



James B. Needham (American, 1850 - 1931)
Untitled (River Scene), 1898
Oil on cradled panel
12 x 8 1/2 inches (framed 17 x 13 1/2 inches)

Inscribed and dated with artist's diamond shaped monogram on reverse.

#4532



James B. Needham

James Bolivar Needham was born in Chatham, Ontario, Canada in 1850. He was an African-American man who made his living working on the merchant ships that plied their trade on the Great Lakes. As a teenager, his work on the lumber schooners is what likely brought him to Chicago at the age of 17. His passion was lovingly painting scenes of the ship traffic and daily life on the Chicago river, before the turn of the last century. Needham had little formal training. According to his brother, he may have studied briefly at the Art Institute and had some instruction from sculptor Lorado Taft. Through Taft's involvement with the Central Art Association, Needham even exhibited a painting through the association in 1896. In Chicago, Needham supported himself at various times as a janitor, caretaker and as a house and decorative painter. There is a newspaper article that details Needham's fall from a scaffold during his work for Ivison Decorating Company for the 1893 Columbian Exposition.

Apart from this exhibition, Needham did not further exhibit or sell his paintings. He lived in a simple loft room that was filled with his artwork which was packed in boxes and stacked against walls. On New Year's eve 1931, a fire broke out in Needham's room. The 81 year old artist died of smoke inhalation while trying to save his paintings. About 30 of Needham's paintings survive today, the bulk of which are in the collection of the Chicago History Museum.