



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

A Finding Aid to the Abraham Joel Tobias Papers,
1913-2000, in the Archives of American Art

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Archives of American Art
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Collection Overview

Repository:	Archives of American Art
Title:	Abraham Joel Tobias papers
Identifier:	AAA.tobjoel
Date:	1913-2000
Extent:	2.8 Linear feet
Creator:	Tobias, Abraham Joel, 1913-1996
Language:	English
Summary:	The Abraham Joel Tobias papers date from 1913 to 2000 and measure 2.8 linear feet. Through project and exhibition files, printed material, correspondence, and photographs, the collection provides an overview of Tobias's career as a painter and muralist in New York City.

Administrative Information

Acquisition Information

The papers were donated in 2001 by Carolyn Tobias, the widow of Abraham Joel Tobias.

Processing Information

This collection was fully processed and a finding aid prepared by Carla de Luise in 2006.

Preferred Citation

Abraham Joel Tobias papers, 1913-2000. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Restrictions on Access

Use of original papers requires an appointment. Use of archival audiovisual recordings with no duplicate access copy requires advance notice.

Ownership and Literary Rights

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Biographical Note

Abraham Joel Tobias (1913-1996) was a painter, muralist, and educator in New York City. He was a pioneer in the use of shaped canvases.

A native of Rochester, New York, Tobias came to New York City to study at the Cooper Union School of Art, 1930-1931, and at the Art Students League, 1930-1933. He worked for the Federal Arts Project, 1938-1940, where he continued his training as a muralist, working with artist and technicians.

During World War II, Tobias served in the armed forces. He was an art director with the Intelligence Division, Army Air Force, and in 1945 was employed as a graphic designer for the Office of Strategic Services (OSS). Tobias was artist-in-residence and served as instructor in painting and drawing at Adelphi College, Garden City, Long Island, 1947-1957. He also was a visiting lecturer at various schools including Howard University, Brooklyn Museum Art School, Pratt Institute Art School, as well as at colleges in Illinois and Kansas.

Tobias completed over ten mural commissions for governmental agencies and educational institutions, including: United States Post Office, Clarendon, Arkansas; Howard University, Washington, D.C.; James Madison High School, Brooklyn, New York; Beth Israel Hospital, New York City; Domestic Relations Court Building, Brooklyn, New York; and Adelphi College, Garden City, New York. In 1962, Tobias began *The History of Science* mural for the lobby of the Polytechnic Institute of Brooklyn; it was never completed.

Tobias experimented with diverse materials such as terrazzo and mosaic for mural application. He also broke new ground with the use of ethyl silicate paint as a permanent medium for outdoor murals. In 1958, he patented striated plastic, a pliable material used to achieve an effect similar to stained glass.

He participated in many solo and group exhibitions. In 1935, Tobias presented his shaped canvas painting in the "Sculptural Painting" exhibition at Delphic Studios in New York City. In 1987, Tobias was recognized for his earlier pioneering work with a retrospective exhibition, "Abraham Joel Tobias: Sculptural Paintings" at The Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum of Rutgers University. Other exhibitions included: "Plastics U.S.A.," the United States Information Service's exhibition in Moscow (1961); "New York City WPA Art," Parsons School of Design, New York City (1977); "For a Permanent Public Art," Tweed Gallery, New York City (1989); and "The Technological Muse," Katonah Museum of Art, New York (1991).

Tobias's professional memberships included the Architectural League of New York, National Society of Mural Painters, and New York Artists Equity Association. He served on the Board of Directors for the Fine Arts Federation of New York from 1988-1996. He won the Architectural League Award in 1952. The Art Commission of the City of New York recognized Tobias, posthumously, for distinguished service to public art.

Abraham Joel Tobias married Carolyn Pratt in 1949; the couple had one daughter. Abraham Joel Tobias died in Rego Park, New York, in 1996 at the age of 82.

Scope and Content Note

The Abraham Joel Tobias papers date from 1913 to 2000 and measure 2.8 linear feet. Through project and exhibition files, printed material, correspondence, and photographs, the collection provides an overview of Tobias's career as a painter and muralist in New York City.

General correspondence regards mural proposals, exhibitions, professional activities, and museums' acquisitions of artwork by Tobias. A file of correspondence with the Fine Arts Federation of New York concerns efforts to recognize murals by Irving Block, James Brooks, Philip Evergood, Abraham Lishinsky, José Clemente Orozco, and Max Spivak as landmarks; it also includes minutes of meetings, 1988-1995, that reflect Tobias's service as a board member. Other correspondence is with friends and artists including Edward Caswell, George Gaber, Filia Holtzman, Vincent La Gambina, and Alton S. Tobey.

Project files document murals such as: *The Four Freedoms*, Midwood High School, Brooklyn, New York, honoring students and teachers who died in World War II (circa 1946); *Birth* for the maternity

ward at Mount Sinai Hospital, New York City (1951-1953); and *Medical Science* and *Medical Research*, Long Island Jewish Hospital (1954). The *Science* and *Engineering* project file (1958) contains a patent certificate for striated plastic, a material Tobias used in two murals. Also of interest is correspondence with the Harman Foundation regarding a documentary film about Tobias's use of ethyl silicate for outdoor murals. Among the exhibitions documented are: "Plastics U.S.A.," "New York WPA Artists Then and Now," and "Abraham Joel Tobias: Sculptural Paintings of the 1930s."

Printed material consists of announcements, invitations, solo and group exhibition catalogs, and clippings relating to Tobias's artistic career. Also found are pamphlets he designed for the Congress of Industrial Organizations. Photographs are of Tobias's artwork and the artist with friends and family. There is a video recording of an interview with Tobias conducted by Brendan Gill in 1995.

Arrangement

The collection is arranged as 8 series:

- Series 1: Biographical Materials, 1913-1996 (Boxes 1, 4; 0.3 linear feet)
- Series 2: Correspondence, 1933-1997 (Box 1; 0.4 linear feet)
- Series 3: Project and Exhibition Files, 1938-2000 (Boxes 1, 2, 4, OV 5; 1.6 linear feet)
- Series 4: Writings, circa 1928-1992 (Box 2; 0.1 linear feet)
- Series 5: Printed Material, 1913-1999 (Boxes 3, 4; 0.3 linear feet)
- Series 6: Artwork, circa 1990s (Box 3; 1 folder)
- Series 7: Photographs, 1929-1970 (Box 3; 0.1 linear feet)
- Series 8: Video Recording, 1995 (Box 3, 1 folder)

Names and Subject Terms

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

Subjects:

Mural painting and decoration
Muralists -- New York (State) -- New York
Painters -- New York (State) -- New York

Types of Materials:

Interviews
Photographs
Video recordings

Names:

Block, Irving
Brooks, James, 1906-1992
Caswell, Edward C.
Congress of Industrial Organizations (U.S.)
Evergood, Philip, 1901-1973
Fine Arts Federation of New York
Gaber, George
Gill, Brendan, 1914-1997
La Gambina, Vincent, 1909-1994

Lishinsky, Abraham
Orozco, José Clemente, 1883-1949
Spivak, Max, 1906-1981
Tobey, Alton S. (Alton Stanley), 1914-2005
United States. Work Projects Administration

Container Listing

Series 1: Biographical Materials, 1913-1996

0.3 Linear feet (Boxes 1, 4)

Among the biographical materials are curriculum vitae, military records, awards and certificates, obituaries and condolence letters, a scrapbook documenting Tobias's early artistic career and personal financial records.

Box 1, Folder 1	Curriculum Vitae and Biographical Notes, 1943, undated
Box 1, Folder 2	Birth Certificate, 1913
Box 1, Folder 3	Certificates and Awards, 1980-1983, 1995, 1943
Box 1, Folder 4	Financial Records, 1949-1959, 1961-1964
Box 1, Folder 5	Employment Applications, Federal and United Nations, 1944-1945
Box 1, Folder 6	Military Records and Awards, 1948, 1943-1944, undated
Box 1, Folder 7	Death Certificate, Obituaries, and Condolence Letters, 1996
Box 4	Scrapbook, 1935-1939 <i>1 Volume</i>
Box 4	Enlarged Copy of Tobias's Signature, 1960 photocopy

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Series 2: Correspondence, 1933-1997

0.4 Linear feet (Box 1)

General correspondence contains letters, drafts, and carbon copies of letters sent by Tobias regarding proposed mural commissions with responses from various trade unions and public institutions. There is scattered correspondence with museums such as the Brooklyn Museum, Guggenheim Museum, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, The Jewish Museum, North Carolina Museum of Art, and Seattle Art Museum. Correspondence with the National Museum of American Art concerns the acquisition of Tobias's shaped canvas, *Sky Formation* (1935); other letters concern the donation of two life drawings to the National Gallery. Also found are letters of recommendation written on Tobias's behalf.

This series is organized chronologically. Project and exhibition files (Series 3) contain additional correspondence.

Box 1, Folder 8-16	General Correspondence, 1933-1997, undated <i>9 Folders</i>
Box 1, Folder 17	The Fine Arts Federation of New York, 1988-1995, undated

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Series 3: Project and Exhibition Files, 1938-2000

1.6 Linear feet (Boxes 1, 2, 4, OV 5)

Project and exhibition files contain varying combinations of the following: correspondence, photographs, publicity material, legal documents, and proposals. Printed material includes announcements catalogs, and clippings. Some material is in Russian.

The project file for *Science and Engineering* (1958) contains a patent certificate for striated plastic, a material that Tobias employed in two murals. Other material of interest is correspondence with the Harmon Foundation regarding a documentary film on Tobias's use of ethyl silicate for outdoor murals.

This series is organized chronologically by mural commission, followed by project proposals, and exhibition files.

Murals

Box 1, Folder 18-19	<i>They Cleared the Land and Planted Cotton</i> (1943), Clarendon, Arkansas, Post Office, 1941-1988, undated 2 Folders
Box 1, Folder 20-21	<i>The Triumph of Science Over Charlatanism</i> (1943), Midwood High School, Brooklyn New York, 1943-1996 2 Folders
Box 1, Folder 22	<i>The Student</i> (1946), Founders Library, Howard University, Washington, D.C., 1938-1959, undated
Box 1, Folder 23	<i>The Sacrifice of Youth for Democracy and The Fulfillment of Youth Under Democracy</i> (1952), James Madison High School, Brooklyn, New York, 1988, 1947-1958, undated
Box 1, Folder 24-27	Untitled Mural (1953), Charles H. Silver Clinic, Beth Israel Hospital, New York City, 1953-1992, undated 4 Folders Oversized material housed in Box 4 and OV 5
Box 2, Folder 1	Untitled Mural (1955), Domestic Relations Court Building, Brooklyn New York, 1955-1993, undated Oversized material housed in Box 4
Box 2, Folder 2-7	<i>Science and Engineering</i> (1958), Polytechnic Institute of Brooklyn, New York, 1954-1970, undated 6 Folders Oversized materials housed in Box 4
Box 2, Folder 13	<i>The History of Science</i> (commissioned 1962, unfinished), Polytechnic Institute of Brooklyn, New York, 1957-2000

- Box 2, Folder 8-12 *Teacher and Pupil* (1960), Public School 134, Henrietta Szold School, New York City, 1959-1960, undated
5 Folders
- Box 2, Folder 14-15 *The Arts* (1966), Adelphi College, Garden City, New York, 1945-1967, undated
2 Folders
- Proposals
- Box 2, Folder 16 Freedom Monument (1976), Gateway National Park, Brooklyn, New York, 1953-1954, 1975-1976, undated
- Box 2, Folder 17 Various Projects, circa 1947-1958, undated
oversized material housed in OV 5
- Box 2, Folder 18-19 Various Exhibitions, 1949-1997, undated
2 Folders
- Box 4 Untitled Mural (1953), Charles H. Silver Clinic, Beth Israel Hospital, New York City, 1953-1955, undated
from Box 1, folders 24-27
- Box 4 Untitled Mural (1955), Domestic Relations Court Building, Brooklyn, New York, 1955, undated
from Box 2, folder 1
- Box 4 *Science and Engineering* (1958) Polytechnic Institute of Brooklyn, New York, 1957-1958
2 Folders
from Box 2, folders 2-7
- Oversize 5 Untitled Mural (1953), Charles H. Silver Clinic, Beth Israel Hospital, New York City, undated
from Box 1, folders 24-27
- Oversize 5 Various Projects, undated
from Box 2, folder 17

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Series 4: Writings, circa 1928-1992

0.1 Linear feet (Box 2)

All writings are by Tobias. Essays include "The Coexistence of Science and Art," "Thoughts on Mural Painting," and "The Statue of Liberty and Public Art."

Box 2, Folder 20	Essays, 1952-1986, undated
Box 2, Folder 21	Poems, circa 1928-1932
Box 2, Folder 22	Miscellaneous Notes and Writings, 1970, 1992, undated

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Series 5: Printed Material, 1913-1999

0.3 Linear feet (Boxes 3, 4)

Exhibition catalogs include: *Abraham Tobias* (1939), Delphic Studios, New York City; *27th Annual Exhibition* of the Brooklyn Society of Artists (1943), Brooklyn Museum, New York; The Architectural League of New York Gold Medal Awards, 1950-1952 (1952); *New York City WPA Art* (1977), Parsons School of Design, New York City; and *Abraham Joel Tobias: Sculptural Paintings of the 1930s* (1987-1988), The Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum, Rutgers University, New Jersey.

The congress of Industrial Organizations pamphlets were designed by Tobias.

Box 3, Folder 1-3	Announcements and Invitations, 1935-1999, undated <i>3 Folders</i>
Box 3, Folder 4	Clippings, Newspaper and Magazine, 1913-1999, undated oversized material housed in Box 4
Box 3, Folder 5-7	Exhibition Catalogs, 1939-1988, undated <i>3 Folders</i>
Box 3, Folder 8	Magazines, 1937-1985
Box 3, Folder 9	Press Releases, 1937-1993, undated
Box 3, Folder 10	Pamphlets, Congress of Industrial Organizations, 1944-1945, undated
Box 4	Clippings, Newspaper and Magazine, 1956-1997 from Box 3, folder 4
Box 4	School Newspapers, 1951-1952

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Series 6: Artwork, circa 1990s

1 Folder (Box 3)

This series contains photocopies of Tobias's sketches, including a self-portrait.

Box 3, Folder 11	Sketches (undated), circa 1990s photocopies
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Series 7: Photographs, 1929-1970

0.1 Linear feet (Box 3)

The majority of this series consists of photographs of sketches, murals, and shaped canvases by Tobias. Also found are views of the artist with friends and family.

Box 3, Folder 12	Artwork, 1929-1959, undated some photocopies
Box 3, Folder 13	Shaped Paintings, 1935, undated
Box 4, Folder 14	Tobias with Friends and Family, 1919-1970, undated

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Series 8: Video Recording, 1995

1 Folder (Box 3)

Among the topics discussed in an interview of Tobias conducted by Brendan Gill are his shaped canvases and murals created for the Polytechnic Institute of Brooklyn. Sponsored by the New York City Art Commission Archives, the interview was conducted at the Polytechnic Institute of Brooklyn on December 19, 1995.

Box 3, Folder 15

Abraham Joel Tobias interviewed by Brendan Gill, 1995
1 videocassettes (vhs)

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