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ART

## Arthur Dove Finally Takes Wing

*During the abstract pioneer's lifetime, his work was mostly overlooked. A retrospective opening today at LACMA puts his talent in focus.*

August 02, 1998 | Hunter Drohojowska-Philp | Hunter Drohojowska-Philp is a frequent contributor to Calendar

The story of Arthur Dove may encourage all artists who feel that they have not been awarded sufficient acclaim.

Widely considered the first American artist to intentionally make an abstract painting, Dove exhibited from 1910 to 1946 at the New York galleries of the great impresario of American Modernism, Alfred Stieglitz. His work was collected by the perspicacious Duncan Phillips. Nonetheless, during his lifetime, Dove's genius was largely unsung. He watched as his friends from the Stieglitz circle--Georgia O'Keeffe, John Marin and Paul Strand--were offered retrospectives at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Dove's only retrospective was in 1937, at Duncan Phillips' then-private museum in Washington, a cultural backwater at the time.

It was only after Stieglitz died in 1946 and Dove joined Edith Halpert's Downtown Gallery in New York that his work began to sell briskly. But when Dove died at 65, just six months after Stieglitz, Dove's reputation languished. As recently as a decade ago, Dove's paintings could be bought for less than \$100,000, while ones by O'Keeffe had soared into the millions. One might wonder, as novelist Francine Prose did recently in the Wall Street Journal, "Why hasn't Dove become a household name, an icon of American Modernism, plastered on date books and calendars like his contemporary and friend, Georgia O'Keeffe?"

"Arthur Dove: A Retrospective," opening today at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, offers a correction. Co-organized by Washington's Phillips Collection and the Addison Gallery of American Art in Andover, Mass., the show was coordinated by independent curator and art historian Debra Bricker Balken in collaboration with co-curators William Agee, a Hunter College art history professor, and Elizabeth Hutton Turner of the Phillips Collection. The show contains some 70 paintings, assemblages, pastels and charcoal drawings for its four-city tour.

Having earned largely rave reviews at previous venues, it is clear that Dove's genius is no longer underrated. Coincidentally, the show comes to California on the heels of shows of two other artists from the Stieglitz circle: "Marsden Hartley: American Modern" closes today at the Frederick R. Weisman Museum of Art at Pepperdine University in Malibu and "Paul Strand: 1916" continues at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art through Sept. 15.

Born and raised around upstate New York, Dove studied law at Cornell University at the insistence of his father, who was a prosperous brick manufacturer, but he quickly discovered the art courses that would lead him to his true calling. In 1903, he was working as an illustrator for popular magazines, including Scribner's, where he met painters Robert Henri and John Sloan, who suggested he go to Paris. With no help from his father, Dove saved enough to sail in 1908, and he lived with his wife, Florence, in France for 18 months. Getting firsthand exposure to the work of the Impressionists and the Postimpressionists and

meeting both the Parisian avant-garde and expatriate Americans such as Marin and Strand deeply influenced Dove's work. It also provided him with the crucial introduction to Stieglitz.

When Dove returned to New York in 1910, his only son, William, was born, and around the same time Dove began making purely abstract paintings, predating the seminal abstract work of Wassily Kandinsky. Dove's 1911 canvas "Team of Horses" may lead a viewer to look in vain for plodding animals hidden in the arcs and ovals of earth-toned paint, but as the modest Dove explained this new way of painting: "I no longer observed in the old way, and, not only began to think subjectively, but also to remember certain sensations purely through their form and color."

Having invented his own visual language by melding organic shapes, natural hues and radiant light, Dove moved his family to Westport, Conn., where his success as a painter was evenly matched by his failure as a chicken farmer. By 1918, he was forced back to New York to earn a living as a commercial artist. In 1921, he left Florence to live with artist Helen "Reds" Torr, whom he would marry in 1932, maintaining a devoted, if impoverished, relationship until his death. The couple lived on a 42-foot yawl that they docked at various ports on Long Island Sound until, in 1929, they moored at the Ketewomoke Yacht Club in Halesite, where they lived in the custodian's quarters in exchange for upkeep.

Dove's response to the cramped quarters and constant movement of boating life was to change materials. Throughout the 1920s, he produced inventive, small collages and assemblages made of such unconventional items as mirrors, sandpaper, cork, sticks, springs, flowers and denim. For example, the 1924 work "Ten Cent Store" superimposes wildflowers over a Woolworth label. Dove composed landscapes with gauze on metal and gold brushed on plastic. The changing light and fog, the movement of waves, lent a fluid aspect to his painting. Duncan Phillips, who bought work by many of Stieglitz's artists, became Dove's patron in 1930, giving him an annual stipend in exchange for first choice of the 40 works he eventually acquired.

Following the death of his mother in 1933, the Doves moved back to Geneva, N.Y., to settle the estate. The memories of Dove's childhood and the easy rhythm of life in the country inspired biomorphic shapes with sunshine and haystacks. For example, "Flour Mill II" (1938) is radiant with the golden and green shades of the countryside.

The sale of the family properties in 1938, along with the end of the Depression, left the Doves with barely enough money to buy their final home and studio, an abandoned post office near a tidal pool in Centerport, Long Island. The following year, at age 59, he suffered his first heart attack and was diagnosed with Bright's disease, a kidney condition exacerbated by years of heavy drinking. Despite his illnesses, he continued to paint, often inspired by the seasons' effect on the willows and water outside. The simplified, geometric shapes of his last paintings reflect his desire "to clarify" as he said, 'the point where abstraction and reality meet.'

One of the most enthusiastic reviews for the current show came from Hilton Kramer, editor of the Neo-conservative art journal the New Criterion, who is also art critic for the New York Observer. In a recent telephone interview, Kramer explained, "I think that what's important for us today is that so many of his paintings have stood up so well over what is now almost a century. In the retrospective, there [are] more first-rate works than have ever been shown in any Dove exhibition in the past.

"For people like myself, looking seriously at Dove for 40 years, and for the younger artists looking at his work, he can be a revelation. This is because of his special attitude toward abstraction during the decade that abstraction was being created. It tends to be the case that the kind of abstract paintings that Americans produced were more closely based on nature than on abstract ideas, while the Europeans based their abstract painting on more theory. I think that

Dove's complicated attitude toward nature and his unprecedented use of new Industrial Age materials in painting as a way of dealing with nature--that whole aspect of the work is sensational. He gives the art public today, which tends to be short of memory about the past, a sense that many of the problems that painters face today in dealing with subject matter and form have a Modernist tradition in this country, going back to the first and second decades."

The Phillips' Turner calls the exhibition timely, because "Dove really does represent this artistic freedom and authenticity. He really had a true understanding of abstraction. He was a pioneer in thinking about the independent importance of color and form and allowing that to become the vehicle by which one reconnects oneself to nature. It's not that he is representing nature, or imitating nature, but through his magnificent use of color, art becomes a vehicle, the conduit. You come to this deep-seated feeling about color and to understand the resonance and value of it for Dove. He was so uncompromising in his desire to hold fast to the understanding that he wasn't going to imitate anything. He was going to use art to reconnect us to nature."

Asked about his impact on the artists of today, Turner adds, "Frank Stella said that he wanted to be like Dove. What does he want that Dove had? He seems to admire his authenticity, his ability to speak clearly through his art."

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Hunter Drohojowska-Philp is a frequent contributor to Calendar. Her biography of Georgia O'Keeffe will be published next year by Alfred A. Knopf.

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"ARTHUR DOVE: A RETROSPECTIVE," Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 5905 Wilshire Blvd., Los Angeles. Dates: Opens today. Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, noon-8 p.m.; Friday, noon-9 p.m.; Saturday and Sunday, 11 a.m.-8 p.m. Ends Oct. 5. Prices: \$6, adults; \$4, students and seniors; \$1, children. Phone: (213) 857-6000.