

Arthur Dove Watercolors

Syracuse University
Lubin House
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Syracuse University Art Galleries

Arthur Dove

Once again we are pleased to devote our Lubin House Gallery to an important but not often exhibited facet of a major American artist. Arthur Dove's place among the artists of modern America needs no further exposition here. We are delighted to have the opportunity to display a selection of these jewel-like, truly exquisite watercolors.

All work is displayed through the courtesy of Terry Dintenfuss, Inc., 18 East 67th Street, New York, New York 10021.

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"Works of nature are abstract. They do not lean on other things for meaning," pronounced Arthur Garfield Dove at age fifteen. These were prophetic words for him. His painting would follow this pattern; extracted from nature but existing in itself. Dove's paintings were the first abstract work to appear in 20th century America.

Dove, who has frequently been called a pioneer of the Modern Movement, made his diffident beginnings in Upstate New York. He was born in Canandaigua on August 2, 1880, the son of a brickmaker and contractor. Although urged by his father to study law at both Hobart and Cornell, Dove's interest was in painting. After college, he pursued a rather successful career as an illustrator in New York, working for "Harper's", "The Saturday Evening Post", and "Collier's". There is a certain importance that belongs to these lesser known watercolors or sketches, for these represent steps towards the final stage, the oils. Here the viewer almost feels the artist working out his thoughts. They are a tentative intermediate step, exploring qualities of the object and turning them out in quivering motion and dramatic light. They are more sensitive than the carefully constructed oils. Elizabeth McCausland of the "Springfield Union and Republican" drew an interesting comparison between the watercolors and oils:

One may say the sketches (watercolors) are freer and gayer; conversely the oils are stronger, more subtle, more *sauve*, more abstract, also of course, both are masterly.

They may not be considered among his finest works, but then, as sketches, they were not intended to be final pieces, just studies, mapping out plans for the finished oils.

Dove always had a sense of what was important to him and was willing to sacrifice one thing for another. In 1907 young Dove abandoned his illustration work in favor of his stronger inclination, painting. He went to Paris where his whole visual world began to change. He was exposed to the work of the Fauvists and early Cubists, Cezanne, Matisse, Derain, Braque and Vlaminck. It was here that he also met and worked closely with Alfred Meurer, who would have a strong influence on his painting.

While in Paris Dove's style began to unwind from its commercial tightness. He became a post impressionist for a short while. His painting, THE LOBSTER, exhibits definite influences of Cezanne. The most interesting evolution however, followed his return to New York in 1909. Through Maurer, Dove was introduced to master photographer, Alfred Stieglitz, and soon became his protege. Dove's coming-of-age as an artist and his transition to abstract expressionism occurred under the influence of Stieglitz, his dealer, mentor and friend. Dove became himself only after meeting Stieglitz.

Although a number of exhibitions followed at the Stieglitz gallery, Dove remained obscure and his work was unfathomable. He was too far ahead of his time, and his work was over the heads of the people. In a poem written by Burton Taylor for the "Chicago Tribune" in 1912, comes a tongue-in-cheek comment which revealed public reaction to the "new view".

But Mr. Dove is much too keen
To let a single bird be seen;
To show the pigeons would not do
and so he simply paints the coo.

Dove's developing style can be traced chronologically through his various moves, as each carved a deep impression on his work. His rural instincts soon led him from the city to a farm in Westport, Connecticut. Unsuccessfully, he tried to support his painting by farming and lobstering. Despite financial obstacles, this period left him free to develop his feelings about nature.

Dove was in many ways a recluse and tended to withdraw often to rural life. He did not find new thoughts or ideas in his withdrawal, but took them there with him. His ideas, theories, and work developed early and changed little throughout his life. His province was the earth, and this is reflected by the browns and blue pastels he used. Dove, the

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loner, was transforming objects into symbols. He was interested in rhythm, force lines and expressive color. He infused his objects with new life. *FIELDS OF GRAIN AS SEEN FROM A TRAIN* is perhaps one of his best efforts during this first period of rural life.

In 1920 Dove moved to a houseboat on the Harlem River, and later purchased a yawl, his new home for cruising Long Island Sound. This marks a seven year period of marine life and a growing fascination with sun, moon, sky and water. Some of his work, at this point, takes on a mysterious, supernatural mysticism. In *MOON* and *SUNRISE 1* and *SUNRISE II* there is a strong sense of rhythmic forces and primitive simplicity at play. Color, though subdued, becomes bold and organic. A dramatic use of light lends a haunting aurora borealis glow. Dove had begun to define the "essence" of natural objects.

FOG HORNS, also of this period, represents a move to larger, circular form. Here he paints the swelling shape of sound and the thick color of fog. Borrowing from nature, he attempted to put more of it back on canvas. Another remarkable painting of this era is *ALFIE'S DELIGHT*.

Earnings were never more than meager for Arthur Dove, who managed to live and paint on a scant \$50 a month. Upon his mother's death in 1934 he moved to Geneva, New York and struggled to settle his family's tax affairs. The first signs of what would become a crippling heart failure set in. Somber works and thoughts resulted. His mind during the early thirties seems reflected in his comments on the public resistance to the new as Wight quotes in his monograph:

If they refuse to read the writing on the wall, the part of art that is most alive will move on without them.

There are many things next door that we do not see when we look so near.

Despite his declining health, or perhaps because of it, the painter-recluse worked on stubbornly, reaching and pushing himself toward purer expression. It was always the new, that which lay beyond the point he had reached that excited him. The Stieglitz circle and its atmosphere of discovery stimulated his constant search and there seemed nothing static in his achievements. His symbols were a visual shorthand for natural forms, "the elimination of the nonessentials" as he called them. In a happier mood, Dove expresses his purpose in a

1916 catalogue as "not to revolutionize nor reform, but to enjoy life out loud."

Although Lawrence Campbell of "Art News" considered him more a sign post pointing to a place but never getting there, Dove is regarded by most critics as a trail blazer in American abstract expressionism. He substituted symbol for representation in art. He believed in the self-significance of color and line. Although they were abstractions of form and emotion, color and line held pleasure within themselves, beyond their meanings.

Dove concluded that there are a few principles, and a few basic forms and colors account for all art and nature. He began to perceive and to paint subjectively, transferring to canvas the sensations created by forms, colors, shapes and light. Dove's art evolved into a synthesis of sight, sound and color. He pared his philosophy and art down to conceptions and practical essentials, throwing away the extraneous to basic forms. In an excerpt from "Notes" published by Stieglitz to accompany a 1929 Exhibition, Dove seems best able to explain himself:

Perhaps art is just taking out what you don't like and putting in what you do.

There is no such thing as abstraction.

It is extraction, gravitation toward a certain direction, and minding your own business.

If the extract be clear enough its value will exist.

It is nearer to music, not the music of ears, just the music of the eyes.

It should necessitate no effort to understand

Just to look, and if looking gives vision, enjoyment should occur as the eyes look.

An enigma in his own time, Dove claims his historical importance as a pioneer in the abstract expressionist movement, setting his highly imaginative style to canvas even a year before the great Kandinsky. Dove remained detached and shy of public notice. His painting was nevertheless shown frequently in New York galleries, from the first exhibits in the Steiglitz gallery to the annual shows at An American Place and later at The Downtown Gallery. Most currently, it is the Dintenfuss Gallery in New York that represents him.

Dove's work is still closely associated with the early Steiglitz group: Georgia O'Keefe, John Marin, Marsden Harley and Charles Demuth. Recognition as an important figure in the modernist movement came only towards the end of his life. Dove died in 1946 seeing the first hints of approval, but never dreaming that his work would be represented in the most prestigious public and private collections in the country.

Although Dove's watercolors remained for years rather obscured from public view, they surface today for their freshness and intrinsic beauty. These tiny pieces like a flash of genius, represent that moment when thought first translates itself to paint. Dove frequently tested his ideas in watercolor before enlarging them in oil. Generally the sketches were no bigger than five by nine inches; the final works would grow to three times that size.

The watercolors are jewel-like in tone as well as quality and illustrate Dove's interest in the denser colors of nature. Garnet, ruby, emerald and jade, amethyst, topaz, amber, onyx, and finally, triumphantly, sapphire: colors with the depth and brilliance of gemstones.

WATERCOLORS

DISTRACTION. 1928
8½ x 12

FISHING BOAT BARGE. 1932
8¼ x 11¾

STEAM SHOVEL, PORT WASHINGTON III. 1932
5 x 7

NEW YORK CENTRAL RAILROAD. 1934
8½ x 10½

COWS III. 1935
5 x 7

GOAT #1. 1935
4½ x 6

LEHIGH RAILROAD. 1935
7 x 5

CASTLE STREET. 1938
5 x 7

GAS TANK. 1938
5 x 7

EXCHANGE STREET II (Geneva). 1938
5½ x 9

FLOURMILL 3. 1938
5 x 7

SENECA LAKE. 1938
5 x 7

The meticulous draftsman is evident in these small and detailed studies. Each seems complete in itself. Their vitality springs from being so close to Dove's imagination, the first expressions of his thoughts. Their transition to oil would add power to their proportion, but cause a loss of spontaneity.

The watercolors represented in this exhibition are primarily from the thirties and forties—two very important decades in the maturing style of Arthur Dove. The sketchy, exploratory renderings of the post-impressionist twenties had given way to the more confident swirl and roundness of the 30's. Some of Dove's most remarkable work derived from this period of circular fascination. In the late thirties we see him emerge from a quivering play with chiaroscuro to define his forms in pure, flat color. His work begins to glow like the light emanating from some mystical source or through color itself. A new preoccupation with boldness, triangular and squared-off in shape, defines the paintings of the forties. There is a certain "eureka" quality in this later work. Exploring the essence of landscape, Dove was to find his style, and himself.

TRAIN. 1938
5 x 7

CENTERPORT #4. 1940
6 x 8¾

CENTERPORT #5. 1940
3½ x 5

GAS SHOVEL. 1940
5 x 7

CENTERPORT. 1941
6 x 8

KATHERINE—CENTERPORT. 1941
4½ x 6

PYRAMID FORMATION. 1941
5 x 7

SUNRISE I. 1941
4 x 5½

SUNRISE II. 1941
4 x 5½

CENTERPORT SERIES #5. 1942
5 x 7

CENTERPORT #11. 1942
3 x 4

CENTERPORT #17. 1942
3 x 4