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C O U R I E R

WILLIAM LESCAZE

THE RISE OF
MODERN DESIGN IN AMERICA

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A BRIEF SURVEY OF
THE SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY
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William Lescaze and Hart Crane: A Bridge Between Architecture and Poetry

BY LINDSAY STAMM SHAPIRO

The following is a curious note about the influence that William Lescaze had on Hart Crane after Lescaze's emigration to the United States. In 1920 Lescaze worked in Paris for Henri Sauvage, an architect noted for his set-back apartment blocks and his involvement with workers' housing. Lescaze grew impatient with the lack of architectural projects after the war and, at the same time, longed to start his own practice. His former teacher, Karl Moser, asked, "Where are you ever going to find the chance of doing monumental work? Egypt? It's too late. Maybe America."¹ At that point, Lescaze determined to emigrate to America, as did so many other European figures during this period. Thus, in any assessment of Lescaze's work, it is necessary to emphasize his situation as a European émigré. Lescaze was attracted by a myth of America, a myth which was, in any case, partly of European invention. He arrived in New York with a letter of recommendation from Moser *auf deutsch*, only to discover that Moser's reputation had yet to reach the New World. Unable to find work in the metropolis of his dreams, Lescaze settled in Cleveland, Ohio, where he exhibited paintings and worked, ironically enough, in a bastion of architectural conservatism, the office of Hubbel and Benes.

Also in Cleveland during the 1920s were the composers Ernest Bloch and Roger Sessions, and the painter Charles Burchfield; but it was with Hart Crane that the architect forged a lasting relationship. Crane's and Lescaze's rapport undoubtedly stands as one of the most interesting liaisons between architecture and poetry in America. It has not been sufficiently noted that Hart Crane received inspiration from the cosmopolitan background of Lescaze, who provided the prodigious American poet with literary sources of symbolism. One may surmise that Lescaze became a symbolic "bridge" for Crane, the future poet of *The Bridge*, as well as a link to the technological dream of modernism. The influence of Rimbaud, Baudelaire, and Laforgue, whose work Lescaze first introduced to Crane, is evident in Crane's first book, *White*

1. This quotation was discovered in the William Lescaze Papers, Series II, box 1, George Arents Research Library, Syracuse University.

Buildings (1926), with its rather purist title. Crane himself wrote, “Lescaze has proved an inspiration to me. Knowing intimately the work of Marcel Proust, Salmon, Gide, and a host of other French moderns, he is able to see so much better than anyone else around here, the aims I have in my own work. . . . I never found a more stimulating individual in N.Y.”² Lescaze’s portrait of Hart Crane, published in the Parisian journal *Gargoyle* in 1923, accentuated the utopian element in Crane. Crane praised the portrait for its almost melodramatic, visionary quality, a quality brought out by the emphatic right eye that suggested for him the notion of the *voyant* (fig. 1).³

Crane needed at that point to discover the means to counteract the pessimism of T. S. Eliot’s “The Waste Land”, which he considered to be a collage of the accumulated debris of Europe and Asia. Also, Crane, like William Carlos Williams, wanted to create a vernacular affirmation of the machine age without resorting to the use of naturalistic mimesis. Crane’s poetry aspires to a gigantic scale, a new maximalism, that is comparable to Lescaze’s quest for the monumental in architecture. There is no doubt that Crane was involved in something like a “skyscraper poetry”; similarly, Lescaze alluded to skyscrapers even in his furniture designs. In Crane’s work there is an insistence on inserting canonic American diction: “Stick your patent name on a signboard/brother—all over—going west—young man. . .”⁴ Yet Crane wanted America affirmed not only in diction, since he also used Christopher Columbus, Pocahontas, and Rip Van Winkle as American heroes and myths. This was his response to the overly Europeanized modernists and expatriates like Eliot and Pound, who disdained the American mainland. Lescaze, a European, resembles Crane in that he attempted to adapt European modernism to an American context. Although he started from the opposite direction geographically, Lescaze, like Crane, sought to move beyond the facile architectural symbolism of the Moderne Style to an aesthetic truly appropriate for the new epoch. Both men maintained a balance between the American and the European elements of their respective art forms.

2. Letter to Gorham Munson, October 6, 1921, in *The Letters of Hart Crane: 1916-1932*, ed. by Brom Weber (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1965), 66-67.

3. For more on this portrait and Crane’s response see: Ann Lorraine Lanmon, “The Role of William Lescaze in the Introduction of the International Style to the United States” (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Delaware, 1979), 38-43.

4. Hart Crane, “The River”, *The Bridge* (New York: Liveright, 1970), 16.

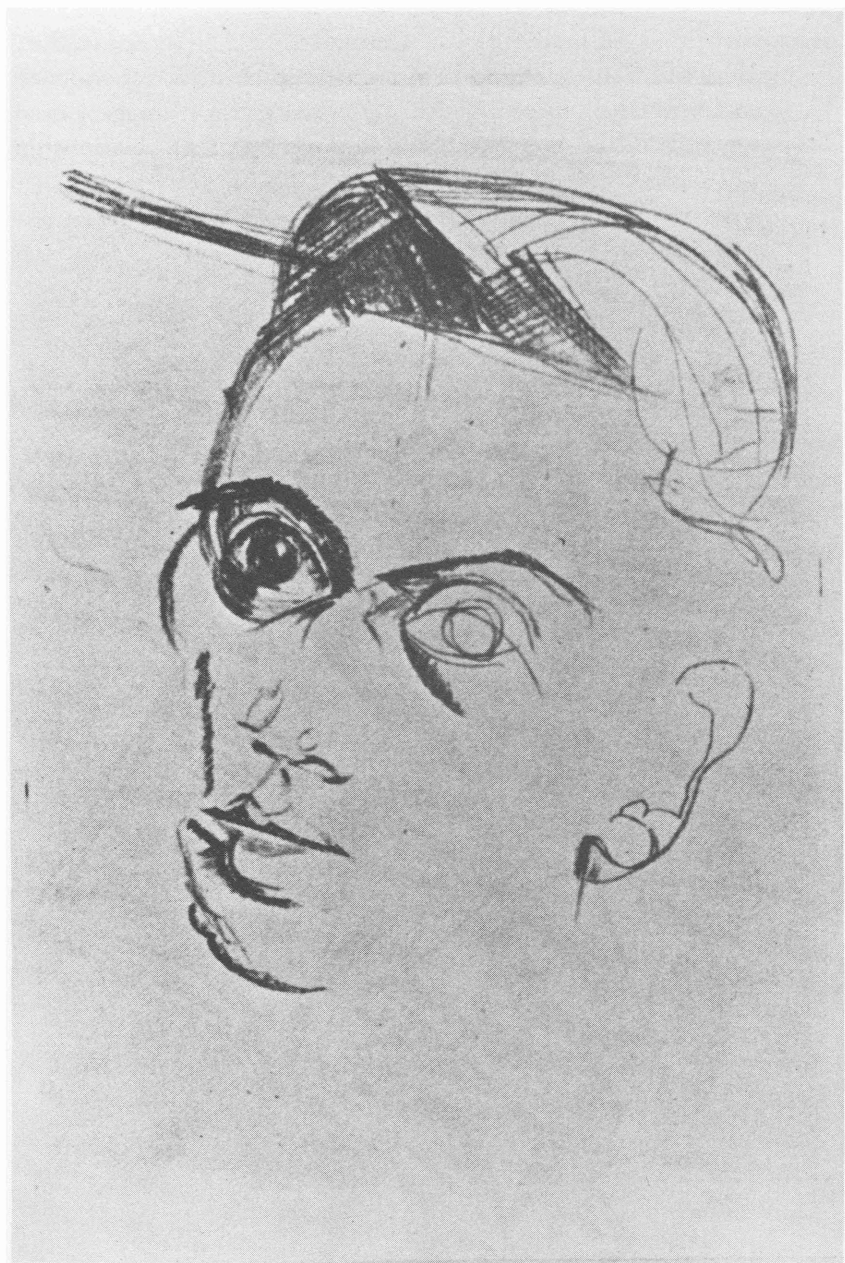


Fig. 1. Hart Crane, portrait by William Lescaze (1923).
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Columbia University Library.

And just as Crane never gave up his poetic inheritance of metrics and tensions, neither did Lescaze give up the traditions of architecture. Surely one does not want to build a complete structure of correspondences between Crane and Lescaze, based on their skyscraper imagery of affirmation and collage, but one should not overlook their relationship.