



Smithsonian

Archives of American Art

O'Brien Galleries records

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

Table of Contents

Collection Overview	
Administrative Information	1
Biographical / Historical	2
Scope and Contents	2
Arrangement	2
Names and Subjects	
Container Listing	
Series 1: O'Brien Galleries records, 1811-1970	4

Collection Overview

Repository:	Archives of American Art
Title:	O'Brien Galleries records
Date:	1811-1970
Identifier:	AAA.obrigall
Creator:	O'Brien Galleries (Chicago, Ill.)
Extent:	3 Microfilm reels
Language:	English .
Summary:	The O'Brien Galleries records measure 3 microfilm reels and date from 1811-1970. The collection charts the gallery's history through biographical material about William V. O'Brien, Jr., personal and business correspondence, business records, notes and writings, printed material, photographs of artwork and the O'Brien family, and a scrapbook.

Administrative Information

Acquisition Information

The collection was loaned to the Archives of American Art for microfilming in 1986 by the current owners of the gallery, Stephanie Roberts and her husband, Bill Dickerson, and was returned after filming.

Location of Originals

Originals returned to the lenders, Stephanie Roberts and Bill Dickerson, after microfilming.

Available Formats

The collection has been microfilmed on reels 4180-4181, and 4193. The microfilm has been digitized and is available on the Archives of American Art website.

Processing Information

The collection was microfilmed on Reels 4180-4181, and 4193. The microfilm was described in a finding aid by Stephanie Ashley in 2024 and was digitized in 2024 with funding provided by the Terra Foundation for American Art.

Preferred Citation

O'Brien Galleries records, 1811-1970. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Restrictions

The Archives of American art does not own the original records. Use is limited to the microfilm copy.

Biographical / Historical

Located first in Chicago, Illinois, and later in Scottsdale, Arizona, O'Brien's was Chicago's first art gallery and one of the oldest family owned and operated galleries in the United States.

Opening as a frame shop in 1855, O'Brien's offered a variety of services to both artists and collectors. It was called by several names including O'Brien's Art Emporium, O'Brien Art Galleries, O'Brien Galleries, House of O'Brien, and M. O'Brien & Sons. The gallery remained in Chicago until 1941, closed during the war, and resumed operation in Scottsdale, Arizona in the 1950s.

Three generations of O'Briens (Martin, William, and William Jr.) ran the gallery before it moved to Arizona; all were committed to bringing culture and the visual arts to Chicago and supported and sold work by conservative academic painters. The business developed and reflected the tastes of many Chicagoans and was an important influence in shaping art collections and attitudes to art in the city.

Scope and Contents

The O'Brien Galleries records measure 3 microfilm reels and date from 1811-1970. The collection charts the gallery's history through biographical material about William V. O'Brien, Jr., personal and business correspondence, business records, notes and writings, printed material, photographs of artwork and the O'Brien family, and a scrapbook.

Correspondence is from artists, patrons, and others (1811-1952) and includes 8 letters from Winslow Homer (1898-1902).

Business records include financial and legal documents (1857-1941), name lists and lists of paintings sold, painting and print registers (1898-1954), and minutes from corporation meetings (1901-1941).

Writings are by Howard O'Brien and include poems (1909-1944), some illustrated with photographs a script "Cherchez La Femme," and a typescript "The Long Trail". Printed material includes advertisements, clippings (1900-1970), exhibition catalogs (1921-1924), a sale catalog, and a booklet (1927) on landscape painters of America.

Photographs include an album of portraits painted by Louis Betts, an artist promoted by the gallery. Other photographs (1885-1936) show O'Brien family members, Winslow Homer, and Irene Dunne (in one autographed publicity photograph).

Also found is a scrapbook containing exhibition announcements, clippings, and brochures from Chicago (1873-1941) and Arizona (1953-1958).

Arrangement

The collection is arranged as one series.

Names and Subject Terms

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

Types of Materials:

- Drawings
- Scrapbooks

Names:

House of O'Brien
M. O'Brien & Son
O'Brien Art Galleries
O'Brien's Art Emporium
O'Brien, Martin, 1834-1917
O'Brien, William Vincent, 1859-1952
O'Brien, William Vincent, 1902-1972

Functions:

Art galleries, Commercial -- Arizona
Art galleries, Commercial -- Illinois

Container Listing

Series 1: O'Brien Galleries records, 1811-1970

Reel 4180, Frame 40-42	Introductory Material, undated
Reel 4181, Frame 1-3	Introductory Material, undated
Reel 4180, Frame 43-84	Biographical material, circa 1902-1950s
Reel 4180, Frame 85-200	Correspondence, 1811-1952
Reel 4180, Frame 201-353	Correspondence, 1811-1952
Reel 4180, Frame 354-360	Business Records, 1901-1910
Reel 4180, Frame 361-412	Business Records, Balance Sheets, 1912-1940s
Reel 4180, Frame 413-564	Business Records, Print Register, 1911-1954
Reel 4180, Frame 565-646	Business Records, Oil Painting Register, 1898-1914
Reel 4180, Frame 647-702	Business Records, Secretary's Minute Book, 1901-1910
Reel 4180, Frame 703-815	Business Records, "Old Chicago mailing list", 1933
Reel 4180, Frame 816-868	Business Records, Miscellaneous, 1890s-1949
Reel 4180, Frame 869-1009	Writings, 1909-1944
Reel 4180, Frame 1110-1171	Printed material, 1900-1970

Reel 4180, Frame 1172-1328	Photographs, Portraits Painted by Louis Betts, undated
Reel 4181, Frame 4-6	Photographs, Portraits Painted by Louis Betts, undated
Reel 4181, Frame 7-64	Photographs, O'Brien Family Photographs, 1885-1936
Reel 4193, Frame 1-200	Scrapbook, 1873-1958
Reel 4193, Frame 201-400	Scrapbook, 1873-1958
Reel 4193, Frame 401-563	Scrapbook, 1873-1958

[Return to Table of Contents](#)