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
# Table of Contents

Collection Overview ........................................................................................................ 1  
Administrative Information .............................................................................................. 1  
Biographical/Historical note ............................................................................................ 2  
Scope and Contents note .................................................................................................. 3  
Arrangement note ............................................................................................................... 3  
Names and Subjects .......................................................................................................... 4  
Container Listing ............................................................................................................. 5  
  
Series 1: Biographical Material, 1938-1994 ............................................................. 5  
Series 2: Correspondence, 1939-1996 ..................................................................... 6  
Series 4: Writings, 1963-1996 ................................................................................ 20  
Series 6: Printed Material, 1941-1997 ...................................................................... 23  
Series 7: Scrapbook, 1930-1940 ............................................................................. 25  
Series 8: Photographic Material, 1920-1990 .......................................................... 26
Collection Overview

Repository: Archives of American Art  
Title: Leon Polk Smith papers  
Identifier: AAA.smitleon  
Date: 1921-1997  
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 1921 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.
Preferred Citation

Restrictions
Use of original papers requires an appointment.

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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 1921 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 1920-1960, 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, 1920-1990 (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

Return to Table of Contents
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
Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 16 Bard College, 1984-1985
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Box 1, Folder 17</th>
<th>Bronx Museum of the Arts, 1985-1986</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Image(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Box 1, Folder 18</td>
<td>Brooklyn Museum, undated, 1992</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Image(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Box 1, Folder 19</td>
<td>Brooklyn Museum, 1993</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Image(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Box 1, Folder 20</td>
<td>Brooklyn Museum, 1993</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Image(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Box 1, Folder 21</td>
<td>Brooklyn Museum, 1994</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Image(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Box 1, Folder 22</td>
<td>Brooklyn Museum, 1995</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Image(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Oversized material housed in Box 9, F2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Box 1, Folder 23</td>
<td>Buecker, Robert, 1972-1987</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Image(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Box 1, Folder 24</td>
<td>Burnett Miller Gallery (undated), circa 1984-circa 1990</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Image(s): Burnett Miller Gallery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Box 1, Folder 25</td>
<td>Burnett Miller Gallery, 1984-1990</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Image(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Box 1, Folder 26</td>
<td>Butler Institute of American Art, 1988</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Image(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Box 1, Folder 27</td>
<td>C, Miscellaneous, circa 1980-1995</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Image(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Box 1, Folder 28</td>
<td>Carnegie Institute, 1967-1980</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Image(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Box 1, Folder 29</td>
<td>Case Western Reserve University, 1969, undated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Image(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Box 1, Folder 30</td>
<td>Ciba-Geigy Corporation, 1967-1994</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Image(s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Box 1, Folder 31</td>
<td>Cleveland Museum of Art, 1966-1975</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Page 7 of 26
Box 1, Folder 32  Columbia University, Wallach Gallery, 1992-1994
Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 33  D, Miscellaneous, circa 1980-1995
Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 34  Daniel Goldreyer, Ltd., 1978-1982
Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 35  Daniel Goldreyer, Ltd., 1988-1992
Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 36  Davis, Philip, 1981-1984
Image(s)

Box 1, Folder 37  Davis, Philip, 1985-1988
Image(s)

Box 2, Folder 1  DiLaurenti Gallery, 1985-1986
Image(s)

Box 2, Folder 2  DiLaurenti Gallery, 1987-1989
Image(s)

Box 2, Folder 3  Dord Fitz Gallery, 1969-1988
Image(s)

Box 2, Folder 4  E, Miscellaneous, circa 1980-1995
Image(s)

Box 2, Folder 5  East Central University, 1984
Image(s)

Box 2, Folder 6  East Central University, 1985-1989
Image(s)

Box 2, Folder 7  East Central University, 1990-1993
Image(s)

Box 2, Folder 8  East Central University, 1994-1997
Image(s)

Box 2, Folder 9  Edition and Galerie Hoffmann, circa 1987-1993
Image(s)
Box 2, Folder 10: Edition and Galerie Hoffmann, circa 1987-1993
Image(s)
Oversized material housed in OV 10

Box 2, Folder 11: Edition and Galerie Hoffmann, 1987
Image(s)

Box 2, Folder 12: Edition and Galerie Hoffmann, 1987
Image(s)

Box 2, Folder 13: Edition and Galerie Hoffmann, 1988
Image(s)

Image(s)

Box 2, Folder 15: Edition and Galerie Hoffmann, 1992-1993
Image(s)

Image(s)

Box 2, Folder 17: F-G, Miscellaneous, circa 1980-1995
Image(s)

Box 2, Folder 18: G.W. Einstein Company, Inc., 1986
Image(s)

Box 2, Folder 19: Galerie Chalette, 1965-1981
Image(s)

Box 2, Folder 20: Galerie Denise Rene, 1971-1976
Image(s)
Oversized material housed in OV 10

Box 2, Folder 21: Galerie Denise Rene, 1977-1982
Image(s)

Box 2, Folder 22: Galerie Muller, 1964-1976
Image(s)

Box 2, Folder 23: Gallery North, 1976-1981, undated
Box 2, Folder 24  Gallery of Applied Arts, 1985
   Image(s)

   Image(s)

Box 2, Folder 26  Gibson, Ann, 1990-1991, undated
   Image(s)

Box 2, Folder 27  Goethe-Institut (Osaka and Turin), 1987-1992
   Image(s)
   Oversized material housed in OV 10

Box 3, Folder 1  Gorewitz, Rubin, 1981-1990
   Image(s)

Box 3, Folder 2  Grace Borgenicht Gallery, 1981-1983
   Image(s)
   Oversized material housed in OV 10

Box 3, Folder 3  Guggenheim Museum, 1970-1984
   Image(s)

Box 3, Folder 4  Guild Hall, 1987-1990
   Image(s)

Box 3, Folder 5  H, Miscellaneous, circa 1980-1995
   Image(s)

Box 3, Folder 6  Heckscher Museum, 1983-1984
   Image(s)

Box 3, Folder 7  Hoffman, Marianne, 1992
   Image(s)

Box 3, Folder 8  I, Miscellaneous, circa 1980-1995
   Image(s)

Box 3, Folder 9  International Contemporary Art Fair (Robinson, Charles), 1985-1986
   Image(s)

Box 3, Folder 10  J, Miscellaneous, circa 1980-1995

Page 10 of 26
Box 3, Folder 11  James Lodge and Associates, 1981-1982  

Box 3, Folder 12  K, Miscellaneous, circa 1980-1995  

Box 3, Folder 13  Kunstverein in Hamburg, 1989  
Oversized material housed in OV 10  

Box 3, Folder 14  L, Miscellaneous, circa 1980-1995  

Box 3, Folder 15  La Paloma (McPherson, Ronald and Morikawa, Mark), 1988  

Box 3, Folder 16  M, Miscellaneous, circa 1980-1995  

Box 3, Folder 17  Marilyn Pearl Gallery, 1980-1991  

Box 3, Folder 18  Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1982-1986  

Box 3, Folder 19  Meyers/Bloom Gallery (undated), circa 1988-circa 1993  
Image(s): Meyers/Bloom Gallery  

Box 3, Folder 20  Meyers/Bloom Gallery, 1988-1990  

Box 3, Folder 21  Meyers/Bloom Gallery, 1991-1993  

Box 3, Folder 22  Munson-Williams-Proctor Institute, 1991-1992  

Box 3, Folder 23  Musee de Grenoble, 1988-1990  

Box 3, Folder 24  Musee National D'Art Moderne, 1976-1977  

Box 3, Folder 26  
N, Miscellaneous, circa 1980-1995  
Image(s)

Box 3, Folder 27  
Nabakowski, Gislind, 1987-1988  
Image(s)

Box 3, Folder 28  
National Galerie Berlin (Grisebach, Lucius), 1982-1987  
Image(s)

Box 3, Folder 29  
Nurnberg Museum, 1986-1989  
Image(s)

Box 3, Folder 30  
O, Miscellaneous, circa 1980-1995  
Image(s)

Box 3, Folder 31  
Oklahoma City Art Museum, 1983-1990  
Image(s)

Box 3, Folder 32  
Image(s)

Box 3, Folder 33  
Image(s)

Box 3, Folder 34  
Prakapas Gallery, 1986-1993  
Image(s)

Box 3, Folder 35  
R, Miscellaneous, circa 1980-1995  
Image(s)

Box 3, Folder 36  
R+V Allgemeine Versicherung AG (Weiermair, Peter), 1989-1991  
Image(s)

Box 3, Folder 37  
Riley, Orrin H., 1985-1987  
Image(s)

Box 3, Folder 38  
S, Miscellaneous, circa 1980-1995  
Image(s)

Box 3, Folder 39  
San Francisco Museum of Art, 1967-1973  
Image(s)

Box 3, Folder 40  
Sidney Janis Gallery, 1948-1958
Box 3, Folder 41  Siegel Contemporary Art Inc./Ruth Siegel Ltd., 1982-1987
Image(s)

Box 3, Folder 42  Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation (Rebay, Hilla), 1943-1949
Image(s)

Box 3, Folder 43  Squatriti, Fausta/La Biennale di Venezia, 1982-1991
Image(s)

Box 3, Folder 44  Stamford Museum and Nature Center, 1981
Image(s)

Box 3, Folder 45  SUNY, College At Old Westbury, 1978-1979
Image(s)

Box 3, Folder 46  Susan Caldwell Gallery, 1978-1980
Image(s)

Box 3, Folder 47  T, Miscellaneous, circa 1980-1995
Image(s)

Box 3, Folder 48  Tallix, 1987-1988
Image(s)

Box 4, Folder 1  U, Miscellaneous, circa 1980-1995
Image(s)

Box 4, Folder 2  University of Oklahoma, Museum of Art, 1971-1993
Image(s)

Box 4, Folder 3  V, Miscellaneous, circa 1980-1995
Image(s)

Box 4, Folder 4  Virginia Commonwealth University, 1980-1981
Image(s)

Box 4, Folder 5  Volair Gallery, 1975-1976
Image(s)

Box 4, Folder 6  W, Miscellaneous, circa 1980-1995
Image(s)

Box 4, Folder 7  Washburn Gallery (undated), circa 1980-circa 1985
Image(s): Washburn Gallery

Box 4, Folder 8  Washburn Gallery, 1980-1981
  Image(s)

Box 4, Folder 9  Washburn Gallery, 1982
  Image(s)

Box 4, Folder 10  Washburn Gallery, 1983-1985
  Image(s)

  Image(s)

Box 4, Folder 12  Wichita State University, 1975-1983
  Image(s)

  Image(s)
  Oversized material housed in OV 10

Box 4, Folder 14  Wilhelm-Hack Museum, 1988
  Image(s)

Box 4, Folder 15  Wilhelm-Hack Museum, 1989
  Image(s)

  Image(s)

Box 4, Folder 17  Y, Miscellaneous, circa 1980-1995
  Image(s)

Box 4, Folder 18  Yale University Art Gallery, 1979-1985
  Image(s)

Box 9, Folder 2  Brooklyn Museum, Draft Exhibition Catalog, 1995
  Scanned with Box 1, F22

Box OV 10  Edition and Galerie Hoffmann, Exhibition Announcements, circa 1987-1993
  Scanned with Box 2, F10

Box OV 10  Galerie Denise Rene, Artwork Layout, 1976
  Scanned with Box 2, F20

Box OV 10  Goethe-Institut, Color Sample, circa 1987-1992
Box OV 10  Grace Borgenicht Gallery, Gallery Floor Plan, 1981
          Scanned with Box 3, F2
Box OV 10  Kunstverein in Hamburg, Gallery Floor Plan, 1989
          Scanned with Box 3, F13
Box OV 10  Wilhelm-Hack Museum, Gallery Floor Plan, circa 1988-1995
          Scanned with Box 4, F13

2.2: Personal

Box 4, Folder 19  A, Miscellaneous, circa 1980-1995
                 Image(s)
Box 4, Folder 20  B, Miscellaneous, circa 1980-1995
                 Image(s)
Box 4, Folder 21  Buck, Bob, 1992-1996
                 Image(s)
Box 4, Folder 22  Butera, Virginia, 1984-1995
                 Image(s)
Box 4, Folder 23  C, Miscellaneous, circa 1980-1995
                 Image(s)
Box 4, Folder 24  Clark, Alma, 1968-1969
                 Image(s)
Box 4, Folder 25  D, Miscellaneous, circa 1980-1995
                 Image(s)
Box 4, Folder 26  Danto, Arthur C., 1991-1995
                 Image(s)
Box 4, Folder 27  Downe, Edward Jr., 1980-1982, undated
                 Image(s)
Box 4, Folder 28  E, Miscellaneous, circa 1980-1995
                 Image(s)
Box 4, Folder 29  F, Miscellaneous, circa 1980-1995
Box 4, Folder 30  G, Miscellaneous, circa 1980-1995
Image(s)

Box 4, Folder 31  Galloway, David, 1981-1993
Image(s)

Box 4, Folder 32  Gego, 1968-1969
Image(s)

Box 4, Folder 33  Glattfelder, Hans, 1991-1995
Image(s)

Box 4, Folder 34  H, Miscellaneous, circa 1980-1995
Image(s)

Box 4, Folder 35  Highwater, Jamake, 1979-1985
Image(s)

Box 4, Folder 36  Humblet, Claudine (undated), circa 1985-circa 1989
Image(s): Humblet, Claudine

Box 4, Folder 37  Humblet, Claudine, 1985-1989
Image(s)

Box 5, Folder 1  Humblet, Claudine, 1990-1997
Image(s)

Box 5, Folder 2  I, Miscellaneous, circa 1980-1995
Image(s)

Box 5, Folder 3  Inaya, Beata, 1969-1984
Image(s)

Box 5, Folder 4  J, Miscellaneous, circa 1980-1995
Image(s)

Box 5, Folder 5  K, Miscellaneous, circa 1980-1995
Image(s)

Box 5, Folder 6  Kennedy, Edward M., 1980-1986
Image(s)

Box 5, Folder 7  L, Miscellaneous, circa 1980-1995
Box 5, Folder 8  Little, John, 1981-1984
Image(s)

Box 5, Folder 9  M, Miscellaneous, circa 1980-1995
Image(s)

Box 5, Folder 10  N, Miscellaneous, circa 1980-1995
Image(s)

Box 5, Folder 11  O, Miscellaneous, circa 1980-1995
Image(s)

Box 5, Folder 12  P, Miscellaneous, circa 1980-1995
Image(s)

Box 5, Folder 13  Parks, Addison, 1982-1996
Image(s)

Box 5, Folder 14  Pekarsky, Melvin (undated), circa 1980-circa 1989
Image(s): Pekarsky, Melvin

Box 5, Folder 15  Pekarsky, Melvin, 1980-1982
Image(s)

Box 5, Folder 16  Pekarsky, Melvin, 1983-1985
Image(s)

Box 5, Folder 17  Pekarsky, Melvin, 1986-1989
Image(s)

Box 5, Folder 18  Polk, Mark, 1990-1993
Image(s)

Box 5, Folder 19  Polk, Mark, 1994-1996
Image(s)

Box 5, Folder 20  R, Miscellaneous, circa 1980-1995
Image(s)

Box 5, Folder 21  Rowe, Harry L., 1939
Image(s)

Box 5, Folder 22  S, Miscellaneous, circa 1980-1995
Box 5, Folder 23  Smith, Leon Polk and Jamieson, Robert, 1968-1972
Image(s)
Oversized material housed in OV 10

Box 5, Folder 24  Smith, Leon Polk and Jamieson, Robert, 1981-1994
Image(s)

Box 5, Folder 25  Smith, Virginia, 1969-1996
Image(s)

Box 5, Folder 26  T, Miscellaneous, circa 1980-1995
Image(s)

Box 5, Folder 27  V, Miscellaneous, circa 1980-1995
Image(s)

Box 5, Folder 28  Vavruska, Frank, 1971-1973
Image(s)

Box 5, Folder 29  W, Miscellaneous, circa 1980-1995
Image(s)

Image(s)

Box 5, Folder 31  Warren, Alice, 1968-1976, undated
Image(s)

Box 5, Folder 32  Wooding, Robert, 1987-1995
Image(s)

Box 5, Folder 33  Workman, David, 1984-1988
Image(s)

Box 5, Folder 34  Y-Z, Miscellaneous, circa 1980-1995
Image(s)

Box 5, Folder 35  Unidentified and Illegible, circa 1980-1995
Image(s)

Box OV 10  Smith, Leon Polk, Oversized Letter, circa 1968-1972
Scanned with Box 5, F23

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)

Box 5, Folder 37  K. Osis Interview of Leon Polk Smith, May-June 1963
  Image(s)

Box 5, Folder 38  D'Arcy Hayman Interview of Leon Polk Smith, May 1964
  Image(s)

Box 5, Folder 39  Gerald Moore Interview of Lucile Horsley, March 1965
  Image(s)

Box 6, Folder 1  William Jeffet Interview of Leon Polk Smith, May 1985
  Image(s)

Box 6, Folder 2  James Collins Interview of Leon Polk Smith, November 1987
  Image(s)

Box 6, Folder 3  Brooke Kamin Rapaport Interview of Leon Polk Smith, July 1993
  Image(s)

Box 6, Folder 4  Michael Baker Interview of Robert T Buck for National Arts, 1995
  Video recording

Return to Table of Contents
Series 4: Writings, 1963-1996

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
Image(s)

Image(s)

Box 6, Folder 7  Calas, Nicholas, "Leon Polk Smith, The Pioneer", 1971
Image(s)

Box 6, Folder 8  Castle, Ted, "Leon Polk Smith: The Completely Self-Referential Object", 1979
Image(s)

Box 6, Folder 9  Danto, Arthur C., "Painting as Sculpture: Leon Polk Smith and Real Space", 1993-1994
Image(s)

Box 6, Folder 10  Elger, Dietmar, "Leon Polk Smith - An Introduction", circa 1981
Image(s)

Box 6, Folder 11  Parks, Addison, "Leon Polk Smith", 1992, undated
Image(s)

Image(s)

Box 6, Folder 13  Seeman, Joan, "Leon Polk Smith", 1978
Image(s)

Box 6, Folder 14  Smith, Leon Polk, "Minus Gallery/Plus Gallery", 1965
Image(s)

Box 6, Folder 15  Smith, Leon Polk, Notes, circa 1960s-1990s
Image(s)

Box 6, Folder 16  Walsh, Grace M., "Leon Polk Smith: A Pioneering Geometric Abstractionist", 1995
Box 6, Folder 17


Return to Table of Contents

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

Return to Table of Contents
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  Book, *Leon Polk Smith: American Painter* by The Brooklyn Museum, 1996
                  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

Oversized material housed in Box 9, F1
Box 7, Folder 5  Exhibition Announcements and Catalogs, 1984-1985

Box 7, Folder 6  Exhibition Announcements and Catalogs, 1986-1989

Box 7, Folder 7  Exhibition Announcements and Catalogs, 1990-1992

Box 7, Folder 8  Exhibition Announcements and Catalogs, 1993

Box 7, Folder 9  Exhibition Announcements and Catalogs, 1994-1997

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, 1920-1990

8 Folders (Box 8)

Photographic material includes black and white photographs of Smith and his acquaintances circa 1920-1960, 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 1920-1960
Image(s)

Box 8, Folder 3  Photographs of Leon Polk Smith with Friends and Family, circa 1920-1960
Image(s)

Box 8, Folder 4  Photographs of Leon Polk Smith with Friends and Family, circa 1920-1960
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
Image(s)

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


Return to Table of Contents