A Finding Aid to the Al Hirschfeld Papers, 1931-1983, in the Archives of American Art

Jean Fitzgerald

Funding for the digitization of this collection was provided by the Terra Foundation for American Art.

November 2006
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Collection Overview

Repository: Archives of American Art
Title: Al Hirschfeld papers
Identifier: AAA.hirsal
Date: 1931-1983
Extent: 0.9 Linear feet
Creator: Hirschfeld, Al
Language: English
Summary: The papers of caricaturist Al Hirschfeld measure 0.9 linear feet and date from 1931-1983. Found within the papers are letters to Hirschfeld, business records, writings, artwork, printed material, and photographs.

Administrative Information

Provenance

The Al Hirschfeld papers were donated in 1983 by Al Hirschfeld and his dealer, George J. Goodstadt.

Alternative Forms Available

This site provides access to the papers of Al Hirschfeld in the Archives of American Art that were digitized in 2010, and total 1,004 images.

Processing Information

The papers were processed to an intermediate level in November 2006 by Jean Fitzgerald. The collection was digitized in 2010 with funding provided by the Terra Foundation for American Art.

Preferred Citation


Restrictions on Access

Use of original papers requires an appointment.

Ownership and Literary Rights

The Al Hirschfeld papers are owned by the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Literary rights as possessed by the donor have been dedicated to public use for research, study, and scholarship. The collection is subject to all copyright laws.
Biographical Note

Albert Hirschfeld was born on June 21, 1903 in St. Louis, Missouri, the youngest of the three sons of Isaac Hirschfeld and his Russian-born wife Rebecca.

Al Hirschfeld studied art in St. Louis and moved with his family to New York City in 1915. He studied at the National Academy of Art and Design and at the Art Students League, but due to financial difficulties in 1919, he took a job at Selznick Pictures where he was given his first art assignments designing advertisements. He was soon made art director, a position he held for several years, until the company went bankrupt. Because the company could not pay him what they owed, Hirschfeld worked for an entire year to earn enough to pay his artists what he, in turn, owed them.

By 1924, Hirschfeld was able to travel to Paris and London, where he studied painting, drawing, and sculpture, and began to grow his distinctive beard. By mid-1925, he had returned to New York City planning to begin a career as a painter, but on December 26, 1926, a sketch he had done of French actor Sacha Guitry was published in the New York Herald Tribune. Within two years his theatrical drawings were appearing in five different New York newspapers, including the New York Times, for which he worked on a freelance basis until the newspaper offered him a contract in 1990. Hirschfeld's caricatures have also appeared in The New Yorker, Playbill, TV Guide, New Masses, Time, Life, Reader's Digest, Rolling Stone, and many other publications.

Beginning in the late 1920s, Hirschfeld was assigned to capture the essence of each new Broadway play through his line drawings that were published prior to the play's opening night. Performers and the public alike were captivated with the accuracy of his seemingly effortless caricatures. During this time, Hirschfeld also co-edited a satirical journal, Americana, with Alexander King.

Divorced from his first wife, Florence Ruth Hobby, Hirschfeld met German-born film actress Dolly Haas when he was assigned to do a caricature of her. They were married in May 1943. Two years later, to celebrate the birth of his daughter Nina, Hirschfeld concealed her name in the background of his drawing for the play Are You With It? Finding the "Ninas" in his caricatures soon became an American ritual. During World War II, the Department of Defense trained bomber pilots the techniques of camouflage and target-spotting by having them search for the "Ninas" in Hirschfeld's drawings.

For forty years, Hirschfeld collaborated with S. J. Perelman in illustrating and writing books, including Westward Ha!, Listen to the Mockingbird, and The Swiss Family Perelman. Hirschfeld also provided illustrations for the 1986 memoir of Perelman, And Did You Once See Sidney Plain? Other books published by Hirschfeld include The Speakeasies of 1932, Harlem as Seen by Hirschfeld, Show Business is No Business, and Hirschfeld on Line.

Hirschfeld also had solo art exhibitions at the Heller Gallery, Hammer Gallery and at the Lincoln Center Museum of the Performing Arts. He received a Special Tony Award "for 50 years of theatrical cartoons" in 1975.

In 1991 and 1994, the United States Postal Service commissioned Hirschfeld to design a series of stamps commemorating comedians and silent film stars respectively. He was not only allowed to be the first artist to put his name on a U. S. postage stamp, but was allowed to include Nina's name within the caricatures as well.

In 1996, an Academy Award-nominated documentary film about Hirschfeld's life, The Line King, was released.

Scope and Content Note

The collection measures 0.9 linear feet, dates from 1931-1983, and documents the career of caricaturist Al Hirschfeld. Found within the papers are letters, business records, writings, artwork, printed material, and photographs.

Letters are from friends and colleagues, and the subjects of Hirschfeld's drawings. A small majority of letters are from Brooks Atkinson, John Mason Brown, Edward Chodorov, Beauford Delaney, Roger K. Fruse, and Charles F. Lowe. Additional correspondents for which there are one or two letters are listed in the series description that follows.

Business records include a receipt for artwork delivered, a notice of probate on the will of Billy Rose, a loan agreement from the Studio Museum in Harlem for a work by Beauford Delaney, and a contract from The Franklin Library for a portrait of Mencken. Writings by Hirschfeld consist of brief typescripts of film and theater critiques.

Artwork consists of a sketchbook of caricatures of theater performers, a sketchbook of images from travel to Japan, loose sketches, and drawings by children inspired by a visit to see Hirschfeld.

Also found within the papers are 11 folders of clippings, posters, and miscellaneous printed material. Photographs are of Hirschfeld, his wife, and a drawing.

Arrangement

The collection is arranged as 6 series. All series are arranged chronologically.

- Series 1: Letters, 1931-1983 (Boxes 1-2; 1.75 linear feet)
- Series 2: Business Records, 1932-1979 (Box 2; 1 folder)
- Series 3: Writings, 1937-1973 (Box 2; 3 folders)
- Series 4: Art Work, 1967-1977 (Box 2; 4 folders)
- Series 5: Printed Material, 1953-1983 (Box 2, OV 3; 11 folders)
- Series 6: Photographs, 1965 (Box 2; 1 folder)

Names and Subject Terms

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

Subjects:
- Caricaturists -- New York (State) -- New York

Types of Materials:
- Drawings
- Photographs
- Sketchbooks
- Sketches
- Writings
Names:
Atkinson, Brooks, 1894-
Brown, John Mason, 1900-1969
Chodorov, Edward, 1904-1988
Delany, Beauford, 1901-
Fruse, Roger K.
Lowe, Charles

Geographic Names:
Japan -- Description and Travel
Container Listing

Series 1: Letters, 1931-1983

(Boxes 1-2; 1.75 feet)

Letters are primarily from friends, colleagues, the subjects of Hirschfeld's drawings, and the general public. There are also copies of seven letters sent by Hirschfeld. A small majority of letters are from Brooks Atkinson, John Mason Brown, Edward Chodorov, Beauford Delaney, Roger K. Fruse, and Charles F. Lowe.


Box 1, Folder 1
Letters, Surnames Unknown, undated
Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 2
Letters, Surnames "A-D", undated
Image(s): Letters, Surnames "A-Z,"

Box 1, Folder 3
Letters, Surnames "E-G", undated
Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 4
Letters, Surnames "H-L", undated
Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 5
Letters, Surnames "M-R", undated
Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 6
Letters, Surnames "S-T", undated
Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 7
Letters, Surnames "V-W", undated
Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 8
Letters, 1931-1935
Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 9
Letters, 1937-1938
Box 2, Folder 1  Letters, 1974  Image(s)
Box 2, Folder 2  Letters, 1975  Image(s)
Box 2, Folder 3  Letters, 1976  Image(s)
Box 2, Folder 4  Letters, 1977  Image(s)
Box 2, Folder 5  Letters, 1978  Image(s)
Box 2, Folder 6  Letters, 1979  Image(s)
Box 2, Folder 7  Letters, 1980  Image(s)
Box 2, Folder 8  Letters, 1981  Image(s)
Box 2, Folder 9  Letters, 1982  Image(s)
Box 2, Folder 10  Letters, 1982  Image(s)
Box 2, Folder 11  Letters, 1983  Image(s)

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Series 2: Business Records, 1932-1979

(Box 2; 1 folder)

Business records consist of a receipt for artwork delivered to the Cleveland Museum of Art, a notice of probate on the will of Billy Rose, a loan agreement from the Studio Museum in Harlem for a work by Beauford Delaney, and a contract from The Franklin Library for a portrait of Mencken.

Box 2, Folder 12 Receipt, Notice of Probate, Loan Agreement, and Contract, 1932-1979

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Series 3: Writings, 1937-1973

(Box 2; 3 folders)

Writings by Hirschfeld consist of brief typescripts of film and theater critiques. Writings by others include a typescript by Brooks Atkinson for his book *The Lively Years*, a poem by Oriana Atkinson with caricatures drawn in the margin, and a typescript from the magazine *Movie Makers* illustrated with color cartoon drawings in the margin.

Box 2, Folder 13  Miscellaneous Writings by Hirschfeld, 1940-1942, undated

Image(s)

Box 2, Folder 14  Typescripts by Brooks and Oriana Atkinson, 1973, undated

Image(s)

Box 2, Folder 15  Typescript from *Movie Makers* Magazine, 1937

Image(s)

(Box 2; 4 folders)

Artwork consists of a sketchbook of caricatures of theater performers, a sketchbook of images from travel to Japan, loose sketches, and drawings by children inspired by a visit to see Hirschfeld.

Box 2, Folder 16  Sketchbook 1, 1974
                  Image(s)

Box 2, Folder 17  Sketchbook 2, 1975-1977
                  Image(s)

Box 2, Folder 18  Loose Sketches, undated
                  Image(s)

Box 2, Folder 19  Children's Drawings, 1967
                  Image(s)
Series 5: Printed Material, 1953-1983

(Box 2, OV 3; 11 folders)

This series includes clippings, posters, and miscellaneous printed material.

Box 2, Folder 20  Clippings, undated

Box 2, Folder 21  Clippings, 1953

Box 2, Folder 22  Clippings, 1956

Box 2, Folder 23  Clippings, 1960

Box 2, Folder 24  Clippings, 1960

Box 2, Folder 25  Clippings, 1960

Box 2, Folder 26  Clippings, 1970-1979

Box 2, Folder 27  Clippings, 1982-1983

Box 2, Folder 28  Posters, 1960-1980
(Oversized items housed in OV3)

Box 2, Folder 29  Miscellaneous, undated, 1962

Box OV 3  Poster for Hirschfeld Art Expo at New York Coliseum, 1980
(Scanned with Box 2, folder 28)
Series 6: Photographs, 1965

(Box 2; 1 folder)
Photographs are of Hirschfeld, his wife, and a drawing.

Box 2, Folder 30 Photographs, 1965, undated
Image(s)

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