

Guide to the Katharine Kuh Papers

YCAL MSS 15



by Ellen Zak Danforth

August 1987

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Collection Overview

REPOSITORY: Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library
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CALL NUMBER: YCAL MSS 15

CREATOR: Kuh, Katharine, 1904-1994

TITLE: Katharine Kuh papers

DATES: 1937-1964 (inclusive)

PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION: 0.75 linear feet (2 boxes)

LANGUAGE: English

SUMMARY: The papers contain correspondence and art on greeting cards by artists whose works she exhibited.

ONLINE FINDING AID: To cite or bookmark this finding aid, please use the following link: <https://hdl.handle.net/10079/fa/beinecke.kuh>

Requesting Instructions

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Key to the container abbreviations used in the PDF finding aid:

b. box
f. folder

Administrative Information

Immediate Source of Acquisition

Gift of Katharine Kuh, 1964.

Conditions Governing Access

The materials are open for research.

Conditions Governing Use

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Preferred Citation

Katharine Kuh Papers. Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

KATHARINE KUH (1904-)

Katharine Kuh, art historian, curator, author, and critic of twentieth-century art, was born in St. Louis on July 15, 1904. She was educated at Vassar College (A.B. 1925) and the University of Chicago (A.M. 1928).

From 1935 until 1942 she owned and directed The Katharine Kuh Gallery in Chicago and also served as visiting professor of art at the University School of Fine Arts in San Miguel, Guanajuato, Mexico. In 1943 Katharine went to the Art Institute of Chicago as curator, Gallery of Art Interpretation. Until 1959 she was also curator of modern painting and sculpture and edited the *Bulletin of the Art Institute of Chicago* from 1943 to 1953. Following her departure from the Institute, she became art editor for *Saturday Review* (1959-72), *World Magazine* (1972-73), and *Saturday Review Magazine* (1973-77).

During her career, Katharine Kuh wrote many books. They include *Art Has Many Faces* (1951), which was inspired partly by her experience in preparing an advisory report on the fate of Alaskan totem poles for the Office of Indian Affairs in 1946, *The Artist's Voice* (1962), and *Break Up: The Core of Modern Art* (1965). She also wrote a catalog of Fernand Léger's work, *Léger* (1953), and the catalog for a retrospective exhibition, *100 Artists, 100 Years: Alumni of the School of the Art Institute of Chicago* (1979).

Katharine Kuh married George E. Kuh in 1930 and was divorced in 1936. See also: *Who's Who of American Women*, Vol. I, p. 722.

Scope and Contents

The Katharine Kuh Papers contain correspondence and pieces of art sent to Katharine Kuh as greeting cards by artists whose works she showed in her gallery and at the Art Institute of Chicago.

The papers are arranged alphabetically in thirty-two folders. Letters, notes, envelopes with marginalia, and decorative greeting cards are interfiled as correspondence.

The correspondence contains dialogue between Katharine Kuh and American artists like Mark Tobey, Alexander Calder, Joseph Cornell, Man Ray, and Len Lye and such European contemporaries as Marcel Duchamp, Jean Dubuffet, Jean Hélion, and Fernand Léger. The letters contain frequent references to the ideological similarities and differences of their work and illuminate the role that Katharine Kuh played as interpreter and champion of abstract art in the United States.

Most of the letters contain material that was incorporated into her books, especially *The Artist's Voice* (1962). Naum Gabo (October 22, 1961) and Saul Steinberg (November 9, 1961), for example, speak about the conflict between the visual and verbal expression of an idea. They give Kuh explicit instructions on how to represent their ideas in print. In a November 9, 1961, letter Mark Tobey explains that artists either talk about their art grudgingly or not at all and that he would not have done so for anyone but Katharine Kuh. Although this respect is characteristic of the artists' letters, Kuh herself, in a reply to Abraham Rattner (Apr 13, 1956), calls herself an "art entrepreneur" who is, in reality, merely a frustrated artist.

Several artists, including Jack Levine and Pavel Tchelitchew, write about specific works of art and what inspired them to create particular images. Marcel Duchamp in a February 23, 1949, letter answers a

series of questions about Jacques Villon for a catalog of an exhibition of the Arensberg Collection at the Art Institute of Chicago and explains the triple pun in his pseudonym "Rose Sélavy." Alexander Calder tells how to repair some of his pieces and, in a May 1, 1947, letter relates a humorous incident in which a sculpture that had been tampered with later "attacked" someone.

Other interesting letters include one to Katharine from a friend of Le Corbusier (June 5, 1941) asking her to give prominence to Le Corbusier's work in her gallery because of the artist's "difficult economic situation." The correspondence of art patrons Katherine Dreier and Walter C. Arensberg discusses modern art from a collector's point of view. There is also a note of appreciation from Eleanor Roosevelt and a letter from Thornton Wilder about the Virgin Islands.

Almost all of the original art works are signed by the artists and many are dated. Some bear evidence of having been displayed. The highlights include nine paintings done jointly by George and Juliet Kepes, seven black- and-white photographs by André Kertész, five prints by Boris Margo, two drawings by Carlos Merida, and some of Joseph Cornell's collages. Another collage, dated 1938, is filed with the Merida correspondence, was made and signed by Carlos Merida, Julio de Diego, Alexander Archipenko, and Katharine Kuh. Len Lye's letters take the form of drawings in ink and magic marker, and Alexander Calder addressed an envelope to Kuh in mirror-image writing. There is also a signed lithograph by Léger in a copy of Tristan Tzara's *La face intérieure*.

Collection Contents

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|-------------|--|---------------|
| b. 1, f. 1 | Albers, Josef | 1957-62, n.d. |
| b. 1, f. 1 | Albright, Ivan | 1962 |
| b. 1, f. 2 | Archipenko, Alexander | 1937-41, n.d. |
| b. 1, f. 2 | Arensberg, Walter C. | 1949 |
| b. 1, f. 3 | Bayer, Herbert | 1963 |
| b. 1, f. 3 | Bazzine, Jean | 1953 Jan 1 |
| b. 1, f. 3 | Berko, Ferenc | n.d. |
| b. 1, f. 3 | Biddle, Francis | 1964 Sep 8 |
| b. 1, f. 4 | Calder, Alexander | 1947-61 |
| b. 1, f. 4 | Chavez Morado, José | 1939 |
| b. 1, f. 4 | Cornell, Joseph | 1964-66, n.d. |
| b. 1, f. 5 | Davis, Stuart | 1939 Feb 18 |
| b. 1, f. 5 | De Diego, Julio | 1946-49 |
| b. 1, f. 5 | Dickinson, Edwin | 1963 Jun 4 |
| b. 1, f. 5 | Dreier, Katherine | 1951 Nov 28 |
| b. 1, f. 6 | Dubuffet, Jean | 1951-60 |
| b. 1, f. 7 | Duchamp, Marcel | 1948-61, n.d. |
| b. 1, f. 8 | Ernst, Jimmy | n.d. |
| b. 1, f. 8 | Ernst, Max | n.d. |
| b. 1, f. 8 | Feininger, Lyonel | 1942, 1957 |
| b. 1, f. 9 | Gabo, Naum | 1961 Oct 22 |
| b. 1, f. 9 | Graves, Morris | 1953, 1961 |
| b. 1, f. 9 | Guarero, José | n.d. |
| b. 1, f. 10 | Hélion, Jean | 1957-64 |
| b. 1, f. 11 | Hiler, Hilaire | 1960-62 |
| b. 1, f. 11 | Hoffman, Hans | 1961 |
| b. 1, f. 11 | Kazin, Alfred | 1963 Nov 15 |
| b. 1, f. 11 | Kemany, Z. | 1953 Nov 4 |
| b. 1, f. 12 | Kepes, George and Juliet | n.d. |

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|-------------|--|---------------|
| b. 1, f. 13 | Kertész, André | 1957-73, nd. |
| b. 1, f. 14 | Kopman, Benjamin | 1937 Apr 2 |
| b. 1, f. 14 | Le Corbusier | 1938, 1941 |
| b. 1, f. 15 | Léger, Fernand | 1941, 1953 |
| b. 1, f. 16 | <i>Chansons de France</i> by Ivan Goll, 1940. Contains reproduction of drawing by Léger. | 1940 |
| b. 1, f. 17 | <i>La face intérieure</i> by Tristan Tzara, 1953. With color lithograph signed by Léger. | 1953 |
| b. 1, f. 18 | Levine, Jack | n.d. |
| b. 1, f. 18 | Lipchitz, Jacques | 1962 Jan 27 |
| b. 1, f. 19 | Lye, Len | 1961-64 |
| b. 1, f. 20 | Margo, Boris | 1964, n.d. |
| b. 1, f. 20 | Martyl | n.d. |
| b. 2, f. 21 | Merida, Carlos | 1942-66, n.d. |
| b. 2, f. 21 | Murphy, Gerald | 1953, 1961 |
| b. 2, f. 22 | Noguchi, Isamu | n.d. |
| b. 2, f. 22 | O'Keeffe, Georgia | 1943-61 |
| b. 2, f. 22 | Onslow-Ford, Gordon | n.d. |
| b. 2, f. 23 | Porter, Eliot | n.d. |
| b. 2, f. 23 | Pousette-Dart, Nathaniel | 1965 Feb 23 |
| b. 2, f. 23 | Priebe, Karl | 1943 |
| b. 2, f. 24 | Rand, Paul | n.d. |
| b. 2, f. 24 | Rattner, Abraham | 1956 |
| b. 2, f. 24 | Ray, Man | 1941-47 |
| b. 2, f. 25 | Reinhardt, Ad | 1962 |
| b. 2, f. 25 | Roosevelt, Eleanor | 1943 Jun 26 |
| b. 2, f. 25 | Roszak, Theodore | 1958-64, n.d. |
| b. 2, f. 25 | Rothko, Mark | 1956-57, n.d. |
| b. 2, f. 25 | Ruvolo, Felix | n.d. |
| b. 2, f. 26 | Seligman, Kurt L. | 1946-61, n.d. |
| b. 2, f. 27 | Siegel, Eli | 1963-64 |

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|-------------|--------------------------|---------------|
| b. 2, f. 27 | Siskind, Aaron | 1958 |
| b. 2, f. 27 | Smith, David | 1961, n.d. |
| b. 2, f. 28 | Steinberg, Saul | 1961, n.d. |
| b. 2, f. 28 | Still, Clyfford | 1964 May 17 |
| b. 2, f. 28 | Sutnar, Ladislav | n.d. |
| b. 2, f. 28 | Szell, George | 1953 Oct 26 |
| b. 2, f. 29 | Tamayo, Rufino | n.d. |
| b. 2, f. 29 | Tchelitchew, Pavel | 1952 |
| b. 2, f. 29 | Thannhauser, J.K. | 1963 Oct 22 |
| b. 2, f. 30 | Tobey, Mark | 1953-63, n.d. |
| b. 2, f. 31 | van Gogh, Vincent Willem | 1950-58 |
| b. 2, f. 31 | Weston, Edward | 1938-39 |
| b. 2, f. 32 | Wilder, Thornton | 1937 May 5 |
| b. 2, f. 32 | Zalce, Alfredo | 1946, 1950 |

Selected Search Terms

The following terms have been used to index the description of this collection in the Library's online catalog. They are grouped by name of person or organization, by subject or location, and by occupation and listed alphabetically therein.

Subjects

Art, Abstract
Art, American
Art, Modern -- 20th Century
Art criticism
Artists -- United States
Art literature
Expatriate artists

Genres / Formats

Collages (visual works)
Greeting cards
Paintings
Photoprints

Occupations

Art critics -- United States
Authors

Names

Arensberg, Walter, 1878-1954
Calder, Alexander, 1898-1976
Cornell, Joseph, 1903-
Dreier, Katherine S. (Katherine Sophie),
1877-1952
Dubuffet, Jean, 1901-1985
Duchamp, Marcel, 1887-1968
Gabo, Naum, 1890-1977
Hélion, Jean, 1904-1987
Kepes, Gyorgy, 1906-2001
Kertész, André, 1894-1985
Kuh, Katharine, 1904-1994
Le Corbusier, 1887-1965
Léger, Fernand, 1881-1955
Lavier, Jack, 1915-
Lye, Len, 1901-1980
Man Ray, 1890-1976
Seligmann, Kurt, 1900-1962
Steinberg, Saul, 1914-1999
Tchelitchew, Pavel, 1898-1957
Tobey, Mark, 1890-1976