



Max Weber

American, born Poland, 1881 - 1961

## *Rush Hour, New York*

1915

oil on canvas

overall: 92 x 76.9 cm (36 1/4 x 30 1/4 in.)

framed: 111.7 x 95.9 cm (44 x 37 3/4 in.)

Inscription: lower right: MAX WEBER 1915

Gift of the Avalon Foundation 1970.6.1

---

### ENTRY

Aptly described by Alfred Barr, the scholar and first director of the Museum of Modern Art, as a "kinetograph of the flickering shutters of speed through subways and under skyscrapers," [1] *Rush Hour, New York* is arguably the most important of Max Weber's early modernist works. The painting combines the shallow, fragmented spaces of cubism with the rhythmic, rapid-fire forms of futurism to capture New York City's frenetic pace and dynamism. [2] New York's new mass transit systems, the elevated railways (or "els") and subways, were among the most visible products of the new urban age. Such a subject was ideally suited to the new visual languages of modernism that Weber learned about during his earlier encounters with Pablo Picasso (Spanish, 1881 - 1973) and the circle of artists who gathered around Gertrude Stein in Paris in the first decade of the 20th century.

Weber had previously dealt with the theme of urban transportation in *New York* [fig. 1], in which he employed undulating serpentine forms to indicate the paths of elevated trains through lower Manhattan's skyscrapers and over the Brooklyn Bridge. In 1915, in addition to *Rush Hour*, he also painted *Grand Central Terminal* [fig. 2], which has been interpreted as "rendering in non-representational terms a consciousness of the assault on the body and senses that the daily rush of the crowds has on the urban traveler." [3] The term "rush hour" was relatively new in 1915 and almost exclusively associated with New York City. According to historian of slang Irving Lewis Allen, it had been "coined by 1890 to denote the new urban phenomenon of several hundred thousand workers and shoppers crushing onto mass transit to go to and from the center each weekday morning and evening." [4] One of the expression's earliest appearances was in the caption to an illustration

by T. de Thulstrup in *Harper's Weekly* on February 8, 1890 [fig. 3]: "A Station Scene in the 'Rush' Hour of the Manhattan Elevated Railroad." The els became an integral part of New York's cityscape and appear in many paintings of the period, such as John Sloan's *The City from Greenwich Village*.

According to Weber's early biographer Holger Cahill, the images that appear in the artist's New York paintings "are not simply fantasies, but are made up of many visual contacts with actual scenes." [5] That being said, *Rush Hour* more nearly approaches total abstraction than most contemporary European cubist paintings, and individual forms are extremely difficult to recognize. No trains are visible, and, unlike *New York*, there is no indication of their routes. The composition is devoid of human presence. It is uncertain whether the viewer is looking at the entrance to a subway station, the underground station itself, an elevated train, or some combination of all three. Given the similarity of the architectural forms in lower center of the painting to those in *Grand Central Terminal*, the first option is perhaps the most plausible. Regardless, Weber's primary aim was not to record objective details but rather to give form to the dynamism and velocity generated by a machine whose immense power had transformed and energized the urban setting. He dispensed with any indication of a specific time, so there is no sense of whether this is a morning or evening rush hour. Curvilinear forms, zigzags, jagged angles, and radiating force-lines explode and intersect in multiple directions, expressing both the subway's movements and its dematerializing effect on the environment. As one writer has described it, "The station explodes with the thunder of the passing machine." [6]

Art historians have unanimously praised the vividness with which Weber's *Rush Hour* captures the modern urban environment's essence. Lloyd Goodrich considered it the "most forceful" of the artist's New York City paintings, and noted that "the thrusting diagonals and energetic play of lines expressed the turmoil of rush hour, while the representation of elements suggested the city's mechanical, multitudinous character." [7] The art historian Robert Rosenblum has noted how "the spectator is thrust into the most frenetic confusion of the city's daily peaks of mechanical and human activity. Rolling wheels, skyscrapers, station platforms are fragmented and recomposed as the whining, metallic engine of a vast urban machine; and, in particular, the sensation of rushing motion in all directions is suggested by the repetitive sequences of spiky, angular patterns that appear to roar past the viewer like an express train." [8] Viewing *Rush Hour* as an image of

## NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART ONLINE EDITIONS

*American Paintings, 1900–1945*

urban transportation, the scholar Dominic Ricciotti called the painting "a paradigm of locomotion; in choosing the twice daily rush through the city, the artist dramatized those peak periods when the urban machine churned most forcefully. *Rush Hour* embodied the futurist principle of 'universal dynamism'—that the world is continually in a state of flux." [9]

Unlike John Marin (American, 1870 - 1953) and Joseph Stella (American, 1877 - 1946), who had direct contact with futurist artists in Europe, Weber for the most part had to assimilate the style from secondhand sources, such as photographs, newspaper articles, and descriptions by other artists. [10] He was certainly familiar with Marcel Duchamp's mechanomorphic *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2* [fig. 4], but rather than strictly confining himself to representing physical motion, he sought a more comprehensive personification of the urban environment transformed by new modes of mass transportation. Whereas Duchamp's robotic figure possesses a somewhat sinister, enigmatic quality, Weber's attitude toward the machine is less troubling. His highly individualistic form of futurism lacks the more aggressive violence and anarchism characteristic of the movement's Italian progenitors. In this work, he provides us with an image of the early 20th-century New York rush hour as a dynamic, enthralling, and awe-inspiring experience. *Rush Hour, New York* is largely devoid of the petty annoyances and frustrations that continue to bedevil commuters in cities all over the world. As Allen put it, Weber "abstracts the human tumult and exposes a new dimension of its meaning." [11]

Robert Torchia

September 29, 2016

---

## COMPARATIVE FIGURES



**fig. 1** Max Weber, *New York*, 1913, oil on canvas, private collection. Image courtesy Guggenheim, Asher Associates



**fig. 2** Max Weber, *Grand Central Terminal*, 1915, oil on canvas, Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid.  
[www.museothyssen.org](http://www.museothyssen.org)





**fig. 3** T. de Thulstrup, "A Station Scene in the 'Rush' House of the Manhattan Elevated Railroad," from *Harper's Weekly* 34, no. 1729 (February 8, 1890), Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Massachusetts



**fig. 4** Marcel Duchamp, *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2*, 1912, oil on canvas, Philadelphia Museum of Art, The Louise and Walter Arensberg Collection 1950-134-59. © 2016 Succession Marcel Duchamp / ADAGP, Paris / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

## NOTES

- [1] Alfred H. Barr, *Max Weber Retrospective Exhibition, 1907–1930* (New York, 1930), 11.
- [2] The other paintings are *New York at Night* (The Archer M. Huntington Art Gallery, The University of Texas at Austin), *New York Department Store*

(Detroit Institute of Arts), and *Chinese Restaurant* (Whitney Museum of American Art, NY).

- [3] Dominic Ricciotti, "The Revolution in Urban Transport: Max Weber and Italian Futurism," *American Art Journal* 16 (1984): 55.
- [4] Irving Lewis Allen, *The City in Slang: New York Life and Popular Speech* (New York, 1995), 91.
- [5] Holger Cahill, *Max Weber* (New York, 1930), 37. In this same vein, Lloyd Goodrich, *Max Weber* (New York, 1949), 30, noted: "although in certain works Weber like Delaunay and Kandinsky approached closer to pure abstraction than did the cubists, even his most abstract works were always related to specific themes. Never purely formal exercises in plastic values, they were primarily expressionistic."
- [6] Dominic Ricciotti, "City Railways/Modernist Visions," in Susan Danly and Leo Marx, *The Railroad in American Art: Representations of Technological Change* (Cambridge, MA, 1988), 132.
- [7] Lloyd Goodrich, *Max Weber* (New York, 1949), 28–30.
- [8] Robert Rosenblum, *Cubism and Twentieth-Century Art* (New York, 1960), 221–222; quoted in Alfred Werner, *Max Weber* (New York, 1975), 50.
- [9] Dominic Ricciotti, "City Railways/Modernist Visions," in Susan Danly and Leo Marx, *The Railroad in American Art: Representations of Technological Change* (Cambridge, MA, 1988), 132; quoted in Percy North, *Max Weber: The Cubist Decade, 1910–1920* (Atlanta, GA, 1991), 37.
- [10] For a discussion of these sources, see John O. Hand, "Futurism in America," *Art Journal* 41 (Winter 1981): 337–342.
- [11] Irving Lewis Allen, *The City in Slang: New York Life and Popular Speech* (New York, 1995), 90.

---

## TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The pre-primed, finely woven linen support remains unlined and mounted on its original stretcher. The smooth, white priming remains exposed in many areas, and thus functions as an integral part of the design. The artist applied oil paint rather thinly, and extensive charcoal underdrawing is visible through much of the translucent paint film. The painting is in very good condition. The surface is coated with a moderately thick layer of natural resin varnish that has discolored.

---

## PROVENANCE

The artist [1881-1961]; his estate; purchased 1970 through (Bernard Danenberg Galleries, Inc., New York) by NGA.

---

## EXHIBITION HISTORY

1930 Max Weber Retrospective, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1930, no. 33.

1945 Max Weber, Paul Rosenberg Gallery, New York, 1945.

1949 Max Weber: Retrospective Exhibition, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, 1949, no. 18, repro.

1951 Abstract Painting and Sculpture in America, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1951, no. 108, repro.

1959 Max Weber: Retrospective Exhibition, The Newark Museum, 1959, no. 20.

1965 Roots of Abstract Art in America, 1910-1930, National Collection of Fine Arts (now National Museum of American Art), Washington, D.C., 1965-1966, no. 187.

1965 Six decades of American Art, The Leicester Galleries, London, 1965, no. 91.

1970 The Cubist Epoch, Los Angeles County Museum of Art; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1970-1971, no. 320, pl. 197.

1973 City and Machine Between the Wars: 1914-1945, Museum of Fine Arts, St. Petersburg, Florida; Loch Haven Art Center, Orlando; Cummer Gallery of Art, Jacksonville, 1973-1974, no. 15.

1976 The Golden Door: Artist-Immigrants of America, 1876-1976, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C., 1976, no. 3, repro.

1977 Paris - New York, Musée National d'Art Moderne, Paris, 1977, unnumbered catalogue.

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. 41, color repro.

## NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART ONLINE EDITIONS

*American Paintings, 1900–1945*

1981 *Visions of New York City: American Paintings, Drawings and Prints of the 20th Century*, Tokyo Metropolitan Museum, 1981, no. 88, repro.

1982 *American Masters of the Twentieth Century*, Oklahoma Art Center, Oklahoma City; Terra Museum of American Art, Evanston, Illinois, 1982, no. 53, repro. (shown only in Oklahoma City).

1982 *Max Weber: American Modern*, Jewish Museum, New York; Norton Gallery and School of Art, West Palm Beach; McNay Art Institute, San Antonio; Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha, 1982-1983, no. 44, repro. (shown only in West Palm Beach and Omaha in 1983).

1986 *Futurismo e Futurismi*, Palazzo Grassi, Venice, 1986, unnumbered catalogue, repro.

1991 *Max Weber: The Cubist Decade, 1910-1920*, High Museum of Art, Atlanta; Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.; Albright-Knox Gallery, Buffalo; Brooklyn Museum, 1991-1993, no. 57, repro.

1996 *To Be Modern: American Encounters with Cezanne and Company*, Museum of American Art of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia, 1996, unnumbered catalogue.

2000 *Max Weber's Modern Vision: Selections from the National Gallery of Art and Related Collections*, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 2000, brochure.

2000 *Tempus Fugit: Time Flies*, The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, 2000, fig. I.31.

2002 *Debating American Modernism: Stieglitz, Duchamp, and the New York Avant-Garde*, Georgia O'Keeffe Museum, Santa Fe; Des Moines Art Center; Terra Museum of American Art, Chicago, 2003, no. 15, repro.


2007 *Art in America: 300 Years of Innovation*, National Art Museum of China, Beijing; Shanghai Museum; The State Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow; Museo Guggenheim Bilbao, 2007-2008, unnumbered catalogue, repro.

2017 *New York, New York*, Nassau County Museum of Art, Roslyn Harbor, 2017, no catalogue.



## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- 1930 Cahill, Holger. *Max Weber*. New York, 1930: 26-27, pl. 9.
- 1951 Baur, John I.H. *Revolution and Tradition in Modern American Art*. Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1951: 52.
- 1960 Rosenblum, Robert. *Cubism and Twentieth-Century Art*. New York, 1960: 221-222, 322, fig. 151.
- 1967 Rose, Barbara. *American Art Since 1900: A Critical History*. New York and Washington, 1967: 88, fig. 4-3.
- 1975 Werner, Alfred. *Max Weber*. New York, 1975: 50, color pl. 62.
- 1978 King, Marian. *Adventures in Art: National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.* New York, 1978: 115, pl. 74.
- 1980 *American Paintings: An Illustrated Catalogue*. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1980: 254, repro.
- 1980 Wilmerding, John. *American Masterpieces from the National Gallery of Art*. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1980: no. 56, color repro.
- 1981 Williams, William James. *A Heritage of American Paintings from the National Gallery of Art*. New York, 1981: detail 212, 214, repro. 216, color repro. 224.
- 1983 Brown, Milton W. *One Hundred Masterpieces of American Painting from Public Collections in Washington, D.C.* Washington, D.C., 1983: 130-131, color repro.
- 1983 Henderson, Linda Dalrymple. *The Fourth Dimension and Non-Euclidian Geometry in Modern Art*. Princeton, 1983: 130-131, color pl.
- 1984 Ricciotti, Dominic. "The Revolution in Urban Transport: Max Weber and Italian Futurism." *American Art Journal* 16 (1984): 56, fig. 1.
- 1984 Walker, John. *National Gallery of Art, Washington*. Rev. ed. New York, 1984: 574, no. 878, color repro.
- 1988 Ricciotti, Dominic. "City Railways/Modernist Visions." In Susan Danly and Leo Marx, *The Railroad in American Art: Representations of Technological Change*. Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1988: 132, color pl. 99.
- 1988 Wilmerding, John. *American Masterpieces from the National Gallery of Art*. Rev. ed. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1988: 172, no. 63, color repro.
- 1991 *Max Weber: The Cubist Decade, 1910-1920*. Exh. cat. High Museum of Art, Atlanta, traveling exhibition, 1991: 62, no. 57.
- 1992 *American Paintings: An Illustrated Catalogue*. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1992: 375, repro.
- 1995 Stokstad, Marilyn. *Art History*. New York, 1995: 1097, fig. 28-109.
- 1999 Stokstad, Marilyn. *Art History*. 2 vols. Revised ed. New York, 1999: 1097, fig. 28-110.
- 2000 Oja, Carol J. "George Antheil's Ballet Mecanique and Transatlantic

 NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART ONLINE EDITIONS

*American Paintings, 1900–1945*

Modernism.” In Townsend Lundington, ed. *A Modern Mosaic: Art and Modernism in the United States*. Chapel Hill, 2000: 187, 193, color pl. 4.

2008 Miller, Angela et al. *American Encounters: Art, History, and Cultural Identity*. Upper Saddle River, NJ, 2008: 458, 460, color fig. 14.12, color frontispiece.

---

**To cite:** Robert Torchia, “Max Weber/*Rush Hour, New York/1915*,” *American Paintings, 1900–1945*, NGA Online Editions, <https://purl.org/nga/collection/artobject/52086> (accessed April 11, 2025).