

ALBANY INSTITUTE OF HISTORY & ART

A Guide to the Albany Art Union Collection, 1910-1968

Summary Information

Repository

Albany Institute of History & Art Library

Title

Albany Art Union Collection, 1910-1968

Identifier

MG 79

Date

1910-1968

Physical Description

121 boxes

Physical Location

The materials are located onsite in the Museum.

Language of the Material

English

Abstract

The Albany Art Union was a commercial portrait photography studio, active from approximately 1897 to 1968, in Albany, New York. The studio changed ownership and locations several times over the years. Photographers took portrait photographs of individuals, families, business employees, and organization members.

This collection contains documents, card files, negatives, and photographs.

Preferred Citation

Preferred citation for this material is as follows:

Albany Art Union Collection, MG 79, 1910-1968. Albany Institute of History & Art Library, Albany, New York.

Conditions Governing Access and Use

Restrictions on Access

None

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Immediate Source of Acquisition

Source of Acquisition: Gift of Hortense Henning, 1968

Accession Date: May 1968

Biographical/Historical

The Albany Art Union was a commercial portrait photography studio, active from approximately 1897 to 1968, in Albany, New York. An entry for the Albany Art Union first appeared in the Albany City Directory in 1897 at which time it was located at 55 North Pearl Street. The 1903 Directory contained an advertisement noting the studio's new location at 48 North Pearl Street. Documents in the collection outline the sale of the Albany Art Union to the Griffin Art Company in January of 1910 by George S. Fulton. The Griffin Art Company subsequently sold the studio to L. Washington Bergh (1884-1968) in 1924. In 1946 the studio once again changed location, this time moving to 51 Maiden Lane. The Albany Art Union closed upon the death of Bergh (its photographer and president); it was not listed in the Albany City directory after 1968.

Bergh did most, if not all of the photography work for the Albany Art Union during his tenure as chief proprietor. Bergh's obituary reports that he was the organizer, and for two years the president of the Capital District Photographer's Society. He was also a member

of the New York State Society of Photographers and the National Society of Photographers. In addition to his photography work, Bergh also drew and painted. One of his sketches is in the Institute's Curatorial collections. Photographs of Bergh are located in box 86, folder 7 of the archive.

The Albany Art Union specialized in portraiture. Its clients included individual men, women, and children as well as family and business groups. Bergh was the official photographer for the State Legislature for nearly fifty years and produced the portraits that appeared in "The New York Red Book" into the 1960s. Bergh was also commissioned to photograph the "Prise d'Havit" or "Clothing Ceremony" for the nuns of the Sacred Heart order. Subjects of these photographs, who were new sisters, are referred to as "brides of Christ" because they dressed in wedding gowns, which they later exchanged for their habit. Although most of the work of the Art Union was done within the studio, commissions such as that for Sacred Heart would bring Bergh off-site to photograph on location. Bergh also occasionally traveled to his customers' homes to do family portraits.

Members of some of Albany's most notable families such as the Cornings and Pruyns, were photographed by the Albany Art Union. Indeed, many Albany residents of the early to mid-century remember their own trip to the Art Union for a sitting. The studio reached a wide clientele by photographing students of local schools and colleges, employees of area business and members of several religious organizations.

Scope and Contents

The Albany Art Union collections spans the period from approximately 1910 to 1968 and primarily contains materials from Bergh's tenure as chief proprietor. The collection is divided into 4 series: Business and Personal Records; Card Files; Negatives, and Photographs.

Business and Personal Records (1910 -1968) is divided into two subseries, Business Records and Personal Records. Most of the business records, and all of the personal records, belonged to L. Washington Bergh. The Business Records subseries (1910-1968) contains banking records, documents related to the sale of the Art Union to the Griffin Art Company and then to Bergh, minutes of the Griffin company's annual meeting, leases, insurance records and a binder containing the minutes of Albany Art Union's stockholder meetings (1931 and 1944). Also included are documents relating to *Coss v. Albany Art Union* (1934) and an insurance certificate of Elizabeth V. Colburn, presumed to be a relative of Mary B. Colburn, who was the secretary and treasurer of the Art Union from 1924-1935.

The client records group within the Business Records subseries contains correspondence to and from customers of the photography studio relating to orders, copies, pricing requests, and similar matters. Also included in this subseries are bills to customers. Correspondence from clients as far away as Nebraska and California is represented. This

group also contains records of photography assignments Bergh had at schools, colleges, businesses and for the state legislature (1927-1959). Most of the papers contained in this group were either folded inside of Bergh's card file or attached to the cards themselves with pins or clips.

The Personal Records subseries (1935-1966) consists of Bergh's health and life insurance records, social security documents, tax and insurance records pertaining to his property in Breakabeen, New York (Schoharie County) and sympathy cards Bergh received upon the death of his sister, Sophia, in 1963. Also are included uncirculated United States one dollar silver certificates, which were neatly folded within Bergh's card files.

Card Files (circa 1921-circa 1965) were maintained by L. Washington Bergh during the course of his business. Each card contains the client's name, address, the date of the sitting or order, a negative number and order and payment notes. Although many of the cards provide complete information about an assignment, quite a few are missing a date, a negative number or other information.

Bergh's card files were housed in a large set of metal drawers. They were arranged in various subsets, some alphabetical, some according to no apparent order. To make access to the cards possible, they were rehoused and alphabetized as a set while the collection was being processed. The cards are now filed under two subseries, Individuals, and Groups and Miscellaneous (including businesses, schools and churches). The quantity of cards greatly outnumbers that of photographs or negatives; there are upwards of 11,000 cards in the collection.

Negatives (1921-1965). The collection holds over 3000 glass plate and film negatives, most of which were taken by Bergh. The negatives are arranged into three subseries, Glass Plate Negatives 8" x 10," Glass Plate Negatives 5" X 7" and Film Negatives. During the processing of the collection, each glass plate and film was removed from its old sleeve, cleaned and re-sleeved in an acid free envelope.

Photographs The over 5,000 Albany Art Union photographs in the collection provide an expansive view of the studio's output. Dating from approximately the late nineteenth century to the 1960's the photographs trace the work of the early Art Union photographers (filed as "Vintage" prints) through and including the career of Bergh. Also included are photographs taken by other studios, which were brought to the Art Union for copy work. The progression of portraits provides an excellent demonstration of the changes in photography trends, clothing styles and even home decorating tastes of nineteenth and twentieth century Albany residents. Notable subgroups of photographs include brides, brides of Christ, legislators, military, clergy, and copy photography (photographs and snapshots taken by other photographers that Bergh was assigned to reproduce.)

The brides of Christ photographs were differentiated from the other bridal photographs that Bergh took by several clues. All brides of Christ were posed in the same distinctive parquet floor that is only seen in photographs of this type. Many were posed leaning

against the same chair, or with the same painting in the background. Although the sisters did not wear much jewelry along with their bridal outfits, many wore a religious medallion. Finally, the brides of Christ were distinguished by their lack of floral bouquets, which featured prominently in most other bridal photographs.

The photograph series is divided into five subseries: Identified Photographs, Unidentified Photographs, Miscellaneous, Photographs Over 11” x 18,” and Proof Prints. Subjects within the identified photographs are arranged into smaller groupings such as men, women, children, military, brides, “vintage,” and copy photography. They are further divided by size: 8” x 10,” or 11” by 14.” Although most are identified, photographs in the Miscellaneous subseries do not fall into any of the previously listed categories. They include pets, several school groups, a memorial plaque and a sculpture. The subseries containing photographs over 11” x 18” holds several large-format unidentified prints that needed extra-large storage boxes. The Proof Prints subseries is a collection of poorly processed photographic proofs which were originally sleeved with their corresponding negatives. The proofs were arranged alphabetically by name and removed to their own box.

It must be noted that photographs and negatives of women may be filed under either their maiden or married name; patrons should check both names when searching for a particular woman.

Contents List

The following section contains a detailed listing of the materials in the collection.

Description	Box	Folder
Business and Personal Records		
Business Records		
Griffin Art Company		
Bill of sale, Albany Art Union, 1910	1	1
Annual and director’s meetings, 1910-1911		2
Transfer to L. Washington Bergh, 1924		3
Albany Art Union		
Coss v. Albany Art Union, 1934		4
Elizabeth V. Colburn, 1934		5
Phones, leases, and insurance, 1944-1948, 1965-1968		6
Bergh, bank statements, and notes, 1944-1966		7
Shareholder’s meeting minutes, 1931-1944		8
Empty envelopes, undated		9
Bergh’s seal, undated		10
Agfa Portrait –film box, 1929		11
Client records		
Correspondence A-C, 1931-1961		12

Correspondence D-H, 1931-1956	13
Correspondence I-M, 1929-1958	14
Correspondence N-R, 1932-1961	15
Correspondence S-Z, 1927-1961	16
Group commissions	
General, 1929-1933	17
Schools and colleges, 1929-1937	18
New York State Legislature, 1927-1959	19
Personal Records	
Health and accident insurance, 1923, 1961-1966	20
Social Security, 1945, 1949	21
Breakabeen property, insurance records, 1935-1946	22
Breakabeen property, tax notices and receipts, 1962-1966	23
Sympathy cards, Sophia Bergh Smith, 1963	24
Miscellaneous personal papers, 1935-1962	25
Card Files	
Individuals	
Aalto - Boyton	2
Brabb - Collier	3
Collins - Dowsett	4
Doyle - Ghio	5
Gibbard - Hiestad	6
Hoag - Klutleo	7
Knapp - McConnell	8
McCormack - Noyes	9
Nuckols - Rhodes	10
Ricca - Smelzer	11
Smith - Vanderzee	12
Van Deusen - Zwetschkenbaum	13
Groups and Miscellaneous	
Academy of the Holy Names	14
Albany Academy for Boys	
Albany Academy for Girls	
Albany Business College	
Albany College of Pharmacy	
Albany High School	
Albany Institute of Bankers	
Albany Law School	
Albany Medical College	
Assembly	
Bar Association Group, 1933	
Bible School (281 State Street)	
Bishop Gibbons School	
Bowling League	
Christian Mothers Union	
College of Saint Rose	

Court of Appeals
 Court of Claims
 Cyrene Temple No. 18
 Delaware & Hudson Railroad
 East Greenbush Grammar School
 Immanuel Baptist Church
 Fourth Presbyterian Church, Trustees
 Girl Scouts
 International Business Machines
 Masonic Hall Association
 Memorial Hospital
 Milne High School
 National Training School for Certified Nurses
 New York State Fire Insurance
 New York Telephone Company
 Orchestra- Dewitt Clinton
 Russell Sage College
 Sacred heart Convent
 Saint Agnes School
 Saint Anne's Academy
 Saint Margaret's School
 Saint Margaret's Home
 Saint Peter's Hospital
 Sampson Murdock Company
 Senate
 State College
 Supreme Court
 Times Union
 Vincentian group
 Williams Press
 Nuns and priests (no last names given)
 Illegible

Negatives

Glass Plate Negatives 8" x 10"

New York Governors	15
New York State Legislature, Unknown, A-Bi	
New York State Legislature, Bl-Fe	16
New York State Legislature, Fi-Mc	17
New York State Legislature, Me-Wi	18
Name only (no negative number) A-Z	19
Sitters identified by job title only	
Unidentified sitters	20
Negatives 0000390 - 0011825	21
Negatives 0011873 - 0012888	22
Negatives 0012889 - 0012908	23
Negatives 0012909 - 0012935	24

Negatives 0012936 - 0012953	25
Negatives 0012954 - 0013001	26
Negatives 0013003 - 0013054	27
Negatives 0013055 - 0013106	28
Negatives 0013108 - 0013148	29
Negatives 0013149 - 0013175	30
Negatives 0013176 - 0013219	31
Negatives 0013227 - 0013271	32
Negatives 0013273 - 0013295	33
Negatives 0013296 - 0013334	34
Negatives 0013344 - 0013373	35
Negatives 0013374 - 0013401	36
Negatives 0013407 - 0013450	37
Negatives 0013451 - 0013479	38
Negatives 0013483 - 0013529	39
Negatives 0013533 - 0013585	40
Negatives 0013586 - 0135614	41
Negatives 0135615 - 0135629	42
Negatives 0135631 - 0135690	43
Negatives 0135665 - 0135690	44
Negatives 0135692 - 0135718	45
Negatives 0135720 - 0135740	46
Negatives 0135742 - 0135766	47
Negatives 0135767 - 0135799	48
Negatives 0135800 - 0135894	49
Negatives 0135895 - 0135911	50
Negatives 0135912 - 0135945	51
Negatives 0135948 - 1360054	52
Glass Plate Negatives, 5" x 7"	
New York State Legislature	53
Name only (no negative number) A-H	
Name only (no negative number) J-Ta	54
Name only (no negative number) Th -Y	55
Unidentified sitters	
Unidentified sitters	56
Negatives 0001380 - 0009911	
Negatives 0010114 - 0012874	57
Negatives 0012875 - 0012918	58
Negatives 0012920 - 0012968	59
Negatives 0012974 - 0013039	60
Negatives 0013048 - 0013113	61
Negatives 0013114 - 0013179	62
Negatives 0013180 - 0013221	63
Negatives 0013223 - 0013251	64
Negatives 0013252 - 0013314	65
Negatives 0013321 - 0013383	66

Negatives 0013387 - 0013441	67	
Negatives 0013443 - 0013530	68	
Negatives 0013530 - 0135623	69	
Negatives 0135635 - 0135791	70	
Negatives 0135793 - 0135974	71	
Film Negatives		
5" x 7" and smaller film negatives	72	
8" x 10"		
New York State Legislature	73	
Name only (no negative number) A-Da		
Name only (no negative number) De-Mac	74	
Name only (no negative number) Mar-Se	75	
Name only (no negative number) Sh-Y	76	
Unidentified sitters	77	
Negatives 0001004 - 0001402	78	
Negatives 0001403 - 0001434	79	
Negatives 0001435 - 0012813	80	
Negatives 0012868 - 0135645	81	
Negatives 0135682 - 0136004	82	
Negatives 0136005 - 1360037	83	
Negatives 1360038 - 1360063	84	
Negatives 1360066 - 1360092	85	
Photographs		
Identified Photographs		
A, general	86	1
Albright		2
Aronowitz		3
B, general		4
Battin		5
Bedell		6
Bergh, L. Washington		7
Blackburn, John Hall		8
Bond		9
Bouck		10
Bowen		11
Brandow		12
Brasure		13
Brunner, Laman		14
Burlingame		14a
C, general	87	15
Caruno, Joe		16
Callanan		17
Carnell		18
Codling		19
Corning		20
Corning, Edwin Jr.		21

Corning, Erastus 2 nd		22
D, general		23
Davie		24
Dearstyne		25
DeBeer		26
DeGraff		27
Doran		28
E, general	88	29
Eckert, Dr. Charles		30
Ellis		31
Erway		32
F, general		33
Farrell		34
Findlay		35
Frangella		36
G, general		37
Goetz		38
Gosnell		39
Governors, New York State		40
Groups		41
H, general	89	42
Hackett, William S.		43
Harcourt		44
Harris		45
Harris, Florence Palmer		46
Hawn		47
Heck		48
Heidenrich		49
Henning, Hortense		50
Henning, Hortense, Abbie, and Ann		51
Henzel		52
Herzog		53
Heslin		54
Hopkins		55
Howard		56
Hutchinson		57
I, general		58
J, general		58a
Jones		58b
K, general	90	59
Kelley		60
Kellogg		61
Kiernan		62
Kimmey		63
Kinnear		64
L, general		65

Lifset		66
Lithgow		67
Lord		68
Lyons		69
M, general		70
Mack		71
Mantica		72
Maynard, Erville		73
McCabe		74
McCormick		75
McEwan		76
Meneely		77
Milner		78
N, general	91	79
O, general		80
O'Brien		81
Olcott		82
P, general		83
Palmer		84
Parker		85
Pellman		86
Peters		87
Pound		88
Pruyn, Robert C.		89
Pruyn, Sewall		90
R, general		91
Rand		92
Randels		93
Robinson		94
Rubenstein		95
S, general	92	96
Saunders		97
Shincel		98
Smith		99
Staley		100
T, general		101
Tebbutt		102
Thatcher		103
V, general		104
Vanderzee		105
Vanduzer		106
W, general		107
Wadsworth		108
Waldbilling		109
Weilbacher		110
Willard		111

Williams		112
Wilson		113
Woodward		114
Yanney		115
Yates		116
Young		117
Z, general		118
Zimicki		119a
Unidentified Photographs		
Women		
5" x 7" and smaller, various ages	93	119
8" x 10" under 40 years of age		120-124
8" x 10" aged 40 and over		125-128
11" x 14" under 40 years of age	94	129-136
11" x 14" aged 40 and over	95	137-144
Women in groups		145
Men		
5" x 7" and smaller, various ages	96	146
5" x 7" possibly legislators		147-148
8" x 10" aged 40 and over		149-151
8" x 10" aged 40 and over	97	152-158
8" x 10" aged 40 and over, in glasses	98	159-163
8" x 10" under 40 years of age		164-165
11" x 14" aged 40 and over	99	166-174
11" x 14" aged 40 and over, in glasses	100	175-184
11" x 14" aged 40 and over, in glasses	101	185-186
11" x 14" under 40 years of age		187-190
Men in groups		191
Men seated in distinctive chair		192-193
Children		
Girls		
5" x 7" and smaller, various ages	102	194
8" x 10" infants and toddlers		195
8" x 10" aged 5 to preteen		196
11" x 14" infants		197
11" x 14" toddlers		198-199
11" x 14" aged 5 to 12		200-201
11" x 14" teenagers and preteens		202
Boys		
5" x 7" and smaller, various ages	103	203
Albany Academy and CBA students		204
8" x 10" aged 7 and under		205
8" x 10" aged 8 and up		206
11" x 14" infants		207
11" x 14" toddlers		208
11" x 14" aged 5 to 12		209-210

11" x 14" aged 12 and over		211-212
Oversized prints		
Girls, infants	104	213
Girls, toddlers		214
Girls, aged 5 to 12		215
Boys, various ages		216
Children and families		
Children, gender undetermined	105	217
Children in costume		218
Children in groups (without parents)		219-220
Children and mothers		221-222
Children and fathers		223
Families		224-225
Military		
8" x 10" Army	106	226-228
11" x 14" Army		229
8" x 10" Navy		230-231
11" x 14" Navy		232
Pre-World War II		233
With family		234
Miscellaneous military		235
Miscellaneous groups and individuals		
Couples	107	236
Court of Claims, New York State		237
Senators and Assemblymen, New York State-Mostly Identified		238
Academics (missing)		239
Judges		240
Clergy, 8" x 10"		241
Clergy, 11"x 14"		242
Men-Cyprus Temple Potentates		243
Miscellaneous oversize (11" x 14")		
Women	108	244
Men		245-246
Men, loose pages from an album		247
Judges		248
Court of Appeals, New York State		249
Court of Claims, New York State		250
Military		251
Brides of Christ (sisters of Sacred Heart Convent)		
5" x 7" and smaller	109	252
8" x 10"		253-254
11" x 14"		255-260
Brides (probably Brides of Christ)		
8" x 10" and smaller	110	261
11" x 14"		262-265

Brides		
8" x 10"	111	266
11" x 14" close ups		267-268
11" x 14" three-quarter length		269-271
11" x 14" full length		272-273
Brides and grooms		274
Bridal parties		275
“Vintage” Albany Art Union prints		
Brides, pre-1920s	112	276-278
Women, pre-1920s		279-281
Women, pre-1920s	113	282-284
Men, pre-1920s		285-287
Parents and children, pre-1920s		288
Children, pre-1920s		289
Copy Photography		
Copy work, with customer’s name identified	114	290
Organ grinder, by R.W. Thatcher, 1901		291
Women		292
Men		293-294
Men, tintypes		295
Families and children		296
Couples		297
Groups		298
Paintings		299
Notable photographs		
Women		
Woman with bird cage	115	300
Woman in Red Cross uniform, with a banner		301
Woman posing for a painted portrait, and a photograph of the finished painting		302
Women, hand colored		303
Women, pairs of black and white and hand-colored portraits		304-305
Double sided: colored portrait of a woman/group of judges		306
Men		
Court of Appeals, with judges’ autographs		307
Men		308
Men, image mounted on cardboard		309
Men, image in album		310
Man [actor?]		311
Man [actor?], image in album		312
Children		313
Framed photographs		
Young man, image in rectangular wooden frame	116	314
Young woman, image in oval frame		315

Girl, image in small oval frame [copy photo?]		316
Girl, image in gilded rectangular wooden frame		317
Empty frame, oval		318
Young man, military, image in rectangular leather frame	117	319
Man, image in rectangular wooden frame		320
Infant, image in gilded rectangular wooden frame		321
Woman, enhanced with pencil and watercolor, signed "Allan," gilded rectangular wooden frame	118	322
Miscellaneous		
Interior (church or chapel)	119	323
Pets		324
Howard, William G. memorial plaque		325
Seals (Bergh and unidentified)		326
Schools and school groups		
Saint Agnes		327
Academy of the Holy Names building		
National Training School for Certified Nurses [?]		
Dearstyne, John H., "The Bowler" sculpture , 1929		328
Photographs over 11" x 18"	120	
Proof Prints		
Identified (arranged alphabetically)	121	
Unidentified		