

Charles Henri Ford:

An Inventory of His Papers at the Harry Ransom Center

Descriptive Summary

Creator:	Ford, Charles Henri, 1913-2002
Title:	Charles Henri Ford Papers 1928-1981
Dates:	1928-1981
Extent:	29 document cases (12 linear feet)
Abstract:	The Charles Henri Ford papers consist of typescript and holograph manuscripts, correspondence, postcards, clippings, photographs, financial documents, contracts, invitations, page proofs, prospectuses, journals, and diaries.
Access:	Open for research

Administrative Information

Acquisition:	Purchase, 1968, 1986 (R4110, R11095)
Processed by:	Robert Kendrick, 1996-1997
Repository:	Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin

Biographical Sketch

Charles Henri Ford, artist, poet, editor, and filmmaker, was born on February 13, 1913, in Brookhaven, Mississippi. In his teens, Ford had two poems, "Interlude" and "In the Park (For a Gold Digger)," published in the *New Yorker*, after which he continued to publish poetry in various little magazines, such as *Free Verse* and *Contemporary Verse*. Ford dropped out of high school in 1929 in order to publish, with Parker Tyler and Kathleen Tankersley, the little magazine *Blues: A Magazine of New Rhythms*.

Envisioned as a vehicle for experimental writing, *Blues* boasted such contributors as Kay Boyle, Witter Bynner, Erskine Caldwell, Harry Crosby, E. E. Cummings, James T. Farrell, H. D., Oliver Jenkins, Eugene Jolas, Ezra Pound, Kenneth Rexroth, Laura Riding, Herman Spector, Gertrude Stein, Laurence Vail, William Carlos Williams, and Louis Zukofsky. During this period, Ford continued to publish his poems in *Blues* and other little magazines, including *Transition*, *New Review*, and *Tambour*.

After a brief stint in Greenwich Village beginning in 1930, Ford sailed for Paris in 1931, where he quickly ensconced himself in the expatriate literary community. Ford cultivated friendships with Natalie Barney, Paul Bowles, Paul Claudel, René Crevel, Mina Loy, Carmen Mariño, Edouard Roditi, and Gertrude Stein, among many others. His friendship with Djuna Barnes resulted in their sharing an apartment and in Ford's typing part of the manuscript of Barnes's novel *Nightwood*. In 1932, Barnes introduced Ford to the Russian painter Pavel Tchelitchew. Despite Tchelitchew's relationship with Allan Tanner and the disapproval of friends of both Ford and Tchelitchew, they began to live together in 1934, an arrangement that continued until Tchelitchew's death in 1957. Throughout this period, Ford continued to write, publishing "Letter from the Provinces" in *Readies for Bob Brown's Machine* (1931) and four poems in the anthology *Americans Abroad* (1932). His first collection of poetry, *Pamphlet of Sonnets*, appeared in 1936, which was followed by *The Garden of Disorder and Other Poems* in 1938. In 1933, *The Young and Evil*, a novel written with Parker Tyler about the homosexual world of Greenwich Village in the early thirties, was published in Paris by the Obelisk Press.

From 1940 to 1947, Ford, again with Tyler, published another little magazine, *View*. The magazine provided a medium for the dissemination of surrealist writing and painting. Individual issues were devoted to the artists Max Ernst, Yves Tanguy, and Pavel Tchelitchew, and contributors and illustrators included Ford, Tyler, Lionel Abel, Kenneth Burke, Joseph Cornell, E. E. Cummings, Randall Jarrell, Wallace Stevens, and William Carlos Williams. During the forties, Ford also published four books of poetry: *The Overturned Lake* (1941); *Poems for Painters* (1945); *The Half-Thoughts, the Distances of Pain* (1947); and *Sleep in a Nest of Flames* (1949). After this flurry of activity, there followed a long fallow period, in which Ford dabbled in various activities, including drawing and painting, while dividing his time among Weston, Connecticut; New York City; Paris; and the suburbs of Rome.

Despite one-man exhibitions of his gouaches and oils in both Paris and Rome, Ford did not resume his creative endeavors in earnest until after the death of Tchelitchev. Moving between Rome, Paris, New York City, and Greece, Ford devoted himself to photography, until he returned to poetry with a series of "poster poems," published as *Spare Parts* (1966) and *Silver Flower Coo* (1968). In 1972, Ford published the collection *Flag of Ecstasy: Selected Poems*, which was followed by *7 Poems* in 1974. Ford's increasing interest in Eastern philosophies inspired the series *Om Krishna* (Vol. 1: *Special Effects*, 1979; v. 2: *From the Sickroom of Walking Eagles*, 1981; v. 3: *Secret Haiku*, 1982). Perhaps prompted by his acquaintance with the denizens of Andy Warhol's Factory, Ford also made two movies: *Poem Posters* (1966) and *Johnny Minotaur* (1972).

Charles Henri Ford died in New York City on September 27, 2002.

Scope and Contents

The Charles Henri Ford papers consist of typescript and holograph manuscripts, correspondence, postcards, clippings, photographs, financial documents, contracts, invitations, page proofs, prospectuses, journals, and diaries. The collection is organized in four series: I. Works, 1930-ca. 1965 (6.5 boxes); II. Correspondence, 1928-1972 (8.5 boxes); III. Miscellaneous, 1930-1965 (4 boxes); and IV. Journals/Diaries, 1932-1981 (10 boxes). The arrangement of the first three series reflects the earlier cataloguing of these materials. Additional information concerning materials in the first three series, which are cataloged at item level, may be found by consulting the card catalog.

The Works series consists of typescript and holograph manuscripts, notes, and page proofs of Ford's literary work, including both published and unpublished material, arranged alphabetically by title. There are poems in English and French, theatrical work, and prose. Of special interest, there are holograph and typescript fragments of *The Young and Evil*, including a holograph fragment of the novel under its working title, "Love and Jump Back," and articles for an unpublished issue of *View*, devoted to theater.

The Correspondence series contains both outgoing and incoming correspondence (arranged in two subseries, each arranged alphabetically), including postcards and clippings. The outgoing correspondence touches on subjects such as Rome; Paris; Vienna; Morocco; poster poems; Pavel Tchelitchev's designs for the theater; *Sleep in a Nest of Flames*; a project proposed to the Ingram Merrill Foundation that would document *View's* influence on the arts; assessments of Ford's contemporaries, including one in which he calls Henry Miller a fake; Paul Eluard; and *Om Krishna*. There is also a large group of letters to Ford's sister Ruth, his mother Gertrude, and his father Charles L., in which Charles Henri discusses the various places where he lived, friends and acquaintances, professional associates, and his work, with specific subjects that include Paris, New York City, Gertrude Stein, Djuna Barnes, Pavel Tchelitchev, and *The Young and Evil*.

The incoming correspondence includes among its significant correspondents Conrad Aiken, W. H. Auden, Djuna Barnes, Sir Cecil Beaton, Karen Blixen, Paul Bowles, Kay Boyle, Ronnie Burk, William S. Burroughs, Jean Cocteau, Joseph Cornell, Leonardo Cremonini, E. E. Cummings, Leonor Fini, Gertrude Ford, Ruth Ford, Allen Ginsberg, Ted Joans, Ray Johnson, Philip Lamantia, James Laughlin, Mary McCarthy, Gerard Malanga, Carmen Mariño, Henry Miller, Marianne Moore, Edouard Roditi, Dame Edith Sitwell, Gertrude Stein, Wallace Stevens, Allen Tate, Pavel Tchelitchew, Parker Tyler, Carl Van Vechten, William Carlos Williams, Donald Windham, Bill Wolak, Kathleen Tankersley Young, and Stark Young. The correspondence covers subjects such as poetry, with special reference to prose poems; theater; New York City; France during World War II; Ford's "Life of a Child"; Allen Ginsberg; Athens; Giorgio Strehler; the influence of a Eugene Berman painting on Wallace Stevens's poem, "The Man with the Blue Guitar"; Andy Warhol; American idealism in the sixties; art collecting; Dylan Thomas's disparagement of collaborative poetry; the demerits of "Auden & Co. Limited"; and Tennessee Williams. A complete index of correspondents may be found at the end of this inventory.

Deserving special mention are large groups of letters from Djuna Barnes, Sir Cecil Beaton, Paul Bowles, Dame Edith Sitwell, and Pavel Tchelitchew, in which these correspondents discuss their professional and artistic aspirations and projects, friends and associates, frustrations, daily routines, and romantic concerns. Specific subjects include Djuna Barnes's novel *Nightwood*, Gertrude Stein, contemporary painting, theater design, poetry, and contemporary music, just to name a few.

The Miscellaneous series includes correspondence to Charles L. Ford, Gertrude Ford, Ruth Ford, Pavel Tchelitchew, and Parker Tyler from various correspondents, including a large group of letters from Ruth Ford to Gertrude Ford. Among the highlights are a typescript of Djuna Barnes's story, "Behind the Heart"; typescript poems by Paul Bowles; a typescript of Jean Genet's "Chants secrets"; a typescript of Dame Edith Sitwell's preface for *Sleep in a Nest of Flames*; and typescript poems by Parker Tyler. The Miscellaneous series is arranged alphabetically by author, except the *View* materials, which are filed by title.

Series IV, Journals/Diaries, consists almost exclusively of the journals and diaries of Charles Henri Ford from 1932 until 1967, with a few lacunae in the chronological coverage. There are some typescripts of selected portions of the journals, one photographic negative, and two printed sheets. A much later accession consists of one folder of correspondence, clippings, typescripts, and photocopies to Ford from Ronnie Burk and Bill Wolak.

The journals provide an intimate portrait of a poet in his peregrinations across Europe, northern Africa, the United States and Mexico from the early thirties until the mid-sixties. The journals touch on a wide variety of literary topics, including novelists, poets, playwrights, and philosophers, in addition to Ford's own aesthetic concerns. Ford also records his impressions of such literary figures as Edward Albee, W. H. Auden and Chester Kallman, Djuna Barnes, Natalie Barney, Sylvia Beach and Shakespeare & Co., Paul Bowles, William Burroughs, Truman Capote, Jean Cocteau, Cyril Connolly, Gregory Corso, E. E. Cummings, Nancy Cunard, Isak Dinesen, James Farrell, Janet Flanner, André Gide, H. D., Ernest Hemingway, James Laughlin of New Directions, Mary McCarthy, Claude McKay, Gerard Malanga, James Merrill, Henri Michaux,

Marianne Moore, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Jean-Paul Sartre, the Sitwells, Stephen Spender, Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas, Allen Tate, Dylan Thomas, Parker Tyler, Gore Vidal, Thornton Wilder, Tennessee Williams, William Carlos Williams, Edmund Wilson, literary agent Audrey Wood, and Stark Young, just to name a few. Ford also includes his thoughts on various works of literature, including Antonin Artaud's *Le Théâtre et son double*, Paul Claudel's *Tête d'or*, René Crevel's *Le Clavecin de Diderot*, *Flair*, Jean Genet's *Notre dame des fleurs*, Robert Graves's *The White Goddess*, Aldous Huxley's *Mortal Coils*, Raymond Radiguet's *Devil in the Flesh*, Denton Welch's journals, Tennessee Williams's *Summer and Smoke* and *A Streetcar Named Desire*, and William Carlos Williams's *Autobiography*.

The journals also present a detailed record of Ford's own creative aspirations and endeavors. Among the projects and issues discussed are the scope of his journals and Ford's initial desire that they be eventually housed in the Yale University Library; magazine editorship; the difficulties of finding a publisher for *The Young and Evil*; the relative merits of photography and writing as contemplative arts; *Blues*; *View*; various playwriting projects, including "Alexander" (an historical play treating Alexander the Great), "Let's Get Out of Here," "The Poet" (based on the Isak Dinesen short story), and "The Labyrinth" (a play combining the myths of Antigone, Phaedra, and Ariadne); correcting the page proofs of *Sleep in a Nest of Flames* and Ford's hope that this volume will establish his reputation as the best poet of his generation; the desire to rewrite *Oedipus Rex*; the use of verse in the theater; the desire to publish an edited version of his journals; the inability to work; the desire to sublimate his sexual energy into poetic activity; the difficulties of translation; the poetry of sound; the desire to write as a desire to dominate; measuring himself as a playwright against T. S. Eliot and Christopher Fry; the abandonment of journal writing; the lure of documentary filmmaking; a possible sequel to *The Young and Evil*; a potential hoax to publish a story under the pen name Ghondi Cato; the abandonment of literature for painting; the possible sale of his papers to the University of Texas at Austin; and *Spare Parts*.

Of more general interest, the journals provide a detailed record of the expatriate literary and artistic community in Paris in the thirties; important visual artists of the twentieth century; the social mores of the United States, France, Greece, Italy, Mexico, and Tangiers; the cultural elite of the United States; Russian influences on the arts in the United States and Europe; theater; ballet; modern dance; the American South; Europe before the outbreak of World War II; post-war Paris; drugs; cinema; music; Greenwich Village; Weston, Connecticut; anti-Semitism; trans-Atlantic boat travel; and Florida. A few of the important persons mentioned are Kenneth Anger, George Balanchine, Tallulah Bankhead, Samuel Barber, Jean-Louis Barrault, Cecil Beaton, Eugene Berman, Marc Blitzstein, Alice Bouverie, Jane Bowles, Marlon Brando, John Cage, Nicolas Calas, Elliott Carter, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Jean Cocteau, Fleur Cowles, Leonardo Cremonini, Caresse Crosby, Merce Cunningham, Alexandra Danilova, Bette Davis, Jean Dubuffet, Max Ernst, Leonor Fini, Martha Graham, Peggy Guggenheim, Alexandre Iolas, Elia Kazan, Lincoln Kirstein, Alice de Lamar, Tanaquil Leclercq, Serge Lifar, Kenneth Macpherson, Nicholas Magallanes, Igor Markevitch, Leonide Massine, Nicolas Nabokov, Francis Picabia, Pablo Picasso, Robert Rauschenberg, Man Ray, Edouard Roditi, Ned Rorem, Kay Sage, Ben Shahn, Leo Stein, Florine Stettheimer, Igor Stravinsky, Allen Tanner, Dorothea Tanning, Stephen Tennant, Virgil Thomson, Tamara Tomanova, Andy Warhol, Peter Watson, and Orson Welles.

The journals also provide an intimate portrait of Ford's private life. They document Ford's relationships with his father C. L. Ford, his mother Gertrude Cato Ford, his sister Ruth Ford, his niece Shelley, and Ruth's husband Zachary Scott. Ford often reminisces about the family's frequent relocations during his childhood, including periods in Brookhaven, Mississippi, and Big Spring and San Antonio, Texas. There are also accounts of Ford's trip to Tennessee to visit his dying father; the intimacy of the relationship with his mother; Gertrude Ford's business ventures; Gertrude's romantic involvements; the sibling rivalry between Charles Henri and Ruth, as well as their mutual dependence; the difficulties Ruth experienced in raising a child as a single parent; the difficulties Zachary Scott's alcoholism created in his marriage to Ruth; Zachary and Ruth's generosity to Charles Henri; Ruth's career as a model and, later, as an actress; Zachary's acting career; the tensions between Shelley and Ruth Ford; the death of Gertrude Ford in Mexico; and the death of Zachary Scott.

Ford also chronicles his long-term relationship with the Russian painter Pavel Tchelitchew ("Pavlik"). The journals include detailed passages concerning the beginning of their relationship against the objections of many friends; their domestic arrangements; Tchelitchew's artistic concerns; his likes and dislikes among his fellow artists; his cultivation of younger artists; his close friendships with Alice de Lamar, Leonor Fini and, for a time, Edith Sitwell; his relationship with his sister Choura; his theatrical design projects; his chronic health concerns; his generosity to and affection for the Ford family; his emotional dependence on Ford; Ford's financial dependence on Tchelitchew; their intermittent squabbles; Tchelitchew's impatience with Ford's tendency to idleness; and Tchelitchew's insecurities concerning his worth as an artist. Especially moving are the passages in which Ford documents Tchelitchew's courage while the artist languishes in the Salvator Mundi Hospital in Rome, where, after some months, he would die of heart failure.

The journals also provide a lively record of some aspects of male homosexual activity in the twentieth century. Ford recounts his earliest sexual encounters with older men; his experiences with prostitution; the heady sexual climate of New York City in the thirties; his arrest for public indecency; the constant struggle between his desire for sexual release and for creative activity; venereal disease; his various sexual partners; his predilection for adolescents; the sexual unreserve in Paris *pissoirs*; the difficulty of renewing his Italian visa after he comes under suspicion of homosexuality; attitudes in various countries towards homosexuality; and the cruising protocol of several cities, especially Paris and Athens.

The journals have been extensively marked for deletions. Many of these are the result of Ford's re-reading with a view to publication. In addition, there are extensive editorial markings by Parker Tyler throughout; there are also occasional editorial comments in Tyler's hand.

A later accession contains a newspaper clipping about the American Indian activist Leonard Peltier, one letter to Ford from Ronnie Burk, as well as two of Burk's typescript poems ("Heatwave" and "Snapshot") and photocopies of his word collages. There are also eleven photocopy typescript poems by Bill Wolak.

Index Terms

Correspondents

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