

# Basic Detail Report



## **Title: Strokey's Bar**

Date: 1940

Primary Maker: com.gallerysystems.emuseum.core.entities.RecordXPerson@3eac2

Medium: Watercolor on paper laid down on composition board

Description: "Strokey's Bar" depicts the teeming mass of humanity that frequented the Bowery, a seedy New York neighborhood. Strokey's Bar stood on the corner of Bowery and Pell Streets, and many an unemployed derelict passed through its doors during the hard years of the Depression. Marsh reveled in the crowds of workers and panhandlers that filled the streets of lower Manhattan, and he made frequent forays south from his Fourteenth Street studio to find such subjects for his work. Marsh is known for including a profusion of signage in his images, and in "Strokey's Bar" he captures the promotional chaos of billboard advertising. Aside from the sign above the bar that gives the painting its name, another, to its left, advertises a clothing shop that sells suits and coats for four dollars. Farther down the street, the sign immediately above an old-fashioned barber's pole advertises shaves for ten cents along with other haircutting services. Carefully placed in the center of the composition is a traffic sign directing the viewer's gaze to the right. There is only "one way" to go amidst this urban confusion, and the directional arrow of this sign leads the viewer straight into Strokey's Bar. The people on the street, who do walk toward the bar, are differentiated by anecdotal details that individualize

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and personalize them. In a friezelike composition, Marsh included (from left to right) two men--one tall and bald, the other short and hairy--walking together and absorbed in conversation; another duo, one with hands in his pockets, the other with cigarette by his side, bidding each other good-bye in the center; and at the far right, two indigent beggars, the shorter one on crutches, stopping to ask a passerby for a handout. Others are similarly detailed--a worker climbs aboard the back of a truck, two old men watch the beggars from the doorway of the bar, and toward the center, a single woman steps briskly forward with her head held high and her purse clutched tightly in her hand. This motif of an attractive young woman striding through a group of loitering men is often found in Marsh's work. Marsh painted "Strokey's Bar" in watercolor on paper, a technique to which he had returned after almost a decade of painting in tempera. He generally worked from sketches and photographs that he made on the site that he transformed into large scale works in the studio. (1) Essentially a draftsman, Marsh drew the setting and figures of "Strokey's Bar" in a monochromatic brown pigment, then highlighted the composition with subtle washes of blue, yellow, and pink paint. Marsh returned to the subject of Strokey's Bar several times during his career. Five years after completing the New Britain version, he produced a second version in Chinese ink (1945; private collection), in which he repeated the motif of a single young woman making her way through a crowd of loitering men. The mood of this work is less frenetic, and the price of a suit has risen from four dollars to an inflationary six. In 1953 Marsh essayed the subject a third time, in tempera on panel. In "Bowery--Strokey's" (1953; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York), the figures are more attenuated and a Chinese restaurant has added its name to the profusion of lettered advertising. The front page of a newspaper signals the chronological move from the Depression to the Cold War: "Atom Bomb Burns Out Ghost Town" blares the "New York Post" headline. Marsh saw many changes during his thirty-year career, and the Bowery bums and Strokey's Bar were there to see them with him. MEB Bibliography: Lloyd Goodrich, "Reginald Marsh" (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1972); Edward Laning, "The Sketchbooks of Reginald Marsh" (Greenwich, Conn.: New York Graphic Society, 1973); Marilyn Cohen, "Reginald Marsh's New York" (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1983); Ellen Wiley Todd, "The 'New Woman' Revised: Painting and Gender Politics on Fourteenth Street" (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993). NOTES: 1 . Several sketches of Strokey's and its immediate surroundings are reproduced in Laning "Sketchbooks", pp. 47-56. Dimensions: 27 x 40 1/2 in. (68.6 x 102.9 cm) Sheet Dimension: 27 x 40 1/2