



JAN MATULKA

THE UNKNOWN MODERNIST

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This online catalogue is published in conjunction with exhibition *Jan Matulka: The Unknown Modernist* presented at the Flint Institute of Arts, Flint, Michigan.

Jan Matulka loans courtesy of McCormick Gallery, Chicago.

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Cover: Double-exposed portrait of Jan Matulka, c. 1920. Jan Matulka papers, 1923-1960. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

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PREFACE

I first read the name Jan Matulka while looking through the Flint Institute of Arts database of the nearly 9,000 artworks in their collection. Eager to find a compelling artist or subject to base my research on, I was continually drawn to two works in the collection by Czech-American artist Jan Matulka. The works *Four Nudes in a Landscape* (fig. 4), and *Two Nudes* (cat. 10) were some of the most interesting and well-executed early modern artworks I had seen, yet I had never heard of the artist. As I began my research I realized that although I had never heard the name Jan Matulka, he was connected to some of the most important names and moments in art history.

Due to choices made by himself as well as outside sources, Matulka was lost to history by the 1950s and his name was not resurrected again until after his death. In 1995 the McCormick Gallery, Chicago acquired the artist's estate and eagerly went about promoting Matulka through exhibitions and catalogs. Despite this, Matulka remains nearly unknown in the understanding of modern art. Due to the self-perpetuating

nature of art history, Matulka is continually forgotten. This exhibition looks to reinforce his role in the pivotal decades of the development of modern art and reinforce his importance in the oeuvre of art history.

This catalogue and accompanying exhibition are the product of the thesis requirement for a Masters in Arts Administration at the University of Michigan-Flint. I am grateful to the FIA for allowing me the time, space, and resources to execute this exhibition. I am also grateful to FIA Curator of Collections and Exhibitions Tracee Glab for acting as a mentor and sounding board during the process of this project. Thank you Tom McCormick for the many loans to this exhibition. Your generosity and kindness made this project possible.

Thank you Dr. Linda Johnson for your advice on behalf of the University of Michigan-Flint and for filling in on a moment's notice. I'd also like to take a moment to remember Dr. Sarah Lippert, who acted as my advisor for the beginning of this project and whose efforts will not be forgotten.

Rachael Holstege

Flint Institute of Arts Curatorial Assistant and

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INTRODUCTION

To many, the name Jan Matulka may be unfamiliar. When walking through an art museum you're unlikely to stumble upon one of his paintings in the early modernism gallery—though his works are included in most major collections. Despite his presence and participation in some of the most impactful years in the development of modern art in the United States, due to personal choices as well as health and economic factors, Matulka's role as an influential artist has been pushed to the periphery of history.

From the 1920s to the mid-1940s Jan Matulka was an active participant in the production and propagation of modern art in the United States and Europe. Born in South Bohemia in 1890, at the age of fifteen he began to study art in the nearby increasingly metropolitan city of Prague. Prague was one of the first cities outside of Paris to embrace the avant-garde and young Matulka would have experienced the first inklings of modern art here.

In 1907 Matulka and his family immigrated to the United States and he enrolled in the National Academy of Design in New York

City where he studied for the next nine years. After his conservation academic studies, he began intensely exploring the burgeoning avant-garde through his artworks. He spent much of the 1920s in Paris, experiencing first-hand the development of modern art. He was included in many exhibitions in both New York and Paris and soon Matulka's name was synonymous with modern art.

Despite his success, Matulka never fully embraced the social aspect of art. He thought his works could speak for themselves and was resistant in engaging in the transactional aspect of the business. In 1944 an exhibition at the A.C.A Gallery in New York City would be the last of his current work during his lifetime. Following that exhibition Matulka ceased participating in current events, secluding himself in his apartment though he continued to create artworks until he died in 1972. After the close of the 1940s, there was nearly no mention of Matulka and he gradually became the Unknown Modernist. This catalog and accompanying exhibition reevaluate Jan Matulka's role in modern art through works by him and his contemporaries.

THE YOUNG ARTIST

Jan Matulka was born on November 7, 1890, in the small town of Vlachovo Březí in Southern Bohemia (now known as the Czech Republic). He and his five younger sisters were raised by their parents on a modest dairy farm. At a young age, Matulka realized that he wanted to be an artist and at the age of fifteen began taking art classes in the nearby city of Prague. Prague was, and remains, the largest city in the Czech Republic and has a rich cultural history. Much like Paris, Prague was experiencing a shift in values socially, economically, and artistically. Artists began to grow tired of the conventional, conservative, and old-fashioned approaches to art and were eager for more.

Unable to advance financially in the stagnant economy of Southern Bohemia the Matulkas sold their farm and immigrated to the United States in 1907. The family departed from Germany aboard the *Grosser Kurfurst*, arriving at Ellis Island in the New York harbor. The family settled in the Bronx, New York, a popular borough for newly arrived immigrants.

In 1908 Matulka was accepted into the National Academy of Design in New York City. The Academy followed the accepted academic curriculum of the time, teaching students about the strict principles of subject, composition, and technique, focusing on the idealization of form. Although he thrived at the Academy, like many young artists around the world Matulka yearned to break from the academic tradition that had been so ingrained in him.¹ Having lived in Europe, Matulka was aware of the developing avant-garde and was eager to explore and develop new methods of expression.

At the conclusion of his studies at the Academy in 1917, Matulka was nominated by his instructors for the first Joseph Pulitzer Traveling Scholarship, which was to be awarded to the most promising and deserving student.² He won the scholarship and was awarded a cash prize. With the award money he had planned to return to Europe but ultimately was unable to obtain the proper visa. Instead, he traveled to the American southwest, observing



Figure 1. Jan Matulka, *Untitled Cubist Study*, ca. 1918, cat. no. 13.

the lifestyles of Native American cultures. Matulka was among the first generation of American artists to look inwardly and use the national landscape as a source for inspiration. During this time, he produced various interpretations of Native American ceremonies, often in a Cubist style. For the first time, he was able to discard the structure and rules of academic art and experiment with different forms of representation. *Untitled Cubist Study* (fig. 1) is the earliest

work in the exhibition and one of Matulka's earliest-known efforts in Cubism. Using various shades of vibrant colors, he created the shadows and definitions of the shapes, allowing them to almost seamlessly blend into one another. Likely painted after the conclusion of his studies at the Academy in 1917 and before he returned to Europe, this work would have been a departure from the modest and conservative style he had previously been producing.

LE TYPE TRANSATLANTIQUE

By the end of the 19th century Paris had evolved into the arts and culture capital of the world. A large number of art schools, museums, and exhibition spaces attracted artists from across the globe to visit for artistic inspiration and participation in the developing avant-garde. Jan Matulka was finally able to return to Europe in late 1919, spending six weeks in Paris. For the next six years, he would split his time between New York and Paris, becoming what would be known as *le type transatlantique*—a term for American expatriates who were participating in both the cultures of New York and Europe.³ Matulka joined a group of visual artists including Max Weber, Alexander Calder, as well as literary artists such as F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway who crisscrossed the Atlantic in search of inspiration.

In Paris, Matulka resided in Montparnasse, the bustling artistic center of the city and home to the many infamous bars, cafés, and cabarets of La Belle Époque including the Moulin Rouge, as seen in one of Matulka's sketches (fig. 2). Drawn in Paris in 1921, this work depicts the legendary cabaret venue,

recognizable by the building's iconic windmill. The Moulin Rouge, which opened in 1889, had become emblematic of Parisian nightlife and modern inclinations. Matulka depicts the work through a lens of contrast. Semi-circles make up the turning blades of the windmill, and figures crowd the street below.

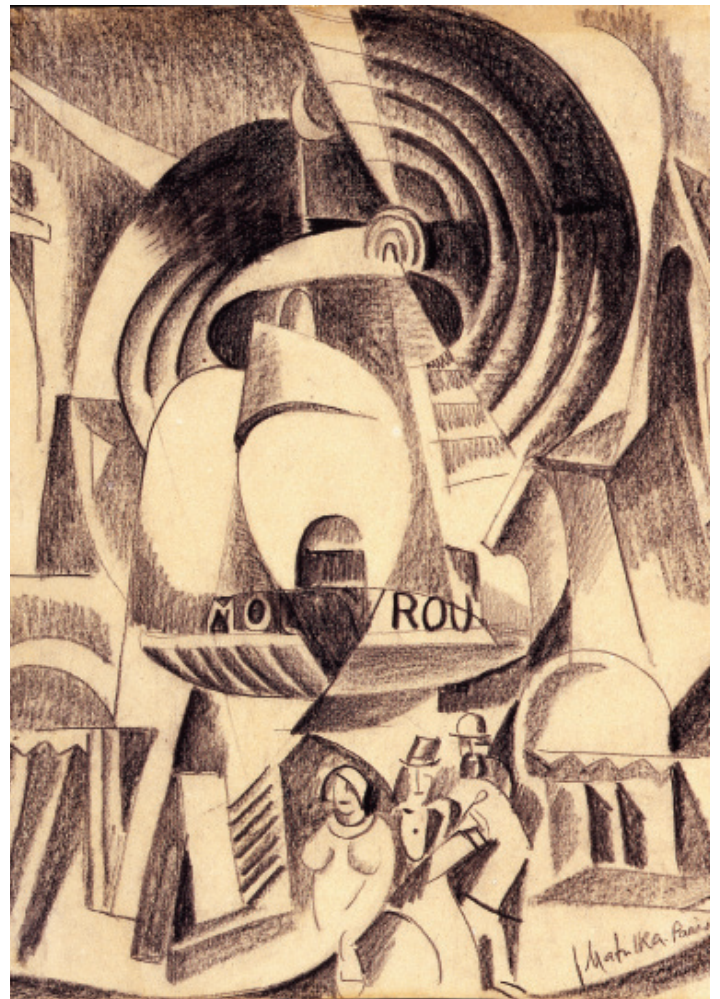


Figure 2. Jan Matulka, *Moulin Rouge*, 1921, cat. no. 9.

Of the many reasons artists took to Paris, one was the city's extensive array of both fine art and ethnographic museums. Seeking to separate themselves from Western academic restraints, artists looked to other cultures for alternate sources of inspiration. In Paris, Matulka frequented the museum at the Palais du Trocadéro, which housed a collection of African art. Although it has never been confirmed that they met, Pablo Picasso is most-famously known to have frequented the museum as well. Picasso, and his development of Cubism, had a considerable amount of influence over Matulka's art. Picasso introduced the world to Cubism with works such as *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. M.)* (fig. 3). The painting of the five women has been broken into planes by sharp lines and all traditional ideas of perspective have been abandoned. Using *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. M.)*

d'Avignon as their prototype, Picasso and colleague Georges Braques went on to develop what would be known as Cubism.⁴

Like Picasso, Matulka referenced folk and non-mainstream tradition in his work, a hallmark of modernism. *Four Nudes in a Landscape* (fig. 4) displays Matulka's own affinity for the geometric qualities of African art including the exaggerated proportions and harsh, angular faces of the figures. In this work, Matulka has completely abandoned the rules of figure drawing and proportion that he was taught at the National Academy of Design. Throughout his career Matulka continually referenced Picasso for inspiration, continuing to build upon the artistic pathways that he had opened up for the next generation.



Figure 3. Pablo Picasso, Spanish, 1881-1973, *Les Femmes d'Alger*, 1907, oil on canvas, 96 x 92 inches, Collection of the Museum of Modern Art, New York, Acquired through the Lillie P. Bill Bequest (by exchange), 333.1939



Figure 4. Jan Matulka, *Four Nudes in a Landscape*, 1923, cat. no. 7.

THE NEW SPIRIT

As the 1920s came to a close, the United States was gaining traction as an economic and cultural force. Cities, particularly New York, expanded rapidly as people came from all over, wanting to seize the opportunities a metropolitan setting had to offer.

The beginning of modern art in the United States is thought to have officially started with the International Exhibition of Modern Art (more commonly known as the Armory Show) in 1913. The Armory Show was the first full-scale modern art exhibition in the United States and presented avant-garde works from European and American artists. The exhibition shocked the general public, not ready for the new, unconventional forms of representation artists were exploring. Despite the public's hesitation to accept modern art, the artists of New York City welcomed the break from tradition, using what they had seen at the Armory Show to inspire their own artistic endeavors.⁵ In the coming years, modern art would flourish in New York City.

By the early 1930s, Jan Matulka began spending less and less time abroad. He

made his last trip in 1933 before finally settling into New York City permanently. America was no longer as hostile to the avant-garde and the galleries of New York City were embracing artists who were part of the movement. Despite no longer visiting Paris, there was an upcoming avant-garde in his own city now that he could participate in.

One of the ways Matulka transmitted the avant-garde ideas he had learned in Paris was through Precisionism. In the mid-1920s Matulka began making works in a Precisionist style such as *Arrangement, New York* (fig. 5). Inspired by Cubism, Precisionism became a distinctly American style that focused on the city, machinery, and architecture. These scenes of the urban environment, such as this one, emphasized American ingenuity.⁶ One of the symbols that became synonymous with American progress was the skyscraper. The skyscraper soon became central in depictions of New York City, representing the progress and prosperity of the increasingly industrialized city. Artists like Matulka began to incorporate the skyscraper into their works, creating a modern image of the American landscape.

Before Georgia O'Keeffe was painting her iconic flowers and desert landscapes, she too was using New York City's rapidly changing landscape as a source for inspiration. In *Radiator Building—Night, New York* (fig. 6), O'Keeffe references the famous skyscraper of the same name. Erected in 1924 the building symbolized the upward mobility of the American people. In the distance, the name Alfred Stieglitz is illuminated in neon. Stieglitz was an American photographer who was central in promoting modern art in New York City. In the early 1900s, Stieglitz opened "291 gallery" to promote photography a fine art but it is known today for hosting early exhibitions of European painters including Picasso, Marcel Duchamp, and Francis Picabia.

Matulka is less precise about representing specific landmarks and more concerned with trying to capture the spirit of the city through space and color. Matulka fills the entire paper with overlapping buildings and structures. Light shoots out from various angles, showing the motion and life of the city. Both works, with their low perspective, draw the viewer into the image as if they are standing on the street below.

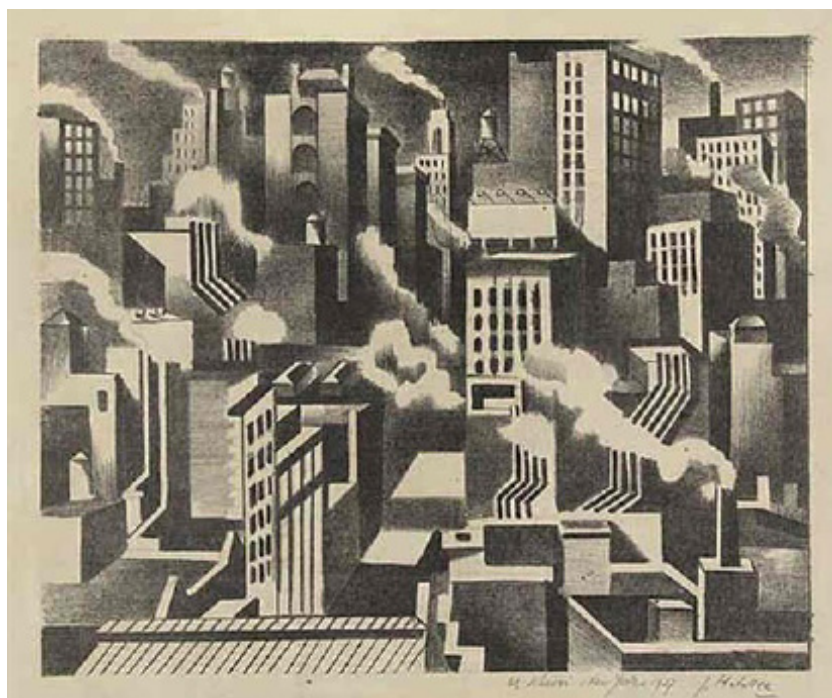


Figure 5. Jan Matulka, *Arrangement, New York*, ca. 1925; printed 2016, cat. no. 3.



Figure 6. Georgia O'Keeffe, American (1887-1986), *Radiator Building—Night, New York*, 1927. Oil on canvas. 48 x 30 inches. Alfred Stieglitz Collection, Co-owned by Fisk University, Nashville, Tennessee, and Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville, Arkansas, ACS. 2012.73. Photography by Edward C. Robinson III.

A LASTING LEGACY

Jan Matulka had an incredible ability to vacillate between different styles and methods of creation, almost seamlessly. Rather than be constrained as one type of artist, he explored the artistic spectrum from realism to abstraction, oftentimes in the same day. He adopted many aspects of modern art movements but never prescribed to a single one.

This ability to create from different perspectives allowed Matulka to be an impactful teacher and mentor to a generation of young artists. One of the most profound aspects of Matulka's career was his brief—but compelling—time teaching at the Art Students League of New York (ASL). On the recommendation of artist Max Weber, Matulka accepted a position teaching art at the school in 1929. At the time Matulka was the only instructor that we know of who was presenting early modernist art to students. Matulka introduced his students to the original avant-garde artists like Picasso, Georges Braque, and Juan Gris. For many, this was their first exposure to such works but the experience would define the trajectory of their future careers as

modern artists. Matulka only taught at the ASL for a few years before the effects of the Depression hit the school and his position was terminated. Despite no longer being on the ASL's payroll, his students continued to study privately with him for years following. This group of young students that Matulka taught, including David Smith, Dorothy Dehner, and Burgoyne Diller, would go on to become some of the most influential modern American artists of their generation.

One of these students, George L.K. Morris would go on to help form the first official group of artists practicing abstract art in New York City. Matulka, Morris, and other like-minded artists came together to create the American Abstract Artists (AAA). The AAA was a group dedicated to exhibiting and promoting a new art form in the United States—abstraction.⁷ Morris served as the president and de-facto spokesperson for the group for many years. He emphasized that abstract art was not a complete break from history but rather was getting back to the true nature of art. In an introduction to an AAA exhibition in 1940, Morris wrote: "Abstract paintings are



Figure 7. Jan Matulka, *Untitled Abstraction*, ca. 1930, cat. no. 11.

a logical beginning. They are not puzzles; they are not difficult to understand; they need only to be looked at, as one might look at a tree or a stone itself, and not as the representation of one. They stand with the independence of architectural shapes, and through very simple means a whole new world is opened.”⁸ An early abstract work, *Untitled Abstraction* (fig. 7) combines the sharp planes of Cubism with the non-representational subject matter of abstraction. By the mid-1930s Matulka was mainly creating works such as this one, experimenting in abstracted forms.

One of the modern movements that Matulka adopted tenets of was Surrealism, though he never claimed the title. Surrealism began in Paris in 1917. Matulka had likely encountered many of the Surrealist artists in the city though he did not begin using aspects of the movement until the 1940s. In *Untitled Study* (fig. 8) Jan Matulka used the Surrealist method of automatic drawing, a technique in which the artist allows his or her subconscious to take over, creating a work of chance and spontaneity. In this work, Matulka has gone back in and emphasized in black the naturally occurring human forms.

Fellow American Gerome Kamrowski began making Surrealist works around the same time as Matulka, such as *Via Space Ward* (fig. 9). In 1932 Kamrowski enrolled in the St. Paul School of Art where student Cameron Booth (who had previously studied with modernist Hans Hofmann) introduced him to Cubism and Surrealism. Booth would later introduce Kamrowski to Hofmann, who would help Kamrowski develop his modernist style through private lessons. In the late 1930s, Kamrowski moved to New York and began meeting with other artists who had similar interests in the avant-garde including Jackson Pollock, William Baziotis, and Robert Motherwell. According to Robert Motherwell, “Kamrowski was the most Surrealist of us all.”⁹



Figure 8. Jan Matulka, *Untitled Study*, 1940-50, cat. no. 14.

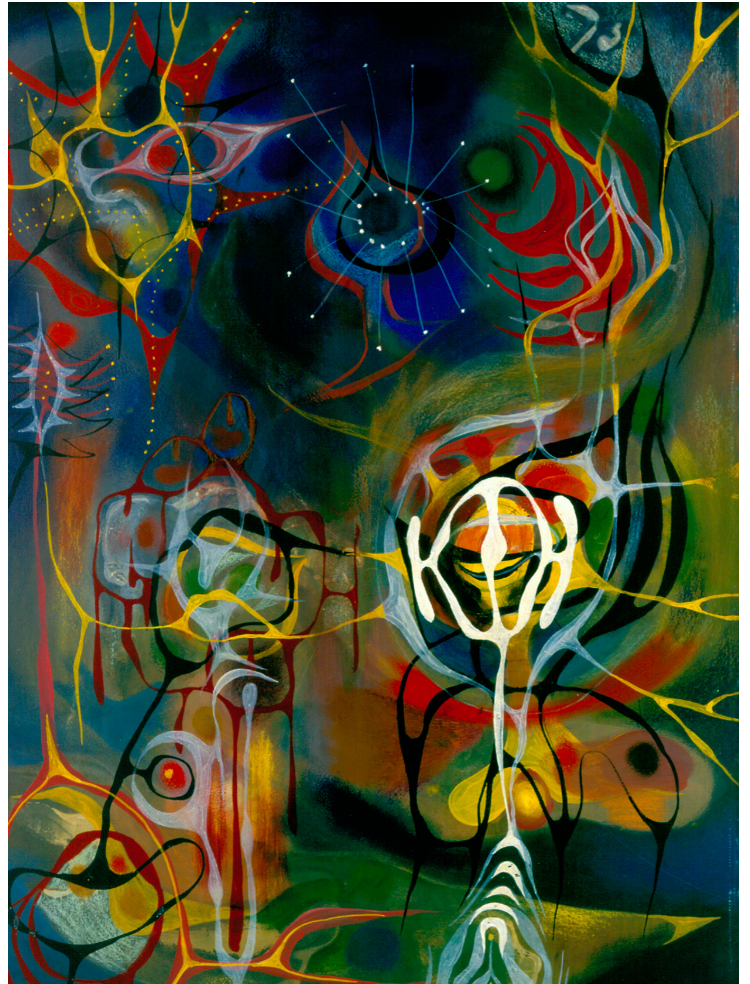


Figure 9. Gerome Kamrowski, *Via Space Ward*, 1948, cat. no. 2.

ABSTRACTED CONCLUSION

Years after meeting instructor Jan Matulka at the Art Students League, former student Burgoyne Diller would head one of the most progressive public art projects. Diller became head of New York City's mural division of the Works Progress Administration's Federal Art Project. Diller would recruit a team of modern artists to join the division including Jan Matulka, Alexander Calder, and Arshile Gorky, bringing abstract art to the larger public.

In an effort to alleviate the difficulties of the Great Depression, President Franklin D. Roosevelt enacted the New Deal (1933), a series of public programs set to stimulate the economy. The Federal Art Project was part of a larger cultural project including music, theater, and literacy and would employ more than 5,000 artists who made more than 15,000 artworks. The mural division was inspired by a program executed by the Mexican government in the early 1920s in which they subsidized the paintings of public murals in the cities. Many of these Mexican artists, such as Diego Rivera, would later gain notoriety in the United States for their commissioned public murals.¹⁰

Most federally sponsored artwork depicted traditional, realistic scenes of American history, industry, and progress. Creators of the program hoped that through art the nation could begin to heal and feel empowered again. Diller's division had the same goal but presented the same themes through non-objective abstraction. Jan Matulka is known to have painted two abstract murals for the program, but both have been destroyed.

One of the artists that worked alongside Jan Matulka and the other muralists was Stuart Davis. Davis and Matulka met early on in their careers and continued to stay connected throughout the years. Matulka sublet his studio in Paris to Davis after he stopped traveling. Davis gained initial notoriety when five of his works (in the Ashcan style) were included in the Armory Show. Davis was just twenty-one years old at the time. Much like Matulka, Davis began in a realist style but eventually segued into total abstraction. *Composition* (fig. 10) is an example of Davis's later work, in which he has disregarded recognizable imagery. Instead, he uses bold colors to form abstract shapes that fill the composition.



Figure 10. Stuart Davis, American 1894-1964, *Composition*, 1964, silkscreen on paper, 20 x 24 inches, Gift of the Betty Parsons Foundation, FIA 1985.54.5



Figure 11. Jan Matulka, *Untitled Abstraction*, 1940-50, cat. no. 12

In June of 1944, an exhibition of ten paintings by Jan Matulka opened at the A.C.A Gallery, New York City. This exhibition would be the last of his current work during his lifetime, although he lived for another thirty years. Once a lively, active participant in the art world, by the mid-1940s Jan Matulka withdrew himself from the public sphere while his contemporaries like Arshile Gorky and Stuart Davis were solidifying their positions in history. Until his death in 1972, Matulka lived in near isolation except for the company of his wife Lida. Due to a myriad of reasons including health and economic hardships, the artist disappeared from the public but nevertheless continued to create works that would remain unseen during his lifetime, such as *Untitled Abstraction* (fig. 11).

Matulka's unavoidable need to create reinforces his position as an artist in the truest sense, drawn to the process and exploration of painting rather than the recognition. After he passed away in 1972 the estate of Jan Matulka acquired a large series of unseen abstract paintings, such as this one, which were finally revealed to the public giving us a rare glimpse into the last thirty years of the artist's life.

NOTES

- 1 Lucie-Smith, Edward. *Art of the 1930s: The Age of Anxiety*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1985.
- 2 Rugg, Whitney. Jan Matulka: *The Global Modernist*. Chicago: Thomas McCormick Gallery, 2004.
- 3 Wierich, Jochen, and Barbara S. Groseclose. "Internationalizing the History of American Art: Views." Essay. In *Internationalizing the History of American Art: Views*, 130–35. University Park (Pennsylvania): Pennsylvania State University press, 2009.
- 4 Kirschenbaum, Baruch D. "Primitivism and Impossible Art." *Art Journal* 31, no. 2 (1971): 168- 72. doi:10.2307/775571.
- 5 McCarthy, LauretteE. "Armory Show: New Perspectives and Recent Rediscoveries." *Archives of American Art Journal*, no. 3/4 (2012): 22-35.
- 6 Baigell, Matthew. *Artist and Identity in Twentieth-Century America*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001.
- 7 Davis, Stuart. "Abstract Art in the American Scene." *Parnassus* 13, no. 3 (1941): 100-03. doi:10.2307/772264.
- 8 Seibert, Elke. "'First Surrealists were Cavemen': The American Abstract Artists and their Appropriation of Prehistoric Rock Pictures in 1937." *Getty Research Journal* 11, no. 1 (2019): 17-38.
- 9 Landau, Ellen G. "Robert Motherwell among the Surrealists." *Archives of American Art Journal* 56, no. 2 (2017): 4-25.
- 10 Patterson, Jody. "Modernism and Murals at the 1939 New York World's Fair." *American Art* 24, no. 2 (2010): 50-73.



Jan Matulka, *House on Cove*, ca. 1935, cat. no. 8

CATALOGUE

Catalogue is organized alphabetically by artist last name and title of artwork.

1. FANNIE HILLSMITH

American, 1911 - 2007

The Molasses Jug, 1949

Mixed media on burlap on masonite

38 x 32 inches

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Harold Frank, by exchange, FIA
2007.124

2. GEROME KAMROWSKI

American, 1914 - 2004

Via Space Ward, 1948

Oil on board

29 1/4 x 22 inches

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Kaye Goodwin Frank, FIA 1964.7

3. JAN MATULKA

American, born Czechoslovakia, 1890 - 1972

Arrangement, New York, ca. 1925; printed 2016

Lithograph on Kitakata Natural handmade paper

13 3/8 x 16 1/4 inches

Courtesy of McCormick Gallery, Chicago and the
Estate of Jan Matulka

4. JAN MATULKA

American, born Czechoslovakia, 1890 - 1972

Bather (Nude Bather Seated Facing Window), 1925

Lithograph on thin, laid Japan paper

14 1/2 x 11 inches

Courtesy of McCormick Gallery, Chicago and the
Estate of Jan Matulka

5. JAN MATULKA

American, born Czechoslovakia, 1890 - 1972

Boat on the Shore, ca. 1928

Gouache on paper

15 x 20 inches

Courtesy of McCormick Gallery, Chicago and the
Estate of Jan Matulka

6. JAN MATULKA

American, born Czechoslovakia, 1890 - 1972

Boat Scene in Central Park, 1923

Etching and drypoint on wove paper

10 7/8 x 13 5/8 inches

Courtesy of McCormick Gallery, Chicago and the
Estate of Jan Matulka

7. JAN MATULKA

American, born Czechoslovakia, 1890 - 1972

Four Nudes in a Landscape, 1923

Etching and drypoint on paper

10 3/4 x 13 15/16 inches

Gift of the Estate of Jan Matulka, FIA 2016.5

8. JAN MATULKA

American, born Czechoslovakia, 1890 - 1972

Houses on Cove, ca. 1935

Oil on canvas

22 x 25 inches

Courtesy of McCormick Gallery, Chicago and the
Estate of Jan Matulka

9. JAN MATULKA

American, born Czechoslovakia, 1890 - 1972

Moulin Rouge, 1921

Conte crayon on paper

15 x 12 inches

Courtesy of McCormick Gallery, Chicago and the
Estate of Jan Matulka

10. JAN MATULKA

American, born Czechoslovakia, 1890 - 1972

Two Nudes, c. 1923

Oil on canvas

36 x 27 1/2 inches

Gift of the Estate of Jan Matulka, FIA 2016.4.

11. JAN MATULKA

American, born Czechoslovakia, 1890 - 1972

Untitled Abstraction, ca. 1930

Ink and pencil on vellum

16 x 13 1/2 inches

Courtesy of McCormick Gallery, Chicago and the
Estate of Jan Matulka

12. JAN MATULKA

American, born Czechoslovakia, 1890 - 1972

Untitled Abstraction, 1940-1950

Oil on board

23 1/2 x 17 1/2 inches

Courtesy of McCormick Gallery, Chicago and the
Estate of Jan Matulka

13. JAN MATULKA

American, born Czechoslovakia, 1890 - 1972

Untitled Cubist Study, ca. 1918

Oil on commercial artist's board

8 × 10 inches

Courtesy of McCormick Gallery, Chicago and the
Estate of Jan Matulka

14. JAN MATULKA

American, born Czechoslovakia, 1890 - 1972

Untitled Study, 1940-1950

Watercolor/ink and red pencil on paper

11 × 8 1/2 inches

Courtesy of McCormick Gallery, Chicago and the
Estate of Jan Matulka

15. GEORGE L.K. MORRIS

American, 1905 - 1975

Rotary Motion, 1938

Oil on canvas

30 × 26 inches

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Martin Ryerson, by exchange,
FIA 2002.2

16. MAX WEBER

American, born Russia, 1881 - 1961

Untitled (Cubist Still Life), ca. 1920

Oil on canvas on board

36 × 30 inches

Bequest of Mary Mallery Davis, by exchange, FIA
2002.5.

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