A Finding Aid to the Leon Polk Smith Papers, 1938-1997, in the Archives of American Art

Judy Ng

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

July 22, 2011
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Collection Overview

Repository: Archives of American Art  
Title: Leon Polk Smith papers  
Identifier: AAA.smitleon  
Date: 1938-1997  
Extent: 7.2 Linear feet  
Creator: Smith, Leon Polk, 1906-1996  
Language: English  
Summary: The papers of New York abstract painter Leon Polk Smith measure 7.2 linear feet and date from 1938 to 1997. The papers consist of biographical material, business and personal correspondence, interview transcripts and an interview video recording, writings, financial records for the corporate entity Leon Polk Smith, Inc., printed material, photographic material, and a scrapbook of newspaper clippings.

Administrative Information

Acquisition Information

The papers of Leon Polk Smith were donated by the artist's partner, Robert Jamieson, in 1998 and 2002.

Available Formats

This site provides access to the papers of Leon Polk Smith in the Archives of American Art that were digitized in 2011, and total 396 images.

Blank pages, blank versos of photographs, photographs of artwork, duplicates, and medical and routine financial documents have not been scanned. In most cases, only the cover, title page, and individual relevant pages have been scanned from published materials.

The video recording in this collection was digitized for research access in 2011 and is available at the Archives of American Art offices. Researchers may view the original cassette for the archival notations on it, but the original cassette is not available for playback due to fragility.

Processing Information

The collection was processed, arranged, and described by Judy Ng and digitized in August 2011 with funding provided by the Leon Polk Smith Foundation and the Terra Foundation for American Art.

Use of original papers requires an appointment.

The Leon Polk Smith 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

Leon Polk Smith (1906-1996) worked primarily in New York City as a painter, educator, and lecturer. He is considered one of the founders of the hard edge style of minimalist abstract art.

Smith was born in Chickasha, Indian Territory one year before its formal incorporation into the Oklahoma Territory. Both of his parents were of Cherokee ancestry and he was raised in a small farming community that included Cherokee and Choctaw Indians. After receiving his teaching degree in 1934, Smith worked as an educator in rural Oklahoma communities and, at the same time, took the opportunity to introduce arts programs to local schools. In 1936, he enrolled in Columbia University's Teachers College to pursue a graduate degree in arts education and began painting full time. That summer, he visited the Albert E. Gallatin Gallery of Living Art at New York University, where he was first introduced to the work of the European modernists Constantin Brancusi, Jean Arp, and most importantly, Piet Mondrian.

In the late 1940s and early 1950s, Smith accepted university teaching positions at Rollins College in Florida, and New York University and Mills College of Education in New York. During this time, Smith moved beyond his early explorations of neo-plasticism and began to paint in a more hard edge style, typified by geometric lines, curving shapes of color, and the use of tondo (disk shaped) canvases. In 1958, Betty Parson's Section Eleven Gallery showcased his new work in two one-man exhibitions, which introduced him to a wider audience of museum curators and art collectors. In the 1960s, Smith's work was included in two of his most important group exhibitions, The Responsive Eye at the Museum of Modern Art (1965) and Systemic Painting at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum (1966). In 1995, the Brooklyn Museum curated Leon Polk Smith: American Painter, a retrospective exhibition of Smith's career.

Smith produced works exploring shapes and lines, minimalist use of color, and modularity well into the 1990s and exhibited at a number of affiliated galleries, including the Stable Gallery, Galerie Chalette, Galerie Denise Rene, Washburn Gallery, and ACA Galleries. Smith died in 1996 in his home in Manhattan, at the age of 91.

Scope and Contents

The papers of New York abstract painter Leon Polk Smith measure 7.2 linear feet and date from 1938 to 1997. The papers consist of biographical material, business and personal correspondence, interview transcripts and an interview video recording, writings, financial records for the corporate entity Leon Polk Smith, Inc., printed material, photographic material, and a scrapbook of newspaper clippings.
Biographical material includes official affidavits, certificates, passports, expense receipts, and a travel expense notebook. A curriculum vitae, family history, and medical records are also included in the series.

Correspondence, both business and personal, comprises the bulk of the collection. This includes correspondence between Smith and his life companion, Robert Jamieson; art critics Arthur C. Danto, Claudine Humblet, and David Galloway; and artists Gego (Gertrude Goldschmidt) and Ray Johnson. Business correspondence relates to Smith's various gallery and museum exhibitions, loans, and sales. There is extensive correspondence between Smith and the Brooklyn Museum, Butler Institute of American Art, Di Laurenti Gallery, Edition and Galerie Hoffmann, Galerie Denise Rene, Meyers/Bloom Gallery, Washburn Gallery, and the Wilhelm-Hack Museum. The business subseries also includes correspondence between Smith and his alma mater, East Central University, formerly known as Oklahoma State University.

Interviews consist of six typewritten transcripts of interviews conducted with Smith over the course of his professional career from 1950 to 1993, a 1995 video interview of museum director Robert T. Buck discussing the Brooklyn Museum's exhibition of Leon Polk Smith for the television program National Arts, and a 1965 interview transcript with gallery owner Lucile Horsley.

Writings include sixteen published and unpublished scholarly essays on Smith and his work. The series also includes notes and a brief artist's statement by Smith regarding the pros and cons of modern art galleries.

Financial records are 1978-1989 federal income tax filings and routine tax preparation and payment receipts for the corporate entity Leon Polk Smith, Inc. Smith's personal filing records from 1987-1989 are also included in this series.

Printed material consists of two books, including the Brooklyn Museum's monograph Leon Polk Smith: American Painter, newspaper clippings reviewing Smith's work, and exhibition announcements and catalogs of Smith's museum and gallery shows from 1941 to 1997.

A scrapbook contains newspaper clippings documenting Smith's years as an educator and artist in Oklahoma in the 1930s and 1940s.

Photographs are of Smith and his acquaintances circa 1930-1960, and a representative selection of photographs and color slides of Smith's artwork from 1939 to 1960.

**Arrangement**

The collection is arranged as 8 series:

- Series 1: Biographical Material, 1938-1994 (Box 1, OV 10; 11 folders)
- Series 2: Correspondence, 1939-1997 (Boxes 1-5, 9, OV 10; 5 linear feet)
- Series 3: Interviews, 1950-1995 (Boxes 5-6; 8 folders)
- Series 4: Writings, 1963-1996 (Box 6; 13 folders)
- Series 5: Financial Records, 1979-1990 (Box 6; 15 folders)
- Series 6: Printed Material, 1941-1997 (Boxes 6-7, 9; .5 linear feet)
- Series 7: Scrapbook, 1930-1940 (Box 8; 1 folder)
- Series 8: Photographic Material, 1930-1990 (Box 8; 8 folders)

**Names and Subject Terms**

This collection is indexed in the online catalog of the Smithsonian Institution under the following terms:
Subjects:
Art galleries, Commercial
Painters -- New York (State) -- New York
Painting, Abstract -- United States

Types of Materials:
Essays
Interviews
Photographs
Scrapbooks
Transcripts
Video recordings

Names:
Brooklyn Museum
Buck, Robert T.
Butler Institute of American Art
Danto, Arthur Coleman, 1924-
East Central Oklahoma State University
Galerie Denise René
Galloway, David D.
Gego
Humblet, Claudine, 1946-
Jamieson, Robert
Johnson, Ray, 1927-
Meyers/Bloom Gallery
Washburn Gallery (New York, N.Y.)
Wilhelm-Hack-Museum
Container Listing

Series 1: Biographical Material, 1938-1994

11 Folders (Box 1, OV 10)

Biographical material includes official affidavits, certificates, passports, expense receipts, and a travel expense notebook. A curriculum vitae, family history, and medical records are also included in the series.

This series has been scanned in its entirety.

Box 1, Folder 1 Affidavits, 1940, undated Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 2 Biographical Data, 1956 Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 3 Certificates, 1938, undated Image(s) Oversized material housed in OV 10

Box 1, Folder 4 Medical Records, 1951-1967 Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 5 Miscellaneous Receipts, 1958-1973, undated Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 6 Notebook, Expenses, 1968-1972 Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 7 Passports, 1939-1986 Image(s)

Box OV 10 Certificates, 1938, undated Oversized material scanned with Box 1, F3
Series 2: Correspondence, 1939-1996

5 Linear feet (Boxes 1-5, 9, OV 10)

Correspondence is predominantly in the form of business letters and personal letters received from family and friends. This includes correspondence between Smith and his life companion, Robert Jamieson; art critics Arthur C. Danto, Claudine Humblet, and David Galloway; and artists Gego (Gertrude Goldschmidt) and Ray Johnson.

The bulk of the business correspondence relates to Smith's various gallery and museum exhibitions, loans, and sales. Outgoing correspondence, photographs, slides, and instructions on the installation of exhibitions have been chronologically interfiled within the correspondents' files. There is extensive correspondence between Smith and the Brooklyn Museum, Butler Institute of American Art, Di Laurenti Gallery, Edition and Galerie Hoffmann, Galerie Denise Rene, Meyers/Bloom Gallery, Washburn Gallery, and the Wilhelm-Hack Museum. The business subseries also includes correspondence between Smith and his alma mater, formerly known as Oklahoma State University.

The bulk of this series has been scanned. Slides of artwork filed with Meyers/Bloom Gallery have not been scanned. The series is arranged as 2 subseries:

- Subseries 2.1: Business, 1943-1996
- Subseries 2.2: Personal, 1939-1997

2.1: Business

Box 1, Folder 8  A, Miscellaneous, circa 1980-1995
          Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 9  ACE Gallery (Christmas, Douglas), 1979-1993
          Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 10  Albright-Knox Gallery, 1968, 1979-1990
          Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 11  Amarillo Art Center (Kochka, Al), 1984-1988
          Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 12  American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, 1979-1991
          Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 13  Art and Literature, 1964
          Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 14  Art Museum Association of America (Butera, Virginia), 1984-1988
          Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 15  B, Miscellaneous, circa 1980-1995
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Box 1, Folder 16  Bard College, 1984-1985
Box 1, Folder 17  Bronx Museum of the Arts, 1985-1986  Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 18  Brooklyn Museum, undated, 1992  Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 19  Brooklyn Museum, 1993  Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 20  Brooklyn Museum, 1993  Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 21  Brooklyn Museum, 1994  Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 22  Brooklyn Museum, 1995  Image(s)
Oversized material housed in Box 9, F2

Box 1, Folder 23  Buecker, Robert, 1972-1987  Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 24  Burnett Miller Gallery (undated), circa 1984-circa 1990  Image(s): Burnett Miller Gallery

Box 1, Folder 25  Burnett Miller Gallery, 1984-1990  Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 26  Butler Institute of American Art, 1988  Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 27  C, Miscellaneous, circa 1980-1995  Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 28  Carnegie Institute, 1967-1980  Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 29  Case Western Reserve University, 1969, undated  Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 30  Ciba-Geigy Corporation, 1967-1994  Image(s)

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<td>Box 2, Folder 3</td>
<td>Dord Fitz Gallery, 1969-1988</td>
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<td>Box 2, Folder 4</td>
<td>E, Miscellaneous, circa 1980-1995</td>
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Box 2, Folder 11  Edition and Galerie Hoffmann, 1987
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Box 2, Folder 18  G.W. Einstein Company, Inc., 1986
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Box 2, Folder 19  Galerie Chalette, 1965-1981
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Box 2, Folder 20  Galerie Denise Rene, 1971-1976
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Box 2, Folder 21  Galerie Denise Rene, 1977-1982
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Box 3, Folder 3  Guggenheim Museum, 1970-1984
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Box 3, Folder 18  Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1982-1986
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Box 3, Folder 19  Meyers/Bloom Gallery (undated), circa 1988-circa 1993
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Box 5, Folder 10  N, Miscellaneous, circa 1980-1995
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Box 5, Folder 11  O, Miscellaneous, circa 1980-1995
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Box 5, Folder 12  P, Miscellaneous, circa 1980-1995
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Box 5, Folder 13  Parks, Addison, 1982-1996
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Oversized material housed in OV 10

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Box 5, Folder 34  Y-Z, Miscellaneous, circa 1980-1995
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Box OV 10  Smith, Leon Polk, Oversized Letter, circa 1968-1972
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8 Folders (Boxes 5-6)

Interviews consist of six typewritten transcripts of interviews conducted with Smith from 1950 to 1993 by Brooke Kamin Rapaport, D'Arcy Hayman, and William Jeffett, among others, over the course of Smith's professional career. The series also includes a 1995 video interview of museum director Robert T. Buck discussing the Brooklyn Museum's exhibition of Leon Polk Smith for the television program *National Arts*, and a 1965 interview transcript with gallery owner Lucile Horsley.

This series has been scanned in its entirety. The video interview recording has been digitized for research access and is available at the Archives of American Art offices.

Box 5, Folder 36  Creative Art Seminar Symposium on Modern Art, March 1950
Image(s)

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Box 6, Folder 4  Michael Baker Interview of Robert T Buck for *National Arts*, 1995
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13 Folders (Box 6)

Writings include sixteen published and unpublished scholarly essays on Smith by Lawrence Alloway, Ted Castle, Arthur C. Danto, Carter Ratcliff, and Joseph R. Wolin, among others. The series also includes notes and a brief artist's statement by Smith regarding the pros and cons of modern art galleries.

This series has been scanned in its entirety.

Box 6, Folder 5  "Constellations", 1989
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   Image(s)

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Box 6, Folder 15  Smith, Leon Polk, Notes, circa 1960s-1990s
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Box 6, Folder 16  Walsh, Grace M., "Leon Polk Smith: A Pioneering Geometric Abstractionist", 1995
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Image(s)

15 Folders (Box 6)

Financial records is comprised of the 1978-1989 federal income tax filings and routine tax preparation and payment receipts for the corporate entity Leon Polk Smith, Inc. Smith's personal filing records from 1987-1989 are also included in this series.

This series has not been scanned.

Box 6, Folder 19  Corporate Taxes, 1978 Preparation, 1979
Box 6, Folder 20  Corporate Taxes, 1979 Preparation, 1980
Box 6, Folder 21  Corporate Taxes, 1980 Preparation, 1981
Box 6, Folder 22  Corporate Taxes, 1981 Preparation, 1982
Box 6, Folder 23  Corporate Taxes, 1982 Preparation, 1983
Box 6, Folder 24  Corporate Taxes, 1983 Preparation, 1984
Box 6, Folder 25  Corporate Taxes, 1984 Preparation, 1985
Box 6, Folder 26  Corporate Taxes, 1985 Preparation, 1986
Box 6, Folder 27  Corporate Taxes, 1986 Preparation and Past Amounts Due, 1987
Box 6, Folder 28  Corporate Taxes, 1987 Preparation and Past Amounts Due, 1988
Box 6, Folder 29  Corporate Taxes, 1988 Preparation and Past Amounts Due, 1989
Box 6, Folder 30  Corporate Taxes, 1989 Preparation and Past Amounts Due, 1990
Box 6, Folder 31  Corporate Taxes, Past Amounts Due, 1991

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Series 6: Printed Material, 1941-1997

0.5 Linear feet (Boxes 6-7, 9)

Printed material consists of two books, including the Brooklyn Museum's monograph *Leon Polk Smith: American Painter*, newspaper clippings reviewing Smith's work, and exhibition announcements and catalogs of Smith's museum and gallery shows from 1941 to 1997.

The bulk of this series has been scanned. In most cases, only the cover, title page, and individual relevant pages have been scanned from published materials.

Box 6, Folder 33  
Book, *Design* by Paul Zelansky and Mary Fisher, 1984  
Image(s)

Box 6, Folder 34  
Image(s)

Box 6, Folder 35  
Clippings, Leon Polk Smith (undated), circa 1941-circa 1997  
Image(s): Clippings, Leon Polk Smith

Box 6, Folder 36  
Clippings, Leon Polk Smith, 1941-1979  
Image(s)

Box 6, Folder 37  
Clippings, Leon Polk Smith, 1980-1997  
Image(s)

Box 6, Folder 38  
Clippings, Smith's Influences, 1972-1991  
Image(s)

Box 6, Folder 39  
Exhibition Announcements and Catalogs, 1941-1949  
Image(s)

Box 6, Folder 40  
Exhibition Announcements and Catalogs, 1951-1958  
Image(s)

Box 7, Folder 1  
Exhibition Announcements and Catalogs, 1962-1964  
Image(s)

Box 7, Folder 2  
Exhibition Announcements and Catalogs, 1965-1969  
Image(s)  
Oversized material housed in Box 9, F1

Box 7, Folder 3  
Exhibition Announcements and Catalogs, 1971-1979  
Image(s)

Box 7, Folder 4  
Exhibition Announcements and Catalogs, 1980-1983
Box 7, Folder 5  
Exhibition Announcements and Catalogs, 1984-1985
Image(s)

Box 7, Folder 6  
Exhibition Announcements and Catalogs, 1986-1989
Image(s)

Box 7, Folder 7  
Exhibition Announcements and Catalogs, 1990-1992
Image(s)

Box 7, Folder 8  
Exhibition Announcements and Catalogs, 1993
Image(s)

Box 7, Folder 9  
Exhibition Announcements and Catalogs, 1994-1997
Image(s)

Box 9, Folder 1  
Stedelijk Museum Catalog, Vormen van de Kleur, 1967
Scanned with Box 7, F2
Series 7: Scrapbook, 1930-1940

1 Folder (Box 8)

The scrapbook consists of newspaper clippings documenting Smith's years as an educator and artist in Oklahoma in the 1930s and 1940s.

This series has been scanned in its entirety.

Box 8, Folder 1  Scrapbook, circa 1930-1940  
Image(s)
Series 8: Photographic Material, 1930-1990

8 Folders (Box 8)

Photographic material includes black and white photographs of Smith and his acquaintances circa 1930-1960, and a representative selection of black and white photographs and color slides of Smith's artwork from 1939 to 1960.

Original photographs have been scanned. Photographs and slides of artwork have not been scanned.

Box 8, Folder 2  Photographs of Leon Polk Smith with Friends and Family, circa 1930-1960
               Image(s)

Box 8, Folder 3  Photographs of Leon Polk Smith with Friends and Family, circa 1930-1960
               Image(s)

Box 8, Folder 4  Photographs of Leon Polk Smith with Friends and Family, circa 1930-1960
               Image(s)

Box 8, Folder 5  Photographs of Artwork, 1939-1949, circa 1960-1990

Box 8, Folder 6  Photographs of Artwork, 1950-1959, circa 1960-1990

Box 8, Folder 7  Photographs of Artwork, 1960-1979, circa 1960-1990

Box 8, Folder 8  Slides of Artwork, 1937-1969, circa 1960-1990


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