



## Five Questions with Michael Maglaras, Director of *The Great Confusion: The 1913 Armory Show*

July 15, 2014

*On July 16th, the American Art Museum welcomes writer and director Michael Maglaras, who will introduce his documentary, *The Great Confusion: The 1913 Armory Show*. The film examines the New York exhibition that exposed Americans to modern art by Cézanne, Renoir, van Gogh, and Duchamp, as well works by Americans such as Hartley, Marin, and Sheeler. A special pre-screening tour of the American Art collection, highlighting works by artists who were in the Armory Show, meets in the G St. lobby at 5:30 p.m. The film begins in the McEvoy Auditorium at 6:30 p.m. A light reception will follow the screening and Q&A. Additional details for this event can be found on our museum's [calendar](#). Program Coordinator Alli Jessing discussed the film and the impact of the Armory show with Michael Maglaras for Eye Level.*

**Eye Level:** Of the artists featured in the 1913 show, do you have a favorite artist or artwork?

**Michael Maglaras:** This is a tough one; with as many as 1,300 works there was much to choose from, and much of it of exceptional quality. I have a soft spot for the painting [Family Group](#) by William Glackens, which we feature prominently in the film. Glackens is a singular artist, and it seems to me that this painting has one foot planted firmly in the legacy of 19th century painting, with its particular elegance of spirit (look at the line of the leg leading to the end of his daughter's shoe on the left side of the canvas) and the other foot planted firmly in the 20th century with Glackens' Fauvist-like use of color. It is really a masterpiece of its kind.

**EL:** The 1913 Armory was quite a pivotal one, and introduced American audiences to a more experimental style. Tell us a little about how the critics and audiences reacted to this unfamiliar visual style.

**MM:** The reaction was a surprising combination of delight and disgust. The press, of course, had a field day reporting about the varied reactions of the public to the works of Matisse, Gleizes, Duchamp, and others. And it became a kind of social and, for its time, important media event. The public came in droves: 4,000 on the first day and 12,000 on the last. It would be difficult to imagine a reaction today more varied and more provocative at the most basic level than the reaction provoked by the Armory Show in 1913. Of course, the evidence is clear that in 1913 we held strong views about what we liked and didn't about art, and the debate then, pro and con, about Modernism, was seldom tinged by the kind of political correctness we sometimes exhibit today. Three months after the close of the Armory Show, in May of 1913, at the premiere of Igor Stravinsky's [\*The Rite of Spring\*](#) in Paris, fistfights broke out before the orchestra had finished playing the first page of the score.

Many who came to see the work in the Amory Show had their views changed about what art is and what it should mean to us. In 2014, the way we look at what hangs on a wall, how we perceive its value, whether it speaks to us on multiple levels, and the role of the artist in our society, are all ideas that are a result of the 27 days that the public flocked to the Armory Show in New York.

**EL:** When you visit an art museum, what kinds of works do you gravitate towards?

**MM:** I've made five films about American Modernism, and I have to confess that if a museum has works by American painters who were active from about 1900 through the 1950s, I'm immediately drawn to whatever is in that collection. [John Marin](#), for example, is in my view the undisputed poet of American Modernist painting. Whenever I encounter a Marin, all I do is simply stand there and smile at the sheer joy that his work represents to me.

**EL:** Marcel Duchamp's painting [\*Nude Descending a Staircase \(No. 2\)\*](#) famously caused some furor during the show. What were some of the other controversial artworks, and what about them caused such an upset?

**MM:** Everything in Gallery I, where most of the Cubist work was hung (it was called by the press the "Chamber of Horrors") caused an immediate controversy. From the standpoint of sheer geography, Gallery I was hidden away in the upper left-hand corner of the armory space, and if you had been strolling through the galleries in no particular order, coming upon the contents

of that gallery would have taken you completely by surprise. Several works by Matisse hung in Gallery H, including his exquisitely delicious [\*Blue Nude\*](#) of 1907, which Kenneth Clark called the first painting of the modern era. If you actually made your way through the Armory Show galleries alphabetically (they started with A, B, etc., and ended with the letter R) you would, of necessity, have had an intimate encounter with *Blue Nude*. Nothing like it had ever been seen before in America by so many people in such a brief span of time. The reaction of the public to the painters of French Modernism was only what it could have been in 1913: a complete shock.

**EL:** Are you working on any new film projects at the moment?

**MM:** Our next film is now in production. It's entitled *Enough to Live On: The Art of the WPA*. This film is in honor of the 80th anniversary of the [Federal Art Project](#) of the WPA. As we travel the country deciding which art to use – individual paintings, murals, sculpture– we discover that this will be a film full of surprises: surprises about the overwhelming quality of some of the work, how much of it was created under the auspices of the federal government, and how the making of art was used by Franklin Roosevelt's administration as a tool to reinvigorate our national spirit at a time of national depression.

For additional information about the 1913 Armory Show and to view original source material from that exhibition, take a look at the Smithsonian Archives of American Art's website: [1913 Armory Show: The Story in Primary Resources](#).

<http://eyelevel.si.edu/2014/07/five-questions-with-michael-maglaras-director-of-the-great-confusion-the-1913-armory-show.html>