

1. Max Weber, *Rush Hour, New York*, 1913, oil on canvas, 101.6 × 81.3 cm; private collection



# Cubism in America

## Modernist explorations and domestic concerns

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Cubism was the most widely explored and influential modernist style in painting and sculpture in the United States during the first half of the 20th century. American artists discovered cubism about three years after its birth in France in 1907 and their interest in it quickly intensified. Most of the earliest American artists to practice cubism stayed close to the style once they first discovered it. They tended to be more responsive to the slightly later French cubists, namely Fernand Léger, Albert Gleizes, Jean Metzinger and Francis Picabia, who have been referred to as the “salon cubists” or “Puteaux cubists”, rather than Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque, who invented the style. Most of these Americans took what they learned and quickly made it into something more relevant to and indicative of the rapid social, economic, and cultural changes in America at the time<sup>1</sup>. American cubism was often used for personal expression, social observation, and comprehending modern American life. Unlike much European cubism, it was not mostly concerned with formalist or philosophical considerations of composition, form, space and time. A few of these American artists were also influenced by expressionism and developed styles that were complex hybrids of the two movements. They also used color more than the French artists who originated the movement. Some of the best cubist painting in the United States was done in watercolor, a medium that Americans have periodically tended to favor for its immediacy and spontaneity. By 1930, the assimilation of cubism led to an art deco-like, pre-pop art variation of the style that has been labeled “billboard cubism” and a tightly angular, emphatically geometric type of realistic imagery depicting 20 c. urban, industrial America known as “precisionism”.



<sup>1</sup> See P. van der Huyden Moak, *Cubism and the New World: The Influence of Cubism on American Painting, 1910-1920*, Philadelphia 1970, pp. 2-8; R. Rosenblum, *Cubism and Twentieth Century Art*, 2nd rev. ed., New York 1976, pp. 241-244; J. Cauman, *Inheriting Cubism: The Impact of Cubism on American Art, 1909-1936*, New York 2001, pp. 13-18.



<sup>2</sup> See S. Greenough [et al.], *Modern Art in America: Alfred Stieglitz and His New York Galleries*, Washington D. C. 2000, p. 42, 107–117, 185–202.

<sup>3</sup> See *Exhibition of Paintings from the Collection of the Late Arthur Jerome Eddy* [exhibition cat.], 19 September – 22 October 1922, The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago 1922.

American artists became aware of cubism through various sources starting around 1910. Numerous American artists went to Paris and learned about cubism firsthand, since there it was easy to see the most recent and important works by the leading artists in the movement. They saw many cubist works exhibited at the gallery of Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler. Kahnweiler was the most important exhibitor and promoter of cubism during the years before World War I, when it was current and still evolving, because he knew the artists personally and had contracts to be the exclusive dealer of their work from 1907 to 1914. They could have learned much from his numerous essays and his book *The Rise of cubism*, most of which were written in 1914 to 1920. Another helpful venue for modern European art in Paris at this time was the apartment of Leo and Gertrude Stein at 27 rue de Fleurus. The Steins came from a wealthy German-Jewish American family that migrated across the United States from Baltimore to Pittsburgh to San Francisco in the middle of the 19th century. They became wealthy in San Francisco from the rental properties and cable car routes that they owned and operated. In Paris in the years from 1904 to 1914, Leo and Gertrude had weekly soirees in their apartment where their art collection was always on display. These soirees were very popular and well attended by many artists, writers, collectors and other creative and intellectual figures in Paris in the early 20th century.

Some American artists learned about cubism through various remote, slower and more detached ways in the United States. Many saw cubist works exhibited at Alfred Stieglitz's gallery "291" and a few other American galleries and exhibitions of the period. Stieglitz held an exhibition of Picasso's work in 1911 and a joint exhibition of the works of Picasso and Braque in 1915 that included many drawings and painted sketches rather than finished paintings and sculptures. The 1911 exhibition was accompanied by an essay written by Marius de Zayas, copies of which were given to gallery visitors<sup>2</sup>. Some cubist works were reproduced in Stieglitz's periodical *Camera Work* and Arthur Jerome Eddy's book *Manet and the Post-Impressionists*. Eddy authored one of the first art-historical examinations of cubism available in English in the United States, which was published in 1914. His discussion of cubism offers some useful insights and information but it is limited by the lack of historical perspective and direct contact with artists and their artworks, since the movement was still developing when he wrote the book. One serious limitation is the sparse discussion of Braque and synthetic cubism. Eddy's own collection of modern art, as large and varied as it was, contained only a few cubist works<sup>3</sup>. Many cubist works were exhibited at the Armory Show of 1913. Although all the major artists were represented to some extent at this hugely influential exhibition, the most important followers of Picasso and Braque, in particular Léger, Gleizes, Metzinger and Picabia, were somewhat better represented. The works shown that

are probably best known today include Picasso's 1909 bronze *Head of a Woman* and Gleizes' *Man on a Balcony*<sup>4</sup>. Kahnweiler arranged for the Daniel Gallery in New York City to be the exclusive venue in the United States for selling Picasso's work. All of these exhibitions, galleries and publications constituted useful introductions to cubism but were far from balanced, representative, cogent surveys of the movement, which was still new, radical and mutable.

Max Weber is usually considered the first American cubist and the one who stayed closest to the actual French style the longest; it dominated his paintings from 1910 until 1920 and its impact is very apparent in his later work. He became familiar with many excellent examples of cubism when he was in Paris from 1905 to 1908. He saw the collection of the Steins when he attended their soirees<sup>5</sup>. Marsden Hartley experimented with cubism around 1910 in several tentative, exploratory works that portend later achievements<sup>6</sup>. He was in Paris from 1911 to 1913 and visited numerous exhibitions and attended the soirees of the Steins, so he was also well versed in cubism from viewing original works and meeting the artists. Charles Demuth visited France for several months in 1907 and for two years in 1912 to 1914, so he was there when cubism was new and also when it was near its end as an avant-garde movement<sup>7</sup>. H. Lyman Säyen lived in Paris from 1906 to 1914 with his wife because both of them worked for Wannamaker's Department Store at the time, so he was there for the entire length of the cubist movement<sup>8</sup>. Charles Sheeler traveled extensively across Europe in the first decade of the 20th c. and spent a few months in Paris in late-1908 to early-1909<sup>9</sup>. Demuth and Sheeler were probably more interested in Paul Cézanne than they were in cubism when they were in Europe, but the influence of both is obvious in their work soon after they returned to the United States. Stuart Davis is widely regarded as one of the greatest cubists in the United States and to have developed the most visually impressive and original, distinctly American version of the style. He was living in New York during the era of cubism and had already become very involved in the artistic social circles of the era, so he learned about cubism from the many exhibitions and publications that promulgated it. He was one of the youngest artists to have works included in the Armory Show; he was 21 at the time. He did not visit Europe until 1928, shortly after his great breakthrough paintings of the 1920s were done, so what he saw there further developed his aesthetics but did not gestate these works<sup>10</sup>.

The development of Weber's cubism paralleled what was typical of the movement's European pioneers; he went from the geometric and tribal sculptural forms of early analytic cubism to the extremely fragmented, shattered planes of late analytic cubism to the colorful, tactile, abruptly juxtaposed and fragmented forms of synthetic cubism. He did many paintings of nude women walking, standing and reclining in forests and jungles in the years 1910 to 1913 that



<sup>4</sup> See M. W. Brown, *The Story of the Armory Show*, 2nd ed., New York 1988, pp. 241-327.

<sup>5</sup> See Max Weber: *The Cubist Decade, 1910-1920* [exhibition cat.], Ed. P. North, Introd. S. Krane, 10 December 1991 - 9 February 1992, High Museum of Art, Atlanta 1992, pp. 85-94.

<sup>6</sup> See A. A. Davidson, *Cubism and the Early American Modernist*, "Art Journal" 1966/1967, No. 2, pp. 124-125.

<sup>7</sup> See B. Haskell, *Charles Demuth* [exhibition cat.], 15 October 1987 - 17 January 1988, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York 1987, pp. 22-29.

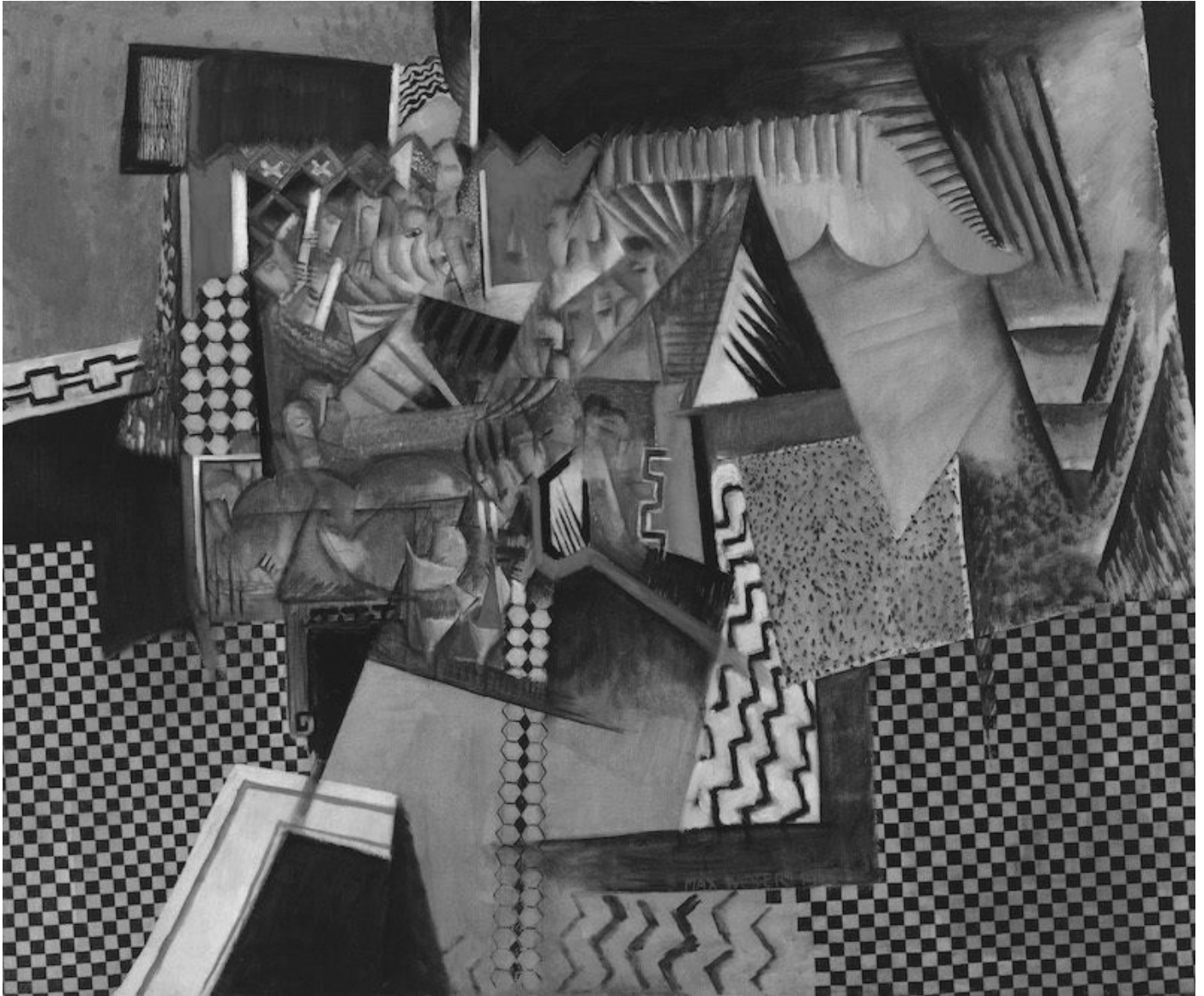
<sup>8</sup> See A. D. Breeskin, *H. Lyman Säyen*, Washington D. C. 1970.

<sup>9</sup> See C. Troyen, E. L. Hirschler, *Charles Sheeler: Paintings and Drawings* [exhibition cat.], 13 October 1987 - 3 January 1988, Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, New York 1987, pp. 4-5, 223-224.

<sup>10</sup> See L. Stokes Sims, *Stuart Davis: American Painter* [exhibition cat.], 23 November 1991 - 16 February 1992, Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, New York 1996, pp. 17-30.

are analytic cubist and reflect ideas gleaned from Cézanne, Picasso and African sculpture and demonstrate increasingly deconstructed forms and fused spaces. The blunt angularity and taut faceting of forms and the simplified breasts, torsos and hips in *Composition with Three Figures* of 1910 are reminiscent of Picasso's *Three Women* of 1908, which he probably saw in person when he was in Paris. His *Two Women* of 1910 (Regis Collection) shows more compressed and contorted figures. Weber's nude women seem anxious, suspicious and restless as suggested by their drooping heads and their chins resting in their hands. These poses and gestures are classic indications of melancholy and introspection. By 1913, Weber's nude women were crystalline forms of cool blue-green and dark brown tones, as in *Bather* (Hirshorn Museum and Sculpture Garden), or heavily obfuscated by layers of surrounding forms rendered in muted tones, as in *Women in Tents*.

Weber did many other paintings during this decade with forms that are more fragmented, disjointed, overlapped, dispersed and tactile and with colors that are brighter, livelier, more intense and sometimes less naturalistic. They reveal an homogenous, fluid understanding of cubism acquired within a year after these innovations developed in France. Many of Weber's paintings from 1913 to 1920 are scenes of New York City, although some are not obviously architectural nor set outdoors and are not quickly recognizable locations. In fact, the more carefully rendered architectural views that Weber produced early in this decade are not his most interesting depictions of the changing urban scene. His *New York* of 1913 (Thyssen Bornemisza Collection, Lugano) is a nearly abstract composition of many planes of dark browns, tans, blues and greens clustered and intersecting with few clear references to actual buildings, bridges and streets. It is an interesting, colorful late analytic cubist depiction of the modern urban skyline but it does not really resemble New York City. His better known *New York* of 1913 (private collection) [Fig. 1] is a colorfully abstracted interpretation of the modern American city that strongly implies Weber was already familiar with synthetic cubism when he made this painting, even though this second phase of cubism was only months old at most at the time. At first, the painting seems to be a collage of densely clustered, narrow, rectangular shapes, most of which are leaning to the right. However, it is done entirely in oil on canvas. Scattered about are more rounded, diaphanous forms that are also somewhat more painterly. Up close, it is apparent that Weber has carefully described small details on these forms which would be obvious if they were larger. Weber has thoughtfully and delicately arranged his colors in this canvas; the tones of blues, reds, tans and grays are coordinated for pleasing and interesting effects. When viewed more intimately for an extended period of time, many of these forms look like skyscrapers, townhouses, apartment buildings, train tracks, smoke and fragmented portions of other industrial and



2. Max Weber, *Chinese Restaurant*, 1915, oil, charcoal and collaged paper on canvas, 101.6 × 122.2 cm; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York City



<sup>11</sup> See Max Weber (1881-1961), "New York", <https://www.christies.com/lot-finder/Lot/max-weber-1881-1961-new-york-5994687-details.aspx> (access date: 5.07.2024).

urban forms and spaces that have been structured and organized so that they shift, turn and slide in multiple, often physically impossible directions<sup>11</sup>. *Chinese Restaurant* (1915, Whitney Museum of American Art), probably the best cubist painting Weber ever made, consists of recognizable fragments of forms and textures from any of the many small, inexpensive, fast-paced restaurants that opened in American cities, especially New York, around the beginning of the 20th c., offering highly Americanized versions of Chinese cuisine. Much of the canvas is filled with areas of black and yellow-orange checkerboard and octagonal tile patterns which refer to the decorative styles of the floors, tables and restrooms of these businesses. Zigzagging green lines with flower images in them suggest curtains and wallpapering that were also common in these establishments. Shaded gray planes refer to shelves and table tops seen from multiple points-of-view, creating the fusion of time and objects that was the essence of the cubist experience. Some of these shapes have been rendered with charcoal. Other variously colored and textured pieces of things, some of which are small pieces of cut paper affixed to the canvas, produce countless more suggestions and associations of the many things that commonly surround the patrons of these restaurants. The colorfulness, tactility and collage-like arrangement of fleeting references in this painting suggest that Weber had been carefully studying synthetic cubism and developed a distinct personal style from what he saw. His debt to this later cubist style is apparent in the thinking about space that he used in this canvas. The fragmented surfaces that would be below the viewer, that he would walk on or sit by, have been turned upward by the placement of the canvas on the wall. Thus the viewer experiences the multiple viewpoints of cubism as he looks at and into the hanging canvas but also apparently down at the objects that would be on the tables and shelves in such a restaurant. This almost vertiginous spatial dislocation is similar to that in *Still Life with Chair Caning*, Picasso's breakthrough collage-painting that began synthetic cubism in 1912. *Rush Hour, New York* (1915, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.) uses overt repetition of easily recognizable forms to suggest the rapid speed, crowds and noise of the modern city. The most obvious of these references is the sequence of narrow gray-green triangles and the black curves adjacent to them which evoke the Statue of Liberty seen from different viewpoints or, less logically of course, as if it is moving. The relative literalness of the subjects and quasi-abstract referential fragments in these last two paintings by Weber demonstrates what is typical and distinctive about American cubism. The titles that Weber gave these paintings are mundanely straightforward and help make the cubist imagery become more cogent and orderly. The use of collage and charcoal rendering in combination with oils by an American artist in 1915 is truly radical.

In 1917 to 1919, Weber did numerous paintings of pairs and groups of figures who are dressed and talking, sitting and eating in

parks, restaurants, bars or rooms. He has emulated synthetic cubism, but these canvases are executed completely with oils and have no actual collage elements in them even though they seem very collage-like. *The Musicians* (1917, Museum of Modern Art) depicts two men against a dark yellow-green background. One is standing and playing a bass violin and the other is seated and playing a less clearly defined instrument that might be a small keyboard. Weber has described them with an undercurrent of humor that comes from their disparate sizes, the broad grins on their narrow mustached faces, and the sharply abutted and disjointed limbs. *The Conversation* (1919, McNay Art Museum) presents two figures standing in a room with orange-brown walls whose bodies and faces are alluded to with painted fragmentary forms, some of which are deliberately textured to suggest real objects or printed, flat materials assembled in collage-like ways. The left figure is more complete and intact as indicated by her blue-green dress with dotted pale red collar, tan dress and black shoes. The other figure is less coherently structured with a brown rectangle for a leg, zigzagging tan and black shapes for the torso and shaded dark beige forms for the forehead, chin and cheek.

H. Lyman Säyen was a Fauve painter for most of his short career (he died at age 43 in 1918) but he experimented with cubism in the last three years of his life. *The Thundershower* of 1917–1918 [Fig. 3] is an eclectic mixture of then-recent styles. Large shapes with simple patterning surround the two stylized figures working in the garden who bend and turn in various directions that are mostly incongruous relative to any accurate perspective. They are cubist suggestions of grass, plants, flowers and stone or tile paths. The illusionistic rendering of the flowers in the background deceives the viewer into thinking that they were created with actual wallpaper or other printed, decorative material. This is faux-synthetic cubism; it looks like collage but is actually intricate rendering of contours, textures and patterns of light and shadow. The two figures, the rain and the other forms in the composition are very decoratively patterned and contrast sharply with this floral background. The large, virtually completed preparatory painting for *The Thundershower* that Säyen made shortly before the finished, larger tempera on wood painting includes actual pasted papers with realistic images of flowers reproduced on them<sup>12</sup>. It is curious that the artist did not use collage in the finished version. Since he was in France for the entire time that cubism was the current leading development in modern art, he would have seen many fine examples of the style, including the invention of collage. It seems possible that this was a reactionary stylistic move or the result of doubts about the physical reliability and durability of collage materials. He might have been disappointed or doubtful about the aesthetic qualities of collage and may have also had concerns about how durable and reliable collaged materials would be over long periods of time. The thin and fragile qualities of glued papers and wall and



<sup>12</sup> See H. Lyman Säyen, “*The Thundershower (study for painting)*”, <https://americanart.si.edu/artwork/thundershower-study-painting-21724> (access date: 5.07.2024).





3. H. Lyman Sayen, *The Thunderhower*, 1917–1918, tempera on wood, 91.4 × 116.8 cm; Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington D. C.

floor coverings necessitates special considerations in conservation, and these issues are more apparent now, since cubism is well over one hundred years old. *Daughter in a Rocker*, done in 1917 to 1918, is a vibrantly, diversely colorful cubist painting with various geometric, truncated, sharply interconnected shapes, many of them outlined firmly in black, which create an almost two-dimensional design with only the girl's face and some parts of the rocker discernible. The richness of the colors is impressive considering that the artist used tempera. Small areas of this painting have been done with collage that has been smoothly, flatly applied to the wood surface.

Hartley experimented with cubism in 1910 to 1915, as he was coming into his own stylistically. At this time, he produced divergent results that include some of his best and most recognizable paint-

ings and some of his least-known and atypical works. His abstract portraits of German soldiers from 1912 to 1914 resulted from many influences; symbolism and expressionism are the most obvious and important ones. However, their fragmented, disjointed compositions are rather cubist. This is particularly evident in such paintings as *Abstraction (Military Symbols)* of 1914–1915 (Los Angeles County Museum of Art), which is densely filled with images of significance to the German army of World War I but the forms have little depth, mass and scale. At the same time, Hartley developed another version of cubism that involved pale, muted and tonal colors (especially when compared to most of his works) and large, flattened and sharply abutted shapes. Hartley often gave these paintings titles that included the vaguely musical term “movement”, which suggests that he was thinking of synaesthetic abstraction. He also gave some of them referential and descriptive titles that indicate what inspired and motivated them. Many of these were inspired by his visits to the New England coast at this time. Hartley spent much of his youth in Maine and he always gravitated to New England and northeastern Canada for spiritual solace and renewal. *Movement No. 3, Provincetown* (1916, private collection) consists of several truncated, overlapping brown, black and gray triangles that suggest a boat on the water. *Movement No. 7, Provincetown* (1916, private collection) consists of several triangles and quadrilaterals, some arranged sequentially and some overlapping one another. These shapes are colored with very agreeable gray, tan and red-brown tones that are unusually reticent for Hartley.

Patrick Henry Bruce is mostly associated with synchronism, the abstract style extremely similar to orphism that was pioneered by Morgan Russell and Stanton Macdonald-Wright around 1912 and which influenced many American painters through the 1920s in using liberated, highly expressive, diverse and vivid colors. However, his synchronist style was also strongly influenced by cubism and Cezanne, and is really a fusion of these separate but related developments. His series of *Compositions* from 1916 consist of many small rectangular shapes of diverse vibrant hues that collide, overlap, merge and reverberate on the picture plane in ways derived from cubist scaffolding and fragmenting forms. In 1917, he began to create intricate compositions of hard-edged, geometricized, block-like forms in contorted and imbalanced perspectival spaces which were usually based on ordinary things at his immediate disposal. These included cut pieces of wood and moldings from the furniture he made or repaired in order to make a living since his paintings never sold well. They also included dishes, vases and nic-nacs in his apartment. Bruce was depressed for years because of his lack of critical success and sales, the failure of his marriage because his career in painting left his family impoverished, and the loss of his relationship with his wife and only child when his wife left him and returned to the Unit-



<sup>13</sup> For these detailed analyses and interpretations, see W. C. Agee, B. Rose, *Patrick Henry Bruce: American Modernist* [exhibition cat.], 31 May – 29 July 1979, The Museum of Fine Arts in Houston, New York 1979.

<sup>14</sup> See A. A. Davidson, *John Marin: Dynamism Codified*, "Artforum" 1971, No. 8, pp. 37–41. In this article, which he published five years after the previously cited one by this scholar (see footnote 6), Davidson considers cubism much more important to Marin's vigorous, chaotic views of modern urban America. In the 1966 article, he considers Marin's cubism a tentative, inconsistent and elusive stylistic exploration.

ed States. He lived in Paris for much of his life and was there continuously from 1915 to 1935, and most of his works were created in Europe. He stopped painting altogether around 1930 and committed suicide six years later, only months after he returned to the United States. Most scholars have studied Bruce's paintings for their formal innovations and visual qualities. However, art historian Barbara Rose has interpreted Bruce's "building block" paintings psychoanalytically, as expressions of the artist's loneliness, isolation, sadness and frustration and his search for order, stability and harmony in his life. These divergent methods of inquiry have yielded intriguing and insightful interpretations of many of the artist's works<sup>13</sup>. As much as the viewer can appreciate the wonderful visual effects of shape, color and composition, some of these paintings insinuate feelings that the blocks are carefully and even obsessively organized, or dispersed and incomplete, comfortably placed or imbalanced and ready to tumble. *Objects on a Table* [Fig. 4] from around 1920 (Metropolitan Museum of Art) is an excellent example of this period in Bruce's career.

John Marin was also among the first Americans to develop a personally distinctive cubist style influenced by expressionism, and to a lesser extent, fauvism and impressionism as well. He usually worked on location in watercolors with charcoal and graphite and produced many views of New York City as well as rural, coastal New England. Some of his watercolors have noticeable cubist qualities while others have a much more ambivalent cubist ambience. His expressionist version of cubism developed around 1912 in such watercolors as *Brooklyn Bridge* (1912, Metropolitan Museum of Art), in which broad slashing brushstrokes of cerulean and gray loosely describe the forms of the bridge and turn the walkway and its pedestrians upward abruptly. The result is the dislocation of perspective typical of cubism with an aggressive personal temperament in responding to one's observations of the light, atmosphere, pedestrians, sights and noises. A related but more complex deconstruction of architectural forms and space occurs in *Lower Manhattan (Composing from the Top of the Woolworth Building)* from 1922 (Museum of Modern Art) [Fig. 5], a watercolor done 10 years later that reveals Marin's growing sophistication in studying the American urban environment. Multiple, partially overlapping fragments of building facades are fanned out across the paper and have been crudely outlined in wide, slashing brown and gray brushstrokes. The details of the buildings have been similarly described with short, wide streaks and dabs of watercolor. The sky has been rendered with even wider zigzagging brushstrokes of somewhat darkened blue. The ultimate effect is a fast-moving, destabilized, energetic and panoramic view of the rapidly rising skyline of 1920s Manhattan<sup>14</sup>.

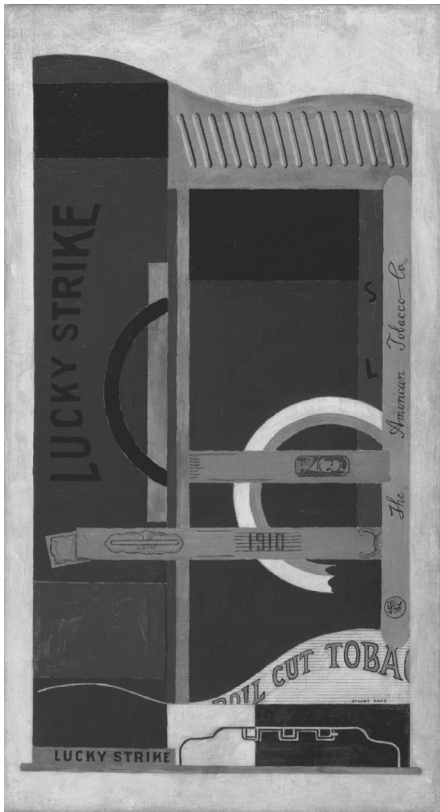
Stuart Davis and Gerald Murphy are best known for their highly innovative and particularly American interpretations of cubism. What seems so American about their work is how closely tied it is to



4. Patrick Henry Bruce, *Objects on a Table*, 1920–1921, oil on canvas, 88.9 × 116.2 cm; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City

consumer products and household items that were inextricable parts of early 20th c. American life. Davis' breakthrough came in his cubist analysis of the packaging and logos of the Lucky Strike brand of tobacco and cigarettes around 1921–1922. *Lucky Strike* of 1921 (Museum of Modern Art) [Fig. 6] contains an array of fragmented motifs derived from the packaging of the brand which have been rearranged in a disruptive, blunt, sharp-angled way that is indebted to synthetic cubist collage but is not as elusively and subtly referential. The painting looks like a collage but is entirely oil on canvas and it suggests that a cigarette package has been carefully dismantled and flattened<sup>15</sup>. The careful and methodical process of deconstructing forms is particularly, distinctly American; one would expect a faster, looser, more spontaneous and more intuitive process to be used by French cubists. In contrast, Davis' 1924 *Lucky Strike* (Hirshhorn Museum

 <sup>15</sup> See L. Stokes Sims, *op. cit.*, pp. 219–221.



5. John Marin, *Lower Manhattan (Composing from the Top of the Woolworth Building)*, 1922, gouache, charcoal and paper cut-out on paper, 54.5 × 67.7 cm; Museum of Modern Art, New York City

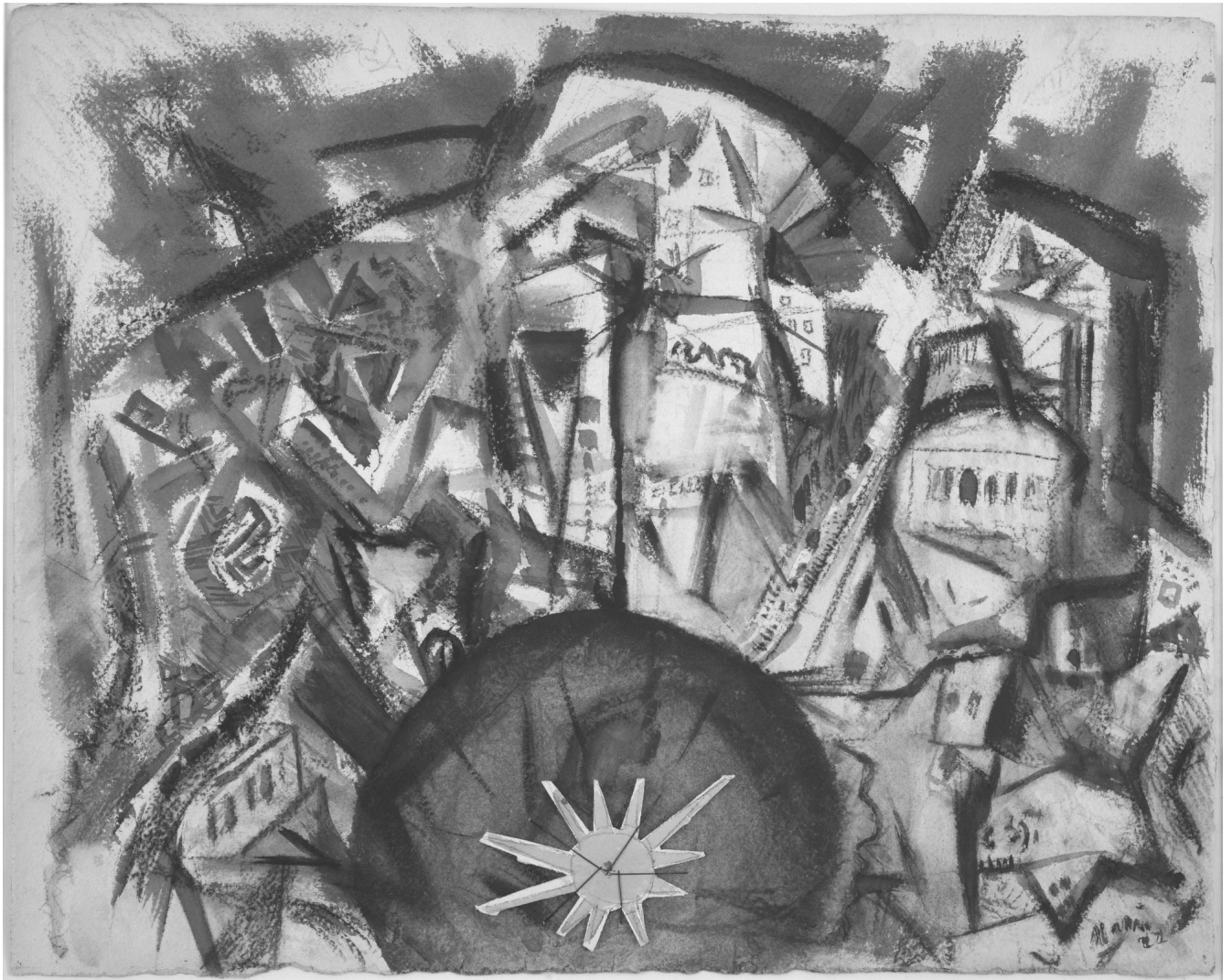
and Sculpture Garden) depicts much more solid, three-dimensional objects in rather bizarre space since some things look too small or too large, too close or too far, or suspended in air. Although various modernist trends including cubism are apparent in this painting, it is more traditionally solid and perspectival than most of Davis' innovative and engaging paintings of the 1920s.

In his *Eggbeater* series of 1927–1928, Davis drastically deconstructed the forms of the eggbeater, fan, rubber glove and other kitchen objects that inspired the four paintings in the series into broad, flat, smooth and brightly colored forms with faintly noticeable suggestions of real things. Davis referred to this cubist practice as “analogous dynamics”, which meant that the results produced were purely visual and painterly means of expressing solid, recognizable objects with the artist’s personal response and reaction imbued in the finished painting or print. Davis said that the visible and physical manifestations of modern urban living were best expressed by modern artistic styles. *No. 1* is the most abstract painting in the series with firmly contoured, quasi-geometric green, blue, orange, gray and brown shapes at rather sharp, blunt angles to one another<sup>16</sup>. *No. 2* and *No. 3* are more representational and their colors are not that strong and powerful. *No. 4* is more visually appealing and intriguing than *No. 2* and *No. 3* and more ambivalently representational. Its appeal comes from the powerful formal effects and limited evocation of real objects; the two paintings that are more representational are not as pictorially compelling. This series depends on nuanced and precarious balancing of the referential and purely abstract.

Gerald Murphy achieved a similarly bold, dynamic and exciting cubist style with ordinary objects slightly later in the 1920s with paintings such as *Razor* (1924) and *Watch* (1925). In the former, a gray razor and a brown metal dip pen which crisscross one another have been rendered with intricate contours, virtually no shading and bright, shiny, metallic surfaces. Their exaggerated size is not surprising because they are surrounded by large geometric objects and a rectangular label for “Three Stars Safety Matches” which complicate the spatial logic of the composition. This oversized still life encourages us to stare at the forms and contemplate their modern, machine-produced perfection and pristineness. The carefully described mechanical apparatus in *Watch* epitomizes the precisionist fascination with the look and feel of the modern and industrial. It is tightly and smoothly rendered with extremely intricate contours and lines for such small details as the internal gears.

Precisionism is an American style that began around 1920, spread and matured in the mid 1920s, and lasted into the 1940s. It is a crisply linear, smoothly planar approach to depicting skyscrapers, factories, houses, machinery and other iconic forms of urban, industrial America in the era spanning World Wars I and II. This was a period when most American artists distanced themselves from mod-

<sup>16</sup> See *ibidem*, pp. 23–24, 184–189.



6. Stuart Davis, *Lucky Strike*, 1921, oil on canvas, 84.5 × 45.7 cm; Museum of Modern Art, New York City

ernism and reverted to more tangible, volumetric forms and clearer, more accurate and believable spaces. The origins of this new style are found in the delicate, subdued, sometimes diaphanous drawings and watercolors of houses, factories and barns done in 1917 to 1919 by Charles Demuth and Charles Sheeler. They sketched and painted on location frequently, both during their travels and also when they were in the countryside and small towns of eastern Pennsylvania, where they were born and raised and spent most of their lives. Their cubist proclivities as manifest in depicting architecture are most noteworthy in Demuth's work, since his depictions of other subjects at this time, such as fruit, plants and circus performers, are more vigorously and organically delineated. Changes in subjects are not as important with Sheeler because he focused almost entirely on architectural and mechanical subjects.



7. Charles Demuth, *I Saw the Figure 5 in Gold*, 1928, oil, graphite, ink and gold leaf on board, 90.2 × 76.2 cm; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City

Demuth's exquisitely delicate and graceful cubist form and space comes about with carefully, thoughtfully arranged planes of grays and browns, sometimes contrasted with richer colors and textures, that are fairly smooth or slightly roughened by carefully blotting areas of wet paint. *Trees and Barns: Bermuda* (1917, Columbus Museum of Art) consists of delicately shaded and blotted gray planes and smaller, slightly more richly colored reds and ultramarines for the roofs and walls of the buildings which are arranged so they seem to merge, abut and overlap<sup>17</sup>. They are surrounded by long, twisting brown and violet-gray trees that serve to frame the composition. The result is a charming, quiet, tranquil scene of the Atlantic island tropics. *Stairs, Provincetown* (1920, Museum of Modern Art) capitalizes on the delicacy of watercolor to describe architectonic forms as shifting, overlapping, tilting geometric shapes. The rickety, old, wooden steps that turn sharply in the middle are described as an implicitly flowing array of narrow trapezoidal shapes. The bricks and windows of the weathered building are flatter, somewhat wider and more rectangular shapes. In the mid-1920s in watercolors and occasionally oils, Demuth developed a mimetic style that is truly precisionist. In these paintings, the enduring impact of cubism is seen in the accentuated facets and contours of the more solidified and tightly structured forms which are sometimes surrounded and sometimes struck by broad rays of colored light. These architectural structures were mostly from his native eastern Pennsylvania and he continued this style for the remaining ten years of his life. These stylistic qualities are apparent in *Aucassin and Nicolette* (1921), with its firmly defined chimneys and faint blue rays of light, and even more so in *My Egypt* (1927, Whitney Museum of American Art), with its massive cylindrical silos and cubic barn which are crisscrossed by white and blue rays of light that energize the orderly, stable forms. The title of the latter painting suggests that Demuth equated modern industry and architecture in America with the enormous tombs and temples of ancient civilizations, that all of them were the lasting legacies of their people. Therefore, these small, simple, often crude and weathered rural structures were historic markers of their own and, more importantly for Demuth, they were his own personally significant relics and memorials<sup>18</sup>. *I Saw the Figure 5 in Gold* (1928, Metropolitan Museum of Art) [Fig. 7], the most famous of Demuth's poster portraits, is the ultimate example of an American stylistic tendency that has been called "billboard cubism", an American idiom of the late-1920s and 1930s which combines the vocabularies of cubism with those of packaging and advertising as that which was seen in store windows and shelves and on posters, street signs and large, overhead advertisements<sup>19</sup>. The numeral five appears three times concentrically in different sizes while ray-like rectangles of gray and larger planes of cadmium red evoke architectural forms seen in fragmented, momentary views. The painting also contains references to Demuth's friend




<sup>17</sup> B. Haskell, *op. cit.*, pp. 126-133.

<sup>18</sup> See Charles Demuth, "My Egypt", 1927, Apr 29, 2015, <https://whitney.org/media/1106> (access date: 5.07.2024).

<sup>19</sup> W. M. Corn, *The Great American Thing: Modern Art and National Identity, 1915-1935*, Berkeley 1999, pp. 192, 200-211, 223-228, 234-236, 246, 357-359, 383-384.



 <sup>20</sup> B. Haskell, *op. cit.*, pp. 172–187.

<sup>21</sup> See C. Troyen, E. Hirschler, *op. cit.*, pp. 72–73, 80–81.

<sup>22</sup> See *ibidem*, pp. 115–123.

the poet William Carlos Williams, with “Bill”, “W.C.W.” and “Carlos” dispersed in different sizes and at different angles in the composition. The painting is based on Williams’ imagist poem *The Great Figure* and attempts to visualize the speeds, sounds and lights of a fire engine in a cubist manner, just as the poem tries to evoke them in a fleeting glimpse expressed pointedly with words<sup>20</sup>.

Sheeler was bolder than Demuth in his watercolors of architectural scenes of the late-1910s and this led to a more strikingly abstract cubist style around 1920. His *Bucks County Barn* (1917, Columbus Museum of Art) [Fig. 8] is a gouache and graphite composition that depicts a building which consists of five geometrically solid forms with firmly contoured planes that emphasize their architectonic qualities. The more delicately rendered details of stones and wood and textural patterning of the facades result in an oscillating sense of the physically real and more decoratively flat. The ground and sky are implied by the contours of the architecture but are not described, which makes the image of the barn seem more abstract. *Church Street El* (1920, Cleveland Museum of Art) is larger and done in oil on canvas. It is a more drastic embrace of cubism that seems to indicate that precisionism was soon to come. Numerous rectangular planes, many of which are cut at sharp angles at the tops to indicate they are architectural forms, overlap and abut one another to suggest crowded tall buildings and the nearby elevated train seen from above. The forms are smoothly painted with browns, tans and beiges and occasionally gray tones that soften the harsh, drab architectonic presence that excessive gray tones could produce. The small reddish brown form at the bottom and the small gray one at the top are slightly more three-dimensional. They are doorways to roofs or rooftop architectural forms for storage or building operations and they make the highly abstract shapes around them a little more realistic<sup>21</sup>.

Sheeler painted the seminal examples of precisionism in the late 1920s; he did *Upper Deck* in 1928 and *Classic Landscape* and *American Landscape* in 1930. Although not cubist, their austere geometry and contouring of forms have roots in earlier cubist-influenced paintings that he, Demuth and others made<sup>22</sup>. Some precisionist painters remained closer to cubism with styles that are less illusionistic than Sheeler’s but which have more dramatic and conspicuously accentuated geometry, heavily skewed expanses of depth and intensified streamlining of forms. This is evident in Louis Lozowick’s *Pittsburgh* (1922, Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts) and *Minneapolis* (1925, Minneapolis Institute of Art), George Ault’s *Hudson Street* (1932, Whitney Museum of American Art), Ralston Crawford’s *Factory Roofs* (1934, Phillips Collection) and *Maitland Bridge No. 2* (1938, Museum of Fine Arts–Boston) and Niles Spencer’s *Waterfront Mills* (1940, Metropolitan Museum of Art). Lozowick’s *Pittsburgh* is an early example of precisionism and thus is more freely experimental, with sharply pointed and tilted brown surfaces of factory buildings and narrow



8. Charles Sheeler, *Bucks County Barn*, 1917, gouache and conté crayon on paper, 41 × 56.2 cm; Columbus Museum of Art, Columbus, Ohio

red cylinders for smokestacks. Ault's *Hudson Street* is more dryly and smoothly painted and its architecture is severely geometric and precisely organized. It seems that as the 1920s progressed, the precisionists reverted to earlier stylistic stages of cubism.

American artists found cubism to be wonderfully rich with aesthetic and stylistic possibilities and they explored these for decades. Cubism proved useful for depicting American subjects and themes in exciting new ways, so the search for "Americanness" in the visual arts continued into the middle of the 20th century. It merged with other stylistic developments of the early modern era, particularly figurative and representational expressionism but also abstraction. It led to new American-born styles like billboard cubism and precisionism. Cubism helped American modernism rejuvenate itself at times and was often used pragmatically to expand expressive possibilities, and it was impressively, even surprisingly, successful in this way.

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**Słowa kluczowe**

Galeria 291, Armory Show, Alfred Stieglitz, Patrick Henry Bruce, Stuart Davis, Lyonel Feininger, H. Lyman Săyen, Charles Sheeler, Max Weber, kubizm billboardowy, precyzjonizm

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### Summary

#### **HERBERT R. HARTEL, JR. (John Jay College of Criminal Justice) / Cubism in America: Modernist explorations and domestic concerns**

American artists started to become aware and knowledgeable of cubism around 1910 through the galleries of Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler and Alfred Stieglitz, exhibitions like the Armory Show, private collections like Leo and Gertrude Stein and Arthur Jerome Eddy, and publications like *The Rise of Cubism* and *Camera Work*. Some of the best and earliest American cubists were Max Weber, Marsden Hartley, Lyonel Feininger, Charles Demuth, H. Lyman Säyen, Stuart Davis and Charles Sheeler. American cubists were very interested in the so-called “salon cubists” or “Puteaux cubists”, such as Fernand Léger and Albert Gleizes. Weber and Hartley developed personally distinctive styles that combine aspects of expressionism and cubism for social observation and personal revelation. American cubism developed two interconnected stylistic tendencies that are particularly American: billboard cubism and precisionism. They are characterized by sharp contours, flattened, emphatically geometric and abruptly juxtaposed forms, smooth and bright surfaces, clear mechanical and industrial references, and references to advertising, packaging, logos and labels. This extremely American sensibility is seen in the work of Davis, Demuth and Sheeler.