

The Archives of American Art

By GARNETT McCOY

Archives of American Art

A DESCRIPTION of the Archives of American Art must begin with a precise definition. It is a series of collections of personal papers and of institutional and business records that reflect the history of the visual arts in the United States. In a technical sense, therefore, it is a repository of primary documentation acquired from a variety of sources rather than a true archives. Nor is its subject matter simply American art. The Archives is of a more comprehensive scope, embracing all those activities connected with creating, marketing, and collecting paintings, sculpture, decorative objects, and architecture in this country from their earliest manifestations in the 17th century to the present time.

The Archives has its headquarters in, but is not a part of, the Detroit Institute of Arts. Its staff consists of six professionals and seven clerks and secretaries. The Archives receives no Federal, State, or municipal funds but relies instead on members whose financial contributions and fund-raising activities support the work of gathering, processing, and preserving documents.

The need for such work had long been recognized by a few scholars and museum curators. The American Art Research Council, a similar entity founded in 1942, failed to generate widespread support. It was not until 1954, when growing public interest in American art became evident, that the Archives of American Art was established, chiefly through the efforts of two men whose personal involvement in the world of art enabled them to lay a firm groundwork for the organization. During the early 1950's when E. P. Richardson, then Director of the Detroit Institute of Arts, was conducting research for his *Painting in America; the Story of 450 Years* (New York, 1956), he "discovered that there was an up-to-date, useful book on only one out of ten of the artists whom I wished to discuss."¹ Time and money were required for travel to sources scattered about the country. Relevant documents were often unknown or difficult to get at. While Dr. Richardson was struggling with these conditions, Lawrence Fleischman, an energetic art col-

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¹ E. P. Richardson, "Editorial: How To Make a Time Capsule," in *Art in America*, vol. 53, no. 4:21 (Aug.-Sept. 1965).

lector in Detroit, found himself at a loss for biographical material on artists whose works he had bought. Thus faced with similar problems, they conceived the idea of establishing in Detroit a research center whose fundamental goal would be to encourage research and publication on the subject of art in the United States by providing the necessary documentation through the use of microfilm.

From its beginnings microfilm has been a prominent feature in the operation of the Archives of American Art. Initially it was regarded only as a means of collecting historical records maintained in other repositories. This conception was rapidly abandoned as collections of original papers began to be offered as donations to the Archives. In addition to maintaining and preserving them in the usual fashion, however, these donated collections were microfilmed. The value of the Archives of American Art, it was thought, would lie in its ability to make both borrowed and donated records, now gathered together in one central location, more easily accessible to scholars than they would have been in their ordinarily dispersed state.

Three additional advantages springing from the use of microfilm were envisioned. Since the Archives limits its scope to papers relating to one subject, a more intensive cataloging effort can be pursued on the relevant borrowed collections than the owning institution might find possible. Moreover, many of the extant records dealing with this field postdate 1870. Microfilming serves as a useful means of preserving the content of papers, particularly those in collections that are in frequent demand by researchers. Finally, a roll of film can be easily and safely sent through the mail. Through the interlibrary loan system, a scholar lacking the funds or time for travel from place to place can borrow from the Archives copies of papers he needs to conduct his research. Since a complete security set of negative film is maintained in a fireproof vault, a lost or damaged roll of positive film can be inexpensively replaced.

All of these reasons reinforce the Archives' view of itself as not merely a collecting agency, but rather as a research institution devoted to encouraging scholarly investigation by making primary sources widely and easily available. The goal, then, is research and publication; the process of seeking, gathering, and preserving papers is simply one way of achieving that goal. Though the statement of this ideal does not always suffice to remove occasional objections to the microfilming of institutional holdings, the Archives

does feel that the primary consideration should be the advantage offered to the scholarly community by its emphasis on accessibility.

If the merits of duplication can be weighed, the Archives' initial effort in that direction was an outstanding success. It was, in a sense, a pilot project. Seventeen historical society, museum, college and other libraries in the Philadelphia area were investigated for their resources, chiefly 18th- and 19th-century manuscripts on American painting, sculpture, and decorative arts. Having secured the cooperation of these repositories, a team of highly qualified researchers selected the material to be filmed. A total of 94 rolls in both negative and positive form were sent to the Archives in Detroit, where they were intensively analyzed and inventoried. In some cases the descriptive work performed by the Archives made collections far more usable than they had been, and the concentration of copies of all of these records in one agency with an accompanying overall index was an obvious gain for the historian.

The processes developed during this operation have, with some modifications, been followed ever since. Each roll of film is assigned a letter designating the city of origin. The letter is followed by a number, comparable to an accession number. Thus the 94 Philadelphia rolls were given the symbols P 1 to P 94. Indexing or inventorying the contents of these rolls is made possible by the use of a numbering meter during the filming process. As each document is photographed, the meter, which also appears in the frame, automatically turns to the next consecutive number. The average role of film consists of about a thousand photographs or frames, and since each frame is numbered in sequence the place of any specific document within the roll can be easily indicated. Thus a Thomas Eakins letter owned by the Philadelphia Museum of Art is assigned the symbol P 10:549.

Before the actual filming begins, a group of target cards is typed to be photographed together with the documents. Each card identifies a clearly defined series within a particular collection and carries brief notes on the series, on its source, and on any restriction or limitation on use desired by the owning institution. The appropriate target card then appears on each frame of microfilm.

Two separate finding aids were prepared for the Philadelphia material. One is a conventional card index, each card referring to a personal name or subject, which is then followed by a brief description of the document and a note indicating its source. In the upper left-hand corner of the card is the code symbol identifying the location of the document on microfilm. The second control is a looseleaf notebook containing rough listings of the various series of papers,

arranged according to owning institutions, together with the relevant symbols. Using this inventory as a basis, a summary of the contents of each roll of film is typed on a label headed by the roll number. This label is then pasted to the cardboard box containing the roll.

The Philadelphia project took 2 years to complete. A similar undertaking was then carried out in the vast holdings of the Manuscript Division, the Art Division, and the Prints Division of the New York Public Library.

Meanwhile, beginning with the donation of two elegantly bound volumes containing an autograph collection entitled "The History of Art in America as Told in a Remarkable Collection of Autograph Letters and Documents . . .," the Archives became the recipient of original papers. Within a short time collections of the personal records of artists, critics, art scholars, and collectors were offered and accepted, either as outright donations or as loans for microfilming. With the opening of a permanent branch office in New York and the engaging of a field representative there, the soliciting of documentary collections accelerated rapidly. The overall result has been a continuing flow of both borrowed and donated material to the Archives, all of it to be microfilmed, cataloged, and, subject to the particular form of restriction imposed, made available to scholars.

In addition to gathering manuscript papers of artists, dealers, critics, organizations, and institutions, the Archives took on a related project involving printed material. This is a compilation on microfilm of a copy of every known art auction catalog published in this country from 1785 to 1950. Microfilming has been completed, and when the retrieval system for the contents is further advanced, complete sets of the film will be offered to major libraries. A similar compilation of art exhibition catalogs is now underway.

Another form of documentation, the tape-recorded interview, has been energetically collected by the Archives. The reminiscences and comments of over a hundred artists ranging in time from Abraham Walkowitz and Charles Sheeler to Robert Rauschenberg and George Segal have been gathered and transcribed.

If the particular mode of procedure of the Archives of American Art is somewhat more complex than that of most documentary repositories, the resources under its care are easily described. Relatively few papers are available from the colonial period. The plastic arts had a slow growth in the Thirteen Colonies, and the often anonymous portrait painters of the 17th and 18th centuries left

little trace of their activities beyond the actual canvases. Some of the collections filmed in Philadelphia contain material from that era, but the earliest original item owned by the Archives is a 1743 letter from John Smibert, one of the few well-trained European emigrants. Benjamin West, the Pennsylvania youth who became the first in a long line of expatriates and who achieved an international reputation in England, is represented by several oddly spelled letters. Aside from a few pieces, records of the great late-18th-century portrait painters—John Singleton Copley, Ralph Earl, Gilbert Stuart, Charles Willson Peale, and John Trumbull—appear only on microfilm from the older repositories in Philadelphia and New York.

The same situation is true for the early-19th-century figures who turned to historical, classical, and religious subjects and for the more successful Hudson River School. This group, whose founder and best-known exponent was Thomas Cole, is well documented in the rich collections of Cole papers owned by the New York State Library and the Detroit Institute of Arts and in the large body of Asher B. Durand papers in the Manuscript Division of the New York Public Library.

Several important collections of original papers of the mid-19th century are in the possession of the Archives. The letters written to his wife by Thomas Crawford, an expatriate sculptor in Italy and father of the novelist F. Marion Crawford, are filled with useful information on the working arrangements of an artist abroad and on the American colony in Rome in the 1840's and 1850's. The papers of William Page, another member of the same colony, also cover these subjects and a great many others. In the 1840's Page was a close friend of James Russell Lowell and of Charles Frederick Briggs, a New York literary journalist. Their letters touch on the art scene in New York and Boston and on the literary controversies of the day. Briggs' letters in particular carry significant information on the rise and fall of the *Broadway Journal* and on the connection of Edgar Allan Poe with that short-lived publication. A later series in the Page papers is the family correspondence of his third wife, Sophia Stevens Page, sister of the notable antiquarian booksellers Benjamin F. and Henry Stevens. "High art and naked human female figures are all well in their places," wrote the latter, who was unhappily subsidizing the Pages, to his sister in May 1859, "but the first and only thing for you both to do *now* is to go into a still *higher art* of getting out and keeping out of debt."²

² Henry Stevens to Sophia Stevens Page, May 8, 1859, in William Page papers, Archives of American Art.

Another 19th-century resident in Italy was Elihu Vedder, a New York painter who moved to Rome in the 1860's and remained there, with occasional trips home, for the rest of a very long life. His papers, one of the largest groups in the Archives relating to an artist, further reveal the manner of life of an American painter abroad.

As every curator of manuscripts knows, diaries are usually disappointing affairs. Rubens Peale's journal covering the years 1855 to 1865 is a typical series of entries describing the weather, the crops, and the physical state of the writer. The diary of Jervis McEntee, a late Hudson River School painter, is a refreshing exception. His record of activities, associations, and events is a remarkable re-creation of the life of a representative New York artist of the 1870's and 1880's. The operation of the art market, the names and personalities of fellow artists and their patrons, the attitudes and techniques of a painter of the time, the social and professional organizations of the art community, the growing preference among the rich for European rather than American art—all are dwelt on at great length. Since McEntee knew many of the leading artists and writers of his day, there are frequent references to Eastman Johnson, Sanford Gifford, Worthington Whittredge, Frederic E. Church, John F. Weir, to such literary figures as Bayard Taylor, Richard H. Stoddard, Edmund C. Stedman, Bret Harte, and to the actor Edwin Booth. "Sometimes I wonder why I keep this diary," he once wrote.³ But we can be grateful that he did when we read such passages as "Had a talk with a model on her mode of life. Advised her to go to housework." Or this from March 31, 1877: "The Munich students' work prevails and the genuinely American productions are put aside to give prominence to the foreign looking art."⁴

Art journalism was a late development in America. The first successful periodical devoted to the subject was *The Crayon*, published in New York from 1855 to 1861. The bound set owned by the Archives is supplemented by the editorial correspondence, filmed as a part of the John Durand papers of the Manuscript Division, New York Public Library. An extensive collection of similar records is the papers of Sylvester Rosa Koehler, who published the *American Art Review* in Boston from 1879 to 1881.

Two important 19th-century collectors of American art were Luman Reed in the 1830's and Thomas B. Clarke in the 1880's. Reed's activities are well documented in the filmed papers of

³ Diary entry for Apr. 4, 1880, Archives of American Art.

⁴ *Ibid.*, Feb. 1, 1876; Mar. 31, 1877.

Thomas Cole and of William S. Mount, while Clarke's efforts are often referred to in the McEntee diary and in his own letters to Sylvester Koehler. An ambitious but abortive attempt to publish a scholarly, multivolume work on major American art collections is represented in the papers of August Florian Jaccaci, who, with the painter John LaFarge, gathered material on the subject from 1905 to 1915.

There were relatively few art dealers in this country before 1900. The first to devote himself entirely to American painting and sculpture was William Macbeth, who opened his gallery in New York in 1892. The Macbeth Gallery records, which form the largest single group of papers in the Archives, range from that date to the closing of the business in 1954. Over 70,000 items, chiefly correspondence, business papers, and photographs, faithfully reflect the operation of the art market and the shifting trends in taste during a period of radical transition. They also provide important documentation on hundreds of works of art.

The Macbeth Gallery papers are neatly complemented by the Rehn Gallery records, which cover the decade immediately following the First World War. Frank K. M. Rehn was the dealer for several significant figures in American art, and his correspondence with such painters as George Bellows, Charles Burchfield, Edward Hopper, and George Luks and such collectors as Duncan Phillips, John Gellatly, and John T. Spalding adds much to our understanding of their contributions.

Art in the United States at the turn of the century was held in the grip of tradition and dominated by the powerful National Academy of Design. The struggle against the academy first produced a school of social realism and climaxed dramatically in 1913 with the International Exhibition of Modern Art, known to history as the Armory Show. One of the most important collections in the Archives is the papers of the painter and promoter Walt Kuhn, who, as secretary of the Association of American Painters and Sculptors, preserved the Armory Show records. He also kept his own uninhibited letters to his wife containing detailed accounts of the circumstances leading to and following that celebrated event.

An American school of abstract painting arose during this period under the leadership of Alfred Stieglitz. Marsden Hartley, Max Weber, Arthur Dove, Abraham Walkowitz, and John Marin are among the better known figures of this movement toward new expression in American art. Letters from all of them appear in various groups at the Archives. The Max Weber and the Abraham

Walkowitz papers are major sources, and an enormous collection of information on Hartley and his work was gathered by the art scholar Elizabeth McCausland, whose papers also include correspondence with Dove and Stieglitz. The correspondence and writings of Kenneth Hayes Miller, lent for microfilming by his daughter, reflect the history of a somewhat more conservative circle that came to prominence in the 1920's. The same period is quite thoroughly documented in the filmed records of the Whitney Museum in its various early stages.

Records of art during the Depression and especially of the federally sponsored art projects have been intensively sought by the Archives. A Ford Foundation grant made it possible to engage several field representatives, who arranged the filming of papers belonging to administrators and artists active during the New Deal era. The major effort in this direction was the selection and filming of Government art project central office records maintained at the National Archives. Perhaps the most valuable single result of this concentration on art and the Government is a collection of several hundred tape-recorded interviews on the subject conducted by the field staff. Only a beginning, however, has been made on the formidable task of indexing this wealth of material.

Art in the postwar period was marked by a rejection of the social realism that dominated the 1930's. The records of the American Abstract Artists, an organization formed in 1936, and of a later discussion group known simply as The Club help to document this transformation. The abstract expressionist movement is chiefly represented by the papers of Franz Kline. The Louise Nevelson papers are also important for the 1950's and 1960's, but the major source of information on the contemporary scene available at the Archives is the rich collection of records from the sculptor David Smith.

After 13 years of rapid growth, two major problems face the Archives of American Art. The most difficult one concerns information retrieval. It is clear that a highly refined card index is an impossibility. An experiment with an optic-coincidence retrieval system has not been altogether successful. Catalog descriptions of collections, similar to those used by the National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections, supplemented by inventories listing series and selected personal names, seem the most feasible solution at the present time.

The goal of the Archives is to stimulate research in the history of art in the United States. Research requires use of the available

documents, and use, in turn, depends on a knowledge of the existence of the documents. The Archives has taken several steps to make its resources known, most notably the publication of a quarterly journal, which includes descriptions of recent accessions and articles based on papers in its possession. The January issues of 1965 and 1967 of *Archives of American Art Journal*, devoted to a preliminary guide to the collections of the Archives, have been widely distributed among university and museum libraries and have brought a number of requests for material. This year the New York branch of the Archives will be greatly expanded by the addition of a complete duplicate set of the microfilm now available in Detroit, a step which is expected to create heavy use of the resources.

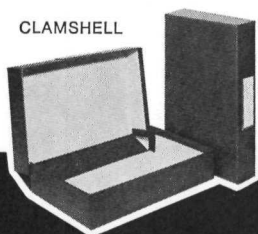
"A fashionable but worthy organization" was the description once applied to the Archives by a friendly commentator in the magazine *Manuscripts*.⁵ Having established itself as the largest institution devoted to the history of art in the United States, the Archives of American Art feels that the order of adjectives might now be reversed.

⁵ Colton Storm, "News Notes," in *Manuscripts*, vol. 16, no. 4:54 (Fall 1964).

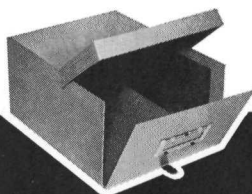
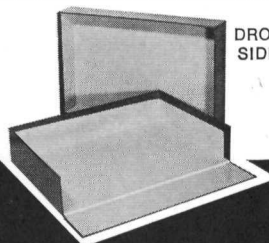
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