

Watkins, Franklin Chennault ^[1]

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by Claiborne T. Smith, Jr., 1996

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Franklin Chennault Watkins, artist, was born in New York City, the son of Benjamin Franklin and Shirley Chennault Watkins. His father, a Reidsville, N.C., native, was an inventor and made a career of developing and marketing patents. Having sold a patent to the British government for a new method of gold mining for a large sum, he maintained a bachelor existence in Europe for many years prior to marriage. His wife, a native of Louisville, Ky., was eighteen years younger than he. Her sister was the mother of the poet [Ogden Nash](#) ^[2], whose paternal ancestors were prominent in the history of North Carolina. Benjamin and Shirley Watkins were the parents of two sons and two daughters. The other son, Edmund, was a newspaperman in the Philadelphia area and an author of some note, contributing short stories to *Scribner's* magazine and the *Southern Review*. A novel, *The Palace of Dim Night* ^[3], was published in 1965.

As an infant Watkins was taken to London, where the family then resided. During childhood and adolescence he lived at various times in Rye, N.Y., Louisville, Ky., and [Winston-Salem](#) ^[4]. Due to the uncertain nature of his father's income, Watkins was reared in an atmosphere of alternating affluence and financial difficulties. Entering [Groton](#) ^[5] in 1908, he had to leave in 1910 because money was tight. He then matriculated at [The University of North Carolina](#) ^[6] but left after four days, not finding the school congenial. Watkins then spent a year at the [University of Virginia](#) ^[7]. Several terms at the University of Pennsylvania followed. In 1913, having decided on art as a career, he entered the Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia, an institution he was associated with for the remainder of his life. During [World War I](#) ^[8] he did camouflage work for the U.S. Navy, and from 1918 to 1923 he was employed as an artist by the Philadelphia advertising firm of N. W. Ayer.

Franklin Watkins was little known in the art world until, at age thirty-seven, he suddenly received national recognition when his entry *Suicide in Costume* ^[9] won first prize at the Carnegie International Exhibition in 1931. The oil painting, in an oval frame with a horizontal orientation, shows a male figure in a clown costume, lying on a table and holding a smoking gun. This picture, touching as it does on such basic human feelings, aroused so much controversy that the artist kept a low profile for several years afterwards. The painting now hangs in the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

On achieving success, Watkins enjoyed a wide patronage among the rich and prominent in Philadelphia. He became chiefly known as a portrait painter, though he painted still lifes, landscapes, and animals as well and executed the murals in the [Rodin Museum](#) ^[10] on Philadelphia's parkway. Commissioned to paint President Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1941, he and his wife went on a short vacation to North Carolina's [Outer Banks](#) ^[11] prior to beginning the work. While they were there, Pearl Harbor was attacked, and the president never had time to sit for the portrait. Among Watkins's many sitters were Dr. Jefferson B. Fordham, a North Carolina native and dean of the University of Pennsylvania Law School, and Dr. Eugene Strecker, the noted psychiatrist. An important commission was his portrait of the three Beinecke brothers, painted in 1969 for the Beinecke Rare Book room and manuscript library at Yale.

Watkins's portraits were at times controversial. He said that he painted what he saw in the sitter and did not strive for an exact likeness. His portrait of Joseph Clark, the Democratic reform mayor of Philadelphia, which showed the subject standing with arms folded and looking down, was not well received. It was only at Clark's insistence that the city accepted the picture. In his portraits Watkins has been said to have been influenced by Thomas Eakins, his great predecessor at the [Academy of Fine Arts](#) ^[12].

During his distinguished career Watkins, or Watty as he was known to his friends, received innumerable awards and honors both in Europe and America. His alma mater, the Academy of Fine Arts, gave him the three gold medals at its disposal. In 1934 he held his first one-man show at the Rehn Gallery in New York. The [Philadelphia Museum of Art](#) ^[13] honored Watkins and his close friend Arthur B. Carles with an exhibition in 1946. A major show of his work took place at [New York's Museum of Modern Art](#) ^[14] in 1950, and a retrospective was staged at the [Philadelphia Museum](#) in 1964 ^[15]. A member of many prestigious organizations and boards, including the American Academy in Rome, he was awarded a doctorate in fine arts by [Franklin and Marshall College](#) ^[16] in 1954. His paintings now hang in thirty major museums. Watkins occasionally contributed articles to art periodicals, the most important of which, "An Artist Talks to His Students," was published in the *Magazine of Art* in December 1941.

Throughout his life he painted pictures of a religious nature. Critics have noted the influence of [William Blake](#) ^[17]. The [Vatican Museum](#) ^[18] in Rome, having built a wing for contemporary art, selected Watkins as one of six American artists to be represented and chose a large painting of the Crucifixion. The wing had been scheduled to open in October 1972, and Watkins and his wife went to Italy for the event. The opening was delayed and they decided to remain in Europe. However, he was stricken and died in Bologna.

Franklin Watkins was a tall, handsome, urbane man. A self-portrait, exhibited in the 1964 retrospective at the Philadelphia museum, is in a private collection. He was married first in 1927, to Fredolyn Gimble, daughter of Ellis Gimble, the department store magnate. The marriage ended in divorce in 1942. He then married Mrs. Ida Quigley Furst, a native of Lock Haven, Pa. There were no children by either marriage.

Watkins, though born in New York City, was proud of his southern heritage and claimed North Carolina as home. The family had lived on Fifth Street in Winston-Salem in 1910 and 1911. As a former resident of that city, he exhibited oil paintings at the Piedmont Festival of Music and Art in 1944 and 1946. A few years before his death, he and his wife visited the Watkins ancestral home in Reidsville. An early study in oil of a reclining nude is in the collection of the Ackland Museum ^[19] at Chapel Hill.

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Origin - location:

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