

DALLAS MUSEUM OF ART

A Conversation with Stanley Marcus

October 27, 1994

Jay Gates: Good evening, it is a pleasure to welcome so many of you here. I must say I feel slightly inadequate to the task of introducing Stanley Marcus to a room full of Dallasites. It would be the height of presumption for me to think that I could somehow adequately characterize in a short period of time the significance of this life or its contributions to this community. But suffice it to say, speaking on behalf of the entire museum community, it is a privilege to be able to share with all of you the artistic pursuits of this very long and civilized life.

Stanley, welcome. It's nice to have you here tonight.

Stanley Marcus: Thank you, Jay.

Jay Gates: I thought we might pursue this evening as follows: I am going to try to ask several probing and stimulating questions and then let the master speak. We'll bring the house lights down during that and then a little bit later on we'll bring the house lights up, and I will ask you if you have some questions that you perhaps would like to have answered.

So with that, there is more or less in the middle of the exhibition a wonderful document of your correspondence with a prominent American architect. Would you like to talk about that for a minute?

[00:01:33.4]

Stanley Marcus: Well, I guess you could call it my life and love with Frank Lloyd Wright. I have to start at the beginning. I met Mr. Wright--when I first came back from college in 1925, I found that this was some of an aesthetic desert. And I felt impelled to try to become an impresario and to animate things by bringing in some outside speakers with wisdom to impart. And in the course of doing that, I -- the lecture series I brought a man called Rockwell Kent and subsequently Frank Lloyd Wright. And that was the beginning of my saga with Mr. Wright.

He appeared at the old Dallas Little Theater, strode out on the stage with his cape, his hat on, and a stick, a walking stick. And in the question and answer period someone said, "Mr. Wright, how do you like our wonderful new Little Theater?" And he flourished his stick and he said, "You should tear it down." That should have been a warning, but it wasn't.

Subsequently I decided--my wife and I decided--that we wanted to build a contemporary house. So on the basis of the invitation Mr. Wright had given me to come visit him at Taliesin, I went up, we went up, and I posed the question to

Mr. Wright. "Mr. Wright, we are going to build a contemporary house. Whom would you recommend?"

[00:03:33.8]

Bill Lescaze, the Swiss architect whom he had brought down to Dallas who did the Magnolia Lounge for the Texas Centennial, or Richard Neutra? Mr. Wright looked me straight in the eye and said, "Son, why take the substitute while you can still get the original? I'll build a house for you," and I said, "well, Mr. Wright"--this was in 1936--I said, "Mr. Wright, I can only afford to spend \$40,000 and I know you couldn't do a house with that." And he said, "That's ridiculous. I could do a house for \$10,000." So he mesmerized me and I accepted his assurance that he could do it, and then we went through the period of sighting the location, and the development of the house.

He arrived in Dallas for this location sighting on January 1st and I think anybody in this audience will say that January 1st in Dallas usually means ice, or sleet, or both. That was one of those extraordinary days of freak weather where the temperature was 84 degrees. He said, "This is the most wonderful climate I have ever seen. This beats Arizona," and I assured him that this was unusual. And he said, "Well, that's what people always say about their weather," but he came back again in March.

[00:05:24.6]

And anyone of us here would say that March is usually a blustering, nasty month that could be eliminated from the calendars as far as Texas is concerned, but he arrived that day and the temperature was 84 degrees. So by that time, he was convinced that I didn't know good weather when I saw it. And he proceeded to design the house on the assumption that this was the average mean temperature of Texas.

In the course of the design we had a few minor disagreements. When the first plans came in, there were no bedrooms, and I said, "Mr. Wright, you've forgotten to include bedrooms." He said, "Oh no, I didn't forget that, but with weather as magnificent as you have, you don't need to waste any money or time for bedrooms, you can sleep on the roof." And I said, "But Mr. Wright it rains in Texas on occasion." He said, "Yes, I have a little pup tent, it will protect you from the elements if they ever get that bad, which I doubt." And besides I said, "I am susceptible to cold," and he said, "Well, if you sleep outdoors, you won't get cold." And throughout the entire design period, which I have described as being my PhD experience in architecture because, while I didn't get a house, I did learn a lot about architecture and a lot about Mr. Wright and about his great design ability.

[00:07:16.3]

Finally, when the bids came in, they were for \$140,000 instead of \$40,000, and I told him I couldn't build the house, and he said, "Well, the architects don't understand my plans." And I said, "Well, was that their fault or your fault?" And with that he broke off relations and wouldn't speak to me for about five years. We finally made up, but in the meantime, he wrote that series of vituperative letters that are in the exhibition.

Jay Gates: Now adjacent to the letters and the drawings for the house, are a sample of Japanese woodblock prints that are a by-product of this association, correct?

Stanley Marcus: Well, during the course of the house-designing period, Mr. Wright was always short of money and the minute he had hit town, he'd say, "You know, I happen to be short of money, and I wonder if you could advance me \$500 or \$1000." Finally, I had advanced him his whole fee before we had gotten a set of plans and I said, "Mr. Wright, I am a merchant. I am not a banker and I can't lend you anymore money."

Well, one time he came and he said, "I'm desperate, I need \$500 and I remember what you told me. I'll give you some collateral." And I said, "Fine, what is it?" He said, "Well, I have an extra set of the Tokaido, the series of prints that the great Japanese printmaker Hiroshige had done," and he said, "I'll put them up and I will pay you back within a year." A year went by, and two, and three, and four, and five, and finally, I wrote to him and said, "Unless I get payment for the loan or the loans, I am going to consider that the prints are foreclosed."

[00:09:36.9]

I never had a reply from him. So, after 30 years, I took possession. And subsequently gave them to the museum where they've been exhibited on occasion in their entirety. There are 52 prints of what I think are among the masterpieces of Japanese printmaking.

Jay Gates: One of the major monuments in this museum--in this museum for a very long time--is the painting *El Hombre* [1953.22] by Rufino Tamayo. There is a story associated with that.

Stanley Marcus: Well, I mean, we can start that story from several angles. It was known for a while as the "Lost Painting" because after it was painted and shipped, it never arrived. It took about a year later, I had a phone call one day from Nuevo Laredo, where the station master said, "Mr. Marcus, we have a package for you." And I said, "But I wasn't expecting a package." And he said, "Well, this is a very large package. It measures about 9½ meters and we want to know what you want us to do with it?" And suddenly I recalled that this must be the painting that Tamayo had painted that never arrived.

So I said, "Well, ship it up to us right away. Where has it been?" Well, he said, "We found it on a boxcar that had been shunted off on a spur, and it's been out in the elements for about a year. I hope it isn't ruined." Well, fortunately when

we unpacked it, it was in good condition. And I'll go back to how it was commissioned in the first place.

[00:11:38.2]

My wife and I had been to Oaxaca, which was a birthplace of both Olga and Rufino Tamayo, and he wanted to take us down to show us Oaxaca for the first time. We had a very wonderful visit and so we invited them to come to Dallas. They said, they were going to be in Amarillo and they would drive down on a weekend in February. So they came down. They were due in at 5 o'clock on a Friday afternoon. Well, 5 o'clock came, 6 o'clock, 7, 8, 9. No Tamayos. Finally, at 10 o'clock they did arrive somewhat bedraggled and very subdued. I could tell that something had happened that was, in a way, an unusual experience because there was absolutely no gaiety in their voices or their faces.

So after a couple of drinks of tequila, things began to warm up a little bit. I said, "Why were you late?" He said, "Well, we had an unfortunate incident in Amarillo. We were hit from behind--a truck hit us--and the police came over and blamed us and had some very uncomplimentary things about Latin Americans," and he wished they would stay where they belonged, rather than in the Panhandle. He said, "We were very much abused and shocked."

[00:13:25.0]

I tried to express my apologies for any visitor to the United States, particularly if it's to Texas, getting such rude and improper treatment. And we went on and discussed the problems that faced not only Hispanics, but other minority groups who come to this country and do not speak English language any better than we speak Spanish language, and what could be done to increase a general public appreciation of foreign cultures. I said I was President of the Board of the museum at the time, and I said, "Mr. Tomayo, we have very little money, but I'll try to rake up what I can and we would like for you to commission a mural," and "I think it's important to -- a work of importance by you should be under Dallas Museum...

...And I believe that we can use this to help educate both the American public and the Hispanics as well on the tremendous cultural legacy your county has given the world." And he says, I like that idea, and I'll do it. And then he did paint the picture. We paid him all we had in the treasury, \$7,500 for a picture I guess at that time had a market value of well over a \$100,000. Today I would assess that painting to be worth about \$2.5 million. But it was done as a real gift to the heart from Mr. Tamayo for the museum.

[00:15:30.5]

Jay Gates:

Let me go back to the beginning of the works, the many and diverse kinds of objects that are in the exhibition. Do you recall which was the earliest you collected, the one you collected first?

Stanley Marcus: I think the first painting that I ever bought was the painting by Raphael Soyer, which was a very realistic traditional picture of a girl removing her red jacket. It had at the time I bought it a very wistful quality, which I liked very much. And now some 70 years later I am as much in love with it now as I was when I acquired it.

Jay Gates: The exhibition and the collection is obviously characterized as much by its range as by focus. Range of techniques, materials, parts of the world, individual cultures. But it also stretches from works of art conventionally understood like paintings by Raphael Soyer to objects that aren't conventional works of art at all. I think of one in particular, that is in fact a tool, an implement called a censer.

Stanley Marcus: Are you referring to the long piece of ivory that's about this long?

Jay Gates: Right.

[00:17:18.8]

Stanley Marcus: Well, that was an object I found in China on my first trip after Nixon opened the country to American traders. And I was impressed by the beauty of the proportions of the instrument--I didn't know what it was for. I found that it was called a breath censer, which the common man held in front of his mouth or face as he appeared in court before the emperor. And it was used to prevent the foul breath of the peasant from irritating the sensitive nose of the Emperor. At least that's the way was explained to me.

But in traveling, and everywhere over a period of time, I trained myself to be alert to unusual forms, pleasing aesthetic forms of sometimes commonplace utilitarian items because I think that there is beauty usually in most places around this. We look at them, we see them, but we don't look at them, or vice versa, whichever you want to say. We don't examine them and so we lose a lot of the beauty that is around us.

And I think that in African art you see that very frequently, where in the so-called "primitive art"--which is very sophisticated art--they took and embellished utilitarian articles so that they would be more pleasing to the hand and to the sight.

[00:19:22.0]

A lot of people who have seen the collection in my home will come up to me and say, well, we have enjoyed seeing it, but it's a very personal collection. I started puzzling what did they mean that it was very personal? I finally concluded that it was a polite way of saying, well, you have collected all over the lot, why didn't you stick to one thing?

I guess if I had stuck to one thing I would have had probably a wonderful collection of one thing. But I think I have had more fun by collecting in a wide variety of opportunities that presented themselves that sometimes are right at our feet and we have to step on them before we notice them.

Jay Gates: If you found yourself vanished to a desert island for a period of two years, are there a handful of things from the collection that automatically recommend themselves to you as good company for that period of time?

Stanley Marcus: Well, I don't think I'd take any work of art to desert island, because the elements certainly --

Jay Gates: I think I am getting dry.

Stanley Marcus: ...would certainly destroy them or damage them. I can imagine a wind or a sandstorm or dryness ruining any work of art or fading them. I would take a book though. I'd probably take a wonderful dictionary that a man named Morris and his wife wrote that's, I think, one of the most fascinating books. I think it'd probably be as entertaining as anything or anybody I can take to a desert island. If you haven't ever become acquainted with that book, you should take a look at it. It's available in the bookstores, still in print, and it tells about word origins. How phrases and words that are in common parlance today originated--fascinating volume.

[00:22:06.3]

Jay Gates: For those of you who don't know, one of the events that occasioned the opportunity for this exhibition was that Mr. and Mrs. Marcus recently moved from a house in which you had spent many years to a smaller place. You had moved recently.

Stanley Marcus: Oh yeah.

Jay Gates: That means probably pruning, is that right?

Stanley Marcus: Well, you can call it that. My wife said I'd lived in this house for 40, 56 years, and never thrown a single thing away. So it needed pruning and eradication. I had a library of I think 18,000 volumes. We finally found a house that had a built-in library. We added some more bookshelves, bookcases, and after adding additional book cases, I found that I had to give away about 3,000 books, some of which came to the library of the museum, some at universities and the public library in the neighborhood, in the vicinity of Dallas.

[00:23:33.5]

So I finally unpacked the last of some 900 cartoons of books and I found that I had room for just one more book. I can't buy more than one book unless I give away another book. So I'm having to go into a bookstore with great care and great restraint so that I don't violate the space limitations that I now have. But it

has meant a condensation of things. After all, you can't get as much into a 5,000 square foot house as you can in a 10,000 square foot house. So I am losing weight and the collection is losing weight.

Jay Gates: I am particularly struck by the character of objects. The Giacometti sculpture, in particular, seems to me to be an object so saturated with mood. Are there a couple of objects that you simply hold dearer, that you find yourself spending more time with, more associations about?

Stanley Marcus: When I'm asked that question, I always think of my mother who had four sons, and people would say, Ms. Marcus, tell me which is your favorite son? And she was smart enough to never commit herself, though each of us knew that we were the favorite son.

[00:25:29.1]

But when asked that question about a collection, I find that I am as indebted and in love with a small object that is completely valueless, except for its aesthetic qualities, as I would be the Giacometti.

I think you're referring to the Giacometti, the lonely figure in the case. That is one of the -- I think my great favorites in the collection. But I'd have as much difficulty giving away almost any piece, including that, without having a lot of anguish about which one I'd give away, or part company with. But I have had the ability to sell pieces and give them away and have no regrets because once, having made the decision, I have indelibly etched that object in my mind and I can think about it, where there's as much pleasure as if I had it on the wall or on table. And I have never had any regrets about anything that I have finally made a decision. The problem is making the decision.

Jay Gates: With that could we bring up the house lights, and may I ask you, if I can see you, please, right in the middle of the room.

Audience Member: Mr. Marcus, do you consider yourself an artist?

Jay Gates: Do you consider yourself an artist?

[00:27:23.8]

Stanley Marcus: No, not at all. I am an art appreciator. It's very important I think to have art appreciators as well as artists, and collectors, and viewers, and critics because each play on the other. If there weren't art appreciators, artists would have, I think, an unrewarding sort of life; and if collectors didn't have things that they wanted to collect, they would have a pretty dull sort of life.

So I think that I have developed an appreciation through long experience of looking. I have often said and have written that I think that the eye is very much like any other muscle in the body. You have to keep it in training if you want it

to be sharp. I find that if I don't visit a museum, or visit a collection, or go out and search for something, then my eye gets flabby and my taste is not as acute as it is when I have been looking at lot of things, and sort of hone the eye to close perception.

I think also that having been in the position of a merchant and having to be a buyer of a wide variety of products has certainly had an affect on my perceptive abilities. And I think that being the collector of art also affected my competence as a merchant because both of them involve different use of the eye in different sets of circumstances.

[00:29:27.3]

Jay Gates: In the back please.

Audience Member: [Inaudible]

Stanley Marcus: I couldn't hear.

Jay Gates: In your collection are represented works by Diego Rivera. Did you know Frida Kahlo? Did you have any personal acquaintance with either of those two?

Stanley Marcus: I met Rivera but I had never met Frida Kahlo. I'm sorry I hadn't had the opportunity and I'm sorry that on one occasion that I had, where I could have brought a Frida Kahlo painting, I struck out. But the part of the vocabulary of the collector, a couple of words that all of them subscribe to, "I should've-a, and I could've-a," and anybody who has gone around collecting art who doesn't own up to the use of those words, just isn't telling the truth because we all in collecting make mistakes or are unable to make a purchase or collect something--lack of funds that collecting would require.

Jay Gates: The gentleman in the back row.

Audience Member: [Inaudible]

Jay Gates: Can you speak up so everyone can hear better?

Audience Member: [Inaudible]... how did you get involved?

[00:31:30.2]

Jay Gates: The books that you publish, the tiny books that you publish, how did you get involved in that?

Stanley Marcus: I started my book collecting career long before I got involved in art, while I was at college, and I was buying books so rapidly that my father suggested that I better get a job and pay for them. So I started a book business when I was in Cambridge and I earned-- I made enough money to build a library, and I became

a student of the history of printing at the Widener Library, which was a very wealthy and rich experience.

At that time, my first sight of miniature books I think must have been back in 1925. I didn't collect any until the early '60s when I received an ultimatum from my wife that our house was becoming so crowded that she wanted to remind me that we were not running a museum or a library, a public library, and that I was forbidden to bring any more objects into the house. So I thought about that and I figured that I could defy the ultimatum by smuggling small books in.

[00:33:15.4]

Not realizing that if you finally bring -- and even though these are little tiny books, if you bring in enough of them, that I was going to be in the trouble. Finally, after I had brought 5,500 of them in, she took notice and lowered the boom. Well, I have always wanted to be a publisher and, since my retirement from Neiman Marcus, I had decided to become a publisher of miniature books. I collected, as I have said, quite a group, many of which I have given to the Bridwell Library, which incidentally is going to have an exhibition of them in February.

And it looks to me like it's going to be a very, very nice exhibition with the special miniature books that they are publishing on the occasion of the exhibition. But this gave me an opportunity of designing fine press books, just as -- more easily than if I were had chosen to publish large books.

The trick of it is that it's just about one-fifth as expensive to produce small books than it is to do big books. The risks are about same. But I have had great fun in publishing now I guess maybe 30, 35 books. One of which just being issued now by an Englishman named Nick Bantock whose trilogy of love of letters between a girl in the South Sea and an artist in London hit the bestseller list in the *New York Times* last year.

[00:35:29.2]

This is a spoof book that he has written on imaginary spinning tops, which he presents with great authenticity and the beautiful sketches that he drew. And then, finally, at the end admits that all of the descriptions and all of the attributes to the various designers including some famous artists was completely a spoof.

Jay Gates: Another question, yes sir.

Audience Member: Mr. Marcus, your collection is so wide ranging... [inaudible].

Jay Gates: In a collection that is so diverse and ranges so far, what criteria do you use in selecting and acquiring individual objects?

Stanley Marcus: A very simple one, I bought what I like. And I have never tried to set up any rules of what I like except I have to like it to buy it. I have never bought what somebody told me I should buy or what would go up in value. I have never considered art a particularly good investment though some pieces have been. I think probably stocks are better investments than works of art.

But I guess I must have developed some criteria that I have not been able to define that characterizes my selections. I happen to like what I bought, and rarely have I felt the impulse to get rid of something because it turned out to that, didn't like it.

[00:37:32.0]

Jay Gates: Sir.

Audience Member: Mr. Marcus, when it became apparent to your wife that your collecting was wide and diverse, what was her reaction?

Jay Gates: As your wife saw you collecting broadly and diversely, what was her reaction?

Stanley Marcus: Oh, very cooperative, very cooperative. My wife and I -- my wife for 15 years and I collect on the basis of neither of us make decisions unless we are in agreement, and most of the time we do agree, but occasionally you have to leave something on the table because of a lack of agreement. But I think that's pretty good working arrangement.

I think it should be terrible thing to impose your tastes on someone close and dear to you that they would find unacceptable. I don't like that. I don't think a marriage could withstand an imposition of distasteful objects.

Jay Gates: Yes sir, please.

Audience Member: [Inaudible]

Jay Gates: Could you stand up, and speak a little louder, I am having trouble myself.

[00:39:16.6]

Audience Member: I said, he's certainly an icon [inaudible]. I was wondering what you may think about the...[inaudible].

Jay Gates: Did you get that?

Stanley Marcus: No, I'm sorry, I didn't.

Jay Gates: Alright, I am going to try, alright. He began by acknowledging that you're an icon. Okay.

Stanley Marcus: I am a what?

Jay Gates: An icon. I--C--O--.

Stanley Marcus: Thank you.

Jay Gates: You obviously have been a tastemaker over the years and as you see this community developing and evolving, what do you think about our standards and the kinds of things that we choose for ourselves? Are we getting better or our tastes diminishing?

Stanley Marcus: Well, it depends on which day of the week you ask that question. If I've just come back from an overseas, taking an overseas flight, I have a very low opinion of the taste of my countrymen, or for that matter the taste of any countrymen, when I see some of the ways people get themselves up for long range travel. But I think it's a very good question that you have asked because I've been given credit rightly or wrongly for having influenced the taste of the people in the Southwest. Looking back to the period when I started in business in 1925, there were people of good taste in this community who bought beautiful art, beautiful clothes.

[00:41:32.7]

They didn't buy them in Dallas; they bought them from wherever they traveled. Part of the challenge that I had was to find a way of making a living by selling them things here.

I found that once you've brought beautiful things to the market, people were perfectly willing to buy them at home. The only reason they were buying them in New York or Europe was because they didn't find them at home. But then in an emerging business and with a changing group of people coming into the marketplace from all parts of Texas, and before the war, from all parts of the country, and since the war, people from all parts of the world, there was a problem in the early days of educating people to the subtleties of etiquette, the subtleties of taste development, and we used a number of different devices.

I think probably the most interesting and exciting part of my business career was in helping people who wanted to know about beauty, helping them to find it in merchandise that were offered and in helping to set some standards that elevated the taste standards, not only of the community of customers, but of our competition as well. And so for a long period of time, I think that the general level of merchandise taste in the city of Dallas was better than almost any other city in the country.

[00:43:35.2]

Now whether it is today or not is another question. But the people have often asked what I did, and I said, "well, at times I feel like I am a teacher. Other times

I feel like I am a preacher, and I have to constantly remember that I am a merchant, and I have to turn in a profitable performance." But I was never so impressed for the latter requirement that I was willing to make compromises in taste and in quality that might have sold, might have made a temporary profit, but would have been a false profit so that the part of being an educator has been a very interesting and exciting and challenging one. And we found all sorts of ways that we could educate people in a manner that they enjoyed. That answer your question?

Audience Member: Yes Sir.

Jay Gates: One more question, please.

Audience Member: How did you and the museum decide which pieces ...[inaudible]... to include in the exhibition?

Jay Gates: How did we at the museum decide which objects to include in the exhibition? We didn't.

[00:45:16.3]

Stanley Marcus: At the time, this was not our idea. This was his idea and the idea of the President of the museum, Mrs. Rose, who said they wanted to come to see me and I tightened my pockets. But when they came in the door, they said, "We are not asking for money," which was unusual. But they said, you are just in the process of moving, so all of your works of art are in storage we presume, or at least they are packed. This would be a good time to put on a show at the museum and we happen to have a vacant time slot for one of the galleries, and we would like to do a show and call it under the presumptuous title, I think, of *The Eye of Stanley Marcus*. So I said, "Well, we're getting ready to unpack it," and they said, "Well, it would simply mean delaying unpacking it by a month or two," and so we counted up the days we would be going here and there.

So we said, "Yes, we'll do it on one condition, and the condition is that I would curate the show, and that nobody could argue with me about what I've selected." I wanted it to be a very democratic decision. And I knew that if we had gotten into a broad discussion, I would hurt some feelings of people who thought maybe they want to show this or that, and I frankly just didn't have the time to get into the arguments.

Nor did I want to do an exhibition that would be a typical good art exhibition, because our collection isn't the typical good art collection. There are some very good pieces in it. There are pieces in it I love, but it is not a typical collection of Impressionist paintings or Cubist paintings or paintings that you can easily categorize.

[00:47:36.8]

I wanted to do a show, once the idea was presented, that could help educate a lot of people into the variety that exists in life and the variety that I found in collecting in this country and in Europe--wherever I've been, and in a variety of different media. There is a piece in the show that you may recall, it is a big round piece made of flanges of steel, those objects were called *objet trouvé*, found objects.

And the man who put that together was a man without any artistic training but who has great artistic instincts. And he took these flanges of steel and composed a construction. I have great respect for that piece of art. And I wanted to be able to show that you could collect both sophisticated art like Giacometti, like Georgia O'Keeffe, and you could also collect things right at hand that were in the price range of many, many people. The young people starting to collect firstly need to learn to use their eyes properly, to see what's around them, not just look at them, but to see them. And that was a kind of exhibition that I wanted if we were going to do a show, and I wanted to write the captions myself so that that they would contain some information besides birth date and birth place of the artist.

[00:49:37.8]

I think most captions in most museums ought to be banned by law because they don't tell you anything and they are usually placed in locations you can't see 'em anyway. So it doesn't make much difference.

So those were the terms that I laid down and my good friend here Jay Gates graciously accepted them and said we won't give you a single argument, and believe me they didn't give me a single argument. So if it's good, I'll take credit for it, if it's bad I'll take the blame for it.

Jay Gates: Would you all join me in thanking Mr. Marcus for joining us? Goodnight! Thank you all for coming.

Audio file: MarcusConversation_public