Boris Aronson:

An Inventory of His Scenic Design Papers at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center

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Descriptive Summary

Creator:	Aronson, Boris, 1900-1980
Title:	Boris Aronson Scenic Design Papers
Dates:	1939-1977
Extent:	5 boxes, 4 oversize boxes, 47 oversize folders (4.1 linear feet)
Abstract:	Russian-born painter, sculptor, and most notably set designer Boris Aronson came to America in 1922. The Scenic Design Papers hold original sketches, prints, photographs, and technical drawings showcasing Aronson's set design work on thirty-one plays written and produced between 1939-1977.
RLIN Record #:	TXRC00-A6
Language:	English.
Access:	Open for research

Administrative Information

Acquisition:	Gift and purchase, 1996 (G10669, R13821)
Processed by:	Helen Baer and Toni Alfau, 1999
Repository:	Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin

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Biographical Sketch

Boris Aronson was born in Kiev in 1900, the son of a Jewish rabbi. He came of age in pre-revolutionary Russia in the city that was at the center of Jewish avant-garde theater. After attending art school in Kiev, Aronson served an apprenticeship with the Constructivist designer Alexandre Exter. Under Exter's tutelage and under the influence of the Russian theater directors Alexander Tairov and Vsevolod Meyerhold, whom Aronson admired, he rejected the fashionable realism of Stanislavski in favor of stylized reality and Constructivism. After his apprenticeship he moved to Moscow and then to Germany, where he published two books in 1922, and on their strength was able to obtain a visa to America. In New York he found work in the Yiddish experimental theater designing sets and costumes for, among other venues, the Unser Theatre and the Yiddish Art Theatre.

Aronson's first major success was *The Tenth Commandment,* directed by Maurice Schwartz at the Yiddish Art Theatre in 1926. His reputation was further improved by an exhibition of his set models in New York in 1927 and by the 1928 publication of a book about Aronson by the art critic Waldemar George. Aronson quit the Yiddish theater to avoid the "ghettoization" of his work and began doing Broadway productions in 1932. Between 1935 and 1939 he did several productions for the Group Theatre, among them two Clifford Odets plays and Irwin Shaw's *The Gentle People,* the latter considered a breakthrough for Aronson. In the 1930s and early 1940s Aronson experimented with projected scenery and did his first settings for a ballet and a musical.

Despite Aronson's critical successes in the 1930s, his career was in limbo for much of the 1940s and 1950s. In a Broadway which favored tactful sets over dramatic designs, other designers were getting many of the better productions. Aronson was forced to temper his abstract, Constructivist inclinations and produce naturalistic sets, but he continued to make important contacts. In 1953 he created sets for *The Crucible,* the first of six Arthur Miller works that he would design. He worked frequently with the directors Harold Clurman and Garson Kanin and was praised for his sets for the long-running *The Diary of Anne Frank* (1955). He became proficient in using collages, and some of his work anticipated the epic style that he employed to great effect in the "concept" musicals of the 1960s and 1970s.

Aronson's career upswing began with *Fiddler on the Roof* (1964). His first commercial success, the play marked the beginning of Aronson's fruitful association with the producer-director Harold Prince. After creating sets for two productions at the Metropolitan Opera, Aronson collaborated with Prince on *Company* (1970). The show featured Aronson's most Constructivist sets to date and established Stephen Sondheim as a composer. Three more Price/Sondheim/Aronson shows in the 1970s(*Follies, A Little Night Music,* and *Pacific Overtures)* solidified Aronson's reputation as one of Broadway's most respected artists. His last set design was in 1976 for *The Nutcracker,* choreographed by Mikhail Baryshnikov. Aronson won eight Tony Awards and maintained an active career as a sculptor and painter until his death in 1980.

The Boris Aronson Scenic Design Papers were donated to the Ransom Center by Lisa Aronson in 1996. One rendering for *Love among the Ruins* was a purchase.

Scope and Contents

The Boris Aronson Scenic Design Papers, 1939-1977, contain original sketches, photostats and copy prints of sketches, photographs, art reproductions, scripts, technical drawings, and a model which document Aronson's work as set designer for thirty-one plays written or produced between 1939 and 1977. The papers are arranged alphabetically by title of production and can also be accessed by playwright, librettist, or translator via the index of authors following the folder list. Items are grouped together in accordance with their original order, e.g., the two folders of photographs for *The Garden of Sweets* have not been interfiled, but are left in Lisa Aronson's original groupings.

Though the papers are slightly skewed toward the later part of Aronson's career, his work in the 1940s and 1950s is amply represented. In particular, works by Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams, and Irwin Shaw abound. These production materials include Miller's *The Crucible* and *A View from the Bridge,* Williams' *The Rose Tattoo,* and Shaw's *The Gentle People.* Also represented are two Stephen Sondheim works(*Company* and *Pacific Overtures)* and four Harold Prince productions(*Fiddler on the Roof, Cabaret, Company,* and *Pacific Overtures*). Two of the works represented in these papers, *The Golden Door* and *Love among the Ruins,* are unrealized projects for which Aronson made preliminary sketches. Also included are scripts of three plays on which Aronson did not work: *Sex* and *Death* by Woody Allen (never produced, though *Death* was published in Allen's *Without Feathers* in 1975); *Vieux Carré* by Tennessee Williams; and Benjamin Sonnenberg's unproduced 1975 translation of Fernand Crommelynck's *Les Amants puérils.*

The bulk of the papers comprises concept drawings, study "sketches", and preliminary and final renderings for stages, scenery, show curtains, and cyclorama projections. The sketches range from a single prop to individual scenes to overall floor designs. They are executed in pencil, ink, watercolor, lithographic crayon, or pastel. (For brevity and clarity, all of the drawings, renderings and sketches are referred to as sketches in the folder list; those utilizing color media such as watercolor and pastel are so noted.) Complementing the renderings are research files and production photographs. The research files contain art reproductions, a few postcards, and photographs, many of which were taken by Robert Galbraith of Jamaica, N.Y. The production photographs depict Aronson's models or the finished sets. Also present are technical drawings and a stage model for Arthur Miller's *Incident at Vichy.* Completing the papers are rehearsal copies of scripts, including multiple versions of *Pacific Overtures* and *Company,* and a folder of bulletins written by director Garson Kanin to production personnel during rehearsals for *Dreyfus in Rehearsal.* Annotations found throughout the papers are usually Lisa Aronson's.

Item-level descriptions of all materials except for the *Incident at Vichy* model are available in an earlier finding aid in the Reading Room.

Notes Concerning the Folder List

In the folder list, year of production is given in parentheses after the title of the work. Dates for the contents of individual folders are given only if known and if they differ from the year of production. The number of items per folder is given in parentheses.

Abbreviations used in the folder list are as follows

Source: Rich, Frank, with Lisa Aronson. *The Theatre Art of Boris Aronson.* New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987.

Related Material

Elsewhere in the Theater Arts Collection is an Aronson costume rendering for *Day and Night* (1924) which can be found in the W. H. Crain Costume and Scenic Design Collection. Other Aronson papers are located at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts.

Arrangement

The finding aid for the Boris Aronson Scenic Design Papers is a conflation of the original inventory created in 1999, and of a small addition that was catalogued in 2006. Currently the addition is described only by a Folder List which has been appended to the original inventory, continuing the box and folder numbering sequence. The Scope and Contents does not make reference to the addition, and the RLIN record for the collection summarizes the original inventory only.

Boris Aronson Scenic Design Papers--Original Inventory [This Page]

Boris Aronson Scenic Design Papers--Addition

Index Terms

Names

Furth, George, 1932- .

Kanin, Garson, 1912- .

Miller, Arthur, 1915- .

Shaw, Irwin, 1913- .

Weidman, John, 1946- .

Williams, Tennessee, 1911-1983.

Subjects

Theaters--Stage-setting and scenery.

Set designers--United States.

Document Types

Photographs.

Scripts.

Set design drawings.

Sketches.

Technical drawings.

The Assassin (1945)

Sketches (3)	**box-folder** ff 1
Sketches with watercolor (3)	**box-folder** ob 6.1-3
Photostats of sketches (3)	**box-folder** b 1.1

Bus Stop (1955)

Sketches with watercolor (2)	**box-folder** ff 2-3
Photos (5)	**box-folder** b 1.2

box-folder b 1.3 *Cabaret* (1966). Script
box-folder b 1.4 *A Childhood Disease* (translation of *Les amants puérils).* Script, 1975

The Cold Wind and the Warm (1958)

Sketches with watercolor (5)	**box-folder** ff 4-8
Photos (47)	**box-folder** b 1.5

box-folder b 1.6 *Company* (1970). Script, 1969; see also *A Husband, a Wife and a Friend*

The Country Girl (1950)

Sketches with watercolor (7)	**box-folder** ff 9-12
Photos (27)	**box-folder** b 1.7

The Creation of the World and Other Business (1972)

Sketches, some with watercolor, pastel, and paint (9); collage; assembled piece	**box-folder** ob 6.4-6 **box-folder** ff 41-44
Photos (7); copy prints of sketch (2)	**box-folder** b 1.8
Copy prints of sketches (4)	**box-folder** b 2.1
Model" "(Basic Formation)	
Model for Act 1, Scene 1, Adam and Eve	

The Crucible (1953)

Sketches" "with watercolor (5)	**box-folder** ob 6.7-9, ff 13
Postcards" "(3); art reproductions (2); photos (23)	**box-folder** b 2.2, ob 6.10-11
Photos" "(6); copy prints of sketches (3)	**box-folder** b 2.3

box-folder b 2.4-5 *Do Re Mi* (1960). Script
box-folder b 2.6 *Dreyfus in Rehearsal* (1975). Company bulletins by Garson Kanin with clipping, 1974

Aronson, Boris, 1900-1980

[*Fiddler on the Roof*] (1964, previously titled *Tevye*). Script

Script **box-folder** b 2.7

Set designs, (2) 1965

The Garden of Sweets (1961)

Sketches with watercolor (4); collage	**box-folder** ob 6.12-13, ff 14-16
Photos, (4) 1963, nd	**box-folder** ob 6.14
Photos (40)	**box-folder** b 2.8

Aronson, Boris, 1900-1980

The Gentle People (1939)

Sketch	**box-folder** ff 17
Photos (3)	**box-folder** b 3.1

Aronson, Boris, 1900-1980

The Golden Door (1948)

Sketches with watercolor (6)	**box-folder** ob 7.1-6
Photos (17)	**box-folder** b 3.2

box-folder b 3.3 *A Husband, a Wife and a Friend* (an earlier version of *Company).* Script, nd

Incident at Vichy (1964)

Technical drawings (7)	**box-folder** ff 45, 47
Stage model	**box-folder** ob 8-9
Photos (32)	**box-folder** b 3.4
Photos (11)	**box-folder** b 3.5
Photos, 1965, nd (9); copy print of sketch	**box-folder** b 3.6

I've Got Sixpence (1952)

Sketches with watercolor (15)	**box-folder** ff 18-23
Photos (10)	**box-folder** b 3.7

Love among the Ruins (1951)

Sketches with watercolor (3)	**box-folder** ff 24-26
Sketch with watercolor	**box-folder** ob 7.7

A Memory of Two Mondays (1955)

Photos (13), 1946, nd	**box-folder** b 3.8
Photos(2)	**box-folder** b 3.9
Script	**box-folder** b 3.10

box-folder ff 27 *The Merchant of Yonkers* (1938). Sketch with pastel
box-folder b 4.1 *Orpheus Descending* (1957). Script

Pacific Overtures (1976, previously titled *An Untitled Play about the Opening of Japan*). Scripts

[Feb. 1975]	**box-folder** b 4.2
May 1975	**box-folder** b 4.3
Aug. 1975	**box-folder** b 4.4
Sept. 1975	**box-folder** b 4.5

The Rose Tattoo (1951)

Sketches with watercolor (3)	**box-folder** ff 28-30
Photos (3)	**box-folder** b 4.6

box-folder b 4.7 *Sex and Death.* ca. 1975 Script,

Small War on Murray Hill (1957)

Sketches with watercolor (3), 1956, nd	**box-folder** ff 31-33
Sketch with watercolor	**box-folder** ff 46
Photos (6); art reproductions (2)	**box-folder** b 5.1

box-folder ob 7.8, ff 34 *The Survivors* (1948). Sketches with watercolor (2); photostat of sketch

This Is Goggle (1958)

Sketches with watercolor (5)	**box-folder** ff 35-39
Photos (13)	**box-folder** ob 7.9-10
Photos (9)	**box-folder** b 5.2

box-folder ff 40 Truckline Café (1946). Sketch with watercolor
box-folder b 5.3 *Vieux Carré.* Script, ca. 1977

A View from the Bridge(1955, previously titled *From under the Sea*)

Sketches with watercolor (5)	**box-folder** ob 7.11-15
Photos (2)	**box-folder** b 5.4
Script	**box-folder** b 5.5

Boris Aronson Scenic Design Papers--Index of Authors

Material from the Addition is not included in this index.

- Allen, Woody
  - *Sex and Death*

  - *Sex and Death*

- Anderson, Maxwell
  - *Truckline Café*

  - *Truckline Café*

- Behrman, S. N.
  - *The Cold Wind and the Warm*

  - *The Cold Wind and the Warm*

- Furth, George, 1932-
  - *Company*
  - *A Husband, a Wife and a Friend* (an earlier version of *Company*)

  - *Company*
  - *A Husband, a Wife and a Friend* (an earlier version of *Company)*

- Grumberg, Jean-Claude
  - *Dreyfus in Rehearsal*

  - *Dreyfus in Rehearsal*

- Hansen, Waldemar
  - *The Garden of Sweets*

  - *The Garden of Sweets*

- Inge, William
  - *Bus Stop*

  - *Bus Stop*

- Kanin, Garson, 1912-
  - *Do Re Mi*

  - *Do Re Mi*

- Masteroff, Joe
  - *Cabaret*

  - *Cabaret*

Aronson, Boris, 1900-1980

- Miller, Arthur, 1915-
    - *The Creation of the World and Other Business*
    - *The Crucible*
    - *Incident at Vichy*
    - *A Memory of Two Mondays*
    - *A View from the Bridge* (previously titled *From under the Sea)*

    - *The Creation of the World and Other Business*
    - *The Crucible*
    - *Incident at Vichy*
    - *A Memory of Two Mondays*
    - *A View from the Bridge* (previously titled *From under the Sea)*

- Odets, Clifford
    - *The Country Girl*

    - *The Country Girl*

- Plagemann, Bentz
    - *This Is Goggle*

    - *This Is Goggle*

- Rice, Elmer
    - *Love among the Ruins*

    - *Love among the Ruins*

- Rosten, Norman
    - *The Golden Door*

    - *The Golden Door*

- Shaw, Irwin, 1913-
    - *The Assassin*
    - *The Gentle People*
    - *The Survivors*

    - *The Assassin*
    - *The Gentle People*
    - *The Survivors*

- Sherwood, Robert E.
    - *Small War on Murray Hill*

    - *Small War on Murray Hill*

- Sonnenberg, Benjamin
    - *A Childhood Disease* (translation of *Les Amants puérils)*

    - *A Childhood Disease* (translation of *Les Amants puérils)*

Aronson, Boris, 1900-1980

- Stein, Joseph
    - *Fiddler on the Roof*

    - *Fiddler on the Roof*

- van Druten, John
    - *I've Got Sixpence*

    - *I've Got Sixpence*

- Viertel, Peter
    - *The Survivors*

    - *The Survivors*

- Weidman, John, 1946-
    - *Pacific Overtures*

    - *Pacific Overtures*

- Wilder, Thorton
    - *The Merchant of Yonkers*

    - *The Merchant of Yonkers*

- Williams, Tennessee, 1911-1983
    - *Orpheus Descending*
    - *The Rose Tattoo*
    - *Vieux Carré*

    - *Orpheus Descending*
    - *The Rose Tattoo*
    - *Vieux Carré*

Boris Aronson:

A Preliminary Inventory of an Addition to His Scenic Design Papers at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center

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Descriptive Summary

Creator:	Aronson, Boris, 1900-1980
Title:	Addition to the Boris Aronson Scenic Design Papers
Dates:	1965-1972
Extent:	2 oversize boxes, 1 oversize folder (3.0 linear feet)
RLIN Record #:	None
Language:	Material in English
Access:	Open for research

Administrative Information

Processed by:	Helen Adair and Katie Causier, 2006
Repository:	The University of Texas at Austin, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center

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Arrangement

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Boris Aronson Scenic Design Papers--Addition [This Page]

Aronson, Boris, 1900-1980

The Creation of the World and Other Business (1972)

Model" "(Basic Formation) **oversize-box** ob 10

Model" "for Act 1, Scene 1, Adam and Eve **oversize-box** ob 11

flat-file ff 48 *Fiddler on the Roof* (1965) Set designs (2)