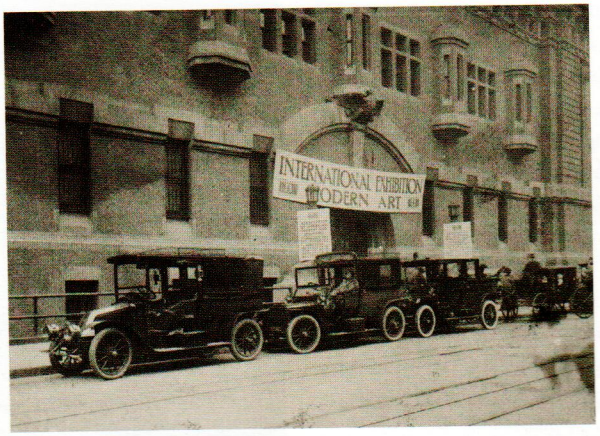
THE ARMORY SHOW 1913

A CENTENNIAL RECKONING BY MATTHEW DRUTT

This month marks the 100th anniversary of the International Exhibition of Modern Art, popularly known as the Armory Show. Many are familiar with its namesake, which was founded as the Gramercy International Art Fair in 1994 and renamed the Armory Show in 1999, but the two resemble each other in few respects.

Long before art fairs existed and blockbuster exhibitions became engines for driving an international art market and cultural tourism, there were annual exhibitions at academies of fine art that showcased refined, traditional works in painting and sculpture by member artists. In this country, the National Academy in New York held sway over Americans' perception of quality—largely a reflection of European academic taste—beginning in the early 19th century. As the next century unfolded, a growing tide of artists worked outside the academy and in a more experimental idiom, inspired in part by the European avant-garde. Independent salons and ad hoc exhibitions increased in frequency and size.



The original Armory Show remains the mother of all independent exhibitions in the U.S. Conceived and organized by artists—Arthur B. Davies, Robert Henri, Walt Kuhn, and Walter Pach—it was the first and most ambitious show ever put together to highlight the newest trends in American art as well as the latest art from the European vanguard. It was staged first at the Armory of the 69th Infantry on Lexington Avenue between East 25th and 26th Streets, in New York, opening February 17. Organizers chose the image of an inverted pine tree from an American Revolutionary War flag as their emblem, imprinting the notion of insurrection on their efforts. Some 1,300 objects, one-third by non-American artists, were arranged in 18 contiguous galleries according to nationality and perceived similarity of style.

The public reception of the Armory Show during its three-city tour (New York, Chicago, Boston) was nothing short of sensational. No art exhibition before or after has generated so much collective outrage or exerted the same kind of influence, turning the tides of taste and cultural production in this country. It was a spectacle unthinkable in today's globally aware culture. Much of

the work from abroad debuted to an unknowing public. Art by Paul Cézanne, Marcel Duchamp, Paul Gauguin, Wassily Kandinsky, Henri Matisse, Francis Picabia, Pablo Picasso, Odilon Redon, and other artists regarded today as masters was placed before an American audience for the first time. Artists, dealers, and several private collectors with an interest in advancing the cause of modernism lent works to the exhibition.

The press had a field day, and the story resonated in papers across the United States in a crescendo of coverage. At first the exhibition was labeled an event "not to be missed" and a "bombshell." Soon that bomb exploded, as critics began to eviscerate the new art from Europe as "insurgent," "freak art," and "grotesque," with particular hostility directed at the unintelligible work of the Cubists and Futurists (although the latter were not even represented in the exhibition). The public was advised not to visit the show while intoxicated, for fear of falling ill. But visit they did: Some 80,000 people packed the Armory during the exhibition's monthlong run, sometimes filling the galleries until 10 P.M. in such dense crowds that it was difficult to see anything and it took hours to empty the premises.

Department stores scrambled to capitalize on the celebrity of the exhibition with Cubist-inspired window displays. On the day the show closed in New York, Kuhn wrote to a colleague, "You haven't any idea how this confounded thing has developed; every afternoon Lexington Avenue and the side streets are jammed with private automobiles, old-fashioned horse equipages, taxi cabs, and whatnot. To give you an idea of what a hit the show has made, I might merely state that the receipts for admission and catalogues last Saturday amounted to $2,000. That's going some, isn't it? The newspapers have treated the thing royally and over 90 works have been sold since the opening; it's all like a dream but the unexpected has happened, that is unexpected as far as the public is concerned. You know what I have always thought of it; the expenses of the show will amount to $30,000, and at that we expect to make money."

By the end of the three-city tour, 174 works of art had sold for total receipts of $44,148.75. European artists—a minority in the show—accounted for the majority (123) of those sales, or $30,491.25. The exhibition attracted the major collectors of the day—Louise and Walter Arensberg, Dr. Albert C. Barnes, Lillie P. Bliss, Stephen C. Clark, Arthur Jerome Eddy, Hamilton Easter Fields, Henry C. Frick, A.E. Gallatin, John G. Johnson, John Quinn, and Edward W. Root—all of whom purchased works that now reside prominently in public collections across the country. What follows are some highlights of the exhibition's legacy.

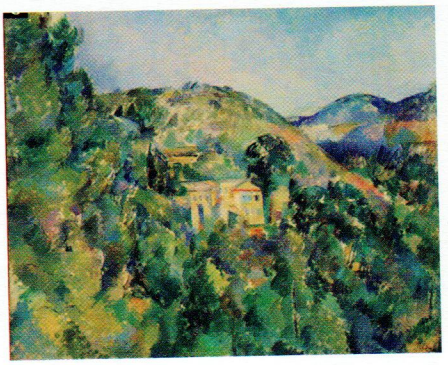
The largest space at the Armory Show, Gallery H, shown above, featured painting and sculpture. From left to right: Constantin Brancusi, *Mlle. Pogany*, 1912 (on plinth); Wilhelm Lehmbruck, *Kneeling Woman*, 1911; Josef Bernard, *Jeune fille á la cruche*, 1912; a bas-relief by Aristide Maillol; and Lehmbruck's *Standing Woman*, 1910.

A banner above the entrance to the Armory of the 69th Infantry on Lexington Avenue, in New York, opposite, announces the "International Exhibition of Modern Art" in February 1913.

PAUL CEZANNE

VIEW OF THE DOMAINE SAINT-JOSEPH, 1888–90
METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

The first work by Cézanne to enter an American museum is also the only one of his paintings to sell at the Armory Show. He was already considered a father of the avant-garde in Europe and was celebrated by a memorial exhibition at the 1907 Salon d'Automne, but like many artists from abroad, he was little appreciated in America in 1913. Seven paintings by Cézanne, most of them lent by the legendary French dealer Ambroise Vollard, occupied a gallery that the painter shared with another Post-Impressionist master, Vincent van Gogh. Cézanne received scant attention in the press, but Walter Pach and Alfred Stieglitz had lobbied the Metropolitan Museum of Art to hold an exhibition of his work, with Stieglitz asserting in a letter to the trustees that "they owed it to the American public." While that effort was unsuccessful, the Met's curator of painting, Bryson Burroughs, did convince the trustees to acquire this one painting. Burroughs had been the assistant to the previous curator, Roger Fry, an early champion of Cézanne. The pair nearly lost their jobs in 1907 after they persuaded the museum to purchase Renoir's 1878 *Portrait of Mme. Charpentier* at auction and the price rose to $20,000. The trustees were similarly distressed by the price of *View of the Domaine Saint-Joseph*, which was listed at $8,000 in Walt Kuhn's Armory Show ledger. The museum acquired the painting through Pach for $6,700, the highest price paid for any work in the exhibition.



MARCEL DUCHAMP

NUDE DESCENDING A STAIRCASE (NO. 2), 1912
PHILADELPHIA MUSEUM OF ART

No work in the Armory Show generated as much buzz and ridicule as Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase (No. 2)*. It arrived in New York already tainted by scandal, having been rejected the year before by the hanging committee (Cubist painters themselves) for the Salon des Indépendents in Paris. The objection? "A nude never descends the stairs—a nude reclines." The response in New York was less restrained. Critics mocked the painting as "an explosion in a shingle factory," an "orderly heap of broken violins," and an "academic painting of an artichoke." One cartoonist famously satirized it as "The Rude Descending the Staircase (Rush Hour at the Subway)." *American Art News* (forerunner of today's *ARTnews* magazine) offered a $10 reward to anyone who could successfully locate the figure in the work, and even former president Theodore Roosevelt entered the fray, likening the painting to a Navajo rug in "A Layman's View of an Art Exhibition," an article published in *Outlook* magazine. Given Roosevelt's other comments comparing Cubism to comics in the funny pages, one can assume that the comparison was not meant as praise. *Nude Descending a Staircase (No. 2)* was installed with works by other Cubist artists in Gallery I, dubbed the Chamber of Horrors in the press. The painting was purchased sight-unseen by Frederic C. Torrey, a San Francisco dealer, for $324. After fending off numerous offers, Torrey sold the piece in 1927 to Louise and Walter Arensberg, the celebrated patrons of Brancusi, Duchamp, Man Ray, and Picabia, but only after Torrey persuaded the artist to make him a hand-colored photographic copy. The painting, its photographic copy, and a preliminary oil sketch all ended up in the Arensberg collection, which was gifted to the Philadelphia Museum of Art in 1950.

ARTHUR JEROME EDDY: VANGUARD COLLECTOR

A colorful Chicago attorney, Eddy was known around his hometown for being the first to ride a bicycle and the first to own an automobile. He was also known as "the man that Whistler painted," having been an early admirer and the author of a critical essay on the artist. Eddy was a passionate collector of American and European modernism. When reports reached Chicago of the Armory Show's sensational offerings and the sales that were starting to emerge, he traveled to New York, not willing to wait a month for its arrival in Chicago, although he had been instrumental in bringing the show there. In all, he purchased 18 paintings and 7 lithographs for a total of $4,888.50, making him the second-largest buyer of works from the show after fellow attorney John Quinn. Eddy famously diagrammed Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase* to demonstrate the progression of the figure through the picture, and he wrote *Cubists and Post-Impressionism* (1914), which was among the first serious analyses of the new art to appear in America. Much of the collection was dispersed by his widow after his death in 1920, but 11 years later she and her son gave the Art Institute of Chicago 23 works that they had retained to establish the Arthur Jerome Eddy Memorial Collection.

right: James
histler,
nent in Flesh
Brown:
f Arthur
ddy, 1894.

HENRI MATISSE

***BLUE NUDE (SOUVENIR DE BISKRA)*, 1907**
BALTIMORE MUSEUM OF ART

Matisse was one of the better-represented artists in the exhibition, with 11 paintings and 3 drawings. Although most were from the collection of the artist, *Blue Nude (Souvenir de Biskra)* was lent to the Armory Show by expatriate American collectors Gertrude and Leo Stein, who had purchased it at the Salon d'Automne in 1907. Matisse didn't suffer in the New York press as badly as other artists, but it was another matter entirely when the show traveled to the Art Institute of Chicago. A representative from the Chicago Law and Order League declared, "The idea that people can gaze at this sort of thing without hurting them is all bosh. The exhibition ought to be suppressed." The press decried the desecration of the museum and excoriated Matisse for his degenerate treatment of the human figure. Students at the Institute were particularly enraged. On the last day of the exhibition, they burned copies of three Matisse paintings in effigy, *Blue Nude* included, and then staged a mock trial of the artist, dubbing him "Henry Hair Mattress." He was charged with "artistic murder, pictorial arson, artistic rapine, total degeneracy of color, criminal misuse of line, general aesthetic aberration, and contumacious abuse of title." Unsurprisingly, he was found guilty and sentenced to death, but as reported in the *Chicago Tribune*, "the shivering futurist, overcome by his own conscience, fell dead." The students planned to burn Matisse in effigy as well, but the police intervened at that point. The painting later sold to John Quinn and eventually ended up in the collection of Etta and Claribel Cone, the Baltimore sisters who amassed a trove of some 3,000 modernist paintings, sculptures, drawings, prints, and books (including 500 works by Matisse), which were gifted to the Baltimore Museum of Art in 1949. *Blue Nude* would return to the Art Institute of Chicago in 2010 as a centerpiece of the exhibition "Matisse: Radical Invention 1913–1917," which helped the museum raise $500,000 at its benefit opening.

WASSILY KANDINSKY

***THE GARDEN OF LOVE (IMPROVISATION NO. 27)*, 1912**
METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

Although Kandinsky was the most prominent member of the German Expressionist group *Der blaue Reiter* ("the Blue Rider"), a confederation of independent artists whose use of abstract form and free color privileged the subjective and the spiritual, he was represented by only one work in the Armory Show. (Considered by the exhibition's organizers to be overly dependent on French developments, advanced German art was less well represented than that of other countries.) Kandinsky's painting had been shown at Herwarth Walden's Der Sturm gallery in Berlin the year before in a landmark Blue Rider exhibition, and it was lent to the Armory Show by Hans Goltz, another important German dealer and publisher who supported the group. Excerpts from Kandinsky's influential essay "Concerning the Spiritual in Art" (1911) had been published in translation by Alfred Stieglitz in his magazine *Camera Work* in 1912, so the painter was not entirely unknown in the U.S. Nevertheless, the painting failed to have a broad impact. Stieglitz, who championed the work of the European avant-garde in his gallery 291, purchased the Kandinsky for $731.25. He wrote to the artist that he "was so insenced [sic] at the stupidity of the people who visited the Exhibition, and also more than insen [sic] at the stupidity of most of those in charge of the Exhibition, in not realizing the importance of your picture that I decided to buy it." The painting was donated in 1949 to the Metropolitan Museum by Stieglitz's estate (he died in 1946), along with more than 400 paintings, sculptures, drawings, and prints that became the cornerstone of the museum's holdings of early 20th-century art.

JOHN QUINN: PATRON AND PUBLIC ADVOCATE

Quinn was a world-traveling New York attorney who, between 1902 and 1924, amassed more than 2,500 paintings, drawings, and sculptures by 20th-century modern European masters such as Brancusi, Georges Braque, Raymond Duchamp-Villon, Matisse, Picasso, and Redon, as well as works by leading American artists of his generation. More than a patron of the Armory Show, Quinn was its legal adviser and vociferous public advocate, delivering the welcoming address at the exhibition's opening and successfully lobbying Congress to lift the duty on works by living artists, which significantly reduced the organizational costs of the show. He purchased numerous works from the exhibition throughout its national tour, spending a reported $5,808.75 on pieces by André Derain, Duchamp-Villon, Jules Pascin, Redon, Paul Signac, Jacques Villon, and others. In short, he was the patron of the show. He was also its largest source of loans, with 79 works from his collection woven into the fabric of the exhibition. Quinn was an enthusiastic collector of books and manuscripts as well, assembling holdings of nearly 13,000 items. A confirmed bachelor, Quinn died in 1924 at the age of 54. His collection was auctioned off, with many works finding their way into important public collections in the U.S.

John Quinn (in circle) among Armory Show artists and members of the press at the dinner given by the Association of American Painters and Sculptors, March 8, 1913.

FRANCIS PICABIA

***DANCES AT THE SPRING*, 1912**
PHILADELPHIA MUSEUM OF ART

Picabia was perhaps the most obscure of the Cubist artists showing in Gallery I, the so-called Chamber of Horrors, but it has been suggested that the large scale and bright colors of his paintings led to the assumption that he was of great importance, and as a consequence, he was singled out for attention in the press. *Dances at the Spring* became one of the sensations of the show, epitomizing Cubism for better or for worse. It helped that Picabia was the only European participant present in America at the time of the Armory Show (he and his wife arrived in New York three days after it opened) and was available for interviews. While he spoke intelligently about modernist aesthetics, to an uninitiated public he might as well have been speaking in tongues, and his comments were greeted with ridicule. *Dances at the Spring* was largely undecipherable to critics and viewers alike, who struggled to locate figures in the work. The Chicago collector Arthur Jerome Eddy purchased it—the only one of Picabia's four works in the show to sell—for $675. Louise and Walter Arensberg acquired the painting with several other works from Eddy's collection following his death in 1920 and included it in their 1950 gift to the Philadelphia Museum. Another version of *Dances at the Spring* is in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art in New York. ⊞

Essential Sources: Milton W. Brown, *The Story of the Armory Show* (1963); Laurette E. McCarthy, *Walter Pach (1883–1958): The Armory Show and the Untold Story of Modern Art in America* (2012); Archives of American Art: Walt Kuhn, Kuhn family papers, and Armory Show records, 1859–1978 (bulk 1900–49).

Coming Up: "The Armory Show at 100," an exhibition at the New-York Historical Society, October 11, 2013–February 23, 2014, reuniting some 90 artworks from the landmark event.