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Interview with J. Paul Getty

by Milton Gendel

The interview took place on May 29th at La Posta Vecchia, an old post house recently restored by Jean Paul Getty, which stands by the sea adjoining the great 15th-century Odescalchi castle at Palo, about 37 kms northwest of Rome.

AN: When did you begin to think of yourself as a collector?

JPG: About five years after buying my first picture. It was in Berlin in 1932 that I bought a Van Goyen, at the Goldschmid-Rothschild auction, for about \$1000, and by '37 or '38 I had acquired so many things that I guess I began to think I had a collection.

AN: You were forty at the time of the auction and the very rich have a choice of buying horses, yachts, works of art...

JPG: Well, I did have yachts. I gave up my last one around 1935.

AN: Then would you describe buying the Van Goyen as another millionaire's activity?

JPG: I'd say that the popularity of objects declining in value is not very great. Art prices had been going down and in the end in fact stayed low over a twenty-year period. This brought paintings within my reach.

AN: But if you had a lot of money, weren't they already within your reach?

JPG: That was the time of the big dollar, the great big dollar. The cartwheel dollar you might say, rather than today's minidollar. And I had all my capital tied up in my business. You need a lot of capital in the oil business...

AN: Besides paintings you have collected a large number of art works.

JPG: Yes, I have a great interest in Greco-Roman art, then tapestries, 18th-century French furniture, Savonnerie carpets and 16th-century Persian carpets. Besides Renaissance paintings I've also bought a few 18th-century and Impressionist works. There are many collectors of Impressionist paintings but not so many of Persian carpets, so the prices of the carpets have remained relatively low.

AN: The title of your book, *The Joys of Collecting*, suggests a romantic and euphoric approach to the acquisition of these works.

JPG: Yes, but there are limitations. By the '50's there was more interest in these things and prices went up.

AN: And the excitement of making a find went down?

JPG: Yes, I suppose so.

AN: What was your most memorable experience in collecting?

JPG: The most exciting moment I can remember was on June 20, 1938, when the Raphael came up at Sotheby's. It's known as the Loreto Madonna and is on loan now to the National Gallery in London. In the catalogue it was listed as a copy and I got it for forty pounds, or about two hundred dollars at the time.

AN: Were you following a hunch or did you have good advice as well?

JPG: I've always had close relations with the experts... Berenson, Duveen, Julius Held and many others... Zeri has been very helpful. Alfred Scharf expertized the Raphael. I had it cleaned in 1963 and today it's insured for more than ten thousand times the price I paid for it.

AN: To what extent, would you say, is your collection an image of your personality?

JPG: Only in that a collection generally reflects an owner's taste.

AN: Have you always thought of it as involving a responsibility to the public?

JPG: I began to think of it that way some time before I founded the museum at Malibu in 1954. Malibu is a section of Los Angeles. The new building is a copy of the *Villa dei Papiri* at Pompei... because the plans could be traced and it is about the right size.

AN: And you think of it as a public trust?

JPG: Yes, in the sense that the museum is open to the public. You don't want to be a dog in the manger with these things. To take an extreme example - Rembrandt's *Night Watch* - you couldn't imagine that in a private house, where the public had no opportunity to see it.

AN: There is an opposite attitude, now current, of treating paintings as a private trust. Some new mutual funds based on pictures held in vaults like securities.

JPG: Well, I suppose there are worse investments than good pictures.

AN: Are all your art works eventually going to the J. Paul Getty Museum?

JPG: Most of them. I've sent 21 pictures from Sutton Place to Los Angeles.

AN: What made you settle in England?

JPG: It was rather unexpected. For business reasons it was necessary to have a place, an office, somewhere around Western Europe. In France, Switzerland or England. I always preferred France, but was talked into buying Sutton Place against my better judgment.

AN: Does that often happen?

JPG: Yes. I like England and it was considered that the English were nice people, but there was more fun in being in Paris. London is more like Boston, and you'd never find many people going to Boston to have a good time.

AN: How many houses do you have in all?

JPG: Let me see. I own two houses in Naples... Yes, they're fully equipped. Small houses, by the sea. Then I own this one and my old home in Malibu... No, Sutton Place does not belong to me; it's owned by a corporation.

AN: You-haven't spent much time in Italy in this splendid house, La Posta Vecchia.

JPG: I always mean to come to Palo more often; I like it here not very far from Rome, by the sea... I've also a pool in the loggia... Palo is interesting historically: there was an Etruscan port nearby and this house is built over the ruins of a Roman villa. You may have seen some of the lower courses in *opus reticulatum* out front in the garden, and in the basement I've made a small museum of the mosaics and artefacts – lamps, vases. Dishes – we found under the house. But unfortunately since I restored this old post house, starting five years ago, I've spent about a month here all told.

AN: Then the Posta Vecchia has no justification for your business?

JPG: I've always liked Italy very much.

AN: Which countries in your opinion have the most enlightened policy concerning taxation and the arts?

JPG: American museums are favored by the tax system, but the English and French museums are not so short in art works. The English encourage the transmission of works of art from one generation to the next, as you can keep them without being taxed.

AN: None of your children are interested enough in art for you to have thought of leaving your collection to them?

JPG: It's an arduous proposition leaving children works of art. With an inheritance tax of 80% I doubt that they would thank you for such an expensive legacy.

AN: Then your museum is run by a foundation.

JPG: Yes, a private foundation that I've subsidized, and I've given the art works.

AN: What's your view of the new museology and the museum as a popular civic center?

JPG: That has its place in a museum of modern things. But for traditional museums - pop music, rock music and so forth - no.

AN: You have no interest in acquiring contemporary art works?

JPG: The question has been put to me often, and as I've asked before, "Why don't the avid collectors of contemporary art buy Titians or Tintoretto?" I doubt whether Pop or Op or the most recent kinds of art would go very well with a 16th-century tapestry or a Gainsborough but "digressions" in the collection like Sorolla y Bastida... Gauguin... Pissarro don't clash with the Rembrandt, the Rubens, the Lotto, the Gentileschi, the Batoni and other old masters.

AN: According to Who's Who, you have written or collaborated in writing seven books. Most of them are about collecting and your life, but the first was called a *History of Oil Business*. The title implies an interest in history as well as in the oil business.

JPG: Yes, I've always been interested in history.

AN: Was it an interest you acquired at Oxford, when you went to study there in 1912?

JPG: Yes, but history is not enough. In my opinion, an individual without a love for the arts is not completely civilized.

AN: Do you mind being photographed with some favourite possession, for Art News?

JPG: Not at all. Let's go out in the hall to the porphyry basin, if that's the sort of thing you'd like. I bought it in Florence, from a dealer. Porphyry was imported from Egypt for the use of the Roman emperors. Red was the imperial color. I'm told that there are only a few of these, at least of the size, in existence.

AN: There are good reflections in and around the basin. Now could we have another picture, perhaps with one of those 17th-century Roman busts?

JPG: Oh they're not good enough. I haven't put many things in here. Just few pictures, some marbles, tapestries and Italian furniture.

AN: What sort of things would you like to add to your collection in general now?

JPG: Some more Greco-Roman objects, though I scarcely expect to have the good fortune of finding another Lansdowne Hercules or more of the Elgin marbles. As for paintings, they have become very scarce and expensive. It's all changed. Buying pictures used to be a sign that a man had more money than he knew how to deal with, or was crazy. Throwing money away. That reminds me of a story about J. Pierpont Morgan, who was bringing a suit over a set of teacups. The lawyer pleading his case addressed the court, saying, "Your Honor, put yourself in my client's place..." Before he could get any further the judge broke in and said, "How can I put myself in the place of anyone who would pay \$20,000 for a set of teacups?" Incidentally, on the subject of buying more things for the collection, please put in your magazine that all purchases for the museum are handled by Burton Frederickson, so there's no point in writing to me.