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Collection Overview

Repository: Smithsonian Institution Archives, Washington, D.C., osiaref@si.edu
Title: Oral History Interviews with Abram Lerner
Identifier: Record Unit 9600
Date: 1998
Extent: 4 audiotapes (Reference copies).
Creator: Lerner, Abram, interviewee
Language: English

Administrative Information

Prefered Citation
Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 9600, Lerner, Abram, interviewee, Oral History Interviews with Abram Lerner

Use Restriction
Restricted (Tapes only).

Historical Note

Abram Lerner (1913-2007) was the founding Director of the Smithsonian's Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden. He was born on April 11, 1913, in New York City. He received his B.A. from New York University in 1935 and studied for five years at various art schools in the city, including the Art Students League and the Brooklyn Museum of Art. During the Great Depression, like many young artists of his generation, he worked as a mural painter for the Federal Arts Project in New York City, a work relief effort of the Works Progress Administration. During World War II, he worked as an illustrator for the Quartermaster Corps, and in 1945, he took a position as the Associate Director for Herman Baron's American Contemporary Art Gallery (A.C.A. Gallery) in New York City. While working there, Lerner met Joseph H. Hirshhorn and eventually began advising him on purchases of modern painting and sculpture for his growing art collection.

In 1955, Lerner left for Europe to travel and study art in Rome and Florence. Upon his return, he took a position as Associate Director of the Artists' Gallery and a year later, he was hired to curate Joseph H. Hirshhorn's collection. Lerner remained Hirshhorn's private curator for over a decade. In 1967, after Hirshhorn donated his collection to the Smithsonian Institution, Lerner was appointed Director of the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden that opened in 1974. In 1984, Lerner retired and subsequently was named Founding Director Emeritus.

His publications include the inaugural book, The Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden (1974) for which he wrote the introductory essay and served as editor. He also wrote numerous essays on Joseph H.
Hirshhorn's collection and made many contributions to museum catalogues on the work of artists such as Gregory Gillespie, Auguste Rodin, and Raphael Soyer. In 1958, Lerner had his first and last solo exhibition at the Davis Gallery in New York City. In addition, he exhibited his work in group shows between 1941 and 1962 at the A.C.A Gallery, Peridot Gallery, Brooklyn Museum of Art, Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Davis Gallery, and the Hirshl and Adler Galleries.

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 conduct 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 Abram Lerner interviews were accessioned into the Oral History Collection because of his role in the development of the Joseph H. Hirshhorn collection and the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden (HMSG).

Descriptive Entry

The Abram Lerner Interviews were conducted during two sessions in October 1998 by Sidney S. Lawrence, III, Head of Public Affairs, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden. Lerner's wife, Mrs. Pauline Lerner, also participated in the interviews. The Lerner Interviews discuss the beginnings and development of the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden including the architectural design of the building; the preparation for the opening of the museum; reminiscences of staff, trustees, artists, and critics; exhibitions from 1974 to 1984; gifts and acquisitions; the decision to donate Joseph H. Hirshhorn's collection to the Smithsonian; Lerner's views on modern art; and his social life in Washington D.C. The collection consist of approximately 3.75 hours of audiotape, 171 pages of transcript, and occupies 0.25 cubic feet of shelf space. There are three generations of each recording, 4 original audiotape cassettes, 8 digital audio .wav files for preservation, 4 duplicate audiotape cassettes and 8 digital audio .mp3 files for reference. Box 1 contains transcripts of the interviews and cassette copies of the original recordings, which are in security storage.

Additional documentation pertaining to Lerner can be found in the Records of the Office of the Director, and the Department of Painting and Sculpture, Curatorial Records, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, which are also housed in the Smithsonian Institution Archives. In addition, the Archives of American Art has information pertaining to Lerner including an oral history interview with Lerner in 1975.

Names and Subject Terms

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

Subjects:
Art museum directors
Art, Modern
Gifts
Museum exhibits
Museum techniques
Museums -- Acquisitions

Types of Materials:
Audiotapes
Interviews
Oral history
Transcripts

Names:
American Contemporary Art Gallery
Art Students League (New York, N.Y.)
Baron, Herman, 1892-1961
Botero, Fernando, 1932-
Brooklyn Museum
Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden
Hirshhorn, Joseph H.
Lawrence, Sidney, 1948-, interviewer
Lerner, Abram
Moore, Henry, 1898-1986
New York University
Quartermaster Corps (United States Army). United States Army
Ripley, Mary Livingston
Ripley, S. Dillon (Sidney Dillon), 1913-2001
Rivers, Larry, 1925-2002
Soyer, Raphael, 1899-1987