



HAWTHORNE  
Fine Art

**GUSTAVE WOLFF (1863-1935)**

Influenced by his teachers Paul Cornoyer (1864-1923) and Frederick Oakes Sylvester (1869-1915), as well as the New York-based artist and teacher William Merritt Chase (1849-1916), Wolff developed his unique style of painting by combining the lightfilled leisure scenes of American Impressionism, the atmospheric effects of the Dutch Hague School, and the search for beauty in urban life of the early twentieth century.

Gustave Wolff was born in Berlin, Germany and immigrated with his family to the United States at the age of three, settling in St. Louis, a destination for many German immigrants. It was a propitious time for art in St. Louis as Washington University had recently added drawing classes to its curriculum, and by 1879 Halsey Ives had established the St. Louis School of Fine Arts, a special section of the Art Department of the University. Furthermore, there were a growing number of collectors in the city and, in turn, a growing movement to establish an art museum. Wolff was enrolled for a time at the St. Louis School of Fine Arts and was a student of Paul Cornoyer, F. Humphrey Woolrych, and Frederick Oakes Sylvester. Little more than this is known about his schooling, and it is reasonable to assume that he was essentially an autodidact.

Wolff quickly became active in the St. Louis art scene, however, and was invited to join the St. Louis Artists' Guild. The organization held regular exhibitions, and Wolff was a frequent exhibitor, drawing auspicious attention as early as 1901:

In the work of a young man named Wolff there is a breath of freedom and an independence of treatment that are refreshing. His painting is poetical and yet his touch is realistic. In two of his canvases in which there appear women, in the fields he has no little of the feeling of the Barbizon school, and I have seen high priced pictures by famous Frenchmen that did not compare with them for general effect.

Charles Kurtz, reviewing the Guild's 1902 exhibition, praised the landscapes by Wolff:

Gustave Wolff exhibits several landscapes of excellent quality. The most artistic of these in the opinion of the writer, is *Early Spring* .... There is a luminous gray sky characteristic of an April day. The composition is unconventional and natural, yet agreeable. The color is harmonious throughout.



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1904 was a banner year for St. Louis. The Louisiana Purchase Exposition of 1904 invigorated the city's arts community. It was so successful for St. Louis artists, who had made a strong showing at the expo, that the following year, the Artists' Guild organized an exhibit of Missouri art at the Lewis and Clark Exposition in Portland, Oregon. Missouri was the only state at the exposition to have a gallery dedicated to its artists, a point that was underscored in the accompanying catalog. All of the major St. Louis artists exhibited, and Wolff was one of the most conspicuous with seven paintings. His standing among the St. Louis art community had become indisputable by then, as indicated in the accompanying biography in the catalogue:

If the maxim that artists are born, not made, be true, it applies most decidedly to Mr. Wolf [sic], whose training was as unsystematic and interrupted as his career was subjected to influences most unfavorable to his artistic development. But in spite of all difficulties he has forged his way to the front until his work has become of such importance that an exhibit of Western Artists would be incomplete without his admirable landscapes.

By 1906 Wolff had established himself as one of the foremost landscape painters in St. Louis. In an extensive review of an exhibition of St. Louis artists at the Noonan & Kocian Galleries, the major commercial art gallery in the city at that time, critic Maurice Goodwin wrote, "Wolff has astonished me more than any other man in St. Louis. I shall not be surprised at anything he may achieve."

To further his training, Wolff traveled to Holland. This was a logical choice of location given the abundance of Dutch painting he had seen in St. Louis, and the general propensity toward Hague School-inspired work there. Exhibiting his Dutch scenes in St. Louis, elicited one critic to write,

When his first work came back from Holland for exhibition, The Mirror had occasion to note that the painter seemed a little bewildered by the Netherlands landscape, of great expanses beneath heavy skies, and indeed, was rather overwhelmed by Dutch painting but was making progress in technical proficiency.

After his return to St. Louis, Wolff's reputation only increased. A testament of this recognition was



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a depiction of the artist in 'Kindly Caricatures,' a profile of prominent St. Louisians in the weekly newspaper *The Mirror*:

His paintings at their most veristic have a glamour, in a certain wistful key. His 'atmosphere' is romantic, with, probably a touch of Teutonic philosophizing. Wolff's landscapes are as strong, as tender, as deeply seen as those of any American painter. He is one of this city's few really big men.

St. Louis, however, ultimately proved too provincial for him and he headed to New York, evidently in search of a greater audience for his work. His departure from his hometown was announced in the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, "Artist Believes That He Will Find Wider Field for Work in East."

Wolff's relocation to New York City came after early training in St. Louis and travels in Europe, including the Netherlands. A well-known artist in the Midwest and successful exhibitor at the Paris Salons, Wolff was relatively unknown in New York upon his arrival in the early 1910s. However, he exhibited frequently in New York and maintained a painting style that incorporated influence from the burgeoning urban realist movement while remaining loyal to the vibrant light effects and animated brushwork of Impressionism. Most importantly, Wolff continued to depict what he loved: the natural beauty that he was able to discover amid his urban life in New York.

In 1913, Wolff had a solo exhibition in New York at the Yorkville Library, located on 79th Street. It was through the German Association for Culture. He would continue to exhibit with the Two-By-Four Society through 1914 and was also included in a Special Exhibition of Missouri Painters Arranged for the Delegates of the Senate Federation of Women's Clubs in 1919. While he lived well into the 1930s, the art world was beginning to change with advent of modernism in the early nineteen-teens. Gustave Wolff's paintings of tonal winter sunsets, docks along Manhattan's East River, cityscapes, and pastoral scenes of city parkland, really belong to the previous generation of artists. In spite of this, Wolff remained true to his love: Nature. This led one astute critic to write of him, "Of rather retiring disposition, Mr. Wolf's [sic] best friend, confidant and master is Nature, to whose counsels he listens and whose moods and beauties he interprets with a masterly hand, guided by the heart and mind of the true artist."



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More recently, the artist was given a full-scale retrospective at Hawthorne Fine Art, LLC in 2006 which unveiled many of the artist's important works which were hidden away for decades in the hands of his descendants. Then in 2012, the Wichita Art Museum presented *Gustave Wolff: An Impressionist Eye for New York*, which highlighted the complexity of the artist's urban subjects and exposed them to a growing national audience.