

Guide to the

Berenice Abbott papers

1927-1992 [bulk 1960-1992] MssCol 17972

Compiled by Lea Jordan, December 2008. Additional materials were integrated into the collection by Robyn Hjermstad, July 2015.

Summary

Creator: Abbott, Berenice, 1898-1991

Title: Berenice Abbott papers

Date: 1927-1992 [bulk 1960-1992]

Size: 5.3 linear feet (13 boxes)

Source: Transfer from the Photography Collection, 2008

Abstract: Berenice Abbott (1898-1991) was an American photographer best known for her black and white photography of New York City's architecture. This collection consists primarily business and personal letters she received, 1928-1992. Other materials include notebooks, diaries, photographs, and personal and family materials. It is not, however, a major source for Abbott's photography.

Preferred citation: Berenice Abbott papers, Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library.

Processing note: Compiled by Lea Jordan, December 2008. Additional materials were integrated into the collection by Robyn Hjermstad, July 2015.

Related Materials:

Berenice Abbott's Changing New York. Museum of the City of New York (http://www.mcny.org/collections/abbott/abbott.htm).

Changing New York: Photographs by Berenice Abbott, 1935-1938. Miriam & Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs (Holds a significant collection of Berenice Abbott photographs).

Creator History

Berenice Abbott (1898-1991) was an American photographer best known for her black and white photography of New York City's architecture. Abbott was born July 17th, 1898 in Springfield, Ohio. She attended Ohio State University for one year with the goal of becoming a journalist, but abandoned that course to move to New York City in 1918. While there, she became interested in sculpture. In 1921 she

sailed for France and spent several years living abroad. During this time Abbott was hired by Man Ray to work as his darkroom assistant. During her years in Paris she began to practice her own photography and became acquainted with Eugene Atget. After his death she purchased all of his work and returned to New York.

In 1935 Abbott was hired by the Federal Art Project which allowed her to complete her "Changing New York" project. At the end of this arrangement in 1939, over 300 detailed photographs of the city were donated by Abbott to the Museum of the City of New York. 1935 was also the year that Abbott moved in with Elisabeth McCausland, noted art critic. Abbott would remain partners with McCausland until the latter's death in 1965.

Abbott's interests within the world of photography were varied. She began by focusing on urban architecture. In the 1940 she developed an interest in scientific photography, working for a time as photo editor of Science Illustrated. Not only was Abbott a talented photographer, but she invented many techniques and designed new equipment for other photographers. In 1947 she opened her House of Photography which sold her inventions, including the distortion easel and the autopole.

In 1954 Abbott traveled US 1 from Maine to Florida on a photographic expedition, accompanied by McCausland. This expedition resulted in more than 2000 negatives, ranging from antebellum architecture to the new roadside architecture. Shortly after she completed the trip, Abbott underwent a lung operation and was told she needed to leave New York City to avoid air pollution. She relocated to Blanchard, Maine where she purchased a house on the Piscataguis River.

Abbot's last publication was "A Portrait of Maine" in 1968, though she continued to take photographs and enjoyed an active social life until her death in 1991.

Custodial History

Donated by Susan B. Blatchford, 1996

Scope and Content Note

The Berenice Abbott papers contain correspondence, writings, photographs, and personal materials relating to the life and career of the noted photographer. The bulk of the collection consists of personal and business letters that Abbott received. The correspondents include notable artists, writers, and public figures, art galleries, universities, photographic magazines, scientific journals, and publishers. The subjects of the correspondence range from requests for copies of photographs, business propositions, plans for exhibits, requests for interviews, and other subjects relating to Abbott's work as well as notes from friends and family. Notable correspondents include Djuna Barnes, Kay Boyle, Cornell Capa, Lisette Model, Marianne Moore, and Jacqueline Onassis. The correspondence contains few replies from Abbott. The bulk of the correspondence dates from the late 1950's to 1991, though the 1920's are represented in her correspondence with André Calmette, Pierre MacOrlan, Evelyn Scott, Jules Romains and Lucia Joyce.

The personal miscellany series contains a family history, interviews, passports and copies of Abbott's will, among other items. Of interest in this series is a list of prominent individuals who were invited to Abbott's memorial service, and an interview conducted by the WPA in 1939, which provides insight into Abbott's work style and her personality. The family history folder includes inquiries after birth certificates, and notes and letters that Abbott collected in the 1980's.

Abbott's writings contain not only personal biographical statements that Abbott used for brochures and gallery programs, but diaries and notebooks that Abbott kept for her own personal use. The entries in the diaries are sporadic, but do contain details about Abbott's daily life. The notebooks are more varied, some containing notes on science and the economy, others ideas for photography subjects and means by which she could improve her equipment.

The photographs series contains photographs and snapshots taken by Abbott herself later in life, as well as photographs of Abbott with her family and friends, and documentation of the layout and exhibit spaces for several of Abbott's photography exhibitions. Abbott collected copies of photographs of Greenwich Village, the Erie Canal, and an entire set of reproductions of works by Chansonetta Emmons. These images are all reproductions of photographs made in the early part of the 20th century.

Key Terms

Subjects

Architectural photography
Photography -- Scientific applications
Photography, Artistic
Women photographers -- United States

Genre/Physical Characteristic

Diaries Photographs

Occupations

Photographers

Names

Barnes, Djuna
Boyle, Kay, 1902-1992
Capa, Cornell
McCausland, Elizabeth, 1899-1965
Model, Lisette, 1901-1983
Moore, Marianne, 1887-1972
Onassis, Jacqueline Kennedy, 1929-1994

Container List

	Series I. Correspondence 1928-1992 (6 boxes)
b. 1 f. 1	Abbott, Berenice, undated
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b. 1 f. 3	Abramson, Michael 1976
b. 1 f. 4	Adams, Barbara 1979 Ethel Adams' daughter
b. 1 f. 5	Adams, Harriet Dyer 1978
b. 1 f. 6	Adams, William Howard 1970
b. 1 f. 7	Agger, Lee 1982
b. 1 f. 8	Akron Art Institute 1950
b. 1 f. 9	Album 1970
b. 1 f. 10	Allan Frumkin Gallery 1976
b. 1 f. 11	Allentuck, Nina 1981
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b. 1 f. 14	American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters 1983
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b. 1 f. 19	Anzai, Shegio 1979
b. 1 f. 20	Aperion Workshops 1980
b. 1 f. 21	Aperture Magazine 1958-1981
b. 1 f. 22	Archetype 1973-1974
b. 1 f. 23	Architectural Digest 1983
b. 1 f. 24	Architectural League 1954
b. 1 f. 25	Archives of American Art 1959-1992
b. 1 f. 26	Arete Publishing 1981
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b. 1 f. 28	Art Institute of Chicago 1985
b. 1 f. 29	Art News 1983
b. 1 f. 30	Les Artes dans la Ville 1978
b. 1 f. 31	Artists and Writers Press 1959 From Peter Gallagher
b. 1 f. 32	Aspen Institute 1951
b. 1 f. 33	Association Française 1985
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b. 1 f. 35	Association du Salon National de la Photographie 1960
b. 1 f. 36	Atkins Museum of Fine Arts 1982

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- b. 1 f. 39 Baevsky, Sonya 1981
- b. 1 f. 40 Baez, Albert V 1958-1959
- b. 1 f. 41 Baker, Jean-Claude 1985
- b. 1 f. 42 Baldwin, Neil 1983
- b. 1 f. 43 Baltimore Museum of Art 1986
- b. 1 f. 44 Bard College 1981
- b. 1 f. 45 Barnes, Djuna 1967, 1977
- b. 1 f. 46 Barrett, Robert, undated
- b. 1 f. 47 Bates College 1975-1977
- b. 1 f. 48 Beam, Lura 1970
- b. 1 f. 49 Bettmann Archive 1960
- b. 1 f. 50 Bennett, Edna 1977-1983
- b. 1 f. 51 Benison, Diane 1982
- b. 1 f. 52 Berg, Gretchen 1978, 1982
- b. 1 f. 53 Berman, Avis 1982
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- b. 1 f. 55 Bernikow, Louise 1979
- b. 1 f. 56 Bigham, James 1983
- b. 1 f. 57 Biren, Joan 1982
- b. 1 f. 58 Blackwood Productions 1981
- b. 1 f. 59 Blanchette, Gary 1985
- b. 1 f. 60 Bletter, Diana 1983
- b. 1 f. 61 Blue Moon Gallery 1976
- b. 1 f. 62 Blum, Joseph 1983
- b. 1 f. 63 Boeckmann, Mary, undated
- b. 1 f. 64 Boisgelin, Isabelle de, undated
- b. 1 f. 65 Bourke-White, Margaret 1971
- b. 1 f. 66 Bowdoin College 1982-1983
- b. 1 f. 67 Bowers, Jane 1978
- b. 1 f. 68 Boyle, Kay 1979, 1983
- b. 2 f. 1 Braziller, Karen [{1985} 1985
- b. 2 f. 2 Brecht, Stefan, undated
- b. 2 f. 3 British Broadcasting Corporation 1982
- b. 2 f. 4 Broadman, Beatrice, undated
- b. 2 f. 5 Brooke, Kaucyila 1985
- b. 2 f. 6 Brooklyn Bridge Film Project 1979
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- b. 2 f. 8 Burke, Carolyn 1979
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b. 8 f. 52	World Publishing Company 1964-1974
b. 8 f. 53	Wunderlich, Gabrielle 1981
b. 8 f. 54	Wyhes, Sara 1978
b. 8 f. 55	Yale University 1977
b. 8 f. 56	Yarlow/Salzman Gallery 1979
b. 8 f. 57	Zabriskie Gallery 1971-1977
	Series II. Personal Miscellany 1927-1992 (1 box)
b. 9 f. 1	Aperture materials 1988-1989
b. 9 f. 2	Berenice Abbott memorial list 1992
b. 9 f. 3	Changing New York 1938 Report on expenses
b. 9 f. 4	Gallery brochures 1970-1978
b. 9 f. 5	Family history research 1982
b. 9 f. 6	Framed photographer poem, undated
b. 9 f. 7	Interview with WPA 1939
b. 9 f. 8	Passports 1927-1938
b. 9 f. 9	Poem 1985 Dedicated to Berenice, author unknown
b. 9 f. 10	Will 1962, 1965, 1984
b. 13 f. 1	Address Book and Autodex

	Sorios III. Writings 1020 1020 (2 house)
b. 9 f. 12	Series III. Writings 1929-1980 (2 boxes)
D. J 1. 12	Biographies for program use 1970-1980 Diaries
	Very few entries included
b. 9 f. 13	1946
b. 9 f. 14	1947
b. 9 f. 15	1989
	Notes
b. 10 f. 1	Economic notes, undated
b. 10 f. 2	Equipment improvement ideas, undated
b. 10 f. 3	General notes, undated
b. 10 f. 4	Lecture notes, undated
b. 10 f. 5	List of potential subjects, undated
b. 10 f. 6	Photography and Science 1929
b. 10 f. 7	Scientific notes, undated
b. 10 f. 8	Undeveloped patent ideas 1953
	Series IV. Photographs 1930-1991 (2 boxes)
	Berenice Abbot, as subject
b. 11 f. 1	Portraits 1930-1980
b. 11 f. 2	Snapshots 1940-1991
b. 11 f. 3	Family and friends 1930-1991
	Berenice Abbott, as photographer
b. 11 f. 4	General 1930-1980
b. 11 f. 5	Butch, undated Framed photograph of Abbott's cat
b. 12 f. 1	Emmons, Chansonetta, 1900-1910 Reproductions
	Exhibits
	See also Springfield Art Center, Box 7
b. 12 f. 2	Addison Gallery of American Art, undated
b. 12 f. 3	New York Public Library 1980
b. 12 f. 4	Scuola Grande San Giovanni Evangelista 1986
b. 12 f. 5	Erie Canal Sesquicentennial, undated Copies of historical photographs
b. 12 f. 6	Greenwich Village 1920s Copies of historical photographs
b. 12 f. 7	International Center for Photography reception 1981 Includes photographs of Berenice Abbott, Cornell Capa, and others, by John Abrams
b. 12 f. 8	McCausland, Elizabeth, 1900-1920 Copies of original photographs
b. 12 f. 9	Man Ray photographs, undated Copies of original photographs of Berenice Abbott and Bronja Perlmutter
b. 12 f. 10	Monson House 1991 Pictures of Abbott's Maine residence

Series IV. Photographs (cont.)

b. 12 f. 11 O'Neal, Hank 1980s

Photographs of Berenice Abbott with Lisette Model, Jacqueline Onassis, and others.