

Pugilist/painter Tony Sisti wearing red, white and blue in a 1927 Bantamweight fight against Chick Enzo in Italy. The fight ended in a draw.
AUTHOR'S COLLECTION

Buffalo's Two-Canvas Knockout

By David Martin

Tony Sisti (1901-1983) was renowned for his work on two different types of canvas. Initially, he was noted for his athletic abilities in the ring as a Bantamweight boxer and shortly afterward as a first-rate painter. He used the earnings from his boxing career to fund his art school training and soon garnered significant recognition in both fields. As the recent subject of an exhibition at the Burchfield Penney Art Center, Sisti's artistic legacy and his numerous cultural contributions to this region are worthy of examination and preservation. Although he is well known for his boxing subjects and for portraiture, the artist boasted that he "...paints anything that light falls on."

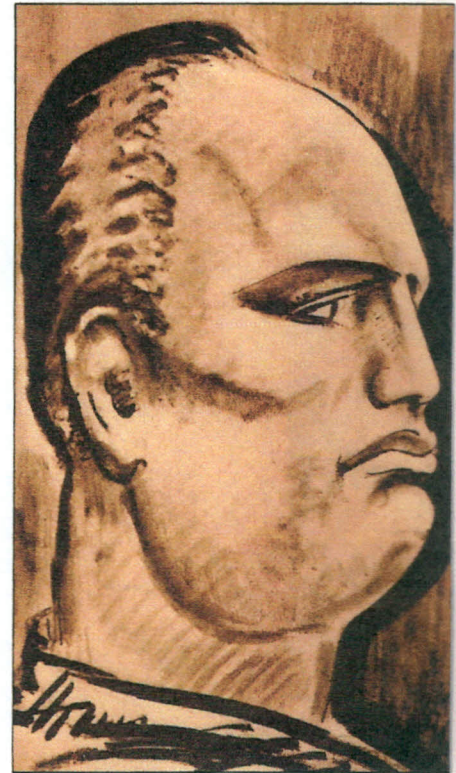
My earliest memories of Tony Sisti occurred during my childhood in Niagara Falls, NY. I was raised in a house that had once been the convent for the nuns at St. Joseph's Roman Catholic Church located at 15th Street and Pine Avenue, the heart of the city's "Little Italy." The diocese had built a new convent for the Sisters directly across from their grammar school and my mother and father took ownership of the large three-story home before I was born.

Monsignor Pascal Tronolone was the Pastor of the church and was also our neighbor. On one occasion, I noticed a short, unusual looking man speaking intently with Monsignor. He was wearing a black beret on his head and the two men seemed to be engaged in some spirited discussion. When I asked my mother who the stranger was and why he was wearing a funny hat, she informed me that the man was Monsignor's nephew, Tony Sisti, and that he was a famous artist. That became my first cognizant realization that artists existed and

apparently they looked and acted differently from the rest of us. Monsignor had been an accomplished amateur artist himself and he influenced his nephew at an early age, encouraging the young man to copy his own drawings.

My siblings and I attended St. Joseph's grammar school around the corner from our house and every morning we walked past a portrait of Monsignor on our ascent up the stairs to the awaiting classrooms. This daily greeting of the pastor's protective and welcoming painted visage made a lasting impression on me. It wasn't until many years later that my sister pointed out that the portrait that I walked past so many times had actually been painted by Tony Sisti.

Fast forward to the present and I am currently living in Seattle, Washington and like Mr. Sisti, I own, or more accurately co-own, an art gallery which is now in its 20th year. When my partner Dominic Zambito and I moved to Seattle in 1986, the time had come to realize my lifelong dream of operating my own



"Benito Mussolini," 1930, ink sketch, drawn from life in the Colosseum in Rome. Originally published in the *Buffalo Times* Rotogravure section, undated. AUTHOR'S COLLECTION



Sisti, at right in knickers, likely at one of the marble quarries near Carrara, Italy, c. 1927.



"Jack Johnson," c. 1928. The former Heavyweight champion signed the sketch, "To my pal Tony Sisti from former Champion Jack Johnson, November 20, 1936." Originally published in the *Buffalo Times* Rotogravure section, undated. AUTHOR'S COLLECTION

gallery, but unlike Sisti, I had no ability to create art myself. Instead, I would research, support and promote those artists who were active in the early 20th century from the two regions with which I most identified: Western New York and Seattle. I began to realize that not all great artists of the recent past were famous or had familiar names. For many varied reasons, some produced great work but never became recognized outside of their region while others attained an exalted position in the socially-based hierarchy of artistic reputation. Helping to keep such deserving artists alive in the public memory became my mission.

This past summer, the Burchfield Penney Art Center mounted an exhibition titled "Tony Sisti: A Forgotten Regionalist" featuring a selection of his paintings and drawings. This was an attempt to remedy the situation stated so clearly in the title of their show. To the credit of the museum, they held their first Sisti exhibition in 1979 while the artist was alive and healthy enough to enjoy the recognition.

I have to admit that I initially did not hold Sisti's reputation in very high esteem. But then, how could I when my exposure to his art was so limited? This began to change when I was taken to task by my friend Charles Petrozzi, one of the prescient collectors of Western New York regional art whose opinion I highly respect. On one of my yearly summer visits he decided to show me

what a great and underappreciated artist Sisti really was. We made an appointment to see his collection that was stored away in the stacks of the BP and later visited his daughter Marlene to observe her collection.

This was a revelation to me. Over the years I have visited innumerable museums and read countless books on American art of the Depression-era. Having done a great deal of research on this period and with some publications under my belt, I was confident that my aesthetic opinions were rational and held some degree of merit.

To say that I was overwhelmed with the quality of Sisti's work is an understatement. Western New York places a strong emphasis on Charles Burchfield and rightfully so. But the lesser attention reserved for his local contemporaries underestimates the region's cultural contributions to American art. I believe that his work would most certainly be welcomed once again into national exhibitions, publications and studies by art historians if they were simply informed and had some exposure to his major works. With this in mind, I set out to study the art and life of this talented man whom I now believe to be among the most interesting artists ever active in Western New York. With proper positioning and exposure, his reputation could and should be elevated to a national level.

Anthony Sisti was born on April 25, 1901 on Sullivan Street in Greenwich Village, the artistic and bohemian heart of New York City. He moved with his family to Buffalo at the age of 10 where his advanced drawing abilities were noticed by one of his teachers at School 2. This educator, whose name is now unknown, arranged for weekly Saturday art classes for his student, but after a while the energetic youth preferred the street activities of his fellow adolescents to the discipline of the art class.

At the age of 15, he began to participate in local amateur boxing matches where he honed his skills and advanced his athletic abilities. By 1918, he had a substantial number of fights to his credit and won the Western New York Amateur Bantamweight championship.

By the age of 23, Sisti was married to Carmella Leone and was also supporting their daughter while balancing his boxing and art careers. For extra income he worked as a truck driver during the day while attending the Albright Art School at night.

In 1925, Sisti went to Europe to attend the Florence Academy studying under Felice Carena (1879-1966), a prominent Italian painter of the period. During his European stay, he augmented his studies by attending both the *Académie de la Grande Chaumière* and the *Académie Julian* in Paris as well as the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Munich.

While in Europe, he continued boxing to supplement his income and met future World Heavyweight Champion Primo Carnera (1906-1967). He hired Carnera as a model (at 25 cents an hour) and produced several portraits and studies of the imposing young man. During his time in Paris, Sisti also met the legendary Jack Johnson (1878-1946), the first black World Heavyweight Champion, whose life inspired the play and film, "The Great White Hope." Sisti said of Johnson... "This man who

never went beyond grade school, had a real taste for art. We used to go to the Louvre together between fights and Johnson amazed me with his knowledge and appreciation of art. He had the polish of a college professor." Johnson would later visit Sisti's studio in Buffalo in 1936.

By 1929, he purportedly earned a Doctoral Degree in art from the Academy in Florence and continued to paint and sketch, traveling to Africa, Manchuria, Morocco and the Philippines. That same year, Sisti sketched from life the inventor Guglielmo Marconi (1874-1937) and the following year produced two portraits from life of Il Duce himself, Benito Mussolini (1883-1945).

After returning to Buffalo, Sisti set up a studio at 1139 Main St. where he maintained his athletic interests by setting up a punching bag platform near his easel for daily workouts between painting. In 1930, one of his paintings was accepted in the prestigious Carnegie Institute's Annual of American Art in Pittsburgh.

Sisti had become active with the Buffalo Society of Artists before his European sojourn and won their Fellowship Prize in 1934 for a painting titled "Tuscan Farm" which had been painted in 1927 while still in Italy.

Although his training was as an academic artist, he also accepted Modernism and incorporated expressionistic techniques into his own work. With Burchfield being a major influence on most of the local artists, Sisti was no exception. His earlier works such as "Frozen Assets," 1926, attest to this but also display an awareness of the great Canadian modernists, the "Group of Seven" in nearby Toronto.

One of the key members of the Group of Seven, Lawren Harris (1885-1970), produced compatibly stylized studies of houses in winter and Sisti most certainly would have been aware of his work. Arthur Lismer (1885-1969), another Group of Seven member, was one of the judges who awarded Sisti the 1934 BSA award.

In defense of his modernist style, he stated... "The old masters painted everything. I take my hat off to the man who



Study for Frozen Assets (#1), c. 1926, graphite on paper, 11½ x 17¾ inches. COLLECTION, BURCHFIELD PENNEY ART CENTER, GIFT OF TONY SISTI, 1979:071.000.

The completed oil painting appeared on the cover of *Western New York Heritage*, Winter 2002.

knows his fundamental drawing and draftsmanship. He is ready to understand how distortion- which is shocking a person by one line or by one color against another- can be used... I have no patience with a person who gets into the modern swing without

knowing what the performance of a distorted line or distorted color should be. The artist, for any picture realistic or abstract, must start from life."

Like so many artists of his generation, Sisti produced works for the Federal Art

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Circus, 1934. Oil on canvas, 59½x72 inches. This large scale work was exhibited in several national venues including the National Exhibition of American Art at Rockefeller Center in 1937. COLLECTION, BURCHFIELD PENNEY ART CENTER, GIFT OF TONY SISTI, 1979: 043.000

Projects under President Roosevelt's New Deal. From its inception in 1933 as the short-lived Public Works of Art Project (PWAP) through the several incarnations of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) between 1935 and 1943, this life saving program assisted thousands of artists in maintaining their livelihoods.

He produced a circus-themed mural, probably under the Treasury Relief Art Project division for the Buffalo City Hospital and another for the University of Buffalo (both now lost).

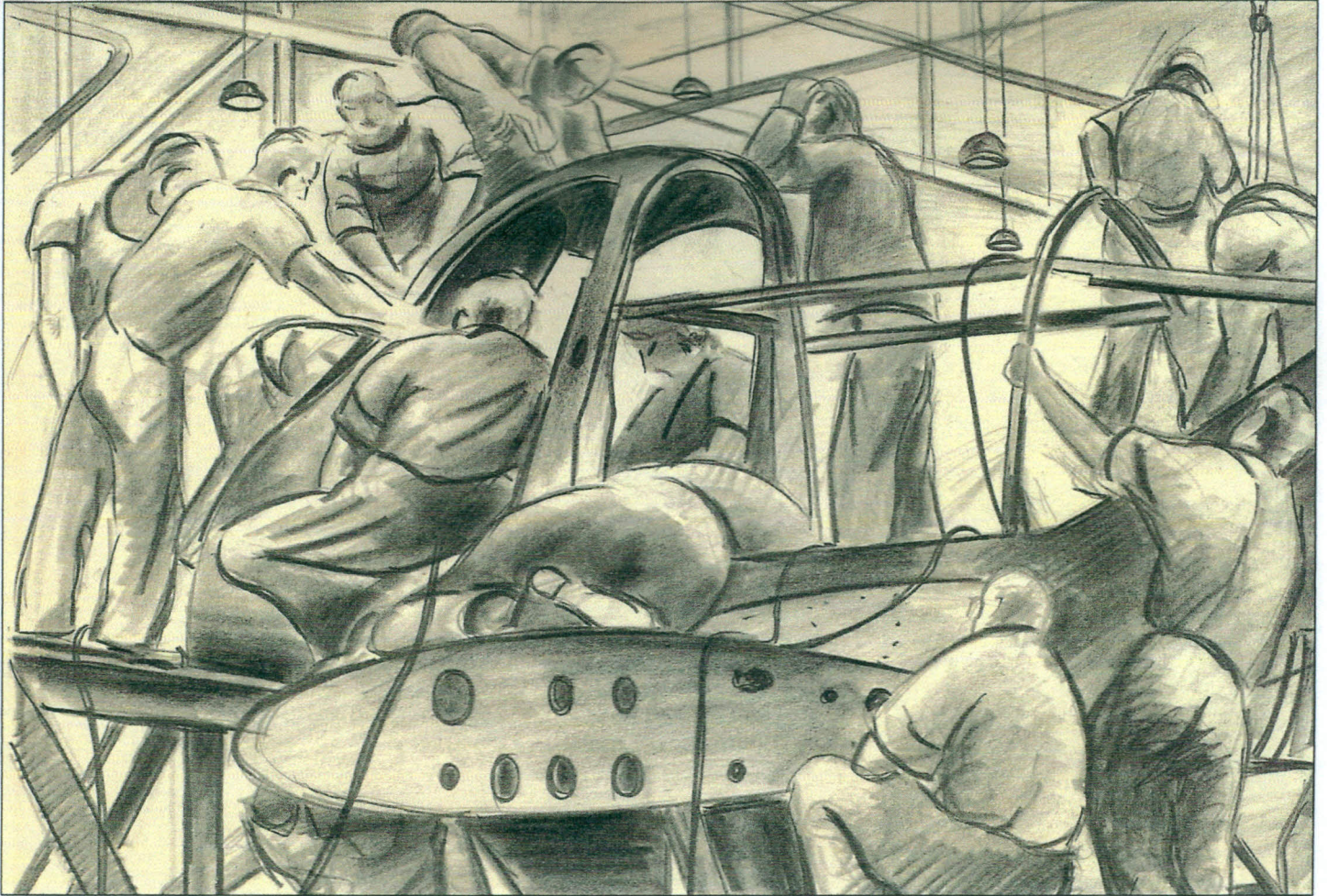
Sisti's painting abilities were now beginning to be noticed outside of the region. In 1934, he exhibited his large painting "Circus" at the Salons of

America in New York City and again the following year at the Second National Exhibition of American Art which was held at Rockefeller Center. In this prestigious exhibition, Sisti was one of the few local artists to be included. In the Spring of 1937, he held a one-man exhibition of his works at Howard University's Rankin Gallery in Washington, D.C.

Although he was affiliated with the Buffalo Society of Artists for years, Sisti also joined a group of the more independent members that had seceded from the organization in 1933 to form the Patteran Society.

The newly invigorated group of local Modernists was welcomed by the

Albright Art Gallery who would now sponsor Western New York Annuals beginning in 1934. Two years later, Sisti's painting "New England Port" won the James Carey Evans Memorial Prize and was purchased for the Permanent Collection of the museum. Although Sisti stopped exhibiting with the BSA for the next several years, he later rejoined the group and participated in both organizations, winning several awards. In 1938, the Patteran Society, in conjunction with the Albright, organized the Great Lakes Exhibition consisting of 151 artists from Western New York, Illinois, Wisconsin, Ohio, Michigan and Ontario. The show traveled to six additional venues and



Workers at the Bell Plant, 1942, graphite on paper. These workers are building a P-39 (see p. 34). COLLECTION, BURCHFIELD PENNEY ART CENTER, GIFT OF HARRIET AND MORTIMER SPILLER, 2001:009

included major Buffalo artists such as Burchfield, Evelyn Rumsey Lord (1877-1963), William Rowe (1910-1955), William Schwanekamp (1893-1970) and Sisti, who exhibited an oil titled "Sunday Afternoon at the Rapids." Even several members of the aforementioned Group of Seven from Toronto participated.

With his advanced training and impressive technical abilities, Sisti augmented his painting career by becoming an instructor, initially at the Art Institute of Buffalo where he taught painting and Anatomy from 1932 until 1938. The following year, he became a life class instructor at the New York School of Applied Design for Women in NYC. Sisti had been hired to replace one of the most prominent art instructors of the time, Kimon Nicolaïdes (1891-1938) whose book *The Natural Way to Draw* is still a classic. Sisti maintained his Buffalo home base, commuting by air to NYC, teaching three days a week to ful-

fill his position and maintaining a small studio in Greenwich Village.

With his boxing career mostly behind him, Sisti made one last entry into the ring. He had been invited to have a solo exhibition of his paintings at New York's prominent Argent Gallery but needed some additional funding for the exhibit. On Monday, February 20, 1939, the 37-year-old Sisti squared off with Freddy Sulanto at St. Nicholas Arena in NYC. It had been eight years since his last fight but he knocked out Sulanto with a right cross in 1:10 of the first round.

The Argent Gallery exhibition consisted of 50 works: oils, watercolors, drawings and prints made over a period of 10 years. The show was very successful and received mostly favorable reviews. His unusual dual career was profiled in *Time Magazine*, *Newsweek*, *The Art Digest* and several other national publications.

One of the paintings in the Argent exhibition was a large oil titled "Rhapsody

in Steel," which depicted a group of figures gathered on the iron bridge along the gritty Buffalo River with City Hall in the background. When the painting was later exhibited at the Syracuse Museum of Art and the Grand Central Art Gallery in New York, it was purchased by Thomas J. Watson, then president of the IBM Corporation.

During the years of WWII, Sisti was employed by the Bell Aircraft company to

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Sisti's depiction of Lew Jenkins (1916-1981) *Leaving the Ring* is a fine example of how the artist synthesized his classical training with modernist techniques. The 1940 drawing of the World Lightweight champion displays the artist's awareness of Michelangelo's classic studies of the male form.

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produce a series of drawings depicting their workers in the various stages of the manufacturing of aircraft. An exhibition titled "*The Workers in the Bell Plant or the Human Side of Plane Manufacturing*" featured 70 of these drawings at the Albright Art Gallery in February, 1945.

By the following year, Sisti had built and opened an exhibition gallery adjacent to his studio. The beautifully appointed space spotlighted his own work and soon became a venue for other artists as well.

Although his boxing days were now over, Sisti's artistic career continued to

thrive. In November, 1947, five of his boxing-themed paintings were included in an exhibition titled "*The Ring and the Glove—A Survey of Boxing*" at Manhattan's Museum of the City of New York. Being a part of this show attests to the high regard in which his work was held, even outside of Buffalo. Now, his paintings shared the walls with major American masters such as George Bellows (1882-1925), Thomas Eakins (1844-1916) and George Luks (1866-1933) as well as France's Georges Rouault (1871-1958), all of whom had produced boxing imagery.

The Sisti paintings included his monumental oil "*At Ringside*" depicting the



The Boxer, 1947 oil on canvas, 51 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 26 $\frac{3}{8}$ inches.
Phil Muscato is the model.
COLLECTION, BURCHFIELD PENNEY ART CENTER, GIFT OF TONY SISTI,
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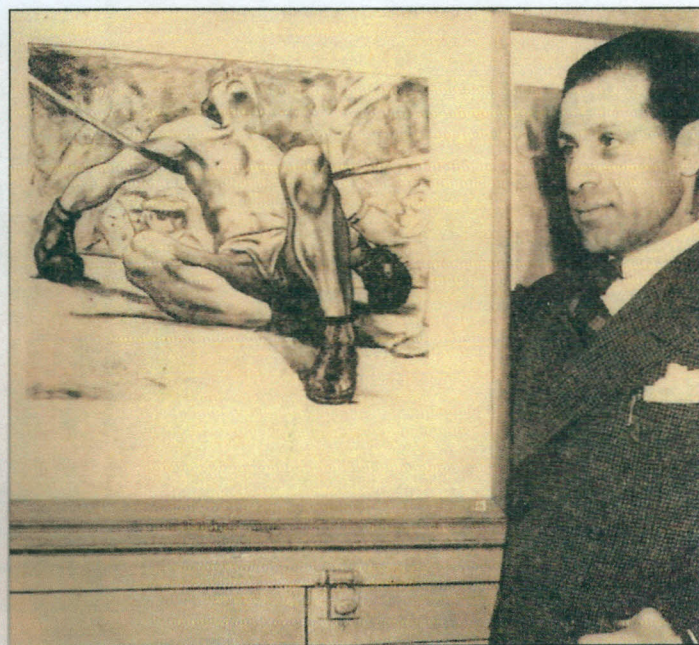
Sisti painting Phil Muscato at a demonstration, c. 1942. Originally published in the *Buffalo Courier-Express*, March 30, 1952.

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1938 Max Schmeling (1905-2005) vs. Joe Louis (1914-1981) fight as well as other works where local boxing legends such as Jackie Donovan (1919-1997) and Jimmy "Slats" Slatery (1904-1960) posed as models. Some of these athletes would also serve as live models for public portrait demonstrations. Sisti gave several such demonstrations at the museum, attracting large groups of people. In 1941, local boxer Joe Muscato (1919-1977) posed and a few years later his younger brother Phil Muscato (1923-1991) modeled for a portrait that would be completed in the studio in 1947.

Sisti gave over 150 portrait painting demonstrations for museums and regional organizations. His subjects ranged from a young man selling magazines door-to-door, to his cousin, Major League baseball player Sebastian "Sibby" Sisti (1920-2006) who posed for him at the Albright in 1942, and prominent Buffalo author Taylor Caldwell (1900-1985) who posed in 1947.

In 1948, Sisti purchased a 125 year old house at 469 Franklin St. The once beautiful home had fallen into a state of disrepair and he set out to remodel the building for use as a personal studio as well as offering rental apartments to help defray the costs of this undertaking. *"When the chance came to buy it, I didn't even have the down-payment.... I went off to Boston and painted a couple of portraits to get the money. Then I started to do the work-remodeling, laying sidewalks, tilling-myself."*



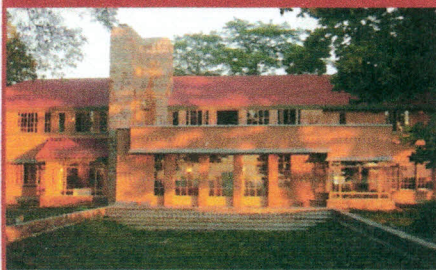
The artist portrayed with "KO'd" at his Argent Gallery Exhibition in New York City, 1939. Notice his black left eye, likely received from a Freddy Sulanto punch the night before.

AUTHOR'S COLLECTION



Sunday Afternoon at the Rapids, c. 1945. Oil on canvas, 41½ x 59¾ inches.
 COLLECTION, BURCHFIELD PENNEY ART CENTER, GIFT OF TONY SISTI, 1979:064.000

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Over the years, artists have often used whatever new technologies were available at the time in order to progress and advance in their work. Sisti was no exception. In the early 1950s, he used the medium of television as a source for his sketching. He set up two TV sets in the studio and often watched sporting, political or news events, making quick sketches for exercising and strengthening his drawing technique.

"They put the outside world before my easel." "I used to go to the movies to get little scraps of action from prize-fights. It always was a problem because of the dark. Now I have the fights before me and a good light on my paper. It's the swift stroke that's important in making a sketch from life. Once you harness the spirit or action, the rest comes. The artist knows where the shadows belong."

In March, 1953, Sisti held a one-man show – the first in 10 years – at the Community Music School at 325 Summer St. The exhibit covered 27 years of painting and included many of his well-known paintings and drawings.

By 1955, Sisti's studio gallery on Franklin Street was open to the public

and he displayed his own paintings in a unique and creative basement gallery. The following year, he joined still another group of disgruntled artists who were protesting the decisions made by the jury for the Western New York Art Exhibition at the Albright. He decided to offer his gallery as a venue for a *salon des refusés*, accepting the rejected artists. The contention was that the jury for the Albright's show automatically included works by faculty of the University of Buffalo's Albright Art School as well as art faculty of Buffalo State Teachers College, thus circumventing the usual two-thirds jury vote which was previously the basis for acceptance into the important regional exhibition. By 1957, the idea grew into a more formal presentation with the *First Spring Exhibition* which was accompanied by a published catalogue. In the forward, Sisti stated:

"I feel fortunate to present the first exhibit of an independent nature in Buffalo which represents a cross section of talent in the Western New York area. It was good to see such an enthusiastic response to the idea

of an exhibition originally limited to rejected works and to see such names as Charles Burchfield behind us. The idea of this exhibit should do much to help make us more familiar with the works of the artist in the community and has revealed with variety and vitality local talent. I am grateful to the wide community response from our industrialists and patrons to encourage creative effort. This has created a closer relationship between the living artist in the city and community."

This third regional venue directly followed the April 8th closing of the 61st Annual of the BSA held at the Hotel Statler.

The Sisti "Spring Show" was very successful and besides Burchfield, other prominent local artists participated such as Virginia Cuthbert (1908-2001), Martha Visser't Hooft (1906-1994), Walter Prochownik (1923-2000) and many others. With several prominent venues displaying work of local artists, outdoor events such as the "Courtyard Show" at 224 Summer St. attracted mostly established artists such as Arthur Kowalski (1893-1958) and others who

had been active with the BSA for decades. The younger and more avant-garde artists such as Lawrence Calcagno (1913-1993) and John Drummer (b. 1934) were active

with the "The Stable," another outdoor venue at 628 Delaware Ave. The outdoor displaying of art drew public support but both courtyard shows were short-lived.



The house that became Sisti's gallery at 469 Franklin St. Photo by James N. Matthews, originally published in the *Buffalo Courier-Express* December 4, 1949. AUTHOR'S COLLECTION

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Already an established advocate for local art, in 1958 Tony Sisti – along with the Allentown Village Society – became a major organizer of the first Outdoor Art Festival, which included painting, sculpture and crafts. The festival attracted over 25,000 visitors, reflecting the growing interest in art by the public. The following year, during the festival, he displayed his own retrospective at his Franklin Street studio showing work dating from his student days of the 1920s through the following decades. By the second year, the outdoor festival featured 200 artists and included talented local

artists such as James Kuo (1920-1995) and James Vullo (1914-1999). Sisti became associated with the Allentown Art Festival which is still going strong in its 51st year.

Besides marketing his own work, Sisti was passionate about promoting other artists. He held numerous exhibitions for regional, national and international artists as well. Even posthumous exhibitions were held for prominent local painters such as Roycroft artist Alexis Jean Fournier (1865-1948). The Fournier exhibit was held in September, 1959, long before the artist was rediscovered as a major American landscape painter. Sisti had known Fournier for many years and acknowledged that the elder artist had thoughtfully sent him a good luck telegram before he entered the ring of St. Nicholas Arena in New York in 1939.

During the 60s and 70s, Sisti continued his association with the Allentown Art Festival and used his regional position and influence to promote art. He could look back at the many highlights of his interesting life including giving boxing lessons to Gianni Agnelli (1921-2003) at the age of 10. The former President of the Fiat Motor Company maintained a correspondence with the artist over the years. Besides the numerous

portraits he painted of regional citizens, his sitters also included prominent figures such as Jack Dempsey (1895-1983), President Franklin D. Roosevelt (1882-1945), famed Italian tenor Tito Schipa (1888-1965) and New York Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia (1882-1947).

Tony Sisti died in Buffalo on December 15, 1983, followed shortly by his wife Carmella who died four months later. A public park was named in his honor located near the intersection of Franklin and North streets. ❏



Born and raised in Niagara Falls, NY, David Martin is an independent art historian and co-owner of Martin-Zambito Fine Art in Seattle, WA where he currently resides. He is the author of several art publications, as well as articles in the Winter 2003, Winter 2004 and Fall 2007 issues of *Western New York Heritage*. His current book, *Painting with Light: Pictorialism and the Seattle Camera Club* will be published by the University of Washington Press in 2010.

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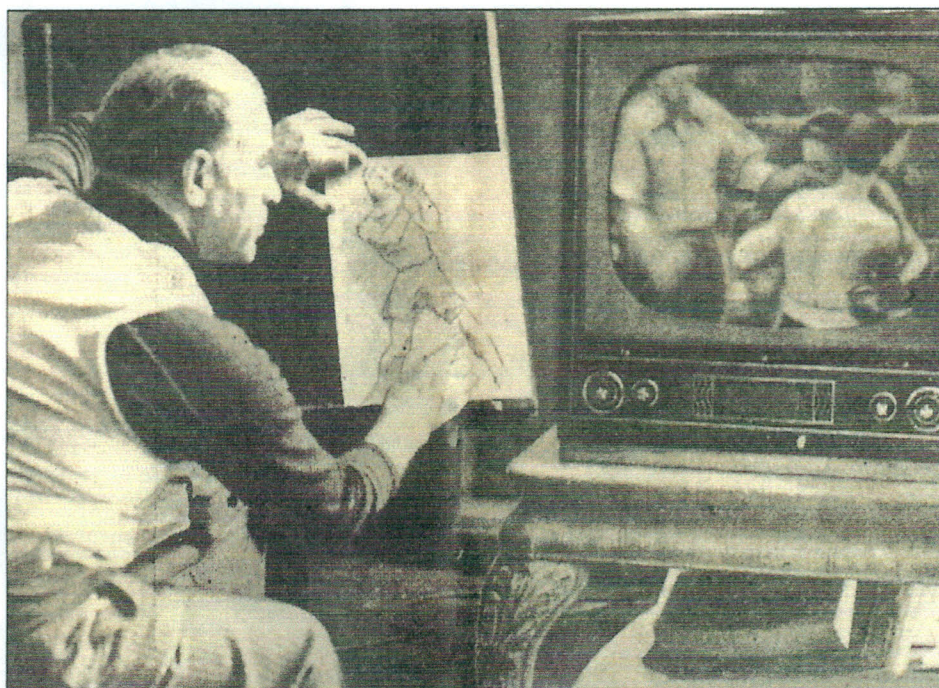
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Sisti sketching the Chuck Davey vs. Kid Gavilán fight from his TV set, 1953. Originally published in the *Buffalo Evening News*, February 14, 1953. AUTHOR'S COLLECTION