

Lloyd Branson (1853-1925)



Born in Knox County (now part of Union County, TN), Lloyd Branson moved to Knoxville as a youth, where he is said to have been encouraged to pursue art by Dr. John M. Boyd, a prominent Knoxville physician. Branson's prodigious talent led to his being nicknamed the "boy artist." His first art teacher was portrait painter Flavius J. Fisher, in whose Knoxville studio Branson worked and studied from 1869 to 1871. After leaving the University of Tennessee due to its lack of an art program, he enrolled at the renowned National Academy of Design in New York and won a prize there in 1875 that enabled him to study in Europe. He returned to Knoxville in 1878 where his refined style set him apart from most of his fellow painters. At the turn of century, Branson's activities were based in a studio building he shared with photographer Frank McCrary at 130 Gay Street.

Not long after his return to Knoxville, Branson established a regional reputation as a broadly talented painter. His *After the Bath* won the bronze medal at the Cotton States Exposition in Atlanta in 1895, and he won the gold medal at the Appalachian Exposition in Knoxville in 1910 for *Hauling Marble*, one of his most successful compositions (currently on view in the Museum of East Tennessee History). Throughout his career he produced history paintings, landscapes, genre scenes and portraits with equal facility. Although Branson successfully mastered European techniques of 19th century academic painting, he is not known to have experimented with impressionism or avant garde styles.

Branson's chief fame, and earned income, rested on his ability as a portrait painter. Scores of Branson portraits hang in the courthouses and homes around East Tennessee. He was hailed by the *Atlanta Constitution* in 1879 as one of the leading "crayon artists of the South," a technique of enhancing a faint

photograph with charcoal to create a very lifelike portrait. Although Branson painted many portraits from life, the use of photographs enabled him to produce highly accurate posthumous portraits.

One of Branson's lasting contributions to the Knoxville art scene was as a teacher and as a founder of the Knoxville Sketch Club in the early 1880s, a predecessor of the Nicholson Art League. Branson taught painting and drawing to Adelia Armstrong (later Lutz), C. Mortimer Thompson, Mrs. Walter van Gilder and William Cary Ross, among others. His work also inspired good friend and fellow artist James Wallace, with whom Branson shared his studio. In addition to his role as an influential artist and teacher, and a central figure in the Nicholson Art League, Branson was a driving force in the organization of art exhibitions featured in the Appalachian Expositions of 1910 and 1911, and the National Conservation Exposition of 1913, each of which was held in Knoxville.