

**Cindy Gehrig
Narrator**

**Betty Bright
Minnesota Center for Book Arts
Interviewer**

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At the Jerome Foundation
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BB: My name is Betty Bright, and today, July 21, 2015, I am interviewing Cindy Gehrig, President of the Jerome Foundation, in St. Paul. This interview is being conducted on behalf of Minnesota Center for Book Arts' 30th Anniversary Oral History Project, which has been financed in part with funds provided by the State of Minnesota through the Minnesota Historical Society, from the Arts & Cultural Heritage Fund.

Cindy, thank you for visiting with me today. Your involvement with MCBA is longstanding, in your role as President of the Jerome Foundation throughout the lifespan of MCBA, which is just extraordinary and very fortunate for us. Let me begin with a few general comments for context. As you know, in 1985, MCBA's founding Board of Directors galvanized community support and established MCBA's first home in downtown Minneapolis' Warehouse District, in the McKesson Building.

The Jerome Foundation was one of MCBA's earliest funders. The MCBA/Jerome Book Arts Fellowships, which provide grants for new work created by emerging book artists, dates back to the mid-1980s; it showed its first round of winning works in 1987, and MCBA is currently working with its Series XIII Fellowship artists. The Jerome Foundation also supports MCBA's Jerome Book Arts Mentorships, which involve artists from mediums other than the book arts. MCBA's fifth round of mentorships will conclude this November with an exhibition of the works produced during that period, so this is just to say that the Jerome Foundation has had a continuing impact on the book arts community in Minnesota. With this in mind, and considering your 28-year tenure at the Foundation, we feel that you carry a unique perspective on MCBA's role in the larger cultural life of the Twin Cities and Minnesota. To begin with, perhaps you could help with a bit of context by sharing with us the mission or any general comments about Jerome Foundation.

CG: The Jerome Foundation's decision to support the fellowship program was a pretty logical one. For over twenty-five years we have had a program focus on helping emerging professional artists create new works. So, that overlap of what the Center wanted to do, and what Jerome Foundation's mission has been for a long time, was a very

natural one. I don't believe the Center tried any other approach to Jerome at the time it was started. It knew that it wanted to help book artists, and it was a perfect fit for Jerome's mission.

BB: How did you first hear about Minnesota Center for Book Arts? How did it first come in on your radar?

CG: I was thinking about that and I have a couple of stories that I remember. We had been funding literature for many years, of course, as a foundation, and funded a number of independent presses in the Twin Cities. We also received applications from distributors. Jim Sitter was then associated with a distributor, I think it was Consortium, I'm not positive, it was a distributor at the time. And he is the kind of person who educates the people with whom he works. So, while he was applying for support from the Jerome Foundation, he also provided a lot of information about the field. We found out that he was a collector of books himself, and that he sold those books to a very small group of clients, but these books were pretty exceptional pieces of art. Jim had told us that he was very interested in seeing whether the Twin Cities could be a mecca for an organization that would work with book artists, and from the beginning he described it as a blend of literature and the visual arts. That was intriguing to us, because we funded in all arts disciplines. So he began to give us examples of the types of books that he was thinking about, and introducing us to regional artists who had that kind of practice, and before you knew it, he had talked about others in the literary community, in the region, coming together to form a center for book arts. I can remember when he was looking for a location, actually touring a couple of locations with him, and one of those was the site that the Center actually selected.

BB: The McKesson Building?

CG: Yes, so I saw it before it was actually was built out. It was unusual at the time. I couldn't envision how beautiful it would become, but it certainly was exactly the right choice, so we were very pleased to see it there. I also remember that Jim was seeking to build the archive of presses for MCBA, and I actually accompanied him on a visit to this strange man's house in South Minneapolis, a decrepit old house. He let us in and down into the basement, and he had six presses that were beautiful, ancient pieces. Jim and his colleagues were so intent upon getting that as a donation, they thought that if they trotted a funder along with them, that might be convincing! I don't know if they ever got that donation, but I hope I was helpful.

BB: It's exciting to hear about that personal involvement in that nascent period when it was so unknown. When Jim was meeting with potential supporters throughout the Cities, the book arts were something were probably known to few if any of the funders. So, what you're saying is that Jim had brought you and the Jerome Foundation in by showing you the works themselves?

CG: Absolutely, and that was our first introduction to the field. Soon thereafter the Center for Book Arts in New York City began applying to us on a regular basis, so we saw an uptick in activity based on our support for MCBA.

BB: In that period in the mid-1980s, can you describe any reflections or memories of the cultural scene in Minnesota, and what [in that environment] might have led to support for MCBA? What were the strengths and weaknesses in that scene?

CG: In thinking back on that, I think I'm reflecting primarily on the fact that presses at that time were often simply sole proprietorships of the editors who founded them. And, there was a strong movement in the state of making more literary organizations non-profit organizations, so that they could receive donations not only from corporations and foundations, but also from individuals for tax-deductible contributions. There was a big push to make Coffee House, Milkweed, Graywolf and other independent presses non-profit if they weren't already. So the idea of a center for book arts as a non-profit service entity feeding that field and connecting with both the literary arts and the visual arts was part of that push to build a strong non-profit network of support.

BB: Were there any other historical factors that might have fed into the founding of MCBA?

CG: I think so. This community, particularly the Twin Cities, has been very welcoming to artist service organizations: the Playwright's Center, the American Composers Forum. So the idea of creating nonprofit service organizations that supported artists and activities in a particular field was a big part of our history. Jerome Foundation, for example, has been supporting the Playwrights' Center for forty years, and we're only fifty-one years old. So, we and other funders including McKnight and Bush at that time were very interested in supporting service organizations, and I think MCBA played right into that. Also, its location in the Warehouse District in Minneapolis was pretty perfect. It was within an arts community, there were many artists living in the area at that time, it was still affordable. The New French Café, the Thompson Gallery nearby, those were all big parts of the community, small theatre companies, so it became part of a geographic five- or six-block circle that put it within a community.

BB: Do you have any particular recollections of the McKesson Building as a site for an art center, viewed either from the street as you entered, or once you were in that space?

CG: You walked up a six-step incline to get to the main floor of the Center from the street level. With the large glass windows you could see into the space and what was happening. The Center used its window access in very strategic ways to draw people in. I can remember that the wet area of making paper was toward the back in its own location, which is great, and I can recall that the presses were in the back right hand corner, so they had their little block within the overall spread. I remember a beautiful gallery space centrally located, and an office archive that you could walk into and actually see historic

examples of the book form. So it was a very good layout and worked well for bringing crowds of people in, as well as bringing in school groups.

BB: That neighborhood was something of a mecca for artists at that time. And now we have the Target Center there and it has shifted somewhat.

CG: It has shifted.

BB: More of a sports entertainment district.

CG: And not as many artists can afford to live there. And certainly, parking was never easy, but it's much more difficult today than it was then.

BB: How did MCBA's first space compare to that of other arts start-ups that the Jerome Foundation supported? Were there common aspects that MCBA shared with other new organizations or were there unique traits of MCBA, from your involvement with a number of start-ups?

CG: MCBA came out of the starting block much faster than any one organization that we'd funded. When I first started visiting the Playwrights' Center, which was in the Playwrights' Lab, it was a tiny, unheated room in an old building, and the same was true I think in the early stages of the American Composers Forum, with a very small office in the Landmark Center. MCBA really had a head start. I think it had secured some early backers, not only institutional but also individual believers in its mission, and I felt at the time that MCBA really started ten steps ahead of most of the other service organizations that we had supported.

BB: Did you meet with other individuals who were affiliated with MCBA or were your contacts primarily with Jim Sitter?

CG: No, Jim was very good about bringing his board members into contact with funders. It was part of the sales approach. And his board members were people who had well-recognized names in the literary and arts communities, so they lent credibility to it. And I think he was also pretty wise about the staffing of MCBA from the beginning. So from the funder's point of view, you were seeing a start-up but you were seeing a start-up that was being led by very experienced people, so there was a cumulative years of service even though it was a new organization.

BB: Moving from the administrative aspect and the larger role of the board of directors, to looking more broadly artistically, can you comment on MCBA's support for emerging artists as far as the impact that MCBA's ongoing commitment may have had on Minnesota's artist community?

CG: I'll hazard a few guesses on that one, opinions. I can remember going to MCBA early on, and the staff taking care to educate us about regional book artists who were experienced. And we met with a few of them, saw their work, got a sense of the quality of their investigations and what they were doing. Then we came to believe through further education that there were a crop of artists, some of them younger, some middle-aged, mid-career, who had been working for a period of time with not much attention paid to what they were doing. And it wasn't simply that their work was already great and should be supported, but it was more a sense that the field itself was developing in this region. So, by supporting explorations by those artists rather than just commissioning a series of books, but giving them a fellowship that would allow them to test and fail, or to move into a new direction or a different arena, was going to be necessary to build that field. So even from the early years we felt like we were developing artists, not just recognizing them.

BB: In 2000, MCBA partnered with the Loft Literary Center and Milkweed Editions to move to Open Book, where it currently resides. MCBA is currently the largest and most comprehensive center of its kind in the world. That move was profound for the Center in a number of ways. Did you visit that rough space before it was renovated? Do you have any thoughts or memories about that Open Book space?

CG: Absolutely. I too visited that space before it was developed. And it was much rougher than the previous location. I remember visiting it a couple of times, once in a group led by Jay Cowles, who was one of the early fundraisers and board members on several of the organizations that came into the Open Book building. The building was beautifully placed, I thought, on University Avenue. It had a clear view to the river, which was before all the high rises were built blocking that view. It was something of an outpost but still part of the community and people felt that you could get there easily. It had its own parking lot, which was a huge advantage. I remember being entranced by the vision of Garth Rockcastle and the architectural firm of which he's a partner, and how that building would be transformed. You may or may not know that at the time the Jerome Foundation had a program that would allow organizations that had acquired new facilities or were rehabbing their existing facilities to commission artists to make works of art that were part of the building itself. So some of the artist enhancements that were part of the building were from a Jerome Foundation grant. We were very interested and were supporting several of the organizations that went into Open Book. I believe that I shared with you earlier the fact that I was pleasantly surprised when I found that MCBA got the best placement in the building, even though you weren't the largest organization in terms of budget size.

BB: Yes, that's absolutely true. So, you mentioned in passing that neighborhood, in what's called now the Downtown East neighborhood. Are there any other memories about it from that time? I know it's changed tremendously since the year 2000.

CG: Big liquor store across the street—Liquor Warehouse that people went to frequently, the view of the river, the Southern Theatre was a few blocks away, so those of us who went to the Southern were very familiar with the area. Sage and John Cowles were going to be living nearby soon so we had all gone to their home for a variety of events and programs. A part of the city that came to be known for the stadium, but then quickly as MCBA and Open Book came in, the Guthrie, it's transformed remarkably, and I think it's an arts corridor now, an arts area, the Gold Medal Park, it's changed tremendously, very active, there's street traffic.

BB: So, once the renovation was complete and Open Book and MCBA opened, what was it like? Can you think back to when you first visited that space?

CG: I was thrilled. I think it remains one of the most beautiful buildings that I've ever seen. I think the Center is active and vibrant from the start of the day until late at night, there's always activity going on, it's very welcoming. Parking is decent, still. It is just a fine building. I can remember visiting MCBA and thinking that the gallery and the sales shop were well placed, then walking into the education areas. And I think the thing that surprised me the most was the extensive basement footprint for MCBA. I didn't realize until I'd walked downstairs just how vast that space was, how much equipment it held, and what could be done there. It seemed to me to easily quadruple the amount of working space for artists and students of all ages coming to MCBA. We know those presses are very heavy, and we know that working areas require strength of flooring and also wet areas for papermaking, so I think the basement and first floor space were wisely chosen. I love that there are windows on the street, so you look in and see people working.

BB: Now returning to a question I asked you earlier about the 1980s. Around the year 2000, are there any thoughts about the arts and cultural scene in Minnesota? Were there any changes around the time that this other amazing effort of Open Book was successfully pushed forward? Any thoughts about the philanthropic scene?

CG: I think at the time Open Book came to be, it immediately established itself as a major arts organization just by having the component groups come together and occupy space. I think that was very important. Most other major arts organizations are the only tenants of the buildings that they occupy. So, the Open Book is a cooperative model that I think worked very well, certainly for the funding community because it enabled funders to help several organizations through a grant to the Open Book, so I think that was key, very smart of those organizations to come together. My sense of the giving community is that we had remarkable changes from the mid-1980s to the current time. I think that corporate funders became larger over that period of time, and certainly Target's support for Open Book wouldn't have been possible via Dayton Hudson in the mid-1980s, so there's a change in terms of that. The Bush Foundation has somewhat walked away from the arts in the last decade, so that's changed. While the players may have changed, I think that the amount of money available has certainly grown. There have been more arts organizations founded; it's still a fairly robust funding community.

BB: If we look at MCBA, a studio-based, artist service organization, do you have any thoughts about what might be special about this kind of organization like MCBA in how it contributes to the cultural landscape? What I'm thinking about here is an organization that provides a broad arc of programming including teaching, study with master artists, studio access for creating work, gallery space, that sort of thing. What kinds of contributions does that kind of organization make since Minnesota has a number of those studio-based organizations?

CG: MCBA diversified from the get-go, so while Jerome is focused on its professional development of artists in the field, or artists in other fields looking to move into the book arts, we've always known from the beginning that while that was a strong pillar of what MCBA did, its education programs for adults and students were extremely important, and arguably of a volume much higher than its funding programs with Jerome, in terms of number of people contacted. It also has a very important role in access to equipment and space for artists, and although Jerome doesn't fund that directly, we recognize that the artists we fund directly through the Fellowship and Mentorship program make use of that artist access function of MCBA, so that's very important. I think that its general education of the public through the Shop and through exhibitions is very important because, how else would we know really what the book arts are. I have a sense that it is a leader nationally so that other centers look to the artists that it supports and nurtures. It returned to its Winter Book publication a few years ago, which I was very pleased to see, because that is a singular publication that sets a standard for the field. MCBA serves many different types of clients.

BB: Regarding *Minnesota* Center for Book Arts, is there something characteristically Minnesotan that you see in the founding and development of MCBA? Is there something Minnesotan that helps to create a nurturing climate for this kind of artist's service organization?

CG: I've seen the Center for Book Arts in New York City, and you know Jerome funds New York as well as Minnesota, so a common comparison beyond MCBA is that if there is a Minnesota organization that does something similar to a New York organization it's usually in a footprint space that's ten times as large, [Laughing] because it's affordable to buy space here. In terms of just space in which to do work and show work, Minnesota gives you good leasing and rental prices. The other thing I would mention is that if an organization serves artists, and MCBA does, I think it's typically Minnesotan to try to give those artists a real say in how that organization evolves. Artists are not thought of as people at whom that you throw some services. You do serve them but they also have to be engaged in terms of caring for the organization, supporting the organization, offering counsel on how programs might operate, sitting on a board of directors, so the level of artist engagement is distinctively Minnesotan, and the level of cooperation with other organizations is a hallmark of the state.

BB: Keying off of that, and thinking about organizations like MCBA that have lasted and continued to thrive, are there any keys to longevity that you've seen in MCBA that might be shared by other organizations as they begin to build and expand their services?

CG: MCBA has not been immune from periods in which the finances were very difficult; I've lasted through a couple of those times with MCBA. Sometimes they're precipitated by: a change in leadership, board changes, funding community changes, the loss of some longtime supporters, and the delay in building new ones. So, MCBA has weathered those down times, and organizations like MCBA need a lot of resiliency to be able to do it. I think the key factors that have brought them through those difficult times have been: that the board hasn't given up, and they've rolled up their sleeves and done what they can; staff has downsized, and for a period of time staff members work the equivalent of two or three jobs to keep the organization running—that's really key; and third, they've been open with the funding community about the challenges so that funders can see what's necessary to rebuild. I think to be resilient you have to be able to—it's existential—you roll that ball up the hill, it rolls back down on you and you roll it back up again, and you have to be in it for the long haul. And people don't give up easily.

BB: I have one last question, a question that comes to mind on an anniversary year. Do you have any thoughts about what MCBA's legacy might be, as it stands today?

CG: I think, from talking with staff and board, that people are as committed to teaching those of us who are ignorant about what the book arts are, as they were back in 1985. There is still a lot of education to be done, there are still many people who don't recognize what the book arts are, and I think that MCBA's mission is still very strong in that area. I also think that more and more artists understand what the book arts are, and that's thrilling to Jerome. Not only are there more artists that qualify for fellowships, but there are more artists from other fields who want to learn more about the book arts, and see a way for their creative voice to manifest itself in that form. I am excited by the number of applicants to those programs. I don't think we've had a significant dip, I think that the numbers are up and people are really committed. I love going to openings, I think people are very supportive of colleagues. I've noticed that there's been a nice tie to the Highpoint Center for Printmaking. We have a lot of artists working in both areas and I find that really intriguing. I think we feed off one another in that way. Jerome has a funding program there as well. I also have been really intrigued of late in how performance artists have interpreted the book arts form. I would never have expected that, but in the last eight to ten years that's been very exciting.

BB: This has been wonderful, Cindy. On behalf of the board, staff, faculty and all the artists involved at MCBA, our sincere thanks for your participation today.

CG: Thank you for the opportunity, I've learned a lot. Thank you!