



HIRSCHL & ADLER GALLERIES

NILES SPENCER (1893–1952)

*In Fairmont*

Oil on canvas, 65 1/2 x 41 1/2 in.

Signed, dated, and inscribed (at lower right): NILES SPENCER – ©; (on back edge): Niles Spencer '51 In Fairmont

RECORDED: *Contemporary American Painting and Sculpture* (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1952), pp. 33 illus., 233 // *Mārg: A Magazine of the Arts (India)* 10 (1956), pl. 6 illus. // *The Art Quarterly* 19 (1956), p. 309 // *Painting and Sculpture in The Museum of Modern Art* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1958), p. 57 // Edith G. Halpert, “Moscow Greeting; American Art Rouses Lively Response,” *New York Times*, August 2, 1959, p. X15 // Edwin L. Dale, Jr., “Gray Flannel Bosses: Industrialism and Industrial Man,” *The New York Times Book Review*, October 1960, p. BR46 illus. // Hilton Kramer, “Art Retrospective for Niles Spencer; Cubism-Derived Urban Scenes at Whitney,” *New York Times*, February 12, 1966, p. 19 // Samuel M. Green, *American Art: A Historical Survey* (New York: Ronald Press, 1966), p. 541 // Vicente Gesualdo, ed., *Enciclopedia del arte en América: Biografías* (Buenos Aires: Bibliográfica OMEBA, 1969), n.p. // *Praeger Encyclopedia of Art* 5 (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1971), p. 1907

EXHIBITED: University of Illinois, Champaign, 1952, *Contemporary American Painting*, p. 233 no. 125, pl. 33 illus. // The Downtown Gallery, New York, 1952, *Niles Spencer: Paintings*, no. 10 illus. on cover // Akron Art Institute, Ohio; Cincinnati Art Museum, Ohio; Currier Gallery of Art, Manchester, New Hampshire; The Museum of Modern Art, New York; and Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, Minnesota, 1954, *Niles Spencer: A Retrospective Exhibition*, no. 31 // Musée d'Art Moderne, Paris, 1955, *50 ans d'art aux États-Unis*, p. 37 no. 33, pl. 10 illus. // Kunsthaus, Zürich; Palacio de la Virreina & Museo de Arte Moderno, Barcelona; Haus des Deutschen Kunsthandwerks, Frankfurt; Tate Gallery, London; Geementemuseum, The Hague; Secession Galerie, Vienna; and Kalemegdan Pavilion, Belgrade, 1955–56, *Modern Art in the U.S.A.*, no. 33 // The Downtown Gallery, New York, 1957, *New Art in America* // Moscow, Russia, 1959, *American National Exhibition* // Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 1959, *Paintings and Sculpture from the American National Exhibition in Moscow* // University of Kentucky Art Gallery, Lexington; Munson-Williams-Proctor Arts Institute, Utica, New York; Portland Museum of Art, Maine; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Allentown Art Museum, Pennsylvania; Currier Gallery of Art, Manchester, New Hampshire; Rhode Island School of Design, Providence; and Guild Hall, Easthampton, New York, 1965–66, *Niles Spencer*, p. 36 no. 120, illus. in color on cover // Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 1966, *Art of the United States, 1670–1966*, p. 154 no. 262 // The Katonah Gallery, Katonah, New York, 1976, *The American Scene and New Formations of Modernism, 1935–1954*, no. 63 illus. // Whitney Museum of American Art at the Equitable Center, New York, 1990, *Niles Spencer*, p. 15

EX COLL.: the artist; to [The Downtown Gallery, New York]; to Edward Joseph Gallagher, Jr.; by gift to The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1956–2012; to sale, Sotheby's, New York, May 17, 2012, no. 33; to [Hirschl & Adler Galleries, New York, 2012]; to private collection, 2012 until the present

Niles Spencer was born in Pawtucket, Rhode Island, where his family owned a textile mill. He studied at the Rhode Island School of Design in Providence from 1913–15, where by the end of that period he was already teaching evening classes, and spent summer sessions painting with Charles Herbert Woodbury at Hamilton Easter Field's art school in Ogunquit, Maine. It was in Ogunquit that Spencer met many of the modernists who became lifelong friends, including Marsden Hartley, Yasuo Kuniyoshi, Stuart Davis, Bernard Karfiol, Hilaire Hiler, and Louis Bouché, and the author John Dos Passos. In the summer of 1915, Spencer visited New York for the first time, enrolling briefly at the Art Students League as well as at the Ferrer School in the Bronx, where he studied under Robert Henri and George Bellows for just one month. Spencer returned to Providence full of ideas received from Henri and Bellows, and when he tried to spread them in his classes at RISD, he was asked to leave the school. Spencer moved to New York in 1916, and in 1917 he married Betty Lockett. The Spencers removed for the next several years to Ogunquit, making occasional month-long visits to New York.

The Spencers made a fateful trip to Europe in 1921, traveling throughout France and Italy. Already under the sway of Cézanne, in Paris Spencer came into contact with the work of the cubists Georges Braque, Juan Gris, and Pablo Picasso, which forever changed the course of his art. His early painting *City Walls* (1921, Museum of Modern Art, New York; see p. 5 illus. in color), is his first documented response to cubism. A flattened and compactly designed grouping of interlocking architectural forms painted in muted colors, *City Walls* established in one stroke the direction Spencer was to take for the rest of his career. Spencer's new style allied him with the Precisionists, American modernists of the Machine Age who painted cubist-infused architectural landscapes in a highly controlled technique, in which space is divided into precisely drawn geometric regions of color.

Spencer returned to the United States in 1922, and the following year he settled in New York, near Washington Square. Now firmly entrenched in the city, Spencer began to flourish. Through his friends he was invited to join the Whitney Studio Club, and through the recommendation of the sculptor William Zorach, the influential art dealer Charles Daniel decided to represent Spencer. Daniel gave Spencer two one-man shows, in 1925 and 1928. Though Daniel handled the work of a wide variety of American modernists, including Stuart Davis, Marsden Hartley, Rockwell Kent, John Marin, and Man Ray, the Daniel Gallery became especially strongly associated with the leading Precisionists Charles Demuth, Charles Sheeler, and Preston Dickinson. Spencer's pictures of urban buildings were a natural fit among this group, and he was rightly considered one of them by critics and collectors.

Spencer enjoyed moderate success in his own lifetime. Like the works, the man himself was a modest, understated, and cerebral personality, neither ambitious nor keen to promote himself in the oftentimes cutthroat art world. Spencer received the third and final one-man show of his career in 1947 at the Downtown Gallery, New York, nineteen years after his previous show at the Daniel Gallery. Also in 1947, after a fallow period during which his marriage disintegrated, Spencer divorced his wife, Betty. He married Catherine Brett, the director of a girl's school in Dingman's Ferry, Pennsylvania, in November of that same year. This heralded a new period of energy and activity for Spencer. In 1950, he and Catherine moved to Sag Harbor, Long Island, and during these years he divided his time between there and Dingman's Ferry, frequently stopping over in New York to visit his friends. By late 1950, however, declining health forced him to curtail his shuttling to and from Dingman's Ferry, and he made his last trip to New York in February 1952. Spencer died in Dingman's ferry in May of a coronary artery occlusion.

What attention Spencer may have lacked during his life he received immediately upon his death. The Downtown Gallery held two posthumous exhibitions of Spencer's work in 1952, and in 1954, the Museum of Modern Art, New York, mounted a major exhibition of Spencer's art that traveled to six venues across the Northeast and Midwest, bringing an enormous amount of attention to his art. Spencer has since been remembered as a major figure in Precisionism as its most subtle and intimate practitioner whose works, although products of the Machine Age, never relinquished the sense of being made by hand.

*In Fairmont* is a major late canvas by Spencer and one of the greatest works in his oeuvre. Perhaps the largest canvas Spencer ever completed, and painted at the height of his artistic maturity, *In Fairmont* is based on large ventilator and glass works in Fairmont, West Virginia. Fairmont, which is located about 90 miles south of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, was a major glass center, with a number of glass-manufacturing companies building their factories along the shore of the Monongahela River. In heroic scale, Spencer deconstructs the industrial forms into geometric shapes and orders them into a highly refined composition. As Spencer's career progressed, his style drifted away from the abstraction seen in *City Walls* to a more realistic, but still highly sophisticated Precisionist portrayal of urban and vernacular architecture, all the while retaining the muted palette and dry application of paint that characterized virtually all of the work of his mature career. By the mid-1940s, however, Spencer once again edged toward abstraction, leaving behind the realistic modeling of his previous works and focusing instead on hard-edged regions of largely unmodulated color. If Spencer's paintings were becoming more simplified and abstract, they were also becoming ever larger and more heroically scaled. Spencer scholar Richard Freeman wrote of these later canvases:

Always a painstaking worker whose paintings were preceded by completed oil on gouache studies, which in turn had been preceded by many drawings, he seemed to have slowed his pace even more. During the early 1940's his production was about one big painting a year. The paintings, however, became increasingly daring and monumental. Shapes settled elegantly and irrevocably into convincing position. The colors sang in a muted rich baritone chorus of tans, greys, rusts, and greens, with occasional vivid greys and blacks giving structural drama. An almost suppressed excitement invaded what had been the lyric calm of his classicism. His late major works, like *In Fairmont*, *The Wake of the Hurricane* [1951, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, Minnesota], or *The Cement Mixer* [1949, Worcester Art Museum, Massachusetts] heralded a new Spencer (Freeman, *Niles Spencer*, exhib. cat., traveling exhibition [1965–66], p. 16).

*In Fairmont* is an iconic work in Spencer's oeuvre and has been included in a variety of important exhibitions in America and Europe. It was shown at the landmark exhibition *Contemporary American Painting* held at the University of Illinois, Champaign, in 1952. *In Fairmont* was included one of the two shows of Spencer's work at the Downtown Gallery later that year, and it was also included aforementioned traveling show organized by the Museum of Modern Art in 1954. The painting also has appeared in the two major retrospectives of Spencer's work since that time: a traveling show sponsored by the University of Kentucky Art Gallery in 1965–66, with *In Fairmont* being illustrated in color on the cover of the catalogue, and *Niles Spencer*, a show at the Whitney Museum of American Art at the Equitable Center, New York, in 1990. *In Fairmont* was purchased from the Downtown Gallery by the important collector Edward Joseph Gallagher, Jr., who presented it as a gift to the Museum of Modern Art in 1956. The painting remained in the Museum's collection until 2012.

As he did for nearly all his works, Spencer made several drawings and studies for *In Fairmont*, including the related oil painting, *In Fairmont, West Virginia* (1951, 23 1/2 x 14 5/8 in., The SBC Collection, San Antonio, Texas; see Laura Carey Martin *et al.*, *American Images: The SBC Collection of Twentieth-Century American Art* [New York: Harry. N. Abrams, 1996], p. 76 fig. 38 illus.).

APG 8838    ZDR    NS8838