

**THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM**

**INTERVIEW WITH: MARGARET McDERMOTT (MM)**

**INTERVIEWER: SHARON ZANE (SZ)**

**LOCATION: THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART**

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**BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE 1**

SZ: I think you were sent an outline of the questions that I want to ask. Tell me a little bit about your background. You come from Texas?

MM: I was born in Texas. My family came to Texas in 1829.

SZ: Oh, my.

MM: So, I'm from a pioneer tradition. I was born in Dallas where I live now.

SZ: And so you grew up in Dallas?

MM: I grew up in Dallas, From childhood I was interested in art. I can remember my mother taking me to the Dallas fair, the State Texas fair. And I was so impressed, when I was four or five, seeing for the first time an art museum. In those days in Texas a wonderful museum included potted palms and statuary, plaster statuary.

SZ: And that was it?

MM: That was it. That was the first.

SZ: In those days how big was Dallas?

MM: In those days -- I'm eighty-six, we're talking about 1917 -- there were 200,000 people.

SZ: So, it was a really small town. . .

MM: Yes.

SZ: And in terms of other cultural things, in Dallas, in your growing up years?

MM: We had Victrola Records, [Enrico] Caruso. . . There was a symphony, but it was a very small one.

SZ: But you did those things?

MM: Oh yes, my mother took me to the museum in the Gas building. We lived in a small town, Highland Park, and my mother was on the Highland Park Art Gallery board.

SZ: Did the art museum get traveling shows at that time? Or was it just really potted palms?

MM: There wasn't very much. They would get traveling shows, and, of course, they would put on their own exhibitions. In 1936 the year of our Texas centennial, our museum moved to Fair Park, where it had its own building for the first time. It had a small staff of no more than ten.

SZ: Now, you told me that you were always interested in art. Were your parents collectors?

MM: No, my parents didn't collect art. I had a wonderful aunt named Mrs. Litcher Stark and she lived in Orange, Texas and she traveled more; had the urge to travel more,

than Texans did in the '20s. She and her husband were collectors. They explored Egypt and bought wonderful Egyptian glass, now in the San Antonio Museum. But mostly they collected American Western art, particularly the Taos School. Her love for art had an effect on me. In 1936, as I said, the Dallas Art Museum moved to Fair Park, the site of the Texas Centennial. It was an important move for the community to have a real museum.

SZ: So just tell me a little bit more. When did you first travel around to see some of these wonderful works?

MM: After I got out of college I was a journalist. . .

SZ: Did you study art in college?

MM: I took art courses, but I was a journalism student. After I got out of college I worked for five years on *The Dallas News* staff. World War II came along in 1941, and during the war, I went overseas -- first to India. After the war I lived in Germany and then Japan. During my travels, living in Europe and Asia, at all times I visited museums, art galleries. My interest in art grew and my knowledge grew too.

As far as the Dallas Museum of Art, I have been on the staff in public relations. I have also served as President, Chairman of the Board of the Museum, head of the Education Department, head of Acquisitions. So, in the fifty years that I have been associated, connected closely with the Museum, I've done it all. Dallas is small enough to be closely, closely associated with many things, and it's big enough where there are many activities. Through the years I've been active in the theater, the symphony, in educational circles -- but the Museum has been the longtime and real firm commitment.

SZ: When you first really started traveling and looking at art, did you have a particular period that was your favorite or that you knew the most about?

MM: I guess everyone is drawn towards Impressionists, but I liked all types of art. I like Indian art. I like the art of Japan, so fascinating with its architecture and gardens. But most of all, the Impressionists are favorites. After our marriage, my husband and I bought Impressionist pictures. This was forty years ago, when they were affordable.

SZ: Well, what about modern art?

MM: I love modern art. I love to see it; study it; learn from it; more about now. That's one reason why it's so very, very wonderful to come to New York and come to The Museum of Modern Art.

SZ: Do you remember your first visit to The Museum of Modern Art?

MM: Yes. In 1962, I was President of our museum and Ruth Carter Johnson Stevenson, my friend from Fort Worth, who was on the International Council, called me and invited me to become a member. I was busy at the time and involved with what I was trying to do in Dallas. I said to my husband, "You know, I don't know whether I want to spend the time and money, because there is so much Dallas needs money-wise". And my husband said, "Margaret, you love New York, you'll meet wonderful people". Which I certainly have. "It's not a life-time commitment," he said. But here I am thirty-five years later.

SZ: So you did. Now was that your actual first visit?

MM: In 1962.

SZ: So you'd never been inside. . .

MM: Oh, I'd visited MoMA many times.

SZ: That's what I . . .

MM: . . .many times.

SZ: Do you remember the first time you came here?

MM: I did not know any of the staff or many of the Trustees, except the de Menils from Houston and Ruth Stevenson. One of the first people I met was Louise Smith who was born in Dallas. She was an important Texas connection, interwoven with her deep association with The Museum of Modern Art. Louise was kind, welcoming. In any event, people I met were so attractive, friendly, interesting that I couldn't wait for the next meeting.

SZ: Well, then, it was 1962. . .

MM: That I became a member.

SZ: That you became a member.

MM: That's right.

SZ: Monroe Wheeler was here, and Bill Lieberman. . .

MM: That's right.

SZ: Do you remember the first trip you took?

MM: The first trip I took was to Quebec, and it was during Expo '64, was it?

SZ: Expo '67.

MM: Expo '64, I think. [Note: the International Council's first spring meeting held outside of the United States was in Montreal in 1967, the site of Expo '67]. It was Quebec. My husband couldn't join me and so I was by myself. I'd been a member a short time, but hadn't taken any trips. In any event, I was looking at an exhibit at a museum dinner evening when Monroe came up to me. Our friendship began by discussing the exhibit. He described his thoughts about the pictures and asked for mine. This was the first of many wonderful conversations I had with Monroe. We became such friends. He would visit me in Texas every year. His visits were something all my Texas friends would look forward to. And later, after his official retirement, Monroe taught at the University of Texas at Austin. So, he had a Texas connection, too. And we Texans certainly held him with great affection and admiration.

I think it might be interesting for me to discuss how the International Council has influenced its members, certainly me. One of the first trips I took was to Peru in the middle to late '60s. [Note: 1968]. Louise Smith and Eliza Parkinson invited me to join them, with René d'Harnoncourt, to spend a day exploring the gold, textile, ceramic museums in Lima. We went to them all. It was a most wonderful experience, complete with a long luncheon. When I got back to the hotel I said to my husband, "These -- Pre-Columbian -- are the most wonderful art works. What an introduction to a new art world. Gene, we are in Texas, between North America and South America, we must acquire this wonderful art for our Museum". On that same trip the International Council visited Argentina. There I bought four or five pieces from a splendid dealer, Ed Shaw, recommended by René d'Harnoncourt. We -- Gene and I -- gave these first purchases to the Dallas museum.

Then, at a later date, through the Edward Marcuses of Dallas, I met John Wise of New York, who had formed in the 1920s a marvelous collection of Pre-Columbian art. Because of my introduction to the masterworks in Peru, I was motivated to assist with the purchase of the Wise Collection, now one of the Dallas museum's

outstanding acquisitions. I don't believe it would be in Dallas, in Texas, as part of our Texas legacy without my day in Lima with René, Monroe, Louise and Eliza. Incidentally -- for the record -- four Dallas families bought and gave the Wise collection to the Dallas Museum of Art, the John Murchisons, Jake Hamons, Al Meadows and -- the McDermotts.

SZ: I was just going to ask, can you think of another way in which you feel you. . .

MM: Well, exhibitions. On one of his Texas visits, Monroe described an extraordinary exhibit proposed for MoMA, African Influences on Contemporary Art [Note: *"Primitivism" in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, MoMA Exh. #1382, September 19, 1984-January 15, 1985; also traveled to the Detroit Institute of Arts, February 27-May 19, 1985 and the Dallas Museum of Art, June 23-September 1, 1985]. He asked would there be interest in funding its catalogue. I thought it an appropriate and fine idea for several reasons. For one thing, our family had given two collections of African art to our museum -- the Clark Stillman and Schindler Collections. Then, too, I wanted to contribute to MoMA. So my family gave \$200,000 for the great catalogue of MoMA's exhibition African Influences on Contemporary Art. The show brought great crowds to MoMA before it traveled to Dallas. At that time, Dallas had opportunity to entertain Eastern friends -- Dick [Richard E.] Oldenburg, Monroe, Liza, Bill Rubin, who brought Jacqueline Picasso, to name a few. So, exhibit-wise, it was important; friendship-wise even more.

About traveling with MoMA. At one time I told Dick Oldenburg, "Through the International Council I've traveled all over the world, with the best people in the world." I mean that sincerely. With the International Council, I've seen South America, Europe, Asia, Japan -- the world with splendid people, under splendid circumstances.

SZ: In a different way I guess. . . that you might have. . .

MM: Don't you think this is enough? [Laughter].

SZ: No. [Laughter]. Are you really tired? Can you do a little bit more? I wanted to ask you, for instance, about the International Council trip to Dallas in 1976 that you played such a large part in organizing.

MM: The International Council has been, since the time I joined in 1962, to Texas twice. It's a cause for celebration when MoMA comes to town. I've been treated so royally in many states and countries, had such hospitality shown me, it is great fun to try to do something for my round-the-world friends. And the Museum was, of course, absolutely delighted. During MoMA's visit there were parties at the museum; our small ranch. I also wanted to show them something of the traditions of my state. I find that when I travel with MoMA, one of the great things is getting to know people that live in that community. When people visit Texas, there certainly are contemporary things, contemporary art to see -- but also I think it important [that] something of the past, of history -- a real feel for Texas -- should be given. I think -- I hope -- guests like it.

SZ: The huge growth of the International Council. . . When you joined it was much smaller in terms of membership than it is now. How has that affected what you do?

MM: It seems to me that every person who is asked to join the International Council is invited for a reason, most important their interest in art, contemporary art. Now, it's a large Council. I have many, meaningful relations and treasured associations today; but my greatest friendships were formed when it was small. For instance, in Peru, there were no more than twenty, twenty-five. In Australia -- in a group of twenty -- I had the opportunity to know Blanchette Rockefeller, who was a great art patron and even greater lady. We were together for almost a month, saw each other every day. I've always said that to really know someone, you marry them or travel with them. And I got to travel with remarkable people who became life-long friends.

SZ: What other people stand out in your mind?

MM: Pardon?

SZ: What other people stand out in your mind besides Mrs. Rockefeller?

MM: Well, Bill Lieberman, of course, is always such fun -- helpful too. In Australia, Bill told me of an artist who in his opinion was outstanding. His name was Fred Williams. Bill, Blanchette and I visited the Williams' home. We were having a glass of wine with Fred, a very relaxed Australian, when I said, "That picture of yours, the one right on the wall, is the one I really like. It's wonderful". Fred said, "Do you want to buy it". Of course I did. It might be interesting that Fred Williams' paintings, which in the early '70s cost \$15,000, now fetches well into the six figures.

MoMA has introduced me to many people -- ones it has been a joy to meet, to re-meet under different circumstances. This trip -- the morning in Soho, Ann Lewis [Mrs. John D.] of Sydney, stopped me for her guest for the morning was Mrs. Fred Williams, who I had not seen for more than twenty years. Mrs. Williams and I had a sentimental talk about the past, for Fred Williams had died several years ago. She's planning a Texas trip, and I invited her to be my guest. Another enriching MoMA experience.

SZ: And you said Mrs. Smith was a good friend of yours?

MM: Louise Smith was born in Dallas. While we had mutual old friends, she had been away from Dallas many years. She visited me, too, and always royally entertained Texans when they were in New York -- many arrived at her door. The last time my husband and I came to New York, before his death, Louise expressed her feeling for him in a touching way. Everyone loved my husband, including MoMA friends.

SZ: Anybody else from the staff whom you remember particularly, whom you had a

particular relationship with?

MM: Many people -- Bill Rubin, Wolfie and Florine [Note: Wolfgang and Florene Schoenborn; she was elected Honorary Trustee for Life], and, of course, Carol Coffin -- no one can say enough about Carol. I'm sure you've heard this again and again. Carol makes everyone feel very important; takes care of everyone's problems, travel problems. I would like to say something -- a lot really -- about the leaders of the International Council, beginning with Beth Straus, who gave me my first warm welcome.

SZ: That's right.

MM: Joanne Stern was next, I think, and Lily Auchincloss -- the two of them together saw that we had great times.

SZ: And then Mrs. Phillips.

MM: Joanne, I think, came back. . .

SZ: Oh, I thought. . . when you said Joanne, I was thinking of Joanne Stern. I think it was Mrs. Straus, Mrs. Stern. . .

MM: . . .and then Joanne Phillips, then Jeanne Thayer.

SZ: Jeanne Thayer, right. [Note: Beth Straus was President of the International Council, 1966-1971; Joanne Stern from 1971-1986; Joanne Phillips from 1986-1991; Jeanne Thayer, 1991-1993.]

MM: And of course, Jo Carole Lauder, now. I don't see how the Museum could attract such a group of dedicated, thoughtful, hardworking, attractive, fun people. But they did [laughter].

SZ: So it's really been fun for you to do these things. Do you have a similar organization at your museum?

MM: No. No. Of course we have lots of organizations, but they're geared to people in the community. There's so much in New York to see. I'm going to be here four days, and I do not know how I'll see half of what I'd like to see and do. I'll go to half the museums, half the restaurants. Coming to New York with the International Council is a true treat because the programs are always different, stimulating, informative, so enjoyable -- and I've been coming for forty years. I feel like I know New York through the International Council as I never would have an opportunity. So, in conclusion. . . I would like to say that the International Council had enriched my life. It's helped me, helped my city, and helped my Museum. I've made lifelong friends. It's meant so much to me. It's hard to explain.

SZ: You've done an admirable job, and thank you very much.

MM: Thank you.

**END TAPE 1, SIDE 1**

**END INTERVIEW**