



Smithsonian

Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Helen Zell

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Table of Contents

Collection Overview	1
Administrative Information	1
General.....	2
Scope and Contents.....	1
Scope and Contents.....	1
Biographical / Historical.....	1
Names and Subjects	2
Container Listing	

Collection Overview

Repository:	Archives of American Art
Title:	Oral history interview with Helen Zell
Date:	2016 December 5-6
Identifier:	AAA.zellh16
Creator:	Zell, Helen, 1942- (Interviewee) Berman, Avis (Interviewer)
Extent:	110 Pages (Transcript)
Language:	English .

Administrative Information

Acquisition Information

This interview is part of the Archives of American Art Oral History Program, started in 1958 to document the history of the visual arts in the United States, primarily through interviews with artists, historians, dealers, critics and administrators.

Restrictions

This interview is access restricted; written permission is required. Contact Reference Services for more information.

Biographical / Historical

Helen Zell (1942-) is a philanthropist and art collector in Chicago, Illinois. Avis Berman (1949-) is an art historian and author in New York, New York.

Scope and Contents

An oral history interview with Helen Zell conducted 2016 December 5-6, by Avis Berman, for the Archives of American Art and the Center for the History of Collecting in America at the Frick Art Reference Library of The Frick Collection, at Zell's home, in Chicago, Illinois.

Scope and Contents

Zell discusses growing up as a Jewish Northerner in Baton Rouge, Louisiana; her parents and their extended family and the impact on her of visiting with her father's bohemian relatives in Brooklyn; her early interest in reading and English studies; her enthusiasm for collecting and organizing paper dolls and books as a young girl; the family's relocation to Rockville Centre, New York on Long Island; her visit as a teenager to Europe and the Rome Olympics with her grandparents; her college years at the University of Michigan, where she met her first husband, James Fadim; her work as an editor for the American Society for Microbiology; the

couple's meeting and socializing with Sam and Janet Zell at the University of Michigan; their move to Chicago in 1967; her first purchases of art at the Old Town Art Fair in Chicago; her work as the general manager for the Chicago String Ensemble; her work on the Women's Board at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago; her divorce from her first husband and her return to school to study interior design at the Harrington Institute and her subsequent work as an interior designer; her deeper involvement with Chicago-based art collectors through her work at the MCA. Zell also describes her reintroduction to Sam Zell after many years apart at an art fair in Chicago in 1995; their burgeoning relationship and his desire to help her acquire and develop an art collection, initially concentrating on Surrealist work; their marriage and acquisition of a neighboring apartment in their condominium building which they renovated in order to create space for their growing collection; the expansion of their collection into photography; her enthusiasm for the work of Joseph Cornell, Louise Bourgeois and Lee Bontecou, among others; the assistance of the gallerist Alan Koppel in acquiring work for the collection; her feelings about loaning from the collection for exhibitions; the valuable assistance of curators and dealers in expanding her knowledge and expertise; and her and her husband's feelings about eventually creating a legacy for their collection. Zell also recalls Robert Natkin; Grace Hokin; Bud Holland; Helyn Goldenberg; Marilyn Alsdorf; Allen Turner; Stefan Edlis; Gael Neeson; Kevin Consey; Madeline Grynstejn; Elizabeth Smith as well as Michael Heltzer; Meredith Palmer; John Vinci; David Tunkl; Lynne Warren; and Wilbur Ross, among others.

General

Originally recorded as 2 digital wav sound files. Duration is 4 hr., 53 min.

Names and Subject Terms

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

Subjects:

Philanthropists -- Illinois -- Chicago -- Interviews
Women art collectors

Types of Materials:

Interviews
Sound recordings

Names:

Art Collectors: A Project in Partnership with the Center for the History of Collecting in America
at The Frick Collection