?

BJ: Alfred retired, I think, so Alfred was not really....

SZ: What I'm really thinking of is, any change in pattern over the years?

BJ: In him or in the Museum?

SZ: In the collection, in the acquisitions. I know the answer but I just want to hear it.

BJ: Yes. Certainly Bill Rubin had much grander ideas. Alfred was, in the first place, a Scotch Presbyterian; he thought very much about how much he's paid for his lunch--anything. He was very careful with his money and was not a big spender, whereas Bill Rubin had quite a bit of inherited wealth and had already formed his own collection of very good twentieth-century art, and I don't think he much cared what was spent. I remember I was just staggered at the price--I think \$100,000--for the big [Jackson] Pollock, Number 10? It was totally different. Bill was an excellent speaker. He had the history of art in his head and could select any particular section of it to speak about at any moment. I was just absolutely agog. It was very different from Alfred, who always spoke narrowly, to the point. His writing was very much about that. When he wrote, he would always ask the Publications department for a publication, "Now how many words?" They had to count it out. They say, "It's like sixty," and he'd write sixty words--you know, work it out very carefully. He was the master of the concise, lucid style. Bill Rubin, I think, is an excellent writer; he always tells you

something that you have not noticed before. Their styles were just so different; it's like night and day. Bill had a sort of bulldog style and Alfred was very quiet, and Bill pushed the trustees. Bill got his way, as Alfred did, but by different techniques.

END SIDE 1, TAPE 1

BEGIN SIDE 2, TAPE 1

SZ: What was your opinion of splitting the acquisitions committee into committees by department.

BJ: I think it was a very good idea. Alfred was the only thing that kept it as a single thing, and as soon as he departed, there was no sense in having them. Since he had kind of created those departments, it made sense. Besides, [Edward] Steichen was his own man and not in any way interested in what Alfred Barr thought of his selection. Arthur Drexler, for instance, usually liked to have Alfred's okay. But John Szarkowski knew what he wanted; Alfred might disagree with it, and Alfred would probably surprise him by knowing a great deal about the work or the particular photographer, because his knowledge was absolutely omnivorous. There was hardly any aspect of modern art that he wasn't very well versed in. I think the split became absolutely essential at one point. Film, at the beginning, was very...she [Iris Barry?] was a real genius, apparently. When I came, the director was Richard [?name] for Film, and he was a little bit...was kind of in the grip of Hollywood, everybody thought. I think that was a good thing to do. Everybody had very limited funds before, and I guess they had to come and ask Alfred if they could spend money; he sort of controlled it. [After the split] they were allowed to raise their own funds with their own collectors.

SZ: You then became attached just to the painting and sculpture committee?

BJ: Yes. I think one of the things that always sort of irritated me is the suggestion that Alfred ignored the Abstract Expressionists. That very often is said.

SZ: That he was too late in coming to an appreciation of them.

BJ: Yes. I think if you looked through the "Chronicle" you would find that Pollock's She-Wolf was bought about three years after it was painted. His painting called 1948, which was his first very abstract painting, was, I think, bought in 1949, 1950. Nobody else had bought these pictures at that point. The [Willem] de Kooning, the black-and-white de Kooning, that was bought very shortly after it was painted. In the first place, you were dealing with a trustee like Stephen Clark who really wanted to turn down the Rothko, really didn't want the Rothko at all, and that was around 1950, I think. So he did have some difficulties with really retrograde trustees, and very little money. Bill Rubin always had plenty of money--well, he assumed that he had plenty of money and he just spun it out of the Museum budget, and the collections fund went into huge debt to buy things. It never would have occurred to Alfred in a million years to go into debt, to just borrow money to buy pictures. He would try to improve the price. I think he probably lost a few good works because he would not pay the price that was being asked, because he really thought it was too much. In any case, I think it is really kind of unfair to suggest that he did ignore these artists. The Museum did not put on an exhibition of their work early, but they were seen on the walls of the Museum, and it was the only place that you could see them--the Whitney certainly wasn't showing them. In fact, you couldn't see any of the Whitney collection a lot of the time. Some American artists really probably were irritated, because the Museum's collection...this was about the only place that you could see an interesting selection of modern American art. Of course, a lot of people were annoyed because they weren't in the collection. But I don't know. I can't remember when they bought [de Kooning's] Woman, I, but it was not long after [it was painted, really, and when you consider that this was a museum devoted to, not just American art, and that Alfred's specialty was, after all, Picasso and European art, I think they did very well. I noticed that Bill Rubin,

after he became director of the collections, at first he tried out a few more artists, and I think quite a few of them bombed. Then he really just gave up. He never tried. I think if he'd been director when Alfred was, he wouldn't have bought these artists either, because when he became director of the Museum collections, he really just began filling gaps. That was his contribution. We had these gaps to be filled.

SZ: Lacunae.

BJ: Yes. He'd go back and fill in one month in the work of Picasso because we didn't have anything in June but we had August and July. I don't know, he was.... It does kind of make me angry, because I wonder what he would have done if he had...of course, he would have gotten to know Clement Greenberg, probably--I guess he did get to know him. If he had had to do all the things that Alfred had to do, he probably wouldn't have had time to inform himself.

SZ: Did you see the conflict between the two Bills coming?

BJ: Yes. I couldn't believe that there wasn't going to be [a conflict]. I happen to like Bill Rubin better than I like Bill Lieberman. I didn't like Bill Lieberman very much at all, I will say. Bill Rubin knew that he might have to watch out for Bill Lieberman, but he didn't do much about it. Then suddenly, Walter Bareiss had installed Bill Lieberman as the head of the department. I don't think Bill Lieberman, for a while, cared very much. But they were just so different. I think Bill Lieberman, as far as I remember, had hardly ever produced a piece of real scholarship for the Museum. He wrote some rather short texts from time to time, and he did a lot of exhibitions. But Bill Rubin was really the heaven hitter. Anyone could easily see that Bill Lieberman wasn't going to last, especially since he had a difficult personality. He had very good staff relations with some of the people whose hands he held, but other people he fired. I remember once he fired somebody, she was off on a research trip, in Russia, I think, and he just announced that he was firing her. I thought, God, wait till she gets back. You're going

to fire her and she isn't even here? He was not to be questioned about that. Anyway, their personalities were just so different, and I think Bill Lieberman was right. I think in the back of his mind a lot of the departmental directors felt it would be nice to be director of the Museum. Many people felt that Arthur Drexler was gunning for the job, and he would have been absolutely hopeless. I think that Bill Lieberman also in the back of his mind thought, since he had been there longer than anybody--he came when he was still at Harvard--he thought it was his by rights almost, although I think in the back of his mind he knew that he was never going to be made director. As a matter of fact, he did try to get promoted and was told he was not going to get promoted. Bill Rubin had the ammunition that Bill Lieberman did not have. Bill Lieberman, as I said, had a lot of collectors. There were all kinds of threats that he would take all of them with him to the Met, and I guess he did take some of them, but nobody cared anyway, by that point; it was very good that he left when he did.

SZ: I guess within a space of two years you had Barr retire, you had d'Harnoncourt retire and die, and then Wheeler retire, so you really had a power vacuum. And in the middle of all that came....

BJ: Bates Lowry. That was really a disaster. I guess he's okay. He was not my favorite person, partly because at that time Dorothy Miller was getting ready to retire, and one of her last exhibitions was going to be the Nelson Rockefeller exhibition. She had known Nelson Rockefeller since the '30s and she knew his collection very well; she made lots of suggestions to him for purchases, as did Alfred. At one point she told me that Bates had called her in and more or less told her that he was going to do the show. She was just absolutely staggered. Nobody could believe that he would have done such a thing. But she wouldn't let him do that. Then Bates left, within a year and a half, and then John Hightower.

SZ: And then you had the triumvirate--Walter Bareiss, Wilder Green, and Dick Koch.

BJ: I forgot about that.

SZ: It was a tough time, because politically there was a lot of unrest, and there was trouble here, too, right? The whole unionization thing, which I think you know something about.

BJ: Yes, I was part of the union.

SZ: I'm just trying to get more of a sense how it was, because it seems like it was a very different time internally than when you first got here.

BJ: Yes, it certainly was. But it had happened at the Museum before, I understand from Dorothy, I guess it was when Alfred was fired. There was a kind of moment when there were people vying for control of the place. After Bates Lowry left, I can't remember how much time passed between the firing of him and the hiring of Hightower.

SZ: It was a year.

BJ: Walter then took over after Hightower left.

SZ: No, it was Bates Lowry for a year and a half. First he came just in the department, then he had that [179]. Then it was the triumvirate, and then Hightower was hired. He didn't last. Dick [Oldenburg] became acting director in January 1972, so Hightower was here for eighteen months also, something like that.

BJ: The interim period was especially bad. Lowry wasn't very good, because I don't think he really understood what the job was. He'd come from academe, and I don't think he had very many administrative skills. He had a kind of hundred-days philosophy, that he should announce big changes and make big organizational changes right off. I

think that offended a lot of people--not just people who were oldtimers, hangers-on. I think a lot of people just didn't follow his ideas and didn't seem to support his plans. Walter Bareiss was kind of a steamroller. He would just say, "We've got to do this." If there was some reason for waiting, he would only wait so long. He just wanted to have decisions made. I suppose it's a businessman's philosophy: You make up your mind and do something. So he was a little difficult to get along with. He was a friend of Bill Lieberman's, however. I would have thought that he and Bill wouldn't have shared so many personality traits, at least, because Bill...well, he acted decisive, I guess. It was a very unpleasant time. The department that I was in, the collections, or the Painting and Sculpture department, was sort of enlarged by the addition of several new curators, some of whom...they just didn't contribute to the general running of the department, they simply focused on what they were doing. Everybody else had some chore, you had to do something else for the good of the department, so to speak. For instance, some people had to interview artists very regularly and let them bring in their slides.

SZ: Did you do that?

BJ: No. Alicia [Legg] did that. There were people who had to do that. I had to do all the financial business, which wasn't very complicated, I should say. But anyway, I remember in particular that Meg Potter was working on the Gertrude Stein, the Four Americans in Paris show. She was looking at old photographs with a magnifying glass. She just worked on that show--did nothing else but work on that show. That was a luxury that no one else had. None of us had ever been allowed to just let everything go and just do that. I think lots of people do do that now, and it's probably a good thing. But the tradition was...Alfred, I never understood how he could do Cubism and Abstract Art and Fantastic Art, Dada, and Surrealism, two massive and difficult-to-organize shows from all over Europe, while running the Museum and doing a lot of other things too. It was really amazing.

SZ: That was the argument they used against him, isn't it?

BJ: Right. Well, that he was not a good administrator and that he should be writing. He should be a scholar and do research and let somebody else....

SZ: What was the impetus to unionize?

BJ: I think that they started to cut back at that point, cut the staff drastically, and they were not raising the wages. I can't remember what the people at the front desk earned, but they were the lowest. [240] we could never get to join us, and there were already unions for the electricians, and I think the other guys belonged to the buildings union or something like that. In my estimation the reason was a lot of them felt that there was kind of a feeling that...the way it worked when I got to the Museum was, you just started as a secretary, and if you were lucky, you moved up. And about that point it became evident to a lot of people that started as secretaries with the hope of moving up that they were bringing in a lot of people above them--new curators, new assistant curators--who hadn't gone through this early apprenticeship and whom they had to instruct. The secretaries were having to tell these new curators what to do, and some of these secretaries had M.A.'s and Ph.D.'s and were perfectly qualified but were not being given the advance, and at that time an advance degree was really probably very mandatory. At the beginning, Dorothy Miller never had a master's degree, and a lot of the people...and Arthur Drexler I don't think went to college, did he?

SZ: A little bit.

BJ: Alfred always valued academic credentials and in fact set the...the gradation of ranks was very set on college, university rankings. He believed you went through a year, five years, and you didn't get promoted until after a certain number of years. The younger staff members were really, I think, a little bit irritated that not only were their

salaries very poor but their chances of promotion were getting less and less.

SZ: I assume that you had seen this change too, because one of the things that is said is that in the early days museums were places that people went to work [at] because they wanted to do that kind of work; it didn't matter what salary they made. I guess that over the years that also changed. You had a different class of...

BJ: That's true. Also, it's not possible to live in New York after a while and take that attitude. You couldn't say, "Gee, I don't care what you pay me." When I came, I shared an apartment with two other people, but I was the poor one. I was always struggling to find my share of the rent. I think that you probably are right, that people began to think, "I deserve to be paid for my work, and I'm not just doing it for the love of...." Actually, in the early days of the Museum and to a certain extent when I got there, there were dollar-a-year men. There were really people who...I think none of the...there was a position called secretary of the Museum, and Mr. Koch had that job at one time, that was his title, although other things too. But these were men who...one was Francis McIlhenny, and I'm not sure what his position was; he was kind of an assistant to René, more or less. But he didn't need to work. The secretary of the Museum at one point was a guy named John Stillman, and he also was independently wealthy. I'm sure when Jim Soby worked at the Museum he didn't take a salary. I remember though at some point, when Alfred retired, I think it was Blanchette Rockefeller who was so appalled to discover what kind of pension he was going to get on the basis of his salary. I know she made some radical changes, so that there would be enough money for them to live on. So it's true that the attitude toward anyone working at a museum, you just understand that you weren't going to get paid, that that was not why you were there. It's very much like teaching, and I don't know whether it's true now that salaries are still way below. My roommates were both getting huge salaries compared to me; one of them was an architect, and she was earning twice as much as I was, and she was always hitting them up for a raise. She never let a year go by without asking for a raise, and it never occurred to me in a

million years.... When I first came to the Museum, a woman from the treasurer's officer would come around with little manila envelopes filled with dollar bills coins, and that was our weekly salary--probably fifteen or twenty dollars, maybe thirty or forty dollars. It seemed so nineteenth-century. You should talk to...well, Helen Franc has no doubt given you a load on the unions, because she was very, very vociferous and active. I was not really an organizer. I was a participant without being very deeply involved.

SZ: You had the change in the institution, it grew physically, you had the '64 expansion, that change first and then what it really felt like to have it suddenly open up.

BJ: It's like what continues to happen all over, the complications that that expansion brought are just unimaginable. When I first came, if you wanted to hang a picture in the galleries, the only obstacle you really had was the registrar, Dorothy Dudley, who was a kind of tiger--very nice, but you couldn't just go and take a picture off the storage rack and hang it, or if you did and told her, she got very angry, because she wished to be sure, she had a certain responsibility to know where everything was anyway. But generally speaking, that's what you could do. If you wanted to make a switch in the galleries, you just went to the storeroom, got the picture, you called the custodian, then you'd call the electricians and say change the lights. So you could do things very easily. And it just got more and more complicated. Then you had to start making appointments a day in advance, and then they'd be a week in advance. Everything just...it became so difficult to me, I'm so glad I don't work in a museum anymore. Just seeing my colleagues at the Smith College Museum, they're just in the throes of organizational chaos, as far as I can see. It's a very small museum, but they don't get very much done, because they spend so much time going to meetings. They should just get rid of meetings altogether; they're such wastes of time. Perhaps we should just go back to some kind of a [357], and say, "This is what we're going to do." But anyway, it does seem to me that with that expansion in '64 just did really grossly complicate and sort of slow down.... The Museum just became less and less

an interesting place to work, less and less fun. A lot of the exhibitions seemed...the exhibition program remained an interesting and viable program, and there were still a lot of interesting people doing exhibitions.

SZ: What year did you leave?

BJ: Seventy-four.

SZ: You were here for a little bit under Dick.

BJ: I was on the committee to choose a new director; I was one of the staff representatives.

SZ: What was that like, because here he was an inside candidate?

BJ: Yes, he was. Paley, I think, was the chairman and Blanchette Rockefeller was on it. I don't remember who else, some of the trustees. And then Dick Palmer--is he still here?--Dick Palmer and I were the staff representatives. We started out by being told that Dick would be happy to remain for as long as it took, and within the space of a month or two months, they began to nag us, "You've got to make a decision." I said, "Come on, Dick said he would stay. We really have to look at people." I have to confess, I'd ask people, "Who do you...?" I had one candidate, and I think he wasn't a very good one anyway. But there were not--same problem today--there were not so many people who really looked like good candidates. Martin Friedman, I thought, would be a good candidate, and we did go out and interview him.

SZ: At the Walker?

BJ: Yes. He had a good track record. Probably a difficult personality, but he had the requisite kind of experience. I'm not sure he did want the job, actually. But anyway, I

thought that the director of the Museum, and I still think, that the director should be a scholar or an authority in some [field]. René, you would say, was not a scholar of modern art, but he was really very much an artist and in installation he was really unsurpassed. He was an artist of sculpture installation; he really was remarkable. And he knew a great deal about, had done an exhibition of pre-Columbian art. He had a field of expertise. I hope that they choose a new director who has, in fact, some scholarly attainments in modern art, and then find someone else to do the administration. I don't know how that works. It seems to me it works out at the Met. I have no idea.

SZ: It's a different institution. The size is so different. At any event, they haven't been able to find anybody to do that.

BJ: To do what? Here, you mean? Oh, no. They haven't been able to find anybody to do it anyway, either way--however it's done.

SZ: Which is an interesting issue, isn't it?

BJ: I don't blame them. I think it would be an impossible job. I think it would be more pain than it's worth. Maybe there are lots of rewards, but I can't see them. I think at one point this was a real plum, but now I think people who are at the other museums see that there are so many problems connected with it that they're probably much happier where they are.

SZ: The major problems being...? That it's private?

BJ: Not that it's private. Handling a board of trustees that is lots of rich people, a lot of them not terribly knowledgeable, though they're heavy collectors, and who have, perhaps, not too much attachment to the Museum, who may have come to the Museum, a lot of them, because it impresses their friends. I think that that is a

function. And who the Museum really wanted for nefarious reasons. The Museum always did and still does, I'm sure, appoint trustees who will give them money, and that's really what it has to do. But the earlier trustees had a connection with the founding of the Museum, so there was kind of a different attitude toward it as an institution. I have a feeling that you could get a board of trustees who was like the board of General Electric or PaineWebber, something like that: "This isn't making money, so let's get rid of it."

SZ: In 1974 you were fed up with Museum work, is that what happened?

BJ: Yes. I actually had a knock-down, drag-out fight with Bill Rubin. I can't for the life of me--and very soon afterward I could not remember what it was about, so I think I must have...I truly can't remember why we had such an argument, but we did. I found him a difficult personality anyway. He was always referred to as Bill Rubin and His Cast of Thousands--everybody had to work for Bill Rubin, and that had not been the way for everybody who was working for the Museum before. But it began to be that you worked for Bill. Still, I think he was very good, and when the moment came to decide who was going to succeed Alfred, Alfred very much wanted Bill Rubin, he was very much a supporter, and I very much did, too. I really thought that Bill was an excellent choice, and a lot of people did not. Many people objected. I actually didn't really like the job anymore and just wasn't doing it very well. I wasn't very pleased with the way I was doing the job or what the job was that I had to do. I just thought there was something more interesting to do. I didn't feel any obligation. By that time, Alfred was really quite sick. I'd seen him a lot after he retired, he used to come down very often and we had lunch a lot of the time, because he was already...the mind was already in bad shape, so it was hard for him to talk and hard for him to remember things. His feet just naturally walked down to the Museum every day.

SZ: So you left to do what?

BJ: I was expecting not to work. I really wanted to just go and live for about a year sort of in the wilderness. I thought that would be great. I'd been to a part of Vancouver Island that I liked very much once years before, and I thought that would be a really great place to go, just live a whole year 'round in that, unfortunately now, very famous place, the site of environmental difficulties. But then I was offered a job at the Smith College Museum and I didn't know where the money was coming from, so I'd better take it. So I did. I didn't regret it.

END SIDE 2, TAPE 1

END INTERVIEW