

An abstract painting featuring a dense composition of vibrant, overlapping brushstrokes in various colors including red, orange, yellow, green, blue, purple, and grey. The strokes are thick and expressive, creating a sense of movement and depth. The overall effect is a rich, textured surface of color.

MODERNISM EMERGES

THE EVOLUTION OF
FORM AND COLOR IN THE
EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

BY KIMBERLY ORCUTT

MORGAN RUSSELL

OPPOSITE: *Organization in Orange*, c. 1914, oil on canvas laid down on canvas, 12 $\frac{5}{8}$ × 9 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches, private collection

RIGHT: A Group of Young American Artists of the Modern School (from left to right: Jo Davidson, Edward Steichen, Arthur B. Carles, John Marin; back: Marsden Hartley, Laurence Fellows), c. 1911, Bates College Museum of Art



The stubborn myth of early twentieth-century modernism is that it burst on the scene loudly and contentiously, causing consternation and scandal and clearing a path for a triumphal new art paradigm. And indeed, the 1913 Armory Show dovetails neatly with the mythology of modernism as a sudden, explosive new development that shocked the public and changed the American art world forever. As satisfying as such narratives are, the truth is more complicated, more textured, and perhaps even more interesting. Modernism did not burst forth, even though that seems so much in keeping with its transgressive character. Rather, it emerged, slowly and one might even say naturally, from developments decades in the making. Perhaps the best way to understand this gradual development is to ask some foundational questions that follow the circuit of inspiration, creation, and

reception that shape our understanding of art movements: how did modernism emerge, what exactly emerged, and how was it received?

“Modernisms” of various kinds had been emerging and creating a ruckus in the United States since the 1870s. The brand of modernism that we think of in the early twentieth century, which loosed the bonds of representation to experiment with abstraction and bold, expressive color, was just one style among others that blossomed rather quietly during its first decade, an incredibly rich era in which multiple movements existed and even flourished side by side, though sometimes elbowing each other sharply. For instance, in just over a year from February 1908 through April 1909, one could have seen radically different examples of American art on display that showed the diversity of approaches that characterized the period.



JOHN WHITE ALEXANDER

Study in Black and Green, by
1906, oil on canvas, 50 × 40½
inches, The Metropolitan
Museum of Art, George A.
Hearn Fund, 1908

charming but “not strained or *bizarre*,” perhaps to distinguish it from other styles of the period.

J. Alden Weir’s *Building a Dam, Shetucket (The Building of the Dam)*, exhibited at the Corcoran Gallery from December 1908 to January 1909, exemplified the Impressionist style that had gained widespread popularity. Shortly after the Society of American Artists broke ground for technical experimentation, French Impressionism made its way to American shores through private collectors and through artist- and gallery-organized exhibitions in the 1880s. It introduced viewers to a new kind of vision that disintegrated form into perceptible brushstrokes of unblended color, placing a stronger spotlight on technique and unmodulated hues in the service of depicting idealized figures, idyllic landscapes, and genteel views of the city. It was greeted with skepticism at first—in fact, Weir himself called the 1877 French Impressionist exhibition in Paris “a chamber of horrors.” However, over time both artists and the public embraced it with intense and lasting enthusiasm.

John White Alexander’s *Study in Black and Green* was on view at the august National Academy of Design’s (NAD) annual exhibition that opened in March of 1908. Founded in 1825, nearly a century later the Academy had become a bastion of conservatism. The institution had just withstood a challenge from a rival artist organization, the Society of American Artists, established in 1877 in protest of the Academy’s resistance to new movements. Young U.S. artists returning from training abroad brought home with them an interest in technique rather than subject matter, and their free brushwork and lack of finish sparked debates that led to the new exhibiting organization. Ironically, over the years the NAD became more open to the new tendencies, and the two organizations became so similar that they merged in 1906. John White Alexander, a member of both organizations, epitomized the embrace of technique over subject that had seemed transgressive decades before but by the early twentieth century had become widely accepted and could even be called academic. Arthur Hoeber of *International Studio* called it

John Sloan’s *Election Night* was included in the Macbeth Gallery’s infamous February 1908 exhibition of “The Eight” that introduced urban realism to New York. Just as American audiences learned to understand and even enjoy Impressionism, the urban realists known as the Ashcan School applied their freedom of the brush to gritty scenes of life in the city, often creating a stark contrast with the Impressionists’ genteel subjects. The urban realists and their students and disciples continued a tradition of representation and realism that had its own roots in late nineteenth-century modernists such as Édouard Manet and Edgar Degas. While some defended the group, others objected to their “coarse and vulgar point of view.”

Over decades these movements broke down traditional expectations of form, color, and subject, preparing the ground for further experiments. As they had done since the nation’s founding, ambitious U.S. artists continued to travel abroad for study. By the early twentieth century, Paris remained the center for training, but the attraction of established schools such as the École des

JULIAN ALDEN WEIR
The Building of the Dam,
1908, oil on canvas,
29 $\frac{7}{8}$ × 40 inches,
Cleveland Museum of
Art, Purchase from the
J.H. Wade Fund



JOHN SLOAN
Election Night, 1907,
oil on canvas, 26 $\frac{3}{8}$ ×
32 $\frac{1}{4}$ inches, Memorial
Art Gallery, University
of Rochester, Marion
Stratton Gould Fund





MARSDEN HARTLEY

LEFT: *Movement #4*, Provincetown, 1916, Oil on board, 20 × 16 inches, Thomas H. and Diane DeMell Jacobsen Ph.D. Foundation

OPPOSITE: *Abstraction, detail*, 1912–13, oil on canvas, 46½ × 39¾ inches, private collection

Beaux-Arts and private ateliers like the Académie Julian was eclipsed by the appeal of even more daring experiments in form and color. For instance, Americans in Paris could view works by Paul Cézanne, Henri Matisse, and Pablo Picasso at the salon of Gertrude and Leo Stein, and many saw the notorious debut of the Fauves, led by Matisse, at the Salon d'Automne in 1905 and the Salon des Indépendants two years later. In March and April of 1909 at Alfred Stieglitz's Little Galleries of the Photo-Secession (better known as 291) in New York, Alfred Maurer, called the first American Fauve, exhibited his boldly colored Matisse-inspired works, in keeping with *Paysage*, where they were assailed as "nightmares."

As Impressionism had come to the U.S. quietly, at first through private collectors and gradually through public venues, these new experiments in form and color made modest debuts in the early 1900s. Dealers such as Stieglitz's 291 Gallery and Clara Davidge's Madison Art Gallery mounted exhibitions for a small group of collectors intellectuals. For example, Stieglitz presented exhibitions of Matisse drawings, watercolors, and

lithographs in spring 1908 and lithographs by Post-Impressionist Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec the following year. Among the earliest American collectors of modern art were New York lawyer John Quinn, nicknamed "The Noble Buyer" for his generosity and concern for artists. Quinn amassed over 2,500 American and European works, including examples by Cézanne, Constantin Brancusi, Marcel Duchamp, Matisse, and Picasso. Philadelphian Albert Barnes began acquiring works in 1912 and was galvanized by a visit to Leo and Gertrude Stein's collection in Paris. His own collection now resides in the Barnes Collection in Philadelphia. Katherine Dreier both lent a work to the Armory Show and exhibited two of her own paintings there. In 1920 she would join with Duchamp and Man Ray to form the Société Anonyme to promote modern art.

What grew out of this gradual and surprisingly organic evolution? American artists, often inspired by abstract and Post-Impressionist works in Europe, conducted daring experiments with form and color in the first decade of the twentieth century that came of age during the 1910s, as some successfully applied the new ideas and others developed them further, making them their own and even advancing them in unexpected ways.

American artists' explorations of the possibilities of abstraction took various forms. The poet William Carlos Williams admired Marsden Hartley's "prescience" over the course of his career: Hartley had already made forays into abstraction even before his 1912–15 sojourn in Paris and Berlin. He is best known for his early German abstractions, which combine bold color with expressive brushwork to render symbols and fragmented forms into robust and emotionally charged compositions that evoke sweeping themes of war, death, and spirituality. After his return to the U.S., Hartley continued to evolve: his time with



ALFRED MAURER

CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT:

Abstraction 1919, 1919, casein on board, 22 × 18 inches

Abstraction: Fishing, c. 1919–20, oil on board, 21¾ × 18 inches

Abstraction, c. 1919, gouache on card, 21 × 17 inches



ALFRED MAURER

The artist in his studio in his studio, November 1928, Elizabeth McCausland papers, 1838-1995, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution



artists and playwrights at the Provincetown, Massachusetts art colony in 1916 inspired him toward a cooler, more Paris-inspired form of abstraction, sometimes taking on the traditional genre of still life.

One of the most promising artists of the period was Morton Schamberg. After his time in Paris in 1908-09 and his contact with the Stein circle there, he explored Fauvist color and the flattened forms of abstraction and even engaged with Dadaist examinations of mechanical forms before his tragic death in the influenza epidemic of 1918. Alfred Maurer evolved from the initial foray into Fauvist color that characterized his exhibition at 291 Gallery in 1909. He experimented with natural forms under the influence of Arthur Dove, who made his own dramatic transition from Post-Impressionist representation to pioneering abstractions in 1910-11.

Interestingly, these avant-garde innovations were usually technical in nature, applying new ways of painting to remarkably traditional subject

matter; that is, the figure, the still life, and the landscape. For all their bold experiments, very few ventured to take their work to its logical conclusion of total abstraction; rarely did artists venture to break ties with representation.

One of the earliest attempts toward total abstraction was the short-lived Synchronist movement, conceived by twenty-seven-year-old Morgan Russell who was joined by twenty-three-year-old Stanton Macdonald-Wright. Their works exploring the use of color to express spatial form have been called the first American avant-garde paintings to attract attention in Europe. They enjoyed a flare of success, with exhibitions in Munich and Paris in 1913 and in New York at the Carroll Gallery the following year while contending with Orphism, another color-based movement that is distinguished by its more two-dimensional colored planes. Russell boldly proclaimed in the 1914 Carroll Gallery exhibition catalogue that the Futurists and Cubists had "resolved themselves in superficial manifestations" and that "color is the only quality which should





STANTON MACDONALD-WRIGHT

OPPOSITE: *A Synchrony*, 1914, gouache and ink on paper, 20¾ × 12¾ inches, private collection

LEFT: Photo of Stanton Macdonald-Wright by Robert Bruce Inverarity, 1948, Robert Bruce Inverarity papers, circa 1840s–1997, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution

JOSEPH STELLA

BELOW: *Futurist Abstraction*, detail, 1918–19, pastel on board, 15½ × 8½ inches, private collection

engage painters of to-day.” Another example is in the work of Italian émigré Joseph Stella, who has been lauded as “America’s first Futurist.” After encountering the Italian Futurists in his homeland, he was inspired by their embrace of the speed and dynamism of modern city life and took their experiments even further in the later teens in such works as *Futurist Abstraction*.

If art is a form of communication, then the circuit is not completed until a work is seen and produces a response in the viewer. The question of how modernism was received is one with many answers, as responses evolved during the early twentieth century. Criticism of the avant-garde reached a turning point with New York’s 1913 International Exhibition of Modern Art, better known as the Armory Show, where approximately 87,000 people flocked to see the latest movements en masse. Nearly half of the over 1,300 works in the exhibition were by American artists. In fact, it represented a thoroughgoing cross-section of American art, showcasing the Impressionist and urban realist styles that continued to thrive alongside more avant-garde efforts. However, it is best remembered for a few sensationalized works such as Henri Matisse’s controversially chromatic *Blue Nude* (1907, Baltimore Museum of Art) and a group of Cubo-Futurist works gathered in what



SOMETIMES WE DREAD THE FUTURE

Photographs by Paul Thomson



ALBERT GLEIZES belongs to the generation of living artists who are called "cubists" because of their style. In their eyes, the world is not what it is, but what it is made of. It is a collection of planes and lines, and they seek to find their way back to reality through their art. They do not paint what they see, but what they know. They are the most modern people in the world—modern in their style, their ideas, their methods, and their aims. They are the artists of the future.



JEAN CROTTI is a French artist who has been called a "cubist" because of his style. He is one of the most modern people in the world—modern in their style, their ideas, their methods, and their aims. They are the artists of the future.



STANTON MACDONALD-WRIGHT is a French artist who has been called a "cubist" because of his style. He is one of the most modern people in the world—modern in their style, their ideas, their methods, and their aims. They are the artists of the future.



FRANCIS PICASSO is a French artist who has been called a "cubist" because of his style. He is one of the most modern people in the world—modern in their style, their ideas, their methods, and their aims. They are the artists of the future.



HUGO ROBUS is a French artist who has been called a "cubist" because of his style. He is one of the most modern people in the world—modern in their style, their ideas, their methods, and their aims. They are the artists of the future.

Albert Gleizes, Marcel Duchamp, Jean Crotti, Hugo Robus, Stanton Macdonald-Wright, Frances Simpson Stevens, *Every Week*, No. 14, April 2, 1914

was called "The Chamber of Horrors," recalling Weir's assessment of the Impressionists decades before. The most notorious of them was Marcel Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2* (1912, Philadelphia Museum of Art); some wags in the press even challenged readers to "find the lady" in Duchamp's seemingly indecipherable depiction. The artist-organizers tried to illustrate the emergence of modernism, distributing instructive pamphlets and filling galleries with works by early nineteenth-century masters such as Eugène Delacroix and Honoré Daumier, intended to show the lineage of the new works. Unfortunately, the message was lost on most visitors.

Modernism had been growing slowly but steadily in the U.S. in the years leading up to the Armory Show, and without the 1913 exhibition it would probably have continued to grow in the fashion that Impressionism had in the preceding few decades. However, one of the most important impacts of the Armory Show was placing many examples of the new movements before a broad public all at once in a way that the "modernisms" of the previous decades had not been. The Armory Show forced a conversation about the new relationship between artist and viewer that was proposed by these works. A long-standing critical debate about the merits and meaning of the growing exploration of technique came to a head, as the most discussed issue was the artist's relationship with, and responsibility to, the viewer—that is, whether a work of art should be intelligible to the viewer, or whether the viewer must decode the artist's intentions.

The impact of this public introduction to twentieth-century modernism was reinforced when World War I brought U.S. artists back from Europe and European artists as well, as Duchamp, Jean Crotti, Albert Gleizes, and Francis Picabia arrived in New York in 1915. Several new dealers opened galleries that offered avant-garde work,



MARCEL DUCHAMP

Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2, 1912, oil on canvas, 57 $\frac{7}{8}$ × 35 $\frac{1}{8}$ inches, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia

such as Marius de Zayas' Modern Gallery, Harriet Bryant's Carroll Gallery (backed by collector John Quinn), and the Bourgeois and Daniel Galleries.

More avant-garde exhibitions followed as well, attempting to shape an understanding of these sometimes-puzzling works and the new art ideal and the new form of perception that they proposed. In 1916, critic Willard Huntington Wright (the brother of Synchronist Stanton Macdonald-Wright) organized the Forum Exhibition of Modern American Painters at New York's Anderson Galleries under the aegis of *Forum* magazine. The carefully selected group of nearly two hundred paintings was intended as a response to what the organizers thought to be the overabundance and lack of discrimination shown at the Armory Show. Among the sixteen artists included were Hartley, Maurer, Wright, and Russell. The exhibition catalogue included a number of short essays by critics and the contributing artists explaining the new movement. It was smaller and less notorious than the Armory Show, but like the 1913 exhibition, it generated a mixed critical response and few sales in proportion to the number of works on view.

In yet another response, the first Society of Independent Artists exhibition in 1917 at Grand Central Palace in New York returned to the model of an overwhelmingly large exhibition of over 2,000 works and attempted to show the most liberal spirit possible, bypassing the usual practice

of a jury that selected works, and hanging them in alphabetical order by artist's last name to avoid accusations of favoritism in giving some artists most prominent locations. Duchamp mischievously tested the limits of the policy, and of the increasingly expansive definition of art, when he submitted a urinal that he titled *Fountain* and signed with the pseudonym "R. Mutt." His "readymade" artwork unexpectedly pushed modernism beyond technique, off the canvas altogether, and into the artist's mind. After much deliberation, the Society rejected the work and Duchamp resigned in protest. However, modernist experiments in painting and sculpture continued, alongside the much-favored Impressionist style and the persistent urban realism.

Returning to the idea of art as a form of communication, what do these works say to us today? Where they were surprising and even shocking when they were first created, at their very best they elicited a shock of recognition, of seeing something familiar in a new way. We have had over a century to plumb their depths and learn their language, so we experience them differently from viewers of a century before. We no longer have to squint to "find the lady" as Armory Show attendees strained to do before Duchamp's *Nude* in 1913. In the 1916 Forum Exhibition catalogue, Willard Huntington Wright insisted that this new form of modern art would endure, adding that "the day will come when [these works] will not seem bizarre and incomprehensible," and indeed it has. Years of familiarity may allow us to decipher them more easily and better appreciate their efforts toward a new comprehension of the constituent elements of art. That familiarity also clears the way for us to perceive in them a stillness, an expressiveness, even sometimes an otherworldly beauty that bespeaks the search for essences, for the ideal that some critics despaired was lost in the early twentieth century. The circuit of communication continues in a conversation that adds new meanings with each generation, each viewer, and each encounter.

This piece is an excerpted version of an annotated essay by Kimberly Orcutt. For a copy of the essay in its entirety, please contact the gallery at 212-879-8815 or alana@schoelkopfgallery.com.