

A TEI Project

Interview of Blanche and John Leeper

Contents

1. Transcript

- 1.1. TAPE NUMBER: I, SIDE ONE (MAY 9, 1988)
- 1.2. TAPE NUMBER: I, SIDE TWO (MAY 9, 1988)
- 1.3. TAPE NUMBER: II, SIDE ONE (MAY 10, 1988)
- 1.4. TAPE NUMBER: II, SIDE TWO (MAY 10, 1988)

1. Transcript

1.1. TAPE NUMBER: I, SIDE ONE (MAY 9, 1988)

RATNER:

We're in San Antonio, Texas, with Mr. John Palmer Leeper, director of the Marion Koogler McNay Art Museum. Before we begin our discussion of the Pasadena Art Museum, I was hoping that you would tell me a little something about your background, when and where you were born and where your family was from.

JOHN LEEPER:

I was born on February 4, 1921, in Dennison, Texas, and I was brought up in West Texas, in Sweetwater, but with close associations with Dallas and Fort Worth. I went to college at Southern Methodist [University]. I discovered there a great discovery: that I couldn't paint! There was nothing I could do that satisfied me in the slightest, but I gradually drifted into what kind of art history there was available, although I always took studio courses. But I took my degree in journalism. After that, in 1941, or '42 it was, after I graduated, I joined the army immediately, was stationed in Newfoundland for a year, and then came back and was stationed in New Hampshire. That was the beginning of my life really, because I discovered the plethora of museums that there were. And I visited every one of them. I had an army copy of Helen Gardner's Art through the Ages. I read every single chapter and then would go to the Boston Museum [of Fine Arts] and look under chapter one at everything they had—

RATNER:

[laughter]

JOHN LEEPER:

—and then explored Worcester [Massachusetts] and Providence [Rhode Island] and Hartford [Connecticut] and all the other museums, as well as going into New York to the Metropolitan [Museum of Art]. So I was remarkably self-taught in art history. And there is a room at the [William Hayes] Fogg [Art] Museum at Harvard [University] called the Naumberg Room, which was left by a graduate, of antique furniture, Titian, Rembrandt, this kind of thing. And it's not open to the public. I asked to see it one day, and the librarian took me to it. I asked her, "What are all these people studying?" She said, "Art history. They're going to be teachers or museum people." And it was like the blinding of Saul; I knew exactly what I wanted to do at that point! And so I enrolled in Harvard while I was still in the army. Then, as soon as I was released, I came there, and while there married my wife [Blanche Magurn Leeper], who was the assistant curator of oriental art. Her sister [Ruth Magurn] was assistant curator of prints at the Fogg Museum. So I not only got a wife but a whole curatorial staff!

RATNER:

[laughter] How did your interest in the arts develop? You mentioned that you were interested in painting early on.

JOHN LEEPER:

Well, you know, Texas that many years ago was a fairly bereft country. There were no public collections to speak of. I went to the opening of the Dallas Museum [of Fine Arts] in 1936 when I was fifteen. And I think it was the presence of magazines around the house that inspired me. For some odd reason my family had subscribed to the good old *The Connoisseur* years ago, and referring to those began an interest in it. There was no question about it. When I was at Harvard I majored in medieval art. And I've never looked at it since! The interest became entirely American and modern.

RATNER:

So what degree did you get from Harvard?

JOHN LEEPER:

I took an M. A. and completed the residency for the Ph.D., but I didn't want to bother with the thesis. My first job was at the Corcoran Gallery [of Art] in Washington [D.C.], where I was for three years before going to Pasadena.

RATNER:

And what were your responsibilities at the Corcoran?

JOHN LEEPER:

I began as keeper of the W. A. [William Andrews] Clark Collection and then became assistant director. And my duties there were almost entirely administrative. Well, never entirely administrative, because you're always involved in objects and exhibitions and things of the sort. But I mostly administered the museum.

RATNER:

You wrote your thesis—you didn't do a doctoral dissertation, you just said, but your master's thesis was on medieval art?

JOHN LEEPER:

You don't write a master's thesis at Harvard, only a Ph.D.

RATNER:

So your concentration was medieval. How did it happen that you became interested in—?

JOHN LEEPER:

Well, this happens at most universities. It depends on where the faculty is very strong. Harvard at that time had a very distinguished medieval faculty, and it operated in conjunction with Dumbarton Oaks, so they could draw on two bodies of scholars. It was a very esoteric and very popular field at the time. At that time there was only one course in American art taught at Harvard and nothing in modern art, as I recall.

RATNER:

And did you take the course in American art?

JOHN LEEPER:

No, lamentably, I didn't. I didn't like the professor.

RATNER:

So then you go on to the Corcoran, and then your next—

JOHN LEEPER:

And the Corcoran, you see, is a museum of American art.

RATNER:

How did you end up at the Corcoran?

JOHN LEEPER:

Well, I needed a job in the first place. I went to, the only time I've ever gone to a meeting of the—what is the group—the College Art Association, and was interviewed, got the job, and it was a wonderful job. It paid \$2,200 a year plus an apartment in the Corcoran. Oddly enough, my wife and I have now been married forty years and we've never lived any place except in a museum!

RATNER:

Really! But at the Pasadena [Art Museum], you lived—

JOHN LEEPER:

I lived upstairs in the Chinese [Grace Nicholson] building. Beautiful apartment! And I stood as much as I could of Washington—I mean, of the Corcoran. But it was an unpleasant situation. And when I was invited to come to Pasadena, I leapt at it.

RATNER:

So how did that all come about?

JOHN LEEPER:

They were looking for a director, and the president of the museum was a marvelous lady named Miss Abigail von Schlegell. And Miss von Schlegell came to Washington, and we had her home for lunch. Then she invited me to come to Pasadena to be interviewed by the board. Miss von Schlegell was very smart. She said, "It's always better when you're interviewing candidates to see them in their own environment, to go home with them, see how they live and behave and so forth. You can measure whether or not they're the kind of people you want to have." I think that's very sensible. Then I came to Pasadena. I remember you took a bus at that time from the airport to the Biltmore [Hotel]. Miss von Schlegell's chauffeur met me and took me to the faculty club at Caltech [California Institute of Technology]. And the next morning, stepping out on the balcony and seeing the San Gabriel Mountains and everything in bloom, orange trees and so forth, my heart just melted!

RATNER:

[laughter]

JOHN LEEPER:

I love Southern California!

RATNER:

When she came to the Corcoran, she was coming specifically to see you? Or she just happened to be coming to Washington?

JOHN LEEPER:

I'm not quite sure. Miss von Schlegell spent every summer in Paris. And whether she was on her way back from Paris or whether she'd gone to New York and came back, I'm not certain. But it was a very specific appointment. I learned a great deal from Abby. She told me one thing: that she and her mother, when they moved a princely, baronial establishment from Detroit to Pasadena during the Depression, that she and her mother made a firm pact they would never buy anything that cost under a hundred dollars!

RATNER:

[laughter] That's great! I've heard a lot of—well, not a lot, but some about her. I want to ask you a little bit more about her in a few minutes. What did you know about the Pasadena Art Museum before she arrived at the Corcoran?

JOHN LEEPER:

Nothing.

RATNER:

You'd never heard of it?

JOHN LEEPER:

Nope. I really didn't know a thing about it. And I was totally unprepared for that exotic Chinese structure.

RATNER:

When you went for your interview, what was your perception of the museum itself?

JOHN LEEPER:

Well, I learned a lot about it very quickly. I think what I mostly realized about it was that it was an organization that was controlled by a small group of people, and that they were moderately interested. I learned, for example, that one of the trustees had been William Milliken, who was the president of Caltech, and that he was the greatest pilferer in the world of other people's money; that he could serve on one board and get money from his fellow board members for another institution.

RATNER:

[laughter]

JOHN LEEPER:

And that's rather damaging, you know, to a situation like that. But one sensed immediately the great cultivation of the community. And I realized that there wasn't much money and there was not much collection.

RATNER:

So beyond the beauty of the environs, what really attracted you to the position?

JOHN LEEPER:

Well, I wanted a job again! That was one of the main—I wanted to get away from Washington. Not that I didn't love Washington, but away from the Corcoran. And there comes a time, you know, that you just have to move on to a different position. I had looked at other jobs. I looked at a job in Toledo, Ohio, which wasn't nearly as attractive. It was in the education department, and I wasn't that interested in education. And you know, a lot of it is a matter of evolution, of luck and evolution. The situation in museums has changed enormously in the last forty years. So I felt myself very lucky. I did know about the Santa Barbara Museum [of Art], and a little bit about the Los Angeles [County] Museum [of Art], which at that time was a totally different institution from what it is today. A mighty little part of life is a matter of plan.

RATNER:

So you've come to Pasadena, you accept the job, you move your family out there and become the director in 1951, is that correct?

JOHN LEEPER:

Let's see. We were married in '48; '49, '50, '51, yes.

RATNER:

So as director, what were your responsibilities?

JOHN LEEPER:

Everything. We had a staff of two or three. There was a lady at the front desk, a very competent secretary and bookkeeper, and the superintendent of the building who also lived there, I had to plan the exhibition program, the lectures,

do all the publications, make sure the galleries were clean, and install the exhibitions. There was no limit to what one had to do. You also had to be the public relations person.

RATNER:

So you obviously felt a need for a curatorial staff at some point?

JOHN LEEPER:

No.

RATNER:

You didn't?

JOHN LEEPER:

No.

RATNER:

Why is that, with all those responsibilities?

JOHN LEEPER:

I just didn't need one. I was young then! [laughter] I could do everything, and we set about it. The first exhibition we had was the [Henri] Toulouse-Lautrec ["Toulouse-Lautrec"]. And I had very good connections in the museum world. They were very generous to us and lent us a magnificent Toulouse Lautrec exhibition. And we turned up a good many in Los Angeles. One of our first—I had two letters of introduction when we went to California, both from Edward Forbes, who is the co-director of the Fogg Museum. One letter was to Walter Arensberg and the other was to Earl Stendahl. They lived side by side.

RATNER:

Oh! I didn't know that.

JOHN LEEPER:

And Earl called us one day and said, "You're coming for cocktails tomorrow afternoon with the Arensbergs." I said, "There's certainly no way we can do that." He said, "There's certainly no way you cannot do it, because I'm going to Hawaii, and you just be here!" So we met at the Stendahls' and walked across the hedge to the Arensbergs' and became great friends instantly. I am convinced that if we had been in Los Angeles two years earlier, the [Walter and Louise] Arensberg Collection would not be in Philadelphia [at the Philadelphia Museum of Art]. It would have remained in Los Angeles.

RATNER:

One of the great tragedies of Southern California.

JOHN LEEPER:

Yes. Los Angeles behaved very irresponsibly in this respect. But Mr. Arensberg was one of the trustees of the Galka Scheyer estate—

RATNER:

Oh! I didn't know that.

JOHN LEEPER:

—and it was entirely through his efforts that the [Galka] Scheyer [Blue Four] Collection came to Pasadena. He felt it a deep moral responsibility, and it was almost the last act that he did.

RATNER:

So it was '49 when he gave his collection to Philadelphia?

JOHN LEEPER:

Nineteen fifty. I noticed the acquisition numbers the other day.

RATNER:

Nineteen fifty. So you really did just miss it.

JOHN LEEPER:

But of course, it was there [in Los Angeles] the entire time we were there. We used to go for cocktails and sit beneath the [Salvador] Dalis. He hung the [Marcel Duchamp] Nude Descending a Staircase in his stairwell! The pictures were hung back to back on hinges out from the wall, there wasn't room for them.

RATNER:

Because they had everything in their house.

JOHN LEEPER:

Yes. Through Earl we met a great number of collectors and interesting people, not only collectors but, I think, at that time you could keep the best company in the world in Los Angeles. And we made a good stab at it.

RATNER:

So it sounds like the art community in Los Angeles at that time was fairly close-knit.

JOHN LEEPER:

It was. It was organized primarily around the art departments, I think, although there were a few individual strong artists. And we moved right into that circle. I don't know whether we formulated this or whether it happened, whether it just evolved to create a museum of modern art. The Los Angeles County Museum of Art never could decide what it was going to do, and over the three years that I was there we took a very strong position with the local artists. The list of people who had one-man shows is really quite astonishing. You want to talk about the earlier history of the Pasadena Museum?

RATNER:

Prior to your arrival?

JOHN LEEPER:

Yes.

RATNER:

Sure! What you know about it would be great.

JOHN LEEPER:

Well, what I know is mostly gossip, of course. I don't know when it came into existence. I know that one of its first directors was named [Walter] Jarvis Barlow [Jr.]. Miss von Schlegell warned me not to have anything to do with Jarvis. He and I became very, very close friends! He and I used to lunch together at least once a week. And there was a third member of this who was the director of the Southwest Museum, became director of it. I'll think of his name in a minute. We used to have very festive lunches, and Jarvis came to see us frequently. We had dinner at his house. He had done a wonderful job at the time—shows of Man Ray, for example—and was very close to the entire art community out there. He was a great friend of Millard Sheets and of the Stendahls. Jarvis was a rich man. He was fired by a man named [Albert] Ruddock, who was president of the museum at the time, who went to Santa Barbara later. Mrs. Barlow gave a great party. They were very fashionable people. She gave an elaborate dinner party at the California Club and invited everyone—except anyone who was a member of the board of trustees of the Pasadena Museum! [laughter] And Mrs. [Mathilde W.] Barlow never drove down Los Robles [Avenue] again. She would not set foot on the street where the museum was, although she and I became pretty good friends. He was succeeded, if I'm not mistaken, by a woman named Alice [M.] Goudy.

RATNER:

Right. I found that in the—

JOHN LEEPER:

Goudy. Or Gawdy. Something like that.

RATNER:

She didn't last too long, I don't think.

JOHN LEEPER:

No. She was apparently very extravagant and had a very intimate relationship, I've heard, with Mr. Ruddock. But she didn't last. And then they hired a man named Alvin Eastman, whom my wife knew. He came from an old, fine New England family and was the last gasp of red blood in the family. He was totally incompetent.

RATNER:

I haven't come across his name at all.

JOHN LEEPER:

Alvin Eastman. He was totally incompetent. Miss von Schlegell told me on one occasion— there's lots of stories about him—that she told him she wanted him to come to work and sit at his desk and open his mail. He said, "Why?" And Miss von Schlegell said, "I don't know, but all the men in my family do it." [laughter] And on another occasion, in the San Gabriel Valley Exhibition, one woman, whose work had been rejected, was leaving, very furious, and she showed it to Mr. Eastman and said, "Don't you think this is good?" He said, "I

think it's excellent. Why isn't it in the show? Let's put it in." So he took it back in over the jurors' decision and put it in, which caused, again, a great furor. Mr. Eastman would accept two Thanksgiving day invitations, go from one house to the other, and have a full dinner. So I have a feeling that I was a welcome ray of sunshine. [laughter]

RATNER:

So about how long did he last?

JOHN LEEPER:

I don't know. I have no consciousness of time span there. I doubt very long. A year or so. And then he just—I don't know what happened to him. I used to read about him occasionally, but not much.

RATNER:

So that's interesting. I wonder how Miss von Schlegell heard about you.

JOHN LEEPER:

I don't know how she heard about me. She had all kinds of powerful connections among art dealers, and it's possible [that she heard of me] that way. But she was not a collector herself, except of the supplies of good living.

RATNER:

That were over a hundred dollars. [laughter] So you're in Los Angeles, in the Pasadena area, and you're telling me about this community of people interested in the arts. What was their perception of the Pasadena Art Museum at that time?

JOHN LEEPER:

Well, the Pasadena Museum at that time was distant from Los Angeles, so we had to get something to attract them. We began by having a one-man show once a month. My wife and I would invite the artist, ask the artist to invite forty people for dinner after the opening—anybody he wanted, since we lived right in the museum—and that swelled the attendance immediately. Gradually they were the most interesting people in Los Angeles. I mean, we really covered Los Angeles! The amount of driving that one did going into Los Angeles every day, almost, and to any reach of town! If anyone called and said they had a group of African vases, we would go and look at them, wherever they lived.

RATNER:

And your wife accompanied you on these outings?

JOHN LEEPER:

On a great many of them, yes. She wasn't working at the time, and we had no children. So she went to a great many of them and made a great many friends among artists. I taught a course, I think at USC [University of Southern California]. Yes, I did. I don't remember in what, but I taught one. And then we went out a great deal. California is a very sociable place, you know. When we put on this Toulouse-Lautrec show, which was my first exhibition there, we

found incredible treasures, primarily through Earl Stendahl and Dalzell Hatfield, who became a good friend right away. But they knew where pictures were. I remember on one occasion going to a lady in Santa Monica whose name was Estelle Katzenellenbogen. It was one of these apartments off the ocean that have the kind of odor of cabbage to them. I rang the doorbell, and when she opened it, there was a large [Edouard] Manet watercolor on the wall. And she had one of the great Toulouse-Lautrec oils of the opera Messalina. We were able to assemble three of the great paintings that Lautrec did of the opera. And she had [Edgar] Degas oils, all kinds of things in this little apartment. Her husband had been an art dealer in Berlin. I don't know what's happened to all of those either. But we were able to get a great deal of material. The National Gallery [of Art in Washington, D.C.] lent to us the [Lessing J.] Rosenwald collection. It was a beautiful show.

RATNER:

So that, when you mentioned the National Gallery, from what I can figure out, the Pasadena was the Pasadena Art Institute at that time still and probably didn't have a very national reputation, so to be able to borrow things from the National Gallery must have been based on your reputation in the art world?

JOHN LEEPER:

I don't know about my reputation, but on personal acquaintances. The museum field is a very small one. It was much smaller then. And my wife, you see, had been in an influential position at the Fogg Museum for many years, and so she had close friends. But it was primarily personal.

RATNER:

Prior to your arrival, how frequently would you guess that people from Los Angeles made the trek out to Pasadena to see a show? Does it seem like there were shows that were worthy of a trip that distance at that time?

JOHN LEEPER:

Well, I never regarded the Los Angeles [County] Museum as anything more than a friendly competitor. As far as being serious opposition, no, it wasn't. And the Los Angeles museum at that time had a reputation of disastrous errors in judgment, one after the other. They had offended so many segments of the population. It was simply a matter of letting people know about it. And Arthur Millier, the art editor of the Los Angeles Times, was a kind of guarded friend of ours. But he came and he gave us good reviews for everything. We built a considerable clientele over the whole Los Angeles area.

RATNER:

What was the exhibition policy before your arrival?

JOHN LEEPER:

Filling space. Anybody who had anything that could occupy a gallery could have an exhibition.

RATNER:

And so, when you arrived, you implemented this contemporary program. I remember when I was looking through some scrapbooks—that's the only real research information that I was able to look at to prepare for this—the main thing it said about 1951 to '52—which is, of course, when you began—is that the plan for the museum was to consolidate the programs and upgrade the quality of the exhibitions.

JOHN LEEPER:

Well, those are just generalities. You know, you say that about anyone. As I say, a lot of this is not a matter of making policy. I never organized, formulated a policy and presented it to the trustees to ask their approval of it. I just did it. And a lot of it is a matter of taking advantage of the community. You have to utilize the community. I think one of the best shows we ever put on was of English sporting art ["The Chase, the Turf, and the Road"].

RATNER:

You sent me that catalog.

JOHN LEEPER:

—which wasn't of interest to me particularly, but this Turf Club at Santa Anita had this magnificent collection which had never been exhibited. And my wife did all the research on it. Of course, the [Henry E.] Huntington Library [Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens] is the perfect place to do that. She wrote all the labels and the catalog and had the highest compliment paid to her. Someone stole all the labels from the exhibition!

RATNER:

[laughter] That was an interesting catalog. I enjoyed looking at that.

JOHN LEEPER:

And then another one—you know, you have to roll with it—Miss von Schlegell wanted to have an exhibition of lace, because her friend, Mrs. [Estelle] Doheny, had a lace collection. I didn't object to that at all. We went to see Mrs. Doheny several times, and that was an experience, you know, of a lifetime. She was blind.

RATNER:

Oh, really?

JOHN LEEPER:

She had two gigantic houses, one across the street from the other. One was her summer house and one the winter, and she moved across the street!

RATNER:

[laughter] That's great.

JOHN LEEPER:

She was a very devout Catholic, as you know, and the house was filled with flowers and a large, framed picture of the Pope. When we opened the

exhibition of lace, the black Cadillacs stretched down Colorado Street. Everybody from the upper echelon of Los Angeles came to that show. But those, you see, wouldn't be part of a policy of a museum of modern art, to have English sporting art.

RATNER:

Right. In fact, I've put together a list—I'm sure you remember, but I just thought you might want to look at it, too—of some of the exhibitions. This isn't complete by any means, but that's a list of the things done in the contemporary galleries. Then the sheet behind that includes some of the more general kinds of exhibitions you did while you were there.

JOHN LEEPER:

When these exhibitions took place in the contemporary galleries, we had very close relations with every single person. And it wasn't a matter of—I mean, I was tireless at that time. If somebody said, "Come look at ray pictures, " I would go. If we liked them, we'd have a show of them. As I say, we'd then have a party for them. And many of them became many good friends. Charles Tracy was a dear friend. And Dorothy Jordan. All of them were. This represents a considerable spectrum of artists, too. Some of these were very conservative painters. They're all accomplished, and some of them were having their first exhibition. I don't regret one of them.

RATNER:

I wanted to read to you a quote. In preparing for this interview, I had read an interview with June Wayne [from "Los Angeles Art Community: Group Portrait"]. In it she credits you for "bringing Pasadena to life, " particularly with regard to the contemporary programs. She said, and I'm quoting here, "He did a lot of very important shows, good shows. He ran a very tight ship.... He was interested in contemporary art, and he had a pretty ranging taste." "He wasn't doctrinaire, and he had a natural courtesy toward artists." [paraphrase]

JOHN LEEPER:

Well, that's very nice.

RATNER:

So as we've said, it seems to imply that contemporary artists were not exhibited with any real regularity prior to your arrival.

JOHN LEEPER:

Well, they were not. And someone like Lorus Feitelson, who was, you know, a great bastion of opposition to the Los Angeles [County] Museum [of Art], and pro- contemporary art—he was a very opinionated man, but he occupied a position of great importance. But the attitude in Los Angeles is what alienated Arensberg and a number of other people. There were several great collections in Los Angeles that vanished. And the opposition was strong. One of the funny things about Pasadena that's revealing of its attitude: when we decided to come

here, I wanted to be influential in choosing my successor. There was a young man that I'd known in Roswell [New Mexico], who had been the director there [at the Roswell Museum of Art]. I was very impressed by him and recommended highly that he come. He had one terrible detriment. He had an Oriental wife, and no one in Pasadena could employ an Oriental of that capacity. See, this was still so soon after the war [World War II]. They were very suspicious of them. So he wasn't offered the job, but he became director of the Solomon [R.] Guggenheim Museum. [laughter] That's [Thomas M.] Tom Messer.

RATNER:

Right.

JOHN LEEPER:

But I would like to have done it. Also, you know, at that time Los Angeles was very distant from New York. You, by and large, still went by train. There was a great schism between the two.

RATNER:

Which, I guess, is narrowing a little today.

JOHN LEEPER:

Oh, I think it's narrowing tremendously. I remember once I was going to New York from Los Angeles and mentioned to someone that I was going East. She said, "Where? Denver?" And I said, "No, New York." And she said, "Oh! The Far East." [laughter]

RATNER:

Let's talk a little bit more about some of these exhibitions not on the contemporary galleries. Is there anything else here on this list that's divided up by years that stands out in your mind as particularly interesting?

JOHN LEEPER:

Well, there's so many good reasons for all these exhibitions. One of them was the Alson Clark show ["Alson Clark"]. He was, of course, dead. He was an immensely accomplished painter, and his widow became a very dear friend of ours. We went through his whole estate, all of the pictures. He'd decorated the Pasadena Playhouse and the University Club in Pasadena. He was a man of great reputation, and a very accomplished one. That was an exceedingly popular show, but no one had ever honored him to that extent. Mrs. Clark was an absolute love the entire time we were there. There was a logic behind all of these. Miss von Schlegell wanted the Doheny lace show. Then Pasadena at that time was the only city in the United States that had two chapters of the American Garden Club, so an exhibition of flower material was an absolute natural. I talked to Hyatt Mayor, who was curator of prints at the Metropolitan [Museum of Art], and asked what he could do to help me. He said, "Well, we can lend you anything that you want. But ours are bound, and you can only

show one plate in a book at a time. But there is a far better source. There is a collector, a man and his wife in Minneapolis, who have the most beautiful collection in existence of flower prints. They not only have the individual plates, but they've French-matted the entire collection." So I went to Minneapolis and called on the Dwight Minniches, whose collection was unbelievable, and ultimately it was purchased by the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, the major portion of it was. I liked them tremendously, and they lent us these beautiful things. And then [Fernand] Leger's Le Cirque, someone in Pasadena owned the whole volume, and we just took that. The "Contemporary Japanese Pottery" [exhibition] was because my wife had a very dear friend who lived in Japan and who sent when we moved to California—I forget what the sequence was—he sent us two barrels of Japanese pottery to use. He was a great collector of this. I'm sure that was the source for it. And there was another great Japanese potter working at the time. And then "Mary Cassatt, Her Paris Friends" was a natural exhibition in Pasadena because of the wealth of that kind of material owned in the area. The National Gallery [of Art], Lessing J. Rosenwald, lent us all of the Cassatt colored prints for that. And Adja Yunkers was an old friend, that ["Adja Yunkers"] was very natural.

RATNER:

I had never heard of him. What kind of work did he do?

JOHN LEEPER:

He was a Swede, I think. At that time he primarily was doing great, big, wonderful woodcuts. He was a very exciting artist. He just died a year or so ago. And he married his third wife, who was Dore Ashton. So she's written a great deal about him. Now, I haven't the faintest idea what "The Necessity of Art" [exhibition] was. Not the vaguest.

RATNER:

I don't know either. I must have pulled it off a—

JOHN LEEPER:

And the "Women Painters of the West," that you can understand. The "Pasadena Society of Artists." I was always very interested in the San Gabriel Valley show. Now those are awfully good jurors on those.

RATNER:

Right. I wanted to ask you about that. How did you select those jurors?

JOHN LEEPER:

Oh, out of the top of my hat. But Helen [Lundeberg] was a close friend. Don [Donald] Goodall, who was at USC, he and I had been at Harvard together, so I knew him very well.

RATNER:

Was he on the board at that time?

JOHN LEEPER:

Not at that time. And then Jules Langsner, of course, was a very close friend of June Wayne's. So they were all people that I knew. And we instituted a marvelous system, which I think is the best jurying system. We arranged every picture that was submitted around the wall. Nothing was shown one at a time. And in the morning we asked each juror to go by himself and pick out ten pictures that were irrevocably going in the exhibition. And then after lunch we chose all the prize winners from those forty pictures. And following that, I explained to them that we needed fifty or sixty more to complete the exhibition, to go back and select those. The show would always have been better if we'd stayed with the first forty. But that worked out very equitably. Nobody felt that anything had been omitted. And they were good shows, too. I liked those area exhibitions.

RATNER:

I've seen some of the later brochures from those, and very outstanding artists showed in those.

JOHN LEEPER:

Yes. Then the "Robert Honeyman Collection." You know, if there's a local collector, you do something about it, and he was a wonderful man, too. "The Textile Art of China" was a remarkable exhibition. This is entirely due to friendship. One of Blanche's closest friends was Larry [Laurence] Sickman, who was the director of, or became the director of, the William Rockhill Nelson Gallery [of Art] in Kansas City [Missouri]. He said, "You know, at a small museum with no collection, the wisest policy you can adopt in having an exhibition is to borrow from a museum that has large collections which it's not using. We, for example, have a vast collection of oriental textiles, and we'd be glad to lend them to you." So the whole exhibition came from the Nelson Gallery. This included excavated material, I mean T'ang fabrics and things of this sort that no other museum in the world could equal. It turned into a very dramatic and very beautiful exhibition.

RATNER:

And your wife wrote the essay for that catalog.

JOHN LEEPER:

Yes.

RATNER:

I noticed that the catalog was dedicated to Grace Nicholson, whose building the museum was housed in. Had she recently passed away?

JOHN LEEPER:

No, she had died some time earlier then. She opened that as an art gallery. I think she lived upstairs where we did.

RATNER:

I think she did also.

JOHN LEEPER:

Well, living in that building was a great experience. There was a lovely apartment. And, of course, there was only one door to get in. It was the front door. It had a Chinese bronze key this big! [gestures]

RATNER:

[laughter]

JOHN LEEPER:

You had to open it—you know, a Chinese lock and the key are the same size. It had to go all the way in. You'd go out to dinner with this key in your pocket, you'd lean over, and your whole pocket could fall! [laughter] I remember one night Blanche and I went—it was a New Year's Eve party, a white-tie party, and I'd lost the key, I forgot it, something of the sort, and we couldn't get in. And there was no way we could wake anybody up. So we went to a motel and spent the night. And you can imagine arriving in full evening dress in a motel and then leaving early the next morning, [laughter] And the George Bellows exhibition ["Prints of George Bellows"], this is following the same policy. The Boston Public Library has the greatest collection of George Bellows prints and drawings, and they would lend them, the whole thing en bloc. They came in one crate.

RATNER:

That's great!

JOHN LEEPER:

Most museums don't have enough sense to do that, most small museums. And the "Greene and Greene" show was done in conjunction with the American Institute of Architects. We gave a banquet in the museum, and one of the Greenes on behalf of both of them [Charles and Henry Greene], if I'm not mistaken, was given the gold medal by the AIA. And "there were tours of the houses—

RATNER:

They were still living at that point?

JOHN LEEPER:

One of them was still living; maybe both of them were still living. I haven't any idea what the "French Decorative Art" was. That was one of Miss von Schlegell's. She was very interested in the decorative arts, you can tell. And then "June Wayne," of course, was a natural.

RATNER:

How did you know her?

JOHN LEEPER:

June was very hospitable to us when we were first there, June and her first husband. We saw a great deal of them, especially on festive occasions. June was a great hostess. I never go to Los Angeles without going to see her. She'd

like to have another show here [in San Antonio] now. Then the "Masterpiece of the Month, " that was a lot of fun.

RATNER:

That was something you instituted, I guess.

JOHN LEEPER:

Well, we had this room that was opened, the Catherine Wentworth Room. We really didn't have very much to put in it, so we borrowed a group of objects from the Metropolitan Museum. At that time they were generous about lending things from their permanent collection. There were single pictures we wanted just to exhibit for a month. We borrowed a perfectly beautiful Winslow Homer watercolor from Earl Stendahl, which years later was purchased by a San Antonio collector who left it to us.

RATNER:

Oh, that's wonderful.

JOHN LEEPER:

A nice circle.

RATNER:

What a great idea, to exhibit one painting for a month so that people could really look at it and get to know it instead of being so overwhelmed all the time by a great number.

JOHN LEEPER:

It also avoids the problem of arranging an exhibition around something. You just show one at a time. One of the most interesting shows we ever had was the "[Jose Clemente] Orozco" memorial show. We got that entirely by accident. Do you know the story behind that?

RATNER:

No, not at all.

JOHN LEEPER:

It had been contracted for by the city of Los Angeles to go in the municipal art galleries. They declined it because of his socialist-communist activities after they'd paid for it and the exhibition had arrived. So we took it. It didn't cost anything. It was a magnificent, great exhibition. The Stendahls came over and helped me install the show, unpack it. We didn't have any staff to do that. The whole family came over and helped, and it was a knockout show. Because of that and because of the "Contemporary Mexican Painting, " all the collectors in Los Angeles—there's an immense amount of Mexican material there. There are frescos by David Alfaro Siqueiros on various private homes in Los Angeles. And we did a great deal with that. Because of the Orozco show, we subsequently developed while here a large circle of friends in Mexico around Orozco, including his son, his widow, and the big collectors. I don't remember

now. "The Fashion Glass of History," that was again part of the Minnich collection. They collected costume designs.

RATNER:

And you had developed a relationship with them by this point?

JOHN LEEPER:

Oh, yes. We'd become very good friends.

RATNER:

Well, let me just ask you about the Orozco. What was the draw for that show? Did you get a large number of—?

RATNER:

Yes. And we played on the fact that the Los Angeles area was not brave enough to accept it. [laughter] We did the same thing here. The first exhibition the museum had—you have to realize how reactionary this time was. This is the [Senator Joseph R.] McCarthy era.

RATNER:

Right.

JOHN LEEPER:

The first exhibition we had here was of Picasso. And in this case, I told my trustees what I was going to do. I said, "First of all, he is the greatest artist of the century and merits an exhibition. Secondly, he's also a communist. And if we're going to have any trouble with that issue, let's get it solved right now." And we had no problem at all. Now, of course, nobody would pay any attention to whether he was a communist or not. I don't remember where the "George Grosz" came from. I don't think that I had anything to do with "Smith College Collects, " did I?

RATNER:

You know, this is 1953, so maybe that was right after you left or something. I wasn't sure.

JOHN LEEPER:

I don't remember "William Morris and Art Nouveau." And I would, because I'm very fond of them.

RATNER:

So maybe it was late '53. I wasn't sure when in '53 you left.

JOHN LEEPER:

We reached here on December 7.

RATNER:

And these were at the end of the year. I have them towards the end of the list.

JOHN LEEPER:

I think that's a good list of exhibitions.

RATNER:

I know there were more. This is what I was able to pull off, but I think there probably were more, because I read in a membership brochure that there were about forty exhibitions planned annually. So there had to have been even more than what I—

JOHN LEEPER:

That sounds like a terrible number of exhibitions.

RATNER:

Well, that's why I was just amazed when you said you were doing it all yourself, because that just seemed phenomenal that one person could do that.

JOHN LEEPER:

Well, I worked awfully hard at that time. Let's stop, because it takes me a few minutes to get Blanche over here.

1.2. TAPE NUMBER: I, SIDE TWO (MAY 9, 1988)

JOHN LEEPER:

One of the ironic things I've just heard [is that] the second part of this interview series at UCLA is being financed by the Virginia Steele Scott Foundation, [laughter]

RATNER:

That's who's paying for this part of the—

JOHN LEEPER:

Isn't that funny.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Yes, it really is.

RATNER:

I just want to say on tape that Mrs. Leeper has just joined us, and we just flipped the tape. Before we flipped the tape, we were talking about the exhibitions that you had done while you were there.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

And this is today. Goodness!

RATNER:

Well, this isn't even everything, I don't think. This is just kind of what I was able to pull together from what you sent me and some scrapbook material. But I'm sure there were other things.

JOHN LEEPER:

It's so interesting, because most of these recall all kinds of associations. The "Contemporary Mexican Painting." We went all over Los Angeles assembling material. And there is a great interest, there was at that time, in Mexican art. You know, Diego Rivera, oddly enough, decorated the San Francisco [Pacific Coast] Stock Exchange.

RATNER:

Oh, I think actually I read that somewhere.

JOHN LEEPER:

But imagine! And then the Ford Motor Company paid for him to do the—

RATNER:

Right. The plant in Detroit.

JOHN LEEPER:

He was dealing with the biggest capitalists in America. Amicably!

RATNER:

The "Contemporary Mexican Painting, " that was done in conjunction with a conference somewhere, it looked like.

JOHN LEEPER:

The conference was at Occidental College.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Oh, Occidental—

JOHN LEEPER:

One of those colleges. We just did it as a courtesy to them.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Not one of the Pomona group [of colleges]?

JOHN LEEPER:

No.

RATNER:

No, it wasn't one of the Claremont Colleges.

JOHN LEEPER:

I think it was Occidental.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

But in almost every case, we had the artist or artists involved at our house for dinner.

JOHN LEEPER:

Had a big party for them.

RATNER:

Yes, that's wonderful.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

They were so interesting.

JOHN LEEPER:

And they were a real community of artists at the time.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

"Contemporary Japanese Pottery."

JOHN LEEPER:

That was Neils [Rawlinson]. Neils, and what was the name of that boy? Was it Kawai, the potter who was there?

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Yes. And Adja [Yunkers], '51, '52. And Adele Watson.

RATNER:

Who's Adele Watson? I've never heard of her.

JOHN LEEPER:

She was a very strange lady who lived off Orange Grove Avenue. I think she was a single lady, wasn't she?

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Yes.

JOHN LEEPER:

She painted very odd pictures, poetic pictures that looked more like Arthur B. Davies than anything else. They were really quite lovely, but it was a nice talent, not a major talent. A certain amount of this, you know, goes back to Miss von Schlegell, because she was a very social figure. I mean, all the rich people in Los Angeles were her close friends, and I'm sure the only way to describe her would be as a great snob.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Oh, yes. She was lovely but difficult.

JOHN LEEPER:

Yes.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Difficult as the chairman of a board.

JOHN LEEPER:

I threw a hammer at her once! [laughter]

RATNER:

I hope you missed her.

JOHN LEEPER:

I missed her!

BLANCHE LEEPER:

He did.

JOHN LEEPER:

But she was full of advice. Miss von Schlegell was a former vice president of the National Junior League, and she said, "Don't ever trust the Junior League." I was the community adviser for the Junior League, which was a lot of fun, and looked at this with misgiving. You can't tell what those women are going to do.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

It's true. [laughter] Yet he's still very involved with women.

JOHN LEEPER:

It's true everywhere. But I was saying earlier that Abby warned us against Jarvis Barlow, but most specifically against Virginia Scott, because they were totally

different. Virginia had lots of money, but she was not in the slightest interested in society.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Not a bit.

JOHN LEEPER:

Just not at all. She wasn't interested in very much of anything.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Except sleeping and drinking.

JOHN LEEPER:

And art.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Yes.

JOHN LEEPER:

But drinking came first.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Yes.

RATNER:

Where did her money come from?

JOHN LEEPER:

Her father had retired to Pasadena.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

From Pittsburgh.

JOHN LEEPER:

And he created a company called American Motors, I think, something like that. He was the sole owner of it, and the children then inherited this huge fortune, something like \$50 million apiece. It was a great deal of money in any case. Virginia's brother kept a large yacht in Newport Harbor, the Odyssey, the largest sailing vessel on the West Coast.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Beautiful.

JOHN LEEPER:

And we, on one occasion, on the Fourth of July, went to Catalina in this boat.

And it couldn't have been a more exciting trip. The ship had a fireplace on it.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

With Dutch tiles.

RATNER:

Oh, my goodness.

JOHN LEEPER:

Virginia was a very capable organizer, and she arranged for all the food. We took everything down, everything was cooked and so forth, and she handled

every detail of it. And on this trip that we made to Europe, well, she and Miss von Schlegell just flat didn't like each other.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Oh, they hated each other.

RATNER:

[laughter]

JOHN LEEPER:

And there must have been before we got there a great jockeying for the presidency of the Pasadena Museum.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Yes.

JOHN LEEPER:

And society won.

RATNER:

So Virginia Scott, how involved was she in the museum? She was on the board at that time?

JOHN LEEPER:

She was very involved. When I went out to be interviewed, I was there for the opening of an exhibition of Millard Sheets ["Millard Sheets in Retrospect"] that she had organized. It was a great, big show, and I would never have done it.

[laughter] But Miss von Schlegell was always sort of horrified that we remained good friends of Virginia, and Virginia was horrified that we could get along with Abby.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Yes.

JOHN LEEPER:

But we had no trouble at all. They didn't speak.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

We had, you know, vicarious kinds of trouble. But they were both difficult. And we were young and free and ready for anything. That's the way it was. Virginia loved cats. I don't know whether that has come up.

JOHN LEEPER:

On this trip to Europe, when she left Rome (they stayed a long while after we did), she gave \$10,000 to create a fund to feed the cats at the Pantheon! Her mother almost expired when she found out about this, [laughter]

RATNER:

So how did that trip come about? You were mentioning while we had the tape off that your first trip abroad was with the Scotts.

JOHN LEEPER:

Well, I don't know exactly how it came about.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

It was on our first trip abroad?

JOHN LEEPER:

Yes, it was. We certainly didn't go when we lived in Washington.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

No, that's right.

JOHN LEEPER:

And so they—I don't know whether they invited us or whether it just—

BLANCHE LEEPER:

It just happened.

JOHN LEEPER:

They went over earlier. It was the year that Queen Elizabeth was crowned [1953]. Virginia went over as the answer, an American answer to the queen. She took fourteen pieces of luggage. Big pieces. She almost sank a gondola in Venice.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Well, she took more than one.

JOHN LEEPER:

More than one gondola, yes. [laughter] And when we got there, they had a house that they had rented in Chelsea, and so we lived with them. Lovely little house. And then we rented a car, and the four of us drove, oh, for a month in England. Had a marvelous time.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

And, of course, Jonathan, her husband, who was so nice—he is still living, did you know that?

RATNER:

I just found that out recently.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

She treated him shabbily.

JOHN LEEPER:

I'll never forget. We stopped in Cheltenham to call on Jonathan's mother. He's English. And this was at a time when the English had no money.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

They couldn't take any money out, practically.

JOHN LEEPER:

While we were there, she gave Virginia a large and very handsome diamond ring. When we got into the car leaving, Virginia looked at it with dismay and said, "It's just too big. It doesn't fit." As though there were any trick to sizing a ring, as though Mrs. Scott should have found out what size finger she had.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

It was a family piece.

JOHN LEEPER:

Then we went to Paris. I remember Paris vividly because Virginia and I got into an enormous fight over whether the Venus de Milo's arms were broken above the elbow or below the elbow. I mean, we were at the point of hitting each other!

BLANCHE LEEPER:

If there'd been a hammer—

JOHN LEEPER:

[laughter] I'd have broken somebody else's arm!

RATNER:

Was this trip pure pleasure, or was it business for the museum as well?

JOHN LEEPER:

Pure pleasure. Then we went to Venice and Florence and Rome. Then Blanche and I came back to London, but they stayed on. They spent the rest of the year in Majorca with this immense quantity of clothes!

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Virginia had—that was a time when you had matching cashmere sweater sets, you know, the slip-on and the cardigan. Virginia took seventeen.

RATNER:

Seventeen?

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Sets. And, of course, other clothes besides. Oh, she was incredible. And awful in so many ways.

JOHN LEEPER:

Yes.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

I was pregnant when we got back. She called me one day and said, "You know, you're not going to have this baby." I couldn't believe it. Remember?

JOHN LEEPER:

Yes. She was interested in astrology and drawing up charts and this kind of thing.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Like Nancy Reagan.

RATNER:

Yes, right in the news, very current.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Anyway, I didn't have the baby. I lost it.

JOHN LEEPER:

And never quite forgave Virginia.

RATNER:

Well, how awful.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Isn't that awful?

JOHN LEEPER:

What Virginia would like to do was sleep all day and get up in time for cocktails.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

At five.

JOHN LEEPER:

And then she'd go on drinking until early in the morning. Jonathan would go to bed and she would leave notes all over, things for him to do. Jonathan did all the shopping, made all the plans—

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Kept all the engagements.

JOHN LEEPER:

—and, at the same time, was trying to be a functioning, serious artist.

RATNER:

Oh, I had no idea he was an artist.

JOHN LEEPER:

Oh, yes.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

And a good artist. Had been trained in England.

JOHN LEEPER:

We don't own anything of Jonathan's.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Just little incidental drawings.

JOHN LEEPER:

Drawings.

RATNER:

Did he ever have a show at Pasadena?

JOHN LEEPER:

Yes, he did. Jonathan Scott.

RATNER:

Is it on that—I didn't even realize that was his.

JOHN LEEPER:

The same. Jonathan Scott.

RATNER:

Look at that! I never even put that together that that was the same person.

JOHN LEEPER:

It's very ironic also that both the Steele fortune from Virginia's part of it and Miss von Schlegell's are at the Huntington now—

RATNER:

That's right.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Yes.

JOHN LEEPER:

—the two women disliking each other intensely.

RATNER:

Well, the Steele's is a separate building, so they're not exactly mingling.

[laughter]

JOHN LEEPER:

Yes.

RATNER:

Anything else from the contemporary exhibitions that stand out as—?

JOHN LEEPER:

Well, the thing that stands out is the personality of these people. Helen Lundeberg is still a good friend of ours. We saw her last year in Los Angeles.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

What a fine painter. Do you know her?

RATNER:

I don't know her personally, but I like her painting very much.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

And her husband—

JOHN LEEPER:

Lorser.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

—Lorser Feitelson, of course, was very active as a teacher.

JOHN LEEPER:

And art politician.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Yes. You'll come to our house some time.

JOHN LEEPER:

Yes.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

We have a big Lorser Feitelson hanging in the living room.

JOHN LEEPER:

Charles Tracy was a very charming man. He was one of the very first people we met in Los Angeles. Virginia took us out to see him. They lived in Claremont, one of those towns. And I remember so much. When we got out— we were leaving, I guess. Charles invited Blanche to pick a lemon, and she had never picked a lemon. [laughter]

BLANCHE LEEPER:

That was very exciting.

JOHN LEEPER:

We have a lovely painting of Charles's that Maryanne [Leeper Maguairn] has.
BLANCHE LEEPER:

Yes. It's in her house.

JOHN LEEPER:

And Dorothy Jordan was a very close friend of Virginia's. And I was telling about Helen Evans Brown. Helen and Virginia worked on a cookbook together, Cooking for Two or something was the name of it. I wish I had a copy of it.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

We don't have it.

JOHN LEEPER:

No, it never was published, I don't think. I realized in talking about this how many of these things evolved, that they were simply reactions to people or to events and not by deliberate plan.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

But that didn't mean they were not worthy of being shown.

JOHN LEEPER:

Oh, no. No other organization in Los Angeles at the time could equal that.

RATNER:

No, definitely not.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Well, let's say when we arrived in Pasadena the museum was at its lowest.

RATNER:

In terms of—?

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Everything.

JOHN LEEPER:

Now, Blanche knew Alvin Eastman.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Oh, yes. You see, he came from Cambridge, as did I. He was the last of a long and noble line. Everything had run out by the time it reached him.

JOHN LEEPER:

Including sense.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Brains and everything. [laughter] And he told us at one time, at one point, that Miss von Schlegell told him the first thing he must do every morning was sit down and answer his mail, remember?

JOHN LEEPER:

[laughter] Yes.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

And he had never thought of it.

JOHN LEEPER:

I don't think I ever met him. Did I meet him in Pasadena?
BLANCHE LEEPER:

I don't think so. Oh, he was a sad character. [tape recorder off]
JOHN LEEPER:

Do you know the paintings of Knud Merrild?
RATNER:

I've just seen a few. I think that I saw a show of his at the Tobey [C.] Moss
Gallery in Los Angeles. I think she shows him.

JOHN LEEPER:

Yes, that would be the place to see it. He was a very interesting man. He was
Scandinavian. He and a friend came to New York in the early twenties, I would
judge, and bought a car and drove to Los Angeles. They spent a winter in Santa
Fe, in Taos [New Mexico] with D. H. Lawrence. Subsequently a book was
written called Two Painters and a Poet. It's a very vivid picture of it. And
Merrild invented a form of painting where he would drop paint, liquid paint,
onto a liquid surface. He was pre-Jackson Pollock by decades. And these were
beautiful little paintings. He was one of the early modernists of the West Coast.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

We have one at home. Goodness, how this recalls. Edgar Ewing.

JOHN LEEPER:

Was that a list to be proud of.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Yes.

JOHN LEEPER:

One of the most interesting things that happened to us in Pasadena was the
acquisition of the Galka Scheyer [Blue Four] Collection. It didn't happen
rapidly, but as I told you, Arensberg was a trustee of hers and a great friend.
The Arensberg collection included a great number of perfectly beautiful Paul
Klees that he had bought from Madame Scheyer. She was the West Coast
representative of [Lyonel] Feininger, Klee, [Alexei von] Jawlensky—

RATNER:

And [Wassily] Kandinsky.

JOHN LEEPER:

Kandinsky.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

And Kandinsky.

JOHN LEEPER:

Nordfeld, I think, was the New York dealer. Or Nierendorf?

BLANCHE LEEPER:

[Karl] Nierendorf.

JOHN LEEPER:

Arensberg wanted to see this collection left [in Southern California], and the terraces were very similar to his. It had to be housed permanently. And the other director, other trustee, was a lawyer named Milton Wichner. And [Earl] Stendahl. I don't know who the third—the third one was that lady who was the collector.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Oh, yes. You must know.

JOHN LEEPER:

I can't remember her name. We never—

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Something like Matlock, but it wasn't.

RATNER:

I think maybe that is the right name.

JOHN LEEPER:

Well, something like that in any case.

RATNER:

Was it Ruth something?

JOHN LEEPER:

Yes.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

I think so.

JOHN LEEPER:

When we were there, the collection was simply on loan. It was not given to us because the trustees objected.

RATNER:

Your trustees or the Scheyer trustees?

JOHN LEEPER:

My trustees. And this was a matter of just telling them they absolutely had to accept this, it was of urgent importance. Blanche and I brought all the pictures from Madame Scheyer's home.

RATNER:

And she had passed away at this point?

JOHN LEEPER:

Yes. She lived in the first [Richard] Neutra house in California.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Way up in Benedict Canyon.

JOHN LEEPER:

Overlooking the Pacific. And she had an outdoor bathtub. Not a swimming pool, but she had a bathtub that was just sunk into the ground. She could bathe outside, and if anyone was coming she could see the car winding up the hill and put on a bathrobe, [laughter] The house had a big vault in it, and we would load

up the car, with Klees in particular. There were two lovely Picassos, and every Saturday we would take a picnic and meet Mr. Wichner there and catalog all these things. The collection also included a great correspondence between Klee and Madame Scheyer and others. Scheyer was a teacher, a very imaginative teacher of children's art. There were hundreds and hundreds of children's drawings.

RATNER:

Oh, really? I didn't know that.

JOHN LEEPER:

There's no telling where those are now. Children's art doesn't look like much in any case, but she was one of the people who felt that you shouldn't "teach" children art at all. What you're teaching them is to express themselves. So it was a very unusual business. But the trustees were very unhappy about this. Miss von Schlegell didn't like it at all.

RATNER:

Why not?

BLANCHE LEEPER:

"It's too modern."

JOHN LEEPER:

"This is very modern."

RATNER:

This is after UCLA had already turned it down?

JOHN LEEPER:

I don't know that UCLA ever turned it down.

RATNER:

I think it was offered to UCLA.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Really?

RATNER:

I think so.

JOHN LEEPER:

They probably turned it down for the same reason then. If they turned it down, it was before it was offered to Pasadena.

RATNER:

Yes, I think so. I think maybe it was offered to them somehow in tandem with the Arensberg collection.

JOHN LEEPER:

That's possible. But Arensberg felt guilty about his collection going to Philadelphia. That's the reason I feel sure that if we could have stayed there and had strong community support, we could have got the Arensberg collection.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

We became very good friends of the Arensbergs, got along beautifully with them.

JOHN LEEPER:

We became good friends with almost everybody.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

They lived right next door to the Stendahls in Hollywood.

JOHN LEEPER:

At 7055 Hillside [Avenue]. And we borrowed—

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Lovely house, but it had been built by one of John's relatives. Did he tell you?

RATNER:

He mentioned that to me while we were waiting for you.

JOHN LEEPER:

But these pictures were all in their original condition, their original frames. No conservation work had been done on them at all.

RATNER:

Were they in good condition?

JOHN LEEPER:

They were in pretty good condition. Living in the museum, we could sometimes use objects that belonged to the museum. And we hung the beautiful cubist Picasso for long periods in our living room.

RATNER:

How lucky.

JOHN LEEPER:

Yes. It was wonderful. But that was a real fight to get those pictures given.

RATNER:

It actually wasn't officially accepted until after you left, 1954, I think.

JOHN LEEPER:

Yes.

RATNER:

So what was involved in that? First of all, clarify for me again how was it offered to you?

JOHN LEEPER:

It was offered on permanent loan through Arensberg.

RATNER:

It was Arensberg—

JOHN LEEPER:

And the attorney, Milton Wichner.

RATNER:

Okay.

JOHN LEEPER:

And Milton is the one who held everything up. He was a very painstaking man. It had to be done exactly as he felt, legally. He was not going to turn it over where there was any possibility of it being sold.

RATNER:

But it was probably offered to Pasadena more because of you—

JOHN LEEPER:

Yes.

RATNER:

—than what was really the program at Pasadena.

JOHN LEEPER:

It primarily was a deal between Blanche and Walter Arensberg. They liked each other especially.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Yes, we did.

JOHN LEEPER:

The year that we went to Europe with the Scotts, Blanche and I arranged to call on Bernard Berenson. He was at his summer home—

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Valambrosa.

JOHN LEEPER:

Yes. While we were having tea, Mr. Arensberg said, "Tell me about the Pasadena Museum." And I told him—

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Not Arensberg. You mean Berenson.

JOHN LEEPER:

Berenson. I told him it didn't have any collection to speak of, that it was primarily a community center and a community effort, but we had lately received the Blue Four collection. And he said, "Of what does that consist?" And I said, "Well, there are two Picassos, half a dozen Kandinskys, about three hundred Jawlenskys, and sixty Paul Klees." And Mr. Berenson's mouth dropped open. He said, "Sixty Klees?" I said, "Yes." And he said, "Well, they would bring about a \$1,000 apiece on the market. My advice to you is to sell them immediately."

BLANCHE LEEPER:

"—young man!"

JOHN LEEPER:

"And the ones you can't sell, burn!" Can you imagine? [laughter]

RATNER:

From the little I know about him, I'm not surprised. [laughter]

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Yes.

JOHN LEEPER:

He took great pride in the fact, however, that he had placed the first Matisse in an American collection, to Isabella Stewart Gardner. That was his last connection with modern art.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Of course, he was very elderly at that time. He was sitting near the fireplace with a lap robe, a fur lap robe.

JOHN LEEPER:

This is Berenson?

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Berenson. Only him. He looked very elderly and very frail. And he was.

JOHN LEEPER:

But when we left, he said, "You have not seen [Villa] I Tatti. I'm going to call and have it opened for you tonight. Let your chauffeur take you there."

BLANCHE LEEPER:

And he did.

JOHN LEEPER:

So we went in all by ourselves.

RATNER:

Wow, that's nice.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

And, of course, you see, coming as we did from the Fogg Museum, he had to be interested in us whether he wanted to or not. But he was very nice.

JOHN LEEPER:

He was very—I disliked him intensely.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Well, you and he were very different personalities. Entirely. But he did well by us.

JOHN LEEPER:

One of the curious things I have no memory of is the finances of the Pasadena Museum.

RATNER:

That's funny, because I was going to ask you about that. But let me just finish up with the Blue Four collection.

JOHN LEEPER:

Sure.

RATNER:

Because nobody else besides you can talk about that. Tell me about the battle with the board. What exactly happened? You told them that this collection was available. What was the scenario there?

JOHN LEEPER:

I not only told them it was available, I brought it back to the museum before that so that they saw it. And I had to argue with it! I said, "There's no reason in the world not to accept them. These are terribly valuable pictures, and your liking them is of no significance."

BLANCHE LEEPER:

"And it's an important loan."

JOHN LEEPER:

Yes. This is one of the last great collections in California and the only one that's going to stay here.

RATNER:

So what did they say to that?

JOHN LEEPER:

Well, they finally voted, finally capitulated and accepted it. But not with any great—

BLANCHE LEEPER:

They were not gracious.

JOHN LEEPER:

No.

RATNER:

Really?

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Yes.

JOHN LEEPER:

But they got it.

RATNER:

Because I was really wondering—you mentioned that Mr. Berenson had asked about the permanent collection, you'd said that Pasadena was basically a community center. That was one of the things I wanted to ask you about, about the permanent collection at the time when you arrived. So I guess there wasn't—

JOHN LEEPER:

There was very, very little. There was a Mary Cassatt watercolor. Maybe it was an oil, but I think it was something even sold. There was a Cassatt. And then there were a few other pictures, but there was nothing that could count as a collection. We were given, while we were there, a handsome group of prints. Do you remember that man's name? This included the whole Toulouse-Lautrec portfolio.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Oh, goodness.

JOHN LEEPER:

That wasn't [Robert] Honeyman. Or was it Honeyman?

BLANCHE LEEPER:

I think it was, yes.

RATNER:

Those prints were of California, I think, that Honeyman collection. Maybe he had other things as well?

JOHN LEEPER:

Maybe it wasn't Honeyman. But that's easy to find out, because they still own all of the Toulouse- Lautrecs. They have the source of them.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

You mean the name of the collector?

JOHN LEEPER:

Yes. But that's easy to document. They gave us a great many other prints. It was actually the nucleus of a good collection. This man had a house that had a long walk coming up to it, and everyone who entered the house was automatically photographed.

RATNER:

Even back then?

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Yes, even back then.

JOHN LEEPER:

[laughter] Virginia [Steele Scott] never gave us anything except some Roman glass. I went to the Walters [Art] Gallery in Baltimore to a friend, asked him how to store Roman glass, and he showed me their equipment. Then he said, "Did you ever think about just dropping it?" [laughter] And our relationship with the Los Angeles [County] Museum was very interesting, because a very good friend became the director. It was a man from Baltimore, and we saw a lot of him and his wife. Marvin—well, it will come to me. Marvin something-or-other. [Marvin Ross]

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Lotus was his wife. And she was pro-Nazi.

JOHN LEEPER:

Oh, very pro-Nazi.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

And that sat very badly with us.

JOHN LEEPER:

Oh, she was a terrible person.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Yes.

RATNER:

And he was the director at the County Museum?

JOHN LEEPER:

At the County Museum. And a very good one. I remember we vied with each other for publicity. Marvin called me one morning and said, "You might just as well abandon this pursuit. You can't keep up with me!" I said, "How come?" He said, "We had someone commit suicide on our front steps today." [laughter]

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Ross. Marvin Ross.

JOHN LEEPER:

Marvin Ross, yes. Marvin Chauncey Ross.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

We had some awfully good times, museum- related and other.

JOHN LEEPER:

And the curator of oriental art had been Blanche's associate at the Fogg Museum. So there was a big connection. But it was a very homogenous group at the time. I don't think we realized how homogenous it was.

RATNER:

The art community?

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Yes.

JOHN LEEPER:

Yes.

RATNER:

Were you able to actively seek new acquisitions?

JOHN LEEPER:

Yes. Aggressively.

RATNER:

Who paid for them?

JOHN LEEPER:

Oh, you mean in buying them? No, we didn't have any money to buy anything.

RATNER:

But you were able to speak to collectors?

JOHN LEEPER:

Get people to give them to us, yes. And we visited all kinds of collectors in Los Angeles, people who have never emerged, who are still totally secret. We called on some man who collected the prints of Albrecht Durer. He had every known impression except those that exist in only one impression.

RATNER:

Oh, that must have been wonderful.

JOHN LEEPER:

He had them in solander boxes like yours, and you'd look at an impression of the Death of the Virgin, and he would have ten or twenty copies of it, with the best one on top, in descending importance.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

He was German and—

JOHN LEEPER:

Or Austrian.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Well, maybe Austrian, and related to one of the dealers. What was his name?

JOHN LEEPER:

I don't know. But he also had a book that had been illuminated in Durer's time, The Life of the Virgin, illuminated only in gold and silver, which was the only existing one of its kind.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Of course, we saw all these things, and there were all these people.

JOHN LEEPER:

There was a great circle of Austrian refugees. They were all people of immense means living in Beverly Hills, lovely houses filled with pictures. One of our best friends was a girl named Anna Mahler, whose mother [Alma Mahler] was the widow of Gustav Mahler.

RATNER:

Oh, really?

JOHN LEEPER:

We knew her very well, too. She had a very interesting career, because after Mahler's death she had a long affair with Oskar Kokoschka.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Her mother.

JOHN LEEPER:

Her mother did. And following that she married Walter Gropius. And then she married Franz Werfel. He died, so she was Madame Mahler-Werfel. Her daughter told us that she was going to marry someone else when he died, or was planning on it. We said, "Who on earth could possibly be added?" She said, "The conductor Bruno Walter." She had over her bed a whole set of very famous, now-famous fans that Kokoschka had painted for her. You see them occasionally.

RATNER:

And people were very open to having you come and see their collections?

JOHN LEEPER:

Yes.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Oh, yes.

JOHN LEEPER:

People nearly always are.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

And the Lesters were of this group.

JOHN LEEPER:

Conrad Lester.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

They had a beautiful house in Beverly Hills and invited us by written invitation for dinner one night, among others. And we accepted.

JOHN LEEPER:

Dinner at eight.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

At eight. And we thought it was a little bit late for dinner, but maybe the Austrians did that. So we arrived from Pasadena promptly at eight, maybe sat outside the house a minute or two until it was eight. Went to the door. And to our amazement, Mr. Lester greeted us at the door chewing. He said, "Oh, do come in." He ushered us into the dining room where there were about twenty people.

JOHN LEEPER:

Eating!

BLANCHE LEEPER:

All obviously in the middle of dinner. They'd had soup, they were having salad.

RATNER:

Oh, no.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

And we were just aghast. He said—

JOHN LEEPER:

I was furious.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

—"You will forgive us if we started." And we said, "Of course." I said, "But you invited us for eight." And he said, "No, seven." Well! John was livid. And I was livid—at John!

RATNER:

[laughter]

JOHN LEEPER:

And Mrs. Lester was livid at both of us.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

And I said, "Please, let us start right where you are." Which was, I guess, the entree by this time. And they insisted, Mrs. Lester insisted, that we start from the beginning, which was awful. Anyway, we got through the evening somehow. Interesting, fascinating people. And when we got home, I looked up the invitation—I never threw an invitation away until the event was over—and it said eight o'clock. I was so mad all over again and wanted to send it back to Mrs. Lester. But of course, I couldn't. Fortunately, he had checked acceptances.

We had accepted for eight, so we had profound apologies from him, and all the rest of the time we were in Pasadena he couldn't do enough for us.

JOHN LEEPER:

He'd lend us anything.

RATNER:

Did he give things to the museum?

JOHN LEEPER:

He didn't give anything. The things he had to give away were, for example, the Toulouse-Lautrec portrait of Oscar Wilde.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Oh, that was wonderful.

JOHN LEEPER:

Great, big [Georges] Braque paintings. It was a marvelous collection. And apparently he had literally escaped Austria with gold bricks. There was this whole set of people right off Wilshire [Boulevard].

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Yes. All in big, beautiful houses.

JOHN LEEPER:

Now, where are you? What do you have next?

RATNER:

Maybe we could just finish up on the exhibitions, kind of back up there, and then we'll have—

JOHN LEEPER:

All right.

RATNER:

—taken care of that. One of the things you mentioned before was the Catherine Wentworth Room. I noticed in something that I was looking at that that was given while you were there.

JOHN LEEPER:

Yes.

RATNER:

Linen panels or something? What was that?

JOHN LEEPER:

It was a very beautiful—it's still there, as a matter of fact. It's a handsome linenfold room. It had a great, big leaded window looking out over the courtyard, and this was done entirely through Abby. Miss Wentworth lived in Santa Barbara and left a good many things to the Santa Barbara Museum—and I think in San Francisco—and somehow Miss von Schlegell got this room given to us. That was really all there was to it. I mean, a linenfold room had about as to do with Pasadena as you can think of, but it was a nice room.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

In the most beautiful color.

JOHN LEEPER:

And it completed the whole circle.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Around the courtyard.

RATNER:

Did the gift include money to have it installed?

JOHN LEEPER:

I'm sure it did.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

It was linenfold paneling and a painted area, I guess, above the dado. It was the most beautiful color of lavender.

JOHN LEEPER:

We didn't know Miss Wentworth, but we knew her companion or her sister or something in Santa Barbara, because we went up to see her one day. We were talking about the museum, and she said, "I think Miss von Schlegell can do a great deal for you in the area of creating friends for the museum, but she's not going to be any good at raising money." Which was exactly the case.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

And she said that of course she was principally interested in the decorative arts. Which is true. But anyway.

JOHN LEEPER:

So something like the Doheny collection was perfectly logical. And this other room across the way was the violet one, not the linenfold paneling room.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Yes. But that was Wentworth.

JOHN LEEPER:

No, that's not Wentworth. That was somebody else.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Was it?

JOHN LEEPER:

Yes. But that was up before we came. But I put up Leger's *Le Cirque*, colorful prints, in this delicate room that Abby had intended to house silver or something of the sort. And she was horrified. This was just desecration of that area! I'd forgotten about that. But Miss von Schlegell was worlds of fun. She was one of the most urbane women I have ever met.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

She visited us in Washington.

JOHN LEEPER:

Do you remember the circumstances, Blanche? Did she come to Washington for that purpose?

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Yes. To interview John.

RATNER:

How did she know about him?

BLANCHE LEEPER:

I don't know. He was assistant director of the Corcoran. I don't know.

JOHN LEEPER:

Well, I don't remember ever making an application to Pasadena.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

We'd never heard of Pasadena, [laughter] But she came there for the express purpose of interviewing you.

JOHN LEEPER:

And we liked her tremendously.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

We had her for luncheon.

JOHN LEEPER:

Yes.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

We had glazed salmon.

JOHN LEEPER:

I remember exactly.

RATNER:

That's amazing that you'd remember the menu. What did you serve her?

JOHN LEEPER:

[laughter] We liked to cook salmon at that time.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

And we got up all night and glazed it because it hadn't glazed all the way.

JOHN LEEPER:

Miss von Schlegell had some marvelous things. She had a beautiful house. And her kitchen. Between the kitchen and the pantry was a wall about the size of twice these bookcases, which was refrigerated, and it meant the cooks could put gelatins or aspics in on one side and the butlers could take them out on the other side. I've never seen that in any house before.

RATNER:

Did you mention at the beginning where her money came from? You said she was from Detroit.

JOHN LEEPER:

Telephone company. We knew her father too. Mr. von Schlegell was a very early employee of AT&T [American Telephone and Telegraph] and apparently had accumulated a great deal of stock in it.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

So early that he went around looking for business—

JOHN LEEPER:

To place a telephone.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

People had never heard of a telephone, and he demonstrated it and persuaded them. Of course, he got stock as part of his payment, and I'm sure did throughout. So it was AT&T.

JOHN LEEPER:

It was a big fortune. Miss von Schlegell's mother was an invalid, and he'd had a car made for her. I don't remember what kind it was. But the fittings were silver and ivory. It had tinted windows before anybody had ever heard of such a thing. After her death they couldn't bear to sell it, so they had the car destroyed.

RATNER:

Oh!

JOHN LEEPER:

Which is just terrible.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

The movie industry wanted to buy it.

JOHN LEEPER:

Pasadena, you know, hated the movies and movie people.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

With very few exceptions.

JOHN LEEPER:

They would rent their houses or their lawns to the movie people, but you just didn't know movie people

BLANCHE LEEPER:

You just didn't entertain them.

JOHN LEEPER:

We never knew a great many. We were good friends of Eddie [Edward G.] Robinson's. And Lew Ayres.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

I liked Lew Ayres.

JOHN LEEPER:

That was primarily through June.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

He, Lew Ayres, was a conscientious objector. They liked him for that and admired him.

JOHN LEEPER:

What's your next point?

RATNER:

Did you want to finish about Lew Ayres whom we were just talking about?

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Oh, just that they entertained him and admired him because he was a conscientious objector. But he was one of the few exceptions. And the art critic of the Los Angeles Times at that time was entertained a good deal.

JOHN LEEPER:

Arthur.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

What was his—?

JOHN LEEPER:

Arthur Millier.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Yes. Horrible man. We used to go for cocktails quite often with the Milliers. I remember the first time we had them at our house.

JOHN LEEPER:

We had just reached Pasadena.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Just, I mean, two or three days. We invited them for cocktails, and I was dressed to receive them. Do you remember?

JOHN LEEPER:

Oh, certainly.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

And John said, "You can't wear that! This is the Milliers who are coming."

JOHN LEEPER:

No, Blanche, I met them downstairs and came up and told you that you weren't properly dressed, that you had to be much more formal, that she was in black and looked very stylish.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

And she had a hat. Anyway, I had to change my dress.

RATNER:

[laughter]

BLANCHE LEEPER:

And, oh dear, they turned out to be—remember when we had cocktails with them?

JOHN LEEPER:

Well, this night they came for dinner.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Yes.

JOHN LEEPER:

And we had brought a bottle of cognac, thinking it would last us all winter. Arthur and Sara got absolutely plowed and drank the entire bottle of cognac as

well as cocktails before dinner! And driving into Los Angeles he was arrested.
And she left her hat behind—

BLANCHE LEEPER:

At our house.

JOHN LEEPER:

—and the Los Angeles Times had to bail him out. Oh, this was just the beginning of the episodes involving Arthur. He was impossible. One time we were at their house and Arthur just all of a sudden fell over backwards. Just passed out. And Blanche sat down and—

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Miriam Hopkins.

JOHN LEEPER:

—said, "You've stolen my drink!"

BLANCHE LEEPER:

She said I did.

JOHN LEEPER:

Then Arthur got propped up, and then he said, "Well, it's time for you all to go home. We're going on to another party."

RATNER:

[laughter] Oh, my goodness.

JOHN LEEPER:

But Lorser Feitelson was a great friend of his, and Stendahl was. They were a close circle. But you really ought to interview Al [Alfred] Stendahl.

RATNER:

I'm going to check to see, but I have a feeling he may have been interviewed already for this other series I was telling you about.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

What series was that?

RATNER:

It was called "Los Angeles Art Community: Group Portrait." It was done a number of years ago. They interviewed collectors and artists and various people.

JOHN LEEPER:

I'd really check on Al. They were our closest friends, I think, in Los Angeles. They were more fun than anybody.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

The whole Stendahl family.

JOHN LEEPER:

Yes.

RATNER:

I need to stop the tape here.

1.3. TAPE NUMBER: II, SIDE ONE (MAY 10, 1988)

RATNER:

Before we continue our discussion on the board of trustees of the Pasadena Art Museum, I had a few follow-up questions from our discussion yesterday. One of the people you mentioned was [Walter] Jarvis Barlow [Jr.]. You had told me that he had been fired, but you didn't say why. I wondered if you remembered the reason.

JOHN LEEPER:

I don't know that I ever knew the specific reason. He never talked about it particularly. I have a feeling it was a clash of personality between Barlow and Albert Ruddock. Ruddock apparently was a difficult man.

RATNER:

Was he still on the board by the time you were on board?

JOHN LEEPER:

No. No. Oddly enough, we were very close friends of a Mrs. Ruddock in Washington who had married Albert Ruddock's son, and he broke up the wedding, Albert, Sr. did.

RATNER:

Yes.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

He must have been very difficult.

RATNER:

What was the size of the staff when you left in '53?

JOHN LEEPER:

Well, it wasn't any larger. We had this bookkeeper that I mentioned who was so wonderful. And there was a receptionist. And Carl—what was Carl's last name?

RATNER:

Pomgrantz. Is that who you mean?

JOHN LEEPER:

Pomgrantz, yes, who also lived upstairs in the museum at the rear of the building. I don't recall there was any larger paid staff than that the entire time we were there.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

You see, I worked entirely as a volunteer, but I did all kinds of things.

RATNER:

That was what I wanted to ask also. What exactly did you do?

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Assisting John in any way, because museum work was my training, too.

JOHN LEEPER:

Blanche wrote catalogs and labels. She made a great many errands. I mean, she returned drawings to Vincent Price and a number of other people. She could take on anything that needed to be done. And then, of course, Pasadena was such a highly sociable city, so that was a great duty.

RATNER:

So basically anything that needed to be done, you—

JOHN LEEPER:

Blanche could do it.

RATNER:

So that's really a lot of the reason, I guess, you didn't feel a need to hire any additional curatorial staff.

JOHN LEEPER:

I still feel that way. We have a very small staff here at the [Marion Koogler] McNay [Art Museum]. Usually I think, if something can't be accomplished, the best thing to do is to fire somebody rather than hire somebody. Then everybody works harder.

RATNER:

And then also we were talking about the various exhibitions. You had mentioned both shows that you had organized yourself as well as shows that came, had originated from other institutions.

JOHN LEEPER:

Very few of them came from other institutions, because we didn't have much money. The easiest thing to do was to organize them from the wealth of Los Angeles. The only big show that we ever took that was traveling was the Jose Clemente Orozco show ["Jose Clemente Orozco"]. And I told you the curious circumstances of that, that it didn't cost anything. Other than that, I don't remember a single traveling show.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

No. There was such an active group of Los Angeles artists who had never been shown really, and so John set about showing them individually or in groups.

And, of course, many of them have subsequently become very well known.

RATNER:

Yes.

JOHN LEEPER:

But the museum always organized its own exhibitions. I think it's an infinitely healthier situation, the one we have today, where people are always so worried about what they're going to take next. And the prodigious price of exhibitions!

RATNER:

Yes. It's very costly with the insurance and shipping.

JOHN LEEPER:

Los Angeles was a unique community. It had had a great tradition of artists and a lot of material there. Their people were very, very generous. The Los Angeles [County] Museum [of Art] was totally cooperative and lent us all kinds of major pictures.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

And the director of the Los Angeles County Museum was a very good friend of ours.

JOHN LEEPER:

We mentioned him yesterday, Marvin [C.] Ross.

RATNER:

Right. That's right.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Also from Harvard [University]. And so we had good connections.

RATNER:

Well, for example, when you were talking yesterday about the Chinese textiles that you had borrowed, that exhibition, how did something like that—?

JOHN LEEPER:

It happened entirely because of our friendship with Larry Sickman, who, I told you, said that the best way for a small museum—

RATNER:

Right.

JOHN LEEPER:

—was to borrow en bloc. And we paid for that exhibition only the insurance and freight.

RATNER:

That's what I was wondering.

JOHN LEEPER:

There was no fee attached to it.

RATNER:

That was maybe something he suggested. I guess what I'm wondering is, if you had a certain number of galleries to fill, I wondered if there was any specific reason for having a certain number of, maybe, contemporary shows or local shows versus shows that maybe had come from anywhere else. Was it just really a matter of filling up the—?

JOHN LEEPER:

Well, it was not a matter of just filling up the space. We tried to appeal to all elements of the community. Things like the Alson Clark show ["Alson Clark"], they were immensely popular. I was reading a long report of that yesterday. We had something like six thousand visitors to it, which was a record number in Pasadena at that time. That was of great appeal. The flower show and the fashion show appealed to a certain aspect of the community. And then we

worked to interest the artists of Los Angeles in what was going on and giving them the opportunity to show.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

And then, of course, oriental art was my special interest.

JOHN LEEPER:

And we were living in a Chinese building.

RATNER:

[laughter] That's right. Then I also wondered, we had mentioned the San Gabriel Valley Exhibition. What was the reputation of that show?

JOHN LEEPER:

It was a very good show. You see, it extended all the way up the San Gabriel Valley, which meant all the faculties of Claremont [College] and Pomona [College] were included, as well as the artists in Pasadena. There was a distinguished group of people who were submitting work to it, and I think the exhibition had a substantial reputation. It's the kind of show that has gone out of fashion now. You don't find area exhibitions anymore.

RATNER:

Right.

JOHN LEEPER:

And I think it's a great pity. I think a museum has a distinct obligation to the artists of the area.

RATNER:

We've been talking about what a distinguished jury had been in that show from 1952, so it seemed that it must have been fairly prestigious to be even asked to be a juror for that kind of show. That's what I was wondering.

JOHN LEEPER:

No one ever declined to be a juror. We also instituted the custom of buying something from every exhibition.

RATNER:

And how was that funded?

JOHN LEEPER:

I'm damned if I know. [laughter] Maybe the artist paid so much to come through the exhibition and then we just used that as a purchase fund. It's easy to get money for prizes though. It changed the emphasis so that instead of giving the artist a prize, we bought the picture, which I think is a far better situation.

RATNER:

Right. What year did those exhibitions start, that series?

JOHN LEEPER:

I can't tell. You can tell that from the catalogs. But it had been going on a good while.

RATNER:

Prior to your arrival?

JOHN LEEPER:

Yes. We did not institute them; we just continued them.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

You mean the San Gabriel?

JOHN LEEPER:

Yes.

RATNER:

Finally, just as a follow-up to yesterday, we were speaking about the [Galka Scheyer] Blue Four [Collection]. You were mentioning that one of the reasons that the board, probably the main reason the board resisted it so much was that it was too modern. I wondered how they felt about many of the contemporary exhibitions that you had mounted.

JOHN LEEPER:

There was never any negative attitude toward them. The board by and large didn't interfere with what I did. Miss [Abigail] von Schlegell every now and then would say "You're much too modern. You're emphasizing altogether things that people don't want to see."

BLANCHE LEEPER:

But, you see, they also were local artists, and that was very different from German artists.

RATNER:

So you think that was the—

JOHN LEEPER:

They were a far cry from Paul Klee.

RATNER:

Yes.

JOHN LEEPER:

[laughter] Or [Wassily] Kandinsky.

RATNER:

All right. I thought we'd pick up today with some discussion of the board of trustees. We talked about them a little yesterday, but mostly in relationship to Miss von Schlegell. Yesterday, when you described the board when you arrived, you said it was controlled by a small group, moderately interested. I wondered why you felt there was so little enthusiasm or energy.

JOHN LEEPER:

I can't explain why, but I think that's characteristic of Pasadena. That's one reason we ultimately made the decision to move. There was no sense of commitment. Miss von Schlegell enjoyed it thoroughly, and Virginia [Steele] Scott enjoyed it thoroughly, as long as they got their way. And there were

tempering influences on the board. The publisher of the Pasadena [Star] News—

BLANCHE LEEPER:

The Pasadena newspaper.

JOHN LEEPER:

Yes, one of the newspapers. She [Neeva Prisk Paddock] was on the board. And then a very attractive man, Robert [O.] Chad, who was high on the staff of the Huntington Library, he was on the board. His concern was nominal. I mean, he was there to advise Miss von Schlegell or the president and give moral support and prestige to the board. But he did not interfere at all or even make suggestions. The board was a very pleasant one, but they just lacked commitment. They weren't as crazy as the Los Angeles County [Museum of Art] board,

BLANCHE LEEPER:

I think in part they came from Midwestern cities—Chicago, Detroit, and so forth—and they still had a great allegiance to the museums in those cities. Pasadena was just where they spent the winter.

JOHN LEEPER:

You know, there were families such as the Severance family from Cleveland who came out every year. They had a very beautiful house there, a Greene and Greene house. And they brought their collection with them, a freight car of pictures and objects. And then when they went home after the winter, they took them back to Cleveland. Today the whole collection is in the Cleveland Museum [of Art], and there is no indication in Pasadena that they ever passed through there. It's that kind of traditional distance,

RATNER:

That's so peculiar, really.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Not really.

JOHN LEEPER:

Santa Barbara suffered from exactly the same thing. Only the presence of Wright Luddington in Santa Barbara has been a consistent supporter. It's changed now, as it has changed in Los Angeles, where people are passionate about their respective institutions. But they weren't then. I also read in one of those letters last night that Blanche and I were the first guests the Arensbergs [Walter and Louise] received after they announced the gift to Philadelphia—or we were the last before they announced it. Very precise timing. I also remarked that at one point we'd gone to the Arensbergs', and the house looked full of pictures, even though they already shipped ninety-five crates.

RATNER:

[laughter] Oh, my goodness.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

They had pictures hanging on the back of doors, and more than one layer.

RATNER:

That must have been something to see.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

It was.

RATNER:

When we were speaking about Abby von Schlegell yesterday, you said—I think, Mrs. Leeper, you said—that she was very difficult as a head of the board. I wondered in what way she was difficult.

JOHN LEEPER:

The ball is in your court. I don't think difficult.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Well, for example, in the respect that she did not really like modern art.

JOHN LEEPER:

But that didn't really make her a difficult trustee. I noticed on one occasion you and I both had the flu and the San Gabriel jurors were supposed to have luncheon with us. On the spur of the moment, Abby took the entire party back to her house and had luncheon. The museum had no transportation, and she lent me her station wagon whenever there was anything big to go. I called Miss von Schlegell every single morning just to report and make sure we were working on the same vibrations, so it was an extremely close relationship.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Oh, it was very close, though I still think she was difficult. It was close.

JOHN LEEPER:

Well, Miss von Schlegell obviously was of Germanic background. She had a great deal of stubbornness and a great deal of will. But, unfortunately, so do I, even though I don't have the German background. I'm not easily swayable. But she never insisted on anything.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

She tried to persuade you when necessary.

JOHN LEEPER:

But she too was a balanced person. She was very good about keeping the garden clubs busy, about working. They took care of the patio of the museum and did a beautiful job of it. And she had a lot to do with the children's program in the museum. Great friends of hers were in charge of it. And, of course, she provided us with a social entree that we would never have had otherwise.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Immediately.

JOHN LEEPER:

Yes, within forty-eight hours. I think those letters will be valuable to you.

RATNER:

Yes, I'm really looking forward to looking at them. I wish I could have looked at them even before.

JOHN LEEPER:

Yes. I don't think it will make much difference though.

RATNER:

You don't? But it will be interesting. But why do you feel that she was so willing to give of her time but not of her money to the museum?

JOHN LEEPER:

She too left all of her fortune to the Huntington Library. Her affection was very great there. She liked to collect silver, and her closest friends were big silver collectors, of which Los Angeles had many. The Huntington now has a superb collection, and she had a great deal to do with its creation.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Did you mention the [Edward W.] Bodmans?

JOHN LEEPER:

I don't know. But they're mentioned in those letters. They were an elderly couple in Pasadena from Chicago, weren't they?

BLANCHE LEEPER:

I think SO.

JOHN LEEPER:

They had a beautiful English house. And they collected graphic arts. He had a wonderful group of Rembrandts of the highest quality, and Manet and Goya. They were infinitely cultivated people. And they did one thing very funny: Pepperidge Farm bread was not a national bread at the time. It was cooked in Connecticut. They had a loaf of Pepperidge Farm bread sent special delivery once a week and always invited the postman to come in and have some fresh strawberry jam and a slice of Pepperidge Farm, [laughter]

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Their butler was named Silk, and he always had bread and jam with us too. We became very, very close friends of theirs. The Annandale Country Club used to import whitefish from the Detroit area periodically.

JOHN LEEPER:

Lake Superior whitefish.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

And whenever they did, they always called us and invited us for lunch.

JOHN LEEPER:

They were very close friends of the curatorial staff of the Huntington, as were we. I think the Bodman collection was left to the Huntington also.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Yes, it was. They left a few things to Pasadena. But you see, still nobody was quite sure how much the Pasadena Museum would amount to.

JOHN LEEPER:

It has no firm financial background. The Huntington was rich and secure and had been functioning properly for a long while. It was the only institution in Southern California of which that was true. It was only natural that collections would go to them. People are reluctant to give things when they don't feel there's a continuity, that their objects are going to be cared for and kept in the context of their peers. The situation, of course, is very different here where people are happy to give things because they know they are all right. One of the curious things about Pasadena—you maybe asked this—I remember almost nothing about the finances. We had a desultory membership program and got some money from the city every year. But that, as I recall, was the total operating fund.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Well, the trustees handled all of that.

RATNER:

Oh, really?

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Yes. Isn't that amusing?

JOHN LEEPER:

Yes. I had nothing to do with this really. I was given the budget and the funds and that was it. They had me run with it then.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

And if John needed extra money for something, he appealed to Abby for it, and she raised it somehow.

JOHN LEEPER:

She could raise a little bit of money, but she wasn't much of a fund-raiser. No one was.

RATNER:

So that lack of commitment that we've been talking about, it just seems so strange to me that the people, these trustees, weren't willing to go the—

JOHN LEEPER:

Well, it was a different kind of conception. You know, every museum today has an ambitious and an aggressive membership program. You don't have friends who aren't members of the museum, or you twist their arms into it. No one did that at that time, virtually, in the United States.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

We have four groups who are members here—

JOHN LEEPER:

Support groups.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

—and provide a lot of support.

JOHN LEEPER:

Half of our budget.

RATNER:

Really?

JOHN LEEPER:

That's half a million dollars.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

But that was not true in Pasadena.

RATNER:

Do you recall what the size of the membership was?

JOHN LEEPER:

No, but I'm sure some place it would be mentioned in one of those publications. We did not publish an annual report, which we do here in exhaustive detail. But I would say fifteen hundred people.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Maximum.

JOHN LEEPER:

Yes.

RATNER:

But you're saying that that wasn't unusual for any museum really in the country?

JOHN LEEPER:

Really, it was not. It's totally different here. But I came here with such trust. That's the reason we came here, back to Texas. I am a Texan, and Texans always have a passionate loyalty to the city where they live, and they will work for it. And this has been increasingly true.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

And they love it.

JOHN LEEPER:

Southern California is built on sand. It's really true. I think it's less true now, but only time will tell. I mean, Norton Simon is characteristic of it. He stole the museum.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

He bought it.

JOHN LEEPER:

Yes. Same thing, because they had no right to sell it. Now he's leaving Pasadena and the collection goes to Los Angeles. Maybe.

RATNER:

Maybe. Yes.

JOHN LEEPER:

He hasn't given anything to Pasadena. The title to those pictures is all the Norton Simon Foundation.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Except the ones that have belonged to the [Pasadena Art] Museum.

JOHN LEEPER:

Except the Galka Scheyer—

BLANCHE LEEPER:

And a few others.

JOHN LEEPER:

—and a few other things. So the Pasadena fundamentally is in the same position it was thirty-five years ago with a far more costly building to maintain.

RATNER:

Oh yes, far more.

JOHN LEEPER:

That's, at least, my analysis. Does that ring true with you too?

RATNER:

Well, your opinion is shared by others. I can't reveal too much, of course.

[laughter]

JOHN LEEPER:

Of course you can't.

RATNER:

Getting back to some of the other trustees, what do you remember about Mary Dunlap? Does that ring a bell?

JOHN LEEPER:

No. Mary, what was the lovely lady's name who was in charge of the docent program?

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Oh—

JOHN LEEPER:

Marion?

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Yes.

JOHN LEEPER:

Hall. Marion Hall.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Yes. Hall.

JOHN LEEPER:

Who was a great friend of Miss von Schlegell's. She operated this little school we had. It was just the children painting; it wasn't really a docent program at all. But every Saturday there the place was filled with kids.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

But I would say she was a loyal supporter of the museum.

RATNER:

Marion Hall?

JOHN LEEPER:

Yes. Marion Hall may still be living, too. Her husband was named George.

RATNER:

Nobody's mentioned that name yet.

JOHN LEEPER:

And then there were a number of artist members of the board.

RATNER:

I wanted to ask you that, if there had been any artists on it.

JOHN LEEPER:

There was a family named Nishan Toor, and Mrs. [Evelyn D.] Toor was on the board.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

We mentioned going to dinner at the Toors', I think, yesterday. Anyway, it's in the letters.

JOHN LEEPER:

And at some point, Theodore Heinrich, who was curator of paintings at the Huntington Library and a very good friend of ours, came on the board. But they did not go abroad. There were no Los Angeles trustees that I recall.

RATNER:

Yes, I don't think that happened until the sixties, actually, or the late fifties. But I think even the sixties.

JOHN LEEPER:

But Pasadena allowed the Pasadena Playhouse to languish.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

And the Pasadena Playhouse, as I'm sure you know, used to be a tradition.

JOHN LEEPER:

One of the great amateur theaters in the nation.

RATNER:

Right.

JOHN LEEPER:

Pasadena never had a symphony orchestra or, as far as I can recall, any resident musical groups of any sort.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

No. But Los Angeles was very close.

RATNER:

Right. How were those artists who were on the board chosen to be on the board?

JOHN LEEPER:

Oh, I think if they had made themselves evident around the museum and helped with one thing or another, they would naturally be considered. And, of course, Pasadena is a very small town. Everybody knew everyone else. Trustees in every instance are very casually selected. Rarely is there any training. That's something that we're going to do here. Our trustees remain for a considerable term, but if someone is selected, they're going to have to take a course in indoctrination to really learn how the museum operates and what their responsibilities are. And they're not going to be chosen because of the color of their car.

RATNER:

That's a good idea. I know throughout these discussions that it seems like part of the problem with the board at Pasadena is that nobody ever told them [laughter] what their responsibilities were.

JOHN LEEPER:

I'm sure that's true. It's one thing to sit on a corporate board and another to sit on a museum board. All the people scrutinize corporate trustees far more than they do cultural ones.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

The Association of Art Museum Directors now publishes a small brochure on the role of the trustee, which is very important.

RATNER:

Yes.

JOHN LEEPER:

That fundamentally was the reason we left Pasadena. We adored California and had many, many close friends there, and still do. But I wanted to come back to Texas, and Blanche had known that when we were first married. This was a very golden opportunity to come back. In this case, we know precisely why we came here, because the executor of the estate, who was a real old bastard—

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Of this estate.

RATNER:

Right.

JOHN LEEPER:

—would not turn over the assets, because he didn't trust the trustees until they hired a professional director. Mrs. [Marion Koogler] McNay had bought most of her collection from the Dalzell Hatfield Gallery, and she was a close friend of Dal and Ruth [Hatfield].

RATNER:

Which was in Los Angeles.

JOHN LEEPER:

Yes. They recommended me for this job.

RATNER:

Oh.

JOHN LEEPER:

So we came here, and I think there was only one other candidate for the position. Mr. [William P.] Maloney liked us better and just told the trustees, "You don't hire him, you don't get the money!"

RATNER:

[laughter]

BLANCHE LEEPER:

We spent a week here coming to be interviewed by the trustees and to interview them. Because, of course, this was at the time—you see, like Los Angeles, we have a very large Mexican population, and for the most part it's a very poor population. The burning of the books was going on at that time in San Antonio.

JOHN LEEPER:

The [Senator Joseph R.] McCarthy period.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Yes. John and I are liberal, politically and artistically. Not artistically so much. So we wanted to find out exactly what that meant. We came and spent a week.

JOHN LEEPER:

Testing the waters.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Yes. We decided we'd come.

JOHN LEEPER:

I was thinking last night that we still have the greatest affection for Pasadena, and I think we can look back with a lot of satisfaction on what was accomplished during our three years. The museum gained a great deal of stature and became oriented in the direction of community service and of modern art. And it never has swerved from that since. At least it didn't until it vanished under Norton Simon. At that time, Pasadena was a fit competition for the Los Angeles museum.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

And it was a lovely place to live. We've been back several times since then, and now there are empty stores and it's sort of run-down. Orange Grove Boulevard was supreme.

JOHN LEEPER:

And that's just vanished now. Well, it hasn't vanished—

BLANCHE LEEPER:

The freeway has taken a lot of it.

JOHN LEEPER:

But it used to be a street of great houses, palm trees, oranges. It was really lovely. Now it's condominiums. I wanted the city of Pasadena to take—what is that street that goes up into the mountains?

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Oh, in Altadena?

JOHN LEEPER:

No, where Bullock's is, and I. Magnin. Lake Avenue.

RATNER:

It's Lake.

JOHN LEEPER:

I wanted them to pass restrictive laws with real teeth in them that nothing could be built there without the approval of the city commission, that the planting be maintained, and perhaps they could do something as wonderful as make those great, big, wide sidewalks such as they have in Rio de Janeiro of black and white mosaics. It could have been, if they'd done it, one of the most beautiful shopping streets in America. Not that I'm right, but at least I have thought about it.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Anyway, they didn't, so it just fell by the wayside.

JOHN LEEPER:

But as I recall—back to the board for a second—I don't recall any factionalism on the board. And they were uniformly hospitable to us.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

They were wonderful to us.

RATNER:

How many people were on the board?

JOHN LEEPER:

Oh, I would say twenty.

RATNER:

Oh.

JOHN LEEPER:

There is that masthead in there that lists everybody.

RATNER:

Yes, I want to look at that.

JOHN LEEPER:

It's not easy to remember, you know, thirty- five years back.

RATNER:

No, I guess not. You've done a lot of things since then. You mentioned that one of your accomplishments was to—when you look back at Pasadena, you put it on a more professional footing, you set the tone and direction in terms of

modern art. How did that happen? Was it just by the kind of work and the quality of work you felt that you wanted to do, or—?

JOHN LEEPER:

Well, most of our friends were artists or were involved in it. They were sophisticated people. And we rendered, I think, a distinct service to the artists of that area. We were interested in the story of modern art as it unfolded in Los Angeles. Hence the [Lorser] Feitelson show ["Lorser Fietelson"].

BLANCHE LEEPER:

That large painting down in the garden room is a Lorser Feitelson*

JOHN LEEPER:

You know his work?

RATNER:

Yes.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

And we bought that before we left Pasadena.

JOHN LEEPER:

Yes. But Knud Merrild was one of the pioneers out there. He never had, but we should have had, an Stanton MacDonald Wright show. But this was continued by my successors who had a [Richard] Diebenkorn show ["Richard Diebenkorn"]. And we had a Rico Lebrun show ["Rico Lebrun"] right before I got there. I think it was before we got there. I don't think we did the Lebrun show.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Yes. It was.

RATNER:

What about in terms of making the operations a little more professional?

JOHN LEEPER:

Well, that just happened because I was a more professional person than any of my predecessors. You realize where emphasis should be and how to get things done. I think that was the big difference.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Yes. And then we became affiliated with national groups as they never had before.

JOHN LEEPER:

Primarily through Blanche. We knew virtually everyone in a substantial position in American museums.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

You see, most everyone at that time had been trained at the [William Hayes] Fogg [Art Museum].

RATNER:

Right.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

And so I knew many of them through that. I remember telling John when we were first married that I knew I could help him professionally the first few years, but after that he would be on his own.

JOHN LEEPER:

That, of course, has not been the case.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Yes, it has.

JOHN LEEPER:

Not really. But it's very interesting. When we came here, we came in December. The museum opened the following November, during which time the McNay was completely remodeled. It was broken down to only the basic structure and those turned into galleries. When the museum opened in November, it opened as a full-fledged museum. The entire collection had been cataloged and published. There was a schedule of lectures and exhibitions right from the beginning. It was a mature museum when it began. And I think we were able to do that simply because of the training we had in Pasadena. Dr. [Paul] Sachs at Harvard used to say, "If you want to work in a great museum, always work for a small one first, because then you see what the totality of operation is."

BLANCHE LEEPER:

And there you have to do a little bit of everything.

JOHN LEEPER:

But you ought to work in a—let me get this straight. If you want to work in a large museum, start in a small museum, because you see the totality of the picture. If you want to work in a small museum, begin in a big one, because there you see how one department functions perfectly and then you can extend it. Mr. Sachs also said the best training for me then was ten years as an investment banker.

RATNER:

Oh? Why is that?

JOHN LEEPER:

Well, he was one. [laughter]

BLANCHE LEEPER:

He came from a family of investment bankers. Goldman Sachs [and Company] in New York.

JOHN LEEPER:

I think you mentioned that yesterday.

RATNER:

No, I never put that together that he was with Goldman Sachs.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

He had to persuade his family when he wanted to go into the fine arts professionally before they would let him. He also had to make enough money, which he did.

JOHN LEEPER:

And then he received no salary the rest of his life.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

A dollar a year.

RATNER:

From Harvard?

JOHN LEEPER:

But he made some contributions.

RATNER:

[laughter]

BLANCHE LEEPER:

And the co-director of the firm—because at the time they always had a co-director—was Edward Waldo Forbes, who was a grandson of [Ralph Waldo] Emerson. He provided cultural activities that even Mr. Sachs couldn't provide.

JOHN LEEPER:

They made a wonderful team.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

And he was paid a dollar a year.

RATNER:

I guess that was the golden era of art history at Harvard.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Yes, it was. John was at the very end of it. Mr. Sachs used to give every year a course called "Museum Management." It was a very small class, mostly graduate students. Well, it just provided all museums everywhere with directors, assistant directors. Of course that's no longer true.

JOHN LEEPER:

Let's get back to Pasadena.

RATNER:

We mentioned yesterday that both of you were actively seeking acquisitions for the museum, visiting collectors regularly. I wondered how involved the trustees were in this regard.

JOHN LEEPER:

I don't recall any activity on the trustees' part, do you?

BLANCHE LEEPER:

No. [laughter]

RATNER:

They were a pretty lethargic group?

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Yes, they really were.

JOHN LEEPER:

I don't recall there was ever any apprehension before a trustees meeting.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

No.

JOHN LEEPER:

It was just a sociable gathering. You also asked about printing. We did, I think, some remarkable catalogs, given the time. And we were very, very fortunate in having superb printers in Pasadena. There was one firm, Castle Press, run by Grant Dahlstrom. I wish there were a printer in San Antonio of his quality. You could simply take him the text and he would design it, select the type, and always produce it exactly on time. He was one of the greatest printers I've ever done business with.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Right.

JOHN LEEPER:

It was a great school of printing. And it was highly criticized. Robert Chad of the Huntington was always very critical of our catalogs. I don't mean negatively. But his standards were very high, and they looked good because Mr. Chad wanted them to look good. And Grant was not the only one. There were a number of splendid printers.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

And many small printers. Deluxe editions of things. The Nonesuch Press, for example. Remember that?

JOHN LEEPER:

Oh yes, and the Grabhorn [Press].

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Small, wonderful presses.

JOHN LEEPER:

I think also, thinking back over our time in Pasadena, it was not only exceedingly pleasant, it was a vivid education. We learned an awful lot about California.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

We certainly did. And an awful lot about museums. We both really loved California.

JOHN LEEPER:

The time we went to Europe together, I realized last night we were gone two months, and the trustees paid our salary in full, even though we'd been there only six months.

RATNER:

So they must have liked you awfully well.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

They did. And they didn't want us to leave. We had no intention of leaving.

They didn't want us to and offered John all kinds of additional salary and a car.

JOHN LEEPER:

I think we had wanted to go more than that, Blanche, because I made an application for the directorship of the Houston museum [Museum of Fine Arts, Houston], We had some very powerful connections in Houston.

RATNER:

At what point was this?

JOHN LEEPER:

Sometime while we were in Pasadena. One of my cousins was a business associate of Jesse Jones, whose fortune is now the Houston Endowment. He wrote him and told him that I was interested in it. And we had a very nice letter from Jesse Jones saying that he was so sorry but they had just made an appointment of a new director. This was just out of the blue when this collection came.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

While we loved Pasadena, we were aware of its faults for the very reasons we've given you. And, of course, John was very young, very ambitious. See, he was in his twenties at that time.

JOHN LEEPER:

No, I was twenty-nine when we went there.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

When we went to Pasadena?

JOHN LEEPER:

We came here when I was thirty-two.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Oh? Well, that's still very young. How old are you?

RATNER:

Twenty-nine.

JOHN LEEPER:

You're ancient!

RATNER:

[laughter] I think I need to flip the tape right here.

1.4. TAPE NUMBER: II, SIDE TWO (MAY 10, 1988)

RATNER:

Before we flipped the tape, we were talking about the publications and your decision to leave Pasadena. I just wanted to ask you one more thing in terms of the board policy. And that is that, I guess, the collection was probably so small

that the issue of deaccessioning may not have ever even come up. I don't know. But I wondered what the deaccessioning policy was.

JOHN LEEPER:

I'm sure there was no deaccessioning policy, partly because they didn't have anything to sell. And we have no deaccessioning policy here. In the first place, we don't acquire anything that we don't know we can keep and use. It's never arisen in San Antonio. That's more a matter of my policy than the board's policy.

RATNER:

Well, I guess at that time in Pasadena they were accepting probably almost everything that was offered.

JOHN LEEPER:

Oh, indeed. We got a lot of African material on one occasion. And Miss von Schlegell would—I mean, we got six or seven clocks from some collector in Santa Barbara, and I'm sure Miss von Schlegell arranged for that. But all kinds of miscellaneous material. But there was no core in the collection that we could build around. And then we accepted from Virginia Scott that Roman glass. This is not apropos to that, but when it was first available, we borrowed a large exhibition of the [Galka Scheyer] Blue Four [Collection] from Pasadena and had it here.

RATNER:

Oh, really? That must have been nice.

JOHN LEEPER:

And I would still like to get the Blue Four collection, because Mr. [Milton] Wichner is still living. I think he's still living.

RATNER:

I don't know. I know a part of his collection went to the Long Beach Museum of Art. I guess he had a number of things from the Blue Four.

JOHN LEEPER:

That alone is telling.

RATNER:

Yes, that's true.

JOHN LEEPER:

While the collection was still kind of up for grabs, we made a strong case for it to come here.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

And, of course, Norton Simon is not interested in the Blue Four. At all. Or very little. Of course, his collection is superb.

RATNER:

Yes.

JOHN LEEPER:

Oh, there are wonderful pictures in it.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

And sculpture. Looking down over that sculpture court with the Degas is wonderful.

RATNER:

Yes, it is. At least the Klees are usually always up, at least a number of them.

JOHN LEEPER:

Yes.

RATNER:

Which is always at least nice when you go there, to know that you'll be able to see those.

JOHN LEEPER:

And that lovely cubist Picasso was on exhibit when we were there last January.

RATNER:

When you were mentioning the publications, we talked yesterday about the bulletin that was published. I believe they started publishing that maybe prior—one issue might have been done prior to your arrival.

JOHN LEEPER:

I don't remember whether there was one before or not. I remember that there were two lions that were outside the entrance to the Pasadena Museum. They're still there. We used those as the logo, and Jonathan Scott drew the logo for us, you remember that?

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Virginia's husband. Yes.

RATNER:

It seemed like, to a certain extent, that functioned somewhat as an annual report, at least in the two that you sent me. One was just essays, but the other one had a list of all the museum's members as well as a list of all the accessions for that year. What do you remember about that publication?

JOHN LEEPER:

That was entirely my creation. I'd like to be able to continue them here. Museum papers are what they really are, very interesting essays about material that's pertinent. Not just information—I mean monthly information. Only a few museums do that, publishing their papers. Curiously, the Barnes Foundation does. But I liked those bulletins. I thought they were very impressive. I was also interested in reading last night that our first exhibition, that of Toulouse-Lautrec ["Toulouse-Lautrec"], the catalog was sold out twice.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Oh, really?

JOHN LEEPER:

We had to reprint it.

RATNER:

Well, that was an auspicious beginning.

JOHN LEEPER:

It was.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Yes.

RATNER:

I was surprised by the number of—of course they weren't full-length catalogs—but catalog-brochure kinds of things that you sent with the materials that you sent to us. You must have been very busy doing publications as well as everything else.

JOHN LEEPER:

We were busy.

RATNER:

And there was a budget, I guess, for publishing these things?

JOHN LEEPER:

Somehow they got paid for so that we remained very good friends with Mr. Dahlstrom. We didn't owe him any money. But you are going to find a lot of that in these letters, even though they don't discuss much of the business of the museum.

RATNER:

And who wrote most of the essays?

JOHN LEEPER:

Well, Mrs. Minnich wrote one on—she may have written two. And our very good friend Pete [James A.] Diefenbeck wrote a philosophic essay. I presume the rest of them I wrote.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Well, not quite.

JOHN LEEPER:

Who else wrote them?

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Bob [Robert] Simmons and I wrote an oriental one.

JOHN LEEPER:

Oh, that's right. We all three wrote that.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Yes.

JOHN LEEPER:

That was a wonderful, small show ["Chinese Ceramics"].

BLANCHE LEEPER:

This was a friend—

JOHN LEEPER:

It was a crackerjack catalog, too.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Yes. It still is a crackerjack catalog. And then I had done the exhibition of hunting prints at Santa Anita ["The Chase, the Turf, and the Road"].

JOHN LEEPER:

We were talking just about the bulletins, not the catalogs.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Oh, the bulletins. Not the catalogs?

RATNER:

But no, I'm interested in the catalogs as well, yes.

JOHN LEEPER:

Well, Jules Langsner wrote the one about June Wayne, even though they were brief essays. Stephen Longstreet did the one about Lorus Feitelson. So we called on anybody who was capable, and especially anyone with literary connections. One thing we did that I'd forgotten about, when we had our Toulouse-Lautrec show, the book *Moulin Rouge* had just been published. Pierre Le Mure, the author, lived in Santa Barbara, and we got him to come down and lecture on Lautrec.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

I'd forgotten that until I read some of the letters.

JOHN LEEPER:

And apparently it was a great success.

RATNER:

What kinds of programs were planned for adults?

JOHN LEEPER:

Only lectures.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

You gave lectures every Sunday afternoon?

JOHN LEEPER:

Yes. And we also had a film program. I happen to loathe film programs. We had—but, you know, even education in museums had scarcely begun at that time. Only the Cleveland museum had a—not Cleveland. The Toledo [Museum of Art] had a really advanced children's program. It was mostly a matter of informal or formal lectures. But the kind of intensive docent program that even a small museum like the McNay has, we will take about 22,000 children through the museum this year with the volunteer staff. There are eighty docents. They have an extensive training program. Most museums do that now, but thirty-five years ago—

RATNER:

It was just barely beginning. In fact, it was probably unusual that Pasadena even had their children's program, as limited as it was at that point. Of course, it later really flourished into something quite wonderful.

JOHN LEEPER:

But that's a matter, you know, of the date and the time.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

I think Marion Hall did that children's program at the Pasadena Museum under the Junior League.

RATNER:

Yes. It started in 1946 under the Junior League.

JOHN LEEPER:

And most of them did in this country. Ours here was begun by the Junior League, but who are very irritated right now.

RATNER:

[laughter] So that children's program, though, was fairly incidental at that point to the rest of the operations?

JOHN LEEPER:

Yes. The docents, for example, they were teachers, they weren't docents. They had no instruction from the museum staff at all. They did it all themselves.

RATNER:

We've talked a little bit about why you chose to resign. But can you tell me a little bit more specifically? Were there specific incidents that—?

JOHN LEEPER:

No, not at all.

RATNER:

You just knew you wanted to come back home?

JOHN LEEPER:

Yes. No, we really left with great, great sadness.

RATNER:

And what was the reaction of the board when you informed them?

JOHN LEEPER:

I think they were horrified, don't you?

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Oh, they were distraught.

JOHN LEEPER:

Especially many old friends.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Of ours.

JOHN LEEPER:

Yes. Mrs. Alson Clark was just bereft. A great many of them have been to San Antonio to see us, and we back there. Abby never came here, did she?

BLANCHE LEEPER:

No. I'm so sorry she never did.

JOHN LEEPER:

But we always called on her to go back there. And Virginia and Jonathan have been here several times.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

You know where Jonathan now lives?

RATNER:

I think you mentioned in Taos [New Mexico]?

BLANCHE LEEPER:

In Taos.

RATNER:

What would you say were your greatest achievements and greatest disappointments in Pasadena?

JOHN LEEPER:

I think the greatest achievement was one that I alluded to, of changing the nature, of solidifying the museum and giving it a commitment and a sense of direction. I think that's the major one. And, of course, getting the Galka Scheyer collection. That was the incomparable one. Even if it didn't materialize under us, at least it was there.

RATNER:

It happened because of you?

JOHN LEEPER:

Yes.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Entirely.

JOHN LEEPER:

Nobody in Pasadena had ever heard of Galka Scheyer or the Blue Four. Some distant scholar might have, but I don't know who it was.

RATNER:

What was most disappointing?

JOHN LEEPER:

I don't remember any great disappointments. Do you?

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Except that the board—

JOHN LEEPER:

Yes.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

—was not enthusiastic.

JOHN LEEPER:

The community disappointed us.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Yes.

JOHN LEEPER:

Not because of lack of charm or lack of beauty or manners or graciousness, but because it simply did not have—it wasn't a real community.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

And it had no sense of commitment.

JOHN LEEPER:

And what commitment it had was heavily toward Caltech [California Institute of Technology] and the Huntington. Those were the institutions.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Yes. Those were already noble institutions.

RATNER:

So you came here [San Antonio] in 1953 and have been here ever since?

BLANCHE LEEPER:

December 1953.

JOHN LEEPER:

I've been in one job longer than any museum director in America.

RATNER:

Really?

JOHN LEEPER:

That's not because of virtue. It's—I don't know what it is.

RATNER:

Well, you must like it and they must like you.

JOHN LEEPER:

We do love it. We love it. There are certain things we miss. In Pasadena, when you wanted to get away you had a multitude of choices. Palm Springs was right there, the mountains were right there, Santa Barbara. And going south on a weekend. Of course, having no children, it was easy to do. And we did it.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Yes. And here there's nothing within any reasonable distance. People go skiing in Colorado and so forth.

JOHN LEEPER:

Or fishing in Mexico.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

And they have summer homes on the coast.

JOHN LEEPER:

And, of course, Texans are tireless travelers. I have great difficulty in getting a quorum of my trustees, to get enough of them in town. That's true.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Yes.

RATNER:

What's the size of your staff here?

JOHN LEEPER:

Well, let's see, I have to count offices. I have eight people working for me, and Blanche has six working directly under her.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

More than that.

JOHN LEEPER:

Well, I'm not counting volunteers. The paid staff. That's the library staff.

RATNER:

You're in charge of the library?

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Yes.

JOHN LEEPER:

We have, of course, six gardeners and five guards. It comes to about twenty-two people. And they're supplemented by an enormous group of volunteers. As Blanche mentioned, we have these four support organizations which not only bring in a great deal of money but also do an awful lot of work. And the docent program is an autonomous group. They select their membership. They arrange for the six-weeks instruction program and do all the scheduling. We work very closely together, but we don't need an educational curator because they do such a good job.

RATNER:

And what's the primary emphasis of the museum? Of the collection?

JOHN LEEPER:

Mrs. McNay specified that in her will. "For the enjoyment and encouragement of modern art." But modern art, according to her terms—ours—begins about 1800, with nineteenth- and twentieth-century French and American painting.

RATNER:

Is there an endowment for acquisitions?

JOHN LEEPER:

No. Mrs. McNay in her complicated will says that nothing can be spent from her income until the museum accumulates one year's operating expenses and \$20,000 in surplus funds. Then something above that can be spent. For a period we could. When we first came here, the income from oil royalties was a thousand dollars a day, which was a big one. But oil has dribbled away. You don't get that. But today, with an operating budget of a million dollars, there's no way we can save that much money. All we have is about \$600,000 in a separate endowment. And we're now embarking on a fund-raising drive with an initial \$10 million, which will bring the endowment to around \$20 million. And that will still be a modest endowment with modest purchase funds. We have

been given about \$400,000 in new funds for an endowment fund. For the first time there will be regular income. Our largest organization, Friends of the McNay, from the beginning have used all of their income to purchase graphic arts and to give parties. They have built over the last twenty-five years the finest print collection in the Southwest, with no rival. It really is very, very good. We just bought a beautiful Picasso from a dealer in Long Beach. I think it's Long Beach.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

No, no.

JOHN LEEPER:

Where?

BLANCHE LEEPER:

San Francisco.

JOHN LEEPER:

But we got it from Aldus [Brown].

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Well, Aldus is in San Francisco.

JOHN LEEPER:

No, Blanche.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

It's not Long Beach. He lives north of San Francisco, in Venice. Isn't that north of San Francisco?

JOHN LEEPER:

No.

RATNER:

Venice is in the Los Angeles area.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Yes. Well—

JOHN LEEPER:

Don't you remember last year, Aldus and Marie just drove in to have lunch with us?

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Yes.

RATNER:

Venice is in the Los Angeles area. It's not near San Francisco. Well, anyway, those are really all the questions I have unless there's anything else at all you would like to add.

JOHN LEEPER:

Unlike Pasadena, we have been able to acquire a great many things through here. You see, there have been seven additions made to the building—new galleries, new museums—all gifts of individuals. And in two instances they

came with whole collections: the [Sylvan and Mary] Lang collection and the [Edgar] Tobin collection. Only a portion of the Tobin collection has been given to us. It ultimately will be with the University of Texas in Austin, and our collection is the greatest research resource in the Western world for the study of the theater.

RATNER:

Really? That's impressive.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Have you seen the museum at all yet?

RATNER:

Just a little bit while I was waiting for Mr. Leeper yesterday. As soon as I leave here, I'm going to go over and see it.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

It's a wonderful museum.

JOHN LEEPER:

The gifts to us have been prodigious. And they're going to continue.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

The gifts are all material which is of exhibition quality.

JOHN LEEPER:

And it's pertinent.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

John never accepts as a gift anything that cannot be used and shown by the museum.

RATNER:

That's great.

JOHN LEEPER:

It makes life very simple not to have a deaccessioning policy.

RATNER:

Yes. Well, Pasadena certainly got into trouble with that a little later on.

JOHN LEEPER:

Yes.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Yes.

JOHN LEEPER:

And I'll be able to show you part of the print collection. I can't think of anything otherwise. I suppose we could go on talking about Pasadena indefinitely.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Yes. There really is no Pasadena Museum now.

RATNER:

No.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

No Pasadena theater. It's really very sad.

RATNER:

School.

JOHN LEEPER:

But there is Caltech and the Huntington. And they're both glorious.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

And all the museums in Los Angeles.

RATNER:

Well, and in its way, Pasadena, I think, certainly contributed to what is happening in the Los Angeles area now in terms of contemporary art.

JOHN LEEPER:

Oh, that's true, because my successors used a great deal more money. Of course, they also virtually drove the museum into bankruptcy.

RATNER:

Yes.

JOHN LEEPER:

But theirs is a much more pronounced interest in the avant-garde than ours was. I think that's fine, if imprudent.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

And, of course, the whole board of trustees changed.

JOHN LEEPER:

Not particularly for the better, I don't think, either. [laughter] With no comment from you!

RATNER:

Well, it's not my job to comment. [laughter]

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Yes.

JOHN LEEPER:

I know that Virginia [Steele Scott]—she remained our strongest contact with the Pasadena Museum—had great bitterness from time to time.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Oh, yes. She had a lot to do with selecting the architect of the building. What was his name?

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Oh, the new—

RATNER:

The first or the second? Edward [Durrell] Stone was the first, and then [Thornton] Ladd and [John] Kelsey were the ones who actually designed the building.

BLANCHE LEEPER:

Ladd and Kelsey.
JOHN LEEPER:
Ladd. Thornton Ladd. But they never had an architectural review.
RATNER:
Oh, really?
BLANCHE LEEPER:
They built all the summer houses of the Scott family.
JOHN LEEPER:
Virginia and John had a house in Palm Springs that Thornton Ladd built, and all the bedrooms had walled ceilings. I mean, walls of that—and they all looked into another bedroom.
BLANCHE LEEPER:
No privacy.
JOHN LEEPER:
Most awful conception you can think of. [laughter]
BLANCHE LEEPER:
And her mother had a house there, too. The Scott family played an important role.
RATNER:
Shall we wrap it up here?
JOHN LEEPER:
When you're satisfied.
RATNER:
Well, if there's anything else at all you want to add—
JOHN LEEPER:
Well, I hope we've given you some fresh information.
RATNER:
Absolutely. I haven't had anybody who's been able to fill us in on this earlier period, so it's just been invaluable, and I appreciate it. Of course, UCLA appreciates it.
JOHN LEEPER:
Well, it's been a pleasure doing it.
RATNER:
Well, thank you very much.

Parent Institution | TEI | Search | Feedback

Date:

This page is copyrighted