



HIRSCHL & ADLER GALLERIES

REGINALD MARSH (1898–1954)

Cabaret

Tempera and pencil on gessoed panel, 35 3/4 x 23 3/4 in.

Painted in 1938

RECORDED: *Fortune* XVIII (September 1938), p. 71 illus. in color

EXHIBITED: Chazen Museum of Art, University of Wisconsin at Madison, long-term loan, 2006–18

EX COLL: the artist; to William Benton, Connecticut, until 1973, to his daughter, Helen Benton Boley (1938–2017), Madison, Wisconsin; to her estate, until 2019

Wednesday July 6, 1938 was a busy day in the life of working artist Reginald Marsh. The cryptic notes Marsh entered into his “Little Red Book” record “2 watercolors” for the morning, “Coney” [Island] for the afternoon and, for the evening, “to Casa Manana—for Fortune” (Reginald Marsh papers, “Diaries, 1912–1954, ‘The Little Red Book’ Engagement Diaries, 1935–39,” Archives of

American Art, Smithsonian Institution). The entry for Saturday July 9 indicates “Casa Manana—even[ing]”. By Tuesday the twelfth, Marsh recorded “paint and finish Casa Manana.” The painting’s subject, Casa Mañana, was a nightclub at 50th Street and Seventh Avenue, equidistant between Times Square and Carnegie Hall in the center of what is still Manhattan’s theater district. In 1938, the Club was owned and operated by the flamboyant entertainment impresario Billy Rose. *Fortune* commissioned Reginald Marsh to paint a picture of the interior during a performance for a full-page illustration in its planned article, “Put Their Name in Lights,” an examination of the very substantial business of the William Morris Agency, the “oldest theatrical agent in the U.S.” The article ran in *Fortune*’s September 1938 issue (pp. 67–72, 96) with Marsh’s picture prominently featured on page 71 in a color illustration that noted in small print at the bottom left of the picture “Painted for FORTUNE by Reginald Marsh.” Marsh was, without question, the ideal artist for this assignment.

Reginald Marsh blended the passion of the Ashcan painters for recording the vitality of the urban scene with a dedication to the study of human anatomy inspired by close study of Michelangelo, Raphael, and, above all, Rubens. For three and a half decades, from the 1920s to his premature death from a heart attack in 1954, Marsh returned again and again to his favorite New York venues, where he became a familiar figure, observing and recording the scene in the sketchbook that was his constant companion. Marsh’s preferred locations were distinctly plebian and often gritty—the beach at Coney Island, the audience and performers at burlesque houses and theaters, the tumultuous sidewalks of Union Square, and the curbs and corners of the Bowery, a garish milieu of gloom and neon under the tracks of the Third Avenue El. His New Yorkers, though, were glorious time travelers from the Renaissance, jostling along the city streets, crowding the public beaches, and constituting the spectacle of modern urban life. In 1945, Marsh wrote, in his book *Anatomy for*

Artists, “In spite of the advance in medical anatomical knowledge since the Renaissance, the art of drawing and the use of anatomy has declined. It is conceded that the highest development in the art of figure drawing was bound together with knowledge of anatomy. The artists of the Renaissance, ... hardly challenged, never have been surpassed” (as quoted in Lloyd Goodrich, *Reginald Marsh* [New York: Harry N. Abrams, Publishers, 1972], p. 164).

Reginald Marsh was the son of artists and the paternal grandson of a wealthy Chicago meat packer, two circumstances that shaped the trajectory of his life. He was born in Paris to Frederick Dana Marsh (1872–1961), a talented muralist, and Alice Randall Marsh (1869–1929), a painter of miniatures. Fred Marsh was fascinated by the brawn and courage of the construction workers who were creating a new New York City. He recorded men at work on buildings and bridges, and these figures recalled the sculpted gods and heroes of the ancient world. Although their careers overlapped, Fred Marsh is said to have not encouraged his son Reginald’s early artistic talent, with the result that his presence in his son’s life is glossed in Marsh’s biographical narrative. In fact, Reginald Marsh’s choice of urban subject matter, his celebration of the modern city, and his portraits of its citizens in mythic terms can be understood, to some extent, as a second-generation revision of his father’s enthusiasms.

Lloyd Goodrich, eminent critic, curator, art historian, and Reginald Marsh’s principal biographer, was a close boyhood friend of the artist from their days together when the Goodriches and Marshes both had homes in Nutley, New Jersey and Sakonnet, Rhode Island. Marsh attended private schools before matriculating at Yale College, where he studied art. More important than whatever studio instruction he received, he honed his graphic skills as a contributor to *The Yale Record*, self-

proclaimed as “America’s Oldest College Humor Magazine.” In Marsh’s senior year *The Record* was edited by William Benton (1900–1973), an undergraduate journalist who would make his fame and fortune in the fledgling advertising profession as a co-founder of Benton & Bowles. Benton left the advertising business in 1935 and was recruited by Robert Hutchins, President of the University of Chicago, to become publisher of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. At Yale, Benton was enthusiastic about Marsh’s keen eye and outstanding graphic ability, an enthusiasm which carried through to a lifelong relationship of friendship and artistic patronage.

Marsh graduated in 1920, degree in hand and planning to make a career in New York City as a commercial artist. He gravitated to the center of creative activity, the bohemian artistic, literary, and theatrical circles of Greenwich Village. In 1919, the summer before his senior year at Yale, Marsh had taken a class at the Art Students League. Through the 1920s he returned there periodically, studying briefly with George Luks, John Sloan, George Bridgman, and most importantly, Kenneth Hayes Miller (1876–1952), who became Marsh’s lifelong mentor, friend, and substitute father figure. At first, Marsh worked as a freelancer. In 1922, he landed a regular stint as a staff artist for the *New York Daily News*, a three-year-old tabloid that advertised itself as “New York’s Picture Newspaper.” Marsh covered the vaudeville beat at a time of decline, when theaters were increasingly being given over to the new popular medium of motion pictures.

With his days largely free, in 1922, Marsh turned serious attention to the study of painting, returning to the Art Students League. In 1923, he joined the Whitney Studio Club, located on West 4th Street. The club, precursor to the Whitney Museum, had been founded in 1918 by Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney as a social center and exhibition space for contemporary artists. Marsh supplemented his

journalism income with theater design and curtain painting, contributing to Broadway productions as well as the Experimental Theater, Inc., a company that staged its work at the Provincetown Playhouse. At the Art Students League, Marsh met Betty Burroughs, a fellow student and sculptor who also came from a family of artists. Her father was Bryson Burroughs, Curator of Painting at The Metropolitan Museum of Art; her late mother was the sculptor Edith Woodman Burroughs (1871–1916); her brother was Alan Burroughs, art critic and conservator, whose wife-to-be, Molly Luce, was a fellow student of Kenneth Hayes Miller. Marsh and Burroughs married in 1923 and lived in the Burroughs family home in Flushing, New York. In 1924, Marsh had his first one-man show of oils and watercolors at the Whitney Studio Club, which had outgrown its original space and moved to more visible and larger quarters on West Eighth Street.

Marsh joined the staff of the newly founded weekly magazine, *The New Yorker*, in 1925, arriving in time for its second issue and sharing an office with Peter Arno and Charles MacArthur. He worked there sporadically for seven years, writing theater and movie reviews and profiles as well as contributing drawings that helped to establish *The New Yorker's* distinctive graphic style. That same year Marsh returned to Paris, the city of his birth, where he spent six months in intensive study of the Old Masters in Parisian museums. Back in New York, Marsh enrolled briefly in Kenneth Hayes Miller's class at The Art Students League. After another trip to Europe in 1928 for second extended study of the Old Masters, Marsh returned to New York in 1929, and took a workspace on West 14th Street. His studio was near busy Union Square and the bargain-priced department stores, Ohrbach's and S. Klein. The new location confirmed Marsh's chosen subject matter of the public life of working-class New York. He became associated with the Fourteenth Street school of artists, not a school in fact, but a group of friends with studios around Union Square. Professional descendants of

Robert Henri and the so-called “Ashcan School,” they were guided by the influence of Miller. In addition to Miller and Marsh, other artists associated with the label included Isabel Bishop, Edward Laning, arguably Guy Pène du Bois, and the Soyer twins, Raphael and Moses. Although each artist developed an individual approach, all were determined realists who shared a common interest in depicting the fabric of daily life in New York.

A hub for mass transit lines that fan out through four boroughs of the city (Staten Island excepted), Fourteenth Street proved an ideal base for Marsh. Personally shy, socially uncomfortable with the trappings of wealth, but distanced in every way from the experience of the working class, Marsh gravitated naturally to the role of the observer in the French *flâneur* tradition. He was never without his sketchbook and later on, a camera, recording the panorama around him in order to translate it into his own distinctive artistic idiom, a mix of fine art, illustration, and caricature in the tradition of Honoré Daumier.

Marsh’s transition to fine art was hampered by his difficulties in using the medium of oil paint. In 1930, he began to use tempera, and at last found the means to express his creative vision. Lloyd Goodrich, in his magisterial book celebrating his late friend, *Reginald Marsh*, quotes Marsh’s own evaluation of his struggle with oil paint in the late 1920s: “The attempts [at using oil] I infrequently made ended always in an incoherent pasty mess” (p. 30). Goodrich credits Thomas Benton and Denys Wortman (a well-known graphic artist and fellow student of Kenneth Hayes Miller) with steering Marsh to tempera. “It opened up a new world to me.... I put egg yolk on a kind of belt line production for a dozen years and shucked oil forever” (p. 33). Goodrich adds:

In this new medium he could build the painting in a continuous process without waiting for it to dry, making possible a rapidity of execution that suited his temperament. Almost immediately he began producing, with a new sureness, large-scale compositions that had a power and completeness he had never approached before. These egg temperas of the early and middle 1930's were to make his reputation as a painter (pp. 33–34).

In 1935, Marsh began to teach at the Art Students League, at first only in the summers, but beginning in 1942, as a full-time year-round faculty member. During his lifetime Marsh exhibited widely and received numerous honors and awards. In addition to his affiliation with the Art Students League, he was an Academician of the National Academy of Art (1943); a member of the National Institute of Arts and Letters (1946); a Fellow of the Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures, and Commerce, London, England; and a member of the Society of American Graphic Artists. In June 1954, a month before his death, he was appointed art editor of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

Cabaret is the painting Marsh recorded as “Casa Manana.” *Fortune* accompanied the illustration in its September 1938 issue with a text explaining that vaudeville, “with its old-time acts has almost vanished. But variety as an entertainment form lives and thrives in theatre restaurants like Billy Rose’s Casa Mañana, pictured here for FORTUNE by Reginald Marsh, and in night clubs and hotel supper rooms all over the country” (p. 71). The subject matter could not have been more congenial for Marsh. In 1937, the administration of Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia succeeded in erasing Burlesque in New York City, chasing it across the Hudson River to New Jersey. The departure of Burlesque left Marsh without a favorite pastime and also without a favorite indoor popular leisure subject.

Billy Rose (William Samuel Rosenberg, 1899–1966) was ready to fill the void. A flamboyant showbusiness entrepreneur and legendary Broadway character, Rose “pioneered in creating entertainment for people of moderate income” (*New York Times*, February 11, 1966, p. 1, “Billy Rose Is Dead; Showman Was 66”). By 1938, Billy Rose was an indefatigable self-promoter whose private life and public activities generated a steady stream of copy for gossip columnists and theater columnists. In 1929, he married comedian Fanny Brice, taller, older and more famous than her five-foot three-inch husband. The union was celebrated at City Hall with Mayor Jimmy Walker presiding. Rose made his name as a Broadway producer and nightclub owner, credited by the *New York Times* as the founder in late 1933, of “the theater cabaret craze” (January 19, 1938, p. 26. “Billy Rose Presents His Night Club Show”), with the short-lived “Casino de Paree.” Rose didn’t confine himself to New York City. In 1936, Amon Carter recruited Rose to Fort Worth to program a Broadway-quality show for an outdoor theater and restaurant as part of the celebration of the Texas Centennial. Located in a transformed cow pasture, the Texas-sized venue featured the world’s largest revolving stage with seating for 4,000 people. It was called the Casa Mañana, (House of Tomorrow), echoing the “World of Tomorrow” theme of the planned 1939 New York City World’s Fair. In summer 1937, Rose went to Cleveland, where, for the Great Lakes Exposition, he created his “Aquacade.” Five thousand patrons dined at lakeside and watched as Olympic gold-medal swimmers Eleanor Holm and Johnny Weissmuller performed in Lake Erie. In 1939 Rose moved the Aquacade to the New York World’s Fair.

Rose opened the Casa Mañana in New York in January 1938. With prices beginning at \$1.00 for a show only and going up to \$2.50 to include dinner, Rose, as always, aimed at the masses, not the classes. He identified his intended customer as “Mr. Forgotten Man (the guy who pays the check)”

(Lewis, Erenberg, “Impresarios of Broadway Nightlife,” in William R. Taylor, ed., *Inventing Times Square: Commerce and Culture at the Crossroads of the World* [Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996], p. 173). The roster of artists who passed through Casa Mañana in its brief year-and-a-half run (it closed in May 1939) illustrates Rose’s ability to present the talent that the people wanted to see: Helen Morgan, Abbot & Costello, the Three Stooges, Jimmy Durante, Bert Wheeler, Betty Hutton, Louis Armstrong, and Millie Picon among many others with orchestras led, at various times, by Vincent Lopez, Louis Prima, and Paul Whiteman. The building that housed the Club was a well-known destination. The original site of Earl Carroll’s theater, it had been renovated into an elegant dinner nightclub in 1934. Named the French Casino, the Club featured a series of Parisian-themed shows with “Folies” in their title and was the most popular nightclub in town until it ran out of money in 1937. Billy Rose promptly took over the space, redecorated, and renamed it. Although the initial lease ran for six years, Rose closed the club in May 1939, partly the result of ongoing union troubles, but also because his attention was diverted. Divorced from Fannie Brice in October 1938, he was preparing to marry his new girlfriend, Aquacade star Eleanor Holm. Moreover, he had a new project, the supper club he called Billy Rose’s Diamond Horseshoe, which opened at Christmas 1938 in the basement of Broadway’s Paramount Theater. Rose ran the Diamond Horseshoe until 1951.

Cabaret is a major Marsh tempera painting. Marsh uses the striking architectural elements of the interior of the Casa Mañana as a setting for his characteristic observations of Americans as they behave when they are not being observed. The picture is a study in chiaroscuro and grisaille. What looks to be a capacity audience sits mostly in the shadows, watching the performers on stage whose acrobatic dance is illuminated by a theatrical spotlight. The internal structure of the club reflects its

previous incarnation as a theater with the former proscenium and stage area rendered in shades of grisaille. The stage was built out allowing for table seating going from stage side to the far rear. The old mezzanine and balcony were built out with rounded projecting terraces whose tables offered unobstructed on high views of the stage. Marsh painted these terraces red and grey in a curvilinear deco pattern echoing the shape of the terraces. The underside of the mezzanine is a deep decorative red, a dramatic architectonic shape in high contrast to the sketched-out sea of faces farther from the stage.

In classic Marsh fashion, the artist focuses his attention on a few figures of special interest. In the left foreground, a waitress leans over in conversation with a male patron. Behind her, a waiter makes his way through the crowd, holding aloft with one uplifted arm a tray with food and drink balanced high over his head, an acrobatic feat as much a part of the nightclub show as the activity on the stage. Two women and a man share a table near the stage, all watching the show intently. A bottle in an ice bucket sits adjacent to the table, the economic engine that made this whole scene a working business model. The patrons are dressed neatly in street clothing, the ladies with everyday hats. They are decent but there is no show of finery. While Billy Rose was famous for glamorous showgirls and as much bare skin as the law would allow, he also had an enduring fondness for vaudeville-style family entertainment. The two performers on the stage appear to be some version of acrobatic dancers, the excitement in their performance the result of breathtaking agility and grace with nothing to arouse either the libidos of the audience or the attention of the licensing authorities.

While the immediate circumstances of the *Fortune* commission remain unclear, in March 1938, Marsh received a letter from *Fortune* requesting that he update his contact information and send

them samples of his current work. (Marsh papers, Archives of American Art). Marsh was not new to *Fortune*. In September 1932, the magazine used his work to illustrate its article, “No One Has Ever Starved.” In July 1935, Marsh supplied paintings to illustrate “King of Bottled Beer,” an examination of the resurgence of the Anheuser Busch brewing company after the end of Prohibition. *Fortune*, had been founded by fellow Yale graduate Henry Luce as “the Ideal Super-Class Magazine.” Proposed in early 1929, Luce was fresh from his success with *Time*. The magazine published its first issue in 1930, hardly a propitious year for an expensive publication examining and celebrating American business. Nevertheless, Luce persevered, and *Fortune* prospered. In the decade of the 1930s, *Fortune*’s roster of writers included James Agee, Dwight MacDonald, Archibald MacLeish, John Kenneth Galbraith, and Alfred Kazin. Led by art director Eleanor Treacy, the magazine commissioned the work of noted photographers Walker Evans and Margaret Bourke White, and the work of contemporary artists Diego Rivera, John Steuart Curry, Paul Sample, and Reginald Marsh.

Marsh’s 1938 assignment from *Fortune* appears to have come at an opportune moment. Though never a “starving artist,” Marsh had to scramble during the 1930s to sell his work. It is not clear what happened to *Cabaret* after it was published in *Fortune*, although we know that it became part of William Benton’s personal art collection. There is a reasonable possibility that the picture was part of a scheme instituted by William Benton in January 1939. On the thirtieth of that month he wrote to his friend, “Dear Reggie,” commiserating about an exhibition that had been, for Marsh, a critical success but a not a financial one. The artist wound up owing his gallery \$200 that he didn’t have. Benton proposed to Marsh to straighten out his account with the gallery and then send him “\$100 a month for six months,” a retainer to be paid for in pictures. The pictures would be “for my

own office and my home.... You are going to be my private W.P.A. project.... Send me any pictures you want. I have only one proviso. You are supposed to like the picture yourself!” In a subsequent letter Benton told Marsh not to worry about framing: he would take care of it. Follow-up letters indicate that Benton received Marsh pictures, but the letters do not describe what they were. (Reginald Marsh papers, William Benton Correspondence, 1939–1954, Archives of American Art).

Reginald Marsh’s *Cabaret* is a major work by an important twentieth-century American realist artist. In William Benton’s private collection until his death and then in the collection of his daughter, Helen Benton Boley until her death, the picture has remained relatively unknown and unpublished since 1938. It finds Marsh, the quintessential New York *flaneur*, painting what he knew best, evoking through his skill as an artist the spirit and texture of his time and place. This is Broadway nightlife in the 1930s, a place where anyone with a few dollars and a few hours to spend could find escapist diversion in a decade bounded by the Great Depression at the beginning and the specter of looming World War II at the end.