

INSTITUTE FOR ADVANCED STUDY  
PRINCETON, NEW JERSEY 08540

MARGARET L. MEISS

Oral History Project

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PREFACE

The following manuscript contains the edited transcript of an interview with Margaret L. Meiss. This interview was held over several hours on March 21, 1991, and was recorded at her home. It was conducted by Patricia H. Labalme.

Margaret Meiss was born in 1906 and grew up in New York City. She graduated from Vassar College in 1926 and she and Millard L. Meiss married in 1928. After receiving an Ed. D. in 1941 from Teachers College, Columbia University, Dr. Meiss was consultant psychologist for the Ethical Culture Schools until she and her husband moved to Cambridge in 1953. While working in New York City, Dr. Meiss trained under experienced child analysts and wrote "The Oedipal Problem of a Fatherless Child" published in The Psychoanalytic Study of the Child, Vol VII, 1952.

Following Professor Meiss' appointment to the Institute for Advanced Study in 1958, Margaret Meiss was affiliated with the Mercer County Child Guidance Center. She remained active in the Clinic and in her private practice with both adults and children until her retirement in 1980.

The reader should be aware that the following is a transcript of the spoken word, that it attempts to preserve the spontaneity and informality of the original tape, and that the views expressed therein are those of the narrator.

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*Margaret L. Meiss.*

*Margaret L. Meiss*

SIGNATURE OF NARRATOR

*Patricia H. Labalme*

SIGNATURE OF INTERVIEWER

Date:

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*Tape and transcript of an interview on March 21, 1991.*

INTERVIEW WITH MARGARET MEISS

Date: March 21, 1991  
Place: Princeton, New Jersey  
Interviewer: Patricia H. Labalme

CASSETTE ONE, SIDE ONE:

LABALME: Ok, Miggie. Now we can begin to talk and this is about Millard and the Institute, you and the Institute, and I thought we could begin a bit with his background about which I have just some bare bones. That he was born in Cincinnati.

MEISS: In 1904.

LABALME: Right. And how did he become to be a historian of art thereafter?

MEISS: Well, I think primarily through some of the professors he had in the University here in Princeton. Men whom he respected very much and became very fond of, and they opened up the whole area for him, and they thought he was very good and that was very important because he did want to go on to graduate school and his father who was not very much in favor of that and insisted that he do something else first.

LABALME: What kind of family did he come from? What did his father do?

MEISS: I think he was an importer of laces and things of that sort from Europe. There was a very close connection with things European, I don't know exactly where but around Strasbourg.

LABALME: And when he came to University here, I know he studied with Rens Lee who taught him -- the records say, English. Was that possible?

MEISS: Yes, yes. Rens taught English in those days.

LABALME: I didn't know that. Was Charles Morey at the University then?

MEISS: Yes, he was, also.

LABALME: So those were two of the professors that he had.

MEISS: Well, yes. But I would say that the one that was most important was George Rowley. Professor Rowley was a remarkable man, deeply interested in music and devoted to his study of early 13th century Italian and particularly Sieneese painting. It is interesting, now, to remember that he later became primarily interested in Chinese Art, and became an authority on it. Professor Rowley was one of those rare professors who was equally interested in his work and that of his students. He held meetings of small groups in the evenings on subjects of interest to himself and his students.

LABALME: OK, so Millard graduated in 1928 from the University.

MEISS: 1926.

LABALME: 1926. Well then I have that wrong.

MEISS: I know that because we graduated from two places at the same time.

LABALME: Aha. But you didn't know him in those days.

MEISS: Oh yes, I did.

LABALME: You did?

MEISS: Oh, yes.

LABALME: Oh, tell me about that.

MEISS: Well, we met, I guess, in my sophomore year or maybe even in my freshman year.

LABALME: And you were where?

MEISS: I was at Vassar.

LABALME: You were at Vassar.

MEISS: And I had a very good friend who was also at Vassar and also had

been born in Cincinnati. And she invited me out to come and visit in Cincinnati in June, after the end of the term. Not the final term, but one of the terms.

LABALME: Yes.

MEISS: And I sort of fell in love with Cincinnati and they with me. I don't think I'd ever had such a success anywhere before.

LABALME: Terrific.

MEISS: And I was very gratified. And I met so many people that I really came to like very much and who have remained friends up until now.

LABALME: Yes. Among them Millard Meiss ---

MEISS: Yes. That has its funny side. Because he fell for me right away and I for him. And it happened one night here after the boat races on the Carnegie Lake in the spring.

LABALME: I see.

MEISS: One of the races. And then in the evening, everybody went someplace in town --

LABALME: Yes.

MEISS: And went on partying for the rest of the time and all I can say is that I had managed to change partners by that time, about 8 pm, and I had Millard, and I never gave him up again, and he never gave me up again. And this is really very private, the mother of my best friend was shocked at my behavior --

LABALME: Oh, dear.

MEISS: And in the fall when we were all back again for the next term, she had me come in to see her and she read me the riot act about all of this stealing, but I wasn't too upset. She wasn't my mother, and

she wasn't close enough to make any real trouble for me, and I felt sorry for my best friend having to deal with such a person.

LABALME: Yes. So then you married at what point?

MEISS: 1928.

LABALME: 1928. So two years after graduation. He went on to--

MEISS: He went to Harvard.

LABALME: He went to Harvard --

MEISS: And was not happy with it because he had a taste of what went on at New York University through another very good friend of mine who was at New York University. And he thought that what they had to offer was much more along the lines he was interested in and so although he did well at Harvard, and was very much encouraged by Professor Sachs, he did transfer to New York University.

LABALME: To NYU.

MEISS: To NYU. One of his most important courses there was given by Professor Morey of Princeton.

LABALME: That's interesting. It was also Offner he worked with, right? Richard Offner at NYU.

MEISS: Yes. He began work with Offner at once and remained very close to Richard Offner for three years during the time he worked on his thesis and during the time he was studying Italian painting in the museums in Europe, especially in Italy.

LABALME: Well, then I have him getting his MA in 1931 and his PhD in 1933 and then he started teaching at Columbia.

MEISS: Yes.

LABALME: And you were living in New York then, for that stretch?

MEISS: Yes, we were.

LABALME: And then he came down first to the Institute in the spring term of 1939-40?

MEISS: Right. I think that's right. I have a book that might tell me.

LABALME: Yes.

MEISS: I brought it along just in case.

LABALME: Oh, good for you. A diary?

MEISS: Well, it's a book in which I always wrote something every year so that I'd know what happened and what everybody in the family did.

LABALME: Right.

MEISS: So now what year?

LABALME: 1940. It would be the beginning of 1940 I should think.

MEISS: Well, I have very funny things in here, but they're very close to the heart.

LABALME: I have that it was the spring term of 1939-40, that you came down here.

MEISS: We had an ice storm in 1940, I can tell you that.

LABALME: OK.

MEISS: And we had a drought in 1944.

LABALME: You're just like the medieval chroniclers! You put the important things down.

MEISS: Yes, that's right. And we had a hurricane in 1944.

LABALME: You lived then at 44 Nassau Street, that first time.

MEISS: Just for a term, yes. Millard lived here and I and the children came down on weekends from New York City.

LABALME: Do you remember what the Institute was like then? I think Fuld Hall

existed, would have just opened.

MEISS: I think there was such a thing.

LABALME: Yes.

MEISS: It didn't make much effect on us, I don't think.

LABALME: Because most of his work was with the University people, maybe?

MEISS: Right.

LABALME: Do you remember anything about Frank Aydelotte who was Director at that time?

MEISS: No, not much, you know, receptions, shaking hands, that kind of thing.

LABALME: Right.

MEISS: But that's about all. I was much more interested in the weather because I was a great, great agriculturalist and what I really have in here is all the amounts of things that I canned in a single year.

LABALME: How extraordinary.

MEISS: Yep. We had an enormous vegetable garden during the war years at our country home in Stamford, Connecticut.

LABALME: You had your own vegetable garden?

MEISS: Right, right. And when we removed the leaves, and when we planted the seeds and all of that is in here [the Diary]. We had a field of blueberries, lots of asparagus, squash, strawberries, cucumbers, corn, lima beans, and Japanese beetles.

LABALME: That's a marvelous record.

MEISS: Yes. When you put the first spray on the fruit trees, whether or not the baby's breath came up, all of that's in here.

LABALME: But when you came down here, had you started your own professional

pursuits? If you married in 1928, you would have been married just about twelve years.

MEISS: In the 1940s, I was the guidance counselor for the Ethical Culture schools in New York City and held that position until we moved to Cambridge in 1953.

LABALME: He went to Harvard then.

MEISS: Yes, he went to Harvard. For a stretch.

LABALME: For a stretch. Before he came here. Yes.

MEISS: We loved it.

LABALME: They made it very flexible. Part of the deal was that he could travel.

MEISS: Yes.

LABALME: Every second semester.

MEISS: He was at Harvard twice. First as a graduate student and then as a Professor. And then the second time when he came, they made all these arrangements.

LABALME: Right.

MEISS: To try to keep him there.

LABALME: But why didn't he stay at Harvard? What was it that he preferred about Princeton, that you both preferred?

MEISS: Oh, it wasn't preferring Princeton. It was really preferring the academic side of things that brought us down here. And we did not come here to live until the appointment to the Institute.

LABALME: I see.

MEISS: Which took us out of Harvard for good.

LABALME: Right. And what do you remember about the early experiences at the

Institute, when you first came?

**MEISS:** My personal one was that I didn't want to be here.

**LABALME:** Why was that?

**MEISS:** Because there wasn't any company for me. It was a very small group of people, some whom were just wonderful to us. I mean the Kennans were marvelous, and my only companion really was Dora Panofsky who was perhaps 30 years older than I and rather frail already and she just wasn't the kind of person you'd say, come on, let's go take a walk in the woods, and I was very, very fond of her and we were together daily, and her house was mine. Mine was not hers because she couldn't get around much herself whereas I was a sort of a "free cannon" as they would call it nowadays. I was able to do things here and there, and so the sense of the Institute as I would think of it now was very narrow. I was very troubled by this question of people and wanting companionship desperately and thinking that this was not a place for me and how on earth was I ever going to find a niche anywhere down here, and finally the thing to do was to go back to work. And so I did and from then on I was happy.

**LABALME:** And you had worked in Cambridge.

**MEISS:** Oh, my heavens, yes. I worked in New York for years. I worked from the age of about maybe 27 or so on.

LABALME: Yes. At psychology? You took courses?

MEISS: I took courses and then I was the consultant psychologist for the school system of Ethical Culture.

LABALME: Ethical culture! Wonderful place, yes.

MEISS: Wonderful. Prior to being a consultant to the schools I completed my Ed. D. at Columbia University and worked with Caroline Zachry. Later I became a child analyst working with Marianne Kris and Margaret Mahler.

LABALME: Very interesting. And your work was with students mostly?

MEISS: No, with teachers.

LABALME: With faculty.

MEISS: Yes.

LABALME: There was a clipping in the archives, they'd misplaced it, but the title was something about "learning disorders is her specialty."

MEISS: That's right.

LABALME: This was from an interview with you. And that's what your specialty was?

MEISS: Somewhat. I observed children in the classroom and helped teachers understand how to better approach a particular child. I was also used for consultation with parents, especially when they demanded more from a child than the child could cope with.

LABALME: So then when you moved to Harvard, had you done that there too?

MEISS: Yes, I did.

LABALME: On your own or with an organization?

MEISS: Well, I worked for the hospital. I was connected there.

LABALME: Massachusetts General?

MEISS: No, Beth Israel.

LABALME: Beth Israel. I see. And then when you came to Princeton you eventually established your own practice?

MEISS: Well, I first joined The Mercer County Child Guidance Center where I happily had two excellent colleagues, Hans Priester and Frances Seidman, and Nat Boonin our director.

LABALME: Are there people in your diary, Institute people, you have described and could read out excerpts about?

MEISS: No, no. They were people in my field.

LABALME: I see.

MEISS: I had plenty of people in my own field and plenty of companionship that way.

LABALME: Good. And how did you work it out with Millard having to travel for his work and for your own work?

MEISS: I was able to get off in summers because some of the kids were out of the schools, so that I was usually free in the summer and we didn't travel very much. Millard had a very serious approach to everything. It didn't bother us, but it was just always there. But it could be toted up, the bottom line.

LABALME: You mean in terms of his work, or his commitments?

MEISS: Absolutely. And so we would go to Europe and we would seldom stay over more than five or six weeks. Because he didn't believe in going over to write in Europe which a lot of people had done and he thought it was totally a waste of time. You should go and look.

LABALME: Yes.

MEISS: You had no right to be over there unless that was what you were

doing.

LABALME: Yes.

MEISS: And so we did it that way. And we would go over because we could get away early, because term ended here perhaps sometime in early May or April sometimes, and we'd get over to Europe and have our 8 weeks there and get back here for the summer in our own house where he could work happily in his own room, everything of his own, and I could go back to work.

LABALME: Did he do most of his work at home, in his study?

MEISS: Yes. A lot during the evenings.

LABALME: Oh, really. He worked at night. He was a night person.

MEISS: Yep.

LABALME: And did he write? Did he use a typewriter?

MEISS: Oh, he loved to write.

LABALME: Yes.

MEISS: He liked good pencils and good ink.

LABALME: Yes. Yes.

MEISS: He was very pernickety about the tools he had.

LABALME: And then he had a secretary who would --

MEISS: Oh, who was marvelous, yes.

LABALME: Who was that?

MEISS: I still --

LABALME: I have one name, Johanna Cornelisson.

MEISS: Cornelisson. Yes.

LABALME: And she was with him a long time?

MEISS: Yes. Yes. I guess close to 13 years, because I know I was there

for the birth of her child.

LABALME: Oh, yes.

MEISS: And he was old enough to come and see me one summer. She was a wonderful -- she was and is a wonderful person. And she was an ideal secretary.

LABALME: Because she --

MEISS: Well, she just put herself into everything.

LABALME: Right.

MEISS: And loved doing it.

LABALME: And she knew the languages?

MEISS: Oh, my, yes.

LABALME: Yes. She was Dutch?

MEISS: Yes. Straight Dutch.

LABALME: So that was very convenient. And what about Millard's connection with his colleagues? How did that go?

MEISS: Oh, that went very well. We absolutely burst out and changed everything. We agreed together that this business of separate little cells here and there around was no good, and we never gave a party that didn't cover both mathematicians and physicists and some art historians.

LABALME: Good. Yes. And I'm sure people responded.

MEISS: Loved it. They really loved it. And I enjoyed giving those parties. They were just sort of rough things but they were good and we just would not allow ourselves to side with one group versus another.

LABALME: But was that the quality of life here before, that everyone was

isolated by discipline or just by themselves?

MEISS: Well, they had the privilege of being uniquely by themselves and actually the University in those days was also very much in cellular, you might call it, arrangements and, for instance, it was well known that you could not be in the University and in the Art Department unless you were part of the luncheon group.

LABALME: Unless you were --?

MEISS: Wanted for the lunch.

LABALME: Wanted for the lunch. What does that mean?

MEISS: Well, once a week they had lunch together.

LABALME: Oh, I see. And you had to show up?

MEISS: You had to show up and you had to be the kind of person that would do nicely at lunch.

LABALME: I see. What did that mean, do nicely at lunch? Being a gentleman, making chit chat? Could you talk shop?

MEISS: It was pretty much limited to, I think, gossip.

LABALME: Gossip. Yes. At the University? In the Art History department?

MEISS: Yes.

LABALME: I see.

MEISS: This is filthy what I'm telling you, but it's true.

LABALME: Well, I think it's very interesting. It really is. I had no idea.

MEISS: No. That's what Rens Lee did.

LABALME: Yes.

MEISS: And his wife was a bit difficult, too.

LABALME: Now did she go, did wives go to the lunch?

MEISS: Oh no, no. But they gave the parties.

LABALME: I see. And so you were expected to be the sort of domestic counterpart of this?

MEISS: Sure.

LABALME: How did they view your professional life?

MEISS: Oh, they just avoided the thought.

[laughter]

LABALME: Isn't that amazing?

MEISS: Amazing. I think they thought that I might know something that I shouldn't know.

LABALME: Probably you did.

MEISS: Yes.

LABALME: No doubt. What about other colleagues at the University in other fields, did you get to know people?

MEISS: Yes, we did. Because we cared about it. It was what we wanted.

LABALME: It's interesting, in the archives there's a place where Millard, this is 1961, raises the question of bringing Douglas Bush who was an English renaissance person, and Marjorie Nicholson who I think was literature and science, here, and does that argue a kind of breadth of interest?

MEISS: Yes, that's why he brought Marjorie Nick in and other people and tried to keep things simmering a bit.

LABALME: Right. He was interested in broadening the disciplines at the Institute?

MEISS: Yes.

LABALME: What about his relationship with Robert Oppenheimer, your relationship with Robert Oppenheimer?

MEISS: Well, I probably stammered. No, but he was very nice and he was really very dear to us.

LABALME: Yes.

MEISS: Yes. My family knew his. And --

LABALME: This is not for anybody else.

MEISS: Kitty didn't like that.

LABALME: Why not?

MEISS: Because it was somebody he might talk to and in fact he suggested that she invite me and she sure got sick the next morning.

LABALME: Really? You mean, invite you by yourself for a lunch or something like that?

MEISS: Yes. And I was present when he suggested it.

LABALME: She just didn't want to? Because she was possessive? Why?

MEISS: Well, she had made an agreement with him. If they came here, if he took this position, it was in no way to interfere with the way she wanted to live. And he told her, he told me that, and she told me that.

LABALME: And how did she want to live?

MEISS: With a few hangers-on is the only way I could express it, and mostly they drank.

LABALME: Right. Lady cronies.

MEISS: Right.

LABALME: And it was luncheons with plenty of cocktails and that sort of thing?

MEISS: And if they gave a party, she and Robert would go and sit in the kitchen.

LABALME: During the party?

MEISS: Yes. Frequently.

LABALME: He too?

MEISS: Yes.

LABALME: Because she pushed him or because he preferred the kitchen?

MEISS: No, I think she insisted.

LABALME: To have their own drinks there?

MEISS: Yes.

LABALME: I had the impression that he was quite gregarious.

MEISS: No. He was not.

LABALME: Although he was a good host, I've been told.

MEISS: Yes. But at quite a distance. I think he very seldom opened up any gates, really.

LABALME: Right. But he liked Millard.

MEISS: Yes, he did.

LABALME: You know, when Millard accepted he sent a telegram that's in the file with one word, "Hosanna."

MEISS: Oh, really?

LABALME: So one has a sense that he was eager to have him come.

MEISS: Yes, yes. I think he was. And he was trying, really trying, as far as I can remember the first meeting we all four had, he was trying so hard to make her find something with me. So that he said this right out in front of the rest of us, there were just the two sets of us, "Wouldn't it be nice, Kitty, if you had Miggy for lunch on Monday?"

LABALME: Yes. Nice to whom?

MEISS: I don't know. I was very naive, I never thought she was going to cancel it the next morning but of course she did. She just wasn't well and then I was told that was just sort of because she's had too much to drink the night before or whatever, she just doesn't want to. And she wouldn't have wanted me to get closer into anything of theirs. So that was that. She brought a book along to our first meeting.

LABALME: A book to read?

MEISS: Yes.

LABALME: You mean, she sat there and she read?

MEISS: She turned the pages.

LABALME: She turned the pages while Robert talked to the two of you?

MEISS: Yes. So it was never very successful.

LABALME: No, I should think not.

MEISS: And it was a book that some friend of hers had some relationship to, and so she was very excited about it and this copy had been sent to her. She wanted us to know that she really was up on this and the other things.

LABALME: Yes. So her life was not terribly successful here?

MEISS: Oh, no. I don't think it was successful for her. She was a most unhappy woman. She couldn't find a place for herself. It was really quite sad, that whole family.

LABALME: And how did he handle the whole thing?

MEISS: Tried to ignore it, I would say. He was well above it. And he had his things to do, and he was very open in some ways, I mean for instance I can remember him saying to me, well, you know, if I

didn't get through all the work I had to do for this Institute in 2½ hours in a day, I wouldn't be here. In other words, he didn't particularly want to do administrative work.

LABALME: So he ran the Institute for 2½ hours and then what did he do?

MEISS: He'd go and work in some office.

LABALME: So he'd go and work for himself and his own interests.

MEISS: And I think he worked very well probably with the scientists.

LABALME: Right.

MEISS: Kept them on their toes. They had many meetings regularly on the first floor on the left hand side.

LABALME: And what was your impression of how the Institute worked in his tenure?

MEISS: I wouldn't have had any sense for that.

LABALME: Things went along?

MEISS: Yes.

LABALME: And what about his own --

MEISS: I knew that there was a fracas in the faculty about it, but I wouldn't know about it.

LABALME: Did Millard come home with these problems?

MEISS: Millard spent his life on that aspect of the Institute and trying very hard to keep some lines open between different people.

LABALME: Right.

MEISS: And he was unafraid. I don't think he cared a hoot whether he'd be here, you know, for any length of time. He liked doing it and it was the kind of work he wanted, but you never could scare him about anything.

LABALME: Right.

MEISS: And he worked very hard, for instance, with Marston Morse.

LABALME: Yes.

MEISS: In Marston's last year, which was dreadful.

LABALME: Why was that? What was the problem?

MEISS: People wanted him to do things differently from what he was doing, and I think there was a lack of help for Marston, and Millard moved right in.

LABALME: Yes.

MEISS: One time, the only time I really remember, is that there was one time when he played hookey. Just took a train and went somewhere. Maybe, I don't know, Washington or whatever, so that he could come back and say, I was not at that meeting because I was in Washington. But I had plenty of time to think about us all and what we were doing, and I felt such and such about it.

LABALME: Yes.

MEISS: And tried to, I don't know, throw some dice in there and get it started. Keep things moving along.

LABALME: He was a bridge builder.

MEISS: Yes.

LABALME: During the Bellah episode, from what I've read, he abstained, along with I think it was Frank Gilliam and Christian Habicht. Do you remember? That was 1973, and he'd had an operation in 1972, so that he wasn't well himself perhaps.

MEISS: He was not well himself, no. He had, for a long time, had to have chest X-Rays taken at intervals of three or four months, and he had

some X-Rays taken in August, 1972. This time they showed there was a very serious problem.

LABALME: He became emeritus in '74.

MEISS: Yes he did.

LABALME: Because he was 70 years old at that point.

MEISS: Right. And also he had become ill.

LABALME: Tell me about the Bellah episode, what you remember of that.

MEISS: I remember that we were not highly enthusiastic for him.

LABALME: Yes.

MEISS: On the other hand, as I remember it, we didn't believe in interfering in other people's personal lives. And if this was what he wanted and people who knew him more closely than we did wanted him also, OK.

LABALME: This is what Carl Kaysen wanted also.

MEISS: Yes.

LABALME: And how did Millard and Carl get on, was that a good relationship?

MEISS: I think it started off very well. I'm not sure that it continued. I'd be very iffy about that.

LABALME: Yes.

MEISS: I think with Millard being really very involved in just taking care of himself and trying to do things, that might be why I think of the relationship as being sort of thinned out.

LABALME: He had work of his own to do.

MEISS: Right.

LABALME: Who do you remember of the Trustees in that sort of earlier years?

MEISS: I don't think we had much relationship to --

LABALME: Well, you knew Harold Hochschild.

MEISS: Yes. That was very special.

LABALME: How did that come about?

MEISS: Because of his wife.

LABALME: Because of Mary?

MEISS: Yes, of course. I was very fond of Mary.

LABALME: And you knew her before they married?

MEISS: I won't say for sure.

LABALME: Right.

MEISS: Probably not.

LABALME: Yes.

MEISS: By name of course before. But she was just wonderful and, you know, she'd advise me and say, now look, no matter what Millard says, you're going to have a garden.

LABALME: Yes.

MEISS: And, you know, she'd come riding in with plants and things I should certainly have or take me out on trips to see things. She gave me her clothes which didn't fit me of course, but I just loved them, they were such beautiful pieces of material.

LABALME: You showed me something once.

MEISS: I still have it. And she had a good, wonderful sense of humor, of people, which made of that place something different. It was great.

LABALME: Of which place?

MEISS: Where they were living.

LABALME: What's now Marquand House?

MEISS: Yes.

LABALME: And did Harold and Millard get on?

MEISS: Yes, indeed.

LABALME: You had a good time together?

MEISS: I mean not close, not the travel time, because when Millard wanted to travel he knew where he wanted to go, and I would have loved to have been picked up and taken on any one of those trips by Harold but that wasn't for me and it never, never bothered me. I knew I could get somewhere else when I wanted to. In a sense, there, I think we had some ability to do what we wanted.

LABALME: Yes.

MEISS: We weren't financially tied up in any way, and Mary knew that, and if she wanted, she'd tell me, you know so and so could use a little help. So we had little underlying things going on. But I enjoyed anything we ever did up around in your neighborhood, the former Marquand properties.

END OF TAPE NO. 1, SIDE NO. 1

TAPE NO. 1, SIDE NO. 2:

LABALME: When you bought your house in the Adirondacks, had that been long ago?

MEISS: Oh, that was a funny one. [Looking in Diary] I wonder if I have the date for that. I should have kept it, here it is, May 1957. Anyway, Millard was known to be a great fisherman. Fly fishing, of course. And so with a man called Lou Zetzel who was the doctor.

LABALME: Lou Zetzel, of course.

MEISS: And he was a doctor for everybody, and I don't know if anybody's ever told you, I practically got run out of town because we gave a big party out in our house in Lincoln--we had a house in Lincoln.

LABALME: Yes.

MEISS: Which was lovely, just beautiful. Overlooking the reservoir.

LABALME: Yes.

MEISS: And I said to Millard, I thought we ought to give a party and we sat down to see who we'd want because we were fairly new, and it turned out we were having an enormous number of doctors.

LABALME: Yes.

MEISS: Because I knew them from where I was working and Millard had picked them up here or there.

LABALME: Yes.

MEISS: And so we gave my usual party which was a shrimp dish, a big dish of shrimp and rice that I always used to make, and salad. You know it was that kind of a thing, sort of build your own plate and move on. And everything was fine and everybody seemed to have a wonderful time, and they were very envious about the place because it really was a dream place. I still go back and look at it from time to time. And everything was fine and then the next morning I learned that the most famous of all the doctors had been called out during the night because somebody else had eaten shrimp, who was also a doctor and should have known full well that he shouldn't have touched it.

LABALME: Because he was allergic to it?

MEISS: Yes. Or something. So it became really quite a--something to be

laughed at.

LABALME: Yes.

MEISS: Miggy's killing off all the doctors!

LABALME: All the doctors, yes. But nobody else was ill?

MEISS: No. We bought the house in Lincoln in January, 1955. Millard was off somewhere, oh yes it was in Wellesley, a whole day thing, and I was free and I went out with a real estate agent and I found this house.

LABALME: In Lincoln. This is the house in Lincoln?

MEISS: Yes and I fell for it at once.

LABALME: Yes.

MEISS: When Millard came home he asked what had I done? And I said, well I'd gone to see a house and done other things that were lots of fun. And he said well, I think that's where I'm going to be found tomorrow also. The woman whose house it was changed her mind and decided she didn't want to sell. And the realtor who, of course, had taken me around and had seen how much I liked it, was incensed. After all, she couldn't go back on her word. And in the end he won out because he wanted his money for the work he was doing and there was nothing the matter with the house. And so we bought it and had three very lovely years in it. And I've never regretted that. It was great.

LABALME: Yes. And then you moved to Pretty Brook. And then here [Maxwell Lane]. There were so many problems that developed with the house here when the Oppenheimers moved next door to you.

MEISS: Oh, golly, yes.

LABALME: That must have been something.

MEISS: Yes. I haven't thought about it in a long time and I don't want to.

LABALME: All right.

MEISS: They had a dog that barked all night.

LABALME: Yes. And they had a swimming pool.

MEISS: And they had a swimming pool. And of course Margaret Setton had that pool removed.

LABALME: Yes.

MEISS: So nothing was on my shoulders.

LABALME: Right.

MEISS: I just scouted through the whole thing. But the police were always on my side as far as the barking dog was concerned.

LABALME: That must have been terrible.

MEISS: Just awful.

LABALME: Especially with Millard working at home. Then there was something that he referred to in his correspondence as the second battle of Princeton in 1971 that had to do with the battlefield.

MEISS: I think that's what it was.

LABALME: They wanted to acquire more land and this would somehow infringe on your rights?

MEISS: Nothing could infringe on us.

LABALME: I wasn't quite sure what the problems were.

MEISS: But I do have a record here for '71. Oh there was a terrible problem for a successor for Millard.

LABALME: Oh dear. That must have been --

MEISS: Difficult.

LABALME: Who were the people in the running? [Long pause, while Meiss read Diary]. I don't know whether to ask you to read that [the Diary] out loud or to put other questions to you. What would you like? What about Millard's work --

MEISS: On Florence?

LABALME: I was thinking of CRIA [Committee to Rescue Italian Art, after the floods of 1965]. Tell me a bit about that.

MEISS: Well, it was one of those automatic things. He was so close to everybody in Florence that nobody could think of letting anybody else take over except Millard.

LABALME: I'm sure.

MEISS: And he gave up a great deal of time to CRIA, and he was chairman of the American Committee for the Restoration of Italian Monuments. But we were also doing things that were great fun. We went to Africa.

LABALME: You did?

MEISS: Yes. We did. On the 7th of June.

LABALME: What year?

MEISS: '70.

LABALME: And why was that? What took you there?

MEISS: Because some people invited us to go.

LABALME: Yes.

MEISS: Very nice people. The Ernst Mayers. He was a great -- still is -- a great man on birds and animals. And they were here at the Institute. In other words, we were able to always get out beyond our work, and we liked changes of that sort and so when Ernst

suggested that they could easily get another two tickets and why not come, we went. And we went, and left here in June and went straight to Africa and the only remarks I remember, I said to Millard after the first day, "they work harder than you do."

LABALME: Who is they?

MEISS: The Mayers.

LABALME: Oh. And why?

MEISS: Because they worked morning, noon and night.

LABALME: Doing what?

MEISS: Oh, looking at caterpillars or butterflies or this or that.

LABALME: Was he a naturalist?

MEISS: Yes. A naturalist.

LABALME: I see. And where in Africa did you go?

MEISS: We started off in the Serengeti Reserve and we went through other preserves with one of the men, an Englishman, watching what was going on there and caring about seeing what they were doing. [Looking at Diary]. And our grandson was born that year and that took up a little time.

LABALME: But it was wonderful that Millard would take some time from his own work for this sort of thing.

MEISS: Yes.

LABALME: Did you get personally involved in his work at all?

MEISS: Oh, yes.

LABALME: And how, in what ways?

MEISS: First of all, I took down all the notes.

LABALME: You took down the notes?

MEISS: I took down the notes.

LABALME: As you traveled about, you mean? As you looked at things?

MEISS: Yes. I was sort of a secretary.

LABALME: Yes. So you'd stand in front of a picture and he would--?

MEISS: We'd look together at things and he'd give me things to write that he wanted to remember, whether you saw an unusual posture, profile, color or image to the right or to the left or something of that sort.

LABALME: Yes.

MEISS: And we would work pretty hard on things of that sort. And he wasn't writing, so he could talk. And in the latter years Elizabeth Beatson was around, also.

LABALME: Yes.

MEISS: Millard also was doing lectures which he didn't really enjoy very much I don't think, but he did them. I think it was maybe just a way of getting around to see more things.

LABALME: Yes. In Europe, he'd give lectures?

MEISS: Yes. Not so many, but enough I think. He would accept invitations, you know, like speaking in Paris or Rome or what have you.

LABALME: How did he lecture, what was his style?

MEISS: I thought he was a pretty good lecturer, I really did. And from what I could see of it, I think people did. I just happen to have the book [Diary] open to the Morgan lectures here, which was March 14 to 28th in 1972 and we were down first in Sarasota and looking around at things down there and holding off until the weather was a little better to come back up for the Morgan lectures.

LABALME: At the Morgan Library?

MEISS: Yes.

LABALME: On what were those lectures?

MEISS: Oh, that was on the "Très riches heures".

LABALME: That's right.

MEISS: And was very successful.

LABALME: Yes. This was before the book was published?

MEISS: Yes, that's right. And so, as I see here, from February 29th to March 6th we had a nice little vacation in Sarasota. And then went back up to New York for the lectures. But then everything was all right. In May we were going off, in May and June, to London and Venice, Florence, Rome and Lisbon and Paris. You know, just ideal.

LABALME: Yes.

MEISS: Perfect.

LABALME: And you bought pictures yourself as you went around?

MEISS: You know, it's interesting that you say that, because I looked that up yesterday in here, because I never kept a proper record. I was shocked to see the times that we were buying things. We started building this house in 1962 in July and we moved into it in April of the next year.

LABALME: Oh, my, yes.

MEISS: We left Lincoln, that's our house up in Massachusetts, in 1958. Parked for a couple of nights on Fernald Drive in Cambridge and then we moved into Stony Ford which was that big house.

LABALME: On Pretty Brook?

MEISS: Yes. Beautiful place. I think it is still.

LABALME: Why didn't you stay there?

MEISS: It took too much time. It was a very big place. It was 100 acres.

LABALME: Oh, wow. Yes.

MEISS: Oh, wow. Which, as you know, now is part of the University.

LABALME: No, I didn't.

MEISS: Yes. It's our place. I still love it. And I still keep it up and care about it and there are very nice people living in it. Henry Horne.

LABALME: I don't know him.

MEISS: Oh, he's a great guy. And his wife, Betty. And they've lived in it ever since we moved out. And I couldn't be happier to have such a thing happen. And we moved on April 1st which was April Fool's Day because I said I don't care what they break on that day. So we went in. But what I really found yesterday doing this, thinking of seeing you today, was the list of things we bought, purchased.

LABALME: Yes.

MEISS: And I was as I say, shocked.

LABALME: At what?

MEISS: At the fact that they were all bought in such quick succession. We started collecting in 1936. And the first thing we ever bought was the Braque, it's right here, and the Bloom Synagogue in 1943, which is back in the next room, and then we bought a lot in 1944--we bought a Tanguy, a Leger, a Marin, a Harnett, and a Graves, and we never spent more than \$150 or \$200 for any one of them.

LABALME: Isn't that amazing?

MEISS: Isn't that amazing?

LABALME: You wrote down how much each one cost?

MEISS: Yes. And then we got a Calder in the same year and we got the St. John in that same year. It's fantastic.

LABALME: 1944, the war was still going on.

MEISS: Yes.

LABALME: The art market was probably, nobody was paying attention to it.

MEISS: That's right. But we had started buying things earlier. The first thing I have written here -- oh, no, but it's my pearls! [Laughter]

LABALME: Oh, that's all right.

MEISS: And then that Austrian panel, the gold one in the place right here, was 1945. And then we just kept going. 1945, 1949, 1950, '51, '52, the Picasso frog which nobody in the family likes except me and the Greek archaic horse.

LABALME: Oh, that's that little thing.

MEISS: Yes. And the Mayan figure, we're still in the '50s. Oh, and the Eskimo sculptures are our last. 1961. And the last things we bought were all from Japan.

LABALME: Had you ever gone to Japan?

MEISS: No. We never had. But we knew we were going and this is really a funny story. In the year just before we were going to Japan, we had decided we didn't like the Tanguy. We didn't like it, we thought it was not wearing as well as it might. And we took it off the wall and put it in the closet. And about three nights later there was a phone call, or three days probably later, there was a phone call from a former student of Millard's wanting to know whether we still had our Tanguy. Oh, yes. Of course we did. And would there be any

thought of being able to buy it? Well, I think he must have said that he'd look into it or I said I'd look into it and give us a week to think about it. So we thought, and we decided to take it out of the closet and dust it off and make it look very good and put it in the living room, any room to hang it, and we sold it. And we sold it for \$4,000.

LABALME: Oh, my goodness.

MEISS: And we went over to Japan and spent the whole thing.

LABALME: You went to Japan, and you spent it on Japanese art. What fun. Anything else we can add later. Thank you, Miggy.

END OF TAPE NO. 1, SIDE NO. 2

END OF INTERVIEW

INSTITUTE FOR ADVANCED STUDY  
PRINCETON, NEW JERSEY 08540

The Institute community mourns the death of Margaret L. Meiss on Tuesday, May 10, 1994. She graduated from Vassar College and received an Ed.D. from Teachers College, Columbia University. Dr. Meiss was consultant psychologist for the Ethical Culture Schools in New York City and published "The Oedipal Problem of a Fatherless Child" in *The Psychoanalytic Study of the Child*, Vol. VII, 1952.

Dr. Meiss and her husband, Millard, became a part of the Institute community in 1958 when Professor Meiss joined the Faculty of the School of Historical Studies. After moving to Princeton, she was affiliated with the Mercer County Child Guidance Center and remained active in the clinic and in her private practice with both adults and children until her retirement in 1980.

A service in memory of Miggy will be held on Friday, May 13, at 11:00 a.m. near the Institute pond.

Phillip A. Griffiths

MEISS—Margaret L. On May 10, 1994, Princeton, NJ. Beloved wife of the late Millard L. Meiss. She leaves a daughter, Elinor M. Siner, son-in-law Joel L. Siner, and two grandchildren, Suzanne and Jonathan. Active professionally thruout her long life, she was a school counselor with an Ed.D. from Columbia University, trained in child psychoanalysis, was a psychotherapist of both children and adults and supervised others in the field. Devoted to conservation causes, she dedicated her time and energy to environmental organizations. Contributions may be made in her memory to The Nature Conservancy, 201 Devonshire St, Boston, MA 02110. A funeral service will be held Friday, May 13 at 11AM, The Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton, NJ.