BREAKING NEWS

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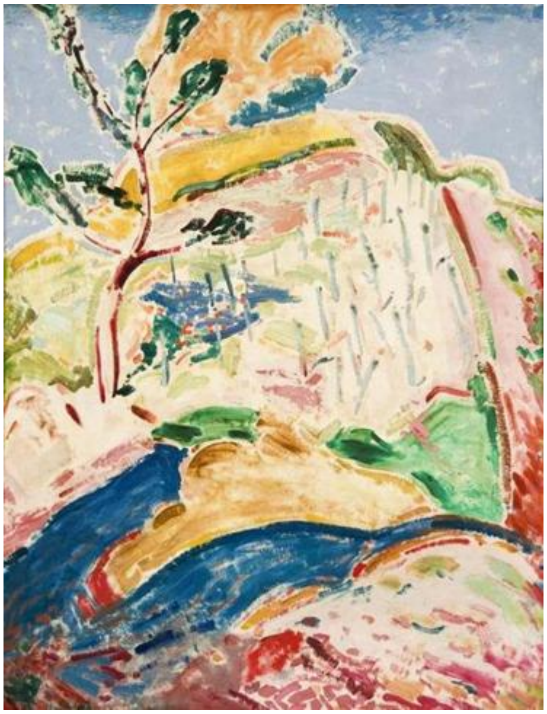
ART REVIEW

Early triumphs shine in expansive Maurer show at Addison

By **Sebastian Smee** | GLOBE STAFF JUNE 06, 2015

ANDOVER — To say of an artist that you prefer his or her early work is downright mean. It contradicts all of our peppy expectations of personal progress, and the very assumptions about life that keep most of us going.

To say it about Alfred Maurer, the underrated American modernist who is the subject of a show at the Addison Gallery of American Art, is somehow worse, because it creates the impression that you are arguing against modernism itself.



PRIVATE COLLECTION

Alfred Maurer's painting "In the Vineyard."

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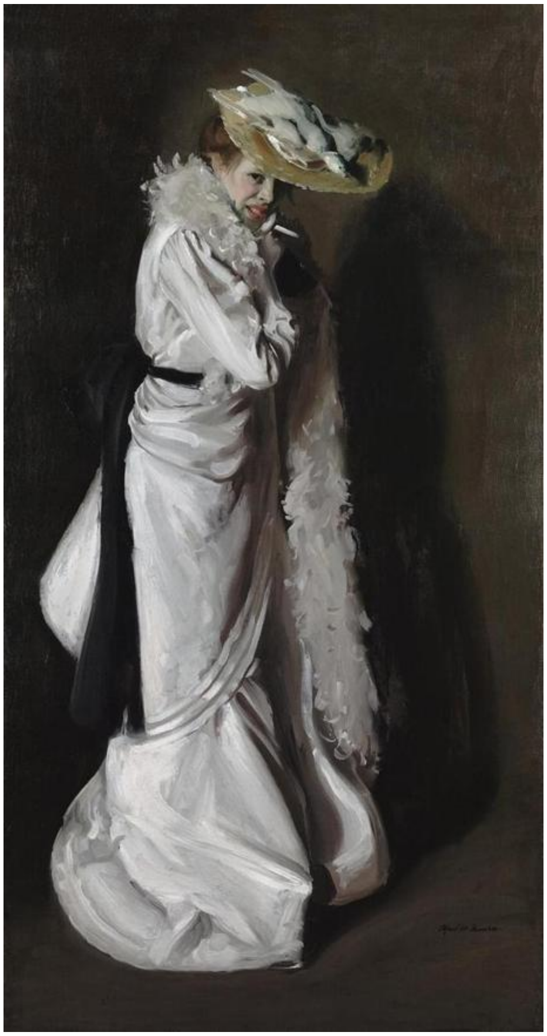
Too bad. Here goes.

There's no question Maurer (1868-1932) was lavishly gifted. The son of a German lithographer who held modernism in contempt, he looked for most of his career as if he were capable, artistically speaking, of anything. Beginning in the late 1890s, he evolved briskly from Whistler's delicate aestheticism toward Manet's more palpably sensuous nonchalance.

Walking into a large gallery filled with his turn-of-the-century portraits and dance hall scenes, you know immediately that you're in the presence of a major, cosmopolitan talent. The idiom is familiar, and so are many of the subjects. Scads of painters, including a Spaniard named Pablo Picasso, were flocking to Paris to paint similar subjects in a similar vein at the time: bars, cafes, and nightclubs. Look out, Montmartre, here they all come.

But Maurer's sensuous yet dandyishly offhand touch, his feeling for strong bursts of local color punctuating an otherwise subdued palette, and his oblique psychology (nothing obvious, nothing didactic, everything suggestively askew) all feel utterly fresh.

Take a look, for instance, at "Jeanne," circa 1904, his full-length character study of Jeanne Blazy, one of his favorite models. (She also sat for Whistler.) The rendering of the dress, the boa, the hat, and the cigarette — all white — is virtuosic. Blazy's beguiling half-grimace, which contorts her powdered face, holds out the promise of a happiness fatally compromised. Never has a self-conscious "study in white" seemed so conspicuously lacking in innocence.



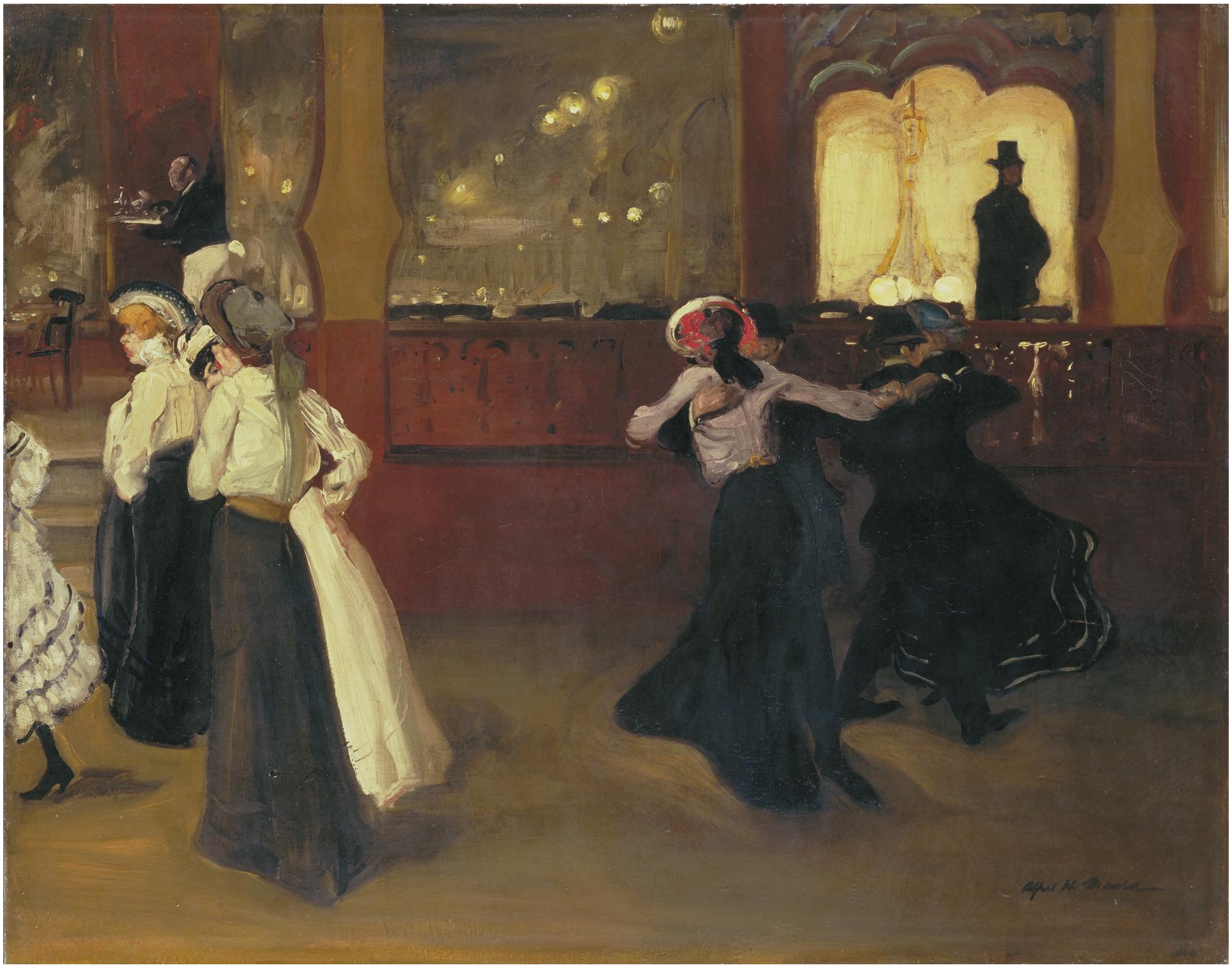
ROBERT LAPRELLE

Alfred Maurer's painting "Jeanne."

Or consider "An Arrangement," painted in 1901. The title suggests Whistlerian aestheticism, a willful turning away from human psychology into ethereal, disembodied realms. And indeed the kneeling woman who takes up most of the picture does have her back turned to us. But how curiously psychological the picture still is!

The blouse tucked tightly into the voluminous black dress, its stretched white fabric bubbling at the seams, suggests a powerfully muscular back. And somehow this stands in for an active, if unknowable, mental life. This woman is no pretty apparition, no "arrangement." She is real, magnetic, present; thoughts and feelings cluster around her.

Maurer is looser, less precious; but the artist he reminds me of most in these early years is the Englishman William Nicholson — an artist far superior to his more celebrated son, the modernist Ben Nicholson. In both, you notice the same deft handling of paint, the same curiosity about people and their social circumstances, and the same underlying loneliness.



SMITH COLLEGE MUSEUM OF ART, NORTHAMPTON

Maurer's "Le Bal Bullier."

Cafe and dance hall scenes like "The Rendezvous" and "Le Bal Bullier" make Maurer feel fresher, more psychologically incisive, and frankly more stylish than works by his various contemporaries — including Walter Sickert, Henri Toulouse-Lautrec, and the young Picasso.

So what happens next?

Maurer becomes a team player. At the 1905 Salon d'Automne, he sees the infamous gallery of "Fauves" — or wild beasts. Matisse and his crazy confreres, Derain and Vlaminck, have kicked painting into the 20th century with a display of intensely colored, haphazardly brushed, all-but-incoherent paintings made over the summer in the Mediterranean fishing village of Collioure.

To most people, these works suggest forms of frothing psychosis. Either that, or they are a vile parody. But Leo Stein and his sister Gertrude, recently arrived in Paris, are intrigued. They buy Matisse's portrait of his wife, "Woman in a Hat," and hang it in their home near the

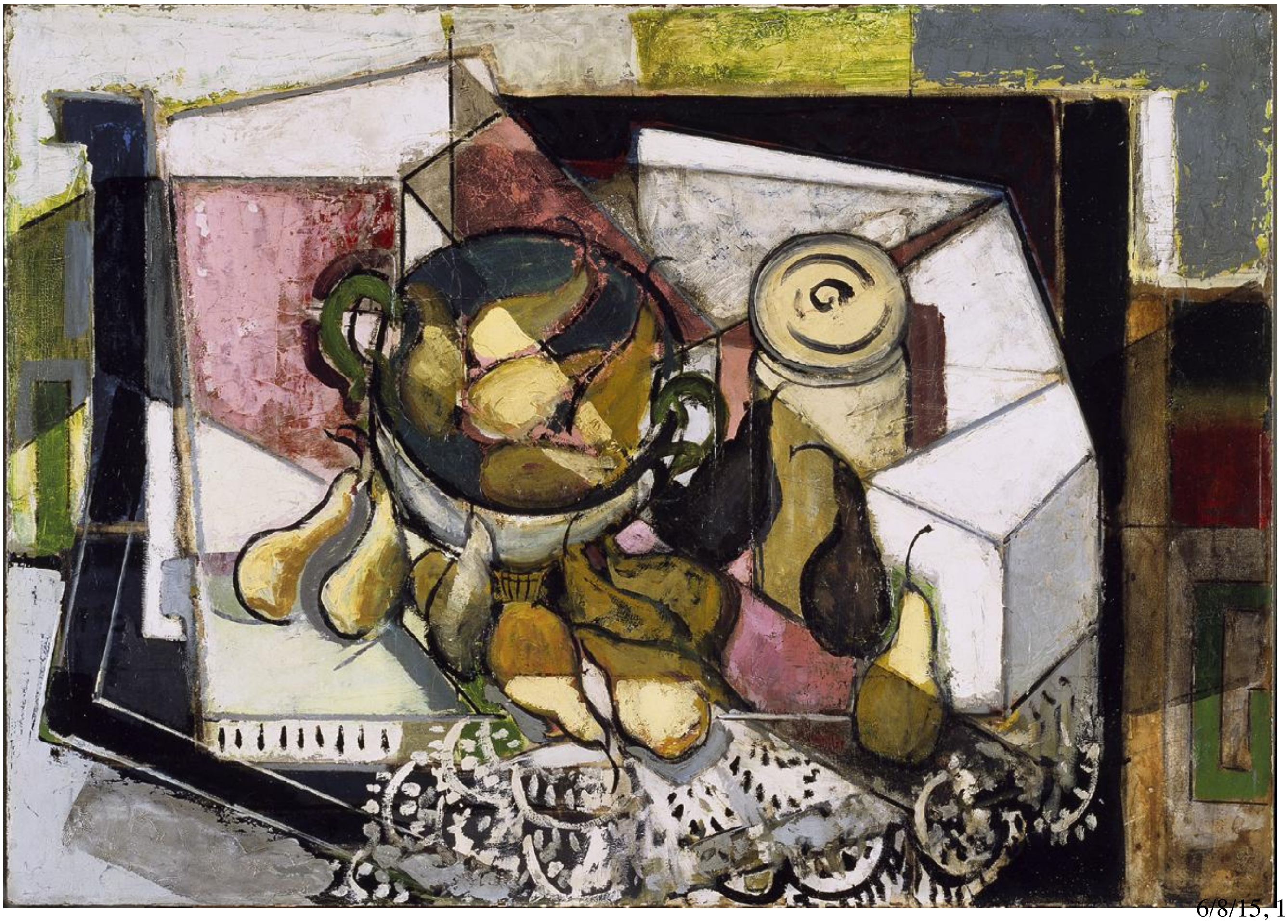
Luxembourg Gardens.

They and their older brother Michael, and Michael’s wife, Sarah Stein, buy more Matisses. Such is their combined influence on a growing number of expat artists and collectors, and such is the commanding impact of Matisse himself, that Maurer converts.

This takes courage: The public backlash against the Fauves is intense. But Maurer is not alone. Matisse is so personally agreeable and persuasive that many artists, sensing the start of something important, are eager to join his camp.

Matisse tries to bolster his besieged position and sets up a short-lived academy. Dozens of knockoff Fauvists emerge, many of them Scandinavian, German, or American, all of them earnestly attempting to grasp the very principles Matisse himself is in the process of leaving behind.

Maurer never attends Matisse’s school, but he is closely involved with those who do, and he gets to know Matisse through the Steins. The many examples of his Fauvist works here make it clear not only that he “got” Fauvist principles, but that he understood their roots in Cezanne and Post-Impressionism. More than perhaps any of Matisse’s other foreign students, Maurer had the talent and touch to make scintillating pictures out of all this.



ADDISON GALLERY OF AMERICAN ART

Maurer's "Still Life With Pears."

The jewel-like brilliance of his Fauvist paintings light up several small galleries at the Addison. They are echt-Fauve: bright hues, stark color harmonies, a light touch with lots of white ground allowed to show through. Truly, they're beautiful: sustained, exploratory, full of passionate feeling before nature.

Even during the subsequent rise of Cubism and the defection of some of Matisse's key followers (Braque and Derain) to Picasso's camp, Maurer tries to keep up with Matisse, experimenting with larger expanses of flat, saturated color and stronger outlines. But at a certain point, for all his competence, you feel he has lost his own voice and is stuck performing someone else's part.

His later experiments, which see him turning to versions of Cubism deeply inflected by Matisse's (Cubist-influenced) 1913-1917 period, are, at best, uneven. Some of them, like "Still Life With Croissant" from around 1930, are fiendishly good. But on the whole, what they're missing is what Maurer's pictures had in spades before 1906: a sense of specific psychology.

This show — five years in the making, and brilliantly researched and selected by curator and Maurer scholar Stacey B. Epstein — tries hard to make the case that Maurer's career was not a discontinuous affair, marked by abrupt shifts in style, and ending tragically in defeat (the artist committed suicide in 1932); that it was instead coherent, sustained, and remarkably consistent in quality.

It's convincing, up to a point. But you can't help feeling, at the end of it all, that Maurer might have been better off without modernism. Just as the ebbs and flows of creativity rarely rhyme with the natural arc of a lifetime, artistic excellence is not always in synch with prevailing artistic ideologies.

Maurer had a feeling — call it a 19th-century feeling, if you will — for human presence: for erotic tension, spiritual desolation, manic gaiety, and many shades of intimacy. He set aside this feeling when he became a vanguard modernist. His art — although it deserves to be much better known than it is — suffered as a result.

Art Review

ALFRED MAURER:**At the Vanguard of Modernism**

At: Addison Gallery of American Art, Andover, through July 31. 978-749-4015, www.andover.edu/museums/addison

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