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.
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, ochre, 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]
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
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).


[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.


[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


[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).


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

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.


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.


EXHIBITION HISTORY


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


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


EXHIBITION HISTORY NOTES
[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 Museum, in NGA curatorial files.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


