



41: Jonas Lie *Morning on the River* (ca. 1911–12)

Barbara Dager Gallali

Jonas Lie's *Morning on the River* is a prime example of the artist's mature work, in which his love of depicting chill winter landscapes merged with his delight in strong, architectural forms. Here, in a finely calibrated composition, Lie juxtaposed the powerful bulk of the Brooklyn Bridge with the brilliant effects of early morning light as it reflects from the cloud- and steam-filled atmosphere above the icy waters of the East River. Lie's emerging penchant for the visual drama provided by the contrast of the man-made and the natural world did not go unnoticed and soon after its execution, the painting was widely recognized as one of the artist's most compelling productions. Writing in 1915, critic Lorinda Munson Bryant described her reaction to the painting: "We feel almost under the power of some titanic monster, only that the pale light creeping in lifts us as it follows the straight columns of smoke reaching skyward and glints the scuttling clouds with ever-varying tints."¹

Although views of New York docks and the Great East River Bridge, as the bridge was officially known, had constituted a significant subgenre in the American arts for decades, Lie astonished the critics when he first showed urban scenes such as this at New York's Folsom Galleries in 1911.² Reviewers noted that the exhibition marked a new stage in the young painter's artistic development. Though he had initially gained attention for his timeless depictions of the wild, frozen landscapes of his native Norway, Lie had suddenly turned to a contemporary and quintessentially American subject. The alteration in his art prompted one writer later to claim that his "brush gives new poetry to modern urban life and aspiration, and fresh power and significance to latter-day industrial effort."³

To be sure, *Morning on the River* and other paintings of this series may be characterized as expressions of the urban sublime, a mode in which the modern cityscape replaced the untamed wilderness in the visual catalogue of national progress as it was articulated in early twentieth-century American art. The Brooklyn Bridge—itsself a positive symbol of America's destiny from its inception—here becomes an even more formidable image, whose ponderous weight is contrasted with the metaphorical language of light that had long been central to the iconography of spiritual sublimity in Western art.⁴ Unlike many of his contemporaries, Lie eschewed what had become the familiar, picture-postcard rendition of this engineering marvel. Rather than exploiting the aesthetic potential of the elegant, rhythmic sweep of its cables or the full extent of its Gothic-manner towers, Lie presented the bridge from the vantage point of the dockside laborer, whose view is anchored by the dark, irregular forms of the sheds and machinery dwarfed by the hulking, radically foreshortened span. The painter's emphasis on the unglamorous aspects of the bridge and its surroundings betrays his close affiliation with the painters of the so-called Ashcan group, yet his focus on the structure of the city itself separates his art from the more anecdotal visions of such artists as John Sloan, George Luks, or Jerome Myers, who often concentrated on the denizens of the streets. Indeed, Lie's *Morning on the River*—so operatic in scale and concept—conveys the sense of the ineluctable energies that brought the nation to the dawn of its economic and industrial priority.

Morning on the River was an apt choice for display at the Rochester Memorial Art Gallery's inaugural exhibition. Its progressive mood corresponded with the regional optimism of upstate New York and simultaneously evoked associations linking Rochester's history with that of the glittering urban gem at the mouth of the Hudson to which it was connected by the Erie Canal. Rochester viewers undoubtedly appreciated the mutually beneficial relationship of the two cities, recognizing that just as New York City's rise to preeminence had depended partly on the transport of goods on the canal, their local economies had also flourished as a result. Purchased from the exhibition

Jonas Lie,
1880–1940
Morning on the River,
ca. 1911–12
Oil on canvas, 50 x 60 in.
Gift of Ruth Sibley Gade in
memory of James G. Averell,
13.6

with funds provided by Mrs. John A. Gade, the painting immediately entered the Gallery's collection. Under such circumstances the painting was destined to be a constant reminder of local progress, for its donor was the former Ruth Sibley, a member of one of Rochester's most illustrious families, whose presence in the area stretched back to the 1838 arrival of Hiram Sibley. Hiram Sibley's rise from humble origins to a position of great wealth reads like the archetypal American rags-to-riches narrative, particularly with regard to his role in founding the Western Union Company, a move that bears witness to his own ingenuity and belief in advancement through technological innovation. The Sibley fortune, as it passed from one generation to the next, was directed to a wide variety of philanthropic causes, including the cultural improvement of the Rochester community and, of course, the founding of the Memorial Art Gallery by Ruth Sibley Gade's aunt, Emily Sibley Watson.



ALSO IN THE MAG COLLECTION:

Jonas Lie,

1880–1940

On the Job for Victory, ca. 1917

Color lithograph, 30 x 38¾ in.

Gift of Dr. and Mrs. E. Henry

Keutmann, 73.170

classes at the National Academy of Design and the Art Students League while he worked by day as a textile designer, and citing the rewards of his talent and diligence by listing the honors he had accrued.

Thus, at the moment of the painting's purchase, both *Morning on the River* and its painter already possessed respected pedigrees rooted in the ideal of America's promise. The painting's aesthetic worth had been validated the previous year by its showing at the National Academy of Design, to which Lie had also been elected an associate member at the time. Ultimately, however, the painting's popularity rested in the universality of its message that declared in spiritual and material terms America's triumphant advancement.

Almost certainly, the well-publicized romance of Lie's foreign birth and climb to success reconfirmed the truth of the American dream as it was exemplified by the Sibley family and thereby augmented the painting's appeal.⁵ Noting Lie as one of New York's most promising artists, writers had enjoyed tracing and retracing the outlines of his biography, which eventually took on the shape of a grand, fairy-tale odyssey from the Old World to the New. Born in Norway to a Norwegian civil engineer and an American mother, Lie reportedly spent an idyllic childhood that closed abruptly with the death of his father. The twelve-year-old was then sent to Paris, where he lived with the famous novelist uncle for whom he was named. After a year, he rejoined his mother, who had since returned to the United States. Published accounts emphasized Lie's triumph over life's obstacles, glorifying his attendance at evening

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