



The New York Public Library
Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture,
Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division

Guide to the

Morgan and Marvin Smith papers

1931-1999

SC MG 757

Processed by Janice Quinter, November 2005.

Summary

Creator: Morgan and Marvin Smith (Photographers)

Title: Morgan and Marvin Smith papers

Date: 1931-1999

Size: 1.75 linear feet (5 boxes)

Source: Gift of Monica P. Smith, August 2004 and November 2005.

Abstract: The Morgan and Marvin Smith papers document the careers of the Smith brothers as professional photographers, in the television and sound industry, and as needlework artists.

Preferred citation: [Item], Morgan and Marvin Smith papers, SC MG 757, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Manuscripts, Archives and Rare Books Division, The New York Public Library

Language of the Material: English

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Creator History

Morgan and Marvin Smith, identical twins, were born in 1910 in Nicholasville, Kentucky. Developing an early interest in art and photography, they graduated from Paul Laurence Dunbar High School in Lexington in 1931. They moved to Harlem in 1933, studying art with Augusta Savage. In 1937, Morgan won honorable mention in the *New York Herald Tribune's* national photography contest, which led to his being hired as the first staff photographer for the *New York Amsterdam News*, a position he held until 1939. That same year, the brothers opened a photo studio, which they called M. Smith Studio, next door to Harlem's renowned Apollo Theater on 125th Street. The twins photographed such legendary figures as Billie Holliday, Duke Ellington, Eartha Kitt, Pablo Picasso, and Albert Einstein. They took photographs for African American magazines such as *Color*, *Ebony*, and *Opportunity*, as well as *Life*; a number of their photographs appeared on the covers. They also took photographs for advertisements printed in magazines and newspapers.

In 1942, Marvin enlisted in the Navy with the 34th Seabees; the following year, he became the first African American to be admitted to the Naval Air Station School of Photography and Motion Picture Camera in Pensacola, Florida. He served as Chief Photographer's Mate in the South Pacific. Between 1950-1952, Marvin studied art in Paris with Ferdinand Leger. While Marvin was in the Navy, Morgan set up a photography studio in New York and experimented with sound recordings. By 1954, both brothers were working in the television and film industry, Morgan working for ABC and Marvin for NBC. Additionally, Morgan served as the sound mixer for the television series *The Truman Story* (1963), and Marvin worked on the set of the movie *Purlie Victorious* (1961). They closed the studio in 1968, retired from their television positions in 1974, and in their seventies, resumed an interest in needlework crafts. Several major exhibitions have featured the photographs of Morgan and Marvin Smith, and they have been the focus of a book and a film. Morgan died at age 83 in 1993, and Marvin passed away in 2003.

Scope and Content Note

The Morgan and Marvin Smith papers document the careers of the Smith brothers as professional photographers, in the television and sound industry, and as needlework artists. Marvin's career as a set decorator and his artwork are also discussed. Only a small amount of correspondence is contained in this collection. As major photographers in Harlem from the 1930s through the 1950s whose work appeared on covers and within magazines, as well as in print ads, a significant portion of the collection consists of their published photographs.

Arrangement: Arranged into 4 series: I. Morgan and Marvin Smith; II. Morgan Smith; III. Marvin Smith; and IV. Published photographs.

Key Terms

Subjects

African American artisans
African American artists
African American photographers
African American portrait photographers
African Americans in television broadcasting
African Americans in the newspaper industry

Names

Smith, Marvin, 1910-2003
Smith, Morgan, 1910-1993
M. Smith Studio (Harlem, New York, N.Y.)
Morgan and Marvin Smith (Photographers)

Container List

Morgan and Marvin Smith 1933-1999

The first series consists of biographical information about the two brothers as well as their joint career. An interview conducted with them by the International Black Photographers in 1982 is included, along with news clippings and printed articles. There is also a scrapbook of news clippings containing many of the photographs they took for the *New York Amsterdam News* and the *Pittsburgh Courier*, some articles about them, and Kentucky newspapers in which the brothers were featured or articles which interested them (1933-1948). One folder of printed material concerns their photography studio in Harlem. Their television and sound careers are represented by lists of equipment used in their work in the United States and Spain, instructions from the networks, and newsletters of the Motion Picture Studio Local 52, in which the twins were featured. Morgan's early interest in sound is demonstrated by correspondence regarding the purchase of sound equipment for the installation of a studio in their photograph studio, 1957-1959. His sound work for a television series about President Harry S. Truman (1963) is represented by the script with technical instructions. The collection includes information regarding Morgan's coverage of the 1972 Democratic and Republican National Conventions as well as many television specials.

Exhibitions of the Smith brothers' photographs at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, the University of Kentucky Art Museum, and the Smithsonian Institution are documented by planning material, exhibition catalogs, and news clippings (1988-1996). The 1995 film *M and M Smith: For Posterity's Sake* by Heather Lyons and Nikky Finney, and the book *Visual Journey: Harlem and D.C. in the Thirties and Forties*, 1996, edited by Deborah Willis and Jane Lusaka, are documented in this series. Also included is printed material collected by the twins about their friend, Romare Bearden, with whom they shared studio space, as well as on other performers, writers, and individuals. The Smiths' involvement in needlework is demonstrated by articles (with accompanying correspondence) showing the patterns they created and sold to such magazines as *McCall's Needlework and Crafts* and *Good Housekeeping Needlework*, 1972-1988.

Biographical Information

- b. 1 f. 1 Interview and Time Line 1982
- b. 1 f. 2-5 News Clippings
- b. 1 f. 6-7 Printed Articles 1939-1993
- b. 1 f. 8 Correspondence 1939-1992
- b. 1 f. 9 Invitations 1953-1992
- b. 5 Scrapbook 1933-1948
Box 5 replaces box 1, folder 10.
- b. 1 f. 11 Printed Materials - Mentions 1944-1997
- b. 1 f. 12 M. Smith Studio - Printed Material and Slides Catalog 1941-1952
- b. 1 f. 13 Carstairs and Savarin Advertisements 1950

Television and Sound Careers

- b. 1 f. 14-17 1953-1989
- b. 1 f. 18 *The Truman Story* 1963

Exhibits

- b. 1 f. 19 1982-1994
- b. 1 f. 20-21 1989-1999
- b. 1 f. 22 Exhibition Catalogs 1988-1996
- b. 1 f. 23 *M & M Smith: For Posterity's Sake (film)* 1992-1998
- b. 1 f. 24 *Visual Journey: Harlem and D.C. in the Thirties and Forties* 1996-1999
Includes printed matter and correspondence.

Printed matter on friends

- b. 1 f. 25 Romare Bearden

Morgan and Marvin Smith (cont.)
Printed matter on friends (cont.)

b. 1 f. 26-27 **Others**

b. 2 f. 1-5 **Needlework**

Morgan Smith 1931-1993

The Morgan Smith series includes biographical information; programs for performances of his wife, coloratura soprano Monica Mais; a small amount of correspondence regarding publication of photographs and photographing specific individuals; printed material; and obituaries. Of interest are drafts of articles that Morgan wrote about photography, as well as a newspaper column entitled "From Harlem to Broadway", which appeared in *The Entertainer*, 1945-1946.

b. 2 f. 6 **Biographical Information - News Clippings**

b. 2 f. 7 **Personal Papers 1931-1986**

b. 2 f. 8 **Certificates 1931-1977**
b. 5

Correspondence

b. 2 f. 9 **1938-1949**

b. 2 f. 10 **1954-1991**

b. 2 f. 11 **Purchase of Sound Equipment 1957-1959**

Writing

b. 2 f. 12 **"From Harlem to Broadway" 1945-1946**

b. 2 f. 13 **Other**

b. 2 f. 14 **Institute of Cosmology 1949**

b. 2 f. 15 **Printed Material**

b. 3 f. 1 **Television and Sound Career - ABC Television 1970-1972**

b. 3 f. 2 **Obituaries 1993**

b. 3 f. 3 **Monica Mais 1950s**

Marvin Smith 1931-1998

This series includes biographical information, some correspondence, his sketchbook, printed material in which his artwork is mentioned, material related to his role as a photographer with the U.S. Navy Seabees in the South Pacific during World War II, and material on his career as a set decorator in television and film.

b. 3 f. 4 **Biographical Information - News Clippings 1950-1973**

b. 3 f. 5 **Certificates 1931-1998**
b. 5

b. 3 f. 6 **Correspondence 1939-1998**

b. 3 f. 7 **Identification Cards**

b. 3 f. 8 **Sketchbook**

b. 3 f. 9 **Printed Material - Art Work Mentioned 1934-1940s**

b. 3 f. 10 **World War II 1940-1959**

b. 3 f. 11 **Set Decorator 1958-1973**

b. 3 f. 12 **Printed Material - Mentions**

b. 3 f. 13 ***Purlie Victorious - Screenplay and Playbill* 1961**

b. 4-5 **Published photographs ca. 1930-1959**

The publications in which their photographs can be seen in this collection include *Color*, *Ebony*, *Flash*, *Newspic*, *Opportunity*, *Sepia*, the Harlem School of Nursing 1948 *Profectus*, and booklets for the Welfare Council of New York City.