



Smithsonian

Archives of American Art

A Finding Aid to the Charles Henry Alston Papers, 1924-1980, in the Archives of American Art

Jayna M. Hanson

Funding for the digitization of this collection was
provided by the Terra Foundation for American Art

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Collection Overview

Repository:	Archives of American Art
Title:	Charles Henry Alston papers
Date:	1924-1980
Identifier:	AAA.alstchar
Creator:	Alston, Charles Henry, 1907-1977
Extent:	0.9 Linear feet
Language:	English .
Summary:	The scattered papers of African American and Harlem Renaissance painter, muralist, illustrator, sculptor, and educator Charles Henry Alston measure 0.9 linear feet and date from 1924-1980. Included are biographical materials, correspondence, commission and teaching files, writings and notes, printed materials, and photographs. Notable correspondents include Romare Bearden, Byron Browne, Jacob Lawrence, and Hale Woodruff.

Administrative Information

Provenance

Charles Alston lent portions of the collection for microfilming in 1970. Aida Winters and Rousmaniere Alston Wilson, Charles Alston's sisters, donated additional materials to the Archives of American Art in 1982 and 1984.

Separated Material

In 1970, Charles Alston loaned materials for microfilming, including correspondence with Henry Epstein, Langston Hughes, Robert Riggs, Harry Sternberg, J. Johnson Sweeney, Hale Woodruff and others. Also loaned for microfilming were sketchbooks, printed materials, and photographs. Subsequently, some of the photographs were later donated by Alston's sisters. The loaned materials are available only on microfilm reel N70-23 at Archives of American Art offices, and through interlibrary loan. These materials are not included in the container listing of this finding aid.

Related Material

Also found in the Archives of American Art are two oral history interviews with Charles Henry Alston, one conducted by Harlan Phillips on September 28, 1965 and another by Al Murray on October 19, 1968.

Additional Charles Henry Alston papers are located at the University of North Carolina's Southern Historical Collection at the Louis Round Wilson Special Collections Library.

Alternative Forms Available

This site provides access to the papers of **Charles Henry Alston** in the Archives of American Art that were digitized in 2010, and total 948 images.

Materials not scanned include health records, financial tax notes, duplicates, and photographs of works of art.

Material lent for microfilming is available on 35mm microfilm reel N70-23 at the Archives of American Art offices and through interlibrary loan.

Processing Information

Upon receipt, the collection was arranged and microfilmed on reels 4222-4223. The collection was reprocessed with a finding aid prepared by Jayna Hanson in 2008. In 2010, the collection was fully digitized with funding provided by the Terra Foundation for American Art.

Preferred Citation

Charles Henry Alston papers, 1924-1980. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Restrictions on Access

Use of original papers requires an appointment.

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Biographical Note

Charles Henry Alston (1907-1977) worked primarily in New York city as a painter, muralist, illustrator, and educator. He was part of the Harlem Renaissance movement in the 1930s and helped form the Harlem Art Workshop and the Harlem Artists Guild.

Charles Henry "Spinky" Alston was born in Charlotte, North Carolina on November 28th, 1907. His parents were the Reverend Primus Priss and Anna Miller. After the death of his father, Alston's mother married Henry Pierce Bearden (Romare Bearden's uncle) in 1913 and the family moved to New York City.

At DeWitt Clinton High School in New York, Alston served as art editor of the school's literary magazine. Alston majored in fine arts and history at Columbia University, graduating in 1929. He became active in the Harlem community and accepted a position as director of Utopia House, a boy's camp, where he started an art program. He returned to Columbia and received a Masters degree in art education from Columbia's Teachers College. While still a student, he illustrated album covers for jazz musician Duke Ellington and book covers for poet Langston Hughes.

Alston played a major role in the Harlem Renaissance Movement of the period. During the Great Depression, he and sculptor Henry Bannarn directed the Harlem Art Workshop which was funded by the Works Progress Administration Federal Art Project. There he taught and mentored African American painter Jacob Lawrence and Romare Bearden, among others.

In the 1950s, Alston embarked on a series of portraits of African American figures. He also taught at the Art Students League and later with the City College of New York (CUNY). Along with his wife, Myra Logan, a surgeon at Harlem Hospital, Alston lived in Harlem and remained an active member of the community until the end of his life. Charles Alston died in 1977.

Scope and Content Note

The scattered papers of African American and Harlem Renaissance painter, muralist, illustrator, sculptor, and educator Charles Henry Alston (1907-1977) measure 0.9 linear feet and date from 1924-1980. The bulk of the collection documents his personal and professional relationships with figures of the Harlem Renaissance. Researchers should note that this collection contains very little documentation on Alston's actual federal WPA work with the Harlem Art Workshop, the Harlem Artists Guild, or his Harlem Hospital murals completed in 1940. A photograph of Alston in 1937 is likely the only reference to the actual WPA murals in this collection.

Scattered correspondence includes general correspondence; letters concerning Alston's artistic endeavors; and personal letters from friends and family. Found is a copy of a thank you note from Eudora Welty to John Woodburn for a jacket design presumably by Alston; letters from Harlem Renaissance figures and personal friends Romare Bearden, Byron Brown, Jacob Lawrence, and Hale Woodruff.

Commission files are for Alston's murals including those in the Golden State Mutual Life Insurance building in Los Angeles, California (1947); and the addition to the Harlem Hospital (1965); and the Family and Criminal Courts Building in the Bronx, New York (1976). There is one file concerning teaching at City College New York (CUNY).

Writings and notes includes scattered notes and three short stories probably by Alston entitled "Bitsy O'Wire," "Body and Soul," and "Gigi."

Printed materials include illustrations by Alston in the Columbia University literary magazine, *The Morningside*, and medical illustrations done for Dr. Louis T. Wright. Also found are scattered clippings, exhibition announcements, press releases, and materials from the First Conference on Aesthetic Responsibility.

Photographs are of Alston, Alston with his wife, Myra Logan, his mother Anna Alston Bearden, Romare Bearden, and Hale Woodruff. Photographs of note include one of Alston holding a self-portrait, and one of the artist in 1937 with works that are most likely preliminary sketches of his WPA murals at Harlem Hospital. There are also photographs of Alston's works of art.

Arrangement

The collection is arranged into 6 series:

- Series 1: Biographical Information, 1924-1977 (Box 1; 3 folders)
- Series 2: Correspondence, 1931-1977(Box 1; 7 folders)
- Series 3: Commission and Teaching Files, 1947-1976 (Box 1; 4 folders)
- Series 4: Writings and Notes, circa 1940s-1970s (Box 2-3; 4 folders)
- Series 5: Printed Material, 1928, 1946-1980(Box 2-3; 5 folders)
- Series 6: Photographs, 1925-1968 (Box 2; 2 folders)

Names and Subject Terms

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

Subjects:

African American artists
African American educators
African American painters
African American sculptors
Harlem Renaissance

Types of Materials:

Photographs

Names:

Bearden, Anna Alston
Bearden, Romare, 1911-1988
Browne, Byron, 1907-1961
City University of New York. City College -- Faculty
Lawrence, Jacob, 1917-2000
Logan, Myra, 1909-1977
Welty, Eudora, 1909-2001
Woodruff, Hale, 1900-1980
Wright, Louis T. (Louis Tompkins), 1891-1952

Occupations:

Educators -- New York (State) -- New York
Illustrators -- New York (State) -- New York
Muralists -- New York (State) -- New York
Painters -- New York (State) -- New York
Sculptors -- New York (State) -- New York

Container Listing

Series 1: Biographical Information, 1924-1977

3 Folders (Box 1)

Scope and Contents: Found here are Charles Henry Alston's resumes, vital information, a copied marriage certificate, memorial information, and educational records from Dewitt Clinton High School and Columbia University. Also found are financial notes from the 1970s which consist of handwritten tax and self-employment records.

Available Formats: The bulk of this series has been scanned. Sensitive health records and financial notes have not been scanned.

Box 1, Folder 1 [Charles Henry Alston, circa 1940s-1977](#)
Notes: (partially scanned)

Box 1, Folder 2 [Educational Information, 1924-1970](#)

Box 1, Folder 3 Financial Notes, 1974-1975, circa 1970s
(not scanned)

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Series 2: Correspondence, 1931-1977

7 Folders (Box 1)

Scope and Contents: Scattered correspondence includes general correspondence, letters concerning Alston's art, illustrations, exhibitions, and personal letters from friends and family. Found is a copy of a thank you note from Eudora Welty to John Woodburn for a jacket design presumably by Alston; letters from Harlem Renaissance figures and personal friends Romare Bearden, Byron Brown, Jacob Lawrence, and Hale Woodruff.

Available Formats: This series has been scanned in its entirety with the exception of duplicates.

Box 1, Folder 4 [Correspondence, 1931, 1937-1938](#)

Box 1, Folder 5 [Correspondence, 1940-1949](#)

Box 1, Folder 6 [Correspondence, 1950-1959](#)

Box 1, Folder 7 [Correspondence, 1960-1969](#)

Box 1, Folder 8 [Correspondence, 1970-1973](#)

Box 1, Folder 9 [Correspondence, 1974-1977](#)

Box 1, Folder 10 [Correspondence, circa 1930s-1970s](#)

Notes: Included is a letter from Eudora Welty to John Woodburn, an editor at Harcourt, Brace and Company. The letter concerns Welty's *Delta Wedding* (1946), for which Alston designed the dust cover.

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Series 3: Commission and Teaching Files, 1947-1976

4 Folders (Box 1)

Scope and Contents: This series includes materials documenting Alston's mural commissions including those in the Golden State Mutual Life Insurance building in Los Angeles, California (1947) which consists of a reproduction of the murals with a description key and a few pieces of correspondence; the expansion in the Harlem Hospital (1965) which consists of a legal agreement and correspondence; and the Family and Criminal Courts Building in the Bronx, New York (1976) which contains correspondence, memoranda, legal agreements, financial materials such as bills, and proposals. There is one file concerning teaching at City College New York (CUNY).

Available Formats: This series has been scanned in its entirety with the exception of duplicates.

Box 1, Folder 11 [Golden State Mutual Life Insurance, Los Angeles, California, 1947-1949](#)

Box 1, Folder 12 [Harlem Hospital Expansion, 1965-1969](#)

Box 1, Folder 13 [Family and Criminal Courts Building, Bronx, New York, 1972-1976](#)

Box 1, Folder 14 [City College New York, 1963-1976](#)

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Series 4: Writings and Notes, circa 1940s-1970s

4 Folders (Boxes 2-3)

Scope and Contents: This series consists of short stories probably written by Alston and scattered notes. Also found is a handwritten draft of "Bitsy O'Wire" with a few illustrations.

Available Formats: This series has been scanned in its entirety.

Formats:

Box 2, Folder 1	"Bitsy O'Wire," circa 1940s-1970s (Oversized material housed on Box 3)
Box 2, Folder 2	"Body and Soul," circa 1940s-1970s
Box 2, Folder 3	"Gigi," circa 1940s-1970s
Box 2, Folder 4	Notes, circa 1940s-1970s
Box 3	Oversized and Illustrated "Bitsy O'Wire," Notes: (Scanned with Box 2, F1)

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Series 5: Printed Material, 1928, 1946-1980

5 Folders (Boxes 2-3)

Scope and Contents: Found are exhibition press releases, announcements and invitations, and newspaper clippings about Alston, copies of Alston's illustrations for Columbia University's literary magazine *The Morningside* and a medical journal featuring drawings done for Louis T. Wright by Alston, and a report for the First Conference on Aesthetic Responsibility which has an inscription from Dr. Wright.

Available Formats: The bulk of this series has been scanned with the exception of the medical journal of which only the front cover has been scanned.

Box 2, Folder 5	Clippings, 1968-1979
Box 2, Folder 6	Exhibition Announcements and Invitations, 1958, 1966, 1968, 1980 (Oversized Material housed in Box 3)
Box 2, Folder 7	Illustrated by Charles Alston, 1928, 1946, circa 1940s
Box 2, Folder 8	Press Releases, circa 1950s-1969
Box 2, Folder 9	Reports, First Conference on Aesthetic Responsibility, circa 1962
Box 3	Oversized Exhibition Announcement Notes: (Scanned with Box 2, F6)

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Series 6: Photographs, 1925-1968

2 Folders (Box 2)

Scope and Contents: Photographs are of Charles Henry Alston, his wife Myra Logan, Romare Bearden, Hale Woodruff, Anna Alston Bearden, and other members of Alston's family, friends, and colleagues. Photographs of note include two photos of Alston with his works of art--one of which may be of his WPA murals dated 1937. Also found are photographs of works of art by Charles Alston.

Available Formats: This series has been partially scanned, photographs of works of art have not been scanned.

Box 2, Folder 10 [Charles Alston and Others, 1925, 1968, circa 1920s-1960s](#)

Box 2, Folder 11 [Works of Art by Charles Alston, circa 1920s-1960s](#)

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