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Oral history interview with David M. Solinger, 1977 May 6

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with David M. Solinger on May 6, 1977. The interview took place in New York City, and was conducted by Paul Cummings for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

The Archives of American Art has reviewed the transcript and has made corrections and emendations. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

PAUL CUMMINGS: —statistics. I want to say it's May 6, 1977. Paul Cummings talking to David Solinger, in his office at 250 Park Avenue, New York City.

DAVID M. SOLINGER: How do you normally start out?

PAUL CUMMINGS: I think usually we start with some kind of family background, to see if—you were born in New York. Other brothers and sisters? Was your family interested in art, literature, music, or is it something you developed on your own? How did it kind of start?

DAVID M. SOLINGER: My interest in the arts came about directly after World War II, when I ran into a friend who said that he was attending classes at the Y at night, where he was learning to paint. I didn't pay too much attention to that, but I did a slow take, and a few weeks later, the idea appealed to me. So I communicated with him, found out about the classes, enrolled for one, and went there once a week on Monday nights. This was about—more than 30 years ago. 1946, probably. I painted once a week for a couple of years. I began to become interested in how other people were solving, or had solved, the problems.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Who did you study with there?

DAVID M. SOLINGER: Our first teacher was a man named—it was a two-syllable name, the first syllable of which was Brad. [00:02:05] Not Bradshaw. Bradford, I guess. Bradford. He was a muralist, and a father of—the son of a muralist, in a studio over in the Beaux Arts department. He subsequently was a guest there. We became friends. I don't remember his first name. Aaron Berkman is an old-time teacher there, and I never studied with Aaron, but he had a big following. I went on from there to the Art Students League, where I worked every Saturday, first with Robert Philipp. Then I took a few private lessons from the late Byron Browne. They were very valuable, because after the second lesson, he said to me, "What you need is to paint on your own. Stop taking lessons." I never had a lesson since. I painted until about—from that time on, I painted Saturdays, Sundays, holidays. In the summer, I started, I think in 1949, in Gloucester, and then I found Provincetown, and went to Provincetown for 10 or 11 years, and spent two or three or four weeks each year painting. And in 1960, quit painting because my studio was torn down.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Where was that?

DAVID M. SOLINGER: It was in Provincetown. Also have a room in the basement of my apartment building where I painted, but I found, as I turned from figurative painting to abstract, and then non-objective painting, that it required more energy, and that I simply couldn't paint at the end of a day. [00:04:12] I became interested in other phases of the visual arts. I might say, parenthetically, that I started to paint again after 17 years this past winter.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, really?

DAVID M. SOLINGER: There is now a new—the acrylic paints are now in existence. There were no acrylic paints when I painted. Being of a relatively impatient personality, and wanting to get a great deal done in a very short period of time, I developed a very unconventional technique of using casein on canvas. I did a tremendous amount of blotting, because if I let the casein dry on canvas, it would cake and crumble. So it was really a form of staining. Now that the acrylics are in existence, it's marvelous, because they dry very quickly. I've painted in the South, and I've never painted on canvas, not yet, but I reserve that privilege and pleasure for the summer.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What got you started again after the hiatus?

DAVID M. SOLINGER: In painting?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

DAVID M. SOLINGER: A chance encounter with a friend who said that he was studying painting. I was married to a woman who enjoyed playing cards, and family gatherings, and things of that sort. I found myself playing cards, and really didn't enjoy it particularly. I was doing it to be a good fellow. [00:06:00] In a sense, painting was a departure from that, and a declaration of independence.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But had you interest in art as a child or as a student?

DAVID M. SOLINGER: No.

PAUL CUMMINGS: No? No family history of it?

DAVID M. SOLINGER: I can remember, in high school, where there was a compulsory art course, making a drawing, and being hurt and offended when my teacher looked at the drawing that I had made and said it looked like a pig's ass. [They laugh.]

PAUL CUMMINGS: I see.

DAVID M. SOLINGER: I had no interest in painting or drawing.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You hadn't gone to museums or galleries or anything?

DAVID M. SOLINGER: Oh, I had gone to museums and galleries, as all the youngsters do, but I wasn't caught up in it. There was no high degree of interest. Yes, there are—visual things interested me, in a sense that when I was a student, university student, I spent a summer traveling through England, and was very much moved by the glass windows and the great British cathedrals, and in fact made a tour of British cathedrals. Also as a student, I was taken for lunch to the apartment of Leo Stein in Paris. That was a memorable experience. There were great Picassos and Matisses on the walls, and I had never been exposed to paintings of that—that so moved me. [00:08:02] It was an aesthetic experience. There was that interest, yes, but I had no interest in doing it myself until after the war.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What do you think it was that really prompted you to begin?

DAVID M. SOLINGER: I was looking for a way to spend leisure time in a different manner from the one in which I had spent it. I had spent five years in the Army, which caused a break in my patterns of conduct. I was married in 1937, and I fell into a pattern of conforming with the ways of life that my wife and her family liked and enjoyed. I came to the realization, slowly, that while that accomplished for me being a good fellow, it didn't bring me any real pleasure. Well, I didn't think all these things out at the time, clearly. The chance meeting with a friend saying he was learning to paint—I put learning to paint in quotes—must have sparked something in me which prompted me to say, well, maybe I'd like to do that, and I tried it. And indeed I did.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You hadn't bought art or anything up to that time?

DAVID M. SOLINGER: That's what I was just coming to. As the result of spending two or three or four hours, a single night a week, for maybe two-thirds of a year, I began, as I said before, to be interested in how people were solving the problems that I was encountering as a beginning painter. [00:10:09] So I commenced to go around to commercial galleries and museums, in a very systematic way, and then ultimately, in 1948, I bought my first painting.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Which was?

DAVID M. SOLINGER: That took a—that was an act of great courage, because to spend a few hundred dollars on a painting was the equivalent of spending what was, in the economy and society of that day, more than a month's rent. One had to think of it in those terms.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What was the artist you bought?

DAVID M. SOLINGER: The painting I bought was a painting by Reuben Tam, a Hawaiian American artist who is still active and painting. Was bought from the Halpert Gallery. I still own it. As a matter of fact, correct that. I've given it to the Whitney Museum subject to my life interests, but I still hang it, and it's hanging in this office. At the moment, you will see the painting—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, terrific.

DAVID M. SOLINGER: —in the Bloedel show, *Fish on a Barrel*, I think it's called, or something like that. But it's there. I still own it. I say the Whitney Museum owns it, subject to my life interest. That started—of course, once I

broke the ice, then I found that I could survive the pain of making what seemed to me to be a very improvident, luxurious kind of expenditure. [00:12:14]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did his work relate to how you were painting, or was it different?

DAVID M. SOLINGER: No, it did not relate to how I was painting. In fact, I think there is perhaps some subconscious, or vaguely conscious, affinity, which I think can be explained, perhaps, by a unanimity of taste, perhaps. The aesthetic product that the artist winds up with, when it pleases me, pleases me, and since that is my sensibility, it's probably a way in which I, too, would like to paint. [Laughs.] Or at least a way in which I—a way that I can admire. But the experience of painting myself opened the door to every facet of visual experience, because it resulted in my becoming interested in and involved with artistic institutions, like the American Federation of Arts, the Whitney Museum, other museums. It made me a collector of art books. I had been a collector of other kinds of books before.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, what kind?

DAVID M. SOLINGER: Well, books in general, with a particular emphasis on the 16th century, Elizabethan England.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What kind of subject matter? What kind of subject matter?

DAVID M. SOLINGER: English literature. [00:14:00] English literature. So there is—of course, it's a new—interest in an art, when pursued with any degree of activity, results in meeting people with the same interests, so that one's friends change, and it has a very deep and pervasive effect on one's whole life. Did on mine. It's very meaningful, particularly to a person who is not religious in any formal sense, as the case in my case.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You've mentioned American Federation of Arts, which you eventually became a trustee of. How did you get involved with that? Through your own initiative, through a friend?

DAVID M. SOLINGER: No, no.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Through—

DAVID M. SOLINGER: These things happen, usual—I think because the organization—almost all organizations—the American Federation of Art, the Whitney Museum, you name it—they're always looking for people who—or should be—who have a true interest in their work, and who have some energy and time to make available to the organization, and frequently who are seeking money, who are prepared to contribute to them. I suppose there are people who knock on the door of institutions, but it's not the usual way, and I think [00:16:00]—

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's true. Well, people don't know how to do it, even if they want to. It's rather difficult to just—

DAVID M. SOLINGER: Yeah, well, there are some people, I guess, with a lot of brass. We have had the experience, at the Whitney Museum, of people very frankly saying, "I want to be a trustee." I think they do it without any real knowledge of the responsibilities of trustees, or what it means, but they recognize it as a badge of honor, and they want to wear that badge.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's true.

DAVID M. SOLINGER: A number of people, I suppose—well, there are not many people who have requested trusteeship. A vast, vast majority of those who do are motivated by wearing the badge, and not by the opportunity to serve the artistic community.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right. Now, you said one thing—

DAVID M. SOLINGER: If that seems cynical, make the most—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, it's, I think, accurate. [Laughs.] You said that, as you got more involved with painting and the art world, have changed your circle of friends. Was that because your interest grew that way, and your previous set of friends weren't interested in the visual arts, and you just gravitated away from them?

DAVID M. SOLINGER: I think one's friends are frequently people with whom one finds mutual interests. Of course, there are old friends, and there are—friendships are based on many things. But it does open, at least on a superficial level, one's acquaintances. Circle of acquaintances broadens, and among that circle of acquaintances, there are opportunities for friendships to arrive.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I know several people who are interested in art, but not interested in the art world. [00:18:06] They find it, sometimes, a little too competitive, complicated, or neurotic or something. There are other people

who become very involved in it. You certainly have been involved, being associated with various museums, and AFA, for example. Did it grow rapidly, or was it a slow involvement?

DAVID M. SOLINGER: No. I think the curve—most of my collecting, the vast majority of my collecting, was done in the early '50s. I was very fortunate, because I had very strong feelings about the painters whom I collected. I collected solely because I loved the things I bought, and once I broke the ice, I was relatively unrestrained. I was also very lucky, because paintings, like strawberries, should be bought when they're plentiful and cheap. That's when you get the best. Artists like Dubuffet, de Kooning, Miró, Klee, Léger were available at—very inexpensively. [00:20:02]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah, that's true. That's true. How did you move to them from Reuben Tam and the Downtown Gallery? Did you—

DAVID M. SOLINGER: Without wishing, in any way, to denigrate Reuben's work, which I continue to enjoy. I think that my perception and my vision became more acute, my judgment became sharpened, and my eye developed, and I was able to really single out the major talents. Incidentally, Alfred Barr once said that few collectors have eyes for more than one generation of painting.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's pretty much true, I think.

DAVID M. SOLINGER: For whatever reason, I had an eye for that generation of painters. Was intensely interested. After I started to collect, I spent all of my leisure time, when not painting—and I didn't paint a great deal in those days. It was a once-a-week affair. I spent all of my leisure time in galleries and museums. I think it was Ruskin who once wrote an essay called "Touchstones," in which he dealt with a question of how does one know that this painting is better than that painting? How do you know what is a good painting and not a good painting? [00:22:00] The thesis that he developed in that essay is that all paintings, all new paintings, should be judged by comparing them with established work of the past. If one looks at a Tam, and one looks at a—well, I mentioned de Kooning, for example—and one has an eye, one concludes that there is a power in de Kooning's work, a passion, a vitality, a sense of exploration, that are some of the earmarks of a great painter.

PAUL CUMMINGS: And he keeps on doing it, year after year after year.

DAVID M. SOLINGER: From the point of view of the collector, you see, if you—I think instinctively, any time that I look at a painting, this human computer that the good Lord gave us lines that painting up against other paintings, and makes comparisons, and puts it up in the A1 class, or puts it back in the E5 class. That's what goes on, and that's why I think—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Kind of constant reappraisal.

DAVID M. SOLINGER: Precisely. Precisely. Precisely.

PAUL CUMMINGS: As you began collecting—and I know that as one goes around museums and galleries, you meet other collectors—were there other collectors that you became friendly with or—

DAVID M. SOLINGER: Sure.

PAUL CUMMINGS: —interested in, or competed with, or learned from, things like that?

DAVID M. SOLINGER: Yeah. Yeah, there were. There are. [00:24:00] There were friendships that resulted from that.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Anybody particularly provocative or interesting?

DAVID M. SOLINGER: Well, it is hard to recall a period of more than a quarter of a century. There are—one meets collectors. In the first place, as you know, a number of institutions—I guess the Museum of Modern Art was among the first—would organize a house tour.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, right. AFA used to do them.

DAVID M. SOLINGER: AFA did it, too. I think perhaps—well, I've shown my collection on behalf of both of those organizations, but what happens is—or what did happen—a quarter of a century or more ago, there weren't that many collectors, and so people went around to see other collections. You would meet the same people at openings, museum openings, functions related to the arts, and in that way you would get to know people, and were drawn to some of them, and formed friendships.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I find it interesting that you began with Reuben Tam at the Downtown Gallery, where many people began as collectors, because Edith had a way of letting people know she was there, and had a lot of

rather well-established people. How did you move on, though? What got you interested in de Kooning, or in Kline, for example? Because you owned that great Kline at one point.

DAVID M. SOLINGER: It was simply a matter of going around to the galleries and seeing shows. I still remember the first de Kooning show at the Egan Gallery in 1948. [00:26:05] I spent the whole day there. I was riveted. I couldn't leave. And I didn't—if I had that same experience today, it would have taken me a moment to say, "How much do you want for all—everything on the wall? I'll take the whole show." Didn't have that kind of courage. I would say that the thing that prevented me from being a great collector, rather than a very modest collector with a modest collection, is two things. I wasn't bold enough financially. I was bold enough to find, I think, the right artists and the right pictures of those artists, but it was always hard for me to buy with a kind of abandon that some great collectors have. One thinks, for example, of a man named Hirshhorn. I'm neither an overly modest man nor a conceited man, but my taste has always been better than his.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, he goes up and down, and up and down. [Laughs.]

DAVID M. SOLINGER: Why do I mention him? He had the quality that I lacked. He would never buy one of anything. He would buy four. I spent a couple of days with him in strange circumstances, and I watched him. He always bought in quantity. Well, if—I think the only reason that he didn't buy forty instead of four of some artists, and none of others, is that he really didn't know, and he was hedging his bets. [00:28:08] One of the great things about—to me, that's what collectors should do. I think of a man like Victor Ganz, who collected nothing but Picasso for many years. That approach is a kind of thing that I'm talking about.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But your collection is very wide-ranging.

DAVID M. SOLINGER: It is. It's both—it's 20th-century. The earliest picture I have is a Kandinsky of 1912, and that's typical, really. I was guilty of a little too much purity. For example, I recognize that—was crazy about those early Kandinskys. Pictures between 1911 and 1914, late 1910 to 1914, and I regarded them as great, great pictures. I went all around looking for Kandinskys of that period at one time. The only picture I found of the kind of quality that I liked was a watercolor, which I bought. It was $650. I guess, today, it's worth [$]100,000. But I was offered at least a half dozen, quote, important, unquote, pictures during that period, which were not of the same quality, but much more important, and of course would have been perfectly credible pictures to have.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right. [00:30:00] How do you define the quality aspect, though?

DAVID M. SOLINGER: I think one can—it's like, how do you define fucking? It's a matter of a whole range of feelings and intuitions and experiences. Sure, one can be—one can try, in words, to define an experience. One can talk in terms of color, rhythms, balance, relationships, space.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But the same elements in another picture don't gel, don't work?

DAVID M. SOLINGER: Yeah. How—

PAUL CUMMINGS: What's the difference?

DAVID M. SOLINGER: What's the difference? Exactly. What's the difference? It's something that one feels, and—I've never seen—I don't think I've ever seen anyone really answer the question that you asked me without—

PAUL CUMMINGS: I haven't either, so—one looks. That's one of the perennial questions. Now, in looking at art, and you have mentioned you built up a library of art books, are there any critics or historians that you found of interest, or provocative, that you [laughs]—

DAVID M. SOLINGER: Damn few. I have long since stopped reading art books. I have a lot of them, and I buy them for the illustrations. Occasionally, I am interested in the provenance of a picture, or I'm interested in something that a historian can tell me. [00:32:01] But most writing about art is—it's just a mass of gibberish. Maybe my feeling is expression of a—maybe other people don't agree with me, and—

PAUL CUMMINGS: I think a lot of people do, and increasingly so in the last decade or so.

DAVID M. SOLINGER: I've even stopped—I don't even read the art reviews in the *New York Times*, the daily papers.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I don't either.

DAVID M. SOLINGER: Couldn't care less what—except—and this may sound a little bit pixieish and contrary to you, but if Hilton Kramer dislikes something, well, maybe I'll like it. And if he likes it, and I like it, too, I have to—I question my—I have to second-guess. That's not only true of Kramer. It's been true of many newspaper critics, although there have been some good critics. My observation is that newspapers pick art critics because they

can write. Kramer writes well, and his predecessors have written well, but they lack connoisseurship. I would be much more satisfied with art critics with a fine sense of connoisseurship.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How do you think one develops that in contemporary art, where—

DAVID M. SOLINGER: Connoisseurship?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah, where it's continually being made, the artist is living, you see new works.

DAVID M. SOLINGER: I think one has to view a tremendous number of pictures. That's why I regard myself as a has-been as a collector. I don't get around, I don't see them. One has to be exposed to what's going on in order to have any real judgments about. [00:34:04]

PAUL CUMMINGS: In other words, one really has to work at it to—

DAVID M. SOLINGER: Precisely.

PAUL CUMMINGS: —keep it going.

DAVID M. SOLINGER: And working at it means using one's eyes. It's a visual thing. It's not an intellectual thing. I recognize that some of the current movements are very intellectual and intellectualized, but to me, art is a visual experience, and requires looking.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What do you think one learns from looking at art in terms of how it affects one's daily living and life? Because—

DAVID M. SOLINGER: I have a very hedonistic point of view about it. To me, art is a—it's a pleasurable experience. I look at pictures. I like pictures that seduce the eye. That is not to say that I don't also like pictures that are like a blow between the eyes, that are very strong, and are very powerful, that are very moving. I think pictures should be accepted on a visual basis. Not very much—I recognize that, particularly two centuries ago, until then, pictures told stories, but the camera hadn't been developed yet. Artists were painting on behalf of the church.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, they had a different purpose, too.

DAVID M. SOLINGER: Exactly.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Recording the king's coronation, or one thing or another.

DAVID M. SOLINGER: Precisely.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Other people do that now, in different ways. [00:36:00]

DAVID M. SOLINGER: They're a source of pleasure. Very hedonistic. Very hedonistic. Even paintings that are revolting. You take an artist like Francis Bacon. One can't ignore, while many of them are utterly revolting, the power and the fact that they do make a comment on the society in which we live. But always, it's a visual experience. One learns about the society through using one's eyes. Then, of course, one can never completely disengage one's own life and one's own experiences from what one sees. It's the experience of seeing and relating what one sees to one's own experiences. Ten people with ten different backgrounds can look at the same picture, and the picture means different things to each of them.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Absolutely.

DAVID M. SOLINGER: There's nothing wrong with that.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I always think the more interpretations a work has, the longer it can survive. If everybody sees the same thing, then it's not too lively after a while. What do you think affects one's shift in taste? Because you certainly have bought several types of art, different schools, different decades, different cultures. How does one move from—

PAUL CUMMINGS: I think one's taste sharpens. In the early days of my collecting, I think I made a number of quote, mistakes, unquote. I think one's taste—one's eye, I think, rather than taste—I think the use of "eye" rather than—I think "taste" is a little bit limiting, but one's eye certainly improves.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Don't you think a good mistake is often very informative in several different ways? [00:38:03]

DAVID M. SOLINGER: Of course. As one discards it, one should know why one bought it in the first place. And

not—"mistake" may be too drastic a word, but one's taste sharpens, improves, and there's only so much room.

PAUL CUMMINGS: As a collector, have you traded works, or bought, say, a painting by an artist, and a couple years later—

DAVID M. SOLINGER: To a minimum degree. I have, only on one occasion, I think, turned in a Calder that I had difficulty, physical difficulty, with hanging, for another one that I could hang more readily and liked better. I don't remember any other trades for the same artist. I have given a number of pictures away, motivated by a desire to enrich the collection of the particular institution, and also to keep my apartment from being unlivable in. That's not a very good sentence. Also, obviously when one does that, one keeps what one likes the best. I had some amazing experiences, though, in exchange of pictures.

PAUL CUMMINGS: In what—for example—

DAVID M. SOLINGER: I think every collector has a whole raft of stories. Eliel Saarinen wrote a book called *The Collectors*. I think somebody could do a marvelous book by seeing 30, 40 collectors and getting some collector stories, things that happened in connection with their pictures. [00:40:07] For example, I think of one of my friends, who is not really—didn't really have the same feeling, I think, that I have for Dubuffet. Returned from France one summer with a Dubuffet, for which he'd paid $1,300. When he came to visit me, he found that I had a new Dubuffet of the same period, which was really a first cousin to his picture, because Dubuffet, like many artists, got interested in something, did a series of pictures. My picture cost $750. This—he, being a trader by nature, and a businessman, he was very, very—talked about this quite frequently. Finally, after he mentioned it several times, I said to him, "Look, if you feel so badly about it, you can have my picture. Give me a check."

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Laughs.] Really?

DAVID M. SOLINGER: So, he lived in the Middle West. He gave me a check on the spot, and he arranged to have the picture picked up, and it was shipped to him. A couple years later, I visited his—I was in his city and stayed overnight with him, and he had a rather large gallery-like place. I noticed that his picture was hanging, and my picture was not. And I began to do a slow burn about this, and I said to him, "What is this? You couldn't rest until you had my picture. Now you don't think enough of it to hang it. I don't like that." Words to that [ph]. [00:42:00] So he said to me, "Well, if you want your picture back, I'll give it back." I said, "Yes, I do want it back." So my picture—I wrote—this time, it was I who gave him the check for $750. Arranged to have it shipped back, got the picture back, and I still have the picture, and I love it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, that's marvelous.

DAVID M. SOLINGER: Subsequently, he sold his, because he never really did like Dubuffet. Sold it at auction. A $1,300 picture, he got some $27,000 for at auction. My $750 picture is really priceless now. It's a 1944 Dubuffet.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, it's an early—

DAVID M. SOLINGER: Early. Marvelous picture. Marvelous picture. But Dubuffets, they were so plentiful, and—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, and very inexpensive.

DAVID M. SOLINGER: Very inexpensive. And he was my friend. [They laugh.]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, that's fantastic.

DAVID M. SOLINGER: I'm sure that collectors—I could tell you a story about trading pictures. I once—when a dealer, who shall be nameless, first went into business, dealer said to me, "Now I'm going into business. As a friend, can you let me have a few pictures?" It was one of the few times I sold a picture. I sent up a Tamayo and a Klee. The Klee was a very sad Klee. It made me sad. There was a third. I've forgotten which. Twenty-four or 48 hours later, she called me. She said, "I sold your picture." I said, "What? I didn't even put a price on it." Well, she sold it. I was actually—I said—so she told me what she got for the picture. She sold it to a bank. I subsequently saw it on the walls of a Manufacturers Hanover Trust Company on 43rd Street, just built. [00:44:00] I began to miss the Klee, the sad picture. I said, "Please send those other two pictures back. I don't want them sold." That's one picture I've sold. I don't think—I can't remember selling any other pictures. [Laughs.]

PAUL CUMMINGS: When did you start giving things to museums?

DAVID M. SOLINGER: I can't tell you precisely, but I think probably in the '50s. Undoubtedly. I know that I did in the '50s.

PAUL CUMMINGS: One thing I want to ask you, apropos of something you said earlier about being a trustee of an organization—I'd really like to start with AFA, because that was the first kind of arts organization you became

involved—

DAVID M. SOLINGER: Yeah, that was about 25 years ago.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What interested you in the AFA? Their general exhibition program that they had in those days?

DAVID M. SOLINGER: I think that I wasn't sensible enough, really, to ask myself that question, which I certainly would now. I think I joined the AFA board because some friends asked me to, and told me there was an opportunity to be of service, and that I would enjoy it. I said, well, why not try it? As I became a trustee and got into the work, I became involved, which is the usual formula, I think. I headed the drive to pay off the mortgage on the building that they acquired on 65th Street. Succeeded in doing that, held an art auction. I guess, at one time, I was the first vice president. Roy Neuberger was the president. Then there is kind of a peak. I got more and more interested in the Whitney. [00:46:00] There are only so many things you can do.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right, that's true. What interested you in—or what does one get out of being a trustee of the American Federation of Arts? Because you did spend many years.

DAVID M. SOLINGER: I'm not at all active at the moment.

PAUL CUMMINGS: No, but you were for quite a while.

DAVID M. SOLINGER: Yeah, raises the question. I think there are several things. I think you get out of it what you put into it. That's an old cliché, but I think it's true. As you—one has any imagination, and one has any sense of dedication, there are so many weaknesses that are exposed at meetings and in conversations, and so many areas that can be strengthened, and so many opportunities, so many things that people feel—so many ways in which one can help, that one pitches in. It's not like a business organization, where you're paid to do it. There are trustees at all levels of all institutions. Some make a vital contribution. Some make a little or no contribution. There's an old song about trustees. They should—when selecting them, one should be guided by the three Ws: work, wisdom, and wealth. There are some trustees who are valuable because they give large sums of money and don't do anything else. Others are valuable because they devote a lot of time to the organization, and get jobs done that have to be done. Finally, there are some who have qualities of leadership and wisdom, and who give their counsel, and help in that way. [00:48:00] The satisfaction is to the individual, or very personal. There are some who get their satisfaction only behind being known as a trustee of AFA, others by doing a job and don't give a damn whether they're known or not, and everything in between.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did you become involved with the Whitney? I suppose—

DAVID M. SOLINGER: That I remember very well. I got a call one day from Lloyd Goodrich, in 1956. He asked me if I would attend a meeting that he was calling of a small group of people who had befriended the museum or were interested in the museum. I think the list was taken largely, if not entirely, from people who had made gifts to the museum of pictures. You will recall that, at that time, the museum was entirely a private institution. It charged no admission. It supported itself and its operations exclusively by utilizing the income from an endowment created by Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney, which at that time was about $300,000 a year.

PAUL CUMMINGS: The income? Right.

DAVID M. SOLINGER: The income. The museum was living on a budget of about $300,000 a year. Lloyd was troubled, because as costs of salaries, light, heat, et cetera, rose, the income from the endowment did not rise enough to keep track of—this was during the earlier days of inflation. It was a quarter of a century ago—almost a quarter of a century. [00:50:02] At that particular time, the Whitney had, after paying for nuts and bolts to stay in business, it had only $16,000 left for the purchase of pictures. So Lloyd's idea was to gather a group of people together who would make some contributions to the museum, dollars, which could be used for the purchase of pictures to augment that $16,000 a year. Out of that meeting grew a suggestion that the group organize a formal organization called the Friends of the Whitney Museum, which I headed. I became its first friend—first president. I did the legal work, being a lawyer. Organized it into what we call a membership corporation—nonprofit. Today it would be called a not-for-profit organization. Everything changes, including law.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It means the same thing. But that was now a separate entity from the museum?

DAVID M. SOLINGER: A separate entity from the museum, not attached to it in any way. I still recall, the next step after we organized the Friends and we got a few—the people around the table, most of them joined. I recall distinctly debating what we should give. The suggestion was that this small group of people give $500 a piece a year. Maybe because I didn't have the $500, or maybe because I really thought so, I suggested that I thought you could get more than twice as many people at [$]250 than you could at [$]500. In other words, if you got 10 people at [$]500, you might get 25 at [$]250. [00:52:03] So instead of winding up with [$]5,000, you would wind

up with more than [$]5,000. We fixed the dues at [$]250 a year. In November or December of 1956, there was an event at the museum in which there were invited a number of so-called art patrons and collectors. Mrs. Miller, who was the president of the museum, introduced me as the—I was already the first president of the Friends, but anyway, I was the speechmaker, and I told the people present what we were doing. We had delineated the privileges of being friends, one of them being the ability to borrow a picture from the museum's collection, and invitations to openings [inaudible] so on and so forth. Within the first year, we got 75 members, which was considerably more than I think Lloyd had hoped for. This then became—it was the beginnings of a constituency. The Whitney Museum had no constituency, being solely a family museum. Then there ensued five years, from late 1956 until '61, in which Lloyd and I, and perhaps others, saw that if the museum was to go ahead, that it would have to be converted. It would have to go public. It would have to change from its status as a small, private museum to a broad-based institution. Both Lloyd and I had some talks with Mrs. Miller, who, intellectually, saw the validity of what we said, but emotionally, and understandably, resisted the idea of having the museum go public. [00:54:16] I still remember her saying, "It's all so pleasant now. There's such an absence of disagreement and friction, and it would be nice to keep it this way." But to her credit, in 1961, the board of the Whitney Museum, which was a very small board, consisting of five people—three of them being the children of Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney, the fourth being the family lawyer—I think the fifth was Herman Moore, who was Lloyd's predecessor, and was still director of the museum. They enlarged the board of the Whitney Museum. They enlarged it in kind of a limited way. They took seven new trustees. Of the seven, two were the Irvings, who were the granddaughter and grandson-in-law of the founder, Mrs. Miller's daughter-in-law. Two were Lloyd Goodrich and Jack Baur. Unless Lloyd—Herman Moore may already have been succeeded by that time. I think he was. So it was—

PAUL CUMMINGS: I think so, yeah.

DAVID M. SOLINGER: He was one of that five. So it was Jack Baur, and the Irvings, and Arthur Altschul, Bob Friedman, Roy Neuberger, and myself. They still clung to this old idea, let's—they didn't quite trust themselves, I guess, and us, so we were—while we were trustees, we had very limited powers. [00:56:04] We couldn't deal with the property of the museum, the finances of the museum. They embarked upon this program as a kind of compromise, not really wanting to—not really trusting themselves or us. Within six months, I think we demonstrated, the new trustees demonstrated, how invaluable they were in any number of ways. This was changed, and in less than a year, we became trustees with full powers, in the same manner that everybody else—the other trustees were trustees. It was comical in a way, because Barbara Headley, one of the five, never came to a meeting. I've never—never been to a meeting since 1961, when I was on the board. Ultimately, she was dropped and her son Barkley took her place. Sonny Whitney, C.V. Whitney, never was at a board. He used to send a representative, which is illegal as I—when you're a director, you can't direct by proxy. You can give your proxy to others, but wholly aside from the legalities.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What do you think that was? It's always intrigued me that—

DAVID M. SOLINGER: Why?

PAUL CUMMINGS: —the whole other side of the Whitney family has never really been too involved.

DAVID M. SOLINGER: They don't like contemporary art. I think that's easy. That's clear. Sonny has started his own museum out in Wyoming, and Barbara Headley—they simply do not like contemporary modes of expression. They're not with it, and don't want to be with it. [00:58:03] Something else I wanted to say in connection with this, in answer to your question. Well, the next—you asked about my involvement from—I would say over a period from 1956 until I relinquished the presidency three years ago, my role in the development of the Whitney was that role of taking it public, so that during my presidency of the Friends, and then presidency of the board of trustees for a period of eight years, from '66 to '74, we grew from an institution that had a budget of—we grew ten-fold budget-wise. We had a budget of well over $2.5 million a year. Employees grew almost as much. We now have about 100 employees. The endowment is no longer solely contributions of Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney. We raised about $7 million to build a new building, of which 10 percent came from the Rockefeller family, which is amusing, because I ran into—in raising that money, or helping to raise that money, I encountered a traditional rivalry between the Rockefellers and the Whitneys, which I was totally unaware of. Very interesting.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did that evince itself? I mean, they were both—

DAVID M. SOLINGER: Oh, in several ways. Most recently, when I went to Lawrence and Mary Rockefeller. [01:00:02] Mary Rockeller had been a member of our board for several years. I endeavored to get them to increase their contributions. Said to me, "Why doesn't Jack do it? Why doesn't this Whitney do it? Why do you come to the Rockefellers?" Oh, there have been many manifestations of it. I think that it's a race in which the Rockefellers long ago out-distanced the Whitneys.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But how have you found it, from the early days of the Friends, to attract people? Was it a one-to-one basis? Was it through social events? Was it through—

DAVID M. SOLINGER: It's a combination. The Whitney has so many wonderful things going for it. It has character. It has a character. It has a personality. It's not just another museum. There is the traditional friendship that the museum has for the artist, the warmth that exists between artists on the one hand, the museum on the other. The Whitney has always been willing to take a chance. It shows work that other museums would not show. It has a boldness and an audacity, and a lack of stodginess. This attracts people, and it attracts interesting people. You go to a Whitney opening, you find a lot of artists there. Whitney thinks artists are important. Recognizes that they make the product that we all feed on.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But how—the Whitney also has been rather controversial at certain times in its history. [01:02:00]

DAVID M. SOLINGER: Thank goodness. [They laugh.]

PAUL CUMMINGS: You like that? But how do you find it? When you go, say, to a meeting of people, or somebody who knows you're involved with the museum, do they say, "Oh, what are you doing up there again?" Do you defend it a lot? Are you attacked by people publicly? What happens?

DAVID M. SOLINGER: I think I'm attacked much less than I would expect to be, and I have to defend much less than I would—the defenses that I have to make, when I do have to make them, are as the result of attacks from philistines. The knowledgeable people are very understanding. I had a woman call me last week, telling me that she was either a friend of or representing the estate of the greatest American sculptor. I said, "Really? Who's that?" She said Malvina Hoffman.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, right. Right.

DAVID M. SOLINGER: She was going to do the Whitney a great favor, and she was going to let the Whitney have some of these things. I explained to her that trustees never got into artistic decisions, and she should get in touch with Tom Armstrong, and I warned Tom what would happen. Now, that kind of person would be likely to tell me how dumb we are, how insensitive we are, how we don't know. It's attack from that kind of a corner that I get. I have—I never cease hearing from one of the trustees of the Whitney Museum out in Wyoming how we should have a great Remington show, all Remingtons. [01:04:10] I don't mean to treat Remington as a non-artist. He has his place in art and art history, as I suppose Malvina Hoffman does, too. But most of the criticism and most of the attacks, to the extent that one is subject to them, are from corners which, really, one doesn't take too seriously.

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PAUL CUMMINGS: This is side two. Continue on the trustee activities. When you first became trustee at the Whitney, it was a small board. It was a smaller building, a smaller operation. It had a somewhat more conservative focus, but not too much. It was always pretty close to what was new and what was going on.

DAVID M. SOLINGER: I think it was a less conservative focus. The rest of it I agree with, but I think it's a less conservative—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Really?

DAVID M. SOLINGER: Yeah. I think the conservatism—I think Tom is more conservative than Jack. Now, maybe not more conservative generationally speaking. In other words, he's 25 years younger. But Tom is a traditionalist, and while Jack, I think, was more closely attuned to showing what was new and having a great many shows, Tom is a great believer in showing the permanent collection and relating what's going on to the past.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But I think showing the permanent collection was part of a committee's recommendation on the museum, was it not? That whole idea.

DAVID M. SOLINGER: Yeah, but those recommendations can be accepted or rejected, and I think Tom supported that recommendation whole-heartedly. And whereas I'm not in disagreement with showing the permanent collection, I think I would be perhaps less rigid in showing it at all times. [00:02:03] I think it's great to show it most of the time, or some of the time.

PAUL CUMMINGS: There are lots of great things there.

DAVID M. SOLINGER: No question of it. But the time will come when we may want to turn over the whole museum to things other than the permanent collection.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I know one day at a meeting, somebody said, "What's shown in New York in American painting?" We realized, at that point, the Metropolitan only had about three galleries, the Guggenheim had a European exhibition, the Museum of Modern Art had the same three or four galleries up. So if you came to New York, the only place you could see a broad range of 20th-century American art would be at the Whitney.

DAVID M. SOLINGER: That's true. Well, that's fine. That's a fine thing to do, and no one quarrels [ph] with that. It's a matter of degree. I'm not—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, yeah, right, absolutely. Absolutely. How have you found, over the years, the development of new people to become trustees? Because it's—

DAVID M. SOLINGER: That's one of the most difficult problems that any institution has, and ours is no exception. Ideally, what you seek in a trustee is someone not only who is willing to work, that is wise, and who is not only wealthy but generous with his wealth; you also hope to find qualities of leadership. Museum presidents differ in their views, as do individual trustees differ. Leading, being president of a museum, is not unlike being the headmaster of a school. Every time you change headmasters, the character of the school changes a little bit. [00:04:01] If a president is any good, that is. If he has a personality, if he has any ideas and concepts. I referred to my administration as one of tremendous growth, which could only be accomplished with a well-organized, able team. I was very fortunate to have Jack Baur and Steve Wyle [ph], and the three of us functioned beautifully together, each of us doing his thing, and merging that doing of our respective things into an endeavor which was, I think, highly successful. We kept the board relatively small, and that was my doing, because I had very, very high expectations of anybody that we put on the board. I was very reluctant to put anyone on the board who was not a known quantity, in the sense that we knew precisely what to expect. When they went on the board, they went on the board for a purpose, to do a job, because we knew we could expect work in a certain area where we needed somebody, plus money, plus wisdom. We didn't settle very often for less than the full combination. As the museum has grown—and I'm not saying that that policy was right or wrong—but during Howard's three-year presidency, the board has increased tremendously in size. A typical Whitney trustee has been Mr. Moneybags, or Mrs. Moneybags. [00:06:00] In some instances, there is more than that. A few of these people are also collectors. There have been one or two exceptions where we've taken a scholar, such as Jules Prown, but for the most part, they are people who are rich. There's nothing wrong with that.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Absolutely.

DAVID M. SOLINGER: I have done what I could to find people who are not only rich, but were also young and ambitious and have qualities of leadership, and we have some of those. I think one of the greatest needs of our board has been some young, aggressive, ambitious people, who ultimately can take over the presidency.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What happens if you have a vacancy or two in the board? Do you think about people? Does the board talk about it?

DAVID M. SOLINGER: Oh, yes. A committee, a nominating committee, it's their business to go over lists and lists of names, and to think of people, and to identify. You see, there was no one who went on our board who didn't have some interest in American art, who wasn't a collector of American art. I think that's probably remained true, to a greater or lesser degree. They all have some—

PAUL CUMMINGS: —involvement?

DAVID M. SOLINGER: Involvement in American art. They all also should either be very hard workers, or very rich, or both.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What kind of advice would you give somebody who wants to be a trustee of an arts organization? AFA or a museum. [00:08:00]

DAVID M. SOLINGER: See to it that your father makes you a rich WASP [they laugh] and evidence an interest in the arts.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Sometimes hard to do after the fact, though, isn't it? You know, I—because I'm a trustee of a couple of minuscule organizations, and I find that, frequently, people from other cities call up or write letters and say, "Can you do this? Can you do that? Can you give us information?" Have you had experience like that in being involved with the trustees?

DAVID M. SOLINGER: I'm sorry, I didn't get that. My mind—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Being used as a kind of sounding board or information source from other museum people, from other institutions around the country. Do you have requests for ideas for gifts, for—

DAVID M. SOLINGER: Sometimes, sure. Sure. But I would not say that that's a frequent occurrence. It really works the other way, that I think my deep involvement with the Whitney has been a kind of insulation, almost a hands-off warning, because people think that it would be impossible for me to devote any time or attention to other things. As a matter of fact, there are a great many people who think I work full-time at the Whitney Museum.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Really?

DAVID M. SOLINGER: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, that's fascinating.

DAVID M. SOLINGER: I get mail there. I'm not talking only about official mail, addressed to president or chairman of the board, but I'm talking about people who call me there, people who try to reach me there, who think that it's a full-time job. [00:10:03] And, you know, it could be. One could make it a full-time job.

PAUL CUMMINGS: There's an enormous amount of work to do—

DAVID M. SOLINGER: Oh, yes. No question.

PAUL CUMMINGS: —in any of those situations. Now, you were—I guess one of the things a trustee does is help to raise money for the acquisition of works of art. Have you been involved ever in particular projects, or has it always been general fund-raising for the collection, say?

PAUL CUMMINGS: At the Whitney?

DAVID M. SOLINGER: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, my God, yes. I raised—I was the—I headed up the drive to raise the money to build a new building. It was a $7 million drive. Now it's [$]6 million, but now we exceeded it. Then, of course, there is annual giving, which, as president, always wrote letters, and then made personal appeals to public people.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you find the personal appeals are more productive?

DAVID M. SOLINGER: Oh, sure. Sure. It's so easy to throw a letter in the wastepaper basket, but one has to deal, on a face-to-face—telephone call is more effective than a letter, and a personal—and—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right. What do you think motivates somebody to give, if they don't live in New York, but they're a collector, and they're involved with things? What motivates somebody like that to give a substantial amount of money to a museum? Or works of art?

DAVID M. SOLINGER: I think there is no one motivation. I think it is—there are various motivations. [00:12:05] It depends on the people. Institutions sometimes find that they get a legacy of several million dollars from someone that they don't even know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, I know.

DAVID M. SOLINGER: I think, as people get older, life becomes lonelier and lonelier. They are neglected. Unlike the Chinese, we don't revere our old. As one gets older oneself, one sees more of this. Children are not only emancipated, but alienated.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Move way, live in different areas.

DAVID M. SOLINGER: Yes, and become interested in their own lives. I think our culture does not foster respect for the aged. That's one aspect of it. People are—their contacts become limited. I think the tax laws encourage this kind of thing. There are some people who are truly motivated by charitable instincts. There are some people who want the notoriety of having made a substantial gift, want publicity. There are many, many motivations. The combination of these and other things, I don't think it's ever that quite—one can't be so simplistic about it and say it's this.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's many different levels and percentages. One thing I'm noticing in your office here, that you have paintings. [00:14:00] I have a long time experience with corporations that have bought works of art, and I wondered if you had—or what the experience you've had with clients who come in and see that you have paintings.

DAVID M. SOLINGER: Yes, what their reaction is to the paintings?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah, what do they say?

DAVID M. SOLINGER: That's an interesting question. I've always been interested not so much in the office, but at home. There are people who come to the office and express pleasure at being in an office that they consider to be less formal, less business-like, if you will. They don't verbalize it in terms of works of art, but they do recognize that it's different. It isn't the typical lawyer's office, where you see a bunch of diplomas and certificates on the wall, with a—

PAUL CUMMINGS: A Daumier print and a file cabinet. [Laughs.]

DAVID M. SOLINGER: But you see, most of them are file cabinet and a certificate, or a diploma, or, if there are any pictures, it's a photograph of the nine justices of the Supreme Court. At home, I'm astonished at the number of people who say absolutely nothing about works of art. They fall, I believe, into two major categories. Those who literally do not see them.

PAUL CUMMINGS: They just don't see what's in front of them?

DAVID M. SOLINGER: They are not aware of the fact—maybe in a subliminal way, they are aware of the fact that there is decoration, wall decoration, and that's all. The other—there is another category that I think is embarrassed. [00:16:05] People are embarrassed. They feel that I know something that they don't, and they don't want to show their stupidity.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But what about people who do see what it is? Do many people know who the artist is and what the works are?

DAVID M. SOLINGER: Oh, there are some. The fact of the matter, I think Tom Wolfe, in his essay, which appeared a year or two ago—what was it called? "Power of the Art World" or—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, there was something about that. I don't know—

DAVID M. SOLINGER: It was—I've forgotten. He pointed out, and I think he's quite right, that the number of people who are interested in the visual arts is infinitesimal.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, yeah. It's only one or two percent of the—

DAVID M. SOLINGER: Very, very small. Very, very small. This is like olives. It's an acquired taste. It's silly to think of it as universal. People go to museums, sure. They're a little bit awed, and they think they ought to do it and improve the mind. But the number of people to whom it gives pleasure, I think, is very limited.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes, I agree. Absolutely.

DAVID M. SOLINGER: So whether one is in an office—sure, it's a crazy kind of office, a different kind of office. At home, it's the same way. It's decoration to most people. What they recognize is an attractive bedroom, or an attractive living room, without realizing why.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You mentioned before that you had collected books involved with English literature. Have you built other collections, or is it the books and the paintings, the art, that's really [00:18:02]—

DAVID M. SOLINGER: No, I don't think so.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you still collect books?

DAVID M. SOLINGER: No.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's really hard to do both of them, because they both require so much time.

DAVID M. SOLINGER: Well, I don't even collect paintings anymore. They've become so expensive, and I don't get around. I don't know—I'm not in tune with what the young people are doing.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What do you think of the shift in the art market in terms of—in the '50s, a young artist would appear, and paintings were $300, $400, or less even sometimes, and now they—a year out of Pratt, they want $4,000 for a painting. I don't think the economy has shifted that much.

DAVID M. SOLINGER: I'm reminded of my old teacher and friend, Bob Philipp, who is a great pal of an artist named Brackman, Bob Brackman. Philipp and Brackman were very competitive. There was a show, quite traditional show, at the Metropolitan Museum, in which they showed both Brackman and Philipp, and I priced pictures of one of the Philipp. It was $5,000. I saw him, and I said, "Bob, isn't that a hell of a price for you to get

on your picture? Don't you want to sell it?" He said, "Well, Brackman charges [$]5,000 for his, and if he charges [$]5,000, I'm as good a painter as he is. That's the price of mine." So he'd rather not sell a picture at [$]5,000, I guess, than not sell it at [$]3,500.

PAUL CUMMINGS: There is a lot of competition. When you were active collecting in the '50s, you really worked mostly with the dealers, didn't you?

DAVID M. SOLINGER: Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Were there any that were particularly interesting to you?

DAVID M. SOLINGER: Dealers?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah. You know, who were informative about, or called you when they got special pictures, or was it just a constant looking and finding things? [00:20:10]

DAVID M. SOLINGER: No, I don't recall people calling me. I just went around and went around. Kept going.

PAUL CUMMINGS: When did you start buying less art? Was that as you got more involved with the museum or—

DAVID M. SOLINGER: It was a combination of things. It was a combination of my walls being crowded and the prices going up. I never paid any real money for a picture. It was very hard for me to adjust. I remember, in 1952, falling in love with Braque. Ted Champ [ph] had a show in his apartment on 72nd Street, and there were Braques from $2,500 to $10,000. I could not bring myself to spend $3,000 or $4,000 on a picture, which to me meant a new car, which I needed very much. A new car would transport me about. The picture would only give me visual pleasure. My values were wrong. I should have made that break, but I didn't.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. That's amazing to think of buying a Braque at that point in history for those prices.

DAVID M. SOLINGER: Yes. No question. Marvelous price. I must say, my wife, who never encouraged me to buy pictures, did encourage me to spend money. She didn't encourage me to buy pictures, but then she never could understand why, if I was going to buy a picture anyway, I wouldn't spend more on it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Was she interested in the art ever?

DAVID M. SOLINGER: Not at all.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Nothing? The children interested?

DAVID M. SOLINGER: They claim not to be, but the fact is that they both have pictures. It's not a passion with either of them. [00:22:01]

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's just a nice addition—

DAVID M. SOLINGER: Yeah, they're—

PAUL CUMMINGS: —to life.

DAVID M. SOLINGER: Yeah. They grew up really—and there are subtle reasons why they wouldn't be.

PAUL CUMMINGS: To talk about the AFA, which we haven't really very much, that's always been a kind of curious organization from my point of view, because I guess it's a national one. It has a board made up of collectors, museum directors, trustees of other institutions. I gather, now they have so many people on the board, it's almost unwieldy. But did you find the meetings and the activity enlightening or useful in any way?

DAVID M. SOLINGER: The AFA is an unfortunate illustration.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's a unique kind of institution.

DAVID M. SOLINGER: Yes, it has, like all institutions, I guess, has its own particular problems. The board meetings were boring for years, because the president was a boring man who talked on and on and on, and drove people away, and always talked about the same things. So that my notion about a board meeting is that it's a place where business is done, and most of the work of any organization ought to be done at the committee level, with committees bringing in reports for the board to act upon. Any place where people start to think of things for the first time at a board meeting, and then discuss them in the presence of a large group, is not very productive. So the board has had a series of—had a few presidents of that kind. [00:24:00] I ceased going to

meetings a long time ago, simply because—for those reasons.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It just wasn't productive?

DAVID M. SOLINGER: That's right. Boredom, and lack of productivity. The AFA has had a real identity problem for a long time. People recognize that the traveling shows are a fine service, but—

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's getting to be so expensive.

DAVID M. SOLINGER: That's right. Once one passes from a traveling show aspect of its functions to other things, there's always a little bit of the sense that they're scratching for things to do, and ways in which to make themselves useful. It might be better if they really concentrated on the few things they do well, and did them. I don't know how successful the film program is. I think it has some degree of success.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you know—one thing that's always interested me about the Whitney is the fact that it has, until the new building and until recently, been only a painting and sculpture museum. Recently, it's opened to film, to video. They've had poetry readings and various things like that. Do you think a museum should expand into as many other audio/visual activities as possible?

DAVID M. SOLINGER: I think it should expand into anything that it can do, and do well, without creating budgetary and financial problems, which will make the museum's future more questionable. I think the idea of a film program, and poetry readings, and the kinds of things we've done are very good, because it exposes some people to the visual arts who might not otherwise have been exposed, and it exposes an audience which is already culturally sensitive. [00:26:13] Having said that, I recognize that I have seen an awful lot of people go to those poetry readings, and go directly to the place where the poetry reading is, never look at the walls—

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right out afterwards.

DAVID M. SOLINGER: Right out the door, and never look around.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's the same way with the film program. They walk up the staircase, and right out again.

DAVID M. SOLINGER: Out they go.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But sometimes they might stop.

DAVID M. SOLINGER: Sometimes they don't. That's right.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right. You never know. Can I ask you, what do you think of as your major accomplishments with the Whitney? You had such a key position there for so long that there must be certain points or activities that stand out.

DAVID M. SOLINGER: I think my major accomplishment was to take it public. We now have 60 or 70 corporate members giving us $1,000 a year. We now have 750 or 800 Friends giving us $250 a year. We now have the Whitney Circle, which—some of those Friends, instead of [$]250, give us [$]1,000. The board has been strengthened and enlarged. Our programs and facilities have expanded, both in terms of number and quality. We have inaugurated, initiated, a number of innovative programs, such as the film program. [00:28:07] I think the museum, without changing its character, has been transformed from a small family museum to a medium-sized, publicly supported one.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But I think, also its reputation has much beyond its own size.

DAVID M. SOLINGER: I think that's true.

PAUL CUMMINGS: From all my years of being around or watching it, looking at it, the 20-some years I lived in New York, and even traveling around the country, it's much more provocative for the Whitney to do something than larger museums in other cities, even. I mean, if it were the same project, you know. It's very interesting that way. I wanted to ask you about the Friends again, because they, some time ago, became part of the Whitney. There was a corporate shift there, wasn't there?

DAVID M. SOLINGER: Yes. What happened was that the Friends were initially organized to contribute money which would be used solely for the purchase of works of art. I wanted to change that to make the Friends the museum's membership body. I wanted to do away with the restriction that Friends' dues could be used solely for the purchase of works of art. So that—we merged the Friends into the museum, and now our members—we had only one class of membership still at $250 a year. [00:30:11] It's relatively recently that we've had corporate members. Now we have the Whitney Circle, all of whom contribute $1,000 a year. Incidentally, it's little known, but we also have—people can buy an annual pass to the museum for 25 bucks a year.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right, which gets them in and out.

DAVID M. SOLINGER: Gets them in and out, and in a sense, this is really a form of membership.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I wanted to ask you about the corporate members, because that seems to be a growing, rather difficult activity, still, for museums all across the country. In New York, it must be even more difficult. There are more institutions after corporate patronage and support. I think—how many years has the Whitney had corporate members now? Not very long.

DAVID M. SOLINGER: Well, I would say a half a dozen at least.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So to have gotten that many, it's pretty good.

DAVID M. SOLINGER: Yeah. I think there has been a growing awareness on the part of corporations that there are good reasons for some of them to identify themselves with the arts. I think it helps their image in some instances. It is sometimes a better buy than spending their charity dollars in other directions.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you think it's hard to persuade corporations to join the museum?

DAVID M. SOLINGER: No, I don't think so. I think that it's simply a matter of appealing to—making the right appeal. [00:32:00] For example, the downtown museum is supported largely by contributions from business organizations in that area. And they believe that they are making a contribution to an organization which helps to entertain their people [inaudible].

[Audio Break.]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Don't corporations have a fairly substantial percentage of their profits that they can give away, in tax terms?

DAVID M. SOLINGER: Oh, sure. Five percent. But the question is how to spend that five percent.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But most of them don't spend anywhere near that five percent, do they?

DAVID M. SOLINGER: I think it differs from corporation to corporation. I don't know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you find corporate members lead you to other corporate—

DAVID M. SOLINGER: Sure.

PAUL CUMMINGS: They do?

DAVID M. SOLINGER: In the business world, there's nothing that succeeds like success. It's crazy. You mentioned trustees before. I think of corporate directors. I think there are very few corporate directors that are only directors of one corporation.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's true.

DAVID M. SOLINGER: Except in the case of the relatively small family type of corporation.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right, closely held.

DAVID M. SOLINGER: Closely held corporation. To me, it's amazing. The best way to be on another corporate board is to already be on 10.

PAUL CUMMINGS: The more, the merrier.

DAVID M. SOLINGER: Well, it's sheepish. Sheepish.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I was going to ask you about that, because you were a member of the Century—right?—Association, the Cornell Club, and various things. [00:34:05] Does that get you involved with people who are interested in the arts or—

DAVID M. SOLINGER: Being a member of the Century or Cornell Club?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, at Cornell, other social activities, or is that just another kind of activity or a sidelight that contrasts—

DAVID M. SOLINGER: I am a graduate of Cornell University. I am the chairman of the museum council there. I

don't know whether that appears in the school.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah, somewhere it refers to that.

DAVID M. SOLINGER: But I don't think that that has anything to do with being a member of the Cornell Club or the Century. I suppose that—well, the Century is, by definition, a group of amateurs of arts and letters, and I suppose if I had no interest in the arts, I might not be a member of the Century. The Century is a unique club in that respect. Most social clubs are just that: social clubs. Most people use them as luncheon clubs. Some people use them as places to exercise or—

PAUL CUMMINGS: A gym. Swim and—

DAVID M. SOLINGER: Gym. They swim.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you find, though, that you, through those other activities, meet people who become interested in the museum, or who might, years ago, become interested in AFA or—

DAVID M. SOLINGER: Not really.

PAUL CUMMINGS: —pretty separate?

DAVID M. SOLINGER: Not really.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's pretty separate.

DAVID M. SOLINGER: I think what happens is that people become interested in the arts for their own reasons. Once, having established that initial interest, they join things, or art, which supplement that interest or augment that interest, and then one meets them. [00:36:04] For example, last night at the Whitney Museum, I met at least a dozen people that I hadn't known before. One's social life is changed by interest in a museum. I find myself going to parties at museums. There was the Frick party a week ago. There is a Museum of Modern Art garden party next month. These are social events. Those parties might just as well be at a hotel, or at a club, as at a museum. But the people that one meets are usually—half of them—three quarters of them are people who have some interest in the arts. And so more and more, one's social life is taken up with people who have mutual interests. Then, as those interests develop, you get to know people, and you might ask them to join the Friends of the Whitney Museum, and might put them on a committee and see how they function.

PAUL CUMMINGS: See what happens.

DAVID M. SOLINGER: See what happens. They make donations to the museum, and they show qualities of leadership on a committee, and ultimately they become trustees.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I think it's very hard to kind of plan the support of any cultural institution, in terms of how to find a certain number of people. It seems that it's rather personal and rather chancy. If one were to say, "In the next year, we want to get 250 new Friends," unless one really did some special program, would be rather difficult, wouldn't it? [00:38:00] All the museum memberships fluctuate a certain percentage every year.

DAVID M. SOLINGER: Many ways of doing this. Of course, we have on our staff Walter Poshuck [ph], who is a professional in this field. There are many ways of doing it. Political campaigns, somebody gives a party. They almost have a price of admission.

PAUL CUMMINGS: [Laughs.] That's true. That's true. I was going to ask you—one thing we haven't talked about, and I think was only hinted at when you said that most of the collecting was done in the early '50s, and not so much recently, and that's in terms of the sort of money value of works of art. Has that had any particular interest to you or—

DAVID M. SOLINGER: Money value?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah, at the time of the acquisition.

DAVID M. SOLINGER: At the time of purchase, the only interest was that I regarded works of art as things one bought with what one might term pin money to spare money. It never occurred to me that one might give up anything to buy a work of art. I think that has changed as the prices of works of art have gone up. I think there are very few people who are in a financial position now to buy works of art, as one would buy a new necktie.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Why do you think the prices have gone up so high so rapidly? It really interests me, because I think in terms of the history of the art market, high art has always been sort of expensive, but it seems to have gotten somewhat out of proportion in the last 10 or 15 years. [00:40:15]

DAVID M. SOLINGER: Well, I think the question you're asking is really a very much broader question: why have the prices of anything gone up, and everything gone up? Before World War I, I paid an excellent secretary $30 a week, and today I can't get an excellent secretary for $270 a week. I have second-raters at nine times what I paid a secretary 40 years ago. Works of art are like anything else in our economy, and the easy and the ready answer is it's because of inflation. But I think that that isn't the whole story by any means. It is what one writer in *Forbes* magazine, November 15, 1976, refers to as diffusion. When—it's a redistribution of wealth, taxes, and those of us who work are paying the freight for people who do not work. We are paying the freight for many, many things. Ecological reforms cost money.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Absolutely.

DAVID M. SOLINGER: It's a complex question that you asked, and I think works of art are just like everything else. [00:42:00]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you think it also has to do with the efficiency of the museums in doing exhibitions, attracting publicity, increasing their attendance? All of the—

DAVID M. SOLINGER: I wish. I wish–

PAUL CUMMINGS: The success seems to push the prices up.

DAVID M. SOLINGER: I wish I could say yes. I think our society has changed. I think our values have changed. We have more leisure than we did. When I first started to practice law, I worked six-and-a-half days a week, and then five-and-a-half days. Now, five days. I did a lot of night work. Don't do much anymore. Our society has changed radically, and I think the answer to your question lies in—

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's also become wealthier, too. Don't you think?

DAVID M. SOLINGER: It depends on what you mean by wealthier. In terms of true wealth, I don't think so. In terms of productivity, I'm not convinced of it. There's more money around, but has it become wealthier? No. I pay in taxes more than I ever thought I would earn as a young man. I think there are a great many people who can say that. There's just a general increase in the price of everything, increase in the size of everything. We've outgrown the plant.

PAUL CUMMINGS: True. But that seems to be such an American thing as opposed to Europe, where [00:44:01]—

DAVID M. SOLINGER: Oh, yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: —it will stay the same size generation after generation.

DAVID M. SOLINGER: It is very much, and I quite agree in that. Quite agree in that.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Here it's more—

DAVID M. SOLINGER: But I think the rest of the world has, too. Been to London or Paris after a long—

PAUL CUMMINGS: You see new buildings cropping up. Yes, absolutely. Your law practice has been involved with television and copyright and things of that nature?

DAVID M. SOLINGER: Oh, at one time.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It was?

DAVID M. SOLINGER: The history of that is kind of amusing. My law practice is a general corporate and trust and estates practice. I spent almost five years in the army, and after I came out of the army—I had built a practice before the war. Even though I was a young man, I had a substantial practice. After I got out of the army, I found that, in five years, everybody had forgotten about me. First one of my major clients was one of the half dozen leading advertising agencies. There was, first being introduced at that time, in the middle '40s, this thing called television. So I decided that the way to put myself back on the map quickly was to become an authority on this new industry. I wrote some articles in law reviews and in other publications—I wrote articles in *Fortune* magazine—on television law. Brand-new subject then. I think the first law review article appeared in the *Columbia Law Review* in 1947 or ['4]8, and within a year, there were seven other articles on the same subject. [They laugh.] [00:46:03] It says something. I lectured at the Practicing Law Institute and at various law schools. So I became an authority in this field, but actually it represents a very small—what happened was that I recaptured a substantial corporate and estates practice. But we're living in an age in which people are supposed to be specialists. Everyone is thought of as a specialist.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Do you think that's true?

DAVID M. SOLINGER: Do I think what is true?

PAUL CUMMINGS: That people really are specialists, or that they're—

DAVID M. SOLINGER: I think there are. Yes, I think there are, and I think that the public is being led down—I think they're really not very sophisticated. One of the definitions of a specialist is someone who knows more and more about less and less, and it's perfectly true. I find that specialists with whom I deal go through their lives, their professional practices, with blinders on. One of the things that—one of the values of—one of the things that a good lawyer can contribute to his client is judgment and a broad view. There are very few lawyers. There are a lot of specialists, a lot of technicians. I think, for that reason, the client relationships we have, we've had for a very, very long period of time, where there are sophisticated clients who value what we know about their business. Not only about the law, but their business. [00:48:00]

PAUL CUMMINGS: There's one thing, I guess, that I always ask collectors, and some of them get upset. [Laughs.] There must always be works of art that one thought one wanted and didn't buy that somebody else got. Have you had many instances of paintings that got away from you, or works like that?

DAVID M. SOLINGER: No. I think of one, but I don't find that so upsetting. The regrets I have are not that I lost out to someone else, but rather things that I didn't have the wit to buy, that I loved, but was too penny-pinching. Those are the misses that I regret. I'm a much better sport at being beaten out than I am at my own infirmities and stupidities.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What does one do with a collection?

DAVID M. SOLINGER: Good question. If one gets old enough, one starts to think about that. I don't know. I am thinking about it now. I never thought about it until the last year. There have been changes in my life. I think it would be relatively easy to decide that question for me if I knew what kind of a world we were going to live in, five years, 10 years, 15 years from now. I think I would like to give it to the public by giving it to an institution or institutions, but I don't know whether those who survive me can afford that. One of the hedges against a collapse in our system is to own things rather than dollars. [00:50:08] Pictures do give some comfort along that line, because they are real value, as distinguished from currency.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So one has to walk a rather tight rope at one point.

DAVID M. SOLINGER: Well, this is my thinking at the moment.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I don't know what one does—and it's something that I've discovered, being involved with the Whitney recently, is that people do ask me, they say, "I've got 10 of these" or—

DAVID M. SOLINGER: Yeah, "What shall I do with them?"

PAUL CUMMINGS: "What should I do with them?"

DAVID M. SOLINGER: What do you say to them?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Pretty much what you just said. I said it depends on your family, depends on what the income situation is. The museum, of course, always likes to get major works.

DAVID M. SOLINGER: As a representative of the museum, let me make this suggestion to you. Why don't you say to them, "Well, I'd like to—do you know Walter Poshuck? I'd like you to sit down and talk with him." I don't know to what extent Walter remembers. We did some work on what we call deferred giving.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What's that now?

DAVID M. SOLINGER: Deferred giving is the ability to create what we call a unitrust or an annuity trust. It has to do with the giving of money as security, and securities rather than paintings. But it's possible, for example, for a man with no family—it's kind of technical, but he can give money or securities to a charitable institution, or a qualified institution, in exchange for which he will get either an annuity for the rest of his life, plus very favorable tax deductions immediately, or he will get an income—not a fixed income—for the rest of his life, which is variable, depending upon conditions, but against a minimum. [00:52:15] There are ways of giving pictures, too. In other words, it's an opportunity for us to get to know somebody better, or someone who's really worried about the problem.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I've often wondered why the Whitney doesn't work on the bequest business as much as other institutions.

DAVID M. SOLINGER: It's strictly—I'll tell you why. I can tell you, during my own administration, it was terribly much in my mind. There were always priorities. We are a small institution. We don't have a chance to explore everything, but there should be such a committee. I have before me a list of committees that Flora came down to see me about and give to me, just within the past week, I think. She was here on Monday. And there is such a committee.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Because so many museums have it in all their information.

DAVID M. SOLINGER: Oh, yes. I think they distribute information. Universities do it. You get it all the time. It isn't because it shouldn't be done. It's because we haven't had the manpower to do it effectively. There's no use doing something unless you can do it well. If you do it badly, you're better off not doing it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Absolutely. Are there any topics or points that you'd like to make that we haven't touched on or talked about?

DAVID M. SOLINGER: It seems to me we've touched on an awful lot. I've been talking for a long time. No, I don't think so.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Okay, well—

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]