

Museum Archivist

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Letter from the MAS Chair, Laura Uglean Jackson

Dear Colleagues,

As we close the book on 2024 and prepare for another year ahead, I want to share a personal tradition of mine that I do every New Year. I write down my goals on a square piece of paper, fold it into an origami crane, and open it at the start of the next year. It's a way to dream big, begin the year with hope, and set good intentions on the shelf. Each new year's goal-setting is paired with reading last year's goals, some of which I remember but often forget, and seeing what I valued enough to actually accomplish. Today I bring the essence of this tradition to the MAS newsletter- reflecting on the Section's accomplishments during the last four months and set goals for the remainder of my stint as Chair in 2025.



Laura Uglean Jackson
MAS chair and Digital Archivist, Denver Museum of Nature
& Science

This past fall, we hosted an engaging pop-up lecture in October with presenter Malia Van Heukelem. She relayed her experience working as a [National Heritage Responder](#) after the devastating wildfire in Lahaina, Hawaii. Seeing images and hearing Malia's firsthand account of the near total erasure of historic records from source communities and organizations was difficult to comprehend. Fortunately, Malia and other National Heritage Responders are trained to provide basic cultural heritage needs and advance efforts toward recovery and rebuilding. Natural disasters can affect any of us, making Malia's presentation all the more relevant.

December brought our first-ever conversation hour, where MAS members shared challenges, insights, and solutions in an informal virtual setting. This was a wonderful way to put names to faces from the MAS listserv, learn who else uses the same weird systems as you, and get advice on all things museum archives.

Looking ahead, our section is gearing up for more pop-up lectures in the coming months. These short, dynamic presentations are a wonderful way to spotlight the diverse projects and ideas within our field. Whether it's a case study, a new tool or method, or a thought-provoking question for the field, your contributions help make our programming vibrant and relevant. If you have an idea for a pop-up lecture, we'd love to hear from you! Please take a moment to submit your proposal using [this form](#).

We're also beginning to plan for our annual meeting tentatively scheduled for July or August, and plan to hold at least one more conversation hour to build on the success of the first one.

As we fold our collective goals into the new year, let's continue to support one another and nurture the work that connects us. I look forward to seeing what we can achieve together in 2025.

Wishing you a joyful and inspiring start to the year,

Laura Uglean Jackson
Chair, Museum Archivists Section

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Dear MAS newsletter reader:

If you would like to include an article, news, or highlight piece to the upcoming Summer 2025 newsletter, please email saamasnewsletter@gmail.com for more information or pitch us an idea. We rely on this community to keep the newsletter engaging and informative. We look forward to learning more about our museum archives community.

Please enjoy the Winter 2024 issue of the MAS newsletter!

Digitizing the Russell Barnett Aitken Collection

By Charlotte Kaczmarek, digitization intern in the library and archives at the Cleveland Museum of Art

As a digitization intern at Ingalls Library and Archives, I had the opportunity to work on numerous projects, including the digitization of the [Russell Barnett Aitken Collection](#), specifically his scrapbooks. The Aitken scrapbooks consist of newspaper clippings, correspondence, and items related to his art and travels from 1915 to 2002.

Russell Barnett Aitken (1910-2002) was a ceramicist and outdoorsman from Cleveland, Ohio. As a Clevelander, Aitken participated in the Cleveland Museum of Art's annual 'May Show' during the 1920s and 30s, where he and other artists from Cleveland presented their works. Aitken consistently placed highly in the ceramics sculpture, pottery, and enameling on metal categories, either winning or placing in the top three for several years (fig. 1)

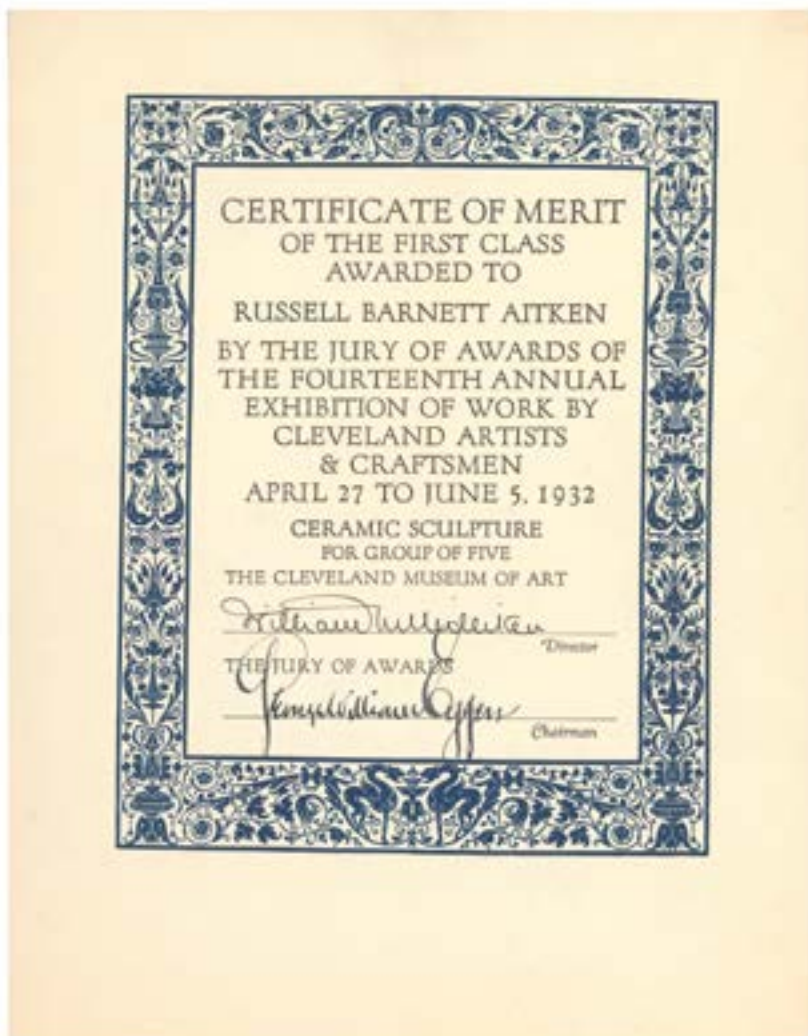


Figure 1, Courtesy of the Cleveland Museum of Art Archives.

As I digitized the Aitken scrapbooks, I was intrigued by his ceramics, as well as his postgraduate trip to Vienna. During his trip to Vienna, Aitken worked with renowned artists, such as Michael Powolny and Josef Hoffman. Powolny and Hoffman were members of the Viennese Art Nouveau movement of the early 20th century, which was called *Jugendstil*. Throughout Aitken's scrapbooks, there are photographs and articles that describe his time in Vienna (fig. 2).

Many of his ceramics reminded me of Art Nouveau ceramics I had seen in the past, and I began to wonder if his ceramic style was inspired by his time studying in Vienna. While examining Aitken's works in the archives, as well as the Museum's collections, I noticed the similarities between Aitken's ceramics and the Art Nouveau style ceramics that were created by his mentors in Vienna. Aitken's use of vivid colors is reminiscent of Powolny's sculptures; both artists use modernist elements in their pottery. Furthermore, Aitken's works such as



Figure 2. A photograph of Aitken during his time studying in Vienna; found in Scrapbook 2 of the Russell Barnett Aitken Collection.

Courtesy of the Cleveland Museum of Art Archives.

Leda and *Possum* (both of which are at the CMA – [Leda](#) in the archives and [Possum](#) in the museum’s collection) are reminiscent of the Viennese sculpture techniques and aesthetics that Aitken was exposed to during his time in Vienna.

However, much of Aitken’s ceramic work features racist depictions of Black figures. While studying Aitken’s life and his work, it immediately became apparent that his work is representative of the racialized stereotypes and assumptions of the time in which he worked. Furthermore, I believe it is important to address these depictions when studying Aitken; by contextualizing his work, archivists and researchers can learn how to better address works with racist tones.

During my time digitizing Aitken’s archive, I was taken aback by the expanse of what he did and achieved during his career. Whether that be writing articles for magazines such as *Field and Stream*, or his artistic accomplishments, Aitken was a multifaceted artist and individual who was deeply associated with Cleveland. Later in life, Aitken received numerous awards from organizations throughout the Cleveland area, as well as in the United States.

Throughout my time as an intern here at Ingalls Library, I have seen how crucial it is to digitize and make available materials like Aitken’s. By digitizing Aitken’s materials, both researchers and the public can see for themselves the life Aitken lived – keeping his memory and experiences around for generations to come.

“A Kind of Love Match from the Beginning”: Helen Frankenthaler and the National Gallery of Art

By Kelly Burton, Media Archivist, National Gallery of Art

In August 2024, the National Gallery of Art in Washington was awarded a grant by the National Film Preservation Foundation to preserve and provide improved access to three unique films featuring Helen Frankenthaler, an American abstract expressionist whose artwork spanned six decades and several generations of painters and printmakers. These films capture various public and behind-the-scenes events related to the National Gallery’s 1993 exhibition, *Helen Frankenthaler: Prints*.

Background and Significance:

Helen Frankenthaler began making lithographs in the early 1960s as one of the vanguard of painters and sculptors who inspired a new enthusiasm for contemporary printmaking, print viewing, and print collecting. The artist then broadened her repertoire to encompass virtually all of the traditional print processes – including etching, stencil, and woodcut – and she often combined several techniques in a single piece. Working in collaboration with master printers around the globe, Frankenthaler expanded upon the methods by which artists have traditionally made prints, transforming the viewer’s awareness of the expressive possibilities of printed images. The exhibition presented by the National Gallery of Art in 1993 included not only edition prints and one-of-a-kind prints, but also related drawings and special proofs from Frankenthaler’s personal archive, thereby providing new insight into the distinctive nature of the artist’s working process.



Helen Frankenthaler (left) with curator Ruth E. Fine (right) during the installation of *Helen Frankenthaler: Prints*.
Courtesy of the National Gallery of Art Archives.

Helen Frankenthaler: Prints was on display at the National Gallery from April 18 to September 6, 1993. The survey exhibition consisted of 77 prints and related drawings from the holdings of the National Gallery of Art, and loans from the artist’s archive and other collections. The show included works from 1961, the year the artist first experimented with printmaking, through 1992. The exhibition was organized by the National Gallery of Art, and Ruth E. Fine, curator of modern prints and drawings, was the exhibition curator. Frankenthaler’s prints were seen by almost 200,000 visitors at the National Gallery, after which the show traveled to San Diego Museum of Art; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; and Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati.

The three films related to Helen Frankenthaler's 1993 show at the National Gallery are significant pieces of institutional and art history. They provide a rare glimpse into the museum's close relationship with a living artist and, perhaps more significantly, Frankenthaler's own thoughts on her approaches to making art. The first two films, taken on April 2, follow Frankenthaler and Ruth Fine through the exhibition spaces as they review the installation's development. In addition to discussing stylistic choices such as the matting, framing, and hanging of works, the artist also shares anecdotal stories pertaining to the creation of many pieces from the exhibition. In the third reel, the camera joins Frankenthaler as she greets guests at the April 15 black-tie exhibition gala. The special event footage from that evening concludes with podium speeches delivered by Frankenthaler and Rusty Powell, then-director of the National Gallery.

Uniqueness of the films:

Filmmaker Robert Pierce was invited by the National Gallery to document an installation discussion between Helen Frankenthaler and Ruth Fine, as well as the black-tie gala for the exhibition. When Pierce's funding efforts to create a documentary on Frankenthaler never materialized, he donated the three edited "sketches" to the National Gallery's Film Programs department for long-term preservation. Digitization of the film elements was completed in 2022 by Colorlab in Rockville, MD, courtesy of the Film Programs department, at which point the films and the digital files were transferred to the Archives for permanent retention. The Archives has subsequently researched the films to confirm their uniqueness. No other versions of these "sketches" are known to exist, and the films have never been screened publicly.



Helen Frankenthaler (middle) with Rusty Powell (right) in the receiving line at the black-tie exhibition gala. Courtesy of the National Gallery of Art Archives.

Increased Access

The Basic Preservation Grant awarded by the National Film Preservation Foundation provides funding for the creation of new 16mm negatives and positive prints for each reel. In addition to providing high-quality digital access copies to researchers at no cost, the Archives plans to incorporate the Frankenthaler films into larger outreach programs involving archival audiovisual holdings. To this end, the archives will be exploring various avenues for increasing public awareness of institutional history, such as collaborative projects with museum curators and online access to the films. Digital versions of the Frankenthaler films will also be uploaded to the National Gallery's internal digital asset management system to facilitate staff access.

Section Steering Committee

Museum Archives Section Steering Committee 2024-2025

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Reach out to Us!

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Visit our page to stay informed on all MAS news and programming:

<https://www2.archivists.org/groups/museum-archives-section>

Official SAA Museum Archives Email List

To connect via the official MAS email listserv, login or create a login for SAA Connect: <https://connect.archivists.org/home>. Once logged in, you can select to join the email list.



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