



MATHIAS J. ALTEN

LEARNING RESOURCE

AN AMERICAN ARTIST AT THE TURN OF THE CENTURY



Mathias Alten, *Self Portrait, Myself at 66*, oil on board, 1937, Gift of George H. and Barbara Gordon, 2009.90.1

German-born American artist, **Mathias Joseph Alten** (1871-1938), emigrated to the United States in 1889 at the age of seventeen. During this period, the country experienced swift economic and urban growth driven by industrialization and immigration. Alten's family settled in Grand Rapids, Michigan, a premier furniture manufacturing center and a desirable location for German and Slavic 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 dominant 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. Despite his attraction to distant locales and artistic 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 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 French Barbizon and Dutch Hague Schools and later by the Impressionism movement. His work embraced a fluid style consistent with an Impressionist-inspired brush, and despite the rapid changes of the 19th and 20th century he lived through, his fascination with quiet places and the old way of doing things prevailed. He repeatedly sought out and celebrated traditional laborers and nostalgic settings even as modernization transformed life in the early twentieth century.

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY

Born in Gusenberg, Rhine Province, Germany in 1871, Alten developed a preference for art-making from an early age. When he was fourteen years old, now living in Marpingen, Germany, he began his apprenticeship under Joseph Klein, painting religious subjects for Catholic churches and secular subjects theaters. He also painted building interiors and installed wallpaper. At this time, Alten sold sketches to soldiers as they passed through the town. Four years later, in 1889, Alten and his family emigrated to the United States, settling in the west side of Grand Rapids, Michigan. There, he took up work as a decorator and furniture painter for Charles C. Nooneman and for the Phoenix Furniture Company. After marrying his wife, Bertha Schwind, they took over her parents' paint and wallpaper shop in 1895, renaming it Schwind and Alten. While he and Bertha ran the family business, Alten took lessons with Grand Rapids artist Edwin A. Turner as he pursued his goal of becoming a professional artist.

In 1898, Alten traveled to Europe to study art in France. When he returned to Grand Rapids, he opened an art studio where he taught evening classes for the next 25 years. He became a widely respected artist in Grand Rapids and was patroned by the wealthy elites of the city. Alten spent much of his life traveling, both alone and with his family, keeping up with the current events and trends in the art world through his ever-expanding artistic network. However, despite opportunities and even expectations that he would move to places more central to the art world, Alten remained in Grand Rapids for his lifetime.

"There are many reasons why I like Grand Rapids. Many people say: "Why don't you go to New York to live?" I prefer to stay here. I have a beautiful country to work from in this locality... I feel that I am enabled to be a better artist by staying here and working out my own ideas than if I were to pass my time in a luxurious studio in New York , with my fellow artists influencing my work."



Mathias Alten, *Gulls of Leland*, oil on canvas, 1935, GVSU Collection, 1998.589.1

ALTEN'S TRAVEL TIMELINE

Explore all of Alten's works in the GVAM collection. See artwork he completed as he traveled around the United States and Europe.

Although Alten was dedicated to his homebase in Grand Rapids, he was committed to traveling in order to learn from other artists and be exposed to new artistic methods and inspiration. Travel was an important part of his self-guided education.

Dec 1898: Alten embarks on his solo journey to Europe after becoming an American citizen and applying for a passport in November.

1899: Alten begins his formal artistic education in Paris at the Academie Julian. Later, he enrolls at the Academie Colarossi and wins a medal in figure drawing. In the summer, Alten visits Italy to see museums in Rome, Florence, and Siena. He later returns to France and begins painting landscapes and laborers along the northern coast at Etaples.

1902: Alten visits the Lyme Art Colony in Old Lyme, Connecticut.

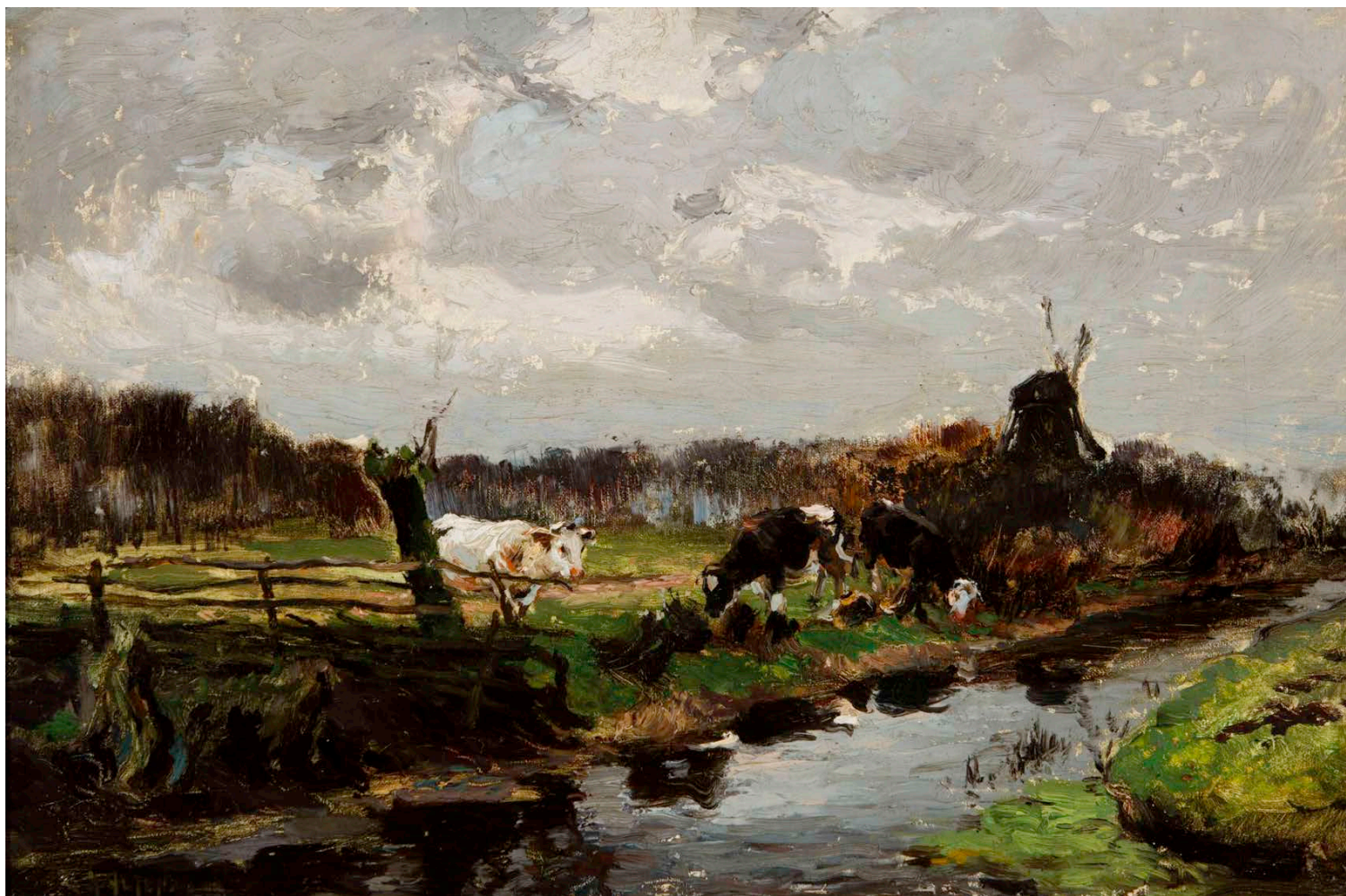
Fall 1911: Alten and his family return to Old Lyme and paints several autumn landscapes.

1929: Mathias and his wife, Bertha, travel to Hollywood, Florida where Alten completes several paintings. Afterward, the couple travels to Laguna Beach in Southern California where he paints more canvases of the coastline and California Mission scenes.

June 1912: Alten completes 23 paintings while in Valencia, Spain. While in Spain, Alten's color palette shifts from that reminiscent of the French Barbizon School to the lighter palette of the Impressionists.

1927: Mathias Alten travels to Taos, New Mexico and paints more than forty canvases depicting the Pueblo people(s) and the landscape.

Summer 1935: Alten travels to Tarpon Springs, Florida painting Greek sponge fishermen. Back home, Alten creates several paintings of Leland, a northern Michigan fishing village.



Mathias Alten, *An Unruly Wind*, oil on canvas, 1910, Gift of George H. and Barbara Gordon, 2021.86.30

Take a moment to look at *An Unruly Wind*. Starting from the center, allow your eyes to move outward, taking the time to look closely at all the details in this painting. Now, put yourself in the scene:

- What do you see? Can you see animals roaming or water running? Are the clouds still or moving?
- What do you hear? Can you hear the cows or the running of the water?
- What do you feel? Do you feel the wind against your skin? Is it a cool wind or a warm breeze?
- What do you smell? Can you smell rain? Is this unruly wind a precursor to an oncoming storm?

After putting yourself in the scene, how do you feel? What is the artist trying to relay to us through his artwork?

(Larger image available on page 10)

Mathias Alten painted many self-portraits over the course of his career. This one was painted in 1917, when he was forty-six years old.

Look at his facial expression. How do you think Alten is feeling, and why?

Portraiture was a common way for people to convey an ideal of themselves through various methods. While having your portrait painted by an artist was often seen as a social status marker, the reasons for having one's portrait painted changed over time. However, the motives behind an artist's self-portrait might be different. Artists may choose to create a self-portrait as a form of documentation of their life throughout their career, as a method of self-exploration, a tool for self-reflection, or simply as a way to showcase their skills as a kind of advertisement. Pay attention to the visual elements in this painting - his clothes, his facial expression, his posture, his gaze, the background. What message is Mathias Alten trying to convey?

If you had your portrait painted, how would you want to look?

Would you smile or would you look off to the side?

What would you wear? Would you want to dress up, or would you rather be wearing your regular day-to-day clothes?

What kind of message about yourself would you want to share?

Would any of your above answers change if you painted a self-portrait, instead of having someone else paint you?

(Larger image available on page 11)



Mathias Alten, *Self Portrait*, oil on canvas, 1917, Gift of George H. and Barbara Gordon, 2021.86.13

COMPARE AND CONTRAST

Let's first take a look at each painting individually. Take about a minute for each painting and challenge yourself to notice as many details as you can. What is going on in each scene? Ask yourself about the weather, the time of day, the season, and any other questions you can think of as you explore each landscape.

Now let's start to contrast the two.

What are some details that differ between the two scenes? Is there a difference in subject? Is there a difference in color and composition?

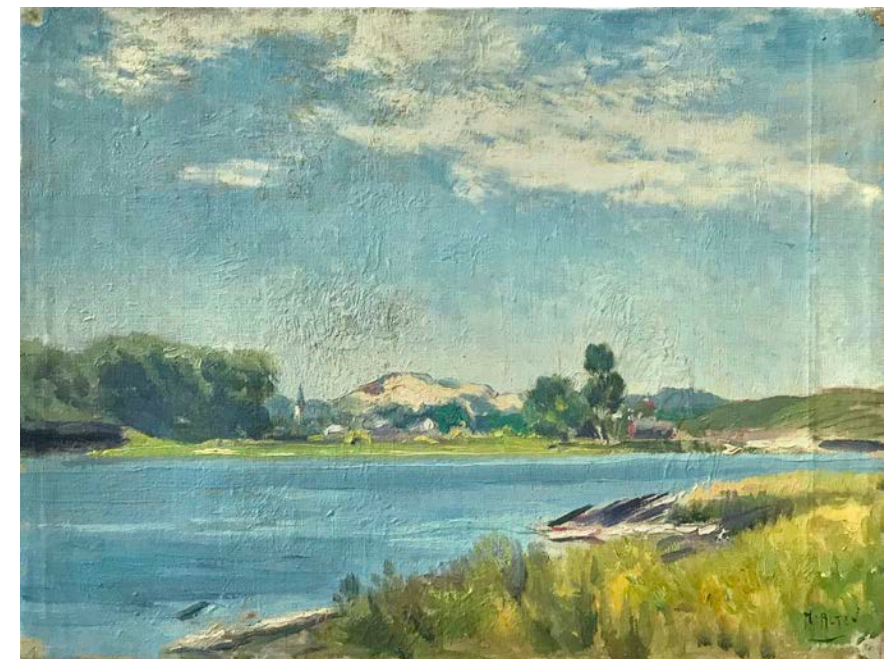
What's similar between these paintings? What seems to be the shared message between these two landscapes?

Mathias Alten notably paints landscapes, scenes of daily activity, and portraits. He lived during the Industrial Revolution, but omits it from his paintings. He actively chooses to focus on nature and the common man rather than urbanization. Knowing this, look again at *Looking North along the Grand from Lower Island*. You can see the silhouette of the city, but your view is obstructed. How can we see Alten's aversion for modernization in this painting? How does this painting differ now from *The Channel at Grand Haven*?

(Larger images available on pages 12-13)

(Top) Mathias Alten, *Looking North along the Grand from Lower Island*, oil on canvas, 1909, Gift of George H. and Barbara Gordon, 2021.86.36.

(Bottom) Mathias Alten, *The Channel at Grand Haven*, oil on canvas, ca. 1920, Gift of Anita M. Gilleo, 2018.58.2.



MEDITATION WITH MATHIAS



Mathias Alten, *House with Stream and Mountains, Taos*, oil on canvas, 1927, Gift of George H. and Barbara Gordon, 2015.71.2.

Imagine yourself inside of *House with Stream and Mountains, Taos*. If possible, dim the lights and encourage visitors to get comfortable.

Allow your eyes to wander over the painting while taking deep, slow breaths.

Close your eyes and continue to breathe deeply. Feel the sensations within this scene: the sound of the river, the temperature of the air, the song of nearby wildlife, the scents of nature or perhaps the tantalizing smell of something freshly baked inside the house. Visualize yourself walking to the house and feel the ground beneath your feet. Is the sun warm on your face? Is there a breeze?

Continue to breath deeply as you enjoy your meditation journey inside *Michigan Summer Woods* on the next page.

(Larger image available on page 14)

ADDITIONAL IDEAS FOR MEDITATION WITH MATHIAS:

- Guide your visitors through this experience. You could play a meditative soundtrack of a meadow and guide them through box breathing. Encourage visitors to focus on the artwork and allow their minds to drift.
- Dim the lights. Using a soft voice, describe the painting in detail. Encourage visitors to close their eyes and imagine themselves inside the painting.
- Practice meditative drawing through contour line drawing in the gallery. Remind visitors that meditative drawing is about the process, not perfection.
- In a classroom, project an image of the painting, play music, and allow visitors to practice meditative art-making with charcoal, pastels, or watercolors.

PROGRAMMING IDEAS:

- Mindfulness in the Museum: Inspired by Meditation with Mathias, host a mindful moment in the gallery. Potential activities include yoga, naptime, guided meditation, and a sound bath.
- Host an en plein air painting activity! Mathias Alten often created his artworks outside.
- Create a self-portrait: Using the questions from the section on Alten's self-portrait, create your own artwork using whatever materials are available.



Mathias Alten, *Late Summer Fields, Michigan*, oil on canvas, 1919, GVSU Gift of George H. and Barbara Gordon, 2009.90.1, 2021.86.17









