

Modernisms: Currents in American Art, 1920–1950

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William D. White's 1934 painting, *Children in the Tree* (on loan to the State of Delaware's facility at Buena Vista) is a typical example of the art produced under the auspices of the Public Works of Art Program. It is apolitical and uplifting in subject matter, realistic in style, and its professional execution demonstrates the artist's academic training and accomplishment as an illustrator.

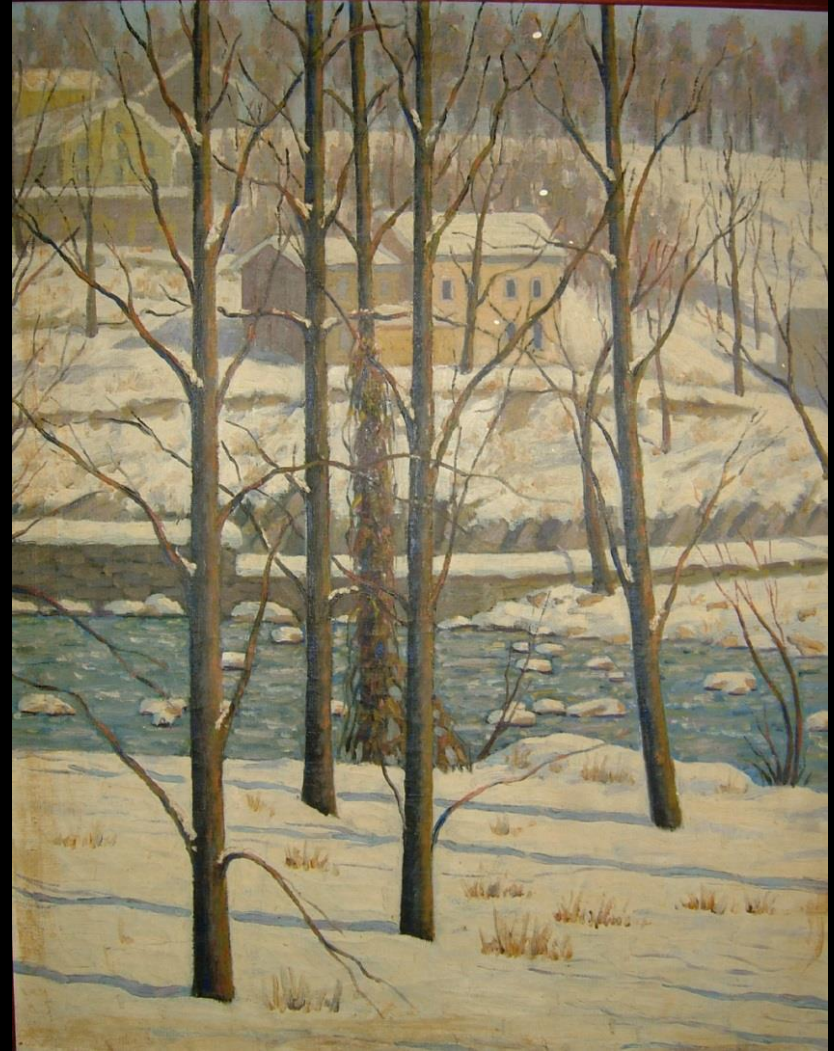


William White, *Children in the Tree*, 1934

It came to the Delaware Art Museum with other Public Works of Art works, like David Reyam's precise drawings of Wilmington's bridges and Walter Willoughby's regional winter landscapes.



David Reyam, *The Race at Van Buren Street Bridge*, 1934
Walter Willoughby, *Winter*, 1934



But *Children in the Tree* is a more complex and accomplished picture, with its apple tree, its proliferation of active children, and its foreground still life of apples. The children are rosy-cheeked and sweet.





Eugenie Wireman, Cover for *Modern Priscilla*, April 1922

Katharine Richardson Wireman, *Now Listen—You'll Hear My Echo*. 1948

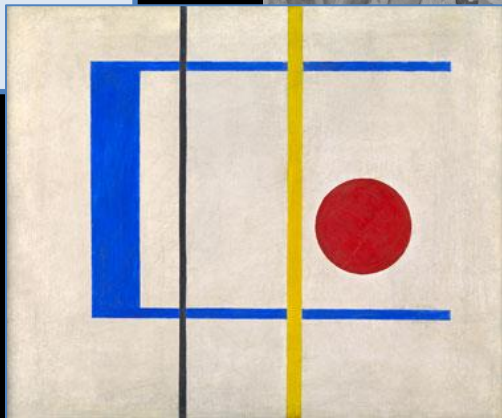
Similar types of children appeared in illustrations by Katharine Wireman and other mainstream magazine illustrators. They are well painted and absolutely typical of their time. They could have stepped out of a popular magazine, or a Dick and Jane reader of the time.



But the gnarled tree, broadly and expressively painted in the trunk, and the still life composition of apples, inevitably reminiscent of Cézanne (*Still Life*, AIC, 1890-94), are also of interest. The tree provides the structure for the painting, balancing the pale flesh tones and bright flat colors of the children and their clothing. Embedded in the trunk you might see a ghostly figure, reminiscent of Edvard Munch's *The Scream* (1893), and the "dark and turgid woods" of modern art—indeed, of White's own paintings of modern life.



The tree itself— with its branches extending far and wide in diverse directions— provides an excellent metaphor for the broad range of modern art in America in the mid-20th century. In 1934, Social Realism shared the stage with Regionalism, Expressionism, and geometric abstraction derived from the work of Mondrian.

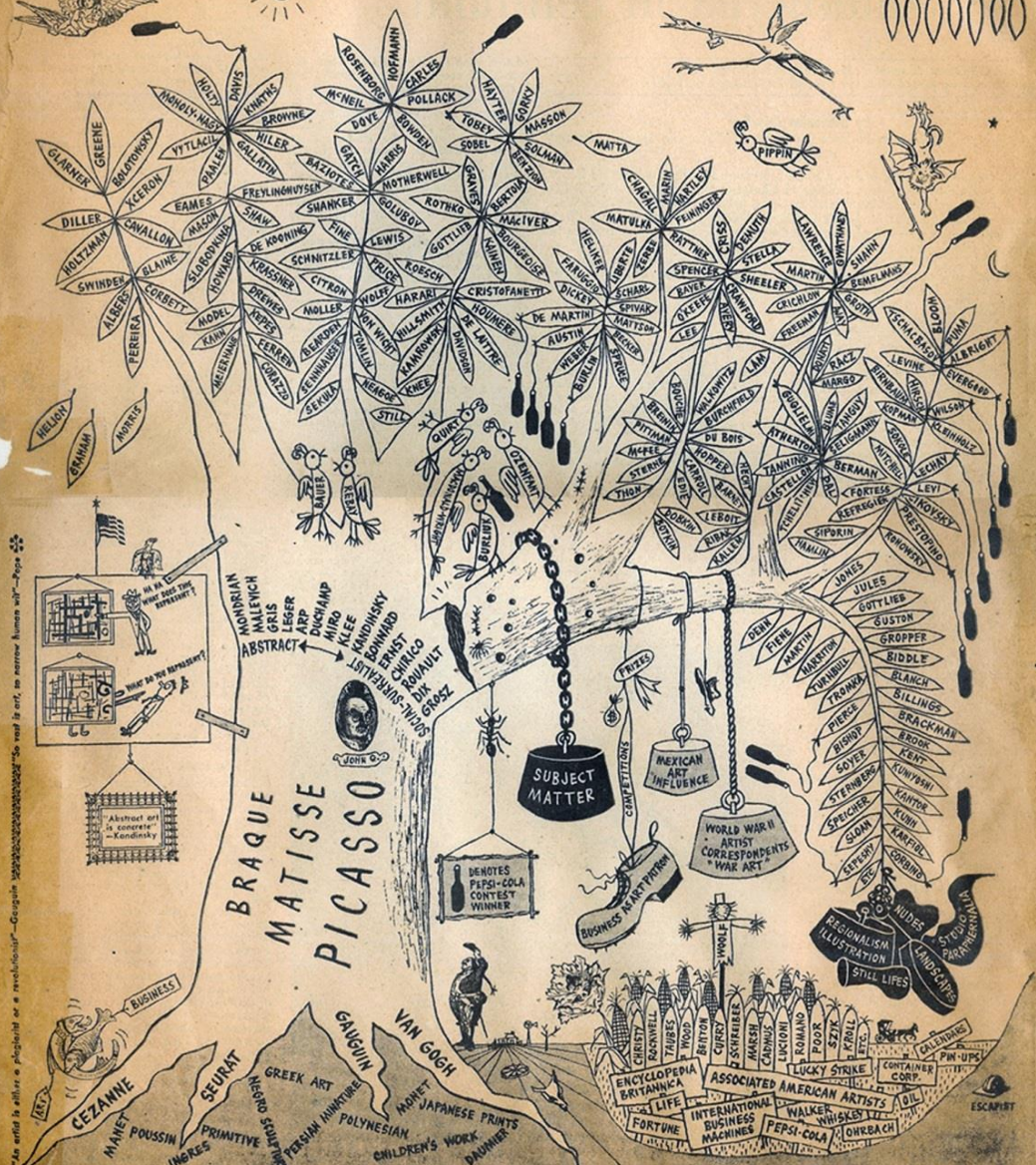


Clockwise from top left: Alfred Maurer, *Head of a Girl*, 1929; Grant Wood, *Young Corn*, 1931; Reginald Marsh, *Why Not Take the El?*, 1930; Burgoyne Diller, *Early Geometric*, c.1934

HOW TO LOOK AT MODERN ART IN AMERICA

by Ad Reinhardt

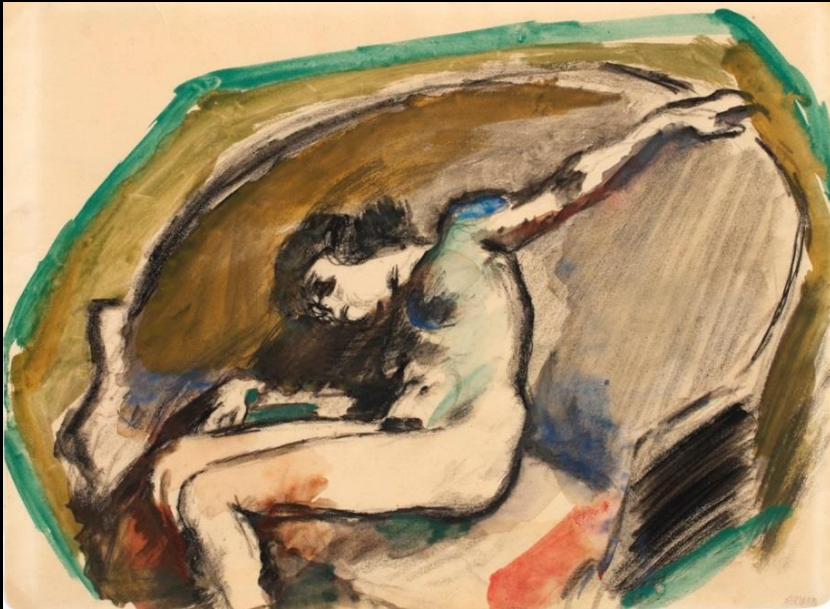
Here's a guide to the galleries—the art world in a nutshell—a tree of contemporary art from pure (abstract) "paintings" (on your left) to pure illustrative "pictures" (down on your right). If you know what you like but don't know anything about art, you'll find the artists on the left hardest to understand, and the names on the right easiest and most familiar (famous). You can start in the cornfields, where no demand is made on you and work your way up and around. Be especially careful of those curious schools situated on that overloaded section of the tree, which somehow think of themselves as being both abstract and pictorial (as if they could be both today). The best way to escape from all this is to paint yourself. If you have any friends that we overlooked, here are some extra leaves. Fill in and paste up...



Ad Reinhardt, *How to Look at Modern Art in America* for *PM* magazine, June 2, 1946

I'd like to claim this tree metaphor as my own, but of course it isn't. The tree of modern art is a famous cartoon by modern illustrator and painter Ad Reinhardt. It appeared in *PM* magazine in June 1946. As it was in 1934, the denomination, "modern American art," was astoundingly broad in 1946.

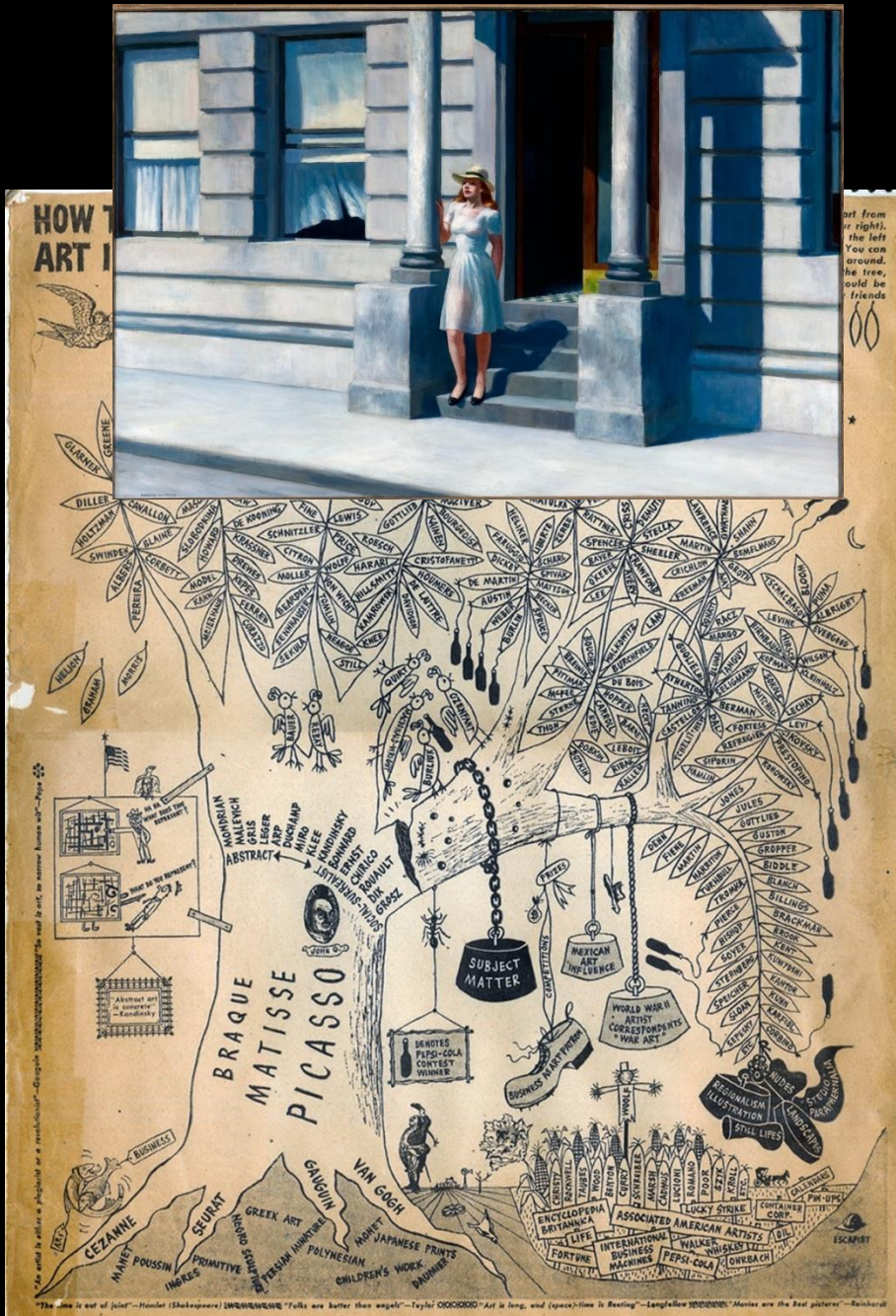
"The one is out of joint"—Hamlet (Shakespeare) "Fools are better than angels"—Taylor "OOOORROO" "Art is long, and (space)time is fleeting"—Langfellow "Movies are the best pictures"—Reinhardt



Toward the center, work that bridged abstraction and representation: the work of Arthur B. Carles, Hans Hofmann, and Lee Gatch. The cartoonist's caption warned readers to pay special attention to this overloaded area full of schools of art "which somehow think of themselves as being both abstract and pictorial."



Clockwise from top: Arthur B. Carles, *Nude in Armchair*, c. 1924; Hans Hofmann, *Still Life—Fruit Bowl*, 1941; Lee Gatch, *Pennsylvania Farm*, 1934



Moving right, we head toward representational art. We find the precise, stripped down, and psychologically resonant realism of Edward Hopper and, on the heaviest branch, the expressionist realism of Walt Kuhn.

Reinhardt saw the healthy half of the tree as that dominated by abstraction, though he recognized the continued dominance of figurative or representational art. The right side—chained to subject matter, and weighed down with illustration, regionalism, corporate and government patronage—has far more leaves and, in 1946, more famous names. Look at the density of leaves on that last drooping branch that includes the grand old men of realism, like John Sloan and Walt Kuhn, who would both be dead within 5 years.



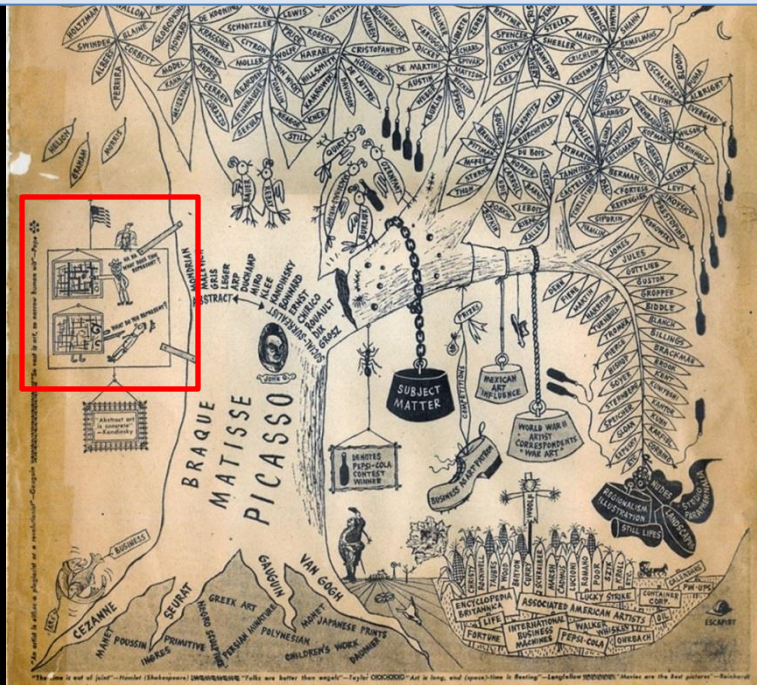
Edward Hopper, *Summertime*, 1943
 Walt Kuhn, *Two Clowns*, 1940

Reinhardt has already buried the Regionalism of Grant Wood and the Social Realism of Reginald Marsh.

But it isn't just old men and outmoded styles on the right side of the tree. Most modern American artists remained tied to subject matter and realistic styles of rendering in the 1930s and still in the 1940s, and most Americans—even the savvy urbane readers of *PM*—would not profess to understand the pure abstraction of artists like Albers and Cavallon, or even the more emotionally evocative work of the abstract expressionists, like Pollock and De Kooning. This was a situation the cartoonist understood, even if he had his money on the triumph of abstract painting. He included a cartoon at the left.

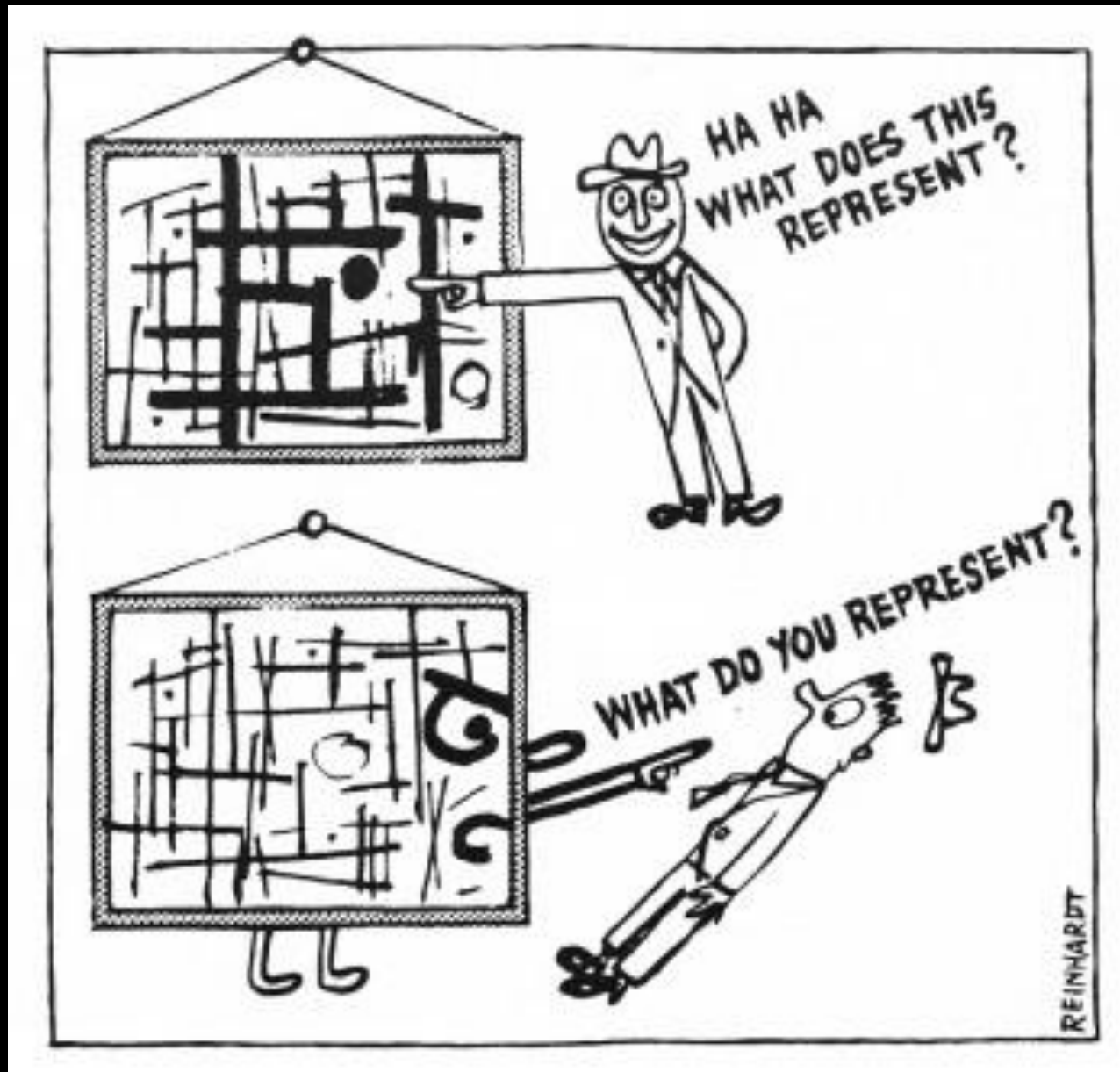


Grant Wood, *Young Corn*, 1931



Reginald Marsh, *Why Not Use the EI?*, 1930

It depicts a typical man encountering ultra-modern, abstract painting with laughter.



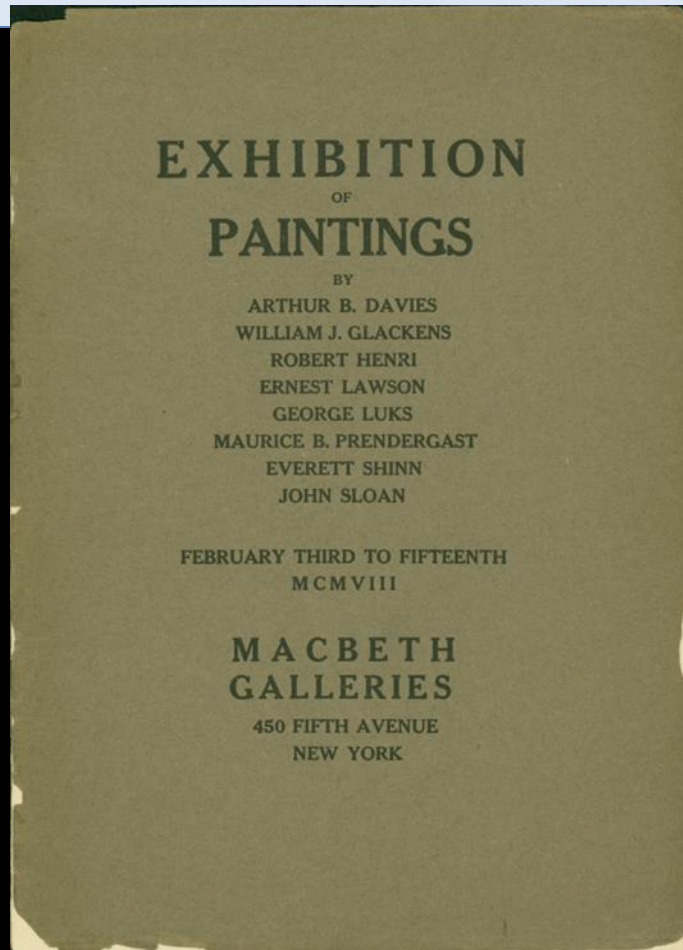
Stuart Davis, *The Dealer Who Handles the Ultra-Modern Works Has a Tough Job*, 1922



Reinhardt's cartoon did not present a new idea in 1946. Stuart Davis reflected the same situation in a cartoon from 1922, captioned "The Dealer in Ultra-Modern Works Has a Tough Job."

This confusing state of modern American art was decades in the making. In 1908, when William D. White was 12 years old, the modern American art debate really got rolling, when the art world was captivated by the work of 8 American painters. Their modest exhibition—13 days, 63 paintings—became a watershed in American art. The show drew crowds, sales, and enormous response, positive and negative, from the press. The artists' portraits were featured in the *New York Times*, and though this was their only exhibition as a group, they became linked as The Eight.

There were many things that made them modern artists—not the least of which was their talent as self-promoters. But more cogent to William D. White's work was the modern subject matter of the Eight.



Catalogue for the Exhibition of The Eight, 1908

Photographs of The Eight in the *New York Times*, 1908

Glackens, *At Mouquin's*, 1905

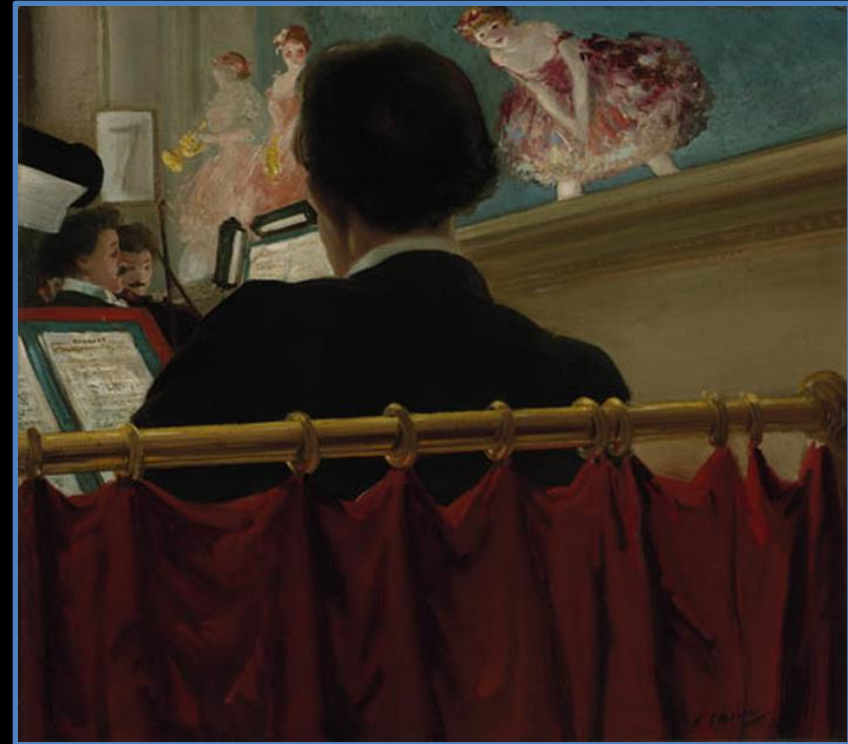


Sloan, *Hairdresser's Window*, 1907



The urban realism of John Sloan, William Glackens, Everett Shinn, and George Luks in particular received attention. These four artists hailed from Philadelphia, where they had studied at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts and worked as newspaper illustrators. In 1908, their loosely painted images of urban streets, cafes, and vaudeville theaters upset critics and patrons accustomed to the elegant subjects and cosmopolitan style of most academic and impressionist American painters.

While their loose brushwork had its roots in impressionism, theirs was an altogether darker vision. Though the Ashcan School moniker wasn't applied until the 1930s and isn't particularly accurate, several members of The Eight did portray the everyday lives of ordinary New Yorkers. Glackens pictured his bohemian set in their bars and shops, while Sloan largely painted his working-class neighbors going about their lives in the streets in Chelsea and Greenwich Village. Luks often painted the denizens of the Lower East Side—in portraits and city scenes—and Shinn specialized in theatre subjects., though he preferred vaudeville houses to Broadway.



Everett Shinn, *The Orchestra Pit, Old Proctor's Fifth Avenue Theatre*, 1906



George Luks, *Allen Street*, c. 1905

ON THE BACK PAGE OF THIS NUMBER WALTZ MUSIC FROM "THE DREAM WALTZ."

The World Magazine

NEW YORK'S ART WAR and the EIGHT "REBELS"

Who Have Dared to Paint Pictures of New York Life (Instead of Europe) and Who Are Holding Their Rebellious Exhibition All by Themselves.



The exhibition was featured in the *New York World* and the *Philadelphia Press* and eventually it traveled around the nation, visiting nine cities. The artists were called rebels, revolutionaries, and "new men," and for several years from 1907 through 1912, The Eight were the face of modern art in America.

THE PHILADELPHIA PRESS SUNDAY FEBRUARY 9, 1908

A REBELLION IN ART LED BY FORMER PHILADELPHIANS

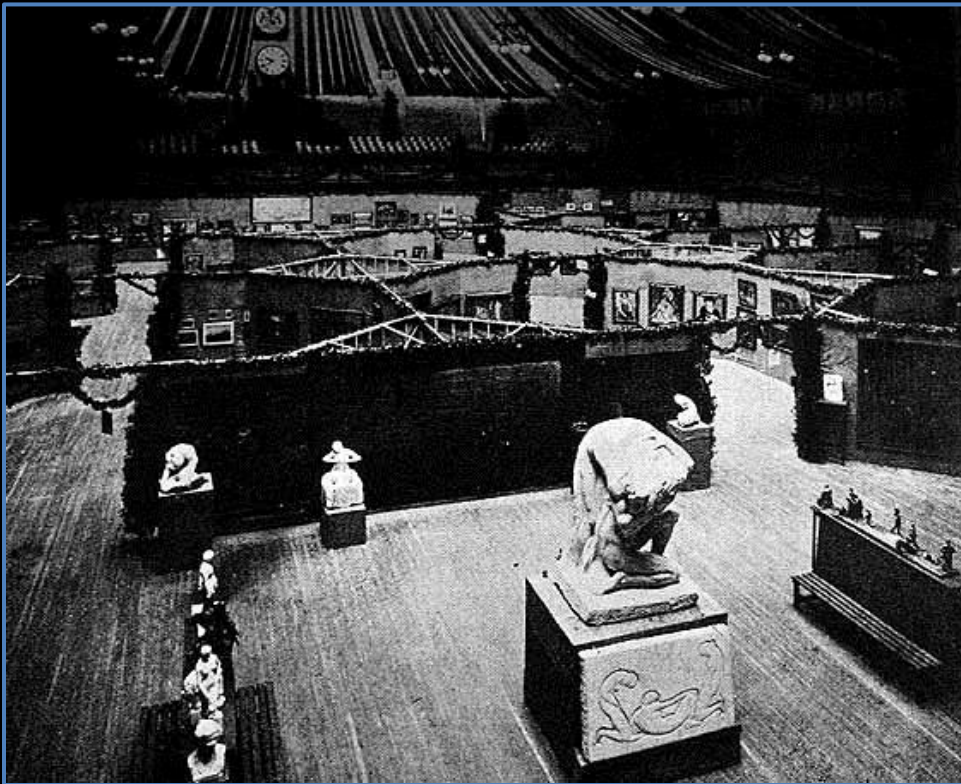
Meas, Glackens, Sloan, Luks, Shinn and Others Cry for an American School.



Four Former Philadelphians...
The Philadelphia Press...
The Philadelphia Press...
The Philadelphia Press...

Press coverage of The Eight exhibition, 1908

In 1913, the year before William White entered the PAFA, the meaning of modernism changed forever with the exhibition known as the Armory Show. The Armory Show introduced the work of European modernists—including Matisse, Brancusi, Picasso, and Duchamp—to a broad American public. It was a massive show (hundreds of paintings, drawings, prints and sculptures) with major promotion behind it. The outrage and excitement were extraordinary. In a month, more than 60,000 people visited the show, and then a selection from it, primarily the most scandalous European works, traveled to Boston and Chicago, where hundreds of thousands saw the work.



The Armory Show, 1913



INTERNATIONAL EXHIBITION
OF MODERN ART
ASSOCIATION OF AMERICAN
PAINTERS AND SCULPTORS

69th INF'TY REGT ARMORY, NEW YORK CITY
FEBRUARY 15th TO MARCH 15th 1913
AMERICAN & FOREIGN ART.

AMONG THE GUESTS WILL BE — INGRES, DELACROIX, DEGAS,
CÉZANNE, REDON, Renoir, MONET, SEURAT, VAN GOGH,
HODLER, SLEVOGT, JOHN, PRYDE, SICKERT, MAILLOL,
BRANCUSI, LEHMBRÜCK, BERNARD, MATISSE, MANET, SIGNAC,
LAUREC, CONDER, DENIS, RUSSELL, DUFY, BRAQUE, HERBIN,
GLEIZES, SOUZA-CARDOZO, ZAK, DU CHAMP-VILLON,
GAUGUIN, ARCHIPENKO, BOURDELLE, C. DE SEGONZAC.

LEXINGTON AVE.—25th ST.

Among the most scandalous, shocking works were Matisse's *Blue Nude*, which many visitors found ungainly, unappealing, and "unrealistic"...



Matisse, *Blue Nude*, 1907

...and his *Red Studio*—shocking not only for its color but also for its lack of traditional perspective.



Matisse, *Red Studio*, 1911



So upsetting was Matisse's work that when the show traveled to Chicago, imitation Matisse paintings were burned in effigy by art students.

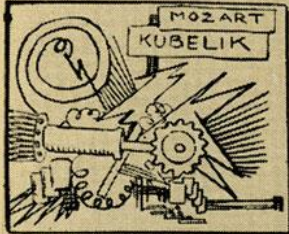


The most famous scandal of the show was Marcel Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2*, which was mercilessly skewered by critics and cartoonists.

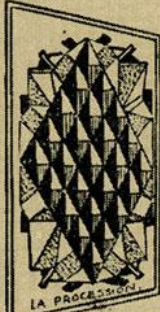


Duchamp, *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2*, 1912

NOBODY WHO HAS BEEN DRINKING IS LET IN TO SEE THIS SHOW



THIS POST-IMPRESSION PORTRAIT OF KUBELIK PLAYING MOZARTIAN RAG-TIME IMPRESSED US MOST.



TRAGEDY
AMMON DIEU! THEY HAVE HUNG THEM, MY MASTERPIECE, UPSIDE DOWN.



PEASANT WOMAN RESTING, OR VENUS LISTENING.



SCULPTURE AS SHE IS DID



THE UNSUSPECTING CRITIC DOES THE SHOW.

He'd Have Bellevue for Next Stop After Futurist Art Exhibition, Scoffers Assert.

The preponderance of French gray in the otherwise magnificent mess of red and dry-points to be seen at the International Exhibition of Modern Art in the fifty-ninth Regiment armory from tomorrow until March 15 induces an expert to assert that, but for this crass error in craftsmanship, the monotonous would be three faces ahead of the Futur-

ists they act in what seems to the untutored a peculiar manner.

The squariness of the Futurists are to the connoisseur the most engrossing of the exhibits, and, if there were no limit on the space allotted to this critique, it would be possible to go into such intimate detail regarding them that, after reading it, the general public would be on its hind feet.

Particularly does painting No. 241 interest. It is labelled "Nu Descendant un Escalier." A reporter for a newspaper that cares nothing about art surveyed the picture. He saw nothing but what resembled a fearful explosion in a lumber yard. Had he known, French the inscription would have informed him that the painting was of a nude person descending a ladder.

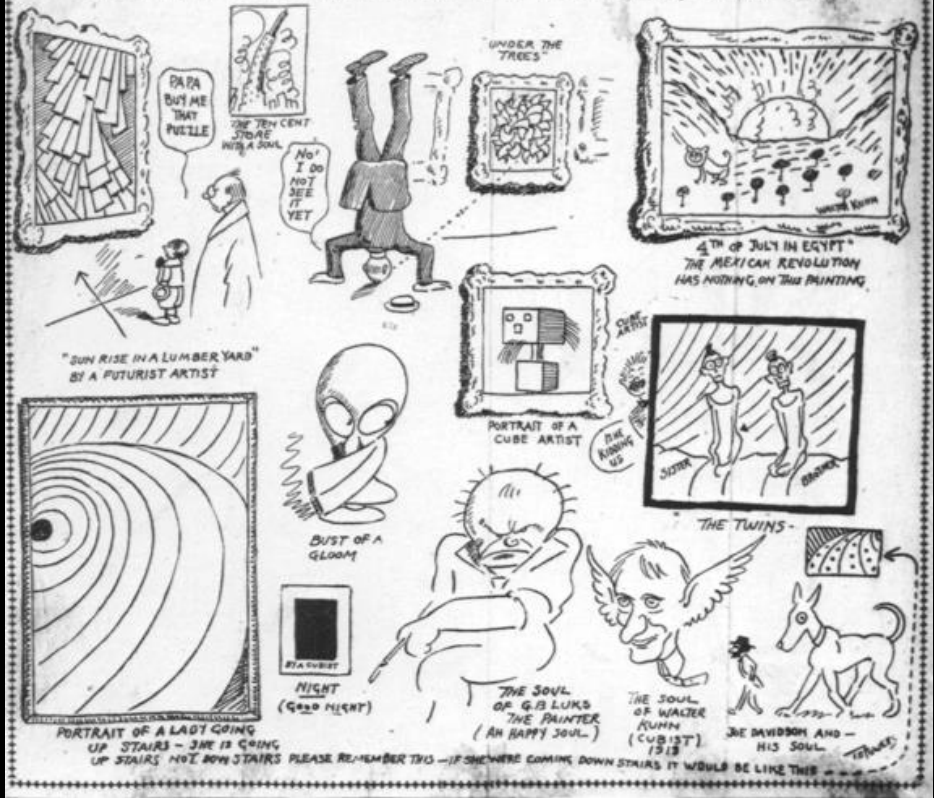
He began to worry. He removed his glasses and polished the lenses, then looked again. He felt awfully sorry for himself, for other persons came up to the picture and, after backing away, exclaimed, "Wonderful! Marvelous! Stamps him as a genius!"

The man in the frock coat became very red in the face. He was certain disgusted with himself. Suddenly he withdrew about a yard, placed his silk hat on the floor, bent over and surveyed the picture backward through his legs.

The light of understanding was in his eyes when he resumed an erect position. "Show me," he half-shouted to an attendant, "show me what the Cubists have here. I can now Frank H. Omni-

In general, the outlandish European art stirred up lots of humor and parody.

ART AT THE ARMORY BY POWERS, FUTURIST



Cartoon about the Armory Show, 1913

The show was organized by and featured the work of modern *American* painters. Sloan and Glackens were on the committee, and Arthur B. Davies and Walt Kuhn were two of the three major organizers of the European work on view. The range of the American work at the show was broad and included realist works by Sloan and the young Edward Hopper. Sloan sent the sort of casual scene of working-class women that had been shocking only a few years before, only to find it completely eclipsed by modern European and American art.



John Sloan, *Sunday, Women Drying Their Hair*, 1912
Edward Hopper, *Sailing*, 1911

Not all of the American art was stylistically conservative. Many American artists were aware of, and some were involved in, the new movements abroad. The Armory Show featured works by Charles Sheeler—here taking a fauvist approach to a Cezanne-style still life, and Alfred Maurer, whose post-impressionist landscape style was honed among the modern painters of Paris. (In a regional context, Maurer was one of the artists who advised Albert Barnes in forming his collection of modern European art, beginning in 1912.)



Charles Sheeler, *The Mandarin*, 1912
Alfred Maurer, *Autumn*, c.1911–12

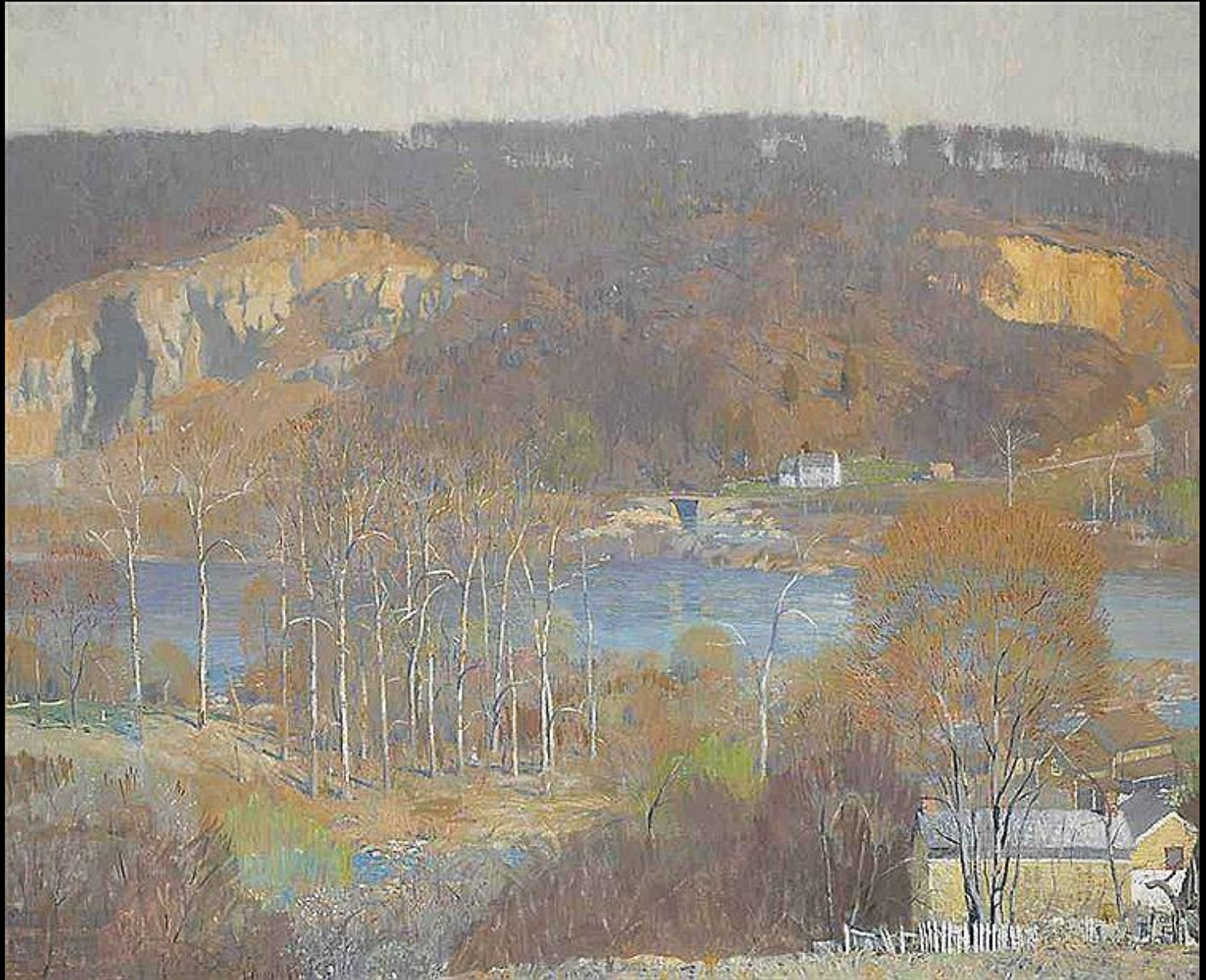


When William D. White entered the Pennsylvania Academy in 1914, many of the students and teachers would have been abuzz about the Armory Show. The Academy was one of the leading art schools in the nation and the oldest art school in the nation. The Academy had excellent facilities and supported a broad range of instructors in the early 20th century.



Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts

William D. White's instructors most likely included Daniel Garber, an American impressionist painter.



Daniel Garber, *The Valley, Tohickon*, 1914



Cecilia Beaux was probably the most successful woman artist at the turn of the century. She painted stylish portraits of wealthy Philadelphia and New York patrons that were compared to William Merritt Chase and John Singer Sargent.

Cecilia Beaux, *Flora Whitney*, 1916

Violet Oakley was a student of Howard Pyle who quickly shifted from traditional illustration to the design of stained glass windows and the painting of murals. When White attended the Academy she was in midst of her largest commission, finishing the murals in the Pennsylvania State Capitol started by Edwin Austin Abbey. She took over after his death in 1911, and the commission occupied her for the next 16 years.



Violet Oakley, Murals for Pennsylvania State Capitol

The illustration teacher, Henry McCarter, was quite a modernist. After study with Thomas Eakins in Philadelphia, McCarter traveled to Europe where he saw Van Gogh's work and watched Corot paint. He met impressionists Camille Pissarro and Edgar Degas, and he served an apprenticeship in lithography with Toulouse-Lautrec. Like Lautrec, as an illustrator, McCarter could employ intense color and simplified, flattened forms in his illustrations and paintings.



Henry McCarter, *Aida by Verdi, for Steinway Pianos*, 1919
McCarter, *Three Women in a Garden*, 1922

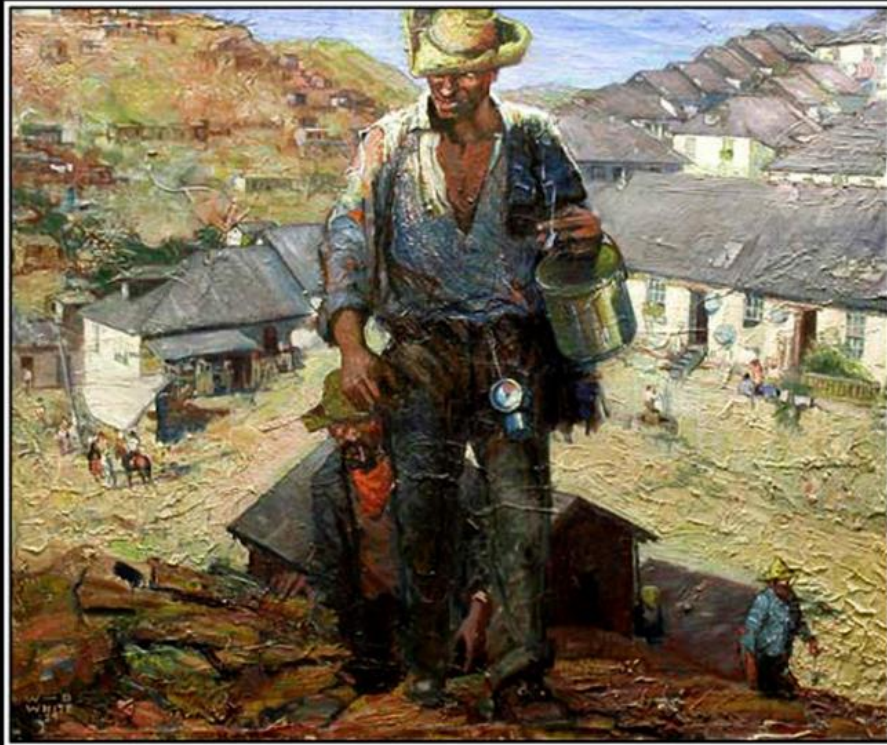
Finally, Hugh Breckenridge, one of the painting teachers, was another modernist. Breckenridge began his long association with the Pennsylvania Academy at age seventeen, when he enrolled there. He won the Academy's prestigious Cresson Travel Scholarship and studied in Europe. Within a short time of his 1893 return from Europe, Breckenridge was offered a position at the Academy, serving as a dedicated painting instructor for more than forty years. He worked confidently in a conservative academic style for portrait commissions, but his own work was brighter and looser in handling, reflecting his understanding of contemporary European art. He embraced the intense color of the Fauves and his work became increasingly abstract in the 1920s.



Breckenridge, *Philadelphia*, 1917

Breckenridge, *Tree of Life*, 1929

White's education at the PAFA certainly impacted his art. He learned thorough, solid figure drawing—a specialty of the Academy—which would be crucial to his vision of heroic workers. His figures always have mass and seem grounded. He also absorbed modern brushwork—including the painterly, post-impressionist style of Garber and Breckenridge. And White's approach to mural painting may have benefited from the example of Violet Oakley. Though her murals for the State Capitol featured more exalted historical figures and allegorical references altogether different from White's down-to-earth motifs, the way White pushed the monumental figures to the foreground has something in common with her approach.

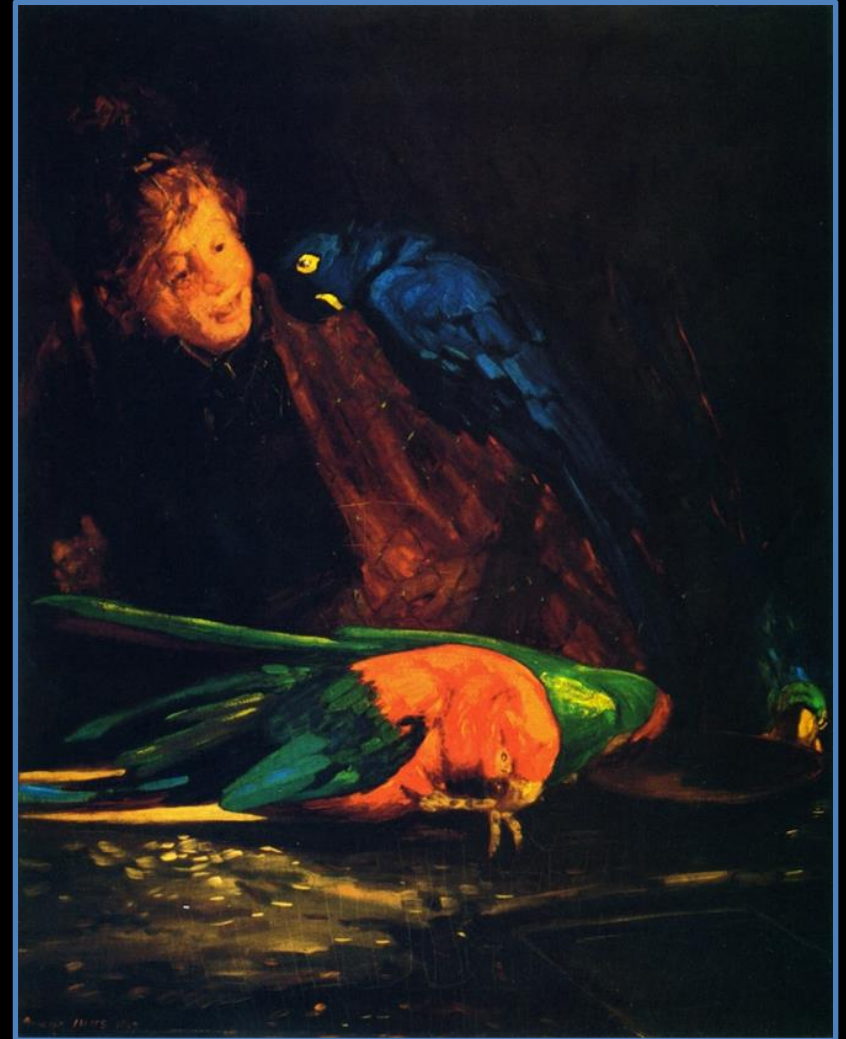


White, *Miners' Village*, c.1924 (above)



White, *Summer*, 1936

The Pennsylvania Academy was more than just classes. The Academy also hosted lots of exhibitions, most notably the large annual juried shows. The Annual exhibition at the PAFA was still a big deal in the early 20th century, especially for representational painters. During White's years there, the Ashcan School artists showed regularly there. For example, he could have seen George Luks's *Little Madonna* and *Woman with Macaws*.



George Luks, *Little Madonna*, c.1907
Woman and Macaws, 1907

Luks's *Houston Street* won an award in 1918.



Luks, *Houston Street*, 1917

John Sloan was also a regular exhibitor. His important painting *McSorley's Bar* was shown at the PAFA Annual.



John Sloan, *McSorley's Bar*, 1912

The next generation of realists also showed at the Annuals. George Bellows was particularly prominent during White's years at PAFA. He exhibited major canvasses and won awards. In 1913, Bellows won the Jennie Sesnan medal for his spectacular *Men of the Docks*.



George Bellows, *Men of the Docks*, 1912. Awarded Jennie Sesnan medal, 1913

From the 1915 Annual, the Academy acquired this strikingly modern painting by the young Academy alum, Arthur B. Carles. A student of McCarter, Carles had traveled to Europe and joined the modern movement, exhibiting in the Armory Show and (even before that) at Alfred Stieglitz's 291 Gallery in New York. The acquisition of this painting presaged the hiring of Carles in 1917 to join the Academy faculty. He taught there until 1925.



Arthur B. Carles, *Actress as Cleopatra*, 1914
acquired by PAFA, 1915

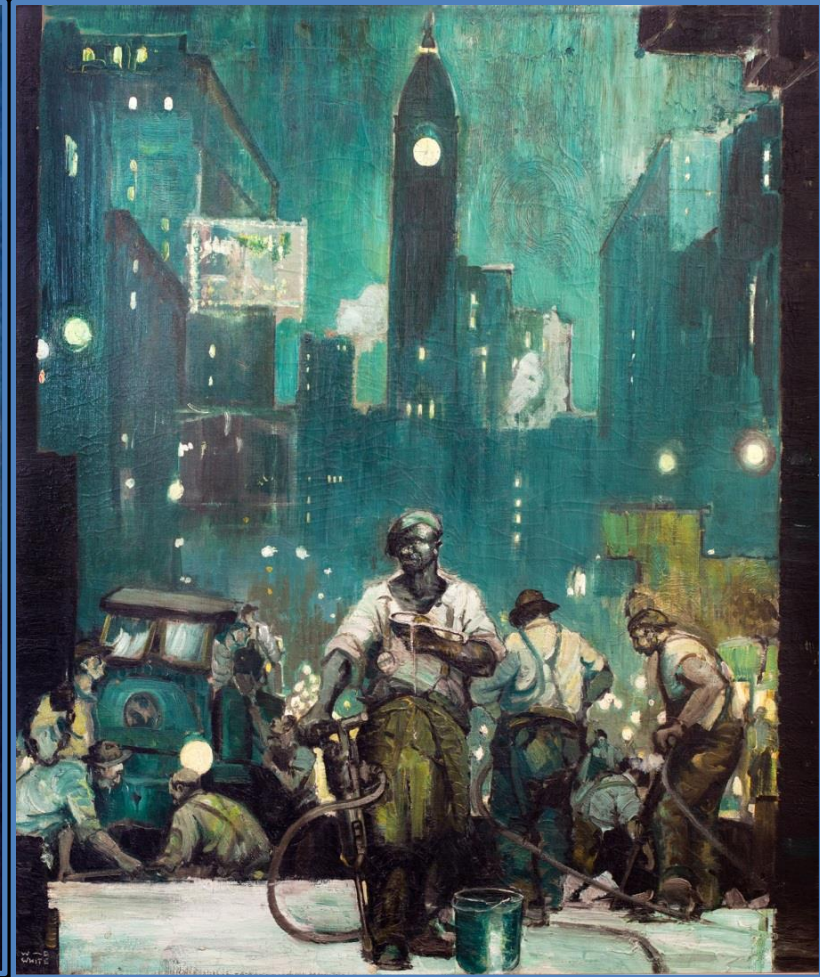


After William D. White, c.1927
Julius Caesar and the Grandeur that was Rome

In 1917 Hugh Breckenridge was awarded the Stotesbury Prize, which honored the artist whose work or works in the Annual contributed the most to the exhibition. Among the works he showed was Philadelphia, 1917. The Annuals and their prizes drew attention to modern, representational painters like Bellows and Breckenridge whose work seems to have informed William White in years to come.



Hugh Breckenridge, *Philadelphia*, 1917
Winner of Stotesbury Prize, 1917



William D. White, *Night Shift on Broad Street*, c.1926

Annual Exhibition, PAFA, 1920s



The Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Art's annual exhibitions were an important showcase for artists and a valuable resource for art students. Most of the work on view in any year was available for purchase. A few works would be purchased by the Academy each year and others by collectors. One such collector, who seems to have depended heavily on the Academy to introduce him to new artists and works, was a Wilmington, Delaware, collector John L. Sexton.

John L. Sexton began collecting seriously in the late 1920s and collected through the early 1950s, forming a collection representative of the broad range of American art during the 1920s, '30s, and '40s. When Sexton died, his was one of the few collections of modern American painting in Wilmington.

Sexton's collection provides an interesting microcosm of modern American painting, and one formed close to White's home. He only collected 44 pictures. All these were seen and purchased in Philadelphia or New York between 1928 and 1950 and they were also displayed at the Museum—so they were available for White to have seen also. About half of Sexton's collection was donated to the museum and it was a transformative gift, setting the Museum on a course of collecting modern American art.

John Sexton Collection Of Art to Be Displayed

The Delaware Art Museum will present an exhibition of its John L. Sexton Collection at the Downtown Art Gallery, 901 Market St., Monday through Nov. 23.

The John L. Sexton Collection is a group of 21 paintings by 20th century American artists. The Delaware Art Museum received the collection in 1955 through the bequest of John L. Sexton. In 1962 Mrs. Dora Sexton Brown added Edward Hopper's "Summertime" from her brother's original collection.

Sexton, a resident of Wilmington, began collecting paintings in 1928. The collection included works by Lee Gatch, Morris Kantor, Arthur Osver, Henry Varnum Poor, Reuben Tam among others. Of special importance were 10 paintings by the American artist Charles Burchfield, four of which were bequeathed to the Museum. These were loaned to the Burchfield Memorial Exhibition at the Munson-Williams-Proctor Institute last spring.

His collection was one of the few large ones of recent American painting in the area. It numbered 44 paintings at the time of his death. He collected because he liked paintings and the collection reflected his personal taste. Many of the paintings have increased enormously in value.

The Downtown Gallery, in the Market Tower Building, is open to the public from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. weekdays, excepting bank holidays.

At the heart and the start of Sexton's collection were several works by Charles Burchfield. In 1929, *Lilacs* was awarded the Jennie Sesnan medal for best landscape in the 124th Annual Exhibition of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. Burchfield was a regular exhibitor at the Academy between 1927 and 1964. Burchfield's focus on the land and architecture of Ohio and Buffalo aligned him with the Regionalists, though there is always something odd and poetic about his work.



Charles Burchfield, *Lilacs*, c.1927



The psychological charge and the stylized view of nature in Burchfield's watercolors appealed to modern artists, and he was admired by younger painters, like Andrew Wyeth.

William Hugh
Ferguson, *Night
Birds*, c.1945



In their mysterious, threatening atmosphere, William Hugh Ferguson's watercolor landscapes suggest the influence of Charles Burchfield. Ferguson was a Philadelphia-based artist, who exhibited regularly in the 1930s and '40s at the Academy. His work is in the collection there, as well as in the Philadelphia Museum of Art and the Reading Museum.



Elizabeth Sparhawk-Jones, *The Dreamer*, c.1942

Similar in its eerie appeal is the work of Elizabeth Sparhawk-Jones. After achieving early success in a very different style, Sparhawk-Jones returned to the art world in the 1930s. By 1942 she was exhibiting paintings that combined "forceful drawing and compact flesh tones" with "a vague under-water quality" and mysterious symbolism. Her technique was experimental, too; she painted in watercolor on the sort of finely woven linen used by the Wright brothers to produce early airplane wings. Perhaps influenced by Surrealism, Freudian analysis, or mental health problems, Sparhawk-Jones' strange, visionary paintings attracted a wide range of reactions from the nation's art critics.



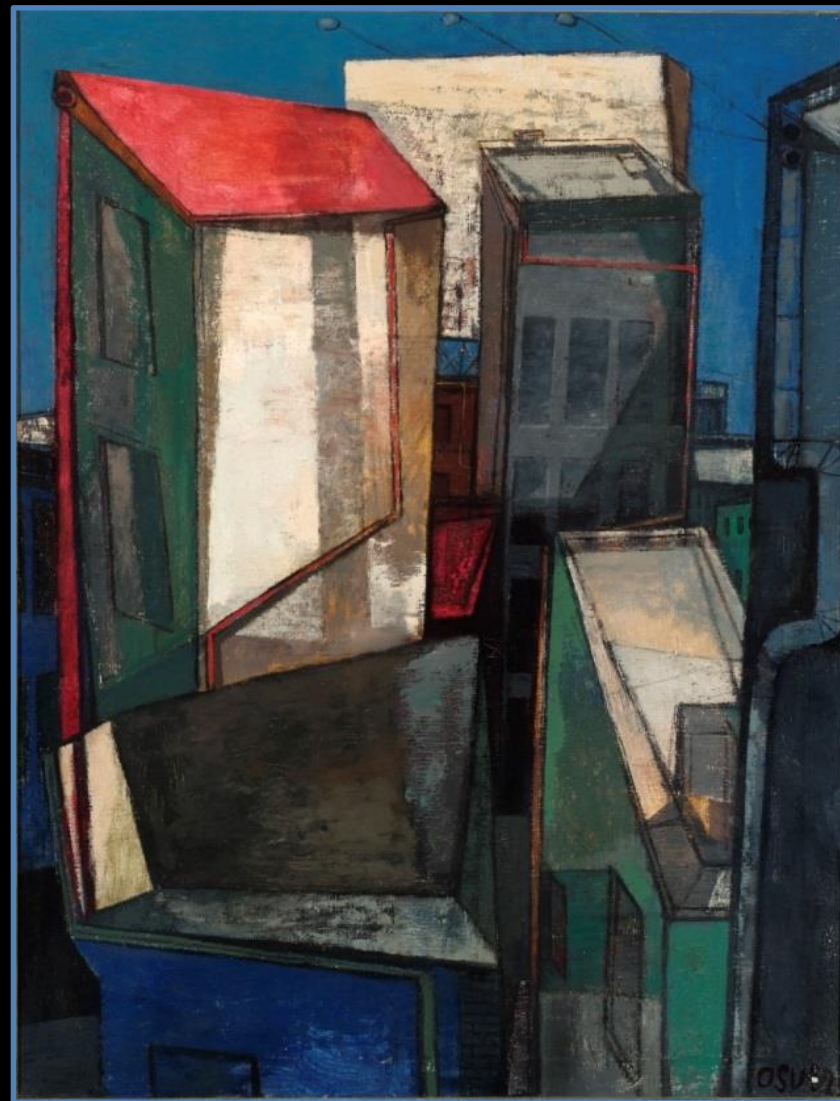
Paul Meltsner,
Martha Graham,
c.1939



John Carroll,
Ribbons, c.1945

The paintings of women Sexton collected were also haunting and mysterious. Carroll's Neo-Romantic portraits of misty-eyed women were extremely popular in the 1940s, but he was practically forgotten by the time of his death.

Sexton's collection wasn't all mysterious and evocative. There was also a strong motif of cubism that ran through it. Indeed, his niece recalled it as being "blue" and "angular" art.



Lewis Jean Liberte, *Street in Rockport*, 1927
Arthur Osver, *The Rainpipes*, c.1948



Everett Franklin Spruce, *West of Austin*, 1941

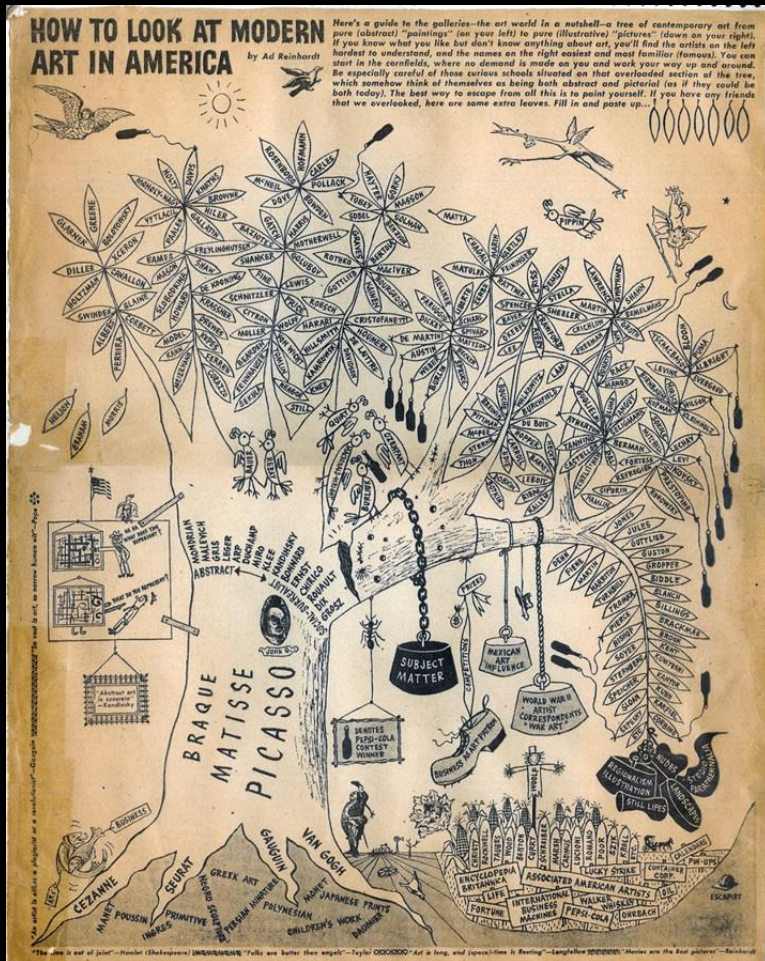
Morris Kantor, *Harbor*, 1944

And there were examples of the Cubist regionalism of Everett Spruce, Morris Kantor, Lee Gatch and Reuben Tam—exhibitors at the Pennsylvania Academy and artists stuck in the middle of Reinhardt's tree of modern art.





Perhaps the strongest painting from John Sexton's collection is Edward Hopper's *Summertime*, featured in the PAFA Annual in 1944. It brings together the collector's interest in mysterious women and strong architectural elements—it's also both blue and angular.



Edward Hopper, *Summertime*, 1943, Sexton Collection



John Sexton was one of the most adventurous collectors in Wilmington, and he amassed a strong and representative collection of modern American painting. Even at his most daring—and he was one of the most ambitious and modern collectors in the region—Sexton stayed mostly on the right side of Reinhardt's tree of modern art.

And so would William D. White, drawing inspiration from the likes of George Luks, George Bellows, and Hugh Breckenridge, as he crafted his own realist vision.

But White, like Sexton, clearly was aware of the larger artistic scene, and his work displays his experimentation with modern artistic movements from Regionalism to non-objective painting.

