



# Smithsonian

## *Archives of American Art*

### A Finding Aid to the Bessie Potter Vonnoh Papers, circa 1860-1991 (bulk 1890-1955), in the Archives of American Art

Erin Corley

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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<https://www.aaa.si.edu/services/questions>  
<https://www.aaa.si.edu/>

## Table of Contents

|  |   |
|--|---|
| Collection Overview .....                            | 1 |
| Administrative Information .....                     | 1 |
| Biographical Note.....                               | 2 |
| Scope and Content Note.....                          | 2 |
| Arrangement.....                                     | 3 |
| Names and Subjects .....                             | 3 |
| Container Listing .....                              | 5 |
| Series 1: Biographical Material, 1922-1955.....      | 5 |
| Series 2: Correspondence, circa 1863-1985.....       | 6 |
| Series 3: Photographs, circa 1860-1950.....          | 7 |
| Series 4: Printed Material, 1901-1991.....           | 8 |
| Series 5: Unprocessed Addition, circa 1875-1991..... | 9 |

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## Collection Overview

|                    |  |
|--------------------|--|
| <b>Repository:</b> | Archives of American Art   |
| <b>Title:</b>      | Bessie Potter Vonnoh papers  |
| <b>Date:</b>       | circa 1860-1991<br>(bulk 1890-1955)  |
| <b>Identifier:</b> | AAA.vonnbess   |
| <b>Creator:</b>    | Vonnoh, Bessie Potter, 1872-1955   |
| <b>Extent:</b>     | 3.1 Linear feet  |
| <b>Language:</b>   | English .  |
| <b>Summary:</b>    | <p>The papers of sculptor Bessie Potter Vonnoh measure 3.1 linear feet and date from circa 1860 to 1991, with the bulk of material dating from 1890 to 1955. The scattered papers document the personal life and career of Bessie Potter Vonnoh, and, to a lesser degree, her husband, painter Robert William Vonnoh. Found within the papers are Vonnoh family correspondence, including letters between Bessie and Robert, and professional and personal correspondence, primarily Bessie's. The collection also contains scattered biographical materials, photographs of the Vonnohs, a photograph album, photographs of artwork, clippings, exhibition catalogs, and other printed material. There is a 2.3 linear foot unprocessed addition to this collection donated in 2022 that includes typescripts of Vonnoh's journals; scrapbooks; photographs of Vonnoh, works of art and events and photograph albums; letters to Vonnoh; exhibition catalogs and other printed material; and biographical material including marriage certificate and Last Will and Testament. Materials date from circa 1875-1991.</p> |

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## Administrative Information

### Provenance

The collection was donated in 1995 by Lulette Jenness Thompson, a cousin of Bessie Potter Vonnoh and in 2022 by Kerry Oliver-Smith, who received the collection from his father, Waren McKenney, a second cousin of Vonnoh.

### Alternative Forms Available

A portion of the **Bessie Potter Vonnoh** papers in the Archives of American Art were digitized in 2007, and total 731 images.

### Processing Information

The bulk of the Bessie Potter Vonnoh papers received a preliminary level of processing in 1996, and were fully processed by Erin Corley in 2006 and digitized in 2007 with funding provided by the Terra Foundation for American Art.

## Preferred Citation

Bessie Potter Vonnoh papers, circa 1860-1991. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

## Restrictions on Access

This bulk of the collection is open for research. Access to original papers requires an appointment and is limited to the Archives' Washington, D.C. Research Center.

This 2022 addition to this collection is temporarily closed to researchers due to archival processing. Contact Reference Services for more information.

## Terms of Use

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## Biographical Note

Bessie Potter Vonnoh (1872-1955) was born in St. Louis, Missouri to Alexander and Mary McKenney Potter. In 1874, after the death of her father, her family moved to Chicago. Also at this time, she suffered from a series of illnesses that she did not recover from until she was ten. In school she enjoyed clay-modeling class and decided at an early age that she wanted to be a sculptor. Beginning in 1890 she studied with Lorado Taft at the Art Institute of Chicago and later became one of his assistants (known as the "White Rabbits") for the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893. She was also given her own commission for the Illinois building at the fair. After this success, Vonnoh opened her own studio in Chicago and made plaster figurines of society women, friends, and their children. She visited New York and took her first trip to Paris in 1895, visiting the studios of many eminent sculptors such as Auguste Rodin. Her work was influenced by the American Impressionist movement, depicted in one of her most famous works, *Young Mother*. This piece was exhibited in the National Sculpture Society exhibition of 1898 and led to several public sculpture commissions.

In 1899 Bessie Potter Vonnoh moved to New York City and married Impressionist painter, Robert William Vonnoh (1858-1933). They lived in New York and maintained a summer home in Lyme, Connecticut. During her career she received many awards for her works at international exhibitions, including two bronze medals at the Paris Exposition in 1900. Other landmark events included a solo exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum in 1913 and membership into the National Academy of Design in 1921 - the first female sculptor accepted as a permanent member. Vonnoh's work was very well received by the public, and in the 1920s she began working on a larger scale, creating large fountains, such as the Frances Hodgson Burnett Memorial Fountain in Central Park, New York, and other decorative garden figures. Robert Vonnoh died in 1933 and, in 1948, she married Dr. Edward Keyes. Bessie Potter Vonnoh died in New York City in 1955 at the age of 82.

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## Scope and Content Note

The papers of sculptor Bessie Potter Vonnoh measure 3.1 linear feet and date from circa 1860 to 1991, with the bulk of material dating from 1890 to 1955. The scattered papers document the personal life and career of Bessie Potter Vonnoh, and, to a lesser degree, her husband, painter Robert William Vonnoh. Found within the papers are Vonnoh family correspondence, including letters between Bessie and Robert, and primarily Bessie's professional and personal correspondence. There is one folder of correspondence of Robert William Vonnoh. Bessie's correspondents include Daniel Chester French, Hamlin Garland, Rupert

Hughes, Archer Huntington, Larkin G. Mead, Jean Francois Raffaelli, Cornelia Otis Skinner, and others. Robert's correspondents include Charles M. Carter, Daniel Chester French, William M. R. French, and Charles Vezin. The collection also contains scattered biographical materials, photographs of Bessie Potter Vonnoh and Robert William Vonnoh, a photograph album, photographs of artwork, clippings, exhibition catalogs, and other printed material.

There is a 2.3 linear foot unprocessed addition to this collection donated in 2022 that includes typescripts of Vonnoh's journals; scrapbooks; photographs of Vonnoh, works of art and events and photograph albums; letters to Vonnoh; exhibition catalogs and other printed material; and biographical material including marriage certificate and Last Will and Testament. Materials date from circa 1875-1991.

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## Arrangement

The collection is arranged into 5 series:

Missing Title:

- Series 1: Biographical Material, 1922-1955 (Box 1; 5 folders)
- Series 2: Correspondence, circa 1863-1985 (Box 1; 11 folders)
- Series 3: Photographs, circa 1860-1950 (Box 1-2; 0.4 linear feet)
- Series 4: Printed Material, 1901-1991 (Box 2; 9 folders)
- Series 5: Unprocessed Addition, circa 1875-1991 (Boxes 3-5; 2.3 linear feet)

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## Names and Subject Terms

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

Subjects:

Artist couples  
Landscape painters -- New York (State) -- New York  
Painters -- New York (State) -- New York  
Portrait painters -- New York (State) -- New York  
Women artists  
Women painters  
Women sculptors

Types of Materials:

Photographs

Names:

Carter, Charles M., 1853-1929  
French, Daniel Chester, 1850-1931  
French, William M. R. (William Merchant Richardson), 1843-1914  
Garland, Hamlin, 1860-1940  
Hughes, Rupert, 1872-1956  
Huntington, Archer M., 1870-1955  
Mead, Larkin G. (Larkin Goldsmith), 1835-1910  
Raffaelli, Jean François, 1850-1924  
Skinner, Cornelia Otis, 1901-  
Vezin, Charles, 1858-1942  
Vonnoh, Robert William, 1858-1933

Occupations:

Sculptors -- New York (State) -- New York

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## Container Listing

### Series 1: Biographical Material, 1922-1955

*(Box 1; 5 folders)*

Scope and Contents: Biographical material consists of a small amount of biographical information on Bessie Potter Vonnoh, including a resume, obituaries, and notes on her family history. Also found is an inventory and appraisal of Vonnoh's estate and various certificates for awards she received. This series also includes Robert Vonnoh's obituaries and a few of his writings.

Box 1, Folder 1      [Biographical Information on Bessie Potter Vonnoh, 1955, 19--](#)

Box 1, Folder 2      [Appraisal, Estate of Bessie Potter Vonnoh Keyes, 1955](#)

Box 1, Folder 3      [Award Certificates, 1931, 1934](#)

Box 1, Folder 4      [Robert Vonnoh Obituaries, 1933](#)

Box 1, Folder 5      [Writings by Robert Vonnoh, 1922, 19--](#)

*[Return to Table of Contents](#)*

## Series 2: Correspondence, circa 1863-1985

(Box 1; 11 folders)

**Scope and Contents:** Correspondence primarily documents Bessie Potter Vonnoh's personal and family life, as well as her career as an artist. Included are letters (mostly transcripts) from Vonnoh, known as "Betty" to her family, to her mother regarding her trip to the Paris International Exposition in 1900 and a later trip to France in 1914. There are letters from Bessie to her husband, Robert Vonnoh, known as "Bonny". Also found are letters to her cousin Lulette Jenness Thompson regarding Vonnoh's career, and several letters from her uncle, J. S. McKenny. Personal and professional correspondence includes letters from Daniel Chester French, Hamlin Garland, Rupert Hughes, Archer Huntington, Larkin G. Mead, Jean Francois Raffaelli, Cornelia Otis Skinner, Mrs. Woodrow Wilson (Ellen Axson) and her daughter Jessie Wilson Sayre, and others. There is one folder of Robert Vonnoh's letters from Charles M. Carter, Daniel Chester French, William M. R. French, Charles Vezin, and others, and scattered family letters. Correspondence is arranged chronologically within each folder.

|                  |  |
|------------------|--|
| Box 1, Folder 6  | <a href="#">From Bessie Potter Vonnoh to Robert Vonnoh, circa 1909-1928</a>                            |
| Box 1, Folder 7  | <a href="#">From Bessie Potter Vonnoh to her mother, Mary Potter, 1900</a>                             |
| Box 1, Folder 8  | <a href="#">From Bessie Potter Vonnoh to her mother, Mary Potter, 1914</a>                             |
| Box 1, Folder 9  | <a href="#">From Bessie Potter Vonnoh to Lulette Jenness Thompson, 1946-1953</a>                       |
| Box 1, Folder 10 | <a href="#">To Bessie Potter Vonnoh from her uncle, J. S. McKenney, 1899-1904</a>                      |
| Box 1, Folder 11 | <a href="#">Lulette Jenness Thompson Letters regarding Bessie Potter Vonnoh, 1952-1954, 1982, 1985</a> |
| Box 1, Folder 12 | <a href="#">Robert Vonnoh Correspondence, 1899-1926</a>  |
| Box 1, Folder 13 | <a href="#">From William Vonnoh (Robert's father) to wife Friederika Vonnoh, circa 1863</a>            |
| Box 1, Folder 14 | <a href="#">General Correspondence, 1892-1914</a>  |
| Box 1, Folder 15 | <a href="#">General Correspondence, 1915-1947</a>  |
| Box 1, Folder 16 | <a href="#">General Correspondence, circa 1900-1950</a>  |

*[Return to Table of Contents](#)*



## Series 3: Photographs, circa 1860-1950

(Box 1-2; 0.4 linear feet)

**Scope and Contents:** Photographs include numerous portraits of Bessie and Robert Vonnoh, and photographs of the Vonnoh's together and with friends, Bessie's father, Bessie with her second husband, Edward Keyes, and the Vonnoh's home in Lyme, Connecticut. Also found are photographs of artwork by Bessie and Robert Vonnoh. Photographs are both loose and in a disbound photograph album.

|                   |  |
|-------------------|--|
| Box 1, Folder 17  | <a href="#">Portraits of Bessie Potter Vonnoh, circa 1890-1950</a>                                 |
| Box 1, Folder 18  | <a href="#">Portraits of Bessie Potter Vonnoh, circa 1890-1950</a>                                 |
| Box 1, Folder 19  | <a href="#">Portraits of Robert Vonnoh, circa 1890, 1930</a>                                       |
| Box 1, Folder 20  | <a href="#">Photographs of Bessie Potter Vonnoh and Robert Vonnoh with others, circa 1895-1930</a> |
| Box 1, Folder 21  | <a href="#">Photograph of Bessie Potter Vonnoh and Edward Keyes, circa 1948</a>                    |
| Box 1, Folder 22  | <a href="#">Photograph of Alexander Potter, circa 1860</a>   |
| Box 2, Folder 1   | <a href="#">Photograph Album (disbound), circa 1900-1930</a>                                       |
| Box 2, Folder 2   | <a href="#">Photograph Album (disbound), circa 1900-1930</a>                                       |
| Box 2, Folder 3   | <a href="#">Photograph Album (disbound), circa 1900-1930</a>                                       |
| Box 2, Folder 4   | <a href="#">Photograph Album (disbound), circa 1900-1930</a>                                       |
| Box 2, Folder 5   | <a href="#">Photograph Album (disbound), circa 1900-1930</a>                                       |
| Box 2, Folder 6-8 | <a href="#">Photographs of Artwork by Bessie Potter Vonnoh, circa 1890-1950</a>                    |
| Box 2, Folder 9   | <a href="#">Photographs of Artwork by Robert Vonnoh, circa 1890-1930</a>                           |

[Return to Table of Contents](#)

## Series 4: Printed Material, 1901-1991

*(Box 2; 9 folders)*

Scope and Contents: Printed material consists of exhibition catalogs for both Bessie and Robert Vonnoh, including joint exhibitions, and newspaper and magazine clippings documenting their careers. Items are arranged chronologically within each folder.

|                  |  |
|------------------|--|
| Box 2, Folder 10 | <a href="#">Clippings, Bessie Potter Vonnoh, 1913-1928</a>   |
| Box 2, Folder 11 | <a href="#">Clippings, Bessie Potter Vonnoh, 1929-1952</a>   |
| Box 2, Folder 12 | <a href="#">Clippings, Robert Vonnoh, 1901-1928</a>  |
| Box 2, Folder 13 | <a href="#">Clippings, Robert and Bessie Potter Vonnoh joint exhibitions, 1913-1929</a>                        |
| Box 2, Folder 14 | <a href="#">Exhibition Catalogs, Bessie Potter Vonnoh, 1926, 1984, 1987</a>                                    |
| Box 2, Folder 15 | <a href="#">Exhibition Catalogs, Bessie Potter Vonnoh, 1990</a>  |
| Box 2, Folder 16 | <a href="#">Exhibition Catalogs, Robert Vonnoh, 1911, 1987, 1991</a>   |
| Box 2, Folder 17 | <a href="#">Exhibition Catalogs, Robert and Bessie Potter Vonnoh joint exhibitions, 1913, 1914, 1922, 1928</a> |
| Box 2, Folder 18 | <a href="#">Miscellaneous Printed Material, 1924, 1942, 1988</a>   |

*[Return to Table of Contents](#)*

## Series 5: Unprocessed Addition, circa 1875-1991

### 2.3 Linear feet

|       |                    |
|-------|--------------------|
| Box 3 | Unprocessed Papers |
|-------|--------------------|

|       |                    |
|-------|--------------------|
| Box 4 | Unprocessed Papers |
|-------|--------------------|

|       |                    |
|-------|--------------------|
| Box 5 | Unprocessed Papers |
|-------|--------------------|

[Return to Table of Contents](#)