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A Roaring Twenties Painting by John Willard Raught

1857 – 1931

The City of Scranton, 1927

By Richard Stanislaus



**Scranton Looking North, oil on canvas, 1927
Collection of Everhart Museum, Scranton, Pennsylvania**

The first quarter of the twentieth-century had passed, and the year 1927 held enthusiasm and promise for the citizens of Scranton, Pennsylvania. In a New Years' editorial, it was noted that an air of prosperity existed for the coming days as the city's basic industry---the mining of anthracite coal---had weathered a serious industrial strike in 1925 that continued through February, 1926. Once settled, the coal collieries started up and the outlook was good for steady work and prosperity, much to the relief of the citizens of northeastern Pennsylvania. It was estimated that a billion dollars was lost to the region because of the long duration of the strike.

It was also a year of important developments:

President Calvin Coolidge (1872-1933) issued the following terse statement to newspaper reporters, "I do not choose to run for President in 1928"; after nearly two years of secrecy the Ford Motor Company introduced its new Model A Ford; a young aviator named Charles A. Lindberg (1902-1974) made a solo flight from New York across the Atlantic to land in Paris among thousands of cheering French citizens; the Sultan of Swat, Babe Ruth (1895-1948) astonished baseball fans by hitting sixty home runs; Cecil B. DeMille (1881-1959) directed the biblical spectacle *King of Kings*; George Benjamin Luks (1866-1933) painted a view of Shenandoah, Pennsylvania; and astronomers peering into the remote inky depths of celestial space found that there were indeed other galaxies besides the Milky Way, home of mankind.

Scranton and much of the country at large was experiencing the golden glow of Coolidge prosperity that continued throughout the decade. Historian Charles A. Beard summarized the era as *The Rise of American Civilization*. No wonder the editor of the *Scranton Republican* stated with enthusiasm: "The New Year opens with all Northeastern Pennsylvanians well equipped for its campaign for the factors of Prosperity!" ¹

Also, during the year 1927 local artist John Willard Raught painted an urban scene of the city of Scranton. He was a citizen of particular note, perhaps more than anyone might have realized or thought at the time, and this quiet, retiring landscape artist was planning a major painting of the city of Scranton at his fourth-floor studio in the Scranton Real Estate Building at 316 North Washington Avenue.

An early surviving biography on Raught was written by Technical High School student Ida E. Twordowski in 1922. In her essay, she summarized his background as it was related to her in an interview with the artist. She wrote:

"John Willard Raught, the landscape and portrait painter, is a citizen of Dunmore and was born in that borough. After receiving a common school education he was compelled by force of circumstances to enter a business office and for eight years was employed as a telegrapher by one of the big coal companies. His desire to become an artist was so strong, however, that he devoted every possible moment to drawing and by the time he was able to realize his dream of going to New York City for instruction his hand and eye were sufficiently trained to admit him to the Schools of the National Academy of Design on a drawing from the plaster cast without any coaching from an art teacher. After nearly five years study in New York he sailed for Paris, the Mecca of all art

students and entered the Academie Julian where for two years he worked under the instruction of Gustave Boulanger and Jules LeFebvre. By that time he was pretty well equipped from a technical standpoint and started out to put his knowledge to the test in the difficult line of landscape painting.” 2

The *City of Scranton* painting attracted the attention of reporter Lucia E. Hammond who wrote an article about it, *John Willard Raught Sees New Beauty and Glory As He Begins Painting City*. She visited the painter’s studio and was clearly impressed at first sight of the painting, which was displayed on a large wooden easel. According to Hammond, “On his easel stood a big canvas, five feet long and three feet wide. It dominated the room. And it was Scranton. At its base lay his palette, its colors in small neat piles, ready for the next day.” 3

The journalist hints at the location from which the painter found the vantage point to compose his city panorama. She wrote:

Somehow Mr. Raught had caught the breathless wonder of the view which bursts upon one as he rounds a turn at the edge of Connell Park on East Mountain. It shows a different Scranton than that one which rubs elbows with us daily with its hard-paved streets and traffic jams and clang of street cars. From that vantage point Scranton is blended into a harmonious whole, wherein there is no discord nor ugliness, and where the smoke from the stacks and engines and chimneys is transformed into a fiery mist, rising like incense to an unknown god. 4

Interviewer Hammond noted Raught’s artistic abilities in composing landscapes from sketches and studies, and also from memory. In referring to the large Scranton canvas, she noted: “Mr. Raught paints almost entirely from memory. His Scranton on which he is now working, is only being done after he has completed 10 sketches or studies, each really a picture in itself. His memory is almost photographic in its regard for detail.” 5

Certainly, Raught had uncanny perception in observing and identifying landscape details at a great distance. Such was the case when he composed the panorama of the city of Scranton. In a sense, he assumed a vantage point from which to survey all that lay before him, and identified and extracted those details that would be of paramount importance to his composition. This ability of having almost telescopic-perception was gained through years of landscape painting in the country sides of France and America under natural light.

Raught’s large painting of the city of Scranton also received attention from the editor of the *Scranton Republican* who extolled the beauty and importance of the painting in an editorial titled, *Scranton in High Art*. He wrote: “It is interesting to Scranton artistic and Scranton civic to note that a large picture of this city, painted by our distinguished fellow-citizen, Mr. John Willard Raught, is on display in the window of Kuck and Sellers, North Washington Avenue.” 6

Raught’s urban landscape measuring five feet in width by three feet in height and accomplished in oil pigment on canvas, is perhaps the largest composition attempted by the painter. Upon completion of the city-view, Raught formally signed and dated it 1927. Documentation has not surfaced on Raught’s inspiration for undertaking such a

large and time-consuming project. Was it a painting commission and if so, by whom? Or was it an independent project realized and brought to fruition by the painter in his seventieth year? Was a sketch of the city view made en plein air that stimulated inspiration to continue with a larger composition? Perhaps the painter conceived and accomplished the work as a preparatory exercise in preparing for an exhibition at the National Academy of Design in which large format works would be accepted and judged by one's peers. If so, the painting was a backward glance towards his student days of competition at the Academie Julian in Paris, France. Whatever reason prompted the project, knowledge of it has been lost, just as documentation of Raught's artistic activity has been difficult to find. 7

The *Scranton Republican* editor continued to express his admiration for Raught's urban view of Scranton, writing that "...the character of this region, natural and industrial, is depicted on the canvas -The Mountains, the steep hillsides, rocky ledges, the laurels and the rough roads leading down to a great city..." 8

Scranton, Pennsylvania was indeed a great city in 1927. There was a special section covering business, coal mining, finance, manufacturing, and railroad activities in the *Scranton Times*, titled *Scranton's Business – Industrial Section*. There was much to write about for by 1927, the city's population approximated 158,883 and, combined with Dunmore, (a nearby borough) amounted in aggregate to 175,000. The city was located in the midst of a country of magnificent scenic beauty, abounding in mountain lakes and streams. It was also a railroad hub with five steam railroads, two inter-urban electric lines, and a trolley system connecting the nearby towns and coal mine patches.

Anthracite coal-mining had developed as a primary industry giving employment to some 38,000 men and boys within Lackawanna County. With the mining, processing and shipping of coal came subsidiary industries such as mining machinery, locomotives, mining equipment, tools and steel rails. There were approximately 300 manufacturing firms and plants engaged in making hundreds of articles that were not only sold locally, but shipped to world markets. Scranton was second in the United States in silk manufacturing, and was an important center for the manufacture of such products as: abrasive wheels, automobile trucks, boilers, bolts, bread, engines, furnaces, horse shoes, lace curtains, lithographing supplies, mine cars, nuts, pianos, proprietary medicines, rugs, scientific glass instruments, shoes, soap, steam pumps, stoves, tobacco, toilet articles, trading stamps, typewriters, wagons, whet stones, and white lead. 9

Such were the diverse manufacturing activities and varied products produced by the citizens of Scranton and nearby communities. It was all part of a greater manufacturing and technological revolution in the United States manifested by new inventions, and the technology with which to manufacture them. And, productivity fostered prosperity.

Scranton was also a center of education-by-mail, as the home of the International Correspondence Schools (ICS). During the nineteen-twenties, more than 2,750,000 students were enrolled in ICS courses from all walks of life and cities, and countries far and wide.

Raught was assuredly cognizant of Scranton's importance. He conveyed some details of its industrial status in his urban painting that were noted in an interview with the artist: "...A warm haze covers the city and distant mountains and the smoke from the factories, the spirit of active industry, floats lazily in the still air – the spirit of Scranton is there." 10

Upon completion of his large urban landscape, Raught displayed it in his annual studio exhibition of 1928 at the Scranton Real Estate Building. He maintained two rooms on the fourth-floor, numbers 418-419, and advised visitors "to take the elevator". His spring exhibit ran from April 23rd to April 28th and could be viewed between 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. The painting was listed as number 1 in his exhibit check-list, but a price was not printed. A curious patron would have had to engage the artist in order to know the asking price. An air of mystery was therefore created around the painting, and Raught probably considered it important and worthy of a high asking price. He offered a description of it in the exhibit check list:

The painting that will attract the most attention this year is the large canvas "The City of Scranton". This picture gives with fidelity the topographical characteristics of the region. Mountains, steep hillsides, rocks and the great sweep of the valley, with the late afternoon sunlight throwing its golden glow over the central city and a portion of South Scranton. 11

City views are not easy to evaluate, compose, and paint. A *Scranton Republican* editor commented on some of the important pictorial details that Raught included in his urban composition. He wrote:

The value of the picture lies partly in that the character of this region, natural and industrial, is depicted on the canvas – The mountains, the steep hillsides, rocky ledges, the laurels and the rough roads leading down to a great city, with its prominent buildings easily distinguishable, such as the Lackawanna Station, the Hotel Casey, the Union National Bank Building, the Times Building... 12

A myriad of details composed the important man-made structures that lay before Raught's eyes, greatly diminished in size, and softened by distance. Curiously, the editor did not mention the obvious outlines of two anthracite coal colliery buildings that the painter included in the middle ground and to the left of his composition. The structures are tentatively identified as the Baker Breaker and the (new) Diamond Breaker. Both coal processing plants were owned and operated by the Glen Alden Coal Company. The industrial structures once symbolized Scranton's rise to coal-mining supremacy since the city was literally built upon the richest deposits of anthracite coal in the world. 13

In 1929 Everhart Museum Director, R. N. Davis solicited for the museum collection Raught's large painting of the city of Scranton. In a letter to the *Scranton Republican* newspaper editor, he wrote,

I am much pleased with your editorial this morning on the picture of Scranton painted by John Willard Raught. I viewed this painting in Mr. Raught's studio some weeks ago and immediately decided it should be the first painting to be placed in our permanent

collection in the art gallery of the new museum. The price of the painting is a thousand dollars and a hundred dollars additional for a suitable frame. 14

Director Davis viewed the urban scene as an important work by a Scranton artist, and considered the local museum an appropriate home for it. In his public solicitation for the painting, Davis concluded his letter, asking, "Again, referring to the picture of Scranton—who is to honor himself by contributing this picture?" 15

A public-spirited citizen of Scranton did not step up to purchase the landscape from Raught for donation to the Everhart Museum. The painting remained at his studio until his death in January, 1931. Thereafter, the painting was inherited by the painter's sister Anna and her husband, Joseph Jeffrey. They donated it to the Everhart Museum in 1931 as part of the Raught Memorial Room. At that time, the painting was titled, *Scranton, Looking North*.



Photo courtesy of Richard Stanislaus

In painting this large, formal work representing the city of Scranton, Raught acknowledged the importance the city had upon his own career, as well as the high regard he held for the metropolis. Trained and experienced in the art of creating images with oil pigment on canvas, Raught painted a composition in the form of a city panorama. To conceive and execute such a view required aesthetic creativity, and a high level of technical expertise. He was the master of his medium. As a work of art,

the city image is fixed in time, and ultimately became an artistic gift from the painter to the citizens of Scranton. Perhaps his intention was to show that Scranton was worthy of artistic consideration and creation. Time, however was passing for Raught in 1927. He acknowledged his earthly condition in a newspaper essay when he wrote, "The old saying that, 'Art is long and life is short' is painfully true." The painter and his generation have long passed, but the city landscape has been preserved at the Everhart Museum for future generations to study and appreciate. 16

In the exhibition brochure for his 1928 annual studio exhibition, the following title is listed as Number 6. *Study for Scranton Picture* with an asking price of \$150.00. It is unknown who purchased the painting and the subsequent history of ownership is uncertain. Over ninety years have passed since the exhibit, and the small urban scene, when sold, literally vanished. It was a mystery in local art history that the work remained unknown, but finally reappeared again, through a most circuitous route. A Princeton, New Jersey, antiques dealer purchased it at an estate sale near Bernardsville, New Jersey.

It was brought to the attention of an old-time Pennsylvania collector who acquired it. Through an informal conversation with a Scranton attorney, the work was brought to the attention of this author, who consequently met the collector. Bartering ensued, and the painting was acquired. Although it was found to be in poor condition and missing both frame and exhibit label, it has since been restored and reframed. A provenance was not available: hence, documentation of ownership cannot be traced, and the study remains a problem in art history. In fact, the discovery of Raught's study of the city of Scranton is in some ways comparable to the tale of the *Maltese Falcon*.

When Raught completed his smaller study of Scranton, he signed and dated it, *John Willard Raught, 1927, Study*. Since the painter was trained in academic procedures, his decision to designate the work, *study*, is significant. The study was most certainly accomplished on-site since the canvas is small and portable. In executing it, Raught worked at gathering important visual facts of the vast urban scene that was spread out before him. Upon closer inspection of the study's surface, one notices that the brush strokes are rapidly applied in thin layers of colors. The composition is developed on a middle ground of city buildings in downtown Scranton, seen as cube-like forms with light colors contrasted against darks. The distant hillsides appear almost feminine in contour with cumulus clouds floating in a soft blue sky. As a composition, it gives the appearance of being cubist in style. Some of the painted structures in the study are recognizable as Scranton city landmarks, for example: the Hotel Casey, the Lackawanna Station, Sacred Heart Church, the Scranton Estate, the Times Building and the Union National Bank.

In composing his study, Raught's main concern was to gather as many facts of the city landscape that lay before him. He had to perceive a multitude of forms, natural, man-made and all altered by distance and changing light. Then he had to interpret it all through brushed pigment and painterly forms. A contemporary of Raught's, painter Daniel Burleigh Parkhurst, notes the importance of a study, writing, "In a study you put

in everything which may be valuable. ...The study is the storehouse of facts to the painter. ...No good painting was ever made without preliminary studies." 17

Raught was well trained in the applications and principles of an Academy of Art, and he had painted landscapes for many years. He instinctively practiced the wise counsel offered from his fellow painter, Parkhurst, in his smaller study for the City of Scranton. It is also possible that Raught took photographs of the Scranton landscape in order to have additional reference material. Raught utilized the camera as a fact-gathering tool, as he explained in a newspaper essay of 1927: ...“After an early breakfast I start out with a light heart, a sketchbook in my pocket and a camera for baggage.” “I have sufficient time to wander around, to take half a dozen photographs and see, not only my old haunts but also my friends in the neighborhood.” 18

Creating urban views was Raught’s modus operandi during his Scranton period, from 1914 through 1927. He noted the importance of this subject in an article announcing his spring annual exhibition in 1924: “Elmhurst and Nay Aug,” says Mr. Raught, “can always be depended upon to furnish their quota of pleasing canvases, while the city itself is filled with inexhaustible subjects, waiting patiently for the landscape painter to come and record them on canvas.” 19

Raught’s large views of Scranton were most certainly based upon smaller on-site sketches, or studies, that were usually one quarter the size of his formal compositions. All acknowledged Scranton’s’ growth and prominence following the end of the First World War, as well as the financial boom of the nineteen-twenties. He continued to paint Scranton views through 1927, but city-views do not appear in his landscape productions after that date.

During this final period of activity, Raught’s career further developed through landscape production, portrait commissions, and annual studio spring exhibitions. He was also recognized by the local press as an essayist of note, and his essays were published by the *Scranton Times* and the *Scranton Republican*, both local newspapers. This brought his name to the reading public of Scranton. He could count prominent Scranton citizens in friendship and patronage, and his small oil sketches executed at pastoral sites in the countryside at Nay Aug, Elmhurst and Moscow found many patrons. He painted prominent citizens of northeastern Pennsylvania and earned their appreciation through his ability to produce a pleasing image. In time, he became Scranton’s artist and was subsequently held in high esteem and respect.

Due to varied circumstances of patronage, recognition by the local press, studio exhibits, portrait commissions, and the fact that Scranton was in its ascendancy as the metropolis of northeastern Pennsylvania, Raught found support for his career. It developed along with the fortunes of Scranton and its citizens. Many reaped the benefits of prosperity during the “Golden Glow” of President Calvin Coolidge’s administration.

The painter maintained a schedule that included a painting season starting in late spring, continuing through the summer and ending in autumn as he painted landscapes in the nearby countryside. It was during the winter season that he continued with

projects such as portraits and large formal landscape compositions. With his studio in downtown Scranton, he became a frequent presence in his business suit, pompadour, and pince-nez glasses, as he rubbed shoulders with prominent as well as humble citizens. In time, many came to admire and respect him as Scranton's artist. As a landscape practitioner of more than forty years, he achieved modest success in Scranton-the metropolitan city of northeastern Pennsylvania, once proudly called-*The Anthracite Coal Capital of the World*.

- 1 *For a Happy 1927*, Scranton Republican, January 1, 1927, p. 8.
- 2 *John Willard Raught*, Ida E. Twordowski, Tech Monthly, Volume 12, May, 1922, pp.1, 6, 20. In Raught files, Everhart Museum, Nay Aug Park, Scranton, Pennsylvania.
- 3 Lucia F. Hammond, *John Willard Raught Sees New Beauty and Glory As He Begins Painting City*, unidentified, undated Scranton, Pennsylvania newspaper article. In Raught files, Everhart Museum, Nay Aug Park, Scranton, Pennsylvania. (Hereafter cited as Hammond).
- 4 Hammond.
- 5 Hammond
- 6 *Scranton in High Art*, Scranton Republican, Wednesday, 10 April 1929, p. 8, (Hereafter cited as Barrett).
- 7 Raught may have conceived the idea of so grand a project in preparation for an Academy submission and exhibition at the National Academy of Design, New York City. The urban landscape would have been judged by Raught's peers. The work however was exhibited locally and thereafter gifted to the Everhart Museum in 1931 by Raught's brother-in-law and sister, Joseph and Anna Raught-Jeffrey. It has been on exhibit at the museum ever since.
- 8 Barrett
- 9 Polk's Scranton [Pennsylvania] City Directory, Volume 23, Philadelphia, R.L. Polk & Co. Publishers, 1927.
- 10 Hammond.
- 11 *Exhibition of Paintings by John Willard Raught, April 23rd to April 28th, 1928, Scranton Real Estate Building, 316 Washington Avenue, Scranton, Pa.* Exhibition checklist in Raught files, Everhart Museum, Nay Aug Park, Scranton, Pennsylvania.
- 12 Barrett.
- 13 Commonwealth of Pennsylvania: Report of the Department of Mines Part I- Anthracite 1927-1928 [Harrisburg, Pennsylvania] pg. 61.
- 14 R.N. Davis, *The Raught Painting*, Scranton Republican, 15 April 1929, p. 8. (Hereafter cited as Davis).
- 15 Davis.
- 16 John Willard Raught, *Art-Its Joys and Its Handicaps*, Scranton Republican, 1 April 1929, p. 8.
- 17 Daniel Burleigh Parkhurst, *The Painter in Oil: A Complete Treatise on the Principles and Techniques Necessary to the Painting of Pictures in Oil Colors*, Boston: Lothrop, Lee & Shepard, 1898, pp. 254-256.
- 18 John Willard Raught, *Old Haunts Revisited*, Scranton Republican, 28 March 1927, p. 8.
- 19 *Personal and Pertinent*, Scranton Times, 26 April 1924, p. 8.

For further information, see:

Frederick Lewis Allen, *Only Yesterday: An informal history of the Nineteen-Twenties*, Harper & Brothers, publishers, New York, 1931.

Robert J. Arthur, *Scranton Known as Metropolis of Hard Coal Region*, Scranton Republican, May 28, 1927, Section B, pp. 11, 14, 15.

Samuel Taylor Moore, *The America of the Busy Towns II. Scranton*, The Independent, Volume 114, No. 3894, January, 1925, p.82.

William Preston Slosson, *The Great Crusade and After 1914-1928: A History of American Life*, Volume XII, New York, The Macmillan Company, 1930.

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Ibid. *Industrial Landscapes: The Anthracite Coal Breaker Paintings of John Willard Raught [1857-1931]*, The Lackawanna Historical Society Journal, Volume 23, No. 1, Spring 1992, pp. 4-5.

Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow, Scranton Republican, May 28, 1927, p. 8, [John E. Barrett, editor].

Clifford M. Zierer, *Scranton as an Urban Community*, Geographical Review, [New York], 1927, pp. 415-428.