

Mathias Joseph Alten  
(1871-1938)  
German-American impressionist painter

Mathias Alten born in Germany, started creating portraits from a young age. Often using the chalk from the millers, they used to mark their grain sacks. From the ages of fourteen, until he and his family moved to the United States when he was eighteen, Alten apprenticed as a painter and paperhanger. Once they arrived in the United States to live with relatives in Michigan, his family settled on the west side of Grand Rapids where there was a large German immigrant population. At this time Alten worked at decorating furniture and wallpaper, though he continued to study and create art outside of the work setting.

Mathias Alten's citizenship was finalized on November 1, 1898, his passport was issued on the 28<sup>th</sup> and by the end of December he was off to Europe through the help of his patrons to study at Académie Julian in Paris. Through out Mathias Alten's life he travels to paint, and study other artists. Often with his family or another artist. However, through these experiences, he maintained a very strong presence in Grand Rapids; teaching painting, creating murals and actively selling and exhibiting his paintings.

He is best known for his land- and seascapes, although he is an accomplished portrait, still life and animal painter. Alten's style incorporated the abbreviated strokes and reflective light showing his commitment to the standards of impressionism even while modernism and abstract styles began to take hold. His style coupled with his chosen subjects revealed little of the rapid modernization occurring around him.

"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."<sup>1</sup>

His work was well received while he was living, and he experienced it being exhibited at the National Academy in New York, The Chicago Institute of Art, the Corcoran Gallery in Washington DC, the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, the Detroit Institute of Art and other smaller venues. Alten actively exhibited his own work in Grand Rapids.

It was patronage that sustained Alten in his early career and now the family continues this legacy through the Mathias Alten Memorial Award at the Kendall College of Art & Design in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

His grand daughter, Anita M. Gilleo, does much to keep the memory of her grand father alive in the community. Recently she donated, to the Holland Museum, nine paintings that have not been exhibited to the public.

It was through her generosity the KIA was gifted Alten's Summer Landscape, 1928. Oil on Canvas.

Tour Questions:

What do you think it would feel like to be part of this day?  
How does Alten's use of color influence this?

I believe VTS would work beautifully for this painting.

Tour ideas:

compare/contrast with other American paintings for the same time period  
use similar subject matter and compare styles

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<sup>i</sup> Alten quoted in W.H. Harvest, "G.R. Artist Began His Notable Career Near Inspiring German Miracle Spring," *Grand Rapids Herald* (June 2, 1929), 7.

<http://alten.gvsuartsGallery.org/essay/mathias-altens-grander-vision>

<http://www.mathiasalten.com/html/information.asp>

<http://americanartgallery.org/artist/readmore/id/51>