Jack Keijo Steele (1919-2003)

Papers, 1941-2003
1.5 linear ft.

Acquisition Number: 2012-09

Acquisition: The collection was donated to the archives by Jack Steele’s daughter, Sandy Steele, in Nov 2012.

Access: Access to the collection is unrestricted.

Copyright: Copyright to this collection is held by the Cranbrook Educational Community.

Audio/Video: VHS tapes removed to the Videotape Collection.

Processing: Robbie Terman, Aug 2013
History

Jack Keijo Steele was born on May 6, 1919 in Ironwood, Michigan, the first of three children to Finnish parents. At age eight, following his father’s death, Steele moved with his family to Detroit. He left Cass Technical High School in eleventh grade to study drawing and composition under Carlos Lopez and George Rich at the Meinzinger School of Art in Detroit. He also worked on the assembly line at Ford Motor Company.

Starting in the fall of 1940, Steele attended the Cranbrook Academy of Art, where he studied painting with Zoltan Sepeshy. In 1942, Steele received his first award as a mural artist as part of the Cranbrook team in the Rome Collaborative competition. Not long after, he left Cranbrook to join the war effort. He was selected by the War Department Advisory Committee to be a “soldier artist” and document his experience. Steele traveled to Australia and the South Pacific, filling books with sketches of his fellow servicemen, living conditions, and the people and places he encountered. After the war, he returned to Cranbrook to complete his studies. In 1949, Steele found employment as a clay modeler in the styling department at Ford, where he stayed until his retirement in 1980.

Known for painting urban realism, Steele exhibited his work throughout the 1950s and early1960s. He withdrew from publicly displaying his work during the rise of pop art in the mid-1960s, but continued to paint. His work was “rediscovered” in the 1990s, when it was once again exhibited.

Steele married his wife Helen in 1947 and together they raised five children.

Scope and Content of Collection

The bulk of the collection consists of Steele’s sketchbooks. For ease of retrieval, the sketchbooks are housed together in Box 2, with two oversized sketchbooks in Box 3.

All other manuscript materials (with the exception of oversized) are arranged alphabetically in Box 1. The biographical folder mainly consists of secondary source materials compiled by Steele’s family.
Box 1
1. Biographical
2. Correspondence, 1942-1959
4. Exhibition Catalogs, 1950-1959
7. Photographs – Artwork, n.d.
12. Writings, 1941-1942, n.d.

Box 2
1. Sketchbook, c1950s-1970s
2. Sketchbook, c1990s

Box 3 (Oversize)
1. Photograph – Jack Steele, n.d.
2. Publication – Christian Art, Oct 1962
3-4. Sketchbooks, n.d.