

# *Mathias J. Alten: An American Artist at the Turn of the Century* Exhibition Transcript

## Exhibition Introduction

German-born American artist Mathias Joseph Alten (1871-1938) immigrated to the United States in 1889 at the age of seventeen. His family settled in Grand Rapids, Michigan, a premier furniture-manufacturing center and desirable location for immigrants in the late-nineteenth century. Here, amidst a rapidly changing world, Alten went on to establish a family, home, and studio for the entirety of his career.

Like many American painters of the period, Alten was drawn to the major artistic and cultural centers of Europe and the United States. Beginning in 1898 and continuing over the next four decades, he traveled extensively to pursue artistic training, exhibit his work, and engage with fellow artists. In spite of his attraction to foreign communities, Alten chose to keep his professional home in the same city and state that welcomed his family during the late nineteenth-century. As a result, his work was influenced by the landscapes and techniques he discovered abroad, but also remained deeply connected to the rural Michigan landscape widely featured in his paintings.

Over his career, Alten created more than 3,000 works of art initially influenced by the Barbizon and Hague Schools and later by the Impressionism movement. He repeatedly sought out and celebrated traditional laborers and nostalgic settings even as modernization transformed life in the early twentieth-century. On the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his birth, this exhibition commemorates Alten's life and career with works of art, historic photographs, and personal artifacts drawn from the collection at Grand Valley State University.

## Section 1: A World in Flux

In the late nineteenth century the United States entered the Gilded Age, a period of rapid economic and urban growth driven by industrialization and immigration. Between 1880 and 1920, more than 20 million people immigrated to the United States. In Michigan the population doubled between 1870 and 1890. This led to an expansion and development of cities in the Midwest, as well as industrial growth in urban regions and farming in rural areas. In the years leading up to the turn of the century, Michigan led the nation in lumber production, which further fueled the state's growth.

Across the Atlantic, in what would soon be the newly unified German Empire, Mathias Joseph Alten was born February 13, 1871 in Gusenburg. From an early age, he showed artistic interest and capabilities, eventually apprenticing as a painter and paperhanger under Joseph Klein. On January 12, 1889, with his parents, brother and sister, Alten left Europe for a new life in the United States, settling on the west side of Grand Rapids amongst the German and Polish communities.

Alten continued his artistic interests as a new immigrant in the United States, finding work as a decorator in local furniture factories. During 1891-92 he decorated the local Rathskeller, a German brew house, and began to take instruction from the artist Edward A. Turner (1851-1899). He married Berth L. Schwind on February 9, 1895, and the couple operated *Schwind and Alten*, a paint and wallpaper store formerly owned by Bertha's late father. In this rapidly changing world, Alten's early experiences and contact with the laboring class would go on to influence his work throughout his career.

### 1.1 Landscape with Stream

A shallow, bubbling stream bisects a light green meadow and disappears into the horizon. A cove of large trees with deep green leaves stands to the left of the stream casting shadows on the grass beneath. Big and fluffy clouds rise in the blue sky over the stream. The overall scene is calm with no animals, people, or buildings visible.

#### *Landscape with Stream*

1915

Pastel on Paper

Rural landscapes were a common theme throughout Alten's career, and this is one of the few known works he created in pastel. This particular medium is difficult to master because the chalky composition requires a skilled hand. Alten shows talent in the delicate blending needed to create the subtle highlights on the river, resisting the element of chalkiness that could make it look foggy instead of defined.

### 1.2 Hauling the Boulder

A farmer prepares to move a boulder with four horses. The farmer is bent down tying the horses' reign to the boulder. Their face is not visible and their clothing is simple and dirty. The farmer and horse are working in muddy field with a few smaller boulders and rocks around them. A tall patch of wheat stands in the foreground to the left of the farmer and horses. A wide-open sky covers two-thirds of the canvas. The painting's colors are muted cool tones evoking a chilly feel, but sun rays breaking through the clouds provide a bit of warmth.

#### *Hauling the Boulder*

1910

Oil on Canvas

Throughout his career, Alten painted scenes that combined manual labor and the rural Michigan landscape. This piece illustrates Alten's commitment to that subject matter. In it, we see a farmer bending down to connect a boulder to his team of horses, whose breath is visible in the cold air. Above them, the sun begins to break through dark clouds, illuminating and warming this agrarian landscape.

### 1.3 Mathias J. Alten Apprentice Certificate

A framed certificate with black, handwritten lettering that says "Lebrbrief," or apprenticeship in English at the top. The certificate is issued to Mathias Alten and signed by Joseph Klein. The certificate has a

decorative border. A man in wearing traditional German dress holding a scroll in the air is drawn in the left margin.

Mathias J. Alten Apprentices Certificate

1888

Paper

Mathias Alten's earliest artist training was with Joseph Klein, a painter and paperhanger in Germany. He apprenticed with Klein from 1885-88, working on projects in churches and theatres. He was presented this certificate upon completion of his apprenticeship. Alten was then employed by Klein as a painter until he immigrated to the United States in 1889.

#### 1.4 Mathias J. Alten Portrait

A young Mathias Alten sits facing the camera looking beyond the photographer with a serene but serious expression. He is wearing a three-piece suit with a tie and high collar. The suit jacket is unbuttoned and Alten's watch chain is peaking out of his vest pocket. Alten is leaning on the back of a wicker chair with his left elbow propped up on top of the chair. Alten's chin is resting in his left hand. The background is out of focus to contrast Alten's crisp portrait.

Thomas Frederick Noble (1866-1932)

Mathias J. Alten Portrait

ca. 1890

photograph

This is like one of the first photographs of Mathias J. Alten, taken shortly after he arrived in Grand Rapids. He was photographed by Thomas Frederick Noble (1866-1932), who owned and operated the Noble Grand Art Studio. Noble, who emigrated from Canada in 1889-90, was one of the more successful and prominent photographers in the city.

#### 1.5 Mathias J. Alten and Bertha Schwind Wedding Portrait

A pair of framed portraits on a white background of a young Mathias Alten and Bertha Schwind. Both are dressed in formal clothing. Alten is wearing a black tuxedo and Schwind velvet dress with a striped silk blouse and bow. Schwind's curly hair is fastened loosely in an updo. The left side of Alten and Schwind's face is illuminated but the right side is in shadow. "Noble" and "126 & 128 Canal St. Grand Rapids, Mich." are printed along the bottom of each photograph.

Thomas Frederick Noble (1866-1932)

Mathias J. Alten and Bertha Schwind Wedding Portrait

1895

Photograph

Bertha Schwind, known by her family as Bert, was born in Grand Rapids, Michigan on February 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1875. She and Mathias Alten met at her father's store, which sold wallpaper, paint, artists' supplies, picture

frames and window shades. Alten and Schwind married in 1895. The two later ran her family's business as *Schwind and Alten*, located at 32 West Bridge Street in Grand Rapids. Bertha passed away in 1945.

## Section 2: Early Work and Study Abroad

*Through prizes and sales I was able to pay my way through my art course here and lay considerable funds aside or the one thing I wanted to do more than any other. Paris. That was the one place in the world I had to go. And go there I did.*

– Mathias J. Alten

Mathias J. Alten continued to establish himself as an artist and member of the Grand Rapids community in the decade following his arrival. His production as a studio painter increased in the years leading up to the twentieth century as he applied himself towards becoming a professional artist. Alten created a variety of landscapes and still lifes, particularly floral arrangements that were heavily detailed and featured dark color palette. The decorative nature and controlled arrangements of these pieces aligned with his naivety as an artist, as well as earlier experiences painting murals in town and decorating furniture at the Phoenix Furniture Company.

In 1898, seeking additional training and exposure to the academic rigors at the center of the art world, Alten joined the artists' pilgrimage to Paris. After applying for both his citizenship and passport in early November following the birth of his second daughter Camelia, he returned to Europe nearly a decade after emigrating from Germany. Alten enrolled at the Académie Julian and later that the Académie Colarossi, where he won a gold medal in figural drawing. Like many artists in Paris, he also attended afternoon sketch classes at a private academy run by American expatriate artist James Abbott McNeill Whistler (1834-1903).

During this trip, Alten also explored Italy, painting and visiting museums in Rome, Florence, Siena, and other cities. Back in France, he painted landscapes and peasants, especially along the northern coast at Etaples, and visited the Netherlands and Belgium. When he arrived home in September 1899, the world was on the cusp of a new century, and he had been filled with knowledge, experience, and passion for art. He opened a studio and art school in Grand Rapids alongside another local artist. Over the next few years, Alten began to exhibit in Detroit, Chicago, New York and Philadelphia. As his adopted home city and state rapidly began to grow and modernize, Alten quickly established himself as a teacher and the premier painter in town.

### 2.1 A Bayou at North Park

A small pond flows into view from the left slicing a blue-grey sliver into an otherwise tan and rust scene. Most of the flora is grass—a border of tall wheat-colored grass along the shore of the pond and low penny-colored grass expanding into a meadow. A line of trees with red leaves are clustered in the top-right. Smooth round hills roll across the horizon. The sky is overcast with no clouds or sun visible.

*A Bayou at North Park*

1898

Oil on board

Realism drove artists to strive for precision, based on the idea that paintings should resemble photographs. Alten's training in this style is visible in the detail-oriented nature of this work. Each blade of grass lining the pond, as well as the plants in the foreground of the painting, have been painstakingly painted individually. Alten would have used a very fine brush, likely made out of a few hog or horse hairs. Alten began his career working within traditional French Barbizon and American Tonalist styles. His landscapes, like this view of North Park Grand Rapids, Michigan, appear more naturalistic and somber when compared to work of other American artists of the period.

## 2.2 French Studies

This painting is divided into four quadrants each with a different landscape scene. At the top left, a dark landscape of a stream or river moving through a muddy brown shore. Small shacks line the horizon. Under the dark stream scene in the bottom left quadrant, a brighter water scene of ten sailboats crowded together on the horizon. The body of water, either a lake or ocean, is a very clear blue with a rocky shore. Some birds fly across a bright blue sky. The right two quadrants feature sunny farm scenes. In the top right, a field with six harvested wheat stacks with a line of green trees on the horizon. A windmill and farmhouse peak into view at the far right side of the horizon. The final scene is more abstract. Trees line the horizon but the field that occupies two-thirds of the quadrant is not improved. A figure composed of red, white, and black globs of paint stands with a white animal in the center of the horizon.

### *French Studies*

1899

Oil on board

This series of studies were completed on Alten's trip to France, where he sought additional training and exposure to new styles of painting. In the four quadrants, there is evidence of both his traditional training and exposure to Impressionism. Intricate brush strokes detail the golden grass on the bottom right, while the lower left features simple brush strokes that create sails of ships layered onto each other.

## 2.3 Rue Cortot

A cobblestone street lined with stone buildings. The view is from the top of a hill looking down. The buildings have traditional Parisian architecture from the 1600s with one or two floors, wood shingle roofs, and many chimneys for heating and cooking. The street, Rue Cortot in Montmartre is identified by a sign placed high on the building at the left.

### *Rue Cortot*

1899

Watercolor on paper on board

The cobblestone Rue Cortot in Montmatre was home for many well known artists throughout the years. The street is identified in this watercolor by a sign placed high on the building at the left. The 1902 Second Exhibition at the Toledo Museum of Art included a watercolor painting titled, "A Corner of the

Town." As this exhibition included several of Alten's French paintings, it is possible that this painting, Rue Cortot, Paris, was the painting shown. The exhibition is therefore noted here for possible reference. While the exact location of Alten's Paris residence is unknown, the area around the cobble-stoned Rue Cortot housed many artists and provided numerous picturesque urban scenes.

Watercolor is one of the oldest and most universal mediums in art, made of pigment ground in gum mixed with a water solution. It allows for a range and variety of looks through the ability to play with the transparency of pigment. Alten shows this by giving the walls of the buildings the realistic texture of stone and the softness of the shadows on the ground from the grey sky.

#### 2.4 The Cavalier

A man stands with his back facing the viewer so his face is not visible. He is holding a long sword across his belly. His hat has a wide-brim with a feather hanging from the left side. He is wearing a shirt, high fluffy collar and a vest over his shirt. His britches end right below his knee showing his stockings. His boots and slouchy and stop at mid-calf.

##### *The Cavalier*

1899

Graphite, ink, and gouache on paper

Alten's drawing of a Cavalier shows the superfluous nature of his clothing; he outlines every drape and layer of clothing to show wealth and high social status. A Cavalier was the name for supporters of King George I during the English Civil War in 1642, who wanted the King to have unlimited powers, without a parliament. The image below show an additional painting Alten completed with the same model in France.

Image on label: Watercolor version of the Cavalier drawing. In this watercolor, though, the Cavalier is facing the viewer.

Image caption: Mathias J. Alten, *The Cavalier*, 1899, watercolor on paper.

#### 2.5 Irises

A bouquet of light purple and white irises on a dark background. Focus is on the flowers from the stem up. Some of the purple irises have blue specks. The iris bouquet fills the image lengthwise.

##### *Irises*

1900

Oil on canvas

Most artists begin their career portraying still-life images, which are works of art depicting mostly inanimate objects that are commonplace in daily life. Painting still-lives is an activity most early painters take on to train their artistic eye. Early in Alten's career, these were usually done against a dark, simple

background. The deep brown around the blossoming flower heads allows the bright colors to be the focal point.

## 2.6 Mathias J. Alten, Citizen Papers

A document with “Citizen Papers” across the top over the executive branch seal of the United States of America. The seal features a bald eagle facing left in profile with its wings stretched wide. The eagle has an American flag in each talon. Stars surround the eagles head. “State of Michigan County of Kent, The Circuit Court for the County of Kent” is under the seal.

Mathias J. Alten, Citizen Papers  
State of Michigan  
1898  
Paper

Between 1870 and 1900 there was a significant increase in immigration to the United States, which led to the creation of the immigration center Castle Garden in Manhattan in 1855. Alten would have traveled through Castle Garden when he first immigrated to the United States with his family in 1889. The conditions of Castle Garden are best summed up by the fact that Yiddish slang term “Kesselgarden” means chaotic, confusing, and loud.

Castle Garden ceased operation in 1890 and, two years later, Ellis Island officially opened. Ellis Island served as a more isolated processing center where lower class immigrants were sent for medical and legal inspections before being allowed to enter the country. During this operation, 12 million immigrants were processed until it officially closed in 1954.

This picture from 1900 shows both Castle Garden (in the foreground) and Ellis Island (background, island on the left). By this time Castle Garden no longer functioned as an immigration center.

Image on label: Ariel view of the Hudson River at the tip of Manhattan looking out to Ellis Island.

Image caption: Battery and old Castle Garden, New York, NY., 1900, Library of Congress

## 2.7 Gold Medal, Drawing

A gold circular medal with raised images and text on both sides. On the front, a male nude in profile sitting on a two-step stool. His left leg is bent and resting on the stool’s first step and his right leg is extended in front of him. He is drawing on a sketchbook that is resting on his left knee. A classical sculpture of a male bust is sitting on a pedestal in front of him. “Academie Colarossi” is above the man and “Paris” is below. On the back, “1 ere Mention Dessin” is above a wreath around the center of the medal. “Mathias Alten” is inside the wreath. “1899” is below.

Gold Medal, Drawing  
Académie Colarossi, Paris  
1899

## Bronze

The Académie Colarossi was an art school in Paris, founded in the nineteenth century by the Italian sculptor Filippo Colarossi. The school was established as an alternative to the government-sanctioned Ecole des Beaux Arts, a school that had become much too conservative for many young artists at the time. The Académie Colarossi became known for its classes in life sculpting and drawing with living models and attracted many students, like Mathias Alten, from around the world.

### Section 4: A Changing Michigan Landscape

*Artists of the old school were slow, deliberate, painfully so. But the painters of the new school work rapidly, and their productions are of course more numerous. The motive must be right, the mood right and when it is, the quick, sure stroke accomplishes as much the slower one.*

– Mathias J. Alten

As the United States moved into the new century, it entered the Progressive Era, responding to industrialization with urban reforms and improvements. The first decade of the new century also saw the widespread application of the internal combustion engine to all manners of vehicle. While late-nineteenth century growth and expansion was fueled by railroads, the rise of electricity and the automobile would rapidly define the American landscape and way of life.

In Grand Rapids, growth of the furniture industry in the late nineteenth-century shaped the face of the city and the Grand River that flowed through it. A major flood in March of 1904 further defined both, as walls and barriers along the banks were extended to contain it. In addition to the factories and mills drawing power from the river, the city was also the first in the nation to have a hydroelectric plant that provided electricity. By 1902, electric Interurban railways connected Grand Rapids to cities along the West Michigan lakeshore with service dedicated exclusively to passengers.

#### 4.1 View of the Gas Works from Lower Island on the Grand

The Grand Rapids Gas Works buildings loom along the horizon of a landscape obscured by hazy fog, two bare trees, and a horse-drawn green cart. The Grand River separates the buildings from the foreground. Despite the title of this painting, the focus is on the natural landscape rather than the industrial buildings.

*View of the Gas Works from Lower Island on the Grand*

1905

Oil on canvas

Tucked away behind a scene with fenced trees and a horse drawn carriage, this work represents one of the few times Alten painted the modernization of the Michigan landscape. The Grand Rapids Gas Light Company, iconic for its tall smokestacks and large round buildings, was incorporated in 1857 and allowed many local businesses to be lit by gas. Alten's choice to use dark, almost gloomy colors in the painting aptly reflect his feelings towards the nationwide move towards industrialization.



Image on label: A black and white photograph of industrial buildings. Alten's natural landscape has been replaced by a gravel yard and dirt road.

Image caption: Photograph of Wealthy St. Gas Works, ca. 1920.

#### 4.2 The Grand River

A blazing orange and yellow sunset over the Grand River. The bright sky is mirrored on the river's surface. The river's left bank, in the foreground, is lined with golden grasses and short bare trees. The river's right bank, in the background, features buildings in silhouette. Two vessels sail on the river and are only visible by the smoke rising into the sky from their engines. The high point of a bridge connecting the river's two banks is in the far background.

##### *The Grand River*

1904

Oil on canvas, laid on board

This striking painting of the Grand River was painted the same year as the largest flood in Grand Rapids history. In March of 1904, the Grand River reached a record breaking 19.6 ft, leading to extensive flooding that damaged 2,500 houses on the west side of Grand Rapids. The flood caused an estimated two million dollars in damages, or approximately 45 million dollars adjusted for inflation.

#### 4.3 Westside Canal in Winter

A vertical landscape with a frown river at the center and white snowy banks on either side. The dark blue almost black water seems to flow both upstream and downstream pooling in the foreground. A multi-story red brick building rises in the background on the left side of the water. Tall bare trees rise to a grey cloudy sky.

##### *Westside Canal in Winter*

1914

Oil on canvas on board

The West Side canal was built along the Grand River to provide water to West Side Grand Rapids factories. West Side Power was built along the canal in 1866-67 by William T. Powers to provide power to his factory, the Powers & Ball sash and door operation. The Grand Rapids Light and Power Company also took advantage of the canal's waterpower.

#### 4.4 Early Spring Landscape with Meandering Stream

A wide landscape showing a stream crisscrossing through a lush green countryside. The bright green grass contrasts to bare brown trees and bushes on either side of the stream. The flowing stream matches a bluish-white sky.

##### *Early Spring Landscape with Meandering Stream*

1914

## Oil on board

Throughout his career, Alten was not afraid to incorporate strong color into his work. They could be seen in works depicting bright vibrant Spanish beach scenes to the rolling green fields that surrounded his Grand Rapids home. In a 1913 interview with the Grand Rapids Herald, Alten described his relationship with color as something that he felt deeply:

*“Color is like a beautiful dream. You can see it, you can understand it, you know why such and such a combination is necessary, it is the only possible combination to produce a given effect. But you cannot express what that is in words. You feel it, that is all. It is like a dream. Or it is like a musical composition”*

## Section 5: The Netherlands

In the decades prior to the turn of the century, a prominent group of artists lived and worked near the Dutch coast in The Hague. Inspired by the French Barbizon school, whose style Mathias J. Alten already encountered on his 1902 trip to the Old Lyme Art Colony, these artists conveyed atmosphere and mood through subdued colors and the use of grey. Known as the “Hague School,” these painters also responded to the rapid industrialization of society by painting scenes of rural life tinged with longing for simpler times.

Alten traveled to the Netherlands in August of 1910 with his family and student, Norman Chamberlain (1887-1961). Having visited there in the summer of 1899, Alten returned to paint the landscape he briefly encountered a decade prior. On this occasion, he remained for nearly an entire year, producing over 150 works depicting local landscapes and scenes of labor throughout the rural countryside and along the coast of the North Sea. He would have undoubtedly been influenced by the legacy of the Hague School artists, as well as the landscape and climate of the Netherlands.

In the spring of 1911, Alten and his family traveled to Scheveningen, a district of the Hague on the coast. By the early part of the twentieth century, urbanization and industrialization had already begun to transform the area. Modern ships started to replace the traditional herring boats drawn up on the shore by draft horses, and hotels had sprung up to support the resort community. Working under the influence of the Hague School, Alten ignored the onset of modernity, seeking out traditional laborers and nostalgic settings with muted browns, blues and grays.

### 5.1 Dutchman with Canal Boat

A man stands on the shore of a canal tying his small rowboat to a dock post. A stone bridge expands across the canal with a figure standing at the bridge railing. The figure on the bridge seems to be overseeing the man tying up his boat. A sail rises beyond the bridge but the actual vessel is obscured by the bridge. Two thatched roof buildings are on the side of the canal with the dock. The whole scene is painted with colors a few shades darker than how they would appear in reality. For example, the water in the canal is almost black.

*Dutchman with Canal Boat*  
ca. 1910

## Oil on board

Alten visited The Hague in 1910 and painted several works in the style of the earlier Hague School masters. The Hague School (1860 to 1890) and Alten were both heavily influenced by the realist painters of the French Barbizon School. Canals have been a feature in Amsterdam since the 1600s, used mainly to transport goods and sometimes people. The water was very unsanitary, as the canals were used as waste disposal due to the city not having a septic system. In the late 1800s, efforts were made to clean the water, and, in the present day, they are sometimes used for swimming by city residents.

### 5.2 Clam Fishers and Horse Carts, Scheveningen

A beach at low tide with tide pools dotting the sand. Two horses, one white and one brown, stand on the sand each hauling a cart behind them. The white horse's image is reflected in one of the tide pools. Three figures work alongside the horses. One figure, with his back towards the viewer, stands in the bubbling surf at the edge of the water. The figure is digging into the sand with a clam shovel. The other two figures are deeper in the water and dragging a net behind them. Three sail boats float on the horizon of the water.

#### *Clam Fishers and Horse Carts, Scheveningen*

1911

Oil on board

Alten's work in the Netherlands was influenced by The Hague School, a group of artists active in the late 1800s. They were inspired by the realist painters of the French Barbizon school and emphasized atmosphere and mood through subdued colors, particularly greys. This painting shows the influence of The Hague School through Alten's use of a soft grey throughout the composition, especially in the water and sky.

### 5.3 Clam Digger, Scheveningen

A man dressed in a red jacket and red pants hunches over a small horseless cart at the edge of the shallow surf. The wet sand underneath him reflects his image and the cart. He is concentrating on a lidded basket that sits on the sand next to the cart. A long clam shovel lays across the cart with most of the shovel sticking out the front and the back of the cart. The ocean swells in the background.

#### *Clam Digger, Scheveningen*

1911

Oil on canvas

One of the most popular themes in Alten's paintings are depictions of people completing physical labor, such as farming or fishing—in this case, fishing for shellfish. The Dutch have been cultivating and harvesting mussels for over 150 years along the coast of the North Sea, where Alten captured this Clam Digger with his cart.

### 5.4 Postcard from Bertha Alten

The front and back of a souvenir postcard with no postage or recipient listed. The postcard's front features a photograph of a beach with water in the far distance. A busy café with outdoor bistro seating that's nearly filled to capacity stands in the foreground. Some bicycles are parked at the café and a Dutch flag flies over the café's seating area. Groups of people cluster together around the beach between the café and the water with crowds becoming denser closer to the water. None of the beachgoers are wearing bathing suits, rather many are in their "Sunday Best." The back of the postcard reads, "1910. This shows you the great wrath of the strand – the hotels are up high back farther. The greater part of this strand is covered with water when the tide is up. Other is a group of Dutch women in the foreground."

Postcard from Bertha Alten  
Scheveningen, The Netherlands  
1911

Scheveningen is a waterfront district in the Netherlands known for its fishing and tourism industries. The town also has a seaside resort which became known in the mid-1800s as a bathing resort. This postcard, from Bertha Alten, shows visitors along the beach with the pier in the distance. The pier opened on May 6, 1901 and was connected to the Kurhaus hotel.

#### Section 7: Longing for the Past

*I am enabled to be a better artist by staying here and working out my own ideas.*

– Mathias J. Alten

During the nineteenth century, advances in farming technology, the development of railroads, and an influx of immigrants and homesteaders seeking land, created a growing agricultural economy in the United States. The McCormick Reaper made large-scale farming profitable, and the rapid settlement and clearing of land opened up new opportunities. By the time Mathias J. Alten arrived in 1889, there were over 4 million farms across the country and farmers accounted for nearly half the labor force. As the nation moved into a new century, application of the internal combustion engine to the farm would further revolutionize agriculture.

In Michigan, the great forests were quickly replaced by orchards and fields of wheat and corn. Throughout the first two decades of the twentieth century, the number of farms continued to increase, while the number of farmers remained constant. This reflects the growing efficiency of new technologies. Despite technological advances, Alten continually depicted traditional forms of agrarian labor. Drawing on early experiences in Old Lyme, he traveled around Michigan to paint the landscape, often with farmers alongside their draft animals.

With the onset of the First World War, which limited his ability to travel, Alten began to paint even fewer industrial scenes and cityscapes. While forces worked to apply technology toward killing humans to great effect in Europe, it is somewhat unsurprising that Alten increasingly focused on Michigan's rural landscape and the farmers working it. In this growing age of modernity, his choice to depict scenes often

offering a harmonious relationship between humanity and nature reflect a sensitivity to the times and a longing for the past.

### 7.1 Gathering Pumpkins at Sunset

A pair of horses pull a cart with no driver. A mound of pumpkins and baskets sit on the ground to the left of the cart. Two figures silhouetted behind the cart. One stands with a basket in his hands, and one is hunched over picking pumpkins off the ground. A blazing yellow sunset fills the cloudy sky.

#### *Gathering Pumpkins at Sunset*

1907

Oil on canvas

The golden sky making the figures in the image appear backlit is visually striking and required Alten to paint very quickly while the sky changed. This is another example of plein-air painting (painting outdoors), where Alten sat in the field at dusk capturing what he saw in front of him. The illumination around the ankles of the horses and the gleam on the pumpkins are intricate details that would have had to be noticed in the exact moment before the light changed.

### 7.2 Plowing at Sunset

Three pairs of horses work in a muddy field each handled by workers. Each pair has one worker guiding them. A man stands nearby overseeing the work with his hand on his chin. A golden sunset falls on the horizon under a gray, overcast sky.

#### *Plowing at Sunset*

1908

Oil on canvas

In this scene, Alten captures farmers plowing with their teams of horses in the rapidly fading light at sunset. The bands of heavy dark clouds at the top of the composition and layer of dark earth at the bottom seem to squeeze the light between them, creating an urgency to the farmers' work.

### 7.3 Autumn Field with Corn Shocks and Stream

A tan and yellow field with rows of corn shocks lining the bank of a stream. A bare log lays across the foreground of the field towards the stream bank. Green trees appear in the background along the horizon. A small stream sparkles in the bottom right of the painting.

#### *Autumn Field with Corn Shocks and Stream*

1914

Oil on canvas

The influence of the Impressionistic style can be seen within the brushstrokes of many of Alten's paintings. The details become less about the ideal scene, more about the exact moment in time and the impression of the artist caught within that moment. The strokes within the light blue sky and sun-lit hay

stacks of this work capture one specific moment as witnessed by Alten, leaving an “impression” of this scene that seemingly only he witnessed.

#### 7.4 Workers in a Field

Two men wearing wide-brimmed hats and work clothes talk in a farm field with large green trees behind them. The man on the right is in cart led by two horses. Rolling hills and a reddish-brown farmhouse are featured in the distance on the horizon. Nearly two-thirds of the painting is a wide blue sky with big fluffy clouds. The clouds seem to be moving from right to left across the sky.

##### *Workers in a Field*

1916

Oil on canvas

Barbed wire, gas tractors, electric washing machines, the Model T automobile, zippers, neon lamps were all recent inventions in 1916, when Alten painted this scene. As the American frontier pushed westward and modern civilization began consuming the landscape, Alten continued to paint idealized pastoral images. His paintings reflect a moment in time that glorified the labor and lifestyle of rural America as industrialization slowly crept into the world around him.

#### 7.5 Creek

A view of a white farmhouse with green shutters settled along a peaceful creek. A soft puff of smoke rises out of the house’s chimney. The creek flows in a sideways u-shape starting in the right corner of the painting’s foreground curving towards the right in the background. The water is clear blue and reflects the grass and trees that line it in some places. The trees on either side of the creek are starting to lose their pinkish-gold leaves. The grass is a mixture of green and pinkish-gold to match the trees’ leaves. A figure peaks out from behind a hay stack on the left of the creek. The figure is almost hidden from view.

##### *Creek*

1917

Oil on canvas

By 1917, Alten had made a name for himself as a professional artist. As his painting style evolved, so did his framing techniques. Many of his paintings were framed in “finished corner frames,” a technique which allowed for no miters to be visible, cleaner connections at the corners, and more ornate designs. The frame was first constructed with raw wood, then carved and finished. This made more ornamental, planned out designs possible.

### Section 8: Spanish Influences

*[There] are sardine fishermen at Cabañal.... They go fishing early in the morning...and as they have no harbor pr pier their boats are drawn ashore by specially trained*

*oxen...this method is gradually disappearing along with other picturesqueness, as Europe is becoming more modernized.*

– Mathias J. Alten

In 1912, Mathias J. Alten took the first of a series of trips to Spain that would profoundly influence his career. Although his second visit would be delayed until after the First World War and lingering economic uncertainty of the 1920 Depression, the impact of these Spanish trips was evident in more than just the paintings he produced on location. His color palette, which had started to expand with his exposure to Impressionism, lightened considerably following his first visit. Increasingly during his second trip in 1922 and final trip in 1928, a vibrant color spectrum and lighter touch were clearly evident in all his work.

Spain had drawn many American artists over the years, but it was the work of the Spanish painter Joaquin Sorolla (1863-1923) that inspired Alten to make his first trip in 1912. Alten may have encountered the work of Sorolla as early as 1899 when he was in Paris. The monumental painting *La Vuelta de Pesca* (Return from Fishing) had won Sorolla praise and the Gold Medal at the Paris Salon in 1895. By the time Alten was in Paris, the work depicting Valencian fishermen and oxen working in the surf was on display at the Luxembourg Museum. However, it was two enormously successful exhibitions Sorolla presented in the United States in 1909 and 1911 that finally encouraged Alten to undertake his third major trip abroad.

Sorolla was well-known for his coastal scenes painted along the Mediterranean at Cabanal, the small fishing village near Valencia. Every trip Alten took to Spain, he based himself and his work in this traditional community. As in his experience in the Netherlands, Alten sought out an environment with traditional laborers and nostalgic settings. Instead of herring boats and draft horse, sardine boats and oxen took center stage in his brilliant compositions. Much like Sorolla, Alten knew his audience's tastes. He understood the types of works that appealed to his Michigan clients, and, even with their relatively exotic locales and subject matter, the artist reiterated his interest in showing the old ways of doing things.

### 8.1 Oxen, Boat and Fishermen, Valencia

A group of people drive four oxen pulling a sailboat to shore. Although not visible, the sunshine casts large shadows in front of the oxen. Some figures sit on the oxen yokes to guide the animals while others guide the boat from behind. One figure is standing on the boat with the bottom of the boat's sail gathered in their hands. The water is a crystal-clear light blue and the shore is rocky and grassy.

*Oxen, Boat and Fishermen, Valencia*

1912

Oil on canvas

Photography was becoming more widespread during the early twentieth-century, and, like a photograph, this painting captures a moment in time. Painting a moving image is extraordinarily difficult. Alten achieved movement by adding the light blue sheen of water on the backs and legs of the

oxen. The oxen's heads, bowed in exertion as they trudge through the sand, make this piece look natural and paced, even though it had to be completed quickly.

## 8.2 Plaza de la Virgen, Valencia

The façades of a gothic church and tower in stark white stone rising in a true-blue sky. The church's façade features a circular rose window above an elaborate entrance of layered pointed arches. The tower, also in the gothic style, to the right of the church features a row of long windows with pointed arches at the top level. The tower also has a double copula. People mill around the plaza that the church and tower face. A figure pulls a small cart behind him. A figure in all black walks near the church. A brown horse waits next to a palmetto tree.

### *Plaza de la Virgen, Valencia*

1912

Oil on canvas

Alten spent much of his time in Spain painting Mediterranean coastal scenes. He made Cabañal his base while staying in Spain and from there travelled to Italy, Austria, and Germany. The works completed while in Spain reflect a much brighter and more sunlit palette than those done in Northern Europe. In 1912, Alten travelled to Spain with his friend Forrest Emerson Mann, a Grand Rapids artist and metal smith, and set his sights on the city of Valencia. Valencia was home to the popular Spanish artist Joaquín Sorolla, whose work Alten admired.

This is one of the few paintings Alten did within the city during this trip to Spain. The Plaza de la Virgen is a centerpiece for the city of Valencia, and the Cathedral and its tower, called El Miguelete, have drawn visitors for hundreds of years. The entranceway to the church is famous for having statues of the twelve apostles surrounding the doorway.

## 8.3 Unfurling the Sail, Valencia

Two oxen pull a sailboat through the shallow water to shore while five figures are gathering the sail. The water around the boat is colorful with lilac, blue, white, pink, and gold flecks throughout. Closer to the horizon the water turns turquoise. The sky is clear but grey.

### *Unfurling the Sail, Valencia*

1912

Oil on canvas

Alten spent much of his time in Spain painting Mediterranean coastal scenes. He made Cabanal his base while staying in Spain and from there travelled to Italy, Austria, and Germany. The works completed while in Spain reflect a much brighter and more sunlit palette than those done in Northern Europe.

Image on label: Two oxen pull a sailboat through the water to shore. Two men are standing in the water guiding the oxen and two are in the boat guiding it with oars.



Image caption: Joaquin Sorolla, *La Vuelta de la Pesca*, 1894

#### 8.4 Windy Day, Cabañal

A group of nine people pull two blue, green, and white striped fishing boats to the shore. In the foreground, two figures on the shore pull a boat with a rope while three figures push the boat from behind. Behind them, four figures prepare to follow with two figures in the water and two still in a boat with a large bellowing sail. Two oxen, one brown and one black, stand in the water watching. Farther out towards the horizon, a number of boats continue to sail.

*Windy Day, Cabañal*

ca. 1922

Oil on canvas

Capturing Alten's view of the Spanish coastline drove him to embrace bright colors and large, visible brush strokes, inspired by the Impressionist style that had swept over Europe. The bright shades of blue give dimension to the water and the golden yellow incorporated into the white of the waves and sails show this piece to be a departure from his early work.

#### Section 6: Legacy of Lumber

Throughout the second half of the nineteenth-century, Michigan experienced remarkable growth, fueled by the rich natural resources found in its plentiful forests. By the 1880s, the Great Lakes region dominated the lumber industry with Michigan leading the nation. Natural waterways and railroads facilitated movement from the forests to sawmills to markets supplying America's westward expansion. Annual harvests peaked in 1890, but, by 1900, much of the desirable eastern white pine in the state's forests had been felled, causing many companies to increasingly invest in timber resources out west.

Grand Rapid made its mark during this period through the development of a robust machine-made furniture industry, which resulted in it adopting the term "Furniture City." Taking advantage of the lumber industry, advances in technology, and a growing immigrant work force, the city quickly became recognized as a leader in fine furniture. By the time Mathias J. Alten arrived in Grand Rapids, the city was already home to dozens of furniture companies and had begun a semi-annual furniture market that brought wholesale buyers directly to the city.

Alten found work with a number of furniture companies when he first arrived in Grand Rapids. As a professional artist whose growing portraiture business featured many of the wealthy owners and industrialists in the area, he continued to benefit from the forces that drove growth in his city and state. As the lumbering industry shifted westward, so too did many lumber barons. In 1909, Alten and his wife traveled to Portland, Oregon where he fulfilled commissions for members of the Haak family, recent Michigan transplants. Throughout his career, Alten continued to seek out opportunities to celebrate the common laborer, while simultaneously establishing connections with society's elite by painting their portraits.

#### 6.1 Pink and White Roses

A basket bouquet of various species of pink and white roses. The bouquet is crammed with some roses spilling around the rim of the basket. The roses are all different sizes and lengths. The basket sits on a grass lawn. Some rose petals are scattered on the grass near the basket.

*Pink and White Roses, Portland*

1909

Oil on canvas

Alten painted this outdoor floral in June of 1909 while he was in Portland, Oregon with his wife. They traveled there so Alten could complete commissioned portraits of John Haak, his wife, and son. While visiting Portland to paint portraits of the Haak family, Alten was inspired by the Portland rose. Roses became the symbol of Portland after the 1905 Lewis and Clark Exposition when landscapers planted 10,000 rose bushes along the streets of Portland. The city developed such a reputation that, during World War I, English rose breeders sent their roses to Portland to have them preserved.

Image on label: Souvenir ticket for the Lewis and Clark Centennial Exposition on September 30, 1905. Along the left edge of the ticket is an image of pine trees with a mountain scape in the background. The image has a black border. The bottom half of the ticket features another image of a figure on horseback looking over an aerial view of Portland. The figure is wearing a headdress and Native American regalia.

Image caption: Lewis and Clark Exposition Ticket, 1905.

## 6.2 Upright Pines

Vertical landscape of tall, full pine trees lining a grassy clearing. One of the pine trees in the foreground houses a large but empty bird nest. Beyond the pine trees, further into the forest, stands a patch of deciduous trees with yellow leaves. The clear sky is multiple shades of blue.

*Upright Pines*

ca. 1915

Oil on canvas

By the 1900s, roughly one billion Michigan trees had been cut down. The deforestation, fires, and pollution caused by the logging industry had an extremely damaging effect on Michigan's ecosystem. The environmental crises left in the wake of the logging industry led to the creation of the Department of Conservation, tasked with the preservation of what remained of the Michigan forests, in 1920.

## 6.3 Michigan Summer Woods

View from inside the woods looking out to a clearing in the trees where the sun is shining. Tall deciduous and coniferous trees inhabit the woods. The trees' leaves and pines are all shades of green from light to dark. Some trees have leaves and moss growing on the side. The ground is covered in grass and bushes.

*Michigan Summer Woods*

1916

Oil on canvas

Michigan lumber became an important resource in World War I, even before the United States officially joined the conflict. The War Industry Board was created in 1917 to organize the transfer of raw materials as needed to branches of the armed forces, and to support the war effort. This idyllic scene of a Michigan forest captures Alten's nostalgia for the rural landscape amidst a rapidly changing world.

#### 6.4 Logging Vignette

Loose sketches of figures working. The top half of the paper features three repeated images of oarsmen standing on boats, although only the figures are drawn so they seem to float in space holding the oar across their bodies. Figures in various stages of digging are on the bottom half of the paper. All the figures face away.

Logging Vignette

ca. 1920

Graphite on paper

This is a preliminary sketch Alten did for one of the covers he was commissioned to paint by *The Commonwealth: A Magazine for Workers*, depicting loggers moving timber down the river. In the pieces he created for the magazine, Alten embraced some modernity and romanticized booming Grand Rapids businesses. For example, industry is celebrated with rich roaring infernos and grinding metal wheels of machinery in some of the other images he produced for *The Commonwealth*.

#### 6.5 Cabinet Maker

Cover of "*The Commonwealth: A Magazine for Workers*" from October 1921 featuring a grey-haired man wearing eye glasses, an apron and blue work clothes. He is working on vanity with a mirror. Work working tools are on the work bench under the vanity. The man's expression is determined but calm. The magazine's price is listed at twenty cents.

Cabinet Maker

*The Commonwealth: A Magazine for Workers*

1921

Paper

Grand Rapids became a leader in fine handcrafted furniture production due to the availability of lumber, advances in technology, and a skilled immigrant workforce. It hosted a semi-annual furniture market that attracted wholesale buyers from across the country and assumed the title of "Furniture City." At the time, cabinet makers were both workmen and merchants, so likely the man on the cover of this magazine is fulfilling both of these titles.

#### 6.6 Sketches of Furniture Workers

Loose sketches of four figures working on different parts of furniture production. One figure uses a wood plane to shape a plank of wood on a workbench. Another figure holds a paint palette in front of a large cabinet. Two other figures stand over finished tables.

Sketches of Furniture Workers

ca. 1920

Graphite on paper

This sketch was probably done by Alten on the production floor of a furniture factory. Alten captures the workers as they move about the factory floor using quick fluid lines. The factory was not unfamiliar territory for Alten; when he originally moved to the United States, his first job was in a furniture factory. Alten never forgot his roots and often returned to depicting the working class in his paintings.

### 6.7 Mathias J. Alten Painting Carl Borcrantz

Mathias Alten sits cross-legged on a chair with his body turned away from the viewer facing a canvas. Alten balances a rectangular artist's palette on his lap and holds a paint brush in his right hand. A lit cigar hangs from his mouth. A faded image of a figure is on the canvas.

Mathias J. Alten Painting Carl Borcrantz

ca. 1910

photograph

In 1910, cameras were beginning to become more portable, enabling the autonomous and adventurous photographer. Before this, film was too expensive to waste, so subjects sat forward and were captured in stoic portraits. Alten having his back to the camera highlights the action of painting and Alten's creation rather than him as an individual. This image also gives an intimate view into Alten's studio and studio practice.

### 6.8 Portrait of Godfrey Von Platen

An grey-haired mustached man with rosy cheeks and nose stares confidently with his face turned three-quarters towards the viewer. He is only visible from the waist up. He wears a stiff, high-collared white shirt and jet-black three-piece suit. He also wears wide tie with a purple and blue pattern. The background is a simple wash of brown tones.

*Portrait of Godfrey Von Platen*

1922

Oil on canvas

Godfrey Von Platen (1867-1924) was a Michigan lumber baron. Born in Germany in 1867, his family moved to Petoskey when he was two years old. His lumber business was based out of Iron Mountain in the Upper Peninsula. In 1920, Von Platen made local headlines after spending \$2,000,000 buying more land.

Image on label: A newspaper advertisement for Von Platen-Fox Co. Manufacturers next to a younger portrait of Godfrey Von Platen. The advertisement is for “abundant timber resources” in the Upper Peninsula and Wisconsin.

Image caption: Godfrey Van Platen Advertisement, 1924

### Section 3: Artistic Community in Old Lyme

Mathias J. Alten supplemented his French training with a stay at the Old Lyme artist colony in Connecticut during the fall of 1902. He would subsequently return to this locale in 1911 and 1913. American artist Henry Ward Ranger (1858-1916) founded the colony at the turn of the century to promote *plein-air* painting (painting outdoors) and support artists returning stateside from Europe.

The rural New England landscape surrounding the artist colony represented an ideal of America’s past. Alten took full advantage of his visits to Old Lyme, painting the surrounding countryside close to fifty times. In some instances, seemingly casual scenes were staged by Alten’s friend and artist, Henry Rankin Poore (1859-1940), who constructed a portable studio to facilitate *plein-air* excursions at Old Lyme.

When Alten first visited in 1902, the colony had only been active for a couple years. Modeled on the French Barbizon school, Alten would have encountered artists working from nature in dark, tonal qualities. By the time he returned in 1911, Old Lyme had been influenced by Childe Hassam (1859-1935) and Impressionism, resulting in paintings that were brighter and less restricted. As Alten encountered this, he gradually moved towards a broader palette and a light touch in his own work.

#### 3.1 Summer Landscape with Split Rail Fence, Lyme

A wooden split rail fence with a gate to a wider golden meadow on a clear sunny day. A dirt path meanders into the meadow from the gate entrance. The fence’s gate has yellow and brown splotches of color randomly painted on the front. A large tree or bush stands to the left of the gate with flowers, smaller bushes, and grasses along the bottom of the fence. The horizon shows a deep green forest.

*Summer Landscape with Split Rail Fence, Lyme*

ca. 1913

Oil on canvas

In 1841, the tin tube was invented, allowing painters to take their materials out into nature with them for the first time. Prior to this, painters had to mix their paints themselves using pigment and oily animal fats. The paint was often stored in pig bladders that could not be resealed. Moving away from this method enabled *plein-air* painting (painting outdoors).

Image on label: An aluminum tube of paint with the bottom third of the tube rolled up

Image caption: Example of a sealable tube of paint that belonged to William Trost Richards, ca. 1890s.

#### 3.2 Farmer Plowing with Team of Oxen

A man in work clothes holds a plow behind two brown and white oxen. The man's clothes are surprisingly clean despite working in a muddy field. In the background, a stone fence lines the boundary of the field with deciduous trees beyond the fence. The trees are turning red, yellow, and orange.

*Farmer Plowing with Team of Oxen*

1911

Oil on canvas

On his visits to Old Lyme, Alten painted agrarian landscapes celebrating the work of farmers in the local fields as they plowed the rocky soil and harvested apples, corn, and salt hay. While there, he resided in the barn-studio of Will Howe Foote (1874-1965), a Grand Rapids native and early member of the Old Lyme artist colony.

## Section 10: Post-War Growth and Travel

*Nothing is more beautiful than pure vibrancy. What more can art be?*

– Mathias J. Alten

The 1920s were a period of economic prosperity marked by dynamic cultural changes and growing consumerism in the United States. Despite restrictions imposed by the prohibition of alcohol in 1920, there was an increasingly optimistic and progressive outlook which included women winning the right to vote. It seemed like a new age of freedom and independence. More Americans than ever, including the Alten family, had access to and owned a car, and a developing national highway system led to increased travel around the country.

Mathias J. Alten moved into the post-war period as a mature artist, ready to take advantage of opportunities to further establish himself. He continued to see and exhibit his work, earning a Gold Medal at the Detroit Scarab Club in 1920, and increasingly secured one-person shows around the country. His daughter Eleanore brokered a 1925 show at the Southby Salon in Los Angeles, California. A 1929 show at Holt Galleries, New York was his most comprehensive and successful yet. Many of these accomplishments were fueled by a renewed interest and ability to travel. In addition to two extremely successful trips to Spain in 1922 and 1928, he visited New Mexico in 1927, Florida in 1929, New England in 1931, and California in 1929 and 1934.

During the late 1920s, Alten's work was particularly colored by his visits to artist colonies, which mirrored his earlier experiences at the Old Lyme artist colony in Connecticut. The early twentieth century was a golden age for American artist colonies, which supported *plein-air* painting (painting outdoors) for artists returning stateside. In 1927, Alten visited the artist colony in Taos, New Mexico. Here, he again found a combination of picturesque subject matter, pastoral landscape, and artistic community. Subsequent visits to artist colonies in Rockport, Massachusetts, and Laguna Beach, California, yielded additional bodies of work that demonstrated his artistic maturity and heightened concern for vibrancy and color.

### 10.1 Fishing Boats at Rockport

Four fishing boats of different sizes tied to a sturdy stone pier. A figure dressed in a yellow shirt and black pants looks into one of the boats from the pier. A one-story, wooden fishing shack sits at the end of the pier. A flock of seagulls soars on the cloudy sky. The shore is visible in the background. Some grey buildings stand on the shore.

*Fishing Boats at Rockport*

ca. 1931

Oil on canvas

In the town of Rockport, Massachusetts, there still stands a small wharf with a red, unassuming fishing shack. During the early 1930s a group of artists began painting the structure so much that it became known in the community as “Motif No. 1.” When Alten visited the artist colony at Rockport, his imagination was also captured by the picturesque building, and he painted it several times during his stay.

Image on label: A one-story, wooden shack at the edge of a stone pier. The water is calm, and the sky is clear.

Image caption: Gordon Parks (1912-2006), *Rockport, Massachusetts, Old net house*, 1943, photograph, Library of Congress

### 10.2 Gold Medal, “Best in Show”

Gold-colored, two-sided circular medal. One side features a nude woman holding a wreath with an outline of the State of Michigan in the background. “Annual Exhibition of Michigan Artists” is around the edge of the medal. “Mathias J. Alten, 1920” is on the bottom. The opposite side features the Scarab Club logo, a scarab with its wings open with a upside-down triangle in the background. “Award is above the image, and “Courtesy of Frederic Zeigen” is below.

Alfred Frederick Nygard (1861-1941)

Gold Medal Award, “Best of Show”

Scarab Club, Detroit

1920

Bronze

In 1911, the Scarab Club originated the Annual Exhibition of Michigan Artists at the Detroit Institute of Arts. Originally formed in 1907 as the Hopkin Club, the Scarab Club was an artists’ club, gallery, and studio where artists met to discuss art, critique paintings, and dine together. Alten was awarded this “Best of Show” medal, designed by Alfred Nygard, for three paintings he had in the 1920 Annual Exhibition. Artists today can still receive this honor.

### 10.3 Mathias Alten Painting Reclining Figure

Mathias Alten sits on a beach chair on the edge of a rocky shore. His back is to the viewer, but the pipe hanging from his mouth is still visible. He has a medium-sized canvas in front of him on a stand. Beyond

in the background, a model lays across a rock on the shore beyond Alten. The model is wearing a bathing suit and is laying on her right hip with her right elbow propped up. The model's back is to Alten. The water and horizon are hazy beyond the model.

Mathias Alten Painting Reclining Figure  
Laguna Beach, California  
1934  
Photograph

This photograph captures Mathias Alten plein-air painting (painting outdoors) at Laguna Beach during his trip to California in 1934. He sits on a small chair, paintbrush in hand, with his canvas set up on a portable easel and model posed in the background.

This is a remarkable illustration of how Alten worked directly from nature, and his ability to do so on large scale canvases. The finished piece, documented in the Mathias J. Alten Catalogue Raisonne as *Bathers, Laguna Beach*, measures 32" high by 40" wide and shows how Alten used his model to create two figures in the composition.

Image on label: Two women in navy blue bathing suits lounge on the edge of the rocky shore. They are facing out towards the ocean. Some waves crash on the rocks, but overall the sea is very calm. One woman is sitting up straight, and the other is laying on her right hip with her right elbow propped up. A white gull flies through the air.

Image caption: Mathias J. Alten, *Bathers, Laguna Beach*, 1934, oil on canvas

#### 10.4 Rocks at Laguna Beach

Big waves crash into a rocky shore. The tan and brown rocks contrast with the deep blue water and white foamy waves. The sky is bright and pale.

*Rocks at Laguna Beach*  
ca. 1934  
Oil on board

Alten's California seascapes play with abstraction more deliberately than his other landscapes. His loose brush strokes construct cool blue waves crashing up against the warm orange rocks, giving the piece a lively energy through his color palette and brush work. This piece is part of a larger trend that can be seen in his work as he approached the end of his life: that of Alten embracing expressionism, which was growing in popularity with the American artistic community.

#### 10.5 Rancho de Taos

A tan stone, mission-style church with a white, arched door that is open. A figure in all black with his back to the viewer walks through the door. The building has two tall bell towers on either side of the



door. A small window is directly above the door. A simple cross sits on a rounded arch over the window. The right side of the church has some scaffolding attached like someone is working on the stonework.

*Rancho de Taos (Mission San Francisco de Asis)*

1927

Oil on board

Taos, New Mexico, provided a different landscape and color palette than Alten had seen in his other travels. The architecture of the American southwest shows Mexican and Native American influences, specifically the Pueblo tribe who utilized adobe to create houses. Adobe refers to the dried mud brick made out of clay and straw, which has a bright orange color from the terrain of the southwest. Alten contrasts this with a bright blue sky and the white door on the building's face.

Image on label: A view of the exterior of the Rancho de Taos Church and church yard. A low stone fence surrounds the church. Two figures walk towards the church outside the fence.

Image caption: *Ranchos de Taos Church, Between 1930 and 1950*, photograph, Library of Congress

#### 10.6 Waiting, Taos

A person sits on a white horse and holds the reins of a brown horse that is standing next to them. The person is wearing a pink shirt and blue pants. Their hair is tied in two braids and they have a blue bandana tied around their neck. The trees around the person and horses have yellow and orange leaves.

*Waiting, Taos*

ca. 1927

Oil on canvas

The Taos Pueblo peoples have inhabited the land of northern New Mexico, separate from the now established town of Taos, for nearly 1000 years. Taos Pueblo is a sovereign nation within the United States and is a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The community is one of eight Northern Pueblos but is uniquely known for being very private. While their lengthy oral history cannot be shared with outsiders, the site itself is available for tourists to learn about the historic and grand pueblo structures made out of adobe—earth mixed with water and straw.

Image on label: A man sits on top of a brown horse looking directly at the viewer. He has a light-colored shirt, dark pants, and a bandana around his neck. His hair is tied in two long braids.

Image caption: *Arnold Genthe, Taos Pueblo, New Mexico, between 1899 and 1928*, photograph, Library of Congress

#### 10.7 Portrait of Chief Justice Walter H. North

A man in black judicial robes and a black bow tie sits in a tall backed, wooden chair. The man is older and wears round metal rimmed glasses. He is staring directly at the viewer. His left hand is on his lap and his right hand is resting on the chair's arm. The background is brown.

*Portrait of Chief Justice Walter H. North*

1929

Oil on canvas

Walter H. North (1871 - 1952) served as a Chief Justice on the Michigan Supreme court from 1927 to 1954. During his tenure, he heard many appeal cases from Grand Rapids, including an early hit and run case where the defendant was driving a dangerous 15 mph through Grand Rapids. Alten painted portraits of a number of Michigan Supreme court justices during his lifetime.

### 10.8 Portrait of Camelia Alten Demmon

A young Camelia Alten Demmon stands looking out with a confident gaze. Her hands are folded together in front of her. She is wearing a colorful, sleeveless dress with a blue and orange flower pattern. The dress also has a big orange flower applique on the right hip. Her hair is cut into a short curly bob held back by a gold headband.

*Portrait of Camelia Alten Demmon*

1924

Oil on canvas

The 1920s saw many changes for the social and political status of women. More women were entering the workforce and the 19th amendment gave white women the right to vote. However, women still faced an ideological fight surrounding their role in society with some newspapers publishing stories that bemoaned the changing times with titles like: "Evils of Woman's Revolt Against the Old Standards".

This portrait of Camelia exemplifies the idea of the "Modern Woman" of the 1920s. Her clothes are the fashionable "flapper" style which was known for its dropped waists and high hemlines, a daring look at the time. She also attended Michigan State Normal College (now Eastern Michigan University) and was part of a trend of women pursuing higher education.

### Section 11: Alten's Last Years and Legacy

*Art of all types must be alive. Brilliancy...has proven to be the greatest thing which ever happened to art. I especially admire the efforts of the modernists...[but] I had rather watch them than attempt to be on of them.*

– Mathias J. Alten

The 1929 stock market crash precipitated a decade of widespread unemployment and poverty across the United States. American artists were increasingly pulled in many directions by modern art movements, which led to the rise of both Regionalism and Social Realism. Mathias J. Alten continued to modestly apply changes in the art world to his work, primarily emphasizing brilliancy and color. His

subject matter increasingly moved away from agrarian themes but continued to focus on nostalgic settings.

Throughout the 1930s, Alten largely kept his travels within the State of Michigan, painting in Leland, Saugatuck, and around Grand Rapids. A trip to Tarpon Springs, Florida, in 1935 was his last major trip outside the state and resulted in over 30 vibrant canvases showcasing the local sponge boats and crews at idle. He returned to paint still lifes of flowers, often near a window in his home, with light filtering through the composition in an impressionistic manner. Alten also created another series of self-portraits, as well as additional portraits and a series of nudes. In February of 1938 he participated in a three-artist show in Chicago and died of a heart attack in his home at age 67 just a month later.

Over a career spanning four decades, Alten painted more than 3,000 works of art. His commitment to the city and state that welcomed him as an immigrant in 1889 was repeatedly demonstrated in the number of scenes and portraits featuring Michigan landscapes and residents. Alten took advantage of advances in technology and transportation to further his training and career. Amongst a rapidly changing world, he celebrated traditional laborers in rural settings, ignoring rapid modernization in favor of nostalgic scenes. As Grand Rapids' most celebrated artist, Alten's views of Michigan record its beauty during the first four decades of the twentieth century and are evidence of an immigrant and artist who found a home there.

### 11.1 Gulls of Leland

Fisher dressed in a blue shirt and white sailing cap stands on the shore of a lake. He is holding a bucket in his left hand. A number of driftwood logs lay on the sandy shore around the fisher. Two piers extend into the water on the fisher's right. A large flock of white gulls fly over the fisher's left shoulder, some seemingly landing on the shore and some taking off into the sky. More gulls are sitting along the piers. The lake is multiple shades of blue—a blueish green nearest to shore, turquoise further out, and deep blue near the horizon. A few clouds pass through the sky.

#### *Gulls of Leland*

1936

Oil on canvas

Alten left the state of Michigan less frequently as travelling became more difficult with age. In 1936 he visited Leland, a small fishing and resort community on the northwest side of the Leelanau peninsula. Here, he painted scenes at Fishtown and the piers leading from the Leland River (Carp River) into Lake Michigan.

Leland was settled by Europeans as early as the 1830s on the site of an important Odawa (Ottawa) Native American village. During the early part of the 20th century, commercial fishermen motorized and enclosed their open boats, and wealthy individuals from throughout the Midwest began building summer cottages. Access by Lake Michigan passenger steamers and rail lines, along with local passenger service to the Manitou Islands, led to further development of the resort community.

### 11.2 Tarpon Springs

Three sailboats pushed together. Of the three boats, though, only one boat is totally visible. Two men work on the visible boat. One of the men is bent over the side of the boat towards the water. The pier jets out into view from the right. A fourth sailboat is crossing the water in the far distance. The water and sky are clear blue.

*Tarpon Springs*  
1935  
Oil on Canvas

Tarpon Springs, Florida, was known for the Greek sponge divers who arrived in the 1900s. Sponge diving is one of the oldest forms of undersea exploration, as sea sponges have been used by humans for centuries evidenced by their presence in writings by Homer and Plato. Alten uses a bright color palette here and focuses on working class laborers, a common theme throughout his work.

### 11.3 Mathias J. Alten Painter's Palette

Metal artist palette about twelve inches in length. Specks of paint remain on its surface. Mathias Alten's initials "M.A." are cut out near the thumb hold.

Mathias J. Alten Painter's Palette  
ca. 1930  
metal

Palettes are used by artists to mix paints and can be used with a variety of paint types. Alten painted himself holding a palette in his last self-portrait. These tools are characterized by the large surface area and ergonomic hand groove, with a hold for the artist's thumb. Some palettes also have holes for paintbrushes to be stored or dips to prevent paint from dripping off the surface.

### 11.4 Mathias Alten Paintbrushes

Three paintbrushes about 6 inches long with wooden handles and bristles connected with a metal section between the bristles and the wood. Specks of paint remain on the handles and bristles. The brushes descend in size from one inch wide to a quarter inch wide.

Mathias Alten Paintbrushes  
ca. 1935  
wood and horse hair

Paintbrushes have been in use since around 300 B.C.E, when the invention is attributed to an artist in the Qin dynasty. Traditionally the brushes are constructed with animal hair bound and glued under a metal clasp and attached to a wooden handle. In modern times, different brush materials are used with different paints; soft bristles are often used with watercolor, and coarse bristles are usually utilized for oil painting.

### 11.5 Mathias J. Alten, On the Dunes

Mathias Alten stands on a sand dune looking back over his right shoulder. He is wearing a light-colored suit and a straw hat. His eyes are squinting in the sun. He is holding a folded easel in his right hand and his canvas bag is hanging from his left shoulder.

Mathias J. Alten, *On the Dunes*  
Leland, Michigan  
1936  
Photograph

In this photograph, Alten poses on the dunes south of the Leland piers leading into Lake Michigan. He carries his portable easel in his right hand and supplies in his left for plein-air painting (painting outdoors). The perspective of the *Gulls of Leland* painting is from the north side of the Leland piers, on the opposite side as he appears in this photograph.

#### 11.6 Mathias J. Alten, *Portrait*

Side profile of Mathias Alten facing the left. He is wearing a brown suit, white shirt and tie. His face is in shadow and his expression is not visible.

Mathias J. Alten, *Portrait*  
ca. 1935  
photograph

Today, Alten's life and work is curated by both the Grand Valley State University Art Gallery and the Grand Valley State University Special Collections and Archives. The Grand Valley State University Special Collections department has preserved Alten's exhibition catalogs, correspondence, newspaper clippings, and a diary of his daughter Camelia. They have also collected interviews with Alten's family, including his wife Bertha, his children Eleanor and Camelia, and his grandchildren Gloria and Anita. These important pieces of history help paint a personal picture of Alten beyond his art career.

#### 11.7 *Brower Lake*

Aerial view of rolling hills leading to a white farmhouse. The landscape is a mixture of forests and farm fields with the fields concentrated around the house. The trees have just started to change colors, some still fully green while others are yellow, orange and red. A blue lake is barely visible on the left through spaces between the trees. The grass and fields have also started to change from green to tans and browns. The sky mostly clear with a few fluffy clouds.

*Brower Lake*  
1935  
Oil on canvas

Unlike the many agricultural scenes Alten painted, the absence of labor being performed gives this piece a particular calm and serene quality. Michigan's scenery in the fall is an enchanting sight. Alten

showcases this by adding deep colors to the leaves on the trees lining the water. He draws dimension out of different variations of color, like adding muted pinks and rich browns to the foliage.

### 11.8 Nude with Amaryllis

A woman sits on a bed in front of a window with her legs tucked under her. She is looking beyond the viewer with a blank expression. Her brown hair is cropped short, and a blue robe is on the bed under her legs. A pink amaryllis plant in a terracotta pot sits in the sun on the windowsill. Lacy white curtains with tiny white polka dots blow in the wind.

#### *Nude with Amaryllis*

1935-1936

Oil on canvas

Alten painted this model at least three times while he lived in Grand Rapids. Even though he was a respected artist, the idea of a woman posing nude for a married man raised a few eyebrows. In 1906, the Grand Rapids Herald even ran a story speculating on the identity of a local woman he had hired as a model.

Alten is quoted by the paper as saying: “Grand Rapids is the hardest city I ever saw in which to get a suitable model... there is a decided aversion to posing in the nude. People ... will not take up the work for fear the finger of scorn will be pointed at them for once having been a model for some great painter. Such a view is not only narrow, it is sinful...it is for the sake of art and art alone, and as such, is sacred to anyone who has any artistic instinct. I respect my models as truly as I do any good woman and so do my students”

Image on label: Clipping of newspaper article, “Mystery of Local Artist’s Model: Young woman who poses before art class in studio is unknown to artists and students—difficulty in securing models.”

Image caption: *Grand Rapids Herald*, 1906, newspaper

### 11.9 Red Roses in a Glass Vase

A green, glass vase holding a bouquet of red roses sits on a white tabletop. The bouquet is full and spilling over the sides of the vase. The leaves have not been trimmed from the roses’ stems making the bouquet even fuller. The background is a bluish-grey.

#### *Red Roses in a Glass Vase*

ca. 1933

Oil on canvas mounted on board

The 1930s found Alten in a second story studio above Peck’s Drug Store in the heart of a bustling Grand Rapids along Division Avenue. An aging Alten traveled less and, as a result, had fewer opportunities to paint new landscapes. Instead, the timeline of his paintings shows a reach back to his years as an artist

in training, as he returned to painting floral still-lives within his studio so he would still have something to paint.

#### 11.10 Myself at 66

An older Mathias Alten wearing a white shirt and striped tie stands with his left shoulder facing out. His head is turned looking out. He has black rimmed glasses, a moustache and cigar hang out of his mouth. He is holding a paintbrush up towards a canvas in his left hand. A painter's palette is resting along his right arm tucked under his armpit. He also holds brushes in his right hand.

*Myself at 66*

1937

Oil on canvas

This is believed to be the final self-portrait Alten painted of himself, before he died of a heart attack the following year. In this self-portrait, Alten depicts himself as active, holding his tools confidently as he smokes a cigar. His face is creased in concentration, with his eyes seeming to flick up at us only for a moment before returning to his work.

#### Section 9: Recreation and Leisure

*Painting direct and in no sense from memory or from a camera portrait brings real freshness into the work and in all cases achieves better results.*

– Mathias J. Alten

By the start of the twentieth century, recreational activities became increasingly accessible to the middle and working classes. Railroads and steamboats opened access to the lakeshore in the previous century, and the electric Interurban of the new century provided convenient transportation to a growing number of suburban and rural areas. In Grand Rapids, the Interurban allowed residents to easily visit the amusement park, bath house, and picnic area at Reed's Lake, or the beach and cottages at one of the communities along Lake Michigan.

Henry Ford's introduction of the mass-produced automobile and standardization of the work week further enabled Americans to travel and commit time to leisure activities. For Mathias J. Alten, advances in transportation allowed him to regularly paint outside his traditional studio setting and away from the city. Drawing on his exposure to Impressionism, Alten consistently sought out opportunities to paint directly from nature. This allowed him to portray the atmospheric conditions and play of daylight in a real outdoor setting.

In addition to the more candid moments and pastoral landscapes Alten captured outside, he also focused on his portrait business. Even with the growth of the photography industry, the wealthy continued to seek him out for a painted portrait. Alten also committed to painting himself regularly. From 1916-1921, when the First World War and ensuing flu pandemic limited his travel, he completed 20 self-portraits. As Americans emerged from the First World War and entered into a period of growth

and prosperity, they would increasingly have more time and income for recreation and leisure. Alten capitalized on this, spending the 1920s adding to his artistic success and traveling outside the state.

### 9.1 Picnic at Macatawa

Gathering of a group of people at picnic tables in a clearing in the woods. Two young girls, one in a grey dress and one in a pink dress, walk together arm-in-arm in the foreground. They are passing by a man in trousers, white shirt, red tie and straw hat who is smoking a pipe. In the background, people dressed in colorful outfits sit on picnic tables. A woman wearing a purple skirt, white shirt, and white hat sits at the nearest picnic table. She is watching the girls over her shoulder and is holding a baby.

#### *Picnic at Macatawa*

1904

Oil on Canvas

In the early 1900s, workers in the white collar sector of Chicago often visited Lake Macatawa as a vacation spot, bringing a lot of business and industry to the area. Residents of Grand Rapids, such as the Altens, would take the electric Interurban to the lakeshore to enjoy time away from work and the city. This wonderfully intimate scene of their extended family illustrates the influence of Impressionism on Alten. Using visible brush strokes, Alten emphasizes the changing qualities of light as it is filtered through the trees.

### 9.2 Sailboats on Reed's Lake

Four sailboats with big white sails glide across the water. The water is so clear, it reflects each sailboat. The sailboat closest to the shore has a "9" painted in orange on the sail. Another sailboat has an "A" painted in orange on the sail. Two green and blue row boats are tied up on the grassy shore in the foreground. Tall green trees line a sandy shore in the background. The sky is clear.

#### *Sailboats on Reed's Lake*

ca. 1930

Oil on canvas laid on cardboard

Grand Haven has been a popular leisure destination since the late 1800s, as the lumber industry brought business to the area and sparked its settlement. In 1915, Congress established the Coast Guard in Grand Haven, and within ten years the Coast Guard festival was created. This event still draws in a huge crowd every year.

### 9.3 Children Climbing a Sand Hill

Five children climb up the side of a green grass covered hill. Erosion on the left side of the hill reveals yellow sand. Near the bottom of the hill, three of the children are holding hands and climbing together as a group. A little further up the hill, one child runs up by themselves. The last child stands at the top of the hill.

#### *Children Climbing a Sand Hill*



1916

Oil on canvas on board

Visiting the dunes along Lake Michigan has long been a favorite activity for residents of the state. The dunes were formed over 5,000 years ago due to glacial drift, the slow movement of glaciers across a landscape. The moving ice deposited sediments, creating the large dunes. Today the dunes are threatened by erosion due to the removal of grasses and trees whose root systems hold the ground in place.

#### 9.4 Sunset, Lake Michigan

A blazing summer sunset over Lake Michigan. The sky, which makes up 80% of the canvas, is yellow, orange, pink, and red with moody blueish-grey clouds along the horizon. The water reflects the colors in the sky. A simple dock extends into the water on the left.

*Sunset, Lake Michigan*

ca. 1931

Oil on canvas

This image captures what generations have come to the lakeshore for: a brilliant sunset over Lake Michigan. This painting shows the influence of Impressionism, as Alten effectively captures the sun setting amidst clouds, with yellow, orange, pink, blue, and purple defining the composition.

#### 9.5 The Channel at Grand Haven

A bright blue body of water passing through a green landscape. The wider part of the water funnels into a channel, a waterway between two landmasses that lie close to each other. A cluster of small buildings and a church steeple sits between rolling hills and tall trees on the far bank of the channel. The channel's bank in the foreground has a rocky shore and light green grasses. A blue sky with wispy clouds cover two-thirds of the canvas.

*The Channel at Grand Haven*

ca. 1920

Oil on canvas

Grand Haven has been a popular leisure destination since the late 1800s, as the lumber industry brought business to the area and sparked its settlement. In 1915, Congress established the Coast Guard in Grand Haven, and within ten years the Coast Guard festival was created. This event still draws in a huge crowd every year.

Image on label: A long pier with a light house at the end extends into the horizon. The right side of the pier is lined with people fishing off the side. A series of electrical towers down the center of the pier connect the lighthouse to electricity on shore.

Image caption: *Fishing at Grand Haven Pier, 1894*, photograph, Tri-cities Historical Museum

## 9.6 Self Portrait

A mustached Mathias Alten stares out with a mischievous look on his face. He is dressed in a brown jacket, white shirt, white tie, and white hat. His signature pipe is hanging from the right side of his mouth. Green leaves decorate the background.

### *Self Portrait*

1917

Oil on canvas

This self-portrait by Alten is a good example of his early work, as the colors are quite muted and dark in comparison to his technique in later years. Also present is some of his Impressionist style, which can be seen in the wide and obvious strokes of color and vague but discernible background foliage.

## 9.7 Alten Family on the Porch of their Grand Rapids Home

A family sits on the porch of a two-story, wood-shingled house. The porch, sided with river stone, extends the entire length of the front of the house. Most of the family are sitting on front steps, which are on the right end of the porch. Three women are standing on the porch behind the members sitting on the steps. One woman leans on the porch's railing to the left of the steps. A woman sits in the shade of the porch behind the family. A young woman sits on the railing to the right of the porch holding to the side the end of a large American flag that hangs over the steps. The house's lawn is well manicured with small bushes and flowers around the path leading up to the house. A second large bay window in the center of the second story opens to a balcony.

### Alten Family on the Porch of their Grand Rapids Home

1203 Hope Street NE, Corner of Fuller Avenue

ca. 1910

photograph

Built just outside of the city in 1900, the Alten family lived in this house until 1917. Alten had been in New York for months looking for a family home only to come back knowing New York was not the place for his family. They had already sold his home, so the family moved to a new home on East Fulton in an even more rural area. While Alten embraced the city for his studio and for the first house he and his wife Bertha lived in, he slowly moved away from the center with each home, choosing to raise his daughters in more rural areas of town.

## 9.8 Alten Family Portrait

The Alten family, Mathias, Bertha, and their three daughters, together in a photography studio. Alten is seated with his daughters and wife standing around him. Alten wears a three-piece suit. Bertha and the girls wear lacy white dresses.

### Alten Family Portrait

ca. 1915

photograph

Mathias and Bertha Alten had three daughters together. The oldest, standing next to Bertha, was Ella, later known as Eleanor (1896-1994). Camelia (1898-1999) was the middle daughter (left of Mathias) and Viola (1903-1995), was the youngest. It was common for Alten to paint portraits of his daughters as they grew up. The three daughters kept their roots in Grand Rapids, marrying local men and raising their families in the same town in which they grew up.