



Smithsonian
Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum

Edward McKnight Kauffer collection, 1915-1954

2011

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Table of Contents

Collection Overview	1
Administrative Information	1
Biographical/Historical note.....	1
Arrangement note.....	3
Bibliography.....	3
Bibliography.....	3
Names and Subjects	3

Collection Overview

Repository:	Smithsonian Libraries
Title:	Edward McKnight Kauffer collection
Identifier:	SIL-CH.1997-134-1
Date:	1915-1954
Extent:	3 Cubic feet
Creator:	Kauffer, E. McKnight (Edward McKnight), 1890-1954
Language:	English
Summary:	This collection documents Kauffer's work as a theater designer, and graphic designer from 1915-1954. The collection includes allusions to correspondences between Kauffer in America to T.S. Eliot (1888-1965) in London, between 1930 and 1955. (There are no letters between the two men in the collection.) Although Kauffer and Eliot were to become friends after 24 July 1930, they were professionally related before that time. Kauffer illustrated the Ariel edition of Eliot's "Marina." Kauffer and Eliot met in London. In the collection are also posters of Kauffer's works, biographical pieces, and obituaries as well as photographs of the artist.

Administrative Information

Acquisition Information

All materials were donated to the museum by Grace Schulman in 1997.

Other Finding Aids

No finding aid available.

Restrictions

Unprocessed; access is limited; Permission of Library Director required; Policy.

Biographical Note

Edward McKnight Kauffer (1891-1954) was born at Great Falls, Montana. He grew up in the small town of Evansville on the Ohio River in Indiana, where the Kauffer grandparents had settled. After the divorce of his parents, he spent two years in an orphanage. By the age of four or five he had begun to draw. His mother remarried in 1899. Kauffer left school at the age of 12 or 13 to be helper to the scene painter in the City Directory.

In the Elder Bookshop and Art Rooms in San Francisco Kauffer acquired not only a speaking voice of marked attractiveness and distinction but also a life-long passion for books. He continued his studies as a painter by receiving his first formal training at evening sessions at the Mark Hopkins Institute. He met Professor McKnight, who became his patron; in homage to him Kauffer adopted the name of McKnight. A small exhibition of Kauffer's paintings was held at the Elder Art Rooms. He also studied at the Chicago Art Institute, and in Munich and Paris, and started his career as a theatrical scene painter. He was returning from Germany to this country in 1914 and was in London when World War I broke out.

In 1914 Kauffer would marry American Pianist, Grace Ehrlich and they would have a daughter. In 1921 Kauffer would move to New York City leaving his wife and daughter. In the spring of 1922 Kauffer returned to London with Marion Dorn, American textile designer. They would stay in London just prior to the beginning of World War II when they would return once again to New York. They would eventually marry in 1950.

In the Twenties in London, he went to work in a soldiers' canteen and began designing posters for the London Underground Railway in his spare time. His posters were so strikingly successful that he soon got further orders, and built up a reputation in his field. The posters would indicate to the war-weary British the normal resumption of public transportation. The posters made history in art circles and have been regarded ever since as revolutionary concepts of art-cum industry. A 1926 exhibition given at the Ashmolean Museum at Oxford furthered Kauffer's notoriety.

His recognition in America began in 1937, when the Museum of Modern Art presented his work in its first one-man show ever given to an American poster designer. He returned to this country to live in 1940. While Kauffer was widely recognized abroad and the MOMA show brought attention, very few Americans knew of him and fewer advertisers were willing to accept the poster as an art form. His clients, since his return to America have included the National Red Cross, American Airlines, the New York Subways, Ringling Brothers Circus, the Container Corporation of America, the American Silk Mills and many others.

Kauffer was among the first in the early Twenties to respond to the impact of modern art, particularly the work of the cubist painters Picasso and Braque. The influence of cubism can be seen in his posters and was the basis of his dynamic geometrical style. The emphatic angular forms of Kauffer's posters shocked the public into attention. His artistry, and in particular his color sense, held that attention and, in a few short years just after the First World War, laid the foundations of his reputation as a designer, not only among the leading business men of the time, but particularly among critics and art students. T.S. Eliot, a friend of Kauffer's, describes his marriage of the public and modern art, "He did something for modern art with the public as well as doing something for the public with modern art."

In addition to his involvement in advertising, Kauffer was a book illustrator as well illustrating editions of many classics, including Burton's "Anatomy of Melancholy," Cervantes' "Don Quixote," Carl Van Vechten's "Nigger Heaven," and works by Herman Melville, T.S. Eliot, Arnold Bennett, Lord Birkenhead and others.

His work is represented in the South Kensington Museum in London and in the Corcoran Art Gallery in Washington, and there are examples of it also in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, and in Milan. He edited a survey, *The Art of the Poster*, in 1934. He was a Fellow of the British Institute of Industrial Art and a member of the Council for Art and Industry. When the Royal Society of Arts established its high diploma of R.D.I. (Designer for Industry) in 1937 he was ineligible as a foreigner, but was granted honorary status. He was asked to be Honorary Advisor to the Department of Public Information for the United Nations. He was Advisory Council for the Victoria and Albert Museum. His biography appears in the English "Who's Who" and in the American "Who's Who", as well as in the Columbia Encyclopedia.

Kauffer began to lose interest in the New York advertising scene. A friend of his said that he chose to kill himself with drink. He continued to work to the end, almost obsessively. Kauffer died on 22 October 1954.

Arrangement

Unprocessed; The archive material consists of sketches, posters, manuscript leaves, photographs, clippings, and other related items that document Mr. Kauffer's career from 1915-1954.

Bibliography

E. McKnight Kauffer : poster art, 1915-1940 / Mark Haworth-Booth. London : Victoria and Albert Museum, 1973.

Bibliography

Drawings for the ballet and the original illustrations for Edgar Allen Poe : Oct. 18 to Nov. 12, 1949 / by E. McKnight Kauffer. New York : American British Art Gallery, 1949.

Names and Subject Terms

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

Subjects:

Graphic arts -- History -- 20th century -- Sources
Illustration of books -- 20th century -- Sources
Theaters -- Stage-setting and scenery -- History -- 20th century -- Sources

Types of Materials:

Announcements
Awards
Calendars
Clippings
Correspondence
Drafts (documents)
Negatives
Obituaries
Photographs
Posters
Reviews
Sketches
Writings

Names:

American Airlines
American Silk Mills
Beddington, Jack
Brighton (Firm)
British Federation of Master Printers

British Institute of Industrial Art
British South American Airways
Container Corporation of America
Cooper-Hewitt Design Archive
Dorn, Marion, 1896-1964
Ehrlich, Grace
Eliot, T. S. (Thomas Stearns), 1888-1965
Fry, Roger Eliot, 1866-1934
Haworth-Booth, Mark.
Huxley, Aldous, 1894-1963
Imperial Airways
Kauffer, E. McKnight (Edward McKnight), 1890-1954
London Underground Limited
Moore, Marianne, 1887-1972
Museum of Modern Art (New York, N.Y.)
National Aid Society
New York (State). Metropolitan Transportation Authority
Pan American World Airways, Inc.
Pick, Frank, 1878-1941
Symon, D. E. (David E.)
Victoria and Albert Museum
Waldman, Bernard.

Occupations:

Draftsmen (artists) -- Great Britain
Draftsmen (artists) -- United States
Illustrators -- Great Britain
Illustrators -- United States
Theater designers -- United States

Preferred Titles:

Advertiser's weekly
Australasian
Brighton warp and weft
Seventeen