



Smithsonian

Archives of American Art

A Finding Aid to the Thomas Downing Papers, circa 1946-1995, in the Archives of American Art

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2018/01/10

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Table of Contents

Collection Overview	1
Administrative Information	1
Arrangement.....	2
Biographical / Historical.....	2
Scope and Contents.....	2
Names and Subjects	3
Container Listing	4
Series 1: Biographical Material, 1949-1995.....	4
Series 2: Correspondence, circa 1948-circa 1987.....	5
Series 3: Writings, 1969-1986.....	6
Series 4: Personal Business Records, 1950-1986.....	8
Series 5: Printed Material, circa 1946-1987.....	9
Series 6: Photographs, circa 1950-1988.....	10
Series 7: Artwork, circa 1950-1984.....	11

Collection Overview

Repository:	Archives of American Art
Title:	Thomas Downing papers
Identifier:	AAA.downthom
Date:	circa 1946-1995
Creator:	Downing, Thomas, 1928-1985
Extent:	1.4 Linear feet
Language:	The collection is in English, French and Italian.
Summary:	The papers of painter Thomas Downing measure 1.4 linear feet and date from circa 1946 to 1995. The papers document his career as an artist in Washington, D.C. and Provincetown, Massachusetts through biographical material, correspondence, writings, personal business records, printed material, photographic material and artwork.

Administrative Information

Acquisition Information

Material was first lent to the Archives of American Art for microfilming in 1988 by Downing's son, Aaron Downing, and then returned to the lender. His widow, Louise Downing, donated additional papers in 1988.

Separated Materials

The Archives of American Art also holds microfilm of material lent for microfilming (reel 4058) including eleven letters from Thomas Downing to his son Aaron and seven photographs of Thomas Downing and others. Lent material was returned to the lender and is not described in the collection container inventory.

Available Formats

Material lent for microfilming is available on 35mm microfilm reel 4058 at Archives of American Art offices and through interlibrary loan.

Processing Information

A small amount of material was loaned and microfilmed on reel 4058, then the material was returned to lender. Donated papers were processed and a finding aid prepared by Rihoko Ueno in 2018.

Preferred Citation

Thomas Downing papers, circa 1946-1995. 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

Thomas Downing (1928-1985) was a painter based in Washington, D.C., and Provincetown, Massachusetts, who was associated with the Washington Color School.

Thomas Downing was born in Suffolk, Virginia, in 1928. He received his undergraduate degree from Randolph Macon College in Virginia in 1948, then attended Pratt Institute in New York from 1948 to 1950. He traveled to Europe for one year in 1950 to 1951 on a grant from Virginia Museum of Fine Arts.

After serving in the military, Downing moved to Washington, D.C., for a teaching job in 1953. He enrolled in a course at Catholic University and studied art under Kenneth Noland, who was a major influence on his work. Downing later shared a studio with Howard Mehring, with whom he founded the Origo, a cooperative gallery that operated from early 1959 to roughly mid-1960. During the 1960s, Downing also taught at the Corcoran School, numbering among his students Sam Gilliam, Rockne Krebs, and Michael Clark. Although he mostly resided in D.C., the last ten years of his life were spent in Provincetown, Massachusetts, where he died in 1985.

Scope and Contents

The papers of painter Thomas Downing measure 1.4 linear feet and date from circa 1946 to 1995. The papers document his career as an artist in Washington, D.C. and Provincetown, Massachusetts through biographical material, correspondence, writings, personal business records, printed material, photographic material and artwork.

Biographical material consists of Downing's college diploma, resume, biographical outlines, birth and death certificates, travel documents, passports and other miscellaneous documents.

Correspondence is between Thomas Downing and his family, friends, and colleagues. Notable correspondents include Phillip Romero, Osuna Galleries and Sidney Wordell.

Writings include notes, notebooks, annotated calendars and essays. There are a few writings by others such as poems by Sidney Wordell and Philip Romero's essay about Thomas Downing.

Personal business records consist of a few legal records, shipping and transportation invoices, and professional certificates.

Printed material includes clippings, exhibition catalogs and announcements, two books and an auction catalog.

Photographic material depict Thomas Downing, friends, family, travel, and artwork.

Artwork consists of sketchbooks and drawings by Thomas Downing, plus some drawings by the artist's son, Aaron Downing.

Arrangement

The collection is arranged as seven series.

- Series 1: Biographical Material, 1949-1995 (Box 1; 7 folders)
- Series 2: Correspondence, circa 1948-circa 1987 (Box 1; 0.3 linear feet)
- Series 3: Writings, 1969-1986 (Box 1; 0.4 linear feet)
- Series 4: Personal Business Records, 1950-1986 (Box 1; 5 folders)
- Series 5: Printed Material, circa 1946-1987 (Boxes 1-2; 0.3 linear feet)
- Series 6: Photographs, circa 1950-1988 (Box 2; 0.2 linear feet)
- Series 7: Artwork, circa 1950-1984 (Box 2; 0.2 linear feet)

Names and Subject Terms

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

Subjects:

Art, Modern -- 20th century -- Massachusetts -- Provincetown
Art, Modern -- 20th century -- Washington (D.C.)
Color-field painting

Types of Materials:

Drawings
Photographs
Sketchbooks

Names:

Downing, Thomas, 1928-1985
Osuna Gallery (Washington, D.C.)
Romero, Phillip
Wordell, Sidney

Occupations:

Painters -- Massachusetts -- Provincetown
Painters -- Washington (D.C.)

Container Listing

Series 1: Biographical Material, 1949-1995

7 Folders (Box 1)

Scope and Contents: Biographical material consists of a copy of Thomas Downing's Randolph-Macon College diploma, resume, biographical outlines, birth and death certificates, travel documents from his 1950-1951 trip to Europe, passports, astrological charts and other miscellaneous documents.

Box 1, Folder 1	Biographical Outlines and Resume, circa 1975
Box 1, Folder 2	Birth and Death Certificates, 1983-1985
Box 1, Folder 3	Diploma from Randolph-Macon College, 1949
Box 1, Folder 4	Europe Travel Documents, 1950-1951
Box 1, Folder 5	Horoscope Astrology Charts for Thomas and Louise Downing, 1977
Box 1, Folder 6	Passports, 1970-1995
Box 1, Folder 7	Miscellaneous Artifact - "Large Circle Template", circa 1960-circa 1980

[Return to Table of Contents](#)

Series 2: Correspondence, circa 1948-circa 1987

0.3 Linear feet (Box 1)

Scope and Contents: Correspondence is between Thomas Downing and his family, friends and colleagues. Notable correspondents include Benjamin Forgey, Grant King, Ira Lowe, Phillip Romero, Osuna Galleries, and Sidney Wordell, on myriad subjects such as art theory and Downing's experiences in school.

Box 1, Folder 8-12	Undated Correspondence, circa 1948-1987
Box 1, Folder 13	Correspondence, circa 1948
Box 1, Folder 14	Correspondence, 1949
Box 1, Folder 15	Correspondence, 1950-1958
Box 1, Folder 16	Correspondence, 1972-1978
Box 1, Folder 17	Correspondence, 1979 January-August
Box 1, Folder 18	Correspondence, 1979 September-December
Box 1, Folder 19	Correspondence, 1980 January-August
Box 1, Folder 20	Correspondence, 1980 September-December
Box 1, Folder 21	Correspondence, 1981-1982
Box 1, Folder 22	Correspondence, 1983
Box 1, Folder 23	Correspondence, 1984
Box 1, Folder 24	Correspondence, 1985-1987

[Return to Table of Contents](#)

Series 3: Writings, 1969-1986

0.4 Linear feet (Box 1)

Scope and Contents: Writings include six notebooks that contain Downing's thoughts on art, occasional journal entries, and scattered drawings; loose notes; six annotated wall calendars; and short essays on a range of topics such as art theory, his observations about life, and Kenneth Noland. There are a few writings by others, such as poems by Sidney Wordell and Philip Romero's essay on "Thomas Downing: The Way of the Dot" (1979).

Arrangement: The material in this series is grouped together by document type, then arranged chronologically within each grouping, except for the essays which are arranged alphabetically by title. Writings by others are at the end of the series.

Box 1, Folder 25	Undated Notebooks, circa 1980-circa 1984
Box 1, Folder 26	Undated Notebook, circa 1980-circa 1984
Box 1, Folder 27	Notebook, 1980 August
Box 1, Folder 28	Notebook, 1980 September
Box 1, Folder 29	Notebook, 1984
Box 1, Folder 30	Annotated Calendar, 1969
Box 1, Folder 31	Annotated Wall Calendar, 1980
Box 1, Folder 32	Annotated Wall Calendar, 1981
Box 1, Folder 33	Annotated Wall Calendar, 1982
Box 1, Folder 34	Annotated Wall Calendar, 1983
Box 1, Folder 35	Annotated Wall Calendar, 1985
Box 1, Folder 36-38	Undated Miscellaneous Notes, circa 1972-circa 1985
Box 1, Folder 39	Miscellaneous Notes, 1973-1978
Box 1, Folder 40	Miscellaneous Notes, 1979
Box 1, Folder 41	Miscellaneous Notes, 1980-1981
Box 1, Folder 42	Miscellaneous Notes, 1982-1985
Box 1, Folder 43	"Andevorante and Vatomandry", 1972
Box 1, Folder 44	"Human Race", circa 1972-circa 1984

Box 1, Folder 45	"Illusions", circa 1972-circa 1984
Box 1, Folder 46	"Inner Peace", 1984
Box 1, Folder 47	"Ken", 1981
Box 1, Folder 48	"Lisa (Ego, Pride, Tension, Selfishness)", 1984
Box 1, Folder 49	"Madame Paquin", 1981
Box 1, Folder 50	Partial Autobiography, circa 1979
Box 1, Folder 51	"Red Room", circa 1972-circa 1984
Box 1, Folder 52	"Two Nine Three", 1979
Box 1	Writings by Others
Box 1, Folder 53	"Thomas Downing: The Way of the Dot" by Phillip Romero, 1979
Box 1, Folder 54	Poems by Sidney Wordell, 1984-1986
Box 1, Folder 55	Preface to Memoirs by Louise Downing, 1981
Box 1, Folder 56	Miscellaneous, 1981-1984

[Return to Table of Contents](#)

Series 4: Personal Business Records, 1950-1986

5 Folders

Scope and Contents: Personal business records consist of a few legal records; assorted invoices and receipts related to the shipping and transportation of artwork from companies such as Hague Warehousing and Artransport, Inc.; and certification records for the appointment of Thomas Downing's wife Louise as the town clerk for Provincetown, Massachusetts.

Box 1, Folder 57	Artransport, Inc., 1981-1986
Box 1, Folder 58	Art Shipping and Transportation Expenses, 1950-1951
Box 1, Folder 59	Hague Art Delivery, 1976-1983
Box 1, Folder 60	Legal Records, 1979-1985
Box 1, Folder 61	Louise Downing Clerk-Accountant Certification, 1978-1979

[Return to Table of Contents](#)

Series 5: Printed Material, circa 1946-1987

0.3 Linear feet (Boxes 1-2)

Scope and Contents: Printed material includes an auction catalog, clippings, exhibition catalogs and announcements for Thomas Downing and other artists, and two books.

Arrangement: The material in this series is grouped together by document type, then arranged chronologically within each grouping.

Box 1, Folder 62	Undated Clippings, circa 1946-circa 1986
Box 1, Folder 63	Clippings, 1946-1968
Box 1, Folder 64	Clippings, 1970-1978
Box 1, Folder 65	Clippings, 1979
Box 1, Folder 66	Clippings, 1980
Box 1, Folder 67	Clippings, 1981-1986
Box 1, Folder 68	Thomas Downing Exhibition Catalogs and Announcements, circa 1951
Box 1, Folder 69	Thomas Downing Exhibition Catalogs and Announcements, 1967-1968
Box 1, Folder 70	Thomas Downing Exhibition Catalogs and Announcements, 1970-1979
Box 1, Folder 71	Thomas Downing Exhibition Catalogs and Announcements, 1980-1987
Box 1, Folder 72	Exhibition Catalogs and Announcements for Other Artists, 1980-1983
Box 2, Folder 1	Auction Catalog, 1984
Box 2, Folder 2	Olympics of Art, 1973
Box 2, Folder 3	Shankpainter 17, 1978
Box 2, Folder 4	Miscellaneous Printed Material, 1956-1984

[Return to Table of Contents](#)

Series 6: Photographs, circa 1950-1988

0.2 Linear feet (Box 2)

Scope and Contents: This series includes photographs of Thomas Downing, friends, family and artwork. There are a few travel photographs presumably from his 1950-1951 trip to Europe. The bulk of the series consists of photographic prints and snapshots, but there are also a few slides.

Box 2, Folder 5	Thomas Downing, circa 1980-1985
Box 2, Folder 6	Family and Friends, circa 1978-circa 1984
Box 2, Folder 7	Undated Artwork, circa 1950-circa 1985
Box 2, Folder 8	Artwork, 1985-1988
Box 2, Folder 9	Slides of Artwork, circa 1976
Box 2, Folder 10	Artwork by Tom Paterson, circa 1983-circa 1984
Box 2, Folder 11	Travel, circa 1950-circa 1951
Box 2, Folder 12	Unidentified Locations, circa 1960-circa 1980

[Return to Table of Contents](#)

Series 7: Artwork, circa 1950-1984

Scope and Contents: Artwork consists of 3 sketchbooks and 20 drawings by Thomas Downing. There is one folder of photocopies of Downing's drawings, some of which appear to be from Downing's sketchbooks. Also included is a folder of drawings by the artist's son, Aaron Downing.

Box 2, Folder 13	Undated Sketchbook, circa 1980
Box 2, Folder 14	Sketchbook, 1980 April-August
Box 2, Folder 15	Sketchbook, 1980 July-September
Box 2, Folder 16	Undated Drawings, circa 1950-circa 1984
Box 2, Folder 17	Drawings, circa 1976-1984
Box 2, Folder 18	Photocopies of Artwork Designs, 1980-1982
Box 2, Folder 19	Drawings "From Aaron to Tom", circa 1979

[Return to Table of Contents](#)