

Art Gallery of Ontario

Finding Aid - Kathleen Munn fonds (SC105)

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Language of description: English

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Kathleen Munn fonds

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Summary information

Repository: Art Gallery of Ontario

Title: Kathleen Munn fonds

ID: SC105

Date: 1912-[193-] (date of creation)

Physical description: 17 cm of textual records 2227 drawings and prints 8 photographs

Administrative history / Biographical sketch

Note

Kathleen Jean Munn (1887-1974) was a modernist Canadian painter active in Toronto between the World Wars. She was the youngest of six children born to a Toronto jeweler who died when she was four (of an infection caused by the impact from a champagne cork) leaving her mother to manage the family business. Her talent for drawing was encouraged by her maternal grandmother, an accomplished amateur painter, and she was sent to study at the Westbourne School with F. McGillivray Knowles from 1904 to 1907. Knowles encouraged personal expression and an understanding of the principles of art and Munn thrived in this environment. In 1909 she began to exhibit Barbizon inspired landscapes at the OSA, RCA and CNE exhibitions, moving through periods influenced by Whistler, Corot, Puvis de Chavannes and the post-impressionists. About 1912 Munn first traveled to New York to study at the Art Student's League and in 1914 she was awarded first prize at the Summer School in Woodstock NY. In 1915-16 she began a series of landscapes in which she showed a mastery of modernist techniques. Her association with the Art Student's League, whose teachers were early proponents of modernism, was an important influence. Her notebooks show that she was reading extensively and broadly in the areas of literature, philosophy and aesthetics. She studied Jay Hambridge's mathematical principles, the concept of 'dynamic symmetry' and Denman Ross's colour theory. She seems to have been drawn to writers who proposed an underlying system of order and logic as a basis for individual expression. She also toured Britain and the major art centres of continental Europe in 1920, accompanied by her sister, and this trip seems to have encouraged her quest for a means to express religious and spiritual themes in a contemporary fashion. She was ultimately uncomfortable with complete abstraction and believed that art should express a larger purpose, influenced by readings of Blavatsky, Blake, Whitman, and others. The Group of Seven shared her interest in the spiritual content of painting but she was intolerant of their nationalism; of her contemporaries she formed the closest bonds with Bertram Brooker and Lemoine Fitzgerald. Her studio, in a large room overlooking the ravine at the family home at 320 Spadina Avenue, was visited often by Brooker. The household consisted of three unmarried siblings: Will (Jr.), who ran the family business, May, a teacher who ran the household, and Kathleen. During the 1920's she began to work on a series of paintings that explored Christian themes and she devoted the 1930's to the subject of the Passion. Two major drawings from this series were purchased by the Art Gallery of Ontario in 1945. She exhibited a number of these drawings with Fitzgerald and Brooker at the Malloney Galleries in Toronto in 1935 but there as little critical response. Discouragement at her lack of critical success, combined with the death of

her brother in 1935 and her sister's increasing disability, led to the end of her artistic output around 1939. Most of her work remained in family hands. The Art Gallery of Toronto exhibited her Passion drawings in several group shows in the 1940's and the Willistead Art Gallery in Windsor included her Ascension in a 1954 show of drawings. She died twenty years later, in October 1974.

Custodial history

Material in this fonds was inherited by the artist's niece, Kathleen Richards, who bequeathed it to her own niece Lenore Richards. Some sketches and items of correspondence have been dispersed to family members over the years; sketches and drawings have been sold by D. & E. Lake Ltd. – Fine Art, Toronto.

Scope and content

Fonds consists of nine notebooks kept by Kathleen Munn as a student at the Art Student's League in New York City and at the Summer program in Woodstock, NY. The books contain a meticulous record of her exposure to ideas about artistic theory, philosophy and art history. Undated drawings, prints and unbound notes are also included, and a group of 'arts-and-crafts' inspired decorative designs. The fonds contains more than 1800 pencil drawings executed as studies for her mature work on the subject of the Christian Passion. Photographs of eight of these completed drawings are included. Fonds is comprised of the following series: 1. Notebooks 2. Life drawings and studies 3. Studies for 'The Passion'

Notes

Title notes

Immediate source of acquisition

Donated to the E.P. Taylor Research Library, Art Gallery of Ontario, in 2005 by Lenore Richards.

Restrictions on access

Open. Access to Special Collections is by appointment only. Please contact the reference desk for more information.

Conditions governing use

Copyright is held by the creator's heirs. It is the researcher's responsibility to obtain permission to publish any part of the fonds.

Finding aids

A finding aid is available for this fonds.

Related material

Art books from the library of Kathleen Munn were donated to the AGO Library in 1976. A list of these titles has been maintained.

Accruals

No further accruals are expected.

Other notes

- **Publication status:** published

Collection holdings

Series: SC105-01 - Notebooks

Title: Notebooks

ID: SC105-01

Date: 1912 -1926 (date of creation)

Scope and content:

Notebooks document Munn's student life in New York City and at the Art Students League Summer School in Woodstock. She recorded her lecture notes, essays containing reviews and summaries of books read, notations regarding books of interest, sketches, anatomical drawings, copies of historical works of art, poems, and occasionally ephemera. Under the tutelage of her teachers at the Art Students League – Andrew Dasburg, Max Weber, A.S. Baylinson, Stanton Macdonald-Wright and Henry L. McFee, she embraced modernism and gained exposure to literary, artistic and musical influences of her day. The notebooks show her to be an avid reader with a keen interest in the intellectual life of her time and in the artistic expression of other cultures and epochs. There is a particular delight in pattern and an underlying search for explanation and order. On the front pastedown of Notebook No. 8 she wrote, "Perfect beauty is the expression of perfect order, balance, harmony, rhythm. Beauty is a supreme instance of order intuitively felt, instinctively appreciated". The notebooks are undated, with the exception of No. 5.

Physical description: 9 notebooks

Language of the material:

English

Latin

Arrangement:

Eight sketchbooks were numbered by Joyce Zemans during research for her 1988 catalogue, 'Kathleen Munn and Edna Tacon, new perspectives on modernism in Canada.' Her numbering system has been maintained and one additional notebook has been designated Notebook No. 9.

Restrictions on access:

Due to their fragility, notebooks may not be photocopied.

Publication status:

published

Series: SC105-02 - Life Drawings and Studies

Title: Life Drawings and Studies

ID: SC105-02

Date: 1912 - [192-] (date of creation)

Scope and content:

Series consists of undated drawings that appear to be contemporary with the notebooks in Series 1 and are consistent with the usual output of an art student. Figure studies predominate, probably originating in life drawing classes with a few drawings of specific individuals and places. A number of published plates of models and statuary are included. Four experiments with print-making are also included in this series, possibly dating from 1930 when Munn attended printmaking classes at the Art Students' League. A file of decorative patterns and one cut stencil are also included in this series. One pattern contains a draft letter to the artist's mother on the verso, remarking on a proposed visit to Elbert Hubbard's Roycroft studio in East Aurora, NY (Hubbard died in 1915). A money-making scheme is mentioned in the letter, perhaps revolving around the production of these stencils. Photocopies of letters written to Kathleen Munn around this time are included (originals remain in the family). Series also contains a hand-lettered sign for a sale at Munn's Jewelry store, undated and unsigned.

Physical description: 378 sheets of drawings

1 cm of textual records

1 stencil

4 prints

Language of the material:

English

Latin

Physical condition:

Pages has often been drawn on both sides.

Arrangement:

Boxes 2, 3 and 4 are oversize and measurements are given for the range of page sizes. Drawings in Box 5 fit within a standard legal file folder.

Publication status:

published

Series: SC105-03 - Drawings for "The Passion"

Title: Drawings for "The Passion"

ID: SC105-03

Date: [192-] - [193-] (date of creation)

Scope and content:

Series contains preparatory pencil drawings for 'The Passion' series. Munn commonly used both sides of her sheets of paper and the numbers given are for the number of pages. Some contain a brief notation or number. She apparently combined and rearranged the small drawings; some are pasted composites, and others contain pin-holes. Most sheets contain a single figure with variations in stance, usually involving points or dots, suggesting that she was using an angle to work out geometrical structure. The sheer quantity indicates the extraordinary effort involved in the creation of her final drawings. Series also contains 1 ink and brush drawing, and one charcoal drawing. None are dated.

Physical description: 1844 pages of drawings
8 photographs

Arrangement:

The archivist has arranged the drawings for physical safety only. Boxes 5,6 and 7 contain pages that fit within a legal file folder. There are generally 3 sizes of sheets used: small sheets, approximately 13.5 x 18.5 cm; letter-size sheets, approximately 28 x 21 cm; and legal-size sheets, approximately 35.5 x 21 cm. Oversize material for this series is found in Box 4. Where noted, drawings were loosely inserted between the covers of commercial writing pads. The covers have been removed for conservation reasons and grouped at the end of each box.

Publication status:

published
