Oral history interviews with Olga C. Hirshhorn, 1986-1988

Finding aid prepared by Smithsonian Institution Archives
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The Olga Zatorsky Hirshhorn Interviews were conducted during nine sessions between 1986 and 1998. Judith Zilczer of the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden and Pamela M. Henson of the Smithsonian Institution Archives conducted the first eight interviews between 1986 and 1988. An additional interview was conducted by Sidney S. Lawrence, III, Head of Public Affairs, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden and Judith K. Zilczer, Curator, Hirshhorn Museum in 1998. The interviews consist of approximately 13.5 hours of audiotape recordings, 474 pages of transcript, and occupy 1.00 cubic feet of shelf space.

These interviews of Olga Hirshhorn by Judith K. Zilczer, Curator, Hirshhorn Museum, and Pamela M. Henson, Smithsonian Institution Archives, discuss her youth; education; child-rearing years; careers in day care and business services; marriage to Joseph H. Hirshhorn; their travels; art collecting; meetings with S. Dillon Ripley; and the decision to donate the collection to the Smithsonian. Included are reminiscences of such art figures as Willem de Kooning, Henry Moore, Pablo Picasso, and Man Ray. The interview of Hirshhorn by Sidney S. Lawrence, III, Judith K. Zilczer, and Meghan Tierney, Intern, discusses a photograph collection of portraits collected by Olga Hirshhorn and includes reminiscences of artists and other important figures in the art world. Appended to the interviews is Hirshhorn’s 1986 lecture entitled, "My Life with Joe." Box 1 contains transcripts of the interviews and cassette copies of the original recordings, which are in security storage.
Names and Subject Terms

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

Subjects:
   Art
   Art -- Collectors and collecting
   Women -- History

Types of Materials:
   Audiotapes
   Interviews
   Oral history

Names:
   De Kooning, Willem, 1904-1997
   Henson, Pamela M. interviewer
   Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden
   Hirshhorn, Joseph H.
   Hirshhorn, Olga
   Lawrence, Sidney, 1948- interviewer
   Moore, Henry, 1898-1986
   Picasso, Pablo, 1881-1973
   Ray, Man, 1890-1976
   Ripley, S. Dillon (Sidney Dillon), 1913-2001
   Services Unlimited (Greenwich, Connecticut)
   Zilczer, Judith interviewer
Container Listing

Box 1

Transcripts of Interviews

Box 1 of 1

Interview 1: 15 December 1986

Note:

- Discusses her childhood, marriage to John J. Cunningham, motherhood, her small businesses, including:
  - childhood in Greenwich, Connecticut, including parents and siblings;
  - Joseph H. Hirshhorn's childhood;
  - marriage to high school English teacher, John Cunningham;
  - life as a young mother and house renovations;
  - beginning her swimming lessons, babysitting, Services Unlimited businesses;
  - "Old Stove" and "Freak & Squeak" contest stories.
- Transcript, pp. 1-59, of audiotape recording, 2.0 hours.

Box 1 of 1

Interview 2: 16 January 1987

Note:

- Discusses her first encounter with Joseph Hirshhorn, outside interest in Hirshhorn's collection, the Smithsonian's interest in acquiring Hirshhorn's collection; Lady Bird Johnson's involvement in securing the collection for the United States; the search for a museum site; reflections on Joseph H. Hirshhorn, including:
  - early relationship with Joseph Hirshhorn;
  - places and sites considered for the collection, including Zurich, Florence, Israel, Baltimore, England, Canada, New York World's Fair site, buildings in New York City, Cunningham Park, Astor Library building, and Purchase, New York;
  - visit from Roger Stevens and S. Dillon Ripley through Mrs. Verner Reed;
  - lunch at White House and visits from Lady Bird Johnson;
  - search for Mall sites for the museum;
  - managing the collection at the house in Greenwich, Connecticut;
  - Joseph Hirshhorn's personality;
  - visits to galleries in New York City with Joseph Hirshhorn;
• Joseph Hirshhorn's fascination with “fast” operations such as McDonald's, Kentucky Fried Chicken and car washes.
• Transcript, pp. 60-88, of audiotape recording, 1.0 hour.

Box 1 of 1

Interview 3: 6 May 1987

Note:
• Reflects on her business, Services Unlimited, planning for a museum to house the collection, managing the collection, and reminiscences of artists, including:
  • phasing out of management of Services Unlimited after marrying Joseph Hirshhorn;
  • their honeymoon to Europe and Israel;
  • meeting with Billy Rose in Israel;
  • Joseph Hirshhorn's early plans to create a museum;
  • art collection at the Greenwich house;
  • preparing a catalog of artwork, first in Greenwich, Connecticut, and then in New York City;
  • reminiscences of Willem de Kooning;
  • brief discussion of Josef Albers and Henry Moore;
  • the Hirshhorn's house on the Riviera and its sale for seven Clyfford Still paintings.
• Transcript, pp. 89-113, of audiotape recording, 1.0 hour.

Box 1 of 1

Interview 4: 16 December 1987

Note:
• Discusses the Hirshhorns' involvement in the art world in New York City and Europe and the development of Joseph Hirshhorn's collection, including:
  • art scene in New York City;
  • reminiscences of Willem de Kooning, Larry Rivers and Saul Steinberg;
  • the Guggenheim show in 1962;
  • Gordon Bunshaft's design for the museum;
  • dealers visiting the house in Greenwich, Connecticut;
  • New York City galleries in the 1960s;
  • reminiscences of artists in Europe, including Pablo Picasso and Edward Steichen;
  • the Hirshhorns' house on the Riviera;
  • visiting dealers and galleries in Europe;
  • Abram Lerner's involvement in the development of the Hirshhorn collection;
  • Joseph Hirshhorn's patronage to Giacomo Manzu;
  • letters written by Olga Hirshhorn and speeches written by Abram Lerner on behalf of Joseph Hirshhorn;
Oral history interviews with Olga C. Hirshhorn
https://siarchives.si.edu/collections/siris_arc_217734

• visiting Man Ray's house;
• the opportunity to acquire the Georgia O'Keefe collection.
• Transcript, pp. 114-166, of audiotape recording, 1.5 hours.

Box 1 of 1

Interview 5: 23 December 1987

Note:
• Discusses Joseph Hirshhorn's relationships and friendships with art world figures, particularly with Henry Moore, including:
  • Henry Moore's house in England;
  • Olga Hirshhorn's story about the maquette for Moore's King and Queen;
  • their visit with Moore to see the Elgin Marbles at the British Museum;
  • their trip to Ireland with Moore;
  • Louise Nevelson's visit to the house in Greenwich, Connecticut;
  • visiting Peggy Guggenheim at her villa;
  • attending the Venice Biennale.
• Transcript: pp. 167-180, of audiotape recording, 0.5 hour.

Box 1 of 1

Interview 6: 13 October 1988

Note:
• Discusses the Hirshhorns' relationships with artists, portraits of Joseph Hirshhorn, interest in and plans for the collection, the founding of the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, including:
  • visiting with Alexander and Louisa Calder;
  • the Marino Marini portrait of Joseph Hirshhorn;
  • Swiss interest in Hirshhorn collection;
  • plans for the collection in California at Greystone Mansion;
  • New York City building renovation plans;
  • Baltimore interest in Hirshhorn collection;
  • Lord Perth and England's interest in Hirshhorn collection;
  • Nelson Rockefeller plans for an art center in Purchase, New York;
  • Billy Rose and Israel's interest in the collection;
  • Florence, Italy's interest in Hirshhorn collection;
  • Joseph Hirshhorn's original plans to develop an art center in town of Hirshhorn in Canada;
  • the Smithsonian Institution's interest in Hirshhorn collection;
  • Joseph Hirshhorn's interest in the idea of housing his collection on the Mall over other options;
• the 1970 U.S. Congress Thompson Committee hearings, how discouraged Joseph Hirshhorn felt and the lack of support he received from artists and gallery owners;
• Joseph Hirshhorn's appointment to the Hirshhorn Museum board instead of Olga Hirshhorn;
• Olga Hirshhorn's later appointment to Hirshhorn Museum board;
• Olga Hirshhorn's role vis-a-vis the collection and how she understood how Joseph Hirshhorn felt about the collection;
• Joseph Hirshhorn's love for collecting art and how he felt the dealers and artists were his family.
• Transcript, pp. 181-230, of audiotape recording, 1.5 hours.

Box 1 of 1  Interview 7: 13 May 1988

Note:
• Discusses the founding of the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, including:
  • the selection of site and architect of the museum;
  • negotiations with the Smithsonian Institution and drafting the legislation;
  • the groundbreaking ceremony;
  • Robert Hilton Simmons and the congressional hearings;
  • the selection of board of trustees;
  • moving the collection from Greenwich, Connecticut, to Washington, D.C.;
  • construction of the museum building;
  • Joseph Hirshhorn's other collecting interests;
  • strains between Abram Lerner and Joseph H. Hirshhorn as Lerner tried to establish his independence as a director.
• Transcript, pp. 231-317, of audiotape recording, 2.0 hours.

Box 1 of 1  Interview 8: 16 May 1988

Note:
• Discusses her role in managing Joseph Hirshhorn's ever-growing collection, the opening of the new museum in 1974, Joseph Hirshhorn's interest in the Archives of American Art, the development of her personal art collection, Joseph Hirshhorn's death, her conversion to Judaism, including:
  • the first major gift to the Smithsonian Institution in 1974;
  • Olga Hirshhorn's role keeping up with her husband's collecting habits;
  • the opening of the museum in 1974;
  • Hirshhorns' involvement with the museum;
• their 1977 trip around the world;
• Joseph Hirshhorn's interest in the Archives of American Art;
• the Hirshhorns' work with other museums, boards, committees, etc.;
• the development of Olga Hirshhorn's own collection and plans for a museum in Naples, Florida;
• Joseph Hirshhorn's death;
• the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service show;
• Olga Hirshhorn's children;
• Olga Hirshhorn's conversion to Judaism and mourning period for her husband.
• Transcript, pp. 352-485, of audiotape recording, 2.5 hours.

Box 1 of 1

Interview 9: 4 December 1998
Note:
• Discusses photographs in a collection of portraits of artists and influential figures in the art world. While surveying the photographs and letters in the collection, Olga Hirshhorn reminisces about her husband, artists, museum events, life in Washington, D.C., and early plans for the museum's sculpture garden, including:
  • Joseph Hirshhorn's role in the placement of sculpture in his garden in Connecticut;
  • visiting Sir Henry Moore in Much Hadham, England;
  • reminiscences of Pablo Picasso and Jacqueline Roque;
  • the opening of the Maeght Foundation;
  • the break-in at the house in Connecticut;
  • dining at the White House;
  • her neighbor and artist Batuz, founder of the Batuz Foundation Sachsen;
  • Joseph Hirshhorn's reaction to Nathaniel Owings' original designs for the museum and sculpture garden;
  • Gordon Bunshaft's original plans for the sculpture garden on the Mall.
• Transcript, pp. 420-470, of audiotape recording, 1.5 hours.

Box 1 of 1

Note:
• Discusses Joseph H. Hirshhorn's life, her marriage to him, reminiscences about artists, the search for a location to house his collection, including an introduction by former Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden director, James T. Demetrion.
• Transcript, pp. 471-503, of audiotape recording, 3.0 hours.

Audio Recordings of Interviews

Box 1 of 1  Interview 1: 15 December 1986
Note:  
• Total Recording Time: 2.0 hours  
• Original Masters: 4 7” reel-to-reel analog audiotapes  
• Preservation Masters: 4 digital .wav files  
• Reference Copies: 2 cassette audiotapes, 4 digital .mp3 files

Box 1 of 1  Interview 2: 16 January 1987
Note:  
• Total Recording Time: 1.0 hour  
• Original Masters: 2 7” reel-to-reel analog audiotapes  
• Preservation Masters: 2 digital .wav files  
• Reference Copies: 1 cassette audiotape, 2 digital .mp3 files

Box 1 of 1  Interview 3: 6 May 1987
Note:  
• Total Recording Time: 1.0 hour  
• Original Masters: 2 7” reel-to-reel analog audiotapes  
• Preservation Masters: 2 digital .wav files  
• Reference Copies: 1 cassette audiotape, 2 digital .mp3 files

Box 1 of 1  Interview 4: 16 December 1987
Note:  
• Total Recording Time: 1.5 hours  
• Original Masters: 4 7” reel-to-reel analog audiotapes  
• Preservation Masters: 3 digital .wav files  
• Reference Copies: 2 cassette audiotapes, 3 digital .mp3 files

Box 1 of 1  Interview 5: 23 December 1987
Note:  
• Total Recording Time: 0.5 hour  
• Original Masters: 1 7” reel-to-reel analog audiotape  
• Preservation Masters: 1 digital .wav file  
• Reference Copies: 1 cassette audiotape, 1 digital .mp3 file

Box 1 of 1  Interview 6: 13 October 1988
Note:  
• Total Recording Time: 1.5 hours  
• Original Masters: 3 7” reel-to-reel analog audiotapes  
• Preservation Masters: 3 digital .wav files
• Reference Copies: 2 cassette audiotapes, 3 digital .mp3 files

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Interview 7: 13 May 1988

Note:
• Total Recording Time: 2.0 hours
• Original Masters: 4 7" reel-to-reel analog audiotapes
• Preservation Masters: 4 digital .wav files
• Reference Copies: 2 cassette audiotapes, 4 digital .mp3 files

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Interview 8: 16 May 1988

Note:
• Total Recording Time: 2.5 hours
• Original Masters: 5 7" reel-to-reel analog audiotapes
• Preservation Masters: 5 digital .wav files
• Reference Copies: 3 cassette audiotapes, 5 digital .mp3 files

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Interview 9: 4 December 1998

Note:
• Total Recording Time: 1.5 hours
• Original Masters: 1 cassette audiotape
• Reference Copies: 2 cassette audiotapes

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Appendix A: "My Life with Joe" Lecture: 17 December 1986

Note:
• Total Recording Time: 3.0 hours
• Original Masters: 2 cassette audiotapes
• Preservation Masters: 4 digital .wav files
• Reference Copies: 3 cassette audiotapes, 4 digital .mp3 files