

Research Note

Ernest Lawson's Spain

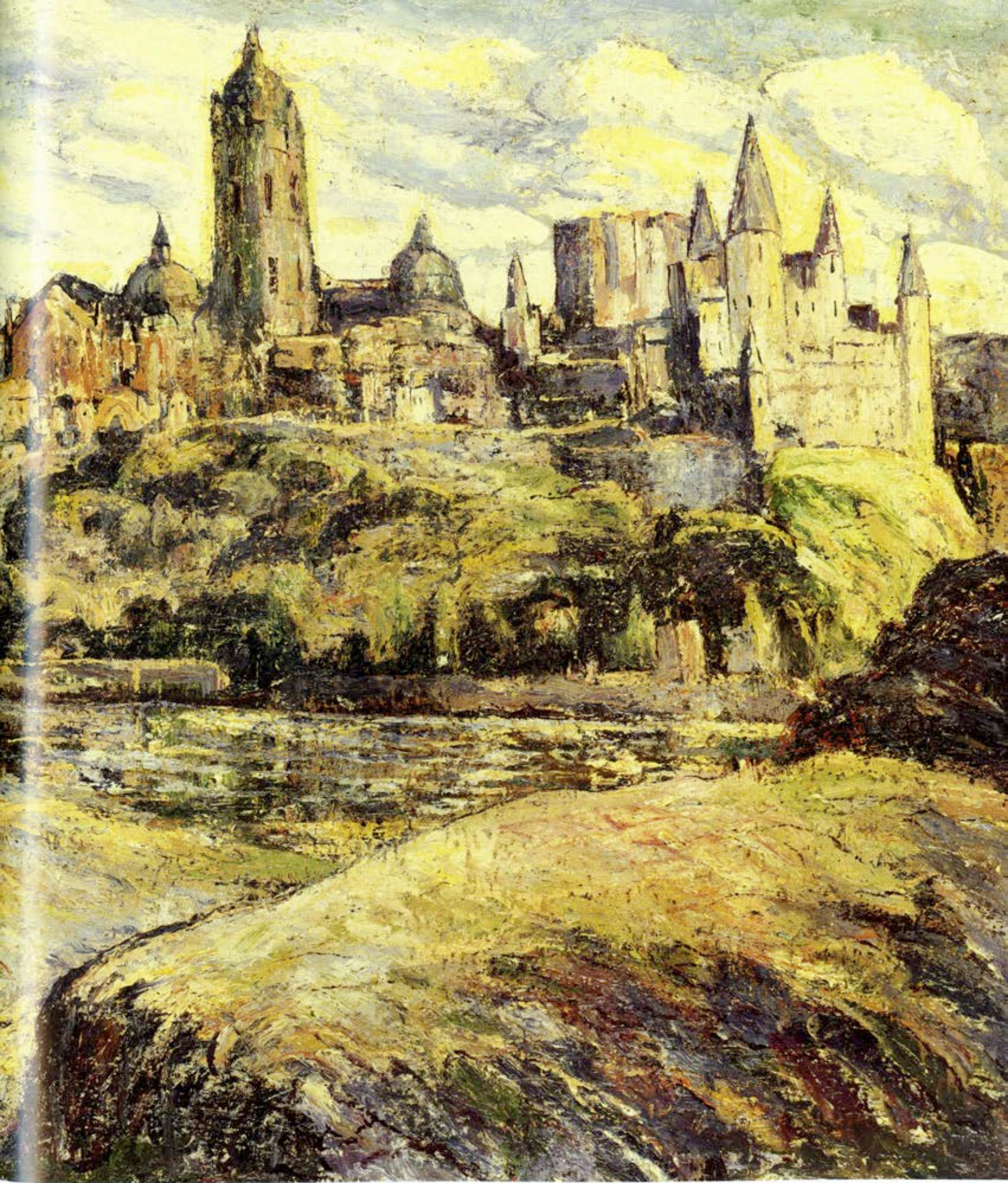
Charles C. Eldredge

Late in the spring of 1916, Ernest Lawson (1873–1939) left New York with his wife and daughter for a sojourn in Spain (fig. 1) that lasted until the following winter. Several circumstances influenced their choice of destination. With much of the rest of Europe engulfed in war, Spain was politically and geographically at the relatively safe margin of the continental turmoil. It was also affordable—an important consideration for Lawson, who was perennially beset by financial worries.¹ Not least among the factors that guided him was the precedent of the many American artists who, from the mid-nineteenth century onward, had worn a familiar path to Spain—George Henry Hall, Mary Cassatt, Thomas Eakins, and John Singer Sargent, among others. Neutral, inexpensive, and scenic: Spain beckoned.

It might seem surprising at first that Lawson, an artist strongly associated with New York City subjects, chose to work in distant Spain. And it might seem out of character for a brilliant colorist, known for his palette of “crushed jewels,” to spend his European journey in the interior of that country, where a stark and austere landscape contrasted with the sunny south popularized through other travelers’ paintings and publications. Inspiration for the trip may have come from Robert Henri, Lawson’s co-exhibitor in the now-legendary 1908 exhibition by a group of urban painters called the Eight. Henri had previously taken student groups for summer painting lessons in the Spanish

1 Ernest Lawson, *Segovia*, ca. 1916–17. Oil, 25 x 30 in. Minneapolis Institute of Arts, John R. Van Derlip Fund





heartland; so too had the esteemed teacher and prominent impressionist William Merritt Chase. But other American artists visiting the region, like Edward Penfield, were challenged by “the bleak, stern wastes of poor old tired-out Spain” and a local scene that, Penfield said, “filled me with despair as I tried to put it down on canvas.”² For Lawson, however, the subject would be exhilarating.

Collector Duncan Phillips, whose first American art purchase was a Lawson landscape, once wrote of the artist’s “peculiar power of finding sensuous beauty in dreary places.”³ Lawson had a notable ability, he said, to “seize upon some cheerful aspect of the otherwise cheerless scene. If there is no redeeming feature, he invents one.” In Segovia and in Toledo, which also captured the painter’s attention, there was no need to invent, however, for the cities and the landscape provided abundant motifs.

“More than any land of the West, more even than Italy, Spain is a world of cities: each distinct, each unique and uniquely Spanish,” commented critic Waldo Frank, who experienced his own touristic epiphany there. But to appreciate them, he cautioned, to know a city like Segovia, required “solitude and silence.”⁴ In Spain during the last half of 1916, Lawson had plenty of both. European warfare chased home most of the expatriate artists who had flocked to the continent a few years earlier; except for his friend Max Kuehne, a landscapist who had been painting in Spain since 1914, Lawson’s contacts with Americans were relatively few. This was also due in part to his somewhat circumscribed movements. He did paint at least one view of the harbor at Cadiz, the Lawsons’ entry point to Spain from North Africa, and briefly visited Barcelona and Madrid before settling in Segovia, but he spent most of his time in or near the ancient Castilian town.

The stay in Spain proved to be productive, yielding a number of small studies, made on site, as well as larger canvases (fig. 1), the products of his studio. These were exhibited at the Daniel Gallery in February 1917 soon after the family’s return to New York; the reviews were mixed. One detractor asserted that Lawson, in his Spanish subjects, “could not strike a balance between colour and form,” the details in his landscapes becoming “lost in a diffusion of colour and light.” Even Lawson’s usual champions, like Frederic Fairchild Sherman, said some of these works displayed an “almost prodigal use of pigment . . . [and] are sometimes unnecessarily painty.” But the Spanish subjects also had their admirers. The *New York Times* reviewer, for example, wrote favorably of “the color that permeates” the twenty-two paintings at Daniel’s, saying, “The pictures are saturated with aesthetic truth.” Other critics liked the works’ “truthful somberness of color” and “exceeding virility,” and said “Lawson’s color seems to have been improved by the Spanish sunlight.”⁵

The brilliant sunlight of Castile rarely failed to elicit comments from visitors. For some artists, the result was a bleaching of color, the glare whitening the palette. For others, like Lawson, chromatic impressions were heightened in the intense light; in his case, they were realized on canvas with pigments the artist had to grind himself owing to the scarcity of materials in wartime Europe.⁶

The bold, sunstruck colors of Spain found their counterpoint in the dark tonalities Lawson used in certain landscapes. Some viewers read cultural meaning into these darker notes, so different from the “tender grays and greens” of his earlier New England subjects. A Lawson painting of a Spanish monastery—probably his view of El Parral, outside Segovia (fig. 2)—led one reviewer to conclude that “there is a reason for the difference in treatment. New England, sometimes called acrid and leaden, is so fair and so feminine in aspect; sunny, semi-tropical Spain, the Spain at least of Segovia and Zuloaga, so stern and puritanical!” The critic’s response echoed the artist’s own. Lawson wrote to a collector: “I am glad you like the Spanish monastery picture as it seemed to me that I got some of the austere quality of Spain in it. Spain is not all gaiety and sunshine, and especially in the centre part has a character of ruggedness and gloom part of the time.”⁷

Segovia, near the rugged and gloomy center, was associated with Ignacio Zuloaga y Zabaleta. American collectors lionized the contemporary Spanish painter after his first solo showing in New York in 1909. "There seems to be in this Spaniard's art something deeply satisfying to the aesthetic craving in America," one observer noted. Waldo Peirce, who painted in Spain between 1912 and 1914 during what he called his "Zuloaga period," later recalled that "the landscapes and everything there look a lot like Zuloaga—one can't help painting Zuloagas."⁸ Evidently this enthusiasm also touched Lawson. Beginning in 1898 Zuloaga had spent nearly every July through December in Segovia, painting somber views of Spanish peasants who inhabited the harsh central Iberian countryside, works that were the basis for his fame. In 1916 Lawson followed the Spaniard's footsteps to the ancient town, but chose to paint the landscape and historic buildings rather than Segovia's inhabitants.

Toledo was likewise sanctified by art, although at a much earlier time. The home of El Greco, it was immortalized in his brooding canvases of the late sixteenth and early

2 Ernest Lawson, *Near Segovia*,
ca. 1916–17. Oil, 25 ½ x 30 ¼
in. Cheekwood Museum of Art,
Nashville



seventeenth centuries, which were being rediscovered and acclaimed anew by Lawson's and Zuloaga's generation of artists and connoisseurs. It was there in Castile, rather than in the Moorish south or in metropolitan Madrid (which some writers dismissed as "but a second-hand Paris") that Lawson found his inspiration, in the land and in man's constructions upon it.⁹

One writer, in praising Lawson's work generally, may have anticipated Lawson's susceptibility to the region's appeal when he noted, "There are not painting to-day half a dozen realists possessing a tithe of Lawson's robust vision and gift as a colorist. Two Spaniards, Zuloaga, [Joaquín] Sorolla [y Bastida]; several Frenchmen, and among the English only Augustus John."¹⁰ Among these, the very different techniques of the Spaniards—Zuloaga's somber palette and stark landscape forms contrasted with Sorolla's fluid strokes and blonder, sunnier tonalities—displayed the strongest affinities with Lawson's work, with Zuloaga's influence more prominent.

One American writer described Segovia as a "grave and melancholy town" laden with history. That sense of history lay heavily on the Spanish land at the turn of the twentieth century, particularly in conservative and traditionalist Castile, where historic sites bespoke the national identity. Toledo, as Frank noted, was no typical Castilian town: in Toledo "Castile surpasses itself. Spain grows universal." Segovia, similarly rich in reminders of ancient glories, could boast of architectural relics from the Romans to the sixteenth century. For writers of Spain's Generation of '98, who had witnessed the final dismemberment of empire in the wake of war with the United States, the Castilian heart of the nation embodied the glories of the past and the sorrows of their age. Zuloaga urged his compatriots to "go forth from our narrow regions and become Castilian, for it was Castile that made the Spanish world." The poet Antonio Machado evoked this national sentiment in his verse:

*Miserable Castile, yesterday's ruler,
Now wrapped in rags, despising all she cannot ignore:
Does she wait? Or sleep? Or dream?*¹¹

In his focus on Spanish subjects, Lawson avoided the rags and ruins. Primarily a landscapist, he generally eschewed genre subjects; only a few of the paintings on exhibit at the Daniel Gallery suggested an interest in religious processions, commerce in the marketplace, or similar activities. Lawson also avoided the large and often somewhat exotic human figures that frequently loomed before Zuloaga's vistas—not for him the Spaniard's "dark and fatalistic kingdom of matadors and manolas, of ascetic hermits and hideous sorceresses, of pilgrims, gypsies and scarred picadors."¹² Instead the manmade structures of the region—its Roman aqueducts, medieval cathedrals, and ancient bridges—played a starring role in Lawson's paintings, especially in his Segovian cityscapes (fig. 3).

Lawson seldom painted within the ancient city walls, confronting his architectural subject close up; he preferred a more distant prospect that situated the city within its landscape, like a jewel in its setting (fig. 4). He moved around the perimeter of Segovia, sometimes viewing the hilltop town from across the Eresma River, sometimes with the Clamores flowing past the view, sometimes assuming vantage points at even farther elevations. Segovia's distinctive skyline remained his one constant. The towers and dome of the famous cathedral and the turrets of the Alcazar crown the hill, reaching into the sky overhead, the sky that in Spain is "so far away, and everywhere. Its apartness," wrote one visitor, "is a force lifting the broken things of Spain as in a great dance Godward."¹³ The serrated outline of Segovian landmarks echoes—albeit under a different light—the skyline of New York, where Lawson often described the prominent structures of Manhattan's

- 3 Ernest Lawson, *Segovia*, ca. 1916–17. Oil on panel, 11 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 15 $\frac{3}{8}$ in. Georgia Museum of Art, Athens, Eva Underhill Holbrook Memorial Collection of American Art, Gift of Alfred H. Holbrook

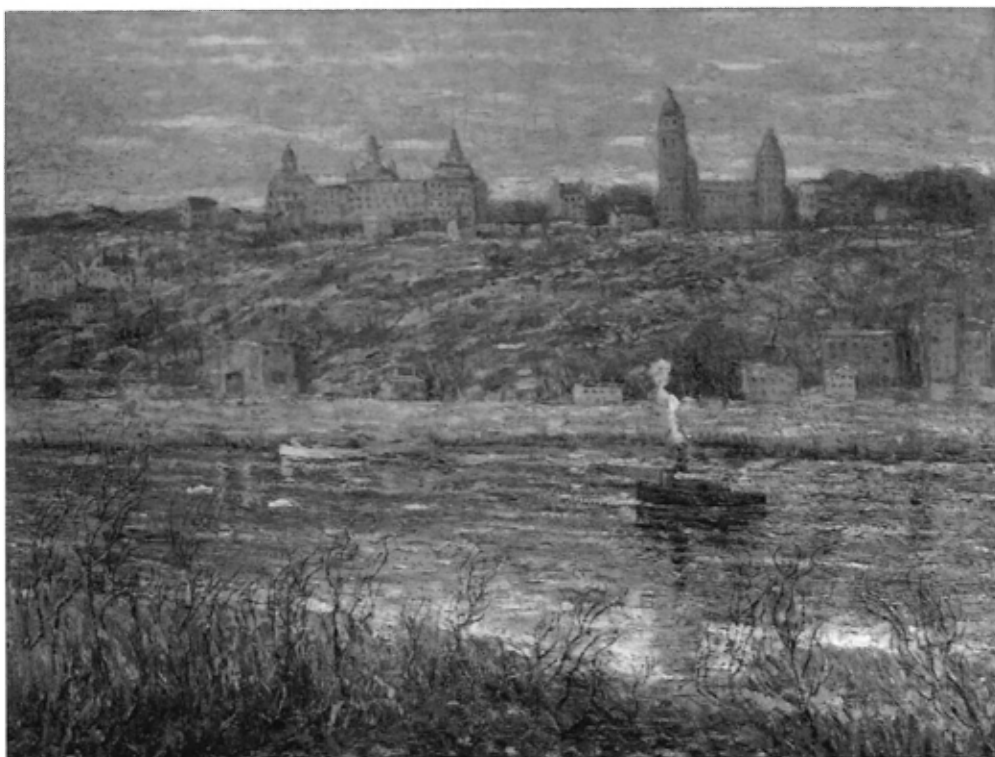


Cathedral Heights, of the Fordham neighborhood in the Bronx, or other aspects of the city similarly profiled against American skies (fig. 5).

Parallels with American landmarks are suggested again in his Toledo views, particularly those featuring its famous bridges across the Tagus River, the fortified Puente de Alcantara and Puente de San Martin. Alcantara, the older of the two, was built on Roman foundations, during a period of Christian domination but likely by Moorish workers who continued as master masons in the region for several centuries. Frank was enchanted by its “subtle dichotomy of arch and gate [that] marks in plastic terms the way from Moslem Musa to Christian Philip.” Guidebooks recommended the view from this area as the preferred vantage for Toledo’s beauty and complexity; oddly, when Lawson worked at the site, he turned his back to the city’s beauty and painted the view across the bridge toward the countryside and the Castle of San Servando in his *Toledo Bridge* (Wichita Art Museum). The Puente de San Martin, on the opposite side of the city, dates from the early thirteenth century; its arches of varied sizes replaced an ancient bridge that once stood downstream. Both of these structures were among the most familiar city landmarks and drew the attention of numerous visitors. Lawson too was attracted by the motif, which provided the subject for several paintings. In one case, he painted San Martin’s arched span on one side of a canvas (fig. 6), then later brushed on its verso an American image of *Blue Night, High Bridge—Moonlight*.¹⁴ This New York structure crosses the canvas in a direction similar to its Toledo mate, from the left middle distance to the right margin. Even more than by composition, the paintings are linked by their subject: the bridge was a motif that for centuries had inspired artists and writers to image and metaphor.

Bridges appear in numerous Lawson landscapes, ranging from covered bridges in Connecticut to simple, nameless structures arcing rural streams. Those reaching to Manhattan were a favorite subject, including the Roeblings’ grand monument, the

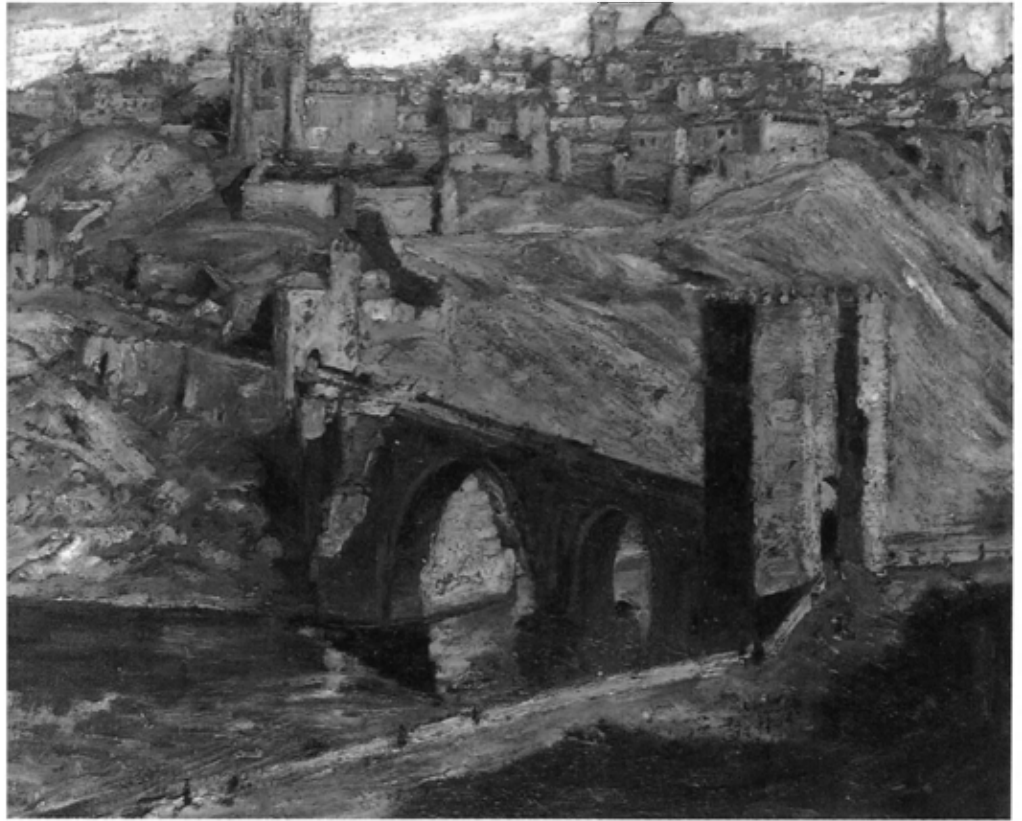
- 4 Ernest Lawson, *Cathedral and Castle, Segovia, Spain*, ca. 1916–17. Oil, 24 x 40 in. Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Albert L. Reeves Jr.
- 5 Ernest Lawson, *On the Harlem*, ca. 1910. Oil, 30 x 40 in. Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Albert R. Jones



Brooklyn Bridge. Lawson was especially drawn to the northern part of Manhattan; the High Bridge across the Harlem River often appeared in his views. Though engineered differently than Toledo's masonry bridges, these graceful spans across the Harlem River echoed the ancient arches over the Tagus, which provided a familiar subject for both Lawson and Max Kuehne, his frequent painting partner in Spain.¹⁵

Lawson's moonlit view of Manhattan's High Bridge suggests the lingering appeal of

- 6 Ernest Lawson, *Toledo*, ca. 1916–17.
Oil, 25 x 30 in. Gerald Peters
Gallery, New York



nocturnal motifs, a legacy of the tonalists and Whistlerians at the turn of the century. That this interest continued during his Spanish period is suggested by subjects such as *Twilight in Spain* (fig. 7), *Rising Moon, Segovia*, and *Evening in Segovia* (both unlocated). Kuehne also succumbed to the romantic subject, or to the influence of Lawson's work, and produced a group of paintings that critic and collector A. E. Gallatin praised as "sensitively seen nocturnes, landscapes or towns bathed in moonlight . . . somber night pictures [that] are possessed of mystery and imagination."¹⁶

The majority of Lawson's Spanish subjects, however, were painted in the full light of day, under an intense sun that heightened the famously jewel-like qualities of his palette. Curator Adeline Karpiscak described Lawson's Spanish sojourn as an important turning point for the artist, one that "brought a new technical vocabulary to his landscape interpretations," which were marked by new directness in the "agitated brushstrokes" and a brighter palette. While inspired by conditions abroad, this change in technique might ironically have been as much the product of his American studio as of Spanish sunlight. According to Phillips, Lawson was in the habit of reworking his motifs, initially brushed *en plein air*: "It was only after working over his canvases in his New York studio, down in MacDougal Alley, that the enchantment of his own art began to transcend the mere impressiveness of the castles in Spain. . . . [There] he loaded the paint as never before, building with it his castles and walls and monasteries."¹⁷

The bright tonalities played off against inky blacks worthy of Goya, and against dark shadowed passages whose contrast heightened the chromatic effect. For example, the bleak *meseta* in which a building is set might make its walls blonder, its roofs redder (fig. 2). Forms were defined with greater solidity, their edges newly outlined in dark strokes, as if to affirm them in the sharp light. Lawson applied pigments with his characteristic gestural



stroke, but now built up impastos to nearly sculptural depth. These tendencies in color, form, and brushwork might be seen as amplifications of developments already under way before his trip to Spain but intensified by the novel ambience. Beyond issues of technique, Lawson's biographers have noted that the Spanish visit prompted a new interest in small landscape sketches, presumably painted on site; the panels, measuring approximately six by eight inches, represented a miniature format in which the artist had not previously worked.¹⁸ These diminutive panels, as loosely brushed as Henri's sketches, were, like Lawson's larger canvases, esteemed for their color and luminosity.

By early 1917 concern about finances and the hostilities on the European continent led the Lawsons back to New York. Within a few weeks of their homecoming, the United States formally entered World

7 Ernest Lawson, *Twilight in Spain*, ca. 1916–17. Oil, 18 x 22 in. Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.

War I, and Lawson's Spanish idyll was never to be repeated. But the impressions of that trip remained with him, shaping his subsequent views of New York City and coloring his landscape subjects from Nova Scotia to the Colorado Rockies.

In the year of his return, Lawson, formerly a young Turk among the Eight, won election to full membership in the National Academy of Design—formal acceptance from the traditionalists he had once scorned. Writer Hilton Kramer has aptly summarized Lawson's career trajectory: "As soon as it was recognized that he was, after all, in a 'tradition' that was safely removed from the innovations let loose on the American art scene by the Armory Show and the Stieglitz circle, he was embraced by the Academy, heaped with prizes and awards, and became a favorite of the leading collectors of the day."¹⁹ It was a turnabout that roughly coincided with Ernest Lawson's Spanish sojourn.

Notes

- 1 Later that year Lawson won the Corcoran Gallery's William A. Clark Prize (and the Corcoran Silver Medal) for his *Boathouse: Winter—Harlem River*, shown in the museum's sixth biennial exhibition (17 December 1916–21 January 1917) and now part of the Corcoran's collection in Washington, D.C. The \$1,500 award helped defray the cost of the Spanish trip. I am grateful to Corcoran archivist Marisa Bourgoin for details on the award. Recent scholarship has focused on the artistic attraction to Spain, most notably M. Elizabeth Boone's *España: American Artists and the Spanish Experience* (New York: Hollis Taggart Galleries, 1999).
- 2 For the first quote, by James Gibbon Huneker, see F. Newlin Price, "Lawson, of the 'Crushed Jewels,'" *International Studio* 78 (February 1924): 367. For the last quotes, see Edward Penfield, *Spanish Sketches* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1911), 59, 87.
- 3 Duncan Phillips, "Ernest Lawson," *American Magazine of Art* 8 (May 1917): 259.
- 4 Waldo Frank, "Self-discovery in Spain," in *Memoirs of Waldo Frank*, ed. Alan Trachtenberg (Amherst: Univ. of Massachusetts Press, 1973), 129.

- 5 See Ameen Rihani, "Landscape Painting in America: Ernest Lawson," *International Studio* 72 (February 1921): cxiv; Frederic Fairchild Sherman, "The Landscape of Ernest Lawson," *Art in America* 8 (December 1919): 33; "Art Notes: Spanish Paintings by Ernest Lawson," *New York Times*, 4 February 1917; "Ernest Lawson at Daniel's," unidentified clipping, 1 March 1919, in "Lawson" vertical file, American Art/National Portrait Gallery Library, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.; and "Ernest Lawson's Spanish Pictures," *Fine Arts Journal* 35 (March 1917): 227.
- 6 The artist's daughter recalled, "My father and Max Kuehne ground all their own paints, and Kuehne had become very interested in the formulas for making paints, so they made good quality paint with the real oxides and everything." Transcript of an interview with Margaret Lawson Bensco, Berkeley, California, 7 September 1976, 15, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.
- 7 The first long quote is from F. W. Coburn's review of the Lawson exhibition at Vose Gallery, Boston; unidentified clipping in reel 1788, frame 997, Margaret Lawson Bensco Papers, Archives of American Art. For the artist's quote, see Ernest Lawson to Sallie Casey Thayer, Kansas City, 26 April 1921, Thayer/Correspondence/Artists file, University Archives, Spencer Research Library, University of Kansas, Lawrence.
- 8 A. Philip McMahon, "Some Aspects of Ignacio Zuloaga," *Art Bulletin* 7, no. 4 (June 1925): 117. For more on Zuloaga's reception in the United States, see Suzanne L. Stratton, *Ignacio Zuloaga in America, 1909–1926* (New York: Spanish Institute, 1989). Peirce is quoted in Margaret Varga, *Waldo Peirce* (New York: Hyperion Press, 1941), 64.
- 9 Arthur Griffiths, "The Artist in Spain," *Magazine of Art* (London) 4 (1881): 30.
- 10 "Seen in the World of Art: Painter Who Has Discovered Coney Island," unidentified and undated clipping, reel 1788, frame 1041, Ernest Lawson Papers, Archives of American Art.
- 11 See McMahon, "Some Aspects of Ignacio Zuloaga," 124; and Waldo Frank, *Virgin Spain: Scenes from the Spiritual Drama of a Great People* (New York: Boni & Liveright, 1926), 124. Zuloaga is quoted in Stratton, *Ignacio Zuloaga in America*, 19. The verse from "A orillas del Duero" is part of "Campos de Castilla (1907–17)" in Antonio Machado, *Poesia* (Barcelona: Vicens Vives, 1995), 63. I am grateful to Patrick Frank for his translation.
- 12 Christian Brinton, "Zuloaga and the National Note in Spanish Art," *Craftsman* 16 (May 1909): 138.
- 13 Frank, *Virgin Spain*, 9.
- 14 See Frank, *Virgin Spain*, 123, for the quote. On the bridge motif, see Valerie Ann Leeds, *Ernest Lawson* (Santa Fe: Gerald Peters Gallery, 2000), 78 (in which Toledo's San Martin bridge is mis-titled as *Segovia*) and 79 (High Bridge).
- 15 For an example by Kuehne, see *Approach to Toledo*, fig. 39c in *The Early Paintings of Max Kuehne* (New York: Hirschl & Adler Galleries, 1972).
- 16 A. E. Gallatin, *Max Kuehne* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1924), 7.
- 17 See Adeline Lee Karpiscak, *Ernest Lawson 1873–1939* (Tucson: Univ. of Arizona Museum of Art, 1979), 26, and, for the quote, Phillips, "Ernest Lawson," 262. On at least one occasion late in life, Lawson copied (as opposed to reworking) one of his initial Spanish subjects. Lawson's hostess in Florida reported to the artist's wife that "Ernie let a chap [Homer Wade] here have a picture that he painted from one of these canvases done in Spain. I don't know if this sort of thing is out of order or not, Ernie simply copies one of his own canvases." See Katherine Powell, Coral Gables, Florida, to Ella Lawson, 12 December 1940, reel 1788, frame 976, Margaret Lawson Bensco Papers, Archives of American Art.
- 18 Henry and Sidney Berry-Hill, *Ernest Lawson, American Impressionist* (Leigh-on-Sea, England: 1968), 35. For an example of the small landscape panels, see fig. 51.
- 19 Hilton Kramer, "Bringing an Entire Career to Life," *New York Times*, 19 December 1976. Lawson exhibited three paintings in the famed Armory Show, an act of apostasy that the academy evidently forgave or forgot.