
Frederic Crowninshield was a minor artist of the Gilded Age, whose involvement in the development of an American art world is no less than major. Best known for his ceiling murals at the dining room of the Waldorf-Astoria (1894), his murals and stained glass commissions can be found across the Northeast. A native of Boston, working primarily in New York, he trained and established his career in Italy. Absorbing both style and a sense of collaborative opportunities presented by engaging in artistic communities, he returned to Boston where he taught at the newly formed School of the Museum of Fine Arts. Later in his career, he was the director of the American School in Rome. Working as both an educator and an artist, his career focused on mediums that created interior decoration and the interplay of the decorative and architectural. He wrote manuals on mediums such as mural painting, where he espoused early theories of interior design and decoration.

This publication is the most comprehensive work on the artist to date, setting Crowninshield in a richly developed context that explores impacts of the historical events of his time, prevailing methodologies of education in the arts, and the role of expatriatism for many American artists. The work is exhaustive in its primary research, which was conducted during site visits to archives in the United States and Italy, as well as making use of family history. The scholarly interests and expertise of the two authors is clearly visible in the partition of the book into two parts; one that makes a history of the artists’ life and influences, and the other that examines the primary mediums of his career. A biographical monograph, the publication traces his many influences, the styles he absorbed, and his exploration of educational methods of the past, and merging them with new techniques, such as those for stained glass, to create a new American style.

The publication is supplementary to most collections and would augment holdings on a number of topics including American art, stained glass, interior design, and New York or Boston history. The volume is beautifully illustrated with sixty-four color images, many full-page, and many others in black and white. An appendix completes the thorough documentation, including an index of all his stained glass work, and another that indexes his murals and illustrations of published graphic designs for some of his windows. Sixty pages of notes add more documentation to the subject, as does a lengthy bibliography.

Sarah Falls, Director of the Library, New York School of Interior Design, sfalls@nysid.edu