Primary Maker: George Lehman
Title: View of Borie's Factory on the Canal at Manayunk
Date: 1827
Medium: Watercolor, gouache, selective glazing, and graphite with scratching out on paper, laid on heavy paper
Dimensions: Overall: 16 13/16 × 24 in. (42.7 × 61 cm)
Credit Line: Purchase, Watson Fund and PECO Foundation Fund for Drawings
Object Number: 2017.29.1

Classification: DRAWINGS

Curatorial Remarks:
George Lehman, one of the artists who worked with John James Audubon on “The Birds of America,” was born around 1803 in Switzerland. He worked as a printmaker (lithographer, engraver, and aquatintist) and ornamental painter in Philadelphia from ca. 1825 to 1870. Lehman immigrated to the United States as a “printer,” arriving aboard the ship Howard in New York City with his parents and siblings on June 11, 1824. Also a talented landscapist, Lehman exhibited views of Pennsylvania and Switzerland at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts beginning in 1825, and served as Audubon’s landscape assistant on his expeditions to Charleston and Florida during 1831–32. Between 1833 and 1834 Lehman partnered in the printing firm of Childs & Lehman in Philadelphia, having delineated works printed by Childs as early as 1827, and subsequently with the French lithographer P.S. Duval in Lehman & Duval (1835–37). Leaving the partnership, Lehman continued to delineate works for Duval and to work as a lithographer in Philadelphia until 1870. Audubon had met Lehman in October 1824 in Pittsburgh. Returning from his first trip to England in 1829, after establishing his successful partnership with the printmaker...
Havell, he stopped in Philadelphia and began working with Lehman. As JJA wrote to his wife Lucy, “I have found . . . Lehman a German whom I knew at Pittsburgh 5 Years since who is helping me with my plants . . . “ Watercolors by Lehman are rare, although “The Annual Exhibition Record of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts 1807–1870” lists about a dozen watercolors that the artist exhibited between 1825 and 1831 before he departed Philadelphia with Audubon. “View of Borie’s Factory on the Canal at Manayunk” is one of the heretofore missing works Lehman exhibited in 1828 at Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts (no. 231). He painted it with a sophisticated mix of media that parallels the one used by Audubon himself, but in an earlier, more conservative style. The beautiful work reveals why the legendary Audubon selected Lehman as one of the five artists he commissioned to render settings for his avian tableaux (Lehman participated in at least 32 of the Audubon’s watercolors held by the N-YHS). It also suggests, as is the case with George Mason who assisted the artist in 1821–22, that Audubon first drew the background compositions of his watercolors in graphite and that his assistants would complete the landscapes or botanicals. This large and ambitious watercolor proves that Audubon challenged his collaborators to paint on his level and inspired them to cultivate their skills. Lehman rose to the occasion to become Audubon’s most accomplished assistant. Only with this watercolor can one make the argument about why Audubon was attracted to Lehman and begin to chart the Philadelphia artist’s development. It is telling that after his southern expedition with the naturalist-artist, Lehman returned to his primary occupation as a printmaker. This fascinating watercolor also captures important historical elements of the Industrial Revolution in America and a celebration of new technology. The Manayunk or Flat Rock Canal is today a remaining segment of the canal system built by the Schuylkill Navigation System, sometimes called the Schuylkill Canal, which was once over 106 miles long, stretching from the anthracite region near Pottsville down the Schuylkill River into Philadelphia. One of the first anthracite canals built to bring coal through this network, its development parallels that of the Erie Canal. Manayunk is six miles from Philadelphia’s harbor and located on fast moving water, making it an ideal location for the early textile spinning mills and glass factories starting up on the English model in New England. Lehman’s watercolor depicts an action-filled scene on the canal at Manayunk with a horse-drawn barge towed on the canal and a boy fishing from a bridge beneath threatening storm clouds. In the middle ground stands the cotton-mill established by Borie, Laguerenne & Keating in 1825; it was one of eight large mills crowded together that by the early 1830s led to Manayunk being called the “Manchester of America.” Two of its smokestacks are ablaze with yellow and red fires. Inexpensive water power and new technology concentrated the industry in Manayunk. The labor of immigrant children, who typically began work at age nine, and women generated the profits. An investigation of 1837 found the wages for children at between $.50 and $1.00 per week. Some of the youngest, according to the testimony of the Manayunk schoolmaster, earned no more than $.75 every two weeks. Women were paid about $2.00 a week. Almost immediately after the Factory Regulation Act of 1833 set a maximum ten-hour day for English textile workers, the demand for the same restrictions spread to the mills of Manayunk. The mostly female workers in the mills of J.J. Borie were among those who walked out over a 20 percent wage reduction in August 1833. The women protested over “thirteen hours of hard labor” and unhealthy working conditions. This led to the immediate formation of the Working People of Manayunk to mobilize workers and subsequently to the Trades Union of the City and County of Philadelphia (TUCCP). By May 1834 the triumphant workers were back at their jobs with a five percent raise. The subject matter of Lehman’s landscape encompasses significant stories about the American Industrial Revolution, transportation, and the beginning of labor movements that involved child labor and the employment of women at lower wages. Lehman’s watercolor also contributes to an understanding of the history of early American watercolors and the development of landscape painting in the country after “The Hudson River Portfolio.” It also helps to tell more completely the epic story of Audubon’s The Birds of America” and demonstrates why Audubon engaged the artist as a collaborator.

Signed: Signed and dated at lower left in black ink: Geo. Lehman pinx. 1827.
Related Objects: