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Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Adelyn Dohme
Breeskin, 1974 June 27

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Adelyn Breeskin on June 27, 1974. The interview took place in Washington, DC, and was conducted by Paul Cummings for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

Tape 1, side A (45-minute tape sides)

[This recording is quite noisy as PC appears to have hand-held the microphone/tape recorder; there's also interference from other voices in the room, and later from a typist and some kind of "manufacturing"—Trans.]

PAUL CUMMINGS: . . . Let's get the statistics on here, and say it's Paul Cummings talking to Adelyn Breeskin in her office in Washington. It's the 27th of June, 1974. I'm curious about how you got interested in art. I mean, was it a . . . Did it start with. . . .

ADELYN BRESKIN: I was always interested in art from the time I was a child, and thought at first that I wanted to be a painter. And I belonged to a group in Baltimore where I grew up, and worked on Saturdays while I was still a school girl, and at the end of my last year in Baltimore before going away to study further, I entered a painting in an exhibition that was held at this Charcoal Club, they called this club, and it was stolen.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, really.

ADELYN BRESKIN: And I decided that was the climax because this painting had been [really] there. Get to work. So then I went up and went to art school direct and took courses and became a friend of Fitz Roy Carrington of the Boston Museum.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, right.

ADELYN BRESKIN: Fascinating person. [A poet]. And publisher of some charming print circulars that he'd get out every once in a while.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

ADELYN BRESKIN: And he really interested me in the print field.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, that's what got that started.

ADELYN BRESKIN: That's what got that started.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I see.

ADELYN BRESKIN: So then after I finished my years in Boston, I had this offer to go into the print program at the Met [Metropolitan Museum of Art—Ed.], which I did.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How long were you in. . . . What did you do in Boston now?

ADELYN BRESKIN: I went to Radcliffe, took courses, and went to this art school.

PAUL CUMMINGS: In Boston.

ADELYN BRESKIN: In Boston. The School of Fine Arts, Crafts, and Decorative Design is what it was called. It wasn't the Boston Museum school.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That was [another one].

ADELYN BRESKIN: That was [another one].

PAUL CUMMINGS: Ah hah.

ADELYN BRESKIN: And it started really with an architect, C. Howard Walker, there, who would give me these assignments. And he also taught at Harvard, and he [sort of] supervised my courses that I took at Radcliffe.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Were you taking art courses, or what was there?

ADELYN BREESKIN: I took [Jay] Hambidge's course on the [Whirling] square.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, really!

ADELYN BREESKIN: And at the time I really understood and was fascinated by it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: [chuckles]

ADELYN BREESKIN: It's all over now.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah. What kind of a person was he? Because I've always been fascinated by all of his ideas and theories.

ADELYN BREESKIN: C. Howard Walker?

PAUL CUMMINGS: No, Hambidge.

ADELYN BREESKIN: Oh, Hambidge. I think he was a little wild.

PAUL CUMMINGS: [laughs]

ADELYN BREESKIN: Really.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

ADELYN BREESKIN: But his courses were fascinating. So it was worthwhile.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, was there much art history at Radcliffe in those days, or was there. . . .

ADELYN BREESKIN: There was much more than there was in Bryn Mawr, because I had entered Bryn Mawr College, but there were so little, so few art courses there at that time that I switched to Radcliffe.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, I see. Well, you know. . . .

ADELYN BREESKIN: It was ____.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah. Well, was your family interested in art? You know, were there, did you have friends. . . .

ADELYN BREESKIN: Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did it all. . . .

ADELYN BREESKIN: My father was something of a collector, and when the Baltimore Museum was first considered—back in 1914 this was—he gave the first painting to the Baltimore Museum, which happens to be on view for the first time.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, my goodness. Really?

ADELYN BREESKIN: That was because it was a painting by [William] Sergeant Kendall. . . .

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, yes.

ADELYN BREESKIN: . . . of his little daughter. It was called *Mischief*. She had just come out of the bath, and she jumped up onto this settee, and looked around. Lovely _____. So it stayed in the basement of Baltimore Museum from that day until practically this. But now they've just bought one of Pearlman's nudes, so they got out this Sergeant Kendall to hang next to it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How fantastic.

ADELYN BREESKIN: I saw a photograph of it ____ _____.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, isn't that something. So you have really had a long—term association with the museum.

ADELYN BREESKIN: Yes. Oh, yes. I went, I started in at the Baltimore Museum in 1930. I was curator of prints.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

ADELYN BREESKIN: Just when it started there.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But you have worked at the Met?

ADELYN BRESKIN: I worked at the Met until I was married.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What did you do, and how did you come to go there?

ADELYN BRESKIN: Because the. . . I had a wonderful mentor while I was in Boston named Miss Kathryn B. Child, who sort of superintended the course of my studies. And she was a friend of Dr. [Edward] Robinson, who was then the director of the Metropolitan.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, I see.

ADELYN BRESKIN: A gentleman of the old school if there ever was one. And so she worked with him about me and said she thought I was ready for a job there. And then, by George, they invited me to come. I was there and. . .

PAUL CUMMINGS: What years were you there?

ADELYN BRESKIN: Ah, it's hard to remember.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Roughly.

ADELYN BRESKIN: Roughly, it was before 1920, because I was married then in 1920. Left to get married. Stayed married for ten years, and then went to the Baltimore Museum.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, fantastic. Well, what was the Metropolitan Museum like in those days?

ADELYN BRESKIN: Oh, it was great. Russell Plimpton was there. Mr. [Joseph—Ed.] Breck was the curator of paintings. And the print department was very active under [William Mills] Ivins. Because he was a very aggressive and spirited person whom I admired tremendously. And he was a real friend to me at that time, taught me a lot. And it was he who one day came in to the desk, while I was sitting, and threw down some prints on my desk. "Now there's someone you should look into. She's a woman, she's a fine artist, and no one's paid any attention to her." It was Mary Cassatt.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh.

ADELYN BRESKIN: Some of her drypoints. And that's when I started my interest in Mary Cassatt, that long ago.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, fantastic.

ADELYN BRESKIN: Yeah, and I've been working on her ever since, and I'm still working.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Um hmm, and that goes on forever.

ADELYN BRESKIN: It goes on.

PAUL CUMMINGS: [laughs]

ADELYN BRESKIN: Now I have to revise that print catalog which came out in 1948. I don't know when I'm going to do it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What, discovered a lot of new prints and states and materials.

ADELYN BRESKIN: Not many. Not too many new prints. But, you know, at the time we took the trouble to put in the initials of all of the main print collectors, like Robert [meant Richard—Ed.] Hartshorne.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, right.

ADELYN BRESKIN: The Whittemore's. Those people who had big collections that are all dead. All of those collections have disbursed.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

ADELYN BRESKIN: So, it all has to be changed now. Anyway. . .

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's fantastic. How long were you there? How long did you work with Ivins?

ADELYN BRESKIN: With Ivins?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Um hmm.

ADELYN BREESKIN: It was about three years. Long enough to . . . _____ with. . . . I had some conversations with him every day for hours, because we loved to argue. And he would come in and put down. . . .

PAUL CUMMINGS: He's a lawyer, right?

ADELYN BREESKIN: Yes. He'd put down something: "What do you think of that?" And I'd say what I thought of it and then he'd argue just the opposite.

PAUL CUMMINGS: [laughs] Just for the activity, I suppose.

ADELYN BREESKIN: Just for the activity.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, that's marvelous. Well, how was the collecting in those days? You know, the. . . .

ADELYN BREESKIN: One thing still even shocked me at that time, was that he came in one afternoon and said, "Now there are two important people coming here to see certain collections. I want you to keep your eye on them every moment that they are here. Otherwise we might have something missing." Now these were collectors of little gouaches, I guess they were, of old carriages. Very specialized collecting, you see. And they were people who might easily have been on the board of the Metropolitan, that important as collectors.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

ADELYN BREESKIN: And yet, to get something [really] choice. . . .

PAUL CUMMINGS: [laughs] Ah, yes.

ADELYN BREESKIN: Shocking.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But the true collective spirit, you know, goes everywhere.

ADELYN BREESKIN: Right.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, that's fantastic. Well, had you thought of working in a museum while you were in college, or was it, that was the idea. . . .

ADELYN BREESKIN: It was really Fitz Roy Carrington. He even offered me a job before I was ready to take on a job. They needed someone at the Boston Museum, and he had. . . . Everything there then was so casual that I could have gone in there and filled in in the decorative arts department.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Um hmm. It's changed a lot, hasn't it? [chuckles] It really has. To get there. It's still a fascinating world, the museum world, I think.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah, that's true.

ADELYN BREESKIN: And certainly more needed today than ever to preserve and to maintain, to conserve and to keep adding more.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, when you were at the Metropolitan, was there much of a collecting program then? Or was it pretty. . . .

ADELYN BREESKIN: No.

PAUL CUMMINGS: He got what he could get?

ADELYN BREESKIN: That's right. Oh, he got. . . . Ivins got wonderful things, particularly the _____ things, [prints] things and very reasonable. But he had plenty to add and add and add to the print collection. But Mr. Breck as curator of paintings couldn't buy. Didn't have any money.

PAUL CUMMINGS: No, yeah. Well, the print market certainly has changed, hasn't it? [laughs]

ADELYN BREESKIN: I think the market today is just beyond reason, it seems.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's astounding. I mean, you know. When they publish a new print for two thousand dollars, at the publishing price, it's terrible.

ADELYN BREESKIN: _____ had one of these new [tilted] prints, that I'd just love to have. But I don't know if I can afford it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I know the prices are amazing.

ADELYN BRESKIN: [The price]. Like a ____.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah. You worked at the Met then for three years, and then you went back to Baltimore.

ADELYN BRESKIN: Then I went back. No, then I was married.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, then you were married in New York.

ADELYN BRESKIN: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes.

ADELYN BRESKIN: Married William _____. And I was married for ten years, had three daughters, and then went back, and then I got a job at the Baltimore Museum as curator of prints. And it was when the museum first started. And I remained curator of prints until I left there in 1962. And when I went there they had about twenty prints, twenty, twenty—five.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Really.

ADELYN BRESKIN: When I left they had eighty thousand.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Eighty thousand?

ADELYN BRESKIN: And those are good prints!

PAUL CUMMINGS: [laughs] That's astounding!

ADELYN BRESKIN: And I think there is a necessity in all museum work of being able—related to those men with their designs of carriages—you just have to by hook or by crook—or any way—manage to get things for your museum.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, what did you do when you went there? You know, two dozen prints is very little, you know.

ADELYN BRESKIN: Very little, you're right. But I had a wonderful patron who was interested in prints, and she would come in and we would talk, and then every once in a while she would go to New York, I would go to New York, and we would look over what was available, and add things. And. . . .

PAUL CUMMINGS: Who was that?

ADELYN BRESKIN: Her name was Blanche Adler, and she was the sister of Saidie [A.] May, who also gave wonderful things to the Baltimore Museum, as well as some to the Museum of Modern Art. But they were so different, those two sisters.

PAUL CUMMINGS: In what way?

ADELYN BRESKIN: Blanche Adler was the most modest retiring little spinster, whereas Saidie May was actually married to Mr. [Albert] Lehman, of our town, and it was she who started the system of his giving good, big prizes to the Carnegie International Exhibition.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, really!

ADELYN BRESKIN: She was starting the top prize for five thousand dollars, which in those days was considered so generous. And that was her doing.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I didn't know that.

ADELYN BRESKIN: Then she married Mr. [Herbert] May of the May drugstores. And she always collected.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, she had been a painter, too.

ADELYN BRESKIN: Yes, right. Jensen knew her. [Mrs. May financially helped painter Alfred Jensen—Ed.]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yes. Oh, yes. All sorts of feats. She must have been a character.

ADELYN BRESKIN: She was, but the most generous patron I've ever come across. Because. . . . for the museum.

Because she didn't have any home of her own, you know, in her later years, when she did most of her collecting. So she would buy things and give the prints, giving it all.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, really. How fascinating.

ADELYN BRESKIN: And then she could only come twice a year to see them and to add to them. And she was so good about not duplicating what the Cone sisters [Etta and Claribel] had.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, that's good.

ADELYN BRESKIN: She was [far—seeing].

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's fascinating, you know, to build a collection from practically nothing to such an astronomical size, you must have had other sources than just her. Or was she really the main one throughout the years?

ADELYN BRESKIN: Well, Blanche Adler and Saidie May were certainly the most generous donors for a number of years. Then of course my main goal while I was at Baltimore museum was befriending Etta and her family. And seeing that she realized that there was sufficient interest in modern art, as it was then called, to warrant her creating a collection of . . . It was really a collection of _____ and her sister finally. [unintelligible] This was my job between 1942 and '49, actually, because I became the director of the museum in '42, but for five years I was just [happened into it]. It took five years to persuade the board that I could do the job. But I was really working those five years just as. . . .

PAUL CUMMINGS: Proving it. [laughs]

ADELYN BRESKIN: And then stayed on for fifteen more. So I was really there for twenty years.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Now what kind of relationship would you have with a woman who had collection, and was obviously unsure about what to do with it—whether to leave it to Baltimore or. . . . You know, how could you, what could you tell her, what could you show her that. . . .

ADELYN BRESKIN: Well, to talk about the new art,, this art that was still new then, the work of Matisse and Picasso and so forth, make her see how appreciative I was and tell her always of other people here in Baltimore. And try to borrow as much as she was willing to lend us over the summers when she went to Europe. Talk to her about extending her collection, and I never could talk to her convincingly about Picasso in his Cubist period.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, really!

ADELYN BRESKIN: She didn't follow him. She later did, however, get one of the littler studies for *Demaiselles d'Avignon*. But she did that just for historical reasons to round out her collection, her main desire being to stress the work of Matisse, and background it, starting in with Delacroix, and Ingres even. I never managed to get, acquire any paintings. He had a beautiful way to draw. And coming right up into, you know, Picasso in various other periods, his Cubist period as well.

PAUL CUMMINGS: She still collected paintings then. I mean, after her sister died.

ADELYN BRESKIN: Oh, yes. She went right on. Many of the most important things came long afterward. But of the two she was definitely the more conservative. I think if Claribel had lived, who died in 1929, if she'd lived longer, she would have had as many Picassos as they had Matisse's probably.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, really. Oh, my goodness. Well, were there many other collectors in Baltimore in the twenties and thirties who were involved with modern art or contemporary art like that?

ADELYN BRESKIN: No. No, there weren't. Because Baltimore was very a traditional city, and so those we did have were collecting older art.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Were they old masters like this then?

ADELYN BRESKIN: There were many who were collecting eighteenth—century furniture, and genre painting, netsuke.

PAUL CUMMINGS: [laughs]

ADELYN BRESKIN: We had a big American wing, and still have it. A great American wing now.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

ADELYN BRESKIN: Billy Elder [William Voss Elder III] has done so well.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, that's fantastic. You know, one thing I thing I discovered is that you did quite a bit of writing in the thirties and the forties. Essays for catalogs and magazines and all this sort of thing. How did you work that in with. . . .

ADELYN BRESKIN: At night. You know, museum life is a full life, and you have to work. . . .

PAUL CUMMINGS: Day and night. [chuckles]

ADELYN BRESKIN: Day and night, you're right. And I had a wonderful assistant who came first as assistant to the director, right out of the neighborhood, and he wanted to be a painter, too. He'd majored in painting at American University. So he asked me if he could have a room in the museum where he could work in the evening, with a daylight bulb. And I said, "Yes, but I can tell you right now that you can't keep it up. You'll just be too tired at the end of the day." And it proved true. But anyway, he was a wonderful young man who's now. . . . He stayed with me for ten years, and after that time, at the end of that time, I knew he was ready for his own museum, and just then Wright Ludington wrote me a letter asking if I had any ideas; they needed a new director at Santa Barbara. So I wrote such a eulogy for Jim Foster that they took him on at once.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, fantastic.

ADELYN BRESKIN: He stayed there for eight years, and now he's out at the Academy in Honolulu [Honolulu Academy of Arts], among the best museum directors I think.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, terrific.

ADELYN BRESKIN: And it was really with great appreciation I sent him on his way.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, did you have much time to travel? Did you go to Europe for the museum? Travel around this country?

ADELYN BRESKIN: Yes, I did. On my own, always.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, really.

ADELYN BRESKIN: It was never paid for by the board. Never. Except when I was. . . . Well, when I was put in charge of our American pavilion in Venice in 1960. It was still then under the direction of the Museum of Modern Art.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

ADELYN BRESKIN: And so their people recommended that I take over for 1960 and choose the art to be shown, which I did. When I mentioned this honor—which had been given to our museum really—to the board, there were just about three members on the board who realized that it was an honor, and who'd never been to Venice to a Biennale. So those three—Alan Wurtzburger especially—made it possible for me to raise the money to take the paintings over there, to gather together. And I had a grand group: Franz Kline, Hans Hofmann, Philip Guston, and Ted [Theodore] Roszak, the sculptor.

PAUL CUMMINGS: All right.

ADELYN BRESKIN: It was good, it really was. And in those days it made a big difference, because Kline wasn't at all known in Europe. And the Italians went wild over his things, and they still do, I think, favor his work to some extent. And Hans Hofmann had been forgotten. [They] were very keen to have his work shown over there before it came back. So that was very worthwhile.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That was enormous.

ADELYN BRESKIN: In those days, going to Europe for the most part was just for study, and I. . . . At the close of the war, I wanted to, I was going to Europe, and I asked my board of trustees to let me have five thousand dollars to take with me to purchase a few paintings, because I knew that there would be wonderful bargains in Paris, where I was going to go, and they turned me down. And I went to see Pierre Matisse [the dealer]. He had the most marvelous. . . . He had the early, one of the finest of the Mirç [faun] scenes. . . .

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, really. Oh, my goodness.

ADELYN BRESKIN: . . . that I could have had for just a few thousand dollars.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Incredible. But the whole art world has changed so much, hasn't it?

ADELYN BREESKIN: It has indeed.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, do you know, from. . . . I find it fascinating that you spent so much time at one institution but you still seem to have juried exhibitions and traveled around and written pieces and had time to do all these other things. You know, how did you. . . .

ADELYN BREESKIN: Sort of keep in touch?

PAUL CUMMINGS: A very tight schedule.

ADELYN BREESKIN: Yes, a tight schedule. Fortunately I had a wonderful housekeeper, who all these years was a second mother to my three daughters. And my rule was when I came home in the evening when my children were home from school I devoted the time to them until they were ready for bed. You know, to keep in touch with what they were doing. Then I'd start working.

PAUL CUMMINGS: The second day would start. [chuckles]

ADELYN BREESKIN: Yes. Till midnight or so.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, that's fantastic. And you collected drawings also, didn't you, at the museum.

ADELYN BREESKIN: Yes, I was curator of prints and drawings.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right. You know, I'm always curious about why museums end up having so few drawings and so many more prints, and I think sometimes it's economics.

ADELYN BREESKIN: We didn't have many drawings until one of our very art—minded board members, Edward Benesch, who's since become one of the biggest interior decorators. . . . He and his wife were leaving Baltimore to go New York to live, and Edward Benesch came, said they'd like to start some sort of a fund to help the museum in memory of their son who had died. And I said, "Well, what will mean more than anything else are drawings." And they started with collecting drawings then, which they'd send back to the museum. And Edward still does that.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, really!

ADELYN BREESKIN: That's what really has made our collection at the museum as fine as it is today, and it certainly is good.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's interesting, because I have a little catalog of the collection that was published some years ago. Oh, that's why. I didn't know how. . . . And it still goes on then.

ADELYN BREESKIN: Still goes on.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So they're still getting things year after year.

ADELYN BREESKIN: Yes, yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, that's terrific.

ADELYN BREESKIN: And then, you see, with the [Alan] Wurtzburger sculpture collection, which is now very soon to be placed in the museum, around the museum. . . . It was many years ago when we put on one of the earliest African sculpture shows that were ever put on in a museum. And we had no specialist in the field, so I had to make myself a specialist practically overnight, studying what books there were, and then I went and soon found out that the two finest collections were one in Buffalo at the Museum of Science. Chauncy Hamlin was there as the head of that museum. And there were great things. And I thought, "Well, their curator won't even be there to help me to choose." The curator was away, because this I had to go in the summer to do. And the same thing happened in Philadelphia at their wonderful collection there. But we got together a good collection, and Alan and Janet Wurtzburger came and saw it, and they decided then that they would collect African sculpture, having seen that show.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, really.

ADELYN BREESKIN: And they went to Africa and found practically nothing, but they soon knew that they were going to Paris to buy some things. And they've made a very fine collection, which they then. . . . They felt they'd rounded it, gave it to the museum. And having. . . . Then they said, "Where do we go from there?" And of their

own accord I think they decided on oceanic art, and collected that—very fine things from the Pacific _____. And then they went into the pre—Colombian things, and each of those collections then came to the museum. And then they didn't know where to go after that, and it was I who persuaded them to try the big garden sculpture. And of course their collection of that is really. . . . I think it's finally one of the most beautiful of collections, as it's been installed in their own place. _____ it's all sitting around.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, that's fantastic.

ADELYN BRESKIN: Now that both Mr. and Mrs. Wurtzburger are dead, the place has been sold. And so there's thirty—six, thirty—eight—maybe forty now—great pieces, starting with Maillol coming forward.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, fantastic.

ADELYN BRESKIN: [With it] a very large Duchamp—Villon horse _____.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, right. The Duchamp—Villon, _____.

ADELYN BRESKIN: And two great [Henry] Moores, and very beautiful, large Max Bill, and many more.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, goodness. All the way through.

ADELYN BRESKIN: Mostly they have. . . . Only one David Smith. Should have had another one. But it's a great collection.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's fantastic. You know, the trustees of the museum, were they people who remained on the board for years and years and years, or was there. . . .

ADELYN BRESKIN: Um hmm, it was self—perpetuating.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It was.

ADELYN BRESKIN: It is not such a good idea, really.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah. You think it should be changed more often?

ADELYN BRESKIN: I think it should change more often.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Have a kind of rotating policy with people changing every so many years, or something?

ADELYN BRESKIN: Yes. I think that's better. But in those days when I was there, to find enough people who were really interested in the arts—or had money to give to the arts. . . . Which you do have to consider, too. I know these artists who think that you should only have artists on the board. Where do they think the money's coming from?

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

ADELYN BRESKIN: And every museum needs extra money. And our museum, you know, was the city museum, and that the. . . . I had to go down and defend our budget every quarter before our city council, because they gave us at least two—thirds of our income.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That much?!

ADELYN BRESKIN: That much.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But was that income for everything, acquisitions, administration, operating. . . .

ADELYN BRESKIN: Everything. And I can tell you that politics, local politics, has never interfered with the running of the Baltimore Museum.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Really?

ADELYN BRESKIN: I think many museums have been worried to ask for city money for that reason, that they would try to influence them. They never did.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How is that so? That seems, you know, because I know in New York every year when the budget comes up, you know, because the city supports the Metropolitan by paying for the guards and various things, it's always some half a dozen things in the newspapers. "Oh, they want more money."

ADELYN BREEKIN: I don't know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: You must have had some friends in city hall or something.

ADELYN BREEKIN: I did. And I went to the people myself, because the president of the board they had never met, knew nothing about him. That was for most of the time I was there. He was one of the best educated men I've ever met.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Who was that?

ADELYN BREEKIN: J. Gilman [D'Arcy] Paul, who was a Rhodes scholar, but a gentleman of leisure, who thought that politics was something not for him. So he wouldn't have helped me with city hall.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, that's fantastic.

ADELYN BREEKIN: _____. [inaudible]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, that's fascinating. I didn't know that the city contributed that much towards its operation.

ADELYN BREEKIN: Yes. And then during the war years the mayor was very eager to have us have branches through the city, throughout the city. And he persuaded me that was the thing to do, since the buses didn't run out to museum. So we started three different branches.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Was that successful?

ADELYN BREEKIN: Not very. But it helped to some extent to, I think, spread an interest in the arts.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Because I know they've talked about that in New York every so often and it somehow doesn't. . . .

ADELYN BREEKIN: It doesn't jell. In the first place, you have to have extra guards. And you don't have anyone around to answer questions, because guards can't.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right.

ADELYN BREEKIN: The less they try to answer questions the better. [laughs]

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

ADELYN BREEKIN: It was just a temporary expedient, let's say; it wasn't a whole answer.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Um hmm. Well, one thing that I think is interesting is the number of years you worked as acting director, and then finally became director. You were one of the first women directors of a museum.

ADELYN BREEKIN: Of a larger museum, yes. I became president for one year of the Museum Directors Association.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right. How. . . .

ADELYN BREEKIN: And I did have, you see, the. . . . I think the main value of the American Art Museum Directors was, their main value is that you soon come to know all the other directors of other museums, call them by their first names, and when you need to borrow they know you and they know what you stand for.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah, right.

ADELYN BREEKIN: Yeah, but it's very, that's a great help.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's it's. . . .

ADELYN BREEKIN: The main function.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

ADELYN BREEKIN: We've also been very much interested through the years in evidence, museum evidence. I was on a committee for a few years working on that, to actually set a [mold evidences]. It's taken all of those intervening years, I think, and even into today. [laughter] And I think it probably will continue to change, for _____.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah. But what do you think of these, you know, all the various associations involved with museums and the arts?

ADELYN BRESKIN: They all get to be too much. And with the Museum Directors' Association for the last—less than ten years, I'd say—that they'd. . . . It used to be that you had to have a budget that's over a hundred thousand dollars a year to belong, which meant that it kept out many a small museum. Then they let down the bars and they've taken in almost anybody who's been accredited.

PAUL CUMMINGS: So there must be hundreds of members now, yeah.

ADELYN BRESKIN: And that makes it much harder to do. And as for the museum association, or the American Association of Museums, that is a mob.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It looks like the College Art Association.

ADELYN BRESKIN: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Four thousand people at a meeting. Right.

ADELYN BRESKIN: How they could get different cities to invite them. . . . It's so difficult to entertain them, feed them. They don't know what to do. [inaudible sentence]

PAUL CUMMINGS: You know, while you were working on the print and drawing collection, before you got active as assistant—acting director. . . .

ADELYN BRESKIN: Yes, in '42. But don't forget, I wouldn't have been made director then, as a woman, if the men hadn't been gone during the war. That's when I started, you see. I just. . . . So women's lib was in order. [laughter]

PAUL CUMMINGS: You know, after you'd been there for a few years, did you develop an idea or a plan of collecting? Or did you figure out. . . .

ADELYN BRESKIN: Yes. You see, before I became the acting director I was general curator.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh.

ADELYN BRESKIN: Chief curator. And when you're that, you have to think of the whole museum.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Everything, right.

ADELYN BRESKIN: And it's very good to, I think, fill that position before you become a director. But not many museums. . . .

PAUL CUMMINGS: Not many museums have that kind of position.

ADELYN BRESKIN: No.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But when you were collecting prints, did you decide, "Well, we need so much German, so much Italian, so much French, so much this"?

ADELYN BRESKIN: I think you can't be. . . .

PAUL CUMMINGS: Or was it just influenced by what was in the market. . . .

ADELYN BRESKIN: I think you have to be.

PAUL CUMMINGS: . . . what you could get as gifts.

ADELYN BRESKIN: Right.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

ADELYN BRESKIN: Of course the print collection of Baltimore Museum, when I first went there, I knew there was this. . . . The first big collection of prints made in the United States was made by a Philadelphia man named [_____]—Ed.] [Cladborne], and he died and one of the Garrett family [Thomas Harrison Garrett] bought that whole collection. There were over 20,000 prints in that collection. And Mr. Garrett kept the collection in a vault downtown. And just about five days before the Baltimore fire in 1904 he decided it wasn't good to have it in this vault and he sent it over to the Library of Congress to be taken care of there. And they'd had it on loan until I

came along as curator and realized it was there and asked to have it come back to Baltimore. So for the first summer after I joined the museum I commuted to Washington and had to check over all 20,000 of those prints, with a member of the library staff. So that started me off with a good. . . .

PAUL CUMMINGS: That was an education! [laughs]

ADELYN BREESKIN: . . . 20,000 prints to start.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's fantastic.

ADELYN BREESKIN: It's still a very interesting collection.

PAUL CUMMINGS: I'm always intrigued by collectors who acquire a collection of that size and then just put it in a vault.

ADELYN BREESKIN: Put it, yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Why do they do it? I mean, the art market wasn't the crazy thing then that it is now and has been.

ADELYN BREESKIN: No, they weren't thinking of the monetary value, I think. It sold probably for a song. _____ in the _____. And, yes, it would have been known in England, and it was quite possible _____ could have bought that, because if he hadn't it would have gone back to England.

PAUL CUMMINGS: What kind of things were in it? I mean, all. . . .

ADELYN BREESKIN: It started in with [Martin] Schongauer, and coming forward through very fine things, Whistler's things. But the finer thing was the fourth state. . . .

Tape 1, side B

ADELYN BREESKIN: . . . of the great Rembrandt, The Three Crosses. And why, when I first joined the staff there I did invite my former mentor, Mr. Carrington, to come down and speak, at the opening of our print department—when we got the Garrett things back—and he said, “We only had that one print. Still, we had a great collection.” [both chuckle] I don't remember his name now.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, that's funny. Were there other large groups that came in like that?

ADELYN BREESKIN: Yes, the [George A.] Lucas collection. I found that collection housed in an art school. And I went over to see that, and found that some things were missing. They had paid no attention to it at all. So it wasn't difficult to persuade them that we were the ones to take care of it. And that was a big [haul], and beautiful things. George Lucas was the man who helped Mr. Walters—the two Mr. Walters [William T. and Henry]—to make their great collection, you know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, right.

ADELYN BREESKIN: Another thing that we never had any trouble with was the relationship between the Walters Gallery in Baltimore and the Baltimore Museum. The Walters is one, has treasures in the manuscript field, in the field of early Gothic things, and fine things, and. . . .

PAUL CUMMINGS: Chinese.

ADELYN BREESKIN: All kinds. And the association between the Walters and the Baltimore Museum was always very friendly. They would lend us things for exhibition because they had very little exhibition space. And incidentally, when [Cannaday] was here the other day, he'd stopped in Baltimore to be shown through the new wing of the Walters Gallery, and he says their auditorium is the very most beautiful one he's ever seen in a museum.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, fantastic.

ADELYN BREESKIN: And that of course will open this fall. So that's another reason for going to Baltimore to see the two museums.

PAUL CUMMINGS: The two museums. Was it difficult over the years to attract patronage to the print collection?

ADELYN BREESKIN: [Oh, no! The tape is very difficult to hear anyway, and then a typist sets to work, obscuring the conversation even further.—Trans.] I think that the thing that has helped the most: My greatest backers are

from the woman's committee. We had a very fine woman's committee, and they started the rental collection.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, the lending. . . .

ADELYN BRESKIN: The lending collection at the museum. And the thing is that people started buying Hans Hofmann gouaches, and beautiful de Kooning drawings. Now you couldn't get them, but you could then, and buy them for very little, a hundred dollars or so.

PAUL CUMMINGS: In the good old days, yes. [laughs]

ADELYN BRESKIN: Now there are so many regrets: "Why didn't I?"

PAUL CUMMINGS: [laughs] I know, I know. Well, have you collected anything over the years?

ADELYN BRESKIN: Very little. I had three daughters to put through college, and that became. . . . Now, I don't see how anyone does it.

PAUL CUMMINGS: And it's astounding.

ADELYN BRESKIN: It is, it is. Three in stairsteps to go on to college. I had to get them. Very difficult.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did the war years affect the museum? You know, during the forties and the war? Did it cut down the activity that they did?

ADELYN BRESKIN: Yes. Oh, we had to really consider that. We even had have dances for the soldiers stationed in nearby towns, in the museum. We had, I think it was a _____ camp. So we even had to have a show called Arts or Bombs? It wasn't a good show at all. But I don't know, we had to _____.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Part of that time, yeah.

ADELYN BRESKIN: And those were difficult years in the. . . .

PAUL CUMMINGS: Did the attendance fall off, or was the attendance still fairly good?

ADELYN BRESKIN: The attendance was all right. I think one thing was by way of getting attendance, the children's classes that we had were really. . . . We had a great woman in Belle Boas, who was the head of our education department for a number of years, ten years, and she would teach the children so well and interest them so much, then they would bring their parents on Saturdays and Sundays.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, I see.

ADELYN BRESKIN: And actually that's great for. . . .

PAUL CUMMINGS: It built up and built up and built up that way. How do you build attendance at an institution like that? I mean, is that one of the ideas?

ADELYN BRESKIN: I think that the main center of the museum should be its auditorium, and I'm saying that since I've been here. . . .

PAUL CUMMINGS: Lectures and concerts.

ADELYN BRESKIN: . . . because we don't have anything for more than eighty people.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Really?

ADELYN BRESKIN: Yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's just one large room.

ADELYN BRESKIN: Yes. Get here and stand. There is a wonderful space for an auditorium if they can find a great patron who'd like to give us one. They could dig down underneath very easily.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, really?

ADELYN BRESKIN: And make a very fine big auditorium. I think it should be at least five hundred seats, preferably six hundred. And I think it should be the center of the museum. And I'm all for having concerts, lectures, all the activities.

PAUL CUMMINGS: All the activities, yeah.

ADELYN BRESKIN: You know, otherwise people don't keep coming. And they have changing exhibitions ____.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How long do you think an exhibition can stay up and still attract people? You know, say, in Baltimore, or in Washington here?

ADELYN BRESKIN: In Washington, we have so many tourists that they can stay a little longer than in Baltimore, for instance. I think six weeks is the longest it should stay.

PAUL CUMMINGS: This is really about enough. It's amazing, because they're so expensive to do, you know.

ADELYN BRESKIN: Oh! Yeah.

PAUL CUMMINGS: [somewhere in here some of the noise blessedly falls off—Trans.] You have organized over the years many traveling shows, exhibitions.

ADELYN BRESKIN: Yes. That's great, too. But I have. . . . Even the van Goghs we have. . . .

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah, yeah.

ADELYN BRESKIN: . . . because I met the nephew van Gogh and managed to get his collection for Baltimore. And then when I first came here, of course, I came to start the Washington Gallery of Modern Art.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right, that's. . . .

ADELYN BRESKIN: That was in '62. And I only stayed for two years.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Now how did that happen? I mean, how did you come to do that? That was. . . .

ADELYN BRESKIN: That was a group of private citizens here who thought it was high time they showed some, had a chance to see some contemporary art in Washington. And there was nothing!

PAUL CUMMINGS: Nothing?!

ADELYN BRESKIN: Nothing. Absolutely. Herman [Warner] Williams, [Jr.] was only interested in the nineteenth century at the Corcoran, and then of course there was a rule at the National Gallery that it had to be dead for 25, 35 years or so.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Or more!

ADELYN BRESKIN: Or more. So they did need it, and so it was. . . . Mrs. Gates Lloyd, who is a brilliant woman I think, and a good collector. Because she was in this group who wanted to start this gallery, and she came over to Baltimore and asked if I'd be interested. And I thought it was time after I had been at the Baltimore Museum for so many years to move somewhere. I was delighted to come, and I started by having the great Franz Kline show, and about two hundred people we had at that opening. Ah! And we were from all over. . . .

PAUL CUMMINGS: That was in a house now. Right. That was in a house that you'd turned into a museum, wasn't it?

ADELYN BRESKIN: Yes, yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How did you do all that?

ADELYN BRESKIN: Found the building, and had a wonderful architect to convert it into a museum. But we didn't have much for attendance. The group at that time interested in contemporary art was small here. So it was then that I decided to bring a van Gogh show to Washington, and I talked with the nephew, who had told me when I had it in Baltimore—and I had toured it from Baltimore to three other museums, and got it back to him in perfect condition—and so he wrote me then if ever I wanted it again just let him know.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, fantastic. [laughs]

ADELYN BRESKIN: So I let him know, and it came. But I found really that the group as a whole, or the board, wanted [wholly] avant garde exhibitions. So it was just at that time that this museum was being considered, moving into this building, and I was asked to come here, and I came. I have no regrets. I've had a wonderful time since I've been here.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Well, have the development of a public interest in more contemporary art in Washington?

ADELYN BREESKIN: Tremendous, I'd say! I think now the interest is second only to that in New York.

PAUL CUMMINGS: There are so many more galleries here now, too.

ADELYN BREESKIN: Yes! Then Franz Bader was about the only commercial gallery in Washington. Now we have more springing up all the time. I can't tell you how many there are, but we couldn't count them on our two hands.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, I know, there are lots and lots of those, yeah. What do you think accounts for that? The work of the institutions? Because, you know, there's no. . . . There are some great collectors here, but. . . .

ADELYN BREESKIN: I think the thing that makes it remarkable is that we have not had very active art departments in four colleges and universities in Washington.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Very little, yeah.

ADELYN BREESKIN: They're not very active, and. . . .

PAUL CUMMINGS: I wonder why. It just doesn't. . . .

ADELYN BREESKIN: Well, I went to a meeting just last week of people interested in American University. I asked them how we can make, bring more activities to them at the university. I was there because I've been interested always in their art department, and that's a very good department of paintings. But haven't very much art history. And there's much more that can be done, certainly, in all the universities here. The University of Maryland's come forward, but they're awfully far out.

PAUL CUMMINGS: But they still send a lot of students to Washington to work and see and research and do things.

ADELYN BREESKIN: Yes. Yes, they do.

PAUL CUMMINGS: How have you found being here now? All of this? Because this was practically nothing when you came here, wasn't it?

ADELYN BREESKIN: Well, and I can tell you that the most modern painting that we had at the National Collection of Fine Arts when I came was either—you can have your choice—either a [_____—Ed.] Meyers or a [Childe Hassem].

PAUL CUMMINGS: Oh, really. [chuckles]

ADELYN BREESKIN: Done about 1904.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Yeah.

ADELYN BREESKIN: So all of the contemporary work has come. . . .

PAUL CUMMINGS: Since.

ADELYN BREESKIN: . . . since.

PAUL CUMMINGS: That's spectacular.

ADELYN BREESKIN: And without money to buy. There have been very few funds for purchases. Of course, when you do, the nineteenth century has been taken so there is more left in the twentieth.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right, right. But this is really like a kind of a national museum though, isn't it?

ADELYN BREESKIN: It is. And therefore. . . .

PAUL CUMMINGS: Gives you greater territory.

ADELYN BREESKIN: Yes. We should be able to interest people all over the country in helping to enlarge our collections. And the fact that we limit ourselves now to American art.

PAUL CUMMINGS: Right. Do other museums find you competitive that way, do you know?

ADELYN BREESKIN: We have no competition—have none—competition that can compete with the National Gallery.

PAUL CUMMINGS: No, but I mean museums in other cities.

ADELYN BREESKIN: Oh, yes.

PAUL CUMMINGS: We'll have to. . . .

PAUL CUMMINGS: I'm always intrigued by collectors who acquire a collection of that size and then just put it in a vault.

ADELYN BREESKIN: Put it, yeah.

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END OF INTERVIEW

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