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John Ashbery papers and reading library acquired by Harvard University

Harvard Library becomes the center of study on Pulitzer Prize-winning poet John Ashbery (1927-2017)

Key Points:

- The gift of the John Ashbery Reading Library by his husband, David Kermani, combined with Harvard's acquisition of the last portion of Ashbery's papers, makes the Poetry Room and Houghton Library the center for study on Ashbery and his pivotal role in 20th- and 21st-century poetry
- The papers of John Ashbery (1927-2017) include manuscripts of his poems, multiple working drafts, and correspondence with fellow poets that occupy more than 250 linear feet of shelf space
- The Ashbery Reading Library features over 5,000 books of poetry and literature, art and film criticism, architectural history, philosophical and religious inquiry, travel literature, and cookbooks collected by Ashbery over the course of his lifetime

CAMBRIDGE, MA— Just as the publication of John Ashbery's *The Double Dream of Spring* (1970) helped cement the poet's post-*Tennis Court Oath* reputation, the double presence at Houghton Library of John Ashbery's papers and the John Ashbery Reading Library promises to do the same for generations to come.

"Ashbery's papers are one of the pillars of Houghton's American poetry collection, along with T. S. Eliot, Wallace Stevens, and Robert Lowell," states Leslie Morris, Gore Vidal Curator of Modern Books and Manuscripts, at Harvard University's Houghton Library.

Houghton's acquisition of Ashbery's manuscripts and correspondence began over 30 years ago in 1986, and the final posthumous shipment of papers occurred in December 2018. Occupying more than 250 linear feet of shelf space, the papers include manuscripts of all Ashbery's work, from *Some Trees* to *Commotion of the Birds: New Poems*, including multiple working drafts. His correspondence also provides a rich research resource, including letters from fellow poets Frank O'Hara, Kenneth Koch, James Schuyler, and Barbara Guest; and artists such as Joe Brainard, Nell Blaine, and Jane Freilicher.

Shortly after Ashbery's death in 2017, his husband David Kermani approached the Woodberry Poetry Room (located in Lamont Library and overseen by Houghton Library) with the generous offer to donate Ashbery's extensive library to its collection.



John Ashbery in Rome at the Villa Madama, 1963

In addition to the reading library, the Poetry Room has helped coordinate Kermani's donation of one of Ashbery's desks to Harvard University. Through a collaboration with Adams House, and with the generous support of the family of Seamus Heaney, Ashbery's beloved "Lawrence desk" (the desk he inherited from his grandfather Henry Lawrence) will be installed in Adams House's Heaney Suite, where undergraduates will be encouraged to create their own works.

Ashbery's Harvard ties were deep, beginning with his time as an undergraduate (class of 1949), where he began life-long friendships with fellow poets Frank O'Hara, Kenneth Koch, Barbara Guest, and Robert Creeley, and gave his very first poetry reading at the Woodberry Poetry Room. His interest in poetry was nurtured by attending campus poetry readings by W.H. Auden, William Carlos Williams, Marianne Moore, T.S. Eliot, and Wallace Stevens, and he chose to write his senior honors thesis on Auden. And Auden just happened to be the judge who awarded Ashbery the Yale Younger Poets Prize for *Some Trees*, an award that launched Ashbery's career.



John Ashbery's 70th birthday celebration at the Woodberry Poetry Room, 1997.

In 1951, the Woodberry Poetry Room made the earliest extant recording of Ashbery's work, when his one-act play *Everyman* premiered in Cambridge, Mass., under the auspices of the Poets' Theatre. He was generous in giving many readings on campus as his fame grew. In 2000 he delivered the prestigious Norton lectures at Harvard and received an honorary doctorate from the University in 2001. He was awarded the Harvard Arts Medal in 2009, and the Harvard Film Archive celebrated "John Ashbery at the

Movies" with the poet's commentary on some of his favorite films. In 2014, John Latouche's film "Presenting Jane" (1952), which features early film appearances by John Ashbery, Frank O'Hara, James Schuyler, and Jane Freilicher, was donated to the Poetry Room by cinematographer Harrison Starr.

Harvard is honored to continue this long and steadfast accompaniment of Ashbery's work into the future.

"We are thrilled to add John Ashbery's papers and reading library to our poetry holdings," says Thomas Hyry, Florence Fearington Librarian of Houghton Library, "and we look forward to seeing generations of scholars, writers, students, and others engage with and learn from Ashbery's life and work."

Images available on request:

1. *John Ashbery in Rome at the Villa Madama. Photo by Fersinando Sacco, 1963. From the John Ashbery papers (*89M-58, box 49), Houghton Library, Harvard University.*

2. David Kermani and John Ashbery. Photograph by Clarice Rivers, Summer 1977. © Clarice Rivers. From the John Ashbery Papers, (*89M-58, box 49), Houghton Library, Harvard University.

3. John Ashbery. "Self-portrait in a Convex Mirror," typescript with autograph changes, ca. 1974. John Ashbery papers, Houghton Library, Harvard University. © 1974, 1975, 1985, 2008, 2019 Estate of John Ashbery. All rights reserved.

4. John Ashbery's 70th birthday celebration at the Woodberry Poetry Room, 1997. Photographer unknown. From the Woodberry Poetry Room records, Houghton Library, Harvard University.

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