

GREY ART NYU GALLERY

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Skyscraper aesthetic celebrated at Grey Art Gallery

John Storrs: Machine-Age Modernist
on view at NYU from April 12 to July 9, 2011

New York City (January 24, 2011)—*John Storrs: Machine-Age Modernist* is the first major museum exhibition of work by this important American sculptor in 25 years. Opening at New York University's **Grey Art Gallery** on April 12, the show features most of the known works—some 40 items including sculptures, paintings, and drawings—from Storrs's most innovative period, from 1917 through the early 1930s. Focusing on Storrs's elegant abstractions of skyscrapers, *Machine-Age Modernist* remains on view at the Grey Art Gallery through July 9, and is accompanied by a fully illustrated catalogue that situates the artist within an international avant-garde milieu.

John Storrs (1885–1956), one of America's foremost modernists, reinvigorated what had become primarily an academic medium, with a dynamism previously unknown in the United States. Situated at the forefront of both European and American avant-garde movements, Storrs participated in a vibrant, early 20th-century culture enthralled with invention. Although he lived and worked in France for most of his career, Storrs was born in Chicago and maintained partial residency there throughout his life due to a stipulation in his father's will. "This transatlantic life allowed Storrs to straddle multiple artistic communities, audiences, and debates, a situation that resulted in his radical renewal of sculpture in both France and the United States," observes guest curator **Debra Bricker Balken**, who organized the show with the **Boston Athenaeum**.



New York, c. 1925. Brass and steel on black (perhaps vulcanite) base, 25 3/4 x 5 1/2 x 3 1/2 in. Indianapolis Museum of Art, Discretionary Fund, 73.8

“Storrs drew inspiration from American life and culture, whatever the lure of France and its staggering, seductive heritage.” While Parisian artistic developments influenced his aesthetic, Storrs continued to be drawn to a particularly American subject: the iconic skyscraper.

The sculptures—29 examples are featured—range in size from intimate to impressive, with some over six feet tall. Included in the Grey Art Gallery’s presentation are major works from New York’s Whitney Museum of American Art and Museum of Modern Art. Storrs’s interest in soaring verticality was influenced by the burgeoning field of American architecture, which saw the construction of the earliest steel-framed buildings capable of reaching heights never before possible. **Lynn Gumpert**, director of the Grey Art Gallery, notes, “We are pleased to present the sculptures of John Storrs at NYU. Our location amidst the cityscape of downtown Manhattan provides an evocative environment for his distinctive architectural forms.”

In addition to studying architecture on his own, Storrs received a peripatetic formal education, spending brief periods at various art academies including the Art Institute of Chicago, the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, and the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia. He also trained abroad, with artists Arthur Bock in Hamburg in 1905 and Auguste Rodin in Paris in 1913. Perhaps even more formative were his childhood years in Chicago, where he was impressed by the modernist structures at the World’s Columbian Exposition and works by local architects Louis Sullivan and Frank Lloyd Wright. Storrs much preferred the simplified, functional approach of Sullivan and Wright to the Beaux-Arts architectural aesthetic then in vogue in the United States, which he viewed as too traditional and conformist. In contrast, in his stylized, architectonic sculptures, Storrs absorbed and referenced the austere style of Chicago modernism.

Explorations of planar forms are at the core of the works featured in *Machine-Age Modernist*. Examples carved from stone in the late 1910s and early ’20s reflect Storrs’s interest in Native American art, which he discovered while travelling through the American West in 1914 with his wife Marguerite, a French writer. In the later 1920s, Storrs’s interest in geometry was realized in lustrous metal structures. These pieces reflect Storrs’s attraction to the skyline of New York City—which he visited on several occasions—and to the Machine Age’s streamlined aesthetic.

Embracing sleek industrial design and characterized by an obsession with mass-produced objects such as the automobile and the steel-framed skyscraper, the Machine Age provided an ideal context for Storrs. During the 1920s, he successfully melded his interest in Americana with

his earlier explorations of pure geometric abstraction. While many of the sculptures produced during this period retain surface decoration that recalls Art Deco, others are quite spare and anticipate Minimalism's reductivist aesthetic of the 1960s. Storrs's approach appealed to a Machine Age society eager to celebrate modernism and technological advances. Several large sculptural commissions resulted. One, a 31-foot-high aluminum figure of *Ceres*, would serve as the Chicago Board of Trade building's renowned finial and is represented in the show by two studies. A stylized, svelte, metallic Art Deco goddess, *Ceres* resembles a classical column. Adorned with sheaves of wheat, she symbolizes American agricultural fecundity.

With the onset of the Great Depression in the 1930s, commissions became scarce and sculptural materials too costly. In response, Storrs increasingly turned toward painting, a less expensive medium. The paintings included in *Machine-Age Modernist* convey Storrs's sculptural concerns translated into two dimensions. They also introduce Surrealism's influence, demonstrated by Storrs's addition of biomorphic forms to his vocabulary of angular geometries. Storrs also created many works on paper. Some were studies for projects that were later executed in three dimensions; others are pure exercises in imagination.

The sculptures, paintings, and drawings in *Machine-Age Modernist* represent a high point in a long and influential international career. Storrs's Franco-American lifestyle allowed him to foster friendships with prominent artists on both sides of the Atlantic. In Paris, he became familiar with the Cubist sculptural experiments of Pablo Picasso, Georges Braque, and Jacques Lipchitz, which profoundly informed Storrs's own manipulations of geometric shapes. He later met the sculptor Constantin Brancusi, with whom he shared an interest in representing essential forms in three dimensions. Back in the United States, Storrs knew members of Katherine Dreier's Société Anonyme in New York, a circle of artists that included Marcel Duchamp, Man Ray, Charles Demuth, Joseph Stella, and Morton Schamberg. Other artistic acquaintances of Storrs during the 1920s included Francis Picabia, Marsden Hartley, Alexander Calder, Buckminster Fuller, and Fernand Léger. This international, avant-garde context is reflected in the many dynamic works on view in *John Storrs: Machine-Age Modernist*. Poised at the forefront of European and American artistic movements, Storrs created an art that convincingly attests to the multi-faceted concerns of a society enraptured with the sleek aesthetic embodied by early skyscrapers.

Also on view at the Grey Art Gallery, from January 11 to March 26 and from April 12 to July 9, 2011, is *Art/Memory/Place: Commemorating the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire*, an exhibition tracing 100 years of the fire's memorializations.

Sponsorship:

John Storrs: Machine-Age Modernist was guest curated by Debra Bricker Balken and organized for the Boston Athenæum by David B. Dearing, Susan Morse Hilles Curator of Paintings and Sculpture. Major funding for the exhibition was provided by generous contributions from the Henry Luce Foundation; the Florence Gould Foundation; Furthermore: a program of the J. M. Kaplan Fund; and Cushing Academy. Additional funding was provided by the Susan Morse Hilles Bicentennial Fund for Exhibitions; donors to the Richard Wendorf Bicentennial Fund for Exhibitions; Elizabeth and Robert Owens; Anne and Joseph P. Pellegrino; Sandy and Jim Righter; and two anonymous donors. Additional support for the presentation at the Grey Art Gallery is provided by the National Endowment for the Arts; the New York State Council on the Arts; the Abby Weed Grey Trust; and the Grey's Director's Circle, Inter/National Council, and Friends.

About the Grey Art Gallery:

The Grey Art Gallery is New York University's fine-arts museum, located on historic Washington Square Park in New York City's Greenwich Village. It offers the NYU community and the general public a dynamic roster of engaging and thought-provoking exhibitions, all of them enriched by public programs. With its emphasis on experimentation and interpretation, and its focus on exploring art in its historical, cultural, and social contexts, the Grey serves as a museum-laboratory for the exploration of art's environments.

Exhibitions organized by the Grey have encompassed all the visual arts: painting, sculpture, drawing and printmaking, photography, architecture and decorative arts, video, film, and performance. In addition to producing its own exhibitions, which often travel to other venues in the United States and abroad, the Gallery hosts traveling shows that might otherwise not be seen in New York and produces scholarly publications that are distributed worldwide.

General Information

Grey Art Gallery, New York University, 100 Washington Square East, New York, NY 10003
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E-mail: greycastle@nyu.edu
Web site: <http://www.nyu.edu/greyart>

Hours:

Tuesday, Thursday, Friday: 11am–6 pm

OPEN LATE Wednesday: 11 am–8 pm

Saturday: 11 am–5 pm

Sunday, Monday and major holidays: Closed

Admission: Suggested donation: \$3; NYU students, faculty, and staff: free of charge