



Special Collections & University Archives
1 Campus Drive • Allendale, Michigan 49401 • 616.331.8556

Collection title: Mathias J. Alten Papers **Volume:** 2.5 cu. ft.
[7 boxes]

Collection number: RHC- 28
Date received: May 2008
Inclusive dates: 1893-2008

Provenance: The papers were donated by Gloria Gregory, Dianne Boozer, and Anita Gilleo, grandchildren of Mathias J. Alten in 2008.

Copyright Status: GVSU has rights to manage and provide access to the collection. Consult Special Collections for further information.

Preferred Citation: Researchers wishing to cite this collection should use the following credit line: Mathias J. Alten Papers, RHC-28. Special Collections & University Archives, Grand Valley State University Libraries.

Restrictions: N/A.

Biographical note: Chronology

Mathias J. Alten, 1871-1938

- 1871 Born on Feb. 13 in Gusenburg, Rhine Province, Germany
- 1876-84 Alten family lives in Marpingen, Germany. Mathias earns money painting pictures of soldiers stationed there to control crowds making a pilgrimage to the area of a reported apparition of the Virgin Mary. He sells a portrait of the Crown Prince Frederick to the Countess de Wendel.
- 1885-88 Apprentice to Joseph Klein as a painter and paperhanger. He works in Roman Catholic churches and in theaters, and receives an apprentice certificate signed by Klein.
- 1888-89 Employed by Joseph Klein.
- 1888-90 Immigrates to the United States with his parents, brother, and sister. The family lives for a short time with relatives in Ferrysburg, Michigan, moving to the west side of Grand Rapids in the spring. This area is heavily populated by German immigrants at this time. Alten works as a decorator for local furniture factories.
- 1895 Marries Bertha L. Schwind. Together they operate Schwind and Alten, a paint and wallpaper store formerly owned by Bertha's father, who had died the previous year.
- 1896 Daughter Eleanore (Ella) is born Dec. 1.

- 1898 Daughter Camelia is born Nov. 13. Alten becomes a U.S. citizen Nov. 1, and applies for a passport that same day. He leaves in late December for study in Europe when she is 6 weeks old.
- 1899 Enrolls at Academie Julian in Paris. Later enrolls at Academie Colorossi, where he wins a gold medal in figure drawing. He also attends afternoon sketch classes at J. A. McN. Whistler's academy. In the summer he travels, paints, and visits galleries in the Vatican, Rome, Florence, Naples, Genoa, Turin, Herculaneum, Siena, and Alexandria. Returning to Paris, he paints landscapes and peasants, especially along the coast at Etaples. He visits and paints in Holland and Belgium before returning home in September. In October he and another artist, Constant L. Flierman, open a studio and art school in the same room where his former teacher, E. A. Turner, had maintained a studio. Alten continues to teach evening classes in Grand Rapids for 25 years.
- 1902 In the fall he paints at Old Lyme, Connecticut.
- 1903 Daughter Viola is born Oct. 19.
- 1909 Alten goes to Portland, OR to fulfill a commission for a portrait of former Michigan lumberman John H. Haak with his wife, daughter, and son.
- 1910 Alten leaves for Europe with Bertha, his three daughters, and a student, Norman S. Chamberlain on August 24. He goes to Holland first and paints people, homes, canals, seascapes, and landscapes.
- 1911 In the spring he travels with his wife and daughters to Scheveningen, a fishing village/resort on the North Sea. He paints huge work horses pulling herring boats to the seashore. While he is overseas, the two large murals, The Sources of Wealth and The Uses of Wealth, painted in 1910, are installed in the Grand Haven State Bank. A grand opening is held June 3. Alten and family visit Belgium, France, Switzerland, and Germany before returning to America in late summer. While in New York, Alten sees paintings by Spanish Impressionist Joaquin Sorolla and is much impressed with the colorful rendering of many of the same subjects that he had painted in Holland. Bertha and the children return to Michigan, and Alten travels to Old Lyme again, where he stays for three months before returning to Grand Rapids in November.
- 1912 In March Alten sails to Spain, establishing his base in Cabanal, near Valencia, where Sorolla had done many of his beach paintings. He travels to Italy, Austria, Germany, and Tangier, also visiting other Spanish cities such as Madrid and Granada. He tries to visit Sorolla but discovers that he is not at home. Alten's love of animals causes him to describe the single bullfight that he attends as "revolting". He paints many scenes of oxen pulling fishing boats in the brilliant sunlight, and on his return to Grand Rapids in October, his palette remains much brighter than before this trip.
- 1913 Alten purchases a home at 1593 E. Fulton in July, which will be his residence for the rest of his life. In the fall he returns to Old Lyme.

- 1914 Several of Alten's paintings are reproduced as color lithographs for a 1915 calendar printed by Dickinson Bros. of Grand Rapids at Michigan Lithograph on the corner of Fulton & Carlton.
- 1919 Commissioned to paint a posthumous portrait of a young Grand Rapids man killed in action in France, Alten hires a sitter who was about the same size and requests numerous photographs showing the subject's hands and facial features. He uses this same procedure in later years when he was asked to do posthumous portraits, including those of the Michigan judiciary and the portrait of the woman who was killed on the Titanic.
- 1920 In December, Alten wins the gold medal at the Scarab Club in Detroit for a group of three of his paintings.
- 1922 Returns to Spain with Bertha and a student, Grand Rapids born Foster Jewell. He paints for a while in Valencia, and then travels inland to Sagunto, where he paints peasants and village scenes. They return after spending several months in Europe.
- 1925 Exhibits several of his Spanish scenes in April in a one-artist show at the Southby Salon in Los Angeles. This show was arranged by his daughter Eleanore, who had traveled to the West Coast to promote and sell his work. Other paintings from this year include a portrait of the Bishop of the Grand Rapids Diocese, Edward Kelly, with dimensions to the precise protocol for a seated bishop, and an illustration of a newsboy for the 1926 Grand Rapids Press calendar.
- 1927 One of Alten's former students, Norman Chamberlain, comes to Grand Rapids in June for a month-long exhibit of his work at the Grand Rapids Art Gallery. Alten travels with him to Taos in July, where he paints more than 40 canvases depicting Native Americans, landscapes, and adobe buildings in the Taos area.
- 1928 Travels again to Spain with student, Kreigh Collins.
- 1929 Travels with Bertha to New York, where he exhibits at a one-man show in the Holt Galleries from February to March. They go to Hollywood, Florida, where Alten paints colorful pictures of sunbathers and beach umbrellas. He purchases a home in Florida and, before the family could move, in loses it during the crash of 1929. Later that year he travels to southern California, where he paints scenes at Laguna Beach.
- 1931 Travels to New England in the fall, where he concentrated on scenes of beaches and small fishing boats.
- 1934 Travels to Los Angeles to paint a portrait of Fred Webber, formerly of the Webber Showcase Co. in Grand Rapids. While there he also paints several views of Spanish missions that are later featured in the May/June issue of the Grand Rapids Mirror.
- 1935 Travels to Tarpon Springs, Florida, in the summer, where he paints a series of pictures of the Greek sponge fishermen and their colorful boats.

- 1937 Alten paints autumn and early winter landscapes in rural areas around Grand Rapids.
- 1938 On March 8 Alten dies of a heart attack at his home at 1593 E. Fulton in Grand Rapids.

Mathias Alten Papers

Collection description summary:

The Mathias J. Alten papers document the personal life and career of the West Michigan painter. The collection includes biographical information, business records, exhibit catalogs, and newspaper clippings collected by family members.

Arrangement: The collection is organized in # series: 1) Personal and professional files, 2) Photographs, 3) Reference files and publications

Series descriptions:

Series 1: Personal and professional files

Personal and professional files document portions of the life and career of Mathias J. Alten. Files include biographical materials, interviews with family members, a high school diary of his daughter Camelia, exhibit and gallery files, painting inventories, and awards.

Series 2: Photographs

Photographs of Alten, his family and friends, and photographic reproductions of his work. File also includes a home movie.

Series 3: Reference files and publications

Catalogs, brochures, newspaper clippings, a scrapbook of clippings, and publications related to the life and work of Mathias J. Alten.

Container List

Box 1

Series 1: Personal and professional files

Box 1

- Biographical file
- Biographical sketches from Bertha Alten
- Biographical sketches by family members
- Camelia Demmon interview (see box 7)
- Family history
- Correspondence from M. Alten and quotes
- Gloria Gregory/Anita Gilleo notes
- *I Painted Pictures*, Michigan Historical Center, 2001
- Homes
- Tiffany-style window
- Alten Foundry
- Legal file
- Insurance file

- Sales
- Inventory of paintings
- Correspondence about Alten
- Cynthia Kay film/ Jim Straub
- Historic marker
- Otto Malek, Grand Rapids Music School
- Other artists
- Southwest painting

Box 2

- Amway Grand Plaza/Pantlind Hotel
- Art Digest, 1938
- Bergsma Gallery
- Butterworth Hospital, 1976-1980
- Center Art Gallery exhibit, 1984
- Chicago Galleries Assoc., 1937-1938
- Creative Arts Gallery, 1985
- Detroit Historical Museum, 1973-1974
- Detroit Institute of Arts, 1901, 1993
- Durant Hotel-Spanish paintings
- Fountain Street Church
- Fremont Foundation exhibit
- Grand Rapids Art Gallery
- Grand Rapids Art Museum
- Grand Rapids Historical Society
- Grand Rapids Art Museum 1998 exhibit
- Grand Rapids Public Museum, 1981-1982
- Grand Valley State University and the Gordon Gallery
- Hefner Art Gallery
- Holt Gallery, 1929
- Michigan Historical Museum, 2004
- Muskegon Museum of Art, 1991, 1994
- National Museum of American Art, 1987
- Perception Gallery, 1986, 1990-91
- Purdue University Galleries/Krannert Gallery
- Sketches of Alten and of Alten's life class
- Revue du Vral et du Beau
- Villa Taverna
- Women's City Club

Box 3

- *The Poetical Works of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow* (household edition) inscribed 1893 "A Merry Christmas" M. Alten (to his wife), later inscribed "1940 A Happy Birthday to Gloria (Alten Gregory) from Grammie. This was your Grandfather's gift to me."
- Diary of Camelia Alten (Demmon) during her last semester of her senior year at Central High School, 1917.
- Gold medal from Académie Colarossi, Paris. 1ère Mention Dessen Mathias Alten 1899.

- 14k gold medal to Mathias J. Alten Annual Exhibition of Michigan Artists Mathias J. Alten 1920 on front, Scarab Award Courtesy of Frederic Zeigen, Weyhing Bros. Mfg. Co. Detroit, Mich.
- Video of taken from old movies photographed by Ralph W. Demmon with one of the first Kodak movie cameras, 1930.
- Audiotape and CD of Camelia Alten-Demmon talking about Mathias Alten, copy of interview taped in ca. 1969
- Schwind & Alten (32 Bridge St. GR.) ledger/account book, May 1897-Aug. 1898 (See Box 7)

Series 2: Photographs

Box 4 and 5

- Photographs and reproductions of paintings

Series 3: Reference files, publications, and artifacts

Box 6

- Newspaper clippings, 1900-present, undated

Box 7

- Schwind & Alten (32 Bridge St. GR.) ledger/account book, May 1897-Aug. 1898 (see Personal files)
- CD of photos and article layouts from scrapbook and photocopy of contents (see Scrapbook)
- Exhibit catalog from Grand Valley State College, 1979. Alten exhibit coinciding with Festival '79.
- Michigan Carved Out of the Woods 1988 calendar from the Bureau of History Michigan Dept. of State.
- Grand Rapids magazine, Dec. 1993, Mathias J. Alten: Prolific Painter by Janet Meana.
- Mathias J. Alten: Journey of an American Painter, 1998 [hardcover]
- American Art Review, Dec. 1998 (2 copies)
- Bound photocopy of Catalogue of Paintings by Joaquin Sorolla y Batista.
- Scrapbook of newspaper articles
- 1 metal palette