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Oral history interview with Eleanor Sayre

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## Collection Overview

<b>Repository:</b>	Archives of American Art
<b>Title:</b>	Oral history interview with Eleanor Sayre
<b>Identifier:</b>	AAA.sayre93
<b>Date:</b>	1993 April 19-1997 January 10
<b>Extent:</b>	213 Pages (Transcript)
<b>Creator:</b>	Sayre, Eleanor A. Brown, Robert F.
<b>Language:</b>	English .

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## Administrative Information

### Acquisition Information

This interview is part of the Archives of American Art Oral History Program, started in 1958 to document the history of the visual arts in the United States, primarily through interviews with artists, historians, dealers, critics and administrators.

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## Biographical / Historical

Eleanor A. Sayre (1916-2001) was a curator and art historian from Boston, Mass.

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## Scope and Contents

An interview of Eleanor Sayre conducted 1993 April 19-1997 January 10, by Robert F. Brown, for the Archives of American Art.

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## Scope and Contents

Sayre talks about her early childhood in Williamstown and Cambridge, Mass.; her family background; visits to the White House with her maternal grandfather, Woodrow Wilson; living abroad while her father was in government service in Bangkok, then Siam (now Thailand), Paris, and Switzerland, with extensive recollections of her brothers and schooling in Europe.

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## Scope and Contents

Attending Winsor School in Boston; her mother's death; her years at Bryn Mawr College, including her switch to art history from political science; Georgianna Goddard King as an influential teacher; an internship under Laura Dudley at the Fogg Art Museum's Print Room and the lasting effect of this experience.

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## Scope and Contents

Being a graduate student in fine arts at Harvard and the importance of Edward Forbes and Paul Sachs as teachers; her decision not to pursue a PhD; working with Jakob Rosenberg; helping to get young Jews out of Europe; her position as assistant for exhibitions at Yale University Art Gallery under Theodore Sizer; the trauma of her father's internment by the Japanese in the Philippines, where he was High Commissioner and his rescue; and her decision to turn down a military intelligence job in order to work with German Jewish refugees.

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## Scope and Contents

Her brief tenure at Lyman-Allyn Museum, Conn., under Winslow Ames; her years in the education department under Lydia "Ma" Powel at the Museum of Art of the Rhode Island School of Design with Gordon Washburn as director; and working closely with Heinrich Schwartz on prints and drawings.

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## Scope and Contents

The liberal tradition of her father's wealthy family; her father; being brought to the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston by its curator of prints, Henry Rossiter and on the charming collector and benefactor, Maxim Karolik; MFA curator of paintings, William George Constable; and George Harold Edgell, MFA director.

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## Scope and Contents

The collector, Philip Hofer, who by putting his Goya proofs on loan at the MFA, led to Sayre's life-long study of the artist; her research on Goya in Spain; raising of a large sum from Boston businesses to purchase Hofer's prints for the MFA, and the MFA's eminence by the 1960s in Goya's graphic work; the disgusting repression of dissent in Franco-era Spain; Goya's passionate self-assertion, which is what principally attracted Sayre to his work, and his conceptual process and method of work.

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## Scope and Contents

Earlier years at the MFA, Boston, including the accessibility of the print department's study rooms; Edwin J. Hipkiss, curator of American decorative arts; the Christmas poetry and prints exhibitions designed as

profound learning experiences for a broad public; and being chosen as successor to Rossiter; and further comments on Maxim Karolik.

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## Scope and Contents

W.G. Russell Allen and other collectors who gave their collections to the MFA; her efforts to effectively present art to the broad public; her methods of appealing to the public coalescing at the MFA in 1989 with the "Goya and the Spirit of the Enlightenment" exhibition; and an exhibition of the work of Beatrix Potter.

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## Scope and Contents

Spain under the dictator, Francisco Franco; her first study in Spain of Goya's drawings and her urging the Prado Museum to conserve its drawings; the Prado's director, F. Sanchez-Canton; her research on prostitution at the Ministry of Justice; being decorated for her recommending the preservation of Goya's art and the marvelous private collections of Goya in Spain; and her obsession with interpreting the meaning of Goya's work.

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## Scope and Contents

The MFA, Boston, under the directorship of Perry Rathbone, who wanted many more people involved than had his predecessor, George Harold Edgell, who ran it like a Boston Brahmin Club; Rathbone's accomplishments; his downfall and that of his assistant (and curator of European decorative arts and sculpture) Hanns Swarzenski in bringing a so-called Raphael into this country by irregular means, which led to Rathbone and Swarzenski's firing by George Seybolt, the trustee president; Rathbone's reluctance to hire women curators and Sayre's finally becoming curator of prints and drawings in 1967; her philosophy as curator; on Hanns and Brigitte Swarzenski as dear friends; her exchange of positions with the curator of the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, where she put their valuable but neglected print collection in order.

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## Scope and Contents

The exhibition and catalog, "Rembrandt: Experimental Etcher," (1969) in collaboration with the Pierpont Morgan Library; general views on exhibitions; co-authoring the exhibition catalog "Goya and the Spirits of Enlightenment" (1989); her contributions to Goya research; her current research and writing on Goya's Capaprichos print series; and her satisfaction in having spent her career in art museums.

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## General

Originally recorded on 8 sound cassettes. Reformatted in 2010 as 15 digital wav files. Duration is 11 hrs., 21 min.

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## Names and Subject Terms

This collection is indexed in the online catalog of the Smithsonian Institution under the following terms:

### Subjects:

Jewish refugees -- Germany  
Museum curators -- Massachusetts -- Boston -- Interviews  
World War, 1939-1945 -- Germany -- Refugees  
World War, 1939-1945 -- Personal narratives, American

### Types of Materials:

Interviews  
Sound recordings

### Names:

Ames, Winslow  
Ashmolean Museum  
Bryn Mawr College -- Students  
Constable, W. G. (William George), 1887-1976  
Edgell, George Harold, b. 1887  
Fogg Art Museum  
Forbes, Edward Waldo, 1873-1969  
Goya, Francisco, 1746-1828  
Harvard University -- Students  
Hofer, Philip, 1898-1984  
Karolik, Maxim  
King, Georgiana Goddard, 1871-1939  
Lyman Allyn Museum  
Museo del Prado  
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston  
Rathbone, Perry Townsend, 1911-2000  
Rembrandt Harmenszoon van Rijn, 1606-1669  
Rhode Island School of Design. Museum of Art  
Rosenberg, Jakob, 1893-  
Rossiter, Henry P. (Henry Preston), b. 1885  
Sachs, Paul J. (Paul Joseph), 1878-1965  
Seybolt, George Crossan, 1914-1993  
Sizer, Theodore, 1892-1967  
Swarzenski, Hanns, 1903-1985  
Washburn, Gordon B. (Gordon Bailey), 1904-1983  
Wilson, Woodrow, 1856-1924  
Yale University. Art Gallery

### Occupations:

Art historians -- Interviews  
Printmakers

### Geographic Names:

Philippines -- History -- Japanese occupation, 1942-1945  
Spain -- History -- 1939-1975