



# Smithsonian

*Archives of American Art*

## A Finding Aid to the Alice Trumbull Mason Papers, 1921-1977, in the Archives of American Art

Erin Corley

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## Collection Overview

<b>Repository:</b>	Archives of American Art
<b>Title:</b>	Alice Trumbull Mason papers
<b>Date:</b>	1921-1977
<b>Identifier:</b>	AAA.masoalic
<b>Creator:</b>	Mason, Alice Trumbull, 1904-1971
<b>Extent:</b>	1.3 Linear feet
<b>Language:</b>	English .
<b>Summary:</b>	The papers of abstract artist Alice Trumbull Mason date from 1921 to 1977 and measure 1.3 linear feet. The collection documents her career as a painter, particularly her role as one of the founders of the American Abstract Artists group, through biographical materials; correspondence with family, friends, fellow artists, art galleries, museums, and organizations; writings and notes, including notebooks of poetry and other creative writings; a small amount of printed material; photographs of Mason, friends, and her artwork; and original artwork, including five sketchbooks.

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## Administrative Information

### Provenance

A portion of this collection was donated by Alice Trumbull Mason in 1969. Additional material was donated from 1972 to 1977 by Mason's daughter, Emily Mason Kahn.

### Separated Material

A portion of the material donated by Alice Trumbull Mason in 1969 relating to her involvement with the American Abstract Artists was separated and filed with the American Abstract Artists records at the Archives of American Art. Files of news clippings about Mason and exhibition catalogs and announcements were transferred to the Smithsonian American Art Museum and National Portrait Gallery Library after microfilming on reel 630 and are not described in the collection container listing.

### Related Material

Also found in the Archives of American Art is a collection of interviews by Ruth Bowman of members of the American Abstract Artists group conducted between 1963-1965, that includes an interview with Alice Trumbull Mason. The Archives of American Art also houses 2.3 linear feet of the records of the American Abstract Artists group.

### Processing Information

Portions of the collection received a preliminary level of processing at some point after donation, and the collection was microfilmed in accretions on reels N69-137, 629, 630, and 3134. The collection was processed and a finding aid prepared by Erin Corley in 2007, was prepared for digitization by Stephanie Ashley in 2023, and was digitized in 2023 with funding provided by the Terra Foundation for American Art.

## Preferred Citation

Alice Trumbull Mason papers, 1921-1977. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

## Restrictions on Access

This collection is open for research. Access to original papers requires an appointment and is limited to the Archives' Washington, D.C. Research Center.

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## Biographical Note

Alice Trumbull Mason was born in 1904 in Litchfield, Connecticut. Her mother, Anne Leavenworth Train, was an accomplished artist before she met Alice's father, William Trumbull, a descendent of the Revolutionary War era painter, John Trumbull. Alice spent much of her childhood in Europe with her family. From 1921 to 1922 they lived in Florence and Rome where she studied at the British Academy. In 1923 she continued her studies with painter Charles W. Hawthorne at the National Academy of Design in New York and from 1927 to 1928 attended courses at the Grand Central Art Galleries taught by Arshile Gorky. Gorky inspired her interest in abstract painting, and Mason painted her first non-objective works in 1929. In 1928 she returned to Italy and Greece and was greatly influenced by ancient art, Byzantium, and Italian primitives. She married Warwood Mason, a merchant seaman, in 1930 and her daughter Emily was born in 1932 and her son Jonathan in 1933. During this period she stopped painting and devoted her creative energy to writing poetry inspired by American avant-garde writers.

Mason began painting again in 1934 and was recognized as a key figure of American abstraction. In 1935 she met and became close friends with fellow artist Ibram Lassaw, and they, along with several other artists, began to meet on a regular basis which led to the first American Abstract Artists group exhibition in 1937. Mason remained very active in the group and served as treasurer in 1939, secretary from 1940 to 1945, and president from 1959 to 1963. She was also an activist for abstract art, protesting the decisions of the Museum of Modern Art several times for excluding abstract artists from exhibitions. During the 1940s her paintings and concept of "architectural abstraction" was influenced by the arrival of Piet Mondrian in New York. Also in the 1940s she had two one-woman shows, but throughout her career she felt there was a bias against women in the New York art world and most often she participated in AAA group shows. Her work would be viewed as an important bridge for future abstract and conceptualist artists. In 1958 her son died, and though she continued to paint and participate in exhibitions, she never recovered from this tragedy and in the late 1960s withdrew into seclusion until her death in 1971.

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## Scope and Content Note

The papers of abstract artist Alice Trumbull Mason date from 1921 to 1977 and measure 1.3 linear feet. The collection documents her career as a painter, particularly her role as one of the founders of the American Abstract Artists group, through biographical materials; correspondence with family, friends, fellow artists, art galleries, museums, and organizations; writings and notes, including notebooks of poetry and other creative writings; a small amount of printed material; photographs of Mason, friends, and her artwork; and original artwork, including five sketchbooks.

Biographical material consists of resumes, passports, exhibition files, as well as documentation of her membership and active participation in art organizations, including her work as an officer in the American Abstract Artists group.

Also found here are scattered personal financial and legal records. Personal and professional correspondence is with family members, including many detailed letters between her and her husband Warwood, fellow artists, including Paul Kelpé, art organizations, curators, museums, galleries, and others. Professional correspondence generally discusses selection of exhibition and awards, sale of artwork, and art events. Writings and notes, mostly from the 1920s and 1930s, consist of Mason's notes on art history and her creative writings, including poetry and "abstract writing." Also found are a few writings about abstract art and various notes and lists.

Printed material includes news clippings on topics of interest to Mason, and other miscellaneous items such as brochures, and exhibition announcements. Photographs include several portraits of Mason with her artwork, photographs of friends including artist Ibram Lassaw, photographs of an American Abstract Artists exhibition, and artwork by her and others. Original artwork found in this collection includes five sketchbooks belonging to Mason, including two that document her travels through Greece and Italy, and other loose drawings.

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## Arrangement

The collection is arranged into 6 series:

Missing Title:

- Series 1: Biographical Material, 1925-1968 (Box 1, OV 3; 0.2 linear feet)
- Series 2: Correspondence, 1922-1977 (Box 1; 0.4 linear feet)
- Series 3: Writings and Notes, 1921-1965 (Box 1; 6 folders)
- Series 4: Printed Material, 1936-1974 (Box 1; 2 folders)
- Series 5: Photographs, 1920s-1967 (Box 1, OV 3; 5 folders)
- Series 6: Artwork, 1924-1963 (Box 1-2, OV 3; 0.4 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  
Women painters

Types of Materials:

Sketchbooks

Names:

American Abstract Artists  
Kelpé, Paul, 1902-1985  
Lassaw, Ibram, 1913-2003

Occupations:

Authors -- New York (State) -- New York  
Painters -- New York (State) -- New York

## Container Listing

### Series 1: Biographical Material, 1925-1968

#### 0.2 Linear feet (Box 1, OV 3)

**Scope and Contents:** This series consists of scattered documentation of Alice Trumbull Mason's career as an artist and her active membership in many art organizations. Included are brief resumes and biographies that provide information about her memberships, exhibitions, awards, representation in permanent collections, and other professional information. Also found here is her Guggenheim fellowship application. Other professional records include scattered exhibition records and records of her work as an officer in the American Abstract Artists group that includes letters to members written by Mason, lists of members, press releases, reports, and letters to her from the vice president, Esphyr Slobodkina. Mason's active participation in other art organizations, such as the Federation of Modern Painters and Sculptors and the International Association of Plastic Arts, is documented here through reports to members, brochures, newsletters, meeting minutes, and other membership information. This series also includes some of Mason's personal financial records as well as a few legal documents.

**Available Formats:** The bulk of this series has been digitized. Personal budget lists and notebooks, the checkbook ledger, and the deposits book have not been digitized as they record routine transactions with no additional information related to Mason's work.

Box 1, Folder 1	<a href="#">Resumes &amp; Biographies, circa 1954-1966</a>
Box 1, Folder 2	<a href="#">Fellowship Application Form, John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, 1948</a>
Box 1, Folder 3	<a href="#">Passports, 1925, 1928</a>
Box 1, Folder 4	<a href="#">Certificates of Service and Discharge, Bureau of Marine Inspection and Navigation, 1939-1940</a>
Box 1, Folder 5	<a href="#">Exhibition Records, 1945-1968</a>
Box 1, Folder 6	<a href="#">Price Lists, circa 1952-circa 1968</a>
Box 1, Folder 7	<a href="#">American Abstract Artists Records, 1939-1968</a>
Oversize 3, Folder 1	<a href="#">American Abstract Artists Records, Poster, Oversize, 1940</a>
Box 1, Folder 8	<a href="#">Art Organizations, circa 1953-circa 1967</a>
Box 1, Folder 9	<a href="#">Personal Budget Lists, 1932-1934</a>
Box 1, Folder 10	<a href="#">Personal Budget Notebook, 1937-1939</a>
Box 1, Folder 11	<a href="#">Personal Budget Notebook, 1938-1941</a>

Box 1, Folder 12      Checkbook Ledger and Deposits Book, 1949-1950

Box 1, Folder 13      [Legal Documents, 1933](#)

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## Series 2: Correspondence, 1922-1977

### 0.4 Linear feet (Box 1)

**Scope and Contents:** This series contains Alice Trumbull Mason's personal and professional correspondence. Almost all of the letters prior to 1940 are to and from family and friends; the earliest are from friends she made while in Europe during 1921 and 1922. Also found is correspondence with her sister Edith, also known as "Edi" and "Buddah", her brother Jack, and her parents, sharing family news during Mason's travels abroad. There are letters to and from her sister Margaret (Margie), also an artist, discussing Mason's views on art, including her opinions on surrealism, her desire to paint, and other intimate thoughts. Also found here are numerous letters between Mason and her husband Warwood written while he was working as a merchant seaman. These very detailed letters discuss news of their children Emily and Jonathan (Jo), her current paintings, early meetings of the American Abstract Artists group in 1937, political problems within the group, and her participation in exhibitions. One interesting letter describes her reaction to Orson Welles 1938 broadcast of *War of the Worlds*. In their later correspondence, Warwood is often called "Po".

Professional correspondence includes some letters regarding Mason's work within the American Abstract Artists Group, including two letters from Josef Albers about AAA exhibitions. Other letters concern the selection of her artwork for exhibitions or prizes, exhibition venues and schedules, curators' visits to her studio, and the sale of her artwork to galleries and museums. Additional correspondence also discusses her participation in other art organizations, such as the Society of American Graphic Artists and the Print Club. Correspondents throughout the series include L. Alcopley, Dore Ashton, Joseph Fiore, László Moholy-Nagy, Knute Stiles, Carl Zigrosser, and others.

Also found are numerous letters from friend and fellow founding member of the American Abstract Artists, Paul Kelpé, dating from 1953 to 1970. In these letters Kelpé discusses his current artwork, his teaching career, participation in exhibitions, and professional and financial struggles. Most of the correspondence after 1967 is of a personal nature with Kelpé, her husband, and her daughter Emily. There are many letters between Mason and her daughter Emily and son Jonathan, discussing their activities, including Emily's early career as an artist.

**Arrangement:** Series is arranged chronologically.

**Available Formats:** Series has been digitized in entirety.

Box 1, Folder 14	<a href="#">Correspondence, 1922-1924</a>
Box 1, Folder 15	<a href="#">Correspondence, 1925</a>
Box 1, Folder 16	<a href="#">Correspondence, 1931-1938</a>
Box 1, Folder 17	<a href="#">Correspondence, 1941-1949</a>
Box 1, Folder 18	<a href="#">Correspondence, 1950-1951</a>
Box 1, Folder 19	<a href="#">Correspondence, 1952-1954</a>
Box 1, Folder 20	<a href="#">Correspondence, 1955-1956</a>
Box 1, Folder 21	<a href="#">Correspondence, 1957</a>



Box 1, Folder 22	<a href="#">Correspondence, 1958-1960</a>
Box 1, Folder 23	<a href="#">Correspondence, 1961-1963</a>
Box 1, Folder 24	<a href="#">Correspondence, 1964-1965</a>
Box 1, Folder 25	<a href="#">Correspondence, 1966-1967</a>
Box 1, Folder 26	<a href="#">Correspondence, 1968</a>
Box 1, Folder 27	<a href="#">Correspondence, 1969-1970</a>
Box 1, Folder 28	<a href="#">Correspondence, Undated, circa 1922-1970</a>
Box 1, Folder 29	<a href="#">Emily Mason letter to the New York Times, 1977</a>

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## Series 3: Writings and Notes, 1921-1965

### 6 Folders (Box 1)

**Scope and Contents:** Writings and notes by Alice Trumbull Mason include four notebooks. One notebook is entitled "History of Art" and contains her notes about famous artists, and the others contain poems, stories, and other creative writing. Also found are notes and lists, including various lists of artwork and address lists. This series also contains other writings, such as artist statements, brief writings about abstract art, a draft of a lecture on art, several poems, and creative writings identified as "abstract writing."

**Available Formats:** Series has been digitized in entirety.

Box 1, Folder 30	<a href="#">Notebook, "History of Art", circa 1920s</a>
Box 1, Folder 31	<a href="#">Notebook, 1921-1922</a>
Box 1, Folder 32	<a href="#">Notebook, 1922, 1928</a>
Box 1, Folder 33	<a href="#">Notebook, 1927</a>
Box 1, Folder 34	<a href="#">Notes and Lists, circa 1940s-1960s</a>
Box 1, Folder 35	<a href="#">Writings, Poetry, and Artist Statements, circa 1920s-1965</a>

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## Series 4: Printed Material, 1936-1974

### 2 Folders (Box 1)

Scope and Contents: Scattered printed material on various topics includes news clippings from magazines and newspapers on topics such as art, music, literature, and events that were of interest to Mason. Also found are a few exhibition announcements, brochures, unsend postcards, and a 1936 issue of *Art Front*.

Available Formats: Series has been digitized in entirety.

Box 1, Folder 36	<a href="#">News Clippings, 1940-1969</a>
Box 1, Folder 37	<a href="#">Miscellaneous Printed Material, 1936, 1947-1974</a>

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## Series 5: Photographs, 1920s-1967

### 5 Folders (Box 1, OV 3)

**Scope and Contents:** This series contains photographs of Alice Trumbull Mason, including portraits, a photograph of Mason with her husband Warwood, and photographs of her in her studio in 1954. Photographs of others include one of her friend and fellow artist, Ibram Lassaw, and several photographs sent to her from friends in Europe. Also found are photographs of the 26th Annual Exhibition of the American Abstract Artists group. There are several photographs of artwork by Alice Trumbull Mason, including many in color, and a few photographs of artwork by others, including one sculpture by Ibram Lassaw and two by Richard Lippold.

**Arrangement:** Photographs are arranged by subject and chronologically within each folder.

**Available Formats:** Series has been digitized in entirety.

Box 1, Folder 38	<a href="#">Photographs of Alice Trumbull Mason, circa 1939-1954</a>
Box 1, Folder 39	<a href="#">Photographs of Others, 1920s, 1937</a>
Box 1, Folder 40	<a href="#">Photographs of 26th Annual Exhibition, American Abstract Artists, 1962</a>
Box 1, Folder 41	<a href="#">Photographs of Artwork by Alice Trumbull Mason, 1942-1967</a>
Box 1, Folder 42	<a href="#">Photographs of Artwork by Others, 1937, undated</a>
Oversize 3, Folder 2	Oversize Photographs of Artwork by Others, 1946-1947 Notes: Digitized with Box 1, Folder 42

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## Series 6: Artwork, 1924-1963

### 5 Folders (Box 1, OV 3)

**Scope and Contents:** Artwork by Alice Trumbull Mason includes loose drawings and five sketchbooks, most of which date from the 1920s when she was studying painting and traveling in Europe. Loose drawings are of her family, various abstract images, architecture, landscapes, and other studies. A sketchbook dating from circa 1925 to 1928 includes portraits, seated figures, and anatomy drawings. Two sketchbooks dating from 1928 to 1929 document her trips to Italy and Greece, and include descriptions and dates for each drawing. Other sketchbooks from the 1920s include various sketches similar to those found in the loose drawings. This series also includes a signed etching by Mason's friend Letterio Calapai and a small painting by her granddaughter, Cecily Kahn.

**Available Formats:** Series has been digitized in entirety.

Box 1, Folder 43	<a href="#">Drawings, 1924-1932, 1962-1963</a>
Box 1, Folder 44	<a href="#">Drawings, 1924-1932, 1962-1963</a>
Box 1, Folder 45	<a href="#">Sketchbook, circa 1925-1928</a>
Box 1, Folder 46	<a href="#">Sketchbook, 1928-1929</a>
Box 2, Folder 1	<a href="#">Sketchbook, 1929</a>
Box 2, Folder 2	<a href="#">Sketchbook, circa 1920s</a>
Box 2, Folder 3	<a href="#">Sketchbook, circa 1920s</a>
Box 2, Folder 4	<a href="#">Etching by Letterio Calapai, 1950</a>
Box 2, Folder 5	<a href="#">Artwork by Cecily Kahn, circa 1960s</a>
Oversize 3, Folder 3	<a href="#">Drawings/Sketches, Oversized, circa 1962-1963</a>

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