

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

INTERVIEW WITH: RONA ROOB (RR)

INTERVIEWER: SARAH SUZUKI (SS)

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SS: I am Sarah Suzuki, Associate Curator at The Museum of Modern Art. And I'm here today with Rona Roob. It's April 18th 2012, and we are in the Department of Architecture and Design at The Museum of Modern Art. Rona, I ask you now to state your name, your date of birth and place of birth.

RR: My name is Rona Roob. I was born in New York City on October 4th, 1938.

SS: Okay. And tell us what your last official departmental title was when you were here at The Museum of Modern Art.

RR: My title was Chief Archivist of The Museum.

SS: We've said that in this session we're going to talk about your first stint at the Museum, how you came to be here. So first, why don't you tell us a little bit about your background, growing up in New York City.

RR: I was born and grew up in Manhattan. I visited the Museum when I was a child, during my school and college years. My older brother went to the Victor D'Amico School which was on Fifth Avenue. It wasn't in this building at that time. My mother would take us to the Metropolitan Museum, which I didn't particularly like, but after I was 10 years old we went to the Frick Collection which I adore and was near our

apartment. I just loved going to the Frick. When I was in high school, I used to take my reading and walk into the Frick in the afternoon when I got home from school, sit around the pond there and just read. This was a great joy to me. In those days, nobody really went to museums in the same way they go today. At the Frick, usually there were very few people. The guards would smile and let me in, and that was the end of that. There was no admission fee or anything, so that was my early introduction to museum going. I went to Barnard College where I majored in History of Art, and modern art really wasn't taught. I did take one course as an undergraduate with Julius Held, as I recall it went through Picasso and Matisse, and it did mention Pollock, but that was it. I graduated in 1961, at a time when Abstract Expressionism still wasn't widely accepted or understood. There was this real negative feeling about the way they painted. In college, I remember coming to the Modern one Sunday and actually seeing Miró standing next to the self portrait with his daughter. And I just was really bowled over by that. And we [the Museum] had all kinds of other things on the wall, like the Thomas Wilfred [MoMA 166.1942], which was very popular; I thought this museum was just a wonderful place. I mean, I really loved coming here and I loved going to the Frick. I guess those were my two favorites in New York. I do recall, I think, as a very young person, seeing the Barr big Matisse show in the '50s. I loved Matisse. And that was it. I graduated from college, and my senior year, I took all graduate courses. Meyer Schapiro was on leave of absence from Columbia, so there was no Meyer Schapiro. But I took courses with Wittkower and took everything Julius Held gave. And the chair of this department was a woman named Marion Lawrence. She was, I believe, one of the first graduates of the Princeton Institute of Advanced Studies, and her specialty was early Christian sarcophagi. The course was very challenging, and there were not many art history majors. We read—and this is important for later on, working for Barr—Panofsky, Morey, Rensselaer Lee, and that kind of thing. I wanted to go on to graduate school. It was suggested that I apply for a Woodrow Wilson Fellowship. I wanted to go on because what I wanted to do, I thought, was, become a professor of art history at the college level. I loved the stuff. My introduction, my earliest introduction to art history, aside from the fact that I lived in New York, et cetera, was my wonderful French teacher, Anne Breguet; she took me and two classmates to Europe with her for the summer. I was fifteen I think. We went to the major cities in

Europe, and we had to speak French during meals, and keep a notebook in French. She knew the names of every architect, landscape designer and artist, le Notre, everybody in Paris, and it was really quite an eye-opener, and I loved it. Afterwards, she kept lending me her books on the history of art, so I could look at the art and architecture, the French cathedrals; this was big in my life, and I'll never forget her. She was a very kind woman. When I graduated from college, my mother said to me that I had to get a job. I loved school, loved it, and I was always reading, looking, or doing something. Anyway, so I went around looking for a job. I did read German, I spoke French, and I could read and get along in Italian. Also I had a solid art history knowledge, plus a lot of knowledge in religion and philosophy, the usual college stuff. I was offered a job at the Met selling postcards, at the Whitney doing the same thing. At the Morgan Library, they offered me a job doing research. And then, on a Friday morning, I walked into this museum, and I gave my very small resume, which consisted of nothing, to Althea Borden, then the director of personnel. I had called before, and Mrs. Borden, an absolutely immaculate, pristine little woman, white hair, very nice and very formal, came out and invited me to her office. I sat down and talked with her for just a few minutes, and she said, "Wait a minute." And she called a woman named Betsy Jones who was the executive secretary of the museum collections department. I didn't know what all of these departments were named at that moment. Betsy interviewed me on a bench outside Althea Borden's office for a few minutes, and then said, "Wait a minute." She brought out Dorothy Miller. I had no idea who Dorothy Miller was, Betsy Jones, any of these people. They asked if I could be there Monday at 9:30 sharp, and I couldn't be late, and they would like to try me out, a trial period kind of thing. And my salary would be, I think, \$48.00 a week. I got there Monday morning early—they handed me a feather duster, a notepad, and a dust rag. My job was to go to the second and third floor galleries—there was no Philip Johnson east wing. There was only the Philip Goodwin-Edward Stone building with the collections on the second and third floor—and I was to go through the Museum and make sure that the cleaning people had done their job, that the labels were still on the wall, that nothing had been damaged, and that the place looked fit for the public to come. So that's what I did every morning. Of course, in doing this, here I am at the Museum, all by myself, walking through the galleries, absorbing all of this stuff on the wall,

and I learned the collection of the Museum as it was then hung. Because I was trained in the history of art, and I had that kind of “click” photographic memory, I thought this was the greatest. I returned to my desk in an office with a woman named Eileen Wells, who was Dorothy Miller’s assistant. Betsy Jones was in that office, and Linda Dubinski who worked for Alfred Barr—she had started months before me. She had just graduated from Wellesley and spent the summer at Katharine Gibbs learning how to type and take shorthand. My job was to answer the phone, answer nut letters, and occasionally do research on something that they needed research on, for example, artists’ questionnaires. That was exciting because every artist whose work came into the collection was given a questionnaire. And the questionnaire was: in red I would type in what we knew about the artist: birthdate, where they were brought up, et cetera. And then another sheet was about the work of art, and on the top we’d type in red the title that we thought it was, the date we thought it was executed, the medium, and all that. And this would require my going to the library and looking in their voluminous artists’ files, because the Library kept records on everything. [10:02]

SS: The Library.

RR: The Library. They kept, and still do as a matter of fact, these files, I think they called them APF, Artists Pamphlet Files. Any announcement that came into the Museum of any artist’s show, that artist got a file folder. And you could usually find something about that artist having a show someplace or other. Museum staff sent this material through the interoffice; curators sent in these things that came to them in the mail. We all know, looking back on this and working here, that these files are invaluable. At the time I worked here, the Museum Collections Department was headed by Alfred Barr. Its work was totally devoted to building the Museum’s collections. That was the whole focus, whether it was older works from major donors, or new art from artists as seen in galleries. Collections of all curatorial departments were included and considered. The Painting and Sculpture Exhibitions department was separate, that was Bill Seitz and Peter Selz, and they did exhibitions. There was a publicity department directed by Elizabeth Shaw; most publicity releases that went out about the collections or about exhibitions were read and often edited by Barr. The Director of the Museum was a very open, pleasant

person named René d'Harnoncourt. And René had an assistant named Ellen MacKethan. Ellen was a bit older than I but had also gone to Barnard, and showed me the ropes. Anyway, how did I get to work for Barr? At that time, Linda Dubinski had worked for Barr for a few months. She was preceded by a woman named Marie Alexander, who I think maybe I met once or twice. And Marie had worked for him for probably fifteen years, and she left. John McAndrew, an old friend of Barr's, who was at Wellesley, had selected Linda Dubinski to come to work for Barr. Okay, this is the fall. She went home to St. Louis for I think Thanksgiving, and she falls in love with her old boyfriend, comes back and announces that she's going to go back to St. Louis to live and be married. –Frequently during this period [a few months] of my being an assistant in this department, Barr would poke his head into the office. He was putting together the large PASITMOMA [Painting and Sculpture in the Museum of Modern Art], what I always called and Mrs. Barr also called “the telephone book.” [14:03]

SS: The telephone book.

RR: He was also putting together “the chronicles,” and this is early, but because it took so many grants and so many years to get that book published, I don't think it was published until the '70s. He was laying it out, though. The way it's laid out is very much like the galleries looked. The layout is important. And he would pop his head in the office, and he would say, “Can anybody think, in Gallery A-4 on the second floor, what is hanging between the (this) and the (that)?” So, of course, silence, and I would say, “I think it's the (...).” And he would say, “Bless you,” and he would walk out. This would happen repeatedly, almost every day. Of course, I would always come up with the, “I think it's the” And I'd be looking down at my desk. Well, Linda's leaves. He comes into our office and asked if I would come into his office for a minute. So I went in. I was kind of fearless, because although I knew he was an important person, but I had no idea, Sarah, that he was this iconic figure. He was, and I learned this in time. He asked me to tell him about myself. I told him I'd gone to Barnard, and he said, “So, you knew my friend Marion Lawrence. So what do you think of early Christian sarcophagi?” I said, “I think it's a fascinating field of study. I think Professor Morey and his Early Christian art and medieval art books were riveting.” I did not know at the time that Rufus Morey was Barr's mentor at

Princeton. And I did not know that this museum is organized like Morey organized Early Christian and medieval art. Barr believed that any, just like Morey did, that any moment of civilization can be defined by the arts of the time. Morey did this with ivories, stained glass windows, architecture, manuscripts, et cetera. Barr, when he taught his course at Wellesley in 1927, which is the basis of this museum, did this with film, painting, sculpture, prints, et cetera. I didn't know any of this. I said also that I'd read Millard Miess. It turns out, as I later learned, that the Miesses and the Barrs were the best of friends. I did not know any of this. I also mentioned that I had read Panofsky. I did not know that when Panofsky got to this country, when he left Germany, Mrs. Barr had taught him English. I didn't know about any of these connections until very much later. We talked for a while, and he asked me all kinds of questions. Then he asked, "How would you like to come to work for me?" So I said I thought that was extremely nice of him to ask me, but frankly, I wasn't planning to stay at the Museum very long. I had planned to get my master's, and I wanted to teach art history in college. And he said, "Well, I want to tell you something. This museum has a fellowship to the Institute of Fine Arts, which I can make available to you. And you can take courses at the Institute, but only after hours." He added that if I stayed and worked for him I'd learned more...and he was in retrospect absolutely correct. I answered that honestly, I'd have to think about it. I went home and ran this by my mother and a very close friend. They said, "You're crazy. There is no question here; you're going to stay there and work for Alfred Barr at the museum." So I came back and said, "Okay," but I had to tell him that there were a couple of things I didn't do. I said, "First of all, I don't take shorthand, and I am a terrible typist." I said, "I've just typed school papers and that kind of thing, but I'm not very fast." He said, "That's not a problem. First of all, there's a school down the street, and maybe you could go there and learn a few things about that kind of stuff." Which, by the way, I went to. It was a total waste of time, but everybody realized that after three times, and so we agreed that I give that up. Barr said that they planned to fill my old position with someone who had those skills. Barr told me that he liked to write a lot of drafts. I found out very shortly that he wrote major things on the backs of envelopes, and so on. I didn't have any problem with his handwriting. He added that I'd probably be good at drafting things for him. What's so funny is, because years later, I found a couple of publications which had these

facsimile reprints of Alfred Barr letters, and they're signed "(AHB) RK," and I think this is because I wrote the letters. And he would okay practically everything. We got along very well.

SS: What was your impression of Barr as a person, when you first met him and you first started working for him from that front office? [19:50]

RR: Well, I just thought that he was a really kind man, because, you see, he would always say things to me like "Bless you" and "Thank you; bless you." He was very kind and gentle, but he was totally organized. He knew where every single thing was in every single file. One thing we did in those days, I did, anyway, was to come to work on Saturdays. We worked Saturday mornings. That was a given. Shortly after I got here, they raised my salary to \$68.00 a week, and I did get periodic raises. When I worked especially hard on a project, he would give me a personal check. He would say, "You're not paid enough. This is ridiculous." So he would write me a check—he was a Scot and very careful about money. One morning he gave me a check for \$25.00. At lunch time I took it over to the Associated American Artists Gallery at 711 Fifth Avenue. And Sylvan Cole was in charge. I went through the bin and I found a little Wayne Thiebaud etching, and it cost \$22.00. I told Sylvan that I had a check for \$25.00 and I hadn't cashed it yet. He said to hold it and and you bring the money tomorrow. I wouldn't have brought it back to the Museum because I would have had to go to the registrar's office to check it in.

SS: Had you already started collecting art, or was that one of the first things?

RR: No; we never collected; we accumulated. We had no money. But Barr was in charge of collections, and that's what the whole department was about. He went to galleries all the time, and many times he would ask me along. For example, practically every Saturday, I went to Leo Castelli. By the way, there was no SoHo then, and there was certainly no Chelsea. The galleries were uptown or on 57th Street; that was it. Except for one. In the early '60s, there was Claus Oldenburg's Store. Barr went down to The Store, and he bought the *Red Tights* [387.1961]. He used the G. David Thompson Fund for that. And I don't know if I can say the price of it. Can I say the price of it?

SS: Yes. [22:42]

RR: Paid \$98.00 for it. And so he said, "You've got to get down to The Store." He would always tell me where I must go and what I must see. I had a date with Richard one night around that time. I called him and said, "We're going down to The Store, Avenue A between," and this was the end of 1961 or early 1962. So we went down. There was a happening in the back. We went to that. My husband was a lawyer and in those days, lawyers wore three-piece suits. So there he was in his three-piece suit, and he's quite tall. He did stand out, I have to tell you. My favorite work there was a coconut cream pie. It was oilskin with string on the top—I see it in my head today. And I wanted to buy it. It was \$32.00. Richard disliked it and we had just decided to get married. We didn't buy it. To this day, he's sorry. He likes Oldenburg's work now—we enjoy the prints we own by him. We saw something at the Armory Show from Dick Feigen's gallery, last year or the year before, a liverwurst, \$750,000.00. So I __[laughter]

SS: Oh, Rona.

RR: I said, "This could have sent several grandchildren to college." But anyway, the fact is that, no, we never collected in the way people do today. We just acquired when we had to have something. Can you imagine, working and practically living in this museum, you just get that fever. I'm sure you know what I mean. There's always something within your budget to buy. And if you can't buy it, you can buy on time. Which brings me to Leo Castelli.

SS: Okay. Every Saturday. [24:29]

RR: Almost every Saturday. Leo Castelli knew that I worked for Barr. He was one of the most gentle, kind people. I was never mystified by this, because I knew that he knew where I worked, who I worked for. He telephoned Barr often, I answered and put the call through. They genuinely liked each other. If you wanted to speak to or see Barr or have contact with him, you had to go through me. He did not suffer fools. That was one thing. So I went by Leo's regularly, and occasionally bought things. You asked about collecting. The Museum at that time was located in the Philip Goodwin building. But next door to the Museum was the Whitney. You could

enter the Whitney on 54th Street and walk straight through with no trouble at all and you were in the Modern. And that was a staff exit/entrance to the Museum; you would just wave to the guard and walk right through. We did have staff cards. The staff was big but it was not enormous. Today, we have lots more guards and restaurant people and cleaning people. Considering the work the Museum does, this is essential. I never remembered, even later on, in the '90s, that the staff was very big considering the work that we do, which is really quite amazing. I think anybody from the outside would be quite amazed if they saw how much work everybody does. In any case, the Whitney had a print annual every couple of years or every year. And one went and looked. There was a catalogue. You pulled out the back page and you checked which ones you wanted and whether it was framed or not. And you could send in for it. Then a Jasper Johns coathanger was \$90.00. That kind of thing. So I mean, it was possible to buy even though we were not making a lot of money. This was the 1960's and everything was a different scale. Our first apartment was rent controlled. It was \$180.00 a month, three rooms, and I walked to work. I guess it's relative today. People earn a lot more money. Anyway, I'd go to Leo's on Saturdays, along with the Stable Gallery, Sidney Janis, the Green Gallery, and Bonino, sometimes Emmerich. The Fuller Building was opening up to galleries, and I went to Pace, which had just opened. Wilder Green, who worked at the Museum, was very important to the Museum, designed that gallery. And there were a lot of places on 57th Street. Knoedler's, of course, had a building on 57th and had shows of interest. But I would mostly be told where to go. I really liked Leo, and he liked me, I guess. We just kind of got along. I realized it was nothing to do with me personally; it was fact of where I was working and for whom I was working for. He was close to Barr. They had a really nice working relationship. One Saturday, Richard and I went there and Leo had a Bontecou, and I fell in love with it. It was a soot on muslin. I fell in love with it, and it cost \$360.00. \$360.00 was a lot of money for me. I said, "Leo, is it possible, could I give you \$50.00 for it now and I'll just keep paying you?" He said, "Of course." So that's how I would buy many times. When I think about it now, it's kind of crazy. I just had this passion for this stuff. This was about 1963, because I knew Lee's work from Dorothy Miller's *Americans 1963* show [MoMA Exh. #722]. I've rarely come upon a person who's nasty. Also I don't remember any altercations at the Museum. It has

just been a very nice road. The Museum is my second family. And to be honest with you, I'm very honored to be doing this oral history. [29:36]

SS: Well, I think we're extremely lucky to have you agree to do it, precisely because you're part of that family. And so you really have amazing insight and kind of first-hand knowledge about all of the things that were happening in those days. So as you stayed on with Barr, how did your responsibilities grow or shift? What would an average day be like?

RR: Oh, an average day; there was no average day. One routine was that the restaurant upstairs closed at 6:00 every night. At about three minutes to six, Barr would come over to where my desk was and he would say, "Let's have tea." We would walk up and everybody there would roll their eyebrows, and they would have to serve us tea. I did work until maybe 8:30, 9:00 at night. He never got in very early in the morning—so after a while, he told me to come to work later. Now that was fine. I came to work a little bit later, by 10:00, 10:30 sometimes. I worked when I had to work. Barr knew where everything was. On one Saturday I was home in the afternoon after having worked in the morning (we worked Saturday mornings in those days), and he called. He was annoyed. He said, "Where is that Matisse..." It was an article. So I said, "Well, it's in the Matisse MC." That's the Museum Collections file, with whatever was relevant to the work. He said, "Rona, on top of the piece of paper I wrote 'Matisse Book File'. That's where I wanted it to go." He had this huge file; it still exists in the Museum today and I know John Elderfield has looked at it. It was called Matisse Book file, and it was all of the things he planned to include in a revised edition of Matisse, His Art and his Public. "I wanted it in the Matisse Book file; that's where it has to go." I didn't do a lot of the filing then; the person who was hired to fill my original job did. The fact is that, I had to tell her that she had made a mistake. Barr also was an insomniac and he listened to Long John Nebel every night, so he was up on everything: the Beatles, the latest night clubs, the whole thing, Studio 54, Lafayette, Escadrille. He would ask me if I'd been and I would tell him about them. Barr was Director of Museum Collections, with a plural. That was all of the departments of the Museum in terms of the collections. Once a month, we would have a Collections Committee meeting. All of the curators of the Museum, Bill Lieberman, Arthur Drexler—and Bill was head

at that point of Prints and Drawings, it was called—would come. It was like a big Show and Tell. The curator in charge would present desired acquisitions. There was a Trustee Museum Collections Committee, a very, very informed, devoted group of people headed up I think by Jim Soby, who was in the Museum all the time and who was lively, fun, and informative. He was the antithesis of Barr in many ways, and he was rather like a Noel Coward. He was a country man, a country squire type, very well-dressed; he lived in New Canaan, but he had an apartment on 52nd Street. He drank, but nowhere near the alcoholic state as when he died much later. And he was devoted to this museum, too. He and Barr were really close. Later on, and this is when I got to know Mrs. Barr very well, in the '80s especially, she said to me, "Alfred Barr had two best friends, two people close to him in his entire life. One was Jim Soby and the other was Philip Johnson." These are people who became involved in the Museum early. I think Jim's first show at the Museum must have been in 1941; he worked for Chick Austin at the Wadsworth Athenaeum before that. He wrote in the most breezy, extraordinary way, and his articles for the Saturday Review, his letters to Barr and the Trustees, are wonderful. You can't read them today without just breaking into laughter. Additionally, they're really informative. These Collections Committee meetings were a big deal. Barr would speak about the works of art. I heard him speak to the trustees who came to view the works beforehand. I don't know if you were around when Kirk [Varnedoe] was here. In the Department Heads meetings, he would speak about a work to be acquired or an exhibition to be planned. The talks by Barr about different things that he wanted for the collection were absolutely amazing. I mean, it was like going to a really extraordinary lecture. He took his time, and he was extremely patient. He was extremely patient with me too. He educated me in all kinds of things I knew nothing about. [35:50]

SS: For these reviews, would he always have the work physically?

RR: Yes.

SS: So he would bring it in from—

RR: The galleries. Oh, the dealers would send it in, or if it was a donor wanting to give a work to the Museum, we'd pick it up. Unless it was a three-ton Henry Moore

sculpture or a Ipousteguy David and Goliath or something like that. But you can imagine, Sarah, how much you learn about what's going on in the art market and the art world from this. And there was no Google, no Internet. Getting a phone call to Europe was still a challenge, and calling from Europe was a bigger challenge. It took a long time, eight hours or something like that, to fly. It was totally different—we had regular typewriters. He liked letters that were clean. And the only way to correct a letter was with Wite-Out. He couldn't stand Wite-Out. And of course, my letters were full of Wite-Out, so this other person had to type them quite often, and if she wasn't there, Dorothy Miller would type them. On one occasion, there was a letter to Bill Paley and it had to be typed perfectly. I just kept making the same mistake. I said, "Dorothy, I've had it." She typed it and that was that.

[37:15]

SS: Can I ask also about those collection meetings, what was the relationship like between Barr and his—it was an advisory role, I guess,

RR: Yes.

SS: And the curators of the departments?

RR: Well, it seemed okay. Everybody, they had their own points of view. There were a lot of chiefs there and not many Indians. For example, Arthur Drexler and Bill Lieberman had very strong points of view—but I think by this time, even though it was not his field, maybe, Barr had a proven record. And there was a lot of mutual respect among the curators. Not that that helped with the press; it didn't. I'll give you an example. The art criticism in New York in the newspapers at that time was severely conservative. John Canaday was at the *New York Times*, and Emily Genauer at the *Herald Tribune*. Those were the two papers that had major art critics. There were other newspapers in New York in those days... the *Post*, the *Journal American*, the *Mirror*, and the *News*. But Canaday and Genauer were the most influential and came down hard on the Museum. We did a show called *Art of Assemblage* [MoMA Exh. #695]. Also Bill Seitz, who got along tremendously with Barr. They were both Princeton men and I think Barr wrote to enable him to do his Ph.D. on Abstract Expressionism which, as you can imagine, was unheard of at Princeton. He was very serious, very professorial, nice, and fun. They had a lot of

respect for each other. Anyway, Bill Seitz did this really quite controversial show called *Art of Assemblage* [MoMA Exh. #695]. It included Chamberlain, César, who compacted John Rewald's Buick for this show, and all kinds of assemblage art we find very acceptable today. The *Times* and the *Trib*, they were horrible. Barr got a little worried because the trustees couldn't understand why we would be doing such a thing. So Barr and Soby got together with Seitz, and they decided they wanted to acquire about twenty or maybe more works from that exhibition for the Museum's collection, which they subsequently did. For example, *Essex* [MoMA # 282.1961], the Chamberlain, was from that show; so too the César Buick [MoMA #294.1961], I think. Barr sent this list around to the trustees and Collection Committee members so they could vote on which ones we should acquire and to make sure they saw the show. This list exists in the Archives today. It's an interesting commentary. It goes back to the early days of the Museum when people were asked to vote on things they liked from a design show or whatever. They were presented with a card and asked to check their preferences.

SS: So what was the outcome of the *Art of Assemblage* [MoMA Exh. #695]?

[41:42]

RR: It was explained to the trustees and Collections Committee what the show was about; objects were brought to the meeting. One thing about the Collections Committee that is really historically so useful is that minutes were painstakingly taken, corrected, and transcribed. The history of the Museum's collecting, collection building, combined with the lists in the back of the minutes showing the acquisition of every single work, were very detailed. They exist to this day in the Archives. This plus the trustee minutes are a total history, in many ways, of this museum. And before the Museum Collections Committee, before the Museum Collections department, there was a Painting and Sculpture department, so those minutes exist, too. So these minutes were very important. And he knew it. He did have a sense of the history of the place, and I believe the idea of the MC file and the artists' questionnaires, that was his. This early stuff that still, I assume it still continues.

SS: It does. They're still called the MC files, in Painting and Sculpture, anyway.

RR: And then there was the APF file, that's the Artist's Pamphlet File, which I have already discussed.

SS: Those are just called artists' files.

RR: And then there's the, oh, the other one, the personal files, which I found invaluable and built up even more. The people files, of people associated with the Museum, I'm sure they do all this stuff online today, but you know, there are obscure little things that you miss. [43:26]

SS: So what was his rate of success with the Collections Committee? High.

RR: Oh, well, I know historically his rate of success was pretty high, extremely high. And then he had allies, you know, Jim Soby of course. Dorothy Miller attended these meetings and explained the works that she was interested in getting for the Museum. She was very much Barr's assistant in this. Barr really was very successful in what he did, but you know, he had the help of a lot of other great people around him. Betsy Jones kept all of the books. She was fierce about this. She kept the purchase orders, the purchase funds, which were really many, because getting money to buy these things was such a problem. There were no government grants, there were no big corporation grants. We had a couple of grants, but this was part of the whole game here, going out and getting these people. We had a helpful Larry Aldrich Fund for a while; I'm not sure how much of that was initiated by Dorothy, how much by Alfred. We had Mrs. Simon Guggenheim, who was just so generous—I was told by Marga [Barr], that in 1939, she walked into—this is Marga's words—she walked into Alfred's office, and she said she wanted to buy a major work of art for the Museum. He said, "How about *Girl Before the Mirror* [MoMA #2.1938]?" so she bought it for the Museum. Marga said, "This was the first pearl in a necklace of gifts that Mrs. Guggenheim was to give the Museum." In the '60s when Mrs. Guggenheim was an older woman, if Barr wanted to acquire a major, major work of art, he would call her lawyer—and tell him. These were things like the Monet *Water Lilies* [MoMA # 666.1959; 712.1959]. The car would come and Dorothy would get in, and she would drive up with transparencies and the history of the work, pick up Mrs. Guggenheim, and drive around the park with her talking about this and that and the other thing. Mrs.

Guggenheim and Dorothy got along very well, and the call would come back, sure, we had it. David Rockefeller, Florene Marx Schoenborn, and Louise Smith are other major donors of this period. These are people who were regularly telephoning, and were very close to the Museum. Barr regularly recommended works for them to buy and in the case of Louise Smith, René did the same. I remember when Florene Marx moved to New York City. Sam Marx was sick, and they moved into the Westbury Hotel. She asked Barr to hang the collection at the Westbury. He took the two installers; one was Robbie [Gilbert Robinson] or Tom who wore the red baseball hat, and another one. He said to me, “Get your coat, we’re going up to the Westbury.” So I got my coat and he told me to take a pad, so I did. There we are, in Mrs. Schoenborn’s apartment at the Westbury, hanging magnificent pictures. I had absolutely nothing to do with the installation, Sarah. I was there to hold the thumbtacks and take any notes if anything was going to be needed. This was awesome. The walls of her drawing room were striéed yellow and white, this wonderful pale yellow and white. I never forgot this—in my apartment today, we have striéed yellow and white walls [laughing] in our living room. [48:09]

SS: Inspired by—

RR: I don’t know if it was inspired, but I’ve never forgotten that afternoon. She was happy, he was happy. As you know, a good part of her collection, the part that Barr wanted for the Museum, has come here. The rest, as she was also very close to Bill Lieberman, was left to the Met. That was okay. I don’t think we’ve lost too much that way. Barr was totally focused on building the Museum’s collection. It made him very happy when—one day, and I think it was not known that this was going to happen, because I was there and it was a surprise. He got a phone call that Nelson Rockefeller had bought the *Dance* study [Matisse, MoMA #201.1963] and was donating it to the Museum in his [Barr’s] honor. I did not know about Schukin and Morozov before working for Barr, Sarah. In doing research for Barr, I of course came upon them and was fascinated. I read everything about them that I could. I knew about the *Dance* and the *Music*, the studies, about Schukin’s stairwell in his home in Moscow, and so it was, you can imagine the joy. A major gift from Nelson Rockefeller in honor of Alfred. What happened in the ‘60s of great

importance was a bill permitting promised and fractional gifts to museums. In terms of collecting, I don't know the details now, even though I worked on parts of it with Dick Koch, the Museum Council, who was wonderful. He was brilliant and he was happy to answer any question with a clarifying explanation. He was second in authority to d'Harnoncourt in the Museum. He put together with Senator Javits and the help of Ralph Colin a tax bill that enabled donors to give works of art to museums and retain a lifetime interest. This resulted in the founding of the Art Dealers Association. It was a great thing for this museum, probably all museums. But it doesn't exist anymore.

SS: This is the fractional and promised gift. [53:10]

RR: Yes. It enabled the Museum to acquire works of art. So that's one thing. Barr was involved in this, not hands-on in a detailed way, but he knew every step of what was going on. This was most important to someone who was most responsible for building the collection. Barr and d'Harnoncourt got along very well. D'Harnoncourt was well liked by all and took excellent care of the trustees, the International Council Members, et cetera. Barr socialized too, had lunch with people who were important to the collection and knew the dealers. Barr was a member of the Artists Club downtown, the only non-artist invited to be a member. On Friday night when he couldn't go, he asked me to and gave me his card. Most often I sat with Louise Bourgeois and Robert Goldwater, because I knew them. I was intimidated—there were all these artists, the majority of whom I did not know, and I was supposed to listen carefully and report to Barr what they said, on Monday. So I listened as hard as I could and I told him on Monday. After a couple of times, it really turned out to be okay. This was quite an honor for him, because artists said that when he came to their studio to visit, they felt as though their work was being looked at by another artist, that he had a keen eye, that he was not outwardly critical and that he was very sympatico.

SS: Do you remember who else was at the club those nights?

RR: No.

SS: Were they artists that you knew by name at that point?

RR: No, but there are probably notes in the papers, because I wrote notes for him and all these were saved.

SS: So going back for a moment to the relationship between Barr and d'Harnoncourt, and sometimes Monroe Wheeler's name gets in there as the kind of triumvirate. So it was a relatively easy relationship?

RR: I'm going to tell you something. When I worked for Barr, he and d'Harnoncourt were on a different level of communication in terms of influencing how the Museum operated, than Monroe Wheeler. Monroe Wheeler and Barr did not enjoy a close relationship, but Monroe Wheeler was essential to the publication of our books, and also as a loan-getter. He was very savvy and socially close to some people in the south of France, so if a loan had to be [obtained], they would send him along. I never had much interaction with Monroe. The first social event I was ever invited to at the Museum—now remember, I came in the fall of '61—was Alfred Barr's 60th birthday. January 28th, 1962. There was a surprise party planned for him at the Philip Johnson Guest House, by the trustees. The surprise was that their daughter, Victoria Barr, would come and be there. At that point, I think she lived in Aspen. I did not know a soul, except for Dorothy. I dressed very carefully and I went. And I had never been to the Philip Johnson Guest House. And I was just overwhelmed by the house. I talked to the people at my table but I don't remember who they were. The trustees gave Barr a certificate made by Saul Steinberg. It was one of those illegible things, and then in one space it is written "Alfred." It is dated on the verso. The Barrs had it for years in their house. It was illustrated in The New Criterion in 1987, the summer issue that Marga and I wrote, and when Marga died, she left it to me. It's in my apartment, and it will eventually come to the Museum.[59:10]

SS: How amazing. That's pretty wonderful. And you had mentioned that Marga had said that Barr's two really close friends were Soby and Philip Johnson. And so what was the relationship like between Johnson and Barr, that you could observe?

RR: Oh, it was great. And my relationship with Philip stuck all through when I was putting together the Archives. He was a great supporter. We would lunch together every few weeks, alternating between the Four Seasons and the University Club—

he loved the 7th floor dining room there. You know how he would write these one-liner letters and think nothing of picking up the phone to call Dick Oldenburg to make suggestions about the Archives. And of course, I knew David Whitney from the 1960s. I don't know where we first met, whether it was through Leo or through something he did at the Whitney, but I just don't remember. But I knew David for a long time. We really liked each other, you know, hugs and kisses and discussing gardening and flowers. We just had a great fondness for each other. During the time I was here in the 1960's, the Philip Johnson wing got built. It opened in May 1964. Everything went pretty smoothly. Of course, they were very mindful of cost because not to go over budget was essential. Now of course we know, it did go over budget, which is the history of another area of the Museum. The fact is that this became a very important aspect of how we chose architects for the subsequent buildings, I believe. Anyway, Philip was always loyal to Alfred and he also had a great eye. He left the Museum much of his collection, and had a purchase fund for acquiring art here. He went with Barr different places. His eulogy that he gave at the Barr memorial service is so telling and so informative that anybody who is doing any kind of research and wanting to write about Alfred Barr has to read that eulogy. Wilder Green from our Architecture and Design department was the liaison between the Museum, Philip Johnson, and the construction people.

END Audio File: Roob_01 at 1:02:08

BEGIN Audio File: Roob_02

RR: So that was how that building got built. When it was opened it was quite splendid. In one part you had 5,000 square feet of space uninterrupted by piers, which I think later became the restaurant and *SetteMoMA*. But that was gallery space, and with views to the garden. Our offices were at the far east end, and that was kind of fun. That's where we all entered and left and that's where visitors were announced. An interesting note is that the night watchman, and I worked rather late, was Sol LeWitt.

SS: What year did you get married?

RR: 1962. Barr gave me the weekend off to take a “honeymoon,” and we went to Bermuda. Subsequently he had to go to Greece for three weeks, in early 1963 I think, and we went down to the Yucatan and Mexico for a delayed holiday. At the time, nobody did that kind of trekked around to Chichen, Uxmal, Kabna, et cetera. I think we were talking about the Philip Johnson Wing. The opening was in May of 1964 with a big splash. It was to honor artists in the collection and all of the artists were invited and most of them came. The garden was wall to wall people. There were private dinner parties before. That night it was close to 100 degrees in New York. It was ferociously hot. Lady Bird Johnson spoke in the garden, and David Rockefeller and Barr took her around beforehand. Paul Tillich was supposed to speak. But he became very ill that day, so I was summoned from wherever I was and went up to Union Theological Seminary to his apartment and got his speech, so somebody could read it. Reinstalling the new museum, the second and third floors, was absolutely, that was absolutely an education and memorable eye-opener. I worked on that with Barr and Dorothy Miller and Sara Mazo. Sara Mazo worked for Dorothy. She was a former Martha Graham dancer who married Kuniyoshi. She was tiny, she was adorable, and she was totally thorough and business-like. It was she who kept the files, managed loans along with the registrar person, and kept data on the collection. For example, the museum Collections catalogue includes the dimensions, centimeters, the media, all of that. Sara did that. Barr relied on her and so did Dorothy. She was really important person to the Museum. She was very exacting about everything, and if you found out one little thing, like, one dimension mentioned in some other book a different way, she checked it out. The installation of the collection, that was fun. We were behind schedule. And at night, occasionally, we would go down the street on 53rd Street. Around the corner from the Museum, on Sixth Avenue, there was the Sixth Avenue Bar. And d’Harnoncourt, Dorothy, Sara, sometimes Betsy Jones, me, I don’t remember, maybe Robbie, maybe Mike and Tom, I don’t know, but we would sit at the bar, not at a table, and they would order drinks and sandwiches. Then we would come back to work. Barr had this idea that on the third floor of the Museum, the gallery to the left as you entered, or the second floor, was going to be devoted to some themed exhibition from the Museum collections. And the first theme was going to be the family. So we’re sitting at the bar, and Barr said that he wished he could find

something a little modern or something abstract to put there. So I'm sitting looking at my sandwich and I said, "Well, Mr. Barr, how about Tanguy's *Mama, Papa is Wounded!* [MoMA #78.1936]" He gets up from the chair and asked Sara to find out where it was and get it. He comes over, gives me a big hug, says, "Bless you dear, bless you!" [laughing] I'm sorry to say this, but he probably liked somebody working for him that was sort of like an instant file. [laughing]

SS: Photographic memory.

RR: One of his passions outside of the museum was bird-watching. He was a paraprofessional ornithologist. He went to visit [Louis] Leakey. He was invited with Roland Penrose who was his very close friend to a conference down in Africa. They went at the invitation of Frank McEwen, to Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe, to a conference for some museum center they were opening¹, and then from there, went on a bird-watching animal safari. He met Leakey, I believe. I was assigned, the summer before he left, to go over to the Museum of Natural History and do research on the birds of East Africa. I also met with their curator of ornithology. Now, I know, I think birds are very beautiful but Sarah, this was a bit outside my field. I did it, found it fascinating, and I think there's a two- or three-page single-spaced memo from me in the files about my findings. Barr was so grateful. I look back on that and I think, how did I do it? I think I know that I have forgotten more than I ever knew. I did a lot of things like that. Many of these things really have come to be gifts in my life. Barr was into all things Russian, whether it was school of Novgorod icons or Repin or Vrubel. Now I had had a lot of art history, in every area, but I never came upon Repin or Vrubel. He had many books in the office and he would open them and explain them to me. We would be sitting at his table with those wonderful hands of his showing me different aspects of their work that he thought I should know about and remember. He also showed me the work of Theophanes the Greek, who nobody knew about. Theophanes the Greek lived in the 14th century. You know Barr kept a diary of his trip to Russia. Now in the Russian diary he mentions that he went to Novgorod. In Novgorod, in one of the wooden churches, there is a painting by Theophanes the Greek that you can date to 1378. I was

¹ 1st International Congress on African Culture, August, 1962 at the National Gallery in Salisbury/Harare (JC)

invited on the first fact-finding trip into the Soviet Union in August 1989 when I was on the board of the Archives of American Art of the Smithsonian. The person who was supposed to represent the Smithsonian could not go, and told them there was only one person that should be asked to go in her stead, and that was Rona Roob, that she was the only person she knew who knew anything about Novgorod. I won't describe the trip but it was in a van through Estonia, to Saint Petersburg, and then when we got to Novgorod, I asked for a ladder. I went up the ladder to the dome, oh, got goose-bumps. In the dome of this wooden church is an ethereal painting of angels, and it's Theophanes the Greek. Barr called it "Byzantine impressionism." So I was able to tell this group of nine people about Alfred Barr, whom they didn't know much about, and about Byzantine impressionism. These things never left me, for some reason. [11:04]

SS: Amazing.

RR: This whole experience of my friendship with the Barrs, both Alfred and Marga, changed our lives. Not just my life, but my husband's and our children. They knew the Barrs. Nancy knew Alfred from when she was a small child.

SS: All right. So we'll talk about Marga next time. Is there anything else that you have that you want to cover from this period? I mean, we talked briefly about some of the other players that were here at the Museum at the time: René d'Harnoncourt, Monroe Wheeler, Bates Lowry, who was here for only a very short time.

RR: Bates Lowry?

SS: Yes.

RR: I never was here for that. I missed that whole episode of Bates Lowry and John Hightower. I left the Museum at the end of September, that first time, in 1965. There are two other things that might be of interest, but they're not in the right spot here. When I first went to work for him, drafting letters and such, Barr had a distinct writing style that was very simple and very clear. I would draft things for him, and he would call me in. I would have used a big word, for example, and he would say, "If you want people to read it, and if it can be said in two syllables instead of three,

say it. If you can say it in one syllable instead of two, do so.” I never forgot this. The things that I really worked on that he believed in so strongly were acquisition bulletins, those yearly or every other year bulletins the Museum used to publish of the collection. The cover might illustrate an important work from a bequest or an acquisition. But then you’d turn to the back, and it would include key acquisitions—some years Canadian, another year Iceland. Some of the time, it wasn’t all written by him. He would do a little introduction, which I might probably draft. But the body of the text was quotes from artists, from the artists’ questionnaires. This is how he hoped to entice people to come to the Museum. A small, well attended exhibition accompanied this, and we called them Recent Acquisition shows. It was just painting and sculpture. It was not constructions, it didn’t include prints and drawings or anything else. They were a good educational tool. Barr was always very big on educating, wanting to get the message out.

SS: Did you find yourself in time coming to emulate his writing style? [15:10]

RR: I did. As a matter of fact, when I got married and I wrote thank-you notes, they were Alfred Barr-style thank-you notes. And I never forgot that writing style. I always tried—and it’s not easy, by the way. It takes a lot of paring down. And sustained for many, many pages, it’s quite challenging. But that’s the way he wrote, and that’s why today, I think, anybody could pick up the Matisse book or whatever and find it a pleasure to read.

SS: But that was always his strategy.

RR: Yes.

SS: Say it simply.

RR: And also make sure the page layout was appealing. That was big—all of the goals of the first catalogue of the Museum, as I’ve written in *The New Criterion* I think, were still the same goals when I got here.

SS: And we talked very briefly about Dorothy. Was there anything else?

RR: Dorothy and I were friendly and got along well. Our friendship continued until her last days. A lot of what she has accomplished is documented elsewhere. After she left the Museum, she began a second career as an art advisor, I believe. I don't know the circumstances of her leaving. I wasn't here then. Apparently it was not a completely pleasant time at the Museum to be here and it was a difficult time for her, I believe, which is too bad. I look back Sarah, and honestly, for both tours of duty, I think quite positively about this institution. The young staff is just superb, excellent, you and Eva [Respini], and others, and I think making Ann Temkin the head of Painting and Sculpture was a stroke of genius. The galleries have never looked better. It's great that she's really thought about the collection so deeply. The Museum is a really great place, and I hope that those associated with it appreciate it. It was a privilege to have worked here.

SS: Yes. Shall we stop here for today?

RR: Yes.

SS: Okay. All right. So this concludes our first session. To be continued.

END Audio File: Roob_02 at 0:19:31

End of Interview April 18, 2012

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

INTERVIEW WITH: RONA ROOB (RR)

INTERVIEWER: SARAH SUZUKI (SS)

LOCATION: THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

DATE: APRIL 25, 2012

TRANSCRIBER: JANET CROWLEY, TRANSCRIPTION COMPLETED 5//2012

BEGIN Audio File: Roob_03

SS: All right, so this is our second session. I'm Sarah Suzuki, Associate Curator in the department of Prints and Illustrated Books at The Museum of Modern Art. Today is April 25, 2012, and I am here with Rona Roob. Rona, I know last time you stated your name and date of birth, so we won't do that again, but I will ask you to state

your last official departmental title, since that's pertinent to what we'll be talking about today.

RR: Well, when I left the Museum, I was Chief Archivist of The Museum of Modern Art.

SS: All right. So in the last session we talked about your first stint here at the Museum working with Alfred Barr. And you left in, it was 1971?

RR: I came in late September 1961; I left in late September 1965.

SS: 1965. Okay. And so that was the end of your kind of first career at MoMA, and today we're going to talk about your second career at MoMA, which was the establishment of the Archives. But first, why don't you tell us, after 1965, where you were and what you were doing, and then, what brought you back to the Museum.

RR: Okay. The end of '65, I had a child, our first daughter, named Nancy. And about 23 months later, I had our second daughter, named Helen. At three, both girls went to school. And this brings us to the late '60s, early '70s. In the early '70s, Marga Barr said Alfred needed somebody to help him at work. I came back to work briefly at the Museum in the very late 1960s. Barr's office at that time was in what they called the Theater Guild building.

SS: And that was on?

RR: Fifty-third Street. The small houses next to the Museum on 53rd, I think, were mostly owned by the Museum. And there were other staff working in that building. I remember seeing Waldo [Rasmussen] often, so maybe the International Program had offices there, too. I'm not sure. I came to work in the morning, and my job was really Barr. They wanted to revise and update WIMP, *What Is Modern Painting?*, which had sold millions of copies in three languages, and do additions and addendum to Barr's Matisse book. The work I did on WIMP really included bringing it up to date, death dates of artists, tweaking the language. When it was first published, in 1941 or 1943, I think, Barr used words like "pancakes" for tamales, so the public would understand. We never got around to Matisse. [0:03:35] Barr was not in good shape at all. I would get to the Museum after the children went to school, but the understanding was that I would work in the morning, as I had to be home to pick up one of them who got out of school around 12:30. This did not go with his schedule. He could hardly remember. He was in the beginning stage or maybe in the middle of his dementia. By the time he got to the office, I was almost ready to go home. Sometimes he got there earlier, though. What he would do is, he would call me into his office, and we would talk. He could remember things from the past. And that's when he told me about his early trip to Russia, and how he had visited Malevich and Malevich's factory, and all those kinds of details. That he remembered clearly. But he couldn't remember what he had for breakfast, or where

he was the night before, or even getting to the Museum. After a short time, maybe less than two years, I wrote a letter to Marga, and I said I could not continue to do this. It was heartbreaking, and I didn't think we were accomplishing anything. When I was getting ready to leave on an ordinary day, Dorothy Miller would arrive to take him out to lunch, and I would leave for the day. But it just, it did not work out.

[5:20]

SS: Was he physically frail?

RR: Yes. He was always physically frail. He was slight of build. He was not physically frail in terms of illness, except he was an insomniac, as I mentioned before. But it was very sad to see him this way. In 1975, we were very into Chinese medicine in this country, I believe. There was an operation they could do called, I think, shunting of the brain. Marga wrote it all out for me in detail. They drained fluid off the brain. He had this operation at Lenox Hill Hospital, and from 1975, he never spoke again. He went into a nursing home called Noble Horizons, and she went up to visit him every weekend, but I never saw him again. I asked if perhaps I could go up to see him, and she said no, that it would be too sad. The only person, she told me, that he seemed to recognize was Philip Johnson; he came to see him, Barr cried and Philip cried. Marga bought him a little kitten because he loved kittens. It was a heartbreaking time for her. Barr didn't die until 1981. [7:10]

SS: So how long then—

RR: Six years, at the end of 1977, I was on a bus going down Fifth Avenue, and met Marga Barr. We did speak over the intervening years because I really felt, and I think the Barrs felt, very close to me. They were very protective. Barr would come up to our house, my apartment occasionally. I lived at 90th Street, he lived at 96th. We'd play sort of childish games. One of our children had a little plastic pony from the five and dime, and she named it Alfred. She's going down to return Christmas presents, and I was also on my way downtown. We're standing on the bus talking, and she asked what I was doing? And I said told her I was volunteering. I'm processing papers at the Archives of American Art. I got involved a bit with the Archives of American Art through a friend, and they had offices on 65th Street, and I would go there in the morning, a couple of times a week, and work on archives for them. I found it fascinating; I absolutely loved it. She said there was a project to be done at the Museum and that my name came up. And I said I could not go back to the Museum because my life was wonderful as is. I get home, and I have a phone message to please call Dick Koch. I called Dick, whom I was very fond of, and we had lunch. He told me about a project to prepare research, a whole, heavy-duty research, on the history of *Guernica* in preparation for its return to a Franco-free Spain. They needed somebody to do confidential research. There was nobody in Painting and Sculpture at the time to do this and would I? I told Dick I really couldn't, because I had a life, and I knew it would just take over, and I couldn't

commit that kind of time to it. He said I could name my price and my hours, so long as I didn't work more than twenty hours. I said I would think about it. 20 hours a week meant I could amortize my time any way I wanted to. And if there was a Christmas vacation or the child was sick or something like that, I could work 40 hours one week, which is what I did much of the time, and less another week—I just had to hand them in a monthly bill. And then I could name my own price. The research required me to read trustee minutes, committee reports, all kinds of confidential material. In the registrar's office, Painting and Sculpture, and then even the Drawings department for the *Guernica* drawings.

SS: And at this point, where were these materials held? [12:12]

RR: They were held in the departmental files that nobody except staff got to see. Everyone was very solicitous, very open, very helpful. I just went from department to department. I didn't have to bother people to ask. I just walked in and said, "Hi," and they said, "Oh," and they made a little space for me to work at. I was like the traveling researcher. By this time, I met Dick Oldenburg, whom I had never met before. And Dick tells a story [laughing], he said that, "I had on my calendar that day that I was going to meet Rona Roob who worked for Alfred Barr." He said, "I expected them to wheel in a little old lady with white hair in a wheelchair, and you just bounced into my office." And that was the beginning of a very nice relationship with Dick. Of course, I met Ethel.

SS: This is Ethel Shein. And what was her official position at that point.

RR: Ethel Shein, I don't know what her official title was. I really can't tell you titles. But I did know that she [laughing] appeared to be very much in charge at the Museum, in many ways.

SS: But out of Dick's office.

RR: Dick had an office, and Ethel sat directly outside. Ethel had an assistant and was into a lot of what happened at the Museum, whether it was seating a dinner, or issuing invitations to opening events. There was a protocol list, but Ethel was a very important person to the Museum. Ethel and I got along fine. I didn't really have any interaction with either Dick or Ethel at this point, and so, I just was going about my work. Back to *Guernica*—there was a woman in the library, named Janet Rosine, and she was the reference librarian. As I'm doing this work, which took some time, Janet put together with me a list of photocopies of periodicals and articles that had come out at the time, and we made a complete package. Then Dick Koch's office sent it out. [15:05]

SS: So what was the nature of the research on *Guernica*?

RR: The nature of the research were things like, for example, condition, its traveling schedule, where it had been. It was really from the time it came to America to the

time it was first shown the first big Picasso show at the Museum, from the time that it left Paris until the time that it came here. And a little bit of the bombing of Guernica, but not much, because that was a fact that was well documented. We were very surprised, months later, or maybe as much as six months later, to read an article, in one of the art publications—it might have been something like *Art News* or *Art in America* or *Arts*—written by Herschel Chipp, which revealed a lot of the things that were in this documentation that we sent, supposedly, to Spain. After a while, these things aren't confidential anyway, but at the time, they were.

[16:32]

SS: So did you have other thoughts on who had commissioned the research or where it had ended up?

RR: No, I never had a thought about anything like that. I just did what I was supposed to do, and I loved it. Right after that, I was told that the Museum wanted to prepare a bibliography of all of Alfred Barr's writings because they were thinking of publishing an anthology of his writings. And would I do this? Marga Barr told me there was a bibliography that Bill Lieberman had prepared that went up to about 1943; and he had done this when he first worked at the Museum. [pause] So they had another project for me. So I took Bill Lieberman's bibliography as my starter. In the interim period, I mentioned to Dick Oldenburg, in passing, that I was really enjoying this, except that if anybody came from the outside to do research at the Museum, they'd have to get special letters to every department to be admitted to that department to do research. They would wind up maybe interrupting the routine and work of several people. There was no central place for all of these records, some of which hadn't been looked at in years. And I said, "Probably this Museum has to think about what they're going to do with all of their archival records."

Dick was attending an American Association of Museum Directors conference in New York, at around the same time in the 1970s. He called me and he said, "I don't know what you're doing tomorrow, but I want you to put the whole day aside. I want you to go to the Hilton Hotel down the street, and I want you to go to this session that the museum directors are having on establishing museum archives. I want you to stay for the whole day and listen to what they have to say, and tell me about it." I went, took notes. I sat next to someone named Maygene Daniels, who was sent there by either John Walker who was still the head of the National Gallery, or Carter Brown, who was his assistant. And she was there doing the same thing for the National Gallery. And the rest is history, because Maygene and I worked on funding our institution's archives for years, using each other as a sounding board; and she organized the National Gallery Archives, and I the Museum of Modern Art Archives. I gave Dick a one-page synopsis of my notes and he liked it. He was really very enthusiastic about it. He said, this is probably something you could handle.

I was so energized by this whole thought and all of this material, and I just—by this time, my children were getting older; they had after-school activities, and they were very responsible, so I could see this might be a really fun thing to do. In any case, he must have presented this to the curators, maybe at one of his department heads meetings because he called me in and he said, “You know, two of our curators don’t think that you could be the person to be in charge of this. They said you don’t have the academic credentials that would be necessary. And even though other people feel that you’d be the perfect person because you know so much about the Museum and you know your way around it.” Now, as you know, I had gone to the Institute and I had my points toward my master’s. I never wrote my thesis. Dick asked me to find out what credentials were needed, and get back to him. So I found out that an MLS, a Master of Library Science with specialty in archives from Columbia would be fine, and that they had a school. This was, I think, a year program. He told me to go. I told him I couldn’t handle the tuition. We had two children in private schools and could not afford it. So he got right back to me saying it wouldn’t be a problem, that the Museum would fund two thirds if I could do one third. So we did, a small part, and the Museum paid for it, and I got my MLS with a specialty in archives, while I was working at the Museum. My grades came on postcards from Columbia. And I graduated with a 4.0 average, because my children would get home before I did and I wanted to set a good example. And I thought: here I am, working at the Museum, school at night and on weekends, a mother, and a wife with a husband, who traveled a lot and had a job that took an endless amount of hours. I was so tired all of the time, Sarah. The thing that made graduate school so easy for me was photocopy machines. I could photocopy the reading, and just read back and forth on the bus. My papers I wrote from home, and every class I could, I focused on the Museum. For example, I indexed the Conger Goodyear book. Finding aids. I did a complete finding aid of the Barr papers. I tried to connect everything at the school to the work I was doing at the Museum. And online systems. At that point, they used OCLC; I became very familiar with online systems. But this was all for books, then. RLIN was just beginning, and we didn’t do RLIN at Columbia, but I found out what RLIN was early on, in its early stages. But the thing is that I learned how everything had to be processed by processing the Matisse papers. I just knew, in my mind, the online systems for books really could be applied at some later stage for manuscript material.

And so we started to get off the ground. This was, I guess I graduated from Columbia in January of 1981. My first spot that I worked at the Museum when I was doing the bibliography was a little place in cold storage. There was a shelf that they lowered to desk level, and I sat there freezing cold, but I wasn’t in that room very much, because I took Bill Lieberman’s bibliography and checked everything. Remember, we had no way of checking on a computer at that date. And I checked everything very carefully. But in order to get a full bibliography, I had to read the entire Barr papers, which I began to do. A voluminous amount of material. Mrs.

Barr would come—by this time, I was reading; I was there sitting in cold storage doing this sort of stuff, and I found out that a bibliography—of course, I learned this at library school. I learned something else, by the way, just to back-track for one second. At library school, I learned the difference between archives and librarianship, and I learned that they were like oil and water. The fact is, the way you approached papers was so different than a book. You want to catalogue a book? You open up the book, you look, you see what it's about. It's half been done by the people who printed the book with ISBN numbers. But archives, you pick up a file folder. You just don't know what's in it. Later on, I picked up a file folder of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's speech in 1939, and in it I found the lost page from the Barr diary. You just don't know until you open up that folder. In reading through the papers, there was handwriting to decipher, or initials to decipher. Mrs. Barr took a tremendous interest in the establishment of an archives at the Museum, and the whole idea of somebody putting the Barr papers in order. She would come many times a week to help—by this time, the Museum had moved because of the Pelli building, and we were scattered. And my office was at 22 West 55th Street on the second floor, in what, we decided, must have been Henry Kissinger's coat closet. But it was perfectly adequate. [27:40]

SS: Who else was in that building on 55th Street?

RR: Next door to me was Pat Whitman, and she had the front office, and that was the Associate Council, now the Contemporary Arts Council. And behind me was a wonderful man named Steve Harvey, who died. A couple of people from the Film department, and Sonia Lopez from the International Program. Sonia subsequently left, and she works for Agnes Gund. In that building was Publications, the International Program and Council, Art Advisory, some Finance. There was a lot of camaraderie, and Dick would come by every once in a while and poke his head in the door, and say, "How are you doing?" to all of us. Mail was delivered. And there was an underground passage from 55th Street to 54th Street. That's the building where Nelson Rockefeller was found dead. From there, across the street, there was the Museum where some Museum staff were still in place, I believe. The building on 55th street doesn't exist anymore.

So I got my Masters in Library Science, and the Archives was established under the authority of the General Counsel's office. This was because there were legal issues in personal papers. This was the beginning. I did the Barr bibliography. It was not published by the Museum. It was published in a book called *Defining Modern Art*, and was very complete. It had periodical references, and that's what I got from reading the Papers. "Loved your article in last Sunday's *Herald Tribune*." "Wonderful to have heard you..." such and such. And Mrs. Barr would come by, and I would make piles of things, and she would come by and identify signatures, maybe put a date on something or whatever, and put everything in context. This was a learning experience for me; and I could not imagine who could have a better

job. Every day I learned so much that was new, and this began a decade or two here. Little by little—I don't know how we did it—we put this thing together. I had no help. My first user was Jack Flam. I had met John Elderfield at Marga Barr's house. She had a party for the end of the strike of the *London Times*, and John was there. And we instantly liked each other, and his friend Jack Flam, who of course is also a great Matisse scholar, was working on a book, and he wanted to see a certain Barr Matisse file. So Jack came over, and he remembers to this day, he sat in a little corner and he looked through the Matisse material, he thanked me very much, and off he went. And that was the beginning of—that was my first user.

[31:35]

SS: So at this point, was there a physical plant? Was there a physical space in the Museum where this material was starting to be?

RR: We weren't in the Museum. We were at 55th Street. But at 55th Street, all of the Barr papers were sent over. Other material that I needed to verify from the Painting and Sculpture and other curatorial departments was elsewhere. I had to go to those departments to do that kind of verification. The Registrar's office records were hugely important. Little by little, people were beginning to realize there was a person there where they could get answers to questions. And thinking back, I think that was probably very big. [32:23]

SS: Rona, could you talk just a little bit more about the reasoning for Archives being under the kind of supervision or the authority of General Counsel?

RR: Well, there were permissions that are needed if you want to quote from papers. There are access questions, because accessing personal papers—it requires a certain kind of legal expertise. There's copyright law. Beverly Wolff was happy to have this under her. She just let me go ahead and do what I had to do, and if I had a question, I would ask her. Very few questions came up in those early days, because there weren't that many users. And if it was a question of confidentiality, my feeling was that I'd read so many things that really never should have been made public. But they were, and nobody ever went there to look at them. Nobody picked those things out because there was so much material. It was okay. They formed a picture and they told a story. If it was something that was blasphemous, or whatever, but that hardly ever happened. It really hardly ever happened. It did happen in one case with some Philip Johnson letters that were written to Barr during the time that he was not at the Museum, when he left in 1934, and the Goodwin Stone building was going up. Those couple of letters were taken out, and Beverly felt they should be put aside, and they were. We called that "3-G" material.

A turning point for the Archives, was 1979. 1979 was the fiftieth anniversary of the Museum. In the meantime, every time there was an opportunity, when I look back now, it really seemed to turn into something very positive. For example, I was flying to California, and I had some papers with me that I was reading. Sitting next to me

was a man to whom I hadn't yet spoken. Eating dinner, he asked what I was doing, and I told him I worked at The Museum of Modern Art. I asked him what he did, and he said he was the director of the Museum of Broadcasting. I mentioned that William Paley was a long-time trustee of the Modern, that at one point, the Museum, Barr, and Paley actually considered the idea of having television as the eighth curatorial department of the Museum. Of course, that's all past history, because look at the wonderful accomplishments of your museum. I told him about an archives situation that he could advise on—we had come upon recordings, records, of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's speech in 1939 on the radio, when The Museum of Modern Art's original Goodwin Stone building opened. I asked if he could suggest a way to get them onto cassettes so he told me to just bring them over to his office when I returned to New York. I called up his office, gave him the records, and we now have cassettes of the FDR 1939 address.

In 1979, the Museum was celebrating its 50th anniversary. In preparation for this, Sam Hunter was hired to write a book. Each head of a department was asked to write a section on their department, with illustrations. There was a reception, a party for the 50th anniversary, to which only staff were invited, no spouses, no friends, or anything. Dick spoke, and they played the recording of the Franklin Delano Roosevelt speech. And we all sat around, talked, or just stood there. That was the party; they had food and drink and whatever, and it was very nice. One thing happened at the party was kind of interesting: I was standing next to Bill Lieberman, and as soon as FDR's speech was over, I said, "You know, Bill, Monroe Wheeler told me he wrote that speech for Roosevelt." Bill Lieberman quickly dispelled that. I mean, I don't know how Monroe and Bill felt about each other, but it was interesting because Monroe Wheeler outlived everybody of his era at the Museum, and was *compos mentis* until the very end. He wrote an article about the Museum in the 50th anniversary issue of *ArtNews*. Many people didn't agree with what he said. Sometimes people get old, like me, and you have to take whatever they say with a grain of salt. [laughing]

But by 1979, people had discovered that I was here, and they started to call. For the opening in 1979, Ethel called. Special Events was going to have a dinner, and they wanted to know what the menu and the table settings for the 1939 dinner were. Well, I had come upon that, so I just quickly said, when do you want me to come by with the information? She said, "Do you have it?" So I said, "Yes." We had these wonderful Conger Goodyear scrapbooks, and in one was the menu and also clippings. I also discovered that we had newsreel film of the event, and that was very useful. With many events that happened, people became aware of the fact that if you were working on something, it was possible that maybe it had an historical precedent, and you could go to the Archives. I would be in the elevator, and someone would say, "Oh, you know, I've been meaning to call you to ask you about such and such," and the elevator doors would be opening, people would be getting impatient; they'd eventually call. Little by little the Archives was becoming a

reference resource. This was impinging on my time—there was no end to the amount of hours that I could have worked, in those days.

Another thing that happened in 1979 was [pause] Jim Soby died. He left all of his pictures to the Museum, all of his paintings, which were considerable, and he also left all of his papers. The papers were delivered to my office at 22 West 55th Street in grocery boxes, but his files were precise and immaculate. He had an organized mind—he was a writer. He wrote for the *Saturday Review*. He wrote I don't know how many publications for the Museum. I've done a complete annotated bibliography of his writings that was published in one of the *Studies* [*Studies in Modern Art*]. The papers were in file cabinets that were overturned and thrown into these boxes. I didn't process it at that time, but I tried to sort it out—like running a film backwards—picking out chunks of material with file folders and putting them together in clean boxes, Hollinger boxes, in a manageable way. This was definitely an important project that would have to be addressed. Now back to the Barr bibliography. The Museum did not publish the bibliography. Marga is very anxious to get it published though. A chronology of Barr's life is done by Jane Fluegel, who was in our Publications department, a crackerjack, wonderful editor. She died very early, unfortunately. I did the bibliography, and many people were asked if they would write the forward. I must tell you, it really came down to Irving Sandler, everyone else was too busy or unwilling. Irving interviewed Marga, talked to me, and together we decided which things were to be included. The book was to be published by Abrams; it was to be based on my bibliography, which was an annotated bibliography with cross-references, et cetera. It included publications that were Museum bulletins, Museum catalogues, other things he wrote for, and newspaper and periodic articles. And the book was published. He had asked me if I would be his collaborator. After talking a bit with Dick, I said no. I felt that I would have the lion's share of the work and this was just something that I was not interested in doing. And by this time to be honest, I was really preoccupied with the Museum's Archives. Abrams took it over, and there was a woman named Phyllis Freeman who was in charge of the Abrams publication, who was in touch with me all the time. Unfortunately, she also died very young. She was a great friend of Judith Cousins, who was a crackerjack research curator here at the Museum for Bill Rubin. Absolutely brilliant. So that's the end of the Barr bibliography saga. But that took me all over the Museum, too, so it became more apparent than ever that the Museum really needed something or somebody or someplace.

Before the Pelli building opened, we all moved from 55th street over to 799 Seventh Avenue, which was not as pleasant. It was an office building, one great big floor, and I don't remember staying there too long. What I do remember—this was another way the Archives got better known, is that John Elderfield was doing a Matisse drawings show. One day, in walks Magdalena Dabrowski. I had never met her before. She was working on the Matisse drawings show, and needed some very detailed information. I showed her the Matisse finding aid which I had

prepared when I was getting my MLS, and she found what she wanted. She took her notes, her copies, whatever she needed. That was the beginning of a really long relationship with Magdalena, which continued even after she left the Museum. Every time we worked with someone, they would go back and tell somebody else. Little by little, the work of the Archives was leaking out there. I didn't realize this until you asked me, until we decided to talk.

We finally moved into the Pelli building. The Museum did not have a computer-wide system, by the way. I guess we're in the early 1980s now. And I have my MLS, I've worked for Beverly, and I guess they called me museum archivist. I don't know what they called me. I don't recall what my title was. Lyanne Dowling, who was head of what you call Human Resources now, which was then Personnel, who was really a lovely person, said, "You know, I wonder if we couldn't backtrack you to when you began this segment of your work at the Museum, so that maybe when your pension days come—let me see what I can do." Sarah, the kindness of people was just amazing. The Museum has its own culture, and people really are kind to each other—there did not seem to be competition between them because everybody wanted everybody else to succeed. It was a great team. And I think that that's always held. It held until I left, certainly, the cooperation was always great for me.

In any case, we move to the Pelli building, and I see my office. I'm in the library, and my title has been changed. I now have a disappointing title, "Assistant Librarian, Archives." I have an office which is so tiny you can't believe, an inside office. Clive was not really into archives and the history of the Museum. And I have to tell you, that for the first and only time, I was really upset. When Mrs. Barr came in to visit, her visitations, Clive would not even come out of his office to say hello to her. And sometimes I'd be working in the evening, and he would be going home, and he would shut the lights out with me still working. It became a very disagreeable situation. The rudeness to Mrs. Barr really got my attention, so I spoke to Ethel. She brought it up to Dick, and so, this became a known fact. There was no reason for her or me to be treated this way. But I did keep chugging along, getting papers and processing papers and whatever, but it did become apparent that if we were going to continue, we needed to have a formal archives program. I had joined SAA, the Society of American Archivists, and I had been in regular contact with Maygene Daniels and we visited each other's sites. She had a spectacular set up. Paul Mellon was well behind her efforts, so was Carter Brown. We helped each other with processing and provenance questions and copyright things. We talked all the time. And we were both members of SAA, which didn't even have a museum archives section, at that point. There was a meeting that came to my attention in Austin, Texas of the Society of American Archivists, and I sent it over to Ethel and Dick, and so, they told me to go. I went down to Austin—it was all about online systems and information records, et cetera. I met a lot of other archivists, and went to all of the sessions. I was really struck by two things, the

efficiency of religious archives and business archives. And I was painstaking in listening to these people very carefully and talking to them, because they had some great ideas that we could incorporate into what I was trying to do at the Museum. The same principles prevailed; and this really got my attention. In one session, I'm seated next to a man named Joe Ernst. Joe Ernst was the founder of the Rockefeller Archive Center. My badge said MoMA and he began talking. He told me he began in a closet at Rockefeller University or something, in a closet, and that's how the Rockefeller Archives began. He was amazed that we didn't have an archives. I told him that we were going to apply towards a formal archives. And he said that the Museum is really a member of the Rockefeller family. "We can make space available to you up at the Rockefeller Archives Center." I said, "Space!" He said that space has going to be a problem. You're in midtown Manhattan; there will never be enough space for the amount of material the Museum probably has. I said that I didn't even know how much material they have. he asked me to write a letter explaining the connection between the Rockefeller family and The Museum of Modern Art, and he'd see what he could work out. I was so excited, and I came back and I told this to Beverly. I made a list of the connections, and the connections are just astounding, as you know. We made our case, and David Rockefeller gave us a gift in kind of 300 [300–350?] square feet of space to store material, material that could be accessed up there through the Rockefeller Archives staff. The material would be prepared by us, the finding aids, et cetera. And the head of the Rockefeller Archives Center then, after Joe retired, was Darwin Stapleton, who was tremendously cooperative. There was a person on their staff named Michelle Hiltzig, who was really a pro, and she and I worked together; this was a matter of history until we had the space in Queens. That's where processed material was able to be read, and if we go forward to the 1990s, oral histories could be read up there. This was really a big thing, because it's very close, Tarrytown, on the train. The material is there; you just make an appointment and go. It did not require any staff time from us, didn't require any storage space for us, and it was a gift in kind that was worth money. So this was another one of those pluses. Anyway, also at one of these conferences, I met a woman named Laurie Baty. Laurie was second in command, I think, at the NHPRC. The NHPRC is the National Historic Preservation and Records Commission. I told her about the Museum situation. First of all, The Museum of Modern Art just lights up everybody. I mean, you say "The Museum of Modern Art," and people really want to help. I mean, the panache of the Museum is just unbelievable. And I was very laid back about all of this, too, because basically, I really am a shy person, and I didn't know where I was going with this, Sarah, honestly. And so I started, I talked to Laurie. I don't know how—she said, why don't we have a cup of coffee together, or something. So we did, in the lobby of the hotel, and we talked about the NHPRC and how this would be a tailor-made project for them. So I come back with these two things, Rockefeller Archive Center and NHPRC. And I told Ethel something like, "We're on our way." I just felt something in my bones, I just knew that this could work out.

I got to New York, and I'm so energized and so excited. We got together all of the stuff for the NHPRC, and by then Laurie and I have become friends. She comes to New York for something, for example, she needs a place to stay. So I said, "That's not a problem; you can stay overnight at my house." Well, this was just great, because there I had her in my apartment. I mean, I didn't have her all day. She was never there in the day, but in the evening, she slept there. So I had an initial idea about the amount of material we had. She said we couldn't apply on this cycle and that we didn't have something very important. You must show financial support from outside, another foundation or foundations or donors or something like that. This was a big dilemma because Archives is not a priority in terms of funding for this Museum. It never was and it never will be. It is the un-sexiest part of the Museum. It's right up there with establishing a trustee committee for cleaning the floors. It's not quite the same thing, but you know what I mean. It's not prints, drawings, paintings, sculptures, architecture, or design. But David Rockefeller, his gift in kind, and the Museum did chip in some. No question; they had to. And I don't recall who else we got. Early on it was the Reed Foundation. We put together a package. The first time the proposal did not fly. The second time, with Laurie's tweaking, it did. And we got this money in 1987, perhaps. I don't remember exactly when, but it included a built in staff assistant, which was really a great thing for me. However, nothing happened. No space, no assistant, nothing. I just sat there. Now we had been planning for this archive, so when Michelle [Elligott] told me it was founded not until 1989, I mean, this was something that had gone on, in terms of talk, discussion, et cetera, since the early 1980s. And certainly, by 1987, it was on the verge, but I'm going to backtrack. You'll have to take me back there.

By 1987 I was working with Marga on her papers at her home, on weekends and evenings. My children were grown and away at college. The catalyst for my work with Marga was the 50th anniversary of the Museum, Sam Hunter's book, and *The New Criterion* and her year-by-year account of her and Alfred's history of the Museum. That's another part of the story, but that's something that was on the side but had a direct bearing on the Archives. But in terms of the establishment of the Archives, funding was put together, and by January of 1989, we had everything in place, but no space for me and no assistant. So, the first week of January, 1989, was a Friday, I think. I walked into Beverly's office—I had called and said I need to see you for about twenty minutes—and I walked in. I closed the door. And I told her I wanted to resign from the Museum. I said that I was not taking another job at the moment. But that I couldn't stay at the Museum under these circumstances. I said we had the money to establish an archives, for an assistant for me, and that absolutely nothing had happened. More and more people kept calling. I was dealing with trustees, scholars, and all this, and the situation was just not professional. I asked her to accept my resignation. She stopped everything, looked at me, and said, "Do you think this could wait until Monday?" I said, "Yes, but I'm going home right now." It was in the middle of the afternoon, I got my purse, and

left the Museum. I was absolutely deadly serious. And I know it sounds like a very impetuous thing to do, but it wasn't, because I really had thought about this. So I left the Museum and came back Monday morning, planning to gather my personal stuff together, and there was a note to please see Beverly. By Monday, a notice had been prepared, sent around from Dick Oldenburg to the staff, establishing the Museum Archives program with me as the head of it. And by Monday afternoon, James Snyder,

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RR: who was Director of Operations, was in the back of the area of the library where my office was, and he had with him whoever it is who redesigns space in the Museum. The Special Collections Reading Room was to become the Archives Reading Room, and the office next door to it overlooking the garden was to become my office. The person who was in that office had her space reduced. And a notice was put in the paper for my assistant, and she was going to have my old office. So, I said that was fine, I'd stay.

SS: Were you surprised? [0:01:06]

RR: I didn't think of it either way. I just couldn't imagine not being at the Museum and not seeing this thing through, in a way. But you know, we had worked so hard for this, and there had been so many glitches along the way, with turning the lights out when I was working, and the unpleasantness over that. I didn't have any of that from the Library staff; they were always very cooperative. By this time I worked closely with the cataloguer from the library, because RLIN was up and running. But the fact is that that was the physical establishment of the Archives. That was when the Museum dates the beginning of the Archives. And shortly thereafter, I interviewed several different people, but from my working with Beverly and her interns—and that's another story because that's about the warehouses, because we have to go back, pre date 1989 to show you what was there in 1989—I realized I needed someone with a legal background. A person comes and applies for the job who was working at Fried and Frank, and she was knowledgeable about art history. She had gone to Barnard, was a paralegal, but did not want to become a lawyer. She came from a family of lawyers. She had a thorough knowledge of photography, which is something that I did not have. I always tried to hire—all my years here, since I came and since right before I left—someone on my staff who has a knowledge of something, of something I know little about. Being able to read German easily or extreme expertise in computer literacy; knowledge of photography. Anything that I really lacked, I really wanted that person to have, because it just enhanced the whole breadth of what we could do for people. To me, the whole name of the game was, service, service, service. I mean, that's what the Archives is about, in many ways. We have to get the information in order so it can

be used. This person's name was Rachel Wild; she is now Rachel Wild Salzman. And she stayed for five or six years. She left to have a baby. As a matter of fact, she left on a Friday; the baby was born on Saturday. She was great. She brought certain legal ideas with her to the job, which I thought were wonderful, and one was particularly great, and we use it to this day, Michelle uses it to this day, and it's the establishment of a user log. In other words, every time someone called with a question or came in to use a certain aspect of the papers, their name, the date, and their project was described. This became invaluable. We did it by hand then, in a book. Of course, now it's all done on the computer. This was just a great thing to do.

Okay. Let's go back a bit, I think, to my getting out of library school, but also the expansion of the Museum by Pelli. The idea of an archives was already in several people's, like the director, the general counsel's, head. I had the credentials, we could go forth. I'm working for the general counsel and we're about to begin the Pelli expansion. When I look back, Sarah, I always think of how the Archives was able to become important to the Museum's operation. And I see it was always a move, a catastrophe—we had one of those along the way with financial records—sort of Museum crisis, or an anniversary. These are the things that really caused the Archives to come to the fore, because people want to get rid of the material in their offices, or need background history for a project. I'm working under Beverly's aegis, and the Museum is expanding, and the Museum was going to abandon the buildings on, I think 19th, 22nd or 21st Street and Eleventh Avenue. Museum storage was there: many paintings, architecture and design models, and some sculpture. It was airless, except the small part that had art in it was air conditioned. There were one or two guards there, and porters. I was told to go down there with Beverly's intern that summer, and look at it. It was stacked with big trans-file boxes. Stacked. With all kinds of numbers on them, no identification at all. I usually had a porter with me. He pulls down a box, and I look in it; it's International Program. Pull down another one, it's artists' files from Painting and Sculpture, artists who write in and want to show their work or sent notes about themselves. There were hundreds of them; an entire floor of big unmarked boxes. Some of these were very important records, and some of them were not. So I come back and I tell Beverly what I found, and that it was mind-boggling. I said I didn't know how long it would take anybody to go through them, and I didn't know how to sort them, but I had an idea. I said that with her intern and the summer interns, I thought we might be able to do it. So I got three summer interns through Education, and we went over. Every day we took our food with us, and we had to leave there at a certain hour at night. It was not the kind of neighborhood that you'd hang out in at night. For air, we would go every once in a while into the air conditioned part or bring a box in there to work on it. And we all spread out. The system I devised was *ColorForms*, kids' *ColorForms*. Every department or area got a colorform combination. Of course, you could run out of colors, because there was red, blue, yellow, green, but the

combinations worked. We made a file of index cards, put a ring binder around them, and they had the code for that department. So Painting and Sculpture was a blue and a yellow. Prints would have been maybe some three other colors. Everything was color coded and it worked because when you wanted a porter to bring something over to the Museum, or you wanted to move them and have them all together by department, you just had to take the file with the code of color codes. It didn't make any difference if you couldn't even read or speak English, you could still get the whole thing organized. It worked out brilliantly. We found duplicates of material which we trashed right then and there. We trashed it; we didn't shred it. We didn't have the kind of security we have now, to be honest. We got hungry during the day, and there was only one diner nearby, but we did bring lunch, and we brought snacks, and we cleaned up every single speck because we were afraid of animals with the papers.

SS: Rodents. [10:36]

RR: Rodents. So that's what we did for that summer. It was really quite an adventure. One of these people was Beverly's intern, Katherine Mackling, and she was absolutely excellent and so pleasant—she had just graduated from law school and would be taking the bar exam in the fall.

END Audio File: Roob_04 at 10:48

BEGIN Audio File: Roob_05

SS: Okay, so we were just talking about the registrar and how you had made suggestions for the institution of some policies about handling of files and materials so they didn't walk away. But I know that that also went into a more Museum-wide standard.

RR: It did. One of the things the Museum did, it sounds like a silly little thing now, we were photocopying onto the worst paper. And in some of our earlier records, if you've ever used them, as I'm sure you have, you'll see that there's faded print. This doesn't happen anymore. We changed it. It doesn't cost that much more now. All Museum-wide paper, photocopy and printer paper is acid-free, decent paper, and this became just a part of the Museum's program. And as papers got turned over to me, we encouraged more efficient methods for keeping records. By this time I had a couple of staff people, and we would go down to the different departments and make suggestions. For example, if your department gets fifteen copies of something, just keep one. Weeding really did reduce Museum records in a way for us that was just great. People in Conservation also came into this with their expertise on condition and preservation.

I want to skip to something else for one second. I don't think there was a department in the Museum or a department head that I didn't deal with. They came

in, they opened the door, they knocked, some didn't even bother to call. If I was busy, I was busy. It became a wonderful thing. I mean, I was inundated; we were just, we were always inundated. We always had someone waiting for something, but that was okay. Bill Rubin used to call me at home at 7:30 in the morning. One morning he said, "Ever hear of David Smith?" So I said yes. He told me what he was working on ... And he needed something that day. So when I got to the Museum, I would look it up immediately, and I would call Judith, meaning, Judith Cousins, his research curator. I told Bill that we had a lot of David Smith material. He was satisfied.

Okay. To get back to how we went around processing; we had all of this material from the warehouse, with all the color coding on it. One of the first groups that I brought back, I think, was Circulating Exhibitions, because the Museum had tons of stuff in the Museum about it; albums, papers, etc. Many of these shows were tangential to the shows that the Museum had here also. But the Circulating Exhibition program was something that started in the 1930s. It was extremely interesting. And the records from the early part of this history of this institution are much thinner, than later on. The Matisse 1931 show has like two file folders. John [Elderfield]'s first big Matisse show has three file cabinets. And so it grows. Where did I get the staff from? Where did we get the money from? Well I think that there are a couple of nice stories about this.

The first was the Reed Foundation. They gave us \$75,000 or more, maybe; Michelle will know about that. The person who was head of it was a friend of Beverly Wolff, and I met her with Dick Oldenburg and Beverly at lunch. They came to lunch at then SetteMoMA, and she was very generous. Whether she renewed or not, but, she gave some money over a three-year period, and this helped fund the operation, which was not expensive to run. What the Museum Archives could do with ten to twenty thousand dollars was amazing, compared to what it would be for a curatorial department. We could stretch those dollars, and I tried my hardest. The Mellon Foundation was extremely helpful; really big. But I have to tell you about Neil Rudenstine, first. Neil and Angelica Rudenstine were personal friends of Marga Barr. And it was Barr's sixtieth reunion from Princeton in 1982. Barr was already dead, and Marga wanted desperately to go to the 60th reunion at Princeton, but she wouldn't go without me. By this time, she had eye problems, and she was getting more frail. She was already in her eighties. She died in 1987. So this was 1982, and it's Barr's 60th reunion, and she asked me to go with her, and it was a Saturday, and I went. Here I am at the Princeton reunion sitting at the 60th anniversary table with my little tag on saying Rona Roob. Everybody, of course, thinks I'm related in some way to Alfred Barr, but I explained that I was just there as a friend to Marga. I met Neil Rudenstine, who came over to the table and sat and talked with Marga and me, mostly Marga, of course, for a good long while. It was brutally hot. And that's my introduction to Neil Rudenstine, who was then the Provost at Princeton.

Fast forward, Neil leaves Princeton and becomes one of the top two people at the Mellon Foundation. Dick Oldenburg calls me one day, in my office, and said he'd gotten a call from Neil Rudenstine and the Mellon Foundation is revising its grant procedures, and they're very interested in funding archives and that Neil was going to call me, and he's coming over. Dick wanted me to talk to him, but we should discuss exactly what I should say." So I said this was great news. So, he said, "Come into my office." I hang up the phone, I go to Dick's office, and I explain to him. He tells me what he wants, and I said, "Fine." And he said, "Do a show-and-tell for me first." I do a whole walk-through for Dick, which he liked. So Neil is scheduled to come, it's a blizzard, and he cancels. He comes another time, instead, and spends a very short time with me. He told me that I didn't need another piece of equipment. I didn't need another file folder. He said I needed a body. I needed a staff person. So Neil and the Mellon Foundation fund for many, many years, a staff person. And I immediately called that person the Mellon Fellow.

My first Mellon Fellow was Michelle Elligott. Then Michelle became my assistant. And I have to tell you something; Michelle, from the get-go, was absolutely excellent. She was all business. She seemed to love the work. We got along just fine. She was sharp. She was bright. She was fast. I really, instinctively knew, and she seemed to love working on archives. She wrote well, and she just wanted to learn as much as she could. And I just talked to her non-stop. She did readings and all this. By the way, I never told Dick Oldenburg until much, much later, that I knew Neil from Marga Barr, because that was my little thing. To keep up with Neil, I wrote him. The Mellon Foundation never asked for any follow-up reports about what you were doing, but every six months, when I wrote the NEH—I'll get onto that one, next—I always was mindful of the fact that this information was also going to be sent to Neil. I wrote him every six months a detailed letter and he always wrote back a lovely note, and he seemed very appreciative. And this stretched on. The next Mellon Fellow was Clair, and she stayed until the Museum strike, they were both there when I left. Michelle is now the head of the Archives. Unfortunately, they never named her Chief Archivist, which made me sad, because she's so expert. Every person who worked for me, including Rachel Wild had to acquire the education needed for the work. We were really dealing, by this time, with some of the most important researchers, the trustees, and of course all senior staff—they had to get a master's in art history. Then I sent them to Washington for six weeks to the Museum Institute for a certificate course in Museum Archives. Those two things were fine. Every one of them has it: Michelle, Michelle Harvey, Rachel Wild; they all got this. And they did this while they were working at the Museum. They went at night, or whatever else it took. Michelle Elligott has all of the credentials.

When I left, they did a search to fill my position, and I kept saying—I was not on the search committee—I kept saying to Aggie, with whom I had a wonderful relationship, "You know, Michelle is the person." And somebody who can remain nameless said to me, "She's too young, and she just couldn't stand up to the job."

Well, I told him that he was absolutely wrong. She might have been young, but she could stand up to the job. The fact is that she has stood up magnificently. When Alfred Barr left the Museum, Katherine Kuh asked him what was his greatest joy, and he said, "Seeing dreams come true." And I have to say the same thing about Michelle. I did tell her of all the things that I hoped that someday we would accomplish as part of the Archives, and how it could work. She has been as successful and as hard-working and as well respected as anybody that I know. I've had so many people call me or tell me, "Michelle is absolutely wonderful." And she is. And to this day, it gives me great joy. I'm very, very happy. And I'm so happy that Michelle Harvey is here, because she is also just the most able and wonderful person. I cannot tell you what a joy it is for me to observe the workings of today's Archives, how it's expanded. Michelle's taken it to a whole new level, which was only possible because of her expertise in and her rapport with online systems, and the respect that Glenn seems to hold for her, plus Aggie and all the trustees with whom I've spoken, including Emmy Pulitzer. It's really a remarkable thing. I believe that she's really the unsung hero of the research wing of the Museum. I think that, if anything, she doesn't get enough credit, because primary source material has become more and more important, in fact essential in serving scholars.

Now, the next thing I just want to talk about for a minute, is the NEH. The NEH was also a major factor in helping to establish and getting the Archives off the ground, because every time I applied to the NEH, I got the grants a hundred percent. One was a huge scrapbook project. We had these enormous scrapbooks. They were very unwieldy in format, falling apart, and they were put together by our Public Information department probably before the Museum even opened. People kept little clippings about the Museum, and they were all glued on terrible paper. Well, what to do with them? They were essential, you can't get this material on line, from 1928, '29, '30. I don't know if you can. But anyway, the fact is that, what should we do with them? They were also very cumbersome. They took up a lot of room. I found out, through my association with the Archives of American Art, which does a lot of microfilming—I had been on that board for a while—that there was microfilm that could be downloaded digitally when the time came. This was not being done yet.

So I worked up a deal with the Archives of American Art—how, I don't know; couldn't do it today—that they would do the filming and we would prepare everything for them; the targets, etc. But this material had to be put in order, so that every time we lifted up a page, it would stay intact. So I had this idea of high school interns. I called three different high schools in New York, and sure enough, I got three, fabulous, young students who came. We gave them temporary staff cards. They came two or three afternoons a week. And Karl Buchberg from Conservation came down and talked to them about paste and water glue. And he showed them how to do it, and we were off to the races. Apphia Loo, who was one of my assistants, came as an Education Department summer intern. She started to

outline this project under my direction. The summer she worked here, this was going to be her project. She came back in for her fall semester, winter session, and we were able to get funding for her to work here. I mean, the amount of time I spent on funding, Sarah, is legendary. When she graduated, she came back again—I don't know how we funded her; maybe it was the NEH grant. She stayed for a long time. She was here when Michelle got here. She eventually left because she needed to make more money, and we couldn't pay her any more. She oversaw the project of these three girls with Karl coming down whenever we needed him. He was magnificent, as he always is and continues to be. The NEH, the Archives of American Art has the microfilm, we have a copy of it, and the scrapbooks were stored temporarily at the Rockefeller Archive Center, the originals. I believe they are probably now out in Queens.

The other thing the NEH was instrumental in was funding our oral history project. I had the idea that we should have an oral history project at the Museum. I ran this by Dick and Beverly, who agreed. Even though I really wasn't working for them anymore, this was something that they had to [approve]—as it would involve trustees. Well, we drew up a list. It included artists, trustees, porters, long-time staff, [and] this whole kind of thing. To get people to decide on who should be interviewed was no small task. I mean, everybody had a say. People on the list died or had dementia before we got underway—Bill Paley had died. Todd Rockefeller and Blanchette had early onset of dementia, loss of memory; they couldn't be interviewed. And so it went. These things do take time, but we got a list together. Someone that Beverly knew became the oral historian in charge, and her name was Sharon Zane, and she began the Oral History Project. I knew something about oral history. And I was still attending SAA meetings, Society of American Archivists meetings, and I went to their sessions. There was a special weekend on oral history at Princeton that I went to. Both at SAA and at Princeton, I heard a man speak, and his name was Jim Fogarty. He was from the Minneapolis Historical Society and he really got my attention. He was so sensible about oral history projects. He wrote an article called "Filling in the Gap" and that's what I took as the cue for this museum. I figured, we have these voluminous papers, but there were so many unanswered questions in them. There were so many things already known about some of these people, but what we needed to do was find out about their relationship to the Museum, its art and operations. I mean, this was what I had outlined for Bill Paley. How did he become interested in art? I wasn't interested in the cigar store and his father and how he made his money and all that. That's been documented in biographies. We wanted to learn about the direct relationship to the works we acquired, how they got interested in art and their involvement with the Museum. Some of these oral histories are absolutely wonderful.

We have a short, pithy one, with Sol LeWitt, an example of one of the excellent small ones. Sol, as you know, I think I mentioned in the first part of this oral history, worked here. And he wasn't a big conversationalist, early on. In any case, Aggie

was doing something; she needed to have maybe a speech, maybe an article; I don't know what she was writing, but it came to my attention, and I thought this would be useful. So Karen Davidson, who was working for her, who is a great person, the most extraordinary woman, told me this. I sent Aggie over the oral history of Sol LeWitt. Well, she just adored it, and this I believe was the beginning of Agnes Gund's tremendous support of this Museum Archives program.

I must say, I don't think the Archives would exist in its present—this is really going out on a limb—in its present form today, in many ways, was it not for Aggie. Aggie funded, initially, Michelle Harvey's position when Michelle came to the Museum in 1998. That was one thing. She was always very cognizant of the fact that I needed staff, and staff costs money, and that this was not a priority for the Museum. And she also was very mindful of the kind of work we did, and how useful it could be in all kinds of ways. As Dick was, too, by the way. Early on he gave a talk about Rauschenberg, who was getting some award. He needed something about Rauschenberg that no one knew about. I found a couple of good stories, and he was able to use them. The funding of my staff's salaries, was a big deal. James Gara said he used to get a headache every year when I came to see him for our budgetary meetings. The union had these categories of what you had to be or do or whatever. My salary was so ridiculous. But I was really appalled at how little salary my staff was getting, considering the work they were doing. We were doing a lot of work for a lot of people as advocacy of the Museum, not just research. I would always be moving a person from one category to a higher category in order to get them more money. I would probably be quite adamant about some of this, as adamant as I ever get; to me, it was just embarrassing to pay these people with this kind of education and expertise as little as we were paying them. I just thought this was a very bad reflection on the Museum. So I guess everybody got as much as they possibly could have gotten, but this was something that was a very, very big concern of mine.

Another way that the Archives got to be known, started to build up its program is, this goes back a bit, is my public speaking. I'm not into public speaking at all. When we were in the midst of the Pelli expansion, we were still in this building, and it was during the summer. Susan Jackson, of Visitor Services, and Dick Oldenburg decided that they needed a summer program for staff during lunch hours to boost morale. Mary Lea Bandy was to pick out movies that they might like to see. And Dick's idea was that I should give a lecture on the history of the Museum. I had never spoken about the Museum; I never did public speaking. I told him that I thought it was a terrible idea, that I thought the staff doesn't want to hear about the past of the Museum, they want to hear about the future of the Museum, and he should give the talk. He said that wasn't what he had in mind.

I went home, everybody was out of the house, and I started to write on a legal pad, the history of the Museum, as I would present it. Well, I almost filled a full legal pad

and I haven't even hit 1940. In the middle of this, somebody called the apartment and I told them what I was doing, and they said, either you say it in 50 minutes, or you don't say it. If it can't fit into 50 minutes, forget about it. So I came back and I told Dick on Monday that I didn't see how I could get this into one sitting and he suggested that I give a whole series, a little course on the history of the Museum. I told him I'd get it into 50 minutes, and I did. I decided to divide the Museum into decades, and for the middle, I found movie films from the 1930s, the staff moving out in 1932 from the townhouse into Rockefeller Center, and the newsreel from 1939. For the rest I just talked with slides of course.

This was the beginning of giving and re-giving this speech *ad nauseum* to all kinds of groups, in and out of the Museum, with tweaking depending on to whom I was speaking. People came to this that weren't curatorial staff, but people from the treasurer's office, the mailroom. I mean, it was so wonderful in that respect, because frankly, these are people who really liked working here, but didn't know these things. And I tried to tell stories along the way.

There are a couple of things that came up with David Rockefeller. First of all, his extreme generosity about the Rockefeller Archive Center space was one thing that kept us going. The other thing is, his end of year gifts. At the beginning, he used to give the Archives—I would get a check. I would get these checks. They could be \$30,000 or they could be less or more. This was just out of the sky, and this was just a wonderful, generous, thoughtful thing for him to have done. But then he asked me, in 1996 to speak at a conference at Kykuit. It was going to be a meeting of the heads of different projects that the Rockefeller family had funded all over the world: the Africa fund, the population growth fund. Many of them had nothing to do with art, really. Alice Victor from his office called. David Rockefeller would like, on the opening night, for me to give a talk about the Rockefeller family connection to The Museum of Modern Art. And I would stay there overnight and come home the next day. I said yes, and I immediately went called Darwin Stapleton to ask that since I was staying in Kykuit, could I have John and Abby's front room. He said I couldn't; Joe Ernst was coming and that's his room. So I had room eleven. It was so much fun and it was so beautiful. It was April. And the room was probably just like it was—the bathroom had about fifteen coats of white paint. It was huge, and the bedroom was right there overlooking the installation of the sculpture which Dorothy Miller had initially done with Nelson decades before. I wish I had brought a camera, because I would have done a little article about this place and what it was like to stay in it, because it was a very special thing. I gave my talk with slides; no movies this time, just slides. And I was introduced as the Museum Archivist, Chief Archivist, and people asked where I worked out of, Development? Did I do this thing all over the place? Honestly, Sarah, it was kind of a high. These people were so rapt in attention.

Now about Philip Johnson. Philip was so close to Alfred. Well, fast forward to 1987. Marga has just been taken to the hospital. She said it was for observation. Marga was not well, and I didn't know what was wrong with her. She never told me. I found out it was some sort of growth in her stomach. But anyway, she was in the hospital and she made everything very clear to me about what I was supposed to do if anything ever happened. I knew she had had a disagreement with Philip, and that they hadn't seen each other for a while. So I went to visit her at the hospital, and the next morning I called Philip. I told him that Marga was in the hospital and he should get to the hospital to see her, that if he didn't, he would be sorry. He should do this. "It's up to you." So he went up that afternoon to the hospital. And I went that night to visit her; she said, "What a day I had, Rona; you won't believe it. Philip came for the whole afternoon, and we took off our hearing aids and we yelled at each other. It was simply heaven. We had the best time." And Philip called me a day or two later and said how grateful he was, and he thanked me. That was December of '87.

I had been working with Franz Schulze, who was writing a biography of Philip. And he would come to New York on weekends. He was Chicago based and he would need a place to stay. My husband was a member of the University Club, which was really convenient for him, so we put him up there. He would stay there on the weekends because it was inexpensive, he could pay for it and be comfortable. He would take the train up to New Canaan, and he'd spend the weekend or the day there, and go back and forth. And Philip knew that I was doing this. He had asked him to work with me on this, but I couldn't help him very much, Sarah, because honestly, he knew much more than—he was a crackerjack researcher and he was brilliant. He was also very kind. I mean, he just knew where he was going with all of this, and he had access to everything to do with Philip—his family, his sisters, Harvard papers, everything. And what happened was—the beginning, kind of, of Philip and my getting together all the time. This was into the '90s now, Philip had a party in Connecticut, a luncheon party, and he invited Richard and me to come. He rushes to greet us, went to Richard's side of the car, he opens the door for Richard, and said, "I hope you don't mind if I introduce you to everybody as Mr. Rona." [laughing] And Richard smiled, and he said, "Of course. Sure; go ahead." We just became very good friends during the later part of his life and the end of my tenure at the Museum. And with David [Whitney], too. And David took me upstairs—the cocktail part of the party was at David's house. We went upstairs, and David showed me file cabinets of all the early Philip material. He said, "This is the kind of thing you'd die to have, wouldn't you?" And I said, "I certainly think that, David, there's only one place it belongs; it's at the Museum." Philip I think enjoyed our lunches. He said, "We are the last two leaves on the tree. And I love talking to you;" and so, every six weeks, once at the Four Seasons, then at the University Club, where he would order a ham sandwich and by the time he got around to eating it the bread was curled up. He was very helpful to me in many ways. By this

time another piece of advocacy was PI. Public Information had asked me just by chance, once, to do a column on some show we were going to have. Michelle will tell you the first article I did for them. They'd given me maybe 48 hours or 72 hours to do this. Whatever the show was, I would find something from the Archives that would be an interesting take on that show. The column was called From the Archives. I'd write it with an illustration of whatever it was. Sometimes it was half a page, and sometimes it was three pages. Everybody seemed to like it.

SS: Where would those appear? [39:18]

RR: In the Members Quarterly, Members Bulletin, or whatever we sent out to our membership and the public. The same kind of thing, we do as a little pamphlet today; there was no online access in those days. Some of these pamphlets were very useful. We did an entire one on the history of the garden, I think. They kept changing the format of these members' bulletins, and everybody seemed to think that was a good idea, and Philip was very helpful. He wrote something. They wanted me to get him to talk about what he thought the future of the Museum would be like. He was really very funny. At lunch, he drew circles and he drew pictures, and he said the Museum will be like going into the circus. There'll be three rings; there'll be something different going on in each different section; they might even have something on a neon sign going around and saying what the different things were. And everybody will have access to all this information. He said it will be very user-friendly. And then he said asked me if I had been to *Nike* or to *Swatch Watch* on 57th Street lately. Because that's the kind of people you're going to have to attract. Both of these stores had museum-like displays but were glitzy and people went to see them. [41:00]

SS: He was just right. He was just right.

RR: I don't know. One thing that he did suggest, at one of these lunches—we were talking about the progress of the Museum Archives—was that we needed a trustee committee. For Archives, a trustee committee that will really help you go on to get more things established and just help, just like other trustee committees back up their departments. He said that I had to discuss this with Aggie and Dick Oldenburg. I got back to the Museum, and Patterson Sims was then in charge of the Archives area. He had been brought in as Deputy Director for Education, which included the Library, the Archives, and Education. I mentioned it to Patterson, who thought it was also a good idea. I sat down with Aggie, and she thought it was an excellent idea. I had in mind already who could be on this. So we got our trustee committee up and running, and doing fine. Aggie was the first chair. Marie-Josée never chaired it, but she comes to almost all the meetings. The fact that she does, I think, is interesting. Kynaston McShine used to take all new trustees through the Museum and introduce them to every department. And this happened over, you know, forever. I would always have a packet, a file that I put together, a list of all of

the oral histories, all of the finding aids, all of the types of papers. It was just around five sheets of paper. Eventually, I included a reading list. But Marie-Josée came by, and she asked a lot of interesting questions. She left, and thanked me, and we heard from her a couple of days later. She wanted a reading list. We sent it, and we also sent a couple of sample oral histories, and maybe articles and other things. I don't remember, it's probably in the user log. She became interested in the history of the Museum, and she does come, often, to the Archives trustee committee, which is called the Archives, Research, and Library Committee. That's how it's worded. And I think it's been a very helpful thing for Michelle. It's now chaired by Emily Pulitzer. That's how we built support for the Museum. It's a form of advocacy and it's something that just didn't come to me easily, but just happened. I've been so energized by my life here. It was great, and I have no complaints.

SS: Well, that's a good note on which I will suggest that we finish up for this week, and we'll pick up again in our next session in three weeks, and wrap up a couple of remaining discussion points.

RR: Okay.

SS: Thank you.

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END OF INTERVIEW April 25, 2012

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

INTERVIEW WITH: RONA ROOB (RR)

INTERVIEWER: SARAH SUZUKI (SS)

LOCATION: THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

DATE: May 30, 2012

TRANSCRIBER: Janet Crowley, transcription completed 6/1/2012

BEGIN Audio File: Roob_06

SS: I'm Sarah Suzuki, Associate Curator in the department of Prints, and I'm here with Rona Roob. Today is May 30th, 2012. And we are back in the department of Architecture and Design conference room. This is our third session, and we're just going to circle back and talk about a couple of things that we didn't really talk about in our first two meetings. The first one I wanted to ask you about was the role of Marga Barr. We've talked about Marga off and on, and your relationship with her,

how you met, again, riding the bus; she was going to return her Christmas gifts. But I wondered if we could talk a little bit more about the kind of role that she may have played here at the Museum.

RR: Well, I knew Marga from about the second week I ever worked for Alfred Barr, because one night—Barr used to get *Vogue* magazine delivered to the Museum, and one night I took *Vogue* home, because it had a recipe in it that I wanted to check out. The next morning, I got a phone call. “Don’t bother to try those recipes from *Vogue* magazine; they always leave something out.” So I said, fine, that was a good heads up. I didn’t know how to cook anyway, but I just happened to love dessert and there was a particularly delicious-looking chocolate one. She added that she knew what day the new magazines came, and that I should send it to her home that day, adding she would send it back to me after she finished reading it. But that was my introduction to Marga. I didn’t know Marga very well personally, at all, as a matter of fact, when I worked for Alfred in the ‘60s, except on one occasion. She was working on her brilliant Medardo Rosso book. She wrote the essay for a show that was held here at the Museum. I’m not sure of the exact year; I can fill that in. [*Medardo Rosso*; MoMA Exh. #729, October 2- November 23, 1963] It’s the most readable essay, and it’s really still considered to be quite an important piece on Medardo Rosso, especially because of the extensive bibliography and the extensive notes. She was a totally, quintessential, thorough scholar. She was brilliant. And she wanted me to help with the manuscript. I mentioned it to Barr, but he said, “Absolutely not.” He said, “I will speak to Marga myself. Publications can find somebody to help her. You have too much to do.” I had to explain to Marga to talk to Mr. Barr first. But I did call her Marga, and early material about Marga Barr and the Museum is included in the *New Criterion* issue of summer 1987. Marga wrote there how she got her name, because most people, in the academic world, called her Daisy; Margaret, margherita in Italian, is daisy. Her background is extremely interesting, and a lot of that is detailed in that issue. There was an oral history done of Marga with Paul Cummings, at the Archives of American Art, early on. Marga disapproved of this oral history, vehemently, and was very vocal to me about it, because she felt that Paul was not terribly intelligent about asking continuing follow-up questions. And so she gave me a copy of it with Post-its sticking out with her comments. It’s a really wonderful piece of material, which I

have at my home amongst the papers that she left to me personally. On that note, Marga and I worked on the *New Criterion* together. We owned joint copyright on it until she died, and then she transferred the entire copyright to me. So, that's the state of the manuscript of the *New Criterion* campaigns, notes for which, include the day that Barr had his surgery, and the memorial, which was 1981. We ran in to each other—I had already known her—on that bus. This is when our friendship began. And it was, indeed, a friendship. She was, from the outside, the world considered her a very difficult, didactic woman. She was a brilliant art historian. She could have had a professorship. She had an appointment to Smith College early on, but instead married Alfred. She had many highly placed friends in the academic world, and curators of Renaissance and Medieval sculpture gravitated to her. I think I might have mentioned that when Panofsky came to this country and he had to learn English, Marga was assigned to teach him English. And so, she tutored Panofsky in English. When she got to know Dora Panofsky, Marga told me that Dora was slightly jealous of her and thought that maybe her husband was having an affair with her. She said, no such thing happened, but that she and Panofsky got along just great. One of the only altercations I ever saw Marga and Alfred have was when I was in graduate school at the Institute. I was only allowed to take classes after hours and Panofsky was teaching a Titian, I think, seminar, and it started at 4:00. And so, Marga called me and told me about it. I said, "I know." And she said, "I'm speaking to Alfred about it; he has to let you go at 4:00." So she spoke to him about it and he said no. And that was the end of that. [laughing] So, I mean, "A rule is a rule," he said. Anyway, the fact is that he was pretty strict on that score. I believe, in knowing Marga, that Alfred Barr could not have done his life work without someone like that at his side. I know that sounds like a very big statement, but I think it's true. I think if you look to the early history of the Museum and you see the way these shows were turned out, she went, as you can see in "Our Campaigns," [*New Criterion*. Summer, 1984] with Barr every summer; she was the one who typed; she was the one who spoke the languages. She was the one who really communicated with Picasso, and Matisse. She was fluent in French. She was fluent in French, German, Spanish, of course Italian, her native language, and perhaps another language or two. She was a brilliant linguist. She was also a student of English. I would hand in papers up at Columbia, or,

when I wrote articles, she would look at the sentence structure, or how I was using a certain word, and she would say, “Oh; Rona! That is not acceptable use of the word.....” I’d change it. I would listen, because she usually was correct, and she just made it sound better. That was fine by me. I really loved her very much. I still miss her. We did speak to each other almost every day, and I found her to be a person from whom I learned a tremendous amount. And yes, she was difficult, but you know, she wasn’t my mother, and I didn’t work for her, and we had this tremendous friendship. I never forgot—I took her to see the Spielberg movie *ET*. She asked why and I told her she had to see it. We went to a matinee on a Saturday. She had no idea why we were there. We went, and the reason was that *ET* looks exactly like a Miró that the Barrs owned, a big Miró painting. I was in Spain many years ago, certainly after 1987 when Marga died. It had been hanging in their apartment and is illustrated in the Soby Miró book of ’59. There it was hanging in the Reina Sofia. I think the sale was handled by Bill Acquavella. It was such a great joy for me to see it again. She liked *ET*. We had such a good time together. I took her to a lot of movies, but she was very hard of hearing late in her life, and I’m very sympathetic now because I’m hard of hearing, too. She did not have the benefit of the kind of audiological equipment that we have today. She got very angry about her hearing, which, I do, too. But I know that she was just a person who suffered. She had severe emphysema at the end of her life. And she loved my daughters. She sent books, and recommended things, and gave Nancy all kinds of instructions when she was off for her junior year in Florence. She was a good person, and she loved this Museum. [11:50]

SS: Was she often physically present at the Museum?

RR: Yes.

SS: In the ‘60s?

RR: Not in the ‘60s. I never saw her in the ‘60s at the Museum. But when I came back, in the late ‘70s and the ‘80s, she was very present. From about ’82 to ’84, the Museum was closed and my office was at 22 West 55th. She would come by maybe three or four times a week, in her tights, her leotard, et cetera, from her stretch class or exercise class at the Cosmopolitan Club. I kept in my office her cheese knife.

She would come with her cheese and her pear or apple or peach, whatever, and her bread, she would sit in my office, and have her lunch. Then she would go to our ladies' room and change into normal clothes. I was processing the Barr papers at the time, and I would have folders of material I couldn't figure out, things that were undated or signatures I couldn't read, or people I had never heard of. She would sit, I would give her a pencil, paper and clips, and she would sit and identify these different things. When I was typing some of my articles, she would look over my shoulder sometimes and comment. She would come and do her thing, and there were other staff in the building who would come in and out. That's how she got to know them and they got to know her. It was a very congenial and pleasant situation. She was a special kind of person. She apparently, from people who knew her, and there are two now in the art history area whom I have met. One is Joan Mertens, curator at the Met; the other is Patty Tang who runs the [Eugene] *Gene Thaw* gallery. They were students of Marga's at Spence. And she has told me that Marga was the most extraordinary art history teacher. Marga used to say that she loved teaching the students at Spence art history. She used to tell me, she was lucky because she spoke to those in charge and she only got "the brighties." To make sure they didn't fall asleep, she would pass around Mentos when she saw that they were getting a little tired, so that the sugar

SS: A little sugar? [15:10]

RR: A little sugar apparently kept them alert. For years, when I went to the theater and I was really tired at night, I would always grab a pack of Mentos [laughing]. I don't know what else to say about Marga.

SS: All right. Well, you mentioned that during that closure of the building, you were on 55th Street in the Nelson Rockefeller office building. But we should probably talk a little bit about Nelson, also, because we haven't talked about him much in our first two sessions, and just kind of his role and involvement with the Museum during your years.

RR: Nelson Rockefeller was bigger than life. He was friendly and gregarious, just like you see in the old newsreels. And I found out early on about his dyslexia. Barr told me that he didn't really read notes, but that he could remember everything. I also

learned about his passion for art. Nelson had a curator named Carol Uht; U-h-t. She was the wife of Charles Uht, a photographer, who did many of the object photos for this Museum. Many of them say "Uht" and have a number after it; the negatives are here. Nelson and his art collection; [he] went in for the big guys: Picasso, Matisse, et cetera. And Miró. He owned the great Matisse *Italian Woman* which is now at the Guggenheim Museum, which Barr bought from Pierre Matisse so that it would fit perfectly into the collection of Matisses that he wanted for the Museum. Barr is dead by the time this work gets transferred. I got a phone call at home early one morning from Marga Barr. She asked if I had seen that day's *New York Times*?" I went to the front door, got my *New York Times*, and on the front page, I believe, was an article about the swapping of pictures. The Museum had traded a big Picasso still life, and the *Italian Woman*, this beautiful, gorgeous painting, for two Kandinsky panels which went with two Kandinsky panels in the Museum's collection. Marga was irate. She said I should get down to the Museum as soon possible and look up the file on this Matisse *Woman*. I'd see that Pierre made it possible for Alfred to buy this for Nelson at a special price, and Nelson bought it under the condition it would go to the Museum. She asked if I had known about this. I said, "Of course I didn't." It was a Bill Rubin thing. Marga often did not approve of a lot of what Bill did. There was no friendship or warmth between Marga Barr and Bill Rubin. That's another story, and I don't know enough about it to speak to it. But just let me say that she was sad and furious. I explained I knew nothing about it. As soon as I got to the Museum, the first thing I went to were the confidential Nelson Rockefeller papers. Nelson had died and people were clamoring to learn more about him personally, and his art collection was one of those things. They included receipts and accounts of money that he paid for his collection. In the papers, sure enough, was an invoice from Pierre Matisse saying "for Museum collection." No one on the staff had inquired, no one had asked. The work does fill a real slot in the Museum's whole story about Matisse. Every time I see it at the Guggenheim, I have to tell you, it makes me sad we don't have it. Nelson gave Alfred Barr, Jim Soby, and I think maybe René, the opportunity of coming to his apartment, just like many other of that group of MoMA family collectors, to choose which works they wanted for the Museum. The notes on these collections exist in the Museum Archives and the works were rated A, B, C, D, or A,

B, C, or A+, A-. Everything that Barr and Soby wanted for the Museum, came to the Museum after Nelson's death, including the Miró from Kykuit. The Miró hanging in Kykuit has been replaced by a facsimile. I believe Happy Rockefeller also had pictures that went to the Museum that had been in their apartment also copied; she has reproductions on her walls. Nelson Rockefeller decided in the early '60s, I think as early as '59, but certainly by the early '60s, to run for President of the United States. During this period, Nelson decided, no purchases of art over \$5,000. This was put into effect immediately. It was decided to do rugs of pictures in the Museum's collections. Rugs. Color reproductions were sent to a place in the south of France—the name will come to me—very famous, very old, very distinguished, highly thought of rug place. Tufts of wool would be sent to Barr, who would give them to me, and I had to go down to the galleries in several different kinds of lights to see which was the right yellow, the right red, etc. I mean, I tell you, it became a joke in the office and among the guards. I was coming to the galleries, walking in with these tufts of wool. The yellows were particularly difficult, I must say. I had to look at different times of the day. But the rugs got made, and I did see some of them up in Pocantico when I went to do a walkthrough preview of Kykuit, which David Rockefeller asked me to do before they opened it up to the public. Wherever Barr and Dorothy went, they would, if they saw young artists' works' they were thinking of acquiring for the Museum, they would take brochures and photographs and copies would be set aside for Nelson. This was a lot of work because it was not just one or two things but many. This was uppermost in Barr's thought and I was the one labeling the transparencies and the catalogues, writing descriptions, and explaining why this material was being sent to him. I would also deliver it. So one night, it was absolutely pouring rain. I mean pouring rain. By this time I had developed a relationship with Carol Uht and Louise Boyer, so I knew where Nelson was, and which days he'd be at the apartment in New York. Anyway, one night it was pouring rain. Barr's in his office working away, and I'm sitting at my desk with this material, typing up labels and having to show him the text of what I was including. He said I must finish this tonight because Nelson's at 812 and I want him to have it. He told me to take it there—you drop it off. I just said, "Tonight? Look outside; it's horrible." He said, "Tonight." So I must have made a horrible face, and I went back to my desk, and he asked me to come back in his office in a stern voice. I walked in, and I

thought that this is it; I'm getting fired. So what. Get my degree faster. This is it. So he told me to sit down. He told me that Nelson Rockefeller was "the best damn president" this Museum ever had, and he was the most effective; he loved the art; he loved everything we did; he was easy to work with; everybody loved him. And, he said he's never going to be president of anything else [laughs] and it was his and René's job to keep him interested; this is what he wants and this is what we do. He said it was his pleasure to be able to do this, and it should be my pleasure to go up there tonight with a smile on my face when they open the door, and to give him the material, and to see if there are any questions. He asked if I understood and I said yes, and I went trudging off. And that was kind of the way they thought. He would go gallery hopping on some Saturday mornings. One Monday, Dorothy came back in and said she had been around to galleries with Nelson on Saturday. I don't know if Alfred had been with them, but she certainly had, and Dorothy said, there'll be things coming that she'd reserved for Nelson. Or that Nelson's reserved. She turned around and she said to me, you know, he can't afford himself. [laughing] She said she'd never seen anything like it. He just loved collecting. It just gave him such pleasure. And that was a nice thing.

SS: So, of the Rockefellers of his generation, was he by far the most involved with the Museum and Museum activities? [28:30]

RR: By 1964 David Rockefeller was Chairman of the Museum and his involvement continues to this day. John Jr. was very involved at Asia Society and Lincoln Center. Lincoln Center began in the early '60s. And Winthrop was Governor of Arkansas. Blanchette was deeply committed to the Museum—she was president, I think, when the Pelli building was designed, and was very close to Dick Oldenburg. David was young. We know what happened when David and Peggy began collecting, after they were married. He tells that story in his autobiography. David, as you know from the bug collections, was a born collector. When he was young, living at home with his parents, his brothers were at the war, or in the war. In many ways it seems that Nelson was very much the heir to his mother's sensibility but David loved and still loves the Museum. It was Nelson or David or maybe the boys together, who initiated the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller rose window at Pocantico, in

honor of their mother. I'm not sure it was Nelson's idea to begin with; it might have been. All of that is in the Barr Matisse papers. [30:40]

SS: All right, so, I think that the one other thing we wanted to talk briefly about today was the Museum during the Kennedy years.

RR: This was interesting, because the Museum of Modern Art closed for the construction of the East Wing. Kennedy was assassinated in November 1963. In 1959 there was a fire at the Museum during construction and pictures were lost and damaged. I think a workman was killed. Barr was adamant that during the construction period for the Philip Johnson wing, which opened in May of 1964, the Museum would not be open and operating. And it wasn't. We closed for a while, and we planned a show in Washington, D.C. Did I talk about this? An arrangement was made with John Walker, who was then Director of the National Gallery. The person who worked for him at the time was named Carter Brown. Carter had the same sort of job for John Walker that I had here, working for Alfred. I got to know Carter, which was fun, because we re-got to know each other later in our lives. Barr went down with Dorothy and Danny Clark to Washington to look at the space, etc. Danny Clark, by the way, was our head framer. Danny Clark was the nicest, sweetest, most loving guy in the whole world. He came here from the Navy after World War II. After he left, it was so sad, because he got some kind of horrible cancer, and died about six months after he retired. It was awful. Anyway, they went down to Washington; there was no I. M. Pei wing, there was none of that; there was just the original National Gallery. The idea was to have a show of Museum masterpieces while we were closed at the National Gallery in Washington, downstairs. But the downstairs had no light, no air, and tan burlap walls. They had to put it into shape. We air conditioned it, air controlled it, painted the walls, changed the lighting, the whole thing was readied for the Museum's collection. We did a catalogue, a soft back catalogue reproducing a lot of the works with a preface. So we went to work on this. It was an interesting time. This occupied a lot of our time. We also sent shows elsewhere. I think the *Guernica* studies went up to Toronto. Museum works traveled around the country. At the Met, there was a show of all of the Museum's masterpieces minus Picasso. It was really a strange looking show. The show was a big deal in Washington, and it was going to coincide

with some special event in Washington. It was scheduled to open the night or the night after Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas. So the show never opened officially; it just opened. It was a horrible time. I'll tell you two things in association with the Kennedy assassination, and in connection with this National Gallery show. One is about Danny Clark. The 1960s was a time of real prejudice in this country. The South was still very segregated, and Washington was borderline south. Alfred, Dorothy and Danny were going down to look at the gallery spaces. They were going to spend the night and do some work down in Washington on this show and I made reservations for them to stay at the Hay Adams. They get to the Hay Adams, and I get this phone call asking me to confirm how many people I reserved for? I said three; you, Dorothy, and Danny. Barr said the clerk here only has two reservations. The clerk had a reservation for Alfred, a reservation for Dorothy, and none for Danny. Danny was light; he was black; he was very light black. You know we wouldn't think about it up north. I told Mr. Barr, I had all of the paperwork in front of me. You couldn't fax in those days or email. Barr said, just as I thought. So this is what subsequently happened, because I asked. He apparently said to this person behind the desk that he'd spoken to his assistant in New York and she confirmed that we made three reservations. He said that if there's a problem here, he could call Arthur Goldberg over in the State Department. Arthur Goldberg was also one of these people who really loved art, so did his wife; I think we had maybe lent some pictures to his office. The clerk looked again, [laughing] and kept looking again as Barr and Dorothy kept dropping names, and they sure enough found a room for Danny. This was not pleasant, but it gives you an idea of what it was like at that time. I think the Hay Adams would be mighty surprised to hear that story, but that's what life was like in the early 1960s. I was in the Museum and so was Barr the day that Kennedy was assassinated. It was around lunch time when Dick Koch came walking down the hall, took me aside, and he asked quietly whether Alfred had a little radio in his office. I said yes and we went back to Barr's office. I opened the drawer, and we could not get reception on the transistor radio. I've got goosebumps while I'm telling you this story. I asked Dick, what happened and he told me the President's been shot. Barr also had a private outside line in his office. I went to the telephone to try to verify this by reaching my husband in his office, and could not get an outside line. Then I hear some noise down the hall. Dick and I

walked down the hall to the Registrar's office. They had one of those very loud boom boxes. We all sat on tables. There were about six of us, listening to the news, and indeed, Kennedy had not only been shot, but he was dead. We just were dumbfounded, just dumbfounded. Barr was still out at lunch with d'Harnoncourt and they came back, and they knew the news at the time they walked into the Museum. The two of them had to confer as to what they were going to do. Barr took me aside and asked me to go across the street and buy him some Horlick's malted milk tablets. So I did. Most of the staff was told to go home. He asked me to stay. He and d'Harnoncourt decided to close the Museum. I don't know how long we were closed. We certainly were closed for the day. But it was, I tell you, Sarah, it was one of the saddest times. I remember that mostly everybody, and we said this when we all came back, two days later, three days later after that weekend—it was a weekend, I think.² And none of us had done anything except watch television for the entire weekend. Were you born yet? No. [41:05]

SS: But as you tell the story, I was here September 11th. And this is, for me, the echo.

RR: You were in this building.

SS: I was in this building, yes, trying to call someone and say, "Is this really happening?" And the staff kind of coming together around, in this case, a computer, and trying to get news updates, and then just days, watching CNN.

RR: But of course, you have the computer today. There was no computer. There was no cell phone. I mean, it's hard for people of your generation, or even just fifteen years younger than I am, to understand. No cell phones, no computer; we just had the telephone. And so, I was in the Museum until quite late that evening. That, on the heels of the Bay of Pigs.

RR: So that's it, for today.

SS: All right, great. That's it for today. So we'll wrap up, and we will revisit once you've had a chance to review the transcripts.

² Kennedy was assassinated Friday, Nov 22, 1:30 EST.

RR: Perfect. Perfect.

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END OF INTERVIEW May 30, 2012