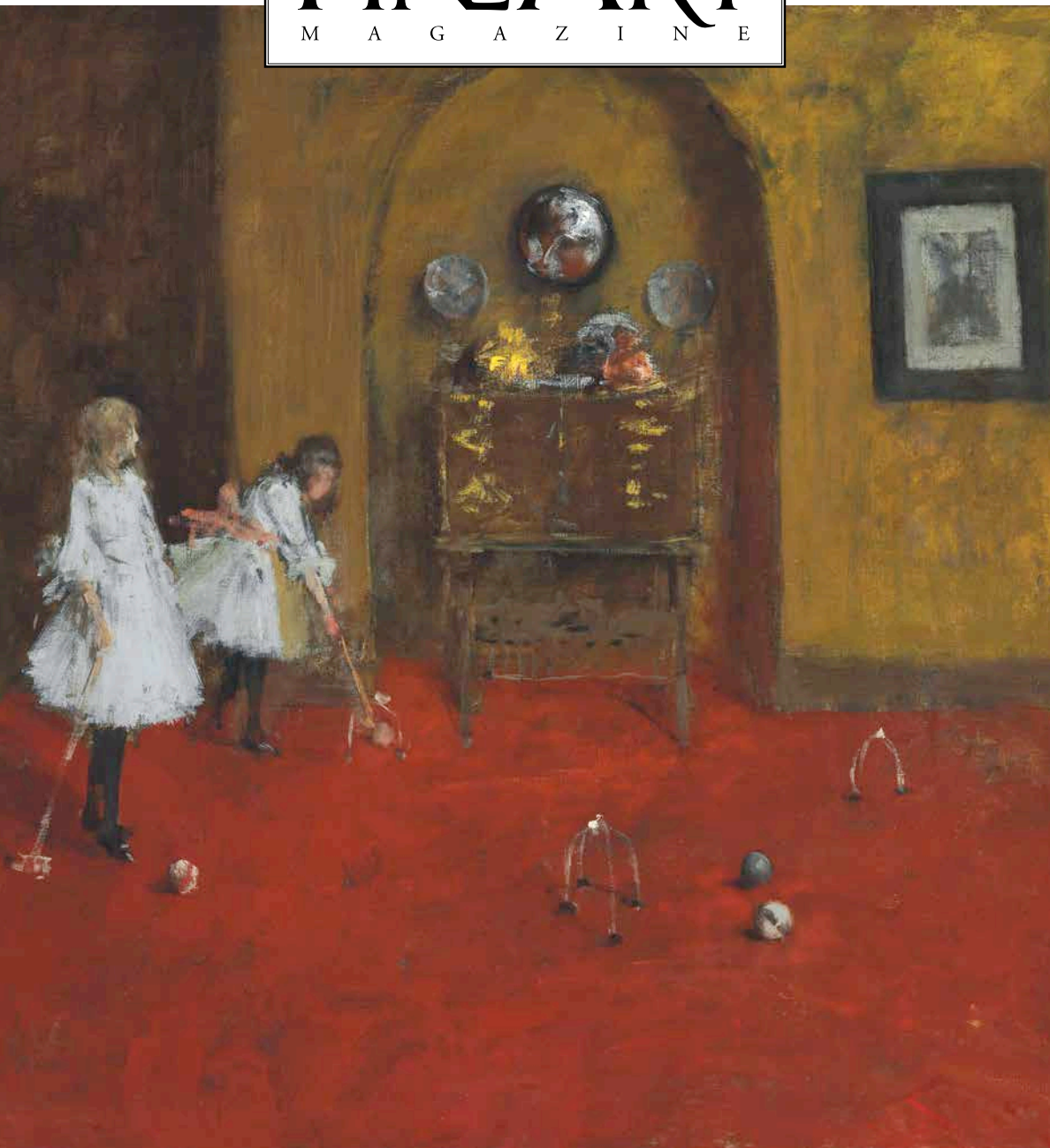
PREVIEWING UPCOMING EXHIBITIONS, EVENTS, SALES AND AUCTIONS OF HISTORIC FINE ART

AMERICAN FINE ART MAGAZINE

ISSUE 24

NOV./DEC. 2015



Alfred Maurer: From martyr to modernist visionary

AN EYE FOR ACCIDENTS OF *Beauty*

by James D. Balestrieri

Alfred Maurer (1868-1932), *Still Life with Pears*, ca. 1930-1931. Oil on board, 26 x 36 in. Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy, Andover, MA, museum purchase, 1945.20.

Alfred Maurer. At first glance, his story is the same old story. A young, promising, award-winning artist has an epiphany and changes the way he paints—radically. This incurs the wrath of the critics, and his father—who is himself an artist (cf. Currier and Ives, especially the famous Fireman image) of some note. He enjoys some success, largely in the shadow of other artists who manage to break out. All of his peers admire him and his work. Nothing they do helps him achieve financial or critical success. He lives in a garret in his father's house. Still, in spite of all, his art continues to grow and change, to the point, in the late works, where it might be said he leapt far ahead of his peers—from our vantage point, he is

Alfred Maurer (1868-1932), *An Arrangement*, 1901. Oil on cardboard, 36⅜ x 32⅛ in. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, gift of Mr. and Mrs. Hudson D. Walker 50.13. Photography by Geoffrey Clements.

Alfred Maurer (1868-1932), *At the Shore*, 1901. Oil on board, 23½ x 19¼ in. Courtesy Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville, Arkansas. Photo by Susan A. Cole, Seattle Art Museum.

a visionary, the advance guard of the avant garde. When his father dies, just after having had a successful exhibition at the age of 100, our artist, his son, weeks later, commits suicide.

He stayed faithful to his art, they say. His vision never wavered, they say. His relationship with his father lies at the root of it, they say. Through the legacy of his art, we profit by his suffering, they say. Thus we romantically elevate the artist from human being to martyr. Which is the same old story—one of them, anyway.

If you read these pages, in the last issue I took on the American art behemoth, monolith, that is Thomas Hart Benton. And found him wanting. A serial compromiser who wanted to be successful, Hollywood-ized himself—while pretending to be an outsider—and succeeded beyond his wildest dreams. What greatness he achieved after his auto-rebranding in the mid-1920s came as a result of talent and popularity, not intention.

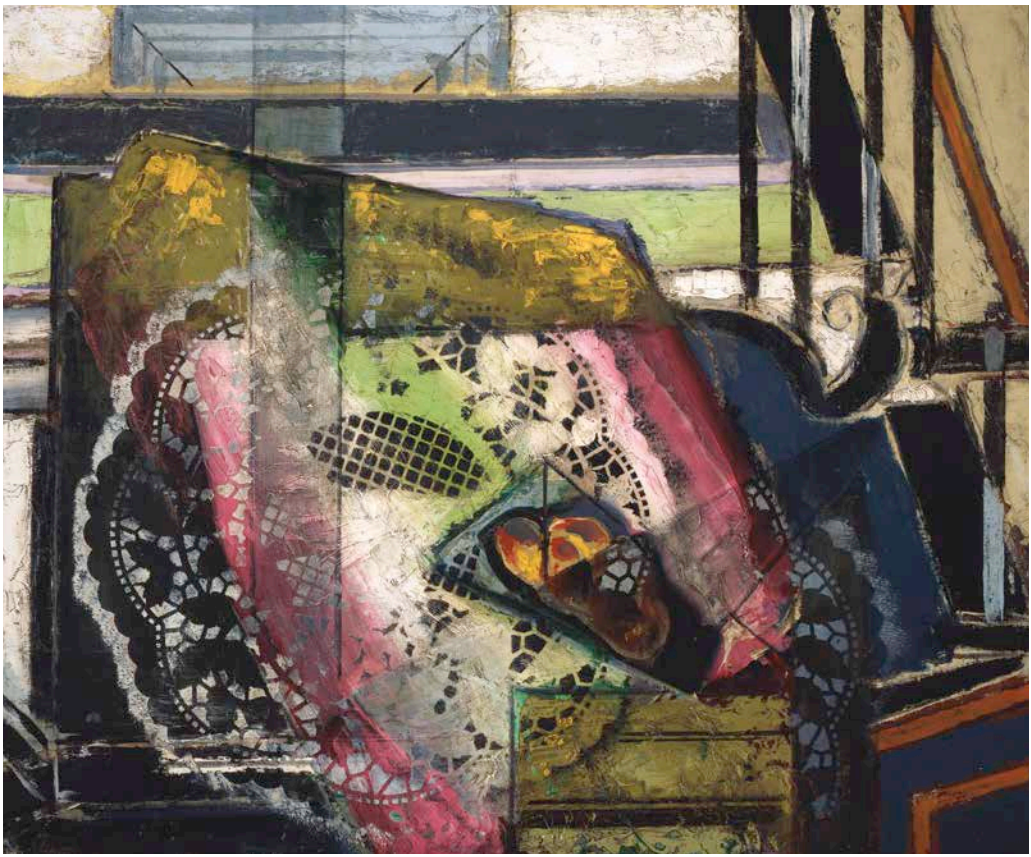
So now, this issue—the opposite. Alfred Maurer. Who didn't seem to know how to compromise. Who could have been successful at several different moments in his career. He was close to the Steins, Gertrude and Leo; exhibited with Marin; knew Stieglitz and every other artist of note in New York and Paris; helped Barnes amass his incredible collection in Philadelphia; sold all of his paintings, all, every one, on a single day to a single dealer.

Yet Maurer isn't very well known at all, apart from the fact some of his paintings look a little like Whistler, some look like Degas or Cézanne, and others seem to borrow something from Picasso or Braque. And isn't that strange? Oh, yes, and the father thing. For the armchair art historian who minored in psychology. Pull up a cigar.

Nope.

We're going to look at the paintings.

Stacey B. Epstein and Susan C. Faxon, curators of *Alfred Maurer: At the Vanguard of Modernism*, now at the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, go to great lengths to present Maurer and his work as a continuum, a natural progression stemming from the artist's interests, while minimizing the



Alfred Maurer (1868-1932), *Still Life with Doily*, ca. 1930. Oil on hardboard, 17⅞ x 21½ in. The Phillips Collection, acquired 1940. Accession no., 1313.

psychological baggage that has often diminished the work.

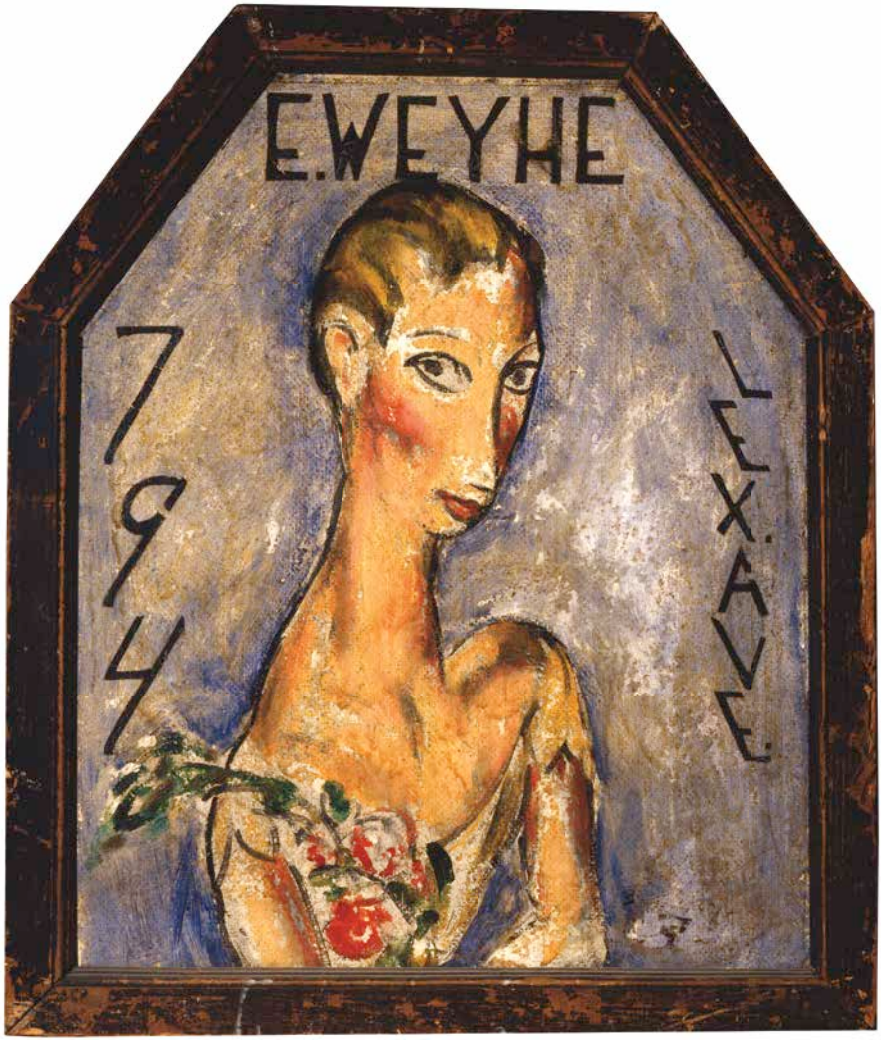
Maurer's 1901 masterpiece, *An Arrangement*, won the coveted Carnegie International (judged by Eakins, Vonnoh, and Homer, among others) and propelled Maurer into the top tier of young American artists. Maurer's handling of the folds in the dress and shirt in the patterned *Japonisme* cloth the woman works on, and in the contrast of their texture with the Oriental carpet, the rattan or bamboo-paneled walls and the semi-gloss sheen of the Asian jars, neatly encompasses the preoccupations of post-impressionism as exemplified in Sargent, Hassam, and Whistler.

Maurer pushes the muted, narrow palette, and goes bravura with the blacks in the scalloped oval of the skirt. But this isn't a portrait of Madame Anybody. If anything, it's a portrait of work, of the labors of a seamstress. She herself is turned away from us, concentrating on the job at hand. Beauty here is accidental rather than posed; it swirls around the central focus of the painting, the woman's strained back and the ochre yellow belt that peeks through the folds. Most of all, perhaps, the painting is an arrangement of colors, forms and textures, and it is this, as opposed to representation, that will shape Maurer's art.

By 1909, Maurer had taken in Cézanne and Matisse and the tenets of Fauvism (the French *fauve* means "wild beast"), a style of painting made popular in France that made use of bold, non-naturalistic round and jagged masses of color, fast brushwork, and a flattened anti-vanishing point perspective.

Landscape (Autumn), painted in 1909, seems the very antithesis of *An Arrangement*. And yet, consider Maurer's interest in form, color and texture. Consider the notion of accidents of beauty. Consider Maurer's desire, one of the lynchpins of modernism, to paint not—or not merely—what he sees, but what he feels. Consider these concepts, and Epstein and Faxon's thesis—the

Alfred Maurer (1868-1932), *Landscape (Autumn)*, 1909. Oil on canvas, 25⅝ x 32 in. Collection of the Frederick R. Weisman Art Museum at the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis. Gift of Ione and Hudson D. Walker, 1953.299.

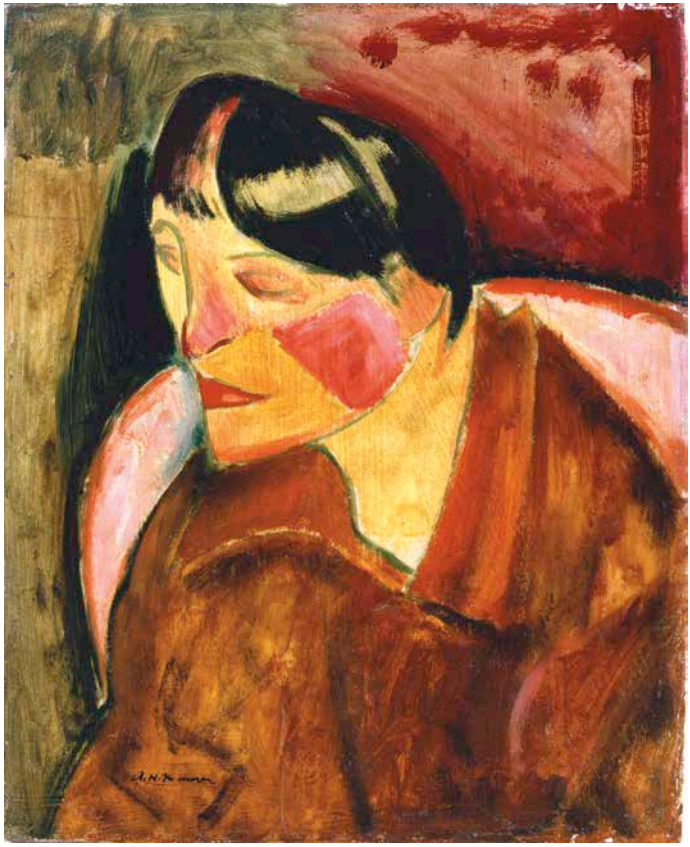


Alfred Maurer (1868-1932), *Weyhe Gallery Sign,* 1924. Oil on panel, 22⅜ x 19 in. Private collection.

continuity they see in his work—begins to make sense.

What we see in *Landscape (Autumn)* is the work of an artist acutely in touch with the latest currents in art, transforming and adapting them to his own vision. Maurer's palette is broad here, but still tightly controlled. Hues of green and pink dominate the canvas, while blues and purples seem to sprinkle from the sky. Thick black shadows some of the forms, while Maurer lets the white ground outline and highlight smaller shapes: the buildings in the narrow, distant valley and the patches of green in the near foreground. The overall effect makes the viewer's eyes restless; this restlessness imitates the shimmer of sunlight. The painting is, in the end, representational, but what it represents exceeds expectation.

Head of a Woman, executed around 1908, and *Weyhe Gallery Sign*, done in 1924 for gallery owner Erhard Weyhe (it was he who purchased Maurer's entire studio, thus becoming his dealer), shows the artist's progression as a figurative painter. Yes, they nod to cubism, to the simplifications and elongations that characterize, say, Modigliani. But where his contemporaries' paintings—think of Picasso, or Modigliani—exude a kind of abstract, otherworldly detachment, Maurer's women are very much



Alfred Maurer (1868-1932), *Head of a Woman,* ca. 1908. Tempera on French cardboard mounted on gessoed panel, 18¼ x 15 in. Curtis Galleries, Minneapolis, MN.

of the moment, warmly engaged with the larger world in attitudes of contemplation and seduction. The great 20th-century American writer Sherwood Anderson (*Winesburg, Ohio*) saw the affinities between his words and Maurer's 1920s paintings of "Girls and Heads," as they have rather dismissively come to be called. Anderson described them as "half-mystic wonders," reflecting, "Life twisted, beaten down, perverted often enough, life as it is—in young girls in the back streets of cities, in tired old women having its wonder moments, this poet has caught…" (*Exhibition catalogue*, p. 164).

Even later in Maurer's career, portrayals of young women, often two together (which were not, sadly, available to the press) become transparent scaffoldings, cubistic renderings reduced to cubes, doubled, redoubled and mirrored, as if they have been bounced off of and refracted through prisms. Selves are assemblages of shards of otherness, Maurer seems to say, yet somehow they are possessed of—by?—souls.

Accidental beauties.

We glimpse some of this in the late still life paintings, *Still Life with Doily*, circa 1930, and, especially, *Still Life with Pears*, circa 1930-31, where the repetition and variation of the fruit inside an abstraction of angled shapes in one and three dimensions appears to be a time-elapsed image of movement and of the play of light. The doilies in each painting anchor the composition, bringing us full circle, back to the cloth in *An Arrangement*. Maurer knew where he came from and where he wanted to go. In the alembic of his vision, he reduced each iteration of his art to what he saw as its essence, distilling it into something new, making short stories of novels, sonnets of short stories, epigrams of sonnets.

We treat artists the way we treat characters in books, plays, comic books and films, casting them in our minds as types: the hero; the martyr (often one and the same—both triumph over adversity, the former without sacrificing their lives); the journeyman, the charlatan; the visionary; the subversive (who can belong, overtly, to any of the other categories); the enthusiast; the natural. There are villainous artists (Hudson Mindell Kitchell springs instantly to mind—story to follow, at some point, perhaps); still, villainy in art is typically reserved for dealers, collectors and critics.

The essay you have just read and the exhibition to which it refers shifts Alfred Maurer from man to artist, from martyr to visionary, with a bit of hero, perhaps, mixed in. Infinitely preferable to a story of a martyr who suffered greatly for his art, it is, in the end, a different same old story. But Alfred Maurer's art is anything but the same old thing. ■

Alfred Maurer (1868-1932), *Model with a Japanese Fan (Jeanne),* ca. 1902-1904. Oil on canvas, 32 x 25⅝ in. Karen and Kevin Kennedy Collection.

Through January 4, 2016

Alfred Maurer: At the Vanguard of Modernism

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