



Reginald Marsh  
American, born France, 1898 - 1954

## *Smokehounds*

1934

egg tempera on hardboard

overall: 90.81 × 75.41 cm (35 3/4 × 29 11/16 in.)

framed: 113.03 × 97.79 × 6.99 cm (44 1/2 × 38 1/2 × 2 3/4 in.)

Inscription: lower right: Reginald Marsh 1934

Corcoran Collection (Gift of Felicia Meyer Marsh) 2014.136.78

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### ENTRY

Two men in the middle of a busy sidewalk struggle to support their fallen companion. The storefront signs place the scene between Pell and Doyers Streets on the Bowery, a major north-south thoroughfare running through the Lower East Side of Manhattan. [1] Marsh studied the site carefully, as demonstrated by several drawings in various sketchbooks. One drawing, inscribed “Stand between No. 8 Mission & No. 10—3 feet from wall,” records the locale of *Smokehounds* [fig. 1]. A more developed one establishes the painting’s perspective [fig. 2]. Additional quick sketches [fig. 3] [fig. 4] record details of signage and architecture that relate both to *Smokehounds* and to another painting, *Tattoo and Haircut* [fig. 5], done earlier and set in the same location.

The title *Smokehounds* alludes to the intoxicated central characters. “Smoke” was slang for the cheap booze—all but guaranteed to “rot your guts”—available in Bowery saloons. So-called “smokehounds,” it was thought, would resort to drinking lighter fluid, if necessary. [2] The association is reinforced visually by the men raising a flask, either midtoast or midquarrel, beneath the sign at right for the Lighthouse Bar and Grill.

The paint of *Smokehounds*—in colors of brown, ocher, and eggplant—is applied in multiple thin washes of egg tempera, the primary medium used for panel painting before about 1500. Marsh was interested in technical aspects of painting and had studied old master panels and canvases in the Musée du Louvre as well as in other major European collections. He learned the recipe for egg tempera, though, from his contemporaries Thomas Hart Benton (American, 1889 - 1975) and Denys Wortman in 1929. [3] Marsh’s emulation of the old master technique imparts to

*Smokehounds* a muted and mottled appearance suggestive of a dingy, nocturnal scene lit obliquely by flickering artificial illumination from shop windows and incandescent signage.

A quasi-subterranean impression is created by the Third Avenue elevated train tracks that appear overhead. The sturdy I-beam that parallels the left edge of the painting compresses its already tight space, creating a claustrophobic effect. Marsh enhanced the painting's compressed look in a drawing made to facilitate the painting's translation into an etching; in the drawing, Marsh narrowed the image's overall proportions by cropping the right edge [fig. 6]. He further crowded the setting by inserting a fire hydrant in the left foreground, present in a preliminary study for the painting (see [fig. 2]) but absent from the painting itself. Marsh ultimately eliminated the hydrant from the print [fig. 7]. [4]

The Bowery neighborhood, sandwiched between Chinatown to the east and Little Italy to the west, was once a prosperous entertainment district. But following the Civil War the area attracted unemployed, injured, and bereft veterans, causing a gradual decline. By the 1930s the old theaters had been replaced by stale-beer dives, pawnshops, flophouses, brothels, and tattoo parlors-cum-barbershops that catered to the influx of poor transients. [5] In an effort to counteract the influence of such establishments, rescue missions were founded along the street. The All Night Mission, whose sign is visible in *Smokehounds*, was set up in 1911 to provide safe haven and spiritual salvation. Dudley T. Upjohn, the mission's founder, believed it was his duty to "bend every energy to win back to God Almighty" the "lost soul belonging to Christ" of each of the "thieves, gamblers, drunkards," and drug addicts wandering the Bowery. [6] He offered those in need a free evening meal, fresh water, and pews on which to sleep. The All Night Mission occupied No. 8 Bowery until it closed in 1948. [7]

The centrality of the All Night Mission sign hints that *Smokehounds* transcends documentary illustration. The implication is reinforced by marked similarities between the foreground figural group and representations of Christ's Entombment or Deposition, such as Titian's *The Entombment of Christ* [fig. 8]. [8] Located directly below the rescue mission's glowing white cross, Marsh's central figure is a proxy for the crucified Christ, supported by stand-ins for Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus. Marsh was explicit about his admiration for the old masters; his sketchbooks are filled with copies of paintings by Sir Peter Paul Rubens (Flemish, 1577 - 1640), Michelangelo (Florentine, 1475 - 1564), Raphael (Marchigian, 1483 - 1520), and others [fig. 9], and the drawings in his own publication *Anatomy for*

*Artists* (1945) are based on old master works [fig. 10].

Marsh's admiration for the old masters and dedication to the mundane realities of the modern city were encapsulated in his advice to students: "Stare at Michelangelo [sculpture] casts. Go out into the street, stare at the people. Go into the subway. Stare at the people. Stare, stare, keep on staring." [9] Marsh's exhortation justifies the interchangeability of biblical tropes and Bowery drunkards. This equivalence in *Smokehounds* underscores the gravity with which Marsh felt the disenfranchised deserved to be treated. Yet by translating Titian's tragic masterpiece into a grotesque scene of public drunkenness, Marsh's painting also bristles with satire. Where Titian's dead Christ is lamented by the grief-stricken Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene, whose moonlit faces show their agony, Marsh's drama is witnessed by an apathetic spectator at left whose expression suggests that he has seen it all before. Marsh offers a subtle critique of a society unmoved by such nightly dramas. [10]

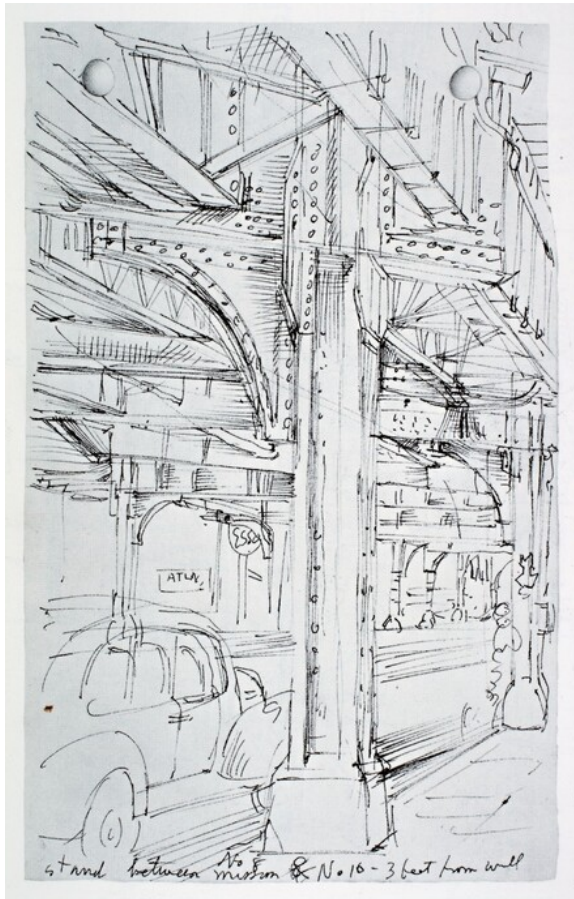
*Smokehounds* might also question whether institutions like the All Night Mission represent an adequate solution for the Bowery's problems at the time. Where, one wonders, will Marsh's latter-day Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus lead their fallen companion once they have him upright and figuratively, if not literally, resurrected? Will they heed the mission's hovering, cruciform invitation, or will they be drawn instead to the nearby Lighthouse Bar and Grill's irradiating beacon? Given the trio's proximity to the latter, one suspects that the bar's lure may well offer greater temptation than the mission's promised salvation; a lighthouse, after all, is designed to guide vessels to safety.

Adam Greenhalgh

August 17, 2018

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## COMPARATIVE FIGURES



**fig. 1** Reginald Marsh, *Stand between No. 8 Mission & No. 10—3 feet from wall*, reproduced in Edward Laning, *The Sketchbooks of Reginald Marsh* (Greenwich, CT, 1973)



**fig. 2** Reginald Marsh, *Study for Smokehounds*, c. 1934, graphite and black chalk on off-white wove paper, Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum, Gift of Mrs. Reginald Marsh, 1962.273. © Estate of Reginald Marsh / Art Students League, New York / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. © President and Fellows of Harvard College



**fig. 3** Reginald Marsh, page from sketchbook no. 59, 11854, black chalk on paper, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. © 2017 Estate of Reginald Marsh / Art Students League, New York / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Image copyright © The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Image source: Art Resource, NY

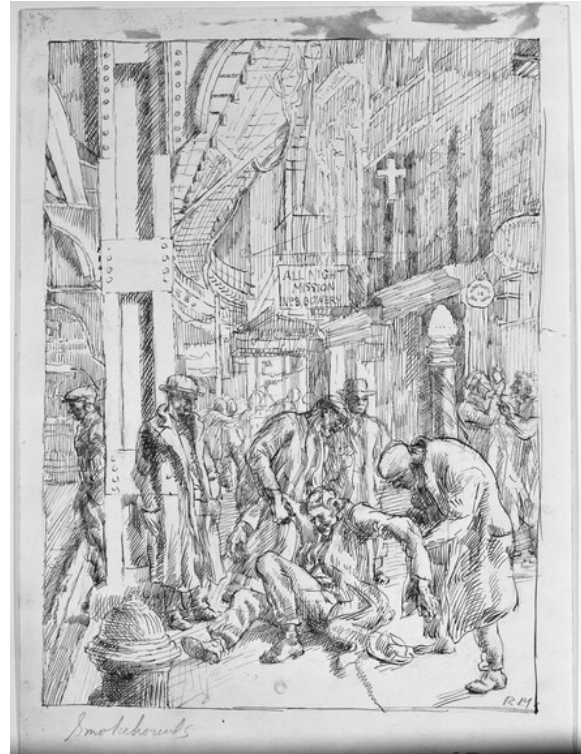


**fig. 4** Reginald Marsh, page from sketchbook no. 59, 11854, black chalk on paper, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. © 2017 Estate of Reginald Marsh / Art Students League, New York / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Image copyright © The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Image source: Art Resource, NY





**fig. 5** Reginald Marsh, *Tattoo and Haircut*, 1932, egg tempera on Masonite, The Art Institute of Chicago, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Earle Ludgin, 1947.39. © 2017 Estate of Reginald Marsh / Art Students League, New York / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Image: The Art Institute of Chicago / Art Resource, NY



**fig. 6** Reginald Marsh, *Study for Smokehounds*, 1934, black ink over graphite on off-white wove paper, Harvard Art Museums / Fogg Museum, Gift of Mrs. Reginald Marsh. © Estate of Reginald Marsh / Art Students League, New York / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Image © President and Fellows of Harvard College



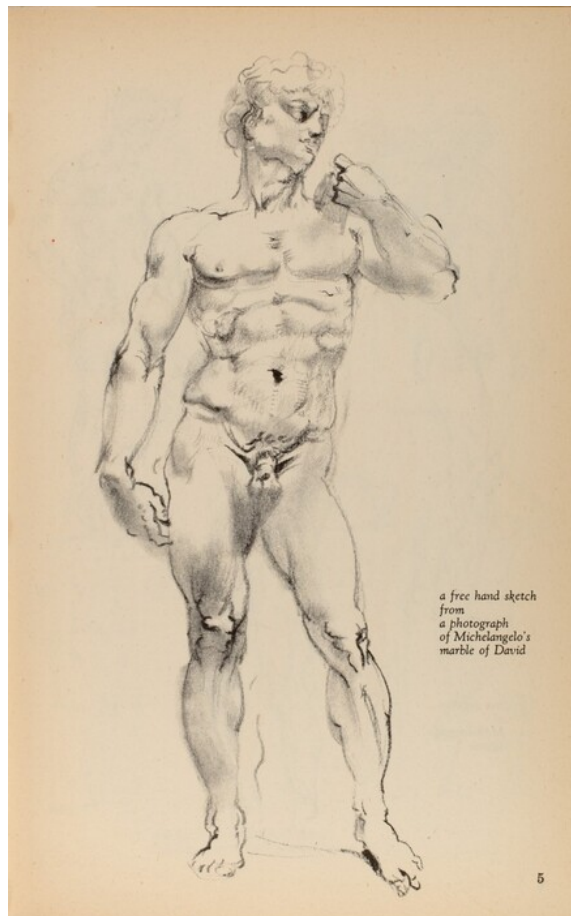
**fig. 7** Reginald Marsh, *Smokehounds*, 1934–1935, etching, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Reba and Dave Williams Collection, Florian Carr Fund and Gift of the Print Research Foundation



**fig. 8** Titian, *The Entombment of Christ*, c. 1520, oil on canvas, Musée du Louvre, Paris. © RMN-Grand Palais / Art Resource, NY. Image: Stéphane Maréchalle



**fig. 9** Reginald Marsh, *Sketches after Rubens*, n.d., charcoal and brush and wash on paper, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Felicia Meyer Marsh Bequest 80.31.111



**fig. 10** Reginald Marsh, A free hand sketch from a photograph of Michelangelo's marble of *David*, in Reginald Marsh, *Anatomy for Artists* (New York, 1945), 5, National Gallery of Art Library, David K. E. Bruce Fund

## NOTES

- [1] The address No. 8 Bowery, featured prominently in *Smokehounds*, is approximately one block north of Chatham Square, which marks the southern terminus of the Bowery.
- [2] "Talk of the Town: Transients," *New Yorker*, Apr. 20, 1940, 15. Irving L. Allen, *The City in Slang: New York Life and Popular Speech* (New York, 1993), 152.
- [3] See Lance Mayer and Gay Myers, "Old Master Recipes in the 1920s, 1930s,"



## NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART ONLINE EDITIONS

*American Paintings, 1900–1945*

and 1940s: Curry, Marsh, Doerner, and Maroger,” *Journal of the American Institute for Conservation* 4, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 21–42.

- [4] Norman Sasowsky, *The Prints of Reginald Marsh* (New York, 1976), 197.
- [5] *The WPA Guide to New York City: The Federal Writers’ Project Guide to 1930s New York* (1939; New York, 1982), 119–120.
- [6] Dudley T. Upjohn, “An Unique But Practical Rescue Mission: New York Churchmen Establish a Mission of Help on the Bowery for the Many Unfortunates in that Great City,” *St. Andrew’s Cross* 25, no. 11 (Aug. 1911): 18.
- [7] “Chinatown’s Only All-Night Mission Closed; Founder Died Recently after Car Hit Him,” *New York Times*, Oct. 18, 1948, 25.
- [8] Marilyn Ann Cohen, “Reginald Marsh: An Interpretation of His Art” (PhD diss., New York University, 1986), 132.
- [9] Reginald Marsh, “Let’s Get Back to Painting,” *Magazine of Art* 37 (Dec. 1944): 296.
- [10] On Marsh as satirist, see Richard N. Masteller, “Caricatures in Crisis: The Satiric Vision of Reginald Marsh and John Dos Passos,” *Smithsonian Studies in American Art* 3, no. 2 (Spring 1989): 23–45.

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### TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The painting was executed on a 1/8-inch-thick piece of Masonite-like hardboard, which is somewhat softer than modern Masonite. The original support was attached with a lead-white adhesive to a fabric, which was then stretched over a second piece of Masonite-like hardboard and tacked to a nonoriginal six-member, mortise-and-tenon stretcher. The original support was prepared with a thick white gesso-like ground. The artist added texture by applying paint in dabs and, in some places, by what appears to be scoring. The paint layer, probably egg tempera although it has not been analyzed, is built up in many layers of small brushstrokes to create a convoluted texture. Much of the modeling of form was done with thinner layers of paint, in some cases very thin washes, which pick up the texture from the underlayers. Most of the colors are quite thin and muted, except for the shop sign at the upper right, where opaque yellow paint has been applied over a bright blue underlayer. No artist’s changes are visible. The painting has been covered with a thick, semimatte natural resin varnish that was probably Marsh’s original varnish. He often coated his paintings with complicated sequences of natural resin varnishes, sometimes interlayered with egg or wax.

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Marsh's paintings are often considered to have darkened over time, partly because of his egg medium and partly because his thick varnishes, which are often impossible to remove safely, have turned darker and more yellow. Deep gouges in the painting in the upper and lower right have been crudely repaired with translucent smears of overpaint; the character of the paint and the amateurish nature of the repairs hint that they could have been done by the artist rather than by a professional conservator.

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### PROVENANCE

The artist [1898-1954]; by inheritance 1954 to the artist's second wife and widow, Felicia Meyer Marsh [1912-1978]; gift 1958 to the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington; acquired 2014 by the National Gallery of Art.

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### EXHIBITION HISTORY

1936 First Annual Exhibition of the Work of Yale Professional Artists, Yale Club of New York, 17 March-13 April 1936, no. 3.

1963 American Traditionalists of the 20th Century, Columbus Museum of Arts and Crafts, Georgia, 1963, no. 99.

1963 Progress of an American Collection, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, 1963, unpublished checklist

1966 Past and Present: 250 Years of American Art, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, 1966, unpublished checklist.

1976 Corcoran [The American Genius], Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, 1976, no checklist.

1980 La Pintura de los Estados Unidos de Museos de la Ciudad de Washington, Museo del Palacio de Bellas Artes, Mexico City, 1980-1981, no. 56, as *Borrochines*.

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1981 *Of Time and Place: American Figurative Art from the Corcoran Gallery, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington; Cincinnati Art Museum; San Diego Museum of Art; University of Kentucky Art Museum, Lexington; Hunter Museum of Art, Chattanooga; Philbrook Art Center, Tulsa; Portland Art Museum, Oregon; Des Moines Art Center; Museum of Fine Arts, St. Petersburg, Florida, 1981-1983, no.48.*

2004 *Figuratively Speaking: The Human Form in American Art, 1770-1950, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, 2004-2005, unpublished checklist.*

2005 *Encouraging American Genius: Master Paintings from the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington; Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; Parrish Art Museum, Southampton, NY; Mint Museum of Art, Charlotte; John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, Sarasota, 2005-2007, checklist no.90.*

2008 *The American Evolution: A History through Art, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, 2008, unpublished checklist.*

2009 *American Paintings from the Collection, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, 6 June-18 October 2009, unpublished checklist.*

2013 *American Journeys: Visions of Place, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, 21 September 2013-28 September 2014, unpublished checklist.*

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- 1986 Cohen, Marilyn Ann. "Reginald Marsh: An Interpretation of his Art." Ph.D.

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- dissertation, New York University, 1986: 132 repro.
- 1999 Ursini, James, and Alain Silver. *The Noir Style*. New York, 1999: 22 repro.
- 2000 Cash, Sarah, with Terrie Sultan. *American Treasures of the Corcoran Gallery of Art*. New York, 2000: 160, 200 repro.
- 2003 Ellis, James Walter. "The Fourteenth Street School." Ph.D. dissertation, Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland, 2003: 133.
- 2005 Higginbotham, Carmenita D. "Saturday Night and the Savoy: Blackness and the Urban Spectacle in the Art of Reginald Marsh." Ph.D. dissertation, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, 2005: 240, 245, 247, 252, 368, repro.
- 2011 Greenhalgh, Adam. "Reginald Marsh, *Smoke Hounds*." In *Corcoran Gallery of Art: American Paintings to 1945*. Edited by Sarah Cash. Washington, 2011: 244-245, 282, repro.
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