THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

INTERVIEW WITH: **SARA MAZO (SM)**

INTERVIEWER: **SHARON ZANE (SZ)**

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[Note: this oral history was extensively edited and amplified by the interviewee in the course of the review process.]

BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE 1

SZ: Sara, I'll start the way I always do and you can do it how you like. Tell me where and when you were born a little bit about your background.

SM: I was born in New York City. My great interest as a child was in dance. My sister, who was twelve years older than I, was taking dance lessons. Knowing my interest and eagerness to also do so enrolled me at the Neighborhood Playhouse, where I went to classes every Saturday.

SZ: Ballet or modern dance?

SM: My first instructor was a young woman, a dancer, who had developed and formulated her own teaching methods. She had studied with many other dancers. Looking back — since we were now wearing ballet slippers, but danced barefoot, we were taking our cues from Isadora Duncan, reacting against the stilted academic ballet performances at that time. I can't remember how old I was at the time when I first started but I was still in public elementary school. I was born in 1910.

SZ: I would never have believed it. Where did you live in the city?

SM: We lived all over — East Side, West Side; finally, we settled, the longest place we

lived was in Greenwich Village. My father died when I was only about a year and a half, so I never really knew my father. I had a brother, who all his life was troubled with rheumatic fever, and my mother devoted herself to him completely it seemed to me. I was the youngest. I also had a sister. When I graduated from high school, the Lewisohns — Irene and Alice Lewisohn — who were creative, philanthropic women and the mainstay of the Neighborhood Playhouse, decided to further the careers of a few of us they felt were talented and should be encouraged. We were offered a small weekly subsidy so that we could continue not only with dance instruction but all the other aspects theater demanded, such as courses in voice, acting, stage design, lighting, even museum visits with an instructor, choreography with Louis Horst, and lessons with Martha Graham. In a way, we were the progenitors of the Neighborhood Playhouse School of the Theater, where Marlon Brando (to mention one) studied acting later on. Also, we took part in some of the productions at the Playhouse.

SZ: You went to public school?

SM: Yes. My mother wanted me to go to college, but the above offer was what I wanted. As a matter of fact, I stayed, you see, in this scholarship course for almost four years.

SZ: You mean it was almost like taking a degree in theater?

SM: Yes. For example: there was Miss Peck, a very talented woman who designed many of the costumes and scenery for the Playhouse productions. I remember I cut myself with a can opener [laughing], trying to get a color that I wanted. Thought and effort were given to provide us with as wide a spectrum as possible to understand what made theater, to learn and experience the crafts involved.

SZ: How many people were in this program?

SM: I think we were about eight. We were a small group. As a matter of fact, one in the group was Anna Sokolow, another, Sophie Maslow. They are the two people (both well known now) I remember at the moment.

SZ: Were there similar kinds of things going on in New York?

SM: Not to my knowledge.

SZ: So it was a very unique....

SM: It was a very unique program. I never heard that it was repeated. The amazing thing is, it blossomed, as I say, into bringing very renowned actors and actresses to study at the playhouse, which was downtown on the East Side. The Lewisohns were extraordinary sisters. They brought to the theater many exciting and imaginative and unusual programs. As children, we put on Christmas shows, creating original choreography to classical music. They introduced us to other cultures by inviting, for example, Japanese and American Indian performers — the two I especially remember — to study how they move, learn their songs and dances. The Lewisohns staged many productions. I remember my sister telling me about one very successful musical called "The Grand Street Follies."

SZ: Your sister never pursued this?

SM: Yes, she studied too, but she never went as far with it as I did. Then, when we were through with the course, where do we go from there? I did try, went around trying to get jobs in the theater. I think for a little while a group of us got together, but it didn't last very long.

SZ: I'm trying to do my math with your birthday. This was after the crash? You graduated from high school in '27?

SM: No, '28 I guess it was.

SZ: So by the time you finished the course, economic conditions were pretty rough.

SM: Very bad. Finally, I joined Sara Mildred Strauss Dancers. She was responsible for getting her dancers into Broadway shows. It's going to sound funny to you, but we were in the revival of the Ziegfeld Follies. We did what they called at that time a specialty number. After that, also, we were in — I say "we" because it was her group — in a show called "Calling All Stars." I think that was 1934.

SZ: This is all you were doing? It was full-time?

SM: I would like to continue about events in 1932 and, after that, in 1933. I met a friend, an artist, who had worked at one time for a man named William Blake, who had done stage designs and sets for him. It so happened that Blake was in Provincetown at the former Eugene O'Neill Playhouse and was going to produce Mary Heaton Vorse's play "Strike." He asked Jim to join him, and when we came to Provincetown he offered me the leading role. Mary Heaton Vorse lived in Provincetown and was very well known at this time for her support of the labor movement.

SZ: So you were really quite successful.

SM: Yes, very much involved is more like it. When the run of the play ended, Blake said he wanted to put on a play in Woodstock; would we come with him? We thought that would be fine. I hate talking about all of this past, actually. I'm not very good about reminiscing. I don't do it, and my husband, too, never seemed to do much talking about his past. At any rate, the play we put on was an old-fashioned mocking comedy, for example: "Father, Dear Father, Come Home to Me Now, The Clock in the Steeple Strikes 12," and so on. We didn't play for many weeks in Woodstock, but then Blake ran off with the money — the box office proceeds. Jim and I were stuck. We had nothing [laughing].... I met [Yasuo] Kuniyoshi in Woodstock that summer, and since we loved each other eventually married in 1935.

SZ: You obviously gave up the theater.

SM: Yes, I had to give it up, because, as I say, it just didn't work. If there was going to be

a marriage, it just didn't work very well. For a while I wrote, as a matter of fact. The New York Herald Tribune had a weekly trade paper called Retail Merchandising Service. It was mostly for buyers, to inform them of merchandise featured in various markets. Julien Levy's wife (Jean Laurent) — not the gallery dealer, but the artist — said they needed someone at the paper where she was employed and suggested I apply. I said, "Jean, I've never written about fashions." She said, "Oh, you can do it." So I did try, and worked there until it folded. There was a private organization I worked for after that which had a similar service. I wonder why I failed to tell you that in 1933 when I was again in Woodstock I studied painting. Conrad Kramer, Kuniyoshi, and Judson Smith conducted summer classes and I studied with Kramer. In case you ask, I did not continue to paint. Let us leave the thirties and I'll tell you when I was fortunate enough to meet Dorothy Dudley in 1941. We met at a time when she needed an additional person in the Registrar's department. She became an important and good friend of mine. I very much miss her. She was a gracious, understanding woman whose friendship meant a great deal to me. She said, "You have to go to the personnel department, see if the Museum wants you," which I did. I worked in Dorothy's department, the registrar, for a while until there was this crisis at the Museum. Funds were low, and since I was the last one hired, I was the first one fired. We were in the war then, you see.

SZ: So you didn't work there for very long.

SM: I do not remember the length of time. I was asked if I'd like to work in the library. Beaumont Newhall went off to war and Bernard Karpel came in his place. I worked in the library for a while, until the Museum decided the Photography department had to move across the street. They moved to the house where after the war the Museum of Primitive Art was located and exhibited the Nelson A. Rockefeller collection. Nancy Newhall took over, and I was transferred. We had photography exhibitions and functioned all through the war.

SZ: Why was it over there?

SM: Beaumont Newhall was not only the head of the Library but director as well of the Photography department. When he went off to war, I don't believe, at least I don't recall, if anyone had been decided upon to replace him. Bernard Karpel had been employed to run the Library, so who was going to take care of the Photography department.

SZ: But the new building was up.

SM: The new "21" building was not there before the war. When the war was over, [Edward] Steichen took charge of the Photography department. Nancy did not stay on and I returned to the Library. Not very long afterwards Lisi van Hook was leaving the Museum Collection department. From what I gathered, she was very much admired and loved by everyone in the department. I think by that time there'd been all this terrible trouble with Alfred [Barr], and [James Thrall] Soby was there. Soby asked if I would like to come to the Museum Collection department, with the understanding there would be a six-week trial period. I said yes, I'd like to very much. I would come to be an assistant to Dorothy Miller, and so I stayed on there. At this point I would like to say — this has nothing to do with the Museum — that there is a new book about my late husband's paintings by Tom Wolf, professor at Bard College — it isn't the well-known author Tom Wolfe — in which he says that I was "assistant" to Alfred Barr. I was furious when I read this because it is misleading. When I confronted him with this, he said, "Well, I thought you knew Alfred Barr." I said, "Yes, I knew him, but I never said I was his assistant. I was Dorothy Miller's assistant." He said, "If he was head of the department, then you were his assistant, too." I did not agree. I hate these things to appear misrepresented in print. Tom has been working on an art history book of my late husband, and he's going to correct this if he ever mentions it again [laughing].

SZ: He'd better let you see everything, I have a feeling [laughter].

SM: The unfortunate thing is, he did show me the first copy of his script, which is very different from what now appears in the book, I guess because it was edited. I think it's

better, but nothing like it was said in the copy he showed me. It upsets me!

SZ: I'm going to go back and ask you some questions about the Museum in those years before you actually started working for Dorothy. First of all, was the Museum a place that before you went to work there that you went to, were you familiar with it?

SM: Yes, of course.

SZ: What was it like to go there and see some of those early shows?

SM: I think the first time was when the Museum first opened. My sister took me to it — yes, to the first show that was put on by the Museum before they were in the new building, when it was in the Heckscher Building. So I saw that show. I don't think I recollect very much about it now. My husband being an artist, of course, we were more than aware of it, and we did go. I hadn't been in the offices, but the Museum was not a strange place to me. Aside from the fact that in my three or four years at the Neighborhood Playhouse we used to visit the Metropolitan Museum frequently.

SZ: So you first came in 1941, when you went to work.

SM: December '41.

SZ: And you've said a little bit about Dorothy Dudley. I don't know very much about her.

SM: She was a very close friend of Dorothy Miller's. They studied together at the Newark Museum, and she also knew Holger Cahill (Dorothy Miller's husband) very well. I think both Dorothys may have shared an apartment at one time, but I'm not certain. Dorothy Dudley did a book on Museum registration procedures, perhaps the first of its kind concerning contemporary art. As Registrar, she was well known in the field and liked very much. She was a great gal.

SZ: And that department at that time was how big?

SM: She had about, I don't know, three or four assistants. Dorothy Lytle was there, also Monawee Allen and David Vance. All admirable people. Betty Burnham (she was in the department later on), who lives in California, had an accident in New York City. We all had dinner — Helen Franc, Olive Bragazzi, Letitia Howe, Betty Burnham, and I — just a few days ago, two weeks ago Sunday. We all had dinner, and the next day Betty Burnham was in midtown and was knocked down by a truck, broke her collarbone, and was just badly hurt. I think she's recuperating with friends in New Jersey. I understand she's fine now. One other person, also in the department, was Eric Rowlison, who wrote a very good and useful pamphlet, "Rules for Handling Works of Art," dedicated to Dorothy Dudley. I learned a great deal in that department, actually, and also by working in the Library, so that I had some familiarity of how other departments of the Museum functioned before I got to the Museum Collection department.

SZ: Sure, because registration is critical. Then the library....

SM: They were important in many ways.

SZ: Did you get to know Bernard Karpel?

SM: Yes, yes. Bernard, as everyone will say to you, was a great talker, very knowledgeable about many things and always helpful.

SZ: From this story you told me about having lunch recently, maybe I could ask you to describe what the ambience was at the place when you came — how people interacted, or didn't.

SM: I think at the beginning there was a friendlier atmosphere than in later years. I think the competitiveness...I don't know how to describe it, but it was not so much in

evidence as it was later. Perhaps because later on there was less communication between the departments which sometimes created unnecessary friction. Activities also increased at the Museum.

SZ: Surely, it was smaller.

SM: Of course, that contributed to it. The possibility of getting to know other departments better was there before, whereas later, it was more difficult. Another good friend of both Dorothy Dudley and Dorothy Miller who was head of the Circulating Exhibitions department was Mrs. Osborne [Elodie Courter]. When she was in charge of the circulating department at least we knew what she was planning, because she would come and ask, "If such-and-such a painting was available?" Quite a number of works from the collection were used in the circulating exhibitions here. There was unnecessary rivalry to mention just one — the Friends of the Museum who were in charge of lending works of art for a fee — frequently ignored the advice of the Museum Collection, causing conflicts which could have been avoided. Art works rented were not from the collection.

SZ: But in those first years....

SM: In my first (Museum Collection) years there was a way of understanding and getting to know what was going on which later, I can't say why, became not so.

SZ: You were there during the time that Alfred went through his....

SM: By the time I got to the Painting and Sculpture department, it had already happened.

SZ: Right, but weren't you there when it happened? It happened in 1943....

SM: I was there [across the street], but the atmosphere was very hush-hush-hush. We knew something had happened, everyone was very tight-lipped about it, and sad. But I didn't know what was underneath it all.

SZ: Did you know him?

SM: I'm trying to remember now, when did I first join the Museum Collection — 1951? It was after the war, and it was after he had already been demoted. It was '43. perhaps my recollection of this happening is not as vivid because I was not in the Museum building but on 54th Street at that time. I didn't see staff members, and my dear friend Dudley did not give me particulars.

SZ: That's right, ['43].

SM: So I was there when he wasn't director any longer. It was when he was working on the Museum collection publication that he asked me to start work on it. I don't know how long he had or anyone else had been working with him on it. That's when I saw more of Alfred.

SZ: What about the war years at the Museum? Anything you remember about the impact of that?

SM: Well, yes, there was great concern about the collection. Everything was very secretive. You learned things mostly by osmosis, so to speak, but I did know that the collection was protected and certain things that were extremely valuable were put in places away from the city. There were rumors, always. I remember in particular during the Cuban [missile] crisis. There were all kinds of rumors from trustees. Yes, it was all very, very fearful. I remember someone in Dudley's department — it may have been Dorothy Lytle during the war — said, "What are we doing here? With all this going on, we should be more useful, we should be doing other things."

SZ: But didn't the Museum put on a number of exhibitions that somehow had....

SM: They had a big poster show, I believe. I don't remember.

SZ: Steichen did a couple of shows there.

SM: Family of Man, you mean.

SZ: No, I mean this thing called Road to Victory....

SM: Oh my, yes, that was a very popular show. Yes, that's right, but it wasn't anything that I was involved in or that our department was involved in.

SZ: No, I'm just fishing. Then somebody told me about dances that were held in the garden and that servicemen were invited into the Museum from time to time.

SM: I guess so, now that you mention it. It was personally a trying and difficult time for me.

SZ: Did you feel just in those few years before you really started — I guess we're assuming that was after the war, so up until that time — you in one way or another witnessed this thing that happened to Alfred? And I guess there was a reshuffling of how things were going to be. Anything else about, I hesitate to call it the power structure, but I can't think of anything else?

SM: There was a great change. René d'Harnoncourt came. René was a very elegant man in his way and always tried to make everyone feel at ease. I remember he came to Woodstock (as a few other directors did) to one of the conferences held there. Because my late husband was president of Artists Equity (sponsors of the conferences) we had a big party for all the invited guests. I have a small couch, old-fashioned country-type (lounge), the kind country people would keep out on their porch. It is in the living room, and as soon as he saw it, threw himself on it, giving us a wonderfully amusing picture, but also expressing exhaustion listening to so many speeches. He could be fun and he could be very reassuring. I heard some complaints — "I asked René for this and haven't gotten it yet," and so on. But I appreciated having him there and liked what he was trying to do. I thought of him as a fatherly figure in many ways.

SZ: How did he and Alfred fit together?

SM: I can't say. I don't really know.

SZ: I'm just trying to think of other personalities who were there in the early years. Monroe Wheeler had come already.

SM: Monroe was there a long time before I was. I got along very well with Monroe, had no problems at all. As a matter of fact, Frances Pernas (who had been in his debt), when we were working on the catalogue — PASIT/MoMA, as it's called — I asked if Frances could come help us. Frances had by that time left the Museum. She came back and worked on the catalogue with us, as did Monawee. She was a great friend of Monroe's and knew him very well. Are you going to see Frances Pernas?

SZ: I hope so.

SM: A lovely woman. That was the nice thing about the Museum, that there were people you could like and did like — unlike the supposed fashion world that I had to cope with formerly. People that one did not necessarily cotton to always.

SZ: Would you say that most of the people that you're now talking about that you could meet and like, were they...Alfred's talked about, in that book anyway, as a missionary, which maybe is a bit of an overstatement, but certainly....

SM: His father <u>was</u> a missionary.

SZ: ...as really having a very clear vision of what he was doing. I've gotten the impression from a lot of people I've talked to that they really wanted to be there for the same sorts of reasons — loved modern art....

SM: Yes, absolutely. The devotion and the insight. As a matter of fact, one of the things

that I do want to say to you, which has nothing to do with me but is about Alfred. In a way he eased the path for Yas [Yasuo Kuniyoshi] by recognizing him as an American artist, including him in the Paintings by Nineteen Living Americans exhibition, as he did [Lyonel] Feininger, for example. There was a great commotion at the time because Kuniyoshi, who was Japanese, and Feininger, who really, I think, was born here but lived in Germany, were included in that Nineteen Americans show. I don't think you know — most people don't know — that Japanese were not permitted to become American citizens until 1951, '52, and that was my husband's desire, to be an American citizen, but then it was not possible. I think in the catalogue, for example, Alfred saying "American, born in Japan," made it so much easier for acceptance. He therefore was given the same consideration as four of the other artists who were also not native-born Americans. Someone unlike Alfred would be inclined to exclude him because he was born in Japan. Of course, the most dramatic thing was in 1948, when the Whitney Museum of American Art gave him their first retrospective show — he was the first to have that kind of an exhibition. But by Alfred recognizing the fact that Kuniyoshi had made his home here, he had made his reputation here, most of his instruction and orientation were here, helped, I think, in doing it the way he did, saying "American, born in Japan." That was a marvelous thing. It isn't as though Yas didn't already have a reputation, wasn't already accepted and his work shown in other in American shows, museums, and invited to prestigious exhibitions. It wasn't as though that hadn't happened already; but it had never been explicitly done, I believe, in quite the same circumstances early in Yas's career. It was an important recognition for him. He realized the plight. For example, the Metropolitan Museum has the Hearn Fund. It's only able to purchase work by American citizens. So no matter how good an artist may be, those funds are restricted — to work by American citizens only. They have other funds, and they do have paintings now by Kuniyoshi. But they were not acquired with the Hearn Fund.

SZ: It's interesting, because my memory of it is that it [the Hearn Fund] says "works by American artists," but the way you would define it....

SM: At the time, he was told you had to be an American citizen. So there were

disadvantages.

SZ: That says something about Alfred.

SM: Yes, of course. I remember one time at tea he said to me, "I understand Yas never played golf." I said, "Where did you hear that, Alfred?" "Somebody told me." I said, "That's not true. I just gave his golf clubs to Bob Plate, a painter friend. When he was in Maine, I understand, he played golf more often. This was his way, because [the Museum] owns the Kuniyoshi which is called Golf Player [laughing]. Later, too, when Yas was dying, Alfred and Dorothy did come to see him. Of course, Yas was on medication and it was not a very happy time nor the best time to see him, but it was very good of them to come.

SZ: I certainly want to talk later about Dorothy and Alfred and all of that.... Once you went over to the Museum Collection — and it was within that department, was it not — you started a long history there, right?

SM: I was there for almost twenty-five years; not quite. Excepting I did leave, I think it was in '49. Kuniyoshi was asked to come to Mills College as a guest artist, and I wanted to go to California with him. I asked Dorothy [Miller] if I could have a short leave and she said, "Nope. If we granted you a leave, we'd have to do the same thing with everybody else." So I left. In '51 I was asked if I would want to come back, and I said yes, I'd be delighted.

SZ: You had come back to New York by that time?

SM: We were only to be there [in California] for the summer. That's all that I wanted, to have the summer — not even the whole summer, just to be there for the summer session. That's all that I wanted when I asked. I'd not been to California and I did want to be with him, so I had to resign. I returned in 1951. By that time, the staff, too, had changed in the Museum Collection in just those two years. During my absence from the Museum the Magazine of Art wanted to raise money and they asked if I

would take over organizing or looking after — how shall I put this? They knew that members of the magazine would be permitted to see works of art at collectors' residences, and so they asked if I would take over the project — arrange for proper security, help to be on hand at the collectors' homes at visiting times, and take full responsibility for everything connected with this event. I did that for a brief time.

END SIDE 1, TAPE 1

BEGIN SIDE 2, TAPE 1

SZ: In 1945, when you got to the Museum Collection, Alfred had had his troubles and things had been split up — this was René's solution to this, I think I'm correct — so that Alfred had control of the collection?

SM: Yes, Alfred took charge of the acquisitions committee. The split came when [William] Seitz and [Peter] Selz came and they took over and became The Painting and Sculpture Department — the department I was in became the Museum Collection; that is why I have made the change of name on this copy. It's very hard to reconstruct all this, for me.

SZ: Then just tell me, Alfred was there and Jim Soby was there, right?

SM: Well, Alfred was there all the time. Even though he was no longer the director of the Museum. Soby left (when, exactly, I don't know) but was he there when [Andrew Carnduff] Ritchie was at the Museum? I can't remember. Alfred was given another office and we saw him frequently. He'd come up, and I saw him more often, especially when I was working on PASIT/MoMA. When Seitz and Selz came to the Museum their department was called Painting and Sculpture. They took over Monroe Wheeler's office. Monroe had retired by then. What year did Monroe retire, do you know?

SZ: This is in the '60s. Here's what I think it is; maybe this will help. Jim Soby took over....

SM: [James Johnson] Sweeney and then Soby came in, yes.

SZ: And then there was Andrew Ritchie, and then Seitz and Selz.

SM: Yes. (Alicia Legg worked for Ritchie.) This meant a new department had been introduced right then. At first I didn't know what and how they were going to function. Dorothy Miller felt that she had been pushed back or been replaced by Ritchie. She never said it, and I shouldn't perhaps assume this, but I know that her feelings were hurt. Dorothy was not a person, to me at any rate, who expressed any of this, or said any of this, so I shouldn't be putting words in her mouth.

SZ: No, but you're telling me that that was your perception.

SM: That was my feeling, yes. That was when there was a great change. Neither Soby nor Sweeney stayed very long, actually; I wish Soby had stayed a little longer.

SZ: Did you like him?

SM: Yes, I liked Soby. Sweeney, I think, was not very happy in the post.

SZ: It seems to me that there must have been a built-in tension in that post.

SM: I don't know how welcomed Sweeney was.

SZ: And Soby? Just tell me a little more.

SM: Soby was a gentle, poetic man, in a way, and, of course, he and Alfred got on very well. I think they responded to the same things, and I think they both appreciated each other, so it made for good feelings. Soby himself never seemed to be a man to put pressure on anyone. He wasn't there very long after I first came to the department. I never really got to know him when he was in the department. Later,

when he wasn't well, we used to go to Connecticut, Betsy [Jones] and I and Alicia. We visited him a couple of times when he wasn't well. After his wife died, he himself was failing. I always thought Soby had a very good appreciation of literature as well as of paintings. His letters were always prized and we were eager to read them.

SZ: And he and Alfred got along?

SM: Yes, I think so. I think they were good friends. I think they understood one another. I'm sure Soby appreciated Alfred's abilities and his judgment, and trusted him. I believe Alfred could rely on Soby's support. Soby gave his whole collection, of course, to the Museum.

SZ: Tell me more about Dorothy Miller: what it was like to work for her and what her position really was there.

SM: Dorothy was most devoted to Alfred. They were very close. She conferred with Alfred a good deal, and I think Alfred relied on her, too, very much. Dorothy was rather secretive as far as I was concerned. I think in many ways Dorothy was very brave in accepting me as an assistant. After all, I was an artist's wife — could I be trusted? It was only after a long, long time that Alfred invited me to the acquisitions committee meetings. I was there many years before it happened — which Dorothy could have made happen, but she didn't. She wasn't sure whether I wouldn't go telling everybody about what's happening at The Museum of Modern Art. I shouldn't be saying this, but this is the feeling I had, and it is still difficult to discuss it. She had to share her office with me when I first came to the department. Dorothy finally had her office to herself when (I think it was) [William] Rubin came.

SZ: Okay. You talked about them relying on each other.

SM: Yes. Perhaps I should explain: You see, artists in the '40s were more openly complaining and critical about museums and MoMA. "You're not showing our work, you're not purchasing it," etc. There is a whole chapter that you should hear from

Alice Bacon about seeing artists' work by appointment at the Museum, which I did for a while. They were always after Alfred, after Dorothy, to do something for them, to do something that was not always possible for them to do. However, artists were demanding and speaking up. I was an artist's wife, so naturally there may have been some unease and question whether I was for them only. It was because of Dorothy Dudley, who did trust me and did recommend me, because she knew what kind of person I was, that perhaps Dorothy Miller did take me on. There's no reason why she should have, and I don't actually know how much Dorothy [Miller] trusted anybody else or what she thought of me. Of course, you could look at the other side of the coin and come up with another answer.

SZ: In those shows, the "Americans" shows, this is a question that I ask: were they her choices, or was Alfred behind that?

SM: I'm sure she always conferred with Alfred on all of them. But she had to first come up with the artists. She always wanted his opinion. She went to California, visited artists' studios there, other places as well, to find these artists for the exhibitions. To make her selection, I believe, was a really hard task. [Tape interruption] One other thing I'm very grateful to the Museum for is that they were really extremely kind, when Yas was ill and I knew he had six months to live. During the time he was up and teaching again I continued to go to work because the doctor said, "I don't want you to stay home, get somebody to help" — to give him hope that he would survive, which I did — but there came a time when he was bedridden and asked me to "Please stay." So I had to tell MoMA I couldn't come in anymore. I had to stay at home. I can't remember now how long that was, whether it was more than a month. I'm not sure. They were very kind and considerate; they paid my salary, which was a help at that time. I felt very grateful and appreciative. In my great need, they were there for me.

SZ: And then you went back afterwards.

SM: When Yas died, yes. It was interesting, thirteen years later. Everybody was given a bonus who had been at the Museum for twenty-five years. I was ill at the time when it

happened and was told later, "You missed it, you missed it!" I guess when I'd been away in '49, that eliminated me [laughing].

SZ: Is there anything you can tell me about working on PASIT/MoMA, which was a huge undertaking?

SM: Tremendous, tremendous. The thing that was most difficult was in the reexamination of many things stated previously; dates were changed, mediums were changed by Alfred — all kinds of things turned up that had not been investigated before. Not that I did the discovering of it (I was not asked to make changes), but in reviewing previous information Alfred would say, "No, this can't be this date." As an example: So many times an artist doesn't necessarily put a date on a work of art or might not even sign it. Works that had been in the collection for a long time and perhaps rarely shown, no need had arisen to question the information. I began to panic at the revisions and what I did was to note the changes on the Museum Collection cards we kept in our office. When major changes were made, I'd state it on the back of the card, "AHB," date when made as well. M.C. cards were very much used for labels of works put on view, photographs, cataloguing, etc. Years later, some friends of mine were invited to lunch because [Philip] Guston's family had been invited and they were friends of theirs. [Dick] Oldenburg was sitting next to this friend of mine. She said, "We go to Woodstock," and he said, "Mrs. Kuniyoshi goes there." She said, "Yes, she's a good friend of ours." And he said, "She kept wonderful records," which, when that was related to me, I just thought...[laughing]. That period — PASIT/MoMA — when suddenly things were being crossed out, edited and so on. With hundreds of items in a collection, the only chance to make corrections, and, of course, additions, is when cataloguing for a publication.

SZ: Pre-computer age, also, so it must have been just an enormous job.

SM: David Vance, who would later take over, when Dorothy left, in the Registrar's

department, did know how to run the computer. However, it had to be fed the information first, and as I related above, changes were being made, which could only happen when PASIT/MoMA was published. Then the changed information would be entered in the computer.

SZ: How long did it take to do this?

SM: A long time. I don't know exactly. I did not see PASIT/MoMA until 1977, two years after I left. I was also in charge of photographing recent acquisitions — not doing it physically, but working with Soichi Sunami, the Museum photographer. The photography studio was not very large and just barely adequate. Sunami was often unhappy, rightly so, with the conditions that prevailed. However, he would never think of complaining. I was the one to be critical if the photos, as rarely happened, had to be redone. He would rather had done without me, I think! He was a very good photographer, a modest man, and friendly, but shy. The M.C. photograph albums, which I took care of too, were sometimes vandalized, and I would get very cross about that. I also supplied M.C. photos to the Library for their album. I want to note the important I felt about removing "master" photos from M.C. albums. Paintings, also sculpture, when first acquired, are photographed, documenting the condition of the work at the time of acquisition. It can prove to be valuable if by chance the work is later damaged. Yes, MoMA has the negatives, but it took time to obtain duplicates and no one ever thought of reordering. And the files! The M.C. files when I first came, I almost died. They were so poorly taken care of. Nobody likes to file, so whatever belongs was just thrown into the folder. That, too, I slaved over so that when you picked it up you wouldn't have to spend time searching for related previous correspondence. One other bête noir: Alfred was already forgetting something somewhere, and Dorothy would come running to me, "Sara, would you please find it? He had this letter but he doesn't know where he put it." I would hurry from office to office trying to track it down. That was another time-consuming chore [laughing]. It was all in a day's work.

SZ: Seitz and Selz: Everybody sort of puts them together.

SM: They shouldn't be, because they really worked quite differently. Selz, perhaps, was a little bit more aggressive than Seitz. There was one other thing that occurred to me that I wanted to say, but it's gone.

SZ: From the bête noir story?

SM: Yes. Yes, now I know. I want to mention this, too. I had one of my very serious operations, and Marga Barr was very sweet, and concerned about me. It was after Yas died. I didn't know Marga well, and I'm sure that was because of Alfred telling her that I was in hospital for surgery. She was very nice.

SZ: Does that mean that she wasn't really a presence there?

SM: You'd have to ask someone who worked for Alfred, who was his secretary, not me.

SZ: But for you, you didn't...?

SM: No. I think I was at their apartment for dinner once, but otherwise, no, I had very little contact. Helen — who knew Alfred and Marga previously, before the MoMA period — Olive and Rona [Roob], all the people who worked more closely with Alfred, day to day. They could tell you more about Marga than I. You were asking about Seitz and Selz. Also, I have nothing of interest to say.

SZ: It didn't really affect you that much.

SM: No. It immediately brings Alicia to mind. She's coming to the city. She called me yesterday.

SZ: Alicia Legg? I've seen her. I went down a few times this year.

SM: You did? She's fallen, hurt something in her arm. I asked her if it was the good arm or

the bad one, and it's evidently the bad one. She asked me if I could join her for lunch, but I go to see my nephew over Thanksgiving. I was sorry, because I would like to see her.

SZ: She's lovely.

SM: Yes.

SZ: I'm sorry about that. You were there all through the rocky times with the changes in directors?

SM: Yes. As I say, I was there when Soby was there, when Sweeney was there, and when Selz and Seitz were there, and those directors in-between.

SZ: I was actually thinking of after d'Harnoncourt.

SM: After René died. Then Bill Lieberman was there as acting [director of the Painting and Sculpture department], and yes, when Bill Rubin arrived. Rubin assigned me to visit the members of Gerald Murphy's family who were living outside of Washington, to get as much information that would be of value to his exhibition and catalogue of the artist's paintings. We did not express it this way, but it was understood. When I was there and being escorted through the rooms by the artist's daughter, I noticed an old-time watch on one of the tables. I inquired if that had belonged to her father. She said it had. (At the time, I knew nothing about Murphy's paintings.) I did know references to him and his wife when reading about Picasso. I mentioned this object to Bill Rubin when I returned. It turned out it had figured very importantly in his work. Because of this assignment I thought I was going to work on the Murphy show. It didn't happen that way. Carolyn Lanchner took over and did a fine catalogue.

SZ: In Washington, D.C., did you say?

SM: His family lived there. Talking about this makes me realize I have been away from the

Museum for eighteen or more years. I didn't have very much contact with Rubin, actually. I did not find him a very friendly nor unfriendly man, but maybe it was my fault, I don't know. I didn't mean to be unfriendly, and I wasn't. I think being associated with Dorothy [Miller] may have had something to do with it, so that, since I worked closely with her, mostly in my early days, that may have put him off — or again — being an artist's wife? I made no overt efforts to get to know him better.

SZ: It put you in one place.

SM: Yes, that's right. The Museum last year sold one of Kuniyoshi's paintings. They only had two paintings. In other mediums they do have other work of his, and I made it a point of giving them the prints I owned, so that they are the only ones (the Print department) that have a complete set of his lithographs. I'm diverting from what I started to say. I'll stick to one point at a time. Last year — this is where I started — they sold the other painting they had, which is a still life, in order to buy an early study of Picasso's Demoiselles that was offered at auction. The whole transaction was rather amusing, which I won't go into entirely, but the consequences I did not find amusing, their selling it for a good, hefty price. Prices were not as high for Kuniyoshis when he was alive and when that work was purchased by the Museum. I don't know if you've seen the Picasso. When I saw it in the gallery, it was sort of tacked up rather casually next to the Demoiselles. Now the collection has been rehung, but I haven't seen the rehanging, because I'm only back for a month or so. (But I found out before [Kirk] Varnedoe called to tell me that something was going to happen.) Varnedoe told me that when he first came to the Museum, several Japanese inquired if the Museum would be willing to sell their Kuniyoshis, and he said MoMA said no. They weren't interested. I know that is true because the Japanese people I knew asked me to give them a list of who owned Kuniyoshi paintings. I said, "I can't do that and I don't want to do that," so I'm sure they tried The Museum of Modern Art as well as they did try and succeeded with others. But he said when this study of Picasso's came up at auction, no one had known of its existence and no one at the Museum knew how much it would bring. They knew, however, where there was a chance to get funds for it. Because a Japanese dealer who had his office in the building next to The Museum

of Modern Art and who sort of kept in touch with MoMA had let them know if they ever wanted to sell Kuniyoshi's work he knew someone who would buy it. So MoMA went to him, of course, and the sale was made. He called (prematurely) to ask if I had heard from Mr. Varnedoe. A day or so later, Varnedoe called and said he would like to see me. I said I would come to the Museum, but he said, "No, I'll come and see you," which he did graciously and with candor and full explanation. But I'm still sorry that it happened. The only good thing about it: It went to Kuniyoshi's museum in Japan instead of to another dealer. That's the only happy part of the whole transaction.

SZ: In the middle of that, you were going to tell me something else.

SM: Yes, what was it? It was off on another track, but I don't know...I'm trying to tell you two things at once. Now I know. I interjected the fact that MoMA is the only one I know who has a complete set of Kuniyoshi lithographs. Would you like something — water, tea or something else?

SZ: No, thank you for offering. I could just ask you, since we were there, in the later period, when you said you didn't really have much to do with Bill Rubin, but Bill Lieberman you had more to do with?

SM: He wasn't there in that position very long. I get on fine with Bill [Lieberman]; he's at the Met and I've given them several things.

SZ: That was a pretty rocky period when the two of them were....

SM: Yes.

SZ: What I was asking before about the directors, I wasn't thinking about the directors of P&S, I was thinking about the directors of the Museum. After René d'Harnoncourt retired and then died, there was a period of time when, first, Bates Lowry was hired....

SM: I'd forgotten all about Bates Lowry. That was not a very good time at all [laughter]. It was hard to adjust to that change. No one, somehow, who was appointed had the overall grasp of what made it The Museum of Modern Art. Alfred was concerned about everything from photography to painting to prints to sculpture to the garden — his interests were wide and international. Alfred was an innovator in establishing departments in MoMA which heretofore had not received equal representation with painting and sculpture in an art museum. His broad acceptance expanded our vision of contemporary design, architecture, and photography; and not to neglect the mention of cinema. And no one, it seemed, was able to deal with this as well as he did. Somehow I think that was the general feeling of those who had been there for a while.

SZ: So you're saying that was a real lack.

SM: That was the feeling, I wish I could think of something the others contributed to MoMA. Yes, MoMA did have more exhibitions of contemporary American artists than had happened since Dorothy Miller's shows, when Seitz and Selz were there. Of course, as to directors of MoMA, they, too, had to make some kind of an adjustment. And the Museum had changed; it was different when we were smaller, and we admired Alfred not only for the exceptional and fine catalogues written by him but also his willingness to introduce paths not previously explored. None of the new directors stayed long enough, either, to leave their mark, except René. Thinking back — what about that awful fire we went through.

SZ: You were there?

SM: Yes. As a matter of fact, Alfred was at our end of the floor, far away from the elevators, and we all, instead of running down the hall, we all went into the closest office. I think it was one of the bookkeeping offices. Alfred was there, I guess Dorothy Miller and I, Betsy Jones, and several others. We shut the door but the smoke started to come through underneath the door. There was a window with wire threaded through it that led to the roof of the house next door. Alfred tried to break the window

with a chair. Finally, someone else tried and did break it. We were able to get out and step onto the roof and leave that room, because the smoke was beginning to take over.

SZ: It was really terrible?

SM: It wasn't that terrible, but if we had stayed and couldn't get out it would have been bad. But we were lucky because others, I think, had many more problems about getting out of the building. Alfred may have come in to talk to us about something, and that's why we were all together. It was frightening. The painters had been working on the second floor. We were later told that they had been responsible for starting it — not meaning to, of course. Everybody ran downstairs when we could finally get down off that roof, and started helping to bring paintings out through the "21" building. I wasn't there, by the way, when the "21" building went up. That's when I was away in 1949. Upon my return to MoMA I found the Whitney next to the garden and the "21" building with its flight of stairs.

SZ: But you were there when the sculpture garden was redone, right?

SM: Yes, I think that was done when the new building went up.

SZ: That was in '64, when Philip Johnson did the whole East Wing.

SM: Yes, and the René d'Harnoncourt Galleries were established downstairs. I was so amazed later on, seeing all those named galleries. This was something Alfred not for — if I am remembering correctly — having galleries named after people. I was not for the little Acoustiguides. We were asked at one time about that. Of course, the Museum does use them now. There was a time when Alfred was there and a staff census was taken. I was not for it.

SZ: Because?

SM: Because I want to look first, I don't want to have to listen; I want to use my eyes first, to look. I think they're very useful, but I prefer to see at an exhibition without having something attached to my ears, and perhaps find out what I respond to. I might even make some discoveries.

SZ: Did Alfred have an opinion on what was proper to be for sale in a museum store? Was that something that was discussed, too?

SM: No, not as far as I know.

SZ: I guess it was too early, really.

SM: All I know is that at one time they said (because I asked about some catalogue), that they would only sell Museum publications. They don't do that now.

SZ: No.

SM: They do have other publications. In my time, the bookstore only sold books, catalogues, and posters relating to the Museum Collection and MoMA exhibitions.

SZ: It's a different world.

SM: Yes, that's right. I have to go and see the [Joan] Miró show, I haven't seen it. I've been wading in paperwork. I won't go into that.

SZ: You should go see it.

SM: I intend to see it, but I don't know when I can get there, because I'm going away for a few days at Thanksgiving, so it won't be until after Thanksgiving.

SZ: There was Bates Lowry, then there was the threesome that kind of ran the Museum for a year that included Walter Bareiss, who was a fairly important trustee; and then

John Hightower; and then Dick [Oldenburg], of course. In all that time there started to be a lot of unrest among staff members; there was a strike....

SM: We had a strike, yes, but that was because staff wanted to join the union and the Museum was not for it. I joined the union, but a lot of friends did not. Then they tried to say people who were curators could not join the union. Yes, that's what the whole strike was pinned on. But I was not very active in the union. I wasn't a curator at that time. Finally I became an assistant curator, but it took a long time for that and, as I say, it took a long time before I was trusted sufficiently to be allowed to go to acquisitions meetings. Consequently, when I did go, I kept my mouth shut [laughing].

SZ: So you retired when?

SM: In 1975. I will edit some of this when you give it to me. I'm being very frank, which I shouldn't.

SZ: And you retired because...?

SM: It was time. I think Rubin was rather surprised, but I said, "It's time." I was ready to leave. I had been there almost twenty-five years, and there were other things in my personal life that seemed more important to me, so....

SZ: You'd had enough.

SM: I'd had enough, yes. Also, I had neglected doing anything with the work my late husband left me. I knew I had to take care of it eventually.

SZ: Offhand, is there anything that you would like to add? I don't think anyone will care if I did not add the following. However, for the record in this too lengthy account: My last years at MoMA were divided by spending mornings in the Study Center. The remainder of the day back in my M.C. office. In recalling this routine I have to mention one special highlight: Bill Lieberman walked into the Study Center one day with a

world-famous actress, Marlene Dietrich. To my surprise, she was rather small, but no mistaking who she was. Who will remember another renowned actress, Greta Garbo, frequently having lunch with Allan Porter in the sixth-floor dining room?

SM: Nothing else comes to mind, excepting the annoyance about the recent Kuniyoshi book I mentioned in this interview. [The author's] reply to my objection: "I thought you knew Alfred" — I mean, his reasoning. I replied, "You didn't get this information from me." Sorry to end on this unfortunate note!

END SIDE 2, TAPE 1

END INTERVIEW