



Smithsonian

Archives of American Art

A Finding Aid to the James Edward Davis papers, circa 1917-1970, in the Archives of American Art

Allessandra Liberati

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.

2023 August 14

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Collection Overview

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| Repository: | Archives of American Art |
| Title: | James Edward Davis papers |
| Date: | circa 1917-1970 |
| Identifier: | AAA.davijame |
| Creator: | Davis, Jim, 1901-1974 |
| Extent: | 3.8 Linear feet |
| Language: | English . |
| Summary: | The papers of painter, photographer, and filmmaker James Edward Davis measure 3.8 linear feet and date from circa 1917-1970. They highlight Davis's career through biographical material, correspondence, writings, personal business records, printed and photographic material, and artwork. |

Administrative Information

Acquisition Information

Sketches, designs, working papers related to Davis's art films, the John Marin letters, and drawings were lent for microfilming by James E. Davis in 1967 and 1968. Papers were donated in 1969 by James E. Davis and Rosalind Kossoff.

Separated Materials

The Archives of American Art holds microfilm of material lent for microfilming (reels N172, N68-86A, and N738) including sketches, designs, working papers related to Davis's art films, the John Marin letters, and drawings. Loaned materials were returned to the lender.

Related Materials

The Archives of American Art also hold an oral history interview with James Edward Davis conducted 1971, August 10 by Paul Cummings.

Available Formats

Portions of the collection and material lent for microfilming are available on 35mm microfilm reels N172, N68-86A, N738, and 430-433 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

This collection was processed, and a finding aid prepared, by Alessandra Liberati in 2023.

Preferred Citation

James Edward Davis papers, circa 1917-1970. 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

James Edward Davis (1901-1974) was a painter, photographer, and filmmaker who worked primarily in New Jersey. Born in Clarksburg, West Virginia, Davis specialized in the abstract and surrealist styles and his artwork was heavily inspired by the zeitgeist of the 1920s. He graduated from Princeton University in 1923 and studied painting and sculpture in France with Andre Lhote for three years. Davis taught at multiple places during his career including Lawrenceville School (1933-1936), Princeton (1936-1942), and the Moholy-Nagy Institute of Design (1947). Davis is also known for his experimental abstract films that use mobile designs of transparent plastics and controlled illumination. His paintings have been shown at the Museum of Modern Art, the Addison gallery, and the Princeton and Yale University Art Museums. He died in Princeton, New Jersey at the Princeton Medical Center at the age of 73 on September 20, 1974.

Scope and Contents

The James Edward Davis papers measure 3.8 linear feet and date from circa 1917-1970. Biographical materials consist of a resume, an interview with Davis, and certificates related to his career and schooling. Correspondence consists of letters between himself and his agent Rosalind Kossoff, Frank Lloyd Wright, John Marin Jr., and others. Writings includes notebooks pertaining to his many projects and personal business records are composed of documents relating to his career and his time spent in Princeton, New Jersey, as well as artwork appraisals. Printed material is made up of exhibition announcements and catalogs, news clippings, press releases, and other documents. Photographic materials include photographs from various film projects and exhibits, as well as personal photographs. Artwork consists of a group of sketches showing a figure in motion.

Arrangement

This collection consists of seven series.

- Series 1: Biographical Material, circa 1954-1966 (.1 Linear feet: Box 1)
- Series 2: Correspondence, circa 1940-1969 (.6 Linear feet: Box 1)
- Series 3: Writings, circa 1920-1960 (.8 Linear feet: Boxes 1 and 2)
- Series 4: Personal Business Records, circa 1956-1967 (.1 Linear feet: Box 2)
- Series 5: Printed Material, circa 1945-1969 (.2 Linear feet: Box 2)
- Series 6: Photographic Material, circa 1919-1970 1(.9 Linear feet: Boxes 2-5)
- Series 7: Artwork, circa 1946 (.1 Linear feet: Box 5)

Names and Subject Terms

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

Types of Materials:

Drawings

Names:

Marin, John, 1870-1953

Wright, Frank Lloyd, 1867-1959

Occupations:

Filmmakers -- New Jersey -- Princeton

Painters -- New Jersey -- Princeton

Photographers -- New Jersey -- Princeton

Container Listing

Series 1: Biographical Material, circa 1954-1966

.1 Linear feet (Box 1)

Scope and Contents: Biographical material includes Davis's resume, certificates relating to his career, and the transcript of an interview with Davis by Bruce Friar.

Box 1, Folder 1 Resume, circa 1955

Box 1, Folder 2 Interview with Davis by Bruce Friar, Transcript, circa 1966

Box 1, Folder 3 American Film Assembly, Recognition of Merit Certificate, circa 1954

Box 1, Folder 4 Kiskiminetas Springs School, Certificates , circa 1956-1957

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Series 2: Correspondence, circa 1940-1969

.6 Linear feet (Box 1)

Scope and Contents: Correspondence is between Davis and Rosalind Kossoff, Frank Lloyd Wright, John Marin Jr., and Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, as well as others.

| | |
|---------------------|--|
| Box 1, Folder 5 | Correspondence (1940s), circa 1940-1949 |
| Box 1, Folder 6-7 | Correspondence (1950s), circa 1950-1959 |
| Box 1, Folder 8 | Correspondence (1960s), circa 1960-1968 |
| Box 1, Folder 9 | Kossoff, Rosalind (1940s), circa 1949 |
| Box 1, Folder 10-19 | Kossoff, Rosalind (1950s), circa 1950-1959 |
| Box 1, Folder 20-29 | Kossoff, Rosalind (1960s), circa 1960-1969 |
| Box 1, Folder 30 | Marin, John Jr., circa 1950-1953 |
| Box 1, Folder 31 | Moholy-Nagy, Laszlo, circa 1945-1948 |
| Box 1, Folder 32 | Vanderpool, Wynant D. , circa 1947-1958 |
| Box 1, Folder 33 | Wright, Frank Lloyd, circa 1950-1957 |
| Box 1, Folder 34 | Films by Davis, circa 1948-1953 |

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Series 3: Writings, circa 1920-1960

.8 Linear feet (Boxes 1 and 2)

Scope and Contents: Writings includes notebooks consisting of notes and narratives on each project, news clippings and other articles, drawings, and photographs. Also included are an article written by Cecile Starr and miscellaneous writings.

By Davis

Box 1, Folder 35 "Continuity Sheet for Film Pertaining to Chicago", by Davis, circa

Box 1, Folder 36 "Through the Looking Glass", circa 1954

Notebooks

Box 1, Folder 37 "Exhibits-Collections-Etc. of Paintings", circa 1946

Box 1, Folder 38-39 "Experiments in the Visual Expression of Motion", circa 1920-1950

Box 1, Folder 40-41 "Notes on Frank Lloyd Wright", circa 1950

Box 1, Folder 42 "Notes, Photographs, Etc. on John Marin", circa 1940-1951

Box 2, Folder 1-4 "Pertaining to the Films of Jim Davis", circa 1949-1959

Box 2, Folder 5-8 "Plastics and Illumination", circa 1930

Box 2, Folder 9 "Photography", circa 1952-1960

Box 2, Folder 10-11 "The Visual Arts and Space", circa 1945

Box 2, Folder 12-13 "Visual Design, Notes, and Illustrations", circa 1936-1952

By Others

Box 2, Folder 14 Article for June Issue of House Beautiful (1954), Draft by Cecile Starr, circa 1954

Box 2, Folder 15 Miscellaneous Writings, circa 1952-1956

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Series 4: Personal Business Records, circa 1956-1967

.1 Linear feet (Box 2)

Scope and Contents: Personal business records include materials relating to the Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts, a signed petition to keep Davis as a resident of Princeton, New Jersey, and the artist record for Davis at the Museum of Modern Art. Also included are bills and receipts for artwork sales, and artwork appraisals.

| | |
|------------------|--|
| Box 2, Folder 16 | Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts, circa 1957 |
| Box 2, Folder 17 | Museum of Modern Art Department of Photography, Artist Record, circa |
| Box 2, Folder 18 | Residency Petition for Princeton, New Jersey, 1961, Jul. 25 |
| Box 2, Folder 19 | Artwork Appraisals, circa 1967 |
| Box 2, Folder 20 | Bills and Receipts for Artwork Sales, circa 1956-1967 |

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Series 5: Printed Material, circa 1945-1969

.2 Linear feet (Box 2)

Scope and Contents: Printed material consists of exhibition announcements and catalogs, a convocation program for the Kiski school, news clippings and press releases, and publications featuring Davis's artwork.

| | |
|------------------|---|
| Box 2, Folder 21 | Exhibition Announcements, circa 1950-1969 |
| Box 2, Folder 22 | Exhibition Catalogs, circa 1950-1961 |
| Box 2, Folder 23 | Kiski School Convocation Program, 1956, Jan. 21 |
| Box 2, Folder 24 | News Clippings, circa 1949-1968 |
| Box 2, Folder 25 | Press Releases, circa 1954-1968 |
| Box 2, Folder 26 | Publications Featuring Artwork, circa 1945-1967 |
| Box 2, Folder 27 | Miscellaneous Printed Material, circa 1952-1965 |

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Series 6: Photographic Material, circa 1919-1970

1.9 Linear feet (Boxes 2-5)

Scope and Contents: Photographic materials consist of photographs of images from Davis's films. Also included are photographs from his personal life.

| | |
|---------------------|--|
| Box 2, Folder 28 | Personal Photographs, circa 1964 |
| | Titled |
| Box 2, Folder 29 | "Calligraphic Designs", Photographs and Slides, circa 1960 |
| Box 2, Folder 30-31 | "Figures in Motion", circa 1919-1958 |
| Box 3, Folder 1-3 | "Human Figure - Static", circa 1919-1956 |
| Box 3, Folder 4 | "Japanese Calligraphy", circa 1953-1960 |
| Box 3, Folder 5 | "Ice Forms", circa 1953-1958 |
| Box 3, Folder 6-7 | "Landscape", circa 1925-1956 |
| Box 3, Folder 8-10 | "Light Reflections", Photographs, circa 1937-1949 |
| Box 3, Folder 11 | "Light Reflections", Photographs and Slides, circa 1937-1949 |
| Box 3, Folder 12-13 | "Mirrored Effects", Photographs, circa 1952-1958 |
| Box 3, Folder 14 | "Mirrored Effects", Slides, circa 1952-1958 |
| Box 3, Folder 15-16 | "The Path of Motion", circa 1937-1947 |
| Box 4, Folder 1 | "Portrait and Genre", circa 1925-1947 |
| Box 4, Folder 2 | "Prism Refractions", circa 1959 |
| Box 4, Folder 3-5 | "Plastics and Illuminations", Exhibit, circa 1932-1960 |
| Box 4, Folder 6 | "Still Life", circa 1927-1947 |
| Box 5, Folder 1-2 | "Time Exposures", circa 1937-1958 |
| Box 5, Folder 3 | Photographs from Films, circa 1920-1970 |
| Box 5, Folder 4 | Duplicates, circa 1920-1970 |

Box 5, Folder 5

Miscellaneous Photographs, circa 1920-1970

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Series 7: Artwork, circa 1946

.1 Linear feet (Box 5)

Scope and Contents: Artwork consists of a group of sketches showing a figure in motion.

Box 5, Folder 6 Sketches of Figures in Motion, circa 1946

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