

Vitality in American Still-Life: The Flowers of Martin Johnson Heade and Georgia O'Keeffe

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Long disdained as intellectually barren and technically elementary, still-life painting has only relatively recently begun to claim the serious attention of connoisseurs and critics. The subjects' frequently mundane character, their fundamental isolation from the human realm and consequent emotional neutrality make the genre an excellent format for both the artists' formal investigations and development of intellectual themes. Thus, the inherent simplicity of still-life allows it to serve simultaneously as a mirror of social and intellectual history and to manifest, as Wolfgang Iser has pointed out, "the intrinsic values of art, very little diluted by incidental elements."¹ The still-life painting can, and does, serve as a vehicle for a variety of interests and issues—both scientific and aesthetic, personal and popular.

The artists who are the focus of this study, Martin Johnson Heade (1819–1904) and Georgia O'Keeffe (b. 1887), are not infrequently mentioned in recent literature in relation to each other due to their flowers' basic characteristics (Figures 1 and 2). Both artists' work consistently exudes an atmosphere of organic vitality by means of magnification, vibrant color and sinuous forms. William H. Gerdts in particular has noted this relationship, writing that Heade's flowers "seem to breathe and pulsate as though they were the ancestors of Georgia O'Keeffe's."² The comparison is not valid in formal terms alone, for both painters also felt deeply about their subjects and derived a significant degree of intellectual and emotional satisfaction from them. Heade's and O'Keeffe's flowers also clearly echo various contemporary artistic, social and intellectual currents and illustrate specific phases of their personal and professional lives. The specific works examined in the course of the following discussion will be Heade's orchids and the flowers produced by O'Keeffe in the 1920s.

It will be noted that, despite initially different appearances, Heade's and O'Keeffe's flowers demonstrate a similar perception. In both the artists' paintings the flowers appear as if held up for our inspection. Indeed, they seem forced upon us. The orchids, while clearly associated with banks of foliage, separate themselves and hover above the jungle growth. This separation is accompanied in both cases by an enlargement of the flower through close proximity to the picture plane. O'Keeffe's flowers are isolated to a greater extent due to a complete disassociation from any environmental setting created by extreme distortion of scale. Her flowers completely fill the picture space and push against the picture plane.

This monumentalization results in an exclusion of reference to human existence. Indeed, humanity is not absent so much as it is aggressively ignored. The orchids and their native jungle are obviously wild. The sheer size of O'Keeffe's various blooms reduces the human viewer to the status of an insect. Nature is perceived by both artists as

requiring neither human attention nor aid to flourish, to manifest its beauty and strength.

Both artists' flowers convey a remarkable sense of organic vitality. Heade's close observation of the orchids' structure, their curving stems and movement through the air suggests a living presence akin to the amorphous liveliness of O'Keeffe's examples.

Heade reached artistic maturity in the 1850s as a landscapist. He began painting still-lives in the 1860s; after 1870 they formed the bulk of his production. Besides orchids, he painted bouquets or single flowers in vases and single flowers reclining on cloth. Heade began painting orchids in 1870 after three trips during the preceding decade to South and Central America. The purpose of his initial trip in 1863–1864 had been to prepare illustrations for a book about Brazilian hummingbirds, creatures about which he was a self-described "monomaniac."³ The book was never published, but illustrations which Heade had intended for it do exist. They are quite close in general composition to the orchid paintings. Heade continued to paint orchids regularly until 1901, three years before his death.

Certain aspects of the orchid paintings suggest affinities with the American Transcendentalist philosophy which had been formulated earlier in the century but which was still viable. Its adherents postulated that wisdom and spiritual understanding were accessible through careful study and contemplation of the natural world, the mirror of God's plan. Ralph Waldo Emerson explained:

Standing on the bare ground,—my head bathed in the blithe air and uplifted into infinite space,—all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all, the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God.⁴

A corollary of this basic concept was that the microcosm reflects and illuminates the macrocosm. Heade's paintings present us with beautiful flowers, a dramatic panorama of lush forest. If they do not inspire spiritual exploration, they at least evoke a significant degree of respect for nature. The orchids loom quite large within the picture space, yet we know that they are, in actuality, relatively small plants. Though they are intellectually recognizable as the microcosm, the flowers display themselves as the macrocosm.

Another aspect of the Transcendentalists' affectionate study of nature was the identification of a psychic unity between mankind and the natural world. Emerson expressed this succinctly:

The greatest delight which the fields and woods minister is the suggestion of an occult relation

between man and the vegetable. I am not alone and unacknowledged. They nod to me, and I to them.⁵

Heade's orchids seem to push forcefully towards us and to engage in some sort of communication via waving stems and bobbing buds. Finally, the Transcendentalists perceived beauty in terms of dynamic, purposeful, normal activity.⁶ Heade's orchid is a living organism in its proper wild environment.

Heade's orchid also suggests some degree of influence from the theories of John Ruskin, the English critic whose book *Modern Painters* made him quite popular in America in the late 1850s and 1860s. Ruskin asserted that truth was the foundation of all good, worthwhile art. For example, he instructed that a flower should be depicted in its normal, wild habitat. He further explained that the most valuable truths are those:

which are most historical, that is, which tell us most about the past and future states of the object to which they belong. . . . [In a tree, for example] we should feel that the uppermost sprays are creeping higher and higher into the sky, and be impressed with the current of life and motion which is animating every fibre.⁷

Although the orchid does not offer the sentimental, moral instruction sought by Ruskin and his followers, its grand setting and obvious strength can suggest meditations of a cosmic scope.

Heade was an avid amateur naturalist and during his lifetime Americans were entranced by science and by its application in exotic, unexplored regions. Charles Darwin's revolutionary concept of nature as a dynamic system based upon struggle, competition and adaptation appears to have had a significant effect on Heade's presentation of the orchid. In particular, his emphasis of plant physiology and interaction between plant and environment are echoed in the orchid's apparent strength, energetic movement through space and integration with the jungle.⁸ His choice of the orchid as a subject may also have been prompted by Darwin's interest in and study of this particular plant, but tropical vegetation had also been enthusiastically described in the earlier popular writings of Alexander von Humboldt and Louis Agassiz. Orchids were very popular hothouse specimens with American and British horticulturists in the mid-nineteenth century.

Heade's orchids bear a resemblance to several contemporary artistic currents. The Luminist style, in which he had painted his finest landscapes (Figure 3), is apparent in the orchid paintings' glowing skies, opalescent mists, smooth finish and extreme clarity of color.⁹ Heade's orchids also bear a striking resemblance to segments of the epic landscapes of his friend Frederic E. Church (Figure 4) who had offered encouragement and advice to Heade concerning his tropical voyages. Thomas Cole's much earlier interest in the dramatic possibilities of blasted trees and tangled foliage (Figure 5) found an echo in Heade's similar preoccupation with the Romantic detail. Heade also adapted the illustration techniques of earlier botanical artists in presenting the subject close-up and frontal and John James Audubon's practice of representing the subject in the midst of authentic existence.¹⁰

O'Keeffe has not pursued the flower still-life as consistently as did Heade, but she is nevertheless famous for her representations. She initiated her magnified flower and leaf series in the early 1920s, and they were first exhibited by Alfred Stieglitz in about 1925.¹¹ The flower paintings appeared regularly in her annual exhibitions for several years and were gradually integrated into subsequent series.

From the first, O'Keeffe's work has incorporated the intense interest in natural forms and nature which infuses her flowers with a remarkable vitality and vibrancy. Precedent for the flowers is easily discerned in early landscapes and abstractions. Suns, stars, hills and color areas disengage themselves from an environmental context to become at least organic if not wholly vegetable-like in character (Figure 6). Purely abstract paintings bear the shadow of some organic sense and even her architecture retains a significant degree of this biomorphic sensibility (Figure 7).

There are not direct influences so much as parallels to be identified in O'Keeffe's flowers. As O'Keeffe has put it, "What happens is that you pick up ideas here and there."¹²

Arthur Wesley Dow, with whom O'Keeffe studied at the Teachers' College of Columbia University from 1914-1916, introduced her to the principles of abstract design—which he considered the basis of art. Dow emphasized the expression of emotion rather than representation as the artist's purpose and instructed his students in the effective composition of line, shape, space and color to that end. He provided O'Keeffe with a firm structure for her flowers.

Arthur G. Dove had produced several series of abstract paintings based on natural forms as early as 1910-1911 (Figure 8). O'Keeffe first encountered them while she was a student of Dow. She was, and has continued to be, quite impressed. Dove's appeal was probably based upon the reinforcement he offered O'Keeffe's own tendencies, love of nature expressed in simplified form. His method also allowed attention to be focused on emotional response to the subject.

This emotional dimension was fostered by Alfred Stieglitz, mentor of both Dove and O'Keeffe, who dedicated himself to restoring the primacy of sensation and emotion in art. His photographs of clouds, which he explained as "'equivalents' of my most profound life experience, my basic philosophy of life,"¹³ cannot be considered a true source of O'Keeffe's flowers for they were conceived at just about the same time and in her company, but they demonstrate a common ethos in the isolation of an aspect of nature and its intimate examination for emotional import.

It seems more probable that the photographs of Paul Strand, another member of Stieglitz' inner circle, reinforced O'Keeffe's awareness of the aesthetic and intellectual effectiveness of abstract pattern and sharp lines. The closeup Cubist-Realist photographs he took of machines and other inorganic objects (1913-19) are distinctly recalled by the clear patterns, sharp edges and extremely close viewpoint of O'Keeffe's flower paintings. As do the objects in Strand's work, O'Keeffe's blooms lose their identity in the distortion of scale.

The curious sterility of O'Keeffe's flowers and her return with them to a representational mode place her in the company of the Precisionists. Her work shares with that of Charles Demuth and Charles Sheeler precise edges, smooth

gradations of light and shade and a tendency towards the assertion of flat pattern over multi-dimensional form.

The obvious subjectivity and sensuous intensity of the flowers of both Heade and O'Keeffe have been regularly interpreted as sexually symbolic. This is largely unreasonable or, rather, too particular and narrow in scope, in terms of their sources and statements.

The following information has been offered for such an interpretation of Heade's orchids: orchids are an ancient aphrodisiac, the Greek word "orchis" meaning testicle; the hummingbirds which are generally present are either a mated pair or fighting males; attention is drawn to the reproductive organs of the plant; contemporary critics and historians do not mention the orchid paintings at all; the delicate Victorian era used flowers as symbols of the female and of passion.¹⁴ The orchid's meaning, however, becomes less specifically suggestive when the following points are considered: orchids are also an ancient fertility drug;¹⁵ hummingbirds do not flock, therefore if two are required they should be engaged in these activities to maintain a sense of realism and Heade was an expert on the birds; earlier botanical examples drawn upon by Heade would also have had this instructive pose, since the flower is the subject; contemporary mention of Heade in the press or artistic literature did not demonstrate any squeamishness about his tropical vegetation—they did not mention the orchids because still-life was not considered a subject worthy of attention;¹⁶ popular flower dictionaries of the mid to late nineteenth century mentioned a genus of orchid other than Heade's *Cattleya* frequently, and marvel at its peculiar shapes while popular manuals on orchid cultivation praise the flowers' beauty and unique appearance;¹⁷ Heade was interested in natural science and the tropics and these paintings were a normal response to that.¹⁸

O'Keeffe's work was associated by critics with passionate femininity from her large 1917 exhibition onwards through the flowers in the 1920s. The following factors undoubtedly prompted their interpretation: the growing independence and visibility of women in the early twentieth century; a scarcity of great women artists—O'Keeffe was a sensation; the special forcefulness and innovation demonstrated by her art; the recent great popularity of Sigmund Freud's theories in which he postulated sex as a principal factor in the creation and appreciation of art, and his premise that the artist has unusually strong instinctual demands which must be expressed via his or her art.¹⁹ The following description of her work was quite typical:

The pure, now flaming, now icy colours of this painter, reveal the woman polarizing herself, . . . spiritualizing her sex. Her art is gloriously female . . . here, . . . is registered the manner of perception anchored in the constitution of the woman. The organs that differentiate the sex speak. Women, one would judge, always feel, when they feel strongly, through the womb.²⁰

When the flower paintings appeared the interpretations became even more specific. For example, this description offered by Lewis Mumford:

Miss O'Keeffe's world. . . touches primarily on the experiences of love and passion. . . . She has beautified the sense of what it is to be a woman;

she has revealed the intimacies of love's juncture with the purity and absence of shame that lovers feel in their meeting; she has brought what was inarticulate and troubled and confused into the realm of conscious beauty.²¹

O'Keeffe herself was very upset and embarrassed by these comments and has repeatedly professed confusion about these sorts of interpretations.²² She wrote in a 1939 exhibition catalogue, in an effort to clarify her work, that:

A flower is relatively small. Everyone has many associations with a flower—the idea of flowers. You put out your hand to touch the flower—lean forward to smell it—maybe touch it with your lips almost without thinking—or give it to someone to please them. Still—in a way—nobody sees a flower—really—it is so small—we haven't time—and to see takes time like to have a friend takes time. If I could paint the flower exactly as I see it no one would see what I see because I would paint it small like the flower is small.

So I said to myself—I'll paint what I see—what the flower is to me but I'll paint it big and they will be surprised into taking time to look at it—I will make even busy New Yorkers take time to see what I see of flowers.

Well—I made you take time to look at what I saw and when you took time to really notice my flower you hung all your own associations with flowers on my flower and you write about my flower as if I think and see what you think and see of the flower—and I don't.²³

The term "still-life" is not a particularly appropriate label for the flowers of either Heade or O'Keeffe, for both produced images of organisms seemingly actively engaged in the business of life. Our perception of the flowers as non-human objects, still or otherwise, allows a productive examination of (as Born has noted) the painter's art.

Composition is especially apparent and important in these artists' works; it is their paintings' most significant formal element. The flowers of either Heade or O'Keeffe would not possess the provocative intellectual and emotional force which they obviously do were it not for the special mode of presentation utilized. These paintings offer a fine example of the manipulation of composition for purposes other than narrative clarity or visual coherence. As do most still-life paintings, Heade's and O'Keeffe's flowers not only demonstrate an interest in the object as an entity, but offer an equal appreciation of its various textures and structure. Just as an artist can become entranced by the simple beauties of his medium's physical properties, the viewer is invited by Heade and O'Keeffe to investigate the physical reality of these flowers on a purely sensual level; to react without thought to their colors and shapes.

Liveliness of form and subject has always seemed to American art critics an appropriate symbol of the nation's youth and innocence. Although James Jackson Jarves heartily deplored the lack of intellectual content or subtlety in American landscape painting, he did note its vigor and freshness, writing, "it pauses at no difficulties, distance,

expense, or hardship in its search for the new and striking. The speculating blood [of America] infuses itself into art."²⁴ The quasi-landscape orchid paintings surely reflect that optimism. O'Keeffe has been described, along with John Marin and Dove, as being "truly one with the romantic ebb and flow of American energies," possessed of boundless confidence, exuberant zest for beauty and freedom of expression.²⁵ Her flowers are clear examples of that emotional vitality.

Heade's and O'Keeffe's independent, strong flowers also reflect a certain spiritual respect for nature which can be related to the nation's long awareness of and moral interest in America as a wild land. Stebbins has associated Heade's orchids with a pervasive motif in nineteenth-century literature, that of the American Adam finding himself in the garden.²⁶ Aside from the Edenic locale utilized, however, the paintings seem to have less to do with the concept of an innocent land offering heretofore unimagined opportunities than they do with the self-sufficiency of that paradise before and despite the advent of man. Jarves commented upon American landscape painting in terms which, again, are appropriate to an examination of Heade's orchids: "To such an extent is literalness carried, that the majority of works

are quite divested of human association. 'No admittance' for the spirit of man is written all over them . . . they both pall and appall the senses."²⁷ Although the images presented by Heade rather disturbingly ignore human existence, they evoke a certain amount of admiration for that independence.

Nature has remained a metaphor of human endeavor in the twentieth century but no longer provides companionship or promise as unequivocally as it once did. However, O'Keeffe seems to have maintained a sense of the spiritual importance of nature, as her genuine interest in the delicate life of a flower suggests. Her powerful flowers threaten to overwhelm the viewer in a manner analogous to but surpassing Heade's. Nature has become not simply self-sufficient, but positively aggressive.

It is clear that the painted flowers of Heade and O'Keeffe offer much more than simple transcriptions of details extracted from the natural world. Intimately related to the artists' techniques and formal interests, they serve simultaneously as vehicles for the expression of intellectual and emotional concerns about organic life. The flowers seem more than capable of that task.

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- 1 W. Born, *Still-Life Painting in America*, New York, 1947, 3.
- 2 W. H. Gerdts and R. Burke, *American Still-Life Painting*, New York, 1971, 96. Also see Gerdts' discussion in *Painters of the Humble Truth*, 130 and 296.
- 3 Stebbins, *Heade*, 129.
- 4 R. W. Emerson, *Emerson's Essays and Poems*, ed. A. H. Quinn, New York, 1920, 4.
- 5 Emerson, *Essays and Poems*, 4.
- 6 C. R. Metzger, "Emerson's Religious Conception of Beauty," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, XI, September 1952, 68.
- 7 J. Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, New York, 1873, I, 136-7.
- 8 Foshay, "Darwin and American Flower Imagery," 309-14.
- 9 Not incidentally, the Luminist style has been associated with American Transcendentalist thought. See J. I. H. Baur, "American Luminism," *Perspectives U.S.A.*, IX, Autumn 1954, 90-8; B. Novak, *Nature and Culture, American Landscape and Painting, 1825-1875*, New York, 1980, 28-9; E. A. Powell, "Luminism and the American Sublime," in *American Light: The Luminist Movement, 1850-1875*, ed. J. Wilmerding, Washington, 1980, 69-94.
- 10 J. T. Soby and D. C. Miller, *Romantic Painting in America*, New York, 1943, 21-2.
- 11 It is difficult to pinpoint exactly when the flower paintings were begun or when they were first exhibited publicly. See the chronology and exhibition list provided in Goodrich and Bry, *O'Keeffe*, 185-190.
- 12 C. Tomkins, "Profiles: The Rose in the Eye Looked Pretty Fine," *The New Yorker*, 4 March 1974, 50.
- 13 D. Norman, *Alfred Stieglitz, An American Seer*, New York, 1960, 144.
- 14 Stebbins, *Heade*, 137 ff.
- 15 O. Ames, *Orchids in Retrospect, A Collection of Essays on the Orchidaceae*, Cambridge, 1948, 2-5.
- 16 H. T. Tuckerman, *Book of the Artists, American Artist Life*, New York, 1867, 542-3; S. G. W. Benjamin, *Art in America, A Critical and Historical Sketch*, New York, 1880, 133; S. Hartmann, *A History of American Art*, Boston, 1902, I, 248-9.
- 17 E. S. Rand, *Orchids*, New York, 1876, xiv.
- 18 Heade was a regular contributor to the magazine *Field and Stream*. For a list of his articles, see Stebbins, *Heade*, 202-4.
- 19 J. J. Spector, *The Aesthetics of Freud, A Study in Psychoanalysis and Art*, New York, 1972, 100-1.
- 20 P. Rosenfeld, "American Paintings," *The Dial*, LXXI, December 1921, 666. Also see M. Hartley, *Adventures in the Arts*, New York, 1921, 116.
- 21 L. Mumford, "O'Keeffe and Matisse," *The New Republic*, L, 2 March 1927, 42. Also see *The New York Times*, 16 January 1927, Sect. 7, 10; *The New York Times*, 12 June 1927, Sect. 7, 10.
- 22 For example, see G. Glueck, "Art Notes—'It's Just What's In My Head . . .'" *The New York Times*, 18 October 1970, Sect. 2, 24; Eldredge, "Georgia O'Keeffe," 53.
- 23 Goodrich and Bry, *O'Keeffe*, 17-18, 19.
- 24 J. J. Jarves, *The Art-Idea, Part Second of Confessions of an Inquirer*, New York, 1864, 238.
- 25 E. McCausland, "Stieglitz and the American Tradition," in *America and Alfred Stieglitz, A Collective Portrait*, New York, 1934, 229. B. Novak has written that the flowers of Heade and O'Keeffe, among others, "append a small footnote of vitalism to an American tradition that was predominantly mathematical," in *American Painting of the Nineteenth Century: Realism, Idealism and the American Experience*, New York, 1969, 270.
- 26 Stebbins, *Heade*, 143.
- 27 Jarves, *The Art-Idea*, 231.

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Goodrich, Lloyd and Doris Bry, *Georgia O'Keeffe*, New York, 1970.

Stebbins, Theodore E., *The Life and Works of Martin Johnson Heade*, New Haven, 1975.



Fig. 1. Martin Johnson Heade, *Orchids and Hummingbird*, ca. 1875-85, oil on canvas, 14½ x 22¼ inches (Courtesy Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; M. and M. Karolik Collection).



Fig. 2, Georgia O'Keeffe, *Yellow Cactus Flowers*, 1929, oil on canvas, 30 3/16 x 42 inches (Courtesy of permanent collection, the Fort Worth Art Museum, Fort Worth).



Fig. 3, Martin Johnson Heade, *Salt Marshes, Newport, Rhode Island*, ca. 1865–70, oil on canvas, 15½ x 30¼ inches (Courtesy Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; M. and M. Karolik Collection).



Fig. 4, Frederic E. Church, *The Heart of the Andes*, 1859, oil on canvas, 66⅞ x 119¼ inches (Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Bequest of Mrs. David Dows, 1909).



Fig. 5, Thomas Cole, *Landscape*, 1825, oil on canvas, dimensions unavailable (Courtesy of Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design, Providence; Walter H. Kimball Fund).



Fig. 6, Georgia O'Keeffe, *Light Coming on the Plains II*, 1917, watercolor on paper, 11 $\frac{7}{8}$ x 8 $\frac{3}{8}$ inches (Courtesy Amon Carter Museum, Fort Worth).

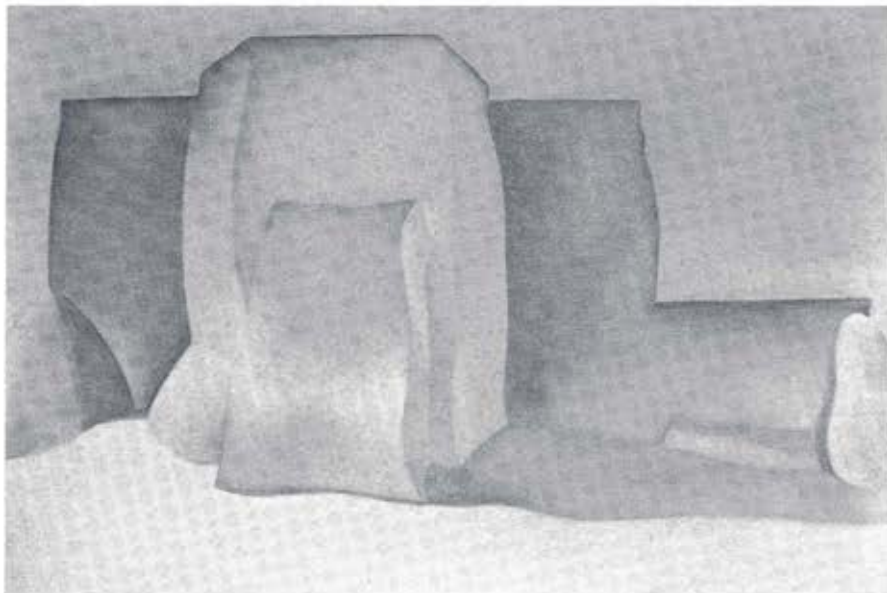


Fig. 7, Georgia O'Keeffe, *Ranchos Church*, ca. 1930, oil on canvas, 24 x 36 inches (Courtesy of the Phillips Collection, Washington).

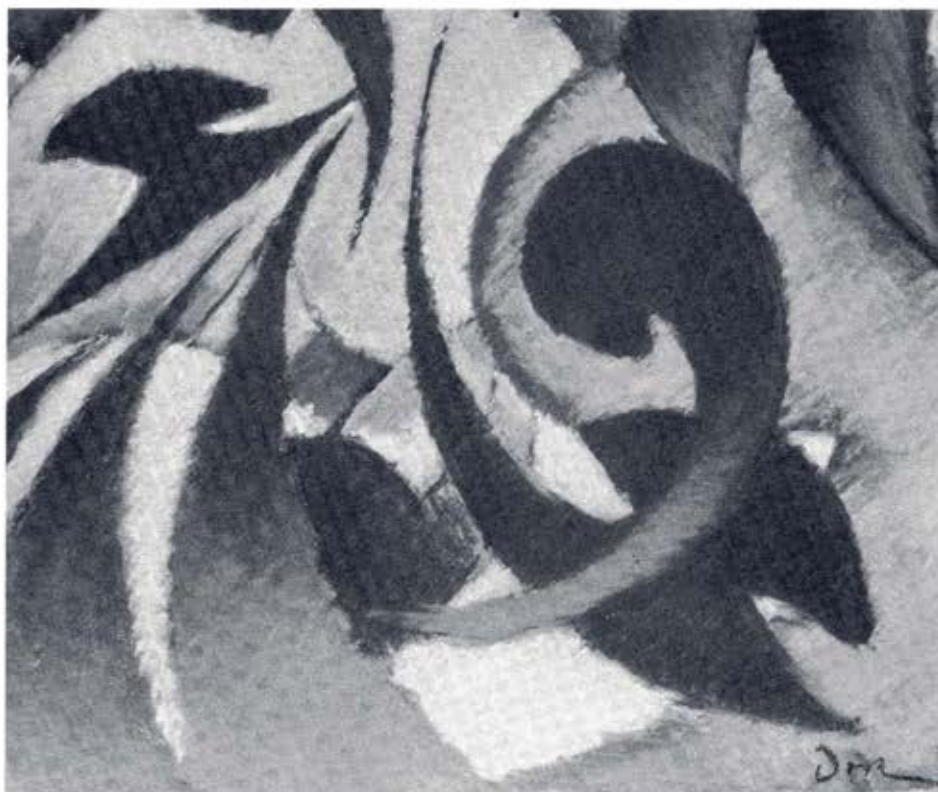


Fig. 8, Arthur Dove, *Nature Symbolized No. 2*, 1911, pastel, 17 $\frac{7}{8}$ x 22 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches (Courtesy of the Art Institute of Chicago; Alfred Stieglitz Collection).