THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

INTERVIEW WITH: **MRS. DONALD B. (BETH) STRAUS (BS)**

INTERVIEWER: **SHARON ZANE (SZ)**

LOCATION: **NEW YORK, NEW YORK**

DATE: **MARCH 31, 1993**

BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE 1

SZ: Tell me where and when you were born and just a little bit about your background.

BS: I was born in 1916 in San Francisco, California, and grew up there, went to Stanford University. I'm a fourth-generation Californian.

SZ: Which means that they got there...?

BS: They got there in the '49s, and my grandmother was the first white baby born in Humbolt County. It's very shallow history. I didn't come to New York or live in New York until after I was married.... I went to high school at Miss Burke's School in San Francisco and then I went to Stanford.

SZ: And studied...?

BS: I started as a math major, and then moved into social sciences and ended up mostly in literature, writing poetry with a wonderful man named Yvor Winters, who was a good poet and a wonderful teacher.

SZ: Poetry. Do you still read it or do you follow it?

BS: Yes, I do, as much as I can. Some of his gotten away from me now [LAUGHTER]. And then I married a New Yorker [Donald B. Straus]. We met in Hawaii and moved to New

York, really settled in New York after the war. We were married in 1940 and have three children. I really started life all over fresh, because I knew no one except his family. So the Museum was a wonderful resource for me.

SZ: Tell me, had you had an interest in art?

BS: Yes, I had, and I'd always been a member of the Museum and gotten their literature.

SZ: Of the Modern?

BS: Of the Modern.

SZ: But what about back in San Francisco?

BS: I was involved with an organization called Telesis, which had to do with modern architecture and design, but there wasn't much doing. Remember, [Robert] Motherwell was in the class ahead of me at Stanford. It was a long time ago [LAUGHING], so I hadn't had a great deal of exposure to contemporary art until I came to New York.

SZ: But art in general was something that you had....

BS: Yes -- also Oriental art at that time, [being] from San Francisco; I was very interested in that.

SZ: So when you came to New York -- you say it was after the war -- how did you first get to the Museum?

BS: I used to go as a member, and then, much to my surprise, one day Blanchette Rockefeller called me and said that she was forming a group called the Junior Council and that somebody suggested that I might be interested. And I joined. I was one of the original small group that formed the Junior Council.

SZ: That was along with Walter Bareiss?

BS: Yes, and Anne Jones and...it was really before Joanne Stern and Lily Auchincloss became members. It was a very small group of people, I think maybe around fifteen or twenty when we first started.

SZ: Did you have a sense of the purpose of it at that time?

BS: Yes, it was very exciting, and we worked with all the staff -- it was a very small museum.

SZ: Did you know Alfred Barr at that time?

BS: Yes, I knew Alfred Barr, and loved him. And René [d'Harnoncourt], of course. Bill Lieberman at that time was our Junior Council adviser. We meddled with everything. We started the Art Lending Service. One of our members was Harmon Goldstone, who is still alive. Under his direction we all started the Art Lending Service, because galleries weren't as numerous or as readily available [then], and people were rather surprised and puzzled by contemporary art and to be able to come in and to borrow paintings and then buy them was a great service. Then we did some shows, we did some lectures. Later on in the development of the [Junior] Council we did a wonderful program with Monroe Wheeler. [We] did that show on the arts of India [Textiles and Ornamental Arts of India, 1955]; I've forgotten the exact year. Ann Laughlin -- Ann Resor, that was -- was able to get us a foundation grant and we brought over the first Indian musicians -- Ali Akbar Khan and Chata-lal -- [at a time when] nobody had heard Indian music. We brought over some dancers and the first Indian films. We really had one of the most wonderful times in my whole life during that period. We used to go over to Blanchette's guest house over in the East 50s and sit on the floor and listen to them practice their music, and stay up practically the whole night. Yehudi Menuhin was advising us, and I used to feel, "This is life." It was a very exciting time for us all. Most of my New York friendships started there.

SZ: Through the Junior Council.

BS: Yes. Then I became chairman of the Junior Council. Later on I was asked to be a trustee, and then I became chairman of the International Council for five years.

SZ: When you were a member of the Junior Council, did you have a sense that you were there to learn and be...?

BS: Yes. You know, it was just at the blooming of Abstract Expressionism, and we all felt evangelical about it. It was so exciting. The art was so beautiful, the artists were readily available -- we got to see and know many of them. It was a wonderful time.

SZ: Did you say that it was Mr. Goldstone's idea to form the Art Lending Service?

BS: I don't know if it was his idea per se, alone, but Harmon was really...we all worked on it, but he's a lawyer, and he was able to help us structure it so that it made sense and it was legal, and it held us together because we all volunteered. We had an office on the fifth floor, before the remodeling of course, with a little gallery and stacks where we kept our extra paintings, and we all took turns renting and selling and did a lot of actual volunteer work that way. Then, Anne Jones, who was a wonderful volunteer, was very helpful. We did a number of shows; Walter Bareiss was involved in those too. That was in the days when people were a lot more informal and amateur about it. We did a survey of printmaking and drawing and some other things; I don't remember them all now. And we started doing the Christmas cards for the Museum. Those were our main projects in those days.

SZ: You said that Bill Lieberman was one of the liaisons.

BS: Yes, he was assigned to us as our adviser for a number of years. He was young too.

SZ: And how did that work? Did you have a lot of freedom in choosing works for the Art Lending Service?

BS: We were usually assigned galleries to cover, depending on our expertise, and then it was always checked out by staff members before it went into the Art Lending Service. You should really ask Anne Jones about it, because she was a very important member of the [Junior] Council in those days. People had fun; we had a great deal of fun together, all of us, [because] there was a sense of mission and because the Museum was small enough to let us sort of play around and go and talk to staff members. And René was very welcoming, you know. I'm sure we were a problem to him from time to time, but from him you would never know it. We did things with Alfred, too. I remember during the fundraising drive Alfred asked me to go to and have lunch with him, with [Joan Whitney Payson], who bought the [New York] Mets.... She had a great, great collection of Impressionists.... She had asked us to do a show of animal art out in Long Island for the gallery she was involved with. I'll never, never forget going out with Alfred to have lunch with her. We were sitting on the porch looking out into the garden and the telephone rang, and she said, "Excuse me a minute," picked up the phone and said, "Oh, well, that's great," and hung up: she had just bought the Mets. And would you believe it, Alfred Barr started to talk about baseball? He knew everything that there was to know about baseball. I was astounded. It was really marvelous [LAUGHING].

SZ: I hadn't heard that.... I think, in any event, that you were pretty much associated with the Junior Council throughout the '50s.

BS: Yes.

SZ: Do you remember the fire? Were you there?

BS: I wasn't in the building, but like everyone else, I rushed over and tried to help. It was terrible. Then we all went through the big drive and remodeling and the new Museum. A person I simply loved was Monroe Wheeler. He was a great resource, because he sort of bridged the gap. I don't think people realize how involved he was in the other arts, the performing arts, like the ballet. He and Eddie Warburg were very influential, with Lincoln Kirstein, in bringing the ballet to New York -- to America, really. Then he

was very involved in the printing of these exquisite books that were works of art in themselves. He was a wonderful person to talk to in the Museum. I was very fond of him.

SZ: Because he was so knowledgeable?

BS: Because he was so knowledgeable and because he was just so nice. He had a tiny little apartment and sometimes he used to invite me over for dinner and there would always be a fascinating artist or a fascinating writer there, and it was memorable. I think he did a great deal in his quiet way to broaden the horizon of the Museum. When I was president of the International Council, one of the most exciting things I did was, he sent a great show called Cézanne to Miró [1968] around Latin America, and the Council members organized the trip and we all went around Latin America. René went with us -- can you imagine how wonderful that must have been? Peru and Chile, and when we got to Buenos Aires, the whole town turned out, you know, for the opening of the Cézanne to Miró show. It was a great event. I remember we were so light-hearted we even hosted a dance that night, and how we did it, I don't know, because we were all very inexperienced in this sort of thing. But for us, and, I think, for part of the Museum, it established the Latin American program, and that's become a very strong program.

SZ: That must have been very exciting too.

BS: It was, it was, because most of us had not seen any Latin American art except maybe the Mexican things in the collection.

SZ: But that was one of René's specialties.

BS: Yes, and so, of course, he was an enormous help, traveling with us. About twenty of us or more went down.

SZ: In the '50s, did you feel Alfred's [Alfred Barr's] presence a lot?

BS: Yes, I did. More a spiritual presence than an everyday presence. At the end of the long corridor that ran down to his office, there was always some fascinating new painting there, so that the people who came to see him would always see it, and it usually ended up in the collection. It was always fun to see what he put there to look at from some gallery or other.

SZ: And then would he talk to you about it?

BS: I'm sure he talked to his visitors and he'd talk to us about it if we had an occasion to go to his office. It was always a great treat. René used to sit in his office behind that enormous desk which is now in the collection in the architectural gallery, that great one that is, I guess, Art Nouveau, a giant desk. And of course, he was so giant. I always used to try to make a list of things that I had to accomplish before I went to talk to him because he just would relax and you'd talk and you'd forget what time it was, you'd forget why you came in, and you would just delightfully ramble on. It made me so nervous, because I felt the whole rest of the world was waiting to get into that office, but you never would know it from René. He was a real delight. And he wasn't afraid to break any rigid pattern of Museum exhibitions. We had things on primitive art. We had a wonderful exhibition called Architecture Without Architects [1964]. We had a lot of things that were not quite per se art, because things were all newer and not so codified then. For instance, the garden was much bigger because there wasn't the d'Harnoncourt wing when I was first there, and so they were able to have the Japanese house in the garden [Japanese Exhibition House, 1954], which was another sort of window-opening for everyone in New York. I'll never forget, you'd go there at lunchtime and people would just be sitting there and wishing they could put their feet in the stream. They lolled around the house, people just actually meditating there. It was fascinating. And then, of course, there were other display houses. They used that space in a very free way. I don't think you could do that anymore, and of course there's no space left. It's a different time.

SZ: Do you remember when the sculpture garden was redone in the '50s?

BS: Yes.

SZ: Anything about that that...?

BS: I don't remember anything about it except that it was miraculously beautiful, and before that it had been kind of a gravelly space. We'd had for a long time a wonderful Greek who handled the cooking. There was a little pavilion out there and you used to go out and you'd have Greek dishes in the summer and sit on chairs on the gravel. It was fun.

SZ: But then the renovation really took that.

BS: Yes. It was all a process of growing up and formalizing and getting bigger. It's magnificent now, but much bigger and grander. I think it makes it difficult for the amateur to find a place where he can really be valuable. It's much harder now, because I think everything has become much more professional. Not just our Museum, but everywhere in general. The great flood of art galleries didn't exist when I was first there. We were able almost to cover them all with the Art Lending Service. People were really timid about going into these new galleries and about collecting contemporary art at first. They were trying to learn.

SZ: Was that true for you, too?

BS: Yes. I learned a lot from working in the Art Lending Service and from going out and looking at the shows the curators would suggest to us. Really, you were educating yourself all the time.

SZ: Did you have anything in particular that you really liked?

BS: Yes, I did. I'm just trying to look around [this apartment] and see what I got that came from the Art Lending Service. I have a lot that I bought at the time, but it's not right here -- early things like [Arthur] Dove and [Joseph] Cornell, that period, which you bought

for a song. That [Mark] Tobey print over there I got from the Art Lending Service.

SZ: When you were asked to be a trustee [in 1959], was there anything specifically that you were interested in doing? How did that happen in the beginning?

BS: I don't really know, except I think in those days they thought of the Junior Council as a trial ground for trustees, and I was very much surprised, and delighted, of course. I didn't have any particular assignment when I became a trustee. But a few years later, I became involved with the International Council.... [We were] a very small group, and we all had a mission, because international shows were not frequent and there was no contact whatsoever with Latin America and a very different kind of contact with Europe. It is hard to think back to those days. What was going on in America was not at all known widely in Europe, so we all felt we had a mission. Then we had a program of Art in Embassies, which was a very valuable program, run by a wonderful woman named Caroline Simmons. She was from Washington. We were able to borrow paintings and make a collection and then lend them to embassies that requested them. We did that for a number of years, until the insurance got to be too expensive and the collectors weren't as willing to lend for a period of two or three years. Then it was taken over by the State Department. There is a program in Washington, but it's run differently.

SZ: The International Council [exhibitions] program [the International Program] was being run by Porter McCray at that time.

BS: At the beginning, although I entered the International Council really just before Waldo [Rasmussen] took over from Porter.

SZ: I had one other note under the International Council: the Library Overseas Program.

BS: Yes, we were all involved in that. We collected catalogues, any catalogues you got from overseas, for our library, then we did what we could to get books out to libraries in third world countries and the Orient. I went over to Japan with a show we did [Two

Decades of American Painting], one of our first really contemporary shows for Japan. It was a wonderful show, but nobody came except artists and students because it was all too new for the average Japanese public. They didn't know what to do with a woman either; they were very bewildered by the whole thing.

SZ: How was that for you?

BS: It was daunting [LAUGHING], but we had a very good time, principally because it was sponsored by the Ashai Shinbun, a big newspaper chain, and we'd been able to get enough funds to send over six or eight artists, good artists, some with their families, their wives and babies. Just being able to be with them and see their exposure to the Orient, to Japan, to Japanese art, was wonderful. Then I came back with the International Council and took them all around Japan. That was a much bigger group, but really a fascinating time. Blanchette came, and [so did] Brooke Astor. I'll never forget, she was such a good sport.

SZ: Because?

BS: The first day, I said, "Now the bus isn't going to wait for anybody." And who was late the first day? Mrs. Astor. And we left without her. She didn't get a bit upset. She hired a car and followed us all day, and nobody was late after that. But she was the best sport, she really was. And when we got to Kyoto, they gave her a huge suite that her husband had had years and years ago when he had visited Kyoto. It was really hysterical. It was all in satin, and there was a butler bowing. She took one look, then she invited us all up for cocktails [LAUGHING], so we all enjoyed it together. We saw a lot on that trip. It was marvelous. We went down the islands and saw [Masayuki] Nagare and...who is the Japanese sculptor whose museum is over in Queens? [Isamu] Noguchi.... Going to Noguchi's quarry and watching him working, then he took us all to his house, which was an old Japanese farmhouse that had been moved into a grove of trees not too far away and gave us tea. It was marvelous. Then we went to Nagare's house for dinner, and it was the exact opposite. He had a purple plush barber's chair in the middle of the living room, because, of course, he thought that was

fascinating [LAUGHTER]. It was very, very interesting. We had a wonderful docent who went with us. The council's gone back, I think, once or twice since then, but that was our first trip. Now, of course, it's gotten so much bigger that it's hard to do those intimate things that we were really privileged to do.

SZ: Because it was much smaller, as I remember.

BS: Yes. When I first joined it I think there were only thirty members and now there are nearly two hundred, which makes it very difficult. There are things you can't do anymore unless you break up into small groups. Of course, it's become the most marvelous network of friends and associations of art collectors and museum people, which I think has proved to be very valuable to the Museum.

SZ: But it was already going when you joined it, since Mrs. Rockefeller....

BS: ...had started it, and Mrs. [Eliza] Parkinson had carried on. But we had some very rough days, because when Bates Lowry was [director of the Museum], [and] he had a totally different vision of the Museum's role. I think he saw it more like a university. He had thought of an International Study Center, but not the same kind of International Council that we have. Waldo and I had some very lean years holding onto the [International] Program and trying to keep it from being discontinued.

SZ: Because he didn't support it?

BS: No. He didn't see it the way we saw it.

SZ: But you still had your network of members and people were, I assume, very attached to the....

BS: Yes, but we didn't really have the backing of the Museum that we had had in René's day. We lived in that little brownstone next door, sort of in a closet. It's rough when your management doesn't share your particular vision, and that was a bad time for us.

SZ: I'll come back to that in a different way. Australia -- were you a part of that, too?

BS: No, I wish I had. But it was just when I'd been president for five years and Joanne Stern took over, and the first trip was [INTERRUPTION]...and I missed that trip because I didn't want to be...looking over her shoulder.

SZ: Not even just as a guest.

BS: No, I thought I'd better take a year off. I'm sorry I've missed both trips to Australia, and I regret it. We were hearing about it today at the program committee. One of our members had just come back. Our connections there and our influence on the Australian art scene have been enormous.... We have some wonderful members from Australia, just wonderful. I think it's amazing that we have members from Japan and from India, who aren't great joiners as a whole.

SZ: Which speaks to the...?

BS: Which speaks to the validity of what we've been doing and the fact that they need that contact and enjoy it. When it comes time for a show to be sent there, they're willing to do everything they can to help because they identify with it. I think this Latin American show is just thrilling because it's the first major Latin American show [Latin American Artists of the Twentieth Century, 1993] that I think any...no, they had big show at the Met, but it wasn't a real survey show like this. This is a culmination of twenty years or more of work. And the need for a new catalogue was great because there's not enough written about Latin American art. I think our contacts now in Russia and Central Europe are marvelous. I think that we had a show in Prague even before the liberation, so to speak.

SZ: Of course, now it's going to be so different.

BS: Yes, it's going to be so different now, but there are so many wonderful people there.

We have members who are deeply involved and who are terribly helpful.

SZ: So that part of your association with the Museum you've enjoyed.

BS: I've enjoyed all my associations. But I did enjoy that, although after I'd been president for about five years, I was ready to step down. Because there are just so many details, you have to keep so many people happy, so it's really exhausting. It's nice to take a break.

SZ: From the International Council -- it must have been at the same time too -- you moved out into other areas in the Museum.

BS: Yes. I was chairman of membership for nearly twenty years, and I enjoyed that a lot. A lot of people keep saying, "Oh, yes, I've gotten letters from you." The membership grew steadily. Of course now we have a wonderful chairman in Paul Gottlieb, so it's going great guns. Of course, Matisse [the 1992 retrospective] has really increased it. It's higher than it's ever, ever been.

SZ: That happened during Picasso [the 1980 retrospective], too, did it not?

BS: It went up during Picasso, but not as high as [it is] now. It's even more so now. Whether they'll stay is another question, because very often people join for the year there's going to be a great show, a blockbuster, and then drop off. I think it is a problem of the changing audience for art and how to stay abreast.

SZ: You mean how to appeal to them?

BS: How to appeal to them and how is it that they're changing. I'm not sure I know the answer, but it's very different. The art museum over the years has had different roles. Just from when young people used to go and try to meet a friend or pick up a girl at MoMA, and now they all sit on the steps of the Met. Over and above the function as a grand museum, there's a sociological function as well.

SZ: As a trustee, thinking about those kinds of things in these various areas has to be a very tough but important thing to do.

BS: Yes, and I think we're in a moment of change right now that's going to be very hard to determine. I'm glad that Aggie [Gund] is there giving us some younger leadership. I think we're very lucky.

SZ: As chairman of the membership committee, tell me the kinds of things you would do and the kinds of things you had to think about. You've said some of them, but....

BS: Ways to try to bring in new members, little devices, little benefits, programs that appeal to them, and working on these trips that we do -- I don't mean overnight trips, I mean the day trips that we'd do, out to Philadelphia or to Boston. We'd do a great deal of that; we have a special committee on that. You have to work with the staff, of course. For instance, we don't give books very much anymore because it's just too expensive. That used to be a big thing, to figure out which books would appeal to members and how you could keep it within bounds. You had to use your ingenuity. And how to make members feel at home in the Museum. How to keep the dining room from getting too expensive, and how to keep people feeling as if they were part of the Museum family -- film benefits, all that sort of thing. We even dabbled in how to make sure that the shop is user-friendly and all that.

SZ: It's interesting, because you were also a member of the house committee.

BS: Yes, I'm chairman of the house committee.

SZ: So those things all....

BS: They all meshed. I've been on numbers of the collections committee, and I'm still on the drawings committee, but collecting has gotten to be such an expensive thing that I haven't been as active as I'd like to be.

END OF SIDE 1, TAPE 1

SIDE 2, BLANK

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

INTERVIEW WITH: **MRS. DONALD B. (BETH) STRAUS (BS)**

INTERVIEWER: **SHARON ZANE (SZ)**

LOCATION: **NEW YORK, NEW YORK**

DATE: **APRIL 22, 1993**

BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE 1

SZ: You actually started to tell me a funny story which you may want to tell in a different way, having to do with the 1964 expansion.... [LAUGHTER]

BS: Yes. Of course, we used [what are now] the d'Harnoncourt galleries, where now the public restaurant is; that was then the "new" wing.... [Exhibition galleries in this wing were not named in honor of either René d'Harnoncourt or Alfred H. Barr, Jr., until 1973.] We had a magnificent dinner party that René d'Harnoncourt sort of masterminded for the opening. Then we went up and they had a ceremony, after dinner, on the terrace roof of that wing. There were ramps coming up from the garden to that roof, and that roof was a great terrace -- very often totally empty -- for people to sit and look out over the garden. I remember after this great, glamorous dinner in which we had birthday cakes of flowers in the middle of each table, because it was sort of a birthday of the Museum, we had to go upstairs and then they had the ceremonies there. I was supposed to escort Lady Bird Johnson, and she was the calmest, coolest customer I have ever met in my life, and perfectly delightful. I had to take her to the ladies room and then I had to take her upstairs, and the crush was really quite frightening, but it was a very nice ceremony. I remember there was a picture of everybody looking up at some overhead light, and she made a nice speech and was the guest of honor. It was a very gala occasion for us all.

SZ: [In] that new wing, which was the d'Harnoncourt wing, were exhibition galleries.

BS: Yes, but that night they were used for the opening dinner party.

SZ: But that was also the expansion during which the garden was substantially changed by Philip Johnson.

BS: Yes, it was.

SZ: Did you have any hand in that at all?

BS: Well, no, I was more of an audience, as one often is with Philip. But it is the most beautiful garden, and even more beautiful now that you don't have the ramps up and there is a larger building. I think in the final [1984] expansion, the last in my time anyhow, the garden looks more beautiful than it ever did before. It's really magnificent. I have had a lot to do with the garden since I've been chairman of the house committee. One of the cleverest things I think that we did with the garden was, the pools were always emptied in the winter, and they looked just like missing teeth: they had the fountains sticking up out of them and they were black and empty and horrible. In the last few years we've put a layer of slate or some dark stone only about 2 1/2 inches below the surface of where the water is;...we watched to see how the drops were, so that when the fountains played, it gives the impression of a full pond, but when it's empty you still have this calm layer of gray stone almost where the surface of the water had been and you realize that they've had to be drained for the winter.

SZ: So it looks so much better.

BS: It looks <u>much</u> better.

SZ: That was done during the last expansion [in 1984]?

BS: No, it was done just recently, in the last five years. We keep twiddling away at it. The planting is now, I think, just lovely, because it's supported by Jan Cowles in honor of her husband, who was a trustee, as you know, for many, many years, and I think it

really does look nice now.

SZ: But over the years you really saw it change a lot. How would you describe it originally?

BS: It was sort of a backyard, with a few trees in it, gravel, some sculpture and a little kiosk in the middle, which was run by a delightful Greek, and in the summer we all went out and sat around in chairs around this little kiosk and had..., as I remember, Greek-style food. I think one of its most exciting moments was when the Japanese house was built, because there was room then for a really exquisite house that Arthur Drexler was responsible for, albeit it was designed, of course, by a Japanese architect. It was such a surprise and a shock to everyone in New York because it was the time when, I think thanks in good part to Arthur, modern architecture in our country became aware and deeply influenced by Japanese architecture and Japanese contemporary architects started interrelating with us. That made a great impression on us all. I hated to see it leave, and hated to see it leave the New York area, but [the house] is now in the Philadelphia park.... I haven't seen it, so I don't know what condition it's in, but it was a shame to let it go.

SZ: I think the garden underwent a couple of transitions. One was in the '50s, because it originally had been so gravelly, and...it was changed.

BS: It <u>was</u> changed. I don't quite remember what we did then. I don't quite remember the date when Philip put in the great weeping beeches [1953]. I know it was completed by the end of the last expansion, when the terrace on the end where the church was finished. Before that, we used to be served a very simple cafeteria-style meal at the other end, where the education department is now. I think that was really designed with the regularity of the trees and everything to be sort of a European café in a park. I think that was in the back of Philip's mind.

SZ: I guess that was the old Whitney Museum, that building [where lunch was served].

BS: Yes, that building.

SZ: But I remember reading that when the garden was substantially redone, in [1953], that there was some controversy over some of it, because it really became....

BS: A sculpture garden.

SZ: Yes. It...had a whole different feel to it.

BS: A sculpture garden was a relatively new concept to everybody; now it seems very gardeny, but in those days it didn't. Of course, I think it's a thing of great beauty. I think it's really one of the loveliest things Philip has ever achieved.

SZ: It really has been a popular oasis.

BS: It's been a popular oasis, and it was a great place for boys and girls to meet when it was first...as the Museum was when it was first reorganized.

SZ: I think you mentioned last time that you think now it's not so much....

BS: No, it isn't so much anymore. It looks to me like everyone's meeting on the steps of the Metropolitan [LAUGHING].

SZ: ...When talks first began about expanding again--I guess it was in the mid '70s that it really began to be talked about--how did you feel about that? It was obviously going to be an enormous undertaking.

BS: I never thought of questioning it. It was exciting and it really seemed needed. I'm not so sure today whether I'd feel the same way about expanding, adding another building.

SZ: Because?

BS: Because I feel that some expansion would be great. I do feel we need new large-scale

galleries for contemporary works of art, but I'm not entirely sure the climate is right for a massive expansion. I'm not entirely sure that the role of the museum as a philosophical and spiritual center isn't changing slightly. I don't know quite what it's changing into....

SZ: You said something similar last time, and I was going to ask you what you meant by that.

BS: It worries me, it really does worry me, and I don't think it's just because I'm so old. I think that it's the mood of the artists and the mood of the country [that have] changed, and I would rather not see us take too big a financial step, at least until we have our own house in order.

SZ: Because this last one was an enormous financial [undertaking].

BS: It was.... That whole innovative concept of building the Museum tower and selling the air rights and all that was absolutely brand new and very innovative, and, of course, I think it will pay off over the years. It's beginning to now. But I'm just not sure that this is the right moment. As I say, I don't talk about it very much, because it may be my age.

SZ: You've alluded to it, but I would think that climates change, and not just the financial climate of the city or the country, but within the Museum itself, the different personalities heading up the different....

BS: Yes, I think it would require a whole new reshaping. In the last expansion Don Marron played an enormous role, and you had to have somebody who was very firm and businesslike and could cope with a large project like that. Ever after, we've become so big. We've become much, much more professional. It started like most institutions, small with a great deal of volunteerism and an almost family feeling, and like lots and lots of institutions it's become big and professional and very expensive to run.

SZ: And that development seems almost inevitable.

BS: It does, and it seems part of the American philosophy of growth and if you don't keep moving, you're stagnating. I just wish we could keep reevaluating what we have so that we could grow, but not at a pressurized pace, and thoughtfully. That's hard to do.

SZ: You touched on something the last time, and I wanted to get into it a little bit. Shortly after the '64 expansion was completed, one could say in society -- and it was also reflected in the Museum -- [that] things got kind of rocky for a while.

BS: I think that you're probably referring to the change in administrators, the change in directors.

SZ: Yes.

BS: Yes, it was a very rough period before we found Dick [Richard Oldenburg]. As you know, John Hightower was not a success. I think he was much more of a task-force person than an administrator, and things got out of hand.... [Hightower had succeeded Bates Lowry]..., a professor and an educator whose concept of the Museum was so different....

SZ: You mentioned that, for instance, whatever plans he [Lowry] had for his International Study Center, how that cut into your....

BS: Absolutely. He had no concept that the International Council and the International [circulating exhibitions] Program could be such a help to the Museum and a help to the world, in a way, making art infinitely more international, because we really led the way. Doug Dillon was an enormous help, in a funny way, because he, with other people, worked on getting indemnity from the federal government for a certain number of international shows each year of a certain caliber. That had become almost prohibitively expensive for museums, so that accelerated the movement toward international shows. I think it was very valuable. During Bates Lowry's regime, it was simply that he didn't have the concept of what a museum was. He had the concept of

what a study center was, what a university was, and for us it just didn't suit the picture.

SZ: What about what you sensed of his idea of the place of trustees in that institution? We could talk about that a little bit, too, I think.

BS: I don't know what his overall sense was. Perhaps something more remote, the way the trustees of a university usually are, like visiting committees. But I know my life was utterly miserable, trying to run the International Council and sort of feeling eased into an attic all the time, because it really turned out to be a very innovative thing to do and all the other museums are copying us now. It makes me rather irritated when I get these great brochures from other museums just frankly imitating as fast as they can the International Council. I think we have a sufficient head start [so as] not to worry about that, but I'd hate to see the concept lost, because it's proved to be so valuable in creating this network of information and generosity, in the sense of loans and all that, and a lot of fun for people all around America as well as around the world to get to know each other and to travel together and to meet together. It's been an enormous success.

SZ: You've had the experience of trusteeship at a number of institutions. Can you just compare and contrast a little bit your trusteeship at the Modern with some of the others? I'm asking because...the trustees really play a large and important role here....

BS: I think they do; they play a very serious role. And there's not a lot of dead wood, either. Everybody feels so honored, I think, to be a part of the Museum, and if they're interested in contemporary art, their contact with the staff is so valuable to them and so enriching that they take it very seriously. It's also such a pleasure because you're usually working with first-rate people. I've been trustee of a lot of different organizations and many of them don't expect or really want the degree of involvement that the Museum has always had. It's very important, I feel, that the board of trustees represents a spectrum between probably the very wealthy and business-experienced trustee who can respond to the degree of the financial level, [with] contribution[s] and expertise, and the trustee who is sort of a working trustee and very interested in art but

can't buy millions of dollars' worth of paintings each year but is very valuable in the sense that he works with the staff on a different level. And of course it's much more fun if you really have a job to do, and I've had a lot of wonderful jobs to do, and fun, all of them.

SZ: Tell me about some more of them. For instance, one thing I'd like to know about is, during this '84 expansion you did the house committee.

BS: No, I did membership. [INTERRUPTION]

SZ: You said membership, but I had this memory, because I was there at that time, of your working on [the house committee].

BS: I've been chairman of the membership and the house committee since...when I finished my term at the International Council, those were two of the jobs. I was chairman of membership for over twenty years, and that was really my concern during the changeover, during the reorganization and the new building, to try to help try retain as many members as we could during the lean period of reconstruction, and then to take advantage of the opening and the excitement and the desire of people to see the new Museum and all that to increase our membership, which fell down, of course, during the closing. It was really remarkable how it surged up afterwards. We were just becoming more professional, too, in our techniques of developing membership and we had a good committee and some wonderful people from direct mail. Soon, Paul Gottlieb joined the committee, and he was chairman of publications at the time, so it made a great team, because book dividends in those days when he started were very important to members, and it's been hard to think of substitutes and to wean them, because it just became too expensive. But I still feel that we give our members as much if not more than any other museum I've ever known--a sense of belonging, lots of special events and previews, and I like our new little newsletter and all that. Since the Matisse show [in 1992], of course, it's gone to glory, it's wonderful, but it's been a steady growth over the years, and it was a fun thing to do.

SZ: I still have this memory of all these discussions when the new restaurants were being considered and everybody was trying to figure out what and how....

BS: How and what to do to make the members feel...oh, it was so different from the previous little restaurant and it was all so grand-scale. It became very popular and I think that now that we've just this week changed, we have a new caterer coming in, an Italian restaurant named Sette Mezzo is taking over from Daka, who's been our contracted purveyor for years. So there's going to be a whole new look.

SZ: Were changes made because...?

BS: It was because our philosophy was really not the same as Dakke's, and we never could get it through their heads what we wanted. Their prices got so high, and it was to my mind quite pretentious food. We'll see how this goes. It'll be very exciting.

SZ: Does this mean that the service people change, too?

BS: Everything changes. I don't know how many of the people who are working for Daka will transfer over. They're just in the process of negotiating all of that right now, so it's quite exciting. It may be a total surprise to everybody; we'll have to see. But it'll be fun.

SZ: It'll be Italian food now?

BS: Yes. They have a very nice restaurant on Lexington Avenue in the 70s that everybody likes, and we're going to see what they're going to do. And they're going to be open at night, independently, and people are going to come in through an entrance into the garden and go across and go up in the elevator. It will be quite a different set-up. It will be their restaurant except on Wednesday nights, when it will be ours for parties--the upstairs restaurant; the downstairs restaurant we can always use.

SZ: So the upstairs restaurant you'll still have access to for openings.

BS: Yes, because we usually do that on Wednesdays, you see, so we're trying a whole new formula. So things do move on, they change [LAUGHTER]. But that's good. I think that's the way they should move. It's a shame to have all that facility empty at night, and we tried to devise ways of using it without keeping the whole Museum open, which would be far too expensive. So we'll see.

SZ: I assume the Museum gets a portion.

BS: Yes. I don't know the deal with the contractor, but it's going to be quite profitable if it's a success. We need every little thing we can get. I'm really delighted, because we've been trying to accomplish this for maybe five years or more, and it's always fallen through for one reason or another--principally the union reason. We'll see how this is going to work.

SZ: We'll have to hope it's going to be great.

BS: Yes, we'll see. Because there's a huge audience in the neighborhood for lunch if it's not too expensive and it's pleasant, and I think it'll increase membership. It is meant to be a members' restaurant, but of course at night it will be open to the general public.

SZ: But the fact is that it's also open to the general public during the day, isn't it?

BS: The members have the right to make reservations, and if it isn't full, then they let people come in in order to fill it up, but you can't be sure.

SZ: Are you going to advertise the change?

BS: Oh, yes [LAUGHTER]. But I think we have to make sure it's going smoothly before we do anything.

SZ: So that's one thing you're obviously pleased about.

BS: Yes, I am pleased about it. I'm pleased about everything, in general.

SZ: I was going to ask you for another specific.

BS: I'm terribly pleased that now that Paul Gottlieb has taken over membership, how well it's going, and I'm so grateful to the Matisse show.... We'll see if those members stay on. Of course, a lot of them will drop off after the year is up, but I'm sure it's going to result in higher membership. He keeps thinking up new tricks; he's a very inventive person. So that's good. What else am I happy about? I think the general level of the staff is marvelous, in every department. We don't seem to have too many prickly personalities, which we have had from time to time.

SZ: I was going to ask, this is a change, too?

BS: Yes, it is. It's a pleasant change. Naming no names, but it is [LAUGHING]. There were times when there was a lot of controversy. I'm not on the painting and sculpture committee, but to my knowledge there will be shifts and changes. For instance, I think the role of John Elderfield is going to change, because he no longer wishes to be curator of drawings. It's essential that he remain at the Museum, he's so wonderful. Just what role he's playing hasn't been announced yet. That'll be interesting.

SZ: There are changes in the air--structural, organizational changes.

BS: Yes. The idea of having both a director and a paid president is an enormous change, and I only hope we can work it out. I think it's needed right now, because the administrative job is really just too burdensome for Dick. He doesn't have the time and I think it's wearing him down, and I feel very sorry about that. But, I think it's going to be terribly hard to find just the right person who had the right flavor and mood and who will work as a team with Dick [Oldenburg], which is what I think we're all hoping for.

SZ: It has to be more than that. It's a team with Dick and a team with the trustees.

BS: Yes, that's right. It has to be somebody we all feel is worthwhile. And there will soon be a change at the International Council, because I think Waldo is due to retire. So it'll be a very different group of faces. You always worry a little bit at a time of transition. It's exciting, but you worry that you can find just the perfect person. Sometimes yes and sometimes you have to try two or three times, but it's worth keeping at it.

SZ: What about the role of the Rockefellers? The Museum's been called a "Rockefeller museum."

BS: It has been. They've certainly been the...well, the Bliss family, with Eliza Parkinson Cobb representing them -- and her son still is the treasurer -- has also been important. There's been a strong family feeling among many of the trustees, and that they've wanted younger members of their families to follow in their footsteps. But, of course, overwhelmingly it's been the Rockefeller family. I think Blanchette was a magnificent president. It was so sad that she became ill, because she was dedicated and regal and she really loved it. She loved learning from Alfred Barr and René when she was young, and then really helping. She and Eliza were a great team and went everywhere as a team for many years. It was really very good. We used to joke a little, but it was good. The whole thing has lent a stability to the Museum, I think. I don't know how the current younger generation is enjoying their role at the Museum because they're just growing into effectiveness and importance. I know that young David [David Rockefeller, Jr.] has been terribly helpful in the Department of Education, but whether he has the same enthusiasm for collecting that his father [David Rockefeller, Sr.] had, it's hard to tell. But he takes his role very seriously, I know. There are numbers of others in the family that are involved as well. It will be very hard now that David Rockefeller, Sr., is becoming a life trustee. I must say I love the idea of life trustees. I do, personally, because I've spent all my life at the Museum.

SZ: So it's an appropriate evolution.

BS: Yes, it is. We all hate to move away because it's so much a part of the fabric of our lives. And yet we have to make room for younger people to take over. That's life, you

know, and this makes it possible for us to come to the meetings, stay in touch, be on committees, and yet not have the full burden of the leadership. You know, some of us fall asleep at meetings these days [LAUGHTER]. I think it's very important that the Museum represent the younger generation as well, and I think it's a delight that Aggie Gund has become president. She's working terribly hard and, I think, doing a very fine job. I think we're terribly lucky to have her. I feel that about all the jobs that I've had, that it's time for me to turn them over to younger people. Yet, being a life trustee means that you can keep a toe in the door. If somebody wants to ask your advice, there you are. That's very comforting to know. I would miss it awfully.

SZ: You get to attend meetings and you can serve on committees.

BS: Yes. You can even be a chairman of a committee, only I think it's probably wiser if one doesn't, because it's very habit forming and you've just got to face reality. Older people are inclined to not be able to face up to change and feel a little frightened by it, so it's just as well, because things do change.

SZ: I wish my tape recorder could record your smiles when you talk about what you've done and having been there, and, obviously, what it means to you.

BS: Oh, it's meant a great deal to me. It's been a wonderful thing. And we've had such fun over the years. I told you those wonderful days when we used to go to Blanchette's guesthouse and feel that we were in touch with everything exciting in the world. That was a rare privilege, so you hate giving up the friends you made in those days.

SZ: You don't, really.

BS: No, you don't have to. I miss Eliza, now that they're living in New Jersey, because it's harder and harder for her to come up, although she does. And Joann Phillips. The Phillips are a wonderful couple, and I think he [Gifford Phillips] has been an exemplary trustee and so has she. I know now they're spending more and more time in New Mexico. I think they'll be sorely missed, because they represent a very pure idea of

what the role of a museum is and they're true collectors and, funny thing to say, true aristocrats, although they're totally democratic, but they have such high ethics in every way. So I think they'll be missed a great deal, and I think that they'll miss us, too. I know that Joann Phillips will, a great deal. I think she hates to leave New York.

SZ: You said you spend more time now in Maine.

BS: Yes, I do. It's a love-hate relationship [LAUGHTER]. I love it. My husband hasn't been well and he likes the quiet life in Maine, so we are spending lots and lots more time there. That's the way it goes.

SZ: There's a luncheon for you on becoming a life trustee?

BS: Aggie's giving a lunch for all the life trustees, which I think is a totally sweet and unexpected thing to do. It's very Aggie-ish, you know. She keeps a wonderfully personal, director point of view about people and is very loyal in her friendships. I think that we're very lucky with her. So there is going to be a lunch this next month, in May, and we'll all put on our best bibs and tuckers and go. Now what else can I tell you about?

SZ: I don't know. Do you think that's it?

BS: Maybe, maybe it is. If I have any brilliant ideas, or if you do....

SZ: We've covered everything that I have. The one other thing, and maybe enough has been said about it, we were talking about the difficult time in the '70s and the change in the directorships, but there were also difficulties with staff, and I know that then the trustees moved out into some of the problems in the city society in terms of what the Museum did.

BS: Yes, I think so, too, and there were personality difficulties, with Bill Lieberman and Bill Rubin. But I think they really were thrashed out at the level of the painting and

sculpture committee more than anything else. I think several of the trustees felt very bitterly and were very deeply involved, but I was on the periphery of that. I've never served on painting and sculpture; I've been involved in drawings and prints. I've also not been on the architecture committee, but I've been involved; I've always known the curators of architecture and liked them a lot. There's so much going on now. You can't be involved in everything there: it's very big. That's wonderful, but you don't have quite the immediacy. I think Joanne Stern knows the staff, the whole staff, as well as anybody--she's younger than I am, but she's more or less of my generation--because of her long time in the International Council and, before that, the Junior Council.... She's very close to all of those changes....

SZ: Thank you very much, Mrs. Straus.

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END INTERVIEW