THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

INTERVIEW WITH: **JEAN VOLKMER (JV)**

INTERVIEWER: **SHARON ZANE (SZ)**

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BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE 1

SZ: Jean, here's how I usually start. Tell me where and when you were born and a little bit about your family's background.

JV: I was born in Queens, in New York, in Ridgewood, and grew up....

SZ: Are you going to skip over the date? [LAUGHING]

JV: Oh, what? December 21st, 1920. December 21st, so that makes a great difference. The whole year goes by, but I always think at the beginning of the year that I'm seventy or seventy-one or whatever, and I'm not until the end of the year.

SZ: You mean you're always making yourself a year older.

JV: Yes, because '20 is so easy, the subtraction is so easy. The family lived in and out of New York. We took a little time out and lived in New Jersey for a while, but most of the time we were in New York, in Queens, the suburbs.

SZ: Queens was the suburbs at that time.

JV: Yes, that's true. Well, we got as far out as Queens Village, I guess, when I was living with my family. After I left, my father went further out on the island. My mother died when I was seventeen and we were living in Queens. My father remarried a couple of

years later and we remained. We still lived out on the island. I went to Washington Irving High School.

SZ: Which was not in Queens.

JV: No, so I commuted from Jamaica Estates, where Donald Trump comes from. As a matter of fact, my father knew Donald's father and my kid brother and sister went to school with Donald. I was too old for Donald.

SZ: You have a brother and a sister.

JV: I have a brother and a sister, and they're both in Florida at the moment. I have one nephew, one blood nephew, and then another one by marriage, and that's about it, I guess. Oh, and three great-nieces, who are monstrous now, they're growing up.

SZ: Was your father in real estate?

JV: No, no. My grandfather came over here because he was, apparently, an inventor. I've said there could be pirates in the background and I couldn't remember, but they came over when my father was about six years old. My father was born in Berlin, and when he was two years old my grandfather and the family moved to London. They lived around London with my father, and then they all came over here. I don't know how many children...I think my father had three brothers. One died, but the two other brothers, and I think maybe his sister, too, I think they were all born...I don't know whether they were born in Germany or they may have been born in England. I never kept track of that. My brother would be the one who would know. I don't want to ask him about it because I used to have to ask my father when he was naturalized because of applications for passports and whatnot. The family lived in Manhattan, apparently, all over Manhattan, and my grandfather must have done something with machinery for a while. He had invented a machine that did welding that was unique, and he finally somehow managed to finance it so that he was manufacturing these things and they

were doing extremely well. He had a place in Newark, New Jersey, and another factory in Chicago. That was when we moved to Maplewood, New Jersey, for a while, and I think it must have been maybe about four years when the thing was going very well. These welding things were used inside radio tubes, so they were doing extremely well; RCA was one of their customers. But then, like all big companies, they didn't want to bother dealing with the little guy and depending on him, so they managed to find a way to the welding themselves. They didn't buy my grandfather out, but they did manage to find a way. Then my father converted the machines so that they would do something that had to do with neon lighting, for the anode and the cathode and ether, and then for a while did very well with that. Then that was going down, too. My brother at that point, too, had gone into business with him. He had left Columbia University, where he would have finished, but my father teased him out of it and my brother joined him in the business. Then my brother took over for him, but then they sold out just in time. They all went to Florida. My brother is still down there; he went into computers, but now he's retired, too. While we were in Jamaica Estates I would commute to high school, because I was interested in art. When I was a kid, my father was quite good at drawing and painting, although very academic and he never did much with it. But he originally, before my father got so involved in this business, was in a factory in Hollis, Long Island, that worked on rotogravure, which is also extinct. He was with that until my grandfather pulled him into the business. I used to draw a lot, and I remember when I was very young I had drawn a picture of an Indian, and somebody looked at it and said, "You know, that's very good. You should be an artist." So I decided then and there that I was going to be an artist, which was a big mistake. I did well in it in grammar school, so then I decided to go to Washington Irving, because at that point there were no art high schools scattered all over the way they are now. It was a girls' school and it gave a very good art course.

SZ: Studio art?

JV: All kinds, actually. You got a very wide background. As a matter of fact, I later went to Pratt [Institute], and I frankly learned more at Washington Irving than I did at Pratt. I

took advertising at Pratt, but Washington Irving gave a well-rounded course. There was one teacher I had in the last year I was there, to whom I owe a great debt, although it's not to her credit. I'll never forget her name: Anna Frost. She was a very good watercolorist, but she didn't want to teach. She was doing it to make a living. So what she would do with her classes was to take us to museums constantly and dump us. We were all wise to this, so that after about an hour Frost would be gone and we could do whatever we wanted. But it was because of that that I got to know all the other museums in New York, because she just thought this was a good way to spend our time. I commuted and was going there for the full four years. Then I took a postgraduate there. They gave a postgraduate where you could earn money. The school then found out that, whether it was illegal or too risky, I don't know, but they discontinued it. They would get clients for the kids and we would do the work and then get a percentage, I guess, of whatever it was. That was a six-month thing. Then, after that I went to Pratt, and while I was at Pratt, the war broke out. One of the fellows that I was rather close to--he was 4-F--got a job at the Modern. I was still very friendly with him, but then when I first started [working] I did a few funny little things, but I finally wound up in Bell Telephone Laboratories.

SZ: But you said that you studied advertising.

JV: Advertising design, yes. Well, you see, at the Modern I didn't start in conservation. I took advertising, but the war was beginning and there wasn't anything much in advertising. I did work for an agency that did men's clothing ads for a while, then a few of my friends got into Bell Telephone Laboratories, and they were making about six times as much as I was. There were loads of openings so I applied for a job. They actually talked me into it; I wasn't serious about it. Well, they called me, and I was supposed to do airbrush work for them, but because they had so many quotas that they had to fill.... Oh,it was so phoney. The various departments had to have so many people working in them in order that the company could get money from the government for the government contracts. It was war work, and the thing is, I wound up filing blueprints. Lots of them were sitting around reading magazines. It was terrible.

Your job was frozen if you were in war work at that time; I bet that was illegal, too, but at that time that was the way it was. You had to get permission to leave; you couldn't quit because you were doing work for the cause. The thing was that once a month or so the word would go around, "Look busy, the colonel is coming." The government would send an inspector to see that their work was being fulfilled, and so you sat around and looked busy.

SZ: What was that work?

JV: Bell did all kinds of secret stuff. Most of the things that I was filing, there were different grades of secrecy. I suppose it had to do with radar and things of that sort. I really wasn't paying very much attention to what those darn blueprints were about, but it had to do with communication. The very secret things I suppose I didn't see, but even if I had, I wouldn't have know what they meant. And then this friend, Frank Vitullo, who was at the Modern called me.

SZ: He was at the Modern doing what?

JV: He was in the exhibitions department. He was doing both exhibitions and, I think, publications under Monroe Wheeler. Monroe was the head of the department.

SZ: He was a graphic artist, too? He had studied the same thing as you at Pratt?

JV: Yes, we had gone to Pratt.

SZ: How long was that program at Pratt?

JV: Three years, and you didn't at that time get a degree, you got a certificate. Now, I guess, they give a degree, and it's a much better school, I'm sure. It was very waspy. I remember being interviewed, and they just wanted to look at me, because they could tell what they couldn't ask me to write on the piece of paper.

SZ: And they needed to know that?

JV: Well, the funny thing was, even at Bell they had to hire a certain quota of blacks and Jews. Well, at Bell they put all the blacks and Jews together in one room doing something. They were having such a good time, I was so envious. It was terrible, really, and I think it was the same at Pratt. It was a very waspy institution at that time. I don't think it is anymore--it can't be. They've changed greatly.

SZ: Does that mean that it was sort of an upper-class institution, too? That wanting to do this kind of thing was something that...?

JV: I don't know. When I went to Washington Irving there were a lot of kids who weren't very well-heeled. Parsons was the other choice. I don't know why I had decided on Pratt. Parsons was a much better school, and I had friends who went to Parsons and did very well. I don't know. I had just made up my mind, the way I'd made up my mind to be an artist. Anyway, I hated lettering all the while I was there, so when I did finish, I destroyed all the lettering samples in my portfolio because I couldn't stand it and I didn't want a job doing lettering. So Frank called me from the Modern and asked, "How would you like a job at the Modern?" I said, "Are you kidding?" Then he said, "It's lettering." I said, "You know I'm wonderful at lettering." Of course, that was when I went to see Monroe.

SZ: You went anyway.

JV: I went for the interview, to see Monroe. I could do it, I knew I could, because I knew the style at the Modern. It isn't really the kind of lettering that you'd have to do for an advertising agency. The thing is, I would have to go at night because I was locked into this thing. When you were in war work, I had to get there at eight-thirty in the morning and I worked all hours and made tons of money. I think it took me about four years at the Modern to even equal what I was netting at Bell. Monroe agreed to interview me at

an odd hour, and I did go for the interview. He said, "This is all well and good, but I have no idea if you can do what the job entails because there's no lettering in your portfolio." So I made a deal with him that if he would let me try for the show--I think it was Religious Folk Art of the Southwest--if he would let me try and do a poster for it to show him that I could do it, he could judge from that. So that's what we did, and it worked out. I was hired.

SZ: At Bell, you said that you were earning a lot more than you started with at the Museum. Were you living at home then, or had you moved out?

JV: I think I had moved out. Yes, because at Pratt I was living in, well, it wasn't a dorm, it was just.... I worked at Macy's, too; as a matter of fact, Macy's got me through Pratt. I quit at Macy's when I was at Bell, but I was doing Saturday-only work and I would work at Macy's during the summer. I finally wound up as a section manager on the main floor at Macy's, so I had saved enough that I could take care of myself. Then, with the money I was making at Bell, I didn't have a small apartment. I think I had roommates on and off.

SZ: Did you have to support yourself? That's the question I'm really asking.

JV: I suppose I didn't really have to, although I don't think my father was doing that well. He had remarried and had two other, younger children. I was fond of my stepmother, but it was time for me to go. I think at that age you feel that you want to...you know, I was twentyish, and once I had had a taste of being on my own at Pratt I just felt that I wanted to go on with my own apartment. I'd go home and have dinner and all that, we were close enough that way. Then my brother went off to school and my sister went to Katherine Gibbs, I think. At that point my father went into an apartment in Forest Hills; it was a duplex, I guess, because we were there for a while. I moved back and forth. That is one thing that hits you when you get to be my age, that, just as I thought I'd never forget any picture I ever worked on, and you do, you just don't have enough room up there. What happened was that after I was at the Museum...I started work

there in '43, and in '49 Monroe granted me a leave of absence and I took six months off and went to Europe, because the war had ended and I had friends over there, so when I got back, I had no money. I did make a deal that I could go back to the Museum. He said, "If you can get somebody to replace you while you're gone, then it's okay." Then I did move back with the family for a while.

SZ: I wanted to just go back to those visits you made to different museums around New York. Do you remember the first time you went to the Modern?

JV: I don't know that she took us to the Modern too often, because it cost money. That was it. We went to [the Brooklyn Museum] a lot, I remember that. Boy, that's a wonderful museum. It's a shame it's got that location, where it's hard to get to, but it's a wonderful museum. Then, of course, we went to the Met, and we went to places like the Hispanic Museum. But I don't remember going to the Modern; I don't think she ever took us there, frankly, because it would have been too expensive for a lot of the kids. Washington Irving was very interesting. It gave a homemaking course, so that you had a lot of poor black people going there because they learned a useful trade, although it's still true, they weren't as well-heeled. But there were some in our classes who were very talented naturally. Maybe she didn't have money herself, Frosty. I often wonder what happened to her. She was a very good watercolorist, but even then she would correct our work in such a way, she had a very farsighted look, and it was too way-out for me. When I first started to work at the Modern, I didn't like modern art.

SZ: This is what I was going to ask: when Frank called you, what did you think?

JV: The thought of working in a museum.... It was the Museum itself, physically, that was so appealing, with the marquee coming out and the curve and in the penthouse with the rug on the floor and the fireplace really worked, although I never saw them make a fire in it, but it had the [Alexander] Calder andirons in it. It was a much more intimate place and very dazzling. It didn't take long before I started to convert. Oh God, and now it's so funny. You go to something like a [François] Boucher show or something

and I think, Where is [Henri] Matisse? Your taste, you develop. My mother died when we were all underage. My father had taken over the business, and men, you know, they never think...I mean, she was never going to die. And she did die, suddenly; she was only forty-two. And we owned everything; there were three underaged children, and so the law protects them, so we had to have a guardian. I became of age the following year. But he would come in because whenever he wanted to do anything with the money he'd have to get my signature. He would arrange to meet me in the lobby; he would not come into the Museum. He'd say, "That nut house?," because he had been trained academically, and he just couldn't see beyond John Constable or something like that. He was very proud of the fact that I worked there and thought it was a very prestigious thing that I was doing, but that stuff was all so crazy. My stepmother was a lot more open to that kind of art, but I don't think he ever really came in, that I can remember. We would meet in the lobby and would sign whatever papers there were, and that was that. So I couldn't convert Pop, any more than I could convert him from being a Republican [LAUGHING].

SZ: But you're saying you worked at it.

JV: I know from his vote, which mine nullified every single time. Sad, but true. I don't know about my brother and sister; I never got that close to ask. I suspect my sister probably did whatever her husband at the time was doing. I think my brother was fifty-fifty.

SZ: So you got to the Modern in the middle of the war. Maybe for a second I should just ask you what your initial impressions were of Monroe Wheeler, and then I'll ask you something about what was going on at the Modern during the war, because there was a lot.

JV: Oh, yes. I liked him but I was afraid of him. I mean, I'd never met anybody like that. He was a funny guy, because he was comfortable with women up to a point, but I think my type, where I was very direct--at that point it wasn't so, but later on, when I got more important positions, when you would go in to talk to him.... Like whenever Edgar

Kaufmann gave one of his "Good Design" shows. Edgar was a talented man, but he was completely impossible. Completely impossible. I later evolved from just doing posters and I would do the floor plans of the shows because I did anything that was involved with drawing. Frank was more involved with the publications part; he was designing the books. When I would work with Edgar, invariably I'd go and tell Monroe, "I'm never going to do another show with him. I'll quit first." And Monroe was so funny, because when he got nervous he'd start moving everything around his desk, rearranging everything. He'd say, "Now we all know that Edgar is very difficult," which he was. He was impossible. He expected the impossible, but the Modern always expected the impossible. They'd been very lucky, and some of the people that are on the top probably recognize some of the unsung heroes. I think that René d'Harnoncourt, who was a man that was very involved with the shows that he did, [recognized them]; even Alfred [Barr], although he had no concept of anything mechanical. At the time, we used wooden letters on the walls. Well, in those days you couldn't buy those things, so I had to draw the lettering on plywood and then our carpenters would cut them out. Every now and then I would get permission to have some new letters made because they would wear out, the plywood would flake away. We had a staff downstairs, they always had a staff downstairs that was absolutely fabulous, and with the wooden letters, that seemed to be something that other museums, for some reason, were very intrigued with that. Over and over again there would be people that would come in and want this explained to them. I would have to show them how we did these wooden letters, people from other museums.

SZ: You mean for things like names of galleries?

JV: Yes. Now they blow everything up and use silkscreen on it. I tell you, if I were working there now it would be such a breeze. They don't know how lucky they are. I had to do everything by hand. I mean, isometric drawings on the wall, you had to draw them; there was no getting all these things.... But now they silkscreen the entrance walls, but when I was doing it I had to draw them. I had to draw it out, do the design and then, if they liked it, I enlarged it, I just blew it up. I did it all the hard way. We went through a

period where when we gave one-man shows the artist's signature was the entrance thing. Then I really got off very easily. First, I'd go to the artist and we'd have a meeting and have them sign however they signed. I remember Georgia O'Keeffe very distinctly; she had that sort of square-tipped nib pen. And Henry Moore. They would do a series of signatures and then we between us would decide which was the nicest. Then I'd make a slide of it and project it on the wall; that was luxury, but I had to be on the nose for that. Otherwise, a lot of the things that were done were pretty unique there, and they had to do them in the shops and I had to do them. But they had a staff of carpenters, and the one carpenter that...he died recently, Danny Clark, the Jamaican one, he was a magician. Everybody adored him. I had him up here just before he died. He and his wife spent the weekend, and oh, it was terrible to see.

SZ: That was because he was sick?

JV: He had gotten lung cancer, and you know, I think it came from the plaster dust--he didn't smoke--and they say walnut sawdust is very carcinogenic, and a lot of the pedestals were made of walnut. He found out he had it accidently. His wife, she's a secretary in a public school, was going for a physical and her insurance, I guess, covered him, too, because he belonged to the carpenters' union, but it's an outside union and they're not very good to their people compared to other unions apparently. So his wife's union offered this physical and she said, "Why don't you come with me?," and just by accident they found this. It took two years, but they found a little spot on one lung, and by the time they got through, between the two lungs they had taken out a whole lung, and he got so...oh, it was terrible to see him. But he could do anything, really anything. Even the man who preceded him, Rudy Simacek, who was Czechoslovakian and was very close to Danny, was also great, but Danny had more of a feeling for what these nuts wanted to do. Arthur Drexler used to drive him crazy. We all liked to work for Arthur, even though it was the impossible, we'd do it once; the difficult takes a little longer, or vice versa. He had very good idea for design, but he had no concept of the fact that you couldn't do it. So, because he didn't think you couldn't do it, they did it. René, on the other hand, asked a great deal of them, but his requests,

although they were extravagant, were also practical. He knew how things were built. He, really, of all the directors, he and Arthur...Arthur appreciated them because he was just a very nice person and he couldn't conceive how these things were done, so when they were done, he appreciated them. A lot of them who couldn't conceive how they were done didn't give a damn afterward. I'll never forget the India show we did with Sandy Gerard. Oh, he was terrible.... I still, when I hear about somebody new coming into the Museum, I'll go to the carpenters' shop and say, "What do they think about them?" Because they get the backstage about what kind of a person they really are. Like Alfred. He had no concept with the wooden letters, no concept; it was magic. But still, he was very sweet about it always. There was one guy, Tommy Dalton, who did all of the installations. What do you call them, the kind that hang the pictures? They always have a team of them, and Tommy was one of the team. He was around at the time of [Edward] Steichen's Family of Man. You know "The Little Flutist"? Tommy had this real Irish sense of humor, and so he put up about three hundred of these things all over the place, and finally he looked around and he said, "Who is this guy, is he running for mayor?" But Tommy was so crazy about Alfred, and it was very funny. Alfred had this thing where he was very interested in...what do you call that thing when they're interested in military maneuvers. I remember the Israeli war fascinated him, because of the way the Israelis handled the whole logistics of the military, how they managed the war. There is a name for it, but I can't remember it.

SZ: But Alfred liked that? I think, actually, that that was in that book.

JV: Yes, and so was Tommy. Tommy was very interested. Tommy's wife was expecting. I guess it was their first child, so Tommy was going to name it Alfred. Well, Alfred turned out to be a girl, but don't you think he didn't call her Alfa all the time? It was very funny. Unfortunately, Tommy left first, but I think he drank himself out of everything. He wound up at CBS down the block, but he drank like a fish. They wouldn't judge. They--the workmen--knew a lot more than I think they were given credit for. René, you know, with the men, they were very willing to do anything he asked because they knew that probably, if you put him to it, he could do a lot of it himself. He always had this

great thing with the shows. He always had to have one night, whether it was necessary or not, where you worked all night. He would buy one bottle of whiskey for the whole crew, everybody, so that nobody ever really got drunk, but we would work all night long, just keep at it, because it was drama and that was what interested him. Then we'd stop and everybody would have a drink with the director. You know, he knew how to manipulate people. I'll never forget, with me, because I had to work with him a lot on shows, with the design of shows, when he inherited, when [James Johnson] Sweeney suddenly left--I think it was the Henry Moore show--it was very late in the game and he had to do the installation, so I had to build the scale model of the galleries, and he did scale models of the sculptures. The smaller it was, the more interested he was. I'll never forget, we were working together, and it was a Saturday, I think, and I had the gallery layout, because if you wanted to move a wall or something I had to be on hand to record, because then I was going to do the floor plan. We were working out the floor plan so the men could start building the walls. And he'd walk around and start singing, and of course I was just a good old New York kid, and I didn't know any of these languages. So he started singing all these very risque songs. Of course, the few words I do know in most languages are those words, so at one point something he said broke me up, and he got so horrified, and he said, "You understand?" I said, "I'm afraid I do." Because he thought he was doing this without my knowing it. But the men respected him and would work hard for him, and Arthur, even though he drove them crazy, because, you know, you'd have a whole show done and.... I forget what show it was where they had to suddenly at the very end sort of build a house at the beginning of the entranceway because he decided that it had to be. He had no concept of what you'd have to do, what you'd have to rip out and put out. Money meant nothing. But his shows were always very good, so that it was worth it in the end. He was one who really understood what the men had contributed, and they realized that, so even though his shows were always difficult, they liked to work for him, whereas some of those others, you'd just think, uh! Edgar was one of them. Edgar would always at the end then send me these very expensive plants from Max Schling or jewelry or something.... I didn't know what to do about it, except go into Monroe and say, "I'm never going to work for him again," and then I'd wind up doing it. He really was a very sad person, I guess; he

just couldn't handle people very well. He had no concept, no empathy for what was involved. That was interesting. When I first started, I just did the posters, and then I got more and more into the production of it and would wind up having to work with whoever was directing the show and order them whatever materials they needed.

SZ: So you did get to know a lot of the curators quite well.

JV: Oh, yes. In those days I worked with all of them--Steichen, the whole crew. I got to know a lot of places in New York that I'm still grateful about, places where you could buy oddball things like, like Dazians for fabrics and whatnot. Boy, that's the one thing I've missed up here. In New York, no matter what you want, you can find it, whereas up here, God help you. You really have a hard time.

SZ: Jean, go back and tell me a little bit about anything you can remember about the Museum and World War Two, any of the shows, Steichen's shows.

JV: They did a lot. Airways to Peace...I'll never forget, we did an inverted globe, which is kind of an interesting thing. I don't remember who designed that show, but they built a globe and then we painted the globe inside instead of on the outside, so while you were in, you know, you could stand in this and see what was opposite what. It was a very interesting concept. I was working on that and I remember being on a ladder and painting the top of the world or something, and Mrs. Abby Aldrich Rockefeller came in, and, oh, she was very excited about this show, and she said, "I must bring my grandchildren to see it, it's very interesting." And then she said to me, "Do you read the London Daily Times?" Well, it just so happened that I hadn't that day [LAUGHING], so I just quietly demurred, because she said that they had a very interesting something or other, and I thought, Oh, boy, she probably had the London Daily Times delivered to the door every morning. But that was one of the shows.

SZ: Was she an imposing presence?

JV: Yes. Very pleasant, but she was a big woman and very...and then I knew who she was.

SZ: Did she spend a lot of time at the Museum?

JV: At that time she was in and out a lot. I don't know for sure, but I know that when we were installing shows and when the show got to a point to where there was something to see, then Alfred would invite them in, I think. It was a good way of keeping them happy about what we were doing with their money. I don't remember being so conscious of when she died or anything, although I'm sure they did things about it. That's because there was so much happening at that time. They had the Dance Archive, and you know George Amberg was in charge of that, and they did a lot with music. Villa-Lobos came, I remember, and then Merce Cunningham was around. I worked with Lincoln Kirstein one time, and he was still in the army and we were corresponding; I was doing a freelance thing for him. I wish I had saved those letters. I was just designing some kind of little brochure for him; it was a nothing thing.

SZ: For something outside the Museum.

JV: Yes, for something that had to do with the ballet, I guess. The letters I got from him, because he was still in the army, about what color to make it and whatnot were absolutely hilarious. I still wasn't used to this type of person, because it was like this little seventeen-year-old that they had hired for Monroe as a secretary at one time, Rosemary. He was working with Edith Sitwell, and, well, Rosemary was seventeen; she'd never heard of Edith Sitwell, and Monroe was so floored by this.

SZ: Floored by the fact that she had never heard of her?

JV: Yes. This was the way you were, you know. The personnel person at that time was Ruth Morton. She's still living, but, unfortunately, she's got Alzheimer's. It's too bad, because she could have told you.... She was very close to Allan Porter. You know

about Allan, I'm sure. They shared an office.

SZ: You were going to say something about Allan Porter.

JV: Well, he was also very close to Rosemary. As a matter of fact, Rosemary, when she got married in later years.... I think they had a secretarial pool, that was it, and that was how they knew her, and Allan and Ruth shared the same office and they were both devoted to Rosemary. I think the secretaries, when they weren't floating around, were based there. She did work for them, too, so they were very fond of her. Rosemary named her first baby after Allan when she got married later on. He was quite a colorful person. Ruth was exposed to a great many things at the Museum. Now it's just as though there's nothing there, but she's still living. Her husband was also at the Museum for a while, Ted Morton. He was a purchasing agent at the Museum. She hired him and said, "The only reason I'm hiring you is because you're single and you're my age."

SZ: And then she married him. [LAUGHING]

JV: Well, it was quite a few years later, but he took the cue and started to date her. It was quite a long while afterward, but they did get married. Now, sadly, she's completely out of it. I have been going down there--they live in Chappaqua--and getting some things. She had a lot of old Museum Bulletins. I don't know whether the library would want them. I think they probably would, because they stopped publishing them.

SZ: They have a few copies of things, but I think anything that is there would be most welcomed by the archives.

JV: Is Clive [Phillpot] still there?

SZ: Clive is still there, and Rona Roob is running the Archives now.

JV: Rona is? Oh, great.

SZ: I really think she'd love anything at all.

JV: I'll call her then, because I have a lot of stuff. I don't know if Ted has any more of it, but I do have things.

END TAPE 1, SIDE 1

BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE 2

JV: There's actually a list of shows that I wonder whether they ever...I don't even remember some of the shows they gave. There was a wonderful show that Bernard Rudofsky directed, Are Clothes Modern? That was where the Rudofsky scandal, I guess, started. That really got some funny publicity. I don't whether he's still living. He was married to--what are they, Austrian or something?--at any rate, they lived rather flamboyant lives. He was interviewed by The New Yorker, and one of the things that came out was that his wife roamed around the apartment nude. That really got things going, because it was part of this show that we claimed we wore too many clothes. I remember I had to do a drawing of a figure as though it were cut in half at the waist, just the cross-section of us at the waist, the skin and then the underwear and then the this-and-that, and it went on and on. He was a very talented and amusing man. They did a lot of good shows like that. They don't do anything like that much anymore. Of course, I suppose the people aren't around, and they're expensive. I don't think they used to cost as much as they do now. But it was very imaginative. During the war the sailors would come in. They had open house. I remember one of the reasons I had to go around taping all of the glass windows was because sailors were walking through them. I don't know whether they gave them anything to drink--I have a feeling they probably did some--but also, lots of times they would come in drunk, I suppose, and they would walk through the glass doors or windows. It's a very common thing, apparently, that's why you do see little dots on windows. They make stronger windows

now, though, and I think a lot of them now are plastic, so you can't do it. But they were having trouble with that. It was always very heavily protected.

SZ: Didn't they give them parties in the garden?

JV: Yes, that was it. I think it was during those parties that we had a little trouble. The garden was so beautiful then. Of course, it still is, I love the garden.

SZ: But it was different how?

JV: Well, it was very rustic. There was gravel on the ground and trees all over the place and no big buildings anywhere. Even the far end of the garden where the restaurant is now was where they put the Japanese house. That was funny, the story of Kobayashi? He was hired as a gardener. He's an artist. Robert Kobayashi. I think he's had a few shows lately. He was Japanese and he was an artist, so he was interested in working at the Museum. He heard that they needed a gardener, so he applied for the job, and of course all he could do was squirt the hose, he didn't know anything about gardening. He's a very quiet, taciturn kind of guy. But he applied for this job and they took it for granted he knew what he was doing, and of course he could do what they needed, so that was fine and he got his foot in the door of the Museum. He wound up at the warehouse with the traveling shows, supervising the packing, and that's where he would get all these pieces of metal he cut out and he was making these little metal boxes. Then he wound up in metal sculpture, and then he painted all the time. They got some very colorful people. Of course, I'm sure you've encountered the business of all the guards who were artists there. There was one guard...he didn't want to run the elevator, and I don't blame him. In those days you had to have somebody in the elevator, running it all the time, and it wasn't the push-button thing. So he made up some story about himself, that physically he couldn't do it, and got away with it. But a lot of them were really artists. Dan Flavin was one, and he was married to somebody on the staff, too, at that time, but a lot of them, I think the exposure was good for them. There was a fellow in the frame shop, Nick Kruscheneck. He was doing well for a

while. I know he bought a hearse, which impressed me, because it's great for hauling pictures around, they would sit very well in the hearse. He was there for many years.

SZ: Sol LeWitt, I know, was one.

JV: A lot of them, and it was very good exposure for them.

SZ: Jeff Koons, too.

JV: Yes, this guy. I don't know....

SZ: He was there when I was first there, but I don't remember him....

JV: There was a very interesting thing. One of the guards, a much older guard, when I first started there, and I guess it was the first Matisse show they gave--I don't remember, it was the one in 1950 or even whether they did anything earlier; probably the one in 1950--and the one very early picture that's quite realistic, it's called either The Breakfast or The Dinner or something and it's a table set, with a maid, a beautiful picture--and this one guard came from one of the big families, maybe the Whitneys. Somebody there, a trustee at the Museum, had gotten him the job, because he had been instrumental in doing something in their family and they felt obligated to him, and he was no longer able to work at work he was doing--I think he was a butler--but he could no longer do it but he wanted to be occupied, I think, so that they got him the job at the Museum. He was guarding, a very elegant, white-haired man, and this picture upset him so because the table setting was all wrong; the knives and forks were all in the wrong place. He would take me over and show me and say, "This should be here." He told everybody about this. Boy, if you ever tried guarding.... I will never cease to appreciate them, because, if you've had to do that you realize it's probably one of the most boring and tiring things. Still, things do happen with them there, like the Guernica vandalism. Their purpose is psychological, but if somebody wants to do something, they'd do it, no matter what. That's true, I think, in any kind of situation like that. That

was quite a day too.

SZ: Do you want to tell me about that now, since we've hit upon it? Even though it's out of sequence, it's okay.

JV: I guess we came back from lunch. It was about two o'clock in the afternoon, and I got a phone call. We had at that time found a very good intern, Joseph Griffin; he was from New York University and he had been interning with us. I got a call from downstairs saying that the Guernica has been vandalized, could you send somebody down? So of course I went racing down. They said with some paint, with spray paint, so I went down and I took Joe with me. We went down and brought, you know, just a little rag, I think, and maybe some solvent. Well, I took one look at the thing and I said, "Boy, we're going to need a lot more than this." So what we did, of course, was shut the galleries so that the public couldn't come in anymore and started to try and work on it. We corralled everybody; we needed rags and whatever we could use to absorb it quickly. The faster you worked, the easier it would be to get it off. But dammit, these letters were all the way across. It was just unbelievable. But what was fortunate about that was, no matter what anybody says about varnishing--and it's a big, big issue; I know they've stopped varnishing there now, because it's always a big controversy that's usually started by some art critic, that varnishing ruins everything--but we had cleaned that picture a number of years before when it was moved. It was on the third floor for a while, inside, and not in the front where you saw it as you went in. When it was there, we worked on it, Tosca [Zagni] and I and Felrath Hines, who painted that picture over there; he later became chief conservator at the Hirshhorn and now he's retired.

SZ: Tell me his name again.

JV: Felrath Hines. He's a black artist and he's very good. He's with a gallery in Washington now. But we had cleaned the picture, and I remember Dorothy Miller looking at us--to give you an idea of how times change, we were all on ladders, working--and she said, "How does it feel to be working on a million dollars' worth of picture?." Boy, that's like a

nickel for a cup of coffee. So, after we did it, we varnished it with this clear varnish that dissolves very readily, because I was worried about the picture, the priming, that Picasso didn't do, and it's only single priming, it's not double-primed, so it's a delicate thing, and being rolled and unrolled.... We had to work on it a great deal whenever Picasso said loan it we had to loan it, and one of the times it came back it was full of creases and cracks and paint losses, so that we had to do a lot of work on it. I infused it years ago--it's infused with wax; that I did all by myself before Tosca was in on it, when I was apprenticing, actually, with the Kecks [Sheldon and Caroline Keck]. But it had varnish on it, we had brush-varnished it, so that saved it. Otherwise, that red paint would still...you'd have to overpaint it, cover it over, because it was penetrating. What happened then was that this nut--not so nutty; I understand he's a pretty successful dealer on the West Coast--he had had his girlfriend notify the press, so they were there, practically. As it happened, [Richard] Oldenburg felt that he had to let them in, which was true, otherwise the rumors were going to be much worse than they were. The press was really so aggressive; they were sticking the camera between my hand and the canvas, they were shining their lights on it, making the paint dry faster. So finally I prevailed on Dick Oldenburg and he brought them all out to the landing and he talked to them there while we worked, because the faster we worked, the easier it was to get off. And that was it. It happened on a Thursday, when we were open late at night, and psychologically we felt that we'd have to get something so that we could show the public that whatever they were hearing about it wasn't so. It was funny, the conservator from Brooklyn was visiting--I guess we'd had lunch with her--Sue Sack, so she pitched in, and everybody in the department was down there, back and forth, and we were using the solvent that I knew would work on removing the varnish without touching the paint film, and that was what saved us. The varnish buffered it, and then we did get it off enough so that I could brush varnish it, and we reopened that evening, and then the following morning, before the building opened, we could edit it. But it was just because of the varnish film that that was saved. It was red Krylon that he had used, and they haven't done anything to him. You know, every time they caught anybody for vandalism, nothing happened. Really, the law is very negligent, I think, for that, for what if that had really been wrecked. When I think of what we went through

getting it out of the building; that was drama in everyday life. Politically, it would have been terrible, and that man got away with murder, so far as I'm concerned. It had been vandalized a few times, although we never caught who did it. It had been slashed, but never seriously. Somebody poked a pencil through it once. I remember one guy caught doing something to the Man Ray. He was a little off his rocker, though, because he took off all his clothes in the men's room and refused to come out. So the police finally draped him in an overcoat and got him out, so he wasn't so punishable. But there was somebody else who they caught doing something. Most of the time they do it for publicity. Usually, it's in conjunction with another vandalism that's been publicized, and they think, Well, maybe I can get my name in the paper that way. That's why the Museum, lots of times when things would happen, nothing was said about it. During the Gertrude Stein thing, it could have been terrible, but it wasn't because, again, it was saved by varnish. Somebody got loose in the early part of that show, where all of the early Picassos were, the more valuable, in terms of money, and got loose with a pen. They put earrings on one of the portraits and [vandalized] quite a few things, in just a small area of the exhibition; the guard must have been somewhere else and they worked very quickly. Luckily, the pictures all had varnish on them and, again, I could get it off very readily just even using water. If I used water on that Guernica thing, for instance, God help me. It would wreck the way it looks. The varnish did buffer it in that case, too. There have been a lot of cases with vandalism where the public never got to know about it, and we find that it's better that way, just because it seems to stimulate the same reaction in people.

SZ: Before you start telling me how you got interested [in conservation] and moved away from what you had been doing, let me just pick up a few things. You came in in 1943, which was the year Alfred was fired. Were you there for that?

JV: Yes. You see, I came in March of '43, so I didn't work much with him before that. I wasn't too conscious of that, except that you'd see him, you know, in the library.

SZ: Because one of the things that's been written, and I'm just trying to see how true it is, is

that when that happened the staff just really coalesced?

JV: I was conscious of the fact that everybody was just terribly upset about it and certainly disapproved, but I hadn't been there long enough. The other thing that might have influenced me--not influenced me, but kept me out of it maybe--was that Monroe and Alfred didn't hit it off too well. I don't know what it was, really, but there was a sort of rivalry there, so Monroe and he were not that close. So Monroe didn't rally to his side particularly, but I know that the other people in the department were upset about it. I think at that time that Frank was and there was a gal, Frances Pernas, who was doing publications; I'm pretty sure Frances was there then, and Frances was devoted to Alfred, because she had worked on publications with him. Again, he was very difficult there, because he was so slow and whatnot. The Masters of Modern Art book and all those things that he did, it took forever, the deadline was never met; but, by the same token, he wrote very good books. I'll never forget, on the Matisse book...I would have to check the color plates very often and tell him the name of what color it would need. That I would do mostly with Frances, but one time I went through it with Alfred, when he was doing the Matisse book; he wanted me there to tell him the name, like alizarin crimson--the names of the artists' colors, the exact name of some of the colors that are in some of the Matisse pictures, which I did. But then, Charles Oscar, who was then in publications, told me that he went through [with Alfred], that they were talking about how Matisse would get these colors, what he would mix to do it, and Alfred said something to Charles, the equivalent of, "Oh, everybody knows that red and green makes purple," something like that. So Charles said, "You know, if Alfred did it, it probably would," because he, again, had no concept of that. I know that in the book I think he mixed up a couple of the things that I had told him and didn't get them right, because he just could not get that kind of thing. I mean, it's like some men can't change a fuse, and for that type of thing he was just not good at all. But he certainly could write. His are the only art books that I can slide through, like What Is Modern Painting?, which I still think is a tremendous book. I recommend it; I don't know whether you can get it so much now, I don't know whether they still publish it, but it gets people off your back. Of course, up here you do hit it more than you do in the city,

especially in these art classes you'll get some of these people who just cannot for the life of them.... It isn't that they're too old, because I'm old, but it's just that the exposure is different. It's true that I can't understand some of the music that I hear. Not "understand"; understand is a dumb word. I mean I can't appreciate it. They do get so that they can see these things more readily, but.... We're going to go see the Cone Collection at Boston, and the teacher put a slide of one of the Matisse reclining nudes on, which, you know, the figure is all.... And one of them says, "What size shoe do you think she wears, a ten?" [LAUGHING] And I thought, Oh dear. They were looking at the Seurat Grande Jatte, and there is a nurse in sort of the center of the picture with her back to you, and someone said, "What is that, a parking meter?" I must say, though, Alfred made it [accessible]. They don't know who Alfred Barr is up here, to a great extent, and that's something. Even in the younger people that come into the Museum now in my department as I was leaving, I couldn't understand that they couldn't appreciate what he had done and what the Museum has done. But that was it. One time we had this hilarious conservation because we were taking in NYU interns...well, not even just from NYU, but when the conservation schools started, in most of the schools their last year is internship, and we had quite a few from the various schools, mostly from NYU because it was easy and also Larry Majewski, who was head of the department there, could con us into this, because that's a tremendous responsibility. After all, I was trained too, although not that way, and I appreciate it. The only way you're going to learn is to have somebody help you with it. They would come in and they wouldn't know who Alfred was or this one, so we had a conversation one time with this Ruth Morton about our generation, talking about what has happened in my lifetime, and I realized that so much...I mean, the industrial revolution has done so much. I remember iceboxes, I remember the ice man, I remember milk bottles, I remember the cream pushing the milk bottle top off. Ruth is Pennsylvania Dutch, and she remembers that down there they didn't have electric lights, the automobile, all these things. Refrigeration. I remember feeling so badly about my mother saying they used to get an orange for Christmas every year, and I thought, Gee.... This was such a novelty because of the refrigeration; it wasn't that they couldn't afford the fruit, it was because it wasn't available. It's the same sort of thing, I suppose, and that's why I was

interested with this Seurat. I did go up and talk to the teacher about it. Philippe de Montebello does this, which I hate. Thank God the Modern sticks to its guns about these walkie-talkie things.

SZ: The audio tours.

JV: Yes. You know, we cleaned all those things after the show. René sent telegrams the same day getting permission to remove the smoke from these small pictures. Maybe they weren't one specific thing, but they were, a lot of them, painted on cigar-box covers. Now, in this guided tour that de Montebello gives, he says they aren't, but he's never unframed one and cleaned it, and we have. I went up and told the teacher that's what they were, because she didn't know that they were. We went last Friday, and she always gets this [tour]. I suppose that's why he's a museum director, she thinks he's marvelous. They had a curator there who also used to date Alicia Markova. That's their function, I suppose. I don't think Dick Oldenburg goes in for that so much, you know. And [Thomas] Hoving, too, how all the ladies donate money, and I think that's part of the thing. But he's never gotten so close to those Seurats that he could be so conclusive about it, whereas we had, and they were, I'm sorry. I figure, alright, it was '58 and this is '91. Of course, I think Alfred would probably be very happy, because he just wanted to pretend that it had never happened at the Museum. I never saw anybody so stricken, you know. It was like going to a funeral. Everybody was so sick about that, and thank God I was out of the building when it started, because it was because of it that the conservation department started.

SZ: I found some memos, and there was obviously a move, they were pushing for it before that.

JV: Oh, yes, but you know how things move. I got bored in 1954....

SZ: I was going to ask you how this came about.

JV: Everybody who directed a show had their own ideas about the art work concerning the poster and the entrance wall; it was up to them, and I just executed it. So there was no opportunity for any design and I was getting bored.

SZ: Was that the way it was when you first started, too?

JV: Yes, but of course everything was so exciting then. I could do a little more, maybe, especially with some people. The religious folk art show, Dorothy Miller was the director, and she's fantastic. Are you going to be interviewing her? Her memory.... She's going blind, and then you never know with her, but her memory for things of the past is so fabulous. She could remember a color and tell you about it. It was wonderful to work with her. She didn't do that many, but she'd let you suggest things. She didn't have a predetermined notion, because she wasn't that kind of an entrepreneur. She was a real scholarly curator, although she didn't like to write--she always made the artists do their own writing--and I don't think she liked to speak much about it, but her eye for art, I think, was better than Alfred's, frankly. She discovered so many artists in those "Americans" shows, and then she installed them, too, although she would get to a point and then she would always want Alfred to edit. She would do a show and then Alfred would come in and they'd work together on it. They worked extremely well together; I mean, they really were a great pair. And he certainly consulted her, especially, I think, on the selection of artists, and paintings. He, too, you know, they could only afford one picture, so what would he do? He'd get the best, the [Arthur] Dove and the [Marsden] Hartley or....

SZ: That he and she would go out and find?

JV: No, either way. The thing is, they would consult on things together. But no, I'm talking about him and the fact of convincing people about things, and then when he liked an artist's work and they could only afford one, he would always manage to find the best. A lot of the things that he selected, these current curators don't like and they're in storage, and that's the way everything works, I'm sure. It'll happen to them, too, as time

goes on. I liked the [Thomas] Wilfred Lumia, which both Alfred and Dorothy believed in as another art form, the color and light and design. Wilfred was a very interesting person, and that was one of my chores, that thing. It was one of the most popular shows in the Museum, but it needed maintenance. He was quite a ladies' man. He would bring Dorothy these lily of the valley; he grew them, and he must have had a fantastic garden. He lived upstate New York and he would bring her these flowers, and of course he always wore blue, everything was blue. He wanted only the women to take care of things, so he decided I knew all about this thing, and I did not. But there was another girl that worked with him that I could hire to come in, because the thing needed cleaning every now and then. Now, I don't know what has happened to it. And the same, of course, with the [Richard] Lippold. These current curators don't like Lippold, so I don't know what they've done with those things. I don't know whether the Met still has theirs up, the Lippold. The Met had a big one, too.

SZ: Avery Fisher Hall still has theirs up.

JV: He was an interesting artist too. Of course, tastes and trends do change.

SZ: Did all of your growing appreciation of modern art, did it just come through being there? You didn't go back and take courses or anything?

JV: No, no. No, I haven't taken courses. I mean, now I'm starting. I really honestly don't believe that you can learn [appreciation]. You can learn certain things, you know, scholastic things, but I mean insofar as appreciating it.... Then telling me what I see in it is crazy; I mean, that's up to you. And as far as the artist meaning what he means, I think that all of that kind of thing, it's a vicarious thing, an extension of egos on the parts of people like Douglas Cooper and whatnot. They can't do it themselves so they have to have somebody else's work to expound on. I don't think Alfred does that so much. I could always read his things. He doesn't really tell me that Matisse was thinking this when he did that. How could they know? They [critics] don't know themselves. Some of the things that I've read about Picasso and what Picasso used, and what I know he did,

he was so tongue-in-cheek and everybody knew that. He was a rascal, and you shouldn't take it seriously. I think that just being around it, as I say, I find that I get bored looking at certain types of things. We went to the Frick the last time we were down for the whole day, and it's interesting what you gravitate to. Now, those things are so different, but there were certain artists that, probably because they relate, I always like, but there are others that I just.... I appreciate what they've done, but they don't stimulate me. I once asked Dorothy, "If you could have your choice of stealing one artist's picture in the Museum, who do you think you'd choose." She said, "I don't know. Probably a Matisse." I sort of feel that way too; I'm not sure, but I was stimulated again because a lot of the Cone Collection is Matisse. I'd love to be able to go to the Hermitage and see those things. I've never been down to the Barnes Collection, either, but that, so far, is what really gets to me more. But, this, too, this fellow....

SZ: What is his name again?

JV: Felrath Hines. His style has changed a lot, but he has a studio down in Silver Springs (Maryland), but he was with the National Portrait Collection for a while as chief conservator, and then at the Hirshhorn. He's married a gal that he met, I think when she was with the portrait collection; they're both retired now. She comes from Connecticut. She had been married before and she has a daughter, a married daughter and grandchildren, up in Boston, so whenever they go up and visit, they come and stay. One of the times Fel was here, he said, "You know, would you like it if I painted you a picture?" We said, "Oh, we'd be crazy about it." So we wandered all over. Tosca wants to hang things all the time, but I wouldn't at the beginning. I said, "Let's just leave everything, I'm so sick of pictures." [LAUGHING] But we wandered all over the house and then finally decided on the site for it. That was around Thanksgiving, and that same year he came up around Christmas, with Dorothy [his wife] and our painting, and he said, "I won't hold you to it," or something like that. But we love it; it works out very well for the area. Actually, it lives with us very well.

SZ: Jean, you said that in '54 you were bored. How did you get [into conservation]?

JV: Caroline Keck came in one day to work on something, and she needed some benzine. The Kecks used to do the work for the Museum--they would farm it out. Sheldon at that time was the chief conservator; I mean, he was the conservator at Brooklyn [the Brooklyn Museum]. Caroline was running their studio on State Street in Brooklyn.

SZ: So you knew her?

JV: I didn't know her. I knew of her. But she came in because there was something that happened to something and the Museum didn't want to spend money on it. Well, they didn't have any money for that; they had money for lots of things, but not that. So they had a limited budget for conservation, and she would come in and do certain things. She came in this one time and she needed some benzine. Well, it happened that I had some in the department because I used it for painting, I guess. She was working in the gallery somewhere and I brought it to her and talked to her, told her I was interested. Sheldon would take apprentices at the Brooklyn Museum, and Caroline at that point felt that the Museum really should have somebody to maintain the collection. The Kecks are marvelous that way. It was doing them out of work, but they were working in the Guggenheim [Museum] together in the conservation department, and they were working in the Modern.

SZ: They were really the premier conservationists?

JV: Yes, they were doing the work here. He was in charge of Brooklyn; I don't know that it paid very well, but his job was extremely responsible there. He ran a service where people could come in once a week and bring things to be examined--not authenticated, but he would give them an idea of their condition, and they would x-ray things. He always had a couple of people apprenticing with him.

SZ: What about it interested you?

JV: Well, I have a leaning toward things that are more mechanical and chemical and whatnot, just intuitively. I'm very good with my hands, and it was interesting what you could do with pictures. Cleaning pictures interested me. So I spoke to Caroline, and Caroline sort of encouraged it at that point and said, "Why don't you see if we can't persuade Dorothy to let you work with Sheldon when he has an opening?" So I talked to Dorothy Miller about it, and she was very enthusiastic. At that point I was still in Monroe's department, and while I was doing that work I was also doing some conservation work...I was into everything. Monroe left me alone. I must say, he was very good that way. As long as the work got done, nobody ever stood over you, and I guess that's still true, to a great extent. You know, you fulfill your responsibility, and whatever else happens is up to you. Because I had a knowledge about color and things of that sort...I mean, I was working on publications and things of that sort, and then, because of the nature of what I was doing in exhibitions, I was into everything, really. You worked with all the departments, on all kinds of crazy problems. When the design department had something that was falling apart and it had to be shown, I would put it together, just because I knew I could do it, it was simple. So we [Dorothy and I] talked about it, and then Sheldon had a couple of people so he wasn't about to take me. But it was a funny thing. Margaret Watherston, who's quite a well-known conservator in New York, had also worked for Dorothy Miller. Margaret is a very bright gal, and the thing is, Dorothy got part-time help for secretarial work, and Margaret was her secretary for a while, but Margaret drove Dorothy crazy because Dorothy's got a certain way of working, it's kind of methodical, and she didn't dictate very quickly. Tosca worked for her for a while.

SZ: For Dorothy?

JV: For Dorothy and for the finance department before she started in conservation. Margaret would get bored waiting for Dorothy to dictate, so she would read magazines and whatnot and drive Dorothy crazy. So they didn't hit it off too well. Well, Margaret was interested in conservation and had, I guess, done some. Anyway, Sheldon took her; he had an opening and he took her. Dorothy heard this and got furious, because

we had already asked whether I could [apprentice]. Margaret may have applied earlier, I don't know. Anyway, Dorothy got very annoyed and she conned Sheldon. I guess Margaret didn't stay with them very long, because she was.... She was Canadian and she probably had had some training. So, as soon as Margaret left, I was it, I started working. Then I worked with him at the museum....

SZ: At the Brooklyn Museum.

JV: Yes. Caroline made a deal that I would come to their studio on State Street and work with her on whatever Museum pictures she was working on, because she did the private work that they were doing, at their studio on State Street, and then I was just working on the Brooklyn collection in Brooklyn, so it was very good experience for me. I started in '54, and we did rig up a little room at the front of 21 West 53rd. I was doing some work while I was still in the exhibitions department. I was juggling both and I was working very long hours to work this out. We were thinking about how we were eventually going to do this, and one of the things was that I had to find someone to replace myself in the exhibitions department. The secretary of Steichen was dying to work in graphics, but he was a very difficult man, and also kind of a terrific--I don't know whether they publicize this--but the womanizer thing. I mean, if you went up the back stairs and he was coming down, you were in trouble. You must have run into that. Well, Monroe realized that he could not take her--Kathleen Haven was her name then--he could not hire her when I was leaving without Steichen blowing his top. What finally happened was that Kathleen quit. She was willing to do that. I forget how long she was out, and I would work with her at home, showing her. She hadn't had too much training, but she was very bright and talented. I just had to show her how to use a triangle and t-square, which isn't that artistic but is necessary for the kind of work she would have to do. I was working with her on things that came up that were related, so that she would have some clue of what to do when she came in. After a discreet length of time, she could be rehired, and that was what happened, so that she could be hired by Monroe.

END TAPE 1, SIDE 2

BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE 1

SZ: You said that you were working with Steichen on The Family of Man? You said he was indecisive?

JV: Yes. He knew what he wanted in terms of material, but not how to display it. We did have a couple of guest directors there, though, and one fellow was awfully nice. Steichen was a very autocratic man and he made life difficult for all of them. He also got people in the act who didn't do what they were supposed to do but got paid for it; maybe they compensated in other ways. He had all these quotes from various books--I don't think they were all from James Joyce, and we had to give them credit lines. He didn't bother with any of that, but the Museum had to think about this, and this gal was supposed to do it and she didn't do it. There was this one quote and I had to find out where it came from exactly and give it proper credit, and Ulysses is a big book. Well, this was very lucky: it was the very last chapter, practically the last page, that this quote was from, so I found it readily. He just dumped everything and left you, and then he never compensated people. I don't think Kathleen ever got a raise when she was working for him. The man who did his copy negs for him, Rolf Petersen, who was the only one that Steichen would trust making copy negs of a lot of the pictures whose negatives were destroyed in the fire, he was so badly paid that, when [John] Szarkowski took over, he was horrified and raised the guy's salary right away. Kathleen was discontent anyway, so she was looking to transfer. Monroe knew that he could never get away with this. Steichen would go to the top and say, "He took her away from me and I need her." Steichen had a lot of clout and was a famous man, delphiniums and all. So what happened was that she did quit, and then started all over again. It was when I got out, and I can't remember whether it was after the fire, because, really, the department started after the fire, but I was already in it. I had a little room in the front of 21 West 53rd and the fourth floor and I was doing some stuff, so we were doing some conservation work. I think maybe Kathleen at that point might have been hired for Monroe.

SZ: Before the fire, in that little room doing what you were doing, how much of a commitment was there in the Museum?

JV: I don't think the commitment was that strong.

SZ: But you were doing it full-time.

JV: No, I was still doing some of the other, as I recall. They would never have...even if I were doing it full-time, they would never have built a laboratory.

SZ: So you were just in a room and then you would go and do a lot of the work somewhere else?

JV: What I could do in the room I would do there--it was a very small room--and then I would do it in the galleries and also the storage floor, "S" floor, we would work on that. That's actually how Tosca started to work with me, because we had a big picture that we had to do on "S" floor and I needed help. So I went to the personnel people and I said, "Who is there on the staff who has had some experience with practical art?" Tosca had worked with a sculptor out in Michigan; she's also good with lots of other things, and she was working part-time doing secretarial work for Dorothy and also working in the treasurer's office. So they told me about her and I interviewed her, and okay. That's how she got into it. [TAPE INTERRUPTION]

SZ: I found a 1956 memo that talked about the problems with air conditioning and noninsulating glass on the south wall. These were reasons that you were giving for pushing to have some kind of....

JV: You know what happened? They would air condition only while the building was opened to the public, maybe a little bit longer, but then they would shut it off at night and then they would turn it on again. This constant on and off and on and off was very

bad for the pictures, but it was going to cost an awful lot of money to revise the thing so they were hemming and hawing about it. They had bought this Monet, the first Water Lilies they bought. Dorothy and Alfred went over to Europe. They went with Sheldon Keck, and they looked at all these Monets, which were out in a courtyard, exposed to the outdoors. Sheldon chose the one that they decided to buy because it had already been treated--it had a glue lining--and it was in the best shape, so he felt that that was the best buy for them. I think at the time they paid something like two thousand dollars or so for it. They brought it over, and it was the first time that this kind of thing had been seen over here. Alfred wanted to initiate the public to it, and right after that Knoedler got into the act. Was it Knoedler? One of the big galleries bought some, and the price started jumping. I remember it went from two to six [thousand] right away, because some of the other galleries were interested because the public took to it right away. Well, it was hanging on the second-floor landing, because it had to be a big space, and the glue in it was reacting [to the turning on and off of the air conditioning system]. I was getting upset because I knew enough about that, and so did Sheldon, and we were saying, "Better to leave it off all the time if you can't do it all day." They never would believe you; this really couldn't happen. What happened was, one night the humidity outside must have changed drastically. We came in in the morning and the thing had absorbed so much water, it was bowing out, and there was a big crack--the paint was popping off. So we got everybody down there to show it to them, and said, "This is what has been caused by this." Sure, the thing tightened up right away when they turned the air conditioning on, so that was a clincher. What is ironic is that that was the picture that was lost in the fire. Then they went ahead and did the revision, and god, it was almost finished, it would have been only a couple of days, but we decided that...you know, the Monets had to be carried up and down the stairs, they wouldn't go in the elevator that we had. They still wouldn't go in the elevator we have now. To see that happening, carrying the things up and down the stairs, is enough to make your heart stand still. So we decided that rather than take that out of the building we would wall it in on the second floor, because they didn't have to do that much to the place, they just had to put ducts in and lower the ceiling. So we decided to put that and the [Candido] Portinari and the Larry Rivers and the Hide-and-Seek and the [Umberto]

Boccioni there, and we built a regular...actually, there were two areas. The Monet was bigger than the other pictures, so they did that separately and it was toward the front of the building. Then they built another storage area further in. They walled it in, but they used masonite, which is flammable.

SZ: This was all done because of the...?

JV: To protect them.

SZ: But they were going to fix the air conditioning.

JV: Yes, they were working on it, but before they were going to work on it...all the other things were taken out. As a matter of fact, they went to the National Gallery. I think it was at that time, while they were doing this renovation. No, maybe that was after the fire. That we'd have to look up, I don't remember. Anyway, the pictures were not in the building. There were a lot of pictures in "21," where the storage was. I remember, vividly, that one of my favorites, the Rousseau Sleeping Gypsy, was at the Kecks's being cleaned; it wasn't in the building or in the building next door. But a lot of the pictures were elsewhere. Maybe that wasn't the time of the National Gallery loan; maybe that was after they were rebuilding the second time. Anyway, they did have all that was on the second floor out of the second floor. We had the Seurat on the third floor and the Juan Gris on the first floor, and those were two loan shows. We thought that they would be safe, putting them in these walled-in niches, and it turned out it wasn't. What happened was that the tarpaulin caught fire, and the heat was so intense there that, when you went down after it, the metal mullions had melted where the windows had been. It was something. I guess the outer walls were still there, too, and they were all masonite, which was flammable and had a few layers of paint on them. The walls that we used to use in the galleries before this, we stored them. I don't know where they were then; I think they stored them down in the carpenters' shop. They were masonite and they were a modular thing that worked very well, actually, very mobile, but they used a type of paint that would cover very well so they didn't have to

scrape them down each time, so they had layers of paint and they were made of masonite, so they were very flammable. If they had been up and the pictures had been on them, the whole place would have konked out. As it is, most of the walls, maybe some of the outer walls, were still there, but whatever was around burned like crazy. These storage areas burned. We looked for the Monet. What happened too was, when they were also doing this, they had left on the top floor, even above the sixth floor, where the machinery is, in a little nook above the sixth floor, somebody had left a water thing open because it wasn't being used. I guess it was for a fire hose. Then, when the firemen came in, they turned that thing on and the water was cascading down all the stairs in the whole building. It was like a waterfall. All of the floors were flooded, and that, really, was what killed this one man. The second floor was flooded, not only from the firemen's hoses, but also from the water that came in. He passed out and fell face-down in two inches of water and drowned. But then when we went in to look for the Monet after the fire was out, I couldn't find anything at all. We had made a special stretcher for that when we got it and there were just the metal parts, and I couldn't even find all of them. It was funny, with the pictures that were in this thing, the Boccioni and all of those, we did get those, they evacuated them down, but the Portinari was bigger in one dimension and it would have had to be carried down the stairs, so they decided to leave it. Then, [Nelson] Rockefeller, being governor and so influential, took a crew from the Trump building that was going up, Turner Construction, and they came in and started working. Well, they sent in first these characters that clean up, and there was this picture and it was dark, there were no lights, and they probably couldn't see what it was, and it was junked.

SZ: That's what happened to that painting?

JV: It went to the dump. Arthur Drexler went over with a couple of other people--I remember Arthur was in charge of this--over to the dump after they found this out, that the workmen threw this picture out. They hush-hushed it so much because it was really Rockefeller's gung-ho thing that had caused it. Thank god it was that picture and none of the others. They went over and couldn't find it. Never found it. Of all of the

things that were in there, that would have been the easiest to repair. There wasn't really much wrong with that except that it was ripped. The others had been scorched or burned. The part of the Boccioni that was burned was the part that projected beyond the [Pavel] Tchelitchew Hide-and-Seek. The Hide-and-Seek had a wax lining, and the wax lining, next to the Boccioni, insulated the whole thing. The wax didn't burn quickly, whereas the canvas went up right away, and the part that was scorched was just the part that was beyond the Tchelitchew. In Larry Rivers's thing, it had a strip lining that somebody had put on, we hadn't done it, and it was adhered with wax. The wax melted and rolled down the front, but wherever the wax had rolled down, that part stayed clean. I had to even it all out because the wax protected the paint from the heat apparently, it insulates, so it was really something. But it was that poor picture that started the whole thing that sacrificed itself. It was because of the Monet that was destroyed that that happened. Of course, then they got the triptych and the other that is very similar to the one they had, they got with the insurance money, because the Museum had a wonderful policy, and I guess it still does because, god knows, they collect enough premiums from them. They are insured for current market value, because it is impossible to keep up with the market as it is, so the Museum is always insured for what it would be up on the market whenever something happened to it. What did they pay, a hundred thousand I think, for the triptych, and he must have paid two, maybe three thousand for that one when he got it.

SZ: Did you say you were there on-site the day of the fire?

JV: We were in the bank in the "666" building. We had had lunch at Stouffer's. It was April 15th and I was putting money in my bank account so that my check to the government wouldn't bounce. We were in the bank and I heard all this, in the middle of "666," in Seaman's Savings Bank. We heard all this rumpus, and so I said, "Oh goodie, maybe the Museum is on fire," and the guards there said, "It is." Well, my god, we went racing out. We were in the arcade of the "666" building, and I took one look over at the windows and remembered where the Grande Jatte was, and all the windows adjacent to it were broken. They had broken the windows even up on the third floor. I thought,

Oh, my god. There was no point trying to get in on 53rd Street, it was a mass of people, so we went around to what was then the Whitney. They were not letting anybody in, but they recognized us and let us in. So we got in and started right away. Dorothy Dudley, the registrar, was there, and what they were trying to do was evacuate stuff but put it in a place where they would know where the heck it was. The fire, by that time, was out for all intents and purposes. What was happening then was the water and the smoke, and no lights, although on the third floor, as I recall, the lights were still on, but you couldn't see because of the smoke. I got a napkin or something from the restaurant that we wet--everybody was doing this--and we tied it around like bandits and went around to try and see what we could do. We did get all the Gris pictures out; they put them in the garden, and they were trying to do it so that they would recognize where they were. And the Seurats...well, we went up the stairs, and you really couldn't see. They had an alarm system on, especially for the little ones and we had also wired them to the wall, so it was hell to get them off. I would go in first and feel along, and if I felt glass on it, I would leave it and go to the ones that were exposed. It turned out this was the biggest mistake you could make. The ones that were under glass got twice as much smoke because the air space acted as a flue, so they were just as exposed, if not more so, than the others. The Grande Jatte, of course, there wouldn't have been anything you could do about that anyway, but that was in the front and they had really walled that in very carefully, sealed it, because they were so worried about the thing. Thank god.

SZ: Because of what you told me about the loan?

JV: The Art Institute of Chicago was given that picture with the stipulation that it could only be loaned once, otherwise they were going to have to keep it all the time, and the only time it could be loaned was to The Museum of Modern Art, and this was it. I don't remember who gave it to them, it would be something that you would have to track down, but that was the story. Actually, what had happened too was that a woman was up in the penthouse having lunch when this happened, and she knew Dan Rich, who was then director of the Art Institute, and she phoned him and said, "You know what?

The Museum is on fire." Well, Dan grabbed their conservator, Louis Pomerantz, who was a friend of ours, and got the nearest plane to New York. By that time, when they arrived, they were coming across 54th Street in a cab, I guess trying to get in the front of the Museum. They passed the Whitney and looked in, and the Larry Rivers was leaning against the wall, that was the biggest thing, and maybe the Boccioni too. At any rate, they thought that one of those pictures was the Grande Jatte. Then they were so upset, but of course, then they got there and found that everything was okay. A few days later everybody in the world came to check it out. They took the glass off and brought it up to the penthouse and had the conservator that they used at that time, a man who was with the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, George Stout--he was a very famous old-guard conservator--and they examined it and decided, I think, not even to clean it, because they didn't feel there had been enough exposure. But the small things...that afternoon René got on the wireless and sent telegrams to everyone who had loaned anything and said reassuring words, then also told them that we would like to clean them. Didn't tell me anything about it. It was a terrible job, because they were also trying to get everything back to reassure everybody. I think the Gris [exhibition] they even wanted to reopen. I can't remember if they tried to do the same with the Seurat.

SZ: So you had to clean all those paintings?

JV: We had to clean everything, and that was only the beginning. We had no place to work. They set up us in the penthouse for a while. We were all over the place. But the offices all had to be evacuated because the wiring was affected throughout the building because of this water exposure. It was awful, everybody was sick. I was so distraught by the whole thing. The French, who were always so great about everything anyway, had given us stipulations that we were not to touch their pictures at all, not anything. One of the things they had loaned us, one of the Seurats, was terribly slack. We were trying to dry everything out. They were all in the Whitney lobby and we were trying to dry everything out, fans going everywhere. There was an oscillating fan, I remember, and whenever it went across this picture, it made the whole thing flop.

When I saw it, the first minute I saw it, I reacted so that, instead of trying to turn off the fan, I put my hand right in the fan. Sheldon yanked me out, but I'd cut my hand up. You were really so punchy at this point, it was terrible. The other thing was, the "S" floor, where all of the Museum pictures were, they were on the floor on little rubber pads to get them off the floor proper, but that floor was flooded. There was a ramp that went from the second floor, where the fire started, down into "S" floor, because "S" was a little lower. The two buildings, "21" and "11," weren't aligned the same. So the water was rolling down there and I realized.... That's it: the pictures were still there, they hadn't gone to the National Gallery. They were all stacked in the front of "S" or all on the floor and on the screens on "S," because that's where the storage screens were. So I realized that there was probably a problem there. The front only was flooded, the back wasn't, so there was everybody, moving [the pictures]. They were bringing things down in the elevator, too. The "21" elevator was working, I don't know why; the damned thing was usually stuck half the time, but then it behaved. So we were taking things out and bringing them around to the Whitney. The staff was working at that, and the fire department broke all the windows on the front of "21" and got a pump and was pumping out the water, so "S" was cleared out pretty quickly. Things went very well.

SZ: You said that this was something that Alfred didn't want anybody to know? What didn't he want anybody to know?

JV: Because the whole thing was so upsetting to him, that we had a museum fire, that he wanted to disown the whole thing. It was just so upsetting to him. It was as though somebody had murdered his best friend, so he just didn't even want to talk about it. I remember Sarah d'Harnoncourt bringing in food. We were all down in the garden. The weather wasn't too bad, it was April, and we were down in the garden, and she would bring food for us to eat while we were really trying to check and see whether we had everything accounted for, and then, what to do. So we started thinking about where to put a laboratory. "21" was still intact, so the back of the fourth floor at "21" they did set up the first conservation lab. I remember the Boccioni took a couple of years to do, because what I had to do was paint one third of that. When we first rehung it, we had a

sign on it. Now nobody knows.

SZ: What was the sign?

JV: Saying that the left third of it is not original. There was an inscription on it, and that we didn't put back. We just left it off. There was a big hole in the left corner, which we repaired. Larry Rivers came in to look at the picture, the Washington Crossing the Delaware, because he was the only living artist involved. He took one look and he said, "It looks toasted." The lower right-hand corner of that was completely burned away. So I said, "What do you want me to do with that? Do you want me to put in an inlay and have you paint it back the way it was?" I showed him what an inlay would look like over the thing. He decided he wanted that. Well, the thing is, the insurance company made a deal with him to do another one. He did do another one, and it was terrible. Alfred wouldn't accept it, and neither would René. He couldn't do it again; something like that you can't duplicate. So he went along with that. I thought, Well, this inlay is a temporary thing, not temporary, but it was something that was always going to look the way it did, so I did it not as though it was forever. If I had known what I know now or knew later, I would have done it differently. When he couldn't redo it, and it took him about a year or so for this, then he decided he wanted to overpaint what was left. Then I had to put a priming on the inlay area that we had put in, and you always saw the seam, because the Jewish Museum was going to give him a show and he wanted this in because it's one of his greatest pictures. We did finally get it so he could paint on it. It doesn't look like the rest of it, but it looked better, apparently, than what he had done. I don't know what they did with the other one, because it belonged, really, to the insurance company, but I never did find out. There was another small Monet that was destroyed almost. That went up to the NYU conservation center. It's one of those six-foot-square things, and I think it's still hanging there. The kids take sections of it and do all kinds of experiments to try and see if the paint can revert, what they can do with it. It's a good guinea pig for them to work on, a fire-damaged picture. The [Wilfredo] Lam we managed to put an inlay in. That was sad because he had just died, and so the widow was very upset.

SZ: That it had happened at all?

JV: Sure. It just seemed to go along with all the other luck he'd had. The Tchelitchew, that has such a crazy history anyway, because that was in a railroad accident. The Kecks, years before, said it needed lining, but the Museum couldn't afford to line it, it would have been a big job. Even then, I think, we couldn't even get canvas that size; it wasn't that available. They were talking about having some woven, but it would have been out of sight, so they just did a stop-gap thing. It had been slashed, but it was done with something so sharp that you couldn't see it. It was a series of things. One of his boyfriends apparently got involved; it was a vendetta kind of thing.

SZ: He came to the Museum and did it?

JV: I guess it was done at the Museum. They could fix so that it wasn't visible, but they said later that it had to be lined. Then they loaned it to Canada, I think, and it was in a railroad accident, so then the insurance company could pay for lining it, because it was badly damaged. There were two rips, and one you could still see; it drove me crazy, I couldn't ever get it to hide. If you don't catch that thing right after it happens originally, it's very hard to hide old damages. You don't see it so readily, but I see it all the time, and it haunts me. But they did line it at that time. So it had a lining and that's what protected the Boccioni, but then it had to be relined. It had actually been scorched up in the corner. He painted that with a different medium. It wasn't linseed oil, it was a poppy oil medium that he used. That's what gives it that very fluid look; it's not the traditional linseed oil medium. It made it trickier to fix. It discolored slightly; we finally got most of it out, but there's a little bit up in the upper left corner that's not quite right. We had to line that, too, and redo the long gash in it from the railroad accident. So that has had a history. Really, the only two that were destroyed was the Portinari and the two Monets. The other Monet, for some reason, they never mentioned. I don't think they'd ever even shown it.

SZ: It was a little Water Lily?

JV: Yes, small. It was six-foot-square, about. Small, for Monet.

SZ: The [Jackson] Pollock was slightly damaged too, right? I found that out somewhere.

JV: The Pollock, I don't know where that was. I think it was hanging on the landing on the second floor. It was on a landing, it wasn't in the gallery. Maybe it was the second floor, because that would have been closer to the fire. That was very stained by smoke. It's painted on raw cotton duck and it has no priming. What had happened was that it was sort of scorched, discolored, and I was trying to get one of the distinguished people in the field, like Sheldon [Keck] or John Gettens, who was a chemist, or any of these very famous old-timers, to tell me what to do, whether it would be alright to try bleaching it. Nobody wanted to stick their neck out. They all said it didn't look well the way it was, because the lower half was okay, but heat rises, and the whole upper half looked toasted, like the Larry Rivers. Finally, I just thought, To hell with it. Nobody's going to tell me anything and the thing is not right the way it is. So I talked to Dorothy and Alfred and whoever else was involved at that point and said that I proposed to use bleach. All I did was use a very mild clorox solution. First, we cleaned it, because there was soot all over, but then this discoloration was still on there. Cleaning it was very tricky, because something that has soot on it and has no priming is not easy. We did a combination of dry cleaning and...I don't think at that point we were using bread. We learned about bread in the Rockefeller fire in Albany on a smoke-exposed painting. The Museum owns this picture now, he gave it to them. There was a [Paul] Klee painted on burlap, with nothing else, and it loaded with smoke and soot, and what are you going to do to get it off? Well, we did finally give a try with breadcrumbs. What we did was take white bread and put it in the Waring blender and make crumbs out of it and then pour it on the picture--there's enough moisture. Then you brace the picture from underneath, rub it in and then vacuum these crumbs up. You can see these crumbs turning black, and it works very well. But at that point, with the Pollock, we didn't know this. The picture did have some sizing in it, so whether we used just very

light moisture to get it off...at any rate, we got the soot off. I tried in just one area, and there are photographs of it in the collections file of this one area, I did it right where two of his drips met, I bleached it, and it looked much better. It wasn't quite right, so I gave it another go with the same solution, I think it was two percent, and then it was just right, so we did the whole thing. Now I'm waiting for it to disintegrate. No, it seemed to be alright. I figured that you could do it with cotton that you wear...well, what else were you going to do? So it did work. I wouldn't want to do it all the time because you really just didn't know. We had a big consultation about it, and it seemed to work alright, so....

SZ: Tell me something about the theory of conservation. You learned it from the Kecks. You mentioned before that varnishing at one time was accepted and now is not, although you think that might be a mistake.

JV: The Picasso show at the Museum....

SZ: The 1980 show?

JV: Yes, with what's-his-name, the one who wrote the book. Richardson. He's British. He and Caroline knocked heads like crazy. He has all these theories. He has a big ego and he knows all about what Picasso wanted and what he didn't. There is a big controversy, especially with the Cubist things, about whether varnish and all the conservation that might have been done to those things, whether it has altered their appearance. There are lots of schools of thought on this. We, today and all the while that I had been working, do not use the kind of varnish that they used when they were first treating these things. They used natural resins, like damar, and most of those natural resins do discolor. They start out yellow; they're not clear. When you're putting it on, you're altering the appearance right away. It's a tone.

SZ: And that used to be done.

JV: That was the only varnish that was available, so that they would use it. They even used

it as a medium or as a glaze. So there was a prejudice against this. When I started, we had all the plastics, and you can really work with them. We can't use all of them on contemporary things; you couldn't use all of them that are available, but there are quite a number that are available that dissolve very readily in mild solvents, which is all that you can use on fairly contemporary pictures. It's what we used on the Guernica. If you apply them the way we do, where you spray them, you can get them so that the picture doesn't look varnished. Georgia O'Keeffe wanted all her things varnished. She worked very closely with the Kecks, and later, I worked with her curator, Doris Bry, and talked to O'Keeffe occasionally on it. She really insisted on it, because cleaning, which is something that has to be done every now and then, especially in nowadays climates and the impurities in the air, it's a strain on the paint film. Well, if you can buffer it with a varnish and just go over the varnish.... Most of the time, the best solvent for cleaning contemporary things is water or water with a very mild detergent in it, but you don't use solvents that much on contemporary things. If you varnish the picture, the dirt is resting on the varnish and you can just go over it with the water and it doesn't get at the picture. I believe in it and I don't care what anybody says. But, if you brush-varnish--and we brush-varnished the Guernica; we couldn't spray it, it was too big, but there are ways of doing that, too--if you dilute the varnish to the right consistency, you can still get it to look very matte. Also, sometimes people don't know this, and if they brush it heavily, and especially with the all-natural resins, they get heavy strokes of varnish on it, and it's very unsightly. I think a lot of these Cubist things...I know that most of the Picasso Cubist [things], somewhere along the line, and while he still owned them, they were all glue-lined. The glue also does something to it. We were using wax. Now they don't use wax so much, they use plastic. I'm not that sold on the plastic because I think it's harder to get off if you want to get it off. Theoretically, the thing is, never do anything you can't undo, which is a lot of nonsense, because, how can you undo a cleaning? You clean a picture, how can you undo it? You can't. You don't put the dirt back on. The thing is, with linings you do like to be able to get them off if it's necessary. I have relined even a lot of the things that I myself have done, because pictures get damaged more than once. Look at the Tchelitchew. That had to be relined and that was a wax lining, and we got it off very

readily. But people like Richardson get these ideas that this doesn't look the way it should. Everything changes. Look at us, for heaven's sake. But he is against the varnish, and it's frightened all of the curators, all of the directors. Even at the beginning, Alfred used to call us in all the time, when we were first starting to use these varnishes he'd get Sheldon and he'd get me and we'd try to explain it to him. He never understood. He just let us use it because he had faith in Sheldon, I think, and in Caroline and, later, me. He didn't really understand it, but the thing is, we tried to assure him that this was just something that was a protective thing. O'Keeffe certainly went for it, hook, line and sinker, because she saw that, if you have a delicate surface, like that one, and I know he would let me varnish it if it needed it, if you have something like that and it's exposed to what you're exposed to in a museum, where you've got clothing and they clean the floors at night, they're not going to take all the pictures down, and they use those buffing machines, stuff gets in the air and it does get dirty, it doesn't stay pristine. Then they loan things....

SZ: So Alfred just went along with what you said. What about Bill Rubin?

JV: Rubin was very amiable. It was funny. He was going over and see Picasso and he wanted to talk the Guitar out of him, the little one. So he decided he was going to give him in return...what was it? It was a Cézanne, I think.... It was a picture that they were going to try to trade with him. It had a varnish film on it. I think it was one of the Cézannes; it's not in the collection now, and it was one of the things that he was going to trade anyway, he was such a horse trader. So he had the picture brought to the lab and said take the varnish off, Picasso doesn't like varnish. We took the varnish off and there it was, and we sent it back to Rubin. Next thing I know, he sent it down again. "Put the varnish back on."

SZ: Because it looked so different.

JV: Yes. The intensity is gone. Bill said, "They're used to it." With oil paint, if you know anything about paint, you know that your pictures change as they dry. If you want them

to stay looking the way they did, unless you change in a very matte fashion and want it to be that way, the one way that you can get it to revert to the intensity is to varnish it then, to give it that intensity. Certainly with these colors that were used in this, it made them look right to him. Maybe it's a question of taste. With me, it's not even so much taste, because frankly, that surface over there [looking at the Hines painting in JV's living room], we probably could have it look just the way it looks by spraying it carefully. All of the O'Keeffe's I worked on we sprayed. If you know how to work with it, if you do it at a distance with a lot of air going through the gun as you're working, the particles get on and the refractive index stays so that the matte look remains. Of course, if you brush it, that's all gone. This is just something that I don't think someone like Richardson you could explain to him, because he's just decided that this is no good. Even at the time of the Picasso show, who was the Frenchman who was there, Françcois whatever-it-is, I can't remember his last name, but we were talking about it.

SZ: Dominique Bozo.

JV: Dominique, not François. I know he had a girl's name. [LAUGHTER] He's so nice, I liked him so much. We had a long talk about it, and the thing is, a lot of the things that were in the show were very dry-looking, and he felt that that was the way that he thought they should. I don't know if Dominique has ever painted, you know, but when you work with oil paint, you realize that oil paint is shiny when you're working with it. Maybe he thought that Picasso looked ahead. [Picasso] said, "Dust is my friend," but Picasso said a lot of things.

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BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE 2

JV: Picasso also swore that he had put red paint in something, that he had used something that we know gave them the old one-two. I'm sure that was the way he was. It was the Student with a Pipe. The paper on that made some people think that was

painted originally, and there isn't a trace of it. We have had it really analyzed. We even worked with a paper conservator on it, and there is no pigment in there, there's none at all. What color might have been in the paper was in the paper when the paper was made. I think he read all these theories about himself, and knowing him and how superstitious and coo-coo he was, do you think he was thinking about all these things, that in two years this was going to look this way? In all the years that I was there I would get phone calls from everybody. The artists who called me with technical questions who were worried about things were generally the artists who weren't much as artists. If they were so concerned about technique, usually their art wasn't so good. The ones that really were great were the ones who....

SZ: They would just leave it to you?

JV: Or just leave it. I mean, they don't care. I talked to Ad Reinhardt. He came in and repainted one of the Black pictures one time in our lab. We set him up and he brought his paint and everything. He was such a sweet man. I said, "This is all well and good, here you are, you're doing this. What am I going to do when you're gone?," never thinking that he would be gone so soon. He said, "It's like anything else, it's like an automobile or whatever." Art is...what was the term he used? It was indicative of the time. His art was really like everything else. Whatever they say about washing machines and whatnot. It's all expendable. Not expendable, but it just doesn't last that long--"built-in obsolescence."

SZ: Degradable.

JV: Biodegradable. I mean he didn't expect that. Of course, then his poor widow had to have some work done because what was she going to live on? There was one child at least; I guess it was just the one baby that they had. But, you know, he never made that much and there she was, stuck, so of course his things were being overpainted. I could never really make myself do it, but I think if an artist gave permission, I wouldn't disapprove. [Ellsworth] Kelly, at the time of his show, would send things out. He got

permission, maybe he didn't even get permission, from the owners. I know there were a couple of things that were going to be in the show that he didn't like how they looked, but he couldn't do anything about it. So he sent them to a guy in Long Island City who used to do this kind of thing and just had it overpainted. It didn't look the same when it came back, and I don't think the Reinhardts could ever look the same. Those blacks, none of them are one black; there are all different colors involved in there. But she had a lot of his palette and he mixed up a lot of these colors. This one time I had to go to Brice Marden's studio. There was a Marden that had been vandalized in one of the shows that we had. There were a number of people involved that were in the show, the one that Jenny Licht did, and somebody poked an umbrella, no, a cane, not an umbrella, because they don't let them have umbrellas [in the galleries], and they poked it through the canvas. You couldn't hide this, it was encaustic, we decided that he could overpaint the whole area because it was one of his banded things. Well, he couldn't match the color. He just said, "I can't." So I went down to his studio and matched the color, and then he painted it, because he just couldn't get the same color again. It was a very subtle color, and he, looking at it, couldn't remember what he put in it; that isn't the way they work. So I just had to figure it out. Of course, I had to experiment with it a little bit; at least, in looking at it I could say, "It has a little of this and a little of that." It's like cooking, you know. They don't think that way, and when they do, they don't work as well. Even [Andrew] Wyeth, who's such a finicky painter--I'm not a Wyeth fan--his things aren't technically that good. A lot of them...well, Christina's World was flaking, and even with all his precision he just isn't that kind of a painter. His good things are good for what they are. I like his watercolors a lot better. Usually, I found that the ones that were really worried about everything that they did, they were too tied up in what they were doing to do anything.

SZ: Did you ever have a situation where you and either a curator or a director had a real disagreement about what to do about something?

JV: I frankly don't remember anything. With Dorothy, now, it was marvelous. I didn't even have to consult them. The only time I got in a little trouble, there was group of things,

and there was a Rousseau that was full of damar varnish. I started to take it off, because it was going to be in a show or something and it distorted the whole picture, it was all yellow. Nothing was said, then Dorothy or somebody realized that it wasn't our picture; it was on an extended loan from somebody, somebody in Europe. She said, "Oh my god, put it back." Well, at that point I couldn't really just put the varnish back. I had to tone the thing. Luckily, I hadn't done the whole picture. So I told her all that. I have since seen the picture, it's been in a lot of shows, and the whole damar coating has been taken off, because it distorted it. Otherwise, we always managed. There's a pro and con for everything, and I did what I was told.

SZ: But with Dorothy and Alfred you basically did it yourself?

JV: With Rubin I would tell him. We would talk about what I would propose. Sometimes I would even show them; that would very often happen, you would do a little test cleaning you can say, "This is what the whole thing is going to look like, do you want it or no?" If they don't want it, you just tone back that [area]. That's easy, and that's what you can do. When I worked privately, I did that very often too. I remember one time I was doing work for the Phillips Collection and there was a John Constable that would have been completely different had I removed it. It had a very funny film all over it. Marjorie Phillips came up and I showed her, and the thing is, I was certain that it wasn't his work because it dissolved so readily. It was added later. It wouldn't have done that if he had done it; it would have been part of the glaze. She agreed, and the picture looked marvelous when it was through. We did one time do something for the Whitneys. John Rewald is their curator. I did a Cézanne for the Whitneys. On all the Museum's Cézannes, too, they all had these very yellowed varnish films. It [the Whitneys' Cézanne] had a white tablecloth; it was yellow, and when I took the varnish off, it was white. Anyway, I would go out to Manhasset, where most of their things were, and even in the New York apartment, and go through with Rewald and look at everything, and then we would decide what should be done. With this one picture, a Cézanne, we removed the varnish on it. Apparently, it was very upsetting to them. They didn't say anything at first, and finally it got back to me. I said, "That's terrible, you

should have told me, because I can make it look the way it did, I can put a tone on it. I just took it for granted because this is what the curators here want with all of the Cézannes and what most museums with Cézannes want." Then they talked to Rewald, and Rewald just let them have it and said, "Don't you dare let her do anything else. That's the way it should look." They got used to it then, but you're used to something and you like it that way, this old master glow. But I was so grateful when the man now, I don't know what's happened with him because he had a stroke, John Brealey at the Met. When he came in they started cleaning their Impressionist pictures. Thank god, because there's nothing worse than an Impressionist thing that looks like a Rembrandt, and that's what had happened. Either it was dirt or it was varnish or it was both in some of these things. When he came in, because the director had so much confidence in him, he let him go ahead and have all those things cleaned for the hanging of the André Meyer galleries, and they looked beautiful. It used to kill me to go in there and see those things.

SZ: Did you do sculpture conservation, too?

JV: When we first started there were little things that we would do, but nothing of any consequence that I can remember. I could do some. I mean, I still wouldn't worry about it. We didn't touch paper much, because, first of all, it's so tricky, and then it needs materials that we didn't have.

SZ: That stuff went out to somebody else?

JV: No. I was given a choice: either I could have a paper conservator or a secretary, so I opted for a paper conservator. But when we first started to work, we budgeted a certain amount of money and I would have people come in, like Marilyn Weidner [Consultant, Paper Conservation, 1967-69], who I still think is one of the best paper conservators in the country, and she worked for us right at the Museum. She told me what she would need and I had everything set up for her. Sculpture wasn't that necessary, but we did that. When we finally built up the department, we had a

sculpture conservator, and they still do have paper and sculpture now. Actually, Antoinette King, who took over when I left, was in paper, but she started in painting first. But paper, it takes a different kind of training and a different approach entirely. Their concerns are very different; one of the biggest things is light, and then they always are fighting about whether to bleach or not to bleach. It's just like us, varnish or not to varnish, bleach or not to bleach, and even to clean or not to clean? There are arguments that have been going on since the beginning of conservation history that will go on long after I'm gone, I'm sure. Look at the controversy over the Michelangelo things. You're always going to have that kind of thing, because people get accustomed to things. Imagine what the Parthenon would look like if it was the way it was. It must have been ugly as all get-out, to our eyes, but if somebody came along who was alive when it was in its hey-day, they would say, "My god, what happened to it, where did all the paint go?"

SZ: You've given me a lot of great examples of things. I know there are a few others, and maybe you can think of others. The [Francis] Picabias, there was an interesting story with those.

JV: You know, that was discovered by accident. That was Grace Mayer. Did she tell you all about that?

SZ: No.

JV: Steichen had painted these things, and I wonder what's happened to them. He was a painter before, that's why he went into photography, and when you saw these things, you would see why. He had painted some pictures, and I guess when he knew Mrs. Meyer, Katherine [sic Agnes Ernst] Meyer, over in Europe, I think that they had commissioned these things for their dining room or something, and he painted them. They brought them over here to Mt. Kisco; they had a big estate there because the husband [Eugene Meyer], you know, was the Washington Post. They had a tremendous amount of land there, and these outbuildings. I guess that once they saw

these pictures in the dining room, they decided that everybody'd get indigestion. Anyway, they rolled them all up. Along with that, and this was around World War I, they rolled up these other Picabias that they had. They were rolled about a broom handle, and it was fifty-eight years later they were found. Grace went up there with...I don't know whether it was Bernie Rabin, who was a conservator, how Bernie was involved, because Bernie got involved originally. They went looking for these Steichens, and they got this big roll of stuff, and when they unrolled it, there were these Picabias. The Steichens...I don't know whether the Museum still owns them. They are gone, all of them. He said he realized he couldn't paint, that's why he went into photography. And believe me, they were done in tempera or something like that, and they were in terrible shape. Grace wanted them for her book and that was really why they were unearthed. I remember they were huge. We didn't do anything to them because it would have taken a tremendous amount of work and tremendous space that we didn't even have at the time. They had this deal, because they all belonged to the Meyers, that they would give the Museum the Picabias if the Museum would accept the Steichens. You might look into it and see what's happened with them, because they wanted them to go on loan once. We were trying to get somebody to take them, you know, they could have them if they'd fix them or something like that. It was really very embarrassing and funny. Anyway, they unearthed these Picabias and two of them, of course, are lovely; the other two are iffy. We did get a National Endowment grant for them [for conservation]. It took a few years. They were so cupped--they were like this--and they were heavily painted and cracked to smithereens. When you hung them up, it was heartbreaking. I realized that you could never, ever make them lie down unless you could adhere them to something rigid. Two of them, they're eight-feet-square, the big ones, and then the other two are six-feet-square. We couldn't get anything that size that wouldn't react all the way, so we finally dealt with a company out in New Mexico and we worked out a hollow-core aluminum panel because I felt the aluminum wouldn't react as much. Usually, these hollow-core panels that we use are made of masonite, with an air space in-between, but that comes only in small four-foot things. They made these panels, but they took forever, and they were still flexible. I had to devise a way to strengthen them from the back. Then, we did line the picture, but even then I didn't

want to put it directly on metal, so I covered the metal with another layer of linen that I got from Ireland. We were looking for linen that was wide enough for this, and I went to the Irish Institute or something to see what kind of Irish linen they would have, rather than the Belgian that we were using, because I thought they might have more of a diversity of textures. So I chose something that they sent over, but when we got it, it wasn't what we had expected at all, so I wound up using the Belgian linen that we usually had anyway for lining the actual paintings. I used this Irish linen to cover the panels and I had to get an adhesive that would work on metal, and it went on and on and on. We got a grant, and then I think we got a little extra money from them and I had to keep doing reports to the NEA. But the NEA is a wonderful thing, and this latest thing just upsets you so. I was called in twice for these preliminary hearings that they've had. I don't think the public and these lousy senators know anything about this, that they do call in a whole series of people who have some expertise in the fields that are involved, because they get applications from everywhere and some of these applications are hard to believe. Even the photographs that they send with them, you know; they're not upside-down or anything like that, but out-of-focus and whatnot. I was there to evaluate if I knew the conservator that they were going to use or if I thought whether or not what they were proposing was feasible. I was one of maybe three or four conservators and we would be down there for a day and go over these many applications for grants. They pay your day; I'd fly down and back on the same day, and you'd spend the whole day just evaluating all of these grant requests. They screen them very carefully, then, I'm sure they must have other people who do it from the standpoint of whether or not it really is art. We did it just about whether or not it was salvageable. I remember that wonderful director from Toledo--he's since retired--the one that made the Toledo Museum of Art what it is. I can't remember his name, Otto somebody-or-other [Whitman]. A marvelous man, and he had such a good sense of humor. He finally said, "Sometimes I wonder whether these things should be saved for posterity." I mean, one of these things was really tragic. But they would have all kinds of things that had to do with art when I was there, and I suppose they do the same with the dance and everything. I was called twice for that, and it certainly is a very good thing. I mean, we couldn't have done the Picabias without it. We got matching funds

from the Meyers on it; they matched what the NEA gave us. They have four pictures, two of them very beautiful. The curator-director has both of them hanging; at least the last time I was there, both of them were hanging. That was a big deal. There were things that you did that I had never done before. There, you just have to be innovative. Of course, you call everybody you know, and we all do that, and I must say, the field here--I don't know whether it's still true, but I have a feeling it is, it used to be in Europe that it's like not giving up your recipes, but here we all knew each other and would call or see or even go and consult to get ideas when you have something that's such a problem. Fel [Hines] called me, for instance, the other day because one of his own things got scratched and he doesn't know whether he wants to tackle it himself. I talked to him about it and told him what I would use, and he said, "I thought about doing that, so maybe I can do it." It was out of the state somewhere, so he was being a little apprehensive, but since he knows what he wants it to look like, I suppose it is logical, but most of the time it's dangerous to let artists touch their own work. He happens to be a conservator, too, but an artist, you never can tell. [Francis] Bacon was trying to come over to repaint part of that one famous picture of his that's in the Museum collection, where he used a color that was defective, it just had inherent vice, there was something wrong with it. We knew that, and we wanted to just get his permission to redo the whole area, scrape off this old stuff. He wanted to come over, and they just wouldn't let him, because they were afraid that he would change the whole thing. Most of the time they do. [Robert] Motherwell once wanted a color removed, and since it was the Museum's and he was the artist he said there's another color, he named the color, underneath it, and now that I've seen it all this while I really feel that I really like the other color better. So he said, "Could you take that off? I don't like it, make the other come back." I said that we had to see what the owners think, and the Museum agreed, since it was the artist, and we could get it off. It worked out very well, but that doesn't always work that way, either. There was enough space between the time he added the [first and] second color, so that the color underneath wasn't affected. He was funny, because after the Rockefeller fire, he had a whole series of drawings and they were in one of the rooms under Plexi and the Plexi sprung out, the heat made it, and it just shot all over the room and the drawings were exposed. Then they even fell

on the floor. He thought his color had melted, but it was a graphic art, something that was done in ink or something, but he decided that the thing had melted, and he kept saying, "That just isn't my kind of a drip." Oh, boy. I just went along with him. What are you going to say? I thought the insurance company could fight it out with him, because I think they were on loan from him to the Albany mansion or something, so he might have gotten something out of it. "His kind of drip." Working with artists can be very funny, and sometimes very enlightening. [Joan] Miró, that was wonderful. He came over at the time of the retrospective, the last big retrospective of his work. He didn't speak a word of English and my French is very shaky, but one of the gals was translating for him. We went through the whole show together, because a lot of people who owned these pictures had asked him to sign them now that he was here, so we were going to see which and where we would put the signature. Then I got the paint for him and we set him up in the lab and did it. Unless you document everything, if you looked at those pictures under ultraviolet now, you'd say those signatures are phoney, because they fluoresce as though they're phoney. But of course they aren't. I kept insisting, and I hope they did record the fact that these pictures were signed at this time, because they were years after the pictures were painted. They looked like something added, and they were added, but they were added by the little guy who did them. He was so funny, because he would look at these things and admire them, oh, ooh, he was blowing kisses at them. Then, with the one that [Ernest] Hemingway owned, The Farm, it was the first picture that he painted that had everything a little bit of everything that was to follow later, and it was a marvelous picture. Hemingway took it with him everywhere. It had been brought over from Cuba, but he had it down in Key West when he was living there. Somebody went to Cuba to get it out, because it was around the time of the Cuban crisis. The then Registrar, David Vance, went and got it, and the thing was a mess. It was all blanched from being exposed to all this moisture between Key West and Cuba. It had a wonderful blue background, but it was all chalky, and there were parts of it that were mildewed, actually, and then staining and cracking. Hemingway agreed that after the show--there wasn't time before the show--that we could do it, but Miró looked at it and he kept saying it has a skin disease. He was so upset about it. So we did, after the show, work on it. It had a seam across

the middle; he had added a piece of canvas and there was a different weave, and along that seam all the paint had cracked because there was an expansion and contraction. One was a twill weave and one was a regular weave, so there was this big fight going on all the time. We worked on it and we got rid of the blanching. Even the stretcher had termites in it. The funny thing is, the termites had eaten the canvas away from behind the stretcher, but not the paint film. I guess they don't like paint film. So the termites had eaten the canvas and I only had the paint in that area. Finished, it was beautiful, it's a wonderful picture. I talked to Hemingway a couple of times but I never saw him. He came in, apparently, one weekend. After it was finished we hung it down on the main floor as you came in before all this revision; there was a place where you could hang it where the stairway went up. He came in, the guard told me, with a very beautiful woman to see it. I don't know what his widow has done with it. The Museum was hoping they would get it, but I think it might have gone to the National Gallery. It's a wonderful picture. He had made all kinds of changes in it, and we took infrared of it to show all these changes. It was a very fascinating picture. That's one I'll never forget. The only autograph I got was on his check, so I couldn't save it.

SZ: What about the departure of Guernica?

JV: That was a howl. Again, people don't understand. You go through all these gestures, like "Don't touch the picture." That thing is how high? It's twenty-odd feet...I can't remember the dimensions on it, but it's a good height. It's over twelve feet, because the third floor is fourteen feet and I think the second floor is twelve, so it's just about twelve. There comes a time, when they were lowering it from the wall, where you do have to brace it, you have to put your hands on it. We had this audience, the Spanish somebody-or-other, everybody, and we were doing it after midnight. It was awful, because you never know what's going to happen with something like that, and all of these dilettantes standing around and you're trying to act so delicately about this thing when you really can't all the time, and it had to be rolled and everything. Thank god, it went well, but we had to take the strip lining off there. We were confined. If we had had more space, but, no, they had to have all these people. I realized that, politically, it was

very important. They had to reassure them that, first of all, they were getting what they paid for. It certainly was not easy. There again, you see, it was the unsung heroes, those wonderful carpenters, Danny and all of them. We built the special roller for it; I mean, supplemented the roller, because the roller had been used so many times. It was tricky. Another tricky thing that never got publicized at the time of the Cuban crisis was, the Museum was very conscientious and they decided that we may be at war and that they should put away the things that they felt were extremely valuable, and that included the Matisse Piano Lesson. There was another one; I can't remember which one it was [Les Demoiselles d'Avignon]. They had settled on a storage place up in the mountains and it had a vault with a door. The thing is, these big, square pictures would not go through the door. I didn't want to roll them up, if I could help it. We were in the middle of a big thing at the Brooklyn Museum; they were doing an exposition on painting conservation and I was working with Caroline Keck and so was Tosca. We were very much depended upon them there, so we had to do all of the work that we were going to do with this other thing in the middle of the night and then go back to Brooklyn. I got the then Registrar to give me the diagonal of the door. Then I got our carpenter, and we made a special thing, an arc with masonite on a framework so that we wouldn't have to roll these things. What we did was take the pictures off the stretcher and put them on this arc, and then we could tack to the arc so it was pretty taut on this arc and it would go through the door. It was two of them. It might have been the two Matisses, I'm not sure. A couple of them were just inched through on their stretchers, but there were two of them that, no matter what we did, we couldn't get them through. We evacuated a lot of the valuable Museum pieces that way. Those had to be done that way, but they hid a lot of the things until that crisis was over. No other museum in the city, I think, did that, but we were worried about, if something happened, what would happen to those things, so they did it. That had to be done quickly and you have to figure out a way to do it. That place was always jumping with stuff. Never a dull moment, I must say. Conservation wasn't just cleaning pictures and all that. It was a little more of all this kind of political thing, too. The Guernica, certainly, and the business of maybe bombing it.... First, there was the big argument of where they were going to put it. I'd like to go and see it. I hear it looks shrimpy. It probably is,

too, behind bulletproof glass, but it certainly is a statement.

SZ: Let's go back just a little. You said you took six months off and went to Europe. Was that your first trip?

JV: Yes, because it was after the war. I had a friend with whom I'd gone to high school who married a guy. They were both in the OWI, the Office of War Information, in radio, where they broadcast and received broadcasts. He, the husband, was Austrian; he had been a judge in Austria and had gotten out. I think somewhere, way in his background, there was a Jewish somebody-or-other. He wound up over here. When Hitler was broadcasting his harangues, Ernest would literally translate for American radio as Hitler was speaking. She, my friend, speaks a number of languages, so that she was there doing other translating, and that's how they met and married. Then they went over and he got a few jobs. He was first with the Graves Commission, I guess. They were tracking down first the American soldiers that were over killed there, and eventually he wound up as cultural attaché in these various places. They were living in Munich at the time, and she said come on over and we can toot around. I thought great, you know. I had about seven hundred dollars and I had already booked passage on the Saturnia, I think it was, when this friend of mine said, "You know, I can get you a free ride. My husband works for General Motors, and they have a charter airline that goes over for some reason." They went by way of Venezuela, I remember. It wound up that I didn't go to Venezuela, but anyway, I did get a free ride. I got my money back from the Saturnia, so I had all that money. So over I went. I had never been there. Again, this was this deal. I had this wonderful gal who was working with me and she had already been there, Florence Bezrutczyk, but I had to get another person to work with her. Monroe said, "If you can do that, everybody owes it to themselves to go to Europe." I had never been there. It was '49, and so I found a girl that Florence liked and they were compatible and it worked out. I would write to Florence everything. She gave the letters back to me, and they are really very interesting to me, my reactions, because I was in the cockpit of the plane when we flew into Rome. That was my first view. When I got on this charter plane, I was supposed to be the sister-in-law or

something of this friend's husband. I was sitting next to this older man, he was very pleasant. He was talking to me, and I noticed that he was getting quite inquisitive about who I was. It turned out, he was vice president of the airline or something like that. He had been with the Flying Tigers. We hit it off very well. He would go up and fly the plane every now and then. What we did, we went down to Bermuda, because Bermuda was trying to get more trade. It had something to do with the automotive thing, too, but this guy, I don't know what his interest was. He was on it because of the airplane. Anyway, we got there about two in the afternoon and we were going to leave at two in the morning if I wanted to stay. We had been flying forever. We left from up here; I think it was Bradley [Field]. We left from a hangar up here, because this was '49, it was right after the war, in this old, rickety propeller plane. When you think of the difference and how long it took and the noise and everything.... He had a hearing problem because he had flown so much during the war. I did get off, and we were entertained by the governor and everything. Then the plane went down to Caracas and came back. I had gotten all the shots for that, but I didn't need them as it turned out. Then we went back through the Azores and then went to Rome. So that was quite an adventure. I could have had a free ride home, but that was the year that Marcel Cerdan, the boxer, was killed in a plane crash in the Azores, so my father said, "You're going to take the ship back." So I came back on the Queen Mary, but I left in October of '49 and came back in March of '50. That was Holy Year in Rome. I was in Rome, and actually, the sister of this friend with whom I later stayed, lived in Rome, so I saw her and I got in a pensione there that was marvelous. I just had the time of my life. Then I went to Munich, which was wonderful then, although everything was a wreck, really a wreck. Even Rome was a wreck. In Florence, the only bridge that was up was the Ponte Vecchio. I was so hooked that I borrowed money every other year to go to Europe again, and saw that it took them I don't know how many years to rebuild that bridge there. It was the one that Michelangelo had designed, and they just couldn't figure out how to get it right. They finally did, of course. It was interesting to see it then. These friends drove me; I even took the Orient Express and I went into Vienna. It was a marvelous experience. I didn't get very far north in Germany, mostly in Bavaria. In Italy, the furthest I got south was Rome. I didn't get to Naples that year. I was in

France. The funny thing is, when I went to Rome I went to this pensione, where you shared the john down the hall. I was walking out of my room and there was this gal who worked at the Museum. She had left, but she was there and I said, "Fancy meeting you here" or something, and then she said something about Frances Keech being there. I said, "Frances Keech can't be here, she's in Rome," and she said, "Where do you think you are?" Her name was Sally Loehmann, and then she later married a guy named Smith, whom she met on the boat on the way over apparently. We traveled together and went into France; I stayed with her in Paris. I went to London, everywhere. It was wonderful. Everybody owes that to themselves, it's true.

SZ: Monroe was right about that.

JV: Yes. And these friends, I would go back and forth and see them in Munich. You forget how small Europe is. They would come and meet me in another country. We really saw a lot and did a lot. I went to Austria when the occupation was on, and saw the difference from the communist occupation, what had been done on the one side and not on the other.

END TAPE 2, SIDE 2

BEGIN TAPE 3, SIDE 1

JV: Douglas Cooper, I'd had no idea who he was, but I'd met him on a bus down there, when I ran out of Italian money and it was a Sunday and I was going from Rome to Florence. We stopped for lunch somewhere, in one of those towns along the way, and I had only American Express travelers' checks and American money, but no Italian money, and nobody wanted either my American Express checks or my American money. So I was sort of sitting near the bus or whatever, getting ready to go back, and these fellows that were on the bus said, "Did you have a good lunch?" And I said, "No, I couldn't have any because...." "Oh," they said, "that's terrible." There was still time, so they dragged me into something and treated me in the name of the Marshall Plan, they

said. Well, it turned out that we got very friendly and were talking and whatnot, and it turned out later that he then gave me his name and address and gave me a few names, because I was going to go to London eventually, and places to look up. Well, it turned out that it was Douglas Cooper. Years later I found out that I was next to someone who was very related to what I was going to get into later, because then I was not doing the conservation work.

SZ: I was going to pick up a few of these things that we just sort of were talking about off-tape, if you want to do that. One was, you were telling me a little bit about Dorothy Dudley.

JV: She really was fantastic. She drove you crazy, because she was very meticulous and very thorough, but she was a very moral and straight woman, very clear-headed about what she wanted. The funny thing was, always the department was looking for ways to improve it, and when they were going onto computer, which she innovated, she wanted to put registration files on computer, the whole department had to go and take computer lessons. Dorothy was terrible with anything mechanical like that, so whenever she got on it, she'd always come up with "SEVERE ERROR." But she did innovate that. It was she who, because of the [Constantin Brancusi] Bird in Space thing, got the Customs laws changed, because they said this is not a work of art, and apparently she worked with the people at the Museum and got enough scholarly opinion that the whole law was rewritten to go along with this. And the same with this insurance thing. She worked out this deal with the insurance company we use, Huntington Block, who must be a millionaire now. He was a very bright young insurance person who was smart enough to realize the importance of this. She must have worked with him and other people in making them realize that for an institution like the Modern, you couldn't possibly keep reevaluating everything. First of all, they don't know the monetary value; they always have to check with the galleries to see what the current market value is. So she worked out this deal where they would go along, for a higher premium, I suppose, but for a steady higher premium, they would go along with the current market value thing. Then, of course, the whole thing with the

indemnity and all this business with foreign travel. We had a funny thing happen, and you realize how sharp insurance people can be, in both directions. We had loaned a [Ernst Ludwig] Kirchner Street--the Modern has two of them; it's the bigger one, I think, that's the later one--to Germany. They put a hole through it, they gashed it; I don't know how, I don't remember, but it happened in Germany, there was a rip in it. There was a painting on the back of that picture, and it has a semblance of a composition, so they felt they wanted to have you be able to see it. We had taken the stretcher off and photographed the whole thing. A lot of it is visible with the stretcher. So we got it back and I was examining it with the adjustor and with their adjustor; the German insurance was going to cover it, but our people were there too. We were talking about repairing it, and I said, "Of course, the repair is a little complicated because of the picture on the back." Well, the German guy pricked up his ears right away, while we never realized what was going on. I said it was going to make it a little tricky because we probably should use fiberglass so that you can see it, so that it will make it a little bit more difficult to repair than it would be if it was just a straight, frontal thing. Well, it turned out that he goes back to his company and says that the picture on the back was never insured, so they were trying to claim half or some crazy thing like that. It was the craziest thing. I guess they wouldn't pay the whole claim, so because of that, now, I think they still insist that if foreign countries borrow our pictures, they pay our insurance people for insuring it. They will no longer allow them to use foreign insurance companies, that was just because of that crazy thing. These things can get so complex. Dorothy innovated all kinds of packing, with, of course, these magicians downstairs. Also, she wrote everything out, and she trained people. When you went into her department, you weren't just put there and told, "Okay, there it is." You really had a regular training program. I don't think it's that way anymore, to that extent. She had somebody working with everybody; she'd assign somebody to each new person so that they would get shown the whole thing. She would even have them bring them around and introduce them to everybody. It was really a good indoctrination. She was a very good person for that. And then she apparently with the museums associations did a lot of work, so that a lot of the registration things that are used nowadays are because of her. She went to the Newark Museum school.

SZ: The other thing you mentioned was Calder's Circus and how he came and....

JV: I don't know whether he did it regularly, but one time he was going to give his Circus up in the penthouse and the whole staff was invited. Everybody sat on the floor, including Calder. He would take these things and he would wield them. His wife was working him and he'd signal to her and then he'd turn on the phonograph, and then he would make all these things work. It was just such fun. He was such a wonderful guy. He did it for the whole staff. We went through the whole Circus performance, with music. I think we then had refreshments later. At openings he would always get drunk, then he would pick you up, grab you around the waist and swing you around. Boy, you'd be black-and-blue the next day. Jim Soby one time gave a party at his place, and Calder was there with this Allan Porter. Allan was six feet tall, and Calder lifted him up and Allan's feet touched the ceiling and left two footprints there. Well, Soby would never have the house painted after that, at least not the ceiling. He thought that was so great. You did see more of the artists. In the file, if you ever want to have some fun, they have the artists' files, and supposedly when you acquire a new work of art they're supposed to answer all the questions on it. Well, some of them do and some of them don't; most of them don't. Calder's is very amusing, what he answered for some of the questions. They're really a lot of fun. One thing, with Soby, too, apparently Allan Porter had a file of Soby's memos. Soby was one of the funniest men alive. He was a very serious person, but he wrote these hilarious memos. Anybody who got anything from him saved it; Allan had a big file, and, actually, we don't know what happened to it. I don't think it was stolen, but I don't know, they were talking about everything. He really saved it, because he thought that someday it could be published, because it was so interesting. Alfred wrote good memos, too, you know. But that was a good way of intercommunication. Some of them were a lot better than others.

SZ: Do you remember all the upheaval of the late '60s and early '70s with the search for a director?

JV: Yes. Bates Lowry, that was another disaster. He came in and started spending money like there was no tomorrow. So then, when [John] Hightower came in, they were going to start firing everybody. As a department head then, I would go to these meetings and they would even lock us in, lock the door. It was really scary.

SZ: Because they didn't want anybody crashing the meeting?

JV: I guess they didn't want anybody coming in and listening to what we had to say. René, you know, he came in and, first of all, he didn't want to become director right away; he wanted to feel his way through. I must say, he was very good. I didn't always agree with him, but I do think that for what they need as a director he was a very good director. He gave himself away to me one time, because we were going to have some kind of a show that was going to be tricky, maybe with the Andean gold or something like that, but it was going to be a lot of work for me and a lot of pain in the neck. So he invited me out to lunch and we were talking about this. I don't know, he got off and forgot who he was with and why, and he started saying, "You know, when you get in a situation like that is, you take them out to lunch and you just butter them up"--which is exactly what he was doing to me. He said, "You know, make them feel relaxed about it." I thought, Oh, boy, you're doing it.

SZ: But that was often the right thing to do there, you think?

JV: I guess he did, yes. The thing is, the thing he did, he was close to the people. No one was afraid of him. I never bothered going to him that often because I didn't have occasion to have to. He let it be known that you could confide in him, whereas I think some of them were more aloof. He did take people seriously, I think; he couldn't always do a lot about it, but.... I know that he was popular with most of the people, and that was sad that so soon after [he retired, he was killed]. You feel that he probably would have, with the shows he was planning.... His shows were so good. Oh god, I'll never forget, in the middle of the night, during the [exhibition] with the feather cape. He put it on, and of course he was as big as some of those chiefs, dancing around with

this gorgeous feather cape. [Miguel] Covarrubias, was there, and Covarrubias was a big guy too, but very pudgy; he was not as tall as René, but he was tall, and he was quite heavy and round. They were singing in Spanish. Of course, this had nothing to do with Spain, but still.... He really, I think, would have enjoyed doing some more shows. That's what he was hoping to do, and it's a tragedy to go the way he did. His secretary said, "I no sooner got through doing the list for the party for him than I have to do the list for the funeral." There again, it reflected on him, because most of the men in the shops were invited, whereas a lot of the people upstairs weren't, because she knew who he would want. It was such a sad thing. I don't know, the whole series of things that happened then, and with the strikes...it was all mishandled. They should never have had that meeting; it wasn't necessary. Look at what happened at the Met. It's just sheer perversity, I think. They just got very stubborn about it, and that shouldn't be. I don't know how active they are now. Are they doing anything? But it shouldn't be. It wasn't necessary to do it that way.

SZ: What do you think it did to the institution?

JV: It demoralized everything and separated everyone. Even the fact that now the unions don't support each other. I mean, when the guards go out, the others don't go out, and vice versa. Now they have to go through this whole hassle and there's always the threat of having to go out again. It created a lot of ill will. Some good things came out of it. One couple got married when they were sharing a sleeping bag on 54th Street to prevent people from coming in. You know, they did all kinds of sneaky things that were really petty, and you lose respect for people that way. I mean, they were smuggling the milk for the restaurant in across the roofs or something, I forget what the situation was, and everybody found out about it, everybody found out about everything. The staff did some funny things, too, but, as a result, it just made for bad feeling where it hadn't existed before.

SZ: What about the issue, because it was something we talked about at lunch which I'm not sure was clear the way it was phrased before, but what you told me at lunch was

that, when you first came to the Museum, in order to make your own ends meet, you were still working at this job at Macy's that you had had, and that most people, almost everybody, really, who worked at the Museum could afford to work there.

JV: Look, the place got so much bigger, and museum work is a profession, it's not a dilettantish thing. The Museum was very small then. A lot of people were volunteers. We were stuck with people that we had to work with, including what Rockefeller brought in. He was paying people off to keep quiet about his shenanigans, that kind of thing.

SZ: So people were hired because...?

JV: They were hired because the trustees would want them, because it was a favor to these people. There was Francis McIlhenney, who never did anything; they thought they would get the McIlhenney collection, I think. I don't know what his job was, but he sat in an office all day long sorting his own slides from trips he took. I know he was earning money, they were paying him. People were very upset about this. They weren't getting more income. I had Ruth Morton, who had been in personnel and then left--she was teaching up here in Bedford for a while--she was very interested in conservation and she had a lot of free time, so she would come down and volunteer. She was interested in learning, and she was working with us for a long time. I didn't have any money to pay her, but finally somebody from the treasurer's office said, "It's about time you put her on the payroll." But I was never very good at arguing for money. I'm not a fundraiser; I could never do that kind of thing. I would never qualify as a museum director, that's for sure. I finally did have to ask for [funds]. That was easy because it was from the treasurer's office that they said she should be paid. But then you always have to ask for raises for your people and whatnot.

SZ: But as an issue, the fact that the staff felt so underpaid....

JV: Well, I don't know that it was just the underpayment.

SZ: It wasn't just that.

JV: I don't think it was that completely. I think now, probably even more, there are more grievances about who gets to do what, in the painting and sculpture department especially, whether you really need this kind of degree to do that. Of course, a lot of it was money, and benefits, naturally; that's what they always want. But in the beginning everything was like that. Most people weren't thinking in those terms who were in the nonprofit field. But that has changed; everybody has to live, and the thing is, you can't get everybody in nonprofit fields who are...you know, they have to be qualified, and to be qualified for a curatorial thing now you need a lot of education, and it just makes it unfair, you can't do it that way anymore. I'm sure there are a lot of people who have the jobs.... You know, Rubin doesn't need money, but still, he should get paid, because if he doesn't get paid, then that position, if it's open to somebody else who's qualified but doesn't have any money, it doesn't work that way. No, it's just that times have changed.

SZ: How else did you see the Museum change over the years?

JV: The whole upper echelon, the trustees, for instance, you don't have the art scholars; now they're all investment bankers. I don't think there is as much ethics, frankly. There are conflicts of interest, definitely. I saw that in conservation because there were people who were coming in, looking at things. First of all, I don't know why they were there, but I had no say in their being there. It had to do with buying and selling and things like that. That has changed a great deal. You don't get people like Soby and Monroe and the people who really wrote books about art, knew about art, collected art, are not their trustees anymore, so that has changed a great deal. Of course, art has changed a lot. Art has gotten gimmicky; a lot of it is maybe because of the dealers. How many dealers do you feel confident about, that are really doing it because they love art and want to not just try to push something that is going to make them some money, you know, or want to extend their ego to something, to make everybody think

they discovered this. Art has been here since the beginning of time. Because of its size, I suppose, you just don't get the camaraderie that we had in the beginning. It extended for a quite a while. In my department we were all very close, very compatible. I don't know whether they still are, really.

SZ: Both you and Tosca said something about how there was something interesting always happening in the old days, and that it was much less that way around the time you left.

JV: First of all, they're not doing as much, because they're afraid to. We were doing a lot more work. Frankly, most of the collection has been caught up with, most of it is in good shape. I don't know. The shows, to me, aren't as interesting as they were.... They do do some things. Of course, the Picasso, the Cubist thing, was marvelous, but they can't do that all the time, and, in a way, that's a little old-fashioned too. Still, the quality of what they do. When they got adventurous, like with the Are Clothes Modern? or Airways to Peace or something, they were sticking their neck out, I'm sure. Now they don't dare do that, and maybe now it's too expensive for them to do. There's a lot of competition, just in the IBM Gallery and all those, maybe they can't afford to. I just find that a lot of the things that I've seen there haven't been as interesting to me as the things I used to see, but maybe they don't have the material with which to work. Of course, if you want to put on a show where you're using somebody that's well-known, my god, the insurance on everything is so out-of-sight that it is hard. Maybe it's the economy, who knows.

SZ: What's the one thing that you remember as being the most meaningful to you, or your happiest memory?

JV: It's hard to say, there were so many things. I get a big kick out of, even now, walking through the collection and seeing all the things we worked one. The Matisse, the Dance--that was a wreck when they bought it. I mean, [Walter] Chrysler took terrible care of things. And now you look at it and see it, and nobody knows, they didn't want

anybody to know how bad it looked when they got it, but we knew, and there's a great deal of satisfaction in that, there always will be. The things that we treated, even the Water Lilies. Now they're working on the Water Lilies, or have been again lately. Some of those things are always going to take maintenance, but you know that you helped. Some of the funny things, like the [John] Peto thing, the "Harnett" Peto. I don't even know whether they still own that, but it was called [After the Hunt]. Anyway, it was signed "Harnett" but it really was a Peto, and we knew that because that had been determined by that professor. What was his name? Alfred Frankenstine? The one out in San Francisco who did a lot of work on it. At any rate, I was wondering about it because it had a lining on it and it didn't need a lining as far as I could see, so I thought, Maybe there's an inscription on the back that they were hiding. I said to Dorothy [Miller], "I think that this might be the case, too." So I said, "Are you game for me to try to take it off and see?" She said sure, and sure enough, the whole thing was on the back, including the title Old Time Letter Rack. So we lined it with fiberglass, but I don't know whether they still own that. That was sort of my party piece, when we'd have little groups who wanted to come in and see the conservation department.

SZ: You'd show that.

JV: Yes, because you see the front and then tell them the story and turn it around and show the back. I made a lot of good friends. It's just hard to say. It was a very pleasant memory until toward the latter years, really. I think that then there was so much going on, with changing labs. Actually, when we were going into the lab as it is now, the last lab, I left it up to the young man I thought was going to take over for me.

SZ: That was Terry?

JV: Terry Mahon. His wife is, I guess, a big wheel at the Met. She worked with Brealey. Of course, he had a stroke and still can't speak. I don't remember that they brought in anybody. They were talking about getting back the one that they had had there before, who was very nice--Hubert von Sonnenburg; but again, he didn't do a lot except charm

the ladies.

SZ: So you thought that Terry was going to be....

JV: Well, I felt that he was best qualified, but I think there was a lot of feeling against him because he had been the shop steward.

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END INTERVIEW