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New England filmmakers explore how modern art shook things up

A new film chronicles how a first-in-the-nation exhibition, 1913's Armory Show, caused an uproar in America.

By Bob Keyes bkeyes@pressherald.com Staff Writer

New England filmmakers Michael Maglaras and Terri Templeton have made a habit of making movies about art-world greats. They've made two films about Marsden Hartley, another about John Marin. They're out with a new film about the landmark art exhibition of a century ago, the so-called Armory Show in New York City.



[click image to enlarge](#)

Joe Wiegand as Theodore Roosevelt in "The Great Confusion: The 1913 Armory Show."



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“Man on a Balcony (Portrait of Dr. Morinaud)” 1912, by Albert Gleizes, who was considered to be a founding member of the Cubist movement.

The exhibition marked the first time a large collection of modern art from Europe was shown in the United States. It created an uproar, heightened by an essay by former President Theodore Roosevelt, who derided the show as “repellent.”

The show was open for a month in New York, from Feb. 17 to March 15 at New York City’s 69th Regiment Armory. It was seen by tens of thousands of people, and provided mass exposure to European artists such as Cezanne, Renoir, Van Gogh and Marcel Duchamp, whose “Nude Descending a Staircase” was the exhibition’s lightning-rod painting.

It also exhibited works by the Americans Hartley and Marin and many others. The exhibition helped lead America into the modern era, Maglaras said.

“What I really like about this story is the whole concept of how long have we been asking the question, ‘What do you think about modern art?’ We’ve only been asking it 100 years, and it really started in February 1913 with people seeing stuff for the first time, like Picasso and Marcel Duchamp and the Cubists,” Maglaras said. “That question is really only 100 years old, but we have a tendency to think that it’s a much older question.”

Maglaras and Templeton will be joined by Roosevelt repriser Joe Wiegand at the Portland premiere of “The Great Confusion: The 1913 Armory Show.” The film will screen at 7 p.m. Wednesday at the Abromson Community Education Center on the University of Southern Maine campus in Portland.

Roosevelt saw the exhibition March 4, 1913, choosing it over Woodrow Wilson's first inauguration. Wiegand gives a dramatic reading of the Roosevelt essay for the movie. It was filmed in the Portland Masonic Temple on Congress Street in Portland, as were other scenes in the movie.

"Roosevelt was passionate about anything he encountered in his life, and he decided to write an essay about the art he saw at the show. Some he liked, some he didn't like. It made it into the canon of what we know about the show," Maglaras said.

Wiegand will be on hand Wednesday to introduce Maglaras, who will introduce the film. Maglaras and Templeton based their film company, 217 Productions, in Connecticut, but do much of their creative work in Maine. They use a Maine-based crew, and film here regularly.

Wednesday's screening will raise money for Goodwill Industries of Northern New England. This year marks the 80th anniversary of the opening of the Maine office of Goodwill Industries Northern New England, which was founded in Boston in 1902, Maglaras noted.

One of the sub-themes in the "The Great Confusion" the effort of artist-entrepreneurs Walt Kuhn, Walter Pach and Arthur B. Davies, who staged the exhibition. They got together as friends, committed to make taste rather than follow the taste-makers.

The show featured hundreds of paintings, and posed numerous logistical challenges, Maglaras said. Kuhn's archives provided a tremendous amount of material for the film, he said.

“These guys get together, rent an armory, go to Europe, round up work, ship it overseas and cram the armory with work. They had no grants to go on. They did it all on spec, and they introduced America to the concept of modern art,” Maglaras said.

“It’s an amazing and typically American story. There were 4,000 people in line on opening night, and 12,000 passed through the gallery on the final day.”

Smaller, stripped-down versions of the exhibition traveled to Chicago and Boston. “But the real impact were those 27 days in New York,” Maglaras said.

‘THE GREAT CONFUSION: THE 1913 ARMORY SHOW’

WHEN: 7 p.m. Wednesday

WHERE: University of Southern Maine, Abromson Community Education Center, Hannaford Hall, 88 Bedford St., Portland

HOW MUCH: \$10 advance at [eventbrite.com/event/9076741779](https://www.eventbrite.com/event/9076741779); \$15 at the door

NOTE: The screening will benefit Goodwill Industries of Northern New England

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