THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

INTERVIEW WITH: **ELIZABETH BLISS PARKINSON COBB (EC)**

INTERVIEWER: **SHARON ZANE (SZ)**

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BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE 1

SZ: Mrs. Cobb, I generally like to start by asking a little bit about your background, so tell me first, if you would, where and when you were born and a little bit about your family background.

EC: Well, I was born in New York City, on 36th Street, and we lived a block away from my grandparents--my father's parents--and my aunt, Lillie Bliss....

SZ: This was East 36th or West?

EC: It was East 36th, 14 East 36th. [LAUGHING] I can still remember it. My grandfather lived at 29 East 37th and the house is still there--it's apartments now, I think--and my aunt, Lillie Bliss, was never married. She lived with her parents in that house until her mother died. Her mother died when I was sixteen, and I was born in 1907.

SZ: So your maiden name....

EC: Was Bliss.

SZ: Eliza?

EC: Elizabeth. My name was Elizabeth Addison Bliss. Addison was a family name of my mother's.

SZ: And so Lillie Bliss was your....

EC: She was my aunt.

SZ: Your father's sister.

EC: My father's sister. She was quite a lot older than my father. I think she was sixteen years older. There were two children in between who had died, as children did in those days. My grandfather died when I was four years old. Lillie Bliss began her collection in 1913, at the time of the Armory Show. She was involved with the Armory Show through Arthur B. Davies, who was a friend of hers, and so she began collecting. My grandmother disapproved of modern art, as most people did for a long time, and wouldn't allow her to hang the pictures, so she kept them in a store-room at the top of the house. People who knew about them--from Europe, especially, when they came to this country--would make arrangements with Lillie to come to her house. She would get a wonderful black man who worked for the Macbeth Gallery to come and bring down one picture at a time in the little house elevator, put it on an easel for the guest to see and then put it back, because they weren't allowed to be hung in the house.

SZ: You remember this.

EC: I can remember this. So it was always a big issue.

SZ: Was she very close with your father?

EC: Yes, very close with all of us.

SZ: And I guess living in the same proximity you had a lot of day-to-day....

EC: Yes, we saw them all the time.

SZ: Now, your mother's maiden name was Addison?

EC: No, her mother's name was Addison. Her maiden name was Cobb. No relation to my husband, but nevertheless, that was her name. Her mother's name was Addison. They came from Maryland. John Addison was the brother of Joseph Addison and he founded a family in Maryland. Most of his sons and grandsons were ministers. One of them was named Walter, and I believe he freed all his slaves long before the Civil War and impoverished the entire family for several generations.

SZ: Because of that?

EC: Because of that.

SZ: And the Cobbs?

EC: I've never known much about my grandfather Cobb. He died when my mother was a baby and I've never known anything about him.

SZ: But your mother grew up in New York?

EC: She grew up in Washington. She had a sister and a brother. Her brother was mustard-gassed in the First World War and was an invalid all his life. Her sister was Elsie Cobb Wilson, which was the name of a well-known decorating firm in both

Washington and New York. In those days there weren't so many decorators, so she was quite famous and very successful. The family ceased to be impoverished through her business and my mother's marriage. [LAUGHING]

SZ: And your mother's marriage took place in...?

EC: In 1906.

SZ: And now tell me just a little bit about your father's family.

EC: Well, my father's family came from Fall River [Massachusetts]. We have a letter in the family written by my grandfather when he was a boy, describing a trip. His father died and his mother married again to a man who lived in New Orleans; she left [my grandfather] with his grandparents, his Bliss grandparents, and went to New Orleans. I think it was a year later that she had established herself and had found a school for him and he wrote this extraordinary letter. It's dated 1847 and he describes traveling from Fall River to New Orleans. You wouldn't believe it, the number of different ferry boats and rail cars and horse carts and the days that [the trip] took, and he mentions several times seeing the slaves at work and being so surprised that they seemed so happy. My grandfather was very active in politics. He was very prominent in the Republican Party and was asked by McKinley to be his Vice President, but my grandmother didn't want to go and live in Washington. She refused, and so he refused to be the Vice President. There was a biography of McKinley written by a woman, and she said that it was only gossip that my grandfather was asked to be Vice President, but I have all the letters so I know it wasn't gossip. He asked him twice....

SZ: What was his full name?

SZ: Cornelius N. Bliss, Cornelius Newton Bliss. McKinley asked him twice and he refused,

and then McKinley asked him to be Secretary of the Interior and he said he simply could not refuse him again, so he accepted until [McKinley] could find somebody else. Then McKinley didn't find anybody for about two years, and my aunt, Lillie Bliss, went down to Washington as his hostess because my grandmother wouldn't go. We have several things in the family, [including] an Indian blanket that was made for him when he was Secretary of the Interior by one of the Indian tribes. I also have a newspaper clipping--his great friend was Mark Hannah--that gives Mark Hannah's description of coming down in the elevator in a hotel in Washington the night that McKinley was shot. He was in the elevator with my grandfather, and he turned to him and said, "Do you realize where you would be now if...?" My grandfather's face froze him right there and he never went any further, he never mentioned it again. But I'm sure that if he had accepted he would have been president for a little while, but I doubt if he would have been re-elected, because I think he was very conservative and I think the country was ready for Teddy Roosevelt. I knew my grandfather until I was [only] four years old but I remember him very well. I adored him and he was very sweet to me. He was ill in bed for a long time. He died, I was told, of hardening of the arteries. I don't know what they call it today. My aunt and my grandmother used to read to him all the time and I wanted to read to him, but I didn't know how to read, so my nurse taught me a book by heart and I went and read it to him [LAUGHING].

SZ: You grew up in the house on East 36th Street. Tell me a little bit about it. Do you have brothers and sisters?

EC: I have two brothers, both younger. My older brother is Cornelius N. Bliss, III, and my other brother is Anthony Addison Bliss.

SZ: So you are the oldest.

EC: I'm the oldest, yes, and we lived on 36th Street until I was seven and then my family

moved to Long Island. We used to rent houses in New York in the winter time for a long time. I don't remember them all. I've lived all over the city.

SZ: What did you do about schooling?

EC: I went to Miss Chapin's School in New York.

SZ: You were beginning to describe what sounded to me like a fairly close family living together, and memories of your aunt. Any other memories that stay in your mind of your young years?

EC: Well, I have another memory of my aunt that I think is interesting in view of her collection and her founding of the Museum and so forth. She told me that at around the age of forty she had a terrible, terrible depression. She used to walk the streets feeling depressed, and one day she went into a rug store, an oriental rug store--a place called Kalachian, I think it was very famous--and she said, "Please show me some rugs and tell me about them." She just wanted to put her mind on something. So Mr. Kalachian showed her rugs and told her about them and she got very interested in them. I think she became a friend of his and somehow or other that led to her going to the Macbeth Gallery, about the only gallery in New York in those days that showed anything contemporary. There she saw paintings by Arthur B. Davies and she fell in love with them. She thought they were so beautiful, and so she kept going back, and finally she bought a couple. Then she said to Mr. Macbeth, "You know, I think I'd like to meet this man," and he said, "Well, that would be very easy. Come next Monday afternoon"--or something like that. She came and they became great friends. She contributed toward the Armory Show and he helped her make her collection.

SZ: She did not have a collection previously?

EC: Not before that. She was a pianist. She was a very good pianist and she used to go to [Arthur B. Davies's] studio and play the piano for him. She always said that she taught him about music and he taught her about painting. My mother used to say she was such a good daughter, an old-fashioned Victorian daughter. She slept in the room with her mother after her father died, she went for a drive with her every afternoon, she read to her every afternoon, she ran the house for her, she did everything for her. I don't remember my grandmother except lying down. She was sort of an invalid. I think today they would call it psychosomatic. Anyway, my grandmother did like the Davies paintings, so [my aunt] was allowed to hang those. My mother said that she only saw my aunt disobey her mother twice, and once was when her mother, my grandmother, said to her, "I don't think it's suitable for you to go and be all alone in a studio with Arthur B. Davies." Apparently, Lillie said, "Well, I'm going to do it." [LAUGHING] It was a different day alright from today.

SZ: Since we've started to talk about Lillie in her young years, tell me a little bit about her. Did she study at home?

EC: She studied music and she played with the Kneisel Quartet, which in those days was a very famous quartet. She went to Boston and lived with them, I think, for a while and she used to play with them, but never publicly. She had a great many musician friends. Joseph Hoffman was a friend of hers, and when she died we found lots of letters from composers--some of whom I really don't think I'd ever heard of--who used to send her their music. People used to come and play to her before they played concerts, for her criticisms. I think if she had lived in this day she would have been a professional pianist, but in those days a woman in her position with plenty of money, it never would have occurred to her to try to be a professional pianist.

SZ: Did she ever study with anybody of note?

EC: That I couldn't answer, but I know she was a very fine pianist and had a great many very fine musician friends.

SZ: Wasn't it rather unusual for someone in her position to have even gone to Boston to do that?

EC: Yes. Oh, yes. She took it very seriously and she practiced every day of her life. She had a "dumb" piano, and she practiced scales and things so that she wouldn't disturb anybody; then she'd come down in the afternoon and she always played for her mother. Her mother was very musical. After her mother died she didn't play anymore, but by that time she was so involved with her collection and the modern art museum [The Museum of Modern Art] I think she really didn't have time anymore.

SZ: As a young girl, what did you think of her as an aunt?

EC: Oh, I was very, very devoted to her and knew her very well and saw her a great deal. We did things together. I went to exhibitions with her and she and my father and I took a Mediterranean cruise and went to Egypt and the Holy Land together.

SZ: When you were young?

EC: The year I got out of school.

SZ: Which was 19....?

EC: I was eighteen or nineteen. She died in `31 so I was... what? I was born in 1907.

SZ: So, 1926?

EC: Yes. She died in `31, you see, and she founded the Museum with Mrs. Rockefeller and Mrs. Sullivan in `29. It was too bad, it was only two years [before she died]; she couldn't see where it was going. But she left her collection to it on condition that my father, who was her executor, thought they had a sufficient endowment fund within three years of her death. He put the amount at $1 million and they couldn't raise it. They only raised $600,000, but he gave them the collection anyway because he said he knew that's what she really wanted, that's what she had really done with her life. He felt sure that the Rockefellers wouldn't let it fail. So he gave it to them anyway and that's what really made it a museum. Before that it had just exhibited loaned exhibitions.

SZ: Do you think that if she had lived in this day that she would have--you've alluded to it, I guess--she would have been a different kind of person?

EC: Well, that's always hard to say, isn't it? I think she would have certainly made a collection and founded the Museum anyway. I think she might have done more with her music or had more ambition to do something with her music because that's what people do today. Women like more to have careers today and she was very musical.

SZ: And she liked her music?

EC: She loved music and she was a very, very fine pianist. But I'm just assuming that. She might not have wanted to. She was quite shy, very quiet.

SZ: Did she have a lot of friends?

EC: Well, she had very close friends but she didn't have a big social life or anything like that and she didn't want it. After her mother died she invited Walter Hampton and his wife and two children, half-grown, to come and live with her because she didn't want to

live alone. She was very interested in all the arts. She was a friend of theirs and [Hampton] was doing Cyrano de Bergerac at that time, and so every Sunday night she had a big supper for the cast and she invited other people. She was always at home Sunday night and she had music. I think it was probably the Kneisel Quartet. One year they played all the Brahms quartets, another year they played all the Beethoven quartets, and it was sort of an "at home," but that's the only really social thing she ever did. She had wonderful guests. One of them was Madame Sembrich, the famous coloratura, and of course there was always the cast of Cyrano de Bergerac, which was sort of the backbone of the party.

SZ: But that was somewhat unusual for her?

EC: She never had done anything like that before but she did do that for a couple of years, almost every Sunday night, but then it broke up. She sold the house.

SZ: On 37th Street?

EC: On 37th Street, and bought the three top floors of an apartment house, 1001 Park Avenue, and made a gallery for her pictures on two of the floors. She had great, high ceilings and had plenty of room to hang all of her pictures for the first time in her life.

SZ: You said that her mother did not like modern art?

EC: No, not at all. [My aunt] was allowed to hang the Cézannes in the parlor, which was the downstairs room which they only used when they had guests. She hung the Davies in the library where they lived, upstairs, but otherwise her mother just didn't approve of them, as people really didn't, you know.

SZ: What do you think it was about your aunt that led her to modern art and to liking

modern art, or what was it about modern art that appealed to her?

EC: Well, apparently, it was first seeing the painting by Arthur B. Davies, and, of course, Arthur B. Davies had these romantic friendships. I think it was a very romantic friendship. He painted a room for her. She had a very small bedroom and a sitting room on the top floor of the house and she had him paint the sitting room. He painted it on canvas so it could be rolled up. When she sold the house, she took it with her and put it in the apartment, and when she died she left it to me. She told me she would, and said, "I wish I could also leave you the letter he wrote me when he completed the room, but I can't do that." She left several boxes of personal letters marked "To Be Burned Unread." My father and I dutifully carried this out. When I got married, my father gave me a house on his place in Westbury, Long Island, and I made the Davies room into a dining room and built the house around it. When I moved from there, I couldn't go on doing that, so I gave [the canvases] to the Utica Museum [in Utica, New York], which was where [Davies] came from.

SZ: And that's where it is now?

EC: And that's where it is now. I don't think they've ever installed it as a room, but they have installed the canvases. I don't know whether they're installed all the time or not, but I know they have been installed.

SZ: You were born in 1907.

EC: Yes.

SZ: And I'm just thinking, the Armory Show was in 1913?

EC: Yes.

SZ: Do you have any memory yourself of the show?

EC: I have absolutely none and I doubt if I ever even went to it. I don't remember it at all, but I know I sort of grew up hearing about it and I've always thought that in some indirect way, at the back of it all, that Arthur B. Davies was really the founder of [the Museum]. [LAUGHING] All three of those women: Lillie Bliss, Mrs. Rockefeller and Mrs. Cornelius Sullivan, they were all friends of his, and they, and other people of course, helped him with the Armory Show. I've always just thought that, in a sense, he was really the founder. It should be stated that Arthur B. Davies died long before the Museum was ever thought of! Because he was not the founder in any real sense.

SZ: You never knew him?

EC: Yes, but I don't remember him very well. She used to bring him down to our place in Westbury. I dimly remember, once, her bringing him, but I don't really remember what he looked like. It was very interesting; he was a bigamist. He had a wife and sons--I think two sons--and they lived in the country; the girl he painted all the time was his mistress, and he lived with her in New York and he had a daughter by her. She used to work in the Kennedy Galleries. A very nice, intelligent, attractive man, whose name I don't remember, from an upstate university came to Alfred Barr and asked him if he could give him some information about Lillie Bliss because she'd been such a friend of Arthur B. Davies and he was writing a biography of Arthur B. Davies. So Alfred turned him over to me, and he came here and he told me things I'd never heard about. He was writing this biography at the request of the daughter, the illegitimate daughter. Nobody knew about this. He knew this. He said that in Lillie Bliss's address book...no, in Davies's address book it was written down somewhere that there were only three people who knew that he lived in New York with this girl and what his telephone number was. One was Macbeth and one was Lillie Bliss. I don't know who the other

one was. So she knew all about this, and although she was a very Victorian lady, she apparently approved of it and she always thought that his wife treated him badly and that his children treated him badly and that he did the best he could. So when he died--this is what this man who was writing a biography told me--I told him that I had invited Mrs. Davies to come to Westbury and see the Davies room when I had it installed as my dining room. I said, "She never answered my letter," and he said, "Well, of course she wouldn't answer your letter, because she knew that Lillie Bliss knew all about this other girl and she wouldn't have had anything to do with you." So that explained that to me. And then he said [that] when Arthur B. Davies died in Italy he [had been] traveling with this other woman, and she couldn't get his body out of Italy because they didn't have the same passport, they were not married, and so she didn't know what to do. Of course, in those days you couldn't telephone across the ocean. She came back to this country and went straight to Lillie Bliss, and she said, "What will I do?" and Lillie Bliss said to her, "You'll have to go and tell his wife. His wife will have to get him out of Italy." So it seems she went to the door of his wife's house--it was somewhere in the country--and she knocked on the door and Mrs. Davies came down, opened it, and she said, "My name is" whatever it was, "I am your husband's mistress and I have been for twenty years and he's dead." [LAUGHING] And apparently the Davies family--Mrs. Davies and her two sons--had begun to be worried about him because they hadn't heard from him for so long and they were just about to look him up to try to find him.

SZ: She solved the mystery.

EC: So this man told me all this and then he said that the Davies family wouldn't cooperate with him, and that he couldn't get a lot of information that he wanted. The book never was published, but he sent me a copy of what he was going to put in that I had talked to him about and I thought it was awfully well-written. It's too bad it never came out.

SZ: And it never did?

EC: No. I believe there's going to be one now. I don't know why. I seem to have read this in a magazine or something. Somebody is writing one but I think it's under the auspices of the family, and this one, you see, was under the auspices of his daughter, who worked in the Kennedy Galleries.

SZ: A much livelier book, I'm sure.

EC: [LAUGHTER]

SZ: I keep wanting to go back. Well, now, you've described one trip that you took with your father and your aunt. As a family, when you lived out on Long Island for a while, what kinds of things did you do, summers, together?

EC: Well, [Lillie] used to come down for weekends but she didn't do anything else with us in the summers. We used to go out West, too, as a family. We used to go out West. She didn't do that. They used to go to Southampton--we all went to Southampton for a few years. As long as her mother was alive she went to Southampton, but after her mother died she just stayed in New York in the summers and came to us in Westbury for weekends.

SZ: Did she get along with her mother?

EC: Yes. Yes, I think they got on very well. I think it was as close a relationship as could possibly be.

SZ: The day that she was wandering around wanting to get her mind off things, was that an unusual thing, for her to feel depressed, as you put it?

EC: I think it was a thing that happened at that period. I think she came out of it by finding a new interest, [by] finding an interest in pictures and meeting Arthur B. Davies. I think it was a romantic friendship in spite of the fact that he had a mistress and she knew all about it and so forth. It was the kind of thing people could do in those days that probably people don't do very much today. [LAUGHING]

SZ: Do you have any idea why she never married?

EC: She had some inhibition about it. She couldn't marry, she told me.

SZ: She did say that?

EC: But she had two men in her life that meant a great deal to her. One was Arthur B. Davies and one was Christian Herter, who was a doctor. When she [was dying], she had to be brought down to a guest room in her apartment because her bedroom was too small, and she brought three large photographs with her: one of her mother, one of her father and one of Christian Herter. When [Dr. Herter] died, Mrs. Herter sent for her; Mrs. Herter took to her bed with a migraine headache and Lillie Bliss took care of everything. Then Mrs. Herter married another doctor, Dr. Dakin--who is responsible for something called the Dakin solution, which was nothing but salt and water, but it saved a lot of lives in the First World War--and she and [Lillie Bliss] were great, great friends always, so it must have been some kind of triangular relationship. Maybe Mrs. Herter liked Dr. Dakin long before Dr. Herter died. I don't know. [LAUGHING]

SZ: Did you call Lillie "Lillie?"

EC: Yes, we called her Lillie. Her name was Lizzie. Her christened name was Lizzie, and I must remember to speak to Bill Lieberman about it. I see they still have a Davies

picture in the Metropolitan Museum over the name of Lizzie P. Bliss, but my father changed her name legally when he gave the collection to [The Museum of Modern Art] because he said that she had never liked being called Lizzie and everybody had called her Lillie, so he didn't see why the pictures couldn't be in the name of Lillie.

SZ: No one ever called her Lizzie?

EC: No one ever called her Lizzie but she signed her checks Lizzie. She was christened Lizzie and Lizzie P. Bliss was her name until it became legally Lillie when [my father] gave the collection to the Museum.

SZ: What did she look like? What was her physical presence?

EC: Well, I don't know how I could describe her because I remember her as she was much older. She had gray hair. She wasn't really pretty. She had a very beautiful expression, a lovely face, but she wasn't really pretty and she didn't put on any make-up.

SZ: Was that unusual at the time?

EC: No, I think make-up was considered very shocking. I remember I wasn't allowed to put on lipstick. When I was about seventeen or eighteen I remember my mother made a terrible fuss because I wanted to put on lipstick.

SZ: Which had become the fashion then?

EC: It was becoming the fashion then. After the First World War, you know, skirts got short and people put on lipstick and things like that, but before that, women wore skirts down to their ankles. I don't know how they played tennis and things. They wore

those corsets.

SZ: But one doesn't think about the make-up.

EC: Well, I remember there was a terrible scene about make-up. I put make-up on my eyes and my mother didn't know it and somebody said, in front of my mother, "You've done something to your eyes. I like it very much." And mother wheeled around and said, "What!" [LAUGHING] I can remember that. It seems hard to believe today. I wouldn't be seen without my make-up.

SZ: She was obviously a woman who was interested in aspects of the world outside of....

EC: Yes. She was interested in intellectual and artistic things, always.

SZ: Had she gone to college or been educated in that formal kind of way?

EC: No women went to college in those days. In my day they were just beginning to. I didn't, but they were just beginning to and a few of my friends did, but very few. She was a great reader. She had read everything and she used to read to us and to give us Sunday school lessons. She came to the house every Sunday and she brought pictures and told us the entire story of the Bible, illustrating it with pictures of some kind, from Adam and Eve through the Crucifixion.

SZ: So she was your Sunday school?

EC: She was our Sunday school.

SZ: Was she a very religious person?

EC: I think she was religious, yes. She went to church and she participated in the church. She always knew the minister.

SZ: What church was that?

EC: Well, it was Episcopalian. I always thought it was St. George's Church downtown, but I called up when I got married--I just got married again seven years ago and I wanted my birth certificate or christening certificate or something for some reason, and so I thought, well, it must be there, because I seem to remember going to St. George's Church. I called them up and they said they had no record of having christened me, so I don't know where I was christened. I don't really know where they went to church but I think that's where they went.

SZ: Do you remember, did you go to church as a young girl?

EC: As a child, not so much as a young girl, but as a child, yes, in Southampton and here in New York.

SZ: Was that an important aspect of your family life?

EC: Well, I wouldn't say that it was a very important aspect, no. I think they had respect for it and they thought they should take their children to church but I don't think they were religious in that way.

SZ: So, as a young girl, it would be something that faded away?

EC: I sort of stopped going, yes.

SZ: Did you ever find the christening certificate?

EC: No. Now I'm married to a converted Roman Catholic.

SZ: Maybe that's why you needed it.

EC: Maybe. [LAUGHING]

SZ: Music-- was there a lot of music in your house growing up?

EC: Yes. My father was very musical. He had a singing voice and he loved to sing, but [his voice] wasn't big enough; I mean he couldn't have been an opera singer. He always said if he could come back again he'd like to be a singer, that he was a "square peg in a round hole" as a businessman, that what he wanted to be was a singer. I have a daughter who's a very fine pianist; she really is a professional pianist and makes her life around it. She has a son who I think is going to be a very fine violinist.

SZ: So there's something in the....

EC: There is music in the genes.

SZ: So, would your father sing?

EC: He sang all the time, especially in the bathroom because the bathroom made his voice sound bigger.

SZ: Was he baritone?

EC: Yes. [LAUGHING] And now I have a grandson who's suddenly developed an enormous baritone voice, but he's never had any musical education or studied it or

gone to hear it much. He doesn't know what to do because his voice is so big and so good. He's taking singing lessons. He doesn't know whether he's going to try to be a singer or not. He's through college; I mean, he's getting ready to make a career. So, it seems to be in the genes, but it completely skipped our generation. My brothers and I have none of it, but my one brother, Anthony--Tony Bliss--has a daughter who has a lovely singing voice. Again, too small, but she's very, very musical, and I have a very musical daughter and she has two musical sons. One of them wants to be professional, the other one doesn't.

SZ: But you appreciate music?

EC: Oh, I like it, yes. I go to hear it a lot.

END TAPE 1, SIDE 1

BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE 2

SZ: Anything else about your younger years that you can recall?

EC: I don't really think there's very much more that's interesting about me.

SZ: Oh, I don't know. [LAUGHTER]

EC: I think I'll have more to tell you when we get to the Museum, simply because it was those early days and so few people are left that were there.

SZ: Your aunt, and the first pictures that she acquired: give me a little bit of a picture of what she was doing with them. I mean, she brought them home and she hung a few of them....

EC: Well, she had eleven Cézannes before she was through and I think she must have begun with Cézanne. I don't really know just when she bought what. I have a book that shows her collection; the Museum has a copy of it...but the Cézannes were hung in the parlor. The others were all kept in a store-room; she had Degas and Renoir and Monet and Manet and Modigliani and Seurat, and they were all in storage until she moved to Park Avenue. She moved to Park Avenue in...I don't know how many years she lived there; what year would it have been? If my grandmother died when I was sixteen and I was born in 1907....

SZ: It was 1923.

EC: She died in 1923. Well, then, I think Lillie Bliss moved in 1925 about and she died in 1931, so she only had her pictures hanging for six years.

SZ: What year was she born?

EC: Well, she was sixty-eight when she died in `31.

SZ: That's 1863. She moved to Park Avenue in 1925, around then.

EC: Around then. I wouldn't swear to it, but around then.

SZ: Describe her apartment a little bit more. That was truly her home.

EC: Well, it was her home for six years. She copied her bedroom and the Davies room and the library exactly from 37th Street, the same furniture, everything, placed in the same places. The new part was the dining room, the guest room and this great big gallery, but as I remember it was a triplex. I don't think it was a duplex, I think it was a

triplex, although I'm not sure about that. Anyhow, there was more than one floor.

SZ: Why did she move? Do you know?

EC: Because she wanted to hang her paintings.

SZ: To have this kind of expanse.

EC: Yes. She wanted to make a gallery.

SZ: But there was enough about her old home that she liked and she reproduced it.

EC: And she had them all around and could see them all the time for the first time. You see, she was a real Victorian daughter and she devoted her life to her mother and this life of hers was all the life of the mind and on the side. When my grandmother died, my father said to her, "You will come and live with us," and she said, "Oh, no, I won't. I'm going to live," and I guess she had always planned that she would do this. It was a tragedy that she died. She was only sixty-eight, but she had cancer, and in those days they didn't have as many ways of curing as they have today. But it was a tragedy because she would have had such an interesting time with the beginnings of the Museum.

SZ: So from 1925 until `29, when the Museum was founded, she basically was just working on her collection?

EC: Well, I think they were planning the Museum for quite a long time.

SZ: Tell me whatever story you know about....

EC: The Depression interfered with it. The Depression came in 1929, too. I know there's a story that she and Mrs. Abby Rockefeller met in Jerusalem and decided to found [the Museum]. I'm sure that's not true. That would have been when we were on our trip, when I was with my father and Lillie Bliss and we came through the Holy Land to Egypt and the Rockefellers--Mrs. Rockefeller, Mr. Rockefeller, David, who was only thirteen then, and a whole entourage...I think they had the historian [James Henry] Breasted with them and couriers and so forth--they were going the other direction and we all stayed in the same hotel in Jerusalem and had lunch or dinner together. My aunt and my father were already great friends of the Rockefellers so there was nothing so extraordinary about that, and I'm quite sure that [Lillie Bliss and Abby Rockefeller] didn't dream up the Museum then. I think they must have been already talking about it for a long time. But that's the story...that must have been in the year 1927.

SZ: And it's certainly nothing you remember.

EC: Because I graduated from school in `26 and I'm sure we went the next year.

SZ: What you're saying is that you think that they may well have been talking about doing something like this but they didn't sit in Jerusalem and cook it up.

EC: They didn't cook it up at lunch in Jerusalem, but that's the story! [LAUGHING] But I'm sure they had talked about it before they met in Jerusalem and they probably talked about it in Jerusalem.

SZ: Although you don't know that for a fact.

EC: I don't know that. I didn't hear that conversation.

SZ: They were fairly good friends?

EC: Oh, they were very good friends. They had mutual interests. They both loved modern art. They were mutual friends of Arthur B. Davies. He probably brought them together through the pictures and, you know, in those days not many people liked, they didn't even know about most of the modern art in Europe. When the Museum opened with Cézanne, Gauguin, Seurat, and van Gogh, it was unknown. Those painters were unknown in this country but they were well known in Europe. So, Lillie Bliss and Mrs. Rockefeller had this mutual interest and had Arthur B. Davies and the Armory Show all behind them and they decided to found a museum because they loved their pictures. They knew if they left them to the Metropolitan Museum that the Metropolitan Museum wouldn't hang them. They [the Metropolitan] would put them in the cellar. They'd love to have them now.

SZ: That was the [Metropolitan's] policy at the time?

EC: Well, they were not interested in [modern paintings]. I know that's why [Lillie Bliss and Mrs. Rockefeller] didn't want to leave their pictures to them, although I think [the Metropolitan] did buy more than people thought they bought. They didn't show them.

SZ: What about [the third member of] that triangle, Mrs. Sullivan?

EC: Mrs. Sullivan did not have a collection because she wasn't rich. She didn't have money of that sort. She did have some Davies paintings because he was a great friend of hers. She had a husband who was a lawyer and her contribution--she was a great friend of both Mrs. Rockefeller and Lillie Bliss--was that her husband gave them free legal advice.

SZ: But she was a long-standing friend?

EC: Yes.

SZ: Do you remember her at all?

EC: I met her once, in an automobile with my aunt, but I don't remember her very well.

SZ: Mrs. Rockefeller?

EC: I remember Mrs. Rockefeller very well because I knew her. She was alive for quite a long time and very active in the Museum and awfully nice to everybody, including me. Her son, Nelson, was a friend of mine, and we all knew each other well.

SZ: We'll talk about her some more next time.

EC: She will certainly come into it very much when we talk about the Museum.

END TAPE 1, SIDE 2

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

INTERVIEW WITH:	**ELIZABETH BLISS PARKINSON COBB (EC)**
INTERVIEWER:	**SHARON ZANE (SZ)**
LOCATION:	**215 EAST 72ND STREET, NEW YORK CITY**
DATE:	**JULY 14, 1988**

BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE 1

SZ: What I thought we might do this time was to pick up on some of the things that were either mentioned last time or that I thought about afterwards. One of the things that I actually asked you off-tape last time and which I was hoping you could repeat to me was to describe your aunt's apartment. She had such a love of modern art and I was wondering what the rest of her surroundings were like.

EC: Well, I have been trying to remember and I don't remember it as clearly as I think I should. I told you it was a triplex but I don't think it was, I think it was duplex but I'm really not sure. In any case, it was a traditionally furnished apartment. The library was an absolute copy of the library that she had lived in all her life at 29 East 37th [Street] and it wasn't a very pretty room, I never thought. It had dark brown sofas and chairs and Tiffany lamps and that's about all I remember. There were books and bookshelves--wooden bookshelves with glass--and there she did have Davies' paintings hanging over the bookshelves, I remember that. She duplicated that room exactly. I think there was an entrance hall, and there was that room, and there was a dining room, and there may have been a guest room on that floor; and then above it, she had another guest room and her own room and the Davies room, which had been her sort of boudoir/sitting room. I'm not sure of this, there may have been three floors, but, in any case, the only modern thing she had was the gallery and the furniture designed for the gallery. It was the whole width of the apartment and was either two or three stories high, and it was properly lit for pictures and she had her whole collection hung there. She did have furniture made to order, designed by, I think, a Frenchman, and I never liked it very much. It was rather heavy and bulky and white and it was mostly sofas, I think, arranged so that you could see the pictures, and a big table in the middle. Philip Johnson can tell you about it in more detail because he remembers things like that and he knew the name of the designer. He didn't like it either; we neither of us liked it--I remember talking to him about it--but that was her gallery and that was the only thing that she didn't bring with her from the house on 37th Street. My

mother's sister was a decorator. Her name was Elsie Cobb Wilson and she had a firm called Elsie Cobb Wilson. She had a branch in Washington and a branch in New York. She had beautiful things, beautiful taste, and I know that Lillie employed her, or that office if she wasn't still alive--I'm not sure--to do her apartment when she moved in. She may have had some furniture that wasn't at 29 East 37th because it was a very different place, but she had nothing that was modern except in the gallery.

SZ: It was Victorian in feel?

EC: I don't think so, no, I don't think it was. I think it was more what Elsie Cobb Wilson would do, which was probably French, eighteenth-century, nineteenth-century furniture, English.

SZ: It just occurred to me, what about her taste in music? Was her taste in music fairly traditional too?

EC: Well, I couldn't answer that question really. I never heard her play except occasionally. She never played except to her mother and with the Kneisel Quartet, which she didn't do for audiences. She did it with them just because they were all friends and they liked to do it, but I know that she was very knowledgeable about classical music and I know that she corresponded with living composers because we found a lot of letters in mail that she had kept, after she died; and so obviously she did know some living composers and they must have sent her their music and she must have known about it, but I never heard her talk about it or play it. By the time I was growing up and knew her, she was pretty well into the visual arts and not concentrating so much on her piano and musical life. Of course, they went to the opera a great deal and my father had a singing voice, which he trained, although it wasn't big enough for him to be a professional singer; but he loved it, and in those days they didn't have Gramophones so they used to go through the operas together before they went. Can I interrupt?

SZ: Certainly. [TAPE INTERRUPTION] Okay. Continuing, you were telling me about the Gramophone.

EC: Well, they had an opera box and they went every week to the opera. In those days there weren't Gramophones and things of that sort, so Lillie would play the opera through and my father would sing all the parts that were suitable to his voice, so that by the time they went to the opera they knew it pretty well. They enjoyed doing that.

SZ: Did you go with them?

EC: Well, I did after I got older, yes, but you must remember that it was 1931 when she died. A good deal of her life I was pretty young. She was the godmother of one of us, I can't remember which one, but she took it very seriously and she gave us our entire religious education. I think I may have told you that. She came every Sunday and went through the whole Bible from Genesis through the New Testament, and she had pictures--I don't know where she got them, but she used to put them up on a board to illustrate the story with pictures. In those days, people did things like that. They don't have to today, they have TV.

SZ: In those days, people really relied on each other much more.

EC: Yes, and they made a life in their families and in their homes of this sort of thing. It was very nice.

SZ: Better, do you think?

EC: Well, it's hard to imagine today, I mean it's so completely different. People had more time. You wouldn't have time for all that today.

SZ: Which reminds me of another thing we had started to talk about last time. You were telling me the story about when your father would go to work, how you would go to see him off.

EC: Oh, my grandfather. That was my grandfather. You see, my grandfather died in 1911 so you can imagine that New York was a very different place. Where we all lived, that was what was called Murray Hill. It was the residential sector of the city. We were very free to walk around. It was very safe and there weren't cars, there were horses. It was a ritual every morning when he went to Wall Street. Today you wouldn't put on such an act unless somebody was going around the world or going to be gone for ninety-two years [LAUGHING].

SZ: Describe the ritual for me.

EC: Well, my brother and I each had a gray baby carriage and a white ermine lap robe, and each had a nurse in a dark blue uniform, and they pushed us from 14 East 36th Street to 29 East 37th Street at whatever the hour was that my grandfather went to Wall Street. There was a victoria with two horses and a coachman and a footman, and my grandfather wore a tall silk hat and a high stiff collar and a black bowtie to the office. He would come down the steps, lifting his hat to the nurses, and kiss each of us and say good morning to his footman and his coachman and get into his carriage; and the maids, the Irish maids, would be in the basement, waving their hands, and my grandmother and my aunt, in their wrappers, would be on a little balcony outside the library, waving their hands. He'd tip his hat to everybody and off he'd go to Wall Street. [LAUGHTER] I don't know how long it took him to get there but it was a ceremony every morning.

SZ: Anything else about the neighborhood that you remember? I guess it was, on the

streets, mostly brownstones, right?

EC: Yes. I think the street is very unchanged. You see, the Morgan Library is right behind it, and [J. P.] Morgan's house was on the corner, and I think the street is pretty much unchanged. I go through it once in a while. The house is still there and it's now apartments or rooms. During the [Second World] War I was working in what was called the Home Service of the International Red Cross, and I [was assigned] a case of a young wife who couldn't live on her allowance from her husband, who was in the Army; [the address] was 29 East 37th--she had a room in that house. I took it to the head of the department and said that I would prefer not to go back and see that house as a rooming house and would she exchange my assignment with somebody else, and she did. So I never went back, but I know the house is still here, I've seen it very recently. I don't think the street has changed much. It still has trees on it. It's just that there's a lot of traffic now, as there is everywhere.

SZ: But the house that you grew up in, which was on 36th Street....

EC: That was a brownstone and that was torn down. I think that's very near where Altman's is now.

SZ: Yes, so that's changed.

EC: Yes, so that's totally different.

SZ: Now, tell me a little bit about your father, what he did and what sort of a man he was.

EC: My grandfather had a business which was called Bliss, Fabian and Company, and my father went into that business and carried it on after his death. They were merchants; they were in the cotton business. They had cotton mills in the South. There was sort

of a depression in the cotton business at one point and my father sold the business and got out of it altogether, and then he more or less lived by investing his money. He was a philanthropist and a patron of the arts. He was president of the Metropolitan Opera for a good many years and he was president of something called the AICP, which is now the CSS...[the] Community Service Society, and he was very, very active in the Red Cross. During the Second World War, when, I think, it was Norman Davis [who] was the head of it, he [Davis] became ill and my father took it over for him for quite a long time. He was very deeply [involved] in the Red Cross during both wars.

SZ: Was your mother active in charitable....

EC: Yes, she was very interested in the social service of the New York Hospital and she ran a nursery for small children somewhere--I think it was called the Chelsea Day Nursery. She also established something that still exists--it's called something else now, it's down on Madison Avenue--I think it's called Elderly Craftsmen or something of that sort....

SZ: Oh, the Elder Craftsman.

EC: Yes, that was within the AICP. She established that for elderly people to sell things and be occupied, either [as] carpenters or seamstresses or whatever they wanted. It doesn't belong to a charitable organization anymore, I think it's just a business now.

SZ: Did they have an active social life when you were young?

EC: They were never very social people. They had a lot of friends and they had a lot of people to dinner once in a while, but it was usually the family doctor and intimate friends or family. They, very elaborately, once or twice a year, gave a formal dinner party but they were not part of the fashionable social life of New York. They didn't like

it.

SZ: They were home a lot when you were young?

EC: They were home a lot, yes. They went to the opera and they went to the Philharmonic and they went to the theater, things of that sort.

SZ: Now, I know you were a young girl during World War I but do you have any particular memories of it? Your father, was he involved?

EC: He went overseas for the Red Cross, and I remember being very upset by that, thinking that his boat would sink and things like that--I was only about eight years old or seven years old--but he was overseas for quite a while with the Red Cross; I think he was head of the International Red Cross in Washington during part of World War I. I couldn't really tell you much about it. I do have his diary, but I haven't read it for years. I don't actually know where it is now. It's in this house, I know that--that's all. [LAUGHING]

SZ: Anything else about it, I mean do you remember having put up with any kind of shortages during that war?

EC: No, I don't remember anything about it except that everybody talked about it all the time, and I remember how shocked everybody was, particularly Lillie Bliss, that after the war all the girls began wearing very short skirts and the styles changed a great deal. They bobbed their hair and they wore short skirts and they put on lipstick and they did things that were considered shocking. There was talk about how the younger generation had changed, was changing everything, was doing everything they shouldn't do. I remember when I was going to "come out," as they used to call it--I don't know if anybody still does that or not. I would have been eighteen, turning

eighteen, and I went to visit a friend in Maine and I had my hair cut. I had my hair "bobbed" as they called it in those days.

SZ: For your coming out?

EC: Well, I just had it bobbed and I knew it was going to be a terrible shock to my parents, so before coming home I sent them a telegram and said, "Have had my hair bobbed." My father met me at the station--I think it was the Grand Central Station--and I remember coming up the steps and he was standing there waiting for me. I went up expecting to kiss him, but he turned immediately and walked very fast out of the station, I following him, without even speaking to me. He was so mad because I'd had my hair bobbed. When we got home--this must have been August--my mother said, "Well, of course you'll have to let it grow before I can bring you out in October." I said, "I'm sorry, mother, but I don't think it will grow that fast." [LAUGHING]

SZ: So, what happened?

EC: So, it never did grow again. I never had long hair again [LAUGHING], but that's about as much as...I mean, the war did that....

SZ: But she brought you out anyway?

EC: Yes, she had to. What could she do? [LAUGHING]

SZ: The war changed a lot.

EC: It changed a lot of things, it really did. Just as the Second World War changed a lot of things.

SZ: When was your first trip abroad?

EC: In 1927, right after I got out of school. Or it may have been 1926 even, in the summer. Anyway, that was the beginning.

SZ: Was it that trip that you described last time, the trip to Jerusalem?

EC: No, that was a little bit later. That might have been 1928, I don't know, I went to Egypt and the Holy Land with my father and Lillie Bliss, but before that we all went-- my two brothers and my mother and I--over in the summer to Europe, and that was my first time. That would have been 1926.

SZ: Was that an exciting trip, the first trip, for you?

EC: Well, only fairly so, I think. We were very much tourists; [none of us] had been to Europe and we were very much tourists. I learned to enjoy Europe more later on. My brothers hated it; they wanted to be in Montana, and they weren't interested in seeing anything. I think we only went to London and Paris. I don't think we went anywhere else.

SZ: You traveled by boat.

EC: There was no other way to travel.

SZ: Yes. Do you remember which boat?

EC: No, I don't remember the name of it. I don't remember the name of it at all. It's a long time ago we're talking about.

SZ: I know that. [LAUGHTER]

EC: Life changed a great deal for me when airplanes came in, because I was always seasick on steamers and I never was sick on planes, it's a different kind of motion. I would be sick on a boat even if it wasn't rough. It has something to do with your inner ear.

SZ: For a lot of people that could be a great deterrent.

EC: Oh, it's awful, just awful, but once airplanes came in, I was fine.

SZ: Now, when you were young, did you study at home? I know you went to Miss Chapin's School, but that was later on.

EC: Yes. I didn't study anything at home except French.

SZ: So, before Miss Chapin's you....

EC: I was there for twelve years.

SZ: Oh, you were?

EC: Yes.

SZ: I see.

EC: And if you weren't going to college, which very few girls did in those days, she had a special course for the last two years which concentrated on English and American history and literature and the Bible and [the] history of art, and I found that I had had

sort of a junior college education instead of a preparation for college. They divided us [into groups]. It was very good; I mean it was very good. I wish that they had it [this sort of educational program] today for more people.

SZ: And you say you studied French at home?

EC: I studied French at home because it was so badly taught in the schools. I had somebody who came to lunch, that was while I was still in school. You see, we didn't stay in school all day in those days, we just stayed until lunch time. I had a French teacher from the Spence School, where they've always taught French beautifully and still do and she had lunch and spent the afternoons with me, just doing whatever I had to do and we talked French all the time. I never learned to read it or write it but I could talk to anybody. [LAUGHING]

SZ: You've told me a couple of stories that lead me to suspect...well, I guess you say that the times were changing but your parents were fairly conservative.

EC: Well, I never know quite what people mean by being conservative or liberal. Are you talking about politics?

SZ: No, I'm talking about being rooted in the old traditions, because [of their reaction when] you had your hair bobbed, and you told me a story last time about putting make-up on, which was also shocking to them. So, I'm just trying to get a feeling of....

EC: Yes, they stuck to the old ways. Until Prohibition came in, I never saw them drink a cocktail, I never heard of a cocktail, but after Prohibition came in there was always a cocktail tray set up and everybody always had cocktails before dinner. That was a big change. What Prohibition did to this country really [had] quite an impact, and the repeal of it [had] quite an impact. I don't think people ever drank as much at parties

before Prohibition. My mother told me when she was growing up in Washington that if a man got drunk at a party he was never asked anywhere again. There may have been a lot of drinking in the lower classes which caused them to put in Prohibition, but at dinner parties I never saw my family drink a cocktail. They had a little wine at dinner, but never a drink, except if there was company. After Prohibition, we never had an evening without a drink. [LAUGHING] I remember seeing a friend of my mother's drinking a whiskey and soda. It was the first time I had ever seen a woman drink a whiskey and soda. I was terribly shocked.

SZ: Why do you think that happened that way?

EC: Well, I think people felt very strongly about Prohibition. They didn't like being told they couldn't drink and they couldn't buy liquor, and they didn't know whether what they bought was poison or not so they went into it very seriously. They repealed it. Mrs. Dwight Davis was a leader in repealing Prohibition. She was a great friend of my mother's and my mother worked with her very hard, and once it was repealed, everybody served liquor at parties. Women began to drink and smoke. That's another thing, I suppose: before the First World War, women never smoked.

SZ: You never remembered seeing a woman smoke?

EC: Not until well after the First World War, but well before the Second World War.

SZ: Well, I guess a lot of it coincided. In the '20s you found that there was a certain....

EC: Yes, well, you see, the war wasn't over until 1918, so this all began in the '20s.

SZ: Do you remember the flu epidemic [of 1919]? Did that have any effect on....

EC: Yes, I remember the flu epidemic very well. We had a pretty large house and quite a number of servants, and everybody--all the children and all the servants--got it. Everybody had it except my mother, and she had to nurse everybody.

SZ: You had it too?

EC: I had it too. Yes, that was a very bad epidemic. I think she managed to get a trained nurse and she and the trained nurse had to do everything. She never got it.

SZ: But everybody came through it?

EC: Yes, but one or two of the people, I remember the nurse, the children's nurse, was terribly ill and thought she was dying and wanted her mother to be brought and I remember my mother saying, "She isn't dying and I simply cannot have another person in this house." [LAUGHING]

SZ: And she didn't die?

EC: And she didn't. [LAUGHTER]

SZ: Well, really, the era of the 1920s was the same era when you really grew up and became a young woman, so there must have been a lot of these confrontations that you had to make some decisions about.

EC: Yes. They were minor, though. I don't remember, except the hair and the lipstick and that I smoked. My father never objected to my smoking. He said it was a very good idea not to smoke before 1:00 p.m., because then you didn't smoke as much. He never smoked before 1:00 p.m., and he persuaded me to make that a rule. I don't think I ever liked smoking anyway. I didn't do it for very long, but I don't remember

those things were much of an issue with us. I remember his telling me that I should drink cocktails at home with the family and learn how to drink, which I think was a very wise decision.

SZ: What does that mean, "learn how to drink"?

EC: Well, how many cocktails can you take? Some people used to go out to dinner and take four or five. Of course, they fell under the table, but you could learn, if you drank carefully. If I fell under the table at home it didn't matter. I'd know I'd taken too many and I wouldn't take that many again. [LAUGHING]

SZ: And only the family would know. [LAUGHTER] After you graduated from Miss Chapin's, you still lived at home?

EC: I lived at home until I married.

SZ: How old were you when you married?

EC: Twenty-five. I would like to have lived in an apartment of my own, but my family wouldn't have tolerated that and I wasn't financially independent. I remember thinking I would like to take a job, but my father persuaded me that there was a depression on and it wasn't fair for me to take a job since I didn't really need one, so I dropped that idea.

SZ: Aside from the economic situation overall, would that have been something that wouldn't have been done anyway?

EC: Well, I don't know. I had a friend who opened a bookstore and if I'd wanted to go and work in her bookstore I don't think anybody would have objected. I don't know what I

would have done. I used to think that if I did anything I'd like to buy clothes for a shop, that I'd go to a department store and try to learn to be a buyer of clothes because I loved clothes, but I never tried to do it or seriously contemplated it. I don't believe they [my parents] would have objected; I don't think they were that conservative. I think they would have wanted me to live at home.

SZ: So, for those years, what did you do to occupy yourself?

EC: Well, I fox-hunted, if you really want to know.

SZ: I do. [LAUGHTER]

EC: I loved fox-hunting; I went to Virginia to fox-hunt. I spent a great deal of time over that. My mother wanted me to work for the New York Hospital social service, so I did for a while, but I never enjoyed it very much. Then, of course, the Museum started in `29. I was twenty-two then and the Museum really became, gradually, my entire life.

SZ: When it started, you were involved through your aunt?

EC: Yes, my aunt and Mrs. Rockefeller founded something called the Junior Advisory Committee. I think they wanted it for two reasons: I think my aunt wanted me involved and Mrs. Rockefeller wanted Nelson involved, and they also wanted to get as many as possible of the young people that were interested in the arts and would be interested in modern art and could become trustees. You see, it was a time when people were not interested in modern art. They didn't like it; they thought it was awful, and until the Armory Show in 1913, hardly anybody in this country knew anything about it. The artists in those days were quite poor and couldn't go to Europe, and so with the exception of Prendergast and Arthur B. Davies, I don't think very many artists saw European art until the Armory Show. They did get some very interesting young people

for the Junior Advisory Committee. The ones that come immediately to my mind were Lincoln Kirstein, Eddie Warburg, Philip Johnson--I guess he didn't come in through the Junior Advisory Committee, that's wrong; he came in directly through Alfred Barr--but Lincoln Kirstein, Eddie Warburg--they branched off afterwards into the ballet--[and] George Gershwin, who was a collector as well as a musician and who died very young but might have remained very active, I think.

SZ: But he was active?

EC: Yes, he came to the meetings always and he used to take me to exhibitions. He really was interested in the visual arts. And then...who else was I just about to say? George Gershwin.... Walter Chrysler, he was a member and he was quite a collector and quite interested in modern art even in those days. Well, that's sort of the nucleus of the really bright young people.

SZ: Who were put together by Mrs. Rockefeller and your aunt?

EC: Yes, for the Junior Advisory Committee, and we were simply told that it was a modern art museum and therefore the opinion of the younger generation was important and they wanted us to watch what they did, follow what they did and criticize it and comment on it.

SZ: Well, now, you were twenty-two, you had seen these paintings at your aunt's and had....

EC: I'd seen them at my aunt's. I hadn't really seen them much anywhere else except there was the Macbeth Gallery and I used to occasionally go to galleries with her [Lillie Bliss], but I hadn't seen very much. I wasn't a very useful member the way Lincoln Kirstein and those people were, but I was there anyway.

SZ: Did you like it?

EC: Oh, yes. Oh, we had a fascinating time. They were brilliant people and we were all very interested. We used to meet sometimes all day and we all had so much we wanted to say, we'd have to raise our hands and wave them violently to make somebody shut up and let us speak and we'd break up for lunch and come back again.

SZ: I want to ask you about each of those people, but modern art--did you have an affinity for it back then? Could you see what your aunt saw in some of the paintings?

EC: Yes, I liked her pictures, but of course as time went on the Museum began buying more contemporary things. I took quite a long time over that. Alfred Barr used to introduce me as the trustee who didn't like anything later than the Impressionists. [LAUGHING] But I gradually changed quite a lot.

SZ: Let's go back to the actual founding of the Museum, just whatever you remember about it. Were you involved in that opening?

EC: I must have been, but for some reason I do not remember the opening of the original museum in the Heckscher Building. I remember the opening in the house that Mr. [John D.] Rockefeller gave us, which was on the present site, and I think I told you that I organized the party for the opening.

SZ: No, we didn't talk about that yet.

EC: We haven't gotten into that yet?

SZ: No.

EC: But I have that [to tell you about], and Mrs. Rockefeller comes into that, but I don't seem to remember any opening. I do remember the exhibition Cézanne, Gauguin, Seurat, and van Gogh, [but] I'm not sure where it was given. I suppose it was given in the Heckscher Building.

SZ: It was.

EC: But that was the opening, and whether there was anything more than just going to see the pictures, whether there was a dinner party or anything like that, I have no recollection. I just remember the exhibition, and I remember preliminary to that their trying to raise enough money just to have a museum. In those days, to raise $5,000 was quite a thing. I think my father gave $5,000. He didn't like modern art, but he liked his sister. [LAUGHTER] I think he gave her $5,000.

SZ: Well, at that time, too, my understanding of it is that [the Museum] was in rented space, so it was a little bit different than an institution that had its own....

EC: Well, you see, it was all they could afford, and they never knew whether [the Museum would be] were permanent or not. They were just going from hand to mouth, hoping to establish it. The fact that we then went right into the Depression didn't help any.

SZ: Two weeks later.

EC: I don't remember how much of this we talked about. You see, my aunt died in `31; there were only two years [between the founding of the Museum and her death]. We were still in the Depression and she left her collection to the Museum on condition...did I tell you this? So, you don't want me to say this again?

SZ: Go ahead.

EC: On condition that they raised an endowment fund that my father considered adequate. So, he put $1,000,000 on it and we only could raise $600,000. He gave it [the collection] to them anyway, which made them a museum because they then had a collection. Mrs. Rockefeller always, from the very beginning, told my aunt that she couldn't help them very much financially because her husband didn't like modern art, didn't approve of it and wasn't going to give to it. He eventually did give this house, and he eventually gave more on her account, but he never did like it and she did not put up a great deal of money. It wasn't until Nelson came along that money began to pour in from the Rockefellers. He loved it [modern art] and shared that love with his mother, and he did it [contributed to the Museum] to help her because nobody else in the family would. He, of course, when I told you who was on the Junior Advisory Committee, well, of course, I did mention his name too, and I think I told you I don't think the Museum would have gotten on its feet and ever really have survived if it hadn't been for Nelson. He not only gave a great deal to it [financially] but he gave energy and vision and time and thought and enthusiasm, and he got other people involved and enthusiastic.

SZ: That was his basic nature?

EC: Yes, and it was his chief interest for a long time and then I think I told you about the exhibition that the Junior Advisory Committee put on and Lincoln Kirstein did....

END TAPE 2, SIDE 1

BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE 2

EC: Well, the Junior Advisory Committee had been instructed to criticize [the Museum], so

they criticized. One of the chief criticisms that was reiterated a great deal was that we were showing so much European art and that American artists were starving and we were doing nothing for them.

SZ: This was during the Depression?

EC: Yes. So, finally the trustees suggested that the Junior Advisory Committee put on an exhibition. There was nobody on the committee that really knew how to do such a thing except Lincoln Kirstein, so he was appointed--delegated--to do it, and he went out and did it, by himself. He put on a mural show [Murals by American Painters and Photographers, 1932]. He invited--I can't remember the names of the artists, but they will be listed somewhere, you can find that--he invited them to do murals because he thought that rich people would then perhaps give them commissions to do murals in their houses. It was a rather optimistic idea, but, anyway, every artist brought his picture in [to be part of] a great big exhibition. They were installed in one of the four rooms in the Heckscher Building and the trustees were invited to see them. One of the trustees was Sam Lewisohn and he was a very acute man. He slept all the time through meetings, but he always woke up when there was anything important. He was sleeping peacefully when we were all looking at the pictures and nobody quite took in what the pictures were all about, and Sam Lewisohn opened his eyes and said, "Do you realize that that's a picture of J. P. Morgan being hung and this is a picture of John D. Rockefeller being crucified [in Hugo Gellert's `Us Fellas Gotta Stick Together'--Al Capone]?" Now, I'm not sure this is absolutely accurate, but when you find out what the pictures were about, you can tell. Then he said, "I thought this museum needed money," and, with that, he shut his eyes again. [LAUGHING] So, it was decided by the trustees that this exhibition could not be shown.

SZ: It was already up?

EC: Well, it wasn't publicly up.

SZ: Right, but it was up and it had had this preview.

EC: It was up enough for them to see it at a meeting, so.... [INTERRUPTION] Now, where was I?

SZ: You were saying that they [the trustees] decided that it couldn't be shown to the public.

EC: Oh, so they decided that it couldn't be shown, that it would be a disaster. So the artists said, very well, they'd [mount] it as an independent show. They'd hire some place and give it as an independent show and say that it was a show that had been commissioned by the modern art museum [The Museum of Modern Art] but that the Museum wouldn't show [it]. Well, then the trustees decided that would be very bad for them too, so Nelson was given the job of going around and calling on all the people that had been insulted. J. P. Morgan was one of them, and his own father was another--I don't know who else--and they all said they didn't care in the least, to go ahead and [hold] the show. So we did, and the show was so popular that the Heckscher Building put us out. The elevators couldn't handle the crowds, and that's when Mr. Rockefeller came through and gave us a house. The [Junior Advisory] Committee was very divided. There were some conservative and slightly older people on it whose names I don't remember, and they disapproved terribly of Lincoln Kirstein.

SZ: Why?

EC: Well, he was a very avant-garde man, and there was no fooling around with him. You know his history, you know what he's done. He was always a very strong character. Anyway....

SZ: How did you feel about him?

EC: Oh, I loved him. I thought he was one of the most attractive people I'd ever met in my life, and he was so stimulating. I love him still. I think he's a wonderful person and I think what he's done is simply wonderful.

SZ: But, I mean back then.

EC: Oh, back then I was crazy about him, and he was he was in such a bad way with the committee that he used to be scared to go to the meetings, and he wouldn't go unless I'd walk in with him. I remember we had one meeting, I think it was at the University Club--anyway, it was a club right on the corner of Fifth Avenue--and I came down in a taxi cab and he was standing on the corner waiting for me; he put this huge paw in and pulled me out, and with this other paw he gave five dollars, which was an enormous sum in those days, to the taxi driver, and then he dragged me in. [LAUGHING] He wouldn't walk into the meeting without me. But, anyway, the conservative group thought that he should be asked to resign, that this was a terrible exhibition he had put on. We were all so innocent about how to do anything. We didn't have a chairman of the committee, we just always met and talked. So, that summer Nelson wrote to us all and said that he thought the committee ought to have a chairman and would we all please write in who our choice of chairman was. Everybody wrote in and said that we'd like him to be the chairman, so he became the chairman. Then, gradually, the conservative people all resigned, and so it was a Junior Advisory Committee of really very active and useful people for quite a while.

SZ: But, in terms of the power structure at that time, was there a lot of difficulty between the Junior Advisory Committee and, well, the trustees or the older....

EC: Well, they considered us a nuisance by the time they were through, and they

disbanded us. They got tired of us.

SZ: But, in the beginning, you had a certain amount of power and authority?

EC: Well, no, we didn't have any. We just made suggestions and they took them or not as they pleased, but they did ask us to put on this show and this show did have a terrific impact...[the Museum acquired] a house instead of four rooms.

SZ: Let me go down the list of the other members that you mentioned. Tell me a little bit about each of them, how you felt about them then, connections, whatever. You talked a little bit about Lincoln Kirsten. Anything else?

EC: Well, he always knew more than anybody else. He really was educated in contemporary art. He left us completely when he went over to the ballet because that absorbed the whole of his life, but before that I think he was tremendously interested in the visual arts. I remember having lunch with him one day, and he said, "I don't know why everybody thinks I'm a Communist." He said, "You know, actually I'm very rich and I'm not Communist." [LAUGHTER] But they suspected him of everything.

SZ: He was very unusual.

EC: Well, he was a very unusual person, very intense. He still is. He's a gifted man; he's a genius and he's an eccentric. It's interesting, you know, he's become a Roman Catholic. He converted to Roman Catholicism. I was very surprised and said so to Philip Johnson, [who] said, "Well, he's been studying it all his life."

SZ: He just recently did that?

EC: Yes, within the last two years.

SZ: He must be a very spiritual man.

EC: Well, I think he is, and I think the arts were a very spiritual thing for him. I don't know why people thought he was a Communist, except that he was so avant-garde and it was so unusual to be that interested and knowledgeable in contemporary art in those days; and, he was Jewish, and there was a lot of anti-Semitism then, as there is not in the same way today at all. The Metropolitan Museum never had a Jew on the board, and we had, from the very beginning; half the people were Jews, and, of course, they were the people that appreciated modern art. They were the only people that did in Europe.

SZ: Well, the '20s was a time when there was a lot of radicalism and a lot of fear on the part of many about anarchism.

EC: Yes, and so they suspected him of being that way, which he really wasn't at all. He wanted to build things like the ballet and the modern museum [The Museum of Modern Art], but [even] that was considered pretty radical.

SZ: I was just reading some of the reports that came out of the modern art exhibition that your aunt had something to do with at the Metropolitan. Some of her paintings, I think, were loaned to it in the early '20s, and the show was villified in the papers.

EC: Absolutely.

SZ: Anyway.... Eddie Warburg.

EC: Yes, he was very avant-garde and, of course, always had a wonderful collection. He collected all through his life, always had beautiful things, and was terribly interested in

modern art and in the ballet. He became more interested in the ballet, went off with Lincoln and pretty well devoted his life to that, but he remained interested in the Museum for a long time. Then he became a member of the Board of Regents and he had to resign from [the Museum] because it was considered a conflict of interest. He was told that he would be taken back as a trustee, and he should have been after [completing his term on] the Board of Regents, but by that time everything had changed so much. The director, René d'Harnoncourt, had died; the presidency had changed. I think people forgot what they had said, and he wasn't taken back. I think his feelings were very hurt, and he doesn't have anything to do with the Museum anymore. It's too bad, because he was a very useful, active member of the founding family, and he was on the Junior Advisory Committee.

SZ: Right, he was a name that you had given me.

EC: Yes, but then later he was a trustee.

SZ: And he was always interested; so when he was on the Junior Advisory Committe, did he already have a collection?

EC: Well, he was young then, but he was making one, he was always buying things. Speaking of Lincoln again, he has always been terribly intense, thinking so hard about something that he might not even recognize you, you know, or speak to you. I met him one day, oh, this was quite a long time ago, maybe ten years ago or more, but he was walking down the street and I came out of my front door just as he was walking by and I said, "Hello," and he didn't even hear me; so I walked next to him, I walked side-by-side next to him, and he was deep in thought and he didn't turn to the right or the left. He didn't even see me, although I was walking step-by-step right next to him. I thought, "I'm going to see how long I can keep this up before he sees me," and I walked along beside him, and all of a sudden we came to a corner and he turned left

and just walked off before I had a chance to speak to him. He never saw me, ever. [LAUGHING] But, that's how intense he was. He was thinking about something.

SZ: George Gershwin.

EC: Well, George Gershwin I remember as being perfectly charming. I liked him immensely. I can't remember the name of the artist that he particularly liked. He wasn't a very avant-garde or extreme artist, or abstract or impressionistic, and I cannot remember his name, but George Gershwin liked him very much and I remember his taking me to an exhibition to see his work. I don't remember that I saw very much more of him. It was a short period that he was there. I don't remember when he died.

SZ: 1937.

EC: Well, you see, I got married in `32 and I had a baby in `34, and so I began to be less active and less around, and then he died before I really came back into the picture.

SZ: Was he fun to be around?

EC: Oh, yes, he was a delightful person, delightful person. It's too bad he didn't live.

SZ: But his brother wasn't....

EC: I don't remember ever meeting his brother.

SZ: And Walter Chrysler?

EC: Well, I never knew him, but I know that was on the committee and that he had pictures. I think we once had a meeting in his apartment, but I don't remember him at

all. I just remember that he was there.

SZ: And Nelson Rockefeller.

EC: But Nelson, of course, was the heart and soul of the committee and the heart and soul of the Museum for many years.

SZ: Do you remember when you first met him or had you always known him?

EC: I always knew him. He went to a boys camp in the Adirondacks when he was eight or nine years old and my brother went to the same camp. My mother had a little, well, it was called a camp; it was a little acre of land with a few little houses on it and we lived there in the summer for several summers and Nelson used to come over to lunch on Sundays with my brother, so we were friends in our childhood. Then, of course, our parents and our families were friends, and then we met again with this museum, and it became such a deep interest for both of us that it naturally deepened and increased and continued the friendship. I would say that we were friends all of his life, although, after he got divorced and remarried and went to live in Washington and so forth, I didn't see him, but we were always friends. When I became president of the Museum he took me out to lunch and said, "Whenever you need me, I'll always be there. Just tell Louise Boyer and I'll be at the meeting and I'll see that you get what you want." [LAUGHING] And I only did it twice, but both times he came and fought hard for what I wanted.

SZ: Which we'll talk about at some future time. In the early days of the Junior Advisory Committee he was a young man and he had really inherited his mother's interest?

EC: Oh, yes. I think she tried to make all her children like it. She collected watercolors and drawings because Mr. Rockefeller didn't give her the money to buy the paintings.... But

she had a very fine collection of watercolors and drawings by the people of the '30s and '40s, and she had a little sort of a house of her own or apartment of her own where we [the Junior Advisory Committee] used to sometimes meet, and her collection was all hanging. It was always there and the children could see it, but it was Nelson who really liked it. He really loved it. It was an essential thing in his life. He got very interested in primitive art later on, and René d'Harnoncourt made his collection for him and with him, which became the [Museum of Primitive Art]. When he was tired or under great stress, upset about something, he used to call up René and say, "You've just got to come up and show me something, bring me something I haven't seen," and René would go off with a piece of primitive art that Nelson had never seen and they'd talk about it and handle it, and it would calm him down and make him feel better. Or else he'd come home and rehang his entire collection. He'd take a wall like that and take all the pictures off and put other pictures on, hammer and nails, do it all himself. He loved that. When I moved into this apartment from my house in the country he came up and hung all the pictures in my apartment for me.

SZ: The way they are now?

EC: Well, no, it wasn't this apartment, but I mean he loved doing that. He didn't need a carpenter to do it for him, he loved doing it.

SZ: So, his whole involvement right from the beginning, I think what you're saying is, really came out of a deep....

EC: A really innate, deep feeling. He didn't just get it by being told about it by his mother. It was in him. It may have been in him from her genes, because she certainly felt the same way, but it was a vital part of his life, an essential part of his life. He couldn't have lived without it. He was buying pictures all the time and hanging them and rehanging them, all the time.

SZ: I think we'll stop today.

EC: Okay.

END TAPE 2, SIDE 2

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

INTERVIEW WITH: **ELIZABETH BLISS PARKINSON COBB (EC)**

INTERVIEWER: **SHARON ZANE (SZ)**

LOCATION: **215 EAST 72ND STREET, NEW YORK CITY**

DATE: **JULY 19, 1988**

BEGIN TAPE 3, SIDE 1

SZ: I wanted to go back to what we were talking about last time. You told me a little bit about the genesis of the Junior Advisory Committee and some of the people who were on it. Maybe you could elaborate a little more on what the spirit was like among the group.

EC: Of the Junior Advisory Committee?

SZ: Yes, and then in relation to whatever you can remember of the feeling among, I guess, the trustees and among the Museum staff members, what the interplay was like at that time.

EC: Of course, there were very few staff members at that time. I don't remember just who there was. There was Alfred Barr--I don't remember when Dorothy Miller came in--and there was a man named Alan Blackburn who was sort of a secretary and used to attend our Junior Advisory Committee meetings, but I think he did more than that. I don't think he was just there for the Junior Advisory Committee, but he used to take notes and he was always there. Jere Abbott was really the most important staff member after Alfred. He worked closely with him and they were very good friends. And, of course, there was Philip Johnson.

SZ: I wanted to ask you a little bit about what you knew, at all, about how the staff was put in place and whether your aunt had anything to do with it. There was Alfred Barr; Dorothy Miller came in a few years later. There was Mr. Abbott.

EC: Jere Abbott was very close to Alfred and they worked together like partners. He didn't have the position of director but he was very important to Alfred.

SZ: And how was he seen? At that time was Alfred really accepted as the one with the vision?

EC: Oh, I think so. Of course, you must remember that we didn't have any money to buy pictures with. It was only a question of giving exhibitions. Alfred was chosen because Paul Sachs told the trustees that if they wanted to take a chance on anyone as young as twenty-seven that he thought, of all his pupils that he'd ever had, that Alfred was the most suited to do this kind of work, and so Alfred left the college where he was teaching--it was either Smith or Vassar.

SZ: It was Wellesley.

EC: And he left and took this job because it thrilled him and he had in his mind right away what he wanted, which was a museum of all the arts, the five disciplines, including photography for the first time, architecture and design, painting [and] sculpture--that's one department--drawings and film. That was his conception from the beginning, what he planned to do. He did as much of it as he could. One of the first exhibitions was the 1932 exhibition [International Exhibition of Modern Architecture] that Philip Johnson put on of architecture and design, and, of course, the first exhibition you know about, Cézanne, Gauguin, Seurat, and van Gogh. [Those artists] were pretty well unknown in this country, and [everyone] always said it was one of the greatest things for

[American] artists because so many of the artists, in those days anyway, didn't have enough money to go abroad. They hadn't seen those pictures either. It was very important to them. It was a very small place, four little rooms in the Heckscher Building, and no pictures that it [the Museum] owned, but it had a big impact, an impact on people who were attracted by it and an impact on people who thought it was all crazy.

SZ: There were a number of them.

EC: Well, most of them felt that way. [LAUGHING] That's why it was so hard to raise the money.

SZ: Actually, I was reviewing some of the press on the exhibition. It was quite vocal and....

EC: I'm sure. I'm sure, and even as late as when I became a trustee, which was in the '40s, I used to try to hide it from people because I didn't want to get into those discussions, and of course we had so little room to show anything that even after we began to have a collection, people didn't see what we had. Until we built the new building, people didn't really know what we had, so the few people who were outside of the Museum but did like modern art used to come and criticize us for the things we didn't show. I remember saying to one friend, "Well, if you will make me a list of everything you think we should be showing that we're not showing, I'll report to you about it." So I took the list to Alfred and we had all those pictures but we couldn't show them because we didn't have any space.

SZ: In the very early years, how did decisions get made? Was it really Mr. Barr who decided? What was the power balance like?

EC: Alfred Barr would pretty much bring in the pictures. (After we had a larger staff, we had

a director of the painting and sculpture department, a director of each department, and they would bring in pictures too.) Alfred would bring in the pictures, and there was a trustee committee, as there still is, to decide whether or not to buy them. Although I think the trustees felt that they should support their director, there were some pictures that they just couldn't take, and in that case, always, Philip Johnson bought that picture and kept it, and when the trustees came around to it, he'd give it to the Museum. In those days, there was only one Acquisitions Committee for the entire Museum. Today there is one for each department.

SZ: Can you think of any example?

EC: No, but he'll tell you when you talk to him. In that way the collection was built and I think that, not to the same extent as far as buying to give to the Museum, although he left all his pictures to the Museum, that...what's his name?

SZ: Soby.

EC: Jim Soby. He, of course, had money of his own, but he was the director of the Wadsworth Athenaeum.

SZ: In Hartford, Connecticut.

EC: Hartford. He left that job and came to be chairman of the Acquisitions Committee at [the Museum] because he so believed in what Alfred was doing and was so excited about it. He was chairman of that committee for many years, until he was too old and ill to function anymore.

SZ: You're saying he would do the same as Philip Johnson?

EC: Well, he had a great collection and he probably bought a lot of the pictures for himself, but he left his collection to the Museum. He was very influential; people trusted him very much. There was something very gentle about him and he never was antagonized or antagonistic. He was influential. If he really liked something very much he spoke for it very strongly. He was a great help to Alfred in this way. He influenced the trustees enormously, I think.

SZ: But, what you're saying is that there were certain works or certain movements that the trustees....

EC: Even the trustees couldn't take, although the trustees were the founders and had the idea of having such a museum, Alfred had a very advanced taste even for them, for a great many of them. Finally, they formed a subcommittee called the Committee on Masterworks to decide which pictures [in the collection] could not be sold, because Alfred was so eager to buy some very contemporary things at times that he might have wanted to sell things that some of the trustees felt should never be sold. So there was a subcommittee for masterworks and they picked out the pictures that they said should never be sold. There was that much division between people, but how could there be anything else? It was a very controversial subject. It still is, for that matter, as anything contemporary is bound to be. Not everybody sees it at the same time in the same way.

SZ: Wasn't there also a similar division in the very early days--I think the Advisory Committee was supposed to have taken a position that, well, a truly modern museum shouldn't perhaps have a permanent collection?

EC: Well, it was always discussed because it was always a question of whether we could afford it or not. If we couldn't, or we couldn't afford the space, well, then we would just perhaps give exhibitions; but I think they always wanted to be a museum and have a

collection.

SZ: So, you mean it was a financial consideration, not an ideological one?

EC: I think so, yes. That you could check with other people, but that would be my impression.

SZ: Well, it's your memory that....

EC: And, you see, when my aunt's collection, as I told you, I think, was left on the condition that they had an endowment fund within three years of her death, and my father, as her executor, put the endowment fund at $1,000,000, we couldn't raise it--we raised $600,000--but he gave it to them anyway, and that is what made it a museum. From then on it was a museum, it had a collection.

SZ: Do you think that Alfred Barr would have been much more disposed to moving pictures around according to his changing taste or whatever, that there were things that he would....

EC: Well, I think that he was always tremendously interested in Matisse, Picasso--that period and those two artists. I don't think, for instance, that he was nearly as enthusiastic about the American Abstract Expressionists. He thought that they were good painters and that they were important painters and that they should be bought by the Museum, but I don't think he had the same enthusiasm, the same excitement; [however], they didn't exist when he was founding the Museum. I think Dorothy Miller did more for the American Abstract Expressionists than anybody else with what came to be called the "Dorothy Miller shows." Every other year there was an exhibition. She went all over the country and collected those pictures. I think she made those artists, and then we bought them, the Museum bought them. Alfred thought that we should

buy them, but I don't think he had the same feeling that he had about buying Picasso and Matisse.

SZ: The Committee on Masterworks that was established was established essentially to protect certain....

EC: Yes, because if Alfred wanted to buy something very much sometimes the only way to do it was to sell something, and so there was always tremendous discussion about what to sell; so, finally, they did give this subcommittee the power to say what could never be sold. One reason for that was that we were afraid people wouldn't leave us pictures if they thought we were going to sell them, and so we only accepted pictures that we could sell unless we were willing not to sell that picture. It had to be a decision.

SZ: Which the donor would stipulate?

EC: If the donor said, "I'll leave you this picture if you'll promise never to sell it," we would either promise or we wouldn't, but it would be discussed.

SZ: What were those discussions like?

EC: Well, I don't know. I mean, they would vary a great deal, but it was a question of whether we wanted to say we'd never sell that picture, because we knew we couldn't buy more pictures except by selling pictures [from the collection].

SZ: Did the trustees have a lot of say over what exhibitions were shown or was that something that....

EC: I think that was left to Alfred.

SZ: It was?

EC: I think that still is left to the staff. I don't think the trustees interfered with that at all. The trustees really put up money and pictures and deferred to Alfred for a lot of decisions and policy.

SZ: I want to talk about him in a minute. After your aunt died, there was a some sort of memorial for her. I think it was an exhibition of her pictures, and then there was some sort of a service or program.

EC: Well, there was a memorial service in her apartment right after she died. It was a funeral--it was called a funeral in those days--but it was in her apartment.

SZ: Was there something else at the Museum?

EC: I don't remember. Isn't that funny, I don't remember. I know her pictures were exhibited by the Museum and that was a kind of a memorial, but I don't remember a ceremony.

SZ: Was it at her funeral in her home that Mrs. Belmont spoke?

EC: No, you're right. I think she probably spoke at the Museum. You're right, because I remember that I was on the stage and she brought me out in some way, but I can't remember what it was; but I do remember being in back of her when she was talking, so there must have been some kind of a memorial service. That must be in the records.

SZ: Yes. I was just wondering if there was anything that you had remembered about it....

EC: It's funny that I don't remember it, but I do remember, now that you say that, that Mrs. [August] Belmont made a speech, and so I suppose somebody else must have made a speech too.

SZ: She was a good friend of your aunt?

EC: She was a very good friend of my aunt, yes.

SZ: Well, from what I found, she spoke, Mr. Goodyear [A. Conger Goodyear] spoke, and Madame Stokowski spoke.

EC: She [Mme Stokowski] played the piano.... She was a pianist and a piano teacher. She had been married to [Leopold] Stokowski. Her name was Olga Samaroff and she had an accident--she fell over her suitcase [while] visiting somebody for the weekend and broke her wrist and had to give up being a concert pianist. So she went into teaching and she was a great friend of my aunt, Lillie Bliss, and she did play at the funeral in her house, too, that's why I remember that.

SZ: Now, we talked about the famous murals exhibition.

EC: Yes. Well, of course that's what caused us to get out of the Heckscher Building. It was such a popular show that the Heckscher Building objected to the crowds in the elevators and asked us to leave. Then Mr. Rockefeller came through and gave, for the sake of his wife, a house on the property where we now are. It was just a big, enormous private house and we moved into that.

SZ: You told me last time, and you were going to tell me a little bit about how you arranged [the party for the opening of the Museum]. That was in 1932, according to my records.

EC: That was in 1932, or whenever, and we [the Museum] didn't have the kind of staff we have now that has a whole department for development and special events and parties. There was nobody really to do it, and they decided that I was a debutante and I was the social member of the group, so I should put on the party. So I hired a secretary from the Colony Club and went out and had some invitations printed. Of course, I had some help from the staff and various people, whoever was there, on who should be asked. I didn't decide all that, but I did do all the secretarial work, you might say, of the whole thing. At the next meeting of the Junior Advisory Committee, one of the staff members, Alan Blackburn, came up with an accounting of how much money I had spent--the Museum was paying for it--and how much money should have been spent and could have been spent, which was about half [of what had been spent], and I felt pretty small. I went home and wrote a check to the Museum for the half too much that I had spent and sent it to Mrs. Rockefeller, who was the Treasurer [of the Museum]. I always thought it was a nice thing to remember about Mrs. Rockefeller--she turned my check in to the Museum, which gave me credit for a contribution, and then she sent me a personal check of her own for the same amount of money and said, "I don't see any reason why you should be expected to know how to put on a cheap party." [LAUGHTER] I think that's a rather nice story about her. She took care of everybody. Everybody adored her and she was into everything.

SZ: Can you tell me a little bit more about her, just about her character?

EC: Well, I didn't really know her that well. I know that she was a great friend of my aunt's and she was very interested in modern art, although she said to my aunt, when they founded the Museum together, "I won't be able to give you a lot of money. I can only give you my moral support and the name, because when I married John I gave all my money to my husband and my husband doesn't like modern art and he won't give me money to buy it." She was nevertheless a very strong moral support. She was interested in every detail, and even when she more or less retired and wasn't around

all the time, everybody called her up all the time and everybody wanted to know what she thought about everything before they did anything. And, of course, Nelson came in very strongly, I told you that.

SZ: Now, the party that you put together--do you remember anything about it, what it was like, who was there?

EC: No, I don't remember a thing about it except it opened the new building and we had all the pictures that we had--of course, there were Lillie Bliss's pictures, and then I suppose there were other pictures. There must be a record of what was shown.

SZ: Yes.

EC: I don't remember anything except that we had a big party and we moved into this place [11 West 53 Street].

SZ: And that wonderful story you just told me.

EC: And there we were, you know. We had a wonderful house but it was quite different from being in the Heckscher Building. If it hadn't been for the controversial Junior Advisory Committee, we might have stayed in the Heckscher Building much longer and Mr. Rockefeller might not have given us that house, at least not at that time. I remember that Nelson took a very strong position about that exhibition--I think I told you that last time--and said that the whole committee had to be responsible for it. Just because they had delegated Lincoln to do it didn't mean that Lincoln had to take all the responsibility. We had put on that show and we were responsible for it as a committee and that caused quite a number of people to resign from the committee, so what was left was pretty much in line with what everybody else wanted to do.

SZ: Did the committee stay a much smaller body from then on?

EC: No, it increased in size and took more people on as time went on, but finally it was disbanded. It was always said that the trustees got tired of the criticisms [made by the committee] and thought they were getting too strenuous but by that time so many of the people that were on it had gotten themselves into other positions in the Museum that it wasn't the loss that it could have been.

SZ: You mean, for instance, Mr. Johnson, Philip Johnson?

EC: Well, he was on the staff from the beginning. He didn't take any pay but he was on the staff from the beginning. I suppose he came to those meetings, but he didn't get into the Museum by the Junior Advisory Committee. He came into the Museum because he had met Alfred Barr at his sister's graduation at Vassar and Alfred said to him, "I have this wonderful job offered to me and I'm going to take it. Why don't you come and do it with me?" Philip, at that time, was studying to be a pianist and the story is--I don't know whether it's true or not, you'll have to check that with Philip--but the story I've always heard was that Alfred said, "You come and do it with me," and he told him what kind of a museum he wanted and he wanted, [with] these different departments, and he said, "You could be the head of the architecture and design department." Philip said, "The only trouble is I don't know anything about architecture," and Alfred said, "That's alright, I do." [LAUGHING] I hope that story is true.

SZ: And that's how it went, isn't it? [LAUGHING]

EC: And that's how it went. He [Philip Johnson] came and he didn't take a salary, but in a sense I think they budgeted his salary because they had to know what the Museum was going to cost to run, but they didn't pay it to him so in a sense he gave it.

SZ: Now, going back, there was Alfred Barr, there was Jere Abbott.

EC: And Philip Johnson.

SZ: Right. There was Mr. Goodyear.

EC: Well, he was president. He was not on the staff.

SZ: No, but I'm just thinking of the original core.

EC: He had been president of the Buffalo Museum, which is now the Albright-Knox [Art] Gallery, and he was very controversial as president because he was so advanced in his taste. He was too advanced in his taste, in those days, for Buffalo, although Buffalo is now, I believe, second to [the Museum] for its advanced art. However, he was a controversial figure and he was considered too advanced, and he got divorced and everybody in Buffalo really was on the side of his wife and upset by the divorce, so he left and came to New York. He only knew three people in New York: one was Katherine Cornell, whom he'd been in love with, and one was Mrs. Snow...what was her first name? She's very famous. You could find her first name if it doesn't come to me. She ran Harper's Bazaar. There was a third. I don't know who the third was. Anyway, they were all women and they were the only people he knew in New York, and so he had a rather small, lonely life. And then one day the telephone rang and it was Mrs. Rockefeller asking him to come and see her because she wanted to talk to him about The Museum of Modern Art, which she was founding. He always used to tell the story that he went out and bought himself a new suit and he always referred to it for the rest of his life as "my Rockefeller suit." He went and called on Mrs. Rockefeller and she asked him if he would be president because the three ladies thought they should have a man for president. Rather different from what they might think today. [LAUGHING] And so that's how he became president and of course it

changed his life in New York a great deal.

SZ: You mean he knew more than three people.

EC: Well, he began to know a great many more than three people and he married my mother after my father died.

SZ: So you knew him well.

EC: Yes. I'm not going to burst into any eulogies of love, but I knew him well. [LAUGHING]

SZ: Well, in terms of the Museum, what do you think his impact was?

EC: Well, he was president for ten years. I think by the time he ceased to be president they wanted him to go. He had difficulty getting along with people, that was a problem in his life, and I think they wanted him to go. I think by that time he was getting older and people of Nelson's age were coming up. They wanted Nelson. Nelson succeeded him, you see, and I think the older people like Mrs. Rockefeller...of course, she was his [Nelson's] mother, but I think everybody felt the time had come for a change.

SZ: But in the early years, one thing that's said is that he and Alfred Barr rarely saw eye to eye.

EC: I don't know so much about that. I think that he admired Alfred. I know he gave a very handsome Matisse painting to the Museum in honor of Alfred Barr and I think they must have gotten on a good deal of the time but what they argued about I wouldn't know. It may be because Nelson's point of view always was....

SZ: Not Nelson. I was thinking of....

EC: No, but I was diverting, saying Nelson's point of view always was, somebody would say, well, we ought to put on this show but we haven't got enough money, and Nelson would say, "Well, we'll put it on anyway. Let's decide to put it on anyway, we'll get the money." I think possibly Conger Goodyear was more conservative than that and would say to Alfred, "You can't do this because there isn't any money." I don't know, I'm just guessing, but I don't think that he disagreed with his taste, although his own collection had already been pretty much made before he left Buffalo. He had a very fine collection that every museum in the country wanted. He was angry with [the Museum] and didn't leave it to us, and I think that, well, I think he got his feelings hurt after he left. They didn't pay enough attention to him or something. Perhaps he didn't really want to resign. I don't know, but there might be people who do know. Of course, so many people have died. Alfred would have been the person to know, and Marga [Margaret Scolari Barr], his wife, would have been somebody that would have known. I don't know that there's anybody around now that would know just what went on between them. Philip might know.

SZ: Was he a good fundraiser, Mr. Goodyear, for the Museum?

EC: I couldn't say. I don't know who raised the funds. We really didn't raise very many funds. I think the trustees supported the Museum for a long, long time. There was Philip Goodwin and Mrs. David Levy, and then, of course, Stephen Clark was there for a while. He didn't get on very well and didn't stay very long and didn't really like modern art. I don't know who raised the funds. I think Nelson probably raised more than anybody else and gave a lot.

SZ: In those early years, did the Museum take up a lot of your time and your energy?

EC: Well, in the early years of the Junior Advisory Committee we were awfully excited. We loved it. We were all of us very thrilled about it. We met a lot. We'd meet for hours and have very heated discussions, and it was education for me. There were an awful lot of artists that I'd never heard of that I learned about from people like Lincoln and people who were always in that world. Then I got married and moved to the country and had children, so I was out of it for a while.

SZ: What year was it that you got married?

EC: I married in '32. I came back into the Museum...I was always in the Museum, I was never out of it, but I wasn't as active as I had been, and the Junior Advisory Committee wasn't as active and it was finally disbanded. Then I became a trustee. I can't remember just what the date was, but it was during the [Second World] War and I used to go to the trustee meetings. I was working in the Red Cross and I don't think I was very active [in the Museum]. It was after the war, after René d'Harnoncourt became director, which was in 1949, that I became more active. He knew how to use his trustees more than Alfred had. Alfred was intent on what he himself was doing in the way of buying pictures and deciding about exhibitions. He wasn't really gifted with people the way René was and René found what people could do and put them there to do it and backed them up, and I became much more active from then on. Nevertheless, Alfred was very good with people from whom he could get pictures, and/or large sums of money. Mrs. [Simon] Guggenheim is the prime example of this.

SZ: Well, going back to `32, the year you got married, I think also Alfred took an extended vacation, that he had had some sort of a...I don't know if breakdown is the proper word.

EC: I don't remember what year that was, but I remember that he was sent away on a cruise trip because he couldn't sleep, that was what we were told, and he came back

after three or four months and said could he have two more weeks because he still couldn't sleep. I don't remember just when that was.

SZ: Thirty-two is the year I have, but you do remember that?

EC: But then Alfred, of course, didn't get along at all with Stephen Clark, and it was Stephen Clark whom Alfred considered fired him. Alfred never got over that, and to Marga's dying day, which was only a few months ago, she never stopped talking about that. I don't think Alfred was ever really fired, but he was told that he couldn't be the director. The thing was that Alfred had this genius for knowledge about painting. He wasn't an administrator and the Museum was getting bigger and bigger and bigger. There were more and more people to handle. He couldn't do it, but he didn't ever face that and understand that. So, anyway, he was fired as the director, [yet] he was writing a book and he came every day to the Museum and continued to write a book. It was a curious situation. René came in very soon after that, you see, and he took the position that Alfred was Mr. Museum of Modern Art. He said he would only take the position [of director] if he could have Alfred back and put him in charge of the collections, which was obviously what Alfred should be in charge off, all the collections. Today, there's a separate person in charge of each collection, but in Alfred's day he was in charge of all of the collections and there was only one Acquisitions Committee; it was under Alfred and Jim Soby and it covered everything. So Nelson said to [René], "Well, of course, if you're going to be director of the Museum you can hire anybody you want to do anything you like, but if you want to bring Alfred back into the picture, you're going to have to stand between him and us because we've had it." So René brought him back into the picture and he gave everybody the title of director rather than curator so that he himself would not have a higher title than Alfred, and Alfred was in charge of all the collections. It was almost the most important job in the Museum. The director of the Museum, and then the director of the collections.

SZ: But what Alfred had been up until that time was both of those things?

EC: Yes. But Alfred didn't know how lucky he was to be able to get rid of that job and put his mind on what he really wanted to do. He never understood it.

SZ: And neither did Marga, you're saying?

EC: And neither did his wife. They always felt very resentful about it. We had a sixtieth birthday party, I think it was, for René, and Alfred was asked to make a speech, which, of course, he did. I sat next to him at dinner one night before the party and he was talking to me about it because he was trying to write a speech and he wanted to talk about René, and he said, "You know, I owe my whole career to this man and I wish I could be nice to him." He was a very complicated man. When René died, he wrote to Sarah [d'Harnoncourt's wife] and said that he thought that René was really a very great man and he had loved him and he wished and hoped that René knew that, but he made things so difficult for him. René used to tell me that sometimes before he had to have a meeting with him about something he'd lie in a lukewarm bath for half an hour and get himself in a calmed-down state. [LAUGHING]

SZ: He was a complicated man.

EC: He was complicated, but most geniuses are, and René had a great gift for handling those people. Actually, it was Alfred who introduced René to Nelson, and that's how the whole thing worked out.

SZ: And wasn't there a reason, some exhibition that....

EC: Well, René put on an exhibition of Indian art--I think that was in 1937, because he was working in the Indian Bureau. He'd been in Mexico and had become a professional

man on primitive art, and so then he founded the [Museum of Primitive Art] with Nelson. He made Nelson's original collection.

END TAPE 3, SIDE 1

BEGIN TAPE 3, SIDE 2

EC: There was something I was going to say that's gone out of my head, before we got to talking about the [Museum of Primitive Art] and [Nelson's] collection.

SZ: We were talking about [Alfred Barr] being complicated and a genius.

EC: And a genius, and all those people being difficult in that way, and René had this great gift for understanding that and handling these people and creating an ambiance in which they could work, taking away from them the things that upset them and they couldn't do and giving them the things that they could do.

SZ: I guess what you're implying is that that was something that Alfred wasn't particularly good at doing. The Museum during the '30s kept expanding, the different departments kept coming into being, and I guess there was more and more staff being taken on....

EC: Yes, and it was too big an administration job.

SZ: Also, I'm asking how Alfred was with other difficult people or in difficult situations. Was he particularly diplomatic?

EC: Well, not always, I don't think, but any problems that they had within the staff I don't think I would have known about. I know that he was not an administrator and shouldn't have been. He had something else to do, and it's too bad he didn't understand that

and he so resented the idea that he wasn't the director.

SZ: You got married in 1932? You married....

EC: A man named John Parkinson and we lived in Westbury [Long Island], where my family had a place. My father gave me a house. Well, I wasn't very far away. My life was in New York, but still, I had babies, and then the war came and I moved out of the house and moved back to New York because my husband went into the Navy. I wasn't as active. During the war Stephen Clark was president. The trustees were very active. There was a very small group of trustees. Mrs. David Levy was the treasurer. She was wonderful. I remember we had a lot of pictures in a warehouse, a place like the Lincoln Warehouse. I don't know just which warehouse it was, but I remember we used to have meetings--we once had a dinner meeting--in the warehouse and looked at all the pictures that were there to see what we should do with them. I think that so much of the staff was removed by the war that the trustees perhaps were more active at that time, or at least this small group was, but I couldn't tell you just what they did, except that I do remember having a dinner party in a warehouse in order to look at the pictures we were keeping in the warehouse, and making a decision about what to do with them.

SZ: Back up a little. From the time you moved out to Westbury and had young children you say you were not very active [in the Museum].

EC: No. I went to meetings, but I wasn't as active as I became later on.

SZ: But do you remember anything about the project for building the new building and how any of that evolved? Was it a controversial move, decision, in the beginning?

EC: We were closed, you see, for a while. Philip built it, didn't he, the first new museum?

No, no, it was....

SZ: [Edward Durrell] Stone.

EC: Philip Goodwin.

SZ: Yes, right.

EC: And he brought in Stone because he said that a modern museum should have a contemporary architect and he [Philip Goodwin] was an older man. They did it together, but it was considered Stone's building, chiefly, and Philip [Johnson] did the garden. I remember that we were closed and we had some rooms in Rockefeller Center. We had exhibitions there while the Museum was being built.

SZ: Did you participate at all in any of the opening festivities for the building?

EC: Well, I must have, but I just don't remember. You know, over the years there have been so many parties in that museum that I can't really distinguish one from the other. [LAUGHTER]

SZ: We'll "x" that out of the transcript! [LAUGHING]

EC: And you can always get the list of who was there.

SZ: Oh, yes, I only asked that because if something particular happened that you might remember it might bring it out. Well, that may take care of the '30s, which is what I was hoping to talk about today.

EC: Well, now, let's just think. One of the most important things I remember about opening

the new building--it was opened just before I, for some reason, went to Europe--and I remember going to see the opening exhibition. With all the years that I'd been in the Museum, I had never seen all the pictures we owned, because there never had been room to hang them. I remember that it was really a great surprise to me. I just thought the collection was perfectly wonderful and the whole thing seemed worth all the work and effort, but it was a quite a surprise. We'd had so little room. We'd shown so few things together at one time that suddenly to see them all like that was extraordinary. It was Alfred's collection. Alfred had made it.

SZ: Do you remember your impression of the original building at all?

EC: Oh, we loved the building. We loved the building and that great entrance hall was beautiful, beautiful. It was too bad that we had to get bigger. We hated getting bigger, at least I did. I hated tearing parts of it and so forth, and the same thing now, but I think we've done very well, and the thing that I like the most about what this man [César Pelli] has done today is that he's made so much of the garden, he's taken the garden right into the building, and it is such a beautiful garden. The garden must have been built at the same time as the original building.

END TAPE 3, SIDE 2

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

INTERVIEW WITH: **ELIZABETH BLISS PARKINSON COBB (EC)**

INTERVIEWER: **SHARON ZANE (SZ)**

DATE: **NOVEMBER 21, 1988**

LOCATION: **215 EAST 72ND STREET, NEW YORK CITY**

BEGIN TAPE 4, SIDE 1

SZ: Mrs. Cobb, I thought we would start the interview today, if you wouldn't mind, by going out of sequence a little bit and talking about Monroe Wheeler. I did interview him, so I'm somewhat familiar with his life story, but, as I said to you before, the wonderful memorial service that was held at the Museum for him a few weeks ago really started me thinking that you must have some very clear and personal memories of him as a person and of some of the things that he did at the Museum. I thought that--I'll lead you through it a little bit--if you wouldn't mind, we could talk a little bit about him today before we get on to post- World War II. Tell me, can you remember the first time that you met Monroe, what the circumstances were, what your impressions were?

EC: No. It's strange, I don't remember that at all. I even am unable to tell you when he came to the Museum, although I know it was later than I thought. I think it was the early '40s, wasn't it?

SZ: No. Actually, it was in the '30s.

EC: In the '30s?

SZ: Yes.

EC: In the late '30s?

SZ: Yes. He came, and very soon after he arrived he started doing something in publications.

EC: Well, I think he came in as director of the publications department. I'm not positive about that, but you could certainly verify it. I think that was his original position in the Museum. Before he came, the Museum catalogues were a very different thing. They put out a catalogue as well as they could and as quickly as they could. First of all, we didn't have a very big staff, and whoever put on the show had a good deal to do besides write a book, so the catalogues were just catalogues, but Monroe really developed the art book. I don't think we ever had art books such as we have now; we call them "coffee table books," but they are art books. They simply didn't exist before the Museum began to put those books out and that took place under Monroe. He developed that, invented it, you could say. What the first book he put out was I don't know, but it would be interesting to find out.

SZ: Yes, I think I do know that, but that's not really what I'm trying to get at. I guess I want you to talk to me a little bit about Monroe, the kind of person he was, just from your having known him all those years. What you feel he contributed and just any little anecdotes you can recall.

EC: I don't think I'm going to be very helpful. He was a diplomat, as somebody said, he was a diplomat and a politician. He did a lot of things by talking to people all around and getting them all interested and then it would take place. He didn't, for instance, come to a meeting and say, "I want to do this." Everybody would be already prepared for it and he would have done enough groundwork so that if he thought it wasn't the

right moment and that it wasn't going to be a success, well, he'd drop it for a while. But he would finally get enough [funding] to do whatever he wanted to do, and so he gradually extended his activities from being just [director of] publications to being director of exhibitions, scheduling them, arbitrating about who would have the space and when, and then he put on shows himself--some very important shows. Of course, that big show we took to South America, that was Cézanne to Miró [1968], but the [J.M.W.] Turner show [Turner: Imagination and Reality, 1966] was entirely his doing. He brought over all those Turners from England.

SZ: Having a Turner exhibition was a real departure in [the Museum's] policy, and....

EC: Well, it was, and yet Turner being the kind of painter he was, it was so very appropriate, but it just never had happened. We'd been so concentrated on the French from the period of particularly Matisse and Picasso, Braque.

SZ: So he didn't have a major uphill battle in having the idea of Turner accepted at the Museum?

EC: Oh, I don't think so. I don't really know even whether it was his idea, but I know that he did do the show. He chose the pictures, installed them. He was into everything and you couldn't always say just what he did because he was into everything, and a lot of people would come and do things with him, or because he had thought of it he'd get a lot of people going doing things. He did things in that way. It makes it hard to say just what he did, if you see what I mean. I don't really know just what he did. I know that he was pretty much involved with everything, that he knew everything about the Museum. He was very, very close to Mrs. Rockefeller, Abby Rockefeller, and he reported everything to her and talked to her when he didn't see her, talked to her on the telephone. She was very dependent on him. After she became older and not quite so active, she had a very direct line into the Museum through him. He was very

fond of her and that was a very close relationship that probably helped them both very much.

SZ: Was he popular among other trustees?

EC: Oh, I think he was. He was much the most social of the trustees. I mean, Alfred Barr was a total intellectual, René d'Harnoncourt really didn't like a lot of social life, going out to dinner parties and things of that sort. He was deaf and it was very tiring for him and he had an awful lot on him because it was a small museum and he ran the whole place, so it was nice that Monroe was so sociable and loved to go to dinner parties and loved to have cocktail parties and meet people. He was the easy staff member for the trustees to really have a relationship with.

SZ: Because he could really have a conversation?

EC: On any level. He loved people and he loved social life, so that I think he was very popular with all the trustees. I think perhaps he was more popular with the trustees than he was with the staff. I think the staff sometimes were critical of him for being too social, and I think everybody's ambitions sometimes got a little bit tangled, you know. And I think that as he got older and got off the staff and became a trustee emeritus and a counselor to the trustees, he became very, very popular with the staff, particularly with the young, newer staff. I think he was a great help to people who came in later on and hadn't had the background of the old museum, the original museum.

SZ: He had all that history inside him.

EC: He had all that history at his fingertips and I think he was a great help to them, and very kind to them, and took a great interest in every single department of the Museum.

I don't think there was anything--he may not have been interested in the education department, but I think he was interested in everything else. He sat on practically every committee. After he was not a staff member he was on practically every committee and he once told me that he went through the galleries every single day. He wouldn't go through all of the galleries every day but he would go through a gallery every single day, so he kept himself terribly familiar with everything that was in the Museum that was on exhibition. I don't know that I can add very much to that. You could get the picture, I hope.

SZ: Oh, absolutely.

EC: He was in everything and he knew everything. You could ask him and he could tell you.

SZ: I guess Mrs. [Donald B.] Straus--I got the feeling from listening to her comments that she had a lot of affection for him and was close to him.

EC: Yes, very, and of course she came in and she was a later trustee. He helped people tremendously who came into the Museum later. He helped them get to know everybody else. He took them around. He went places with them, went to parties with them and invited them to his house with people.

SZ: It sounds like he was really an integral part of the workings of....

EC: Oh, very much so, very much so.

SZ: Has he been replaced by anybody? I mean is there anybody there now who serves that kind of....

EC: Well, now his job is split of course. There's one man who's head of the publications department and there's another man who's head of the exhibitions department.

SZ: Oh, yes, but I meant more just in his function even outside of his actual staff position.

EC: I think Dick Oldenburg has taken over beautifully in making good relationships with trustees and in representing the Museum to outside people. He is extremely sensitive [and] thoughtful with the trustees. There are certainly some trustees who are very close to some staff people, but it's apt to be because they're interested in that particular discipline and on that committee, and so become very close to two or three people. Somebody like Robert Tobin lends his house in Santa Fe to two or three of the staff members that he's close to. Gifford Phillips has them come down to visit him in his house in Santa Fe. But I wouldn't say that there's anybody who is a roving ambassador amongst all the trustees, which is what [Monroe Wheeler] really was.

SZ: Before we move to the International Council, which was the first large activity that you undertook after the [Second World] War, tell me just a little bit about how you spent the war years, how your family spent the war years.

EC: Well, my then husband went into the Navy very, very early, in 1939.

SZ: And his name was?

EC: His name was John Parkinson. We were living in a house that my father gave me on his place in Westbury, Long Island, but I didn't want to live there alone, in the country, so when he went into the Navy in 1939, the autumn of '39, I rented an apartment in New York and put my son, who was then ready for first grade, in school in New York. We stayed in New York except for weekends and the summer, and actually never went back to living in the winter time in a house in the country. I was less active in the

Museum during the war than at any other time. Perhaps because I worked in the Red Cross in New York. I had a job there every day, and I went away with my children in the summer, but I did go to the trustee meetings. Of course, it was a very small group and we also had a very small building, so we had a lot of pictures in storage. I remember going to the Lincoln Warehouse--I think it was the Lincoln Warehouse--where we had stored some pictures. We had a trustee meeting which was a dinner party, served by a caterer, in the Lincoln Warehouse, and took a look at all the pictures we had there, just to make sure that everything was all right. Stephen Clark was the president at that time, and then for a short period Jim Soby was director. Stephen Clark and Alfred Barr didn't get along, and that was the period during which Alfred considered that he was fired. I don't really think he was fired, except as director of the Museum, but he wasn't given any official title until René d'Harnoncourt came in.

SZ: Which was after the war.

EC: That was after the war. That was 1949.

SZ: Right.

EC: Jim Soby took over temporarily. I don't think anybody got along very well with Stephen Clark, and I don't think Stephen Clark really liked modern art. I think he was much more somebody who belonged to the Metropolitan Museum, where he eventually ended up, and where his art eventually ended up. I think that Nelson was away. I don't know what had become of Conger Goodyear, why he was out. He was president for ten years, but that would have taken him only to '39, you see, and he was getting older of course. I wasn't very close to Stephen Clark, and I was working also in the Red Cross and my children were very young, so I really wasn't very active; but I did go to the trustee meetings every month. That's about all I can remember that I did.

SZ: When the war came to an end, your husband came home?

EC: Well, we got divorced right after the war. I stayed in New York, however, but I never became really active and deeply involved [in the Museum] again [until 1949]. I was as a member of the Junior Advisory Committee, [but] then I got married and had children and lived in the country and we had the war. I never became deeply involved again until René d'Harnoncourt came in 1949 and he was wonderful at using his trustees and knowing his trustees. He got to know them all. He'd go and call on them over weekends and sit down and talk to them for an hour or two. He knew what people could do and what they couldn't do and what they would like to do and what they were most interested in and who could work with whom, and he got everybody on the Board involved who wanted to be involved. I would say that I was not deeply involved until then, and then one thing grew out of another. The first thing I remember was that I was very anxious to have more education in the schools. I suppose partly because I had young children and I didn't think art was taught very well in the schools, and that's how Victor D'Amico came in [as director of the education department]. It was the Junior Advisory Committee, nevertheless, that put that in. I'm not sure what the date was, whether it was after the war. The Junior Advisory Committee was still in existence and I was still on it. For a while I was chairman of it after I was married. I remember that Alfred Barr was against [the establishment of the educational program] because it was one more thing to cope with and we had such a small staff and he was so pressed, and he really was much more interested in buying and exhibiting pictures than he was in educating school children, which is natural enough. I remember that the Junior Advisory Committee raised the money to hire somebody and have a trial program of teaching art in the schools. For some reason I can remember very distinctly that I interviewed Victor D'Amico, and the first funds came from the [Junior] Advisory Committee.

SZ: Tell me a little bit about Victor D'Amico.

EC: Well, Victor D'Amico had been a teacher at the Fieldston School and he was considered a very good teacher. Bill Rubin studied under him, and that's one of the things that Bill Rubin always mentions, that [Victor] helped him so much. I don't know just where he came from originally. It was an Italian name, Victor D'Amico, but I never knew him except here in New York. I think he came from a background of no money but tremendous interest in this and somehow got a good education. He developed something quite different from what we had expected. First of all, we had expected that the private schools would be very interested and they weren't, and so we concentrated on the public schools and they were very interested. What he did was to develop all these materials that he sent to the teachers to use for teaching, like reproductions, but then he also developed things for the children to do to make things. He developed these wonderful boxes full of different kinds of materials, beads and strings and different colored things for children to make things with. Then he developed that thing that became very famous called the "Children's Art Carnival," which Mrs. Jack Kennedy eventually presented to the Government of India and which we had in the garden every Christmas; there was always a sign saying, "Adults permitted if accompanied by a child" and on the sculpture and things inside there were always little signs saying, "Please touch me" instead of "Do not touch." Then, if the children got fascinated, there was a room as they went out where there were all these materials--easels, paints, beads, whatever--and they could stay and make things. There was somebody there to supervise them and the children used to come over a period of weeks, Christmas time, and stay all day. Then [Victor] did an awful lot for the teachers, because the real problem was that the teachers themselves didn't have the background to teach the history of art, or any kind of art, so he developed a club for the teachers [the Committee on Art Education]. It was a national club and he provided them with materials to help them teach, things that they could read and things that they could look at--reproductions of pictures that they'd never have a chance to see, because maybe [the pictures] weren't even in museums in this country. All these

teachers belonged to it from all over the country, eventually, and they had an annual seminar meeting every year. They came to New York for three or four days--I suppose money was raised for this--and we'd entertain them. We'd all have them to dinner and he would see that they got to artists' studios and saw all kinds of exhibitions that they wouldn't have seen, particularly if they came from California or Minnesota. They wouldn't be apt to get to New York and see exhibitions and most of the exhibitions didn't travel around in those days the way they do now, and this was a terribly important thing. I don't think it exists anymore. I think since Victor left the Museum it sort of dissolved.

SZ: Can you continue the story? Obviously, it really fulfilled your original desire.

EC: Well, much more so, I mean it developed, he developed something we didn't even expect. Then he had classes in the Museum for parents and children. They got so big that we had to stop them--the elevators couldn't cope with [all the people who attended] them--but that was after a long time. It was all [Victor D'Amico's] idea. It eventually...it very quickly became so important that the Museum had to absorb it into its budget. I don't think the [Junior] Advisory Committee could pay for it for very long.

SZ: You say that Alfred Barr was not really enthusiastic about this when it started. How did he deal with it once it....

EC: Well, I don't think he ever took a very great interest in it, but he didn't have to. Victor ran it on his own and then when René came in; René was the director of the Museum anyway, so it didn't matter. Alfred wasn't expected to do anything except as director of Museum collections. He was director of all the collections. Now we have a director of each collection, but Alfred was the director of all the collections. We only had one Acquisitions Committee which bought for every discipline--drawings, prints, architecture and design, as well as painting and sculpture--and Alfred was the director

of that. He had a director for each one under him, but René set that.

SZ: Now, did Victor D'Amico leave under any particular circumstance?

EC: No, I think he came to retirement age and what he was doing was still the parents and children. We had to stop it. The Museum was getting so crowded and so big it became impossible.... He continued to work for the rest of his life. The Museum gave him that barge he had down at Long Island. I think the Museum bought the barge and he used it in the summer while he was still in the Museum. When he retired, we gave it to him and he continued to work there in the summers. I think that a lot of those teachers that had been in our club used to come there in the summers.

SZ: And work with him?

EC: And work with him.

SZ: Where was this in Long Island?

EC: Well, it was somewhere near Montauk Point. He moved and lived in Montauk Point and he had this barge which he fixed up as a great big workshop studio. I don't know what's become of it now but I think he kept it going as long as he was able to. I think maybe the last couple of years of his life he was beginning to get a little...you knew he was getting old, and I think he may have had to stop working quite so hard but I think he kept up doing something.

SZ: He was dedicated.

EC: He was very, very dedicated to his work and he obviously influenced a great many people and a great many artists and art historians like Bill Rubin.

SZ: How did you feel when he left and the program just disintegrated?

EC: Well, I didn't feel badly because I felt that the program was no longer suitable to the times. The times had changed too much. The schools had changed. The Museum had changed. We couldn't cope with it anymore. First it was taken over by June Larkin and now it's being run...by David Rockefeller, Jr., who is terribly interested in it. They're doing a lot of the same things that Victor did, but they're doing them slightly differently. They worked out the problems of not enough space and so forth. There's a director whose name won't come to me now, but you could find it very easily.

SZ: The present director of the education department?

EC: Of education.

SZ: Philip Yenawine.

EC: That's it, yes, and he and David Rockefeller, Jr., I think, are working together very well and they have a very good committee. I'm not on it because I didn't really want to go on with it. I was on it for as long as June Larkin was chairman, and then when she said she was going to resign and David was going to take it over, I said, "Well, I don't want to resign the minute David takes it over, it'll look as if I didn't want to work under him, and it isn't that. I just really don't want to go on with this." So, I don't know too much about it now, but I know that it exists and that it's doing a good job. David Rockefeller, Jr., made a report at the annual meeting and it was an excellent report. I would say we're doing a good job.

SZ: They're doing a lot of exciting things.

EC: Primarily in the schools but we do have people who come to the Museum. Of course, we now have a whole education department wing in the old Whitney Museum and June Larkin, who has the Noble Foundation behind her, gave a lot of money to that. I think they have lots of classes and courses and people meet there and go out on trips to look at things. There's a great deal going on there, but I'm not able to tell you just what it is.

SZ: Okay, let's go back to, well, 1949, when René came in, because that was really the beginning of, obviously, great growth for the Museum and a lot of change. What were some of his personality characteristics that allowed him to really take charge and have the Museum move in this kind of direction?

EC: Well, as I've already said, he first of all got to know everybody very well, not only getting to know them as friends but getting to know what their interests and their capacities were, so he organized all the committees in a very constructive way. My first job under him was with Mrs. Walter Hochschild, running Victor D'Amico's department; I think we were co-chairmen of the education committee and worked particularly on that. René developed that and gave Victor much more scope than he had before, and, I don't know, one thing led to another. He put people on committees because they wanted to be on them and they were interested. He got the whole board to be very cohesive and working together. Of course, Nelson Rockefeller then was president and was very close to René, very attached to him, great friends. They understood each other, had the same excitements and enthusiasms. René had made Nelson's original collection, which became the first [Museum of Primitive Art], so they worked together awfully well, and that, I think, made a great difference. I think a director and a president being close and having the same ideas for a place makes a great deal of difference.

SZ: What happened with Alfred Barr when René came in? I guess this was the first time

since Alfred's position had changed that there was finally a director.

EC: Well, René did, of course, the most wonderful thing for Alfred. Alfred...had no position. He was there, but he had no position, and he had been the director of the Museum. René called everybody director. Instead of Alfred being Director of Museum Collections and then you'd have a curator for architecture and design, you also had a director for architecture and design. René said he did not want to have a title that was any higher than Alfred's. That was the kind of a man he was. I think he wasn't willing either to take any salary any higher than Alfred's, so Alfred had the number two position and it was a very, very powerful position. He was the director of the collections and every director of every discipline was under him. There was only one Acquisitions Committee, of which Jim Soby was chairman. Philip Johnson was very active on it, and he and Jim Soby and Alfred were a very close trio. When Alfred wanted a picture that the committee thought was a little bit too far out and didn't want to spend the money on, Philip would buy it and keep it until the committee came around to it and then give it to the Museum, so that, thanks to Philip, Alfred got a lot of pictures he wanted that he might not otherwise have gotten. And, thanks to René, he had an absolutely top position in the Museum and he had no reason to feel that he hadn't been well treated. I don't think he did feel that way, but, like so many very gifted people, he was complicated. He always resented that he wasn't director of the Museum, although he had the position that was suited to him. He wasn't meant to be an administrator; he was meant to buy pictures.

SZ: I had read somewhere that Barr himself felt that he was not nice to René.

EC: He made life as difficult for René as he could. He tried to obstruct everything René tried to do, and he divided the Museum, he polarized the Museum. There was Alfred's group that was always against everybody, and there was René's group.

SZ: Who was in Alfred's group? Can you remember?

EC: Well, that I couldn't tell you, because it would change, but Dorothy Miller, of course, and Betsy whatever-her-name-was, who was in that department. Betsy, Betsy, Betsy...well, you can find out [Betsy Jones]. She was there for a long time and then she went to Smith College. It would vary. We had a lot of different directors of [the Department of] Painting and Sculpture, for instance. There was Bill Seitz. There was the German man, Peter Selz. There was the man who went to Yale and took over Yale, Andrew Ritchie. We had a series of people, and, you know, some of them would be in one camp and some of them would be in another. They didn't all stay forever, so it would be hard to tell you that. I can only say that Alfred did polarize the Museum. He did make life difficult for René. He did it on purpose. On the other hand, when René died, [Alfred] wrote to Sarah, "I believe that he was a truly great man and I loved him and I wish that he had known it." And, at the time of a birthday party for René when he became sixty--we gave him a surprise birthday party. René was so loved by all the staff, even by the elevator men and the women who washed up the latrines, that we had to hire a temporary staff for the evening so that they could all come to the party. Amongst other people, Alfred, of course, was asked to make a speech and he was terribly nervous about this speech. He spent three days in his pajamas at home, without going to work, struggling with the typewriter, and Marga, his wife, was very angry with me, because she said, "I hope you will never ask Alfred to do anything as difficult as this again." [LAUGHING] But, anyway, during the course of this I sat next to Alfred somewhere and he said to me, "This man," meaning René, "made my career" (because he had reinstated him in such a way), "and I wish I could be nice to him." Now, those two things are things that I actually know were said and written. So you can see how complicated it was and how very difficult it would be to really describe it to you.

SZ: Was René the kind of person who would let that get him down?

EC: It used to tire him very much. He felt that he had to cope with it and handle it, but he was a very big person and he was a very understanding person--he should have been either a psychiatrist or a priest--and he understood what made Alfred that way. He never held it against him in any way at all. He just tried to cope with it. I remember another time, we were talking about people not being nice to other people, René and I, and he said something to the effect that this didn't mean that so-and-so didn't like so-and-so. He said, "Well, look at the way Alfred treats me, but I know Alfred loves me." He was a man who understood things like that. Very few people do. He was way, head and shoulders, big as compared to almost anybody I ever knew.

SZ: And he was big, too, right?

EC: He was big, too. [LAUGHTER]

SZ: Very tall.

EC: Very tall. Nobody else could have handled it the way he did. Well, he was director for nineteen years and a lot of things went on.

SZ: And he was popular, is that correct?

EC: Oh, yes. Everybody loved him and everybody admired him, and of course Alfred was jealous of him for just that one reason, that the Museum was his particular thing and he wanted it always to be his and it got bigger and bigger and bigger and it couldn't just be his. René never interfered with him as far as his purchases and what he did for the collections was concerned, never interfered with him. In fact, he often didn't come to the Acquisitions Committee meetings because he didn't want Alfred to feel that he was in his way in any way. We finally had to draft him and make him come, because

Alfred would get into such arguments with some of his other directors about whether they should buy this or not and why, that we had to have René there to keep the peace. René didn't have to do anything. He used to always doodle. He just sat there and doodled, but it was like having a benign policeman in the room; he would somehow keep them all from getting quite so angry. [LAUGHING]

SZ: Did he get on well with the trustees?

EC: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. He was a truly wonderful director of the Museum and everybody knew it. We couldn't have done what we did if we hadn't had him when we had him.

SZ: What do you think his greatest accomplishment was at the Museum?

EC: I think he really brought it together into an institution that was not just divided into factions and small groups vying for this and vying for that. He made it into one institution. He brought everybody together. He was terribly proud of it. He gave everybody else the sense of pride in it and what a really great place it was. He recognized talent and who the people were that were the most helpful and the most talented. I think the artists admired him very, very much.

END TAPE 4, SIDE 1

BEGIN TAPE 4, SIDE 2

SZ: I thought today before we get too tired or whatever maybe we could talk about the genesis of the International Council. That was something, as I understand it, that René felt strongly about. He really began it, is that correct?

EC: It should be fairly stated...it should be somewhere written down that the Rockefeller

Brothers Fund had the idea that we were not properly presented in the visual arts in Europe and that it was a mistake, during what they called the Cold War, that in Europe they said we had nothing in this country except Cadillacs and bubble gum, that we didn't have any culture. There were only three paintings by Americans in museums in Europe. One was in London and I think one may have been in France [and] one may have been in Switzerland. I think one was a Whistler; I'm not sure who the other two were by. One may have been a Sargent--they were that ilk. There was nothing, for instance, from the Hudson River School or anything that showed that we did have a culture. Then the Venice Biennale, of course, took place and there was a United States pavilion, but I don't know whether it was owned or just given out by the government. I don't know. I think it was owned. Anyway, the Grand Central Art Galleries put on the American exhibition in the American pavilion at Venice, and they were not a gallery that was up to that standard and they shouldn't have been the people to do it. The government at that time did nothing for the arts in this country. No money was ever given to a museum by the government. I think that, well, the Metropolitan Museum was free of taxes and was part of the city in that way, but there was nothing like what's done now. The Rockefeller Brothers Fund thought that something should be done about this, so they offered to the Museum $250,000 to do a three-year program of sending American art to Europe. We had a department called Circulating Exhibitions [now called the Department of Exhibitions], but it only functioned in this country. We sent exhibitions to schools and colleges.... [Exhibitions were also circulated to museums and other cultural institutions.] Porter McCray was the director of that department. So we accepted this offer from the Rockefeller Brothers Fund and we put the money and the program into that department [now the International Program]. Porter was the first director of it and he ran it for the three years. The money was given to us for a three-year period. Of course, in those days you didn't need as much money for those things as you do today. At the end of three years we realized that we had done something so important and so necessary to continue, but the Rockefeller Brothers Fund had a bylaw that they didn't support things

indefinitely, they started things. So they couldn't go on supporting it and the Museum didn't have enough money to do it, so we went out and we made a new arrangement with the Rockefeller Brothers Fund for another three years. We would try to raise money for this particular program and as we raised money they would give us less. Each year we would raise a little more and they would give us a little less, and that's how the International Council was founded. Mrs. August Belmont, at around that time, founded the National Council for the Metropolitan Opera and she asked me to be a member, and it occurred to me that we could do something like that for our own program, so I spoke to René about it. René, being very chauvinistic about The Museum of Modern Art, said, "Well, if the Metropolitan Opera can charge $250 a year, we can charge $1,000." Now, you'll have to check that figure, but I'm pretty sure that was it. So then the question was, how are we going to get people to join this thing and pay these dues? If you called up somebody in Texas and asked them if they would like to be a member, it didn't come across to them right away that this was a national, almost, you could say, patriotic endeavor. They immediately thought, The Museum of Modern Art in New York is trying to get money that we ought to be giving to our own museum right here in this town. So it occurred to us that we needed somebody who could handle this kind of a situation and who had a name that, if they called up somebody in Texas, that person would come to the telephone and would be pleased to talk to them. We asked Mrs. John D. Rockefeller 3rd, Blanchette, if she would take it on, and it was a very happy choice. She was a perfectly marvelous president [of the International Council], but we literally, for a great many years, had only something like twenty or thirty members. Now we have one hundred and seventy-eight and it's a pretty big organization to cope with, but those twenty members were people who really cared about art and really knew about it and really had good collections, and they made wonderful friendships. They lived in different cities all over the country and they might never have met if it hadn't been for this organization. They loved the meetings and still do, because it's a chance for them to all get together again, and we kept it very much to that level. We never took in anybody just because they had money and

would like to belong. We only took in people who truly cared about art and had fine collections. At the end of the three years, we were making enough money to carry on the program without any further help from the Rockefeller Brothers Fund. But the Rockefeller Brothers Fund should get the credit for having thought of the idea.

SZ: I believe that it was formally founded in 1953.

EC: It was formally founded in 1953 but it was already struggling before that. Then I became president in 1957 because Blanchette--by that time her husband was building Lincoln Center and so they were competing with the same people for money and it became a difficult thing--couldn't go on being president. So I became president, but she had established it so well, along with René, that it wasn't so difficult for me to take it over as it would have been if I'd had to do it in the beginning. René, of course, his name was a very famous name in Europe, and that helped a great deal. Even people who'd never met him knew who he was. I remember when I became president, it was 1957 and we were going to have a meeting in San Francisco, where we had one very active, helpful member, Mrs. Russell, Helen Russell, and Nelson Rockefeller was going to come with us. He was very interested in the International Council, always, and very active. He and Blanchette and René and I really were the four people that pushed it off the ground, so Nelson was coming with us to this meeting. We had twenty members, but only seven of them were coming to San Francisco. San Francisco was so excited about having Nelson Rockefeller come that they put on a special ballet. The ballet season had just closed. They put on a special ballet that night, and they had a box or two boxes for us in the center, and dinner parties were given and everything was arranged. The night before we were supposed to go, Nelson called me and he said, "Now, I've told you I'll come and if you tell me I must, I will, but I think it'll ruin my political career if I can't be" wherever else it was on that night. What was I to say? So we arrived, six members who nobody cared whether they met or not. [LAUGHTER]

SZ: For this ballet that had been put on especially for....

EC: I'll never forget that. [LAUGHING] So we did have our struggles, but now we're paying the price of success. We have too many people.

SZ: Well, in those first years you did do a lot of traveling, even then?

EC: Yes. We put on exhibitions and we'd go to Europe, but it was a different kind of traveling. We wouldn't travel as a group. We'd all go over--anybody that wanted to would go over and stay in a hotel and we'd go to the opening and somebody, one of us, would give a party or something like that.

SZ: Without this organized kind of....

EC: Now it's all organized. They buy your tickets and we have a bus to go around in and you see each other every minute from morning till night.

SZ: Now, the exhibitions that the International Council sponsored, was there always a lot of discussion about what they would be or were ideas brought to you?

EC: Well, Porter McCray...the staff always did the exhibitions. Porter McCray really did; he's somebody you should talk to if you want to talk about the ins and outs of the Council in those early days, because he really did it. He would sometimes ask somebody from the Museum, but now, of course, we have an arrangement where the Museum staff does it. Depending on what the show is, a different member does it, but Porter really did the whole thing. The first exhibition we put on for Europe was American art [Modern American Painters and Sculptors]. I think it was from 1948 through the early 1950s, and so we started with people like Prendergast, and there

was just one small room at the end in which we had a Pollock and a Rothko--maybe five or six pictures by that group. The interesting thing was that that was what interested the French people and the rest of it they didn't take so much interest in. It was a huge exhibition, but those five pictures in that room.... now, Porter could tell you just which ones they were and how many there were and so forth, but René, I remember, said, "Well, you see, all that American art that we showed was influenced by French art and the French would rather have their own art. It's better, but this is something new in the world and something that belongs here and they recognized it right away." And so they asked to see more of that, and so we put on another show called The New American Painting [in 1959] that was entirely that; we concentrated on Europe for a long time. Of course, now we're in South America. At that time, you see, the important thing was the Cold War, the peace after the war and representing ourselves as having a culture, and so we went to Europe a lot. We went to the Venice Biennale, we went to Paris, we went to London, we went to Spain, we went to Italy. Almost all our exhibitions were sent to Europe. Now we send them everywhere, including around this country. We don't need to send them to Europe anymore. There's just as much American art in Europe today. If you go to Paris, you see almost the same things you see here in New York, and that really is a result of the Council. That began after the Council exhibitions began to go over there.

SZ: Sometimes they weren't really well received by critics, as I recall.

EC: Oh, critics were awfully annoyed because New York was becoming the center of the arts instead of Paris. Some of the critics even boycotted. I remember we had a Rothko exhibition [Mark Rothko, 1961]. I think the critics boycotted the opening, and I think they gave us some bad reviews, but then, you know, the French are a very intellectual, objective people, and somehow or other it would always come out somewhere that somebody thought it was pretty interesting.

SZ: It sounds like it was a very exciting time.

EC: Very exciting. Then there was a group of French Protestants that were always interested in modern art and had been very avant-garde in the days when even the French weren't interested--and you know Monet almost starved--and they came over here to see pictures in this country. When we went over there--they weren't members of the Council or anything like that, as today they would be--they entertained us madly and they invited us to their houses to see their collections. In those days, Americans never got invited inside a French house. So, for those of us--we were a pretty small group--but for those of us who went, we had a wonderful time.

SZ: Nice collections?

EC: Well, we saw lots of collections, yes.

SZ: And they were in Paris, this group of French Protestants?

EC: Paris, yes, but I remember thinking, What am I going to do when these people come over to New York and they want to see American collections? All the American collections are French! Ben Heller had a wonderful American collection and for a long time that's where we took everybody, but gradually we began buying our own pictures.

SZ: I have to ask you one thing, what was your collection like at that time?

EC: Is this [construction noise] going to interfere? [TAPE INTERRUPTION]

SZ: I was just asking you, at that time did you have a collection of your own?

EC: Well, I never had what you would call a collection. I had a few pictures, but I never

had a real collection. I did get very interested in it and I did come home from Paris with a feeling that the important thing to do was to buy some American pictures.

SZ: That's what you came back with? [LAUGHTER]

EC: And so that's what I did. I bought that Marsden Hartley, the first thing I ever bought.

SZ: That was when, in the early 1950s?

EC: Yes, and then eventually I bought a Rothko which was the pride and joy of my life. I really didn't buy very many. I just lived in this apartment and there isn't room for very many, you can see that. I had five or six pictures. I changed a lot. I'd sell them and buy another one.

SZ: But the Marsden Hartley you kept.

EC: Well, I've kept that, yes. I've kept a few.

SZ: I think from everything I see, it's strictly American.

EC: Oh, yes, strictly American. I have got an inherited picture by Redon and an inherited small watercolor by Miró, but anything I bought was American.

SZ: Okay. Shall we stop for today?

EC: Well, I think we'd better, with this [noise], don't you?

SZ: Yes, I do.

END TAPE 4, SIDE 2

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

INTERVIEW WITH:	**ELIZABETH BLISS PARKINSON COBB (EC)**
INTERVIEWER:	**SHARON ZANE (SZ)**
LOCATION	**215 EAST 72ND STREET, NEW YORK CITY**
DATE:	**NOVEMBER 30, 1988**

BEGIN TAPE 5, SIDE 1:

SZ: One of the things I wanted to pick up on was about the [Junior] Advisory Committee in the early days and your involvement with it, some of the people who were on it. You did mention in passing the fact that it went out of existence but I know from having done a little bit of research that there were a number of things that brought it to a head when it just disbanded, if that's the proper term.

EC: It didn't go out of existence for quite a long time and I think we were already in what was then our new building. I don't really remember the date or just how it came about. There was a lot of humorous talk that we were too fresh, we interfered too much, we criticized too much, but I think also we were all getting older and getting involved in other parts of the Museum, and a good many of us gradually became trustees and, so, I think there wasn't the same need for it. Then, many years later, they reinstated the idea of it in a different form which became the Junior Council [now the Contemporary Art Council], and the purpose of it was to bring young people into the Museum and interest them in the Museum, which had also been the purpose of the original Advisory Committee. The Junior Council was never set up in the same way as the Junior Advisory Committee. There was a different Museum by that time.

SZ: What do you mean it wasn't set up in the same way?

EC: Well, I mean when the Junior Advisory Committee was set up, the trustees found some young people. They thought, because it was a modern museum, it would be a good idea to have that generation represented, interested, giving opinions and so they simply asked them to make criticisms and suggestions. The Junior Council was a volunteer organization where people could come and work in the Museum for a day. For instance, they had a lending service and you could lend pictures and borrow pictures, and the money that you gave for renting them went against the purchase price if you decided to buy it. They had activities. We didn't have any definite set activities on the original Junior Advisory Committee. We just met and talked.

SZ: But you had regular meetings?

EC: Well, we had irregular meetings. We just had meetings all the time. We loved it. We were fascinated by the whole thing and it was a very interesting group of people that loved talking to each other, and we used to sit around and talk sometimes for several hours. But we didn't meet Wednesdays at 5:00 p.m. or anything like that. We'd end up saying we hadn't finished and we didn't have any more time and when we would meet again. [LAUGHING] I can remember sitting on the floor raising our hands as though we were in school for a chance to say something. [LAUGHING] And it was a very bright group, I mean we had George Gershwin and Lincoln Kirstein and Philip Johnson. Alfred Barr came to all the meetings and there was [Walter] Chrysler, who was just beginning his collection. I can't even remember now all the people who were there. Bill Burden, who became president of the Museum very soon after Conger Goodyear. [Goodyear resigned as president in 1939; William A.M. Burden was elected president of the Museum in 1953.] Then Lincoln Kirstein left to do the ballet, and Eddie Warburg was on it. Eddie Warburg remained with us, but also went with Lincoln Kirstein to do the ballet (he was, I think, even more interested in that), so that it broke up in a more or less natural way. We grew up, you might say, and so did the Museum.

SZ: Well, I did read an account of...I think it was after the war, in 1946, when Beaumont Newhall came back. He had gone off to serve in the Armed Forces and came back after the war, and there was struggle between him and Edward Steichen. The report was that the [Junior] Advisory Committee, which, I guess, took the part of Newhall, got so fed up--this was the last straw--and disbanded.

EC: Well, I was much less active in that period and so I wouldn't really remember much about it. I was already married, living outside of New York, had young children, and I was no longer as active, although I was still a member.

SZ: You didn't really come back until about, what, after the late 1940s, I guess.

EC: Well, I always stayed there and I always went to the meetings and so forth that I was supposed to go to. I can't remember when I became a trustee but it was in the early 1940s, it was during the war, and I went to the trustee meetings but I didn't do much else. The [Junior] Advisory Committee, I think, had broken up by that time.

SZ: Okay. I think that in two instances--and this again was the time when you were not so involved, I think in 1944 and again later on--the Museum put up for auction a number of its pictures, including a few of your aunt's; and then I think again in 1947 there was an arrangement between the Metropolitan and the Whitney and the Modern where pictures were transferred, so that a few others of hers were deacquisitioned. I just was wondering if you had any particular feelings about it.

EC: She left her pictures with that idea. The Museum originally said that they would not accept pictures with the idea that they would always keep them, that they would not accept anything they were not free to sell. After a while we had to modify that ruling, because we found that people didn't want to leave us pictures we wanted very much

because they were afraid we wouldn't keep them. They wanted them to be there, so we established a committee. I don't remember who was on it except Conger Goodyear and Jock Whitney. It was called the Master Collection or something like that [Committee on Masterworks]. It was a part of the Acquisitions Committee, a little subcommittee, and they made decisions about which pictures could never be sold. This came about because people worried about what we were selling or exchanging, but the general feeling was that Alfred Barr should be backed on this. We didn't want to go against Alfred Barr. He was the one who made the collection. The general feeling was we wanted to back him, but then when we found that we were really not going to be left pictures in peoples' wills on account of this, we modified it to that degree. I think that committee still exists in some form. They decide that some pictures can never be sold. Then, if somebody wants to give us a picture and makes that condition, we either accept it or refuse it.

SZ: On the basis of the merits of the work as judged by this....

EC: And what we have also by that artist. It's a problem that's resolved partly by quality, partly by quantity.

SZ: So that was a significant change.

EC: Yes, but as we went along we made lots of changes. We had to because it started with such a very small group and there was such a very small group of people in the city or even in the whole country who had any interest in modern art at all. They thought it was just crazy and they didn't like it. It made them angry, and they didn't want to see it and they wouldn't give it any money. It was very difficult.

SZ: Did you encounter some of that when you were first setting up the International Council?

EC: Well, that was a different kind of thing. That was a question of...first of all, did I tell you that the international program idea originated with the Rockefeller Brothers Fund?

SZ: Yes, you did tell me that last time.

EC: And so, this was not a question of buying pictures. We didn't buy pictures, we borrowed or lent and sent pictures to Europe. We asked people from all over the country. We considered it a national project, and we were not trying to do it from the Museum alone. We asked people from all over the United States, and, originally, the feeling was on the part of a great many people that [the Museum] was trying to get money from them that they should be giving to their own museums. We had a hard time [trying] to persuade people that that wasn't what we were trying to do, that it was not going to benefit the Museum financially, that we were doing something for the United States.

SZ: You mean in convincing these other museums around the country?

EC: Well, not the museums but the members that we invited who were interested in their own museums.

SZ: I see.

EC: I mean, if a lady from Dallas was asked to give this she thought, well, that's [The Museum of Modern Art] trying to get money that I ought to be giving to my own museum in Dallas. Mrs. Rockefeller, being the president [of the Council], was very good at talking to these people, getting them to talk to her and persuading them. We gradually built up a group that really did feel they were not being disloyal to their museums, that they were doing something that needed to be done, that the United

States Government should be doing. It was the only government in the world, practically, that wasn't doing it and so we did it.

SZ: And you and she really were the two....

EC: Well, she was the first president and she did a great deal of this. I mean, she would just telephone people she'd never met, in another city, and talk to them and sometimes she'd meet them and talk to them. It took us a long time. I don't know, I'm sure it's in the records somewhere, how many members we got per year, but I do remember, I think I told you last time, that when we went out to California in 1957, which must have been four years after we'd founded the Council, we only had twenty members, and only six of them came to California. We tried to pick up some more when we got there, from California. We did have one member from California. That's how we got there.

SZ: And how many did you leave with?

EC: Well, that I can't remember. It might be in the records. I don't know. We may have had two members in San Francisco but I know we had one who arranged everything for us and put on the special ballet we were so excited about.

SZ: Who was that?

EC: I told you that Nelson Rockefeller was coming and he didn't come and it was such a terrible blow. Six stragglers came out and had a special ballet put on for them. [LAUGHING] So it was an uphill job for a long time. Now it's turned into something quite the opposite. We have a long waiting list. Everybody wants to get on it.

SZ: Now, you had an uphill job building the Council at that time but then there was also the

question of how the Council would fit into the Museum itself, is that right?

EC: Well, the Council was first called the International Council at The Museum of Modern Art. The word "at" was very important, because it meant that it was not of the Museum and therefore you were not giving your money to the Museum. You were giving your money to something that was doing something for the country. But then we got worried because some of the members thought, well, why shouldn't our museum do it? Next time we'll put on the show. And so we decided that we had to change the name to International Council of The Museum of Modern Art because only the Museum put on the exhibitions, chose them and went over and installed them. I remember we had a whole meeting on just the subject of those two words, "at" and "of." The meeting took place in Washington, and the greatest help was John de Menil from Houston, Texas. He was a terribly nice man and a wonderful worker and very devoted to the arts and to building up Houston, but he saw the importance of this, too. We felt that if somebody from New York or from [The Museum of Modern Art] told the Council that we must change the name, that it would never go through, but because he came from Houston and he was very eloquent--I remember he talked for about an hour--he put it across. He deserves full credit.

SZ: In line with that....when it first developed it seemed as if it was an entity unto itself and there was some friction between, I guess, the Council and some of the Museum staff which ended in this Maine meeting which I think you were present at, or knew about.

EC: I was not there. I don't remember why I wasn't there but I was not there. Bill Burden had it at his place in Maine, a big meeting of the Council and the Museum, and I think it helped a great deal. I think...yes, I think the Museum felt that, first of all, it took up some of the time of the Museum staff. We have now made a different arrangement. We are paying them for this now, but we didn't have any money then, so the Musem staff had to give their time. Maybe [the Council's exhibitions] took pictures sometimes

that the curator would rather have put in another exhibition here in New York. It was a new idea. It had never been done before. It was taken from Mrs. Belmont's idea of the National Council for the Metropolitan Opera, which was purely fundraising. A lot of this has grown up since. I think we established something that quite a lot of people use in memberships [now]. They take trips and they have membership groups that give pictures; I think a lot of those things came out of this. It was the first thing of its kind, so it grew like Topsy. We had to make changes as we went along and we had to integrate it into the Museum so that they felt part of it instead of being against it.

SZ: So that was the positive benefit that came out of this meeting?

EC: I suppose it did. Really, as I say, I was not at the meeting, and until you mentioned it now I'd forgotten all about it.

SZ: Well, because I think that McCray resigned sometime after that, and it was thought that that was maybe a direct result of some of the animosity that had been....

EC: Well, I think the reason that Porter McCray resigned was because Porter McCray put on all the original shows, and I think the Museum felt that more of the Museum staff should have something to say about this as it was under the name of the Museum. Porter was a man who had a certain way of running things. I don't think he could run things other ways, doing a lot of delegating. He did a lot more himself and he was given the choice of changing his method in some way--I can't remember just exactly what that was, but I think it was allowing curators from the Museum to put on some of the exhibitions. I'm not sure but I'm sure you could find it in the records.

SZ: I believe that's correct.

EC: Porter decided that he didn't want to run it that way and so he did resign, and

immediately he got another job as head of Johnny Rockefeller's special fund [John D. Rockefeller Fund]....

SZ: But he really was responsible for....

EC: He was responsible for the entire beginning of the [international] program.

SZ: And you worked with him fairly closely at some point?

EC: Well, he already was in the Museum doing their traveling shows, which went to schools and colleges, and so this was put into his department and he was the head of it. I don't remember what year it was that he resigned, but if the first year we gave an exhibition was '52; he certainly didn't resign until....

SZ: He didn't resign until 1961.

EC: He was head of it for a long time and he really founded and established it.

SZ: Speaking of him, is there anything else you can tell me about him, what he looked like, what his temperament was, what kind of a man he was?

EC: René d'Harnoncourt used to say that he thought that Porter knew more about all the arts than anybody in the Museum except Alfred Barr. He has a brilliant mind and a very fine background of education in the arts. He wanted to be an architect and he went through architectural school, I think at Yale, and then he came out right in the middle of the Depression. He got a job right away in Wally Harrison's office, but there wasn't enough work and he had to make his living. He didn't have any money, so he got himself then from there into Nelson Rockefeller's South American project, which was an exchange of pictures, I think, from South America and had to do with the war.

He worked with that for a long time, and René d'Harnoncourt did, too. That's how they met. Then Nelson put René into the Museum, and I think René brought Porter in.

SZ: Was he a popular person?

EC: I think he was tremendously respected and he's still a friend of everybody there. He comes to openings and things that we have. He's had a very serious time, you know. He had cancer and he had to have his leg cut off, one leg cut off, very high up--so high up that it's hard to make a false leg and the stump changes its shape all the time, so he has to keep on having different legs made. There was a man, I think it was in the Hospital for Special Surgery, who was very good at this, but he has since retired, and for the last eighteen months Porter hasn't been able to get a leg that suited him. He's very uncomfortable and he's getting older and he's having, I think, a very hard time right now. But he's been very active; he's made a very big life for himself ever since he retired from the John D. Rockefeller Fund and his advice is sought by so many people for so many things to do with the visual arts and other things. He's very active at St. John the Devine. He's been sent for to India, I don't know how many times. They take beautiful care of him and do everything for him and he has so many people who come to advise him that he told me once he has to limit them. He tells them on the telephone, "Well, you can come at 11:00 a.m. on Thursday morning, but I'll only be able to see you for twenty minutes." So he's made a really very big life for himself with his one leg. He goes everywhere. He travels everywhere. He has two canes. He looks very elegant with his two canes, although he's short and one-legged. Well, I mean, you see two legs.

SZ: Yes, but one would think it would be hard to....

EC: But he's been terribly courageous about it and made a whole new life.

SZ: Now, the International Council, during the seven years that you led it....

EC: I think it was [seven years], yes.

SZ: Did you enjoy it? Was it fun, doing that?

EC: Oh, yes. First of all, we had wonderful trips. They were terribly interesting. For instance, when we went to Paris...you know, the Parisians never invited foreigners into their houses, they might lunch with you in a restaurant but they never invited you into their houses. There was a Protestant group that was interested in modern art and they came over here and then they invited us back there, and all of them invited us to their houses and showed us their collections. I made quite a few friends that I kept up with for a number of years by correspondence and saw when I went back, but I've lost track of them all now. We were small enough then so that it was a much more intimate affair. Now, of course, with so many people, we go everywhere in buses and we have a travel agent who puts us up in hotels and takes care of our luggage. It's necessary and very pleasant, but we used to simply say, there's going to be a meeting in Paris, so anybody that wanted, that was a member of the Council, would go to Paris and stay at any hotel they chose and we'd have a certain number of things that we would do. We'd arrange a certain number of lunches and dinners and get invitations to people's houses, but they weren't all together all day from 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., with big cocktail parties and dinner parties planned for every minute. They'd have their own life in Paris, too, and see each other and it grew that way. It grew until it got too big to handle that way.

SZ: But during the time of your presidency of the International Council it pretty much remained a....

EC: It was much smaller than it is now so that it was a much less difficult job

administratively.

SZ: Yes, I was going to ask you what kinds of things you had to do.

EC: Well, on the other hand, as I was going to say, everybody that came from another city to New York, the first thing they'd do is call me up, so I would always have to do something about them. It was very personal. Being the president at that time was very personal. I made a great many good friends out of it but I was very busy taking care of people as they came through the city because they would call me up right away. I think there's still a great deal of that, but not nearly as much, because it's so big it couldn't be. The president couldn't, now, see all the people that belong to the Council every time they came to the city, it's just impossible, but when I had it it was small enough so you could and I had to. I was very busy but, as I say, now the administration is much more of a job than it was.

SZ: Did you have staff at that time?

EC: I had one secretary. Now, of course, they have an executive secretary, and then she has a secretary.

SZ: And you had an office, obviously, in the building.

EC: I had an office with a secretary in it.

SZ: And would you go there pretty much every day?

EC: I went there pretty much every day, maybe not from 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., but pretty much every day for a part of the day.

SZ: At that time were you taking two trips a year, or was it much less formalized?

EC: We always met in New York once a year. We never met anywhere unless we had a member there and of course we have members in so many places now that there's no question. Every Spring Meeting is somewhere else. I don't think when I was president that we took quite as many trips but we did take some trips. I know we took one to Texas and one we took to San Francisco. That's when I was elected president. Then I remember going to Texas and I remember going to Paris, and then there was [a meeting] in Barcelona. I don't think I went to the opening in Barcelona, but some members did.... Oh, we went to Fort Worth in this country and we went to Houston. We had the de Menils in Houston and we had Ruth--Ruth Carter Stevenson, she is now--in Fort Worth; and then we had Mrs. McDermott, Margaret McDermott, in Dallas, so that Fort Worth and Dallas were sort of combined. Let's see...California, Texas. I can't really think if we went anywhere else in this country or not, but certainly we went to Paris more than once. We went to Paris twice, I'm sure, while I was president. I don't really remember anything else at that time.

SZ: And by the time you resigned as president, obviously it had grown.

EC: It was pretty large. I resigned to become president of the Museum, so that it wasn't a very great change. I was still in the Museum every day. [LAUGHING]

SZ: More work to do. [LAUGHTER]

EC: Yes, I suppose there was more work. I don't know. The Council is a big job, and the bigger it gets the bigger the job is.

SZ: Did you enjoy doing it?

EC: Oh, yes. It was very interesting, you know, all the meetings. They had meetings discussing what [exhibitions] they were going to send [abroad], and the Council would be invited to make suggestions and objections, if they had any. We borrowed a lot of pictures from the Council members.

SZ: So that was something that you would be involved with as well?

EC: We'd have meetings here in New York, but they would not be big meetings of the whole Council. They'd be committee meetings for an exhibition, and, of course, Porter would organize that.

SZ: So you worked pretty closely with Porter?

EC: Oh, very closely with Porter.

SZ: And anybody else?

EC: Well, René. René really was a very big figure in the Council, particularly being Austrian with a very big, well-known name in Europe. It was very helpful and he knew how to handle those people. They all knew who he was and he went on every trip and came to every meeting. He and Porter worked it out together.

SZ: And he and Porter got along well, obviously.

EC: He and Porter?

SZ: Yes, got along well.

EC: Oh, very well. Oh, yes. They were very, very good friends and he brought Porter into

the Museum.

SZ: Okay, I'm just going to ask you about some various things. The fire in 1958, were you at the Museum at the time?

EC: You know, it was the only day in six weeks that I was not at the Museum. I'll never forget, I came home at 5:00 in the afternoon--for some reason I had gone somewhere like Brooklyn or someplace that I never go to. And I came in and I had a housekeeper and she said, "Everybody's been calling up all day to see how you were." And I said, "Well, why? Why shouldn't I be all right?" And she said, "Oh, didn't you know? The Museum's done burned down!" And I was so horrified. I rushed to the telephone. I realized I wouldn't be able to get anybody on the telephone and that if I went down there I wouldn't be able to get through the fire lines, so I rushed to the telephone and I called Louise Boyer, who ran Nelson Rockefeller's office. She was the most efficient woman in the world, and she came to the telephone and she said, "Everybody is all right. My bell is ringing. I can't talk now but I'll call you right back." And I said, "Don't bother to call me back, you've told me what I want to know. I'm going to the Museum now." That was the conversation. So I turned around and went down to the Museum, and I did get through the fire lines, because the worst of the fire was over. It had been put out.

SZ: Were the streets crowded with people?

EC: Well, the police had pretty well put up barriers and it wasn't too bad. I didn't seem to have any trouble getting in, but when I got in there was about six inches of water on the floor in the lobby. It was an extraordinary thing....we were having a Seurat show [Seurat Paintings and Drawings] and also a Juan Gris [Juan Gris] show, a loan exhibition. Those two artists died very young; they didn't have a great many pictures. We had practically every picture by both of them. That staff, they didn't have time to

talk to each other, but they made a body line, and without even discussing it, they just took out, first of all, all the Seurat and then all the Juan Gris pictures. The Whitney Museum was then there next to us. They closed and opened the [connecting] door into us. They just passed pictures hand by hand off the walls into the Whitney Museum.

SZ: You saw this?

EC: No. I'm telling you what they did. I didn't see it. But then they did that with the Juan Gris ones and they didn't touch ours until they had gotten all the loans out. Then they took all the pictures that had no glass on them. Then they took the pictures that had glass on them. There were a lot of pictures behind the walls, because we didn't have any storage space. Just fortuitously, Nelson Rockefeller was crossing the street at 53rd Street and Fifth Avenue when he saw the fire and fire engines going down to the Museum--he was running for Governor then--and he rushed down and he put on one of those hard hats the firemen gave him. He went in and he was able to persuade them not to hose down the walls that had pictures behind them; otherwise, we would have lost a lot of pictures. We only lost three, I think, and he persuaded them not to soak everything that had pictures behind it. What had happened was the Seurat, the main Seurat, was loaned from the Art Institute of Chicago, and by the terms of the will when it was left to the Institute it could only be lent once, and this was the time it was lent! I think it was the first picture they took out. Then René sent a telegram right away to, I think his name was Dan Rich [Daniel Catton Rich], who was the head of the Institute, or he called him on the telephone, and told him about the fire and that the picture was all right. But Dan Rich got on the next plane and came to New York. I arrived just the same time he did, and everybody was standing around in the lobby--I'll never forget it--and René was standing there waiting for Dan Rich when he walked in. They didn't even speak to each other. They just went up to each other and put their arms around each other and walked off to wherever the picture was for Dan Rich to

look at it. [LAUGHING] So that's what I remember about the fire, except that everybody had a nervous breakdown afterwards. It was just a perfectly terrible, terrible thing.

SZ: You mean just having....

EC: Well, I mean the shock of it, the worry and the responsibility. René was a wreck. We had to make him go away and take a rest, [but] he couldn't rest. He came right back. Alfred Barr was a wreck. Everybody was a wreck, but they recovered in time.

SZ: And the Museum was closed for a few months.

EC: Oh, yes. The Museum was closed for a long time and rebuilt after that, you see. Then we raised money, that was the next big building project.

SZ: Tell me a little bit about that. That was called the thirtieth anniversary drive?

EC: Yes. Well, I'm not good at remembering all that, I'm afraid. We did have a thirtieth anniversary drive, and we got enough money to build pretty much a new museum. Philip Johnson built it, and it was a very satisfactory museum. I wish we hadn't outgrown it, because the rooms were beautiful and the ceilings were high; it was everything that it should be.

SZ: Can you remember anything about the discussion of undertaking this at that time? There had been some talk, I think, before the fire, that the Museum ought to think about expanding. As you say, paintings were hidden behind walls.

EC: Yes. I think the fire forced us into it because so much had to be spent just fixing the building up again afterwards that there was no question that it would be uneconomical

to just do that. We knew we had to build a building sometime, so it forced the issue...it precipitated the issue. So we did.

SZ: It was a $25,000,000 campaign, which at that time, I think, was quite a good amount of money.

EC: Enormous. Enormous, yes, and we made it. Then it was wonderful, the opening was wonderful because they hung the whole collection. For the first time a great many of the pictures were seen and it really was a wonderful sight.

SZ: Do you remember anything else about the opening, the reopening, the party?

EC: I don't think I was here. I think I was abroad for some reason. I don't seem to remember the opening, but I do remember the impression that it made on me to see so much of the collection hung for the first time, and I realized for the first time what a perfectly marvelous collection it was. I had never seen it altogether like that. I mean, I don't suppose it was all there; I don't know. But I'd never seen that much of it together before. We'd never had that much space before.

SZ: And the new building?

EC: Well, it was the same building that had always been there, but it was greatly enlarged. We bought the building next to it, you see. Again, that would be something you'd have to look up in the records. I wouldn't have it all in my head, just what it was, but I do know that we built a new building. I mean, the lobby, everything was changed.

SZ: Now, during this time one other thing that I understand you were involved in pretty strongly was getting the International Study Center put together.

EC: Yes. That was very much an interest of René d'Harnoncourt, and I think he did more about it than anybody else. It must be in his papers, which have all been very well sorted, annotated, and they're all available. I remember that we had a big opening for it and they named it for my aunt, Lillie Bliss, so I remember that this was done and that it was considered terribly important; and it still is there, of course. I don't think it's worked out quite the way they intended, but I've forgotten some of it. I remember hearing conversations about how you could have a computer in Princeton and you could talk to somebody in the library. I don't think we've done all that sort of thing, but there was so much conversation about it. You know, when something is new and being established, you have a lot of ideas that you don't always carry out. You get new ideas as you go along so you would have to look into the papers to find out about that, but I think there would be a lot in René's papers about it because I think he spearheaded that. It was also, I think, of great interest to Nelson Rockefeller.

SZ: Now, we're just getting into the time when you became president of the Museum and I remember something you said to me, maybe the second time I was here. It must pertain to the time when you were president. You said that on two occasions Nelson Rockefeller backed you up and really helped you get something that you wanted during your tenure.

EC: I don't know whether I said on two occasions, exactly. I just meant that he was a very good friend of mine and had been since we were very young children. He told me he would always back me and help me, and that I should send for him through Louise Boyer--he was Governor then. I think on two occasions I asked Louise to ask him please to come to a meeting because we were going to discuss something for which I felt I might need support, and he did, but just what they were I don't know. You see, at that time, this whole business of pensions had come in quite recently--I don't think, before the war every business office and firm gave pensions to their retirees. The Museum never had enough money anyway to get by from day to day. Pensions never

were even thought about, and that staff was so devoted to the Museum--it was very much of a partnership between staff and the trustees. The staff really was anxious to take the smallest salaries they could live on so that the Museum could have the money and so they didn't, really, any of them, think about what they were going to do when they retired. Nobody ever thought about it. When David Rockefeller became president, he was young and new and hadn't been deeply involved in the Museum in the beginning. It was his turn as a member of the family to take this on, and I think that he felt that the time had come when the older people, such as René and Alfred and Monroe--there were six of them--the Registrar, whose name I can't remember now [Dorothy Dudley]. That would be four....

END TAPE 5, SIDE 1

BEGIN TAPE 5, SIDE 2

EC: Anyway, I think there were six [staff members to be pensioned].

SZ: Monroe, René, Alfred, the Registrar....

EC: Dorothy Miller didn't come into it immediately, but she was certainly due to come. That would be, what, five? David thought that we should have a retirement age of sixty-five and replace these people. It caused an absolute uproar in the Museum because, first of all, nobody ever thought of the Museum apart from René and Alfred, and secondly, everybody realized that this would be a big turnover. Monroe was already sixty-seven and they, none of them, had any money to live on. So there was the question...first of all, there were people who didn't want to retire them for any reason, and then there were people who felt that they should be pensioned, but where was the money going to come from to pension them? We had a great many argumentative meetings and I was very agitated about the necessity of pensioning them. There was a lot of

opposition to David's idea, and so David appointed me, asked me to be president of the Museum and sort of head that opposition, and we all worked it out. I thought he did it awfully well, because he, after he put me in, supported me so strongly, although I was opposing him. I've always admired him for that. We ended up giving the six people what seemed at that time [to be] very handsome pensions. In a very few years, thanks to inflation, they were not very handsome pensions. We had thought that we would try to keep them up with inflation, but we simply couldn't. When Monroe died, he had awfully little money, but he had a great many friends who helped him. Anyway, we did get pensions for them.

SZ: Despite your initial....

EC: Well, I wasn't alone. There were plenty of people who agreed with me and we set up, I think it was called, the "ad hoc" committee; there were about seven people on it. I remember there was Mike Cowles and David and Blanchette Rockefeller--she and I were very much of a team. There were about seven of us, I think, and we met very frequently and discussed what to do and how to do it.

SZ: How does a disagreement like that get resolved? It has pretty large ramifications for a museum and policy and everything. How does that normally happen?

EC: Bill Burden was on that committee too.... I don't remember how it got resolved. I only know that we did give them pensions and that we did retire them. We retired Monroe first; he was already sixty-seven. And then we retired Alfred and then we retired René, but we planned it all out on this ad hoc committee.

SZ: As president, [were there] any other issues that came up where you needed or called in Mr. Rockefeller to help you?

EC: Well, he [David Rockefeller] met with us. He was on the committee. He was chairman of the committee. Oh, and then we had somebody from outside, Ivan Chermayeff, who later became a trustee. David Rockefeller had the idea that he might make a good director of the Museum, which he would never have wanted to be, and which I don't think he would have been, but he was on that committee too, although he was a total outsider. He would not have been a good director of the Museum. He's a designer and it isn't what he would have wanted to do.

SZ: But that's what David had thought at one time?

EC: Well, I don't know. I think he liked him very much. He had worked with him in something else and he thought it would be a good way to look at him, to have him on that committee, but it never went further than that. Oh, and then René was on that committee too. I was president for three years. I only took the presidency to do that.

SZ: Is that right?

EC: And I said I could never take any responsibility for the finances of the Museum, that I just didn't have the experience or the knowledge, so David kept all that as chairman of the board. I was president long enough to solve this problem of how to retire the old staff [and to] get in new staff, which was a part of it and very difficult. We hired two directors [Bates Lowry and John B. Hightower] we had to fire. It went on for three years. I resigned as soon as it was finished and was followed by Bill Paley.

SZ: Right. So when you took on the presidency it was very clear that you were going to do it just for a limited amount of time and it was very contained?

EC: Yes.

SZ: Now, also, I think at that time the Museum had just reopened, had this enormous plant, needed more staff to run it and all that, and there started to be some financial difficulties, is that right?

EC: Well, yes, but of course René was there and he'd been there a long time and he really ran it. I was president for this purpose and I didn't know when I took it how long it would take, but it did take three years.

SZ: Was that a difficult job, being president of the Museum?

EC: Well, it was awfully interesting and I liked it. I mean, by this time I was working with people I'd been working with for an awfully long time and I knew them very well and I liked them very much. It was awfully interesting, and I never felt that I had responsibilities I couldn't take, because René was there to take them. He'd already been there since 1949.

SZ: And even before.

EC: Yes, but as director. And then Mrs. Rockefeller, Blanchette, she had been president, you see, so she was very supportive and helpful, and she and I saw eye to eye about everything, so I wouldn't say that it was difficult. It was full-time work.

SZ: Now, the two directors after René retired.

EC: Yes. Well, we had the man from Brown University. Can you remember his name?

SZ: Bates Lowry.

EC: Bates Lowry. He was our first choice and we liked him very much, but he proved not

to be adequate to the job at all. He was a very good professor of architecture and his students loved him. After he left us he went back to Harvard; he had a heart attack and his students refused to go on with the class until he was able to take it up again, because they liked him so much. But an administrative job, a museum job, was not his dish at all; he just wanted it to be. He took to drinking and we had to fire him. Then the next one we got, John Hightower, was no good at all, so we had a very bad reputation for a while of hiring and firing directors.

SZ: What were Hightower's weaknesses?

EC: Well, he had been very good as whatever he was for the Council on the Arts, the [New York] State Council on the Arts. Nelson Rockefeller was asked to suggest somebody; he said that he suggested [Hightower] because he was the only person he could think of. He'd done a good job in that. Bill Paley felt that Nelson had gotten René, so anybody Nelson suggested was certainly going to be another René, and so we hired him. Again, there was a lot of division of opinion and he wasn't up to it in any way.

SZ: There was division of opinion before he was hired?

EC: Yes, but he wasn't up to it in any way. He couldn't handle the people and so forth.

SZ: I guess René was a hard act to follow.

EC: Yes, but now we have Dick Oldenburg, and of course it was very helpful to have him because he'd already been in the Museum as director of publications, so he knew a good deal about the Museum. Now how much....

SZ: That finishes me for today.

EC: For today it does, that's good.

END TAPE 5, SIDE 2

END INTERVIEW