

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Sheldon Museum of Art Catalogues and
Publications

Sheldon Museum of Art

1985

Cubism in America

Donald Bartlett Doe

Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/sheldonpubs>



Part of the [Art and Design Commons](#)

Doe, Donald Bartlett, "Cubism in America" (1985). *Sheldon Museum of Art Catalogues and Publications*.
19.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/sheldonpubs/19>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Sheldon Museum of Art at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Sheldon Museum of Art Catalogues and Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

RESOURCE/RESERVOIR SHELDON MEMORIAL ART GALLERY



Henry Fitch Taylor

Cubist Still Life, c. 1914, oil on canvas

Cubism in America

As a style, Cubism constitutes the single most important revolution in the history of art since the second and third decades of the 15th century and the beginnings of the Renaissance.

A number of circumstances augered in favor of the emergence of Cubism and, with it, the break with the tradition of depicting a convincing illusion of real space within the picture frame. Among all of the factors, however, the most important is the art of Paul Cézanne, who struggled with one of the great challenges intrinsic to art: how to represent a three dimensional world on a two dimensional surface while sacrificing *neither* solidity *nor* flatness.

Georges Braque and Pablo Picasso took up this challenge in a joined and sustained

effort which began in 1907. Their development of what came to be called Cubism—by a hostile critic who took the word from a skeptical Matisse—can, in very reduced outline, be summarized as follows:

1908-09: A Cézannesque period, in which both artists produced strongly geometric landscapes.

1910-12: the Analytic phase, in which both sought to present reality in a manner unique to painting. They presented various views of an object which would ordinarily be seen in sequence—its front, side, and back—simultaneously.

1912-14: Synthetic cubism, so named by Juan Gris, in which both artists exploited the resources of their recent invention, the collage.

RESOURCE SERIES

CUBISM IN AMERICA

Resource/Reservoir is part of Sheldon's on-going *Resource Exhibition Series*. *Resource/Reservoir* explores various aspects of the Gallery's permanent collection. The *Resource Series* is supported in part by grants from the National Endowment for the Arts.

A portion of the Gallery's general operating funds for this fiscal year has been provided through a grant from the Institute of Museum Services, a federal agency that offers general operating support to the nation's museums.

Cubism

Synthetic Cubism not only synthesized "real" materials with painted/constructed reality, but also synthesized earlier discoveries, permitting objects to seem tangible while forms and surfaces were shuffled in space as thin as gossamer.

World War I ended the joint investigations of Picasso and Braque and dispersed the international community of artists who had gathered in Paris. Excepting Juan Gris and Ferdinand Léger, all of these artists, including the American artists, were on-lookers. Few grasped all of the issues and formal ideas with which Braque and Picasso experimented. Most seized upon an aspect of the style and wedded it to theories of their own, sometimes political, sometimes purely aesthetic.

Those theories produced Futurism in Italy, Vorticism in Britain, Constructivism and Suprematism in the Soviet Union, De Stijl in Holland. Orphism and Purism were generated by French painters while two Americans in Paris, Morgan Russell and Stanton MacDonald-Wright developed their concept of Synchronism. The work of some of these moved toward pure abstraction, the work of others returned to a more traditional, often figurative art.

Fundamental to nearly all, however, was the use of the facets of Analytic Cubism. Fractured planes served to generate complex, geometric images which frequently were held to be a metaphor for the mechanized and shattered quality of modern industrialized experience.

To many parts of this complicated avant-garde profusion of styles the American artist could and did respond. Generally, however, progressive American painters did not, collectively, generate a national style as can be discovered in Russia or Holland. Rather, Cubism in America tends to reflect the diversity of styles produced internationally.

In Joseph Stella's Cubist paintings of Manhattan, Coney Island, and the Brooklyn Bridge, for example, the small planes of shimmering color and the use of line celebrate mechanized and electrified New York in a manner that clearly reflects the artist's response to the Futurists, who also arranged the fractured planes of Cubism to produce dynamic images of speeding machinery and the rise of modern cities. Max Weber's Cubism also reflects the influence of Futurism in his concentration on the skyscrapers and hurry of New York, but his work is often monochromatic and the space virtually flat, in close accord with Picasso's Analytic Cubist canvases of c. 1911. Marsden Hartley, profoundly influenced by Weber, also produced works of analytic cubism, but in his work forms are stable and solidly realized in the manner of Cézanne's still lifes of c. 1890-1900. Many Americans, in addition to Russell and MacDonald-Wright, fused Neo-Impressionist color with Cubist geometry.

Among them are such otherwise dissimilar artists as Morton Schamberg and Thomas Hart Benton. John Marin zigzagged his often delicate watercolors with "force lines" taken from Futurism, giving his closely observed street scenes and landscapes a compressed, geometric structure.

The post-war development of Cubism in America does not follow a single course either. A number of the early modernists, working in a conservative artistic milieu and finding little support for an art perceived as European, responded to the general isolationist spirit with increasingly conservative imagery. Thomas Hart Benton's rather abrupt dismissal of modernism for scenes of Americana is perhaps only the most famous reversal. Several artists, most notably Charles Sheeler and Charles Demuth—and Georgia O'Keeffe in a number of paintings of Lake George barns and New York skyscrapers—produced a uniquely American style which came to be called Precisionism. In these paintings, the inherent geometry of colonial architecture or railyards and factories, or steamships and locomotives, were pared of detail and awarded a shimmering kind of clarity in sunlight often given the geometric character of Cubist planes.

Finally, there are a small number of American painters who produced cubist works which are to be found nowhere else. In the work of Ralston Crawford, a scene from a New Orleans dockside (for instance) is handled in a manner not found in Futurism or Precisionism: the shapes of freight containers and equipment are transformed into a static arrangement of geometric shapes which hover, like elements of a Braque collage, in an airless, compressed space. Stuart Davis seized frequently upon billboards and commercial packaging to create images in which sometimes overlapping, sometimes discontinuous planes of color and letter shapes pulse across the surface of the canvas in rhythms which suggest the syncopation of American jazz. In space which was also airless and flattened to ambiguous but narrow confines, Patrick Henry Bruce presented arrangements of inherently geometric objects given three-dimensional solidity. As with Davis and Crawford, Bruce began with perceived reality, but did not fracture it into juxtaposed facets rendered as geometric planes. He, like the other two, preserved a fundamental aspect of the real things before him—their actual shape—while he also transformed those things into an abstracted image that could only exist in the space of the painted surface.

It is this creation of an actuality that can only exist in a work of art that is the center of the Cubist revolution. Cubism in America, although originally the source of bafflement and the target of derision, proved strong enough to endure and to provide the foundation for a continuing tradition of abstract art.

Donald Bartlett Doe

Patrick Henry Bruce

Much about the life of Patrick Henry Bruce remains unknown. Family records show that the great-great-great-grandson of Patrick Henry was born on March 21, 1881, but the artist's birth certificate bears the date of March 25. Bruce, as a man, proved aloof and increasingly reclusive as he aged. He communicated nothing about his own art and actually destroyed a major part of his own work.

What is known, however, suggests an extraordinary if unhappy life. He was born into an aristocratic Virginia family. Of their vast holdings—the family had once owned an estate of 5,000 acres—little remained but patrician attitudes. In spite of financial urgency, Bruce evinced no desire to enter business but very considerable interest in art. By 1902, following several years of classes at the Richmond Art Club, he was in New York, studying under the charismatic teachers Robert Henri and William Merritt Chase. Two years later, Bruce was in Paris. Except for a brief return in the summer of 1905, to settle his father's estate and marry another Henri student, Helen Francis Kibbery, Bruce was to spend nearly all of the rest of his life in France.

He became a Francophile, refusing to leave during the war years, living at the very center of the Parisian avant-garde, becoming a highly respected connoisseur and a dealer in antiques. Until the depths of the Depression, he kept a servant, dressed in hand-tailored elegance, and kept company with the rich and fashionable of Parisian society.

It was the Depression which proved disastrous. The market for antiques vanished. Poverty forced him from Versailles to his sister's home in New York. For this artist of refined taste but few expectations, life must have offered little. On November 12, 1936, a few months after arriving in the United States, he committed suicide.

In Paris, however, he had known everyone. By 1906, he and his wife were close to the Steins; Gertrude, Sara, and Leo. (His letters to them often began intimately with Dear Girls or Dear Family). By 1908, he was in close contact with his teacher, Henri Matisse, taking an apartment above the Matisse school of art and residence at 33 Boulevard des Invalides. For an extended period, Bruce and his wife lived entwined lives with Sonia and Robert Delaunay. He came to know Man Ray and Marcel Duchamp. Katherine Dreier bought several of his Orphist paintings, which are today among the major examples of American abstraction in the collection of the Société Anonyme at Yale. In 1925, at the "L'Art d'Aujourd'hui" exhibition, his work was viewed as Surreal, perhaps because of his association with the Surrealists, especially the poet, Tristan Tzara.

Undoubtedly urbane, notably intelligent, he still managed to alienate others. An especially abrupt letter reversed Guillaume



Patrick Henry Bruce

Forms, c. 1918-19, oil on canvas

Apollinaire's favorable critical attitude toward his work. In his last years, he seems to have seen hardly anyone. Twice annually, long and awkward visits by Henri Roché were an exception. Roché championed his work and to him Bruce gave all 21 of his surviving geometric still lifes in 1933. It is one of those that is now in the Sheldon's collection.

Bruce's development as an artist, which culminated in these highly original works, spanned a decade and a half. At first, his work reflected the continuing influence of his American teachers and of James McNeill Whistler. By the Salon d'Automne of 1907, however, his work was beginning to reveal the influence of contemporary art. Meeting Matisse in 1908 completed the transformation of his art. The French master held that Cézanne was "the father of us all," and Bruce responded to this view with a long series of Cézannesque still lifes.

Although his commitment to the still life would be renewed, upon meeting the Delaunay's in 1912 this chapter in his career came to a close. Like many others, Bruce found in their art a liberation from natural color. Their Orphist works, which fused flat, planar forms of Cubism with Fauve color, soon displaced the influence of Matisse.

At the Salon des Independants of 1913, he showed with Delaunay and Francis Picabia, receiving good reviews from Guillaume Apollinaire and the critic and poet, André Salmon. By 1916, his Orphist abstractions had taken on a new geometric stability. In these works, it appears that the influence of Picabia and perhaps Duchamp is at work. So too may be the work of British Vorticists, whose version of Cubism was reproduced in the magazine, *Blast*, which cir-

culated in Paris. Photographs by Man Ray and Constantin Brancusi have marked affinities with the elegant compositions and precision of shapes that is found in Bruce's work after 1917. Even Leo Stein's profound admiration of Quattrocento Italian painting, especially the powerfully realized still lifes found in the work of Mantegna, may have reinforced Bruce's ideas.

All of these influences tended toward volumetric solidity and abstraction within the structure of the still life. These qualities dominated the artist's long series of geometric works which began c. 1917 and did not end until within months of his death.

Barbara Rose and William Agee, whose joint scholarship affords us nearly all that is known about Bruce, have concluded that the Sheldon still life, *Forms*, is the second of the surviving late works and dates from c. 1918-19. Between what they believe to be the first and the second, however, there is hardly any clear relationship. In *Forms*, there are far fewer elements and they are arranged on one, not two table tops or surfaces. Because scrutiny of the remaining still lifes reveals a clear, serial relationship between many—there is a clear relationship between *Forms* and what Rose and Agee consider to be the third still life, for instance—and because Bruce tended to simplify as he moved from one work to the next in a series, it seems at least certain that a number of works, now destroyed, came between his first geometric still life and the one now in Lincoln.

As a work which seems to come at the end of a sustained sequence, *Forms* crystallizes much of the artist's achievement. It presents a group of inherently geometric objects, given solidity through draftsmanship and the uniform use of local color. The triangular rod may be a drafting ruler, the sphere an orange, (Bruce consumed four or five daily), and other shapes perhaps details from his carefully collected furniture. The tradition of perspectival rendering is fused with compressed Cubist space. Flat colored planes seem to rise directly from the rear edge of the sharply inclined plane of the table top, yet, at the left, a curvilinear shape projects past the table top, into space which otherwise does not seem to exist.

In all, it is a meticulously composed grouping which defies gravity—the objects should slide from the table—and occupies ambiguous space. Bruce has wedded the abstraction of geometry to the realism of Renaissance illusion. Restricted to a unique vocabulary of forms and achieving a notable austerity with its limited range of colors set against glistening black, *Forms* exemplifies the elegant Cubism of an aristocrat.

Marsden Hartley

Edmund Hartley was born in Lewiston, Maine on January 4, 1877. The youngest child of a mill worker who had immigrated

from Stalybridge, England seventeen years earlier, his youth was marked by poverty, loneliness, and a pervasive sense of despair. His mother died when he was eight. Four years later, he was passed into the care of an older sister when his father remarried and moved to Cleveland. At 15, he was forced to leave school to work in the mills for a wage of three dollars per week. When able to rejoin his family, he went to work in a quarry for the same wage. Years later, evidently in an effort to heal a rift between himself and his father, he took his step-mother's maiden name as his first.

In the boy who was to earn himself a place in American art history as Marsden Hartley there was an innate aesthetic sensitivity, however. In Cleveland, he began to study art, first with local painters and then, after his work commanded the attention of a trustee, at the Cleveland School of Art.

At the end of his first semester, a Cleveland school trustee, Anne Walworth, offered the young art student a five-year stipend which provided \$300.00 each year for study in New York and half that amount for summer expenses. In the fall of 1899, ignoring his father's predictions that he would be an utter failure, Hartley left Cleveland to enroll in William Merritt Chase's New York Art School. After a single year, disappointed in Chase's singular emphasis on technique with the brush, he became a student at the National Academy of Design, remaining there until the Walworth stipend expired in 1904.

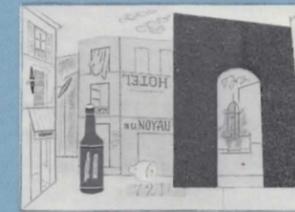
Barbara Haskell, who has written the retrospective exhibition catalogue essay which most thoroughly explores the vast amount of material on Hartley's life, notes that none of his teachers made an indelible impression on the artist. During these years, however, his art did change gradually from an academic realism to an American mode of Impressionism. By 1908, his work most closely resembled the muted impressionism of John Twachtman and, although less mystical in character, George Inness. Perhaps the clearest influence, in this period, is that of an Italian impressionistic painter, Giovanni Segantini. His work Hartley found reproduced in an issue of *Jugend*. The Italian's "stitch" brushwork was especially suited to the difficulty of replicating the visual texture of the forested Maine hillsides and mountains, scenes to which Hartley turned every summer.

By the autumn of 1908, Hartley's growth as a painter was being recognized. A Boston collector purchased a work for \$400.00, providing enough money for the artist to move to Stoneham Valley, Maine. There, he produced what he came to call his first mature works. In spite of no direct contact with French art, Hartley began to execute thoroughly Post-Impressionistic landscapes in which masses of heavily painted foliage exist on a continuous plane with the textured paint of the sky. The brilliant color often approaches the intensity of the Fauves.

The quality of these works transformed the course of Hartley's career. In March,

Selected Cubist paintings and sculpture from the collections of Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery, University of Nebraska-Lincoln

ARTHUR B. DAVIES
Peach Stream Valley, c. 1915
oil on canvas, 8 1/4" x 15"
Nebraska Art Association
Thomas C. Woods Collection



STUART DAVIS
Arch Hotel, 1929
oil on canvas, 28 3/4" x 39 1/2"
F. M. Hall Collection



LYONEL FEININGER
City Moon, 1945
oil on canvas, 28 1/2" x 21 3/4"
Nebraska Art Association

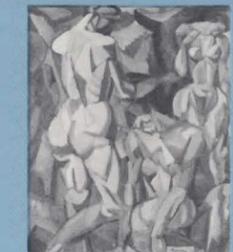
RALSTON CRAWFORD
New Orleans #5, 1953-54
oil on canvas, 50" x 36 1/2"
F. M. Hall Collection



MARSDEN HARTLEY
Painting Number One, 1913
oil on canvas, 39 3/4" x 31 3/4"
F. M. Hall Collection

HANS HOFMANN
Fruit Bowl, 1950
oil on canvas, 29 3/4" x 38"
Nebraska Art Association

JOHN MARIN
Pertaining to Nassau Street,
New York, 1936
watercolor, 25 3/4" x 20 1/2"
University Collection
Sheldon Bequest



JAN MATULKA
Cubist Nudes, c. 1915-16
oil on canvas, 29" x 25"
University Collection
Gift of Mrs. Mary Rieplma Foss

ALFRED H. MAURER
Still Life with Paint Brushes, c. 1928
oil on panel, 30" x 19 3/4"
University Collection
Bertha Schaefer Bequest



JOSEPH STELLA
Battle of Lights (Coney Island), 1914-18
oil on canvas, 39" x 29 1/2"
F. M. Hall Collection

JOHN STORRS
Figurative Abstraction, c. 1919-25
carved marble, 20" x 13" x 6"
University Collection
Gift of Mrs. Olga N. Sheldon



MARGUERITE ZORACH
Sunrise—Moonset, Provincetown, 1916
oil on canvas, 20" x 24 1/4"
Nebraska Art Association
Nelle Cochrane Woods Collection

1909, he took these landscapes to Boston, showing them to Maurice and Charles Prendergast. Impressed, Maurice wrote to fellow members of The Eight, William Glackens and Robert Henri. Glackens, in turn, provided his studio for an exhibition of these Post-Impressionist images of Maine.

Shortly, Hartley won an introduction to Alfred Stieglitz. He also responded to the committed intensity of the painter and his art and offered Hartley an exhibition at the 291 Gallery. His first true solo exhibition opened on May 8, 1909.

The Stieglitz exhibition brought Hartley into sustained contact with the most advanced art circle in the United States. Max Weber, only recently back from Paris where he had been a student of Henri Matisse, imparted his knowledge of modernist European developments. At Gallery 291, Hartley saw the Matisse and Picasso exhibitions—actually producing an Analytic Cubist landscape in the Picasso manner in the spring of 1911. It was to the work of Cézanne that Hartley responded most profoundly, however. He did not see the exhibition at Gallery 291, but Arthur B. Davies troubled to take him to see the major Cézannes in the Havemeyer collection.

This intensive introduction prepared Hartley for his own extended contact with European modernism. In the spring of 1912, again aided by financial arrangements made by Davies and through sales at Stieglitz's gallery, Hartley left for a year in Paris.

He arrived in April, made quick contact with other American artists in Paris and was soon invited to the Saturday afternoon gatherings at 27 rue de Fleurus, where Gertrude Stein and her brother Leo opened the doors to the avant-garde. The art and the artists he encountered there struck Hartley immediately; on a postcard to Stieglitz, he wrote, "I felt indeed like a severed head living itself of mystical excitation."

By the late spring of 1912, his work brought the color of Matisse to the structure and form of Cézanne's still lifes. Only months later, by the end of the summer, he had moved away from Matisse and toward Picasso, adopting the sharply angular planes of Analytic Cubism. From this period in Hartley's complex career, the Sheldon's *Still Life With Fan* is perhaps the most notable work.

A year earlier, working solely from reproductions (Davies had yet to take him to the Havemeyer collection), Hartley had already worked at Cézannesque still lifes. In his work done in Paris, he continued his earlier palette: tans and browns and deep green, but now added a liberal use of white and touches of dark yellow. The modeled fruit and the goblet of the Sheldon still life all appear to derive most directly from Hartley's study of the French master from Aix; however, these are placed on folded drapery which is thoroughly Cubist. Outlined in dark brown, geometric facets of cloth are presented as sharply defined planes which angle steeply from the bottom to the top of the picture, the compressed configuration of fabric echoed

by the inherent geometry of the partially unfolded fan.

Very soon, Hartley would find greater congeniality in the group of German artists in Paris and would be drawn toward the Blue Rider artists and Kandinsky's ideas as expressed in his *On the Spiritual in Art*. Briefly, however, Hartley was concerned with the intellectual study of forms in compressed Cubist space. *Still Life With Fan* thus marks one of the moments when this American modernist came closest to the spirit of French Cubism.

Henry Fitch Taylor

Henry Fitch Taylor was born on September 15, 1853 in Cincinnati, Ohio. Six years older than Childe Hassam, the same age as John Twachtman, and only a year older than J. Alden Weir and Theodore Robinson, he belonged to the generation which produced nearly all of the major American Impressionists. Yet Taylor, himself an Impressionist throughout his early career, was to become the oldest among the American artists who responded to and explored Cubism. Even the statesmen of American modernism, Alfred Stieglitz and Arthur B. Davies, were his junior by eleven and nine years, respectively.

Unlike Stieglitz and Davies, however, Taylor is little known. Early interest in theater found him an established member of Joseph Jefferson's popular performing troupe. Jefferson, who was himself a painter, encouraged Taylor to go to Paris. There, Taylor enrolled in the Académie Julian and then, in 1885, went to Barbizon to paint.

He returned to the United States three years later an accomplished painter in the Impressionist manner. He showed successfully in several juried shows, but then abandoned the established New York art world. Between 1898 and 1908, he resided in Cos Cob, Connecticut, painting little and showing never. Cos Cob was something of a colony for artists; among the frequent visitors were Twachtman, Hassam and Willa Cather. Less often, Davies, George Luks and Walt Kuhn were there. These acquaintances were to have a decisive role in Taylor's life as an artist.

William Agee, who is responsible for virtually all we know of Taylor, reports that with Clara Potter Davidge (whom he was later to marry), the artist took up the direction of the Madison Gallery in New York in 1908. Soon the gallery was showing progressive art. Kuhn and others from Cos Cob joined Taylor in conversations which led to the formation of the Association of American Painters and Sculptors. Taylor was its first president. A retiring personality, he perhaps gratefully surrendered that post to Davies in 1912, but continued to serve as trustee and secretary. Little more than a year later, the Association was responsible for mounting the most important single event in the history of 20th



Marsden Hartley

Still Life With Fan, oil on canvas, 1912

century American art: The Armory Show.

Nearly sixty, Taylor almost at once began working again. At first producing Cezannesque still lifes, he painted his way rapidly "through" Cubism, producing canvases which explored both the analytic and synthetic phases of the style.

By 1914, he was represented by the Montross Gallery, which also showed the work of the Frenchman, Albert Gleizes. Gleizes was a member of a small group of French Cubists (Duchamp was another) who were influenced by the philosophical ideas of Henri Bergson. As Agee points out, Bergson saw change as the fundamental condition of life, with each new development emerging out of and being shaped by the preceding one.

Almost immediately, Taylor responded to the work of Gleizes, producing abstract arrangements of circular, rotating forms. In 1915 as well, Taylor painted *From Generation Unto Generation*, a metaphorical image in which a pale and anonymous, yet rather traditionally rendered figure faces another executed in cubistic planes of a machine-like character seated in compressed cubist space. The transformation of style clearly symbolizes the transformation of the character of modern life.

The Sheldon's *Cubist Still Life* clearly pre-dates this final stage in the evolution of Taylor's own art, but it is a confident example of his exploration of Synthetic Cubism.

In a manner which specifically suggests Picasso's use of wall paper in his *papier collé* of 1912-13, *Bottle and Glass on Table*, Taylor employs a tile pattern which serves simultaneously as a ground and as an implied wall in the space in which the still life rests. The tile pattern, reaching from the top to the bottom of the picture on the right side, seems a paper-thin plane which compresses the pictorial space. At the left, however, the same green tonality is not marked by pattern. A horizontal line, from the central composition to the framing left edge, seems to mark a shift from a horizontal plane to a vertical one, suggesting floor and wall, with the red rectilinear shape taking on the identity of a rug or shadow.

In the central composition, the still life itself, there are a host of ambiguities. Planes of color tip backward and fold forward in space. At the rear, a purple shape seems a geometric bottle; in the foremost part of the still life, a wine glass seems to rest on its side. Taylor uses color here in two ways, as local color to describe a shape and, on the rectilinear mass over-lapping the "tiled" zone, to create shadow and hence a sense of volume.

All of these characteristics, combined with a relatively wide range of color, suggest clearly that Taylor's mastery of Synthetic Cubism was well established.

This, in turn, suggests that the painting must date from the fall of 1913, at the earliest, to mid-1914, at the latest. In all, as an example of Cubism as practiced by an American artist past his sixtieth year, this work exemplifies a mastery hardly less adventurous in its transformation of the subject from visual to painted reality than that being produced in the same years by Picasso and Braque.

Max Weber

Max Weber referred to many of his works as "form in the crystal," hoping to avoid being linked with European art. Whatever label he might have chosen, however, it is clear that in the years 1913-15 Weber produced some of the most fully resolved Cubist paintings to come from an American hand.

Weber came to the United States as a child of ten in 1891. Raised in Brooklyn, he attended Pratt Institute, studying under the remarkable teacher Arthur Wesley Dow (also an early inspiration for Georgia O'Keeffe), and graduated in 1900.

Weber taught on American campuses for several years before sailing for France in September of 1905. Like so many Americans before him, he enrolled at the Académie Julian and studied life drawing, then moved on to open academies where an artist could study without supervision by an instructor. In 1906, '07 and '08, his work was included in major exhibitions (each year, for instance, in the Salon d'Automme). In 1908, with Patrick Henry Bruce and Sarah Stein,

he helped organize the classes held by Henri Matisse. Through Matisse, he came to know the Steins and a number of the artists, critics and poets who were a part of that remarkable circle of the avant-garde.

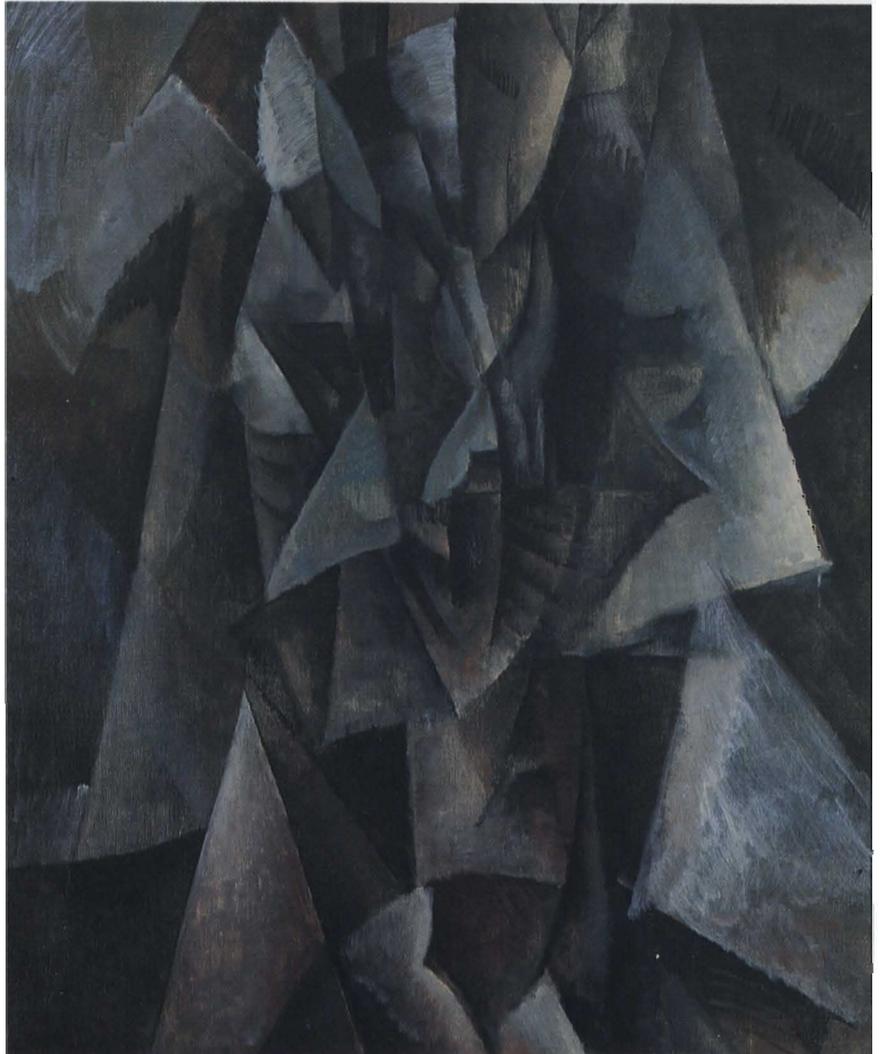
By the end of 1908, however, his funds had run out. Henri Rousseau hosted his bon voyage party and he returned to his adopted native city of New York.

Very quickly, he became a member of the Stieglitz circle. An egoistic man, Weber's relationship with Stieglitz (who was equally egocentric) was not to last long. While it flourished, however, the owner of "The Little Galleries" at 291 Fifth Avenue offered impoverished Weber a tiny room in which to live, included the artist in his landmark exhibition, "Younger American Painters," which introduced American modernism to New York, and offered Weber a solo exhibition in February of 1911.

During this period, Weber served as something of a mentor for Stieglitz, providing insight and information regarding the new developments in art which were gaining notoriety in Europe. For Stieglitz's periodical, *Camera Work*, Weber wrote an article titled "The Fourth Dimension from a Plastic Point

Max Weber

Night, 1915, oil on canvas



of View," offering a theoretical basis for Cubism. In several respects, this essay is remarkable. Weber had left Paris on December 19, 1908, many months before Braque and Picasso had taken up their definitive work in Analytic Cubism. Juan Gris had yet to join the Spanish and the French artists and to publish his careful explanation of this new style in art. Stieglitz's exhibition of Picasso's Analytic Cubism would not be held for another year. Weber's ideas, while of course given impetus and early shape during his European stay, were to a substantial extent his own. Four years later, in his *du Cubisme*, Guillaume Apollinaire was to draw heavily upon Weber's essay and thereby inserted an American influence into the flow of aesthetic ideas on the continent.

Weber's view of the Fourth Dimension was one influenced by developments in mathematics. Objects and places were seen in time, and therefore time itself was a dimension to be added to height, depth and width. Weber asserted:

In plastic art, I believe there is a fourth dimension which may be described as the consciousness of a great and overwhelming sense of space magnitude in all directions at one time, and is brought into existence through the three known measurements. (*Camera Work*, July, 1910, page 25).

Three years later, Weber completed a major oil, *Interior of the Fourth Dimension*. Suffused with a sense of movement and structured by sequences of overlapping planes which evoke New York's towering skyline, the work depicts a sailing craft entering New York Harbor.

Through 1915, Weber completed at least seven major works dealing with the city, including *New York at Night*, *Grand Central Terminal*, *Chinese Restaurant* and *Rush Hour, New York*. The title of this last work points to the most immediate source of all of these works: Marcel Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase, #2*.

Duchamp's work had been the scandal of the Armory Show. A cartoon in the *New York Sun* bore the caption "The Rude Descending a Staircase (Rush Hour at the Subway)." Weber actually made a sketch of Duchamp's work and then, seizing upon the sense of motion generated by the sequence of planes in the Duchamp canvas, made a serious painting of the singularly urban experience of rush hours. A series of planes which generate a Futurist sense of speed seem to spin around a sequence of shapes that evoke the sense of a subway car speeding into an underground station.

The elements of urban architecture, sidewalks, staircases and streetlights which are elliptically a part of this work recur in his other New York paintings. It is among these canvases that *Night* must be grouped.

Like the title itself, the actual content of the work is obscure. It is, however, a work of great spatial complexity. Executed in a palette very close to that employed by Duchamp in *Nude Descending a Staircase*, a

series of planes seem to unfold to reveal a central composition made up of shapes which hint at high rise buildings, the sweep of metal stairs, and forms created by the play of dark and light in a city at night. In this work, to quote his *Camera Work* essay, there is "an overwhelming sense of space magnitude" which seems to include glimpses of the city "in all directions at one time."

As is true in the last works of Henry Fitch Taylor, it appears that Weber, directly prompted by Duchamp, found in Cubism a style which would enable him to capture the scale of New York and quality of life in the vast, mechanized city.

Not many years after his great canvases of 1915, Weber, like most American painters of the avant-garde, turned increasingly conservative. His role in the development of modernism in this country was, however, fully recognized. During his lifetime there were retrospectives at the Museum of Modern Art (1930), at the Whitney (1949), at the Jewish Museum (1956), the Rose Gallery at Brandeis University (1957) and the Newark Museum (1959). He died, much honored, in 1961.

Check list of works not reproduced

Pablo Picasso:
Bottle and Glass on Table, 1912-13
charcoal, ink, and collage on paper
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, The Alfred Stieglitz Collection

Max Weber:
Interior of the Fourth Dimension, 1913
oil on canvas
Natalie Davis Spingarn Collection, in memory of Linda R. Miller

New York at Night, 1915
The Archer M. Huntington Art Gallery, University of Texas at Austin, The James and Mari Michener Collection

Grand Central Terminal, 1915
oil on canvas
Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection, Lugano, Switzerland

Chinese Restaurant, 1915
oil on canvas
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

Rush Hour, New York, 1915
oil on canvas
National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

Marcel Duchamp:
Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2, 1912
oil on canvas
Philadelphia Museum of Art, Louise and Walter Arensberg Collection



Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery
University of Nebraska-Lincoln
Lincoln, Nebraska 68588-0300
(402) 472-2461