

Gordon Conway:

An Inventory of Her Papers at the Harry Ransom Center

Descriptive Summary

Creator:	Conway, Gordon, 1894-1956
Title:	Gordon Conway Papers
Dates:	1864-1986
Extent:	39 document boxes, 19 oversize boxes (osb) (27.51 linear feet), 7 oversize folders (osf)
Abstract:	The Gordon Conway Papers, 1864-1986, document the personal and professional activities of Gordon Conway, American fashion illustrator and costume designer, with the bulk of the collection dating from the 1910s to the 1930s. The papers also contain materials that belonged to Conway's mother, Tommie Conway, and Raye Virginia Allen, who wrote a biography of Conway, <i>Gordon Conway: Fashioning a New Woman</i> .
Call Number:	Performing Arts Collection PA-00019
Language:	English, French, and German
Access:	Open for research. Two posters are restricted due to their fragile condition, and will not be paged.

Administrative Information

Acquisition:	Gift, 1991 (G9170)
Processed by:	Ancelyn Krivak, 2013
Repository:	Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin

Biographical Sketch

Gordon Conway was born in Cleburne, Texas, in December 1894, the daughter of Jack Conway, who had served as mayor of Cleburne, and Tommie Conway. She was raised in Dallas and attended the National Cathedral School in Washington, D.C. After her graduation in 1912, Conway enrolled at finishing schools in Lausanne, Switzerland and Rome, and travelled around Europe. After seeing some of Conway's impromptu sketches at a London dinner party, an acquaintance recommended her to Heyworth Campbell, art editor for Condé Nast's publications. Conway returned to the United States and met with Campbell in New York in 1916, and within a year he was publishing her illustrations in *Vogue* and *Vanity Fair*. From 1918 to 1920, Conway was a regular contributor to *Vanity Fair*, and occasional contributor to *Harper's Bazaar* and commercial advertisers. Among her early successes was a 1918 illustration intended for *Vanity Fair*, "The Red Cross Girl," that was reproduced and sold as a poster. In 1920, she married Blake Ozias, a sales representative for the Delage touring car, and moved to Europe, where she maintained apartments in London and Paris.

In the 1920s, Conway continued to illustrate for fashion magazines, primarily *Eve* and *The Tatler* in England and the Italian periodical *La Donna*, while simultaneously taking her career in a new direction as a theatrical designer. She began by designing posters and billboard art for theatrical productions in New York and London such as *Oh, Lady! Lady!* (1918) and *Pins and Needles* (1922), then moved on to designing costumes for musical revues such as the *Midnight Follies* at Club Daunou, Paris (1924) and the *Frivolities* at New Princes' Theatre, London (1924). Conway designed costumes for numerous plays on the London stage, many featuring her friend, actress Dorothy Dickson, including *Patricia* (1925) and *Peggy Ann* (1927).

By the late 1920s, Conway had divorced Blake Ozias and transitioned from theatrical costume design to designing for the new medium of talking pictures. Beginning with *Confetti* (1927), Conway designed costumes for twenty-four British films, including *High Treason* (1929) and *Rome Express* (1932). In 1933, Conway was appointed chief costume designer for Gaumont-British Studios, but retired the following year and returned to the United States to take possession of Mt. Scion, the eighteenth century Virginia estate that was originally the home of Nelly Conway, mother of President James Madison. She continued to work sporadically through the late 1930s on magazine illustrations and advertisements, but focused primarily on restoring the architecture and interiors of her estate. Conway lived at Mt. Scion with her mother, Tommie Conway, until her death from cancer in 1956.

Sources:

Information in the biographical sketch is derived from the exhibition booklet "That Red Head Gal: Fashions and Designs of Gordon Conway 1916-1936," edited by David Schaff in 1980, and from other materials in the Gordon Conway Papers.

Scope and Contents

The Gordon Conway Papers, 1864-1986, document the personal and professional activities of Gordon Conway, American fashion illustrator and costume designer, with the bulk of the collection dating from the 1910s to the 1930s. Personal and business correspondence, diaries, notebooks, scrapbooks, photographs and photograph albums, clippings, and programs illuminate Conway's frequent travels and her career in Paris, New York, and London; production materials including photographs, programs, and clippings record Conway's design work for theater and film. The papers also contain materials that belonged to Conway's mother, Tommie Conway, and Raye Virginia Allen, who wrote a biography of Conway, *Gordon Conway: Fashioning a New Woman*.

The papers are arranged in three series. Series I. Gordon Conway, 1891-1984, is divided into five subseries, beginning with Subseries A. Production Materials, 1918-1984. This subseries is comprised of photographs, programs, clippings, and posters related to theatrical and film productions that Conway contributed to in the form of advertising or costume designs. Materials are arranged alphabetically by production title. Subseries B. Correspondence, 1912-1956, includes personal letters from Conway's friends and admirers, such as the artist Porter Woodruff and the playwright Guy Bolton, as well as business correspondence with Conway's employers, including Condé Nast art director Heyworth Campbell and *Vanity Fair* editor Frank Crowninshield. Also in this subseries are some of Conway's original designs for Christmas and New Year's cards, and a woodblock used to print cards. Subseries C. Address Books, Calendars, Diaries, Notebooks, and Scrapbooks, 1894-1964, contains a large number of diaries recording Conway's social and business appointments from the 1910s to the 1930s, address books listing her contacts in New York, London, and Paris, notebooks with lists of expenses and work projects, and scrapbooks of her school days and professional activities. Photographs of Conway, her family and friends, photographic postcards, and photograph albums make up Subseries D. Photographs and Postcards, 1891-1953. This subseries includes several photographs of stage actress Dorothy Dickson, and photographs of Conway's other friends including writer Guy Bolton and the heiresses Dore and Rita Gulbenkian. Subseries E. Clippings, Notes, and Printed Materials, 1904-1953, contains clippings about Conway, handwritten notes, and printed materials, such as programs, playbills, and posters.

Series II. Tommie Conway (Mrs. Jack Conway), 1892-1957, is a small series comprised of materials originating from Gordon Conway's mother, Tommie Conway, also known as Mrs. Jack Conway. Subseries A contains correspondence sent to Tommie Conway, most of it associated with the death and funeral of Gordon Conway in 1956. Tommie Conway's diaries and address books are filed in Subseries B, along with several scrapbooks and diaries created by Ollie-wood J. Leake, Tommie Conway's niece. Some of these scrapbooks contain clippings about Gordon Conway and other Conway family members. Subseries C. contains clippings and other printed materials collected by Tommie Conway.

Series III. Raye Virginia Allen, 1864-1986, primarily contains Allen's research materials on Gordon Conway and materials associated with the exhibit *That Red Head Gal: Fashions and Designs of Gordon Conway, 1916-1936*, which opened at The Octagon House in Washington, D.C. and travelled to several other museums in 1980-1981. Subseries A. Research Materials, 1925-1986, undated, includes notes, clippings, drafts of articles about Conway, and printed materials related to Conway and her family. Subseries B. Exhibit Materials, 1978-1981 contains clippings, notes, correspondence, programs, invitations, exhibit preparation documents, and posters. Subseries C. Personal Papers, 1864-1985 contains clippings, notes, correspondence, and printed materials not connected with Conway or the Conway exhibit. Included in this subseries is an original letter dating from the Civil War (November 30, 1864) written by "S. Fitzhugh." Its relevance to other materials in the collection is unknown. Series III contains a few pieces of original correspondence sent to either Gordon or Tommie Conway which were not removed in order to preserve the original order of the materials; these items are noted in the folder descriptions and the Index of Correspondents.

Access Notes

Two billboard posters for the plays *Oh, Lady! Lady!* and *Rock-a-Bye Baby* are restricted from access due to their fragile condition.

Related Material

The Harry Ransom Center's Gordon Conway Design Collection contains Conway's original illustrations and artworks, and the Costumes and Personal Effects Collection contains reproductions of costumes designed by Conway as well as personal items that belonged to Conway. Also at the Harry Ransom Center, the W. H. Crain Costume and Scenic Design Collection contains two original costume designs by Conway for the film *High Treason*, and the B. J. Simmons & Co. Costume Design Records contain several of Conway's designs for British theater and films.

Index Terms

People

Conway, Gordon, 1894-1956.

Conway, Tommie.

Allen, Raye Virginia.

Subjects

Fashion illustrators--United States--Biography.

Fashion illustrators--United States--Exhibitions.

Costume--Exhibitions.

Costume designers--United States--Biography.

Document Types

Clippings.

Correspondence.

Diaries.

Film stills.

Photographs.

Posters.

Programs.

Scripts.

Scrapbooks.

Series I. Gordon Conway, 1891-1984

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Subseries E. Clippings, Notes, and Printed Materials, 1904-1953

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