



Smithsonian

Archives of American Art

A Finding Aid to the Francis Criss Papers, 1916-1975 (bulk 1940-1969), in the Archives of American Art

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Archives of American Art
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<https://www.aaa.si.edu/services/questions>
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Collection Overview

Repository:	Archives of American Art
Title:	Francis Criss papers
Date:	1916-1975 (bulk 1940-1969)
Identifier:	AAA.crisfran
Creator:	Criss, Francis, 1901-1973
Extent:	1.9 Linear feet
Language:	English .
Summary:	The Francis Criss papers comprise 1.9 linear feet of material dating from 1916 to 1975 (bulk 1940-1969). The collection documents the painting and teaching career of modernist painter Francis Criss mainly through correspondence, handwritten notes for class lectures, exhibition files, newsclippings, scrapbooks, and photographs. Oversized reproductions of his commercial artwork are also found.

Administrative Information

Provenance

In 1970, Francis Criss loaned portions of his papers to the Archives of American Art for microfilming. In 1976, Criss' daughter, Katherine Criss Cappello, donated most of the previously microfilmed materials with additional papers to the Archives.

Separated Materials

The Archives of American Art also holds microfilm of material lent for microfilming (reel N70-34) including notes, exhibition material, photographs of works of art, clippings and a scrapbook. Lent material was returned to the lender and is described as series 1 of the collection container inventory.

Alternative Forms Available

Portions of this collection are available on 35 mm microfilm reel N70-34 at the Archives of American Art Offices and through interlibrary loan.

Processing Information

The 1976 unfiled gift was processed by Rosa Fernandez in 2003.

Preferred Citation

Francis Criss papers, 1916-1975 (bulk 1940-1969). Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Restrictions on Access

The collection is open for research. Use requires an appointment and is limited to the Washington, D.C. research facility.

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Biographical Note

Modernist painter Francis Criss was born in London in 1901 to a Jewish family of Russian descent. At the age of three, his family moved to the United States and settled in Philadelphia. Criss began his art training nine years later at the Graphic Sketch Club and continued his studies at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, the Barnes Foundation, the Art Students League in New York, and, later, with private instruction under Jan Matulka. In 1920, Criss was awarded the prestigious Cresson scholarship by the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts which allowed him to further his studies in Europe. Around 1931, he began to exhibit paintings in a style that came to define his work -- clean lines, simple forms, and flat color of cityscapes and portraits. Criss' first public success as an artist was his inclusion in the inaugural 1932 Whitney Biennial Exhibition; the museum purchased his painting, *Astor Place* (1932) for its permanent collection. In 1934, Criss was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship to study in Italy.

Throughout the 1930s and early 1940s, Criss was involved with the Works Progress Administration (WPA) and the American Artists' Congress, which he helped to organize in 1936. He was also a charter member of the "American Group" with artists that included Philip Evergood, Julian Levy, Jack Levine, William Gropper, Yasuo Kuniyoshi, the Soyers, Chaim Gross, and Abraham Rattner. Critics described his work as both Surrealist and Precisionist and it is often compared to that of Giorgio De Chirico, George Ault, Charles Demuth and Charles Sheeler.

Criss' career began to wane in the 1940s when he turned his attention to commercial art and teaching in order to support his family. Criss taught painting privately and at the Knox-Albright Museum, Brooklyn Museum Art School, The Art Students League, the New School, and the School of Visual Arts. He rarely returned to his own painting during the remainder of his life. Criss died at the age of 72 in 1973.

Scope and Content Note

The Francis Criss papers comprise 1.9 linear feet of material dating from 1916 to 1975 (bulk 1940-1969). The collection documents the painting and teaching career of modernist painter Francis Criss mainly through correspondence, handwritten notes for class lectures, exhibition files, newsclippings, scrapbooks, and photographs. Oversized reproductions of his commercial artwork are also found.

The collection is divided into two separate parts. The first represents the papers originally microfilmed as a loan in 1970 that includes biographical information; teaching and lecture notes compiled by Criss for courses he taught at several New York art schools, including the New School and the School of Visual Arts. Also found is correspondence with museums and magazines, Cornell University, the Henry McCarter Estate, and Theodore L. Shaw; exhibition announcements and catalogs; exhibition files and photographs for the Philadelphia Art Alliance exhibition in 1953 and the Visual Arts Gallery Retrospective in 1966; a record of paintings, murals, and projects; clippings; personal photographs and photographs of works of art.

The second part of the collection represents the portion of the 1976 gift that was not microfilmed in 1970. Found is business and personal correspondence with arts organizations, colleagues, former students, and fellow artists. Also included within this accession are Criss' handwritten notes and syllabi for courses he taught and printed material, such as exhibition announcements, invitations, and catalogs. Photographs are of

Criss, his studio, several family members, and photographs of artwork Criss produced between 1935-1964, including those for the U.S. Army Medical Corps.

Also found are three dismantled scrapbooks. Scrapbook #1 documents Criss' later career as a commercial artist in New York City, primarily in the 1940s, a decade in which he experienced his greatest success. This scrapbook contains a series of large scale reproductions of his illustrations. Scrapbooks #2 and #3 also include examples of Criss' commercial work, as well as illustrations by other artists, and Criss' handwritten notes and instructions on drawing and painting techniques. A small series of miscellany includes several ledger pages detailing art supply expenses, a small unidentified collage, a copy of a 1957 appraisal report titled The Role of the School of Visual Arts, and other miscellaneous items.

Arrangement

The collection is arranged in two parts. Part 1 represents the papers originally microfilmed as a loan in 1970 on reel N70-34. Part 2 is comprised of the 1976 gift.

Researchers should note that many of the papers filmed as a loan on Reel N70-34 in 1970 were also donated in their original form as part of the 1976 gift. However, certain documents may only be found on the microfilm. For this reason, the Archives maintained and arranged the collection in two separate parts. Part 1 represents the papers originally microfilmed as a loan in 1970 on reel N70-34. Part 2 is comprised of the 1976 gift. The arrangement of the first part of the collection reflects the original order of filming of the loan, with original documents found only on microfilm noted as See or See Also References. The remaining materials donated in 1976 have been arranged into series according to type of material.

Missing Title:

- Part 1: Papers filmed as a loan on Reel N70-34, 1916-1969 (Box 1, Reel N70-34, 0.4 linear feet)
- Part 2: 1976 Gift, 1935-1975, undated (Boxes 2-6, 1.5 linear feet)

Names and Subject Terms

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

Subjects:

Art -- Study and teaching
Art -- Technique
Commercial art -- 1940-1950
Modernism (Art)
Painters -- New York (State) -- New York

Types of Materials:

Photographs
Scrapbooks

Names:

New School for Social Research (New York, N.Y.) -- Faculty
United States. Works Progress Administration

Container Listing

Series 1: Papers filmed as a loan on Reel N70-34, 1916-1969

0.4 Linear feet (Box 1, Reel N70-34)

Scope and Contents: Found here are biographical data; teaching and lecture notes and data compiled by Criss for courses he taught at several New York art schools, including the New School and the School of Visual Arts. Topics include particular styles of teaching and his personal philosophy on art; general correspondence with museums and magazines; correspondence with Cornell University, the Henry McCarter Estate, and Theodore L. Shaw; exhibition announcements and catalogs; exhibition files and photographs for the Philadelphia Art Alliance exhibition in 1953 and the Visual Arts Gallery Retrospective in 1966; a record of paintings, murals, and projects; personal photographs and photographs of works of art; reproductions of Criss' commercial work for Abbott Laboratories and others; and clippings. The folders have been arranged in the order as they were filmed in 1970. Materials on microfilm only appear as See or See Also references.

Box 1, Folder 1	Biographical Data and Memorabilia, 1939-1945, 1969
Box 1, Folder 2	Education Notes, undated
Box 1, Folder 3	Learning to See Notes, 1936, undated
Box 1, Folder 4	Character Analysis, Philosophy of Art Notes, 1960, 1966, undated
Box 1	Education Notes (See Reel N70-34), undated
Box 1, Folder 5	Learning to See Notes, undated
Box 1, Folder 6	General Business and Personal Correspondence, 1937-1965, undated
Box 1, Folder 7	Cornell University Correspondence, 1941
Box 1, Folder 8	Henry McCarter Estate Correspondence, 1943-1944
Box 1, Folder 9	Theodore L. Shaw Correspondence (includes Today's Art Gallery and Stuart Art Gallery), 1944-1946, undated
Box 1	Notes (See Reel N70-34), undated
Box 1, Folder 10	Teaching Data (notes and letters), 1945-1949, 1956, 1965, undated
Box 1	Exhibition Data, Catalogs, Announcements, and Lists (See Reel N70-34), 1933-1969
Box 1, Folder 11	Philadelphia Art Alliance Exhibition File, 1952-1954, undated

Box 1, Folder 12	Visual Arts Gallery Retrospective (1966) Exhibition File(See Also Reel N70-34), 1966, undated
Box 1, Folder 13	Record of Paintings, Murals, Projects, 1931-1939, undated
Box 1	Photographs of Works of Art (See Also Reel N70-34), 1941-1946, undated (4 folders)
Box 1, Folder 14-15	Personal Photographs, Snapshots, Group Photos, circa 1920-1966
Box 1, Folder 16	Photographs of U.S. Government, Army Medical Corps Works of Art, circa 1942-1945
Box 1	Photographs, Francis Criss Retrospective, Visual Arts Gallery (See Reel N70-34), 1966
Box 1, Folder 17	Printed Material, Reproductions of Works, Abbott Laboratories, undated
Box 1, Folder 8	Photographs and Reproductions of Commercial Work, undated
Box 1	Clippings and Scrapbook (See Reel N70-34), 1916, 1931-1954, 1967

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Series 2: 1976 Gift, 1935-1975, undated

1.5 Linear feet (Boxes 2-6)

Scope and Contents: Part 2 includes business correspondence regarding finances, contract work and membership in several arts organizations and with government agencies including the Works Project Administration that document Criss' involvement with the Federal Art Project during the 1930s and 1940s. Personal correspondence includes handwritten notes and greeting cards from students and colleagues expressing their get well wishes during Criss' illness in 1965. Also found are several letters of condolences to Criss' wife, Miriam after her husband's death in 1973. Writings consist of loose pages of Criss' handwritten notes for his art lectures and syllabi for illustration courses he taught between 1953 and 1957. Included are exhibition announcements and invitations from several art museums and galleries including the Corcoran Gallery of Art, National Gallery of Art, Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and other art institutions. Exhibition catalogs include *Painting in the United States* from a show hosted by the Carnegie Institute in 1944 and *Eric Isenburger*, an exhibition at M. Knoedler and Company in 1950. Also included is a list of works for an unidentified exhibition in which Criss' painting *Fascism* was among the works shown. Color and black and white photographs are of Criss' wife Miriam and their children and of work Criss created for the U.S. Army Medical Corps.

Found are three dismantled scrapbooks. Scrapbook #1 documents Criss' commercial art in the 1940s and contains a series of large scale reproductions of his illustrations. Scrapbooks #2 and #3 also include examples of Criss' commercial work, as well as illustrations by other artists, and Criss' handwritten notes and instructions on drawing and painting techniques. Miscellany includes several ledger pages detailing art supply expenses, a small unidentified collage, a copy of a 1957 appraisal report titled *The Role of the School of Visual Arts*, and other miscellaneous items.

Box 2, Folder 1	Business Correspondence, 1938-1970, undated
Box 2, Folder 2-4	Personal Correspondence (Oversized in Box 6), 1948-1975, undated
Box 2, Folder 5	Syllabi, 1953-1957, undated
Box 2, Folder 6-7	Writings On Painting, 1957, undated
Box 3, Folder 1	Exhibition announcements and invitations, 1941-1950, undated
Box 3, Folder 2	Exhibition catalogs and lists of titles, 1944,1950, undated
Box 3, Folder 3-4	Photographs (Oversized in Box 6), 1935-1973, undated
Box 3, Folder 5	Miscellany, 1940-1959, 1965, undated
Box 4	Scrapbook #1, circa 1940s, undated
Box 5	Scrapbook #2, circa 1940s-1950s, undated
Box 6	Scrapbook # 3, undated

Box 6 Oversized Mounted Christmas Card from Box 2, undated

Box 6 Oversized Photographs from Box 3, 1935-1973, undated

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