

# **John Marin : an American modernist in Abby Aldrich Rockefeller's collection**

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**Marin, John, 1870-1953**

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# JOHN MARIN

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AN AMERICAN MODERNIST IN ABBY ALDRICH ROCKEFELLER'S COLLECTION

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WOOLWORTH BUILDING NO. 2 and BROOKLYN BRIDGE from SIX NEW YORK ETCHINGS. 1913. Etchings, 12 <sup>13</sup>/<sub>16</sub> x 10 <sup>7</sup>/<sub>16</sub>" (32.5 x 26.5 cm) and 11 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 8 <sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub>" (28.6 x 22.5 cm). Publisher: Alfred Stieglitz at 291, New York. Printer: the artist. Edition: each approximately 20

DOWNTOWN, THE EL. 1921. Etching, 6 <sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 8 <sup>13</sup>/<sub>16</sub>" (17.5 x 22.4 cm). Publisher: Alfred Stieglitz, New York. Printer: the artist. Edition: approximately 30

Gifts of Abby Aldrich Rockefeller, 1940

As one of the founders of The Museum of Modern Art and as a private collector, Abby Aldrich Rockefeller was a vital force in promoting modern art during the first half of this century. She was committed to living American artists like John Marin. Marin's pioneering experiments with expressionism and abstraction had made him a fundamental voice of the burgeoning avant-garde in this country. Since he was a prolific print-maker, his work appealed to Mrs. Rockefeller, who was an avid print collector and believed that prints were an indispensable tool for fostering a popular

appreciation for contemporary art.

In the mid-1920s, soon after she had begun collecting art by living artists, Mrs. Rockefeller bought her first Marin. By this time, New York's Downtown Gallery and Weyhe Gallery, where she bought the prints illustrated here, were regularly exhibiting his work. These galleries were among the most vocal in their support of living American artists; both published prints and offered works on paper at affordable prices. Mrs. Rockefeller became a regular customer, and Edith Halpert, director of the Downtown Gallery, became a close friend and advisor. Mrs. Rockefeller would acquire eleven Marin etchings, all of



BROOKLYN BRIDGE, 1913



WOOLWORTH BUILDING NO. 2, 1913

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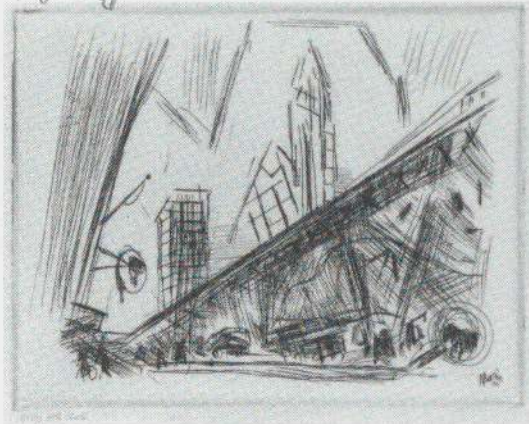
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which she gave to the Museum in 1940.

Initially trained as an architect, Marin learned to etch shortly after moving to Paris to study art in 1905. In Paris, he earned a living by selling traditionally styled etchings of European cityscapes. When Marin returned to New York in 1911 his work grew increasingly abstract. While he made fewer prints, he remained involved in etching, eventually completing nearly two hundred. Interestingly, Marin always maintained a strict pairing of subject with medium: landscapes done mostly in painting and cityscapes executed in etching.

The photographer Edward Steichen, after meeting Marin in Paris, brought his work to the attention of Alfred Stieglitz, a photographer and art dealer. From 1905 until his death in 1946, Stieglitz galvanized the American avant-garde by championing the work of contemporary artists. It was he who persuaded Marin to return to America and settle in New York. Stieglitz's New York gallery, 291, provided an intellectual forum for a tightly knit group of abstractionists that included Marin, Arthur Dove, Marsden Hartley, and Georgia O'Keeffe.

From 1911 to 1931, Marin's prints almost exclusively featured New York City scenes. He and Mrs. Rockefeller shared a deep affection for Gotham. She once wrote to



DOWNTOWN, THE EL, 1921

one of her sons, "If you should ask me what I thought was the most perfect place in the world to be in I should say New York without a doubt."

The Woolworth Building, the world's tallest building upon its completion in 1913, and the Brooklyn Bridge, the world's first steel suspension bridge, were international symbols of modernity. The bridge, in particular, served as a

muse to countless American artists and writers. The prints shown here demonstrate Marin's pursuit of a distinctly American cubist abstraction, one based on the power of New York architecture to express the rhythmic dynamism of modern life. Using etching's myriad linear effects he established both a monumentality of structure and a delicacy of details. These images by Marin, collected and enjoyed by Abby Aldrich Rockefeller in her home, reflect her engagement with the energy and beauty inherent in the art and life of the period and place in which she lived.

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