



John Marin
American, 1870 - 1953

Marie Jane Hughes Marin (Mrs. John Marin)

c. 1944

oil on canvas

overall: 71.1 x 55.8 cm (28 x 21 15/16 in.)

Inscription: upper center on canvas over top stretcher bar reverse: SR 44.15 Mrs.

John Marin - ca. 1944; upper right on canvas over top stretcher bar reverse: NBM

1/13/84; center of canvas reverse: Property of / John Marin / Jr.

Gift of John Marin, Jr. 1986.54.8

ENTRY

Following their marriage in 1912, Marie Jane Hughes Marin often accompanied her husband on his painting trips but was rarely the subject of his work. John Marin produced portraits of friends and family members only sporadically until the mid-1940s, when he began to take portraiture more seriously. This portrait was painted approximately one year before Marie died in February 1945. In the last year of his own life, Marin, in remembrance, included her in *A Looking Back: The Marin Family* (1953, private collection), a family portrait after a 1921 photograph by Alfred Stieglitz (American, 1864 - 1946), and painted *Untitled (Mrs. Marin)* (1953, private collection), a portrait of his wife that was based on a photograph by Dorothy Norman. [1]

The calligraphic line and brushy technique of *Mrs. John Marin* are characteristic of Marin's late series of oil portraits, which also includes *Portrait of Roy Wass with Apologies* (1949, private collection) and *The Spirit of the Cape: Susie Thompson* (1949, private collection). [2] In these works Marin, as he had since the late 1920s, continued to apply his mastery of watercolor, the medium for which he is best known, to oil painting. [3] He thinned his paint until it could be applied in fluid, transparent washes, and he held areas of the white canvas in reserve to construct his image in the same dynamic way he employed the white, untouched surfaces of his watercolor paper.

Marin favored the three-quarter-length seated format for his portraits and usually posed his subjects with their hands folded in their laps. Rather than an exact

physical likeness, the sketchy, abbreviated quality of *Mrs. John Marin* was meant to convey the psychological and spiritual presence of a pensive elderly woman.

Marin's emphasis on the spiritual rather than the physical attributes of his sitter recalls, in both its format and technique, the work of the Austrian expressionist Oskar Kokoschka (Austrian, 1886 - 1980), an artist avidly collected by Marin's patron and friend Duncan Phillips, who, most notably, had acquired Kokoschka's *Portrait of Lotte Franzos* in 1941.

At midcentury and nearing the end of his long career, Marin was acclaimed as one of America's greatest living painters and acknowledged as an important forerunner to such emerging movements as abstract expressionism. [4] Like a number of the abstract expressionists themselves, for instance Willem de Kooning (American, born the Netherlands, 1904 - 1997), Marin's work, despite its experimental, abstract tendencies, remained deeply rooted in his direct experience of the visual world. Regarding portraiture, in a letter of 1953 Marin predicted that "the painted portrait has held for a thousand years--I feel it will have Value in the years to come--that mankind will eventually--is now beginning to get tired and sick of the abstract--the nonobjective--that old subject object forms will come forth again." [5]

Robert Torchia

August 17, 2018

NOTES

- [1] See Sheldon Reich, *John Marin: A Stylistic Analysis and Catalogue Raisonné*, 2 vols. (Tucson, AZ, 1970), 53.1 and 53.3.
- [2] See Sheldon Reich, *John Marin: A Stylistic Analysis and Catalogue Raisonné*, 2 vols. (Tucson, AZ, 1970), 49.40 and 49.58. Other related portraits in watercolor are *John Marin Jr.* (1942, R.42.16) and *Elizabeth J. Patterson* (1949, R.49.3), and the oil *Susie Thompson* (R.46.37).
- [3] On Marin's late oils, see *John Marin: The Late Oils* (New York, 2008), and Debra Bricker Balken, *John Marin: Modernism at Midcentury* (New Haven, CT, 2011).
- [4] On Marin's reputation at midcentury, see William Agee, "John Marin's Greatness: The Late Oils and Post-1945 Art," in *John Marin: The Late Oils* (New York, 2008), 7–9.
- [5] Marin to Louis Kalonyme, July 7, 1953, NGA curatorial files, quoted in Ruth Fine, *John Marin* (Washington, DC, 1990), 251.

TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The medium-weight, plain-weave fabric support was attached to a nonoriginal stretcher, and during this process it was shifted 3/8" to the right. The original tacking margins are intact; a selvage edge is present at the left margin. The artist freely applied a layer of light gray, leanly bound priming over the commercially prepared white ground. This layer was also applied before the canvas was stretched, as it extends almost to the lower edges of the tacking margins. The very lean paint was diluted to the consistency of watercolor, and, in the thickest areas, gouache. Colors have dripped down the surface from some of the brushstrokes in the background. The outlines and contours have a calligraphic rather than continuous character, and broad washes fill in the planes. The unvarnished paint surface is abraded, and a significant amount of grime has accumulated on it. There are also several scrapes in the painting that go through the paint and the gray imprimatura layer. These scrapes are found at the center of the bottom edge, around the sitter's chin, and at the left side of the neck. A number of bulges and other distortions are also evident in the picture plane.

PROVENANCE

The artist [1870-1953]; his estate; by inheritance to his son, John C. Marin, Jr. [1914-1988], Cape Split, Maine; gift 1986 to NGA.

EXHIBITION HISTORY

1944 John Marin: Paintings - 1944, An American Place, New York, 1944-1945, no. 11, as Portrait: Mrs. John Marin.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- 1970 Reich, Sheldon. *John Marin: A Stylistic Analysis and Catalogue Raisonné*. Tucson, 1970: no. 44.15.
- 1992 *American Paintings: An Illustrated Catalogue*. National Gallery of Art,

Marie Jane Hughes Marin (Mrs. John Marin)

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Washington, 1992: 233, repro.

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