

Basic Detail Report



Title: City of Detroit

Date: 1943

Primary Maker: com.gallerysystems.emuseum.core.entities.RecordXPerson@3ee1c

Medium: Oil on board

Description: Detroit was a burgeoning metropolis when Richardson painted this canvas. The home of the American auto industry since the beginning of the twentieth century, it was a leading manufacturing center during World War II. Although Richardson often focused on industrial sites, here she trained her eye on the skyline. Dark skyscrapers frame an aerial view of the city and a contrasting silvery, muted grayish green light casts a calming atmosphere over the rooftops and parks spreading out below our vantage point. Richardson's fascination with local history was an interest she had shared with her father, a noted regional historian, since childhood. Here, she subtly documents a flourishing contemporary metropolis with a rich heritage through close observation and finely detailed renderings of the fabric of the city. The terracotta ornamentation, high chimneystacks, and steep-pitched roofs of the nineteenth-century brick structures contrast with modern skyscrapers, in all their geometric regularity. Richardson reduced human presence to a handful of figures and eliminated mundane elements of modernity such as

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street signs in this pristine and stately view-even cars, Detroit's lifeblood, are noticeably absent. Richardson explained, "As the . . . wife of a museum director, I am accustomed to thinking in terms of centuries." (1) Ready access to museum collections and art conservation experts led to her keen interest in the history of paint techniques and Western pictorial traditions. Richardson executed "City of Detroit" with a painstaking and time-consuming process developed from her knowledge of the Flemish Old Masters: she laid down numerous layers of paint, requiring long periods of drying in between; allowed the completed painting to dry for one year; rubbed the canvas with bread to remove shine; varnished it; and, finally, polished it with a silk cloth. (2) The aerial vista recalls the panoramic views of many of Hudson River School paintings, another interest of Richardson's. As those works focused on features of the landscape more than people, Richardson's aerial view directs our attention to structures rather than inhabitants, downplaying the most transient qualities of the city. Nineteenth-century Americans believed the nation's greatest resource was the land itself; Richardson's painting asserts that the city was America's twentieth-century face of power and endurance. N.N. NOTES: 1. Quoted in Charlotte Streifer Rubinstein, *American Women Artists from the Early Indian Times to the Present* (Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1982), p. 238. 2. *Ibid.*, p. 239. Dimensions: 20 x 28 1/8 in. (50.8 x 71.5 cm)