



Arthur Dove
American, 1880 - 1946

Moth Dance

1929

oil on canvas

overall: 50.8 x 66.4 cm (20 x 26 1/8 in.)

framed: 51.7 x 67 x 3.1 cm (20 3/8 x 26 3/8 x 1 1/4 in.)

Inscription: lower right: Dove

Alfred Stieglitz Collection 1949.2.1

ENTRY

A diary entry of Thursday, July 18, 1929—likely written by Arthur Dove’s partner and fellow artist Helen Torr—describes the day that Dove began work on *Moth Dance*. After a morning visit to his doctor in Manhattan, the artist repaired to his studio and “came over with swell start of painting ‘The Dance of the Moth.’” A later entry, for November 24, 1929, notes, “then he finished painting of ‘Amorous Moth’ and cut out frame for it.” [1] Ultimately titled *Moth Dance*, the work is a playful, inventive image. Dove depicts the insect’s reptilian eyes with vertical black lines for pupils that slash outward beyond the top and bottom rims. Waving antennae emerge like arms from the thorax (rather than from the top of the head) and drift off beyond the picture plane. The moth has two brilliantly colored sets of wings: the top set are a dark bluish-green, spotted with white and abstracted into one continuous oval; the bottom wings extend from the body in a bright teal that darkens to black at the tips. Two delicate black feet swerve to the left from the lower end of the moth’s body, completing an S-curve that begins with the antennae. The moth hovers over a beige background articulated with light brown and yellow brushstrokes that accentuate the moth’s movements. A few dots of turquoise, brown, and yellow in

the background, particularly at the upper right, whimsically suggest that the moth's vigorous dance has flung spots of color off its wings.

The concise, elliptical visual language of *Moth Dance* reflects, in part, Dove's experience as a magazine illustrator. Dove supported himself with his illustrations for several years after graduating from college, and he continued to supplement his income with illustration work even after deciding to pursue a career as a fine artist. His January 30, 1904 cover for the *Illustrated Sporting News* [fig. 1] playfully uses curving lines to depict motion in a way that echoes the background of *Moth Dance*. (On the magazine cover, the lines animate a woman sliding a curling stone on a frozen pond).

Though Dove was certainly capable of rendering fauna in greater and more realistic detail, as seen in his illustrations for the 1905 *Calendar of Birds and Beasts*, there are a number of precedents for *Moth Dance* in Dove's oeuvre that demonstrate his willingness to experiment with a wide range of techniques and materials in depicting insects and animals. A work of about 15 years earlier, *From a Wasp* [fig. 2] is a close-up of a wasp's body, antennae, and legs, reducing the insect to a study of shapes and textures. In the painting *Seagull Motif (Violet and Green)* [fig. 3] Dove has abstracted seagulls in flight to swirling and twirling lines that rise and fall from an island in the waves. *Monkey Fur* [fig. 4], an assemblage of corroded metal, tin foil, and real monkey fur, evocatively references a monkey without depicting its form outright. [2] Lastly, *Dogs Chasing Each Other* [fig. 5], completed in August of the same year as *Moth Dance*, is a highly keyed composition of slashing black lines and drily cross-hatched white, grey, and brown fur. [3] The dog at the top of the painting bares sharp teeth and a lolling red tongue, and animated whiskers leap from its snout with vibrating intensity in an abstract style that is simultaneously cartoonish and sophisticated, and uniquely Dove's own.

In a letter to Samuel M. Kootz excerpted in his 1930 book *Modern American Painters*, Dove stressed the role of color and light in his work:

There was a long period of searching for a something in color which I then called "a condition of light." It applied to all objects in nature, flowers, trees, people, apples, cows. These all have their certain condition of light, which establishes them to the eye, to each other, and to the understanding. To understand that clearly go to

nature, or to the Museum of Natural History and see the butterflies. Each has its own orange, blue, black; white, yellow, brown, green and black, all carefully chosen to fit the character of the life going on in that individual entity. [4]

Moths and butterflies both belong to the insect order Lepidoptera and Dove was likely inspired by the butterflies he had seen at the American Museum of Natural History when conceptualizing *Moth Dance*. He used the moth's vibrant color (or "condition of light") to convey an abstract idea. The references to dance and an "amorous" moth associated with the painting indicate that Dove was striving to communicate, through precise visual means, exactly how the insect's fluttering movements evoked joy and passion.

Moth Dance punctuates the end of a decade of personal and professional transitions in Dove's life. In 1921 he left his wife, Florence Dove, for Torr, who was also married, and the following year he and Torr moved onto their boat, *Mona*. Dove's new relationship and the death of his father, who was not supportive of his son's artistic career, inspired him to resume painting regularly in the summer of 1921 after a lull dating back to 1917. He began to exhibit more often, and starting in 1926 he had annual solo shows sponsored by Alfred Stieglitz. When Florence died unexpectedly in September 1929, Dove married Torr and began to reconcile with his son, William, whom he had not been permitted to see after the separation.

Art historian Ann Lee Morgan has noted that the dramas of Dove's personal life during the 1920s are manifest in his work of this time. He "experimented more with materials, subjects, and styles than any other time. He pondered the question of pure painting, he explored the possibilities of assemblage, and he experimented with techniques related to those espoused by surrealism for opening up the unconscious." [5] Dove's interest in the metamorphic nature of moths and butterflies, with their four stages of life from egg to larva (caterpillar) to pupa (chrysalis) and finally adult (imago), further reflected his own ever-changing nature during this productive period of his career.

Moth Dance was shown in Dove's 1930 solo exhibition at Stieglitz's An American Place gallery in New York. *New York Times* reviewer Edward Alden Jewell singled out the painting, noting "You will treasure the exquisite color values in *Moth Dance*, as well as in several other poems." [6] The painting stayed in Stieglitz's personal collection until his death in 1946, when it fell to his wife, Georgia O'Keeffe, to

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distribute the works in Stieglitz’s estate. She visited the National Gallery of Art and was taken with its pristine newness (the West Building opened in 1941) and emptiness: “the institution seems like a peak—something finished—standing alone.” [7] In 1949 O’Keeffe chose the Gallery as the repository for the definitive Key Set of Stieglitz’s photographs, three John Marin watercolors (*Storm over Taos*, *Movement No. 9*, *Sea and Boat*, *Deer Isle, Maine*, and *Echo Lake, Franconia Range, White Mountain Country*) and two paintings: Marsden Hartley’s *Landscape No. 5* and Dove’s *Moth Dance*.

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COMPARATIVE FIGURES



fig. 1 Arthur Dove, cover, *The Illustrated Sporting News* 2, no. 38, Jan. 30, 1904, General Research Division, The New York Public Library. New York Public Library Digital Collections. digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/5d1eadc0-668e-0131-864f-58d385a7bbd0



fig. 2 Arthur Dove, *From a Wasp*, c. 1914, oil on wood, The Art Institute of Chicago, Alfred Stieglitz Collection. The Art Institute of Chicago / Art Resource, NY



fig. 3 Arthur Dove, *Seagull Motif (Violet and Green)*, 1928, oil on metal, Collection of Pitt and Barbara Hyde



fig. 4 Arthur Dove, *Monkey Fur*, 1926, corroded metal, monkey fur, tin foil, and cloth on metal, The Art Institute of Chicago, Alfred Stieglitz Collection. The Art Institute of Chicago / Art Resource, NY



fig. 5 Arthur Dove, *Dogs Chasing Each Other*, 1929, oil on canvas, The Art Institute of Chicago, Alfred Stieglitz Collection. The Art Institute of Chicago / Art Resource, NY

NOTES

- [1] Dove and Torr kept a diary together, though in 1929 their often telegraphic notes were written primarily by Torr. At the time the two were living on their boat *Mona* moored at the Ketewomoke Yacht Club in Halesite, on the north shore of Long Island, about 40 miles east of Manhattan. They stayed there rent-free in exchange for serving as the club's caretakers. Dove had a makeshift studio on board the boat. Archives of American Art, Arthur and Helen Torr Dove Papers, Box 2, Folder 3: Diaries, 1927–1945.
- [2] For a full discussion of *Monkey Fur*, see Rachael Z. DeLue, *Arthur Dove: Always Connect* (Chicago, 2016), 243–244.
- [3] The August 4 date is derived from diary entries: Archives of American Art, Arthur and Helen Torr Dove Papers, Box 2, Folder 3: Diaries, 1927–1945 and Box 2, Folder 15: Excerpts (1925–1939), undated.
- [4] Samuel M. Kootz, *Modern American Painters* (New York, 1930), 37
- [5] Ann Lee Morgan, *Arthur Dove: Life and Work, with a Catalogue Raisonné* (Newark, DE, 1984), 53
- [6] Edward Alden Jewell, "Concerning Mr. Dove," *New York Times*, Mar. 30, 1930.

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- [7] Letter from Georgia O’Keeffe to Art Institute of Chicago director Daniel Catton Rich, December 18, 1948, as quoted in Sarah Greenough, *Alfred Stieglitz: The Key Set; The Alfred Stieglitz Collection of Photographs* (Washington, DC, 2002), L n. 5. For more on O’Keeffe’s selection of the National Gallery of Art, see the opening essay to this catalog, Charles Brock, “American Modernism and the National Gallery of Art: ‘The Perfect Place.’”
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TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The unlined, plain-weave fabric support remains mounted on its original stretcher. The thin white ground layer may have been prepared by the artist. The paint was applied in a matte, opaque technique that ranges from flat to heavily impastoed, textured layers. Much of the ground can be seen through gaps in the overlying paint. The painting is in excellent condition. The surface is unvarnished.

PROVENANCE

Alfred Stieglitz [1864-1946], New York; by inheritance to his wife, Georgia O’Keeffe [1887-1986], Abiquiú, New Mexico; gift 1949 to NGA.

EXHIBITION HISTORY

1944 History of an American. Alfred Stieglitz: "291" and After; Selections from the Stieglitz Collection, Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1944, no. 257.

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