



# Smithsonian

*Archives of American Art*

## A Finding Aid to the Helen DeMott Papers, 1896-1997, in the Archives of American Art

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Archives of American Art  
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Washington, D.C. 20001  
<https://www.aaa.si.edu/services/questions>  
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## Collection Overview

<b>Repository:</b>	Archives of American Art
<b>Title:</b>	Helen DeMott papers
<b>Date:</b>	1896-1997
<b>Identifier:</b>	AAA.demohele
<b>Creator:</b>	DeMott, Helen, 1920-1997
<b>Extent:</b>	7.9 Linear feet
<b>Language:</b>	English .
<b>Summary:</b>	The papers of painter Helen DeMott measure 7.9 linear feet and date from 1896-1997. DeMott's painting career from 1940-1996 is documented through her numerous sketchbooks and original artwork. Also found is biographical material, correspondence, writings and poems, scrapbooks, printed material, photographic material, audio and video recordings, and scattered material from collagist Ray Johnson.

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## Administrative Information

### Provenance

The Helen DeMott papers were a bequest to the Archives of American Art in 2003 by James Goldiner, executive for the estate of Helen DeMott.

### Alternative Forms Available

Videotapes in the collection were digitized in September 2009 and are available upon request from the Archives of American Art.

### Processing Information

In 2003, the collection was accessioned and books were cataloged and removed. The papers were processed to a preliminary level and described by Justin Brancato in September 2006. In November 2009, the collection was minimally processed and further described by Sarah Haug.

### Preferred Citation

Helen DeMott papers, 1896-1997. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

### Restrictions on Access

The collection is open for research. Use requires an appointment.

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## Biographical Note

Helen DeMott (1920-1997) was a New York City based painter and poet and well-known East Village community activist.

In the 1940s, DeMott attended the National Academy of Design and Art Students League. In the late 1960s, DeMott began focusing her work on the scientific study of waves, specifically the structure of water wave surfaces, a theme that remained in her work for the rest of her career. In 1974-1975, DeMott completed two building murals of water wave structures in New York City: *Wave Spill*, located at 155 First Avenue and 10th Street; and *River Wave*, at 509 Amsterdam Avenue. She had a solo exhibition at the Green Mountain Gallery in 1969, and exhibited at the ground-breaking alternative space, 112 Workshop/112 Greene Street in 1979. DeMott was received a number of grants and awards throughout her career including National Community Arts Competition winner in 1974, a grant from the New York State Council on the Arts (CAPS) in 1976, a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship in 1978, and a Gottlieb Foundation grant in 1983. She passed away in 1997.

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## Scope and Content Note

The papers of painter Helen DeMott measure 7.9 linear feet and date from 1896-1997. DeMott's painting career from 1940-1996 is documented through her numerous sketchbooks and original artwork. Also found is biographical material, correspondence, writings and poems, scrapbooks, printed material, photographic material, audio and video recordings, and scattered material from collagist Ray Johnson.

The scattered biographical material contains official documents, DeMott's resume, circulars and receipts from the Art School of the National Academy of Design, and two obituaries. Correspondence includes letters from publishers regarding DeMott's book proposal "Geography into Landscape," correspondence with universities and scientific institutions regarding her Wave series, and personal correspondence including letters from photographer, filmmaker, and painter Rudy Burckhardt, writer Alfred Chester, painter Clifford Wright, and collagist Edith Schloss.

The bulk of the writings is DeMott's poetry, as well as some artist's statements, loose notes, a speech, travel diaries, and handwritten, typed, and edited manuscripts, including a typed manuscript of "Geography into Landscape." Writings by others include poetry by Celia Bland, Miriam Finkelstein, and Marie Ponsot. Scrapbooks document DeMott's research and artwork related to waves and includes clippings, photographs of artwork, sketches and notations, and typed notes on painting waves. Printed material includes magazine and newspaper articles about Helen DeMott and various other artists, and many articles related to water waves.

Photographic material includes black and white photographs of DeMott's artwork and personal photographs. Of interest is a 1943 photograph of a group at the Art Students League which includes Ester Rolick, Edith Schloss, Max Eastman, and Helen DeMott. Also found are slides and transparencies of artwork and slides for lectures on waves. Audiovisual Recordings include one reel-to-reel tape and five videotapes, some related to DeMott's study of waves.

There is one folder of material from collagist Ray Johnson containing scattered letters and mail art, exhibition fliers, and collages. Measuring 4.2 linear feet, the bulk of DeMott's papers are sketchbooks and original artwork spanning her artistic career. There are numerous loose sketches, notes, sketchbooks, holiday cards, watercolors, and oversized drawings in pencil, ink, and oil pastels, much of which is related to waves. Original artwork by others includes Esther Rolick and Edith Schloss.

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## Arrangement

The collection is arranged into 9 series:

Missing Title:

- Series 1: Biographical Material, 1911-1997 (Boxes 1, 9; 7 folders)
- Series 2: Letters and Correspondence, 1896, 1930-1995 (Boxes 1-2; 1.1 linear feet)
- Series 3: Writings, 1950-circa 1996 (Boxes 2-3; 1.0 linear feet)
- Series 4: Scrapbooks, 1967-1989 (Box 3; 2 folders)
- Series 5: Printed Material, 1961-1996 (Boxes 3, 9; 0.2 linear feet)
- Series 6: Photographic Material, circa 1920s-1996 (Boxes 3-4, 9; 0.8 linear feet)
- Series 7: Audiovisual Recordings, 1975, 1978, undated (Box 4; 0.4 linear feet)
- Series 8: Ray Johnson, 1947, 1963, undated (Box 4; 1 folder)
- Series 9: Artwork, 1941-1996 (Boxes 4-9, OV 10-13; 4.2 linear feet)

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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:

Women artists  
Women authors

Types of Materials:

Drawings  
Manuscripts  
Notes  
Photographs  
Poems  
Scrapbooks  
Sketches  
Sound recordings  
Travel diaries  
Video recordings  
Watercolors

Names:

Art Students League (New York, N.Y.) -- Photographs  
Bland, Celia  
Burkhardt, Rudy  
Chester, Alfred, 1928-1971  
Eastman, Max, 1883-1969  
Finkelstein, Miriam  
Johnson, Ray, 1927-  
Ponsot, Marie  
Rolick, Esther G., 1922-  
Schloss, Edith, 1919-  
Wright, Clifford, 1919-

Occupations:

Painters -- New York (State) -- New York  
Poets -- New York (State) -- New York  
Political activists -- New York (State) -- New York

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## Container Listing

### Series 1: Biographical Material, 1911-1997

#### 7 Folders (Boxes 1, 9)

Scope and Contents: Biographical material contains official documents, DeMott's resume, circulars and receipts from the Art School of the National Academy of Design, and two obituaries.

Arrangement: Folders are arranged alphabetically by subject.

Box 1, Folder 1	Birth Certificate, 1916
Box 1, Folder 2	Curriculum Vitae, circa 1980s-1990s
Box 1, Folder 3	Diploma, 1938 Notes: Oversized material housed in Box 9, Folder 1.
Box 1, Folder 4	Marriage Certificate, 1911
Box 1, Folder 5	National Academy of Design, 1940-1942
Box 1, Folder 6	Obituary, 1997
Box 9, Folder 1	Blessed Sacrament Academy Diploma, 1938 Notes: Oversized material from Box 1, Folder 3.

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## Series 2: Letters and Correspondence, 1896, 1930-1995

### 1.1 Linear feet (Boxes 1-2)

**Scope and Contents:** Both business and personal correspondence are found in this series. Business correspondence includes correspondence with publishers regarding DeMott's book proposal "Geography into Landscape," with universities and scientific institutions regarding the Wave series, with galleries, museums, art programs and foundations, and correspondence regarding her various committee and community activities. Much of the personal correspondence is from friends living or traveling outside of the United States; many address DeMott with familiarity and fondness, using the salutation, "Ho!" Among the correspondents are photographer, filmmaker, and painter Rudy Burckhardt, writer Alfred Chester, painter Clifford Wright, and collagist Edith Schloss. There is also a large quantity of personal postcards.

**Arrangement:** Folders are arranged alphabetically by type of correspondence, then by subject. Undated correspondence is filed at the back of each folder.

Box 1, Folder 7-10	Business, 1934-1995, undated
Box 1, Folder 11	Business, Book Proposal: Geography into Landscape, circa 1984-1986
Box 1, Folder 12	Business, Ottendorf Library, 1966-1967
Box 1, Folder 13-19	Personal, 1896, 1930-1995, undated
Box 1, Folder 20	Personal, Burckhardt, Rudy, 1947-1952, 1970
Box 1, Folder 21	Personal, Chester, Alfred, 1960-1965, 1983, undated
Box 1, Folder 22	Personal, DeMott, Helen, 1987-1994
Box 1, Folder 23-24	Personal, Hacker, Lucia Vernarelli, 1947-1958, undated
Box 1, Folder 25-26	Personal, Schloss, Edith, 1947-1971, undated
Box 1, Folder 27	Personal, Wright, Clifford, 1949-1954
Box 1, Folder 28	Postcards, 1943-1952
Box 2, Folder 1-4	Postcards, 1953-1976, undated

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## Series 3: Writings, 1950-circa 1996

*1 Linear foot (Boxes 2-3)*

Scope and Contents: The bulk of the material found in this series is poetry written by DeMott in notebooks and on loose paper. Also found are artist's statements, loose notes, a speech, travel diaries, and handwritten, typed, and edited manuscripts, including a typed manuscript of "Geography into Landscape." Writings by others includes music scores and essays, but the bulk of the material is poetry by Celia Bland, Miriam Finkelstein, Marie Ponsot, and others.

Arrangement: Writings by Helen DeMott are filed before writings by others. Folders are then arranged alphabetically by subject or title.

Box 2	Writings by Helen DeMott
Box 2, Folder 5	Artist's Statements, 1981, 1993, undated Notes: Contains original artwork.
Box 2, Folder 6	"Cezanne's 'The Cardplayers'.....What's in a Game?", 1988
Box 2, Folder 7	"The Chronicle of Sonta Kerosina", undated
Box 2, Folder 8	City Planning Commission Speech, 1963
Box 2, Folder 9	"Geography into Landscape", circa 1980s
Box 2, Folder 10	"How 'Ho' Became the Battle-Cry of Chelsea,", undated
Box 2, Folder 11	"Lone Dog's Winter Count", 1991
Box 2, Folder 12	"Mother Goose Cookbook", 1964, 1995, undated
Box 2, Folder 13-15	Notebooks, Loose Notes, 1964-1996, undated
Box 2, Folder 16-21	Notebooks, Poetry, 1989-1996
Box 2, Folder 22	Notes, Various, 1968, 1983, 1991-1995, undated
Box 2, Folder 23	Notes, Waves, 1974-1975, undated
Box 2, Folder 24	"Octopus in the Metropolis", 1966
Box 2, Folder 25	Poetry, DeMott, Helen, 1952, 1989-1996
Box 2, Folder 26	Travel Diary: France, Italy, Greece and Turkey, 1950-1951
Box 2, Folder 27	Waves, circa 1970s, undated
Box 3	Writings by Others



Box 3, Folder 1	Allan, Sergio Borges, "The Indian Space Painters,", 1995
Box 3, Folder 2	Goldscheider, Ludwig, "Jan Vermeer: The Paintings Complete Edition,", undated
Box 3, Folder 3	Music Tablature, 1968-1975, undated
Box 3, Folder 4	Poetry, Bland, Celia, 1996, undated
Box 3, Folder 5	Poetry, Finkelstein, Miriam, 1990-1996, undated
Box 3, Folder 6	Poetry, Ponsot, Marie, 1996, undated
Box 3, Folder 7	Poetry, Various Artists, A-Z, 1994-1996, undated

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## Series 4: Scrapbooks, 1967-1989

### *2 Folders (Box 3)*

Scope and Contents: Scrapbooks related to DeMott's Waves series includes clippings, photographs of artwork, sketches and notations, and typed notes on painting waves. Much of the material is photocopied.

Arrangement: Folders are arranged chronologically.

Box 3, Folder 8	Waves, 1967-1973
Box 3, Folder 9	Waves, 1967-1975, 1985-1989, undated

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## Series 5: Printed Material, 1961-1996

### 0.2 Linear feet (Boxes 3, 9)

Scope and Contents: Printed material includes magazine and newspaper articles about DeMott, various other artists, and scientific articles related to water waves. Also found are clippings of images, exhibition announcements, a sign, and a poster. Many articles are photocopies.

Arrangement: Folders are arranged alphabetically by type of material.

Box 3, Folder 10	Catalogue, "Artists of the Lower East Side," 1975
Box 3, Folder 11	Exhibition Announcements, 1977-1991, undated
Box 3, Folder 12	Exhibition Sign, undated
Box 3, Folder 13	Magazine and Newspaper Clippings, 1969-1993, undated
Box 3, Folder 14	Magazine and Newspaper Clippings, Various Artists, 1982-1991, undated
Box 3, Folder 15	Magazine Clippings, Bore and Meander, Chaos (Fractals), 1979-1996
Box 3, Folder 16	Magazine Clippings, Helen DeMott, 1963-1977, 1991
Box 3, Folder 17	Poster, 1985 Notes: Oversized material housed in Box 9, Folder 2.
Box 3, Folder 18	Various Printed Material, Clippings of Images, undated
Box 3, Folder 19	Various Printed Material, New York City Housing, 1961-1962, undated
Box 9, Folder 2	"Conch Music" Poster, 1985 Notes: Oversized material from Box 3, Folder 17.

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## Series 6: Photographic Material, circa 1920s-1996

## 0.8 Linear feet (Boxes 3-4, 9)

Scope and Contents: Photographic material includes black and white photographs of DeMott's artwork and personal photographs. Most of the artwork photographs are taken by Rudolph (Rudy) Burckhardt and have notations on the back with dimensions, title, date of creation, and ownership information. Personal photographs are mostly snapshots of unidentified persons in New York and Italy, circa 1920s-1930s, and DeMott and others with dogs, circa 1960s-1990s. Also found are slides of artwork, slides for lectures on waves, notes on slides, and transparencies of artwork.

Arrangement: Folders are arranged alphabetically by type of material, then by subject.

Box 3	Photographs and Negatives
Box 3, Folder 20-22	Artwork (1940-1982), undated
Box 3, Folder 23	Ocean Photographs, 1967, 1990 Notes: Oversized material housed in Box 9, Folder 3.
Box 3, Folder 24-30	Personal, circa 1920s-1991, undated Notes: Oversized material housed in Box 9, Folder 4.
Box 3	Slides
Box 3, Folder 31-33	Artwork (1945-1991), undated
Box 4	Slides
Box 4, Folder 1	Artwork, Miscellaneous, undated
Box 4, Folder 2	Artwork by Cezanne and Caravaggio, undated
Box 4, Folder 3	Lectures Slides (Waves), undated
Box 4, Folder 4	Notes on Slides, 1978-1996, undated
Box 4, Folder 5	Personal (1971-1982), undated
Box 4, Folder 6	Transparencies, Artwork, undated
Box 9, Folder 3	Ocean Photographs, 1967, 1990 Notes: Oversized photographs from Box 3, Folder 23.
Box 9, Folder 4	<a href="#">Personal, "Fun for Funds," Art Students League, 1943</a> Notes: Oversized photograph from Box 3, Folders 24-30.

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## Series 7: Audiovisual Recordings, 1975, 1978, undated

*0.4 Linear feet (Box 4)*

Scope and Contents: Found is one sound tape reel (1/4 in. tape) of a music recording and two video recordings on five videoreels (1/2 in. tape), including "Chorda," a dance performance, and multiple copies of DeMott's "Wave Notes."

Arrangement: Folders are arranged alphabetically by type of material, then by title.

Available: All of the video recordings have been digitized for research access.

## Formats:

Box 4, Folder 7	Bach, Suite #3, undated 1 Sound tape reel
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Box 4, Folder 8	"Chorda", 1978 March 31 1 Videoreel
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Box 4, Folder 9-10	"Wave Notes", 1975 July 17 4 Videoreels Notes: Original videoreel and three duplicate videoreels.
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## Series 8: Ray Johnson, 1947, 1963, undated

### *1 Folder (Box 4)*

Scope and Contents: Found is one folder of scattered letters, mail art, exhibition fliers, and collages by collagist Ray Johnson.

Box 4, Folder 11 Collages/Mail Art/Letters, 1947, 1963, undated

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## Series 9: Artwork, 1941-1996

### 4.2 Linear feet (Boxes 4-9, OV 10-13)

**Scope and Contents:** The bulk of the material found are sketchbooks from 1941-1996 and DeMott's original artwork related to water waves. The sketchbooks primarily contain pencil and ink drawings; many also include notes on and sketches of waves. Also found are numerous loose sketches and notes, holiday cards, watercolors, and oversized drawings in pencil, ink, and oil pastels. Original artwork by others include Esther Rolick and Edith Schloss.

**Arrangement:** Folders are arranged alphabetically by type of material.

Box 4, Folder 12-14	Drawings, 1941-1986, undated Notes: Oversized material housed in Box 9, Folders 6-9 and OV 13.
Box 4, Folder 15	Drawings, European Landscapes, circa 1950s Notes: Oversized material housed in Box 9, Folders 10-11.
Box 4, Folder 16	Drawings and Printed Material (used for reference), 1979-1996, undated
Box 4, Folder 17	Gifts of Artwork to Helen DeMott, 1941-1986, undated Notes: Oversized material housed in Box 9, Folder 12.
Box 4, Folder 18	Holiday Cards, Miscellaneous, 1964-1971, 1985-1995, undated
Box 4, Folder 19	Pastel on Paper, 1961-1966 Notes: Oversized material housed in Box 9, Folder 13.
Box 5, Folder 1	Pastel on Paper, 1966-1990, undated Notes: Oversized material housed in Box 9, Folder 14, and OV 13.
Box 5, Folder 2	Postcard Collages by Others, 1948, 1969, 1981-1982, undated
Box 5, Folder 3	Prints, 1942-1948, 1963-1968, undated
Box 5, Folder 4-19	Sketchbooks, 1941-1975
Box 6, Folder 1-10	Sketchbooks, 1976-1987
Box 7, Folder 1-9	Sketchbooks, 1986-1996, undated
Box 7, Folder 10	Watercolors, 1942-1966, undated Notes: Oversized material housed in OV 13.
Box 7, Folder 11-12	Wave Series, 1967-1971
Box 8, Folder 1-3	Wave Series, 1971-1996, undated Notes: Oversized material housed in Box 9, Folder 15, and OV 10-12.
Box 9, Folder 5	Oversized Collage Poster, undated

Box 9, Folder 6	Oversized Drawings, 1959-circa 1966 Notes: Oversized material from Box 4, Folders 12-14.
Box 9, Folder 7	Oversized Drawings, 1976-1980 Notes: Oversized material from Box 4, Folders 12-14.
Box 9, Folder 8	Oversized Drawings, 1986 Notes: Oversized material from Box 4, Folders 12-14.
Box 9, Folder 9	Oversized Drawings, undated Notes: Oversized material from Box 4, Folders 12-14.
Box 9, Folder 10-11	Oversized Drawings, European Landscapes, circa 1950s Notes: Oversized material from Box 4, Folder 15.
Box 9, Folder 12	Oversized Gifts of Artwork to Helen DeMott, 1959-1969 Notes: Oversized material from Box 4, Folder 17.
Box 9, Folder 13	Oversized Pastel on Paper, 1962-1964 Notes: Oversized material from Box 4, Folder 19.
Box 9, Folder 14	Oversized Pastel on Paper, 1982-1990 Notes: Oversized material from Box 5, Folder 1.
Box 9, Folder 15	Oversized Wave Series, 1980-1996, undated Notes: Oversized material from Box 8, Folders 1-3.
Box OV 10	Oversized Wave Series, 1978, 1986-1991 Notes: Oversized material from Box 8, Folders 1-3.
Box OV 11	Oversized Wave Series, 1992-1993 Notes: Oversized material from Box 8, Folders 1-3.
Box OV 12	Oversized Wave Series, 1993-1996, undated Notes: Oversized material from Box 8, Folders 1-3.
Box OV 13	Oversized Drawings, 1943 Notes: Oversized material from Box 4, Folders 12-14.
Box OV 13	Oversized Pastel on Paper, 1990 Notes: Oversized material from Box 5, Folder 1.
Box OV 13	Oversized Watercolors, 1958, 1965-1966 Notes: Oversized material from Box 7, Folder 10.

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