



John Marin
American, 1870 - 1953

Tunk Mountains, Maine

1948

oil on canvas board

overall: 35.4 x 45.7 cm (13 15/16 x 18 in.)

Inscription: lower right: Marin 48; across upper center reverse: (Tunk Mountains, Maine) 1948 / oil on canvas board 14 x 18 /

SR 48.38; upper right reverse: NBM 2/21/84

Gift of John Marin, Jr. 1986.54.9

ENTRY

John Marin painted this small oil sketch in 1948, the year *Look* magazine pronounced him America's "Artist No. 1" and he was at the pinnacle of his fame. [1] It represents one of his favorite landscape subjects, the multiple peaks of Tunk Mountain, situated approximately 30 miles from his summer home in Cape Split, near South Addison, Maine. Marin painted the motif repeatedly in both oil and watercolor between 1939 and 1952, the year before his death. Among these works are *Tunk Mountains, Autumn, Maine* (1945, Phillips Collection, Washington, DC) and *Tunk Mountains* (1952, Wichita Art Museum, KS). Three of Marin's depictions of the Tunk Mountains in watercolor and in graphite are in the Gallery's collection.

This oil sketch was completed in the same year as the larger, more complex, and more colorful *Tunk Mountains, Maine* [fig. 1]. Both works exemplify Marin's increasing tendency during the mid-1940s to refine pictorial elements into expressive calligraphic lines, conveying a sense of rhythm and motion. The reduction of color to bare essentials (blue, mauve, brown, and ochre in this example) and the prominent role of the off-white ground layer are characteristic of his work in this period. Describing Marin's late work, curator Debra Bricker Balken

CE NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART ONLINE EDITIONS
American Paintings, 1900–1945

observed that “the white ground of paper or canvas was approached as an integral feature of the picture plane, consciously incorporated to assert its flatness. The tension between the active, sprawling, animated line and the bare surfaces renewed the experimental traits of Marin’s work yet once again, lifting the final phase of his output to what he admitted were ‘just gestures—and to me art is no more than that.’” [2] Marin’s simplified forms, calligraphic markings, and incorporation of swaths of unpainted canvas into his compositions culminated in his late masterpiece *The Written Sea* (1952), now in the Gallery’s collection.

Robert Torchia

July 24, 2024

COMPARATIVE FIGURES



fig. 1 John Marin, *Tunk Mountains, Maine*, 1948, oil on canvas, Louisiana Art and Science Museum, Baton Rouge

NOTES

- [1] “Are These Men the Best Painters in America Today?,” *Look*, February 3, 1948, 44.
- [2] Debra Bricker Balken, *John Marin: Modernism at Midcentury* (Andover, MA,

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART ONLINE EDITIONS

American Paintings, 1900–1945

2011), 18. Marin's quotation is from a November 18, 1947, letter to Duncan and Marjorie Phillips and is included in John Marin, *The Selected Writings of John Marin*, ed. Dorothy Norman (New York, 1949), 222.

TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The support consists of an artist's board faced with a plain-weave fabric commercially prepared with an off-white ground; it retains the manufacturer's label that identifies it as the product of The Palette Art Co., 436 Madison Ave., New York. The artist applied paint in a series of narrow black sketch lines (some may have been applied with a stick), with scumbles of opaque paint in the distant mountains and in the pink foreground. The painting is in very good condition. Grime has accumulated on the unvarnished surface.

Michael Swicklik

July 24, 2024

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

1998 American Light: Selections from the National Gallery of Art, Art Museum of Western Virginia, Roanoke, May-August 1998, no catalogue.

1998 Treasures of Light: Paintings from the National Gallery of Art, Dixon Gallery and Gardens, Memphis, March-April 1998, no catalogue.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Tunk Mountains, Maine

© National Gallery of Art, Washington

 NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART ONLINE EDITIONS
American Paintings, 1900–1945

- 1970 Reich, Sheldon. *John Marin: A Stylistic Analysis and Catalogue Raisonné*. Tucson, 1970: no. 48.38.
- 1992 *American Paintings: An Illustrated Catalogue*. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1992: 233, repro.
-

To cite: Robert Torchia, “John Marin/*Tunk Mountains, Maine/1948*,” *American Paintings, 1900–1945*, NGA Online Editions, <https://purl.org/nga/collection/artobject/67925> (accessed April 11, 2025).