Fall 2021

In the Archives: The Artist's Scrapbook

Molly McClain
University of San Diego, mmcclain@sandiego.edu

In the Archives: The Artist's Scrapbook

Abstract

The article discusses the scrapbook created by artist Charles A. Reiffel (1862-1942), a landscape painter working in early twentieth-century San Diego.

Disciplines

Book and Paper | History | Painting | United States History

Molly McClain, "In the Archives: The Artist's Scrapbook," The Journal of San Diego History, 67, no. 2 (Fall 2021): 159-170.

THE JOURNAL OF

SAN DIEGO HISTORY

A Publication of the San Diego History Center

Published since 1955 by the
SAN DIEGO HISTORICAL SOCIETY
1649 El Prado, Balboa Park, San Diego, California 92101
ISSN 0022-4383

In the Archives: The Artist's Scrapbook

Molly McClain

Editors' Note

We present here the second installment of what we hope will be a regular feature of the Journal in which contributors will compose brief essays about collections in the San Diego History Center's Research Archives. Our goal is to illustrate how the archival collections constitute a rich community resource providing researchers the raw materials we need to interpret the history of our region.

Visitors to the San Diego History Center (SDHC) are often impressed by two large murals, *San Diego Harbor* and *San Diego Back Country,* painted by Charles A. Reiffel in 1936 when he was employed by the Works Progress Administration (WPA) Federal Art Project. Originally displayed at San Diego High School, they are imagined landscapes in a colorful post-impressionist style.

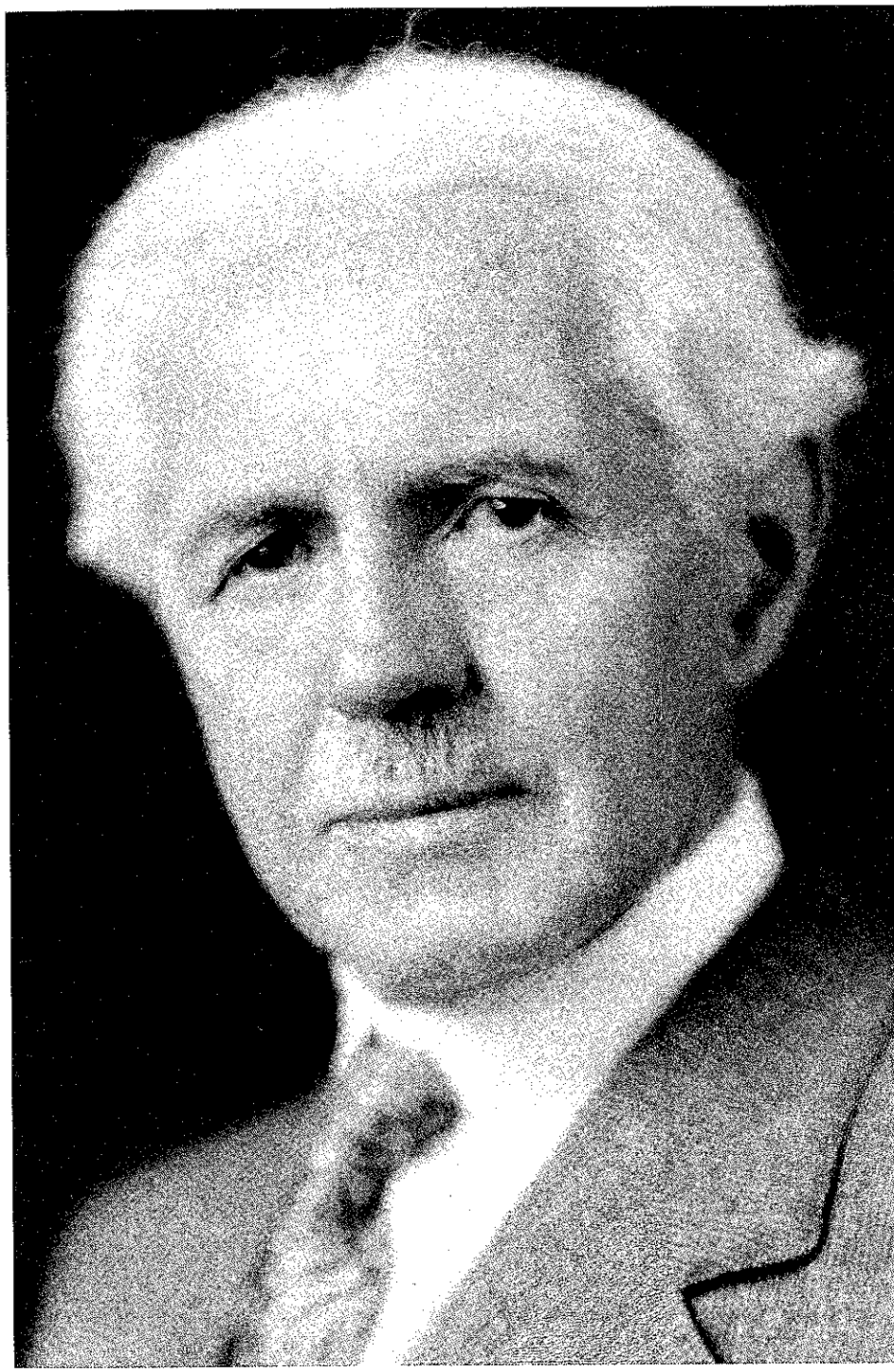
SDHC's archives holds another treasure, the Charles Reiffel Scrapbook (SB 152), donated by George Stern Fine Arts in 2013. The scrapbook—filled with newspaper clippings, cartoons, photographs, and personal ephemera—is an "unwritten history" created with scissors and paste. It holds the potential to serve as a visual autobiography; it also offers a window into the broader cultural milieu of an early twentieth-century artist.

The Artist: Charles A. Reiffel (1862-1942)

Charles Reiffel was a landscape painter who arrived in San Diego in 1925 and went on to play an important role in the community's arts and culture scene. Born

---

Molly McClain, PhD, is a professor of history at the University of San Diego. She is the author of four books and numerous articles in the fields of British and US history, including *Ellen Browning Scripps: New Money and American Philanthropy* (2017). A ninth-generation San Diegan, she is on the board of the La Jolla Historical Society.



Charles Reiffel, San Diego artist, 1927. ©OP #10014.

in Indianapolis, Indiana, he was the son of Jacob Reiffel, a native of Bavaria, and Nancy Ellen Marshall, who descended from an old Virginia family. He apprenticed at Strobridge Lithography in Cincinnati before moving to New York to work in a printer's shop. Noting the demand for American lithographers in England, he crossed the Atlantic in November 1891. During a three-year period, he lived in England and traveled throughout western Europe and North Africa while practicing his artistic skills. He studied briefly at the Munich Academy, his only formal artistic training.[1]

Reiffel lived in Buffalo and Cincinnati between 1894 and 1901 while painting and exhibiting his work. In 1898, he married Elizabeth Frances "Frankie" Flanagan (1862-1942). The couple lived in England between 1901 and 1903 before returning to Buffalo, where Reiffel took up work as a poster designer for the Courier Co. He continued to draw and paint, experimenting with a variety of different styles before adopting Tonalism around 1907. In 1908, his *Moonlight on the Niagara* won the Buffalo Society of Artists' Fellowship Prize. The following year, the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, DC acquired his *Railway Yards—Winter Evening*. By this time, he was an established landscape painter whose works were compared with those of Edward W. Redfield (1869-1965).[2]

The artist gave up lithography, devoted himself to landscape painting, and settled in Silvermine, Connecticut, an artists' colony, in 1912. The following year, Reiffel attended the International Exhibition of Modern Art in New York, known as the Armory Show, where he saw works by *avant garde* European artists. Inspired by their use of bright color and bold lines, Reiffel began working in what would later be described as a post-impressionist style. He displayed his work at prestigious venues, including New York's National Academy of Design, the Art Institute of Chicago, the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, and the Panama Pacific International Exposition of 1915. The recipient of many awards and honors, he exhibited in the prestigious First Pan-American Exhibition at the Los Angeles County Museum in 1925.[3]

Reiffel left the New York art scene in 1925, at the height of his career, intending to spend a year at the artists' colony in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Instead, he and Frankie found themselves in San Diego. Inspired by the region's chaparral, oak trees, and rock-strewn hills, they never left. The artist began exhibiting his work in the Fine Arts Gallery among other museums and galleries in Southern California. Late in 1929, he helped to organize the Contemporary Artists of San Diego with the aim of promoting and exhibiting local work. He was a member of the San Diego Artists Guild, among other professional organizations.[4]

The artist might have abandoned his career during the Great Depression but for the establishment of the WPA that threw a lifeline to struggling artists. In return

Charles Reiffel, 1929. ©UT 16523-5.

for a small weekly stipend, Reiffel produced some of his most celebrated works, including *Road in the Cuyamacas* (1933-34), now in the Smithsonian American Art Museum. He also taught painting classes and accepted commissions to produce murals for San Diego High School and Lincoln High, including *San Diego Harbor* and *San Diego Back Country*, now on permanent display at SDHC. He also produced murals for the auditorium at Memorial Junior High School and the City Council Chambers at the San Diego Civic Center.[5]

In the 1930s, Reiffel mixed with a younger and far more modernist crowd of artists, becoming intrigued by the potential for the expression of emotion in even the most abstract paintings. Bram Dijkstra described him as an "Abstract Expressionist before his time."[6] His paintings won awards but did not sell well. The artist died in San Diego on March 14, 1942, one month before his eightieth birthday.

Scrapbooks: A Brief History

A unique form of expression, scrapbooks have gained the attention of scholars interested in visual culture, history, and biography. Katherine Ott, Susan Tucker, and Patricia P. Buckler, in *The Scrapbook in American Life*, describe them as "a material manifestation of memory—the memory of the compiler and the memory of the cultural moment in which they were made."[7] They are not confessional, like diaries, but anecdotal. Scrapbooks "open a window into the lives and thoughts of people who did not respond to the world with their own writing," explains Ellen Gruber Garvey in *Writing with Scissors: American Scrapbooks from the Civil War to the Harlem Renaissance*. Instead, "they saved printed matter and arranged it in ways that expressed their own ideas."[8]

Scrapbooks were the product of a revolution in printing that began during the Renaissance and accelerated over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Depending on their age, scrapbooks may contain engravings, lithographs and chromolithographs, or throwaway paper artifacts like ticket stubs, advertising cards, and valentines. The boom in newspapers during the mid-nineteenth century led to scrapbooks filled with clippings, wood-engraved illustrations, and later printed photographs. According to Garvey, "Scrapbook makers' work mirrored the practice of newspaper editors, who continually clipped and recirculated material."[9] With the introduction of the Kodak Camera and flexible roll film in 1888, albums began to feature photographs of friends and family, holiday destinations, and pets.

The growing popularity of scrapbooking led to the creation of mass-marketed albums with gummed pages and strong bindings. Mark Twain was such an avid scrapbooker that he patented a "self-pasting" album in 1873. A commercial success, *Mark Twain's Patent Scrapbook* was sold in a variety of shapes and sizes.[10] Specialized photograph albums, meanwhile, appeared as early as 1861. Known as carte-de-visite albums, they stored small albumen prints mounted on 2.5- x 4-inch cards. In the early twentieth century, publishers produced blank "memory books" and encouraged people to save tokens of personal experience.

Scrapbooks have the potential to communicate valuable information about social class and culture. They appeared at a time when a growing middle-class

began to define itself and produce symbolic artifacts and rituals that marked its status. The documentation of family life was one such ritual. Scrapbooks preserved items of personal significance; they were also objects of display in themselves. Photograph albums often joined the family Bible on the parlor table "as proof of middle-class gentility."[11]

Scrapbooking is often characterized as a female activity, but men and women from all classes and backgrounds created scrapbooks. They chronicled their careers, documented family history, and saved helpful hints, cartoons, or speeches. Suffragists compiled evidence of their public activities in albums "with an eye to preserving their own role in history."[12] African Americans, meanwhile, compiled "unwritten histories" in which they claimed their place in the historical record.[13]

Scrapbooks made by artists served a variety of different purposes. Sometimes they documented a career through newspaper reviews of exhibits, programs, and other printed material. They were places for an artist to work out ideas or preserve inspirational images. The placement of photographs and text on the page sometimes reveals aesthetic principles. The curators of *Paperwork: A Brief History of Artists' Scrapbooks*, explained, "the artist's scrapbook often trades in nascent ideas, both visual and textual, which may or may not grow into a more finished work."[14]

SB 152: Charles Reiffel's Scrapbook

The scrapbook formerly belonging to Charles Reiffel is a commercially produced album measuring 8.5 x 12 inches and containing sixty-eight pages, not all of which were used. Newspaper clippings, photographs, and paper ephemera are placed on both sides of the page. The earliest date in the album is 1893 and the latest is 1941.

One function of the scrapbook was to chronicle Reiffel's career. It is filled with newspaper clippings from New York, Cincinnati, Buffalo, and San Diego newspapers and magazines related to his career as an artist, together with exhibition catalogs and invitations to private viewings. Scholars such as Martin E. Petersen and Bram Dijkstra have used the album in their research, as have art dealers seeking to establish the provenance of Reiffel's paintings.

The scrapbook documents two trips to Europe. It contains two envelopes addressed to Reiffel and his mother in Madrid and Munich, photographs of Reiffel and his wife Frankie, and sketches of the married couple in Mablethorpe, a seaside town in Lincolnshire, England.

Photographs in the album, meanwhile, memorialize family, friends, and colleagues. These include the artist's mother, his brother Will, his sister-in-law

Margaret, and various cousins. Several photographs show the Reiffels with their dogs, "Fido" and "Kwang." Others depict fellow artists. One image shows six men seated around a table, the wall behind them covered in lithographs. It is captioned, "Rimanoczy," possibly a reference to Otto Rimanoczy, a lithographic artist active in Cincinnati where Reiffel once worked. Three pages of the album are filled with printed photographs of San Diego artists clipped from a magazine. There are also paper ephemera and photographs related to "Le Bal des Quatres Arts" held annually at the El Cortez Hotel, notably pictures of the artist's wife in an ornate peacock costume.

The scrapbook contains original artwork, some of which may have been produced by the artist. There is a pencil sketch of Charles Reiffel by Henry G. Keller and a woodblock print by Maynard Dixon, together with a variety of other sketched portraits.

At some point after the construction of the scrapbook, Reiffel's wife Frankie added notes in pencil for the purpose of identifying individuals and events for posterity. For example, she captioned a photograph of herself with a dog, "Fido with me in the studio." The notes are written hastily and not particularly legibly, which was not in keeping with the otherwise careful organization of material.

The scrapbook, together with other sources of information, has the potential to reveal a good deal about the artist and his milieu. Research questions might include: How does the album reveal Reiffel's self-presentation as an artist? How did he depict himself in photographs and sketches with respect to clothing, poses, and setting? What do we learn about his family relationships? How important were collegiality and community? What roles did Reiffel play in the various artistic groups with which he was involved? One contemporary recalled Reiffel as a man of "great charm" with "a personality that appealed to everybody."[15] What could we learn about his character from the humorous cartoons that the artist pasted into the album? How did the cartoons reflect his political and social attitudes?

The scrapbook could also help us to understand Reiffel's aesthetic sensibilities. A former lithographer, he was more than usually aware of the print culture of his time. Did this affect the way that he organized texts and images within the volume? Could a visual analysis of the scrapbook reveal anything about his artistic journey from post-impressionism to abstract expressionism?

It would be useful to ask what is missing. For example, the landscape painter included few photographs or sketches of the natural world. Instead, he typically documented himself and others framed by the built environment: houses, fences, railway stations, and automobiles. Also missing is evidence of the poverty in which he and his wife lived during the 1930s.

Finally, the scrapbook requires us to consider the artist's purpose in compiling evidence about his life and career. Did he intend to produce an autobiographical object or simply to preserve personal memories? Was the scrapbook an expression of hope that his talent as an artist would be recognized and remembered, or a product of fear that his work would be forgotten? A clue lies at the very end of the volume, an autograph note by William Rothenstein, author of *Men and Memories* (1932):

> "O collectors, O museum directors and other experts, your familiarity with art, the complacency and familiarity with which you speak of masterpieces, sometimes make me long to say 'Down on your knees' before a work even by a good living artist."