

67: Guy Pène du Bois *Jane* (ca. 1946)

Betsy Fahlman

During a career that spanned the first half of the twentieth century, Guy Pène du Bois established himself as one of America's leading realists. His first works date from 1904, when he was still an art student, and his last were executed fifty years later. As the son of an art critic, a profession Guy would also pursue, he enjoyed an aesthetic advantage reinforced by family heritage and European travel. His paintings blended American urban realism with a distinctly French flavor.¹

Enrolling at the New York School of Art in 1899, Pène du Bois first took classes from William Merritt Chase. Chase impressed his students with his combination of an art-for-art's-sake philosophy combined with the agile realism of his style. But it was the legendary and charismatic painter, Robert Henri, who began teaching there in 1902, who most strongly affected the young artist. Among his fellow students were several who would have notable careers, including Edward Hopper, Patrick Henry Bruce, Rockwell Kent, Walter Pach, and George Bellows. Together, they learned to be men first, and artists second, and to take their inspiration from the life they knew around them. Years before Henri became famous as the leader of the anti-academy group known as The Eight,² he was urging Pène du Bois and his contemporaries to execute gritty urban themes in a darkly toned, painterly style. Although Pène du Bois's style changed with each succeeding decade, Henri's lessons remained the foundation of his art for the rest of his career.

In 1905, after three years of study with Henri, Pène du Bois departed for Europe, spending most of his time in Paris, where he took classes at the Colarossi Atelier. Intense exposure to French art exerted a deep influence on him, and he honed his skills as a sharp observer of social exchanges, a characteristic theme he would continue to explore—he was especially intrigued by the interactions between men and women. Returning to New York in 1906, while he continued to paint, he took up writing criticism as a means to support himself. He began to actively exhibit his work, and astute collectors, including Chester Dale, Albert Barnes, and Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney, purchased his paintings. In 1920, he began teaching at the Art Students League, where his students included some of the next generation of urban artists, such as Isabel Bishop and Raphael Soyer.

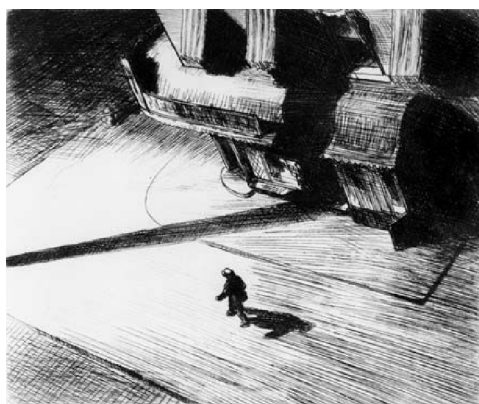
His move to France in 1924 for a six-year sojourn marked the beginning of the mature phase of Pène du Bois's work. Liberated from the wearying cycle of teaching and criticism, and supported by steady sales from the Kraushaar Gallery, which had given him a solo show in 1922, he could now devote himself full-time to painting. His style became broader and more stylized, his palette lighter, his paintings larger, and his vision more distinctly individual. Pène du Bois's paintings from this period are stylish and sophisticated, depicting the social theater he saw around him with a sharp wit.

The stock market crash ended Pène du Bois's time in France, forcing his return to America in 1930 and, out of economic necessity, to take up writing and teaching once again. In his painting he continued to pursue many of the themes that had interested him throughout the teens and twenties. Now, however, his figures have gained in solidity and breadth, his humor has become more subtle, and many of his compositions have taken on an impressive new monumentality. Like many artists during the Depression, Pène du Bois sought government support through Post Office mural competitions: he did three. Whether as cause or effect of this work—but again like many artists at that time—he discovered a renewed interest in the human figure, and emerged as a strong portrait painter.

Guy Pène du Bois,
1884–1958
Jane, ca. 1946
Oil on canvas, 30 x 24 in.
Gift of Thomas and Marion
Hawks by exchange, 98.36
Courtesy James Graham &
Sons, and the Estate of Yvonne
Pène du Bois McKenny

He published his autobiography in 1940, but otherwise, the forties proved to be difficult years for the artist. Heart attacks in 1940 and 1941 limited the time he was able to be active in his studio; in 1947 he broke with Kraushaar Gallery, after twenty-five years. Sales generally were slow, and the art market was further strained by World War II. As the larger art world changed, many representational artists like Pène du Bois found themselves increasingly out of touch with contemporary developments, and the rise of abstract expressionism would soon eclipse his generation of Henri-trained realists.

Jane is a typical work of Guy Pène du Bois's later years. A woman whose blond hair has been carefully arranged and who wears an elegant long sleeveless evening dress with a plunging neckline, accented by a glittering necklace and bracelet, enters an undefined space alone. Her body is partially obscured by the dark shadow that stretches diagonally across the lower right third of the canvas. The artist has used the striking contrast of light and dark to create a suspenseful mood, and his figure pauses momentarily before proceeding further. The eerie blue tonality is typical of Pène du Bois's palette during this period, as is the somewhat ominous atmosphere. Whether she is meeting someone else or is exiting from a previous encounter is not clear, but her solitude adds an element of anxiety and tension worthy of a suspenseful movie scene. The artist often presented his subjects in pairs, but in this case the other participant is only implied. Nor is the precise nature of the space through which she passes clear. It might be the courtyard of a city apartment or townhouse, or it could be the entry of a nightclub or elegant restaurant for which her attire would be appropriate. Pène du Bois often employed such ambiguity in his depictions of character types (which he favored over individuals), who perform highly structured roles within the social theatre of their economic class.



ALSO IN THE MAG COLLECTION:

Edward Hopper

1882–1967

Night Shadows, 1921

Etching, 10% x 13³/₁₆ in.

Gift of Sister Magdalen LaRow

in honor of Robert Gianniny,

89.52

Stylistically, *Jane* evokes the spirit of Guy Pène du Bois's lifelong friend, Edward Hopper, whom he had first met in Henri's class. The two had early on shared an enthusiasm for Paris, which Hopper had visited twice by 1910. Further, both had depicted elegant themes in the 1920s, as seen in Hopper's *Two on the Aisle* (1927, Toledo Museum of Art). But by the 1940s, Hopper's interest in depicting sophisticated and urbane themes had waned. His paintings from that period have become emotionally arid, whereas Pène du Bois's figures still retain some of the visual snappiness of his 1920s flappers.

By 1950 the active career of Guy Pène du Bois was at an end. He experienced increasing health problems, and his wife Floyd, to whom he had been married for nearly forty years, died. With his daughter Yvonne, also a painter, he spent the years between 1953 and 1956 in Paris, where he painted his last dated significant canvas, *The Café Flore* (1954, private collection), four years before his death in 1958.

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