



Smithsonian Institution Archives

Abram Lerner Oral History Interviews, 1998

Finding aid prepared by Smithsonian Institution Archives

Smithsonian Institution Archives
Washington, D.C.
Contact us at osiaref@si.edu

Table of Contents

Collection Overview	1
Administrative Information	1
Historical Note.....	1
Introduction.....	2
Descriptive Entry.....	2
Names and Subjects	2
Container Listing	4

Collection Overview

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

Administrative Information

Preferred Citation

Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 9600, Abram Lerner Oral History Interviews

Use Restriction

Restricted (Tapes only). Contact SIHistory@si.edu to request permission.

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 and 171 pages of transcript.

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
- Interviews
- Museum exhibits
- Museum techniques
- Museums -- Acquisitions

Oral history

Types of Materials:

Audiotapes
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

Container Listing

Interviews

Interviews

Interview 1: October 22, 1998

Interviews

Discusses the design, installation, and opening of the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, reminiscences of staff, the board of trustees, artists, and critics; the opening of the museum, and early exhibitions, including: architect Gordon Bunschaft's vision for the Hirshhorn building; the installation of the collection for the opening of the museum; reminiscences of staff Michael Shapiro, Cynthia Jaffee McCabe, and Inez Garson; the plan and reconfiguration of the Sculpture Garden; the role of the Smithsonian in the new museum; the purpose of the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden Board of Trustees; reflections on the political climate during the 1970s; the initial objections toward the Hirshhorn Museum prior to its opening; hearings on the museum by the U.S. Congress; moving the collection to Washington, D.C.; the Bicentennial of the American Revolution exhibitions; public attendance and response once the museum opened; ideas on the depth of the collections and the role that research plays in a museum; the *The Noble Buyer: John Quinn, Patron of the Avant-Garde* exhibition; Hirshhorn's collection of Benin art now housed at the National Museum of African Art; the article by Harold Rosenberg on the opening of the museum; John Beardsley and the *Probing the Earth: Contemporary Land Projects* exhibition; reminiscences of the sculptor Henry Moore; the exhibition interests of Charles W. Millard, III, the first Chief Curator; *The Avant Garde in Russia* exhibition and the play *Victory Over the Sun*; reminiscences of artist Larry Rivers; exhibitions curated by Joseph Shannon, such as the *R. B. Kitaj* exhibition; the obligation to show overseas exhibitions; the installation of the Jesus Raphael Soto retrospective; the Bicentennial exhibition openings; *The Sources of Country Music* (Thomas Hart Benton's final mural) exhibition; personal recollections of Thomas Hart Benton and American mural painting; the Raphael Soyer exhibitions; the Smithsonian underground complex; the curatorial staff; the Hirshhorn film program; acquisition of *Action in Chains (L'Action Enchaînée) Monument to Louis-Blanqui* by Aristide Maillol; reminiscences of registrars Brian Kavanaugh and Doug Robinson; reminiscences of artists Fernando Botero and Raphael Soyer; foreign dignitaries; the di Suvero dedication ceremony; the Hirshhorn Holiday program; and reminiscences of Steven E. Weil.

[Digital Content: Abram Lerner \(Director of Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden\), Columbian artist Fernando Botero, and Frances and Sydney Lewis \(philanthropist, a retail company executive and trustee at Hirshhorn\), December 1979. \(Image no. 2006-3937\)](#)

Interviews

Transcript, pp. 1-85, of audiotape recording, 2.0 hours.

Interviews

Audio Recordings of Interviews: Total Recording Time: 2.0 hours

- Note:
- Original Masters: 2 audiotape cassettes
 - Preservation Masters: 8 digital audio .wav files

- Reference Copies: 2 audiotape cassettes and 8 digital audio .mp3 files

Interviews

Interview 2: October 23, 1998

Interviews

Discusses the early exhibitions, trustees, acquisitions and gifts, modern art, S. Dillon Ripley's efforts to persuade Hirshhorn to choose Washington, D.C., and the Smithsonian to house his collection; and life in Washington, D.C., including: the Jesus Raphael Soto retrospective and Elie Nadelman exhibition in 1975; George Heard Hamilton, an early trustee of the Hirshhorn; Lerner's thoughts on selling or deaccessioning pieces from the collection; the variety of exhibitions shown at the Hirshhorn; curator Charles W. Millard, III, and his influence on Hirshhorn exhibitions and acquisitions; the Saul Steinberg, David Levine, David Hockney, and Josef Albers exhibitions; commemoration of the Josef Albers *Learning Never Ends* stamp, in 1980; the *Brancusi as Photographer*, *The Fifties: Aspects of Painting in New York*, and the *Edwin Dickinson: Selected Landscapes* exhibitions; the site for the National Gallery Sculpture Garden and Lerner's thoughts on the design of the Hirshhorn Sculpture Garden; the modern collection of the National Gallery of Art and other museums; a list of acquisitions to the collection and reminiscences about artists and donors; the work of the artist Gregory Gillespie; Lerner's views on contemporary painting and exhibiting the work of younger artists; reflections on the first *Directions* exhibit series; his opinions of art after Abstract Expressionism; reminiscences of Joshua Taylor of the National Collection of Fine Arts (now the Smithsonian American Art Museum); Marvin Sadik of the National Portrait Gallery; Lisa Suter Taylor from the Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum; Laughlin Philips of the Philips Gallery; collector David Lloyd Kreeger, and Congressman Sidney R. Yates; social life in Washington, including dinners with ambassadors and cultural attaches; scouting various locations and offers to house the collection outside the United States in Italy, London, Israel, and Canada; S. Dillon Ripley and Mrs. Lyndon B. Johnson's role in securing the Hirshhorn collection for the Smithsonian; reminiscences of S. Dillon Ripley, Mary Livingston Ripley and family; reminiscences of other acquaintances in Washington; and the design of the logo for the museum.

[Digital Content: At the Kenneth Snelson opening, Abram Lerner, left, Director of the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, stands talking to Joseph H. Hirshhorn next to an abstract sculpture by Snelson, December 1981. \(Image nos. SIA2010-0384 and 81-6664.14A\)](#)

[Digital Content: Abram Lerner, Director of the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden \(HMSG\), is standing next to Joseph H. Hirshhorn, donator of his collection to the Smithsonian Institution, 1979. \(Image nos. SIA2010-0385 or 2006-3936\)](#)

Interviews

Transcript, pp. 86-171, of audiotape recording, 1.75 hours.

Interviews

Audio Recordings of Interviews: Total Recording Time: 1.75 hours

- Note:
- Original Masters: 2 audiotape cassettes
 - Preservation Masters: 8 digital audio .wav files

- Reference Copies: 2 audiotape cassettes and 8 digital audio .mp3 files