



“I’m going to be a great painter”

So said Eugene Speicher and, for a while, the world agreed.

WE’RE FAMILIAR with the romantic story of the great artist appreciated only after his death, but sometimes, as in the case of Eugene Speicher, the circumstances are reversed. At the height of his fame, Speicher was called “America’s most important living painter” by *Esquire* magazine. A gallery show of his work in

1934 drew more people than did an Edward Hopper retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art the previous year. Times changed, and in the second half of the 20th century Speicher’s reputation suffered a precipitous decline. He’s become best known as a footnote in American art for his youthful putdown of

fellow student Georgia O’Keeffe: “It doesn’t matter what you do; I’m going to be a great painter, and you will probably end up teaching painting in some girls school.” O’Keeffe had the last laugh, though for a few decades Speicher’s arrogance looked well-founded.

This year, Speicher’s art is the focus of a retrospective that chronicles the arc of his career. “Along His Own Lines: A Retrospective of New York Realist Eugene Speicher” is curated by Valerie Ann Leeds, who offers a spot-on explanation for Speicher’s fall from grace. New styles, the formality of his work and an impression that his paintings don’t transcend their era were all factors that contributed to his eclipse. Major museums deaccessioned his canvases as quickly as they’d once grabbed them up, and Speicher’s name was all but expunged from 20th-century art history.

The current exhibition features portraits, landscapes, still lifes and drawings. Speicher’s drawings are energetic



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LEFT: *Portrait of a French Girl (Jeanne Balzac)* (ca 1924; oil on canvas, 40x36¼)

“Along His Own Lines: A Retrospective of New York Realist Eugene Speicher” was first exhibited at the Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art, State University of New York at New Paltz, and will be displayed at the New York State Museum, Albany, from October 18 to March 22, 2015.

and offer a stylistic hybrid between the solidity of Hopper and the lyricism of Matisse. Still, Speicher was best known for his portraits in oil, and they remain the works by which he can be most fully assessed.

Portrait of a French Girl (Jeanne Balzac) merits a second look, for it's Speicher at his best. The painting is expertly composed, the girl expertly drawn. Speicher took a long time on

his portraits, and his heavy-lidded women appear either bored from the hours of posing or just plain world-weary; ennui seems to have been his default mode. The woman in *French Girl* is an opaque soul, wearing an impenetrable expression. A dependable characteristic of Speicher's human subjects is their emotional inaccessibility.

That said, the *French Girl* is a dominating presence in real space. Her three-dimensionality is impressive and lends the work a gravitas often missing in portraits of conventionally attractive subjects. The girl's head is a terrific example of classical modeling of form; the dark rings under her eyes and rouged cheeks take the image from the realm of the abstract to that of the particular. Her open red wrap and the flowers she holds near her heart enliven her.

Reassessing Speicher, we can appreciate his talents. His painterly aptitude is welcome when compared to the rank and file of portrait artists, for whom spit-and-polish surfaces are an ultimate virtue. In the end it's difficult to see why he was once so wildly popular, and only a little easier to understand how he fell so completely off the map. Sometimes a good painter, Speicher serves as a reminder of the fickleness of worldly renown and the ruthlessness with which each new generation reevaluates the art of the previous age. n

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