

Guide to the Alfred D. Crimi Papers

CMS.088

Finding aid prepared by Richard Del Giudice

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Describing Archives: A Content Standard

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Summary Information

Repository	Center for Migration Studies
Creator	Crimi, Alfred D., 1900-1994
Title	Alfred D. Crimi Papers
Date [inclusive]	1924-1993
Extent	15.0 Linear feet in 22 boxes.
Language	English

Language of Materials note Materials in this collection are in English and Italian.

Abstract Alfred D. Crimi (1900-1994) was an Italian-American, New York City-based muralist and painter. He painted for the Works Progress Administration and continued to paint throughout his life, exhibiting at museums and galleries throughout the city. In addition to creating art, Crimi also was active in the art world, by exhibiting his works, teaching art classes, and working in organizations that promoted fine artists. His correspondence, images of his art, lectures, art catalogs, clippings, writings, and other ephemera document his life and art interest in a wide variety of subjects, including religion, nature, still life, and multi-dimensional works.

Preferred Citation note

Center for Migration Studies of New York; Alfred D. Crimi Papers (CMS 088); Box; Folder.

Biographical/Historical note

Alfred D. Crimi was born in San Fratello, in the province of Messina, Sicily, on December 1, 1900. He was the eighth of eleven children born to Filadelfio Crimi and Maria di Giorgio. He attended school in San Fratello and at the age of eight his parents sent him for few hours after school to a furniture maker to learn a trade. In 1910, the Crimi family emigrated to America.

They embarked from the port of Palermo, and traveled steerage for thirteen days until they arrived in New York. For the first three years he lived and went to school in East Harlem. It was during this period that young Crimi was inspired to become an artist. He began his formal training in art at the National Academy of Design, New York City. In 1924, lived in Greenwich Village, renting a studio at West 14th Street. While there, he won the Suydon Gold and Silver Medals for drawing from life, in addition to other prizes for which he competed. Adding to his academic training, Crimi studied for one year at the Beaux Art, being honored with the Tiffany Fellowship. Crimi's first one-man show in drawing was at the Babcock Galleries in 1928. He then exhibited at various places including the National Academy of Design, the Sesqui Centennial in Philadelphia, and the Ferargil Galleries. In 1929, he returned to Italy to continue his art studies. In Rome, he attended the Scuola Preparatoria Alle Arti Ornamentali where he studied the art of fresco and Pompeian encaustic as well as perspective drawing. At the end of his studies, he received a diploma and was awarded first prize for fresco painting. After graduation, he left Rome by train, to return to San Fratello.

During his sojourn in San Fratello, he painted several canvases and during the remainder of time he visited the cathedrals of Palermo, Cefalu, and Monreale - masterpieces of Norman-Byzantine art. Many years later, the cathedral of Monreale inspired his painting "The Cathedral", which is on display at the Griffiths Art Gallery, St. Lawrence University, Canton, N.Y.

Crimi returned to the United States in 1930 during the Great Depression. Crimi found a position in Portland, Oregon, as a consultant in color decoration for a firm in New York City. After several months in Oregon, he returned to New York and was engaged to teach art at the John Reed Art School. (When he found out that the School was a front for communist propaganda, he immediately resigned). During this time he occasionally visited his brother Fred and his wife Sara, who were musicians. Fred a violinist, and Sara, a pianist, frequently invite other musicians to their home for chamber music sessions. It was at one of these gatherings that Crimi met his future wife, Mary Timpone, a pianist. Mary, whose family had emigrated from San Fratello, married Crimi in 1935.

On May 12, 1935, President Roosevelt signed the Federal Emergency Relief Act and on December of the same year, through the newly organized Public Works of Art Project, he received a commission to paint a fresco in the Open Air Aquarium, Key West, Florida, which he completed in 1935. The fresco, with its vivid, vibrant colors, and one of the main attractions of the Aquarium, shows Key West fishermen unloading a catch of fish and a fishing sneak being docked.

In 1936, both Crimi and Mary were employed on the Works Projects Administration (W.P.A.) - Mary as a piano teacher, and Crimi as an artist in the mural division. His first assignment for which he competed, was to paint a fresco for the Medical Board Room at Harlem Hospital. The fresco was entitled "Modern

Surgery and Anaesthesia". Meanwhile, he entered a competition for the main Post Office building in Washington, D.C., and out of more than three hundred entries submitted, he was chosen as one of the six winners. The mural he completed "Parcel Post", depicted a rural railroad station with a loading platform and men loading and unloading mail.

In 1935 he was invited to become a member of the National Society of Mural Painters. In 1936 the Society sponsored a nationwide competition for an eight hundred square feet mural for the chancel of the Rutgers Presbyterian Church in New York City. Crimi won the competition. The resulting mural, called "The Spreading of the Gospel," played another role in Crimi's life in 1946, when a new administration at Rutgers Presbyterian, ordered it destroyed. Crimi asked the officials of the church for the restoration or removal of the fresco to another place, but was refused. Crimi, then, sued the church and lost. Supreme Court Referee, Charles C. Lockwood, ruled out the work had been "sold unconditionally" in 1938.

For the years 1939 and 1940, under the WPA's section of Painting and Sculpture, he was awarded through national competition two additional mural commissions: "Work, Religion and Education" for Northampton, Mass. Post Office, and "Anthony Wayne, General, Surveyor, and Gentleman Farmer", for Wayne, Pennsylvania, Post Office. These murals were painted on oil canvas. In 1941 as the U.S. entered World War II, all federally sponsored art projects were terminated; consequently, Crimi was compelled to seek other employment.

During the war, he went to work for the Sperry Gyroscope, and was assigned in the Graphic Engineering Department. In this department he was part of a team of artists doing three-dimensional drawings of military weapons and other instruments from engineers' blueprints; these illustrations were reproduced in military training manuals. Several of these drawings were also published by *Life* magazine, the *London Illustrated Sunday News* as well as other industrial publications. It was during this period that the genesis of a multi-dimensional painting began to take form. This method involves a combination of geometrical, transparent, overlapping plans; the light is emitted by the whole painting, different from the traditional method of light cast on subjects - the method of chiaroscuro painting. Crimi later perfected this method and used it in many of his paintings; he also wrote a book entitled *The Art of Multi-Dimensional Painting*.

After leaving Sperry, Crimi returned to full-time easel painting and watercolor. However, before he resumed his career as a creative artist, it was necessary that he reconcile his training in the classical tradition, which progressed from realism to expressionism, to abstractionism and to his new found method of multi-dimensional principles of color animation. The first important painting to come out of this period was the much acclaimed "Metropolis", which is now in the Wisteriahurst Museum of Holyoke, MA. The Painting uses rectangular and abstract geometrical forms to represent a modern city.

In 1947, George Binet Gallery in New York sponsored a one-man show. The exhibition was a retrospective of the previous six years and demonstrated Crimi's abundant capacity for handling pictorial problems masterfully. It showed how Crimi worked his way through strong-modeled, rounded forms, to pure abstraction. Among the painting presented were "My Window", "Polyphony", "The Unconquered", and "Meucci". As a result of this exhibition he was invited to teach at City College in the Adult Education Program, lecturing on paintings, watercolor, and perspective drawing. He also taught at the Pratt Institute in New York and Penn State University. Among the subjects covered in his classes were "Fresco Painting in Terms of the Present", "The Making of Venetian Glass Mosaic", "A Creative Approach to Color". Crimi's film "The Making and Fascination of Fresco Painting" was usually included in the curriculum.

During this time he became member of several art societies, including National Society of Mural Painters, Allied Artist of America, The Audubon Artists, The Federation of Modern Sculptors and Painters, and others.

In 1949, he held a successful one-man show at the Ferargil Galleries in New York City. The show received effusive praise from the critics; "Jewel-like" was the term used by a critic for several of his oil paintings. In 1956 he won The Emily Lowe Prize for his painting entitled "The Three Mary's", depicting the Annunciation. Also in 1956, he returned to the Village renting a new studio on 13th Street. The following year he held an exhibition at the World Eggleston Gallery on Madison Avenue. Among the paintings presented were: "Metropolis", "Dead City", "Out of Space-Out-of Time", and "Rigging". The critics gave good critical reviews, but were confused with the diversity of styles. Crimi was essentially a mural painter who had turned to easel painting. However, he relentlessly experimented with new mediums, in order to more fully and originally express himself, going from realism to multi-dimensional techniques and to abstraction.

In 1959 he held a one-man exhibition at the Two Selected Artists Gallery in New York. This exhibition consisted mainly of works of the multi-dimensional style, and it included "The Cathedral", which had been inspired by the Byzantine Cathedral in Monreale (Sicily). In 1962 the Holyoke Museum in that Massachusetts town sponsored a one-man exhibition of Crimi's works. This was followed by an exhibition sponsored by Fordham University, New York in 1966, one at Temple Emeth in Teaneck, New Jersey, in 1969, and another in 1971 at the Ringwood Manor Museum, Ringwood, New Jersey. Moreover, he exhibited in major national and international group shows including New York City's Whitney Museum, Museum of Modern Art, and Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Chicago Art Institute, and The Cerneschi Art Gallery in Paris. In 1961 he was invited to participate in the Prima Mostra Internazionale d'Arte Sacra in Trieste, Italy, and in 1972 at the Cerneschi Art Gallery of Paris. He served during the years 1958-1961 with the Art Commission of the City of New York. When his three years term expired he returned to mural work while continuing easel painting. During the next ten years he was engaged by the Board of Education to execute five Venetian glass mosaics in New York City Schools - including those of Adlai Stevenson High School, Albert Einstein Jr. High School, and Public School 377.

Crimi was the recipient of more than forty awards from numerous art organizations. His articles on fresco painting, mosaics, and the multi-dimensional principle of color animation, appeared in *American Artist*, *Today's Art*, *Liturgical Art*, and the *Book of Knowledge*.

After 18 years, he had to vacate the studio at West 13th Street, New York City. He rented another studio on West 4th Street, but left in 1978, after a 1976 flood that damaged several of his paintings and led to litigation against the landlord, he left.

His last one-man exhibition was sponsored by the Ulrich Museum of Wichita State University and featured predominantly his multi-dimensional paintings. Simultaneously, he received first prize in graphics for his famous "Mediterranean Noon" from an exhibition sponsored by the Associated Galleries of West New York.

During the early 1980s the Crimis moved to a new apartment near the New York Botanical Garden in the Bronx, New York, where Alfred Crimi expanded his artistic skills yet again, doing a series of watercolors of the garden. Crimi died on January 7, 1994.

Scope and Contents note

This collection documents the artistic work of Alfred Crimi, through photographs, correspondence, exhibition catalogs, clippings, writings, and other ephemera. Crimi was a prolific artist, creating murals throughout the United States, the bulk of which were in New York. Crimi's desire to document his own work is evident throughout the collection, the majority of the collection consists of photographs of his murals, oil paintings, drawings, and watercolors, as well as correspondence with universities and museums about housing his artwork. Most of his artwork documents professions, still life, nature, religion, and some abstract multi-dimensional work. In addition to creating art, Crimi also was active in the art world, by exhibiting his works, teaching art classes, and working in organizations that promoted fine artists. His lectures, correspondence, pamphlets, reports, meeting minutes, notebooks, and catalogs document these activities. For researchers of 20th century artists, the collection thoroughly documents how artists lived and were inspired by New York City, made it their profession, and earned money through artistic pursuits.

Arrangement note

The papers of Alfred D. Crimi have been arranged into the following series:

Series I. Biographical Material

Series II. Correspondence

Series III. Photographs

Series IV. Manuscripts, Articles, and Speeches by Crimi and about Crimi

Series V. Art Exhibits

Series VI. Lectures

Series VII. Association Papers

Series VIII. Records of Paintings Donated to Museums and Universities in the U.S.

Series IX. Miscellaneous Items

Series X. Oversized Material

Series XI. 1994 Accession

Administrative Information

Publication Information

Center for Migration Studies January 1993

Revision Description

Edited for DACS compliance by Nicole Greenhouse January 2015

Conditions Governing Access note

Open to researchers by appointment.

Conditions Governing Use note

Copyright is owned by the Center for Migration Studies. Permission to publish materials must be requested before use.

Immediate Source of Acquisition note

The collection was received by CMS in two accessions, the first in circa 1989, the second in 1994.

Processing Information note

In 2015, a series level, DACS compliant finding aid was adapted from the original description.

Related Materials

Related Archival Materials note

Alfred D. Crimi Papers, Syracuse University, Syracuse, New York, 1912-1935

Separated Materials note

Additional drawings, paintings and watercolors are stored in other locations.

Controlled Access Headings

Corporate Name(s)

- Artists' Equity Association.
- Sperry Rand Corporation. Sperry Gyroscope Division.
- United States. Works Progress Administration.

Genre(s)

- Black-and-white photography.
- Exhibition catalogs.

Occupation(s)

- Muralists.

Subject(s)

- Italian American artists.
- Italian Americans |z New York (State) |z New York.

Other Finding Aids note

The original inventory is available in print upon request.

Series I. Biographical Material

Collection Inventory

Box

1-3

Series I. Biographical Material 1924-1985

Scope and Contents note

Included is the first article on Crimi as an artist from the *Bronx Home News*, dated 1924. The article has a notation "First Notice", and express Crimi's views on art and the creation of art. There is a clipping dated Sept. 1951, from *Il Progreso* of New York, with an article on the celebration of Crimi's mother Maria's 90th birthday. The happy occasion was celebrated by her husband Filadelfio, also 90, and her children. In 1930 Crimi was a student at the Scuola Preparatoria Alle Arti Ornamentali in Rome, Italy; included is the Diploma he received and other items. The material continues with sixty loose photographs of Crimi taken at different periods of his life. There are photos of his wife Mary, his father and mother, and an album labeled "Family Album and Friends". Moreover, there are five poems and short articles relating to the years 1920s and 1930s, and a file with selected excerpts from Crimi's notebook illustrating the principles that governed his artistic career. Included with this material are comments on the genesis of seventeen of his paintings; thoughts and observations on the nature of art, and miscellaneous short articles. Finally, there are drafts of his autobiography and two copies of his published autobiography titled, *A Look Back - A Step Forward*. Additionally, there are copies of three questionnaires from the Federal Government requesting information regarding its support of Visual Arts from 1934 through 1943. Crimi answered the questionnaires and attached a sheet with a synopsis of his artistic career during these years. There is biographical data including the biographical entry on Crimi in *Who's Who in American Art*, 1936, *Who's Who in America*, 1984-1985, and several awards.

Box

4-5

Series II. Correspondence 1929-1989

Scope and Contents note

Series II. Correspondence

The correspondence covers the years 1929-1989. It is mostly in Italian in the early years, switching to English gradually after 1934. Also, up until 1934, most are handwritten letters that Crimi received. After 1934, Crimi saved his letters sent, but did not necessarily keep together the initial correspondence and the response. When Crimi grouped an exchange of letters by the correspondent around a specific person or topic, the grouping was retained.

The correspondence reflects Crimi's travels. Family and friends sent numerous letters and postcards when Crimi was studying in Italy between 1929 and 1931. Items of interest from that period include his mother's letter of Oct. 30, 1929, peremptorily warning him to be careful when in company of young ladies, a May 30, 1930, letter informing him that his father and brothers had lost their jobs and his family was relying on his sister Marie's salary, and nine 1930 letters from Berthy Blay, daughter of the Director of the Spanish Academy in Rome, whom Crimi met at a masked ball at the Art Academy where he was studying. In 1935, he worked on a WPA Art Project in Key West, Florida, stimulating letters to and from his bride, friends and family. His wife wrote almost daily in 1937 while Crimi was working on a mural in Washington, D.C. Crimi preserved both his and his wife's letters written in 1963, when he was lecturing at Penn State University.

The correspondence also documents the issue of artistic control over a commission. The correspondence from Crimi's most famous case, the destruction of the mural he painted for Rutgers Presbyterian Church in New York City, is included in this Series; Crimi continued to advocate for the artist's control over commissions until 1983, when New York State law established the artist's right to sue to protect an artistic reputation associated with a particular work. Crimi was involved in a similar issue in 1980-1981 regarding the relocation of a mural he had painted for the Northampton, Massachusetts, post office, and that is documented in this Series.

Crimi corresponded with several persons of interest. He was close friends with Paul Creston (born Giuseppe Guttovoggio), a second-generation Italian-American symphonic composer. He saved correspondence to, from and about Creston, including a letter from Arturo Toscanini. Crimi followed the local art scene in the New York Times, and sent letters to and about critics such as John Canaday, William Hannon and Hilton Kramer.

Series III. Photographs

Finally, Crimi corresponded with art institutions. Of particular interest is his correspondence with art institutions on Staten Island from 1956 to 1987, a period which saw the creation of the Snug Harbor Cultural Center, an important venue for visual art.

Arrangement note

Arranged chronologically.

Series III. Photographs 1934-1980s

Box
5-12

Scope and Contents note

This series, the most important and extensive in the collection, contains photographs of Crimi's major works. There are many loose photographs as well as those which were assembled into albums, a large number of slides and color transparencies. The photographs represent the corpus of his paintings, frescoes, and murals, produced in the course of his distinguished career. The photos are black and white, 8" by 10"; the color transparencies are 4" by 5"; and the slides are 24/35 mm. (2" by 2" with frame) and in color.

Beginning in the year 1934, Crimi received mural commissions through awards and competitions. Included are photographs of the Open Air Aquarium, Key West, Florida (fresco), 1935-1936; Post Office Department Building, Washington, D.C. (National Competition-fresco), 1937; Rutgers Presbyterian Church, New York City (National Competition-fresco), 1936-1938; Post Office, Northampton, MA (oil), 1940, and the Christian Herald Building, New York City (oil), 1950-1951. From 1942 to 1945, Crimi was employed by Sperry Gyroscope Co., Long Island, N.Y., in the Graphic Engineering Division. There are photos featuring military weapons and other instruments, as illustrated by Crimi. Included are photographs and slides of glass mosaics executed for five New York City Public Schools, 1961-1974.

As an easel painter, Crimi produced many oils and watercolors; much of this series documents those paintings. Most photos were taken between the 1920s and the 1980s, and are captioned. (The bulk of Crimi's paintings date from the 1940s to the 1970s.) There are six leather-bound albums of black and white photographs. Two of the albums contain additional photos of frescoes and murals; the other four contain photos of paintings in oil and watercolor. Also included is another album containing color transparencies and

Series IV. Manuscripts, Articles, and Speeches by Crimi and about Crimi

color slides. The slides are identified, but the transparencies are not; however, many of the transparencies have duplicates in other sections of the series, and they are identified. Finally, there are twelve sheets containing 235 slides of oil and watercolor paintings.

Series IV. Manuscripts, Articles, and Speeches by Crimi and about Crimi 1935-1980**Box**
12-15**Scope and Contents note**

The M. Grumbacher, Inc. of New York City, published a series of books on how to paint. In 1975, Crimi prepared the material for a book titled, *The Art of Abstract Dimensional Painting*, which the M. Grumbacher, Inc. printed. Crimi selected several of his most representative paintings, rich in color and design, to illustrate his new method of painting. Included are the drafts for this monograph with lessons on color, light, and dimension, the correspondence and two copies of the book. There are five short speeches dealing with art, and an article titled, "The Artist in War Industry". Also included are articles written by Crimi for several arts magazine, and many articles on Crimi and his works. Finally, there are newspaper clippings with articles on Crimi and his art. The clippings are in a scrapbook kept by Crimi, and are dated from 1935-1980.

Series V. Art Exhibits 1926-1984**Box**
15-16**Scope and Contents note**

Announcements and catalogues of his one-man shows and other exhibitions containing his works.

Arrangement note

The material is listed chronologically and according to the art gallery that sponsored the exhibition.

Series VI. Lectures circa 1940s-1970s**Box**
17**Scope and Contents note**

Series VII. Association Papers

Crimi was a lecturer and was often asked to teach. He taught at City College of New York, Pratt Institute, New York, and Pennsylvania State University, and conducted private classes in painting and drawing. He composed and presented lectures with visual aids on frescoes, mosaics, color and oil. This series includes a notebook with lectures on fresco illustrated with 57 slides, and a notebook containing the narrative for a 16mm film with a lecture on fresco, titled, "The Making and Fascination of Fresco Painting". (The film is oversized; separately filed). Also included are four notebooks with lectures on mosaics, and 160 slides describing the lectures on mosaic at several New York City Public Schools. Additionally, there is a book with lectures on color illustrated with 80 slides, and 3 copies of a lecture on multi-dimensional color principles.

Series VII. Association Papers 1947-1973**Box**
17-18**Scope and Contents note**

Crimi was Director of Artists' Equity Association in 1954-1955 and a life long member. This Association was found to advance the interests of those who work in the fine arts, including painters and sculptors. In 1951-1952 he was President of the Audubon Artists. The Audubon Artists presented exhibitions of contemporary works in all media and technique. Included is correspondence, reports, memoranda, and other miscellaneous items regarding both organizations. Also included is correspondence with the Somerset Art Association of Bernardsville, N.J.

Series VIII: Records of Paintings Donated to Museums and Universities in the U.S. 1955-1989**Box**
18-19**Scope and Contents note**

During the 1980s Crimi, conscious of his age, began to give a great deal of thought to the body of oils, watercolor and prints he still held, and that had never been exhibited. He approached several academic and artistic institutions, expressing his wish to donate these works to them so that they would not fall into inappropriate hands. Among the institutions chosen that are now the repository of some of his works are: The Smithsonian Institution, The University of Maryland, The University of Syracuse, and the Whitney Museum

Series IX: Miscellaneous Items

of American Art. This series contains the correspondence between Crimi and those institutions, including lists of the works donated, deed of gift, brochures, and miscellaneous other items.

Series IX: Miscellaneous Items 1929-1980s**Box**
19**Scope and Contents note**

There are six photographs showing Crimi's restoration of Diego Rivera's controversial fresco of communist leaders at the Rockefeller Center in New York City, and a pamphlet titled, *Diego Rivera Portrait of America*. Included are 18 photographs of students learning how to paint in Crimi's studio, and a large photograph showing the dedication of the Service Flag, painted by Crimi during the American entry into World War II. There is Crimi's written complaint and other items against his landlord, for water damage caused to his paintings and to other material and equipment in 1976, a membership list of the Federation of Modern Paintings and Sculptors, Inc., dated 1980 and several reports and two books by Ted Crawford, who represented Crimi during the "Mural Rights Bill" case with New York State.

Series X: Oversized Material 1920s-1980s**Box**
20-21**Scope and Contents note**

This series contains six large photographs showing parts of Rutgers Presbyterian Church, (N.Y.) fresco, a color photograph of the paintings "The Troubadour", and "The Fortune Teller". There are four drawings in sepia ink and pencil titled, "Self-Portrait of the Artist", "Head of a Young Woman", "Dance", and "Magnolia Tree". Included is a 16mm narrated color film: "The Making and Fascination of Fresco Painting", and an upper frontal section of a skull found by Crimi in an archaeological excavation at the amphitheater at Pozzuoli, Italy, in 1930.

Series XI: 1994 Accession 1938-1993**Box**
22**Scope and Contents note**

Series XI: 1994 Accession

This series contains poems, exhibition catalogs, materials concerning the murals at the Rutgers Presbyterian Church and Wayne and Northampton Post Offices, classes on paintings he taught, correspondence, correspondence with museums, galleries, and universities.