



Arthur Dove
American, 1880 - 1946

Moon

1935

oil on canvas

overall: 88.9 x 63.5 cm (35 x 25 in.)

framed: 94.6 x 69.2 x 5.1 cm (37 1/4 x 27 1/4 x 2 in.)

Inscription: lower center: Dove

Collection of Barney A. Ebsworth 2000.39.1

ENTRY

In the summer of 1933, after much hesitation, Arthur Dove moved back to his family home in Geneva, New York. [1] Although he felt there was “something terrible about ‘Up State,’” and described the prospect of returning to his hometown as “like walking on the bottom under water,” he and his wife Helen “Reds” Torr had endured grinding poverty during the early years of the Great Depression, and he knew that the struggle to survive was sapping his ability to focus on his painting. [2] With his mother's death earlier in the year, in Geneva Dove and Reds could live for free on the family property, farm and forage for food, and hope that his paintings would at least pay for more materials.

Dove's years in Geneva from 1933 to 1938 would prove to be remarkably productive. Shortly before he returned, Duncan Phillips agreed to provide him with a monthly stipend in exchange for paintings. [3] Although the payments were modest and fluctuated, and the checks occasionally late, for the first time in many years Dove had a steady source of income. Gradually, as he came to see that he could perhaps survive in his old haunts, his spirits were restored and his confidence returned. By late 1934 he announced that his production was “two and a half months ahead of last year,” and by the fall of 1935 he proudly told Alfred Stieglitz (American, 1864 - 1946) that he was feeling “better than in some years” and, judging from his watercolors made the previous summer, had “about 35 good prospects for paintings.” [4]

Dove's move to Geneva also coincided with a renewed interest in painting. Abandoning the extensive experimentation with collage that he had explored so

fruitfully in the 1920s, he decided in February 1932 “to let go of everything and just try to make oil painting beautiful in itself with no further wish.” [5] Once settled in Geneva, Dove continued these explorations by carefully examining his technique. He had always been fascinated with the materials of his art—he often ground his own pigments—and avidly read such books as Jacques Blockx’s *Compendium of Painting* and Maximilian Toch’s *Materials for Permanent Painting*. This interest was intensified in October 1935 when he read, as he told Stieglitz, “every inch” of Max Doerner’s recently translated *Materials of the Artist*. [6] Dove was especially intrigued by Doerner’s description of the use of resin oil color with and without wax, which, the author wrote, produced colors with “a misty, pleasingly dull and mat appearance, and great brightness and clarity.” Dove immediately began his own experimentation with these materials. [7]

Along with *Autumn* [fig. 1], *Naples Yellow Morning* [fig. 2], and *October* [fig. 3], *Moon* was painted during the highly productive fall of 1935 and depicts a tree covering the glowing moon. Derived directly from the landscape and light of the Finger Lakes region, all four paintings are composed of earthy colors, with shades of brown, yellow, green, and red ranging in intensity from pale, muddy tones to rich, saturated hues. Like these other works from 1935, *Moon* incorporates some of the lessons Dove learned from Doerner. Painted with short, thin, almost translucent brushstrokes over underlying hues of different intensities, *Moon* has a surface that seems almost to throb with luminosity and energy. But this technique also creates the impression of an all-enveloping atmosphere—like “walking on the bottom under water,” as Dove put it—where the air surrounding objects is as weighty, charged, and meaningful as the subjects themselves.

However, unlike *Autumn*, *Naples Yellow Morning*, or *October*, *Moon*, with its highly simplified composition, looks forward to works that Dove would create in Geneva in 1936 and 1937. During these years, spheres and columns, the sun, the moon, and tree trunks dominated his imagery as he sought to create a “definite rhythmic [sic] sense.” He was not interested in “geometrical repetition,” but, by using “the play or spread or swing of space [that] can only be felt through this kind of consciousness,” he wanted to make his works “breathe as does the rest of nature.” [8]

Like Georgia O’Keeffe (American, 1887 - 1986), Dove captured natural rhythms and explored shapes that are undeniably sexual, often phallic in form. Noting that Dove revealed “the animating forces of life,” Elizabeth McCausland wrote that he “sees life as an epic drama, a great Nature myth, a fertile symbol.” [9] However, like

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O’Keeffe, who greatly admired and collected his work, sexual allusions or fertility symbols were not Dove’s intention. Instead, both Dove and O’Keeffe sought to construct independent aesthetic forms that were real unto themselves and would not only “breathe,” as Dove wrote, but, more significantly, speak of the artists’ experiences of nature. In the fall of 1935 these experiences for Dove were grounded in the glowing, exuberant, even euphoric feelings that enveloped him in the light, colors, atmosphere, and almost palpable energy of the Geneva landscape.

But Dove also strove for a more transcendent vision and to reveal the presence of the divine in the natural world. *Moon*, with its Redon-like, all-knowing eye and its tree that connects the terrestrial and celestial worlds, speaks both of his symbolist heritage and his then-current fascination with theosophy. [10] Yet, perhaps because of the diminutive scale of his paintings or their often charming forms, there is something homegrown about Dove’s mysticism. As in *Moon*, while Dove’s spirit strove to burst forth into the light of the heavens, his strength, nourishment, and indeed inspiration were firmly rooted in the ground.

Sarah Greenough

September 29, 2016

COMPARATIVE FIGURES



fig. 1 Arthur Dove, *Autumn*, 1935, tempera on canvas, Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy, Andover, Massachusetts / Art Resource, NY. © The Estate of Arthur G. Dove, courtesy Terry Dintenfass, Inc.



fig. 2 Arthur Dove, *Naples Yellow Morning*, 1935, oil on linen, Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia, The Vivian O. and Meyer P. Potamkin Collection, Bequest of Vivian O. Potamkin



fig. 3 Arthur Dove, *October*, 1935, oil on canvas, Collection of the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, Kansas City, Bebe and Crosby Kemper Collection, Gift of the R. C. Kemper Charitable Trust 1996.16. © The Estate of Arthur G. Dove, courtesy Terry Dintenfass, Inc. Image: Dan Wayne

NOTES

- [1] This entry is a revised version of text that was originally published in Bruce Robertson et al., *Twentieth-Century American Art: The Ebsworth Collection* (Washington, DC, 1999).
- [2] Dove to Alfred Stieglitz, May 18, 1933, as quoted in Ann Lee Morgan, *Dear Stieglitz, Dear Dove* (Newark, DE, 1988), 271. See also Dove to Stieglitz, November 17, 1932 (Morgan, *Dear Stieglitz*, 253), when he wrote, acknowledging a check from Stieglitz: “Whew! That was a close shave that

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time. *Much!* obliged. Almost spoiled a painting yesterday, but think it will come right when I go at it a bit more cheerfully today. When you get down, your mind begins having dialogues with itself while you're working. Like trying to establish a new form. And the old form bobs out and takes a crack at you and you say—To hell with form, it is just a medium of exchange, like money,—go on painting—but you need some.”

- [3] For a full discussion of the relationship between Dove and his patron Duncan Phillips, see *In the American Grain: Dove, Hartley, Marin, O'Keeffe, and Stieglitz* (Washington, DC, 1995).
- [4] Dove to Stieglitz, December 19, 1934, October 1, 1935, and October 24, 1935, in Ann Lee Morgan, *Dear Stieglitz, Dear Dove* (Newark, DE, 1988), 322, 341, and 342.
- [5] Dove to Stieglitz, February 1, 1932, in Ann Lee Morgan, *Dear Stieglitz, Dear Dove* (Newark, DE, 1988), 237.
- [6] Dove to Stieglitz, October 1, 1935, in Ann Lee Morgan, *Dear Stieglitz, Dear Dove* (Newark, DE, 1988), 341. For further discussion of this issue, see *ibid.*, 210, and Elizabeth Hutton Turner, “Going Home: Geneva, 1933–1938,” in Debra Bricker Balken, *Arthur Dove: A Retrospective* (Cambridge, MA, 1997), 103–105.
- [7] Elizabeth Hutton Turner, “Going Home: Geneva, 1933–1938,” in Debra Bricker Balken, *Arthur Dove: A Retrospective* (Cambridge, MA, 1997), 104.
- [8] Dove to Elizabeth McCausland, May 3 or 13, 1933, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Elizabeth McCausland Papers, reel 03848.
- [9] McCausland, as quoted in *Arthur Dove: New and Old Paintings, 1912–1934* (New York, 1934), 2. Brochure published in conjunction with the exhibition of the same name, shown at An American Place.
- [10] See Sherrye Cohn, “Arthur Dove and Theosophy: Visions of a Transcendental Reality,” *Arts* 58 (September 1983): 86–91.

TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The unlined painting is composed of what is estimated to be oil paint on a loosely woven fabric support. [1] The canvas was primed with a white ground after it was stretched, and the painting remains on its original four-member, key-type stretcher. The unprimed tacking margins and corner folds remain intact. Distinct cusping can be seen along all four edges, and pronounced horizontal curvature in the weave is seen in the upper third of the canvas. A palette knife or other flat tool was used to apply the ground. Although it is relatively smooth, ridges and tool marks are still

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evident in many places, and several long, arcing grooves, caused by pulling coarse particles through the soft ground, are a distinctive feature of the surface. A graphite or charcoal underdrawing is intermittently visible along the edges of the primary forms of the design. Infrared reflectography has revealed the extent of this underdrawing: two broadly concentric rings around the circular form [fig. 1] and lightly sketched lines along the edges of the brown form and the horizon. The brush-applied paint layers vary from passages of stiff, low-relief impasto to thin, translucent washes, and from medium rich to quite matte. Minute burst bubbles and reticulation in the green paint along the top edge of the painting may indicate the use of an emulsion paint that has been documented in other works by the artist. Ultraviolet examination has confirmed that the painting is unvarnished. The paint film is in excellent condition overall, with almost no cracking. There are a few retouched losses around the edges, and random lines of abrasion or burnishing are visible in several areas.

TECHNICAL COMPARATIVE FIGURES



fig. 1 Detail of infrared reflectogram, Arthur Dove, *Moon*, 1935, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Collection of Barney A. Ebsworth

TECHNICAL NOTES

[1] Dove's materials can be difficult to identify because he often ground and prepared his own pigments.

PROVENANCE

Alfred Stieglitz [1864-1946], New York; (The Downtown Gallery, New York), by 1952;^[1] Mr. and Mrs. Max Zurier, Los Angeles, by 1957;^[2] (John Berggruen Gallery, San Francisco); purchased July 1985 by Mr. and Mrs. Barney A. Ebsworth, St. Louis; gift 2000 to NGA.

[1] The Downtown Gallery lent the painting to an exhibition in Buffalo in 1952.

[2] The Zuriens lent the painting to an exhibition in New York in 1957. They owned the painting until 1984, when it was included in an exhibition at the John Berggruen Gallery in San Francisco in which all the works exhibited were for sale.

EXHIBITION HISTORY

1936 New Paintings by Arthur Dove, An American Place, New York, April-May 1936, checklist no. 16.

1936 Third Biennial Exhibition of Contemporary American Painting, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, November-December 1936, no. 11.

1941 Exhibition of New Arthur Dove Paintings, An American Place, New York, 1941, checklist no. 12.

1952 Arthur Dove, 1880-1946: Paintings, The Downtown Gallery, New York, April-May 1952, no. 9.

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1952 Expressionism in American Painting, Albright Art Gallery, Buffalo, May-June 1952, no. 28, repro.

1954 Paintings and Watercolors by Arthur Dove, Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, 1954, no. 11.

1956 American Paintings in This Century, University of California at Los Angeles, November-December 1956.

1956 The American Scene, Los Angeles Municipal Gallery, April-May 1956.

1957 Ten Paintings Selected From "New Art in America," The Downtown Gallery, New York, 1957, unnumbered checklist.

1958 Arthur G. Dove Retrospective Exhibition, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; The Phillips Gallery, Washington, D.C.; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; Marion Koogler McNay Art Institute (now McNay Art Museum), San Antonio; Art Galleries of the University of California at Los Angeles; La Jolla Art Center; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1958-1959, no. 52, repro.

1963 Mr. and Mrs. Max Zurier Collection, Pasadena Art Museum, 1963, no. 23, repro. on cover.

1964 A View of the Century, Pasadena Art Museum, 1964, no. 47.

1974 Arthur Dove, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; Albright-Knox Gallery, Buffalo; Saint Louis Art Museum; Art Institute of Chicago; Des Moines Art Center; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 1974-1976, unnumbered catalogue, repro. (shown only in San Francisco).

1976 Paintings from the Zurier Collection, La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art, 1976, no catalogue.

1979 2 Jahrzehnte amerikanische Malerei 1920-1940, Städtische Kunsthalle, Dusseldorf; Kunsthaus, Zurich; Palais des Beaux Arts, Brussels, 1979, no. 59, repro.

1980 A Mirror of Creation: 150 Years of American Nature Painting, Braccio di Carlo Magno, The Vatican; Terra Museum of Art, Evanston, Illinois, 1980-1981, no. 43, repro.

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1981 Amerikanische Malerei 1930-1980, Haus der Kunst, Munich, 1981-1982, no. 4, repro.

1984 The Zurier Collection: An Exhibition of 20th Century American and European Paintings and Works on Paper, John Berggruen Gallery, San Francisco, 1984, no. 12, repro.

1987 The Ebsworth Collection: American Modernism, 1911-1947, Saint Louis Art Museum; Honolulu Academy of Arts; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 1987-1988, no. 21, repro.

1997 Arthur Dove: A Retrospective, Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Addison Gallery of American Art, Andover, Massachusetts; Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1997-1998, no. 62, repro.

2000 Art for the Nation: Collecting for a New Century, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 2000-2001, unnumbered catalogue, repro.

2000 Twentieth-Century American Art: The Ebsworth Collection, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.; Seattle Art Museum, 2000, no. 17, repro.

2009 Dove/O'Keeffe: Circles of Influence, Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, 2009, pl. 58.

2019 The Color of the Moon: Lunar Painting in American Art, The Hudson River Museum, Yonkers; James A. Michener Art Museum, Doylestown, 2019, no. 29, repro.

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- 1973 Metzger, Robert. "Biomorphism in American Painting." Ph.D. dissertation, University of California at Los Angeles, 1973: 62-63.
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- 1984 Cohn, Sherrye. "The Image and the Imagination of Space in the Art of Arthur Dove; Part II: Dove and 'The Fourth Dimension'." *Arts Magazine* 58, no. 5 (January 1984): 121-125, fig. 3.
- 1984 "Moon." *Art in America* 72, no. 4 (April 1984): 6, repro.
- 1984 Morgan, Ann Lee. *Arthur Dove: Life and Work, with a Catalogue Raisonné*. Newark, London, and Toronto, 1984: 57, 232-234, no. 36.8.
- 1985 Cohn, Sherrye. *Arthur Dove: Nature as Symbol*. Ann Arbor, 1985: 16, 35, 67-68, 76, 78, 113, 121, fig. 5, repro.
- 1997 Balken, Debra Bricker, et al. *Arthur Dove: A Retrospective*. Andover, MA: Addison Gallery of American Art; Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997, pp. 29, 94, 95, 105, 119, no. 62.
- 1998 Kimmelman, Michael. "Nature Stripped to Its Essence in Visionary Images." *The New York Times* (16 January 1998): E37.
- 1998 Updike, John. "Pioneer." *New York Review of Books* 45 (5 March 1998): 15.
- 2000 Robertson, Bruce, et al. *Twentieth-Century American Art: The Ebsworth Collection*. Exh. cat. National Gallery of Art, Washington; Seattle Art Museum. Washington, 2000: no. 17, repro.
- 2009 Balken, Debra Bricker. *Dove/O'Keeffe: Circles of Influence*. Exh. cat. Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, 2009: 63, pl. 58.
- 2016 DeLue, Rachael Ziad. *Arthur Dove: Always Connect* Chicago and London, 2016: 1, 16, 23, 44, 53, 105, 134, 184, 252.
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