



**Embarking on an Eastward Journey**

**Irene Rice Pereira's Early Work**

Published 1994, Lowe Art Museum, Miami, FL

**FOREWORD**

*Irene Rice Pereira's Early Work: Embarking on an Eastward Journey* marks the Lowe Art Museum's first exhibition of a substantial number of its more than seventy works by this artist. The museum's collection, donated during the two-year period 1977–78, includes a broad spectrum of the artist's oeuvre from the early 1930s through 1960s. To my knowledge, no other museum in the country can boast so comprehensive a survey of Pereira's work.

The idea of an exhibition was first formulated by the Lowe in the early 1980s. But it was not until Dr. Karen Bearor, who has written a definitive biography of Irene Rice Pereira, contacted us in 1990 informing us of her Pereira scholarship, that the decision was made to organize a major retrospective. It is our hope that the exhibition and companion catalogue will focus critical attention on an important but overlooked artist whose fascinating achievement deserves reevaluation and recognition.

As a university museum, the Lowe Art Museum is grateful for the opportunity to make this exhibition dream a reality. I would like to thank Denise Gerson, associate director, for coordinating the organization of the exhibition, as well as José Guitian and Susan Lucke, who succeeded each other in the position of registrar, for handling loan and conservation details. I am especially grateful to Karen Bearor, who curated the exhibition and wrote a perceptive essay. Finally, I thank the donors, John V. Christie, William E. Lange, Mr. and Mrs. R. M. Lubin, and Lawrence Rodgers, whose early generosity provided the substance of the exhibition.

A major grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, as well as additional conservation and exhibition support from the Lowe's Friends of Art, has made this project possible.

Brian A. Dursum, *Director*

as in this one, the various versions are virtually identical in composition. They confirm what critic Emily Genauer said in a 1954 review of Pereira's work, that the artist refrained from committing a subject to canvas until she had first familiarized herself with it in other media. Later in life, Pereira would deny ever making sketches for paintings, preferring to have her audience believe that she was merely a conduit for "rhythms" emanating from the unconscious and finding concrete expression in her abstractions. Art historical literature is filled with countless similar statements by Jackson Pollock and others invested in the idea that the individual has little control over the creative forces. While Pereira relied upon many years' experience and a sure hand in composing her geometric abstractions, torn pages from a sketchbook now located in the George Reavey archive at the University of Texas at Austin indicate that she occasionally made preparatory studies for her later work.

From 1932 through 1938, Pereira created images of machines (which she broadly conceived to include her marine subjects). In this she was in step with many young New York artists who responded to the pared-down geometries of mass-produced objects and the factory assembly-lines that fashioned them. This aesthetic and the fascination with the industrial landscape it inspired were so pervasive that the era was journalistically christened the Machine Age. Pereira's contributions to this genre gained her critical acceptance, and she included seven such works in her first one-person show, at the ACA Gallery in 1935. The following year she selected *Wharf Construction* (1934), the first of her paintings to be published, to represent her in the *Second Biennial Exhibition* at the Whitney Museum of American Art.

**MACHINE/MARINE  
PAINTINGS**

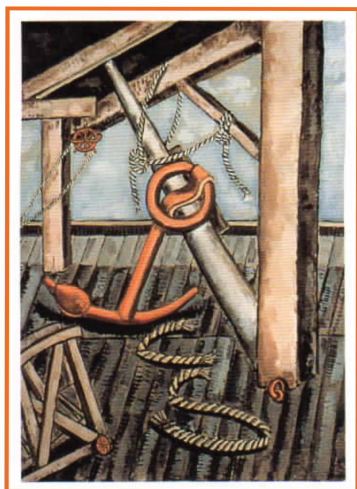
VENICE, 1931, ink and watercolor on paper, 14¼ × 18⅞"  
Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, Waltham, Mass.,  
gift of Teresa Jackson Weill, New York



Central to her personal and professional development, these works figure prominently in “Eastward Journey.” Yet the artist’s sentiments regarding the subject did not remain constant throughout the decade. One can perceive her shift from a positive assessment (*Wharf Construction*, 1934) to a fear of the machine as a malignant social force (*Machine Composition [Man and Machine #1]*, 1936) to a final satiric ambivalence (*Monument No. 2*, 1938).

The handful of drawings Pereira made on board the ship taking her to Europe in September 1931, and those made at Provincetown the following summer, became the source for her paintings of marine paraphernalia. In “Eastward Journey,” Pereira identified *The Anchor* (1952) as the first of these, and it remains the most literal in its depiction. Subsequent paintings of the wharf anchor reveal a sometimes faltering reliance on an underlying structure of perpendiculars and triangles also seen in her contemporary cubist still lifes.

The Provincetown wharf paintings lead one to suspect that the artist’s intentions lay more in metaphor than in mere description. The anchor, of course, has a long tradition as a symbol of spiritual hope and salvation. In *The Ship* (1934), the first of three versions of this subject, the anchor is combined with three pails so obviously and unnaturally placed as to demand symbolic interpretation. Three is the number of the Trinity, although a specifically Christian interpretation should not be forced, as three may also be associated with the soul. Steps located on either side of the composition suggest ascent, an interpretation reinforced by the presence of the prominent capstan, a windlass used to hoist heavy objects by cable. The ship itself, doubly present, is the vessel that ferries the soul to heaven. The anchor, the ship, the steps, the cable, the number three—each of these symbols has some connection to the passage from the physical plane to the spiritual. Water is traditionally associated with women, the feminine, and spiritual rebirth, and the



WHARF CONSTRUCTION, 1934, oil on canvas, 48 x 34<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub>"  
Lowie Art Museum, University of Miami, gift of John V. Christie, 78.005.004



VENTILATORS, 1936, oil on canvas, 34 x 42"  
Lowe Art Museum, University of Miami, gift of John V. Christie,  
78.005.000

pails, as vessels of water, could be similarly interpreted. Pereira's apparent interest here in spiritual passage and transcendence foreshadows concerns more readily confirmed in her later work.

*Ventilators*, surviving in at least three identically composed versions in different media, was probably not painted in 1933, despite the artist's (altered) inscription to the contrary. In an early photograph of the work located in Pereira's archive, the date appears to read "1936," which makes more sense stylistically and methodologically. The painting is dissimilar in organization to one exhibited under the same title in the artist's ACA Gallery show in 1955, which, like *The Anchor*, is very literal in its depiction of its subject. *Ventilators* has, instead, a sophistication of arrangement that is more consistent with Pereira's work at mid-decade. Compare it, for example, with *Boat Composite* (ca. 1933–35), which resembles a painting of the same title identified in "Eastward Journey" as preceding *Ventilators*. While the question of date for this and several other paintings in the artist's oeuvre may never be satisfactorily resolved, *Ventilators* remains significant in that it is the profile of the eponymous structures themselves that she would abstract for the Z-shaped motifs that dominate her late canvases.

Pereira's attitude toward the machine had clearly changed by 1936, when she created two versions of *Man and Machine*. (The title was borrowed from an exhibition in which she had participated that same year, a practice she repeated on at least two other occasions.) In the first version, three men, driven by the relentless belts and pulleys of modern factories, struggle against the weight of their mechanical burdens. In the second canvas, the men have been reduced to faceless robots, their vaguely discernible heads and torsos hardly distinguishable from the

Irene Rice Pereira in 1940, with painting *Curves and Angles (Composition)* (1937).



machines they tend. Their humanity survives solely in their parallel upraised arms and enlarged hands, vestigial reminders of Diego Rivera–like workers. In its more abstract depiction of factory attendants, the second version of the work is more ominous in its implications.

Alter *Man and Machine* Pereira's attitude toward the machine shifted once again. She continued to manipulate its forms through 1938, but these later, more abstract collages and paintings reflect her exposure to the anthropomorphic machines exhibited by Francis Picabia and Marcel Duchamp in *Cubism and Abstract Art and Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism* at the Museum of Modern Art in 1936. In *Monument No. 2* (originally titled and exhibited as *Congress* and reproduced in "Eastward Journey"), Pereira painted the facade of a classical temple, inspired, no doubt, by government buildings she saw in March of that year when her one-person show opened at Howard University in Washington, D.C. Against this backdrop, she placed vaguely mechanical forms that take on anthropomorphic qualities one critic likened to pontificating politicians. The temple, symbol of reason and democracy, the ideal, shares space with the farcical remains of the machine, a union of opposites that can be interpreted as a biting comment on industry and our social order. Pereira herself saw the forms in *Monument No. 2* as anthropomorphic and thus rendered less malignant in their "demechanization," as she termed it. One of these shapes, with its prominent "eye" retained, recurs in *Revolving Poetry* (1938), one of two collages bearing this title exhibited in her 1939 one-person show at the Julien Levy Gallery. The two collages were rare collaborative efforts. Bearing poetry written by David Sortor (which Pereira described as irrelevant in "Eastward Journey"), the collages were initially assembled for one of the *Four Gala Night Exhibits* held at the East River Gallery in New York in 1938.



detail, STRUGGLING  
(THE ARTIST), 1937

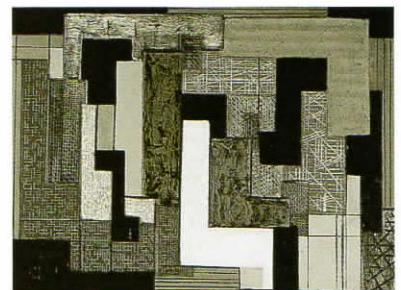
The familiar anthropomorphic shape appears again in the collage *The Diagonal* (1938). Inspired by the teaching methods of the Bauhaus, Pereira required her students at the Design Laboratory to make two-dimensional “optical translations” in graphic media of collages and assemblages constructed of materials with contrasting textures and light-reflecting qualities. Pereira performed this exercise herself with *The Diagonal*, reworked the same year in oil. One of her last machine compositions, *The Diagonal* reveals her increasing interest in abstraction, nontraditional materials, and light.

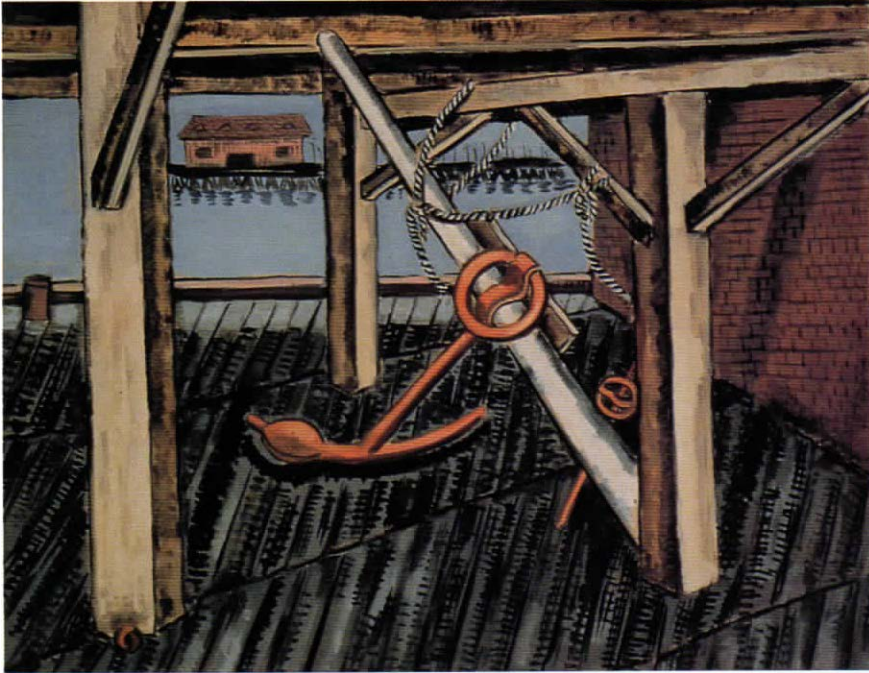
Discussion of Pereira’s machine paintings would not be complete without mention of her interest in the New York World’s Fair of 1939–1940. Not only was she fascinated with the construction of its Theme Center, but she also showed a 1937 machine painting at the fair in May 1940, in an exhibition of WPA art. Originally given the generic title *Composition*, the work was identified as *Curves and Angles* in a critic’s review.

Pereira’s first abstractions, distilled versions of machine paintings, were exhibited in November 1937 at the East River Gallery. But she did not begin to work in the Bauhaus-related style for which she is best remembered until the following year. Moving away from the machine as subject, she incorporated instead a machine-like precision of line and form. She constructed complex patterns of interrelated rectangles, eliminating any trace of recognizable imagery, although she claimed in “Eastward Journey” that vertical lines were masts and rectangles, sails. Furthermore, her position at the Design Laboratory brought her into contact with engineers and architects, potential collaborators with whom she might work to

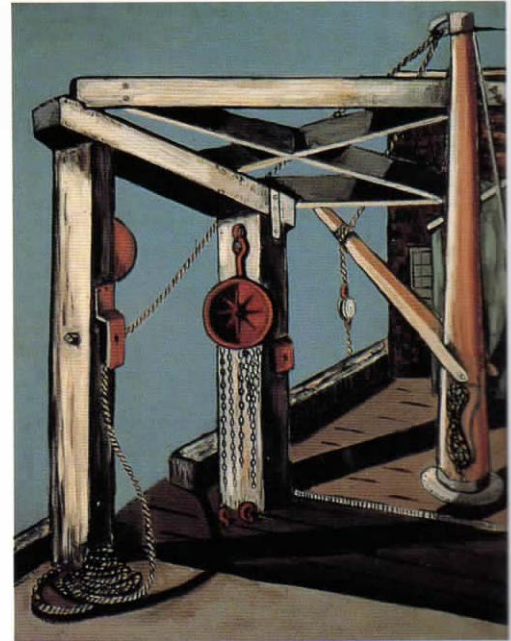
**EARLY  
ABSTRACTIONS  
AND GLASS  
PAINTINGS**

detail, WHITE RECTANGLE NO. 1, 1938



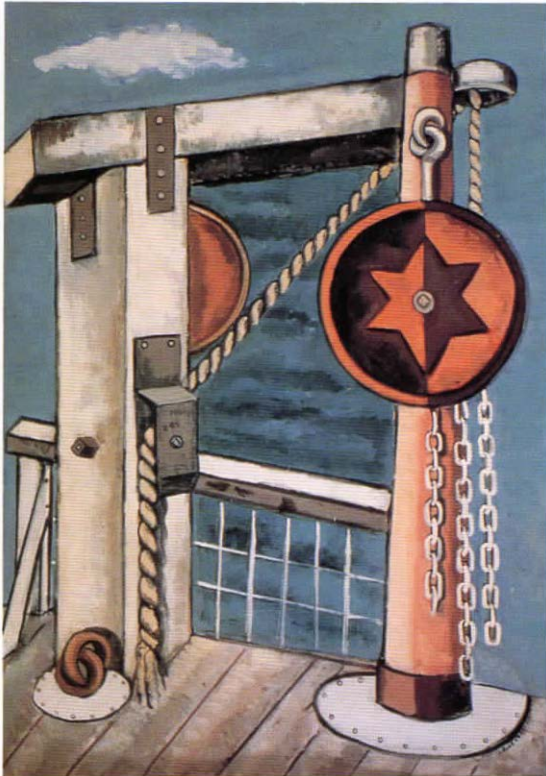


WHARF COMPOSITION, ca. 1934-35, oil on canvas, 33 $\frac{7}{8}$  x 42"  
Lowe Art Museum, University of Miami, gift of John V. Christie, 78.005.003



WHARF IN PROVINCETOWN, 1933  
oil on canvas, 38 x 30"  
Lowe Art Museum, University of Miami,  
gift of Mr. and Mrs. R. M. Lubin, 78.020.005





MARINE COMPOSITION, ca. 1934-35  
oil on canvas, 48 x 36"  
Lowe Art Museum, University of Miami,  
gift of Mr. and Mrs. R. M. Lubin, 78.020.003



THE SHIP, 1934, oil on canvas, 42 $\frac{1}{8}$  x 34"  
Lowe Art Museum, University of Miami,  
gift of John V. Christie, 78.005.002

## CHRONOLOGY

**1902** August 5. Irene M. Rice born in Chelsea, Massachusetts, to Emanuel Rice and Hilda Vanderbilt Rice.

During childhood, family moves around Massachusetts, from the Boston area to Pittsfield, to Great Barrington, and back to Boston. They subsequently move to Brooklyn, where Pereira attends Eastern District High School.

**ca. 1918** Father dies.

**1927–28** Studies with Richard Lahey at Art Students League, New York.

**1929** Marries Humberto Pereira.

**1929–31** Studies with Jan Matulka at Art Students League, New York.

**1931–32** Travels to Europe and Africa. Possibly studies with Amédée Ozenfant at Académie Moderne, Paris.

**1932** Begins painting ship paraphernalia.

**1933** Has first solo show, at American Contemporary Arts (ACA) Gallery, New York.

**1934** Exhibits in *Second Biennial Exhibition*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

**1936** Becomes member of original faculty of WPA Federal Art Project Design Laboratory, New York.

**1937** Design Laboratory undergoes change in sponsorship. Works there until October 1939.

First abstractions exhibited at East River Gallery, New York.

**1938** Divorces Humberto Pereira.

Has solo show at Howard University, Washington, D.C.

**1939** Begins first glass painting.

Has solo show at Julien Levy Gallery, New York.

**1940** Begins work at Museum of Non-Objective Painting as museum assistant. Works there until 1942.

**1941** Sister Dorothy Rice dies of cancer.

Creates first parchment painting.

**1942** Marries George Wellington Brown.

Begins teaching design at Pratt Institute, Brooklyn.

**1943** Resigns from Pratt Institute when diagnosed with cancer.

Undergoes radical mastectomy.

**1944** Has solo show at Art of This Century Gallery, New York.

**1946** Wins \$500 award at PepsiCola *Third Annual Exhibition*.

Exhibits in *Fourteen Americans*, Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Included in U.S. State Department show *Advancing American Art*.

**1947** Has solo show at San Francisco Museum of Art.

Name appears in *Congressional Record* for alleged Communist sympathies.

**1948** Begins Jungian psychoanalysis.

Has solo show at Barnett Aden Gallery, Washington, D.C.

**1949** Separates from Brown.

Travels to France.

**1950** Divorces Brown.

Moves to Salford, England.

Marries George Reavey, who teaches Russian grammar and literature at the University of Manchester.

**1951** Returns to U.S.

Teaches at Ball State University, Muncie, Indiana.

**1952** First philosophical essay, "Light and the New Reality," published in *Palette*.

Creates last paintings on glass and parchment.

**1953** Retrospective at Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, opens.

Spends time at the MacDowell Colony, New Hampshire.

Makes first unsuccessful attempts to publish "Eastward Journey."

**1955** Leaves Reavey.

**1956** Has solo show at Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

**1959** Elected Life Fellow, International Institute of Arts and Letters, Lindau-Bodensee, Germany. Begins to use letters F.I.A.L. with signature.

## SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

- 1959** Divorces Reavey.
- 1960** Travels twice to Italy. Visits Caresse Crosby's Castle Roccasinibaldi.
- 1961** Travels to Italy.
- 1963** Travels to Italy and stays at Castle Roccasinibaldi. Travels also to Switzerland and England.
- Converts to Catholicism.
- 1966** Becomes new and regular contributor to the *Literary Half-Yearly*, published in Mysore, India.
- 1968** Hospitalized with severe breathing difficulties.
- Establishes I. Rice Pereiro Foundation.
- 1969** Receives honorary doctorate from L'Université Libre (Asie), Karachi, Pakistan, and the International Federation of Scientific Research Societies of Europe, Asia, Africa and America. Begins to preface signature with "Dr."
- Travels to Portugal.
- 1970** Travels to Paris, Madrid, and Brussels. Purchases apartment in Morbello, Spain. Visits clinic in Switzerland.
- Evicted from New York apartment in which she has lived thirty-one years.
- Moves to Spain.
- 1971** January 11. Dies in Morbello.
- I. Rice Pereiro Trust formed, administered by nephew, Djelloul Morbrook.
- 1976** Retrospective exhibition held at Andrew Crispo Gallery, New York.

### ABOUT THE ARTIST

- Bau, John I. H. *Loren MacIver; I. Rice Pereira*. New York: Macmillan Company, 1953.
- Bearor, Karen A. *Irene Rice Pereira: Her Paintings and Philosophy*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993.
- Harithas, James. "I. Rice Pereira: American Painter-Writer with Bold Solutions to Old Problems." *Vogue*, June 1970, 128-29, 185.
- McCausland, Elizabeth. "Alchemy and the Artist: I. Rice Pereira." *Art in America* 35 (July 1947): 177-86.
- Miller, Donald. "The Timeless Landscape of I. Rice Pereira." *Arts* 55 (October 1978): 152-55.
- Schwartz, Therese. "Demystifying Pereira." *Art in America* 67 (October 1979): 114-19.
- Van Wagner, Judith K. "I. Rice Pereira: Vision Superceding [*sic*] Style." *Woman's Art Journal* 1 (Spring-Summer 1980): 53-58.

### BY THE ARTIST

- Crystal of the Rose*. Introduction by Lee Nordness; prefatory statement by Ranjee Shahani. New York: I. Rice Pereira and the Nordness Gallery, 1959.
- The Finite Versus the Infinite*. New York: I. Rice Pereira, 1969.
- The Lapis*. New York: I. Rice Pereira, 1957; reprint, Washington, D.C.: Corcoran Gallery of Art, 1970.
- The Nature of Space: A Metaphysical and Aesthetic Inquiry*. New York: I. Rice Pereira, 1956; reprint, Washington, D.C.: Corcoran Gallery of Art, 1968.
- The Poetics of the Form of Space, Light and the Infinite*. New York: I. Rice Pereira, 1969.
- The Transcendental Formal Logic of the Infinite: Evolution of Cultural Forms*. New York: I. Rice Pereira, 1966.
- The Transformation of "Nothing" and the Paradox of Space*. New York: I. Rice Pereira, 1955.