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Jan Matulka

(Czech-American Painter, 1890-1972)

Jan Matulka was born in 1890 in a small town southwest of Prague, in what later became Czechoslovakia. In 1905 he took his first art classes in Prague, and two years later his family emigrated to the United States, settling in the Bronx, New York.

He then began taking classes at the National Academy of Design, continuing there through 1917. After he finished his training, he moved into a studio apartment in Manhattan and met Lida Jirouskova, whom he married in 1918. Throughout this time he traveled quite extensively, visiting the southwest United States, Czechoslovakia, Paris, and Prague. In 1917 he lived in New Mexico, where he adopted a cubist style and painted some of the earliest modernist works in the Southwest. In addition, he also painted directly from life, recording ceremonial scenes and daily life in the Pueblos.

In 1926 Katherine Dreier arranged his first important one-man exhibition at The Art Center, 65 East 56th Street in New York. However their relationship soon began to sour due to disagreements.

In 1931, Stuart Davis arranged a showing of his own work at the Art Students League along with the work of Matulka, John Graham, and Arshile Gorky, which began a professional friendship between the four. Ultimately Matulka's position at the League was eliminated in part because of opposition from conservative faculty members.

In 1933, he made his final visit to Europe and gave up his Paris studio to Josef Sima. In 1935 he joined the Federal Art Project (FAP) under the WPA, where he created the mural "Synthesis of American Music and History." His affiliation with FAP ended in 1939.

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In 1944 he had a solo exhibition at the A.C.A. Gallery and after that time dropped off the artistic map, but still kept working until his death in 1972. In 1969 his name was mentioned in the retrospective catalog for David Smith as his biggest influence, and Matulka's work began to sell again. In 1970 New York dealer Robert Schoelkopf began representing Matulka and gave him a solo exhibition.

In 1979 a retrospective of Matulka's work opened at the Whitney Museum of Art, and in 1982 an exhibition of works donated by Lida Matulka was organized at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York. Thomas McCormick Gallery in Chicago was responsible for reviving interest in Matulka's work, organizing a one-person exhibition in 1995, as well as the subsequent exhibition "Jan Matulka: The Global Modernist," which traveled to six museums around the United States from 2004-2006.

His work is found in numerous museum collections, including the Amon Carter Museum, Fort Worth; Detroit Institute of Arts; Guggenheim Museum, New York; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Hirschhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC; Los Angeles County Museum of Art; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, MA; National Gallery in Prague, Czech Republic; Museum of Modern Art, New York; and Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

Courtesy of McCormick Gallery