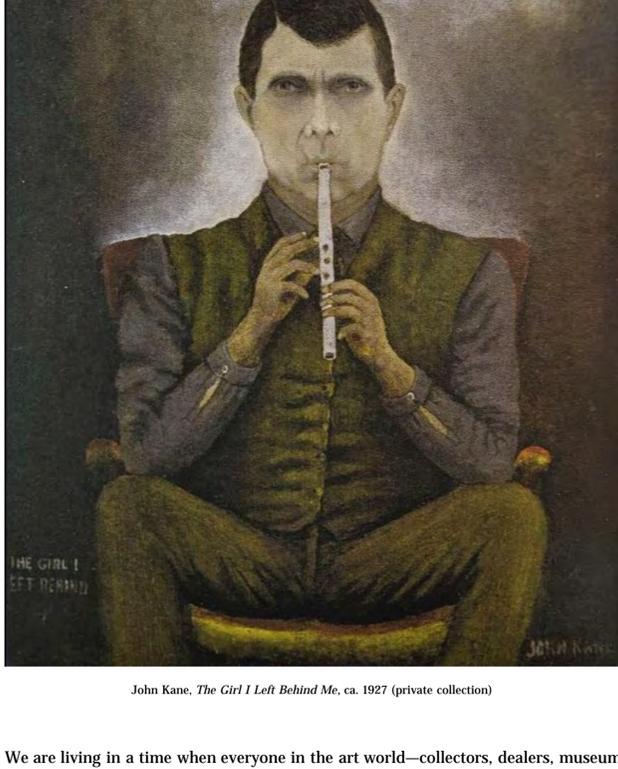


C. G. BOERNER

DEALERS IN FINE ART SINCE 1826

Distraction / Abwechslung
27 May 2022

"Isn't every artist self-taught?" asked Louise Lippincott when we met for dinner recently in Pittsburgh. It was my first stop on a trip to the Midwest, and I couldn't have planned it better. Of course, going on the road meant bringing my portfolios along to show to curators and collectors, but it was also a way to meet old friends, to see art—and, in doing so, to learn new things. New, at least for me, was the artist John Kane (1860–1934), on whom Louise had just finished a monograph, written jointly with Maxwell King. It accompanies an exhibition that opened on May 21 at Pittsburgh's Heinz History Center. It is telling that the exhibition is not being shown at an art museum, despite the fact that any online search for the artist immediately mentions that Kane was "the first self-taught American painter in the twentieth century to be recognized by a museum."



John Kane, *The Girl I Left Behind Me*, ca. 1927 (private collection)

We are living in a time when everyone in the art world—collectors, dealers, museums alike—is eagerly looking out for the next big thing, preferably among the underprivileged and so-called outsiders. But memory can be short, and Kane already had his moment. Kane's biography might also not quite radiate the safe benevolence of a James Castle, a Grandma Moses or a Bill Traylor. He was the son of a Scottish gravedigger who died when John was only 10 years old. He emigrated to the United States at age 19 and ended up in Pittsburgh working for the railway. After being crippled in a train accident in 1891, he was forced to eke out a living with dozens of different jobs, among them carpentry and house painting. He fell into alcoholism, abandoned his family, and was twice institutionalized for "toxic insanity."

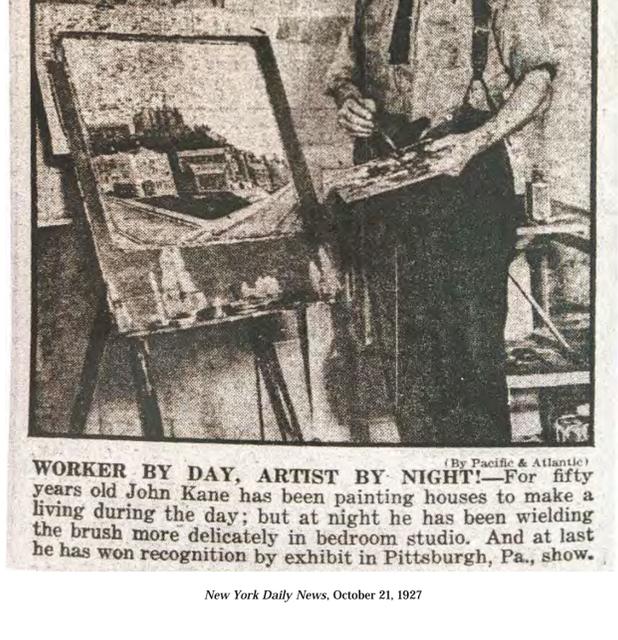
Kane's artistic breakthrough came during the 1920s. His paint jobs had made him realize how much he enjoyed painting. Sometimes he even decorated boxcars with landscapes—only to be forced by his philistine superiors to paint them over again. He also understood that pictures could be something that is saleable. He scrambled materials together and, once he was able to afford a large enough storeroom, began, often using photos and postcards, to make "portraits" of the elegant houses that lined the streets in the wealthier parts of Pittsburgh. He hawked them to the houses' owners but also felt confident enough to start submitting paintings to the annual Carnegie International exhibition. After two rejections, he was accepted for the show in the fall of 1927. The driving force behind this was one of that year's jurors, Andrew Dasburg, an artist and critic from New York who had been part of Gertrude Stein's circle in Paris and was attracted to Kane's distinctive style.



John Kane, *Scene from the Scottish Highlands*, ca. 1927 (Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh)

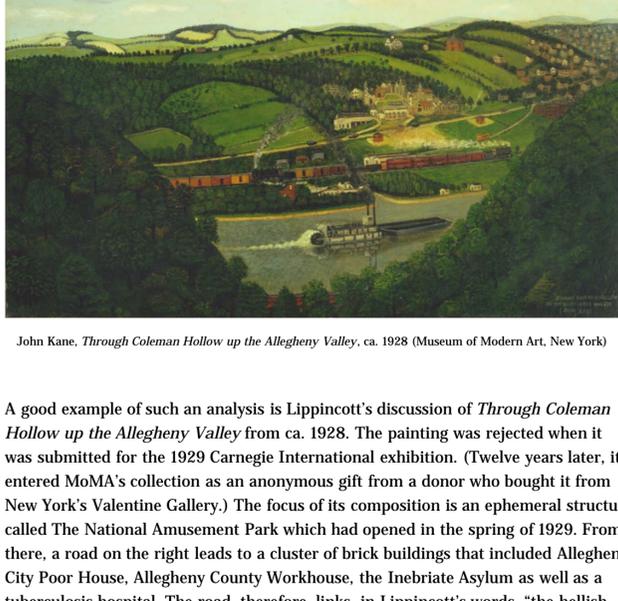
This was the first painting by the artists to be accepted for the Carnegie International exhibition.

The Carnegie Museum's assistant director at the time, John O'Connor, was media-savvy enough to alert the press, and the inclusion of Kane's painting made front-page news of the *Pittsburgh Press*. More articles in other cities followed, as did exhibitions at Harvard, in Toledo, Philadelphia, and Chicago. Kane's works were included in MoMA's 1930–31 show *Painting and Sculpture by Living Americans* as well as in the first Whitney Biennial in 1932–33. They were bought by many of the progressive collectors of the day such as Albert C. Barnes and Duncan and Marjorie Acker Phillips for their respective collections in Philadelphia and Washington, DC, as well as by Abby Aldrich Rockefeller, whose purchases were later given to MoMA. In late 1932, though, Kane showed the first signs of tuberculosis of which he died in August of 1934.



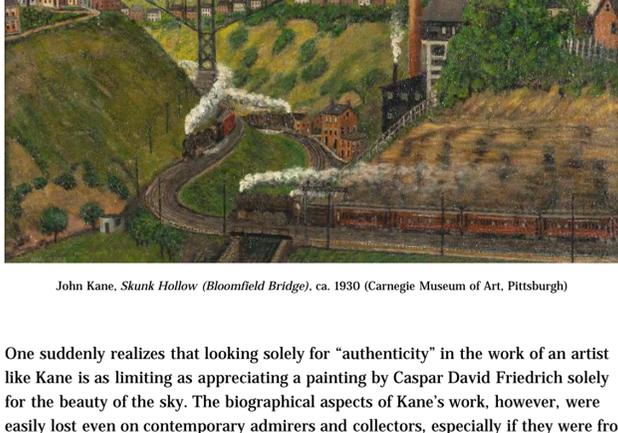
New York Daily News, October 21, 1927

All of this is recounted in lively detail in *American Workman: The Life and Art of John Kane* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2022), with King focusing on Kane's biography and Lippincott on his art. As curator at the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh for many years, Lippincott often surprised with shows that presented art from perspectives that were not strictly—or at least not only—art historical. Memorable examples were *Light! The Industrial Age 1750–1900: Art and Science, Technology and Society* (2000) and *Fierce Friends: Artists and Animals, 1750–1900* (2005). In this new book, her method is actually traditional but she uses the tools available to an art historian to apply them to a body of work that was previously seen mainly as the expression of a desirable but vague notion of authenticity—a fate Kane shares with many other outsider artists. It is surprising and exciting to see what happens when landscapes that had always been perceived as illustrations of the interplay between nature and technology are analyzed in a manner usually reserved for the heroic or idyllic landscapes of such seventeenth- and eighteenth-century masters as Poussin and Lorrain or Joseph Anton Koch and Johann Christian Reinhart.



John Kane, *Through Coleman Hollow up the Allegheny Valley*, ca. 1928 (Museum of Modern Art, New York)

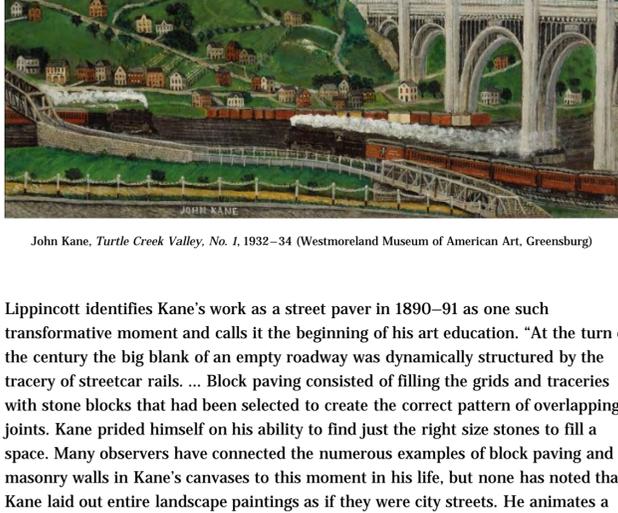
A good example of such an analysis is Lippincott's discussion of *Through Coleman Hollow up the Allegheny Valley* from ca. 1928. The painting was rejected when it was submitted for the 1929 Carnegie International exhibition. (Twelve years later, it entered MoMA's collection as an anonymous gift from a donor who bought it from New York's Valentine Gallery.) The focus of its composition is an ephemeral structure called The National Amusement Park which had opened in the spring of 1929. From there, a road on the right leads to a cluster of brick buildings that included Allegheny City Poor House, Allegheny County Workhouse, the Inebriate Asylum as well as a tuberculosis hospital. The road, therefore, links, in Lippincott's words, "the hellish counterparts of the heavenly pleasure park." Kane's landscape is anything but a detached view—what it shows is "the short path between a Pittsburgh workman's earthy success and failure." As Lippincott explains, "his wife had committed him to similar institutions in 1899 and 1909 ... [and] he would remember his stepfather's demise in the same institution a few years after Kane regained his freedom." For him, paintings such as this and many others were replete with deeply personal undertones.



John Kane, *Skunk Hollow (Bloomfield Bridge)*, ca. 1930 (Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh)

One suddenly realizes that looking solely for "authenticity" in the work of an artist like Kane is as limiting as appreciating a painting by Caspar David Friedrich solely for the beauty of the sky. The biographical aspects of Kane's work, however, were easily lost even on contemporary admirers and collectors, especially if they were from out of town. All they wanted were illustrative depictions of the tortured industrial landscapes and views of the down-at-the-heels neighborhood of Pittsburgh. The paintings were expected to provide an artistic frisson that today is often referred to as "ruin porn." The tragic consequence for Kane was that during the years of his short-lived success, he was expected to paint the very settings he had spent his whole life, unsuccessfully, to escape from.

Four years after his death, MoMA included his paintings in its 1938 show *Masters of Popular Painting: Modern Primitives of Europe and America*, thereby making sure that Kane's art would be safely separated again from that of "properly" trained art and placed instead with all the other "outsiders" that still make up their own section in every art history 101 course. Which brings us back to Lulu's question from the beginning. Aren't all artists self-trained—either from the moment they step out of art school or every time they finish their day job and devote themselves to making art? Perhaps the difference between "trained" and "untrained" lies merely the different sets of rules they work from—one that had been taught at art academies for centuries (even if it has become less and less rigid over the last half century), the other often highly idiosyncratic and derived from each practitioner's everyday experiences.



John Kane, *Turtle Creek Valley, No. 1*, 1932–34 (Westmoreland Museum of American Art, Greensburg)

Lippincott identifies Kane's work as a street paver in 1890–91 as one such transformative moment and calls it the beginning of his art education. "At the turn of the century the big blank of an empty roadway was dynamically structured by the tracery of streetcar rails. ... Block paving consisted of filling the grids and tracteries with stone blocks that had been selected to create the correct pattern of overlapping joints. Kane prided himself on his ability to find just the right size stones to fill a space. Many observers have connected the numerous examples of block paving and masonry walls in Kane's canvases to this moment in his life, but none has noted that Kane laid out entire landscape paintings as if they were city streets. He animates a canvas's flat surface with dynamic transportation lines (railroad and trolley tracks, roads, rivers)." What the life drawing class is for an academic artist, was, for Kane, drawing when taking a break from paving. "Trained" by having to find the right blocks for a specific section in the street, he divided, as Lippincott suggests, "flat surfaces—floors, walls, and ceilings—into zones of different patterns, textures, and colors."

Later, Kane would remark that beauty "is all over, everywhere, even in the street on which you work." When traveling the street/road over those last weeks, I was often able to get a sense of what he meant.

Heinz History Center: Pittsburgh's John Kane

