NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART ONLINE EDITIONS
American Paintings, 1900–1945

Arthur Dove
American, 1880 - 1946

Space Divided by Line Motive

1943

oil on canvas
overall: 60.96 × 81.28 cm (24 × 32 in.)
framed: 66.68 × 86.68 × 3.81 cm (26 1/4 × 34 1/8 × 1 1/2 in.)
Inscription: lower center: Dove; top center of frame reverse: ARTHUR G. DOVE / care of ALFRED SEIEGLITZ / 509 MADISON AVE., (Rm. 1710) New York; top of frame reverse in black crayon: 1944, SPACE DIVIDED BY LINE MOTIF
Corcoran Collection (Museum Purchase, William A. Clark Fund) 2014.136.105

ENTRY

Arthur Dove belonged to a pioneering group of artists whose increasingly abstract style radically changed the course of American art. [1] The son of a brick manufacturer, he received his first art instruction from an amateur painter near his family's home in Geneva, New York, before graduating from Cornell University, where he studied law and took an occasional art class. After working for four years in New York City as an illustrator for such popular periodicals as *Harper's Weekly* and *Scribner's Magazine*, Dove traveled to Europe, where his works were included in the progressive 1908 and 1909 Salon d'Automne exhibitions in Paris and where he studied the work of the impressionists and the fauves, notably Henri Matisse. When he returned to the United States in 1909, Dove supplemented his income through farming and fishing and often tied his images to the land and sea, calling them "extractions" from nature. [2] He became a protégé of the influential promoter of modern art Alfred Stieglitz (American, 1864 - 1946), who included Dove's work in a group show at his 291 gallery (named for its Fifth Avenue address) in 1910–1911 and gave the artist his first solo show in 1912.

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Space Divided by Line Motive is one of a group of paintings from the early 1940s that mark a transformation in Dove's work toward greater abstraction, a trend that continued until his death in 1946. [3] This shift followed major changes in the artist's life: in early 1938 he moved with his wife, Reds (the artist Helen Torr), to a home on Long Island Sound, and afterward he suffered debilitating health problems. Despite his impaired health, he continued to paint and embraced the broad move, by European and American artists alike, toward a universal language of abstraction that occurred in the late 1930s and early 1940s. [4] In fact, Dove was a pioneer of abstraction and has often been cited as the first artist of any nationality to make a nonrepresentational painting. As Debra Bricker Balken notes, "Dove's abstract paintings of 1910/11 and 1912 . . . seem to parallel if not predate by maybe a year the production of Kandinsky's Improvisations, generally touted as the first European paintings to dispense totally with figuration." [5]

In late 1942 Dove's work became consistently nonrepresentational, as the artist noted in a December diary entry: "Made abstract painting." [6] Created just 10 months later, *Space Divided by Line Motive* is characteristic of the artist's output from 1942 to 1944, when his lifelong experimentation with line, color, composition, and medium culminated in paintings devoid of representational subject matter and focused almost exclusively on formal concerns. Large, interlocking planes of opaque, saturated color—13 in total, ranging from bright red and blue to olive green, ocher, and brownish plum—animate and unite the composition. While most of the shapes are unmodulated, four are flecked with small dots of contrasting hues. The active design flows, in three triangular sections, from the lower left to the upper right; these sections, in turn, are cut by three shapes reaching from upper left to lower center. As Dove describes in his title—an unromantic, nonreferential moniker typical of this period—space is divided by lines that are by turns straight, slightly undulating, curvy, and jagged. [7] He references the painting's design in his diary entries, too, which evolve from "Division of Space . . . with motif lines" (October 10) to "space division" (October 12 and 13) to his proclamation that he had "Finished Space divided with line motif" (October 16). [8] The resulting image manifests Dove's increasing interest not only in abstraction but also in the specific idea of spatial planes and their interaction. The overall positive-negative effect of the design conveys a strong sense of movement across the canvas's surface, as if to suggest a seismic shifting of tectonic plates. [9] Other diary entries of this period also hint at this interest: on August 12, 1939, he wrote about painting "not static planes in space not form but formation. To set planes in motion." [10]

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The high-keyed palette Dove employed in *Space Divided by Line Motive* is also evidence of the change in his art during this pivotal period. It diverges from the more naturalistic and subtly modeled hues he had used earlier in his career and shows him to be a master colorist, a characterization also noted by contemporary critics, such as the *New York Sun*'s Henry McBride, who remarked that the artist was "the best colorist among American abstractionists." [11] Moreover, the artist's application of broad, clear planes of flat, opaque color in the Gallery's painting demonstrates his interest in the precise placement of specific colors at this time. In December 1942, Dove recorded his aim of "getting down one shape and one color at a time, as directly and clearly as possible," and wrote of being "[f]ree from all motifs etc just put down one color after another." [12] The uniform intensity of the colors also has the effect of asserting the two-dimensionality of the picture plane; none appears to advance or recede. As the artist stated: "Pure painting has the tendency to make one feel the two-dimensionality of the canvas, a certain flatness which is so important in the balance of things and often so difficult to attain." [13]

When *Space Divided by Line Motive* was first exhibited in the artist's 1944 one-man show at Stieglitz's American Place gallery, it was not singled out for mention, although critics responded quite positively to the display and took note of the changes in Dove's art. A writer for *Art News* identified "a new strength," while a *New York Times* reviewer observed that the works in the exhibition, "[b]orrowing a phrase from the field of color, might [be called] primaries in thought," and asserted that the paintings, in which Dove "has carried simplification of forms and arrangements about as far as possible," are "big-boned compositions [with] impact." [14]

Despite the support he received from Stieglitz and important collectors, such as Paul Rosenfeld and Duncan Phillips, and his success in showing his work—he held one-man exhibitions annually and participated in a number of the major exhibitions of the period—Dove struggled for acceptance of his art. Even Stieglitz noted that some of his paintings were "above the heads of the people." [15] Nevertheless, Dove vigorously and steadfastly pursued his art, producing some of the most avant-garde paintings of the period. *Space Divided by Line Motive* remained unsold at his death and was purchased by the Corcoran Gallery of Art in 1968 from the estate of his widow.

Sarah Cash

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NOTES

[1] This entry is a revised version of text that was originally published in *Corcoran Gallery of Art: American Paintings to 1945*, ed. Sarah Cash (Washington, DC, 2011).

[2] "Notes by Arthur G. Dove," in *Dove Exhibition* (New York, 1929), n.p., quoted in William C. Agee, "New Directions: The Late Work, 1938–1946," in Debra Bricker Balken, in collaboration with William C. Agee and Elizabeth Hutton Turner, *Arthur Dove: A Retrospective* (Andover, MA and Cambridge, MA, 1997), 134.

[3] The title was changed from *U.S.A.* to *Space Divided by Line Motive* in accordance with the Corcoran Gallery of Art's (CGA) American Paintings Catalogue policy, which restores titles to those under which a painting was first exhibited or published; see *Arthur G. Dove: Paintings, 1944*, An American Place, New York, 1944, cat. no. 6. Sarah Cash, Bechhoefer Curator of American Art, to Registrar, October 24, 2001, memorandum, CGA Curatorial Files.

[4] For an excellent discussion of this shift, see William C. Agee, "New Directions: The Late Work, 1938–1946," in Debra Bricker Balken, in collaboration with William C. Agee and Elizabeth Hutton Turner, *Arthur Dove: A Retrospective* (Andover, MA and Cambridge, MA, 1997), 133–153, esp. 135–139. Agee notes (138) Dove's awareness of abstractionist trends in the work of his contemporaries, for example his perusal of the fully illustrated catalog of the Museum of Modern Art's important 1939 exhibition *Art of Our Time* and his awareness of the recent changes toward more geometric abstraction in the art of Wassily Kandinsky and Paul Klee.

[5] See Debra Bricker Balken, "Continuities and Digressions in the Work of Arthur Dove from 1907 to 1933," in Debra Bricker Balken, in collaboration with William C. Agee and Elizabeth Hutton Turner, *Arthur Dove: A Retrospective* (Andover, MA and Cambridge, MA, 1997), 22.

[6] Diary entry for December 8, 1942, Arthur and Helen Torr Dove Papers, 1904–1975, reel 725, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.

[7] Titles such as *Space Divided by Line Motive*, like *Structure*, *Parabola* (both 1942), and *Formation I* (1943) signify a departure from Dove's earlier, nature-derived titles. For the last three works, see Ann Lee Morgan, *Arthur Dove: Life and Work, with a Catalogue Raisonné* (Newark, DE, London, and Toronto, 1984), cat. nos. 42.20, 42.13, and 43.6, respectively. On December

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17, 1942, Dove recorded in his diary "names for pure paintings: Design, arrangement, monochrome—polychrome—unochrome—duochrome trio-quatrosexo etc. Motif plan—venture adventure Formation"; quoted in William C. Agee, "New Directions: The Late Work, 1938–1946," in Debra Bricker Balken, in collaboration with William C. Agee and Elizabeth Hutton Turner, *Arthur Dove: A Retrospective* (Andover, MA and Cambridge, MA, 1997), 144–145.

[8] Diary entries for October 10, 12–14, and 16, 1943, Arthur and Helen Torr Dove Papers, reel 725, frames 993–96, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC.

[9] William C. Agee, "New Directions: The Late Work, 1938–1946," in Debra Bricker Balken, in collaboration with William C. Agee and Elizabeth Hutton Turner, *Arthur Dove: A Retrospective* (Andover, MA and Cambridge, MA, 1997), 146, notes that this "sense of constant, shifting movement is almost cinematic, and raises the possibility that Dove had been touched by the compositions of Léopold Survage," which he may have known through the catalog *Art of our Time* (see n. 5 above).

[10] William C. Agee, "New Directions: The Late Work, 1938–1946," in Debra Bricker Balken, in collaboration with William C. Agee and Elizabeth Hutton Turner, *Arthur Dove: A Retrospective* (Andover, MA and Cambridge, MA, 1997), 139. These notations recall Dove's 1913 description of his creative process, when he "remember[ed] certain sensations purely through their form and color . . . by certain shapes, planes, light, or character lines determined by the meeting of such planes." Quoted in Arthur Jerome Eddy, *Cubists and Post-Impressionism* (Chicago, 1919), 48.

[11] McBride, quoted in *Art News* 42 (March 1–14, 1943): 23, in William C. Agee, "New Directions: The Late Work, 1938–1946," in Debra Bricker Balken, in collaboration with William C. Agee and Elizabeth Hutton Turner, *Arthur Dove: A Retrospective* (Andover, MA and Cambridge, MA, 1997), 140 and 152 n. 28.

[12] December 5, 1942, diary entry paraphrased in William C. Agee, "New Directions: The Late Work, 1938–1946," in Debra Bricker Balken, in collaboration with William C. Agee and Elizabeth Hutton Turner, *Arthur Dove: A Retrospective* (Andover, MA and Cambridge, MA, 1997), 146; and December 30, 1942 diary entry, quoted in ibid., 145.

[13] Barbara Haskell, *Arthur Dove* (Boston, 1974), 111.

[14] "The Passing Shows," *Art News* 43, no. 6 (May 1–14, 1944): 19; and Howard Devree, "A Reviewer's Notes: Brief Comment on Some Recently Opened Shows—Dove and Marion Greenwood," *New York Times*, March 26, 1944, Arts sec., 7.

[15] "Dove and His Father, 1919," Alfred Stieglitz, as dictated to Dorothy Norman,

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February 1937, cited in Suzanne M. Mullett, “Arthur G. Dove [1880–], a Study in Contemporary Art” (master’s thesis, American University, 1944), 9, cited in Linda Ayres, Jane Myers, Mark Thistlethwaite, and Ron Tyler, *American Paintings: Selections from the Amon Carter Museum* (Fort Worth, TX, 1986), 84.

TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The painting is executed on a plain-weave, medium-weight, pre-primed canvas and is lined with a heavier weight linen using a Beva 371 adhesive. The tacking margins are intact, indicating that the painting is very close to its original dimensions. The stretcher is a modern, five-member, expansion bolt replacement. The commercially prepared ground is a grayish off-white color. With the exception of the blue shape at the bottom center, which is more thinly and translucently painted, the paint application is generally flat and opaque. However, the artist's brushstrokes within the solid passages of color still create some texture. The shapes appear to have been initially blocked in on the canvas in a thin application of paint in a hue similar to that found in the final, uppermost layer. The one anomaly is the brown passage in the bottom left, which is underpainted in a bright red, perhaps an alizarin crimson color. Dove seems to have used only a few thinly applied layers in each colored passage to arrive at the finished work. Infrared examination shows that each shape is painted within a nervous, nuanced pencil outline that Dove drew on top of the ground to serve as a guide for his painting. [1] The x-radiograph shows no significant artist’s changes.

There is an undated treatment report in the Downtown Gallery Records at the Archives of American Art (Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC) from Fine Arts Conservation Laboratories in New York City. It states that losses, abrasion, and scratches on the painting were filled and retouched, the painting was cleaned "superficially," and a thin spray application of synthetic resin varnish was applied. In 1982 the picture was treated at the Corcoran Gallery of Art after a large tear was made in the lower right corner of the canvas when the painting was accidentally hit from the front during an installation. The tear was mended, the painting was attached to an auxiliary lining fabric with Beva 371, and the painting was mounted on a replacement stretcher. Losses were filled and retouched, and the "surface was coated with paste wax to even the surface saturation." In 2004 the picture was treated again at the Corcoran for severe interlayer cleavage in the center yellow,

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center green, and upper blue passages of paint. Losses were filled and retouched, and the picture was surface-cleaned with water. Because of the synthetic resin spray varnish and “paste wax” coating of previous conservation treatments, the artist’s intended juxtaposition of different surface textures within a single composition has been altered. [2]

TECHNICAL NOTES

[1] The infrared examination was conducted using a Santa Barbara Focalplane InSb camera fitted with an H astronomy filter.

[2] Elizabeth Steele prepared a comprehensive technical summary for *Corcoran Gallery of Art: American Paintings to 1945*, ed. Sarah Cash (Washington, DC, 2011). A copy of this summary is available in NGA conservation files.

PROVENANCE

The artist [1880-1946], Centerport, New York; by inheritance to his wife, Helen S. Torr Dove [1886-1967], Centerport; her estate;[1] (Downtown Gallery, New York); purchased April 1968 by the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington; acquired 2014 by the National Gallery of Art.

[1] Arthur Dove Artist Files, Downtown Gallery Records, 1824–1974, reel 5547, frames 869–871, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

EXHIBITION HISTORY

1944 Arthur G. Dove; Paintings - 1944, An American Place, New York, 21 March - 21 May 1944, no. 6.

1947 Loan, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, perhaps between 1947 and 1963.[1]

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1947 Paintings by Arthur Dove, San Francisco Museum of Art, 22 April - 18 May 1947.

1963 Then and Now: Early and Mature Examples of the Work of Twenty-five Twentieth Century Artists, Guild Hall, East Hampton, New York, 21 July - 11 August 1963, unnumbered checklist.

1964 39th Anniversary Exhibition, Downtown Gallery, New York, 6-31 October 1964, unnumbered catalogue.

1965 Six Decades of American Art, Leicester Galleries, London, 14 July - 18 August 1965, no. 29.

1976 Corcoran [The American Genius], Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, 24 January - 4 April 1976, catalogue with no checklist, as U.S.A.

1978 The William A. Clark Collection, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, 26 April - 16 July 1978, catalogue with no checklist.

2005 Encouraging American Genius: Master Paintings from the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington; Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; Parrish Art Museum, Southampton, NY; Mint Museum of Art, Charlotte; John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, Sarasota, 27 August 2005 - 29 April 2007, checklist no. 95 (shown only in Washington).

2008 The American Evolution: A History Through Art, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, 1 March - 27 July 2008, unpublished checklist.

2009 American Paintings from the Collection, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, 6 June - 18 October 2009, unpublished checklist.

2013 American Journeys: Visions of Place, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, 21 September 2013 - 28 September 2014, unpublished checklist.

EXHIBITION HISTORY NOTES

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[1] An information sheet about the painting supplied to the Corcoran Gallery of Art by Downtown Gallery, dated 29 December 1967 and in NGA curatorial files, lists the University of North Carolina under "Exhibited" but provides no date. The listing appears after the January 1947 listing for Van Bark Studios and before the July 1963 listing for the Guild Hall exhibition. No details about this loan were found in the University of North Carolina Archives; see e-mails from November 2007 between Emily Shapiro of the Corcoran Gallery of Art and Carol Gillham, Assistant Curator of Collections, Ackland Art Museum, in NGA curatorial files.

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0 Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.: Arthur and Helen Torr Dove papers, Diary Entries for 10,12,13,14,16 October 1943, reel 725, frames 993-996..

1947 Barefoot, Spencer. "The Art Galleries [exh. review]." *The Art Galleries* (27 April 1947): 22.

1973 Morgan, Ann Lee. "Toward the Definition of Early Modernism in America: A Study of Arthur Dove." 2 vols. Ph.D. dissertation, University of Iowa, Iowa City, 1973: 1:326.

1973 Phillips, Dorothy W. *A Catalogue of the Collection of American Paintings in the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Vol. 2: Painters born from 1850 to 1910*. Washington, 1973: 105, repro., 106.

1984 Morgan, Ann Lee. *Arthur Dove: Life and Work, With a Catalogue Raisonné*, Newark, London, and Toronto, 1984: 303, 304, repro.

2000 Cash, Sarah, with Terrie Sultan. *American Treasures of the Corcoran Gallery of Art*. New York, 2000: 161, 206, repro.

2002 Cash, Sarah. "Space Divided by Line Motive (U.S.A.)." In *A Capital Collection: Masterworks from the Corcoran Gallery of Art*. Edited by Eleanor Heartney. London, 2002: 256, 257, repro.

2011 Cash, Sarah. "Arthur Dove, *Space Divided by Line Motive*." In *Corcoran Gallery of Art: American Paintings to 1945*. Edited by Sarah Cash. Washington, 2011: 252-253, 283, repro.

Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.: Downtown Gallery Records 1824-1974, Arthur Dove Artist Notebooks, reel 5570, frames 349-350.

To cite: Sarah Cash, “Arthur Dove/*Space Divided by Line Motive*/1943,” *American Paintings, 1900–1945*, NGA Online Editions, https://purl.org/nga/collection/artobject/195821 (accessed October 12, 2024).

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