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Oral history interview with Thomas M. Messer, 1994 Oct.-1995 Jan

Funding for the digital preservation of this interview was provided by a grant from the Save America's Treasures Program of the National Park Service.

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Thomas Messer on October 10, 1994 through January 25, 1995. The interview was conducted by Andrew Decker for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Thomas Messer has reviewed the transcript and made corrections and emendations. The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

THOMAS MESSER: Well how to begin. I was born in Czechoslovakia, and my father, who taught at the Charles University in Prague, was an art historian, though that was not the subject he taught. So I was surrounded on the one hand by his interests, and I went to some of the slide lectures he did for his students. And, on the other hand, my mother's family, who lived chiefly in what today is Bratislava, were professional musicians. So both art and music were part of my home and of my spiritual inheritance. But because of various reasons, particularly the economic picture in my youth, there was no thought of my studying either art or music professionally. I was sent to study chemistry in Prague, and I graduated from what was corresponding to a gymnasium, an undergraduate college, to obtain a degree in chemistry. And when I received a one-year scholarship to the United States as an exchange student, it was chemistry that brought me here, a subject that made me deeply unhappy and for which I had absolutely no natural inclination. And so, after two more unhappy years with the same subject I finally dropped it. It was in '39 that I came with the intention of staying in the US for one year but then added more than half a century, because war had broken out as I was crossing the Atlantic on my way to New York, so that what originally was to be a one year stipend was extended eventually transformed into a permanent move to the United States.

ANDREW DECKER: Scholarship came in '38 or '39?

THOMAS MESSER: The scholarship was in preparation since '38, I fell due in '39. I actually, in a romantic touch, left London on the 2nd of September, 1939. On the 3rd of September war was declared, and seven hours later, the boat on which I was bound for the United States was sunk by what must have been the first German torpedo fired in World War II. I was rescued, first back to Europe, and eventually made a second and this time successful try.

ANDREW DECKER: So you were returned to England and shipped off again to America. Czechoslovakia annexed in 1938?

THOMAS MESSER: The so-called Sudentenland, the strip of land at the northwest and northeast border was cut off in 1938, and the German armies occupied Czechoslovakia it in 1939.

ANDREW DECKER: Did life change for you at that point, or your parents' ability to work?

THOMAS MESSER: Life changed radically for everybody at that moment, of course. And while my original intention was simply to go to the United States to study for a year, it was, I would say, not a bad time to do so.

ANDREW DECKER: Where [did you] come to in the US?

THOMAS MESSER: My scholarship was given under the auspices of the Institute of International Education, an organization that I'm now a trustee of. And it was done by arrangement with the Czechoslovak Ministry of Education. And so they determined that I should go to Thiel College in Greenville, Pennsylvania on superficial grounds, for I had filled out a questionnaire that asked about my religion, which was Lutheran, and Thiel College was a pre-ministerial, Lutheran school. So I was sent there, and was very happy and grateful.

ANDREW DECKER: So you were a pre-ministerial chemistry student.

THOMAS MESSER: Yes. Both equally absurd. [laughs]

ANDREW DECKER: So that lasted for two years.

THOMAS MESSER: At Thiel, yes. I then switched. I'd had enough of ministerial chemistry.

ANDREW DECKER: So what exactly did you study at the Sorbonne?

THOMAS MESSER: The Sorbonne offered a general course from Egyptian art on. It lasted only one semester, so

it was certainly not exactly exhaustive. But I also took a course in French art, which took me from its beginnings through the late nineteenth-century. All that, however, was less important, than the fact that I made it a point to train my eye.

ANDREW DECKER: Just out of curiosity, did they have lectures with slide projectors at that time?

THOMAS MESSER: Yes. Large slides in black and white, but they did have that. Yes. And, of course, it was also my first very tentative move toward the art world as such. I started to go to galleries on a regular basis. The Musée d'Art Moderne had just opened in 1947 and had installed its collection of modern art. Apart from Prague where I grew up as a boy it was for me the first modern museum of importance. The one in Prague, of course, existed long before there was a MOMA in New York. Both Prague and Paris in this way provided me with my first important contacts with Modernism.

ANDREW DECKER: Now, you mentioned your father had studied art.

THOMAS MESSER: Yes. Not only studied it. He was an art historian and he lectured.

ANDREW DECKER: But was his area older?

THOMAS MESSER: Yes, it was older. Yes. It was older. He was in principle, always interested in modern art, but my father was born in 1881, in other words the year that Picasso was born. And so his notion of modernism is not your notion of modernism today. But I certainly did get the message from him, as well as from my maternal musical family; the message that modernist contemporary art and music was something to pay attention to.

ANDREW DECKER: And what was the gallery in Prague that had modern art?

THOMAS MESSER: It's the National Gallery. I forgot to put this down here, but I also had a contact with them in a trustee capacity. The Czechoslovak National Gallery, with its famous collection of Kramar -- Vincent Kramar -- who was the first director of that institution and a great collector. And he eventually left his collection to that museum which today has one of the finest public collections of French Cubism -- Picasso, Braque, and Gris and others. And prior to this, of Impressionism and Post Impressionism. So it was a very solid environment to grow up with.

ANDREW DECKER: So going back to Paris. I guess it is now 1947 or 1948.

THOMAS MESSER: Yes. 1947.

ANDREW DECKER: You have a Louvre; you have a new Museum of Modern Art.

THOMAS MESSER: Yes.

ANDREW DECKER: And the galleries.

THOMAS MESSER: And the galleries.

ANDREW DECKER: How was working with the galleries to you?

THOMAS MESSER: Well, I knew that they were important, but I was so disoriented at that time. As I look back, I could have known Raoul Dufy for instance but I didn't know his name. I could have known any number of people who subsequently became important, and with whom eventually I caught up. Even in the Army when I arrived in Paris -- I'm stretching back now a couple of years -- in December of 1944. In 1944, in December, Kandinsky died. I did not know his name. Although I had occasion to think about this because I did know the names of Klee and Matisse and Picasso but not Kandinsky. Kandinsky was not nearly as well-known at the time. And I actually came to be aware of him only when I returned from the war, and when I saw his work for the first time at the Museum of Non-Objective Painting in New York. And at that time of course, I became very much aware of him. But I'm saying this only because you now think of Kandinsky and Klee as much in the same way. Or Kandinsky and the German Expressionists. But Kandinsky did not have a name that was nearly as accessible.

ANDREW DECKER: So in late 1947 or early 1948, you returned to America?

THOMAS MESSER: Yes. Early 1948 I returned to America and plunged into my museum career. By 1949, I became employed by a small general museum in a town in New Mexico. The Roswell Museum in Roswell, New Mexico.

ANDREW DECKER: Where is Roswell, New Mexico?

THOMAS MESSER: Roswell is in the Pecos Valley. It's in the south-eastern part of the State. Not the dramatic

north of Santa Fe or Albuquerque. But in the plains in the desert. It was then a town of thirty thousand inhabitants. A military base. By that time I had married, and had to strike out for myself. My wife showed me an ad in the Saturday Review of Literature, one that indicated interest in an enterprising young man -- I don't think they said young person at that time -- willing to undertake a pioneering cultural job, and one who would assume this at a minimal salary, which I found out amounted to two thousand four hundred dollars a year, which is of course more than it would be now but still very, very little. And so, after giving it some careful consideration, we picked ourselves up and bought a second-hand car and drove ourselves to New Mexico, and I stayed there, actually, for three years, of which, however, I spent one at Harvard on a leave of absence from the Museum, to get my M.A. and to take the famous museum course available at the Fogg Art Museum.

ANDREW DECKER: Okay. So you returned in early '50 for one year -- a year at Harvard.

THOMAS MESSER: Yes. For one year I was doing all sorts of things just re-acclimatizing. And in January '49, we arrived in New Mexico, and stayed there except for my leave of absence until the spring of '52, when we moved to New York.

ANDREW DECKER: Was there a collection at the Roswell Museum?

THOMAS MESSER: There were two types of collections. The museum was one of those combining art history and archaeology. So it had local history, and archaeological specimens, many of them excavated around Roswell itself by pot hunters or archaeological societies, to do them justice. And then there was a collection of local art consisting largely of the work of Peter Hurd. I don't know if this is a name that means anything to you.

ANDREW DECKER: No.

THOMAS MESSER: Well, Peter Hurd was one of the American realists of the War and Post-War era and is, or rather was, married to the sister of Andrew Wyeth, who was a portrait painter. Both of these had a circle of admirers. There was a wing for Peter Hurd, which I took care of, and we collected very modestly and did exhibitions, partly of local artists and partly of imported exhibition. By today's standards, it was a very modest activity, but there was a group of very intelligent and well informed people to support my function. The president of the Board was Paul Horgan, a distinguished novelist and poet. At the time, he had written a book for The Great River series, named The Rio Grande [Great River: The Rio Grande in New Mexico History, 1954], for which he received the Pulitzer Prize. He was the one who pulled my name from that of sixty-four unqualified candidates who responded to the ad that I mentioned before. And Paul, who now is 90 years old and at Wesleyan University in a retired status, was one of the guardian angels of my life. There were others, too, but I owe him a lot. .

ANDREW DECKER: So this was your first time west of the Mississippi, going out to Roswell, New Mexico.

THOMAS MESSER: I guess it was. Yes.

ANDREW DECKER: Were there other people there who had a serious curiosity about art?

THOMAS MESSER: There were people, some of them well read and cultivated, and there was a sprinkling of very indigenous folk -- I don't mean Indians. I mean doctors, lawyers and so on. And there was a public that was reasonably curious. And so I behaved as if I was director of the Louvre, took things very seriously and taught myself a lot. In the process I did get some inkling of what art culture in the context of American life really meant. And without wishing to jump ahead too fast, my next assignment was with the American Federation of Arts, an organization created for the purpose of sending their traveling exhibitions to places like the Roswell Museum. And so, once with the AFA, I got some idea of what was expected, what was required, what made sense and what didn't, nationwide. It was rather distant from the New York avant garde and at the same time, it was a very real experience.

ANDREW DECKER: In your short description of the museum, it sounds a little bit -- and I don't mean this disparagingly --but a little like almost a social club, in a way, for a group of people who were committed to it, and who wanted to make certain kinds of knowledge or information or experience available to a broader public.

THOMAS MESSER: It had, of course, an elitist tinge, yes. But it was not social in the sense that much of New York is social. It wasn't climbing. It was really quite sincere and the conveying of art took many forms. There was a program of school participation; there were public lectures and an emphasis upon education. There were real efforts to say something about art to an interested public, and not only about modern art --because the program of the museum reached into the Colonial and the Pre-Columbian past. There was some substance, some content even if on a very modest level. There was practically no staff, and it was run as a volunteer undertaking. It was a very modest way for me to begin.

ANDREW DECKER: So it sounds very civic-minded, in a sense.

THOMAS MESSER: Yes.

ANDREW DECKER: Community-oriented place.

THOMAS MESSER: Well, it was so. It was so. It was a municipal museum, supported to the degree to which it was, by the city and the museum was built under the WPA program. Originally it was a handsome small adobe building, which we proceeded to enlarge by floating a bond issue.

ANDREW DECKER: [laughs]

THOMAS MESSER: So the thought of future enlargement was embryonically present from the beginning.

ANDREW DECKER: Seriously? Enlarged it by floating a bond?

THOMAS MESSER: Yes.

ANDREW DECKER: How much was the bond for? Do you remember?

THOMAS MESSER: It was twenty-eight thousand dollars, or something like that. An enormous amount of money to raise, but you could build for that.

ANDREW DECKER: Yes. So does the museum still exist?

THOMAS MESSER: It not only exists, it has further grown and flourishes as a regional museum. What I didn't tell you is that I had a treasurer on a small board of five people. Paul Horgan was president. And the Treasurer was a young man, about my age, in his late twenties, whose name was Robert Anderson, who has subsequently become one of the wealthiest people in the United States --one of the biggest land owners. And who was not poor at that time, but I was grateful for amounts of money that he gave generously, which today would strike us as very small. [laughs]

ANDREW DECKER: You were the director of the museum?

THOMAS MESSER: I was the director of the museum. You may well ask how or why, but the museum was as embryonic as I was. I don't think it could have at that time attracted a more qualified director. But I qualified myself a little more in the process of being there. And, of course, it was through the generosity of these people who appreciated my efforts that, subsequently, during my year of absence, I was able to formalize some of this early professional exposure besides converting it into an academic degree.

ANDREW DECKER: In getting your master's at Harvard, did you have to write a dissertation of some form?

THOMAS MESSER: It was more a series of papers, on such subjects as individual works of art in the Boston museums. I was, at that time, interested particularly in seventeenth century Flemish paintings, and Rubens in particular. And I took a very useful and marvelous course in Greek art and archaeology to obtain my masters degree in one year while also continuing at that time to orient myself in the contemporary field both in Boston and New York.

ANDREW DECKER: So in 1952, you left?

THOMAS MESSER: In 1952 I left Roswell for good. So I had one year in Roswell; then my leave of absence in Cambridge, Massachusetts; return to Roswell and another year there to pay my debt of honor, because, after all, they did continue to pay one-half of my salary; the other one having come from the GI Bill of Rights to which I was entitled to. But things started seriously in 1952, when I was first appointed "assistant director in charge of the National Exhibition Service" of the American Federation of Arts.

ANDREW DECKER: When was the American Federation of the Arts started? Do you recall?

THOMAS MESSER: 1909. So it recently was something like seventy-five years old, or more.

ANDREW DECKER: So it was pretty well established by 1952.

THOMAS MESSER: It was pretty well established, but it certainly was a shoe-string operation. Prior to my arrival, it existed in Washington, and moved just in the year, in which I was hired, from Washington to New York. Its purpose at that time, was very simple, to provide exhibitions -- modest exhibitions I would say --that would be sent to museums, university galleries and other cultural receptacles from coast to coast.

ANDREW DECKER: Did institutions have to be a member of the AFA in order to qualify to receive the exhibitions?

THOMAS MESSER: Yes. They were called charter members or chapters. And as I recall at that time there were between 40 and 50 of them. They paid an annual fee as members, and in addition to this they paid a fee for each exhibition they received. Our job here in New York was first of all, to see that exhibitions either came into existence by commissioning qualified people to do them, or to utilize available ones for circulation wherever we found them. Thereafter we coordinated programs, schedules, finances and all that to create a program of some scope. Most AFA shows were organized in this manner because nobody could expect our tiny staff to initiate them all by ourselves even though, occasionally, we did so.

ANDREW DECKER: What kinds of exhibitions were in demand at the time? That museums wanted to have on their walls?

THOMAS MESSER: I don't know how to answer that question. Museums throughout the country needed to fill their walls. The museum rhythm that exists today was already basically in existence then. Shows usually had a run of three to four weeks. Even though most museums had permanent collections on view, when the loan show was over they needed something else. Some they organized themselves, but others they were not able to do themselves and therefore either borrowed them though direct contact with their fellow museums or else turned to an agency. Actually, at that time, there were only two of these of some importance: the AFA, and the fully developed service of the Museum of Modern Art, which to be sure, limited itself to modern works, which we did not. I remember having, for instance, established contact with the Metropolitan Museum, to prepare Greek sculpture and pottery exhibitions. Obviously these were not the most important things that the Metropolitan owned. But we argued that they kept it in their basement, so why not let us organize it and disseminate it in their name before the material was returned to them safely.

ANDREW DECKER: [laughs]

THOMAS MESSER: There were museums that were eager to have their names bandied about. The Virginia Museum, a State museum, made part of their permanent collection available for touring. The medium could be textiles, there could be drawings here and there, or even paintings. I also looked abroad, went to Paris and I gathered one of the early surveys of French post-war art as well as one of the early shows of the école de Paris on paper. At that time, I also curated an exhibition of the work by the then contemporary French artist Nicholas de Stael, which, incidentally, I repeated a few months ago, which is to say 40 yrs later, in Frankfurt am Main. It was not the same show, of course, but the same artist.

ANDREW DECKER: [laughs]

THOMAS MESSER: So it's difficult for me to categorize the program -- I can show you, for your information, a number of annually published catalogs -- that will give you a glimpse, an idea of a variety of the exhibitions. And, the AFA program, of course, continues to the present day.

ANDREW DECKER: Well, it sounds very broad.

THOMAS MESSER: Yes. There were little or no limits. The assumption was that it was qualitative work, that there was a concept, that it was modest, because it was not meant for the great museums, although they did sometimes participate as well.

ANDREW DECKER: Was photography, at that point, continued an artistic medium?

THOMAS MESSER: Oh, yes. There were very important shows.

ANDREW DECKER: You were a federally funded organization?

THOMAS MESSER: No. We lived from the product itself. No, there was no federal funding. The income partly came from memberships and fees, and partly through contributions from trustees and whomever we could persuade to help us. Even though donations were asked for a deserving activity, we just barely made it. All the time there was financial strain.

ANDREW DECKER: Was censorship ever a consideration or a problem?

THOMAS MESSER: Well, yes, it became one. At the time at which we got involved with the USIA-- an involvement which incidentally started during my directorship-- the USIA began to use the American Federation of the Arts as a preparator of exhibitions for presentation abroad. And there were instances of problems with government attitudes in some way. I think that there was once a problem with a Ben Shahn who was considered by them to be a communist.

ANDREW DECKER: So those were reservations that our government had about works, rather than the receiving government overseas?

THOMAS MESSER: There were some of the latter as well, but not with those that we organized. In our case, the USIA really commissioned the AFA to prepare the shows and to make them available. They were the ones that dealt with the foreign governments. I doubt very much that there was censorship on the part of the recipient. The censorship instances were on our side.

ANDREW DECKER: How much interaction was there between you and the AFA and museums around the country?

THOMAS MESSER: A great deal. And it was from that point of view, of course, an extremely useful enterprise for me because I wasn't just sitting in my office. I went around. and became very well acquainted with the museum scene from coast to coast and got to know every museum director in the country and many curators during those three years that I served under very strenuous circumstances. It was perhaps the most difficult job that I have ever had; more difficult certainly than the Guggenheim. But I was extremely young and from the point of view of exposure, I could not have asked for anything better.

ANDREW DECKER: Were you able to go into the collections of the museums -- both those on display and in storage?

THOMAS MESSER: Yes. There were limits, of course, but yes, I think that the job invited a very far reaching exploration of the museum landscape -- the people, the works of art -- and of course also allowed me to determine my own directions, and my own preferences. I could look at almost anything, so I looked at what interested me. And I got to know specialists in various fields and various media and historical epochs. So all of this was very good. It was extremely difficult to hold it together financially, and it was also difficult because it was my first close contact with a board of trustees that was not only representing a particular community but had national interest and, at times, national pretensions. I had to come to terms with some powerful people who sat on this board. Because the board was national in its composition, some members had ideas that were not really realizable solely with the means at our disposal. Some of these notions were offered by people who had no particular qualifications for making such propositions. Very well meaning people throughout, but well meaning people are sometimes capable of causing much damage. Still, I was thirty-two years old when I came to the AFA, I had Harvard as well as the Roswell Museum experience behind me, and I had my childhood and my young man's life in Prague with its rather intense art involvement. But it was perhaps the first time for me that I stepped into the larger art world and tried to orient myself within it.

ANDREW DECKER: This is going to sound silly -- and kind of is -- but in terms of getting around, was that by rail or plane?

THOMAS MESSER: It was exclusively by rail. It was by rail partly because I was sort of afraid of flying, so I didn't fly. But most people went by rail at the time.

ANDREW DECKER: What were some of the major collections major museums had at that time?

THOMAS MESSER: Well, most American museums would be the same as today. There are some today that did not exist at the time. In New York, of course, I had occasion to visit all major museums and New York was more or less the same, institutionally, as it is today. I am thinking of the Guggenheim, the Whitney, then downtown on 8th Street, and I, of course, frequented the Museum of Modern Art. the Metropolitan, and the Brooklyn Museum. The Cooper Union was uptown at that time Besides I already knew. Philadelphia, Washington and some other American cities. All of this was very much within my itinerary and I made friends who supported me in my future assignments; in particular, those who later supported me in my post at the Guggenheim, were actually drawn from these first contacts at the Federation because there were frequent meetings and discussions and we were always selling our exhibitions and talking our heads off. So we were highly visible, and we were surrounded and projected among a fairly glamorous set of private and professional art world individuals.

ANDREW DECKER: Were there collections at that point in California, of some interest?

THOMAS MESSER: Oh, yes. There was, of course, the Los Angeles County Museum which, at that time, was still one of those many-headed monsters with multiple collections all under one roof. You had the art collection, a historic museum, I believe, and a science museum, and it was all together, so that the dinosaurs and the icons were all only a few galleries apart. This, of course, was before its present quarters. And there was the Pasadena Museum, which is no longer there, as well as the San Francisco Museum of Art.. All three were in situ. So I can hardly think of any major museum today that was not in one form or another in existence, with the exception of some relatively few important museums that have been added --like the Getty.

ANDREW DECKER: So how long were you with the American Federation for the Arts?

THOMAS MESSER: I was with the AFA four years, from the spring of 1952 to the winter of 1956. I came in as an assistant director, became director of exhibitions, and eventually director of the institution. By that time, I

thought it was enough and I had developed a great yearning to get to what I would consider a real museum situation as opposed to a liaison organization that floated next to and above everything else and therefore one very difficult to grasp.

ANDREW DECKER: Were there members of the Boards of Trustees of the AFA who were constructive?

THOMAS MESSER: Yes. Very much so. There certainly were. And furthermore, there are a few that remain friends to me ever since. At the AFA too, I had a guardian angel, and her name is Eloise Spaeth who actually hired me in 1952 when she was Chairman of the Exhibition Committee. And we have been lifelong friends ever since. Neuberger was an AFA trustee long before a museum was named for him, but at the time collected paintings for his brokerage firm. He was particularly involved with American art, which was beginning to be fashionable at that time. I don't mean it that way. I mean that it was becoming more frequent in those post-War years to turn away from Paris and emphasize the American schools as many people did.

ANDREW DECKER: Were those mostly nineteenth century American schools?

THOMAS MESSER: No. It was modernist. Neuberger's great interest was Milton Avery. He collected him in great numbers, but many others, too.

This was also the time at which I met regularly with people like Daniel Catton Rich, the director from the Chicago Art Institute who, later on, became a true friend who supported me very effectively when I went to the Institute of Contemporary Art on Boston and, thereafter, to the Guggenheim. And, of course, I got to know Perry Rathbone well, when I became director of the Institute in Boston.

ANDREW DECKER: He was at the MFA?

THOMAS MESSER: Yes. also George Stout, who was director of the Gardner Museum in Boston. So, I have very dear memories of this time, when I began to penetrate the profession from a sort of curious side position because, as I said, the AFA was something atypical. But I want to stress again that it was very helpful to me, as early professional contacts matured into friendships in many instances.

ANDREW DECKER: What did the exposure of all these different forms of art do to your take on it? Did it lead you in certain directions? Did it rule out certain areas as ever possibly being of interest?

THOMAS MESSER: Well, when you are very young you tend to take an interest in many things, and I tried to look around. But I was -- in my heart I knew that I was-- primarily interested in the modern era, by which I did not necessarily mean, and do not now mean, only its most recent manifestations. But the part of art that assumed an increasingly important meaning for me was from the later nineteenth century to the present on an international level, without any particularly emphasis upon one or another national school.

ANDREW DECKER: So Cézanne or even Manet forward?

THOMAS MESSER: Yes. Even a little earlier. Delacroix, Ingres are not so bad, either. But from that period on is what interested me. Edvard Munch, German Expressionism, and then Kandinsky, Klee, and so on.....

ANDREW DECKER: What happened to Rubens?

THOMAS MESSER: Well, he lives in me. [laughs] I have never shed him.

ANDREW DECKER: And your brief involvement in.

THOMAS MESSER: ....brief involvement with Rubens and the paper that I wrote for Jacob Rosenberg at the Fogg Art Museum about a Rubens oil sketch at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. A sketch about Hercules Slaying Envy, a little thing like this [gesturing to indicate a small drawing], but of tremendous verve and dynamic force. I wouldn't consider that at all passé.

ANDREW DECKER: Did you have much exposure to works by Rubens?

THOMAS MESSER: I did have some exposure because I visited museums and looked around with particular interest in these areas. But Rubens loans were not easily obtained for our shows as you can imagine.

ANDREW DECKER: Okay. So how did you get to Boston?

THOMAS MESSER: How did I get back to Boston? Well, the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston has its own somewhat curious history. A history that began in the same year as the Guggenheim's, in 1937. It had by that time, exhausted its first Director, Jim Plaut.

ANDREW DECKER: He worked for the OSS, I believe. Or the Art Loot Investigative Unit during the war. He put together a report on Goering's collections.

THOMAS MESSER: That could well be. Yes.

ANDREW DECKER: He was a formidable person.

THOMAS MESSER: Yes. He certainly was. And he certainly was the first staff head of the Institute. There were other people behind him --for instance, Nat Saltonstall -- who was a Boston architect and an esteemed and marvelous friend. Or Nelson Aldrich, a cousin of the Rockefellers. These were the people who were on the Board in Boston. And when Plaut -- as I say -- exhausted himself after many years of directing the Institute under trying and difficult circumstances, they started to look for somebody to take this on. And they found me. So I spent many years there.

ANDREW DECKER: What was the appeal of going back to Boston? You'd been in New York at the Modern and the Metropolitan around you.

THOMAS MESSER: Well, the appeal was not so much Boston, although I liked Boston. As I told you before, my godfather, who was a viola player in the Boston Symphony, was a very strong magnet in that respect. But I did not go back to for Boston, I went back to direct a public oriented institution, one that greatly appealed to me. The ICA is a Kunsthalle, let us say, because they didn't have a permanent collection. So I was eager, by that time, to function not as I did at the AFA, as a sort of super administrator of a large program in which I could only seldom enter into the creative aspect of exhibition making, but rather to concentrate on a program within a community and doing exhibitions of my choice and work with the public.

ANDREW DECKER: How large a public was there in Boston for contemporary art?

THOMAS MESSER: Small. Small, and I would say rather tortured because --

ANDREW DECKER: [laughs] You're not referring to Mr. Plaut's being difficult here. [laughs]

THOMAS MESSER: [laughs] No, Boston has a strange mentality in this respect. Of course, these are hair-raising generalities that I am saying to you. But I think that Boston --at least, you know, that element of Boston that was representative of what the city connotes -- had the feeling that art is a duty. Particularly Modern art. That was something that had to be done no matter how much they disliked it. [laughs] So you were continuously caught between people who seemed to be telling themselves on every step that this is something that has got to be done and so they did it, even though with a clear distaste.

ANDREW DECKER: [laughs]

THOMAS MESSER: And I had quite some problems with modern art in Boston.

ANDREW DECKER: What did they find relatively palatable, if anything?

THOMAS MESSER: Well, mostly the things that were outside of the reach of the Institute of Contemporary Art. In other words, they found the Museum of Fine Arts relatively palatable, or the Gardner even more, and the Fogg, so all that was all fine. But even so, they felt that there's got to be something in Boston like the Museum of Modern Art in New York. And if not that much, then at least the Institute, which, incidentally, started as a chapter of the MOMA. The Museum of Modern Art originally meant to be part of the great American dream, and meant to place itself in various communities to split the finances in some ways. But I remember how this didn't work.

ANDREW DECKER: So kind of like the Guggenheim of present day.

THOMAS MESSER: Of present day. [laughs] I didn't think of that. The Guggenheim is worldwide. That was merely American. And I think it stopped with the Boston experiment that collapsed in a very early stage. So I can't tell you what the Bostonians really wanted, but they did come to the museum and the programs that we did at the ICA, or that I had an occasion to do over a period of a few years were not without meaning, I hope.

ANDREW DECKER: Would Matisse have qualified as a contemporary?

THOMAS MESSER: Oh, yes. Matisse would have been greatly liked, and Jim Plaut did some of these things at a time at which it was still possible to organize a Matisse or a Picasso show. In fact, the first shows of classical Modernism that Boston saw was through the Institute, because I think the program of the Museum of Fine Arts ended more or less with Millet and was very cautious about trespassing into the 20th century at all. So the Institute did well already before my time in its function of introducing modernism to Boston. And then, of course, each generation takes it a step further. The Institute continues to do such thing today. And incidentally, the

Institute produced two directors that -- within a span of thirty years --came from it to New York. Me and David Cross(?), who came thirty years later, to the day. [laughs]

ANDREW DECKER: [laughs]

THOMAS MESSER: With a very different contribution to make, I might add.

ANDREW DECKER: Did you organize most of the exhibitions at the ICA, or did you also take on loan shows put together elsewhere?

THOMAS MESSER: I mostly organized the shows myself. There were exceptions to that. But the idea was to look around and to develop a program which was about modern art and artists; and so you'll ask me what this was, for instance, and again, I will show you some catalogues when we speak about this again, but what stand out in my memory is the first exhibition of Egon Schiele-- the first museum show in the United States. That was, I think, in '58.

ANDREW DECKER: Was that well received?

THOMAS MESSER: It was sort of a success de scandal. We did have problems with that show, actually, even though I was cautious in my selections because I did not want to introduce Schiele in the same scandalous terms in which he introduced himself in Vienna many decades ago. It did not seem particularly interesting to me to scandalize Boston with erotic images. I wanted to show that he was a great artist. And so my selection was somewhat cautious. But it was still more than Boston could bear at the time, and we did have visits by the police or whatnot, whom I did not receive. Instead I let my staff fence with them, and by the time they got through, the exhibition was over. But they were pressures, no doubt.

ANDREW DECKER: And was your Board of Trustees comfortable with all the attention?

THOMAS MESSER: No, they were uncomfortable, but they behaved themselves. They really were never comfortable with this modern art, and extremely sensitive about criticism. They so much wanted to be liked by everybody else. They had in me a conservative director as I have been all my life to the chagrin of some of my fans. I have always been on the cautious side, and never rushed into the avant garde; partly because I never wanted to do things that I had not myself fully absorbed. And so I was, I think, a rather logical director for apprehensive boards. But I was still ahead of them and thereby caused a certain amount of chagrin.

ANDREW DECKER: Were there other exhibitions of central European artists or movements? Or was there an equal focus on French, Italian, American art?

THOMAS MESSER: Well, I don't know about equal, but among the exhibitions that I remember easily, I brought in some of the great modern collections from Europe. For instance, a selection from the Musée d'Art Moderne--by that time I had my contacts in Paris--a very respectable selection from their permanent collection which was actually very successful in Boston. And that was the sort of a show that attracted people. I did the same with the Stedelijk in Amsterdam with the help of Willem Sandberg, who was a great director at that time in Amsterdam.

ANDREW DECKER: Who was the director?

THOMAS MESSER: Willem Sandberg. I would visit him and he was very open, and lent me some van Goghs and German Expressionist, all very well received, of course.. Obviously, we could not do this all the time. Then I also did Americans. Not really those that have become very famous afterwards, but I very much liked the sculptor Saul Baizerman, who hammered copper and in the process created beautiful works of art. Another one was Atilio Salemme. These were artists who at that time had larger names than they presently do, I think. But their inclusion in the ICA program serves as an indication that American as well as European art was being presented. One of the last exhibitions that I did was a didactic show entitled 'The Image Lost and Found,' which traced the effort toward abstraction and then postulated a certain return of the figurative elements in the work of such artists as Nicholas de Stael and even the late Jackson Pollock and others, to indicate that this absolute division that existed at the time between the abstract and the figurative should not be exaggerated. I did not make myself many friends in New York with this show at that time and was accused of furthering retrograde movement. [laughs]

ANDREW DECKER: Was there pressure on you to bring in work from Europe, or were you pretty much on your own to do whatever seemed appropriate?

THOMAS MESSER: Well, the pressures were related to feasibility and finances. There were no other pressures. No. The people in Boston, unlike the AFA board which had strong notions of what we should be doing, let me do what I wanted to do. They were not always happy, but they did not engage in as active a role.

ANDREW DECKER: Would it have been, or was it possible at the time, to borrow works from Prague from the National Museum there?

THOMAS MESSER: No. Because the years that I spent in Boston were still the tail end of Stalinism. And, in fact, it was only at the end of my stint in Boston that I, myself, got back to visit my parents again in Czechoslovakia. Let's see. I got to Boston in '56 and the visit I made from Boston after the Communists had taken over Czechoslovakia was in '58. I remember both of my parents were alive, but my mother died shortly afterwards, so I was in a hurry.

ANDREW DECKER: In 1958 that was?

THOMAS MESSER: 1958. Yes. I was in a hurry to get there and see her before she died. What was your question? Whether we could borrow from Prague? No, that was very tight and it was very difficult at that time to do anything with central Europe and the Communist world.

ANDREW DECKER: In returning to Prague, was it difficult to get a visa?

THOMAS MESSER: It was complicated. You had to apply for it way ahead and explain why you were going there and all that. And I was not really protected because there was no treaty yet between the United States and Czechoslovakia about mutual protection of their citizens. So if the Czechs had wished to claim jurisdiction over me, there would have been no legal way to prevent this. But I had no reason for assuming they would do this, and they didn’t.

[TAPE OFF/ON]

ANDREW DECKER: You continued at the ICA until 1961.

THOMAS MESSER: That's right. From late '56 to early '61.

ANDREW DECKER: Did you maintain relationships with any of the board members at the ICA?

THOMAS MESSER: I was on friendly terms with them.. Most of them have, alas, died in the meantime. We were close to Nat Saltonstall, a marvelous person. And Nelson Aldrich, also, used to contact us from time to time. Both of them have since died. And there were some other collectors with whom I stayed in touch for a little while. Beyond this, no. I then got too busy to maintain such contact.

ANDREW DECKER: Did the collectors in Boston regret not having a contemporary or modern institution to which they could give their works?

THOMAS MESSER: I'm sure they did. Yes. And the idea of the non-collecting institute has always been contested. There always were people who regretted that there was not a modern museum. But there were ideological counter-argument similar to those that existed at the Museum of Modern Art in its inception. The Museum of Modern Art intended originally not to have a permanent collection. You'll find in the charter, I think, that the idea was that when these things became better known, famous and expensive, they would place them in historic museums, like the Metropolitan.

ANDREW DECKER: So it's like the New Museum today.

THOMAS MESSER: Yes.

ANDREW DECKER: Where they can keep things only for twenty-five years.

THOMAS MESSER: Yes. Well, I doubt that they abide by this rule, but as far as I know, the Museum of Modern Art has given a Picasso to the Metropolitan. There is a record of such an intention at any rate. But when, through the passage of time, things become really beautiful and expensive -- treasures -- it's very difficult to make gifts of them. The mistake was, I think, to assume that New York would do what Paris has done. Paris, of course, can do it because there is only one proprietor -- the State. So essentially, the Parisian pattern was the Louvre -- well, the old pattern of the Louvre/Luxembourg, and now Louvre/Jeu de Paume. The pattern is very simple: The State possesses it and puts it either here or there. They do not lose possession. But with separate corporate entities and separate boards, you do lose possession. And you are beginning to make gifts for no material reason that you can justify. So that probably is why it didn't work in Boston. . The other even more potent cause is that the Museum of Fine Arts would never allow a collecting competition to be created in Boston. And the people who are sitting on their museum boards are the same people or their sons and daughters sitting on other boards because the texture of Boston culture is very narrow, and it's usually the same do-gooding families whose younger members are in the more modern area, and whose older, respected family members maintain the seats of power.

ANDREW DECKER: So that sounds, in a way, that they were closer to the Parisian model.

THOMAS MESSER: Yes, closer to the Parisian model without the framework of the State.

ANDREW DECKER: This is again Andrew Decker with Thomas Messer. Today is October 20, 1994. This is the third interview. Mr. Messer, following our conversation of the previous times, Mr. Messer has kindly thought of some things that I neglected to ask about.

THOMAS MESSER: No, that was not the way I put it to you. You asked if I had questions, and it just occurred to me that there are a few characterizations that I would like to make of each of the periods that we have discussed so far. To begin with my childhood and youth in Czechoslovakia, and in Prague, in particular. I think it's important to realize what a marvelous epoch it was politically and culturally. Prague was a city full of cultural opportunities, from the Fine Arts and its museums, to music, to splendid operas. Chamber music was like going to church on Sunday. It took place on Sunday morning, and the best quartets came to town. It was a period of political awareness and political cabaret, was particularly strong and meaningful. So we all grew up with these values around us, and I wanted to stress this. And all this happened in an ambiance of not only political, but social freedom, which I think was unique, even for Central Europe at that time. Then, of course, all that ceased with the Hitler aggression and with the invasion, and the opposite immediately took place. And those few months that I spent under the German occupation, of course, belong to the worst times in my life, and I was indeed fortunate that everything worked out in a way in which I could leave, for the United States. And even though Greenville, Pennsylvania and Thiel College were a rather distant and unaccustomed place for me, I felt with infinite gratitude the freedoms that surrounded me there, and the lifting of the oppression that I had experienced during the Nazi occupation. Boston, again, was interesting culturally, partly because of my proximity to my godfather and to the music of the Boston Symphony in which he participated. And, of course, it happened there that I finally broke away of the hated subject of chemistry and began to do what I thought I should be doing with my life. The war also was only partly bad. I have to say this with hesitation because war is inherently bad, and service in military camps was no joy.. But once we were on the battlefield, I had much time for myself to read, to think, and to come to terms with myself and with my life. Paradoxically, these were productive times in which I could concentrate upon myself more than perhaps ever before. I already spoke about Munich and the awakening after the war, culminating in my return and reunification with my family in Prague. I was 25 years old at that time, and there were beautiful ladies around me to provide great moments in my life. Paris, and to the studies of the Sorbonne, came next. These were preparatory only, to be sure, but they did nevertheless opened up the large panorama of French culture, French thought and French art-- all of which very important. Roswell, New Mexico was an entirely new experience--one which gave me a sense of being in the middle of a large continent, distant from the centers that I was used to, and able to begin to think about what a museum is, even if the one in which I function was of an embryonic kind. So that, combined with my year of absence at Harvard, the Roswell experience did amount to a very real professional involvement. Harvard, of course, was my one concentrated contact with art history, and I remain very grateful to my teachers. To Jacob Rosenberg, to Charles Kuhn, to Frederick Deknatel, to John Coolidge, to Agnes Mongan, all teachers I held in very high esteem. Then, as we come to New York again with the AFA, it amounted to a technical drill that I would not have gotten otherwise. And difficult as it was, God knows, as it taught me about the craft of exhibition making on a big scale, to say nothing of the diplomatic engagement I benefited from simply by having to deal with a trusteeship and with people who only very partially understood at the time what this was about. The ICA in Boston was the first real museum experience, the first time that I could create sensible programs, the first time that I dealt with a community, and with a particular constituency. It led directly to the following experience at the Guggenheim, which was central to my life. Everything up to that moment was prelude. Everything afterwards is postlude.

ANDREW DECKER: [laughs]

THOMAS MESSER: So that's what I wanted to say.

ANDREW DECKER: Before we really get into the Guggenheim, I'm wondering about your time at the AFA and the ICA in terms of how important was contemporary American post-war art to your work at those institutions? Were you trying to put together exhibitions of Jackson Pollock and Willem DeKooning, or were they considered too current really for the institutions that would receive exhibitions from the AFA, or for the ICA itself?

THOMAS MESSER: Well, they were at the time, certainly too current for the ICA. The ICA did have a curiously conservative attitude toward modern art, and in fact, maintained under my predecessor rather steadfastly, a programmatic adhesion to figurative and semi-figurative art. The notion of total abstraction was not easily acceptable, and in fact, there were polemics between the ICA and the Museum of Modern Art. Jim Plaut was considered by the increasingly -- how should I say? -- by dogmatic standards that began already in the late fifties and became even more evident in the sixties-- something of a traitor to the cause. There were very bitter arguments between MOMA and ICA. And actually between ICA and the dogmatically modern scene. I did not participate in these arguments, and was certainly entirely open to non-objective abstraction. But there were two

things: First of all, organization of contemporary shows were already then a rather ambitious undertakings, and it was not all that easy to do so; and secondly, it was really not what to me, personally, at that time, was all that close. I was very much attached to the European schools and to European aesthetics, to what is now classical modernism, i.e. to the generations of the Cubists and the Expressionists. And so I also did not rush into what then was the avant-garde. But I was aware of it, and became increasingly so.

ANDREW DECKER: So museums who were subscribers to the AFA were not clamoring for that kind of exhibition.

THOMAS MESSER: No. It is not my recollection that they did. I did bring some AFA catalogs, and we can check whether there's anything in it. I have the recollection of a contemporary show of American work on paper, which followed a similar contemporary show on French art, also, of watercolors and drawings. These two were following each other, and many of the names including, I think, Jackson Pollock, and De Kooning were listed. But the scale was modest, as indeed all AFA shows had to be. I also remember having sent an exhibition to India, under the auspices of the AFA at that time, and it included Arshile Gorky and geometric abstractionist, but I cannot now remember the details...

ANDREW DECKER: When you talk about the split between the ICA and the Museum of Modern Art, and other proponents of modernism, you mentioned last week that the ICA started as a -- more or less -- a satellite of the Modern.

THOMAS MESSER: Right.

ANDREW DECKER: Was that split part of the reason that it was clear to the Modern that such an arrangement would not work?

THOMAS MESSER: I think it had more complicated causes. The split was in part, at least, due to an inability to find a financial formula that would satisfy both. I think MOMA -- and I really don't have proof for this -- but I think that MOMA looked upon such extensions as something that at least would not add to their financial problems. And ICA probably felt that they could do better alone, rather than paying tribute to MOMA. There were differences in scale and in attitude. There was certain jealousy on Boston’s part of New York, in general. There were probably many aspects of this -- psychological, financial, and so on. But the split came about and remained in permanence. What I should also say is that the Institute had increasing financial problems, and to solve some of these it turned increasingly to design. Design was, for a while, a rather lucrative way for them to meet their budgetary requirements. This was all before my time. And eventually it ran into trouble because the commercial design companies felt that the Institute was unfairly competing under the shelter of tax exemption. And eventually they prevented the Institute from continuing that way.

ANDREW DECKER: Now, when you say design, you mean people in-house would create desks?

THOMAS MESSER: No, not create, but I think there was advice and I think the Institute staff was involved in advisory capacities -- I don't know really to whom anymore -- and received fees for it. There were also contracts with foreign countries. There were design instructions, I think, in Tunisia, and things of that kind. All of which, I think, was certainly legitimate. But it did run into difficulty. And it also removed the Institute at that time more and more from the artistic scene. My appointment changed that. I was seen as the director who brought the ICA back to art.

ANDREW DECKER: I don't know to what degree we touched on this last week, but how many really world-class collectors -- you know, very serious collectors -- were there in Boston, in the late fifties?

THOMAS MESSER: Well, world-class, serious, in the modern field -- if any -- I mean, world-class is a rather --

ANDREW DECKER: It's a disgusting phrase. [laughs]

THOMAS MESSER: Yes. Well, I was aware of two or three people who did buy then-current and important art in Boston. But there certainly were few. They were all with the Institute and we cultivated them. There were, of course, many collectors in the more traditional and historic periods. But to the best of my knowledge, there was no great private collection of Cubism or Expressionism or anything like that.

ANDREW DECKER: So it really kind of stopped about 1900?

THOMAS MESSER: On the one hand, but then, of course, there were a few who collected then contemporary art. American, as well as European. There was, as a matter of fact -- I remember now one rather important collector of American art, whom I would have to look up -- but he was very important indeed. It was Edith Halpert, who had her ways of persuading this person in particular, and over the years, he bought very important things -- both figurative, and later abstract American idioms.

ANDREW DECKER: Okay. Moving then on again to 1961. Who had been Director of the Guggenheim?

THOMAS MESSER: James Johnson Sweeney immediately before me.

ANDREW DECKER: And he had been the Director since she left?

THOMAS MESSER: Yes. Since Hilla Rebay left. Yes. Hilla Rebay was more or less ousted in 1951, and Sweeney was brought in after the death of Solomon Guggenheim. She would not have been ousted during Solomon Guggenheim's life, that would have been quite impossible. But once he died, the successor trustees did not tarry long to see to it that she would leave the scene.

ANDREW DECKER: Now, were most of the successor trustees in the early fifties relatives of Solomon Guggenheim's or associates of his?

THOMAS MESSER: I'll tell you how that was. First of all, the board was very, very small. Even at the time I came, it was no more than --at the most -- six or seven people, of whom quite a few were family or if not family then the family lawyer, or something like that. It was a very cozy board. And immediately upon Solomon's death, the English Guggenheim branch -- the Earl Castle Stewart -- became President, I think, for no longer than one year. It didn't really work. He didn't live here, and everybody is considering that that was strictly interim. But then shortly afterwards, Harry Guggenheim, who as Solomon's nephew, became President. And he became a very strong dominating presidential personality for a long, long time.

ANDREW DECKER: And how did they find James Johnson Sweeney?

THOMAS MESSER: Well, James Johnson Sweeney was a curator at the Museum of Modern Art, and I think that at that time, the attitude was, "Let's get the best person that exists, the person with the greatest reputation," and all of that, and somebody told the Guggenheims and in particular Harry, that that at the time was Sweeney. The Guggenheims and the Board were not an art world board. They were not like the Museum of Modern Art, made up of collectors. They were rather distant from the art field. But they all had friends somewhere. In fact, sometimes this worked in various curious ways. The Greek painter Xenon, who was custodian -- not curator, but custodian --actually, took care of the collection in the warehouse. He was always the first person that Harry Guggenheim would go to and say, "What do you think?" I mean, he was art world, and he was close at hand, and he usually told him, "Well, go and speak to such-and-such and such-and-such." And so they did, and eventually some kind of consensus was built. The same happened in my case, later. So I guess gradually Harry and the other trustees became convinced that Sweeney was it.

ANDREW DECKER: And he was there for ten years?

THOMAS MESSER: No, he was there between '52 and '59. Seven years.

ANDREW DECKER: Do you know much about the search that led to you?

THOMAS MESSER: Not too much, but I have a pretty good idea how it happened. Do you want to know? [laughs]

ANDREW DECKER: Yes. What is your speculation?

THOMAS MESSER: Well, speculation is like this. First of all, Harry Guggenheim, after two disenchanting experiences with directors, from his point of view -- first with Hilla Rebay, and then Sweeney, who both were ousted -- thought that the whole system of directorships was no good. So it was an early case of directorial split. Before I was appointed director, the trustees had agreed to appoint an in-house administrator.

A colleague of mine, the Director of the Walker Art Center. H. Harvard Arnason, was to assume a position, which in some ways, was above me. I reported to Harvey and, in principle, to the trustees throughout him. . It was not quite clear how. But the idea was that the Director has too much on his plate and that in addition to art and exhibitions he also has to worry about everything else. There was no fund-raising at that time, but there were all sorts of organizational matters, trustee relations, and so on. So the idea was that in addition to a director and to an independent Business Administrator, who would do sales tasks, security, guards and the cleaning, there was too be a Vice President for Art Administration. So by the time I assumed the directorship --and I have not yet explained how I thought it happened -- by that time I assumed this position, the position had been redefined and in many ways diminished.

How I was appointed I believe is less involved. One of the trustees whom Harry Guggenheim had turned to, was Daniel Catton Rich, the former Director of the Art Institute of Chicago, who at the time had semi-retired as Director to the Worcester Art Museum in Massachusetts. He had observed me ever since my AFA days and had seen what I had done in Boston. I have every reason to believe that it was Dan Rich who told Harry Guggenheim that I should be offered the job and as far as I know, there were no other candidates.

ANDREW DECKER: So there was no big search committee?

THOMAS MESSER: No. The Guggenheims have never worked that way. They have never done that.

ANDREW DECKER: So you became Director in '59, or there was an interim period between that '61?

THOMAS MESSER: There was an interim without a director, essentially, until '61 when I became Director in February of that year.

ANDREW DECKER: Was Harry Guggenheim kind of functioning as Director?

THOMAS MESSER: Difficult to say. I mean, Harry Guggenheim was certainly the last word on everything. And we were all scared of him. Harry was an overwhelming personality. I respected him, I must say. And he was respectful toward me, too, in a professional sense. He, I think, probably exaggerated my curatorial capacity and underrated, on the other hand, my worldly wisdom.

ANDREW DECKER: [laughs]

THOMAS MESSER: So he treated me like a young prodigy. And indeed, he was seventy-one when I was forty-one, so it was a relationship in which even for reasons of age, I could not assume anything but a respectful posture which I did. Harry Guggenheim and I really did have a very good relationship. A relationship that, over a certain period of time, gradually removed the structures that had been created to keep the director in line. In other words, Harry came to the conclusion that he didn't really need an Art Administrator, and he came to the conclusion that he didn't need this particular Business Administrator, either. As a result, I was able to consolidate directorial power while Harry Guggenheim was alive. All this was handled in a very personal manner. Harry used to invite me every two or three weeks for lunch in his townhouse on 74th Street, and serve me an elegant little lunch. Over lunch we discussed things and he tactfully let me know his wishes, and I carried out most of them.

ANDREW DECKER: How tactful was he?

THOMAS MESSER: To me he was very tactful. Harry Guggenheim was of course, ultimately a tough and domineering man, and you couldn't oppose him. But he was not somebody who would be unaware of quality with people, or who would needlessly humble them. I was very fond of the old man, I really was. I took him to galleries on Saturdays, and that was very purposeful, too. I didn't do it only to educate him about art, which of course was very important because we had a great many conversations about what this is all about. Harry's idea basically was -- he didn't put it this way, because I said he was tactful, but I'm abbreviating now -- the idea was that, "I'm paying a lot of money here, to tell people knowledgeable about art, so please explain it to me, and no double talk, please." That was more or less the way it worked. But I took him to galleries because it gave me a chance to obtain his okay for acquisitions that would then formally be approved in a meeting of the Acquisition Committee. I knew that if Harry gave his nod, nobody would oppose it.

ANDREW DECKER: So how receptive was he to these gallery visits?

THOMAS MESSER: Well, he was receptive. I mean, obviously one could not go too far. But I took him mostly to galleries concerned with classical modernism-- one that I felt needed enhancing in our collection. By way of example, we would visit the Pierre Matisse gallery, and I would ask to point out a particular Giacometti -- 'The Man With the Long Nose', a masterpiece, which, at that time, sold for -- if you can believe it -- no more than about twenty thousand dollars, which, to be sure, was more money than it is now. And Harry would sort of look at it, and I would talk to him, and if I had the feeling that he sufficiently responded, it was a shoe-in for the next meeting.

ANDREW DECKER: Did he look forward to these gallery visits?

THOMAS MESSER: Yes. It was his wish. Harry was interested, and was prepared to make an effort. And I was prepared to make that one too, partly self-serving though in the institutional interest. It was my way of getting for the museum what I thought was right. And partly because I had really no other choice. I needed his support. Sweeney did not do that, nor anything like it. Sweeney, having been at the time, first of all, a much more mature professional than I was in my youth, and secondly, a man of a very different character, would not be bothered with things like that. Eventually Sweeney and Harry Guggenheim fell out with each other and Sweeney was removed.

ANDREW DECKER: There's one thing that -- if I'm recalling correctly -- may have pre-dated you. There as a time in the early sixties when the Guggenheim sold a number of Kandinsky paintings.

THOMAS MESSER: That did not pre-date me.

ANDREW DECKER: No? Like two hundred paintings.

THOMAS MESSER: No. Fifty.

ANDREW DECKER: Fifty?

THOMAS MESSER: Yes. Fifty. We have a catalogue of them. The trustees were unjustly blamed for that move because it was really my initiative. I felt that we, at that time, had more than two hundred Kandinsky's of very uneven quality. I did feel then, and I do feel today, that Kandinsky is an uneven painter. That he is marvelous in his top production, and very dry and uninteresting on the lowest level of his achievements. And we did need acquisition funds even then, which were no longer plentiful, and so I made that proposal. And it was hesitatingly accepted, I might say.

ANDREW DECKER: And they were sold in London.

THOMAS MESSER: They sold at Sotheby's in London, and I made the selection.

ANDREW DECKER: So the board did not specify what paintings should or should not be sold?

THOMAS MESSER: No. That was my selection, and I have to say that it did not give me sleepless nights. I do think that the things that were sold could not hold up to the qualitative level that we retained, and that the collection as a whole was not adversely effected, except quantatively.

ANDREW DECKER: So that the number of Kandinsky's remained at in excess of a hundred and fifty, even after the sale?

THOMAS MESSER: Yes. There was a subsequent sale, too, much later, that was chiefly works on paper. But even so, we paired down Kandinsky to a size and to a quality level which I honestly feel has improved rather than diminished his value in our collection.

ANDREW DECKER: One of the reasons I asked about it was that I had been under the impression that the Guggenheim was not a well endowed institution, but one that had enormous financial support from the Guggenheim family. Was that actually the case?

THOMAS MESSER: No. Not in my time. The Guggenheim family -- well, first of all, there was not all that much family; the board was very small, so it was Harry Guggenheim and his daughter and son, who were strictly family--which, in a very small board, of course, constitutes heavy representation. But none of these people gave more than very small amounts for specific purposes. The only important financial contribution that Harry made was a memorial for his deceased wife, Alicia Patterson when, upon my recommendation, he commissioned a ceramic mural by Miró which is permanently set into the museum's wall . And I forget now how much that was. Again, it was not God knows what, but it was nevertheless, a significant contribution. Other than that, neither Harry nor others contributed towards purchases.

ANDREW DECKER: Where did the money for purchases come from, aside from deaccessioning the Kandinsky's.

THOMAS MESSER: Well, they did come in the first years of my directorship, and before from the surplus in the budget. In other words, we did have large attendances at the time the building was erected, and even though the attendance fees were very low, attendance and sales in a small budget -- the budget was less than one million dollars when I came -- produced enough to provide for a few years. It was these small surpluses which were used for acquisitions. In addition to this, there was income from deaccessions -- and, of course, I solicited gifts, which my predecessors did not need to do.

ANDREW DECKER: How easy was it to solicit gifts from people who were not on the board?

THOMAS MESSER: I think the question really should be placed a little differently. The question is how important were the gifts that we received. And I have to say that we did not receive too many gifts of real importance, although there were some. It was difficult, but in some instances, I --and later my curators -- established contacts, which we knew how to exploit. And, of course income tax, for some people, helped as an incentive. So the problem was more to keep only such gifts that were on a level that would be a real increment qualitatively, and not just accept too many things that were not sufficiently interesting.

ANDREW DECKER: By the 1960's -- before the 1960's -- the Museum of Modern Art was a pretty substantial institution.

THOMAS MESSER: Yes.

ANDREW DECKER: And I would imagine, in some ways, a favorite involving a certain group of collectors and art

patrons.

THOMAS MESSER: Definitely.

ANDREW DECKER: And the Whitney, in a very distinct sense, being the self-proclaimed home of American art, again had a different group of collectors who were working with it. To what degree was the Guggenheim integrated into New York - into the fabric of artists and collectors, and critics?

THOMAS MESSER: It always stood a little apart. It had to do with many things. One of them is that we were so distinctly a family foundation, and the credits that other people were able to give individuals who helped were not as easily available at the Guggenheim. Partly, also, as I told you before, while the Guggenheim was financially flush -- that is to say, at least did not have financial worries, and lived on nothing but its endowment, which was the case originally -- it lived also in a kind of splendid isolation. And to that you may add the fact that we were not trendy, really, at any time. And that is in part an artistic decision. Hilla Rebay was certainly out of the main current, as far as New York was concerned. Sweeney had a very personal taste, and knew how to assert it. And I opposed a trendiness with increasing difficulties incidentally, because by the time I became director, there were already many opinions among people with whom I worked. There was, in the initial years, the opinion of Harvey Arnason, whom I have mentioned, who was very much in favor of American art, for instance; there was Lawrence Alloway, who was my first curator and no curator before him was totally devoted to American art. And later on there were Diane Waldman and Margit Rowell, among others. I report this somewhat misleadingly because I did not oppose American art. But I did have, first of all, an aversion against short-ranged trends, and resisted doing what many people thought we would or should do. And also, I had other links and other passions, which there considered as somewhat off-side by that time. So all these things together did make the Guggenheim, in those days, a bit isolated, . which may be good or bad or both.

ANDREW DECKER: The Guggenheim was founded as a Museum of Non-Objective Painting, I believe.

THOMAS MESSER: Yes.

ANDREW DECKER: When did it become objective, as well?

THOMAS MESSER: Well, it became officially objective with the change of its name, which was in 1952. And that was Sweeney's doing. Sweeney disliked -- for very good reasons -- a categorization like non-objective, or a limitation to a particular style. So he was, I think, quite right in proposing this to the trustees, who agreed with him. In reality, of course, Sweeney bought very few things that were not in fact, non-objective. Only that by that time they were called Abstract Expressionist or Informal. The names have changed but the point is that Sweeney was not dogmatically committed to a particular style. But really, the big change happened when we succeeded in obtaining the Thannhauser collection. Because that, in one fell swoop, suddenly brought in an introductory chapter to modern art--one that was wholly figurative.

ANDREW DECKER: And when was that negotiated?

THOMAS MESSER: I have to take credit for that. That was negotiated in the early '60s, first as a loan for 6 to 10 years, as I remember. Then, in '76 upon Thannhauser's death, the collection became legally ours. But it had been installed and presented many years prior to its formal acquisition. And you asked before about important gifts, and I said that it was ordinarily very difficult to obtain them. But the Thannhauser collection would, of course, be the great exception to this because we did receive this as a gift, and there were two more in my time. One was the negotiated gift of works of Hilla Rebay's personal collection. And finally, there was that of Peggy Guggenheim in Venice. These three were massive influxes that came to us during my directorship.

ANDREW DECKER: With the Thannhauser collection, was Mr. Thannhauser someone you had known previously?

THOMAS MESSER: Many years.

ANDREW DECKER: How did you come to know him?

THOMAS MESSER: Well, when I came to the American Federation of Arts in 1952, my wife and I lived in an apartment at 9 East 67th Street. And across from this apartment, much more sumptuously, Thannhauser and his first wife Kaethe, were installed. It that was the time before air conditioning, or at least before we could afford air conditioning, so the windows were open and I was still practicing piano every day. Eventually, Justin Thannhauser kept asking around who the hell is playing those Beethoven sonatas. So I was introduced to him at the AFA, and we kept in touch when I went to Boston. And when I returned, we were ready to negotiate. The negotiations in which Harry Guggenheim had become the leading negotiator were complex but they finally resulted in the gift.

ANDREW DECKER: Had Mr. Thannhauser long been a collector?

THOMAS MESSER: Yes. Mr. Thannhauser is a nephew of a very famous European dealer named Heinrich Thannhauser.

ANDREW DECKER: And he was located in Berlin?

THOMAS MESSER: In Berlin and in Munich. The important Thannhauser collection, I believe, was in his Munich gallery, which was the same that showed the first Blaue Reiter exhibitions. So it's a very historic affair. And Thannhauser then emigrated, I think, in the thirties, and established himself in this mansion in which -- I don't think he ever had a gallery-- he was dealing out of his apartment, in rather expensive categories. Chiefly Impressionists and Post-Impressionists, all French.

ANDREW DECKER: And that was the uncle, Thannhauser?

THOMAS MESSER: Yes, Justin was the nephew of Heinrich Thannhauser.

ANDREW DECKER: Who came to New York?

THOMAS MESSER: That was already my Thannhauser. Justin Thannhauser. I don't know what happened with the uncle.

ANDREW DECKER: Okay. So he was a collector and dealer.

THOMAS MESSER: That's right. And at this given moment, he had made up his mind that he would like to give it to a museum, and of course we tried to make strong arguments in favor of the Guggenheim--arguments that were logical enough. Partly because we had to fight off other competitors, we maintained that if he gave it to the Museum of Modern Art, it would disappear in the general already very famous collection of that period and that we had nothing like this; that in our case, it would retain its identity, that we would give him a separate place, although we didn't know where that would be at that time, and that we would do anything he wished. We even accepted the terrible installation that he forced upon us, and I lived in misery about this decision for a long, long time, until, for his eightieth birthday, I told him that the original installation was all my fault, and we had a new one for him as a birthday present, which he accepted graciously.

ANDREW DECKER: Did he insist on having his name on the building?

THOMAS MESSER: Not at the time, no. No. The name came later. The idea was that he would have a wing, but at the moment, of course, all that we could do -- and he was reasonably satisfied with this --was to free a part of the Guggenheim that was not built for exhibitions at all. It was, in fact, the library and some administrative offices that we moved out -- that is, we moved into the area of the restaurant, and we discontinued the restaurant for many years, so that this area which is in the so-called monitor on the northern side of the edifice was reserved for Thannhauser, and was kept essentially unchanged for a long time, until I was able to persuade Thannhauser that other works of the same period in the Guggenheim collection might be added to his. The Thannhauser collection, as you see it today, thus already reflects additional gifts also placed in the Thannhauser wing.

ANDREW DECKER: Now, how large a gift was it, in terms of number of works?

THOMAS MESSER: This, of course, can be documented. But speaking by memory, I think there were between sixty and seventy works of different scale and varying importance. Not all of them were oils, and not all of them were all that marvelous. And we did, in fact, after Thannhauser's death, and at a time at which we had the possibility to research works more thoroughly than was possible at the time of the acquisition, obtained the agreement of Justin's widow, Hilde, his second wife, to remove and sell off some of the lesser works, and some that we did not feel belonged.

ANDREW DECKER: So you received a loan in 1966?

THOMAS MESSER: I think so. We can check all of that.

ANDREW DECKER: To someone walking into the Guggenheim, would that installation dramatically change the look of the art in the museum?

THOMAS MESSER: It certainly did. Mr. Thannhauser insisted on having red fortuny drapery, huge golden frames, and all the things we didn't want and didn't like. The decision that we had to make -- and I will say that Harry Guggenheim left it to me-- I mean, he was willing to forego this if I had opposed it. But I didn't since I felt that in the long run, this could be renegotiated.

ANDREW DECKER: Now, that was specifically in the monitor building?

THOMAS MESSER: Yes.

ANDREW DECKER: So someone going to the main galleries --the ramp -- would see instead either a temporary exhibition, or works from the permanent collection?

THOMAS MESSER: That's right.

ANDREW DECKER: And those were still mostly non-objective?

THOMAS MESSER: Well, mostly, I guess, they would have been. Yes, but, even under Hilla Rebay's directorship, there were important works that were not non-objective. She did buy Leger, she did buy Modigliani, and she did buy Klee and a figurative Kandinsky. So one shouldn't exaggerate this. Her dogma was less flexible than her actions. So I'm not sure that one could say more than that the presentation of the permanent collection was still very strongly marked by her non-objective attitudes. But exhibitions were not. And just to answer your question, when people entered the museum, and saw the ramp, the Thannhauser collection was not visible, it was off the ramp. We breached the door into an area that was not formerly intended for exhibition purposes and only when it was entered did one become fully aware of a very different sensibility--initially at least, a disconcerting one largely because of the way were had to install it.

ANDREW DECKER: A conflict?

THOMAS MESSER: Aesthetic conflict. Yes.

ANDREW DECKER: What was your vision for the museum? What did you want it to contain? What did you want it to show and present?

THOMAS MESSER: Well, I think, first of all, let me say what I did not want. I certainly did not wish to be hampered by stylistic limitations. In other words, I would -- no more than Sweeney before me -- would have wanted to direct a museum of non-objective painting. I also did not want to limit myself to a particular period. In other words, I aimed at the broadening of the scope, and in that sense I welcomed, the Thannhauser collection. I welcomed it not only because of its beautiful paintings, but also because with the strong didactic emphasis that existed at the time, it seemed to me that the best education for our large public would be the clarification of the relationship between older and more recent art with its implication for the art of today through the morphological developments from old to new. In other words I felt, as most people did at the time, that there was a traceable sequence from Impressionism to Post-Neo-Impressionism to Fauvism, Cubism, Expressionism, and so on and that not to benefit from its visual presentation would be depriving us of a powerful educational tool. I also wanted to bring us up-to-date, but not necessarily along the lines of everybody else. I did want a recognizable profile for the Guggenheim and for that reason insisted on the presentation of European art, which was not much seen in the immediate post-war period.. To that end, I brought in art from Latin America, and from the Orient, and all sorts of things of that kind for which, at the time, I was not highly praised.

ANDREW DECKER: [laughs] In the fifties, the Modern had its fifteen American shows.

THOMAS MESSER: Yes.

ANDREW DECKER: In the sixties, I imagine, they were going more toward Pop Art, to some degree.

THOMAS MESSER: Which we did too. I mean, we did not exclude any of these categories.

ANDREW DECKER: But you did not focus on them quite so heavily?

THOMAS MESSER: No. We didn't limit ourselves quite as much. What made the Guggenheim different in the sixties and the seventies were the presentations in retrospective form of what I considered then the great post-war Europeans -- Dubuffet, who was also shown at MOMA to be just, Bacon, deStael, Fontana, Burri, Jorn and others of comparable stature. And some of these were not shown anywhere else in New York, at least not on the museum level.

ANDREW DECKER: And, I believe, you also showed Beuys.

THOMAS MESSER: Yes, I also showed Beuys in the late seventies.

ANDREW DECKER: Let's go back to him for a minute.

THOMAS MESSER: I have a list for you here of all the exhibitions we had since 1961.

ANDREW DECKER: Oh, terrific. Thank you.

THOMAS MESSER: If you want to, you can pick some.

ANDREW DECKER: Did the board remain pretty constant throughout the 1960's?

THOMAS MESSER: Yes. I would say up to Harry's death, the board remained pretty constant. It remained small, and it remained detached. It was a very pure board -- nobody gave any money. [laughs] and nobody was even asked. [laughs]

ANDREW DECKER: So did the smallness and the kind of isolationist stance of the board make it easier for you to present things that were not being presented elsewhere?

THOMAS MESSER: I had much freedom in those days. There was very little pressure from the board. But I did feel increasing pressure from the staff that I had created, and from critics, the market and from the outside world in general. I added to the Guggenheim predicament, in a sense, by pursuing a different line than the one that was in vogue. And I felt the pressures. But not from the board. No.

ANDREW DECKER: How were those pressures exerted or expressed?

THOMAS MESSER: That's a very subtle matter. There was no overt action of any kind. But I really don't think that I was ever the darling of the art world in New York on the basis of the program that we presented. And increasingly the curatorial staff, with some of its very gifted people, wanted a larger share in programming which I had to concede.

ANDREW DECKER: Okay. But were the critics routinely skewering your exhibitions?

THOMAS MESSER: Frequently. Very frequently. Particularly the European shows. Yes. I had here and there some favorable reviews. I remember that the Dubuffet show was very well reviewed by John Canaday. I have to say that Hilton Kramer, for instance, really tore down most of the European shows,. He devastated Fontana. He was fairly gentle on Burri. Nicholas deStael had a very bad press from everybody. I would say yes, that there was much opposition to my general orientation.

ANDREW DECKER: And at the same time, were exhibitions at the Modern received fairly well?

THOMAS MESSER: Perhaps not. I don't take this kind of criticism personally by any means. The Modern also had their share. We both, for instance, presented Japanese art, and both theirs and ours were brutalized. The worst review that I ever had, probably, was our exhibition called 'The Emergent Decade,' that I got together in Latin America. And maybe I deserved it. It probably could have been a better planned exhibition. But there was much animosity. And many of the people who were presented at that time, have since established important reputations and are well-regarded.

ANDREW DECKER: What was the basis of the animosity? Did people disagree with the works that you selected, or just the subject overall?

THOMAS MESSER: I think that in New York we suffered in these years from the kind of symptom that the French showed before the second World War. We took a look at these imported work quickly and we said, "Well, that was here already. What's so special about it, it's an adaptation of American art," and so on. Just as the French would say mais c'est comme Picasso or c'est comme Matisse, mais pas grand chose.

ANDREW DECKER: [laughs]

THOMAS MESSER: Which, of course, in some ways, may be correct. Just a few days ago, I've seen the De Kooning show now at the Metropolitan Museum, and it's really uncommonly strong and marvelous. So I'm not really saying that there was absolutely no argument, if, that is, you take the position that you are not particularly interested in the things that come from the outside, and that you are satisfied to look at the beautiful things that you can do yourself. And in many instances the position taken was outright unjust. For instance, in the case of Fontana, who, I think by any standards, is an artist of great originality, and to treat him the way he was treated is not justifiable in any sense.

ANDREW DECKER: Has there been a retrospective or a major show of his work in New York since then, that you can recall?

THOMAS MESSER: I think not. Maybe nobody dared.

ANDREW DECKER: [laughs]

THOMAS MESSER: There have been major shows in other parts of the world. And, of course, Beuys too -- Beuys had something of a rave from John Russell, and by the time Russell came to The New York Times, the climate

had improved. John was a much more sympathetic reviewer of European art than Hilton. He favored Beuys among others but Beuys did run into quite some difficulty in other reviews.

ANDREW DECKER: But it never got to the point that American artists were picketing the Guggenheim, or were throwing water balloons at the --

THOMAS MESSER: Not for reasons of the selection, no.

ANDREW DECKER: Were there substantial crowds, and how interested were people generally, in art itself?

THOMAS MESSER: I don't know how to answer that question.

ANDREW DECKER: Did you find yourself needing to introduce evenings with jazz to entice people?

THOMAS MESSER: No, not really, although we did have various productions. We used the building for theatrical purposes, and I remember a very successful one called 'The Liquid Theater,' which was based on participation of the public, and gave rise to a great deal of interest. But no, generally, I think it was art and architecture that attracted people. And, of course, in the first decade after the building was erected, it itself was to many the main attraction. They couldn't get enough of it.

ANDREW DECKER: What was fun at the time, for you?

THOMAS MESSER: Are we talking sixties?

ANDREW DECKER: Sixties. Yes.

THOMAS MESSER: Well, I had a lot of fun if only because the museum was relatively small I was in every sense an active curator, the only one in those days who acquired works for the collection. And I reserved for myself the exhibitions that were the most important to me These included the Kandinsky retrospective in 1963, and subsequently one devoted to Klee in 1965. I traveled all over the world to look at art and I always relied on additional expert advice.

So it was primarily the selection for exhibitions and the purchasing for the collection that gave me much pleasure. And last but not least, installations, which, in the early times of my directorship I did almost exclusively. It was only much later that installation was done by curators as well.

ANDREW DECKER: Was it easy in asking for loans around the world, to get them, and did people know the Guggenheim particularly well?

THOMAS MESSER: Yes. The Guggenheim had a very wide-ranging reputation, and it was easy therefore. You of course always have to work at these things, but we had very satisfactory responses to most loan requests.. And our exhibition budgets were adequate enough, not to have to say, "No, we can't afford the shipping from Australia." We didn't have to do that. So we were in a very good position to do major exhibitions, and many of them worked extremely well. The fact that there were negative reviews at times doesn't mean that everything that we did was rejected. I didn't mean to say this at all. So the fun for me at the time was my first-hand involvement with what interested me about museums and about art. In time, as the museum grew, this became less and less and the fun decreased proportionately.

ANDREW DECKER: [laughs] You mentioned hiring Lawrence Alloway.

THOMAS MESSER: Yes.

ANDREW DECKER: Do you recall when it was that you hired him, about?

THOMAS MESSER: Very shortly after my arrival here, so it must have been at the latest, in 1962 or so.

ANDREW DECKER: And what was his role at the museum, if you were the one going out and --

THOMAS MESSER: Well, his role was the avant garde, which was his passion more than mine. I don't mean to say that I never looked at current art, or that I didn't have preferences, but he was highly expert and involved with working artists more than I could involve myself. We therefore very much needed this dimension and Alloway did some very important and beautiful shows within it. He was brought in originally to do the so-called 'Guggenheim Internationals'-- a project started before my time by Harry Guggenheim that was meant to bring about a selection in some fair and equitable way, of works from every country. This resulted in some pretty awful exhibitions and we then changed the rules upon my recommendation. I argued that art exhibitions are not to be done by committees, and certainly not by organizations in various countries who would determine bureaucratically who should or should not be chosen. To correct the procedure, we gave the responsibility with

only minimal restraints to Lawrence Alloway who was to select and present as he saw fit. His first effort, however, was again very ill-received by the critics, even though it was the first responsible show of its kind that we had ever had.

ANDREW DECKER: But was it an annual exhibition, or a biannual exhibition?

THOMAS MESSER: I think at one time it was even annual. Then it became bi- and triennial, and eventually, it had no schedule. But I still did exhibitions called "Guggenheim International" with Edward Fry and with Diane Waldman, as late as the seventies. You will find them on my list.

[October 24, 1994]

ANDREW DECKER: This is Andrew Decker with Tom Messer on October 24, 1994. One of the things that seems to come out from looking at a list of exhibitions you held in the sixties was a strong predilection in European art -- a sort of interest in European art. And I noticed that as early as 1962 you held an exhibition of Anthony Tapies's work. How did that come about? Why were his works deemed important for the Guggenheim to show?

THOMAS MESSER: It had, of course, much to do with my conviction that the Guggenheim had its roots in classical European art, and that this should find a contemporary post-war expression. I might say that while this seemed logical to me, it was by no means the accepted view at the time. There was much opposition to an accentuated European program at a time at which American painting had risen to unprecedented heights and had finally, after years of relative obscurity, and after fighting off a traditional French domination, reached its own level not only of acceptance, but of consensus. The European shows that were presented at that time thus represented convictions that I held. And Tapies was not exactly unknown though he was young. And the exhibition, I should say, was not a huge retrospective. It couldn't be, because in 1961, Tapies had just barely developed beyond his Surrealist phase, and had only moved into the idiom that later became identified with him. But he was known to me because he was represented by Martha Jackson here in New York and because Gordon Washburn showed him at the Carnegie International. So I decided to do this. And at that time, this was not a big deal. I sent a young curator to Barcelona, and in a very short time the selection was made and a little catalog was printed. It was also the moment at which Lawrence Alloway had just come on board, and I had asked him to write a little essay for the catalogue, which he did. I'm reminded of this incidentally, because last year I did a large retrospective of Anthony Tapies at the Schirn-Kunsthale in Hamburg, and Tapies himself has given me much credit for having shown his work at the Guggenheim.

ANDREW DECKER: Similarly in 1963, you exhibited Francis Bacon in a somewhat larger exhibition.

THOMAS MESSER: Right. Well, that, of course, was bull's-eye as far as major European postwar art was concerned, even though it was perhaps the first one in this country. Again, we benefited from Lawrence Alloway's presence, his English background, and his detail knowledge of Bacon's work. To some degree, it was a re-formulation of an exhibition that the Tate Gallery had presented a year before. Lawrence reshaped the exhibition somewhat thereby adjusting it to the needs of the Guggenheim. But it was the first important Bacon show in New York. And what is perhaps equally important is that we succeeded in buying the major work in the exhibition, the 'Crucifixion Triptych,' which now is one of the Guggenheim's proud possessions.

ANDREW DECKER: Did you have many artists coming to the Guggenheim, at that point?

THOMAS MESSER: I would say yes. We had Tapies, for instance, who came to the opening. I should repeat the opening and the show itself filled, as I remember, two ramps. It was not the same as the with the Kandinsky show that was presented at the same time, or shortly thereafter. But artists did come and were in evidence.

ANDREW DECKER: For the Bacon show, was there much critical reception? Were there artists coming back? Were there lectures held? Was there any particular fascination with the works by artists here in America, who were perhaps seeing a large group of his paintings for the first time?

THOMAS MESSER: I think the answer to all of those questions is yes in the case of Bacon. Not necessarily in the case of everyone else. Bacon had a sufficiently established reputation in America. There were American collectors already, and so I would say that the Bacon show certainly did attract the sophisticated art public. I do not recall how well it was or wasn't received, or whether the question so important on many minds--the distinction between figurative and non-figurative art -- became an issue in that case. But I can't stress enough that for the public in general, this question of recognizability -- the question of whether it represents something or not -- was preeminent, and much of our didactic efforts at that time were spent trying to explaining the nature of abstract art.

ANDREW DECKER: Even in 1963?

THOMAS MESSER: Yes, even in 1963. Of course, I'm not saying that everybody at that time was unaware of the

complexity of the issue, but the Guggenheim had, at that time, very large attendances. The building was still new. I think we had close to a million people that came from the whole world, and across the continent, and they did want to have answers to their questions and an opportunity to react. It was the one area in which my trustees -- and particularly Harry Guggenheim -- were rather insistent that we do not just close ourselves to the issue raised by a public larger than the art world. And it was an attitude that I shared. For better or worse, I have always been public-oriented.

ANDREW DECKER: Was that true of other museums that were exhibiting post-war art? I mean, at this point, I can imagine only the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

THOMAS MESSER: Yes. Well, I don't want to generalize too much, but my feeling is that in most museums there was a rather clear distinction between curatorial and educational activities. The curators of sophisticated museums tended to stand above those issues. The educators, of course, did their work. We have not accepted this division at the Guggenheim and therefore never had an education department. It was assumed that the director is, among other things, the chief educator, and our curators too had didactic obligations which they fulfilled to a larger or lesser extent, depending on their disposition.

ANDREW DECKER: Today, for instance, there is an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art with works by Cy Twombly. And there are also exhibitions of Twombly's art at the C&M Galleries, and at the Gagosian Gallery downtown. And it seems that part of the current fad is to show -- you know, for galleries -- to try to play-off a major museum exhibitions. Was that the case at the time, also? I mean, were there galleries that would kind of piggy-back or ride on the coattails?

THOMAS MESSER: I'm trying to remember whether this happened. It does go way back. Whether it goes into the sixties, I cannot now recall. But I certainly -- in my Guggenheim years -- do remember many instances in which galleries did have smaller exhibitions of the same subject. And we welcomed it.
ANDREW DECKER: In 1964, you had a retrospective of works by Alexander Calder, who is perhaps one of the more fun artists, among other things. Was he viewed as a serious artist at that point?

THOMAS MESSER: Absolutely. Oh, yes. He was certainly viewed as a serious artist, but also as a fun artist, and fun it was, from beginning to the end. I think I should -- since his show was so early in my administration, in 1964, I should give credit to Harvey Arnason, whom I have already introduced here as the Guggenheim's Vice President for Art Administration. He was an old friend of Sandy Calder's and he originally established the personal contact between Sandy and myself.. I subsequently visited the Calder’s with my wife at their home in Sachet, France and we spent a hilarious week with them in this French village where Sandy worked. It was there that he and I jointly selected the exhibition which I then installed with my own little hands, I might say that the installation was a major challenge as the irreversible gravity of objects hanging from the ceiling down, required adjustment of the works that did not hang and therefore had to be slanted not to create spatial discords within Wright's architecture. In other words, they could not be presented as clear verticals so, as to create the illusion of verticality. So it was very difficult to do all of this. But it was truly one of the most sensational exhibitions, perhaps an all-time attendance record. And it was received with nothing but praise.

ANDREW DECKER: Shocking. [laughs] Did exhibitions at that time -- they had about a two month run.

THOMAS MESSER: Yes. Ordinarily, perhaps. Depending on the jigsaw puzzles -- how one puts together a schedule. But yes, I would say two months may have been a good average.

ANDREW DECKER: So while the Calders were in the main building, where was the rest of the collection?

THOMAS MESSER: Well, nowhere, really. There was --shocking to say -- no space for the permanent collection in those years. And we could show the permanent collection only by displacing exhibitions or vice versa. We could show exhibitions, and that was the usual case, by displacing the permanent collection. An existing space for the permanent collection was, for the first time, created, in part at least, when the Thannhauser gift was received with the condition that there be such a space.

ANDREW DECKER: Was that condition something you encouraged?

THOMAS MESSER: Well, if I had had a choice, I probably would have liked not to fulfill this condition because it is limiting. But I knew -- everybody knew from the beginning -- that we would only receive that gift if we made the provisions requested by the donor. And, of course, in the long run, the penetration of added museum spaces not previously earmarked for art of any kind led, step by step, to the present solution. Namely, the tower addition that was eventually put up.

ANDREW DECKER: An exhibition in 1965, of Gustav Klimt and Egon Schiele. Was it easy to find works for that show?

THOMAS MESSER: I was much involved with Klimt and Schiele before at the Institute of Contemporary Art and I presented a Schiele exhibition at that time with the help of Otto Kallir which gave me an opportunity to acquaint myself with Schiele collectors. I also renewed a friendship, one that went all the way back to my student days, with Fritz Novotny, who was director of the Albertina museum in Vienna. He helped a lot with both Klimt and Schiele, and I traveled extensively in Austria to benefit from his support. So I would say yes, it was difficult to locate and borrow major works for a number of reasons partly, also, because of the personalities involved. But it was accomplished just the same.

ANDREW DECKER: You mentioned Otto Kallir who was, I believe, the man who more or less as a gallerist rather than curator introduced Schiele to America, and that is a claim that is made on his behalf.

THOMAS MESSER: That claim is just.

ANDREW DECKER: Okay.

THOMAS MESSER: Otto Kallir certainly did introduce -- not only Schiele, but also Kokoschka, Gerstl and other Austrian artists to America, as a gallerist. There's no question about it.

ANDREW DECKER: There's also some antipathy between him and a man named Rudolph Leopold, who was a prominent, avid, voracious collector in Vienna.

THOMAS MESSER: Still is.

ANDREW DECKER: Yes. [laughs] I was wondering how easy it was to get works from both collections, when the two men were not great fans of each other's.

THOMAS MESSER: Thank you for the question. It was extremely difficult, and I grew gray hair over this. I had to navigate between two people who hated each other, and who translated such feelings into exhibition problems that had to be solved. It is, of course, not the only such situation. The large Kandinsky show, which had taken place a year or so earlier, had to be gathered in cooperation with Nina Kandinsky, the widow of Wassily Kandinsky. The remaining large collections that had never been seen in this country before, belonged to Gabriela Muenter, Kandinsky's mistress, and finally, to the Soviet government at that time in its Stalinist era. So I will say that conflicting and clashing interests in the craft of exhibition making is not the exception but the rule.

ANDREW DECKER: Did Nina Kandinsky --it was Gabriela Muenter's estate? That was what it was?

THOMAS MESSER: Yes, it was the legacy of Gabriela Muenter to the Municipal Gallery in Munich, the Lenbachhaus.

ANDREW DECKER: Were they carrying the torch in the same way that Gabriela Muenter had? Were they obstructionists at all, given that you were also borrowing from Nina Kandinsky? Or did it work the other way around?

THOMAS MESSER: Let me see whether I understood your question. You are asking whether the Municipal Gallery was committed to non-objective art?

ANDREW DECKER: Well, what kind of difficulties arose from having Nina Kandinsky participate, as well as --

THOMAS MESSER: Well, strange to say, Nina Kandinsky, whom I admired, and who has been very nice and good to me, was terribly jealous of the woman that preceded her, which is as irrational as all matters having to do with love. And so for many years, there was absolutely no contact between Nina's private collection, which, at that time, was in her home in Paris, and the collection that was left with Gabriela Muenter when Kandinsky left Munich in 1914. And it was only after Gabriela's death, which was, I believe, in the early sixties --in other words very shortly before the Guggenheim exhibition, that her legacy became public in Munich, and could for the first time be combined with the other great collection, the one in Nina's hands. Nina had not only late things, but early things as well. Gabriela -- The Gabriella Muenter Foundation, as it was called -- had only early things, works up to 1914. And the Russians had some marvelous works, without which Kandinsky could not be shown in his fullness, either. So it was a first time ever that Nina, Gabriela, the Russians, and, of course, the Guggenheim Museum, could be combined in a major exhibition.

ANDREW DECKER: But was Nina Kandinsky's objection that she didn't want her art works intermingled with those of Muenter's?

THOMAS MESSER: She just didn't want to have anything to do with anything that bore the name Muenter.

ANDREW DECKER: Were the paintings exhibited under the name Muenter?

THOMAS MESSER: Well, the labels indicated where they came from.

ANDREW DECKER: Was that the Lenbachhaus or the Muenter Foundation?

THOMAS MESSER: We have to look this up in the catalogue. I can't remember this now.

ANDREW DECKER: And did you actually travel to the Soviet Union to arrange for the loans?

THOMAS MESSER: Not at that time, no. The Soviet loan came to us largely by way of Nina who had a good relationships with the communist government. And since the Kandinsky show after it opened at the Guggenheim Museum was shared with the Musée d'Art Moderne in Paris (the institution that preceded the Center Pompidou) , the loan officially was negotiated with the French, rather than with us. We didn't have a single contact at that time, nor did we know whether the paintings were going to arrive. They did arrive the night before the opening, and therefore are not included in the catalog, except in an insert which nevertheless records some of the most important paintings that Kandinsky has ever painted.

ANDREW DECKER: In 1966, you exhibited Barnett Newman's Stations of the Cross, which I believe are now a gift to the National Gallery in Washington.

THOMAS MESSER: Right.

ANDREW DECKER: And I believe that they were created not long before 1966, when you showed them.

THOMAS MESSER: Right.

ANDREW DECKER: How did you come across this exhibition?

THOMAS MESSER: Via Lawrence Alloway. Lawrence was a great admirer of Barney Newman's, and he introduced me to Barney, and we talked really in terms of a general exhibition and narrowed it gradually to those fourteen works which at that time had no name. It was a group of works -- mostly black and white -- that Lawrence was particularly interested in showing, and so we would jointly visit Barney Newman several times. He usually took us to a delicatessen which he loved. I don't know why, because it was not all that hot. [laughs] But we would go there, and Barney would play cat and mouse with us, and we would beg him to let us show these works and he would say, "Well, maybe perhaps," and this and that. So having done this for several months, Lawrence and I decided that we'll give it just one more try, no more. And we had no hope really. And suddenly, Barney must have sensed that we were about to break off, and so he suddenly agreed to let us go ahead with our project. And then, shortly before the opening -- it must have been at least a few weeks before the opening because the catalog was about to be printed -- Lawrence came into my office visibly upset. And I said, "What happened?" he said, "Well, Barney now says that these are 'The Stations of the Cross.'" And, of course, it was predictable that this would cause the kind of uproar that it did. And there's a famous review by John Canaday in which his outrage exceeded anything that I encountered before or that I have subsequently experienced by way of critical reactions.

ANDREW DECKER: But what was the basis for his outrage?

THOMAS MESSER: Well, I think it was double. First of all, these were really extremely abstract paintings, the kind of abstraction that was insulting to those not in sympathy with the style because it seemed so easy to just put a few dark stripes on a light background and make a claim for its importance. Then, to additionally mix this up with religious sentiments, and add what some critics conceived to be an the insult to a sacred subject, was apparently more than some could bear.

ANDREW DECKER: Well, sacred subjects were common in art for centuries.

THOMAS MESSER: Yes, but it was not perceived in terms of a radical abstraction. As Barney used to say, "What would they want me to do? Paint a yellow Christ?" [laughs]

ANDREW DECKER: [laughs] And he was Jewish, of course.

THOMAS MESSER: Yes.

ANDREW DECKER: Was there any reasoning for his coming to a decision that this was the "Stations of the Cross"?

THOMAS MESSER: I'm sure there was, but I cannot answer that question, although it's a very legitimate one to pose. I had assumed that it really could --I don't know why; I must have read this somewhere -- that there was originally some connection with Adam and Eve, in other words, not a specifically Christian subject. And that this somehow metamorphose into the "Stations of the Cross". I think it might be helpful to read Lawrence Alloway's

introduction to the catalogue, although I must say that he wrote this essay ex post facto because when he originally started to write the catalogs, there were no "Stations of the Cross" on the horizon. And there was a great deal of kidding, of course, once this became part of the program and staff used to mock irreverently: "Has Barney fallen the second time?" and so on. We all felt that there was a measure of Christ identification on Barney's part. But these are things of such elusiveness that I have not much to add to it; except that if Barney meant to provoke -- and I don't put this beyond him -- he certainly succeeded.

ANDREW DECKER: Did people representing Catholic groups or Christian groups contact the museum?

THOMAS MESSER: I think that too happened but I cannot now be certain. It often happened that religious sensitivities were unwittingly and unintentionally insulted and when it did it usually was in a Jewish context. For instance, when Walter de Maria did three stainless steel works -- a Star of David, a Christian cross and one called 'Museum Piece,' which was a swastika--Jewish groups were outraged at this, and we did what we could to explain that this was not meant as an insult. And if my recollection is correct, yes, there were, among other things, also, outraged Christians about Barney's Stations of the Cross.
But the massive outrage was really about something that the large segment of the public and many critics felt to be a put-on. They felt this not to be legitimate art. It's difficult to reconstruct this today but this is what came through at the time.

ANDREW DECKER: Yes.

THOMAS MESSER: But that happened to the Impressionists, too. The question was not that they didn't like what was painted, the public in Paris at the time did not see how this could be art.

ANDREW DECKER: So it was a double whammy, in a sense.

THOMAS MESSER: A double whammy. Yes.

ANDREW DECKER: It wasn't art, and it was misnamed.

THOMAS MESSER: And in addition, it was misnamed with possibly insulting connotations to Christians.

ANDREW DECKER: But you didn't have pickets.

THOMAS MESSER: No.

ANDREW DECKER: At the same time, in the same year -- 1966 -- you had an exhibition Gauguin and the Decorative Style, as well as one about "Systemic Painting". And Kandinsky paintings on glass. So it was kind of -- I don't want to say a grab bag, but you were representing a breadth -- a wide breadth of art of the twentieth century.

THOMAS MESSER: Yes. Of course, you realize these were not all exhibitions of the same size or the same importance. It's not that one major exhibition followed the other. 'Gauguin and the Decorative Arts,' for instance, was one of a didactic series in which I tried to trace such contacts -- such morphological connections as existed between Cézanne and the element of construction -- Van Gogh and the element of expression. Gauguin and the element of decoration. These were summer shows supported by beautiful paintings and a didactic theme of that kind and that was one thing. Kandinsky was the specialité de la maison and his painting behind glass or Hinterglasmalerei as it is called in German, is a marvelous sidelight, one that was important for a museum that was particularly interested in Kandinsky. It was a very risky show to organize because I imported most of these small glass works from Munich, going there myself and carrying away a dozen works in a case that had been elaborately constructed to protect them. I shudder today at the notion that something might have happened and that I may have been the one to cause it. And the exhibition of "Systemic Painting", of course, was in keeping again with our commitment to contemporary art, which was, I believe, Lawrence Alloway's last show. But you are right. Of course, our program addressed itself to a variety of orientations at the same time.

ANDREW DECKER: Okay. And as far as the board was concerned, that was just fine.

THOMAS MESSER: I have to say that the board rarely expressed itself about the content or choice of exhibitions. The board as a whole did not usually address itself to the exhibition program. You see, the board at that time was something of a decorative item that met, at the most, twice a year, sometimes only once. And it was something that Harry Guggenheim considered a legal necessity to race through it in a few minutes during which nobody as much as dared to whisper anything. And whatever was talked about seriously was not about art. Now, apart from the board meetings, there was a so-called art museum committee, a sub-committee of the board, on which some of my older professional colleagues served. I mentioned Harvey Arnason before. But I would like to point out the very important presences of Daniel Catton Rich, and of Carl Zigrosser, two board members who served on this subcommittee who were museum directors. They did have opinions, and they were there to guide

me. But if we discussed the success or the failure of an exhibition, it was certainly not to criticize or to pressure me.

ANDREW DECKER: In 1968 you had an exhibition of Peruvian antiquities. Master Craftsmen of Ancient Peru.

THOMAS MESSER: Yes.

ANDREW DECKER: Which seems to be the first time -- if not the only time -- that you had an exhibition of what could be considered tribal art.

THOMAS MESSER: That's right.

ANDREW DECKER: How did that happen, and did people think that you had lost your senses?

THOMAS MESSER: [laughs] Some did, yes. Well, I think that I know what the reasons were. I was under great time pressure with my exhibitions. We produced one after the other, and we were few to do it. And most exhibitions in those years were done by Lawrence Alloway or myself. The larger curatorial staff was not yet in place. Daniel Robbins, and Maurice Tuchman, two younger curatorial staff members, did no more than one exhibition each one their own, while assisting with others. We did not yet have the infrastructure to do quite as much as we were pushed to do by events. And so I was looking for something to stabilize the traffic and so established contact with a curator at the Textile Museum in Washington, who was an expert in pre-Columbian art. I gave him the assignment to do a major exhibition, with perhaps the same rationale that the Museum of Modern Art developed toward primitive art in recent years. However, we did not try to derive any particular conclusions from this. We did not present it in order to prove that Cubism came out it, or anything like that. I just thought it would be a popular show, which it was, and one that could run for a long time, and would give us a chance to catch our breath.

ANDREW DECKER: So there was no tie-in to twentieth century art.

THOMAS MESSER: No, except a general assumption -- true or false -- that modern art and the so-called primitive cultures had certain obvious relationships to each other. We didn't make anything of it.

ANDREW DECKER: So in 1969, the year following Master Craftsmen of Ancient Peru, you had two exhibitions of American artists in one year, which was unusual for you at the time. One being David Smith, the other Roy Lichtenstein. Were these exhibitions that were lobbied for by curators? What was the reason behind them?

THOMAS MESSER: Well, I guess I have to quickly review what constitutes a decision to do an exhibition -- any exhibition. It must be something about which we had some collective convictions; something that nobody else had done recently, at least not in New York. And, of course, it has to be feasible financially. These three considerations narrow the possibilities right away. Both of these exhibitions fulfilled those requirements. Certainly David Smith's sculpture was a very natural objective for the Guggenheim. By that time, we knew that we could do sculpture, and Smith was an American sculptor of considerable stature, was a normal follow-up on Sandy Calder, as a major sculptor. So I don't think it was lobbied for. No. I think it corresponded to our conviction. And curator Edward Fry was qualified to undertake the task and it was a very beautiful and successful show. We had some dealings with Clem Greenberg at the time, who was, I think, one of the executors of the David Smith estate which did not simplify the situation.

ANDREW DECKER: Wasn't he willing to promote, in the best sense of the word, David Smith's works?

THOMAS MESSER: Yes, he was, but he wanted to do it his way, and I had a few run-ins with him as to the mode of presentation. I installed the exhibition because in those days I did practically all the museum installations. And the building -- while it had been tested by that time -- mainly through the installation of the Hirshhorn Sculpture Collection-- that sculpture could be installed, there nevertheless were some very serious problems as the bays, which were very deep in the upper portion of the building, flattened out in the lower parts and therefore made it very difficult for the effective presentation of monumental sculpture.

ANDREW DECKER: Were the later works down, toward the bottom?

THOMAS MESSER: Yes. But I think I skipped a ramp because I didn't quite know how to deal with this. And Clem got quite upset with that decision, but it prevailed. And I say the show turned out beautifully, and we bought a very important stainless steel work out of the show.

ANDREW DECKER: Were they expensive at that time?

THOMAS MESSER: Not by later standards. I remember most of the prices paid for collection items, but this one escapes me. I think it probably was something between thirty and fifty thousand dollars. So it still was money.

ANDREW DECKER: Yes. And the same year -- 1969 -- you exhibited Roy Lichtenstein, which seems to have been your first pop exhibition.

THOMAS MESSER: Not quite because earlier in the decade Lawrence Alloway did a group show called Six Painters and the Object, and it was thus that Lichtenstein, Warhol, Rauschenberg, Johns and others, for the first time entered the Guggenheim. But Lichtenstein's was certainly the first major Pop one-man show. The great commitment was on the part of Diane Waldman , who was very friendly with Roy, and who wanted to do this big, and so she did. By that time, both artists were by no means unknown. They were, in fact, both heroes. And the exhibition was a tremendous artists and art world success even though it had its critics, too.

ANDREW DECKER: And at that point were people saying, "Oh, it's just a comic?" Or had they gotten over that.

THOMAS MESSER: Well, I think they were again so many complicated issues involved. The philistine reaction for years, or the philistine intention for years, had been somehow to get back from Abstract Expression into figurative stride. And then when Pop came upon the scene, they said, "Yes, but not that. [laughs] That's not what we had in mind." And the philistine reaction was in part shared by members of my board. Not all of them, but some. And so the Lichtenstein show was not the most popular with, let us say, Harry Guggenheim and some others. But it didn't matter.

ANDREW DECKER: But he didn't try to kill it?

THOMAS MESSER: Oh, no. No, no. He just let me know.

ANDREW DECKER: How did he let you know something? How did he let you know displeasure? His displeasure?

THOMAS MESSER: I think I told you that we had a friendly relationship. I saw him privately and regularly and we spoke about everything. And Harry was quite capable of expressing himself in a differentiated manner. He would not say, "You cannot do this or you cannot do that" but he did express -- yes -- he did express greater or lesser degrees of enthusiasm with my general orientation.

ANDREW DECKER: Does that mean he was stomping around his office, yelling at you?

THOMAS MESSER: No, no, no. Never. Never.

ANDREW DECKER: Going back a year for a moment, you had an exhibition entitled Acquisitions in the 1930s and 1940s: A Tribute to Baroness Hilla von Rebay. She, of course, had been Solomon Guggenheim's Art Advisor, I believe. She had been very close to Rudolph Bauer, and I understand you have a number of his works, or there are a number of his works in the Guggenheim collection, as well as a number of her own works in the Guggenheim collection. Was this basically a memorial exhibition to her? I believe she died about that time. In fact, she died in 1967. The year before.

THOMAS MESSER: Yes. Then this is what it was. I had in mind, actually, to do this and to follow it up later with acquisitions under James Sweeney's regime, and I had talked with him about it because he was alive, and we planned this, but he never delivered his selection. So yes, the Hilla Rebay show was in that sense, a memorial. And it led up, of course, to the somewhat complicated issue as to what is to happen with works in her collection that were bought originally with Guggenheim money. I think with Solomon Guggenheim's money. And to capsule this briefly -- I think that the arrangement was that she could buy for herself -- provided she would leave it to the museum after her death. When she did die, I think most of the things were left to her foundation, which she had created. And so there was, for some time, the question whether we would go to court and demand the transfer of these works. Instead we came to terms with the Hilla Rebay Foundation. That is to say, with the lawyers who had stored her things somewhere in Connecticut. We agreed that I could make a selection of one-half of the works that would be transferred to the Guggenheim. And that the other half would remain in the Hilla Rebay Foundation, which it has. But the Hilla Rebay Foundation has been transferred to the Guggenheim as a permanent or as a long-term loan.

ANDREW DECKER: Had her executors been aware of the original agreement she had with Solomon Guggenheim, that she could buy for her own collection, but that it would wind up with the Museum?

THOMAS MESSER: Well, if they weren't, she made them aware. But I should stress that our relations with her foundation representatives, were always most amicable and generous, and we never quarreled.

ANDREW DECKER: But by the time she died in 1967, it was by then twenty-five years after she resigned as director of the museum.

THOMAS MESSER: 'She resigned' is a euphemism.

ANDREW DECKER: [laughs] Had she been involved in any way with the museum in the interim?

THOMAS MESSER: No, not in any decisive way. Harry Guggenheim was always uneasy about any contact, and so the only thing that I remember is a visit of my own. I did visit her in Connecticut, and I spent the morning with her which had its moments because while I was trying to remain loyal to the Guggenheim, she minced no words about everybody who, in the meantime, were either my friends, my bosses, or both. So the intended homage that I was trying to pay to her turned into an embarrassing event.

[TAPE OFF/ON]

ANDREW DECKER: In 1969 you had an exhibition of works from the Peggy Guggenheim Foundation in Venice. How had relations been between Peggy Guggenheim and Harry Guggenheim?

THOMAS MESSER: Relations between Peggy and Harry were rather neutral. But there was considerable enmity between Peggy and Hilla Rebay. And as a result, there was no contact between the Solomon collection, on the one hand, and what became the Peggy Guggenheim Foundation in Venice. I urged from the very beginning of my term as director, that an effort be made to come to terms with, after all, a member of the family. It was a self-evident ambition. Harry Guggenheim was agreeable, and in fact did write a letter introducing me, sometime in the mid-sixties. I had met Peggy before, but only fleetingly. And so with this introduction, sometime between '65-'75, began almost fifteen years of courting that was done on a regular basis and meant an annual visit or two on my part to Peggy's collection in Venice. And it resulted in the establishment of not only warm relations, but a full scale effort to get Peggy to do what she finally did.

ANDREW DECKER: Did she come to visit the Guggenheim collection in New York?

THOMAS MESSER: Yes, she certainly did. She certainly did. It was a memorable visit during which we staged a selection from her collection. There are great photographs of all the Guggenheims locking arms, embracing, and so on. And the exhibition was successful. It was during this visit that Peggy agreed formally to leave her collection to our museum and to allow her own foundation to be absorbed within the Solomon R Guggenheim Foundation.

ANDREW DECKER: Would that visit have been possible while Hilla Rebay was still alive?

THOMAS MESSER:: As I remember it, Hilla Rebay, after her departure, had no visible effects upon Guggenheim policies, so I would have to say, yes, it would have been possible. She would have been outraged, but that wouldn't have made any difference at that stage.

ANDREW DECKER: Did Peggy Guggenheim want works in the Guggenheim exhibited in Venice, at her palazzo?

THOMAS MESSER: No, on the contrary, Peggy was very much of that breed of collectors who instinctively feel that what they possess is good and what they don't is not. So Peggy wanted as much as possible to preserve the autonomy of her own collection. She did not come with the intention of getting anything from us.

ANDREW DECKER: So she did not try to get a seat on the board, or to dictate what you should acquire?

THOMAS MESSER: Absolutely not. Absolutely not. No. Peggy was not an institutional person. Peggy could not have ever functioned on a board, nor would she have been absorbable . Peggy was her own person, and she did what she damned pleased. That was never the problem.

ANDREW DECKER: So your visits to her started this going, obviously with Harry Guggenheim's approval.

THOMAS MESSER: No, more than approval. With his blessing. I was, in a sense, an emissary. Which, incidentally, made me mildly suspicious in Peggy's eyes. I liked Peggy, and we had very warm moments together, but Peggy never was really at ease with me because she saw me as an agent of Solomon, whom of course, I never even knew. [laughs]

ANDREW DECKER: How difficult had her relations with Solomon Guggenheim been?

THOMAS MESSER: I think it wouldn't have been difficult but for Hilla Rebay. Hilla Rebay wrote Peggy a letter, which is part of the official record, in which she accuses her of using "the good name of the Guggenheims for commercial purposes" because Peggy did have a gallery in New York during the war. And so there was no love lost between the two of them.

ANDREW DECKER: Okay. So by 1969, when this exhibition was held -- during the exhibition, she agreed in principle to establish a connection between her collection and that of the Solomon Guggenheim Foundation?

THOMAS MESSER: That's right. That's right. And that was translated into contracts that went into effect during her lifetime, in 1976. When I say went into effect, it went into legal effect. But we didn't do anything with her collection until her death in December 1979, when I immediately went over there and did everything that was

necessary, to implement the legacy.

ANDREW DECKER: Was she still pretty clear-minded in 1976?

THOMAS MESSER: She was absolutely clear-minded.

ANDREW DECKER: And still suspicious?

THOMAS MESSER: That was part of the clarity of her mind. [laughs]

ANDREW DECKER: In 1971, Harry Guggenheim died.

THOMAS MESSER: Right.

ANDREW DECKER: Now, admittedly, this is after Peter O. Lawson-Johnston became a trustee of the foundation, after he had been elevated to President, and Harry assumed the role of Chairman. How did Harry Guggenheim's death effect the institution, if it did at all?

THOMAS MESSER: Well, I think it did affect it very much. It certainly was a generation change; it was the introduction of entirely different attitudes, and it signaled, I think, a certain degree of retreat of trustee power within the framework of the organization. It did not necessarily have great programmatic influence because Harry, while he took an interest, and while he expressed himself, did not determine the exhibition or acquisition program. And neither did his successor. But what did change was the whole concept of trusteeship which was, first of all, operationally passive in Harry's time and secondly, without financial implication. The trustees who served during Harry's time did not contribute any money, nor were they asked to. Nor was Harry somebody who would have liked this particularly because he understood very well that significant gifts would mean a reduction of presidential authority.

ANDREW DECKER: Was it his authority or the authority of the Guggenheims, that he was seeking to protect or preserve?

THOMAS MESSER: He was the impersonation of Guggenheim authority. He saw himself very much as the presiding Guggenheim which, indeed, he was. So in Harry's time, the family as presided by himself, retained a very central position, and whatever the framework, whatever the formal dispositions were, Harry Guggenheim had the last word on anything that he chose to. And all of this changed after his death.

ANDREW DECKER: You mentioned that at the beginning of the sixties, when you became director the board was small, a handful of people, really.

THOMAS MESSER: That's right.

ANDREW DECKER: Was it still that way in 1970, do you think, prior to Harry Guggenheim's death?

THOMAS MESSER: It was still small. I would have to check exactly whether it had increased numerically. It probably slightly did, but it still was a very small board. And it was, as I say, a board that was essentially there to fulfill the legal requirements a board is invested with. But Harry stood for a particular generation, and for a particular attitude that with his passing went very quickly because he probably artificially prolonged various already dated notions.

ANDREW DECKER: Such as?

THOMAS MESSER: I think Harry essentially viewed the Guggenheim Museum as an extension of his home. And I think that he was a man of considerable decorum. He got greatly upset if somebody did not arrive in black tie at museum openings, and used to give me dirty looks while asking me who these "friends of mine" whom I didn't even know, are. That was meant to be a joke, but he felt very much that the Guggenheim assumed a social plateau of distinction that should be maintained, and he liked to do this within the means that the Guggenheim had at its disposal, whether in the form of the endowment, or in the form of funds that we generated. He was, in other words, as a member of this generation, careful about not diluting the financial level upon which the Guggenheim image was built. I remember that even the introduction of a fifty cents admission charge was cause of some discussion at the time the new building opened to the public. But these were attitudes which the financial realities could no longer support. Nor could the existing uptight image be combined with the free-wheeling and informal attitudes of the art world.

ANDREW DECKER: When you say uptight image, you're referring to the black tie expectations?

THOMAS MESSER: Yes. But these are merely symptoms. They are characteristic for an expectation that things should be just right, and that, art too, should fulfill a preconceived notion of perfection and beauty, which, of course, the whole tradition of the modern movements contradicted.

ANDREW DECKER: So it sounds not as if it were quite a social club in his mind, but that there was a certain noblesse oblige going on.

THOMAS MESSER: There was. Yes. It was not a social club in an exclusive sense. In other words, there was no discrimination against anyone who wished to visit the Guggenheim. Harry was very interested in the large public and we never had racial problems of any kind within the Guggenheim. But there was the feeling that the museum is an elevated thing devoted to beauty, and that those who administered it and who were responsible for it, should fulfill these expectations.

ANDREW DECKER: In looking at some of the exhibitions that you held in the early seventies, there were several that struck me, including those of Robert Mangold, Robert Riman and Eva Hesse, who had recently died at that point. As well as one of Hans Haacke, who isn't really a Minimalist, but is kind of outside the painterly tradition. And I'm wondering, how did you choose so early on to look at Minimalism in any museum, and were there any concerns that by institutionalizing artists at that point you would be stultifying their development or unfairly increasing their popularity over those of other artists?

THOMAS MESSER: Well, we did not think of it in those terms. We always did have a multi-layered exhibition program. On the one hand, the most significant Old Masters, which were frequently replays, of course, although always replays that had not been done recently in New York. And on the other hand, we were always concerned with things that appeared on the scene, that had taken shape recently, and that needed to be discovered. And everything in between, too for the layers are many. I would like to repeat that these exhibitions were of different scope. They were not all the same size; they did not all have the same catalogue treatment; they did not receive the same build-up. There was a very distinct differentiation that reflected our sense either of acknowledgment of an existing status, or an experimental attitude. So I did not fear that we were prematurely creating something because experimentation and search was part of the idea.

ANDREW DECKER: In the eighties at another institution there were, for instance, nearly retrospectives of artists like David Salle and Julian Schnabel, who, at that point, were barely forty years old, perhaps.

THOMAS MESSER: But not at the Guggenheim.

ANDREW DECKER: No, not at the Guggenheim. Were your exhibitions decidedly smaller than exhibitions that would take up two floors of another museum?

THOMAS MESSER: I can't do this in terms of measurement, but we gauged it by ramps, which was a convenient way of assessment. Let us say for instance, some of the exhibitions that we have already discussed -- Sandy Calder among others -- had the whole building, from top to bottom. And then there were others that had no more than one ramp. Group shows, of course, were another way of introducing artists without giving them too much emphasis. But there was just about any degree of differentiation, in terms of size and other attributes.

ANDREW DECKER: Was there much public interest in works by Mangold and Ryman?

THOMAS MESSER: I don't think there was in terms of numbers. No. And we knew perfectly well that there wouldn't be. We always tried, therefore, to have such exhibitions together with something else that would bring in the public. This might have been simply part of the collection, or Klee and Kandinsky since the public always complained that we did not show enough of them. This was, of course, before we had established permanent exhibition space for the collection. And so whenever we had more or less current names presented modestly, we tried to make sure that the museum would not remain unattended.

ANDREW DECKER: And the Hans Haacke exhibition --that seems to have been perhaps the first intended exhibition of words at the Guggenheim. Or art incorporating words to a large extent.

THOMAS MESSER: Well, of course, the Hans Haacke exhibition did not take place, and instead became a cause celebre--a much publicized encounter between director, curator and artist, which ended in the cancellation of the exhibition and much public uproar. Incidentally, because of the defense of the position that I had taken at the time I probably should restate my position here: The Hans Haacke exhibition was the idea of Edward Frye, who admired the artist and introduced me to his work which was meant to produce an exhibition in three parts. One was concern with matters physical--water, ice, steam--things of that kind. One was organic growth--plants that would, during the exhibition, grow and change form. And the last part was supposed to be social--in the sense of changes of populations, statistics and so on. When the exhibition reached its stage of presentation, it turned out that it was one to draw attention through texts and photographs, to New York's slumlords and their abuses of the public interest. It included the names of those accused, their connections, and other details. It was, in other words, I think in retrospect, an exhibition that had much to do with a rising interest in political correctness and political issues--one that I saw as an effort to address a socio-political issue. I saw this as inappropriate and did not feel that an art museum was the place in which a public exposé of individuals identified by name could or should take place. And as I say, I canceled the show to be accused of all sorts of

things. Among them, that I was protecting trustees who were themselves presumably slumlords. This accusation, made in print, was withdrawn when challenged. It has also been said, not recently but over the years -- that Haacke had offered to withdraw the names of slumlords to leave just the photographs anonymously. I am unaware of such an offer and believe that I would have accepted it because the crucial point of the dispute was precisely the exposé of anonymous individuals who were not politically prominent or in the public limelight. And so I did what I did. It was a difficult decision, and one for which I got it on the chin for a long time but I did not feel at the time that I should have acted otherwise.

ANDREW DECKER: Did Mr. Frye remain at the museum?

THOMAS MESSER: No, he did not. The controversy became very public and continued over television, and everybody said things.

ANDREW DECKER: On New York local news?

THOMAS MESSER: On everything. And so I had to tell Ed that we could not work together, and he was given an adequate settlement and left. I might say that we have remained friends. We have been over this situation many times without acrimony and without enmity before Ed's death. I don't want to put words into the mouth of somebody who is no longer here to confirm it or to deny, but I believe that Ed came to think about this whole thing differently over the years.

ANDREW DECKER: Were, in fact, any of the people named on the board?

THOMAS MESSER: No, of course not. No. In fact, the board was totally uninvolved in this whole thing. Here again, it has been said that I was pushed by the board to do what I did. But the board was largely unaware of the issue and it was I who brought in the lawyer. It was my wish to have him understand the situation, and advise me. But at no time was I under board pressure in any sense.

ANDREW DECKER: At the same time you also had some retrospectives of John Chamberlain, Jean Dubuffet, Alberto Giacometti, Max Ernst. Almost annually. Were these considered box office draws at that point? Was there an interest in having block buster exhibitions, or did people even think of major shows in those terms?

THOMAS MESSER: I would say that in those terms they were not arranged primarily for financial reasons, although it would be untrue to say that we were not aware of money. We were, of course. But the names you mentioned were important to me--they were part of the exploration of modern art history. And while all of these artists had been seen somewhere, none of those had been seen recently and in their fullness in New York. I said before that my directorship was public oriented, that I was interested in programs that could become meaningful to a large public. It was not only because of its size but also because I considered that we were talking about a constituency that the Guggenheim should be addressing. And while the exhibitions here discussed could not and were not the only the only kind we presented, they certainly did play an important role in our planning.

ANDREW DECKER: Did you need to coordinate with other museums, the fact you'd be having these shows? I imagine they took eighteen months, or often --if not always more -- to put together. And would you need to call over to the Modern or to the Metropolitan and say, "We're planning this?"

THOMAS MESSER: Well, there were sporadic efforts to do such things, and in a well-ordered world this probably would have been the case. But truth is we did not because everybody was terribly busy doing their own thing. And it did happen occasionally that we collided. I remember two such occasions with the Museum of Modern Art. We collided with the preparation of the Bacon show and the presentation of the Motherwell show. In the case of Motherwell, MOMA won out and in the case of the Bacon, we did. I should really stress that, during my years, relationships with other museums, were extremely good and that, at least on the directorial level, there have not been any significant strains.

ANDREW DECKER: There are a number of exhibitions -- well, there's one -- the Guggenheim Museum Collection of Paintings 1840-1945. When you took down a show to have a retrospective -- a show of your permanent collection -- and then the retrospective came down -- did you make an effort to present the works that you had in a slightly different installation, or somewhat different installation? Or were there particular paintings that the public just wanted to see whenever possible?

THOMAS MESSER: In installing we did not think of the public in that way. The exhibit that you mentioned was installed on the occasion of the publication of our collection catalog which covered those years. And the decision of what works to include in the permanent collection catalog had been made previous to that, probably years before. And this particular exhibition had the purpose of reflecting the publication. So that it had nothing to do with what the public wanted to see. Of course, some of the things that we, within the museum, thought to be the most important works were also public favorites. That goes without saying.

ANDREW DECKER: By 1976, when you exhibited the works -- well, where did you get the money for that, by the way?

THOMAS MESSER: For what?

ANDREW DECKER: For the publication of the museum's collections?

THOMAS MESSER: We did everything we could. We, as I remember, got a grant from the National Endowment, and besides it was a legitimate museum activity. It was research. And you might say that it was in the budget. I considered the publication of the collection in consecutive volumes one of the most important activities for us to engage in.

ANDREW DECKER: So by that time -- by 1976 -- Harry Guggenheim had been dead for five years. Had the internal structure of the museum changed by then? Or was it largely continuing as it had while he was first President, and then Chairman of the Board?

THOMAS MESSER: Well, there was no deliberate change of the institutional structure. No effort was made and none was required to structure the Guggenheim in different ways. But what had changed was not only the personalities, but in fact there was a move from one generation to another. There was an entirely different feeling about the Guggenheim. It had moved into a much more public phase than Harry Guggenheim would have been comfortable with. It had also found itself in greater need of money as the endowment continued to erode, and prices of everything rose, and as we began to expand our building. So there were generational issues as well as those traceable to personalities, money and size. Everything did change in an evolutionary manner and it changed very markedly.

ANDREW DECKER: Harry Guggenheim was an elderly man when he died?

THOMAS MESSER: Yes. He was over eighty.

ANDREW DECKER: And Peter Lawson-Johnson was, at that point, in his forties?

THOMAS MESSER: Yes. Peter was born in 1927, and that means also that he was seven years younger than I. And my relationship with the President had changed partly for this reasons but also because Peter is an entirely different kind of a person. Harry Guggenheim, whom I respected very much, was something of a tyrant. There was absolutely no question that a man of great wealth, a man who considered himself not only President of a board he controlled, but also head of a distinguished family also fully under his control, had all the cards in his hands. And I do want to say here somewhat in my defense, that I did not do everything that Harry wanted. We did have our polite disagreements, which took no small effort on my part. To face up to Harry or to disagree with him certainly was not easy. But it did happen on various occasions. But all of this changed with Peter, who apart from being younger and very differently constituted, did not view himself in such omnipotent terms.

ANDREW DECKER: Was he interested in art?

THOMAS MESSER: Well, I think the Guggenheim interest in art was always a qualified matter. They were more interested in doing something good. They were interested in education. They were interested in the museum as a monument to the family. None of the Guggenheims, with the exception of Peggy, had a developed intense personal relationship with art.

ANDREW DECKER: So was it kind of a family matter with Peter? And I assume that there was an interest, if not a great knowledge.

THOMAS MESSER: Yes. There was certainly the conviction that this is something that the Guggenheim should be doing. It was an established tradition and what we did had his support. But with the exception of Peggy none of the Guggenheims were art world people.

ANDREW DECKER: Did you continue to be with him, as you had with Harry and go to galleries with him?

THOMAS MESSER: No. That was no longer requested or required. We had a very different relationship. By that time, of course, the museum was not so cozy a place anymore. The board had become much larger. The people around Peter were very different from those around Harry.

ANDREW DECKER: Who joined the board, or why? Why did it grow?

THOMAS MESSER: Why did it grow? Well, I said before that the financial basis had changed, and money that had not previously been considered a responsibility of the board, suddenly became one. We needed financial board support and had needed it for some time. But we didn't have it and we didn't seek it. But when Harry had gone and Peter found himself President of the board, he did realize that this had to change, and so the people who

joined the board were so informed. Actually, most of those who were now invited by Peter and voted in as board members, were corporate types. They were part of the business world who, if they did not give us money themselves, opened doors for us at a time at which corporate support had suddenly become very important. None of this existed in the earlier phase of the Guggenheim.

ANDREW DECKER: But even in the seventies, it was possible to solicit and receive money from corporations?

THOMAS MESSER: Yes, but for the Guggenheim it only started thereafter, in a serious way. We were late, of course, with all of this. Other museums had been seeking corporate support much earlier. But that was not compatible with the earlier stance of the Guggenheim.

ANDREW DECKER: Okay. Were non-family members and people -- you mentioned before that while Harry was President of the board, if not Chairman, the board consisted of family members and people that they were associated with. Lawyers, for instance.

THOMAS MESSER: Yes.

ANDREW DECKER: Were people beyond that small circle invited to join the board?

THOMAS MESSER: At what time?

ANDREW DECKER: Under Peter's early Presidency.

THOMAS MESSER: Yes. Very quickly, the board lost its family intimacy. This. however, shouldn't be exaggerated, because even at Harry's time, as I mentioned before, there were museum professionals on the board who certainly were not family. But what was basically a very intimate and family-oriented board, had now become something else. Not suddenly, but step-by-step.

ANDREW DECKER: Were any of the board members collectors?

THOMAS MESSER: Not at that time. No. We had no tradition that way. And I think this might have been rejected -- resented in the early stages. It was left for a later phase, to consider the presence of collectors, and to invite a few collectors.

ANDREW DECKER: Was there a reason for that? Or was there a reason that they hadn't been invited onto the board earlier?

THOMAS MESSER: I don't even think that we worried about this very much. Because, as I say, it was not traditional at the Guggenheim. But thinking of it retrospectively, there is, of course, a self-evident problem with collectors -- and I'm speaking generally now, without thinking of anyone in particular. Collectors of modern art, within an institution such as ours, are there in order to help the institution. And while they are collecting, they cannot but also benefit from the resources and the information that the institution has at its disposal. In any case, they would probably have strong views on what is or isn't desirable and therefore carry, for better or worse, such personal views into the institutional pattern. We took a long time before we accepted -- shall I say -- this risk and when we did, we did it very cautiously.

ANDREW DECKER: With Peter as President, did you find that there were new things that you could do at the museum? Were there steps that you took that you hadn't taken before, by choice, or out of concern for not wanting to raise a ruckus with Harry on a relatively minor basis? Or over a minor issue?

THOMAS MESSER: I really don't know what you're asking me now. [laughs]

ANDREW DECKER: Okay. Did you have more latitude?

THOMAS MESSER: Oh, yes. I had much more latitude. I mean, Peter is a lovely man, and he is laissez-faire. And as I already said, he was younger, and our relationship was one of a warmly cordial friendship. I always had his ear, and he had mine. So the whole hierarchic relationship that existed under Harry had been substituted by something quite different. Yes.

ANDREW DECKER: Did his being more of a laissez-faire sort of person -- what did it mean to you?

THOMAS MESSER: Well, in a sense, it meant that I became a full-fledged director, which of course Harry's presence limited. My directorship under Harry was contingent always upon my ability to persuade him, which I mostly succeeded in doing. But I also wasn't foolhardy enough to propose directions which were hopeless. I knew that Harry considered himself to be the head of the Foundation that operated the Guggenheim Museum, and I knowingly accepted this limitation of my status in his lifetime. Formally, this continued that way. But in reality, concerns which were not mine in Harry's lifetime, now became so. These included administrative,

financial, social, organizational matters, in a much fuller degree than before when my range of action was essentially limited to art.

ANDREW DECKER: So you became less of a Director/Curator and more of a Director/Administrator?

THOMAS MESSER: Yes, I did. And not all of this was for the best. You asked me during our last session what fun I had in the early days, and I told you that I had curatorial fun. And of course, I continued to have this, never willing to give it up. But for various reasons, which were not only related to the trustee situation, but also to that of a growing staff, my curatorial involvement became somewhat more restricted.

ANDREW DECKER: Is there such a thing as administrative fun?

THOMAS MESSER: There is planning fun. Yes. There is gratification with well-laid plans turning out well. Yes. And, of course, I didn't give up making programs, and I continued to do exhibitions occasionally. But the balance had swung.

ANDREW DECKER: So fundraising, then, is part of your new portfolio?

THOMAS MESSER: Necessarily so. Yes.

ANDREW DECKER: Was the board generous?

THOMAS MESSER: Well, the board had no tradition of giving. Certainly not prior to Peter's time. And it was only when Peter became President, that we gradually -- and, I might say uneasily -- entered into this. Uneasily, because Peter too is a Guggenheim, and he had emotional problems in his earlier Presidential years, to look somebody in the eyes and ask for money. And it took some time for him, and for me, too, to do this with some ease and success.

ANDREW DECKER: Okay. So you wouldn't have lunch with somebody and say, "How about a two million dollar gift?"

THOMAS MESSER: I don't remember such lunches. [laughs]

ANDREW DECKER: [laughs] Were there people who were asked to join the board simply because they were expected to give a certain amount of money? Like, did you have a formula for a new trustee had to give X number of dollars a year?

THOMAS MESSER: No, that never works. We were never that crass about it. And we certainly never told somebody that, "We are taking you on for the exclusive reason of getting money." But it is also true that certain people in our minds were asked to join, whose usefulness in our thinking, was primarily monetary.

ANDREW DECKER: In 1979 you had an exhibition of Matisse from the collection of the Baltimore Museum of Art. Today it's fairly commonplace for museums to charge lending fees for shows, if not for individual works. Was that a practice at that time?

THOMAS MESSER: No. The practice was if you prepared an exhibition, that you shared the total cost with others. The practice was to involve them in cost sharing of the exhibition. And there was also an increasing tendency to charge modest service fees for the loans of individual works. I think the Museum of Modern Art probably started this by charging X hundred dollars for each object that was lent out. We eventually accepted that formula, also. But other than that, and perhaps with the exception of one or two exhibitions that we sent to Japan, we did not charge high fees for exhibitions originating at the Guggenheim.

ANDREW DECKER: Why wouldn't a museum then have charged, say, fifty thousand or two hundred thousand dollars to another institution that would be getting the benefit of the work that they had done?

THOMAS MESSER: Well, I think first of all it's very doubtful in those days that we could have gotten such amounts. And apart from that, there was a different sense of solidarity among museums. Every one of us knew that if we are going to do it to others, others will do it to us. And so we refrained, I think, knowingly and instinctively, from applying these methods among ourselves, and I still regret that this time has apparently passed.

ANDREW DECKER: In 1978 and 1980 you had two exhibitions of the Evelyn Sharp collection.

THOMAS MESSER: Yes.

ANDREW DECKER: Was she a donor to the institution?

THOMAS MESSER: Well, she became one. It was part of the idea of this exhibition, which I persuaded her to hold at the Guggenheim, that she would make substantial gifts of works that I would select. In fact, we had a contract with her by which upon exhibiting a selection from her collection at the Guggenheim, we would receive four works of my choice -- two Mirós and two Legers -- that she would donate in shares over the years. And that has happened. They have entered the collection.

ANDREW DECKER: Okay. But that exhibition was among the few -- up to 1980, at least -- where you were exhibiting the collection of one person.

THOMAS MESSER: That's right.

ANDREW DECKER: Was that just not something that was done so much, or had not been done at museums generally? Or simply not at the Guggenheim?

THOMAS MESSER: It was done whenever you hoped to justify it by lasting benefits to the museum. Actually, we did show the G. David Thompson collection in 1961. We showed the Hirshhorn Collection in 1963 before it was institutionalized, so there have been precedents. But I would not have been as enthusiastic about the exhibition project if it had not been tied to acquisitions that I thought were very important.

ANDREW DECKER: A way that you sought exhibitions resume. Exhibitions entitled Acquisition Priorities. There were, I believe, two. One was Aspects of Post-War Painting in America, and another one, subsequent to that, in 1976, was Post-War Painting in Europe. Were these successful?

THOMAS MESSER: Yes, they were. The effort was to add to the collection works which were already moving into the category of classical modernism. By that time, the artists included in this exhibition were, if not as famous as Picasso and Matisse, on the verge of coming into their own--and as a result, very expensive and difficult to acquire. And in order to stimulate interest in specific paintings that we were lacking, I organized and selected these two exhibitions in such a way as to show what we missed, next to what we had. And we also conveyed through black and red labels -- that signified "we are in the black" or "we are in the red" -- what we needed to add, stimulating interest in financial support, which often materialized. Not, alas, in all instances, but in quite a few.

ANDREW DECKER: Who was it that kind of stepped up and acquired the works on your behalf, or provided you the money to acquire them? Were these trustees, or just people who loved art and wanted to have it around the corner, at the Guggenheim?

THOMAS MESSER: No, it was never people who forced themselves upon us. It was always the result of elaborate cultivation. By that time it may well have been in part a new breed of trustees, and perhaps some of the collector-trustees which we had added to the board, who directly or indirectly did help.

ANDREW DECKER: In the late seventies also -- 1978 -- I believe the Thannhauser collection formally was installed.

THOMAS MESSER: That's right. That was in 1978?

ANDREW DECKER: Yes.

THOMAS MESSER: It was, I believe, formally installed on the occasion of Justin Thannhauser's eightieth birthday, unless I am mistaken. But in any case, the Thannhauser presentation beset with difficulties from the beginning, went through a gradual purification process, and so the exhibition that you mentioned may have been the occasion for clearing up everything and of the presentation of the Thannhauser collection under much improved conditions.

ANDREW DECKER: By a purification process. Was that referring to re-doing the building?

THOMAS MESSER: Well, that of course was the last phase. But that came later, in 1987 or so. We are not there yet. The purification process that I'm referring to took place in the seventies. It consisted, first of all, in the removal in the original installation as I mentioned before. The Fortuny back-drop, the heavy golden frames and all of that. And we also eliminated some works which were deemed to be unworthy of the collection as a whole. These were measures which were taken with the permission of Hilda Thannhauser, the second wife and eventually the widow of the Justin. And gradually this led to a physical reconstruction of those premises, which then yielded into the new building phase of the eighties.

ANDREW DECKER: Going back to an earlier part of the seventies, you had exhibitions entitled, for instance, in 1971, Ten Young Artists, Theodoron, and later Amsterdam, Paris, Düsseldorf, and other Theodoron awards, and later Exxon Awards. Were these your surveys of contemporary art?

THOMAS MESSER: These exhibitions in a way grew out of the Guggenheim Internationals of earlier years. The Guggenheim Internationals became too cumbersome, too ambitious, too large, too nationally oriented. And when they ran out, we felt that we needed something that would nevertheless send us looking for things that were happening in this country, and in other parts of the world, meaning working artists without an as yet established reputations. And so when I was approached with various program proposals by the president of the Theodoron Foundation, I suggested that we establish a program by which every year we would present selections of current art. These were not museum-filling events but smallish surveys gathered world-wide. Let's say in 1975 there might be one limited to American artists, and in 1976, one from a previously determined part of Europe. And when this program ran out, when the Theodoron Foundation was no longer prepared to support for it, I made arrangements with the Exxon Foundation to start the so-called Exxon Series, which proceeded somewhat more ambitiously along the same lines. And so for many, many years we had every year an exhibition selected by one of the younger curators of the Guggenheim, to survey a scene, nationally or internationally.

ANDREW DECKER: So it doesn't though, like a kind of full-fledged Whitney Biennial, or the Modern on its reopening had an international survey. And those exhibitions habitually brought criticism for exclusions or selections. Were the Exxon and other exhibitions as ambitious in scope, where they trying to survey the world or America?

THOMAS MESSER: No, they were not. They were precisely avoiding this approach because others -- and we, ourselves -- had sort of gone through this, and had, I think, realized its inherent limitations. That didn't protect us from our share of criticism which, of course, we received. You cannot do contemporary shows of that kind without attracting criticism. But I think people got used to it, and even some of our more consistent critics came to the conclusion that the Exxon shows were worth having and even said so in print.

ANREW DECKER: We've reached the point of the 1980s, which included a number of exhibitions of some interest. One of them is Picasso: The Last Years, curated, I believe, by Gert Schiff.

THOMAS MESSER: That's right.

ANDREW DECKER: And there was a great interest in that exhibition, if I recall correctly.

THOMAS MESSER: There would, of course, be a great interest in almost any Picasso exhibition. The general public reacts mainly to names that they know and there's no name they know better than Picasso. Unless it were Van Gogh. And so, yes, we had crowds for that one. But there was also a legitimate critical interest because it had been said so often and maintained by reputable critics that Picasso -- let's say at the very latest after the 1950s, went into a big decline and that what he did as an old man didn't amount to much. And Gert Schiff, and our projection of his exhibition, were at pains to prove the contrary; namely, that Picasso, in fact, remained a very vital artist to the end of his life. Different, of course. No true artist, not even those who do not reach their nineties, fail to change. And if they don't change, then we may talk about decline. Picasso kept changing to his last breath, and I myself, found the late years very moving.

ANDREW DECKER: Was this an exhibition that you had talked about with Mr. Schiff beforehand?

THOMAS MESSER: Oh, yes. But not in the sense of having cooperated in the conception of the show. Not before he did it. No. He called me when the exhibition was completed -- at least in his mind --and inquired about my interest. I thought about it and agreed that we should have it. And then we talked.

ANDREW DECKER: A point that some have made -- accurately or not -- is that it was Picasso's work in the last years that inspired and influenced people like Julian Schnabel, and Eric Fishel and David Salle. Does that ring true to your mind?
THOMAS MESSER: Not terribly. I mean, I don't want to deny it, because it's always terribly difficult to know how an artist is influenced, and under what circumstances. Influence thinking is probably a necessary evil because you can't get away from it, and yet it falsifies the nature of the process because artists and others are always influenced by a multiplicity of stimuli, sources, and everything else. And so how would I know whether Picasso was among them in their minds. But to me, the issue is very, very different. The late Picasso came to terms with his age, with his impotence, and eventually with death, which, as I remember in Schiff's essay, is described very movingly. The last sentence of his text reads: "Yes, he thought about it, and finally, as a good Spaniard, he faced it."

ANDREW DECKER: Also in the eighties -- in fact, in 1982 and 1983 and 1985, you had a series of exhibitions on Kandinsky. Kandinsky in Munich, Kandinsky Russia and Bauhaus, Kandinsky in Paris, which seem to kind of cover his maturity. His evolution and maturity.

THOMAS MESSER: Yes.

ANDREW DECKER: Did you rely mostly on works from the collection, or were other people willing to lend, as well?

THOMAS MESSER: We borrowed from various sources. The collection, of course, was a great help. We did this because Kandinsky is something of a Patron Saint for the Guggenheim, and nobody else probably could have done it with as much effectiveness as a museum that could dip deeply into its own holdings, and also has established the tradition of scholarship related to Kandinsky. But yes, we did rely on other loans, the more so because not all the works in that series were by Kandinsky. In the 'Munich' phase, for instance, there were many examples that aimed to show Kandinsky's derivation, according to Peg Weiss, who curated this phase of the series, and so there were many works that had strictly speaking nothing to do with Kandinsky. Similarly, in the Russian period, we did show the Russian avant garde --the Constructivists -- which was very enlightening as they pointed to the interesting, if conjectural, relationship between Kandinsky and the artists who, at that time, constituted the progressive movement in Russia.

ANDREW DECKER: Did he actually spend time with them?

THOMAS MESSER: Well, you know, this is a question that scholars are still debating. He was not one of them by any means. He was, I think, considered to be an old fogey by most of them. An unaccustomed position for Kandinsky, to be sure. But they were much more radical, really. They reflected an attitude and a philosophy if you will that was very far removed from expressive romanticism of the pre-war Kandinsky kind. Very much more programmatic and more political. In terms of form, they were much more radical as they foretold some of the developments that Kandinsky eventually was to pick-up during the Bauhaus years. And so if you ask me, I think he did know about them quite well, and Kandinsky was intelligent and perceptive. I think yes, he did see them, and very likely derive benefit from those encounters. Again, I don't want to simplify the issue just because Rodchenko did some circles before Kandinsky. I don't mean to say that he copied those, that would be much too simple. But it stands to reason that in those years, this was an insight that had important effects in Kandinsky.

ANDREW DECKER: Also in 1981, there were two exhibitions. One, a retrospective of Gorky. Was this a major show of several ramps?

THOMAS MESSER: Yes. It was a very major show which Diane Waldman did as a follow-up to her large American exhibitions -- Rothko preceded this, and De Kooning in East Hampton was another one. So yes, it was very major and very beautiful.

ANDREW DECKER: Was that, to your recollection, one of the first retrospectives of Gorky's work?

THOMAS MESSER: I don't think so. I can't answer this question fully, but I'm almost certain that there was a large retrospective staged by the Museum of Modern Art years before.

ANDREW DECKER: In the same year there was an exhibition of the Russian avant garde.

THOMAS MESSER: This was essentially an exhibition of the Costakis collection, which included many works of the Russian avant garde. That incidentally was not planned necessarily that way. I mean, this was not a year of Russians, as it may seem. But it had to do with the fact that sometime before Costakis was allowed to leave the Soviet Union, and take with him a good part -- although by no means everything -- of his collection, and since I had been visiting him in Moscow previous to that, I arranged with him the first collection showing in the United States and one of the first outside of Russian. There was one small exhibition in Düsseldorf, quickly prepared but ours, which was a result of research by Margit Rowell and Angelica Rudinstein, was a very thorough undertaking resulting in a scholarly catalogue.

ANDREW DECKER: How easy was it for Costakis to get the works out of Russia, in 1981? It wasn't the height of the Cold War, but it wasn't a terribly friendly situation, either.

THOMAS MESSER: I just don't know how he did these things.

ANDREW DECKER: He never discussed it with you?

THOMAS MESSER: Not in any detail. No. We all knew that the deal was that he would be allowed to leave with about half, and that the other half would be donated to -- I guess it was the Tretyakov. And I remember an I.C.O.M. [International Council of Museums] meeting in Moscow, which was probably even earlier, in the seventies, if I'm not mistaken. And we all saw the very beautiful things that he left there. So the Russian government didn't feel badly, the Soviet government didn't feel badly, by holding on to what they received.

ANDREW DECKER: Toward the end of the decade, in 1987, there was an exhibition of fifty years of collecting, which covered the Guggenheim, basically, and its collections. That exhibition included works acquired by Solomon Guggenheim, by Hilla Rebay, by the Thannhausers, and by Peggy Guggenheim.

THOMAS MESSER: Right. This was a most comprehensive showing of the Foundation's holding. I think we called it Collection of the Solomon Guggenheim Foundation, rather than Museum. Because as you said, it included

works from New York, as well as from Venice, with purchases made by the first three Directors, by Hilla Rebay, James Johnson Sweeney, and myself, in addition to major gifts received from various donors.

ANDREW DECKER: Did you find any surprises in putting your show together, in terms of strengths or areas that you wanted more or needed more?

THOMAS MESSER: Strengths -- do you mean was I being hindered?

ANDREW DECKER: Oh, no, no. In going through the collection -- I would imagine that in looking at a collection for Kandinsky's exhibition, you look at it in a certain way.

THOMAS MESSER: Yes.

ANDREW DECKER: And looking at it for kind of an overall retrospective of the Guggenheim itself, you see things somewhat differently.

THOMAS MESSER: Yes, of course. Well, it was a deep involvement on my part because this was, in a sense, my farewell show. And I worked on this exhibition for a long time, and tried to show everything that the foundation owned in its fullness. When I say everything, I don't mean every work, of course, but every important aspect. The show was conceived more or less chronologically, with the Thannhauser collection at the base because of its point of departure in the nineteenth century and moving upward toward the most recent period. In other words, the classical part of the collection remains a base for recent purchases of some of the more important post-war acquisitions. These were subdivided it into three part: European, North American and Latin American. And it was interesting to see how they related to each other. I also divided painting from sculpture and allowed painting to be seen for the first time in the north wings of the building prior to the subsequently constructed tower. There was, in other words, already some new building activity at the time this exhibition took place.

I came to the conclusion, after years of experimentation, that contrary to previously held opinion by everybody including my own, the ramps are not only suited for sculpture -- that is to say, useable for sculpture -- but particularly well suited. Sculpture in the building looks dramatic when well installed. And this exhibition, in effect, divided up painting and sculpture in a manner that gave sculpture the entire ramp space, and presented painting in the already existing areas of new construction in the northern part of the museum.

THOMAS MESSER: The northern part includes the lower circular building -- the monitor building, which had originally been used for office space. It includes the entire monitor, in fact. When I mentioned this -- and it's difficult to explain this without showing models -- but anything that is north of the large ramp, or if you wish, north of the elevator shaft that acts something like a spine for the museum as a whole, was not originally intended for presentation of works of art. These were administrative spaces which we gradually invaded, because we needed them for the collection. We extended them and eventually made them the base for the tower that is now in place.

ANDRES DECKER: So how much space did that give you, as you took those offices over? I believe there are two floors in the monitor building -- the circular monitor building.

THOMAS MESSER: No, there are three. There are three floors which extended eastward toward the old annex. I remember that in the late 1960's we already built a service building subsequently torn down, but with pillars reaching deep down, so as to support the present tower. And so the spaces that I'm talking about is the entire monitor, although I have to say that we did not invest heavily there because we thought them to be unsuited, and I still think they are.

ANDREW DECKER: So those were three stories of square buildings, the same height as the monitor.

THOMAS MESSER: That's right. Yes.

ANDREW DECKER: So that area which had been used for the Thannhauser and permanent collections during various temporary exhibitions and retrospectives -- the monitor building and the annex -- were three stories that probably went sixty feet east from Fifth Avenue.

THOMAS MESSER: I can't calculate measurements. I can't do this. But I think we are talking about the same spaces.

ANDREW DECKER: Okay. We'll get back to the annex building in a couple of minutes. Along with exhibiting in Fifty years of collections of Solomon and Peggy Guggenheim, the Thannhausers, and Sweeney's acquisitions --

THOMAS MESSER: ...and mine. [laughs]

ANDREW DECKER: There were some acquisitions that you had made. [laughs] Looking through a fairly short list

that I have here, it seems that perhaps fifty works were purchased. There is one commission, I think, a couple of trades, and a few donations. Did you find that throughout your career you had to buy more often than receive as gifts?

THOMAS MESSER: The gifts that we received greatly outnumbered what we were able to buy. I wish it had been otherwise because, obviously, buying is a much more precise way of obtaining what you really want. On the other hand, many of the gifts were what I would call controlled gifts. In many instances I was able to negotiate specific works in a private collection, which would be of particular interest to us. And in many other instances, the gift consisted of a monetary contribution toward a work of art that I, or in some cases curators, would agree upon with the donor. So gifts do not mean necessarily that we had nothing to do with a selection. But obviously -- before my time, for instance, gifts were very rare, and it was easier to collect with money than without, of course.

ANDREW DECKER: And you also exchanged a couple of paintings -- made a couple of exchanges with the Museum of Modern Art, in one case receiving Matisse's Italian Woman. In another case, receiving Kirchner's Artillery Man.

THOMAS MESSER: Yes.

ANDREW DECKER: How tough negotiators were they?

THOMAS MESSER: We both had to be tough as we were defending our respective holdings. On the other hand, as I have had occasion to say before, the relationship with MOMA, was exemplary both in my contact with the Dick Oldenburg and with Bill Rubin. And there was never in my memory either strife, unreasonable demands, or any of that. We made such exchanges as would benefit, in our view, both institutions. And it worked, I think, very much to our mutual benefit.

ANDREW DECKER: Why did you give up a Franz Marc, and what was so important about the Kirchner that you received?

THOMAS MESSER: Well, it chiefly had to do with the fact that the Guggenheim was rich in Franz Marcs who was close to Kandinsky and the Blaue Reiter group. So we had many. And Marc, of course, is not always on the same level of accomplishment. We have kept our best Marcs, and have never intended to part with those. The Yellow Cow or the White Bull are works that would never have been considered for exchange. And MOMA, of course, did the same. MOMA was richer in German Expressionism than we were. For some reason my predecessors at the Guggenheim did not collect German Expressionism before. I think, for Hilla Rebay it was too figurative and Kandinsky was not fond of the Brücke Expressionists. And Sweeney seemed to have no particular liking for the movement while, for me, it was part of my tradition. To make myself clear, I'm not German, but I grew up in a European space, in which German art was highly valued. And so I was familiar with Expressionism from way back, and it bothered me that we had virtually no examples of the Brücke when I came. Or, for that matter, of Austrian Expressionists.

ANDREW DECKER: So you had, at that point, almost no Kirchners?

THOMAS MESSER: I had bought one Kirchner before.

ANDREW DECKER: And that was it?

THOMAS MESSER: And that was it.

ANDREW DECKER: What about Klee?

THOMAS MESSER: Klee, to be sure, is a different matter. Klee was very richly represented in the collection, but not very selectively. Because what happened is that the Guggenheim bought the Nierendorf estate after the dealer's sudden death in New York, I believe, in the early fifties. And as I was told the story, the Klees came in suitcases and all was acquired. Now, Klee was, in fact, always interesting, which is not to say, always of equal quality. No artist is. And so at one time we had a very large number of Klees, though not as many as we had Kandinsky’s. And, for many years, I had sought opportunities to sell off a number of works by Klee that seemed less important to me and to others, to buy with the proceeds fewer works by the same artist that seemed to be missing from his stylistic sequence in addition to being of exceptional importance.. So I bought a few, sold many, but I think increased the quality of the Klees in our collection. And I've never used income from Klee's sales for anything but the acquisition of other Klees.

ANDREW DECKER: So it was a very narrow-focused exchange program, set-up within the museum, basically.

THOMAS MESSER: I don't quite understand.

ANDREW DECKER: Well, you were staying within the same arena.

THOMAS MESSER: Yes. Oh, definitely, yes. But what I attempted to do was to reduce quantity and increase the presence of major works.

ANDREW DECKER: What about Latin American works? You had a number of Latin American exhibitions, or exhibitions of Latin American artists.

THOMAS MESSER: Yes.

ANDREW DECKER: Were you able to acquire any works in that area?

THOMAS MESSER: Yes, we did. Way back in the mid-sixties, I had been to Latin America, and we subsequently presented an exhibition called The Emergent Decade, which was largely post-war work by artists not very well known at the time. And while this exhibition was being presented, and during this entire process, I had a small grant. I remember exactly, ten thousand dollars, given to us by Evan Israel and a friend of his. I therefore could buy a number of works which, I believe, established that generation at the Guggenheim in a meaningful way.

ANDREW DECKER: Was there support within the board for Latin American art?

THOMAS MESSER: There as no objection. There was no special support, no.

ANDREW DECKER: Other artists whose works you acquired from the pre-War era were Mondrian, Leger, Kupka, Miró and Brancusi.

THOMAS MESSER: Among many others, yes.

ANDREW DECKER: The Brancusi you acquired late, for a great deal of money, I believe. Around 1982 or 1983.

THOMAS MESSER: Well, the Brancusi has a very special story. The major Brancusi contribution to the collection of the Guggenheim Museum was made by Jim Sweeney who was a great connoisseur of Brancusi's work He did, I believe, the first Brancusi exhibition in New York -- a beautiful show, which we all remember. And either during the exhibition or afterwards, he acquired a number of very important pieces, among them The Muse, a marble of great beauty. It was acquired not by purchase, but by gift from those Swiss watch people, the Bulovas. Do you know the name?

ANDREW DECKER: Yes. The family or the company?

THOMAS MESSER: The family. It was Mr. and Mrs. Bulova. That's just the point, because after it had been given to the Guggenheim and had been in our collection for many years -- it was in the collection when I came -- Mr. Bulova, I believe, had died by that time and Mrs. Bulova, had been divorced from him. And she claimed that he had no right to give The Muse to the Guggenheim. And so a lawsuit ensued that was carried through various stages. And at the end of it, it was decided in favor of the Bulovas, so that Mrs. Bulova could remove the work under the protection of the U.S. Marshall, against our emphatical protest, needless to say.

ANDREW DECKER: But had she previously made any claim toward the work, prior to her husband's death?

THOMAS MESSER: No. And I cannot now recite the details of that case, simply because I don't remember them that well. But I know that we did everything to prevent the loss of the work. However, I never let the Muse out of my sight, and when I finally found it again in the collection of Mr. Crispo, an art dealer...

ANDREW DECKER: That was Andrew Crispo?

THOMAS MESSER: Yes. When I found it again, I was already scheming about how to bring it back. And one day I had a call from Sotheby's, who told me that I should come over -- they had a surprise for me. And in David Nash's office, stood The Muse, and Nash explained to me that it had been confiscated from Crispo by his creditors or by the U.S. government and that it was for sale. So even though it is, of course, regrettable that you have to pay for a piece that you had once lost, it was of sufficient importance to make the sacrifices and buy it back. And so, I sold off a number of sculptures from the collection and with the proceeds, bought this extraordinary work.

ANDREW DECKER: Did you have to buy it at auction, or was this a private sale?

THOMAS MESSER: It was a private sale.

ANDREW DECKER: I recall the price was two million dollars or something. $2.7.

THOMAS MESSER: Well, we didn't tell the price then, and I don't think that I should be the one to divulge it now.

ANDREW DECKER: But it was a substantial work of art and a substantial amount of money?

THOMAS MESSER: It was.

ANDREW DECKER: At the same time you acquired works by Rothko and Smith and Lichtenstein and Estes among contemporary Americans, and Francis Bacon, Dubuffet, Beuys and Kounellis among Europeans.

THOMAS MESSER: Among others.

ANDREW DECKER: Among others. Yes. This is a very short list.

THOMAS MESSER: Yes.

ANDREW DECKER: Was there any -- slant or bias would be a dark word for it -- but were there decisions made by you with the curators -- or you, on your own -- that certain areas should be focused on? I don't see any representatives of pattern painting here, for instance, among your acquisitions. How did you choose?

THOMAS MESSER: How did we choose? Well, first of all, I think -- let me say bluntly that there never has been a stylistic exclusiveness, or any strong interest in trends. It was perhaps one of the characteristics of the Guggenheim in my time, that we did choose by personal conviction across the board. And, of course, different people have different convictions. In general, the way it divided up was that the historic purchases -- certainly everything prior to World War II -- was exclusively my initiative. Then, in the post-war period, the Europeans and Latin Americans and all that, was again my almost exclusive leaning, strengthened occasionally by the presence of these works in exhibitions prepared by curators. And with respect to the post-war era--on the other hand--Diane Waldman had strong convictions about various American painters, and we spoke about it and decided jointly what to do. And her lead was often followed. When we came to more recent things -- let's say selecting for purchase out of the Exxon shows -- it was the young curators who were pretty much determining.. I always participated but only to keep up and be informed. But they were closer to the scene than any of us. But there definitely was no collective buying. There was always the desire by one of us to take the initiative and unless there was any real reason not to follow it--a situation which I cannot even recall-- and provided, of course, that we had the funds in one way or another, we just went along. In other words, we were not establishing in my time any deliberate accents. From our previous conversation it follows that if there was an important area like German Expressionism, as I explained before, one which was not represented--not so much the style, but through artists like Kirchner, Nolde, or like Schiele and so on-- these were naturally on my mind and I would not have been looking for Franz Marc, or for Wassily Kandinsky. I was looking for special Klees. Yes. So there is, if you wish, no rhyme or reason, but there was a great deal of thought and emotion that went into this.

ANDREW DECKER: And at the same time, there was this Estes Commission. How did that come about? What is the work, in fact?

THOMAS MESSER: The work is a portrait of the Guggenheim Museum. How did it come about? I got to know Estes. I went to his studio. I even did a little exhibition for Japan because interest was shown there, one which we also presented at the Guggenheim. And Estes interested me, and so we came to terms. That's how it came about.

ANDREW DECKER: The museum paid for that?

THOMAS MESSER: Yes.

ANDREW DECKER: He didn't do it out of the goodness of his heart?

THOMAS MESSER: Well, I think he was generous in setting the price, as I remember. No, it was a commission.

ANDREW DECKER: What about minimalist work? You had a number of shows in the late sixties, early seventies.

THOMAS MESSER: Yes.

ANDREW DECKER: Did you come out of those shows with people interested enough in the works -- trustees or other people -- to acquire or donate, or provide funds for acquisitions?

THOMAS MESSER: I don't remember any specific donation of a work, so described. But we did nevertheless acquire -- we acquired Donald Judd, for instance, and Flavin. Donald Judd, out of a young talent show, that far back. Flavin, we bought a whole ramp, which again in a sense, was commissioned. I forget now exactly how this was arrived at. But yes, there was interest on the staff level. I think that if one were to scrutinize this -- the presence of minimalist artists prior to the donation of the Panza collection -- you will find that almost all of the

people were fragmentarily represented and almost all the Minimalist names were already in the collection.

In connection with this whole procedure of acquisitions at the Guggenheim, I think it's important to understand that there wasn't really any acquisition budget. At least certainly not in the eighties, and not much in the seventies. So that the assumption that money was there and we could more or less decide what to do with it is simply not true to life. We nevertheless continued to acquire not only actively, but I would say purposefully, with the burden upon all of us to create opportunities and occasions for the acquisition itself. In other words, it was not enough to say, "Well, I would love to buy a Gonzalez," or what not, "but it costs six hundred thousand dollars,". That's not the way it worked. We had our eyes continuously -- when I say we, I and a few curators, because only very few people got involved in the process of acquisition at al--we had our eyes on works that intrigued us, and if we wanted them enough, we were then thinking of what could be done. Whether there was, in fact, a small amount of money left from other budgets that could be used for experimental purchases, whether there were collectors who we could approach for one or the other potential acquisition, whether there was something hanging around somewhere, in somebody's apartment, that, through due cultivation, could eventually be acquired, or whether it was necessary to either exchange or deaccession works of art and buy with the proceeds, which is a form of exchange, of course, and thereby acquire some important examples. So it was never enough to say, "Well, the museum should have this or that," because first of all, one needed to have the money in order to then do what mattered to us most.

ANDREW DECKER: You mentioned surplus from a preceding year. In our earlier conversations, I got the impression that the Guggenheim had an endowment, and that the endowment generated capital. And that capital went toward the operation of the museum. And that the museum survived and thrived and operated to the extent that it did within that budgetary restraint. Were there ever donations to the endowment fund? Were there people kicking in money? Did the board become more active after the mid-seventies?

THOMAS MESSER: These are a number of questions. [laughs]

ANDREW DECKER: Yes.

THOMAS MESSER: I'll subdivide them. First of all what you said about the endowment and the budgets is basically correct. When I came to the Guggenheim, the interest from the capital were sufficient to cover everything that we did, including some acquisitions. But over the decades, the endowment, while it grew in absolute terms, began to be less and less adequate for the growing program of the museum. So that eventually, it fulfilled only a relatively small percentage of the overall budget. I remember that in 1961 which is when I came, the annual operating budget was less than a million. When I left, it was more than ten million. We were a different kind of museum by that time.

ANDREW DECKER: Your staff was much larger.

THOMAS MESSER: The staff was larger, the program was larger. Actually, the big expansion happened, of course, with our operation in the Frank Lloyd Wright building before my time. Because prior to the sixties, the Guggenheim was a very intimate affair. In terms of space, in terms of staff, in terms of public reach -- all of that. So its presence on this scene -- and I don't mean this now qualitatively because in those old days, the Guggenheim fulfilled an admirable function in terms of the small contributions that it made. Qualitatively it was very important from the beginning. But it only took its place with other leading museums, in the course of the sixties and thereafter. That is to say after we moved and operated in the Frank Lloyd Wright building. And so demands grew, and it became increasingly difficult to relate expenses to income, or to assure that sufficient incomes would cover the expenses. And the first victim of this, of course, was the area of acquisitions because you cannot leave a building without guards, you cannot leave it without cleaning, you cannot do without those basic things. But technically at least, you can do without acquisitions. And while we didn't do without them, we certainly were restricted in the freedom of our actions.

ANDREW DECKER: So where did this money come from, with the interest from the endowment becoming inadequate?

THOMAS MESSER: It came from various sources. The endowment was still there. It was enhanced by increased public activity. We had relatively large incomes from attendance and from bookstore sales, which, of course, we did not have in the early years. Secondly, there was by that time, a realization that a museum was able to rely on members and supporters. A membership was created in the sixties, which grew subsequently.

ANDREW DECKER: You had no membership until then?

THOMAS MESSER: We had no membership when I came. No.

ANDREW DECKER: Was that common?

THOMAS MESSER: No. It was most uncommon. The Guggenheim was very much behind the times in that respect because they saw themselves as a family foundation. The notion of earning money from the public was somewhat repugnant to a certain generation. And they only very slowly warmed to this idea. So a membership was created, and the usual museum dimensions of development and fund-raising, among others, were gradually and hesitatingly introduced and in time, extended and made more effective. And then, of course, there were two other sources which, at least for us, did not exist before. One was the government, the National Endowment and State-- wait a moment, what am I saying? We never got any direct State money. But there is the --

ANDREW DECKER: State Council for the Arts?

THOMAS MESSER: Yes, State Council for the Arts. We did get money from that. We started very slowly. Partly because they were not used to thinking of us as recipients, and were rather slow in accepting us within their ranks of applicants.

ANDREW DECKER: Well, you were a private museum.

THOMAS MESSER: No, legally speaking, we were a public operating museum, so we were eligible. But in any case, we gradually got on to the government channel, and in time also, to the corporate money source. And I think that this was probably the main achievement of Peter Lawson-Johnson's presidency, that he surrounded himself, and created a board of corporate personalities, who either gave us some themselves, or at least enabled us to fund-raise effectively, toward the reduction of our operational deficits.

ANDREW DECKER: I remember talking not too many years ago to the Treasurer of a museum -- in fact, the Guggenheim.

THOMAS MESSER: Ted Dunker?

ANDREW DECKER: No. Maybe Heidi Olsen. Is that possible? It was a financial person, in any case.

THOMAS MESSER: After my time?

ANDREW DECKER: Yes.

THOMAS MESSER: Oh, yes. Okay.

ANDREW DECKER: She said that usually when museums have a shortfall, the trustees just either write checks, or they dip into the endowment. Was that necessary, to get trustees to write checks, or to take money out of the endowment to cover expenses?

THOMAS MESSER: Of course, in the end there is nothing else to be done unless you stop paying bills. So if you do have deficits --and we gradually had an increasing curve of deficits -- it stands to reason that the formula that once worked easily -- or not easily, perhaps, but effectively -- simply ceased to function. I believe that in a sense the Guggenheim was always under-financed. Even in the old days. It was never flush, even though people thought so, because of the great wealth at one time of the Guggenheim family. But the proportions were so minimal, and when we were talking about income and expenses -- in today's terms it was so small that nobody had any reason to get excited about it.

ANDREW DECKER: Did Harry Guggenheim leave the Guggenheim any money?

THOMAS MESSER: No. It was not in the tradition. Harry Guggenheim felt that this was Solomon Guggenheim's museum, that one should live within the endowment that Solomon left, and that nobody should reduce his preeminence by diluting the fund. That's how I understood his feeling to be.

ANDREW DECKER: [laughs] But then, by the late seventies, you had all these foreign trustees, foreign meaning not related to the Guggenheims.

THOMAS MESSER: Yes.

ANDREW DECKER: And the museum was changing. Or, in fact, had changed.

THOMAS MESSER: Yes.

ANDREW DECKER: Including a couple of collectors.

THOMAS MESSER: Yes.

ANDREW DECKER: But not collectors in the sense that the Museum of Modern Art has a great number of

collectors on its board. How did those trustees and other trustees view their role at the Guggenheim? If one had asked them what their reason for being there was, what kind of answer do you suppose one might have received?

THOMAS MESSER: Well, of course we are talking about very differently motivated people here. You said a moment ago that some were collectors, and I said before that some were corporate personalities. So I think you could have almost as many motivations as you had people. There were certainly those who were there for no other reason than their conviction that the Guggenheim is an important element in society, and that one should do what one can to help it. There were those who were never, in effect, candidates for any financial contribution, whose help to the museum was based upon other aspects -- art historical knowledge, and on advice, and on wisdom, and so on, which is all very important, only it doesn't pay the bills. There were also, as I told you, a number of collectors who did, in fact, either contribute money or works of art or both. The rate of contributions for trustees in the seventies and eighties, increased very markedly by comparison to zero before. But at no time was it sufficient to really assure the kind of funding that would have kept the museum financially sound.

ANDREW DECKER: And at the same time, they were aware that your space was inadequate?

THOMAS MESSER: Yes. We were all aware of that. In the latter part of the seventies, and during our fortieth anniversary, as I said before, we had come to the conclusion that it is necessary for the fulfillment of our institutional objectives to increase the space, with the attached hope that this again would result in greater interest, in greater contribution, and so on. Which, of course, it has.

ANDREW DECKER: When was it that you decided -- realized -- that you were going to need to expand? Physically increase the size of the facility?

THOMAS MESSER: We were really expanding almost from the moment that the building was completed by Frank Lloyd Wright. It's only the form that changed. The first expansion was our moving into areas which were not originally meant to be for works of art. And the corresponding expansion was the so-called service building. We said at that time that we are building this to replace the supporting spaces that we had lost to the collection. But then as the collection grew, and we had important things that we wished to show, we again switched these spaces to the collection, thereby incurring new problems in the area of supporting space. So it was clear that whatever we did, we lacked one or the other. By the mid-seventies, it was clear that the piecemeal shifts -- which, incidentally, were quite effective -- were not enough. And that therefore, a massive increase -- although not as massive as it finally turned out to be -- should be envisaged, and a drive should be mounted to cover the expense for that.

ANDREW DECKER: How massive was the initial increase? The initial -- the projected increase -- to be?

THOMAS MESSER: It was what we now have, minus the underground space. We considered the underground expansion, but desisted from developing it, partly because of cost, but also because there were fears that the water level may endanger the operation there. So even though there were many people who wanted us to go underground rather than upward -- particularly those who were worried about the context of the new addition with respect to the Wright building , we staved this off and said, "No, we must build upward." So the difference was the underground space, plus, of course, the facilities that were added to the Guggenheim. In other words, there were other technical facilities which we intended to take care of within the existing enlarged building.

ANDREW DECKER: So, in other words, the warehouse in the forties was not a thought?

THOMAS MESSER: We did have warehouse space, but much more limited.

ANDREW DECKER: Was there space for the staff within this new hoped for facility? Or was there much staff to plan for?

THOMAS MESSER: Which phase are you now talking about?

ANDREW DECKER: I think we're probably about 1982 or 1983, planning the new vault-less building.

THOMAS MESSER: Of course, there was always space for the staff. It was never particularly lavish, and nobody was really satisfied with the allocations. I myself eventually had an absolutely tiny office because it gave me a chance to throw everybody out who claimed that they needed more space now that I had less space than anybody else. So yes staff was a consideration. But the staff had not increased radically in those years. We kept the staff within numbers that we could control financially.

ANDREW DECKER: Were these seven or ten curators? Or fifty?

THOMAS MESSER: No. I'd say in the eighties, we had certainly not more than three full curators, whatever their

titles were. And then maybe an assistant, associate, and research person-- if you count all of this, there may have been seven or eight. But this gets down to rather basic levels of curatorship.

ANDREW DECKER: And you mentioned earlier the gentleman who resigned over the Hans Haacke exhibition.

THOMAS MESSER: Ed Frye. Yes.

ANDREW DECKER: Were there other staff defections?

THOMAS MESSER: On those grounds? No. I have to correct you, however. The truth is that as a result of this clash, I asked Ed to leave.

ANDREW DECKER: Okay. Sorry.

THOMAS MESSER: He did not resign and there were no defections. There were strains with curators, and clashes on various points which, may have been the result of changing relationships within the Guggenheim. My predecessor, James Johnson Sweeney, had no curators at all. Jim Sweeney did everything himself. And as I stressed before, the dimension of the museum was small enough to make this possible. I'm not saying that he didn't have any help. But he did not have independent creative workers within the institution. The concept -- the initiatives -- the execution with such technical and maybe research help as he needed, was in his hands. That was no longer possible by the time we moved into a large program in a large building. I certainly could not hope to amuse millions of people all by myself. And so we gradually did establish a curatorial staff beginning with Lawrence Alloway and the elevation of Louise Swenson who before was called curator of education. She eventually became senior curator. There were associate and assistant curators as well as researchers already in the sixties--Daniel Robbins, Maurice Tuchman, and some others. And later, of course, the generation of Diane Waldman, Margitt Rowell, Angelica Rudinstein, made up a curatorial staff of some strength and authority. And that was, I think, as it should be. Naturally, by that time, the museum was no longer monolithic. There were many viewpoints and various pressures and desires that emanated from these various orientations, and we did have our run-ins, and there was, at the end of the seventies, a change during which Margaret Rowell left, which was a great loss to the museum, but it became evident at that time that the curatorial texture could not continue as before.

ANDREW DECKER: How so?

THOMAS MESSER: I think that among the curators themselves, there were contradictions which could not be harmoniously resolved. There were other things, too. You see, up to a certain point in the seventies, I directed the museum in person. But thereafter, we reached the point where this was beyond my strength. It got to be too large and too fast. Too many things. I became involved with Venice, for instance, and all of that. So I did appoint a very brilliant young man, Henry Berg, who served as Deputy Director, and served loyally and effectively for several years during which the museum ran very well. It did nevertheless, contribute to tensions and difficulties, and we came to the point in which I could not sustain Henry Berg in the position of Deputy Director and therefore moved him to the Peggy Guggenheim Collection in Venice-- in a sense out of the way. And we went through a couple of strenuous years -- perhaps strenuous months would be more precise to say -- with a reorganizations in which curatorial positions were at least temporarily increased, and made more important and more determining. Until, as I said a moment ago, the newly evolving texture broke down, and one of the curators left, after which we returned to a somewhat reduced, but nevertheless functioning system.

ANDREW DECKER: What were the grounds of the clashes? Just people wanting more time or more space to exhibit things they thought were important to be seen?

THOMAS MESSER: There was no one thing that I can point to. I think the Guggenheim had become very important. We have had -- as I remember -- within a twelve month span presentations of the Rothko, the Benys exhibition and a third major show. All of this required tremendous efforts. I think the pressures mounted to a point in which the relatively placid way in which a smaller staff operated a smaller program in preceding years, could not be continued.

ANDREW DECKER: Before you retired as Director of the Guggenheim, you had commissioned, if I recall, plans for an expansion and renovation of the building itself. Why? What was needed, and what was planed? What resolutions did you have?

THOMAS MESSER: The decision to expand the building was taken during the museum's fortieth anniversary. 1979 was the year. It was clear at the time that it was very difficult to stand still, that if the museum and its collection were to develop, spaces that were never particularly adequate for exhibitions and for a simultaneous presentation of the collection , would need to be modified. Some of this had happened actually long ago, in the sixties. The first impulse was the donation of the Thannhauser collection-- or initially the loan of it, since it was to be converted only later on-- which could not be placed in the only space that we had when I came to the

museum, which was the magnificent ramp. The magnificent ramp is unsuited for the simultaneous presentation of exhibitions. and of the collection. Exhibitions, as you can imagine, benefit from the dramatic structure of the building. Collections could probably live there if they were not competing with exhibitions. But even that is doubtful because I think by their nature they need a more intimate, more enclosed, less dramatic space--a contemplative environment, in other words.. And so Mr. Thannhauser, who in any case would not have contemplated to have his paintings on a slant, insisted that if we wanted his collection, we had to find an adequate space for it. And so we did by invading, for the first time, museum spaces that were never envisaged to be used as galleries. At the time we did these were library and administrative spaces. And their reconstitution as an exhibition space for the Thannhauser collection required some work as well as imagination. But having done it, we had, I would say, set into motion a development which over the decades thereafter, continued upward. Upward and sideways. At one time we built an annex, really for technical reasons, to be converted into a gallery space only if a concrete need were to arise. The technical departments then went somewhere else. But at any rate, the decision in 1979 to build the so-called tower amounted to a continuation of a development that had been in force for some time.

ANDREW DECKER: What would the tower give you in terms of -- I mean, did you recall whether the tower was going to be devoted to office use, or whether it would also have exhibition space?

THOMAS MESSER: The tower, as far as I was concerned, was primarily built for purposes of collection placement for which, with the exception of the Thannhauser adjustment, there was no provision. There was literally no place where the Guggenheim's collection could permanently live. So I certainly did think of the collection in the first instance. However, it was very important that the collection space should be accessible from the spiral. And the tower, of course -- the tower idea -- went to a height beyond one that is equal to the height of the spiral portion of the building. And that part -- the part above the old building -- was intended to take care of the overflow of administrative and other non-exhibition needs. So we did need both, but I think the motivation or the impulse for the whole thing was not administrative expansion but collection.

ANDREW DECKER: So then the height up to about, I guess, five or six stories would be for permanent collection or for exhibitions. And an additional story or two for offices.

THOMAS MESSER: Yes. [laughs]

ANDREW DECKER: That was the initial plan?

THOMAS MESSER: That was the plan. Yes.

ANDREW DECKER: And if I recall, there was some controversy within the community about whether that plan was appropriate.

THOMAS MESSER: Well, there was extensive controversy, which, incidentally, delayed the whole thing for years, and made it impossible to complete this particular project by the fiftieth anniversary, as had been intended. But yes, among other things, there were objections to the height, and in fact, the height was scaled down somewhat, in the final plan.

ANDREW DECKER: Under this plan, the museum would have been fine, or a self-contained unit, with a space for administration, technical facilities, and exhibition space all at 89th and 5th Avenue?

THOMAS MESSER: That was the intention. Yes.

ANDREW DECKER: And I believe that that changed somewhat.

THOMAS MESSER: Yes. It changed in two ways. One deviation from the plan as I left it before my retirement was the addition of administrative spaces in the basement. We had talked about such a solution frequently and it was, in fact, the favorite solution of the opponents to the expansion who would have preferred if we had gone underground altogether. In other words, they hoped that our administrative needs -- and perhaps the collection needs as well -- could all be accommodated underground, so that the visible part of the Frank Lloyd Wright building would not be altered in any way. This was rejected for two reasons. We were afraid of the possibility of water damage, and also it would have been an extremely costly solution, and the plan was therefore rejected at the time. However, after my time, it was adopted, thereby greatly increasing the administrative dimension in the final version. That was one thing. The other change pertained to the use of the spaces above ground. I had envisaged this area limited to collection use, so that the collection could stay put as much as possible to change very slowly only with new acquisitions, but not be mobile and thereby become a counterpart to the quickly moving temporary exhibitions on the spiral. The present procedure is such as to use the space at least in part as an extension of the exhibition area on the spiral, so that rather than slowing down, it has accelerated the exhibition program. This certainly is contrary to what I had envisaged because my feeling was that we had already too much exhibition traffic and that the collection, apart from the importance of being seen, should be

seen as much as possible in places where it was expected to be.. In other words, being able to visit particular paintings, and more or less expect them to be where you looked for them, was the idea. But of course, none of this has happened.

ANDREW DECKER: So you wanted works of art to be identifiable as part of the Guggenheim collection that anyone could see, more or less any time.

THOMAS MESSER: That was my hope. Yes. And that has happened only to a very limited extent. I don't, of course, deny that the exhibitions have gained additional space, and that these spaces are often more useable for certain types of exhibitions than on the spiral. This is perfectly true. But that was not what I was aiming at. And linked to all of this -- and also very important -- rather than containing all museum activities within the building on 5th Avenue, such activities have been further dispersed, partly through the addition of the activities in SoHo, and partly through the purchase or rent -- probably rent rather than purchase -- of other facilities -- extensive facilities -- to take care of working and procedures that are not, under the present circumstances, easily combined within the formerly existing building frame.

ANDREW DECKER: Well, there was the purchase -- I believe for two million dollars or perhaps three million--the building on the west side, a warehouse that I believe has been converted to use for technical facilities. Conservation, photography -- things like that.

THOMAS MESSER: I don't know the figures, nor do I deny perhaps the necessity of always using somewhere out space. We have used it, too, in my time, because the building was definitely short of that sort of thing. But what I'm saying is that the purpose of the addition was containment of activities within the building. It had the opposite effect. They were more dispersals than before.

ANDREW DECKER: Why did that happen? I mean, was it simply that even with the expansion of the Frank Lloyd Wright site, that even then it was inadequate to a greater need on behalf of the public?

THOMAS MESSER: Well, that, of course, is necessarily a matter of opinion because it is inadequate if you plan activities that are very extensive, and it's difficult to know exactly what is in the best interest of the public. I'm merely saying that this was not what I had intended.

ANDREW DECKER: Okay. So basically it simply grew -- the entire thing.

THOMAS MESSER: It grew. It grew more than anyone had envisaged. And only time will tell whether that growth is a positive development or not.

ANDREW DECKER: Now, with all this in mind, if I recall, you and members of the board had looked around for people to succeed you. And I have read accurately or otherwise that Tom Krens was somebody who you interviewed and settled on in part because of his experience with building museums, I think, in Williamstown, and as a consultant in Brooklyn, as well.

THOMAS MESSER: That is correct. Yes.

ANDREW DECKER: And so it sounds like one of the qualifying aspects of -- one of the reasons that you chose him was simply for construction knowledge, in addition to many other things.

THOMAS MESSER: I presented him to the trustees because he appeared to have qualities that were certainly needed. There was his particular building experience, which certainly could come in handy. There was, an addition to this, a stated interest and a record in organization and administration in public relations, and in management, and in all of these things that contemporary museum directors now are supposed to be particularly proficient. And I did feel that the Guggenheim, before I left, had attained a size and a velocity that required something in addition to art history.

ANDREW DECKER: Were those changes specific to the Guggenheim, or were they generic for institutions within America?

THOMAS MESSER: They are generic, I think, but they manifest themselves differently in every institution. And the Guggenheim was slow to grow. It was slow to adapt the techniques of fund-raising, of public relations. It led a rather enchanted existence as long as it had the means to do so. And therefore, the growth, at a certain point, was more abrupt and more difficult to control.

ANDREW DECKER: When you say that it was an enchanted existence when it had means to do so, what do you mean exactly?

THOMAS MESSER: Well, when I came to the Guggenheim in 1961, we had just instituted the first admissions fee, which was fifty cents a person. We had no membership. Fund-raising was an unknown concept. And everything

that we needed -- and at that time this included even acquisitions -- came from the endowment. We lived a very simple and very reduced life within an endowment that was in relation to those needs, more than adequate. But that all gradually changed. We became larger and more ambitious as our resources, for various reasons, were reduced.

ANDREW DECKER: Was there a particular turning point?

THOMAS MESSER: Difficult to know. My feeling is that from year to year and certainly also through my own doing -- I cannot deny that I have wanted to do things that were not done before and that I was ambitious about both the collection and about exhibitions and that I needed more money for the program than I had envisaged. And so the span between available incomes and incomes that needed to be raised in order to meet such increased program visions, increased from year to year. If there was a radical acceleration it was after my time, I would say.

ANDREW DECKER: So in preparation of the expansion that you planned, you didn't sit down with the board and say, "All right, we've been this nice relatively small, certainly compared to the Met, the Brooklyn, which are encyclopedic museums, and perhaps even the Modern -- we've been a nice relatively small museum. It's time that we start having some fun, and I want fifty million dollars on the table in the next three years for this group of paintings, and for this particular facility."

THOMAS MESSER: Well, that wasn't the way we talked at the Guggenheim.

ANDREW DECKER: [laughs]

THOMAS MESSER: I have related to you before my relationship to Harry Guggenheim and so let's say during the first ten years of my administration, Harry was the one to determine such things. At best, he might have asked my opinion. But he, too, was ambitious for the museum, and he was certainly pressing me for exhibitions that had a large reach, that were by the standards of the Guggenheim, blockbusters if you will. And so the money negotiation was more or less keeping pace with such enhancing notions. The longer this development took -- and this is partly generic, of course -- the more difficult was it to keep a controllable relationship between the money that was needed and the money that was available.

ANDREW DECKER: Okay. But there was no decision, say, in 1979, you know, with the plans for expansion, to go out and hire five people for the development office, and a chief financial officer?

THOMAS MESSER: No, there was nothing like this. But on the other hand, there were times in which we had nothing like a Development Officer at all. And so we did acquire one, and that person gradually acquired a staff, and so on. It was a creeping expansion, rather than a deliberate one. I think that the principle that we all subscribed to was to remain as small as we could. We did not want to be big. But at the same time, we wanted to be brilliant, and we wanted to be successful, and we did, increasingly, compete with other museums for donations of works of art and for money, too. And for that, a more spectacular program was part of the game.

ANDREW DECKER: But it was only after your tenure that the museum substantially expanded its vision.

THOMAS MESSER: Well, I wouldn't want to say that I had no vision, or that I didn't expand it. But I will agree that the explosive enhancements and enlargements came after my time.

ANDREW DECKER: Do you think that was a function of a change in society, where art became something that people wanted more of -- wanted to see more of? Or where size equaled stature?

THOMAS MESSER: I do think --yes -- that something like this occurred in America, at any rate, but maybe everywhere. When I entered this field in the old days -- in the forties and fifties -- the art world was very small. The public was small. The exhibition programs were modest. Catalogs were little publications. All of this was in an embryonic state. And I think we have to blame ourselves partly. When I say ourselves, I mean the museum professional -- particularly its directors and trustees -- for having educated the public to make demands for which perhaps we were not wholly prepared.

ANDREW DECKER: Demands for what, for instance?

THOMAS MESSER: For more. For bigger. For more spectacular. Not always for better.

ANDREW DECKER: Are there limitations to blockbusters? I mean, there are people who talk about what it is visually and conceptually that people can absorb in the course of a single visit to a museum. And there are people who feel that small is worthless, also.

THOMAS MESSER: Yes, that's right.

ANDREW DECKER: Do you think that there are now reservations about blockbuster shows? I know that financially a number of museums around the country have been turning more and more to their private collections.

THOMAS MESSER: Yes.

ANDREW DECKER: Simply because it costs less to fund an exhibition of works from the basement than from all over the world.

THOMAS MESSER: There have, of course, been such opinions, and there has been much lip service to these ideals. But when the next blockbuster came around the corner, everybody who was able to do so, sort of snatched it. So there is some difference here between what people say and what they do. But to come back to the building and its relation to exhibitions and collections, I may say that perhaps a very important aspect in this whole calculation was to slow down the traffic, and to use the collection, which I think is a popular one. In other words, I think people frequently came to the Guggenheim in order to see the Kandinsky's, the Klees, and the Picassos which were not always to be seen. So that I believe that a more sustained reliance upon the collection would have been helpful in many ways. And it's for that reason that I'm somewhat disappointed that the new facility has only very partially been used to that end.

ANDREW DECKER: So it sounds like the physical space of the museum is basically preventative from having a continually present and exhibited permanent collection. And your hope for the expansion was that that would be an anchor for the identity of the museum. But that as things have turned out, it's become more of a Kunsthalle.

THOMAS MESSER: Yes. With the one factual reservation that the collection, of course, is being shown. But it is being shown in a jumpy way. It's being replaced whenever exhibition requirements impinge upon it. So that while I'm not saying that nothing of what I expected has happened -- in my view, not enough of it has.

ANDREW DECKER: The current show uptown is, I believe, Italian Metamorphosis.

THOMAS MESSER: Yes.

ANDREW DECKER: Is the permanent collection on view at this point?

THOMAS MESSER: Only to a minimal extent. The 'Metamorphosis' reaches into the tower area very effectively. But the result is that the collection is greatly reduced- and not only this one time. But the function of a permanent collection, as I tried to say before, is the possibility of getting used to works of art in a more or less fixed place, as the Museum of Modern Art has arranged its collection with great success and for many years. And that has not happened at the Guggenheim so far.

ANDREW DECKER: So it sounds like the current identity of the Guggenheim is that of a very freewheeling institution, where during any particular period, what one will find there varies enormously, from season to season, or year to year.
THOMAS MESSER: Yes. that seems to be the case. And, of course, there are people who like that. It's a free country, obviously. Any administration, any director, must do what they think is right, in terms of their own convictions, and in terms of public needs. So it's difficult to say anything else about this, than that I disagree with this particular interpretation. I think it would be better for the public, and incidentally, less taxing financially, if the plan of using the tower primarily if not exclusively-- I would rather say exclusively -- for the permanent collection in a sensible order, were adhered to.

ANDREW DECKER: Isn't the tower, as it exists now, perhaps somewhat -- wouldn't that be a strange space for the permanent collection? I mean, it has those twelve or fifteen or eighteen foot ceilings, and the rooms are basically shoebox-like. They are rather long, and not terribly wide. And it seems almost designed for big art.

THOMAS MESSER: Perhaps the spaces are not ideal, but then few modern museum buildings are. It should be possible to present the collection in a manner that has continuity if, for instance, one were to begin-- as is anyway necessary because of the position of the Thannhauser collection-- from the bottom and move upward, to ever expanding spaces, which would mean that the classical periods would be in the smaller and the more contemporary periods in the larger spaces. This, together with the possibility of subdividing the large spaces through partitions or in other ways. I see no great problem in coming to thoughtful solutions that would accommodate the collection to advantage.

ANDREW DECKER: Okay. Well, one of the larger acquisitions that the museum has made since you left was part of the Panza collection. Was that something that had been in the works during your time?

THOMAS MESSER: No. It had not.

ANDREW DECKER: Now, in terms of the expansion that you had planned as reduced by community opposition,

do you recall what that was going to cost, and where the money was going to come from?

THOMAS MESSER: Well this, of course, has its own history. When we began to talk about the expansion, first of all it was many years back; and secondly, it was much more modest. The figures that we were operating with at that time were somewhere around fifteen to twenty million dollars. That was the range of our financial thinking. Impossible for me to say now whether this was realistic or not. But that was -- with the help of estimates given to us and with the help of fund-raising counsel that considered the capacities of our fund-raising capacities -- the original premise.

ANDREW DECKER: That was for the tower?

THOMAS MESSER: That was for the tower. Yes. Then, of course, two things happened. One was a delay of many years as a result of the public opposition to what we were trying to do; and secondly, there was the greatly enhanced building scope, which I have already mentioned. So these two things put this into an entirely different category from the one we had originally discussed.

ANDREW DECKER: Okay. So of that fifteen to twenty million dollars, was the board going to pay for that?

THOMAS MESSER: No, I don't think so. What was intended was to continue an incipient fund-drive. We had been fund-raising toward the building since the beginning of our decision to build.

ANDREW DECKER: So that would have been 1979 or so?

THOMAS MESSER: Yes. And we raised several million dollars in the process. We got matching grants from the National Endowment, and all sorts of things. But it was certainly intended that at a given moment, this drive should flower into a full-scale effort with all stops pulled. And we were under the impression at that time, that the amounts that we were figuring on could be raised.

ANDREW DECKER: So fifteen or twenty million seemed like a reasonable target?

THOMAS MESSER: It certainly did.

ANDREW DECKER: While all this was going on in New York, you still had the Peggy Guggenheim collection in Venice. Was that being schlepped back and forth between New York and Venice?

THOMAS MESSER: Do you mean the works?

ANDREW DECKER: The works. Yes.

THOMAS MESSER: Peggy, of course, goes back again -- I forget exactly how many years -- it can be figured out. But when she decided to liquidate the Peggy Guggenheim Foundation and yield into the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, which happened in 1976 -- in other words, three or four years before her death-- there were no absolute rules as to loans from one institution to the other. But it was certainly assumed that the collection would stay in Venice, and that it would remain essentially unchanged. Now, during Peggy's lifetime, she showed her collection publicly, only during the clement season. She did not show it during the winter and I, therefore, introduced winter programs in which the New York museum provided most of the works of art. In other words, we did present in Venice things from our collection within the same stylistic horizons that Peggy Guggenheim's collection also maintained, and that worked really very well. The Venetians were very happy to see the Solomon works there, and we, of course, were most grateful to Peggy during her lifetime and afterwards felt free, for particular occasions such as during my last exhibition devoted to the permanent collection, to bring a substantial portion of the Peggy Guggenheim collection to New York. All that was arranged at the time without particular difficulty.

ANDREW DECKER: And so in the mid to late eighties, her works -- or those works in her collection -- continued to be shown during the spring and summer months in Venice. And yet, at the same time, you'd be sending works by people such as Pollock, over to Venice for the off-season.

THOMAS MESSER: Yes. Pollock is a bad example because she had so many, and really we had no more than one. But I know what you intended to say. We did show prime works from our permanent collection during the off-season time in Venice. Yes.

ANDREW DECKER: Has her collection remained undisturbed since then, do you know?

THOMAS MESSER: Well, I do know that it has not.

ANDREW DECKER: In what way?

THOMAS MESSER: We all know that there have been tensions in recent years between the Guggenheim Foundation and the heirs of Peggy Guggenheim, who maintained that the intentions of Peggy had been disregarded, and that the collection has not been consistently shown. That it has been infiltrated by works of a different kind. All of this has been claimed. I also understand now that the situation has been consolidated in this respect, and that the collection more or less as intended, remains in situ.

ANDREW DECKER: Now, by the mid-eighties, I guess, you had decided to retire. You had found your man -- found your successor -- who apparently met with the board's satisfaction, the requirements for the new expansion directorship. Why did you choose to retire when you did?

THOMAS MESSER: In the mid-eighties I was in my mid-sixties. [laughs] And I retired in 1988. I was '68. I had wanted to retire earlier, but 1987 was also the fiftieth anniversary of the creation of the Foundation, which was an important signal, and so I allowed myself to be persuaded to stay that long. But I had certainly no other reason then age and fatigue to withdraw at a time at which it is entirely normal for museum directors to withdraw.

ANDREW DECKER: Did you imagine retiring to Florida, and spending the rest of your life on the golf course?

THOMAS MESSER: No. I did not. I didn't imagine very much of anything, but certainly not that. [laughs]

ANDREW DECKER: What did happen?

THOMAS MESSER: What did happen is that I had never thought about retirement or my life after museums, while I was too busy doing what I was doing, and so when the day came -- on the first of July 1988 --I had to begin to think about how to rearrange my life. And there was a moment -- not exactly of panic, but nevertheless of some apprehension -- in which stupidly I thought that I did not know how I'm going to fill the day, and so I made the mistake of saying "yes" to anything that anybody asked me to do. And within weeks I was so crowded with commitments and obligations that it took me years to get out of them.

ANDREW DECKER: [laughs]

THOMAS MESSER: So the change from active museum life to what is called retirement really, in my case, was important to be sure, but it did not mean that I suddenly was sitting around with not knowing what to do. I felt relieved in many ways because I had spent so many decades of my life tied to institutions. I came to assume that one can only live within an institution. I didn't think that it was possible to function independently of one. Furthermore, inevitably, as my institutional obligations increased, I became less and less able to do the things that originally brought me into this profession. I became more and more directorial and less and less curatorial, and so retirement provided me really with a new phase in my life. A very satisfactory one, in which I could get back to works of art. Not only in an overall general, planning sense, but also in terms of looking and selecting and installing and writing--all the things that I have never given up to be sure, but that have nevertheless become more and more difficult for me to combine with other obligations that I had assumed.

ANDREW DECKER: So once July 1, 1988 rolled around, what kind of offers were you receiving, and how did you decide whether they were worth pursuing?

THOMAS MESSER: They came gradually. One of the first ones was here in New York by the Americas Society -- the former Center of Inter-American Relations, of which I had been a trustee ever since the 1960's. The President of that institution asked me whether I would be willing to be a Senior Advisor, which did not mean that I had to do anything much, except be simply available for art and exhibition advice. This had the advantage of providing me with an office and some necessary support. Then, for awhile, I had an involvement with the International University in Miami, since you mention Florida, to help them with intentions to rework the Lowe Art Gallery. I did this for several months, before I received larger and more intriguing offers. One came from an old friend of mine. From Louis Monreal, whom I knew when he was secretary of I.C.O.M., the International Council of Museums in Paris, while I was on his executive committee. He asked me to -- because he was, at that time, directing a rather large and powerful art foundation attached to a bank, la Caixa, in Barcelona -- whether I would be willing to direct that foundation's art program. I told him that I was not willing to direct anything, but that I would gladly act as an advisor. And I am still functioning in that capacity. It has been very rewarding to me to determine their program not only for Barcelona, but also for Madrid, Parma, and other centers that la Caixa controls.

ANDREW DECKER: So is it the bank that controls exhibition galleries?

THOMAS MESSER: No. It's the bank foundation. Yes. The bank is separate from the foundation. But it is the foundation that has buildings and staff, and know-how, and money. Plenty of money. And so I have been doing this, and whenever I felt like acting curatorially and doing an exhibition myself, as the current show that is comparing the early Mondrian and the early Kandinsky, both on their way to abstraction, I would do that, and that's nice.

ANDREW DECKER: Was that kind of a carte blanche sort of arrangement where he said, "Is there a show you'd like to do, and if so, propose it to me?"

THOMAS MESSER: In effect. I didn't even have to propose it. I could do largely whatever I wanted, and that was of course welcome. Then, more or less parallel with this, the Schirn Kunsthalle in Frankfurt, whose director, Christoph Vitali I knew for years, asked if I would do an exhibition for them. I said I would if I could determine the subject. He said you can, and I did a Dubuffet retrospective, which was very successful. Upon its completion, he asked me what I would do next, and I said that the Dubuffet retrospective took two years out of my life, and that I may not have that many two year spans in my life and that, therefore, we have to set this up differently. And so I proposed that I establish contact with the Goethe University in Frankfurt and teach a seminar in post-war European art and do a number of exhibitions with student help. And so, since that time, four or five years ago, we have done many exhibitions in this manner, for example two Spaniards, Tapies and Chillida among quite a few others With this and with my continuing interest in Kandinsky's work as well as my obligations to finally produce a long-promised book for Abrams on that subject, I was kept more than busy.

ANDREW DECKER: So the artists, the roster of artists, sounds very similar to artists you were exhibiting at the Guggenheim.

THOMAS MESSER: That's right.

ANDREW DECKER: With a very heavy European focus.

THOMAS MESSER: Yes.

ANDREW DECKER: Have you ever thought of taking American artists to Europe?

THOMAS MESSER: Yes, I have thought of it. If I had another life I would love to do this. Not that they are unknown by any means. I have continued to concentrate on Europeans because American art so totally overshadowed everything else after the War that I felt, here at the Guggenheim as well as in my post-retirement years abroad, that the balance still needed to be adjusted. I saw the European post-war generation as one somewhat lost -- strangely enough, particularly in Europe, where predominant public interest on the one hand responded to the classics, Picasso, Braque, etc., while the subsequent, later phase was getting lost. The same generation of Americans did not get lost because it was one of great strength at the time.

ANDREW DECKER: I am very interested in your fledgling involvement with the Prague National Gallery, which, I guess, brings you back to your country of birth at a time when it has changed radically after the Velvet Revolution. And I'm wondering what is it that you, as a consultant/trustee would be doing with them --what can you hope to do given your resources, and what do they want done?

THOMAS MESSER: This goes back a few years. Shortly before my retirement from the Guggenheim, and it was just around the time of my retirement, I had arranged an exchange exhibition with what was then Czechoslovakia, by which an important segment of the permanent collection from the National Gallery in Prague -- particularly the part know as the Kramar collection -- came to the Guggenheim. And in exchange we sent them, again a carefully selected group of masterpieces, from the permanent collection of the Guggenheim Museum. This was, by all standards, a very important event for the Czechs because it has never been possible before to present there a panoramic view of Modernism. It would have been possible during the First Republic, except that the century wasn't old enough and Czechoslovakia was destroyed in '39. And later it was not possible for political, financial and cultural reasons. So this was actually the first time that the Czechs and Slovaks could come to the Sternberg Palace, up around the Castle, and see works of great importance within an international range, from the beginning of the century to the eighties. And hundreds of thousands of people came. It was front page news in Czech newspapers, and extreme statements were made to the effect that I had contributed to the success of the Velvet Revolutions through this conscience-raising exhibition. So much by way of background. Thereafter, when everything started to happen, the minister of culture Czechoslovakia, who after the division of the Czechs and the Slovaks, became minister of the Czech Republic, tried to establish a board of trustees for the National Gallery in Prague. When I say board of trustees, this is something of a misnomer because obviously, any such structure could not have ultimate authority in a state that traditionally relied upon the ministry of culture for decisions concerning financing, and everything else. But in the spirit of privatization, which is now the cry in those lands, this had been established, perhaps along the lines of an exercise. In other words, how is a board of trustees to behave even when there isn't such a thing? So its sessions were clearly advisory. And we very soon ran into irreconcilable difficulties and contradictions with the Ministry. And after suffering a few humiliations, I, who had been elected President of that group, and six members (that is, one-half of the then-existing board) withdrew thereby in effect, killing off the entire undertaking.

ANDREW DECKER: What were the minister's reservations about what it was that you wanted to do? And what was it that you wanted to do that created problems?

THOMAS MESSER: It was impossible to explain to the minister that important decisions, like the hiring or dismissal of a director, for instance, is something you do not do without referring to what you call an advisory board. And it was decisions of this kind, which not once, but several times, were carried out -- that prompted us from withdrawing -- simply because we saw that we had only ornamental usefulness. We were there-- I am now referring to the past minister and not to the present one--in order to cover the famous fig leaf analogy, and we did not want to do this. So that happened more than one or two years ago, I forget now. In any case, that past minister was unseated. A new, very intelligent man came in, and he then proceeded to name another board, in which I am the only survivor from the first, original one. The present board, however, is not primarily an art board, but primarily a general board for purposes of control and supervision of the policies and procedures of the National Gallery.

ANDREW DECKER: So it's more about their operations than curatorial?

THOMAS MESSER: That is correct. Nevertheless, they wanted to have a minority of art-oriented members, and I am among two or three who are so qualified. However, the term of "advisor" was struck out and we now are simply called "council" even though effort continue to adjust the terminology to make the body more autonomous, more meaningful, and thereby get closer to a useful structure in future. Perhaps, the ministry will come to rely on the council without the degree of involvement that it now claims for itself.

ANDREW DECKER: Given that there's been relatively little exposure to art of the Twentieth Century -- I'm assuming that there's been relatively little exposure to art of the Twentieth Century -- at least the second half of the Twentieth Century -- in Prague. Is that a fair assumption?

THOMAS MESSER: Well, it depends what you mean by relatively. It isn't as if they hadn't had exhibitions. The National Gallery is spread all over Prague, and there are various places, including the Castle areas, where important exhibitions since the Velvet Revolution, not before, have taken place. Dubuffet has been shown, Tapies has been shown, others, too. So it's not as if nothing had happened. But relatively is correct.

ANDREW DECKER: So, in a sense, is the Gallery giving -- now and for the last couple of years -- is it giving the population of the Czech Republic its first exposure to these artists?

THOMAS MESSER: It is about to. Right now what is in preparation is the opening of the so-called Veletrzni Palac, which is the fairgrounds palace. An Art Deco structure that was built early in the century for the fair and has since been forever transfixed and transformed. It now is ready to open in September with its own collection to be shortly followed by the Whitney Biennial.

ANDREW DECKER: And can you see exhibitions, like works by Kandinsky going there?

THOMAS MESSER: Yes, I could see this very well. The question is who is going to pay for it ? As you know, the situation in the world is one in which there are a few spots that are over-saturated with art, where you really can no longer amuse the public, whatever you tried. New York, Paris, Milan, some German cities and so on. London, of course. There's really nothing new that can be shown anymore. And then there are large areas in the world which haven't seen anything, and cannot afford the shows because exhibitions are mostly arranged by people who need to be reimbursed at least, if not more.

ANDREW DECKER: So they would be unable to come up with the six figure lending fee required of a major exhibition organized by a U.S. museum.

THOMAS MESSER: Exactly. Which is now the case. And, of course, it would be marvelous if somebody stepped in with an international endowment, something that is not likely to happen in the near future.

ANDREW DECKER: Is there much interest within the curatorial staff at the gallery or on the part of advanced students there to travel abroad, to study, to -- well, actually, my question kind of presumes that we do it better here in the West than they do it there. How sophisticated is the training? Is that the kind of thing that they've been asking you to discuss with staff there?

THOMAS MESSER: Of course, in all countries these are minority concerns, even in the United States. But things are much more massive here than there even if, art historically I think, they are no less sophisticated than we are. Museologically, I'm not so sure that they are behind, either. It is rather that they have to catch-up with so much after years of isolation which, of course, also was never total. You know, there always have been people coming and going. The Iron Curtain was not insurmountable, it was only an obstacle for most people, particularly for most young people. But exchange programs have always existed, our catalogs have always traveled. People have been aware -- with greater difficulty than they should have, but just the same. As I say, for that reason they have much to catch up with.

ANDREW DECKER: Do you imagine spending much time over there, or maybe going over twice a year for several

days each time.

THOMAS MESSER: According to the bylaws, meetings there are supposed to be held every month. I don't think I could go every month, if only because that could become too burdensome for the Czech budget. But since I go to Europe for other reasons as well and, if I can possibly combine these with visits to Prague, I will. As it happens, I will be going at the beginning of next week because this next meeting is important. A decision is to be made again about the appointment of a new director of the National Gallery. There has been quite a few of them that have come and gone since the long-time great director, Jiri Kotalik retired in 1990.

ANDREW DECKER: Do they face the same problems that museum directors here face, in terms of dividing or devoting so much of their time to administrative, operative fund-raising programs as anything else?

THOMAS MESSER: It's different. It's different because administration and organization is closely tied to the State. That is to say they sit in the antechambers of the ministers, and get their bearings that way. Organization is actually, of a low standard by comparison to our more sophisticated system. Now, I'm not speaking of museology in a limited sense, but about the whole structure of a museum. Fund-raising is a very new concept and is exerting much fascination. But basically they do benefit still from some of the advantages of the European State system, and therefore they are not wholly helpless if money runs out.

ANDREW DECKER: I think that brings us fairly well up-to-date, in terms of what you're doing.

THOMAS MESSER: Yes.

ANDREW DECKER: If not entirely comprehensively.

THOMAS MESSER: [laughs] Well, have I been opaque? [laughs]

ANDREW DECKER: Well, I suspect there are some other things that you are working on, as well.

THOMAS MESSER: Yes.

ANDREW DECKER: In looking back at what has been a fairly long career, what have you found that has been rewarding and of interest particularly to you, along with the day-to-day decisions? With a little bit of hindsight, but what has been enjoyable and rewarding in your work?

THOMAS MESSER: Well, let me see whether I can present this in a brief summary. I did start to tell you about my childhood and youth in Czechoslovakia, and my unhappy involvement with the uncongenial subject of chemistry. But what was wonderful about it was that life in the First Czechoslovak Republic was free, progressive and culturally most rewarding. I had direct and important access to literature, to art, and above all, to music, which really was the basis for my formation in the arts. I then did report about my studies in the United States, and about my eventual assimilation in this country where, thanks to the Institute of International Education, I had originally come as an exchange student at the beginning of the war. And I stated that the United States amounted for me to a liberation in two ways. First of all, liberation from an insufferably oppressive system after the invasion of Czechoslovakia by Germany; and liberation eventually, also, from a subject that I hated, in favor of the one that I came to consider to be my vocation. During the European War and the post-war period, this liberation continued. Strangely enough it is assumed that the war is necessarily a total loss in terms of one's life. It was not so in my case, even though I did see action overseas. And immediately thereafter, my studies at the Sorbonne were really my first academic involvement with art history and particularly with French culture. So all of this, of course, was very rewarding, and nourished me for a long time. In the U.S. then, involvement with the museum profession began very modestly in New Mexico. It was then interrupted but sustained by my studies of art history at Harvard, and I am, and remain very grateful to the great teachers that I had at the Fogg Art Museum. Jacob Rosenberg, John Coolidge, Charles Kuhn, Agnes Mongan, Frederick Deknatel, George Hanftman. They're all people who have left a stamp upon me, and have enriched my life. Thereafter, I tried to use what they had taught me professionally-- first at the American Federation of Arts in New York, then at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston, at a time in which the art scene was much slower than the one we perceive today. The fact that art historically there was an enormously important avant garde, did not necessarily translate itself quickly into institutional life. And I have a feeling looking back, that we were -- not only I and my institutions, but generally-- somewhat isolated. There was a much greater gap between the art world in New York and the rest of the country. But it was important again to learn the ropes, and to begin to establish contact between American and European art, which I was fated to do. And then, of course, came the Guggenheim. And we're, now, in the early sixties -- and I think as I said before, the Guggenheim was, professionally, the central stage of my life I reported about my contacts and upon both, dependence and sympathy, that characterized my relation with Harry Guggenheim, toward whom I feel a real debt of gratitude. Also to Dan Rich, who was a trustee, and who guided me at a time at which I very much needed guidance. Years later, I also established a rewarding friendship with Peter Lawson-Johnston who succeeded Harry as the Foundation's President and with whom I shared common ground in many a skirmish. In terms of what was rewarding to me at the Guggenheim, at the

time I came, was my own curatorial involvement as already commented upon. But to create a generation of curators for the institution I served also became important, if only because my predecessor, James Sweeney, retained and brilliantly performed, all curatorial tasks himself. In this connection, I must report much to my chagrin, that some of those that I brought to the Guggenheim have since died. This holds true of Lawrence Alloway, of Edward Fry, and of Daniel Robbins, who was one of the first curators I hired, and about whose death I read in the newspaper only last week.. Happily, others are fully active. Diane Waldman continues at the Guggenheim. Margit Rowell, after moving around in the world, has returned to New York-- not to the Guggenheim, but to the Museum of Modern Art. Lisa Denison, who was very young when I hired her, has become a very full-fledged museum authority. And perhaps most importantly, Vivian Barnett who came to the Guggenheim as a researcher, is now the most outstanding Kandinsky expert. These and many others -- not only curators -- were valuable friends to me. Some of them made their mark in other places like Maurice Tuchman, who is now the eminent curator of the Los Angeles County Museum while his former colleague, Daniel Robbins, was Director of the Fogg. This means that young people whom I brought into the profession, made in their subsequent assignments, important contributions that were most gratifying to me.-- I don't want to talk about exhibitions and acquisitions except in general terms, because we have done this already. The classics of modern art, on the one hand, post-war painters, sculptors -- both European and American -- and not last, young talent of national and international stature in repeated performances give me much satisfaction as I look at the catalogues that are now lining my library. I should also mention as particularly gratifying my encounters and acquaintances with artists. Some of them are monumental figures like Max Ernst, Juan Miró and Marcel Duchamp, whom I remember from more than one encounter. Some of them extended over years, but in such instances I would not want to claim friendship since this would be immodest. I could, perhaps, do so in the case of Dubuffet and Beuys, and certainly in the case of Chillida, Barney Newman, and some others, as well. There also were musicians, e.g. Bela Bartok on whose lap I sat as a child in Europe, since he was a close friend of my composer-uncle in Bratislava. And here, in America, I was privileged to follow Stravinsky around during his visit to New Mexico during one of his trips to the US. So all of this is something I look back to.-- In terms of more or less tangible accomplishments, one would have to look at the collection as I found it and as I left it, with perhaps the Thannhauser collection, the Hilla Rebay collection, and the Peggy Guggenheim collection as centerpieces in terms of massive enrichments. In addition, of course, to many important individual works. The building -- we have covered the building and the building expansion. And even though this was one of the more controversial and difficult decisions, I did feel then and feel now, that as director of the Guggenheim, I could not think of it exclusively in architectural terms but that I had to consider functional aspects as well. And I am content that the final architectural result has turned out as it has. The research activities and the catalogues, which were chiefly carried by Vivian Barnett and before her by Angelica Rudinstein, are, I think, a lasting contribution.-- In conclusion I might say and underline something that has to do more with my fate than with anything else. I came to the Guggenheim as a European at a time at which the great emphasis upon American post-war art needed a balance by way of the inclusion of neglected European achievements. And it was natural for me to provide such a balance. I am not saying this in opposition to what was the prime stylistic direction of American Abstract Expressionism; but rather because European post-war developments were of special concern to me and because I did feel that it provided an emphasis that at the time was insufficiently acknowledged world-wide. Thereafter, there was my retirement and various programs and teaching assignments in Barcelona and Frankfurt, as well as advisory functions in New York, and in Prague. All of these have given me a chance for some reflection and for a rethinking of subjects that preoccupied me from a perspective that, perhaps, had become a little more ample and thoughtful, now that I was more detached. So that's what I wanted to say.

ANDREW DECKER: Okay. Well, let me thank you for your enormous patience and forbearance. [laughs]

THOMAS MESSER: [laughs]

ANDREW DECKER: And the time that you have given over to this. It's been a pleasure.

THOMAS MESSER: I thank you too. It's been a pleasure for me also.

END OF INTERVIEW

Last updated... *December 6, 2005*