



Smithsonian

Archives of American Art

A Finding Aid to the Esphyr Slobodkina Papers in the Archives of American Art

Judy Ng

Processing of this collection was funded by the Terra Foundation for American Art

2013 September 18

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Collection Overview

Repository:	Archives of American Art
Title:	Esphyr Slobodkina papers
Date:	circa 1925-1995
Identifier:	AAA.slobesph
Creator:	Slobodkina, Esphyr, 1908-2002 Bolotowsky, Ilya, 1907-1981
Extent:	1.9 Linear feet
Language:	The collection is in English.
Summary:	The papers of painter, sculptor, author, and illustrator Esphyr Slobodkina measure 1.9 linear feet and date from circa 1925 to 1995. Found within the papers are personal and professional correspondence, including letters from Ilya Bolotowsky, George L.K. Morris, and Paul Kelpé; writings, including a copy of the autobiography <i>Notes for a Biographer</i> (vol. 1); printed materials; photographs; and material on the American Abstract Artists, including administrative records, business correspondence, and publications.

Administrative Information

Acquisition Information

Esphyr Slobodkina loaned a portion of her papers for microfilming and donated material in 1970. She gave additional papers between 1995 and 1996.

Separated Materials

The Archives of American Art also holds materials lent for microfilming (N70-61) including a travel album, printed material, notes, McDowell colony correspondence, and an American Abstract Artists financial ledger. Lents materials were returned to the lender and are not described in the collection container inventory.

Additionally, 69 rolled drawings on tracing paper were transferred to Hillwood Art Museum in 2006.

Related Materials

The Archives also holds the American Abstract Artists records.

Available Formats

Portions of the collection and material lent for microfilming are available on 35mm microfilm reels N70-54-N70-55, and N70-61 at the Archives of American Art offices and through interlibrary loan. Researchers should note that the arrangement of the collection as described in this finding aid does not reflect the order of the collection on microfilm.

Processing Information

Portions of the papers were microfilmed onto reels N70-54 and N70-55 shortly after receipt. All materials were merged, processed, and described by Judy Ng in 2013 with funding provided by the Terra Foundation for American Art.

Preferred Citation

Esphyr Slobodkina papers, circa 1925-1995. 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. Contact Reference Services for more information.

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Biographical / Historical

Painter, sculptor, author, and illustrator Esphyr Slobodkina (1908-2002) lived and worked in New York City, Great Neck, and Long Island, New York and was known for her abstract art and her children's books, including the seminal *Caps For Sale*.

Slobodkina was born in Chelyabinsk, Siberia to Solomon Slobodkin and his wife, Itta Agranovich. After the Russian Revolution and Civil War of 1917-1918, her family immigrated to Harbin, Manchuria where her father found work with Standard Oil and her mother contributed to the family's finances by working as a dressmaker. After graduating from high school in 1927, Slobodkina immigrated to the United States to join her brother in New York City where she enrolled at the National Academy of Design.

At the Academy, Slobodkina met her future husband, the artist and fellow Russian émigré Ilya Bolotowsky. In 1936, they became founding members of the American Abstract Artists, an artist run organization that worked to advance abstract art at a time when few opportunities to exhibit their works existed. She served as the organization's first secretary and later served as treasurer, president, and institutional bibliographer.

In 1937, Slobodkina met the children's author Margaret Wise Brown. After seeing her work, Brown invited Slobodkina to illustrate *The Little Fireman*, the first of their many collaborations together. In 1940, Slobodkina's first published book, *Caps For Sale*, was released and has remained in print for over 70 years. It won the Lewis Carroll Shelf Award in 1958 and is considered a classic of children's literature.

Slobodkina and Bolotowsky divorced in 1938, after which she continued to produce abstract mixed media paintings and sculptures. Her first major one-person show was organized by the gallery owner A.E. Gallatin in 1940. Through the 1940s and into 1970s, Slobodkina regularly contributed to group exhibitions and her works are owned by numerous institutions, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Whitney Museum, Boston Museum of Fine Arts, and Hillwood Art Museum.

In addition to publishing children's books, Slobodkina authored three volumes of her autobiography, *Notes for a Biographer* (1976-1983) and edited *American Abstract Artists: Its Publications, Catalogs, and Membership* (1979) and the folio *Ilya Bolotowsky* (1985). Active until the end of her life, she oversaw the production of musical audio recordings for her 20 children's books well into her 80s, and at the age of 90, designed a museum financed through the Slobodkina Foundation. She died at her home in Glen Head, Long Island in 2002.

Scope and Contents

The papers of painter, sculptor, author, and illustrator Esphyr Slobodkina measure 1.9 linear feet and date from circa 1925 to 1995. Found within the papers are personal and professional correspondence, including letters from Ilya Bolotowsky, George L.K. Morris, and Paul Kelpé; writings, including a copy of the autobiography *Notes for a Biographer* (vol. 1); printed materials; photographs; and material on the American Abstract Artists, including administrative records, business correspondence, and publications.

Correspondence is primarily with Slobodkina's family, friends, and business associates. The series includes significant correspondence from her first husband, Ilya Bolotowsky, as well as abstract artists George L.K. Morris, Paul Kelpé, Ruth Eckstein, Leo Rabkin, and Harry Tedlie. The series also includes correspondence regarding her published works.

Writings consist of 3 essays by Slobodkina on abstract art, the autobiography *Notes for a Biographer* (vol. 1), the edited folio *Ilya Bolotowsky*, and a small notebook kept by Ilya Bolotowsky during the 1920s-30s.

Printed material includes clippings; samples of announcements and cards designed by Slobodkina; exhibition announcements and catalogs; and press releases.

Photographs are of Slobodkina and her paintings and sculptures, as well as photographs of artwork by other abstract artists.

American Abstract Artists' records includes administrative material, correspondence, writings, selected exhibitions, and printed material dating from 1936 to 1996.

Arrangement

The collection is arranged as 5 series.

Missing Title:

- Series 1: Correspondence, 1934-1992 (0.4 linear feet; Box 1)
- Series 2: Writings, circa 1920-1985 (6 folders; Box 1)
- Series 3: Printed material, circa 1939-1994 (7 folders; Box 1, OV 4)
- Series 4: Photographs, circa 1925-1970 (3 folders; Box 1)
- Series 5: American Abstract Artists, circa 1936-1995 (0.9 linear feet, Box 1-3, OV 4)

Names and Subject Terms

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

Subjects:

Authors -- New York
Illustrators -- New York (State)
Painting, Abstract -- New York (State) -- New York
Sculptors -- New York (State)
Women artists
Women illustrators
Women painters

Types of Materials:

Photographs

Names:

American Abstract Artists
Eckstein, Ruth, 1916-
Kelpé, Paul, 1902-1985
Morris, George L. K., 1905-1975
Rabkin, Leo
Tedlie, Harry

Occupations:

Painters -- New York (State)

Container Listing

Series 1: Correspondence, 1934-1992

0.4 Linear feet (Box 1)

Scope and Contents: Correspondence is primarily with Slobodkina's family, friends, and business associates. The series includes significant correspondence from her first husband, Ilya Bolotowsky, as well as abstract artists George L.K. Morris, Paul Kelpe, Ruth Eckstein, Leo Rabkin, and Harry Tedlie. The series also includes correspondence regarding her publications, including her children's books, the folio on Ilya Bolotowsky, and Slobodkina's autobiography.

Arrangement: Correspondence is arranged alphabetically by correspondent, then followed by correspondence related to Slobodkina's book projects.

Box 1, Folder 1	A-Z, Miscellaneous, 1940-1990
Box 1, Folder 2	Bolotowsky, Ilya , 1934-1947, 1988 Notes: For typescripts of handwritten letters and English transcriptions of letters written in Russian, see Box 1, Folder 33.
Box 1, Folder 3-5	Eckstein, Ruth, circa 1965-1992
Box 1, Folder 6	Forest Lake School, 1980
Box 1, Folder 7	Gallatin, A.E., 1940-1949
Box 1, Folder 8	Hulbeck, Beate, 1966-1973
Box 1, Folder 9	Kelly, Isabel, circa 1980-1989
Box 1, Folder 10	Kelpe, Paul, circa 1960-1973
Box 1, Folder 11	Mason, Alice Trumbull, 1942-1967
Box 1, Folder 12	Meierhaus, Joe, 1942-1975
Box 1, Folder 13-15	Morris, George and Suzy Frelinghuysen, 1947-1959
Box 1, Folder 16	Nieuwe Kerk Museum, 1990
Box 1, Folder 17	Rabkin, Leo, circa 1970-1990
Box 1, Folder 18	Sennhauser, John, 1949-1983
Box 1, Folder 19	Shaw, Charles G., circa 1940-1979
Box 1, Folder 20	Slobodkina, Esphyr, circa 1960-1990

Box 1, Folder 21	Tedlie, Harry, circa 1970-1975
Box 1, Folder 22	Washburn Gallery, 1975-1984
Box 1, Folder 23	Publication of Children's Books, 1974, 1983-1989
Box 1, Folder 24	Publication of Ilya Bolotowsky, 1986-1987
Box 1, Folder 25	Receipt of Notes for a Biographer, Friends, 1977, 1981-1987
Box 1, Folder 26	Receipt of Notes for a Biographer, Institutions, 1977-1986
Box 1, Folder 27	Letters and Inscriptions to Recipients of Unidentified Book, circa 1960-1990
Box 1, Folder 28	Unknown and Illegible, circa 1940-1990

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Series 2: Writings, circa 1920-1985

6 Folders (Box 1)

Scope and Contents: Writings include 3 essays by Slobodkina on abstract art, the autobiography *Notes for a Biographer* (vol. 1), the edited folio *Ilya Bolotowsky*, and a small notebook kept by Ilya Bolotowsky during the 1920s-30s. The folio reprints a selection of Bolotowsky's drawings and his correspondence to Slobodkina during their marriage, which are typescript and translated from Russian.

Arrangement: Materials are arranged by author, then by document type.

Box 1, Folder 29	Slobodkina, Esphyr, <i>Notes for a Biographer</i> (Part I), 1976
Box 1, Folder 30	Slobodkina, Esphyr, "My Secret Life With George Morris", 1961
Box 1, Folder 31	Slobodkina, Esphyr, "Small Abstract Line Drawing", circa 1960
Box 1, Folder 32	Slobodkina, Esphyr, "What is Abstract Art?", 1961
Box 1, Folder 33	Slobodkina, Esphyr (folio editor), <i>Ilya Bolotowsky</i> , 1985 Notes: For original letters, see Box 1, Folder 2.
Box 1, Folder 34	Bolotowsky, Ilya, Notebook, circa 1920-1939

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Series 3: Printed Material, circa 1939-1994

7 Folders (Box 1, OV 4)

Scope and Contents: Printed material consists of clippings; samples of announcements, cards, and brochures designed by Slobodkina; exhibition announcements and catalogs; press releases, and miscellaneous printed material.

Arrangement: Materials are arranged by document type.

Box 1, Folder 35	Clippings, circa 1939-1994 Notes: Oversized material housed in OV 4.
Box 1, Folder 36	Designs by Esphyr Slobodkina, circa 1955-1985
Box 1, Folder 37	Exhibition Announcements and Catalogs, 1950-1963
Box 1, Folder 38	Exhibition Announcements and Catalogs, Other Artists, 1961-1993
Box 1, Folder 39	Exhibition Announcements and Catalogs, Other Artists, Group Shows, 1984-1991
Box 1, Folder 40	Postcard, circa 1978
Box 1, Folder 41	Press Releases, 1988
Box 4	Oversized Clipping, circa 1936-1970 Notes: Oversized material from Box 1, Folder 35.

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Series 4: Photographs, circa 1925-1970

3 Folders (Box 1)

Scope and Contents: Photographs are of Slobodkina and her paintings and sculptures, as well as photographs of artwork by other abstract artists.

Arrangement: Materials are arranged by subject matter.

Box 1, Folder 42	Photographs of Esphyr Slobodkina, circa 1925-1970
Box 1, Folder 43	Photographs of Artwork by Esphyr Slobodkina, circa 1940-1964
Box 1, Folder 44	Photographs of Artwork by Others, circa 1938-1965

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Series 5: American Abstract Artists, circa 1936-1995

0.9 Linear feet (Box 1-3, OV 4)

Scope and Contents: The series American Abstract Artists includes administrative material, correspondence, writings, selected exhibitions, and printed material.

Administrative material includes copies of the constitution, meeting minutes, membership lists, and a treasurer's report. Correspondence is with officers of the AAA regarding meetings, member dues, and publication projects. Writings include three essays on the AAA and draft copies of American Abstract Artists, 1936-1966. Exhibitions include substantial correspondence regarding the logistics of two early exhibitions, the "National Exhibition" (1940/1940-1941) and the "Traveling Exhibition of Matted Works" (1940-1941). Printed material contains clippings; exhibition announcements, catalogs, and posters; sample organizational letterhead; and a copy of *American Abstract Artists: Its Publications, Catalogs, and Membership*.

Arrangement: Administrative materials, writings, and printed materials are arranged by document type. Correspondence is arranged alphabetically by correspondent, then followed by correspondence related to book projects. Exhibitions are arranged alphabetically by exhibition title.

The series is arranged as 5 subseries.

Missing Title:

- 5.1: Administrative materials, 1949-1995
- 5.2: Correspondence, 1940-1995
- 5.3: Writings, circa 1936-1994
- 5.4: Exhibitions, 1939-1966
- 5.5: Printed Material, 1936-1992

5.1: Administrative Material, 1949-1995

Box 1, Folder 45	Constitution, 1949
Box 1, Folder 46-47	Meeting Minutes, 1949-1995
Box 1, Folder 48	Membership Lists, 1958-1991
Box 1, Folder 49	Treasurer's Report, 1965-1982

5.2: Correspondence, 1940-1995

Box 1, Folder 50	A-Z Miscellaneous, 1940-1986
Box 1, Folder 51	Goodyear, John, 1983-1990
Box 1, Folder 52	Kelpe, Paul, circa 1956-1965
Box 1, Folder 53	Mason, Alice, 1949-1962
Box 1, Folder 54	Rabkin, Leo, 1961-1979

Box 1, Folder 55	Riese, Beatrice, 1988-1995
Box 1, Folder 56	Rousseau, Irene, 1979-1982
Box 1, Folder 57	University of New Mexico, 1973
Box 1, Folder 58	Membership Dues, circa 1961-1978
Box 2, Folder 1	Publication of American Abstract Artists, 1936-1966, 1966-1968
Box 2, Folder 2	Requests for American Abstract Artists: Its Publications, Catalogs, and Memberships, 1979-1984

5.3: Writings, circa 1936-1994

Box 2, Folder 3-7	Book Draft, American Abstract Artists, 1936-1966, circa 1966
Box 2, Folder 8	Slobodkina, Esphyr, On American Abstract Artists and Art, circa 1960-1990
Box 2, Folder 9	Slobodkina, Esphyr, "Historical Outline", circa 1966
Box 2, Folder 10	Unknown Author, "Pioneers in the Field", 1962
Box 2, Folder 11	Notes, circa 1936-1994

5.4: Exhibitions, 1939-1966

Box 2, Folder 12	"28th Annual Exhibition" (1964), circa 1964
Box 2, Folder 13	"American Abstract Artists, 1936-1986" (1986), 1984-1986
Box 2, Folder 14	"Exhibition in Honor of Albers, Morris, Rice-Pereira, and Shaw" (1976), 1976
Box 2, Folder 15	"National Exhibition" (1940), Administrative Memorandum, 1939-1940
Box 2, Folder 16	"National Exhibition" (1940), Lehigh University, 1939-1940
Box 2, Folder 17	"National Exhibition" (1940), University of Minnesota, 1939-1940
Box 2, Folder 18	"National Exhibition" (1940), Declines to Exhibit, 1939-1940
Box 2, Folder 19	"National Exhibition" (1940-1941), Declines to Exhibit, 1940
Box 2, Folder 20	"Riverside Museum Show" (1966), circa 1966
Box 2, Folder 21	"Traveling Exhibition of Matted Works" (1940-1941), Administrative Memorandum, 1940-1941

Box 2, Folder 22	"Traveling Exhibition of Matted Works" (1940-1941), Cranbrook Academy of Art, 1940
Box 2, Folder 23	"Traveling Exhibition of Matted Works" (1940-1941), Norfolk Museum, 1940
Box 2, Folder 24	"Traveling Exhibition of Matted Works" (1940-1941), Declines to Exhibit, 1940

5.5: Printed Material, 1936-1992

Box 2, Folder 25	Book, American Abstract Artists: Its Publications, Catalogs, and Membership, 1979
Box 3, Folder 1-2	Book Draft, American Abstract Artists: Its Publications, Catalogs, and Membership, 1979
Box 3, Folder 3	Clippings, 1936-1988
Box 3, Folder 4-7	Exhibition Announcements and Catalogs, 1948-1992
Box 3, Folder 8	Exhibition Posters, 1956-1982 Notes: Oversized material housed in OV 4.
Box 3, Folder 9	Letterhead, circa 1960-1969
Box 3, Folder 10	Newsletters, circa 1960-1969
Box 3, Folder 11	Press Releases, 1972-1991
Box 3, Folder 12	Miscellaneous Printed Material, circa 1960-1969
Box 4	Oversized Exhibition Posters, 1956-1982 Notes: Oversized material from Box 3, Folder 8.

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