



# Smithsonian

*Archives of American Art*

## A Finding Aid to the Emil J. Bisttram papers, circa 1902-1983 in the Archives of American Art

Sabine Lipten

The processing of this collection received Federal support from the Smithsonian Collections Care and Preservation Fund, administered by the National Collections Program and the Smithsonian Collections Advisory Committee.

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## Collection Overview

<b>Repository:</b>	Archives of American Art
<b>Title:</b>	Emil J. Bisttram papers
<b>Date:</b>	circa 1902-1983
<b>Identifier:</b>	AAA.bistemil
<b>Creator:</b>	Bisttram, Emil, 1895-1976
<b>Extent:</b>	2.4 Linear feet
<b>Language:</b>	English .
<b>Summary:</b>	The papers of Emil J. Bisttram measure 2.4 linear feet and date from 1902-1983. The papers document Bisttram's life and career through biographical material, business and personal correspondence, writings, professional files, printed material, photographic materials and original artwork.

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## Administrative Information

### Acquisition Information

The records were donated by Mayrion Bisttram, Emil Bisttram's wife, in three accessions in 1963, 1978 and 1983. Papers microfilmed on reel 581 were lent for microfilming in 1973, and some were subsequently donated with the 1983 gift (and refilmed on reels 2892-2894).

### Location of Originals

REEL 581 (selected papers): Originals returned to lender, Emil J. Bisttram, after microfilming.

### Available Formats

35mm microfilm reels 79, 581, 2787, and 2892-2894 available for use at Archives of American Art offices and through interlibrary loan.

### Processing Information

The collection was processed, and a finding aid prepared by Sabine Lipten in 2023.

### Preferred Citation

Emil J. Bisttram Papers, 1902-1983. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

### Restrictions

This collection is open for research. Access to original papers requires an appointment and is limited to the Archives' Washington, D.C. Research Center.

### Conditions Governing Use

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## Biographical / Historical

Emil J. Bisttram (1895-1976) was a Hungarian American painter and educator living in Taos, New Mexico and New York. Born in Hungary in 1895, Bisttram immigrated to New York City with his family when he was eleven years old. He remained in the city into adulthood studying art at the National Academy of Art and Design, then Cooper Union, Parsons, and The Art Students League developing an early career in commercial art. In 1930 Bisttram visited Taos, N.M. for the first time and fell in love with the area leading him to relocate there after completing a Guggenheim fellowship whereby he studied mural painting with Diego Rivera. Numerous mural commissions would follow throughout his career, including murals for the Department of Justice in Washington D.C., The Taos County Courthouse, New Mexico, and the Federal Courthouse in Roswell, New Mexico. Once settled in Taos, Bisttram became a major figurehead in the Taos art colony and was involved with the local Treasury Relief Art Project, a Works Progress Administration initiative. Additionally, while living in Taos, he opened the Taos School of Art (renamed the Bisttram School of Art in 1943) and co-founded the Transcendental Painting Group in 1938. The school drew students from around the country until its closure in 1965.

Bisttram's work brought him recognition and honors throughout the country including exhibitions at the Whitney, Guggenheim and Corcoran Museums. He was known for his modernist work and use of dynamic symmetry, a painting technique.

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## Scope and Contents

The papers of Emil J. Bisttram measure 2.4 linear feet and date from 1902-1983. The papers document Bisttram's life and career through biographical material, business and personal correspondence, writings, professional files, printed material, photographic materials and original artwork. Biographical material includes resumes, baptismal and naturalization records along with several awards and certificates. Also included are business and personal letters to and from Bisttram, including a letter from Lily and Eero Saarinen, and letters from Raymond Jonson; and correspondence with Public Works of Art Project administrators and others involved in the Treasury Relief Art Project, with galleries, museums, art organizations, and students. Writings consist of book drafts by Bisttram for a book on dynamic symmetry and a book on Bisttram's life and career. Also found is information for a course Bisttram taught as well as overview information on the Bisttram School of Fine Art. Other writings include essays and writings on art and Taos, New Mexico by Emil and Mayrion Bisttram, and writings related to government art programs. The professional files contain correspondence, contracts, reports and receipts related to Bisttram's Treasury Relief Art Program work, exhibitions and the establishment of the Taos school of art including legal and property records; invoices, artwork lists, shipping records and materials related to Bisttram's Guggenheim fellowship application. Also found are printed material related to a selection of Bisttram's exhibitions and the art scene in Taos, N.M. Photographs, slides and negatives depict Bisttram, his artwork and select exhibitions. Original artwork includes approximately 175 drawings and sketches of bodies, animals, many of which use dynamic symmetry shapes and figure proportions.

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## Arrangement

The Collection is arranged as seven series. Nitrate negatives are housed separately and closed to researchers.

- Series 1: Biographical Material, 1902-1975 (8 Folders: Box 1)
- Series 2: Correspondence, circa 1925-1983 (0.5 Linear feet: Box 1)

- Series 3: Writings, circa 1921-1975 (0.4 Linear feet: Box 1)
- Series 4: Professional Files, circa 1926-1972 (0.4 Linear feet: Box 1-2)
- Series 5: Printed Material, 1929-1983 (0.5 Linear feet: Box 2)
- Series 6: Photographic Material, circa 1920-1975 (7 Folders: Box 2)
- Series 7: Artwork, circa 1921-1934 (0.4 Linear feet: Box 2-3, OV 4)

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## Names and Subject Terms

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

### Subjects:

Federal aid to the arts -- Arizona  
Federal aid to the arts -- New Mexico  
Painting, Abstract  
Taos School of Art

### Names:

Public Works of Art Project  
Treasury Relief Art Project

### Occupations:

Muralists -- New Mexico  
Painters -- New Mexico -- Taos

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## Container Listing

### Series 1: Biographical Material, 1902-1975

#### 8 Folders (Box 1)

Scope and Contents: Biographical material documents Bisttram's career and life through resumes, biographical summaries, interviews regarding American art and the Federal Arts Program; as well as certificates and awards related to both Bisttram's career and personal life.

Box 1, Folder 1 Resumes and Biographical Summaries, circa 1945-1971

Box 1, Folder 2 United States Certificate of Citizen Naturalization, 1924

Box 1, Folder 3 Hungarian Baptismal Registry Certificate and Notarized English Translation , 1902, 1966

Box 1, Folder 4 New Mexico Arts Commission Appointment Certificates, 1970-1973

Box 1, Folder 5 "Emil Bisttram Day" Proclamation Certificate, 1975

Box 1, Folder 6 Miscellaneous Awards and Certificates, circa 1941-1971

Box 1, Folder 7 Archives of American Art Interview with Bisttram by Sylvia Loomis, 1963

Box 1, Folder 8 "USO Show of the Week" KPHO Radio Show Station Interview, 1944

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## Series 2: Correspondence, circa 1925-1983

### 0.5 Linear feet (Box 1)

Scope and Contents: The correspondence series contains letters of personal and professional nature. Topics include WPA projects, the Treasury Relief Art Program, the New Mexico art committee, The Bisttram School of Art and other art schools such as the Buffalo Fine Arts Academy and the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Art. Additional correspondence relates to event invitations, exhibition planning, returning artwork loans, different professional organizations and clubs. Notable correspondence includes Lily and Eero Saarinen, Raymond Jonson and Bisttram's wife Mayrion Bisttram on his behalf.

The series has been arranged chronologically.

Box 1, Folder 9	Correspondence, 1926-1929
Box 1, Folder 10	Correspondence, 1930-1934
Box 1, Folder 11-12	Correspondence, 1935-1939
Box 1, Folder 13	Correspondence, 1940-1944
Box 1, Folder 14	Correspondence, 1945-1949
Box 1, Folder 15	Correspondence, 1950-1954
Box 1, Folder 16	Correspondence, 1955-1959
Box 1, Folder 17	Correspondence, 1960-1964
Box 1, Folder 18	Correspondence, 1965-1969
Box 1, Folder 19	Correspondence, 1970-1974
Box 1, Folder 20	Correspondence, 1975-1983
Box 1, Folder 21	Correspondence, circa 1925-1983
Box 1, Folder 22	Correspondence from Bisttram to Others, circa 1936-1975

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## Series 3: Writings, circa 1921-1975

### 0.4 Linear feet (Box 1)

Scope and Contents: Writings consist of book drafts by Bisttram for a book on dynamic symmetry and a book on Bisttram's life and career. Also found are notes for a course Bisttram taught as well as overview information on the Bisttram School of Fine Art. Other writings include additional essays and writings on art and Taos, New Mexico by Emil and Mayrion Bisttram; and writings related to government art programs.

Box 1, Folder 23	The Practical Application of Dynamic Symmetry for the Contemporary Artist Book First Draft, circa 1921-1934
Box 1, Folder 24	The Practical Application of Dynamic Symmetry for the Contemporary Artist Book Typescript, circa 1921-1934
Box 1, Folder 25-26	The Creative Process in the New Age by Emil Bisttram, Book Drafts, circa 1975
Box 1, Folder 27	The New Vision in Art Essay by Bisttram, circa 1940-1975
Box 1, Folder 28	Writings on Art and Taos, New Mexico , circa 1940-1963
Box 1, Folder 29	Taos Art Association Meeting Report, 1974
Box 1, Folder 30	Pure Design Course Syllabus and Information for Students, circa 1948
Box 1, Folder 31	Bisttram School of Fine Art, circa 1948
Box 1, Folder 32	Miscellaneous Notes, circa 1959-1962
Box 1, Folder 33	New Mexico and Arizona Public Works of Art Project Description, 1934
Box 1, Folder 34	Creation of The New Mexico Arts Commission Senate Bill, Carbon Copy, circa 1965
Box 1, Folder 35	Taos, An Artist's Paradise Essay by Mayrion Bisttram, 1940
Box 1, Folder 36	Poetry by Francis V. O'Connor, 1973

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## Series 4: Professional Files, circa 1926-1972

### 0.4 Linear feet (Box 1-2)

Scope and Contents: Professional Files contain correspondence, contracts, reports and receipts related to Bisttram's Treasury Relief Art Program work, exhibitions and the establishment of the Taos School of Art including legal and property records; invoices, artwork lists, shipping records and materials related to Bisttram's Guggenheim fellowship application.

Box 1, Folder 37	Treasury Relief Art Project, circa 1934-1937
Box 1, Folder 38	Property Records, circa 1933-1951
Box 1, Folder 39	Sewer Tax Court Summons, 1939
Box 1, Folder 40	Sale Contracts and Loan Agreements, circa 1926-1958
Box 1, Folder 41	Workshops and Artwork Price Lists, circa 1940-1960
Box 2, Folder 1	Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Fellowship, 1931
Box 2, Folder 2	Taos School of Art Tradename Registration Application and Award, 1936
Box 2, Folder 3	Exhibition Lists, Contracts and Shipping Records, circa 1951-1972
Box 2, Folder 4	Design Publishing Company Bisttram School Advertisement Receipts, 1940-1948
Box 2, Folder 5	Furniture INC. Invoices, circa 1958-1959
Box 2, Folder 6	Archives of American Art Deed of Gift, 1972
Box 2, Folder 7	Taos Institute of Creative Orientation INC. Stock Shares Certificate, 1958

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## Series 5: Printed Material, 1929-1983

### 0.5 Linear feet (Box 2)

Scope and Contents: Printed material includes clippings and magazine articles documenting Bisttram's career and the art scene in Taos, New Mexico, along with exhibition announcements and catalogs. Also found are printed materials related to the WPA's Public Work of Art Project initiative, brochures and advertisements for the Bisttram and Taos schools of art and miscellanea.

Box 2, Folder 8-9	Exhibition Announcements, circa 1931-1977
Box 2, Folder 10	Exhibition Catalogs, circa 1931-1947
Box 2, Folder 11	Exhibition Catalogs, circa 1950-1982
Box 2, Folder 12	News Clippings, Bisttram, 1929-1954
Box 2, Folder 13	News Clippings, Bisttram, 1956-1983
Box 2, Folder 14	News Clippings, Bisttram, circa 1929-1983
Box 2, Folder 15	News Clippings, Miscellaneous, circa 1936-1973
Box 2, Folder 16	Magazine Articles, Bisttram, 1957-1978
Box 2, Folder 17	Reproductions of Bisttram's Paintings, circa 1931-1977
Box 2, Folder 18	Public Works of Art Project, 1934-1939
Box 2, Folder 19	Taos Art Scene, circa 1954-1982
Box 2, Folder 20	Taos School of Art, 1935-1941
Box 2, Folder 21	Bisttram School of Art, circa 1941-1963
Box 2, Folder 22	State of New Mexico Planning Office Newsletters, 1962
Box 2, Folder 23	Transcendental Painting Group, circa 1940
Box 2, Folder 24	Miscellaneous Printed Material, circa 1930-1974

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## Series 6: Photographic Material, circa 1920-1975

### 7 Folders (Box 2)

Scope and Contents: Photographic Material contains photographs, negatives and slides of Bisttram, his artwork and exhibitions he held. Also found is a photograph of sculptor Emma Lu Davis in front of a painting.

Box 2, Folder 25	Photographs of Bisttram, circa 1920-1966
Box 2, Folder 26	Photograph of Emma Lu Davis, 1956
Box 2, Folder 27	Photographs of Drawings, circa 1931-1960s
Box 2, Folder 28-29	Photographs of Paintings, circa 1950-1975
Box 2, Folder 30	Negatives of Paintings, circa 1950-1975
Box 2, Folder 31	Slides of L.A. Exhibition and Assorted Paintings, 1954, 1972
Box NTR07	Nitrate Negative, circa 1950-1975

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## Series 7: Artwork, circa 1921-1934

### *0.4 Linear feet (Box 2-3, OV 4)*

Scope and Contents: The artwork series contains approximately 175 drawings and sketches of bodies, animals, many of which use dynamic symmetry shapes and figure proportions.

Box 2, Folder 32	Dynamic Symmetry Illustrations, circa 1921-1934
Oversize 4, Folder 1	Dynamic Symmetry Illustrations, circa 1921-1934
Box 2, Folder 33	Figure Drawings, circa 1921-1934
Box 3, Folder 1	Sketches and Dynamic Symmetry Illustrations, circa 1921-1934

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