“A SYMPHONY IN LINES”: SOUND IN ABRAHAM WALKOWITZ’S ABSTRACTIONS OF NEW YORK CITY

by

LACY HAMILTON

(Under the Direction of Nell Andrew)

ABSTRACT

In 1948, Russian-American painter Abraham Walkowitz (1878-1965) published his Manhattan cityscape series in a retrospective illustrated compilation entitled *Improvisations of New York: A Symphony in Lines*. Although decades past the titular series’ inception, Walkowitz and his publisher friend Emanuel Haldeman-Julius issued the short book in response to the rise of Abstract Expressionism in America so as to assert the artist as an early pioneer within a lineage of abstraction. The series, and Walkowitz’s abstract visual language, emerged during a period of aesthetic discourse on the plastic arts’ relationship to music in the years surrounding the seminal Armory Show of 1913. This thesis argues that Walkowitz was a significant figure in this interdisciplinary conversation and developed how own abstract idioms, applying these new methods of expression to the premiere urban metropolis in order to communicate sensations unique to his contemporary moment.

INDEX WORDS: Abraham Walkowitz, Abstraction, Music, Armory Show, New York City

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INTRODUCTION

In 1948, Russian-American modernist Abraham Walkowitz produced a book entitled *Improvisations of New York: A Symphony in Lines*, in which he reproduced hundreds of his drawings and paintings of New York City made between 1910 to 1930. The varying styles among the publication's drawn and abstracted cityscapes demonstrate the artist's development of new representational modes in this period. (Fig. 1) Walkowitz's early experiments with an abstract visual language coincided with the upward expansion of Manhattan's skyline as well as the growth of the city's population during World War I and the inter-war period, and the cityscapes show rhythmic movement and the bustle of everyday urban life such as people coming to and from work, cars navigating traffic, and ferries arriving at piers. The New York images help to place Walkowitz within a larger modernist phenomenon of finding inspiration for the development of an abstract pictorial style in the sensations of motion, rhythm, and temporality of music. In contrast to the Greenbergian medium-specific approach to abstraction that was in vogue at the time of *Improvisations of New York*'s publication, Walkowitz's early-20th-century vision of abstraction pioneered a "symphony in lines" that might bridge the gap between differing arts, particularly the plastic arts and music.

This study explores Walkowitz's largely overlooked New York cityscapes and asserts that the artist's interest in the abstract qualities of music and sound led to the development of a distinct abstract pictorial language. The cityscapes can therefore be placed within a larger ongoing exploration of the influence of music on early American abstraction, especially

surrounding the seminal International Exhibition of Modern Art or Armory Show of 1913.[1] Additionally, Walkowitz holds an interesting place within the general modernist pursuit of abstraction through his non-conformity to abstract essentialism and homogeneity. Exploring various styles of abstraction at once, Walkowitz engaged with a European universalist model of abstraction yet also anticipated the inward-facing, self-expression of American Abstract Expressionism.

There is a notable lack of scholarship on Walkowitz's work and career despite his close affiliation with American photographer and art promoter Alfred Stieglitz and his membership within the Stieglitz circle of American modernists. Studies of the Stieglitz circle and early American Modernism have acknowledged Walkowitz's presence, but only in passing, allotting single paragraphs at most to the discussion. No catalogue raisonné has been produced for Walkowitz; and dating his unlabeled cityscape works is a precarious task due to his series' decades-long time span and the artist's simultaneous stylistic variety and experimentation. Studies that exclude visual analyses of Walkowitz's works have been able to skirt these issues in favor of discussing his work in the context of Marxism, socialism, and anarchism of the early twentieth century.[2] Studies that delve into visual analysis and closely consider the aesthetics of Walkowitz's works typically discuss his representations of modernist dancer Isadora Duncan rather than his cityscapes. Even still, scholars have considered movement in the Duncan works to

[1] For an overview of scholarship on the relationship between music and the development of abstraction, see Sharon L. Kennedy, Painting Music: Rhythm and Movement in Art (Lincoln, Nebraska: Sheldon Music of Art Catalogues and Publications, 2007), published in conjunction with the exhibition of the same title at the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery at the University of Nebraska, from June 13, 2006 through June 24, 2007; Howard Risatti, "Music and the Development of Abstraction in America: The Decade Surrounding the Armory Show," *Art Journal* 39, no 1. (1979): 8-13; Kendall L. Walton, "What Is Abstract about the Art of Music?" *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 46, no. 3 (Spring 1988): 351-364.

[2] For socio-political considerations of Walkowitz's work, see Catherine Berger, "Progressive Nostalgia: Alfred Stieglitz, his Circle and the Romantic Anti-Capitalist Critique of Modernity," PhD diss., University College of London, 2014 and Gail Gelburd Kilmer, "The Art of Abraham Walkowitz: A Political and Social Re-Evaluation," master's thesis, Ohio State University, 1977.

be a product not of musical influence, but of the forms of dance, and even poetry.[3] The dance works' notable spirituality and non-objectivity have yet to be considered in relation to the abstract qualities of music, underestimating the influence of both Duncan's and Walkowitz's interest in the other arts in their development of abstract artistic styles.

Furthermore, the significance of the late-career publication of *Improvisations of New York*, in which we can see Walkowitz's clear desire to promote himself as an early practitioner of abstraction, has not yet been fully realized in art historical scholarship. *Improvisations of New York* is one of five books of reproductions that Emanuel Haldeman-Julius published for Walkowitz, including *Isadora Duncan in Her Dances* of 1945; *A Demonstration of Objective, Abstract, and Non-Objective Art* of 1945; *Barns and Coal Mines Around Girard, Kansas* of 1947; and *Art from Life to Life* of 1951.[4] Walkowitz had befriended Haldeman-Julius while living in Manhattan's lower East side before the publisher left for Girard, Kansas in 1919.[5] In 1945, Haldeman-Julius invited Walkowitz to visit Kansas.[6] There, the artist created a series of on-site drawings around the state and the two began to collaborate on the books that would promote Walkowitz's long artistic career.[7] All five publications serve a similar purpose: to affirm

[3] For an overview of current scholarship on Walkowitz's images of Isadora Duncan, see Ann Cooper Albright, *Modern Gestures: Abraham Walkowitz Draws Isadora Duncan Dancing* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2010); Kent Smith, *Abraham Walkowitz: Figuration, 1895-1945* (Long Beach, California: Long Beach Museum of Art, 1982); JoLee Gillespie Stephens, "Modern Art and Modern Movement: Images of Dance in American Art, c. 1900-1950," PhD diss., University of Kansas, 2011; *Line Dance: Abraham Walkowitz's Drawings of Isadora Duncan*, program accompanying the exhibition at the University Gallery of the University of Delaware, from October 19 through December 17, 2000.
[4] Box 2, Folders 55, 57, 58, and 59, Series 6: Printed Material, 1910-1969, Abraham Walkowitz papers, AAA.walkabra. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.
[5] Biographical Note, Abraham Walkowitz papers, AAA.walkabra. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.
[6] Novelene Ross, "Abraham Walkowitz, Forgotten Pioneer of American Modernism: Selections from the Collection of Eugene DeGruson and the Collection of the Wichita Art Museum," Wichita Art Museum, Traditional Fine Arts Organization, Inc., May 2005, https://www.tfaoi.org/aa/5aa/5aa337.htm.
[7] Ibid.

the artist's role as an early pioneer of abstraction.[8] Publishing his books during the rise of Abstract Expressionism in America, Walkowitz likely sought to establish himself as foundational to the development of a characteristically American abstract visual idiom and the creation of an American modernist style.

This study will approach the prominent place of the New York series within the development of Walkowitz's abstract idiom, with particular attention to the artist's overt aural evocations, and to the artistic, aural, and theoretical sources that Walkowitz consulted in this process. My approach aligns with the scholarship of Rachael Z. DeLue, who has considered the evocations of sonic experience in the paintings and assemblages of Stieglitz-circle member Arthur Dove. DeLue understands the influence of the auditory not only in the way that Dove experienced his subjects but also in the formal language through which he communicated this experience. I similarly suggest that Walkowitz's series is key to understanding how his nonrepresentational mode of painting evolved in response to the sonic experience of the city. The series exhibits a variety of styles of representation in the pursuit of expressing an embodied understanding of his individual modern experience.

When the series was reproduced in 1948, the work chosen as the publication's frontispiece was a more legibly representational cityscapes; yet it is a good introduction to the

[8] R. Alton Lee, *Publisher for the Masses: Emanuel Haldeman-Julius* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2017), 93, 97, 205. These publications also fit within Haldeman-Julius's Little Blue Book series, which spanned from 1919 to 1978. The Little Blue Books were inexpensive, mail order booklets that reprinted a variety of work, including condensed or excerpted Western literary classics, biographies of famous figures, and essays on a variety of topics, many of which were controversial for the time. Booklets on same-sex relationships, sexual health, atheism, capital punishment, prostitution, racism, and communism were published within the series for a working-class audience. Haldeman-Julius was an outspoken socialist, and Walkowitz's relationship with him and his publication house in Girard, Kansas merits further study through a political lens.
Walkowitz's publications are not included in the Emanuel Haldeman-Julius Little Blue Books Collection at California State University's Special Collections and Archives. However, the collection's scope and contents note indicates that titles are missing from the collection, and the publications can be understood to generally fit within the series. Existing scholarship on Walkowitz includes a few studies on his socialist leanings and socialist reads of his figural images of New York's parks. Perhaps most substantial is Gail Gelburd Kilmer's 1977 master's thesis for Ohio State University entitled "The Art of Abraham Walkowitz: A Political and Social Re-Evaluation."

ways in which Walkowitz abstracts the city in order to express a personal sensorial experience. (Fig. 2) Long, rectangular forms of skyscrapers dominate the composition, many depicted from their corners with two faces flanking each junction. This creates a simplified illusion of three-dimensionality, while emphasizing the strong, vertical lines that convey the height of the structures. Like the strings of a violin, the lines provide a taut framework from which Walkowitz conveys a sense of movement, plucking chords to create vibrations. The buildings appear to thrust upwards, pushing the sky populated by v-shaped birds into the shaded atmosphere at two distinct angles. These triangular thrusts parallel the representation at the bottom of the image, identifiable as New York's city streets by the inclusion of the Brooklyn Bridge and its two gothic arches. The streets are a cacophony of lines, including small dashes that embody at once both cars and people and zigzagging lines that lead the viewer's eye from the lower center of the image and drive upwards into the skyline, conveying the city's ascending growth. The towering skyscrapers remain relatively upright in comparison to other more fluid and, at times, frantic representations within the series as a whole, yet there remains a slight inward lean, reflecting the point of view of someone looking up at the metropolis. Walkowitz highlights rhythm and movement to evoke the spirit of his subject, presenting the skyscrapers not as mundane but as "The Cathedrals of New York" as the faint label reads in the lower border of the image.

Because of the quantity and diversity of cityscapes that Walkowitz produced between 1910 and 1930, this thesis focuses on the drawings, the most common medium Walkowitz chose for the series. I propose that these may be categorized into four general styles: works that verge on abstraction, Cubist-inspired works, non-objective lyrical studies, and frenzied non-objective works. As many of the original works that Walkowitz reproduced in the publication were lost to a fire, I analyze each style through comparable works with more complete documentation

currently held in museum collections.[9] Based on those works, which have secure dating within the series, it is evident that Walkowitz was creating incredibly varied images of the city simultaneously rather than in a progressively more abstract language over time. He moved back and forth freely between levels of representation, not evolving into one final abstract visual language. This study considers how Walkowitz employed abstraction as a medium rather than a subject, understanding abstraction as a means rather than an end.[10]

[9] Bibliographical note, Abraham Walkowitz papers, AAA.walkabra, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC. Many of the images reproduced in the publication were lost in a studio fire in the mid-1940s. Additionally, Walkowitz's habit of signing and dating works at a much later point in his career problematizes the chronology of the series.

[10] Nell Andrew, "Introduction: The Medium Is a Muscle" in *Moving Modernism: The Urge to Abstraction in Painting, Dance, Cinema* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), xxii. This way of understanding the modernist pursuit of abstraction is directly informed by Nell Andrew's *Moving Modernism* of 2020 in which she asserts that abstraction can be understood as a medium employed to convey movement rather than a generic visual descriptor.

THE MODERN METROPOLIS

Born in Tyumen, Siberia, Walkowitz emigrated with his widowed mother and two sisters to New York City in 1889 at age eleven.[11] He grew up in poverty on Essex Street in Manhattan's lower East Side.[12] His mother ran a newsstand on Delancey Street to support the family, eventually earning enough to send Walkowitz to the Cooper Union and the Educational Alliance, where he first studied art.[13]

Walkowitz's immigration into Manhattan coincided with the city's upward growth, and his early experience exemplifies the ways in which the modern metropolis began culturally diversifying while consolidating the urban landscape, thrusting upwards with the advent of the skyscraper.[14] The building of skyscrapers such as the Woolworth Building and the Flatiron Building were particularly newsworthy at the turn-of-the-century, drawing onlookers during the act of construction and being photographed incrementally by photographers such as Stieglitz. Despite their commercial and industrial nature, the structural ingenuity and richly ornamented exteriors of skyscrapers made them of aesthetic interest among contemporary American artists.[15]

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[11] William Innes Homer, "Chronology, 1878-1920," In *Abraham Walkowitz: Watercolors from 1905 through 1920 and Other Works on Paper* (New York: Zabriskie Gallery, 1994): 14. Published in conjunction with the exhibition of the same name shown at the Zabriskie Gallery from November 30, 1994 to January 7, 1995.
[12] Ibid., 14.
[13] Homer, "The Watercolors of Abraham Walkowitz," In *Abraham Walkowitz: Watercolors from 1905 through 1920 and Other Works on Paper* (New York: Zabriskie Gallery, 1994): 8.
[14] Robert W. Snyder, "City in Transition," in *Metropolitan Lives: The Ashcan Artists and Their New York*, ed. Rebecca Zurier, Robert W. Snyder, and Virginia M. Mecklenburg (New York: National Museum of American Art and W.W. Norton & Company, 1995), 29-30. Published in conjunction with the exhibition of the same name shown at the National Museum of American Art, November 17, 1995 - March 17, 1995.
[15] Dell Upton, "An American Architecture?" in *A Companion to American Art*, ed. John Davis, Jennifer A. Greenhill, and Jason D. LaFountain (West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., 2015), 217-218.

New York City became not only the scene of American cultural experience but also an icon of it.[16] The hallmarks of the city were its skyscrapers, which became well-known silhouettes and were frequently depicted by fellow American modernists as pinnacles of modernity.[17]

Artists within the Stieglitz circle such as John Marin and Joseph Stella turned to architectural icons of the city for specific and identifiable form in their paintings. Ashcan School artists also painted scenes of particular urban settings and their shifting social forces.[18] Walkowitz too created multiple works that focus on particular sites, such as the watercolor paintings *Improvisation: Coney Island #1* of 1915 (Fig. 3) and *Times Square* of 1910 (Fig. 4), which are both reproduced in *Improvisations of New York*. More frequently however, Walkowitz produced abstracted and generalized views that have no precise location and instead convey the general spirit and dynamism of the city.[19] Konrad Bercovici's introduction to *Improvisations of New York* notes that Walkowitz's images of the city were distinct from those of his contemporaries. He wrote, "As one of New York's lovers, I have seen many paintings and drawings of my city. Walkowitz's paintings and drawings are the only ones that have captured the spirit, the life, the music and the captiousness, the massive coquetry of the giant of all giants we call New York."[20]

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[16] Angela Miller, "'Home' and 'Homelessness' in Art between the Wars," in *A Companion to American Art*, ed. John Davis, Jennifer A. Greenhill, and Jason D. LaFountain (West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., 2015), 250.
[17] Wanda M Corn, *The Great American Thing: Modern Art and National Identity, 1915-1935* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999), 155-156.
[18] Snyder, "City in Transition," in *Metropolitan Lives: The Ashcan Artists and Their New York*, ed. Rebecca Zurier, Robert W. Snyder, and Virginia M. Mecklenburg (New York: National Museum of American Art and W.W. Norton & Company, 1995), 35.
[19] Abraham Walkowitz, "Explanatory Note," in *The Forum Exhibition of Modern American Painters* (New York: Mitchell Kennerley, 1916), 1. Published in conjunction with the exhibition of the same name shown at The Anderson Galleries, New York, March 13-March 25, 1916.
[20] Walkowitz, *Improvisations of New York: A Symphony in Lines* (Girard, Kansas: Haldeman-Julius Publications, 1948), unpaginated.

Walkowitz's abstracted images of the city evoke an embodied experience among towering and mammoth skyscrapers, whose height was of particular interest to the artist. In a 1958 interview for the Archives of American Art, Walkowitz noted, "So you see how it built up? One building is jealous of the other: 'I want to be taller,' 'I want to be taller.' They all want to reach the sky."[21] This competitive nature among skyscraper architects as well as the commercial nature of the structures underscore the capitalist core of American society, becoming a visual representation of the idea of American progress and modernity.[22] As the European avant-garde began to arrive in Manhattan from roughly 1913 to 1915, years closely aligned with the run of the Armory Show, spinning wartime displacement into an opportunity for artistic growth, these colossal structures were solidified as uniquely American.[23] In published interviews discussing their time in the city, French painter Francis Picabia remarked on the "stupendous skyscrapers" and "mammoth buildings," and fellow French artist Marcel Duchamp asked, "Has Europe anything to show more beautiful than these?"[24] At a time when American artists were looking to create an indigenous modern art, the unique aesthetics of Manhattan and its international prominence as a model metropolitan city provided them with a subject that could assist in the reconstitution of their national identity.[25]

[21] Bartlett Cowdrey and Abram Lerner, "Oral history interview with Abraham Walkowitz, 1958 December 8-22," Abraham Walkowitz papers, AAA.walkabra, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.
[22] Upton, "An American Architecture?" in *A Companion to American Art*, ed. John Davis, Jennifer A. Greenhill, and Jason D. LaFountain (West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., 2015), 217.
[23] Corn, *The Great American Thing: Modern Art and National Identity, 1915-1935* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999), 53.
[24] Ibid., 52-53.
[25] Ibid., 188.

THE ARMORY SHOW OF 1913

Walkowitz had traveled to Europe as an artist, first in 1906, visiting Paris and then Florence, Venice, Rome, and Anticoli Corrado in Italy. In Paris, he attended the 1906 Salon d'Automne, visited Auguste Rodin's studio, saw Isadora Duncan dance for the first time, and met Jewish-American painter Max Weber.[26] In Anticoli Corrado, he created many of the figural works that he would later exhibit in New York, representational depictions of urban scenes and locales.[27] Returning to New York City in 1907, Walkowitz developed a friendship with Max Weber, living with him for three months in 1909. Weber had already met and befriended American photographer and art promoter Alfred Stieglitz, and had exhibited works in Stieglitz's 291 Gallery, located in Midtown Manhattan at 291 Fifth Avenue. Weber may have been expelled from the so-called "Stieglitz Circle" of modernist artists in 1911,[28] but that same year Walkowitz was introduced to Stieglitz and his circle through painter Marsden Hartley and invited to mount a one-man show at 291 from December 15, 1912 to January 14, 1913.[29]

1913 was a critical year for American Art with the mounting of the International Exhibition of Modern Art or Armory Show in Manhattan, and Walkowitz, already informed by a

[26] Walkowitz was especially interested in the ten paintings by Paul Cézanne that were exhibited at the 1906 Salon d'Automne. Kandinsky was also represented in the Salon that year with paintings, drawings, and woodcuts.
[27] Homer, "The Watercolors of Abraham Walkowitz," in *Abraham Walkowitz: Watercolors from 1905 through 1920 and Other Works on Paper* (New York: Zabriskie Gallery, 1994): 8-9.
[28] Martica Sawin, *Abraham Walkowitz, 1878-1965* (Salt Lake City: Utah Museum of Fine Arts, 1975): . Published in conjunction with the exhibition of the same name shown at the Utah Museum of Fine Arts, Utah, May 1-June 22, 1975.
[29] Cowdrey and Lerner, "A Tape Recorded Interview with Abraham Walkowitz," *Archives of American Art Journal* 9, no. 1 (1969): 14.
Sawin, 11.

conglomeration of avant-garde influences, was primed for it. While the Armory Show's introduction of the European avant-garde's Fauvist and Cubist styles to American audiences was a key goal for organizers Walt Kuhn, Walter Pach, and Arthur B. Davies,[30] blocks away, Gallery "291" showed Marin's watercolors of New York City to much acclaim, as well as Stieglitz's photographs of the city.[31] In this way, Stieglitz's gallery presented the American avant-garde based in New York in dialogue with the works displayed at the Armory Show.

Walkowitz exhibited five oil paintings in Gallery E of the Armory Show, the gallery for American paintings, and seven watercolors, drawings, and monotypes in Gallery K, the gallery for French and American watercolors, drawings, and other works on paper.[32] All of Walkowitz's exhibited works were figural representations created during his time in Europe.[33] Walkowitz would later express his discontent with his exhibited works, which he felt paled in comparison to the innovation of the avant-garde works of the European exhibitors.[34] After the 1913 exhibition Walkowitz actively pursued abstraction, perhaps in response to the lack of attention that his artwork received, but most certainly in response to the examples of abstraction on display.[35]

Cubistic works such as the widely noted and perhaps infamous oil painting *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2* of 1912 by Marcel Duchamp demonstrated new ways of representing motion and spatial dimensions, leading viewers to question their interaction with the city immediately after departing from the exhibition. While the exhibition was still mounted,

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[30] Milton W. Brown, "The Effect of the Great Adventure," in *The Story of the Armory Show* (New York: The Joseph H. Hirshhorn Foundation, 1963), 207-209.
[31] Ibid., 210.
[32] "Armory Show 1913 Complete List," The Armory Show at 100, The New-York Historical Society Museum and Library, accessed January 17, 2022, https://armory.nyhistory.org/armory-show-1913-complete-list/.
[33] Ibid.
[34] Brown, "The Effect of the Great Adventure," in *The Story of the Armory Show* (New York: The Joseph H. Hirshhorn Foundation, 1963), 207.
[35] Though both artists sold a few of their exhibited works, reviews and criticism of the Armory Show overlooked their contributions in favor of the more experimental artwork on view.

Irish-American art collector John Quinn, one of the Armory Show's main patrons and supporters, wrote to Irish painter George William Russell that, "When one leaves the exhibition he goes outside and sees the lights streaking up and down the tall buildings and watches their shadows and feels that the pictures that he was seen inside after all have some relation to the life and color and rhythm and movement that he sees outside."[36] This statement emphasizes an awareness of the visual rhythm of the city's forms, which for Walkowitz also converged with the city's sonic rhythms. For Walkowitz, the Armory Show awakened long-held interests in dance and sound that became intertwined with his painting. Abstraction, he found, might synthesize the more fully embodied sensory experiences from a range of sources within the urban landscape.

From the show's opening on, he became actively involved in the development of both European and American modernist art theory and avant-garde style.[37] Stieglitz often provided, either directly or indirectly, many of the resources that Walkowitz used to develop his abstract pictorial language, key among which were opportunities to engage with the work of Russian artist Wassily Kandinsky whose art was first exhibited in the United States at the Armory Show.[38] Kandinsky's oil painting *Improvisation No. 27 (Garden of Love)* was hung in Gallery G, devoted to English, Irish, and German paintings and drawings.[39] Stieglitz promptly purchased the painting during the run of the exhibition, later writing to Kandinsky that he recognized "the

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[36] Judith Zilczer, "The New York Art Market: 1913-1918," in *"The Noble Buyer:" John Quinn, Patron of the Avant-Garde* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1978), 27. Published in conjunction with the exhibition of the same title shown at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. from June 15 to September 4, 1978.

[37] Walkowitz, interview by Abram Lerner and Bartlett Cowdrey, "Oral history interview with Abraham Walkowitz, 1958 December 8-22," Archives of American Art, December 22, 1958. Walkowitz claimed to have been at the Armory Show every day.

[38] Howard Risatti, "Music and the Development of Abstraction in America: The Decade Surrounding the Armory Show," *Art Journal* 39, no. 1 (1979): 9.

[39] "Armory Show 1913 Complete List," The Armory Show at 100, The New-York Historical Society Museum and Library, accessed January 17, 2022, https://armory.nyhistory.org/armory-show-1913-complete-list/. The exhibition's inclusion of Russian Wassily Kandinsky in this gallery demonstrates the way in which the Armory Show emphasized the separation of American and European art, often with little consideration of national boundaries in Europe. Kandinsky was living in Germany at the time and was closely associated with Munich during those years.

importance of the picture," and emphasized the "stupidity" of visitors and organizers of the exhibition who'd overlooked the painting.[40] Walkowitz certainly had access to the painting and, in his pursuit of abstraction, appears to have been inspired by it, directly borrowing the musical terminology adopted by Kandinsky for the title of his own foray into abstraction, *Improvisation of New York.*

Although Kandinsky's seminal book *Concerning the Spiritual in Modern Art*, published in Munich in 1911, was not translated into English until 1914, Stieglitz had printed translated excerpts from the text prior to the Armory Show in his July 1912 edition of *Camera Work.*[41] Walkowitz later purchased and annotated his own English-translated copy of the text, which now is archived in the artist's collection in the Smithsonian Archives of American Art.[42] Kandinsky's influence on Walkowitz was quickly noted. In an essay, entitled "Kandinsky and Walkowitz," for the October 1913 edition of *Camera Work*—distributed in March 1914—German-American artist Oscar Bluemner compared the two painters' attention to the inner spirit in their abstract artwork.[43] Bluemner's essay helps to confirm that Walkowitz was already pursuing abstraction in line with Kandinsky's just one year after the close of the Armory Show.

Though Kandinsky is among the most major artists and theorists to explore the relationship between art and sound in the development of abstraction, his works did not provide the singular text on the relationship between these genres. Walter Pater notably stated in his 1873

[40] "Gallery G: English, Irish, and German Paintings and Drawings," The Armory Show at 100, The New-York Historical Society Museum and Library, accessed January 17, 2022, https://xroads.virginia.edu/~museum/Armory/galleryG/tour.g.html.
[41] Wassily Kandinsky, "Extracts from 'The Spiritual in Art' [Translated from German], *Camera Work* no. 39 (July 1912): 34.
[42] Abraham Walkowitz papers, 1904-1969, AAA.walkabra. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.
[43] Oscar Bluemner, "Walkowitz [Extract from "Kandinsky and Walkowitz," an Essay by Oscar Bluemner," *Camera Work* no. 44 (October 1913): 25-26. A copy of this edition of *Camera Work* was owned by Walkowitz and is now housed in the Abraham Walkowitz Papers in the Archives of American Art.

book *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, "All art constantly aspires towards the condition of music," providing a much earlier source for this discourse than Kandinsky.[44] Other well-known texts on the topic include the 1904 publication, *Recollections and Impressions of James A. McNeill Whistler* by American art collector Arthur Jerome Eddy, a collection of Whistler's own writings and remembered anecdotes as well as recorded observations of his contemporaries who watched him work. Whistler, who titled many of his paintings after musical terms—"symphony," "arrangement," "harmony," and "nocturne"—became a key American source for the discussion of the pictorial arts' adoption of musical qualities.[45] Among Eddy's recollections, he notes Whistler's rejection of strict naturalism in any art form, including painting:

> "Truths of sound," in the sense that Ruskin speaks of "truths of form" and "truths of color," are not tolerated in music. To attain certain effects, dramatic in character, imitations of sounds in nature are sometimes introduced, but sparingly, and unless with great skill the effect is disagreeable to even the uneducated ear, and if pressed too far it becomes grotesque. One art is like unto another, and what are really "truths" in one are "truths" in another. It is immaterial whether the sense of hearing, sight, or touch is appealed to; it does not matter whether it is a composition of sound, of color, of line, or of form that is under consideration, the fundamental principles of the art are the same; and one of the fundamental propositions is: imitation is fatal to pure art.[46]

For American audiences in Walkowitz's time, therefore, Whistler was an early source for the pictorial pursuit of abstraction through the observation of music and would have been particularly important for Walkowitz's study of abstraction. The desire to historically legitimize the rise of an American avant-garde, stemming not solely from the European model but from indigenous roots, I would argue, is precisely what led Walkowitz to produce his 1948 publication.

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[44] Walter Pater, "The School of Giorgione," *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* (London and New York: MacMillan and Co., 1888): 135.
[45] Arthur Jerome Eddy, *Recollections and Impressions of James A. McNeill Whistler* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1904): 176.
[46] Ibid., 204.

Whereas Whistler's interest in music did not result in non-objective form, French artist Francis Picabia asserted that all pictorial art's interest in music naturally leads to abstraction. Art and music debates from Walkowitz's time, more directly related to the Armory Show, were spurred on by Picabia and his spouse Gabrièle Buffet, an art critic and Dadaist writer. Picabia exhibited four oil paintings at the exhibition, including the controversial *Dances at the Spring*, which was the subject of criticism due to its highly abstract nature. In various venues during the run of the Armory Show, Picabia asserted his theory of an art-to-music parallel.[47] In an interview for the *Globe*, Picabia stated, "Art resembles music in some important respects. To a musician the words are obstacles to musical expression... the attempt of art is to make us dream, as music does. It expresses a spiritual state, it makes that state real by projecting on the canvas the finally analyzed means of producing that state in the observer."[48] This assertion was controversial among art critics, some citing Whistler as an example of exemplary painting that adopts musical qualities without resulting in abstraction.[49] Picabia would later clarify his statements in the preface catalog to his show at Stieglitz's gallery in March 1913:

> If we grasp without difficulty the meaning and the logic of a musical work it is because this work is based on the laws of harmony and composition of which we have either the acquired knowledge or the inherited knowledge. These laws are the objectivity of painting up to the present time. The new form of painting puzzles the public only because it does not find in it the old objectivity and does not yet grasp the new objectivity. The laws of this new convention have as yet been hardly formulated but they will become gradually more defined, just as musical laws have become more defined, and they will very rapidly become as understandable as were the objective representation of nature.[50]

[47] Risatti, "Music and the Development of Abstraction in America," *Art Journal* 39, no. 1 (1979): 10.
[48] Hutchins Hapgood, "A Paris Painter," *New York Globe and Commercial Advertiser* (February 20, 1913).
[49] Risatti, "Music and the Development of Abstraction in America," *Art Journal* 39, no. 1 (1979): 11.
[50] Francis Picabia, "Preface to Picabia Exhibition at Little Galleries of Photo-Secession," reprinted in *Camera Work*, no. 42-43 (April - July 1913): 20. Stieglitz's Little Galleries of the Photo-Secession would later be renamed 291 after its street address in New York City.

Here, the artist asserts that both abstract art and music must be studied in order to be understood, a sentiment that countered the prevalent idea that music was naturally understood without a need for analysis.[51] Buffet's subsequent essay entitled "Modern Art and the Public" in the June 1913 edition of *Camera Work*, defended the statements of her husband: "[T]he public looks upon art merely as a pastime, a form of entertainment that is due to it, and balks at making the slightest effort to understand the significance of the work of art or art itself."[52] Walkowitz's contact with this Euro-American debate encouraged him to move past figuration, providing examples of new ways to render sensory experiences.

[51] Risatti, "Music and the Development of Abstraction in America," *Art Journal* 39, no. 1 (1979): 12.
[52] Gabrielle Buffet, "Modern Art and the Public," *Camera Work*, special issue (June 1913): 10.

THE ART-TO-MUSIC PARALLEL

Walkowitz's affinity for music stemmed in part from his aptitude for playing amateur violin.[53] The artist's niece, with whom he lived in his later years, remarked, "That was all he ever did, draw and listen to music."[54] Additionally, the artist would have known well the compositions of Richard Wagner, Christoph Willibald Gluck, Ludwig van Beethoven, and Johann Sebastian Bach through his close attention to Isadora Duncan's performances.[55] In critical response to Walkowitz's one-man show of abstract drawings and watercolors at the Gallery of the Photo-Secession in 1916, American painter Ben Benn wrote, "The music of Beethoven vibrates all through his works."[56] The artist's personal familiarity with music allowed him to adapt its language of rhythm, vibration, repetition in the pictorial translation of his own experience in the city as well as the spirit of the metropolis itself.

In 1925, Walkowitz collaborated with American publisher, fellow immigrant, and violinist Ben Huebsch in the publication of *100 Paintings and Drawings from the Objective to*

[53] Cowdrey and Lerner, "Oral history interview with Abraham Walkowitz, 1958 December 8-22," Abraham Walkowitz papers, AAA.walkabra, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.
[54] Quoted in Martica Sawin, *Abraham Walkowitz, 1878-1965* (Salt Lake City: Utah Museum of Fine Arts, 1975), 16. Published in conjunction with the exhibition of the same name shown at the Utah Museum of Fine Arts, Utah, May 1-June 22, 1975.
[55] Cowdrey and Lerner, "Oral history interview with Abraham Walkowitz, 1958 December 8-22," Abraham Walkowitz papers, AAA.walkabra, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.
[56] Jonathan Green, *Camera Work: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Jonathan Green (New York: Aperture, Inc., 1973), 304. Critical responses to the exhibition were reprinted in *Camera Work* 48 of 1916.

Abstract, which first presented the artist's development of a personal abstract vocabulary.[57] Walkowitz's introduction to the publication emphasizes how sound informed his artistic translation of interior sensations into exterior visualizations:

> I do not avoid objectivity nor seek subjectivity, but try to find an equivalent for whatever is the effect of my relation to a thing, or to a part of a thing, or to an afterthought of it. I am seeking to attune my art to what I feel to be the keynote of an experience. If it brings to me a harmonious sensation, I then try to find the concrete elements that are likely to record the sensation in visual forms, in the medium of lines, of color shapes, of space division. When the line and color are sensitized, they seem to me alive with the rhythm which I felt in the thing that stimulated my imagination and my expression.[58]

This passage, which draws heavily from the language and theories of Kandinsky's *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, shows Walkowitz's pursuit of abstraction not as a formal quest, but as a tuning fork for the harmony between the inner self and the outer world. His cityscape works, for instance, render in visual form the inner sensations inspired by the encounter with the spirit of the modern metropolis. Walkowitz's first German edition of Kandinsky's book is annotated in the margins, especially in sections directly discussing abstract form.[59] Kandinsky's ruminations on the spiritual foundations of abstraction and his discussion of the simplistic and powerful expression of line were perhaps most influential. Walkowitz adopts, for example, the term "improvisation," which Kandinsky defines as "spontaneous expressions of inner character, or impressions of the 'inner nature.'"[60] Walkowitz's abstractions of the city, however, do not indicate that the artist was exactly following Kandinsky's formal methods of abstraction, such as

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[57] "100 Drawings by Abraham Walkowitz, 1925," Box 2, Folder 53, Abraham Walkowitz papers, 1904-1969, AAA.walkabra. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.
[58] "100 Drawings by Abraham Walkowitz, 1925," Box 2, Folder 53, page 1, Abraham Walkowitz papers, 1904-1969, AAA.walkabra. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.
[59] Sandra Gail Levin, "Wassily Kandinsky and the American Avant-Garde, 1912-1950," PhD diss., (Rutgers University, 1976), 61.
[60] Kandinsky, *On the Spiritual in Art*, ed. and trans. Hilla Rebay (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 1946), 98.

the psychology of color or relationship between differing geometric forms. Rather, Walkowitz recognized the relationship between music, spirituality, and abstraction through Kandinsky and applied these concepts to his American context in the development of his own non-objective formal language in his *Improvisations of New York* series. For example, Kandinsky asserts that it is essential to create harmony among the various formal elements of an improvisation so that "the inner sound is but one major chord."[61] Using the musical term chord, which is several notes played simultaneously, Kandinsky conveys a consonance of visual forms. This musical concept is visually apparent in Walkowitz's cityscapes not just through the interrelation of shape and line but also in the ideas of his Stieglitz circle colleague John Marin. Marin described the mass and height of urban buildings as "pushing, pulling forces," in a statement on his one-man show of watercolor cityscapes at "291" gallery in 1913. This concept of force lines is not exclusive to Marin and was a major component of Futurist artwork. However, Marin's use of vertical line to convey life within the inanimate form of the city spoke more to Walkowitz's pursuit of abstraction than the violent slashes of the Futurists. Marin states, "If these buildings move me they too must have life. Thus, the whole city is alive; buildings, people, all are alive; and the more they move me the more I feel them to be alive."[62] Walkowitz synthesizes Kandinsky's chord and Marin's push and pull forces as a way of visualizing the embodied experience of living in the city while maintaining its association with inner feeling. He depicts a sense of universal harmony and consonance while imbuing it with the more individual experience of change and life.

[61] Kandinsky, *On the Spiritual in Art*, ed. and trans. Hilla Rebay (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 1946), 56.
[62] Ibid., 18.

A SYMPHONY IN LINES

Walkowitz's *Improvisations of New York* series includes watercolor cityscapes that are formally comparable to those of Marin, but in his drawings in crayon and ink Walkowitz goes beyond Marin to produce a more distinct sense of sonic or musical tension. Marin's watercolor painting *Woolworth Building, No. 28* of 1912, for example, conveys a towering quality of the modern skyscraper similar to Walkowitz's series. (Fig. 5) However, the brushy and fluid nature of watercolor does not allow for the same strong vertical push and pull of drawing. Using drawn lines, Walkowitz creates a tensile vibration that can be associated with the sound and rhythm of the city. This sonic component I believe distinguishes Walkowitz's abstract idiom from both his European and American his peers.

In musical notation, two-dimensional graphs with axes are used to denote time and pitch.[63] Through the vertical play of line, Walkowitz visualizes pitch, the low to high frequency of sound. This is demonstrated in the publication's frontispiece, as the skyscrapers meet the sky at acute angles, conveying the vibrations of a sonic atmosphere that surrounds the city. This two-dimensional reference to musical notation allows Walkowitz to translate not just the three-dimensional forms of the city but the more abstract spiritual and sensorial nature of his experience moving through it. He also evokes temporality through the serial nature of the works, revisiting the subject of the city repeatedly over decades of his career, and through the quickness of the medium, which allows for the spontaneity required for Kandinsky's concept of an

[63] Stephanie Probst, "Pen, Paper, Steel: Visualizing Bach's Polyphony at the Bauhaus," *Journal for the Society for Music Theory* 26, no. 4 (December 2020): unpaginated. https://www.mtosmt.org/issues/mto.20.26.4/mto.20.26.4.probst.php.

improvisation. Moreover, His depiction of the city through varying modes of abstraction also demonstrates his interest in improvisation. I examine here four works from the New York series. Each work represents one of four distinct styles or modes of abstraction Walkowitz employs in the series to capture the multi-sensory, visual, auditory, embodied experience of the city.

In the first, most representational mode of Walkowitz's cityscapes, such as in his lithograph *New York* (1927), the underlying two-dimensional, chart-like framework is readily legible and is mirrored by the rectangular forms of his skyscrapers. (Fig. 6) Buildings are reduced to long, framing lines that convey the internal steel structures of skyscrapers with windows indicated by dashes within these loose borders. This creates an image visually similar to traditional music notation. But beyond such traditional conceptions of music that reference musical compositions produced by specific instruments, Walkowitz also exhibits an interest in the general sounds of the city, rendering birds, traffic, and masses of people as producers of rhythm in his works. Additionally, the lean of his skyscrapers evokes wind, conveying the movement of the environment around the columnar buildings. The cacophony of lines that zigzag and collide produce visual representations of vibration that evoke embodied and aural sensation. The lines act as chords which Walkowitz plucks in harmony with his own inner vibration, synthesizing the inner and outer realms of his experience.

Walkowitz toys with these basic elements of line and dash in his alternative modes of representation, maintaining the same basic framework. Walkowitz's cubist-inspired cityscapes, such as his graphite and crayon *Abstract Cityscape* (1913), incorporate curved lines to convey a shifting point of view of the city. (Fig. 7) The cubist interest in flattening or converging multiple perspectives of a subject provides a visual language that aligns with Walkowitz's interest in finding harmony between differing sensations of the urban experience. However, rectilinear lines

reminiscent of his more representational cityscapes pervade the image among the cubist-inspired curved forms. Faintly smudged dashes indicate windows hovering both within and behind the composition's cubistic framework. In 1916, American art critic Henry McBride described Walkowitz's faint forms with reference to their aural effect, as "airs played upon muted strings."[64]

The drawing *Cityscape* (1913) represents a third mode of Walkowitz's abstraction that I call non-objective, lyrical study. (Fig. 8) Here, and in other lyrical studies, Walkowitz formally translates the strong vertical thrusts of the skyscrapers into curved and continuous, organic lines that swirl and intersect about the composition, bordered by non-rectilinear shading. (Fig. 9) However, the strong, vertical lines still act as borders for the simplified windows of the buildings, similar to his most representational style. Even in his fourth, most frenzied abstract style, such as in *New York* (1917), Walkowitz maintains a layer of this rectilinear framework in small dashes in black ink under a cacophony of watercolor lines. (Fig. 10) The immediate illegibility of this fourth mode effectively conveys noise, an auditory bustle of the growing city. Walkowitz's incorporation of color here also suggests the visual presence of electric and neon light. These most non-objective works perhaps most closely anticipate the artwork of the Abstract Expressionists, and in particular, the American painter Jackson Pollock. (Fig. 11)

Each style of representation incorporates a chaotic mass of small dashes and curved lines in the bottom of the composition. At the base of his works, Walkowitz plays with scale, demonstrating the immensity of the urban landscape from his point of view. The growing height of the skyscrapers over time provided Walkowitz with a visible equivalent to the embodied

[64] Jonathan Green, *Camera Work: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Jonathan Green (New York: Aperture, Inc., 1973), 302-303. McBride's critical reception of Walkowitz's works for the *New York Sun* was reproduced in *Camera Work* 48 of 1916.

qualities of inner feeling. He once said of them, "One building is jealous of the other… They all want to reach the sky."[65] This striving for upward growth was both visually apparent to Walkowitz as well as felt, allowing the artist to articulate the convergence of the inner and outer realms of experience.

Each representation also demonstrates the relative stability of the skyscrapers in comparison to the tumult of the city streets. The lines that make up both portions of each composition vary in vibration, conveying different experiences. This accords with Kandinsky's concept of the inner or spiritual vibration in which, "The artist is the hand which, by touching various keys, (form), affects the human soul to respond to certain vibrations. Therefore, it is evident that forms of harmony reflect in a corresponding vibration on the human soul."[66] Walkowitz too described the congruous vibration between the outer world and the inner soul that result from forms that are, "alive with the rhythm which I felt in the thing that stimulated my imagination and my expression." Through the interaction of lines and their curved vibration, working in harmony to produce a visual symphony, Walkowitz evokes the experience of someone at the heart of the mammoth dynamism of the cityscape.

Within the last decade of his life, Walkowitz claimed, "You see. It's the spirit, not the imitation. You can't count the windows, so what? I never worked that way. I love New York, it's music to me. I was a fairly good violinist in my day, and I didn't try to imitate New York, but I got the spirit of New York. The skies. The equivalents."[67] Most important to Walkowitz was to express to the viewer the experience of living in Manhattan during the height of its physical and

[65] Cowdrey and Lerner, "Oral history interview with Abraham Walkowitz, 1958 December 8-22," Abraham Walkowitz papers, AAA.walkabra, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.
[66] Kandinsky, *On the Spiritual in Art*, ed. and trans. Hilla Rebay (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 1946), 47.
[67] Cowdrey and Lerner, "Oral history interview with Abraham Walkowitz, 1958 December 8-22," Abraham Walkowitz papers, AAA.walkabra, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.

cultural development, an experience that necessitated the convergence of the visual, aural, and spiritual.

CONCLUSION

When Walkowitz published *Improvisations of New York: A Symphony in Lines* in 1948, it was with the goal of establishing his status as an early pioneer of abstraction. The artworks reproduced within use simple line expressively to convey his experiences maturing as an artist alongside the development of the United States' premiere modern metropolis. The timing of Walkowitz's retrospective publication aligns with the year Jackson Pollock produced works such as *No. 5, 1948* and *No. 17A*, solidifying Abstract Expressionism's rise. (Fig. 11-12) Indeed, Walkowitz gifted Pollock with autographed copies of both *Improvisations of New York* and *Barns* and *Coal Mines Around Girard, Kansas*. In this way, the artist asserted his place in the early stages of the artistic lineage of American abstraction, stamping his name on an art historical timeline of non-objective representation.

Walkowitz's personal abstract language countered the high-modernist abstract ideal at midcentury, which aimed for medium specificity. Instead, he had looked outside of the plastic arts to music and sound in his pursuit of abstraction. Rather than progressing farther into reduced and non-objective styles of representation, Walkowitz employed multiple styles simultaneously, each acting as counterpoints within his artistic symphony. Similarly, Walkowitz wove together a variety of contemporary source material in anticipation of the creation of his cityscape series, pioneering his own abstract style rather than conforming to prevailing styles of American or European modernism. Countering the idea that abstraction results from pure formal experimentation, Walkowitz engaged in a central modernist discussion spurred by the Armory

Show concerning the relationship between music and the plastic arts. He recognized music as an abstract artistic language, abstraction as the visual language of the modern era, and Manhattan as an iconic symbol of modernity. Walkowitz connected these three key concepts to create works that convey rhythm, time, and spirit. The introductory essay for *Improvisations of New York* leaves the reader with an assertion of Walkowitz's prominent place within the history of abstraction and within American art history as a whole. In Bercovici's words, "Is there a musician who would do with sound what Walkowitz has accomplished with light and shades? If there is one, let him come forward to be greeted as the Michelangelo of sound."[68]

[68] Abraham Walkowitz, *Improvisations of New York: A Symphony in Lines* (Girard, Kansas: Haldeman-Julius Publications, 1948), unpaginated.

FIGURES

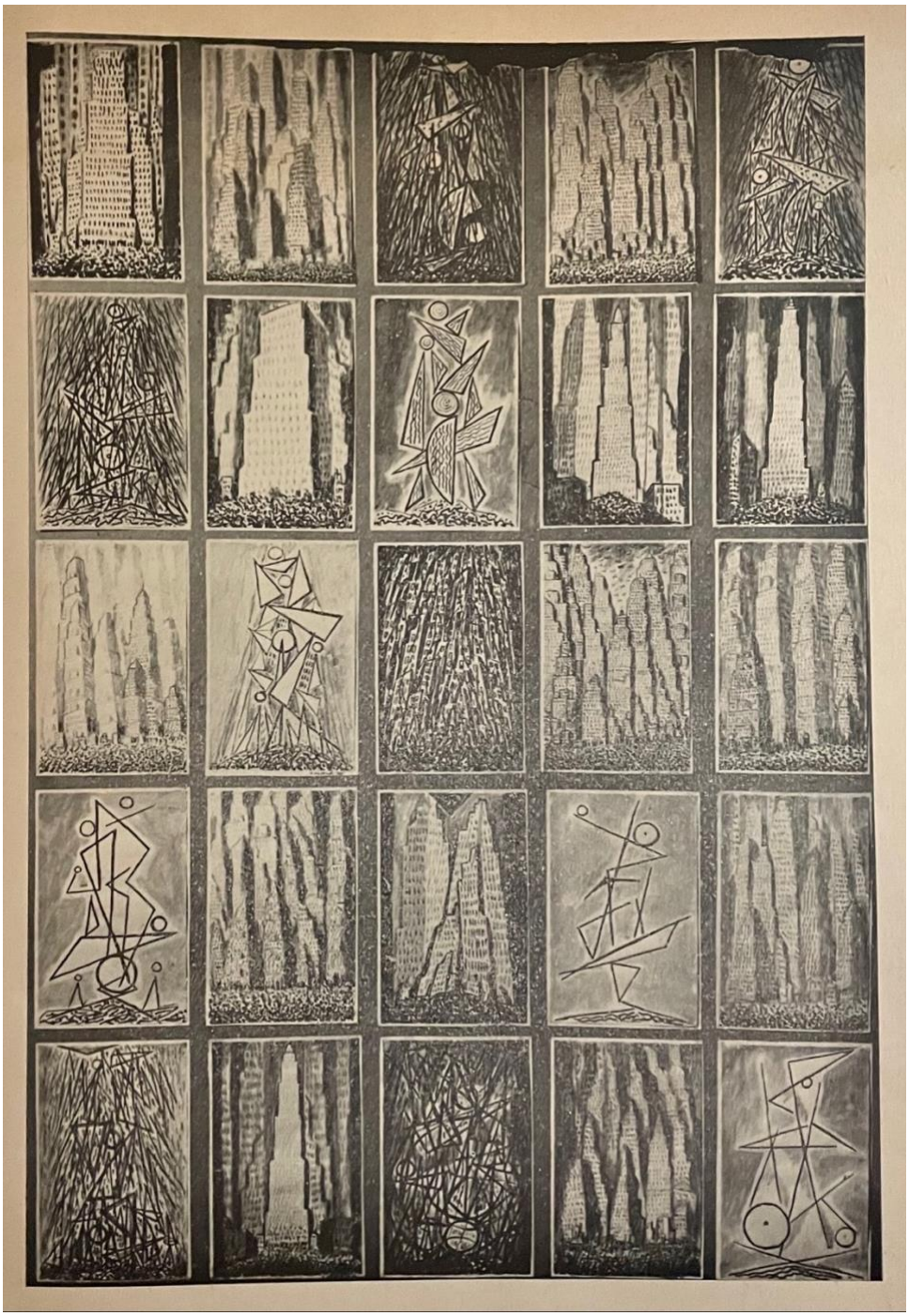

Figure 1: Abraham Walkowitz, reproduced artwork in *Improvisations of New York: A Symphony in Lines* (1948), c. 1912-1920, page 26.

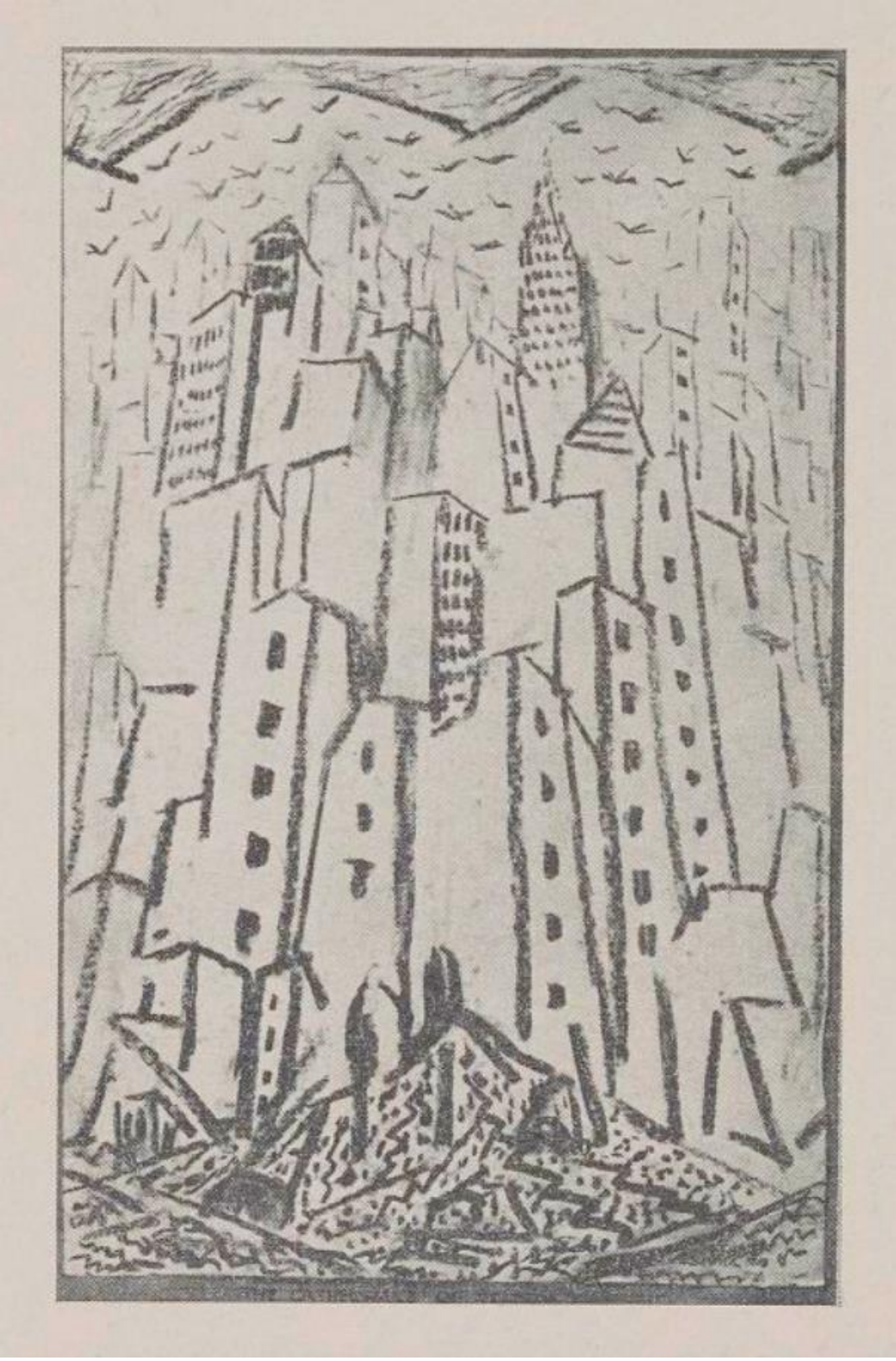

Figure 2: Walkowitz, *The Cathedrals of New York*, frontispiece to *Improvisations of New York: A Symphony in Lines* (1948), c. 1912-1920.

Figure 3: Walkowitz, *Improvisation: Coney Island #1*, 1915, transparent and opaque watercolor, brush and black ink, charcoal, and graphite on heavy wove paper, 21 11/16 x 29 15/16 in., Philadelphia Museum of Art.

Figure 4: Walkowitz, *Times Square*, 1910, watercolor on paperboard, 24 ½ x 18 11/16 in., Hirshhorn Museum.

Figure 5: John Marin, *Woolworth Building, No. 28*, 1912, watercolor over graphite, 18 ½ x 15 9/16 in., National Gallery of Art.

Figure 6: Walkowitz, *New York*, 1927, lithograph in black on wove paper, 10 x 15 ¾ in., National Gallery of Art.

Figure 7: Walkowitz, *Abstract Cityscape*, 1913, conte crayon and graphite on paper, 11 7/8 x 18 in., Amon Carter Museum of American Art.

Figure 8: Walkowitz, *Cityscape*, 1913, pencil and graphite pencil on paper, 20 x 13 in., Smithsonian American Art Museum.

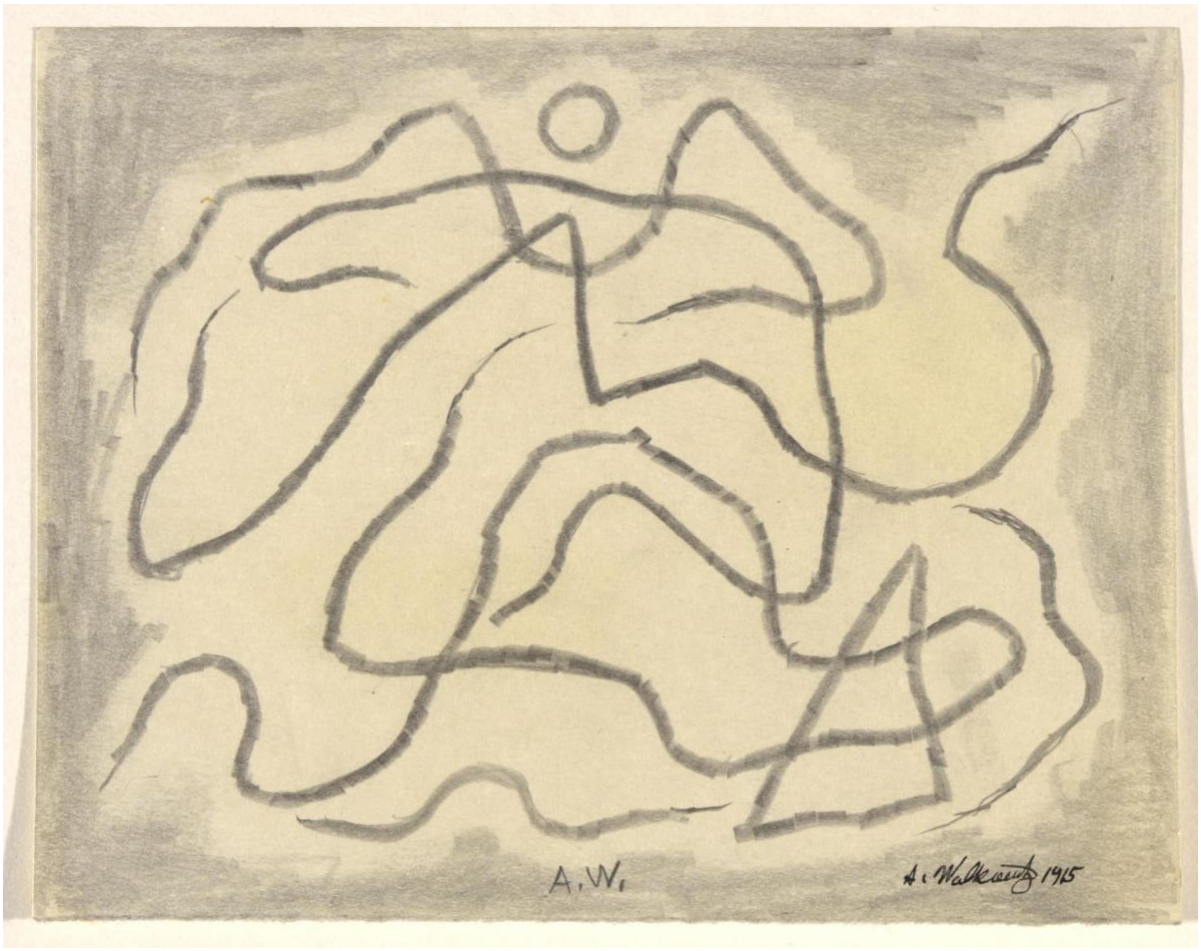

Figure 9: Abraham Walkowitz, *Rhythmic Lines (Abstraction)*, 1915, graphite on white paper mounted on green paper, 5 ¼ x 6 ¾ in., Yale University Art Gallery.

Figure 10: Walkowitz, *New York*, 1917, watercolor, brush and ink, and graphite pencil on paper, 30 ¾ x 21 ¾ in., Whitney Museum of American Art.

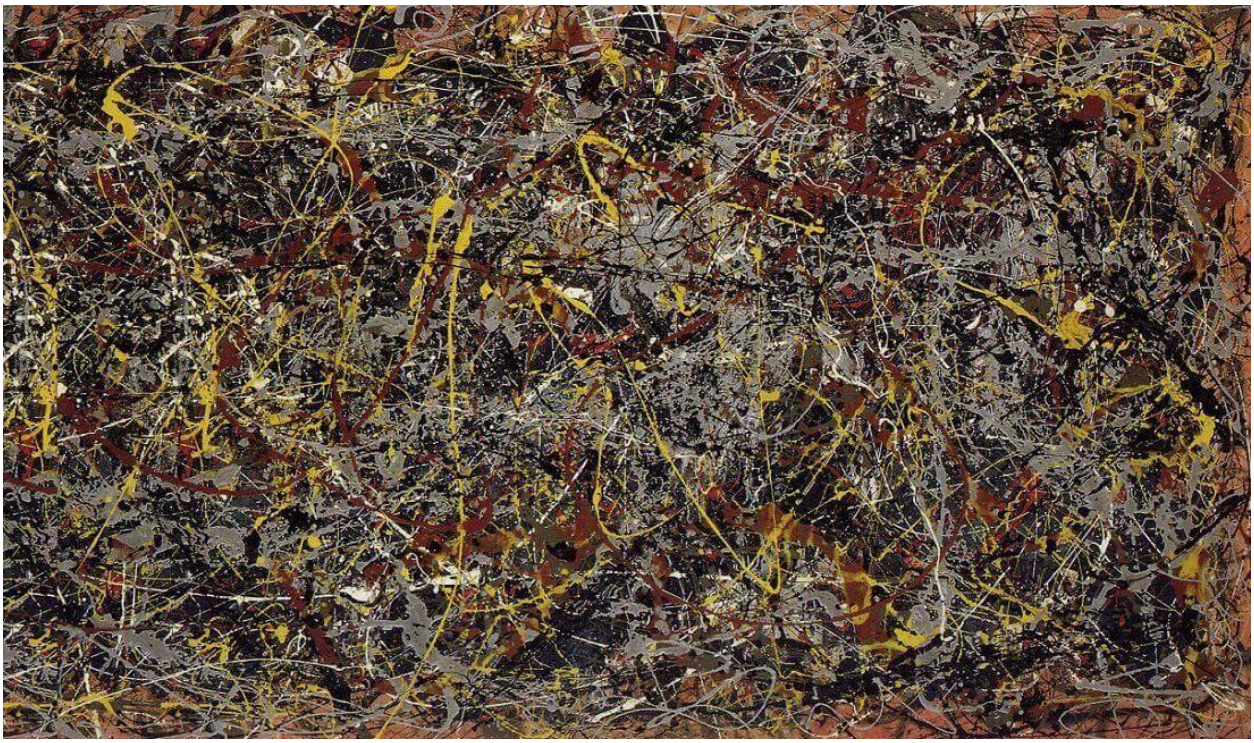

Figure 11: Jackson Pollock, *Number 5, 1948*, 1948, oil on fiberboard, 96 x 48 in., private collection, New York.

Figure 12: Pollock, *Number 17A*, 1948, oil paint on fiberboard, 44 x 34.1 in., private collection.

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