



Smithsonian Institution Archives

Records, 1912-1965

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Smithsonian Institution Archives
Washington, D.C.
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Collection Overview

Repository:	Smithsonian Institution Archives, Washington, D.C., osiaref@si.edu
Title:	Records
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Administrative Information

Preferred Citation

Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 312, National Collection of Fine Arts. Office of the Director, Records

Historical Note

The charter creating the Smithsonian Institution (SI) includes a provision for collecting works of art. The earliest collection of the Gallery of Art consists of prints and drawings collected by George Perkins Marsh and paintings of Indians by John Mix Stanley and Charles B. King. In 1865, a fire in the Smithsonian building destroyed most of the collection. Surviving paintings and sculptures were transferred to the Corcoran Gallery and the prints and drawings were transferred to the Library of Congress. All of the collections were transferred back to SI in 1895 and added to the George C. Catlin collection, which had been acquired in 1879.

In 1904, President Theodore Roosevelt recommended to Congress that the SI establish a National Gallery of Art and to accept additions to its collection. Congress failed to take action on the recommendation. In 1906, the Supreme Court of the District of Columbia, interpreting the original provision in the SI charter, defined the Gallery of Art to be in fact the National Gallery of Art. Substantial additions of works of art by Harriet Lane Johnston and William T. Evans to the collection of the newly renamed National Gallery of Art (NGA) during 1906 and 1907 formed the nucleus of the new Gallery. In 1937, NGA became the National Collection of Fine Arts (NCFA) when its old name was assigned to the new museum created by Andrew W. Mellon. In 1980, NCFA was renamed the National Museum of American Art (NMAA).

The Gallery was administered by the United States National Museum (USNM) from 1906 to 1920. William Henry Holmes, Chief of the American Bureau of Ethnology, 1902-1909, and Head Curator of Anthropology, 1910-1920, served, concurrently, as Curator of NGA, 1907-1920. In 1920, Congress granted money to the NGA to become a separate Smithsonian bureau. Holmes resigned from the USNM, and served as Director until his retirement in 1932. From 1932 to 1946, Ruel P. Tolman, who previously was Curator of the Division of Graphic Arts, USNM, served as Acting Director (NGA, 1932-1937; NCFA, 1937-1946) and Director (1946-1948, at his retirement). The directors after Tolman were Thomas M.

Beggs (1948-1964), David W. Scott (1965-1968), Robert Taylor Davis (interim, 1969), Joshua C. Taylor (NCFA, 1970-1980; NMAA, 1980-1981), Harry Lowe (interim, 1981-1982), and Charles C. Eldridge (1982-1988).

Prior to 1906, the art exhibits were displayed in a room in the SI Building. From 1907 to 1909, the exhibits were split between the Arts and Industries Building and the Corcoran Gallery. From 1910 to 1968, the exhibits were held in the second floor in the Natural History building (just off the Rotunda, behind the escalator). In 1939, Architect Eliel Saarinen drew plans for a Smithsonian Gallery of Art on the site where the National Air and Space Museum now stands. In 1968, the Museum opened its first permanent gallery in the renovated Old Patent Office building, which it co-occupies with the National Portrait Gallery. The building was known as the Fine Art and Portrait Gallery (1968-1981), and the American Art and Portrait Gallery (since 1981).

Record Unit 312 documents for the most part the administration of Thomas M. Beggs, Assistant Director (1947-1948) and Director (1948-1964).

Thomas M. Beggs (1899-1990, born in Brooklyn, New York) graduated from Pratt Institute, 1920; Yale University, BFA 1924; attended the Ecole Americaine des Beaux Arts, Fountainbleau; and did graduate studies at the Fogg Museum, Harvard University.

From 1926 to 1947, Beggs served successively as Instructor, Assistant Professor, Associate Professor, and Professor of Art at Pomona College, Claremont, California. He also served as the head of the Art Department prior to coming to NCFA.

In 1964, Beggs was appointed Special Assistant to the Secretary for Art of the Smithsonian Institution and served in this capacity until his retirement in 1965.

Introduction

Record Unit 312 was transferred from the National Museum of American Art (NMAA) Archives to the Smithsonian Institution Archives in October 1984. The NMAA Archives, which was created in January 1975, and located in the Fine Arts and Portrait Gallery Building, came under the daily administration of the NMAA, with technical supervision and assistance provided by the Smithsonian Institution Archives. The NMAA Archives was discontinued in October 1984.

Descriptive Entry

These records consist of administrative memoranda, budget, travel, and personnel files; correspondence with art collectors and institutions, mostly inquiries on the identification and preservation of works of art, including photographs; lectures and newspaper articles written mostly by Beggs and Rowland Lyon, NCFA's Curator; information on restoration or preservation methods; and information on the proposed Smithsonian Gallery of Art, and the Eliel Saarinen design, 1939. Also included are files culled from previous NCFA directors, which includes a script by William Henry Holmes (read on radio by Austin H. Clark, 1923) and administrative memoranda, 1908-1918.

Smithsonian Art Commission materials include minutes of meetings, NCFA annual reports, and lists of members, 1948-1964; and correspondence with Lloyd Goodrich and with caterers.

Photographic materials consist of black-and-white prints and negatives of NCFA exhibit halls; objects in or formerly in NCFA's collections, 1950-1956; the Cultural Anthropology exhibit, 1950; NGA exhibit halls; and the SI building's Upper Main Hall.

Special exhibition files concern the exhibitions of individual, local, and international works of art held monthly at the NCFA between 1948 and 1965. Included are correspondence and memoranda, exhibition announcements and catalogs, and photographs. The 1962 *Art and Archaeology of Vietnam* exhibit is well-documented in this collection.

Names and Subject Terms

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

Subjects:

- Art museums
- Museum buildings
- Museum directors
- Museum exhibits
- Museums -- Administration

Types of Materials:

- Black-and-white photographs
- Manuscripts

Names:

- Art and Archeology of Vietnam (Exhibition) (1960: Washington, D.C.)
- Beggs, Thomas M.
- Holmes, William Henry, 1846-1933
- Ravenel, W. de C. (William de Chastignier), 1859-1933
- Saarinen, Eliel, 1873-1950
- Smithsonian Art Commission
- Smithsonian Gallery of Art
- Tolman, Ruel P. (Ruel Pardee), 1878-1954
- Walcott, Charles D. (Charles Doolittle), 1850-1927

Container Listing

Series 1: GENERAL ADMINISTRATIVE AND CORRESPONDENCE FILES, 1908-1965, ARRANGED ALPHABETICALLY.

This series consists of administrative memoranda, budget, travel and personnel files; correspondence with art collectors and institutions, mostly concerning the identification and preservation of works of art, with photographs; lecture and newspaper articles written by NCFA staff, mostly by Thomas M. Beggs and Rowland Lyon; notes on restoration or preservation methods; and information on the proposed Smithsonian Gallery of Art (never constructed), and the Eliel Saarinen design, 1939. Also in this series are files culled from previous NCFA directors, which include administrative memoranda, 1908-1918, and a script by William Henry Holmes (read on radio by Austin H. Clark, 1923).

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Series 2: SMITHSONIAN ART COMMISSION, 1948-1964.

The Gallery of Art Commission was created by the Board of Regents of the Smithsonian Institution on December 8, 1925. In 1937, the name was changed to the National Collection of Fine Arts Commission following the creation of a separate National Gallery of Art. On January 13, 1938, the Commission was renamed the Smithsonian Art Commission (SAC).

The function of the Commission was to consider all art matters concerning fine arts under SI's jurisdiction. The SAC submits its findings to the Board of Regents.

The SAC members are appointed by the Board of Regents. The members consist of five artists, five fine arts experts, and five businessmen or fine arts professionals. The Secretary of SI is an ex officio member. The term of service is four years, and each member may be reappointed.

This series consists of minutes of the SAC meetings, 1948-1964; NCFAs annual reports, 1948-1964; correspondence, mostly with caterers and with Lloyd Goodrich; and lists of SAC members, 1948-1964.

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This series consists mostly of black and white prints of NCFA collections; exhibit halls; drawing of a site plan for a proposed Smithsonian Gallery of Art; objects in or formerly in NCFA's collections, 1950-1956; the Cultural Anthropology exhibit in the Smithsonian Institution building, 1950; National Gallery of Art exhibit halls; and the SI building's Upper Main Hall.

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Series 4: SPECIAL EXHIBITIONS, 1948-1965.

This series documents the NCFA's monthly exhibitions for individual, organization, and international works of art. Documents include correspondence and memoranda, mostly concerning exhibition preparations and shipments of works of art; exhibition pamphlets, announcements, and catalogues; newspaper and journal articles; and photographs.

Also included in this series is correspondence with donors whose donations of art works were accepted or rejected by the Smithsonian Art Commission.

This series is arranged alphabetically by artist's name or exhibit title.

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[Digital Content: The Miniature Painters, Sculptors, and Gravers Society of Washington, Thirtieth Annual Exhibition, at the National Collection of Fine Arts, now the Smithsonian American Art Museum, 1963. \(Image no. 94-9287\)](#)
- Box 54 of 57 Folder 8 National Coin Week, April 1963
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- Box 54 of 57 Folder 10 Pre-Hispanic Mexico, September - November 1962
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