



ABRAHAM WALKOWITZ
NEW YORK CITYSCAPES

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Abraham Walkowitz was one of a select group of artists that included Arthur Dove, John Marin, and Georgia O'Keeffe, who advanced abstract art in America before the first World War. Embracing such European developments as Cubism, they established a unique place within the history of modern art. Although Walkowitz was represented in the famous Armory Show of 1913, his contribution to the first generation of modernists in America has not been fully explored. This exhibition of New York Cityscapes concentrates on the most advanced work Walkowitz created between 1910 and 1920 and provides a new insight into the importance of his contribution to 20th century American abstraction.

Abraham Walkowitz was born in Siberia in 1878. His father was a lay rabbi who died when Walkowitz was four. In 1889, the Walkowitz family emigrated to the United States and settled on New York's Lower East Side. There Walkowitz became friends with a neighbor, the young Jacob Epstein, who later became a figurative sculptor.

In 1894 at the age of sixteen, Walkowitz enrolled at the National Academy of Design. Twelve years later at Jacob Epstein's urging, Walkowitz went to study in Europe, where he attended the Académie Julian in Paris. He arrived about three months after the death of Paul Cézanne, just in time to see the important Memorial Exhibition of 1907 at the Salon d'Automne. Walkowitz was quick to recognize Cézanne's important contribution to painting. That same year Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque were beginning their painterly explorations which would lead to the discovery of Cubism. While in Paris Walkowitz met the painter Max Weber who soon introduced Walkowitz to Picasso as well as Henri Matisse and Auguste Rodin. Through his association with Weber, Walkowitz became part of the group of avant-garde artists and writers who frequented the home of Gertrude and Leo Stein. It was at Rodin's studio that Walkowitz met Isadora Duncan, the modern dancer who later became the subject of more than 5,000 drawings Walkowitz made throughout his career.

Late in 1907 Walkowitz returned to New York bringing with him modernist ideas from Europe. At this time only a small number of New York galleries exhibited modern art. Walkowitz could find none interested in his work, which, even though still representational, was considered too non-academic. However, a friend, Julius Haas, who owned a picture-framing shop allowed Walkowitz to use a back room of his shop for an exhibition. Though the critics were not receptive, Walkowitz did find support for



17. *Untitled (City Rhythm)* ca. 1909

his work among fellow artists Dove and Marin.

Around 1911 the painter Marsden Hartley introduced Walkowitz to the photographer Alfred Stieglitz, the courageous champion of avant-garde art in New York. Walkowitz became a friend of Stieglitz; a confidant and close associate in the activities of Stieglitz's Gallery 291, where modern art of both Europe and America was consistently exhibited. Walkowitz participated actively in the production of *Camera Work*, the quarterly magazine devoted primarily to photography. In fact, part of the October 1913 issue contained an article by Walkowitz and reproductions of seven of his drawings.

Between 1912 and 1917 Walkowitz had four shows at 291. In 1913 he was asked to participate in the then controversial Armory Show which presented the work of such European artists as Braque, Cézanne, Marcel Duchamp, Picasso, Rodin, and Vincent Van Gogh alongside the work of such American artists as Dove, Hartley, Marin and Weber. Walkowitz was represented by twelve works: five oils, five drawings, a monotype, and a watercolor. It is believed that at least one of these was a cityscape.

Between 1909 and 1917 Walkowitz's work moved from realistic expression to pure abstraction. Walkowitz brought to his work a new freedom of expression as seen in the Cityscapes in this exhibition. He was a prolific artist who neither dated nor titled the bulk of his work. It is, however, reasonable to assume that the most abstract Cityscapes date from the period



4. *Untitled (City Abstraction)* ca. 1913

1912 to 1917 when Walkowitz was associated with Stieglitz and his circle and with the group of socialists in Greenwich Village. Among his companions in the Village were Emma Goldman, Haldeman-Julius, Horace Traubel, the editor of the leftist magazine *The Conservator*, and Mabel Dodge, who provided a salon for many intellectuals concerned with radical art and politics.

While Walkowitz was creating his city abstractions he was also making sympathetic portraits of workers for the leading socialist journals, *Puck* and *Masses*. In *Puck*, his drawings of faceless, monumental figures became known as the "New Beauty" and were described as pictorial representations of the democratic spirit. *Masses*, published in Greenwich Village and reborn in the 1930s as *New Masses*, attacked traditional values and glorified social and artistic change. Such painters as Stuart Davis and John Sloan worked for *Masses* from 1911-16 and encouraged others, like Walkowitz, to join them.

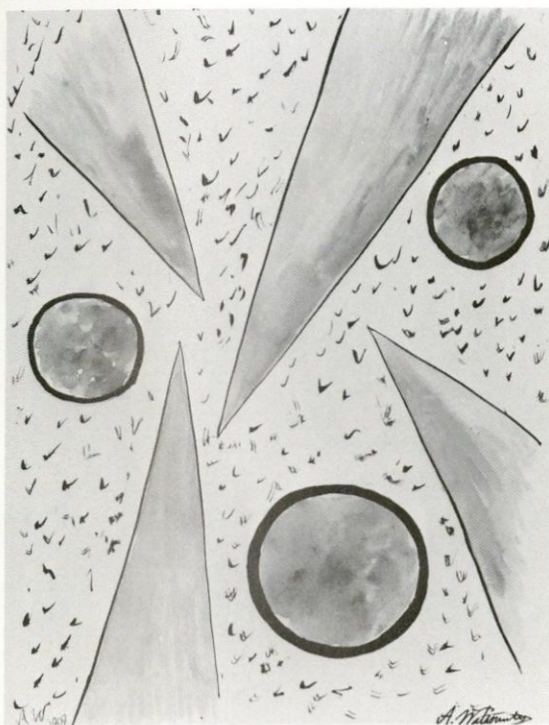
In 1914 Stieglitz financed Walkowitz's second trip to Europe where Walkowitz saw the art of the Italian Futurists. Upon Walkowitz's return to New York he found widespread sentiment that the Armory Show had given too much exposure to European artists and not enough to the Americans. As a result, the Forum Exhibition of Modern American Painters was organized and held at the Anderson Gallery for twelve days in the Spring of 1916. Sixteen artists were selected, including Thomas Hart Benton, Oscar Bluemner, Dove, Hartley, Stanton



24. *Untitled (Cityscape)* ca. 1914

Macdonald-Wright, Man Ray, and Marin. Walkowitz was represented in the exhibition by twenty works.

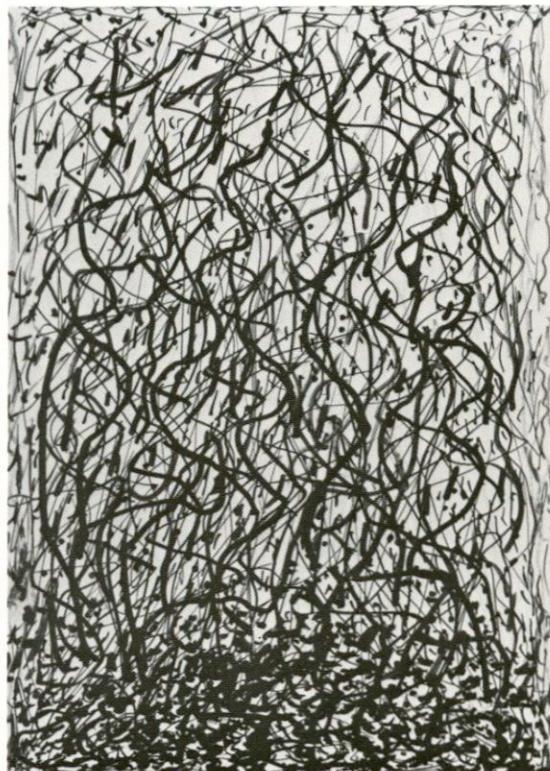
Walkowitz produced his most abstract and advanced work during the years he was associated with 291. Struck by the fast-rising skyscrapers that began to crowd the city streets, Walkowitz, Dove, Marin, and Weber began to record their impressions of New York. Walkowitz's views of the city moved from realistic images such as *City Rhythm* ca. 1909 (no. 17) to complete abstraction. While Dove and Weber used large organic forms for their city abstractions, Walkowitz employed the geometric devices of Cubism and Futurism. He used the cubist method of geometric reduction to organize the forms within his drawings. He combined the ideas of Cézanne with those of Picasso and Braque. The density and cubic structure in Walkowitz's work is reminiscent of Cézanne's landscapes. While Cézanne used brush and paint to build up forms, Walkowitz used only a pencil to set up his light-and-dark rhythms. The streets move into the picture plane but are stopped by the flat, two-dimensional buildings. Walkowitz, like Cézanne, maintained a strong sense of place, as his buildings always rise from a firmly stated ground line. However, as in the later cubist work of Picasso and Braque, his buildings often conform to a regular grid which covers the paper from edge to edge. Like the Futurists who celebrated the new technology of the machine age, Walkowitz repeated a single, often diagonal or curved line to give his work a greater sense of movement.



19. *Untitled (Abstraction)* ca. 1917

In the lithograph *City Abstraction* (no. 14) and the watercolor *Cityscape* (no. 24) Walkowitz portrayed New York in a constant state of dynamic, urban growth. In both works the buildings reach up to the sky and converge in the center of the paper to form a pyramid. The base is made up of swirls and lines that dramatically cut into the pictorial space. These swirls and lines represent the subway stations, the hurrying crowds, and the fast-moving streets thrusting their way between the buildings. The birds above the buildings, one of Walkowitz's favorite motifs, move toward the center of the composition as though drawn by a magnet. Unlike Marin's cityscapes, Walkowitz's views are energized by swirling crowds and impenetrable structures. In the watercolor (no. 24) the toppling structures are barely rooted to the ground. It might be said that Walkowitz predicted the New York of today, for the density of the buildings and the population he represented are far greater than that which actually existed in the early part of the 20th century.

In the five drawings entitled *Abstraction*, ca. 1917 (nos. 6, 7, 8, 9 and 11), Walkowitz transformed the pictorial surface into pure abstract energy. Nevertheless beneath this network one still perceives the angular buildings dotted with windows. The controlled dots and dashes of previous drawings have now come to life. Static geometric forms give way to spiral lines entwined about crossed diagonals. The squiggly forms seem to grow from the black mire at the bottom of the page, for Walkowitz never



11. *Untitled (Abstraction)* ca. 1917

lost the stability of the ground even within these totally abstract works. The surface, now uncompromisingly flat, is covered with moving forms that intertwine with one another. In these drawings, Walkowitz curiously anticipated some of the major discoveries that would be fully realized by the Abstract Expressionists in the late 1940s. Jackson Pollock, for instance, covered the surface of his drawings and paintings with a kind of abstract calligraphy similarly found in the five small pen and ink drawings done by Walkowitz around 1917.

Walkowitz's transition from the crowded, bustling city, into a world of color and open sky is seen in the watercolor entitled *Abstraction* ca. 1917 (no. 19). Triangles and spheres float on the surface of the paper amidst a sky filled with swarming birds. The forms appear abstract, but in fact they represent another view of the city, seen from the street, as if Walkowitz were flat on his back looking up at the tall buildings converging on one another against the sky. The sun-like spheres revolve around the triangular structures. This form of abstraction reflects Walkowitz's admiration for the work and philosophy of the Russian painter, Wassily Kandinsky, the pioneer of non-objective art, whose book *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* Walkowitz read in 1912. These floating compositions strangely foreshadow a later development in Kandinsky's art—his geometric paintings of the 1920s.

In 1917 after breaking with Stieglitz, Wal-

kowitz became more actively involved with socialist causes. In the 1920s and 1930s Walkowitz aligned himself with the social realists, particularly the painter John Sloan, as well as the political activist Horace Traubel. Walkowitz was also instrumental in the People's Art Guild, an organization designed to bring art to the people by exhibiting the art of Guild members in storefronts on the Lower East Side. He continued to illustrate for *Puck* and *New Masses* and to support advanced art, though his own work became more conservative. Between 1934 and 1938 he served as Vice President of the Society of Independent Artists, an organization he helped establish in 1917. He was also a member of the Société Anonyme, a group spirited by Katherine Dreier to foster such progressive artists as Marcel Duchamp, Marsden Hartley, Man Ray, and Joseph Stella.

During the 1940s Walkowitz renewed his friendship with Haldeman-Julius, then the editor of the largest socialist journal in the country, *The Appeal to Reason*, and the publisher of inexpensive educational books called *Little Blue Books*. Walkowitz spent the summer of 1945 with Haldeman-Julius on his farm in Kansas. While there, they compiled a series of five books illustrating Walkowitz's paintings and drawings. One of these books, entitled *Improvisations of New York A Symphony in Lines*, published in 1948 (no. 25), reproduced more than two hundred of Walkowitz's cityscapes.

Despite failing eyesight during the last twenty years of his life Walkowitz remained an active participant in the art world of New York. Although he could no longer work, he encouraged younger artists, and gave away countless numbers of his own works to rich and poor alike. It was not until 1959, six years before his death that Walkowitz had the first and only retrospective of his work which was organized by the Zabriskie Gallery in New York.

Walkowitz's participation in socialist causes, as well as his portraits and cityscapes, not only reflect his deep commitment to his adopted country but express his concern for others as well. He is remembered as a generous and compassionate man who continually supported others, a guiding spirit within a small group of pioneering artists. His art during this critical decade was modest in size but large in idea. His most advanced work, largely done in ink or pencil, was in many instances ahead of its time. It is most particularly with the Cityscapes that Walkowitz can claim a rightful place within the Stieglitz circle. ■

Dale Leibson Mintz
Class of 1982

Acknowledgements

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D.L.M.

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Frontispiece: 10. *Untitled (New York)* ca. 1910

Design: Barbara Shenefield, Class of 1982
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Catalogue of the Exhibition

Dimensions are given in inches; height precedes width.

*Shown at the Neuberger Museum only.

†Included in the traveling exhibition only.

Unless otherwise indicated all works are from the Collection of the Neuberger Museum, State University of New York at Purchase, gift of Roy R. Neuberger.

1. *Untitled (City Abstraction)* ca. 1909
pencil on paper, 13¾ x 7½
2. *Untitled (City Abstraction)* ca. 1913
pencil on paper, 10¼ x 9½
3. *Untitled (Cityscape)* ca. 1912
pencil on paper, 12½ x 8
4. *Untitled (City Abstraction)* ca. 1913
pencil on paper, 12¾ x 9¼
5. *Untitled (Abstraction)* ca. 1915
pencil on paper, 14 x 8½
6. *Untitled (Abstraction)* ca. 1917
ink on paper, 10½ x 7¼
7. *Untitled (Abstraction)* ca. 1917
ink on paper, 13 x 8½
8. *Untitled (Abstraction)* ca. 1917
ink on paper, 10½ x 7¼
9. *Untitled (Abstraction)* ca. 1917
ink on paper, 10½ x 7¼
10. *Untitled (New York)* n.d.
ink on paper, 10½ x 6¾
11. *Untitled (Abstraction)* ca. 1917
ink on paper, 10½ x 7¼
12. *Untitled (Abstraction)* ca. 1912
pencil on paper, 14 x 8½
13. *Untitled (New York Abstraction)* ca. 1927
lithograph, 15¾ x 11¼
14. *Untitled (City Abstraction)* ca. 1927
lithograph, 17⅝ x 11¼
15. *Untitled (Abstract Cityscape)* ca. 1913
watercolor on paper, 19 x 12½
Collection Françoise & Harvey Rambach, New York
16. *Untitled (Cityscape)* ca. 1917
crayon on paper, 17½ x 11
Collection Françoise & Harvey Rambach, New York
17. *Untitled (City Rhythm)* ca. 1909
pencil on paper, 7 x 5
Collection Françoise & Harvey Rambach, New York
18. *Untitled (Abstraction)* ca. 1914
watercolor on paper, 16 x 14
Courtesy Sid Deutsch Gallery, New York
19. *Untitled (Abstraction)* ca. 1917
watercolor on paper, 12 x 8⅝
Courtesy Sid Deutsch Gallery, New York
20. *Untitled (New York)* ca. 1911
pencil on paper, 12¾ x 7½
Courtesy Sid Deutsch Gallery, New York
21. *Untitled (New York Scene)* ca. 1912
ink on paper, 10⅞ x 7
Courtesy Sid Deutsch Gallery, New York
22. *Untitled (Abstraction)* ca. 1913
ink on paper, 17¼ x 11¾
Courtesy Sid Deutsch Gallery, New York
23. *Untitled (City)* n.d.
pencil on paper, 13½ x 6½
Collection Charles Choset, New York
24. *Untitled (Cityscape)* ca. 1914
watercolor on paper, 19 x 16
Private Collection, Scarsdale, New York
25. *Improvisations of New York A Symphony in Lines* 1948
printer's ink on paper, 11 x 8½
publisher: Haldeman-Julius, Girard, Kansas
* Collection Neuberger Museum
† Collection Reference Library, The Museum of Modern Art, New York
- †26. *Untitled (Cityscape)* n.d.
watercolor on paper, 12¾ x 10¾
Collection Joyce & Mark Lerner, New York
- †27. *Untitled (Cityscape)* n.d.
charcoal on paper, 19½ x 25
Collection M. Vanderwoude, New York
- †28. *City with Smokestacks* ca. 1914
pencil on paper, 17½ x 12
Private Collection, New York
- †29. *Abstraction* ca. 1917
ink on paper, 22 x 17
Private Collection, New York
- †30. *New York Improvisations* n.d.
ink on paper, 19 x 12½
Private Collection, New York
- *31. *Untitled (Cityscape)* ca. 1915
oil on canvas, 13¾ x 7½
Collection Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; gift of Philip Morris, Inc.
- *32. *Untitled (Abstraction)* ca. 1915
crayon on paper, 17½ x 10½
Courtesy Sid Deutsch Gallery, New York

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