

An impressionist painting of a landscape. In the foreground, a dirt path leads from the bottom right towards the center. Several figures in late 19th-century attire are walking along the path. To the right, a large, multi-story house with a prominent dark roof and a red chimney stands on a slight rise. The background shows a town or village nestled in a valley, with rolling hills and mountains in the distance under a soft, hazy sky. The overall style is characteristic of American Impressionism, with visible brushstrokes and a focus on light and atmosphere.

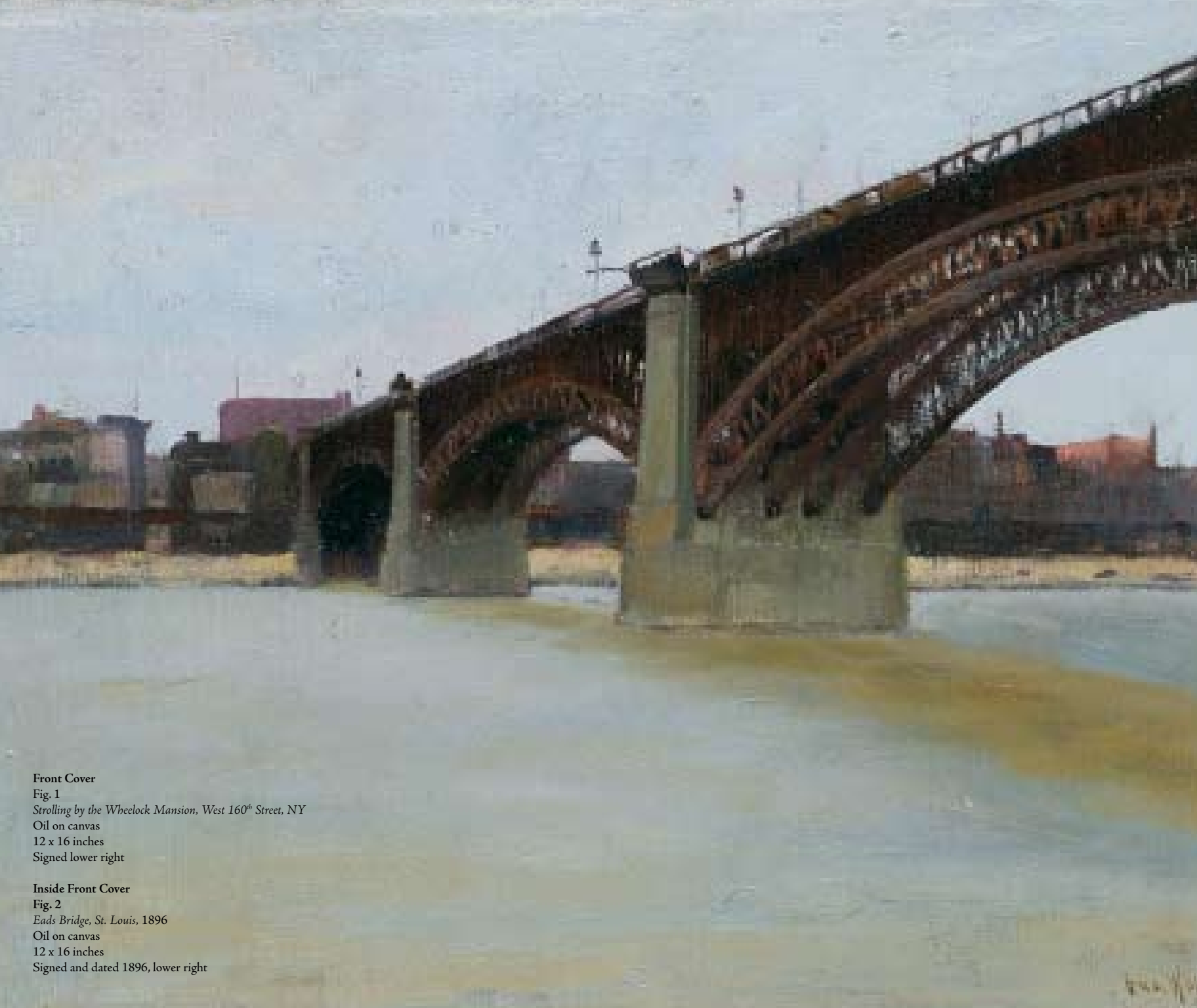
# *Brought to Light*

**GUSTAVE WOLFF (1863-1935)**

**Brilliant American Impressionist Rediscovered**



Hawthorne Fine Art, LLC



**Front Cover**

**Fig. 1**

*Strolling by the Wheelock Mansion, West 160<sup>th</sup> Street, NY*

Oil on canvas

12 x 16 inches

Signed lower right

**Inside Front Cover**

**Fig. 2**

*Eads Bridge, St. Louis, 1896*

Oil on canvas

12 x 16 inches

Signed and dated 1896, lower right

# *Brought to Light*

GUSTAVE WOLFF (1863-1935)

Brilliant American Impressionist Rediscovered

April 7 - May 27, 2006

Over 35 works on view

Essay by: Marshall N. Price

Foreword by: Jennifer C. Krieger

Edited by: Rebecca M. Collins



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Fig. 3  
*Wildflowers Along a Path*  
Oil on canvas  
16 x 12 inches  
Signed lower right

## FOREWARD

Mark Twain once mused, “What is there that confers the noblest delight? What is that which swells a man’s breast with pride above that which any other experience can bring to him? Discovery! To know that you are walking where none others have walked; that you are beholding what human eye has not seen before; that you are breathing a virgin atmosphere. To find a new planet, to invent a new hinge, to find a way to make the lightning carry your messages. To be the first - that is the idea.” It is with this sense of elated discovery that we present this group of beautiful paintings by Gustave Wolff. Having greatly admired the few works I had seen by this artist, I was delighted to have the opportunity to mount a large-scale exhibition of a remarkable hidden trove. Wolff was an artist of tremendous depth and range, creating scenes as real as they are poetical. His lessons under Paul Cornoyer and the influence of William Merritt Chase only helped to bring out the best of his underlying vision, his ability to see the supramundane in the mundane. With equal poise, he captures the light and dark moods of urban Manhattan and St. Louis as well as the warm, radiant expanse of wholesome country landscapes.

I am most grateful to Marshall Price for writing a brilliant essay. He transports us easefully back to the artist’s time and eloquently shares with us Wolff’s great triumphs and experiences. I am also grateful to Dr. William H. Gerdtz for sharing his extensive knowledge and library of primary sources. I would also like to recognize the efforts of Eric J. Lutz, Assistant Curator of Prints, Drawings, and Photographs at the St. Louis Art Museum, for helping us to obtain important information and materials, vital in assembling Wolff’s biography. This exhibition would not have been possible without the involvement of the artist’s descendants and their desire to accord Wolff the recognition he deserves. Sincere thanks to Rebecca Collins, my right-hand lady, for her invaluable and unrelenting help; Mark Davis for supplying us with masterful frames; Chelsea Restoration for doing such an excellent job cleaning and mounting these paintings on stretchers; Paola Canepa from [www.paoladesign.com](http://www.paoladesign.com) for her elegant design work; Deborah Albanese of Meridian Printing for the superb quality of this catalogue; and Tim Pyle for his special talents in art photography. I would also like to extend my utmost gratitude to those individuals who generously supported my dream to open this gallery.

-Jennifer Krieger

## ESSAY

*And there was Wolff, half Norseman he,  
Broad-shouldered and bog of arm,  
Who could sling a barrel of paint around  
With a Thor's stroke, great and calm,  
And land it as gently as a new-born snow,  
Rose-tinted and full of charm.*

- Frederick Oakes Sylvester<sup>1</sup>

Gustave Wolff (1863 – 1935) was born in Berlin, Germany and immigrated with his family to the United States at the age of three, settling in St. Louis, a destination for many German immigrants. It was a propitious time for art in St. Louis as Washington University had recently added drawing classes to its curriculum and by 1879 Halsey C. Ives had established the St. Louis School of Fine Arts, a special section of the Art Department of the University. Furthermore, there were a growing number of collectors in the city and, in turn, a growing movement to establish an art museum. St. Louis collectors tended to favor the landscapes of the Dutch Hague School and the French Barbizon artists, and these were some of the earliest examples of contemporary art exhibited in the city.<sup>1</sup> This predilection for the tonal landscapes of the French and Dutch schools strongly shaped the development of local landscape painters. It was in this burgeoning artistic environment that Gustave Wolff came of age.

Wolff was enrolled for a time at the St. Louis School of Fine Arts and was a student of Paul Cornoyer, F. Humphrey Woolrych, and Frederick Oakes Sylvester. Little more than this is known about his schooling, and it is reasonable to assume that he was essentially an autodidact.<sup>2</sup> He quickly became active in the St. Louis art scene, however, and was invited to join the St. Louis Artists' Guild. This was the dominant arts organization in the city and provided a forum in which both fine and performing artists could display their talents. The organization held regular exhibitions, and Wolff was a frequent exhibitor, drawing auspicious attention as early as 1901: "In the work of a young man named Wolff there is a breath of freedom and an independence of treatment that are refreshing. His painting is poetical and yet his touch is realistic. In two of his canvases in which there appear women, in the fields he has no little of the feeling of the Barbizon school, and I have

seen high priced pictures by famous Frenchmen that did not compare with them for general effect."<sup>3</sup>

The two other significant arts organizations in St. Louis were the Society of Western Artists, with branches in many of the major cities west of the Mississippi, and the Two-By-Four Club, a smaller exhibition group whose name referred to the maximum size of the paintings exhibited. Each also held regular exhibitions, and while the Two-By-Four Club was a local St. Louis organization, the Society of Western Artists held exhibitions in each of the cities that had a branch, disseminating paintings by artists that would otherwise perhaps not have been seen by the local communities.<sup>4</sup> Wolff exhibited with each organization, the criticism of his work growing more positive with each passing year. Charles Kurtz, reviewing the Guild's 1902 exhibition, praised the landscapes by Wolff: "Gustave Wolff exhibits several landscapes of excellent quality. The most artistic of these in the opinion of the writer is 'Early Spring'... There is a luminous gray sky characteristic of an April day. The composition is unconventional and natural, yet agreeable. The color is harmonious throughout."<sup>5</sup>

1904 was a banner year for St. Louis. The Louisiana Purchase Exposition of that year invigorated the city's arts community. It was so successful for St. Louis artists, who had made a strong showing at the expo, that the following year the Artists' Guild organized an exhibit of Missouri art at the Lewis and Clark Exposition in Portland, Oregon. George Zolnay acted as the Chairman of the Art Commission, and the committee was composed of Halsey C. Ives, Frederick O. Sylvester, Frederick L. Stoddard, and Montrose P. McArdle. Missouri was the only state at the exposition to have a gallery dedicated to its artists, a point that was underscored in the accompanying catalog. All of the major St. Louis artists exhibited, and Wolff was one of the most conspicuous with seven paintings. His standing among the St. Louis art community had become indisputable by then, as indicated in the accompanying biography in the catalogue: "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."<sup>6</sup>





Fig. 4  
*Approaching the Wheelock Mansion, West 160<sup>th</sup> Street, NY*  
 Oil on canvas  
 16 x 12 inches  
 Signed lower right

By 1906 Wolff had established himself as one of the foremost landscape painters in St. Louis. In an extensive review of an exhibition of St. Louis artists at the Noonan & Kocian Galleries, the major commercial art gallery in the city at that time, critic Maurice Goodwin wrote, “Wolff has astonished me more than any other man in St. Louis. I shall not be surprised at anything he may achieve.”<sup>7</sup> It was the modest and poetic scenes in which the artist captures the fading glow of a winter sunset, such as *Close of Day* (fig. 6), that brought the attention of the St. Louis critics. Wolff was also captivated by one of the



Fig. 5  
*Early Autumn, Riverside Park, NY*  
 Oil on board  
 12 x 8 inches  
 Signed lower right

most distinguished landmarks of his hometown, Eads Bridge, a common subject for artists of that city. As his mentor Paul Cornoyer had painted the famous landmark that straddles the Mississippi River, Wolff depicted numerous views of the iron truss structure. His 1896 painting, *Eads Bridge, St. Louis, Mo.* (fig. 2), is a studied composition showing the entire expanse of the bridge, not unlike those painted by Cornoyer. A later depiction, however, shows a much different approach. *Under Eads Bridge*, 1900 (fig. 12) was likely painted from a boat under the second span of the three-span bridge. The bridge itself,

however, is not the focus of his interest. Instead, Wolff has captured the mighty river with a fluidity of brushstroke that is reminiscent of John Singer Sargent.

To further his training, Wolff traveled to Holland. This was a logical choice of location given the abundance of Dutch painting he had seen in St. Louis and the general propensity for Hague School-inspired work there. *Late Afternoon Promenade* (fig. 9) is one of a series Wolff painted depicting strollers along the Singel Canal in Amsterdam with the broad dome of the Ronde Lutherse Kerk dominating the background. Wolff was captivated by both the urban and rural landscape of Holland and this work shows the characteristic gray sky of the Netherlands. An exhibition of his Dutch scenes in St. Louis, prompted one critic to write, “When his first work came back from Holland for exhibition, *The Mirror* had occasion to note that the painter seemed a little bewildered by the Netherlands landscape, of great expanses beneath heavy skies, and indeed, was rather overwhelmed by Dutch painting but was making progress in technical proficiency.”<sup>8</sup>

After his return to St. Louis, Wolff’s reputation only increased. A testament of this recognition was a depiction of the artist in “Kindly Caricatures,” a profile of prominent St. Louisians in the weekly newspaper *The Mirror*. “His paintings at their most veristic have a glamour, in a certain wistful key. His ‘atmosphere’ is romantic, with probably a touch of Teutonic philosophizing. Wolff’s landscapes are as strong, as tender, as deeply seen as those of any American painter. He is one of this city’s few really big men.”<sup>9</sup> St. Louis,



Fig. 6  
*Close of Day*  
 Oil on canvas  
 12 x 16 inches  
 Signed lower right



Fig. 7  
*Sunlit Path*  
 Oil on board  
 8 x 12 inches  
 Signed lower right

however, ultimately proved too provincial for him and he headed to New York, evidently in search of a greater audience for his work. His departure from his hometown was announced in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, "Artist Believes That He Will Find Wider Field for Work in East."<sup>10</sup>

Wolff's New York paintings are characterized by a lightened palette and a much more impressionistic brushstroke. His subject matter varied from the bucolic scenes of city parks and undeveloped open spaces to the gritty docks of downtown Manhattan. In the National Academy of Design's winter annual exhibition of 1912 he exhibited a St. Louis scene, a larger version of *Approach to Eads Bridge* (fig. 11). Four years later, his submission to the Academy's annual was *Manhattan Docks*. At the time, he was living on West 162<sup>nd</sup> Street and became enchanted with the pastoral views of upper Manhattan. The towering pier of High Bridge from the embankment below replaced Eads Bridge as subject matter in works such as *High Bridge, NY* (fig. 8). In other works, strollers along the canals of Amsterdam were now replaced by city residents on a leisurely excursion along the expansive boulevards of the northern end of Manhattan.

*Washington Heights Bridge, NY* (fig. 10), *Strolling by the Wheelock Mansion, West 160<sup>th</sup> Street, NY* (fig. 1), and *Early Autumn, Riverside Park, NY* (fig. 5) all exhibit this shift toward impressionism in Wolff's work and suggest the influence of William Merritt Chase in both palette and touch. Wolff would have been familiar with the work of Chase, who not only previously had a studio in St. Louis, but also exhibited with the Society of Western Artists, and who was, by the time of Wolff's arrival in New York, perhaps the leading American artist. In *Approaching the Wheelock Mansion, West 160<sup>th</sup> Street, NY* (fig. 4) and *Strolling by the Wheelock Mansion, West 160<sup>th</sup> Street, NY* (fig. 1) the Wheelock Mansion is the focus. One of a series of large homes built in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Victorian mansion was located between 158<sup>th</sup> and 160<sup>th</sup> Streets and surrounded by a large parcel of land that belies its proximity to the city and provided a sweeping landscape for the artist. In *Early Autumn, Riverside Park, NY*, (fig. 5) Wolff similarly cloaks the vicinity of the urban environment by making the buildings just visible in the middle ground.

In 1913, Wolff had a solo exhibition in New York at the Yorkville Library, located on 79<sup>th</sup> Street. It was through the German Association for Culture. He would continue to exhibit with the Two-By-Four Club through 1914





Fig. 8  
*High Bridge, NY*  
Oil on canvas  
16 x 12 inches  
Signed lower right

and was also included in a Special Exhibition of Missouri Painters Arranged for the Delegates of the Senate Federation of Women's Clubs in 1919. While he lived well into the 1930s, the art world was beginning to change with the advent of modernism in the early nineteen-teens. Gustave Wolff's paintings of tonal winter sunsets, docks along Manhattan's East River, cityscapes, and pastoral scenes of city parkland really belong to the previous generation of artists. In spite of this, Wolff remained true to his love: Nature. This led one astute critic to write of him, "Of rather retiring disposition, Mr. Wolf's [*sic*] best friend, confidant and master is Nature, to whose counsels he listens and whose moods and beauties he interprets with a masterly hand, guided by the heart and mind of the true artist."<sup>11</sup>

-Marshall N. Price





Fig. 9  
*Late Afternoon Promenade*  
Oil on canvas  
12 x 16 inches  
Estate stamp verso



Fig. 10  
*Washington Heights Bridge, NY*  
Oil on canvas  
12 x 16 inches  
Signed lower right



Fig. 11  
*Approach to Eads Bridge*  
Oil on canvas  
12 x 16 inches  
Estate stamp verso



Fig. 12  
*Under Eads Bridge, 1900*  
Oil on canvas  
12 x 16 inches  
Signed and dated 1900, lower right



Fig. 13  
*Washington Square Park, NY*  
 Oil on board  
 8 x 12 inches  
 Signed lower right



Fig. 14  
*The Park in Winter*  
 Oil on board  
 8 x 12 inches  
 Estate stamp verso

## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Frederick Oakes Sylvester, “The Two-By-Four Club,” *The Mirror* 3 May 1906: 16.

<sup>2</sup> See Julie A. Dunn-Morton, “Art Patronage in St. Louis, 1840 – 1920: From Private Homes to A Public Museum” (Ph.D. diss. University of Delaware, 2004).

<sup>3</sup> Betty Jean Crouther, “‘The Artist Sings for Joy’ Frederick Oakes Sylvester and Landscape Painting in St. Louis” (Ph.D. diss. University of Missouri-Columbia, 1985): 97.

<sup>4</sup> Pinx, “The Artists’ Guild,” *The Mirror* 30 May 1901: 12.

<sup>5</sup> The Artists’ Guild had been founded in 1886, the Society of Western Artists in 1896 and the Two-By-Four Club in 1906. Another organization, the Society for the Promotion of St. Louis Art, was formed after 1904 in order to specifically purchase work from local artists. The second painting purchased by the Society was a Wolff landscape.

<sup>6</sup> Charles M. Kurtz, “Artists’ Guild Pictures,” *The Mirror* 10 April 1902: 13.

<sup>7</sup> 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. Wolff won a silver medal for one of his landscapes.

<sup>8</sup> Maurice Godwin, “St. Louis Artists’ Exhibition,” *The Mirror* 18 October 1906: 5.

<sup>9</sup> St. Louis Public Library, artist files, *The Mirror*, unidentified newspaper clipping, n.d.

<sup>10</sup> “Kindly Caricatures No. 112,” *The Mirror* 13 June 1907: 7.

<sup>11</sup> St. Louis Public Library, artist files, *Post-Dispatch*, unidentified newspaper clipping, n.d.

<sup>12</sup> St. Louis Public Library, artist files, “Gustave Wolf” unidentified newspaper clipping, n.d.

Inside back cover

Fig. 15  
*Winter, Rooftops*  
 Oil on canvas  
 12 x 16 inches  
 Signed lower right

Back cover

Fig. 16  
*Carondelet Park, 1899*  
 Oil on board  
 8 x 12 inches  
 Signed and dated 1899, lower right; inscribed with title, verso







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