



Smithsonian

National Museum of American History Kenneth E. Behring Center

Guide to the Ira L. Hill Portrait Photonegatives

NMAH.AC.0144

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Collection Overview

Repository:	Archives Center, National Museum of American History
Title:	Ira L. Hill Portrait Photonegatives
Date:	1912-1953 (bulk 1925-1931)
Identifier:	NMAH.AC.0144
Source:	National Museum of American History (U.S.). Division of Photographic History (Collector)
Creator:	Martin, Ray (Photographer) Hill, Ira L. (Ira Lawrence), 1877-1947 (Photographer)
Extent:	200 Cubic feet (300 wooden drawers; 23,metal file drawers)
Language:	English .

Administrative Information

Acquisition Information

Collection donated by Ray Martin, 1970.

Provenance

Ray Martin, having purchased the collection with the studio, held it in storage for many years before donating it to the Museum.

Provenance

Collection transferred to the Archives Center from the Division of Photographic History (now Division of Cultural and Community Life) August 1986.

Related Materials

Materials at Other Organizations

National Portrait Gallery has a portrait of Margaret Sanger by Ira Hill.

Processing Information

Collection processed by David Haberstick, undated

Preferred Citation

Ira L. Hill Portrait Photonegatives, 1912-1953, Archives Center, National Museum of American History.

Restrictions

The majority of the collection is inaccessible and is stored off-site. Special arrangements must be made to work with it. Contact the Archives Center for information at archivescenter@si.edu or 202-633-3270.

Conditions Governing Use

Collection items available for reproduction, but the Archives Center makes no guarantees concerning copyright restrictions. Other intellectual property rights may apply. Archives Center cost-recovery and use fees may apply when requesting reproductions.

Biographical / Historical

Ira Lawrence Hill opened a photographic studio in New York City about 1905, and died in 1938 or 1939. His birthdate has not yet been located. Hill was considered the "Cecil Beaton of his time" in New York, for he photographed the wealthy and socially prominent in his studio, but also received requests from all over the country to document society events "on location". He photographed many film and theatrical celebrities, portraits with helping to launch her career. She wrote: "Aside from his own enthusiasm, the above [referring to the Hill photograph] was the only evidence which C. B. Cochran submitted to Sir Gerald du Maurier when suggesting I be imported for a role in 'The Dancers' in London. Since my first transatlantic flight marked the turning point in my career, my personal thanks go to photographer Ira Hill who posed and reproduced me. I've faced many a camera since, both still and moving, but not one of their images served me so well as Ira's. Photographers can flatter you and they can foul you up. When submitting to news cameramen I often came out looking like the second witch in 'Macbeth.'"

Ray Martin, donor of the collection to the Museum, noted that her personally photographed the wedding of Sen. Claiborne Pell while working for Hill. Hill eventually married five debutantes in succession, according to Martin. His work frequently was published in *Vanity Fair*, *Town and Country* and other magazines, and he did his best work from 1920 on.

The Hill studio was located at 677 Fifth Avenue, near 53rd Street, according to a letter from 1946 on "Ira L. Hill's Studio" stationary. It is not known whether the studio was always in that location.

Ray Martin worked for Hill from 1936 to 1938. After Hill's death Martin purchased the studio and operated it until about 1960. Photographs in the collection which are dated after 1939 presumably were made by Mr. Martin or under his supervision. The early Hill and Martin photographs were placed in storage for several years after Martin closed the studio, and he subsequently donated them to the Division of Photographic History of the Museum of History and Technology in the 1960s. The Division finally accessioned the collection in 1981 (accession number 1981.0463).

Biographical / Historical

Although some sources give Hill's date of death as 1938, an article in the *New York Times*, November 21, 1939, describes the arrest of "Society Photographer" Ira L. Hill after a fight at the home of his ex-wife.

Scope and Contents

Approximately 86,000 photographic negatives (Series 1) and twenty-three drawers of file cards (Series 2) comprise the collection. Most of the pictures are studio portraits.

Series 1: Photonegatives

The majority of the negatives are glass plates, 5 x 7 inches. Approximately 10% of the total number of images are on film, also 5 x 7 inches, and all the film material which has been inspected thus far is on safety base: rapid deterioration of some of the film indicates that it is unstable cellulose acetate or diacetate. Nearly all of the negatives are portraits. Many of the female subjects wear furs or expensive gowns and dresses, and most of the men seem well-dressed. The majority of the portraits inspected have been heavily retouched with pencil, as apparently was Hill's custom, and the standard procedure followed by most commercial

portrait studios. There are some large portraits, especially wedding photographs, which are in extremely poor condition due to the acetate deformation and deterioration.

Several hundred 8"x 10" glass negatives are not studio portraits. Many are informal outdoor portraits, landscapes and scenic views. Some seem to depict vacation outings and camping trips.

These photographs (approximately 86,000, according to the inventory conducted in the early 1980s) are currently stored off-site (building 18, Silver Hill Facility), and are not yet accessible due to the fact that parts of the collection are contaminated with asbestos insulation fibers; after preliminary cleaning, asbestos levels remaining were still considered hazardous. The collection must be included within the over-all Silver Hill asbestos abatement program. However, a small representative sample of glass and film negatives (1 box) has been cleaned and shelved in the Archives Center.

Series 2: Card Files

The collection is accompanied by twenty-three drawers of cards which form a partial working catalog. These cards are business records, recording the names of subjects and dates of sittings, along with prices charged, and the photographer or studio's catalog number. These numbers are on the negative jackets and match the card numbers. The cataloguing system incorporates at least in part a chronological arrangement which parallels the numerical sequence.

Celebrity subjects in the collection include Eleanor Roosevelt, Hedda Hopper, Fred Astaire, Ziegfeld girls such as Billie Burke, and other public and entertainment figures. However, the celebrity portraits represent only a small percentage of the photographs. Indeed, an extensive list of prominent subjects supposedly to be found in the collection was supplied by Ray Martin before the acquisition, but most of these names have not appeared in either the card files or the collection itself, to the limited extent that the material could be inspected during inventory. Of course, there are chronological gaps in the cards.

Arrangement

The collection is divided into two series.

Series 1: Photonegatives

Series 2: Card Files

Card files arranged alphabetically by client name; each file devoted to a single year, half-year, or, in one instance, consecutive series of years. Photonegatives arranged numerically within drawers.

Names and Subject Terms

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

Subjects:

Celebrities -- 20th century
Portraits -- 1900-1950

Types of Materials:

Photographs -- Black-and-white negatives -- Acetate film -- 1900-1950
Retouching -- Pencil

Names:

National Museum of American History (U.S.). Division of Photographic History
Roosevelt, Eleanor, 1884-1962

Occupations:

Actors
Actors -- Interviews -- Pennsylvania

Places:

New York (N.Y.)

Container Listing

Box 1	2700s-5800s , 1912 - 1913
Box 2	6200s-7400s , 1914 - 1915
Box 3	6100s-8100s , 1915 - 1916
Box 4	15,400s-16,000s , 1925
Box 5	17000s, 1926
Box 6	15,000s-18,000s , 1927
Box 7	13,000s-20,000s, 1928
Box 8	A-M, 21,800s , 1929
Box 9	N-Z, 21,000s , 1929
Box 10	23,400s, 1930
Box 11	24,000s , 1931
	<p>[Portrait of Miss Batcheller : black-and-white glass photonegative], [ca. 1930s.] 1 Item Photographer: Hill, Ira L. (Ira Lawrence), 1877-1947 Language: English. Notes: Silver gelatin on glass plate, 7" x 5". Negative or sitting number 24260 [?]; subject's name and negative number in ink on edge of negative. Unrestricted research use on site. Modern print available. Portrait shows subject partially nude above waist, with lace collar but slip pulled down, showing bare breasts. Otherwise she is seated as for a formal portrait. This image relates to another in which the subject is fully clothed.</p> <p>Names: Batcheller, Miss Topic: Photography of the nude -- 1930-1940 Portraits -- Women -- 1930-1940 Nudity Genre/Form: Photographs -- 1930-1940 -- Black-and-white negatives -- Glass</p>
Box 12	28,000s, 1934
Box 13	29,000s, 1935

[Portraits (2) of Eleanor Roosevelt : photonegatives,], 1935

2 Items

Photographer: Hill, Ira L. (Ira Lawrence), 1877-1947

Language: English.

Notes: 29354 (Hill no.)

99-1648 (OPPS Slide).

Silver gelatin on cellulose acetate film, 7" x 5".

Negative or sitting number 29354; subject's name and negative number in ink on edge of negatives.

Unrestricted research use on site. Modern prints available.

Two portraits, one showing the subject wearing a hat, coat with fur collar, and gloves, holding a purse (OPPS Slide No. 99-1648). The other shows her wearing a formal dress, seated in front of a Venetian blind.

One image reproduced in D. Haberstick, "The Archives Center and Photography: National Museum of American History," *History of Photography*, vol. 24, no. 1 (Spring 2000), p. 47. Neg. no. 99-1648.

Names: Roosevelt, Eleanor, 1884-1962

Topic: Portraits -- Women

Genre/Form: Photographs -- 1930-1940 -- Black-and-white negatives -- Acetate film

Box 14 32,000s, 1938

Box 15 34,000s, 1939

Box 16 35,000s , 1940 - 1940

Box 16 A-P , 1941

Box 17 Q-Z , 1941

Box 17 36,000s , 1942

Box 18 40,000s , 1945 - 1947

Box 19 50,000s , 1950 - 1953

Box 20-23 4 additional card drawers are located among the negatives, and have not yet been inspected due to the asbestos hazard. , undated