Overview of the Collection

Creator | Helck, Peter, 1893-1988
Title | C. Peter Helck papers
Dates | 1904-1973 (inclusive)
Quantity | 5.0 linear feet, (11 containers)
Collection Number | Coll 181
Summary | Clarence Peter Helck (1893-1988) was a writer and illustrator who became most known for his automobile and racecar illustrations. The collection contains manuscripts, correspondence, and research files mainly concerning two books, "The Checkered Flag" and "Great Auto Races," and five framed car racing prints.
Repository | University of Oregon Libraries, Special Collections and University Archives.
| UO Libraries--SPC, 1299
| University of Oregon
| Eugene OR
| 97403-1299
| Telephone: 541-346-3068
| Fax: 541-346-3485
| spcarref@uoregon.edu
Access Restrictions | Collection is open to the public.
| Collection must be used in Special Collections & University Archives Reading Room.
Additional Reference | Paper finding aid with additional information is available in Special Collections & University Archives.
Languages | English
Sponsor | Funding for production of this finding aid was provided through a grant awarded by the National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC).

Historical Note

C. (Clarence) Peter Helck (1893-1988) was born in New York City on June 17, 1893. As a child he sketched the steam trains that passed near his home. In 1911, Helck began his career as a commercial artist with a New York department store, dropping out of high school to accept the position.

Helck developed an early interest in automobiles and became an avid fan of motorsport. As a young boy he got rides with race car driver Al Poole testing the latest cars from Simplex. The first race he attended was the 1906 Vanderbilt Cup on Long Island. In 1912 he studied art at the Art Students League in Manhattan (befriending fellow student Norman Rockwell), and spent many a lunchtime gazing at cars in nearby showrooms.
In 1915 Helck began free-lancing in advertising art. His first major clients were Republic Trucks and Exide Batteries. A long series of advertisements for Fisk Tires began shortly thereafter, a series which he continued after discharge from Navy duty during WWI. The simplicity and strength of the Fisk ads make them outstanding examples of their genre.

An early influence was the 'grandfather' of automotive art, the legendary French artist Edouard Montaut, who depicted speed through exaggeration. Helck next went to London, where he became an assistant to muralist Frank Brangwyn. A source of realism was that he painted on the spot, not from photographs. His first published work was for the Brighton Beach Motordrome and commissions for the Sheepshead Bay Speedway soon followed. He worked on art for Motor Owner magazine, and picked up commissions with automobile manufacturers Packard, Napier, and Sunbeam. Spain was Helck's next destination, where he did Benz advertisements and a program for Royal Spanish Opera. Returning to the US, Helck assisted muralist William De Leftwish Dodge at the Nebraska State Capitol. Advertising work done at this time includes Ford Trucks and Tarvia, a paving oil manufacturer.

From the 1920s through the 1940s Helck was a very successful magazine illustrator and advertising artist, acquiring innumerable awards and recognition. His commissions frequently were of industrial scenes, or featured cars, trucks and locomotives. During that period he also painted pictures of famous automobile races.

Helck worked for most of the major car magazines of the day, in particular The Autocar, which took him to England and to major races in France and Italy. In the 1930s he was commissioned by the Sinclair Oil Company to create a five paneled road map. The result was a portfolio of lush service station scenes which did much to promote the idea of driving for pleasure.

Harvard Business School awarded Helck in 1939 for an institutional series for Westinghouse. By this time, Helck had collected Art Directors medals in New York, Philadelphia, Detroit, Cleveland and Chicago. During the early 1940's he worked for Mack Truck, General Electric, Republic Steel, and Timken Roller Bearing. Helck painted automobile racing scenes which were exhibited in two cities. He also illustrated for various national magazines, especially the Saturday Evening Post during 1930-1945.

A big break came in 1944 with a series of eight paintings for Esquire magazine, in which he recreated the excitement of automobile races from the first decades of the 20th century. To his great satisfaction, these pictures proved very popular, and in the following decades he developed a large market for paintings of old cars.

Helck wrote a book on old time (car) racing and after years of rewriting and refinement, Scribner's accepted "The Checkered Flag" for publication in 1959. The printing was done by Enschede in Amsterdam and Helck personally went there to supervise corrections of inconsistencies in the art reproductions. H wrote another book titled, "Great Auto Races" (Abrams, 1975).

The magazine "Automobile Quarterly" has used Helck's racing paintings. The Arkansas Art center was the scene of a major Helck exhibit (100 works) in October 1964, which led to another large exhibit at Terra Haute, Indiana. Helck's painting of De Palma is permanently exhibited in the Speedway Museum. During the 1960s, Helcks commercial work included Chevrolet Trucks, National Steel and a course for the Famous Artists School.

By the time of his passing at age 95 he had witnessed motor racing from its earliest beginnings, when men drove huge machines at tremendous speeds over rock strewn roads, to rear-engined single seaters on modern tracks. He knew drivers from Louis Wagner to Mario Andretti and his paintings documented their exploits as none before or since. Helck once said, "Perhaps the greatest satisfaction has come from producing paintings, drawings and sketches for the heroes of my boyhood, the speed kings of their day, whom I later came to know."
He was one of the founding faculty for the Famous Artists School and in 1968 he was elected by the Society of Illustrators to its Hall of Fame artists for his “distinguished achievement in the art of illustration.”

A founding member of the Automotive Fine Arts Society, he was dubbed “the dean of American automotive illustrators of the 20th century.” The society’s Peter Helck Award is their highest honor, given annually at the Pebble Beach Concours d’Elegance to the artist whose work represents the pinnacle of automotive fine art.

POSSIBLE Helck’s real last name was Helok and that he used the aliases C. Peter Helck, Clarence Peter Helck, and Peter Helck. SOURCE: The website arfact.com

Biographical information Sources:
artfact.com website: http://www.artfact.com/artist/helok-c-peter-ki6w92452r

Content Description

The collection contains manuscripts, correspondence, and research files mainly concerning two books, "The Checkered Flag" and "Great Auto Races," and five framed prints of race car scenes by Helck. The manuscripts are separated by book and divided into chapters, and chapter entries often include drafts and revisions. Also available are research files and other unpublished materials which were used in writing the books.

Of particular interest are forwards to chapters of "The Checkered Flag," which were written by winning car racers. Publisher correspondence is included (1944-1963), as is a prototype of a book about car racing that contains sketches and draft chapters.

There are five framed prints of car racing scenes by Helck. The correspondence between the UO professor (John W. Crawford) who donated these prints, and Helck is catalogued separately in the collection C. Peter Helck letters, SFM 143.

Use of the Collection

Restrictions on Use

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private life are published that would be deemed highly offensive to a reasonable person) for which the University of Oregon assumes no responsibility.

If a researcher finds sensitive personal information in a collection, please bring it to the attention of the reading room staff.

Preferred Citation

[Identification of item], C. Peter Helck papers, Coll 181, Special Collections & University Archives, University of Oregon Libraries, Eugene, Oregon.

Administrative Information

Arrangement

Collection is organized into the following series: Manuscripts and a 1985 Addenda.

Processing Note

Collection processed by Richard Bear, 1989.

This finding aid may be updated periodically to account for new acquisitions to the collection and/or revisions in arrangement and description.

Related Materials

Other collections relating to C. Peter Helck at Special Collections and University Archives include: C. Peter Helck papers, Ax 841; C. Peter Helck letters, SFM 143.

Work by C. Peter Helck can be found in many private collections and museums, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the Congressional Library in Washington DC, the Carnegie Institute in Pittsburgh, the Philadelphia Museum of Fine Art, the Northwestern University Transportation Library, and the Long Island Automotive Museum in New York.

Names and Subjects

Subject Terms:
Authors and publishers--Correspondence
Automobile driving--Popular works.
Illustrators--United States--Correspondence
Motorsports

Personal Names:
Helck, Peter, 1893-1988

Form or Genre Terms:
Manuscripts for publication
Photographic prints.
Sketches

Finding aid prepared by University of Oregon Libraries, Archivists' Toolkit Project Team and Tanya Parlet.

C. Peter Helck papers, 1904-1973
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