This transcript was not approved by the interviewee.
C. Wistar: Is that a recorder?

Meredith: Yes!

Meredith: Today is Saturday, February 9. I’m here with Caroline Wistar and we’re doing an interview about the Art Museum at La Salle. Okay, good morning, Caroline.

C. Wistar: Good morning, Meredith.

Meredith: Thank you. I was wondering if you could tell me a little bit about you first. Have you always lived in Philadelphia?

C. Wistar: No. I got out of college, which was Wheaton College up near Boston. I went to work in the Boston Museum. And in those days, you could find jobs in museums just with a BA degree. Nowadays, they want a PhD. So, I worked there in rights and reproductions for about, I guess it was 4 years. Then I went to London, I had a good time but I also worked at the Courtauld Institute for Art History in London. And then, I came back and got a job in the Philadelphia museum in the department of prints and drawings and photographs. And I was curatorial assistant and then I rose to the assistant curator. And when La Salle was opening as a museum in 1976, I lost my job at the Philadelphia Museum. (1 min. 24 sec.) They had a bad time with the bicentennial and they had to let a lot of junior people go. So, it was just at the time when they were establishing the museum and opening it up at La Salle. So fortunately, the timing was good and I started full-time in 1978. I was part-time before that. It was just me and brother Daniel. He was part-time. He had been president and he was teaching part-time.
Meredith: Yes. I did get a little article that I was reading about when they did the declaration and that there was some difficulties of June of 76 with Philadelphia and everything else. So, that did impact you. You lost your job.

C. Wistar: Oh, it was horrible. You know, because they had Legionnaire’s disease nobody came and they just spent a lot of money doing this huge exhibition (2 min. 20 sec.) and it just bankrupted them. It was just very sad because they expected huge crowds and nobody came. It impacted a lot of the culture institutions in Philadelphia. So, there I was and they had just renovated the basement of only, as whole the museum. So they were sitting there with the collection that developed over the past 10 years was on the walls but that was it. They had the collection inventoried but that was about it. So, everything needed to be done. We needed to establish all the museum procedures and policies and turn it into a museum, open it up to the public. Do exhibitions. Care for the collection. Just everything.

Meredith: Do you have a special exhibition or exhibit that you really liked?

C. Wistar: Well, gosh, we were doing, maybe, 3 or 4 exhibitions a semester. It was a lot. Based on the collection that we had, we’d do — there’s a bible collection of rare bibles and prayer books and things like that so.... we would, generally, have an exhibition going in hall as well as an exhibition in the print/study room, based on the prints and drawings and sometimes, paintings. And then, we got to the point where we started borrowing things from other museums and also, lending to other museums. So we had to establish lending procedures and borrowing procedures and showing procedures.
Meredith: So, what brought you to Philadelphia?

C. Wistar: Oh, I grew up here.

Meredith: Oh, you did. Okay, cool. Do you go to high school around here too then?

C. Wistar: I did and then, I went away to college.

Meredith: Right, right.

C. Wistar: So, I was gone for a while and then I came back.

Meredith: Right, fantastic. I understand your last name has some special significance. Do you want to talk about that?

C. Wistar: Well, it is an old name. We’ve been here a long time starting in, I guess, the 1700s. 1709 or something, when the first Wistar came over from Germany. There were two brothers and one spelt his name, the first one, my relative spelled his name with and -a-, W-i-s-t-a-r. And actually, it was a mistake because he was going through his oath of allegiance to the king through customs so he kept it that way. And then, the brother came over and he kept his -e-. So that’s the two different, you know its Wister Street and Wistar Building.

Meredith: Right, that’s wild. That’s fantastic, I love that. Do you have any siblings?

C. Wistar: I do. I have a sister who lives Montreal and her husband is a professor at McGill University up there of Islamic studies.

Meredith: Oh, really. Do you get to share any information with her for the museum?

C. Wistar: Well, she’s very interested museums too. They’ve got a good museum up in Montreal. There’s also a very good part of her family that lives in Ottawa. So there’s a very wonderful museum, a National gallery in Ottawa. So, I’ve
grown up. You know, I go to museums a lot and that’s the real key if you’re going to work in a museum. You have to know all the ways of running a museum. It’s also so important that you just spend a large part of your time looking and that’s what Brother Daniel did ever since he was a kid. So, you gain a real knowledge and discrimination of what’s good. And it really comes through looking, you shouldn’t have to depend on anyone to tell you what they think is good. I mean you can go to dealers, which we did, but it was mostly through auctions that we purchased works of art. And you really have to have a sense of what is good or not because a dealer will sell you what is available to him. And they very well can talk you into sometimes getting things that don’t stand the test of time. So, to be on the safe side you really should just do a lot, a lot of looking to build up a knowledge and discrimination.

Meredith: Do we do any renovations on art and things like that or...?

C. Wistar: Cultivation?

Meredith: Yes.

C. Wistar: No, I don’t. We would send it out to professional conservators the works of art.

Meredith: Do you have a famous or personal museum that you love above all others?

C. Wistar: Well, for western art I think for paintings that National Gallery in Washington is one of the most superb museums in the world because they really collect only the best. They don’t have all the history. You know, the museums 600 years in Europe now. Well, not that old. Museums really didn’t start. It’s
private collections up until the 1800s but they have is just a staff that knows how to put on an exhibition. How to display the paintings. How to interpret them so that you’re not overwhelmed when you go in there. It’s just the best and so beautifully exhibited more than any other museum. But there are a lot of wonderful museums and the Philips collection in Washington was one of Brother Daniel’s favorite and one of mine because it’s art in a house. You know, you go from room to room and you can sit down in the rooms and that was his inspiration for the gallery, the art museum here. He wanted it to small and go into various rooms, which it is now, and you could see just a nice gallery of paintings. Well displayed, not too crowded and then, what we set out to do is interpret it and we have a guidebook and there is guidebook in every room. And we also have take tour, so it gives you an introduction and of course, if you are going to study a painting further you can get into it with special research, dive into it.

Meredith: Right. There is a special collection?

C. Wistar: We have everything in the collections catalog and in the catalog, you put the name of artist and dates and the title and you try to assume what the date is as accurately as possible. You write other scholars and get their opinion. You keep a record of anywhere that a painting has been on a exhibition or where the painting came from that’s the provenance. And that’s very, very important to try and trace where the paintings has been ever since the artist did it. And I think you heard about some of the — many of the painting that were lost during the war? Now they’re trying to — a lot of Jewish collections were all
stolen and dispersed. So eventually, every museum, the bigger museums are
doing it now. Anything that was purchased between 1935, let’s say and 1945
that came from a dealer and they can’t document who the owner was. They
are going to have to put it up on the Internet and then, if somebody comes
along and can prove that they own that painting it’s theirs. It’s going to have
to be returned.

Meredith: I did a little following myself on Latvia. One of the things I was reading
about was the Amber room that was done by St. Peter. The entire room was
all made out of amber and when the museum had gotten a bombed they tried
to take it down and move it and it got captured by Germans and now, there’s
just speculation, after speculation, of who really has this room.

C. Wistar: You know if you want to see a good movie on this, it’s called the “Rape of
Europa” and it’s playing at — it’s in Ambern.

Meredith: Oh, I’m right around there.

C. Wistar: You have to go there to see it. You have to go there to see it because it’s a
special. It’s a 2-hour movie. But it just shows [UI] in the Louvre packed up
every single painting, thousands and took them away and buried them and
took them off to the salt mines. It’s just a fascinating movie. You cannot —
it is almost overwhelming. And every painting in the Hermitage in Russia
was wrapped up.

Meredith: Yes, it was amazing some of the stories out of the curators that were there.
They tried all different kinds of things. There were rumors that they were
shipped to America.
C. Wistar: You would love this movie.

Meredith: Yes. It sounds fantastic.

C. Wistar: It’s really worth seeing.

Meredith: Okay, great. Have you come up with any that have been questionable? Any art?

C. Wistar: We do have a number of paintings that were purchased in the 60s and 70s from a very perfectly, very reputable dealer in New York. But the thing is he didn’t always know, it wasn’t documented beyond where that he had it. So, anything that was acquired during that time should be put on the Internet and just, hopefully, we don’t have anything that did belong to a.... but it’s going to be a long process. And places like the national gallery have already started, but they have the money to do it. It means putting every single picture and any single, all the catalog information on the Internet. So, I think museums will eventually get help.

Meredith: Do these people have documentation that they’ve owned it? Or is it just a family heirloom?

C. Wistar: Well, they have to have something to prove that it was theirs. And I think they do. I think they do have records. But slowly you hear about, and also, a lot of ancient art. You know, whether it’s from Asia or Egypt, Greece or Rome are discovering that they have been stolen and looted before things were really being carefully guarded at sites. So, they’re having to be returned. But they are working very hard at it, I must say the curators. There’s been a lot about getting a museum, which you read about getting curated there.
Meredith: Fantastic. Do you have a famous collection that you like or is there a family that donated pretty frequently that you say, hey?

C. Wistar: To La Salle?

Meredith: Yes.

C. Wistar: We had — you know over the years, Brother Daniel and I had I would say two prime collectors who endowed funds in their name. And one was Benjamin Bernstein, so we could purchase art and he would give us a lot of art. He was a big collector of modern art here in Philadelphia. Just a very generous man and he would give us things and we would very well often trade up if it was duplicate or something we didn’t really need, we traded up and then, take the money that we got from the sale of his works and purchase something that we did need. It might be a 17th century painting or another 19th century painting or whatever. So, we built up an endowment fund plus a lot of wonderful things from his collection. The other thing, endowed fund, was for prints and drawings. And that is the Pinkus funds and that was named after two collectors that collected American art, early 20th century, Marjorie and Nate Pinkus.

Meredith: American art, Native American art or?

C. Wistar: No, it was all American artist. Not Indian. Just American artist from about the turn of the century up to 1930s-1940s.

Meredith: Can you tell me a little bit about Brother Daniel?

C. Wistar: Brother Daniel is quite a connoisseur. He was really interested in art when he was very young as I was. And he went to the museums in Pittsburgh, he grew
up in Pittsburgh. And then, continued in college where he minored in art
history as I did and did just a lot of looking. He was very near the national
gallery. He took courses there. He went there. He looked all the time. He
looked at the Philips collections and then, he ended up doing graduate work in
Washington. So we had all those years to go to the national gallery and
Philips and just absorb. And I was lucky because I, of course had the
Philadelphia museum, and when I went away to college I had all the museums
in Boston. I went into museum work right after. So, you know, it was very
much of an effort and the wonderful thing was that at La Salle that everyone
in the administration just let Brother Daniel and myself build the collection,
form the museum and we did it. And we didn’t even have secretary to start of
with, we just had students working on a typewriter. This was before
computers. And we just worked away and eventually, you know, after 15
years, we got a part-time secretary and then, full-time secretary. But as long
as we were there, I was always the only full-time person and Brother Daniel
was part-time. The last couple years he went full-time. And our main thrust
of the museum was really putting on exhibitions culled from the collection
and also, developing the collection because it was a great deal of in order to
get paintings, new paintings — purchase new paintings, we had to do a lot of
looking and a lot of going to New York and also, we had to sell. We had to
sell to be able to buy.

Meredith: And you did all of that?
C. Wistar: Yeah. It was wonderful. It was just a really wonderful experience and I guess somewhat unique because most college and universities museums started with alumni gifts. You know, maybe at the turn of the century, Princeton, Yale, Harvard, all have big museums. But they have very wealthy alumni that have been giving for years and years.

Meredith: Did you have any difficulties through the years of getting endowments or getting money from the alumni?

C. Wistar: Well, we always had to work at it. It took a lot of work. It took a lot of visiting and a lot of listening to people, entertaining people. We would have a reception every year. Very often, it would be in honor of donor or an artist or something like that. And so, we personally tried to cultivate people and then, sometimes, word would get out that we had this wonderful collection and sometimes, donors/collectors that we didn’t even know, they’d hear about us somewhere else and they knew when you give away art you can get a tax deduction. So, in the days before Reagan, because Reagan greatly decreased the taxes for the wealthy, people needed tax deductions so they would donate to us and we maybe didn’t even know them. They’d come down and see the museum and see that we were there and then, offer us a work of art. And they knew it would be handled very quickly. This is what they were concerned with. Sometimes, if you give things to bigger museums you have to go through all this process through the register, through the curators, and through committees. And they knew it would be processed quickly and efficiently, so for their income tax purposes. So that’s how we built up the collection.
Eventually, at first, La Salle had some institutional funds to make purchases that happened for about, they’d make a contribution maybe for the first 10 years. And after that, it all depended on selling things to buy things pretty much plus these two endowed collections. I mean endowed funds.

Meredith: Did you have any pieces that were just extremely difficult to get? Or was everybody pretty much cooperative?

C. Wistar: We have a painting that we chased around for maybe 4 years. We saw it in exhibition and it’s a 17th century painting, which you can look up in the catalog. It’s — and you can read about it. It’s painted in the 17th century, it’s Adoration of Magi and I saw it in an exhibition. It’s this one. So when you get the catalog. It’s just a perfectly exquisite sort of French Classical Baroque painting. So, we tracked it down to the dealer and then, we didn’t have enough money for it and so we worked at and he held it for us and we had to sell a few things and we held our breath and 3 years later, I think it was we were able to acquire it. After selling other things that had been given to us that, you know, just weren’t appropriate really in deciding for the collection but gave us a lot of funds. It was a horse painting of a horse and rider, English. And the English just dote on their horses and the painting, of course, showed a jockey and so, we were able to sell it and purchase it with the funds. So, whoever gave it to us, we would say if we sold one of their paintings than bought something with the proceeds from the sale we’d say versus funds generously donated by whoever it was. And they were alright with that, the
owners were always— but we only accepted gifts on a no-strings-attachment basis, meaning you could sell it and they’d sign.

Meredith: How do you think La Salle shaped your life?

C. Wistar: Well, I spend three-quarters of my life, 30 years, working there.

Meredith: 30 years, that amazing!

C. Wistar: So that shaped my life! Also got a chance to see many museums, because of research that you have to do and looking at other paintings, at other collections, meeting other curators, going to New York. That’s another thing, we were so lucky that we live so close to New York because that’s the center of art market.

Meredith: Did we ever get anything from Sotheby’s or Christie’s?

C. Wistar: Only really, occasionally dealers, but most of the time, through Sotheby’s especially and Christie’s. They would come down and look what we had and then, we’d have to decide, you know, what auction it could go into and you had to decide how much it was going for and what the reserve was going to be and the insurance and all that. So, it took a lot of business transactions.

Meredith: And you’re still doing this all on your own with a little help from Brother Daniel? You’re getting the prices, the insurance...

C. Wistar: Yeah, all of that had to be done. The catalogs would come in. We would find something and go up to New York see it and get conditional reports on it. We’d sell things. We’d put the money, hold it somewhere and so...that took a lot of time. And then, we had a very active program of exhibitions. We
generally do 2 or 3 a semester, a full semester. We’d put them up and have a little brochures, which is a list of all the exhibitions we’d done.

Meredith: Okay, what kind of things were going on in 1976 when you started with La Salle other than the art museum?

C. Wistar: It was just there. The painting were on the wall that was it. So, we had to establish everything. How we were going to run it. How we were going to keep it open just with student work-study. Budget students, they were the ones who guarded it.

Meredith: Were their credits available for the students for working at the museum?

C. Wistar: Some courses they did get credit. But they were generally art history majors and they were coming down to work on a specific project. I worked with a number and I worked with a number of honor students who were doing projects. Research on work of art and then, they brought a paper and they would supervise the research. I loved that. I mean that was fascinating.

Meredith: New kids every semester, that’s phenomenal.

C. Wistar: Oh, gosh, hundreds over the years. Kids that I worked with and you know, some were more interested than others.

Meredith: Do you have some that keep coming back?

C. Wistar: I still keep in contact with a number of them, which is wonderful. Some are on the committee, they’d a current committee and we’ve always had an advisory committee. We’d meet and then, it was trustee committee. But...

Meredith: Is it a lot easier to get money than it was back then?
C. Wistar: It gets more and more competitive for any nonprofit organizations. You know, there’s just so much money around and there’s just so many museums here in Philadelphia. You know, and historic houses and they’re all going after very often the same people. So, it does become harder and harder. Also, because the tax structure has changed. As you know, it favors really the more wealthy and they’ve made it harder to give. You have to have more documentation, more appraisals, and so, very often, sadly, the more wealthy people that are in the higher tax bracket don’t need the deductions the way they did. So, that has slacked off and that, happens slowly in the 90s. But that’s true of every nonprofit museum.

Meredith: I signed up. I’m an archangel. I was very proud.

C. Wistar: Oh, you did? Good.

Meredith: I got my little membership.

C. Wistar: That’s terrific. The other thing is museums now all have to compete with art as investment, like a stock. And when we first started, it was just beginning to be that way, then it got so hot. You know, in terms of people, individuals, corporations investing in art, and they’re all going after the same thing at Sotheby’s and Christie’s. So, and they all have their advisors and so, it’s a lot more competitive family because the art that’s purchased through auction is treated as a stock commodity. A lot of people are investing in it, they keep it and they resell it for a profit.
Meredith: Of course. I was reading an article in the city of Philadelphia that — I didn’t write the year down here, there was a fund shortage. Did any of that kind of effect the museum at all?

C. Wistar: There was what?

Meredith: There was a funds shortage in the city of Philadelphia, they were unable to help with any kind nonprofits and there was no excess money?

C. Wistar: Recently?

Meredith: Yes.

C. Wistar: Yeah, I think that is true but I haven’t been there for a couple years. But we weren’t — we never had any city funds. No. So all our money came from private. No, I take that back. We had over the years, you know, we applied while I was there I think we had about maybe 25 grants coming in. We had applied for things, one of those was National Endowment for the Arts and they pay for the first guide to collection, was funded by them, to do the research and publication of it. All of that, and that is a very good organization, the National Endowment because it’s very little bureaucracy and paperwork. They have a wonderful application. It’s very concise. They come and visit you. They know what you’re about before you.... the other thing was something called the Institute for Museum Services. I think its still going. We got grants from them. We also got grants from Pennsylvania State Museum Council. So, those are the state ones we got. The rest, the other ones were private. But there is a list of foundations and private and public funds.

And that was a very big part of — not for acquiring art but for doing things
like conserving the collection, finding frames for the collection, gaining a
apainting storage area, having bookcases built, exhibition material that we
needed, all of that was done.

Meredith: If you wanted to acquire a painting what procedures would you follow to get it?

C. Wistar: Well, the first thing is you’d go see the painting. You’d talk to the people at
the auction houses. We had our special client office people that we worked
with who would find out the conditional report because it’s best to remain
anonymous because if somebody at an auction finds out that a museum is
interested. They’ll get interested. They’ll bid the price up. So we kept very
discreet and tried to remain very anonymous and worked with the people that
we knew who didn’t announce to the world that we were....

Meredith: Right. And how would you do the research? Going to other museums or...?

C. Wistar: Well, sometimes the auction houses would have provenance and research and
you could follow up on the that and do that. Sometimes, we just had to trust
our eye. You know, if we’re looking at something and if it didn’t have—if it
hadn’t been published before, nobody had seen it. You would just hope and
you’d go up there and you’d get conservation report of the condition of the
painting and you would talk to our special people up there. They would get
reports from whatever the department was, usually it was the painting
department. And very often, you know, the painting had been published
somewhere before. Somebody had done a research piece on it or it had been
in an exhibition. So, you knew that it was pretty much right. I must say of all
the years, we never bought anything that I can recall that wasn’t what it was cataloged to be. And then, what you do is you research it once you get it. You can do more and more research on it. Usually, call in the expert if there’s an expert in the field of particular artist or if a particular museum has a large collection of works of that era and somebody’s a 17th century baroque Italian expert they will come and look. We constantly had people coming to see the collection. And that was great fun, every single object in the collection with the exception of the prints have an option file and there you would keep down other art connoisseurs and scholars would say about the painting. We don’t think it’s this or we think it’s that. And you write to other universities and professors and get their opinions. So it was a constant give and take.

Meredith: Sure. Do you have any programs with the other museums where you borrow and swap information? Paintings and things?

C. Wistar: Yeah, we borrowed from a lot of museums.

Meredith: Yeah, they do an easy...

C. Wistar: Yeah, and they all have requirements. You know, you have to fill out these huge application requirements that... well, they’re called facilities reports to find out before they will lend to you they have to know what kind of museum you have and what kind of facilities and what kind of security and all that, how you’re going to hang the paint. What you’re going to do with it. There’s just a whole lot of rules and regulations. And the basic rules and regulations are written on the back of the loan form. So, they had to find out if you’re borrowing from a particular museum, they have to find out about you and you
have to find out about them and vice versa. So, but we borrowed from the National Gallery in Washington and Yale University and Princeton. And just lots of museums in the area, but the Laury Company and Bryn Mawr College. The Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, Philadelphia Museum of Art, various local collectors, and on and on and on. There’s a whole list of places that have borrowed from us as well as we borrowed from them. And we have a whole section, and this is the kind of thing I think, Brother Joe, there is a record of all. It’s a lending file. For every painting we lent and we have paintings that go abroad. They go to Italy and France and circulated all the way across the country and those records have all been kept for the painting that was lent and where it went.

Meredith: How do you ship something like that?

C. Wistar: We would call in professionals. Bigger museums have their own professional packers and shippers but we would call in outside professionals and they would come measure the painting, build a crate for it, pack it, and then, depending on where it was going. Sometimes a curator, guiding it, took it, literally. They would be on the plane or train or on the truck with the work of art depending upon its value. It’s called a courier. Once time we had to turn down a painting going to Italy, that painting I showed you that was by Mikos Spadero, because at the last minute we found out it was going to be transported out of New York without a courier and they promised it would have a courier. It one of our most valuable paintings and once it got to Rome it was going to be put on truck and taken down to Naples but it was not going
to be escorted so we said no. Well, they had a fit. The director of the museum in Italy calling us. We had the Philadelphia Museum curator calling us and trying to dissuade us to let it go. It’s such an important painting and I just said no. You know, it was just too valuable to take a chance if it wasn’t going to be properly handled and escorted. All of that kind of think you have to look into. Most of the international registrar work to get paintings shipped and through customs and all that had to be down by the borrowing institution because we didn’t have a registrar that did that kind of work. So, they were very good about it. They would do the work for us. There was one painting that was escorted by curator by the National Gallery and she was very good and they made all the arrangements. And we had the shipper that would come up and we did with one painting have a big problem. This was being curated and escorted by curator by the National Gallery but what had happened was there shipper and packer had not put a protective lining over the painting and a piece of the frame fell off and it was wrapped but the piece of frame scratched the surface of the painting. So, they sent it to the best conservator in the country, which is Oberlin Painting Conservation. And you would never know, but it was — they had to take the painting out of the exhibition and he was being handled by the National Gallery but they just — it was the packer, it was fault of the packer. So, whether they ended up having to pay for the conversation I don’t know. They may have.

Meredith: Do you find that people in Philadelphia and suburbs know about the art gallery at La Salle? Or is it mostly La Salleins?
C. Wistar: They are more and more. But, I must say, it’s mostly people in the Philadelphia area, fairly close, that come down and see it. Word is getting out and through—you know we’re on the Internet. You go into La Salle Museum and that’s how a lot of people find out what we’re all about. You can see a lot. You know a lot of people when they find that Brother Daniel and I knew we were going to retire, and they we’re looking for a new curator and director. Those people never had seen a museum before but the applications just poured in and that was because they gained a lot, I think through the Internet. Seeing what was in the collection. Seeing what we are all about. The physical layout of it, the history of it. You get it all in the website. So, I would say, you know, we are certainly becoming nationally. Regionally, we’re known and people come down. Nationally, we’re listed in a lot of guidebooks and in various museum sources and internationally, I mean they’re finding out what we have. And if you are doing an exhibition in, let’s say on Nikos Spadero, you would have your researchers go into all the collections on the Internet. Our collection is on the Internet so they would find out that we have it and they would see where it’s been published and where it came from and all that. So, there’s a lot you can find out these days through the Internet.

Meredith: You have tours you can take? Or classes?

C. Wistar: Yes. Absolutely, what they have now is they have hired somebody that just does that. That’s their main job. I’ve forgotten her name but she is the one who does tours for the public. School tours, etc. And you could interview her, before we did it. And we did have this guide and we have an audio guide.
And the good thing about the audio guide I think is a lot of people do want a personal talk and a guide. But, we very often found out or I discovered that people really wouldn’t look at the art. They were listening to you or they were wandering around. And if you take the audio tour, you can listen and look at the same time. You don’t get distracted the way you do. So, we very often would push that and certainly, have special classes would be given a tour. If they are doing religious symbolism in painting or whatever, we would have special classes. We would have lots of classes that would visit. Very often, 60 or 70 a year. But also people from the outside take tours, you know, senior centers and adult education groups come in. People, docents from other museums. High schools, when we were running it, it was really geared and tape tour is geared towards high school and above. But they may doing things with elementary schools now. I don’t know.

Meredith: Talk about some history in Philadelphia, let’s see, the black women march in October of ‘97. Did we have anything special with that?

C. Wistar: What was that?

Meredith: The black women march in October of ‘97 that was in Philadelphia, did you have anything to help out with that and do black American and that kind of....

C. Wistar: No, I don’t — we would do things for black history month. Usually, every year we had an exhibition. But I don’t remember the march.

Meredith: Right, okay. If people were coming in, they would come by bus or car or whatever...
C. Wistar: Generally, if it was group they would come by bus. The bus driver would let them off and we’d notify security and they would go park and stay with the bus and when they were finished they’d bring the bus up.

Meredith: So, when Philadelphia had some problems with their trolleys and stuff like that, none of that really effected people coming in to see you?

C. Wistar: No. But I was there, we were a member of historic Germantown house association which was a consortium, actually also the Woodmere Museum was involved, and we tried to get together for publicity purposes mostly to advertised what we had in Germantown [UI] with Chestnut Hill. And then, they’d bring out groups and maybe, they’d go to two historic houses and come and see the collection at La Salle. So, that was group that would get together to support each other and publicity. Nowadays, you know, it’s very hard Meredith, because so many people are working and really museums were founded by people of independent means. The trustees were there and then, for years up until I would say the 1980s, they were run by women committees, the big museums. They still have it at the Philadelphia Museum, who would volunteer their time all during the week for fund raising purposes. You know, they’d give gala events. They would give tours. They would give all kinds of dinners and gatherings and it was all to raise money. Now, it is so hard to find volunteers to serve on these committees because everyone’s working. So, not only, they don’t have volunteers to fund raise. They also don’t have the people to come to museums. You go down to the Pennsylvania Academy in the middle of the week and maybe you’re the only person there. It’s awful.
The Philadelphia Museum does get people in, particularly, to see the special exhibitions. But you go into the permanent collection, and there’s hardly anyone there during the week. It’s not a good thing. And you can never replace, people have pictures on the Internet and they can be in books and all over like that, but nothing replaces seeing it first hand. You simply cannot. So, La Salle is really a unique place because it was built from nothing. We didn’t have anything the way a lot of university museums had— were started, with a good collection from alumni, gifts from alumni. We had to start from nothing and work up and I think it’s an optimum size. It’s very crowded in terms of finding facilities for proper storage and proper working space and office space and all that sort of thing. I think you’ll see that all the staff have gone way down the opposite end of the hall to two rooms that we acquired from the communications department.

Meredith: How do you do storage of the units that you are no longer exhibiting at the moment?

C. Wistar: That’s the problem, we don’t have enough facilities for storage. We do have — we got a grant to buy these big metal folding, they look like fences that come out on runners and you hang the painting through the holes in the wire. So there are screens that you pull out and that’s the proper way to do it for paintings. And so, that’s all the first room you come to in the museum. The prints and drawings were always kept in drawers because we have thousands of prints and drawings. They have now been taken out of the big case we kept them in the first room and all in storage in the back two rooms with the office.
I haven’t seen it yet. But it’s a constant problem because you really, the
mission of any museum is to protect and interpret an exhibit and collect the
works of art. But the conservation is a very important factor and if you don’t
have a proper place to store them, then it’s not good.

Meredith: Do you ever have any difficulties with paintings getting damaged by anybody
or there’s a leak in the roof?

C. Wistar: No, we were very lucky. But we had some very close calls. And we did have
a couple things, nothing that was really badly damaged. Actually the first
week I got there, the crew were getting ready to take everything down in the
gallery and put it in the storeroom and the storeroom had been emptied out
and in the storeroom was a file cabinet because they were doing some work in
this small storage closet that’s at the end of the museum, and they put this file
cabinet in this room and when they were lifting the painting off one of the
workers, by accident of course, backed it into the file cabinet. So it got
ripped. That happened the first day I got there and I thought, oh no! This is a
bad omen or what. And we had it conserved and you would hardly know
there had been problem. But beyond that, beyond the painting that went with
the National Gallery to Louisville, Kentucky. Those were the only two that
were badly damaged.

Luckily, we didn’t have any more damage. But you constantly have to work
at humidity control and La Salle really needs to work on that because we’re in
a basement of a building. We are not in a separate museum building but
humidity is very important because things in the atmosphere change a lot and
if it gets suddenly very wet and suddenly very cold, particularly the painting on wood will expand and contract and when they do that, when they move like that, they lift the paint, it starts chipping and buckling off the surface. Particularly, with all works of art you have to keep the proper environment and that means the proper temperature, the proper humidity, air circulation, all of that. So, we constantly worked at that. We had parts of the summer when half the museum has been dismantled whether air conditioning or the storage, humidifier or whatever. But you can’t borrow paintings unless you have these proper environmental conditions. And you have to keep records of all this.

Meredith: Right.

C. Wistar: So, the museum is not like a book when catalog a book, you cataloged it, you know you put the record on the Internet and that’s it. Paintings, no. You have to work with them all the time.

Meredith: Did you have a good restorer that would always come in? Or anybody that...

C. Wistar: We had many people over the ages. We knew ended up with a very good paint conservator who’s in Center City. So, it means you would have to get a packer, to take it and transport it down to the conservation. But, that’s just part of the game. You find out who the good shippers. Who handles the works of art? We would also call on this group who were wonderful to hang the bigger paintings because they had the equipment to hang large paintings. Get them centered, get them properly hung on wire. Things like that.

Meredith: Do you have any trouble with people trying to steal any of your paintings, prints, anything like that?
C. Wistar: Knock on wood, we never did while I was there. But, you know, you just constantly have to keep after the work-study students to make sure that they’re not sitting out there asleep or whatever. Whoever is doing the guarding, you do have to watch people come in. There is only one way of getting in and one way of getting out. And we don’t allow people to bring in big containers or book bags or anything like that.

C. Wistar: Smaller works of art are bolted to the ... so it’s not easy to do but we do have to guard it. And that’s why there should always be people to keep track of what’s going on in there. Particularly, in special exhibitions because you’re dealing with often objects that don’t belong to you that you have to insure. You just can’t leave people in a room because you never know. Things do have to be guarded but by keeping the main galleries so people would go in and out we never had any attempt at a theft.

Meredith: There was an exhibit in Doylestown a few years ago and they found out it was an inside job but, you know, all of sudden a few pieces started to walk out and I just remember reading the article how devastated the people were that had lent their items to the museum and they were stolen right [UI phrase].

C. Wistar: It’s horrible. I mean you just have to be so careful and you know, you just never know when you’re lending to another place you just have to look into everything because even though they have a burglar alarm system or something like that if somebody’s not there and they could break in you hear people now breaking into places and getting out with whatever before the alarm goes off. By the time the police get there, they’re gone. They just clip
a wire and they’re out of there. See, all that kind of thing, you have to take into consideration the total environment of where you’re lending something and take no risks. Tried to see that it’s guarded as much as possible. I mean things do happen but, luckily, we never had. We had one thing that we misplaced and never found. I know it’s down there somewhere it was a print. No, I don’t think. We use to hang big paintings out in the hall. So they weren’t under alarm but to get something that big out of that building would be pretty hard.

Meredith: Definitely. So when you knew you were going to retire how was it picking a successor?

C. Wistar: It took quite some time. Because you decide what you want, what the qualifications are and then, the applications start coming in and then, you have to wheedled it down. So, it took, I would say, over a year. Then you have to interview the people. And as I said, so many people that applied had never seen the museum before but they had found out a lot through other people that had seen it but mostly, through the internet.

C. Wistar: You can ask Madeline about that.

C. Wistar: Because I don’t think she had seen it before. She was at Princeton. So, then you just we had a committee and start interviewing and interviewing people. Turning down a lot of people. It’s very hard to get a job in a museum these days.

Meredith: And is the museum open all year? Or is closed during...
C. Wistar: All year accept in August. We, traditionally, accept when I was there it seemed to me we were always even open in August. Depending, but sometimes it’s hard to get students to guard it. So, I think they’re still dependent on student help to do most of the guarding. Are you allergic to cats?

Meredith: No, I’m not.

C. Wistar: Good. Mooch, come here sweetie. This is Mooch after the [UI] cartoon. She wants to play.

Meredith: Did you give her words of wisdom when you retired?

C. Wistar: What?

Meredith: Did you give the new curator words of wisdom?

C. Wistar: Yeah. She was there. I think Madeline was there two years, maybe not quite while I was there.

Meredith: Did you give here some hints? Tell her certain people to see or talk to?

C. Wistar: Oh, yeah. For two years, yeah. Show her where everything was. You know, all the— there’s just so many aspects to. When we were there we were handling the whole membership group. I think now they’re getting some help with the development office with that. But that’s another whole aspect. Another huge aspect is all the budgets. While was there, we had as many as 9 to 13 separate budgets running the place. That’s counting the separate endowment funds and all the grant funds and the art angle funds and the regular museum funds. And any gift, the funds that we had. So, it was a lot.
Meredith: If someone saw you on the street and said, should I go check La Salle Museum. What would you tell them? Go and is there certain things they should see?

C. Wistar: I say go and absorb all and get a wonderful introduction and see a very good collection of American and European works of art from the 1500s or late 1400s, right up to the current times. And you get it on a small basis and it’s intimate and you can look at it and enjoy it. No crowds of people and it’s just great as a student. Many of which have not had that much exposure coming in as freshman. If you start your freshman year and get interested and start looking, then by the end of 4 years and I saw this happen to many students when I was there, that would come away with a wonderful interest and sort of discriminating eye. They would guide themselves and learn for themselves and get interested in going to other museums. So it was great introduction and a bridge to the bigger collections. I think you could go to the big art museums, you almost get overwhelmed.

Meredith: Yes. Those you need to do for several days in a row. You know, if you can. For La Salle...

C. Wistar: And there’s just so much, that you, sort of your eye just kind of scans. If you take classes and go down on your own and get involved in the museum. You know, it’s — you can come away with a lifetime care and interest in appreciation of art history and collecting.

Meredith: So, are you still in touch with everyone? Or do you still do any kind of like volunteer work with them or?
C. Wistar: Volunteer work? No. I am doing things that are totally different now.

Meredith: Oh, cool.

C. Wistar: You know what, Brother Daniel and I keep up and see what’s going on and I haven’t been back since for 4 or 5 months. But I plan to come down soon. I see there’s an exhibition coming up that the assistant curator is doing of 19th century prints about the middle class/working class, called bourgeois, the title of it is. I’d like to see that and see what they’re doing. It’s a great little collection for those that just want to get a small amount of good quality tracing of art from the last 1400s up to the present day. Then if you want to see prints and drawings, you can request to make a special appointment and those can be taken out. Because all the thousands of works of art on paper, we just don’t have room to show them and also, it’s not good for them to be exposed to light indefinitely. But one problem with La Salle, I have to say, is people got upset about going down there because they know it’s a tough area. And until they feel comfortable about knowing exactly where to go, where to park, that they’ll be safe, and they can get out of their car and go into the museum, they’re not going down there. And it’s something that, you know, just was — I was concerned about the whole time I was there. Because so many people from [UI], would say, oh we’re coming down, we’re coming down and they never did. The reason was, they were scared to go down. Some would, and they didn’t let it bother them. Go right down to the street, now with the construction it’s maybe harder to get around. But we tell them always to come in the afternoon, and we would often, if they would request on
campus parking by them something would free up and they could park there. And all our events we had on-campus parking, it was usually in the evening after the students had gone. So if you go down there in the middle of the day, middle of the week, it is hard to find a place to park.

Meredith: Yes, like I say I take the night class. I have a G.P.S. system and something happened with it and I’m in West Oak Lane. Definitely, scared. You know, not a nice area.

C. Wistar: I’ll tell you what they need and it may be very hard to acquire because parking is always a problem. But they need a designated visitor parking, so that they could put this on the Internet. They could tell the people exactly where to go. I think if they would have that it would help. It would really, really, help people coming in. Because we have free admission. It’s all-free. You don’t have to pay anything. You do, we always request a donation accepted. If a group came in, they were always very good about giving us a check. But it was no designated amount.

Meredith: Right. Anything else problematic that you see that could be fixed in the future to help La Salle out?

C. Wistar: Well, those are the two main problems I think. Visitor parking and facilities. It’s just very crowded because they have to keep the hallway open for a fire corridor. There’s just no place to go. Because they never excavated beyond the walls down there on the hall. Accepting from the art museum end all the way to the other end to. So, we would expand. It’s just a constant problem. I always had visions of the English Department going somewhere else so you
could break through the stairway and have two floors instead of. That would be the only conceivable thing. Now, when I was there we had this wonderful architect who knew a lot about museums and art. And he was so taken with this collection that he drew up plans for a new museum. We have those plans still and he conceived of putting out on the hockey field with a road connecting South Campus with the main campus and it’s a wonderful two-floor.

Meredith: Is it something I can see when I go to the museum?

C. Wistar: It’s there. You ask Madeline for it. It’s full plans and his name is David Trowe. He has his own firm in Center City and he’s just masterful at combining classical with the modern and he helped design with the museum in Fort Worth. The Kimmel Museum, it’s a barrel-vaulted. I think there are 4 barrel-vaulted areas just with natural light and artificial light coming in. Just beautiful.

Meredith: Wow. Well, thank you for this interview. I really appreciate it.

C. Wistar: Do you have any other questions? Anything?

Meredith: Just the basics, you know I’m waiting to see Brother Joe next week and he said he’s got some articles for me. So, I was thinking maybe we could set another appointment.

C. Wistar: We had wonderful publicity.

Meredith: Yes, that’s what he said.

C. Wistar: Some major, major articles that come out in the Sunday paper.
Meredith: Yeah, so if I get a chance to meet with him next week then in another week or two, we could get together.

C. Wistar: You could read the introduction here.

Meredith: Yes, definitely.

C. Wistar: You will get a pretty good sense of this unique little museum.

C. Wistar: We also have a lot of sub-collections. Like I said, it’s basically European and American from the late 1400s up to the present time. But we also have the Dunlevy collection of rare bibles, which are now over in the library though. They no longer have that. It’s in the special collections. We have a collection of Japanese 19th century prints. We have a collection of Indian miniature going all the way back to the 1700s, which were given to us, again, by a collector of Indian miniatures who we cultivated. We have some African art, masks and objects. So we do have these special collections that you don’t see in some pre-Columbian art objects. And ancient, I forgot about them, this wonderful couple who were in Greece. He was in the diplomatic service and he started collecting ancient art when they were selling a lot of Greek objects after the war they were destitute and they were all looked at by the British School of Classical Studies and cataloged. They gave us their collection. And he was, actually she was cousin of one of the teachers in the political science, that’s how the connection was made. And then, I went down to Maryland to see them, they were at a retirement center and the works of art were in storage. Wonderful Greek and Roman classical.

Meredith: Wonderful. Like I said you answered all my questions I had today.
C. Wistar: Well, if you have any other questions just call me.

Meredith: That would be great.

[End of recording]