

John Lloyd: Impressionist of the Steel Valley

John Lloyd's career provides a stunning instance of how art can transform a seemingly mundane and uneventful existence into something inspiring and beautiful. Lloyd spent his life obscurely in the rust belt coal country of Pennsylvania and Ohio. He was never wealthy, never held a salaried position for his artistic work, and supported himself for much of his life as a meter reader for the local electric company, retiring from Ohio Edison in 1954 at the age of seventy. Nonetheless, he painted prolifically, leaving a rich and colorful artistic legacy.

The child of Charles C. and Susannah Shipton, John Lawrence Lloyd was born in 1884 in Coaltown, Pennsylvania, where there were fifty smoky ovens that burned coal to create coke. Coke burns at a higher temperature than coal, much as charcoal burns at a higher temperature than wood, and it provides the high temperatures necessary to forge steel.

In 1898, at age fourteen, Lloyd and his family relocated to Warren, Ohio, fourteen miles northwest of Youngstown. He would live there for the next sixty-seven years until his death at eighty-two in 1967. Along with Youngstown, Warren is one of the two major urban centers in the Steel Valley of Ohio, which at the time had the greatest density of steel mills and steel manufacturing in the United States. At night, the flames from Bessemer converters shot thirty and forty feet into the sky, as if the two cities were being firebombed.

Little is known of Lloyd's childhood, although surviving family photographs reveal that he played football and baseball, and he reportedly belonged to



a close-knit Baptist family. The family was no stranger to tragedy. At the early age of twenty-three, Lloyd's brother, Will, died of injuries sustained in a football game. Four years later, at the age of twenty-nine, his sister, Margaret, died of tuberculosis. In the late 1930s, Lloyd's father was hospitalized for mental illness, very likely some form of dementia. Lloyd's artistic output diminished around this time, apparently due to the money and effort he was putting into his father's care.

We know nothing of what turns on Lloyd's attention to art-making, but in 1913 at the relatively advanced age of twenty-nine, he enrolled in the Cleveland Institute of Art, where he graduated four years later with a degree in decorative design. One of his fellow students at the time was the well known watercolorist Charles Birchfield. He is also said to have been a friend of one of the old timers of Cleveland Art, Archibald Willard, who for the nation's centennial in 1876, created one of America's best known patriotic icons, "The Spirit of '76", showing three ragtag patriots marching to fife and drum.

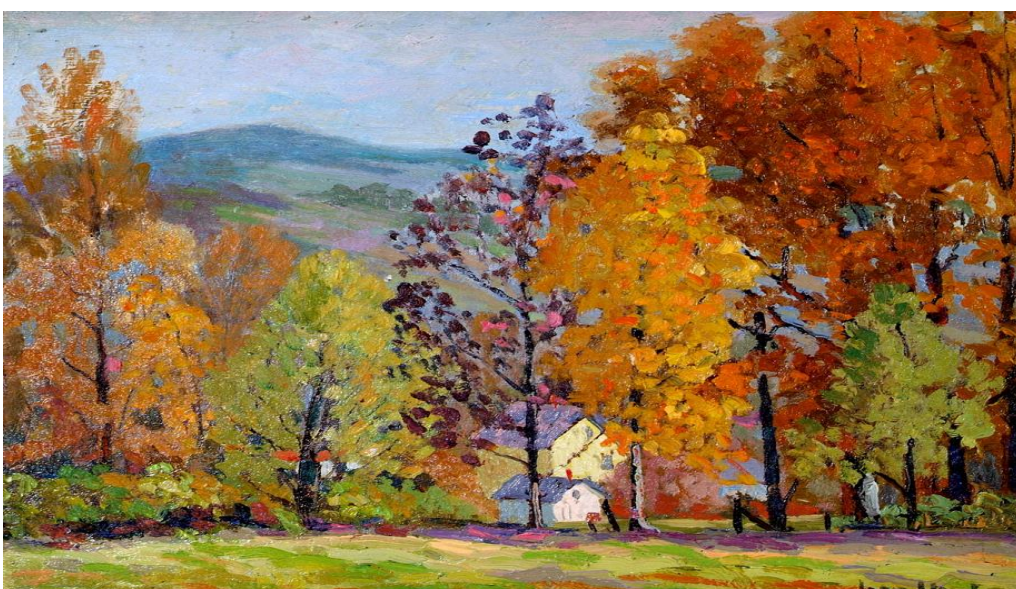
In the years just after his graduation from Cleveland Institute of Art, however, Lloyd traveled extensively, taking summer classes in Chester Spring, Pennsylvania, in 1919 and 1922, and attending the summer school of the Art Students League in Woodstock, New York, in 1915 and 1919. Allegedly, his father covered much of the expense of these excursions.



John L. Lloyd, 1922
Chester Springs, Pennsylvania

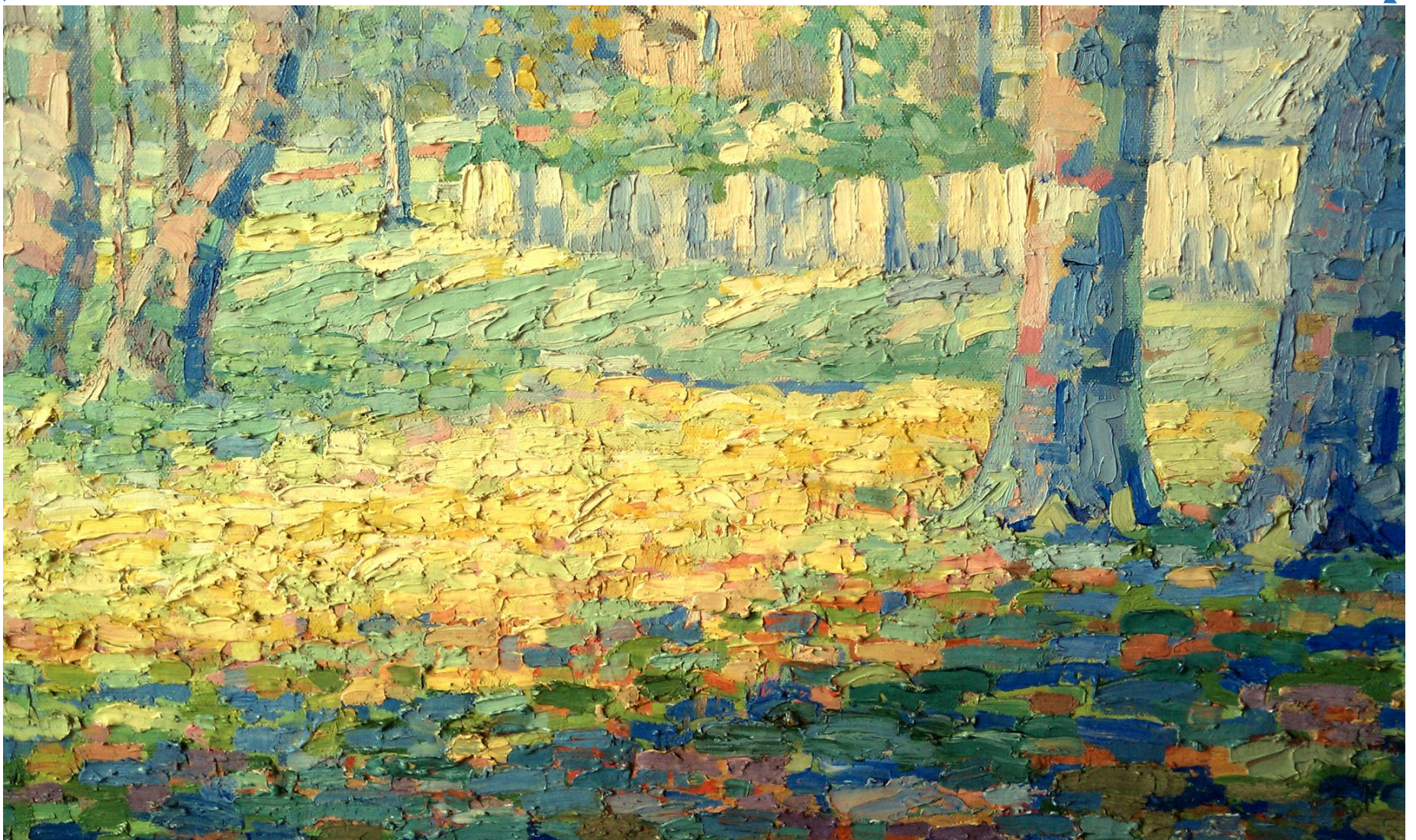
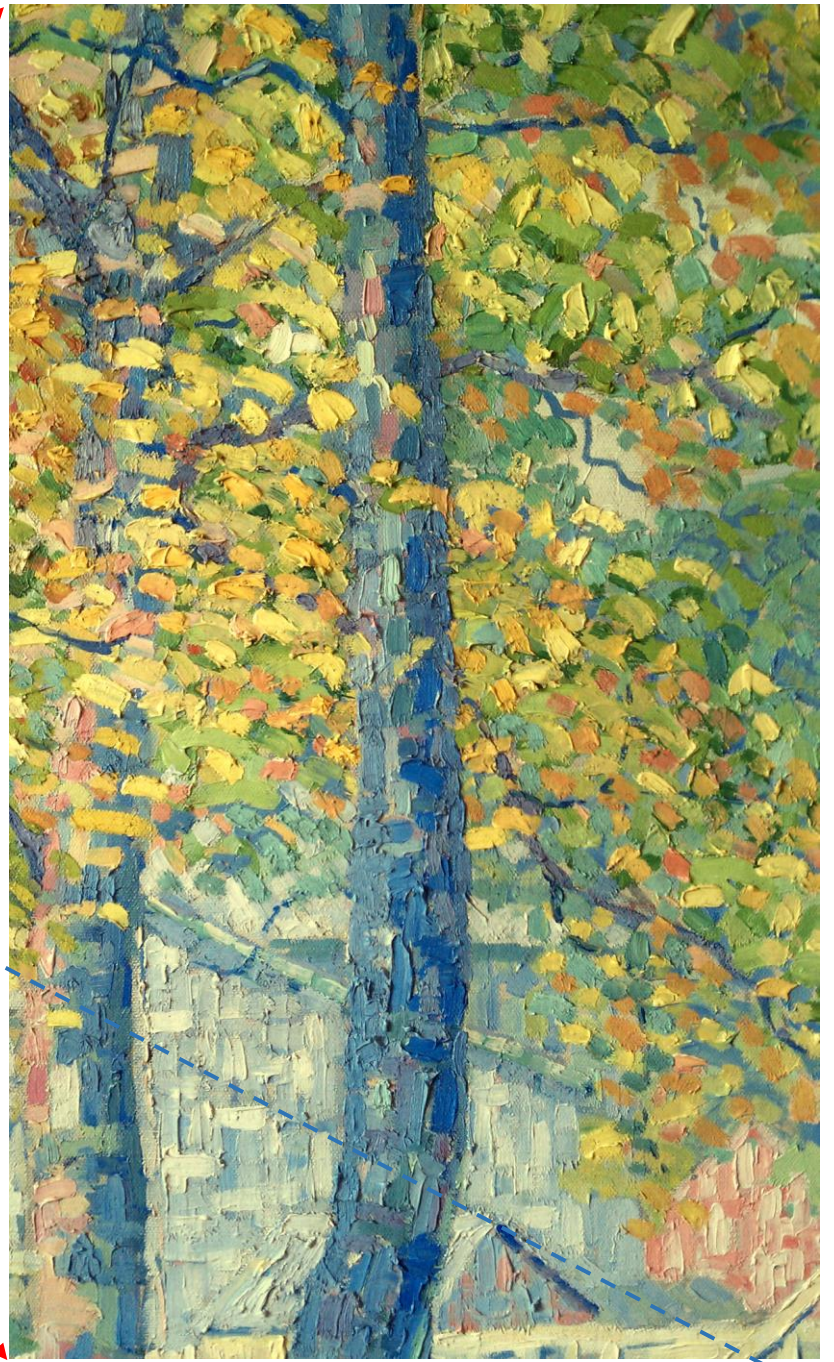
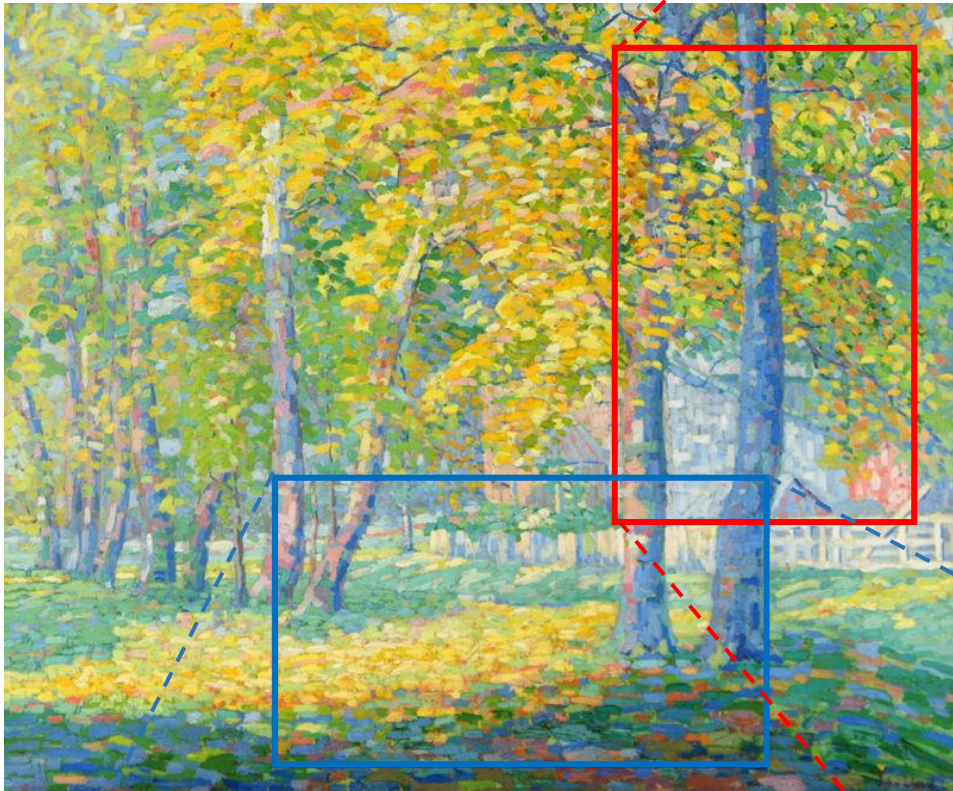
In 1921, he exhibited at the Art Club of Philadelphia, in 1922 at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, in 1923 at the Philadelphia Sketch Club, and in 1924 at the Art Club of Philadelphia. His chief mentors seemed to have been John F Carlson (1875-1947), the author of a well-known book on landscape painting; and Daniel Garber and other members of the art colony in New Hope, PA, about 40 miles from Philadelphia. Rather varied in approach, what ties together this group is that they all painted outdoors and were fascinated by the way colors shift in flickering outdoor light. While most of the group worked in a traditional Impressionist style, it also included figures such as Arthur B. Carles who were influenced by modern and abstract art, particularly the colorful work of the French Fauves. Lloyd was also a lifelong friend of Clyde Singer, the painter and curator at The Butler Institute of American Art, who had studied at the art students league in New York with Reginald Marsh and Kenneth Hayes Miller. Singer clearly provided encouragement to Lloyd and his lifelong artistic quest, and while their subject matter and artistic approach was very different, Lloyd was surely inspired by the freedom and gusto of Singer's work. There's a sort of no-nonsense working man's bluntness to the way they both paint.

Lloyd was principally a landscape painter, although his landscapes often include livestock and figures. Loosely speaking, he excelled in two rather different modes, that of natural landscapes, and that of industrial scenes. His natural landscapes are characterized by bright color, including lively shades of pink, purple and mauve, and juicy impasto.



John L. Lloyd, Landscapes

John L. Lloyd
use of "impasto" style painting



He's at his best when representing clusters of grass and foliage, subject matter that's particularly difficult to paint, with vibrant dots and dashes of green, yellow, ochre, and pink. His paint handling and color are bolder than that of most painters of the New Hope School, whether because of his own passionate temperament or awareness of figures like Van Gogh, Gauguin, and the Fauves.

In a somewhat different vein are his industrial scenes of the steel mills in Youngstown and Warren. The backdrop of these is generally a hellish inferno of fire and black smoke, but in the foreground are houses that gleam brilliantly through the smoky haze.

There's nothing second hand about Lloyd work, no flavor of the photograph or the artist's studio. He clearly painted directly from the motif, from life, outdoors, infusing each brushstroke with intense feeling. Subject



matter, which to other painters might have been dull toned and grim, becomes in his art, a glorious celebration of light and color.

Henry Adams, M.A., PhD
Ruth Coulter Heede Professor of Art History
Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland
HenryAdamsArt.com