



John Marin  
American, 1870 - 1953

## *Untitled: Circus*

c. 1953

oil on canvas

overall: 56.1 x 71.1 cm (22 1/16 x 28 in.)

Inscription: across top stretcher bar reverse: unfinished - of circus - Archives ["unfinished", "of", and "Archives" crossed out]

Untitled: Circus, ca. 1953 - 22 x 28 NO SR# NBM 1/13/84

Gift of John Marin, Jr. 1986.54.12

---

### ENTRY

Beginning in 1934, the circus became a major theme in John Marin's art. Ruth Fine noted that this subject "undoubtedly served in some respects as a metaphor for the city," and that it would also "have signified the human condition in much the same way it did for other artists of the period, from Picasso to Walt Kuhn." [1] Marin's fascination may have been stimulated by his familiarity with the popular *Circus in Paint* exhibition that had been held at the Whitney Studio Galleries in 1929. This interest intensified in his last years; in 1950 he executed a series of six watercolors of the subject, and in 1952 he painted two oils. [2] This untitled painting is not listed in Sheldon Reich's catalogue raisonné of Marin's work, but its stylistic similarity to *The Circus* of 1953 (R. 53.12) suggests that it was also executed in 1953, probably with the aid of earlier sketches that Marin had made during a performance. [3]

The majority of Marin's circus subjects, such as the watercolors *Circus Elephants* (R. 41.10 and R. 41.11) and the oil painting *Circus Clown* (R. 44.3), represent clearly defined and recognizable images of animals and performers. Reich observed that these early figural works "often present a rather disconcerting world populated by

## NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART ONLINE EDITIONS

*American Paintings, 1900–1945*

helpless dolls.” [4] The remarkable freedom and spontaneity of this very late and nearly abstract oil is closely related to some of the graphite and colored pencil sketches that Marin drew in his sketchbook while he attended the circus.

The artist was primarily concerned with capturing the circus’s rhythmic, centrifugal movement that nearly subsumes all details. From a vantage point high up in the stands, the viewer looks down over the heads of other spectators in the right foreground and views the equestrian performers in the illuminated ring. The rectangular configuration at the upper left of the composition is probably a trapeze, and calligraphic lines across the top may indicate its trajectory through the air, as well as the steps and seats in the opposite side of the stands. The energetic, rapidly applied brushstrokes, contrasting paint textures, and diverse repertoire of forms coalesce to create a sense of the intense excitement generated by a circus performance.

Robert Torchia

July 24, 2024

---

### NOTES

- [1] Ruth Fine, *John Marin* (Washington, DC, 1990), 256.
- [2] Sheldon Reich, *John Marin: A Stylistic Analysis and Catalogue Raisonné* (Tucson, 1970). These are, respectively, the *Circus Scenes* (R. 50.4–R. 50.9), *The Circus No. 1* (R. 52.46), and *The Circus No. 2* (R. 52.47).
- [3] Sheldon Reich, *John Marin: A Stylistic Analysis and Catalogue Raisonné* (Tucson, 1970).
- [4] Sheldon Reich, *John Marin: A Stylistic Analysis and Catalogue Raisonné* (Tucson, 1970), 1:210.
- 

### TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The medium-weight, plain-weave fabric support is unlined and remains on its original stretcher. The tacking margins are intact, and the top margin retains its selvage edge. The artist rapidly applied paint over a commercially prepared, moderately thick white ground layer. There is minimal abrasion around the edges, and some paint has cracked around the tacking margin folds. The painting is

*Untitled: Circus*

© National Gallery of Art, Washington

**oe** NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART ONLINE EDITIONS  
*American Paintings, 1900–1945*

unvarnished.

Michael Swicklik

July 24, 2024

---

## 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.

---

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

1992 *American Paintings: An Illustrated Catalogue*. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1992: 234, repro.

---

**To cite:** Robert Torchia, “John Marin/*Untitled: Circus/c. 1953*,” *American Paintings, 1900–1945*, NGA Online Editions, <https://purl.org/nga/collection/artobject/67928/2024-07-24> (accessed July 24, 2024).