



George Luks
American, 1866 - 1933

The Fire Boss

1925

oil on canvas

overall: 153.1 x 128 cm (60 1/4 x 50 3/8 in.)

framed: 181 x 156.2 x 6.4 cm (71 1/4 x 61 1/2 x 2 1/2 in.)

Inscription: lower right: George Luks / Pottsville. Pa.

Chester Dale Collection 1954.2.1

ENTRY

Throughout the 1920s, George Luks often vacationed in Pottsville, Pennsylvania, the heart of the state's anthracite coal-mining industry. Art collector Duncan Phillips observed Luks's dedication to Pennsylvania coal towns and noted, "In recent years he has returned to this section to portray the stark desolation of mining towns yielding him grim humor, dramatic suggestion." [1] The artist spent his youth in the mining town of Shenandoah, in northern Schuylkill County, and briefly worked at a drugstore in Pottsville before he moved to Philadelphia to study at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. According to a biographer, he had an "emotional bond" with the region, which he regarded as his home. [2] Although genteel and cultured, Luks's family was sympathetic to the plight of coal miners; his parents often aided widows of the notorious Molly Maguires, and his multilingual father served as an interpreter for immigrant miners in the Pennsylvania courts. [3] This early familiarity with the violent and strike-ridden mining industry may have predisposed the young artist to reject the decorous subject matter prevalent at the turn of the century and gravitate toward the grittier realism that often characterized the work of The Eight.

Toward the end of his career, Luks resumed summer painting trips to Pottsville, where he painted many images of life in the mines. These mining subjects culminated in the mural *Necho Allen Discovering Coal* [fig. 1], which depicts the hunter who was reputed to have discovered anthracite while camping on a mountain near Pottsville in 1790. [4] A reporter observed that while working on the mural, Luks "often painted in a haze of nostalgia with tugs on the heartstrings that led back to his youth in the mountains." The artist described his fascination with

the miners and their lifestyle:

You know, these friends of mine, the miners, are the greatest individuals in the world. Strong, without fear, they leave their homes each morning with no established certainty that they will return to their wives and children that night. They have come to live in the proximity of danger, and they accept the hazards of their work as a more meager individual accepts the fact that he will drive to his city office in the morning.

Through this constant living with danger, much that is mysterious, superstitious perhaps, certainly of a parcel of mysticism has come into their minds. They dwell in, well, call it sort of a Gothic twilight. It is a quality like that of the tale-weaving mind that arises about hearth fires in the long dusks of Northern lands. [5]

Luks painted *The Fire Boss* during the summer of 1925. The near life-size image is a personification of a profession rather than a portrait of a specific individual. Luks's friend and protégé, the artist Nicholas Bervinchak (American, 1903 - 1978), said that Luks had arranged for a miner named Willie Olearchick to pose for the picture, and that the artist had consumed five bottles of whiskey while working on it. Luks—whose memory of the event was understandably impaired—informed another source that he had bought the clothes off a miner's back and persuaded a library janitor named Davy to pose in them. [6] Luks represented the accoutrements of the miner's profession accurately. Union regulations made after 1925 rendered the clothing and equipment seen here obsolete; the miner's "soft shell" leather helmet and shoes were prohibited for being insufficiently sturdy, and the carbide light attached to the helmet was soon replaced because it could only be ignited with an open flame, a potentially hazardous procedure. [7]

For two weeks in October 1925, Luks exhibited *The Fire Boss* as the centerpiece of an exhibition of about 30 paintings, watercolors, and drawings at the Pottsville Free Public Library. A local reviewer pronounced it "a canvas which will have wide appeal." She continued that the subject was "just back from his responsibilities under ground, with his miner's cap, bucket and boots, the whole figure is eloquent to the people of this region. Those searching for technique will find much to

admire, notably the strong modeling of face and hands with the smooth texture of the white rubber boots.” [8] A fire boss was responsible for examining a mine for dangers, such as explosive, poisonous, or suffocating gases. Usually he was the first person to enter a mine in order to verify its safety before the shift crew entered.

There have been diverging opinions in the scholarly literature as to whether Luks intended *The Fire Boss* to be a message of social reform, or if he was attracted to the subject primarily because its relentless realism and pictorial objectivity agreed with the aesthetic ideals he had learned from Robert Henri (American, 1865 - 1929). [9] Jules Prown viewed the painting as both “an immediate, direct visual report and social commentary,” and provided this eloquent description: “The miner, after a day of hard physical labor, sits covered with soot. His bulky figure sags from exhaustion. Sapped of energy, his muscles can barely counteract the downward pull of gravity. Depression and exhaustion pervade this somber image. There is nothing in the theme or its treatment to evoke pleasure. There is a grim message of truth about one man’s world, and there is an implicit point that the miner’s lot should be improved.” [10] Another writer, who observed that Luks’s portraits “are often chastened caricatures,” saw less pathos in the image: “*The Miner* [*The Fire Boss*], seated in obscurity, is blue and grim, his eyes black caverns of sight, staring steady anger and persistence from under his cap lid.” [11] The miner’s pose is reminiscent of the famous Greek Hellenistic bronze *Boxer at Rest* (late 4th to early 2nd century BCE, Museo Nazionale Romano, Rome), and Luks conferred something of his notoriously pugnacious spirit to the figure, who remains defiant despite his bedraggled appearance. The painting’s predominantly blue-gray palette suggests the gloomy depths of a mine and further underscores the fire boss’s danger-ridden subterranean existence.

Luks’s summer visit to Pottsville coincided with the beginning of a protracted strike that a historian of coal mining described as “the most bitter struggle in the anthracite industry since collective bargaining was introduced” in the late 19th century. [12] The strike endured from September 1, 1925 until February 12, 1926, and involved some 158,000 workers in and around Pennsylvania’s anthracite-producing region. American mining had suffered from labor unrest for years, with management and workers contesting such issues as salary increases, the right to join the union, and sanitary and safety conditions. At the time Luks painted *The Fire Boss*, a union reporter complained that “in the anthracite industry one man is injured about every four minutes and one man is killed every four hours.” [13]

Luks's depiction of *The Fire Boss* effectively communicates aspects unique to the coal mining labor dispute. The miner's assertive physical presence and defiant stare align with the fact that he was, like most miners in the midtwenties, a highly skilled contractor who worked without direct supervision and chose his own working hours. The average miner at this time was an "independent craftsman who was paid for the number of tons of coal he mined," and his work "required a high level of knowledge, experience, and dexterity, which were acquired . . . by serving an apprenticeship of variable length, depending on law and custom." [14]

The emphasis on the miner's hands stresses that mining was done manually prior to the introduction of mechanization. By 1925 efforts by the major steel and coal companies to increase production through mechanization and factory methods of supervision were met with tremendous resistance by miners reluctant to relinquish their independence. Management regarded older miners such as Luks's subject as truculent adherents to an outmoded system who were best replaced by unskilled workers. Even the fire boss's act of smoking a pipe can be interpreted as a gesture of resistance toward owners, whose ban on smoking outraged miners. [15]

Defiantly sitting on a pile of coal, Luks's miner is on the verge of being rendered a living anachronism by forces beyond his control. The image imparts a message similar to the one found in Carter Goodrich's 1925 book *The Miners' Freedom: A Study of the Working Life in a Changing Industry*, in which "The Miners' Freedom" is contrasted with "The New Discipline." The book's frontispiece, Lewis W. Hine's *The Miner and His Place* [fig. 2], is the photographic equivalent of Luks's painting.

Luks's exhibition of his mining pictures at the Pottsville Free Public Library was an unusually egalitarian gesture for the time; Guy Pène du Bois (American, 1884 - 1958) recollected that in New York's commercial galleries, "art was unquestionably designed for the captivation of tycoons." [16] Luks sent a telegram to his new dealer, Frank K. M. Rehn, and invited him to the event, commenting that there was "plenty interest here—twenty seven hundred people in on first ten days—got the world beater of a show for New York." [17] According to another source, a total of 3,500 viewers attended the exhibition. [18] The event stirred considerable interest in an area where almost half of the local population consisted of miners and their families. When the exhibition ended, Luks donated about a dozen drawings to the library, including a preliminary sketch for *The Fire Boss*, and the show traveled to the Frank K. M. Rehn Galleries on New York's Fifth Avenue. Evidently Luks was satisfied with the figure, because in 1927 he included a similar one seated on the left side of his *Necho Allen* mural.

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Other than the illustrations he made for the liberal magazine *The Verdict* in 1899, Luks seldom indulged in overt political radicalism to the extent that John Sloan (American, 1871 - 1951), George Bellows (American, 1882 - 1925), and Stuart Davis (American, 1892 - 1964) did. Although it was not created in a propagandistic spirit of socialist activism, *The Fire Boss* is a compelling image that arouses sympathy and admiration for the American laborer. In this respect, it is a fitting precursor to Philip Evergood's *Mine Disaster* [fig. 3] and Jack Delano's documentary photographs of life among the miners in Schuylkill County. [19] As a reviewer of the Rehn Galleries exhibition commented, "It will not take anybody more than two minutes to realize that Mr. Luks has been to the coal fields, that he has lived with the miners and with coal." [20]

Robert Torchia

July 24, 2024

COMPARATIVE FIGURES



fig. 1 George Luks, *Necho Allen Discovering Coal*, 1927, mural, Ciletti Memorial Library, Penn State Schuylkill



THE MINER AND HIS PLACE
Photo by Lewis W. Hine.
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fig. 2 Lewis W. Hine, *The Miner and His Place*, frontispiece to Carter Goodrich, *The Miners' Freedom: A Study of the Working Life in a Changing Industry* (Boston, 1925). Image courtesy of HathiTrust Digital Library



fig. 3 Philip Evergood, *Mine Disaster*, 1933–1937, oil on canvas, Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, Philadelphia, Edward H. Coates Fund

NOTES

- [1] Duncan Phillips, *Exhibition of Paintings by George Luks* (Washington, DC, 1926), n.p.
- [2] Robert B. Koslosky, “George Benjamin Luks, 1866–1933: The Painter of the Anthracite Region. A Biography and Analysis,” 3, transcript of unpublished paper presented at the Schuylkill County Arts and Ethnic Center, Pottsville, PA, October 20, 1979, NGA curatorial files.
- [3] Stanley L. Cuba, Nina Kasanof, and Judith O’Toole, *George Luks: An American Artist* (Wilkes-Barre, PA, 1987), 8.
- [4] The mural was commissioned by the wealthy Pottsville art patron Henry Sheaffer, who presented it to the Necho Allen Hotel. Robert B. Koslosky, “George Benjamin Luks, 1866–1933: The Painter of the Anthracite Region. A Biography and Analysis,” 9–10, transcript of unpublished paper presented at the Schuylkill County Arts and Ethnic Center, Pottsville, PA, October 20, 1979, NGA curatorial files.
- [5] “Hard-Coal’s Spirit Shown in Mural,” *Philadelphia Public Ledger*, November 13, 1927, 2, Frank K. M. Rehn Galleries records, reel NY59/17, frame 401, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.
- [6] Robert B. Koslosky, “George Benjamin Luks, 1866–1933: The Painter of the Anthracite Region. A Biography and Analysis,” 10, transcript of unpublished paper presented at the Schuylkill County Arts and Ethnic Center, Pottsville, PA, October 20, 1979, NGA curatorial files.

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- [7] The equipment was identified by Officer Corley, who had worked as a miner in West Virginia at the time Luks painted this picture. NGA curatorial files.
- [8] Edith Patterson, “Art Exhibit Opened Today,” *Pottsville Daily Evening Republican*, October 5, 1925.
- [9] For an example of the latter opinion, see Margaret Bouton, *American Painting in the National Gallery of Art* (Washington, DC, 1959), 38. She wrote that *The Fire Boss* does not “attempt to pass judgment on social conditions. It is merely an objective presentation of the miner, such as his environment has made him.”
- [10] Jules Prown, *American Painting from Its Beginnings to the Armory Show* (Geneva, Switzerland, 1969), 129, color repro.
- [11] Leslie Katz, “The World of the Eight,” in *The Turn of the Century, Arts Yearbook 1* (New York, 1957), 71.
- [12] Arthur E. Suffern, *The Coal Miners’ Struggle for Industrial Status* (New York, 1926), 125; for a summary of the strike see 122–127; and “When the Strike Call Was Issued One Year Ago in the Anthracite Field,” *United Mine Workers Journal* 37, no. 19, October 1, 1926, 4.
- [13] “Anthracite Industry Is at a Standstill Because Operators Refuse to Negotiate a New Agreement,” *United Mine Workers Journal* 36, no. 17, September 1, 1925, 13.
- [14] Keith Dix, *What’s a Coal Miner to Do? The Mechanization of Coal Mining* (Pittsburgh, PA, 1988), 6.
- [15] Carter Goodrich, *The Miner’s Freedom: A Study of the Working Life in a Changing Industry* (Boston, 1925), 121–122.
- [16] Guy Pène du Bois, *Juliana Force and American Art, A Memorial Exhibition* (New York, 1949), 43.
- [17] Luks to Rehn, telegram, October 14, 1925, Frank K. M. Rehn Galleries records, reel D-291, frame 607, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.
- [18] October 1925 minutes, Minute Book, Pottsville Free Public Library, January 1921–December 1925, cited in Linda Dugan Partridge, “Souvenir from Pottsville: The Luks Portraits,” *John O’Hara Journal* 3 (Summer 1980): 62 n. 5. For a review of the event, see “Exhibition of Paintings Depicts Life in Coal Belt,” *Philadelphia Evening Public Ledger*, October 11, 1925.
- [19] For the latter see Vera Posever Curtis, *Photographic Memory: The Album in the Age of Photography* (New York, 2011).
- [20] Unidentified newspaper clipping, Frank K. M. Rehn Galleries records, reel NY59/17, frame 367, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.

TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The unlined plain-weave fabric support remains mounted on its original, six-member stretcher. The original tacking margins are intact, and the tacks attaching them to the stretcher are original. The fabric is preprimed with a thin white ground. The paint is applied *alla prima* (wet-on-wet), in an opaque, vigorously brushed manner. Fully loaded brushes were used to pull and drag color, sometimes scrubbing and mixing the paint on the surface. The blunt paint strokes in the figure are laid on in slabs of color, often ending in impasto, especially in the whites and highlights. The background was painted much more thinly. The painting is in good condition. The surface is coated with a layer of varnish applied randomly in broad swaths, some of which have dripped. There are gaps in the strokes of varnish, sometimes as wide as the brush used to apply it.

Michael Swicklik

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PROVENANCE

The artist [1866-1933]; his estate; (his estate sale, Parke-Bernet Galleries, New York, 5 April 1950, no. 80).[1] Hildegard [née Hildegard Loretta Sell, 1906-2005] and Anna Sosenko [1909-2000], New York; (their sale, Parke-Bernet Galleries, New York, 6 January 1954, no. 42); Chester Dale [1883-1962], New York; gift 1954 to NGA.

[1] 1954 sale catalogue incorrectly lists this sale as taking place in 1940. The painting sold for \$400.

EXHIBITION HISTORY

1925 Public Library, Pottsville, Pennsylvania, October 1925.

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American Paintings, 1900–1945

1925 Recent Paintings, Water-colors and Drawings Done in the Anthracite Coal Regions of Pennsylvania by George Luks, Frank K.M. Rehn Galleries, New York, November 1925, no. 1.

1926 Paintings, Sculpture and Prints in the Department of Fine Arts: Sesqui-Centennial International Exposition, Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1926, no. 466.

1935 Loan to display with permanent collection, Pennsylvania Museum of Art, Philadelphia, 1935-1936.

1951 Collection of Hildegard and Anna Sosenko, M.H. de Young Memorial Museum, San Francisco, 1951, no catalogue.

1965 The Chester Dale Bequest, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1965, unnumbered checklist.

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- 1959 Bouton, Margaret. *American Painting in the National Gallery of Art*. Washington, D.C., 1959 (Booklet Number One in *Ten Schools of Painting in the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.*): 38, color repro.
- 1965 *Paintings other than French in the Chester Dale Collection*. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1965: 60, repro.
- 1969 Prown, Jules David. *American Painting, From its Beginnings to the Armory Show*. Geneva, 1969: 129, color repro.
- 1970 *American Paintings and Sculpture: An Illustrated Catalogue*. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1970: 80, repro.
- 1980 *American Paintings: An Illustrated Catalogue*. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1980: 196, repro.
- 1981 Williams, William James. *A Heritage of American Paintings from the National Gallery of Art*. New York, 1981: 207, color repro. 221.
- 1984 Walker, John. *National Gallery of Art, Washington*. Rev. ed. New York, 1984: 572, no. 874, color repro.
- 1992 *American Paintings: An Illustrated Catalogue*. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1992: 229, repro.

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