



Hartford Courant, April 21, 1952

Joseph (Giuseppi) Gionfriddo (1907-1978)

“A Hartford Biography”

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In 1920 when he was 13, Gionfriddo of the small Sicilian town of Canicattini Bagni, arrived in Hartford, joining his parents, his siblings, and hundreds, if not thousands of other immigrants to Hartford from the same Italian town. He was trained as a barber but had been painting since he was a boy. His paintings, displayed in a barbershop on Trumbull Street caught the attention of the patrons and by age 17 he was proclaimed as a major talent and profiled in the *Hartford Courant*. He studied with James Goodwin McManus and Guy Wiggins and at age 30 was elected to the Governing Council of the Connecticut Academy of Fine Arts. He lived in the Hartford area for the rest of his life and continued to be active in the local art scene. However, like so many other landscape painters of the early 20th century, he was largely forgotten by the 1970's and died with little notice in Glastonbury in 1978.

Joseph Gionfriddo was born at home on April 14, 1907 at Via Garibaldi No. 42, Canicattini Bagni, a small town in the province of Siracusa (Syracuse) in Sicily, Italy. His parents were Santo Gionfriddo and Antonina Marino. He likely had three siblings, two brothers, Salvatore and Paul, and a sister Lucy. A reporter for the *Hartford Courant* writing in 1924, said that Gionfriddo wanted to be an artist when he was a young boy. He drew pictures that were admired by his family and his teachers were said to have admired his talent when he was nine years old. He later said that when he was young, he liked to watch the painters at work in the picturesque countryside around his village. Some of them would wave him away, but others were friendly, and allowed him to watch them as they painted. At around the same time he and some of his brothers and cousins were apprenticed as barbers. It was apparently a family tradition.

In 1916 his mother and father immigrated to Hartford, Connecticut and left their children in the care of the grandparents. They joined a large group of immigrants from Canicattini Bagni in Hartford. Bill Ryan in a March 31, 1983 article in the *Hartford Courant*, about Santo Gionfriddo (not Joseph's father), the founder of Gionfriddo's restaurant on Asylum Street in downtown Hartford, said that “thousands” of people immigrated from Canicattini to Hartford early in the 20th century. According to Wikipedia, the population of Canicattini dropped from 11,809 in 1921 to 9,260 in 1931. Apparently a lot of them moved to Hartford.

In 1920 Gionfriddo's parents sent for their children. His father worked at a typewriter company. Joseph attended the Brown elementary school for two years, learning English and completing the equivalent of 5th grade. His teachers are said to have admired his artistic talent.

Gionfriddo had a large extended family in and around Hartford consisting of his parents, siblings, aunts and uncles, and cousins. He used his brother Salvatore as an early model. Santo Gionfriddo, the founder of Gionfriddo's restaurant located on Asylum Street in downtown Hartford was also trained as a barber and likely was a relative.

Gionfriddo began to work in a barbershop at 415 Trumbull Street around 1924, when he was 17. The owner of the shop allowed him to display his paintings in the shop and the owner of the Savoy hotel nearby at 255 Asylum Street asked to display a particular painting of his in the hotel lobby. All of this attracted the attention of the local art crowd, whose studios were clustered on the nearby streets. The *Hartford Courant* ran a large feature article on March 2, 1934 titled "*Young Local Barber Discovers Unsuspected Artistic Talent*" which included details of his young life. Gionfriddo said he had occupied his time while waiting for customers by copying advertisements from the magazines in the shop. He also started making sketches using Salvatore Gionfriddo, "a strong man", as a model. A brother who lived in New York (Probably Paul) wanted Gionfriddo to move to New York to study art, but his father preferred him to remain in Hartford. A friend told him of the night classes in art that were given at the Hartford High School. Gionfriddo quickly enrolled in James Goodwin McManus' class there. After studying for two years, McManus suggested he enroll in the classes of the Connecticut Art Students League, where McManus had been director since 1916.

In 1928, Gionfriddo accompanied McManus and his class on a day trip to Lyme where McManus spent his summers. There he met Guy Carleton Wiggins, a friend of McManus' and a member of the Old Lyme Art Colony. Gionfriddo continued to accompany McManus to Lyme for the next three years. He was invited by Wiggins to live at his home while he was studying in the summer classes taught by McManus and Wiggins.

The young Gionfriddo rapidly rose in the ranks of the local arts groups. In 1929 he was elected Corresponding Secretary at the Connecticut Art Students League. Also in 1929 he won first prize at Wiggins' School in Lyme. In 1930 McManus suggested he submit a painting to the Connecticut Academy of Fine Arts and the painting won the Flagg prize for best work in the show. His teacher McManus won the Bunce prize that year and Albertus Jones won the Cooper Prize. At 47, both McManus and Jones were considerably older than the 22 year old Gionfriddo,

In 1932, Gionfriddo returned to Hartford from Lyme and was living at 180 Roosevelt Street in Hartford's South End with his mother, father, and sister Lucy (four years younger than he). The South End was largely populated by Italian Americans, many of them from Canicattini Bagni. 1932 was a big year for Gionfriddo. In April he received a grant from the Tiffany Foundation to live at Louis Comfort Tiffany's former home, Laurelton Hall in Oyster Bay, Long Island. (He was recommended for the grant by McManus, Wiggins, and William Steene of New York City.) He became a naturalized citizen in June. He won the Dunham prize at the 1932 Connecticut Academy show. He was also featured in another long article in the *Hartford Courant* titled "*A Tonsorial Artist Takes to Canvas*". He held his first solo show in February at the Town and County Club on Woodland Street. The reporter wrote, "*One well known Hartford art expert predicts a splendid future for Gionfriddo. He'll do great things one day. Unless I am mistaken, he will become one of Connecticut's leading artists. The Logans and the Orrs (Robert Logan and Louis Orr) had better look to their laurels.*"

In 1934 he won the Atheneum prize at the Connecticut Academy and in 1937 he was elected to the Academy Governing Council. He served on the Council off and on until 1941.

By 1940 he was living at 192 Hubbard Road in Hartford with his mother and father and a brother Salvatore who was one year older. His profession, along with that of his brother, was shown as a proprietor of a beauty salon in the 1940 census.

Around this time he married Helen Salafia of Cromwell.

Some time after 1941, perhaps when he got married, he moved from Hartford to Gilead in Hebron where he lived for the rest of his life. After 1941 there is little mention of him in the *Courant*, although he certainly continued to paint and to be involved in the local art world. In 1958 he was Director of the Connecticut Artist's Exhibition that was held at the Hebron Women's Club. He exhibited several of his paintings along with the paintings of his old teacher McManus, Sanford Low who was Director of the New Britain Museum of American Art, Louis Fusari who was a good friend of Low's, Irving Katzenstein who taught at the West Hartford Art League, Edith Dale Monson who had studied with Henri at the Art Students League in New York, and Walter Korder, Ralph Eno, and Harry Ballinger who were all prominent members of the Hartford art circles, all participated in the exhibition.

Gionfriddo was a "Friend" of the New Britain Museum of American Art.

The last mention of Gionfriddo in the *Courant* was an article on May 17, 1964 that noted he served as a judge for the Cherry Hill Arts Festival at the Lucy Welles Library in Newington, along with Robert E. Smith and Louis Fusari.

He died on December 30, 1978 in Glastonbury and is buried in the Rose Hill Memorial Park Cemetery in Wethersfield, Connecticut.

He apparently had no children. His obituary stated that he was survived by his wife Helen Salafia Gionfriddo, a brother Paul, and a sister Lucy Gionfriddo Bagley.

In 1979 his wife donated a large painting of his titled *Anno Domini* to the NBMAA. She died on January 11, 1995, in Newington, Connecticut.

Ancientfaces.com

Birth Records for Canicattini Bagni,

Casa Emigranti Italiana website, "Joseph Gionfriddo"

Hartford Courant, 3/2/1924, "Young Local Barber Discovers Unsuspected Artistic Talent", 2/9/1929, 9/20/1929, 3/23/1930, 2/21/1932, "A Tonsorial Artist Takes to Canvas", 4/21/1932, 1/11/1958, 5/17/1964, 3/31/1983, 1/12/1995

US Census 1930, 1940

Wikipedia, *Canicattini Bagni*



Joseph Gionfriddo, *Rock Wall Landscape*, oil on Masonite, 16"x20"