

American Moderns in Watercolor

An intimate exhibition of watercolors by Edward Hopper and his contemporaries is on view at the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art

Through March 17
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During the 1920s and '30s, a number of American artists began experimenting with watercolors and artistic styles, pushing beyond the confines of classical oil painting and academic ideals. These artists were influenced by European modernists as well as the changing

American landscape brought on by industrialization. The Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art has been at the forefront of collecting paintings from this period of evolution, especially the works of Edward Hopper.

Through March 17 the Hartford, Connecticut-based museum will mount *American Moderns in Watercolor: Edward Hopper and His Contemporaries*, an intimate exhibition of 16 watercolors from its permanent collection. There will be four pieces by Hopper on view, including the first watercolor the museum purchased by the artist in 1928, and works by John Marin, Charles E. Burchfield, Stuart Davis, Preston Dickinson and more.

“Watercolor had a unique popularity

in the early decades of the 20th century. Edward Hopper is such an important part of that story, and watercolor is an important part of the evolution of his career,” says Erin Monroe, the museum’s Robert H. Schutz Jr. Associate Curator of American Paintings and Sculpture. “He made his first museum sales with watercolor works. They represent this moment in the mid-1920s when he starts to get critical recognition. These are the works that form the backbone of the exhibition.”

His piece *Marshall’s House* was another important early acquisition for the museum. In 1930, Hopper and his wife began to visit South Truro on Cape Cod where they eventually purchased a home that they returned to



Reginald Marsh (1898-1954), *The Bridge, N.Y.C.*, 1933. Opaque and transparent watercolor over graphite on wove paper. Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, CT. The Ella Gallup Sumner and Mary Catlin Sumner Collection Fund (1939.209). © 2018 Estate of Reginald Marsh / Art Students League, New York / Artists Right Society (ARS), New York.



Edward Hopper (1882-1967), *Marshall's House*, 1932. Opaque and transparent watercolor over graphite on wove paper. Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, CT. Purchased through the gift of Henry and Walter Keney (1933.93). © 2018 Heirs of Josephine Hopper / Licensed by Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.



John Marin (1870-1953), *From the Bridge, N.Y.C.*, 1933. Opaque and transparent watercolor with charcoal and collage on wove paper. Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, CT. The Ella Gallup Sumner and Mary Catlin Sumner Collection Fund (1948.479). © 2018 Estate of John Marin / Artists Right Society (ARS), New York.



Charles E. Burchfield (1893-1967), *Looking Thru a Bridge*, 1938. Opaque and transparent watercolor over graphite on wove paper. Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, CT. The Ella Gallup Sumner and Mary Catlin Sumner Collection Fund (1939.208). Reproduced with permission of the Charles E. Burchfield Foundation.

every summer. This 1932 piece depicts his neighbor's house on the Cape.

"If I think of [the movement] as a family, Hopper is about the same age as Stuart Davis and Preston Dickinson. They're emerging around the same time. John Marin is sort of the father of this movement of modernists. He's about 12 years older than Hopper," explains Monroe. "Marin is working at a pivotal moment when European modernism is being introduced through people

such as Alfred Stieglitz, who was showing watercolors by Cézanne. Marin takes what he's seeing in European watercolor and applies it to American modernism. Watercolor was his primary medium. He is a perfect example of someone who excelled in watercolor in ways that were different from his oils."

Marin is represented in the show by his 1933 painting *From the Bridge*, N.Y.C. that is marked by his energetic brushstrokes capturing the skyscrapers

of New York City. The vantage point is looking into the city from the outside, rather than being in its confines already.

"Stuart Davis is a counterpoint to Hopper and Marin, who were using transparent watercolor that is more washy and watery. Davis prefers opaque watercolor called gouache, and you have graphic quality in his paintings," Monroe says. "He has these hard edges and wonderful use of signage and lettering, and an interest in what's



Stuart Davis (1892-1964), *Gas Pumps*, 1935. Opaque watercolor with pen and black ink on illustration board. Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, CT. Gift of Henry E. Schnakenberg (1952.388). © 2018 Estate of Stuart Davis / Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

defining the modern landscape in ordinary motifs. That comes out really explicitly in the show in a work called *Gas Pumps*. It is a view of a harbor in Gloucester, but right in the foreground is the gas pump, which signifies the rise of the automobile and a new moment in American culture where you're exploring [the country] by car."

Similar to Marin, Burchfield preferred working in watercolors to oils. His paintings were often large in scale as he would attach multiple pieces

of watercolor paper together. His piece *Looking Thru a Bridge*, 1938, is a contrast from his rural Ohio living in portraying an industrial waterfront in Buffalo, New York. "We acquired it just months after it was painted, which gets back to how the Wadsworth had an exceptional interest in collecting what was modern art of the time and watercolors," Monroe shares.

When visiting the museum, the 16 paintings will be spread across two galleries. The first will feature the

more rural, coastal environments and the second will feature the urban, industrial scenes. "I think the show makes it pretty clear that American artists found their voice in watercolor in ways that were not in keeping with a particular style or school," Monroe says. "In other words, they took ownership in a traditional medium and breathed new life into it and made it modern. It demonstrated what close looking they were doing of everyday settings or subjects." ■