

Archives of the Arts: An Introduction

By WALTER MUIR WHITEHILL

Boston Athenæum

PAINTERS, sculptors, and composers of music are apt to be more concerned with giving birth to pictures, sculpture, or symphonies than with keeping detailed records of their past accomplishments. Once a thing is done they want to go on to the next, and if what they have created has passed out of their possession, they may have only the most fragmentary information about it. Now and then a painter like Edvard Munch will cling to his drawings and canvases with an archivist's determination, but as a rule studios seldom produce complete and orderly information. Architects are a different breed. As they have to cope with plumbers and building inspectors, they keep their drawings and specifications in orderly files, for future reference. But these take up a considerable amount of space, and when an architect retires or dies, all this magnificent record too often goes to the dump. Some sketchbooks or photographs may be kept by the architect's family, but the great mass of correspondence, specifications, and plans normally disappears beyond retrieval. Performers of music are temperamental people, more likely to give their names to some favorite form of spaghetti or peaches than to worry about recordkeeping, whereas producers and managers of theatres and opera houses are more concerned with staving off bankruptcy than with preserving sources for the future historian.

In this issue of the *American Archivist* Mary Ellis Peltz describes the chaos that existed in the Metropolitan Opera before she and a group of volunteers undertook to transform chaos into archives. But how few centers of the performing arts have survived long enough to make such a rescue operation possible. Galleries, museums, and libraries have proved more durable. Kenneth H. MacFarland describes the archival resources of the Albany Institute of History and Art. Similar records of exhibitions survive in the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, my Boston Athenæum

The versatile Director and Librarian of the Library of the Boston Athenæum needs no introduction to readers of the *American Archivist*. Among more than a score of books written or edited by Dr. Whitehill, or to which he contributed, a recent one may be mentioned because of its relevance to this special-contents issue: *The Arts in Early American History: Needs and Opportunities for Study. An Essay by Walter Muir Whitehill. A Bibliography by Wendell D. Garrett and Jane N. Garrett.* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1965.)

(whose art gallery, first opened in 1827, grew by 1870 into the Boston Museum of Fine Arts), and other old institutions.

In dealing with archives of the motion picture, Raymond Fielding makes it clear that the archivist must become a missionary as well as a collector, for the majority of film makers do not realize that old papers, drawings, photographs, and films have any future value to themselves or anyone else. Moreover films printed on nitrate stock are uncomfortable possessions, for if they by luck avoid blowing up or catching fire, they will eventually crumble to dust. Thus J. M. Calhoun provides a technical note on the preservation of motion-picture film to assist the 11 institutions in the United States that attempt to cope with these difficult and uncooperative records of our past. Lillian Brown describes the National Library of Television, which undertakes, through contracts with the three networks and with the major producing organizations, to preserve pertinent material in branches at the University of California at Los Angeles, New York University, and The American University in Washington.

What these articles make clear is that many of the richer collections concerning the arts in the United States are not technically archival at all, for these records are not as often preserved by a public or private institution in connection with its proper business as collected by enthusiastic individuals for preservation in a library, historical society, or other institution that had no necessary connection with the works of art or artists that they describe.

The Catalogue of American Portraits, which Daniel J. Reed describes, is a recent scholarly tool created in the new National Portrait Gallery of the Smithsonian Institution. The nucleus of the catalogue came from the vast holdings of photographs and information assembled over several decades by the Frick Art Reference Library, which was the personal creation of Helen Clay Frick. Another great personal creation, the Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum, has encouraged its staff and students to seek archival and historical sources for the origins of the examples of the arts and crafts preserved in the institution. Thanks to Winterthur, undocumented attributions by dealers and collectors are no longer taken as seriously as they once were. Elizabeth Wood, formerly of the Downs Library at Winterthur, describes the rewarding wild goose chase that resulted from her attempt to establish a valid history for an engraved 19th-century trade label. "Pots and pans history" pursued in this manner may lead the inquirer into almost any library, archive, or manuscript collection in the United States.

Bernice Nece shows how the efforts of two personal friends, Mrs. Milton H. Esberg, Sr., and Prof. Samuel Draper, led to the assembly of the Kirsten Flagstad memorial collection in the California Historical Society—an institution organized in its present form a decade after Mme. Flagstad began singing and an ocean and a continent away from Norway. So too Dorman H. Winfrey's contribution shows how the Toscanini Memorial Archives grew out of the desire of the New York Public Library to honor the great conductor on his retirement from the New York Philharmonic Orchestra by collecting musical autographs. Nevertheless the Toscanini archives in the Villa Pauline at Riverdale, which owe so much to the conductor's son, come as close to the technical definition of archives as is possible in the case of an individual artist.

Barbara J. Kaiser's account of the Wisconsin Center for Theatre Research concerns a project that grew out of a research program of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin and the University of Wisconsin, just as the Archives of American Art, described by Garnett McCoy, came into being under the wing of the Detroit Institute of Arts during the directorship of E. P. Richardson. When somebody starts a specialized center, original records (or copies thereof) that had earlier been homeless, drift in, at a speed and in a quantity in direct ratio to the resources of the institution. There will certainly in the future be more and more of these library collections concerning aspects of the arts in America, but I suspect that we shall not see many additions to the company of the Metropolitan Opera Archives.



Still available

\$2.50 postpaid

HANDBOOK OF STATE AND PROVINCIAL ARCHIVISTS
AND RECORDS ADMINISTRATORS, 1966

Order from: Division of State Archives and Public Records,
1530 Sherman, Denver, Colo. 80222.