



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

A Finding Aid to the Richard Dempsey
papers, 1929-1989, bulk 1960s-1980s,
in the Archives of American Art

Rayna Andrews

Funding for the processing of this collection
was provided by the Henry Luce Foundation.

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Table of Contents

Collection Overview	1
Administrative Information	1
Arrangement.....	3
Biographical / Historical.....	2
Scope and Contents.....	2
Names and Subjects	3
Container Listing	5
Series 1: Biographical Material, 1930-1987.....	5
Series 2: Correspondence, 1938-1985.....	6
Series 3: Writings, 1981, undated.....	7
Series 4: Project and Exhibition Files, 1929-1986.....	8
Series 5: Printed Material, 1930s-1989.....	10
Series 6: Photographic Material, 1932-1981.....	11
Series 7: Artwork, 1965-1981.....	12

Collection Overview

Repository:	Archives of American Art
Title:	Richard Dempsey papers
Identifier:	AAA.demprich
Date:	1929-1989 (bulk 1960s-1980s)
Extent:	2.9 Linear feet
Creator:	Dempsey, Richard W., 1909-
Language:	The collection is in English.
Summary:	The papers of painter Richard W. Dempsey measure 2.9 linear feet and date from 1929 to 1989, with the bulk of the papers dating from the 1960s to the 1980s. The papers contain biographical material, correspondence, writings, project and exhibition files, printed material, photographs, and artwork and notes related to planning artwork.

Administrative Information

Acquisition Information

The Richard Dempsey papers were initially lent for microfilming in 1990 by Vonja Kirkland Dempsey, Richard Dempsey's widow. After the collection was microfilmed, Vonja Kirkland Dempsey donated the bulk of the collection, excluding some photographic material, in 1990.

Separated Materials

The Archives of American Art also holds microfilm of material lent for microfilming (reel 4368) including a photograph album chronicling Dempsey's 1951 trip to Haiti and other photographic material. Loaned materials were returned to the lender and are not described in the collection container inventory.

Available Formats

Portions of the collection and material lent for microfilming are available on 35mm microfilm reels 4366-4370 at the Archives of American Art 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

Material in this collection was processed by Sarah La Rocca and microfilmed onto reels 4366-4370 in 1990. The collection was minimally processed and a finding aid prepared by Rayna Andrews in 2017 with funding provided by the Luce Foundation.

Preferred Citation

Richard Dempsey papers, 1929-1989, bulk 1960s-1980s. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Restrictions

Use of original papers requires an appointment and is limited to the Archives' Washington, D.C., Research Center.

Biographical / Historical

Richard W. Dempsey (1909-1987) was a painter known primarily for his abstract works and his portraits of prominent African American individuals including Ethel Waters, Duke Ellington, Thurgood Marshall, and Adam Clayton Powell. He was born in Ogden, Utah, but spent the majority of his youth in Oakland, California. He studied art at Sacramento Junior College, the California School of Arts and Crafts, and the Student Arts Center. Dempsey had four exhibitions in California before moving to Washington, D.C. to begin work as an engineering draftsman with the Federal Power Commission in 1941. He later transferred to a position as an illustrator with the General Services Administration (GSA), where he would spend the rest of his nearly 30-year government career.

In addition to his work with the GSA, Dempsey participated in the Art in Embassies program for decades, and his work was chosen by Congressman Adam Clayton Powell to hang in the Education Labor Committee rooms.

Dempsey was awarded a Julius Rosenwald Fellowship in 1946 to paint 100 portraits of "Outstanding American Negroes." He taught art courses at the Corcoran School of Art and at Glen Echo and received invitations to exhibit around the world in places like Haiti, Colombia, and Jamaica. He exhibited frequently in the U.S., most often with Franz Bader Gallery in Washington, D.C.

Scope and Contents

The papers of painter Richard W. Dempsey measure 2.9 linear feet and date from 1929 to 1989, with the bulk of the papers dating from the 1960s to the 1980s. The papers contain biographical material, correspondence, writings, project and exhibition files, printed material, photographs, and artwork and notes related to planning artwork.

Biographical material consists of employment records; resumes, chronologies, and biographies; and compiled personal papers that may have once been part of scrapbooks. These materials are not bound, but have remained together and in the order in which they were received. This series also includes a folder of material related to Dempsey's wife, Vonja Kirkland Brooks.

Correspondence includes letters both sent, and received by the artist, primarily concerning the exhibition of Dempsey's paintings at the Franz Bader Gallery, the Atlanta University Gallery, Howard University, the Corcoran Gallery of Art, the U.S. Embassies in Colombia and Jamaica, and with the Art in Embassies Program. Notable correspondents include Jack Perlmutter, Ethel Waters, and Jacob Lawrence. Personal and professional correspondence are intermingled throughout.

Writings include notes and drafts of lectures and other course materials, as well as excerpts and quotes from reviews of exhibitions of Dempsey's work. These excerpts, usually titled "comments," are frequently copied out by hand. Also included in this series are two folders of poetry.

Project and exhibition files include photographs; correspondence; lists; sketches and other plans; and printed material including clippings and exhibition announcements. Materials related to his Rosenwald Fellowship, his participation in the Art in Embassies program, his many exhibitions at Franz Bader Gallery, and his international exhibitions in Colombia and Jamaica are featured. Some files in this series may only include photographs or sketches.

Photographs are primarily of Dempsey's work and of exhibitions. There are some of the artist and of his Takoma Park, MD home and studio (designed by Harry Ormston of McLean, VA and occasionally featured in architecture articles).

Artwork is primarily composed of sketches, often with detailed planning notes for the completion of paintings.

Arrangement

The collection is arranged as seven series.

- Series 1: Biographical Material, 1930-1987 (Box 1; 0.2 linear feet)
- Series 2: Correspondence, 1938-1985, undated (Box 1; 0.2 linear feet)
- Series 3: Writings, 1981, undated (Box 1; 3 folders)
- Series 4: Project and Exhibition Files, 1929-1986 (Boxes 1-2; 1.2 linear feet)
- Series 5: Printed Material, 1930s-1989, undated (Boxes 2-3; 0.4 linear feet, OV 5)
- Series 6: Photographic Material, 1932-1981, undated (Boxes 3-4; 0.5 linear feet)
- Series 7: Artwork, 1965-1981, undated, (Box 4; 5 folders, OV 5)

Names and Subject Terms

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

Subjects:

African American artists
Artists' studios -- Photographs
Jamaica -- Description and Travel
Painting, Abstract -- Washington (D.C.)

Types of Materials:

Photographs
Poetry
Sketches

Names:

Art in Embassies Program (U.S.)
Brooks, Vonja Kirkland
Clark Atlanta University Art Gallery
Corcoran Gallery of Art

Franz Bader Gallery
Howard University
Lawrence, Jacob, 1917-2000
Perlmutter, Jack, 1920-2006
United States. Embassy (Colombia)
United States. Embassy (Jamaica)
Waters, Ethel, 1896-1977

Occupations:

Educators -- Washington (D.C.)
Painters -- Washington (D.C.)
Portrait painters -- Washington (D.C.)

Geographic Names:

Colombia -- Description and Travel

Container Listing

Series 1: Biographical Material, 1930-1987

0.2 Linear feet (Box 1)

Biographical material includes employment records from Dempsey's time working at the Federal Power Commission, the General Services Administration (GSA), and inquiries related to teaching positions. The series also includes materials from courses he taught and resumes, chronologies, and biography information, possibly produced by or for galleries preceding exhibitions. There are some business and membership records, though this material appears elsewhere in the collection as well. Also included in this series are compiled personal papers. These materials may have originally been arranged in scrapbooks, but are no longer bound. They remain in the original order and are within the series in general chronological order. The final folder in this series includes materials related to Vonja Kirkland Brooks, Richard Dempsey's wife, and the donor of this collection.

Box 1, Folder 1-2	Employment records, 1930-1952, 1962-1974, undated
Box 1, Folder 3	Business records, 1955-1956, 1984-1985
Box 1, Folder 4	Memberships and organizations, 1959-1975
Box 1, Folder 5	Corcoran course materials, 1965-1966
Box 1, Folder 6	Corcoran School of Art tour of Jamaica, 1968
Box 1, Folder 7	Resumes and biography, 1981, 1987, undated
Box 1, Folder 8	Compiled personal papers, 1938-1946
Box 1, Folder 9	Compiled personal papers, 1950, 1959
Box 1, Folder 10	Compiled personal papers, 1951
Box 1, Folder 11	Compiled personal papers, 1953
Box 1, Folder 12	Vonja Kirkland Brooks, 1983

[Return to Table of Contents](#)

Series 2: Correspondence, 1938-1985

0.2 Linear feet (Box 1)

This series includes correspondence between Dempsey and friends, other artists, galleries, museums curators, art program directors, etc. primarily concerning exhibitions of Dempsey's work. Notable correspondents include Jack Perlmutter, Ethel Waters, and Jacob Lawrence. Personal and professional correspondence are intermingled throughout. Researchers should note that additional correspondence can be found throughout the collection, particularly in the biographical material and in some of the project and exhibition files.

This series is arranged chronologically, with undated items appearing at the end.

Box 1, Folder 13-20 Correspondence, 1938-1959, 1963-1985, undated

[Return to Table of Contents](#)

Series 3: Writings, 1981, undated

3 Folders

Writings include notes and drafts of lectures on subjects related to originality, ideas, and working with an agent. There are also excerpts, many copied by hand, of reviews of Dempsey's work and exhibitions. For the most part, the excerpts include the name of the original publication and the date. This series also includes two folders of poetry, all undated.

Box 1, Folder 21 Notes and excerpts, 1981, undated

Box 1, Folder 22-23 Poetry, undated

[Return to Table of Contents](#)

Series 4: Project and Exhibition Files, 1929-1986

1.2 Linear feet (Boxes 1-2)

Project and exhibition files include correspondence, photographs, artwork, lists, and other planning documentation, as well as exhibition announcements, clippings, and other printed material. Some files in this series may consist entirely of photographs or sketches with no other materials related to the exhibition or project. Some materials related to the Bogota, Barranquilla, and Kingston exhibitions are in Spanish.

This series is arranged in loose chronological order by project/exhibition. General project/exhibition files follow and are also arranged chronologically.

Box 1, Folder 24	"Retrospective exhibitions", 1931-1985
Box 1, Folder 25	"Retrospective exhibitions" - photographs, 1933-1965
Box 1, Folder 26-27	"Early artworks 1939-1941, Into Abstraction", 1940-1941, undated
Box 1, Folder 28-30	Rosenwald Fellowship - photographs, 1942-1948, undated
Box 1, Folder 31-32	Rosenwald Fellowship and other activities - 1940s-1950s, 1942-1956
Box 1, Folder 33	Recent paintings, 1959
Box 2, Folder 1-3	Bogota, Barranquilla, and Kingston exhibitions, 1962-1963, undated
Box 2, Folder 4-5	Franz Bader group show - photographs, circa 1964
Box 2, Folder 6-8	Art in the Embassies Program, 1964-1974, 1981-1985, undated
Box 2, Folder 9	Paintings on loan to Adam Clayton Powell and the Education and Labor Committee, 1966
Box 2, Folder 10	1967-1968 exhibitions and activities, 1967-1968
Box 2, Folder 11	1960s exhibitions, 1960s
Box 2, Folder 12	Focus on Jamaica 1974 Bader exhibition sponsored by Ambassador Fletcher, 1974
Box 2, Folder 13-14	Army art project, 1974-1975, undated
Box 2, Folder 15	Nyangoma's Gallery and retrospective, 1981, undated
Box 2, Folder 16	Gallery 1221, Inc., 1982-1983

Box 2, Folder 17	Richard Dempsey, Recent Paintings exhibition, Franz Bader Gallery, 1983
Box 2, Folder 18	Glen Echo Yurt artist in residence program, 1983-1984
Box 2, Folder 19	Tel Gallery exhibition - photographs, 1983-1984
Box 2, Folder 20	Evans-Tibbs Gallery - photographs, 1985
Box 2, Folder 21	"Africa-Goree Island & the New World," Howard University - photographs, 1986
Box 2, Folder 22	Assorted exhibitions, 1959-1985
Box 2, Folder 23-25	Projects, exhibitions, and activities - 1930s-1950s, 1929-1954
Box 2, Folder 26-30	Projects, exhibitions, and activities - 1940s-1950s, 1937-1957, 1968

[Return to Table of Contents](#)

Series 5: Printed Material, 1930s-1989

0.4 Linear feet (Boxes 2-3, OV 5)

Printed material includes auction catalogs, clippings, exhibition announcements and catalogs, press releases, and materials created by and for the General Services Administration (GSA). Researchers should note that clippings and exhibition announcements and catalogs can also be found in other parts of the collection, particularly in biographical material and project and exhibition files.

Materials in this series are arranged chronologically by type.

Box 2, Folder 31	Art auctions - printed material, 1981-1985
Box 2, Folder 32-38	Clippings, 1940s-1987, undated
Box 2, Folder 39-40	Exhibition announcements and catalogs, 1940s-1954
Box 3, Folder 1-6	Exhibition announcements and catalogs, 1956-1989, undated
Box 3, Folder 7	Press releases, 1966-1985
Box 3, Folder 8	General Services Administration materials, 1950s Oversized material housed in OV5.
Box 3, Folder 9	Assorted printed materials, 1930s, 1957-1985, undated
Box OV 5	Oversized Exhibition posters, 1974, 1981, 1983, undated
Box OV 5	Oversized General Services Administration organization chart, 1951
Box OV 5	Oversized General Services Administration posters, 1952-1954

[Return to Table of Contents](#)

Series 6: Photographic Material, 1932-1981

0.5 Linear feet (Boxes 3-4)

This series consists of photographs of Dempsey's work and of his exhibitions. There are some photographs of the artist, as well as some of his home and studio. The majority of the photographs are black and white. There are four glass slides. The photographs are largely undated.

Photographs are arranged in the original groupings and in chronological order when possible.

Box 3, Folder 10	"Early Art" -photographs of works of art and people, undated
Box 3, Folder 11-12	"Early Art" photographs of works of art, 1937-1946, undated
Box 3, Folder 13	"Early Paintings & Sculpture 1932-1960s" - photographs of works of art, 1932-circa 1960
Box 4, Folder 1	"Photographs of works of art - early paintings, Washington, D.C.", 1942-1944, undated
Box 4, Folder 2	Photographs of paintings, 1960s
Box 4, Folder 3	Photographs of works of art, 1944-1946, undated
Box 4, Folder 4-5	Photographs of works of art, 1940s, undated
Box 4, Folder 6	Photographs of works of art, 1950-1951, undated
Box 4, Folder 7-10	Photographs of works of art, undated
Box 4, Folder 11	Photographs of works of art in color, 1940-1981
Box 4, Folder 12	Photographs of works of art and of the artist, 1944, undated
Box 4, Folder 13	Photographs of the artist, 1951-1952, undated
Box 4, Folder 14	Photographs of people and places, 1951, undated

[Return to Table of Contents](#)

Series 7: Artwork, 1965-1981

5 Folders (Box 4, OV 5)

This series is primarily composed of sketches, most in pen, marker, or colored pencil. Many of these sketches are accompanied by detailed notes Dempsey made while planning his pieces. Also found is a small paintbrush.

Box 4, Folder 15	"Paintings 1960s", 1965-1969
Box 4, Folder 16	"Ideas for paintings: drawings & sketches", 1965-1972
Box 4, Folder 17-18	Recent ideas for paintings (for Bader) including Creation of the Earth, 1969-1975
Box 4, Folder 19	Unidentified sketch and small paintbrush, undated
Box OV 5	Oversized page from sketchbook with photograph of finished work, undated
Box OV 5	Oversized personal chronology graph, circa 1965

[Return to Table of Contents](#)