

An impressionist landscape painting by Gustave Wolff. The scene depicts a body of water in the foreground, with a large, dark, multi-story building on the opposite shore. The sky is a mix of warm yellow and orange tones, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. The brushwork is visible and expressive, characteristic of the Impressionist style. The text is overlaid on the upper portion of the painting.

GUSTAVE WOLFF

(1863 — 1935)



AN IMPRESSIONIST EYE FOR NEW YORK

MAY 13TH—AUGUST 5TH, 2012 | WICHITA ART MUSEUM

Gustave Wolff



1. WASHINGTON HEIGHTS BRIDGE, NEW YORK

Oil on canvas, 12 x 16 in., Signed lower right, Hawthorne Fine Art, LLC, NY



2. APPROACHING THE WHEELOCK MANSION,
WEST 160TH STREET, NEW YORK

Oil on canvas, 16 x 12 in., Signed lower right, Hawthorne Fine Art, LLC, NY



3. A WINTER DAY, 79TH STREET BOAT BASIN, NEW YORK

Oil on canvas, 16 x 12 in., Signed lower right, Hawthorne Fine Art, LLC, NY



4. HARLEM RIVER FACTORIES, NEW YORK

Oil on board, 8 x 12 in., Signed and dated 1894, lower right,
Hawthorne Fine Art, LLC, NY

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CURATOR'S STATEMENT

One of the most rewarding functions of curatorial work is the opportunity to show the art of an undeservedly forgotten figure whose art still has the power to engage us, give us pleasure, and make us think. Thanks to a visit to the Hawthorne Fine Art gallery in New York, this curator encountered the paintings of Gustave Wolff, whose career Hawthorne had led the way in reviving. The paintings seemed most appropriate for an exhibition at the Wichita Art Museum. The Museum collection has important holdings in Impressionist art, most notably its *Mother and Child* by Mary Cassatt. Yet the Cassatt is an unusual Impressionist painting in that its focus is on the formal and psychological relationships between the two figures. More typically, Impressionist paintings feature scenes of urban leisure or street life, of rural landscape, or of the margin between—the emerging suburban developments. The Museum is fortunate to have fine works representing both the urban and rural Impressionist subject, but little that explores those often anxious spaces between. Given the current Museum interest in developing a collection of paintings by Guy Carleton Wiggins, an Impressionist whose feature subject was the streetscape of central Manhattan, it is especially poignant that Gustave Wolff focused on the suburbs around Wiggins' New York. Thus, an installation of Wolff's paintings adjacent to the Museum's permanent collection of Impressionist art allows the visitor a fully-rounded view of the subjects and scenes of Impressionism, including the contrast between the bustling and correspondingly brightly-colored Manhattan views of Guy Wiggins, and the suburban New York views of Gustave Wolff, characterized by carefully balanced compositions, subtle color harmonies, and an air of calm and ease touted as a tonic for the complications of urban life.

STEPHEN GLEISSNER, Ph.D.
Chief Curator, Wichita Art Museum

INTRODUCTION

Critics of his time celebrated Gustave Wolff's landscapes "of great expanses beneath heavy skies," luxuriantly painted in thick strokes. So it is fitting that when Wolff came to Manhattan he chose to settle at its highest point in the northern extremity of Washington Heights where he would be closest to the sky. The neighborhood was named after the fortification of Fort Washington, built by Revolutionary forces at a crowning elevation to defend the city from British invaders. In Wolff's time, the area became a picturesque amalgam of Victorian homes built along country paths, on wooded slopes, overlooking the Harlem and Hudson Rivers. Wolff took full advantage of the genteel Impressionist subject matter the scenery offered and created compositions of elegant figures wandering through sundrenched fields. The region's industrial docks, marinas, riverside factories, and viaducts provided the artist with alternate subjects, which he readily recorded with the Realist vision and moody sensitivity of the Ashcan School. Wolff's great technical skill enabled him to portray with equal beauty the rural and urban aspects of his environment and to oscillate between the Impressionist and Ashcan styles with a unique versatility.

I have truly enjoyed exploring the world of Gustave Wolff and am delighted the Wichita Art Museum has selected him as the subject for an exhibition. It is important that we remain committed to enlarging the compass of art historical scholarship and I am proud to help bring this brilliant body of work forward to a growing national audience.

JENNIFER C. KRIEGER
Managing Partner, Hawthorne Fine Art, LLC

URBAN NATURE: GUSTAVE WOLFF (1863–1935), AMERICAN IMPRESSIONIST IN NEW YORK



IN THE AUTUMN OF 1913, the German Association for Culture featured the work of Gustave Wolff (1863–1935) in one of the artist's first New York City exhibitions held at the Yorkville Library. The *New York Times* stated, "Mr. Wolff is better known in the West and in Europe than in New York, and this is the first opportunity to see a collection of his work in this city."¹ A painter of Impressionist and Tonalist landscapes, Wolff arrived in New York most likely within the year prior to this exhibition. However, by the 1910's, the American art scene was witnessing a shift toward modernism. American Impressionism, which began as a rebellion against conservative academic artistic standards, was now endorsed by the National Academy of Design, while urban realism and abstraction became the new form of artistic protest. Having matured artistically around the turn of the century, just before this major shift, Gustave Wolff remained committed throughout his career to capturing the everyday poetry of the rural and urban landscape.

Raised in St. Louis after his family immigrated to the United States in 1866 from Berlin, Germany, Wolff studied at the St. Louis School of Fine Arts and with Paul Cornoyer, F. Humphrey Woolrych, and Frederick Oakes Sylvester. By 1901, Wolff had become the preeminent painter in St. Louis and a frequent exhibitor with the St. Louis Artists' Guild, the Society of Western Artists, and the Two-By-Four Club, leading one critic to write:

*"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."*²

By 1906, Wolff was considered one of the leading landscape painters in St. Louis. It was in that year that two of his paintings were accepted to the Paris Salon. One humorous and rather cynical article discussed Wolff's success:

*"Gustav[sic] Wolff of St. Louis, who does the fine art decoration of the billboards³ behind which you threw the tin cans this spring, has just had a bit of luck . . . [T]he people who sniffed when they saw Mr. Wolff sitting under a screen and daubing the billboards are surprised to learn that two pictures of his have now been accepted by and are hung conspicuously in the Paris salon. He is known in Paris as a landscape painter of ability and exquisite workmanship."*⁴

Like many American painters in this period, Wolff traveled to the Netherlands for further artistic training. In the late nineteenth century, there was a growing fascination in the United States with Dutch Art of the seventeenth-century, which became widely collected. At the same time, more affordable works by contemporary Dutch artists working in The Hague were increasingly collected especially by patrons in St. Louis. Guided by Dutch Old Master depictions and romanticized literary descriptions, American artists visiting the Netherlands produced images of domesticity, strong communities, and religious values.⁵ Having trained in St. Louis, where Dutch artistic influence was strong, Wolff had already adopted the loose, confident brushwork and atmospheric effects that characterize Dutch painting.

When Wolff arrived in New York City in the early 1910s, he would have encountered the group of urban realist painters who dominated the New York art scene. The Eight, or the artists of the Ashcan School, were known for their frank, un-idealized depictions of common people and the industrial energy of New York. Their works presented the appealing, yet gritty reality of this urban environment and the transitory nature of the city.⁶ Wolff's paintings of everyday life often depict scenes of leisure, typical of the Impressionist manner. However, expressing the character of the modern metropolis was also a significant statement of his work.

Wolff's light-filled images such as *Washington Heights Bridge, New York* [FIG. 1]; and *Approaching the Wheelock Mansion, West 160th Street, New York* [FIG. 2] express the joy of leisure and relaxation that was sought amid the density and grittiness of New York. Like the paintings of American Impressionist William Merritt



5. A QUIET FIELD

Oil on canvas, 12 x 16 in., Estate stamp verso, Hawthorne Fine Art, LLC, NY



6. PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST'S WIFE

Oil on canvasboard, 19 x 25 in., Signed and dated 1905, lower right, Collection of artist's granddaughter-in-law



7. CLOSE OF DAY, HARLEM TENEMENTS

Oil on canvas, 12 x 16 in., Signed lower right, Hawthorne Fine Art, LLC, NY



8. THROUGH THE CLOUDS

Oil on canvas, 20 x 26 in., Signed lower right, Private Collection

Chase, who had spent the early 1870's active in the St. Louis art scene, and who was considered one of the most important artists and teachers in New York by the turn of the century, Wolff's scenes of urban leisure are populated by New York's fashionable elite. *Approaching the Wheelock Mansion, West 160th Street, New York* depicts well dressed New Yorkers walking along a path that cuts neatly through a field, the lushness of which is enhanced by Wolff's loose and rapid application of vibrant tones of green. Wheelock Mansion was built in the 1860's in Audubon Park by William A. Wheelock and remained an important monument to Victorian style architecture amid the rapidly changing city until its demolition in 1939. Wolff's meditation on this fleeting moment of urban life and the anonymity of the figures on the path can easily be compared to the Ashcan artists' illustration of interactions between strangers in New York's public spaces.⁷

In contrast to his scenes of leisure, Wolff also produced paintings of New York's commercial activity. Typical of the Impressionist mode, *A Winter Day, 79th Street Boat Basin, New York* [FIG. 3] displays Wolff's mastery of color and light effects in the lavender and orange clouds juxtaposed against the crisp blue sky, and the rippled shadows of the boats on the water. Wolff's confidence and control is revealed in the sweeping brushstrokes of the water and the rough texture of the sky, demonstrating the influence of artists like Chase and John Singer Sargent. His grittier scenes reveal the industrial activity along the shores of New York. In *Harlem River Factories, New York* [FIG. 4], Wolff balances the flourish of Impressionist brushstrokes in the bright white clouds with the browns and grays of the murky water. The artist has noticeably omitted any figures from this image, instead focusing on the stark beauty of this commercial waterfront.⁸ A decade after his arrival in New York, Wolff continued to exhibit his river and harbor scenes to favorable reception from the press.⁹



9. ACROSS THE HUDSON, NORTHERN MANHATTAN

Oil on board, 8 x 12 in., Signed lower right, Hawthorne Fine Art, LLC, NY



10. DYCKMAN STREET DOCKS, MANHATTAN

Oil on board, 8 x 12 in., Signed lower right, Hawthorne Fine Art, LLC, NY



11. SHADOWS ON THE SNOW, UNIVERSITY HEIGHTS, NEW YORK CITY

Oil on canvas, 12 x 16 in., Signed lower right, Hawthorne Fine Art, LLC, NY



12. WINTER LANDSCAPE

Oil on canvas, 29 ¹/₈ x 39 ³/₈ inches in., Signed and dated 1907, lower right, Hawthorne Fine Art, LLC, NY

The selection of works in this exhibition reveals the striking breadth of Wolff's oeuvre, which ranges from light-filled Impressionist works (for example, *A Quiet Field*; *Portrait of the Artist's Wife* [FIGS. 5 and 6]) and expressive Tonalist compositions (*Close of Day*, *Harlem Tenements*; *Through the Clouds* [FIGS. 7 and 8]) to darker urban subjects (*Across the Hudson, Northern Manhattan*; *Dyckman Street Docks, Manhattan* [FIGS. 9 and 10]). As the demand for city scenes relevant to urban dwellers increased in the 1910's, Gustave Wolff was able to continue his study and depiction of the built environment. And as modernist trends such as abstraction infiltrated American art, Wolff maintained an allegiance to the tenets of Impressionism and Tonalism, which better portrayed the texture of the modern urban experience.

CAROLINE GILLASPIE

Researcher, Hawthorne Fine Art, LLC

NOTES

1. "Art at Home and Abroad," *New York Times* (November 9, 1913): SM15.
2. George Julian Zolnay, ed., *Illustrated Handbook of the Missouri Art Exhibit Made under the Auspices of the St. Louis Artists' Guild* (St. Louis, MO: The Missouri Art Commission, 1905), 21.
3. This use of "billboards" may refer to murals, which all three of Wolff's aforementioned teachers had included in their oeuvres.
4. *The Minneapolis Journal* (June 15, 1906): 24.
5. The best source on American artists in the Netherlands is Annette Stott, ed., *Dutch Utopia: American Artists in Holland, 1880-1914* (Savannah, GA: Telfair Books, 2009).
6. Important sources on the Ashcan artists include Rebecca Zurier, Robert W. Snyder, and Virginia M. Mecklenberg, *Metropolitan Lives: The Ashcan Artists and Their New York* (Washington, D.C.: National Museum of American Art, 1995); and Rebecca Zurier, *Picturing the City: Urban Vision and the Ashcan School* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).
7. Zurier, et al., *Metropolitan Lives*, 130-134.
8. For a discussion of the Ashcan School's frequent depictions of waterfront scenes, see *Ibid.*, 95-97.
9. Margaret Breuning, "Delightful Decorations," *New York Evening Post* (January 27, 1923). This brief article mentions Wolff's "good waterside pictures."



13. *IN THE AFTERNOON SUN*

Oil on canvasboard, 8 x 12 in., Signed lower right, Hawthorne Fine Art, LLC, NY



14. *VIEW OF NEW JERSEY FROM THE HUDSON RIVER*

Oil on canvas, 12 x 16 in., Signed lower right, Hawthorne Fine Art, LLC, NY



15. *THE OVERLOOK, FORT TRYON PARK, MANHATTAN*

Oil on canvas, 12 x 16 in., Signed lower right, Hawthorne Fine Art, LLC, NY



EXHIBITION FUNDED BY THE FRIENDS OF THE WICHITA ART MUSEUM ENDOWMENT FUND, THE CITY OF WICHITA, TCK-THE TRUST COMPANY OF KANSAS, AND ORGANIZED COURTESY OF HAWTHORNE FINE ART, NEW YORK.

FRONTCOVER: *Close of Day, Harlem Tenements* (detail), Oil on canvas, 12 x 16 in., Signed lower right, Hawthorne Fine Art, LLC, NY

BACKCOVER, TOP: *Walking Along the Hudson by Riverside Park*, Oil on canvas, 14 x 10 in., Signed lower right, Hawthorne Fine Art, LLC, NY

BACKCOVER, BOTTOM: *Entrance to Eads Bridge, St. Louis, MO*, Oil on canvas mounted onto board, 26 x 32 in., Signed lower left, Private Collection

CATALOGUE DESIGN: RITA LASCARO

