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The Harry Brorby Project

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Archiving At An Undergraduate Level

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Abstract

In 2014, sixteen boxes of artist Harry Brorby's personal documents, drawings, photographs, and ephemera were donated to The De Pree Gallery. A respected West Michigan-based painter, printmaker, and sculptor in the 1960s and 70s (whose work is part of the permanent collections of the Museum of Modern Art in New York City and Walker Art Center in Minneapolis to name a few), this project seeks to understand Brorby's prolific career within the context of Contemporary Art and, moreover, the notion of artistic legacy and collective cultural memory. To this end, students have been divided into five project teams, each focusing on a specific aspect of the archives and its preservation: website creation and content management (Amy Van Dommelen, project manager), organization of archival material (Stephanie Harron, project manager), digitization of archival material (Brant Biba, project manager), contact management and historical reconstruction (Nancy Laning, project manager), and provenance reconstruction (Erin Schregardus, project manager). In addition to this group component, each student is concentrating on a specific aspect of Brorby's archives that peaks their curiosity—something they would like to personally explore further. Individual research papers and on-line digital portfolios will serve as measurable outcomes for the course.

-Dr. Heidi Kraus

Process

Our organization group played a pivotal role in the scope of the class. We were in charge of archiving all of the material contained within the sixteen boxes. The best and only way of beginning this daunting process of organization was to each pick a box and start sorting through its contents. Once we began gathering related items, a folder was labeled; the respective documents placed inside. Soon the folders began to grow in size – some expanding way past their capacity, which resulted in us refining and articulating new labels to accommodate new information. Any photographs we came across or letters close to disintegrating were placed in protective sleeves of all sizes; slide and film strips included. Photographs bent or rolled beyond our repair need special care – a humidity treatment – which the Joint Holland Archives will play a huge role in completing for us. All metal paperclips, pins, and tape were removed in order to preserve the papers they held together. The rust and adhesives are harmful to the papers they are in contact with, interfering with the preservation process. Thus plastic paperclips are used in their place. This aided in a (short-lived) color coding process about halfway through the semester as we started to be familiar with the archiving process. All of the categorized documents and photographs are kept in their folders and are subsequently placed in acid free boxes.



Pictured is a small portion of the 16 boxes – as we received them – containing documents, photographs, and much more from Harry Brorby's life.



A glimpse into the chaos of archiving in room 221 in Van Wylen Library.



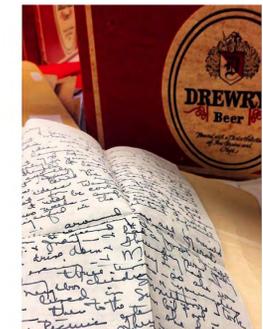
The sorting process initially started with us gaining an understanding of what we had to work with. This first part took a few weeks due to the fact that we had to discover what was in the boxes.



Progress with projects like this may be slow and tedious, however seeing the stacks of paper shrink and gaining an understanding to the life of another person is incredibly rewarding.



Letters saved from Melvin Brorby (Harry's dad), Nancy Brorby (Harry's wife) and from Harry Brorby himself. Some of these letters are 100 years old.



Dissecting one of the many letters found in the collection.

Introduction

Born to Melvin and Rowena Brorby in 1927, Harry Brorby went on to become a contemporary artist (famous in his own right) who gained popularity through the 1950s and 60s. Brorby lived and worked in Holland, MI during this time, later moving to Arizona, which resulted in him leaving behind numerous boxes full of personal papers and photographs as well as much of his oeuvre. His death in 2012 consequently left these boxes (16 in total) to an old family friend.

As an artist who had work in permanent collections of museums such as the Museum of Modern Art in New York City and Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, Harry Brorby had a strong footing within the art world. As this is just the start of the process it is not our job to make assumptions about his life or the lives of his family members and friends. Our job in archiving and organizing what we can of the information left behind is to piece together his life and artistic career in attempt to maintain not only his legacy, but his memory as well.



A small photograph from Harry's father, Melvin's overseas travels sitting on top of a pile of old letters.



A Photo from one of Melvin's many family photo albums.

Conclusion

This project is a rare opportunity and experience for undergraduate students. Archiving typically only occurs at the graduate and professional levels. In the Harry Brorby Project class we still have a long way to go as far as archiving. This semester was a great opportunity for us to scratch the surface of this project and leave the next class with a framework from which to work. Our greatest contribution as a class is leaving behind this solid starting point for future classes to pick up from.

In order to insure that archiving for the next class is a smooth transition from ours we have made attempts to document and categorize as much of this collection as possible and to do so in as much detail as possible. This is important because vital information could become lost during the transfer process if we have not labeled everything correctly. The purpose of archiving is reconstructing the past, since we are not historians we feel that it is not our place to make assumptions about the life of Harry Brorby or the lives of his family members. It is our job to collect, sort and present the facts and a clear manner while using our best judgment to determine what is the most important information.