

MARSH'S WOMEN



*Against the
backdrop of a metropolis,
a painter finds exultation in the
vigorous beauty of the
common girl*

By Gordon Ewing

REGINALD MARSH feels that the world is bent on abolishing his best subjects. Broadway burlesque queens that he had painted in the '20s have been forced by municipal fastidiousness to give way. The theaters in which they practiced strip-tease are now used to show films "for adults only." Most of the New York waterfront, which Marsh has called "one of the most absorbing spectacles in the world," is now barred to visitors, is made perilous by express highways, or has been improved into dullness. All but one of the city's elevated transit lines are gone. The railroads, with diesel engines and streamlining, are becoming too dainty for Marsh's robust art. Even the circus has recently paid more homage to ballet than to Barnum.

The casualty list also includes such items as taxi dance halls, the more picturesque of street vendors' wagons, and barber poles. Marsh's muscular shoulders droop in resignation as he names the casualties. Then, picking up the binoculars which he keeps on a window sill, he looks out of his studio nine floors above New York's Union Square. Life in the Square furnishes a scene that never fails to restore him.



Girl Running on Beach (1938)

Marsh is also happy to observe that nothing has made any alteration in the design of the girls of 14th Street. Marsh's intense, detailed interest in this design is registered in scores of paintings and hundreds of drawings. The girls apparently are numberless. Marsh is not yet 50. So this remarkable output may be only a beginning.

In the winter Marsh paints the girls as they window shop below his studio or as they emerge from S. Klein's and Ohrbach's low-price clothing establishments on Union Square, or as they wait for a date in front of the movie houses. In the summer he follows them to Coney Island and paints them in the amusement park or on the beach, sun-bathing, playing games, eating sandwiches, or being ogled by males who have much less flesh than the girls and hardly any of their exuberance.

Marsh considers the girls of 14th Street one of the real triumphs of the American experiment. There is a kind of magnificence about them. They walk easily, and there is independence in their gestures.

Marsh's well-documented love affair with 14th Street, New York City, and these girls began when he was a small boy. Born in Paris of American parents, he was brought to New Jersey at the age of two. As soon as he was old enough to explore his surroundings he discovered what he still considers the finest feature of New York's suburbs—the glorious views of the towers of Manhattan. Suburbs, he says, are places where "nothing goes on."

Marsh began his career as a cartoonist on the *New York Daily News*, for which he made some 4000 drawings in three years.



"THREE GIRLS" is Marsh "classicism" at its most obvious. Using transparent varnishes and pigments, cooked in his own studio, he borrowed the background shadows and sweeping lines from Hogarth.

Then he turned to what the critics call serious art. After a short period of study with John Sloan and a longer one with Kenneth Hayes Miller, he began work on his own. In the early 1920s he did pictorial theater curtains and stage designs. He also turned out cartoons and illustrations for *Vanity Fair*, the *New Yorker*, and other magazines. And all the while he was developing his technical knowledge, working in water color, tempera, oil, lithography, engraving, and Chinese ink. By the time he was 30, critics were praising his draftsmanship and the freshness of his subjects, as they still are. They were also calling his colors "murky" and his canvases "too crowded," comments which they have since dropped.

Marsh was too busy to read these remarks. He had discovered the old masters and was spending all the time he could afford in absorbing their techniques. "I was interested in anatomy," he says, "so I had to turn to those who knew most about it." He studied, and still studies, da Vinci for heads, Michelangelo and Dürer for torsos, and Rubens—Rubens for everything.

Europe's newer masters, however, have had little influence on Marsh. The contemporary Europeans, in his view, play too many games on canvas; some are unable, some unwilling, to draw well.

For Marsh, drawing is an artist's first duty and final pleasure. Although he has long since modified his early notion that oil painting is "a laborious way to make a bad drawing," the remark expresses his permanent impatience with whatever intervenes between the spectator and the drawing. He likes the immediacy of figures sketched in Chinese ink. He developed a method of painting in transparent glazes



IF YOU CAN read a painting, you can note half a dozen things in "Greenwich Village Bar." The medium is egg tempera, also used by Rembrandt. It never fades or cracks. The Marsh feeling for anatomy is here, even under clothes.

which gets away from the usual opaque deadness of oils.

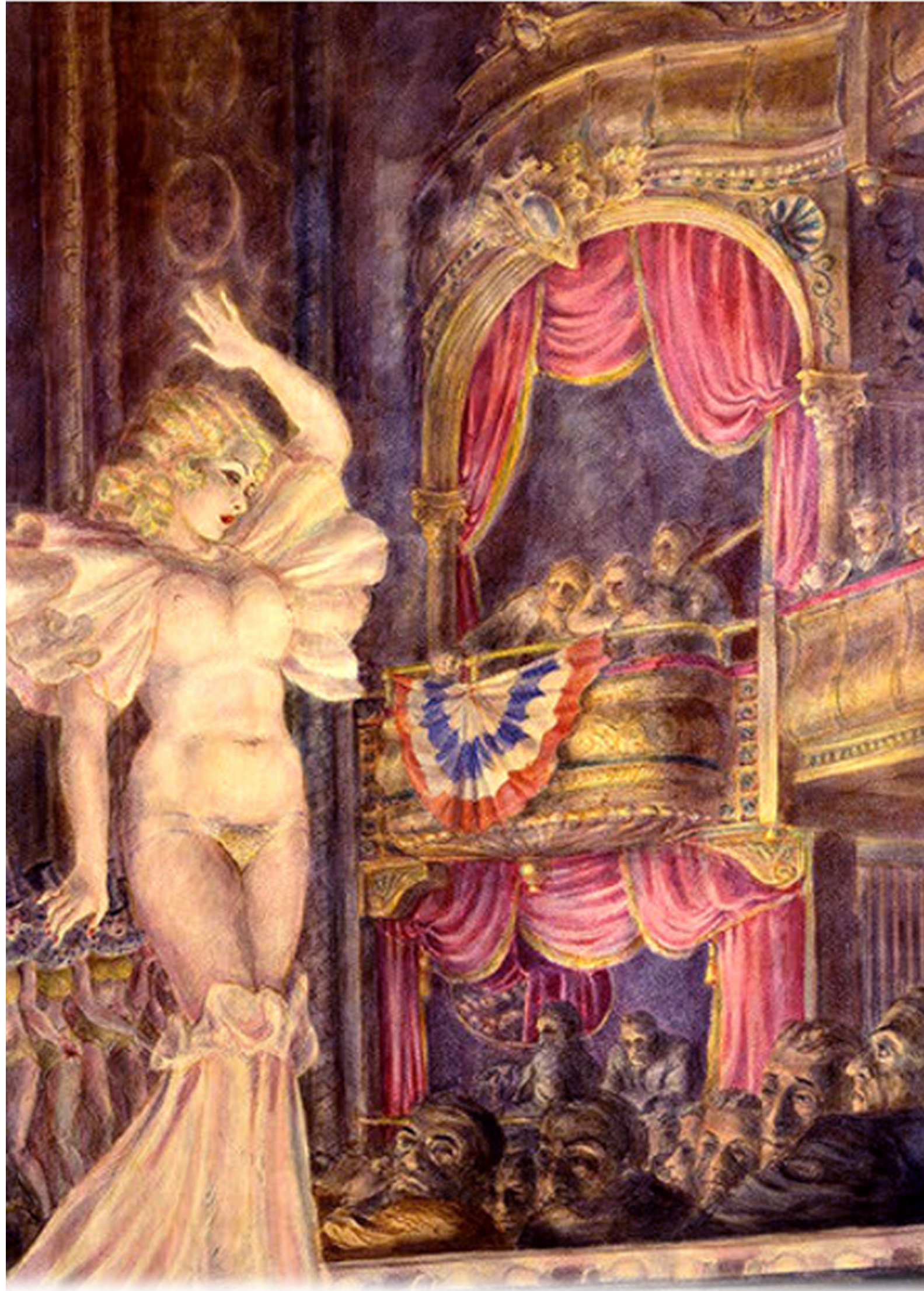
Marsh cooks his own oils and varnishes in his studio, where he maintains a work week that has nothing to do with the legendary schedules of Bohemia and everything to do with craftsmanship. His three tiny rooms are packed with evidence that the occupant is a workman who likes to practice his trade.

Marsh's love of his calling is revealed, too, in the history of his murals in the New York Custom House. When the Treasury Department selected his designs for the murals in 1936, Marsh, who was "keen as hell to do the job," took a nonrelief post as an assistant clerk in the department's supply branch. By 1938 the Treasury Department had acquired 2600 square feet of notable art and Marsh had earned about \$3,000, half of which went for materials.

It is from his incessant activity with pen and brush that Marsh has gained his speed in execution, his bold, confident line. He does not believe in "nagging" at a picture. When he was commissioned recently to illustrate a new edition of John Dos Passos' *U.S.A.*, he completed more than 500 drawings in one month. His formula is classical and deceptively simple: When you have mastered the fundamentals, you find subjects in your own environment and you paint them with imagination. He adds that many artists fail to develop fully because they try to paint too many unrelated things, "like the newspaper columnists who feel they have to write on everything."

REGINALD MARSH

Richer development, he believes, comes through working out "the almost endless aspects of a few subjects."



Star Burlesque (1933)

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