Smithsonian Institution Archives

Joseph H. Hirshhorn Papers,
circa 1926-1982 and undated

Finding aid prepared by Smithsonian Institution Archives
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Collection Overview

Repository: Smithsonian Institution Archives, Washington, D.C., osiaref@si.edu
Title: Joseph H. Hirshhorn Papers
Identifier: Record Unit 7449
Date: circa 1926-1982 and undated
Extent: 29.78 cu. ft. (27 record storage boxes) (1 document box) (3 16x20 boxes) (3 oversize folders)
Creator:: Hirshhorn, Joseph H.
Language: English

Administrative Information

Prefered Citation

Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 7449, Joseph H. Hirshhorn Papers

Access Restriction

Box 31 contains materials restricted indefinitely; see finding aid; Contact reference staff for details.

Historical Note

Joseph Herman Hirshhorn was born in 1899 in Mitau, Latvia, the twelfth of thirteen children. His father died when Joseph was still an infant. In 1905 his mother emigrated with her children to the United States and settled the family in Brooklyn, New York, where she found work in a purse factory, six days a week, twelve hours a day. To keep the family afloat, the children had to help, and Joseph left school at the age of twelve to sell newspapers. By the age of fourteen, he was an office boy for the firm that later became the American Stock Exchange. In a short time, he became a chartist, charting stocks for an editor on Wall Street. In 1916 he took a small sum he had saved and launched himself as a broker, earning $168,000 the first year.

In 1924 Hirshhorn became a broker's broker, dealing in bank stock and unlisted securities. He made his first million long before he reached the age of thirty. In 1929 he distrusted the booming stock market and pulled out completely with four million dollars just two months before the crash.

In the 1930s, he began to invest heavily in Canadian mining, discovering gold and then uranium. He secretly acquired mining rights to some 56,000 acres, which became two huge uranium mines. By the mid 1950s, his interests stretched across Canada and the United States, involving him in more than two dozen mining and oil companies. Shortly thereafter, he began to reduce his business interests. His fortune was once estimated at more than one hundred million dollars.
Although the grinding poverty of his childhood spurred Hirshhorn to create a fortune, he also credited it with his love of art. His mother managed to buy her children a piano, and an insurance policy with Prudential sent a yearly supply of calendars into the home. The calendars included reproductions of various art works, which Joseph pinned to his wall.

Joseph H. Hirshhorn with Smithsonian Regent and Vice-President Nelson Rockefeller, at the Museum's First Anniversary, December 9, 1975. When he began to make money, he began to buy art, both paintings and sculpture. Using only his own tastes as guidance, he bought and bought, until the size of his private collection had grown to some 5,600 pieces. In the 1950s, he hired an art dealer, Abram Lerner, to curate his collection. Even Lerner could not always keep track of the acquisitions. Hirshhorn would sweep into a gallery and make so many purchases that the dealer felt his head spinning.

Hirshhorn relied solely on his own "feel" for each piece he bought. He once told a dealer who was advising a purchase for investment purposes, "Don't tell me how to make money. I don't collect art to make money. I do it because I love art." (From Art in America, summer 1958.)

In 1966 President Lyndon B. Johnson announced that Hirshhorn would donate his entire collection to the United States along with one million dollars to supplement the collection. A new museum would be constructed on the Mall as part of the Smithsonian Institution and would be named the Joseph H. Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden. The new museum opened in 1974 with Abram Lerner as its first director. It was called the most important development in art for the Capital since the Andrew Mellon gift of the National Gallery of Art.

Hirshhorn's collection includes an international range of sculpture, but its paintings are primarily modern American. The collection has paintings by Thomas Eakins, Jackson Pollock, and Stuart Davis, and sculpture by Henry Moore, Picasso, and many others.

Hirshhorn was married four times, lastly to Olga Zatorsky Cunningham, who shared his passion for art. His marriages produced four children and two adopted ones. He died in 1981.
Subjects:
- Art
- Art -- Collectors and collecting
- Art museums

Types of Materials:
- Artifacts
- Black-and-white photographs
- Manuscripts

Names:
- Albers, Josef
- American Stock Exchange
- Avery, Milton, 1885-1965
- Calder, Alexander, 1898-1976
- Chagall, Marc, 1887-
- Davis, Stuart, 1892-1964
- De Kooning, Willem, 1904-1997
- Duchamp, Marcel, 1887-1968
- Eakins, Thomas, 1844-1916
- Hayes, David Vincent, 1931-
- Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden
- Hirshhorn, Joseph H.
- Hirshhorn, Olga
- Johnson, Lyndon B. (Lyndon Baines), 1908-1973
- Lerner, Abram
- Marini, Marino, 1901-1980
- Moore, Henry, 1898-1986
- Motherwell, Robert
- Nevelson, Louise, 1899-1988
- O'Keeffe, Georgia, 1887-1986
- Picasso, Pablo, 1881-1973
- Pollock, Jackson, 1912-1956
- Ray, Man, 1890-1976
- Rickey, George
- Rivers, Larry, 1925-2002
- Saint-Phalle, Niki de, 1930-2002