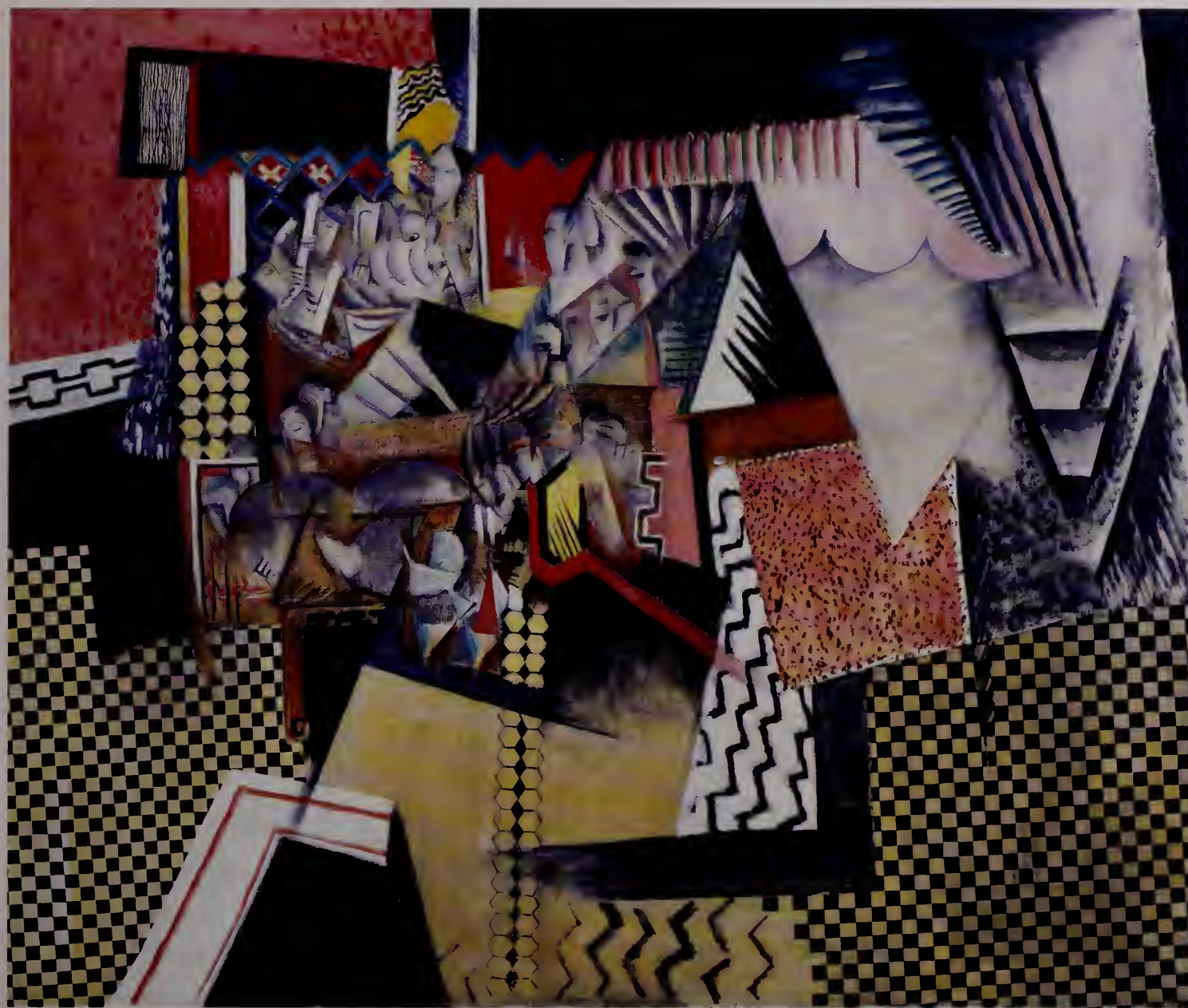


ABSTRACTION BEFORE 1930

Selections from the Permanent Collection of the Whitney Museum of American Art

Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris · March 1 – May 1, 1991



Jan Matulka, *Arrangement with Phonograph*



AMERICAN INNOVATIONS IN ABSTRACTION

Kathleen Monaghan

Cover: Max Weber, *Chinese Restaurant*

What is abstraction and what does it mean in the context of art? The answer is neither singular nor simple, for the concept of abstraction is open to any number of interpretations. When artists use real objects, people, or places as models but markedly reduce the amount of detail rendered, the work is said to be "abstracted" from reality. Imagery completely unrelated to things in the world is considered "non-objective," "non-figurative," "non-representational," or "non-iconic" abstraction. And within abstraction itself there are a diverse number of schools and manifestations. These seemingly distinct forms are not mutually exclusive, however, nor do they have inflexible boundaries; indeed, they can appear simultaneously in one work. Although abstraction existed in the art of the past, it was in the early years of the twentieth century that artists began to explore pure form either by paring away

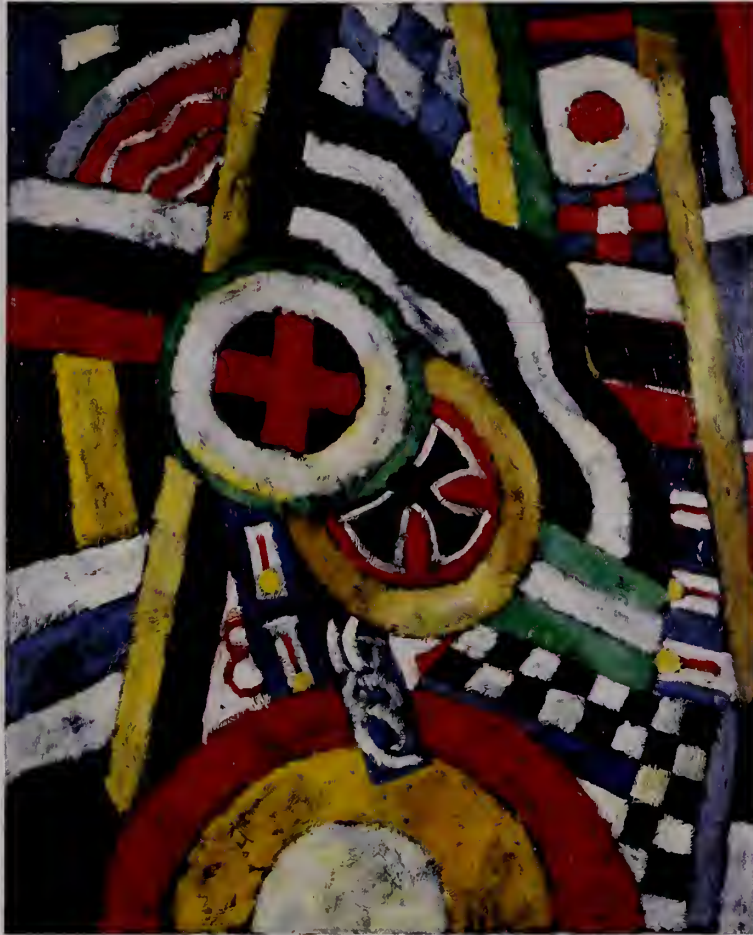
details or by rejecting the real world as a point of departure.

At the end of the nineteenth century, the foundations of academic art had been shaken first by Impressionism and then by its successors, Post-Impressionism, Fauvism, and, by about 1910, Cubism. For the first time artists centered their ideas not on realism or the illusion of reality, but on the process of creating art. Rather than looking at nature and trying to transform it into a concrete image, they began to consider the fundamentals of visual experience. This artistic revolution focused on the exploration of mass, line, color, and form for their own sake. It was suddenly possible for artists to strip away the distractions of realism in order to concentrate on a series of conceptual problems related to the form of art.

In America, the foundation for future change was laid in the earliest years of this century by The Eight, the so-called Ashcan School. Led by realist Robert Henri, they rejected the pastoral landscapes of their nineteenth-century predecessors, depicting instead urban shops, parks, celebrations, and squalor. Although not abstractionists, these artists, by repudiating academic standards, established a new spirit of aesthetic freedom in America.

It was this independence that enabled a younger group of artists to form America's first true vanguard. These American modernists, as they came to be called, used abstraction as a visual focal point. And it was only in the spirit of modernism that abstraction could have flourished. Artists needed its expanded language to express their individual and collective concerns in a new age. Abstraction in its many forms not only offered alternatives to prevailing academic taste, but also gave artists an opportunity to create work that reflected their internal world, the imaginative subjectivity of what they thought and felt.

The confluence of many events contributed to the success of the new modern art in America. In 1905, in a brownstone at 291 Fifth Avenue, photographer Alfred Stieglitz, along with painter-photographer Edward Steichen, opened the Little Gallery of the Photo-Secession, later to become known simply as 291. The gallery was a center for avant-garde exhibitions. Stieglitz, the apostle of modernism, was the first to



Marsden Hartley,
Painting, Number 5

The first necessity was to break with traditional narrative art. In this endeavor, American modernists found inspiration in a variety of sources, in both the visual and non-visual arts. Igor Stravinsky, Béla Bartók, Isadora Duncan, Gertrude Stein, James Joyce, Frank Lloyd Wright, and Walter Gropius are only a few of the many creative artists whose work abandoned conventional linear sequences of sound, movement, words, or images in favor of counterpoint, simultaneous but parallel experience, and attenuated composition in order to produce a new "reality."

In 1913 the "International Exhibition of Modern Art" in New York—the famous Armory Show—exhibited more than 1600 works of European and American painters and sculptors. The exhibition, organized by American artists, included many of the "outsiders" who had shown only at 291. Although the organizing committee took little interest in the Italian Futurists and German Expressionists, it attempted to represent every other major art movement. The Armory Show was the first large-scale confrontation American audiences had with European avant-garde developments. An estimated two hundred thousand people attended the exhibition, which helped close the gap between what had been acceptable in art and what had been considered radical.

In the 1920s, modernist art had many manifestations. Artists assimilated a wide variety of sources and often went through periods of stylistic change. Indeed, an idiosyncratic approach to the challenge of abstraction characterizes the decade.

During these years, realism continued to play an important but a somewhat submerged role in American painting. By the thirties, however, as economic instability led America into the Depression, artists looked once again to the external world for subject matter. Social realism and social responsibility became a focal point for American artists. But abstraction never ceased to be a viable force in art. Then, as now, it sustains artists and provides viewers with a spiritually satisfying, intellectually challenging form of art. The initial ideas and ideals of abstract language have been altered through time. The first steps, however, were taken by these early innovators, who gladly assumed the role of pioneers in American abstract art.

show Matisse (1908), Toulouse-Lautrec (1909), Picasso (1911), Picabia (1913), Bronzino (1914), and Severini (1917) to American audiences.

Steichen spent much of his time in Paris. He met many young Americans working or studying abroad and reported his latest discoveries to Stieglitz in New York. It was through Steichen that Stieglitz became the first to exhibit the works of Alfred Maurer and John Marin (1909), Marsden Hartley, Max Weber, Arthur Dove, and Arthur B. Corles (1910), Abraham Wolkowitz (1912), Georgia O'Keeffe (1910), Oscar Bluemner (1915), and Stanton Macdonald-Wright (1917).

Many of these artists were students of the Académie Julian in Paris, where they were officially represented by the American Artists in Paris organization. Disgruntled by its conservatism and bureaucracy, which borely differed

from the older, established academy, in 1908 these young men and women formed their own secessionist group called the New Society of American Artists in Paris.

Aside from a flurry of press coverage, the New Society received little attention and was never successful as a unified movement. The artists did not exhibit together nor did they manage to insinuate their work into European shows. Many members also traveled freely from New York to Paris and other European cities, making any kind of cohesive movement difficult. Their contribution should not, however, be underestimated. New Society members and their circle of friends inspired a fresh kind of creativity. Although founded partly in rebellion, somewhat in controversy, and largely in experimentation, this small group did its best to defeat the prevailing provincialism of American taste.

Stuart Davis, *Egg Beater No. 1*



ABSTRACTION

BEFORE

1930

Kathryn Kanjo

Although abstraction came to these shores from Europe, the movement spoke to the spirit of many American artists. Its liberating non-objectivity allowed artists to circumvent having to paint what they "saw" in order to illustrate what they "felt."

Alfred Maurer was one of the earliest American proponents of the European aesthetic. Living in Paris for seventeen years, he began early on to connect Fauvist color strategies with the formal structuring of Cubism. In *Still Life*, the flattened backdrop of continuous patterning reflects the influence of Matisse. Through spatial ambiguity and distortion the work becomes more about art than about the depicted objects; the true subject of *Still Life* is abstraction. In Tom Benrimo's canvases on the same theme, a spherical shape is as much about the geometry and weight of the form as the feel and texture of the actual fruit. Likewise, Patrick Henry Bruce's neatly delineated, unmodulated planes of color—though they make reference to still-life objects—insistently explore the creation of space through the juxtaposition of color. Unlike the precise control in Bruce's abstraction, a loose explosion of high-keyed color infuses Arthur B. Corles' *Bouquet Abstraction* with a dynamic tension.

Color took the central role in the American art movement called Synchronism. Founded by Stanton Macdonald-Wright and Morgan Russell in 1913, Synchronism advocated the creation of pictorial space through the manipulation of color. Macdonald-Wright layers arcing wedges of pigment to produce a pulsating web of violet, turquoise, and gold in "Conception." *Synchrony*. In Russell's *Four Part Synchrony, Number 7*, the physical division of the canvases cleverly echoes the implied division of space created by the color harmonies.

Not all abstract painting in the early twentieth century was non-representational, and often the point of departure remains visible. Narrative, however, was generally shunned. The urban motifs in the work of Charles Demuth, Louis Lozowick, John Storrs, Abraham Wolowitz, and Max Weber, for example, were employed less to convey the humanistic pulse of the streets, as the Ashcan painters had done, than to project an aura of modernity. The



Man Ray,
Five Figures

city—with its glistening skyscrapers, frenzied restaurants, and mon-mode forms—symbolized the energy and future of modern life. Turning these images of progress into abstractions topped into the spirit of America while also asserting the primacy of painting. Demuth's sleek, proud, geometric volumes in *My Egypt* become as pure in form and spiritually inspiring as were the pyramids of ancient Egypt. Likewise, Storrs' *Forms in Space #1* makes solid the shadows and voids of clustered skyscrapers. Frontal and stable, these iconic images mythicize the industrialization that generated them.

In Lozowick's *Pittsburgh*, the thrusting perspectives of the city are neither temporal nor

atmospheric. Indeed, the shadows cast from the buildings describe rather than dematerialize the planes that receive them. The skyline of Wolkowitz's *Cityscope* juts upward like an indefatigable, crystalline growth. Massive and dominating, these city views project a sense of permanence and impenetrability.

Mox Weber's Cubist-inspired *Chinese Restaurant* avoids the iconic solemnity of Demuth's or Storrs' works. It is about the pace and people of the city, not the industrial marvels of the era. The movement of the waiter and the check of the tablecloth, for example, refer to the onslaught of sensations experienced in what was then still an exotic locale, a Chinese restaurant. These elements, synthetically composed, use the piecemeal construction of Cubism to present the dynamic, real time of urban living.

Mechanical still lifes also found their place in early twentieth-century painting. In 1916 Morton Schomberg created a series of paintings that isolated and described various mechanical objects. *Untitled (Mechanical Abstraction)* is thought to represent a stocking machine Schomberg had found illustrated in a catalogue. Siting the machine on a vertical axis, he reproduced the lines and contours with precision, perhaps influenced by the mechanical drawing classes he had once taken as an architecture student. Thus isolated, the object loses the specificity of its function and acts instead as a universal image of mechanical progress. In 1927 Stuart Davis also turned to the mechanical object as subject. For one year he systematically analyzed the geometric properties of an eggbeater, an electric fan, and a rubber glove. "Gradually through this concentration I focused on the logical elements," Davis commented. In *Egg Beater No. 1*, those "elements" are non-objective, hard-edged, interrelated planes of single color.

Not all images were restricted to an urban or mechanical source. Georgia O'Keeffe's *Flower Abstraction* presents a telescoped view of nature, a magnification of the rhythmic folds of a colorful bloom. At once revealing a natural symmetry and exploring subtle variations of color, O'Keeffe's composition suggests primal order and regeneration. Arthur G. Dove also abstracted from nature. Botanical motifs of arcing lines, quivering orbs, and podlike forms infuse his work with organic references.

In the twenty-year period covered in this exhibition, the artistic options for abstraction seem to have been unlimited. Used formally and expressively, abstraction permitted each artist to work out a personal response to modernism. United by the belief that art no longer needed to be realistic, these artists forged new paths in the history of art.



Louis Lozowick, *Pittsburgh*

**Whitney Museum of American Art
at Philip Morris**

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New York, New York 10017
(212) 878-2453
Free admission

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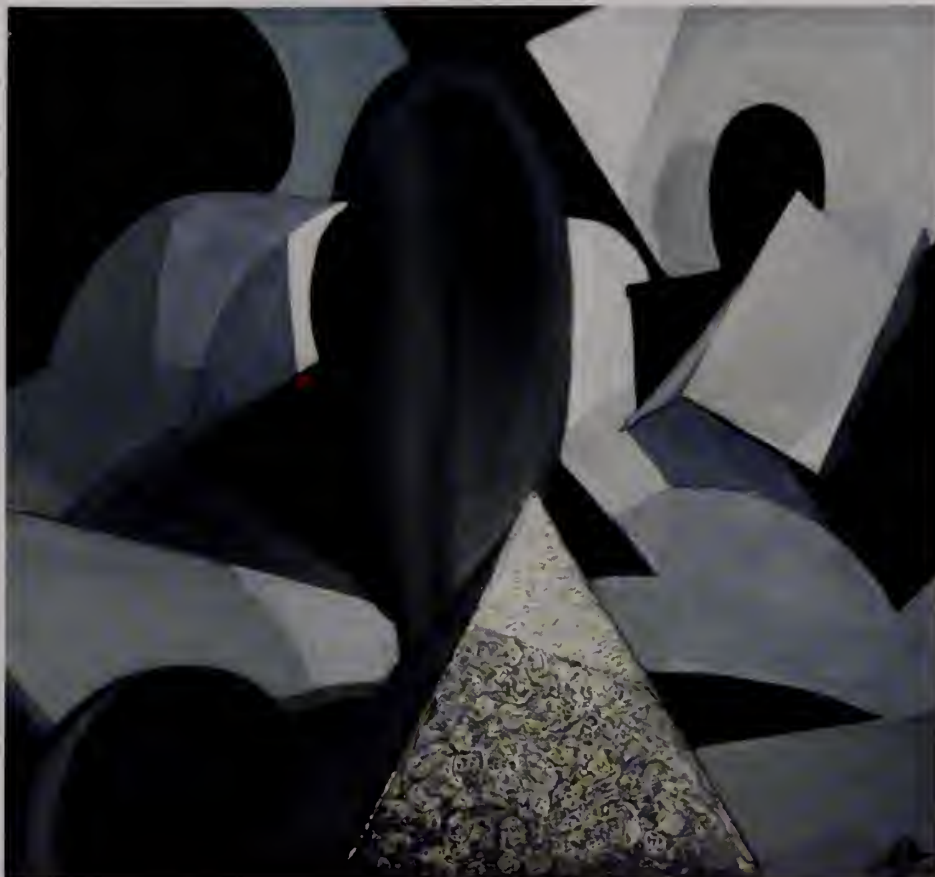
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John Covert, *Resurrection*



WORKS
IN THE
EXHIBITION

Dimensions are in inches;
height precedes width precedes depth.

Tam Benrma (1887–1958)
Still Life, 1921
Oil on canvas, 15 × 18
Gift of the Dorothy S. Benrma Estate 78.8

Thomas Hart Benton (1889–1975)
House in Cubist Landscape, c. 1915–20
Watercolor on paper mounted on board,
11¼ × 7¾
Purchase, with funds from The Hearst
Corporation 82.34

Oscar Bluemner (1867–1938)
Space Motive, o New Jersey Volley, c. 1917–18
Oil on canvas, 30½ × 40½
Purchase, with funds from Mrs. Muriel D.
Poltz 78.2

Patrick Henry Bruce (1881–1936)
Pointing, c. 1921–22
Oil on canvas, 35 × 45¾
Gift of an anonymous donor 54.20

Arthur B. Carles (1882–1952)
Bouquet Abstraction, c. 1930
Oil on canvas, 31¾ × 36
Purchase 53.41

John Covert (1882–1960)
Resurrection, 1916
Oil on composition board, 24¼ × 27
Gift of Charles Simon 64.18

Kanrad Cramer (1888–1963)
Improvisation #1, 1912
Oil on canvas, 29¾ × 24
Lawrence H. Bloedel Bequest 77.1.13

Stuart Davis (1892–1964)
Egg Beater No. 1, 1927
Oil on canvas, 29½ × 36
Gift of Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney 31.169

Charles Demuth (1883–1935)
My Egypt, 1927
Oil on composition board, 35¾ × 30
Purchase, with funds from Gertrude Vanderbilt
Whitney 31.172

Arthur G. Dave (1880–1946)
Distraction, 1929
Oil on canvas, 21 × 30
Gift of an anonymous donor 58.64

Marsden Hartley (1877–1943)
Pointing, Number 5, 1914–15
Oil on canvas, 39½ × 31¾
Gift of an anonymous donor 58.65

Louis Lazawick (1894–1973)
Pittsburgh, 1922–23
Oil on canvas, 30 × 17
Gift of Louise and Joe Wissert 83.50

Stanton Macdonald-Wright (1890–1973)
"Conception." Synchromy, 1915
Oil on canvas, 30 × 24
Gift of George F. Of 52.40



Charles Demuth,
My Egypt

Martan Schamberg (1881–1918)
Untitled (Mechanical Abstraction), 1916
Oil on composition board, 20 × 16
50th Anniversary Gift of Mrs. Jean
Whitehill 86.5.2

Joseph Stella (1877–1946)
Untitled, c. 1919
Oil and wire on glass, 13³/₁₆ × 8¹/₂
Daisy V. Shapira Bequest 85.29

John Storrs (1885–1956)
Farms in Space #1, c. 1924
Marble, 7³/₄ × 12⁵/₈ × 8³/₈
50th Anniversary Gift of Mr. and Mrs. B.H.
Friedman in honor of Gertrude Vanderbilt
Whitney, Flara Whitney Miller, and Flara Miller
Biddle 84.37

Abraham Walkowitz (1880–1965)
Cityscape, c. 1915
Oil on canvas, 25 × 18
Purchase, with funds from Philip Marris
Incorporated 76.11

Max Weber (1881–1961)
Chinese Restaurant, 1915
Oil on canvas, 40 × 48
Purchase 31.382

Figure in Rotation, 1915
Polychromed bronze, 24 × 7 × 7¹/₂
50th Anniversary Gift of the Edward R. Dawne
Jr. Purchase Fund 80.1

This exhibition was organized by Kathleen
Managhan, branch director, Whitney Museum
of American Art at Equitable Center, with
the assistance of Kathryn Kanja, gallery
assistant.

Jahn Marin (1870–1953)
Weehawken Sequence, Number 5, 1903–04
Oil on canvas mounted on composition board,
9¹/₂ × 12¹/₂
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. John Marin, Jr. 63.18

Jan Matulka (1890–1972)
Arrangement with Phanograph, 1929
Oil on canvas, 30 × 40
Gift of Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney 31.298

Alfred H. Maurer (1868–1932)
Still Life, n.d.
Oil on composition board, 18 × 21¹/₂
Gift of Charles Siman 61.17

Georgia O'Keeffe (1887–1986)
Flower Abstraction, 1924
Oil on canvas, 48 × 30
50th Anniversary Gift of Sandra Payson 85.47

Man Ray (1890–1976)
Five Figures, 1914
Oil on canvas, 36 × 32
Gift of Katharine Kuh 56.36

Margan Russell (1886–1953)
Four Part Synchramy, Number 7, 1914–15
Oil on canvas, 15³/₄ × 11¹/₂
Gift of the artist in memory of Gertrude V.
Whitney 51.33