

San Francisco Museum of Modern Art
75th Anniversary
Oral History Project

Regional Oral History Office
The Bancroft Library
University of California, Berkeley

SFMOMA 75th Anniversary

BURTON GREENBERG
SFMOMA, Member

Interview conducted by
Elizabeth Castle
in 2006

Copyright © 2008 by San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

Funding for the Oral History Project provided in part by Koret Foundation.



Since 1954 the Regional Oral History Office has been interviewing leading participants in or well-placed witnesses to major events in the development of Northern California, the West, and the nation. Oral History is a method of collecting historical information through tape-recorded interviews between a narrator with firsthand knowledge of historically significant events and a well-informed interviewer, with the goal of preserving substantive additions to the historical record. The tape recording is transcribed, lightly edited for continuity and clarity, and reviewed by the interviewee. The corrected manuscript is bound with photographs and illustrative materials and placed in The Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley, and in other research collections for scholarly use. Because it is primary material, oral history is not intended to present the final, verified, or complete narrative of events. It is a spoken account, offered by the interviewee in response to questioning, and as such it is reflective, partisan, deeply involved, and irreplaceable.

All uses of this manuscript are covered by a legal agreement between The Regents of the University of California and Burton Greenberg, dated August 17, 2007. This manuscript is made available for research purposes. All copyrights and other intellectual property rights in the manuscript, including the right to publish, are reserved to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

Excerpts up to 1000 words of this manuscript may be quoted for publication without seeking permission as long as the use is non-commercial and the attribution below is included.

Requests for permission or questions should be addressed to SFMOMA Research Library and Archives, 151 Third Street, San Francisco, CA 94103 or archives@sfmoma.org and should include identification of the specific passages to be quoted, anticipated use of the passages, and identification of the user.

It is recommended that this oral history be cited as follows:

“SFMOMA 75th Anniversary: Burton Greenberg,” conducted by Elizabeth Castle, 2006, Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley; © San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 2008.

Discursive Table of Contents—Burton Greenberg

Audio File 1

1

How Greenberg arrived at the museum—early interest in the visual arts—membership at the SF MOMA—experience in member events—member parties—thoughts on Grace Morley— impact of Mrs. Walter Haas and Mrs. Helen Crocker Russell—gender divisions of the boards—how the museum was perceived in the broader community—lack of community participation—working with clients as an attorney to donate funding to various San Francisco cultural institutions—museums and social ambitions—comparing Morely to contemporary museum directors—comparing the museum’s facilities of the past to the present—comparing the museum’s vision of the past to the present—comparing the SF MOMA to the de Young—comparing the accessibility of the older museum building to the current one—impact of the museum on his life and vice versa—state of the contemporary San Francisco cultural scene.

Interview #1: February 23, 2006

Begin Audio File 1

00:00:01:23

Castle: I'm with Mr. Burton Greenberg. It's February 23rd, 2006. Mr. Greenberg, if you could tell us how you first became involved with the museum.

00:00:14:26

Greenberg: When I first passed the bar, I was aware that I had no training in any art form, no experience in any art form. As a resident of San Francisco and the Richmond District, I used to go to the de Young Museum a lot, even as a school kid, but I had no formal training. When I became an attorney, I had an opportunity to join a museum and expand my knowledge of art through being a member of the museum.

Castle: As a recent law grad passing the bar, why would you think it's important? Why was it important to you to have this kind of experience and training?

00:01:05:12

Greenberg: Well, I had an interest in art forms. I used to audit architecture classes at [UC] Berkeley, because the architecture school was almost across the street from where I lived. I had taken music courses at Cal [UC Berkeley]. Art was an area that I had not experienced. The visual arts was an area I hadn't experienced, and I felt a lack in my personality because of my lack of appreciation of art.

Castle: Did your parents encourage this? Or was this something that was just very personally important to you?

00:01:51:23

Greenberg: It was just something that was important to me. As a kid in high school, I used to volunteer to be an usher at the Opera House. So I saw everything at the Opera House when I was in high school. In those days, the Opera House not only had the symphony and the opera, but they opened the doors to road shows—*Call Me Madam*, ballets; many different ballet companies other than San Francisco Ballet. The seasons were short, so there was room for many venues to many activities to be in the Opera House.

Castle: First of all, how old are you, and what year is this?

00:02:40:12

Greenberg: Well, I'm talking about a little over fifty years ago. I've been practicing law a little over fifty years. It was when I first passed the bar that I decided that I had no knowledge about art and it was time that I should try and learn something. The San Francisco Museum of Art was not then a city-funded organization, it was a member-supported organization. I thought I should join and be a member, and participate in learning what I could. Also, the social aspects—although the social aspects were not as important. I remember when I first joined, on at least one Thursday a month, there was a tour through the

museum, and cookies and cocoa afterwards. I enjoyed those things where we would walk through the museums with knowledgeable people who would talk about the art that was presently there. We had traveling shows. It was a lot of fun to learn something and have a social experience.

Castle: This was a members only privilege?

00:03:56:02

Greenberg: I think it may have been. I don't know that people who weren't members would have known about it and participated.

Castle: Do you recall what it cost you to join or become a member?

00:04:09:25

Greenberg: I don't recall at this time. It was very modest.

Castle: It wasn't prohibitive?

00:04:14:27

Greenberg: It was not prohibitive. Most of the functions that were social served free punch, and if you wanted an alcoholic beverage, you paid more. There were parties that were a lot of fun, and I enjoyed them very much. I enjoyed everything that was going on in the old museum on McAllister and Van Ness Avenue.

Castle: Could you describe to us what the building looked like, what it was like to experience that museum at the time?

00:04:44:10

Greenberg: Well, it's a grand building. I think the architect was one of the Browns [Arthur Brown, Jr.], who designed the Opera House and the Veterans Building. It was on the top floor of the Veterans Building. In the center was a huge rotunda with an all-glass ceiling. Parties were usually held in the rotunda.

Castle: When were the parties held, what were they like, how did you dress?

00:05:21:01

Greenberg: Everybody dressed stylishly. Some people outrageously stylishly, and some people just outrageous. (laughs) They were a lot of fun just to people-watch because there were so many different kinds of people who attend the parties. The artists themselves were always artistic looking. The socialites were always very much interested in attracting attention to themselves.

Castle: What kind of clothes did that result in, do you remember? I mean, were they sparkly, were they revealing?

00:05:56:13

Greenberg: Many women wore very revealing clothes, and some wore long wool stockings. It was a complete variety. That's why I think that anybody who had

a sense of humor would enjoy just attending and watch as well as looking at the pictures, but nobody did. If you wanted to see the pictures, you had to not go on an opening night, you had to go subsequently. You couldn't really look at pictures on an opening night.

Castle: It was all about the people.

00:06:33:15

Greenberg: It was all about the people.

Castle: What year are we talking about right now?

00:06:41:11

Greenberg: In the fifties.

Castle: Are you in your twenties?

00:06:49:18

Greenberg: Oh, I was in my early twenties at that time.

Castle: So this is quite an experience.

Greenberg:

Not too early, mid-twenties.

Castle: Do you recall, at that time, did you have a date or a girlfriend that you brought?

00:07:05:15

Greenberg: I used to be very friendly with different gals. At one time, I remember attending with Pat Robb, who became Pat Steger, who ultimately wrote the society column for the *Chronicle*. She was a good friend. I'd known her for a long time. I worked in an office that was Delger, Robb and Greenberg, and her father and brother were part of that firm.

Castle: You just described some of the social events, like the Thursday evening talks, it wasn't necessarily a curator, was it?

00:07:45:12

Greenberg: I think it was a curator who would take us through and talk about it, and because I knew nothing about art, it was an introduction from a knowledgeable person. It was really a lot of fun to go and attend these things.

Castle: Can you recall some of the types of art, or any of the exhibitions that stood out in your mind?

00:08:08:26

Greenberg: There were all kinds that we had in San Francisco. There was sculpture and art too. The head of the museum liked Orozco, I think, at that time. So I

remember during her reign, they purchased some Orozco, and there were different Mexican-type shows. The director at that time was Grace Morley.

Castle: Could you share the type of interaction or the memories you have about her?

00:08:46:01

Greenberg: Well, Grace Morley, who was the director, was a wonderful lady. Although she was reserved, she was accessible. But her concept of a museum was that it should be part of the community. She used that emphasis to open the museum to different kinds of activities. I remember one time, specifically in the rotunda, they flashed modern art on a screen, and there were live musicians, who would make up music as they saw the visual thing, they would play music.

Castle: They would respond it?

00:09:31:18

Greenberg: They would respond to the visual object, which might be just an ink blot kind of thing, musically. That was a very exciting thing for a young person like myself to attend.

Castle: That's just totally outside the box from what you would've experienced.

00:09:51:27

Greenberg: Exactly. That was the kind of thing that Grace Morley did. I don't think she was one who would attract a lot of money to be given. I think she was a person who believed in the community aspects of the museum. I had great respect for her. I think when she left San Francisco, she went to India, and ultimately, the United Nations, because she had that tremendous interest in the importance of museums.

Castle: Do you recall any other particular interactions or experiences you had with her? I mean, just give me your thinking about her in action, does anything else come to mind?

00:10:35:18

Greenberg: Not particularly, other than she was a great presence. Some people think that whoever is the head of an organization, that organization reflects the personality. Certainly, she made a very big impact on the museum. At the same time, there were two women who also made a very big impact on the museum, and that was Mrs. Walter Haas and Mrs. Helen Crocker Russell, I think her name was. When I first joined the museum, Mrs. Haas came up to me at a new membership gathering, introduced herself, and became interested in me as a person thereafter. Her opening words to me were, "Oh, I think I know you." I remember that. I said, "No, we've never met." She said, "Well, now we have." She was always very warm and friendly.

Castle: That's pretty significant because there was no real call for her to have— I mean, she wouldn't have known you, right?

00:11:44:14

Greenberg: Well, she thought she did apparently, and although she didn't, she acted as if she was a good friend.

Castle: I guess that's what I was trying to say, is that she kind of pulled you in and made you feel very welcome. So we were talking about—

Greenberg: The two women who I think had a very definitely impression on the museum because they were really interested in the museum.

Castle: And they were part of the Women's Board?

00:12:09:30

Greenberg: I think at that time, the board was divided into a women's board and another board, which wasn't called the men's board, but which, in my mind, was another board.

Castle: By default, the men's board, basically.

00:12:24:25

Greenberg: I guess. But it was the women who I think made great contributions to the museum.

Castle: In what way?

00:12:30:25

Greenberg: Well, they were always there, and they were always accessible on events. I don't even remember any of the men who were on the so-called men's board. I remember one, I can't even think of his name.

Castle: But their presence, and making you feel welcome. Is there anything else you can remember about their function in the museum?

00:12:55:15

Greenberg: Well, they were always around, and always accessible, and that made it very nice, to always see at events, that the same people were there, and that they were interested, and made contributions of their own to the museum. And their contributions were many, in many ways, other than just their presence.

Castle: Were other contributions maybe donations and/or art?

00:13:20:24

Greenberg: Oh, I think Mrs. Haas and Mrs. Russell both made very substantial donations of art to our local museum, yes. They were interested in modern art when many people were not. San Francisco, I think, had a unique interest, in that there were people in San Francisco—or Oakland—who were related to Alice

B. Toklas and Gertrude Stein. When Stein and Toklas went to Paris, they met Matisse. They met all of the artists of that era, and the Stein family, I believe, gave pictures to the museum.

00:14:17:29

And the Matisse *Girl with the Green Eyes*, I think was acquired around that time [acquired 1950]. I think there are Stein portraits at the museum, which they used to bring out years ago, at Christmastime. That was the connection that San Francisco had to the French artists, and the women were the ones who brought that forth into the city.

Castle:

Throughout your experience, especially in these early days, how would you say the museum was received by San Francisco? From your memories, how did the community relate to the museum?

00:15:07:08

Greenberg:

There was not too much community participation. I think the museums have become more accessible to the general public, because of the different concepts that the people who run the museum feel. In my early days, the museum was on the fourth floor of the Veterans Building. You had to take an elevator up. It was sort of hidden. You had to know about it. It didn't have a big facility. I sort of hated to see it leave that area, but the facility on Third Street is much bigger, and draws a lot more people from the community, and outside the community, than the old museum, which was a lot smaller.

Castle:

So even though Grace McCann Morley at that time had a specific mission to see that the art was accessible or relevant to the community, it was a little more difficult because of the building, in particular?

00:16:14:23

Greenberg:

There were a lot of reasons, and the building being more difficult to get to—not to get to, but you had to know about it. Its presence wasn't as obvious. And in those days, all of the cultural aspects were smaller than they are now. All cultural aspects. The symphony, the opera, the ballet, they all had much shorter seasons.

Castle:

So drawing out this line between how you knew the museum then and now, what's been your relationship over the years with the museum?

00:16:54:10

Greenberg:

Oh, I very seldom go to opening parties anymore.

Castle:

Are you still a member?

00:16:59:18

Greenberg:

I'm still a member, I've always been a member. I've been a member well over fifty years. More recently, I've been more involved as a guest, because I had a client who was very interested in the museums.

Castle: We were just talking about your relationship with the museum over time. From your early days as a budding member yourself. Could you talk a little bit about how you have interacted with the museum over time and what, more recently, has happened?

00:17:40:11

Greenberg: Well, more recently—in fact, in the past just few years—I had a client who was in a position to leave some money to various cultural institutions. The client gave some money, and there is, in the new museum in Golden Gate Park [the deYoung Museum], a room called the Lewis and Emmy Callaghan Room. It is the twentieth century art room, which would be very appropriate for Lewis and Emmy Callaghan because that was their period. That was the period of art that they enjoyed very much. Emmy had a great affection for Grace, entirely separate from mine, but perhaps for the same reasons. She recognized the integrity that the woman had. She left the museum money in memory of her. That was completely her idea, not mine. She had that concept long before she was my client.

Castle: And over the years, as her lawyer, were you making donations to the museum on her behalf?

00:19:04:07

Greenberg: No. She made all of her donations while she was alive, by herself. In her will, she left money to various cultural institutions. But they were extremely lucky, because she was interested in them, but they were always her interests. Lawyers never direct their clients to spend money. They can make suggestions. Emmy Callaghan was a very strong-minded woman, and definitely knew what she wanted to do about everything. I could talk to her and give advice when asked, but I frequently deferred to her. She knew a great deal more about art than I did. She was born and raised in San Francisco, and didn't have any interest in art until she married. She married a man who had great knowledge of all forms of art and music, visual art, statuary, music. She learned from her husband. She often remarked that she learned from her husband, and she gave him full credit for taking her out of the desert of San Francisco to Paris and to France, where he instructed her. It was almost like Pygmalion. She always gave him full credit for that. Her San Francisco family wasn't particularly enthusiastic with that concept; but that was her concept, nevertheless.

Castle: You had mentioned that your relationship with the museum had shifted a little bit, having to do with these larger donations, so that's—

00:21:03:09

Greenberg: Well, when you're a young person, you can go to the museum and do things, and go to the parties; but after a while, they become very repetitious. I don't want to say boring because they weren't really boring, but they were all the same. So openings came and went, and I had no desire to go. I became acquainted with a person who was very interested in the arts. After her

husband's death, we attended many art functions together. I learned from her a great deal, because she was anxious to teach and knowledgeable.

Castle: You mentioned the inherent tension, if you will, between maybe trustees and museum staff, or some of those situations where you want the ability for art to flourish, and that takes money. So sometimes that's a challenge.

Greenberg: Of course.

Castle: Could you comment on that?

00:22:07:14

Greenberg: Well, I guess naturally, people join museums for different reasons. Many newly acquired rich arrivals can get involved in a cultural function to further their social ambitions. It's easy to do that in a museum. If somebody contributes money, or a substantial sum of money, for a painting or a loan, they can quickly get on a board. Staff members, who have a different perspective, can come in conflict with volunteer board members, who are not as knowledgeable, but who want to impress the community with their money.

Castle: Do you ever recall any situations where this occurred; that you thought was difficult?

00:23:09:09

Greenberg: I think it occurred in San Francisco.

Castle: There's no particular instances that you remember?

00:23:15:15

Greenberg: There may be, but I would prefer to not mention the names of the people who I think were involved.

Castle: Sure.

00:23:25:21

Greenberg: I made apparent the fact that I really enjoyed the museum under Morley, that I thought she had wonderful concepts. She was—not shy, but reserved. That entire concept has been changed. There is no museum director these days who is shy. They're all out there trying to get donations of money and art. So the entire direction of a knowledgeable director with training in art may not be as important to some people as somebody trained to raise money. So the concept of a museum, or the primary concepts of a museum, are always evolving.

Castle: How would you say SFMOMA is different today? In terms of vision.

00:24:31:00

Greenberg: Well, it's a much more imposing site, and the imposing site creates different social aspects. The fact that it's on Third Street, it is accessible by streetcar,

it's accessible by all public transportation. It seems to be very desirable, and a lot of tourists go to the museum. I go by and I see long lines, almost every day that I go by. The food is very good. People can go there and enjoy eating. The de Young Museum has awful food. If you go to the de Young Museum, don't eat there. But the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art is smart enough to have a very good kitchen. And it's fun to go. They've got a very good book shop and gift shop. They always had a gift shop, but it is much improved. I seldom go in there that I don't want to buy something. Ultimately, I do. I'll walk out and walk back in, just to buy some little thing, because I think it's attractive. It becomes a complete outing. And it's fun to do. Much more fun than the de Young.

Castle: One of the things I think is tourists may attend, and it's certainly more accessible, but is it really more accessible? Does it draw in the local community and a cross-section, across race, class, culture? Do you have any impressions of that, from your experience?

00:26:24:00

Greenberg: I think that there is a broader appeal of the community and tourists than there used to be because of its location. I guess it gets good publicity. They must have outreach programs. Maybe the current director is more interested in that than other directors have been. But the force of a museum in a community is very hard to evaluate. And yet, the director's outlook is very important. Whether you want to make it for the community, or primarily for its significance on the international and national stage. They're different pursuits.

Castle: How would you say—in your interpretation, obviously—SFMOMA fits within that international/national framework?

00:27:28:08

Greenberg: Well, I think it's more significantly placed now than it was, but I don't know whether it's more fun to the community now. I think that I personally felt more involved with the community, with the museum, when it was a more local thing. Not that I want to be exclusive. I think it's wonderful to be open. But I personally found that the smallness of it, the accessibility, the fact that it was smaller itself made the art more accessible.

00:28:04:11

The larger an institution becomes, the less accessible it becomes, because there's too much to see. The current museum is fun to go to. It is still accessible, and it's just a nice place to go. But I personally don't get as much out of it as I used to, when I learned more from the museum.

Castle: That's a really interesting point, because part of what I hear you describing is you had this privilege, in a way, to be part of its earliest formations. What you describe is very deeply about the educational and interactive process of you learning from the art.

00:28:50:25

Greenberg:

I did. I did learn. I don't know that it is currently available. They do have a lot of programs for children, but I think it's play art sort of thing. I don't notice that they have the same things that I was able to participate in.

Castle:

As you very aptly described it, there's always these trade-offs, if you will. They move to a bigger space and it becomes, in some ways, more accessible, right? By public transport, by its mere location. But then it becomes I hate to say entertainment art, but it's more of a viewing experience than interactive.

00:29:30:02

Greenberg:

I think much art has become entertainment. A big show will draw people who go for the entertainment. I don't know that that's a bad thing. But wherever you go and whatever city you go and they have a major show, there're long lines of people who go for the entertainment. But television is entertainment. The news is entertainment. Why shouldn't art be entertainment? Why shouldn't it be accessible to all people? But every big show becomes an entertainment. Who can draw the most people?

Castle:

You've used the term "modern art" a few times throughout. When the museum very first started, it was just the San Francisco Museum of Art. When is it that you came to have kind of a discreet understanding of what "modern art" is, and was?

00:30:28:16

Greenberg:

Well, I always thought that the San Francisco Museum should be supported because it, one, was locally funded, but it didn't have a large, huge private endowment. The fact that it was modern art was also interesting to me, because I knew nothing about it. I was raised near the de Young, and I always went there. I always went to the Legion [California Palace of the Legion of Honor]. But I was not acquainted with modern art, and knew nothing about it.

00:30:59:21

So it— it was an opportunity to join and learn something about it.

Castle:

Probably the best question to wind up with is how your involvement with the museum, how it's affected your life. In what ways has it enriched your life?

00:31:38:01

Greenberg:

Well, all experiences can have effect on your life. Certainly, San Francisco has a lot of cultural experiences that can affect one's life. I was always disappointed that the Mapplethorpe show had to be shown in Berkeley, at the Cal [UC Berkeley] museum. It wasn't shown at the San Francisco modern museum.

00:32:09:09

I don't know why. I know that some benefactors of the Berkeley Art Museum sponsored that and gave money for that. I don't know why it wasn't done at the San Francisco Museum, because they were San Franciscans who did that.

So I'm not sure how cutting edge the San Francisco Museum really, really was at that time. But I don't know how to answer the question.

Castle: When you bring up Mapplethorpe, it does bring up the question of was that a trustee issue? Were there concerns at SFMOMA at the time?

00:32:53:09

Greenberg: I have no idea why they didn't bring it up. I do know somebody was on the board of the Berkeley Art Museum, and she gave money for it because she thought the Bay Area should see the show.

Castle: Are there any other exhibits that stand out in your mind, in particular? Maybe not from the early time, but that you thought were just incredibly important to be seen here.

00:33:18:04

Greenberg: The more recent museum has not played as significant a factor in my life as earlier times. There may be more competitive cultural things to do now in San Francisco. I don't know. But there's plenty going on. And the seasons are longer. I remember the symphony used to begin on Thanksgiving Day and end in May. Well, the symphony is now almost fifty weeks out of the year. The opera season was much shorter. The ballet season is much extended, although we have fewer ballets coming here. But the competition for the cultural attention is certainly here.

00:34:11:02

I even have gone now, more recently, to the Italian Cultural Institute, where they show Italian films. I went Tuesday night. I'll probably go next Tuesday night. There's always something going on. As we change our own focuses, we get tired of going to the symphony every week and tired of going to another thing at the museum, so that something different becomes more attractive. It certainly, after going to the symphony for many years, seems like I didn't want to go anymore for a while. It became boring. I began going to the symphony under Pierre Monteux. I remember going to music things at Berkeley, where Pierre Monteux would come and speak with his wife, and she would bring her needlework. He would talk, and she would be with her needlework, doing things, and they were great fun. It was the sort of thing that we were lucky to have, that Mrs. Monteux would come with Mr. Monteux. I don't think they brought Fifi. I think the dog was left at home. Generally, Mrs. Monteux liked Fifi around. We had these opportunities having a smaller city, perhaps. I don't know Michael Tilson Thomas although he does a great outreach, he always makes a grand production of it.

Castle: It also speaks a little bit to the potential eccentricities of artistry. Fifi and the needlework. I wonder if SFMOMA, modern art, does always have that, the opportunity to provoke.

00:36:02:07

Greenberg:

Well, the San Francisco Museum used to be very provocative, I think. I think it's not as provocative anymore, for me. That may be that I have just found other things more provocative to do. It's not the influence in my personal life as it used to be. And that's just personal. Morely did want the museum to be a more important part of the community. She was perhaps able to direct things in that direction. That's not being critical of the current administration.

Castle:

But it was just so openly a part of the mission statement. I mean, I was just reading that it must be relative to the local community.

00:36:54:00

Greenberg:

Well, that probably was created by Grace Morely. I'd not been aware that that was the— the mission.

Castle:

That's what I hear from you, is that she saw that through.

00:37:07:21

Greenberg:

I think so.

Castle:

That's an important legacy.

00:37:11:20

Greenberg:

Yes. If it still exists, though, is something I don't know.

[End of Interview]

Elizabeth Castle is an Assistant Professor of American Indian Studies at the University of South Dakota and is an Academic Affiliate at the Regional Oral History Office at the University of California, Berkeley, where she previously held a position as academic specialist. Her book *Women Were the Backbone, Men Were the Jawbone: American Indian Women's Activism in the Red Power Movement* will be published by Oxford University Press. The heart of her work concerns communicating the priorities of indigenous communities to public institutions and creating transformative social change in response to colonization.