



Smithsonian

Archives of American Art

A Finding Aid to the Ben Cunningham papers, 1904-1984, bulk 1930-1975, in the Archives of American Art

Christopher DeMairo

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.

9 November 2023

Table of Contents

Collection Overview	
Administrative Information	1
Biographical / Historical	2
Scope and Contents	2
Arrangement	2
Names and Subjects	
Container Listing	
Series 1: Personal and Professional Papers, 1941-1984	4
Series 2: Writing Files, circa 1950s-1989	6
Series 3: Printed Materials, 1940-1981	7
Series 4: Artwork, circa 1930-1970	8
Series 5: Photographic Materials, 1904-1972	9

Collection Overview

Repository:	Archives of American Art
Title:	Ben Cunningham papers
Date:	1904-1984 (bulk 1930-1975)
Identifier:	AAA.cunben
Creator:	Cunningham, Ben, 1904-1975
Extent:	3.2 Linear feet
Language:	English .
Summary:	The papers of artist and educator Ben Cunningham measure 2.3 linear feet and date from 1904 to 1989 with the bulk of the material dating from 1930 to 1975. The collection documents his career through professional and personal papers, writings, printed materials, artwork, and photographic materials.

Administrative Information

Acquisition Information

Donated 1972-1989 by the estate of Patsy and Ben Cunningham.

Related Materials

Syracuse University Libraries also holds papers of Ben Cunningham.

Available Formats

Portions of the collection are available on 35mm microfilm reel 663 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

The collection was processed and a finding aid prepared by Christopher DeMairo in 2023

Preferred Citation

Ben Cunningham papers, 1904-1989. 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. Researchers interested in accessing audiovisual recordings in this collection must use access copies. Contact Reference Services for more information.

Conditions Governing Use

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Biographical / Historical

Ben Cunningham (1904-1975) was an artist and educator who worked in San Francisco and New York. He was from Nevada and initially attended the University of Nevada to study architecture. After a year, he moved to California to attend the San Francisco Art Institute. His first one-man show was at the Beaux Arts Gallery in San Francisco in 1931, and for the next decade exhibited in solo and group shows. While in San Francisco, Cunningham also worked as a muralist and was a supervisor of mural paintings under the Federal Art Project. Cunningham moved to New York City in 1944 where he continued his work as an artist, and began teaching at the Newark School of Fine and Industrial Arts, Cooper Union, Pratt Institute, and the Art Students' League of New York. He conducted the summer workshop in advanced painting at the University of Minnesota at Duluth. His artwork can be found in the permanent collections of the Museum of Modern Art, New York, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, Forth Worth Art Museum, the Birla Academy of Art and Culture in Kolkata, India, and private collections.

Scope and Contents

The papers of artist and educator Ben Cunningham measure 2.3 linear feet and date from 1904 to 1989 with the bulk of the material dating from 1930 to 1975. The collection documents his career through professional and personal papers, writings, printed materials, artwork, and photographic materials.

Personal and professional papers include resumes, biographical summaries, audiovisual recordings of two interviews with Cunningham, papers related to the damage of *Autumn Nonscape*, and handmade cards by Cunningham, his wife, and others. One file concerning artist and psychologist Hilaire Hiler includes several letters by Hiler, correspondence with Hiler's daughter and son after his death, and one print made by Hiler. The series is comprised mostly of professional correspondence between Patsy and Ben Cunningham and collectors, museums, galleries, and others concerning the exhibition and sale of Cunningham's artwork. Personal correspondence includes postcards, letters about friends and current events, christmas cards, and some business topics are discussed as well. Writings include an illustrated lecture on color given by Cunningham at the Art Students' League, mixed writings and notes by Cunningham, notes by Patsy on Ben's life, things he once said, his artwork, and bibliographic information. Writings by others about Cunningham, one pamphlet draft from the Newark School of Fine and Industrial Arts that incorporated Cunningham's ideas and philosophies, and a copy of "The Revision of Vision" by S. I. Hayakawa are also present. Printed materials consist of clippings about Cunningham's career, the death of Jean Varda, exhibition catalogs, announcements, posters, and invitations, reproductions of Cunningham's artwork, two scrapbooks, and more. Artwork includes glass slides that Cunningham used to create designs, two sketches, one drawing, and a woodcut by Cunningham. Studies include those for *Callipycia*, *Gordon Knot*, *Topological Conjecture*, *Escape Velocity*, poster work for the John Lindsay's New York mayoral campaign, and more. Photographic materials depict the artist, exhibitions and events, and several snapshots of his studio. The series also includes photographs, slides, and transparencies of Cunningham's artwork; and one file of artwork made by his students at Cooper Union.

Arrangement

The Ben Cunningham papers are arranged as five series:

- Series 1: Personal and Professional Papers, 1941-1984 (1.2 linear feet; Box 1-2, 5)
- Series 2: Writing Files, 1950s-1989 (9 folders; Box 2, 5)

- Series 3: Printed Materials, 1940-1981 (.8 linear feet; Box 2, 5)
- Series 4: Artwork, 1930-1970s (7 folders; Box 3, 5, OV 6)
- Series 5: Photographic Materials, 1904-1972 (.6 linear feet; Box 3-5)

Names and Subject Terms

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

Subjects:

Painting, Modern -- 20th century -- United States

Types of Materials:

Interviews

Sound recordings

Names:

Hiler, Hilaire, 1898-1966

Occupations:

Art teachers -- New York (State) -- New York

Muralists -- New York (State) -- New York

Painters -- New York (State) -- New York

Container Listing

Series 1: Personal and Professional Papers, 1941-1984

1.2 Linear feet (Box 1-2, 5)

Scope and Contents: Found here are the artist's resumes, biographical summaries, and several passports; audiovisual recordings of two interviews with Cunningham, one of which includes an edited transcript; papers concerning damage to *Autumn Nonscape*; an instructor contract with the Art Students' League of New York; and handmade cards by Cunningham, his wife, and others. Hilaire Hiler's file includes several letters, correspondence with Hiler's daughter and son after his death, and one print made by Hiler. The bulk of this series consists of professional correspondence between Patsy and Ben Cunningham and collectors, museums, galleries, and others concerning the exhibition and sale of Cunningham's artwork. Folders might include receipts, exhibition ephemera, lists of exhibition attendees, and shipping information. Personal correspondence includes postcards, letters about friends and current events, christmas cards, and some business topics are discussed as well.

Box 1, Folder 1	Archives of American Art, 1966-1973
Box 1, Folder 2	Autumn Nonscape, Papers, 1968-1973
Box 1, Folder 3	Biographical Materials, Biographical Summaries, Resumes,, 1965-1973
Box 1, Folder 4	Contract, Art Students' League of New York, 1972
Box 1, Folder 5	Correspondence, Ben and Patsy Cunningham Handmade Cards, 1943, 1950, undated
Box 5, Folder 1	Correspondence, Ben and Patsy Cunningham Handmade Cards, undated
Box 1, Folder 6	Correspondence, Hilaire Hiller, 1950, 1965-1966
Box 1, Folder 7	Correspondence, Holiday Cards by Cunningham and others, 1952-1981
Box 1, Folder 8	Personal Correspondence, 1957-1975
Box 1, Folder 9-18	Professional Correspondence, 1968-1984
Box 1, Folder 19-20	Mixed Correspondence, 1957-1974
Box 2, Folder 1	Mixed Correspondence, 1972-1974
Box 2, Folder 2	Interview with Ben Cunningham for Colette Robert's "Meet the Artist" Class at New York University, circa 1967 1 Sound tape reel (1/4 inch)
Box 2, Folder 3-4	Interview, John Daly with Ben Cunningham, 21 November 1970

3 Sound tape reels (1/4 inch)

Box 2, Folder 5

Interview, John Daly with Ben Cunningham, Edited Transcript, 21 November 1970

[Return to Table of Contents](#)

Series 2: Writing Files, circa 1950s-1989

9 Folders (Box 2, 5)

Scope and Contents: Writings include an illustrated lecture on color given by Cunningham at the Art Students' League; drafts about color technique; mixed writings and notes by Cunningham on color, the life of an artist, feelings, subject matter in paintings, his artwork, and more; notes by Patsy on Ben's life, things he once said, his artwork, and bibliographic information. This series also includes writings by others about Cunningham, one draft of a pamphlet from the Newark School of Fine and Industrial Arts that incorporated Cunningham's ideas and philosophies, and a copy of "The Revision of Vision" by S. I. Hayakawa.

Box 2, Folder 6	"A Lecture Delivered by Ben Cunningham," Art Students' League, 1968
Box 5, Folder 2	Ben Cunningham, Color Section Draft for A Dictionary of Art Terms and Techniques (1969), circa 1969
Box 2, Folder 7	Ben Cunningham, Writings, circa 1950-1970
Box 2, Folder 8	Ben Cunningham, Miscellaneous Notes on Art and Color, undated
Box 2, Folder 9	Patsy Cunningham, Notes on Ben Cunningham, 1966-1971
Box 2, Folder 10	"Ben Cunningham: A Life with Color," Cindy Nemser, circa 1989
Box 2, Folder 11	Writings about Ben Cunningham, circa 1950s-1974
Box 2, Folder 12	Pamphlet on Careers in Art, Newark School of Fine and Industrial Arts, undated
Box 2, Folder 13	"The Revision of Vision" S. I. Hayakawa, circa 1944

[Return to Table of Contents](#)

Series 3: Printed Materials, 1940-1981

.8 Linear feet (Box 2, 5)

Scope and Contents: Clippings cover Cunningham's career, exhibitions, other art related topics, the death of Jean Varda; an invitation to Varda's funeral ceremony is also present. Exhibition materials consist of catalogs, announcements, posters, and invitations for Cunningham's group and solo shows. Scrapbooks contain mostly clippings, exhibition ephemera, and photographs of artwork and exhibition installations. Also present are reproductions of Cunningham's work used by others, ephemera from art events, and a copy of *Cuas 9* published by the Cooper Union School of Art and Architecture.

Box 2, Folder 14	Art Students' League, 1967-1975
Box 2, Folder 15	Clippings, 1940-1975
Box 2, Folder 16	Clippings, Concerning the Death of Jean Varda, 1970-1971
Box 2, Folder 17	Cuas 9, Cooper Union School of Art and Architecture, 1963
Box 2, Folder 18	Exhibitions, One-man shows, Brochures, Catalogs, Invitations, Posters, 1953-1975
Box 2, Folder 19-24	Exhibitions, Group Shows, Brochures, Catalogs, Invitations, Posters, 1941-1981
Box 2, Folder 25	Exhibition Press Releases, 1966-1979
Box 2, Folder 26	Exhibitions, Other Artists, 1970, 1975
Box 2, Folder 27	Minnesota State Junior College Fine Arts Festival, Schedule and Clippings, 1971
Box 2, Folder 28	Reproductions, circa 1970s
Box 5, Folder 3	Reproductions, Record Cover Design for Eric Dolphy, 1963
Box 5	Scrapbook, 1949-1965
Box 5	Scrapbook, 1969-1981

[Return to Table of Contents](#)

Series 4: Artwork, circa 1930-1970

7 Folders (Box 3, 5, OV 6)

Scope and Contents: Found here are glass slides that Ben Cunningham used to create designs, two sketches, one drawing, and a woodcut by Cunningham. Studies include those for *Callipycia*, *Gordon Knot*, *Topological Conjecture*, *Escape Velocity*, poster work for the John Lindsay's New York mayoral campaign, and more.

Box 3, Folder 1-2	Glass Slide Designs, undated
Box 3, Folder 3	Sketches, 1950, undated
Box 3, Folder 4	Studies for Cunningham Artwork, undated
Oversize 6	Studies for Cunningham Artwork, undated
Box 3, Folder 5	Wood Engraving by Ben Cunningham, circa 1935
Box 5, Folder 4	Drawing of a Man by Ben Cunningham, 1930

[Return to Table of Contents](#)

Series 5: Photographic Materials, 1904-1972

.6 Linear feet (Box 3-5)

Scope and Contents: Photographic materials consist of family photos, pictures taken at exhibitions and events, images of the artist, and several snapshots of his studio. The series also includes photographs, slides, and transparencies of Cunningham's artwork; and one file of artwork made by his students at Cooper Union.

Box 3, Folder 6	Ben Cunningham and Others, 1904-1972
Box 3, Folder 7	Ben Cunningham, Exhibition Installations, 1952, 1957
Box 3, Folder 8	San Francisco Studio, circa 1941
Box 3, Folder 9	Artwork, Photographs, circa 1940s-1960s
Box 4, Folder 1-3	Artwork, Photographs, circa 1940s-1960s
Box 5, Folder 5	Artwork, Photographs, 1939, 1952
Box 4, Folder 4	Artwork, Slides, 1940s-1970s
Box 4, Folder 5-6	Artwork, Transparencies, 1940s-1970s
Box 4, Folder 7	Cooper Union Student Artwork, 1960-1964

[Return to Table of Contents](#)