Finding Aid to the Elbridge Ayer Burbank Collection MS.577

Autry National Center, Braun Research Library
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Title: Elbridge Ayer Burbank Collection
Identifier/Call Number: MS.577
Contributing Institution: Autry National Center, Braun Research Library
Language of Material: English
Physical Description: 5.0 Linear feet(4 document boxes, 2 portfolio boxes)
Date: 1900-1949
Abstract: Elbridge Ayer Burbank was an artist known for his portraits of American Indians. He was born 1858 August 10 in the village of Harvard Junction in northern Illinois. He enrolled in the Academy of Design, Chicago (now the School of the Art Institute of Chicago) in 1874. Works by Burbank were included in exhibitions in Paris, the St. Louis Worlds Fair, and The Chicago Art Institute. He was struck down by a cable car in 1949 and died two months later on 1949 April 21 at the age of 91. The collection includes correspondence, published reproductions of Burbank’s artwork, published articles by or about Burbank, and origanal artwork by Burbank from 1900-1949. It also includes one scrapbook of autographed pictures and thank you notes from actors and celebrities such as Shirley Temple, Jean Harlow, Deanna Durbin, and Jane Withers.
creator: Burbank, E. A. (Elbridge Ayer), 1858-1949
Acquisition
Custodial history
Illustrated articles about Burbank's paintings, correspondence, original sketches, and scrapbooks were a gift of E.A. Burbank to the Library, received 1942-1945, accession number 746.G. Other published articles and reproductions of Burbank’s artwork were acquired by the Library from 1910-1945 and were originally from the collections of Hector Alliot, Clifford Baldwin, Frederick Webb Hodge, George Wharton James, Charles Lummis, Joseph Amasa Munk, and Charles McCormack Reeve.
Access
Collection is open for research. Appointments to view materials are required. To make an appointment please visit http://theautry.org/research/research-rules-and-application or contact library staff at rroom@theautry.org. A folder level inventory is available from library staff.
Preferred citation
Elbridge Ayer Burbank Collection, 1900-1949, Autry National Center, Los Angeles; MS.577; [folder number] [folder title][date].
Processing history
Biographical/Historical note
Elbridge Ayer Burbank (1858-1949) was an artist known for his portraits of American Indians and African Americans. Burbank was born 1858 August 10 in what was then the newly established village of Harvard Junction in northern Illinois at the edge of Indian country. The Burbank and Ayer families came to Illinois from Massachusetts in 1836. Burbank was the nephew of Edward E. Ayer, the first president of the Field Museum of Chicago and a trustee of the Newberry Library. Ayer also owned substantial collections of books and original manuscripts in the subjects of Native American and colonial-era history and ethology.
Burbank began to draw at an early age, but received his first formal art education at Academy of Design, Chicago (now the School of the Art Institute of Chicago) where he enrolled in 1874. After graduating, Burbank opened a small studio in St. Paul, Minnesota. Eugene Smalley, editor of the Northwest illustrated Monthly, became acquainted with his work and offered him a job. In this period Burbank made two trips to Munich to further his artistic education, returning to Chicago in 1892. In this same year Burbank opened a studio in the Athenium Building. His first oil portraits were of local African American youths. These small paintings, some only two inches square on mahogany wood panels, became the young artist’s trademark. His "American Beauty," a small boy holding an American Beauty rose, was reproduced as a chromo in the Sunday supplements of the Northwest Illustrated Monthly.
In 1893 Burbank was awarded the Yerkes first prize and in 1895 he was given an honorable mention medal at the Atlanta Georgia Exposition. Works by Burbank were included in exhibitions in Paris, the St. Louis Worlds Fair, and The Chicago Art Institute. Burbank became a member of the Chicago Society of Artists.
Burbank’s interest in American Indian subjects increased and he painted portraits of such luminaries as Geronimo and Chief Joseph, the leader of the Nez Perces Indians. In 1905 Burbank spent 10 months in Ganado, Arizona sketching and painting the Navajos. A series of articles appeared in the Los Angeles-based magazine, *The Graphic Magazine*, in 1910, on Burbank’s experiences of painting Indians. Burbank’s best seller and most widely publicized picture was of Medicine Woman, a Cheyenne squaw. She was one of the best and most admired dancers among the Cheyenne.

Public and private institutions control the bulk of his work. Among these are: Field Museum, Butler Art Institute, Newberry Library, Gilcrease Art Museum, Southwest Museum, Pony Express Museum, Smithsonian Institute. Burbank’s last years were spent at the Manx Hotel in San Francisco. He was struck down by a cable car in 1949 and both of his hips were broken. He died two months later on 1949 April 21 at the age of 91.

References:


Scope and contents

The collection includes folders of correspondence, published reproductions of Burbank’s artwork, published articles by or about Burbank, and original artwork by Burbank.

This collections also consists of bound scrapbooks. Four scrapbooks include correspondence from 1941-1945 and the topics of the correspondenc primarily relate to Burbank’s artwork. The largest number of correspondence is from Sadivoe Olga Gaddin, who usually signs her letters as “Davie.” One other scrapbook includes autographed pictures and thank you notes from actors and celebrities such as Shirley Temple, Jean Harlow, Deanna Durbin, and Jane Withers.

Most of the artwork in this collection are portraits of Plains Indians, but also include historic figures, California buildings, and Pueblo houses in New Mexico. The artwork primarily consists of reproductions published in magazines, journals, ephemera, and postcards. A small number of items are original sketches.

Use

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