

V A N I T Y

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The Water-Colours of John Marin

*A Note on the Work of the First
American Painter of the Day*



Color Added by O.M.A.

"Lower Manhattan" a water colour from the recent
Marin show at the Montross Gallery,
Fifth Avenue, New York.

JOHN MARIN is fast in the American life of the hour as a fibrous, tough little apple-tree is lodged and rooted in the ground. It is infinitely well with him here in the western light and clay. His branches grow fruits; like a hardy *pyrus malus* he is restlessly, unconsciously busied in transforming the materials amid which he is set, dayshine and moisture and minerals, pigment and water and white sheets of whatman paper, into the fresh firm, savourous pulp of his art. Each year, he gives himself anew in showering windfalls, producing and strewing on the ground about him his explosions of tart water-colour, slithering suns and racing seas of Maine; his wet, fishy poems of headlands and pine-pinnacles and rain-gusts in which the rocky strength and almost Chinese delicacy of a sensitive and a robust nature seem to have been completely, miraculously, released. And the fruition in diaphanous washes, in pounding blues and gritty browns is with him as simple, as uncalculated and as unconscious a process as is that of respiration. Works come unto him as buds to the stalk, as breasts to the young girl. To this man, as to the stilly labouring appletree, nature has imparted the principle that makes production of astrakhians or bellflowers or spies to the latter, of images built in aquarelle upon white plinths to the former, the sole manner of existence possible to them. Neither debates nor questions the ultimate importance of pomes or pictures. For both, the way of achieving satisfactions meet their individualities is widely open. And while there is a sun in heaven for either, and a little potash and phosphoric acid in the soil, they of instinct, follow it, and give profusely of themselves in flower and seed, and scented acid-clean flesh.

About John Marin, there move sad, disgruntled beings, full of talk and lamentations. These are of the sort that write in a book called *American Civilization*. They bewail the fact that in America, soil is poor and uncondusive to growth, and men remain unmoved by growing green. But Marin persists, and with what ebullience and good humour, in the rocky ungentle loam! He gives himself, whether men want his plastic colour or not. Men have not yet commenced to want this granitic wash, and still he spreads his sensitive tips to the day-pour, and litters with his warm and sonorous oblongs the ground about his roots. He requires so little pruning to preserve him: some bread, some paper and tints; all the rest necessary to him comes to him with the sun. It is spread with overflowing liberality upon the shore and ocean, here, where American Civilizers find so little able to procure them satisfactions. Everything can procure him his sudden electric flashing visions, his towering toppling moments of insight: a street corner in downtown Manhattan, a sachem pine on the Maine coastland, a summer-green hillock in Delaware county, sand and fog and breakers of Stonington, a thousand unnotable niches.

An outward push is always pressing from his bosom upon the overwhelming metal tons of the world. The menacing piles are thrust backward, balanced by the force from within,

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Resurexit follows hard upon *Crucifixus*. The brutal chaos of the universe is always being compelled to confess in some fashion the inviolacy and supremacy of spirit. A skyscraper has but to jab its giant thumb into the falling sky, or rapids of traffic to shoot past wedging jagged masonries; a squall has but to comb the waters of Casco Bay as clawing fingers comb tumbling tresses, sunset splinters to pour javelin-like over the spruce-tops, fall blue to crowd over hilltops, a shower to lift its veiling and reveal bush-green new-laved, and the rapid vision can rear itself, and the essence of a state be caught in terms of running, exquisitely balanced watercolour. In that instantaneous process, the objects present to the painter's eye, Woolworth Tower and smacks nosing their way through archipelagos and tides sweeping about fuzzy islets are suddenly become singing, scherzando wash, rivulets and pools of aquatint, blank hard white meeting carpety gold-green and crushed tender rose, red celluloid lightening, nuggets and nucleae of somber and mystical colour-ore. What was the tangled shapeless world had suddenly become crystalline balanced form limited by the four outlines of a sheet of paper; become springs of pungent rich colour, become gushes of soft, lustrous, palpable colour into which what appears all of the ache and passion, the tenderness and yearfulness and brimming joy of a generous heart, has been squeezed as from a sponge.

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AND the stubborn noisy stuff of the present world, the material deemed too harsh and resistant to suffer manipulation, returns in these works to the turbulent place of its origin, and stands significant and arrested upon the walls. It is



water-colour of lower New York City

the very electricity of the present hour which is recollected by the painter in the tranquillity of his salt Maine and is fixed in his nervous opposition of forms. At the core of the marvelously stained sheets their resides. of course, like a sweet kernel in a nut, like a whiff of the main in a breeze, the element of personality independent of all external influence. It is the element which was resident in the man from the instant of his conception, and which might, we suppose, have realized itself in every age and in every land in a faintly similar fashion. It seems to us, this center of an art, a strange, fantastic blend of Puck and quiet fulfilled man and mystical visionary. There is a Marin who dances within with elfish playfulness, scrubs his wash upon the paper in a half jesting fashion; a sort of boy igniting water-colour squibs; a timothy grass among the other herbs; a leprechan who might have larked in the train of Titania and Bottom. There is a Marin with a great peaceful space in him,



John Marin
(Stieglitz, 1922)

a great outstretched space that is full of the nourished tranquillity of farmland, a serene inviolate open where a single hoary tree stands erect, chieftain above his farflung demesne, and the ocean lies blue and infinite. There is a Marin who feels life much as the old Ionian seers felt it, perceives a cosmos composed alone of fire and sand and water, fire drawing water

into floating mist, water returning to earth again in a warm rain, endless mystic glittering cycle of life and death.

But, fused with this inscrutable central element, there is present in every one of his spurts the influence of the day and the spot which have seen and

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see him live. The violent cross-rhythms register as directly as does very little pictorial art the excitement of the world at this moment. In Marin, we have the frantically accelerated modern age, life flying onward through space with such rapidity we can scarcely glimpse it as it thunders by; climax of life succeeding climax with indecent unceremoniousness; generations being littered every four or five years; radicals of yesterday becoming overnight the liberals of today and the Tories of tomorrow; an era of sudden developments. Scarcely any other plastic rhythms outside musical art express as do these, lightning momentum. Here, particularly in Marin's "New York" all is sudden upheaval, spasmodic earthquake from the abyss of society, a thousand maddeningly conflicting tugs, London Bridge falling down, Wall Street a clattering shamble. For, in this age, men are commencing to find themselves forced to make mental calculations with the rapidity of electric current if they will remain functioning; we seem called upon to show a power of abrupt readjustment like that once shown by primitive animal life in the days when climate made immense sudden springs; and Marin appears to be one of the individuals who possess elasticity sufficient to acquire, quite undeliberately, the new technique. He understands with a sudden intuitive leap, reaches his goal he knows not how, and yet with all the elimination of slow human processes, in complete certainty. He doesn't walk; he flies rather. He has the unsentimental modern mind that faces life directly, passionately and yet coldly, of course. He turns, in his work, to the crisp perfect short story, because the medium is more characteristic to the day in its astringency, than is the more elaborate novel and oil painting. If any painting expresses our time, and makes us know indeed what we are all of us experiencing, it is, most certainly, this water-colourist's.

The Yankeeism of Marin

BESIDES, the work is local. None but one American-born could have rubbed this pigment and made it into the peculiarly tempered colour it is. The nervousness of Marin's pictures is deeply American, deeply Yankee. It is inherently the nervousness of a people submitted to violent and sudden thermal changes, wintry January mixed with soft languorous spring twilights, sudden summer heats in March, perpetual wrestling matches between arctic and tropic oceanic streams. Moreover, his wash is curiously different in tactile quality from that of Europeans, particularly from that of the recent French magisters of art. It strikes a western keynote. There is something Walt Whitmanish, a little crude and rough in its essence. Marin has little of the heavy slow voluptuous. There is richness of touch; sensuality, even, crushed out like fruit juice, in him. But it is a richness economically emitted, athletically held in rein; a sensuality not repressed and sour, but chaste and not easy. Besides the modern man, there is a good deal of the Huguenot and the Puritan in the scantness, the terseness and laconic brevity, of the man's sentence-like forms. Marin, who can be so goosily playful, can also be severe; there is a fourmaster of his that issues from the ship yards of Massachusetts Bay Colony. Life has made the Puritan in him affirmative, loving; but it has left him still the lean, the silent, the wren-eyed Yank.

If so much of life passes through Marin clarified, it does for the reason that he possesses the principle of fecundity in the shape in which it occurs in humankind: the shape of perfect truthfulness to self. The man is of one piece. No schism between feeling and thought inhibits him. Feeling and thought are united in him, one, inseparable; he goes with absolute directness to his own life. The direction of his strong fecundity is visible, primarily, in the unerringness of his choice of media. Since his eye is the port through which the world, chiefly, enters into him, wash is the medium ordained to render appropriately the movements of his electric, springing mind. For water-colour is an epigrammatic medium; it makes very laconic statements of great and complex truths without, necessarily, in any fashion minimizing the importance of the statements or the complexity

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"Beyond the Three-Mile Limit."

of the truths. It has the perfectionability of the sentence. If it forces a definite simplification, a suppression of detail, it can nevertheless adumbrate in its simple forms all that oil can blazon forth. Wash is a chink through which one glimpses mountainy vistas, and the pleasure it gives is distinctly a pleasure of economy, the pleasure of nature cheated and small space made to contain uncrowded, a multiplicity of things. So positive is Marin's orientation, that even when he turns to oil, as he has recently commenced doing, he merely paints water-colours with somewhat more of body, thanks to the weightiness of oil itself, than water permits him to achieve.

His Concentrated World

THE deep fecundity, again, is to be seen in operation in the concentratedness of the worker. The unconscious mind has selected for Marin his medium; and Marin pursues the road, quite undiverted by everything in the world that would lure him from his expression. He has selected, and he abides in his espoused field. He has had the courage to be poor and solitary, even, for the sake of this his soul's business; to renounce much for the sake of achieving in one direction intensity of depth. He has found in himself the patience to set his soul still in one or two spots, and permit saturation to take place. Marin has not travelled far from New York since 1908, the year of his Dolomite trip; Grantwood and Stonington appear to have become his two poles in space. It even seems as if, fundamentally, he had concentrated on a comparatively few motifs; the New York of the paintings of 1921 was anticipated a dozen years ago by studies of the promontories and chasms of lower Manhattan, and by the very much skeletonized etchings of 1913; and if each one of Marin's water-colours seems the fresh attempt at the solution of a problem, the problems have a certain patent homogeneity. At the heart of all this concentration, one spies a quite unostentatious, good-humoured, and patient willingness to accent the black of life with the white, a love of the world that makes even the pain bearable when it comes. It is this trait that differentiates, one would say, Marin from Ryder and Davies and Hartley. Ryder's barks, for example, are a-fly from any human responsibility. They are evaded from the port, escaped into the solitary spaces where they are alone, a husk about an inviolate kernel, free to pursue their course through the cold shoreless sterile seas under the night disk where no human being comes. Marin, too, knows the hoarse insistent summons of the Atlantic. With what ache and yearning and lowness of heart he paints for us the sloop lifting her moth wings for the voyage out beyond the islands into the gray unknown, and trailing eternal farewells through the channel water! All the wistfulness for the other, the reverse of the known, the transported state, is in this supremely tender, perfect wash. But the shore is about the vessel; and we remain on the shore; and let the mystical body take its voyage unboarded through the space which we may never know. And the shore seems to reward its constant husband. For, see, it, too, shimmers in delicate-limpid greens.

It is the spontaneity, the relaxedness of his painting that bears the strong-

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est evidence of Marin's fecundity. Nothing stands between him and his paper. He applies his wash with the directness of impulse that is supposed to be discoverable only in the work of small children. One racks one's brain for memory of a water-colour painter who reveals in every stroke of his brush a more uninhibited urge outward. The Chinese only, seem to have been as freely, as singingly spontaneous in this particular medium. Conception and execution are in Marin so closely allied that they appear almost identical; here, if ever, a hand and a brain are paired. The man trusts completely his eye. He is not concerned with what other people see, or think they see. He knows what records itself on the retina of his sharp eyes, and he never doubts his senses. Nor when he gazes about him does he perceive Cézannes in rocks and trees; he sees Marin, sees what the life in him forces him to observe, and not anything other. Now, when he stands still, his healthy eye like every other healthy eye is continually moving; when he walks, it is moving; and Marin has recorded what very few artists have perceived, and what makes him a very important discoverer in the field of realism: the very rapid movement of objects against each other in our vision, the balanced resistant rhythms in what we see. No one before him has seen so clearly that, as we follow the trunk of a tree upward in rapid glance, the landscape behind the trunk appears to throw itself violently to one side, thus balancing the vertical movement. No one has perceived that as we walk, the middle distance moves in a direction opposed to that taken by the objects in the foreground, while the background assumes a march of its own, opposing the middle distance by taking the same route as the foreground, though at a slower pace. We are continually casting objects behind and before us as we progress. But Marin has reported this opposition of movements in nature. He analyzes his own vision correctly; knows what objects in the scene before him plot his dynamic vision; and rigorously eliminates all others.

He knows precisely when he has dabbed upon the paper the scratches and spots and swirling lines which record his impressions of three dimensional movement, of objects deformed by the swiftly traveling eye, give the values correctly; and is content to let the paper with its neatly marked planes and opposing forms and colours appear sketchy to the academic eye. For he himself houses within him no academies. Sometimes, one perceives scarcely any representativity in Marins glimpsed a first time. But then, as one goes through the streets and over the country paths, lo, the whole world is Mariniert.

The development of John Marin has been a fairly rapid process. In the exhibition of over a hundred of his works recently held at the Montross Gallery, there was included a water-colour which, though very sensitive is scarcely emerged in feeling from the Whistlerian tradition; and the sheet was painted as recently as 1908. Like so many American masters before him, Marin found himself comparatively late in life; he was well on in the thirties when he quit the architect's office for the life of art. But once orientated, he has shown himself a flame in a pile of brush. For the first few years, his expressions were, in comparison with the turgid, heavily rhythmical, profoundly rich pieces of the recent years, lyrical and soft in character. As in the early Stieglitz photograph, one perceived a wren-eyed being peeking through a silver mist. The mood registered was often one in which a wound was felt closing: there had been a deep hurt, one felt, but it was no longer serious; the world, so warm with rain, so tender with opalescent mist and watery sunshine, was there to show that it was long ago, and forgiven, and of no serious wrong. And then, the head was lifted, and very gently, very whimsically, must have come over the painter that it was, after all, a crystal, dancing world; not boisterously, not noisily, with a sort of little inner leap, and an amused smile upon the mouth.

But, commencing about 1915, the Marins began to come more boisterously, more craggy and dionysiac; stronger in colour and in tension. There can be

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no doubt that the experience of 291 Fifth Avenue, particularly the experience of the back room, where the painters sat about the iron stove and warmed their feet and thrashed violently through aesthetics, helped considerably in this development. Marin, who did not so passionately care for thought, was forced to reason; the problems of his art began seriously to engross him. The images commenced to be built upon the white paper as on a plinth. The whole mood changed to more powerful, full-throated yea-saying. What Mr. McBride has termed the Beethoven of watercolour began to have being. It is, then, in the space of scarcely thirteen years that the very sensitive but very Whistlerian Marin of the early etchings and the spring showers at Meaux, has become the craggy artist commensurate with the vast life aflow and unrecorded around him. Thirteen years have seen the growth of a delicate watercolourist into one of the few important artists America has produced. For this reason, one finds oneself looking forward to the next thirteen years of the man's life with a wilder surmise than that called out of us by the work of scarcely another artist living in any portion of the world.



Woolworth Building, 1912

(Image Added)