



John Marin
American, 1870 - 1953

Buildings with Snowbank, Cliffside, New Jersey

1928

oil on canvas board

overall: 22.5 x 28.3 cm (8 7/8 x 11 1/8 in.)

Inscription: lower right: Marin 28; across upper center reverse, by the artist's son: (Farm Buildings)-1928-incorrectly identified-Marin garage-part of Marin house & neighboring homes, Cliffside, N.J. / 9 x 11 SR#140[the "140" crossed out] SR28.16; upper right reverse: NBM 2/21/84

Gift of John Marin, Jr. 1986.54.2

ENTRY

In 1920 John Marin and his wife, Marie, bought a seven-room house at 243 Clark Terrace [fig. 1] in Cliffside Park, a borough in Bergen County, New Jersey. The town was located atop the Hudson Palisades, within easy commuting distance of Manhattan. A local reporter described Marin's winter studio there as "a quite matter-of-fact place of work in the rear of his home. It's big, airy and of course has the invaluable north light exposure. Wide windows spread against the wall and through them you can see a lot of the sky over Cliffside Park as well as its nearby backyards." [1] Contrasting the views he produced every summer in Maine, Marin often painted his unassuming residential neighborhood in New Jersey covered in snow.

Trained as an architect early in his career, Marin was adept at rendering urban cityscapes such as New York. In the Gallery's *Buildings with Snowbank, Cliffside, New Jersey* and *House with Dutch Roof* he turned his expert eye to the suburban

architecture of New Jersey. The works date from shortly before the Great Depression, when Marin took a renewed interest in experimenting with oils. [2] In both Marin applied the techniques of watercolor, the medium that he had become most closely associated with and one that many viewed as inherently more modernist than traditional oil painting. The most distinctive features of the two works—their small scale and the rapid, lively application of pigment—were clearly informed by Marin’s mastery of watercolor.

An inscription by the artist’s son, John Marin Jr., identifies the subject of *Buildings with Snowbank* as the garage behind the artist’s home. Part of the Marin house is visible at the far left, recognizable by the rusticated stone at the base of its wall. Recently shoveled snow is piled up against the sides of the buildings. The point of view—looking toward the garage from Marin’s driveway—emphasizes the buildings’ abstract geometric forms. The Dutch-style roof with three windows rising directly above the garage also appears, from the elevated vantage point of Marin’s studio, in *House with Dutch Roof*. *Although the composition is not as geometrically rigorous as Buildings with Snowbank* and Marin’s interpretation of the subject is considerably more spontaneous and expressive in *House with Dutch Roof*, especially in his treatment of the rutted snow along the roof in the foreground and the background details, the two works were likely executed at the same time.

The truncated forms and partial vistas found in Marin’s works of the late 1920s drew upon the lessons of cubism he had learned from the displays of works by Pablo Picasso (Spanish, 1881 - 1973) at *Alfred Stieglitz’s* 291 gallery from 1911 to 1917. During the early 1930s Stieglitz, working in a similar vein, embarked on a series of photographs looking out *from the windows of his new gallery*, *An American Place*, and *from his modern high-rise apartment building* in New York, *The Shelton*.

Ruth Fine, in her discussion of two additional oil paintings of Cliffside from 1929—*From My Window, Cliffside, New Jersey* [fig. 2] and *Winter from My Back Window, Cliffside, New Jersey*—noted: “dating from long after Marin had begun investigating abstraction, [they] exemplify the fact that virtually every year he made paintings of close fidelity to their sources in nature as well as paintings in which formal or ideational notions prevail.” [3]

Robert Torchia

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COMPARATIVE FIGURES



fig. 1 Dorothy Norman, *John Marin House, Cliffside, N.J.*, 1930s, gelatin silver print, Collection Center for Creative Photography. © 1998 Center for Creative Photography, The University of Arizona Foundation



fig. 2 John Marin, *From My Window, Cliffside, New Jersey*, 1929, oil on canvas, Detroit Institute of Arts, Bequest of Robert H. Tannahill. © Detroit Institute of Arts / Bridgeman Images

NOTES

- [1] “Noted Artist Abhors All ‘isms’ Except Real ‘ism’ in Art,” *Palisadian*, Dec. 11, 1947, quoted in Ruth Fine, *John Marin* (Washington, DC, 1990), 110.
- [2] Sheldon Reich, *John Marin: Part I, A Stylistic Analysis; Part II, Catalogue Raisonné*, 2 vols. (Tucson, AZ, 1970), 1:192.
- [3] Ruth Fine, *John Marin* (Washington, DC, 1990), 111.

TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The painting was executed on a commercially prepared artist canvas board that was glued to a secondary support of low quality pulp cardboard. The canvas board was prepared with a commercially applied, thin, grayish, off-white ground. Examination of the painting with infrared reflectography shows a free-form outlining of the major design elements in the painting with what appears to be a charcoal medium. [1] There is also an underdrawn pencil line running the entire distance vertically three-quarters of an inch from the right edge. Within the guide provided by the drawing the paint was built up in mildly impastoed, active brush strokes with a brush that has an approximate width of three-quarters of an inch. The finer, less broad paint applications that define the edges of the buildings were probably executed with the same brush on its side. The painting is in very good condition with only small losses in all four corners. In the X-radiograph it appears that there are two losses filled with white lead in the upper right; however, these are actually dabs of white lead paint found on the reverse of the secondary support. The secondary pulp cardboard support is quite chewed up along its edges and has a water stain at the lower left. The primary support is delaminating from the secondary support in the lower right. The painting was unvarnished but has been made gray by a significant layer of grime.

TECHNICAL NOTES

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

PROVENANCE

The artist [1870-1953]; his estate; by inheritance to his son, John C. Marin, Jr. [1914-1988], Cape Split, Maine; gift 1986 to NGA.

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