

**The New York Public Library
Humanities and Social Sciences Library
Manuscripts and Archives Division**

**Holger Cahill
Papers, 1907-1983**

**Richard Salvato
1989; 1999**

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Summary

Main Entry: Cahill, Holger, 1887-1960

Title: Papers, 1907-1983

Size: 6.5 linear feet (22 boxes)

Source: Gift of Dorothy Canning Miller and Jane Cahill Blumenfeld, 1989.
Additional gift of Wendy Jeffers, 1996.

Biographical Statement: Edgar Holger Cahill (born Sveinn Kristjan Bjarnarsson) was an Icelandic-American novelist, poet, folklorist, art exhibitions curator at the Newark (N.J.) Museum and the Museum of Modern Art, and National Director of the Federal Arts Project of the Works Projects Administration from 1935 to 1943.

Description: Correspondence, 1933-1960, with writers, artists, publishers and others, relating to Cahill's writings on art, his poetry and novels; family correspondence, 1907-1983, between Holger Cahill and his sister Anna Johnson, his mother, Vigdis Bjarnsdotter, and his wife, Dorothy Canning Miller, and between Anna Johnson and Dorothy Canning Miller; manuscript drafts of his novels, short stories, and articles; story ideas and notes; research notes; poetry and play scripts; writings by others; photographs; post cards; biographical material; clippings; annotated books and magazines.

Biographical note

Holger Cahill was a novelist, art critic, museum curator, authority on the folk art of the United States and Central America, and national director of the Federal Art Project of the Works Projects Administration from 1935 to 1943. He was born in Skogarstrond, Iceland, in 1887, and was the son of Bjorn Jonsson and Vigdis Bjarnsdottir. The name he was given at birth was Sveinn Kristjan Bjarnarsson.

Shortly after his birth the family emigrated to western Canada, and later moved to North Dakota. Poverty and domestic conflict marred Cahill's early childhood. A critical stage in Cahill's extraordinary life began at the age of eleven when his father abandoned the family and his mother became ill. Unable to care for her children, she sent Cahill to live with a nearby Icelandic farming family. Two years later Cahill ran away to Canada, where he briefly worked as a farmhand. Sometime later he began the wandering search for his mother and young sister that would consume much of his youth. He also lived for a time in a Winnipeg orphanage and a Gaelic-speaking farm community where he attended school. Returning to North Dakota, he renewed the search for his mother and sister and eventually found them working on a farm. Later he left his family once more and did not see his mother again until 1947 when he was sixty years old.

Cahill worked as a cattle-driver in Nebraska and Minnesota., and in St. Paul where he was a clerical worker for the Northern Pacific Railway and attended night school. He worked on ore boats on the Great Lakes and as a coal passer on the passenger-liner, *Empress of China*, which took him to Japan, Hong Kong, and Shanghai, where he jumped ship. His experiences in the Orient led in later years to the writing of two books: *China: A Yankee Adventurer* (1930), a biography of Frederick Townsend Ward which outlined his role in the Taiping rebellion; and a novel, *Look South to the Polar Star* (1947).

After his return from China, Cahill sold insurance and books and washed dishes in hotels before heading for New York City just prior to the outbreak of World War I. He worked as a short-order cook in lower Manhattan and attended night classes in journalism and creative writing at New York University where he met the future novelist, Mike Gold. When Gold became the editor of the *Scarsdale Inquirer* and the *Bronxville Review* in Westchester County, he employed Cahill as a reporter. At about that time he adopted the name, Edgar Holger Cahill, by which he would be known in the art and literary world. When Gold left for Harvard Cahill took his place as the editor of the two small weekly newspapers and ran them for three years before returning to New York to work as a freelance journalist and to attend courses at Columbia University and The New School for Social Research. In 1919 he married Katherine Gridley. They had one daughter, Jane Ann, and were divorced in 1927.

While writing publicity for the Society of Independent Artists Cahill met the painter John Sloan who introduced him to a remarkable group of painters and sculptors including Robert Henri, George Bellows, Max Weber (for whose important show in 1930 at The Downtown Gallery he wrote the catalogue), Mark Tobey, Walt Kuhn, Jules Pascin, Joseph Stella, and William Zorach. Thanks to his friendship with these artists, Cahill soon became involved in New York's bohemian

life. Another pivotal point in his life came in 1922 when he joined the staff of the Newark Museum, which had been successful in popularizing contemporary art through its exhibitions program. Encouraged by the Museum's director, John Cotton Dana, Cahill organized two comprehensive and significant exhibitions of American folk art, *American Primitives* in 1930, and *American Folk Sculpture* in 1931.

In 1932 Cahill served as the acting director of the Museum of Modern Art and organized an exhibition of early American folk art. In his catalogue for this important exhibition, *American Folk Art: The Art of the Common Man in America, 1750-1900*, Cahill drew on his Icelandic background in his description of the distinctive qualities to be found in the work of the largely unknown artists and craftsmen included in the exhibition. He felt that any critical assessment of folk art must begin with an understanding of the communal utilitarian traditions which infused it with meaning. In drawing attention to the underlying formal kinship with modern art of much of the work of folk artists, Cahill challenged the customary distinctions between fine art and folk art, high culture and popular culture. In the same year he arranged an important show of American paintings and sculpture from 1862 to 1932, followed in 1933 by the notable exhibition, *American Sources of Modern Art*, which featured the pre-Columbian indigenous art of Mexico, Peru, and Central America, and explored its influence on generations of Latin American and European artists. In 1938 Cahill married Dorothy Canning Miller, a long-time colleague at the Museum of Modern Art, who later became the museum's curator of paintings and sculpture.

By the mid-1930s Cahill's articles and exhibition catalogues had firmly established his reputation as a writer on art. He had arranged the first Municipal Art Exhibition of New York, and, with Alfred Barr, co-edited *Art in America in Modern Times*; and *Art in America: A Complete Survey*. In 1935, one of the worst years of the Depression, President Roosevelt summoned him to Washington to help organize Federal One, a relief program for some forty thousand needy painters, sculptors, musicians, writers and theatre people as part of the Works Progress Administration. Later in the year he was appointed national director of the Federal Arts Project. He proved to be an imaginative, sensitive, and skillful administrator. Under his leadership art centers were established in over a hundred towns and cities, murals reflecting the geographical area were painted in post offices throughout the United States, an index of American design was produced, and a generation of artists was nurtured, and their work exhibited.

When the Federal Arts Project ended in 1943 Cahill returned to New York to concentrate on writing novels, although he composed essays on art and a history of the Federal Arts Project. Despite being hampered by various illnesses and a severe heart attack in 1947, he managed to complete two books, *Look South to the Polar Star*, in 1947, and *The Shadow of My Hand*, in 1956, which was set in the Midwest of his youth. In the same year he began studying poetry with Stanley Kunitz, and taped a memoir for the Columbia University Oral History Project. He also received a Guggenheim Fellowship to work on another novel, *The Stone-Dreamer*, which was left unfinished at his death. Cahill died in Stockbridge, Massachusetts in 1960.

Scope and Content

The papers consist of general correspondence, 1933-1960, with writers, artists, publishers and others; and the emotion-charged family correspondence, 1907-1983 (much of it dealing with Cahill's childhood and the years of family estrangement). The papers also contain manuscript drafts of Cahill's novels, short stories, and articles; story ideas and notes for fiction; research notes on Gaelic; notes on *Finnegans Wake*; some poetry and scripts of plays by Cahill; writings by others, including Josephine Herbst, Robert Armstrong Andrews, and Bobby Edwards; photographs of Cahill, members of his family, and friends; and biographical material, interviews, miscellaneous clippings, and some annotated books and magazines. This collection does not include Cahill's papers on art and the Federal Arts Project, which are held by the Archives of American Art. The appended list of letters, and list of published works by Holger Cahill, were prepared by Wendy Jeffers.

The 1996 additions to the collection include postcard communications from and to Holger Cahill and Dorothy Canning Miller; drafts of *The Stone Dreamers* and unidentified fiction; black and white photographs, c.1937, of Chinese soldiers and refugees, and of North Dakota and South Dakota; and black and white and color postcards (without text) of North Dakota, Canada, and Iceland.

Arrangement Note

The papers are arranged in six series: I. Correspondence, 1907-1983. II. Writings. III. Biographical Material. IV. Photographs. V. Printed material. VI. 1996 additions.

Series Descriptions

I. Correspondence, 1907-1983

A. General Correspondence, 1933-1960.

This series consists of Cahill's correspondence with writers, artists, publishers and others. Included are such notables as Albert Barr, Malcolm Cowley, Dorothy Day, Hallie Flanagan, Mike Gold, Josephine Herbst, Stanton MacDonald-Wright, Nikolaus Pevsner, Mari Sandoz, and Ethel Schwabacker. Josephine Herbst's interesting letters number over sixty and cover the period 1950-1960. They contain friendly criticisms of Cahill's writings, and comments on literature and politics and her own work, her friendship with Cahill, relations with various publishers, and her radical political views. The witty letters of Stanton MacDonald-Wright, written in 1947 and reflecting his opinions on art, especially Oriental art, and his life as a painter, are also of unusual interest, as are the letters of the British art historian and editor, Nikolaus Pevsner, requesting that Cahill write a book for the Penguin History of Art series.

B. Family Correspondence, 1907-1983.

Includes letters by Cahill, his sister, Anna Johnson, his mother, Vigdis Bjarnsdottir, and his second wife, Dorothy Canning Miller. Of critical importance in this series is the emotion-charged correspondence of his sister with Dorothy Canning Miller concerning Cahill's remarkable adolescence, his change of name, and misrepresentation of his age and birthplace.

II. Writings

Drafts of Cahill's novels, *Look South to the Polar Star*, *The Stone Dreamer*, *The Hero*, *In the Desert*, *The Negro*, *Shadow of My Hand*; and drafts of short stories, notes, and draft story ideas.

III. Biographical Material

Biography of Cahill's mother, Vigdis Bjarnsdottir; obituaries; interviews; clippings re: Cahill and his books.

IV. Photographs

Cahill and members of his family; pencil sketch of Cahill by Joseph Pollet; grave of Frederick Townsend Ward.

V. Printed Material

Annotated books, farming and other pamphlets, catalogs, and other printed materials.

VI. 1996 Additions

The material added to the collection in 1996 by Wendy Jeffers consists of post-card communications from and to Holger Cahill and Dorothy Canning Miller; typescripts of Cahill's writings; black and white photographs, c.1937, of Chinese soldiers and refugees fleeing from the advancing Japanese Army, and of North Dakota, South Dakota, and Iceland; black-and-white and color postcards (without text) of North Dakota, Canada, and Iceland.

Container List

Correspondence, 1907-1983

General, 1933-1960

- 1 Andrews, Robert Armstrong
- Barker, Virgil
- Barr, Alfred **See:** Penguin Books, Inc.
- Burke, Libbie (Mrs. Kenneth Burke)
- Columbia University Oral History Project
- Cowley, Malcolm
- Davis, Hallie Flanagan
- Davis, Stuart
- Day, Dorothy
- Dewey, John
- Evans, Ernestine
- Feitelson, Lorser
- Fitzgerald, Robert
- Flanagan, Hallie **See:** Davis, Hallie Flanagan
- Gavert, Olive Lyford
- Gold, Michael
- Giroux, Robert **See:** Harcourt, Brace & Co.
- Guggenheim Memorial Foundation
- Guttormsson, Guttormnur
- Harcourt, Brace & Co., Inc.
- Hardy, Bettina Sallemme
- Hatcher, Doris **See also:** Harcourt, Brace & Co., Inc., and M.C.A. Management, Ltd., under Doris Schneider
- Hauksson, Porleifur, to Halldor Laxness
- Herbst, Josephine
- Jordan-Smith, Paul
- Komroff, Manuel
- Lattimore, Eleanor Frances **See:** Andrews, Robert
- Lattimore, Owen
- Laxness, Halldor
- Lindley, Denver **See:** Harcourt, Brace & Co., Inc.
- M.C. A. Management, Ltd.
- MacDonald, Dwight
- MacDonald-Wright, Stanton
- MacGibbon & Kee
- Mangione, Jerre
- Mencken, Henry Louis
- Meyer, Frank S.
- Morrison, Dick
- Mount, Charles

Munson, Gorham
Norman, Geoffrey T.
Penguin History of Art **See:** Pevsner, Nikolaus
Penguin Books, Inc.
Perkins, Maxwell
Pevsner, Nikolaus
Phelps, Robert
Prescott, Orville
Richardson, Edgar P.
Sandoz, Mari
Schneider, Doris **See:** Hatcher, Doris Schneider
Schneider, Douglas
Schwabacker, Ethel
Scribner's Sons **See:** Perkins, Maxwell
Siporin, Mitchell
Smedley, Agnes
Smythe, Donald
Tahcheechee, Leon
Thorfinson, Snorri
Ullman, John
Weld, Jacqueline Bogard

Family, 1907-1983

- 2 Holger Cahill with his sister Anna Johnson, his mother Vigdis Bjarnsdottir, and his second wife, Dorothy Canning Miller; and correspondence between Anna Johnson and Dorothy Canning Miller.

Writings

- 3 *Look South to the Polar Star*
The Stone Dreamer
- 4 *The Stone Dreamer*
The Hero
In the Desert
The Negro
- 5 *Shadow of my Hand*
- 6 *Shadow of my Hand*
- 7 Short stories; notes; story ideas

- 8 Research; reviews (clippings); notes on Gaelic; notes on *Finnegans Wake*; dream material
- 9 Articles (clippings from magazines; articles and reviews; art catalogs; poetry
- 10 Scripts of plays by Cahill and writings by others

Biographical material

- 11 Biography of his mother; obituaries; interviews; clippings re: Cahill and his books

Photographs

- 12 Holger Cahill; his first wife, Katherine Doolittle; members of Cahill's family; pencil sketch of Cahill by Joseph Pollet; grave of Frederick Townsend Ward

Printed material

- 13, 14 Annotated books; pamphlets, catalogues, and other printed material

Additions, 1996

- 15 **Postcards, 1947-1952**

From Holger Cahill to Dorothy Canning Miller

Writings

- 16 *The Stone Dreamers*. Draft typescripts
- 17-21 Unidentified fiction

- 22 **Photographs & Pictorial Postcards**

Chinese soldiers and refugees, circa 1937

1. Old woman.
2. Resting soldiers
3. Buffalo and old man
4. Washing clothes
5. Outside a town
6. On the road
7. Emaciated soldier and dead soldier
8. Children playing
9. Young man and old man with staffs

10. Waiting
11. Soldiers and refugees mingling next to train
12. Soldiers and hanging wash
13. Soldiers and refugees on board the [Chungking and Hanchow Railroad?]
14. Outside the gates

North Dakota and South Dakota

1. Fisk and his wife, Fort Yates, North Dakota. Two photographs, one closeup, one middle-distance
 2. Clouds and plain between Fort Yates, North Dakota and Mobridge, South Dakota
 3. Road in South Dakota near North Dakota border
 4. The long road, South Dakota
 5. Valley east of Fort Yates, North Dakota
 6. Oat field twenty-five miles west of Fargo, North Dakota (beginning trip to Fort Yates)
 7. Erosion at the roadside near the Cannonball River, twenty-five miles east of Fort Yates
 8. South Dakota ranch near the Cannonball River
 9. Four combines resting in a field, South Dakota
 10. Oat stacks about twenty-five miles west of Fargo, North Dakota
 11. Between Fort Yates, North Dakota and Mobridge, South Dakota
 12. ditto
 13. Near Fort Yates, North Dakota. The Pyramid buttes.
 14. Valley near Fort Yates, North Dakota. See the Pyramid buttes in center
 15. Monument of Sakajawea near Mobridge, South Dakota
 16. Sakajawea monument near Mobridge, South Dakota
 17. Sign at Fort Yates, North Dakota at turnoff to Sitting Bull's grave
 18. Mr. Longchase (left) and Holger Cahill (right) at Sitting Bull's grave
 19. Sitting Bull's grave
 20. Indian boy in the doorway of Mrs. Longchase's cabin
 21. Mrs. Longchase and her cabin
 22. Sioux County Honor Roll. Fort Yates, North Dakota
- Postcards (mementos)

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Assorted Published Materials

Material related to Cahill's interest in the Chinese Language