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The 1913 Armory Show Changed America's Art



William Glackens (1870-1938). Family Group, 1910-1911 (Oil on canvas) National Gallery of Art, Washington, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Ira Glackens.

By Nicola Smith Valley News Staff Writer

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When Michael Maglaras is interviewed by phone about his most recent documentary, *A Great Confusion: The 1913 Armory Show*, he happens to be in his car in front of a Saks Fifth Avenue in Greenwich, Conn.

To illustrate how the Armory show, which introduced some of the greatest modern European painters to American audiences, has permeated our culture, Maglaras, who makes films about art, doesn't have to look far.

In fact, he has only to look over at a Saks display window, where, as expected, there's a mannequin in a dress. But it's the printed design of the dress that's caught Maglaras' attention. It's Cubist, he said. An abstract, geometric pattern of triangles and shapes that, whether the designer intended it, reflects the Armory Show's long reach.

"I'm sitting in front of the legacy of the Armory Show," Maglaras said.

A Great Confusion will be screened this evening at 6:30 at the Hood Museum of Art. The documentary's executive producer Terri Templeton will introduce the film and answer questions afterward. Together the pair, under the name 217 Films, have made documentaries about the American painters John Marin and Marsden Hartley, and the illustrator Lynd Ward.

Through a swift montage of photographs, newsreel footage and movie images, with narration by Maglaras, the documentary describes how the Armory Show, which opened in New York in February 1913, swept up its audiences in the breaking wave of avant-garde European and American art.

The works of such titans of European art as Cezanne, Gauguin, Picasso, Matisse, Duchamp, Kandinsky and the sculptor Brancusi were exhibited, as well as works by American painters John Sloan, John Marin, Kathleen McHenry, George Luks and William Glackens.

Officially called the International Exhibition of Modern Art, the show eventually became known simply as the Armory Show, because it was displayed in the Armory on Lexington Avenue and 25th Street that housed the “Fighting Irish” 69th U.S. infantry regiment. It ran from Feb. 17 to March 15 before moving, in truncated form, to Chicago and then Boston.

Long regarded as probably the single most significant exhibition of art in 20th century America, the Armory Show, which included a staggering 1,200 works, ushered in an ebullient, raucous and primarily urban modernism in American art.

Among all the remarkable facts about the show, Maglaras finds it extraordinary that the artists Arthur B. Davies, Walt Kuhn and Walter Pach, who organized the exhibition, visited the artists in Europe, chose the works, arranged the shipping, courted publicity and hung the art in less than five months, in an era in which it took a week to cross the Atlantic by ship.

“And they did it without fear of failure,” Maglaras said. “They seemed to me to be filled with typical American optimism and exuberance.”

Matisse's billowy nudes and brilliant colors, Picasso and Braques' broken planes and sharp angles and Duchamp's kinetic *Nude Descending a Staircase* elicited a wide range of reactions from the audiences that lined up to see them, from excitement to bafflement to derision — just as a few months later, the premiere of Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring* in Paris would provoke both howls of protest and proclamations of genius.

In hindsight, it's tempting to attribute a watershed cultural event like the Armory Show to a combination of timing, coincidence or the workings of the zeitgeist. But in fact, said Maglaras, the organizers of the Armory Show anticipated that the exhibition would explode with meteoric impact on the American art scene.

In December 1912, Walt Kuhn wrote a letter to his wife Vera, crowing that the International Exhibition of Modern Art would “be the greatest modern show ever given anywhere on earth as far as regards high standards of merit.”

Just a few months earlier, Kuhn described in another letter how he thought the exhibition would elevate the role of American art. “We've got a healthy American germ that is personal and the art of the future. America in spite of its newness is determined to be the coming center.” (Kuhn's letters can be read online at the Smithsonian Institution's Archive of American Art website, at www.aaa.si.edu.)

The sensation that the Armory show caused, said Maglaras, was due to a confluence of events.

“We were coming to the end of what was our belle époque. Rightly or wrongly we were flexing our military and economic muscle. We were filled with exuberance and optimism, we saw a limitless horizon for the American democratic ideal and we had some money in our pocket. We were developing a middle class with an appetite for art.”

Until that time, said Sarah Powers, assistant curator for special projects at the Hood, one of the drivers of the American art scene was the National Academy in New York, which was “a very traditional, conservative organization.”

But New York in 1913 was also a hotbed of artistic experimentation: in 1908 the photographer Alfred Steiglitz, who would later marry Georgia O’Keeffe, opened Gallery 291 on Fifth Avenue, where he exhibited photographs, painting, sculpture and drawing from the Americas and Europe. American painters were agitating against the 19th-century tradition of pastoral landscapes and sleek portraiture with works of social realism and political commentary.

In the years before the Armory show, photographers Jacob Riis and Lewis Hine had gone into the slums and factories to document the degraded conditions in which the poorest

Americans lived and worked. Theodore Dreiser had published *Sister Carrie*, his novel about a young woman seduced into prostitution, in 1900. Upton Sinclair had published *The Jungle* in 1906. It was, broadly, an era of muckraking journalism and societal and political reform.

So although the myth of the Armory Show has been that it thoroughly alarmed and offended the complacent bourgeoisie, who clucked indignantly and flapped their feathers, the record shows that for every fulminating critic, there were others who knew full well the effect the show would have, and embraced it.

Although she was dismayed by some of the art, the critic and founder of *Poetry* magazine Harriet Monroe wrote of the show when it came to the Chicago Art Institute that the works on view “represent the revolt of the imagination against nineteenth century realism.” She was hardly the only viewer to feel that, after this, art would never be the same. Even Teddy Roosevelt came to take stock.

“Many artists... and collectors were transformed by the work that they saw,” said Powers, who has also organized in the Hood Museum’s Sack Gallery of American art a small installation of works on paper by five artists who exhibited at the Armory Show: Edward Hopper, Arthur B. Davies, Walt Kuhn, Robert Henri and Oscar Bluemner.

And the European artists who were able to travel to the city during and after the exhibition “all sort of expressed this idea that New York was the new image of modernity,” Powers said.

One indication of how much the show caught the public imagination, said Maglaras, was that people bought the art;— not all of it, but enough to start collections that eventually found their way into the great American museums. “The way you show acceptance is by opening your checkbook, really.”

Not all the work in the show was at the level of a Cezanne or a Duchamp, said Maglaras, but “there was no fear about hanging truly great and remarkable works of art next to stuff that was fifth rate. ... You could walk right from something mediocre into the arms of a Matisse. To me, what it says was that it was their attempt to be inclusionary.”

The Great Confusion: The 1913 Armory Show will be shown tonight at 6:30 p.m. in the Hood Museum of Art auditorium. There is no charge to the public. For more information go to the Hood Museum website at <http://hoodmuseum.dartmouth.edu> or call 603-646-2808.

Nicola Smith can be reached at [nsmith@vnews .com](mailto:nsmith@vnews.com)