

John Marin

(1870–1953) by Erik R. Brockett

The importance of John Marin's contribution to American modernism gained increased validation with the saleroom figure of \$1,248,000 paid for his *Sailboat, Brooklyn Bridge, New York Skyline* in December 2005. Fueled by the use of abstract lines emphasizing structure and motion, the painting epitomizes the distinctive renditions of urban and shoreline subjects that brought the artist financial success during his lifetime.

Born in Rutherford, New Jersey, and reared by his grandparents and aunts in Weehawken, New Jersey, Marin's artistic inclinations were manifest by age eight in the form of outdoor pencil sketches. Ten years later he was producing his first watercolors, his eventual mastery of which is challenged by few American artists. Forsaking a career in architecture in which he had gained experience as a draftsman, Marin entered the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in 1899, where he studied with Thomas Anshutz (1851–1912). After briefly attending the Art Students League in New York, Marin traveled abroad in 1905. For nearly five years he worked in Paris during the winter and traveled through Europe in the summer, producing a good number of etchings.

By 1907 Marin was also producing an increasing number of watercolors and oil paintings for his own enjoyment rather than for commercial purposes. Through his friend Arthur B. Carles (1882–1952) Marin joined the New Society of American Artists in Paris, a circle of progressive Americans working in that city, of which Edward Steichen (1879–1973) was a fellow member. Through Steichen, Marin was brought to the attention of Alfred Stieglitz (1864–1946), the prominent photographer and gallery owner, who became a staunch advocate, supporting and encouraging Marin for the remainder of his career. Marin's work was shown at Stieglitz's Gallery 291 in New York City in 1909, a regular Marin venue from then on. By guaranteeing Marin a living income, Stieglitz freed Marin to develop his artistic style. This investment proved mutually beneficial by the mid-1920s, when Marin's work often sold for a thousand dollars a watercolor; in 1927 he sold *Back of Blue Mountain* to collector Duncan Phillips for a reported \$6,000.

Moving away from the influence of Whistler and the fauve painters, which had held him in good stead with critics, Marin's work became increasingly abstract, and following his return to the United States in 1911, his New York subjects displayed an energy and tension reflecting the extent to which he embraced modernism (Fig. 1). While these urban



Fig. 1: John Marin (1870–1953), *Movement, Nassau Street*, 1936. Watercolor and ink on paper, 26 x 21 inches. Courtesy of Meredith Ward Fine Art, New York.



Fig. 2: John Marin (1870–1953), *Small Point, Maine*. Watercolor and pencil on paper, 18 3/4 x 16 1/2 inches. Courtesy of Deborah Force Fine Art, New York.

TOP:

Fig. 3: John Marin (1870– 1953), *Deer Isle, Maine, No. 1*, 1919. Watercolor on paper, 16½ x 19½ inches. Courtesy of Meredith Ward Fine Art, New York.

MIDDLE:

Fig. 4: John Marin (1870– 1953), *Seascape Fantasy, Maine*, circa 1944. Oil on canvas, 25 x 30 inches. Courtesy of Hollis Taggart Galleries, New York.

BOTTOM:

Fig. 5: John Marin (1870– 1953), *St. John, New Brunswick*, 1951. Watercolor on paper, 15½ x 21 inches. Courtesy of Brock & Co., Carlisle, MA.

views are among the most readily identifiable of his oeuvre, Marin produced them relatively infrequently. Consequently, as Meredith Ward of Meredith Ward Fine Art, New York, explains, “The New York subjects in general command a higher price because they are rarer....”

After exhibiting at the Armory Show of 1913, Marin spent most of his summers in Maine along the New England shore, where he painted distillations of coastal themes and simultaneously experimented with completely abstract compositions based on geometric motifs (Figs. 2 and 3). By 1920 Marin’s paintings bear witness to his interest in integrating vividly observed landscapes and seascapes with impulsive patternmaking and abstract lines,

John Marin	
Record Prices for Work at Auction	
Present	\$1,248,000
2000	\$610,750
1995	\$198,000
1990	\$165,000
1980	\$35,150

characteristics of his mature style that would last over twenty years (Fig. 4). His late style included paintings that in some instances were reduced to calligraphic elements paralleling abstract expressionism.

In 1936, when Marin was in his mid 60s, he was honored by a major retrospective exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art whereby Marsden Hartley wrote in the catalog, “You will never see water colors like those of John Marin again so take a good look and remember.” In May 1951, *ARTnews* referred to Marin as the “greatest living American painter.” Marin remained active (Fig. 5), painting until his death in 1953 at age 83. Marin was a pioneer in American art and was one of America’s greatest modernists—it is no surprise that Marin’s prices are on the rise. @

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