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# Alfred Maurer

## AT THE VANGUARD OF MODERNISM

By STEPHEN MAY

ANDOVER, MASS. — A good case can be made that Alfred Maurer (1868–1932) was America’s first Modernist painter. A gifted and daring artist, early in the Twentieth Century he experimented with Fauvism, helped introduce French avant-garde art in America and ultimately created revolutionary, adventurous compositions that presaged experiments in abstraction.

An excellent overview of Maurer’s diverse oeuvre is offered in “Alfred Maurer: At the Vanguard of Modernism,” on view at the Addison Gallery of American Art at Phillips Academy Andover through July 31. Co-curated by Addison curator Susan Faxon and independent scholar Stacey Epstein, who single-handedly has revived interest in Maurer through this exhibition and shows at Manhattan’s Hollis Taggart Galleries, the exhibition comprises 70 Maurer works.

Maurer was born in New York City, the son of Currier & Ives artist Louis Maurer, who executed representational genre scenes and came to dislike his son’s Modernistic images. Young Maurer left school in 1884 to work in the family lithographic printing business, and a year later began a decade of study in academic art at the National Academy of Design.

Maurer sailed to France in 1897, staying there most of 17 years, during which he was thoroughly immersed in the French avant-garde movement. At the outset, Maurer, whose friends called him “Alfy,” created fashionable portraits that owed much to James Abbott McNeill Whistler — and a bit to William Merritt Chase — and drew critical approval on both sides of the Atlantic.



“Girls” and “Heads” that Maurer created in the 1920s featured brightly hued and distorted figures of young women, characterized by long necks, red lips and fashionable clothes, as in “[Three Women],” circa 1928. They were controversial in their day and make a lasting impression in this exhibition. Craven collection.

Whistler intrigued Maurer as he tried to separate himself from academic constraints. The best-known canvas of this period, “An Arrangement” of 1901, earned rave reviews in New York and established Maurer’s career.

Eventually abandoning his Whistlerian style, Maurer began to work in a romantic Realist manner. An astute observer, Maurer depicted everything from a rendezvous of a man and woman in a darkened café to a nocturne of Place St Michelle that resembled works by John Singer Sargent and Whistler to a club scene of men — and a cat — gathered around a somber shuffleboard game in an ambience reminiscent of John Sloan’s iconic “McSorley’s Bar,” painted seven or eight years later in New York.

During a yearlong sojourn in New York, 1901–1902, Maurer communed and exhibited with the likes of Robert Henri, William Glackens, John Sloan and other American Realists. Like these future members of the Ashcan School, Maurer sought out scenes — primarily at the beach — populated by everyday folks, not the fashionable upper class portrayed at the shore by French artists like Eugene Boudin. Maurer’s depictions of Coney Island (“a watering place noted for its seedy crowds,” notes Epstein) and Rockaway Beach, equally swarming with working-class crowds, bore more resemblance to Edouard Manet’s beach vignettes, featuring simplified views of seaside denizens observed from unusual perspectives.

As early as 1904 Maurer was befriended by

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Maurer’s sense of abstraction and patterning is apparent in his early Fauve works, like “Still Life,” circa 1910. A riot of discordant colors and spatial relationships, it brings to mind Matisse’s comments in a 1908 essay that paintings are about the “art of arranging in a decorative manner the various elements at the painter’s disposal for the expression of his feelings.” Collection of Tommy and Gill LiPuma.



Maurer applied his knowledge of Fauvism to numerous brightly colored landscapes, including “Landscape (Autumn),” 1909. Here he applied offbeat colors to the path, the hill to the right, all the time emphasizing the brilliant green of the dominating trees. Collection of the Frederick R. Weisman Art Museum at the University of Minnesota, gift of Ione and Hudson D. Walker.

# Alfred Maurer

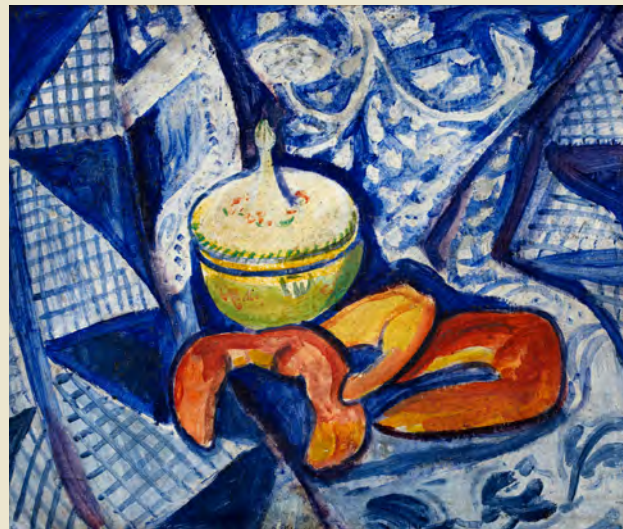
## AT THE VANGUARD OF MODERNISM



Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec's views of Parisian night life influenced many painters, including Maurer. In "Le Bal Bullier," circa 1900–01, Maurer captured activity around this popular entertainment center. During his 17 years in Paris, the American visited this site on many occasions. Maurer and William Glackens visited the place for a masked ball on Mardi Gras one year, for example. Smith College Museum of Art, Northampton, Mass.



One of Maurer's most striking images, "Head of a Woman," circa 1908, reflects his adoption of the Fauves' high-keyed palette and interest in African tribal art. This 18¼-by-15-inch tempera on French cardboard mounted on gessoed panel is in the permanent collection of Curtis Galleries, Minneapolis, Minn.



Plunging into Fauvist still lifes, Maurer created intensely patterned decorative compositions like "Un Sucrier et Trois Croissants," circa 1908. Here, patterning on the tablecloth looks to be dissolving into moveable figures, framed by high-keyed walls and objects like a dinner plate. This work, measuring 18 by 21⅝ inches, is in the collection of Tommy and Gill LiPuma.

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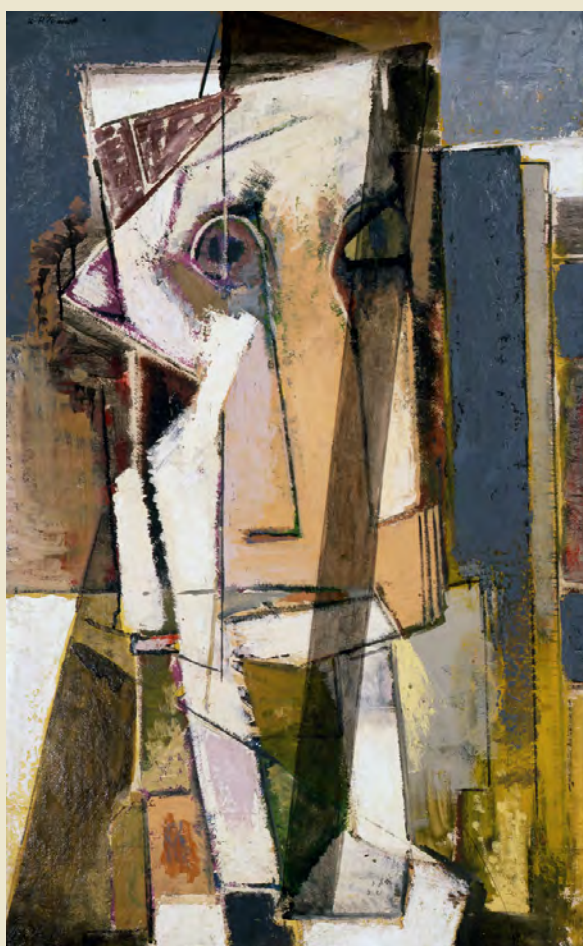
A showstopper is "Jeanne," circa 1904, a realistic view of a working-class woman who frequented Parisian cafes and nightclubs, a subculture that fascinated Maurer and led to a series of vignettes of nightlife in the City of Light. Carefully delineated are Jeanne's cigarette, rouged lips, hat with a taxidermied bird and her shimmering gown, beautifully painted. In 1900, when Maurer began to chronicle the world of the Parisian café, there were an astounding 27,000 cafes operating in Paris — more than in any city in the world; they served as the primary gathering place for residents and tourists outside of work and home. Private collection.

Leo and Gertrude Stein, becoming a regular at their celebrated salons at 27, rue de Fleurus, Paris, where he was likely the first of his fellow American artists to see the Modernist work of Cezanne, Gauguin, Lautrec, Matisse and Picasso. Before long, Maurer took on the challenge of responding to the animation and dynamism of the French avant-garde.

Maurer's epiphany was the discovery of Fauvism, which used vivid, nonrealistic colors and distorted forms to convey the essence of subject. Ditching the limited palette of his Whistlerian period for a sparkling new one, Maurer adopted manners and motifs that would guide the rest of his career.

He first experimented with the new approach in a series of jewel-like landscapes, notably "Landscape (Autumn)." Art impresario Alfred Stieglitz mounted a John Marin and Maurer exhibition at his gallery, 291, after which the dealer commented that "Crowds visited the show... Marin's watercolors sang their quiet song while the Maurer's seemed like instruments of music run riot."

The provocative canvases by Maurer introduced America to Fauvism. The show at 291, says Epstein,



"was a watershed moment for American Modernism and for the careers of Marin and Maurer." Critic Paul Rosenberg called the exhibition "wild and revolutionary," noting that Maurer "played the historic role of the first American artist to go Fauve."

Maurer applied rich and vivid colors to his Fauve florals and still lifes, many of which were painted from an elevated point of view. They ranged from the highly patterned but relatively straightforward "A Saucer and Three Croissants" to several works named simply "Still Life," featuring complex collections of objects on tables.

A brilliant colorist, Maurer utilized bold colors to remove unnecessary details to convey the essence of his sitters. This is particularly apparent in his most interesting figurative work, "Head of a Woman," notable for its intense directness, its red-rouged cheek, nose and lips, its kinship with African tribal art and its enigmatic mysteriousness.

A big year for Maurer was 1913, when he had his first solo exhibition at Folsom Galleries in New York and contributed four Fauve paintings to the Armory Show. The Folsom exhibition, with 27 works, offered an opportunity for visitors to view for the first time a cohesive body of Maurer's Fauvist paintings — landscapes, still lifes, heads and florals.

Critical response was mixed. *American Art News* raved about paintings "afire with brilliant color," and opined that the exhibition went "farther than anything New York has yet seen, in its line." On the other hand, Harriet Monroe, writing in the *Chicago Tribune*, called Maurer's works "screams, nay catcalls."

In the 18 years before his death in 1932, Maurer created a rich and diverse body of work that marked him as an inventive artist guided by a firm and independent spirit. Buoyed by the success of the Armory Show, freed from naturalistic color by his adoption of Fauvism and encouraged by his acquaintance with progressive artists like Arthur Dove, Maurer melded Post-Impressionist's fractured forms and Cubist distortions of perspectival forms to execute increasingly adventurous explorations of abstraction.

Maurer began spending every summer and early fall in bucolic Marlboro, in Ulster County, N.Y. The landscapes of this period were painted with flair and a palette of off-beat colors that animate each canvas to this day.

In the early 1920s he began painting a series of "Girls" or "Heads," odd-looking, lissome women with long necks and full, red lips that put one in mind of

As Maurer integrated the Cubist manner in still lifes and nudes, in the last year of his career he also created a series of "Heads" that are highly abstract and owe much to Cubism. "George Washington," 1932, is remarkable for its commitment to abstraction, while at the same time the face of America's first president can be glimpsed at the center of the image. Portland Art Museum, gift of Mr and Mrs Jan de Graaff



"Alfy," as Maurer was known, had an intense gaze and a face punctuated from an early age by an ample mustache. He had a wide circle of friends and admirers on both sides of the Atlantic. Compatriot artists kept him up to date on changes in the art world that informed many of his paintings. This photograph, taken in Paris before 1914, is in a private collection.

the work of Amedeo Modigliani. Their frontality, enigmatic stares and elongated figures stirred controversy in their day and continue to intrigue Twenty-First Century eyes.

In 1924, fine art dealer Erhard Weyhe made an unprecedented move, buying the entire contents of Maurer's studio, some 250 works. As Maurer's dealer, Weyhe offered encouragement, mounted an annual Maurer exhibition and generally supported him for the remainder of his career.

Around this time Maurer began to concentrate on still lifes, florals and studies of the nude. He also worked in watercolor, which suited the energy of his new work. Much of it reflected his continued interest in the structure and composition of Cezanne, which was clearly evident in his the color construction and modeling of form through color in closeup florals and sketches of beefy nudes in tilted environments.

In his final years, Maurer took up Cubism with a vengeance, in paintings that Epstein calls "superb examples of Cubism that are among the finest of their kind." Among the standouts are "Still Life with Pears," a challenging image with a jumble of objects observed through various perspectival distortions, and "Still Life with Doily," a complex image mixing artifice and reality.

Maurer's last subject was a series of Cubist "Heads," fascinating ventures into distilling the human form into reductive geometric imagery. "George Washington," in which the subject's identity is visible through all the distortions, was the last work Maurer completed.

Maurer committed suicide in 1932, curiously shortly after the death of his disapproving father. It is interesting to speculate what he might have achieved had he not cut his life short. Surely he was poised to make further strides in expanding Modernist abstraction. True to his own emotions and instincts, he would have continued to search for new aesthetic styles and imagery.

This splendid exhibition, which showcases the magnitude of Maurer's achievements, is a welcome recognition of his significant role in the growth of American Modernism. As American historian Lewis Mumford observed, "Of all the painters who developed abstract art during the last 20 years [1914–1934], struggling for new symbols to express new states of mind and feeling, Maurer was one of the handful of genuine moderns who really felt abstractions as experiences."

The fully illustrated, 255-page catalog, written by Epstein, is very well done. Published by the Addison and distributed by Yale University Press, it sells for \$65, hardcover.

"Vanguard" travels to Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, October 10–January 4.

Addison Gallery is at 180 Main Street. For information, [www.andover.edu/museums/addison](http://www.andover.edu/museums/addison) or 978-749-4015

Stephen May is an independent historian, writer and lecturer who divides his time between Washington, D.C., and midcoast Maine.



Among the genre scenes Maurer painted during his 1901–02 sojourn in America were beach scenes that reflected the lure of the ocean for city-dwellers. "At the Shore," 1901, was painted with bravura brushwork of simplified masses of color and form. Maurer was interested in genre scenes of working-class people, not the fashionable, decorous views created by Eugene Boudin and William Merritt Chase. Courtesy Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville, Ark.

Many consider Maurer's late abstract heads among his most enigmatic and compelling work. An example is "Two Heads," circa 1928–32, which co-curator Stacey Epstein calls an "amalgam of Fauve color, Cubist space, primitivistic form, abstraction, landscape, still life, the nude and figuration." The show and catalog emphasize how Maurer "tirelessly pushed the boundaries of artistic expression throughout his career." Also examined is the artist's "cross-fertilization of Fauvism between French and American circles... [and his] channeling of abstraction" to his countrymen. Maurer proved to be a formidable creative force in expressing the potential of artistic expression in American art. Measuring 21<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> by 18 inches, "Two Heads" is in a private collection.

In the last years before he committed suicide in 1932, Maurer painted some of his most inventive yet engaging Cubist still lifes, like "Still Life with Pears," circa 1930–31. In this work the artist melded elements of Analytic and Synthetic Cubism, along with perspectival distortions to paint a colorful, challenging image. It took both courage and skill to display this Cubist-inspired image at a time when Cubism was under attack in American art circles. Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy, Andover, Mass., museum purchase.



Living in Paris, Maurer as a young artist fell under the spell of American expatriate James Abbott McNeill Whistler — and Japonisme, the European rage for Japanese artwork. In "Model with a Japanese Fan (Jeanne)," circa 1902–04, the Japanese fan is prominently displayed, but the painting ends up being more about the pensive young woman than her symbol of Japonisme. Karen and Kevin Kennedy collection.

