



REGINALD MARSH'S *MANHATTAN TOWERS*

Elizabeth Jenner and Donald Myers



Hillstrom Museum of Art



Reginald Marsh (1898–1954), *Manhattan Towers*, 1932, watercolor over graphite on paper, 14 x 20 inches, Hillstrom Museum of Art, gift of the Reverend Richard L. Hillstrom

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FOCUS ON

FOCUS IN/ON is a program of the Hillstrom Museum of Art that engages the expertise of Gustavus Adolphus College community members across the curriculum in a collaborative, detailed consideration of a particular artwork from the Hillstrom Collection. The extended didactic text on the painting appears both in this brochure and in the FOCUS IN/ON exhibition. It was written collaboratively by Elizabeth Jenner, associate professor and chair in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology and associate professor in the Gender, Women, and Sexuality Studies Program, and Donald Myers, director of the Hillstrom Museum of Art and instructor in the Department of Art and Art History.

INTRODUCTION

Reginald Marsh (1898–1954) devoted the majority of his prodigious artistic output to New York City. He is known particularly for depicting its people: on the street, attending burlesque shows, riding the subway, and enjoying the attractions and beach at Coney Island. An example of this is his 1939 etching and engraving *Coney Island Beach #1*, also on exhibit, which shows a teeming crowd of sun bathers.

But Marsh also portrayed the city itself, including vantages from the rivers and the harbor that provided glimpses of characteristic skyscrapers of the city's iconic skyline. Especially in his watercolors and prints, he portrayed New York's impressive appearance from a distance, sometimes with foreground elements framing the view. The Hillstrom Museum of Art's 1932 watercolor *Manhattan Towers*, donated by Richard L. Hillstrom in 2004, demonstrates Marsh's great facility in such works; a vibrant, fresh depiction of the uptown skyline from across the East River on a brisk day.

Manhattan Towers was purchased by Hillstrom in 1961 from New York's Frank K. M. Rehn Galleries, which had begun showing Marsh's work in 1930 and which represented Marsh's estate after his premature death in 1954 from a heart attack. It relates to a number of works the artist did in the late 1920s into the 1930s and demonstrates his natural affinity with the watercolor medium. It also shows his fascination with landmarks of the city, such as the famed Chrysler Building, which opened to the public mid-May 1930 and which not long before Marsh's portrayal had been the world's tallest building.

EARLY LIFE, EDUCATION, AND TRAINING

Marsh's interest in skyscrapers must have been prompted to some degree by images by his father, artist Fred Dana Marsh (1872–1961). Marsh's mother, Alice Randall (1869–1929), was also an artist, a painter of miniatures. She and the elder Marsh met and were married in Paris, and Reginald and his two brothers James and Dana were born there, in the artistic Montparnasse neighborhood. The family relocated in 1900 to Nutley, New Jersey, where, according to a 1933 article in *Creative Art* magazine (for which Marsh apparently was interviewed), one could view the famous Flatiron Building in Manhattan, then one of the tallest structures in New York City.

According to Lloyd Goodrich (1897–1987), the art historian who was Marsh's childhood friend and biographer, Fred Marsh was one of the first American artists to depict modern industrial themes, and his works included images of skyscrapers under construction, as in a mural painted around 1910 for the Engineers Club in New York, and a bird's-eye image lower Manhattan, done for the Automobile Club of America and similar to later images by his son. Fred Marsh also made a series of large ceramic-tile lunettes illustrating the naval history of New York harbor, for the Rathskeller restaurant in the luxurious McAlpin Hotel (opened 1912) on Herald Square. The backgrounds of two of these include identifiable skyscrapers. They seem prescient of Reginald Marsh's 1937 murals for the United States Custom House in lower Manhattan, which include eight views of ocean liners arriving at New York Harbor, two with particular skyscrapers in the background.

Marsh was influenced by some of his father's subject matter specifically and by his artist parents in general. Goodrich states that Marsh made drawings in his youth of locomotives, ships, and tall buildings, which his mother preserved. Although Alice Marsh was supportive of his artistic proclivities, setting him the task of sketching plaster sculpture casts in her husband's studio, Fred Marsh did not approve when his son became an art major at Yale University, where he studied from 1916 to his graduation in 1920.

At Yale and before, drawing was a basic part of Marsh's life. A 1935 *Esquire* article claimed that his earliest drawing, of a locomotive, was made when he was just two and one-half years old, and his preserved diaries for 1912 and 1913 contain many sketches as well as developed drawings. In his maturity, he was rarely without a sketchbook, and his friend the artist Edward Laning (1906–1981) noted that the pocket-sized, portable sketchbooks, which Marsh made using the best quality artist paper, "were the central fact of his career as an artist..." Marsh left some 200 such sketchbooks in his studio at his death. Drawing is the basis of all of his art, and he was masterful at it. Marsh's friend and fellow artist John Steuart Curry (1897–1946) once bemoaned, "I wish I could draw like Reg; we've never had anyone in America like him." Lloyd Goodrich called him a "born draftsman," and in Marsh's paintings—in watercolor, tempera, and oil—this quality is ever apparent. It also naturally informs his extensive work as the printmaker of over two-hundred etchings and engravings.

Before attending Yale, Marsh studied for a year at the prestigious Lawrenceville (New Jersey) preparatory school and drew for its yearbook, and at the University, he drew for the *Yale Record*. Its student editor, William Benton (1900–1973), became Marsh's close friend. Benton went on to become a U.S. Senator from Connecticut and long served as publisher of the

Encyclopedia Britannica, appointing Marsh as its art editor in 1954, just a few months before the artist died.

Marsh's art training at Yale was academic, with courses in drawing from the antique and in painting still life. He found little value in this tutelage, describing his teachers as "pedants" who taught "in a way that would make their 'old master' heroes turn in their graves." The summer before his final year at the University, he took classes in life drawing and illustration at the Art Students League in New York, and he returned to the League for additional classes several times in the 1920s. At the League, he met Kenneth Hayes Miller (1876–1952), who became a mentor and close friend. Miller was acclaimed as both painter and teacher, and Marsh noted in a brief 1937 autobiographical sketch in *Art and Artists of Today* that "One of the greatest things that has happened to me is [Miller's] guidance," claiming, in his 1944 article titled "Let's Get Back to Painting," in the *Magazine of Art*, that he always showed everything he did to Miller. The older artist encouraged Marsh to continue concentrating on New York imagery and to apply Renaissance and Baroque academic compositional principals to those subjects, which Marsh studied during several trips abroad, including one with Miller in 1933.

After Yale, Marsh moved to New York City where he freelanced as an illustrator for publications including the *Evening Post*, the *Herald*, and *Vanity Fair*. He became a staff artist for the *Daily News* from 1922 to 1925, doing drawings related to the city, including a daily column in which he illustrated Vaudeville acts and ranked them with a percentage system. Marsh was hired by *The New Yorker* shortly after its inception in 1925 and contributed images through the early 1930s.

THE WATERCOLOR MEDIUM

In 1923, Marsh decided to become a serious painter instead of making his career as an illustrator. Initially he worked primarily in watercolor and oil and his first solo exhibition was held the following year at the Whitney Studio Club, a forerunner of the Whitney Museum of American Art. Marsh struggled with the oil medium but, as a draftsman, was naturally adept at watercolor. In "Let's Get Back to Painting" (1944) he noted, "Watercolor I took up and took to it well, with no introduction," after having stated that he had initially "shied away from oil," and later referring to his "hopelessness" about working in that medium. In the late 1920s, Marsh worked mainly in watercolor and printmaking, and he had three watercolor exhibitions in New York galleries at the end of the decade, at Valentine Dudensing Galleries in 1927, Weyhe Gallery in 1928, and Marie Sterner Galleries in 1929. These exhibitions were well received, as was

Marsh's first exhibit at Rehn Galleries the following year, which included watercolors and oils.

Marsh had begun working in the egg-based tempera medium in 1929 after a discussion with artist Thomas Hart Benton (1889–1975), who was then beginning to use it. Tempera was more suited to Marsh's abilities than oil, since he was able to handle it in a way similar to watercolor, and many of his most successful paintings were in tempera or watercolor. He returned to oil in the early 1940s, studying the methods of Jacques Maroger (1884–1962), a French painter and technical director of the conservation lab at the Louvre. The "Maroger medium" was essentially a variant of oil painting based on research on old master painters of the Renaissance and Baroque periods, and Marsh studied with Maroger from 1940 to 1946.

The artist never gave up watercolor and it arguably was his most successful painting medium. He would eagerly find locations within New York to paint on-site watercolors, though he tended to consider it a medium with too many drawbacks to be appropriate for major artworks. Nevertheless, in 1939 and 1940, he did a series of over 40 very large watercolors that put him on par with Charles Burchfield (1893–1967), the artist recognized as the great American master of the medium. Burchfield in 1940 won the Dana Watercolor Medal from the annual watercolor exhibition at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts; the following year, it was awarded to Marsh.

The Hillstrom *Manhattan Towers* comes from the height of arguably Marsh's most productive and successful period in watercolor. In his preserved desk calendars for 1931, 1932, and 1933, Marsh recorded not only daily social events—such as with whom he dined or what movie he saw—but also the artworks on which he worked. For these three years there are indications of at least 71 watercolors. Fifty of those were done in the period from April 30 through October 3, 1932. Thirty-five of these were made between September 3 and October 3 alone, with Marsh painting as many as four in a single day. When Marsh noted a subject, it was usually either a train yard or a cityscape from a specified locale.

It was not long after this point that the artist, in response to the disintegration of his eight-year marriage to Betty Burroughs, left New York to live briefly in Reno, Nevada to obtain an easy divorce that the state would typically grant after residency of only six weeks; and he did not record any more watercolors until October 2, 1933. For the last three works done the previous year (on October 3, 1932), Marsh noted their subjects, "Queensboro Bridge," "Empire State," and "Uptown Skyline," and the Hillstrom *Manhattan Towers* seems to be the third of these. In that case, it would have been the last work he did at the end of an intense period of activity in watercolor.

Marsh had already been recognized for his skyline watercolors in his exhibitions of the late 1920s. A *New York Times* review of the 1927 Valentine Dudensing Galleries exhibition noted, “The water colors of New York are concerned with the skyline of Manhattan, and Mr. Marsh admirably communicates both the fairylike and the metallic qualities of that vibrant mass of stone and steel and sky.” Another review of that exhibit, in the *New York Tribune*, also praised the New York images, stating that they “...have great charm in their evanescence of the contour of buildings against the sky and a feel of the sweep of wind and wave through the harbor.” Like his father, Fred Marsh, Reginald Marsh’s skylines tended to depict lower Manhattan—from the harbor, from Governor’s Island, or from Brooklyn. A review in the New York *Sun* of Marsh’s 1928 Weyhe Gallery exhibit reflected this, and referenced the typical range of his watercolor subjects when it noted that Marsh “...records the towers of Manhattan as seen from the lower bay, studies the same towers in process of construction and considers the factories, the barges in the rivers and the railways.” In a review in *The Arts* of the 1929 Marie Sterner Galleries exhibition, Marsh’s friend Lloyd Goodrich also indicated the watercolor subjects while praising his ability: “...his subjects—ships, skyscrapers, freight-yards, and city streets—call for solidity and structure, qualities which his work possesses in a marked degree, without loss of freshness of handling or sensitiveness of line.” And a review of the 1930 Rehn Galleries exhibit took a similar approach: “His water colors, done in and around New York, showing the ever changing skyline from various points of vantage, are in his usual manner and stand among the best things in this particular field of American painting today.”

MARSH AND NEW YORK’S SKYLINE AND SKYSCRAPERS

The Hillstrom watercolor is a fine and typical example of Marsh’s technique in the medium and of his perennial use of the skyline subject matter. Marsh noted in a 1937 letter related to his Custom House murals that he had “painted dozens of watercolors around N.Y. harbor,” and it is clear that the New York skyline held special meaning for him. As noted, Marsh inherited some of his interest from his father Fred Marsh. But he seems to have been struck by the city’s appearance even earlier. The first publication about Marsh as an artist, in the February 1923 issue of *The Arts* and titled “Young America—Reginald Marsh,” was written by Alan Burroughs, an artist and technician whose sister Betty, also an artist, became Marsh’s first wife the next year. In it, Burroughs lauded his future brother-in-law’s

seriousness, and recorded Marsh’s recollection of his first view of New York when, as a toddler, he arrived with his family from Paris: “Steaming up the harbor I felt, though I never had been there, that here was my home. The skyline of Manhattan...,” Marsh went on, “chanted an anthem” to him.

The majority of Marsh’s New York skyline views are of lower Manhattan, and in them he clearly indicated famed skyscrapers such as the Singer Building (completed in 1908), the Metropolitan Life Tower (complete in 1913), the Woolworth Building (completed in 1913), and the Bank of Manhattan Trust Building (completed in 1930). These four structures successively were the world’s tallest buildings and as such would have held special significance not only for Marsh but for all New Yorkers. Marsh also less frequently depicted the skyline farther up Manhattan, not only in the Hillstrom watercolor but also in another 1932 watercolor titled *New York*, in the Art Institute of Chicago, and in a 1930 watercolor, *New York from the East River*, currently with New York dealer D. Wigmore Fine Art. The Chrysler Building (completed 1930), next in line to become the world’s tallest, is prominently shown in all three. And in the works at Wigmore and the Art Institute, the Empire State Building, which took the Chrysler’s record when it was completed in 1931, is also shown (still under construction in the Wigmore painting).

Marsh was keenly aware of the changing guard of the tallest skyscrapers, and the structures evidently were highly significant to him. Lloyd Goodrich recorded the artist recalling his emotions upon returning to New York after his trip abroad in 1926: “I felt fortunate indeed to be a citizen of New York, the greatest and most magnificent of all cities... New York City was in a period of rapid growth, its skyscrapers thrilling by growing higher and higher.”

He certainly was not alone in his eager interest. Great excitement accompanied the opening of the Empire State Building when, less than a year after the Chrysler was finished, it became the tallest. The *New York Times* noted in a June 1931 article that revenues from visits to the top of the Empire State were coming in at a rate of over \$1 million per year. Marsh recorded in his 1931 desk calendar what was presumably his first visit—“up Empire State end of day”—in a page from early September. As noted, on the same day that Marsh painted the “Uptown Skyline,” here identified with the Hillstrom watercolor, he also painted the Empire State Building, and he depicted it in a number of other works as well, including a 1933 lithograph and a 1934 etching of Union Square with the Building visible in the background, a 1933 painting with a view similar to the prints, and a drawing that appeared in the January 9, 1932 issue of *The New Yorker*.

THE HILLSTROM MANHATTAN TOWERS

It's possible that Marsh might have included the Empire State Building in the Hillstrom watercolor if his vantage point had been different. He must have been in Brooklyn when he painted *Manhattan Towers*, perhaps at the Brooklyn Navy Yard looking sharply northwest across the East River from one of its piers (as suggested by Bob Singleton, executive director of the Greater Astoria Historical Society in New York). If this is the case, it means that Marsh eliminated any view of the intervening Williamsburg Bridge and that he adjusted the scale so that the Chrysler Building and the surrounding structures were more prominent. The crane in the left of *Manhattan Towers* is similar to ones associated with the Navy Yard.

Between the crane and the Chrysler Building are four additional identifiable skyscrapers. Left to right can be seen the American Radiator Building (1924), the Lefcourt Building (1930), the Lincoln Building (1930), and the Chanin Building (1929). The somewhat shorter building just in front of the Chrysler is the Daily News Building (1930). Also prominent, in front of the Chrysler and Daily News Buildings, are several smoke stacks of the Con Edison electric plant, another subject of interest to Marsh (who in 1931 recorded painting a watercolor with it as the subject). While many of Marsh's skyline images are devoid of human figures, there is a man seated near the center in the middle ground of the Hillstrom painting. He does not play a significant role, however, and the painting has none of the buzzing human activity typical of the artist's depictions of New Yorkers.

Hillstrom himself gave his watercolor the title *Manhattan Towers*, and he originally had purchased a different Marsh painting of the New York skyline from Rehn Galleries. Correspondence with John Clancy at Rehn includes an October 1960 letter with Hillstrom asking the price of the Marsh watercolor "of lower Manhattan from the bay," recently seen during one of his regular trips to New York. Nearly 10 months later, in a letter of August 1961, Hillstrom noted receipt of that first Marsh watercolor, and then less than two weeks later he wrote Clancy again, guardedly asking if he could exchange the work, there identified as *Dockside, New York*, with "...the other one showing the New York skyline with the Chrysler building (also showing a crane in the upper left-hand corner and a dock with a small car and figure in the foreground)." Hillstrom asked permission to view the two Marsh watercolors together since he was having "an uncertain feeling" about the one he already had, noting that its price—\$350—made it the second most expensive purchase he had ever made. About a month later, in September

1961, Hillstrom wrote Clancy again, indicating he had returned the first work and was satisfied with its replacement: "It seems that there was something about the first one...that just didn't seem to click. The one you sent seems so right. It has such a quiet feeling about it. It is done rather simply and broadly while the other was somewhat 'busy.'"

In that same letter, Hillstrom suggested that if the second work had no title, he would like to call it *Manhattan Towers*. Clancy responded that *New York Dock* was just a descriptive title he had assigned to that work, and that Hillstrom's title was better, so they should use it. While artist Marsh tended to be specific regarding titles of his tempera and oil paintings, he seems to have been less concerned about the watercolors, possibly because they usually were not listed separately in his exhibition catalogues. *Manhattan Towers* could thus justifiably be known instead as *New York Dock* or *Uptown Skyline*.

An inscription beneath the artist's signature, "WC 32-20," covered by the mat, is likely an inventory number, perhaps assigned by Marsh's second wife and widow, artist Felicia Meyer Marsh, after his death. If so, it could potentially lead to another, possibly more accurate, title for the watercolor.

SOCIAL IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION AND ICONS

A typical scholarly approach to understanding a piece of art is to consider it from an historical point of view and to use the artist's goal or vision for the piece by tracing the steps that produced it, similar to the preceding analysis of Marsh's *Manhattan Towers*. In such an approach, there is acknowledgement of art as a statement about social life, and arguments are made about voice, representation, and truth within the work. This method can be enhanced by adding sociological analysis to provide a broad perspective through which the social contexts of artistic forms can be identified and explored. Sociology in the United States as a discipline has been infatuated with cities since its beginning in the 19th century. From the work of sociologist and Nobel Peace Prize recipient Jane Adams to Dana Webster Bartlett's 1907 book, *The Better City: A Sociological Study of a Modern City*, the earliest American sociologists strove to understand and describe the modern city with all its complexity. This is the common ground between art theory and sociology.

The power of iconic landmarks has long been the subject of scholarly research and theories that explore the manner in which objects become icons when they have not only material force but also symbolic power. Cities are not simply a backdrop for movement, but are engines of cultural and emotional practices

that become uniquely associated with a particular city's silhouette. A city becomes more than the sum of the life and lives held within it and is equally implicated in the production of emotions related to itself. Nothing evokes the emotion of membership more powerfully than the silhouette of a city.

Art is able to transmit the ineffable qualities of the social life of cities as both an aesthetic experience and as an authentic experience. As an aspect of an authentic distillation of the social world, art is both reassuring yet troubling and challenging of social order by its very authenticity. In addition, within the social world as represented through art, there are few more unifying icons in the modern world than iconic silhouettes and images. Cultural icons associated with cities often resonate with each person's individual experience of citizenship, community, place, and purpose. In every cityscape and skyline there is both invitation to tell one's own story in collaboration with a story told by an artist such as Reginald Marsh, and the creation of a space for the insertion of one's own story. People will talk about their city as if it were a friend or beloved companion to their personal narrative. Riding around with others in their city, one will hear how their lives are inextricably interwoven with the life of the city. They might tell about their favorite restaurant, now gone and replaced with condos. The trees in the distance are in the park near their house, or work; the skyline of a block, or a district, marks their neighborhood, community, or workplace, regardless of the "truth of a map" or other official designation.

One comes to know these frequently-viewed images and landmarks and fall in love with them. The artist of cityscapes and skylines can provide people with a unified collective social identity. The Hillstrom *Manhattan Towers* opens a social space for people to see the past and embrace the lives lived at that moment in that place. This creates a kind of social compact, as people become part of others' stories, of other peoples' experience of their city through telling the myriad stories of "this is the park I used to go with my grandmother to play on the swings;" or "there is where my father used to work before the factory shut down."

Skylines and cityscapes are also more than just personal place markers; they serve to unify individuals with others when they tell their stories about their places. When one hears about the bakery on Main Street that has delicious caramel nut pies, or the barbershop that's gone now but used to have the best haircuts, a connection on an intimate and personal basis. This is the singular unifying power of artwork that evokes a city icon because the cityscape creates a social bridge that lets people cross from stranger (them) to intimate acquaintance (us), even if only for a brief time and on a single axis.

Thus, even if the icon of a city is gone, such as the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center, or the Singer Building that

was demolished by its owners in 1968, the iconic image has been woven into the iconic narrative of place and culture. This is true for many city landmarks and skylines because the material and physical signs of even the most iconic landscapes and cityscapes will change. This is the paradox of the social as a dynamic entity. The icons of a city may change as the city changes, but so too do the people—they are born, they live, they age, and then they die. Thus, even as the city and its landscape are physically altered, they will still play an important part of each person's narrative in order to preserve individual consistency. This may be all the more fiercely held onto because although an iconic structure is physically gone, the individual experience built upon that icon still remains as an essential aspect of one's social experience.

Marsh's work can be seen as capturing the complex and contradictory feelings of urban residents about the iconic image of their city's skyline. For example, Marsh's *Manhattan Towers* depicts the magnificence of an energetic and changing city; yet the single person in the painting is dwarfed by the imposing architecture of the city's landscape and machinery. The almost palpable vibrancy of the painting dispels any sense of isolation; rather, it points to the unity of people under the icons. The city is the product of ordinary people, like that figure, joined together to create something larger than they are and something more durable.

As society has become more diverse and the need for social unity has become pressing, so has increased the need for social products that can provide a conduit for social interaction and unity. The artist's depiction of landmark cultural icons can be such a bridge between individuals. Marsh's *Manhattan Towers* is an example of a work that fulfills this need, in addition to being an embodiment of all his own deep feelings for, and experience of, New York City. The vertical cityscape, as a focal point, represents an icon where communal identities can be located, as part of "the social" experience that is a part of a society's collective culture. For instance, the image of the Twin Towers collapsing on September 11, 2001 served to draw Americans' attention, created social bonds, and became the focus of national sentiments. Social unity in and around New York City after the events of 9/11 that caused the Towers' collapse became a link and context to unite all the individual experiences within a single shared social experience that redefined them as New Yorkers. This is the power of an iconic image; it is a catalyst for connection to others on a personal and intimate basis, even if this connection is due to a brief and fleeting experience and through a shared experience of the art itself.

Art has the capacity to probe ongoing social ills and social contradictions and create a pictographic language allowing for engagement with each person. The social problems that sociologists research and try to ameliorate come to life in art as it

creates emotional connections between viewer and painting. Each citizen possesses wide-ranging associations with her or his city that are awash with lived experiences, social meanings, and memories. Interactions between socioeconomic class to family, gender, work, race, ethnicity, education, and religion are written on a city. The tensions created by change and stability of socioeconomic class in cities are visible in the mansions and the housing projects, the community organizations, the skyscrapers of transnational corporations, and the city services and agencies of a city. In contrast, skylines of all great cities reflect the promise of a new future, as well as the complex social problems of the present. Cityscapes embody a critical facet in the reconstruction of society's collective social identity as the future and the present transmute to become the collective past. The city is more than an object that serves as a backdrop or stage upon which social life plays out. A cityscape captured by an artist's work becomes a kind of contemporary social diary that reveals much about the social world and provides insights into cultural and social processes.

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SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

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Hillstrom Museum of Art

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Regular Museum hours: 9 a.m.–4 p.m. weekdays, 1–5 p.m. weekends.

The Museum is generally closed when College classes are not in session and between exhibitions.

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