Arthur Dove, Sensations of Light

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When Arthur Dove (1880–1946) proclaimed in 1916 that his goal was to elaborate on "the sensations of light from within and without,"[1] his reputation as America's foremost abstract painter of the early twentieth century had been gestating for almost five years. The distinction was remarkable, if not astounding, for an artist who was not only a late convert to painting but also to the modernist ethos in invention, its driving mechanism.

After graduation from Cornell University in 1903, Dove had got his start as an illustrator in Manhattan where he worked on a free-lance basis for mass media publications such as *McClure's*, *Scribner's,* and *Cosmopolitan Magazine*. Yet the requirements to enact his patron's prescriptions for cartoons and line drawings that were alternatively topical or whimsical never satiated a desire to pursue his own subjectivity, or "inner consciousness"[2] as one early writer put it. There were too many impediments to accessing his own creativity, Dove deemed, foremost among them illustration's *de rigueur* need for figuration.

Dove's first attempts at painting failed to augur or even hint at the astonishing abstractions that he embarked on around 1910 after returning from a fifteen-month sojourn in France. There was little build-up, that is, to his series of small panels that grew from a honed study of nature. Not only do these abstract compositions dispense with the voluminous brushwork that had defined his sun-drenched agrarian scenes of France's coastal regions but there is no lingering reference to a specific site and its unique topographies. For all their charm and allure, the landscapes that Dove produced abroad had been dependent upon the begone movement of Impressionism where nature was construed as an atmospheric wonder. Still, Impressionism's preoccupation with light, with its resonant sensuality, would hold him over a lifetime. Back in the United States, his project became more disciplined and probing. While camping in the woods in 1909 near Geneva, New York where he grew up as a child, he began to examine the way in which the eye processes light sensations into color. He was overcome by a huge revelation that natural specimens—be they the bark of a tree, a flower, bird, or butterfly[3]—proffered a world of chromatic variety that could be distilled into abstract statements that paralleled the vitality and thrust of modernist painting.

Dove admitted that his work in France had amounted to a "blind alley,"[4] however welcome a diversion from the constraints of illustration. Yet, it took him exhibiting at Alfred Stieglitz's 291 Gallery in Manhattan in 1910 to fully recognize that his work required greater rigor to bypass lingering aesthetic conventions, even the more advanced strategies of Post-Impressionism where the architecture of the picture plane was dismantled and reconfigured by figures such as Paul Cézanne whom Stieglitz had exhibited. Stieglitz, who had also shown the likes of Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso, and the paintings of American artists such as Marsden Hartley, John Marin, and Max Weber—all before the landmark Armory Show in 1913—would claim that Dove's bold advances beyond known representations of nature in pursuit of the "condition of light,"[5] as Dove also phrased it, was without precedent, however. He averred that Dove landed in the precincts of abstraction "independently"[6] of prevailing experimentations. As Dove himself later proclaimed, "I could not use anothers [*sic*] philosophy

except to help and find direction any more that I could use anothers [*sic*] art or literature."[7] Not only does the declaration reinforce Stieglitz's affirmation but it emphasizes the artist's mandate to counter expectation, to chart new visual territory. Such would be his lifelong ambition.

Dove's abstractions of 1910/11, however pictorially intrepid, were never exhibited during his lifetime. Nonetheless, they spawned a number of subsequent pastels that when exhibited first at 291, and later at the Thurber Galleries in Chicago, were critically acknowledged for their extraordinary assurance and singularity. One reviewer noted that they represented a first for an American artist and commented on their "absolute originality."[8] These works—authoritatively dubbed "The Ten Commandments" (most likely by Stieglitz)—along with the subsequent trajectory of his work were given to capturing the ephemeral processes of nature, such as growth patterns, the curvature of the earth, and "the misty folds of the wind,"[9] as Dove described it.

It is unlikely that Dove knew of the work of Wassily Kandinsky in 1910, although he read his seminal tract, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, which was excerpted in Stieglitz's quarterly publication, *Camera Work* in 1912, the year of Dove's first and only solo show at 291. Kandinsky had been credited with producing the first abstract paintings in Europe—that is until recently when Hilma af Klint, who similarly mined her psyche for pictorial equivalents is recognized as the actual forerunner. Kandinsky, moreover, had exhibited in New York, most notably at the Armory Show in 1913 (unlike af Klint).[10] Yet, Dove's abstractions, for all of their prescience, are not the outgrowth of metaphysical inquiry. They operate more as investigations of the myriad optical effects that nature proffers. To be sure, there are parallels with Kandinsky's analogies of painting with music and their mutual abstract properties—a crossover that Dove gleaned from the older artist—but their formal investigations remain entirely separate. Nature would endure as Dove's abiding subject, even late in his career when his analysis of organic form became non-objective, no longer an outgrowth of observation.

From the beginning, Dove placed a premium on intuition, an intangible source, that could buttress his scrutiny of nature's vast inventory, its random rhythms, and intense meteorological dimensions. There had been a great deal of discussion on the role of intuition in the formation of art in the pages of *Camera Work* in 1912, most notably in the writing of the French philosopher Henri Bergson whose ideas imprinted Dove's understanding that his emotional life was a viable origin for painting. This was a conviction that shaped the arc of his career and accounts for the ongoing sensuality and uplift of his work at every phase.

Part of Dove's emphasis on feeling can also be attributed to his aversion to the rampant materialism that had begun to alter American culture in the early twentieth century. Like Stieglitz and writers such as Sherwood Anderson, Paul Rosenfeld, and Waldo Frank, who followed his work, Dove viewed the mechanization of the urban landscape, mass production, and new proliferation of commodity objects as a detriment to the engagement of feeling. Nature, by contrast, with its omnipresent fecundity, could serve not only as a wellspring but as an analogue for the creativity and generative powers of the artist.

In 1921, Anderson wrote to Dove, who had just come out of a fallow period and overly taxed by the demands of eking out a living as a chicken farmer—such had become his resistance to working as an illustrator: "There is some faint promise of rebirth in American art but the movement may well be a stupid reaction from Romanticism into realism—the machine. To be a real birth the flesh must come in. And, that's why, I suppose, I have, since seeing the first piece of your work, looked to you as the American painter

with the greatest potentiality for me."[11] Anderson's reference to the "flesh" was potent and would set the tone for subsequent interpretations of Dove's work. As the decades of the 1920s and '30s unfolded, and Dove's painting was routinely exhibited at Stieglitz's later showcases for art, numerous writers would frame his painting in Freudian and sexualized terms by linking the occasional phallic shafts of both vegetal and architectonic forms, as well as his surging cloud formations and rise of the sun at dawn as evidence of his "virile and profound talent."[12] Critic Elizabeth McCausland would later enlarge upon this metaphor, writing, "He sees life as an epic drama, a great Nature myth, a fertility symbol."[13]

Georgia O'Keeffe, with whom Dove would be critically paired by writers such as Rosenfeld, said it more succinctly when she announced that Dove "is the only American painter who is of the earth."[14] By that she meant his radiant distillations of nature, with their "sensations of light within and without," were the outcome of a heightened intuition and abstract sensibility that stood out within American art in the first half of the twentieth century.

1 Arthur Dove, "Explanatory Note," in *The Forum Exhibition of American Painters*, exh. cat., ed. Willard Huntington Wright (New York: Anderson Galleries, 1916; repr., New York: Arno Press, 1968), n.p.

2 Samuel Swift, "Review of Picabia Exhibition," *The Sun* (New York), March 1913; reprinted as "Samuel Swift in the N.Y. Sun,'" *Camera Work*, nos. 42–43 (April–July 1913), 48–49.

3 I am paraphrasing Torr here. See Helen Torr, "Reminiscences," n.d., Arthur and Helen Torr Dove Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution (hereafter Dove papers, AAA).

4 Arthur Dove, quoted in Helen Torr, "Notes," n.d., Dove papers, AAA.

5 Arthur Dove, quoted in Samuel Kootz, *Modern American Painters* (New York: Brewer and Warren, 1930), 37.

6 Alfred Stieglitz, quoted in Swift, 48.

7 Arthur Dove, "An Idea," in *Arthur G. Dove: Paintings,* exh. cat. (New York: Intimate Gallery, 1927), n.p.

8 John Edgar Chamberlain, "Pattern-Paintings by A. G. Dove," *Evening Mail* (New York), March 2, 1912; reprinted in "Photo-Secession Notes," *Camera Work*, no. 38 (April 1912): 44.

9 Arthur Dove, quoted in H. Effa Webster, "Artist Dove Paints Rhythms of Color," *Chicago Examiner*, March 15, 1912, 12.

10 See Debra Bricker Balken, "Continuities and Digressions in the Work of Arthur Dove from 1907 to 1933," in *Arthur Dove: A Retrospective*, exh. cat., ed. Balken (Andover, Mass.: Addison Gallery of American Art; and Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1997), 22.

11 Sherwood Anderson to Arthur Dove, late 1921, Sherwood Anderson Papers, Newberry Library, Chicago.

12 Paul Rosenfeld, "American Painting," *The Dial*, no. 71 (December 1921): 665.

13 Elizabeth McCausland, "Dove's Oils, Water Colors Now at American Place," *Springfield* (Mass.) *Sunday Union and Republican*, April 22, 1934, E-6.

14 Georgia O'Keeffe, quoted in Susan Fillin Yeh, "Innovative Moderns: Arthur G. Dove and Georgia O'Keeffe," *Arts Magazine* 56, no. 10 (June 1982): 69.