ENTRY

Aptly described by Alfred Barr, the scholar and first director of the Museum of Modern Art, as a "kinetograph of the flickering shutters of speed through subways and under skyscrapers," [1] *Rush Hour, New York* is arguably the most important of Max Weber’s early modernist works. The painting combines the shallow, fragmented spaces of cubism with the rhythmic, rapid-fire forms of futurism to capture New York City’s frenetic pace and dynamism. [2] New York’s new mass transit systems, the elevated railways (or “els”) and subways, were among the most visible products of the new urban age. Such a subject was ideally suited to the new visual languages of modernism that Weber learned about during his earlier encounters with Pablo Picasso (Spanish, 1881 - 1973) and the circle of artists who gathered around Gertrude Stein in Paris in the first decade of the 20th century.

Weber had previously dealt with the theme of urban transportation in *New York* [fig. 1], in which he employed undulating serpentine forms to indicate the paths of elevated trains through lower Manhattan’s skyscrapers and over the Brooklyn Bridge. In 1915, in addition to *Rush Hour*, he also painted *Grand Central Terminal* [fig. 2], which has been interpreted as “rendering in non-representational terms a consciousness of the assault on the body and senses that the daily rush of the crowds has on the urban traveler.” [3] The term “rush hour” was relatively new in 1915 and almost exclusively associated with New York City. According to historian of slang Irving Lewis Allen, it had been “coined by 1890 to denote the new urban phenomenon of several hundred thousand workers and shoppers crushing onto mass transit to go to and from the center each weekday morning and evening.” [4] One of the expression’s earliest appearances was in the caption to an illustration

Max Weber
American, born Poland, 1881 - 1961

*Rush Hour, New York*

1915

oil on canvas
overall: 92 x 76.9 cm (36 1/4 x 30 1/4 in.)
framed: 111.7 x 95.9 cm (44 x 37 3/4 in.)
Inscription: lower right: MAX WEBER 1915
Gift of the Avalon Foundation 1970.6.1

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by T. de Thulstrup in Harper’s Weekly on February 8, 1890 [fig. 3]; “A Station Scene in the ‘Rush’ Hour of the Manhattan Elevated Railroad.” The els became an integral part of New York’s cityscape and appear in many paintings of the period, such as John Sloan’s The City from Greenwich Village.

According to Weber’s early biographer Holger Cahill, the images that appear in the artist’s New York paintings “are not simply fantasies, but are made up of many visual contacts with actual scenes.” [5] That being said, Rush Hour more nearly approaches total abstraction than most contemporary European cubist paintings, and individual forms are extremely difficult to recognize. No trains are visible, and, unlike New York, there is no indication of their routes. The composition is devoid of human presence. It is uncertain whether the viewer is looking at the entrance to a subway station, the underground station itself, an elevated train, or some combination of all three. Given the similarity of the architectural forms in lower center of the painting to those in Grand Central Terminal, the first option is perhaps the most plausible. Regardless, Weber’s primary aim was not to record objective details but rather to give form to the dynamism and velocity generated by a machine whose immense power had transformed and energized the urban setting. He dispensed with any indication of a specific time, so there is no sense of whether this is a morning or evening rush hour. Curvilinear forms, zigzags, jagged angles, and radiating force-lines explode and intersect in multiple directions, expressing both the subway's movements and its dematerializing effect on the environment. As one writer has described it, “The station explodes with the thunder of the passing machine.” [6]

Art historians have unanimously praised the vividness with which Weber’s Rush Hour captures the modern urban environment’s essence. Lloyd Goodrich considered it the "most forceful" of the artist's New York City paintings, and noted that "the thrusting diagonals and energetic play of lines expressed the turmoil of rush hour, while the representation of elements suggested the city's mechanical, multitudinous character." [7] The art historian Robert Rosenblum has noted how "the spectator is thrust into the most frenetic confusion of the city's daily peaks of mechanical and human activity. Rolling wheels, skyscrapers, station platforms are fragmented and recomposed as the whining, metallic engine of a vast urban machine; and, in particular, the sensation of rushing motion in all directions is suggested by the repetitive sequences of spiky, angular patterns that appear to roar past the viewer like an express train." [8] Viewing Rush Hour as an image of
urban transportation, the scholar Dominic Ricciotti called the painting "a paradigm of locomotion; in choosing the twice daily rush through the city, the artist dramatized those peak periods when the urban machine churned most forcefully. *Rush Hour* embodied the futurist principle of 'universal dynamism'—that the world is continually in a state of flux." [9]

Unlike John Marin (American, 1870 - 1953) and Joseph Stella (American, 1877 - 1946), who had direct contact with futurist artists in Europe, Weber for the most part had to assimilate the style from secondhand sources, such as photographs, newspaper articles, and descriptions by other artists. [10] He was certainly familiar with Marcel Duchamp's mechanomorphic *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2* [fig. 4], but rather than strictly confining himself to representing physical motion, he sought a more comprehensive personification of the urban environment transformed by new modes of mass transportation. Whereas Duchamp's robotic figure possesses a somewhat sinister, enigmatic quality, Weber's attitude toward the machine is less troubling. His highly individualistic form of futurism lacks the more aggressive violence and anarchism characteristic of the movement's Italian progenitors. In this work, he provides us with an image of the early 20th-century New York rush hour as a dynamic, enthralling, and awe-inspiring experience. *Rush Hour, New York* is largely devoid of the petty annoyances and frustrations that continue to bedevil commuters in cities all over the world. As Allen put it, Weber "abstracts the human tumult and exposes a new dimension of its meaning." [11]

Robert Torchia
September 29, 2016

COMPARATIVE FIGURES
fig. 1 Max Weber, New York, 1913, oil on canvas, private collection. Image courtesy Guggenheim, Asher Associates

fig. 2 Max Weber, Grand Central Terminal, 1915, oil on canvas, Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid. www.museothyssen.org
fig. 3 T. de Thulstrup, "A Station Scene in the 'Rush' House of the Manhattan Elevated Railroad," from Harper's Weekly 34, no. 1729 (February 8, 1890), Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Massachusetts


NOTES


[2] The other paintings are New York at Night (The Archer M. Huntington Art Gallery, The University of Texas at Austin), New York Department Store
TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The pre-primed, finely woven linen support remains unlined and mounted on its original stretcher. The smooth, white priming remains exposed in many areas, and thus functions as an integral part of the design. The artist applied oil paint rather thinly, and extensive charcoal underdrawing is visible through much of the translucent paint film. The painting is in very good condition. The surface is coated with a moderately thick layer of natural resin varnish that has discolored.
PROVENANCE

The artist [1881-1961]; his estate; purchased 1970 through (Bernard Danenberg Galleries, Inc., New York) by NGA.

EXHIBITION HISTORY


1973 City and Machine Between the Wars: 1914-1945, Museum of Fine Arts, St. Petersburg, Florida; Loch Haven Art Center, Orlando; Cummer Gallery of Art, Jacksonville, 1973-1974, no. 15.


1982 American Masters of the Twentieth Century, Oklahoma Art Center, Oklahoma City; Terra Museum of American Art, Evanston, Illinois, 1982, no. 53, repro. (shown only in Oklahoma City).

1982 Max Weber: American Modern, Jewish Museum, New York; Norton Gallery and School of Art, West Palm Beach; McNay Art Institute, San Antonio; Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha, 1982-1983, no. 44, repro. (shown only in West Palm Beach and Omaha in 1983).


BIBLIOGRAPHY

2000 Oja, Carol J. "George Antheil's Ballet Mecanique and Transatlantic