



Smithsonian  
*Archives of American Art*

A Finding Aid to the Thomas Seir Cummings  
papers, circa 1824-1983, bulk circa  
1824-1894, in the Archives of American Art

Stephanie Ashley

Funding for the processing and digitization of this collection was provided by  
the Terra Foundation for American Art and The Walton Family Foundation

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## Collection Overview

<b>Repository:</b>	Archives of American Art
<b>Title:</b>	Thomas Seir Cummings papers
<b>Identifier:</b>	AAA.cummitho
<b>Date:</b>	circa 1824-1983 (bulk circa 1824-1894)
<b>Extent:</b>	0.4 Linear feet
<b>Creator:</b>	Cummings, Thomas Seir, 1804-1894
<b>Language:</b>	English .
<b>Summary:</b>	The papers of acclaimed miniaturist and co-founder of the National Academy of Design Thomas Seir Cummings (1804-1894), measure 0.4 linear feet and date from circa 1824-1983, with the bulk of the material dating from circa 1824-1894. Papers include correspondence, writings and notes, personal and academy business and financial records, and printed material, which provide scattered but significant documentation of Cummings's various roles at the National Academy of Design and as an author and educator.

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## Administrative Information

### Acquisition Information

The papers were donated to the Archives of American Art in 2018 by the National Academy of Design via Maura Reilly, Executive Director.

### Available Formats

The bulk of the collection was digitized in 2019 and is available on the Archives of American Art website. Materials which have not been digitized include blank pages and duplicates. Publications have had only their covers, title pages, and relevant pages digitized.

### Processing Information

The collection was fully processed and described in a finding aid by Stephanie Ashley in 2018, and the bulk of the collection was digitized in 2019, with funding provided by the Terra Foundation for American Art and The Walton Family Foundation.

### Preferred Citation

Thomas Seir Cummings papers, circa 1824-1983, bulk circa 1824-1894. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

## Restrictions

Use of original papers requires an appointment and is limited to the Archives' Washington, D.C., Research Center.

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## Biographical / Historical

New York painter Thomas Seir Cummings (1804-1894) was one of the most acclaimed miniaturists of the nineteenth century. He helped found the National Academy of Design in 1826, served as treasurer for almost forty years, and published a history of the organization in 1865.

Cummings was born in Bath, England, and was brought to New York City as an infant. He learned miniature painting from Henry Inman, with whom he worked in partnership from 1824 to 1827, focusing on portraiture. As interest in miniature portraiture declined with the growing popularity of photography, Cummings turned increasingly to teaching and writing. He taught miniature painting at the National Academy from 1831 to 1838, became a fine arts professor at New York University in 1844, and founded the Cummings School of Design in 1846.

His contributions to the National Academy of Design included serving as treasurer from 1827 to 1865, vice president from 1850-1859, and chairman of the committee that erected the present home of the academy. Cummings also led the development of the academy's art instructional program during the late-1850s to mid-1860s and, in 1865, published *Historic Annals of the National Academy of Design*. This seminal history of the academy's early years is also considered an important history of early American art.

Cummings later settled in Hackensack, New Jersey, where he died in 1894.

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## Scope and Contents

The papers of acclaimed miniaturist and co-founder of the National Academy of Design Thomas Seir Cummings (1804-1894), measure 0.4 linear feet and date from circa 1824-1983, with the bulk of the material dating from circa 1824-1894. Papers include correspondence, writings and notes, personal and academy business and financial records, and printed material, which provide scattered but significant documentation of Cummings's various roles at the National Academy of Design and as an author and educator.

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## Arrangement

Due to the small size of the collection, papers are arranged as one series by record type.

- Series 1: Thomas Seir Cummings Papers, circa 1824-1983 (0.4 linear feet; Box 1)

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## Container Listing

### Series 1: Thomas Seir Cummings Papers, circa 1824-1983

#### *0.4 Linear feet (Box 1)*

Correspondence includes letters to Cummings from the National Academy of Design inviting him to events and inquiring about his plans for the disposition of his papers relating to the academy, with responses from his daughter, Lydia M. Cummings. In addition, there are copies of eight Cummings letters from the National Academy of Design records, referencing various aspects of academy business. Correspondence from 1981-1983 is National Academy of Design correspondence related to Cummings's papers, and includes notes and correspondence with Whitney Hartshorne, a relative of Cummings.

Writings and notes include handwritten manuscripts of three essays by Cummings: "History of the Early State of the Arts of Design," "On the Education of the Eye," and "Cummings, Cards of Design." Two of the essays include illustrations in pen and ink. There is also a photocopy of Cummings's manuscript for "Cummings, The House of...", notes relating to the National Academy of Design, an account of an incident involving an intoxicated Charles Loring Elliot's visit to an academy exhibition, and a folder of papers given to the academy by Cummings's daughter, Lydia M. Cummings, described in the transmittal envelope as "Private papers." These papers include handwritten memoirs with accounts of Cummings meeting Henry Inman, their subsequent partnership, and Cummings's development as a painter. Also of note is an account of a visit from General Lafayette who brought a miniature of George Washington to the studio for repair. The account describes how Lafayette was accompanied by Alexander Hamilton's widow, Elizabeth Schuyler Hamilton, who brought a miniature for inspection. Writings and notes also include notes on Samuel F. B. Morse, notes and lists of artwork and of exhibitions at the academy, and other fragments of writings on portraiture, art, and artists.

Business and financial records include receipts for payments from Cummings to Samuel F. B. Morse for paintings, National Academy of Design receipts for advertisements, four 1852 checks co-signed by Cummings, an 1854 mortgage signed by Cummings, a resolution that a 1863 credit for the academy given by Thomas be put into a trust, and a draft of Cummings's resignation as treasurer of the academy. There are also records relating to the William Ranney fund, which was organized by fellow artists after Ranney's death to raise money for his wife and two children through an exhibition at the academy and donations from fellow artists; records related to properties occupied by the academy; and an inventory of paintings at the Academy of Fine Arts which the National Academy of Design offered to purchase in circa 1841.

Cummings's personal business records include a copy of his circa 1824 agreement with Henry Inman and a letter from Cummings to Inman's wife, as well as copyright applications for Cummings's marginal drawing cards, and for "A Course in the Elements of Design." Also found is a document produced by the committee to report on the academy's constitution and bylaws, and a handwritten letter of transmittal of the document written by Cummings as head of the committee, as well as Cummings's 1852 copy of the academy's constitution and bylaws with annotations.

Printed material includes a pamphlet entitled "Life and Antique Schools of the National Academy of Design Presentation of a Testimonial to Thoms. S. Cummings, Vice-President, by the Students;" an article printed in the *Monthly Illustrator* by Cummings, after his death, entitled "Memoirs of a Miniature-Painter-I;" and a copy of Cummings's *Historic Annals of the National Academy of Design* (1865).

The bulk of this series has been digitized. Materials which have not been digitized include blank pages and duplicates. Publications have had only their covers, title pages, and relevant pages digitized.

Box 1, Folder 1

Correspondence, 1894-1896

[Image\(s\)](#)

Box 1, Folder 2 Correspondence, 1981-1983

[Image\(s\)](#)

Box 1, Folder 3 Correspondence, Copies of Cummings Letters, 1843-1861, from National Academy of Design Collection, circa 1980s

[Image\(s\)](#)

#### Writings and Notes

Box 1, Folder 4 Account of Incident Involving Charles Loring Elliot, 1860

[Image\(s\)](#)

Box 1, Folder 5 Essays, circa 1840s-circa 1850s

[Image\(s\)](#)

Box 1, Folder 6 Essay on Alfred T. Agate, 1846

[Image\(s\)](#)

Box 1, Folder 7 Notes on National Academy of Design, circa 1830s-circa 1860s

[Image\(s\)](#)

Box 1, Folder 8 "Private Papers," Memoirs, circa 1825-circa 1860s

[Image\(s\)](#)

#### Business and Financial Records

Box 1, Folder 9 Agreement with Henry Inman, circa 1824, 1846

[Image\(s\)](#)

Box 1, Folder 10 Copyright Applications, 1846, 1858

[Image\(s\)](#)

Box 1, Folder 11 Correspondence and Receipts for "Historic Annals...", 1915-1919

[Image\(s\)](#)

Box 1, Folder 12 Inventory of Paintings in Rooms of the Academy of Fine Arts, 1841

[Image\(s\)](#)

Box 1, Folder 13 National Academy of Design, circa 1834-1865

[Image\(s\)](#)

Box 1, Folder 14 National Academy of Design Constitution and Bylaws, 1844-1849

[Image\(s\)](#)

Box 1, Folder 15

National Academy of Design Properties, 1840-1860

[Image\(s\)](#)

Box 1, Folder 16

National Academy of Design Ranney Trust, circa 1859-1863

[Image\(s\)](#)

Box 1, Folder 17

Printed Material, 1857, 1869

[Image\(s\)](#)

Box 1, Folder 18

Printed Material, *Historic Annals of the National Academy of Design*, 1865

[Image\(s\)](#)

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