

Norman Bel Geddes:

An Inventory of His Papers at the Harry Ransom Center

Descriptive Summary

Creator:	Geddes, Norman Bel, 1893-1958
Title:	Norman Bel Geddes Theater and Industrial Design Papers
Dates:	1873-1964 (bulk 1914-1958)
Extent:	570 document boxes, 118 oversize boxes, 48 models, 7 bound volumes, 99 flat file drawers, 35 framed/oversize items, 37 rolled items, circa 1,600 sound recordings, circa 325 reels of film (circa 400 linear feet)
Abstract:	Norman Bel Geddes (1893-1958) was a visionary stage designer, director, producer, theater architect, industrial designer, producer of model photography, and author. The Norman Bel Geddes Papers, 1873-1964 (bulk 1914-1958), include correspondence, drawings, models, clippings, and photographs that document his industrial design and theater work.
Call Number:	Performing Arts Collection PA-00036
Language:	English
Access:	Negatives and damaged materials will not be paged. Access to audio and video recordings is strictly limited to those items for which a viewing/listening copy has been created. All other materials are open for research.

Administrative Information

Acquisition:	Gift of the Edgar G. Tobin Foundation, 1958, and Edith Lutyens Bel Geddes, 1961-2003
Processed by:	Frederick J. Hunter, 1963; Rufus Lund, 1991; Erin Lawrimore, 2002; Helen Adair, 2006
Repository:	Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin

Biographical Sketch

Norman Bel Geddes (1893-1958) was a visionary stage designer, director, producer, theater architect, industrial designer, producer of model photography, and author. A pioneer in stage design, he was involved as writer and/or designer in more than one hundred plays, motion pictures, and other theatrical performances ranging from the opera to the circus. As an industrial designer, he was identified with the popular streamlining style of the 1930s and was responsible not only for his own tradition of functionalism but for a variety of specific creations including the Toledo scale, Philco radio cabinet, typewriters, cigarette cases, kitchen ranges, poleless tents, and battleships.

Bel Geddes devoted the early part of his career to the theater, establishing his reputation in 1924 by successfully collaborating with director Max Reinhardt on *The Miracle*. In addition to the unproduced *Divine Comedy* (1921), Bel Geddes' most significant productions were *Hamlet* (1931), *Dead End* (1935), and *The Eternal Road* (1937). As a theater architect, Bel Geddes designed television studios for NBC in the 1950s, but his most elaborate (albeit unrealized) designs were for the buildings and grounds of the 1933 Chicago World's Fair.

Bel Geddes began his industrial design work in 1927. In the 1930s, his second wife, Frances Waite, along with Worthen Paxton, Earl Newsome, and the architect George Howe, were partners in Norman Bel Geddes & Co. The firm employed over one hundred people for the General Motors "Highways and Horizons" and "Futurama" exhibits at the 1939 New York World's Fair, and for military contracts and model photography during World War II. Other major clients were Chrysler, IBM, Ringling Bros., and the city of Toledo, Ohio, for which he designed master plans. His influence was perhaps greatest in unrealized, futuristic projects like the Futurama exhibit. In the 1950s, Norman Bel Geddes & Co. became a one-man firm.

Scope and Contents

The voluminous papers of Norman Bel Geddes, 1873-1964 (bulk 1914-1958), document his industrial design and theater work in equal measure and, frequently, in great detail. The papers are divided into three series: I. Industrial Design and Theater Files, 1873-1964 (bulk 1915-1958), II. Office and Clipping Files, 1917-1961 (bulk 1945-1958), and III. Personal Files, 1870-1959 (bulk 1930-1958). Within each series, materials are arranged by job number (000-988), then by format. Most job numbers correspond either to theatrical productions staged or designed by Bel Geddes, or to design projects undertaken on behalf of corporate clients. Coverage ranges from a single folder to hundreds of items. The collection also reveals the contributions and perspectives of Bel Geddes' clients and collaborators, in particular the photographers Francis Bruguière, Maurice Goldberg, and Frances Waite whose photographs and negatives are found throughout the collection.

Bel Geddes's industrial design work is documented with client correspondence, proposals, presentation books, contracts, research data, budgets, estimates, specifications, drawings, models, and publicity materials such as clippings and photographs. In addition, files for most projects from the 1930s and 1940s include job diaries and photographic record copy books.

Works represented in the theater segment of the collection include theatrical productions (dramas, spectacles, marionette plays, musical comedies, motion pictures, operas, and the circus) as well as architectural structures (theaters and television studios), writings by Bel Geddes, and sources of design ideas. Documentation of theatrical productions and architectural structures includes models, renderings, drawings, scripts, scores, production record books, photographs, publicity materials, correspondence, programs, legal documents and contracts, specifications, and source data. Notable among the original writings is Bel Geddes' autobiography, *Miracle in the Evening*, the working papers for which contain information Bel Geddes gathered as well as manuscript drafts, galley proofs, correspondence with the publisher, and photographs. Other publishing efforts are documented, including *Horizons*, *Inwhich*, and *Magic Motorways*.

The Office and Clipping Files contain correspondence with prospective clients, contracts, information about plays Bel Geddes considered producing, directing, or writing, articles by and about Bel Geddes, and information about exhibitions of his works. Also included are a large number of clippings arranged by subject, and other sources of design ideas such as manuscripts of plays and pictorial and graphic materials. The largest office file, "Prospects" (job no. 936), contains records of work that did not lead to job contracts. "Publicity" (937) contains material that was not necessarily related to a particular job. The clipping files include files on architecture, costume, interior sets, arts and crafts, natural phenomena, sculpture, and theater buildings.

The Personal Files document Bel Geddes' personal life, from the cars and homes he owned to travel and family matters. "Correspondence and Autographs" (957) contains letters that were removed by Bel Geddes from other job files. Correspondents include authors, architects, journalists, actors, designers, directors, and photographers. Family correspondence (960) is also extensive, particularly between Norman and his wives Helen Belle Sneider, Frances Waite, Ann Howe Hilliard, and Edith Lutyens. Some family photographs are located in this file; others are located in "Photographs: Personal and Family" (977) which holds a number of photographs of Bel Geddes. Files for "Jamaica" (973) and "Spain - Operations" (985) document Bel Geddes' overseas offices and residences during the 1950s.

Note on Arrangement: The order of the job numbers reflects the practice Bel Geddes developed in the 1940s when he began to assign a number to each design project as it was undertaken. He then applied the system retrospectively to earlier projects, and the resulting arrangement is roughly chronological. For each series, job numbers are as follows: I. Industrial Design and Theater Files, 0-899; II. Office and Clipping Files, 900-950; III. Personal Files, 951-988. For theater projects, materials are arranged within each job number by formats which correspond to the classification codes used by Frederick J. Hunter in his *Catalog of the Norman Bel Geddes Theatre Collection*, q.v. page 19.

Related Material

Drawings for *Divine Comedy* are held at the Tobin Collection of Theatre Arts at the McNay Art Museum in San Antonio, Texas.

Separated Material

Books and commercial sound recordings received with the collection were transferred to the Ransom Center Library.

Films were transferred to the Center's Moving Image Collection.

Noncommercial audio recordings were transferred to the Center's Sound Recordings Collection.

Index Terms

People

Bruguière, Francis Joseph.

Goldberg, Maurice.

Waite, Francis.

Organizations

Norman Bel Geddes & Co.

Subjects

Ames, Winthrop.

Jones, Robert Edmond.

Lutyens, Edith.

Reinhardt, Max.

Chrysler Corporation.

General Motors Corporation.

International Business Machines Corporation.

National Broadcasting Company, Inc.

Ringling Brothers Barnum and Bailey Combined Shows.

Toledo Scale (Firm).

Yale Puppeteers.

Century of Progress International Exposition (1933-1934: Chicago, Ill.)

Industrial design--United States--20th century.

Industrial designers.

New York World's Fair (1939-1940).

Set designers.

Theater--United States--History--20th century.

Theaters--Designs and plans.

Theaters--Stage-setting and scenery.

Document Types

Correspondence.

Costume design drawings.

Legal documents.

Models (representations).

Negatives.

Photographs.

Presentation albums.

Programs.

Prompt books.

Scores.

Scripts.

Set design drawings.

Sketches.

Technical drawings.

Item-level Descriptions

Detailed folder descriptions are available in a [searchable database](#).

Other Description

The theater portion of the collection was previously cataloged in Frederick J. Hunter, *Catalog of the Norman Bel Geddes Theatre Collection* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1973).
