

ALEXANDRE

ARTFORUM

NEW YORK

Arthur Dove

Alexandre Gallery
By Donald Kuspit



Arthur Dove, *Sun and Moon*, 1932, oil on canvas, 18 1/4 × 22".

Between 1910 and 1911, Arthur Dove (1880–1946) made several abstract paintings, becoming the first American artist to do so. Calling them “extractions,” he mined the shapes and colors of nature, rendering its material content as a kind of afterthought, more hallucinatory than real, more suggested than insistently present. The works were never shown during his lifetime, but they were known to Alfred Stieglitz, who exhibited him regularly. He noted that Dove arrived at nonobjective art uninfluenced by Matisse, Picasso, and even Cézanne, all of whom were featured at 291, the photographer’s Fifth Avenue gallery in Manhattan. It’s probable that Dove read an excerpt from Kandinsky’s essay “Concerning the Spiritual in Art” (1911), which was published in a 1912 issue of Stieglitz’s quarterly magazine, *Camera Work* (1903–17). But, as Dove once said, “[I] could not use another’s [sic] philosophy . . . any more than I could use another’s art.”

291 Grand Street, New York, New York 10002

25 East 73rd Street, 2nd Floor, New York, New York 10021 212.755.2828 alexandregallery.com

ALEXANDRE GALLERY ALEXANDRE FINE ART INC. ESTABLISHED 1996

ALEXANDRE

“Sensations of Light” at Alexandre gallery, an exhibition of Dove’s paintings and drawings made during the 1930s and ’40s, confirmed his originality. The works fell into three broad groups: pieces that alluded to nature, nonobjective and primarily geomorphic abstractions, and several untitled watercolors that seemed to go back and forth between the aforementioned categories. All of the works were relatively modest in scale, grand in manner, and dense with meaning—the sublime, whether man-made, steeped in nature, or purely aesthetic, were here distilled into an intimate form of intensity.

Dove said that he was obsessed with “sensations of light from within and without,” reminding me of Robert Motherwell’s remark that abstraction is a kind of mysticism—the “light of revelation”—as Dove’s oil paintings *Dawn I*, *Sun and Moon*, and *Sunday*, all 1932, strongly suggest. How are we to reconcile this with Georgia O’Keeffe’s remark that Dove was “the only American painter who is of the earth,” that is, of nature? A reproduction of a pastel by the artist that O’Keeffe saw in 1913, probably at 291, was her introduction to modernist art. Her close-ups of flowers and animal skulls, emblematic of life and death, are as concentrated and intense as Dove’s rendering of the titular subject in *Silver Log*, 1928, a crepuscular canvas that makes the object look like mortified flesh. The painting *Freight Car*, 1937, is similarly unsettling—the car itself is perceived as a bloodred blotch against razor-like trees and quivering telephone poles. O’Keeffe and Dove appear to have something else in common: Their works are the last hurrah of Emersonian transcendentalism. The fact that *The Dial* (1840–1929)—a literary magazine founded by Ralph Waldo Emerson and Margaret Fuller—published an article about Dove’s art certainly implies as much.

In Emerson’s “Nature” (1836), transcendentalism’s central text, the author famously wrote that “nature is not fixed but fluid. Spirit alters, moulds, makes it.” One can partake in its “rapid transformations,” as Dove seems to do, or become what Emerson called a “transparent eyeball,” discerning the essential spirit of objects, as O’Keeffe did. Dove understood nature through its rapid transformations—its seemingly parthenogenetic amorphousness, indicative of what philosopher Henri Bergson called the *élan vital*. For Dove and O’Keeffe, art was a means of articulating and preserving the fundamental essences of life. Their transcendental realism is more intimate than even that of the Hudson River School painters. Dove, however, eventually withdrew from the outside world completely, as the entirely geometrical compositions of the 1940s in this presentation indicated. He finally came into his own as a purist, an unapologetically abstract artist, stuck between a symbolic realism and a robust formalism. He eschewed European vanguardism for something stranger, messier, and more interior—that is, something deeply American.

291 Grand Street, New York, New York 10002

25 East 73rd Street, 2nd Floor, New York, New York 10021 212.755.2828 alexandregallery.com

ALEXANDRE GALLERY ALEXANDRE FINE ART INC. ESTABLISHED 1996