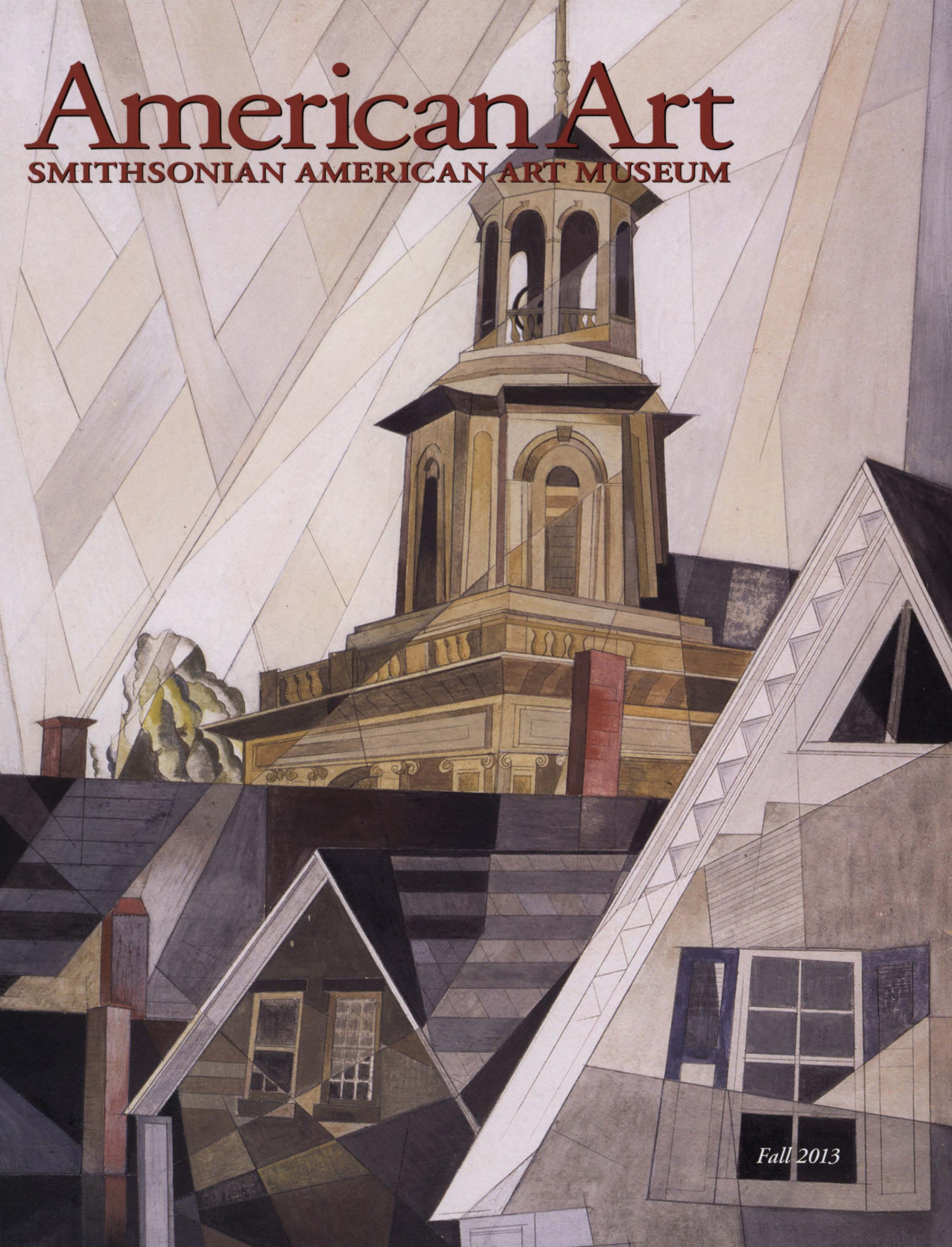


American Art

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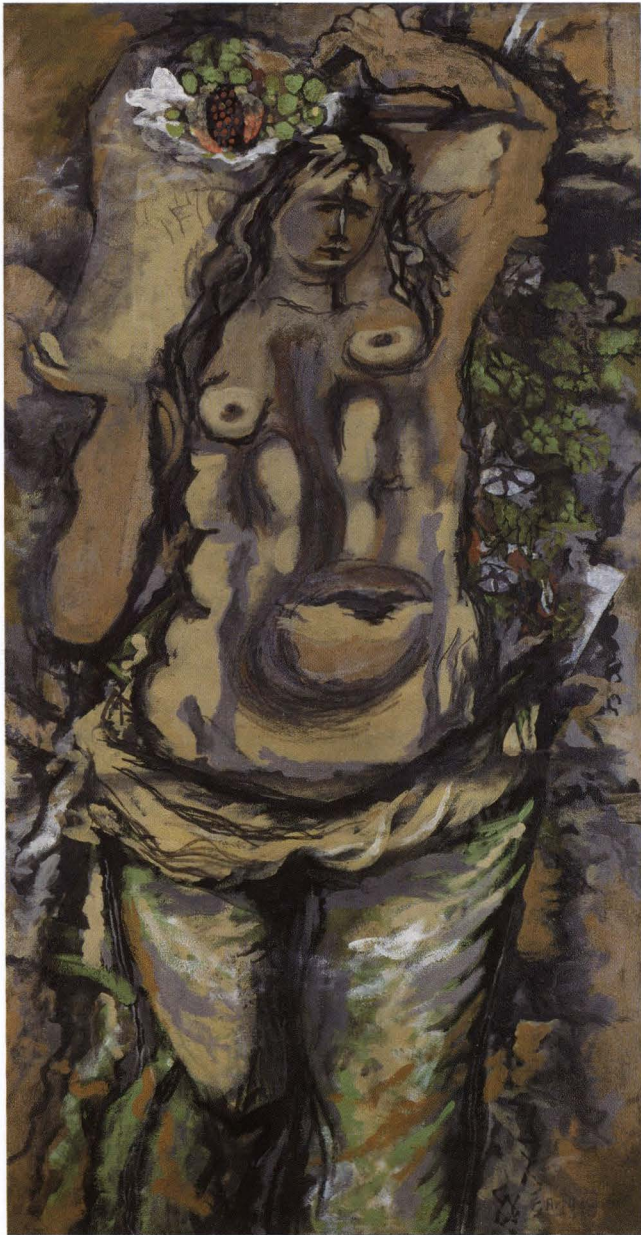
Fearing a “Conservative Public”

The Dial Collection in Worcester

As the Worcester Art Museum prepared to stage an exhibition of the modernist Dial Collection in March 1924, a museum curator wrote a short note to Scofield Thayer, owner of the collection. After informing him that the exhibition would open with a private reception, she included these brief comments: “Because we feared that a conservative public might be prejudiced against the exhibition it seemed best to omit the Braque and one of the Picasso drawings. We are reproducing one of the Laurencins on the cover of the catalogue.”¹ Her frank words provide an all-too-rare window into the responses to modern art well outside cosmopolitan urban centers. The large Georges Braque canvas to which she referred featured a voluptuous, if distorted, figure whose nudity may have prompted its removal (fig. 1). A whimsical scene by Marie Laurencin of three women in diaphanous gowns, set in a garden (*The Visit*, 1916), was, by contrast, apparently an unproblematic choice for the catalogue’s cover. Thayer’s collection, acquired at great personal emotional and financial expense, was intended to augment the literary modernism featured in the monthly magazine *The Dial*, of which he was editor and financial benefactor. The group of works consisted of paintings and drawings by an international roster of artists including Pierre Bonnard, Charles Demuth, Wyndham Lewis, Henri Matisse, Edvard Munch, and Pablo Picasso.

Worcester, Massachusetts, rarely appears in histories of the dissemination and reception of modern art in the United States, which are typically dominated by either the major urban centers of New York and Chicago or rural artists’ colonies such as those at Taos, Woodstock, and Provincetown.² Worcester, a smaller city more than an hour’s journey from the provincial capitals of Boston and Providence and, in the early twentieth century, home to a dense population of Gilded-Age wealth, seems to have no place in the accepted geography of modernism: it is neither a center nor the safely rustic periphery. However, the arrival of the Dial Collection in Worcester in 1924 was not at all surprising. As the following narrative reveals, motivations both prosaic and grand brought the *The Dial*’s avant-garde art to this mid-level city. Thayer had grown up in Worcester, not far from the museum. Although he maintained lifelong connections to the city, his primary motivation for bringing his collection home was the mundane, if self-interested, hope of inexpensive art storage. The Worcester Art Museum, for its part, had established an impressive reputation for its openness to contemporary art by the mid-1920s, and the Dial Collection exhibition must be viewed within the context of that ambitious agenda. The director, Raymond Henniker-Heaton, who described his own policies toward contemporary art as “fearless and independent,” had brought a variety of noted avant-garde exhibitions to the museum in the early 1920s and had made several significant acquisitions for its permanent collection.³ Indeed, as Alfred H. Barr Jr. complained in 1926, a resident of Boston “must actually travel to Worcester to see paintings by Gauguin and Redon.”⁴ While some of the correspondence surrounding the exhibition indicated resistance to the art, the local paper ran a favorable review, and Thayer’s collection became an anchor in the museum’s galleries for much of the twentieth century.

The arrival of the Dial Collection in Worcester in 1924 is a single case study that reveals lesser-known circuits of transmission for modern art in the U.S. in the decade following the Armory Show. In between the urban centers and rustic periphery, there were collectors,



1 Georges Braque, *Woman Carrying a Basket of Fruit*, ca. 1923. Oil and sand on canvas, 57 ¾ x 30 ½ in. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, N.Y. Bequest of Scofield Thayer, 1982 (1984.433.5) © 2013 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris. Image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Image and license courtesy Art Resource, N.Y.

museum directors, and curators who forged connections within and among varied smaller cities such as Pittsburgh, Buffalo, Cleveland, Minneapolis, and Worcester. These locally distinct histories have yet to become an accepted chapter in the story of modern art's reception in this country, but they indicate the potential for a larger, richer cultural geography of modernism in future scholarship.

The Dial and Thayer's Collection

In Thayer's mind, the Dial Collection was an extension of his editorial work at *The Dial*.⁵ After he moved to Europe in 1921 and began collecting modern art, *The Dial* featured in its pages his own collection, which he named after the magazine. While abroad, Thayer conceived the idea of publishing a portfolio of key works of modern art, largely taken from his collection, that would reflect his cosmopolitanism; although his bias was clearly in favor of France, he ultimately included works from Spain, Russia, Norway, England, and the United States. He planned to sell the folio, which he entitled *Living Art*, for the hefty price of sixty dollars (at a time when many books sold for less than two dollars), when he moved back to the States at the end of 1923.

As Thayer made plans to return, he faced two challenges arising from his art-buying and art-publishing activities. The first was the need to find a place to store his collection, now quite large, and the second was to publicize the sale of *Living Art*. Acting on the advice that space would be less expensive in Worcester than New York City, Thayer first contacted the Worcester Art Museum to inquire about storage; his offer to loan the collection for display seemed almost an afterthought.⁶ He also made plans to publicize *Living Art* through an exhibition in New York, where the folio would be on view alongside the original works of art. (Initially scheduled for the Weyhe Gallery, it was ultimately held at the Montross Gallery.) As details for the New York exhibition were finalized and his negotiations with Worcester

continued, Thayer realized that the Massachusetts venue could provide additional publicity for *Living Art*, as he wrote to Henniker-Heaton:

I thought I had mentioned to you . . . that I should want you to be so very courteous as to exhibit The Dial Folio in conjunction with this Dial collection. The Dial Folio being the raison d'être of The Dial collection. And I thought I had also had the temerity to request that some arrangement be made so that anyone interested in the Folio might put down his or her name then and there, you later at the close of the Exhibition sending us the list of names so that we might deliver the Folios.

*If this arrangement does not clash with your own conception of what a museum could or should do I am very happy indeed definitely to agree to the dates you mention for exhibition in Worcester.*⁷

These unglamorous, logistical concerns—publicity for a commercial product and an affordable place to store art—seem to have been the primary forces that drove the Dial Collection to Worcester, as Thayer frankly admitted in a letter to a close friend: “I do not think I shall go to the bother of having the pictures exhibited anywhere else. I would not have exhibited them anywhere did not I gain something by it, to wit, in the case of Weyhe advertisement for the folio and in the case of Worcester free storage for the pictures.”⁸ Thayer himself never expressed any philosophical interest in the value of bringing avant-garde art to a site geographically and culturally distant from New York. Indeed, when he announced the New York exhibition in the February 1924 issue of *The Dial*, he used geography as the primary metaphor to express his belief in the value of cultural centers and his disdain for life on the periphery: beginning with a call to “any unhappy person from the spiritual state known as Missouri,” he demanded that this person “should be escorted New Yorkward” and guided to the threshold of the Montross Gallery. “There,” Thayer promised, “he will at once discover himself . . . within the walls of Living Rome,” where he can stand among “the singular masterpieces of his own generation.” His invitation made clear that enlightenment—both artistic and spiritual—could not happen in a far-flung place like Missouri and insisted on the importance of a “pilgrimage” to experience art in the cultural center.⁹

Worcester and the Dial Collection

When Henniker-Heaton brought the Dial Collection to Worcester, it was merely one piece of a larger campaign to support recent and contemporary art. During his tenure at the museum (1918–25), Henniker-Heaton made several noteworthy acquisitions, including Paul Gauguin’s *Brooding Woman* (1891) and the first painting by a Bloomsbury artist to enter an American museum (Roger Fry’s *Blue Bowl*, 1919). In 1921 he brought the collection of the Société Anonyme to the museum, introducing the Worcester public to the work of Joseph Stella, Wassily Kandinsky, Marcel Duchamp, and others.¹⁰ In 1924, immediately preceding the Dial Collection exhibition, he collaborated with the New York dealer Stephan Bourgeois on an exhibition devoted to contemporary American painting that included pieces by Edward Bruce, Stefan Hirsch, and Maurice Sterne; this show established a template for annual exhibitions of contemporary American art that garnered high visibility through the later 1920s and 1930s. Henniker-Heaton argued repeatedly that contemporary art could be a vehicle for articulating and embracing contemporary identity, writing in 1924, “Denial of new current forces [in art] means a lack of confidence in ourselves and in our age.”¹¹ He also assumed, on occasion, the voice of a kind but insistent teacher, encouraging his Worcester audience to look carefully at the new art:

*It is usual to hear people express disgust and often anger at a painting with modern tendencies. This is not solely because they are confused about something that has no resemblance to the art to which they have become accustomed; but is the result of resentment at the idea that they should readjust their minds to an unfamiliar condition. I sympathize with those who decline to give up a comfortably entrenched mode of thought—I do it reluctantly myself—but failing to do it has but one result, and that is intellectual stagnation.*¹²

It was this multifaceted, ceaseless advocacy that perhaps explained Henniker-Heaton’s tired tone in a letter to Thayer from January 1924, in which he explained that he could not definitely agree to host the exhibition until he had seen Thayer’s collection in person: “On my return from Europe last autumn, I followed the usual procedure of bringing the matter



2 Installation view (detail),
*Exhibition of The Dial Collection
 of Paintings, Engravings, and
 Drawings by Contemporary Artists*,
 March 5–30, 1924. Worcester
 Art Museum, Worcester, Mass.,
 WAM Archives, 1924 Dial
 Collection Exhibition. Image
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[of the exhibition] before the Trustees of the Museum. As is inevitable with an exhibition of this sort, reference was made to certain criticism of modern exhibitions which we have had in the past. I was asked if I had seen your collection. On my saying 'No', I was requested to do so."¹³

Despite the trustees' initial reservations and Henniker-Heaton's last-minute trepidation about the Braque, the Dial Collection exhibition was, overall, less radical than the Société Anonyme show—which included many large, bold, abstract canvases—and even less radical than the exhibition curated with Bourgeois, which featured several precisionist and cubist-inspired works.¹⁴ Thayer himself was frank about his disinterest in abstract art. In response to his friend Raymond Mortimer, who wrote, "Abstract painting very rarely appeals to me, and such painters as Gris and Leger leave me cold," Thayer concurred: "Abstract painting does not appeal to me either."¹⁵ Instead, Thayer's real interest seems to have been in the sensuous possibilities of art—art as it captured and celebrated the sensory delights of human experience. As he explained in the introduction to *Living Art*: "It is the purpose of this folio . . . to refine our tastes and to heighten our pleasures."¹⁶ The exhibition in Worcester was dominated by paintings by Matisse and Bonnard, full of vibrant colors and animated, frequently passionate brushwork (fig. 2). These landscapes and still-life arrangements are not objective records of impersonal objects or vistas but, rather, are expressions of a deeply felt experience of a time and place. As Lewis Mumford observed about Thayer's collection, "the aim of art is poignantly to transform the passing moments of exquisite perception, emotion, or sentiment into a solid, recapturable form."¹⁷ The sole American painting included in the exhibition—Demuth's *After Sir Christopher Wren* (fig. 3)—was also a stylistic anomaly: its crisp lines, cubistic architectural forms, and more subdued palette contrasted sharply with the expressive brushwork and bold hues elsewhere on display.

Indeed, the lush painterliness and celebration of the human form that coursed through the exhibition were amply expressed in the Braque nude that the museum declined to display (see fig. 1). Given the presence of other nude figures in the show (including Jean Marchand's *Reclining Figure*, ca. 1920), it seems unlikely that the lack of clothing in Braque's life-size figure was the sole reason for its removal. Perhaps Henniker-Heaton felt that this canvas, painted with varied, loose brushwork—in places, the paint is almost dripping—in an analytic-cubist palette of gray, olive green, and brown, was both too full of painterly delight and too irreverent about veristic accuracy for the tastes of the Worcester public. Perhaps he felt that the combined effect of the Marchand and the Braque would



3 Charles Demuth, *After Sir Christopher Wren*, 1920. Watercolor, gouache, and graphite on cardboard, 24 x 20 in. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, N.Y. Bequest of Scofield Thayer, 1982 (1984.433.156). Image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art. License courtesy Art Resource, N.Y.

quiet that an inflammatory article in the Worcester *Sunday Telegram* caught Thayer's attention. On July 20, 1924, the newspaper reported on an interview with the academic artist John C. Johansen, who was then visiting Worcester to paint a portrait of the president of Clark University. Johansen baldly stated, "*The Dial* is an intellectual sewer," and went on to describe modern art in charged terms. In modern painting, he said, "If there is no definite obscene subject, the lines themselves are obscene, or there is an obscene effect."²¹ Thayer penned a reply full of the arch sarcasm that his intimates knew well, skewering Johansen's ignorance about modern art, the false claims for open-mindedness made by academic institutions in general, and the cheap, muckraking journalism of his hometown ("this wholesome and brimming receptacle of legitimate activity").²² He did not, however, publish his response until the May 1925 issue of *The Dial*, at which time its appearance acquired additional significance. Thayer's mental health had become increasingly unstable after the summer of 1924, and by March 1925, as he laid out the May issue of the magazine, he simultaneously made plans to announce his resignation as editor.²³ After months of deferring publication of the response to Johansen, his decision to print it as he was stepping down indicates its significance for him: just as he had disdained the hinterlands of the "spiritual state known as Missouri" when he announced *Living Art* in 1924, he again demonstrated his contempt for the noncosmopolitan periphery in his final editorial comment.

overwhelm the public. Whatever the specific rationale, Thayer admitted to a family confidant that he was "irritate[d] slightly" by the news that Worcester had opted not to hang the painting. However, accustomed to some controversy, he conceded, "I am sure they have their own difficulties."¹⁸

Immediate response to the exhibition was generally positive. The *Worcester Telegram* published a review that claimed, "Color is gay and composition fanciful, but underlying there is a freshness of viewpoint and keenness of expression, the great strength of the modernists." Although the text called particular attention to Matisse and Bonnard, the single illustration (perhaps selected for its superior legibility in reproduction) was Demuth's canvas, described as "startling" and "noteworthy."¹⁹ After the exhibition closed, Thayer sent his collection to the Smith College Museum of Art, in Northampton, Massachusetts, where an even smaller selection of works was hung. By the summer of 1924 the *Dial* Collection had been returned to Worcester, packed in boxes in private storage (the "somewhat damp" conditions in the museum basement had prompted Thayer to place the works elsewhere).²⁰

Ironically, it was during this period of

Conclusion

While Thayer apparently had little respect for the cultural appetites of areas outside major centers such as New York, his collection inadvertently became a key instrument in expanding the audience for modern art. In 1926 Thayer suffered a significant mental breakdown and spent the rest of his life under active medical care. In the 1930s another resourceful director at the Worcester Art Museum, Francis Henry Taylor, obtained most of Thayer's collection as a long-term loan, and the potentially scandalous paintings hung on the museum's walls for almost fifty years. During that half century, the works by Demuth, Picasso, Bonnard, Matisse, and the previously censored Braque grew progressively less shocking, until they had become thoroughly integrated, much-loved threads in the tapestry of art history. When Thayer died in 1982, the terms of his will became public: in keeping with his preference for the cultural center, he had bequeathed his collection to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Its departure from Worcester arguably was more widely noticed than its arrival had been, with numerous articles published in local and regional newspapers lamenting the loss for the community.²⁴ The case of the Dial Collection in Worcester demonstrates the resonance and enduring effect modern art had on audiences far outside the cultural capitals of the U.S. However, this historical episode also reveals that serendipity and material need, just as much as ambition and high-minded openness, were instrumental forces. It took the confluence of an opportunistic and enterprising collector on the one hand, and two museum directors willing to take aesthetic risks on the other, to thoroughly expand the cultural geography of modernism in twentieth-century America.

Notes

For their diligent and generous assistance navigating the Worcester Art Museum Archives, I would like to thank librarian Debby Aframe and registrar Joseph Leduc. Rhys Townsend, Jim Welu, and Jim Dempsey provided essential editorial comments on the project. I'd like to thank Anya Geist, who spent a snow day solving a mystery about some old photographs at the museum.

- 1 Mary Thayer to Scofield Thayer (hereafter ST), March 1, 1924, Worcester Art Museum Archives (hereafter WAMA).
- 2 My own recent book is guilty of this neglect: *The Modern Eye: Stieglitz, MoMA, and the Art of the Exhibition, 1925–1934* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2009). Among many publications, see also Wanda Corn, *The Great American Thing: Modern Art and National Identity, 1915–1935* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2001); Elizabeth Kennedy, ed., *Chicago Modern, 1893–1945: Pursuit of the New* (Chicago: Terra Foundation for the Arts, 2004); and Alexander J. Noelle et al., *The Tides of Provincetown: Pivotal Years in America's Oldest Continuous Art Colony (1899–2011)* (New Britain, Conn.: New Britain Museum of American Art, 2011).
- 3 Raymond Henniker-Heaton to Thomas H. Gage, undated, probably summer 1925, WAMA.
- 4 Alfred H. Barr Jr., "Boston Is Modern Art Pauper," *Harvard Crimson*, October 30, 1926, in *Defining Modern Art: Selected Writings of Alfred H. Barr, Jr.*, ed. Irving Sandler and Amy Newman (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1986), 52. In 1929, as he assessed the need for a museum devoted to modern art, Barr noted that Worcester had a better contemporary collection than any museum in New York. "A New Art Museum," pamphlet, 1929, in *ibid.*, 70.
- 5 There are several key sources for information about *The Dial*, Thayer, and his art collection. The most comprehensive study is Nicholas Joost, *Scofield Thayer and The Dial: An Illustrated History* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1964). See also Gaye L. Brown, ed., *The Dial: Arts and Letters in the 1920s* (Worcester, Mass.: Worcester Art Museum, 1981); *The Dial and the Dial Collection* (Worcester, Mass.: Worcester Art Museum, 1959); Walter Sutton, ed., *Pound, Thayer, Watson, and The Dial: A Story in Letters* (Gainesville: Univ. Press of Florida, 1994); and William Wasserstrom, *The Time of the Dial* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse Univ. Press, 1963).

- 6 Mary Thayer to Benjamin Stone, July 19, 1923, WAMA.
- 7 ST to Henniker-Heaton, January 23, 1924, WAMA.
- 8 ST to Hermann Riccius, October 17, 1923, Dial/Scofield Thayer Papers, Box 39, Folder 1090, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University (hereafter Dial/Scofield Thayer Papers). Thayer originally planned to show his collection at the Weyhe Gallery, but for unknown reasons—probably resulting from repeated delays with the shipping of the folios—finally held the exhibition at the Montross Gallery, from January 26 to February 14, 1924.
- 9 [ST], “Announcement,” *Dial* 76, no. 2 (February 1924): 203, 204.
- 10 For further discussion of the 1921 Société Anonyme exhibition, see Kristina Wilson, “One Big Painting: A New View of Modern Art at the Brooklyn Museum,” in *The Société Anonyme: Modernism for America*, ed. Jennifer R. Gross (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press in association with Yale Univ. Art Gallery, 2006), 74–95.
- 11 Raymond Henniker-Heaton, foreword to *Exhibition of Paintings and Drawings by Contemporary American Artists* (Worcester, Mass.: Worcester Art Museum, 1924), WAMA.
- 12 Raymond Wyer, foreword to *Exhibition of Modern Art by Contemporary Artists* (Worcester, Mass.: Worcester Art Museum, 1920), WAMA. In 1922 he changed his name from Wyer to Henniker-Heaton.
- 13 Henniker-Heaton to ST, January 21, 1924, Dial/Scofield Thayer Papers, Box 34, Folder 906.
- 14 This context may explain another complaint Thayer expressed about the response to his collection in Worcester: “It is irritating that Henniker-Heaton should speak of my collection as being over conservative when he declines to hang two of the pictures because they are not conservative enough.” ST to Hermann Riccius, March 13, 1924, Dial/Scofield Thayer Papers, Box 39, Folder 1091.
- 15 Raymond Mortimer to ST, May 9, 1922; ST to Raymond Mortimer, May 14, 1922, Dial/Scofield Thayer Papers, Box 36, Folder 993.
- 16 [ST], preface to *Living Art* (New York: Dial Publishing Company, 1923), 5.
- 17 Lewis Mumford, “Living Art,” *New Republic*, February 6, 1924, 291.
- 18 ST to Hermann Riccius, March 4, 1924, Dial/Scofield Thayer Papers, Box 39, Folder 1091.
- 19 “Modern Art Spirit Seen in Collection,” *Worcester (Mass.) Telegram*, March 6, 1924, 4.
- 20 Mary Thayer to ST (with annotations by ST), October 31, 1923, Dial/Scofield Thayer Papers, Box 44, Folder 1247.
- 21 Margaret Brandenburg, “Johansen Tells What Is Wrong with Modern Artists,” *Worcester (Mass.) Sunday Telegram*, July 20, 1924, magazine sec., 3.
- 22 [ST], “Comment,” *Dial* 78, no. 5 (May 1925): 440.
- 23 ST to Alyce Gregory, March 12, 1925, WAMA. Correspondence with Gregory, Riccius, and Sophia Wittenberg indicates that Thayer was juggling drafts of several different editorial comments through late 1924 and early 1925.
- 24 An excellent, thoughtful summary of the consequences of Thayer’s will can be found in the unpublished remarks of the attorney Paris Fletcher, delivered to the St. Wolstan’s Society, Worcester, March 1983, entitled “Scofield Thayer and His Family,” WAMA.