59: Reginald Marsh *People's Follies No. 3* (1938) *Ice Cream Cones* (1938)

Kathleen Spies

Deemed an American Hogarth by contemporary critics, Reginald Marsh is best known for his lively scenes of modern urban life. Throughout his career, he paid particular attention to the earthy, the vulgar, and the lowbrow, and two of his favorite locations for finding such qualities are depicted in *People's Follies No. 3* and *Ice Cream Cones*.

In *People's Follies*, Marsh portrays a 1930s burlesque performance with all its bawdy energy. His palette of heated reds, tarnished golds, and dingy browns suggests a lustful, tawdry atmosphere, and his jam-packed detail and condensed space create an active, if somewhat chaotic, composition. Marsh painted this scene in his preferred medium of tempera, which dried quickly and allowed him to layer brushstrokes, a technique adding to the overall restless effect. The artist devoted roughly one-third of his output to burlesque subjects, and would often make several different paintings and etchings of the same scene, as is the case with this work. He was drawn to the topic, he said, because "You get a woman in the spotlight, the gilt architecture of the place, plenty of humanity. Everything is nice and intimate...."[1]

Reginald Marsh,
1898–1954
People's Follies No. 3, 1938
Tempera on composition board,
25⅞ x 39 in.
Marion Stratton Gould Fund,
43.1

Alternating between comic skits and strip acts, burlesque in the 1930s was widely considered the lowest form of live entertainment, employing strippers and dancers not talented or attractive enough for Hollywood or Broadway. At the time Marsh painted *People's Follies*, burlesque was a particularly newsworthy topic. The urban reforms spearheaded by Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia led to widely publicized court hearings which gave burlesque more exposure than ever. But it also irrevocably linked the theaters and their performers to degeneracy, vice, and decay.[2]

As with many of his burlesque images, Marsh bifurcates this composition, devoting the left to the scantily-clad female chorines, and the right to the all-male audience. Wearing ridiculously frilly, gaudy costumes, the voluptuous performers are frozen in varied poses—one is in the midst of dancing, one appears in mid-stride, another has her feet firmly planted on the ground—indicating the unrehearsed, ad-lib character for which burlesque was known. As in the shows themselves, these female figures are indistinguishable from one another. With their identical bleached blonde hairstyles and almost caricatured bodies, Marsh depicts them as little more than sex objects. Indeed general public opinion held that burlesque performers were one step removed from prostitutes, selling their bodies for a paying public.

Burlesque audiences often fared just as poorly in the public eye, and were thought to consist primarily of bums and derelicts. But in *People's Follies* Marsh records a different faction: the suited "baldhead" patrons who could afford season tickets closest to the stage. These burlesque "connoisseurs" reveal a variety of reactions to the sight before them: one leans forward eagerly in his seat, one inspects the women with a sophisticated reserve, and another sits back and slyly grins. Visually separated from the audience by a vertical column and the horizontal band of the stage, the women are viewed by these men as if they are in a storefront window display, objects of desire for consumption and possible purchase.

The emphasis that Marsh places on the audience members and their reactions reveals that it was not just female sexuality that interested him, but also the desire, lust, and consumption of that sexuality —in other words, the act of viewing. While the actual burlesque show distinguished itself from other forms of entertainment by encouraging interaction between performers and audience members

Reginald Marsh,
1898–1954
Ice Cream Cones, 1938
Tempera on composition board, 24 x 30 in.
Gift of a friend of the Gallery, 45.70

(through invitations via song to powder one's back, for example), Marsh shows us a world in which there is a lack of connection, in which the modern relation of the sexes is purely visual, a fantasy based on commercial exchange.

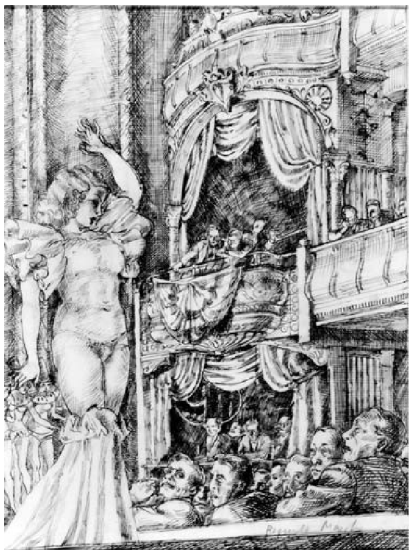
But Marsh was hardly a mere cynic or moralist about this sort of exchange. He infuses his images with a liveliness that suggests he relished, rather than condemned, the tawdry vulgarity of burlesque, and celebrated its lack of pretense. While his images communicate his awareness of the deep subtleties and ironies of such interactions, they are hardly critical statements.

In fact, Marsh was one of numerous artists, writers, and intellectuals drawn to burlesque between the wars, a prestigious group including e. e. cummings, Jean Cocteau, Edward Hopper, and Thomas Hart Benton. For this group, accepting or celebrating burlesque was a means of breaking from Victorian prudery, and marking oneself as modern in thought. With its open attitudes toward sex and the public display of female flesh, burlesque pushed aside all Victorian limits. More broadly, many artists and intellectuals of this period saw the "vulgar" as distinctly American. Rather than look down at popular culture as did previous generations, Marsh celebrated it, and revered what others may have called grotesque or lowbrow as unique Americana.

Further, burlesque was a popular downtown site for slumming uptowners, and like the audience members he portrayed, the artist himself was part of this trend. Educated at Yale, Marsh was described by his lifelong friend and biographer Lloyd Goodrich as a confirmed, if reluctant, member of the upper classes.[3] Like many aspiring moderns, Marsh saw the working class as authentic and uninhibited, as opposed to the wealthy elite still bogged down by Victorian constraints and values. "People of wealth spend money to disguise themselves, but these people live in the open.... [R]eality is exposed and not disguised," he once said.[4]

It is not surprising that Marsh devoted so much of his oeuvre to burlesque, since as his teacher Kenneth Hayes Miller once told him, "Sex is your theme."[5] Marsh was sure to include young buxom blondes in nearly all of his images, even when representing less openly prurient locales. These women became such a stock, identifiable part of Marsh's art that critics dubbed them "Marsh girls."

Apart from the burlesque theater, one of Marsh's favorite sites for locating the "Marsh girl" was Coney Island. At the time the artist completed his 1938 *Ice Cream Cones*, Coney Island had changed significantly from its turn-of-the-century origin as a respectable middle-class destination into a largely working-class area of recreation, replete with freak shows, amusement park rides, and striptease acts. Most burlesque theaters were closed during the summer, and Coney Island allowed Marsh the opportunity to record many of the same themes he sought in burlesque: sex, consumption, vulgarity, and the public display of the female body.



In *Ice Cream Cones*, we see several "Marsh girls" eating cones and evocatively posing for prospective others passing by. Coney Island was known as a place where young men and women could meet and date, and many of the rides promised the potential of physical interaction between strangers of the opposite sex. Unlike the dark and dingy palette of *People's Follies*, the color scheme here is one of pastels, of sunny days at the beach and confectionary delights. Nonetheless, these girls differ little from Marsh's burlesque chorines; their clinging clothes reveal more than conceal their exaggerated anatomy, and their ice cream cones seem little more than props of erotic suggestion.

Yet, typical of Marsh's work, *Ice Cream Cones* injects this outright portrayal of sex with an element of humor. Behind the two coy, attractive women stands a third, who awkwardly leans over and gorges her ice cream cone, oblivious to any onlookers. And, at the right, a fourth woman rushes past with a singularity of focus that is comically out of place in such a leisurely setting. Humor here perhaps served for the painting's viewers, as it did for the patrons of burlesque, to alleviate sexual tension or the guilt of desire, and to place it in the realm of innocuous fun. Marsh often showed people ungracefully shoving food in their faces in Coney Island scenes, a strong parallel to the insatiable appetite the burlesque audience shows toward the strippers and chorines. In these and many of his other images, Marsh defines modern urban society, for all its vitality, as one that is decidedly occupied by the act of consuming rather than producing.

On a more basic level, the indecorous behavior and awkward pose of the third girl balances, and even subverts, the pinup beauty of the two women in front of her. After all, despite his fascination with feminine perfection, Marsh also admitted that he liked Coney Island because "it stinks of people and is earthy and real."[6] And, by the 1950s, he was complaining that the Coney Island he once knew was vanishing: "The bunions and varicose veins and flat chests are gone. Now there are only Marilyn Monroes."[7] Like the ogle-eyed and gaping-mouthed spectators in his burlesque scenes, the third girl provides the "plenty of humanity" Marsh was sure to include in all his works, and through which he comically reminds us of our own.

ALSO IN THE MAG COLLECTION:
Reginald Marsh,
1898–1954
The Star Burlesk, ca. 1933
Ink on transfer paper,
12⅝ x 10 in.
Gift of Dr. and Mrs. James H. Lockhart, Jr., 75.50

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