



# Smithsonian

*Institution Archives*

## Olga Hirshhorn Oral History Interviews, 1986-1988

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Smithsonian Institution Archives  
Washington, D.C.  
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## Collection Overview

<b>Repository:</b>	Smithsonian Institution Archives, Washington, D.C., <a href="mailto:osiaref@si.edu">osiaref@si.edu</a>
<b>Title:</b>	Olga Hirshhorn Oral History Interviews
<b>Date:</b>	1986-1988
<b>Identifier:</b>	Record Unit 9566
<b>Creator::</b>	Hirshhorn, Olga, interviewee
<b>Extent:</b>	18 audiotapes (Reference copies).
<b>Language:</b>	English

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## Administrative Information

### Preferred Citation

Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 9566, Olga Hirshhorn Oral History Interviews

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## Historical Note

Olga Hirshhorn (1920-2015), an art collector, was instrumental in the founding of the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden. Born Olga Zatorsky, she was raised in Greenwich, Connecticut. She attended New York University and from 1939 to 1962 was married to John Cunningham. She established several of her own businesses, including a day care center and a business services firm, Services Unlimited. In 1964, she married financier and art collector, Joseph H. Hirshhorn (1900-1981), also a resident of Greenwich. She assisted her husband with his career and art avocation and began her own collection of modern art. The Hirshhorns were important figures in the art world and formed lasting friendships with many artists. In 1966, at the urging of Smithsonian Secretary S. Dillon Ripley, Joseph Hirshhorn donated his modern art collection to the Smithsonian Institution. In 1974, it opened as the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden.

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## Introduction

The Smithsonian Institution Archives began its Oral History Program in 1973. The purpose of the program is to supplement the written documentation of the Archives' record and manuscript collections with an Oral History Collection, focusing on the history of the Institution, research by its scholars, and contributions of its staff. Program staff conducts interviews with current and retired Smithsonian staff and others who have made significant contributions to the Institution. There are also interviews conducted by researchers or students on topics related to the history of the Smithsonian or the holdings of the Smithsonian Institution Archives.

The Olga Hirshhorn interviews were accessioned into the Oral History Collection because of her close association with Joseph H. Hirshhorn, the development of the Joseph H. Hirshhorn collection and the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden. Additional oral history interviews of Olga Zatorsky Hirshhorn are located in the collections at the Smithsonian's Archives of American Art.

## Descriptive Entry

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 Zilczer, Curator, Hirshhorn Museum in 1998. The interviews consist of approximately 13.5 hours of audiotape recordings and 474 pages of transcript.

These interviews of Olga Hirshhorn by Judith 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 Zilczer, and Meghan Tierney, Intern, discusses a photograph collection of portraits collected by Olga Hishhorn 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."

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## 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
- Interviews
- Oral history
- Women -- History

### Types of Materials:

- Audiotapes
- Transcripts

### 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

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## Container Listing

Interviews	
Interviews	Interview 1: December 15, 1986
Interviews	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.
Interviews	Transcript, pp. 1-59, of audiotape recording, 2.0 hours.
Interviews	Recording of Interview: Total Recording Time: 2.0 hours Notes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Original Masters: 4 7" reel-to-reel analog audiotapes</li><li>• Preservation Masters: 4 digital .wav files</li><li>• Reference Copies: 2 cassette audiotapes, 4 digital .mp3 files</li></ul>
Interviews	Interview 2: January 16, 1987
Interviews	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.
Interviews	Transcript, pp. 60-88, of audiotape recording, 1.0 hour.
Interviews	Recording of Interview: Total Recording Time: 1.0 hour Notes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Original Masters: 2 7" reel-to-reel analog audiotapes</li><li>• Preservation Masters: 2 digital .wav files</li><li>• Reference Copies: 1 cassette audiotape, 2 digital .mp3 files</li></ul>
Interviews	Interview 3: May 6, 1987

Interviews	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.
Interviews	Transcript, pp. 89-113, of audiotape recording, 1.0 hour.
Interviews	Recording of Interview: Total Recording Time: 1.0 hour Notes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Original Masters: 2 7" reel-to-reel analog audiotapes</li><li>• Preservation Masters: 2 digital .wav files</li><li>• Reference Copies: 1 cassette audiotape, 2 digital .mp3 files</li></ul>
Interviews	Interview 4: December 16, 1987
Interviews	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; visiting Man Ray's house; the opportunity to acquire the Georgia O'Keefe collection.
Interviews	Transcript, pp. 114-166, of audiotape recording, 1.5 hours.
Interviews	Recording of Interview: Total Recording Time: 1.5 hours Notes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Original Masters: 4 7" reel-to-reel analog audiotapes</li><li>• Preservation Masters: 3 digital .wav files</li><li>• Reference Copies: 2 cassette audiotapes, 3 digital .mp3 files</li></ul>
Interviews	Interview 5: December 23, 1987
Interviews	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.
Interviews	Transcript: pp. 167-180, of audiotape recording, 0.5 hour.
Interviews	Recording of Interview: Total Recording Time: 0.5 hour Notes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Original Masters: 1 7" reel-to-reel analog audiotape</li><li>• Preservation Masters: 1 digital .wav file</li><li>• Reference Copies: 1 cassette audiotape, 1 digital .mp3 file</li></ul>
Interviews	Interview 6: October 13, 1988
Interviews	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.
Interviews	Transcript, pp. 181-230, of audiotape recording, 1.5 hours.
Interviews	Recording of Interview: Total Recording Time: 1.5 hours Notes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Original Masters: 3 7" reel-to-reel analog audiotapes</li><li>• Preservation Masters: 3 digital .wav files</li><li>• Reference Copies: 2 cassette audiotapes, 3 digital .mp3 files</li></ul>
Interviews	Interview 7: May 13, 1988
Interviews	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.
Interviews	Transcript, pp. 231-317, of audiotape recording, 2.0 hours.
Interviews	Recording of Interview: Total Recording Time: 2.0 hours Notes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Original Masters: 4 7" reel-to-reel analog audiotapes</li><li>• Preservation Masters: 4 digital .wav files</li><li>• Reference Copies: 2 cassette audiotapes, 4 digital .mp3 files</li></ul>
Interviews	Interview 8: May 16, 1988
Interviews	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.
Interviews	Transcript, pp. 352-485, of audiotape recording, 2.5 hours.
Interviews	Recording of Interview: Total Recording Time: 2.5 hours Notes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Original Masters: 5 7" reel-to-reel analog audiotapes</li><li>• Preservation Masters: 5 digital .wav files</li><li>• Reference Copies: 3 cassette audiotapes, 5 digital .mp3 files</li></ul>
Interviews	Interview 9: December 4, 1998
Interviews	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.



Interviews Transcript, pp. 420-470, of audiotape recording, 1.5 hours.

Interviews Recording of Interview: Total Recording Time: 1.5 hours  
Notes: 

- Original Masters: 1 cassette audiotape
- Reference Copies: 2 cassette audiotapes

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

Interviews 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. Demetron.

Interviews Transcript, pp. 471-503, of audiotape recording, 3.0 hours.

Interviews Recording of Interview: Total Recording Time: 3.0 hours  
Notes: 

- Original Masters: 2 cassette audiotapes
- Preservation Masters: 4 digital .wav files
- Reference Copies: 3 cassette audiotapes, 4 digital .mp3 files