

Manierre Dawson

An Artist Out of Bounds

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Manierre Dawson was a pioneer abstractionist whose debut came during the groundbreaking Armory Show of 1913 during its Chicago presentation. The revolutionary quality of his vision is only now being fully appreciated.



*Manierre Dawson ca. 1906.
Photograph courtesy of the
artist's grandson.*

Manierre Dawson, 1887–1969

As the second of four sons that attorney George Dawson and his wife Eva would raise in a prosperous neighborhood on the South Side of Chicago, Manierre Dawson began his formal art training with a single class at South Division (Wendell Phillips) High School. The young artist's career choice was altered dramatically with the tragic death of his older brother, George Jr., in a boating accident near the family's summer home in Ludington, Michigan. The family's professional expectations suddenly fell to Manierre and, after graduation, he entered the Armour Institute of Technology in 1905.

Engineering classes appealed to his meticulous character and probably influenced his approach to abstraction, but they left him little time for the activity of painting. "All these days of hard study at Armour Tech, where I am taking a course in civil engineering, are brightened by continuing the making of pictures on weekends,"¹ he wrote in a journal entry.

Upon graduation in 1909, he took a position in the drafting department of the architectural firm of Holabird and Roche. Within a year, he had planned and embarked on a five-month European sojourn. Taking a leave of absence—ostensibly traveling to acquaint himself with European architecture—he designed,

¹This and other quotes are taken from a transcript of Manierre Dawson journal entries, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, as printed in *Manierre Dawson: American Pioneer of Abstract Art* (Hollis Taggart Galleries: New York, New York, 1999).

constructed, and carried a case that would allow him to safely transport wet paintings.

During the trip, he would visit Germany and Switzerland, as well as the art capitals of London, Rome, Florence, and Venice. In Paris, he would encounter the American painter John Singer Sargent and call on and sell one of his European paintings to the expatriate American collector and avant-garde writer Gertrude Stein.

Returning to the U.S. through New York in November of 1910, Dawson met artist and arts organizer Arthur B. Davies. Davies later invited him to exhibit in the debut presentation of the groundbreaking New York Armory Show. Dawson was unable at the time to supply Davies with what he felt was suitable work for the New York venue, but he was elated when the controversial show arrived at the Art Institute of Chicago in 1913. Walter S. Pach, a member of the American Association of Painters and Sculptors (the show's organizers), insisted that Dawson allow his 1912 abstraction *Wharf Under Mountain* (currently in the Ringling Museum, Sarasota, Florida) to hang in the Chicago show. Although there is no independent confirmation of this inclusion in the landmark cultural event, Dawson did note in his journal on April 4, 1913, "Walter said he had no trouble getting the painting hung."

The opportunity for Dawson to immerse himself in the Modernist vision of young European masters spurred him to visit the show repeatedly, purchase two works, and may have solidified his resolve to leave Holabird and Roche in hopes of finding more suitable employment and time to paint.

The career he hoped for did not materialize. Exhibition opportunities were slim for an avant-garde artist anchored to the Midwest. Within two years, Dawson reexamined his options and decided to become a fruit farmer near Ludington, wagering that he would have time in the "off season" to make his art. He met and fell in love with a young woman, married, and started a family in 1918. As the years went by, he continued to paint and developed an interesting body of sculptural work but exhibited very little. He found success in the farming business, retiring in the early 1960s to Florida. There, he showed Karl Nickel, an assistant curator at the Ringling Museum of Art in Sarasota, a group of paintings he had done nearly sixty years before. Nickel recognized their significance and helped the elderly retiree begin a campaign to claim his rightful place in the history of American abstraction.

Manierre Dawson died in Sarasota in 1969.

In 1980, the Illinois State Museum had the good fortune to be approached by a trio of men from Florida who had assembled a group of paintings by a little-known artist from Illinois with the curious name of Manierre Dawson. The collectors wondered whether the Museum would consider accessioning a selection. The paintings they revealed were as startling in their originality as they were in their source, and the Museum promptly agreed to accept a number of works.

The three men, Dr. Lewis Obi, Frank McKeown, and Lefferts Mabie donated seventeen paintings that have since been acknowledged as an important core collection of work essential to appreciating the once underrecognized contributions of Manierre Dawson to the history of abstraction in the United States during the early twentieth century.

Dawson's oeuvre stands well outside the mainstream of what was being created not only in the Midwest but in the country as a whole. In his investigation of formal concerns and articulation of a personal vision, the 250 plus paintings that burst forth between 1904 and 1918 demonstrate a vigorous and original hand that was unencumbered by academic training, coupled with a level of visual sophistication that stretched far beyond Michigan Avenue in Chicago. Although self-taught by today's standards, Dawson, with his work, stands out as a beacon of Modernism—almost like a stroboscopic flash—against most of the painting that was occurring in the Midwest at the time.

All article photographs by Gary Andrashko unless otherwise noted.

Left: *Manierre Dawson, Beech, 1913, painted he same year as Wharf Under Mountain, which was reputedly part of the Art Institute's controversial Armory Show in Chicago.*

Right: *Manierre Dawson, Essay in Brown, 1913, oil on cardboard. Gift of Dr. Lewis Obi, Frank McKeown, and Lefferts Mabie, 1980.*

All works, Collection of the Illinois State Museum.



The innovation to which Dawson's work points is not confined to its outward manifestations—spatial discontinuities begin to appear around 1909—but, perhaps even more important, his work reflects a uniquely Modern attitude, as well. In December of 1908, in a journal that he would keep intermittently throughout his life, he ended an entry by saying, "This winter I am very hard at work . . . on several arbitrarily constructed paintings of arranged figures, blocking things out without rhyme or reason other than to make the picture look *right*."

A comparison of Dawson's pictures to those of his contemporaries in Illinois can be instructive. Frank Peyraud's *Untitled (Summer Landscape)* (1911), from the Museum's collection, provides



Manierre Dawson's Rocky Pool, 1910, (left) is compared with Frank Peyraud's Untitled (Summer Landscape) of 1911. Dawson employs landscape as a point of departure for his abstraction.



evidence of this artist's easy familiarity with the elements of landscape painting. His broken brushwork and high key palette effectively communicate the dense wetland heat of an Illinois summer. In *Rocky Pool*, (1910) painted a year before the Peyraud work, Dawson employs landscape as a point of departure for his abstraction. He takes what appears to be an abandoned quarry and shifts our attention to *his* agenda with an unexpected articulation of spatial relationships via a purposeful manipulation of line, color, and value. Trees and overgrowth, whose random appearance is determined by the stark, vertical topography of the quarry setting, are indicated by large, flat swaths of green. The pond is transformed into an aqua surface that leaps outside its confines to the front of the picture plane. Clouds are silhouetted against a jigsaw sky, which seems to *advance*, not recede, into space. This painting demonstrates a growing interest on Dawson's part in

how the world might be shifted, molded, and finally brought to heel to serve his vision.

Dawson's ambition as an artist was not confined to one or two subjects. He tackled landscape, figurative, and still life painting with equal abandon. Just how far outside the norm Dawson's work existed can be seen in a comparison of another of his paintings from 1910, *Two Nuts and Three Leaves with Still Life, Roses* (1918) by Pauline Palmer, an artist whose work can be seen in a variety of private collections in Illinois. Palmer emphasizes her subject by flattening the background to a tightly wrought mist of brushwork with little indication of place or space. The informal bouquet of tea roses sits slightly to right of center and droops left, providing a casual balance to the floral study.

In comparison, Dawson's still life—a nearly barren sapling, sitting alone—has lost its significance as subject matter and provides merely the hook on which to hang the painting's title. Incorporating variations of umbers, siennas, and ochres in his analogous color scheme, the artist emphasizes flat planes of value and protectively wraps them around the edges of the spindly plant. Beginning at the lower left of the image, a bubble of space Dawson has created rises from behind the small tree and bulges upward and outward, shielding his fragile subject and almost breaking into the viewer's space before it plunges downward and disappears into the lower right corner. At the same time, the vertical stalk of this fledgling tree cuts a fissure in the flat background. This is anything but naturalistic rendering.

The year 1910 was momentous for the artist. Before departing for Europe in May, Dawson pushed his painting beyond the limits of recognizable form. In a series of works that seem to be loosely based on elements derived from mathematical aspects of his architectural drafting, he took the leap to "pure" abstraction. These paintings appear simultaneously or may have even preceded



the purely abstract images put forth by two artists generally credited with the origin of abstraction: an American, Arthur Dove, who was painting in Westport, Connecticut, and Wassily Kandinsky, a Russian painter who by this time was living in Germany.

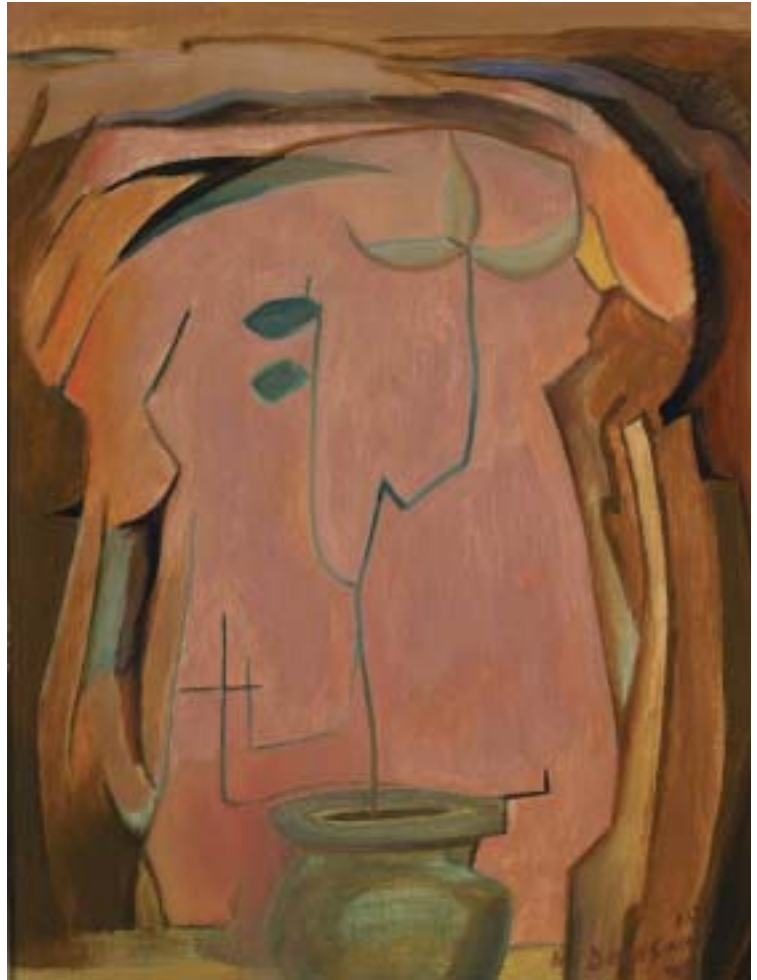
Feeling as though his European sojourn was a success, Dawson returned in November of 1910 and embarked on a series of works which he would call his “museum’ paintings.” He set an almost herculean task for himself: using Old Master compositions as a starting point, he would synthesize the best of old and new painting from Europe with his highly personal vision of what art could be. He wrote in April 1911:

In trying to answer the questions that are repeatedly thrown at me, “What does it mean?” “What does it represent?” I have to start with a statement that sometimes helps. Art is a human invention. In nature there was no art except that all creations of the Almighty are part of that Almighty. “Art” as a word for us to use describes the invention of that part of creation that is man. All nature is bearing down on us day after day. We cannot avoid it. Every form that we could use is there. But away from nature and in the seclusion of the mind we can invent arrangements to be found nowhere else. One answer to the question, “What is it?” is to point to the picture and say, “It is that. It exists nowhere else.”

As he began the series, he wrestled with finding a balance between capturing the gesture of a particular composition and the level of abstraction he wished to impose upon it. *Profile at Window* (1911) reflects some of this struggle: the space surrounding the figure (which may be drawn from an as yet unidentified earlier source) is not collapsed or even shifted, but is simply activated by flattened brushwork.

There is no such struggle occurring in Frederick Fursman’s figure study *Woman with a Blue Parasol*, painted in 1908. Fursman’s loose but direct Impressionistic application of paint deftly sketches

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Just how far outside the norm Dawson’s work existed can be seen in a comparison of another of his paintings from 1910, *Two Nuts and Three Leaves* (shown above) with *Still Life, Roses* (1918) by Pauline Palmer, at left.

a young nurse sitting outdoors. The artist’s keen observation provides the viewer with important information—the quality of light depicted coupled with a harsh shadow immediately below the subject reveal a summer’s midday painting session. The scene is pretty, but what does it tell the viewer about the future of art?

Seemingly in tandem with the development of his “museum” paintings, Dawson returned to complete abstraction, eschewing formal subject matter for what might be thought of as a pre-Surrealist sort of automatic painting. Two paintings from this period, *Scarp* and *Wharf Under Mountain* (which reportedly hung in the Chicago version of the Armory Show), demonstrate a confident hand and a thorough understanding of his own aesthetic goals.

The arrival of the Armory Show in March of 1913 lent confirmation to Dawson’s direction and energized his painting. He and the architectural firm of Holabird and Roche, for whom he had



Left: As he began his “museum paintings” series, Dawson wrestled with finding a balance between capturing the gesture of a particular composition and the level of abstraction he wished to impose upon it. *Profile at Window* (1911) reflects some of Dawson’s struggle: the space surrounding the figure (which may be drawn from an as yet unidentified earlier source) is not collapsed or even shifted, but is simply activated by flattened brushwork. A comparison of Frederick Fursman’s figure study *Woman with a Blue Parasol*, below, painted in 1908, shows no such struggle. Fursman’s loose but direct Impressionistic application of paint deftly sketches a young nurse sitting outdoors.



been working as a draftsman, parted ways during the Armory Shows stopover in Chicago. This provided Dawson with newly found free time which he plowed back into his painting. The work grew in volume and complexity. He returned to “pure” abstraction and, late in 1913, Walter Pach extended Dawson an invitation from Arthur B. Davies to exhibit with fourteen of the most advanced artists in the U.S. After *The Fourteen*, as the exhibition became known, traveled to five American cities, Manierre Dawson would exhibit his artwork only three more times before being rediscovered in 1963.

For all the visual innovation that Dawson’s painting incorporated, perhaps his most startling achievement was his ability to provide visual articulation to his intuitive understanding of the central tenet of Modernist painting in the twentieth century. Manierre Dawson was among a tiny handful of artists at that time who realized and were committed to the idea that in order to be fresh, in order to break the stranglehold that photography had developed on representing the world, in order to be “right” as he might say, the fundamental objective of Painting had to evolve and shift its intention away from a description of the *subject* (still life, portrait, landscape) to the *investigation of form*. By being present to this understanding, by making his paintings “right,” by his unwavering commitment to a personal aesthetic, Manierre Dawson stepped well outside the boundaries of what his contemporaries in Illinois considered art.

His radical vision lives on and continues to unfold in the collection of the Illinois State Museum.

The ISM exhibition *Manierre Dawson: A Startling Presence* presents an overview of the Museum’s collection of paintings by this important artist. The show accompanies *Art in the Abstract* in Springfield, closing August 6, 2006.

The Armory Show, Marcel Duchamp, and *Hercules I*

When the Armory Show opened at the Art Institute of Chicago on March 24, 1913, Manierre Dawson was beside himself with excitement.

I go to the Art Inst. everyday . . . These are without question the most exciting days of my life . . . I am feeling elated . . . I had thought of myself as an anomaly and had to defend myself, many times, as not crazy; and here now at the Art Institute many artists are presented showing these very inventive departures from the academies.

He was particularly attracted to three works: *Woman with a Mustard Pot* by Pablo Picasso (1908), *Nude (Study) Sad Young Man on a Train (Nu [Esquisse] Jeune homme triste dans un train)* (1912) by Marcel Duchamp, and *After the Chase* (1912) by Amadeo de Souza-Cardoza. He requested a loan of \$104 from his father to which he planned to add \$220 of his own funds for the purchase of the Picasso. Predictably, George Dawson was “. . . disgusted with the idea of taking such a thing home.” Manierre was forced to “settle” for the Duchamp and the Souza-Cardoza—a purchase which came to \$216.

During the Armory Show, Dawson left his position at Holabird and Roche. Whether the departure was by choice or involuntary, he seemed happy with the opportunity to devote more time to his art:

Since I left Holabird and Roche I've had a glorious time painting. Hanging over the mantel in the library is the Duchamp. I am having a good look at it. These three paintings I am doing now, *Hercules I, II, III*, may show D's influence. I am contemplating more colorful things to come.

When placed in proximity with Duchamp's *Sad Young Man*, Dawson's work does not suffer by comparison but indicates the fullness of the artist's understanding of the European's ideas.

With *Hercules I* Dawson seems to be challenging himself, searching for and finding something he was seeing in the Duchamp and attempting to understand. The painting in the Illinois State Museum's collection is composed of analogous colors: browns, taupes, and soft grays which, as in the Duchamp, deemphasize extraneous visual information and stress the importance of compositional strategies. Whereas Duchamp's *Sad Young Man* saunters through the frame, swaying with the movement of the train car and rippling the surface of the canvas with a dopplerlike shift of focus, Dawson's *Hercules* strides forward in a three-quarter view. *Hercules I* reflects the almost manic state in which the artist found himself during this period. Dawson's demigod shatters his surroundings as he moves forward, compressing space itself until it splinters and breaks away. ♦



Above: *Marcel Duchamp's* *Nude (Study), Sad Young Man on a Train (Nu [esquisse], Jeune homme triste dans un train)*, 1911–1912. Oil on cardboard, mounted on Masonite; 39 3/8 × 28 3/4 inches (100 × 73 cm). The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, New York. Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice, 1976. 76.2553.9.

Left: *Dawson's* *Hercules I*, of which he wrote, “These three paintings I am doing now, *Hercules I, II, III*, may show D[uchamp]'s influence.”