



HAWTHORNE  
Fine Art

**ERNEST LAWSON** (1873-1939)

*On the Harlem River*

Oil on canvas

25 ¼ x 30 ¼ inches

Signed lower left

By the time the landmark exhibition of *The Eight* (being the core proponents of the Ashcan School, led by the noted realist Robert Henri) opened at Macbeth Galleries early in 1908, Ernest Lawson had already established himself as a painter in his own right. The group, which sought to divorce its art from the stringent and traditional modes of painting that preceded it, consisted of five core members—Robert Henri (1865-1929), William Glackens (1870-1938), George Luks (1866-1933), Everett Shinn (1876-1953), and John Sloan (1871-1951)—as well as three secondary members: Maurice Prendergast (1858-1924), Arthur B. Davies (1862-1928), and Ernest Lawson (1873-1939).

The Ashcan School's members exhibited a variety of diverse styles, as the movement championed originality and the breaking free of traditional modes rather than a universal or imposed style; they demanded that art reflect life and, true to their word, set about painting the modern urban scenes that surrounded them. Utilizing the dark palettes of the realist painters that preceded—from Goya to Degas—Ashcan artists immortalized New York City in the first decades of the twentieth century with a poetic realism that did not shy away from industrialization.



George Luks, *Roundhouse at High Bridge*, c. 1909-10. Oil on canvas, 30 3/8 x 36 1/4 inches. Collection Munson-Williams-Proctor Institute, Museum of Art.



George Bellows, *Rain on the River*, 1908. Oil on canvas, 32 1/4 x 38 1/4 inches. Collection Rhode Island School of Design.



J. Alden Weir, *The Bridge: Nocturne*, c. 1910. Oil on canvas mounted on wood, 29 x 39 1/2 inches. Collection Hirschhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution.

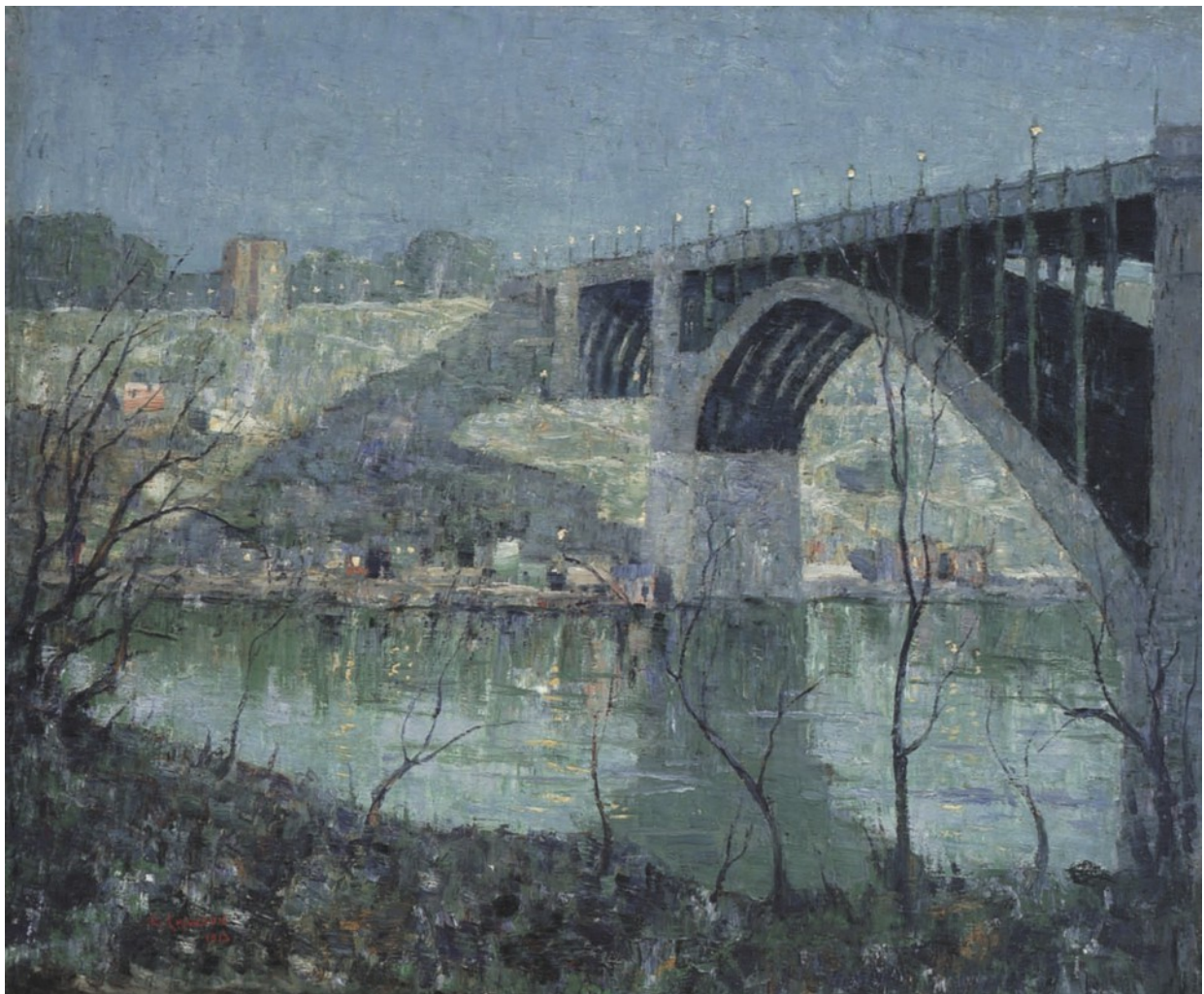
Although all eight artists maintained distinct styles, their mutual affinity for urban subject matter created overlapping trends and motifs in form, composition, color and sensibility. Works such as J. Alden Weir's *The Bridge (Nocturne: Queensboro Bridge)* (1910), George Luks's *Roundhouse at High Bridge* (1909-10)



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and George Bellows's *Rain on the River* (1908) all juxtapose urban structure against natural beauty and atmospheric effect, giving New York City's expanding industrialization a picturesque, almost Whistlerian composition. Ernest Lawson mirrored this sentiment in works such as *Spring Night, Harlem River* (1913), which depicts Washington Bridge—Manhattan's northerly junction—in dreamily impressionist tones of blue and green.

Just as he shared similarities with The Eight, however, Lawson also differed from them; his treatment of landscape subjects and rigorous impasto aligned him—technically—more with the American Impressionists than his realist counterparts. The influence of Lawson's teachers, Julian Alden Weir (1852-1919) and John Henry Twachtman (1853-1902), can be seen in much of Lawson's treatment of paint and





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Ernest Lawson, *Spring Night, Harlem River*, 1913. Oil on canvas mounted on wood, 25 1/8 x 30 1/8 inches. The Phillips Collection.

relationship to color. In a visit to France (1893-1894), Lawson would have become familiar with concurrent modes of Impressionism—specifically the paintings of Alfred Sisley (1839-1899), whose work he openly admired, and Claude Monet (1840-1926), who's pastel-colored palette and open composition Lawson has emulated in *On the Harlem River*. Upon his return to America Lawson moved to Washington Heights, where he began not only to develop his multi-layered, structural surfaces, but began to produce the spirited, textured canvases for which he would be best remembered.



Alfred Sisley, *Apple Trees in Flower*, 1880. Oil on canvas, 25 1/4 x 31 3/4 inches. Chrysler Museum of Art, Norfolk, VA.



Claude Monet, *Poppy Field, Argenteuil*, 1875, Oil on canvas, 21 1/4 x 29 inches, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York NY

Lawson's uniqueness, then, lies in his subject matter—in this turning away from the traditional landscape subjects of the Impressionists, toward the Ashcan school and modern, urban scenes of early twentieth century life. Lawson was and still is well-known for his representations of Upper Manhattan, the Palisades, and Harlem, which he portrayed with deep affection and a brooding, editing hand.

Mirroring his art, Lawson's very presence in the art world remained fluid throughout his career as he moved within art circles that were both radical and traditional. Although he exhibited with the progressive Eight—sharing their penchant for the real—he was also actively involved with the National Academy of Design, and spent his career cultivating a painting style that identified him as a second-generation Impressionist. In merging Impressionistic form with modern content, however, Lawson became the master of reconciling impressionism and realism.

Throughout his career Lawson made judicious use of color and texture in his painting. By 1924 it had



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earned him the well-deserved and long-lauded title, “Lawson, of the ‘Crushed Jewels,’”<sup>1</sup> and *On the Harlem River* is no exception. The scene is rendered in rich hues that capture nuanced light effects and recall Monet’s series at Rouen. Lawson’s particular brand of Impressionism was unconventional in both technique (he often used a palette knife or his fingers in addition to the brush to achieve desired effects), as well as in content (he often chose contemporaneously unusual subjects, such as railroads, bridges, and unremarkable buildings). Ultimately, it was his merging of the conventional with the modern that produced the grittier effects, structures, and near-sculptural surfaces that made Lawson’s paintings so visionary.

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1 F. Newlin Price, “Lawson, of the ‘Crushed Jewels,’” *International Studio* 78 (Feb. 1924), p. 367.