

Manierre Dawson

a biography



Manierre Dawson was born on December 22, 1887, to an established, prosperous middle-class Chicago family. He learned to paint by copying magazine illustrations and attending basic high school level art classes. While his family appreciated his passion for art, his father insisted the artist have a “professional” career. Thus, Dawson reluctantly enrolled in the Armour Institute of Technology (now the Illinois Institute of Technology) to pursue a degree in civil engineering, though he did not give up painting. Upon graduation in 1909, the prestigious Chicago architecture firm Holabird and Roche (now Holabird and Root) immediately hired him. His co-workers impressed upon him the importance of a trip abroad, and his superiors granted him a six-month sabbatical to explore Europe and study architecture.

Starting in mid-June 1910, Dawson traveled throughout Europe, at first focusing on architecture, but eventually painting and studying art, mostly the Old Masters, dominated his time. He did not seek out contemporary art until he returned to Paris. There, he met Gertrude Stein (1875–1946), an American writer and art collector, and became fascinated with the Paul Cézanne (1839–1906) paintings in her apartment. Dawson took the opportunity to share one of his own works, and she purchased it as a gift for a friend, making it the young artist's first sale. He returned to the U.S. and stopped in New York to meet artist Arthur B. Davies (1862–1928), who introduced him to several other well-known artists and urged him to stay in the city. Dawson declined, explaining he would not be able to afford the living expenses, and he went home to Chicago and his civil engineering job.

Artistically, Dawson shifted from painting purely non-objective works to creating abstracted reiterations of Old Master works, and he returned to the human figure as Davies advised. This can be seen in *Meeting (The Three Graces)* (1912), and while it is reminiscent of Pablo Picasso's (1881–1973) cubist work, its inspiration is actually from the Renaissance as Dawson was perhaps only vaguely aware of the Spanish painter. These works were said to be his interpretation of a Cubo-Futurist style, or a movement that combined French Cubism (emphasized the flat, two-dimensional surface of the picture plane) and Italian Futurism (articulated dynamism, speed, energy and power of the machine). The artist soon resumed painting pure abstractions. He focused on dissolving planes, breaking down the

subjects' structures, and expressing the idea of movement on his canvases. Davies invited Dawson to join the 1913 Armory Show in New York, but he declined, feeling his more successful works were stored at his family's summer retreat in Michigan and therefore inaccessible at the time. However, when the exhibition came to Chicago, one of the coordinators, Walter Pach (1883–1958), insisted Dawson submit a work. He obliged with *Wharf Under Mountain* (1913), and it was the only non-objective abstracted American painting.

The Armory Show and subsequent departure from the architecture firm marked a turning point in Dawson's artistic career, and he spent more time in his studio. Davies and Pach organized an exhibition of American modernists, *The Fourteen*, and they invited Dawson to participate. The burgeoning artist also worked with the director of the Milwaukee Art Society (now the Milwaukee Art Museum) to organize a modern American and European art exhibition, *Art in the Modern Spirit*, which included over 30 works by Dawson.

In 1914, Dawson moved to Michigan and purchased a fruit farm. The artist-turned-farmer believed he could work the trees in the warm months and paint in the cold months. Unfortunately, the demands of farming left little time and energy to create, halting his professional artistic pursuits. He continued to paint a handful of pictures a year and submitted work for shows in the 1920s, and he dabbled in sculpture using found material. Upon retiring from farming in the 1950s, he revisited paintings from his first years on the farm and realized them in sculptural forms. Towards the end of his life, there was a resurgence of interest in his work, and the artist was featured in a number of solo exhibitions, including a retrospective in 1966 at Grand Rapids Art Museum. Two years later, Dawson sold the fruit farm and moved to Sarasota, Florida, where he lost his battle with cancer on August 15, 1969.



IMAGES (LEFT TO RIGHT): Manierre Dawson in his Ludington, Michigan studio, 1966 (Photo: Private Collection of Peter Lockwood); Manierre Dawson (American, 1887–1969), *Meeting (The Three Graces)*, 1912, oil on canvas, 58 1/8 x 48 in. (147.6 x 121.9 cm), The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Myra Bairstow and Lewis J. Obi, M.D., 2007.2007.331 © artist or artist's estate; Manierre Dawson (American, 1887–1969), *Wharf Under Mountain*, 1913, 18 x 22 in. (45.72 x 55.88 cm), Norton Museum of Art, Palm Beach, Florida © artist or artist's estate



Manierre Dawson (American, 1887–1969)

Equation 1914

oil on cardboard on board, 42 x 34 in. (106.68 x 86.36 cm)

Museum purchase with funds provided by the Joslyn Women's Association: Collector's Choice III and the JWA 1987–88 Administration, and gift of Ephraim Marks, 1988.4

Art historians and scholars have attempted to establish the correct place for Manierre Dawson's work within the American Modernist movement. He created innovative compositions that clearly anticipated Modernist trends and did this while residing “off the artistic grid” in Chicago without the supportive advantages of the avant-garde community in New York. While viewers may see European Modernism in his paintings, the compositions are actually a result of his civil engineering training.

Some contend that *Equation* (1914) is a Cubist work, but in actuality it cannot be considered one as it does not have simultaneous multiple perspectives nor interlocking planes. It is effectively “math construction” with the following aspects of geometry: lines (horizontal, vertical and diagonal; straight and curved), constructions (perpendiculars, arcs, circles, polygons), and planes (flat shapes having length and width). Also, the viewer may recognize these mathematical symbols in the composition: $+$ $-$ $\sqrt{<}$ $>$ X . This painting, with its muted, colorful geometric planes, demonstrates the artist's use of “construction lines.” A common practice, likely carried over from his years working at a drafting table, where lines continue out beyond the edges or intersections to show how an object exists in space.

Like many abstracted artworks, there remains some dispute as to what the artist intended for the painting's content. Some critics and scholars perceive it as a stained-glass window while others contend it illustrates “the glass box” drawing technique, which is a common architectural exercise to help visualize a form in space. The draftsman imagines an object in a glass box with the shapes from each view projected on the six sides and then mentally unfolds the box. This results in a multiplicity of views, like Cubism, but from a technical, architectural approach. Finally, others see a depiction of a dissolved figure of a single man or both a man and a woman together in the geometric planes.

Discussion Questions

What do you see when you look at Manierre Dawson's *Equation*?



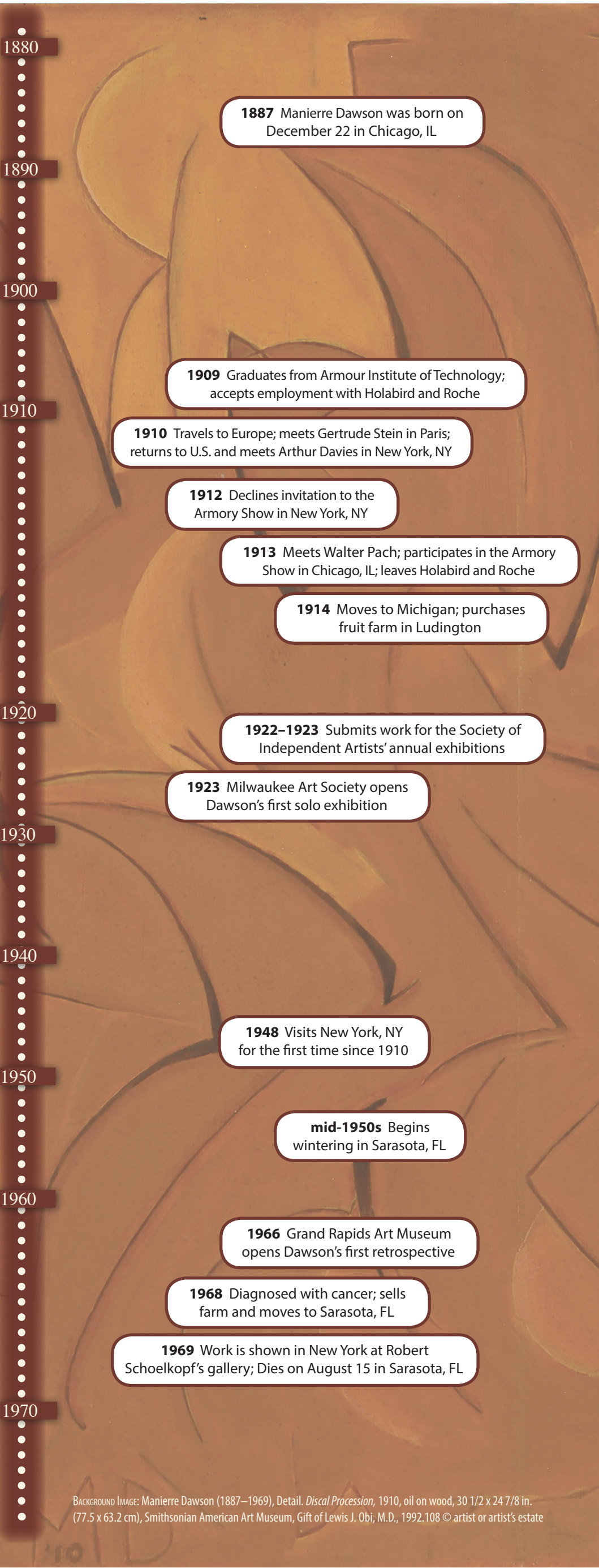
How is math incorporated in Dawson's work?



How would Dawson's career be different if he had moved to New York?

Teachers: go to www.joslyn.org/education for this poster's related academic standards and lesson plans.

Timeline



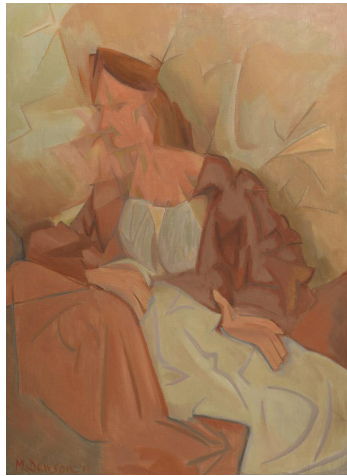
Artistic Shifts



Manierre Dawson's artistic style shifted during his more productive years while in college until 1914, not necessarily following specific styles but perhaps paralleling the popular movements of his time. Some of his earliest works, like *Vase Against Green* (1909), are still lifes with traces of Art Nouveau, where artists used delicate curvatures and ornate backgrounds, and the influence of Japanese decorative aesthetics, which are indicated by the flattened design. He also created simplistic and idyllic figurative paintings and landscapes at this time.

Prior to his 1910 European tour, Dawson briefly transitioned to purely abstract, non-objective paintings, where his composition was no longer representative of original subject, leading some scholars to argue he is the first abstract painter, or at minimum, first American to work in this genre. This is evident in *Prognostic* (1910) where the artist abstracted mathematic symbols and arches beyond recognition. Once Dawson returned to Chicago, he resumed figurative painting and developed what some scholars call “Cubist Transliterations.” These are his own interpretations of Old Masters paintings, such as *Cumaea* (1911) in which he likely used Jan Vermeer's *The Geographer* (1668–1669) as a foundation.

While some claim that Dawson could be considered a Cubist, due to his emphasis of the flattened picture plane, art historians note he does not actually follow the tenets of Cubism. He geometrically abstracted his subjects rather than depict them with multiple interlocking planes at once. The artist's work could also be read as paralleling Futurism, where artists captured movement on their canvases, and therefore some scholars use



Cubo-Futurism as a way to describe Dawson's blend of the two styles. At the height of his professional artistic career, he painted purely abstracted compositions again, like *Figure in Pink* (1914). In March 1913, Dawson explained, “These are without question the most exciting days of my life... I had thought of myself as an anomaly and had to defend myself many times as not crazy... many artists are presented showing these very inventive departures from the academics.”



IMAGES (TOP TO BOTTOM): Manierre Dawson (1887–1969), *Vase Against Green*, 1909, oil on wood panel, 10 1/8 x 14 in. (25.72 x 35.56 cm), Weatherspoon Art Museum, University of North Carolina, Greensboro, Museum Purchase, 1979.2623 © artist or artist's estate; Manierre Dawson (1887–1969), *Cumaea*, 1911, oil on board, 32 1/8 x 23 3/4 in. (81.6 x 60.3 cm), Chrysler Museum of Art, Anonymous gift, 2014.13 © artist or artist's estate; Manierre Dawson (1887–1969), *Figure in Pink and Yellow*, 1914, oil on board, 22 x 28 in. (55.9 x 71.1 cm), Art Institute of Chicago, Gift of Mary and John Gedeo, 2005.427 © artist or artist's estate

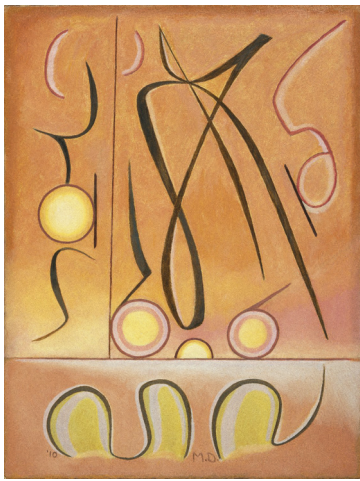
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Mathematics and Art

Manierre Dawson's work, starting in late 1908 and early 1909, demonstrates how math can infuse visual art when he begins to employ engineering techniques, which he learned in school. Trained as a civil engineer, he not only focused on advanced arithmetic, but his rigorous coursework included mechanical drawing, which taught him how to use linear perspective to draw a structure at an angled perspective. With stereotomy, the art and science of stonecutting, he learned how to cut rocks and other stone materials for complicated structures, like arches. This descriptive geometry helped him to solve problems for three-dimensional structures by drawing them in two dimensions with geometric projections.



Dawson's work as an artist benefited from the skills he developed from those courses as well as his training in advanced math. He mapped out his paintings by putting them on a grid, utilizing an XY-axis borrowed from his analytical geometry studies. He employed a faceted geometric style that was often



mistaken for Cubism. The artist populated his paintings, such as in *Xdx* (1910) with mathematic symbols where some are identifiable (like ∂ σ δ $\int$) and positioned according to their mathematical function, while others are abstracted. Although Dawson did not give it a math-related title, like *Xdx* or *Letters and Numbers* (1914), he considered *Prognostic* (1910) to be rooted in his math studies.



IMAGES (LEFT TO RIGHT): Manierre Dawson (1887–1969), *Equation*, 1914, oil on canvas, 16 1/8 x 18 1/8 in. (40.96 x 46.04 cm), High Museum of Art, Purchase with J. J. Haverty Memorial Fund for the J. J. Haverty Collection, 1983.72 © artist or artist's estate; Manierre Dawson (American, 1887–1969), *Xdx*, 1910, oil on paperboard attached to particleboard, 19 1/8 x 14 7/16 in. (48.6 x 36.7 cm), Brooklyn Museum, Purchased with funds given by an anonymous donor and Dick S. Ramsay Fund, 88.122. © artist or artist's estate (Photo: Brooklyn Museum); Manierre Dawson (1887–1969), *Letters and Numbers*, 1914, oil on canvas, 12 1/4 x 16 1/4 in. (31.1 x 41.2 cm), Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC, Museum purchase, 1978, 78.73 © artist or artist's estate

Prognostic



Manierre Dawson painted the triptych *Prognostic* (1910), one of his best-known works, before he left on his six-month European sabbatical. Considered the most ambitious and complex work of his career, the artist claimed that it stemmed from his math courses, saying “this shows in the background of coordinates and super-position of differentials. The black lines and circles thrown over the background are subconsciously possibly by pencils, pens and erasers generally strewn over a student's drawing board.” While some scholars agree this is connected to his civil engineering training, others find this work to be an abstracted landscape. As a result of these differing opinions, *Prognostic* could be

considered to be a “transitional” work, combining both landscape elements from his earliest canvases and mathematical, mechanical drawing elements from his subsequent works. Of note, paintings *Differential* (1910) and *Differential Complex* (1910) are thought to be studies for *Prognostic*.

The triptych consists of the center panel titled *Prognostic* and the outer panels named *Left* and *Right* (both in private collections). While painted as a whole, they have only been exhibited three times as the complete work, with the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago showing it in 1977. The Whitney Museum of American Art and the Hollis Taggart Galleries followed in 1988 and 1999, respectively.

Prognostic is widely considered to be America's, if not the world's, first completely non-figurative or abstracted work of art. Dawson's triptych predates abstract pioneers Wassily Kandinsky's (1866–1944) and Arthur Dove's (1880–1946) first abstracted works by one to two years. While there are some strong parallels with Kandinsky's work, the Midwest artist was not aware of the Russian artist until later.



IMAGES (LEFT TO RIGHT): Manierre Dawson (1887–1969), *Prognostic*, 1910, oil on canvas, 33 3/4 x 35 3/4 in. (85.73 x 90.81 cm), Milwaukee Art Museum, Purchase, M1967.78, © artist or artist's estate (Photo: P. Richard Eells); Manierre Dawson (1887–1969), *Differential Complex*, 1910, oil on board, 16 x 12 1/2 in. (40.7 x 31.8 cm), The Cleveland Museum of Art, Mr. and Mrs. William H. Marlatt Fund, 2001.123 © artist or artist's estate

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MANIERRE DAWSON (American, 1887–1969)

EQUATION

1914, oil on cardboard on board, 42 x 34 in. (106.68 x 86.36 cm)

JOSLYN ART MUSEUM® OMAHA, NEBRASKA

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