

A Green Triangle for a Pine Tree, a Zigzag for a Wave

John Marin produced his first watercolors in 1888 and later became known internationally as a master of the medium. In the catalogue that accompanied Marin's exhibition at the 25th Venice Biennale in 1950—the first time in history half of the American pavilion was dedicated to a single artist—illustrious arts patron Duncan Phillips lauded him as “one of the most gifted and important painters since Cézanne, and perhaps the best of all the watercolor masters.”¹

Marin was deeply connected to the land. He traversed the Northeast hiking, boating, and fishing, all while documenting his surroundings and adventures with his portable painting supplies, easel, and paper. Marin's advice to aspiring painters was to “go look at the way a bird flies, a man walks, the sea moves. There are certain laws. You have to know them. They are nature's laws and you have to follow them just as nature follows them.”²

On March 13, 1916, the landmark *Forum Exhibition of Modern American Painters* opened at The Anderson Galleries on East 40th Street in New York. The exhibition, organized to address the question “what is modern painting?” presented the latest developments from the American avant-garde. Regarding his own works in the exhibition, Marin wrote in the accompanying catalogue: “These works are meant as constructed expressions of the inner senses, responding to things seen and felt . . . There are great movements and small movements, great things and small things—all bearing intimacy in their separations and joinings.”³

While most of the works illustrated in the *Forum* exhibition catalogue retain at least some representational qualities, approximately one third—by Andrew Dasburg, Arthur Dove, Marsden Hartley, Stanton Macdonald-Wright, and Morgan Russell—were daringly abstract and may have inspired Marin to experiment further with abstract approaches as he continued to define his personal creative lexicon during this period. Marin's watercolors from 1916 to 1919 reveal the artist's desire to synthesize two parallel passions—a faithful commitment to the natural world and the modernist drive toward abstraction.



FIG 1 Paul Strand. *Alfred Stieglitz*. C. 1917. Gelatin silver print, 9 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 7 $\frac{3}{8}$ inches. Georgia O'Keeffe Museum, Santa Fe

Echo Lake and Bushkill Creek, Pennsylvania (1916)

In the summer of 1916, Marin traveled to Echo Lake, Pennsylvania, in the Kittatinny Mountains near the Delaware Water Gap. “This year heat, more heat and more of it,” Marin wrote in a letter to his dealer, the legendary gallerist Alfred Stieglitz (fig. 1). “Up here, it is woods and more woods smeared all over the landscape. Mountains without much character? Until you find it.”⁴ During that sweltering summer, Marin drew inspiration from the

FIG 2 John Marin. *Echo Lake District, Pennsylvania*. 1916. Watercolor on paper, 16½ x 19¼ inches. The John Marin Foundation

FIG 3 John Marin. *Region (Cocotte) on Bushkill Creek, Pennsylvania*. 1916. Watercolor on paper, 21¼ x 23½ inches. The John Marin Foundation



wooded landscape to create “subtle and sensitive” watercolors that convey “lushness,” as Sheldon Reich observed in his catalogue raisonné of work by Marin.⁵

In his Echo Lake watercolors, Marin applied vibrant hues in delicate washes to achieve the effect of a hazy landscape lightened by the sun. Soft boundaries between shapes reveal the paper support. These forms appear to float in expansive space, while calligraphic marks, such as the zigzag line in the center of *Echo Lake District, Pennsylvania* (fig. 2), create definition. While Marin used this type of mark-making throughout his career, he employed the technique with increasing frequency during his sojourn in Echo Lake.⁶

That same year, Marin also worked in a neighboring region of Pennsylvania near Bushkill Creek. Of unusually large, nearly square, scale, the Bushkill Creek watercolors feature dazzling colorful orbs that burst from expanses of negative space, creating a mosaic effect. In *Region (Cocotte) on Bushkill Creek, Pennsylvania* (fig. 3), Marin “reduced the representational references to a bare minimum, and the meaning of the painting appears to lie exclusively within the subtle adjustment of color spots to white paper,” Reich remarked.⁷ While this work shares the green, pink, and red hues of *Echo Lake District, Pennsylvania*, the composition is quite spare, and the line significantly more delicate.

A review of a winter 1916 exhibition called attention to these innovative abstract developments: “. . . [Marin] in one short year [had] gone far toward conquering many of the deeper concerns of composition . . . He has attained to a rhythmic conception of his subject-matter until it has become abstract. . . .”⁸



FIG 4 John Marin. *Tree, Beach and Sea, Small Point, Maine*. 1917. Watercolor on paper, 16 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 19 $\frac{3}{8}$ inches. The John Marin Foundation

FIG 5 John Marin. *Rocks and Sea, Maine*. C. 1917. 16 $\frac{5}{8}$ x 19 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Alfred Stieglitz Collection, 1949

FIG 6 Alfred Stieglitz. *John Marin at 291*. C. 1917. Platinum print, 4 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 3 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches. Private collection

Small Point, Maine (1917)

Maine held special significance for Marin, and beginning in 1914, the artist spent much of his time there until his death in 1953. His first experience in Maine was in Small Point, near Casco Bay. When he returned there in 1917, Marin painted *Tree, Beach and Sea, Small Point, Maine* (fig. 4) which depicts the dramatic cliffs and windswept trees characteristic of the region. This watercolor belongs to a group of works Marin produced during this period that share compositional similarities (see, e.g., fig. 5). In each, the separation between sea and shore follows a dividing diagonal from upper left to lower right. A high horizon line compresses pictorial space, and dense lines provide definition to key passages made from aqueous applications of pigment.

Most remarkable in this example, however, is the central tree form. Here, Marin chose a dense application of watercolor, allowing it to bleed into the paper to achieve an ethereal silhouette, which he then likely blotted to create additional texture and to blend the two shades of green. Lastly, he accentuated individual leaves with staccato charcoal lines. *Tree, Beach and Sea, Small Point, Maine* reveals several of Marin's influences, including Japanese painting (apparent in its stylized forms) and Winslow Homer, who famously painted the Maine coastline in watercolor, frequently composed on a diagonal axis.

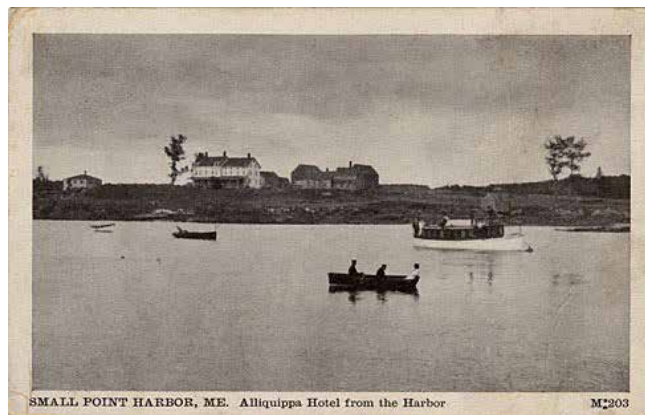
1917 marked an important turning point within both Marin's artistic development and the evolution of modernism. World War I forced Stieglitz to close his 291 gallery (see fig. 6). Fellow American painter Arthur Dow published "Modernism in Art," calling for form over subject with an abstract approach to art similar to music. Marin's work from 1917, the year after the *Forum Exhibition*, is "pushed toward abstraction, in several directions," National Gallery of Art curator Ruth Fine concluded. "Never again did Marin veer so far from nature."⁹



FIG 7 1907 postcard featuring Small Point Harbor, Maine, and Alliquippa Hotel, where Marin and his family spent regular summers

FIG 8 John Marin. *Region Rowe, Massachusetts*. 1918. Watercolor and charcoal on paper, 21¼ x 26¼ inches. The John Marin Foundation

FIG 9 John Marin. *Region Rowe, Massachusetts*. 1918. Watercolor on paper, 21½ x 26¾ inches. The John Marin Foundation



Rowe, Berkshire Mountains, and Hoosac Mountains, Massachusetts (1918)

In the summer of 1918, Marin and his family traveled to Rowe, Massachusetts, rather than Small Point, Maine, as their usual accommodations at the Alliquippa Hotel were booked (see fig. 7).¹⁰ Located in the Berkshire Mountains, this region held lasting appeal for Marin, who returned there throughout his career. During that first summer in Rowe, Marin began working in his largest watercolor format to date: 21 by 26 inches (see, e.g., figs. 8 and 9). This series, according to Reich, includes “some of the most impressive landscapes of his life.”¹¹

Scale was not the only element Marin modified that year. In the Rowe pictures, he also began to use charcoal with increasing frequency. The artist first applied watercolor over a minimal underdrawing and subsequently passed over that layer with charcoal in some areas to reinforce outlines, as in the boundary between the field and trees in *Region Rowe, Massachusetts* (fig. 8). Marin’s experience with charcoal during this period drew his attention increasingly to the importance of line, which he emphasized with innovative techniques including incising and scraping: “Given that charcoal is used so extensively in these paintings—far more, for example, than in the Maine seascapes of the previous year—the Rowe paintings function as a sort of watershed,” Fine observed. “From this point on, Marin’s use of many linear media and of linear incising and scraping would be even more important.”¹²

As he continued to paint Rowe, Marin developed an increasingly abstract approach as he simplified his application of color into expansive passages that anticipate later post-war movements such as Color Field painting. In *Region Rowe, Massachusetts* (fig. 9), for instance, “Color planes overlap color planes, giving the flat areas a renewed sense of vitality,” Reich remarked.¹³ Vertical streaks of



FIG 10 John Marin. *Mountain Shapes and Sky Shapes, Hoosic Mountains, Massachusetts*. C. 1918. Watercolor on paper, 16 x 19 inches. The John Marin Foundation

FIG 11 Vintage postcard featuring aerial view of Stonington on Deer Isle, Maine

FIG 12 John Marin. *Deer Isle, Maine*. 1919. Watercolor on paper, 13¾ x 16⅞ inches. The John Marin Foundation

orange, green, and pink contrast with very light washes. Against these sweeping passages of color, a small schematic tree interrupts the lower right quadrant, creating an unexpected juxtaposition of textures between line and wash. Another work from that same year, *Mountain Shapes and Sky Shapes, Hoosic Mountains, Massachusetts* (fig. 10), advances Marin's non-objective experimentation to its pinnacle through its structural forms completely devoid of vegetation or modeling.

Deer Isle-Stonington, Maine (1919)

In 1919, Marin worked in the Deer Isle-Stonington area of Maine, farther north than Small Point. He described the breathtaking landscape in a letter to Stieglitz from that year: "There are mountains everywhere piling up out at sea, mountains tumbling over and into one another with curious shapes and most wonderful islands, severe, rocky, forbidding, beautiful . . . weird phantoms of monsters, unreal yet strangely real."¹⁴ While the Rowe watercolors typically feature a perspective looking up toward the mountains, this year Marin transitioned to a vantage point out at sea (see fig. 11).

In the Deer Isle-Stonington watercolors, Marin synthesized techniques with which he had experimented during the preceding years. He combined his use of negative space in the Echo Lake and Small Point watercolors with the broad color fields of the Rowe pictures to form colorful, stylized landscapes in 1919, such as *Deer Isle, Maine* (fig. 12). In this lyrical example, abstract shapes surround the natural forms of tree branches. In other works from this year, shapes are directly informed by elements of the landscape. In *From Deer Isle, Maine* (fig. 13), for instance, an angular blue tree anchors the right side of the composition, while oblique grey triangles emanate from a single vanishing



FIG 13 John Marin. *From Deer Isle, Maine*. 1919. Watercolor on paper, 13 x 16½ inches. The John Marin Foundation

FIG 14 John Marin. *Tree Forms, Stonington, Maine*. 1919. Watercolor on paper, 19¼ x 16 inches. The John Marin Foundation

point on the horizon to suggest the sky. These segmented divisions of sky—reminiscent of sunrays—anticipate Marin’s 1919-21 “skylscapes,” which Fine has described as representations of “the flaming rays of the sun, their reflection on the sea, and the island dots that interrupted it.”¹⁵

Tree Forms, Stonington, Maine (fig. 14), testifies to Marin’s developing expressive confidence. A recurring motif throughout Marin’s career, the lone tree in this composition recalls earlier works, including *Tree, Beach and Sea, Small Point, Maine*; *Region Rowe, Massachusetts*; *Deer Isle, Maine*; and *From Deer Isle, Maine*. Fine has suggested the subject, like the boat in troubled waters, serves as a metaphor for “inner travels” and “existence.”¹⁶ In this marvelous example, the monumental scale of the tree dominates the composition. “A tree is fifty feet high,” Marin wrote in a letter to Stieglitz that year, “if you paint it you must get a piece of paper or canvas fifty feet and over in height. That is the . . . logic foreign to the logic of the eye... the artist . . . seems to be born with Eye feeling. He eyes something and must express it with his hands in some medium.”¹⁷

While many modernists were tempted by complete non-figuration, Marin remained faithful to his primary inspiration, the natural world, and experimented throughout his career with various abstract approaches to stretch the boundaries around representation. “I did something I rather like, a disorderly sort of thing,” Marin wrote in a 1919 letter to Stieglitz. “I sort of want to raise Hell in my stuff . . . to paint disorder.”¹⁸ Duncan Phillips admired this side of Marin, calling him “individualist, largely self-taught, indifferent to theories.”¹⁹ In *Tree Forms, Stonington, Maine* and across his body of work, Marin executed his vision, or “eye feeling,” with confident mark-making and economy of form, drawing



on a singular visual language described astutely by Phillips: “abbreviated and personal symbols of color and line—a green triangle for a pine tree, a zigzag for a wave.”²⁰



ERIN O’NEILL is the director of research at Schoelkopf Gallery. She develops and advances strategic goals in the areas of research, market intelligence, and exhibition programming and manages relationships with scholars, experts, and curators. Erin also oversees and contributes to scholarly publications and gallery editorial content.

Prior to joining the gallery, Erin was head of research at Di Donna

Galleries in New York and held positions at The Courtauld Institute of Art in London and Christie's in New York. She has extensive knowledge of twentieth-century modernism and post-war art with a particular interest in Surrealism and has written on a range of subjects including Helen Frankenthaler and Man Ray.

Erin graduated from Columbia University with a B.A. in Art History and French Literature. She received her M.A. in History of Art with distinction from The Courtauld Institute of Art and has studied at the École du Louvre and Sorbonne. Erin is fluent in French and is a member of the International Catalogue Raisonné Association.

NOTES

1. Duncan Phillips, "John Marin" in *Biennale di Venezia XXV*, U.S. Representation, Venice, June-October 1950, pp. 375-376.
2. Marin quoted in Dorothy Norman, "John Marin: Conversations and Notes," *College Art Journal*, August 5, 2015, 326.
3. John Marin in *The Forum Exhibition of Modern American Painters*, New York: The Anderson Galleries, 1916.
4. Letter from Marin to Alfred Stieglitz, Echo Lake, Pennsylvania, September 6, 1916. Reproduced in Dorothy Norman, *The Selected Writings of John Marin*, New York: Pellegrini & Cudahy, 1949, 28.
5. Sheldon Reich, *John Marin: A Stylistic Analysis and Catalogue Raisonné*, Tuscon: The University of Arizona Press, 1970, vol. I, 85 and 101.
6. Sheldon Reich, *John Marin: A Stylistic Analysis and Catalogue Raisonné*, Tuscon: The University of Arizona Press, 1970, vol. I, 97.
7. Sheldon Reich, *John Marin: A Stylistic Analysis and Catalogue Raisonné*, Tuscon: The University of Arizona Press, 1970, vol. I, 101-103.
8. Quoted in Ruth E. Fine, *John Marin*, Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1990, 173.
9. Ruth E. Fine, *John Marin*, Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1990, 177.
10. MacKinley Helm, *John Marin*, New York: Pellegrini and Cudahy, 1948, 41.
11. Sheldon Reich, *John Marin: A Stylistic Analysis and Catalogue Raisonné*, Tuscon: The University of Arizona Press, 1970, vol. I, 114.
12. Ruth E. Fine, *John Marin*, Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1990, 212.
13. Sheldon Reich, *John Marin: A Stylistic Analysis and Catalogue Raisonné*, Tuscon: The University of Arizona Press, 1970, vol. I, 116.
14. Letter from Marin to Alfred Stieglitz, Stonington, Maine, September 20, 1919. Reproduced in Dorothy Norman, *The Selected Writings of John Marin*, New York: Pellegrini & Cudahy, 1949, 50.
15. Ruth E. Fine, *John Marin*, Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1990, 189.
16. Ruth E. Fine, *John Marin*, Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1990, 189.
17. Letter from Marin to Alfred Stieglitz, Stonington, Maine, September 20, 1919. Reproduced in Dorothy Norman, *The Selected Writings of John Marin*, New York: Pellegrini & Cudahy, 1949, 49-50.
18. Letter from Marin to Alfred Stieglitz, Stonington, Maine, August 13, 1919. Reproduced in Norman, *Writings*, p. 46. Quoted in Ruth E. Fine, *John Marin*, Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1990, 185.
19. Duncan Phillips, "John Marin" in *Biennale di Venezia XXV*, U.S. Representation, Venice, June-October 1950, pp. 375-376.
20. Duncan Phillips, "John Marin" in *Biennale di Venezia XXV*, U.S. Representation, Venice, June-October 1950, pp. 375-376.