PAINTING IN PITTSBURGH FROM THE FRONTIER
SETTLEMENT TO THE INDUSTRIAL DEVELOPMENT

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It is a happy quality of painting that it can make vivid for the observer who cares to speculate, not only the physical appearance of things, but their implications in terms of feelings about them. If modern painting has so far departed from the world of tangibility that it only portrays a desire or an illusion we may still find much pleasure in the documentary painting of the past, which more than any photograph expresses significant attitudes. In the early painting of Pittsburgh one is struck by the overwhelming delight in the beauty of one's surroundings. This sense of belonging to an environment is what gives meaning to later scenes depicting social conditions and the industrial development. The nineteenth century painting of Pittsburgh furnishes a unique and beautiful cross section of a vital phase of American life.

The earliest existing oil painting known to have been done in the city is now owned by the Darlington Memorial Library in the University of Pittsburgh. It is by George Beck and was probably painted in 1806 for General John Wilkins. It gives a misty but somewhat detailed view of the city from the south side of the Monongahela River and greatly exaggerates the grandeur of the setting. Beck belonged to a not inconsiderable group of artists who were trained in England and came to America about the turn of the century. They were not averse to doing scenes for china decoration and to painting picturesque views for publication in folio form. One of the finest of such publications was done in aquatint from drawings by Joshua Shaw who traveled extensively in this country. The announcement for his series says that they contain "all the varieties of the sublime." Shaw had exhibited in the Royal Academy and met Benjamin West in Bath in 1807. He probably came to Pittsburgh about 1825 when he did the delicate sketch of the Salt Works on Saw Mill Run now owned by Carnegie Institute.

What is probably the earliest existing drawing of Pittsburgh must be credited to a German artist, Lewis Brandt, who stopped in Pittsburgh in 1790 while on his way to explore the possibilities in colonizing lands

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along the Mississippi River. A copper line engraving was later made from his drawing and it has been much reproduced.

With the opening up of the west, Pittsburgh of course ceased to be a frontier yet it comes as something of a surprise to discover that a Mrs. Gibson from Philadelphia came here on her wedding trip in 1817. A drawing which she made at that time was later reproduced by lithography and gives a charming view of the point with the old hip-roofed Court House in 1794 much in evidence. I believe the couple went on down the river on a flat boat. The pleasure of such transportation, now as outmoded as the rickshaw, must have been considerable in spite of the discomforts and wearisome stretches. George Catlin, famous for his paintings of the American Indian, visited Pittsburgh on several occasions and possibly when he had an exhibition here in 1833, he did the drawing of a flatboat which was exhibited at the Henry Clay Frick Fine Arts Department on the occasion of an exhibition entitled "Pittsburgh and Its Rivers" held in 1948. In that same exhibition there was a painting which gives amazing evidence of the establishment of an elegant way of life along the upper Ohio by the first quarter of the nineteenth century. It represents a county seat overlooking the river and the S. S. Washington passing by. The scene may have been near Wheeling, West Virginia, where the Washington was built in 1824.

The first local painter of significance was James Reid Lambdin who was born here in 1807. He studied in Philadelphia and acquired a considerable reputation for his portraits. No less important was his influence on the city in the field of culture and especially in assisting Russell Smith, a young Scottish lad, to become an artist. Smith's paintings of the local scene—the Aqueduct, Block House, Salt Works—romanticize the coming industrial age which by the 1830's was well under way. It was about this time that he left for Philadelphia and for a more sophisticated environment where the spell of the European romantic movement was to bring about that unfortunate separation between art and life which has too often dominated American taste.

Pittsburgh, like so many American cities, suffered from a great conflagration and the lurid excitement of the destructive flames was a popular theme for artists. A thrilling statement of the fire of 1845 was done by William C. Wall in several panels. Although born in England the artist would seem to have been locally trained. He has created the finest kind of drama without artificiality or ostentation in paintings
owned by the Pennsylvania Room of the Carnegie Library and Mr. and Mrs. Charles J. Rosenbloom.

An important shipbuilding industry flourished here during the mid-century period and brought with it not only skilled workmen but artists. The elaborate river boats had to be decorated. Emil Bott, who had studied in Dusseldorf, carried out such commissions from about 1849 to 1870. A door panel painted by him and now owned by Henry Oliver Rea shows one of the barges, made to bring iron ore from the deposits in Missouri, at dock in front of the company offices on Water Street.

Pittsburgh's most famous artist, David G. Blythe, also came here in connection with the shipbuilding industry. His sad, erratic life is well-known and as a painter of genre, civil war subjects and satire he holds a unique position in American art. Although much of his work is coarse and lacking in rich color he rose at times to great heights of execution in both drawing and painting. A self-portrait with the sculptor Isaac Broome in front of Gillespie's store in 1865 and a small landscape possibly showing the house of his friend Stephen Foster reveal his great versatility. Both were in the exhibition of the Henry Clay Frick Fine Arts Department held at Carnegie Institute in 1956.

Because of the approaching bicentennial celebration for which artists were invited to paint imaginary scenes of old Pittsburgh, an anonymous painting of Fort Duquesne owned by the Richard King Mellon Foundation holds much interest. It might well have been executed in 1854 as an imaginary representation of the scene 100 years earlier.

A few interesting landscapes by amateur artists exist from the second half of the century, but they are greatly overshadowed by the works of a small sophisticated group of European-trained men who had established for themselves an American Barbizon setting at Scalp Level near Johnstown. Of these George Hetzel, who taught at the Pittsburgh School of Design, was outstanding. There was also Jasper H. Lawman who had studied with Couture, Eugene Poole, and Joseph R. Woodwell. Mr. Woodwell later traveled with his daughter, Mrs. James D. Hailman, also an accomplished artist, to scenic spots in America which he rendered with the force and charm of the French landscape tradition.

Something of the impressionistic use of light which marks the French school colored the work of the Lithuanian, Aaron Gorson, whose paintings of the steel mills here were very popular at the begin-
ning of this century. It might well be said that he missed greatness by repeating a popular formula too often.

With John Kane who loved to paint the mills and the rivers, greatness came after his death. It is, however, to the credit of Pittsburgh that he attracted much attention at the annual shows of the Associated Artists of Pittsburgh. He loved the city and it is the sincerity of his feeling, the puzzlement and wonder of creating even in working over a color print or photograph which sometimes gives his work a touch of genius. The culture of a city lies not in its conscious propaganda, not in its schools and institutions, but rather in the hearts and attitudes of its citizens which alone are within the realm of art.