Guide to the Helen M. Danforth records
1926-1967

Rhode Island School of Design Archives
Fleet Library at RISD
2 College Street
Providence, RI 02903
Tel: 401-709-5922
Fax: 401-709-5932
email: risdarchives@risd.edu

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Collection overview

Title: Helen M. Danforth records
Date range: 1926-1967
Creator: Danforth, Helen M., 1887-1984
Extent: .5 linear feet
Abstract: The bulk of the collection consists of Museum correspondence, 1926-1949, organized chronologically. Helen M. Danforth's correspondence with RISD's Presidents, 1947-1967, is included.
Language of materials: English
Repository: Rhode Island School of Design Archives
Collection number: 02.01.8

Scope & content

The bulk of the collection consists of Museum correspondence, 1926-1949, organized chronologically. The records include letters to Danforth, reports, lists of loans to the Museum, a draft of the Administrative Manual, and Museum Director applicant letters. Correspondents include Museum Directors Alexander Dorner and Gordon Washburn, Executive Vice-President Royal Bailey Farnum, Paul Sachs (Fogg Art Museum), Russell Cheney, Charles Sterling, and Gilbert Franklin. Subjects documented include drafts of Trustee meeting minutes, expenses for the Museum's Georgian Room, the Sophia Baker Fund, Advisory Committee reports, "The Terrace," the Royal Little scholarship, RISD dormitories, and the Building Committee. The correspondence was microfilmed as part of the 1985 Archives of American Art project.

Series I contains letters from John J. DeCosta, William H. Edwards, Howard Hoppin, and Edith Wetmore as well as records for the Georgian Room. Series III consists of Danforth's correspondence to RISD Presidents Sullivan, Frazier, and Bush-Brown with copies of their correspondence to her. Also included is a letter from Danforth to her Aunt and Uncle regarding the Eliza Radeke Memorial Garden (1933).
Arrangement

The materials in this collection are organized into three series:
- I. Correspondence, 1934-1941
- II. Museum correspondence, 1926-1949
- III. President's correspondence, 1933-1967, bulk 1947-1967

Biographical note

Born on September 3, 1887, the daughter of RISD Treasurer Stephen O. Metcalf, Helen M. Danforth attended St. Timothy's School (Baltimore, MD). She married orthopedic surgeon Murray S. Danforth in 1916. Danforth joined the Museum Committee in 1927, the year after the Museum of Art's Radeke Building opened. This period marks the beginning of her many gifts and loans to the Museum. In 1931 Danforth succeeded her aunt, Eliza G. Radeke, as President of the RISD Corporation and Chair of the Executive Committee. She served as President until 1947 when she became Chair of the Board of Trustees, an office created that year. Danforth retired as Chair in 1965, bringing to a close 34 years of leadership. She died on October 28, 1984.

During Danforth's tenure, RISD received the authority to grant degrees (1932), awarding the first Bachelor in Art Education in 1937. Changes in the educational program, made under the guidance of Royal Bailey Farnum, transformed the Day School into an accredited college program (1949). Campus expansion included the construction of the Helen Metcalf Building on College St. (1936), the Auditorium (1941), and the Metcalf Refectory and Waterman St. dormitories (1959). Enrollment grew from 388 (1931) to 997 (1965).

Danforth received an honorary degree from Brown University in 1939 and, in 1976, the first honorary degree awarded by RISD. Her son Murray S. Danforth, Jr. succeeded his grandfather as RISD Treasurer, serving from 1952 to 1990. Her oldest child, Stephen Danforth, an Army pilot, died in action over Boulogne, France in September 1943.

Access & use

Access to the collection: T

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Preferred citation: Helen M. Danforth records, 02.01.8, Rhode Island School of Design Archives

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Administrative information

About the collection

Acquisition: Records comprising series one and three were discovered by the Archives staff in the Woods-Gerry attic and a walk-in safe in the College Building. The Museum correspondence, microfilmed in 1985 as part of an Archives of American Art project, was transferred to the Archives by the Museum of Art.

Custodial history: The Museum correspondence, 1926-1949, was transferred from the Wanskuck Company to RISD Treasurer Murray Danforth in 1955. He kept the records in his office until transferring them to the Museum of Art in 1984.

About the finding aid

Author: Finding aid prepared by Douglas Doe.

Encoding: Finding aid encoded by Jessica Bitely 2009 April 10

Descriptive rules: Finding aid based on Describing Archives: A Content Standard (DACS)
Search terms

Names: Danforth, Helen M, 1887-1984

Subjects:
- Rhode Island School of Design. Office of the President
- Cheney, Russell, 1881-1945
- DeCosta, John J.
- Dorner, Alexander, 1893-1957
- Farnum, Royal B. (Royal Bailey), 1884-
- Franklin, Gilbert, 1919-
- Hoppin, Howard
- Sachs, Paul J. (Paul Joseph), 1878-1965
- Sterling, Charles, 1901-1991
- Washburn, Gordon B. (Gordon Bailey), 1904-
- Rhode Island School of Design--Administration
- Rhode Island School of Design--Buildings
- Rhode Island School of Design--Funds and scholarships
- Rhode Island School of Design. Museum of Art
- Rhode Island School of Design--Presidents
- Rhode Island School of Design--Presidents--Correspondence

Types of materials:
- Correspondence
- Museum records
## Inventory

### Series I, Correspondence, 1934-1941

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Container</th>
<th>Description</th>
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### Series II, Museum correspondence, 1926-1949

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<td>Box 7, Folder 3</td>
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<td>Box 7, Folder 4</td>
<td>Museum Correspondence</td>
<td>1937 July - Dec</td>
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<td>Box 7, Folder 5</td>
<td>Museum Correspondence</td>
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<td>Box 7, Folder 7</td>
<td>Museum Correspondence</td>
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<td>Box 7, Folder 9</td>
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**Series III, President's correspondence, 1933-1967**

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