

Gayleen Aiken (1934-2005)
Letters, 1979-2005,
MSA 470

Introduction

This collection contains letters from “outsider artist” Gayleen Aiken of Barre, Vermont, to Edith Harding and John Dumville, during the 1990s and early 2000s. It also includes a collection of original photographs and promotional materials from galleries. The collection came to the Vermont Historical Society through gifts of Edith Harding in 2003 and John Dumville in 2006. It is housed in one archival flip top box (.25 linear feet).

Biographical Note

(Beverly) Gayleen Aiken was born in Barre, Vermont on March 25, 1934, to Erwin W. and Vera Aiken. She lived most of her life in Barre, Vermont, though moved many times around central and northern Vermont through both her childhood and adult life. She proved to be an artist from an early age. As she was an only child, she created a family of 24 cousins, the Raimbillis, to keep her company, and they became an integral part of her art. Though she lacked a formal education, she eventually became a known figure in the world of “outsider art.” In the 1980s, she was discovered and befriended by Don Sunseri, who used his grass-roots arts organization, GRACE, to foster, promote, and share Aiken’s artistic vision. She continued creating her idiosyncratic, magical art until her death in 2005. Her works are part of the permanent collection at the Rockefeller Museum of American Folk Art in Williamsburg, Virginia, and the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington, D.C. She was featured in the Jay Craven movie *Gayleen* in 1985, and co-wrote and illustrated a book regarding her art, *Moonlight and Music*, which was published in 1997.

Scope and Content

This collection contains letters written by Gayleen Aiken to Edith Harding from 1990 to 2005, and to John Dumville in 1979-1980. The letters reflect aspects of Aiken’s identity as an “outsider artist.” Rather unlike traditional correspondence, each letter is more similar to the artists’ book. Most of the letters are stock holiday newsletters and notes of thanks which Aiken has annotated and enhanced with collage elements and photocopied photographs with descriptive captions. Topics discussed in these letters include her many hobbies, day-to-day life, her health and that of her mother, the making of the movie, *Gayleen*, troublesome neighbors, her homesickness and desire to move back into a large “heirloom” house, the fate of the Jones Brothers’ Granite Sheds, her passion for music and nickelodeons, the difficulty acquiring stamps and the challenges of relying on others to post her mail.

Letters longer than a single page are often bound together like a book using transparent tape. One such letter to Edith Harding in 1995 includes a selection of books

created by Aiken which she's bound, along with the letter, into one larger book. This volume contains books with titles like, "Our Properties Places Book," "Book for Nov. 1993," and "Our Closest Neighbors Who We Had the Longest Time, All the Early Half of My Life Book." Each, aptly titled, is a photo album of sorts, depicting and describing the different subjects. Included are numerous photocopied pictures of the old houses and "camps" Aiken and her parents lived in, of Aiken as a small child, of her parents wedding, of her extended family, and of trips to various area lakes, among others.

Also included is a collection of original photographs and promotional materials from galleries. The collection of original photographs includes more of the quintessential Aiken topics: old houses, musical instruments, the Raimbillis, various cats, and her parents. One exceptional photograph depicts her father and grandfather at a table listening to a phonograph with a collection of wall-mounted guns behind them.

A sampling of envelopes, both originals and photocopies, and postcards from some of Aiken's local art showings are also with this collection.

Related Collections

The VHS library collection includes a copy of Aiken's book, *Moonlight and Music* (741.973 A42m).

Inventory

I. Edith Harding

MSA 470:1 Letters, 1990-1993
:2 Letters, 1995
:3 Letters, 1995-2001
:4 Letters, 2002-2005

II. John Dumville

MSA 470:5 Letters, 1979-1980
:6 Photographs

III. Accompanying Materials

MSA 470:7 Envelope Samples
:8 Show Announcements

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