Winter/Spring 1991
Volume 5, Numbers 1–2

American Art

published by Oxford University Press in association with the
National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution

Features

Articles

"Who Will Paint New York?"

"The World's New Art Center" and the Skyscraper Paintings of Georgia O'Keeffe

Anna C. Chave

"For the First Time Europe Seeks Inspiration at Our Shores in the Persons of a Group of Modernist French Artists, Who Find Europe Impossible Because of Its War-Drenched Atmosphere—Macmonnies Predicts that the Effect of this Migration will be Far-Reaching on Art of America and the Older Continent" proclaimed a long headline in the *New York Tribune* in October 1915. The French artists in question concurred that New York was "destined to become the artistic centre of the world," and not only because of the war. Albert Gleizes averred that New York's skyscrapers were "works of art . . . which equal the most admired old world creations" and that "the genius who built the Brooklyn Bridge is to be classed alongside the genius who built Notre Dame de Paris." Francis Picabia argued, "Since machinery is the soul of the modern world, and since the genius of machinery attains its highest expression in America, why is it not reasonable to believe that in America the art of the future will flower most brilliantly?" Jean Crotti predicted that "New York will come to be looked upon as the cradle of art, usurping the proud place enjoyed so long by Paris and other important European cities. . . . Americans have come over to us. Now we are coming over to you." That same year, Marcel Duchamp complained, "If only America would realize that the art of Europe is finished—dead—and that America is the country of the art of the future, instead of trying to base everything she does on European traditions!" He continued, "And yet in spite of it, try as she will, she gets beyond these traditions even in dimension alone," alluding to the city's great skyscrapers.[1]

Though they had sought out New York as a remote haven during wartime, these vanguard Parisians found they had landed not at the peripheries of modern culture, but at something like its very center. "The Great War . . . hastened what prophets regarded as inevitable," Frederick James Gregg announced in *Vanity Fair* in January 1915. "New York is now, for the time being at least, the art capital of the world, that is to say the commercial art centre, where paintings and sculptures are viewed, discussed, purchased and exchanged." The momentous declaration of Gregg's headline—that New York had become "The World's New Art Center"—was not the last of its kind. The same claim was made in the late 1920s by the critic Henry McBride and again by Clement Greenberg in 1948, but only Greenberg's statement would lodge in the standard narratives of modern art: "Now when it comes to the Zeitgeist, we Americans are the most advanced people on earth, if only because we are the most industrialized." That the "most advanced people" should start producing the most "advanced" art in the world's most "advanced" city seems consistent enough, though Greenberg described himself as startled by the realization that "the main premises of Western art have at last migrated to the United States, along with the center of

Alfred Stieglitz, *Georgia O'Keeffe*, 1920(?). Gelatin silver print, 8 1/4 x 5 1/4 in. National Gallery of Art, Alfred Stieglitz Collection

1 *The Shelton with Sunspots*, 1926. Oil on canvas, 49 x 31 in. The Art Institute of Chicago, Gift of Leigh B. Block

gravity of industrial production and political power. . . . It is not beyond possibility that the cubist tradition may enjoy a new efflorescence in this country." For Greenberg, then (in contrast to the prognostication of the American sculptor Frederick Macmonnies), the migration of influences was to travel one way only. Because he viewed Cubism—as most modern art historians have ever since—as the source of all legitimate modern visual languages, he lauded only those artists who had drunk deep from that fountainhead of modern art, artists such as Jackson Pollock (whose work largely prompted this claim of American dominance). The pivotal, global shifts in economic and political power to which Greenberg alluded occurred, however, not after the Second World War when Pollock hit his stride, but following the first. In the decade after World War I, New York replaced London as the financial capital of the world, while the United States as a whole became "incomparably the greatest economic power in the world."[2]

The newfound affluence of the United States was expressed most visibly in a construction boom, and extensive building was necessary to accommodate the flow of people from rural areas to the city. In the 1920s the population of urban America grew by 27 percent, as the nation became for the first time predominantly urban. New York "got a brand new skyline," with the area around Grand Central Station, in particular, almost totally rebuilt with the tall buildings that were increasingly greeted as the symbol of a new architectural era. The American architectural theorist Claude Bragdon observed in 1925:

Eminent European critics, visiting these shores, are in the habit of declaring that the American Spirit expresses itself most eloquently in jazz music and in the skyscraper. . . . Not only is the skyscraper a symbol of the American Spirit—restless, centrifugal, perilously poised—but it is the only truly original development in the field of architecture to which we can lay unchallenged claim.

Bragdon made these observations in an essay on the newly completed Shelton Hotel, then the most celebrated feature of the new skyline near Grand Central.[3]

As it happened, Bragdon lived in an apartment in the Shelton close to that of Georgia O'Keeffe (1887–1986) and her husband, Alfred Stieglitz, and it was just this manifestation of the "American Spirit"—the Shelton Hotel (fig. 1) and other skyscrapers from the same burgeoning Manhattan neighborhood—that O'Keeffe would capture in a remarkable series of urban landscapes painted between 1925 and 1930. Evincing a forthright pragmatism unashamedly overtaken by a visionary romanticism, O'Keeffe's skyscraper paintings glorified that phenomenon that—as the first artifact of American culture to attract sustained international attention—had unexpectedly succeeded in giving New York City a unique, global identity.

"Paris is no longer the capital of Cosmopolis. . . . New York . . . has become the battleground of modern civilization," declared Henry McBride in 1929. American artists who persisted in traveling abroad to work were "jeopardizing their careers for the dubious consommations [*sic*] of the Café de la Rotunde."[4] McBride's counsel was wasted on Georgia O'Keeffe, who spurned the European capitals until her old age, but others were less receptive to such tidings, even those living in Paris at the time.[5] Writing from Paris in 1921, a puzzled Charles Demuth noted how interested the French avant-garde was in events in New York: "Sometimes it seems impossible to come back—we are so out of it," he wrote. "Then one sees Marcel [Duchamp] or Gleizes and they will say, 'Oh! Paris. New York is the place,—there are the modern ideas,—

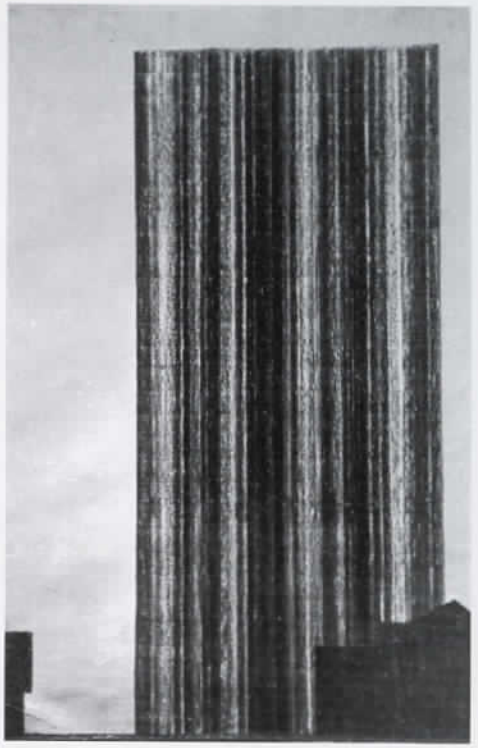
2 Abraham Walkowitz, *New York.* Pencil on paper, published in *Soil* 1 (December 1916)

Europe is finished.' " Even so, the problem for American artists was that "our art is, as yet, outside of our art world," as Robert J. Coady put it in 1917, citing the skyscraper, the steam shovel, and Charlie Chaplin, among other examples. To Duchamp, this was no problem: "New York itself is a work of art, a complete work of art," he proclaimed in 1915, and he proposed to designate Cass Gilbert's Woolworth tower, the architectural sensation of the day, as one of his "readymades." Duchamp saw no reason to use an antiquated medium such as painting to represent New York. But photography was another matter. "I would like to see it make people despise painting until something else will make photography unbearable," Duchamp wrote to Alfred Stieglitz in 1922. For that matter, New York proved from the outset to be a less tractable subject for painters (or sculptors) than for photographers, such as Stieglitz or Berenice Abbott, who could turn their machines on a machine-made subject. But Coady believed that an authoritative image of New York would have to be a painted image because painting was historically the authoritative medium.[6]

"Who will paint New York? Who?" Coady asked again and again in the first issue of *Soil*, published in 1916. Henry Tyrrell echoed this cry in the *New York World* in 1923:

New York, grandiose and glittering—the modern Wonder City of dynamic pulses, wireless, magnetism, electricity and tempered steel, of piled-up architecture like magic pinnacles of Alpine ice. . . . There she stands, matchless and overwhelming. Who shall paint her portrait? This to modern art is the flaming cynosure, this to modern artists the task that beckons with the fatalistic fascination of the unattainable.[7]

As Coady and Tyrrell saw it, attempts at painting the city made by artists like Abraham Walkowitz (fig. 2) and Joseph Stella did not solve the problem, for these artists pictured New York more or less as Fernand Léger and Robert Delaunay had pictured Paris: in a Cubist vernacular. That New York was intrinsically "the Cubist city, the Futurist city" had been decreed by Francis Picabia the moment he arrived there. Fresh from Paris, he claimed that he saw "much, much more" in New York "than you who are used to see[ing] it" and that he could show Americans how to describe New York most effectively—with the fractured idiom then current in Paris. Cubism helped to stress the disjunctiveness of lives lived at quickening tempos in Paris's ever more crowded surroundings, where artifacts of new regimes abruptly insinuated themselves amid the pervasive artifacts of old regimes and of a pretechnological order. But to paint New York, where the new was fairly continuous with the old (which was not so old in any case) and where the new looked newer than anywhere else, posed a



3 Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, *Glass Skyscraper Project*, 1922. Schematic view of elevation. Charcoal, brown chalk, crayon on paper, 54 1/2 x 32 3/4 in. Mies van der Rohe Archive, Museum of Modern Art, New York, Gift of George Danforth

different problem. Solving that problem implied solving the greatest problem of all for American artists: that of formulating an indigenous mode of expression, a new art for the New World.[8]

Cubism undertook "the task of [the] revaluation of old values in Art and . . . perform[ed] it with violence," Naum Gabo once wrote. Cubist paintings are "like a heap of shards from a vessel exploded from within." The Futurists seized on Cubism's violence from the first, stressing that artists had to destroy the preexisting visual order to recover space for their own visions. Making room for new structures by demolishing old ones was a radical proposition to the Italians and the French, but it was a routine practice in an American city like New York. While European artists had liberating dreams of a tabula rasa, the specter of a cultural void was a terrifying, all too real prospect to American artists. What history they had was secondhand—rootless, eclectic, and reimagined—and that was the kind of history they often endeavored not to eradicate, but to recuperate and integrate into their work. Using remnants of European culture to help piece together their own self-image, Americans articulated their identity as ex-colonies. The skyscraper Duchamp wanted to designate a ready-made, for example—the Woolworth building—was an ornate, ersatz, Neo-Gothic cathedral built by a dimestore magnate.[9]

"Look at the sky-scrapers!" Duchamp exulted. "Has Europe anything to show more beautiful than these?" No matter how ornate and Europeanized the Woolworth building was—and Duchamp regretted that aspect of the building—no one could envision such an illimitable structure in Europe. The skyscraper appeared at once tellingly American and distinctly modern—a persuasive answer to that pressing question: "What will the building of the twentieth century look like?" The American critic Charles Downing Lay observed in 1923, "Like all great art [New York's architecture] has grown from the conditions of our life . . . as an expression of our composite genius," while singling out the Shelton Hotel for his praise. But those huge, ornamented, masonry structures, such as the Woolworth building and the Shelton, which were seen as exemplary by critics in their day, are generally downplayed by historians today in favor of those (less representative) buildings that can be seen as foreshadowing the sleek, modernist vision of the Bauhaus or the International Style. By the early 1920s European architects such as Ludwig Mies van der Rohe were applying Bauhaus principles to skyscraper design, picturing an ideal modern tower—a geometric volume cleansed of ornament and historical referents—made possible by new building technologies (fig. 3). There was no call in Europe for such structures, so these architects looked hopefully instead to the United States for opportunities to realize their visions, perceiving it as a country

4 *Radiator Building—Night, New York*, 1927. Oil on canvas, 48 x 30 in. Alfred Stieglitz Collection, Carl van Vechten Gallery of Fine Arts at Fisk University, Nashville, Tennessee

that had "escaped Europe and its history willfully, in order to create a new universe and to initiate a new time," as Thomas van Leeuwen has expressed it.[10]

The European fascination with the skyscraper was connected with "the appeal America exercised as the ideological reflection of anything inadmissible in ancien regime Europe," Van Leeuwen has written.

America was free, it was unlimited in space, it abounded in natural resources and in money. It knew no tradition, it had no history.

From this perspective, the fact that American architects and artists persisted in following the precepts of tradition was baffling and even unforgivable. Many Europeans became convinced that they had a clearer vision of the new art and architecture that belonged in the New World than those who lived there, and they remonstrated with Americans to address their lack of self-perception. "The American character contains the elements of an extraordinary art," because American life is "abstract," "scientific," and "cold" like the twentieth century itself, Duchamp reasoned in 1915, but "the traditions weigh too heavily upon you, turn you into a sort of religious fanatics [*sic*] as little yourselves as possible." For Duchamp as for Mies, the advent of the skyscraper signaled "the call of utility." Americans, however, saw their "cathedrals of commerce" not only as models of efficiency but also as magic mountains of steel and stone, signifying both their material and spiritual ambitions. And while some of Mies's pristine towers were eventually built in the United States, they would never capture the public imagination as did those American-designed, tall buildings that evoked great historical and natural monuments.[11]

"The major formal and theoretical changes in skyscraper design began in the early 1920s with the work of Ferriss, Goodhue, Hood, and others," the architectural historian Carol Willis has written. "The characteristics of this new aesthetic were an emphasis on formal values of mass and silhouette with a subordination of ornament."[12] The identifiable buildings painted by O'Keeffe all dated from this period and were all located in the city's second great outcropping of skyscrapers. Ignoring the downtown skyscrapers rendered by artists before her—the tall buildings packed along the narrow lanes of the Wall Street area, which Joseph Pennell had etched; the famed Flat Iron Building, which Stieglitz had photographed; the ornate Woolworth and Municipal buildings, painted in watercolor by John Marin; even the low-rise, bohemian district of Greenwich Village, depicted by John Sloan—O'Keeffe made her own the stately skyscrapers rising along the broad avenues of her midtown neighborhood. This area boasted fashionable shops, galleries, offices (including the celebrated Radiator Building, designed by Raymond Hood; fig. 4), and, her preferred subject, upscale residential hotels—the Shelton, the Berkley (fig. 5), and the Ritz Tower. Taking some cues on visual poetics from the dark, theatrical drawings of the visionary architectural draftsman Hugh Ferriss (fig. 6) and some on composition, perhaps, from the cleanly composed architectural photographs of Charles Sheeler (fig. 7), O'Keeffe contrived her own ravishing vision of New York as a city awash in sunlight, moonglow, or the dazzling aura of an artificial firmament.[13]

It is difficult now, except in O'Keeffe's pictures of it, to see the appeal of the Shelton Hotel—her favorite architectural subject—which exemplified a vital turning point in skyscraper design. But to critics of the day this mammoth, austere structure was a revelation; it was "not a tower on a building, but it is itself a tower and . . . a really thrilling example of

5 *New York, Night*, 1929. Oil on canvas, 40 1/8 x 19 1/8 in. Nebraska Art Association, Thomas C. Woods Memorial Collection, Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery, University of Nebraska-Lincoln

6 Hugh Ferriss, *The Shelton Hotel*, 1927. Published in Ferriss, *The Metropolis of Tomorrow* (1929; reprint, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Architectural Press, 1986)

7 Charles Sheeler, *The Shelton*. Photograph published in *The Arts* 4 (August 1923)

vertical movement in composition. . . . No one, I believe, can look on the Shelton from near or far without some lifting of the spirit."[14] The hotel O'Keeffe chose to live in was the center of interest in architectural circles for technical reasons as well. As one of the first major buildings to make effective use of the so-called setback mode necessitated by a 1916 zoning law (enacted to ensure that tall buildings not prevent sunlight from reaching the streets), the Shelton proved highly influential. Ferriss had executed a series of studies of architectural solutions to the law's stipulations, and, in designing the Shelton, Arthur Loomis Harmon followed his basic dictum that the setbacks be boldly articulated in architectural form, not camouflaged by ornamentation. Ferriss's renderings of the Shelton shared with O'Keeffe's (fig. 8) an emphasis on its stepped, massive, zigguratlike silhouette. Historically, the ziggurat was a "cosmic mountain," a symbolic image of the cosmos, and both artists rendered the atmosphere enveloping the building in dramatic ways, suggesting cosmic or visionary overtones.

To Hugh Ferriss, there was in the Shelton "something reminiscent of the mountain. Many people choose it as a residence, or frequent its upper terraces, because . . . it evokes that undefinable sense of satisfaction which man ever finds on the slope of the pyramid or the mountainside." O'Keeffe and Stieglitz

8 *The Shelton Hotel at Night.* Present whereabouts unknown. Reproduced in *Arts and Decoration* 26 (March 1927)

regarded their lofty quarters as just such a refuge. Stieglitz wrote to his friend Sherwood Anderson:

New York is madder than ever. . . . But Georgia and I somehow don't seem to be of New York—nor of anywhere. We live high up in the Shelton Hotel. . . . We feel as if we were out at midocean—All is so quiet except the wind—& the trembling shaking hulk of steel in which we live—It's a wonderful place.[15]

O'Keeffe's vision of the Shelton stressed its natural aspect, likening it to an architectural mountain faced by a sheer cliff. To her and Ferriss both, the experience of the skyscrapers was one of sublimity, and by omitting human figures (surrogate viewers) within the image itself, they offered an unmediated access to that experience, picturing a New York viewed from too high up or with the head tilted too far back to admit the presence of others.

When asked about his interest in the vaunted architectural traditions of the École des Beaux-Arts, Ferriss replied that he preferred "to seek the masses of the Grand Canyon and the peaks and spaces of southern California for inspiration rather than the past of Europe" because "they are more truly American." The perceived naturalness and Americanness of O'Keeffe's vision was likewise a factor in the reception of her work. "O'Keeffe is America's. Its own exclusive product," Frances O'Brien wrote in the *Nation* in 1927. "It is refreshing to realize that she has never been to Europe. More refreshing still that she has no ambition to go there. . . . In her painting as in herself is the scattered soul of America come into kingdom." What was so American about O'Keeffe's art was not only that she painted, and painted in, a skyscraper, but also that she painted with clarity and directness. "Having purged herself of New York's borrowed art theories" during her sojourns west of the Hudson, as O'Brien saw it, she had become "of all our modern painters . . . the least influenced by any of the . . . aesthetic fashions of the time." Others also saw O'Keeffe as refusing the abstruse and dissembling ways of the Continent for a mode of visualization founded squarely on perception and

resemblance. "O'Keeffe's pictures are the clean-cut result of an intensely passionate apprehension of things," wrote Virgil Barker in 1924, and in 1927 McBride praised one of her aerial views of New York as "a sufficiently literal rendering of one of the most amazing scenes on earth. . . . The mere facts are overpowering without any mysticism."[16]

McBride also perceptively praised O'Keeffe for painting the skyscrapers "as though their largeness was their main attraction—as it probably is." Eschewing the splintering effects of Cubism, O'Keeffe pictured the midtown towers as virtually whole, sometimes isolated icons of modernity, perceived from the unobstructed viewpoints the New York of her day sometimes afforded. Constructing her portraits of skyscrapers with a few bold, vertical shapes (sometimes punctuated by rows of minuscule windows), O'Keeffe formulated a vision of the tall building that accorded with the architects' own. Louis Sullivan identified "the dominant characteristic of the tall office building" as "its tallness: the force of altitude must be in it. Let it be therefore 'a proud and soaring thing, without a dissenting line from bottom to top.' " O'Keeffe's acute sense of the skyscraper's height was undoubtedly enhanced by her living and working in one, as she was the first artist—and among the first people ever—to reside in a skyscraper. She was able to find an apartment atop a tall building in 1925, whereas Duchamp had failed in his efforts to do so a decade earlier. The building codes had changed in the interim, allowing not only office buildings but also residential hotels (though not, as yet, apartment houses) to take the form of towers.[17]

For O'Keeffe, the prospect of living in a skyscraper prompted the idea of painting New York:

When I was looking for a place to live, I decided to try the Shelton. I was shown two rooms on the 30th floor. I had never lived up so high before and was so excited that I began talking about trying to paint New York. Of course, I was told that it was an impossible idea—even the men hadn't done too well with it.

New York was seen as a man's subject, no doubt because of the skyscrapers' priapic forms, because rendering the city meant taking the kind of commanding perspective that men alone were ordinarily socialized to assume, and because men controlled the civic space.[18] O'Keeffe knew well that New York was Stieglitz's milieu more than her own. In her picture of the Radiator Building she inscribed "ALFRED STIEGLITZ" on a brilliant red sign atop an adjacent building (see fig. 4), thereby imagining her dealer-husband effectively advertising his gallery as he, in fact, had refused to do. Moving to the Shelton eased that feeling for a time, as she became attuned to the city's poetry and found ways of articulating it. Many of her New York pictures offer relatively intimate views of one or two buildings, and she often focused on the open spaces between or over buildings, emphasizing the void as much as, or more than, the skyscrapers' phallic forms. "I saw a sky shape near the Chatham Hotel where buildings were going up," O'Keeffe recalled. "It was the buildings that made this fine shape, so I sketched it and then painted it. This was in the early twenties and was my first New York painting" (fig. 9).[19] Some subsequent paintings emphasized the slitlike canyons between rows of tall buildings facing each other along an avenue.

To work and live atop a skyscraper was to realize a peculiarly modern and American vision of success and emancipation—one not commonly identified with women. Once she started realizing some income from her art, O'Keeffe's ideal urban home became a corner suite (without a kitchen) on an upper floor of a

stylish residential hotel initially designed for bachelors. "Miss O'Keeffe lives there [at the Shelton]—by choice," McBride informed his readers in 1928.

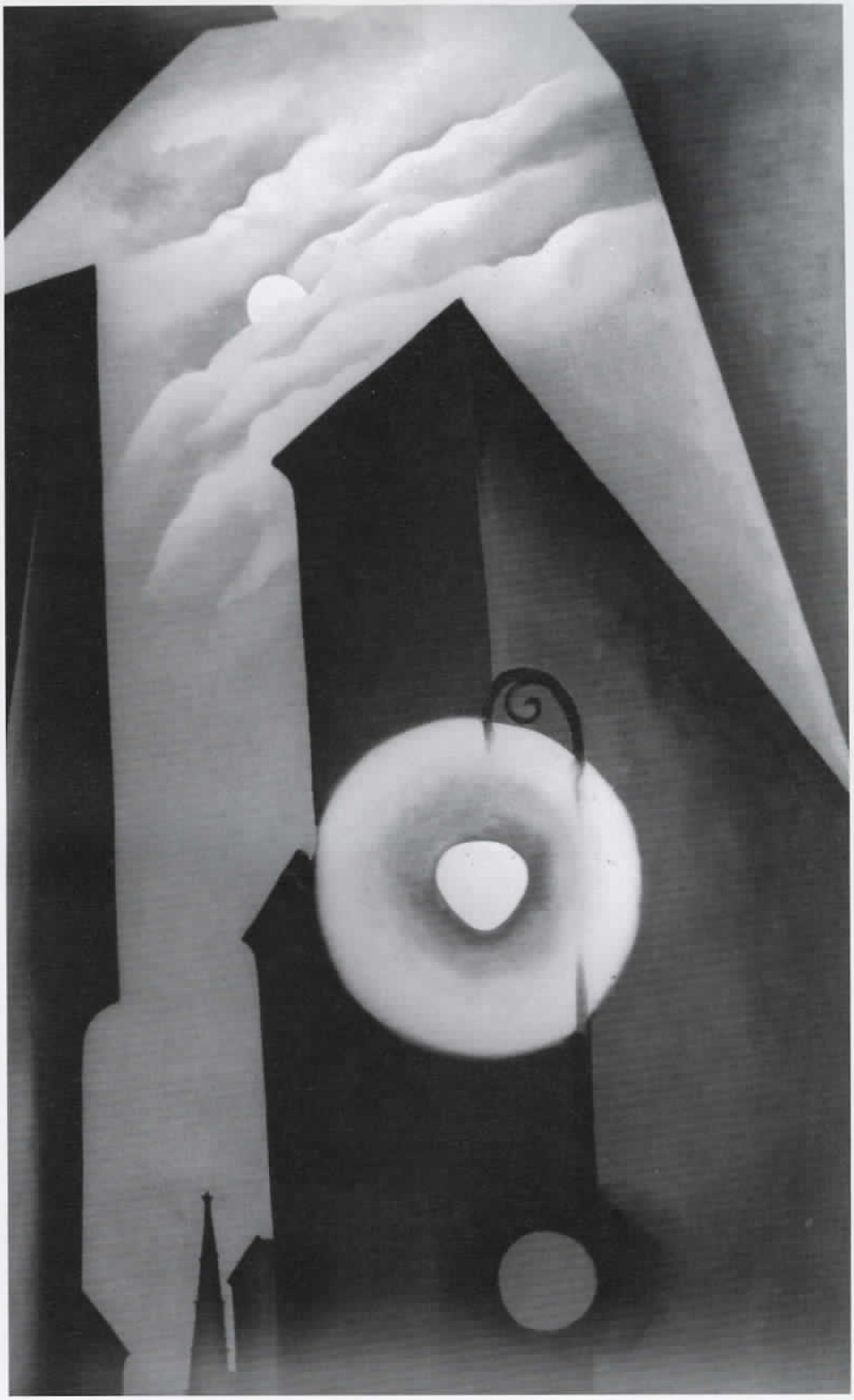
It has long lines, long surfaces—it has everything. At night it looks as though it reached to the stars, and the searchlights that cut across the sky back of it do appear to carry messages to other worlds.

Although none of her biographers have noted it, late in 1927 O'Keeffe evidently moved within the Shelton from the twenty-eighth to the thirtieth floor (of a thirty-three story building), probably to improve her view. A letter to her sister in December 1926 describes two rooms on the twenty-eighth floor with views facing north, east, and south. After January 1928 visitors described going to the thirtieth floor, to a suite with views in every direction. "I am going to live as high as I can this year," O'Keeffe said, after she had moved to her new apartment.[20]

"I realize it's unusual for an artist to work way up near the roof of a big hotel in the heart of the roaring city," O'Keeffe told a critic in 1928, "but I think that's just what the artist of today needs for stimulus. He has to have a place where he can behold the city as a unit before his eyes." Gazing east from the Shelton in the late mornings or through the late afternoon haze, O'Keeffe could render one of those spectacular, urban vistas—across the river to the industrial districts of Queens (fig. 10)—which constitute a uniquely modern vision. Looking north from her corner aerie in the evening, she could capture the whimsical, pagoda-roofed tower of the nearby Berkley Hotel and the bright stream of headlights coursing down Lexington Avenue into the stoplight- and neon-lit well at the base of her building. Most impressive of all were her awesome views of the towers seen from street level: the Shelton, illuminated by the sun and the moon; the black and silvery Radiator Building, lit up like a colossal Christmas tree; as well as anonymous structures (fig. 11). In a subtly abstracted way, O'Keeffe limned the flat, continuous shapes the tall buildings carved into the sky. In her nocturnal views of the Radiator Building and the Berkley Hotel, she similarly depicted the fantastic ornamentation of the buildings' crowns and the complex patterns created by the extravagant displays of artificial light from within and without. O'Keeffe captured New York's spellbinding theater both in its epic and in its vaudevillian aspects: "Her summation of Manhattan, unequalled in painting, has the rude thrust as well as the delicacy and glitter that distinguishes the city of America," pronounced Herbert Seligmann.[21]

O'Keeffe painted more than twenty New York scenes between 1925 and 1930, and while her own recollections do not comprise a seamless account of the course of events, she evidently painted her first city picture—*New York at Night with Moon*—early in 1925, when she lived in an apartment at 35 East 58th Street. Probably in March of that year (not the fall as she recalled), she urged Stieglitz to exhibit the picture in a group show he was organizing at the Anderson Galleries, but, anxious about premiering her outsized flower paintings at the same show, Stieglitz refused. Her city paintings had their debut instead in her solo show in February and March of 1926. *New York at Night with Moon* was the first painting to sell, by her account, on the day the show opened. "No one ever objected to my painting New York after that," she wryly remembered.[22] O'Keeffe and Stieglitz had moved to the Shelton in November of 1925, and during the few months remaining before her 1926 show she seems to have painted three detailed panoramas of the view east from her window. Given that she credited the building with inspiring her to paint the city, however, she may have been shown

9 *New York at Night with Moon,* 1925. Oil on canvas, 48 x 30 5/16 in. Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection, Lugano, Switzerland



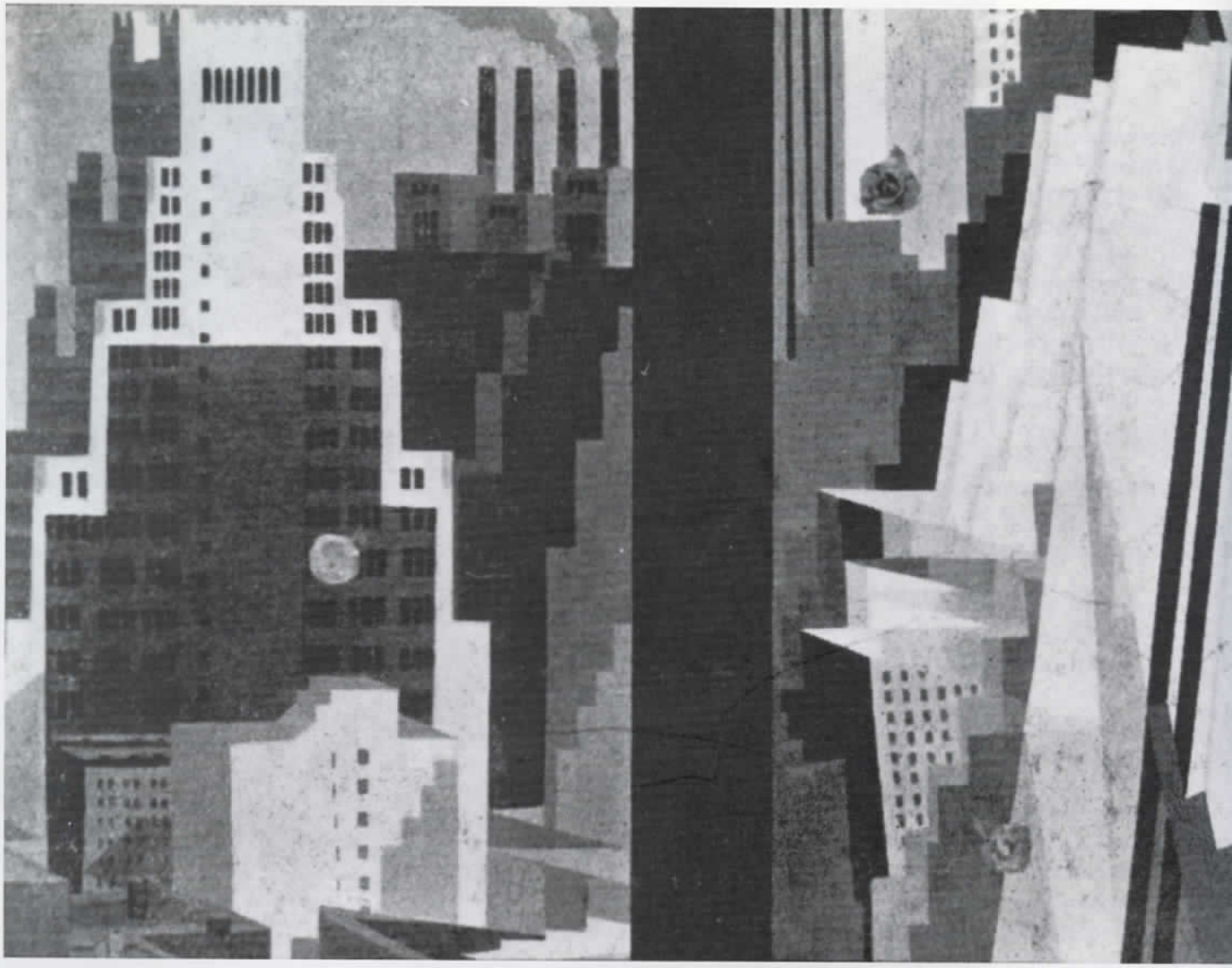
10 *East River from the Shelton*, 1927–28. Oil on canvas, 25 1/16 x 21 15/16 in. New Jersey State Museum, Trenton, Purchased by the Association for the Arts of the New Jersey State Museum with a gift from Mary Lea Johnson

11 *City Night*, 1926. Oil on canvas, 48 x 30 in. The Minneapolis Institute of Fine Arts, Gift of the Regis Corporation, Mr. and Mrs. W. John Driscoll, the Beim Foundation, the Larsen Fund, and by public subscription

the apartment before painting *New York at Night with Moon*, that is, in January or February of 1925, and she probably painted some or all of the four images of the building's facade that were in the 1926 exhibition before moving in.

Nine New York paintings led off the list for O'Keeffe's 1926 exhibition, which the *New Yorker* described as a "marvelous show of a genius which it would be foolish to miss." Six New York pictures topped the list of works at her annual show in 1927, and three city paintings headed the list the following year. These New York paintings drew some special mention in the press, but several of O'Keeffe's regular supporters—Paul Rosenfeld, Waldo Frank, Paul Strand, and Lewis Mumford, who had been principally attracted by the organic quality of her art—disapproved of the skyscraper, complaining of its dehumanizing effects.[23] What influenced O'Keeffe to quit painting New York, however (as she did in 1930, with two exceptions), was probably less the uninterest of those critics in her city pictures than the fact that the newfound spirit of American cultural pride that had permeated her New York pictures collapsed in October 1929 with the stock market crash. (It may be a factor as well that Stieglitz resumed photographing the city at this time, capturing the view west from the Shelton of the construction of Rockefeller Center, for O'Keeffe disliked sharing subjects with him.)

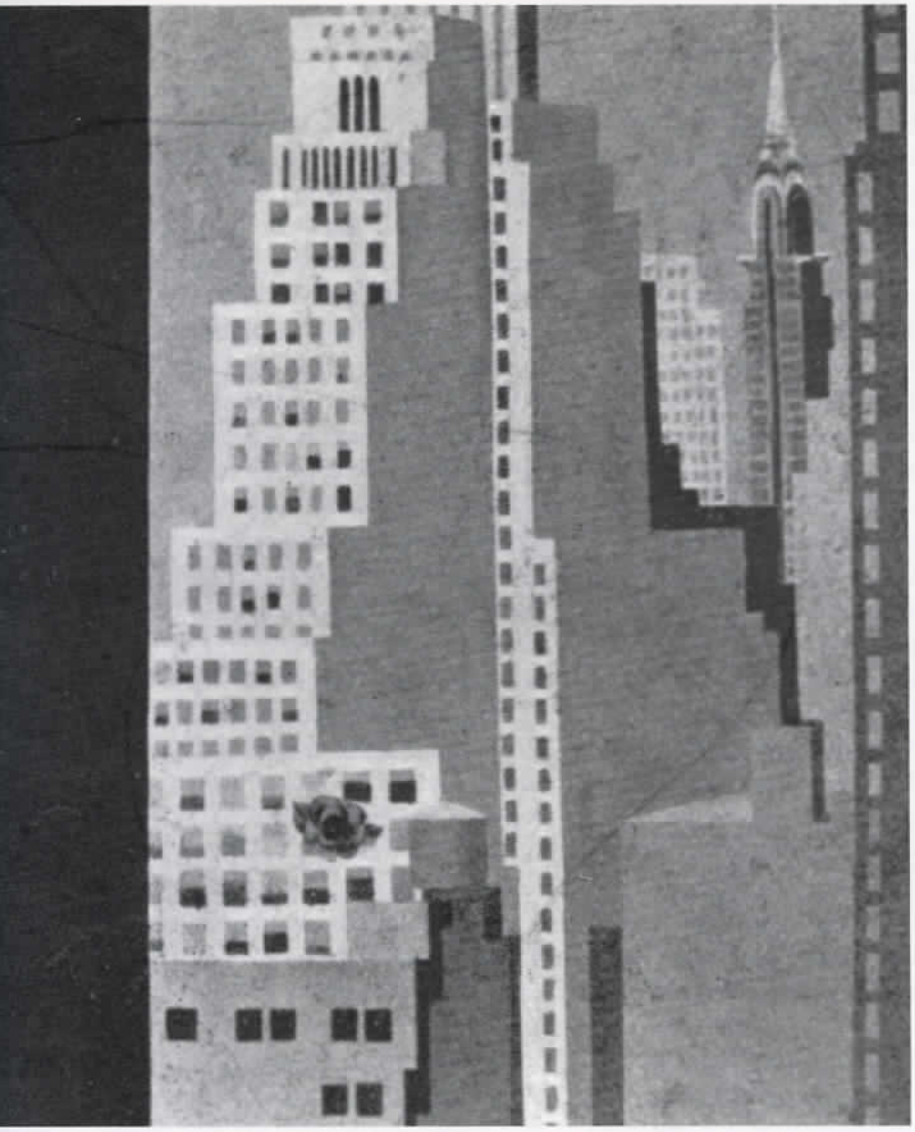
O'Keeffe's last painting of New York, executed in the 1940s, was a rather dry and rigid image of the Brooklyn Bridge (1948, Brooklyn Museum). Her other late painting of the city was a failed but telling experiment: a triptych showing a panorama of Manhattan rendered in a Cubist syntax and dotted with her trademark flowers (fig. 12).[24] O'Keeffe contrived this awkward work for an invitational exhibition of mural proposals by American artists. Organized by the Museum of Modern Art in 1932, the show was meant to convince the designers of Radio City Music Hall that they should not look exclusively abroad for talent to decorate the building. The show's premise and the Eurocentric bias of the Museum of Modern Art must have influenced O'Keeffe in an exceptional (perhaps unique?) attempt to demonstrate her command of the dominant modernist language. Betraying her indifference to Cubism's dire report on the fragmentation of the modern subject would have, in this context, simply stigmatized her as parochial. Her shrewd entry to the exhibition, however, brought the desired outcome, a chance to decorate the women's powder room at Radio City,



12 *Manhattan*, 1932. Oil on canvas triptych, each panel 48 x 21 in. Present whereabouts unknown. Reproduced in *Murals by American Painters and Photographers* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1932)

but Stieglitz interfered, and O'Keeffe withdrew from the project.[25]

Stieglitz was ambivalent about publicizing O'Keeffe's work within the United States, and he declined to promote her career abroad: "I have been asked to let this work go to Europe," he said of the show in which the city paintings premiered. "But they do not take the Woolworth Tower to Europe. And this work here is as American as the Woolworth Tower." European vanguardists might not have recognized in O'Keeffe's pictures their image of the New World's new art or architecture, in any case, for they generally perceived as truly modern only that art which conformed to their own visions of the new visual order. They widely intimated that Americans did not yet know themselves—at least not as well as the Europeans knew them. "When the Americans have traveled sufficiently across the old world to perceive their own richness, they will be able to see their own country for what it is," said a paternalistic Henri Matisse in 1930. While Matisse regarded Americans as cultural "primitives," however, no paintings come so close as O'Keeffe's *Radiator Building, Shelton with Sunspots*, or *City Night* to capturing the exhilarating experience of New York as Matisse



himself described it (while comparing the city favorably both to Paris and to the Swiss Alps): "The first time that I saw America, I mean New York, at seven o'clock in the evening, this gold and black block in the night, reflected in the water, I was in complete ecstasy. . . . New York seemed to me like a gold nugget." Strolling down the "grand avenues" of the midtown area O'Keeffe had painted, Matisse was "truly electrified" to discover that the skyscrapers created "a feeling of lightness . . . [and] of liberty through the possession of a larger space."[26]

The same New York that so inspired both O'Keeffe and Matisse also inspired the leading sculptor of the Paris avant-garde. An awed Constantin Brancusi discovered in New York in 1926

a great new poetry seeking its peculiar expression. In architecture you have found it already in the great skyscrapers. We in Europe are far behind you in this field.

Faced with O'Keeffe's paintings of the city on a visit to Stieglitz's gallery, Brancusi said admiringly, "There is no imitation of Europe here. . . . It is a force, a liberating free force." A sense of liberation was what Brancusi sought in his own work too, and he reveled in the relation of his soaring *Birds in Space* series (1923–40) to the "wonderful, inspiring flight heavenward" of the city's skyscrapers. Piet Mondrian, arriving in New York in the early 1940s, likewise perceived a profound affinity between his art and the architecture of the city, particularly as it was laid out on the clear grid of streets in the midtown area. In New York, Mondrian painted the most ambitious pictures of his career—*Broadway Boogie-Woogie* (1942–43, Museum of Modern Art) and the unfinished *Victory Boogie-Woogie* (1943–44)—and he found a circle of devotees there, as well as entrées to the market and the public. In fact, the first and only solo show Mondrian had in his lifetime was held in New York (no dealer had offered to represent him during the more twenty years he lived in Paris).[27]

To a steady stream of European, avant-garde artists who traveled to New York between the first and fifth decades of the twentieth century, then, the city's great new skyscrapers were more than architectural marvels: they were the true beacons of and for the new art. New York's "skyscrapers . . . say that the country understands art," decreed Brancusi, who had reason to deem Americans "best qualified to speak authoritatively of modern art." All of Brancusi's major patrons were Americans, and all of his

solo exhibitions until the year before he died occurred in the United States, beginning with a show at Stieglitz's "291" gallery in 1914. (O'Keeffe's first solo show took place at the same gallery in 1917.) Matisse also knew that a greater public for modern art existed among Americans than among the French, as his most devoted patrons were nearly all American. Matisse had the first showing of his sculpture at "291" in 1912. He conjectured that "Americans are interested in modern painting because of its immediate translation of feeling. . . . It is more in rapport with the activity of their spirit." As for Duchamp, who would make a home in New York and eventually become an American citizen, it was in America and not in France where he was treated, from the time of the Armory Show, as a celebrity and an authority: he had both his first solo show and his first major retrospective in the United States.[28]

In short, many of those pivotal figures who are ordinarily credited with making Paris the world's art center saw New York in that role instead well before the end of the Second World War. After World War I, New York generally provided artists with better opportunities for showing and selling modern art, and zealous American collectors were working to make modern art publicly accessible in New York in a way it was not in Paris. Stieglitz's highly subsidized "291" gallery was the prelude to Katherine Dreier's nonprofit Société Anonyme gallery, which opened in a New York brownstone in 1920, and A. E. Gallatin's Gallery of Living Art, which opened at New York University in 1927. Two years later the Museum of Modern Art, the brainstorm of a cartel of society women, opened to the public. The Whitney Museum of American Art began operations in 1931, financed by the wealthy sculptor Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney, and Solomon R. Guggenheim made his collection public in the Museum of Non-Objective Art in 1939.

The sense that Paris had become an "onlooker" to New York dawned on different observers at different moments. In a 1931 essay on the "most beautiful spectacle in the world," Fernand Léger exclaimed how that "daring vertical new continent," Manhattan, prefigured a whole new egalitarian world marked by a "new religion" consecrated to business and technology. "New York and the telephone came into the world on the same day, on the same boat, to conquer the world. Mechanical life is at its apogee here." Picturing the mechanical was Léger's forte, but he could not believe that any artist would ever successfully describe New York: "It is madness to think of employing such a subject artistically. One admires it humbly, and that's all."[29]

So who would dare to paint New York? Léger and Matisse would not even try it, and Mondrian's vision of the city, however compelling, was continuous with his vision of Paris and London. It was Georgia O'Keeffe who would paint New York, depicting its towering buildings in a legible, lyrical way that reciprocated the democratized aspect of the city while evincing the limitless aspirations embodied in its newfound imago: the skyscraper. O'Keeffe believed that her images of the city included "probably my best paintings," and she hoped that they would "turn the world over," as the buildings she was painting were very nearly doing.[30] That she pictured "the world's new art center" never did earn O'Keeffe her due, however, for in the standard, Eurocentric narratives of the history of modern art, New York was not the world's art center at the time she portrayed it—no matter who thought so—and O'Keeffe was not a world-wise artist.

The best answer to the question "Who will paint New York?" then, may well be a second question: "Who will get to say when New York has been painted?" From an American vantage point, the most obvious answer to the latter query is

Clement Greenberg, who would most likely have chosen his protégé, Jackson Pollock. Pollock did not paint New York in a literal way, of course—no one asked that anymore by the end of the Second World War—but to Greenberg's eye his art represented "an attempt to cope with urban life; it dwells entirely in the lonely jungle of immediate sensations, impulses and notions, therefore is positivist, concrete"—notwithstanding the fact that the famed poured paintings were made in a barn on a Long Island farm. In the standard art historical narratives, Pollock gets most of the credit for precipitating the shift in the art world's center from Paris to New York, or for "turning the world over."[31] Yet, in a sense, Pollock's art spells the triumph of the Old World's vision of the New World as unlimited in space and energy and innocent of culture. Erasing the colonial past, Pollock invented that much-anticipated art without history. If Pollock found a way to picture America's stark, cultural nakedness, it was Georgia O'Keeffe who first pictured the world's new art center in all its awesome cultural finery.

Notes

I am very grateful to Calvin Brown and Carol Willis for their help with this essay.

1 *New York Tribune*, quoted in Rudolf E. Kuenzli, ed., *New York Dada* (New York: Willis Locker and Owens, 1986), pp. 130–33; Marcel Duchamp, quoted in "The Iconoclastic Opinions of M. Marcel Duchamps [*sic*] Concerning Art and America," *Current Opinion* 59 (November 1915): 346.

2 F. J. G. [Frederick James Gregg], "The World's New Art Centre," *Vanity Fair* 5 (January 1915): 31; Clement Greenberg, quoted in John O'Brian, ed., *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), vol. 2, *Arrogant Purpose, 1945–1949*, pp. 193, 215.

According to William E. Leuchtenberg, "In 1914 the United States was a debtor nation; American citizens owed foreign investors three billion dollars. By the end of 1919 the United States was a creditor nation, with foreigners owing American investors nearly three billion dollars. In addition, the United States had loaned over ten billion dollars to foreign countries, mostly to carry on the war, in part for postwar reconstruction. These figures represent one of those great shifts of power that occurs but rarely in the history of nations"; Leuchtenberg, *The Perils of Prosperity: 1914–1932* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), pp. 108, 225–26.

3 Leuchtenberg, pp. 182, 227; Claude Bragdon, "The Shelton Hotel, New York," *Architectural Record* 58 (July 1925): 1. The Shelton Hotel (now the Halloran House) is on the east side of Lexington Avenue between 48th and 49th Streets.

4 Henry McBride, quoted in Daniel Catton Rich, ed., *The Flow of Art: Essays and Criticisms of Henry McBride* (New York: Atheneum, 1975), p. 256.

5 Once O'Keeffe finally traveled to the cities of Europe, she found they didn't compare: "My ideal city is New York. European cities seem villages in comparison"; quoted in Thomas Lask, "Publishing: Georgia O'Keeffe," *New York Times*, 25 June 1976. (O'Keeffe made her first trip to Europe in 1953.)

6 Charles Demuth, quoted in Joshua C. Taylor, *America as Art* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976), p. 190; R. J. Coady, "American Art," *Soil* 2 (January 1917): 55, and 1(December 1916): 3; "A Complete Reversal of Art Opinions by Marcel Duchamp, Iconoclast," *Arts and Decoration* 5 (September 1915): 428; Marcel Duchamp, quoted in "Can a Photograph Have the Significance of Art?" *Manuscripts* 4 (December 1922): 2. On the Woolworth tower as a "ready-made," see Merrill Schleier, *The Skyscraper in American Art, 1890–1931* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: U.M.I. Research Press, 1986), p. 55. Abbott conceived the idea of compiling an intensive photographic record of New York (such as Eugène Atget had done of Paris) in 1929, and she left Paris for Manhattan that year, before the October crash, to begin her first major photographic project, *Changing New York*.

7 Coady, *Soil* 1(December 1916): 3; Henry Tyrrell, *New York World*, 21 January 1923.

8 Francis Picabia, quoted in Jean-Luc Daval, *Avant-Garde Art, 1914–1939* (New York: Rizzoli, 1980), p. 17, in Schleier, p. 65, and in "Picabia, Art Rebel, Here to Teach a New Movement," *New York Times*, 16 February 1913, p. 9. After years of exhibiting European modernists, by the 1920s Stieglitz was showing only American artists and stressing to them the importance of developing a native vision. But O'Keeffe observed of the Stieglitz circle: "I knew that at that time almost any one of those great minds would have been living in Europe if it had been possible for them. They didn't even want

to live in New York—how was the Great American Thing going to happen?"; O'Keeffe, *Georgia O'Keeffe* (New York: Viking, 1976), n.p.

9 Naum Gabo, "The Constructive Idea in Art," in *Circle: International Survey of Constructive Art*, ed. J. L. Martin, Ben Nicholson, Gabo (1937; reprint, New York: Praeger, 1971), pp. 3–4. Said Duchamp on destroying the old: "I believe that your idea of demolishing old buildings, old souvenirs, is fine. It is in line with that so much misunderstood manifesto issued by the Italian Futurists. . . . The dead should not be permitted to be so much stronger than the living. We must learn to forget the past, to live our own lives in our own time"; "A Complete Reversal," p. 428.

10 Duchamp, quoted in "Iconoclastic Opinions," p. 346 (in the same interview Duchamp described American architecture as "the only architecture"); Charles Downing Lay, "New Architecture in New York," *The Arts* 4 (August 1923): 67; Thomas A. P. van Leeuwen, *The Skyward Trend of Thought: The Metaphysics of the American Skyscraper* (Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 1988), pp. 3, 22–25. According to Van Leeuwen, as the skyscraper's story is usually told, Louis Sullivan emerges as its father, Chicago as its birthplace, but the Sullivan given that role is a man most unlike himself, one who spurned ornament and placed function above all else.

11 Van Leeuwen, p. 3; Duchamp, quoted in "A Complete Reversal," p. 428.

12 Carol Willis, "Drawing Towards Metropolis," in Hugh Ferriss, *Metropolis of Tomorrow* (1929; reprint, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Architectural Press, 1986), p. 166. The way the story is usually told, the turning point in skyscraper design occurred in 1925, when Americans looked to Paris—to the Exposition of Decorative and Industrial Arts—to formulate an Art Deco style. By Willis's account, however, the Art Deco aesthetic "was hardly more than a decorative applique."

13 Ferriss published several drawings of the Shelton in 1923 and 1924. He drew the Radiator Building circa 1925 and showed his drawing at the Anderson Galleries that April (O'Keeffe had been in a show at the same location the previous month); see Willis's Appendix 2 in Ferriss, p. 190. A photograph of the Shelton by Sheeler, who did architectural photography for a living, was published in *The Arts* 4 (August 1923): 86. His photographs of the Berkley (taken in 1920) and of the Ritz Tower hotels were reproduced in *Cahiers d'Art* 2, no. 415 (1927): 180, 182. O'Keeffe wrote admiringly of Sheeler's photography in "Can a Photograph Have the Significance of Art?" p. 17.

14 Lay, p. 68.

15 Ferriss, p. 30; Alfred Stieglitz, quoted in Sarah Greenough and Juan Hamilton, *Alfred Stieglitz: Photographs and Writings* (Washington D.C.: National Gallery of Art, n.d.), p. 214.

16 Ferriss, quoted in Willis, p. 167; Frances O'Brien, "Americans We Like: Georgia O'Keeffe," *Nation* 12 (October 1927): 361–62; Virgil Barker, quoted in Barbara Buhler Lynes, *O'Keeffe, Stieglitz and the Critics, 1916–1929* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: U.M.I. Research Press, 1989), p. 215; Henry McBride, quoted in Lynes, p. 296.

17 Henry McBride, "O'Keeffe at the Museum," *New York Sun*, 18 May 1946; Sullivan, paraphrased and quoted by Claude Bragdon, *The Secret Spring: An Autobiography* (London: Andrew Dakers, 1938), p. 147. On Duchamp's apartment search see "Iconoclastic Opinions," p. 346. O'Keeffe was emulated in 1930 by the pioneering photo-journalist, Margaret Bourke-White, who made her studio and wanted (but was not permitted) to make her home high up in the newly completed Chrysler Building, one of her favorite photographic subjects. See Vicki Goldberg, *Margaret Bourke-White: A Biography* (New York: Harper and Row, 1986), p. 115. Making their offices on the top floors of skyscrapers, preferably of their own design, was also the practice of numerous architects in this period.

18 O'Keeffe, n.p. Inevitably, some critics have intimated that O'Keeffe's gender precluded her picturing the city effectively. Of her city pictures (which are mostly painted in neutral tones and black), Milton W. Brown wrote that "her prettiness of color is an intrusion, her lack of strength obvious. Such paintings as *The Shelton* . . . and *The American Radiator Building* . . . in which she introduced irrelevant embellishments, are decorative designs no more substantial than flower petals"; Brown, *American Painting: From the Armory Show to the Depression* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1955), pp. 127–28. Peter Conrad has called her views of the Shelton "tributes to the perceptual power Stieglitz exercised over the city from inside it"; in *Shelton with Sunspots*, for example, "the burning upper storeys are a camera eye seared in the stone by Stieglitz's power to see through it. . . . Stieglitz—in this painting and in his own photographs—is he who dares to affront that flaming source"; Conrad, *The Art of the City: Views and Versions of New York* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 85.

19 O'Keeffe, quoted in Katharine Kuh, *The Artist's Voice: Talks with Seventeen Artists* (New York: Harper and Row, 1960), p. 191.

20 Henry McBride, quoted in Rich, ed., p. 236; O'Keeffe, quoted in Roxana Robinson, *Georgia O'Keeffe: A Life* (New York: Harper and Row, 1989), p. 288; O'Keeffe, quoted in Lynes, p. 290. On visitors' reports on O'Keeffe's thirtieth-floor apartment, see Lynes, pp. 280, 284–86.

21 O'Keeffe, quoted in Lynes, p. 287; Herbert J. Seligmann, quoted in James Moore, "So Clear Where the Sun Will Come . . . : Georgia O'Keeffe's *Gray Cross with Blue*," *Artspace* (Summer 1986): 35.

22 For quotes and information on O'Keeffe's first city picture, see O'Keeffe, n.p. As O'Keeffe told it, the huge buildings springing up all over the city were what impelled her to enlarge her flowers in the first place; see Kuh, p. 191.

As *New York at Night with Moon* is not listed by that title in the brochure of the

1926 show, she may have exhibited it under another title.

23 "Goings On About Town," *New Yorker* 2 (13 March 1926): 5. The show was so popular that its run was extended. The 1926 show included *The Shelton—New York* (I–IV), *Street, New York* (I–II), and *East River from the Shelton* (I–III). The 1927 show included *New York Night, A Building New York-Night, The Shelton at Night,* and *East River* (Nos. 1–3). In 1928 O'Keeffe showed *East River from the Shelton* (VI–VII), and *Ritz Tower, Night.* For mention in the press, see Murdock Pemberton, "The Art Galleries: The Great Wall of Manhattan, or New York for Live New Yorkers," *New Yorker* 2 (13 March 1926): 36–37, and "The Art Galleries," *New Yorker* 3 (21 January 1928): 44.

24 Whether by intent or coincidence, the central panel of the triptych resembled one of the stage sets for John Alden Carpenter's "Skyscrapers," first performed as a ballet in 1926. A photograph of Carpenter's set was reproduced in *Theater Arts Monthly* 10 (March 1926).

O'Keeffe's painting has not been reproduced since it was first shown, and she is said to have destroyed at least part of it. Each of the triptych's panels was 48 x 21 inches, with the center panel done in a second, full-scale version, 7 x 4 feet (the dimensions were set by the museum). See *Murals by American Painters and Photographers* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1932), n.p.

25 Stieglitz objected to the Radio City commission because he did not believe in the "democratization" of art and because of the low fee. He told the head of design for the Music Hall, Donald Deskey, that O'Keeffe was a child and not responsible for her actions in signing the contract. Deskey and O'Keeffe were both undaunted by Stieglitz's pressure until O'Keeffe discovered that the walls she was to paint had been improperly prepared and that there was insufficient time for her to complete the project. She then withdrew from the project and suffered a breakdown, which left her virtually unable to work for over a year. See Laurie Lisle, *Portrait of an Artist: A Biography of Georgia O'Keeffe* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1980), pp. 258–61. She never painted New York's buildings again and started to spend more time in New Mexico, where Stieglitz would not go. (O'Keeffe's ambition to work on a large scale—even to design an entire house—dated from 1926, when she first exhibited her New York paintings. See Herbert J. Seligmann, *Alfred Stieglitz Talking: Notes on Some of His Conversations, 1925–1931* (New Haven: Yale University Library, 1966), p. 60.

26 Stieglitz, quoted in Seligmann, pp. 27–28; Matisse, quoted in Jack D. Flam, ed. and trans., *Matisse on Art* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1978), pp. 62–63. Matisse, passing through New York while en route to Tahiti, wrote to his wife, "What I find here is really and truly a new world: it's great and majestic like the sea—and on top of that one senses the human effort behind it. . . . On my way to see idle primitives, I've started out seeing active primitives—two extremes. Where do we fit in? That's the question!" quoted in Pierre Schneider, *Matisse* (New York: Rizzoli, 1984), pp. 606–7.

27 Constantin Brancusi, quoted in "Brancusi Returns Here for Display," *New York World,* 30 September 1926, in Seligmann, p. 69, and in "America Holds Future of Art, Brancusi Says," *Evening Union,* 20 December 1927. Mondrian's commercial show was at the Valentine Dudensing Gallery in 1942; the Museum of Modern Art honored him with a memorial retrospective in 1944. The same museum had acquired the first of its major collection of Mondrian paintings in 1937, whereas the Musée National d'Art Moderne in Paris did not acquire a painting by the artist until 1975.

28 Brancusi, quoted in "America Holds"; Matisse, quoted in Flam, ed., p. 63. On Duchamp see Moira Roth, "Marcel Duchamp in America: A Self Ready-Made," *Arts* 51 (May 1977): 92.

Henri Rousseau's first public solo show, a commemorative exhibition in 1910, was also held at Stieglitz's "291" gallery.

29 Fernand Léger, *Functions of Painting,* trans. Alexandra Anderson, ed. Edward F. Fry (New York: Viking, 1973), pp. 84–86, 90.

30 O'Keeffe, quoted in Jack Cowart, Juan Hamilton with Sarah Greenough, *Georgia O'Keeffe: Art and Letters* (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1987), pp. 179, 183. Her estimation of her city pictures and her sense that they had been unjustly treated emerged when, as an old woman, she troubled to show an interviewer an almost fifty-year-old reference in a review by McBride to "one of the best skyscraper pictures that I have seen anywhere. It combines fact and fancy admirably." She remarked pointedly, "I'd be pleased to have that said in your article"; quoted in Mary Lynn Kotz, "Georgia O'Keeffe at Ninety," *Art News* 76 (December 1977): 45.

31 Clement Greenberg, quoted in O'Brian, ed., p. 166. It took a protracted campaign by American critics, however, to persuade Europeans of the legitimacy of Pollock's vision, which bears scant trace of Cubism. The Musée National d'Art Moderne would not acquire its first Pollock until 1972. My thanks to Mary Werth for obtaining this information. Observed the sculptor Constantine Nivola, "The French would say of de Kooning, 'As painting, we can recognize this.' Of Pollock, '*This* is not painting! Only in America could it happen' "; quoted in Jeffrey Potter, *To a Violent Grave: An Oral Biography of Jackson Pollock* (Wainscott, N.Y.: Pushcart, 1985), p. 221.