

Brooklyn Museum

Teaching Resource: Special Exhibition

Fine Lines: American Drawings from the Brooklyn Museum

March 8–May 26, 2013



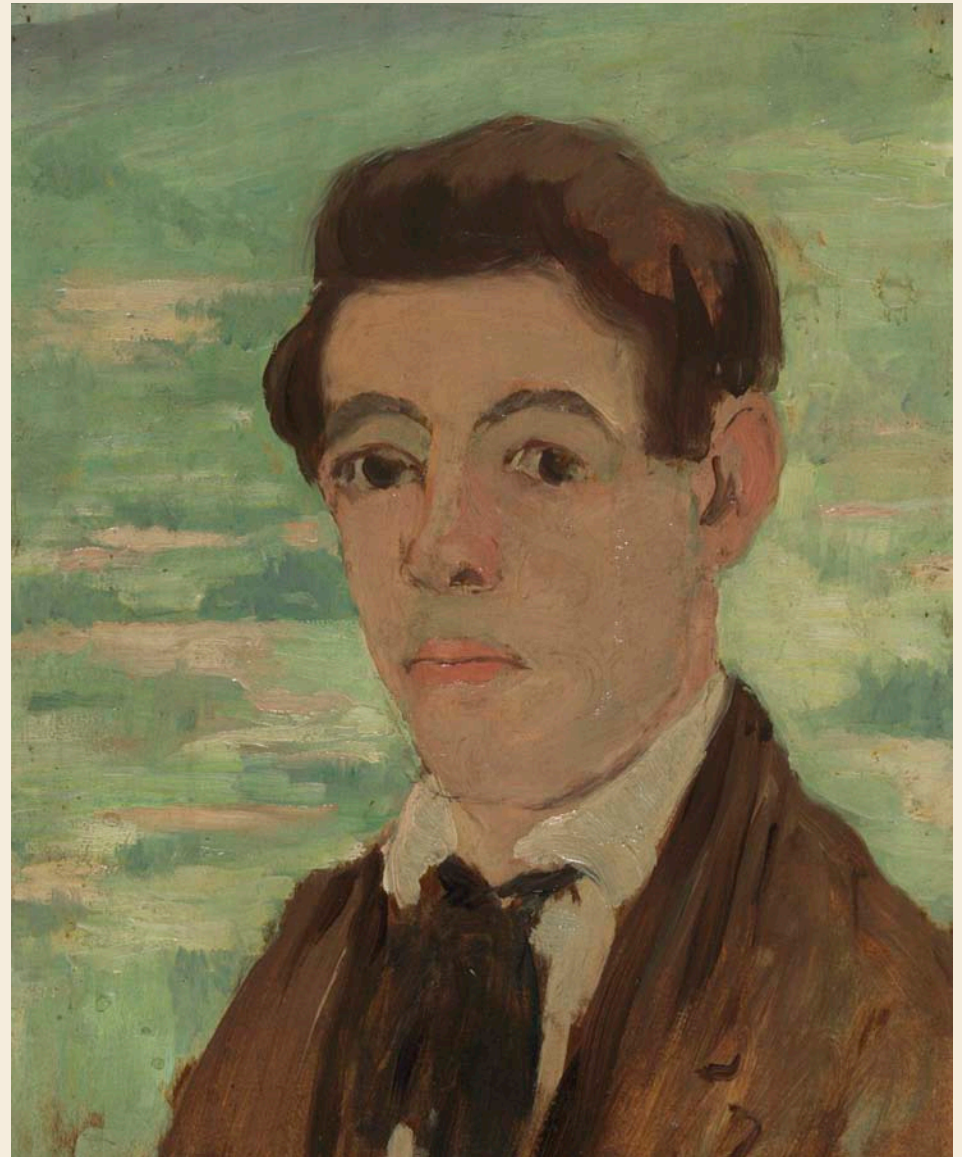
About the Exhibition

Fine Lines: American Drawings from the Brooklyn Museum presents a selection of more than a hundred of the finest, rarely seen drawings and sketchbooks from the Museum's world-renowned collection of American art. Produced between 1768 and 1945 in a wide range of media (including graphite, pen and ink, crayon, charcoal, and pastel), the featured objects represent more than seventy artists—including Winslow Homer, Thomas Eakins, John Singer Sargent, Edward Hopper, and Marsden Hartley. Diverse in subject matter and style, the works in the exhibition are organized into six themes examining the human body, costume studies, portraiture, narrative subjects, the landscape, and the urban environment. This teaching resource features a series of three drawings in black ink and graphite by Abraham Walkowitz, selected for their accessibility to students of all ages and their numerous teaching possibilities. We encourage you to bring your students to this exhibition to explore a wide variety of drawing techniques and styles.

About the Artist

Abraham Walkowitz (1878–1965) was born in Russia and immigrated with his family to New York City when he was eleven years old. He began making art at an early age. Walkowitz recalled, “When I was a kid, about five years old, I used to draw with chalk, all over the floors and everything. . . . I suppose it’s in me. I remember myself as a little boy, of three or four, taking chalk and [making] drawings.”¹ As a young adult, he worked as a sign painter and began making sketches of immigrants on Manhattan’s Lower East Side, where he lived with his mother. Through art classes at the Cooper Union and the Educational Alliance, he learned to draw precise anatomical figures. Later in his career, he abandoned the academic approach that he was taught in favor of a more expressive style.

In 1906 Walkowitz moved to Paris for a year, during which time he met Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse, and other avant-garde artists. While visiting the sculptor Auguste Rodin’s studio, Walkowitz also met the dancer Isadora Duncan, whose expressive style of movement transformed his approach to the figure. He drew her continually in his later career, attempting to capture her movements and gestures in a few essential marks.



Abraham Walkowitz (American, born Russia, 1878–1965). *Self-Portrait* 1903, 1903. Oil on panel mounted to laminated paperboard, 13¹³/₁₆ x 10⁷/₈ in. (35.1 x 27.6 cm). Brooklyn Museum, Gift of the artist, 44.68



Cover (detail), pp. 6–8, and above: Abraham Walkowitz (American, born Russia, 1878–1965). *Dancing Figure (Isadora Duncan)*, undated. Black ink and graphite on cream, medium-weight, moderately textured paper, each sheet 8 x 3⁷/₁₆ in. (20.3 x 8.7 cm). Brooklyn Museum. Gift of the artist, 39.473a–c

Description of the Artwork

This series is composed of three vertical drawings made in black ink and graphite on cream paper, signed by the artist on the bottom center of each sheet. Each drawing features an abstracted figure in a twisting, diagonal pose. The drawings are made up of sinuous lines representing the movement of a body in a flowing garment.

The figure in the first drawing conveys tension, coiling away from the viewer with her shoulders hunched. In the second drawing, the most abstract in the series, the figure becomes more leaflike than human as her arms reach above her head, releasing energy upward. In the third drawing, the dancer faces the viewer, her arms gently cradling her torso.

The artist thought of these drawings as a series and mounted them side by side. They can be read as a dance sequence.

About the Artwork

These drawings are among the thousands that Walkowitz created depicting the revolutionary modern dancer Isadora Duncan, whom he first saw perform in Paris in 1907. In the early 1910s, Duncan came to the United States, providing Walkowitz with numerous opportunities to watch her perform. Duncan aimed to express the harmony of body and soul through dance. Of the process of creating these drawings, Walkowitz stated, "Isadora is movement. I watched her dances, and I never had her pose, I just watched the movement, that's what makes the dance—the feeling, the movement, the grace."²

These drawings are both figurative and abstract, suggesting a dancer's body without realistically depicting it. Walkowitz focused on the fluid shape of the dancer's costumes, which were inspired by classical sculpture, and the expressive movement and energy of the dance. The drawings capture the dancer's movements and gestures in a few strokes, reducing her form to essential lines.

Walkowitz's drawings provide an extensive record of Duncan's dance movements and style.

Questions for Viewing

Trace the artist's lines using your finger. Describe the types of movements the artist made with his pencil to create these drawings.

What moods and/or emotions does each of these poses communicate?

Pose like the figure in each drawing. How do the poses feel? What words can you use to describe them?

Create a fluid dance that connects all three poses. Share your dance with others.

Activities

Gesture and Action Drawing

A **gesture drawing** is a very quick sketch that captures the essence of a subject and is not meant to be realistic. To create a few quick gesture drawings, use a friend as a model and try to capture his or her pose in one or two continuous lines, keeping your hand in motion and your eye on the model. After a few gesture drawings, you will be ready to draw a figure in action. To create an **action drawing**, watch a dancer perform, either live or on-screen. Notice the types of shapes and lines the dancer makes with his or her body. If possible, watch the dance more than once. Try to capture the dancer's movements with as few lines as possible.

An Autobiography in Lines

Isadora Duncan said of these drawings, "Walkowitz, you have written my biography in lines without words."³ Draw your autobiography in lines. What gestures and lines can you use to express the pivotal moments in your life?

Resources

Albright, Ann Cooper. *Modern Gestures: Abraham Walkowitz Draws Isadora Duncan Dancing*. Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 2010. An illustrated book showcasing the work of two great American modernists, the painter Abraham Walkowitz and the dancer Isadora Duncan.

Duncan, Isadora. *My Life*. New York: Boni and Liveright, 1927. Isadora Duncan's autobiography, published just after her death.

Jones, Sabrina. (2008). *Isadora Duncan: A Graphic Biography*. New York: Hill and Wang. A graphic biography of Isadora Duncan for readers ages 9 to 12.

Sherry, Karen. Contributions by Caroline Gillaspie and Caitlin Jenkins. *Fine Lines: American Drawings from the Brooklyn Museum*. Exh. cat. New York: Brooklyn Museum; London: D Giles, 2013. A scholarly catalogue including an introduction, illustrated catalogue entries, a conservation essay and glossary, and a selected bibliography.

www.youtube.com

Footage of Isadora Duncan's dances available on YouTube (search "Isadora Duncan").

This text was written by Senior Museum Educator Nicola Giardina, with assistance from School Programs Manager Alexa Fairchild and Andrew W. Mellon Curator of American Art Teresa A. Carbone.

Fine Lines: American Drawings from the Brooklyn Museum is organized by Karen Sherry, former Associate Curator of American Art, Brooklyn Museum.

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Notes

1. Abraham Walkowitz, Oral History Interview, Dec. 8 and 22, 1958, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, quoted in Abram Lerner and Bartlett Cowdrey, "A Tape Recorded Interview with Abraham Walkowitz," *Archives of American Art Journal* 9, no. 1 (Jan. 1969): 4.
2. *Ibid.*, 15.
3. Quoted in Martica Sawin, *Abraham Walkowitz, 1878–1965* (Salt Lake City: Utah Museum of Fine Arts, 1974), 10.

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