



Smithsonian

Archives of American Art

A Finding Aid to the William Robert Pearmain and Pearmain Family Papers, 1888-1955, in the Archives of American Art

Jayna Hanson

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

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Archives of American Art
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Collection Overview

Repository:	Archives of American Art
Title:	William Robert Pearmain and Pearmain family papers
Date:	1888-1955
Identifier:	AAA.pearwill
Creator:	Pearmain, William Robert, 1888-1912
Extent:	0.4 Linear feet
Language:	English .
Summary:	The papers of painter and activist William Robert Pearmain (1888-1912) and the Pearmain family measure 0.4 linear feet and date from 1888-1955. Papers are found for William Robert Pearmain, his wife Nancy Douglas Brush (later Bowditch), their daughter Mary "Polly" Pearmain, and other members of the Pearmain family. There are biographical materials; family correspondence; a watercolor; a travel diary and school essays by Pearmain; printed materials, including clippings and two publications by the Industrial Workers of the World; and photographs of the Pearmain family and artwork.

Administrative Information

Provenance

Nancy Bowditch and Edward F. McClennen, Pearmain's widow and grandson, donated the William Robert Pearmain and Pearmain family papers in 1973 and 1974. The photograph of the drawing on microfilm reel 4859 was lent for microfilming by William Robert Pearmain, Pearmain's nephew, in 1974.

Separated Material

That Archives of American Art also holds material lent for microfilming (reel 4589) including a drawing by Will Loring of William Robert Pearmain as a child. This item was returned to the lender and is not described in the collection container inventory.

Related Material

Also found in the Archives of American Art is the Nancy Douglas Bowditch papers, circa 1900s-1970s that contain materials relating to her first husband, William Robert Pearmain and an oral history interview with Nancy Douglas Bowditch conducted on January 30, 1974 by Robert F. Brown.

Alternative Forms Available

The papers of **William Robert Pearmain** in the Archives of American Art were digitized in 2010, and total 666 images.

Material lent for microfilming is available on 35mm microfilm reel 4859 at the Archives of American Art offices and through interlibrary loan.

Processing Information

The William Robert Pearmain and Pearmain family papers were microfilmed upon receipt. The collection was fully processed, arranged, and described by Jayna Hanson in 2009 and digitized in 2009 with funding provided by the Terra Foundation for American Art.

Preferred Citation

William Robert Pearmain and Pearmain family papers, 1888-1955. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Restrictions on Access

Use of original papers requires an appointment.

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Biographical Note

William Robert Pearmain (1888-1912), known as Robert, was a painter and political activist working in Boston and New York City. Born to a wealthy family in New England, Pearmain attended Harvard University to study architecture and studied painting in Italy under George de Forest Brush.

Between 1907 and 1908, Pearmain travelled through France and Italy studying with Brush and other artists. Upon returning to the United States, Pearmain married the eldest daughter of his mentor, Nancy Douglas Brush in Dublin, New Hampshire. Also an artist, Nancy settled with Robert in Boston and later in New York City. While in New York, Pearmain worked as an assistant to muralist Barry Faulkner. In 1911, the Pearmain family welcomed their daughter Mary Alice, whom they called Polly.

While in New York, Pearmain grew dissatisfied with his artistic career. He discovered an interest in the conditions of the working class and his social and political viewpoints became increasingly radical. Despite his privileged upbringing, he immersed himself in the world of manual labor. Leaving his wife and daughter behind, Robert walked from New York City to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania to work at the Westinghouse Electric Company. Additionally, Pearmain became associated with the Industrial Workers of the World organization and participated in anarchist demonstrations.

Soon after arriving in Pittsburgh, Pearmain's health started to fail. His family believed the hard working conditions caused his illness and a doctor suggested that he return to Massachusetts to recover. In September of 1912, Robert Pearmain died of leukemia. Later, Nancy remarried Dr. Harold Bowditch.

Scope and Content Note

The papers of painter and activist William Robert Pearmain (1888-1912) and the Pearmain family measure 0.4 linear feet and date from 1888-1955. Papers are found for William Robert Pearmain, his wife Nancy Douglas Brush (later Bowditch), their daughter Mary "Polly" Pearmain, and other members of the Pearmain family. There are biographical materials; family correspondence; a watercolor; a travel diary and school essays by Pearmain; printed materials, including clippings and two publications by the Industrial Workers of the World; and photographs of the Pearmain family and artwork.

Scattered biographical information includes materials concerning the Pearmain and Upton families including a wedding invitation, school transcripts, biographical sketches and a debutante ball program from 1931.

Much of the correspondence is from William Robert Pearmain to his family written while in school and in Europe. Pearmain's correspondence with his family discusses his career, marriage, daughter, travel, and political views. Later correspondence is from both Robert and Nancy to family members. Other family correspondence is between Nancy, Polly, Sarah Upton, Sumner, Alice, Margaret, and Jack Pearmain.

There are a few incoming letters to Robert, including one from Margaret Sanger. There are condolence letters to Nancy from John Graham Brooks, Rockwell Kent, William Sanger, and Alexander Beckman. A letter from George de Forest Brush to Robert's mother, possibly dated 1906, discusses her unhappiness about Robert leaving Harvard and staying with the Brushes' in Italy. A photocopy of a letter from Samuel Clemens to George de Forest Brush is found. Additional correspondents include Charles F. Dole and William E. Trautmann.

Artwork consists of one watercolor by William Robert Pearmain. Writings and notes include one diary written by Robert while in Europe (1907), school essays, and a list of European trip expenses. Printed materials include clippings, and one issue each of *Solidarity*, and *Mother Earth*. Photographs are of a drawing of William Robert Pearmain by Will Loring and family snapshots of Robert, Nancy, and Polly Pearmain in New Hampshire (1911).

Arrangement

The collection is arranged into 6 series:

Missing Title:

- Series 1: Biographical Material, 1888-circa 1955 (Box 1; 5 folders)
- Series 2: Correspondence, 1899-1955 (Box 1; 0.25 linear feet)
- Series 3: Artwork, circa 1910 (Box 1; 1 folder)
- Series 4: Writings and Notes, circa 1900-1908 (Box 1; 3 folders)
- Series 5: Printed Material, 1907-1913 (Box 1; 3 folders)
- Series 6: Photographs, circa 1900-1911 (Box 1; 2 folders)

Names and Subject Terms

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

Subjects:

Art -- Study and teaching
Painters -- Massachusetts -- Boston
Painters -- New York (State) -- New York
Political activists -- Massachusetts -- Boston
Political activists -- New York (State) -- New York
Travel -- Europe

Types of Materials:

Diaries
Photographs
Sketches
Watercolors
Writings

Names:

Berkman, Alexander, 1870-1936

Bowditch, Nancy Douglas
Brooks, John Graham, 1846-1938
Brush, George de Forest, 1855-1941
Clemens, Samuel Langhorne, 1835-1910
Dole, Charles F. (Charles Fletcher), 1845-1927
Industrial Workers of the World
Kent, Rockwell, 1882-1971
Pearmain, Alice
Pearmain, Jack
Pearmain, Margaret
Pearmain, Mary
Pearmain, Summer
Sanger, Margaret, 1879-1966
Sanger, William, b. 1888?
Trautmann, W. E. (William Ernst), b. 1869
Upton, Sarah

Container Listing

Series 1: Biographical Material, 1888-circa 1955

(Box 1; 5 folders)

Scope and Contents: Scattered biographical materials relate to William Robert Pearmain, his wife Nancy, their daughter Polly, and the Pearmain family. Also found are documents concerning the Upton family, from which Robert descended through his mother, Alice. Mostly ephemera, there is a doctor's bill from William Robert Pearmain's birth, transcripts from Milton Academy, a bursar bill from Harvard University, Nancy and Robert's wedding invitation, a program from Polly's debutante ball, a funeral announcement for a Sarah M. Upton, and transcripts of notes found in the Pearmain family bible. Some materials have been annotated by Jack Pearmain, Robert's brother.

Box 1, Folder 1 [Pearmain Family, circa 1955](#)

Box 1, Folder 2 [Pearmain, Mary "Polly," 1930-1931](#)

Box 1, Folder 3 [Pearmain, Nancy, 1909](#)

Box 1, Folder 4 [Pearmain, William Robert, 1888-1914, circa 1955](#)

Box 1, Folder 5 [Upton Family, 1903-1907](#)

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Series 2: Correspondence, 1899-1955

(Box 1; 0.25 linear feet)

Scope and Contents: Correspondence includes many letters from Pearmain to his mother and other family members written while he was attending the Milton Academy and Harvard, ca. 1900-1906, and while studying art and traveling in Paris and Italy, 1907-1908. There are letters from Pearmain to his wife Nancy, and from both of them to their parents, written from New York City, Dublin, New Hampshire, the Adirondacks, and Pittsburgh. The majority of William's letters discuss his education, time spent in Europe between 1907-1908, his marriage and family, dissatisfaction with his career, and his factory work in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

There are a few letters to Robert, including one from Margaret Sanger thanking him for the use of the Dublin house and asking him to write about the "Pittsburgh situation for the Call"; letters to Nancy, mainly of condolence, from John Graham Brooks, Rockwell Kent, William Sanger, and Alexander Beckman. There is a letter from George de Forest Brush to Robert's mother, circa 1906 or 1907, discussing her unhappiness about Robert leaving Harvard and staying with the Brush family in Italy; a copy of a letter from Samuel Clemens to George de Forest Brush is also found.

Other family correspondence is between Nancy, Polly, Sarah Upton, Sumner, Alice, Margaret, and Jack Pearmain.

Box 1, Folder 6	General, circa 1900s
Box 1, Folder 7	Condolence Letters, 1912
Box 1, Folder 8	Brush, George de Forest, circa 1907
Box 1, Folder 9	Clemens, Samuel, 1908
Box 1, Folder 10	Denton, William D., 1906
Box 1, Folder 11	Henderson, C. Handford, 1902-circa 1909
Box 1, Folder 12	McClennen, Joshua, 1934
Box 1, Folder 13	Osgood, Dr. Hamilton, 1905-1906
Box 1, Folder 14	Pearmain, Alice Upton, circa 1910s
Box 1, Folder 15	Pearmain, John "Jack," 1955
Box 1, Folder 16	Pearmain, Margaret, 1907
Box 1, Folder 17	Pearmain, Mary "Polly," circa 1920s
Box 1, Folder 18	Pearmain, Nancy, 1907-1916, 1942
Box 1, Folder 19	Pearmain, Nancy, circa 1910s

Box 1, Folder 20	Pearmain, William Robert, 1899-1906
Box 1, Folder 21	Pearmain, William Robert, 1907-1908
Box 1, Folder 22	Pearmain, William Robert, 1909-1912
Box 1, Folder 23	Pearmain, William Robert, undated, circa 1899-circa 1912
Box 1, Folder 24	Sanger, Margaret, circa 1912
Box 1, Folder 25	Upton, Sarah M., 1906

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Series 3: Artwork, circa 1910, 1955

(Box 1; 1 folder)

Scope and Contents: There is one watercolor by William Robert Pearmain circa 1910. Accompanying the watercolor is a note written by John Pearmain to his niece, Polly concerning the drawing.

Box 1, Folder 26

[Watercolor by William Robert Pearmain, circa 1910, 1955](#)

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Series 4: Writings and Notes, circa 1900s-1908

(Box 1; 3 folders)

Scope and Contents: This series consists of a diary by Robert Pearmain recounting his time spent in Europe and notes concerning expenses of the trip. Also found are two school essays by Pearmain.

Box 1, Folder 27	Diary, 1907
Box 1, Folder 28	School Essays, circa 1900s
Box 1, Folder 29	Trip Expenses, circa 1907-1908

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Series 5: Printed Material, 1907-1913

(Box 1; 3 folders)

Scope and Contents: This series consists of newspapers clippings relating to events in Robert Pearmain's life including his death and marriage. Also found are one issue of the International Workers of the World publication *Solidarity* and an issue of *Mother Earth*.

Box 1, Folder 30	Clippings, 1907-1912
Box 1, Folder 31	Mother Earth, 1912 October
Box 1, Folder 32	Solidarity, 1913 January 4

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Series 6: Photographs, circa 1900-1911

(Box 1; 2 folders)

Scope and Contents: Found here is a photograph taken by the Archives of American Art of a drawing by Will Loring of William Robert Pearmain as a child. Other family photographs are of the Robert, Nancy, and Polly Pearmain in New Hampshire in 1911.

Box 1, Folder 33	Drawing by Will Loring, circa 1900
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Box 1, Folder 34	Pearmain Family, 1911
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