Edward and Ruth Adler Schnee Papers

1828-2009 (Bulk 1942-2009)
28 linear ft.

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Architectural drawings: Cataloged in Horizon online catalog.

HISTORY

Ruth Adler Schnee was born in Frankfurt, Germany in 1923. Her family later moved to Dusseldorf, where they were neighbors to Paul Klee, an admitted influence on her work. Her mother, Marie Adler, studied at the famed Bauhaus, bringing that perspective to Schnee’s early education. As an artist, she was further inspired by the art she saw at Hitler’s Entartete Kunst (degenerate art) exhibition in 1937, in particular the colorful work of Kandinsky, perhaps the only positive to come out of that horrific period. During the increasingly brutal attacks and restrictions of the Nazi regime, the Adlers fled the country.

Schnee came to Detroit with her family in 1939, attended Hutchins Intermediate School, and graduated from Cass Technical High School in January 1942. Winning a four-year scholarship to the Rhode Island School of Design (RISD), she graduated in 1945. A brief career as assistant designer in the New York firm of Raymond Loewy (the result of winning a Condé Nast Prix de Paris award), ended when she attained a fellowship to the Cranbrook Academy of Art. It was while working at Raymond Loewy that she first met Minoru Yamasaki, who became a lifelong friend and associate. At Cranbrook she studied with Eliel Saarinen and experienced the intellectual challenges that she thrived on. Later, she met and became friends with such Cranbrook notables as Ray and Charles Eames, and Louis Redstone. Upon graduating in 1946, she entered a Chicago Tribune “Design for Better Living” competition, earning a prize and the recognition which started her on a career of fabric design. In 1948, shortly after establishing her fabric design and silk-screening business in Detroit, she met and married Edward Schnee, a 1941 Yale graduate from Connecticut. He immediately became part of her creative life, making the silk screen prints that Schnee designed. His degree in economics would prove invaluable to their future endeavors.

Ruth Adler Schnee began winning prizes and recognition for her fabric designs almost immediately. Early awards include: the 1948 American Institute of Designers (A.I.D.) first award in printed fabrics for her design “Strata”; prizes, awards and honorable mentions in many of the Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA) Michigan Artist-Craftsmen exhibitions, from 1949 and into the fifties; recognition in the International Textile Exhibitions at the University of North Carolina; and selection in the Young Designers competition at the Akron Art Institute in 1954.

Along with Schnee’s work in fabric design and interior space design, the couple owned and operated a design and retail establishment in Detroit, bringing mid-century modern décor and furnishings to the area. A carriage house behind the silk screen printing business on 12th St., in Detroit, was converted to a retail establishment, displaying some of the iconic designs first shown at the DIA’s artist and craftsmen exhibitions. The store moved to two other locations before settling in the historic Hemmeter building downtown Detroit. With their landmark store Adler/Schnee, on Harmonie Park, they initiated and were influential in many of Detroit’s downtown activities. Their retail establishment was
an early proponent of Michigan artists, providing a gallery for exhibitions, as well as presenting unique arts and crafts items from around the world, for which they traveled extensively. Edward Schnee was noted for his interest in, and promotion of, cooking utensils and gadgets, cooking-related events to promote them, and his ability to procure unusual items requested by customers. The Schnees sold the store, building and name, in 1977. Following the sale, they continued their business as interior design and space consultants, under the name Schnee & Schnee, Ruth creating fabric designs and designing interior spaces, and Edward managing the business side of the company. (Eddie, as he was known, also gets credit for naming many of Schnee’s textile designs.) In 1992 Schnee signed a contract with ICF/Unika Vaev to have reproductions of her early fabrics reissued. While continuing to work with ICF, she began to work with Anzea in 1993, creating new designs and adapting her original silk-screen designs for woven textiles. The relationship continues to this day and Schnee’s textiles can be found in the Anzea catalog.


In addition to a constant and continuing stream of residential design work, Schnee has had major commissions for interior space designs. They include working with Buckminster Fuller on the Ford Rotunda, and in Detroit, with Louis Redstone on Hannan House, and work for the Krolick School and the Johnson Recreation Center. She supplied retail items and design ideas for Eero Saarinen’s GM Tech Center. Schnee is fond of recounting that her design of a beautiful, draped Thai bok silk ceiling in the Tech Center’s executive dining room was firmly rejected by design executive Harley Earl in favor of something more masculine. She worked with her good friend Yamasaki designing some of the interiors for the World Trade Center. In 1983, Schnee & Schnee was awarded the design contract for the Jewish Community Center’s Edward and Freda Fleischman Residence and Louis and Edith Blumberg Plaza, over such competition as Albert Kahn Associates. It was a three-year project that involved learning how to adapt living space for senior citizens and the design of a Jewish chapel. The firm subsequently did work for a similar senior residence project in Minneapolis called Sholom Home.

SCOPE AND CONTENT

There is a large variety of materials in this collection, covering Ruth Adler Schnee’s early years to the present. The prominent role of her husband, Edward Schnee, in her design work and as partner in their retail business, is documented throughout their married life. There is a wealth of items that illustrate her early, artistic talent, including drawings, diaries and school papers, plus material on the contributions of her parents, Marie and Joseph Adler. Original drawings of her textile designs and correspondence with fabric companies help trace her artistic history. The collection is arranged into five series, Education, Personal, Professional, Oversize Material and Photographs.

SERIES I: Education covers Ruth’s early years in Germany, through her graduation from Cranbrook Art Academy. Material from Germany, in this series, is untranslated. There are related, oversize items, such as diplomas, a scrapbook from RISD, and many drawings done from elementary school age through her Cranbrook period. A number of pattern and fashion illustration books, compiled by Schnee, show her talent in that field, a talent redirected to architecture once she began at RISD.

SERIES II: Personal is of particular interest for the many letters Ruth wrote during her formative years, including camp letters from 1940 and many letters to her family when she was in Providence attending RISD, then living in New York City, 1942-1946. There are also letters from Ruth’s parents, Marie and Joseph Adler, written mainly from their winter home in Mexico. Two early diaries are written in “old” German, but have been translated by Schnee. Contained in this series are the papers of Edward Schnee, though there are many references to and by him throughout the entire collection.

SERIES III: Professional, is the largest and is divided into subseries Design Production, Business Records and Major Projects. Subseries 1, Design Production has in it records of Schnee’s work and achievements as a textile designer. It includes statements of her design philosophy, resumes and copies of publicity for her fabric and interior design work. Correspondence with ICF/Unika Vaev and Anzea documents the reissue of her 1950s designs as well as the creation of new designs. Categories on exhibitions and lectures illustrate her wide popularity and authority on the subject of design, especially mid-century modern. Original textile drawings can be found in the Oversize Material series.

Subseries 2, Business Records has the history of what began as Ruth Adler Designs, Inc., with original catalogs used to promote and sell her fabrics. Following her marriage to Edward Schnee in 1948, the company became Adler-Schnee Associates, then Adler/Schnee, and finally Schnee & Schnee. Materials gathered during the couples’ buying trips to such places as Scandinavia, Mexico and Central America give some idea of what was involved in these endeavors. There is information on the historic Hemmeter building, on Harmonie Park, where the last store was located. Publicity on activities in the store and surrounding area help chronicle the retail history of downtown Detroit during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Advertising and promotions show the avant garde merchandise carried by Adler/Schnee, as well as the store’s involvement with the local
artistic community. There is information on several of the residential projects designed by Ruth, as well as some of the smaller commercial projects such as Hannan House and the DeSerrano senior residence.

**Major Projects**, subseries 3, has detailed information on the work involved in the interior space design work for the Metropolitan Detroit Jewish Community Center’s Residence for Jewish Elderly, in West Bloomfield in 1983-1985. Architectural plans, signage design, chapel and meeting place details reveal the intense level of work involved. In the series **Oversize Material** are room presentation boards for this project. There is also an abundance of material on a similar project, called Sholom House, undertaken in Minneapolis in 1992-1992.

**SERIES IV: Oversize Material** has a wide assortment of mainly artistic materials ranging from childhood, high school and RISD drawings to Schnee’s professional textile designs. There are a few Adler/Schnee items such as a design done for an early promotion piece, shopping bags and some ad layouts. There are over 400 loose pieces of Schnee’s drawing through her Cranbrook years, much of it school assignments. Other work is contained in notebooks. There are roughly 150 of Schnee’s textile designs, in varying sizes and stages. Eighteen presentation boards for the Residence for Jewish Elderly project display room and floor designs, with samples of furniture, window, floor and wall treatments.

**SERIES V: Photographs** has many slides and color prints of Schnee’s work in interior design, both commercial and residential. Images that document several of her exhibitions capture many of her fabrics. Of interest are both prints and negatives of student projects she did while at Cranbrook. Also included are images of work of local artists displayed in the store or used in interior design work.
Box Number--Description

SERIES I: Education

Box 1
2. Germany – Schoolbook, 1912
3. Germany – School reports, 1930-1937
4. Hutchins Intermediate, 1939
5. Cass Tech – Commencement, 1942
6. Cass Tech – Misc., 1939-1942
7. Cass Tech – Papers, 1942
9. Cass Tech – RISD scholarship competition, 1942
11. RISD, 1945
12. RISD – Class materials, c.1945
13. RISD – Research papers, 1943-1944 (1 of 2)
14. RISD – Research papers, 1943-1944 (2 of 2)

Box 2
1. RISD – Reunion, 1995
2. Cranbrook – Tuition grant, 1945
4. Cranbrook – Convocation, 1946

SERIES II: Personal

6. Activities & interests – Brundibar, 1990-1993
7. Activities & interests – Chamber music, 1988-1995
8. Activities & interests – Clinton inauguration, 1993
12. Correspondence – Camp letters, 1940
13. Correspondence, 1942-1943 (found loose in RISD scrapbook)
14. Correspondence, 1946
15. Correspondence – Family, 1943

Box 3
1. Correspondence – Family, 1944 (1 of 2)
2. Correspondence – Family, 1944 (2 of 2)
3. Correspondence – Family, 1945
5. Correspondence – Family, 1964-1997
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6. Correspondence – Family, 1998-2005
7. Correspondence – General, 1961-1994

Box 4
1. Correspondence – General, 1995-2005
2. Correspondence – Housing, 1954-1994
4. Correspondence – Yamasaki, Minoru, 1953-1955
5. Diaries, 1934-1936
6. Diaries, 1939
7. Family and childcare, 1952-1963
11. Interior planning and design, 1954-1956

Box 5
2. Scrapbook, 1929-1937
3. Travel diaries, 1989-1990
4. Travel permission papers, 1942–1943
5. Travel-related documents and correspondence, 1954-1961
6. Wedding gifts notebook, 1948

SERIES III: Professional

SubSeries 1: Design Production

7. American Scandinavian Foundation Fellowship, 1947
8. Artist contacts, n.d.
10. Awards – A.I.D., 1948-1950
11. Awards – Chicago Tribune, 1947
13. Awards and competitions, 1948-1956

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2. Calendars, 2001
3. Calendars, 2002
5. Calendars, 2004
Box 7
1. Calendars, 2005
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3. Calendars, 2007
5. Calendars, 2009

Box 8
1. Correspondence – Anzea, 1993
2. Correspondence – Anzea, 1994
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5. Correspondence – Cranbrook, 1975-2008
6. Correspondence – General, 1942-1998
7. Correspondence – General, 1999-2004
8. Correspondence – General, 2005-2009

Box 10
1. Correspondence – ICF/Unika Vaev, 1992
2. Correspondence – ICF/Unika Vaev, 1993
4. Correspondence – RAS Licensing, 2002
5. Correspondence – RAS Licensing, 2003 (1 of 2)
6. Correspondence – RAS Licensing, 2003 (2 of 2)
7. Correspondence – RISD, 1963-2002

Box 11
2. Employers, 1946-1978
Box 11 (cont.)

Box 12
1. Exhibitions – RAS: A Detroit Treasure, JCC, 2002 (2 of 3)
2. Exhibitions – RAS: A Detroit Treasure, JCC, 2002 (3 of 3)
4. Exhibitions – RISD, “A Retrospective of the work of RAS,” 1995 – Correspondence

Box 13
3. Fabric costs, 1947-1951
7. Interests and activities, 1948-2008
8. Lectures, 1947-2008

Box 14
1. Publicity – Commercial design, 1949-1964
2. Publicity – Fabric design, 1947-1949 (SEE ALSO Box 29)
3. Publicity – Fabric design, 1950-1958 (SEE ALSO Box 29)
4. Publicity – Fabric design, 1991-2000 (SEE ALSO Box 29)
5. Publicity – General, 1940-2009
6. Publicity – Residential design, 1949-2004
7. Quilt design, n.d.
8. Resumes, 1946-1986
9. RISD Works, 2008
11. Student projects on RAS, 1986-2006
12. Teachers, 1943-1999
SubSeries 2: Business records

Box 14 (cont’d)
13. Ruth Adler, Inc. – Catalogs, 1947-1949 (SEE ALSO Box 29)
14. Ruth Adler, Inc. – Correspondence, 1949
15. Ruth Adler, Inc. – Publicity 1947-1949

Box 15
1. Adler/Schnee – Ads, original art work, 1964-1969
6. Adler/Schnee – Buildings, 1977
8. Adler/Schnee – Buying trip to Guatemala, Mexico, 1967

Box 16
5. Adler/Schnee – Cellar Gallery artists A-K
6. Adler/Schnee – Cellar Gallery artists L-R
7. Adler/Schnee – Cellar Gallery artists S-Z
8. Adler/Schnee – Community involvement

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1. Adler/Schnee – Correspondence, 1954-1977
3. Adler/Schnee – Harmonie Park, Correspondence, 1966-1967
4. Adler/Schnee – Harmonie Park, Minutes, 1966
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3. Adler/Schnee – Product catalogs – A-B
4. Adler/Schnee – Product catalogs – E
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6. Adler/Schnee – Product catalogs – H-I

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1. Adler/Schnee – Product catalogs – M-O
5. Adler/Schnee – Promotion samples, 1960-1966
10. Adler/Schnee – Promotions, Copco Cooking School, Correspondence, 1969
12. Adler/Schnee – Promotional activities, 1972 [Store Events]

### Box 20
1. Adler/Schnee – Promotions – Fun Fair, 1967

### Box 21
1. Schnee & Schnee – Correspondence, 1977-1994
4. Schnee & Schnee – Project catalogs – A-W
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7. Schnee & Schnee – Projects, 1997

Box 22
5. Schnee & Schnee – Projects – Sherr, Wm. residence, 1999-2002

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2. Residence for Jewish Elderly – Chapel, 1983
3. Residence for Jewish Elderly – Chapel, 1984
6. Residence for Jewish Elderly – Donor Tree/Wall of Honor, 1984

Box 24
1. Residence for Jewish Elderly – Publicity, 1982-1986
5. Residence for Jewish Elderly – Signage, 1982

Box 25
1. Residence for Jewish Elderly – Signage, 1983
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3. Residence for Jewish Elderly – Signage, 1984 (2 of 2)
6. Residence for Jewish Elderly – Specifications, 1982 (1 of 2)
7. Residence for Jewish Elderly – Specifications, 1982 (2 of 2)

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1. Residence for Jewish Elderly – Specifications (Addendum), 1982
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3. Residence for Jewish Elderly – Specifications (Epicenter), 1982 (2 of 2)
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5. Residence for Jewish Elderly – Specifications (Item), 1983 (2 of 3)
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7. Residence for Jewish Elderly – Specifications (Phase III), 1983
8. Residence for Jewish Elderly – Specifications (Phase III), 1983

Box 27
1. Sholom House, 1990 (1 of 2)
2. Sholom House, 1990 (2 of 2)
5. Sholom House, 1991 (3 of 3)

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SERIES IV. Oversize Material

Box 29
1. Publicity, 1994-2002
2. RAS catalog, 1947
3. Adler/Schnee shopping bags, n.d.
4. Adler/Schnee advertising, 1963
5. Fabric design publicity, c1959
6. Diplomas, 1939-1946
7. RAS design on tissue, 1947
9. Miscellaneous, c1950-1973 (House & Garden certificate; plan of Rosemond Estates; drawing of Shakespeare)

Box 30
1. 2 p. illustrated text, n.d.
2. 2 notebooks of childhood drawings; drawing on notepad cover
3. 50 school drawings, c. 1932
5. Pattern book, 1938
Loose-ring book of clothes design and materials, 1942
“Notes on the Draping of Garments” Cass Tech., c.1942

Box 31
1. 2 architectural drawings done at RISD, c.1942-1943
RISD scrapbook, 1942-1943
Box 32
“Dress Design VI” c.1942

Box 33
1. 5 drawings
2. 30 nature drawings, 1942-1943
3. 4 drawings of women’s heads & hair, c.1943
4. 28 architectural design drawings, 1942-1943
5. 6 fashion-related illustrations
6. 8 fashion-related illustrations
7. 4 fashion-related illustrations
8. 4 fashion-related illustrations

Box 34
1. Color portfolio (1943), 14 color studies + 2 pages color theory
2. 3 pastel drawings (c.1942), 2 on dance, 1 labeled Bach
3. 3 pencil perspectives, c.1941
4. 48 pencil experimentations, 1945
5. 12 pencil drawings on paper, 1943
7. 3 still life watercolors, 1944

(remainder unfolded, on matboard)
1 card design with Mondrian-like design, 1945
Illus. decorative screen inspired by Bali dancers, 1943?
3 designs for photographic background (puppets) 1945
Illus. “Designs for Dressmaking” c.1942
Illus. “Glory That Was Greece” c.1942
Illus. Ornament worked in jade, n.d.
Illus. “Weather Forecaster” 1944
2 typographical exercises, 1944
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Illus. “Breakfast set” 1944
Illus. “Low side table” n.d.
Three dimensional design, April 1946
Illus. “Garden for Victory” n.d.

Box 35 (in Prep Room)
1. Pencil drawings, 1 pastel, n.d.
2. Pastel music studies, n.d.
3. Pencil drawings, 1 watercolor, 1943
4. Pencil drawings, 1942-43
5. Pencil drawings, 1942-43
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6. Watercolor studies, 1943
7. Illustrations on board (includes CAA bookcase design), n.d.-1946

Box 36  Textile Designs *(in Prep Room)*
1. Drawing pad pages (preliminary sketches for Seedpods, Building Blocks, Hidden Treasures (Funhouse), Raindrops, unnamed sketch on reverse of Raindrops)
2. Fabric swatches (samples for weave construction for “Harlequin’s Hat” and “My Secret Summer Garden”)
3. Aerial Fields / Building blocks / Dots
4. Architexture, 1996
5. Aztec, 1993
7. Bells, 1993
8. Birds in Flight, 1993
   Building Blocks see Folder 3
10. Cadenza, 1996
11. Cross-section, 1948
   Dots see Folder 3
   Funhouse see Hidden Treasures
13. Get the Point, Glyphs, n.d.
16. Lamplights, n.d. (Xerox)
17. My Neighborhood, 1996
18. My Secret Summer Garden, 2007 (Xerox)
20. Pinwheels, 1993
21. Pipedream, 1993
22. Rich Soil, 1948
25. Semaphore, 1948
27. Sprouts, n.d.
28. Stardust, 1997
29. Threads, 1993
30. Wireworks I, 1948
31. Woodleaves, 1997
32. Edward Fields, Inc., 1982
33. Unidentified
34. Rejects
**Box 37 (in Prep Room)**
Design boards for Residence for Jewish Elderly. Boards have mounted on them samples for carpet, walls, furniture fabric & wood, and window treatment material, plus illustrations of furniture
- Staff office
- Multipurpose rooms
- General office/Director’s office/Conference room
- Attended bathing
- Nosh nook/Volunteer office
- Ground floor wings
- Second floor lounge
- Daycare lounge
- Miscellaneous room

**Box 38 (in Prep Room)**
Design boards for Residence for Jewish Elderly. Boards have mounted on them samples for carpet, walls, furniture fabric & wood, and window treatment material, plus illustrations of furniture
- Ground, second & third floors
- Atrium area
- Dining room
- Recreation room
- Atrium, lobby
- Wings for second & third floors
- Beauty & barber shops
- Third floor lounge
- Consultation office

**SERIES V. Photographs**

**Box 39**

1. Personal
2. School
3. Exhibitions/Fabric
4. Commercial design 1 of 2 folders
5. Commercial design 2 of 2 folders
6. Commercial design – Greektown
7. Residential design
8. Business – Adler/Schnee
9. Business – Adler/Schnee – Store events
10. Business – Adler/Schnee – Store merchandise
11. Business – Adler/Schnee – Artists/craftsmen
12. Guide to slides (partial)
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- Fink residence
- Markley residence
- Prechter residence
- Radcliffe residence
- Sanfield residence

Slide Box 2
- Adler/Schnee store
- Mexican artists
- Michigan artists
- Other artists
- Quilts
- Woodlands

Slide Box 3
- Residence for Jewish Elderly (RJE)
- Design by the Yard exhibit
- RISD exhibit

Slide Box 4
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- Hannan House
- Johnson Recreation Center
- Renaissance Center
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