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Adolf Dehn: Midcentury Manhattan - Ephemera

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2017

## Adolf Dehn Brochure

Fairfield University Art Museum

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# ADOLF DEHN

## Midcentury Manhattan



# ADOLF DEHN: Midcentury Manhattan

January 27 - April 7, 2017

## Acknowledgments

It is especially fitting that the Fairfield University Art Museum present the exhibition *Adolf Dehn: Midcentury Manhattan*, as our distinguished colleague Dr. Philip Eliasoph, the guest curator, is the author of a forthcoming book about Dehn's Manhattan imagery. A leading expert in the field of American realist art, he has here turned his attention to these evocative and iconic images of New York City by day and night.

Profound gratitude is due to Dr. Eliasoph for sharing his enthusiasm and expertise and for authoring the following text. Thanks are also due to Carey Mack Weber, Assistant Director of the museum, for capably overseeing the organization, design and installation of the exhibition and related print materials, to Lauren Williams, Museum Assistant, and Isabel Telonis '17, student intern, as well as to Dr. Lynn Babington, Dr. Mary Frances Malone, Edmund Ross, Tess Long, and Susan Cipollaro.

For generous support of the exhibition we are immensely grateful to the Robert and Mercedes Eichholz Foundation and the Adolf and Virginia Dehn Foundation. *TownVibe* is the exclusive media sponsor of our 2016-17 season in the Bellarmine Hall Galleries. Finally, we are deeply grateful to Andy Lowe and Ginny Connors of the Dehn Foundation for their generous loans and for their collaboration, as well as to the other institutions and private collectors who lent to the exhibition.

Linda Wolk-Simon, PhD  
Frank and Clara Meditz Director and Chief Curator  
Fairfield University Art Museum

*Numbers below images refer to checklist at end of brochure*  
Front cover: checklist no. 21  
Back cover: checklist no. 12

## ADOLF DEHN'S AMERICAN JOURNEY

### I. Minnesota to Manhattan

"There are no second acts in American life," F. Scott Fitzgerald drily noted in his unfinished final novel, *The Last Tycoon*.<sup>1</sup> Capturing the disconsolate mood of the author's untimely death at age 44, it was published posthumously in 1941.

Fellow Minnesotan, artist Adolf Dehn (1895-1968) also emerged out of the heartland, and in the same generation as Fitzgerald. Coincidentally, in the very year of Fitzgerald's passing, the August 8, 1941, issue of *Life* touted Dehn. He was enjoying the zenith of his career. The five-page color spread promoted Dehn's art in America's most cherished communal print space: words and images converged in the public sphere. This exhibition explores Dehn's artistic legacy with a focus on his depictions of Manhattan, and proposes that it deserves a reappraisal and "second act."

Similar to Fitzgerald, Dehn's career was a rollercoaster: sensational early success, widespread international acclaim, then a fall from grace. Both were outpaced by newer creative voices. Fitzgerald struggled to earn a living as a Hollywood script hack, while Dehn was overtaken by the art world's full-throttle embrace of modernist idioms and abstraction. Both experienced vacillating





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popularity and moments of obscurity in their struggles to retain relevancy and favor in the public's imagination.

Dehn had been interviewed and featured in countless articles in popular magazines and highbrow art journals since arriving on the scene in the 1920s. The answers to new questions about how an artist of such stature could have gone off the radar are surprisingly revealing. That discourse embraces a robust conversation that reimagines and contextualizes the canonical core of American art between the Great Depression and the Cold War.

Unquestionably, Dehn was among the most prominent and critically recognized artists on the American scene during the interwar years and extending nearly into the early 1950s. He enjoyed an enviable exhibition record at the leading art galleries throughout the United States, and his artwork entered the permanent collections of nearly every major museum in the nation. Today, The Metropolitan Museum of Art reproduces a charming Central Park watercolor (back cover, no. 12) as its signature Manhattan image on a large array of gift shop items. However, a survey of college textbooks about American art or of recent museum exhibitions yields an unwavering result: Dehn's visibility is nearly erased. One obvious explanation is that his descriptive Manhattan images share in the precarious fate of all representational painting and printmaking at midcentury.

Much of this reevaluation is predicated on the need to see beyond Clement Greenberg's dismissal of midcentury Social Realism. Promulgating an anti-realist position in the Trotskyite *Partisan Review*, Greenberg's "Avant Garde and Kitsch" essay of 1939 effectively prophesized realism's demise.<sup>2</sup> But

the works coming into focus here, unfettered by a politically charged agenda and critical myopia, allow us renewed pleasure from Dehn's artistry. Now, they reveal a dazzling mastery of a range of media including watercolor, casein and gouache, ink wash, charcoal, pencil, and above all, an unparalleled command of lithography. Contemporary artists have shared with me that they consider him to be the founding "dean" of the school of American lithographers.

Dehn's essential nature as a printmaker taught him how to achieve a rich spectrum of tonalities and textures in the watercolor and casein paintings that blossomed in the second half of his career. Testifying to his graphic supremacy, an early exhibition review from 1929 in *The New York Times* notes:

In his lithographs Mr. Dehn curiously approaches the aspect of paint. Color weaves most graciously, without recourse to hues other than black, white and delicately harmonized grays. The scope of lithography seems to have become enlarged, thanks to the artist, by many leagues, and there is no telling what fresh expansion of a fascinating domain will manifest itself as times goes on.<sup>3</sup>

Contemplating the quality, ingenuity, and spontaneity of these images validates Dehn's original role among New York's most beloved and critically respected image-makers.

In *Adolf Dehn: Midcentury Manhattan*, I argue that stylistic transformations in American art simply left Dehn by the wayside.<sup>4</sup> This pattern is consistently noted in the critical fortunes of a generation of maligned, exiled realists. Spanning over 40 years of sustained research, curating, and authoring catalogs and books, I have explored this cul-de-sac of "left behind" realists: Paul Cadmus, Colleen Browning, Stevan Dohanos, Henry Koerner, and Robert Vickrey. They were all academically trained, figurative, narrative, and literary-based artists. Each suffered from the unorthodoxy of "style heresy": out of sync with the transition defined by the title of Hilton Kramer's book: *The Age of the Avant-Garde*, Dehn fell out of favor.<sup>5</sup> Courageously, he never attempted to morph into a late-in-life abstractionist as did many of his peers facing extinction.



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Dehn was celebrated in a generously illustrated *Life* color splash in 1941. It appeared in that last halcyon summer before Pearl Harbor and

America's entry into the inferno of World War II. No savvy art critic of that day could have predicted how Dehn and his closest professional friends – Arnold Blanch, Guy Pene du Bois, and Reginald Marsh – would be surpassed as a tectonic style shift fractured their positions. A generation of Social Realists, including veteran Ashcan School masters and fellow travelers flirting with the Communist Party such as Ben Shahn, the Soyer Brothers, and William Gropper, were usurped with the advent of America's purely indigenous form of visual jazz: Abstract Expressionism.



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The breaking point was the arrival of a powerfully inebriated, violently foul-tempered painter from Wyoming to be featured in *Life* just eight years later. In the August 11, 1949, issue, a newly crowned Jackson Pollock appears with the headline wondering: "Is he the greatest living painter in the United States?" It augured the explosive arrival and meteoric rise of the Abstract Expressionist generation.

With many of Dehn's artistic colleagues consigned to a Stygian netherworld, their contributions lost out to the mythically worshipped, triumphant "New York School." Instead of the ballyhoo of being cited as a leading American artist, by the early 1950s, Dehn was barely able to earn a living creating illustrations for insurance company calendars, holiday greeting cards, and pharmaceutical ads for middlebrow magazines. However humiliating, he carried on with a persevering dignity. And yet, as late as 1945, the Whitney Museum of American Art's esteemed director Lloyd Goodrich praised Dehn's lively watercolors for their "homely poetry ... but with a modern sensitiveness," noting that in "the beauty of skies with varied cloud shapes, there is a fresh, lyrical response to the poetry of the earth."<sup>6</sup>

## II. Paris – "Les Crazy Years" to the Harlem Renaissance

Considered a brilliantly gifted young lion out of the Minneapolis Art Institute and the Art Students League of New York, Dehn indulged himself as a cosmopolitan *bon vivant* "starving artist," touring Europe's art capitals during "Les Crazy Years" of the 1920s. Fetchingly attractive women in flapper dresses, silk stockings, and fur boas appear in his sketchbooks, highlighting his self-admitted licentiousness. Dehn indulged a string of boyish dalliances, infatuated relationships, and,

occasionally, was lured into financially arranged trysts, frequenting the last remaining brothels of Montparnasse or salons in Berlin's red-light district.<sup>7</sup>

Vagabonding like other literary and artist expatriates of the "Lost Generation," he sketched Leo Stein at a Parisian café. He was a contributor to society magazines including *Vanity Fair*, *Vogue*, and *The New Yorker* and expressed his defiantly socialist views in his ink and charcoal sketches published frequently in *The New Masses*. He inked caricatures of his friend Josephine Baker, sketching beneath the footlights during her daringly and savagely risqué *La Revue Nègre*. In 1928, he attended Kurt Weill's landmark *Threepenny Opera*, caroused in Berlin's KitKat Club, and lived *la vie bohème* on modest monthly payments sent from his New York publishers.

Dehn conversed easily in German with famed Weimar-era social satirist George Grosz, having learned the language from his grandparents. Recognizing his talents for capturing the bestial carnality of brothels and bistros in Berlin and Vienna, Grosz prophetically announced: "You will do things in America which haven't been done, which only you can do – as far as least as I know America."<sup>8</sup>

Donning an acerbic point of view, Dehn was humorously motivated to crucify swine-like burghers and Main Street Babbitts back in the States. He launched a blistering satirical attack on bourgeois pomposity. A favorite target: Manhattan's high society, whose vacuous snobbishness and besotted, double-faced pretensions Dehn exposed. In the spirit of William Hogarth, Honoré Daumier, or Thomas Nast, Dehn came to understand that the satirist's sting comes from merciless caricature. "Caricature is always Us against Them. The joke is shared; so is the hate."<sup>9</sup>

It was the Great White Way's teeming nightlife, its old burlesque houses, and Harlem's famed jazz salons that most appealed to Dehn's unquenched tastes for libidinous sensuality. A pacifist war resister from WWI who eventually received an honorable discharge, known for his Communist leanings, Dehn was on the front line of artists devoted to civil rights advocacy. No white artist of his generation was more in tune – and on the spot – with the jitterbugging and musical frenzy of the Harlem Renaissance. But Jim Crow's shadow even loomed over Harlem's world famous jazz venues. Jazz meccas like the Savoy Ballroom, Lenox Lounge, and Cotton Club denied African-American patrons seating near the dance floor in black Harlem. In 1938, Dehn was invited by his close friend, Communist party member and civil rights activist Barney Josephson, to paint a mural for Manhattan's first integrated jazz club: Café Society in Greenwich Village.<sup>10</sup>

### III. Manhattan *Caput Mundi*: “All the Mystery and the Beauty in the World”

Gotham’s rising skyline, which corsets its Edenic garden of Central Park, became Dehn’s visual obsession at midcentury. He repeatedly depicted the rooftop silhouettes of iconic buildings ringing the park. In hundreds of sketches, lithographs, and paintings, the park is ever-changing – a transitory subject akin to Cezanne’s fixation with Mont Sainte-Victoire. Beneath a nuanced wash of billowing clouds pierced by Manhattan Island’s riveting shafts of east/west sunlight, Dehn fused these elements into his signature vision. By midcentury, Manhattan had become the world’s capital city. Dehn’s art explores and captures the frenetic pulse of the Machine Age’s new *caput mundi*.



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Elegant Beaux-Arts landmarks along Central Park’s southern flank including the Plaza, Sherry Netherland, Hampshire House, and Essex House hotels are backdrops of human design intersecting with Olmstead and Vaux’s master plan of controlled nature. Puncturing the Empire City’s skyline, sleek Art Deco wonders such as the Chrysler and Empire State Buildings and Rockefeller Center towers complete Dehn’s urban canvas.

*Central Park in Spring*, 1941 (back cover, no. 12), a watercolor in the collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, conveys how the park functions as the heart of the city. A cycle of watercolors in the exhibition surveys the Park’s rambling through the seasons. One wonders if Vivaldi’s strings were playing in Dehn’s mind as he composed lusciously verdant summer greens, deep autumnal reds, and the stark desolation of winter, using spring as his rejuvenating coda. Undeniably, each viewer conjures his or her own synesthesia – experiences of Central Park’s wonders as recollections, memories, and dreams.

Why was Dehn so visually obsessed with Central Park, especially its 22-acre butterfly-shaped artificial lake? It was probably a nostalgic affection, for Lake Tetonka bordered his boyhood home of Waterville, Minnesota. Even after traveling the world and becoming a Manhattan resident in 1929, his fondest memories were linked to backcountry adventures hunting, trapping, and fishing along the lakeside.

While Manhattan’s building façades, rooftops, streets, entertainment venues, and recreational parks were depicted by many urban scene painters such as George Bellows, Edward Hopper, and

Reginald Marsh, Dehn set himself apart with a series of wide panoramas of the city seen from either the Brooklyn docks or the deck of the Staten Island Ferry. His impulse to “take it all in” continues the open vistas and deep perspectives of Venetian *vedute* [views] that artists like Canaletto and Guardi made popular during the 18<sup>th</sup>-century Grand Tour. *The Battery*, 1953 (p. 1, no. 19), *Lower Manhattan*, 1956-57 (no. 26), and *Manhattan Harbor*, 1956 (no. 24), are all breathtakingly depicted with heightened, bird’s-eye points of view. Dehn achieves a visual, emotional gestalt of place and feeling. These images plunge viewers into their vortex. Swallowed by their “all overness,” New York’s infinite harbor becomes Dehn’s *Gesamtkunstwerk* – a synthesis of being and seeing.



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This transcendence is also expressed by Nick Carraway, Fitzgerald’s narrator in *The Great Gatsby*. An anti-hero, Carraway is the conflicted Minnesotan who loses his innocence while gazing out at the dangerous allure of the shimmering metropolis. In awe, he whispers: “The city seen from the Queensboro Bridge is always the city seen for the first time, in its first wild promise of all the mystery and the beauty in the world.”<sup>11</sup> This swooning rapture is likewise expressed in George Gershwin’s symphonic tribute to the nocturnal city, his *Rhapsody in Blue* of 1924. Gershwin described his innovative score: “I felt the rhythms of American life [...] to realize the richness of life.”<sup>12</sup> Dehn’s brush puts forth a parallel mood of enchanted ecstasy.

Adolf Dehn’s trajectory was impacted by the shifts from realism to abstraction in the ebb and flow of American art’s tidal changes. His stellar achievement, but paradoxically obscured position, within that landscape echoes the concluding passages from *Gatsby*. Carraway notes with resignation: “It eluded us [...] So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.”<sup>13</sup>

Philip Eliasoph, PhD  
Professor of Art History & Visual Culture  
Department of Visual & Performing Arts

## NOTES:

1. F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Last Tycoon*, New York: Charles F. Scribner's Sons, 1941, p. 189.
2. Clement Greenberg, "Avant Garde and Kitsch," *The Partisan Review*, 6:5, 1939.
3. Edward Alden Jewell, "Dehn and Lemon," exhibition review, *The New York Times*, March 3, 1929.
4. Philip Eliasoph, *Adolf Dehn: Midcentury Manhattan*, New York and North Adams, Mass, The Artist Book Foundation, 2017, forthcoming.
5. Hilton Kramer, *The Age of the Avant-Garde, An Art Chronicle of 1956-1972*, New York: Farrar, Strauss, & Giroux, 1974.
6. Lloyd Goodrich, *American Watercolors and Winslow Homer*, Minneapolis: Walker Art Center exhibition catalogue, 1945, published by the American Artists Group, p. 91. This exhibition continued to the Detroit Art Institute and the Brooklyn Museum.
7. For this rehearsal of Dehn's romantic intrigues, I am deeply indebted to Professor Henry Adams, Case Western University. Dr. Adams has generously shared with me his unpublished manuscript covering Dehn's entire career. With remarkable candor and valued scholarly insights, Adams' study, *The Sensuous Life of Adolf Dehn: American Master of Watercolor and Printmaking* (tentatively titled), is anticipated as the definitive monograph.
8. Carl Zigrosser, *The Artist in America: Twenty-four Close-ups of Contemporary Printmakers*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1942, p. 15.
9. William Feaver, *Masters of Caricature*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1981, p. 9.
10. Barney Josephson, Terry Trilling-Josephson, *Café Society: The Wrong Place for the Right People*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009.
11. F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1925, p. 69.
12. George Gershwin, "Our New National Anthem," from Theatre Arts Magazine, August, 1925, reprinted in Gregory R. Suriano, *Gershwin in His Time: A Biographical Scrapbook, 1919-1937*, New York: Gramercy Books, 1998, p. 47.
13. F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, *ibid.* p. 182.

## EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

1. *Girl Reading Vanity Fair*, ca. 1925-30  
Ink on paper  
10 x 8 1/2 inches  
On loan from the Estate of Adolf and Virginia Dehn
2. *New York Night*, 1930  
Lithograph. Edition: 30  
28 3/8 x 19 7/8 inches  
On loan from the Estate of Adolf and Virginia Dehn
3. *On Eighth Avenue*, 1930  
Lithograph. Edition: 30  
18 1/8 x 15 1/8 inches  
On loan from the Estate of Adolf and Virginia Dehn
4. *Brooklyn Waterfront*, 1930  
Lithograph. Edition: Undetermined, plus artist's proofs  
13 1/8 x 19 1/8 inches  
On loan from the Estate of Adolf and Virginia Dehn
5. *New York Harbor from Montague Terrace, Brooklyn*, 1930  
Ink wash on paper  
13 x 26 inches  
On loan from the Estate of Adolf and Virginia Dehn
6. *Lower Manhattan*, 1931  
Lithograph. Edition: 20  
15 1/8 x 10 3/16 inches  
On loan from the Estate of Adolf and Virginia Dehn
7. *Under the Brooklyn Bridge*, 1932  
Lithograph. Edition: 15  
9 1/4 x 14 7/8 inches  
On loan from the Estate of Adolf and Virginia Dehn
8. *Stuyvesant Park at Night*, 1934  
Lithograph. Edition: 25  
13 3/16 x 9 15/16 inches  
On loan from the Estate of Adolf and Virginia Dehn

9. *Untitled (Ladies at the Museum)*, ca. 1935-39  
Pencil on paper  
10 ½ x 15 inches  
On loan from the Estate of Adolf and Virginia Dehn
10. *Untitled*, 1936  
Watercolor on paper  
22 ¼ x 15 inches  
On loan from the Estate of Adolf and Virginia Dehn
11. *Untitled (Times Square Subway Station)*, ca. 1940  
Lithographic crayon on paper  
9 x 10 ¾ inches  
On loan from the Estate of Adolf and Virginia Dehn
12. *Spring in Central Park*, 1941  
Watercolor on paper  
17 ⅞ x 27 ¼ inches  
Lent by The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Fletcher Fund, 1941 (41.113ab)
13. *Central Park*, 1942  
Watercolor on paper  
21 x 30 inches  
On loan from Harmon-Meek Gallery, Naples, FL
14. *New York Harbor*, 1945  
Pastel on paper  
27 ½ x 40 ¾ inches  
On loan from the collection of Barbara and Steven Goldstein Hertzberg, Great Neck, NY
15. *Central Park Night*, 1946  
Lithograph. Edition: 40, plus trial proofs  
12 ⅜ x 17 ½ inches  
On loan from the Estate of Adolf and Virginia Dehn
16. *Manhattan from Docks*, 1947  
Watercolor on paper  
21 ¾ x 29 ½ inches  
On loan from the Estate of Adolf and Virginia Dehn

17. *Central Park South*, 1952  
Lithograph. Edition: 30, plus trial proofs  
11 ⅞ x 15 ⅞ inches  
On loan from the Estate of Adolf and Virginia Dehn
18. *New York Skyline (or Union Square at Night)*, 1952  
Lithograph. Edition: 25  
11 ⅞ x 15 ⅞ inches  
On loan from the Estate of Adolf and Virginia Dehn
19. *The Battery*, 1953  
Casein on panel  
29 x 60 inches  
On loan from the Estate of Adolf and Virginia Dehn
20. *The United Nations Building*, 1954  
Watercolor on paper  
18 x 23 ¾ inches  
On loan from Plattsburgh State Art Museum, State University of New York  
(Gift of Virginia Dehn and Harmon-Meek Gallery)
21. *White Central Park*, 1954  
Watercolor on paper  
20 x 28 inches  
On loan from a private collection, New York
22. *Untitled (View of Lower Manhattan at Night)*, ca. 1955  
Casein on panel  
29 ½ x 60 inches  
On loan from the Estate of Adolf and Virginia Dehn
23. *Autumn in Central Park*, 1956  
Watercolor on paper  
21 x 28 ¾ inches  
On loan from a private collection, Washington D.C.
24. *Manhattan Harbor*, 1956  
Casein on panel  
28 x 42 inches  
On loan from the Estate of Adolf and Virginia Dehn



- 25. *Central Park at Night*, 1956  
Casein on panel  
28 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 42 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>8</sub> inches  
On loan from the Estate of Adolf and Virginia Dehn
- 26. *Lower Manhattan*, 1956-57  
Casein on panel  
29 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> x 60 inches  
On loan from the Estate of Adolf and Virginia Dehn
- 27. *Central Park Winter*, 1957  
Oil on masonite  
24 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> x 55 inches  
On loan from the Collection of Sarah and Elie Hirschfeld
- 28. *Pond in Winter, Central Park*, 1960  
Watercolor on paper  
15 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 27 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> inches  
On loan from a private collection, Washington D.C.



Adolf Dehn creating charcoal sketches of Central Park looking east towards Fifth Avenue and 65th Street, ca. early 1960s.

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