

Helmut and Alison Gernsheim:

An Inventory of Their Papers at the Harry Ransom Center

Descriptive Summary

Creator:	Gernsheim, Helmut, 1913-1995, and Gernsheim, Alison, 1911-1969
Title:	Helmut and Alison Gernsheim Papers
Dates:	1755-1979
Extent:	32 boxes (16.11 linear feet), 15 galley files (gf)
Abstract:	The Helmut and Alison Gernsheim Papers consist of article and book drafts, correspondence, research materials, and collected correspondence and works that document the Gernsheims' long career as collectors and photo historians.
Call Number:	Manuscript Collection MS-1587
Language:	English, German, French, Italian, and Spanish
Access:	Open for research

Administrative Information

Acquisition:	Purchase, 1963 and Gift, 1980
Processed by:	Nicole Davis, 2011
Repository:	Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin

Biographical Sketch

Helmut Erich Robert Kuno Gernsheim was born in Munich, Germany, on 1 March 1913. His father was an historian of literature and his brothers were historians of art and economics, respectively. Helmut went to the University of Munich to study art history, but on the advice of one of his brothers he turned to photography as it offered better prospects for making a living. He entered the State School for Photography in Munich in 1934, graduated in 1936, and then worked for two months at a provincial portrait studio. From there he returned to Munich and received a commission to photograph the Munich Marionette Theatre. He also began working with color photography using Uvachrom processes. As he was half Jewish he was anxious to leave Germany under Hitler, and an exhibition of his puppet photographs at the World's Fair in Paris in 1937 allowed him the opportunity to move abroad. From Paris he went to London for a commission to photograph works at the National Gallery.

In 1938, Gernsheim took a job taking publicity photographs for P & O Cruises, but eventually war intervened. In July 1940 as a German and "friendly enemy alien" he was forced to go to an internment camp in Australia for a year. During this time he lectured other internees on the aesthetics of photography and then used his lecture notes to write *New Photo Vision*, his first of many books on photography. Upon his release from internment in 1941 he returned to London and joined the staff of the Warburg Institute at the University of London, taking photographic surveys of important and historic buildings in the London area for the National Buildings Record. Gernsheim's work was shown in exhibitions held by the British Council, the Ministry of Information, the Courtauld Institute of Art, and the Churchill Club and was well received by critics.

During the war Gernsheim had met Alison Eames (born 1911), and they married in 1946. Gernsheim continued to work as a freelance photographer, taking architectural images as well as publicity shots and portraits, but his photographic career began to wane. Around this time he met Beaumont Newhall, curator of photography at the Museum of Modern Art, who encouraged Gernsheim to research photographic history and to build a collection of 19th century photographs which were at risk of being lost to history. Gernsheim followed this advice, and Alison became his collaborator on this photohistorical work. Over the next few decades the Gernsheims built a peerless collection. One of their most significant findings was the world's first photograph, "View from the Window at Le Gras," taken by Joseph Nicéphore Niépce in France in 1826. Their collection also contained significant works by many British photographers including Julia Margaret Cameron, Alvin Langdon Coburn, Lewis Carroll (Charles Lutwidge Dodgson), Roger Fenton, David Octavius Hill and Robert Adamson, and William Henry Fox Talbot.

In addition to amassing a large collection, the Gernsheims were prolific writers. They produced dozens of books, over 200 articles, and several exhibitions, helping to establish the study of the history of photography. Their *History of Photography* became an authoritative and influential source from the time of its publication in 1955. Helmut spent many years trying to find a home for his collection in an effort to establish a national museum of photography in Britain. However, his efforts were fruitless and in

1963 he sold his collection to the University of Texas.

On March 27, 1969, Alison Gernsheim died. Helmut continued to advocate for the study of photographic history from his home in Lugano, Switzerland. He served as a distinguished visiting professor at the University of Texas in 1979 and at the University of Arizona in 1981. Helmut Gernsheim died on July 20, 1995, in Switzerland.

Sources:

In addition to biographical information found within the collection, the following sources were used:

"Helmut Gernsheim," *Harry Ransom Center*,
<http://www.hrc.utexas.edu/collections/photography/holdings/gernsheim/> (accessed 3 June 2011).

Oden, Lori. "Helmut Gernsheim (1913-1995)," *International Photography Hall of Fame*,
http://www.iphf.org/Hall_Of_Fame/Inductees_Bios/Helmut_Gernsheim_Bio.html
(accessed 3 June 2011).

Ride, Peter. "Obituary: Helmut Gernsheim," *The Independent*, 5 August 1995,
<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/obituary--helmut-gernsheim-1594867.html>
(accessed 6 June 2011).

Scope and Contents

The Helmut and Alison Gernsheim Papers document the Gernsheims' long career dedicated to the history of photography with book and article manuscripts; correspondence; research files with clippings, notes, and ephemera; collected correspondence and manuscripts by others; and mementos from photography-related events. Items span from the late eighteenth century to the 1970s. The archive is organized into three series: I. Works, 1947-1965, undated; II. Correspondence, 1943-1967; and III. Research Materials, 1755-1979.

Series I. Works consists of notes, drafts, proofs, galleys, and related correspondence for articles and books that Helmut and Alison wrote together, individually, and with others. Items are arranged alphabetically by published title. Variant titles are indicated for some drafts. Included are drafts of some articles that were unpublished.

Series II. Correspondence contains letters to and from both Alison and Helmut Gernsheim relating primarily to their careers as photo historians but also to their personal lives. Correspondents include photographers, families and descendants of deceased photographers, photo historians, publishers, museum curators, friends, and others. Items are arranged alphabetically by correspondent and chronologically within each correspondent's set of letters.

Series III. Research Materials, the largest series, is divided into four subseries: A. Topic Files, 1755-1963, B. Collected Materials and Mementos, 1934-1962, C. Works by Others, 1830-1979, and D. Withdrawals, undated. Subseries A. Topic Files consists of research materials relating to the history of photography which are arranged alphabetically by topic. Items include newspaper and magazine clippings and printed materials dating back to the mid-eighteenth century, Helmut's typed and handwritten notes, and related correspondence. Subseries B. Collected Materials and Mementos contains exhibition catalogs and invitations, conference papers, and other printed materials as well as personal items like press permits and notebooks. The exhibition mementos include items related to exhibitions of the Gernsheims' own collections. This subseries is arranged alphabetically by topic or event name.

Subseries C. Works by Others contains both correspondence and manuscripts by photographers and photo historians from the 1830s-1970s which the Gernsheims purchased or collected. Correspondence is arranged alphabetically by sender, except a couple of folders grouped by recipient, such as letters received by John Spiller. These files do not contain correspondence with the Gernsheims themselves and some of the letters are facsimiles, not originals. Following the correspondence are collected manuscript materials, arranged alphabetically by author, which include essays about photochemistry and photographers and some notes by photographers. The last subseries, D. Withdrawals, contains notes by Helmut Gernsheim which were originally laid into books in his library or with photographs in his collection. Original location information is noted with the items.

Indexes at the end of the finding aid list works and correspondents. Boxes 30-32 contain oversize materials. These materials were previously described in the Ransom Center's card catalog.

Related Material

The Gernsheims' vast collection of photographs is housed in the Ransom Center's Photography Collection.

Separated Material

The Gernsheims' library of over 2,700 books has been separated from the collection and is housed in the Ransom Center's Book Collection. The HRC Personal Effects Collection contains awards, medals, and miscellaneous objects belonging to the Gernsheims. Several cassette tapes with interviews of Helmut Gernsheim are housed in the Ransom Center's Sound Recordings Collection. A set of photographic Christmas cards by Angus McBean has been removed from the Correspondence series and transferred to the Ransom Center's Photography Collection.

Index Terms

People

Gruber, L. Fritz
Hatch, Evelyn M. (Evelyn Maud), b. 1874
Hoppé, E. O. (Emil Otto), 1878-1972
Man, Felix H., 1893-1985
Newhall, Beaumont, 1908-1993
Renger-Patzsch, Albert, 1897-1966

Organizations

George Eastman House
Museum of Modern Art (New York, N.Y.)
Royal Photographic Society of Great Britain

Subjects

Cameron, Julia Margaret, 1815-1879
Carroll, Lewis, 1832-1898
Coburn, Alvin Langdon, 1882-1966
Daguerre, Louis Jacques Mandé, 1787-1851
Fenton, Roger, 1819-1869
Niépce, Nicéphore, 1765-1833
Talbot, William Henry Fox, 1800-1877

Subjects

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Cameras
Color photography
Daguerreotype
Photographic chemistry
Photography, Artistic
Photography--Equipment and supplies
Photography--Europe--History
Photography--Exhibitions

Photography--Great Britain--History

Photography--Scientific applications

Photography--Societies, etc.

Royal Photographic Society of Great Britain

Document Types

Clippings

Correspondence

Manuscripts

Photographic postcards

Research notes

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- "110 Years of Photography--Have We Advanced?" by Helmut Gernsheim, typed draft with corrections, 7 February 1950 **Container** 1.1
- The Acquisition of Cyprus at the Congress of Berlin, 1878 [description of a photograph], typed draft with corrections, undated **Container** 1.2
- "Aesthetic Trends in Photography, Past and Present," by Helmut Gernsheim for *Motif*
- Parts I and II, typed drafts with corrections, 7 June 1958 **Container** 1.3
- Part III, typed draft with corrections, 14 April 1959
- Alvin Langdon Coburn, photographer: an Autobiography*, edited by Helmut and Alison Gernsheim
- Correspondence, notes, and printed materials, undated **Container** 1.4
- Typed draft with corrections, undated, and typed blurb, 12 October 1965 **Container** 1.5
- Typed draft with corrections, undated **Container** 1.6
- "Athanasius Kircher and the Magic Lantern," by Helmut Gernsheim, typed draft for "Discovery" with corrections, 13 February 1958 **Container** 1.7
- Beautiful London*, by Helmut Gernsheim
- Typed draft with corrections and list of plates, [1950] **Container** 1.8
- Proofs with corrections, 1950 **Container** 1.9
- "A Beautiful Queen: the Biography of Queen Alexandra, Consort of King Edward VII," by Alison and Helmut Gernsheim for *Homes and Gardens*
- "Queen Alexandra," typed draft with corrections, undated **Container** 1.10
- "A Beautiful Queen," parts I-IV, typed draft with corrections, 1 January 1960 **Container** 1.11
- Part II, partial typed draft with corrections, undated **Container** 1.12
- British Council Exhibition, by Helmut Gernsheim, typed draft with corrections, May 1950 **Container** 2.1

"Centenary of the Royal Photographic Society," by Helmut Gernsheim, typed draft for *Photorama*, February 1953 **Container** 2.2

A Century of Photography, Niépce to Moholy-Nagy, from the Gernsheim Collection, by Alison and Helmut Gernsheim, galley proofs and page proofs with corrections, 1956 **Container** gf

Churchill, His Life in Photographs, by Helmut Gernsheim with Randolph S. Churchill

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"Churchill, His Life in Pictures," notes and introduction draft, undated **Container** 2.4

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A Concise History of Photography, by Alison and Helmut Gernsheim, typed draft with corrections, 18 September 1964 **Container** 2.6

Creative Photography: 1826 to the Present, an exhibition from the Gernsheim Collection, by Alison and Helmut Gernsheim

Typed draft with corrections and letter, March 1963 **Container** 2.7

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Creative Photography: Aesthetic Trends 1839-1960, by Helmut Gernsheim

"The Aesthetics of Photography," typed draft with corrections, 1960 **Container** 2.10-11

"Creative Photography: Aesthetic Trends 1839-1960," typed draft with corrections, 13 January 1961 **Container** 2.12-3.1

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"Niepce's Supposed Kew Photograph and Other Niepce Heliographs Extant in Great Britain," by Helmut Gernsheim for <i>Photographic Journal</i> . Niepce's Supposed Kew Church Photograph, and other Niepce Heliographs Extant in Great Britain, typed draft with corrections, 12 July 1950	Container 7.11
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"Proposal for a National or International Museum and Institute of Photography," by Alison and Helmut Gernsheim for *Science and Applications of Photography. Proceedings of the international Conference held on the occasion of the Centenary of The Royal Photographic Society of Great Britain, London, 19–25 September 1953*, ed. R. S. Schultze

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Typed draft for *Life*, with corrections, 24 March 1952

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Typed draft for *Photorama*, with corrections, undated [published August 1952]

"Roger Fenton, Photographer of the Crimean War," [print version of the broadcast by Helmut Gernsheim on the BBC Third Programme published in *The Listener*, 1952]

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"The World Exhibitions of Photography at Lucerne," by Alison and Helmut Gernsheim for <i>Process Engraver's Monthly</i> , typed draft with corrections, 22 June 1952	Container 10.4
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