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The Stieglitz Circle

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The Stieglitz Circle

Selections from the
Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery
and Sculpture Garden
University of Nebraska-Lincoln

The Fourteenth Annual Statewide Exhibition
2000 - 2001
This pencil sketch shows the courtyard or “campo,” adjacent to the San Trovaso church, the location of one of three remaining gondola yards in Venice. The artist, German-born Oscar Bluemner, studied to be an architect before coming to the United States, where he became an early advocate of modern painting. Primarily interested in color, Bluemner’s later landscape paintings were a vehicle to present the results of his color theories.

Charles Demuth is described as a master watercolorist, whose sense of order in shapes, planes, and lines gives this composition a geometric precision. The method employed by the artist in portraying Backdrop of East Lynne is considered Precisionist, a movement that has its roots in Cezanne’s analytical approach to painting combined with the Cubists’ precise definition of planes.

Considered one of the innovators of nonobjective art, Arthur Dove abstracted forms from the external world as he produced challenging avant-garde paintings. One of several artists for whom Alfred Stieglitz played a sheltering, patriarchal role, Dove said he could not have existed as a painter without that “super-encouragement” provided by Stieglitz.

In 1913, Marsden Hartley went to Germany where he met a group of artists called Der Blaue Reiter (The Blue Rider) whose art was based on an emotional response to subjects or ideas rather than a representation of the way things actually look. Showing the influence of these artists, Painting Number One, 1913, with its explosive form and spontaneous color, is considered one of the first purely abstract paintings by an American artist.

Painted in the last decade of Hartley’s life after his return to Maine, Mount Katahdin, Autumn No. 1 is an abstracted landscape depicting the highest mountain in his native state. Describing this work, the artist said, “... I am the first serious artist to get to the foot of Mt. Katahdin and to paint it.”
The Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery and Sculpture Garden is pleased to present The Stieglitz Circle, the fourteenth annual Sheldon Statewide exhibition. Sheldon Statewide is a unique collaboration between the Sheldon Gallery, the Nebraska Art Association (a non-profit volunteer membership organization dedicated to the advancement of the visual arts in Nebraska) and the efforts and cooperation of the many Nebraska communities that serve as exhibition venues. The mission of the Sheldon Gallery is the acquisition, exhibition, and interpretation of 19th- and 20th-century American art. Each year twenty works from the collection are circulated throughout the state of Nebraska.

The 2000-2001 Sheldon Statewide exhibition focuses on the works of some of the earliest Americans to embrace Modernism, many of whom were promoted by photographer and gallery owner Alfred Stieglitz. Shaping the New York art world and contributing to the rise of avant-garde culture in the era before the Depression, Stieglitz is without a doubt one of the most important single figures in the development of Modernism in America.

The "Little Galleries of the Photo-Secession" opened its doors on November 25, 1905. Better known as "291" because of its Fifth Avenue address in New York, it became a central gathering place for some of the most significant names of the American avant-garde who looked upon 291 as a safe harbor amidst a sea of anti-modernist hostility in the visual arts. Because art galleries had generally rejected photography, Stieglitz envisioned a space in which photography could be measured in juxtaposition to other media. From this combination of his passionate spirit with specific knowledge of the aesthetic revolutions of his time, he gained the power to change the course of American art and taste.

With the help of Edward Steichen, Stieglitz created a stronghold of modern art at 291 by presenting the first American exhibitions of the leading European artists, such as Auguste Rodin, Paul Cézanne, Henri Matisse, and Pablo Picasso, artists who were virtually ignored by every other gallery or art organization in the United States. These exhibitions, furthermore, helped shape the styles of the major painters working around Stieglitz, providing examples for those unable to view these works in Europe. Marin’s Cubist-inspired views of New York City and the boldly colored Matisse-like forms of Maurer’s still lifes are examples of such influence. Even more significant, these exhibitions anticipated the Armory Show in 1913, which first exposed large numbers of Americans, including artists, to the artistic actions taking place in Europe.

Not merely a reflection of Stieglitz’s personal vision, the dynamism of 291 correspondingly stemmed from the diverse individuals who gathered at the space for discussions of art and aesthetic theories. Nearly every American artist who had been or wished to be exposed to modern European art was attracted to 291. It became a forum wherein both young avant-garde artists and critics could find encouragement and opportunities for discussion that was, at the time, unavailable elsewhere. Valuing what 291 offered, these artists became stronger as a community through their association with Stieglitz.

Ironically it was the Armory Show of 1913 that resulted in the demise of the 291 Gallery. The last remaining years of 291 were then viewed against the backdrop of that sensational blockbuster and the media attention it received. In this period several avant-garde galleries emerged with younger, more vigorous supporters of modern art forcing the doors of 291 to close in 1917 after nearly eighty exhibitions. However, the artists associated with the Stieglitz Circle continued to work from this experience influencing generations of artists who would come after them. Therefore, Stieglitz’s influence far outlived 291’s rather brief existence.

As the focal point for all leading modernists, Stieglitz used the 291 Gallery to promote these artists with great zeal, which resulted in putting his own photography to the wayside. In spite of Stieglitz’s great efforts to enlighten collectors, most of the wealthy, cultured patrons who might have been won over to modernism were unprepared to take the leap before 1913. Moreover, being unable to convert large numbers near the end of the 291 Gallery, he abandoned his hope for America’s appreciation of art. Nevertheless, no other individual or institution has approached the promotion and cultivation of American modernist artists with more conviction and with such a definite educational purpose as Alfred Stieglitz.

Sheldon Statewide succeeds in large part due to the continuing support of the Nebraska Art Association, Rhonda and James Seacrest, the local sponsors who support the exhibition in the respective communities, and the many volunteer docents at each venue. Their appreciation of both the immediate and long-range goals of Sheldon Statewide is especially meaningful, and their generosity has enabled tens of thousands of fellow citizens to encounter works of art of the highest quality.

Nicole Crawford
Assistant Curator

Abraham Walkowitz (1880-1965)
UNTITLED (New York)
n.d., graphite
15 3/4 x 7 1/4 in.
NAA-Nelle Cochrane
Woods Memorial

Max Weber (1881-1961)
NIGHT
1915, oil on canvas
48 x 40 1/4 in.
NAA-Nelle Cochrane
Woods Memorial

Siberian-born Abraham Walkowitz is one of several artists in the Stieglitz circle who were fascinated with New York City. In this pencil drawing, skyscrapers loom over a narrow, pedestrian-crowded street. Compare this work with John Marin’s Pertaining to Nassau Street, New York.

Demonstrating his mastery of the complicated Cubist vocabulary, Weber represents his impression of “night” with this emotional response to the city after dark. The artist, who had become familiar with French art and theory while studying in Paris, uses lines, planes and subtle color to express the deceptive properties of darkness.
Gaston Lachaise
(1882-1935)
PORTRAIT OF JOHN MARIN
1928, bronze
12 1/4 x 9 x 10 in.
UNL-F. M. Hall Collection

The sculptor's skill in modeling is apparent in this sensitively rendered portrait of the painter, John Marin, whose work also is included in the exhibition. The Sheldon Gallery collection includes another important Lachaise sculpture, Floating Figure, a monumental bronze female nude permanently installed in the sculpture garden.

From Ragged Island was painted at a time when the artist had "discovered" Maine. This tranquil landscape captures the essence of land, sea and sky in the artist's personal style, showing a sense of structure and order conveyed with restraint. Comparing his work to the game of golf, Marin commented, "The fewer the strokes I can take, the better the picture."

John Marin
(1870-1953)
PERTAINING TO NASSAU STREET, NEW YORK
1936, watercolor on paper
25 3/8 x 20 1/4 in.
UNL-Bequest of Frances Sheldon

The influence of Cubism is apparent in John Marin's abstract watercolor impression of this bustling urban scene. Trained as an architect, Marin was inspired by the structural forces seemingly pent up within the skyscrapers of the city. With diagonal lines, sketchily defined figures and a unique use of color, he conveys to the viewer a sense of frenetic motion in a confined space.

Insipied by new, boldly colored modernist paintings of Cézanne and Matisse, Alfred Maurer modeled form with color in this still-life composition. Painted while the artist was working in France, this work indicates a shift from Maurer's earlier preference for the subdued tones of Romantic Realism.

Alfred Henry Maurer
(1868-1932)
STILL LIFE WITH BOWL
c. 1908, oil on canvas mounted on masonite
18 x 21 5/8 in.
UNL-Bequest of Bertha Schaefer

Inteinity and expressive range of color make Woman with Blue Background one of Maurer's most outstanding paintings. Taken out of school at age sixteen to work in his father's lithographic business, Maurer was largely a self-taught artist. His own art was transformed by a four-year stay in Paris in the early 1900s when he saw the work of avant-garde artists. The result was a newly found freedom of color and design.

Elie Nadelman
(1882-1946)
FEMALE HEAD
c. 1906-09, drypoint
6 15/16 x 5 in.
NAA-Nelle Cochrane Woods Memorial Fund

This Polish-born artist is known primarily as a sculptor. His bronze Man in the Open Air is one of the most significant sculptures in the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery collection. Female Head is an example of Nadelman's skill in making classical yet stylishly contemporary drawings. He said, "I employ no other line than the curve, which possesses freshness and force."
Georgia O'Keeffe (1887–1986)
BLUE NUDE (LEAH)
c. 1917, watercolor on paper
15 1/16 x 11 1/8 in.
UNL—Anonymous donor

This c. 1917 watercolor, though an obvious reference to the human figure, is similar to other abstract works made by O'Keeffe while she was teaching school in Texas. A year later, O'Keeffe met Alfred Stieglitz (who was to become her husband) when he exhibited her work at his "291" gallery. Thus, O'Keeffe became a member of the circle of struggling abstractionists whose work was exhibited and promoted by Stieglitz in the early years of the twentieth century.

Edward Jean Steichen (1879–1973)
SHROUDED FIGURE IN MOONLIGHT
1905, oil on canvas
24 x 25 1/8 in.
UNL—F. M. Hall Collection

Painted in the Symbolist manner, Shrouded Figure in Moonlight, indicates Steichen's interest in the spiritual and mystical nature of art. This enigmatic image causes the viewer to consider many questions left unanswered by the artist. Self-taught as a photographer, Edward Steichen established "291" gallery in New York with his partner and friend, Alfred Stieglitz, in 1905.

Paul Strand (1890–1976)
THE WHITE FENCE (From "Paul Strand-Portfolio Three")
1916, silver print
9 7/8 x 13 in.
UNL—Gift of Michael E. Hoffman

Photographer Paul Strand had his first one-man exhibition at Stieglitz's "291" gallery in 1916, the year The White Fence was photographed. Strand explored the problems and possibilities of the medium, creating seminal photographic images in the period before World War I. His friendship with artists in the Stieglitz circle influenced the development of his contemporary aesthetic.

Charles Sheeler (1883–1965)
INTERIOR, BUCKS COUNTY BARN
c. 1917, silver print
7 3/4 x 9 11/16 in.
UNL—F. M. Hall Collection

Charles Sheeler trained himself in photography after realizing that he could not support himself by painting. Interior, Bucks County Barn is a result of Sheeler's interest in eighteenth and nineteenth-century barns in the country around his house near Doylestown, Pennsylvania. In this photograph, the dominating silhouette of the old buggy is framed in light and shadow.

Paul Strand (1890–1976)
BLIND WOMAN (From "Paul Strand-Portfolio Three")
1916, silver print
13 x 10 in.
UNL—Gift of Michael E. Hoffman

This poignant photograph is an example of the close-up images taken by Strand on the streets of New York. Stieglitz wrote of Strand's work in 1917, "His work is rooted in the best traditions of photography. . . . It is brutally direct. It does not rely on tricks of process. . . . These photographs are the direct expression of today."

Alfred Stieglitz (1864–1946)
STEERAGE
1907, gravure
13 1/8 x 10 3/8 in.
UNL—Gift of Lawrence Reger

Stieglitz said, "... I was born in Hoboken. I am an American. Photography is my passion. The search for Truth my obsession." While traveling by ship to Europe, Stieglitz observed the scene preserved in this photograph. What he saw caused the photographer to race to his cabin for his last unexposed plate. That plate resulted in the now famous image, Steerage. Throughout his life, Stieglitz championed avant-garde American artists and led the battle to recognize photography as a fine art form.
The Stieglitz Circle
2000-2001 Sheldon Statewide
Program Schedule

Chadron  August 29 - September 27, 2000, Silver Eagle Gallery
Local Sponsor: Chadron State College

North Platte  October 1 - October 27, 2000, The Mall
Local Sponsors: Nebraska Land National Bank; North Platte Telegraph; Ross Perry Motors and Crossroads Dodge, Cadillac, Oldsmobile, Dodge, Jeep & Eagle; United Nebraska Bank; Western Nebraska National Bank; First Federal Lincoln Bank

Grand Island  October 30 - December 1, 2000, Grand Island Public Library
Local Sponsors: Home Federal; Grand Island Public Schools; CAPP

Local Sponsor: McCook Arts Council

Holdrege  January 7 - February 2, 2001, Holdrege Public Library
Local Sponsors: Dr. and Mrs. Stuart Embury; Dr. and Mrs. Wayne Cooney; Dr. and Mrs. Deak Doolittle; First National Bank of Holdrege; Holdrege School Foundation; National Art Honor Society, Holdrege Chapter

Aurora  February 4 - March 2, 2001, Plainsman Museum
Local Sponsor: Hamilton Community Foundation, Inc.

Beatrice  March 4 - March 30, 2001, Gage County Museum
Local Sponsor: Beatrice National Bank & Trust Co.

Columbus  April 1 - April 27, 2001, Columbus Art Gallery
Local Sponsor: First National Bank

Fremont  April 29 - June 1, 2001, Gallery 92 West
Local Sponsor: Fremont Area Art Association

Cozad  June 3 - July 13, 2001, Robert Henri Museum & Historical Walkway
Local Sponsors: Cozad Arts Council; Tenneco Automotive; Friends of the Henri

Local Sponsor: The Hastings Museum

York  September 4 - September 28, 2001, Cornerstone Bank
Local Sponsor: Cornerstone Bank

Norfolk  September 30 - October 26, 2001, Norfolk Arts Center
Local Sponsor: Norfolk Arts Center

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