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Robert Fishko, *Director*

MORTON LIVINGSTON SCHAMBERG
(1881 - 1918)

Machine Composition, c.1915-16
pastel and pencil on paper
5 1/2 x 8 inches

Provenance

The Artist

Alexander Cokos, Pennsylvania

David Schaff

Sid Deutsch Gallery, New York

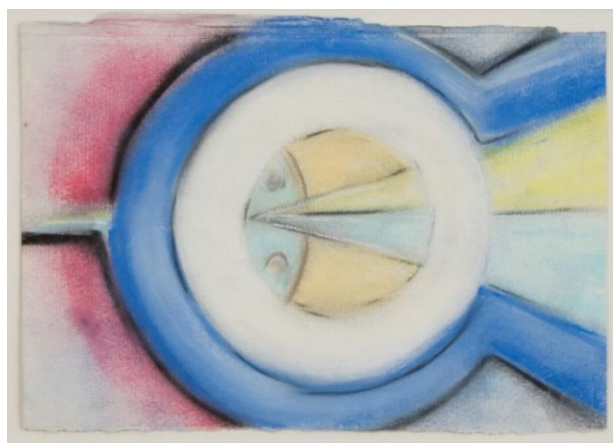
Forum Gallery, New York

Alice and Marvin Sinkoff, New York (1985-2002)

By descent from the above (until 2007)

Martha Parrish & James Reinish, Inc., New York

Private Collection, New York (acquired directly from the above, 2007)



Exhibited

Sid Deutsch Gallery, New York, NY

Forum Gallery, New York, NY, 1985

A Point of View: 20th Century American Art from a Long Island Collection, The Heckscher Museum, Huntington, NY, September 8 – November 4, 1990

Every Day Mysteries: Modern and Contemporary Still Life, DC Moore Gallery, New York, NY, March 18 – May 1st, 2004

Martha Parrish & James Reinish, Inc., New York, NY

Literature

Noll, Anna C., *A Point of View: 20th Century American Art from a Long Island Collection*, The Heckscher Museum, Huntington, NY, 1990, p. 18, cat. 67, Illustrated, and p. 47, Listed.

Essay

Morton Livingston Schamberg remains one of the most elusive figures of early American Modernism. He participated in the most extreme edge of the American vanguard, promoting aesthetic and conceptual values which were only beginning to be understood in the United States. Dealers, collectors, and critics alike who by the mid-1910s were gradually accepting Cubism and who admired Schamberg's work were not able to fully understand his imagery, as evidenced in Henry McBride's eloquent eulogy. * Schamberg was a machine-age modernist even before Charles Sheeler began to pay homage in his own art to American industry and manufacturing. Sheeler assimilated the novel, modernist look of the machine into a hard-edged Precisionist painting style which became a visual metaphor for both the allure and alienation of corporate capitalist culture. Schamberg's approach, on the other hand, was more opaque. Uninterested in outright depictions of machinery as such, he generally favored abstracted closeups of indiscernible contraptions through whose depictions he elevated to a quasi mechanomorphic status. In this, Schamberg occupied a particularly narrow and esoteric interval in American art which was as much defined by the newfound pictorial principles of Cubism as it was flavored by the arrival to the United States of European Dada. **

Born and raised in Philadelphia, Schamberg graduated from the University of Pennsylvania in 1903 with a degree in architecture. He then studied under William Merritt Chase at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts where he met Charles Sheeler who became his closest artist friend. The two shared a studio on Chestnut Street, developed jointly as photographers and painters, traveled to Europe together and after 1910 spent much of their weekend time at Sheeler's 18th century farmhouse near Doylestown, Pennsylvania. Influenced by the Fauve paintings he saw in Paris in 1909, Schamberg worked through his own post-Impressionist style and, after the 1913 Armory Show (in which five of his oils were included as well as six by Sheeler), adopted Cubism in evermore abstract compositions. In 1915 the French Dadaist artist Francis Picabia arrived in New York. In 1916 the artist-dealer Marius de Zayas separated from Alfred Stieglitz's "291" gallery and opened his own avant-garde space where Picabia's machinist works were given their first major showing. It is no coincidence that precisely at this point Schamberg's own mechanical imagery began to appear, first displayed in a group show in April, 1916, at the Bourgeois Gallery also in New York.

The enlightened Philadelphia collectors Walter and Louis Arensberg acquired works by Schamberg and fellow Pennsylvania moderns Charles Sheeler and Charles Demuth. They also came to know and befriend the French Dadaists Picabia and Duchamp, adding pieces by them to their collection. Their circle in Philadelphia included the most advanced-thinking modernists of the day working in the United States. Schamberg and Fauve painter friend Lyman Sayen, whom he knew from his days at the Academy, sought to further their city's recognition of progressive art by organizing Philadelphia's First Exhibition of Advanced Modern Art. The show opened at the McClees Gallery in May of 1916 and included pieces by the Europeans Marcel Duchamp, Francis Picabia, Albert Gleizes, Pablo Picasso, Georges Braque, Constantin Brâncuși, and the Americans Charles Sheeler, Max Weber, Joseph Stella, Man Ray, as well as Sayen and Schamberg. As in the Bourgeois exhibition in New York a month earlier, Schamberg's inclusions mystified Philadelphians who in his indeterminable machine imagery sought verifiable visual associations.

Although Schamberg's forms did come from actual machinery, his pieces remained unrecognizable. In the 1963 monograph on the artist, Ben Wolf surmised that "many of these compositions had their origin in illustrated machinery catalogues borrowed from his brother-in-law, Herbert, who was then engaged in the manufacture of ladies' cotton stockings". In *Morton Livingston Schamberg: Notes of the Sources of the Machine Images* (1985), historian William Agee determined that one of Schamberg's paintings came from a machine used for bookbinding called an automated wire-stitcher. The futile effort to find visual references in Schamberg's machinist compositions, however, speaks to his creativity as a non-objective painter.

Furthermore, like American-born Dadaist Man Ray, Schamberg “discovered” and implemented his subject matter for the specific purpose of conceptual alteration; unlike Man Ray who emigrated to France, Schamberg remained faithful to a home-grown American machinist imagery.

Machine compositions by Schamberg are rare. Between 1915 and 1918 he executed only four such oils and thirty-some pastels, one of which is his *Machine Composition*. Characteristically small, its shape elicits a definite mechanical object, in this case perhaps the birds-eye view of an industrial clamp used in a vertical sequence to secure pipes to a wall frame. The broad bands of delineated color include the artist’s preferred turquoise blue and deep yellow, along with dark pink, light blue, and bright white, yielding a particularly vibrant Schamberg pastel. Its formal arrangement is equally dynamic, denoting an outward thrust of mechanical force mitigated by interior structural tension. On October 13, 1918, at the age of thirty-seven, Morton Schamberg suddenly succumbed to an outbreak of influenza in the Philadelphia area. During his lifetime he was an artist at the creative fringes of American Modernism; posthumously, Schamberg continues to be the source of speculation as to what greater heights of ingenuity he could have reached had his life and art not been so dramatically cut short.

“Morton Livingston Schamberg was one of the first American innovators to utilize the machine as subject matter in his art. {...} *Machine Composition* from 1916 is an arresting image, rendered in blue, pink and yellow pastel with dark accents. The intense coloration of the work is a striking contrast to the soft surface and the implied hardness of the abstracted machine part of which the pastel is based. Schamberg was attracted to pastel probably from his early studies with William Merritt Chase, who was a master of the medium, albeit with totally different aesthetic results.” (Noll, Anna C. [A Point of View: 20th Century American Art from a Long Island Collection](#), exhibition catalog, The Heckscher Museum, Huntington, New York, 1990, p. 19)

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“It seems absurd to say that Schamberg has evolved structures as beautiful as flowers from machine forms, and yet there is no other way in which to express the fact that beauty is the result. This artist is in advance of criticism, and it will be some time before criticism will decide upon its appropriate adjectives. In the meantime, although the language fails, the feeling does not, and it may be put down with perfect confidence that Schamberg meets with the quick response from the sensitive spectator that spells success, not only for his reputation but for modern art.” (excerpt from the eulogy for Morton Schamberg given by art critic Henry McBride, pub. [New York Sun](#), May 25, 1919)

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Morton Schamberg’s participation in American Dada is best remembered for the iconic sculpture called *God*. A readymade consisting of a drain pipe attached to a miter box, *God* was “created” the same year (1917) as Duchamp’s upended urinal titled *Fountain*, and has historically been attributed to Schamberg. However, in his 1994 publication [New York Dada: 1915-23](#), Francis Naumann concludes that Schamberg’s contribution in the sculpture’s genesis is likely limited to its assembly and photography, while its conception and titling was by the Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven. A frequent model for Man Ray, Loringhoven was eccentric even for the New York Dada clan. Poet, shoplifter, and junk collector in Greenwich Village, she was known for affixing cancelled postage to her face and hanging a birdcage with a live canary from her neck. Transforming her body into a living collage, the life of the often-homeless Baroness was a living Dadaist performance.