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Oral history interview with Margaret Scolari
Barr concerning Alfred H. Barr, 1974
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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Margaret Barr on February 22, April 8, and May 14, 1974. The interview was conducted at the American Federation of Art in New York by Paul Cummings for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

PC: PAUL CUMMINGS

MB: MRS. ALFRED H. BARR, JR. (MARGARET OR MARGA)

[SIDE 1]

PC: Let me say this is February 22, 1974; Paul Cummings talking to Mrs. Alfred Barr in the board room of the A.F.A. Why don't we begin sort of at the beginning. You were born in Rome? No?

MB: Yes, I was born in Rome. My mother was Irish from southern Ireland but Protestant. My father was from the Veneto, from the beautiful town of Bassano near Venice. I was brought up in Rome and went to the university there. But my father had died in 1916 so it was incredibly important to be constantly at work to earn a living. In 1922, '23, '24 I was working in the American Embassy in the office of the naval attache. Thanks to one of my bosses who knew the head of the Latin department at Vassar College, I was asked to go and teach at Vassar College in the humblest possible position. I left Rome in ten days because I didn't want to live in my mother's house any more and live the life that I was living then.

PC: How did you come to work for the American Embassy?

MB: My mother had become a Christian Scientist and the wife of the then naval attache, called Captain Hasbrook, was also a Christian Scientist. This wife told my mother that her husband was looking for a bilingual secretary. I had spoken English before Italian so that I was suitably bilingual.

PC: What was it like living in Rome and growing up, going to school? What kind of world was it?

MB: Well, I think I had a very peculiar early life and adolescence -- but everybody's is peculiar -- but, as I look back on it, I think that I had a lot more fun than the young students of the same age that I'm teaching now.

PC: Oh, really?

MB: Oh, yes, I do think so.

PC: In what way? You mean just kind of what the world was like generally? Or people in Europe? Or . . . ?

MB: I really can't explain it. The truth of it is that I was born in 1901. My father died in 1916 which was in the midst of the First World War just before the Retreat of Caporetto. I knew we were left very poor, extraordinarily poor, because the money he had saved was not really quite sufficient. But nevertheless, you see, I went to a coeducational school - the liceo, the gymnasium liceo was where one used to go. We had an extraordinarily active school life. It was a day school. There were lots of young men, too. Little by little, they'd all have to go off to the wars. We started in a class of about forty and -- I don't know -- I think we ended up with about three or four boys. All the others had gone and the rest were girls. But it was really amusing because one was satisfied with very much less than what the young now expect. There was an extraordinary amount of gossip and flirtation. We lived a very separate life from the adults. The adults were our enemies. And it was really very amusing. Then, of course, we went out a lot, dancing chiefly. And then later when I was working at the American Embassy I was making a great deal more money -- thanks to the exchange -- than many of the boys that I had gone to school with. And I had nice clothes. And I adored dancing and I danced three or four times a week in the afternoon and at night. This is terribly different from what our young do here, you know. There was a constant atmosphere of flirtation.

PC: What kind of places did you go to dance?

MB: We went to dance in places that were called -- oh, I don't know -- and there were tea dances, and then you could go to hotels or to the same places for evening dances. But I was terribly handicapped, of course, because those were days when the young girls more or less were supposedly chaperoned by mothers. But my mother never had the patience to do this. She was extremely busy partly teaching and partly straightening out our catastrophic legal affairs. So fairly gradually I began to go out alone which was not supposed to be done. Then,

as soon as the First World War finished, a passion for skiing set in. This was the first time that the Italians had gone skiing. The people that taught us to ski supposedly were the young men who had fought the war on skis in the Alps on the Austrian border. We'd go to Cortina d'Ampezzo and for shorter trips we'd go into the Abruzzi. It was marvelous. Marvelous. We'd go third-class, singing at the top of our voices, living on nothing, you know. Oh, it was really great. None of our young know what it is to be young in that way.

PC: It's all so complicated today.

MB: But this is losing our time.

PC: No. This is the background.

MB: But I'll tell you . . . I'll get very much closer to the Museum of Modern Art in two seconds.

PC: Let me ask you one other thing before we jump that far. What were you studying in school?

MB: Oh, in school one had what was called a classical education, and you got what is known as the licentiate liceale at the age of nineteen, which is somewhat later than when you finish high school here. Then you went to the university. One did not need to attend the university. In other words, you could work full time or part-time and still get credits at the university. My mother is a tremendously intelligent woman and absolutely polyglot, very much better for languages than I am. She knew German very well, which I never really learned well. Anyway, she absolutely insisted that I should go to university. I instead wanted immediately to go to work and bring in some money. But she made enormous scenes; she had a ghastly temper, a ghastly temper, and a ferocious will and she insisted that I should go to the university. I said, "I don't want to go to university and I don't want to study." There are different subdivisions in Italy but, shall we say, the humanistic disciplines are called licere. I said, "I don't want to study licere because all the girls in my class take licere if they go to university at all. My mother said, "Well, all right, if you don't want to study licere you can study whatever you want." I said, "All right, I'll go into medicine." You see, we were very geared to medical things because, at the end of World War I, my mother and many other women of her age, and younger, had gone to be nurses in hospitals, volunteer nurses, and quite a bit, in quantity; poor unfortunate soldiers had come down from the Italian front with their feet frozen because they had been sent up to the front with sabot shoes. My mother witnessed thousands of amputations without any anesthetic. It was ghastly, ghastly. And then one used to go to these hospitals when there were small festivities for the poor wounded. That's the first time that I ever encountered de Sicca, the great movie director, who at that time, at the age of twelve or thirteen, was singing to the troops. He already had a great talent in that way. Anyway, so then I inscribed for licere and at the same time I was working in an insurance office full time. And, as soon as I was through, I used to rush off to various parts of Rome where classes in anatomy, chemistry, this, that and the other were being held. There were very, very few girls studying medicine and they were all very mousy. In Italy it is not a good thing to be mousy. No, not at that time. I used to arrive late. The anatomical amphitheater was full of young men still in uniform. They used to stare at me and draw attention to me in the most exasperating way. One day I landed in a class that was not anatomy -- I can't remember what it was. I walked into the classroom late because I was coming from work. They interrupted the professor and said in Italian, "Ecco la Inglese" because I looked more English than Italian and that finished it. And I quit and went to take licere. I taught myself Greek and finished up all the credits and was in the middle of writing my thesis when I got this chance to go and teach at Vassar. And so I left. I never got my Italian degree.

PC: What was your thesis on? What were you writing on?

MB: It was going to be on something on the history of art.

PC: Your father had been an antiquarian -- right?

MB: My father had been an antiquarian.

PC: Were you interested in the visual arts? Or literature?

MB: Yes, I was much more interested in the visual arts but I was fantastically ignorant, catastrophically ignorant. The courses that were given at the university were very bad, with very bad equipment. Also, by this time I was working at the Embassy. You didn't go to any courses; you bought mimeographed sheets of the lectures and you learned them mechanically. And then you were examined orally by three professors and they gave you a mark and then you forgot about your studies until the next set of exams. Then you killed yourself, practically memorized them and then you passed another set.

PC: Were there any professors or any people you remember from those days who were important to you as far as ideas or instructors or anything?

MB: No.

PC: Nothing?

MB: Yes, I had some amusing professors in the liceo but nothing really formidable. In America I began a totally different education. I was forced by Vassar College to be a student assistant because . . . Well, first of all, they were trying to economize. My first salary was nine hundred dollars a year and out of that I had to send money to my mother. According to the head of the department, it was important to start as a student assistant because of passport difficulties. You see, they were already putting a great barrier against Italians. When I came in September 1925, there were already great limitations on immigration and it was catastrophic to be Italian. And, of course, if you came from Rome you counted yourself Italian.

PC: Oh, right. And then so many were coming from Sicily and places like that.

MB: So they had to call me student assistant so I was forced to take courses besides teaching.

PC: Do you think that was a help in the end? Or . . . ?

MB: Yes. It was quite extraordinary. After having had this complicated life in Rome so full of young men and flirtations, to land in a female world, and I can't say that I liked it much. But, on the other hand, I was sufficiently Anglo-Saxon to fall in with it much more easily than an inseparable friend of mine did who had gone to Vassar a year before me and who was completely Italian. But anyway, the dean at Vassar, called Dean Thompson, said that "I had to take some courses so as to maintain my status as a student assistant." And she said that I'd have to take courses in English. I said that "I didn't want to." She said that all foreigners did. So she sent me into some English courses which were . . . [very noisy train passing]. I said, "Couldn't she let me take courses in the art department because, after all, I had been writing a thesis on this subject." So she conceded and I began really to study the history of art seriously because the kind of teaching . . . well, I mean you can well imagine that whatever good I learned when I just had to learn all the facts by rote without even seeing photographs of what I was studying . . .

PC: Was that the way it had been in Rome?

MB: Well, you see, nobody went to the lectures. You didn't have to. And I was working. So I was a pathetic ignoramus.

PC: You never went to museums or anything in Rome?

MB: I went constantly to museums with my father but with no kind of training. Now that I teach, I know perfectly well that, when you take a young person to a museum, first of all, you shouldn't make them look at everything, and then you should speak to them about the things you want them to notice. My mother and father trailed me around museums and churches from the age of zero. They used to travel in summer and they used to go constantly though mostly in central Italy and Tuscany. They used to trail me around. When I reached the ages of ten and twelve this had reached really an acute situation for me and I detested it. So I charged them so much for a church, so much for a museum, so much for eating cheese.

PC: That's marvelous.

MB: I had no set allowance but only got money for high marks and for those particular things I charged them. Imagine what I learned. Nothing. The only thing I ever remember their having said was, pointing to a certain picture of the Virgin in Arezzo -- which I would not be able to find -- and my father said to my mother that "this Virgin looked like me." That's all that I ever heard about any work of art. So I remained really susceptible but not informed.

PC: Who did you study with at Vassar in the classes that you took?

MB: At Vassar there was a man called Arthur McComb. I don't know if you remember who the Askews are. Do you know the Askews?

PC: Oh, sure.

MB: Arthur McComb was Constance Askew's first husband. He was teaching. Constance and he were living on College Avenue. Their daughter Pamela, who is now head of the department at Vassar, was born while I was there. Well, Arthur McComb was a very amusing teacher to me who had never been exposed to this sort of thing. He was very English though American. It amused me a lot to watch him, to follow his mannerisms. And, of course, I learned a very great deal. And, oh, then I took courses in the art department in quantity and ended by getting an M.A. at Vassar. Which was absolutely a farce. I'm ashamed of it. And what's more, they allowed me even to write it in Italian but there was nobody to supervise an M.A. thesis and nobody wanted to. It's

disgusting. I'm ashamed of it. But anyhow, I got an M.A. I taught at Vassar for four years in all. I went to see McCracken and I said, "What to do now from the point of view of passport and all that?" "You can go and study at New York University. My father did this, or that, or the other for New York University, or was So and So at New York University, so I can get you admitted." So I began to take courses at New York University, which at that time did not have the glorious arrangement that it has now. You had to go down to Washington Square or else there were courses in the basement of the Metropolitan Museum. At the same time I continued to teach at Vassar. Then in the last year I also taught Italian at Sarah Lawrence. I've forgotten to say that in all these places I taught Italian.

PC: How did you like living in this country? This was a great change for you from Rome, wasn't it?

MB: It was very interesting, very interesting.

PC: What did it look like?

MB: Well. at the beginning I was very, very About a month and a half after I got here, I remember saying to somebody in a card that "it's all so interesting and peculiar." This person said, "Write it down." And I didn't. I was tremendously frightened of facing my first class. In the middle of September 1925 I was so frightened that I walked out of my room, walked off on the road, and missed at least a week's worth of my classes. I couldn't face the class; I was too frightened.

PC: You finally did?

MB: I don't know how I found the courage; I was so frightened. And it's funny because I had given private lessons since the age of sixteen. But I was facing the group and they were nearly my age; there was only three years' difference.

PC: You didn't have large classes? Or did you?

MB: Oh, about thirty girls.

PC: That was a pretty good size class.

MB: Oh, yes. Well, now, I know exactly where I want to get myself because this is more interesting. In the last year that I was at Vassar, which I think was 1927-28 but I'm not certain, I was at Vassar four years. Now can you figure that out? I went in September -- yes, I finished in the spring of 1929. So it was in the year 1928-29 that I became quite a friend of Russell Hitchcock who was teaching there. Do you know him?

PC: I know who he is.

MB: Okay, he was very young. We used to love to chat. He was very deaf already then. He isn't deaf now. He's had an extraordinary operation since his retirement so that for the first time in his life he's not deaf. And he's very amusing. He had just been reading Proust. I had finished reading Proust. We used to love to go to the movies. We used to converse. He had more interesting friends among the faculty than I, but still not many. In fact, Vassar was not an interesting place then, at least not for the young people. And he used to read me letters written by Alfred Barr and Jere Abbott who, during that winter, were in Russia in the height of winter. They had started a sort of year of travel and I think got to Germany and Poland and spent the center of the winter in Russia. These letters were fascinating. I don't know how they found time to write but they did. And he read them to me. Also Alfred had taught at Vassar the year before I had gone; in other words, he had finished in the spring of 1925 and I went to Vassar in the fall. So the name of Alfred Barr was still in the air. So at the end of 1928 in the spring I got a Carnegie scholarship to study with , but this time I had two years' work of New York University courses in the afternoon. So it was decided that I would spend from autumn to January -- the first semester -- in New York taking courses and then I would go off to Europe -- don't ask me for what to study. So I came to live in New York on Madison and 91st Street. There were still trolley cars. I was a friend of Agnes Rindge who was teaching in the art department at Vassar and whose course in modern sculpture I had taken. This was the first course that opened my eyes to the advantages of modern art of any kind. You see, we won't be able to go on. [Coughing]

PC: Had you seen much contemporary art up to that point?

MB: There wasn't much to see. There were very few galleries.

PC: Right.

MB: I did go to some galleries. The thing that I remember best was an exhibition of Bellows in which were was a representation of the prize fighter Firpo. I remember when I went to Washington going through that cemetery to see the Saint-Gaudens monument. But there was rather little to see. Well, anyway, Agnes Mongan -- excuse me

-- Agnes Rindge came down from Poughkeepsie perhaps in December -- I don't know -- November or December of 1929 and she said, "Why don't we go together to The Museum of Modern art?" What I'm trying to say is that Russell Hitchcock read me Alfred's letters. Agnes said, "Let's go to the Museum of Modern Art." I had never been there. It was the first exhibition. It was "Cezanne, Gauguin, Seurat, and van Gogh." A smashing exhibition! And it was the very first time I had ever gone in there. In the largest room in the Heckscher Building where it was there were a couple of couches. We were walking around and Agnes saw Alfred Barr. She ran toward him and said, "Alfred, et cetera" and they began to talk. This went on for quite a while so that I sat down on one of the couches to wait. So then she bethought herself of introducing me and said to him, "Of course you know Daisy Scolari." My name was Daisy, not Margaret, and Scolari was my last name. So I got up. And he recognized the name because somehow he must have heard something about me through Russell Hitchcock. But of course I had heard a great deal more about him through these letters that Russell had read me. I have no idea how we met again but it was not with great difficulty; I don't know how we met. I remember vividly that in those early days there was a most delightful Park & Tilford tearoom on the corner where Tiffany's now is; a wonderful place. He asked me out to tea there. Then by and by he asked me to have dinner. But one dined out of the Museum of Modern Art on 56th Street in a little restaurant which I remember as being Chinese, but I'm not sure. This was just a few doors on the north side of 56th Street. There the young people that were interested in the Museum all clustered. There was Alfred, and a young boy -- man -- called Cary Ross, Philip Johnson, and very often, the dealer, J. B. Neumann. And these people were so excited and they were talking like mad. It was a fantastic atmosphere. You felt an unbelievable vibration. It sort of centered around Alfred but, nevertheless, everybody was adding their contributions reminding one another of things and saying, "We could do this." "We could do that." It was absolutely electric. When Russell Lynes was writing his book Good Old Modern I tried as much as I could to try to give him an idea of the incredible excitement that surrounded the Museum in those early years. This, of course, was before I was married. Well, by January I knew that I was hopelessly in love with Alfred. But I never had any kind of connection or flirtation with any American man since I had come to live in America. Such possibilities were completely outside my sphere. I didn't know . . . I had no idea what was going on in his mind, none. I think by the end of January there was a meeting of the College Art Association in Boston. He asked whether I was going. I said, "Yes, that I wanted very much to go." He said, "All right, we'll go together and I'll take chairs." Do you remember when people used to take chairs on trains?

PC: Oh, right.

MB: Actually I had never been in a chair in my life. We sat in these chairs and kept looking over the programs of the forthcoming talks. I don't know where he found my name, -- and he looked at the name "Margaret Scolari" because my official name is "Margaret" -- and he said, "I don't like the name Daisy. Why don't we do this?" He erased the "r-e-t" and that's why so many people call me "Marga." Then it became evident that he also had the same ideas and we fell insanely in love with each other. It was very amusing; most extraordinary. He and Jere Abbott were the most incredibly popular young men about town. They went to dinner after dinner and theater party after theater party both because they were young -- and I think that in those days people, museum people, were not yet feeling that one had to accept invitations of wealthier people for the good of the institution. I think that they were really liked, that nobody thought in these terms in those days. Although -- well, maybe they did; maybe they didn't -- I don't know. But the truth of it is, you see, that the stock market crash had occurred in October 1928, so that all this was immediately after the crash. Nevertheless, he was going out like mad. In those days, and for many years after we were married, you always had to know whether you were to wear black tie or white tie and any wife had to know the evening dresses that would go with black tie and then the fancier evening dresses that would go with white tie. Well, anyhow, they were in constant demand. He was twenty-eight and I was twenty-nine and, more than naturally, he deeply hesitated about the idea of getting married, or marrying me. I've always felt that it was an incredibly alarming thing for a man to have to undertake and I deeply sympathized with him. And also I -- I'm not able to explain -- but I was absolutely not going to do anything to facilitate this. He had some great friends in Princeton called George and Ethel Rowley. He used to teach Siense art and Chinese. He was a charming man. He had married Ethel who was much older than himself. They both adored Alfred. Alfred said to me, "If you allow, I will go off for a weekend to Princeton and see what the Rowleys think." So he went to consult them about this. Then he came back and he said, "All right." So then it was decided that because I had no family in America and because he didn't like ceremonial things of any kind, that we would not get married in New York but we would get married in Paris. Because anyway he had to go to Paris to collect an exhibition for the fall in the Museum, about which more later. So it was all decided. I continued to live on Madison Avenue. He continued to live on 54th or 55th Street with Jere Abbott. The idea was that I would take such and such a boat and then he would follow in about a week. His mother who lived in Detroit was really terrified because the way he announced his intention was to write her, "If you turn to page so and so and so and so of Frank Jewett Mather's History of the Italian Renaissance you will see a picture of an ancestor of the girl I am going to marry."

PC: How marvelous!

MB: She was Presbyterian. And he left her without any further definition. The first thing that crossed the poor woman's mind was that he was marrying a Catholic. I'm Church of England because of my mother. She was

really frightened. In those days I think people used the long distance telephone much less than they do now. But anyhow, she took a train and came to New York. I met her. It was a very strange encounter. She was quickly reassured by Alfred that I was Protestant, but Church of England. Well, that was better than Catholic. But she was so different from any person that I have ever had anything to do with that it was hard going from the start, really very difficult. My father-in-law was really charming and easy to be with. But my mother-in-law was very strict and very conventionally religious. Well anyway, as I was saying, the marriage was organized. I was taking a boat and in a week Alfred was going to take a boat and we were going to get married in Paris. Miraculously, Mrs. Barr telephoned from Detroit and said, "You know, if you want to get married in Paris, you have to establish residence and you have to be married in a mairie." She warned Alfred that we would have to stay in Paris a long time and go through an awful lot of red tape. So all of a sudden we went down to City Hall with Cary Ross and Jere Abbott as witnesses and got legally married. But we stuck to our plan. I took the early boat; he took the later boat. Then we were remarried in Paris by a supposedly dear colleague of my father-in-law. He was rector of the church in the Quai d'Orsay. But, first of all, the church was being restored. By that time what were we? -- End of May, something like May 28, 1930. So we were married in his living room.

PC: Again in Paris?

MB: In Paris. And that was that. And the next day we began to assemble this exhibition of Corot and Daumier instantly. We never took a moment's honeymoon or anything. I think we'll stop because I . . . [Voice is tired]

[END OF SIDE ONE]

[SIDE TWO]

PC: This is side 2 and it is April 8, 1974.

MB: Well then, we have to backtrack because the first exhibition in The Museum of Modern Art was in the autumn of 1929 right after the crash. It occurred to me that I have not made it clear -- or perhaps I did -- what was so novel about this kind of exhibition. What was novel, apart from the choice of paintings -- and such paintings! You remember that it was Corot, Daumier, van Gogh, Gauguin; such painters had not been seen publicly easily before in America. But what was also interesting was how they were installed. This is what I tried to recall and that I had not told you. First of all, they were installed on plain walls; if the walls were not totally white then they were the palest possible grey, absolutely neutral. And in the most novel way they were installed not symmetrically. When I ran up this little lecture on Picasso that I tried to make you look at -- I don't know whether you did . . . ?

PC: Right. I have it.

MB: In 1932 still in Paris pictures were being hung symmetrically and by size, not by content, not by date . . .

PC: Salon style.

MB: And they were 'skied.' Whereas in the Museum right there the first show in the fall of 1929 there were no pictures above other pictures, all the walls were neutral, and the pictures were hung intellectually, chronologically; nevertheless not in such a way that they would clash. In other words, if the colors were not harmonious then they would be separated. But if there were intellectual connections between a large and a small picture they would be hung close to each other so that they could be seen together. And the labels were extremely interesting. For a very long time, up until the moment in which James Johnson Sweeney became the director of painting and sculpture for a brief time, the labels that my husband used to write were not only labels for each picture, but they were general intellectual labels to make people understand what they were seeing. Sweeney was very much against this kind of labeling. But as long as Alfred Barr was in command he used to write what were called "wall" labels. "Wall" labels were larger; they explained the general nature at least of that room or of the whole exhibition. And this had an extraordinary effect on the public; they were enormously interested. Such a thing had never been done before.

PC: Why were the walls painted white? I mean, what was the . . . ?

MB: So as not to fade [pale] the paintings. Previously, the walls would be either paneling or else they would be brocade -- red brocade, blue brocade, green brocade. They would suck the color of the pictures. Instead, the idea was to let the pictures stand on their own feet.

PC: What about the asymmetrical design?

MB: The asymmetrical hanging had to do with hanging them intelligently instead of by size. If you could possibly see -- and I don't think you will -- the installations of the Georges Petit exhibition in 1932 in Paris, you would see that all the chronology was mixed up just so long as they could have a central vertical and then two horizontals, then two verticals. It didn't really matter what year they were in, or what it was all about, just so long as . . .

The Metropolitan Museum, you know, still is hanging in this way; the Metropolitan still hangs on the system of one horizontal, two verticals; or one vertical, two horizontals. But now the Metropolitan doesn't sky. But it does even sky sometimes. To sky is just impossible -- to "sky" means putting a picture above another -- and if you want to see it, well you can't; you can't put your nose into it. That was one of the things I wanted to tell you. And now I don't know where you are chronologically.

PC: I think we were back in Paris at the beginning. What I'm curious about is, in doing the first exhibition . . . ?

MB: That first exhibition was selected by Conger Goodyear. It wasn't selected by Alfred. Not at all. Goodyear, who was the first President of the Museum, went off to Paris. In those days it was not half as difficult to borrow pictures of this period as it would be now, and they were certainly not as valuable, as diabolically valuable as they are now. So Goodyear borrowed the first show and Alfred hung it.

PC: No, but I mean the exhibition that you two were working on in Paris.

MB: The first exhibition that Alfred and I worked on was the exhibition of Corot and Daumier. The general notion was to hark back to the recent past to show, shall we say, the roots and beginnings of the more contemporary forms of art.

PC: But had you made a great deal of correspondence before arriving in Paris: Did you know what you were . . . ?

MB: No. But Alfred used to . . . I saw him selecting this first show of his . . . No, he must have selected various other shows in that year, going from 1929-1930. If we had the catalogue we would be able to see. But the truth of it is that this system of collecting an exhibition had to do with preparing himself violently out of books so as to select the best pictures by these two -- by the painter or painters that he was going to show. He never even asked for whatever else one could borrow, the general idea being to have a very selective show. Whereas even up to this day, most of the shows . . . Oh, I'm thinking even of the very recent shows of Picasso and Matisse in these later years -- are selected on the basis of: let us put in everything that we can borrow. Whereas he always borrowed by quality. He never even asked for secondary pictures that he didn't want.

PC: That was right from the beginning, wasn't it?

MB: He always selected that way; always selected by quality, never asked for whatever you could get easily. And then there was -- but this is of no importance -- a picture was stolen out of that first exhibition that he did of Corot-Daumier. But he did . . .

PC: Really?

MB: If I only had the . . . if I only had . . .

PC: You mean the exhibition chronology?

MB: Yes, that's at the back of the Russell Lynes book. I could tell you the other exhibitions of that year. They were very interesting exhibitions. They were always hung on this system; selected on this system and hung on this system. Now the other thing that I thought of telling you was that, in all the years he functioned in Paris, which means 1930 to 1939, and then again beginning 1948 until -- I can't remember -- Alfred retired in 1967 -- I can't remember how many other shows he selected because in 1943 he had been fired as director. So I would still have to have a chronology of the exhibitions. But there were two things I wanted to say: First, that in the long spell of 1930 to 1939 we had no per diem of any kind. All the other major people that went to Europe to select exhibitions for the Museum had a per diem. Whereas we crossed at that time on boats sometimes third-class. I remember perfectly crossing third-class on the Bremen to spare the Museum money, and we had no per diem. I used to write down every taxi ride. We stayed in acceptable hotels exclusively in order to have decent telephone service. We first stayed in the St. James in Albany which had appalling telephone service. Then we stayed in the Continental on the rue Royale; it had mediocre, not good telephone service. Then we ended up in the Matignon on the rue Matignon which had quite good telephone service. And we always stayed in minute rooms with no working space. I kept every record of every taxi ride and of every lunch. And we would lunch in shopkeepers' restaurants and truck drivers' restaurants in order to spare the Museum money. We never, never lunched in a decent restaurant or dined in a decent restaurant unless we had to entertain somebody. And, when we began to hear that there were other people of the Museum that had a twenty-five dollar a day per diem, we were astounded!

PC: When did that start -- the daily stipend or whatever?

MB: After the war.

PC: Oh, in the Forties.

MB: Peter Selz for a while was in the painting department of the Museum and we overlapped with him in Paris. He was staying at the St. James in Albany and he had a per diem of twenty-five dollars a day. We were amazed! Amazed! This had never happened to us.

PC: That's fantastic.

MB: We never had any entertainment fund. We had to entertain quite a bit for the Museum. We had successively an apartment at 2 Beekman Place and then moved to 49 East 96th Street where there was this beautiful dining room because we knew we would always have to entertain. We used to talk about this with friends who said that if we entertained in the house we could not get any kind of facilitation unless we kept every separate bill of every butcher and grocer and everybody. Which was just too much work. We never had any entertainment fund of any kind.

PC: How extraordinary! Why was that, do you think?

MB: Because the Museum was always broke. And because Alfred was passionately devoted to the Museum. That's the way it was. I mean later people that worked in the Museum didn't see it in that light. But that's the way he saw it.

PC: That's fantastic. Now it's just sort of standard practice.

MB: Yes. Well, I don't know how they manage now. I don't know whether the most charming Oldenburg entertains, whether he has a per diem when he goes abroad; I don't know anything about this. But, for instance, I do know that, when they hired Bates Lowry, he insisted on having a large apartment which the Museum bought for him. He felt that he would have to entertain. Whether he did or not I don't know. But he certainly would have extorted entertainment funds. I do know that all the people that go to Europe now for the Museum have a per diem. But we never had one of any kind.

PC: That's amazing. You were subsidizing the Museum in a way.

MB: No. We charged for exactly what it cost. And the funniest thing is that we used to go at such a hysterical rate that, on July 14th when we would always be still in Paris, and while the parade was going up the Champs Elysees, that we would be nailed into our room in the Avenue Matignon, which was within hearing distance of the parade, and I would torture myself trying to make up these accounts, torture myself.

PC: I'm very curious about those early years, the early Nineteen-thirties in Paris and borrowing works of art from people. Were the dealers cooperative? Were the collectors and the artists available?

MB: Okay, some of that is smuggled into my lecture on Picasso -- though I don't see why you should have read it. But, you see, the Museum was not very well known. And, perfectly obviously, the various dealers and collectors were rather cautious. But, on the other hand, the borrowing that goes on now had really not begun at all, so that often it was possible to borrow. From the very start, it was quite difficult to borrow from the Louvre. It was somewhat easier to borrow in Germany.

PC: Oh, really? From the museums or . . . ?

MB: Well, yes. I mean the French were very obscurantist and very doubtful. But a great many borrowings had to do with people in France. A handicap was that the Museum was absolutely penniless. There was no money to buy anything. In the middle thirties, make it 1934, 1935. For the first time a beneficent woman, Mrs. Stanley Resor, gave Alfred about two thousand dollars for the summer to buy so that at least we were able to buy some smatches of things. And Alfred bought some quite beautiful pictures for her at these delightfully cheap rates which she passed on to her children. That was the beginning of when we could at least spend a few pennies. But otherwise it was just embarrassing to have to beg to borrow without having money to spend, not a penny. The first really important picture that Alfred was able to buy was in 1938, the Picasso Girl Before a Mirror, which he bought for \$10,000 with the help of Mrs. Simon Guggenheim. That was the first important picture he was able to buy - 1938. And by 1939 the War began.

PC: But now from the first years you had gone every year to Europe?

MB: Yes, we did.

PC: Would you travel? Or would you just be in Paris?

MB: Oh, well, I still would need the listing of the exhibitions that we ran up. But in 1934 I think the museum held the first great van Gogh exhibition. For this purpose we went at length to Amsterdam and The Hague. We had to borrow from Mrs. Kroller-Muller. Mrs. Kroller-Muller was of German birth. She was married to a Dutch businessman who already at that time counted as a nonentity. They were extremely wealthy. Her adviser and

mentor was a certain man called Vandeventer, so that we coaxed all the time with Mrs. Kroller-Muller and Mr. Vandeventer. Mrs. Kroller-Muller had the most marvelous number of van Goghs. She had a butler whose name is even acknowledged in the first van Gogh catalogue. The first time we went to call on her -- it was not far by taxi from The Hague -- the butler carried these pictures out and placed them on useful hedges in her garden so that we saw the pictures all in the bright sunlight. It was a most extraordinary experience. We went there for a very long time -- oh, make it two, three, four weeks. But this first view was extraordinary. I wish I had that catalogue to tell you the name of the butler who attended her. But anyhow, he carried them out so that we could see them in the

PC: Just one at a time? Or . . . ?

MB: No, all lined up against box hedges -- except that I'm sure that box doesn't grow there, but similar hedges. It was spellbinding! And then we went back day by day so as to make this and analyze and decide what to do. And then, of course, there was the engineer van Gogh who has just now put up this separate van Gogh Museum. I don't know if you saw it two days ago in the paper -- there was a picture of it.

PC: No.

MB: Yes, there was a picture of it in the Sunday section -- today is Monday -- in the Sunday section there was a picture of the van Gogh Museum that is being put up with the van Goghs that belong to the engineer. The engineer was the nephew of van Gogh; in other words, the son of the admirable wife of van Gogh's brother who so helped van Gogh through thick and thin. Well, anyhow, the engineer has given all his pictures and there is now a separate museum. But we had to beg from the engineer. We had to beg from various other collectors, one of who had a most amusing name -- Toutaine Maritanius was his name. he had an extraordinary name.

PC: What did these people think when you came to them wanting to give an exhibition?

MB: They were a little amazed. But nobody had ever asked to borrow these things. And there really didn't seem to be any reason to refuse. They were always shipped door-to-door and always insured at the price that they suggested. I don't know why they lent. But I think they lent also because they were proud of them and nobody had ever asked to borrow them.

PC: So you were like the first coming to . . . ?

MB: Yes, sure.

PC: It would be impossible to do an exhibition like that now, wouldn't it?

MB: Yes, it would.

PC: I mean the cost would be preposterous.

MB: Yes. Because now people are exhausted and bored with lending. But, you know, we were young and Alfred was extremely charming and very tactful and very circumspect and silent and dignified and extremely serious. But above all charming. He never, never said a tactless thing; he never rubbed them the wrong way. He had a marvelous manner. And he was really unique in this. Nobody had ever asked for these things before. All I did was do his letters and do his phone calls and do his correspondence.

PC: But you obviously talked about the selection of certain pictures over other ones and things like that?

MB: Well, I think that at that time they did not exercise the slightest pressure in the sense of, "Please take this one and don't take that one." There was not the idea of increasing the value of a picture because it was being loaned. These were all later confections. You see, we are now in 1934. These were not the ideas that crossed the mind of collectors at that time.

PC: Yes. Being a collector has changed a lot, hasn't it?

MB: Of course it has changed a great deal. There is one young scholar that says that "Alfred single-handedly changed the taste of our time." But at that time these things were not very much esteemed.

PC: But there were very few art books available.

MB: There were very few art books available and there were, above all, very few books with color reproductions, very few books with good color reproductions. The van Gogh show was an unbelievable affair. People came in droves, even stood in line, to see it. Mrs. Roosevelt went twice to see it. And then we had to go back the next year, 1935, to try to prolong the show.

PC: Looking back, what do you think it was that appealed to the public in that exhibition? Was it the work and the quality of the man? The whole . . . ?

MB: Since that time van Gogh has become, oh, one of the most excessively popular painters, you know, that uncultivated people deeply admire. But at that time there were both the cultivated people who admired it and the uncultivated people who admired it. I mean there was an intellectual aspect to the exhibition and, nevertheless, also an appeal to everyday people in it.

PC: I've seen photographs of the lines and the busloads of people and all the things that the show sort of entailed or that happened.

MB: Well, the fact that the paintings were so colorful and the fact that they were so intense and passionate And also there were . . . as usual when Alfred did shows at that time These wall labels with descriptions by van Gogh of what he wrote about the pictures to his brother. I mean Alfred carefully underlined all the letters that poor van Gogh had written to his brother trying to explain to him what he felt about The Night Cafe, what he felt about The Billiard Room. what he felt about all these things. So there was all this schmaltzy aspect, you know. I mean you saw, on the one hand, these ferociously intense and colorful pictures, and then you also saw what the painter was trying to put into them. I mean it was all written so that if people took the time to read the labels they saw in a very intense way what the artist was trying to do.

PC: One thing that has always intrigued me about the Museum is that there have been committees of this and that, advisory committees and various things. Was it Mr. Barr who generated the ideas for the exhibitions and kind of said, "This is what we should do?"

MB: In those days, yes. I wish I could remember the years, but I remember that, while Alfred was still director, either Conger Goodyear, who was president of the Museum at that time, or some other important trustee -- but probably it was Goodyear himself -- wrote a memo to Alfred saying, "We're going to run out of ideas; we're going to run out of exhibitions. Will you please suggest exhibitors that you think we should have because I think we're going to run out." So Alfred made autocratic suggestions, some of which have never been used. Alfred was an educated art historian and so he had innumerable notions of works of the past that would also be significant in the world of now. Some of these exhibitions never took place and have been used by other museums. For instance, an exhibition of Fuseli -- do you know who he is?

PC: Yes.

MB: Who is being shown now a great deal. There was a marvelous exhibition of his in Zurich about three years ago. And just an enormous book on him has just been written by a man called Gerdshiff (?) at the Institute. Then Alfred wanted to have exhibitions of what he called "The Old and the New," that is, juxtapositions of artists of the past and present. I wish . . . I'm sure that if we could look through Alfred's papers, we'd see the exhibitions that he suggested, many of which have not been used till this day. And now I don't know who could do them -- I don't know.

PC: Well, were suggestions for exhibitions given by trustees or other people? Or . . . ?

MB: No. No

PC: He was supposed to do everything?

MB: No, the trustees may have made some suggestions. But Alfred was a fountain of ideas. And also I think that one of the things that may have been exasperating to some of the trustees was that he was so pugnacious.

PC: In terms of what?

MB: "Pugnacious" in the sense that he would insist a great deal on For instance, when it came to the new building, which is the beginning of the building that is now on 53rd Street, there were certain architectural things that he wanted, and various things that he wanted, which are listed in Russell Lynes' book. Alfred fought very intensely for what he thought was a good plan or the right thing to do. This got on the nerves of several of the trustees. He was terribly pugnacious but not in an irascible way, not raising his voice, but being extremely insistent, extremely insistent, and not being willing to give in at all. This is not very diplomatic.

PC: Well, you know, when one thinks of the great number of exhibitions

MB: I wish we had that book. I should have brought it. Alfred chose all those first shows. I mean Alfred did not choose the first one: "Cezanne, Gauguin, Seurat, van Gogh;" that was chosen by Goodyear. And then he chose all the others. [Sound of pages turning.] That "German Painting and Sculpture" exhibition was an extraordinary one because nobody had ever thought of German painting and sculpture. Nobody.

PC: Really?

MB: No. It was really completely new. Diego Rivera had been at that time commissioned to do the large frescoes in Rockefeller Center. Don't you think we were in the midst of the Depression? Don't you think they were putting up Rockefeller Center so as to give work? And he was commissioned to do the frescoes. And he put in a picture, a portrait of Lenin and various other monstrous personalities. And they all had to be hacked out. Yes. Then . . .

PC: Why did he do that, do you think? Do you know anything of why or . . . ?

MB: Well, because he had been at great length in Russia and he was completely sympathetic to the Communist cause. We in our own house have a drawing of his of the "Workers in the Subways." He felt that if he was going to do a fresco with social content that he certainly had to put in Lenin. Then the "Modern Architecture: International Exhibition" was a sort of battle cry to change the whole current of architecture. And it did indeed. If you remember the Chrysler Building that was done at that time -- and I can't remember the date of the Empire State building -- the general notion was to build skyscrapers but to jolly them up with ornament either in a Renaissance or a Louis Quatorze, Louis Quinze decoration of some sort.

PC: Or vertical Gothic or . . . ?

MB: Or even Wienervechstetter, but something or other to decorate. This was the battle cry; to have undecorated and completely simple and, if possible, asymmetrical buildings. I remember this perfectly.

PC: I'm curious about the German art exhibition.

MB: Oh, well, not art; it was painting.

PC: German painting, right.

MB: Well, Alfred, you see, in that famous year of 1927-28 when he had spent the winter in Russia had also spent a very great deal of time in Germany. And he just had an eye -- I don't know why -- he had this eye for all that was fresh and new, combined with an eye for quality. I don't know why. He had this eye for quality. Here in America nobody had even given a moment's thought -- except people particularly interested in Germany -- to the German artists of that time, such as Nolde, Schmidt-Rottluff, and God knows how many other people. I knew all their names and I can't think of them now. And he put on this show that was completely fresh and new.

PC: There were very few dealers showing those people here in America.

MB: Oh, now yes, but not then.

PC: Then, no. Nobody.

MB: Well of course, I mean it contained a Schwitters. It contained Klee; I mean people had partially heard of Paul Klee. Also in this famous year of 1927-28 he had been at length at the Bauhaus and that accounts for eventually the Bauhaus exhibition that took place when the Museum had moved to the Time-Life Building because they were putting up the new building.

PC: Right. You traveled with him all through the Thirties -- right? Every time . . . ?

MB: We traveled every blessed year. We traveled -- I know exactly what we did: In 1930 we were married and did the Corot, Daumier show. In 1931 whatever did we do? [Sound of pages turning] I guess the Matisse show -- yes -- because there was a great big Matisse show at the Galleries Georges Petit in Paris. We did the first Matisse show. An with the left hand . . . We used to do two exhibitions in one summer so as to spare the Museum money. Nobody . . . You know, now to do an exhibition they go over two or three times. At that time the most expensive exhibition, at most, would cost five thousand dollars. And five thousand dollars seemed an unbelievable, pyramidal, pyramidal, enormous . . . And we used to do two exhibitions per summer.

PC: Why was it possible, do you think, in those days? Was it because of the two of you doing everything?

MB: The staff of the Museum was very small. Insurances were not very high. The pictures were crated and put on boats. In 1932 in the fall Mrs. Rockefeller was very preoccupied about Alfred's health because he was always extremely frail. He had started off the Museum. Doctors and people sort of looked at him. Mrs. Rockefeller decided that he should get a year's leave of absence. So in the fall of 1932 he joined me in Italy. My mother was still living in Rome. We stayed in Rome until about January. Then we went to Saint Anton and Arlberg to ski. There a good woman advised Alfred to go to Stuttgart because Alfred was always exhausted, always exhausted, always exhausted. She said that there was a spectacularly charming and intelligent analyst doctor in Stuttgart who could "de-exhaust" Alfred. So we went to live in Stuttgart beginning in the middle of January 1933. Now this is extremely interesting. We lived in a pension, always the cheapest possible. We were on half salary. So that

meant we lived on At the very beginning of the Museum Alfred's salary was \$10,000. The moment the crash began they had cut him down to \$9,000. So during the leave of absence we were living on half of \$9,000. And we were. We lived in this very cheap pension. Alfred used to call it the Katherine Mansfield Pension. We began to live there, make it around January 15 or 18. Everybody sat at a table that was smaller than this one. The election that brought on Hitler was to take place around January 30. Nobody at the table was going to vote for Hitler's party, the name of which was National Democrat? What was it called? National Socialist? -- I can't remember what it was called at that time. [National Socialist German Workers' Party] But anyhow, what I'm trying to say is that nobody at this table was going to vote for Hitler's party at all. We all used to talk at table at the same time. But the woman that ran the pension had just bought a radio, a most extraordinary and exceptional thing at that time. And within a fortnight all these people at the table were completely converted to Hitler by the screams and yells that they heard on the radio. Meantime we became more -- I mean Alfred was a priori anti-Fascist. I had lived in Italy through the March on Rome while I was still Italian. So neither of us was Fascistically inclined. But all the other people became converted within a fortnight. We stayed on in Stuttgart until about May because of this admirable and charming doctor whose name was Gastrecht (?). We saw the first Jewish persecutions. We saw the first yellow buttons. We saw the first department stores closed as Jewish persecution. And we became very ferociously anti-Fascist. We went to great gatherings and meetings in various theatres in the daytime in Stuttgart in which it was announced what would be done in the teaching of literature, to the teaching of history, to the teaching of every branch, including scientific branches, thanks to what they called the National Habolt (?), that is the National Uprising. We left that place so ferociously anti-Nazi by May. We were sent to Ascona by this doctor. That was supposed to be the sunniest part of Switzerland where we could go to rest. Why he told us to go to Ascona I simply can't remember. And Alfred, instead of going down to the beach on the lake, lay as naked as possible in the sun on the balcony of our room and wrote nine articles called "Hitler and the Nine Muses" in order to say what Hitler was going to do, to the twisting of everything that was intelligent and intellectual, in the Weimar Republic. When he came back to this country he tried to sell them to the Times. Alfred had always sold every blasted thing he had ever written and he couldn't believe he couldn't sell them to Harper's, couldn't sell them to the Atlantic, couldn't sell them to the Times, couldn't sell them to anyone. The only person that published I think what he wrote on movies was Lincoln Kirstein. He published one of Alfred's articles. And then later they were all published in Magazine of Art many, many, many years later. Nobody would believe that Hitler was the kind of person that he ultimately turned out to be. Nobody would believe it. Nobody would believe the content of what Alfred wrote. And he spent all this leisure time in which he was supposed to lie on the beach and rest writing these articles. I can find them for you sometime if you'd like.

PC: That's fascinating. One thing is that he has an enormous bibliography and, I wonder, how did he find time to run a museum, organize the exhibitions, write the catalogues, write all the other things and the correspondence? You know, where . . . ?

MB: I don't know how he found the time. You know, he had never been particularly rapid. He always insisted so much on clarity and it is that that used to lose him time in his good days; the insistence that everything that he wrote should be understood by everybody. When he wrote *What is Modern Painting?* which is a book that the Museum should still be selling, and has sold in thousands of copies (though we don't get any royalty on it), and should still be selling -- he wrote it, it took him quite a while to write it so as to make it incredibly clear. And then in Vermont he would make ignorant summer people read it; he had housewives read it, farmers read it, maids read it, children read it; every possible person read it and mark what they couldn't understand so that he could rewrite it.

PC: Why was he interested in such a kind of broad approach?

MB: Well, it was because he was a rebellious art historian. When he went into Princeton he wanted to become a paleontologist. He graduated at twenty so he was sixteen when he started there. He took a course with Charles Rufus Morey, who was a great historian of that time, and under whom I too have studied. He was an Early Christian and Medieval scholar. Alfred became strangely converted from the notion of paleontology to the notion of art history. How this can have happened is beyond me! According to me, Charles Rufus Morey, under whom I studied, was the most phenomenal bore ever invented. But he was very, very good on method, very sound on method, and very insistent on method. And I think that Alfred, as a form of rebellion against all this methodology applied to works of art that were not intrinsically exciting aesthetically, turned toward the contemporary as a sort of personal, single-handed rebellion. Then, by and by, he went to Harvard to do graduate work. He was very disdainful of the lack of method at Harvard compared to the methodology of Princeton. But they left him a freer hand. And then, of course, he was constantly penniless. He went through Princeton costing his father practically nothing, always on scholarships. He began to teach at Vassar while he was still doing graduate work. Then he taught at Wellesley. Then after two years of Wellesley he got this leave of absence thanks to which he did this great big wandering year of France, Germany, Russia. I mean Russia he began to write about Russian icons. He wrote constantly about modern architecture. He was just writing on Poli Bor (?) when he was finishing at Harvard. He was very many-sided. He continued to be tremendously interested in Russian things over a period of years until the Museum just actually engulfed him. There are many articles of his on Russian icons.

PC: I remember seeing some of those. When did you start going to Vermont?

MB: Oh, my Lord, that has very little to do with the Museum. There's another thing that I wanted to tell you about that I wrote down. I wanted to tell you about how he was fired as director in 1943. Russell Lynes was so marvelously tactful, so extremely correct and intelligent in the way he handled this. But the way Alfred was fired was, I think, absolutely diabolical and I think it should be documented. In the midst of the War -- and I think that Russell Lynes makes it very clear -- there were various people that were assigned elsewhere. I mean Nelson Rockefeller was in Washington. I don't know who else was away. I don't know what Bill Burden was doing -- I can't remember what in creation. But anyhow, Stephen Clark was president of the Museum. Alfred had had always the most charming connection with Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr., namely Abby. They were alive; they were friends. I don't want to say that she had maternal attitude toward him, but I do want to say that they were the greatest of friends, so much so that at times in their very personal conversations they found themselves wondering whether Stephen Clark was really as stupid as they thought him to be. Well, by 1943, Mrs. Rockefeller, I think, was beginning to feel rather old and tired. After all, the Museum was begun in 1929 so, by 1943, I don't know how old she was but anyhow she was less energetic and less "addicted," still interested in the Museum, but less "addicted" to it than she had been. There came a Saturday in our personal life -- we were living already at 49 East 96th Street -- in 1943 our daughter would have been -- she was born in 1937 -- she would have been five-and-a-half or six. All right. There was this sort of dead Saturday on a system of what should we do? I said to Alfred, "Do you want to go to a movie?" He seemed extremely depressed. And I suppose that we did go to a movie -- I cannot remember -- but in a spirit of resignation, in a ghastly mood. And when we got back he showed me a letter that he had received in the mail in the morning from Stephen Clark firing him. He fired him with a letter that he received on a Saturday morning saying "that he would no longer be the director of the Museum, that he really was no good, and that it had been decided in agreement with Mrs. Rockefeller that the only thing he was good at was writing, and that they would cut his salary in half in six months (at that time it was \$9,000), and that all he would do for the Museum would be to write." I do not dramatize but you have no conception of what this did because it was completely unexpected. One of the most absurd aspects of it was that we were in the midst of the War. And in the spring of 1943 Alfred had been asked if he wouldn't like to join the many art historians and art people who were sent . . . who were in O.S.S. or whatever it was called . . .

PC: Yes, O.S.S.

MB: The art experts who went to save works of art, to track down works of art and all that. He had been asked whether he wouldn't suspend his activity at the Museum and join this force. It included Lincoln Kirstein and most of the people that we knew at that time got involved in this, got sent over to Europe for the preservation of works of art. And Alfred had asked Stephen Clark "whether he shouldn't do this, what did Stephen Clark think?" And Stephen Clark said, "No. You're much too valuable to the Museum. You must stay." And in October 1943 he fired him! In other words, he prevented him from doing this. If he wanted to get rid of him, or at least suspend his action, he could have let him do this. But not at all. He said, "Don't do it. You're much too precious to the Museum."

PC: What do you think provoked Clark to do this?

MB: There was an exhibition of an artist called Hirshfield, I think.

PC: Morris Hirshfield, yes.

MB: In which there were some strange naked women, sort of puppet-like naked women. Alfred had put on this show. I think Mr. Clark was shocked by it. Let's see if we can find it. He was hanging that show with Dorothy Miller.

PC: The "Americans . . . ?

MB: It's "Americans 1943: Realists and Magic-Realists." He was fired in the midst of that. He continued to hang it with Dorothy Miller. I don't know where it is -- it isn't even mentioned -- it is terribly hard to do. I think that a person like Bill Lieberman would remember. I think Bill Lieberman would remember. But anyhow, this letter came. And Alfred stayed in the house without getting dressed for at least a whole month writing answers. Some day when I tidy up the papers in our house I may find the innumerable letters and answers that Alfred attempted to write to Stephen Clark and never, never sent. He never dressed. It was nearly impossible to make him eat. There was Prohibition and all this. We never did used to drink, at most some sherry. At this time, in order to make him eat I invented making Old-Fashioneds. I still remember seeing him lying on the couch in the living room -- still everything is exactly in the same place in our house to this day -- lying on the couch at the end of a day of absolute despair, always in his pajamas and bathrobe. I remember kneeling beside him and offering him an Old-Fashioned in order to make him drink something so that he would eat something. It was unbelievable. And then people began to get involved in this affair, especially Jim Soby who is still alive. You see, the whole cabal had been started by a person called Dick Abbott who had been made -- I don't know what he was called --

oh, God -- business manager of the Museum? I don't know. And he had a strong hold on Stephen Clark. He was at that time the husband of Iris Barry who worked in the

PC: In the Film

MB: In the Museum library and then in the movie section of the Museum. And Dick Abbott was power hungry to a fantastic degree and he worked on Stephen Clark to unseat Alfred, I think.

[END OF TAPE 1, SIDE TWO]

[TAPE TWO, SIDE THREE]

PC: Let me say it is May 13, 1974 and this is Side 3. In 1939 it was the tenth anniversary . . . ?

MB: The opening of the new building?

PC: Right. How did that . . . ?

MB: Wait a moment. Excuse me for interrupting you, but have we spoken of the exhibition at the Jeu de Paume in Paris? [Reading] "Construction of new building under way." You see, it wasn't open in 1938. Oh, 1939. Are you looking at 1939? Or are you looking at 1938?

PC: 1939.

MB: Are you, by chance, looking at the show that the Museum sent to Paris -- Three Centuries of American Art" -- at the Jeu de Paume? Did we do anything with that?

PC: I think just briefly. That was 1938, right?

MB: Did we do anything with that?

PC: No. Is there something special about that that you think you should say?

MB: Oh, it was really very funny. It certainly was.

PC: It was the first time they would have seen a lot of those things?

MB: It was the first time. We sent them . . . many very interesting things were sent from America with our insurance. And not only Alfred and I went to Paris, but Conger Goodyear, who was still the president of the Museum, and a charming young man called Allen Porter who wanted so much to go that he was willing to work the moving camera with which they showed masterpieces of architecture. We all went off to Paris. The director of the Jeu de Paume was called, I think, Andre but certainly Dezarrois. He was an extraordinarily conventional and disagreeable man. He had a most marvelous assistant called Rose Vallon. She helped us out to put on the show. It was incredibly difficult because they had no real crew. The same people, the guards that were used for the security when the Museum was open, were used for purposes of hanging. They did not ever put nails in the walls so that they hung the pictures from

PC: Oh, from the rods.

MB: From the moldings with heavy, heavy steel rods that were called trangs (?). These guards would whip around these trangs in these enormous rooms and they were just like steel whips and could cut the canvases in two. They had no care or attention whatever to handling the works of art with any kind of respect. One of the boxes of pictures that was being delivered to the Jeu de Paume fell off a truck on the rue de Rivoli and heaven knows how it was rescued. Then finally, the exhibition was opened with the President of the Republic, I think, and various people. We were very alarmed because this opening was going to take place in the morning. We asked Rose Vallon what one was supposed to wear. She said, "Onjetek." We asked, "What does that mean?" she said, "Black tie." So we had to get ourselves into black tie. Alfred warned Mr. Goodyear that this gala opening would occur probably at half-past eleven or twelve on some given morning in black tie. He said, "Mhm." And he appeared considerably later in a handsome tweed jacket with his two Silian (?) dogs, and the present Mrs. Bliss Parkinson (who was the daughter of Cornelius Bliss), and Mrs. Bliss, and a great friend of theirs who was called something-or-other Cushing, but I've forgotten her first name. They all arrived in a happy little group in morning clothes with the two dogs. This shocked the other officials a great deal. Then they were asked to an official dinner at M. Dezarrois'. I still remember with the greatest amusement Of course I had been to official meals in Paris before. You must remember that the important people are placed in the center of a longitudinal table and the small fry, the unimportant people, are left at the two ends. And thus it was. It was a remarkable dinner. Very dull, but very good. Then Mr. goodyear had to give an official dinner, which he did -- a luncheon in the Salon des Aigles of the Trian (?) for the same people. And what did the French like? They liked, above all, the naive pictures and they liked that picture called American Gothic -- help me -- who is it by?

PC: Grant Wood.

MB: By Grant Wood, yes. That's what they liked.

PC: Really?

NB: Yes,

PC: That's fascinating.

MB: So that's the end of that. Mr. Goodyear previously had borrowed Whistler's Mother for the Museum of Modern Art. The French felt that they had made an enormous concession in allowing The Museum of Modern Art to borrow it, and they felt that The Museum of Modern Art had made a great deal of money by showing it.

PC: Oh, really?

MB: Yes. So now let's pass on to the next.

PC: Did they in fact? They couldn't have, could they?

MB: I cannot remember. I don't know.

PC: Well, are there any other reactions that you remember about that exhibition in Paris?

MB: No, but other people might. I know that it was a terrific job and that Mr. Dezarrois took it as a completely mechanical operation. Later, during -- well, never mind -- during the war he collaborated with the Germans. He was an odious man. But I can't remember; I know that there were rather snide reviews of it in the paper.

PC: Getting back to 1939, what about . . . ?

MB: 1939 -- now the opening of the Museum of Modern Art.

PC: Right. The new building and the tenth anniversary. The Museum still really functioned with a fairly small staff, didn't it?

MB: Oh, far smaller than it is now, but it was increasing. [Machine turned off] It was a very great occasion. I know that there was a big dinner upstairs in the penthouse, and that Sandy Calder was commissioned to make a charming silver chandelier to hold candles -- that is, a chandelier in the sense of a candle holder, not anything that hangs from the ceiling. Everything was very gala. Mrs. Rockefeller wore a very beautiful dress which even Russell Lynes has mentioned. It was a red Lanvin, a beautiful, beautiful dress. Everything went very nicely. Except that -- well, I cannot remember, but I suppose Russell Lynes goes into it -- Mr. Goodyear was very disturbed by situations with Nelson Rockefeller and Mr. Goodyear resigned. And this was really rather bad. Mr. Goodyear had given a very great deal of time to the Museum. He had been a difficult president to work under, quite difficult, but, nevertheless, he had really been the propelling force during the first ten years of the Museum.

PC: Right.

MB: It was just too bad that he should have left in such a huff. And then his resentment toward the Museum continued although, by and by, he seemed to like Alfred much more than he had during his tenure. But the truth of it is that he didn't leave his crucial pictures to the Museum. Which we had very much hoped he would do. Especially his very great Gauguin The Spirit of the Dead Watches, which, if I'm not mistaken, he left to Buffalo. Whereas when he came to be president of The Museum of Modern Art he was in a terrible huff with Buffalo. And then instead he ended by leaving it to Buffalo.

PC: One of the things that I'm curious about and that I suppose is important is Nelson Rockefeller's growing activity with the Museum because it was a family interest.

MB: Well, it is too hard for me to reconstruct, but I think that in a general way one should say that Nelson came to it gradually; he came to it, first, because of his particular devotion to his mother. I don't know how devoted any of those Rockefeller brothers are to their mother, but we've always felt that Nelson was particularly devoted to her. She always wanted to win him over to an interest in the Museum. And it gradually came upon him and then, as you know, he became a violent collector. But it didn't happen as quickly and as soon as she would have liked, I think.

PC: But the other brothers were never involved, were they, with contemporary things the way he's been, or the way he was?

MB: David now has a considerable collection of, I would say, the more conventional and expensive modern pictures -- what one calls "modern" if you still can call van Gogh, Gauguin and Cezanne modern. He has remarkable pictures. I don't know whether he is buying in the more contemporary field. I really don't know. I think that now Bill Rubin advises him but I don't know whether he's still buying.

PC: I don't know either. One thing that is more about you, I guess. You've taught at Spence School for quite a while, haven't you?

MB: I've taught at Spence for centuries.

PC: How did that happen? What do you teach there?

MB: I don't know why you should ask me because that really is of no interest. You see, I very much disliked not working. But when Alfred and I married it was not possible for me to carry any kind of job because of having to go off to Europe for so many months every year. Just before we married I was under contract to go to teach at Smith College and then would eventually have been given the museum at Smith. At the time Mr. Church was director of the museum, and the idea was that it would be passed on to me when he had to resign because of age. Most interesting. Well, all this had to be given up when I married Alfred. During the winter months I had no official job of any kind. I continued to try to take courses at New York University where I was endeavoring to take a Ph.D., but there was just no continuity to it all. Because, make it in April, or in May at the latest, we would go off to Europe to assemble these shows. And at that time I really was useful. I never worked for Alfred in the winter. He had secretaries and things. But in the summer I did all his translating, interpreting and letters. I knew languages. He never managed very well in French; he managed slightly better in German. But he was intensely bored by languages, really bored. So in those months I really was useful. Then when we were through with these things that we called "campaigns," that is, collecting exhibitions, I had to go down to Rome to see my mother who was still residing in Rome; and he had to come back here and make contact with the Museum, and then go to Vermont to see his mother. Then at the end of the summer we would unite, come back to New York and begin again. By and by the war broke out. Well, in 1937 I had a daughter. Then, as you see, we went in 1938 and 1939 and then the war broke out and there were no more "campaigns" and we were stuck in America. One fine day a Mrs. Osborne, a woman that I didn't know in the least, who, strangely enough, turned out to be related to Alfred's family, came to diner to our house with her husband. We were living a 2 Beekman Place. She was the headmistress of Spence. During that summer, which would have been the summer of 1943, she wrote to me while we were in Vermont to see if I would come to teach at Spence. I was of two or three minds. It humiliated me a great deal to go and teach in a school because I had taught at Vassar and I didn't really want to go and teach in a school. But it was a convenient idea because the school was only five blocks from our house -- 96th Street -- and the school is at 91st Street. I consulted a friend of mine by telephone. She said, "You must take it or you will never work again." This frightened me. So I took it. And I've been teaching there ever after. Which is phenomenal -- 1943 to 1973.

PC: That's fantastic!

MB: And the headmaster keeps me.

PC: What classes do you have there?

MB: Now I teach only seniors. For a while I taught juniors and seniors. And it has created a sort of name for the girls that have taken this course. A lot of them have made a career in one way or another out of having it.

PC: Oh, terrific. That's fantastic. Has it affected your other activities? Have you been able to . . . ?

MB: The reason why I was able to cling to it is that when the war finished we started going off to Europe again. We went again for the first time in 1948 to assemble an exhibition of Italian painting. Then I came in awfully useful linguistically. Then we went on various other affairs. Then we went to Russia in 1959. The good thing about this school -- and no other school (Brearley especially wouldn't have done it) If you ask for a leave of absence in totally conventional schools they say, "Well, if you want to leave in April, just good-bye, we'll get somebody else." Whereas Spence allowed me to pay for a substitute and took me back. This is the reason why I've stuck to it.

PC: That's terrific. It's been very useful.

MB: No other school that I know of would have done this.

PC: There would be that six months or whatever . . . ?

MB: If I paid for a substitute they'd let me go. And I think that even if I wanted to do this now they would give me time off just so long as I paid for a substitute.

PC: One thing that you had mentioned briefly before -- and I think Russell Lynes mentions it in his book -- was the activity during the war of getting people out of Europe and into this country.

MB: Oh! Oh, goodness! Didn't we speak about this?

PC: Well, it's just that chronologically we haven't really come up to it yet.

MB: You must try to remember the date of when the Germans went into Paris. Was it 1941? Or 1940? Can you remember?

PC: I think it must have been 1940.

MB: The phony war began in September 1939 and it lasted for about ten months. So the Germans probably went into Paris in the fall of 1940, don't you think? Well, anyway, the situation was that the Museum was understaffed, and that Alfred was beginning to get letters of extraordinary intensity begging for help, letters from artists who were begging for help to be allowed into the United States. Extraordinarily difficult papers had to be procured from the State Department. It was an extremely laborious operation. There was nobody in the Museum that had the time to do this. By that time my daughter would have been three-and-a-quarter years old or something like that and I was more or less nailed into the house, though we had a nurse. Alfred came home and said, "There's nobody in the Museum that can do it. Will you do it?" And so I undertook this job. Which was extraordinarily boring, frustrating and laborious. The State Department wanted true proof that none of the artists who were requesting entry was in any way tainted by Communism. They never, never inquired whether they were Fascist, but they were terrified that they might be Communists. By hook or by crook we managed to get papers for: Lipchitz, Masson, Tanguy, Max Ernst -- I can't remember who else. Sometimes I try to reconstruct this

PC: Leger came over at one point.

MB: Leger I did not clear. No, I can't remember who else.

PC: Did Chagall come over at that time?

MB: Chagall indeed! That's a good question. They came. They probably were particularly difficult because, not only did you have to clear their papers, but also you had to find \$400 for each one, and also you had to organize so that somebody or other would guarantee that they would not become a charge to the state. The dealer who was most helpful was Curt Valentin who is now dead. Pierre Matisse was not particularly helpful. It is so strange because nowadays all these artists would have had innumerable contacts with the United States, whereas instead at that time Alfred and the Museum were the only American people of any kind of caliber that they knew. They didn't have connections with collectors, wealthy collectors and all that who would have helped them. It just had to be the Museum and nobody else. What I was trying to say is that you had to find \$400 each and then a guarantee for each one. This we managed to do for all of them except for Max Ernst. Miraculously, Max Ernst made contact with Peggy Guggenheim in Europe so that by and by she flew him in so that we didn't have to find passage for him. And then, as you may remember, they briefly were married because she wanted to help him out so far as his permanent papers were concerned. But this marriage didn't last very long.

PC: No. Where did Varian Fry come into all this?

MB: Varian Fry was absolutely extraordinarily useful. We used to work with the Joint -- Oh, dear me

PC: There was a committee, wasn't there?

MB: Joint So-and-So Committee -- Joint Refugee? No, there's another word -- Jewish Joint? Do you think it might be here? [Pages turning]

PC: I don't know.

MB: A splendid girl who was then a Warburg -- but again I've forgotten her name. We've tried ever so often to re-find all the papers that pertain to this operation. There must have been a voluminous amount of papers on the subject. Poor Varian Fry in the end wanted to write a book about it and we couldn't find the papers any more. I have no idea where they are. They're not in Alfred's files; they're not in our house; they're gone. Well, anyway Oh, it was called Joint Rescue Committee.

PC: Right.

MB: Varian Fry went over to Europe and helped them. I have photographs of Varian Fry with Breton, Max Ernst and all that in Marseilles. This was the high romantic moment in Varian Fry's life. I don't know whether you knew him.

PC: No.

MB: You didn't? He did a marvelous job and helped from that end. I don't know whether he was doing any kind of espionage work. What else he was doing I have no idea. I greatly doubt it. And then he finally got the . . . he became Chevalier de la Legion d'Honneur. We went to a small ceremony in his honor here at the French Cultural office. And now, unfortunately, he's dead.

PC: One of the other things that is fascinating in your being a part of but separate from, and yet associated with, all of these people and the Museum and everything and it's

PC: I think that there's one more thing to say about this question of the refugee artists. It's not only the ones that I've mentioned that came, but also, for instance, Matta and Breton, whom I did not help out. And they got all involved with Gorky, and Leger got involved with these people and they were a tremendous leaven in the group of American artists that they associated with and had a very great influence on them.

PC: Ultimately.

MB: Also I should say that during these years of suspense -- because the rescuing operation could have continued indefinitely, there was no reason for it to occur precisely in 1940, going into 1941 -- it could have gone on and on. We kept always thinking, would Picasso want to come? And also closely allied with Picasso was the marvelous poet Paul Eluard who had been the second prophet of Surrealism in the Twenties with Breton. And instead they never asked to come. Of course, we now know why Picasso didn't come. But, you see, it's extremely hard now to realize how tremendously little communication there was between Europe and the United States during the war. There was just no knowing what was happening to whom. We didn't know where they were. We didn't know that Picasso was being left untouched by the Germans. We didn't know, for instance, what Marcel Duchamp was doing going in and out of the -- what zone was it?

PC: Vichy?

MB: Yes. He was going in and out of that during the war with great cleverness. But we never knew any of these things. And these people did not ask for help. We were very worried about them, too.

PC: When did the Rescue Committee stop? Was that for just about a year or so?

MB: It petered out. Yes. In one way or another the ones that wanted to get out may or may not have succeeded in getting out. The others stayed or invented other solutions. Like Giacometti going back to Switzerland and things like that.

PC: Just in looking at Mr. Barr's bibliography, or the part of it that you just showed me, how did he find time to write as well as be at the Museum and talk and see and . . . ?

MB: It all depends on what years you're thinking of.

PC: You mean it changed over the years? Some years he wrote more than others? It was easier? More difficult?

MB: I would have to look at the I myself was really astounded at the bibliography preceding the year 1943. But

PC: Would he have a regular writing schedule?

MB: Not at all. He was always extraordinarily absorbed. You never knew what would be coming up next or what he would want to do next. Then, of course, he had to work on all these Museum catalogues. I mean, for instance, the Cubism and Abstract Art was a tremendous operation. I remember that all the photographs were laid out on the floor of our apartment at 2 Beekman Place. We had a cat at that time so it was really rather difficult. The cat would disorder the things. He always wanted enormous surfaces to put down photographs. I just now did that little lecture, you know, on Picasso, of which I gave you a Xerox copy. When he was selecting the Picasso show we were doing all the show on the floor of Paul Rosenberg, as I told in the He always wanted huge surfaces to put things down. But I don't know how he managed to do the writings that preceded his famous firing of 1943. But when he was fired, these good people felt that the only thing he was good at was writing and so he was demoted from his normal office in the Museum. A little cubbyhole had to be sliced out of a corner of the library, which at that time was on the fourth floor of the Museum looking toward 54th Street. They sliced out a closet-size little office with a desk. That's where he wrote, first: Picasso: Fifty Years of his Art. And then he began perhaps to write the Matisse. But this clausturation of his did not last indefinitely so that the greater part of the Matisse was written in our house.

PC: Would he ever discuss things that he was writing with you? Would he talk about things? Would he try out ideas?

MB: No. No. The book in which he tried out ideas like mad was What is Modern Painting?

PC: Oh, yes. We've talked about that. He had people read it.

MB: Then he would make everybody read it so as to be sure that it was comprehensible. But for the rest, he was very much his own art critic so far as his writing was concerned. He wrote extraordinarily slowly and he wrote and rewrote because of this insistence on good writing combined with absolute understandability. He hated being obscure. In fact, he never did think in those terms. But, nevertheless, he was constantly improving and polishing what he was writing. The pieces of foolscap that were used were unimaginable because it was rewritten and rewritten and then typed with spaces and corrected. It was an extremely show and laborious process.

PC: But how did he find time to do the research? You know, what with the slow writing plus the administration and the scene and . . . ?

MB: Well, you see, he did have somewhat less administration when he ceased being director. I don't know what year he was made Director of the Collections. I'll try to find it here. [Pages turning] "Director of Collections 1947-1967." This is really useful.

PC: Right. But now, when he took that position, everything . . . ?

MB: Of course, that entailed buying, seeing an enormous amount of works of art, going to masses of exhibitions. And then, of course, all through he had always made a point of seeing every exhibition worth seeing while we were in Paris or in London. Throughout, and especially in later years, he always used to insist on seeing the Venice Biennales or the Dokumenta. He'd go through these exhibitions with catalogue in hand, of course, meditating and discerning the pictures that interested him, and then going to the purchase bureau and transacting to buy them. I remember this perfectly. I am terrified that now nobody goes to Dokumenta, that nobody goes to these big shows. I don't know whether anyone does. I don't know whether anyone looks or selects or chooses from them. But Alfred was terribly interested in the Museum's being extremely international in nature. We went to the Biennale in Sao Paulo. He was always hunting for people that we hadn't heard of that were interesting and trying to buy them and putting them into the collection. I think a lot of these pictures are not shown now.

PC: Well, there is a huge collection there.

MB: There is a huge collection and a lot of it is in the reserve now. The trustees and other people on the staff, many people on the staff, felt that his last hanging of the collections that he bought through the year 1967 was too crowded, that the space was too chopped up. Of course, the more you chop it, the more walls you have. You see, it's built so that you can put up lots of partitions and have subdivisions of rooms. It was hung with extraordinary attention to chronology, to movements, to countries, to every kind of scholarly aspect of the collection so that it would make sense as a sort of panorama in history and of an international nature. But now they prefer to have opened-out space and to hang the collection decoratively. And if you hang that way, you lose an enormous amount of space. I overheard Rubin showing his rehanging of the collection, at least showing the first rooms of it, and he was terribly interested in perspective, in having the galleries opened out so that the eye could wander through crucial pictures that he had spaced all the way down to the back of the building. It's a totally different concept of hanging. But the result is that there is a tremendous amount that is not hanging now.

PC: Oh, I remember the old exhibitions when they were just filled with marvelous things; it was like going through a garden -- all those things.

MB: Alfred and I have talked about this twenty million times. My crucial example is this one: Let us imagine that Alfred and I are in Basel for twenty-four hours. What do we prefer: To see everything or as much as possible that is in the Basel Museum? Or do we want to see the Basel Museum hung decoratively so that it looks handsome? Now you know exactly what our answer would be. We want it hung showing as much as they have. And if the Museum is too small, well then, it's just too bad that it looks crowded, but at least we see everything. Now if you want to hang it decoratively, instead of showing fifteen Klees, you show five and put the others in reserve. There's no answer to that one. There's no answer.

PC: Well, you need a contrast

MB: You know that, until the finances of the whole country began to go to pieces, there was a tremendous desire to enlarge the Museum immensely and there were all sorts of projects about it, among them, building a skyscraper on top of the Museum, or rebuilding the garden on the second floor and making more space underneath, or else moving everything to the East Side. I still remember Philip Johnson's saying: "All the future of New York is around the United Nations and it is in that region that we should buy land and sell this land, which is extremely expensive, and buy and build a big, big building there so that we can show everything." Well,

all these things, perhaps mercifully I think too big a museum is very disconcerting and exhausting.

PC: True.

MB: So all these projects died for lack of money.

PC: One thing that somebody along the line said that I should ask you about was the kind of social life and the entertaining and the dinners and all of this kind of business, you know, that you cooked so well for everybody.

MB: We did a very bad job. We did a very bad job. Well, it makes my mind race instantly and wonder what Dick Oldenburg is doing. I know that Dick Oldenburg has to go out a tremendous amount, tremendous. I like him very much. I do not have the pleasure of being a friend on his, but I do know that they go out terribly much and that he works fantastically hard. Now we went out. It used to tire Alfred a lot, but we did go out and we did go out in evening clothes. And at the beginning we did sometimes -- even if it is extraordinary to me -- we did ask people to tea, of all things. I remember our asking Mrs. Murray Crane to tea. Unthinkable nowadays. But we did. But we retributed excessively. First of all, we didn't have much money, you know. I never learned to have caterers. I never learned to have people to serve. Every time I had people to serve they ruined what I had cooked. When we were living on Beekman Place we did have a cook and sometimes they managed. But we never had more than six in all. And we never did it in a really elegant way at all. Now I do wonder whether we were right or wrong. But it all had to do with the economics of it. I don't know whether I explained to you -- and stop me if I did -- that when we went to Europe in all those years we had no per diem. Did I tell you that?

PC: Yes, you did.

MB: Everything was tabulated, every taxi, every meal.

PC: Even after the War, in the late Forties, or Fifties?

MB: Never! Never did we have a per diem! Never! Never!

PC: That's fantastic.

MB: We never had any entertainment fund, any, any. I remember talking about it many times with Philip Johnson who, at that time, was very much more intimate with us than he is now. He would say, "My dear woman, if you entertain in the house you cannot take it off your income tax." And then he would say, or somebody else would say, "If you're going to have a dinner, then you get the butcher to give you a slip, you get the grocer to give you a slip; and you get this one to give you a slip, and you put them all together and you say how many people you entertained and you put it all together and you calculate." Well, life is too short to do this kind of thing. And it really never paid for my labor or loss of time or anything. Alfred always insisted that in our house we did not belong to clubs. So he would not belong to the Century Club, he would not belong to the University Club. Mrs. Rockefeller from the very first year of our marriage wanted me to join the Cosmopolitan Club. Alfred said, "No. No. In our house we do not belong to clubs."

PC: I wonder why? Why was that?

MB: It was just the way he felt.

PC: Fascinating. So there was just no outside place . . . ?

MB: I suppose if we had not that I'm particularly thrilled if somebody asks me to dinner at the Cosmopolitan club or anywhere, but still it would have been a solution because then at least you get a chit and you could take it off. But I don't think that any of the people that he needed to entertain would have liked to come to such places. It would not have been a suitable retribution.

PC: what kind of people did you entertain then? One would think of the artists or the trustees or dealers or critics, writers.

MB: No, we only saw friends.

PC: Really? There was no . . . ?

MB: We never had what one would call an intellectual salon or anything of the kind. Nothing. Well, you see, when finally Alfred would come home he was too tired; and he came home later and later and later as the years went on. So it would just be a casual person that was going through New York, or two people that we particularly wanted to see. But never any intelligent get-together. I would have liked very much to be able to do something of the kind. It would have amused me. but it wouldn't have amused Alfred. He was too tired.

PC: It would just be more work.

MB: He always has been very, very anxious when people came to the house. It makes him very anxious. I have given lots of cocktail parties, rather amusing ones, I think. He'd arrive rather late on the day, but then he'd begin to move the pictures and to arrange everything in a sort of anxious, housewifely way. And it created a sort of anxiety. And then he was always terribly anxious because he would say, "When are they going to leave?" I would say, "My God, Alfred, what does it matter?" And he never has fallen in with the system that the last people all go out to dinner together. He wouldn't stand for that.

PC: It's interesting. I don't know him; of course I've met him maybe four times or something, but in seeing him -- one would always see him in the Museum on the different floors, as I wander around there a lot -- and I always got the feeling that there were, you know, different Alfred Barrs, like the Alfred Barr of the Museum and that when he went home he was . . . that was another part of his life and they were compartmentalized or something.

MB: I don't

PC: It's just that somehow I always get that feeling.

MB: I think he knew enormously well what he was doing within the Museum when he had his staff and everything was going along. Everybody was susceptible to his charm, I think. Women loved to work with him. But men less so. He and Rene d'Harnoncourt worked together beautifully, beautifully. They understood each other. Rene always took seriously what Alfred said. Very often when Rene did not do what Alfred said needed to be done it was always done without any kind of rancor or irascibility. It all went absolutely beautifully. They worked together extremely well.

PC: Sometimes in talking to some of the other people, not to d'Harnoncourt, but some of the other people felt there was a certain competitive spirit from the younger curators and some of the other people who came in later.

MB: It may well be. It may well be. It may well be.

PC: Yes. Whereas I don't think with d'Harnoncourt there was. I mean he was not that kind of

MB: Well, I think that all in all it was rather pleasant to work in the Museum at that time. The only person who had his difficulties with Rene was Edgar Kaufmann. But all in all, I think it worked rather harmoniously. And I think that a great many people were not intent on whether they were making a great deal of money or not. I know that Rene had it very much on his mind. And Alfred, too. Every time the budget came up in June they'd be trying to fight to get their helpers to get a little bit more money. I was particularly upset at the time of the strike last fall. The wife of Professor Colin Eisler who teaches at the Institute of Fine Arts was doing a sort of reportage on Channel 13 on the strike and at a certain moment she said something that upset me a lot. She said, "Well, of course, the staff of the Museum of Modern Art in previous years was terribly underpaid and more fool they." This really hurt me. Of course, we were infinitely less well paid than the staff that's working there now. "Peanuts" as Oldenbrug says.

PC: Yes. Well, I think the Museum in those early -- well, say, up until 1950 -- sort of attracted people who were more involved with the Museum, more interested in the Museum.

MB: You mean the trustees?

PC: No, the people who worked there, the staff people who had a greater commitment to

MB: It was more idea-making.

PC: Yes.

MB: Oh, much more.

PC: Yes. And then it became a career step, you know.

MB: I don't know. Unfortunately, I do regret that I have no contact now with the intelligent young people that are working there. And now that Betsy Jones is leaving

PC: Is she leaving too?

MB: Yes, she's leaving at the end of July, I think. She's leaving because she says it's not fun to work in the Museum any more.

PC: Everybody there has been saying that for the last few years.

MB: It's just terrible, you know, because she was in charge of the entire permanent collection and she's been given curator rank and a good salary. I don't know what to think.

PC: It's another regime, another generation. Were there problems, or good things, in terms of certain trustees? Were there trustees who kind of always backed Mr. Barr's activities? or were there some trustees who one always had to persuade?

MB: I suppose that Alfred had to persuade them many times to do things that they didn't particularly want to do. Philip Johnson used to like very much to go to trustees meetings when Alfred was holding forth, and always seconded him, or else would buy whatever Alfred thought should be bought if the trustees didn't want to buy it. At trustees meetings Alfred always seemed to feel that something or other should be thought up or devised that would interest the trustees. I do not know whether anyone does this now. He used to really give it a great deal of thought so that they should feel that they were part of things and his reasons for wanting this or that work of art. I don't know whether anyone does this now.

PC: That's a problem all institutions have these days, I think. One thing we didn't talk about that you said I should mention was the fire.

MB: The famous fire.

PC: The famous fire. Now is the time to

MB: I was working for McGraw-Hill Publishing Company which was publishing an Encyclopedia of World Art. And from 1957 until, I don't know

PC: That went on for a couple of years.

MB: 1958? 1959? I worked there for about the better part of two years in one way or another. They hired me as translation editor. This book was more or less being translated from the Italian but there were innumerable articles that were coming in in other languages. And I know lots of languages and can manage many that I don't know. McGraw-Hill at that time had owned a building on 41st Street between Fifth and Madison. I needed to track down the name of a potential translator and therefore needed to speak to at least a secretary of Robert Goldwater in the Museum of Primitive Art to unearth the name of this translator. So I made my inquiry by telephone. The person who answered said, "Mrs. Barr, I'm sorry to tell you that the Museum of Modern Art is on fire." There I was. It was precisely April 15, 1958. I had announced that I wasn't going out to lunch. I had on a suit with a fairly tight skirt -- which is important -- and I walked out into the street. Fifth Avenue was still two-way. I called a taxi and asked, "Can you change a ten?" He said, "No, I can't." So I lost that taxi. The street was so full of people that I figured that I would get there faster on foot. As I began to rush up Fifth Avenue with this tight skirt on, on unbelievably crowded sidewalks, the fire engines began to go in the direction of the Museum. When I got myself to the level of Rockefeller Center I began to veer leftwards, you know, to go through the Esso Building and that section so as to get off the Avenue. At the building that is called -- dear me -- 50 Rockefeller Plaza, there used to be a ticker tape

PC: Oh, yes, right.

MB: And so on the ticker tape as I rushed by I saw, "Museum of Modern Art on Fire." I went through the Esso Building and there I had the first view of the Museum. The hook and ladder was up. There were women with beautiful hats on up in the penthouse screaming and yelling and looking down. The firemen were beginning to slash the windows. So I rushed toward the Whitney Museum and at 54th Street they let me in and I got myself into the garden. And then the firemen were also on the 54th Street side slashing the windows. There were members of the staff who were carrying out pictures. I think there was a Juan Gris show besides a Seurat show and the Seurat Grande Jatte was in there.

PC: Right.

MB: And there I was in the garden, spellbound. There is a sculptor called Lipton

PC: Yes, Seymour Lipton. Right.

MB: Seymour Lipton. Seymour Lipton was standing there with me and he said, "When you think that the greater part of my work is in that museum at the moment in the basement!" I felt like saying, "Good God! I do admit, but, after all, the Seurat Grande Jatte is slightly more important." Then it occurred to me: where is Alfred, where is Alfred? I started asking everybody, "Where is Alfred?" "Where is Alfred?" Nobody could tell me. I think I saw his secretary, a certain Marie Alexander. Nobody knew where Alfred was. Suddenly terrified, I said, "The only thing

for me to do is to get out of here. I can't do a thing; I cannot." And I ran away and went up to the Institute of Fine Arts because I was listening to a course. Around five o'clock I came down again and found Alfred. Alfred had been on the fifth floor in the office of a splendid treasurer called Sarah Rubenstein who had the last office in the fifth floor on the Fifth Avenue side. This office had a side window there; in other words, these windows looked out onto 53rd Street. Then there was a side window and it was wired for fire and that window overlooked what was known as the Prentice house because that belonged to a member of the Rockefeller family called the "Old Mrs. Prentice." Now that's re-built and it's the new section of the Museum because she left the house. Okay. So the place was invaded by smoke because it was all caused by smoke -- it was caused by a fire that had started where workmen were installing the new air conditioning system. Therefore, all the smoke went freely through the entire Museum. They were suffocating with smoke. They shut the door. I don't know how many of the staff were in there but certainly Sarah Rubenstein, Alfred, and at least one other young man. With the strength of God knows what, they smashed the wired window and started yelling down to the Prentice House, "Give us a ladder! Give us a ladder!" The butler said, "I have no orders." I know that Alfred yelled, "We're on fire, man! Get a ladder!" And they all crawled out that window into Sarah Rubenstein's. And then, of course poor Dan Rich was still director of the Chicago Museum and, by the time I got back, Dan Rich had flown in from Chicago. He was so worried about the Grande Jatte. You know the rest and the things that did and did not happen, that were and were not damaged. The whole place was a madhouse, you know, what with smoke and water and things being lifted off walls and put into other rooms. It was incredible.

PC: That was astounding!

MB: The Monets were in a partition, you see, they had put up . . . they were so big to move that they had put up a partition and the Monets were, so to say, abutting against the walls that overlook 53rd Street. They were sandwiched in there. I think I

[END OF SIDE 3 (TAPE 2, SIDE 1)

END OF INTERVIEW

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