

# Guide to the Faber Birren Papers

ART 13



compiled by Sarah Tunney

September 1998

Arts Library Special Collections  
180 York Street  
New Haven, CT 06511  
203-432-1712  
haasalsc@yale.edu

<https://web.library.yale.edu/arts/alsc>

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## Table of Contents

Collection Overview .....	3
Requesting Instructions .....	3
Administrative Information .....	3
Immediate Source of Acquisition .....	3
Conditions Governing Access .....	3
Conditions Governing Use .....	4
Preferred Citation .....	4
Biographical / Historical .....	4
Biographical / Historical .....	4
Scope and Contents .....	5
Arrangement .....	5
Collection Contents .....	6
Series I: Personal, 1956-1992 .....	6
Series II: Correspondence, 1963-1998 .....	7
Series III: Writings, 1946-1988 .....	8
Series IV: Visual Materials, 1942-1997 .....	10
Restricted [Open 2018 Jan 1] .....	11
Accession 2005--003: Additional Material, 1950-1994 .....	12
Accession 2014: Additional Material, [1983?] .....	13
Selected Search Terms .....	14

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## Collection Overview

**REPOSITORY:** Robert B. Haas Family Arts Library Special Collections  
Arts Library Special Collections  
180 York Street  
New Haven, CT 06511  
203-432-1712  
haasalsc@yale.edu  
<https://web.library.yale.edu/arts/alsc>

**CALL NUMBER:** ART 13

**CREATOR:** Birren, Faber, 1900-1988

**TITLE:** Faber Birren papers

**DATES:** 1942-1998

**BULK DATES:** 1968-1989

**PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION:** 11.75 linear feet (14 boxes)

**LANGUAGE:** English

**SUMMARY:** The papers document Faber Birren's career as an authority on color, particularly during the years 1968-1989. They focus on his scholarship and his endowment of the Birren Collection.

**ONLINE FINDING AID:** To cite or bookmark this finding aid, please use the following link: <https://hdl.handle.net/10079/fa/arts.art.0013>

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## Requesting Instructions

To request items from this collection for use on site, please use the request links in the HTML version of this finding aid, available at <https://hdl.handle.net/10079/fa/arts.art.0013>.

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

b. box  
f. folder

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## Administrative Information

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### Immediate Source of Acquisition

Gift to the Art and Architecture Library from Faber Birren and family, 1971-1998; transferred from the Art and Architecture Library to Manuscripts and Archives, 1998 and 2004; transferred from Manuscripts and Archives to the Robert B. Haas Family Arts Library, 2011.

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### Conditions Governing Access

The materials are open for research. Box 12 is closed until January 1, 2018, unless curatorial permission is granted.

Original audiovisual materials, as well as preservation and duplicating masters, may not be played. Researchers must consult use copies, or if none exist must pay for a use copy, which is retained by the repository.

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## Conditions Governing Use

Copyright has not been transferred to Yale University.

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## Preferred Citation

Faber Birren Papers, Robert B. Haas Family Arts Library, Yale University Library.

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## Biographical / Historical

Faber Birren (September 21, 1900 - December 30, 1988), noted authority on color, was born and raised in Chicago, Illinois. His father, Joseph P. Birren, was a successful landscape painter, and his mother, Crescentia (Lang) Birren, a skilled pianist. He attended classes at the Art Institute of Chicago while still in high school, and completed two years (1919-1921) at the University of Chicago studying color theory. Birren published his first articles on color in 1924, and his first book on color four years later. By the end of his life, he had authored a total of 254 articles and forty books on the subject of color. Over a period of fifty-four years, Faber Birren was retained as a color consultant by companies such as Dupont, Walt Disney and General Electric, as well as by the United States Army, Coast Guard and Navy. In 1971, he established a depository and an endowment at Yale University for books on color. The Faber Birren Collection) has grown from his initial donation of 266 books into the most comprehensive collection of its kind in the world, and numbers over 2000 items. Birren was married for fifty-four years to Wanda (Martin) Birren. They had two daughters, Zoe and Fay, and four grandchildren.

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## Biographical / Historical

Faber Birren, noted authority on color, was born September 21, 1900, in Chicago, Illinois. The son of successful landscape painter, Joseph P. Birren, and skilled pianist, Crescentia (Lang) Birren, Faber was the youngest of three children (Jeanette Birren Quinn (b. 1894) and William B. Birren (b. 1898)). After attending Mount Carmel Roman Catholic Elementary School, Birren studied art and ceramics at Nichols Senn High School. During his last two years there, Faber also attended classes at the Art Institute of Chicago. After high school, he entered the University of Chicago (1919). It was then that he began his study of color theory under Walter Sargent and others. Birren left the University of Chicago after only two years, and in 1921, he began working for a local bookseller and publisher, Charles T. Powner. It was in this first job that Birren began to collect books on color and to write on the subject.

In 1924, Birren published his first articles (3) on color; the same year, his earliest attempt at a book on color was unsuccessfully submitted for publication. It was not until 1928 that *Color in Vision* was published. For the next several years and through the Great Depression, Birren published scores of articles and stories on the functional use of color, especially its use in hospitals and schools. Meanwhile, he continued to submit manuscripts on color and novels to publishers. Birren later explained that the meager pay for a published article coupled with the economic state of the country in 1933, "led to the endeavor to become a free-lance professional color authority." Birren reoriented his focus from writing to consulting.

Until late in life, Faber Birren was retained as a color consultant by companies such as Dupont, Walt Disney, General Electric, Westvaco Corp., and Sears & Roebuck, as well as by the United States Navy, Coast Guard and Army. During World War II, he specialized in the functional applications of color, focusing on its use in factories and war industries. He also developed color safety standards which were internationally adopted.

After the war, Birren continued his color consulting, and began lecturing at museums, universities and other institutions. He was a prolific author. By the end of his life, Birren had authored and published 254

articles and forty books on color; he had also published three novels under the pseudonyms Gregor and Martin Lang.

In 1971, Birren offered part of his personal collection of books on color to Yale University. Along with his donation to the university of over two hundred rare books, he also established an endowment and a research and publication fund for the development of a collection of books on color. The Birren Collection is the most comprehensive collection of books on color in the world.

In the same spirit of patronage, Birren endowed the Faber Birren Color Award Show in 1981, through the Stamford Connecticut Art Association. Birren created this competition in the hope of sparking interest in the field of color. The annual award is given for "distinguished and creative expression with color... in any medium."

In 1934, Birren married Wanda Martin (May 10, 1908 - Dec. 31, 1997), who was supportive of her husband's endeavors. They had two daughters, Zoe (b. Sept. 22, 1935) and Fay (b. May 1, 1939), and four grandchildren. Faber Birren died at age eighty-eight on December 30, 1988, after suffering a stroke.

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## Scope and Contents

The Faber Birren Papers document the endowment and development of the Birren Collection at Yale University. Additionally, there is documentation on the research projects in which Birren engaged during the last twenty years of his life. There is little written documentation on his career as an industrial color expert.

The Faber Birren Papers are one of several resources to be found at Yale University on Faber Birren. Researchers should also consult the [Arts Library Special Collections](#). A significant portion of the Birren Collection is available on microform, which can be purchased through Primary Source Media, Hamden, Connecticut, via URL: <http://www.psmmedia.com>.

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## Arrangement

Organized into four series and two additions: I. Personal, 1956-1992. II. Correspondence, 1963-1998. III. Writings, 1946-1988. IV. Visual Materials, 1942-1997.

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## Collection Contents

### Series I: Personal, 1956-1992

The Personal Series is arranged alphabetically, and is most useful in obtaining biographic and bibliographic information on Birren and on the Birren Collection. It also includes lists of published articles and books by Birren.

	Awards	
b. 1, f. 1	Contemporary	1973-1979
b. 1, f. 2	Posthumous	1992
	Bibliographies [includes autobiographical notes]	
b. 1, f. 3 - 4	1971-1989	
b. 1, f. 5 - 6	undated	
b. 1, f. 7	Biographies	1956-1988
b. 1, f. 8	Memorial service	1989
b. 1, f. 9	Obituaries	1989

## Series II: Correspondence, 1963-1998

The Correspondence Series contains several hundred letters, arranged alphabetically by subject of correspondence. The majority of the series documents the establishment of the Birren Collection at Yale University. There is correspondence between Birren and staff at the Yale University Art & Architecture Library about additions to the collection and research purposes to which it might be put.

The remainder of the series documents his research (often intense and dogged) on subjects about which he wanted to write books. There is, for example, his decade-long correspondence with museum curators and librarians concerning his project, "The Artist and His Palette." As with several other projects, it is unclear whether this particular project culminated in publication.

b. 2, f. 1	Allied Chemical Corporation	1966
b. 2, f. 2 - 12	"Artist and His Palette, The"	1964-1974 undated
b. 2, f. 13	<i>Color and Human Response</i>	1977
b. 2, f. 14	Color Harmony	1984
b. 2, f. 15	<i>Color Identification and Nomenclature</i>	1979
b. 2, f. 16	<i>Color Perception in Art</i>	1974-1976
b. 2, f. 17	Color Vision in Art	1963
b. 2, f. 18	<i>Coloritto</i> , by J. C. Le Blon	1979-1981
Faber Birren Collection of Books on Color		
b. 2, f. 19 - 28	1971-1980	
b. 3, f. 29 - 37	1981-1988, undated	
	1989-1998	
	The materials are open for research.	
b. 3, f. 38	<i>Grammar of Color</i>	1968
b. 3, f. 39	<i>History of Color in Painting</i>	1963-1979
b. 3, f. 40 - 42	<i>Modern Chromatics</i> [by Ogden N. Rood]	1972-1974
b. 3, f. 43	<i>Natural Systems of Colour</i> [by Moses Harris]	1985
b. 3, f. 44	<i>Photo-archive of Color Palettes</i>	1979-1981
b. 3, f. 45	<i>Treatise on Painting</i> [by Leonardo da Vinci]	1987

**Series III: Writings, 1946-1988**

The Writings Series is arranged in two sections: articles and books. The articles are published and are arranged alphabetically by title. They are the primary source of information in the collection on Birren's theories on colors and their functional use, particularly as they evolved in his early career. The books section is arranged alphabetically by title, the same order in which Birren maintained the files. It is comprised of notes by the author, manuscripts, correspondence regarding reproduction rights, and photographs. As noted previously, the publication status of several of the projects is uncertain. The manuscripts, therefore, may be quite valuable in documenting his scholarship. The majority of the book section consists of the artists' files, including primarily black and white photographs of artists' works, and a typed manuscript for the unpublished work, "Color Harmony."

	Articles	
b. 4, f. 1	A-D	1946-1983
b. 4, f. 2	E-Z	1947-1988
	Books	
	"Artist and his Palette, The"	
b. 4, f. 3	Notes	undated
b. 4, f. 4	Reproduction rights	1965-1972
	"Color Harmony"	
	Artists' files [black and white photographs, articles]	
b. 4, f. 5 - 39	A-S	undated
b. 5, f. 40 - 48	T-Z	undated
b. 5, f. 49	Manuscript [typed]	undated
b. 5, f. 50	Notes	undated
b. 5, f. 51	Reproduction rights	1984
b. 5, f. 52	Color Vision in Art [reproduction rights]	1963
b. 5, f. 53	Harris, Moses [notes]	1956-1966
	<i>Modern Chromatics</i> [by Ogden N. Rood]	
b. 6, f. 54 - 61	Chapters [black and white photographs]	undated
b. 6, f. 62	Notes	undated
b. 6, f. 63	Reproduction rights	1972-1973
b. 6, f. 64	<i>Photo-archive of Color Palettes</i> [reproduction rights]	1973-1974
b. 6, f. 65	<i>Textile Colorist, The</i> [hand-written manuscript]	undated
	<i>Treatise on Painting</i> [by Leonardo da Vinci]	
b. 6, f. 66 - 75	Chapters [black and white photographs, drafts]	undated



## Books &gt; Treatise on Painting [by Leonardo da Vinci] (continued)

b. 6, f. 76	Manuscript [typed]	1988
b. 6, f. 77	Miscellaneous file	undated
b. 6, f. 78	Rigaud file	undated

## Series IV: Visual Materials, 1942-1997

The Visual Materials Series is arranged alphabetically by medium. It primarily contains pamphlets, photographs and posters. Photographs comprise the bulk of the series, the majority of which are black and white images. Photographs of Birren's color studies and other artwork, an exhibition, and his *Photo-archive of Color Palettes*, are all in black and white, rather than in color. The color photographs include exteriors of industrial buildings and factories, and images of machinery, to which Birren applied his "color programs," and snapshots from lecture tours and a birthday party.

b. 7, f. 1	Collected material [articles, pamphlets, posters]	1942-1988
	Pamphlets	
b. 8, f. 2	Books	1942-1985
	Exhibitions	
b. 8, f. 3	Contemporary	1948-1982
b. 8, f. 4	Retrospective	1989
b. 8, f. 5 - 6	Faber Birren Color Award Show	1981-1997
b. 8, f. 7	Lectures	1971-1985
b. 8, f. 8	Products	1942-1960
	Photographs	
b. 8, f. 9	Birren, Faber [black and white portraits]	1954-1974
b. 8, f. 10 - 11	Art [works of art by Birren; black and white photographs]	1948-1977
b. 9, f. 12	Birthday party	1980
b. 10, f. 13	Book jackets	1961-1976
b. 10, f. 14	Exhibition [East Hampton Gallery, New York]	1967
b. 10, f. 15 - 16	Industrial sites [color photographs]	1984
b. 10, f. 17	Lecture tours	1975-1978
b. 10, f. 18	Miscellaneous	undated
b. 10, f. 19	<i>Pastels à la gerbe</i> [book by Roché; color photographs of miscellaneous pages; undated slides]	
b. 10, f. 20	<i>Photo-archive of Color Palettes</i> [includes black and white photographs of artists' palettes, and collected materials]	undated
b. 10, f. 21	Stamford Art Association [Salute to Faber Birren...]	1979
	Posters, publicity	
b. 11, f. 22	Retrospective	1989
b. 11, f. 23	Faber Birren Color Award Show	1981-1992

## Restricted [Open 2018 Jan 1]

b. 12, f. 1	Correspondence relating to Faber Birren Collection of Books on Color Box 12 is closed until January 1, 2018, unless curatorial permission is granted.	1989-1998
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**Accession 2005--003: Additional Material, 1950-1994**

Correspondence is arranged alphabetically by subject of the correspondence. Folders may contain correspondence with several people on the same topic, as well as related printed material by the correspondent or others.

Correspondence		
b. 13, f. 1	Baker-Miller Pink	1979-1984
b. 13, f. 2 - 6	Mahnke, Frank and Rudolf	1983-1988
b. 13, f. 7	<i>Treatise on Painting</i> , by Leonardo daVinci, proposed new edition by Birren	1987-1988
Topical Files		
b. 13, f. 8	Aid for Retarded facility, Stamford, Connecticut	circa 1975
b. 13, f. 9	Chevreur, Michel-Eugène, statue of	undated
b. 13, f. 10	Faber Birren Color Award Show	1994
Florida Tile design program		
b. 13, f. 11 - 13	Color recommendations by Birren	1986-1988
b. 13, f. 14 - 15	Advertising brochures not by Birren	1980s
b. 13, f. 16	<i>House and Garden</i>	1987
b. 13, f. 17	Notes on aspects of color	1950-1970
b. 13, f. 18 - 20	Publications and articles re: experiments in art and technology; effects of color on health and human behavior, etc.	1960s-1980s undated
Writings		
<i>Treatise on Painting</i> , by Leonardo da Vinci, new edition by Birren		
b. 13, f. 21 - 22	Handwritten chapters with annotations	circa 1980s
b. 13, f. 23	Photographs, black/white glossies	circa 1980s
b. 13, f. 24	Photographs of Faber Birren	1965 1977 1979-1980 1982
Audiovisual		
b. 13, f. 25	Faber Birren on WOR Radio <i>audiocassette</i>	1982 Dec 16
Oversize		
b. 14	Scrapbook of printed material by and about Birren	1973-1982

## **Accession 2014: Additional Material, [1983?]**

This series contains a videocassette that was transferred to the Faber Birren Papers on 2014-12-04.

b. 13, f. 26      Faber Birren [videorecording].      [1983?]  
*1 Videocassette*  
This item is also individually cataloged in [Orbis](#).

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## **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**

Color  
Colors -- Analysis  
Color -- Study and teaching  
Palettes in art

### **Names**

Birren, Faber, 1900-1988

### **Corporate Body**

Faber Birren Collection (Yale University)