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THE ARMORY SHOW, 1913

The International Exhibition of Modern Art of 1913, popularly known as the Armory Show, brought for the first time before a wide American public in New York, Chicago, and Boston the work of the great French moderns. Thus, with the aid of the publicity suggested in Walt Kuhn's (1877-1949) enthusiastic letter, the intention of Arthur B. Davies (1862-1928) as it was expressed in the introduction to the exhibition catalogue was amply fulfilled. Whether the show succeeded as well in bringing a new spirit to American art, as Kuhn hoped, is much less certain. Many Americans had already come under the spell of the new European painting, and many others would undoubtedly have followed without benefit of the events at the Armory. The show also served to sharpen the hostility of other American painters such as the conservative muralist Kenyon Cox (1856-1919) who was their spokesman. As to the response of the public at large, the honest bewilderment of the distinguished layman, Theodore Roosevelt, is perhaps the most accurate guide. One definite result of the show was the effects it had upon American collectors, many of whom, following John Quinn's example, began to acquire works of the French artists so brilliantly represented. Paradoxically among the Americans most damaged by this shift in taste were the organizers of the Exhibition—all but one of the Eight were involved—whose realism suddenly seemed old fashioned.

Walt Kuhn: Letter to Walter Pach, 1912

Dear Pach:

I should have written you before this but Davies and myself have been on the jump every minute since we landed. Today I gave the

[1] A. P. Ryder, "Paragraphs from the Studio of a Recluse," *Broadway Magazine, XIV* (September, 1905), 10-11.

papers the list of European stuff which we know of definitely. It will be like a bomb shell, the first news since our arrival.

You have no idea how eager everybody is about this thing and what a tremendous success it's going to be. Everybody is electrified when we quote the names, etc. The outlook is great, and after having figured up the likely income we stand to come out ahead of the game as far as money goes. The articles appearing from now on will increase the desire to help by the money'd "classes." We owe you a tremendous lot for your indispensable help and advice, but you know that we are all in the same boat for this great chance to make the American think. I feel as though I had crowded an entire art education into these few weeks. Chicago has officially asked for the show, and of course we accepted.

I am very anxious to get a "thumb nail" biography of *all* the important men. Will you see what you can get for me, every little bit helps, anything of interest. The papers are also interested in portrait-photos of the men themselves. Everything you can send me in this line will be of enormous help in securing good press notices. I have planned a press campaign to run from now right through the show, and then some—a snapshot of the Duchamp-Villon brothers in their garden, for instance will help me get a special article on them. I await your story on them, also Redon. We are going to feature Redon big (BIG!). You see the fact that he is so little known will mean a still bigger success in publicity.

John Quinn, our lawyer and biggest booster, is strong for plenty of publicity, he says the New Yorkers are worse than rubes, and must be told. All this is not to my personal taste, I'd rather stay home and work hard at my pictures shoving in some of the things I have learned, but we are all in deep water now and have got to paddle—Don't disappoint me on this—Our show must be talked about all over the U.S. before the doors open.

* * *

We have a great opportunity in this show, and must try to make it truly wonderful and get all the people there, which owing to the extremely short duration of the show is very hard, and can only be done through the press. So don't ignore my plea for minor information, it may be undignified but it brings the desired result. We want this old show of ours to mark the starting point of the new spirit in art, at least as far as America is concerned.

I feel that it will show its effect even further and make the big wheel turn over both hemispheres.[1]

[1] From a letter from Walt Kuhn to Walter Pach, December 12, 1912.

Frederick James Gregg: Preface to the Catalogue for the International Exhibition of Modern Art, 1913

Mr. Arthur B. Davies, President of the Association of American Painters and Sculptors, gave out the following statement on the last day of December, 1912:

> On behalf of the Executive Committee, I desire to explain the general attitude of the Association and especially in regard to the International Exhibition to be held in this city in February and March.
>
> This is not an institution but an association. It is composed of persons of varying tastes and predilections, who are agreed on one thing, that the time has arrived for giving the public here the opportunity to see for themselves the results of new influences at work in other countries in an art way.
>
> In getting together the works of the European Moderns, the Society has embarked on no propaganda. It proposes to enter on no controversy with any institution. Its sole object is to put the paintings, sculptures, and so on, on exhibition so that the intelligent may judge for themselves by themselves.
>
> Of course controversies will arise, just as they have arisen under similar circumstances in France, Italy, Germany and England. But they will not be the result of any stand taken by this Association as such; on the other hand we are perfectly willing to assume full responsibility for providing the opportunity to those who may take one side or the other.
>
> Any individual expression of opinion contrary to the above is at variance with the official resolutions of this Association.

The wide publicity given to the above in the public press all over the country showed to what an extent it was accepted as a definite and precise expression of the policy and the aims of the Association in its relation to the art of Europe and to the American public. That policy and those aims remain unchanged.

Anything that can be said further must be but an amplification of the statement. The foreign paintings and sculptures here shown are regarded by the committee of the Association as expressive of the forces which have been at work abroad of late, forces which cannot be ignored because they have had results.

The American artists exhibiting here, consider the exhibition as of equal importance for themselves as for the lay public. The less they find their work showing signs of the developments indicated in the Europeans, the more reason they will have to consider whether or not painters and sculptors here have fallen behind through escaping the incidence through distance and for other reasons of the forces that have manifested themselves on the other side of the Atlantic.

Art is a sign of life. There can be no life without change, as there

can be no development without change. To be afraid of what is different or unfamiliar, is to be afraid of life. And to be afraid of life is to be afraid of truth, and to be a champion of superstition. This exhibition is an indication that the Association of American Painters and Sculptors is against cowardice even when it takes the form of amiable self satisfaction.[1]

Theodore Roosevelt: A Layman's View of an Art Exhibition, 1913

The recent "International Exhibition of Modern Art" in New York was really noteworthy. Messrs. Davies, Kuhn, Gregg, and their fellow-members of the Association of American Painters and Sculptors have done a work of very real value in securing such an exhibition of the works of both foreign and native painters and sculptors. Primarily their purpose was to give the public a chance to see what has recently been going on abroad. No similar collection of the works of European "moderns" has ever been exhibited in this country. The exhibitors are quite right as to the need of showing to our people in this manner the art forces which of late have been at work in Europe, forces which cannot be ignored.

This does not mean that I in the least accept the view that these men take of the European extremists whose pictures are here exhibited. It is true, as the champions of these extremists say, that there can be no life without change, no development without change, and that to be afraid of what is different or unfamiliar is to be afraid of life. It is no less true, however, that change may mean death and not life, and retrogression instead of development. Probably we err in treating most of these pictures seriously. It is likely that many of them represent in the painters the astute appreciation of the power to make folly lucrative which the late P. T. Barnum showed with his faked mermaid. There are thousands of people who will pay small sums to look at a faked mermaid; and now and then one of this kind with enough money will buy a Cubist picture, or a picture of a misshapen nude woman, repellent from every standpoint.

In some ways it is the work of the American painters and sculptors which is of most interest in this collection, and a glance at this work must convince anyone of the real good that is coming out of the new movements, fantastic though many of the developments of these new movements are. There was one note entirely absent from the exhibition, and that was the note of the commonplace. There was not a touch of simpering, self-satisfied conventionality anywhere in the exhibition. Any

[1] Frederick James Gregg, "Preface to the Catalog for the International Exhibition of Modern Art, 1913."

sculptor or painter who had in him something to express and the power of expressing it found the field open to him. He did not have to be afraid because his work was not along ordinary lines. There was no stunting or dwarfing, no requirement that a man whose gift lay in new directions should measure upon or down to stereotyped and fossilized standards.

For all this there can be only hearty praise. But this does not in the least mean that the extremists whose paintings and pictures were represented are entitled to any praise, save, perhaps, that they have helped to break fetters. Probably in any reform movement, any progressive movement, in any field of life, the penalty for avoiding the commonplace is a liability to extravagance. It is vitally necessary to move forward and to shake off the dead hand, often the fossilized dead hand, of the reactionaries; and yet we have to face the fact that there is apt to be a lunatic fringe among the votaries of any forward movement. In this recent art exhibition the lunatic fringe was fully in evidence, especially in the rooms devoted to the Cubists and the Futurists, or Near-Impressionists. I am not entirely certain which of the two latter terms should be used in connection with some of the various pictures and representations of plastic art—and, frankly, it is not of the least consequence. The Cubists are entitled to the serious attention of all who find enjoyment in the colored puzzle pictures of the Sunday newspapers. Of course there is no reason for choosing the cube as a symbol, except that it is probably less fitted than any other mathematical expression for any but the most formal decorative art. There is no reason why people should not call themselves Cubists, or Octagonists, Parallelopipedonists, or Knights of the Isosceles Triangle, or Brothers of the Cosine, if they so desire; as expressing anything serious and permanent, one term is as fatuous as another. Take the picture which for some reason is called *A naked man going down stairs.* There is in my bath-room a really good Navajo rug which, on any proper interpretation of the Cubist theory, is a far more satisfactory and decorative picture. Now if, for some inscrutable reason, it suited somebody to call this rug a picture of, say, *A well-dressed man going up a ladder,* the name would fit the facts just about as well as in the case of the Cubist picture of the *Naked man going down stairs.* From the standpoint of terminology each name would have whatever merit inheres in a rather cheap straining after effect; and from the standpoint of decorative value, of sincerity, and of artistic merit, the Navajo rug is infinitely ahead of the picture.[1]

[1] Theodore Roosevelt, "A Layman's Views of an Art Exhibition," *The Outlook,* March 9, 1913, pp. 718-720.

Kenyon Cox: The Modern Spirit in Art, 1913

It is proper to begin an account of the extraordinary exhibition of modern art recently held in New York with an acknowledgment that it is well such an exhibition should be held and that, therefore, the thanks of the public are due to the gentlemen who got it together. We have heard a great deal about the Post-Impressionists and the Cubists; we have read expositions of their ideas and methods which have had a plausible sound in the absence of the works to be explained; we have had some denunciation and ridicule, some enthusiastic praise, and a great deal of half-frightened and wholly puzzled effort to understand what, it was taken for granted, must have some real significance; but we have not heretofore had an opportunity of seeing the things themselves—the paintings and sculpture actually produced by these men. Now the things are quite indescribable and unbelievable. Neither the praises of their admirers, the ridicule of their opponents, nor the soberest attempt at impartial description can give any idea of them. No reproduction can approach them. They must be seen to be believed possible, and therefore it is well that they should have been seen. From this point of view my only regret is that the Association of American Painters and Sculptors did not see fit to include some representation of the Futurists in their exhibition, that the whole thing might be done once for all. In a case of necessity one may be willing to take a drastic emetic and may even humbly thank the medical man for the efficacy of the dose. The more thorough it is the less chance is there that it may have to be repeated.

Of course I cannot pretend to have approached the exhibition entirely without prejudice. One cannot have studied and practised an art for forty years without the formation of some opinions—even of some convictions. But I remembered the condemnation of Corot and Millet by Gérôme and Cabanel; I remembered the natural conservatism of middle age; I took to heart the admonition of the preface to the catalogue, that "to be afraid of what is different or unfamiliar is to be afraid of life." I meant to make a genuine effort to sort out these people, to distinguish their different aims and doctrines, to take notes and to analyze, to treat them seriously if disapprovingly. I cannot do it. Nor can I laugh. This thing is not amusing; it is heartrending and sickening. I was quoted the other day as having said that the human race is rapidly approaching insanity. I never said it, but if I were convinced that this is really "modern art" and that these men are representative of our time, I should be constrained to believe it.

In recollecting the appalling morning I spent in this place certain personalities do, however, define themselves and certain tendencies make

themselves clear. It is no time for squeamishness or for standing upon "professional courtesy," and such persons as I may mention I shall treat quite frankly—in that respect, at least, I may follow their own example. Fortunately there is little necessity of dwelling upon the American part of the show. It contains some good work by artists who must wonder at the galley aboard which they find themselves, some work with real merit by men who have aided in the launching of the galley, and a great deal of bad work which, however, seldom reaches the depths of badness attainable by Frenchmen and Germans. But this work, good, bad, and indifferent, is either perfectly well known or is so paled by comparison that it needs no mention. Some of it is silly, but little of it is dangerous. There is one American, however, who must be spoken of because he has pushed the new doctrines to a conclusion in some respects more logical and complete than have any of the foreigners. In the wildest productions of Picabia or Picasso there is usually discernible, upon sufficiently painstaking investigation, some faint trace of the natural objects which are supposed to have inspired them; and even when this disappears the title remains to show that such objects have existed. It has remained for Mr. Marsden Hartley to take the final step and to arrange his lines and spots purely for their own sake, abandoning all pretense of representation or even of suggestions. He exhibits certain rectangles of paper covered with a maze of charcoal lines which are catalogued simply as Drawing No. 1, Drawing No. 2, and so forth.

This, I say, is the logical end, for the real meaning of this Cubist movement is nothing else than the total destruction of the art of painting—that art of which the dictionary definition is "the art of representing, by means of figures and colors applied on a surface, objects presented to the eye or to the imagination." Two years ago I wrote: "We have reached the edge of the cliff and must turn back or fall into the abyss." Deliberately and determinedly these men have stepped over the edge. Now the total destruction of painting as a representative art is a thing which a lover of painting could hardly envisage with entire equanimity, yet one may admit that such a thing might take place and yet an art remain that should have its own value. A Turkish rug or a tile from the Alhambra is nearly without representative purpose, but it has intrinsic beauty and some conceivable human use. The important question is what it is proposed to substitute for this art of painting which the world has cherished since there were men definitely differentiated from beasts. They have abolished the representation of nature and all forms of recognized and traditional decoration; what will they give us instead? And here is the difference between Mr. Hartley and his Parisian brothers. His "drawings" are purely nugatory. If one finds it impossible to imagine the kind of human being that could take any

pleasure in them one is free to admit that there is nothing especially disgusting about them. But one cannot say as much for the works of the Frenchmen. In some strange way they have made their work revolting and defiling. To have looked at it is to have passed through a pathological museum where the layman has no right to go. One feels that one has seen not an exhibition, but an exposure.

Of course the work of these artistic anarchists formed only a part of the exhibition. A serious attempt was made to get together a representative showing of the artists whom they consider their forerunners, and a number of the smaller galleries contained what might be considered a series of illustrations of Meier-Graefe. A good many critics who find the latest manifestations of the "modern" spirit quite intolerable are yet able to maintain a complacent satisfaction in these earlier exemplifications of it and even, by contrast, to increase their pleasure in work which seems relatively sane and wholesome. I wish I could feel, as they do, that there is a sudden dislocation with the appearance of Matisse and that everything before him falls naturally into its place as a continuation of the great tradition. I wish I were not forced to see that the easy slope to Avernus began as far back as the sixties of the last century. The lack of discipline and the exaltation of the individual have been the destructive forces of modern art, and they began their work long ago. For a time the persistence of earlier ideals and the possession by the revolutionaries of the very training which they attacked as unnecessary saved the art from entire dissolution. Now all discipline has disappeared, all training is proclaimed useless, and individualism has reached the pitch of sheer insanity or triumphant charlatanism.

* * *

Believing, as I do, that there are still commandments in art as in morals, and still laws in art as in physics, I have no fear that this kind of art will prevail, or even that it can long endure. But it may do a good deal of harm while it lasts. It may dazzle the young students of art with the prospect of an easily attained notoriety which they cannot distinguish from fame, and prevent their acquiring any serious training during the years when, if ever, such training must be acquired; it may so debauch criticism that it shall lose what little authority or usefulness it still retains; it may corrupt public taste and stimulate an appetite for excitement that is as dangerous as the appetite for any other poisonous drug; finally, it may juggle out of the pockets of the gullible a few dollars that will be far more wasted than if they were thrown into the sea. To the critics it is useless to speak. How shall we instruct our self-

appointed instructors? The students and the public may possibly listen, and for them I have a few words of earnest advice.

To the student I would say: Distrust all short cuts to art or to glory. No work worth doing was ever done without long preparation and continuous endeavor. The success that is attained in a month will be forgotten in a year. To the public I would say: Do not allow yourselves to be blinded by the sophistries of the foolish dupes or the self-interested exploiters of all this charlatanry. Remember that it is for you that art is created, and judge honestly for yourselves whether this which calls itself art is useful to you or to the world. You are not infallible, but your instincts are right in the main, and you are, after all, the final judges. If your stomach revolts against this rubbish it is because it is not fit for human food. Let no man persuade you to stuff yourselves with it.[1]

ARTHUR B. DOVE: LETTER TO ARTHUR JEROME EDDY, 1912

Arthur B. Dove (1880-1946) was one of those American painters who prior to the Armory Show had already proceeded to draw his own conclusions from the new European painting. In this letter of 1912 he explains to Arthur Jerome Eddy his Based on Leaf Forms and Spaces, *a picture which Eddy had purchased at a Chicago exhibition of Dove's work. Although Eddy was enthusiastic about Cubism and wrote the first American book on the subject, the approach Dove describes is more involved with a reduction and simplification of natural forms than with the elaborate analytical methods of the Cubists. Dove was less philosophically inclined and more deliberate in his painting methods than Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944), the Russian abstractionist, but the two independently reached startlingly similar results in 1910. A series of small abstract paintings of that year by Dove were the first such works painted by an American and perhaps the first painted anywhere.*

My dear Mr. Eddy:

You have asked me to "explain as I would talk to any intelligent friend, the idea behind the picture," or in other words, "what I am driving at."

First of all this is not propaganda, there has been too much of that written on Modern Art already. It is simply an explanation of *my own means* in answer to the above question.

[1] Kenyon Cox, "The Modern Spirit in Art, Some Reflections Inspired by the Recent International Exhibition," *Harper's Weekly*, March 15, 1913, p. 10.

In as much as the means continually changes as one learns, perhaps the best way to make it understood would be to state the different steps which have been taken up to the present time. After having come to the conclusion that there were a few principles existent in all good art from the earliest examples we have, through the masters to the present, I set about it to analyze these principles as they occurred in works of art and in nature.

One of these principles which seemed the most evident was the choice of the simple motif. This same law held in nature, a few forms and a few colors sufficed for the creation of an object. Consequently I gave up my more disorderly methods (impressionism). In other words I gave up trying to express an idea by stating innumerable little facts, the statement of facts having no more to do with the art of painting than statistics with literature. . . .

The first step was to choose from nature a motif in color and with that motif to paint from nature, the forms still being objective.

The second step was to apply this same principle to form, the actual dependence upon the object (representation) disappearing, and the means of expression becoming purely subjective. After working for some time in this way, I no longer observed in the old way, and, not only began to think subjectively but also to remember certain sensations purely through their form and color, that is, by certain shapes, planes of light, or character lines determined by the meeting of such planes.

With the introduction of the line motif the expression grew more plastic and the struggle with the means became less evident.[1]

[1] Arthur B. Dove, "Letter to Arthur Jerome Eddy," in Frederick S. Wight, *Arthur Dove* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1958), pp. 36-37.