



DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

by Michael Maglaras

If I were to ask you, "What do you think of Modern Art?" or any of the variations of that question, and if you were to respond with something such as, "I don't like it," or "I like some of it," or one of the many variations on those answers, it's important to note that the idea underlying both the question being asked and the answer being offered is only about one hundred years old.

For the question itself and the reason for posing it have only recently come into our collective vocabulary and as a direct result of one event: an art exhibition held in New York City in 1913 that lasted only 27 days.

It was between February 17 and March 15, 1913 that a group of artists who styled themselves the "Association of American Painters and Sculptors" rented the 69th Regiment Armory in New York City, on speculation, to hold an art show that they were completely confident would change the world. Their confidence was well-placed. It would become the show of shows and the exhibition of exhibitions.

Everything you see today when you walk into a museum or gallery...how the work is hung on the walls; how you are directed from room to room to view what's there; the way in which your progress through each room is guided or, using the fancier term, "curated"; the brochures, and books, and continuing commentary available to you which expands on the work you are seeing and is meant to heighten your understanding or raise your sensibility about the work shown...all of it, is the direct and absolute result of the International Exhibition of Modern Art held in 1913: what we now simply call "the Armory Show."

Upwards of 1,000 or more works of art (we may never know exactly how many), including paintings, drawings, sculpture, painted porcelain, and works in other

materials, all by more than 300 artists. Some of these artists were already long dead in 1913 (their work chosen to ground the exhibition in a certain historical context). Just as importantly, the show featured work by living artists at the height of their creative powers as well as those just beginning to display what would be evident genius a decade or more later.

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only what was going on within our borders, but also outside our borders, in what Davies termed "an art way." The Armory Show became the quintessential

19th century. Prominent in the show was also the work of the masters of America's Golden Age, that period from the 1890s through the end of the First World War, when we asserted ourselves as a nation on the world stage with a combination of swagger and accomplishment, and our art showed it. The American work in the show proved to be, in some cases, the absolute equal of much of what was brought in from Europe. Women artists were represented by distinguished works and, in the case of the American women, by tantalizingly wonderful work which belied the fact that none of the American women exhibiting could yet vote in a national election.

The membership of the AAPS included remarkable men. Men like Arthur B. Davies, Walt Kuhn, and Walter Pach were artists first, but also men of affairs. They were proud embodiments of the idea of using art as a means to serve a democratic example. These organizers thought that we deserved to see not

American experiment. These men and their brethren at the AAPS put it all together without federal grants, without Facebook, Twitter, television, or computers. They went back and forth to Europe, picking and choosing art, and they did so by boat. They first reviewed and assembled key works from the European tradition and finally invited their American colleagues to join in the fun. No one was afraid of failure. No one was afraid of ridicule (and eventually there would be plenty of that). No one was afraid of quite literally anything.

The result was a glorious art exhibition and a chaos of styles, subject matter, quality, and, yes, of price...for almost everything in the show was for sale in one way or another.

Opening day, February 17, 1913, was a mob scene. On closing day, March 15, the mob was three times larger. The press went mad. For 27 days we became a nation absorbed by art, and never again in our history would we show ourselves to be that committed to a cultural debate of that magnitude. But then, the Armory Show was held during America's Golden Age. We were curious then. We believed in our individual right to hold an opinion, and we vigorously defended others holding theirs. We fundamentally believed in the educational promise of art, and we were committed to the use of art as a "humanizing and civilizing influence" as Kenneth Clark once wrote.

Within the 18 spaces on the floor of the Armory, you could see in one gallery a splendid work by Albert Pinkham Ryder, and then by walking just a few feet more in another direction encounter a Picasso, a Matisse, a Glackens, a Childe Hassam. No over-curated, monolithic, and soul-deadening curatorial attitude... just pictures hanging on a wall and sculpture occupying space on the floor in a hodgepodge of visual excitement and stimulation. You got to pick and choose what you liked. The organizers of the Armory Show respected the intelligence of their public. If you disagreed with them...they embraced your disagreement.

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You could find any prosaic sensibilities you might possess comforted by the work of painters such as J. Alden Weir, or you could have your world turned upside down by the incomparable John Marin. You could be offended by the work of Albert Gleizes or irritated by that of Brancusi. What you would not be, though, is bored. Visitors spent hours wandering through the 18 galleries, and as they finally left the Armory, blinking into the dim winter sunlight on Lexington Avenue, they may have felt joy, or outrage, or puzzlement, or infuriation. The point, however, was that they *felt*.

The Armory Show had its bad boy in Marcel Duchamp, and his work "Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2" was the painting that cinched his future and dragged us headfirst into the Modern Era. "Nude" is a remarkable work of provocation. There was plenty of better art in the show...but that was not the point. One hundred years ago "Nude" created a wonderful circus atmosphere, and the Modern Art movement today owes its P.T. Barnum reputation to that legacy.

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As a film maker I wanted to use about 200 works from the show. This would have resulted in a seven-hour film. I had to choose the works I wanted to use carefully. Of necessity, personal choices figure into this film, because it is an essay in film, and, like any film I've made, is a personal statement. I don't expect the work I've chosen to show you and to dwell upon with the camera (many times lovingly) to have the same effect necessarily on you that it has had on me... but I hope that it does, because the reason I made this film is to share with you the work I fell in love with.

All Americans live today and on a daily basis with some part of the legacy of the 1913 Armory Show. We see what we see, we interpret what we interpret, and

we hold a deeply embedded belief in the right to hold an opinion about art, all of which is a direct result of those 27 days.

When I ask you what you think of Modern Art, remember that your answer is really less important than the question. With art, as with life, it is always the question. The probing for an answer is many times more fun than getting the answer at all. For it is the probing into the *how* and *why* of perception and the understanding of what you take away from that probing that best represents the legacy of the Armory Show. At the end of it all, the Armory Show was and remains a beautifully democratic and American phenomenon.

As Gertrude Stein lay dying in the American hospital just outside Paris, she rose from her bed and asked Alice B. Toklas, "What's the answer?" Puzzled, Toklas replied that she didn't know. Stein then asked her, "Alright then, what's the question?" Before Toklas could answer further, Stein breathed her last. Leonard Bernstein was once asked about the American composer Charles Ives's beautiful elegy to the unknowable, "The Unanswered Question." His response was simply, "I do not know what the question is; I only know that the answer is 'yes'".

More questions than answers were raised by the art in the Armory Show...for the question "What do you think of Modern Art?" quickly permutes into the larger question "Do you think of art?"

The answer to the larger question should be evident in a culturally advanced democracy. This is the final and affirmative legacy of the Armory Show. The questions one hundred years later are still the same: *Do you look? Do you question? Do you think? Do you feel?* There must always be only one answer, and that is Bernstein's simple "yes."

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