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Movements in Paint: The Development of John Marin's Watercolor Palette

ABSTRACT

John Marin (1870–1953) enjoyed an exceptionally long and prolific artistic career. Over a fifty-year period he exhibited works in etching, watercolor, and oil to public and critical acclaim. But it was his watercolors that were singled out for the most praise—both during his lifetime and since his passing. In an essay for an exhibition of Marin's watercolors in 1928, friend and fellow artist Marsden Hartley wrote: "John Marin is behind no one in his comprehension and accomplishment in his medium. . . . He has brought his medium to very genuine heights, has pushed it further than any modern I can possibly think of."

Marin viewed the materials of art as the foundation of—and motivation for—his painting. He reveled in the color, fluidity, transparency, and opacity of watercolor, his medium of choice. His vigorous methodology employing brushes, sticks, hands, and penknives exploited the texture and weight of the papers he painted on. Marin's regard for the materials of his art reflects an essential aspect of modernist painting—the expressive use of color, line, and handling of paint according to the personal vision of the artist.

It is Marin's interest in materiality that makes his paintings such worthwhile subjects for technical study. Producing close to fifteen hundred watercolors over his long career, the artist evolved from a more descriptive topographical use of watercolor toward a mature emphasis on abstracted line and color. Critics have long admired Marin's ability to create rhythm through his use of line, but relatively little attention has been paid to the artist's use of color for its contribution to the sense of movement and dynamism so remarked upon, so critical in securing his place in American modernist art history.

This study explores how Marin's use of color was influenced by the prevailing color theories of his time and considers how his color choices contribute to the sense of movement in his watercolor compositions. Non-destructive analysis of twenty-two watercolors in the collection of the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., including microscopy, infrared spectroscopy, ultraviolet light examination, color spectrophotometry, and X-ray fluorescence, was used to characterize pigments used by Marin between 1895 and 1929.

Given Marin's long history of exhibition (over fifty during his lifetime alone), it is not surprising that many of his watercolors seem to have undergone some degree of fading. This is particularly evident in his earliest works, which utilize thin, transparent washes: many include organic red and yellow lakes, paints known to be fugitive. By analyzing Marin's choice of pigments, it may be possible to speculate about the original appearance of his watercolors and appreciate the full depth of his abilities as a colorist, while helping to reveal how his watercolors have faded with extensive light exposure.

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