

**Finding Aid for the
Sigmund Abeles Papers, 1899-2004**

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**Manuscripts Division
South Caroliniana Library
University of South Carolina**

The papers of Sigmund Morton Abeles (1934-), artist and educator, were transferred to the South Caroliniana Library 1981-2004 by Sigmund Abeles, of New York, N. Y. Information concerning copyright must be secured in writing from the Director of the South Caroliniana Library.

Extent: 10 linear feet (8 cartons) [Annex]
 3 oversize flat file folders

Shelf location:
 Annex + Pob

Accession numbers:
 13746, 14076, 14176

Scope and Content Note

“I was taken to Myrtle Beach, S. C. at age two and a half by my recently separated Mother. In the educationally marginal, deep south’s segregated schools, I attended there were no art teachers and art was not taught. I discovered art and learned by myself after I obtained my drivers licence at fourteen and taught myself to draw from the extensive and fine collection of American figurative sculptures there [Brookgreen Gardens] . . . after all they were mostly nude and always stood still,” Sigmund Abeles wrote in his “Recollections of Skowhegan.” Born in New York, N. Y., in 1934, Abeles spent his childhood and adolescence in Myrtle Beach.

The papers of Sigmund Morton Abeles – consisting of ten linear feet of topically arranged correspondence, exhibition catalogues and notices, genealogy of the Abeles and Banner families, materials from scrapbooks, information and inventory lists from galleries displaying Abeles’ art, papers related to the National Academy of Design, 1982-2002, biographical and autobiographical sketches, student recommendations, papers relating to Abeles’ professorship at University of New Hampshire, and miscellaneous printed items spanning the years 1899-2002 – document the life of this artist and educator.

Abeles’ autobiographical sketch, “My Yes-Tiddies,” recounts stories from his boyhood in Myrtle Beach, S. C., including, “how farm families would come in and politely ask to feel Uncle Mose and Uncle Max’s craniums for the horns that Hebrews supposedly have according to their bibles. When they were disappointed did they then doubt their bibles, or the ‘racial’ purity of my uncles or rationalize that there had to be some NYC clinic that removed them before sending forth heathen Hebrews into their bible thumping midst.” Remembering his childhood home on US-17, Abeles wrote that from the stoop, he had “seen Churchill, FDR and Bernard Baruch together pass by in an open limo, as well as truck after truck loaded with Nazi prisoners of war from a POW camp in our town, at other times, massive bronze or stone sculptures in progress en route to Brookgreen Gardens . . . That spot was my living education taking the place of what the rural deep South lacked, museums of history, nature, art, life.”

Pursuing his art education at various schools – including the Art Students League, Pratt Institute, Skowhegan School, and the Brooklyn Museum School – Abeles holds a Bachelors degree in art from the University of South Carolina and a Master of Fine Arts degree from

Columbia University. David Andrew's essay, appearing in "Sigmund Abeles, A Retrospective" tells the story of how Abeles received his B. A. from the University of South Carolina: "At semester's end, having done many political cartoons in the university newspaper and having participated in front-line activities of the young civil rights movement (the famous Supreme Court decision banning segregation in the schools had been handed down the previous year), he was summoned to the office of the president. Abeles was asked, 'Boy, if you love them [a reference to the minorities of New York] so much, why don't you go live with them? I don't think we have anymore to teach you.' When the young artist protested that he was there to get a degree, the president said, 'We'll send you one in June.' As a result, Sigmund Abeles found himself the sudden possessor of an A. B. degree in fine arts, one that had been earned in the record time of two and a half years."

The majority of the collection is comprised of letter files arranged alphabetically by surname with individual files for persons represented by more than five letters. Represented are family, friends, fellow artists, and former students. Correspondence from Abeles' mother, Henrietta Abeles, documents the dramatic changes occurring in both Myrtle Beach and South Carolina as a whole in the 1960s. Her letters also routinely discuss the civil rights problems throughout the South and lament the narrow-minded political views of South Carolinians. Other letters from South Carolina are from friends Dr. Bob Ochs, professor emeritus of history at the University of South Carolina, David Van Hook, former administrator of the Columbia Museum of Art, and Abeles' maternal and allied families, the Banners and Leders. Artists represented include South Carolinians Jesse Bardin, William Halsey, and Jasper Johns. Other artist correspondents of note are Harvey Breverman, Dominic Cretara, Martha Erlebacher, Gregory Gillespie, Philip Grausman, Bud Shackelford, Lorraine Shemesh, Sidney Simon, Vincent Smith, Frank Stack, Harry Sternberg, Bill Stewart, and Jerome Witkin.

Gallery files include correspondence and inventory lists. Among these are three files tracing Abeles' association with the Mary Ryan Gallery in New York, especially his efforts to recoup major losses after a December 1983 destroyed the gallery. While the galleries represented are from across the nation, many are in the New England area. Also present are various exhibition notices and catalogues of Abeles' works and the work of others. Other materials relating to Abeles' artistic life – articles, memberships, and exhibitions – can be found among the Art files.

Later in life, Sigmund Abeles became interested in the history of his Eastern European Jewish ancestry. There are files containing photographs, vital records, and other information relating to both his maternal family, the Banners from Poland, and his paternal family, the Abeles' from Hungary. An extensive series of genealogical interviews conducted by Sigmund Abeles with relative Vilmos Abeles is included. Abeles also kept scrapbooks detailing his own life and work. Included in the files from his scrapbooks are articles, awards, memberships, and gallery announcements.

Also included are papers relating to the National Academy of Design, 1982-2002. Abeles served as correspondence secretary of the organization from 1991 to 1998. There are files related to Abeles' professional life, including student recommendations and papers pertaining to Abeles' professorship at University of New Hampshire, which spanned seventeen years until he resigned in 1987 to work in the studio full-time.

Oversize items include an account book, 1988-1991, sketch pad from 1949, certificates, watercolor by Natalie Smith, posters for Abeles' exhibitions, and drawings entered in the Boston Memorial Holocaust Competition.

Chronology

- | | |
|----------------|---|
| 1934
Abeles | Born, New York, N. Y., son of Samuel and Henrietta Banner |
| 1936 | Parents separated, Abeles and mother moved to Myrtle Beach, S. C. where her family had recently settled. Henrietta Abeles designed and built an eight-room guest house, "Paul's Guest House," which she operated until her death in 1983. |
| 1952 | Graduated Myrtle Beach High School. Awarded scholarship to Atlanta Art Institute, declined. Accepted to Pratt Institute, Brooklyn, N. Y., left after one semester. |
| 1953 | Entered University of South Carolina, originally pre-med, switched to art. |
| 1954 | Studied in summer at Art Student's League, New York, N. Y. |

- 1955 First solo museum show, Florence Art Museum, Florence, S. C. Awarded scholarship for the summer at Skowhegan School, Skowhegan, Me. Graduated from U. S. C. with B. A. in Art. Moved to New York, N. Y., studied etching at the Brooklyn Museum School.
- 1956 Awarded a second scholarship for the summer at Skowhegan School. Entered M. F. A. program at Columbia University.
- 1957 Graduated Columbia University with M. F. A. Drafted into the U. S. Army, basic training at Fort Jackson, Columbia, S. C., taught English to Hungarian "freedom fighters." Later sent to Heidelberg, Germany as an army illustrator.
- 1959 Married Gina Godwin in Basle, Switzerland.
- 1960 Discharged from army.
- 1961 Began teaching at Swain School of Design, New Bedford, Ma. Adopted son, David Paul Abeles.
- 1964 Began teaching at Wellesley College.
- 1965 Adopted daughter, Shoshanna Lynn Abeles.
- 1969 Divorced Gina Godwin.
- 1970 Married Carolyn May. Began teaching at University of New Hampshire.
- 1974 Divorced Carolyn May.
- 1978 Married Anne Merck.
- 1983 Birth of son, Maxwell Merck Abeles.
- 1987 Resigned position at University of New Hampshire to work in studio full time.
- 1998 Divorced Anne Merck.

Container List

Oversize Flat Folders *[on site]*

Art

Boston Memorial Holocaust Competition drawings
Exhibition posters

Miscellaneous

Account book, 1988-1991
Certificates
Sketchpad, 1949
Watercolor, 1979

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