*Landscape (Cagnes-sur-Mer),* 1908–09

oil on canvas, 18¼ x 22½ inches

In May of 1908, Dove sailed for France with his first wife Florence Dorsey, a former neighbor from Geneva, New York where he had grown up as a child. Prior to this date, he had worked as a successful illustrator in Manhattan where he carved out a career producing line drawings and cartoons of topical subjects for publications such as *McClure's*, *Century*, and *Scribner's*. However, Dove soon tired of the medium, finding little opportunity to deviate from the thematic requirements of his patrons. Illustration was too bound to the figure, he reckoned. Moreover, as a child he had exhibited a deep propensity for nature. As a sideline, he tried his hand at painting where he could better exercise his independence and creativity. The diversion, as it turns out, would soon become a life-long occupation.

Dove lived in France for almost fifteen months where he took to both the environs of Paris and the coastal regions of the Mediterranean such as Cagnes-sur-Mer to paint. There, he produced landscapes that are sun-drenched and comprised of fluid, loose brushstrokes that elaborated on late Impressionist techniques where subject matter is dissolved into the surrounding atmosphere. As such, they represent a significant advance over the more clumsy, less assured cityscapes that Dove painted in New York, revealing that his European sojourn had resulted in new-found pictorial authority.

Upon his return to Manhattan in late 1909, Dove was eager to continue to paint full-time. Yet, he was momentarily forced back into the marketplace for illustration even though it failed to satisfy him aesthetically. As he later wrote, "In France . . . I was free . . . Then back to America and discovered that at that time it was not possible to live by modern art alone."

*Abstraction No. 1*, 1910/11
oil on panel, 8¾ x 10½ inches

*Abstraction No. 4*, 1910/11
oil on panel, 8⅜ x 10½ inches

*Abstraction No. 6*, 1910/11
oil on panel, 8⅜ x 10½ inches

France had been a liberating experience for Dove. Still, upon his return to the United States in 1909, he spent time in Upstate New York in the Finger Lakes region where he had been raised to assess the stylistic approaches that he had adopted such as Post-Impressionism. He knew that his output abroad did not stack up with current avant-garde tactics pursued by the likes of Henri Matisse and Pablo Picasso. In one of the most dramatic reversals in modernist art, Dove subsequently painted six small "abstractions," as he dubbed them, that forged new aesthetic territory by abruptly countering the "dead end" he thought his luminous paintings of the French countryside represented. These small compositions forgo image-making entirely by focusing on the nature of light itself and the chromatic features that saturate landscape.

Helen Torr, an artist who met Dove in the late 1910s, and who subsequently became his second wife, later reminisced on the origins of the new pictorial direction that settled in his work, noting that he "lived in the woods . . . for some months working on three color theory. He tore bark off the trees, pulled up plants by the roots, always finding three colors (in different intensities, of course) in the roots, bark, flowers and leaves, birds and butterflies." As a result, Dove embarked on a life-long project that involved, as he put it, the revelation of the "sensations of light from within and without" that suffuse nature's holdings. Radical, unprecedented visual statements, these paintings represent the first abstractions made by an artist in the United States.

*Abstraction*, 1914–17
oil on canvas, 18 x 22 inches

*Abstraction Untitled*, c. 1917–20
charcoal on paper, 20½ x 17½ inches

That Dove made the leap into abstract painting around 1910–11 with little build-up or foreshadowing in his painting has been the subject of speculation. How did he relinquish late Impressionist techniques that emphasized bright, liquid brushwork, and idyllic agrarian settings in favor of more pondered studies of nature that grew from an analysis of color and quasi-scientific investigation? Part of any retelling of Dove's reconceived project incorporates his new dealer and patron Alfred Stieglitz, who operated the 291 gallery, named for its address on Fifth Avenue in New York, and which operated from 1903 to 1917.

Dove met Stieglitz shortly after his return to the United States in 1909. The encounter occasioned an instantaneous affinity that was sustained over a lifetime. In Stieglitz, Dove located a patriarchal figure whose aesthetic program would eventually include American artists such as John Marin, Georgia O'Keeffe, and Paul Strand while forgoing Europeans such as Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso, and Auguste Rodin, who had once been part of his stable. By 1917, Stieglitz's commitment to homegrown radicals who stretched the formal parameters of modernism was total: he embarked on a mission to tout the unique traits and originality of American vanguard art. It was most likely Stieglitz who encouraged Dove's daring break with representational imagery, that is, to surpass his earlier derivations of French painting.

In advance of his first solo exhibition at 291 in 1912, Dove gave up illustration, and a lucrative occupation, to live in Westport, Connecticut were he supported himself and family as a chicken farmer. However, the demands to make ends meet were daunting and his output as an artist drastically dwindled. By 1917, his sole artistic excursions consisted of drawings in charcoal that probed his avowed interest in disclosing the "sensations of light from within and without."

*River Bottom, Silver, Ochre, Carmine, Green,* c. 1923
oil and metallic paint on canvas, 24 x 18 inches

*Penetration*, 1924
oil on panel, 22 x 18⅛ inches

Despite the perpetual setbacks that he experienced as a farmer, Dove became integrated into a vibrant community of intellectuals in Westport. These figures included some of the foremost writers of the early twentieth century, such as Sherwood Anderson, Van Wyck Brooks, and Paul Rosenfeld, in addition to artists such as John Marin and Paul Strand. Their conversations frequently centered on the intrinsic or defining aspects of American culture and its differentiation from European modernist expressions: a prevalent feature of contemporary literary discourse. Both Anderson and Rosenfeld, moreover, located a matchless sensibility in Dove's painting that countered perceived notions that American art was dependent upon formal experimentation that emanated from Paris. They were also profoundly disaffected of the new invasion of the machine within American culture and the mechanized subjects adopted by contemporary artists such as Marcel Duchamp (who lived and worked intermittently in New York as of 1915) and May Ray. Nature, they believed, propounded the only means for the revelation of the artist's subjectivity.

By 1921, Dove would renew his commitment to painting, and during this year, Anderson wrote to him, "There is some faint promise of rebirth in American art but...to be real the flesh must come in. I suppose, I have since seeing your piece of work, looked to you as the American painter with the greatest potential for me." At the same time, Rosenfeld, who wrote for publications such as *The Dial*, a prominent literary magazine founded by the Transcendentalists in 1840, noted that Dove's work exerted a certain "male vitality," suggesting that Dove's masculinity imprinted his renditions of the generative forces of nature. While Dove's paintings would enact some of this interpretation, especially its phallic adumbrations, he remained equally committed to forging unforeseen stylistic languages.

*Silver Log*, 1928
oil on canvas, 30 x 18¼ inches

*Sun on the Water*, 1929
oil, metallic paint and charcoal on paper mounted on Bristol board, 15 x 19½ inches

*Colored Drawing, Canvas*, 1929
oil on canvas, 18 x 22 inches

*Untitled*, c. 1929
oil on metal, 28 x 20 inches

*Snow on Ice, Huntington Harbor*, 1930
oil on canvas, 18 x 21 inches

During the decade of the 1920s, Dove not only renewed his allegiance to modernist painting, but he left Westport, Connecticut and became involved with Helen Torr, an artist whose aesthetic thinking was aligned with his. Commencing in 1923, they made their intermittent home and studio on a forty-two-foot yawl christened the *Mona*. Frequently docked in Halesite, a hamlet on an inlet on Long Island Sound near Huntington and Lloyd Harbor, the site yielded some of Dove's boldest pictorial statements. Not only is his work of this decade typified by an upbeat sensuality that stems from his ongoing study of light and the ephemeral dimensions of nature, but his subjectivity pervades these ebullient paintings. No wonder that one critic, Henry McBride, would later announce that Dove's entire corpus of work represented the fulfilment of transcendentalism that crested with Walt Whitman and Herman Melville.

In 1925, as he began to actively exhibit in frequent juxtaposition with Charles Demuth, Marsden Hartley, John Marin, and Georgia O'Keeffe, he wrote a poem—his preferred literary form—that he titled "A Way to Look at Things." One section reads: "There is much to be done—/Works of nature are abstract./They do not lean on other things for meaning." That Dove spurned figuration in his abstractions of flora and the diurnal passages of the sun and the moon was reinforced in a subsequent declaration, whereby he averred, "WHY NOT MAKE THINGS LOOK LIKE NATURE? BECAUSE I DO NOT CONSIDER THAT IMPORTANT." In these emphatic pronouncements, Dove makes clear that nature alone provided the ultimate source for experimentation.

*Coal Carrier II*, 1930
oil on canvas, 10 x 20 inches

*Cinder Barge and Derrick*, 1931
oil on canvas, 22 x 30 inches

*Town Scraper*, 1933
oil on canvas, 18 x 24 inches

*Freight Car*, 1937
oil on canvas, 20 x 28 inches

While nature was always Dove's primary subject, he was also drawn intermittently to mechanical and architectonic forms. During the 1920s and early '30s, especially, he painted numerous images of lanterns, gears, water mills, barges, telegraph poles, scraping machines, freight cars, and storage tanks that seemingly counter his stock inventory of natural forms. However, unlike the work of many of his contemporaries such as Marcel Duchamp—who was an omnipresent fixture of the New York avant-garde as of 1915—and American modernists such as Morton Schamberg, Dove approached these technological devices as objects of beauty that could yield to infinite abstraction rather than as deadpan, ironical representations of the commodities that issued from mass-production. Mining the absurdity of mechanized contraptions and their domestic offshoots was never Dove's gameplan as it was for Duchamp whose aesthetic pranks and irreverence for modernism's core investment in ingenuity augured the Dadaist movement internationally.

Dove's allusions to industry in his work always co-exist in relationship to nature. Part of their transformation is realized by the pervasiveness of warm, saturated light, his ongoing visual conceit. This process of idealization was one that he shared with his friend Georgia O'Keeffe whose pictorial responses to the built environment of New York and its new towering structures in the mid-1920s are fused with celestial orbs.

During the early 1930s, as Regionalism made inroads in American art in open distain of the modernist movement, and narrative painting made a comeback, writer Elizabeth McCausland, who would become one of Dove's primary critical advocates during the Great Depression, noted that "He does not paint the American Scene." What she meant, was that Dove was never drawn to mundane subjects, that natural phenomena and all of its transcendent possibilities remained his domain.

*Dawn I*, 1932
oil on canvas, 22 x 22 inches

*Sun and Moon*, 1932
oil on canvas, 18¼ x 22 inches

*Sunday*, 1932
oil on Masonite, 15 x 19½ inches

Alfred Stieglitz had been forced to close his 291 gallery in 1917, no longer able to maintain the rent and upkeep on the space. However, he never became inactive as a dealer: in the early 1920s, he staged exhibitions of American modernist art at the Anderson Galleries, an auction house located on Park Avenue. Thereafter, in 1925, he opened another showcase in the same building that he named the Intimate Gallery, a small space which he operated for four years until 1929 when he relocated to Madison Avenue and founded An American Place where he winnowed his stable of artists to Dove, John Marin, and Georgia O'Keeffe. The "Place," as it was affectionately known, with its austere white walls and no seating, set a new standard for subsequent exhibition spaces in New York, reinforcing that advanced or progressive vanguard art required deep reflection and looking, that its architectural confines had to be neutral.

Not only did Stieglitz's last two ventures provide Dove with solo shows on an almost annual basis until his death in 1946, but they also secured his weight and reputation as the foremost abstract artist to emerge in the United States in the early twentieth century. In 1929, just as Stieglitz opened the Place, Dove wrote that he was "more interested now than ever in doing things about things: pure paintings seem to stand out from those related too closely to what the eyes see there." By that he meant, paring his pictorial elements to more simplified shapes that captured the innate dynamism of nature, such as the rise of the sun at dawn or its transit with the moon above the earth.

*Formation II*, 1942
oil on canvas, 24 x 32 inches

*Polygons and Textures*, 1943–44
oil on canvas, 23¾ x 31¾ inches

*Green and Brown*, 1945
oil on canvas, 18 x 24 inches

By mid-1938, Dove and Helen Torr were able to move back to the north shore of Long Island where they settled in a one room former post office in Centerport near Huntington. The small abode became Dove's final home and studio. With the burdens of his family estate resolved, he resumed life on the Sound, albeit without a sailing boat such as the *Mona*. And, while his back porch had ample views of the inlet where he sat each day to take in the "sexy" wildlife, as he dubbed it, his work became increasingly more inward and more cerebral.

Prior to this date, Dove's work, however abstract, was rooted in observation, especially of the cyclical rhythms of nature and their evanescent, luminous dimensions. Hence, his continuing upbeat revelations or depictions of the "sensations" of light and their animation of the landscape. Dove's years in Centerport, however, were beleaguered by illness. Not only was he initially setback by pneumonia from which it took him months to recover, but also from a weak heart and a chronic kidney condition that kept him frequently bedridden. No matter his love of sailing; his earlier life on the *Mona*, particularly during the winter months, had caught up with him and taken its toll on his health.

In Centerport, Dove abandoned his early repertoire of natural referents for non-objective painting that was given, as he stated to "design arrangements" that have no analogies in the material world. They grew, that is, from pondering the ways to build composition through combinations of organic and quasi-geometric shapes that could be filled with resplendent color. His overall ambition became "to weave the whole into a sequence of formations rather than to form an arrangement of facts." These audacious forays into uncharted aesthetic territory, at once rhythmic and lyrical, forecast some of the preoccupations of artists associated with the midcentury movement known as Abstract Expressionism or the New York School.

## *Selected watercolors from 1933–38*

In 1933, Dove and Helen Torr returned to Dove's family home in Geneva, New York for what amounted to a five-year stay. Despite his love of the water and sailing the *Mona* on Long Island Sound, the maintenance of the yawl had become prohibitive. Dove's economic life had always been fragile but with the onset of the Great Depression there were even fewer sales for his painting. When his mother died in January of 1933, he and Torr sold their few effects and decamped to the family farm where they grappled with unforeseen back taxes and liens on the property. Prior to their departure, Dove conveyed to Stieglitz, "There is something terrible about 'Up State' to me…It is like walking on the bottom of water." Dove's parents had all but disinherited him given his chosen vocation as an artist; returning home was viewed as a setback whatever the financial necessity.

Still, Dove's time as an artist in Geneva was prolific. He produced there some of his most jubilant, uplifting hymns to nature as well as occasional abstractions of industrial structures such as silos, flour mills, power plants, and bridges, in addition to farm implements, barns, and sheds. He also began to work more frequently in series by expounding on the increasingly spare, reductive shapes that now populated his universe of forms. Of this development, that purposefully eliminated any reference to known, identifiable imagery, Dove wrote to Stieglitz in 1938 that his paintings "have more bite than last year, naturally. Life must have more than just the beautiful." The pronouncement—an iteration of earlier statements—denotes that the ongoing thrust of his work pivoted on compositional invention rather than picturesque subjects.