

HILTON KRAMER

## Alfred H. Maurer's Bold Journey From Estheticism to Modernism

In 1901, the American painter Alfred H. Maurer (1868-1932) was awarded the gold medal and the top prize of \$1,500 at the Carnegie International Exhibition for a picture called *An Arrangement* by a jury of artists that included Winslow Homer and Thomas Eakins. For anyone familiar with the art of that period, the title of this painting of a young woman immediately suggests the influence of another American master, James Abbott McNeill Whistler. Yet the painting itself also reflects the influence of still another turn-of-the-century American master, William Merritt Chase—an influence even more pronounced in Maurer's earlier *Self-Portrait* (1897). All of which placed the 33-year-old Maurer in the mainstream of accepted taste in American art when he took the top prize at the Carnegie International in 1901.

There was another reason, too, why Maurer seemed destined to become one of the good old boys of American art in the era preceding the Armory Show of 1913—the heir not only to Whistler and Chase but to another popular figure of the genteel tradition, John Singer Sargent. His father, Louis Maurer, who is today best known for his work as a Currier & Ives artist, was also a well-connected painter in the academic style of the period. It was in his father's successful lithography business that Maurer worked before departing for Paris in 1897—a journey that proved to be decisive in determining both the glories and the miseries of the last half of the artist's life. For it was in Paris that Maurer, to the horror of his reactionary father and at great personal cost to himself, embraced the Modernism of Cézanne and Matisse.

Maurer is thus one of the representative figures in the history of early American Modernism; he is sometimes said to be the first American Modernist. It is the story of that emblematic career that is now beautifully documented in the exhibition called *Alfred H. Maurer: Aestheticism to Modernism*, which Stacey Epstein has organized at the Hollis Taggart Galleries. This is a big show, consisting of more than 100 pictures from the years 1896 to 1932, and Ms.

Epstein's well-written and well-researched catalogue for the show instantly establishes itself as an indispensable guide to the artist's work and to the artistic and intellectual influences that shaped the course of its development.



Alfred Maurer's *Self-Portrait*, 1897.

In that development, Maurer's encounter with the new Fauvist paintings of Matisse in the Salon d'Automne of 1905 was certainly crucial. It was, however, by no means the only experience that prompted his turn away from the tonal Estheticism at which he had excelled to the more radical color-oriented Modernism that became the basis of so much of the best Modernist painting for decades thereafter. Late Cézanne and the late pastels of Degas, and indeed the entire esthetic weight of the Impres-

sionist and Post-Impressionist masters, forced Maurer to reexamine the fundamentals of his art.

This is the way he described his situation in an article for *The New York Times* five years before the Armory Show: "The transition from the old school to the new is not an easy one.... When I decided to make the change, I had to lay aside my brushes for almost a month and think nothing but Impressionism. Then I went at it slowly and timidly, feeling my way. I am still in transition, I know. I can't tell what tomorrow will bring about." Yet, what is remarkable about

Maurer's early Fauvist paintings of figures, still life and landscape is that they don't look in the least timid or diffident. They look like the work of an artist whose gift for lyric expression has been released for the first time.

In the fast-paced world of the Paris avant-garde in the years before the outbreak of war in 1914—the fateful event that forced Maurer to return to the United States—his artistic development was in fact rapid and prolific. Painful as his departure from Paris was for Maurer—for he was never again in a position to return to Europe—he continued to expand upon his early mastery of Modernist innovation, assimilating certain aspects of Cubism and even venturing into abstraction, at a time when all such developments were still anathema to established opinion in the United States. It might even be said that it was in the lost paradise of the Paris avant-garde before the war that Maurer continued to live and work as an artist even after his unhappy return to America.

Disapproval, in Maurer's case, was all the more melancholy, of course, in being a family drama as well as a cultural conflict. For the artist's father, in whose Manhattan town house Maurer was destined to live for the rest of his life, remained fiercely op-

posed to the Modernist course of his son's art, and never hesitated to speak his mind on the subject.

Writing about this ordeal some years ago, I observed, "It was a struggle on the order of one of those late plays by Eugene O'Neill in which the classic bonds of filial attachment—love and dependency, hatred and resentment, the desire for freedom and the impossibility of achieving it—are carried to every extreme of exacerbation and despair." And further: "What most of his contemporaries experienced as a general conflict or taste and allegiance—between the claims of tradition and respectability on the one hand and those of Modernist art on the other—Maurer experienced as a profound family crisis." Now, after reading Ms. Epstein's text for the catalogue of the current exhibition, I feel that I may even have understated the case.

It speaks all the more for Maurer's courage and determination that he continued to produce pictures of such extraordinary quality—not unfaithfully, to be sure, but often enough—under circumstances that would have crushed a less robust talent. And he managed to attract the support of some of the most enlightened collectors, dealers and critics of his time, among them Alfred Stieglitz, Erhard Weyhe and Albert C. Barnes during his lifetime, and later, the admirable Hudson Walker, who in 1941 acquired the contents of the Maurer estate and devoted years to donating important examples of the work to American museum collections.

Still, Maurer's was a sad and lonely life after 1914, and there came a time when he could no longer abide its terrors. On Aug. 4, 1932, he hanged himself in his father's town house shortly after his own father's death—a denouement that even O'Neill might have hesitated to write. The date of the artist's suicide was significant, for as his first biographer, Elizabeth McCausland, pointed out, it marked "the 18th anniversary of the outbreak of the war which drove him home from Paris in 1914."

There are a lot of fine pictures in this exhibition, and a lot about the history of American Modernism to be learned from both the exhibition and its catalogue. *Alfred H. Maurer: Aestheticism to Modernism* is yet another reminder of the extent to which our galleries now often bring us the kind of exhibitions that our museums have abandoned, and it remains on view at the Hollis Taggart Galleries, 48 East 73rd Street, through Jan. 15.