Well before Manhattan’s 69th Regiment Armory opened its doors on February 17, 1913, the word was out that the *International Exhibition of Modern Art*, commonly known as the Armory Show, would be a blockbuster event. A small group of artists, called the Association of American Painters and Sculptors (AAPS), was poised to stage a mammoth exhibition of contemporary American and foreign art that promised to change the American art world. Their motto, “The New Spirit,” encapsulated their mission to present “the best examples procurable of contemporary art, without relation to school, size, medium or nationality.”

Writing to Gertrude Stein the month before the Armory Show opened, Mabel Dodge, a key supporter, expressed her belief in its groundbreaking nature:

> There is an exhibition coming off…which is the most important public event…since the signing of the Declaration of Independence, & it is of the same nature…There will be a riot & a revolution & things will never be the same afterwards.2

Similarly, John Quinn, legal representative for the AAPS, made no small claim at the show’s opening when he declared, “this exhibition will be epoch making in the history of American Art.”3 Statements like those of Dodge and Quinn — only two of many — have come to epitomize our understanding of the Armory Show as a revolutionary and pivotal event. The show has long been mythologized as a turning point in the history of American art and a shock to the system that awakened American artists, collectors, and the public to developments by the European avant-garde.
On view from October 11 through February 23 of next year, the New-York Historical Society’s exhibition *The Armory Show at 100* will commemorate this landmark show and offer a fresh perspective on it. Moving beyond the legend, the NYHS project will rediscover oft-neglected aspects of the Armory story, like the contribution of American artists, the original goals of the exhibition, and the controversies that arose within the AAPS. Moreover, *The Armory Show at 100* will consider the exhibition’s impact beyond the scope of American art.

More than an assault on conventional taste, the Armory Show was part of broader social and cultural transformations in the early 20th century. Its “new spirit” extended well beyond the 69th Regiment Armory, as rapid technological advances and social reforms contributed to a palpable sense of change. Incorporating material culture from early 20th-century New York, *The Armory Show at 100* will situate this event within a society grappling with the onset of modernity.

**SHOCK AND AWE**

Widely considered the most important exhibition ever held in the U.S., the Armory Show was undoubtedly a sensation. It attracted roughly 87,000 visitors during its four-week run (February 17-March 15, 1913) at the 69th Regiment Armory on Lexington Avenue between East 25th and 26th Streets, and subsequently traveled to the Art Institute of Chicago and the Copley Society in Boston. Nearly 1,400 works

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**Henri Matisse (1869-1954)**  
*Blue Nude*  
1907, Oil on canvas, 36 1/4 x 55 1/4 in.  
Baltimore Museum of Art, Cone Collection, formed by Dr. Claribel Cone and Miss Etta Cone of Baltimore, Maryland, BMA 1950.228  
Photo © 2013 Succession H. Matisse /Artists Rights Society, NY, which forbids cropping of the painting’s unpainted edges.

**Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968)**  
*Nude Descending a Staircase (No. 2)*  
1912, Oil on canvas, 57 7/8 x 35 1/8 in.  
© 2013 Succession Marcel Duchamp /ADAGP, Paris /Artists Rights Society, NY
were presented in New York, and, despite the fact that roughly half of them were made by Americans, it was European modernism that stole the show. Although Alfred Stieglitz had previously staged the first American exhibitions of Henri Matisse, Paul Cézanne, and Pablo Picasso at his gallery at 291 Fifth Avenue, the European avant-garde was not common knowledge beyond a small group of artists and connoisseurs. The Armory Show was the first exhibition to present European modernism to a broad American public, and uninitiated viewers struggled to make sense of what they saw. Post-Impressionism, the Fauves, and especially Cubism shocked contemporary audiences with their distortions of form, abandonment of representation, and non-imitative use of color.

The new movements challenged mainstream American taste and provoked vehement controversy; everyone seemed to have an opinion. Hundreds of newspaper articles nationwide reported on the “insurgents” at the Armory, with some calling them “freaks” or just plain insane. Kenyon Cox, scion of the Gilded Age art establishment, was among the most outspoken critics; his commentary demonstrates some of the key issues at stake. For Cox, and many others, the new movements seemed to violate a tacit agreement between artist and viewer; art could no longer be expected to conform to traditional standards of beauty, or be tied to the perceived reality of nature. Cox doubted the sincerity of the new movements, and asked “are these men… charlatans fooling the public?” His answer was decidedly yes. He felt that this outrageous art was nothing more than a marketing ploy: “It is my conviction, though that Matisse has his tongue in his cheek and his eye on his pocket.”

Anxiety about the new art extended beyond aesthetics as critics frequently connected it to the forces of social, political, and technological change occurring in society at large. For Cox, the radical art at the Armory was not an isolated phenomenon, but rather part of a “general movement, discernible all over the world, to disrupt and degrade, if not to destroy, not only art, but literature and society too.”

Not everyone was threatened by modernism, however: the critic and anarchist Hutchins Hapgood regarded the new art as a productive, rather than destructive, force. Hapgood lauded modernism for undermining the status quo and regarded it as a salutary cultural development, which “makes us live more abundantly” and helps “us all to understand more deeply what happens to us in life — to understand our love and our work, our ambitions and our antipathies, and our ideals in politics and society.”

Theodore Roosevelt famously offered “a layman’s view” on the exhibition, indeed a more measured assessment. He called “a picture of a misshapen nude woman” (Matisse’s Blue Nude) “repellent from every standpoint,” and compared Marcel Duchamp’s Nude Descending a Staircase (No. 2) to a Navajo rug, “which, on any proper interpretation of the Cubist theory, is a far more satisfactory and decorative picture.” Though he did not defend the “lunatic fringe,” Roosevelt praised the exhibition’s effort to show “our people… the art forces which of late have been at work in Europe, forces which cannot be ignored.”

Francis Picabia (1879-1953)
Dances at the Spring
1912, Oil on canvas, 47 7/16 x 47 1/2 in.
© 2013 Artists Rights Society, NY/ADAGP, Paris

John Sloan (1871-1951)
Sunday, Women Drying Their Hair
1912, Oil on canvas, 26 1/8 x 32 1/8 in.
Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy, Andover, Massachusetts, museum purchase, 1938.67
© 2013 Delaware Art Museum/Artists Rights Society, NY
The response of the popular press is equally fascinating. Less serious in tone than their highbrow counterparts, countless cartoons, riddles, and rhymes were produced, most of which squarely took aim at the European avant-garde. The most famous of these is J.F. Griswold’s cartoon “The Rude Descending a Staircase (Rush Hour at the Subway),” which lampoons Duchamp’s painting, conflating it with the tumult of New York crowds. Several cartoons displayed some level of understanding of the new movements (indeed, Griswold’s gives a sense of the fractured, successive movement essential to Duchamp’s work), and many expressed sentiments akin to those of the serious critics. More than mere mockery, humor was a meaningful way to process the new art, and cartoons ensured that frequently reproduced works like Duchamp’s Nude Descending a Staircase, Constantin Brancusi’s Mlle Pogany I, and Matisse’s Blue Nude became well known to a broad American public.

The New-York Historical Society will soon assemble approximately 100 masterworks that were originally featured in the 1913 Armory Show.

Marsden Hartley (1877-1943)
Still Life No. 1
1912, Oil on canvas, 32 1/2 x 25 5/8 in.
Columbus Museum of Art, Ohio, Gift of Ferdinand Howald, 1931.184

Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890)
Mountains at Saint Rémy (Montagnes à Saint-Rémy)
1889, Oil on canvas, 28 1/4 x 35 3/4 in.
Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, Thannhauser Collection,
Justin K. Thannhauser, 1978, 78.2514.24
offering today’s audience a unique opportunity to view some of its most provocative works together again.  

Nude Descending a Staircase was almost universally derided, while Blue Nude was deemed indecent and depraved.  

Brancusi’s radical simplification of form baffled critics who wondered if Mlle Pogany was “a lady or an egg?” 13  

Similarly, critics likened Francis Picabia’s Cubist painting Dances at the Spring (1912) to a patchwork quilt, but the show essentially made the artist’s international reputation.  

As the only foreign artist featured in the show who was actually in America at the time, Picabia reveled in the publicity. 14

Not all the avant-garde works in the show generated controversy.  

Cézanne’s View of the Domaine Saint-Joseph (late 1880s) was well received and became the first of his works acquired by an American museum when it was purchased from the show by the Metropolitan Museum of Art.  

Odilon Redon was new to American audiences, and garnered some of the most favorable press attention of all the artists in the show.  

He was also a hit with collectors; 13 of Redon’s paintings and pastels and 20 prints were sold. 15

Paul Gauguin (1848-1903)  

Parau na te Varua ino (Words of the Devil)  

1892, Oil on canvas, 36 1/8 x 26 15/16 in.  

National Gallery of Art, Washington, Gift of the W. Averell Harriman Foundation in memory of Marie N. Harriman
Though the Armory Show is best remembered for its examples of radical European movements, it also included works now considered icons of American art. The N-YHS exhibition will re-create the original ratio of European to American works, which was roughly half-and-half. The Ashcan School represented one of the most radical contingents working in the U.S. before the Armory Show. While their work remained figurative, working-class subjects like John Sloan’s Sunday, Women Drying Their Hair (1912) challenged the genteel standards of beauty promoted during the Gilded Age. Other American artists were working at the forefront of European modernism. Marsden Hartley’s Cézanne-inspired Still Life, No. 1 (1912) was specifically chosen by AAPS president Arthur B. Davies from the artist’s studio in Paris. (For more about Davies, see page __.) John Marin was among the most advanced Americans in the show, and his watercolors of the newly constructed Woolworth Building captured the dynamism of the modern metropolis. Since 1913, the Armory Show has become a parable of American cultural provincialism in the face of modernity, but a century later, the time is right to offer a more nuanced understanding. The Armory Show at 100 uncovers some of the project’s original goals that have been obscured by Armory lore. Though exhibiting foreign art was part of the AAPS’s mission, the Armory Show grew out of the need for American artists to exhibit their work outside New York City’s conservative National Academy of Design. Its planning process was just as controversial as the show itself, as many AAPS members took issue with what they viewed as Davies’s authoritative (some called it “dictatorial”) style. Moreover, to the displeasure of many American artists, the media sensation created by the European avant-garde overshadowed native contributions to the show. The N-YHS exhibition will delve into the politics of the AAPS with a selection of original letters, postcards, and photographs from the Smithsonian Institution’s Archives of American Art that document the behind-the-scenes story.

From the start of the Armory Show’s planning, AAPS leadership aimed not to merely shock viewers, but rather to educate them in the latest European styles by tracing a history of modern European art from Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres and Eugène Delacroix through the Impressionists, Fauves, and Cubism. By couching the most radical styles within a wider modernist trajectory, the AAPS hoped to illustrate a pattern of initial shock and eventual acceptance with every new movement. Styles like Impressionism, which had once been radical, were widely accepted in America by 1913, a perspective that assured viewers of continuity in the face of change. The Armory Show was not an isolated phenomenon, and thus The Armory Show at 100 will place it within the wider cultural climate of early 20th-century New York City. The year 1913 was a crucial moment of social, political, and cultural change. The inauguration of Woodrow Wilson, women’s suffrage, and labor unrest were all at the forefront of current events. Moreover, the very fabric of New York was changing; in 1913 Grand Central Terminal was re-opened as the world’s largest train station and the new Woolworth Building became the tallest skyscraper anywhere. In addition to the visual arts, Americans were becoming aware of new forms of music and literature being developed in Europe, such as Stravinsky’s radical Rite of Spring and Gertrude Stein’s modernist prose. The N-YHS exhibition will include artifacts, historical documents, and archival photographs that evoke the multiple manifestations of the “new” evident in 1913. This interdisciplinary approach is furthered by the accompanying catalogue featuring 31 essays by experts in a range of fields, from art history to history, music, and literature.

For 21st-century viewers accustomed to the secure place of Post-Impressionism, Fauvism, and Cubism in the history of art, it can be difficult to imagine why these works were received with such bewilderment in 1913. To help visitors recover the original Armory Show experience, N-YHS will include a gallery that demonstrates the dominant conservative taste at the moment of the Armory Show, including paintings exhibited at the National Academy of Design in 1913 and Old Master works purchased by New York collectors.

Much of the Armory Show’s mythic status has centered on the notion that it categorically changed the American art world. In fact, its legacy is much more complex. The single greatest accomplishment of the show was likely its effect on the public’s awareness of modern art, but American artists responded to the new movements in a variety of ways. Stuart Davis called it “the greatest single influence I have experienced in my work,” but for others, it did not inspire any change in their practice. Still others, such as Davies, briefly dabbled in abstraction before...
returning to their previous styles. Yet the Armory Show powerfully transformed American collecting. John Quinn and Arthur Jerome Eddy were the most enthusiastic buyers there, and by the show’s close 174 works had been sold, totaling $44,148. The exhibition surely inspired new interest in European modernism because more than two thirds of the sales were of European works. 19

Arthur B. Davies had no doubt about the legacy of the Armory Show when he proclaimed, “New York will never be the same again.” 20 With statements such as this, the Armory mythos was born immediately, and it has subsequently become a well-worn trope in the history of American art. The Armory Show at 100 recaptures the “new spirit” a century later, offering an exciting opportunity to view the iconic masterworks that rocked the American art world in 1913.

Information: New-York Historical Society, 170 Central Park West, New York, NY 10024, 212.873.3400. The Society’s website, http://armory.nyhistory.org, offers details on other commemorations of the Armory Show occurring nationwide. The exhibition is accompanied by a richly illustrated, 500-page catalogue, edited by N-YHS co-curators Kimberly Orcutt and Marilyn Kushner and co-published with D. Giles Ltd. On November 9, the N-YHS will host a day-long symposium at which leading scholars will present their views of the Armory Show and its contexts.

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Editor’s Note: To mark the Armory Show centenary, the U.S. Postal Service has issued a collection of 12 stamps highlighting key modern American artworks created between 1912 and 1931 (https://store.usps.com).

Endnotes