

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:

ROBERT WHYTE

SFMOMA Staff, 1967-1987
Supervisor of Education, 1967-
Director of Education, 1980-

Interviews conducted by
Lisa Rubens
in 2006—2007

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



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

“SFMOMA 75th Anniversary: Robert Whyte,” conducted by Lisa Rubens, 2006—2007, Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 2009.

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Interview #1: November 20, 2006

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Rubens: I'd like to start by just asking you, when and how did you begin work at the museum?

01-00:00:29

Whyte: Well, that's interesting, because I had no intentions of working in a museum. My master's degree was in Italian fifteenth-century sculpture. I never thought I would be working at a modern art museum, which was, at the time, the San Francisco Museum of Art, located in the Civic Center, on Van Ness Avenue. But a person that I had known in the art history department was Claire Isaacs, and Claire Isaacs found this wonderful job that she had at the San Francisco museum, she was the head of the children's education department when she left to go to the Junior Arts Center in Los Angeles, I think she must have suggested my name to Jerry Nordland. Jerry Nordland was the director at that time. I suddenly found myself being called in for an interview. I went, not knowing what it was all about, because she hadn't really informed me too much. There were candidates I thought were far more qualified, who had degrees, advanced degrees, even beyond my masters degree, in education, in art. But they chose me. I started on January 3, 1967. I had always been very fond of modern art, but I really hadn't specialized in that area. I had to do a lot of quick stepping to bring myself up to speed, but I was delighted to work there because it was such a wonderful environment. The San Francisco Museum of Art was located on Van Ness Avenue, in the old Veterans Building, and it occupied just one floor, the top floor, of the building. It was a museum in a building that was designed by Arthur Brown Jr., who had also designed the city hall. He hadn't designed any offices for this marvelous space. The galleries surrounded an interior courtyard, which we called the rotunda, which was a large square space in the middle of the galleries, surrounded by galleries all the way around, except that offices had to occupy some of those spaces. The education department occupied a space down on the first floor, at the museum entrance. Now, the museum entrance was not on McAllister Street, as it was later; it was on— Excuse me, I just made a mistake. It was on McAllister, *not* Van Ness. Our office was right there, so that we could intercept school groups as they would come into the building. Then there was an elevator there that went up to the fourth floor. That was the only way to get into the museum.

Rubens: What was your understanding of what your job was to be when you were hired?

01-00:04:13

Whyte:

Well, on January 3, I didn't quite know, frankly. I knew that I was going to be head of the children's education department, but that's about as much as I knew. Soon, I found myself conducting tours of school groups—elementary grade, high school—along with Susanne Sparks, who had been working with Claire Isaacs before this. We conducted all the school groups. That was the job. In addition to that responsibility, the department had art classes, those were in one of the galleries. The classes were for children only. It was essentially the children's education department. Those were on Saturdays. Then in addition to that, there were Saturday films for children, which happened once a month. That was our little outreach to bring children and their families into the rotunda space, which was also the auditorium, and which had a projection booth. Now, the projection booth was created, I believe, during the late forties, to accommodate "Art in Cinema," which was a very, very well known program that dealt mainly with experimental films of the forties and fifties, and also important films prior to that. So the Saturday films for children were in the rotunda, or sometimes we referred to it as the auditorium. Jerry Nordland had purchased about 400 beautiful chairs to put into the space, and so we had an ample place for lectures and film showings and what have you—except the films hadn't been shown for a number of years. But the Saturday films for children was a program that went on for quite a number of years.

Rubens:

So you inherited a program?

01-00:06:33

Whyte:

I inherited a program.

Rubens:

I know you're going to develop this program considerably—why do you think they hired you? What was attractive to them about you?

01-00:06:47

Whyte:

I don't know.

Rubens:

You still don't know?

01-00:06:49

Whyte:

I don't know. Because I went for a second interview with Jerry Nordland, and we had this long conversation. Then he asked, "Well?" I said, "Well, what?" He said, "We're offering you a job." Something like that. That was back in 1967, actually, when he offered me the job. So I don't know. It may have been Claire. They knew each other, and I think maybe she knew that I was an outgoing person, might be good with children, which I think I am. Because I was going to be doing a lot of work with children. Also, here at Berkeley, I was a teaching assistant. Instead of doing sessions that were strictly lecture, I tried to

involve the students here at Berkeley in dialogue, in discussion. I carried that idea through to my work at the San Francisco Museum of Art. Of course, it was consistent with what Claire had already developed. These were tours that involved the students in a visual experience with the art, so that by asking questions, it would lead them into discovering what they were looking at, and to talk about it intelligently. Then, of course information would be added to this by us, me and Susanne Sparks.

Rubens: Tell me just a little bit about your background. Where were you born and—

01-00:08:37

Whyte: I was born in Los Angeles in 1931, and soon moved to Newport Beach, California. Went to school at Newport High, followed by two years at Orange Coast College; followed by a semester and a half at the Chouinard Art Institute. My interest was really in architecture and interior design, though I did a lot of art during my years at Orange Coast College, and a lot of studies in drafting and architectural details. I had that interest. To avoid the draft, I enlisted in the Air Force for four years, which allowed me the G.I. Bill for a long, long time after getting out. I started at USC [University of Southern California] as a—

Rubens: Were you actually in the service?

01-00:09:44

Whyte: I was actually in the service.

Rubens: Where?

01-00:09:47

Whyte: I spent three and a half years in Marin County during the Korean War.

Rubens: Doing what?

01-00:09:57

Whyte: I don't know. Actually, I did a lot of letter writing. I was a personnel clerk. I wasn't flying airplanes. They called it a Remington writer. Remingtons were a type of typewriter. Then after that, I went to USC to study architecture and decided that that wasn't the thing to do. Then I thought, "Well, I'll go across town, I'll go to UCLA [University of California, Los Angeles], and I'll study the history of art." Which was just perfect for me. I seemed to be able to write well, I had a real interest in academic scholarship, and I loved art history. Then after that, after graduating from UCLA, I spent two and a half years in Italy, where I worked for [the] McGraw-Hill [Companies], working on the Encyclopedia of World Art.

Rubens: So this is in late—

01-00:11:02

Whyte: This was between 1959 and I came back to Berkeley to get my masters degree in 1961.

Rubens: Who did you study with at UCLA?

01-00:11:19

Whyte: I studied with two people. Carl Shepherd, who was a specialist in medieval art, and then Karl Birkmeyer, who was a scholar in, oh, late medieval art and early renaissance.

Rubens: So you were particularly drawn to the—

01-00:11:47

Whyte: This was before going to Italy, but that was one reason why I ended up there in Italy. Then I came back and Karl Birkmeyer was teaching at [UC] Berkeley for a while. So I was a student of his, and then picked up with Juergen Schultz, who was the renaissance teacher. Studied a little bit with [H. W.] Janson.

Rubens: Oh, sure, whose textbook was so well known.

01-00:12:22

Whyte: The textbook. He was here for a while; I was his teaching assistant.

Rubens: I can see you had quite a broad background, even if you didn't specialize in modern art or in contemporary art.

01-00:12:42

Whyte: Well I always loved contemporary art, and Herschel Chipp was— I took a seminar from him. Herschel Chipp was the professor of twentieth-century art here at Berkeley.

Rubens: Had you thought of academic jobs?

01-00:13:13

Whyte: My real intention was not to go into museums as a profession. I really was interested in editing art history texts and publishing. Which I never did. I found myself in January 1967 working at the San Francisco Museum of [Modern] Art.

Rubens: Did you have a strong impression of Nordland when you started? How old was he at that point?

01-00:13:52

Whyte: We may have been about the same age, because I had spent four years in the Air Force, and spent time in Italy.

- Rubens: Was not much older than you. Maybe even about the same age.
- Whyte: I'm seventy-five now. I really admired him, because he came from a small museum in Washington, D.C., where he championed a number of important color-field painters, including Kenneth Noland, Gene Davis, Morris Louis—people like that. The thing about Jerry was that he really befriended artists and became good buddies with them so that they felt very, very unintimidated by him. He also liked a good party, and he would, on occasion play drums in a jazz group or something like that. I think he had ambitions for the museum to become larger. To create more space for the staff, to increase its programs, to professionalize its exhibitions, to make them more newsworthy nationally.
- Rubens: Do you think, looking back now, that there was something implicit in terms of his expectations of you, that you would take this education beyond children's?
- 01-00:15:41
Whyte: Looking back just recently, over my twenty years of experience, I don't think I imagined what I was going to be there on January 3. I was taking over the children's education department, but then Jerry started doing things like telling me that I was going to be involved in curating film programs—which was news to me, because I never had been so much interested in film. But we started showing, much as had been done a number of years ago, during the "Art in Cinema" years of the fifties. I became obsessed with the movement of experimental filmmaking in the Bay Area. I worked with Edith Kramer, who was the coordinator at Canyon Cinema, which was a nonprofit organization that encouraged the showing of experimental films, both national and local. We had a surfeit of these films, I suspect, which I began showing in October 1967. We continued to show these films, along with surrealistic films that had an historical basis from France and from Germany and whereabouts. I think we developed a program that people were interested in coming to see.
- Rubens: Were you doing this in coordination with Canyon? Or Edith?
- 01-00:17:47
Whyte: I was using Edith as my source material. She would recommend things. Because I really didn't know much about all of this.
- Rubens: What was it that attracted you to the genre?
- 01-00:18:02
Whyte: I just felt that there was something going on in the Bay Area. I had heard of Canyon Cinema. As it turns out, I happened to have met Edith Kramer even before she assumed that position.

Rubens: How was that?

01-00:18:19

Whyte: Well, just through friends. She'd come out of Oregon. She was a close friend of a person who had been a TA here at Berkeley, who also studied with her up in Oregon, to get her Ph. D.

Rubens: What field was her Ph. D?

01-00:18:39

Whyte: I believe it was in the history of art; I'm not sure.

Rubens: Not that many women Ph. Ds around in that period so she must have been quite formidable.

01-00:18:56

Whyte: Well, she was. You know? So about 1970, it became obvious that it was a little bit too much to do, as far as me doing the films, and that we really needed a film curator. I think there were two or three people that expressed interest in becoming the film curator. But Edith was one of them. Jerry asked me, "Who do you think we should hire?" I said, "I think you should hire Edith Kramer. She's very knowledgeable, and she's advised us very, very well through the years." So she took the position and immediately stopped showing experimental films and started to show more classic, historical films. We had done an awful lot of programming of this type of film, and she felt that the museum should expand its scope as far as what it chose as a film program. Then, of course, she was hired away from the museum to become the director of the Pacific Film Archive, which she just recently retired from.

Rubens: Did you then replace her?

01-00:20:25

Whyte: She was replaced by Ken DeRoux. He carried on with the program.

Rubens: Now, was that under your—?

01-00:20:36

Whyte: No. That became a separate department. That seemed to be the history of the education department. By late 1967, it was no longer a *children's* education department; it started to become the *education* department.

Rubens: Well, you must have had a vision; you must have had an idea about that.

01-00:21:01

Whyte:

For some reason, I thought, “Well, why are we just having art classes for children?” I didn’t have a vision. I thought, “We have space.” And pretty soon, we had a space on the third floor which was not available to us— Now, I’m talking—

Rubens:

You, meaning the education department.

01-00:21:24

Whyte:

The education department moved down to the third floor. Then we took away from the veterans organizations, several spaces on the third floor, that eventually accommodated staff. My office moved down there. We then had classroom spaces for both art practice and then also art history. So we had a little lecture room and all.

Rubens:

You had figure drawing and painting?

01-00:22:00

Whyte:

To begin, we had just figure drawing and painting. Norman Stieglmeyer, who was a visionary artist at the time, was our teacher there. Then early on, we started having art history classes, taught by Lynn Mattheson, who was a professor at the University of California at Davis, who was interested in expanding. So he taught the first classes of art history. Then along came Al Frankenstein, who was a critic of music and art for the *San Francisco Chronicle*, but with a strong background in American art. So he taught courses for us.

Rubens:

I had him for art history here.

01-00:23:01

Whyte:

You did?

Rubens:

Oh, he was wonderful.

01-00:23:02

Whyte:

He was a wonderful teacher here. He taught essentially nineteenth- and twentieth-century American art history. [RW added in editing: “Another *San Francisco Chronicle* critic, Tom Albright, was brought in to teach a course on postwar Bay Area art. Though he read his lectures at breakneck speed, his notes became the basis for his book *San Francisco Bay Area Art* that was published posthumously.] [*Art in the San Francisco Bay area, 1945-1980: an illustrated history*, University of California Press, 1985)]

Rubens:

Was it you who were finding all these people or making the arrangements?

01-00:23:20

Whyte:

I was doing that until about 1972. When Suzanne Spark had left, we hired Dennis O’Leary. Dennis O’Leary now is the director of the Djerassi Foundation. But he came along. He had been interviewed along with a number of other people. He was a remarkable young man at that time, just out of graduate school, from UC Santa Barbara. But there was something unusual about him, and I could see it. So I hired him. He took over the direction of the classes and developed it into what was a museum art school. Eventually, there were about twenty-one classes being held, three times a year. For adults and children. It became very, very popular. It brought people in that might not have been interested in twentieth-century art. We had Joe Hughes, who taught for us for a number of years; Jay DeFeo, a very important artist taught for us; Larry Sultan taught photography. Phil Sims taught another course in painting. Then we had classes in animation, ceramics; we had jewelry. A whole number of things. We blossomed with Dennis’s guidance of that particular program.

Rubens:

These were day and night? Weekend?

01-00:25:20

Whyte:

Yeah, pretty much. Summers, especially. So that was happening.

Rubens:

I think before that, you were also developing the docent program.

01-00:25:33

Whyte:

The docent program was not my vision. I was perfectly happy conducting tours of children, and so was Susanne, but there was an interest—I think from the Women’s Board and the Modern Art Council [Editor’s note: the Modern Art Council was not formed until 1975; at this time the auxiliaries would have been the Women’s Board and the Membership Activities Committee], which were auxiliary programs that were run by volunteers—for the museum to have a docent program for school groups—high school and elementary grades. I started that in 1968, training them myself. I taught them a basic art history of twentieth-century art.

Rubens:

Did you actually, yourself, did you travel? Did you attend lectures to aid your own education?

01-00:26:33

Whyte:

Well, I had to do a lot of quick studies. I read a lot, and I was quite a bit more advanced than the mainly women, in the beginning, though later on, expanded to quite a number of men being involved.

Rubens:

I was wondering how you did recruit.

01-00:26:57

Whyte:

We interviewed them.

Rubens: Was it the board's job to do that? The Women's Board, or—

01-00:27:01

Whyte: No, I interviewed them. Then when I felt that they had a little spark which I felt would be good, essentially with children, because that's what our first interest was, conducting school tours—Then the way I taught them was that it was essentially the way I felt about teaching anyway, about mixing lecture along with discussion. Sort of the Socratic method. Because I felt if you're going to have people standing in front of a work of art, if you just keep on talking, they're going to pay more attention to you than what they're standing there looking at. So we devised a system where we would ask leading questions that couldn't be answered by yes or no, with the children, so that they would have to look at whatever work of art we were examining, for them to see it and to be challenged by what they were looking at. Then of course, we would give it a setting. We would give them a sense of the history that was behind each of the works of art, trying to give them a background. We felt the most important thing was to have them really look. So the docents were trained to do this. That worked out very well. There seemed to be a great deal of interest in our docents at the San Francisco Museum of— By the time of Henry [Hopkins], we became the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Other museums were interested in what we were doing that was so interesting and unusual. I would go over to the [M. H.] de Young [Memorial] Museum and have lectures to the docents there in training and also those who were conducting tours, because they had really taken their own art history classes—which were extensive—over at the Fine Arts Museums and cutting them down to junior size, for the children. Without them really talking about the art that they were looking at, really examining this.

Rubens: So you really pioneered in this field.

01-00:29:46

Whyte: Yes.

Rubens: I was going to ask if you had models at the Art Institute in Chicago, or did you correspond with MoMA in New York?

01-00:29:57

Whyte: Well one of the things that happened—and it was very early in my career, and it was with Jerry. I think he may have been president of the Art Museum Directors Association. It may have been in 1968 or '69, I went to a conference of art educators, curators of education at art museums, in Cleveland, Ohio. Which was a real mind opener for all of us. I think that began a revolution in the art education field in museums because we became more active in trying to carve out a

space that was more professional and to serve the public better with our efforts.

Rubens: Were you producing materials now? Brochures or—

01-00:31:07

Whyte: I wasn't doing that early on. That, we didn't do until quite a bit later. That came about after we stopped doing art classes. Our art classes existed, with a vengeance, up until 1978, in the fall, when those spaces that we occupied were to be put under construction to make them useful for other museum purposes.

Rubens: For exhibitions?

01-00:31:45

Whyte: Well, no, not for exhibitions, but the registration department moved into one of the spaces; the conservation department upgraded one of the spaces that was down there. The library, space was developed for the library, and another space for the photography collection. Essentially, the education department and its class program was the avant-garde down into the third floor, as the museum tried to invade that space on the third floor for expanding its operation. We were the first to go down to the third floor to do that. We did that through the classes, and my office. Then eventually, as development progressed in these rooms.

Rubens: So would you call that a sacrifice? Were the art classes sacrificed, in a way?

01-00:32:56

Whyte: Well, Henry was interested in having the art classes as long as we were occupying the space. He himself when he was director of education at the L. A. County Museum of Art didn't want art classes in the museum. He didn't feel that that was an appropriate place. So in 1978, we abandoned the art school. I was somewhat disturbed by it. But not really mad.

Rubens: Did you try and make a case with—

01-00:33:40

Whyte: No, because I felt the museum needed to expand its facilities there. We had to regroup. Dennis left for a teaching job and museum job at Montana State University in Bozeman. Then he eventually became director of the Boise Art Museum in Idaho. He did very well for himself. He soon gave up doing his own sculpture, and became a museum professional. We're still great friends.

Rubens: I don't want to get too far ahead of the story because you're moving into something that's pretty important, with Hopkins coming in. So if you don't mind, I just want to go back to the docent program just for a minute, to carry that thread through. Well, by the time Hopkins came—so from '68 to '76—how many docents did you have, would you say?

01-00:34:44

Whyte: Oh we must have had about thirty or forty. Up to about 1973, they were strictly working with the school groups. Then, somehow, we managed to get them to doing regular docent tours of the galleries, about 1973 or '74. It just happened.

Rubens: You thought this was something worthwhile?

01-00:35:13

Whyte: It just all happened organically. It wasn't through a great plan of mine. I kept on thinking, "Well, why aren't we doing this with adult groups?" So we tried it, and it seemed to work. So we developed a special group who were to work with adults. They did it at a prescribed time, every day that the museum was open. The docent program eventually developed into other areas. They began to be interested in such things as handicap issues. They themselves suggested ways of getting involved that way, by having special tours for children who might have been blind or otherwise handicapped, as well as adults. So that was a stepping stone there.

Rubens: Was there any one person, particularly, who was—

01-00:36:16

Whyte: Yes, a woman by the name of Candy Walters. She was a docent. I don't know where she is; I've lost contact with her.

Rubens: I was going to ask you also if you remembered there were people on the Women's Board that particularly were more forceful or interesting?

01-00:36:32

Whyte: Well that's interesting, because when I first started at the museum in '67, a lot of the programs were—the special events programs—were sponsored by either the Women's Board or by the Modern Art Council [see note on page 8]. There were two people I remember distinctly as being especially good at this. One was Margie Boyd, Margaret Boyd, who later became the travel department at the museum. She would take a bus and go to artists' studios with people who were interested in visiting artists' studios. She knew every artist in town, I'm sure. That's an exaggeration, but she really was well known to the art community. She brought a lot of people into artists' studios who would never have

gone there. She also did something that I thought was *extremely* interesting. Some of these artists that she really admired, she had them build soapbox derby automobiles.

Rubens: Oh, of course, yes, that was—

01-00:37:52

Whyte: There was a place in one of the parks—I think it was Dolores Park [actually McClaren Park], but I may be mistaken—where they had races. Artists would build these wonderful objects and race downhill with them. [The Soap Box Derbies took place in 1975 and 1978.]

Rubens: So she was really the instigator of that?

01-00:38:11

Whyte: She really was.

Rubens: That was quite a highlight.

01-00:38:14

Whyte: Oh, it was a wonderful. I loved what the women were doing. It was, at that time, mainly women. The other thing was that they did lots of lectures. We weren't involved in lectures at all, at the very beginning, the education, department. I remember Peg Haldeman, Margaret? What would it be? Peggy Haldeman, we called her. She did marvelous lecture series.

Rubens: She organized them, or actually did the lectures?

01-00:38:50

Whyte: No, she organized them. She would go to university professors or people who were expert in certain fields and put together really wonderful programs. One of them was called "The Course of Modern Art," which was a double entendre, of course, an art history course that brought in a lot of people. It was a basic course but it was at a university-quality level. It was really marvelous.

Rubens: Offered at night at the museum?

01-00:39:27

Whyte: I don't remember whether it was night. I think it was during the day, but I can't remember. Another was, she did a course with one of the exhibitions, "Four Americans in Paris," which was essentially about the Gertrude Stein family, Leo Stein, her friends. It was an exhibition that was full of early masterpieces by Picasso and Matisse and turn-of-the-century artists. She had a lecture series put together for that.

Rubens: She worked with the curators, do you think?

01-00:40:16

Whyte:

Not at this time. This is something that's interesting. I think there was some concern that some of the programs were fine, but then she was running away with it, maybe. I'm not sure. So it was decided eventually that those programs that were related to exhibitions would be put together with the education staff, working with the curatorial staff. Then these other lectures would be auxiliary lectures that would touch on everything from cuisine to just whatever.

Rubens:

Maybe fashion or marketing or—

01-00:41:03

Whyte:

Fashion, marketing.

Rubens:

What was the concern?

01-00:41:09

Whyte:

I think it was a concern that we should be doing ongoing art history classes, which we were beginning to do. Also, that the curatorial department felt that they should be more involved in the selection of people who would be talking. A lot of those programs—which we organized in the department, but worked with the director—mainly Henry—or the curatorial staff—Suzanne Foley or John Humphrey or Karen Tsujimoto, to begin with, and later on, with Graham Beal and George Neubert, who came along later—often involving them in discussion of art *with* an artist. It'd be like what we're doing right now. Henry would ask questions, and then the artist would respond. Sometimes the artist would just give a lecture. Sometimes it worked that way. So eventually, the education department took over those lectures and lecture series or symposia that would pertain to the exhibitions. I think that was a happy compromise, I think. Peg Haldeman continued to do—along with other people at the Modern Art Council [see note on page 8] continued to do wonderful programming. Programs that related to what was going on with the symphony or with the opera, things of that sort, and all.

Rubens:

What about board people? Did you have any interaction directly with board people?

01-00:43:22

Whyte:

Not too much. I was familiar and comfortable with a number of them. I never attended board meetings. That was pretty much Henry, and occasionally some members of the curatorial staff, I think. I never considered myself a curator until later.

Rubens:

I was going to ask you about your relationship with the curators. At this stage, was that a comfortable—?

01-00:43:56

Whyte: Very.

Rubens: Reciprocal?

01-00:43:59

Whyte: John Humphrey had been with the museum for quite a number of years and who continued to work until— I'm not quite sure when he died, but— I think I learned more about art from him than anybody. He was so sensitive to artists and artwork. He was just a remarkable individual.

Rubens: He was the curator—

01-00:44:37

Whyte: He was the curator of painting and sculpture until about 1969. He really backed off. He was getting older. He became interested in photography, and that became what he was about. He developed the photography collection.

Rubens: But when you say you learned so much from him, just say a few more words.

01-00:45:10

Whyte: Just to hear him talk about a work of art. He was so sensitive to what art was about. Mainly painting and sculpture and photography. I had a close working relationship with him. I would say that I had a close working relationship with all the curators. I consider them very good friends. There was a little bit of annoyance, I think, coming from the curation part of the museum world, because a number of art educators had become rather militant. So there developed a little jealousy and territoriality among the curators and the education staff. But I don't think that was taking place too much at the San Francisco Museum of [Modern] Art. Though—

Rubens: What are you thinking of?

01-00:46:18

Whyte: Well, the only thing I'm really thinking about is when I decided maybe I should call myself curator of education, that came up for great discussion. Eventually, I did become called that. At the beginning, there was a little concern about that. So it was suggested that I become director of education. I thought, "Well, now, isn't that threatening to Jerry Nordland or to Henry Hopkins?" So it was never quite clear what to call me. So at times I was director of education, curator of education.

[Begin Audio File 2 11-20-2006.mp3]

Rubens: Now, there was just one thing, maybe in terms of time. I think just before Hopkins came, did you create some family day events?

02-00:00:15

Whyte: Family day events were something that really began with Ruth Asawa suggesting what she called a dough-in. This was with play-dough, which is made of flour and, I guess, water or oil, I'm not sure which. I had met her the very first week that I started work at the museum. Jerry Nordland was very fond of her art, as well of an admirer of a program that she started at her children's elementary grade school, the Alvarado School. It was called the Alvarado School Program, where she brought in artists to work with children in the classroom. It wasn't funded, it was all volunteer. She volunteered her time. So I met Ruth Asawa that very first week. We became good friends after that. It came upon us that we should do something very special for families. So thinking that there might be 200 or 300 people who might be interested in this, children and parents, we opened up the rotunda space and were going to do little small sculpture projects with parents and children. Well, what was supposed to be maybe 200 or 300 people turned out to be 800. We had to send out for more flour, and mix up more play-dough. It was a chance to come into the museum and do something creative. I think Jerry Nordland encouraged this activity. That was the first of a whole stream of programs that would take place, well, maybe three, four, five times a year, through the years. There was one Halloween—it was make a mask—project that was a family day.

Rubens: The soapbox derby was not part of that.

02-00:2:37

Whyte: The soapbox derby was not.

Rubens: Was Asawa already a known entity?

02-00:02:44

Whyte: She was well known in the art world. Concurrent to our talking right now, there is a show of her artwork at the de Young Museum. We had one of her works in the rotunda on permanent display.

Rubens: It was part of the—

02-00:03:20

Whyte: Permanent collection. That began this whole move. Then eventually, the docents became involved in these family day events, which I felt was very, very healthy.

Rubens: Now how long did they continue?

02-00:03:41

Whyte:

I think they even continued beyond my tenure. I believe they kept on going.

[interruption]

[RW added in editing: “Ongoing, even before I joined the staff, was an after-school program for teenagers called ‘Insights.’ From the very beginning, artist Ron Dahl organized these programs, often bringing in artists who were exhibiting at the museum to involve the students about their art. During the late sixties, when San Francisco was the hub for counterculture music, poetry, and art, Ron put together programs bringing to the students ‘psychedelic’ light-show and poster artists. California Poet Laureate and novelist Al Young taught students creative writing in a special Insights class for teenagers. After Ron left, other creative people continued to organize Insight programs.”]

Whyte:

There was, in the middle of the rotunda, where all of these 400 chairs that Jerry Nordland had purchased for the museum, were all mounded into a big mound of chairs, a sculpture in the middle of the room. Jerry was just *furious!* We had to have it taken down. I don’t think Bonnie Sherk ran the docent Insights program for too long. Another project that she had done, maybe a little bit earlier than this, was to have a snowfall in San Francisco. So on the corner of McAllister Street and Van Ness Avenue, right on the corner where the museum used to be, she had a big pile of snow placed. I’m not quite sure how that all ended. Jerry was very much a painting and sculpture man. I think this went against the grain. The person that took over from Bonnie was another well known artist who worked in the conceptual area. Her name was Lynn Hershman. She developed a persona that would be shown in local galleries, called Roberta. She would become Roberta. Everything in the art gallery would be—not at the museum, but in the art gallery—somehow connected with Roberta, this make-believe person that she— this persona that she would assume. That went on for quite a time. She was very good with the students and all. That program eventually was taken over by the docents, and I think that was probably after I left, but—

Rubens:

The Insights.

02-00:06:05

Whyte:

The Insights program.

Rubens:

Now, were you involved—I don’t have my dates right here—with the M. I. X. program? Was that—

02-00:06:14

Whyte:

No, that was Rolando Castellón entirely.

Rubens: Not associated with the education department at all?

02-00:06:23

Whyte: No, but it was an outreach to the community. It would bring in community artists and programs. We liked each other. But I didn't have anything to do with that.

Rubens: Were there other kinds of outreach—just up to Hopkins coming in—that you were involved in?

02-00:06:56

Whyte: I don't think so. Though I was supposed to be the person in charge of disability accessibility at the museum. I arranged for special doors to be installed on bathrooms and at the front entrance to the museum.

Rubens: You had said there was a women's—

02-00:07:19

Whyte: This was after the museum entrance moved to Van Ness Avenue. The first people to go down was the bookshop. The bookshop was down at the old entrance. Then the old entrance was no longer an entrance after that. The education department, which was down at the old entrance, moved up to the fourth floor for a while. Then we made a transit to the third floor, with the classrooms, and also our office. I'm a little hazy about when some of the other stuff moved down.

Rubens: All of this before Hopkins, in your mind's eye.

02-00:08:09

Whyte: Yes, I think so. Then very soon, Hopkins wanted to create gallery spaces on the third floor, which were essentially the corridor spaces. That eventually took place. Then he again wanted a conservation lab, and he wanted to expand the registration department. That all took place about 1978. Then the actual staff offices on the other side of the building, I think we started occupying those spaces after 1978, in the late seventies. I'm a little hazy on that.

Rubens: Well, in fact, why don't we leave that for our second meeting, and maybe just end with, if it comes to you easily now, when Hopkins came in. I don't quite remember the story of how Nordland left. None of the directors left too happily.

02-00:09:18

Whyte: I don't know what the reason was. I wasn't part of that. I admired the work that Jerry did. I *truly* admired and enjoyed working with Henry Hopkins. He wanted to accelerate the expansion of the museum and the collection. The education department was very much a part of that expansion.

Rubens: Do you remember a meeting with him where he said, “I—

02-00:10:01

Whyte: No, those things never happened with Henry. Henry was a person who inspired his staff, but he never gave me directions on what he wanted us to do. I think quite often, the staff—and I think especially the education department—took off into directions that he may or may not have enjoyed us going into. One of them probably was when we started doing concerts in the *galleries*, not only in the rotunda, which was the space where we started out. We started doing dance programs with the Oberlin Dance Collective, in the galleries; other dance, movement programs, in the main gallery, and all over the space.

Rubens: Margie Jenkins, also.

02-00:11:04

Whyte: Margie Jenkins is very much—

Rubens: So the dance and contemporary music came before the jazz, then.

02-00:11:11

Whyte: Yes, that came a little bit later.

Rubens: Is this your idea? What, are you getting—

02-00:11:19

Whyte: Well, it was—I myself had lived in Rome, and I remember going to concerts at the Palazzo Doria—which was also, by that time, a museum gallery—and going to concerts where the musicians would play in the galleries. I thought, “That’s really cool!” So I thought, “Well, we’ll use the rotunda.” But then we gradually moved into the galleries, and that worked out.

Rubens: So this was not something you had to clear with Hopkins?

02-00:11:55

Whyte: We just did it. We just did it.

[RW added in editing: Though the Women’s Board and Modern Art Council (see note on page 8) had through the years organized events involving music and other forms of performance, it was soon after his arrival as director that Henry Hopkins gave the education department the impetus to organize performance events. He instructed Dennis and me to make arrangements for a multimedia event created by Soon Three—a multimedia performance group—to take place in the rotunda. Curiosity about the performance was sparked by a purple-hued poster that displayed an unclothed female performer who had an aberrant third nipple. The fact that there was to be some nudity also

accounted for much interest in a program that was, in reality, aesthetically relevant.

From then on, the education department, on its own, sponsored many performance events including modern Japanese Noh Theater, several performances by Eiko and Koma, Anna Halprin and her group of young dancers, Contact Improvisation—a men’s dance group whose interactive dance movement was created on the spur of the moment. Anna along with her husband Larry Halprin—who was responsible for the FDR monument in Washington—organized “Dance of the City” under the education department’s auspices. Non-dancers—just everyday people—were instructed to do interactive dance movement as personal expression in various locations around the city—it was very New Agey but it got a lot of people involved as a creative exercise. The list could go on. In a way, the education department’s performance programming was parallel to the special summer classes for children that brought together poetry, dance movement, and music making together.”]

Rubens: It must have been very popular.

02-00:12:01

Whyte:

They were very popular. I think the education department was the tail that was starting to wag the dog. Because not only was I involved in that, but Dennis O’Leary, he brought in a wonderful program with poets—I mean, nationally known poets—giving talks. Usually, those talks took place in the rotunda. I think he may have been instrumental in getting the Margie Jenkins group into the museum. So we worked together sort of, in those programs. He was very much involved with the art school as well. Then the other thing that he wanted to do, very soon after he was hired in 1972, was to take a tour group to New York. He wanted to get to New York. So that was so popularly subscribed to that I had to go along. It became—

Rubens: Was this a fundraiser as well?

02-00:13:15

Whyte:

There was always a contribution to the museum. Later foreign tours were organized by our secretary. Karen Lee was hired about 1972 or ’73 because we needed somebody to schedule all the school groups and because there was an expansion so rapidly of the art classes and art history classes that we needed somebody to work on that, with the registration. Then it became obvious to Lee that we needed a travel program. She went off on doing travel. Lots of them. Two and three travel group programs a year. I mean, it was very active.

Rubens: About how many people would go?

02-00:14:11

Whyte:

Well, the one that she designed for doing London and southern England, I think it got so big that *I* had to go along. Henry was supposed to go along anyway; he was supposed to be the host. But it was so big that I went along. I did two travel programs going to Italy because I had lived in Italy. That was a lot of fun for me, and—

Rubens:

So are you saying Dennis was the real push behind the—

02-00:14:46

Whyte:

Well, he just wanted to do that. So then Karen thought she would like to do that so she started to do it and just continued it. I say a lot of things happened organically in our department; it wasn't through some big scheme of ours from the very beginning.

Rubens:

I wonder, also, if this had to do with— My understanding is that Hopkins had more of a national and international focus of art, really wanted to—

02-00:15:17

Whyte:

Yes, he did.

Rubens:

Compared to Nordland, who was more California oriented.

02-00:15:21

Whyte:

Well, he, of course, was very interested in those artists that he brought to national attention, the Washington, D.C., color-field painters. But yes, you're right. Henry moved away from the local artists some, though there was, over the years, there were a number of artists that were local who received important exhibitions. Perhaps one of the biggest was Robert Hudson, who came along in the early eighties.

Rubens:

In '78, the contemporary music players, then your architect series. Things are going to happen pretty quickly. An audio visual program.

02-00:16:32

Whyte:

Then there was something that I'm not sure I put on the list, is that when— After Dennis left and Diane Frankel left, Miriam Grunfeld took over. But Beau Takahara was doing the scheduling of classes and things of that sort. But she took on video art as her special interest.

Rubens:

Was Diane related to the Fraenkel Gallery?

02-00:17:22

Whyte:

No. No, Diane— after she left the museum—and the year is a little bit hazy in my mind, but I think it was '81, maybe, and Miriam maybe was hired in '81 or '82. Diane became the director of the [Bay Area] Discovery Museum, over in Sausalito. Then she went to Washington, D.C., to become Director of Museum Services, a government agency.

Rubens: We want to talk about Bill Fontana.

02-00:18:22

Whyte: What I want to say about Bill Fontana is that doing that was perhaps my reason for leaving the museum. What I may want to talk about with Miriam is that I want to state that she was very good at trying to bring in minorities into the docent program, creating some diversity, and also, she wanted to bring some sense of evaluation into the program. This is where I and she got into big trouble.

Rubens: You know what else we don't have here? When was it that you were organizing, basically, the return of Grace McCann Morley?

02-00:19:17

Whyte: That was for the fiftieth anniversary, which is 1985. The museum dates from January 18, 1935. She was going to be lecturing just about that time, fifty years later. Of course, she died. It was even scheduled and in the calendar, that she was going to lecture.

Rubens: So you never met her.

02-00:19:52

Whyte: I never met her, but I had quite a number of telephone conversations with her in New Delhi!

Rubens: When you were talking about the concerts in galleries, you're saying this just wasn't done.

02-00:20:37

Whyte: It wasn't done.

Rubens: It wasn't done at MoMA [NY], it wasn't done—

02-00:20:46

Whyte: Because it made the curatorial staff a little nervous, but they never said anything. It was maybe the conservation that were a little more vocal. But nothing ever happened. No works of art were— In fact, at some of our museum opening parties, there would be glasses left on top of— You know, people would smoke in the galleries; people would leave their drinks on frames. I mean, we remember that. You know, there was all these things that—

Rubens: Behaviors that just aren't tolerated now.

02-00:21:26

Whyte: Nothing like that was ever in danger during the concerts. It was pretty well monitored. We had lots of staff.

Rubens: The Judy Chicago was during this period, is that right? [*The Dinner Party, 1979*]

02-00:22:20

Whyte: That was during my period. She was wonderful. We had an Insights program with her, and she was so lively. That was in the rotunda, that show. I think it must have been Henry. I forget what she did for us. I met Georgia O’Keeffe. You know, I did get to meet artists. You know, I never thought about talking about that. There was one occasion when Robert Rauschenberg was here to install his show, but then afterwards, he was signing posters for the staff. So I said, “Well I want mine to say something different.” So he wrote on the bottom of my poster, “For by and to Bob.”.

[material deleted]

02-00:26:28

Whyte: The wonderful thing that one of the color-field painters, Gene Davis, who painted stripes—Jerry had the elevator shaft wall at the old entrance on McAllister street painted by Gene Davis. I think he designed it. Then it was all these stripes that went three stories up. No, four stories up.

Rubens: How long did that last?

02-00:26:54

Whyte: It may still be there. I don’t know. It continued to be used and staffed when the bookshop moved downstairs, and I suspect that the bookshop people used that elevator to go up to the museum floor. But it only stopped at the museum floor; it didn’t stop at the other floors. It was a Gene Davis painting that was, what? four stories high.

Interview #2: January 18, 2007

[Begin Audio File 3 01-18-2007.mp3]

Rubens: What was Dennis O’Leary’s role?

03-00:02:08

Whyte: He was the supervisor of the art school. That seemed to be his official title. I was looking last night in the museum’s catalogue of 1975. That was how it was listed, supervisor of the art school.

[material deleted]

Rubens: Did you hire him?

03-00:03:50

Whyte: I hired him. I hired him, and he made [the classes] more vital and more diverse.

Rubens: Where had he come from?

03-00:04:01

Whyte: He had come directly out of UC Santa Barbara as a graduate student in sculpture.

Rubens: Had you advertised widely for this?

03-00:04:16

Whyte: I did. I got lots of responses from people who had museum experience and even education experience within museums. I thought all of them were just fine, but then in comes this young kid—he was still a kid; you know, he must have been mid-twenties—with such *energy* and such *great ideas* that were so different than the usual art education that you find in museums. I thought, This is the guy. He was the guy. He brought a lot of knowledge to the art school, but he also had a lot of influence on the docent program and various things. So he was a marvelous addition to the staff.

Rubens: How advanced was his degree?

03-00:05:16

Whyte: He had either an MA in fine arts or— I’m not sure what— He didn’t have a Ph. D., but he had experience, as far as doing sculpture on his own. He was trying to exhibit.

Rubens: He was an artist.

03-00:05:37

Whyte: He was an artist. But he also was interested in work, and he had a new girlfriend, whom he eventually married. He thought it would be fun to

work for a museum. He did have fun, and I had fun working with him. He was a great employee.

Rubens: Now, how long was he with you?

03-00:05:57

Whyte: He was with us until 1978. I think it was from '72 to '78. The art classes continued until the fall of '78, and they were discontinued because the veterans' meetings rooms—the studio classrooms were being converted into office space. I think Henry Hopkins was never enthusiastic about art classes at museums. Though there's a long history of art schools associated with museums. Boston Fine Arts Museum [Museum of Fine Arts, Boston] has a very famous art school; the Chicago Institute of Art [Art Institute of Chicago] also has a very important art school. This was something that I really liked having and thought we should be doing. But things move on.

Rubens: Hopkins' argument was space, but did you make a counter-argument that you could have rented space elsewhere or done it at the institute?

03-00:07:35

Whyte: No, I realized that the museum actually did need space for its staff, and for it to be able to utilize all of the space on the fourth floor, rather than taking up space for offices and things of that sort. The museum was getting larger, the staff was getting larger. The museum needed a, oh, design department for publication of monthly calendars and design of catalogues and things of that sort.

Rubens: So did that become some of your new duties, to become involved with—

03-00:08:17

Whyte: No, not really. No, I really had to regroup after we stopped doing the art classes. Now, the art classes that did continue were the lecture courses.

Rubens: Yes. Yes. The traveling.

03-00:08:33

Whyte: The travel, yes, and the travel.

Rubens: I suppose other space could have been rented. The de Young had art classes. I don't know whether they were of the caliber of Chicago or—

03-00:08:48

Whyte: No, and I don't think ours were either, but ours were what you would put under the title of extended education or extension.

Rubens: Hopkins just really wasn't behind it, and if the director's not behind it?

03-00:09:04

Whyte:

He wasn't enthusiastic. I don't think he had a particular campaign to do away with them, but I think his need for greater space for the staff was probably paramount. Because Henry was a very nice person to work for.

Rubens:

I don't have the date of the Rauschenberg exhibit, tell me if you remember it under Hopkins or Nordland, that's—

03-00:09:44

Whyte:

I think it was about '74 or '75 [1977]. I think it was under Henry. I have something here that could tell us, but we'd have to look for it.

[material deleted]

03-00:10:15

Whyte:

Dennis is very open-minded. You know, he's very much a man, but he's—you know, he's sympathetic.

Rubens:

But Bob, you said then—and I'm asking you what you meant by this—you said, "He put up with me for all those years."

03-00:10:34

Whyte:

Oh, well, that's just reference to my own particular lifestyle.

Rubens:

Well, do you want to talk about that a little? To the extent that it was known.

03-00:10:52

Whyte:

It was never a problem. Even with Jerry. He suggested that maybe I could change.

Rubens:

How did he know?

03-00:11:01

Whyte:

I think they just knew. I never hid it too much. It just was there. A number of staff people have been homosexual. There never seemed to be an issue with that at the museum. I think no one ever—

Rubens:

Let me tell you why I'm asking you this. I was pretty surprised, in the Henry Hopkins interview, at no point does he ever mention gay people as an issue, as a factor in art, nothing. There's no mention of gay. But he does mention that Grace McCann Morley was let go because of her sexual proclivities. Those were his words. I was shocked. I was absolutely shocked. A, because I hadn't—I don't know, suspected or even thought about that, vis-à-vis Grace, and B, that a community such as San Francisco would have responded that way in the late fifties.

- 03-00:12:09
Whyte: Well, that was in the late fifties and—
- Rubens: Did you know anything about that?
- 03-00:12:15
Whyte: I didn't know that particular fact. I knew that she probably was a lesbian.
- Rubens: Why?
- 03-00:12:23
Whyte: Well, the way she dressed. You know, she would be wearing mannish suits. You know, a dress, but with a jacket that looked like herringbone or something like that. I may be imagining that she wore a tie, but I think that's a little bit of an exaggeration in my memory. So I'm not surprised. But I don't think I ever heard that specifically.
- Rubens: Now, in the art world, it seems to me, there has been a great toleration of freedoms of all kinds. Living together without marriage independent of what sex. San Francisco certainly was known as a, let's put it this way, a semi-tolerant community. Of course, it was illegal and there were raids. But there were certain places in San Francisco you could go. Then certainly in the art world, I've been told there were certain conservators, or maybe there were certain jobs that tended to have a bit more attraction to gay men and others.
- 03-00:13:41
Whyte: I don't know too much about that. I know that the members of the board were aware of me and my proclivities.
- Rubens: How would the board know that?
- 03-00:14:02
Whyte: Oh, just some of the board members were around a lot, so that you would talk to them. You know, word gets around. You know.
- Rubens: It's a small organization.
- 03-00:14:13
Whyte: I know Evie Haas, I'm sure she knew about it.
- Rubens: Were you living with someone by that time?
- 03-00:14:19
Whyte: Oh, yes.
- Rubens: Could you bring him to functions?

03-00:14:25

Whyte:

I didn't. Just because most functions were just for the staff. You know, black tie affairs were just for the staff. I don't even remember people bringing their husbands or wives to— Well, not too many of the staff would go to a lot of those functions.

Rubens:

To the black tie functions.

03-00:14:49

Whyte:

Black tie. But the curatorial staff.

Rubens:

[Eugenie] Candau, of course, never mentioned this as a topic, but she did say that the staff was very friendly, very convivial. She said there was always a party. There was a party for someone's birthday, if they were getting married, if they were leaving. I'm wondering if you had that sense. I don't know if it changed from Nordland to Hopkins.

03-00:15:19

Whyte:

Well, the parties were probably given by the staff itself. I remember one party that Julius Wasserstein and his staff organized. I forget what the purpose was, but the freight elevator was decorated, and the freight elevator went up and down as we partied, and there was music. But the staff was small in those days.

Rubens:

I don't know who Julius Wasserstein was.

03-00:15:46

Whyte:

Julius was, for years, the supervisor of installation. The museum would have faltered without him or his subsequent replacements. But Kent Roberts has continued the position *brilliantly*. Julius Wasserstein really kept the museum *going* because he was able to put up very complicated exhibitions *and* accommodate the whims of the curatorial staff to their satisfaction. Julius was an artist in his own right and was part of the San Francisco abstract expressionist movement.

Rubens:

You told me about the elevators and how they were painted. So now I have an image of—

03-00:16:46

Whyte:

Well, this is the freight elevator. The other elevator was a regular passenger elevator that would go up and down, just for the public.

Rubens:

Oh, so what was the painting in the freight elevator?

03-00:16:57

Whyte:

Well, they decorated it with lights and low—

Rubens:

Oh, they would decorate it for a party.

03-00:17:02
Whyte: For the party.

Rubens: So it was a good atmosphere, working there?

03-00:17:09
Whyte: I *loved* it. I loved working there. Of the twenty years I was there, I'd say I loved nineteen of them.

Rubens: We'll get to that. So you never felt any discrimination.

03-00:17:23
Whyte: No. No.

Rubens: My point isn't to ask you about other people, but you knew there were other gay people there.

03-00:17:28
Whyte: Oh, yes.

Rubens: Were there lesbian women there, too?

03-00:17:32
Whyte: You know, I'm not so certain of that. Now that you say that. I'm not really— No, I think—

Rubens: But it wasn't an issue.

03-00:17:41
Whyte: It wasn't an issue. It was maybe a little curiosity on the part of the straight staff, but there was never any ugliness. I never felt threatened by the board, either.

Rubens: Good. Nice to hear. So it was never discussed as an issue.

03-00:18:01
Whyte: It was never discussed as an issue.

Rubens: Candau was the ringleader of the union.

03-00:18:13
Whyte: Yes. She and Bonnie.

Rubens: Were you involved in that at all?

03-00:18:18
Whyte: I wasn't so much a ringleader, but I—

Rubens: She doesn't name you as a ringleader. I didn't ask her if you were involved, either.

03-00:18:27

Whyte:

I was a union member, much to the distress of the administration. I think I was that way because the education departments throughout the United States were trying to raise themselves to a higher level, and our salaries were always not commensurate with the salaries of the curatorial staff. Certainly, not with the director. Even with the union, with substantial pay raises evolving out of that, my salary, in comparison to the curators of education at the Fine Arts Museums was \$10,000 or \$15,000 less. So I never had a big, big salary. But there didn't seem to be much resistance, actually. I remember Suzanne Foley, who was one of the curators under Hopkins for many years, saying, "Well when your salaries are raised, our salaries are raised." Meaning that the curatorial staff and the rest of the administrative staff realized an increase in their salaries because of the union. So I thought the union was a *good* thing.

Rubens:

Were you considered administration?

03-00:19:54

Whyte:

I was considered administration until it came to union time. The reason I could argue my way into that was that very early in the career, when I—this didn't pertain to Dennis, but before—I had wanted to hire people, and they said, "No, you can't hire those people. We have to hire from within." I had to accept a decision on the part of the deputy director at the time. So I used that as an argument to say, "Well, I'm not always able to hire and fire." But eventually, I was.

Rubens:

So the union was a good thing. I don't recall when the union came in. But under Hopkins, it's—

03-00:21:04

Whyte:

I think it was under Hopkins, so—

Rubens:

Maybe a little bit later.

03-00:21:05

Whyte:

He came in '74, I think. I don't think it was in opposition to Henry, I think we all admired Henry.

Rubens:

But I don't think the issue would've been raised at the time, about partner benefits.

03-00:21:22

Whyte:

No. Oh, that was something *way* in the future.

Rubens:

Which was de facto discrimination against homosexuals, male or female. But it just didn't come up.

- 03-00:21:35
Whyte: It just didn't come up.
- Rubens: It was not in the discourse.
- 03-00:21:38
Whyte: You know, I don't think any of us really thought that far in advance. Just maintaining our jobs was the important thing.
- Rubens: Well, and not getting arrested or—
- 03-00:21:49
Whyte: Not getting arrested.
- Rubens: Those things happened.
- 03-00:21:52
Whyte: Oh, it did. Even in San Francisco.
- Rubens: Let's talk about how your job was reconceived or regrouped. You said you had to regroup, once the studio classes— Do you remember if there was a conversation with Hopkins or what happened?
- 03-00:22:23
Whyte: I just had to realize that the department was not going to have the array of classes that it had been offering.
- Rubens: You were still in charge of a lecture series—
- 03-00:22:35
Whyte: Lecture series. The docent program.
- Rubens: The travel.
- 03-00:22:41
Whyte: The travel, certainly, until I left. Then Margie Boyd eventually took over that, wonderfully. She did a wonderful job. But I think we started going [toward] more lectures, with bigger audiences. Like in 1978, we began the architecture series, involving famous, famous architects, which we organized in conjunction with the American Institute of Architects [AIA].
- Rubens: How did this come about?
- 03-00:23:16
Whyte: It came about because of a discussion between then registrar Susan King and some architects at the AIA. It involved me from the beginning, with her. Then she soon left the museum, and it became me. My function seemed to be the point man to actually contact the architects and to set up a date with them, to tell them about the

program, then to host them when they finally arrived in San Francisco. It was a very wonderful experience for me, because I not only met Bruce Goff and Robert Stern, any number of famous architects. Michael Graves and people of that—

Rubens: So not necessarily Bay Area.

03-00:24:20

Whyte: It wasn't necessary Bay Area. These lectures brought in the architecture community, the architects. Each of them filled to capacity the Herbst Theater, which seats some 900 people. There would be about six lectures given by architects over the year. I think it continued until I left the museum. But—

Rubens: Hopkins did create a department of architecture, didn't he?

03-00:24:55

Whyte: He did. I think that all flowed together. I wouldn't say that I had anything to do with the development of an architecture/design department, but I think the museum having a positive image in the community because of these lectures, I think that helped Henry to establish a department.

Rubens: Did Henry say to you, "I really want you to get national figures?"

03-00:25:25

Whyte: No. Henry allowed things to just develop. If he didn't like it, I think you might hear about it. Maybe not from him, but maybe from Mike McCone. But he never dictated or suggested any of the people that we had. It was really the architects themselves who chose whom they wanted to hear from.

[material deleted]

03-00:26:31

Whyte: After I left, I had arranged for the lecture of Gae Aulenti—she's the Italian architect from Milan that eventually worked on the interior design of the Asian Art Museum. But in any case, we—

Rubens: Is this a woman?

03-00:26:51

Whyte: This is a woman. She came to lecture. I had left the museum at that time, it's—

Rubens: You left when?

03-00:27:07

Whyte:

1987. So she must have come to lecture in September of 1987. My assistant, Beau Takahara, had arranged for a very good company to do the translation, because Aulenti didn't want to speak in English. So I attended this lecture. Aulenti was on the stage with her slides and everything, and there was this translator, who was so amazed that there was a full 900 people audience, that he became terribly disconnected. He started translating her Italian into French. Then he realized he was doing the wrong thing. So then he started to translate her Italian back into another Italian. He never could quite figure out how to translate it into English. Paolo Polledri, the curator of architecture and design, sitting in the front row, quietly got up out of his seat, walked over to the steps, onto the stage of the Herbst Theater, and started doing the translation into English. But I remember this being one of those wonderful events that was so funny.

Rubens:

Could have been disastrous.

03-00:28:35

Whyte:

That could have been disastrous. I think this program of architecture lectures, that were always in coordination with the American Institute of Architects, brought Aulenti to San Francisco; it brought Mario Botta to San Francisco way before anybody knew who he was.

Rubens:

Or was being considered for a new building.

03-00:29:02

Whyte:

He liked San Francisco so much that he later came back and had an exhibition of his drawings at a local gallery. Eventually, I think that may have put his name into the hopper to be considered for the new building.

Rubens:

Fascinating.

03-00:29:21

Whyte:

I don't take credit. But I think the—

Rubens:

Do you know what the local gallery was? We could find that out.

03-00:29:26

Whyte:

It's no longer in existence.

Rubens:

So really, this was your bailiwick; you were responsible for that.

03-00:29:39

Whyte:

I worked with the institute. I can't—

Rubens:

From '79 until you left.

03-00:29:45

Whyte: Then we did lots of music.

[material deleted]

Rubens: How many people do you have under you?

03-00:31:13

Whyte: At that time, there was Dennis, me, and then Karen Lee [was] with me. Karen was the one that took up the idea of the travel program. So that's the staff there. After Dennis left, Diane Frankel came in, and she took over the responsibilities of the docent program. Not its training, but just dealing with its organization and making sure that the program ran well. I think she probably was involved with docent evaluation and things of that sort. Diane was a full-time employee. She did other things, but essentially, that was her big responsibility. Because by that time, the docent program had grown to be rather large. It needed some sense of organization. She was very good at organization. She developed a camaraderie and esprit de corps among the docents themselves, to realize that they were an organization. I think the program improved under her direction.

[RW added in editing: "Diane hired one of the docents—Susan Becker—to do the docent techniques classes. Susan was very good and inspired the future docents to employ the inquiry techniques that I had instituted years before. She continued to train the docents after Diane and I left the Museum. The docents were also instructed in the history of Modern art by a succession of instructors including Wes Chamberlin and Whitney Chadwick, both from San Francisco State University."]

Rubens: My understanding is that Hopkins never aspired to a new building. His goal was to take over the whole Veterans Building, and they were never quite able to do that.

03-00:33:45

Whyte: I was aware of that. I know that Henry was very disturbed by people on the board who really felt that they wanted to have a new building all to the museum's self.

Rubens: Was there ever a time when architects are saying, "I could do something for you"?

03-00:34:18

Whyte: No, that never came up. It was to reach out to the architecture community. I think it operated *very well* in that way. I think there was, by extension, a reaching out to the design community, too, because we always had very beautiful invitations designed by prominent designers.

Rubens: Whose idea was that?

03-00:34:51

Whyte: I think that came through from the architects. They really didn't want architects to design the mailers, but they did want to have a good look.

Rubens: Right. So they suggested someone?

03-00:35:13

Whyte: I can't remember the name of the designer.

Rubens: Michael Manwaring became very involved.

03-00:35:20

Whyte: Well, that was the name.

Rubens: Michael Manwaring.

03-00:35:23

Whyte: It was Michael Manwaring. That was it. He's the one that did that.

Rubens: The other thing regarding Hopkins is that it's Hopkins, my understanding is, who suggests to add the word "modern" to the name of the museum. It was the San Francisco Museum of Art, and he adds the San Francisco Museum of *Modern* Art. Hopkins clearly wants to bring a national standard, a broader world to the museum. It's why he brings the Rauschenberg exhibit. He has a lot of L.A. connections, but the L.A. connections are also now the leaders of modern art in New York. But he also was interested in regionalism, as well. So that's why just going back to say did he say to you, "There's a New York architect I want you to get," or a Chicago or anything like that?

03-00:36:23

Whyte: No. No, that never happened.

Rubens: So you are in this mindset, too? What's your mindset about California versus regional versus national and international?

03-00:36:34

Whyte: I would say that I felt, through all the years that I worked at the museum—now, that was twenty years ago—that especially in later years, that we did not really support the local art scene as I think a museum properly should. It's not that local artists were entirely neglected, but I felt that there was an aura about Bay Area art—Robert Arneson, Robert Hudson, Richard Shaw, David Best, William Wiley, and people of that ilk, whose art was different than what you would find *anywhere* in the United States. I felt the museum should really be supporting something that really was quite unique and really quite wonderful. There was on the board, two people—Frank Hamilton and

then Rene di Rosa, who both kept on pushing, pushing, pushing for greater participation of local artists, both as individual exhibitors, but also as a general movement here in the Bay Area, to show more support for that. I don't think it ever really quite got together. I'm not sure that it ever has.

Rubens: And do you have a speculation of why?

03-00:38:20

Whyte: I don't know why. I think maybe people coming, directors coming from other parts of the country, had a different perspective, and maybe didn't quite take so seriously an art that often was tongue in cheek and off the wall and quirky and wonderful.

Rubens: Give me an example.

03-00:38:43

Whyte: Well Robert Hudson would create these creatures, or sculptures that were made of many different objects, but they would take on a funny little aspect that would be amusing. I think Rene di Rosa's— the di Rosa Preserve, which is out near Sonoma, finally is a museum that honors this whole movement that was taking place in the sixties, seventies, eighties, and even still goes on.

Rubens: Hopkins says, Hamilton was on the board. Hopkins says, "He doesn't really represent the Bay Area arts community." But he says that Hamilton's partner—

03-00:40:11

Whyte: Mason Wells.

Rubens: —was a wonderful artist that didn't get as much recognition as he should have.

03-00:40:21

Whyte: Oh, that's interesting. I haven't seen Frank Hamilton for years, and I've kept in touch, though that's a little difficult to do now, with Rene di Rosa over the years. I've always admired him, and I always felt that artists that he seemed to be interested in were under-represented.

Rubens: Rene came on the board after Hamilton?

03-00:40:52

Whyte: Rene was on the board in '75, I know. I don't think he was on the board in '85. I think he had left, probably unhappily. Not that he was invited off, but I think he left the board because he felt the museum wasn't responding to the local art community.

Rubens: Were these people referred to in a certain way?

03-00:41:21

Whyte:

You know, sometimes it's been called funk art, but I think that is not a great appropriate name. Peter Selz defined some of this activity early on, in a show that he did at the University Art Museum, now the Berkeley Art Museum. I thought it was a brilliant show. It recognized that the art in the Bay Area was and is different. I think things are changing now, but you know, in the sixties, seventies, eighties, and part of the nineties, I think there was a distinct flavor to the art of the Bay Area. So I don't know what you call this art. Rene di Rosa probably has a good name for it.

Rubens:

You mentioned the Berkeley Art Museum. It's going to be pushing SFMOMA a bit. I don't know what's going on at the Oakland Museum at the time. Did you— Oh. Genie Candau says that there was a librarians' group. Was there an art educators' group from the different museums?

03-00:43:07

Whyte:

Yes. Oh, we met.

Rubens:

How did that come about? What was that?

03-00:43:10

Whyte:

It came about, and it started in Cleveland. I would say the year was 1968. The Art Directors Association—which Jerry Nordland—he may have been the president of it, or was one of the officers of this organization—decided that they needed to pay more attention to the education activities of art museums. So that year, I was sent to Cleveland to take part in a program, which art curators, art supervisors—you know, whatever we were to be calling ourselves—together to talk. This was a great eye opener for people in the education wing of museums. So we knew each other quite well. We'd meet locally.

Rubens:

How often, roughly?

03-00:44:19

Whyte:

Oh, maybe once a month, for a while. I forget the details.

Rubens:

Then you'd have this annual, as well.

03-00:44:29

Whyte:

Well, the annual meeting would take place at the annual meeting of the AAM, the American Association of Museums.

Rubens:

Was it the Art Directors Association that initiated it?

03-00:44:57

Whyte:

It was.

Rubens: But then you began to meet at the AAM. I was wondering if Oakland also—

03-00:45:15

Whyte: Ben Hazard was the director of the education department of the Oakland Museum. At that time, there were four departments, and education was one of them. I think since then, that department has been dissolved. But he was part of it.

Rubens: Well, I'm asking—I didn't ask it well—if there's an effort on the part of the Oakland Museum also to define or highlight Bay Area, California art.

03-00:45:47

Whyte: Oh, Bay Area. I think when Karen Tsujimoto left the San Francisco museum— She was a curator, first starting under Suzanne Foley, and then she worked under Graham Beal. There was some thought that why didn't she be promoted to chief curator, instead of bringing in an outside person, Graham Beal? She had done a brilliant catalogue of, I think it was Wayne Thiebaud, that she wrote. A beautiful catalogue. She eventually, for the Oakland Museum, did a show of Joan Brown. I think the Oakland Museum has naturally an interest, because it's the art of California that they're interested in. But I don't think that was an excuse for not recognizing a major movement and a major number of artists for the San Francisco Museum to not do those shows.

Rubens: Hopkins seems to have started out, even at UCLA and then when he's at LACMA, doing art education. So I'm wondering if when he came—he comes in '74; I'm re-asking you this— You said he really let you alone. He didn't come with a vision regarding art education.

03-00:48:32

Whyte: No, he really didn't. I think he was so happy to be doing curatorial work. He said to me once that he got so tired of lugging around a slide projector to schools. Because I think he didn't develop a docent program. It was really his responsibility to do the school tours or the school outreach. But that's the only thing he ever really said. The wonderful thing about Henry was that he allowed people to grow within their own division of the museum. I think if he didn't like something, really, eventually he would either say something or put an end to it. I think that may have happened with the classes, the art classes. But I'm not sure. You'd have to ask him about that.

Rubens: Then do you have any speculation about why Tsujimoto was not promoted, why Graham Beal was brought in?

03-00:49:52

Whyte:

I don't know. It's always been a question in my mind because I thought she was so good. I don't know whether it was that she was too young or just what. But I think she was an excellent and is still an excellent curator.

Rubens:

So you worked with someone at the AIA to develop the—

03-00:50:32

Whyte:

The program. The director was Marie Farrell. She wasn't an architect, she just really ran the organization. Then there was a group of architects that were on the committee. They would discuss among themselves. Then they'd come up with the roster of people they wanted to hear from. I wasn't making the decisions. But what I had to find out was, talking to the— You know, I speak some Italian, so I was able to invite Mario Botta and Aulenti in Italian. I would contact these architects in their offices, invite them, say that, "We don't have much money, but we would love to have you come to San Francisco and talk about your work." Then I would pick them up at the airport. You know, all these little things. Frank Gehry was one of them. Frank Gehry, I picked him up at the airport, and we were driving in. He was remarking on the skyline in San Francisco. I said, did he ever want to do buildings in San Francisco? He said no. Because San Francisco is in such a beautiful setting that he would have a hard time working in San Francisco; there'd been too much distraction from his architecture. San Francisco is not a great architecture town. I think that may have been one reason why the architects were so enthusiastic about having an architecture series of lectures.

Rubens:

In the same vein, we were talking about, a little, not giving enough spotlight to the Bay Area painters. The question that I have is was there some effort to get at least Southern California architects? So there's Gehry and—

Rubens:

I want to know about audio/visual, if you were carrying slide shows to schools. Did you do that?

03-00:53:51

Whyte:

I did in the very beginning, before I began the docent program and probably did so even in the early stages of the docent program. But eventually, the docents themselves would go into the school, equipped with slides, and quite often, with an art activity. This is the one thing I really loved, was that the docents believed that an art activity should accompany a tour as well as being part of a school visit. It's something that I had worked on myself, and I was glad they really liked that. I thought that was just a really good thing.

Rubens:

What had you worked on, particularly?

03-00:54:39

Whyte:

I would go into the schools, and then I'd have them do little art projects. It was an extension of the art class idea that we'd have on Saturday mornings. I felt to better understand modern art, you need to do modern art. You know, that pervaded what I did some in the very beginning, and that the docents were able to carry out with more vigor. The beauty of the docent program was not that one docent would take a whole class through the gallery; they would have maybe five or six of the class, and there'd be several docents working at a time. They would sit on the gallery floor and do something that somehow— some art activity that would relate maybe to what they were looking at. Or even come back to one of our art spaces, one of our art classrooms, and continue that activity. That was something I really feel very positive about our program. I don't know, I think it still exists.

Rubens:

Did you write up anything about—?

03-00:56:00

Whyte:

You mean about the program?

Rubens:

Would you share it at these national meetings?

03-00:56:09

Whyte:

We would talk about these things. I was often hired by the docents at the de Young Museum to go over and give workshops on how to loosen up their docents, to get their students more involved in the seeing activity of an art tour.

Rubens:

The key thing to you was that they were—

03-00:56:35

Whyte:

Well, that they should not only tell the students something about the artist, something interesting, or something about what was going on at a particular era, but also to have them look at the work of art. You would do this by asking them just very simple questions that couldn't be answered by yes or no, that they would have to come up with some response of theirs to what they see in a painting or in a sculpture. This, I certainly taught to my own docents. I think it worked very well. It was called the inquiry method. I think maybe it has degenerated into docents asking people how they feel about a work of art. That was never the intention. My intention was simple questions.

Rubens:

“What shapes do you see?”

03-00:57:37

Whyte:

“What shapes?” “How are they put together?” “What colors are there?” “Are they strong?” You would just ask them questions that would make them come up with answers from what they could observe themselves.

Rubens: How many docents did you have by the time you left?

03-00:57:55

Whyte: It must have been sixty or something like that.

Rubens: The balance between men and women?

03-00:58:02

Whyte: It was getting better. At the beginning, it was entirely women. Then men were filtered into the program. Slowly.

Rubens: Peter Samis, you said.

03-00:58:15

Whyte: Peter Samis was one of them. There were a number of men. But primarily women.

Rubens: Did you make an effort to get men? I mean, how would you do that.

03-00:58:27

Whyte: Miriam Grunfeld, who started, I think, in '82, subsequently to Diane Frankel, made a real effort to reach out not only to men becoming part of the docent program, but also trying to diversify, bringing in men and women of color. She was very successful at that. She also brought in a rather strict system of evaluation. This led to some difficulties eventually, and was probably one of the reasons why I left the museum. I thought she was doing a wonderful job of diversifying the program. I think she was very successful, and she was getting them to be better prepared and to do better tours. But there was great resentment among the docents, feeling that she ruled with an iron hand. Unfortunately, I was oblivious to this. There was a grand revolt that eventually ended with one of the board members saying that I just really needed to get her off the staff. That eventually happened. I think because of a year of having felt that I failed, with regard to the docent program, I eventually felt I needed to leave. I did.

Rubens: You resigned.

03-00:60:27

Whyte: I resigned.

Rubens: Who was the board member?

03-00:60:30

Whyte: Sandy Hobson. She was also a docent. She's no longer on the board. [pause] Her name was Sandra, but we always called her Sandy. She's the one that really influenced me to hire Miriam, and then she was the one that actually was pushing me to get her off.

Rubens: What was Miriam's background?

03-00:60:56

Whyte: Her background was art. She had an M.A. in teaching, in education. She taught at inner city schools in New York.

Rubens: How old was she, about?

03-00:61:15

Whyte: Oh, I'd imagine she was about thirty-two when she was hired. She had come recommended highly from the de Young Museum. She had worked on some programs there, with the de Young. I thought she was super, and she was super. I protected her until I was really forced to—

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Rubens: You did appreciate Miriam. Was there something in her manner, or—

04-00:00:50

Whyte: I'm not sure— Well, it may have been her manner. You know, she may have been a little bit strict with volunteers, maybe insensitive to that aspect. Because I've seen that happen with other organizations. I volunteer as an usher for the Opera House. Recently, we had a person who's come in, and not happily. Not because they don't have good intentions, or even good ideas; it's the manner. I suspect it was Miriam's manner. But she seemed to be very well received by the African American docents and docents that really were less— How to say this? Well, not so middle class, white— I was seeing a change, and I thought it was good.

Rubens: So you think maybe there was some generational conflict maybe between the old guard or—

04-00:02:09

Whyte: The old guard. The docent program itself had younger women in it. Not twenty-year-olds so much but you know, thirty-year-old and forty.

Rubens: Married women with—

04-00:02:21

Whyte: Married women, maybe, with—

Rubens: —children, yeah.

04-00:02:23

Whyte: I really felt very positive about the program, and I thought it was going very smoothly. I was glad she was thinking of putting people on the line, as far as doing good docent tours. The evaluation process. Much to my surprise, there was this undercurrent of dissatisfaction that was

only brought to my attention by Beau Takahara, who was working for me at the same time. She said, “Well there’s this rumbling going on.” The rumbling became louder and louder. Eventually, I had to let her go. She realized that she had to go because of all the contention.

Rubens: Was she full-time?

04-00:03:13

Whyte: She was full-time.

Rubens: You said years later, in ’88, the program became a department. The docent program became a department? An organization within the department?

04-00:03:32

Whyte: It became the docent corps. I think we used that word. I wouldn’t say that it was a separate department, but it became an entity in itself. I felt that was positive, that there was a sense of self-governance, to a point. That they could entertain. But we remained responsible for the education, docent education, which was art history and then touring techniques. But they became a crew. With a president.

Rubens: Oh, really? They elected a president?

04-00:04:13

Whyte: They elected a president.

Rubens: Was there a training period, I’m trying to get at, was there some standard? Did everyone become a docent who started out as a docent?

04-00:04:26

Whyte: Pretty much. We did have some test at the end of the program, just to see how well they would do. Some of them might have had second thoughts. But essentially, I would say 75, 80, 85 percent of them going through the program became docents.

Rubens: How nice. So let’s just make sure that we’ve covered the dance. I thought we had talked about that a little bit. Beginning in ’75, you scheduled concerts, poetry readings, dance. Because we talked about the Kronos Quartet and we talked about Caroline Crawford did the jazz, some of the jazz.

04-00:05:17

Whyte: She worked for the Contemporary Music Players. She was very good. The Contemporary Music Players had a long history that existed until the museum moved to the new facilities on Third Street, but they still exist as an organization, though it’s run by different people and different musicians now. But it had a very good history at the museum, and the concerts were almost always reviewed in the *Chronicle* and in

the *Examiner*. So it had a very good reputation. I was very proud of that association. You know, I didn't plan the programs, I just arranged for them.

Rubens: Then dance?

04-00:06:14

Whyte: Dance was an interesting aspect. It started with Dennis O'Leary, who arranged for a gallery dance program with the Margie Jenkins Dance Company, which is a company that's still going on. Then eventually, I became associated with the Oberlin Dance Collective, which is the ODC, which is still a very, very vital program.

Rubens: How did you become associated with it?

04-00:06:46

Whyte: Well, through the museum, and actually having them come and perform, essentially in the galleries, but eventually in the rotunda area, the center part of the museum. There was a little bit of contention, I think, with all these programs—the jazz programs, the music programs—which in the beginning, were often situated in a gallery. There was always concern that works of art might be damaged. But we always had the guards on duty. There was never any, any damage to any work of art. I had, in Rome, when I lived there, had attended concerts at the Palazzo Doria. I think I mentioned this earlier. You know, in the galleries with masterpieces, and a baroque style musical organization playing. I thought, gee, I just really like the idea of the integration of the arts. This pervaded my whole sense of art education, actually, at the museum. Because sometimes we would introduce the ideas of music into our docent tours, too. You know? With the idea that there's some relationship between art forms.

Rubens: So docents would be talking about music that was contemporary to the—

04-00:08:14

Whyte: Or they would have children respond musically to a work of art. This sounds a little strange, but it would actually make them feel— you know, feel the response to a work of art, whether it was a dramatic situation or something that was very soft and gentle and this thing. Because I think that's part of our art experience, is to respond to a work of art as if it were speaking to us. Or maybe musically playing to us.

Rubens: So you would have these dance performances. The jazz series was, you have 1986.

04-00:09:14

Whyte:

1986, and there were several programs as part of this. It was called “Jazz in the Galleries.” It was organized with Barbara Sherman, who at the time was producing jazz programs in the Bay Area. It was concurrent with the beginnings of SF Jazz, which is a jazz festival two times a year that still exists. We had Bobby McFerrin there, we had musical groups from the Bay Area perform at the museum, in the galleries. One time there were five performances going on at the same time. Because the museum was so vast you could have this happening, so that you could be in a distant gallery and you wouldn’t hear the other groups. This, I think, made some people nervous. There was some, oh, some exertion to not do quite so much of that. Eventually we started doing things just in the rotunda. The music programs eventually went to the green room, which was on the second floor. I think Henry probably had his eyes on that floor, and the green room was a large elegant—“faded elegance”—room with chandeliers and all, which was a wonderful place for music because the sound was very good there.

Rubens:

Do you think Henry was one of the forces that didn’t want so much going on?

04-00:11:01

Whyte:

I think probably. I think probably. Because I think eventually, the rotunda space was renovated. One of the persons contributing the funding for that—I think it was Phyllis Wattis—really felt that the space should really be just a gallery space and not used for lectures, musical events, et cetera. I think this probably reflected Henry’s thinking about it, too. But I don’t know.

Rubens:

Did you try to argue against it or just—

04-00:11:40

Whyte:

No.

Rubens:

George Neubert and Graham Beal. Who was George Neubert?

04-00:12:04

Whyte:

George Neubert had been a curator at the Oakland Museum. He came over. He was invited by Henry to come over. Eventually, he went to Omaha, Nebraska, to be the director. I think he was with us maybe a couple of years. We had a good relationship. I don’t remember in particular what exhibitions he organized.

Rubens:

And Graham Beal?

04-00:12:47

Whyte:

Graham Beal was brought from Minneapolis, I think.

Rubens: By Hopkins.

04-00:12:55

Whyte: By Hopkins. He was an Englishman. Very, very bright. Wrote wonderfully, he was a good addition to the staff, had good installation sense. I think his exhibitions always were beautiful. I think he was somewhat sensitive to Bay Area artists. He worked with an adjunct curator, whose name I just can't think of right now, on the Robert Hudson show, which was a beautiful show. Had something to do with the catalogue. I think there was some disagreement between the museum staff and the adjunct curator, whose name I can't think of right now. But I enjoyed working with him. He took a real interest in the docent program. As a matter of fact, all the—Henry included—all the curators—John Humphrey, Henry Hopkins, Suzanne Foley, Graham Beal, I think even George Neubert—always delighted in giving the docents what we called a walkthrough, which was an introduction to an exhibition which those curators were responsible for. This was always a highlight, as far as the docents were concerned, because it meant they could hobnob with the curatorial staff. They were always just wonderful at that.

Rubens: Did you have regular meetings with the curatorial staff?

04-00:14:45

Whyte: I would not say there were regular, like every Monday morning, but we met often. We were a small enough staff, and we were close enough in our offices, that we really did collaborate. Suzanne Foley was wonderful to work with. I adored working with John Humphrey. I think I said before that I probably learned more about art from John Humphrey than just anybody. He's so sensitive to the artist and a wonderful curator. But older. By the time I came on the staff, he was really slowing down and doing photography, which he really adored. I think he built up the collection tremendously.

Rubens: Well, you started the lecture series also on photography.

04-00:15:44

Whyte: Photography.

Rubens: Friends of Photography.

04-00:15:47

Whyte: Friends of Photography.

Rubens: Friends of Photography, and the photography lecture series, you started before.

04-00:16:06

Whyte:

With John Humphrey. With the lecture series, I always, to keep on good terms with the Modern Art Council [see note on page 8] and the Women's Board, who were also involved with programming, we early decided that the curatorial staff, working with the education department, would sponsor lectures related to exhibitions and that other art related lectures—or other lectures, sometimes they weren't always strictly art—could be organized by either the Modern Art Council or the Women's Board.

Rubens:

Just tell me, when did the Modern Arts Council start?

04-00:16:55

Whyte:

I don't know.

Rubens:

Did you inherit it?

04-00:16:57

Whyte:

I inherited it; it wasn't part of my department. It was really a volunteer organization. The Women's Board were more higher up socially, I would say, in the echelon of the museum and, also, the community. Then, of course, they worked closely with the board of trustees. Many of the Modern Art Council moved up to the Women's Board, and then many Women's Board people became part of the board of trustees. Evie Haas was, I think, one of them; Peg Haldeman, who was a brilliant organizer of lectures, special lectures. I probably talked about her before.

Rubens:

You may have. You said the first one was Louise Nevelson.

04-00:17:50

Whyte:

She was so wonderful! You know? I think I probably mentioned the fact that she was wearing— She came into the auditorium. We were still doing lectures in the rotunda; we called it the auditorium from time to time. She was wearing this long, long, heavy coat. On the outside, it was a Paisley design; on the inside, it was lined with chinchillas. Which she casually draped over the piano before she started her talk. A lot of the lecture series, we organized. Quite often, I did the background work on that. Henry was very good at conversation with the artist. Quite often, if an artist didn't feel substantially confident to talk before a big audience, we would have Henry do the interview. Because he was really wonderful at it.

Rubens:

Would you kind of broker that? You'd figure out if that would be appropriate—

04-00:19:00

Whyte:

Yes, that's right. Working with the curatorial staff because we really did work together at that time, because we were a small staff. You

know, there were not the contentions that some of my art education cohorts experienced at other museums. I really was very privileged.

Rubens: Any other memorable lectures that you want to particularly mention?

04-00:19:40

Whyte: I can't think of anything right now.

Rubens: Why don't you just talk about where you went afterwards?

04-00:20:05

Whyte: I began to think twenty years was a long time. Twenty years is unusual in the museum profession. People change jobs. In fact, I had been offered a job at the Ringling Museum in Florida, which I turned down.

Rubens: Yes, had you ever considered going anywhere else?

04-00:20:32

Whyte: I always thought that I'd like to spend a couple of years in New York, but I never got there. I got there to visit, but I never got there to work. The last year I was still dealing with some discontent in the docent program.

Rubens: Hopkins had left.

04-00:20:51

Whyte: Hopkins had left. There was a period when we didn't have a director at all. Jack Lane came on. I got along very well with him. I think he had some reservations about the problems I was having with the program. But I noticed that when I left, Van Deren Coke left, and Bill Millis left. Then a whole succession of people left after Jack Lane came on. There was no bloodbath. I left [after] maybe working a year with him, but I was working with him. His style of administration was very different. Henry had an open door policy. You could pop into his room, look around the corner and say, "Henry, can you talk?" There was no problem. But that didn't exist with Jack Lane. He just had a different style. I think a lot of us thought, "Well, we need to give him room." That's what I thought. I thought twenty years is long enough in one place. So I went to the Museo ItaloAmericano, which is the Italian American Museum in San Francisco. I saw that they needed a curator. So I applied for the curatorial job, and they said, "No, we want you to become the director." The president of the organization was also, at one time, on our board, Modesto Lanzone. When I went in to be interviewed for this position, I knew all the people that were interviewing me. It was a shoo-in. So I was there. Actually, I left the Museo in the year 2000. When it became retirement years, I stepped down as director, and then became chief curator, which amounted to two people, me and one other person. Then eventually, I started

working just one day a week. Eventually, I stopped working altogether. So it was a slow retirement. That was a very positive experience for me.

Rubens: Characterize the museum for us.

04-00:23:40

Whyte:

It was a museum that was begun as a response to the idea that various ethnic groups need to have greater representation the city. Before the Museo ItaloAmericano, there was the Mexican Museum that was started by Peter Rodríguez. I'm not sure quite when that began. The Museo began in '78. I think the Mexican Museum had existed for two, three or four years before that. This was the brainchild of Giuliana Nardelli Haight, who was living here, who felt that there was a very vital Italian American community that had contributed to the culture of San Francisco. There'd been quite a number of Italian artists, poets and what have you, and she felt, like the Mexican Museum, there should be recognition of the Italian community in San Francisco. Now, I'm not Italian, but I lived in Italy and speak some Italian; I can't say it's wonderful Italian. I was close to Modesto Lanzone. I took most of the after-lecture dinners there, at his restaurant in Opera Plaza. Modesto had a wonderful collection of essentially Bay Area artists, whom I appreciated. We became friends. The docents liked him. So he thought that was a great idea, that I should become the director of the Museo. Whereas I had no intentions of doing that. I liked that, I liked doing that.

Rubens: Thirteen years. Where was it located?

04-00:25:44

Whyte:

It's still located at Fort Mason Center, which is right off the Marina District.

Rubens: Do you have a couple of outstanding accomplishments regarding it that you'd like to just mention?

04-00:26:00

Whyte:

We did a lot of contemporary artists.

Rubens: So you did exhibits.

04-00:26:18

Whyte:

I did exhibits. The one I'm probably most proud of, because it was such an issue at the time, was doing a show of the paintings of Gottardo Piazzoni. Piazzoni had done a series of murals, gigantic murals, for the old library, the old main library. When Gae Aulenti was to become the architect of the new Asian Art Museum, which was to take over that spot, there was a movement on the part of the

museum, the Asian Art Museum, to remove the murals. Which eventually happened. I, and any number of other people in the Bay Area, objected to this. It became an issue in the paper, in the newspapers. I contacted the Piazzoni family, saying, "We would like to do an exhibition of Piazzoni's art at the museum, at the Italian American Museum." He said, "Well, that's a good idea, but we don't want to do that until this controversy has settled itself." It settled itself by the murals being taken off the wall, conserved, and then eventually, Harry Parker at the Fine Arts Museums said they were going to find a new home at the new de Young Museum.

Rubens: There's a room.

04-00:28:04

Whyte: There's a whole room devoted to them. So after that, in the year 2000, in the summer and into the fall, I did a beautiful, beautiful Piazzoni show. That's perhaps my favorite show, because I'm writing a book on Piazzoni. It needs to find a publisher.

Rubens: You know, the one thing we didn't talk about also, is that you did do a considerable amount of writing, though, didn't you?

04-00:28:35

Whyte: I did a lot of, oh, gallery guides. You know, things that you would pick up in the gallery to read. I wrote just about all of them over the twenty years. I convinced the curatorial staff that we needed to have things of that sort. I also did three Acoustiguide tours, and I wrote those. I was the voice for them.

Rubens: What were they? Do you know what they were?

04-00:29:12

Whyte: I remember one of them was Edward Hopper, and I can not remember what the other two were. The other thing that the department did was to create video programs as an introduction to exhibitions. This started out quite simply as an on-going slide show for the Robert Arneson that I think Henry sponsored and curated. But then eventually, we moved to video, which could be put on a loop and shown continuously in an adjoining gallery. We did several of those. Sol LeWitt and Robert Hudson were the two that I remember.

Rubens: Do you have any comment about Hopkins leaving?

04-00:30:52

Whyte: I realized that the board had really thought that they wanted to move to a new facility, which I think, in a sense, would give them a sense of prestige in the community, for being able to create a new edifice for the museum. I think Henry resisted this. This is how I always felt, and

I think it was supported by even Henry himself. I think that thought prevailed among the board. I don't know; I think it was a mutual separation, but I don't know. A lot of us felt very comfortable with Henry. Some of us didn't feel so comfortable with Jack Lane. Though I liked him tremendously as an individual. Henry had such a personal charm with the public. You could say to Henry, "Oh, Henry, why don't you get up on the stage and just say a few words of introduction?" Henry, he'd get up out of his chair and get up on the stage and talk. People just loved what he would say because it was always spontaneous and fresh. Jack Lane's style was much more studied and not so spontaneous. I think more wanting to be in control.

The thing that probably annoyed me the most, and probably ended up with a decision to leave, was that I had worked with a sound artist, Bill Fontana, to do a installation piece that was to take place between the Opera House and the War Memorial Building, where the museum used to be. Bill Fontana had arranged so that he placed microphones on the Farallon Islands, in conjunction with the bird sanctuary there and where the seals would congregate, as well as microphones located on the Golden Gate Bridge. This amounted towards a sound environment between the two buildings. But it was not only that; it had an international aspect to it, because at the same time that Bill was doing this, he was working on a sound piece for the city of Cologne, Germany, which brought together natural sounds from the zoo and manmade sounds from the train station, and then the bells in the famous cathedral in Cologne. I have here a catalogue, which I'll give to you so that you can look at it. Bill had arranged with organizations in Europe to have an hour-long broadcast of the sounds from San Francisco, intermixed with the sounds from Cologne, Germany. Bill had this soundboard that he could control the sounds of any one of his microphones, either in San Francisco, or on the island, or in Cologne. It was an hour-long broadcast throughout Europe, in 1987. But this installation between the two buildings, I had worked very hard to find the funding for—it was related to our interest in music—and actually getting the project done, but I was never given any recognition for it and I was scolded for going off to Germany as a guest of the German government to be there representing this project. Also, the fact that Jack Lane loved the piece that was taking place between the two buildings. This perhaps shouldn't be said, but he was in contention with the then director of the opera company, because they said they wished that he didn't have the sound going on all the time and wouldn't the museum lower the volume on it? Jack Lane refused to do anything about it. He said it was an art piece and that it deserved its own place between the buildings, and it was a very important work of art.

Rubens:

So Jack Lane recognized it, but who did not?

04-00:36:19

Whyte: Jack Lane recognized it, but didn't give me any credit.

Rubens: I was going to ask who initiated it.

04-00:36:31

Whyte: I initiated it. I worked with Bill Fontana. He had done other things for us. He was famous in the Bay Area during the eighties, early eighties, because he did, with KQED, early morning sounds of the bay, which include the foghorns. What was wonderful, there were the sounds of foghorns in the international broadcast. Which was broadcast here in the United States, here. But it was during a day it was sunny. So the Bridge Authority turned on the foghorns to be sounded during this one-hour program, so that they'd be well represented in Europe.

[End of Interview]

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