

THE NATIONAL COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN

THREE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY AMERICAN ARTISTS-
THEIR LIVES, WORKS AND INFLUENCES.

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Introduction:

The vast advances in artistic styles and movements in art of the twentieth century, are usually credited to Kandinsky and early twentieth century European artists. However, while these innovators were at work in Europe, a very definite move towards abstraction was taking place in America. These early twentieth century Americans often go unnoticed because of the high scale of artistic activity in Europe at the time.

In this thesis, I will look briefly at the general trend in early twentieth century American art, and I will also look more closely at three artists whom I feel were the precursors of modern art in America, and who link directly with the Abstract-Expressionists and the Minimalists.

Within the Stieglitz circle, there was a grouping of three artists, who were in themselves a relevant and dynamic force - John Marin, Georgia O' Keeffe and Arthur Dove. They rank among the leading Avant-Garde artists of their time. Although a dominant part of the Stieglitz circle, they were not a "group" as such, as they all kept throughout their careers a very distinctive style. However, their varied personal expressions do fall within a broadly definable category. They were united by a common creative cause, for painting to be judged for itself alone, and for the right of the artist to feel free to abstract ideas and shapes from thoughts or surroundings and to then arrange them as he sees fit, to create the effect he wants.

Individualism, was sacred to each of them, but they did all seek refuge in nature, from the superficial materialism of New York. They consistently presented new, controversial, and revolutionary ideas to their viewers. Although they were often greeted by public and critical ridicule, through their struggle, they opened a path, that enabled later artists to create increasingly original varieties of abstractionism.

Chapter 1:

From 1910 onwards, there was a strong move towards abstraction in American art. Where these concepts came from and who the people who practised them were, I will look at briefly in this chapter. This whole area is part of the background to the three main artists dealt with in this paper, John Marin, Arthur Dove and Georgia O'Keeffe. All of these artists took part in this move towards abstraction in early twentieth century American art.

Art of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in America was very academic, and there was no realization or recognition of what was happening in Europe at the time. The most revolutionary aspect of American art at this stage was the Henri group, who came to prominence around 1910. Henri and the eight were not popular with the public because of the newness of their themes and ideas. Anything new was not understood, and was therefore rejected by society as a whole. The revolution of the eight was one of social comment and not an aesthetic one. However, the fact, that they raised questions and new concepts, did introduce a strong vitality to art and aroused many people's interest. Whether or not, this interest was positive or negative, at least people participated. In fact, some of the first propagandists of modern art in America were from the literary field, some of these being Gertrude and Leo Stein. Fortunately, at this stage, there were American artists like Patrick Henry Bruce, Max Weber, and Alfred Maurer, travelling around Europe, absorbing the work and ideas of people like the Fauves, the Cubists and the Futurists.

It was, actually in Chicago that this modern spirit first proclaimed itself in America, and not in writing or painting, but in architecture. The advances at the time in technology brought to fruit the steel-framed skyscraper. The excitement and reaction to the sudden growth and expansion of Chicago, and the resulting social changes, brought to light new critical and creative energies. Artists, like Joseph Stella, on returning from Europe were greeted by this new America and were quick to record it's impact in their work. Stella had brought with him the Futurist concepts from Italy, and the Brooklyn Bridge furnished him with a vehicle for demonstrating his theories in this field.

This and many other isolated happenings played a role in the introduction of modern art in the United States. But, the main revolution took place in the attic of number 291 Fifth Avenue, where photographer Alfred Stieglitz held exhibitions. In 1907 these exhibitions extended from just photographic to painting and sculpture, and among the numerous American painters he introduced to the public were John Marin (1909), Arthur Dove (1910) and Georgia O'Keeffe (1916). The audience for these exhibitions was small, mainly consisting of other artists and some writers, an elitist group. However, even these people were not all impressed by what they saw. Stieglitz's rivalry with Henri led to a split in non-academic art in America, a socially oriented faction against an avant-garde faction, and so, in looking at Stieglitz and his friends we are narrowing our focus a little. '291' was a gallery which consistently presented it's audience with controversial and revolutionary aspects of modern art. The group of painters with Stieglitz, waged a battle to overthrow tradition and establish a more radical approach to art in America. These artists

Chapter 2:

Arthur Dove (1880 - 1946), was born in Canandaigua, New York, and grew up in Geneva, New York, where he learned the basics of art from a truck driver and part-time artist called Weatherly. On deciding to make art his career for life, after studying law at Hobart College and then at Cornell University, he changed from the faculty of law to the faculty of art. Just one year after his graduation, he was living in New York, working as a freelance illustrator and married to Florence Dorsey. In 1908 and 1909 he travelled abroad to Europe, staying in Paris for a while and then moving to the South of France. It was here that he befriended Alfred Maurer, who was in turn to be his link with Stieglitz. When he returned home to New York he spent some more time as a freelance illustrator, but in 1910 he abandoned this, to pursue his first love, painting. Dove was very interested in the works of Cézanne, whose influence can clearly be seen in one of his earlier paintings, The Lobster. This painting was shown at '291' in 1910 as part of a group exhibition, but it was in 1912 that Dove's first break came, when Stieglitz gave him his first one-man show. This was a new beginning for Dove, and from here he was to progress and indeed surpass many of his predecessors. He painted objects and scenes that were so simplified and modified that they were no longer recognizable. This was of course, until now, unheard of in American art, and indeed it was only around the same time that Kandinsky was making similar progress in Europe.

Dove changed his whole lifestyle to suit his painting. He drew much of his inspiration from nature, and so, he moved to the country, bought a farm, and made his living from chicken farming. In 1923, he bought a boat called the "Mona," on which he lived with his second wife, the painter, Helen Torr. It was at this stage that his interest in Marine life became apparent in his work, as we see in the painting, Sails. For years, Dove and his wife cruised around the harbours of Long Island Sound, painting and enjoying life, but in 1934 they bought a farm in Geneva, New York and moved back to land again. In 1938 Dove had a heart attack and developed kidney complications, so that when he took ill again in 1946, with the same trouble, he eventually died. He was throughout his life, a discoverer, an innovator, who gave himself such freedom in his work that he broke with all the traditions of painting and created a whole new approach to imaginative design. He rebelled in his work, all down through his career, against preconception, and in 1910 when he left his job, he chose to make nature his life and work. Up until Dove, landscape in America had meant either the Impressionistic works of Weir and Hassau, the dark, brooding scenes of Ryder, or the delicate works of Whistler. Dove broke these traditions of symbolism and the sense of inwardness which had, in these works veiled the real works of nature. Instead he presented nature as a force, a strength, something which was vibrant and alive. He looked beyond the surface and painted from within.

Chapter 3:

Georgia O' Keeffe (1887 - 19--) spent the first fifteen years of her life in Sun Prairie, Wisconsin. Awed and inspired by her surroundings she started to draw at the age of ten, and when her family moved to Virginia she continued with this interest. Her work developed, and from 1905 to 1912 she studied art at the Institute of Chicago, and then, at the Teacher's College, Columbia. When finished her training she moved to Amarillo, Texas, a land of deserted open spaces and emptiness, and taught there for two years. The vastness of this land became the subject of her paintings for some time, but in 1914 she returned to New York to study with Arthur Dow, an artist who played an important part in her development.

Soon after, she began to realize that her work was not really her own, but in fact, reflected the ideas, thoughts, and even the styles of her various teachers and instructors. With this, she began to clear her mind of all preconceived ideas and learning and it was her new drawings and watercolours that were shown to Stieglitz by Anita Pollitzer, a fellow student in Dow's classes. Most of these works, were mainly concerned with her putting down on paper things which were in her head, with no reference to external objects or subjects. They consisted of planes, wavy lines and egg-shaped forms in charcoal or watercolour, with the medium handled very delicately. Stieglitz was so impressed, that he exhibited them at '291' in 1916, and Georgia O' Keeffe became the first woman to have a one-man show at the gallery.

Stieglitz and O' Keeffe became very close and in 1924, they married and moved to New York. Some time later she did her first paintings of New York City, and at this time also, she began to spend her summers in New Mexico, where her work had strong links with her earlier Texas paintings. In 1946, after Stieglitz's death she moved to New Mexico to live. This land with its open spaces and deserts became her refuge and her inspiration. Although she had never been outside America before, from 1953 onwards, she began to take trips to Europe, Asia, and South America where she painted, and she also broadened her experience by working in new fields such as ceramics and metal.

The severity and starkness of her work, whether it be flowers, skyscrapers or a dried out skeleton, was achieved by her elimination of everything which would only be distracting. It brings into fuller relief the sensuousness of the image. O' Keeffe's work was sensitive and lyrical, as was Marin's and Dove's, however the sensuousness of her work is stronger and more feminine than either of these two. Her works, like these two, no matter what the subject matter, all have a vitality, a richness and an unmistakable personal quality.

Chapter 4:

John Marin (1870 - 1953) was born in Rutherford, New Jersey. It was always his dream to become an architect. During the early 1890's he worked in no less than four architectural offices, and then in 1893 as a freelancer designed several houses in New Jersey. His architectural training, was of course very important and noticeable in his development as a painter. His concern with valences, weights, stresses and planes remained with him throughout his career even though his vision broadened greatly. In the late 1890's he studied at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Art under Thomas Anshutz and William Chase. It was here also that he met Arthur Carles who was to be his link with Stieglitz. In the late 1910's he travelled extensively in Europe where his work consisted mainly of etchings of picturesque Parisian landmarks. His watercolours at this time were very different from these etchings in that they were suggestive rather than descriptive. This was something which was, in fact, to become even more pronounced in his work. In 1909, he returned to America, and in 1910 he had his first one-man exhibition at '291'.

His work really began to come together in 1911. He followed a very personal vision which always remained his own. His, was an emotional response to his surroundings, whether it was New York City, or the islands off the Maine coast. A true country yankee, Marin was awed and fascinated by New York, especially a New York which was expanding at such a rapid rate as in the early twentieth century. He was, however, eventually to change not his vision or style, but merely his object of inspiration from New York to the Maine coast.

Even moreso than Georgia O' Keeffe, Marin explored and responded to the buildings of New York and the whole concept of growth of a city. His architectural background also gave him an interest or link with this theme. However, in later years, he was so struck with the Maine coast and the islands of the area, that he used this as his inspiration, even to the extent of buying some of the islands for himself.

SECTION B:

Chapter 5:

Marin, Dove and O' Keeffe in their work, all developed a very personal style of artistic expression. All three, did however have much in common in their beliefs, and ideas. They shared the conviction that the source of art, the roots of expression, were to be found in the particular construction of the forms of nature, and their processes. While all three, abstracted or extracted forms from nature to convey these perceptions, they all expressed these ideas with the concrete experiences of particular places - Dove, the Finger Lakes, O' Keeffe, New Mexico, and Marin, the Maine coast. Their work, no matter how abstract always kept the unmistakable stamp of these specific places.

I will now look at each of these artists individually, with particular attention to their part in the introduction of abstract art to America.

"Arthur Dove, was mainly concerned with, disclosing the spiritual forces in and through the world of sense and matter."²

This quote, gives a summary of the theme which Dove strove to express throughout his life. He tried to make visible through his work, the invisible forces and processes which take place in objects. He transformed and exposed nature by digging inside the surface and revealing the structure beneath, and the workings of the interior. Dove was totally captivated by nature, creating exciting, original work out of the simple shapes and forms of marine and rural objects. He attempts in some of his more abstract works, to actually visualize such intangibles as the sound of foghorns, or the sound of specific works of music. The shaky, circular shapes in foghorns, suggest not only the shape of the actual funnels, but also the sound being expelled from them. In Chinese Music, the colour, the spiked curves, and criss-crossing arcs, all convey to the viewer the Far East.

Dove moves between pure abstraction and works with definite reference to reality all of the time. He uses whichever is necessary for him to express what he wants to say. In many works, he emphasises simplified patterns in nature, extending beyond what is actually visible to what is merely perceivable. However, in other cases he expresses the emotions which these experiences evoke in him, in pure abstract form. At times, he feels this need to express his reaction to something, but at other times, his treatment of the actual object is sufficient. Dove shows processes in nature such as the rising of the moon, in Moon, 1935, and the bursting forth of leaves in Plant Forms, 1915. He also uses animals and marine life, although they are scarcely recognizable as such, with a sense of typical activity. Despite the fact that he broke rules, and took many liberties in what he did, his thorough knowledge and experience of the countryside always shone through. Look at, for example the pastel Plant Forms. Here we see a picture of pure energy. The most striking thing, is the feeling of something bursting forth, of growth and expansion. The curved forms, leaves, and grasses that have been simplified, radiate outwards in spirals.

The centre can actually be felt to expand and push through the periphery, across the edge of the paper. There is no sign of human presence, no limits or boundaries. Dove has focussed in on a small part of nature which is untamed, undisturbed by man, and brought this forward as a world in itself. In the 1930's, Dove's work increasingly included the sun and stars and the effects of different lights and light sources on nature.

His tendency towards abstraction is evident from his very early work, and he was the lone exponent of Abstract art in America until the 1920's when Stuart Davis returned from Europe. Dove, never did, in fact, reconcile his love of nature with the systematic working in a nonobjective manner. He wrote,

"There is no such thing as abstraction.
It is extraction; gravitation towards a certain direction,
and minding your own business."

Another area which Dove explored extensively later on, was collage. John Covert had been the first of the modernists to explore collage, but he was soon followed by people such as Stella and Dove. Dove's assemblages were loose and free, and he often incorporated high relief into them. One example is Goin' Fishin', 1925, which was made of such materials as bamboo poles, denim shirtsleeves and bark on metal. Another one called Grandmother, is a portrait achieved with a sample of her needlework, a page from her bible, a flower and a fern pressed in it, and some shingles from her house. The use of these things, in his collages, to bring out contrasting textures is ingenious, and Dove's claim was that he had always used such personalized objects even in his paintings. His raw materials came always from nature, the cows, barns, and pastures were as much a part of his work as the canvas and pigment that he used.

Like Dove, Georgia O' Keeffe, expresses a vision which is distinctly her own, through gradual transformations in her work, throughout her career. In the 1920's, her subject, like Dove's, was the serenity of plants and the internal structures of nature. Through the 1930's and 1940's her powerful works have sombre undertones which reflect her experiences in New Mexico, and then in her later works, there are new joyful experiences, which show her love of travel. She takes a tiny flower, something ordinary and mundane, and enlarges it so that it becomes a fascinating world in itself. Her extensive views of nature are expressed in clear, pure forms whose boundaries would normally limit them, but because of the fact that they are so pure, so uncluttered, they seem to go on forever, and their vastness denies the limits of the canvas.

Like John Marin, she often uses simplified architecture as a starting point. She expresses her reaction to American life and the excitement of the growing New York City, in a symbolism that is both rich and clear. Both landscapes, and images of early twentieth century American architecture, with their feeling for great, clear spaces and beautiful proportion have a vitality of their own. Her work is concerned with the sun and sky, the mountains and plains, the trees and rivers, and life. Like Dove, nothing is still, everything is alive and growing. She gives to the objects she chooses to paint,

an extraordinary clarity, a richness. All of the background or environment is excluded so that the object itself is the sole focus, direct and immediate. There is, of course, a link here with the photographic close-ups of her husband and Paul Strand, but O' Keefe gives her images more, they reflect intensity, personality and soul.

Many of her early works were only a beginning, a starting - point for a pure and lyrical abstraction that depended neither on sentiment nor intellect, but on the purely visual. These non-objective works do allude to nature, even though they are not representational of it. They exist as pure form, with areas so stark and vast that they contradict the confines of the actual canvas. She did not paint landscapes and scenes, but moods and feelings, and although they were not representative of nature, they did suggest it. The sensuousness of nature, the explosion of buds, the birth and growth of seeds were her interest; and this sensuality was so obvious, that in 1915 when Stieglitz first saw her work he exclaimed,

"At last.....a woman on paper!"⁴

In these charcoal and watercolour works the medium is handled with such delicacy that some of them, for example Blue Lines, 1916, suggest Chinese hand-drawn symbols. These pieces are mainly non-objective, as O' Keefe says,

"I have things in my head, that are not like what anyone taught me. Shapes and ideas so near to me - so natural to my way of being and thinking, that it hasn't occurred to me to put them down."

In Black Iris, 1926, one can see how these pure forms can be looked at in so many different ways, depending on the viewer. Many critics at the time angered O' Keefe by reading sexuality into all of her works, because of their sensuality and organic feel. Her expressions of growth, in radiating circles, were read from such extremes as sexual orifices, to waves in water where pebbles had been dropped in. This sexuality was something which O' Keefe alone, of the early modernists, expressed in her work. However there was nothing erotic or pornographic in her work, it was merely an integral part of nature, germination, the growth from seed to bloom, the whole cycle of nature. To O' Keefe, the essence of life.

Despite his connection with Maine, John Marin, had an almost mystical fascination with New York, which is evident in his early work. It was not the city as seen by the eye, but the impact felt by it, which Marin wished to express. His cry of identification before the New York skyline, was typical of the reaction of the artist to the New York of the early twentieth century.

"I see great forces at work, great movements, the large buildings and the small buildings, the warring of the great and small..... While these powers are at work..... I can hear the sound of their strife, and there is great music being played."⁶

His work is a combination of a fierce pride in the country, and a deep respect for all that is cosmopolitan. His intense and individual reaction to a New York in the middle of a building boom, manifested itself in images of explosive growth, vitality and hope for America. He sought a means of expressing the hidden dynamism of existence, of people, of nature, of buildings, the 'aliveness' of life, as did Dove and O' Keeffe. His view was,

"You cannot create a work of art, unless the things you behold, respond to something inside you. Therefore, if those buildings move me, they too must have life. Thus, the whole city is alive;.....and the more they move me, the more I feel them to be alive."

His early cityscapes, were either naturalistic or expressionistic. In 1912 he did several views of the Brooklyn Bridge, and conveyed it's unsteadiness, it's aliveness, with implications of movement in his paintings. Marin, in fact, sets all of his buildings in this unsteady, dangerous environment, trembling blocks of concrete and shaking steel structures. He distorts and juxtaposes these buildings in such a way as to make them appear as if in motion. In Lower Manhattan, one of his many Cubistic watercolours, Marin favours soft lines, breaking down the buildings into planes and angles, but rounding their edges. He then arranges them in such a way that they almost become human, like a crowd scene instead of a cityscape. As a master of understatement, Marin leaves large, airy spaces of his paper blank. His policy being, the fewer strokes the better, just as long as the effect was right.

In 1914, Marin made his first visit to the Maine coast, and from then on, it was a source of inspiration to him. His landscape watercolours come from direct observation of nature, much of his painting being done out of doors. Like Arthur Dove, his landscapes represent a break from the traditional American landscape. His Maine scenes refer to a silent, secluded part of the world, the small private islands off the coast. But location is the only thing in his landscape that is remote. His, is an emotional response to nature, as it was to the urban areas. His work becomes more and more suggestive. Clear vibrant skies, are pierced by moving forms and masses that could be mountains or skyscrapers, it doesn't matter, as long as they give the impression of life. Every mark is a conscious part of the overall, although often brushstrokes appear to be accidental in their casualness. Marin had total confidence in his senses and also in his own decisions. Every stroke is put down with absolute certainty, every mark is a necessary part of the overall image. As with Georgia O' Keeffe, we see in Marin's work the effectiveness of economy. With O' Keeffe, it was economizing on forms, using only the very basics and excluding all detail, whereas with Marin it is economy with his marks. The fewer marks the better, as long as the effect is right. His interest seems to be, in the relationship between land and sea, mountain and sky, and the dramatic effects created by the elements which affect this landscape. He would watch and experience and then paint. However, it is the experience of these scenes, the feelings evoked in him while watching

them, and not the actual physical scene that he paints.

Chapter 6

All three of these artists, used colour in a very personal way. A painting by O' Keeffe, watercolour by Marin, or a pastel by Dove would be instantly recognised as such, by the use of colour and the handling of the medium. Although we looked at some links between the three artists, in their subject matter and their beliefs, their approach to executing these beliefs and ideas are all very different. Their use of colour and the handling of their media is something which is an integral part of their work and one which I will look at in this chapter.

Dove's colour always remained less abstract than his forms. His palette at first, although not rigid like that of the Impressionists, did consist mainly of earthly, sombre colours, which related closely to the natural forms from which he abstracted his shapes. His colour provides the shape and contours which actually disclose the heart of nature. In his works pertaining to animals, for example Team of Horses, 1911, the colour of the creatures is accurately caught even though the forms are only vaguely recognizable. At first, Dove's palette consisted mainly of greys, greens, and browns, and this was only extended for particular works where colours were absolutely necessary to create a particular effect. In Chinese Music, we have an example of this. Here Dove introduces blues and creams into the painting which, along with the arched and spiked shapes, give a clear and strong feeling of the Far East. As well as the actual colours he used, Dove was also noted for the way in which he actually applied his pigment. Whether using pastel or oils Dove's medium was very heavy and dense. Like Georgia O' Keeffe every inch of the surface was thickly covered with layers of pigment. But unlike her smooth, even tonal gradation, Dove's colours were more abrupt and his tonal range was usually strongly contrasting. In some of his early all-over patterns this 'heavy' colour is very obvious and strong. He also often employs a method of radial gradation, where the brushstroke is very obvious and the tones can be seen to step into one another. In some cases, the pigment is so dense that it gives a texture to the shape, and in some pieces the pigment simulates such textures as cow-hide, tree bark or rusty metal. This whole area was later to be explored more fully when Dove experimented with collage. Here, he explored materials and found objects with which he created new, unusual images.

As time went on, Dove's palette was extended, and in fact it soon reached a higher key altogether, which attained the full colour range of the Synchronists. He also became involved with light-absorbent and light-reflective tones. Not only that, but he also used metallic paint at this stage. In the painting, Golden Storm, we have a composition of curves and meanders, depicting rolling waves covered by heavy, bursting clouds. However, through the break in the clouds, we see the sky gleaming brilliantly where Dove has used the dust of gold-leaf to achieve the effect of the sun. Other improvisations were also made in these works, where radiation and reflection was important. Dove often insisted on certain works being placed directly opposite a window so that it could be viewed in specific light conditions.

In contrast with this, the colours used by John Marin, like his

actual marks, were not contrived, but very immediate. His manner of painting draws on the spontaneous colour effects of the Fauves. His early work consisted mainly of watercolours, which were composed of large, soft shapes and blank surfaces which gave a strong feeling of space and airiness. While in Europe, his Austrian watercolours were largely limited to blueish tones and undetailed forms which referred back to Whistler's work. This was also evident in his etchings which had a remarkable feeling of space and lightness, even though most of them depicted large architectural monuments. His washes of colour onto white paper were intuitive, they suggested a mood, a feeling, and Marin knew exactly where to stop. He left these indefinite masses of colour as they were, leaving them open to the viewers own interpretation. His colour itself was dynamic and forceful, as seen in Sailboat in Harbour, 1923. Here the intensity of the blue is startling, even though it is watercolour. In fact, the transparency of the paint makes it appear luminous, and vital. The viewer can actually feel the open space of the harbour, and see reflections in the calm, blue waters as he looks at the painting. In this painting also, Marin introduces us to the device of a frame within a frame.

In later years, Marin drops this device as unnecessary. At this stage his medium has changed to oils. With these, he develops, as with watercolours, a very personal style of handling them. As ever, his oils were immediate and spontaneous. The physical action involved, was vigorous and gestural and this was evident in the paintings. In fact, in the waterscapes of the 1930's and 1940's, Marin's work can be likened to that of the Abstract Expressionists. Whereas, in watercolour Marin's works were sensuous and tactile, with subtle harmonies and clear washes, when using oils, his works became more alive and dynamic. In some of his oils, the pigment is so roughly handled, that it actually takes on a new dimension, where it is applied in relief. He took a preference to oils over watercolour in the late 1930's and the 1940's, and began to handle it with abandon. In some of his seascapes, such as Sea Piece, 1951, he allows the paint to drip onto the canvas and also introduces linear configurations to capture the rhythmic movement of the sea. These images are very close to the early sketches of Jackson Pollock. In fact, some of Dove's later works, especially Rhapsody in Blue, Part 1, 1927, are also likened to these pieces. Here Dove's brushstrokes are immediate and chopped, with discontinued lines criss-crossing in various directions, suggesting the shrill jazz of Gershwin. Although neither painter followed up this particular field or developed it any further, it was a definite area which they explored for a short time.

Georgia O' Keeffe, on the other hand, although she used various different sources, never really changed her technique. Although the colours of her palette changed from time to time, her handling of the media varied little. Her's was a very personal sense of colour, vivid and rich, and handled so sensuously that one could almost feel the fleshlike texture of the petals of her flowers. Her tone and colour sense, was based on the subtle contrasts and massing of tones that Dow had introduced her to in the 1910's. Whether washes of watercolour or layers of oils, her subtle tones and low contrasts recall the works of the Orient.

Her earliest works in watercolour, show the delicacy with which she handled her medium. Like John Marin, her marks often remind us of the delicate, spontaneous characters of the Far East. The sensitivity with which she handles watercolour, suggests the delicate stems of plants, even in some of her non-objective pieces, for example Blue Lines. In many of these early watercolours she handles the paint very broadly, applying it in washes of greys and greens, with hints of violet that diffuse and disperse into one another. These look forward to some of her colour stains of the 1960's. One of these watercolours Evening Star 5, 1917, was basically modulated planes of intense colour, red orange and yellow expanding to meet the deep blue of the sky. Here we have something fresh and new which compares to the American Colour-Abstractionists of the 1960's. However, O' Keeffe was not dedicated to non-objective colour for its own sake, she drew the inspiration for her coloured shapes and forms from nature. Her lush studies of flowers and plants began in the 1920's. At this stage her close-ups were so large that they became a world in themselves. Like Steichen's photographs they were startling, but unlike these photographs they oozed of personality. At first, the flowers were painted in the bright vivid colours which are always associated with Georgia O' Keeffe. These are not flat colours but very subtle tonal gradations which give her forms a soft roundness and a three dimensional appearance. It is by layering her paint that O' Keeffe achieves these subtle contrasts. In the mid twenties her palette changed to a strange mixture of greys and blacks with only subtle hints of green or mauve. This heightened the dreamlike quality of her work, and was probably influenced by her visits to New Mexico and Canada. A fairly typical piece from this era would be Dark Abstraction, 1924. This is a non-objective piece but with strong organic reference. It is like looking at a very dark landscape with a tiny margin of sky at the top. This small area is the only relief from the dark greyed palette, of this stage, it gives the appearance of being touched by some light source. The rest of the painting is a series of dark folds and contours where the colours are so dark that they are barely distinguishable. They appear to be from another world altogether, and there is a sense of remoteness here which is not noticed in the flower or non-objective paintings. Of course her Catholic background was often mentioned in association with some of her paintings, which seemed to have a reverence about them. The spirituality in her work, especially later on, did often affect her palette as in the Black Cross series.

In the 1940's she moved to New Mexico for good. This time it was the vast desert sands and bleached scenery that captured her imagination. Her palette moved towards sunny colours, but they were all modified to project the dryness of the desert. The main colours from this stage were whites, creams, blues and greys which reflected the starkness of the area and the bleached bones of skulls which she found in the desert and used as a source. Now and again she would introduce brilliant oranges and reds into a painting if inspired by a particularly striking sunset.

In the 1960's and 1970's she returned once again to her vibrant

palette of earlier years. Again her colours were joyous and bright. She expressed herself fully with brightly coloured decorative patterns which were very popular because she had managed to combine abstraction with attractive colouring and a polished, professional finish. These colour stains developed and as time went on she worked on an increasingly larger scale, doing some paintings from above the clouds out of an aeroplane window. We see, therefore, that although her actual palette changed colour down through her career, O' Keefe like John Marin, whether working in oil or watercolour always projected into her work an unmistakable quality which was her trademark. Her layering of colour tones and subtle harmonies were always evident, as was the polished, finished, flat surface of her painting, which was so important in creating the starkness and vastness which she wished to express.

Chapter 7:

The progression of these artists throughout their careers, and the influences that they incorporated in their work are varied. All three of them developed along lyrical, poetic lines in their work and all three of them also painted non-objective works during their careers. Although none of them changed drastically from their early work, different influences did emerge in their work, throughout the years.

While in France, John Marin's etchings were his main body of work, and when he changed his medium to watercolour, the architectural disciplines he applied to the etchings were still evident. After a visit to the Austrian Alps he produced work, which although well structured, was loose and free. In 1912 and 1913 he developed a watercolour technique which was apparent in most of his work from then on. This was a new, liberated technique, and gave the artist a freedom to work loosely and freely. He used broad, bold strokes of watercolour which gave the effect of large, undefined masses, as they broke into washes of pigment. However, some of these early works were severely criticized at the time. Cortissov said of Marin's work in 1913,

"His basic form, line, colour and even composition, have all been turned topsy-turvey."

At this stage Marin's compositional structure was very loose, probably because this was an experimental phase. He spent his time exploring and discovering the potential of his medium, and was later to use this in conjunction with the other elements of design. In fact, in 1914, in the painting Pine Tree we actually see where he has combined all of these disciplines together. Here, we see that although Marin's washes and marks are more controlled, he has still kept the spontaneity of his earlier works. His forms are now more definite, which is probably a result of his experimentation with oils. Another factor in these works, is the emergence of heavy, dark lines, which he uses, not only to define and outline his forms, but also as directional lines or valences. His architectural training in weights and balances is quite evident in these works pertaining to New York and its buildings. The frantic pace of his earlier work is calmed down and controlled in such a way that one can now actually follow his brush, and it leads the eye through the actual painting. Pine Tree is also an important work, in that, in it we see very strong Cubistic influences. At this stage, these influences are only secondary to the vivid patches of colour which refer back to the Fauves, because the dominant factor at this stage was the use of colour and the handling of the paint.

The following year, 1915, Stieglitz mounted an exhibition of drawings by Picasso and Braque at '291'. Marin, was of course among the many who viewed these drawings and paintings and this probably accounts for the influences in his work during that year. Once again, he became obsessed with the Cubistic style, with which he had experimented fleetingly in earlier years. In his painting Rocks and Sea, 1915, he imposes a strong linear framework, or grid over the natural forms of the coastline. The pictorial space is very much

controlled by this grid, and the actual subject of the painting, the seascape, does not seem important. At this stage also, Marin reduces his colour range and uses a dryer brush for his paintings. These works are more controlled and rigidly structured than his earlier works or in fact, his later works. His paintings are, in a linear mode rather than the massing of indefinite shapes and forms. The straight lines and sharp angles lead to repetitive geometric patterns. The break with this came in 1917, when, like Arthur Dove and Georgia O' Keeffe, he introduced pronounced curved forms and rhythmic swirls into his work. At this stage, his subject matter had turned to nature, and most of his time was spent at the Maine coast. The seascapes and waterscapes of this period probably influenced his break with geometric and sharp angular shapes. By 1919, in such works as Tree and Sea, he had almost deserted natural forms for pure emotional expression, which was nearly abstract. The Fauve tendency was again noted in the passionately executed strokes and blots, which, as they grew purer, were to be the signature marks of his mature style.

During the 1920's his Expressionistic style was once again tampered with by the influence of Cubism. He returned to the city and it became an integral ingredient of his paintings. He now replaced the free and relaxed strokes with a carefully structured interlocking of planes. One aspect which did not change was the movement and unsteadiness of the buildings in his paintings. This idea of movement was also to carry over into his land and seascapes. His renewed contact with nature, once again pushed aside his Cubistic tendencies, and again the real Marin surfaced, an expressionist with a colour sense of the Fauves. Essentially a lyrical colourist, with a feel for mood and atmosphere, Marin was soon to leave behind him the experimentation with these European techniques. Marin contrived a relationship of forms whose spatial scheme was not necessarily dependent on reality and in so doing made the frame and the flat surface a fundamental part of his composition. Always in search of new channels of expression Marin's work was ever creative and never remained stagnant.

Arthur Dove, on the other hand, has often been criticised, for never having changed much in his work. This was not a weakness. In his early career, he struggled to create an art that was as experimental and searching as the innovative efforts of the European Avant - Garde. Up until 1913, Matisse's work had a dominant influence on him, and from then until 1917 Kandinsky's work impressed him. Dove's own work always wavered between pure abstraction and images with references to reality, and because of this his work can be divided into two channels. The first of these was a lyrical, organic style and the other, a more mechanical, geometric idiom. His palette changed through his early career from low key greys, browns and greens, to the high key colours of the Synchronists. His use of a radial gradation of colour, which is clearly seen in Reaching Waves, was also a Synchronist legacy. His experiments with collage in the 1920's were also a natural progression or development in his work, but collage was something which he used, only when it was necessary for a particular effect. He sustained his efforts towards a pictorial abstraction throughout the next decade and up until his death in 1946.

One of his greatest admirers was Georgia O' Keeffe, who had followed his work from the early 1910's. She herself had begun to paint in earnest in 1914. At this stage, she was determined to rid herself of the influences of her teachers, and she began to paint ideas and experiences from her head. These had no reference to external objects, although some of them did allude to nature. These charcoal drawings were mainly stylized, simplified shapes, which did in fact imply her knowledge of Cubism and the European abstractionists. Her early series of blue watercolours explored the contrasts and harmonies of shape. These were non-objective paintings with a sensuous and sensitive use of paint and colour. Her main achievement was one of restraint, her simple images are pure and uncluttered, and it is because of this that they are so emotive. In 1916 and 1917 her work became more representational. The strength of their visual impact was enormous. These simple yet sophisticated images captured exactly her feelings. Even though they were representational, they did not visualize the scenes or places that she visited, but the moods of these places and her responses to them. Her work, until the 1920's was lyrical and sensitive, and, even more importantly, it was experimental. Then, in 1924, she began her flower paintings. These were microscopic looks at plants, where the flower heads were expanded until they filled the canvas. She brought a complete new experience to visual perception. At the same time, she manages to heighten reality, in enlarging details of common objects and also presenting the viewer with formal relationships, which have all the characteristics of abstraction.

In the 1940's, her work became more spiritual, while she painted in New Mexico. Here, her inspiration, was fired by the austere desert which brought to the fore, the pure, stark qualities in her painting. As time went on, her painting became increasingly monumental and majestic. A single object, a flower, or a bleached skull made up the whole image. The entire canvas was consumed by it, and the actual picture became more and more abstract, without compromising it's links with nature. Because, to O' Keeffe, this was the most important aspect of her work.

We have seen in this chapter, how each of these artists, changed and developed throughout their careers. In the cases of Georgia O' Keeffe and John Marin we see definite influences emerging in their work at different stages. None of these influences, took over from the artists own style as they all remained faithful to their own personal ideas and expressions. Being true to themselves, was the most important factor in their work throughout their lives. However, this did not make their work stagnant as all three constantly explored new areas, whether it be their ideas or techniques.

Conclusion:

In the beginning of this thesis, I looked at the state of art in early twentieth century America. There were many factors which contributed to the emergence of abstract art at the time, one of them being the tremendous building boom. However, this move, which coincided with the one in Europe, can mainly be credited to a small group of artists associated with the photographer Alfred Stieglitz. I feel that there are three people in particular, who can be looked at, in reference to this, Arthur Dove, John Marin and Georgia O'Keeffe. Even though all three of these worked in a very personal way, they can be classed together, in that they each believed that the source of art and expression, was to be found in the artists construction of the forms and processes of nature. They also fought together, for freedom for the artist to be able to draw shapes and forms from his surroundings and ideas, and to be able to organize these in any way he wanted, to create the desired effect. However, none of these artists painted non-objective works for their own sake, but when they were necessary to express the artists ideas or reactions.

The use of colour and the media, was also a very personal thing to each of these artists - it was an integral part of their work. In the case of Arthur Dove, his colour always remained less abstract than his forms. Often the shape or form gave no indication as to what the source was, but the colour was more representational. John Marin, on the other hand, used colour in a very immediate way. His spontaneous colour effects were akin to those of the Fauves. His soft masses of colour, and large blank spaces, all contributed to his very distinctive watercolour style. O'Keeffe's colour also was rich and vivid. Her tonal sense was based on subtle contrasts and the masking of tones which recalled the Orient. With her too, no matter what her media, her use of colour was always very distinctive.

Throughout their careers, each of these artists, showed different influences in their work. However, all three of them, developed along lyrical, poetic lines, and their work did not change drastically at any point. Marin's work often revealed Cubistic or Fauvist tendencies, but even with this, they were still obviously his work. He explored many areas, but only took from these, specific things which related to his work, never tying it down to any particular category. Arthur Dove, on the other hand, discovered early in his career, an art that was both experimental and creative. He strove throughout his life to develop this, with the result that he is often considered, not to have been experimental enough. With Georgia O'Keeffe, her early work mostly showed, either the influence of her teachers, or the Cubists and European abstractionists. She did, however, eventually develop a way of painting which was entirely her own. Her work, although it went through many different phases, was always pure and restrained, with enormous visual impact.

We have seen, therefore, how these three artists varied personal expressions, remained constant throughout their lives. Although their work was very personal and individualistic, they did fall within a broadly definable category. To each of them, pictorial abstraction was ever important, but the feelings and emotions which they expressed was the ultimate.

FOOTNOTES

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| 1. | Page 49 | <u>MODERN AMERICAN PAINTING AND SCULPTURE</u> | Hunter, Sam |
| 2. | Page 15 | <u>PERCEPTIONS OF THE SPIRIT</u> | Dillenberger, Jane
Dillenberger, John |
| 3. | Page 54 | <u>EARLY AMERICAN MODERNIST PAINTING</u> | Davidson, Abraham |
| 4. | Page | <u>EARLY AMERICAN MODERNIST PAINTING</u> | Davidson, Abraham |
| 5. | Page 65 | <u>EARLY AMERICAN MODERNIST PAINTING</u> | Davidson, Abraham |
| 6. | Page 53 | <u>MODERN AMERICAN PAINTING AND SCULPTURE</u> | Hunter, Sam |
| 7. | Page 60 | <u>MODERN AMERICAN PAINTING AND SCULPTURE</u> | Hunter, Sam |
| 8. | Page 33 | <u>ART CRITICS AND THE AVANT - GARDE</u> | Olson, Arlene |

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