



John Marin
American, 1870 - 1953

The Written Sea

1952

oil on canvas

overall: 55.88 x 71.12 cm (22 x 28 in.)

framed: 68.58 x 83.82 x 3.81 cm (27 x 33 x 1 1/2 in.)

Inscription: lower right: Marin 52

Gift of Deborah and Ed Shein 2009.12.1

ENTRY

“The oldest living American practitioner in oils and watercolor is still, apparently, the best.” [1] The subject of this praise was the painter John Marin, and it was conveyed in a brief exhibition review by Henry McBride published in the February 1953 issue of *Artnews*. The review appeared shortly after Marin’s final exhibition, held at Edith Halpert’s Downtown Gallery from December 30, 1952, through January 24, 1953. The checklist for the show documents 11 oils and 13 watercolors, all from 1952; it also carries Marin’s overview of the exhibition in which he describes the show as “composed of movements related to Sea-Land and Circus.” The term “movement” was essential to his discussions of his art, and it was often incorporated into his titles during his later years. Writing about this diverse array of paintings, McBride—always a Marin enthusiast—noted an “extra crispness” in the artist’s paint strokes, a quality he attributed to Marin’s emphatic calligraphy, which he further described as “streaked with the flowing lines that the best Chinese masters love to use.”

The Written Sea was among the oils on view in the Downtown Gallery exhibition, and in its title Marin tacitly acknowledged the boldly calligraphic aspect of his

project. Painted when the artist was in his eighties, *The Written Sea* is a pinnacle of Marin's late career, during which oil painting played a central role in his practice. William Agee has called *The Written Sea* "one of the most glorious bursts of old-age art in the 20th century, matched only by Picasso, Matisse, and Hofmann." [2] Some 40 years earlier, Sheldon Reich described the painting in his catalogue raisonné of the artist's oils and watercolors as "the culmination of [Marin's] urge to translate movement into line." This notion was echoed by a subheading, "Written Paint," in a 1971 *Time* magazine article about Marin's work by Robert Hughes. [3] The title of the article itself, "Fugues in Space," additionally alludes to music, and thus to the multiple associations with movement that musical terms inspire.

Marin made oil paintings throughout his working life, although in smaller numbers and less consistently than the watercolors that brought him his greatest fame. The earliest known oils date to 1907 and depict industrial mills in Meaux, France, painted during the artist's years in Europe (1905–1910), during which he also created approximately 100 etchings: spirited evocations of buildings, bridges, and waterways in France, Germany, Holland, and Italy that Marin drew on copper with a sharply pointed tool, bit with acid, inked, and printed. [4] This indirect and complicated process helped form the foundation for his lifelong exploration of an expansive range of linear elements (drawn, painted, and incised) that was essential to his subsequent work, regardless of media.

In general, Marin's canvases received less exposure and, consequently, less critical attention than his works on paper, both during his lifetime and posthumously. [5] Moreover, critical writing about the oils has generally been less positive than that about the watercolors. [6] This circumstance undoubtedly originated in Alfred Stieglitz's lack of interest in Marin's work in the oil medium. Indeed, Marin's first exhibition composed solely of oils, *John Marin Oils: 1903–1950*, did not take place until his final show at An American Place, four years after Stieglitz died. [7] Among the works included in this exhibition were selections from the hundred or so small paintings known as the Weehawken Sequence, Marin's initial significant body of oil paintings (on canvas-covered boards). These Weehawken scenes have long been controversial in terms of their dates, with attributions ranging from 1903/1904, as reported by MacKinley Helm in 1949 (based on information provided by Marin), to as late as 1916, as cataloged by Reich. [8] Anomalous in terms of medium among Marin's early works, whenever they were done, the Weehawken Sequence as a group presents a strong and coherent statement of the approach to art-making that remained critical to Marin: a commitment to a site seen, neither illustrated nor

discarded, but documented as transformed—abstraction based on nature.

Apart from the Weehawken images, Marin worked in oil only occasionally until the early 1930s, about the time he began to spend summers at Cape Split, Nova Scotia. At that point his work on canvas blossomed, and the interplay among methods he employed in watercolor and in oil enhanced his achievements in both. Through the 1930s he often worked the watercolors more heavily than previously, with broadly painted layers of color modified by the sort of vigorous rubbing out that would more readily be expected with oil. Moving into the 1940s, this emphasis on weight shifted, and the important role paper plays in watercolor inserted itself into the oils, which often were marked by expanses of open canvas. (There was neither a sharp break in the artist's methodology, nor any consistent overall change; instead, new approaches were added to his array of processes.) During these years, Marin increasingly made use of an ink line in the watercolors, enhancing the drama of many compositions. This important linear component soon found its way into the oils as well.

The complexity of Marin's approach is vividly exemplified in *The Written Sea*. The matte white of primed but otherwise unpainted canvas is highlighted by touches of brilliant white oil paint, thickly applied in abundant daubs and strokes. Similarly varied are the dancing marks of rich umber, deep blue, and bright red that create the registers of rocks, sea, and sky typical of Marin's Maine seascapes, seen previously in *Sunset*. Bracketing the horizon line in both works are suggestions of sailing vessels, likewise essential to Marin's Maine. The palette Marin employed in *The Written Sea* is more limited in its number of hues than is usual in the oils, as is its essentially out-of-the-tube nature. More commonly Marin's oil colors are subdued by intermixing. However, the limited palette references on a larger scale the lively color touches that play a crucial role in Marin's sketchbook pages, in particular those that feature the circus, a favored topic in Marin's later years [fig. 1].

The Circus sketchbooks offer clues not only to Marin's palette, but also to his compositional structures [fig. 2]. While his visual spaces are dynamic and engaged by movement at every stage of his career, over its course Marin's strategies for this activity shift considerably. Late works are dynamic in new ways that reflect the artist's growing attention to aerial trapeze artists slashing through space, creating eccentric shapes as they enclose segments of air. The energy relates, of course, to Marin's more geometrically boxed buildings and boats of three decades earlier. In *The Written Sea*, for example, the trapeze is most clearly suggested by parallel black diagonals, left and right, that hover at the edges of the sky. But suggestions

of a trapeze may also be found in busier areas of the canvas, at both the left and right lower corners.

Two years after purchasing his home at Cape Split, Marin wrote to Stieglitz that “here the sea is so damned insistent that houses and land things won’t appear much in my pictures.” [9] This declaration is borne out by canvases such as *The Written Sea*, in which, working from side to side and top to bottom, Marin laid in the pervasive calligraphy, using both black oil paint and black ink. At least some of the latter marks were applied with a medical syringe, an unconventional tool Marin added to his repertoire during a 1951 hospital stay, when he spent as much time as possible sketching views from the window of his room. [10]

While developing new ways of working, Marin also reflected on his life. In the 1950s he made oil paintings based on photographs by Stieglitz dating to decades earlier, for example of his mother and of himself with his parents. These subjects were reflective of past experience, yet Marin’s thought processes required new methodology, a distillation of form not from nature but instead derived from flat photographic images that equally became a source for spatial “movements” on canvas.

The Written Sea pushes at the outer edges of Marin’s late, highly experimental style, which is marked by a shift from his early work not only in method, but also in attitude. Clearly Marin was aware of the younger painters of the New York school, whose growing reputations would soon come to supplant his own. Most evident in *The Written Sea* is his awareness of the art of Jackson Pollock (American, 1912 - 1956). Preceding this canvas by three years, however, in 1950 the painter and critic Louis Finkelstein compared Marin’s late oils to the paintings of Willem de Kooning, citing parallels in what he viewed as both men’s painterly focus on intellectually structuring a canvas rather than deriving inspiration from a source in nature. [11] Marin, of course, never left his source, and what Finkelstein sees is a reordering of priorities rather than a new engagement. The abstraction of the late works mandates a viewer to consider the elements of a site-inspired composition (trees, rocks, sea) as secondary to the character of the visual situation (qualities of movement, light, rhythm).

A special aspect of *The Written Sea* is that it retains Marin’s original hand-painted frame. [12] The artist’s concern for the edges and enclosures of his work goes back to the etching and watercolor compositions of the 1910s. By the early 1920s Marin was using special mounts for watercolors, often including elaborate borders along

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the edges of both the painted sheets and/or their mounts, to dramatically frame his already dynamic images. He also had begun painting the wooden frames themselves.

In the early 1930s Marin occasionally painted complex borders around the edges of his oils on canvas, soon to be followed by wooden frames that he carved and painted, like the one seen here. One can only suspect that many paintings no longer so framed were presented that way originally. The frames would have been subsequently removed by their owners—unfortunately, as it is clear that the framing element was essential to Marin’s concept of the work as a whole. In the case of *The Written Sea*, the frame is relatively spare compared to others of the period that enclose Maine mountain landscapes and New York cityscapes. It suggests the possibility of engaging in reflective and peaceful thought while looking out from the shoreline (only one of many ways to experience the sea), in contrast to the daily tumult of much of our worldly experience.

Some months after *The Written Sea* was completed, Marin discussed his art, and specifically his approach to the sea, with critic Emily Genauer:

The sea, for instance, wants to be horizontal, but then the horizontals begin to play, to move. Sympathetic lines turn up all over the canvas, a diagonal here, a patch of color there, all related to each other, all echoes of each other, all living together, all adding up to a total shape, but always adding up to life. [13]

Ruth Fine

September 29, 2016

COMPARATIVE FIGURES

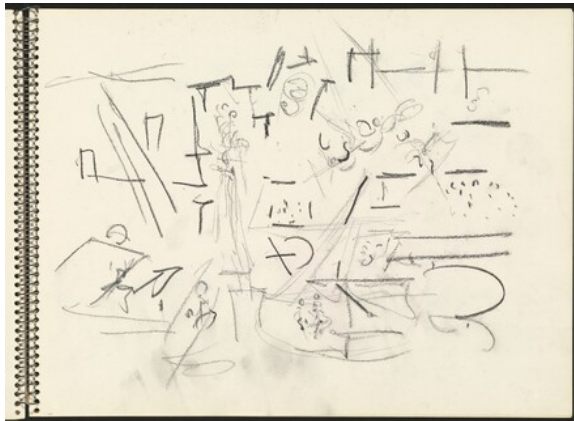


fig. 1 Sketchbook drawing, John Marin, *Circus Abstraction*, c. 1950, black chalk and graphite, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Gift of John Marin Jr., 1986.54.163.m

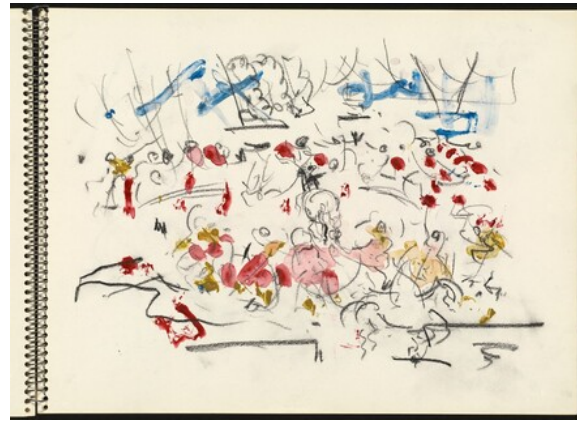


fig. 2 Sketchbook drawing, John Marin, *Circus Scene*, c. 1950, black chalk and watercolor, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Gift of John Marin Jr., 1986.54.163.n

NOTES

- [1] Henry McBride, “Ageless Marin,” *Artnews* 51 (Feb. 1953): 58.
This entry is a revised version of text that was originally published in Charles Brock, Nancy Anderson, and Harry Cooper, *American Modernism: The Shein Collection* (Washington, DC, 2010).
- [2] William Agee, “John Marin’s Greatness: The Late Oils & Post-1945 Art,” in *John Marin: The Late Oils* (New York, 2008), 15.
- [3] Robert Hughes, “Art: Fugues in Space,” *Time* (Feb. 22, 1971): 62.
- [4] The etchings are recorded in Carl Zigrosser, *The Complete Etchings of John Marin* (Philadelphia, 1969).
- [5] On Marin’s oils see Klaus Kertess, *Marin in Oil* (Southampton, NY, 1987).
- [6] Unfortunately, this continues; see Karen Rosenberg, “Art in Review: John Marin,” *The New York Times* (Dec. 19, 2008): C28. Writing about two Marin exhibitions in New York—one of watercolors at Meredith Ward Fine Art, the other of late oils at Adelson Galleries—Rosenberg concluded that the shows affirmed Marin “was a singularly talented water-colorist and a so-so oil painter.”
- [7] With financial assistance from Dorothy Norman, Marin and O’Keeffe kept An American Place open for occasional exhibitions through 1950.

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- [8] MacKinley Helm discussed the Weehawken Sequence in *John Marin* (New York, 1948), 9. Hilton Kramer agreed with this early date in his eponymous essay in *John Marin: The Painted Frame* (New York, 2000), 13, n. 3. In Sheldon Reich's two-volume *John Marin: A Stylistic Analysis and Catalogue Raisonné* (Tucson, AZ, 1970), the paintings are discussed extensively on pages 85–95. This writer's views are laid out in Ruth Fine, *John Marin* (Washington, DC, 1990), 119.
- [9] Letter from Marin to Stieglitz, Addison, Maine, Sept. 10, 1935, in Dorothy Norman, ed., *The Selected Writings of John Marin* (New York, 1949), 171
- [10] Filling sketchbooks and drawing on loose sheets of paper had been an essential part of Marin's image-development strategy dating back to his teens. Throughout his life, etchings, watercolors, and oils were developed from brief studies in graphite, ink, crayon, and watercolor, often in combination. Many drawings were torn from sketchbooks by the artist himself, and others have been dismantled. Eighteen books donated to the National Gallery of Art, either by John Marin Jr. or Norma Boom Marin, track the range of his subjects and styles. New York skyscrapers as well as populous city street scenes, the Maine landscape and water views, and the circus are all well represented. Sheets that are essentially painted in watercolor are not included in Reich, but an entire sketchbook from 1952 is reproduced in Ruth Fine, *John Marin* (Washington, DC, 1990), 272–275. It shows the range of Marin's approach during a limited period of time.
- [11] Louis Finkelstein, "Marin and de Kooning," *Magazine of Art* 43 (Oct. 1950): 202–206.
- [12] See *John Marin: The Painted Frame*, with an essay by Hilton Kramer (New York, 2000). *The Written Sea* serves as the frontispiece for Kramer's essay.
- [13] Quote in Emily Genauer, "Marin's Shorthand," *New York Herald Tribune, Sunday Magazine* (Dec. 28, 1952), Marin Family Papers, Clippings 1952–1953.

TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The painting is executed on a medium-weight, plain-weave canvas that was pre-primed with a white ground. It is still on its original stretcher and therefore retains its original dimensions. The paint was applied directly, much like a colored drawing, leaving most of the ground visible in the final image. Infrared examination shows no additional underdrawing serving as a guide for the painting. [1] Given the linear nature of the painting, no x-radiograph was necessary as there were no changes that could not be detected visually. At the lower left edge in a localized

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area the red paint appears to have been wiped away with solvent. There are small vertical drips of black paint to the left of center. Based on the paint layer's overall thinness and extreme opacity, some of the glossier lines might have been executed in black ink rather than with the oil paint that seems to comprise the rest of the painting. There are a few areas where paint was applied on top of already dried paint, but in general the paint was applied wet over wet. The painting is unvarnished and in very good condition, although it is somewhat grimy.

TECHNICAL NOTES

[1] The infrared examination was conducted using a Santa Barbara Focalplane InSb camera fitted with a J astronomy filter.

PROVENANCE

The artist's daughter-in-law, Norma B. Marin; (Meredith Ward Fine Art, New York); purchased 2006 by Deborah and Ed Shein, Providence; gift 2009 to NGA.

EXHIBITION HISTORY

1952 John Marin Exhibition, The Downtown Gallery, New York, 1952-1953.

1954 John Marin, The Philadelphia Art Alliance, 1954, no. 44.

1955 John Marin, Art Galleries of the University of California, Los Angeles, 1955-1956, no. 36.

1956 John Marin, Arts Council Gallery, London, 1956, no. 29.

1970 John Marin, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1970, no. 154.

1987 Marin in Oil, The Parris Art Museum, Southampton, New York, 1987, no. 53.

1990 John Marin, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1990, no. 250, repro.

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2000 John Marin: *The Painted Frame*, Richard York Gallery, New York, 2000, no. 34.

2008 John Marin: *The Late Oils*, Adelson Galleries, New York, 2008, no. 12.

2010 *American Modernism: The Shein Collection*, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 2010–2011, no. 12, repro.

2011 John Marin: *Modernism at Midcentury*, Portland (Maine) Museum of Art; Amon Carter Museum of American Art, Fort Worth; Addison Gallery of American Art, Andover, 2011–2012, unnumbered catalogue, pl. 57.

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- 1953 *Art News* 51 (February 1953): 58.
- 1953 Faison, Jr., S. Lane. "Art." *The Nation* 176 (7 February 1953): 133.
- 1970 Gray, Cleve, ed. *John Marin by John Marin*. New York, 1970: 171, repro.
- 1970 Reich, Sheldon. *John Marin: A Stylistic Analysis and Catalogue Raisonné*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1970, pp. 235–236, no. 52.50.
- 1971 Hughes, Robert. "Fugues in Space." *Time* (22 February 1971): 62.
- 1987 Smith, Roberta. "Art: John Marin's Oils at an L.I. Museum." *The New York Times* (14 August 1987).
- 1988 Tuchman, Phyllis. "Another Marin." *Art in America* 76 (June 1988): 59, repro.
- 2000 Fine, Ruth E. "John Marin, an Art Fully Resolved." In *Modern Art and America: Alfred Stieglitz and His New York Galleries*. Exh. cat. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 2000: 351–352, repro.
- 2010 Brock, Charles, Nancy Anderson, and Harry Cooper. *American Modernism: The Shein Collection*. Exh. cat. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 2010: no. 12, repro.

To cite: Ruth Fine, "John Marin/*The Written Sea*/1952," *American Paintings, 1900–1945*, NGA Online Editions, <https://purl.org/nga/collection/artobject/140538> (accessed May 20, 2024).