

SEEING AMERICA: Jonas Lie's *Morning on the River*, ca. 1911-12

*M*orning on the River celebrates the energy and beauty of an urbanizing America in the early twentieth century.



Jonas Lie (1880 – 1940)
Morning on the River, ca. 1911-1912
Oil on canvas
Gift of Ruth Sibley Gade in memory of
James G. Averell, 13.6
Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery of the
University of Rochester

The Art

By 1912 New York scenes were an established genre in American art, and the Brooklyn Bridge was often portrayed as the twentieth-century symbol of America's prowess. Jonas Lie's dramatic portrayal juxtaposes the powerful bulk of the bridge with the brilliant morning light reflecting off the icy East River in a drama of humankind versus nature. The modern cityscape has replaced the untamed wilderness as a symbol of America's progress. One writer claimed upon seeing *Morning on the River* that Lie's "brush gives new poetry to modern urban life and aspiration, and fresh power and significance to latter-day industrial effort" (*Seeing America*, 169).

Jonas Lie was also influenced by New York artists of the **Ashcan School**, evident in his presentation of the bridge from the vantage point of laborers. The great bridge had more conventionally been celebrated for its powerful technological and aesthetic properties. In Lie's version, the dark irregular forms of the sheds and machinery of the workers present us with a distinctly unglamorous view of New York City. Yet Lie chooses to focus on the structure and mood of the scene rather than on individual persons, as other Ashcan artists might have done. While the bright orange in the center draws our eyes to human activity, humanity itself is here dwarfed by its own structures.



Glossary

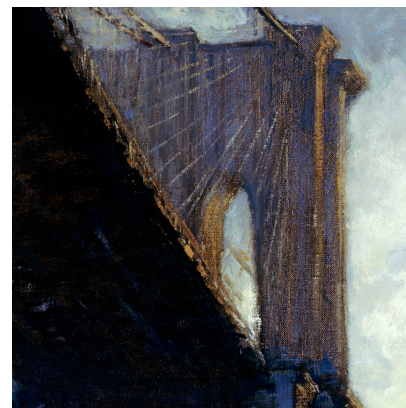
Ashcan School: Early 20th century group of American painters who portrayed scenes of urban life. Originally used by critics as a negative term, deriding their choice of subject matter.

Lie's brushstrokes, his cropping of the scene, and his interest in the spontaneity of the moment reflect the artist's affinity with the **Impressionists**. Lie fills more than half of the canvas with the reflection of a brilliant early morning light on the clouds, steam, and icy waters. One can picture him on a nearby pier quickly sketching the changing reflections as the morning sky brightens. The visible short brushstrokes add a sense of rhythm and the ceaseless motion of all things visible and invisible.

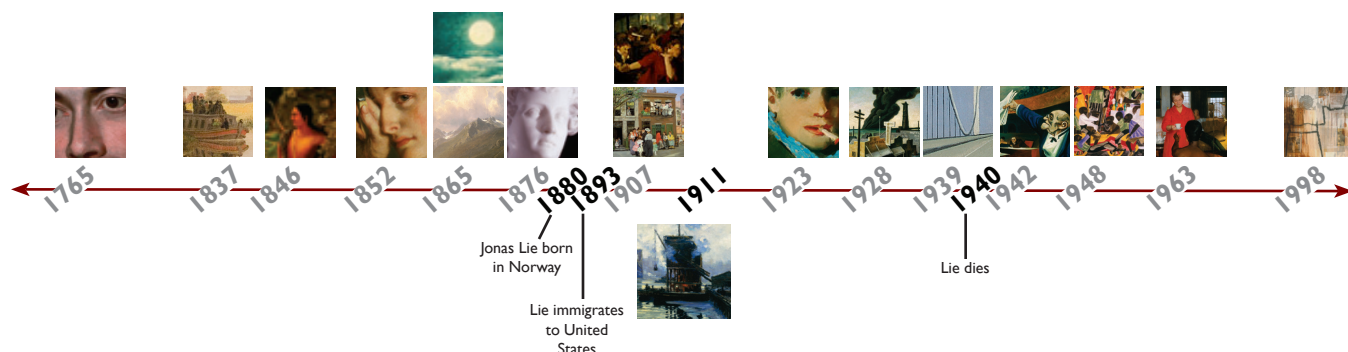
Jonas Lie was a master of composition and design. While the cityscape clearly marks a horizon line, it is the strong diagonal of the bridge that dominates the composition. The bridge is dramatically thrust from the front of the painting to the back, looming hugely above the water, its size and impact exaggerated by the artist's vantage point looking up from below. The dark bulk is balanced by the pier on the right, funneling us directly into the composition. In stark contrast to these dynamic diagonal lines are the vertical lines of the bridge pylons and rectangular shape of the workers' shed. A large expanse of white steam and clouds dominates the central third of the painting, where Lie has created a moment of serenity amidst the suspended chaos of the waterfront activity. It has been suggested that the Brooklyn Bridge is the "star actor in a drama of steam and sunlight." Lie's juxtaposition of the ponderous man-made structure with the evanescent brilliance of cloud, steam, water, and sky makes an apt metaphor for the dynamic contradictions of the City itself.

Glossary

Impressionism: Begun in 1870s among artists in France attempting to develop a technique to capture the fleeting impression of light on the scenes they were painting. The technique they developed of rapidly applying side-by-side small, often unmixed, touches of paint on the canvas was so effective that it soon became an international art movement.



The Artist



The "Painter of Light," Jonas Lie was born in Norway and exposed early to a world of boats, bridges, and sunlight on the water. After the death of his Norwegian father, he moved to New York City in 1893 with his American mother. Working by day as a textile designer and studying art in the evening, he personified the classic immigrant story of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America, in which hard work and aspiration paved the road to success. Lie is best known for his paintings of New York City and the New England coast, rendered with an eye for realistic detail but also full of emotional fervor and love of his new country.

Lie moved from New Jersey to Manhattan in 1910 and began incorporating urban motifs—streets, bridges, and urban toil—into his landscapes. In 1913 he traveled to Panama to observe the construction of the Panama Canal. The resulting paintings brought him renown, and he became a popular and outspoken figure in the New York art scene. After World War I, Lie's work became increasingly personal, his interests shifting to the coastal landscapes and forest and mountain scenes for which he is best known today. Among



Jonas Lie (1880 – 1940)

Evening, 1921

Oil on canvas

Gift of a group of subscribers, 22.38

Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester

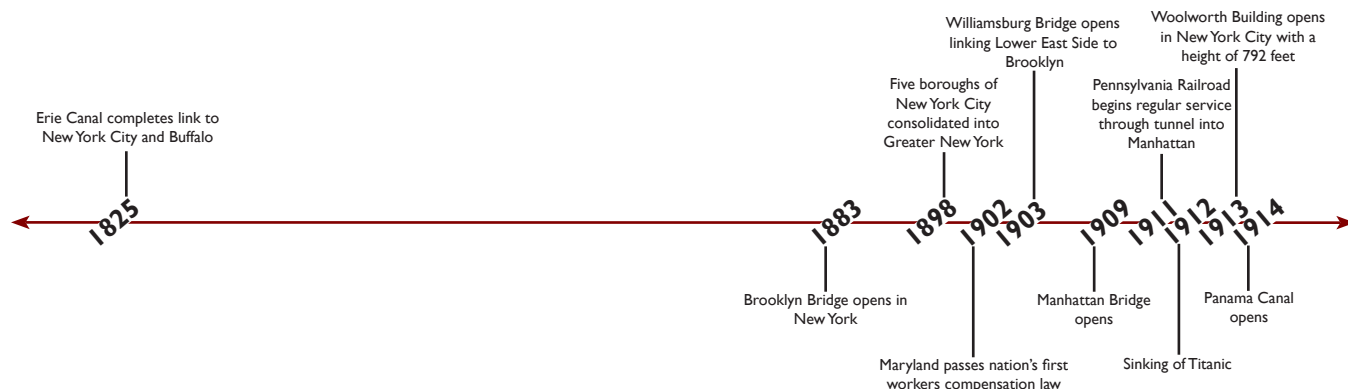
his favorite subjects were the lakes, birch groves, and distant mountain views he found in the Adirondack Mountains of New York State.

In 1919 Jonas Lie led a protest against the jury system of the **National Academy of Design** and with fellow pioneers of modern art George Bellows and Paul Manship established a separatist group. However, Lie remained a member of the National Academy and served as its president from 1934 to 1939.

Glossary

National Academy of Design: Founded in 1825, as a professional organization of artists, its annual exhibition in the 19th century was the premier venue for American artists to show their work.

America



Designed and built by John Augustus Roebling and his son, Washington Augustus Roebling, the Great East River Bridge opened in 1883 and was considered the eighth wonder of the world. Popularly known as the Brooklyn Bridge, it connected New York City Hall to the Brooklyn Navy Yard. In 1898 the two areas were joined to create Greater New York.



Unknown photographer
Brooklyn Bridge from Brooklyn Heights, 1883
 Half of stereoptic card

More than a mile long, the Brooklyn Bridge was then the longest bridge in the world, the first to be illuminated at night, and the first to use galvanized steel, or “iron rope,” in its main cables. Constructing such a bridge across the East River was dangerous work. Riggers, carpenters, masons, and other skilled laborers earned from \$1.75 to \$4.00 per day in an era when average pay was a dollar a day.

By 1900 New York City was America’s most important city. Linked to the West first by the Erie Canal (by way of the Hudson River) and then by the railroad, New York

City became the nation’s leading seaport. Grain and resources flowed to its factories. The finished goods were then shipped to ports throughout the world as well as far regions of the United States. Workers from throughout America and also Europe flocked to New York City to work in the new factories. Engineering marvels like the Brooklyn Bridge, the skyscraper, electric



Bonwell
Top of the Brooklyn Tower and Footbridge
Frank Leslie's Illustrated News, Summer 1877



R. Schwartz
View of Brooklyn Bridge from Manhattan, 1883
 Shugg Brothers, photoengravers

lights, indoor plumbing, and telephones added to the city's allure. Electric trolleys pushed the city limits outward. In 1900 New York City's population had grown to 3.5 million, the second largest city in the world; only London was larger.

See also Barbara Dayer Gallati, "Jonas Lie: Morning on the River (ca. 1911–12)," in Marjorie B. Searl, ed., *Seeing America: Painting and Sculpture from the Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2006), 168–70.



Francis Hopkinson Smith (1838 – 1915)

Brooklyn Bridge, ca. 1912

Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division

Washington, DC, USA

Courtesy of The Library of Congress

DLC/PP-1934:0119

Classroom Activities: Seeing America Through Artists' Eyes

Observing Detail

What clues in the painting tell you where and when this is?

How has Jonas Lie created the illusion of a real waterfront and bridge?

How does knowing the title, *Morning on the River*, shape the meaning in this painting?

What questions would you ask the artist?



Comparing and Contrasting

Compare two views of the Brooklyn Bridge: Alvin Langdon Coburn's photograph and Jonas Lie's painting. How does each use the elements of art: line, shape, light and shadow, composition and perspective? Compare the mood of the photograph and the painting.



Jonas Lie (1880 – 1940)

Morning on the River, ca. 1911-1912

Oil on canvas

Gift of Ruth Sibley Gade in memory of

James G. Averell, 13.6

Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery of the
University of Rochester



Alvin Langdon Coburn (1882 – 1966)

Brooklyn Bridge, ca. 1912

Gelatin silver print

Gift of Alvin Langdon Coburn

Courtesy of the George Eastman House, International Museum of
Photography and Film

Exploring the Context

Artists are keen observers and commentators on the world in which they live. Use *The Artist* and *America* timelines to consider the effect of American history and art history as reflected in their artwork. In what ways did the artist capture or reflect the events, mood and/or values of his/her America? In what ways did the artist continue or alter the American art traditions he/she would have seen?

Exploring the Context

Artists have a long history of romanticizing the American landscape. Compare Jonas Lie's "urban sublime" with 19th-century artists' celebrations of America's wilderness.



John Frederick Kensett (1816 – 1872)

A Showery Day, Lake George, ca. 1860

Oil on canvas

Marion Stratton Gould Fund, 74.29

Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester



Thomas Cole (1801 – 1848)

Genesee Scenery, 1846–1847

Oil on panel

Gift of Howard and Florence Merritt, 94.40

Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester



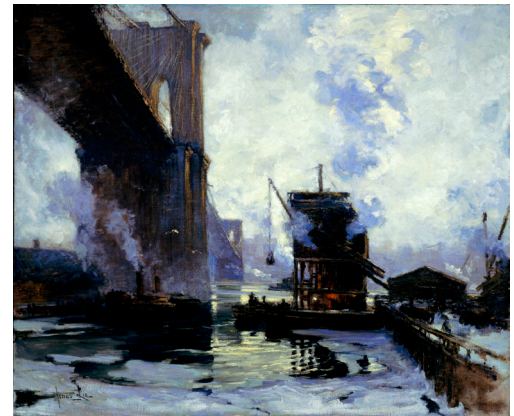
Albert Bierstadt (1830 – 1902)

The Sierras Near Lake Tahoe, California, 1865

Oil on panel

Clara and Edwin Strassenburgh Fund and Marion Stratton Gould Fund, 92.78

Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester



Jonas Lie (1880 – 1940)

Morning on the River, ca. 1911-1912

Oil on canvas

Gift of Ruth Sibley Gade in memory of James G. Averell, 13.6

Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester

Finding and Analyzing Point of View

American artists lived through periods of great technological change. Many paintings record the transformation of the national landscape while others capture Americans' excitement about the technology itself. What do you think was the point of view of each of these artists?



Stuart Davis (1894 – 1964)

Landscape with Garage Lights, 1931-1932

Oil on canvas

Marion Stratton Gould Fund, 51.3

Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester

Art © Estate of Stuart Davis/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY



George Harvey (1800 – 1878)

Pittsford on the Erie Canal - A Sultry Calm, 1837

Oil on panel

Gift of the Margaret M. McDonald Memorial Fund, 2005.33

Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester



Jonas Lie (1880 – 1940)

Morning on the River, ca. 1911-1912

Oil on canvas

Gift of Ruth Sibley Gade in memory of James G. Averell, 13.6

Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester



Ralston Crawford (1906 – 1978)

Whitstone Bridge, 1939-1940

Oil on canvas

Marion Stratton Gould Fund, 51.2

Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester

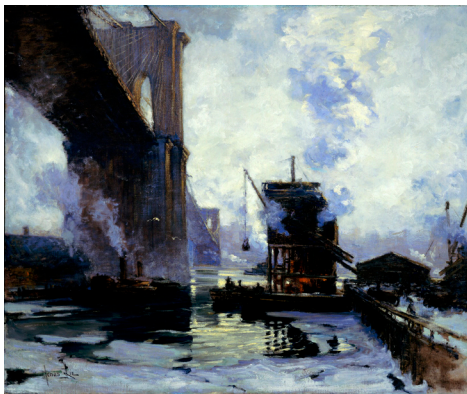
Ralston Crawford Estate

Reading and Interpreting Visual Language

Compare the visual imagery of Jonas Lie's *Morning on the River* with the verbal imagery of one of the poems located here: <http://www.endex.com/gf/buildings/bbridge/bbridgepoetry.htm>. Where have the artist and writer positioned themselves in relationship to the bridge—beneath, above, on the bridge? What point of view have the artist and the writer taken in their work? Discuss the impact of their point of view on the meaning of their work. How has the artist used color, line, shape and composition as well as representational objects to convey the message? How has the writer used color, rhythm and composition as well as specific imagery to convey meaning?

Reading and Interpreting Visual Language

In the 20th century, artists were fascinated with the technology of America's new cities. Compare Jonas Lie's view of the Brooklyn Bridge with those by fellow artists John Marin and Samuel Halpert.



Jonas Lie (1880 – 1940)

Morning on the River, ca. 1911-1912

Oil on canvas

Gift of Ruth Sibley Gade in memory of

James G. Averell, 13.6

Collection of the Memorial Art Gallery of the

University of Rochester



John Marin (1870 – 1953)

Brooklyn Bridge, ca. 1912

Watercolor and charcoal on paper

Alfred Steiglitz Collection, 1949 (49.70.105)

Metropolitan Museum of Art



Samuel Halpert (1884 – 1930)

Brooklyn Bridge, 1913

Oil on canvas

Gift of Mr. & Mrs. Benjamin Halpert, 54.2

Whitney Museum of American Art

We are grateful for the generous support of this project from the Anne and Vincent DeClue family and our School Program sponsors: Dominion, Bank of America, the Mary W. Clark Trust and two anonymous donors. Additional support is provided by Thomson Reuters, the Chester and Dorris Carlson Charitable Trust, Mr. and Mrs. Thomas F. Judson Jr., Rochester Gas and Electric Corporation, Hammer Packaging, the estate of Estelle B. Goldman and an anonymous donor for the McPherson Director of Education.



Jonas Lie
Morning on the River, circa 1911-1912

Gift of Ruth Sibley Gade in memory of James G. Averell, 13.6
Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester