

# THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

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FOR WEDNESDAY RELEASE

MUSEUM TO SHOW RETROSPECTIVE EXHIBITION OF WORKS OF CHARLES DEMUTH

A large retrospective exhibition of the work of Charles Demuth, late Philadelphia artist, will open at the Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53 Street, on March 8. It will remain on view, occupying one-half of the 3rd floor gallery space, through June 11. The exhibition has been organized and installed under the direction of Andrew C. Ritchie, Director of the Department of Painting and Sculpture, who has also written the accompanying catalog. Approximately 137 watercolors, 11 oils, 11 temperas and 3 crayon drawings will be included in the show, which will represent the artist's best work throughout his life.

Charles Henry Demuth (1883-1935) was a prolific American painter who expressed his highly complex personality in his work with extraordinary sensitivity. Working in a period of the country's industrial expansion, Demuth like many of his contemporaries, felt keenly the stifling self-satisfaction of the period, the vulgarization of taste for the arts, and determined to seek escape, to paint as he pleased, whatever the social or economic consequences. He was one of the early experimentalists in the modern idiom, one of the first Americans to go abroad and to react to fauvism and cubism at their height in Paris.

Contrary to the traditional struggling-artist story, Demuth was born into a Lancaster tobacco family of comfortable circumstances, a family sympathetic to his early art attempts and willing to send him to art schools in Philadelphia and Paris, rather than one of those families urging him into hereditary business. Demuth was fortunate too in that, despite his "modern" flavor, he had no trouble in obtaining sponsorship and showings of his work, first at the Daniel Gallery in New York, then as a member of the Alfred Stieglitz group, and he was always a favorite of the New York Sun's art critic Henry McBride. His pictures sold fairly well from the beginning. He never became a battler for any "cause."

Demuth's mature work began to appear in 1915 when he was 32 years old, and for the next 5 years he was at the height of his powers. Always in delicate health and lame from childhood, he was discovered in 1920 to have diabetes, and he suffered ill health until his death in

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1935 at the age of 52. Nevertheless he produced more than 900 paintings, the greater bulk of them in watercolor, his favorite medium.

The rich and varied range of subjects treated in Demuth's work includes flower pieces, vaudeville and theatrical reviews, colonial buildings, the industrial scene and many illustrations to famous authors such as Zola, Henry James, Balzac and Poe.

#### Flower Pieces:

Flowers were always a fascination to Demuth, perhaps because of his mother's Victorian garden, still the glory of the Demuth home in Lancaster. Early watercolors of bouquets, done in 1915, show highly proficient use of the white of the paper to define space and volume. Color areas vary in texture and density so that the forms of the flowers are described in a space which seems to breathe, sometimes with a suggestion of the sinister, sometimes seeming to explode in space. Throughout the years his flower pieces became less sketchy, more precisely delineated in clearly outlined areas; always his perception of the form and character of each type of flower is individual and revealing of its personality.

#### Figure Pieces: Vaudeville scenes:

Marcel Duchamp reports of his friend Demuth that "the Hell Hole (the 'Golden Swan' in the Village), the Baron Wilkins (a cafe) in Harlem, a costumed ball at Webster Hall, Cafes Brevoort and Lafayette were Demuth's favorite places about 1915-16." A watercolor of 1919 shows Demuth and Duchamp in the Hell Hole. It is obvious that vaudeville performers, acrobats, the circus were a part of his fascination in this period, and there are many striking results in rich and contrasting figure pieces. Of these Mr. Ritchie writes in the Demuth catalog: "If Demuth's greatest flower pieces have often a disturbingly sinister quality, many of the figure pieces have even more explicit suggestions of decadence, not to say evil, about them... the impression many of them leave on me is not one of light-hearted gaiety. The features of the performers are too inane... and the acrobats' contortions... are often in themselves uncomfortably ridiculous. Be that as it may, in the best of these vaudeville or acrobat pieces Demuth's draughtsmanship, his line, like Pascin's, vibrating like a living nerve, has seldom been surpassed." In a number of instances, such as Vaudeville Musicians and Circus of 1917 and Acrobats of 1919, the contortions of

the performers make for most striking compositions.

Figure Pieces: Illustrations for stories and plays:

Most important of Demuth's figure pieces are his numerous illustrations: 12 for Zola's Nana in 1915-16, 5 for James's The Turn of the Screw in 1918, and 7 for the German dramatist Wedekind's Erdgeist and Pandora's Box, among others. The Nana illustrations, his most extensive series, are all reproduced for the first time in the catalog to this exhibition. Done as private interpretations of the literary work, Demuth never intended these for publication and was able to give free reign to his independent imagination to recreate the stories in visual terms. Practically all the stories and plays that Demuth illustrated deal with sex as a symbol of social degeneracy, a significant indication of his time and of his own disquieting psychological tensions which are also manifest in the foreboding quality of his painting. Mr. Ritchie says, "No other American has given us by implication so sensitive and so subtle an account of the cynicism and disillusionment that marked the years before and during World War I, a malaise which finally erupted into the dizzy abandon of the so-called jazz age."

Landscapes:

Through his close friendship with Duchamp, one of the leading cubists, as well as from his own visits to Paris, Demuth had an unusual insight for an American into the cubist movement, which began to show its influence in his landscapes in 1916. The clean lines of colonial architecture, in Lancaster, in Bermuda, in New England, became the source material for many of his cubist adaptations with their ray-like shafts of diagonals and their decorative color washes reminiscent of the Japanese prints he liked. By 1919 he turned from watercolor to tempera and about 1920 to oil. Perhaps the most impressive landscapes in these later media are End of the Parade, Coatsville (sic), Pa.; After Sir Christopher Wren, and My Egypt.

In the 1920s industrial urban architecture began to be a major interest that both attracted him by its precise, logical shapes and repelled him with its encroachment of industrial chimneys and water-tanks. In this period and on into the '30s he painted a number of large oils expressing his reactions to these mechanical forms and juxtapositions. At the same time he continued to paint his flowers in

watercolor and also some fine fruit still-lives which show a slight cubist influence. In addition there is a group of poster portraits using words and letters in a fashion of his own invention to make symbolic portraits of a few intimate friends. Perhaps most interesting is I Saw the Figure 5 in Gold, a symbolic portrait of Demuth's friend William Carlos Williams, inspired by the first line of one of the latter's poems.