



John Marin  
American, 1870 - 1953

## *Grey Sea*

1938

oil on canvas

overall: 55.9 x 71.1 x 1.9 cm (22 x 28 x 3/4 in.)

framed: 72.4 x 87.4 x 5.7 cm (28 1/2 x 34 7/16 x 2 1/4 in.)

Inscription: lower right: Marin 38

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. John Marin, Jr. 1987.19.1

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### ENTRY

In 1933, John Marin spent his first summer on Cape Split in Addison, Maine. He experienced an immediate affinity for this remote, sparsely populated, and rugged area so far removed from tourist traffic. The following year, the Marins bought a house in South Addison that was built on a rocky promontory overlooking Pleasant Bay. Marin spent a considerable amount of time on his open front porch painting the sea, which was only about 25 feet away. In 1936, he informed Stieglitz: “Here the Sea is so damned insistent that houses and land things won’t appear much in my pictures.”<sup>[1]</sup> That same year he told an art critic: “I find my brush moving in the rhythm of wave or sail or rock.”<sup>[2]</sup> Ruth Fine has described how the sea became one of the artist’s major motifs: “Moment by moment, day by day, season by season, year by year, he continued to chart the changes that took place in the bay outside his house and throughout the surrounding area. Portraying the sea in all its moods—calm or violent, gray or filled with color, luminous or leaden—he created an extraordinary record of what must be one of the most beautiful places in the world.”<sup>[3]</sup>

*Grey Sea*, one of Marin's most evocative marine images, is not rendered in watercolor, the predominant medium of his career, but rather oil, a medium he began to explore more extensively beginning in the late 1920s.<sup>[4]</sup> His exuberant, expressionistic brushwork has allowed him to achieve an astonishing variety of textures, ranging from thick twists of heavily applied paint seemingly squeezed directly from the tube, to short, straight brushstrokes, to smoothly flowing passages, and even, by way of contrast, to a reserved area of raw, untouched canvas at the bottom center of the picture offset by the swirling pigments around it—effects that could not have been achieved with watercolor. The vigorous technique conveys a vivid sense of a primal, elemental clash between sea, sky, and land. More specifically, *Grey Sea* is thought to have been painted in the aftermath of a serious hurricane that ravaged lower New England and Long Island for nearly two weeks in September 1938. This may explain the patch of bare canvas with its graphic spiral, which perhaps functions as the “eye of the storm” in Marin's painting.

Marin represented the ocean's waves as stylized, triangular configurations that assume their shape as they emerge from the sea, only to be broken into formless, churning whitewater after striking the rocks on the shore. In *Grey Sea*, small triangles are scattered along the bottom foreground, and a single large one appears in the center of the composition, leaning toward the shore. Imparting a rhythmic sense to the composition's surface, Marin derived these abstract forms from his observations of natural phenomena and his visceral connection to the dynamic, underlying forces of nature.

Marin had begun using geometric forms as part of his visual vocabulary in 1931, a tendency that would later reach one of its most extreme manifestations in *The Fog Lifts* [fig. 1]. These geometric motifs also play an especially prominent role in related oils from the late 1930s: *Wave on Rock* [fig. 2], *Off Cape Split, Maine* (1938, private collection, R. 38.25), and the watercolor *Breaking Sea, Cape Split, Maine* (1939, Sid Deutsch Gallery, New York, R. 39.7).

As early as 1917, Marin was enthusiastically describing the distinctive coastline of Maine to Alfred Stieglitz (American, 1864 - 1946): “Big shelving, wonderful rocks, hoary with enormous hanging beards of seaweed, carrying forests of evergreen on their backs. The big tides come in, swift, go out swift. And the winds bring in big waves, they pound the beaches and rocks.”<sup>[5]</sup> Marin's enthusiasm would continue over the course of his long career, and in time his innovative paintings would take their place among those of the many other important American painters who

depicted the state's uniquely American landscape, including the epochal seascapes of his illustrious predecessor, Winslow Homer (American, 1836 - 1910), as well as the iconic images of Mount Katahdin by his great contemporary in the Stieglitz group, Marsden Hartley (American, 1877 - 1943).[6] Marin's Maine seascapes have also more recently come to be understood, as they had been at the time of Marin's death, in the context of the works of the abstract expressionists. His emphasis on painterly, expressive gestures, and the churning, mercurial process of painting itself link him to the concerns of Willem de Kooning (American, born Netherlands, 1904 - 1997), Jackson Pollock (American, 1912 - 1956), and other midcentury artists.[7] In works like *Grey Sea*, Marin, like Pollock in *Number 1, 1950 (Lavender Mist)*, collapses the distinction between the painter and subject. The vital identification in Marin's work between the artist and the sea demonstrates the credo espoused by Pollock, who, when asked by the influential painter and teacher Hans Hofmann (American, born Germany, 1880 - 1966) whether he painted from nature, famously responded: "I am nature." [8]

Robert Torchia

September 29, 2016

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**COMPARATIVE FIGURES**



**fig. 1** John Marin, *The Fog Lifts*, 1949, oil on canvas, Roland P. Murdock Collection, Wichita Art Museum



**fig. 2** John Marin, *Wave on Rock*, 1937, oil on canvas, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; purchase, with funds from Charles Simon and the Painting and Sculpture Committee 81.18

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**NOTES**

- [1] John Marin to Alfred Stieglitz, Sept. 10, 1936, quoted in Dorothy Norman, ed., *The Selected Writings of John Marin* (New York, 1949), 171.
- [2] Edwin Alden Jewell, "A Marin Retrospective," *New York Times*, Oct. 25, 1936.
- [3] Ruth Fine, *John Marin* (Washington, DC, 1990), 237
- [4] On Marin's late oils, see William Agee, "John Marin's Greatness: The Late Oils & Post-1945 Art," in *John Marin: The Late Oils* (New York, 2008), 6–21.
- [5] John Marin to Alfred Stieglitz, July 31, 1917, quoted in Dorothy Norman, ed., *The Selected Writings of John Marin* (New York, 1949), 35.
- [6] For Homer's influence on Marin, see Bruce Robertson, *Reckoning with Winslow Homer: His Late Paintings and Their Influence* (Cleveland, OH, 1990), 149–153
- [7] At the Venice Biennale in the summer of 1950, John Marin was featured along with Willem de Kooning, Jackson Pollock, and others.
- [8] Lee Krasner, "Interview with Bruce Glaser," 1967, in Kirk Varnedoe and Pepe Karmel, eds., *Jackson Pollock: Interviews, Articles, and Reviews* (New York,

1999), 28.

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#### TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The painting is executed on a coarsely woven, plain-weave fabric that has been wax-lined to a fiberglass fabric and stretched onto a nonoriginal stretcher. All the original tacking margins are preserved. The ground is a commercially prepared, thin, grey-white layer.[1] The ground is exposed in many areas and has been used by the artist as an integral part of the composition. The paint layer was quickly and directly applied with assorted sizes of square-tipped brushes, often painting wet into wet with the brushes heavily loaded with paint, forming high impasto.

Throughout the painting, the artist has scraped away areas of paint with a brush end or a sharp tool, creating texture and repeated linear patterns. An area of exposed ground in the middle of the painting reveals a black swirl in diluted dark paint, which may be from an underdrawing or artist's sketch [fig. 1]. The painting is in good condition, although the impasto may be slightly flattened from the lining process. A clear layer of glossy varnish was removed in a 2002 treatment.

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**TECHNICAL COMPARATIVE FIGURES**



**fig. 1** Detail, John Marin, *Grey Sea*, 1938, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. John Marin Jr.

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**TECHNICAL NOTES**

[1] The priming covers all of the tacking margins, indicating that the canvas was primed before painting. This usually indicates that the priming was commercially prepared rather than applied by the artist.

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**PROVENANCE**

The artist [1870-1953]; his estate; by inheritance to his son, John C. Marin, Jr. [1914-1988], Cape Split, Maine; gift 1987 to NGA.

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**EXHIBITION HISTORY**

## NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART ONLINE EDITIONS

*American Paintings, 1900–1945*

1938 John Marin: Paintings, An American Place, New York, 1938, as Grey and Green Sea.

1963 John Marin 1870-1953, The University of Arizona Art Gallery, Tucson, 1963, no. 94, as Gray Sea.

1965 John Marin, The Willard Gallery, New York, 1965, no. 12.

1967 American Masters: Art Students League, organized by the American Federation of the Arts, New York, circulated 1967-1968, no. 33, repro.

1985 John Marin in Maine, Portland Museum of Art, Maine, 1985, no. 58.

1990 Selections and Transformations: The Art of John Marin, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1990, pl. 220.

2001 Modern Art and America: Alfred Stieglitz and His New York Galleries, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 2001, no. 132, 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. 5.

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## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- 1970 Reich, Sheldon. *John Marin: Part I, A Stylistic Analysis; Part II, Catalogue Raisonné*. 2 vols. Tucson, 1970.; 2:no. 38.14, 691, repro.
- 1988 Southgate, M. Therese. "The Cover: John Marin, *Grey Sea*." *Journal of the American Medical Association* 260 (14 October 1988): 2004, cover repro.
- 1988 Wilmerding, John. *American Masterpieces from the National Gallery of Art*. Rev. ed. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1988: 178, no. 66, color repro.
- 1990 Fine, Ruth E. *John Marin*. Exh. cat. National Gallery of Art, Washington. Washington and New York, 1990: 228, pl. 220.
- 1992 *American Paintings: An Illustrated Catalogue*. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1992: 232, repro.
- 2016 National Gallery of Art. *Highlights from the National Gallery of Art, Washington*. Washington, 2016: 304, repro.

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