# Aftershock: One hundred years since The Armory Show

**Clare Hurley**
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*The New Spirit: American Art in the Armory Show, 1913*
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This year marks the centennial of the International Exhibition of Modern Art, better known as The Armory Show. A watershed in the history of art in the 20th century, it opened at the 69th Regiment Armory in New York City in March 1913, bringing what was considered the vanguard of modern art to the attention of the American public for the first time.

Of the 1,200 pieces of art in the Armory show, two-thirds were by American artists. Yet the story that has gone down in art history is that the new European art, in particular that of Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse and Marcel Duchamp, provoked such a sensation that it eclipsed the work of the provincial American artists, and set the course of modern art for the rest of the 20th century.

*The New Spirit: American Art in the Armory Show, 1913*, an exhibit at the Montclair Art Museum in Montclair, New Jersey this past spring, set out to challenge this conventional notion. Though it did not entirely dismiss the shock of avant-garde European art, the exhibit of thirty-six of the American artists in the Armory Show, along with a wealth of archival materials, press clippings, photographs and cartoons, added nuance to our understanding of the 1913 show's impact and artistic legacy.

Organized by the Association of American Painters and Sculptors (AAPS), a group that had first come together in 1910 to organize a smaller *Exhibit of Independent Artists* in opposition to the traditionalists favored by the National Academy of Design, the Armory Show in 1913 was conceived of by the AAPS exhibition committee (comprised of artists Arthur B. Davies, Walter Kuhn, and Walter Pach) as an American equivalent of the infamous Salon des Refusés exhibit held in Paris a half century earlier in 1863.

In that instance, the French Academy's rejection of work by Edouard Manet, Gustave Courbet and other Realist painters who have subsequently been recognized as the progenitors of modernism in art caused such a controversy that their "refused" work was exhibited in its own room for the public to judge for itself how awful it was. Causing a scandal, shocking the tastes of the bourgeois public, had become the necessary hallmark of the most advanced art. (The exhibit in the Montclair Museum also documented Kuhn's publicity efforts to foster the sense of scandal and excitement that resulted in record-breaking attendance at the Armory Show.)

Rather than being hopelessly old-fashioned, most of the work by the American artists resonated sufficiently with the "new spirit" of modern art. Walter Pach's *The Wall of the City* (1912) emphasizes the colorful geometry of encroaching urbanization on the landscape. Maurice Prendergast's lively park scene in *Landscape with Figures* (ca. 1912) shimmers with jewel-like daubs of color. Other works, like John Marin's watercolor *St. Paul's, Lower Manhattan (Broadway, St. Paul's Church* (1912) or *Untitled (Wharf Under Mountain)* (1913) by Manierre Dawson, have an even more distinctly "modern"—if taken to mean purely abstract—quality.

But it's impossible to dispense with one's knowledge of Paul Cézanne's inimitable geometrical explorations of the landscape painted almost 30 years earlier, or Georges Seurat's tour de force of pointillism, *Sunday Afternoon on La Grande Jatte* (1884-6). One feels the American artists were trying to be bold, but the Europeans were bolder; the Americans were colorful, whereas the Europeans were already lurid; the Americans sought abstract elements in the recognizable world, while the Europeans had completely dispensed with any necessary connection between the two.

While the AAPS organizers doubtless did not intend their own work to suffer by comparison, they would be the first to acknowledge the pioneering influence of the European avant-garde. Kuhn had made a visit in the fall of 1912 to the Sonderbund Exhibition in Cologne, Germany, where he discovered the latest works by Picasso and Matisse, as well as post-Impressionists Paul Cézanne, Edvard Munch, Paul Gauguin and Vincent Van Gogh.

Excited by the still somewhat incomprehensible work at the Salon d'Automne in Paris, (he admitted that Cézanne's landscapes were "Greek to me"), Kuhn found the notorious pieces that were exhibited in the "Chamber of Horrors," as the Cubist room came to be called. And a show at Galerie la Boetie would yield the *succès de scandal,* Marcel Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2,* (1912).

Valuable as it was, however, in recreating the original Armory Show—down to showing the floor plans and the show's now quaint-seeming logo of an American pine tree representing the "new spirit"—the Montclair Museum exhibit ended by reasserting the argument advanced at the time that the American artists "held their own" against the Europeans.

But it is simply not the case that the American artists were on a par with the Europeans in their development. Despite their individual merits, the exhibit at the Montclair Museum only confirmed what it set out to disprove. Art historian Meyer Schapiro's *The Introduction of Modern Art in America: The Armory Show* (in *Modern Art: 19th & 20th Centuries*, George Braziller, New York, 1979), written in 1952, brings more insight to bear. Schapiro wrote:

"In the reception in the United States, we are struck by a singular play of provincial backwardness and a generous disposition towards the most advanced forms...Unlike the Europeans we had no official art; there were no state museums and schools of ministers of fine arts to support an orthodoxy in art...The United States had not known the great artistic struggles of the last (19th) century in Europe; Romanticism, Realism and Impressionism were introduced from abroad with little conflict and without the accompanying political implications…

"The reaction to European art at the Armory Show was probably affected by the real lag in American art during the two decades before. Many of our painters remained confidently and even militantly realistic, committed to the spectacle of the city, of activity, and to the picturesqueness of the environment, for some thirty to fifty years after this

taste had declined in Europe. The most influential new styles practiced by Americans around 1910 came out of French Impressionism; the urban realists (Henri, Luks, Sloan, Bellows) used the methods of advanced French painting of the 1860s and '70s." (p.160)

And indeed, at the Montclair exhibit, these were the artists that stood out. Their uniqueness of vision combined with painterly skill brought each of these artists close to their European contemporaries without ever making a radical departure from pictorial conventions. The group around Robert Henri known as The Eight, alternately called the Ashcan School for its gritty urban subjects, was represented at the Montclair exhibit by Henri's *The Spanish Gypsy* (1912), Edward Hopper's *Sailing* (1911), and John Sloan's etchings *Night Windows* (1910) and *The Picture Buyer* (1911). Unfortunately, the work of George Bellows, another one of the Eight who played a role in organizing the Armory Show, was not included at Montclair.

Schapiro, while giving the American Realists their due for a raw vitality suited to the American scene, nevertheless concludes, "What raised the best of the new Europeans above the American artists was their greater seriousness about the qualities of painting; they probed the medium more deeply and were more inventive in their means. Their feeling for the objects they represented was also more imaginative." (ibid., p.169)

This is true, but an important aspect in evaluating the impact of the Armory Show of 1913 not much explored in the Montclair exhibit is the larger political context. In *New York 1913: The Armory Show and the Paterson Strike Pageant*, Martin Green examines the conjunction of radical politics on the one hand and an upsurge in the class struggle in the United States with a receptivity to radical art movements at the Armory Show on the other.

Green focuses on the intersection of progressive social circles, including some wealthy bohemians and radicals, with young labor activists and socialists in New York in 1913. Notably, Mabel Dodge, a wealthy sponsor of the Armory Show, was the lover for a time of John Reed, radical journalist and editor of *The Masses*.

Reed, who would go on to chronicle the 1917 Russian Revolution in the epochal *Ten Days that Shook the World*, was involved in organizing a pageant show in Madison Square Garden to publicize and raise support for the Paterson silk workers strike—a militant, six-month long strike of almost 2,000 silk workers for the 8-hour day. Reed met with fiery labor organizer Elizabeth Gurley Flynn and Big Bill Haywood, leader of the Industrial Workers of the World (I.W.W.), who in turn made several visits to New York City to see the Armory Show.

The work of the American artists in the Armory Show, particularly that of the Ashcan School, many of whom shared this progressive/radical outlook, while perhaps old fashioned in formal terms, was in other ways more far-reaching in its attention to conditions of social life. These artists depicted strikes and city slums, the industrial transformation of the landscape, the raw energy of city streets, the head-on collisions in boxing matches. This relatively new content was poured into old bottles, as it were, as opposed to the same old wine. After all, the Cubists and Fauves were still painting fruit and flowers, nudes, landscapes—albeit in radically new-looking forms.

It is beyond the scope of this review to trace the complex path of Modernism in art in later decades. Abstraction in particular came to international pre-eminence after the Second World War, a development that was bound up with the post-WWII boom and also benefited from the covert support of the US government.

Significantly, however, the piece considered the most scandalous at the 1913 Armory Show, Marcel Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2* (1912)—described by one art critic at the time as looking like an explosion in a shingle factory—and Marcel Duchamp himself, would ultimately prove among the most influential in the developments subsequent to Modernism. Duchamp later moved to the United States and gave up art-making in favor of inventing optical machines, ready-mades, chess-playing and other intellectual pursuits which would spearhead many trends in conceptual art.

Just as the materialist conception of lawfully determined historical development has come under sustained attack from postmodern critics, so too the narrative of art history as a succession of schools or movements culminating in Modernism has been rejected in most academic circles in favor of the idea of multiple, equally valid "art-narratives." The idea that art could be said to progress (or regress) in ways that were intricately bound up with changes in society, and that some artistic styles more effectively expressed the spirit of the times than others, has likewise been called into question.

Judging from the contemporary artwork at an annual international art fair, likewise called The Armory Show and also held in New York last spring, a stylistic free-for-all prevails in which anything goes if it can command high enough prices. Photography and representational realism, colorful expressionism, abstraction, minimalism and conceptual artwork of all kinds--the only thing which might be considered shocking in this context would be any work addressing the social reality of contemporary life in a complex or insightful way. Such work was all but completely absent.

This latter day Armory Show—which took over three piers the size of multiple football fields to accommodate 60,000 visitors for $30 each to over 200 exhibit booths—is just one of the art world's busy roster of fairs, biennials and other high-end sales events for the wealthy elite at which hundreds of millions of dollars change hands for the latest contemporary art.

Beyond taking the same name when it was launched by a consortium of galleries in 1998, today's Armory Show is not technically connected to the 1913 one. Nonetheless it could be said to bear the imprint of that original show, not only because the art which today commands such astronomical prices is in complex ways the end result of that earlier collision between the art of the provincial Americans and the European vanguard, but also and most importantly because it is taking place, though largely unconsciously, on the verge of revolutionary upheavals which are set to change more than just artistic styles.