Richard Thomas, (1917-1988)

Papers, 1930-1984 (Bulk, 1950-1978)
7.75 linear ft.

Acquisition Number: 1989-14

Acquisition: Transferred from Cranbrook Academy of Art in two separate lots, in 1989 and 2013

Access: Access to the collection is unrestricted

Preferred Citation: Richard Thomas Papers, Cranbrook Archives, Bloomfield Hills, Michigan.

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Photographs: Box #s 5-7, 9; negatives in Photograph Special File

Index: See end of finding aid

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History

Richard Thomas was born on April 6, 1917 in Marion Center, Penn. where he attended high school. In 1940, he received a Bachelor of Science degree in art education from the State Teachers College at Indiana (now Indiana University at Pennsylvania). After graduation he worked for a year at Fort Belvoir, Va., on an Army construction job, then was appointed Art Supervisor for the Conneaut, Ohio public schools. He entered the Army immediately after Pearl Harbor, serving at Fort Riley, Kansas and overseas, and was discharged in 1946, having received a Bronze Star.

Thomas made the decision to study at Cranbrook in 1936, when, as part of an undergraduate assignment, he wrote to Zoltan Sepeshy and Carl Milles. Their reply to his letters set him on his course and he was admitted to the Cranbrook Academy of Art in 1947. He graduated in May 1948 with an MFA in painting. At Zoltan Sepeshy’s request, Thomas re-established the Metalsmithing Department, which he headed from 1948-1984. In addition he served in other administrative positions for the Academy, including Dean of Students (1951-50), Registrar (1962-65), Administrative Assistant to the President (1965-66) and Dean of Students (1968).

His chief interest was liturgical art, fabricating around 300 objects for religious institutions locally and across the country including: St. Paul’s Cathedral in Detroit; Christ Church Cranbrook; Concordia Senior College in Fort Wayne; and Presbyterian Church in New York City. At Cranbrook, he designed the school’s ceremonial mace and silver punch bowl. As a student in the Academy of Art, he designed the Cranbrook Medal, originally conceived by Eliel Saarinen as a merit award for students; it became obsolete after three years. Roy Slade resurrected and renamed it the Saarinen Medal, which is now given as an honorary doctorate to notable contributors to the art world. Thomas’s textbook *Metalsmithing for the Artist-Craftsman* is widely used. In 1979 he received a National Endowment for the Arts grant and in 1981, received both a Michigan Foundation for the Arts award and the Cranbrook Founders Medal. He died in Ypsilanti on November 21, 1988.

Scope and Content of Collection

The collection contains correspondence related to Thomas’s artistic work as a metalsmith and author, along with correspondence, meeting minutes and reports from his time at Cranbrook as an educator, department head and faculty member. There is a small amount of biographical information. In addition, there is a sizeable amount of photographic material, including prints and slides, showing his metalsmith work, chiefly liturgical, and drawings of the same. There are also slides of his students’ work.

The collection is arranged in five series, Cranbrook Academy of Art (CAA), Professional, Photographic, Drawings and Oversize.
Series I, CAA deals with Thomas’s role as head of the Art Academy Metalsmithing Department and as faculty member, and is arranged topically, then chronologically. Faculty meeting minutes, interspersed with faculty-related communications, are chronologically arranged and cover the period of Zoltan Sepeshy’s retirement and the search for a new Art Academy director. Items on the Metalsmithing Dept. include itineraries from their 1973 London “field trip,” plans for future departmental activities, and lists of donations from members of the “Harchers,” a group of professional and businessmen who worked and studied weekly in the metalsmith shop. A 1973 “Report of the Reexamination of the CAA,” and a study proposing a trimester system for the Academy is in the CAA minutes.

Series II, Professional contains a significant amount of correspondence dealing with Thomas’s many commissions and is arranged alphabetically by commissioning organization. Folders containing general correspondence are arranged chronologically. Other correspondence covers the American Craftsmen Council Conference (ACC), held at Cranbrook, and his 1961-62 book, Metalsmithing for the Artist-Craftsman.

Series III, Photographic has both black and white prints and 35 mm color slides of Thomas’s liturgical work, as well as a lesser amount of his secular work. There are two collections of slides of work by Thomas’s students, one arranged by student name, and another, called “alumni work,” arranged by slide number. Box 5 contains the accompanying guide to the numbered collection.

Series IV, Drawings is arranged by non-secular and general designs, and also contains several of Thomas’s sketchbooks.

Series V, Oversize has large photographs and drawings, plus a folder of scrapbook pages containing publicity on Thomas.

Related Collections

- Audio Cassette Tape Collection, 1990-09 (various, see index)
- Cranbrook Archives Photograph Collection. See: CAA Faculty Photographs and CAA Faculty Work
- Cranbrook Art Academy. Records of the Administration (1981-09)
Box Number--Description

Series I: CAA

Box 1

4. Metalsmithing Dept. – Travel, 1973
5. Metalsmithing Dept. – Travel, 1976-1978
7. Minutes, 1966

Box 2

1. Minutes, 1971-1977
2. Minutes, Jan.-Feb. 1978
3. Minutes, March-April 1978
4. Minutes, May-July 1978
5. Minutes, Sept. 1978
7. Minutes, Nov. 1978
8. Minutes, Dec. 1978
10. Veteran’s Administration, 1946-1952
11. Veteran’s Administration, 1953-1959

Series II: Professional

Box 3

1. Correspondence, 1948-1959
2. Correspondence, 1960-1969
3. Correspondence, 1971-1978
4. Correspondence – American Guild of Craftsmen Conference, 1961
5. Correspondence – American Guild of Craftsmen Conference, 1962
6. Correspondence – Commissions – B-Col, 1948-1957
7. Correspondence – Commissions – Con-D, 1956-1962
9. Correspondence – Commissions – L-P, 1951-1965
10. Correspondence – Commissions – S-W, 1951-1963
Series II: Professional (cont.)

Box 4

5. Publicity, 1955-1978
7. Research – Cranbrook, ca 1930
8. Resumes, 1948-1985

Series III: Photographic

Box 5

1. Other craftsmen, n.d.
2. General, n.d.
3. Metalwork – Chalices, etc. 1 of 2, n.d.
4. Metalwork – Chalices, etc. 2 of 2, n.d.
8. Metalsmithing for the Artist-Craftsman, 1959

Box 6

Slide Box 1
Ceramics
Christ Church Cranbrook
Exhibits
Jewelry
Masks
Process
Sheffield, Eng.
Students
Text

Slide Box 2
Ecclesiastical
Metalwork 1971
Metal finishes
Studio/Equipment
Series III: Photographic (cont.)

Box 6 (cont.)
  Slide Box 3
  Secular

Slide Box 4
  Student work, BA-BR
  Student work, Burns
  Student work, Blyth
  Student work, C
  Student work, Dehr
  Student work, Dev-I
  Student work, K-M
  Student work, P-W
  Student work, Zilker

Slide Box 5
  Alumni work #s 1-200

Slide Box 6
  Alumni work #s 201-419

Box 7
  Alumni work #s 421-663
  Fabric decoration
  Graphic design
  Knoll textiles, 1961
  Unidentified
  Slide Collection catalog, students-Metalsmithing Dept., 1948-1974

Series IV: Drawings

Box 8

  1. Design work, n.d.-1982
  2. Designs, non-secular, n.d.
  3. Designs, non-secular, n.d.
  4. General, n.d.
  5. General, n.d.
Series V: Oversize

Box 9

1. Publicity, 1960-1968
2. Photographs, n.d.
4. Photographs, n.d.
5. Photographs, n.d.

Box 10

1. Drawings – General, n.d.
2. Drawings – Non secular, n.d.

Box 11

1. Drawings – Non secular, n.d.
2. Drawings – Non secular, n.d.
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