"Urban"—it is a word which sets the screen of our imagination alive with images of tall buildings and noisy, crowded streets. Thus it is a shock to learn that the historic definition of "urban" used by the U.S. Bureau of the Census was an incorporated place with at least 2500 or more inhabitants, and, under special rules, unincorporated places of a particular population and density. Yet in another era when the United States was less populous, when travel was measured by days instead of hours or minutes, a village, town or small city might well become the focal point of social intercourse and commercial exchange for an entire region.

Following World War I, the complexity of the urban image was rendered with rare discernment by Sinclair Lewis in his novel of small-town life, *Main Street* (1920). Early in the narrative two women, unknown to each other, arrive in the town of Gopher Prairie, Minnesota on the same train. Lewis contrasts their first impressions. Carol Kennicott, a college-educated librarian from Minneapolis-St. Paul, who had attended professional school in Chicago, is horrified by what she sees in this town of 3300 people. For her, it is not just that the town is small; but it is so drab, graceless, dirty, incoherent and deathly quiet. Bea Sorenson, a farm girl whose only previous experience of town life were visits to a burg of sixty-seven inhabitants, Gopher Prairie is sophisticated, thrilling and filled with marvelous variety and frightening sounds. Bea had escaped to Gopher Prairie to encounter a larger world and "the excitements of city-life."

In coming to Gopher Prairie, one woman found a depressing village encircled by the endless plains, whereas the other found an exciting city of vast possibilities. For Lewis, however, Main Street revealed "not only the heart of a place called Gopher Prairie, but ten thousand towns from Albany to San Diego."
Lewis’ view was inclusive: it covered larger, older centers of inhabitation such as Albany, as well as such small towns as that described by Sherwood Anderson in his novel of 1919, Winesburg, Ohio, which, with a population of 1800, tell seven-hundred short of the urban minimum set by the U.S. Census.1 Lewis and Anderson were two of the dozens of writers whose image of American society, which dominated much of his art. Raised in Salem, Ohio, Burchfield had a vision of the American urban scene which was originally placed in western New York, especially Buffalo. His painting, one of skyscrapers, nor busy crowds. More often than not, it is with the forces of nature hovering in the Sun, Moon and Stars.

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Hugh Pearce Botts

New York City, for Eastern Airlines, c. 1930-1944

Photograph

8 x 11

Purchase

SU 71.322

Chapter 5

Charles Burchfield

(Ashtabula, Ohio, 1893-1967)

Sun, Moon, and Star, 1920-55

Watercolor

13 9/16 x 13

Purchase

SU 63.176

Max Arthur Cohn

(London, England, 1904-)

City Rain, (Victor Food Store), 1939

Watercolor

8 x 13

Purchase

SU 86.71

Creative Art, 9 (August 1931)


Bl. NK01

Electra, 1937

Etching

81/2 x 13

Purchase

SU 67.259

Manhattan Skyline, n.d.

etching

81/2 x 11

Purchase

SU 84.481

Louis Loowick

(South Russia, 1892-1973)

Distant Manhattan From Brooklyn, 1937

Lithograph

7 1/4 x 11

Purchase

SU 65.948

Manchester, 1931

Etching

8 x 10

Purchase

SU 66.427

Dance Marathon, 1932

Etching

8 x 10

Purchase

SU 64.81

Reginald Marsh

(Paris, France, 1898-1954)

Broadway, 1929

Etching

5 x 9

Purchase

SU 64.75

Coeymans Island Beach, 1935

Etching

8 1/4 x 12

Purchase

SU 64.89

The Jungle, 1934

Etching

7 1/4 x 12

Purchase

SU 64.98

Manhattan, 1936

Tempera on panel

59 x 35

Purchase

SU 64.262

Minsky's New Gotham Chorus, 1936

Etching

8 x 12

Purchase

SU 64.83

Withnail Horace, 1936

Etching

7 1/2 x 13

Purchase

SU 64.84

Battery Dolley, 1938

Etching and engraving

8 1/2 x 11

Purchase

SU 64.85

Coeymans Island Beach, 1939

Etching

8 1/4 x 11

Purchase

SU 64.87

Skyline from Pier 10, Brooklyn, 1939

Engraving

6 x 8 1/2

Purchase

SU 64.77

Dancer Marathon, 1932

Engraving

6 x 5

Purchase

SU 64.81

Ever R.R. Locomotive, Watertown, 1934

Engraving

6 1/2 x 10

Purchase

SU 64.81
Jersey City Landscape, 1939
Etching and engraving
7¾ x 8¼
Purchase
SU 66.66

Kenneth Hayes Miller
(Oneida, New York, 1878-1952)

Shoppers, 1938
Etching
8¾ x 7½
Gift of Harry Wickey
SU 66.2026

Women Shopping, 1938
Etching
5½ x 6½
Purchase
SU 67.89

C. R. W. Nevinson

The Woolworth Building, 1916
Oil on canvas
12 x 17½
Gift of Mr. Harry Wickey
SU 66.2767

C. R. W. Nevinson

The Woolworth Building, 1916
Etching
12 x 9½
Gift of Mr. H. M. Jolenack
SU 65.956

Joseph Pennell
(Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 1860-1926)

Arch Conspirators, 1917
Etching
4¾ x 6
Purchase
SU 67.160

Moses Soyer
(Debreux, Russia, 1899-1975)

Palisade Park, n.d.
Etching
10 x 7½
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Harry Schaefer
SU 66.85

Harry Sternberg
(New York City, New York, 1904–)

Midsummer Night, 1923
Etching and drypoint
7¾ x 11½
Gift of the Artist
SU 66.2176

Coburn Waugh
(Comwell, England, 1896-1973)

Five and Ten, 1935
Oil on canvas
36¼ x 50¼
Gift of Cecilia B. Rorper Estate
SU 70.94

Robert Riggs
(Decatur, Illinois, 1896-1972)

Pro, 1935
Lithograph
14½ x 19½
Gift of the Artist
SU 86.324

John Sloan
(Rochester, Pennsylvania, 1871-1951)

Gloucester Harbor, 1916
Oil on canvas
26 x 32
Purchase
SU 62.61

Berk Conspirators, 1917
Etching
4¾ x 6
Purchase
SU 67.160

Berdie's Cave, 1920
Etching
5½ x 4½
Purchase
SU 67.80

Stuart Davis
(New York City, New York, 1904-)

Bryant Park, 1923
Oil on canvas
27 x 18
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Harry Schaefer
SU 66.247

John Marin
(Voingtown, Pennsylvania, 1870-1953)

Ninth Avenue, 1923-1924
Drypoint
8¾ x 9½
Gift of the Artist
SU 66.2443

Midsummer Night, 1923
Etching and drypoint
7¾ x 11½
Gift of the Artist
SU 66.2176

Brueg Park, 1923
Etching and drypoint
6½ x 6½
Gift of the Artist
SU 66.2444

Harry Wickey
(Syracuse, Ohio, 1892-1960)


veloped his cinematic technique and urban themes in the trilogy, U.S.A., published in the Thirties.

Hart Crane, The Bridge (New York: Liveright, 1933).

Lewis was eventually to do limited pre-production work in Hollywood in 1947 for the writer and producer Dudley Nichols who was working on a screen adaptation of Mourning Becomes Electra for RKO Radio Pictures. See Paul McCauley, Marion Lewis, exh. cat. (New York: Kennedy Galleries, 1973), p. 7.


The theater, burlesque and movies attracted both Marsh and Bellow. The New York Daily News employed Marsh in 1922 to do drawings and provide ratings of vaudeville and burlesque acts. Performers wrote him seeking his attendance and approval. He did a number of works on the burlesque and the movies.

The pictorial drama which is so characteristic of Bellow's work, and repaid by Night Shadows, may have stemmed, at least in part, from his long interest in the theater. For more on this subject, see: Gail Levin, Edward Hopper: The Art and the Artist, exh. cat., (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art in association with W. W. Norton and Company, 1980), pp. 52-58.

The films of nickelodeons and the cinema in the American urban realist tradition were by John Sloan as early as 1905 (Fun, One Center Dinner, the EI, 1921). In this area, as in so many others, Bellow and Marsh benefited enormously by the example of Sloan's work.

Yeates and Garner, p. 21, Table 2.2.

Andres Sutcliffe, "Introduction: Urbanization, Planning and the Giant City," in Metropolis, ed. A. Sutcliffe (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), pp. 8-16, esp. p. 9, Fig. 4.


25. Marsh and the Giant City; in Metropolis, ed. A. Sutcliffe (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), pp. 8-16, esp. p. 9, Fig. 4.

cooperating personalities, events, groups, into more significant
cumulations.3

This vision, that of the potential of the city articu-
lated by Munford in 1938, crystallized a major trend in Amer-
ican literature, poetry and art in the decades between the first
and second world wars. The frustration and rage of Cannon Ken-
dick in Lewis’ Main Street was due, in part, to her perception
of that awful gap between what a settlement of individuals might
become and what it too often failed to be. That sense of the
city as art and theater was expressed by John Dos Passos in
his novel of the mid-twenties, Manhattan Transfer, in which he
wrote the stories of his센터 characters to create an almost
cinematic portrait of the city.17 In quite a different manner,
Hart Crane in his visionary epic of the Twenties, The Bridge,
also saw the city both as a vast work of art and as an enormous
theater.8

Many of the artists in this exhibition engaged the
city in a manner anticipating Munford’s ideal. For Abbott,
Bourke-White, Nat Lowell, Louis Lozowick, Adrian
Lubbers and John Mann—men who called the city—that is.
New York—was a vast, animated stage. Their images focus on the physical-
ity of the city and its struc-
tures, rather than the lives of
the people. They accomplish this task in various ways. In
his 1921 etching, Drunken, the
El (Fig. B4), John Mann
reveals the nervous energy of
the City almost as if the ma-
terial structures of New York
were a vast bell ringing out
without sound. Their city
figures for New York are no
less astonishing: 8235, 11,000
inhabitants; 1953, 7,746,000
inhabitants.11

The unprece-
dented growths of American
urban places, especially the larger
cities, created enor-
mous changes that were
present, confronted each
other. A letter of these
changes is present in a
portraying of the skylines of
American cities from the
1820s to the 1930s. In general,
the new volumes of the 
 GLintcher created an urban
silhouette. Yet by the second
decade of the Twentieth Century the
churches and synagogues were
inhabitants of the urban
cityscape. The cathedrals or
doors of those who live
in the city of the century church

A more heroic vision, yet just as theatrical, is
found in the work of Samuel Margolies. His drama is located
in the very construction of the theatre. In such
prints of the Thirties as Balloons and Men of Steel (Fig. A3), the workers on
girders high above the labyrinth of
city streets, have become Daedalus and Icarus reborn in the Ma-
chine Age. The roots of the American urban explosion
reached back to the period following World War I. The sheer number
of American urban areas began to grow at a frenetic
pace. For example, in 1870, 354 places in the United States had
a population of at least 5000; in 1920, 2599 places; and by 1940, 2042 places.12 In seventy years the num-
er of such places had increased by almost 600%. Another light
on this explosive growth is cast by population figures for Chicago
and New York. In 1830, Chicago was little more than a foot
with a dozen small structures outside its walls.13 By 1855, it had
become one of the largest cities in the land.

In one of her more reflective moments, the hero-
ines of the Twentieth Century the
of Street, Carol Kennecott, declared:

10. Berenice Abbott, with text by Elizabeth McCausland,
11. Louis Wirth, “Urbanism as a Way of Life;”
12. From the true “jerk water towns” of 2500 to the
15. Lewis, p. 39.
16. Lewis, p. 34.
18. Although Main Street and Winesburg are novels about life in small towns, the larger world of Minneapolis-St. Paul, Chicago, Cleveland and New York is never excluded. In his subsequent novel, Babbitt (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1922), Lewis made the huge urban center of Zenith the backdrop of the narrator’s plot, though he never gave such a book much more than a short story, though not a novel in the usual sense. The chapter, “Loneliness,” pp. 167–175, is a story about life in New York City.
19. There is a considerable literature on the differences and similarities between “the urban” and “the rural.” See, for example, Otis Dudley Duncan, “Community Size and the Rural-Urban Continuum,” in Cities and Society, pp. 35–45.
20. Berenice Abbott, with text by Elizabeth McCausland, Changing
21. Lewis Wirth, “Urbanism as a Way of Life,” The American Jour-
nal of Sociology, 44 (July 1938), pp. 474–477.
22. Louis Wirth, “Urbanism as a Way of Life,” The American Jour-
nal of Sociology, 44 (July 1938), pp. 474–477.
23. Dr. Edward A. Aiken, Director, Joe and Emily Lowe Art Gallery
Chair, Graduate Program in Museum Studies

Dance Marathon (1932), The Bridge
(Fig. B1) by Hugh Boffs or Edge of Town (1938) by Thomas Hart Benton,
was never a one-way path. The growth of the cities was very
much tied to more efficient and increased production of com-
mmodities and tools, as the flow of people off the land. The
Coal.

In her page 4
Howell and Hood's Chicago Tribune Tower (1924) the Gothic skyscraper excited the American business community and general public. As late as 1931, Cross and Cross used a Gothic-Art Deco melange in the General Electric Building in New York.

Inspired by the Woolworth Building, the Reverend S. Parker Cadman described Gilbert's Gothic monument as a "cathedral of commerce," and the company used his phrase as the title for a 1917 brochure. John Taylor Arms, who specialized in images of European cathedrals, did an etching of the Woolworth Building in 1921 and titled it, An American Cathedral.

For an article from the period which is critical of the use of historic, religious styles for skyscrapers, see: Philip N. Youtz, "American Architecture Emerges from the Stone Age," Creative Art, 10 (1932), 16-21. An interesting account of the Gothic skyscraper may be found in: Paul Goldberger, The Skyscraper (New York: Knopf, 1985), pp. 44-47, 53, 60-63 and 72ff.

26. Lewis, p. 269.


Fig. A4 Edward Hopper
Night Shadows, 1921
Etching
6½ x 9½
Purchase
SU 87.78

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Dr. Edward A. Aiken
Director, Joe and Emily Lowe Art Gallery
Chair, Graduate Program in Museum Studies