



Rose O'Neill Papers (SP0026)

Collection Number: SP0026

Collection Title: Rose O'Neill Papers

Dates: 1863-1990

Creator: O'Neill, Rose, 1874-1944

Abstract: The Rose O'Neill Papers consist of the personal correspondence of Rose O'Neill and her family members and friends.

Collection Size: 2 cubic feet
(35 folders)

Language: Collection materials are in English.

Repository: The State Historical Society of Missouri

Restrictions on Access: Collection is open for research. This collection is available at The [State Historical Society of Missouri Research Center-Springfield](#). If you would like more information, please contact us at springfield@shsmo.org. Collections may be viewed at any research center.

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Preferred Citation: [Specific item; box number; folder number] *Rose O'Neill Papers* (SP0026); The State Historical Society of Missouri Research Center-Springfield [after first mention may be abbreviated to SHSMO-Springfield].

Donor Information: The papers were donated to the State Historical Society of Missouri by David O'Neill on November 11, 2017 (Accession No. SPA0032).

Processed by: Processed by Erin Smither, November 29, 2017

Biographical Note:

Rose Cecil O'Neill was born June 25, 1874, in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania. Her father, William Patrick Henry O'Neill, was a bookseller of Irish descent who loved literature, art, and theatre. Her mother, Alice Cecilia Asenath Senia Smith O'Neill, was a gifted musician, actress, and teacher. She was one of six children, most of whom had some kind of artistic ability.

The O'Neill family moved to Nebraska when she was a young child. At thirteen she won a children's drawing contest sponsored by the *Omaha Herald*. By fifteen, O'Neill was providing artwork for local publications and helping to support her family with her income. At nineteen, O'Neill was in New York City trying to sell a novel and providing illustrations for various publications. Her illustrations published in the September 1896 issue of *True* magazine, were the first cartoons ever published by an American woman. By the time she was thirty, O'Neill was a nationally known illustrator and author. Her work was featured in *Ladies Home Journal*, *Good Housekeeping*, *Woman's Home Companion*, *Life*, and *Harper's*. She was the only female staff member for the humorous magazine *Puck*.

While she was in New York City, her father moved the family to a homestead in Taney County, Missouri. It originally had a "dog trot" log cabin, but as O'Neill's fortunes improved, so did the family farm, which came to be known as Bonniebrook. Throughout her life, O'Neill would live in Paris, New York City, Italy, and Connecticut. However, Bonniebrook would always be home for O'Neill, where she came to enjoy her friends and family and to recharge. The Ozarks were a huge source of creative inspiration for her.

During the early years at Bonniebrook, O'Neill was briefly married twice. First, she married Gray Latham in 1896, then Harry Leon Wilson in 1902. After her final divorce in 1907, Rose O'Neill never married again.

O'Neill is best known for her Kewpie characters, which debuted in a national women's magazine in 1909. They were impish, round fairies that were loosely based on Cupid from Roman mythology. In 1913, Kewpie figurines began production in German doll factories and became popular worldwide. Other Kewpie merchandise followed including fabric, dishes, books, and a vast array of trinkets. The Kewpies were the most popular characters in America until the appearance of Mickey Mouse, and O'Neill amassed a fortune of over \$1.4 million.

O'Neill was the highest paid female illustrator in the world. Her wealth allowed her to care for her family at Bonniebrook, but it also allowed her to travel extensively and focus on her fine art. Her "Sweet Monster" series of painting and illustrations is probably her best known work outside of the Kewpies. O'Neill also trained as a sculptor with Rodin. She also authored several books for adults and children. She was a very active suffragette, and used her art to promote the 19th Amendment.

The popularity of the Kewpies waned, and photography was replacing illustrations in the print world. O'Neill had spent most of her fortune and she moved back to Bonniebrook permanently in the 1930s. She was very active in the Branson, Missouri, community and the School of the Ozarks at Point Lookout, Missouri. She also worked with famed Ozark folklorist, Vance Randolph. On April 6, 1944, Rose O'Neill died of heart failure at her nephew's home in Springfield, Missouri. She is buried in the family cemetery at Bonniebrook.

Arrangement:

The collection has been arranged chronologically into 35 folders.

Scope and Content Note:

The Rose O'Neill papers consist of the personal correspondence of Rose O'Neill and her family members and friends.

Container List:

Box 001	f. 1-20	Correspondence, 1863-1939
Box 002	f. 21-35	Correspondence, 1940-1990

Index:

Index Term	Folder
Kewpie art	8
O'Neill, Alice Cecilia Asenath Senia Smith, 1850-1937	1-19
O'Neill, Callista, 1883-1946	3-33
O'Neill, Rose, 1874-1944	2-35
O'Neill, William Patrick Henry, 1841-1936	1-19