

Sandor Leopold Landeau

A cloak of mystery and a series of enigmatic moves, marked the life of one of La Crosse's most distinguished artists. Samuel Leopold Landau was born in Hungary (maybe) in 1864 (or was it 1860?). He grew up in Cincinnati, Ohio, where his father had a small business. But somewhere along the way he changed his name to Sandor Leopold Landeau and, as far as his family was concerned, vanished into thin air.

His story was that he had left the family home in Ohio when he was 15 (or maybe 19) and relocated to La Crosse, a bustling lumber and mill town, to take art lessons--even though the Cincinnati Art scene he left behind was a vibrant one. How he could have learned about an art teacher here who would have made the move worthwhile is puzzling. There was a crayon and water color artist/teacher, Guy F. Monroe, on Main Street, but only after 1885.

By his account he would have arrived in our fair city by 1879 or 1880. The first city directory showing his name was that for 1889, which leaves several years unaccounted for. The directory suggests that he came here at the earliest in 1887. He is listed as having a studio in the MacMillan Building, Room 304, where he offered classes and pursued his career of painting, referring to himself as "professor." It also indicates that he roomed there as well.

There was little doubt that he was talented and at ease both with water colors and oils, but he had yet to make his mark as a professional. He incurred debts over those early years, sometimes offering a painting or two to make them good.

And he sold some paintings to local supporters, including to some of the young men of his acquaintance.

After a trip to the Southwest in 1889, Landeau returned with a number of paintings, one of them, "A Halt in the Mesa," hangs in the magazine section of the Main Library. It was purchased by local residents and given anonymously to the library in 1890. And he had other commissions: In a January, 1892, article in the La Crosse Republican and Leader a reporter noted that the drop curtain "completed by Professor S. L. Landeau of this city," complemented the stage at the Park Theater, making it "a little gem." Landeau also did a painting for the Columbian Exposition of 1893 in Chicago—though it is uncertain whether it was ever shown there.

That same year he found a benefactor to help support his further training in Paris—Mrs. Louise Wood Withee of La Crosse. Mrs. Withee was the widow of Niran Withee, who was a lumberman in Clark County and who had interests in mills in La Crosse. Two of her sons, Charles and Haskell, helped support Landeau as did local attorney John E. McConnell and local doctor Edward Evans, all contemporaries of Landeau.

Several letters extant from Landeau to McConnell trace his trip to Paris in the late fall of 1893. During his first year there he sent back a number of paintings for McConnell to offer for sale (apparently at O. J. Oyen's at 509 Main St.) to help satisfy Landeau's creditors. But the bad economic times had the effect of poor or no sales. And Landeau was forced to let his debts ride as well as watch every sou he spent in Paris.

Landeau trained at Academie Julian in Paris, and had high hopes of gaining some recognition by having a painting accepted by the yearly Salon. In the meantime he had visits from Helmus Thompson, then the Withee brothers, then Dr. Bradfield, and finally Dr. Evans and Dr. Adolph Gundersen (in Europe to study the latest surgical practices), all from La Crosse. It was apparently during the latter visit in 1896 that Landeau painted the full-length portrait of “Dr. Edward Evans” that, along with an earlier painting, “Misty Morning on the Mississippi,” is in the Smithsonian Archives of American Art.

At last for the 1896 Salon, Landeau’s painting, “The Remorse of Judas,” was accepted. He had achieved his goal, and he apparently felt his training was about finished. He had paintings accepted for the Salon in the two subsequent years as well. He returned to the States—perhaps to La Crosse—then went to New York City, where in December, 1899, he married Marie Louise Whitney, whom he had met on a painting excursion to Palestine the year before, and they soon left for Paris.

In the meantime Landeau’s family, who had never given up on him, made some connections and learned he was not, as they had feared, dead, but living under an altered name. But apparently no contact was made even then. Paris became the Landeauss’ home base, though New York City served as a backup for the years from 1900 to 1915.

During that time he was involved in a number of exhibitions both here and abroad. His outstanding works were: “The Village Story-Teller” at the Art Institute of Chicago; “Samson,” 1900; “Annunciation to the Shepherds,” which

won the Wannamaker Prize that same year; "Lecture Intime" at Chicago again in 1906; "A Prayer for the Lost at Sea" at the Paris Salon, 1907, for which he won a gold medal; and "La Parure" at the same salon.

A daughter, Marie Louise, was born to them in Paris in June, 1909. During the winter of 1912-13, the Landeaus moved to Rome. Mrs. Landeau wanted her daughter to experience the personal teaching of Maria Montessori who was operating her new *casa dei bambini* school there. Mrs. Landeau and daughter returned to Paris in the spring, but there is no indication that the painter did. There were hints that the marriage was in trouble.

At the Academie Julian from 1893-95, one of Landeau's best friends was the Minnesota-born painter Alexis Jean Fournier. They remained friends over the years as they strove for recognition. Along the way Fournier joined Elbert Hubbard's Roycroft Community in western New York. Fournier urged Landeau to join the community, and Landeau, who apparently was separated from his wife and who was concerned about the war front being so near Paris in 1915, decided to visit Roycroft.

Roycroft was a reformist community, strongly supportive of the arts and crafts movement. Elbert Hubbard started the group in East Aurora, a small town outside of Buffalo, New York, in 1895. Because of its devotion to excellence in the arts and crafts, it gained a national reputation, bringing its membership up to almost 500 at one point. It was a haven for artists of every kind to develop at their own pace, a hive of artistic activity.

Landeau joined the community in 1915, only a month before the founder and his wife were lost in the sinking of the Lusitania. For the next several years Landeau continued painting there, participating in several showings a year, including at least three entries along the way at the Art Institute of Chicago. As far as is known, he did not return to La Crosse, though he seems to have kept his studio in the MacMillan building until 1922.

Debts seemed to hound him in the final years as they had all his life. He was still trying to sell some of his paintings following the end of World War I just to try to make ends meet. He died in East Aurora in 1924—"in comparative poverty and isolation."

His paintings rarely appear at auction, and many seem untraceable, some, of course, in private hands, but equally unavailable even at large museums. Besides the two painting in La Crosse mentioned earlier, there are perhaps a score of more held by local people, originally sold or exchanged for debt to benefactors. In the July 20, 1952, La Crosse Tribune, Susan McCabe traced several of these to their local owners, and the paintings, some of local scenes, some of Parisian scenes, have been kept in the families of his benefactors.