



Smithsonian

Archives of American Art

A Finding Aid to the George Biddle Papers, circa 1910-1970, in the Archives of American Art

Stephanie Ashley

Glass plate negatives in this collection were digitized in 2019
with funding provided by the Smithsonian Women's Committee.

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Collection Overview

Repository:	Archives of American Art
Title:	George Biddle papers
Date:	circa 1910-1970
Identifier:	AAA.biddgeor
Creator:	Biddle, George, 1885-1973
Extent:	0.76 Linear feet
Language:	English .
Summary:	The papers of New York painter and muralist George Biddle (1885-1973), measure 0.76 linear feet and date from circa 1910-1970. The collection includes a certificate signed by President Harry Truman, transcripts of Biddle's diaries, a manuscript of a memoir about meeting President Franklin Roosevelt, three letters from William Hunt Diederich's daughter, transcripts of letters from Bernard Berenson, sketches and mural studies, and two glass plate negatives.

Administrative Information

Acquisition Information

The papers on reels P12-P18 were loaned for microfilming in 1954 by the Philadelphia Museum of Art in Philadelphia, PA. George Biddle lent the material on reel D127 in 1963 and donated the rest of the collection to the Archives of American Art between 1966-1970. In 1972, Michael Biddle, George Biddle's son, gifted a photocopy of an inventory notebook that was discarded after microfilming.

Separated Materials

The Archives of American Art also holds microfilm of material lent for microfilming, including one of Biddle's original diaries, 1933-1935 (reel D127), records from the Federal Art Project, personal correspondence, articles and talks relating to Artists Equity (reels P17-P18), and a photocopy of Biddle's inventory notebook listing artwork and exhibitions (reel 4909). While the inventory notebook was discarded after microfilming, all other loaned materials were returned to the lender and are not described in the collection container inventory.

Related Materials

Originals of the edited diary transcripts in this collection are in the Library of Congress, Manuscript Division. The unedited diary has many more entries than the edited version and includes more details about Biddle's daily life and work, versions of articles by Biddle, and lists of his works of art through 1934.

Available Formats

Portions of the collection and material lent for microfilming are available on 35mm microfilm reels 3621, D127, P17-P18, 899 and 4909 at the Archives of American Art offices and through interlibrary loan.

Researchers should note that the arrangement of material described in the container inventory does not reflect the arrangement of the collection on microfilm.

Processing Information

George Biddle loaned typescripts of his diaries to the Archives of American Art between circa 1966 and 1970, in order for staff to type transcripts of the diaries. The collection was microfilmed on reels 3621 and 899 after the creation of the transcripts. The glass plate negatives were re-housed in 2015 with a grant from the Smithsonian Collections Care and Preservation Fund. The collection was processed and a finding aid prepared by Stephanie Ashley in 2018.

Preferred Citation

George Biddle papers, circa 1910-1970. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Restrictions

Use of original papers requires an appointment and is limited to the Archives' Washington, D.C., Research Center.

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Biographical / Historical

New York painter and muralist George Biddle (1885-1973) proposed to President Franklin Roosevelt the establishment of a federal relief program for artists during the Depression, and subsequently painted a number of government murals under the auspices of the Federal Art Project, including murals for the Department of Justice in 1935.

Biddle was born to a prominent Philadelphia family and graduated from Harvard College. He studied at the Académie Julian and the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, and served in the United States Army in World War I, before returning to New York where he had his first series of one-man shows.

In 1933 Biddle wrote to long-time friend President Franklin Roosevelt, to suggest a work relief program that supported mural painters. Although the idea initially met with opposition, Biddle persisted and the resulting art projects of the Works Progress Administration went on to support the production of thousands of paintings in government buildings throughout the country during the Depression.

In 1940 Biddle was invited by the Mexican government to create a mural for the supreme court building in Mexico City. Biddle had visited Mexico in 1928 where he had traveled and sketched with Diego Rivera, and seen firsthand the value of government sponsored art programs.

In addition to his murals, Biddle was also known for his portraits, lithographs, and paintings. His work can be found in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the National Gallery of Art, the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and others. His work has been shown throughout the United States, Europe, Mexico, Japan, and India in over a hundred one-man shows and group exhibitions.

Scope and Contents

The papers of New York painter and muralist George Biddle (1885-1973), measure 0.76 linear feet and date from circa 1910-1970. The collection includes a certificate signed by President Harry Truman, transcripts of Biddle's diaries, a manuscript of a memoir about meeting President Franklin Roosevelt, three letters from William Hunt Diederich's daughter, transcripts of letters from Bernard Berenson, sketches and mural studies, and two glass plate negatives.

Arrangement

The collection is arranged as one series.

- Series 1: George Biddle Papers, circa 1910-1970 (0.7 linear feet; Box 1, OVs 2-4, MGP4)

Names and Subject Terms

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

Subjects:

Art and state -- United States
Federal aid to the arts
Mural painting and decoration, American
Muralists
New Deal, 1933-1939

Types of Materials:

Diaries

Names:

Berenson, Bernard, 1865-1959
Brewer, Bessie Marsh, d. 1952
Brooks, Van Wyck, 1886-1963
Diederich, William Hunt, 1884-1953
Federal Art Project
Justice Dept. Building (Washington, D.C.)
Kuniyoshi, Yasuo, 1889-1953
National Library Building (Rio de Janeiro, Brazil)
Pascin, Jules, 1885-1930
Poor, Anne, 1911-2011
Poor, Henry Varnum, 1887-1970
Pound, Ezra, 1885-1972
Roosevelt, Franklin D. (Franklin Delano), 1882-1945
Shahn, Ben, 1898-1969
Sterne, Maurice, 1878-1957
Supreme Court Building (Mexico City, Mexico)
United States. Department of the Treasury. Section of Fine Arts
United States. Department of the Treasury. Section of Painting and Sculpture

Places:

United States -- Social conditions -- 1933-1945

Container Listing

Series 1: George Biddle Papers, circa 1910-1970

0.7 Linear feet (Box 1, OVs 2-4, MGP4)

Scope and Contents: Diaries relate to Biddle's involvement in establishing the Federal Art Project of the New Deal, his murals at the Department of Justice which he writes about as he works on them, his involvement with artist organizations, his travels, and his literary and artistic friends including Bernard Berenson, Van Wyck Brooks, Yasuo Kuniyoshi, Ezra Pound, Ben Shahn, Maurice Sterne, Max Weber, Edmund Wilson, and Marguerite and William Zorach. Later diaries reveal a concern with the popularity of abstract art after World War II, and the unpopularity of figurative art. Also found is a manuscript of a memoir by Biddle entitled "A Conversation with President Roosevelt."

Letters include three from William Hunt Diederich's daughter, who signs her name "Koukon," discussing her father. She writes about his work, the influence his late brother, Curt, had on his art, his studio in Paris, his alleged drug addiction, and an incident regarding his model of Venus. She thanks Biddle for reminiscing with her, and refers to Henry Poor, Anne Poor, Bessie Brewer, her sister Diana, and her brother Chappy. Also found are seven of her father's poems, which she has transcribed.

Additionally, there are transcripts of twelve letters from Biddle's friend, Bernard Berenson.

The series includes Biddle's certificate of appointment as a member of the Commission of Fine Arts, signed by President Truman, in 1950.

Artwork includes mural studies with sketches for Biddle's "Rio Mural," "Mexican Mural," and "Washington Mural," a study for an oil portrait of his son, Michael, and others. Sketches are in pencil, pen and ink, and watercolor.

Two glass plate negatives are of artwork by Biddle.

Arrangement: Dates of diary transcripts are in parentheses, followed by dates the transcripts were produced.

Available Formats: Glass plate negatives have been digitized.

Box 1, Folder 1	Diary Transcripts (1933-1938), Version 1, 1970
Box 1, Folder 2	Diary Transcripts (1933-1938), Version 2 and Excerpts from Notebook Copy, 1970
Box 1, Folder 3	Diary Transcripts (1939-1941), 1970
Box 1, Folder 4	Diary Transcripts (1948), 1969
Box 1, Folder 5	Diary Transcripts (1949), 1969
Box 1, Folder 6	Diary Transcripts (1950-1951), 1969
Box 1, Folder 7	Diary Transcripts (1952-1953), 1969
Box 1, Folder 8	Diary Transcripts (1954-1958), 1966-1969

Box 1, Folder 9	Diary Transcripts (1959-1960), 1969
Box 1, Folder 10	Diary Transcripts (1961-1962), 1966-1969
Box 1, Folder 11	Diary Transcripts (1963), 1966
Box 1, Folder 12	Memoir Transcript, "A Conversation with President Roosevelt", circa 1936
Box 1, Folder 13	Letters from William Hunt Diederich's Daughter "Koukon", circa 1969
Box 1, Folder 14	Letters, Transcripts of Letters from Bernard Berenson, 1949-1957
Oversize 2	Certificate of Appointment to Commission of Fine Arts, 1950
Oversize 3	Artwork, Sketches and Studies for Murals, 1935-1936
Oversize 4	Artwork, Sketches and Studies for Murals, 1942-1945
Box MGP 4	Glass Plate Negatives, circa 1910

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