JOHN GRAHAM AND THE QUEST FOR AN AMERICAN ART IN THE 1920s and 1930s

by

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A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Art History in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

2007

UMI Number: 3288949

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Graduate Faculty in Art History in satisfaction of the
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Abstract

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Few accounts of twentieth-century art omit mention of the name John D. Graham (born Ivan Gratianovitch Dombrowski in Kiev, 1886; died in London, 1961), yet he remains an enigmatic figure. This dissertation examines for the first time his role in American Art the 1920s and 1930s, as both artist and theoretician, played out against the backdrop of European modernism.

Graham was emblematic of the artists, many of them recent immigrants to the United States, who countered the inward-looking trend of Regionalism in the 1920s and 1930s and strove to create an American art untethered to the past. **Chapter One** examines his early years in Russia and his exposure to European modernism as it was received there in the years preceding World War I. **Chapter Two** looks at his life in New York and in Paris in the 1920s and what strategies he used during this decade to transform himself into a thoroughly American artist. **Chapter Three** considers the creative intersection of Graham and fellow artists Stuart Davis and Arshile Gorky in the late 1920s and the 1930s, as well as Graham's fluid interchange with leading collectors and patrons, including Duncan Phillips, Frank Crowninshield, and Katherine Dreier. His involvement with African Art, both as connoisseur and dealer, will also be examined. **Chapter Four** provides an analysis of Graham's influential text *System and Dialectics of*

Art (1937), its critical reception, and its influence on other artists. A **Coda** offers an assessment of Graham's contribution to American art and his role as catalyst in the 1920s and 1930s and as artistic progenitor for a generation of younger artists—all examined through the lens of the exhibition he organized for McMillen, Inc., in 1942. Hanging the work of young American artists, unknown until he discovered them, alongside titans of the international art world ultimately said more about Graham's fervor, vigor and resolve than all the words he had written.

Acknowledgments

Writing this dissertation has been a tremendous journey and so many have helped me along the way. My first debt of gratitude is to the faculty at the Graduate Center, most especially my advisor, Katherine Manthorne. Her perceptive criticism and infinite patience has been of enormous support at every step. It was in a seminar which she gave that I first began to take note of the artist John Graham, who kept popping up, Zelig-like, in every circle of exchange in American Art in the 1920s and 1930s. I am grateful as well to my dissertation defense committee: Prof. Diane Kelder, Prof. Rose-Carol Washton Long, and Dr. Bruce Weber. It was Prof. Long's encouragement in a dissertation workshop that first gave me the temerity to start to believe that I might complete this journey some day. I am also immensely grateful to Bruce Weber, whose generosity and collegial support is a model for scholars in the field of American Art. I thank him especially for providing access to key documents that brought John Graham into sharper focus.

There were many people whose help was indispensable: the staff of Long Island University's Southampton Campus made my life so much easier by bringing books and microfilm to the campus library; Joseph Holbach, Chief Registrar at The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C., provided me full access to the collection and its archives on numerous occasions; Natalie Edgar Pavia shared materials that were given by Graham to her late husband, the sculptor Philip Pavia; and colleagues and friends Prof. William C. Agee and Dr. Annette Blaugrund wrote my recommendations for graduate school and have been supportive ever since.

I am deeply grateful to Trudy C. Kramer, the director of The Parrish Art Museum. Trudy was the first person I told about my desire to attend graduate school some ten years ago and she immediately supported those aspirations as well as my own curatorial efforts, first as curator of art and now as the Lewis B. and Dorothy Cullman Chief Curator, Art and Education, at the Parrish. My colleagues there have been steadfast and caring, especially my friends Nina Madison and Anke Jackson. My wonderful co-workers in the curatorial department, Christine McNamara and Jacqueline Pizza, make all that we do a daily joy and their support has been unfailing; I owe a special thanks to Jackie for demystifying all IT issues. Anna Jardine brought her consummate skills to the reading of this dissertation. To my adored children, Julia and Oliver, this journey was in so many ways for them—as a life-lesson that nothing is unattainable if you are willing to work hard and persevere. This dissertation is dedicated to them and to my dear, dear husband, Dennis, whose love, passion for art, and infinite patience (not to mention the exquisitely prepared meals, cheerfully undertaken Xeroxing, and swift courier rounds) have made it all possible.

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Introduction

Dinners, soirées, poets, erratic millionaires, painters, translations, lobsters, absinthe, music, promenades, oysters, sherry, aspirin, pictures, Sapphic heiresses, editors, books, sailors. AND HOW!

—Hart Crane, postcard from Paris to fellow poet Samuel Loveman, 1929[1]

Hart Crane's breathless message might easily have been written by the painter John Graham, so pitch-perfectly does it convey the dizzying whirl that American poets, painters, and writers encountered in the French capital in the 1920s. Crane was a thirty-year-old poet visiting Europe for the first time; Graham a considerably older (forty-two), recently minted American[2] who by the end of the 1920s had established a pattern of annual visits to France.

Indeed, Graham's communiqués from the front would have been even more breathless, for he was a man who had considerable lost time to make up for. He was born in the Ukraine in 1886,[3] and his first careers were in the law and the military. Only after

[1] As quoted in Adam Gopnik, ed., *Americans in Paris: A Literary Anthology* (New York: The Library of America, 2004), 335.

[2] On March 28, 1927, Ivan Dombrowski became a U.S. citizen, officially named John D. Graham.

[3] Graham was born in Kiev on December 27, 1886, in the Julian calendar. His birth date is sometimes given as January 8 or 9, 1887, according to the Gregorian calendar, which was not adopted in Russia until 1918. To be consistent with birth records, in this dissertation I will use the Julian calendar date.

coming to the United States in 1920, having escaped the Bolshevik regime, did he reinvent himself as an artist. Realizing that he could not support himself with the income from the sale of his paintings alone, he also acted as an agent for other artists, collectors, and dealers.[4] He spent time in Paris not only working in the studio but also meeting prominent artists, connecting with critics, and dining with collectors.[5]

Graham's art and writings of the 1920s and 1930s, when they are viewed at all by critics and historians, have been viewed through the prism of his enigmatic paintings and erratic persona of the 1940s and 1950s. This dissertation considers for the first time these early works in the light of what Graham was looking at in the New York art world, what he saw in Europe, and what he had seen before he left Russia, and seeks to explain his pivotal place in the 1920s and his continuing influence on younger American artists from the late 1920s through the 1930s, and into the early 1940s. The same upheaval that propelled Graham to New York pushed American artists to look not to Europe but to themselves for ideas. His reinvention of himself after arriving in the United States mirrors the resourcefulness and ambition of American artists in defining for themselves a new American art. Accordingly, the notion of self-reinvention is a recurrent theme in the discussion here.

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[4] Most significant were the African sculptures he acquired for *Vanity Fair* editor Frank Crowninshield.

[5] An entry in Dr. Claribel Cone's daybook for June 29, 1927, when she and her sister, Etta, were staying in Paris, reads: "8 at table, Mr. and Mrs. Agard / Mr. and Mrs. Kroll / Mr. Roy Sheldon / Mr. John D. Graham / Etta and Claribel Cone," and further notes: "Loaned John D. Graham 50 Fr. [francs]" Dr. Claribel and Miss Etta Cone Papers, Manuscript Collections, The Baltimore Museum of Art, Maryland.

Graham was an active and early participant in what Wanda Corn, in *The Great American Thing* (1999), has called "bicontinental traffic."[6] Perceived as an "old world" insider, he nonetheless shared a "new world" perspective. He is credited with influencing a generation of younger American artists—Stuart Davis, Dorothy Dehner, Arshile Gorky, Willem de Kooning, Lee Krasner, Jackson Pollock, and David Smith among them—keeping them abreast of what was happening in Paris through firsthand accounts and introducing them to European art periodicals such as *Cahiers d'art*.[7] But he was not so much a conduit for formal ideas from Europe as a promoter of the possibilities for artistic advancement in the United States. His auxiliary roles as author, connoisseur, dealer, and impresario were as central to his project as was his artwork. A recent biography described the young Willem de Kooning: "In the 1930s [he] knew how to be modern. And he knew how to be a painter. But he did not know how to be a modern painter. Little in his early life gave him the confidence to put the pieces together."[8] Graham, however, possessed this confidence in spades, and that enabled him to help younger artists put the pieces together.

Yet in many ways Graham was unable to do so for himself. He painted less and devoted more time to writing in the 1930s. At the end of the decade he worked on an idea for an exhibition on *Abstract and Semi-Abstract Painting by French and American Painters* that finally came to fruition in 1942 at McMillen, Inc.[9] He hung works by

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[6] Wanda Corn, *The Great American Thing: Modern Art and National Identity, 1915-1935* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 91.

[7] Edited and published from 1926 through 1960 (except for the years of World War II) by Christian Zervos, *Cahiers d'art* examined all branches of the arts, historic as well as contemporary.

[8] Mark Stevens and Annalyn Swan, *De Kooning: An American Master* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004), 93.

Picasso, Braque, and Matisse alongside paintings by such unknowns as de Kooning, Pollock, and Krasner—a fitting postscript to the years he had worked so diligently to establish the viability of an American art.

The dissertation concentrates on the years from 1923, when Graham enrolled at the Art Students League in New York, until 1942, when he began to abandon his Picasso-influenced Cubism for the Ingres-like drawing that would buttress his late style. Most investigations of the life and work of John Graham privilege biography over formal analysis, looking for early signs of the eccentricity that would overtake his work by the mid-forties, when it devolved into occult allusions. This study instead regards the work of the 1920s and 1930s as an authentic, if retardataire, response to Picasso and Synthetic Cubism and considers it within the cultural milieu of the period in New York, Baltimore,[10] and Paris. Most studies of Graham's work have marginalized the paintings of the 1920s, 1930s, and early 1940s, particularly those that do not evince a clear lineage from Picasso and Synthetic Cubism. I suggest that a closer reading of these works, especially in tandem with works by Russian painters of whom he was aware in the pre-revolutionary period, will reveal influences from this period not heretofore discussed in the literature. It is not likely that Graham practiced painting as anything more than an amateur pursuit before he immigrated to the United States, but what does emerge from his writings is that he was aware of the artistic milieu around him in those early years.

For a close reading of the images, an analysis of Graham's extensive writings is necessary, especially his S*ystem and Dialectics of Art*, published in 1937, and the article

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[9] McMillen, Inc., a leading New York interior decorating firm founded by Eleanor Brown in 1924, frequently held exhibitions in a gallery space at the firm's East 55th Street headquarters (see Chapter Four).

[10] In 1924, Graham married Elinor Gibson, a fellow student at the Art Students League; they moved to Baltimore, her hometown.

"Primitive Art and Picasso," which appeared in the *Magazine of Art* in the same year. In reading both word and image, I intend to highlight the dynamic between his School of Paris–inspired paintings and his resolve to be part of the making of a distinctly American art.

Exile or Émigré?

The turbulence of Graham's personal life reflected—even resulted from—the upheaval and displacement in his homeland. In *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), Edward Said wrote of his own experience of exile: "I grew up as an Arab with a Western education. Ever since I can remember, I have felt that I belonged to both worlds, without being completely *of* either one or the other."[11] Graham's biography remains as compelling as it is elusive.[12] At a minimum, we could say that he belonged to four worlds: the old world of Russia, and the new world of America; the world of the man of action—the military officer with claims to nobility—and the world of the man of artistic introspection—the painter and writer.

Key to this dissertation is an understanding of the terms "exile" and "émigré," and of Graham's notion of himself as one or the other. I investigate Graham's status as émigré vis-à-vis his desire to be an "American" painter, and how he came to negotiate skillfully between those two personas. In 1930, he wrote to his patron, the collector Duncan Phillips, that "Stuart Davis, [Arshile] Gorky, and myself have formed a group

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[11] Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), xxvi.

[12] His descent from Polish nobility, his degree in jurisprudence, his military service under the czar—all are substantiated in testimonials (some more official-looking than others) now among his papers in the Archives of American Art/Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. Graham's biography will be considered more closely in Chapter One.

and something original, purely American is coming out from under our brushes."[13] Graham strategically positioned himself between Davis, the quintessentially American painter, who absorbed the lessons of Parisian Cubism and generated his own vernacular reading of that mode, and Arshile Gorky, the self-styled Russian émigré, who would push his Surrealist-inflected art to the breakthrough style of Abstract Expressionism.

The words "exile" and "émigré" are used interchangeably throughout much of the literature without clear distinction in meaning. By definition, an exile is a person banished from his or her native land. *Émigré* is French for "emigrant," one who leaves his or her native country, especially a person who flees because of political conditions. In general, emigration is distinguished from exile by the active and voluntary nature of the decision to leave the native country, for political, economic, or religious reasons. In the case of exile the same motivations apply, except that here the state is the active party, forcing the individual to relocate. Some artists manage to elude both terms. So fluid were Marcel Duchamp's peregrinations from 1915 that his transatlantic comings and goings are hard to categorize.[14]

Much of the writing on exile and émigré artists in the United States deals with those who came before or during World War II, fleeing the economic and political hardships that beset Europe in the 1930s and 1940s; the two terms have thus become closely identified with that period.[15] In an essay in *Exiles and Émigrés: The Flight of European Artists from Hitler*, the art historian Romy Golan focuses on artists living in

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[13] John Graham, New York, to Duncan Phillips, Washington, D.C., December 28, 1930, The Phillips Collection Archives, Washington, D.C.

[14] Duchamp did not become an American citizen until 1955.

[15] For a thorough discussion of these issues see Matthew Baigell's *Artists and Identity in Twentieth-Century America* (2001) and *American Artists, Jewish Images* (2006).

Paris who came to the United States in the 1930s and 1940s. "For all the alienation evoked by exile, and the lack of communal life for artists in New York," she writes, "the myth of America as land of eternal youth or second chances, a land where everything is possible, served most of these middle-aged artists well."[16] That said, many of those looking for second chances either continued to cross borders or returned to Europe once they were secured. Max Ernst, a German who emigrated from France in 1941, returned there in 1953 and remained until he died in 1976; Fernand Léger immigrated to the United States in 1940, then returned to France in 1945; André Masson immigrated in 1941 and returned to Paris in 1945. Graham's flight from Russia clearly predates this mass exodus but can be considered alongside it.

The Literature

The act of exile or emigration often marks a divide in an artist's oeuvre, coinciding with a departure or a new beginning in the work. Graham's case is unusual in that before coming to the United States he is not known to have produced any artwork. Examination of his life and work presents multiple problems for the scholar. There is neither a critical biography of Graham nor a catalogue raisonné of his work, a fact lamented by Marcia Epstein Allentuck in her introduction to an annotated republication of *System and Dialectics of Art* (1971).[17] Eleanor Green's catalogue for an exhibition at

[16] Romy Golan, "On a Passage of a Few Persons through a Rather Brief Period of Time," in Stephanie Barrons, ed., *Exiles and Émigrés: The Flight of European Artists from Hitler* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1997), 128.

[17] John Graham, *System and Dialectics of Art*, ed. Marcia Allentuck (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1971), hereafter cited as *SDA* (1971). The volume includes a substantial (nine pages) foreword by the sculptor Dorothy Dehner, who first met Graham in 1929 when she and her husband, the sculptor David Smith, were attending the Art Students League. A wealth of biographical information to fill in the 1930s and 1940s is contained in the foreword and in the unpublished manuscript that is the draft for it, found

the Phillips Collection in Washington, D.C., *John Graham: Artist and Avatar* (1987), remains the most complete published volume on the artist and, although it reads largely as hagiography, is the single monograph on him.

These two books are the major published sources on Graham, and there has been little or no substantive revision to the biographical account they offer. Most subsequent articles and essays on Graham—and there are perhaps a half dozen of significance[18]—stick to the facts as laid out in these two texts and recycle the same handful of anecdotes.

Curiously—or perhaps not so curiously, since Graham has a habit of popping up, Zelig-like, when you least expect him—the writing of this dissertation coincided with a retrospective of Graham's work in New York in the fall of 2005 at the Allan Stone Gallery.[19] The exhibition numbered some forty-five works,[20] and was accompanied by a fully-illustrated, 160-page catalogue, *John Graham: Sum Qui Sum*, with an essay by the art historian Harry Rand.[21]

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among Dehner's papers in the Archives of American Art. Her recollection of events that transpired some forty years earlier is necessarily subject to the vagaries of memory; her letters in the Archives provide a lively account of her friendship with Graham and his wives Elinor and Constance over the years (see Chapter Three).

[18] See Irving Sandler, "John D. Graham: The Painter as Esthetician and Connoisseur," *Artforum*, October 1968; Barbara Rose, "Arshile Gorky and John Graham: Eastern Exiles in a Western World," *Arts Magazine*, March 1976; Carl Goldstein, "John Graham During the 1920s: His Introduction to Modernism," *Arts Magazine*, March 1977; Melvin Lader, "Graham, Gorky, de Kooning and the 'Ingres Revival' in America," *Arts Magazine*, March 1978; Elizabeth Langhorne, "The Magus and the Alchemist: John Graham and Jackson Pollock," *American Art*, Vol. 12, No. 3 (Autumn 1998).

[19] Prior to this, the last exhibition held was in 2000 at the Richard York Gallery in New York, the first in 15 years.

[20] Seven notebook sheets of erotic drawings were exhibited in a separate space across a courtyard off the rear of the main gallery, effectively reinforcing the perception of Graham as a transgressive artist.

[21] Rand's important work on Arshile Gorky notwithstanding, this freewheeling essay added little to the literature and dealt glancingly with the work from the 1920s and 1930s included in the exhibition.

Once again, critics turned to his work with new receptivity, many questions, and few conclusions—at least about the earlier work from the 1920s and 1930s. *New York Times* critic Roberta Smith's article was prominently featured in a Friday Arts section.[22] "These works [of the 1920s and 1930s] can be endearingly awkward but are more frequently blustery and preening. Overall, Graham lacked the concentration or urgency that propelled the artists who looked up to him toward work that they could call their own."[23] Smith stated a preference for the work of the 1940s and 1950s; for her, "Graham's best work came only after he turned on modernism and reconnected to his roots as a counter-revolutionary."[24]

This standard judgment begs for a more nuanced approach. In truth, it is hard to assess Graham's work independent of the biography, but this can be said of many artists, his friends Pollock and de Kooning among them. We tend to like our artists with colorful histories intact. It is the two-pronged goal of this dissertation not only to position Graham solidly within the history of American art in the first half of the twentieth century but also come to terms with his production of the 1920s and 1930s, thereby bringing into focus a more complete picture of the artist and his work.

Noteworthy publications by a younger generation of scholars have brought a wider range of investigation into Graham's life and work. Bruce Weber's *Toward a New American Cubism* (Berry-Hill Galleries, New York, 2006) examined in depth Graham's work in the 1920s and 1930s, especially as seen in relation to his peers, Davis and Gorky.

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[22] A feature article by Richard Kalina also appeared in the March 2006 issue of *Art in America*.

[23] Roberta Smith, "A Charismatic Artist Who Was Known for Talk," *The New York Times*, December 2, 2005, p. E37.

[24] Ibid.

Weber also provided broader context by including discussions of the work of artists Jan Matulka, David Smith, Willem de Kooning, Hans Hofmann, John Marin, and Alfred Maurer in this period as well. The extensive essay offered an essential perspective on what else was happening in American art and European art at the time. African Art historian Christa Clarke has contributed an important article that brings new scholarship to the fore as she examines Graham's significant contribution to the creation of an American taste for African sculpture among collectors and artists as well in "John Graham and the Crowninshield Collection of African Art," published in the *Winterthur Portfolio* in 1995. Clarke makes a distinction between the ethnographic and the aesthetic hierarchies that gained wide recognition in the 1920s and 1930s in the United States among collectors and museums (see Chapter Three) and Graham's role in this discourse.

Other Sources

The one previous dissertation on Graham—a doctoral thesis by Anne C. Edgerton (University of California, Santa Barbara, 1984, unpublished)—is a significant study and contains many important interviews.[25] Her interest in the post-1942 paintings led her to explore Graham's dealings with "the Occult" and this is a subtext in the dissertation itself.[26]

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[25] Anne C. Edgerton, "John D. Graham 1886–1961," Ph.D. diss., University of California, Santa Barbara, 1984. Particularly valuable is the extensive interview with Graham's second wife, Vera Aleksandrovna Sokolova (later Vera Thorne), who married Graham in September 1918. Some fourteen years his junior, she gives a harrowing account of their struggle over the course of the first two years of their marriage as they fled the Bolsheviks (See Chapter One).

[26] An appendix to the dissertation contains a lecture, "John D. Graham, the Occult, and the New York School," given by Edgerton at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, February 18, 1983; the only work on Graham subsequently published by Edgerton is "Symbolism and Transformation in the Art of John Graham," which appeared in *Arts Magazine* 60 (March 1986).

Eila M. Kokkinen's 1977 master's thesis is the earliest scholarly study of Graham's work and as such is a valuable source.[27] The exhibition she organized in 1968 while an assistant curator for drawings at The Museum of Modern Art, New York, marked the first museum investigation of Graham's work from the 1940s and 1950s.[28] This exhibition and her subsequent thesis established a critical baseline and chronology for Graham's biography and paintings, separating the artist's own mythologizing treatment of his life and work from factual accounts.

Of importance to note here as well is the correspondence, now in the Archives of American Art, between Graham and his patron, Duncan Phillips. It provides vivid testimony and the best account of Graham's ambitions and endeavors throughout the late 1920s and early 1930s.

While there is reliable biographical information about Graham's education and early military career in Russia, there are few indications of his artistic leanings (a son whom he abandoned in early childhood in Russia remembers holding a piece of paper while his father drew with both hands[29]). Compounding this lack of information is the fact that Graham has not been recuperated in his native country, primarily because he is not known to have painted there, and there is consequently no ongoing scholarship devoted to his career.[30] We can, however, establish with some certainty what

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[27] Eila Kokkinen, "John D. Graham: A Chronology of his Life and Work" M.A. thesis, The University of Chicago, 1977. I am grateful to Bruce Weber for providing access to this document.

[28] *John D. Graham: Paintings and Drawings* was held from August 13 through October 13, 1968.

[29] Eila Kokkinen, "John Graham During the 1940s," *Arts Magazine*, November 3, 1976, 99.

[30] By contrast, the artist David Burliuk, who left Russia in his mid-thirties and spent the rest of his life in the United States, now has a museum dedicated to his work in the Ukraine.

contemporary art, both Russian and European, Graham would have seen.[31] Beverly Whitney Kean's 1983 book, *All the Empty Palaces: The Merchant Patrons of Modern Art in Pre-Revolutionary Russia*, describes the collections of Sergei Shchukin and Ivan Morozov. Their homes in Moscow became galleries filled with contemporary art from Paris, particularly Matisse and Picasso, where young Russian artists such as Malevich, Tatlin, Larionov, and Goncharova, would come to see the latest paintings from France. In a recent study, Jane Ashton Sharp points out that the opening of these collections to young art students provided a critical link to the European art world although this foreign influence was regarded with some suspicion in the post 1905-Revolution press.[32]

If we accept Edward Said's notion of the exile as one between two worlds but of neither, we might then consider the émigré as one who takes from both worlds and then assimilates or synthesizes. Despite the fact that Graham seems not to have painted in Russia, it is essential to look at his work in the United States in relation to that of Russian artists in the pre-revolutionary period who were influenced by so-called primitive or folk art. The subject of the Russian Neo-Primitives has been taken up in recent scholarship in both the United States and Russia, including Jane Sharp's study of Goncharova and in *Origins of the Russian Avant-Garde* (2003), the catalogue of an exhibition organized by the State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg and shown at The Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore. This dissertation brings to the fore for the first time a consideration of the

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[31] In an unpublished manuscript, undated but probably from the 1930s, Graham refers to seeing the "Picasso Room" that the Moscow collector Sergei Shchukin had installed by 1908. This will be discussed in Chapter One.

[32] Jane Ashton Sharp: *Russian Modernism between East and West: Natal'ia Goncharova and the Moscow Avant-garde (*New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 73.

influence of these Russian neo-primitives on Graham and his strategies to become a modern artist. This will be explored in Chapter One.

Millions of immigrants crossed the Atlantic to take up new lives in America, and while even a cursory look at a compendium like *The Golden Door: Artist-Immigrants of America, 1876–1976* reveals that every émigré artist's story is different, one observation that holds is that a majority of those artists who emigrated from Russia beginning in the late nineteenth century were Jews reacting to the increasing anti-Semitism of the czarist regime. Several of these artists were roughly contemporaries of Graham's: Max Weber (1881–1961), Abraham Walkowitz (1878–1965), Louis Lozowick (1892–1973), Raphael Soyer (1899–1974) and Naum Gabo (1890–1977).[33] It is significant to note the parallel but distinctly different experiences of Graham and another Russian painter, David Burliuk (1882–1967), neither of whom was Jewish. Both left their homeland in 1920 in the wake of WWI and the Russian Revolution: Burliuk traveled east and spent two years in Japan before coming to the United States.[34]

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[33] Weber emigrated in 1891 with his family, Hasidic Jews from Bialystok, and became a U.S. citizen in 1905.Walkowitz was born in Siberia, where his father served as rabbi for groups of Jewish boys who were conscripted as young as age twelve and given military training and often pressured to convert to Christianity. Walkowitz's father died in 1882, and he and his mother immigrated to the United States in 1893. Lozowick, forced to drop out of the Kiev Art School after increased anti-Semitism following the 1905 revolution, came to the United States at age fourteen. Soyer immigrated as a thirteen-year-old with his younger twin brothers, Moses and Isaac, and the rest of his family, after his father's residence permit in the town of Borisoglebsk, near Moscow, was revoked by the czar's forces. See Cynthia McCabe, *The Golden Door: Artist-Immigrants of America, 1876–1976* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1976) passim. Naum Gabo was another Jewish artist who left Russia. Gabo, who was in Denmark and Norway during the war, returned to Russia, left after the 1917 revolution, and eventually came to the United States. For an in-depth discussion of this artist see Martin Hammer and Christina Lodder, *Constructing Modernism: The Art & Career of Naum Gabo. (*New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000).

[34] *David Burliuk: The Father of Russian Futurism.* exh. cat. The State Russian Museum. Trans. Kenneth MacInness. (Saint Petersburg: Palace Editions, 2000).

1923

Two paintings by Graham serve well to bracket the period on which this dissertation focuses: a 1923 self-portrait (Fig. 0.1) and a 1941 still life that is in a sense a symbolic self-portrait as well. In 1923 the artist began to sign his name "John D. Graham" rather than "John G[ratianovitch] Dombrowski" which he had used since entering the United States.[35] He had begun a relationship with a young art student, Elinor Gibson, a native of Baltimore, whom he had met in New York at the Art Students League the previous December and, by August 1923, he had authorized divorce proceedings to take place against his wife, Vera. He made frequent visits to Gibson's family in Baltimore,[36] a cultured city that boasted such sophisticated art collectors as the Cone sisters, Claribel and Etta, and was the birthplace of the Stein siblings, Gertrude[37] and Michael, who had been living in Paris full-time since 1903. These Baltimore connections would stand Graham in good stead, and his innate skills for forging relationships would benefit not only his art but his art dealing as well.

Graham had registered for classes at the Art Students League in December 1922 under the name John Abraham Dabrowsky.[38] The 1923 self-portrait would doubtless have been done for one of the classes he took at the League. At once amateurish and awkward, the image nonetheless reveals an assertiveness and an ambition to be considered a serious

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[35] Varying explanations are given for this anglicization. The most plausible is that Gratian, his father's name, written in a mixture of capital and lowercase Cyrillic letters, looks a bit like Graham.

[36] In fact, the Gibson family's address, 127 Richmond Street, Baltimore, is given as his home address in some Art Students League records.

[37] "America is my country," she wrote in *An American in France* (1936), "but my hometown is Paris."

[38] Art Students League registration ledger, 1923–1924. His address was recorded as 158 W. 58th Street.

painter. This is indicated in part in the signature, his newly adopted last name, in block letters and underlined, with the date in Roman numerals.[39] The pose is the customary three-quarter view of the artist looking in the mirror. The hair is jet black with no hint of gray. He does not shrink from depicting his sharply receding hairline (he will be bald in a few years). The eyes are intense and penetrating. The work is relatively small, at 24 by 20 inches. The open-mouthed expression is hard to interpret—is it astonishment or intense concentration? The nose seems the result of either a disturbing amount of reworking or an inability to complete the feature satisfactorily—or a combination of the two and a decision to live with it. The background provides perhaps the greatest clue to what Graham was striving for. It is a tentative but nonetheless recognizable attempt at a Cubist depiction of space. While the planar contours of the face and head are too rounded for this depiction, the background shows hints of a Cubist vocabulary. There is a clear desire to make of his self-portrait something more than the limning of features. The picture heralds the effort it will take for Graham to express himself in paint; the work of a beginner, it is still a compelling introduction to the period under consideration, as it sets up many of the contradictions that will propel Graham in succeeding years.

In December 1923, the artist was enrolled in Allen Tucker's class at the Art Students League. Tucker, by then in his late fifties, had studied at the League with John H. Twachtman in the 1890s, and his courtly, nineteenth-century demeanor may well have appealed to Graham and made the New York art world seem even more glamorous. One student recalled Tucker as "the gentleman and true aristocrat of them all. A great man of dignity, tall in stature, he would step from the taxi on criticism days in high hat, gray

[39] He would sign his paintings in this way until 1942, when he took to signing them "Ioannus" or "Joannus." He continued to use Roman numerals for the date.

striped trousers and black coat with tails; but there was nothing 'stuffy' about him. He brought to the class the real meaning of art, as perhaps no other teacher could. . . . He looked at each of us as though we mattered, and existed for him as individuals."[40]

Closer in age to his instructors than to fellow students,[41] Graham sought to align himself with his younger colleagues. Yet he could not have failed to observe Tucker's *"grand maître"* persona, and it was perhaps *this* aspect of being an artist that Graham yearned most to achieve.

If the 1923 *Self-Portrait* is to some extent amateurish, then a caricature done in the same year reveals a much more adroit attempt to position himself as a player in the New York art world. In a small, privately published volume titled *Have It!*, Graham included poetry (some extolling his new lady love) and two illustrations, one an evident reference to the influential art critic Royal Cortissoz (1869–1948; Fig. 0.2). A critic at the *Herald Tribune* since 1891, Cortissoz had written the book *Art and Common Sense* as a corrective to the Armory Show of 1913; the theme of invading hordes of Cubist artists surfaced again in his 1923 publication *American Artists*, where he decried "Ellis Island Art."[42] Evidently Graham took this personally enough to make Cortissoz the subject of a cartoon. The supplicant (presumably an artist) who has prostrated himself at the great man's feet must be grateful that the top-hatted figure (presumably Cortissoz) has

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[40] *Hundredth Anniversary Exhibition of Paintings and Sculptures* (New York: Art Students League), 23.

[41] Twenty-year-old Adolph Gottlieb was by comparison a seasoned professional. He had dropped out of high school at age sixteen, studied briefly at the League, spent a year in Paris at the Académie de la Grande Chaumière, and then traveled to Berlin and Munich. He finished high school in 1923 and enrolled at the League.

[42] "The United States is being invaded by aliens, thousands of whom constitute so many acute perils to the body politic. Modernism is of precisely the same heterogeneous alien origin and is imperiling the republic of art the same way." Royal Cortissoz, *American Artists* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1923), 47.

momentarily ceased his spiked-club bludgeoning. Graham's fracturing ("Cord Tizes") may well lampoon the critic's name; it reminds us that Graham anglicized his own name that same year. Whether the artist is taking a stance against Cortissoz's pronouncements on immigration or, more likely, objecting to his dismissal of European artistic influence, he wants to make his views known.

1941

As a coda to the period under consideration, the painting *Russian Still Life*, 1941 (Fig. 0.3), is a summative reference to the struggle of the previous twenty years and signals Graham's decision to abandon the course pursued throughout those two decades. He identified the large form on the left as a palette,[43] and it appears to be resting on a round oval table; scattered over the surface is a jumble of Cyrillic letters, some of which form words. An ambiguous form in the lower right has been read as an openwork chair but might also be a head. This would be one of Graham's last paintings to evoke a consciously Cubist vocabulary. A phrase in Cyrillic that might be translated as "I rolled up a picture" [44] perhaps refers to putting away the last twenty years' work, and drawing the curtain on this experimentation with modernism. The use of letters would indicate a nod to Synthetic Cubism—that this work comes some thirty years after Picasso's *Still*

[43] John Graham, New York to Katherine Dreier, West Redding, Connecticut, August 21, 1942. Katherine S. Dreier Papers, Société Anonyme Archive, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut.

Dreier purchased the work anonymously from the artist for $100 that month and donated the work to the Société Anonyme later in the year. "The painting you have kept and sold is a "Russian still life" with a palette on the left side, with Russian lettering."

[44] Robert L. Herbert, Eleanor S. Apter, and Elise K. Kenney, *The Société Anonyme and the Dreier Bequest at Yale University: A Catalogue Raisonné* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 313.

Life with Chair Caning underscores the fact that Graham must have realized that this was an endgame. The painting is at once a last experiment with the vocabulary of Cubism and a renunciation of the course taken, as if to say, Go on without me, I will take a different path. And indeed, they did go on without him—Gorky, Pollock, de Kooning—while Graham returned to a style steeped in Old World mysticism and classical form.

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Chapter One discusses Graham's years in the Ukraine and Russia, from his birth in 1886 to his departure (he was never to return) in 1920, and assesses the impact of his exposure to European modernism as it was received there in the years before World War I. A member of a minuscule educated elite, Graham was of course familiar with the world of arts and letters. Touring exhibitions of modern art did visit Kiev, where he was raised and educated, in the first decade of the twentieth century, and this exposure undoubtedly had an effect on him. Works of Parisian artists on view in the homes of Moscow collectors before the revolution would, as mentioned before, also have been influential. The Russian avant-garde's affinity for Cubism and Futurism, and their fascination with the primitive, mythology, ethnography, and tradition—all parts of the rich cultural history of "Old Russia"—merits consideration in relation to Graham's work.

Chapter Two looks at the 1920s after Graham's arrival in New York, and at his fluid entry into myriad artistic circles. After World War I, the sense was that great things would happen in American art; Marcel Duchamp himself predicted as much. Graham's instructor at the Art Students League, John Sloan, provided a first, critical link to the New

York world. He introduced Graham to Frank Crowninshield, art editor of *Century* magazine and later editor of *Vanity Fair*, for whom Graham would amass a significant collection of African art. Graham's frequent trips to Paris in the 1920s secured his status as firsthand reporter from the front lines and provided a vital connection for New York artists in a period when European art was not frequently seen in the United States.[45] (His familiarity with the Parisian art scene has led many critics and scholars to conclude, erroneously, that he arrived in New York in 1920 after spending time in France.) By decade's end, Graham had, among other achievements, met the Cone sisters, who became collectors of his work; sold a number of paintings to Duncan Phillips and been the subject of a one-man exhibition at the Phillips Memorial Gallery in Washington, D.C.; and begun a correspondence with Katherine Dreier of the Société Anonyme. The nature of his relationships with American collectors and his interactions with art dealers in New York and Paris will also be examined.

Chapter Three investigates the nexus of creativity among Graham, Davis and Gorky and how the affiliation of these three exemplifies the artistic cross-pollination that pervaded the 1920s. An examination of the paintings they were producing in the 1920s and early 1930s—and the ways in which Graham took from the other two artists—will lead to a comparative analysis of his work and how degrees of "Americanness" in style and subject matter colored its public reception. Graham's own status as émigré and his negotiation of this status will also be considered.

[45] Alfred Stieglitz had shown European modernist art before World War I—he had organized the first exhibitions of Cézanne, Matisse, and Picasso—but in the 1920s he chose to show only his American artists, including Hartley, Demuth, and O'Keeffe.

In **Chapter Four**, I look at Graham's work in the 1930s, when his painting production diminished (it virtually ceased by mid-decade) and he turned to writing. He worked on *System and Dialectics of Art* from 1926 until its publication, in Paris and New York, in 1937. The book is a collection of questions and answers on a wide range of topics relating to art, beginning with number 1, "What is art?" and ending with number 129, "What is the art of the future?"[46] It sheds light on understanding much of Graham's critical thinking and offers insights into his methods not borne out in other biographical material. What models did Graham look to for this system? That question, which has not been fully addressed in the literature, is taken up in this chapter. Influences as disparate as the Socratic method and Katherine Dreier (who had written her own treatise, *Western Art and the New Era*, in 1923) are pertinent. This chapter also weighs the critical reception of Graham's book and the response among Graham's fellow artists. Largely overlooked in other discussions is Graham's New York publisher Alma Reed, whose gallery, Delphic Studios, was a center for modernist activity in the 1930s.[47] Her role in the publication is discussed here for the first time.

A **Coda** offers an assessment of Graham's contribution to American art and his role as catalyst in the 1920s and 1930s and as artistic progenitor for a generation of younger artists—all examined through the lens of the exhibition he organized for McMillen, Inc. Hanging the work of young American artists, unknown until he

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[46] Graham writes in the preface: "[The book] is an attempt; to *define* questions of art *exhaustively*; to term them specifically; to formulate a dialectic method in art—a method of plastic, logical argumentation; to unite questions of art into a coordinated system." John Graham, *System and Dialectics of Art* (New York: Delphic Studios, 1937), hereafter cited as *SDA* (1937).

[47] Reed arranged exhibitions of Mexican artists (she was a champion of José Clemente Orozco) and also showed photographs, most notably those of Edward Weston and Ansel Adams.

discovered them, alongside titans of the international art world ultimately said more about Graham's fervor, vigor and resolve than all the words he had written.

Chapter One

Early Years in Russia

In November 1920, as Vladimir Tatlin constructed the twenty-foot-high wood, iron, and glass tower model for his *Monument to the Third International*, John Graham (then known as Jan Dabrowski[1]) sailed for the United States on the SS *Kroonland*.[2] The ship left the port of Antwerp on November 12 and arrived in New York via Southampton, England, about two weeks later.[3] Graham's second wife, Vera Alexandrovna Sokolova,[4] newborn infant in tow, had pleaded with her husband to book first-class passage, so filled with fear was she by stories about going through Ellis Island.[5] Graham used most of their meager savings to secure the best accommodations on the creaky vessel. The *Kroonland* docked in New York on November 24—Thanksgiving Day.

The part of his life that Graham left behind in Russia has been a source of endless conjecture, fueled by the scanty and contradictory evidence the artist himself furnished over the years. Most important for this dissertation is his knowledge of European and

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[1] Graham's reasons for adopting the Polish form of his name will be explained later in this chapter.

[2] The *Kroonland* was built in Philadelphia in 1902 and operated commercially, mainly trading between New York and Antwerp, until the U.S. entry into World War I, during which she was used as a transport ship. After the Armistice, the *Kroonland* brought veterans home from the former war zone until September 1919, when the ship was decommissioned. By October, the vessel had been returned to the original owner, a Belgian company. Commercial operations between the United States and Belgium resumed in 1920.

[3] Cynthia Jaffe McCabe, *The Golden Door*, 209.

[4] Graham married his first wife, Ebrenia (Catherine) Ignatevnia Makavelia, in 1912, and they had two children: a son, Kyril, born in 1913, and a daughter, Maria, born in 1916. In 1918, Graham married Vera, who was seventeen at the time.

[5] Vera Graham Thorne, interview by Anne C. Edgerton, in "John D. Graham 1886–1961," Ph.D. diss., University of California, Santa Barbara, 1984, 40.

Russian art in the pre-revolutionary period and how this familiarity shaped his own artistic and literary inclinations. Some documentation can be found in his personal papers now in the Archives of American Art, Washington, D.C. Other evidence is in Graham's *System and Dialectics of Art*, first published in 1937, which indicates how much he knew of world art events. Graham's initial career in the law and the military may have put him at a remove from the artistic foment of the first two decades of the twentieth century. What he would transmit to the United States in the 1920s is perhaps more a sense of the possibilities of art in those fertile decades than a formal sense of the multiple isms of the period. Kasimir Malevich and Suprematism were elided in *System and Dialectics of Art*; neither his paintings nor his writings are mentioned. Graham does include Vladimir Tatlin and El Lissitzky under the rubric "Constructivism,"[6] referring to them and others, as "a group of talented painters in the U.S.S.R."[7] It is from the names of a group of Russian painters whom he mentions as "representatives" of "Expressionism"—Mikhail Vrubel, Mikhail Larionov, and David Burliuk among them—that we can begin to reconstruct what paintings he may have seen in the years before leaving Russia.

It is unlikely that Graham practiced painting as anything more than an amateur pursuit before he immigrated to the United States, although instruction in draftsmanship and watercolor would likely have been part of his secondary or tertiary school curriculum. What does emerge from his writings is that he was aware of the artistic milieu that surrounded him.

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[6] See question 32: "What is prehistoric art, archaic art . . . abstract art in general?" *SDA* (1937), 32.

[7] Ibid.

Graham was born Ivan Gratianovich Dombrowski in 1886 in Kiev, Ukraine, to a family belonging to the hereditary Polish nobility.[8] His parents were Gratian-Ignatius Dombrowki and Youzefa (Eugenia) Brezinska.[9] The Dombrowskis were on the register of Polish nobility under the crest Dabrova; Graham's mother was the last of a noble German family with the crest Lubich.[10] Graham finished gymnasium in Kiev in 1906 and attended page school at the Czarevich Nicholas Imperial Lyceum in Moscow between 1906 and 1908. He studied at the University of Kiev and in 1913 received the equivalent of a doctorate of jurisprudence from the University of Saint Vladimir, also in Kiev. (When composing a curriculum vitae in the 1930s, he saw fit to clarify the equivalency of his law degree, which he had sometimes erroneously referred to as an LL.B.[11]) After moving to Moscow, he served for a brief period as a minor functionary with a *zemstvo*.[12] In 1914, when Russia entered World War I, Graham enrolled at the Nicolaiev Cavalry Institute in St. Petersburg; he entered the Circassian Regiment with the rank of cornet.

We can speculate about Graham's awareness of the art world in the years before his military engagement and the most persuasive argument for this awareness lies in his

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[8] After the Congress of Vienna in 1815, the historic Kingdom of Poland was divided among Russia, Austria, and Prussia. The newly created kingdom, which included Warsaw, was under the domination of Russia.

[9] Translation of a certified copy of the 1891 baptismal records, John D. Graham records, Archives of American Art/Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. (hereafter AAA), Microfilm reel 3618.

[10] Eleanor Green, *John Graham: Artist and Avatar* (Washington, D.C.: The Phillips Collection, 1987), 132.

[11] "I have corrected my degree in all my records—it is LL.D. and not LL.B. All university work in Europe is post graduate work and Russian universities are organized on the same bases that German and Austrian are, conferring only one, a doctor's degree. All other degrees are honorary." John Graham to William Sener Rusk, chairman of the art department at Wells College, February 21 [1932], John D. Graham artist file, The Phillips Collection Archives, Washington, D.C.

[12] The *zemstvo* was a local assembly that functioned as a body of provincial self-government in Russia, beginning in 1864; the establishment of the *zemstvo* was one of the major liberal reforms of the reign of Czar Alexander II (1855–1881). The system was dissolved after the 1917 revolution.

later paintings that suggest the influence of Russian and European art. The following investigates the two intersections, Moscow and Kiev, and their importance for Graham.

Moscow

At the house of the collector Sergei Shchukin,[13] in the decade before the 1917 revolution, the young Moscow art world would regularly troop through to see paintings by Cézanne, Matisse, and Picasso. Shchukin purchased some fifty Picassos and devoted an entire room in his home in the Trubetskoy Palace to the work of that artist—work that Shchukin felt would not fit in well with the rest of his collection. It was often noted that in this period one could see more Picasso and Matisse hanging on the walls *chez Shchukin* than could be seen in all of Paris.

In an unpublished manuscript written decades later titled "Installment Art II," Graham referred to having seen the Picasso redoubt in the Trubetskoy Palace. With the benefit of hindsight, he may have embellished somewhat his aptitude for spotting up-and-coming talent. The classmate mentioned here would have been at the Czarevich Nicholas Imperial Lyceum, thus placing Graham in Moscow from 1906 to 1908.

> When in 1905 or 1906 in Moscow, I went to see Stechukin's [*sic*] famous collection, (his daughter was married to a classmate of mine), I have seen numberless salons filled with Degas, van Dogens [*sic*], Matisses, Derains, Marquets, etc. Finally, he showed me a small room where he had some new paintings of a young painter, by name of Picasso, that he was not sure of. I have told him then that this young painter, Picasso, was by far the best of all, that he had infinitely greater [talent] than the rest of them. Stechukin, taken aback, said, "how can you make such a daring statement, you are just a young man, and why do you think so?" Because, I said, . . . he has structure, furies, audacity, imagination, and knowledge. His things are felt, as things are felt when they are familiar to you. Besides, he has a greater point of view than the rest of them. After this visit have talked a lot about Picasso's work. What I said was laudatory,

[13] Shchukin's family were wealthy merchants in the textile industry.

> excessive and audatious [*sic*], for I was young, enthusiastic, selfless and violent. Collectors started buying Picasso. It was 56 years ago. At that time I was not painting or had no idea of such a thing. Socially it would have been unthinkable.[14]

Several paintings from the Shchukin Collection, now in the State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, make for intriguing comparisons with Graham works: the Matisse *Nude*, 1905 (Fig. 1.1), and Graham's *The Green Chair*, 1928 (Fig. 1.2); the Picasso *Still Life*, c. 1912[15] (Fig. 1.3), and Graham's *Still Life with New York Times*, 1927 (Fig. 1.4). While a significant number of years separate Graham's seeing the paintings and his making his own art, it is enlightening to compare the works.[16] Graham's nude seems to owe a debt to Matisse in the black contours and the volume of the limbs. With the Picasso, there are correspondences in the composition (the knife, the newspaper). Perhaps most revealing in the passage quoted above is Graham's admission that at that time he had no notion of being an artist, nor would it have been an acceptable career choice for him.

Picasso's works were given a room of their own because they did not "fit in well" with the rest of the Shchukin collection; it was even said that their dense hanging in a single room intensified the viewing experience.[17] The earliest Picasso was *The Embrace*

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[14] Undated manuscript, John D. Graham records, AAA, Microfilm reel 3894. Graham refers to "56 years ago"; fifty-six years after the date referred to, 1905, would put the date of the manuscript at 1961, the last year of his life.

[15] Graham could have seen the Picasso at Shchukin's in 1913 when he was assigned to the *zemstvo* in Vladimir, near Moscow. E. Green, 134.

[16] By including reproductions of some works Graham may have seen early on, my intention is only to suggest that this seminal exposure to Matisse and Picasso might have had later resonance for him. Certainly, many of the female nudes Graham produced in the late 1920s were more classical in form and evince the strong influence of André Derain (see Chapter Two).

[17] Beverly Whitney Kean, *All the Empty Palaces: The Merchant Patrons of Modern Art in Pre-Revolutionary Russia* (London: Barrie & Jenkins, 1983), 220.

(1899), and the collection would eventually include every significant stage of the artist's work until 1914. Shchukin met Picasso in 1908; in subsequent years he purchased from Picasso's Paris dealer, Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, an average of ten paintings a year.[18]

The dates Graham used in his recollection, 1905–1906, are too early for him to have seen the Picassos. It is possible that the dates were actually 1906–1908, when he was still in Moscow. And he did return to the Moscow area in 1913 after finishing his studies in Kiev; he would then have had the opportunity to see the full collection. By the spring of 1909, the Shchukin collection was open every Sunday morning at ten. Visitors have been described as "the Russian intelligentsia, a heterogeneous mingling of students from the Moscow School of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture, writers, professors, critics, poets and painters."[19] Shchukin once remarked to his daughter, "If a picture gives you a psychological shock, buy it. It's a good one."[20] This remark, in its directness and gusto, could almost be an exhortation of Graham's.

Picasso's effect on some of the young artists who saw his work was immediate and palpable; for Tatlin and Malevich, the collection had a radicalizing impact. Tatlin was even prompted to visit Picasso in Paris in 1913. He stayed in Paris for a month and saw the constructions that Picasso was working on, with shapes cut from metal and wire to reconstruct the object. Upon his return to Moscow, Tatlin made his own first constructions.[21]

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[18] William Rubin, ed. *Pablo Picasso: A Retrospective*. (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1980), 122.

[19] Kean, 211.

[20] Ibid., 220.

[21] William Rubin, ed., with chronology by Jane Fluegel, *Pablo Picasso: A Retrospective* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1980), 153.

For Graham, seeing Picasso's paintings on display at Shchukin's would have been his first exposure to the influence of so-called tribal or primitive art and his first awareness of the influence of African art on modern painting. Russia had no programmatically developed museums of ethnography, at least nothing comparable to the displays at the Palais du Trocadéro in Paris that Picasso visited. In addition to African art, Picasso looked at ancient Iberian sculpture and totems from the South Sea Islands.[22] Because of France's colonial activity in western Africa, most of the trade was in objects from those regions. As Picasso's Parisian dealer noted, "There is one art they [French painters] all collect, and this is negro art."[23] When, in the 1920s and 1930s, Graham would trade in African art in Paris, almost all the material came from French colonies.

Being in Moscow and visiting the Shchukin collection almost certainly would have brought Graham into contact with the group of young artists then in the city, including Larionov, Goncharova, David Burliuk and his brother Vladimir, and Mayakovsky.[24] In the fall of 1908, the irrepressible David Burliuk (1882–1967), dubbed the Father of Russian Futurism, brought three hundred paintings with him to Moscow from his summer stay on his father's estate.[25] By 1910, many young artists had formed

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[22] Two New Caledonian sculptures are visible on the studio wall in a 1908 photograph of Picasso at the Bateau-Lavoir by Gelett Burgess, published in *Architectural Record*, May 1910; the photo is reproduced in Rubin, 87.

[23] Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, *My Galleries and Painters*, trans. Francis Cremieux (New York: Viking, 1971), 35. Kahnweiler opened a gallery at 28 rue Vignon in Paris in February 1907; he met Picasso in the summer and visited his studio, where *Les demoiselles d'Avignon* was on view.

[24] Mayakovsky studied art and design before devoting his full energies to poetry.

[25] Katherine S. Dreier, *Burliuk* (New York: The Société Anonyme, and Color and Rhyme, 1944), 51. The elder Burliuk was a wealthy overseer who managed large-scale agrarian complexes and who could well afford to support his sons' artistic endeavors.

the group *Bubnovy Valyet* or Jack of Diamonds. In January 1912, four works by Picasso were included in a Jack of Diamonds exhibition in Moscow.

Two decades later, the director of New York's Museum of Modern Art, Alfred H. Barr, Jr., would note the importance of *Bubnovy Valyet* on the world stage in his foreword to a catalogue published for the museum's first loan exhibition:

> The possibilities of this "expressionist" attitude were little realized in the pleasant art of [Maurice] Denis and his associates. But in Paris, about 1905, another and younger generation, calling themselves "Les Fauves"—Matisse, Derain, Friesz, Vlaminck—carried Gauguin's emancipating ideas far beyond the limits which Gauguin himself had reached. A little later, in Germany, partially through the Norwegian, Edvard Munch, Gauguin and van Gogh inspired the first group of expressionists, "Die Brücke," which included such vigorous painters as Kirchner, Pechstein, and Schmidt-Rottluff. In Russia, as early as 1904, works by Gauguin had been appreciated and later purchased by such collectors as Morosov and Tchukine [Shchukin], so that Gauguin became for a time the principal foreign influence in the Bubnovy Valyet [Jack of Diamonds], out of which came Goncharova, David Burliuk, and Kandinsky, who was to become the first "abstract" expressionist. In England and America, Gauguin became generally known at a considerably later time.[26]

Kiev

Kiev was the center of eastern Slavic civilization in the Middle Ages. The city and its surrounding area were known as Kievan Rus' and the tenth and eleventh centuries are referred to as the Golden Age of Kiev. The city was destroyed during the Mongol invasion of 1240 and came under the control of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania in the 1300s. In the seventeenth century, Kiev and the Ukraine became part of Muscovite Russia,[27] later the Russian Empire.

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[26] Ibid., 57.

[27] Muscovy was the traditional name for the Russian state in the fourteenth through seventeenth centuries.

Graham's parents were Polish, with family in Warsaw, but Graham was born in Kiev when his father was studying law there. Graham's father continued to travel back and forth between the two cities, the largest urban centers of eastern Poland and western Russia.[28] An extract from the register of births in that city attests to the fact that Graham was baptized in a Roman Catholic church on December 1, 1891, and that he was the legitimate son of the "Warsaw nobleman Gratsian-Ignaty Dombrovski and his wife, noblewoman Yusefa (also known as Brzhezinskaya) Dombrovskya."[29] Of primary importance here is the verification of the family's Polish lineage and their status as members of the nobility. In the destabilized period after the Bolshevik Revolution and World War I, when Poland gained independence from Russia, it would become critical for Graham to establish his Polish birthright.

Kiev may have been a site for convergences with Russian art and artists during the years before Graham came to the United States. In this period, he would have been looking at late-nineteenth-century Russian painters: in *System and Dialectics of Art*, Graham singled out Mikhail Vrubel (Russian, 1856–1910) for mention as an illustrator with expressive qualities and included him under the heading "Expressionism" (along with Nolde, Kandinsky, Chagall, Soutine, Kokoschka, and others) as a noteworthy example of an artist practicing in that style.[30] Graham would have been familiar with Vrubel's work in the twelfth-century Church of Saint Cyril in Kiev, where he had worked

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[28] E. Green, 135.

[29] Translation, from the Polish, of a certificate validating Graham's baptism, "authorized by Ober-Commissioner of Police, City of Warsaw, as a faithful copy of the original kept in the archives of the Chancellory." John D. Graham records, AAA, Microfilm reel 3616. Given that Graham would have been nearly five years old by that time, we may conjecture that this was a re-baptism held when his parents relocated to Kiev, most likely for his father's enrollment in law school.

[30] *SDA* (1937), 33.

on a restoration of the original Byzantine wall paintings in the 1880s.[31] Byzantine art had Graham's wholehearted espousal. In *System and Dialectics of Art*, after positing the question "Is painting a two-dimensional or a three-dimensional proposition?" he states that by its very nature of being on a flat surface, painting is two-dimensional and that any art form that aspires to create an illusion on this surface, by modeling or any other device, is simply specious:

> Painting in perspective was known to the antique world (paintings of grapes to which birds used to come and nibble at) and was *not* discovered by the Renaissance painters. . . . The Byzantines and Ucello [*sic*] painted flat. Giotto misunderstood Byzantine painting's precepts and Piero de la [*sic*] Francesca misunderstood Ucello's. The history of pure painting can be expressed as follows: Prehistoric, Greco-Egyptian, Pompeian, Byzantine, Gothic, Ucello, Ingres, Cézanne, Picasso and Mondrian.[32]

Subject matter was of importance to Graham here as well. He acknowledges Vrubel's elevated stature in this regard (the only other illustrators mentioned are Gustave Doré and Picasso[33]). Vrubel's illustrations were largely for *bylina*, or traditional epics based on medieval tales, especially those of Kievan Rus'— stories that Graham may have known growing up in the Ukraine. In fact Graham's acknowledgment of Vrubel in *System and Dialectics of Art* corresponds to the recognition that artist received from the next generation of artists in Russia—including Kandinsky, Larionov, Goncharova, and David Burliuk—whose high regard for traditional folk art, handcraft, and a historicized view of the Russian past as expressed in their work earned them the name "Neo-

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[31] It will be remembered that Graham grew up in Kiev, and attended university and law school there.

[32] *SDA* (1937), 23–24.

[33] Ibid., 28.

Primitives."[34] Both the flatness of the painting and the subject matter in some of Graham's work from the 1920s through the early 1940s requires that we approach this work from a different perspective.

Scholar Jane Sharp has noted that Goncharova's work in the pre-Revolutionary period appears to be "typically primitivist, mirroring and enlarging a cultural world view shared by many Russian and European artists. But unlike Matisse, Picasso, Braque and even Derain, she does not assimilate decorative or exotic art forms into a ready-made master narrative of Western classical subject matter, i.e. the nude. . ."[35] Here Sharp notes that the confluence of modernism and primitivism led Goncharova (and other Russian painters) to invent a "new national Russian painting as a project situated in two cultures."[36]

Although Graham's diligent study of Picasso and Cubism in the 1920s is evident, we must also recognize that he, too, is an artist whose project was "situated in two cultures." The vivid colors and stylized forms of Graham's *Melons* (1926; Fig. 1.5) finds precedent in a vernacular painted signboard from c. 1905 (Fig. 1.6). This was precisely the kind of artifact that influenced the young painters in the Jack of Diamonds exhibition who had, as Sharp has noted, "declared Western European modernism and the Russian popular arts of broadsheets, signboard and graffiti to be the driving forces of new Russian painting."[37] In comparing works by Yury Vasnetsov (Russian, 1900–1973; Fig. 1.7) and

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[34] Yevgenia Petrova, ed. *Origins of the Russian Avant-Garde* (St. Petersburg: The State Russian Museum, 2003), 11.

[35] Sharp, 186.

[36] Ibid.

[37] Ibid., 127.

David Shterenberg (Russian, 1881–1948; Fig. 1.8) with Graham's *Still Life with New York Times*, 1927 (Fig. 1.4), although direct correlations may not be possible, Graham's efforts become apparent. After all, he was not an artist in Russia and we cannot be sure what lasting impressions such work would have made on him. Nevertheless, it is a mistake to assess Graham's art in the 1920s through the early 1940s as solely an imitative response to Picasso and Synthetic Cubism. Graham's 1925 *Still Life* (Fig. 1.9), when viewed as a Cubist work, may fall short of the mark, yet if we look at it in comparison to Josif Shkolnik's (Russian, 1883–1926) *Still Life with Vase and Tray*, c. 1910 (Fig. 1.10), Graham's painting comes alive with possibilities. The paintings share the basic vocabulary of tray, compote, fruit—but Graham inserts into this admittedly jam-packed arrangement a pipe, a saw, and, rather whimsically, several playing cards. Comparisons of Graham's work with work by Matisse, Picasso, and Russian artists are not meant to argue his being specifically influenced by paintings he might have seen in Russia before immigrating to the United States. The intent is, rather, to show that he would have been aware of larger art-world developments.

Burliuk and Mayakovsky

By 1913, it is very likely that Graham had met David Burliuk and also Vladimir Mayakovsky.[38] Their paths may have crossed when Graham was studying law at the University of Saint Vladimir in Kiev.[39] The same year he earned his degree there, 1913,

[38] A card from Burliuk in the Archives of American Art reads: "To dearest friend of Russia (1913) / and USA 1923—till eternity / contemp. Ingres, Raphael and Uccello / John Graham." John D. Graham records, AAA, Microfilm reel 3616. Burliuk wrote a brief essay for a March 1929 exhibition of Graham's work at the Dudensing Galleries, 5 East 57th Street, New York.

[39] Graham and Burliuk in later life found themselves within a few miles of each other, in two villages on Long Island's East End. Graham lived for six years in Southampton with Mariane Strate, his

Burliuk and Mayakovsky published "A Slap in the Face of Public Taste," a manifesto that called on all artists to "throw Pushkin, Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, etc., etc. overboard from the Ship of modernity. He who does not forget his *first* love will not recognize his last."[40]

In the winter 1914, Burliuk and Mayakovsky traveled across Russia, lecturing in seventeen cities "from Moscow in the north to Tiflis [now Tbilisi in Georgia] in the south, from Kazan in the east to Kishinev in the west, creating a tremendous stir wherever they went."[41] It is possible that this is what Burliuk referred to in the note to Graham cited above (see footnote 38).

Mayakovsky, known for stripping Russian poetry of its heavy trappings, throwing in puns, cheeky rhymes, and the occasional popular song, was most highly praised by Graham, who names him in no less than seven different sections of *System and Dialectics of Art*.[42] "What is a genius, a talent, a virtuoso, a craftsman, an erudite, a specialist?" Graham asks. He clearly feels Mayakovsky belongs in the category of genius not virtuoso:

> Of all artists virtuosos are the most fortunate . . . They thrive on the blood of genius, they reap the harvest. They wear long hair, flowing neckties, use vague language and emotional gestures, in fact they look the image of the artist. A real artist on the other hand, never looks the part. Picasso looks like a tailor, Mayakovsky looked like a convict, Cézanne like a shop-keeper and so on.[43]

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last long-term relationship (but never his wife, as is sometimes written), in a house she later bequeathed to him, which he subsequently sold. Burliuk moved with his wife, Marussia, to Hampton Bays in 1939, and lived there until his death in 1967.

[40]As quoted in Anna Lawton, *Russian Futurism Through Its Manifestoes, 1912–1928* (Ithaca, N.Y., and London: Cornell University Press, 1988), 51.

[41] Dreier, 63.

[42] *SDA* (1937), 18, 81, 84, 85, 107, 118, and 119.

[43] Ibid., 18.

In a 1986 article in *Arts Magazine*, the artist Jacob Kainen recalled walking with Graham on 14th Street in Manhattan in the mid-1930s and encountering Burliuk, who greeted Graham as a friend "from the old days." Kainen admitted that he did not really consider what this meant at the time, but speculated that Burliuk was referring to Russia.

> As for Graham, it is hard to imagine that a man with his obsessiveness about art and with his fearless, self-confident manner wouldn't have made connections in Russia with artists of substance. . . . And though I didn't catch the significance of Burliuk's "old days," the words have stuck in my mind; obviously Graham had first-hand knowledge of the Russian art world.[44]

Background in the Law

Graham always made it clear that his university background and graduate study were critical to his future pursuits. In a 1929 letter to his patron, the collector Duncan Phillips, he stated that his study of the law was not merely vocational training but preparation for intellectual quests. "May I suggest . . . if you are going to include a paragraph about me in the second volume of the 'Collection in the Making,' to mention that I was a graduate in law of the University of Kiev with LL.B. degree, which, besides law proper, includes studies of philosophy, economics, and humanitarian disciplines in general. This fact lends more weight to my speculations and affords sound bases for them."[45]

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[44] Jacob Kainen, "Remembering John Graham," *Arts Magazine*, Vol. 61:1, (November 1986), 25–31.

[45] John Graham to Duncan Phillips, April 8 [1929], The Phillips Collection records, AAA, Microfilm reel 1938. Phillips published *A Collection in the Making : a Survey of the Problems Involved in Collecting Pictures, Together with Brief Estimates of the Painters in the Phillips Memorial Gallery* in 1926, before he had collected any work by Graham. Graham is referring to a possible second edition of the publication that would include his paintings in the collection and a biography.

Writing to Phillips several years later, Graham referred positively to his legal background noting how it had equipped him to undertake the writing of not only a comprehensive assessment of the history of art but also a critical analysis of each stylistic period. Presumably, he was referring to portions of the manuscript of *System and Dialectics of Art* when he mentioned the "questionnaire."

> Of course I will be very glad if you publish my questionnaire. In [it] I have answered in an exhaustive way and to the point questions that no one has ever answered. Goethe, Tolstoy, Leonardo, Baudelaire, made poetic, (amateurish), sentimental allusions to art. Picasso has never formulated in works any conception of art, nor did Ozenfant, Leger [*sic*], W. George,[46] Zervos[47] and others.[48]

Graham went on to describe how his legal training specifically prepared him for a radically new way of thinking about art. A series of questions would allow for a logical progression from thesis to thesis. Certain basic premises must be satisfactorily defined for this methodology.

> My legal training has helped me to formulate postulates clearly and to the point. In law, any specific crime or obligation is recognized as such only when that particular crime or obligation satisfies *all* characteristics of that particular legal definition. I am sure no one has ever defined: art; work of art; purpose of art; painting; etc. At least that much I can claim. I would like to write a history of art, which in my understanding has never been written. . . . I would like to write a logical and a comparative history of art with comparative tables, attached.[49]

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[46] Waldemar George was an art critic in Paris during the 1920s and 1930s.

[47] Christian Zervos was the founder and publisher of *Cahiers d'art* in Paris in 1926.

[48] John Graham to Duncan Phillips, May 23 [presumably 1931 or 1932, since he expresses interest in employment by the Works Progress Administration and refers to his "questionnaire," apparently the manuscript for *SDA*, published in 1937 by Delphic Studios], The Phillips Collection records, AAA, Microfilm reel 1941, frame 92.

[49] Ibid.

War and Flight

A 1980s interview with Graham's second wife gives details about his years in Russia after 1915 (when he attended the Nicolaiev Cavalry Institute in St. Petersburg, presumably as a response to Russia's entry into World War I). In 1916, he joined the Grodno Hussars,[50] the light cavalry, of the Circassian Regiment of the "Wild Division" of Grand Duke Michael.[51]

It would be hard to imagine a more dashing or exotic assignment for Graham. On the western front, World War I devolved into bloody trench warfare along a line that ran from the North Sea to Switzerland.[52] Cavalry had no place in this type of modern combat. Graham's unit was concentrated on the southern periphery of the war zone. Romania, which had declared war on Germany and Austria-Hungary in 1916, saw its forces virtually destroyed, and what was left retreated into southwestern Russia, holding just a sliver of its former territory. In 1917, Graham received the Saint George Cross for bravery in battle on the Romanian front, where he "contrived to save a large number of troops who were under heavy machine-gun fire around a mountain passage."[53]

His exploits as an equestrian were legendary, and he maintained the erect bearing of the cavalryman all his life. Years later he would exhort the young New York artists

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[50] Grodno is one of the oldest cities in Lithuania. David Graham, the artist's fourth child (born in 1914), stated that the Hussars were a "family regiment." Edgerton, 24.

[51] Grand Duke Michael was the younger brother of Czar Nicholas; his liaison with and marriage to the daughter of a Moscow lawyer earned him his brother's reproach. As a test of his mettle, Michael was assigned an all-volunteer irregular (and thus "wild") division of the Russian army, composed of six regiments of Muslim soldiers from the Caucasus (Circassian) region.

[52] Paul Fussell, *The Great War in Modern Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), passim.

[53] Edgerton, 14.

around him to expand their visual acuity and sense of perspective by pivoting their heads in a 180-degree sweep. The sculptor Philip Pavia (American, 1912–2005) later remembered:

> Graham had another theory which was very visual and which greatly heightened my sensibility of art space. It was that the space projected out from one's eyes . . . it was a peripheral art space that one sees in the work of Pollock, de Kooning and Gorky. The idea was born in Graham when he was an officer in the Russian Cavalry . . . in the wilds of Siberia. This is how he got his clue:
>
> [Pavia here paraphrases a conversation he had with Graham on this subject:]
>
> Graham: Early in the morning, we would get up. Wash ourselves in ice water, do our toiletries and as a last gesture, we would dash vinegar on our genitals. We didn't ride like the show-offs we see in western cowboy movies. As we cantered our horses we would scan the horizon, our heads turning in a semi-circle, from one side to the other, thereby changing our perspective points on the horizon. The horizon line became as round as the rim of a disk. And we gained a peripheral vision. Our eyes became a little independent of each other. Not cross-eyed but trying to enclose the whole run of the disk. Many small perspective points not big, and jumping around as in Picasso.
>
> Pavia: But, Picasso does have moving perspective points. And what about the Futurists?
>
> Graham: Their perspective points are part of a static geometry. Now, Uccello made moving geometry. Every second as you are looking at his battle paintings, you feel the perspective alive and real, as if you are moving through the painting.[54]

In this manner Graham urged younger artists constantly to survey what was going on around them and to be acutely aware of their surroundings.

After the October Revolution of 1917, Graham was sent to Moscow. His wife joined him there while their son and daughter remained in the countryside. Accommodations were in short supply, and larger houses had to be shared. The couple

[54] Unpublished manuscript chronicling the 1940s through the 1960s in New York City, courtesy Natalie Edgar Pavia, New York. The excerpt is from Chapter Three, "Gulf Stream," Pavia's expression for the fervency that flowed through New York's Greenwich Village in the 1940s.

found quarters in the home of the Sokolov family. One of their daughters, Vera Alexandrovna, was sixteen at the time and in her last year of gymnasium.

In the Edgerton interview, Vera Alexandrovna began her story when she encountered the dashing cavalryman who had moved into her family's home in 1918. He became involved in a counterrevolutionary plot and all of the conspirators were arrested by the Bolsheviks and placed in Butyrka prison. Varying accounts of his escape are found in the Graham literature. One story has a sympathetic guard so taken with some drawings Graham made that he let him go.[55] Another says Mayakovsky helped obtain his release. Closer to the truth no doubt is Vera's recollection that one day Graham simply showed up at the house. He had been released, probably only because the Bolsheviks were wary of conducting too many executions. But he was a marked man, and so he and Vera hurriedly made plans to leave Moscow. According to her, Graham was able to obtain a divorce "very easily and quickly under the Bolsheviks."[56] His first wife remained with the children in Moscow; she later became a museum official.[57]

On August 7, 1918, Graham obtained a safe-conduct certificate from the Moscow representative of the Kingdom of Poland in Russia. Russia's sovereignty over Poland had collapsed after World War I, and Graham was eager to establish his entitlement to privileges on the basis of his Polish heritage. The certificate acknowledged

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[55] E. Green, 135.

[56] Edgerton, 21.

[57] The sculptor Dorothy Dehner recalled a 1936 visit to Moscow with her husband, David Smith, on which she met Graham's first wife, "Mme. Dabrowsky, curator in charge of restoration at the Byzantine Museum and surveyor of all the icons in the Soviet Union." See Dorothy Dehner's foreword to *SDA* (1971), xvii.

> that the Polish citizen Jan Dabrowski, born in 1886, has been registered in the list of persons remaining under the representation of the Most Noble Regency Council of the Kingdom of Poland and thus he and his property are subject to the protection of the Polish state.[58]

After they had been married little more than a month, Graham and Vera left Russia. Taking along only one small bag each, they bought train tickets to a summer resort not far from Moscow, so as not to arouse suspicion. At the completion of this journey, they bought tickets for another destination, closer to the border, and repeated this a number of times, hoping to reach safe territory. Vera described their strategy:

> Under the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, the Russians were not allowed to cross the border, and the border was constantly changed. The territory was given more and more to Russia, and taken away from the Poles. By the time we got to the border, it was a small river. By then there were . . . nine of us—nine people with little packages or bags—obviously trying to escape, but trying to appear not to do so.[59]

Why Not Paris?

They finally made it into Poland, and over the next sixteen months, Graham and Vera moved from place to place while he was engaged in the quotidian pursuit of a job; they were in Lodz and in Warsaw, and he briefly joined a Polish general's secret mission to Romania. The Poles were, not surprisingly, vehemently anti-Russian. Both Graham and Vera found themselves in a state of exile in Poland. Vera tried to learn Polish so that she could pass undetected. Graham did not speak the language well enough to get by in the Polish army; moreover, it was a considerably less stirring experience than his service with the Grodno Hussars At one point he enlisted with the White Russian general Anton Deniken, who was trying to hold the Crimean peninsula. Graham and Vera lived in

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[58] Translated from the Russian, John D. Graham records, AAA, Microfilm reel 3616.

[59] Edgerton, 23.

Sebastopol for six months, until the fighting got too close. After a harrowing trip across the Black Sea, they landed in Romania. When they returned to Warsaw, the Bolsheviks "were already in the suburbs . . . digging themselves into trenches."[60] By this time Vera was pregnant and about to give birth, so Graham set out to find a way for them to escape the chaos of Poland. He was no longer able to live in the country of his birth and was not at home in the country of his ancestors; now there would be even further exile.

Paris would have seemed the logical first choice for immigration. Graham's French was fluent and practiced, as was that of most educated Russians,[61] and if he chose to pursue a career in law, that facility would be a prerequisite. He would have known of Russians already in the French capital. Upper-class Russians had long made it an annual destination for art and culture.[62] David Burliuk had lived and studied in Paris in 1904.[63] From a political standpoint, Graham could have expected a sympathetic reception there. Many accounts of his life, in fact, simply assume there was an initial sojourn in Paris before his coming to America.

Why, then, did he choose to come to the United States? In all probability, it was a matter of expediency. How and why he ended up in Antwerp is not known, but it is likely that he heard about a ship traveling regularly across the Atlantic from the Belgian port. Antwerp was due west of Warsaw and there may have been a reliable train connection.

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[60] Ibid., 39.

[61] During the reign of Catherine the Great (1762–1798), French was established as the court language; the Gallic influence in the upper levels of society prevailed throughout the next century.

[62] Sergey Shchukin served an apprenticeship in the textile industry in Lyons; after he assumed control of the family's textile industry in 1894, he frequently visited Paris. His two younger brothers fled there shortly after their father's death, to indulge their cultural appetites. Kean, 150.

[63] Yevgenia Petrova, ed., *David Burliuk, 1882–1967* (St. Petersburg: The State Russian Museum, 1995), 110.

And it was obviously a ticket out—a chance to get even farther away. Given the upheaval of the past eight years of his life (a first wife and two children; a second wife and an infant son;[64] a world war and a civil war), he may have simply wanted to put as much distance as possible between himself and the past.

What ultimately determined the departure for Antwerp to secure passage overseas may have been more impulse than a reasoned choice. With no family and no connections, the United States offered the chance for a clean break and a fresh start, the opportunity to reinvent himself. Would Graham have decided to become an artist if he had gone to Paris? We do not know. The fact is, he came to America and there the life of an artist proved appealing. John Graham became an eager participant in a new and vibrant culture, as we shall see in the next chapter.

[64] Son Nicholas was born in Lissen, then in Germany, now in Poland, as they made their way East.

Chapter Two

The Twenties

How John Graham sought to position himself in the art world of the 1920s, in a trajectory that took him from Russia to New York, Baltimore, and Washington, D.C., then to Paris, and finally back to New York by decade's end, is the focus of this chapter. The 1920s were in many aspects defined by the idea of "experiment"; in Graham's first review in the *Baltimore News*, the writer advised all who were interested in "sincere experimentalism" to see Graham's paintings at the Modernist Galleries in Baltimore.[1] The collector and museum founder Duncan Phillips called his gallery devoted to new talent the "Experiment Station."[2] Graham thrived in this construct, where the paintings themselves became a metaphor for experiment. The lack of focus that one may detect when looking back on his work is not a negative. Graham turned to the great experimenter, Picasso, as a model. Few view Picasso's brief periods of involvement with any one style as experiments. They seem to forget the brevity of Picasso's periods of Analytical Cubism and Synthetic Cubism, and the fact that he constantly revisited earlier periods. Contemporary assessment of Graham's work often concentrated on his lack of a signature style as a reason for his work not to be taken seriously. My aim in this chapter is to restore serious consideration to his paintings and their critical reception, and to view

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[1] A.S.K., "Graham Stages Original Show," *Baltimore News*, February 3, 1926, photocopies in John D. Graham artist file, The Phillips Collection Archives, Washington, D.C.

[2] Erika D. Passantino and David W. Scott, eds., *The Eye of Duncan Phillips: A Collection in the Making* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 26.

his stylistic changes as manifestations of the term "experiment" that appears in so much of the rhetoric of the 1920s.

Early Years in New York: 1920–1922

We can only imagine the thoughts of Ivan and Vera Dombrowski as they landed in New York on Thanksgiving Day in 1920. The courage required in the next several years attests to the resilience and tenacity of Graham's character and affords insight into his reasons for choosing the life of an artist.

A firsthand account from Vera best describes the months after the couple's arrival in the United States.

> Some people we had met on the ship told us how New York was divided, how the seventies were the most expensive place, and so on. We had to find a cheap place, and we discovered that we could live in White Harlem, between 125th and 130th Streets. I don't remember just what the address was, but that's where we first lived. We didn't live there long—several weeks at most. By that time there was no money left. Graham here and there got different jobs that he was paid for, but not very much. I discovered that I could play an upright piano in a little ice cream parlor from about 2:30 until 5:00 in the afternoon. Children on the way home from school would stop there for a soda, and the music was an addition for them. I got a dollar an afternoon for playing, and I paid for the room, which was six dollars a week. Then we moved to [an apartment in a brownstone at] 131 E. 31st and lived there for several months.[3]

As Vera mentions, Graham tried any number of odd jobs to make a living during this period and he sought a more suitable permanent position as well.[4] Graham later told a

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[3] Vera Graham Thorne, interview by Anne C. Edgerton, in "John D. Graham 1886–1961," Ph.D. diss., University of California, Santa Barbara, 1984, 57–58.

[4] A letter of January 10, 1921, from the American Central Committee for Russian Relief recommended him to Sanderson & Son, steamship agents, as a "gentleman [who] had been personally known to us for some time. He came to America from Warsaw, Poland, where he was a refugee from Bolshevism after having been in General Denikin's [*sic*] Army." Assuring the firm that the information on "I. V. Dobrovsky" is accurate, the writers conclude: "We feel sure he is a loyal anti-Bolshevik Russian." This was an important point for potential employers: the fear of Bolshevik-inspired revolution was

Baltimore newspaper reporter that he worked as a book salesman and at the New York Public Library during these early years.[5] In a 1970s interview, Vera noted that Graham worked briefly as a writer for a Polish-language newspaper but his grammar and spelling proved too shaky. Instead he began to supply the newspaper with sketches. She recalled attending a theatrical performance with him where he held a pencil in each hand and simultaneously drew the figures on stage.[6]

Not long after their arrival, they met a Russian couple who took pity on them living as they did in cramped quarters with an infant. The woman introduced Graham and Vera to her employers, the Thorne family, who lived in Rye, New York. Graham was soon hired to teach horseback riding to two of the Thorne sons (the eldest, Samuel, Jr., seventeen, was away at boarding school[7]) and Vera was to teach music and French to the boys and their younger sister. An Austrian governess cared for three younger children. Vera later recalled that Graham "did not teach much horseback riding, but mostly told stories." [8] By 1922, he was back in New York City, apparently disenchanted with a life in

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widespread at the time in the United States. John D. Graham records, Archives of American Art/Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. (hereafter AAA), Microfilm reel 3616, frame 102.

[5] "Member of Nobility Who Fled Russia Makes Home in Baltimore," *Baltimore Sun*, undated clipping from 1924. John D. Graham records, AAA, Microfilm reel 3616, frame 673.

[6] Eila Kokkinen, "John D. Graham: A Chronology of His Life and Work," M.A. thesis, The University of Chicago, 1977, 41. In the same interview, Vera mentions that Graham quit the New York Public Library job because dust in the stacks affected his sinuses.

[7] Guide to the Samuel Thorne, Jr., Papers, Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library, New Haven, Connecticut.

[8] Edgerton, 51.

service; Vera and baby Nicholas remained in Rye with the Thornes.[9] Graham would initiate divorce proceedings in 1923.

Shortly after his return to New York City, Graham signed up for courses at a commercial art school and also studied privately with Irene Weir, a noted teacher and a member of the well-known family of painters.[10] Several years later he provided this note for a brief biography: "All my life from earliest childhood, I have been drawing and wanted to be an artist, but bewildered by astonishing sights of life and its mirages, entangled in bewitching passions, with no one that could advise me, nor one whose judgement I could trust, I was like a vessel without a captain."[11]

Clearly his status as a recent immigrant would have hindered his pursuing a career in the law. Increasingly aware that his best chance for advancement, professional as well as social, was through his art, Graham enrolled at one of the best-known art schools in New York, the Art Students League.

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[9] Young Samuel Thorne completed Groton; attended Trinity College, Cambridge, in 1923 and 1924; and graduated from Yale College in 1928. That same year he and Vera, who was three years his senior, were married. They appear to have had a long and happy marriage, and in addition to Nicholas raised a son of their own. Samuel died in 1992, and Vera in 1998, at age ninety-seven. A document in the John D. Graham records, AAA, attests to Samuel's legal adoption of Nicholas in 1938 (Microfilm reel 3616, frame 122); he was thereafter known as Nicholas Thorne. Graham's contact with Vera and Nicholas was infrequent after he left Rye.

[10] Edgerton, 53.

[11] John D. Graham, Baltimore, to Duncan Phillips, Washington, D.C., April 2, 1928, John D. Graham records, AAA, Microfilm reel 1935, frame 245. Phillips had asked for the note for a catalogue entry he was writing.

John Sloan and the Art Students League

In December 1922, one John A[braham] Dabrowsky registered for evening classes at the League, giving his address as 158 West 58th Street.[12] Graham signed up for one month of drawing and composition with William von Schlegell, an American painter who worked in an impressionistic mode. Registration took place monthly and students were at liberty to change instructors. The following month Graham was registered in two of John Sloan's classes, life and pictorial composition and life painting, and he continued in these Sloan evening classes through May. In July and August 1923, he registered as John Graham Dabrowksy for Edward Penfield's mediums and figure drawing classes. By the fall of 1923, he was using the name John A. Dabrowsky again. He continued in Sloan's drawing classes and also studied with Kenneth Hayes Miller and Allen Tucker during the 1923-1924 season. A notation in the ledger indicates that he served as monitor during the month of February. According to a memoir by the artist Alexander Brook, who studied at the League from 1914 to 1918, the monitor had the privilege of posing the model and setting up his own easel "while the rest of the class waited outside the room to be called in after the pose was set, then to choose [their spots by picking] a number . . . out of a hat."[13] Graham was thirty-six at the time; most of the other students were at least ten years younger.[14] In Sloan's drawing class he met Elinor Gibson, a fellow student born and raised in Baltimore; at that time Graham was working during the day as a social

[12] All registration records are from the ledger books in the archives of the Art Students League, New York..

[13] Alexander Brook Papers, AAA, Microfilm reel 3928, frame 1041.

[14] Alexander Calder was twenty-five, Adolph Gottlieb twenty, and Barnett Newman eighteen.

secretary to someone at the Associated Press and attended the League in the evenings.[15] He and Gibson would marry in January 1924.

Gibson was the daughter of the prominent musician and composer Archer Gibson (1875–1952). A native of Baltimore, he studied at the city's Peabody Conservatory and in 1901 became organist and choirmaster of the Brick Presbyterian Church in New York.[16] He resigned in 1909 because of personal differences with church officials and for the rest of his life he performed privately for such notables as John D. Rockefeller, Sr., Andrew Carnegie, Henry Clay Frick, and Charles M. Schwab.[17] Gibson was the first organist in America to become a millionaire,[18] and he installed major organs at all his residences. After his divorce from Elinor's mother in 1918, he moved into an elegant duplex apartment on West 86th Street in Manhattan, where he lived until his death. For most of her career, Elinor was employed as an art teacher, and during the years she and Graham were together, she provided them with a steady income. Still, it can be assumed she had some of the Gibson family financial resources on which to rely.[19]

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[15] Kokkinen, 44.

[16] Obituary, *The New York Times*, July 15, 1952.

[17] Ibid.

[18] The income was from his recordings on Aeolian Duo-Art rolls and RCA phonograph records. *Reed Organ Society Bulletin* 14, no. 2 (spring 1995), 14.

[19] At a meeting some years later, the sculptor Dorothy Dehner characterized Archer Gibson in this way: "Her [Elinor's] funny father drove up to get her from New Hampshire, with his swell car, chauffeur, wife, and two dogs. He's a dumb old pot and likes to let you know what a lot of famous people he knows." Dorothy Dehner, Bolton Landing, New York to Lucille Corcos, Brooklyn, New York, September 25, 1936, Edgar Levy and Lucille Corcos Levy papers, AAA, Microfilm reel NDSmith E 1, frame 106.

John Sloan was a great influence on Graham while he studied at the League. A sense of Sloan's teaching method can be gleaned from an interview that Adolph Gottlieb gave in the 1960s:

> John Sloan had the most valuable influence on me because [he] was a very liberal guy for his time. For any time. He was interested in Cubism, for example. He had a peculiar attitude. He thought Cubism was an experimental type of art that would provide training to people so that they then could drop it and do something that was more significant. Well, I quickly discovered that Cubism wasn't valuable as a preparation for anything else. It was just an end in itself and a perfectly valid thing. However, as a result of Sloan's interest in everything that was happening in modern art, I became . . . interested and read every book that I could on the subject, went to see whatever was available in New York.
>
> Yes, that was another thing that was good about Sloan. He tried to get people . . . encouraged [people] to do things that were not exactly literal and to work from imagination or memory. So he implanted that idea rather early in me. When I came back from Europe, aside from any work that I did in art schools, working from the model, I did other sorts of things. Imaginary compositions, landscapes, figure scenes that I worked up from sketches. Even if I painted a model in a classroom I would try to make it look like something other than just a classroom study.[20]

Graham may have found this teacher a sympathetic personality. And Sloan may have taken a special interest in this older student. He is quoted as saying that "the only real abstract art element is line. Light and shade, perspective, solidity and the rest all exist in nature. Line is the creation of the artist."[21] This thought resonates throughout Graham's later writings. In *System and Dialectics of Art*, he wrote: "Perfect two-dimensional form speaks of objects' three-dimensionality better, more fully and more poignantly, than shadow painting possibly can: the goal of painting is to find final

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[20] Adolph Gottlieb, interview by Dorothy Seckler for the Archives of American Art, October 25, 1967. http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/oral histories/transcripts/gottlieb67.htm. Accessed August 6, 2006.

[21] As quoted in Van Wyck Brooks, *John Sloan: A Painter's Life* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1955), 145.

significant shapes. Shadows, modeling an object, deflect artist's interest from the original goal and conceal shape rather than elucidate it."[22] He shared Sloan's view that line is the touchstone for the true artist. Graham's accomplished 1923 *Seated Female Nude, Sloan's Drawing Class* (Fig. 2.1) suggests the caliber of work he was producing at the League.

Many of the catchphrases included in Sloan's 1939 book *Gist of Art* are advice that Graham might have taken to heart. The aphorisms he heard in Sloan's classes must have buoyed him in his decision to become an artist. Sloan wrote:

> Though a living cannot be made at art, art makes life worth living. It makes living, living. It makes starving, living. It makes worry, it makes trouble, it makes a life that would be barren of everything—living. It brings life to life.[23]
>
> Don't be afraid to borrow. The great men, the most original, borrowed from everybody. Witness Shakespeare and Rembrandt. They borrowed from the technique of tradition and created new images by the power of their imagination and human understanding. Little men just borrow from one person. Assimilate all you can from tradition and then say things in your own way.[24]

Evidently the two remained cordial after Sloan stopped teaching at the League in 1924. A 1926 painting by Graham, *Still Life Pitcher and Fruit* (Fig. 2.2), remained in Sloan's private collection until his death (it was given by his widow to the Delaware Museum of Art). Sloan bought the painting in 1928, when a lucrative sale of his own work gave him some ready cash: he acquired a twenty-five-dollar Victrola and two paintings, both by former students.[25] Sloan fostered a critical connection for Graham, by,

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[22] *SDA* (1937), 24. Response to question 21, "Is painting a two-dimensional or a three-dimensional proposition?"

[23] John Sloan, *Gist of Art* (New York: American Artists Group, 1939), 35.

[24] Ibid., 37.

[25] John Loughery, *John Sloan: Painter and Rebel* (New York: Henry Holt, 1995), 290. The other painting was by A. S. Baylinson.

apparently, introducing him to Frank Crowninshield, the urbane editor of *Vanity Fair* and friend of Sloan's.[26] Crowninshield was the collector for whom Graham would amass a stellar collection of African art (see Chapter Three).

League student Alexander Calder included these reminiscences in his autobiography:

> I also went in the evening to John Sloan's class, where my best friend was the painter John Debrowsky [*sic*]. . . . I never was conscious that he was much older than I when I knew him at the Art Students League. Sloan was a good instructor, not trying to make you do it his way but urging you to develop some capabilities of your own. But Debrowsky first attracted my attention by drawing a nude with two pencils, one red and one black, and starting with the feet and running right up. Later on, when trying to earn a living, at a time when we all would have liked to do fashion art, he turned out some drawings that looked impeccable, to me, but he could not sell any.[27]

The Calder scholar Joan Marter points out the closeness of the two artists' drawing in these years and the influence Graham's line drawing may have had on Calder's transition from line to wire.[28] (The artists' shared experience in Paris will be discussed later in this chapter.)

In 1923, Graham had the time, inclination, and, presumably, the means to add "self-published poet" to his roster of achievements. He issued a chapbook, *Have It*, that included twenty-one poems in English (with parts of three in French) and two illustrations (one the caricature of Royal Cortissoz mentioned in the Introduction). There are several references to his new love, Elinor Gibson; one poem about her is titled "To

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[26] Brooks, *John Sloan*, 225. Crowninshield was the toastmaster for a dinner given in Sloan's honor by the Society of Independent Artists.

[27] Alexander Calder, *Calder: An Autobiography with Pictures* (New York: Pantheon, 1966), 61.

[28] Joan Marter, *Alexander Calder* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 19.

Her Who Is 70 Feet High" (She was nearly six feet tall, to Graham's five feet, eight inches). Barnett Newman recalled that Graham was known at the League as the "Russian poet."[29] It seemed as natural to him to write poetry as to draw and he continued to express himself in poetry and in writing throughout his adult life.

Early Years in Baltimore

Graham and Elinor Gibson married on January 9, 1924, and relocated to Baltimore. Whatever the motive, and it was probably economic, the move proved strategic in terms of Graham's career. In Baltimore, he would meet two collectors, Dr. Claribel Cone and Duncan Phillips, each of whom would have a great impact on his life as an artist. An article in the *Baltimore Sun* told of Graham's arrival: "In a modest studio at the corner of Pleasant and St. Paul Streets a member of the Russian nobility, a soldier and former jurist of the Czarist regime, a counter-revolutionist who at one time was imprisoned and sentenced to death by the Bolsheviks, has established a Baltimore home."[30] Graham provided the reporter with a harrowing, if abbreviated, account of his life during the revolution. After such travails, the article concluded, "Graham started for the United States with $1500, all that remained of his fortune." This is the first public construction of his past, and he dexterously elided his earlier marriages and offspring, no doubt in deference to Elinor and her family. (In fact, his divorce from Vera was not final

[29] Kokkinen, 34.

[30] "Member of Nobility Who Fled Russian Makes Home in Baltimore," *Baltimore Sun*, February 12, 1926, John D. Graham artist file, The Phillips Collection Archives.

until December 1924.[31]) The caption for the photograph that accompanied the article identified him as John Dabrowsky Graham—the first time he used this version of his name.[32]

An article heralding Graham's entry into Baltimore society could hardly have gone unnoticed among the art community there. Baltimore was no cultural or intellectual backwater. The Peabody Institute, founded in 1857, was the first academy of music established in the United States and Johns Hopkins University, founded in 1876, was the nation's first research institution. In 1909, Henry Walters opened to the public the galleries housing the collection his father had begun in the 1850s. The Baltimore Museum of Art and Library was founded in 1914. Touring opera and dance companies made regular stops in the city.[33]

The Grahams were soon drawn into the fledgling group of modernists who called themselves the Friends of Art. Formed by those who produced artwork and those who admired it, the organization sought to promote modern art in all its aspects. The artist Shelby Shackleford later recalled that the Grahams' apartment at 15 East Pleasant Street had a large front room that they let the Friends use. "Here, in January, 1926, our small door was opened to the avant-garde, and exhibitions were held regularly throughout that

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[31] E. Green, 137.

[32] The Gibson family's formal announcement of their daughter's wedding two years earlier had referred to him as "Mr. Ivan Graham Dabrowsky." John D. Graham records, AAA, Microfilm reel 3616, frame 207.

[33] Dr. Claribel Cone's 1925 appointment book noted a very busy February at the Lyric Theatre: *Thaïs* with Mary Garden on Wednesday, the 11th; Gounod's *Faust* with Feodor Chaliapin in the role of Mephistopheles; *La Gioconda* with Rosa Raisa; the symphony on the 18th; and the modern dance troupe of Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn on the 19th.

winter."[34] Graham's one-man exhibition in the so-called Modernist Galleries in February 1926 was among the first held there. His excitement at the prospect of exhibiting publicly is obvious in the inscription on the back of one of the paintings made for the show, *Pears in Motion* (Fig. 2.3): "This painting rich in potentialities, I painted for my own satisfaction in city of Baltimore, Md. / 15 E/ Pleasant St. / January 1926 A.D."[35] Subsequent correspondence suggests that Graham's first acquaintance with Etta and Claribel Cone came that same year, probably as a result of this exhibition and his association with the Friends of Art, of which the Cone sisters were members.

A review of his one-man show appeared in the February 3, 1926, edition of the *Baltimore News*. The polite reviewer informed readers that "for all those interested in sincere experimentalism in painting the present exhibition at the Modernist Galleries will prove a veritable Promised Land."

> The . . . show at the Modernist Galleries should be particularly interesting to Baltimoreans, as it is the work of one of Baltimore's most newly acquired and withal most original artists, John D. Graham, whose other more rightful name is Ivan Dabrowsky.
>
> It is a blessing in these days of evolutions and revolutions in art to find an artist who does not shut himself up within the narrow confines of any one school of art but is, rather, an experimentalist. Graham is such. And his exhibition shows, above all else, a certain striving after something that shall give to painting a yet deeper reality than has heretofore been achieved by thousands of so-called schools.[36]

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[34] Quoted in Bruce Weber, *Toward a New American Cubism* (New York: Berry-Hill Galleries, 2006), 20.

[35] John D. Graham artist file, The Phillips Collection, photocopied cataloguer's notes. On the reverse is the head of a woman, most likely Elinor Graham.

[36] "Graham Stages Original Show," *Baltimore News*, February 3, 1926. Clipping in John D. Graham artist file, The Phillips Collection Archives. The reviewer cites *Pears in Motion*, *The Bather*, and

The reviewer tried to deal diplomatically with the fact that there was no one way to describe Graham's work and that, in the great modernist experiment under way, it would be churlish to demand consistency. There are few extant works by Graham that can be dated conclusively to the years 1922–1925. *Self-Portrait* (1923), discussed in the introduction (Fig. 0.1), is the most notable. Several drawings purchased by (or given to) the Cone sisters and now in the collection of the Weatherspoon Art Museum at the University of North Carolina, Greensboro (see below), were made in this period, among them the impressive *Seated Female Nude, Sloan's Drawing Class*, 1923 (Fig. 2.1). The small, tentative *Untitled (Hyacinth)* (Fig. 2.4) could be the work of a talented amateur.[37] Other works dated to 1925 that may have been in the exhibition are: *Still Life*, 1925 (Fig. 1.11); *Still Life*, 1925 (Fig. 2.5); and *Untitled*, 1925 (Fig. 2.6). A brief examination of two of these (Figs. 1.11 and 2.6) suggests the artist's more than passing acquaintance with the work of Stuart Davis, especially the inclusion of a saw in a tabletop still life, which first appeared in Davis's 1922 composition, *Landscape, Gloucester*.

A significant connection that Graham made in these years was with a Johns Hopkins University philosophy professor, George Boas (1891–1980), who was a member of the Friends of Art and a presence in Baltimore intellectual circles. He was close to the Cone sisters and wrote the foreword to *The Cone Collection of Baltimore, Maryland: Catalogue of Paintings–Drawings–Sculpture of the Nineteenth and Twentieth*

Head and Landscape (most likely *Head of a Woman*, 1926 [Fig. 2.3A], a portrait of Elinor with a landscape in the background, now in the collection of the Whitney Museum of American Art).

[37] Shown in the 2005 exhibition at the Allan Stone Gallery; it is dated c. 1922 but may be from 1923 or 1924.

Centuries, published in 1934 by Etta as a tribute to her sister after Claribel's death.[38] Boas worked closely with a fellow faculty member, Arthur O. Lovejoy (1873–1962), who taught history at the university from 1910 to 1939.[39] In 1923, the two founded the Hopkins History of Ideas Club for the historical study of the development and influence of general philosophical concepts, ethical notions, and aesthetic fashions in Occidental literature; the club was open to all—graduate and undergraduate students, as well as interested Baltimoreans. A student participant later described the meetings: "Seventy people would sit in the smoke-filled air, listening with more or less interest to a scholarly paper read often nervously by even the most experienced of renowned scholars. Then they would resettle themselves in the stiff chairs to await the opening of the discussion—what would Professor Lovejoy say?"[40] Given his connection with Boas through the Friends of Art, one could assume that Graham attended some of these sessions. Boas's writings on art, including *Primitivism and Related Ideas in Antiquity* (1935), written with Lovejoy, and his work as editor for Baltimore Museum of Art publications in the 1930s and 1940s, would have certainly had an influence on Graham's writings.

Dr. Claribel and Miss Etta Cone

Graham's first contact with the Cone sisters led to a warm and cordial relationship. Having secured a Polish passport (issued in New York to Ivan Dabrowsky)[41]

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[38] Brenda Richardson. *Dr. Claribel and Miss Etta: The Cone Collection of The Baltimore Museum of Art* (Baltimore: The Baltimore Museum of Art, 1985), 13.

[39] Lovejoy is generally credited with having coined the phrase "history of ideas."

[40] Dale Keiger, "Tussling with the Idea Man," *Johns Hopkins Magazine*, April 2000, 34.

[41] John D. Graham records, AAA, Microfilm reel 3616, frame 295.

in 1925, Graham traveled to Europe in the summer of the next year. A note from Claribel to Etta, written after the Grahams had returned to the United States, indicates that Elinor traveled with him, and suggests how the two financed this and subsequent trips to Europe: "Then I went to the Graham's [*sic*] to see their paintings and things they had bought in Africa and as she (Mrs. G.) said—'Dr. Cone we took your advice and brought a few things back with us to sell in this country'—I naturally bought a few."[42]

In January 1928, Graham resolved the matter of the fifty francs ($20) that Claribel had lent him in Paris the previous June and, as we saw in the Introduction, duly recorded in her daybook. As he wrote her:

> I am sending you the landscape you wanted to have.[43] It was originally bought by Mr. Phillips for $150 and later exchanged for a larger painting for which he paid the difference. The other landscape that I had in mind at first was much smaller and was sold to Weyhe Gallery [in New York] and he resold it this summer again, when I was in France. I was going to ask for the present one, $75 (dealer's prices) being the half of what it was originally sold for, but since this is the one you had in mind when we agreed to $50 price for it last summer in Paris,—I leave entirely it to you to affix the price and any decision you will take will be agreeable to me. Anyhow we are going to deduct the $20 which you gave me in Paris in advance.[44]

He went on to tell Dr. Cone that he had just returned from New York and had entered an exclusive arrangement with Dudensing Galleries, on East 57th Street, and that

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[42] Dr. Claribel Cone to Miss Etta Cone, January 12, 1927, Dr. Claribel and Miss Etta Cone Papers, Manuscript Collection, The Baltimore Museum of Art. There is little factual evidence to suggest that Graham ever traveled to Sub-Saharan or French Equatorial Africa, the source of the majority of African artifacts he traded. In May of 1928, while waiting for the studio in Paris to become available, Graham traveled to Sicily, where he painted *Palermo* (Fig. 2.23). It is entirely possible that he crossed the Straits of Sicily for a visit to Tunisia, and it seems likely that brief excursions to North Africa during trips to Europe would have been his only visits to that continent. In early biographical notes, Graham included mention of travel to Asia Minor (or Anatolia, which is present-day Turkey, across the Black Sea from the Ukraine); he later shortened this to the more exotic-sounding "Asia."

[43] *Landscape of Beaucaire near Provence* (1926–1927), Cone Collection, The Baltimore Museum of Art (photograph unavailable).

[44] John Graham, Baltimore, to Dr. Claribel Cone, Baltimore, January 11, 1928, Dr. Claribel and Miss Etta Cone Papers, Manuscript Collection, The Baltimore Museum of Art.

Dudensing would be his sole agent for exhibitions and sales, including a one-man show scheduled for early in 1929. He described their future relationship:

> I may sell my paintings personally, but *not below* the prices established by [Dudensing]. So this is the last painting that I can sell at this low figure, since our agreement concerning this landscape was made previous to my present contract. The landscape represents Beaucaire (across the river from Tarascon) in Provence, and is brilliant and luminous.[45]

Graham mentioned that he was painting a portrait of the writer Ben Hecht and that he might do one of Duncan Phillips, perhaps in an effort to interest Dr. Cone in her own portrait. He did make a sketch of her in 1927 (Fig. 2.7), a right-profile head in pencil on brown paper but never received the commission for an oil portrait.[46] Graham passed on greetings from his wife and a report on her progress as an artist: "Mrs. Graham sold etchings to Weyhe gallery and other people, her work has progressed immensely. She sends her love and asks you and Miss Etta Cone as soon as you will not be so busy, come and see us."[47] The intimate tone of the letter gives the impression that Graham and Elinor had ingratiated themselves with the Cones. He would always remember them with affection; a copy of the 1929 Waldemar George monograph on Graham in the Cone archives is inscribed "To Miss Etta Cone/my first collector/Graham."

An ebullient letter that Graham wrote after he and Elinor had visited the Cones [48] sheds further light on their relationship.

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[45] Ibid.

[46] There is also an undated full-figure drawing of Dr. Cone in pencil on brown paper now in The Phillips Collection (Fig. 2.8).

[47] John Graham, Baltimore, to Dr. Claribel Cone, Baltimore, January 11, 1928, Dr. Claribel and Miss Etta Cone Papers, Manuscript Collection, The Baltimore Museum of Art.

[48] A virtual tour of the Cone residence at the Marlborough Apartments, 180 Eutaw Place, Baltimore, http://www.artbma.org/video/conevideo.html. Accessed July 14, 2006.

> Dear Dr. Cone,
>
> I enjoyed seeing your collection so much that I had to write you immediately to express how elated I was over your Matisse and van Gogh. They are most inspiring powerful messages calling us to clarity, achievement, and heroic deeds. I can appreciate them better now than two years ago when I saw them for the last time. It is surprising what significant meaning has your collection as a whole and personally, I feel stimulated to produce a greater effort to achievement. When I came home I found a frame that fits exactly the landscape and the frame is of the kind you wanted and in perfect condition . . . .

He closes:

> With best regards of Mrs. Graham and my own
> yours very sincerely,
> Graham
> P.S. I am going to paint a painting which I will dedicate to the exquisite taste of Dr. Claribel Cone
> Graham
> P.S. I was very pleased to know that Miss Etta Cone has bought from Mr. Skutch St. Barbara, the figure I bought the summer before last from France and sold to Mr. Skutch—it flatters my taste. I bought some, more important, figures this year and will be glad to show them to you before I sell them to dealers. My prices are about 50% below dealers'.[49]

At about the same time that Claribel Cone acquired the southern French landscape she also purchased *Still Life with Fruit and Blue and White Pitcher*, 1926 (Figure 2.9). The Cones also bought (or were given by the artist) twenty-seven drawings that are now in the collection of the Weatherspoon Art Museum at the University of North Carolina, Greensboro.[50] The figure drawings, among which is the 1923 seated nude from Sloan's

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[49] John Graham, Baltimore to Dr. Claribel Cone, Baltimore, March 7, 1928, Dr. Claribel and Miss Etta Cone Papers, Manuscript Collection, The Baltimore Museum of Art. Robert F. Skutch was an antiques and fine-arts dealer in Baltimore. The St. Barbara would most likely have been a medieval or Renaissance figure that Graham had purchased while traveling in Europe.

[50] Etta Cone bequeathed 242 works of art to the Weatherspoon, including sixty-seven prints and seven bronzes by Matisse, and a large number of prints and drawings by Picasso, Félix Vallotton, and Raoul Dufy. The Cone family were successful textile manufacturers, and many of their mills were located in the South. Moses Cone had built a vacation home in Blowing Rock, North Carolina, and his sister Etta visited often after Claribel's death. Etta's sister-in-law Mrs. Julius (Laura Wells) Cone was an alumna of the school—which was still a women's college—and she persuaded her sister-in-law to remember in her

Art Students League class, show an accomplished handling of form (Figs. 2.1, 2.10, 2.11, 2.12, 2.13). A series of sketches made out-of-doors reveal an interest in the urban landscape (Figs. 2.14, 2.15, 2.16, 2.17).[51] For a further discussion of Graham and the Cone sisters, see the section "John Graham and African Art" in Chapter Three.

Summers of 1926 and 1927

There is little prima facie evidence about Graham's and Elinor's activities in the summers of 1926 and 1927 in Europe. While Elinor seems to have accompanied her husband to Europe, she may not have been able to remain abroad as long as he, since she was always employed as an art teacher.[52]

The Parisian art world was acclimating to the young Americans who flocked there after World War I. Few made the impact of Gerald Murphy, who arrived in 1921, and set out to reinvent himself as a painter. His singular style would prompt his friend Fernand Léger to call him the "only American painter in Paris."[53] In 1921, Charles Demuth wrote

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will the fledgling museum, established on the campus in 1942. http://weatherspoon.uncg.edu//collections/conecollection.html. Accessed July 20, 2006.

[51] Carl Goldstein, "John Graham During the 1920s: His Introduction to Modernism," *Arts Magazine*, March 1977, 98–99. Goldstein examines these drawings and makes a case that Baltimore and the Cone Collection, not the Schuchkin collection in Moscow, constituted Graham's introduction to modernism. Goldstein takes an overdetermined look at the drawings, and cites Lachaise (Fig. 2.1), Marin (Fig. 2.16), and Hartley (Fig. 2.17) as influences in Graham's work.

[52] The June 29, 1927, entry in Claribel Cone's daybook does not mention Elinor at the dinner party; it is highly unlikely, given their friendly terms, that she would have been excluded if she was in Paris.

[53] Sophie Lévy, ed., *A Transatlantic Avant-Garde: American Artists in Paris, 1918–1939* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 33.

to Alfred Stieglitz from Paris: "All the French painters, the great ones, and the men interested in the two magazines—'L'Amour de l'Art' and 'L'Esprit Nouveau,' are very anxious to have the best of the Americans in with them."[54]

By the mid-twenties, the art historian Kenneth Silver has noted, "American artists were a kind of blind spot in the rhetoric of *L'Esprit Nouveau.*"[55] The same could be said of other journals of the period. But the climate had changed, and Graham's timing could not have been better as entered the Parisian art scene. A new publication would open a window on it and especially on the world of Picasso, and would enable young American painters to steep themselves in the heady atmosphere. In 1926, as a Picasso exhibition was about to open at the renovated premises of the Galerie Paul Rosenberg, a young journalist, Christian Zervos, had just launched *Cahiers d'art*. Zervos was received in the studio of the *maître* and he opened the report in his journal with this breathless line: "In three days Picasso will let us see his recent work."[56] The art historian Michael FitzGerald describes the exhibition: "Continuing the pattern of alternating Neoclassical and Cubist work, this large selection showcased Picasso's revitalized Cubism, an expansive form . . . that embraced the full range of his styles from Neoclassicism to realism and the newest Surrealist departures."[57] More significant, perhaps, were the photographs that

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[54] Bruce Kellner, ed., *Letters of Charles Demuth, American Artist, 1883–1935* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2000), as quoted in Lévy, 16.

[55] Kenneth E. Silver, "From *Nature Morte* to Contemporary Plastic Life: Purism, Léger and the Americans," in Lévy, 32. A journal of design, *L'esprit nouveau* was founded in Paris in 1920 by Le Corbusier and Amédée Ozenfant.

[56] Christian Zervos, "Œuvres récentes de Picasso," *Cahiers d'art,* 5 Juin 1926, 89; quoted in Michael FitzGerald, *Making Modernism: Picasso and the Creation of the Market for Twentieth-Century Art* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1995), 166.

[57] Ibid., 158.

accompanied Zervos's article (Fig. 2.18), which established the studio as a site for painterly action and introduced "the artist in his studio" as a regular feature.

Many young American artists shared the sentiment of the sculptor Alexander Calder when he said that "Paris seemed the place to go, on all accounts of practically everyone who had been there . . . I decided I would also like to go."[58] By 1928, when Graham had his first extended stay in Paris, the number of Americans traveling to Paris peaked, only to plummet in 1929, the year of the Crash.

Duncan Phillips

The Washington, D.C., collector Duncan Phillips (1886–1966) played an important role in the formative years of Graham's career, and it was Graham's presence in Baltimore that first brought him to the collector's attention. Phillips founded his gallery in Washington in 1921, as the nation's first museum of modern art.[59] Through both his gallery and his writings, he was an impassioned proselytizer for modern art.

According to the sculptor Dorothy Dehner, Graham told her that he had met Duncan Phillips on a return voyage from Europe; he showed Phillips some of the works he had recently completed in Paris and Phillips promptly purchased a significant

[58] Calder, 76.

[59] Phillips was born in Pittsburgh, the grandson of James Laughlin, a banker and cofounder of the Jones and Laughlin Steel Company. The Phillips family moved to Washington in 1895, and after the loss of his father and an older brother, Duncan and his mother, Eliza Laughlin Phillips, opened the Phillips Memorial Art Gallery in their home.

number.[60] Nothing in the Phillips Collection archives points to the exact date of their meeting; the catalogue for the 1986 Phillips Collection exhibition on Graham speculates that he "probably just made a trip to Washington, having heard that Phillips was always open to looking at new work and listening to new theory."[61]

It is more likely that the two met in Baltimore, possibly at an event held by the Friends of Art, headquartered at 8 Pleasant Street. A letter from A[lice] Worthington Ball, a member of the board of trustees of the Friends and the chairman of exhibitions, invited Phillips and his wife to a luncheon in their honor in early December 1926. The organization had petitioned Phillips to lend works from his collection for an exhibition, and he responded:

> I promised to write to you in September about the date that would suit me best for the exhibition of a few of our pictures in Baltimore under the auspices of the Friends of Art. The Baltimore Museum has also invited paintings from our Collection for an exhibition to be held in March, and as they are to be specifically of Modernist tendencies it occurs to me that I would like to have the more conservative pictures shown by the Friends of Art at the same time. The two exhibitions would supplement each other and give an idea to the Baltimore public of the cardinal principle of my Gallery, namely, Tolerance for different points of view and different methods of expression.[62]

Phillips's tolerance agenda notwithstanding, the Friends were evidently not pleased with his decision to give them a selection of the "more conservative" paintings

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[60] Dorothy Dehner, "Memoir of John Graham," Dorothy Dehner Papers, AAA, Microfilm reel D298, frame 1540.

[61] E. Green, 30.

[62] Duncan Phillips, Washington, D.C., to Adaline D. Piper, corresponding secretary, Friends of Art, Baltimore, September 30, 1926, The Phillips Collection records, AAA, Microfilm reel 1932, frame 201.

from his collection. They let him know that they had "counted on having a group of . . . modern paintings" for their show.[63]

However Phillips and Graham first met, they seem to have gotten on famously—at least in the first years of their acquaintance. As we shall see, their frequent correspondence over the next several years reveals what might be termed the inherent precariousness of the relationship between artist and collector By early 1927, Phillips was writing enthusiastically to Graham:

> I have been hoping that you and Mrs. Graham would come over some day with your friends, the more progressive painters and art lovers of Baltimore, to see our remarkable Tri-Unit Exhibition featuring the ancient Egyptian Head in stone form the finest period of Egyptian sculpture. But that is not all, there is a whole wall of Marin and it is simply thrilling. And there is another wall of French Moderns including new works by Matisse, Bonnard, Utrillo and Segonzac and others. Don [*sic*] fail to come over to see it. And please let me have a list of the names and addressed [*sic*] of people in Baltimore, artists, and others who would be interested especially in the Moderns. I have heard so much about Miss Cone but she is not on our mailing list and [I] would like to have her address. In case I have the name wrong, I refer to the one who owns the collection of Matisse and has so many of your pictures.[64]

On March 28, 1927, Ivan Dabrowsky became a naturalized U.S. citizen, his name now officially John D. Graham. Adolph Gottlieb, a friend from Art Students League days, acted as a witness at the time of his application.[65]

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[63] Adaline D. Piper, corresponding secretary, Friends of Art, Baltimore, to Duncan Phillips, Washington, D.C., October 11, 1926, The Phillips Collection records, AAA, Microfilm reel 1932, frame 210.

[64] Duncan Phillips, Washington, D.C., to John Graham, Baltimore, February 9, 1927, John D. Graham artist file, The Phillips Collection Archives.

[65] John D. Graham papers, AAA, Microfilm reel 3616, frame 382.

Even at this early stage of their relationship, Phillips's admiration for Graham was such that he commissioned a painting.[66] Not completely happy with the results, he gave Graham some explicit directives on how to "fix" it.

> The landscape [*Blue Bay* (Fig. 2.20)] is not finished. The bay and the foreground are heavily painted whereas the sky has only a thin stain of paint over a canvas with bad cracks in it. I have taken the liberty of flattening these cracks and the sky is already [*sic*] for your brush to make it uniform in thickness of paint with the rest of the picture. I also feel that it should be lighter in color, that under the dark blue there should be a passage scumble of yellow-green, just a hint of this tone worked into the blue at the horizon's edge. It has to be done, of course, very delicately, not to alter the relations of the entire picture, for no new color should be introduced, only a hint of color. I am taking a special interest in this canvas as I think it is extremely good and I want to send it with the other modern things to the exhibition in the Baltimore Museum.[67]

Phillips told Graham that he had selected a natural-color wood frame with a light glaze of white that allowed the pink in the wood to show through. He asked him to visit "our exhibition, which is very important," and to "paint the sky on that landscape."[68]

Despite this meddling, Graham could not have wished for a more generous, involved patron than Duncan Phillips. Apart from the monetary support,[69] Phillips's engagement, as evidenced in the exchange of letters between the two over the years,

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[66] Phillips was especially taken with Graham's *Blue Bay and Interior* (Fig. 2.19, painted most likely in Europe in the summer of 1926), particularly the upper left quadrant of the painting, with its view out the window to the water beyond. Phillips commissioned Graham to develop a painting whose subject would be just the blue bay, and thus took a proprietary interest in the work and gave such explicit directions for the reworking. *Blue Bay and Interior* subsequently came into the Phillips Collection as well, but the date of acquisition is undocumented. This would appear to be the only time that Phillips gave such candid directions to an artist.

[67] Duncan Phillips, Washington, D.C., to John Graham, Baltimore, March 21, 1927, John D. Graham artist file, The Phillips Collection Archives.

[68] Ibid.

[69] It appears that Graham was paid $800 a year in quarterly installments—$200 checks in the months of January, April, July, and October; see Duncan Phillips to John Graham, November 5, 1929, quoted later in this chapter. Phillips then had his choice of any works by Graham. In Passantino and Scott, this contract is erroneously reported as $200 per month, on the basis of an October 15, 1928, letter in which Phillips refers to the enclosure of an October check for $200.

entailed a protective concern for the artist's well-being and that of his family and a very concrete involvement in the way paintings were made.

Duncan Phillips was a painter himself, as was his wife, Marjorie Acker Phillips, so his temerity in suggesting specific compositional changes and modulations in colors to an artist was not naive. He knew what it meant to critique a painting. He maintained a markedly avuncular tone in his correspondence with Graham despite the fact that they were born in the same year, 1886. Graham's "late start" as a painter may have contributed to Phillips's perception of him as a tyro who needed specific instruction, but in his written exchanges with Phillips, Graham held his own.

Graham was not the only artist whose career Phillips sought to shape. His strategy of collecting the work of one artist in depth (a "Unit") was basic to his philosophy and critical to his notion of the "Experiment Station." Nor was Graham the only artist who received Phillips's advice to modify a painting. He suggested to Arthur Dove that he crop out a "distracting" figure in *The Bessie of New York*. Dove and his dealer, Alfred Stieglitz, were outraged by the request, and Dove refused to comply.[70]

Graham evidently repainted *Blue Bay* to his patron's liking, for Phillips did include it in *An Exhibition of Expressionist Painters from the Experiment Station of the Phillips Memorial Gallery*, the show of his collection on loan to the Baltimore Museum of Art from April 8 to May 1, 1927. Phillips's brief essay in the exhibition brochure positions the Expressionist painter against his Impressionist confrères. Phillips was appreciative of the Impressionist's contribution: "Scenes and effects which had always been familiar to us, but never recognized as in any way of significance to art, are brought

[70] Passantino and Scott, 404.

vividly to our consciousness and we live more completely in the full possession and proper function of our senses. . . . The Impressionist leads the public in its visual education."[71] Yet Phillips saw a definite in the work of the Expressionist: "He deals not in precepts but in concepts and in ideas peculiar to himself. When he looks at nature he is not interested in what appears at the moment for all with eyes to see but in what he alone is thinking about and in what equivalent images he can embody his concepts, exaggerated as they must be, out of natural colors and shapes, distorted freely so as not to be mistaken for things instead of thoughts."[72] (Apparently, the concurrent exhibit organized by the Friends of Art did take place, for Phillips referred to the work of Edward Hopper on view there.[73])

Hopper, and other worthy successors of Winslow Homer, as Phillips called them, include Gifford Beal, John Sloan, Charles Burchfield, and James Chapin. They

> express "the American scene" because they are splendidly part of it. No foreign influences can distract such men with their racy sense of the very soil and shores of their native land. The Expressionists at the Museum exhibition on the other hand are inhabitants not of any one country, but rather of the misty realms of the sub-conscious or the cold clear climates where the mind takes stock of itself and puts its calculations to the test on the nearest convenient objects.[74]

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[71] Duncan Phillips, brochure for *An Exhibition of Expressionist Painters from the Experiment Station of the Phillips Memorial Gallery*, held at The Baltimore Museum of Art, April 8–May 1, 1927, unpaginated photocopy, The Phillips Collection Archives.

[72] Ibid.

[73] Ibid. "He [the Expressionist] can express himself through almost anything if he is sufficiently possessed by the preconceived attitude which directs his course. An example of this possible objectivity of the Expressionist is the work of Edward Hopper. . . . Hopper has a sharp, almost a photographic vision of the most homely facts and yet he has a laconic temperament and a challenging intellect and he sees what he sets out to see. That makes him an Expressionist in spite of the fact that he is a master of realistic effects and uses light."

[74] Ibid. Among the artists in the "Experiment Station" at the Baltimore Museum were Edward Bruce, Tito Cittadini, Arthur B. Davies (two works), Arthur Dove, Louis Eilshemius, John Graham (three), Stefan Hirsch, Bernard Karfiol (two), H. G. Keller, Rockwell Kent (three), Walt Kuhn, Peppino Mangravite, Matisse, Alfred Maurer (two), Lisa Moncure, Georgia O'Keeffe (two), Power O'Malley, Josephine Page, Marjorie Phillips (Duncan's wife), William Schulhoff, Niles Spencer, Maurice Sterne

Grouping them together as "Modernists," Phillips suggests that they are

> either too temperamental or not temperamental enough. For extreme examples of the so-called "movement" compare the work of two young Expressionists who cherish their own pre-conceptions of what the world is, to *them*, in sincere disregard of what it may look like to anyone else. I refer you to the neat, sterilized study of lines and planes, of closely related, pellucid tones and perfect spacing of accents, in Niles Spencer's "grey buildings" and then ask you to observe your own Baltimore painter, John D. Graham, with his dream-like, nonsensical, harsh and yet somehow exhilarating and handsome "Black Horse Fantasy."[75]

Phillips took great pride in the experimental nature of his project and saw his collections and exhibition as a crucible for testing the work of contemporary painters. "For one reason or another" he observed, "these artists of so many different kinds, seeking different sorts of beauty, are all in my laboratory, being tested by the great things in the Collection."[76]

Graham was fortunate to have a patron of this capacity. Phillips's enthusiasm for Graham's work—painted in disparate styles marked by an indebtedness to practicing School of Paris painters—may indicate more about Phillips's tastes than Graham's gifts. Phillips embraced the idea of "experiment" and in Graham he found an artist whose every canvas was a testing ground for new ideas; the adventure for Phillips was to see how these paintings measured up. Even a cursory look at Graham's production in this period reveals a myriad of stylistic influences, ranging from the mystery and enigma of de Chirico's cityscapes (Fig. 2.22) to Picasso's depictions of landscape and figure (Figs.

(four), Vincent Augustus Tack, Maurice Utrillo, M. [Louis-Mathieu] Verdilhan, Abraham Walkowitz, and Max Weber.

[75] This painting is possibly *Mysteria 2* (Fig. 2.21) in The Phillips Collection. The only other painting by Graham dated 1927 and listed in Phillips Collection records as having been acquired in that year is *Iron Horse* (Fig. 2.22).

[76] Brochure for *An Exhibition of Expressionist Painters from the Experiment Station of the Phillips Memorial Gallery*, photocopy.

2.23 and 2.45).[77] Phillips zeal was not limitless, however, and he never embraced Graham's more radical experiments (see page 97).

Graham's move to Baltimore, with its proximity to Washington, had proven providential. The financial arrangement with Phillips also guaranteed an income. Yet by the end of 1927, Graham was chafing to escape the provincialism of Baltimore, indeed to leave the United States altogether. His next strategic move would be to Paris.

"Perfect Command of Flowing Paint"

The next year was important in Graham's career, one in which his feelings of mastery would grow. After spending portions of the summers of 1926 and 1927 in Europe, in 1928 he managed to arrange an extended stay in Paris. By the end of his six months there, he established himself among influential critics and dealers, and forged significant friendships with other artists. By year's end he would articulate a new vision. His elation in January 1928 at securing a contract and the promise of a one-man exhibition with Dudensing was countered by the sense of being stifled in Baltimore and the realization he felt that he needed to stay in Paris for a longer time but knew that his funds were inadequate for this plan. He wrote Phillips to let him know of the arrangement with Dudensing, as this would affect his relationship with his primary collector, but also to make Phillips aware that the gallery offered no financial guarantees and that the exhibition itself was a year off, in March 1929. In his letter to Phillips, Graham adroitly mapped out the situation and gave him ample reason to come to his aid:

[77] Other influences include the work of André Derain, André Dunoyer de Segonzac and Jean Lurçat (see discussion page 79).

> But here is the irony of fate. Now when I need so much to paint, when I have the greatest urge to paint, when my mind is mature and my command of paint is at its best, I am handicapped by ever so many little insignificant things, that keep me back, and chiefly by lack of money. This year has been particularly hard for us. Since last spring, I sold only three paintings for a small sum of money, I could not get any outside work and Mrs. Graham's salary has been considerably smaller than the last year, when she held two positions. I have been trying to get some full-time job, any kind of job, ready to abandon painting but my training is of no use in America and my only chance would be some manual labor, porter's job, or else, but even for these jobs a previous experience is necessary and besides they are not plentiful here in Baltimore. Enough to make one worry. And petty little bills are coming; like milkman's, gas, etc., and hard [*sic*]to meet them.[78]

As if this litany of woes were not enough, Graham revealed yet other financial obligations calculated to stir his patron's sympathies.

> Then I have to send a few dollars each month to Europe to my mother, who is old and sick, and sometimes to other people. Inability to come to her aid makes me very unhappy. And again I have no idea what we are going to do next summer as there is no money coming between June and October; not to mention that I cannot afford a model or a bunch of flowers to paint as Baltimore offers no inspiration, no way to get to the country to paint a landscape, no one to associate with. . . . Baltimore feels to me like an immense gaudy coffin and I am locked inside and no escape. Here I am, full of strength and energy with perfect command of flowing paint, eager to work, to deliver my message to humanity, all cornered and trapped like an animal with no chance to work. All this, coupled with bleak aspect of forbidding, endless rows of uniform streets and houses, makes one feel desperate. Those things affect me deeply, striking at the roots.[79]

The letter has been quoted at length to show Graham's strategies in disclosing his personal situation to his patron. Several months later he would make the decision to go to Europe and would never return to live in Baltimore, a city that for two years had offered him concrete opportunities to advance his career.

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[78] John Graham, Baltimore to Duncan Phillips, Washington, D.C., January 19, 1928, John D. Graham records, AAA, Microfilm reel 1935, frame 212.

[79] Ibid.

In April, clear in his resolve to travel, Graham told Phillips he has decided to make an extended stay abroad.[80]

> In twelve days I expect to sail on a freighter for France and if the teaching position in New York will materialize—I will return in the fall, if not—I will stay in Paris the whole winter and next summer. Except for the few people with very keen vision and sensibility I feel that neither my art, nor its potentialities, were appreciated. Baltimore has been very depressing and my work was cramped and dwarfed. I feel like [I'm] being smothered and I naturally dash for life. . . . New York critics are so cowardly, timid and so appallingly ignorant that there is no point in their writings. Yet artist [*sic*] wants sympathy and enthusiasm. . . . P.S. If there is anything I can do or get for you in France or elsewhere please write me here before my sailing date. . . . I will be glad to do anything I can.[81]

Phillips replied immediately:

> I am sorry to hear that your [*sic*] are considering remaining abroad. Personally I belive [*sic*] that you have made a very favorable impression within the last year and that everyone is attentive, at least the artists and connoisseurs are and nothing else matters so far as you are concerned. Were you not to have an exhibition at Dudensing's in the fall and might not that be the beginning of success for you? In fact, I think you are to be congratulated on being so well represented in collections like our own and Miss Cone's, and especially the [Frederic Clay] Bartlett Collection in Chicago[82]. Why should you be discouraged with the way things are going for you in America. Your course has been very courageous and uncompromising but I am confident that you will succeed if you will maintain that course and think only of purifying and improving your own personal expression, clearly detaching it from influence of other artists. You stand out as much more unique in this country than you would in Paris. You are a portent of the new American and with your lovely American wife you must take root among us and contribute to our civilization your ancient Slavonic culture. Don't expect to be acclaimed or understood at once. It never happens. Be content with the interest

[80] At the time, Stuart Davis was also planning an extended stay abroad; he left New York in June 1928 and spent the next year in Paris.

[81] John Graham, Baltimore, to Duncan Phillips, Washington, D.C., April 19, 1928, John D. Graham artist file, The Phillips Collection Archives.

[82] Son of a millionaire manufacturer, Bartlett assembled an important collection of Post-Impressionist work, including Seurat's *A Sunday on la Grand Jatte*, 1884, and later donated to the Art Institute of Chicago.

> of a few of us, remembering that the greatest artists have sometimes struggled along without any appreciation at all.[83]

Three days later Phillips responded to Graham's proposal regarding a syndicate of collectors to support his work.

> I am thinking over what you wrote about the plan to receive funds regularly from a group of collectors who would draw lots for your pictures. I do not like that last part of it at all although it might be the only way if you thought of including several people in the arrangement. Where does Dudensing come in on this plan? I understood he was to be your agent. Please do not think that I have any doubt as to you originality. On the contrary I think you are one of the most original artists I know. It is very interesting what you say about ideas, subjects, poses, etc., borrowed from other masters to save time before starting one's own research. All art is in a sense adaptation.[84]

Paris, May–September 1928

In early May 1928, Graham sailed on a Red Star Line freighter for France, where Elinor would join him in mid-June. Phillips's characterization of him as the portent of the new American did not dissuade Graham from his course toward Europe, and he felt that it was in Paris that he could receive the most stimulation and the best reception. He wrote Phillips that he planned to travel to Italy[85] while waiting for a studio at 6 rue Huyghens (Fig. 2.24–2.25). This address situates Graham in the physical heart of Montparnasse, and in the center of that arrondissement's rich history. As early as the eighteenth century, bohemian artists gathered at "Mount Parnassus," then the outer edges of the city. Between 1921 and 1924, the number of Americans in Paris swelled from 6,000 to 30,000,

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[83] Duncan Phillips, Washington, D.C., to John Graham, Baltimore, April 20, 1928, The Phillips Collection records, AAA, John D. Graham records, Microfilm reel 1935, frame 73.

[84] Duncan Phillips, Washington, D.C., to John Graham, Baltimore, April 23, 1928, The Phillips Collection records, AAA, Microfilm reel 1935, frame 92.

[85] There, in Sicily, he painted *Palermo* (Fig. 2.23).

and Montparnasse was where American artists wanted to be.[86] In 1917, when many theatres and concert halls were closed because of the war, the writer Blaise Cendrars and the painter Moïse Kisling staged a concert at 6 rue Huyghens, in the studio of the painter Emile Lejeune. The building continued to be a gathering place for musicians and artists in the 1920s.[87]

Around the corner on the boulevard du Montparnasse, La Coupole had opened in December 1927. Thirty-three painters decorated the twenty-four first-floor pillars on themes of "La Femme," "La Nature," and "La Fête" (Figs. 2.26–2.27). At a slight remove from this active center was Stuart Davis's studio at 50 rue Vercingétorix, a twenty-minute walk from Graham's (Fig. 2.28). Davis had sublet the space from the Czech-born Cubist painter Jan Matulka, whom Graham would have known from the Art Students League.[88] Isamu Noguchi, who lived on the same street in the summer of 1928, later recalled that on one of his first days in Paris, while sitting at the Café Flore, Robert McAlmon, a young American writer who had ingratiated himself in artistic circles, overheard the sculptor mention his interest in Brancusi and promptly offered to take him to Brancusi's

[86] Theresa Leininger-Miller, *New Negro Artists in Paris: African-American Painters and Sculptors in the City of Light, 1922-1934*. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 111.

[87] Jean-Claude Delorme and Anne-Marie Dubois, *Ateliers d'artistes à Paris* (Paris: Editions Parigramme, 1998.) 102.

[88] Elizabeth Hutton Turner, *Americans in Paris (1921–1931): Man Ray, Gerald Murphy, Stuart Davis, Alexander Calder*. (Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint and The Phillips Collection, 1996), 166.

studio.[89] Graham was likely able to navigate the artistic circles of Paris with comparable ease, especially because of his fluency in French.

Graham had already met Davis in the United States.[90] In Paris, Davis was working at the atelier of the brothers Edmond and Jacques Desjobert, who welcomed young Americans who had had few opportunities in the United States to work in lithography.[91] Graham did produce *Port at St. Tropez* (Fig. 2.29), a chine collé lithograph on paper there, but that was his last exploration in the print medium. This and sketches of Parisian street scenes have a correspondence with Davis's work, and Graham's splendid *Rue Brea* (Fig. 2.30) of 1928 shares an idiom with Davis. Davis wrote to his mother, "In the swellest cafes one can [sit] all afternoon with a six-cent glass of coffee without anything being thought of it. . . . Living is not much cheaper here than in N.Y. but if you are forced to and have good health you could live here on very little and still be around other people who are well to do."[92] The relationship of the two artists—begun in New York, cemented in Paris, and renewed in New York—and its meaning for Graham will be explored more fully in Chapter Three.

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[89] Isamu Noguchi, *A Sculptor's World* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1967), 18. Noguchi mentions other Americans living on the rue Vercingétorix that summer besides Davis: Alexander Calder, Morris Kantor, and Andrée Ruellen.

[90] An anecdote furnished by Davis's wife has Graham bicycling all the way from Baltimore to knock at the Davises' New York apartment door to meet "an artist he admired." E. Green, 31.

[91] Turner, Elizabeth Hutton. *American Artists in Paris, 1919–1929*. (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Research Press, 1988), 39. Davis produced eleven lithographs that summer. Other Americans who had worked there by the summer of 1928 include Adolf Dehn, Yasuo Kuniyoshi, Louis Lozowick, Reginald Marsh, and Benton Spruance.

[92] Letter from Stuart Davis to his mother, January 25, 1929, Collection Earl Davis; quoted in Patricia Hills, *Stuart Davis* (1996), 84.

Another young American artist with whom Graham had contact that year in Paris was Alexander Calder, whom he knew from classes at the Art Students League. Graham's *Self-Portrait* of 1928 (Fig. 2.31) and Calder's portrait of him in wire (Fig. 2.32), probably from the same year, show a strong affinity between the two artists.[93] Calder—seen here in a photograph as he completes a portrait of "Kiki," the famous demimondaine of Montparnasse (Fig. 2.33)—was the toast of the town with his wire portraits.

In a July 5 letter to Phillips, Graham mentions meeting the critic André Salmon and the dealer Leopold Zborowski. These connections would be critical to Graham's situating himself in these months in Paris. Zborowski was a Polish-born poet who went to study in Paris in 1913 and stayed to become one of the best-known dealers there. Zborowski's supportive friendship with Amedeo Modigliani is by now legendary (Fig. 2.34). While he did not open a commercial gallery until 1927, Zborowski acted as *marchand en chambre*, or private dealer, for the Italian artist's work.[94] A photograph from 1925 suggests the large Polish artistic contingent in the city around that time (Fig. 2.35). It is likely that Graham did not meet Zborowski until this trip, when an exhibition was hastily arranged for August 1 to 15 at the dealer's rue de Seine gallery; and also likely that Graham's address at 6 rue Huyghens had something to do with their meeting, given the presence of artists there. The two men shared a Polish heritage, and that may have been important in solidifying their relationship.

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[93] This self-portrait also appeared on the cover of Waldemar George's 1929 monograph on Graham (see Fig.2.31).

[94] Malcolm Gee, *Dealers, Critics and Collectors of Modern Painting: Aspects of the Parisian Art Market Between 1910 and 1930* (London: Garland, 1981), 79.

Zborowski's gallery was among many new Left Bank establishments opened in the postwar economic boom of the 1920s, amid escalating prices in the Parisian art market. The large part of these galleries handled *"l'art vivant,"* or contemporary art. As André Salmon wrote in 1921, "Speculation has been favorable to the development of taste; it is a powerful aid to the re-evaluation of new works; it has vanquished reactionary resistance. Snobbery has rendered analogous services."[95] Christopher Green has noted that these Left Bank galleries were "far less well capitalized than figures like the Bernheims, the Rosenbergs, and even Kahnweiler.[96] They worked therefore with a faster turnover, concentrating less on building up stock and waiting for prices to rise."[97] Before World War I, there was only one gallery in the rue de Seine; by 1930 there were thirteen on that street and in the immediate surroundings.[98]

Graham conveyed to Phillips his excitement at preparations for the exhibition at Zborowski's. "We [by this time Elinor had joined him] met some very interesting people whose company was very stimulating. It is surprising that Paris art critics accepted my work right away while New York critics still do not recognize me." He let Phillips know how much his support meant: "With a friend like you I ought to be able to accomplish a great deal. Though my painting has developed tremendously this summer, I am not satisfied with it and want to do better, much better work. I need not say how much of my

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[95] André Salmon, "La Peinture," La Revue de France, 15 August 1921, 284; quoted in Christopher Green, *Cubism and Its Enemies: Modern Movements and Reaction in French Art, 1916–1928* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 102

[96] The right bank galleries of Alexander Bernheim, Paul Rosenberg, and D.-H. Kahnweiler were among the best known in the period.

[97] C. Green, 134.

[98] Gee, 38.

progress I owe to your understanding, courage, and generosity. . . . People who liked my work so far are Picasso, [André] Salmon, Guillaume,[99] Zborowski, [Waldemar] George, [Florent] Fels and others."[100]

The show at Zborowski's was probably at least partially self-subsidized, although no mention of any monetary exchange survives. Graham knew the importance of an exhibition with a Parisian dealer, and neither the fact that there would be no immediate financial return nor the fact that it was dismally off-season deterred him from seizing the opportunity. Stuart Davis was more discriminating, turning down an offer from Zborowski for a solo exhibition that he would have had to help pay for.[101] Malcolm Gee has noted that Zborowski was widely regarded as a "discoverer of new talent," and that "he acquired the friendship and respect of artists—but was not always punctual in paying them: he was better placed than many of his colleagues from an artistic point of view, but less well from a commercial one."[102] A small (four by three inches) brochure, with two illustrations and a list of the works in the exhibition was produced.[103]

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[99] Paul Guillaume (1891-1934) was a Parisian art dealer who began his career selling African sculpture.

[100] John Graham, Paris, to Duncan Phillips, Washington, D.C., July 19, 1928, The Phillips Collection records, AAA, Microfilm reel 1938, frame 253.

[101] Turner, *Americans in Paris*, 166.

[102] Gee, 86.

[103] "Chez Zborowski/26, rue du Seine, Paris/Exposition de peinture de John D. Graham/du 1er aout au 15 aout 1928/de 10 à 12 heures et de 2 à 8 heures." The works in the exhibition are listed: "1. *Famille des Artistes*; 2. *Femme sur la Chaise Jaune*; 3. *Nu*; 4) *L'Aveugle du Dôme*; 5) *Femme Couchée*; 6) *La Blouse Rouge*; 7) *Femme Assise*; 8) *Pont St-Michel*; 9) *Palermo*; 10) *Composition*; 11) *Rouge et Noir*; 12) *Campagne Romana*; 13) *Nu*; 14) *Nature Morte*; 15) *Arlequin*." The Museum of Modern Art Library, John D. Graham File.

Graham's show drew the attention of an array of prominent Parisian critics, including André Warnod, who wrote a review for the August 6 edition of *Comœdia*, a journal of the arts.[104] Warnod was known for confirming the legitimacy of foreign-born artists whose styles had been shaped by Paris, such as Marc Chagall, Chaim Soutine, Jacques Lipchitz, Kees van Dongen, Amedeo Modigliani, Juan Gris, and Ossip Zadkine:

> The School of Paris exists. Later, art historians can define better its character and study the elements which shape it; but we must certainly affirm its existence and the attraction that makes the artists from the world over flock here. We know the role played in the art of today from the [example] of Picasso, from that of Pascin, from that of Foujita.[105]

In his review of Graham's show, Warnod observed that the exhibition "opens when most of the galleries have closed their doors;" he found it worth a visit, although only fifteen canvases had been brought together. The review is not overwhelmingly persuasive, yet Warnod places Graham among those foreign-born artists making their way in France—namely, in the milieu known as the School of Paris.

> This small exhibition is sufficient to show that John D. Graham is an interesting artist. He embraces neither formulas nor rules; one senses that he seeks to paint the most sincere paintings and the most spontaneous as he can. We hope he will return to make others, and more completely, that will give us a greater overview of his art. But already what he has shown us today makes his name worth remembering.[106]

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[104] A banner headline boasted that the newspaper was delivered daily to Deauville *"pendant la Grand Saison."* The article was illustrated with *Femme assise* (Fig. 2.36) which was incorrectly captioned *Nu*. Archives, Bibliotheque nationale de France.

[105] André Warnod, from *Comœdia*, January 27, 1925, as quoted in Norman Kleeblatt, "Emigrés and Others," *Art in America*, December 2001, 89—a review of *L'École de Paris 1904–1929*, an exhibition held at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris in 2000. As Kleeblatt points out, many in this group were Jewish, and foreign and Jewish artists were here grouped as "other."

[106] André Warnod, "Beaux-Arts," *Comœdia*, August 6, 1928.

The exhibition was reviewed also by Louis Vauxcelles, best remembered as the critic who visited the 1905 Salon d'Automne and cried, *"Donatello parmi les Fauves!"* Vauxcelles felt no more positive about Cubism than Fauvism, and by 1928 his traditionalist views had gained favor. Under the nom de plume "Pinturrichio," Vauxcelles wrote reviews for the column "Le carnet des ateliers" in *Le carnet de la semaine*, a weekly journal of the arts. Bemoaning the fact that there was no one in Paris to see Graham's exhibition and that it was "unfair that the debut of this young man would pass unobserved," he predicted, however, that

> Graham will go far . . . owing to an indomitable will that attests to the young vitality of his birth. It's the first time that we have seen him here, where he wants to settle down, his first studies [and] exhibitions having been . . . made in New York, in Baltimore and in Washington. But in his eyes as in those of painters worldwide, there is only Paris and the School of Paris.[107]

Graham was eager to distinguish himself from others and had a talent for getting his story out and letting it be known that he wanted to stay in Paris. And of the reviews of his exhibition at Zborowski's, the most important to get his story out was the one written by André Salmon for the September 1928 issue of *Apollo*.

Salmon (1881–1969), the son of a sculptor, had lived in St. Petersburg from the ages of sixteen to twenty. His father had received a commission there; Salmon was first a lycée student and then worked in the chancellery of the French embassy.[108] It is tempting to imagine the young attaché at the French embassy and the cadet from the page school crossing paths in St. Petersburg, but the discovery of a shared past could certainly have

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[107] Louis Vauxcelles, "Le carnet des ateliers," *Le carnet de la semaine*, August 12, 1928.

[108] Beth S. Gersh-Nešić, *André Salmon on French Modern Art* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 6.

strengthened the connection between the two later in Paris, and thus Salmon's sympathies for Graham's artistic project.

The foremost critic defending French Cubism,[109] Salmon considered himself a poet who wrote criticism for a living. Being singled out by him for a review would indicate an elevation in Graham's stature in the Parisian art world. In his introduction to *La jeune sculpture française*, Salmon clarified that he was "confining [his] interests here to [those] artists whose noble ambition requires [that they] continue the work of past masters and thereby prolong it."[110] He wanted to see artists build on the past, and in Graham he found an artist who knew how to use what had come before and yet make something new.

> Finally, there is a unique one-man show at Zborowski's of a good American painter, John D. Graham. This artist does not live in France continually; I believe he teaches drawing to American students. If he has not a permanent studio in Montparnasse, he has at any rate profited by his sojourns in Paris. But I wonder whether, well aware of our anxiety and being really a brother of the members of the School of Paris, he has not profited more by his absences? I mean that the painter of "La Femme Assise," the "Pont Saint-Michel," and that of "Harlequin" which goes beyond Picasso to join Cézanne [see Figs. 2.36, 2.37, 2.38] might thanks to his absence, have thrown off all that scholarly artificiality which encumbers so many intending revolutionaries. Anyway, we see John D. Graham, who has long occupied himself with the essentials of the problem, submit to the excellently ordered patience that so many young painters lack. After five years of research, John D. Graham has enriched himself while limiting his anxiety and now being wiser he gives himself up to the joys of spontaneity, which certainly favour in the best moment the rarest and most harmonious accords of line and

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[109] His books *La jeune peinture française* (Paris: Albert Messein, 1912) and *La jeune sculpture française* (Paris: Albert Messein, 1919) place Salmon at the center of the critical literature of the period. He wrote about *Les demoiselles d'Avignon* (1907) from direct observation of Picasso in the studio, and thus his contribution was significant.

[110] André Salmon, *La jeune sculpture française*, trans. Beth Gersh-Nešić, in Gersh-Nešić, *André Salmon on French Modern Art*, 95.

> colour. This summer exhibition is one of the most honourable of the whole year, and that is a good conclusion.[111]

The article featured black-and-white reproductions of Graham's work, *Composition* (Fig. 2.39)[112] and *Palermo*, 1928 (Fig. 2.23), both of 1928.

Salmon had by 1920 realized the difficulty in sustaining Cubism and in an article for *L'amour de l'art*, he praised the work of André Derain as the artist whom younger painters should emulate. Romy Golan has observed that Salmon saw Derain as the "ideal model for the younger generation of French painters if they did not want to surrender to the seductiveness of a colorist like Henri Matisse or the overpowering influence of Picasso's cubism."[113] Graham's classicized nudes of the late 1920s clearly show that he was aware of Derain (Figs. 2.66; 2.67), as does his melancholy harlequin when compared with Derain's painting of the same subject reproduced in *Cahiers d'art* in 1924 (Figs. 2.38; 3.66) André Dunoyer de Segonzac was also being praised by critics for his return to "naturalism." A comparison of Graham's *Road by a River* (Fig. 2.40) and Segonzac's *Spring in Chaville*, 1920 (Fig. 2.41), suggests that Graham was quite aware of the turn to naturalism in French painting, especially seen in the landscapes of Derain, Segonzac, Vlaminck, and Utrillo. This postwar shift was part of an overarching *rappel à l'ordre* (or

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[111] André Salmon, "Letter from Paris," *Apollo* 8 (September 1928), 150. Salmon's "anxiety" relates to a previous paragraph in the same column, where he reviews an exhibition of paintings by André L'hote in which preparatory direct studies of nature were shown alongside the "geometric" final work. "I was looking at these things the other day with a sensitive man who does not pride himself on possessing exaggerated information about the modern world of art. This man, innocent of the knowledge that breeds prejudice, said to me: 'Why will you not admit that the geometric canvas was the preliminary study, and why may I not take the pretty naturalistic composition to be the result of so many researches?'"

[112] Published in the 1929 monograph as *Famille d'artistes*.

[113] Romy Golan, *Modernity and Nostalgia: Art and Politics in France Between the Wars* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 5.

call to order) that permeated French society and culture, marked by increased political conservatism and a rejection of the high modernism of the prewar decades.

The paintings in the exhibition were: 1. *Famille des Artistes* (Fig. 2.39); 2. *Femme sur la Chaise Jaune* (Fig. 1.2); 3. *Nu* (Fig. 2.43); 4. *L'Aveugle du Dôme* (Fig 2.44); 5. *Femme Couchée* (Fig 2.45); 6. *La Blouse Rouge* (Fig. 2.46); 7. *Femme Assise* (Fig. 2.36); 8. *Pont St-Michel* (Fig. 2.37); 9. *Palermo* (Fig. 2.23); 10. *Composition*; 11. *Rouge et Noir* (Fig. 2.47); 12. *Campagne Romana*; 13. *Nu* ; 14. *Nature Morte* (Fig. 2.48); 15. *Arlequin* (Fig. 2.38). Most of the works evinced a heightened interest in naturalistic landscape and figures of classical proportions.

Most important for Graham was the monograph published in January 1929 by Le Triangle, a small Paris press known for its artist's editions.[114] The book featured an essay by Waldemar George, another important connection in Paris for Graham. Born Waldemar Jerzy Jarocinski in Lodz, George (1893–1970) is credited with discovering Chaim Soutine. He was an intimate of Zborowski, and may have come to know of Graham through him. Once again, the shared Polish heritage may have been a positive connection. In 1931, George founded *Formes*, an influential, and somewhat nationalistic, magazine that supported classical values. In the monograph essay, George writes that:

> Graham's point of departure is certainly French. But [he] intends to Americanize the vision passed on by Derain and Matisse, . . . Georges Braque and Picasso. . . . [His paintings] oscillate, or appear to oscillate, between sculptural form: *le fauteuil jaune* [Fig. 2.42]) and paintings that frankly reveal a definition of painting that will break all ties that bind his art to visual logic. . . . *Le rêve* and *le miroir* [Figs. 2.49 and 2.50] are works over which reason has lost all claims of control.[115]

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[114] The slight volume (5 x 3 inches, 26 pages) was in a format Le Triangle employed for many monographs in this period, including those on Pascin by Georges Charensol and on Kisling by Florent Fels (both 1928); and on Soutine (1928) and Lipchitz (1929), also by Waldemar George. These four were in the series "Les artistes juifs."

[115] Waldemar George, *John D. Graham* (Paris: Éditions Le Triangle, 1929), 6.

In the next few years, both Salmon and George would turn dramatically away from the School of Paris and, further, from any foreign-born artists. Both had written monographs in 1929 for Le Triangle's "Artistes Juifs" series: Salmon on Léopold Lévy, and George on Jacques Lipchitz (whom Graham mentioned in *Systems and Dialectics of Art* as one of few artists with "highly developed tastes"). In June and July 1931, George published in *Formes* a polemical two-part article, "École Française ou École de Paris," predicting the end of the School of Paris.

> The École de Paris is a neologism, a new accession. This term, which dominates the world art market, is a conscious example of premeditated conspiracy against the notion of a School of France. It not only takes into consideration foreign contributions; it ratifies them and grants them a leading position. It is a rather subtle, hypocritical sign of the spirit of Francophobia. It allows any artist to pretend he is French . . . . It has no legitimacy. It refers to French tradition but it in fact annihilates it. . . . Shouldn't France repudiate the works that weaken her genius? . . . The École de Paris is a house of cards built in Montparnasse. . . . Its ideology is oriented against that of the French School. . . . The moment has come for France to turn in upon herself and to find in her own soil the seeds of her salvation.[116]

As we have seen, Graham's timing was critical for a positive reception in France. Both the nature of his work and his status as an American in Paris were acceptable there in 1928. Changes in his own style would lead him to realize that he would have return to the United States, as an American painter. When he prepared to do so in September, he would have been justified in a feeling of accomplishment about his sojourn abroad: many new paintings, a one-man show, and a forthcoming monograph on his work with an essay by a noted critic.

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[116]Waldemar George, *Formes*, "École Française ou École de Paris?" June/July 1931; quoted in Golan, *Modernity and Nostalgia*, trans. Romy Golan, 153.

October–December 1928

After his successful summer in Europe, Graham and Elinor moved to New York. In an October 2, 1928, to Phillips, he assessed his situation and his recent work:

> I am exhausted by severe cold we caught when got off the boat, general indifference, obscurauion [*sic*] by endless hopeless search for a studio. After Paris where I met with so much sympathy, interest, enthusiasm and understanding, all here acts like a bucket of cold water. Paint for whom? No one wants it, and do I want it? Well, I am glad that at least in Paris I have done some good work and now I would like to take some of my old paintings from your collection and destroy them as I see how rotten they are—and in place of those three or four paintings give you four new ones. I certainly will be much obliged if you will let me destroy those old ones—card player, blue bay, girl and the cat and a couple more. I see how immature and amateurish they are. What I have now is at least something better, at least an honest effort.[117]

In a postscript to a subsequent letter, Graham seems to have regained his *équilibre*. He assured his patron that "the only worthwhile thing for me is to work, work day and night, frantically to self-oblivion."[118] He closed by asking about two paintings, a Derain and an Utrillo, that Zborowski had sent to Phillips on approval.[119] Presumably Graham would have received a commission on this transaction; this may explain how he financed part of his trip.

As for Graham's idea of taking some of his old paintings from Phillips and destroying them, Phillips commented. "I enclose the October check for two hundred

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[117] John Graham, New York, to Duncan Phillips, Washington, D.C., October 2, 1928, John D. Graham artist file, The Phillips Collection Archives.

[118] John Graham, New York, to Duncan Phillips, Washington, D.C., October 8, 1928, The Phillips Collection records, AAA, Microfilm reel 1938, frame 278.

[119] In a letter of October 15, 1928, Phillips replied that he had not received the paintings. "I am getting anxious about these for your sake if you are to be held responsible. Besides I am eager to see the Derain which you recommend so highly and which is so much less expensive that the ones offered by the New York dealers." Duncan Phillips, Washington, D.C., to John Graham, New York, October 15, 1928, The Phillips Collection records, AAA, Microfilm reel 1935, frame 334.

dollars and I will keep these two pictures of Palermo and Pont S. Michel but do not wish as yet to give up any of the others as you so kindly propose that I should do."[120] Phillips continued to have a high opinion of Graham's work and he included a painting in one of his Tri-unit exhibitions.[121]

In December, Graham brought Phillips up-to-date:

> I have been painting on and off. After [. . .]painting a series of egg, milk bottle, white cafeteria cups, and etc. [see Figs. 2.51; 2.57; 2.61; 2.62; pictures (quite original) I embarckd [*sic*] upon something entirely new at last. Here [*sic*] what it is: there were two essential visions of the past—Oriental or two-dimensional (example Japanese, Persian prints) and Occidental or three-dimensional vision. Cubism came as a revolt and defiance of these two old visions, yet cubism, in spite of its tremendous discoveries and importance as a discipline, did not start anew but departed from premises already existing—like negro art. What I am trying to do is to build a new vision altogether, a vision that starts with *tabula rasa*. Of course, like in any process of radical change, one must start with destruction of the old—to build a skyscraper one has to wreck first this old one or two family house standing on the spot chosen, then lay foundation, then build. Maybe my share is only to blast the old away and to paint out the new direction, at any rate, what I am doing now requires a good deal of courage and determination. I feel myself fit to do this work now. I start with new premisses [*sic*], defy all habits and conventions. I always felt I am going to discover "something new." I had this premonition and vision, too, only I was handicapped by my former lack of experience. The things I am doing now are very startling and bear the prophecy of fulfillment. Someone called this new painting of mine—minimalism.[122]

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[120] Ibid.

[121] Phillips frequently presented several exhibitions in tandem. For this installation he showed "Art is Symbolic" in the Lower Gallery; "Art is International" in the Main Gallery; and "An International Group" in the Little Gallery, that included Bonnard, Braque, Utrillo, Walt Kuhn, Gifford Beal, and Graham. Photocopy of cover and back page of exhibition brochure, *Tri-unit Exhibition of Paintings and Sculpture*, October 1928–January 1929, John D. Graham artist file, The Phillips Collection Archives.

[122] John Graham, New York, to Duncan Phillips, Washington, D.C., December 12, 1928, The Phillips Collection records, AAA, Microfilm reel 1938, frame 732.

The beginnings of Graham's direction toward "minimalism" alluded to here can be seen in two paintings, now lost, that were made in Paris in the summer of 1928: *Le rêve* (Fig. 2.49) and *Le miroir* (Fig. 2.50)—paintings in which Graham had begun to use a pared-down structure for the forms. Although not included in the August exhibition at Zborowski, both are reproduced in the Waldemar George monograph and commented on by George in his essay so this argues strongly for the fact that they were completed in Paris. Evidently, Graham pursued this path upon his return, as we shall see in the discussion of his New York gallery exhibition in the spring of 1929.

Also in December 1928, Graham was asked to speak at the Dudensing Galleries. A notice in the New York *Evening Post* of December 8 identified him as "the son of Count Greshen Dabrowsky" and "a former officer of the Russian Imperial Guard;" his topic would be "Modern Vision in Art.[123]. The tone of the announcement and a concluding sentence ("Mr. and Mrs. Richard Dudensing and Mr. and Mrs. LeRoy Dudensing will be hosts at the tea following the lecture") suggests that Graham was equipped for the social terrain of the art world, crucial for any artist who expected to succeed in the marketplace. He was prepared to make his views on art known to a wide audience; it seems then that his writing on art began simultaneously with his choosing a career as a painter.

1929: Solo Exhibition in Washington, D.C.

Graham's scramble for a tabula rasa may have been impelled by the two exhibitions planned for March. The solo exhibition in Phillips's Little Gallery and the

[123] Frick Art Reference Library, John D. Graham artist file.

show at Dudensing would coincide early that month.[124] In February, a concerned Phillips wrote Graham about the upcoming exhibition.

> I have been frankly disappointed in the last canvasses [*sic*] you sent because none of them seem to have reached as yet the ultimate and completely satisfactory state in which a work of art is finished. There is no time before your show here to have the changes made so I will leave them out of the coming exhibition, using only of the last lot you sent: the Pont Neuf [Fig. 2.55] from the earlier lot, the Landscape and the Eggs [Fig. 2.51]. . . . I think it will be a distinguished little exhibition. Over the mantel will be The Iron Horse [Fig. 2.22], to the left of it Pears [2.3], to the right Hallucination [Fig. 2.52] and the Old-fashioned Vase [Fig. 2.53]. On the walls opposite the entrance will hang the Blind Man [Fig. 2.44] the Harlequin [Fig. 2.38] and Heavy Horses and Mountain Village [Fig. 2.54]. On the wall opposite the fireplace will be Pont Neuf, Palermo [Fig. 2.23] and Eggs [Fig. 2.51], and on the wall to the left of the entrance Clouds over Paris [Fig. 2.37] and Landscape [probably Road by a River, Fig. 2.40]. This last picture is the one of trees by a river and I have framed it in silver which is perfect for it. I will take this picture and the Pont Neuf for the January and April checks.[125]

Phillips went on to name his other choices, presumably to fulfill the quota of paintings that Graham owed him. He added stern suggestions for the "improvement" of these selections and hinted that his contractual agreement with Graham might be coming to an end.

> If you are willing to change the Harlequin, the Vigneux [Fig. 2.56] and the Grapes [Fig. 2.57], I would like those works much better than the ones I am selecting. As it is I am repelled by the whiteness of the tree trunks in the Vigneux, by the black shadows on the left side of the face of the harlequin and the ring of swollen gray flesh encircling his nose and mouth. The actual newspaper with distracting news columns stuck on the grape picture is a trick that never has done anything to me except bore me as it did even when practiced by Picasso, Braque and Riviera. Then too the bathtub enamel of your dazzling polished whites makes it impossible to notice anything else. . . . Your pictures will go up on the eleventh. Shall I return

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[124] In 1929, Phillips organized first solo museum exhibitions for John Marin and Karl Knaths; he did the same for Arthur Dove in 1937 and Milton Avery in 1943. See Passantino and Scott, passim.

[125] Duncan Phillips, Washington, D.C., to John Graham, New York. February 12, 1929, The Phillips Collection records, AAA, Microfilm reel 1938, frame 942.

> the Harlequin, Grapes, Eggs and Milk Bottle and Vigneux to your studio or to Dudensing? The next time I am in New York I would like to meet you somewhere and discuss the changes in these pictures and the possibility of renewing our arrangement for next year. If I could follow you better in your more daring flights I would have less hesitation about doing this. The two still lifes with these textures are not satisfying because they are lacking in balance and adjustment of tone.[126]

In a postscript, Phillips adds:

> I want to go on with you for another year but only on condition that we are agreed on certain fundamental principles. I do not care for sensationalism. There are many others who do. If you want to create sensations there are many other patrons who would give you better support. I must be true to myself and I do not want you to cherish any wrong ideas about my point of view. Hoping that you will not only understand my motive in writing as I do but realize the degree of my interest and of my sympathy.[127]

Graham accepted the suggestion to change the *Grapes* painting but took exception to the changes Phillips had proposed for *Vigneux*. He maintained a cool tone as he told Phillips, somewhat archly, that he would not honor his request.

> I can change the trees the way you wish, but I do not feel that it would improve the painting for the "white trees" is a statement and the painting is different enough to make it unacceptable at the first glance. Good things are usually hard to be accepted at first, then they gradually win their points, and then hold one's favor for ever.
>
> You know that I have been always open, frank and honest with you and I intend to stick to it. I believe it would be a poor service to you if I will follow your advice in this case, and some day, when my work will be sufficiently written up, by people more eloquent than I, this statement of white trees will be brought out as a special achievement.
>
> You know that I desire to sell, you know that I would do anything to oblige you, and that it is easy for me to change the trees, but I do not believe that this way I will give you the best of service.[128]

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[126] Ibid. By "textures," Phillips may be referring to the addition of sand in the medium, seen in *Two Eggs* (Fig. 2.51) and in many paintings dating from 1928 on, including *Vigneux*. Many artists, including Jan Matulka, were adding sand to their medium at this time. See Chapter Three.

[127] Ibid.

[128] John Graham, New York, to Duncan Phillips, Washington, D.C., March 1, 1929, The Phillips Collection records, AAA, Microfilm reel 1938, frame 174.

In his letter of response, Phillips mitigated his criticism. The eyes of the Harlequin were now "wonderfully expressive, in fact quite haunting." *Egg and Milk Bottle* had become a "handsome arabesque and again a fascinating play of rough and smooth, black and white." Yet Phillips could not restrain himself from giving more advice. The greatest still life, he said,

> has either conveyed a love of life and its commonplace objects seen in space as in Chardin, or it has been a grand and austere decoration with a harmonious and unified relation of objects organized in space as in Cezanne [*sic*]and in Braque at his best. Or it has been the vehicle for the expression of the artist's own passion communicated to his way of looking at anything, large or small, as in van Gogh.
>
> It is because I am so much interested in you and your new pictures that I do want you to cultivate moderation and subtlety and not to surprise and shock every time. And not to be so self-conscious about your theories and experiments. I have been interested in you not only for yourself and your charming wife but because of your very great ability as a painter and the temperament which is manifest in your best work. It is up to you to decide whether you will be yourself and perhaps a great master in your own right or just another of the minor men in the Post-Cubist movement, in the Picasso following which is slowly passing, if it is not already out of sight.[129]

Whatever the tone of this last-minute exchange before the exhibition, Phillips would have already completed his essay for the accompanying brochure. It introduced Graham and offered a brief biography, and then noted that during Graham's years in Russia, painting "had always been an urge in his inner consciousness."[130] Not without irony Phillips recalled some of the artist's rants.

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[129] Duncan Phillips, Washington, D.C., to John Graham, New York, March 1, 1929, The Phillips Collection records, AAA, Microfilm reel 1938, frame 321.

[130] Brochure for *Exhibition of Paintings by John D. Graham* (Washington, D.C., Phillips Memorial Gallery, March 6 to 31, 1929). The exhibition included sixteen paintings: *Still Life*, *The Iron Horse*, *Hallucination*, *Pears*, *Blind Man*, *Harlequin and Heavy Horses*, *Trees by a River*, *Mountain Village*, *Clouds over Paris*, *Eggs*, *Pont Neuf*, *Palermo*, *Blue Bay*, *Old-Fashioned Vase*, *Harlequin*, and *Vigneux*.

> The extreme conservatism which he found in Baltimore confirmed Graham in a natural inclination to be a radical and to wear, if need be, the martyr's crown. . . . To Experiment he dedicated himself entirely. He felt that the western world had need of a new language for intense intellectual and emotional expression, a language of plastic symbols to correspond with dynamic urges. He had seen Picasso and Chirico and they had liberated his own Slavonic imagination.[131]

Phillips went on to characterize Graham's paintings, which for the exhibition had been gathered from Baltimore, New York and Paris. "I have noticed that the pictures which he painted in a Baltimore bewildered by his extravagance and in a section of New York where the latest cults of Paris are still unknown, are much more defiant than those which he created in the Paris of the 'dernier cri,' and which he exhibited 'chez Zborovski,' the dealer who had discovered Modigliani and Soutine."[132]

1929: Solo Exhibition in New York

The March exhibition at Dudensing had a catalogue brochure, with a list of the twenty-two paintings on display,[133] and written contributions by André Salmon, Ben Hecht, and David Burliuk. Salmon was hired to write an appreciation of Graham's work presumably because he knew it well and had already written favorably on it. His inclusion lent prestige to the endeavor.

> I wonder if America realizes what artistique France is expecting of her?

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[131] Ibid.

[132] Ibid.

[133] *Girl in Yellow*, 1927; *Tribute to Isadora*, 1927 (Fig. 2.58); *Girl with Marble Arms*, 1927 (Fig. 2.59); *Three Horses*, 1927; *Elinor Gibson*, 1928 (Fig. 2.60); *Nude*, 1927; *Woman Seated*, 1928 (Fig. 2.68); *Egg and Cup*, 1928 (Fig. 2.62); *Coffee Cup and Hand*, 1928; *Dice and Torso*, 1928; *Dice and Hand*, 1928; *Self-Portrait*, 1929 (Fig. 2.31); *Bridge*, 1928; *Brown Painting*, 1929; *Green Square*, 1929; *Blue and White*, 1929; *Disintegration of Composition*, 1929; *Figure*, 1929; *Red and Black*, 1929; *Paris*, 1928; *Composition*, 1928; and *Painting*, 1928.

> To-day I can assure all American artists genuinely engaged in creative work, that French art expects of them not the reflection of itself, but an effort essentially new. . . .
>
> Who of us, then, does not hope that America in her turn will delegate us a new creator, magnificently oblivious of all prejudice, capable of a new message.
>
> It is certain that the best among American artists begins to realize this call, which is their real opportunity.
>
> Last summer's exhibition of Graham's work [at the Zborowski Gallery in Paris], which is one of the foremost markets of living art, has done a great deal to establish this notion in our minds. . . .
>
> Graham has struck us as a double and simultaneous phenomena of assimilation and transposition. In fact, at the beginning of his career, this painter . . . deriving . . . from . . . cubism but [with] positivist values, . . . restores it to us, at the same time purified and enlarged.
>
> It is not that the American artist surpasses . . . its European inventors, it matters but little; what really matters is an undoubtedly new approach in his work that elevates naturalistic impression to an integrity of cubist conception in a manner forceful and new.[134]

The brochure continues in the mode of a festschrift, with contributions by David Burliuk and Ben Hecht. Burliuk was, of course, Graham's artist friend "from the old days," and Hecht, it appears, knew Graham during his first years in New York.[135] Burliuk took up the battle cry for Graham's latest period, "Minimalism."

> Minimalism derives its name from the minimum of operating means. . . . Painting is a mathematical problem, according to Graham (also see Einstein's latest discoveries), and can be considered as a rigorous combination or arrangement, space, color and texture organization functioning together. For a given problem, like in a shooting gallery, there is only one perfect solution.
>
> Minimalist painting is purely realistic—the subject being the painting itself.
>
> Graham's art has passed through many stages and influences (only weak characters are afraid of influences).
>
> No one can say he possesses a typical Graham, for there is no such thing—each separate painting is a problem posed and solved.[136]

Hecht observed that

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[134] Brochure for *John Graham* (New York: Dudensing Galleries, March 1929), n.p.

[135] Kokkinen, 42. Hecht, the son of Russian Jewish immigrants, was a playwright who founded the *Chicago Literary Times* in 1923. He went on to become a noted Hollywood screenwriter.

[136] Brochure for *John Graham* (1929), n.p.

> Graham's paintings are one of the few remaining aesthetic battlefields in modern art. His canvasses [*sic*] are as tormented and aspiring, as bristling with vital theory and assault as the work which distinguished the heyday of the post Cézanne renaissance. . . . I find in Graham's pictures something which has become as rare as hen's teeth in New York—a certainty of their own importance, an exuberant and persistent confession of personality and the disquieting gesture of greatness.[137]

From the exhibition checklist we can conjecture that the minimalist paintings referred to are *Brown Painting*; *Green Square*; *Blue and White*; and *Disintegration of Composition*, all now lost or destroyed. Dorothy Dehner later recalled:

> He [Graham] told me that a mixture of all colors resulted in brown. Therefore all his pictures were brown, a rather dark brown like a burnt umber with black in it. . . . although he arrived at this by a mixture of all colors. I only saw three of Graham's minimilism [*sic*] paintings. All were small, perhaps under twenty inches. The brown was persistent, but not *even*, as I remember them. There were some streaks of black and a few streaks of white drawn across the canvases horizontally, but not geometrically. . . . When he came back [from] Paris, I believe it was 1930 [more likely 1929], he had a large group of canvases painted there that were entirely non-objective. They were painted in white, greys, blacks, pinks. They were made up of line entirely in right-angled blocks. They were the every first completely non-objective works I had seen by an American and I thought there were beautiful. . . . In 1932, Graham held a sale in which he decided to sell all his paintings for $15 each.[138]

The simultaneous showings in New York and Washington, whether orchestrated or coincidental, generated a good deal of attention, but Graham seems not to have won over all critics. In *The New York Times*, Lloyd Goodrich commented:

> Preceded by an extraordinary amount of publicity, an exhibition of paintings by John D. Graham has opened at the Dudensing galleries [*sic*]. This artist's work has recently been shown at the Phillips Memorial Gallery in Washington, but this is New York's first opportunity to see a one-man show by him.

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[137] Ibid.

[138] Dorothy Dehner, undated, unpaginated manuscript, AAA, most likely a draft for the foreword that Marcia Epstein Allentuck asked her to contribute to the republication of *SDA* in 1971. Reel D298, frame 1539.

> Mr. Graham is one of those who seem to think that it is necessary to have some one else vouch for their work, for the catalogue contains no less that three prefaces, culminating in Ben Hecht's statement that his paintings "are one of the few remaining aesthetic battlefields in modern art" and that they have "the disquieting gesture of greatness." One rubs one's eyes after reading this and looks at the pictures, only to wonder what the fuss is all about. Mr. Graham's painting, in spite of a good color sense and a certain bumptious vigor, resemble rather crude reminiscences of Picasso, Braque, Gris and the Matisse of about 1908. Compared with the similar work of these artists, which antedated Mr. Graham's efforts by a number of years, the latter appear singularly rudimentary.

Goodrich did little to conceal his contempt.

> In some of these works Mr. Graham purports to have produced a new type of painting called "Minimalism," which seems to consist of putting as little as possible into a picture. One of them, believe it or not, has only a single uniform flat color, and not a very interesting one at that. This would appear to simplify the painter's problems immensely, and Mr. Graham deserves a vote of thanks from all his hard-working confrères. The next step in this labor-saving process would seem to be to dispense with painting altogether.[139]

Phillips penned a swift response to Goodrich, assuming the tone of an exasperated parent.

> This note is to correct a mistaken impression that the exhibition of John D. Graham held in our Little Gallery in March contained the same pictures now on view at Dudensing's. I also wish to assure you that Graham is a far better painter than his first New York show would lead anyone to suppose. I was among the first in this country to discover Graham's talent and from time to time I selected examples which are very good indeed, in fact splendidly painted with an aristocratic taste for the placing of tones and contours. In my catalogue Introduction I made it quite clear that I disapproved unreservedly of his absurd "minimalism." I am satisfied that sooner or later he will cease to borrow subjects from Picasso and [de] Chirico and express his own richer, sensitive Slavonic temperament. I am taking the liberty of sending you herewith our catalogue of Graham's exhibition with us and under separate cover a few photographs of some of his best things one of which you might care to use in *The Arts*.[140]

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[139] Lloyd Goodrich, "A Round of Galleries," *The New York Times*, April 7, 1929, p. X13.

[140] Duncan Phillips, Washington, D.C., to Lloyd Goodrich, New York, April 9, 1929, The Phillips Collection records, AAA, Microfilm reel 1938, frame 443. Goodrich was associate editor of *The Arts*, a popular cultural magazine in this period, and Phillips may have hoped that he would write another, more favorable, piece on Graham.

Some three weeks later (no letter from Goodrich to Phillips is found in the archives), Phillips was concerned for his own reputation as well as that of Graham. Although the exhibition had closed, he wanted to state his opinion to Goodrich for the record.

> I read your review of Graham's exhibition with mingled satisfaction in your criticism and regret for the impression which you have received that the pictures at Dudensing's represent Graham at his best. The artist I sponsored in an exhibition last month in our Little Gallery is a painter far different and far superior to the one whose extravagant and clumsy works you saw in New York. I wish to have it clearly understood that I made a selection of about a dozen of Graham's best which were, by the way, very good indeed and, in my catalogue introduction, I made it quite clear that I disapproved of his imitations of French fads and formulas and of his desperate bid for originality known as "minimalism." Graham's finest things are so magnificently painted with such an aristocratic taste for the placing of tones and contours that he does not have to follow the French procession of radical art movements and certainly does not have to resort to such "bunkum" as you properly denounced.[141]

One wonders here if Phillips's concern was more for Graham's reputation or for his own as a spotter of new talent. Although he was ready to label his showings of new artists "experimental," Phillips evidently was not prepared for critics to take that view.

May–December 1929
Paris and Back

Graham was contemplating a return to Paris. In March, even before the Goodrich review, he announced to Phillips:

> To free myself entirely from French influence I am going to France, because here in America [a] French style of painting is a distinction, while in Paris it is a common occurrence. I am not inclined to follow the procession; I always go on the line of most resistance, the more competition the better for me. Anyhow I do not expect to stay in France permanently, I feel myself as an American artist and I

[141] Duncan Phillips, Washington, D.C., to Lloyd Goodrich, New York, April 29, 1929, The Phillips Collection records, AAA, Microfilm reel 1938, frame 490.

> am coming back after a year's work. . . . In Paris I have a better chance to develop a personal way of painting since the French style of painting is too obvious there and one has no desire to paint that way. To fight off French influence one has to go and live among [the] French.[142]

Graham did return to Paris in May, despite Elinor's advanced pregnancy.[143] In July, the international edition of the *Chicago Tribune* carried an article highly flattering to Graham, who could hardly have hoped for a more positive appraisal. The author, Jean Xceron, was an American artist of Greek origin living in Paris. He was close to Christian Zervos, another Greek, the founder of *Cahiers d'art*. Once more Graham's network of connections would be an asset.

> In a new movement of aesthetic expression, the modern artist seeks to express his feelings in a new purity of form; in a sequence of colors, lines, planes and surfaces based on geometrical principles. John D. Graham, the American innovator, aims in his paintings to achieve these future possibilities. . . . His exhibition in Paris at the Zborowski galleries has been acclaimed by the Parisian critics like André Salmon, André Warnod, Louis Vauxcelles, and Waldemar George, who has written a book [on] Graham surveying all his artistic career . . .
>
> His latest view in painting is to revaluate [*sic]* all values held as permanent up to now. . . . He is opposed to dynamism in all arts because life is dynamism and it takes great power to arrest things. [He believes] that all manifestations in all arts have value as long as they are statements. Also he contends that in painting, from the time of Rafael [*sic*] up to Picasso and Braque, no one dared to trespass the set rules of composition which consist in balancing color by color and form or shape by shape; and that he is the first to introduce the transmutation of composition values by balancing color by texture or form by texture. In his research he has discovered that for colors, form and texture to be of importance, they must be statements.
>
> In his opinion the work of art is a creative expression of one's point of view to delve into cosmic mysteries and tempt the gods of the unknown.[144]

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[142] John Graham, New York, to Duncan Phillips, Washington, D.C., March 24, 1929, The Phillips Collection records, AAA, Microfilm reel 1938, frame 490.

[143] Their son, named John David, was born June 14, 1929. E. Green, 138.

[144] Jean Xceron, "Who's Who Abroad: John D. Graham," *Chicago Tribune* (international edition), July 24, 1929. Photocopy in John D. Graham records, AAA. Xceron, an American artist living in Paris wrote for this column during 1929–1930. Other subjects he chose included Torres-Garcia; van Doesburg;

Another showing at Zborowski was arranged for October 1–15, consisting of fourteen paintings: *Le thé*, *L'oiseau*, *Les joueurs de cartes*, *La grappe de raisin*, *La tasse de café*, *Le poignet*, *La bouteille de lait*, *La tête et la bouteille* (Fig. 2.61), *Le porte-manteau* (Fig. 2.63 or 2.64), *La toile blanche*, *Le pinceau*, *Nature-morte*, *Composition*, and *Peinture*.[145] Judging from the titles given, few of these canvases would have been called "minimalist," with the exception of *La toile blanche.*

In early November, Phillips wanted to settle up with Graham. He wrote the artist as much, and informed him that when he was next in New York he would not be visiting Graham's apartment, which was so far uptown.[146]

> I was not satisfied with the rather pale Paris landscape which I tentatively selected for last quarter of last year . . . . I have to select something instead of that as well as pictures for the April, July, and October checks already sent to you, and the January check which will complete our contract, if such it can be called. I have no business buying so many of your pictures as I have not done that with anyone else.[147]

Back in the United States, he wrote Phillips about his highly favorable review in *Cahiers d'art* and bemoaned his reception stateside.

Vantongerloo; Teriade; Zborowski; Adolphe Basler; André Salmon; and Christian Zervos—certainly distinguished company for Graham. See Thalia Trezos Vrachopoulos "Jean Xceron: Rediscovered American Modernist Pioneer: Life and Works" (Ph.D. diss., City University of New York, 1999), 154.

[145] E. Green, 139.

[146] Graham and Elinor were living at 630 W. 135th Street following his return from Paris. Elinor had gone to Baltimore for the birth of the child, probably when Graham left for Paris, giving up their E. 9th Street apartment.

[147] Duncan Phillips, Washington, D.C. to John Graham, New York, November 5, 1929, The Phillips Collection records, AAA, Microfilm reel 1938, frame 501. For the years 1927, 1928, and 1929, Phillips gave Graham a quarterly stipend of $200 in exchange for a choice of paintings—five works in 1927, probably six in 1928, nine in 1929, and at least eight more between 1930 and 1933, although the "contract" was no longer in effect. Passantino and Scott, 457.

> Here in New York everything is a rakett [*sic*], a game, in Paris men like George, Zervos, Salmon, Raynal, Terriade, Vauxcelles, Picasso, Léger, and others like my paintings. The Whitney Club intrigue seems to make my effort here . . . hopeless.[148]

The artist Alexander Brook told an amusing and entirely plausible story about Graham and the Whitney Studio Club. Brook, who worked as an installer for exhibitions at the club (founded by Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney in 1918) reported to Juliana Force, the club's director. In an unpublished memoir, he recalled a day when Force summoned him and showed him a letter from Graham that included a biographical sketch in which he outlined his accomplishments—among others, his having been the youngest judge in all of Russia before the revolution.

> With noble aplomb he went on to say that to his mind the Whitney Studio Club was a dull, unprogressive institution offering unimaginative, mediocre exhibitions without any awareness of the changing times. He may have been right, or at least partly so, but I wondered how innocent the youngest judge of all Russia had to be to write [such a] naked criticism to the woman who ran the Club, her pet project, with tyrannical zeal. "At the present time the Club is nothing but an old maid's meeting place," he blithely went on without seeming to realize that he might be getting awfully deep in the mud he was throwing about with such abandon.[149]

Graham wrote Phillips again soon after his letter of complaint about New York, and he took great pains to position himself advantageously. He mentioned that Picasso had come to see his Paris exhibition.

> Do you know William Seabrook? He is the man who wrote the "Magic Island." He used to say in Paris that the next decade will see me as the greatest living painter. Several people wrote me expressing their opinion that they think me being the best living painter. Picasso himself came several times to my exhibition. Terriade says: "peinture fouguese, d'une grand ambiance." [passionate painting

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[148] John Graham, New York, to Duncan Phillips, Washington, D.C., December 3, 1929, The Phillips Collection records, AAA, Microfilm reel 1938, frame 507.

[149] Alexander Brook Papers, AAA, Microfilm reel 3928, frame 999.

> with great feeling]. But New York critics do not even notice me. There are two sorts of critics: one sort—art lovers, collectors and constructive art writers and the same time like you, Meyer-Graffe [*sic*],[150] Salmon, Zervos, Uhde, George, Terriade, Level, Barnes,—and others. The other sort is—just critics, they are not collecting or loving anything. The poorest art critic in Europe collects and writes about art not because this is one of the forms of journalism but because he is passonately [*sic*] in love with it.[151]

January–December 1930

Where is Graham at decade's end? He would have only one more solo exhibition at Dudensing, in January, 1930: the gallery went out of business in 1931 after the death of the owner, LeRoy Dudensing. His brother F. Valentine incorporated it into his own Valentine Gallery, best known for showing the School of Paris.[152] Graham participated in the 125th Annual Exhibition of the Pennsylvania Academy, held in Philadelphia from January to March, 1930, showing *Street Abstraction* and *Landscape*.[153] A January 12, 1930, notice in *The New York Times*, informed that "Romany Marie is holding an exhibition of paintings by Stuart Davis, Glenn Coleman, Jan Matulka, John Graham and David Burliuk at her café gallery in Greenwich Village."[154] He was in a group show at the Mural Galleries in New York in February 1930, together with Adolph Gottlieb, Stuart Davis and others. In the fall of 1930, he had one-person exhibition at the Galerie Van

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[150] Julius Meier-Graefe (1867–1939) was a German art critic who wrote enthusiastically about nineteenth-century French painting.

[151] John Graham, New York, to Duncan Phillips, Washington, D.C., December 8, 1929, The Phillips Collection records, AAA, Microfilm reel 1938, frame 512.

[152] He had founded the gallery in 1926 with Henri Matisse's son Pierre. Michael C. FitzGerald, *Picasso and American Art* (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2006), 131.

[153] E. Green, 139.

[154] Edward Alden Jewell, "Mrs. Whitney's Museum," *The New York Times*, January 12, 1930, p. 119.

Leer in Paris and a reviewer for *Cahiers d'art* noted that ". . . among the American painters who have been seen in Paris in the post-war period, Graham is unquestionably one of the best, if not the best."[155]

Graham needed a more sound financial footing. He wrote Phillips with this in mind in early 1930:

> Now my idea is that the person that would garnatee [*sic*] me $800 a year, for three consecutive years, would get 16 or 20 paintings of mine a year at his choice. Another combination if I could get a loan of $3000 payable in three yearly installments, I would return the money in ten years and as interest would give five paintings a year besides. Or, any other possible proposition that would enable me to go and work peacefully for three years. I thought you might know someone who would consider such a proposition if you would recommend me to him. I wish you could see my latest paintings, they are on the order of the one you liked at Reinhardts,[156] only more developed, infinitely more so, something powerful and pregnant with potentialities. By the way, as a security for the loan I would offer my negro sculpture collection, which is worth more than the sum I am asking.[157]

Phillips responded the following month:

> I will return the large Abstraction by you as I don't see how I could possibly use it. Frankly our Collection is not quite so radical as that, not even my experiment station. I am fascinated by it. But let someone else have it. My courage doesn't quite go so far. . . . That and the other pictures which we kept from your earlier shipment closed our account. I can't see how we can go on with our arrangement for another year with our finances in the state they are. . . . Needless to say, my interest in you and my belief in your future remains undiminished, and if you will put a curb on your impetuous inventions and be satsified [*sic*] just to paint good pictures based on traditions will unquestionably be tempted to add from time to time to our already enormous holdings of your work. . . . I cannot help wishing that you would paint more like it instead of keeping one eye on Picasso and trying so constantly to keep up with him. It wouldn't do you any harm to stay in this

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[155] *Cahiers d'art* 7, (1930), 387. See Figs. 2.69 and 3.25 reproduced with the review.

[156] Reinhardt Galleries showed School of Paris works. Susan Noyes Platt, "Modernism in the 1920s: Interpretations of Modern Art in New York from Expressionism to Constructivism." (Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1985), 102.

[157] John Graham, New York to Duncan Phillips Washington, D.C., February 3, 1930, The Phillips Collection records, AAA, Microfilm reel 1938, frame 545.

> country with your wife and child as I hear when you go to Paris you get too much Bohemia and too much of the contagious and the latest movements which are really a curb to your originality. You are one of the best painters in America and you stand out more over here than you do in Paris where they have so many like you. Think it over.[158]

On December 28, Graham opened *The New York Times* and read a column about his recent exhibition at Galerie Van Leer in Paris. The supportive comments by Samuel Putnam, writing from Paris, would only have strengthened his resolve to persevere as an American painter.

> Painting America has been fortunate in her adopted and errant sons. There is Pascin, of recent tragic memory. There is Max Weber. And now, there is John D. Graham, who is to be placed beside Pascin, Weber, and John Marin—particularly, I should say, Pascin and Marin—as a representative of the United States at the court of modernism.
>
> To say that Graham, whose latest paintings have just been on view at the Van Leer Gallery, is making his reputation on this side of the water would be inexact. He is by no means unknown at home. Nevertheless, it is in France that Graham is very largely working out his artistic destiny: and this is the point—he is bringing something to France. The thing that Graham brings is not merely his native gifts, his own racial heritage, but something he seems to have absorbed from the land of his adoption. There is a peculiarly American quality in his work, his modernism, and it is as an American that most of us instinctively think of him.
>
> Mr. Graham's esthetic product, indeed, might be regarded as an American commentary on Picasso—rather than as an American departure from Picasso. After all, why should not a painter set out from the towering, overawing Pablo? "Setting out from" is something other than imitation, slavish or remote. Yet it calls for a degree of courage, and all the greater degree of courage, to set one's self, not to follow, but to attack the same problem and derivative problems. In the real artist such a course demands a high, calm wisdom and something of sacrifice, a willingness to be confused with petty imitators.[159]

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[158] Duncan Phillips, Washington, D.C., to John Graham, New York, March 14, 1930, The Phillips Collection records, AAA, Microfilm reel 1938.

[159] Samuel Putnam, "Art Comment from Paris," *The New York Times*, December 28, 1930, p. X13.

It would appear that, on the very same day, on the strength of this laudatory review, Graham wrote the following letter to Phillips. Accusations of imitating Picasso had dogged him for years, and Phillips had constantly reminded him that his work could be unduly influenced by the style of better known painters. The column from Paris seemed to put everything in perspective.

> Dear Phillips
>
> We all send you and your family our best wishes for the coming year.
>
> I have not been painting very much—whatever I paint now is only figures. Stuart Davis, [Arshile] Gorky and myself have formed a group and something original, purely American is coming out from under our brushes. It is not the *subject matter* that makes painting American or French, but the *quality, certain quality* which makes painting assume one or the other nationality. I had a good example. I have painted a picture of an egg and stripes in Paris. It was good, so when I came back to New York two months later I have painted identical picture here. I firmly believed (I had a photograph of the first painting) that I faithfully reproduced the original. When I have received the first painting from Paris and compared the second one in New York, the difference was *astounding*—one was a French painting, the other was an American, more detached attitude, etc. This goes to prove that schools of art are not made but are the product of surroundings and time.[160]

Phillips's close relationship with Graham had waned by the end of 1930. By then the patron may have understood that he could not shape the artist exactly as he wanted. A more successful relationship for Phillips was that with the artist Karl Knaths, who had received his first solo museum exhibition in 1929, the same year as Graham. "Knaths's Unit" in the Phillips Collection grew to forty-seven paintings.[161] During their thirty-five-

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[160] John Graham, New York, to Duncan Phillips, Washington, D.C., December 28, 1930. The Phillips Collection records, AAA, Microfilm reel 1938, frame 520. (See Chapter Three for a full discussion of this passage.)

[161] Only Arthur Dove was more heavily represented in the collection, with fifty-five works. There were eventually a total of thirty-six Grahams and twenty-eight Marins. Passantino and Scott, 247.

year relationship, Phillips judged Knaths as having been highly successful in absorbing the "best of French painting, from Chardin to Cézanne to Bonnard and Braque" and having made it something distinctly American.[162] Knaths's homogeneous body of work reflected Phillips's ability to nurture and shape talent, especially that of a young painter who never studied abroad but who absorbed the lessons of Paris under his patron's tutelage.

* * * * *

By 1930, Graham had in a way run his course with Paris; his best chance, he recognized, was to position himself as an American painter. The next chapter will look at the relationships he had begun to build in the late twenties—with Davis, Gorky, de Kooning, David Smith and other artists, and with collectors such as Katherine Dreier—his involvement with African art, and his efforts in writing. As we shall see in the next chapter, these would shape the 1930s.

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[162] Passantino and Scott, 321.

Chapter Three

Becoming an American Artist

The preceding chapter focused on Graham's efforts in three cities—New York, Baltimore, and Paris—to establish himself as an artist in the 1920s. Few if any American artists managed to negotiate a similar number of concurrent exhibitions in France and in the United States or to earn such positive reviews, particularly from the French press. Graham was able to advance this experience into exponentially greater renown.

This chapter weaves several threads from 1928 and 1929 into the next decade. It is essential to understand in what ways Graham had decided, by the end of 1930, to position himself as an *American* artist. Although he continued to spend time in Paris in the thirties, he painted less, wrote more, and emerged as an important influence on younger painters within his acquaintance, some of whom would forge the critical link between European modernism and the breakthrough style of Abstract Expressionism.

The first theme, that of the "Three Musketeers" (Willem de Kooning's name for Graham, Stuart Davis, and Arshile Gorky in this period[1]), will be expanded to take in the younger artists Willem de Kooning and David Smith. In this period these artists felt one could strive to be an American painter and still look to Europe for inspiration. A second

[1] In a recollection of the 1930s and 40s, de Kooning said "Graham, Stuart Davis and Arshile Gorky at that time were known as the Three Musketeers. They were the three outstanding modern artists." James T. Valliere, "De Kooning on Pollock," *Partisan Review* (autumn 1967), 603. The remark is generally taken as a reference to the popular nineteenth-century novel by Alexandre Dumas, *père*. It is also possible, given de Kooning's enthusiasm for American culture and his love of wordplay, that the nickname was suggested by a candy bar introduced by the Mars Candy Company in 1932, *3 Musketeers*. The bar originally came in three separate pieces—one chocolate, one strawberry, and one vanilla—and the epithet may have been de Kooning's wry allusion to the disparity among the three painters, rather than their undying "one for all, and all for one" camaraderie. http://www.3musketeers.com/facts/faq. Accessed December 20, 2006.

theme is Graham's involvement with African art, as connoisseur, collector, and dealer; he used African sculptures, and photographs of them, to introduce the circle of younger artists around him to the mastery of form and the domain of the unconscious mind that he found implicit in these works. A third theme involves Graham's strategic interactions with collectors, his waning relationship with Duncan Phillips, his exchanges with Katherine Dreier, and his efforts to shape the discourse around the idea of being an American artist. In a decade when he was working apace on the manuscript for *System and Dialectics of Art*, we shall see how this transmission of energies to writing and publishing diluted his efforts in painting and exhibiting. A full discussion of *System and Dialectics of Art*, its precedents and influences, will be offered in Chapter Four.

Graham and Davis in Paris: Proximity and Distance

John Graham and Stuart Davis most likely met each other in New York sometime before the summer of 1928 when they were both in Paris.[2] As described in Chapter Two, their paths probably crossed in Paris at the Atelier Desjobert,[3] and they could scarcely have missed running into each other in the cafés of Montparnasse, where they both lived. Davis arrived in Paris in mid-June, 1928, several months before Graham, and returned to

[2] Their introduction could well have come through John Sloan, whom Davis knew from his work for *The Masses*, beginning in 1912. Davis spent the summer of 1923 in Santa Fe with his brother Wyatt and John and Dolly Sloan.

[3] Although only one lithograph has survived from Graham's Paris years (*Saint Tropez*, Fig. 2.29), a review of an exhibition at the Dudensing Galleries suggests that he may have done more lithography there. "John Graham's drawings and lithographs stretch over considerable time and many manners. His most recent lithographs are his most profound and his most humorous contributions, one quality depending on the other. An iron chair on a café terrace is made of two opposing spirals, that could go on turning forever, to manufacture, in their clownish way, a sufficient number of uncomfortable iron chairs to supply all the terraces the world over." Ruth Green Harris, "Seen in the Galleries," *New York Times*, March 30, 1930, X13. The description of the chair sounds very much like the one in *Saint Tropez*.

New York in late August 1929. Funds for his trip were assured when Juliana Force, director of the Whitney Studio Club, purchased two of his paintings.[4] The sketchy planes of his Paris paintings (for instance *Place Pasdeloup*, 1928; Fig. 3.1) have been viewed by many critics as something of a detour from the "ambitious inventions" of his Egg Beater series,[5] begun before his departure for France and resumed on his return to the United States.[6] Davis took several of these canvases with him to Paris.[7] Recent criticism has adopted a more nuanced view of the Paris paintings. Less abstract than the Egg Beater studies that had occupied him in the previous year, these works are nonetheless equally experimental in their innovative spatial concepts and their textures.[8]

Davis found more than enough interesting subject matter in the Parisian façades. Graham's paintings from that summer range widely from portrait to landscape to still life (*Harlequin in Gray*, Fig. 2.38; *Pont Neuf*, Fig. 2.55; and *Two Eggs*, Fig. 2.51). One painting of his from 1928 is stylistically similar to one of Davis's from the same year. Graham's *Rue Brea* (Fig. 2.30) shares many features with Davis's Paris paintings. Given the wide range of Graham's production in this period, his work may seem imitative and

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[4] Lowery Stokes Sims, *Stuart Davis: American Painter*, exh. cat. (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1991), 317.

[5] John R. Lane, *Stuart Davis*: *Art and Art Theory*, exh. cat. (Brooklyn, N.Y.: The Brooklyn Museum, 1978), 21.

[6] In 1927, Davis nailed an electric fan, a rubber glove, and an eggbeater to a table and painted these objects for a year. The critic Brian O'Doherty has described the artist in Paris as "seduced" by his surroundings and producing "confected idealized stage sets for a nostalgic musical of an American artist in Paris." As quoted in *Stuart Davis: An American in Paris,* exh. cat. (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris, 1987), 2.

[7] Most scholars agree that he took two paintings with him, one of which was *Eggbeater No. 4.*; see Patricia Hills, *Stuart Davis* (1996); Lewis Kachur, *Stuart Davis: An American in Paris* (1987) and Bruce Weber, *Stuart Davis' New York* (1985).

[8] For detailed studies of this period see Diane Kelder, ed. *Stuart Davis: A Documentary Monograph* (1971) and *Stuart Davis: Art and Theory, 1920-1931* (2002); Karen Wilkin, *Stuart Davis* (1987).

therefore less successful.[9] In both *Rue Brea*, and Davis's *Rue des Rats No. 2* (1929; Fig. 3.2), sand was added to the medium to give texture. In Davis's painting, the textured areas make up nearly half the canvas: the light blue of the mansard roof, the wall in the right foreground, and the entire surface of the street provide a unifying formal element. In *Rue Brea*, the textured surface that depicts the façade of the pinky-beige building in the background serves both to delineate the space and to give it depth. Davis employs the added texture for similar effect. The initial idea of adding sand may have come from Jan Matulka, the Czech-born American painter whose Paris studio Davis rented. David Smith recalled that at one time in the late 1920s "everyone" in Matulka's Art Students League classes was adding sand.[10] Art historian Patterson Sims has noted that Matulka even suggested to his students that they could build up the surface of their paintings by adding wood shavings and coffee grounds.[11]

This was the first time that Graham and Davis introduced sand into the medium to activate the surface and soften colors laid on in flat, circumscribed areas. James Johnson Sweeney, in the catalogue for Davis's 1933 exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, referred to this as ". . . now a mellowness of surface even when he mixes sand with his paint or makes use of the broadest palette-knife modeling."[12] Adding sand interested Graham more than it did Davis, apparently, for he used it well into the 1930s (see *Yellow Bird*, c. 1930, Fig. 3.3; *White Pipe*, 1930, Fig. 3.4; and *The Embrace* [*Portrait of Graham*

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[9] *Rue Brea* is the only Graham painting in this unmistakably Davis-like idiom that has survived or been seen in reproduction.

[10] David Smith, *David Smith*, (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968), 25.

[11] *Jan Matulka, 1890-1972*. exh. cat. (Washington, D.C.: National Collection of Fine Arts, 1980), 25.

[12] James Johnson Sweeney, *Stuart Davis* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1945), 21.

and Elinor], 1932, Fig. 3.5). What is significant is that *both* painters were using the technique, and must have been looking at each other's paintings. Adding sand to the medium would be of particular interest to younger artists, most notably Jackson Pollock (see his *Dancing Figure*, 1938; Fig. 3.6).[13]

Davis's embrace of the iconography of the street—signs, trellises, streetlamps—was total and occupied him for decades. By omitting anything that hinted at twentieth-century advances such as the automobile, he evoked a nostalgic view of Paris. He also developed a refined calligraphic style of drawing on the canvas. Graham employed this to some degree, but his forms in *Rue Brea* lack the untethered buoyancy of Davis's. There is an awkward bulkiness in Graham's forms—as in the weighty kiosk and the stilted dead tree in the foreground[14]—and the way they are anchored in the composition. Even Graham's *tricolore* flies at a less than jaunty angle. He came closer to achieving Davis's lightness in the lithograph that he made that year in Paris (Fig. 2.29).

Davis was friendly with several young American writers in Paris, including Robert McAlmon and Elliot Paul. Paul, whom Davis had first met in Gloucester,

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[13] Steven Naifeh and Gregory White Smith, *Jackson Pollock: An American Saga* (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, Inc., 1989), 346. The authors suggest that Pollock and Graham met sometime after Graham's 1940 move to 54 Greenwich Avenue in Manhattan. His apartment there shared a fire escape with Pollock's friends Nene and Bernie Schardt, according to an interview with Nene Schardt. Other sources have suggested that Pollock contacted Graham after reading his article "Primitive Art and Picasso," published in the *Magazine of Art* in 1937; see the discussion later in this chapter.

[14] The sources for this particular motif in another Graham painting made in 1928, *Palermo* (Fig. 2.23), have been thoroughly explored by Michael FitzGerald in *Picasso and American Art* (2006), 119. He links the stylized tree in *Palermo* to Davis's *Early American Landscape* (1925; Fig. 3.7) and traces influences on the latter work directly to Picasso's *Landscape with Dead and Live Trees* (1919; Fig. 3.8). As FitzGerald points out, it is likely that Graham knew the Picasso painting as well. In a July 19, 1928, letter to Duncan Phillips from Paris, Graham mentions visiting the collection of Baron Yasumasa Fukushima, owner of the Picasso at that time.

Massachusetts, in 1922,[15] worked at the Paris *Herald Tribune* and then joined Eugene Jolas's fledgling literary journal *transition* ("An International Quarterly for Creative Experiment"), founded in Paris in 1926.[16] Paul penned an appreciation of Davis for the magazine in 1928. He opened on a humorous note:

> Stuart Davis, under any other circumstances, would have been a lazy man. Had there been one of his countrymen painting in a way that satisfied him, he would have been content, perhaps, to watch him and to approve. Such was not the case.[17]

Paul was mindful to situate Davis as an American in the continuum of European art:

> Like Gris and Picasso, Davis resorted to all kinds of materials in order to produce the effects he desired. He glued pieces of tin or sewed buttons upon his canvases and used the letters of the alphabet and numerals in all sizes when their lines supplied whatever he required to occupy a given space. But like the other discerning painters abroad he dropped that line of procedure and studied the more difficult and effective art of mixing paint.
>
> . . . He is the only American who has shown the simple common sense to be influenced by his important contemporaries rather than by his second-rate predecessors. He has been strong enough to withstand all the neglect, nonsense and misunderstanding which has fallen to his lot. He represents the age.[18]

Paul concluded on an upbeat note, clearly admiring his friend's work; but he couldn't resist poking fun at Davis, then in his mid-thirties.[19] "It is time now to salute

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[15] Stuart Davis, interview by Harlan Phillips, May–June 1962, transcript, AAA, 298. I am grateful to Bruce Weber for providing access to this transcript through his kind introduction to Davis's son, Earl Davis.

[16] Douglas McMillan, *transition: The History of a Literary Era, 1927-1938* (New York: George Braziller, 1975), 18.

[17] Elliot Paul, "Stuart Davis, American Painter," *transition*, no. 14 (Fall 1928), 146.

[18] Ibid., 147

[19] Graham, eight years older, was in fact closer in age to Davis than to most of his artistic confrères, including Gorky, de Kooning, and Smith.

him. He will be able to bear up under a little approval after all these years. A very few painters have learned from his example."[20]

Davis's *Hôtel de France,* 1929, was the cover for this issue of *transition,*[21] and the table of contents bore the heading ''America." The issue contained essays by American writers and one section with responses to the query, "Why Do Americans Live in Europe?" from such notables as Gertrude Stein,[22] Robert McAlmon, Kay Boyle, and Harry Crosby. Two reproductions of John Graham paintings were also featured: *Painting*, (1928; Fig. 3.9), on page 171, opposite Crosby's article "Hail: Death!" and *Painting* (1928; Fig. 3.10) on page 170, opposite Robert Sage's essay "Etc.," on James Joyce.[23] Graham's inclusion indicates his fluid intersection with the circle of young American writers in Paris and suggests that Davis fostered his entrée.

Throughout his lifetime, Davis wrote recollections of his Parisian sojourn. His thoughts on the experience of being an American artist in Paris and his return to the New York art world are included here at length as a parallel experience to Graham's. In 1945, Davis summed it up thus:

> Everything about [Paris] struck me as being just about right. I had the feeling that this was the best place in the world for an artist to live and work, and at that time it was. The prevalence of the sidewalk café was an important factor. It provided easy access to one's friends, and gave extra pleasure to long walks

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[20] Paul, 148.

[21] Patricia Hills, *Stuart Davis* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers, 1996), 82 (See Fig. 3.10A).

[22] Davis later recalled that Paul took him to meet Stein. See H. Phillips interview with Davis, AAA, 162.

[23] It is admittedly curious that the title *Painting* is used for both. Davis's works reproduced in this issue of *transition* are identified by their full titles. Fig. 2.39 is reproduced in the Waldemar George 1929 monograph on Graham as *Famille d'artistes* and has also been titled *Composition.* Listing both titles as *Painting* would suggest an editorial lapse rather than an insistence on Graham's part.

> through various parts of the city. The absence of American drive and tempo was not missed. There was so much of the past, and of the immediate present, brought together on one plane, that nothing was left to be desired. There was a seeming timelessness . . . that was conducive to the kind of contemplation essential to art. There was no feeling of being isolated from America, as I met practically everyone I had ever known at one time or another during the year.[24]

Davis described, in contrast, the process of reentry into New York:

> On arrival in New York I was appalled and depressed by its giantism. Everything in Paris was human size, here everything was inhuman. It was difficult to think of either art or oneself as having any significance whatever in the face of this frenetic commercial engine. I thought, "Hell, you can't do any painting here." It is partly true. But on the other hand as an American I had the need for the impersonal dynamics of New York City. [25]

In a later interview, Davis recalled his friendship with Graham and Graham's ease conversing in French: "John Graham was there, an artist I knew very well. He was a Russian. He spoke French and everything else."[26] Davis also remembered that Graham took him to Léger's studio but Davis expressed no opinions of Graham's work.[27] For his part, when they were both back in the United States, Graham felt certain enough about a show of Davis's work to advocate strongly with his patron, Duncan Phillips. "There is an interesting show of Stuart Davis on now, fine paintings, and I believe you ought to have an example of his work in your collection. Beautiful things."[28]

The exhibition *Hotels and Cafés* was held at the Downtown Gallery in New York from January 21 to February 10, 1930. Edith Halpert had opened the gallery in 1926.

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[24] Stuart Davis; quoted in Sweeney, *Stuart Davis*, 19.

[25] Ibid., 22.

[26] H. Phillips interview with Davis, AAA, 158.

[27] Sweeney, 159.

[28] John Graham, New York, to Duncan Phillips, Washington, D.C., February 3, 1930. The Phillips Collection Papers, AAA, Microfilm reel 1935, frame 74. Phillips did acquire a work from the exhibition, *Blue Café* (1928; Fig. 3.11) in 1930.

Davis recalled that Halpert "stuck to Americans because at that time only Montross and McBeth [Galleries] were American. American Art was automatically "second class."[29]

Critical Response back Home

The critical reception for American painters returning from Paris was not always positive. In one of his regular contributions to *The Dial* in April 1929, the prominent art critic Henry McBride confessed that while he traveled to Europe with some frequency, he would not be "deterred from shying a stone at those others who go abroad too often and stay too long when they do go."[30] An artist himself, McBride began writing criticism for the New York *Sun* in 1912. When Scofield Thayer assumed editorship of *The Dial* in 1920, he asked McBride to contribute a column on modern art.[31] McBride found that the public:

> . . . has grown intolerant of diluted patriotism. "American artists who live in France," the very phrase is condemnation. A fiat seems to have gone forth. At any rate cold shoulders in solid phalanges were turned in succession this year on the works of William Yarrow, Marsden Hartley, Paul Burlin, Guy Pène du Bois, Leon Kroll, and a long list of other expatriates.[32]

He ended with a boldly sweeping proclamation.

> The times, as a matter of fact, have changed. There is no longer the necessity (if there ever was) to study art abroad. . . . Strange distillations go to the making of a style but the younger Americans in search of one are herewith

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[29] Harlan Phillips interview, 148.

[30] Henry McBride, "Modern Art," *The Dial* (April 1929), 353.

[31] Susan Noyes Platt, *Modernism in the 1920s: Interpretations of Modern Art in New York from Expression to Constructivism* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1985), 38.

[32] McBride, 354.

> gratuitously advised that the chances of acquiring one in cosmopolitanism are noticeably less than they were a generation ago. The reason for this, to put it in a nutshell, is that the centre of the world has shifted.
> Paris is no longer the capital of Cosmopolis. All the intelligence of the world is focused on New York. It has become the battleground of modern civilization; all the roads now lead in this direction, and all the world knows this save the misguided artists who are jeopardizing their careers for the dubious *consommations* of the Café de la Rotonde. [33]

McBride did not back down from this position in a review the next year in *Creative Art,* a magazine of fine and applied art that flourished from 1927 to 1933 for which he served as editor.[34] He found an exhibition of Davis's watercolors at the Whitney Studio Club galleries lacking, and commented negatively on the artist's "Parisian roots." Davis felt compelled to respond; his letter was published in the February 1930 issue of the magazine. He set out to confront head-on the question of "American-ness."

> Dear Mr. McBride
> I appreciate the good will [*sic*] shown in your review of the watercolors I showed at the Whitney Galleries. There is a point, however, on which I think it necessary to take issue with you. In the review you speak of your enthusiasm for my work and call me a "swell American painter." This attitude on your part I heartily approve, but you further state that my style is French and that if Picasso had never lived I would have had to think out a style of my own. Now is that nice, Mr. McBride?
> In speaking of French art as opposed to American the assumption is made that there is an American art. Where is it and how does one recognize it? Has any American artist created a style which was unique in painting, completely divorced from European models?[35]

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[33] Ibid.

[34] Platt, 35.

[35] Stuart Davis to Henry McBride, published in "The Palette Knife," supplement to *Creative Art* 6, February 1930, 34.

Davis answered with an emphatic no and went on to cite American artists, from Copley to Whistler to Ryder, who were influenced by European art and were "regarded as the best that America has produced."[36] He summed up his plaint:

> In view of all this I insist that I am as American as any other American painter. I was born here as were my parents and their parents before, which fact makes me an American whether I want to be or not. While I admit the foreign influence I strongly deny speaking their language. . . . Over here we are racially English-American, Irish-American, German-American, French, Italian, Russian or Jewish-American, and artistically we are Rembrandt-American, Renoir-American and Picasso-American. But since we live here and paint here we are first of all, American.[37]

As editor, McBride had the last word. He printed his response immediately after Davis's letter. Admitting that he was "in agreement with about seventy-five per cent" of Davis's contentions," he accused the artist of being "too French, technically, for [his] own good."[38] McBride observed that Winslow Homer's fame as a painter of the sea came from an "intimacy with the sea, not to an intimacy with Turner or Claude."[39]

The spirited exchanges between Davis and McBride in this period provide a context for Graham's strategic thinking in this critical period and indicate how his own rhetoric was shaped. He had spent another summer abroad in 1929 and was thinking seriously of an extended stay in Paris.[40] But by the end of 1930, the climate had changed; he wrote to Phillips that something "purely American" was beginning to come from him and his fellow painters. Perhaps Davis was best able to put the Paris experience in context

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[36] Ibid.

[37] Ibid., 34–35.

[38] Henry McBride response to Stuart Davis, published in "The Palette Knife," supplement to *Creative Art* 6, February 1930, 35.

[39] Ibid.

[40] Events in the summer of 1929 are detailed in Chapter Two.

and stress how it had made him into a *more* American artist. In a "self-interview" for the September 1931 issue of *Creative Life,*[41] he wrote:

> Q—. . . Is there any one outstanding event in your artistic life that has special significance for you?
> A.—Yes. My trip to Europe in 1928.
> Q.—What was its particular value?
> A.—It enabled me to spike the disheartening rumor that there were hundreds of talented young modern artists in Paris who completely outclassed their American equivalents. It demonstrated to me that work being done here was comparable in every way with the best of the work over there by contemporary artists. It proved to me that one might go on working in New York without laboring under an impossible artistic handicap. It allowed me to observe the enormous vitality of the American atmosphere as compared to Europe and made me regard the necessity of working in New York as a positive advantage.
> Q.—In view of what you've just said, am I to understand that you think America has a great artistic future?
> A.—Of course! Not only a future but a present. We have the talent right now but could do with a trifle more support from the bleachers.[42]

A little over a year later, a headline for a *New York Times* review of an exhibition at the Downtown Gallery announced: "Stuart Davis Offers a Penetrating Survey of the American Scene—Native Talent in Drawing Shown."[43] The reviewer, Edward Alden Jewell, welcomed Davis back into the fold of *American* painters, using the term "American Scene,"' to describe an East Coast version of the style that would gain predominance in the 1930s:

> . . . "Garage Lights" was painted down Gloucester way and it is reported that one visitor to the gallery delightedly detected in it even the pungent Gloucester aroma, compounded of glue and fish cakes—which can only mean that

[41] By this time, Davis had risen sufficiently in McBride's estimation to be featured in two articles and three reproductions, including a lush chromolithograph of *Coffee Pot No. 2* (1930; Fig. 3.12), which was printed upon the artist's return from Paris. The other two reproduced works were painted in France.

[42] Stuart Davis, "Self-Interview," *Creative Art* 9, (September 1931), 211.

[43] Edward Alden Jewell, "Art in Review," *The New York Times*, March 10, 1932, 19.

> Stuart Davis is a super-realist (not quite to be confused with the term surréalisme)."
>
> In this gay and sparkling show a talented American artist is seen at length definitely on his own, graduated from the School of Paris, although his calligraphy would no doubt still be understood without difficulty along the famous boulevards of the Rive Gauche.[44]

Davis's "Native Talent" positioned him squarely among painters of the American Scene and his dealer, Edith Halpert, exploited this categorization although Davis himself disliked it intensely. U.S. critics never framed Graham's art in these terms. Despite his best efforts to place himself within this construct, his work remained largely outside.

Arshile Gorky (1904-1948)

It is difficult to pinpoint the date when John Graham and Arshile Gorky first met but most sources agree that they were acquainted by 1928.[45] In 1924, Gorky moved to New York from New England, where he had been living with family near Boston and in Providence, Rhode Island, after emigrating from Armenia in 1920.[46] He may have met Graham through David Burliuk, Nikolai Vasilieff, and other Russian artists in New York.

In 1925, Gorky studied briefly in Charles Hawthorne's life-drawing class at the National Academy of Design. By the end of that year he had enrolled at the Grand Central School of Art, where his facility in drawing soon earned him a position as

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[44] Ibid.

[45] The most recent Gorky biographies are Matthew Spender's *From a High Place: A Life of Arshile Gorky* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999) and Hayden Herrera's *Arshile Gorky: His Life and Work* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2003). Both authors had extraordinary access to Gorky's immediate family: Spender is married to Gorky's eldest daughter, Maro; Gorky's widow, Agnes (Mougouch), was Herrera's stepmother.

[46] Hayden Herrera, *Arshile Gorky: His Life and Work* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), 217. Gorky's tragic early history is well-known. He witnessed his own mother's death by starvation in the wake of the Armenia Genocide of 1915–1917. The abject image of the "starving Armenians" that most Americans had in the 1920s may have contributed to Gorky's resolve to dissimulate his true origins by claiming to be Russian.

instructor. Less than a year later, he was appointed a full member of the faculty, and he taught there until 1931.[47] In a list of instructors for the 1926–1927 catalogue, Gorky is listed as "Archele Gorky," born in Nizhni Novgorod, Russia. His credentials are given as study at the School of Nizhni Novgorod and later at the Académie Julien in Paris.[48]

The two had undoubtedly met by the fall of 1928, after Graham had returned from nearly six months in Paris and relocated from Baltimore to New York. They were among many who sought to reinvent themselves in 1920s New York. Ann Douglas, in her influential study *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s*, limned this vivid backdrop and discussed the concept of exile:

> In the American tradition, mimesis is displaced to what the critic Richard Poirier, speaking of American narrative and borrowing a term from Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*, has called "a world elsewhere." Forced into exile, Coriolanus turns the tables on those who exile him by telling them, "I'll banish *you*. There is a world elsewhere." This willed conversion of exile from the known and familiar world into an enhanced power of exploration and vision in another unknown but compelling world, this exchange of the recognizably real for a place or mode defined as more insistently real, a place where provincials are recognized as sovereigns, was the central strategy of classic American literature.[49]

Douglas is examining literature here, but the same paradigm can be applied to the fabrication of life stories that Graham and Gorky undertook. The world became suddenly compressed with their arrival in the United States, among millions of others, disrupted by the upheavals of the previous decade. "With the Great War, America's 'world elsewhere'

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[47] Diane Waldman, *Arshile Gorky, 1904–1948: A Retrospective* (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1981), 257.

[48] Herrera, 131. Born Vosdanig Adoian, Gorky had begun to style himself as a Russian as early as 1922, when he enrolled at the New School of Design in Boston. "Arshile 'may have been chosen as a variant of "Achilles;" "Gorky" was apparently adopted from the Russian writer Maxim Gorky whom the artist claimed as a relative.

[49] Ann Douglas, *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1995), 208.

became the here and now."[50] Each fictionalized a past to some degree. The Anglicization of names was not uncommon; indeed, many immigrants had their names altered by Ellis Island officials.[51]

Gorky may have been able to exchange a few words in Russian,[52] but he fooled probably very few Russians or Armenians. Graham's adoption of an Anglicized name was perhaps less an attempt to disguise his origins than a choice of a more easily handled name. By 1928 he had established a pattern of traveling to France for a portion of the year, and his Anglicized name would have contributed significantly to his recognition as an American painter in France.

We know from correspondence between him and Duncan Phillips in 1928 that Graham was eager to branch out. Impatient with schooling himself in Picasso, Braque, and de Chirico, he wanted to plot his own trajectory. In articulating to Phillips his concept of "minimalism," he was striving for a new vocabulary in paint. His friendship with Gorky may have been the catalyst for this. As seen in the canvases *Le rêve* (Fig. 2.49) and *Le miroir* (Fig 2.50), both from 1928, Graham had begun to pare down the structure in his paintings.

> What I am trying to do is to build a new vision altogether, a vision that starts with *tabula rasa.* Of course, like in any process of radical change, one must start with destruction of the old . . . I always felt I am going to discover "something new." I had this premonition and vision, too, only I was handicapped by my former lack

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[50] Ibid.

[51] Graham, we have seen, was able to avoid that entry point; Gorky's last name was entered in the records as "Manouk." http://www.ellisisland.org/search/passRecord.asp. Accessed January 12, 2007.

[52] He may have picked up some of the language from Russian troops occupying Armenia when he was a teenager.

> of experience. The things I am doing now are very startling and bear the prophecy of fulfillment. Some one [*sic*] called this new painting of mine—minimalism.[53]

Graham's production in 1928 was varied. From landscapes to portraits to figure studies (see illustrations in Chapter Two), it had been a year of experimentation. Despite critical success in Paris, and solo exhibitions at the Phillips Collection and at Dudensing Galleries, he was unsure of his direction.

Gorky had made a concerted effort over a period of years to work through the lessons of Cézanne. A look at two paintings that Gorky and Graham were working on in 1928 reveals shared stylistic concerns, but this similarity is only superficial. Beyond the conventional still-life setups employed by each artist, Graham's *Still Life with Daffodils* (1928; Fig. 3.13) and Gorky's *Flowers* (1928; Fig. 3.14) evolve from fundamentally different approaches.[54] Both attempt to deal with broken-up space, but while Gorky relied on the receding planes of the table that the vase sits on, Graham used color to distinguish the plane occupied by the vase, and made the deep background opaque. If Gorky was deliberate in developing his style, Graham's method was to fast-forward through an inventory of stylistic approaches.

Graham's paintings from 1929 and 1930 signaled a change. After the detour with the single color "non-objective"[55] paintings that Dorothy Dehner described, Graham seemed most productive when working in series or executing a group of paintings that consisted of similar elements, best seen in works where an egg or egg-shaped form

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[53] John Graham, New York, to Duncan Phillips, Washington, D.C., December 12, 1928, The Phillips Collection records, AAA, Microfilm reel 1938, frame 732.

[54] A photograph of Gorky painting a still life around this time (Fig. 3.15) shows his pristine studio and supports Davis's observation: "He was the only artist I can recall who always had a real studio. Most, including myself, painted in their bedrooms or temporary makeshift quarters." Stuart Davis, "Arshile Gorky in the 1930s: A Personal Recollection," *Magazine of Art* 44, February 1951, 57.

[55] See Dorothy Dehner's remarks in Chapter Two, note 135.

predominated: see *Two Eggs* (1928; Fig. 2.51); *Coffee Cup and Egg* (1928; Fig. 2.62); *Le porte-manteau* (*Hat Rack and Other Objects,* c. 1929; Fig. 2.63); *Le porte-manteau (Hat Rack and Egg*, c. 1929; Fig. 2.64) and *Abstract Still Life* (1930; Fig. 2.65). The egg form appears again in *Still Life* (1930; Fig. 3.25) and *The Book of Biology* (1930; Fig. 3.26).[56] Observable textures and finishes take on an almost trompe l'oeil effect in *Composition* (1929; Fig. 3.17); and by 1930, an interest in biomorphic forms and heightened textures, as seen in *Abstraction* (1930; Fig. 3.18), comes into play.

Variations on these themes will predominate in this period, and at least one has a direct correlation to what Gorky was working on at the time. In the early 1930s, Gorky was working on his seminal series of drawings *Nighttime, Enigma, and Nostalgia* (1931–1933; Figs. 3.19–3.20); it is evident that Graham was looking at Gorky's spatial shorthand and using it in his own work (Figs. 3.21–3.22). It is evident, moreover, that both artists were looking at Picasso and de Chirico.

"Something Original, Purely American"

What, precisely, did Graham mean when he wrote to Duncan Phillips in December, 1930, that he, Davis and Gorky had formed a group and that "something

[56] In an insightful discussion, Bruce Weber points out that Graham's use of the egg-shape in these compositions parallels other modernist artists' (including Giorgio de Chirico's and Frederick Keisler's) use of the form, replete with physical and metaphysical meaning. See Weber, *Toward a New American Cubism*, 23. But the hat rack (*Le porte-manteau)* may be just a hat rack: *portemanteau* is the French word for a coat rack or hall stand. In English a portemanteau work is a new word formed by joining two others. (When Lewis Carroll came up with the word "slithy," meaning both lithe and slimy, he said it was like a *portemanteau*, i.e. a French suitcase that opened with two compartments (by extension a word that combines, literally and in its meaning, two other words. A portemanteau word in French is called a "*mot-valise*." Combining and recombining a limited number of recognizable formal elements in a series of paintings was certainly one way in which Graham was striving to be both modern and American.

original, purely American is coming out from under our brushes**.**"[57] Davis, back from the heady atmosphere of Paris for just over a year, was now back on solid ground in Gloucester and painting jaunty scenes of a New England summer, most notably in *Anchors* (Fig. 3.23) and *Summer Landscape* (Fig. 3.24), both from 1930. But it was not subject matter that Graham was referring to: "It is not the *subject matter* that makes painting American or French, but the *quality, certain quality* which makes painting assume one or the other nationality."**[58]**

Graham elaborated in his letter to Phillips:

> I had a good example [of this "certain quality"]. I have painted a picture of an egg and stripes in Paris. It was good, so when I came back to New York two months later I have painted identical picture [*sic*] here. I firmly believed (I had a photograph of the first painting) that I faithfully reproduced the original. When I have received the first painting from Paris [Fig. 3.25][59] and compared the second one in New York [Fig. 3.26],[60] the difference was *astounding*—one was a French painting, the other was an American, more detached attitude, etc. This goes to prove that schools of art are not made but are the product of surroundings and time.[61]

Graham was his own best spokesperson and there is necessarily an element of self-promotion here. But he was articulating a fundamental conviction, shared with Davis and Gorky, that there was a very real need for an *American* art—one that could operate not only in direct contrast to the regionalism of Benton et al., but one that could distinguish itself from European painting as well.

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[57] John Graham, New York, to Duncan Phillips, Washington, D.C., December 28, 1930. The Phillips Collection Archives, Washington, D.C., Microfilm reel 1938, frame 480.

[58] Ibid.

[59] The work reproduced here as Fig. 3.25 is *Still Life* (1930), which appeared in *Cahiers d'art* no. 7, (1930), 389, to illustrate a review of Graham's exhibition at the Galerie Van Leer in Paris.

[60] Fig. 3.26 reproduces a black-and-white photograph of a painting; the photograph, in Graham's papers at the Archives of American Art, bears the title *The Book of Biology* on the reverse.

[61] Ibid.

Two paintings from the early 1930s also suggest that Graham and Gorky were working closely together, and further evince the closest affinity with what Davis was doing at the time.[62] This is the moment when Graham's spontaneous pronouncement ("something original, purely American") rings truest. Davis's *Salt Shaker* (1931; Fig. 3.27) is the most realistic of the three paintings. The salt shaker is easily identifiable as the everyday object it is; the arrows at the bottom connote a shaking movement. The lid, stylized as a positive/negative, functions as a head-like addition. Three bright red lines with a dot over them suggest the jitteriness of the salt-shaking gesture.[63] Gorky's *Still Life Harmony*, (c. 1931; Fig. 3.28) and Graham's *Still Life* (c. 1932; Fig. 3.29), share a vocabulary of color and form. While Davis's work never loses a rootedness in the objects depicted. Gorky and Graham have set out on a more precarious venture. They want to organize shapes on the picture plane not as an allusion to nature but as a composition in and of itself. These three paintings come closest to conveying what Graham was trying to express in his ebullient letter to Phillips. Each of these painters has found what it means to be American. Davis was a native son who absorbed the lessons of Paris and made them his own. Gorky was an "outsider" who made the conversation his own. And Graham had synthesized both worlds.

Within the triumvirate, Graham and Gorky were more suited to each other (Fig. 3.30) and Graham's work had more in common with Gorky's than with Davis's. In a

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[62] There are varying accounts of the meeting of Davis and Gorky; it is most likely that they met in the fall of 1929 after Davis returned from France. In 1951, he recalled knowing Gorky in 1929 after he came back from Europe, but had no recollection before that. "I may have met him in Romany Marie's through Paul Gaulois or John Graham." Davis, "Arshile Gorky in the 1930s," 92. Romany Marie's was a Greenwich Village tavern frequented by artists and writers; in 1929 it was located at 40 W. Eighth Street. See Robert Schulman, *Romany Marie, the Queen of Greenwich Village* (New York: Butler Books, 2006).

[63] The salt shaker was one that Davis brought back from Paris as a souvenir. It remains in the family. Weber, *Toward a New American Cubism*, 35.

1976 commentary in *Arts Magazine*, Barbara Rose labeled the two "Eastern exiles in a Western world," making much of their shared Slavic origins, exile from Eastern Europe, and common belief in a ". . . unifying leitmotif common to Eastern Europe, specifically Russian thinking, regarding a v*olksgeist* or 'spirit of the people' uniting the masses in a common spiritual bond that could be identified with the spirit of the land itself."[64] This is most apparent in Gorky's free construction of his past.[65]

For a brochure accompanying Gorky's first one-man show in 1934, the artist Frederick Kiesler sounded like a sideshow barker as he trumpeted the news about an exotic new artist:

> Gorky, spirit of Europe in body of the Caucasus, getting the feel of American soil.
>
> Unswerving, critical reason seeks the quintessence of Picasso-Miró, drunkenly to absorb them only to exude them again in deep slumber, after such feast.
>
> This Caucasian stranger, having just quenched his hunger and thirst, is ready to shoulder down the doors into land of his own—for those who wait without the threshold.
>
> The genius of Asia celebrates his marriage to the spirit of Europe.
> Such an event is rare.
> We are fortunate to be witnesses
> Tourists of the American, Asiatic and European Continents are invited.
> Tickets free and tickets at popular prices. All depends on you.
> The earlier you come, the longer your pleasure will last.[66]

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[64] Barbara Rose, "Arshile Gorky and John Graham: Eastern Exiles in a Western World," *Arts Magazine*, March 1976, 62-69.

[65] The third show held at the Museum of Modern Art was *An Exhibition of Work by 46 Painters and Sculptors under 35 Years of Age*, and director Alfred Barr, Jr., asked Gorky to participate. His name was given as "Archele Gorki," and he noted that he had studied in Tiflis (Tbilisi). Gorky did pass through this Georgian city in 1919 with his sister Vartoosh on their exodus from Armenia; she later recalled that the city's medieval art inspired him to become an artist; see Herrera, 100.

[66] "Arshile Gorky," exh. brochure (Philadelphia: Mellon Galleries, 1934), n.p.

The notion of being an American painter was more problematic for Gorky than for Graham. Graham had been in Paris where he was perceived as an "American," albeit one who spoke fluent French. According to the artist Balcomb Greene, "Gorky didn't like to think of himself as an American painter. Old world, yes. He wanted to belong to the old world tradition."[67]

The art dealer Julien Levy remembered that in the winter of 1932, Gorky would stop by his gallery not to show his own work but to ask Levy to look at the work of an artist friend of his. That friend was John Graham, who had already dropped by Levy's gallery to implore him to look at a portfolio of Gorky's drawings. Levy described Gorky's visit:

> 'My portfolio is already in your back office," Gorky reluctantly confessed, and my secretary told me that "that man is always leaving his portfolio in the back office. He comes back days later and pretends he had forgotten it."
>
> "Yes," said Gorky shamelessly, "and I always expect you will have opened it and discovered masterpieces. . . ." So I sorted through them now, and I answered Gorky gently. If I had not found masterpieces, I nevertheless thought I detected future greatness. I went down to Union Square with Gorky and looked at everything in his studio. I listened to his passionate discourses concerning the faded illustrations tacked on his walls, monochrome reproductions of Mantegna and Piero della Francesca and photographs of Ingres drawings. I listened to the woes of his financial disorder, and I lent him five hundred dollars. Later, when he couldn't repay, I bought some of his drawings. But I could not promise him an exhibition.
>
> "Your work is very much like Picasso's," I told him. "Not imitating," I said, "but all the same too Picassoid."
>
> "I was *with* Cézanne for a long time," said Gorky, "and now naturally I am *with* Picasso. . . ."
>
> "Someday, when you are *with* Gorky," I promised.[68]

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[67] Balcomb Greene, "Memories of Arshile Gorky," *Arts Magazine*, Vol. 50 (March 1976) 109.

[68] Julien Levy, *Memoir of an Art Gallery* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1977), 283.

In 1931, Stuart Davis thought enough of Gorky and their friendship to choose him to contribute a piece to *Creative Art*.[69] Davis is almost incidental in this fulsome paean to Cubism, and one suspects Gorky was speaking as much about himself as an artist as he was about Davis:

> . . . This man, Stuart Davis, works upon that platform where are working the giant painters of the century—Picasso, Léger, Kandinsky, Juan Gris—bringing to us new utility, new aspects, as does the art of Uccello. They take us to the supernatural world behind reality where once the great centuries danced.
>
> Yet there are large number of critics, artists, and public suspended like vultures, waiting in the air for the death of the distinctive art of this century, the art of Léger, Picasso, Miro, Kandinsky, Stuart Davis. They forget that while the artist never works outside his time yet his art will go on to be merged gradually into the new art of a new age. There will be no short stop. We shall not, contrary to the expectation of these people, hear of the sudden death of Cubism, abstraction, so-called modern art.
>
> The twentieth century—what intensity, what activity, what restless nervous energy! Has there in six centuries been better art than Cubism? No. Centuries will go past—artists of gigantic stature will draw positive elements from Cubism.[70]

By 1934, the friendship between Gorky and Davis was at an end, primarily because of what Davis felt was a lack of political activism on Gorky's part.[71] Balcomb Greene recalled that Gorky

> attended Union meetings, served on committees, and spoke with much feeling on many issues. He considered it his mission to instill into the rank and file of the organization a respect for art and a suspicion of the political adventurer. He would gain the floor on the most inauspicious occasions and declaim about the contours of Ingres…he seemed to give the impression that Ingres might at any moment lend his support to the cause.[72]

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[69] Stuart Davis, *Stuart Davis* (New York: Praeger, 1971), 181. *Creative Art* editor Henry McBride let Davis select the person to write about him. Davis later admitted that he was somewhat embarrassed by Gorky's over-the-top tone.

[70] Arshele [*sic*] Gorky, "Stuart Davis," *Creative Art* 9 (September 1931), 213.

[71] Melvin Lader, *Arshile Gorky: The Early Years* (Los Angeles: Jack Rutberg Fine Arts, 2004), 92.

[72] B. Greene, 110.

Some ten years after Gorky's suicide in 1948, Davis remembered him in the *Magazine of Art*. His respect for Gorky was evident, but little recognition was given to the artist's breakthrough style of the 1940s. Davis focused on their time together in the 1930s:

> During the period that I knew him, Gorky's work was strongly influenced by certain styles of Picasso. This was apparent to everybody, and there was a tendency to criticize him as a naïve imitator. I took a different view and defended his work at all times. Admitting the influence, I would challenge the artist-critic on his own imitation of corny ideas about the old masters. . . . I told these carpers that their own work was so loaded with bad interpretations and imitation that they were the last ones who had a right to speak. I told them that what they were really bellyaching about was the directness and boldness of Gorky's ideas, regardless of source, which made their timid eclecticism look sick.[73]

In 1935, the Whitney Museum of American Art organized the exhibition *Abstract Painting in America* and asked ". . . one of the most brilliant exponents of the movement, Stuart Davis . . . ,"[74] to write an introduction. In his essay, Davis noted that the 1913 Armory Show was the catalyst that sparked the "revolution in aesthetic opinion" in America and that the years 1915 to 1927 marked the period of greatest activity. "Abstract art in America as shown in this exhibition, although actively participated in by relatively few artists, has been a vital factor in the sharpening of issues. Its objective and real contributions will not be lost."[75] Davis's wistful tone suggests the fragile nature of abstract art in mid-1930s America. The exhibition itself featured 134 works by sixty-five

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[73] Stuart Davis, "Arshile Gorky in the 1930s: A Personal Recollection," *Magazine of Art*, February 1951, 56.

[74] Introduction to *Abstract Painting in America*, exh. cat. (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1935), n.p.

[75] Stuart Davis essay in *Abstract Painting in America.* exh. cat. (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1935), n.p.

artists—Davis, Gorky, and Graham among them. David Smith recalled the contention surrounding the show:

> . . . It was in [Romany] Marie's where we once formed a group, Graham, Edgar Levy, [Mischa] Resnikoff [*sic*], De Kooning, Gorky and myself with Davis being asked to join. This was short lived. We never exhibited and we lasted in union about 30 days. Our only action was to notify the Whitney museum that we were a group and would only exhibit in the 1935 abstract show if all were asked. Some of us were, some exhibited, some didn't and that ended our group. But we were what was then termed abstractionists.[76]

In 1942, Graham did not include Gorky in the exhibition of French and American paintings that he organized for McMillen, Inc. By this time their friendship seems to have ended. Graham included Davis in a list of "Young outstanding American painters" in response to the question in *System and Dialectics of Art* "What is American Art?"[77] Perhaps even greater recognition was given to Gorky, who is mentioned in the section devoted to those who have good taste: "To find a perfect . . . painting, or figure, or a living being, or a situation, requires a nature of high tension and capacity for stupendous effort. Example of highly developed taste: . . . A. Gorky."[78]

Adieu to Paris

Graham's show at the Galerie Van Leer in Paris in the fall of 1930 marked his last solo exhibition in that city; subsequent visits were spent buying and trading African art

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[76] David Smith, *David Smith*, Cleve Gray, ed. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968), 36.

[77] *SDA* (1937), 75.

[78] Ibid., 49.

and artifacts. As we have seen in Chapter Two, the climate in France became less welcoming to foreign artists as the 1920s drew to a close. Journals such as Waldemar George's nationalistic *Formes*, published for four years beginning in December 1929, stirred up discourse on the subject. It was George, the author of the 1929 monograph on Graham, who railed against foreign-born artists in the summer 1931 issue of his journal. In the January 1932 English edition of the magazine, his lead article, "Americanism and Universality" asked "Is there an American Art?" and opined that Europeans would always deny its existence.[79] Asked to respond in those pages to the charge that ". . . American painting lacks originality,"[80] Duncan Phillips submitted the essay "Original American Painting of Today." He found inheritors of the American originals like Albert Pinkham Ryder, Augustus Vincent Tack, and John La Farge in the contemporary artists John Marin, Georgia O'Keeffe, Arthur G. Dove, Rockwell Kent, Walt Kuhn, and Charles Burchfield, among others. Phillips took pains to mention the arrival of those artists born abroad who now lived in America. "We are proud to claim them, although they are not rooted in our soil and it is clear enough in their pictures that they have no real love for their adopted country."[81] He offered as a contrasting example Stuart Davis, "a young American painter back from Paris [who] draws from Matisse, Picasso, Braque, and Dufy, and yet, I believe, if he stays in this country, he will ultimately fuse these foreign ideas and idioms into an American style."[82] Phillips continued:

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[79] Waldemar George, "Americanism and Universality," *Formes,* 21 (January 1932), 196.

[80] Ibid., 197.

[81] Duncan Phillips, "Original American Painting of Today," *Formes,* 21 (January 1932), 198.

[82] Ibid., 200.

> Painters like John D. Graham (born Dabrowski) bring to us alien points of view and exotic manners of expression, but they, too, make up a part of the New America. They have much to give us of ancient culture and Old World temperament. If they are wise they will try to absorb from our earlier native character and tradition the stimulus to a fresh start, and perhaps a new art. We cannot expect an American Renaissance based upon the contact of many races and forces until there has been a longer period of assimilation and exchange of influence.[83]

In a way, Graham had, by 1932, been welcomed into the fold of American painters, never again to be scrutinized as one under the spell of Paris. Phillips is prescient here: the American Renaissance he predicts is none other than the efflorescence of Abstract Expressionism. The protracted "period of assimilation and exchange" foretells Graham's solid work in the 1930s in keeping these ideas alive, in his paintings and his writings. The arrival of artists from war-torn Europe in the 1940s would precipitate the breakthrough style of Abstract Expressionism.

Murals in the Air, and the PWAP

No discussion of art in the United States in the 1930s would be complete without mention of the Public Works of Art Project, the New Deal's program to employ artists producing art. Many projects involved murals in public buildings;[84] from December 1933 to June 1934, at least 3,000 artists participated in the program.

Although it was not publicly funded, Davis's mural project for Rockefeller Center was one of the most visible of the period. On June 15, 1932, he was commissioned by the

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[83] Ibid., 201.

[84] Graham's work for the PWAP included two paintings and an oil sketch for a *Mural (Equestrian Epic).* Eleanor Green, 140.

prominent interior designer Donald Deskey to paint a mural for the gentlemen's lounge at Radio City Music Hall (Fig. 3.31).[85] The completed work, *Men without Women*, is a freewheeling mélange of such masculine attributes as tobacco, a pipe, playing cards, barber poles and sailboats. Graham, who would certainly have known of this project, was himself working on a series of murals. These were at Wells College in Aurora, New York, where he was an instructor in art in 1930–1931 and associate professor 1931–1932.[86] His studio courses included lectures in the theory of design.[87] In a sense, Graham's murals were about "women without men": the decorations were for a smoking room, situated in the basement of the main building, at this small liberal arts college for women (Fig. 3.32). There were seventeen panels, about eight by six feet each. The walls of the room were interspersed with steam pipes and hanging lamps, and these elements were incorporated into the scheme of the murals. The subject matter was abstracted into flat planes and solid colors but often with recognizable imagery such as a guitar, playing cards, mechanical works, lettered packaging, and profiles and heads (Figs. 3.33–3.38). An unsigned article in the journal *Parnassus* attributed the murals to John Graham and a group of his students. The article may have been written by Graham himself as it advances many of his most closely held ideas:

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[85] Sims, 317.

[86] Presumably Graham was able to stay in New York City for the first year, but the greater responsibilities at Wells necessitated relocating in the second. In a May 7, 1931 letter (now in the Phillips Collection Archives), he thanks Duncan Phillips for recommending him for the position and notes that he, Elinor, and baby David will live in Summit, New Jersey, where Elinor held a teaching position and he would be within commuting distance of Aurora.

[87] John Graham, New York, to "Cher Ami" [presumably William Sener Rusk], Aurora, New York, January 27 [1932], Wells College Archives, Aurora, New York. "Regarding the theory of design—I have been giving students definition of design and forms of it, composition, etc. all based not only on [Arthur Wesley] Dow and Pope but on other authorities also, in other works giving them *more complete* definitions and examples, however I understand some students' vague point of view and necessity to adhere to the text book as such which I will do starting this semester."

> To those who are familiar with the earlier phases of John Graham's development the murals at Wells will appear as a logical sequence to the earlier post-Cubist abstractions which followed his travels in Europe and North Africa and his apprenticeship with Picasso. They will also serve to explain the painter's present championship of "minimalism," wherein a minimum of operating means, as he puts it, functions as a unit and music, mathematics and bizarre dreams of the subconscious are given existence in space, color, and texture.[88]

There is an evident nod to Davis in the composition of many of the Wells murals, but only Graham would have stated as ambitious a goal as depicting "music, mathematics and bizarre dreams of the subconscious." Gorky's Newark Airport mural (now lost; see Fig. 3.39), done several years later, is more abstract in execution but shares a vocabulary with Graham's Wells College cycle.

The art department at Wells was headed by William Sener Rusk, a Baltimorean well known as a pedagogue. Rusk asked Graham to contribute to his book, *Methods of Teaching the Fine Arts.*[89] Graham's chapter, titled "The Dialectics of Art," is an abbreviated version of his *System and Dialectics of Art*, with only fourteen pages and fifty-nine questions (there are 117 questions in the final, published version).[90]

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[88] "A Series of Abstract Wall Decorations at Wells College," *Parnassus*, Vol. 4, No. 4, April, 1932, 34. "These panels, of which there are seventeen in all, each measure about eight feet by six. They are all abstract . . . and are painted in six elementary colors. The flat masses are devoid of modeling, on the theory that modeling belongs to sculpture. Space evaluation and space organization are sought as the principal objectives, with color only to modify or elaborate the logical expression of space relationships. There has been no effort made to ignore the partially underground location of the room or the obtrusive mechanical fixtures. Steam-heat pipes, electrical features, iron-work are exploited in a Surréalist [*sic*]manner."

[89] The book was published by the University of North Carolina Press in 1935.

[90] Rusk's book also contains a chapter by Elinor Gibson Graham, "Teaching Art in the Primary School." Her position is given as Director of Arts and Crafts, The Froebel League, New York. In his introduction, Rusk notes that "Mrs. Graham refers particularly to very young children, advocating instruction by an artist." John Graham's chapter, meanwhile, "…in the form of a catechism, presents the point of view of a modernist in the studio, at the same time provocative and stimulating." Graham's affiliation is given as "Master Institute of the Roerich Museum, New York." By the time of the publication of Rusk's book in 1935, Graham and Elinor had divorced.

Graham used his time well at the school. On March 2, 1932, Gorky and the art historian Frank Jewett Mather, Jr., then a professor at Princeton, delivered a lecture at Wells, titled "Two Views on Modern Art."[91] It is likely that Gorky's visit was at Graham's suggestion. Through his New York connections, he arranged exhibitions for the school as well. In a letter to Rusk in January 1932, Graham proposed bringing to campus with him a "good number of Negro sculpture and we have anough [*sic*] drawings already to make an interesting exhibition in February. . . . In March we will have a group of oil paintings to show. I could arrange one more show if there would be time enough, namely, a textile show, old damask, antique velvet, brocade, chasables [*sic*] etc."[92]

The Wells murals are no longer extant, painted over at some later date.[93] The photographs (Figs. 3.33–3.38) show a remarkably fluent use of a modernist vocabulary of forms.

Graham and the American View of African Art

African art had particular significance for John Graham, both for its formal and expressive qualities and for its appeal to connoisseurs and collectors. If his accounts are accurate, he may have seen examples of African art on display alongside works by

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[91] Lader, *The Early Years*, 91.

[92] John Graham, New York City to 'Cher Ami' [presumably William Sener Rusk], Aurora, New York, 27 January [1932], Phillips Collection Archives, Washington, D.C., John Graham Papers.

[93] Helen Bergamo, Aurora, New York, to the author, January 12, 2007. "The smoker, being in the basement of Main, had problems with water and dampness and, of course, smoking students probably added to the problem. Apparently [because of] the ravages of time and the fact that the damp was effacing the murals, they were painted over with a cream-colored paint. Oh, how I wish that someone had realized the treasure that was on those walls!"

Picasso in the Shchukin collection in Moscow in the years before World War I in Russia, which established early on for him a connection between avant-garde artists and the works of "primitive" man. In a 1960 Graham recollection,[94] he mentioned seeing the Picasso room at the Trubetskoy Palace in 1905 or 1906.[95] Although Graham does not specifically mention seeing the African sculpture interspersed with the paintings at that time, it is known that by 1911, this display was in place.[96]

In a 1937 application submitted to the Guggenheim Foundation for a grant to support his work, Graham stated that his engagement with African art may have started even earlier than the visit to Shchukin's: "My interest in art began in my third year when I was fascinated by objects of art brought from Africa and shown by visitors at my father's house."[97] This would have been in the late 1880s. Presumably the visitors' interests were more ethnographic than aesthetic.[98] What is most telling in his inclusion of this bit of childhood history is Graham's conviction that it would strengthen his appeal to the committee by demonstrating his awareness of African art and its influence, and secure his position among American artists worthy of consideration.

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[94] See Chapter One, page 23, of this dissertation.

[95] Beverly Whitney Kean, *All the Empty Palaces: The Merchant Patrons of Modern Art in Pre-Revolutionary Russia* (London: Barrie & Jenkins, 1983), 204. It is generally acknowledged that Shchukin did not begin to collect Picasso until 1908.

[96] Ibid., 204. See Fig. 3.40. In this photograph of the Picasso room, the African sculpture was not yet installed. Kean mentions that Gauguin works were interspersed with Maori carvings as well.

[97] John Graham, Guggenheim Fellowship application, 1937, The John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Archives, New York.

[98] Russia's Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography in St. Petersburg, founded by Peter the Great as a *Kunstkammer*, acquired its first African objects in 1836.

Many modern painters in Paris collected African art. Maurice de Vlaminck recalls visiting the Musée d'Ethnographique de Trocadéro[99] many times with his fellow artist André Derain and seeing the African objects, but ". . . neither Derain nor I viewed the works on display there as anything other than barbarous fetishes."[100] One day in 1906, while on a painting expedition to Argenteuil, Vlaminck stopped in a bistro. "While sipping my white wine and seltzer, I noticed on the shelf behind the bar, between the bottles of Pernod, anisette, and curaçao, three negro sculptures: two were statuettes from Dahomey, daubed in red ochre, yellow ochre, and white and the third, from the Ivory Coast, was completely black."[101] It was an epiphany for him and he persuaded the bistro owner to part with them. He hung them in his studio but soon sold them to Derain. It was in Derain's studio that Picasso and Matisse first saw African objects.

The display of African art was not unknown in the United States. A June 1914 announcement for an exhibition at Alfred Stieglitz's gallery 291 described the offering as "…the first time in the history of exhibition that Negro[102] statuary will be shown from the point of view of art"[103] (Fig. 3.41). The phrase "of art" is telling. The American Museum

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[99] The French sphere of influence in West Africa dates back several centuries. Most objects in French ethnographic museums were from colonial territory in West Africa, including present-day Senegal, Mali, Burkina Faso, Benin, Guinea, Ivory Coast, and Niger, comprising the kingdoms of Dahomey and Fang.

[100] Maurice de Vlaminck, "Discovery of African Art," 1906; quoted in Jack Flam with Miriam Deutch, eds. *Primitivism and Twentieth-Century Art: A Documentary History*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 27.

[101] Ibid.

[102] The German art historian Carl Einstein (1885–1940) published the first comprehensive volume on African sculpture, *Negerplastik*, in 1915. The term "Negro" was widely used in this period in describing African art.

[103] Helen M. Shannon, "African Art, 1914: The Root of Modern Art," in Sarah Greenough et al., *Modern Art and America: Alfred Stieglitz and His New York Galleries* (Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art and Bulfinch Press, 2001), 169.

of Natural History, founded in 1869, had opened a gallery in 1910 for its Congo collection, the fruits of a scientific expedition (Fig. 3.42). But Stieglitz's exhibition, *Statuary in Wood by African Savages—The Root of Modern Art*, had a clear agenda. Marius de Zayas, the Mexican-born caricaturist and art critic who was Stieglitz's advance man in Paris, wrote him in 1911: "I remarked more than ever the influence of the African negro art among the revolutionists . . . . I am convinced once more of the necessity of having a show in the S [States?] of the negro art."[104] De Zayas later recalled:

> Through Picabia I met Apollinaire and Max Jacob, and through Apollinaire I met Paul Guillaume, then a modest but ambitious art dealer and collector or rather importer of Negro art. How he imported it will always remain a mystery, but the objects he had were always genuine. When the First World War was declared and desolation reigned among artist and dealers, Paul Guillaume was only too glad to let me have all the African sculpture I could put in a trunk and bring to New York. That was his first contribution to exhibitions of modern art in New York; many others followed—if not with the same intention of making propaganda pure and simple, with the hope of opening a market for them, which was just as legitimate.[105]

An exhibition was not realized until 1914, arranged by de Zayas through Paul Guillaume,[106] who had set up a network of contacts in the French colonies before World War I and established a thriving trade. He also showed African art alongside the work of contemporary artists.[107] De Zayas's rhetoric in his introductory note for the catalogue made clear the view of African art widely held at that time.

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[104] As quoted in Greenough, 173.

[105] Marius de Zayas, unpublished essay "African Negro Art," in *How, When and Why Modern Art Came to New York,* ed. Francis Naumann (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1998), 55.

[106] Guillaume (1891–1934) is mentioned by Graham in *SDA* (1937) among collectors of African art.

[107] Greenough, 114.

> Negro art, product of the "Land of Fright," created by a mentality full of fear, and completely devoid of the faculties of observation and analysis, is the pure expression of the emotion of a savage race—victims of nature—who see the outer world only under its most intensely expressive aspect, and not under its natural one.
>
> The introduction of the plastic principles of African art into our own European art does not constitute a retrogradation or a decadence, for through them we have realized the possibility of expressing ourselves plastically without the recurrence of direct imitation or fanciful symbolism.[108]

De Zayas felt that Western artists were able to borrow from primitive ones without fear of corrupting their loftier aims. For Graham, as we shall see, there was always a process of cross-pollination.

Although Graham could not have attended that exhibition, it is entirely possible that he saw the show of Picasso's work and African sculpture that de Zayas arranged for the Whitney Studio Club galleries in 1923. *Recent Paintings by Pablo Picasso and Negro Sculpture* (Figs. 3.43–3.48) brought together twelve paintings and ten gouaches from the Parisian dealer Paul Rosenberg. All were Cubist works, many of which the art historian Michael FitzGerald has suggested were picked up for very little at the recent auctions of works confiscated from Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler and other German residents of France during the war.[109] Another exhibition of African art was held in New York that year at the Brooklyn Museum from April 11 to May 20—*Primitive Negro Art, Chiefly from the Belgian Congo* (Fig. 3.49).[110] African Art Historian Christa Clarke, in her

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[108] De Zayas, 59.

[109] Michael FitzGerald, *Picasso and American Art,* exh. cat. (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2006), 85. Picasso's portrait of the German collector Wilhelm Uhde, also in the exhibition, came from the liquidation sale of Uhde's collection. Uhde is included by Graham in the discussion to question 41 in *SDA* (1937) as a "great collector, some because of their taste and courage, others because of their generosity and enthusiasm." FitzGerald does not speculate as to the source of the African sculpture in the exhibition.

[110] Carlo Anti, "The Sculpture of the African Negroes," in Flam with Deutch, 181.

groundbreaking work on the collecting of African art in the United States and the tastes that formed these collections, makes a clear distinction between the ethnographic museums that exhibited a range of African cultural material and the early "art" collectors who were more interested in masks and statuary in wood and metal that could be more easily brought into classifications of "Western" art.[111] Clark also points out that the European upheaval during and immediately following WWI had the effect of driving Parisian dealers to seek other markets; Americans in the postwar period became some of the most fervent collectors of this material and it was to this ready market that Graham responded.[112]

These two large exhibitions held in New York the same year may have given Graham the idea to collect African sculpture and to become a dealer as well. He arranged an exhibition of African sculpture for the Baltimore antiquities dealer Robert F. Skutch.[113] His work with Skutch began in 1926, when he sold him a figure of Saint Barbara he had brought from France. Skutch subsequently sold the statue to the Cone Sisters.[114] They also collected African art objects and may have purchased some from Skutch; others were definitely brought back from Paris. Claribel Cone's daybook for the summer of 1925, in which she kept meticulous records of every franc expended, mentions a purchase from her friend and fellow Baltimorean Gertrude Stein. The entry

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[111] Christa Clarke, "John Graham and the Crowninshield Collection of African Art," *Winterthur Portfolio*, Vol. 30, Number 1, Spring 1995, 24.

[112] Ibid., 27.

[113] Kokkinen, 47. The exhibition took place probably in 1926 or 1927, when Graham was traveling to Paris and still living in Baltimore. Kokkinen cites an undated newspaper clipping in Graham's files, not found in the AAA.

[114] See Chapter Two, page 56, of this dissertation.

reads, "Paid Sallie [Sally Stein] Sunday last—for Gertrude's objects—Picasso bronze masque / 3000 [francs] negro sculpture (figure)."[115] Cone later noted a visit to "Paul Guillaume, 59 rue de la Boétie Paris…saw negro art."[116] By and large, the Cones were not drawn to the masks and fetishes beloved by artists; they preferred smaller domestic objects and collected a good deal of African ivory, amber, and metal jewelry.[117] A wooden goblet from the Kongo people of Zaire was a particular favorite (Fig. 3.50).[118]

The Collector Frank Crowninshield and the Taste for African Art

Frank Crowninshield (1872-1947) was one of the most important connections that Graham made in his lifetime and, to judge from the intimate tone of a letter written to Graham near the end of Crowninshield's life, one of the most enduring.[119] In a letter to the Guggenheim Foundation, in support of Graham's 1938 fellowship application, Crowninshield wrote:

> I am glad to be consulted in regard to John D. Graham and can speak about him very frankly. . . .To begin with, he is, I think, the most honest man I have ever known. Added to that he is full of sympathy, taste and cultivated feeling. He is an excellent painter of the modern French abstract school and an art critic of the first order. . . . In the department of African and Oceanic art, I think

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[115] Entry in Dr. Claribel Cone's daybook, July 9, 1925. Dr. Claribel and Miss Etta Cone Papers, Manuscript Collections, The Baltimore Museum of Art, Baltimore, Maryland.

[116] Entry in Dr. Claribel Cone's daybook, July 29, 1925. Dr. Claribel and Miss Etta Cone Papers, Manuscript Collections, The Baltimore Museum of Art, Baltimore, Maryland. Paul Guillaume was a prominent Parisian dealer in African objects.

[117] Brenda Richardson. *Dr. Claribel and Miss Etta: The Cone Collection* (Baltimore: The Baltimore Museum of Art, 1995), 13.

[118] Ibid.

[119] Frank Crowninshield, New York, to John Graham, New York, August 12, 1945, John D. Graham Papers, AAA, Washington, D.C.

> his knowledge and appreciation is second to that of no other in America. He feels for African art (for example) more profoundly than [Leo] Frobenius or other professors of primitive art have felt. . . .I am glad you wrote to me about John D. Graham. He is one of my closest friends and has been a great influence in shaping my taste and knowledge.[120]

The name Crowninshield was synonymous with modernism in America. He was an organizer of the 1913 Armory Show and a member of the founding committee of the fledgling Museum of Modern Art in 1929. In his capacity as editor of the magazine *Vanity Fair,* a position he assumed in 1913, he transformed the publisher Condé Nast's fashion monthly into the preeminent chronicle of café society, entertainment, and the arts, and a prime arbiter of taste and style in America. As noted in Chapter Two, John Sloan was likely the source of Graham's introduction to Crowninshield, which took place around 1925.[121] As we have seen Graham, early in the course of his annual trips to Europe, purchased art and artifacts to sell to collectors—principally the Cone sisters and Duncan Phillips—as a means of augmenting income from sales of his own work.

Crowninshield, it seems, collected solely for his personal pleasure, and while he showed works from his collection from time to time and loaned to museum exhibitions, he had no long-range plans for the eventual disposition of the works to a museum. When he reached the age of seventy, he decided to auction off his entire collection of paintings and sculpture, *livres d'artiste*, and a sizeable library of volumes on art, and, according to

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[120] John Graham Guggenheim Fellowship application, 1936, The John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Archives, New York.

[121] Clarke, 28. Clarke quotes a 1937 letter from Graham to Alain Locke (Alain Locke Papers, Moorland–Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, Washington, D.C.): "I have been associated with him [Crowninshield] and his collection, during the past twelve years."

the auction catalogue "twelve important examples of African sculptures."[122] Asked about his decision, he reportedly said: "It would be a frightful mess if I died and left all this stuff for other people to take care of."[123] *The New York Times* noted that the auction brought in nearly $200,000.[124]

For Graham, the trade in African sculpture had a commercial aspect, but his affinity for these works was evident. Although he did not include Crowninshield under collectors of "highly developed taste," he was mentioned in the commentary on question 40 in *System and Dialectics of Art*, "What is the desire to collect? What is art collecting?"

> There were great collectors, some because of their taste and courage, others because of their generosity and enthusiasm. Such collectors: Stchukin [*sic*], Camando, Morozoff [*sic*], Duncan Phillips, Katherine S. Dreier, Fukushima, Reber, Frank Crowninshield, Uhde, the Steins, the Cones, Gaffé, Feneon [*sic*], Eluard, Bondy, Breton, de Miré, Covarrubias and others.[125]

We can assume that Crowninshield falls into the latter category, collectors characterized by their "generosity and enthusiasm." Although scant correspondence between him and Graham survives,[126] they appear to have had a long and amicable working relationship. An exhibition of African sculpture drawn from their respective collections was held in

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[122] *Paintings, Sculptures, Drawings, and Lithographs by Modern French Artists from the Collection of Frank Crowninshield*, auction cat. (New York: Parke-Bernet Galleries, Inc.), October 20, 1943. The catalogue listed works by Segonzac, Despiau, Bonnard, Chagall, Modigliani, Rouault, Pascin, Maillol, Derain, and Laurencin among the French artists and Demuth, Bellow, Hopper, Lawson, and Arthur B. Davies among the American artists.

[123] "F. Crowninshield is Dead here at 75: Advisor to Condé Nast Firm Introduced French Modernist Painters to This Country," *The New York Times*, December 29, 1947, 17.

[124] "Modern Art Brings $181,747 at Auction: Crowninshield Collection Sold in More Than 1,000 Lots," *The New York Times*, October 22, 1943, 18.

[125] *SDA* (1937), 46.

[126]There is one letter in the Archives of American Art and no archives of Crowninshield's personal correspondence at Condé Nast.

January 1930 at the Dudensing Galleries,[127] and this joint public display indicates a peer relationship. A review of the exhibition quotes the French critic and art historian Élie Faure's (1873-1937) *Histoire de l'art: l'art medieval*, part of Faure's four volume history of art. Faure included a chapter on "The Tropics" in that volume, marking the first time that the arts of Africa and Oceania were considered in a general history of art.[128] Graham furnished the gallery with some of Faure's writings on African art for publicity purposes, and the reviewer for *The New York Times* quoted substantially from them.

> There is so much controversy about negro art, so much questioning of its esthetic importance, that instead of adding another personal opinion, let us quote Elie Faure on the subject. No one is better equipped to give negro sculpture its relative place in the history of art.
>
> "The sculpture in wood of the negroes is still very far from the great Egyptian sculpture. Perhaps it is a first sketch or presentiment of Egyptian art that we see; it may carry us back almost as far as the appearance of man in Africa. To him (the negro) we must not look for metaphysical abstractions, for he gives us only his sensations, as short-lived as they are violent. And perhaps it is because of his fearful candor that he reaches his great expressiveness."
>
> Mr. Crowninshield's and John Graham's collection of negro sculpture will be on exhibition at the Dudensing Galleries until the end of this month.[129]

Faure name appears in an appendix to *System and Dialectics of Art* titled "Sources Consulted."[130] By this time, early 1930, Graham would have been working on this book, and his thoughts would have informed the exhibition. A pertinent passage of the published work reads:

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[127] *African Sculpture from the Collection of Frank Crowninshield and John Graham*.

[128] Elie Faure, "The Tropics," in Flam with Deutch, 54–58n. Faure's book appeared in French in 1912 and in an English translation by Walter Pach in 1930.

[129] R.G.H., "Lo, Another Newcomer," *New York Times*, January 12, 1930, 120. Although the reviewer refers to as a "single collection," the holdings were not mingled together and objects were listed separately by collection in the catalogue.

[130] *SDA* (1937), 152.

> Primitive art is a highly developed art as a result of a great civilization based on principles different from those of the white man's civilization. It is produced by races leading a primitive mode of life. Examples: Negro art, Oceanic art, Precolombian [*sic*] art.[131]

Graham always maintained a balanced tone when describing African sculpture and evinced a profound respect for the "great civilization" that, while admittedly different from his own, was not inherently inferior, as many other writers claimed. There was definitely a discourse on African sculpture, not only in French publications such as *Cahiers d'art* and *Minotaure* but among art historians in the United States as well. In 1935, Robert Goldwater, then an art history professor at Queens College, published an article on African sculpture in *Parnassus,*[132] and aligned himself with those who stressed ethnographic identity in grouping African art.[133] Graham and Goldwater would have known of each other; the *Parnassus* article is illustrated with a Cameroun[134] head from the Crowninshield collection, implying some measure of regard for the pieces that Graham had amassed. Goldwater's influential book *Primitivism in Modern Painting* was not issued until 1938, but many of the opinions in it can be traced to his earlier article. He was clearly invested in establishing art historical taxonomies for African art. "The wealth of African material at our disposal today makes it imperative that tentative connections and evolutions be established, and historical theories proposed."[135]

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[131] *SDA* (1937), 33.

[132] Robert Goldwater, "An Approach to African Sculpture, *Parnassus*, Vol. 7, No. 4 ((May 1935) 25–27.

[133] "Any attempt at comprehension must lead us directly into the arms of ethnology." Ibid, 26.

[134] In this period, African sculpture was largely identified by the French colonial names for the region of origin.

[135] Goldwater, 27.

Goldwater and Graham may have intersected as well on the occasion of the groundbreaking 1935 exhibition *African Negro Art* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, in which six objects from Crowninshield's collection were included. The exhibition was organized by museum curator James Johnson Sweeney with the assistance of Goldwater and the Parisian dealer Charles Ratton.[136] Goldwater's biases notwithstanding, the exhibition was unprecedented in its avowal to place African art in the hierarchy of "great aesthetic traditions of the world."[137] Sweeney made clear his beliefs: "It is not the tribal characteristics of Negro art nor its strangeness that are interesting. It is its plastic qualities. Picturesque or exotic features as well as historical and ethnographic considerations have a tendency to blind us to its true worth."[138] Noting a marked preference for the uniformly elegant finishes and high refinement of the objects included in the 1935 show, William Rubin, in his introduction to *"Primitivism" in Twentieth-Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern* (1984), dubbed this the "Guillaume-Ratton taste . . . with a pervasive Franco-Belgian hierarchy of preferences favoring highly refined, often intricate workmanship, beautifully polished or patinated surfaces, and a restrained stylized realism."[139]

Coinciding with the publication of Graham's article in the April 1937 issue of the *Magazine of Art*, an exhibition was held at the Brooklyn Museum of Art, *African Negro Art from the Collection of Frank Crowninshield*, from March 20 through April 25.

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[136] Ratton was included in *SDA* (1937) as a collector with "highly developed taste."

[137] James Johnson Sweeney, *African Negro Art* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1935), 11.

[138] Ibid., 21.

[139] Rubin, ed., 21.

Featuring 151 objects from the collection, the title of the exhibition and the use of the word "art" is noteworthy.

It is instructive to examine Graham's influence on younger artists in this period through the lens of his involvement with African art, for it was one of the ways in which he was best able to communicate ideas. The summer of 1935 was an active one for him in Paris, where he was largely engaged in buying African art, and included a visit from friends Dorothy Dehner and David Smith.

In a 1971 essay, Dehner (who married Smith in 1927) remembered meeting Graham and Elinor Gibson through acquaintances at the Art Students League.[140] The two couples were friendly over several years, and in 1933, Graham recommended to Crowninshield that Smith be hired to fabricate bases for a large number of his African objects. Dehner recalled:

> Graham's eye was infallible. I never saw a thing he collected that was not absolutely right. . . .[He] had been making a collection of African sculpture for Frank Crowninshield in the early thirties. "Crownie" wanted it mounted and David did the mounting. This took almost an entire winter. It was marvelous to have all those things in our house. . . . Graham took us to [Crowninshield's] apartment for cocktails. He was such a marvelous example of a real American gentleman of the old school. . . an aristocrat . . . with a genuine love of art. His apartment was full of paintings, Segonzacs all about the place . . . and Marie Laurencin in the bathroom and bedroom, African sculpture on shelves on the living room walls. We had a very good time and Crowninshield complimented "David Boy," as he called him, on the ingenious mounting[141] of his collection.[142]

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[140] Dorothy Dehner manuscript, AAA, Reel D298, frame 1531.

[141] Many of the pieces from the Crowninshield collection were auctioned at Christie's in New York in a spring 2003 sale of the Russell B. Aitken collection of African, American Indian, and Oceanic art. The mounts for many of the Fang and Kota figures were identified as "Inagaki base." Although this designation was not explained in the Aitken catalogue, a 1966 catalogue for the auction of the Helena Rubinstein collection goes into more detail. "Most of the stands for the sculptures were made especially for Madame Rubinstein by the famous Japanese stand-maker, Inagaki, who worked in Paris and died shortly after the war. All those made by him carry his circular stamp." During the 1950s, Aitken collected a total of twenty-seven pieces that had been in the Crowninshield collection. The catalogue for the October 1943 sale of Crowninshield's collection at Parke-Bernet contains several photographs of the African material being auctioned, and it can be assumed that some of the bases were fabricated by Smith.

Picasso, Derain, Vlaminck and other European artists were attracted to the formal qualities of African art. Many American artists too were drawn to its expressiveness and its power to convey psychological meaning. Some artists who collected African art, however, were not convinced that it had a direct influence on their work. On a 1935 trip to Europe, Adolph Gottlieb, with an introduction to Parisian dealers furnished by Graham, bought five African sculptures.[143] His interest in African art predated that trip and was influenced by the Cubists' involvement with the work and the ability to see collections in New York. In a 1967 interview, he recalled: "A friend of mine, John Graham,[144] had a marvelous collection. He was collecting things for Frank Crowninshield. He helped assemble that collection and also did a lot of things I believe for Helena Rubenstein."[145] Gottlieb commented that artists' collections of African or pre-Columbian art had ". . . no relation to what they do. They just like it and they collect it if they can."[146] Given the evidence in his own work of associations with prehistory and myth, the influence may have been more profound than he consciously realized or admitted.

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[142] Dehner, 7.

[143] *Adolph Gottlieb: Pictographs 1941-1951*, exh. cat. (New York: PaceWildenstein Gallery, 2004), 57.

[144] Gottlieb knew Graham before 1935 and would likely have seen the exhibition at Dudensing in 1930. By October 1936, they were neighbors in Brooklyn Heights, where Gottlieb and his wife, Esther Dick, and David Smith and Dorothy Dehner, and another young artist couple, Edgar Levy and Lucille Corcos, had been living for several years. Graham and his fourth wife, Constance Wellman, moved to 1 Sidney Place in Brooklyn Heights after their marriage in 1938. A photograph now in the Archives of American Art of Graham among his paintings and some African art is inscribed on the back, "Photographs taken in 1939 in Sidney Place, Brooklyn" (See Fig. 113D).

[145] Adolph Gottliev interview by Dorothy Seckler for the AAA, October 25, 1967. http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/oralhistories/transcripts/gottli67.htm. Accessed March 28, 2005.

[146] Ibid.

The reminiscences of the sculptor Philip Pavia afford a glimpse into the manner in which Graham connected with artists on African art and he "attracted all the young artists, Bill de Kooning, Jackson Pollock, Elaine de Kooning, Lee Krasner, Theodore Stamos, myself and others."[147]

> During the thirties he had been in Paris collecting African sculpture for clients like Crownshield [*sic*] . . . haunting the auction galleries, buying, collecting photographs of the great finds as they arrived in Paris. Later in New York, through these photographs, and . . . by the way he gestured with his hands, we had the feeling that Graham taught the Primitive sculptors how to do sculpture. His positive insights gave clarity to us young artists, and helped get us on the road.[148]

Pavia recalled a conversation about African sculpture:

> For instance, he said to me, "You can sort out the fakes from the real African sculpture by studying the side view. In the fakes, the imitators can't make the side view match the aliveness of the front view." This is food for a sculptor.[149]

In Pavia's possession at the time of his death in 2005 was a group of sixteen photographs[150] given to him by Graham in the 1950s.[151] Each is mounted and overmatted and three can be identified as the actual prints used for reproduction.[152] As Pavia suggested, these are the photographs that Graham brought back from Paris to show

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[147] Unpublished manuscript chronicling the 1940s through the 1960s in New York City, courtesy Natalie Edgar Pavia, New York. The excerpt is from the chapter "Gulf Stream."

[148] Ibid.

[149] Ibid.

[150] See Figs. 3.51–3.57 for a representative sampling of the photographs.

[151] I am grateful to Natalie Edgar Pavia, who brought these photographs in her possession to my attention and graciously allowed me to photographs them in 2005. She has since donated them to the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Department of the Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas.

[152] The three used to engrave the illustrations for the article "Primitive Art and Picasso," discussed later in this chapter are *Striped Polychrome Mpassa Mask (Belgian Congo)* Collection Frank Crowninshield, New York (Fig. 3.51); *Gouro War Mask, West Coast*, *Africa,* Collection Frank Crowninshield, New York (Figs. 3.52–3.53); *White Sorcerer's Mask* from Ogowe River, Gabun (Fig. 3.54). See also Figs. 3.58 and 3.59.

collectors, principally Crowninshield; some bear the blind stamp from Ratton, a prominent Parisian dealer in African art (the stamp is clearly visible at the upper left in Fig. 3.54). It is interesting to note that Graham was using these images for "lectures" to young artists. His advice on the nature of determining a fake is, on one level, about connoisseurship. On another level, it speaks clearly to the artist, and Pavia, as a sculptor, picked up on this immediately. There were two views of the Gouro war mask (Figs. 3.52 and 3.53), and several of the sculptures were photographed in profile or three-quarter view (see Fig. 3.55).

In January 1936, Graham organized an exhibition for the Jacques Seligmann Gallery, New York, then located on East Fifty-first Street, *Sculptures of Old African Civilizations.* Seligmann was a prestigious venue for Graham. The company was founded in 1880 in Paris; a New York office was opened in 1904 to service a growing roster of American clients. Under the guidance of Jacques Seligmann's son, Germain, the Manhattan gallery began showing contemporary European work, most notably that of Picasso; the first exhibition in this vein, in 1936, featured paintings from the Blue and Rose Periods.[153] In 1937, an exhibition titled *20 Years in the Evolution of Picasso* included *Les demoiselles d'Avignon* (1907), recently acquired from the estate of the original owner, Jacques Doucet.[154] Graham would have known the gallery from his time in Paris. The fact that he was asked to organize this exhibition reflects on his connoisseurship, his renown in the field, and his affinity for the work of Picasso, and furthermore signals a recognition of the American appreciation for the artist.

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[153] *Picasso "Blue" and "Rose" Periods: 1901-1906*, was held November 2–26, 1936.

[154] Doucet, a French fashion designer, bought the painting after seeing it in Picasso's studio. This was the first time the painting was seen in the United States. FitzGerald, *Picasso and American Art*, 169.

The ideas on African art outlined in the appendix to *System and Dialectics of Art* were first articulated in Graham's introduction to the catalogue for the Seligmann exhibition. The show was a reunion of sorts (many of the works had been placed by Graham[155]), and the catalogue functioned as a summation of Graham's ideas. The title. *Old African Civilizations*, reinforced his contention that great works of art were no longer being produced in Africa. His essay set up six major groupings of African civilization according to origin and formal attributes:

> Cameroun—ferocious and awesome—a rugged civilization.
> Ivory Coast—An art—suave and sophisticated—of an elegant but declining civilization.
> Pahouin-Gabon—An Art—justly called classical—whose abstractions are the result of profound and logical "argumentation."
> Soudan—An art—geometric and austere—of an inland civilization.
> Congo—An art—violent but sophisticated—in which primal forces are expressed aesthetically.
> Bénin—An art—of great plastic amplitude—resulting from a highly developed civilization.[156]

The afterword to the catalogue was by the English critic Roger Fry. "We have the habit of thinking that the power to create expressive plastic form is one of the greatest of human achievements, and the names of great sculptors are handed down from generation to generation, so that it seems unfair to be forced to admit that certain nameless savages have possessed this power not only in a higher degree than we at this moment, but than

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[155]The exhibition featured works from such distinguished collections as those of Frank Crowninshield, Louis Carré, George Gershwin, Ben Hecht, A. Conger Goodyear, Helena Rubenstein, Walt Kuhn, Mrs. C. Suydam Cutting, and Miguel Covarrubias; the Louis Carré collection appeared courtesy of Knoedler Gallery. Graham chose works from his own collection and that of the artist Edgar Levy as well. Provenance for many of the pieces included well-known holdings in France, notably those of Tristan Tzara, de Miré, Moris, César de Hauke, Fénéon, and Bondy.

[156] John Graham, "*Exhibition of Sculptures of Old African Civilizations*, exh. cat. (New York: Jacques Seligmann Gallery, 1936), 4–5. This essay reappears in the appendix "Negro Art" in *SDA* (1937), 134.

we as a nation have *ever* possessed."[157] Fry went on to state that African sculptures possessed ". . . complete plastic freedom; that is to say, these African artists really conceive form in three dimensions." In writing about African art, Graham never fell prey to the "nameless savage" trap. He placed these artists on an equal footing with their Western peers.

In May 1937, Graham auctioned a large group of his African sculpture at a public sale.[158] Given the paucity of his painting production during this period and the prominence of the exhibition the previous year at Seligmann, he may have deemed it an advantageous moment to sell. At any rate, he did not totally divest himself of interest in this material. Three years later he opened the Primitive Arts Gallery at 54 Greenwich Avenue, his home address at the time.[159]

The sale is also related to the publication of *System and Dialectics of Art* in February and the appearance of his seminal article "Primitive Art and Picasso" in the April issue of the *Magazine of Art.* [160] (Since the ideas expressed in "Primitive Art and Picasso" are largely those found in *System and Dialectics of Art*, a full discussion of them will be deferred to Chapter Four.) Graham's ambition was to bring to an American

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[157] Ibid., 16.

[158]"African Sculpture of Gaboun, Cameroun, and Belgian Congo, The Collection of John D. Graham, New York City." Pamphlet in the John Graham Papers, Phillips Collection Archives, Washington, D.C. Many of the sixty-four lots had annotated provenance, among them Moris, Ratton, Fénéon, and Tzara.

[159] Howard Devree, "Three Galleries Offer Exhibitions." *The New York Times,* September 25, 1940, 37. "John Graham at his Primitive Arts Gallery is showing work from his own collection reinforced with examples from the collection of Frank Crowninshield and supplemented by a group of paintings by Mr. Graham—canvases in which the primitive spirit is adapted to the medium. Various parts of Africa and of Oceania, including Easter Island, are represented among the figures and masks shown. This exhibition will be current through October."

[160] John Graham, "Primitive Art and Picasso," *Magazine of Art* 30, no. 4 (April 1937) 236–39, 260. See Figs. 3.58, 3.59 and 4.12.

magazine the kind of informed discourse found in European publications such as *Cahiers d'art*. Since that journal's inception in 1926, its editor Christian Zervos had followed both the art scene and the market in its pages, and these served as prima facie evidence of Parisian preeminence in the arts. *Cahiers d'art* featured articles on primitive art (African, Oceanic, and European prehistoric) accompanied by extensive photographic documentation. A special issue on prehistoric art, "Des origines de l'art et de la culture" asserted: "Whoever is truly interested in art cannot satisfy himself with the doctrines inspired by classicism. . . . They are but a consequence: we have to return to the source. Thus, in order to seize upon creation closer to its source we will have to study the earth and man."[161] One artist, above all others, was regularly featured, and that was Picasso; with frequent articles devoted to in-depth presentations of his latest work. It was these publications that Graham brought back from Paris on a regular basis and showed to fellow artists in New York. A look at the issues in 1927 demonstrates the wide range of the journal and the wealth of photographic reproductions and further conveys how important a vehicle this was for dissemination of information about what was happening in the Parisian art world. Featured is a ten page article on Picasso's latest work by Zervos (Figs. 3.60–3.64) and an article on African art, "l'Art nègre" (Fig. 3.65), illustrated with a textile from the collection of Matisse and a mask belonging to Picasso.[162] Also reproduced in 1927 was a recent painting by André Derain, *l'Arlequin* (Fig. 3.66), and a bas-relief by Henri Laurens (Fig. 3.67)—both remarkable for their resonance with works made by Graham (see Fig. 2.38, *Harlequin,* 1928; Fig. 3.68, *Untitled*, 1929).

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[161] Christian Zervos, "Des origines de l'art et de la culture," *Cahiers d'art*, No. 8 (1930).

[162] See Christian Zervos, "Dernières œuvres de Picasso," *Cahiers d'art* No. 6 (1927): 189–195; Christian Zervos, " l'Art nègre," *Cahiers d'art* No. 6 (1927) : 229–231.

Even the layout of "Primitive Art and Picasso" (see Figs. 3.58 and 3.59) reflected Graham's input; it is evident that he furnished some of the photographs for the article. Picasso's *Girl before a Mirror*, 1932, was not widely known in the United States and did not enter a public institution in this country until 1938, the year after the article was published, when Mrs. Simon Guggenheim gave the painting to the Museum of Modern. The painting had been seen only twice before in the United States: at the Wadsworth Atheneum's Picasso retrospective in 1934 and in a Picasso exhibition at New York's Valentine Gallery in 1936.[163] Graham's article was widely read—most famously by Jackson Pollock—perhaps even more than *System and Dialectics of Art.*

Katherine S. Dreier and the "Russian Connection"

The friendship that blossomed in the 1930s between John Graham and the collector and proselytizer for modern art Katherine S. Dreier (1877–1952) would be as important for him as was Duncan Phillips's support in the late 1920s. Although Dreier would never provide monetary backing as Phillips had, her encouragement of Graham's art and his writing, through letters and through connections she fostered, was as vital for him as that of his earlier patron.

Dreier had grown up in a progressive German-American family in Brooklyn; she and her three sisters were taught to support social and humanitarian causes. A love of art led her, in 1907, to study in Paris, where she was introduced to the work of Matisse and Picasso. Her conversion to modernism was complete by 1912. She exhibited two works

[163] FitzGerald, *Picasso and American Art*, 162.

in the 1913 Armory Show,[164] and was inspired to join the fledgling Society of Independent Artists in 1917, eventually becoming a member of its board of directors. This brought her into contact with many leading artists, notably Marcel Duchamp, with whom she founded the Société Anonyme in 1920; the organization was dedicated to promoting the notion that the artist taps into certain spiritual powers and has the ability to bring this spirituality to society.

The Société Anonyme held exhibitions in two small galleries on the third floor of an old brownstone at 19 East Forty-seventh Street in the 1920–1921 and 1922–1923 seasons; in 1924, the exhibitions were held at 44 West Fifty-seventh Street.[165] It is likely that Graham's introduction to Dreier came through David Burliuk. Stuart Davis had earlier used his acquaintance with Burliuk to arrange to meet Dreier, hoping to participate in her ambitious plans for an international exhibition of modern art to be held at the Brooklyn Museum.[166] Davis wrote candidly to Dreier, "Burliuk saw my work and said I should be in the show. I would like very much to be a member of the Société and will do anything you may suggest to make it possible. . . ."[167] He submitted his painting *Super Table* (Fig. 3.69), and she responded enthusiastically: "I was delighted when I saw your picture . . . . I shall, of course, exhibit it. "[168]

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[164] Ruth Bohan, *The Société Anonyme's Brooklyn Exhibition: Katherine Dreier and Modernism in America*. (Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1982) 21.

[165] Ibid., 38.

[166] The exhibition was held from November 19, 1926, to January 9, 1927.

[167] Stuart Davis, New York, to Katherine Dreier, New York, September 25, 1926, Katherine S. Dreier Papers / Société Anonyme Archive, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

[168] Katherine Dreier, New York, to Stuart Davis, New York, October 13, 1926, Katherine S. Dreier Papers / Société Anonyme Archive, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke.

Drawing some 52,000 visitors during its run, Graham doubtless among them, the 1927 Société Anonyme exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum featured more than three hundred works by 106 artists from at least nineteen countries.[169] Dreier had chosen many of them during a four-month trip to Europe in 1926, and they reflect her stay in Paris (Arp, Léger, Mondrian) and her interest in the Bauhaus (Kandinsky, Klee, Moholy-Nagy). Her selection of American artists revealed the influence of Stieglitz in full force: Demuth, Hartley, Marin, O'Keeffe, Joseph Stella, Max Weber, William and Marguerite Zorach, and Stieglitz himself.[170]

Graham would likely have been advised by Burliuk to contact Dreier as well, but apparently this did not happen until later in 1928. In December 1928, Dreier wrote to him explaining that she would "not be able to keep my appointment with you and Mr. Burliuk."[171] Plans to reschedule this appointment did not materialize. By the end of January, 1929, Graham wrote to Dreier with some urgency about their meeting.

> I am sorry to learn that you are leaving for Europe and coming back only in June. This is very unfortunate for me as I am leaving for France early in June to stay there at least a year and a half. I was wishing to meet you for the past half a year and so unsuccessfully. My reason for leaving is because I paint in Paris in three months more and better paintings than I paint here in a year, because I had in Paris in half a year more recognition and appreciation than I had here for five. The [*sic*] is a crucial moment in my life—I am giving up an easy, comfortable and well paid position (teaching art ten hours a week) and am leaving my family here to face hardships and work—the work I like. The only worry is to keep the engine running, to be able to work. To be perfectly frank with you I wanted your interest and support. To be able to live and work in Paris fifteen months I need eight hundred dollars. I am not interested in selling paintings or making money. I *want*

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[169] Robert L. Herbert, Eleanor S. Apter and Elise K. Kenney, co-editors. *The Société Anonyme and the Dreier Bequest at Yale University: A Catalogue Raisonné*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984, 758.

[170] Ibid.

[171] Katherine S. Dreier, New York, to John D. Graham, New York, December 4, 1928, Katherine S. Dreier Papers / Société Anonyme Archive, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke.

> *to be able to keep on painting*, therefore I would offer any number of my paintings present or future ones for that amount of money or the part of it, or I would offer 70% of my future year's output, which will amount to from 30 to 40 paintings.[172]

He proposed an outright loan from Dreier, with his wife as additional signatory (he noted that Elinor had a teaching job), and said that he would consider any arrangement that would enable him to go to Paris.

> I realize that you know neither me nor my work, that my claims might seem presumptuous to you, but this my hard luck [*sic*]. I am not interested in money but in *my work*, in my cosmic message to humanity. I feel a stupedous [*sic*] power in myself, an ability to produce a titanic effort, to bridge the times. I know that I am a great living painter, perhaps one of the greatest. I am neither proud nor ashamed of it—it is a fact, like being blond or brunette. And many great men whose opinion you respect believe in my greatness, and if you would see my paintings am sure you would agree.[173]

Lest Dreier think him too forward, he added:

> Whatever will be your decision on this subject, I apologize for writing you so much, and if not in sympathy with my idea—beg you to dismiss the whole matter from your mind.[174]

Graham had just returned from Paris in the fall of 1928, and he and Elinor had relocated from Baltimore to New York. In January 1929 he still had an arrangement with Phillips for the purchase of paintings, but he had received the impression that Phillips would not be inclined to support an extended stay of his abroad. Or he may also have realized that to establish himself in New York, he would need to widen his circle of supporters.

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[172] John D. Graham, New York, to Katherine S. Dreier, New York, January 22, 1929, Katherine S. Dreier Papers / Société Anonyme Archive, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke.

[173] Ibid.

[174] Ibid.

Graham closed his letter to Dreier by delivering a message from David Burliuk, calculated to remind her of his own very solid connection with the Russian artist whom she had championed.

> Mr. Burliuk asked me to write you on his behave [*sic*] for a personal interview for him before your sailing. He likes to speak to you about a pamphlet he is about to publish, he calls it a manifesto, in which he is reproducing a painting of yours 'Stonigton [*sic*] Harbor' and the English text of the lecture you have jointly delivered in Brooklyn Museum and for which text he would . . . call on you in person. . . . P.S. If you decide to see my paintings any arrangement will be agreeable for me.[175]

Dreier and Burliuk had met at a 1923 exhibition of Russian émigré painters at the Brooklyn Museum; the exhibition included thirty-one of Burliuk's paintings.[176] Their friendship was immediate and lasting, culminating in a monograph on Burliuk that Dreier labored on for ten months and published in 1944.[177] The "manifesto" Graham mentions was published as a twenty-page brochure, "American Art of Tomorrow," on the occasion of an exhibition at the Morton Galleries.[178] The exhibition included "four-dimensional painting" by Burliuk and sculpture by Minna Harkavy. The pamphlet featured a page on John Graham by Burliuk, illustrated with *Woman Seated* (1928; Fig. 2.68); *Stonington Harbor* was not illustrated. Dreier was listed on the Committee of Sponsorship for the

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[175] Ibid.

[176] Herbert et al., 118. Dreier did not participate in the organization of *Exhibition of Russian Painting and Sculpture*, which was handled by Christian Brinton, but she did loan works to the exhibition.

[177] Jennifer R. Gross, ed., *The Société Anonyme: Modernism for America*. New Have: Yale University Press, 2006, 46. See Chapter One of this dissertation.

[178] The gallery was located at 49 W. Fifty-seventh Street, New York, and the exhibition ran from March 18 to April 1, 1929.

show, and some of her remarks about Burliuk were included in the pamphlet,[179] as were those of Dr. Christian Brinton, an art critic and tireless promoter of modernism, especially that of Eastern European artists. The director of the Brooklyn Museum, William Henry Fox, and the artists Robert Winthrop Chanler and Ivan Norodny were also included on the committee roster. The pamphlet announced related events: "Every day at five p.m. during the exhibition there will be a special programme to which the public is invited." Speakers included Brinton and Graham, and one afternoon's activities boasted a Russian tea with "Balalaika Trio and Russian Boyar dancers."[180]

Graham's appearance in this pamphlet is noteworthy, especially since he was the only artist featured besides Burliuk and Harkavy. Burliuk's garrulous assessment of Graham and his work were typical of that artist's bravura style.

> All fire and daring, such is Graham, a personality significant and unique. Every new painting is a new adventure, he thrills. Powerful and profound, he leads you in his own circle. Explorer and discoverer, his esthetic signalization perplexes and astounds. He is an artist, still young but whose influence already can be felt. Graham has gone through many stages and influences, he absorbs them, digests them and casts them away. His period of white eggs and cups is personal and potent, his latest painting, Minimalism, can be likened to Antarctic exploration, with its unknown dangers, tenebrous darkness, and ultimate questions to be solved. Or is it a flight into interplanetary spaces? Who knows? Minimalism, to a man of a smaller stature, could be fatal.
>
> Graham is young and strong, and one day he will surprise us with a new twist in his searching ways. Who knows?[181]

Burliuk summarized Graham's recent accomplishments:

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[179] David Burliuk, "American Art of Tomorrow," exh. brochure, Morton Galleries, New York, 1928, n.p. Dreier was quoted, "Few men have so long and constantly worked for modernism as Burliuk."

[180] Ibid., inside back cover.

[181] Ibid. Burliuk was five years younger than Graham but adopted an avuncular style when describing his fellow artist. Graham was by now in his early forties.

> Last summer's exhibition of [his] work in Paris was hailed as an event by men like Louis Vauxcelles, André Warnod, Fernand Léger, André Salmon, and Waldemar George who wrote a book about him.[182]

Graham was attempting to build on Burliuk's relationship with Dreier and Brinton. In 1926, Brinton had been asked to organize an exhibition for Philadelphia's Sesquicentennial. He immediately set out on a tour of Russia, knowing, however, that it would be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to secure loans there. He selected instead works from the large Russian émigré community in New York, which had by now organized into the so-called Artel of Arts.[183] Although the Brinton scholar Andrew Walker does not include Graham among this loose confederation,[184] it is possible that he was a member, given his participation in the events surrounding the Morton Galleries exhibition.

Another important connection for Graham with the Russian community in New York was his association with Nicholas Roerich and the Master Institute of the Roerich Museum. Graham taught painting and drawing there from 1930–1935; the curriculum guide offered classes in "Music–Painting–Sculpture–Architecture–Opera Class–Ballet–Drama–Lectures," with a three year course in the Fine Arts as well as in Applied Arts.[185] Roerich (1874–1947) was born in the Ukraine; he studied law but trained in the arts as

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[182] Burliuk, 5.

[183] Andrew J. Walker, *Critic, Curator, Collector: Christian Brinton and the Exhibition of National Modernism in America, 1910–1945*(Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1999), 169. *Artel* was the term used in Russia for handicraft collectives.

[184] Vladimir Bobritsky, David Burliuk, Nikolai Cikovsky, Nicholas Roerich, and Nikolai Vasilieff are mentioned. The group was in existence for only two years.

[185] Brochure for Master Institute of the Roerich Museum, Nicholas Roerich Museum, New York, Museum Archives.

well, spending a year studying painting in Paris in 1900.[186] Disillusioned by the outbreak of WWI, he left Russia and embarked on a spiritual quest, reflected in his work, and he eventually settled in New York in 1920. On the brink of the Depression, he inaugurated a 24-story skyscraper at 313 West 105th Street that was a center for arts, culture and peace.[187] Certainly this employment afforded Graham some stability during the difficult years of the early 1930s.

In 1930, the same year it was painted, Brinton purchased from Graham the *Study for Ikon of the Modern Age* (Fig. 3.70) for an undisclosed amount.[188] Two works by Graham are listed, *Abstraction*, loaned by Dudensing Galleries, New York, and *Woman of the Steel Age*, loaned by Dr. Christian Brinton, which is the aforementioned *Study for Ikon of the Modern Age*. The painting is usually discussed in terms of its Russianness, implied in the word *Ikon* in the title. That title, though ambiguous, may refer to the modern woman as an archetype; it also invites discussion of the head's formal affinities with the African Mpassa mask (Fig. 3.51) that Graham placed in the Crowninshield collection.[189]

Graham's presentation of himself in his January 1929 letter to Dreier mentioned his "cosmic message to humanity." Evidently he was not unaware of Dreier's own

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[186] *The Nicholas Roerich Exhibition*, with essay by Christian Brinton. Odell Publishing, 1922. Roerich was an active participant in the *Mir Iskusstva* (World of Art) movement at the turn of the last century when Russian artists rejected the machine aesthetic and looked instead to the past for inspiration.

[187] The building still exists, now converted into apartments; there is a display of photographs on the original use in the Art Deco lobby. This fascinating chapter in New York art and architectural history warrants more scholarly attention.

[188] Walker, 193. A reproduction of this painting in the catalogue for a small show organized by Brinton in 1932 for the Wilmington [Delaware] Society of the Fine Arts, *Exhibition of Russian Painting and Sculpture; Realism to Surrealism,* suggests a different title. See Fig. 3.71

[189] This mask was among the Graham photographs in Pavia's possession.

messianic vision of modern art and her devotion to the tenets of theosophy. Moreover, Graham would have known of Burliuk's 1928 gift to her of the painting *The Eye of God* (1923–25; Fig. 3.72),[190] and her keenness for artists who articulated, in their work and in their writings, an amalgam of the spiritual and the aesthetic. Graham's own penchant for the occult, especially from the 1940s on, has been much discussed in the literature; it will be taken up in the last chapter. His allusion to the spiritual realm may have been calculated to signal to Dreier that he, too, belonged in the fold. His true feelings may have been somewhat more skeptical, at least in the 1930s. In *System and Dialectics of Art*, in the discussion of question 11, "What is mysticism?" he groups Madame Blavatsky, the founder of theosophy, with Aimee Simple McPherson, Billy Sunday, and other practitioners of "drawing-room mysticism."[191]

Despite Graham's efforts to "play every possible angle" in his letter to Dreier, her reply was swift (she responded on January 23; he had written her the day before) and conclusive:

> I am extremely sorry that I am not in a position to finance you. It seems a great pity that you cannot secure $800, and I am extremely sorry that my financial position is such that I cannot invest it in you.
>
> I have a small group whom I am helping and until they are more firmly established I cannot extend this help.[192]

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[190] In Burliuk's painting, one can see the figures of Adam and Eve in a transparent triangle inscribed on the pupil of the eye of God. Rays of light emanate from the pupil, the rim of which circumscribes the triangle.

[191] *SDA* (1937), 110.

[192] Katherine S. Dreier, New York, to John D. Graham, New York, January 23, 1929, Katherine S. Dreier Papers / Société Anonyme Archive, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke.

Graham responded just as quickly and apologized for any undue pressure on his part: "I did not mean to force myself upon you nor pretend false modesty—just an appeal of a human to a human."[193]

At the end of the year, he wrote to Dreier again, reintroducing himself and adopting a more temperate tone. He described his "search for a new vision":

> I start at the bottom of things, with "tabula rasa" and proceed towards the discovery of significant, cosmic, extra-mondane vision [*sic*]. To build a new cathedral one has to start with wrecking and blasting to clear the place. In back of my research work, besides my painter's ability, lies my lawyer's and philosopher's training and life full of experience.[194]

He informed Dreier of his many connections. "Fernand Leger, Duncan Phillips, Andre Salmon, Waldemar George, Beh [*sic*] Hecht, David Burliuk, Elliot Paul, and others like my paintings."[195]

There is no surviving correspondence between the two for the next five years. In May 1935, Graham was prompted to write Dreier after reading her book *Western Art and the New Era* (1923). Her influence on *System and Dialectics of Art* will be taken up in the following chapter. It is significant to note how in this period Graham stressed his Russian legacy, through important connections made with Burliuk, Dreier, and Brinton, when it was valuable and yet how he continued to strive to make his way as an American artist. In *System and Dialectics of Art* we shall see some of the ways in which Graham resolved this duality.

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[193] John D. Graham, New York, to Katherine S. Dreier, New York, January 23, 1929, Katherine S. Dreier Papers / Société Anonyme Archive, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke.

[194] John D. Graham, New York, to Katherine S. Dreier, New York, November 20, 1929, Katherine S. Dreier Papers / Société Anonyme Archive, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke.

[195] Ibid.

Chapter Four

Inside *System and Dialectics of Art*

In a striking coincidence, *System and Dialectics of Art* [1] was reviewed in the same issue of *Parnassus* as a book by Graham's old friend from Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University philosophy professor George Boas. The reviewer of both books, Philip McMahon, the journal's associate editor and a distinguished art historian, described Boas's *A Primer for Critics* (The Johns Hopkins Press, 1937), as a ". . . reasonable and thoughtful essay which is so sensible and so helpful to those who honestly want to understand and appreciate aesthetic objects that its very clarity will distress many. If art is an ineffable mystery, you either do or do not know what it is, and you read books about art only to see how far the author seems to share the same secret."[2] If McMahon felt Boas's book helped to demystify art, he found little to dispel the fog he found in *System and Dialectics of Art*. Admitting that Graham evinced ". . . a deep and sincere enthusiasm for the subject, . . ."[3] McMahon went on to point out the book's shortcomings: "The method of treatment consists of 129 short topics discussed in abrupt, fairly dogmatic statements. It is doubtful if the intensity of conviction with which the book appears to have been written will easily persuade either indifferent or hostile readers."[4] McMahon

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[1] See Fig. 4.1

[2] Philip McMahon, "New Books on Art," *Parnassus* 9, no. 5 (October 1937), 33.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid.

felt that *System and Dialectics of Art* would not satisfy ". . . those who are accustomed to the formalities of abstract philosophical discussion . . ." and that it should be ". . . classified as an expression of feeling rather than a contribution to thought."[5] This terse assessment placed Graham's book in a curious position: not technical enough for the aesthetic and not approachable enough for the layman. McMahon closed his review of Boas, which appeared on the same page as Graham's, with what might be read as a direct riposte to Graham's question-and-answer format: ". . . [A] few hours spent on reading [Boas's] book and meditating on its implications will obviate years of unnecessary struggle in the attempt to answer meaningless questions."[6] This implicit dismissal of Graham's efforts indicates the degree to which his writings were misunderstood, or overlooked, by the academic community; the response from his peers in the art community was more positive, and indeed, we may assume that this was the audience for whom he wrote the book. *Art Digest* made this positive comment in a brief entry under "Books Received:" "a catechism of art, covering every angle in hundreds of questions and answers. Necessarily dogmatic, provocative and stimulating, by an artist in the modern movement."[7] *System and Dialectics of Art* gained cult status in the annals of mid-twentieth-century American art and in the lore surrounding those artists who would become known as Abstract Expressionists. This concluding chapter will examine Graham's influences in writing the book and his ambitions for the publication.

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[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid.

[7] *Art Digest*, Vol. 28, no. 9 (May 15, 1937), 31.

If it is little read today for its content, what will a closer examination of Graham's book yield? I will demonstrate that *System and Dialectics of Art* is the best lens through which to read him. At once personal and particular to Graham's own mosaiced background, it also reveals much about American art in this period, and particularly the view to Europe. If we read more passion than polemic in the text, if we agree to treat it not as a work of philosophy, but rather as a virtuoso treatise on the nature of making art, the text will reveal much about Graham and tie together threads from preceding chapters.

"The art of dialectic criticism is the specific art of our age"

A prospectus for *System and Dialectics of Art* described the volume:[8]

> The state of confusion concerning art terminologies existing among artists, the public, collectors and writers is such that determined effort toward an exact and exhaustive definition of such elementals as art, a work of art, style, form, space, method, composition, design etc. must be made.
>
> Certain branches of human knowledge—such as law, geometry, logic, and economics—have achieved an early and complete maturity as to organic foundations, order and terminology. The domain of art has persisted up to our days in a state of chaos.
>
> Artists do not seem to be able to establish common specific terms. In fact, not only the artists who are supposed to be inarticulate, but even the writers whose business is the use of words cannot come to an understanding on the matter of art as a process, as a manifestation, in general and in particular.
>
> The 20th century is the century of general reckoning on bases of material, comparative analysis.
>
> The art of dialectic criticism is the specific art of our age. Comparative balance sheets are being drawn in such domains as hygiene, economics, machine production, exploring, etc.
>
> The business of art in our time is to establish firm, permanent bases for evaluation of works of art both individually and in regard to period and to establish an exact terminology. The purpose of this book is to establish sound systematic bases and clear exhaustive definitions of terms and aspects of art.

[8] A copy of the prospectus, a single sheet of paper folded twice to form a five-by-three-inch brochure, is in the Graham file in the library of the Museum of Modern Art, New York.

975 numbered copies
25 numbered and autographed copies on special Vélin Vergé.[9]
15 half-tone illustrations.
Size of page, 8 x 6 inches
200 pages, approximately.
Stiff paper binding designed by J. D. G.

Subscription……$2.75

Graham's ambition here is clear. He felt that by establishing the definitions, controlling the dialogue, and finding a common language, he and other artists would be able to harness those words that had been manipulated by others and used against them. At the end of the book he included a list of "sources consulted"—art historians and critics, painters and poets, philosophers and theoreticians, ethnographers, and architects and artists themselves—all those whose words had been used to interpret art. (See the Appendix at the end of this chapter.)

The language in the prospectus is telling. On the one hand, Graham (and the source of the text for the prospectus can be no other than the author himself) wanted to establish a lexicon for speaking and writing about art, for both artist and critic, professional and layman. It is significant that he should comment that artists "are supposed to be inarticulate," as he had long sought to distinguish himself from this stereotype. He admits that his fellow artists, however, were not always equipped to speak cogently about art. The "state of chaos" he described could hardly have been central in the minds of his fellow artists; at this point in the 1930s most were worried about where the next meal was coming from. Yet Graham addresses them directly and seems to say that though it is well and good if people outside the art world take note, his intended

[9] *Vélin vergé* is laid (ribbed) vellum.

audience is the already initiated. In the use of phrases like "sound systematic bases" and "clear exhaustive definitions," his sense of urgency is palpable.

**"Art opens access to the unconscious mind,
science opens access to the conscious mind"[10]**

This epigraph appears before the preface to *System and Dialectics of Art*, like an incantation to be intoned before beginning the book. If not a willing suspension of disbelief, Graham seems to suggest, one needs a conviction that art and science reside in separate spheres. Moreover, he has introduced from the start the notion of a duality between art and science and between the conscious and unconscious mind. These themes will be developed throughout the book.

System and Dialectics of Art is a summa of Graham's thoughts on art—considered in the broadest sense—and also a collection of elliptical ruminations on making one's way in the world as an artist. The preface ends with the notation "New York–Paris, 1926–1936." The year 1926 marked Graham's first extended stay in Paris; 1936 is the year the manuscript would have been in final form before publication, again in Paris. An examination of these years in previous chapters has laid the groundwork for an analysis of the structure of the book; an investigation of its publication and reception will provide further insight into Graham's project. It is important to remember that the writing of this book took place over the course of a very productive decade, one in which Graham was actively engaged in making art, selling art, and writing on the subject. At times, one

[10] *System and Dialectics of Art* (1937), 7.

sphere would supersede the other two, depending on creative energies and economic circumstance.

His hopes for the book were laid out in the preface. He bemoaned the state in which he found understanding of the subject "art."

> Art is the force which led humanity through the ages of darkness—automatically, and through the ages of science—by inference.
>
> In the history of humanity subjects and problems in numberless fields have been thoroughly investigated and solved. Such are: geometry and Roman Law which have finally and exhaustively formulated certain phenomena once and for all. The subject of art, however, has never been exhaustively investigated, formulated and systematized, either by writers or artists. There have been pages written on art—inspired, beautiful and otherwise but all have been either fragmentary, amateurish or sentimental.

With this declaration he waved off a century of art historical writing, in large part the work of the German scholars who pioneered the discipline. Graham was not unaware of this history. Many exemplars of the discipline appear in the list of eighty-five names of "Sources Consulted." The list sheds light on what Graham had read and what he was influenced by, although he evidently found these sources lacking. "The state of confusion that exists among the artists and writers in general, regarding such fundamental terms as art, work of art, form, style, method, etc., is no longer tolerable."[11]

By the time the book was published, Graham was fifty years old; he had been actively engaged as an artist for only thirteen years. Much of his adult life had been spent in the military and the law, and he prided himself on his ability to express opinions clearly and reason objectively. He wanted to bring that same rigor to thinking and writing about art. Again from the preface: "This is an attempt: to *define* questions of art

[11] Ibid.

exhaustively; to term them specifically; to formulate a dialectic method in art—a method of plastic, logical argumentation; to unite questions of art into a coordinated system."[12]

Graham's age may have contributed to his sense of urgency, and the preface establishes the tone with such phrases as "no longer tolerable" and "exhaustively." The tone belies his attempt, stated in the preface "to formulate a dialectic method in art—a method of plastic, logical argumentation."[13] And yet the urgency is what gives the volume its spirit and color and what would have made it compelling to his fellow artists. Whether it is a reaction to his own situation—his age and lack of recognition—or a response to the climate of the times, the tone is a fundamental part of the book.

Sustaining a fever pitch could have been stultifying, as Graham realized. The book is, accordingly, not without it own humor and irony. "Critics as a rule are men with thwarted desires and violent repressions. Their profession offers them an excellent chance of temporary relief."[14] The historic enmity of artist and critic dates to the first printed negative review, and no doubt Graham would have been familiar with some of the famous late-nineteenth-century diatribes, including Ruskin's 1877 attack on Whistler. In Graham's case, as in Whistler's, reception abroad was more positive than in the "home" country.[15]

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[12] Ibid.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Ibid., 60.

[15] This brings to mind the French critic André Salmon's 1929 essay for Graham's Dudensing Galleries exhibition, in which he compared Graham's success in Paris with that of another painter from abroad. "Think of the reception accorded by Paris to Whistler." André Salmon, brochure for exhibition *John Graham*, Dudensing Galleries, March 1929, n.p.

Graham tried to maintain a balanced tone, but he was not free from lapses into bitterness:

> In all other professions and crafts only master craftsmen can criticize or teach. A carpenter is taught and criticized by another carpenter only. Not so in art. Anyone who can write in black on white can criticize and teach the artists and the artist has no recourse. Critics and museum directors only obscure the vision of art-students, confuse the public, retard general development and ruthlessly destroy real talent.[16]

On the whole, his assessments of the art world are extremely cogent. His dead-on description of some museum directors could be torn from a current issue of *The New York Times*:

> In America, the system of trustees and their amanuensis, the director, is particularly harmful to art. Directors are usually recruited from personal friends of one of the trustees. The trustees themselves are business men whose unseasoned coming to art precludes any thorough knowledge of it. As for the director or curator, his baggage consists as a rule of a year's course in museum management in one of the fashionable colleges or even more fragmentary than that. . . . He looks grave, makes hazy statements to the public, hangs pictures on the walls and on the whole takes orders from the trustees. This state of affairs has retarded the development of American art and culture by a hundred years.[17]

* * * * *

The Preface

In his preface, Graham explains that the book

> is called a System because it intends: a) to provide a related terminology in art; b) to divide the history of art according to social-economic periods; c) to provide for the classification of works of art and periods of art based on space-consciousness; d) to provide tangible bases for the evaluation of works of art and periods of art.

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[16] Ibid., 61.

[17] Ibid., 62.

> It is called Dialectics because it intends to provide the methods of logical argumentation in the domain of art.[18]

One wonders whether he would have been happy with one twenty-first-century critic's characterization of his treatise as "some mad, caffeinated all-night bull session about the meaning of art."[19] Or did Graham aspire to have the work considered on a higher plane? He certainly wanted to elevate the discourse. *System and Dialectics of Art*, with its 129 questions and their responses, runs to 127 pages, plus appendices ("Sources Consulted"; "Negro Art"). The first question, "What is art?" and the last, "What is the art of the future?" reflect Graham's hopes for the book to be encyclopedic in scope.

The System

Graham's first stated aim is to provide terminology. All but sixteen of the 129 questions begin with "What," and their responses form the backbone of the terminology essential to comprehension. Graham presupposes a degree of knowledge in his intended reader, but in many ways he is equipping this reader, the artist, with ways to express involvement with abstraction. In the response to the question "What is abstract art?" he directly addresses the artist:

> Abstract art departs from reality and nature only to draw far-reaching conclusions about this reality. A legitimate abstract work of art can be produced only on the basis of profound knowledge of nature. . . . Suppose you give the cook: some flour, raw meat, raw vegetables and water and suppose he gives you back on the table the same flour, raw meat and raw vegetables, how would you like it? Suppose I give you, the artist: a river, some snow and some sky and trees and

[18] Ibid., 7.

[19] Jed Perl, *New Art City: Manhattan at Mid-Century* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 103.

> suppose you give me back the same river, snow and sky on the canvas, I will ask you: why have you *not done something* with them?[20]

The System next intends to "divide the history of art according to social-economic periods." In responses throughout the book, Graham took up this challenge of explaining the entire cavalcade of art history, from cave painting to the latest ism. The matter is first addressed in question 32, "What is prehistoric art, archaic art, classicism, romanticism . . . montage, neuesachlichkeit [*sic*], abstract art in general?"[21] Graham's outline included specific names but in almost all cases presupposed a great deal of prior knowledge on the part of the reader. His book was not a primer, nor did it aim to be, and it was certainly not a text for the uninitiated.

Graham reserved special disdain for the Protestant/puritan vein that he found in Western art. In his response to question 71, "What are the bases of Western Civilization and Western art?" he delivered a scorching indictment:

> Anglo-Saxon civilization originated from Protestanto-Puritanic *prohibitions*, and Protestanto-Puritanic insistence on the *subject matter* assumed *facts as an end in themselves*. The result was a literal perception of the world: law, politics, art, religion, education, literature, theatre, speech, love, sex, etc. The result of this was: isolation of facts as totems in themselves, and therefore the removal from nature and loss of the first-hand information about things and emotional courage and poise. . . . Protestantism-Puritanism has produced civilizations well equipped to cope with temporary extraneous problems, hollow inside and incapable to cope with problems of fundamental nature.

Graham went on to present a litany of spurious transformations that pointed up everything lacking in Western civilization and that civilization's "apotheosis" in American culture:

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[20] *SDA* (1937), 35.

[21] Ibid., 30–31.

> Protestantism-Puritanism has substituted:—Subject matter for form; particular for general; rudimentary for elementary; action for reflection; literal percept for evocative; slogans for ideals; common sense for intelligence; cleverness for wisdom; notions for ideas; humour for joy; efficiency for aspiration; success for achievement; physical courage for spiritual; price for value; veracity for imagination; conscientiousness for honesty; cliches [*sic*] for taste; sentimentality for sentiment; flirtation for romance; duty for love; sensuality for passion; comfort for happiness; vice for indulgence; cleanliness for beauty; technique for creation; imitation for art; reserve for intimacy; staccato for legato; manners for culture; quantity for quality; hypocrisy for pietism; explicit for implicit; skepticism for criticism; gullibility for faith; factualism for materialism; conservatism for tradition; reformism for revolution.[22]

Graham's command of the language was formidable. He did use it to admit to some "crude but substantial virtues" among this "Protestanto-Puritanic" civilization:

> Ability to work; ability to have things done; veracity; self-respect; self-control; good sportsmanship; ability to endure (can take it); honor system; looking things straight in the eye; stick-to-itiveness-patience; poise; courtesy; good will; eagerness to learn.[23]

He did not conceal his respect for these good, old American virtues. One might think that he was referring to the struggling artists around him, certainly a beleaguered band in the 1930s.

In response to question 99, "What is history of art?" Graham explained it as "the history of the purpose in art directly related to the bases of the social forms. . . . Thus in the Christian era—art for ecclesiastic purpose—the sacerdotal art. . . . Feudal era —art for potentates, kings, dukes, rajahs, etc.—the court art."[24] The "history of art and its

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[22] Ibid., 70–71.

[23] Ibid., 72–73.

[24] Ibid., 98.

relationship to form and subject matter," he summarized, "is the record of social changes."[25]

Graham's third stated objective for his System was to classify works of art and periods of art on the basis of "space-consciousness." This was addressed in the answer to the first questions, "What is art?" Art was "essentially a process."

> A process of what? A process of abstracting. What kind of a process? A *creative process of abstracting*. A writer abstracts his thoughts and experiences on a white sheet of paper, a musician abstracts the same phenomena into sound and a painter abstracts three-dimensional phenomena on a two-dimensional plane.[26]

This response is fundamental for understanding Graham's project. His audience needed to grasp that the term "abstraction" holds true for any endeavor in paint. For Graham, no painting is truly "realistic" because all paintings are, in essence, a dissemblance. He met head-on the question of abstraction, and returned to it again and again in the text.

Not content with even this radical definition of art as a "process of abstracting," he quickly advanced into even riskier territory. Any art that emulated three-dimensionality was, by definition, specious. Only by two-dimensional abstraction could the artist approach the knowledge of true form and in turn convey this to the viewer.

In the response to question 21 ("Is painting a two-dimensional or a three-dimensional proposition?"), Graham emphatically stated:

> Perfect two-dimensional form speaks of object's three-dimensionality better, more fully and more poignantly than shadow painting possibly can. The goal of

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[25] Ibid., 100.

[26] Ibid., 13.

> painting is to find final significant shapes. Shadow, modeling an object, deflect artists' interest from the original goal and conceal shape rather than elucidate it.[27]

Graham's fourth aim for the System, "to provide tangible bases for the evaluation of works of art and periods of art," is the hardest to trace through the book and seems the most unconventional of his aims. In the response to question 43, "What is good taste?," Graham clearly felt that this was a gift to be cultivated.

> Good taste is the ability to differentiate between forms infallible and forms approximate only. . . . One cannot learn about art by visiting museums and exhibitions, one must *OWN* works of art. The responsibility of selecting, buying, with hesitation or on impulse, owning and handling, (tactile understanding) an infinite number of times the art object, enables one to learn its comparative merit and defects.[28]

Graham felt strongly that the physical possession of objects of art (as we have seen, African art was important for him in this respect) was a necessary component of the artist's environment. Although he was involved in buying and selling paintings and African sculpture, the evaluation he refers to here is more aesthetic than monetary.

The Dialectic

In response to question 37, "Why is modern art inacceptable to many people?" Graham wrote:

> *Starting a painting is starting an argument in terms of canvas and paint.* Artist proceeds two ways: a) backwards—he investigates the phenomenon or object observed and tries to discover how this object has logically cosmically emotionally originated, how it has arrived at its present stage of form; b)

[27] Ibid., 24.

[28] Ibid., 49.

> forwards—into the future or what is the ultimate logical destination of the given object in terms of form.[29]

Here Graham introduced painting as a metaphor for dialectical argumentation. He described a physical back-and-forth in analyzing the activity of starting to paint and implied a synthesis in the resulting form. The artist is thus the master dialectician. One evident model for this analysis is Picasso's 1932 painting *Girl Before a Mirror* (Fig. 4.2), which Graham would have known and seen reproduced in *Cahiers d'art*, and which he used to illustrate his own article on Picasso and primitive art.[30] Picasso's canvas invites the idea of a problem posed and a problem solved, in both formal, compositional terms and in the image of the young woman looking in the mirror and seeing a reflection that reveals more than her physical appearance.

Structure and Models in the 1920s

Few precedents existed for the format of *System and Dialectics of Art* in contemporary writings on art published in the United States in the decade or so before its appearance. Katherine Dreier's *Western Art and the New Era: An Introduction to Modern Art* (1923) began with a question—"Why does art exist?"[31]—and went on, in the chapter "From Byzantine Art to Post-Impressionism," to lay the foundation for the reader's

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[29] Ibid., 38.

[30] The painting was brought to New York by the Valentine Gallery on consignment from Paul Rosenberg, Paris. The painting was purchased from Valentine and given to the Museum of Modern Art in 1938. http://moma.org/collection/provenance/items/2.38.html. Accessed January 12, 2007.

[31] Katherine Dreier, *Western Art and the New Era: An Introduction to Modern Art* (New York: Brentano's, 1923), 3.

instruction in the appreciation of art, most especially its culmination in modern art. Dreier also sought to define terms and began with a dictionary explanation:

> Open Webster's dictionary, to which the average American will turn when looking up the word "art," and one will find that "art" is "acquired skill, dexterity, system of rules, cunning, artifice." "Acquired skill" is the definition which is most closely connected with art as we are considering it. Yet "acquired skill" does not carry one very far in art, for it really does not carry one beyond the stage of craftsmanship. It is because we have over-emphasized skill that we have so little real art in our country, for skill without creation leads us to stagnation.[32]

Dreier's mission was more straightforward than Graham's. Although she, too, was an artist, her higher calling was making known the ways of modern art. She put little store in the public's ability to comprehend art by merely reading about it. Asked by New School director Alvin Johnson to suggest art books for the college library, she recommended Spengler's *The Decline of the West*, Kandinsky's *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, Goethe's *Farben Lehre*, and her own book, among others. But she insisted that Johnson let his students know how she felt about studying art from books alone. As she wrote:

> I would like you to preface the recommendation of these books with the following: "Miss Dreier believes that all reading in relation to art should only be done with the distinct mental conviction that it cannot train the eye to see art—but only stimulate the imagination with regards to seeing. The true appreciation of art and beauty can only come through direct contact with art and beauty and by taking the time to train the eye to observe." This may seem quite unnecessary to you but I find that it is very essential in teaching art to our people here in America. Through our colleges they have received the impression that one can learn to see through reading.[33]

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[32] Ibid., 122.

[33] Katherine S. Dreier, New York, to Alvin Johnson, New York, November 10, 1930. Box 26, Folder 764, Katherine S. Dreier Papers / Société Anonyme Archive, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke.

Dreier's book was a general history intended to initiate the layperson in the practice of looking at art—especially modern art. Graham's book, by contrast, was focused on equipping the professional artist.

The most widely read book on modern art in the twenties was the art critic Sheldon Cheney's *A Primer of Modern Art* (1924). The first edition sold out immediately, and by 1929 the book was in a fifth printing.[34] Cheney's chatty prose style no doubt contributed to the accessibility and popularity of the text. An early review coupled Cheney's book with volume four of Élie Faure's *History of Art, The Development of Man as Revealed by Art* (in a recent translation by Walter Pach). The reviewer was quick to point out that for Faure the period referred to as "modern" was the one immediately following the Renaissance; Cheney "means modern in a narrower and more contemporary sense."[35]

In the preface to his book published some ten years later, *Expressionism in Art* (1936), Cheney looked back on the state of the reception of modern art in the 1920s, in contrast to the then current situation. He writes from a vantage point similar to Graham's in the mid-thirties.

> In those days . . . Modernist Art was on the defensive. One broached the subject with apologies and explanations. One took up arms self-consciously, even heroically, under the barrage of writings laid down by academic critics in defense of what is not obviously "the old art." The whole subject of Modernism was surrounded by an atmosphere of battle, with the radicals on the challenging side . . . . My *Primer* . . . belongs to that earlier time, when the public was unconvinced and the Moderns a beleaguered minority.[36]

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[34] Susan Noyes Platt, "Sheldon Cheney: Crusader for Modernism." *Archives of American Art Journal*, 25, no. 3 (1985), 15.

[35] "In Modern Art the Form's the Thing," *The New York Times*, May 4, 1924, BR 12.

[36] Sheldon Cheney, *Expressionism in Art* (New York: Liveright, 1934), vii–viii.

Cheney was optimistic about the future, if not for abstraction, then at least for Expressionism.

> Today conditions are reversed. If the battle is to continue, it is the conservatives who find themselves on the defensive, who must sue for an audience. Expressionism—if you will allow me the word probationally—is widely accepted, studied, even respectable.
>
> In this book, therefore, if I am wise, only minor effort will be expended to convince the reader that radical Modern is logical and inevitable.[37]

In many ways Graham took the same stance. His book was not an apologia for modernism. Moreover, he was not burdened with trying to convince a broad public, as Cheney was.

"Sources Consulted"

Graham's inclusion of his sources can be linked to the idea of the system and the logical derivation of his thoughts. Each of the eighty-five individuals listed as sources falls into one of eleven broad categories.[38] Notable for their absence are such major dialecticians as Hegel and Marx. From the ancients to the moderns, Graham uses these figures to illustrate his points, and it is instructive to consider their respective categories. The largest group is, not surprisingly, art historians, with twenty-six cited, followed by contemporary art critics, of whom there are thirteen. Nineteen artists are discussed in terms of their written contribution to the discourse, some theoretical and others more anecdotal. More poets (seven) than writers[39] (three) are mentioned, and four philosophers

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[37] Ibid.

[38] With the exception of the revolutionary theorist, G. V. Plechanov [Plekhanov] (Russian, 1856–1918), the founder of Russian Marxism, and the obscure "Dr. Opitz;" See Appendices A and B.

[39] René Crevel and Ramón Gómez de la Serna were known primarily as novelists; the polymath Goethe could, of course, be placed in one of several categories.

are included, and there are two architects, two art dealers, and one filmmaker. There are four scholars whose work falls within the disciplines of ethnology, archaeology, or anthropology; and last, three twentieth-century pioneers in the realm of the unconscious mind (Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, and Freud's protégé Otto Rank).

"Sources Consulted": Art Historians

Of the twenty-six art historians Graham included, sixteen are German or German-trained, six are French, two are Russian and two Italian. All are modern figures (post-1850), with the exception of Vasari. Not surprisingly, given Graham's interests, many of the German art historians listed wrote on African or other primitive cultures. Carl Einstein's (German, 1885–1940) *Negerplastik* (1915) was one of the first art history books published in Europe that recognized the importance of African art. (The publication was the final volume in the highly regarded Propyläen Verlag history of art series, *Die Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts*.) A 1920 reedition of *Negerplastik* (Kurt Wolff, Munich) is notable for the proportion of illustrations to text. One hundred sixteen half-tone photographs grace the volume, for only twenty-two pages of text. This may have been the volume that Graham knew and studied.[40]

Ernst Fuhrmann (German, 1886–1956) wrote on the Incas and the material culture of New Guinea. Herbert Kühn (German, 1895–1982) wrote on the art of the Bushmen of southwest Africa, among other subjects. Carl Kjersmeier (Danish, 1889–1961) published the extensive *Centres de style de la sculpture nègre africaine*, first seen in France in

[40] The auction of Frank Crowninshield's collection of two hundred modern French illustrated books at Parke-Bernet Galleries in 1943 included his library of five hundred art books, among them works on African art and ethnography by Leo Frobenius, Ernst Vatter, Adolphe Basler, Eckart von Sydow, and Paul Guillaume, among many others. Graham most likely suggested to Crowninshield the purchase of many of these books and could have had access to any that he did not own himself.

1935. His stated aim was to present the plastic art of African peoples in which the quality or quantity of artistic life had attained such a high level of development that a proper style was clear. Eckart von Sydow (German, 1885–1942) wrote *Primitive Kunst und Psychoanalyse: Eine Studie über die sexuelle Grundlage der bildenden Künste der Naturvölker* (1927), an examination of the psychological and sexual forces in the art of primitive cultures, and was published frequently in *Cahiers d'art*. Ernst Vatter (German, 1888–1948) published a book in 1926 on primitive art, *Religiőse Plastik der Naturvőlker*. Henri Lavachery (French, 1885–1972) wrote on ancient art of the Americas and on the petroglyphs of Easter Island. The art historians who dealt with African sculpture were important for Graham but do not seem to have been a clear model for his work. As many of their volumes privilege image over text, it is likely that Graham's visual acuity was honed in the course of examining their illustrations of African sculpture.

Gerhardt Rodenwaldt (German, 1886–1945) was an expert on classical Greek and Rome. Oskar Schürer (German, 1892–1949) would have been known to Graham for his 1926 book on Picasso. Alfred Salmony (American, born Germany, 1890–1958) was an Asian expert. Henry Thode (German, 1857–1920) wrote on Renaissance painters. Wolfgang Fritz Volbach (German, 1892–1988) was an expert on Early Christian art and mosaics. Jacob-Baart de la Faille (French, 1886–1959) authored the Van Gogh catalogue raisonné which was published in Paris in 1928. Maurice Raynal's (French, 1886–1954) *Anthologie de la peinture en France de 1906 à nos jours* (1927) was an important account of the Fauves and cubist painters and appeared the next year in an English translation by Ralph Roeder as *Modern French Painters*. Hans Mühlestein (German,

1887–1969) wrote on subjects as wide-ranging as Etruscan art and Ferdinand Hodler and was a contributor to *Cahiers d'art.*

Herman Friedrich Grimm (German, 1828–1901) may have interested Graham because he was a writer and studied law before his pursuits were directed toward art. Grimm was probably best known for the volumes he published on the lives of Michelangelo and Raphael. Will Grohmann (German, 1887–1968) would have been known to Graham for his work on German expressionist artists and his book on Paul Klee (1929). Élie Faure (French, 1873–1937), whose history of art has been mentioned, was well known to Graham. Wilhelm Lubke's (German, 1826–1893) *Outlines of the History of Art* was among the earliest comprehensive German art historical texts.

Aleksandr Ivanovich Anisimov's (Russian, 1877–1931) most significant writings were on the frescoes in the church of Saint Theodore Stratilata in Novgorod; he was also an expert in early Russian icons. Ranuccio Bianchi Bandinelli (Italian, 1900–1975) was one of Italy's preeminent twentieth-century art historians. His early studies of the Apollo Belvedere and of Polycletus were not published until the mid-1930s but Graham could have known his work from the late 1920s on Etruscan sites. G. K. Loukomski (Russian, 1884–c. 1928) wrote on Jewish art in European synagogues. Friedrich Sarre (German, 1865–1945) was an expert on Middle Eastern art, especially Persian ceramics.

Graham lists Vasari among his sources. *Lives of the Artists* (first published in 1550, with a second, expanded edition two decades later) established the basic format for writing on one artist and treats biography as an integral and inseparable part of the story of artistic production. Vasari was, of course, an artist himself. Graham evidently felt that

writing was a fundamental component of the artist's ambition; his stated aim in *System and Dialectics of Art* was to establish the modes for discourse. An example of the significant artist monographically treated in modern times is found in Grimm's work. His *Leben Michelangelo's*, included an aggregation of all known facts, biographical as well as historical, and the artist's own words where possible. It was first published, in two volumes, in 1860 and 1863, and by 1922, nineteen editions had appeared in German, as well as translations in English and Italian.[41] Grimm was one of the first art historians to examine the reception of an artist's work.

Johann Joachim Winckelmann's *Geschichte der Kunst des Altertums* (1746) first used the phrase "history of art." Graham does not list Winckelmann or any of the succeeding generations of prominent German and Swiss art historians, including Jakob Burckhardt, Alois Riegl, Heinrich Wőlfflin, and Wilhelm Worringer, to name only a few. Most of the art historians cited are concerned with primitive, especially African, cultures and many of their texts relied heavily on lavish illustrations to inform the reader. The volumes were not so much long treatises as picture galleries to be perused. Removed from their cultural context, photographed with dramatic lighting, and isolated on a page, these images became studies in pure form.

Max Raphael's (German, 1889–1952) *Zur Erkenntnistheorie der konkreten Dialektik* (*Toward an Empirical Theory of Art*), published in Paris in 1934, was influential. Raphael is regarded as a Marxist art historian today, and Graham would have known his work on prehistoric cave paintings. Raphael perhaps came too late to have

[41] Gabriele Guercio, *Art as Existence: The Artist's Monograph and Its Project* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2006), 329.

been a seminal influence on Graham's work, but this passage from another work of his strongly parallels Graham's thinking.

> The theory of art, the history and the criticism of art . . . have this in common (in opposition to any empirical sociology of art) that they isolate their subject to a degree of abstract purity and seek their proper foundation by immanent means. The sociology of art, on the contrary, is based on a material foundation exterior to art, by means of which one can explain the concrete particularity of each work, the reciprocal relations between all ideologies and the reaction of art to this foundation.[42]

"Sources Consulted": Ethnologists, Anthropologists and Archaeologists

The eminent anthropologist and Africa expert Hermann Baumann (German, 1902–1972) is best known for his book *The Division of Work According to Sex in African Hoe Culture* (published in English in 1928) and for his 1936 *Schöpfung und Urzeit des Menschen im Mythus der afrikanischen Völker* (*Creation Myths in Primitive African Peoples*). He wrote extensively on Africa for *Cahiers d'art*. Leo Frobenius (German, 1873–1938) was the most influential of the German ethnologists and an expert in Africa. Felix von Luschan (Austrian, 1854–1924) devised a chromatic scale for classifying skin color. Spyridon Marinatos (Greek, 1901–1974) was a prominent archaeologist.

"Sources Consulted": Artists and Poets

The artists Graham listed were an important group for him. First because, if not his contemporaries, they were his peers. Second, because those who had written and written well were a model for him. It was fundamental for him that artists be able to write

[42] Max Raphael, *The Demands of Art*, trans. Norbert Guterman (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1968), xx.

about their art, and for this there needed to be a definition of terms and codification of language. Moreover, the artist should retain this power and have some control over the discourse. Graham shared with each of the selected artists the compulsion to write about art—a desire as fundamental as the art-making itself.

The inclusion of Eugène Delacroix in Graham's list is of particular interest. Delacroix's writing (his journals were published after his death) was not programmatic like Graham's, but it is evident that he was motivated by some of the same frustrations. In 1857, he wrote in his diary that he wanted to compile his thoughts in a "Dictionnaire des Beaux-Arts." Confined to his house by illness for the first three months of that year, he accumulated his thoughts and toyed with the idea of what to call the volume. A journal entry for Sunday, January 11, listed some possibilities:

> *Materials for a Dictionary of the Fine Arts*
>
> *A Small Philosophic Dictionary of the Fine Arts*
>
> *Compendium of a Dictionary of the Fine Arts*
>
> *Extract from a Philosophic Dictionary of the Fine Arts, of Painting and Sculpture*.[43]

Walter Pach's English translation of the journals was first published in 1937, the same year as *System and Dialectics of Art*. Graham would of course have read them in the original French, first published in 1893. Graham refers to Delacroix as an exemplar of the Romantic movement and as an artist whose radical style puzzled the public. In response to question 37, "Why is modern art inacceptable to many people?," Graham wrote:

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[43] Eugène Delacroix, *The Journal of Eugène Delacroix*, trans. Walter Pach (New York: Covici, Friede, 1937; reprint, New York: Viking, 1972), 530 (page citations are to the reprint edition).

> The average spectator is unaware of all painful processes of artist's penetration into the past and equally painful attempt to see into the future destiny of the form-of-nature in front of him. When public learns to read and assimilate the symbols by which artist expresses himself, it can readily read the meaning of the picture. History proves it—100 years ago when Delacroix painted, public asked, "*What does it mean?,"* when Courbet appeared public knew all about Delacroix and understood him but asked in front of Courbet's painting, "What does it mean?"[44]

At times Delacroix sounds curiously like Graham when he able to summon a definition only by posing a question. "*Originality.* Does it consist in priority of invention as to certain ideas, certain striking effects?"[45] By February 1857, Delacroix had penned a draft of a preface to his dictionary. He described his ambition for the work:

> I should like to contribute to the teaching of a better way to read in the great works. In Athens, it is said, the number of judges of the Fine Arts was far larger than in our modern society. The greatness of taste so evident in the works of Antiquity confirms one on this opinion.
> In Rome as in Athens, the same man was a lawyer, a warrior, a pontiff, an edile, an inspector of public games, a senator, and a magistrate. He had given himself the education belonging to each of these activities. . . . Among us a notary is only a notary and is acquainted with no more than the things of his office.[46]

Morris Davidson (American, 1898–1979) was an artist who also wrote about art. His *Understanding Modern Art* was published in 1934. Graham includes Davidson under his chosen art critics—some of whom are great "because of their fanatical love for art, others because of their profound understanding of art."[47] (Graham and Davidson may well have known one another in Paris.) Davidson felt that one needed to know the "motivating spirit of all Western painting" before one could truly understand modern painting. And like Graham he was compelled to attempt to explain abstraction because it

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[44] *SDA* (1937), 38.

[45] Delacroix, 565.

[46] Ibid., 572.

[47] *SDA* (1937), 61.

was so largely misunderstood. “Instead of just rapture, I have tried to show the evolutionary process of European painting which culminated in the puzzling pictures we see about us to-day. The puzzle then solves itself.”[48]

Davidson’s history concentrates on nineteenth- and twentieth-century developments in France and advises the reader that “if the painting of other nations, notably our own, has not been touched upon in the foregoing chapters, it is not because we wish to sniff at the art of the rest of the world, but because we are primarily concerned with the evolution of painting, its trends and innovations.”[49] Defending his narrow focus on the art produced in France, Davidson added:

> There is nothing inherent in the Frenchman to make him automatically a man of genius. What France possesses for the service of art is Paris. Paris is a city lacking in homogeneity. It is a collection of pigeonholes in which every sort of pigeon may come to roost. For this reason the artists of all nations, feeling the subtle hostility of their own environment, come to Paris. And because Paris has a tradition and Frenchmen who can intellectualize the most logical abstractions and lay them down like railroad tracks for foreign locomotives to ride on, Paris takes all the credit.[50]

Art by Amédée Ozenfant (French, 1886–1966) appeared first in France in 1928 and in an English edition, *Foundations of Modern Art*, in 1931. This freewheeling look at art is divided into three sections: “From Before the Deluge to 1914;” “From 1914–1918;” and “From 1918–1928.” Ozenfant enjoys this romp through the history of art:

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[48] Morris Davidson, *Understanding Modern Art* (New York: Tudor, 1934), 7.

[49] Ibid., 241.

[50] Ibid., 242.

> Men are different from each other, but much more similar than different. Which is what enables Great Art to be eternal. . . . I am sorry that, in a book whose chief object is to deal with art, I seem always to be going off at tangents: but the ideas thus expressed have a real importance.[51]

Ozenfant appends a chart of definitions from the two most prominent nineteenth-century French lexicographers, Larousse and Darmesteter. Graham credits Ozenfant as being the founder of Purism and defines the movement as one that "tends to bring things to purer ingredients."[52] Ozenfant's own definition rings truer: "Purity, as I understand it, is a maximum efficiency, intensity, and quality issuing from an utmost economy of means."[53] Graham, it seems, borrowed this definition and used it for his own newly-hatched ism. In *System and Dialectics of Art*, he defined "Minimalism" as the "reducing of painting to the minimum ingredients for the sake of discovering the ultimate, logical destination of painting in the process of abstracting." He also laid claim to being the founder of the movement.[54] By the time of the publication of the book, Graham's involvement with such a "movement" was marginal and certainly not evident from any surviving paintings; nonetheless he did want to lay claim to being the progenitor.

Graham was also attracted to poets who wrote on art. He would certainly have known Apollinaire's *Les peintres cubistes,* published in 1913. In a brief 1918 essay for *Les arts à Paris*, an advertising bulletin for the Galerie Paul Guillaume, Apollinaire assessed the taste for African and Oceanic sculpture among French artists and collectors:

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[51] Amédée Ozenfant, *Foundations of Modern Art*, trans. John Rodker (New York: Brewer, Warren and Putnam, 1931), 210. The chart of definitions is on page 305.

[52] *SDA* (1937), 33.

[53] Ozenfant, 300.

[54] *SDA* (1937), 33.

> These fetishes, which have not been uninfluential in modern art, are all related to the religious passion, which is the source of the purest art. . . . The interest of these fetishes lies essentially in their plastic form, even through they are sometimes made of precious materials. This form is always powerful, very far removed from our conceptions and capable of nourishing the inspiration of artists.[55]

"Sources Consulted": Art Critics

In response to question 21, "Is painting a two-dimensional or a three-dimensional proposition?," Graham emphatically chose the former. He traced the trajectory thus: "The history of pure painting can be expressed as follows: Prehistoric, Greco-Egyptian, Pompeian, Byzantine, Gothic, Ucello [*sic*], Ingres, Cezanne [*sic*], Picasso and Mondrian."[56] Ingres remains for Graham the touchstone for artists who used "line," what his teacher John Sloan called "the only really abstract art-element. Light and shade, perspective, solidity and the rest all exist in nature. Line is the creation of the artist."[57] Graham knew the work of the German critic Julius Meier-Graefe (1867–1935) on Ingres, but he was more influenced by the two most prominent English art critics included—Roger Fry (English, 1866–1934) and Clive Bell (English, 1881–1964). The fact that they were both painters was not lost on Graham. As we have seen, his dictum, "The goal of

[55] Guillaume Apollinaire, "African and Oceanic Sculptures," *Les arts à Paris*, July 15, 1918; reprinted in *Apollinaire on Art, Essays and Reviews, 1902–1918,* ed. LeRoy C. Breunig, trans. Susan Suleiman (New York: Viking, 1972), 470.

[56] *SDA* (1937), 24.

[57] Van Wyck Brooks, *John Sloan: A Painter's Life* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1955), 145.

painting is to find final significant shapes"[58] comes very close to Bell's and Fry's espousal of "significant form."

Graham would have known Fry's Slade Lectures, which were collected as *Last Lectures.* Although they did not appear in print until 1939, we can assume that Graham knew the lectures on African art, because he included an excerpt in the afterword to the catalogue he produced in 1936 for an exhibition of African art for Jacques Seligmann. Fry had first published his writings in 1920 in *Vision and Design*; his work on African art evidently influenced Graham:

> All archaic European sculpture—Greek and Romanesque, for instance—approaches plasticity from the point of view of bas-relief. The statue bears traces of having been conceived as the combination of front, back, and side bas-reliefs. And this continues to make itself felt almost until the final development of the tradition. Complete plastic freedom with us seems only to come at the end of a long period, when the art has attained a high degree of representational skill and when it is generally already decadent from the point of view of imaginative significance.
>
> Now, the strange thing about these African sculptures is that they bear, as far as I can see, no trace of this process. Without ever attaining anything like representational accuracy they have complete freedom. . . . So far from clinging to two dimensions, as we tend to do, [the African artist] actually underlines, as it were, the three-dimensionalness of his forms. It is in some such way, I suspect, that he manages to give to his forms their disconcerting vitality, the suggestion that they make of being not mere echoes of actual figures, but of possessing an inner life of their own.[59]

Willard Huntington Wright (American, 1888–1939), the author of *Modern Painting* (1915) and *The Future of Painting* (1923), was a voice for formalism in American criticism. "Serious modern art, despite its often formidable and bizarre

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[58] *SDA* (1937), 105.

[59] Roger Fry, "Negro Sculpture," *Vision and Design* (London: Chatto and Windus, Ltd., 1920; reprint, New York: Meriden Books, 1956), 100.

appearance," he wrote, "is only striving to rehabilitate the natural and unalterable principles of rhythmic form to be found in the old masters, and to translate them into relative and more comprehensive terms."[60]

"Sources Consulted": Psychologists/Psychiatrists

The role of the unconscious in art-making is evident through *System and Dialectics of Art,* beginning with the epigraph "Art opens access to the unconscious mind." Graham had more than a nodding acquaintance with Freudian analysis and, although Jung is never mentioned directly in *System and Dialectics of Art*, Graham's thoughts on the unconscious link directly to his.[61]

> A work of art is neither the faithful nor distorted representation, it is the immediate, unadorned record of an authentic intellecto-emotional REACTION of the artist set in space. . . . The difficulty in producing a work of art lies in the fact that the artist has to unite at one and the same time three elements: thought, feeling, and automatic "ecriture."*
>
> * By ecriture is understood a *personal* technique = result of training and *improvisation* in contradistinction to technique in general which is an accumulation of professional methods.[62]

This passage, an evident nod as well to the Surrealists' notion of "automatic writing," seems to argue for a balance in the control of the conscious and the unconscious. Later on in the book however Graham, in describing the five faculties that

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[60] Willard Huntington Wright, *The Future of Painting* (New York: B. W. Huebsch, 1923), 95. Wright was a well-known detective mystery writer under the name S. S. van Dine.

[61] Eleanor Green, 141. Graham repaid a host during an extended stay in Mexico by providing "analysis."

[62] *SDA* (1937), 55.

propel human endeavor, clearly felt that the unconscious was the greatest source of creative expression, unencumbered by the limits imposed by reason:

> a) physical force; b) the will-power (superior to physical power) which is an ability to choose, to pursue and to attain; c) the power of the Unconscious (instincts and emotions) which is a chaotic but intuitive and creative power (power unorganized); d) the power of reasoning (analysis and synthesis) which can pursue problems consequentially, the power of logical procedure and therefore essentially a *limited* power; and e) the highest power humanity has ever developed is the power of vision, divination, evocation, revelation, power unlimited, power procreative, power advancing directly from point to point without the tedious procedure of logical argumentation, the power of the unconscious organized.[63]

"Sources Consulted" and What They Reveal

It is evident that Graham was very well read; interestingly enough, the names of many of these sources turn up with frequency in *Cahiers d'art* and Graham's familiarity with many of these authors may have come from his readings in that journal. One 1932 edition of the magazine was devoted almost exclusively to Picasso. At over 200 pages and profusely illustrated, it constitutes a veritable *festschrift* to the artist. Many of the contributors are those mentioned in Graham's list. Editor Christian Zervos set the tone in the introduction by stating that "today there is only one artist whose name is known by all"[64] and that was Picasso. An essay by Apollinaire on the *papiers collées* was included; Jean Metzinger contributed an article as did André Salmon. Ramón Gómez de la Serna wrote about Picasso's Spanish roots. Prominent art historians were also included: Carl Einstein, Maurice Raynal, Dr. Oskar Schurer ("*Faszinierenden Picasso*"), and Will

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[63] Ibid, 82.

[64] *Cahiers d'art,* Nos. 3–5, no.7, 1932, 85.

Grohmann ("*Dialektik und Transzendenz in Schaffen Picassos*"). There were contributions also from poets Paul Eluard, Jean Cocteau and Vincent Huidobro. The magazine concludes with two articles on African art: Hermann Baumann on Benin bronzes and Eckart von Sydow on the Von der Heydt Collection of African art. It is not surprising, then, that of the contributors to this edition of *Cahiers d'art*, almost all were significant enough for Graham to include in his source list. This indicates as well his exposure to these intellectual circles through Zervos and his close ties to the Parisian art world.

"Russianisms" and Graham's Writing Style

Nearly a quarter-century after the publication of *System and Dialectics of Art*, the eminent American painter and critic Fairfield Porter made some astute observations about Graham's prose style in an article for *ARTnews*, where he regularly wrote art reviews. In "John Graham: The Painter as Aristocrat," Porter characterized *System and Dialectics of Art* as "written in a Stalinist dialectical manner of question posed and answered by the author."[65] Porter found that the text contained certain Russianisms:

> Such as the omission of the article, and an uncertainty about where to place it. Thus: "Artist creates for society," sounds more abstract than "the artist," as though not only were there a connection between all artists, but as though there existed further a generalized entity, "Artist," the god of artists.[66]

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[65] Fairfield Porter, "John Graham: The Painter as Aristocrat," *ARTnews*, Vol. 59 (October 1960), 40.

[66] Ibid.

Porter was somewhat charitable in his further assessment: "It may be that his taste for generalization and distaste for particularity which he expresses in this book come from the structure of Russian."[67]

Porter certainly knew whereof he spoke. He and Graham were neighbors in Southampton, New York. Porter lived with his wife and family at 49 South Main Street after moving from New York in 1949. Marianne Strate, Graham's last significant liaison, had a house at 32 South Main Street, and the couple spent portions of the year there from 1947 until her death in 1956. Porter no doubt knew the house firsthand:

> He has an eye for quality. Wherever he lives, his home is a museum: its furnishings, from antique and second-hand shops and the five-and-dime store, reassemble a consistent workable house of no particular period in which each chair, painting or cooking utensil is set aside from such things by his recognition (which a visitor immediately senses) of a unique artistic or craft excellence. His houses illustrate a frame for civilized life.[68]

Porter is one of the few credible critics to write about *System and Dialectics of Art* and his proximity to Graham must have engendered this interest. It is noteworthy that Porter points out the awkwardness of the text: what passed unremarked upon in 1937 merits comment in 1960. One does wonder about basic editorial input. As we have seen from letters, Graham's English is fluent enough, and his grammar fairly stable. Could not the publishers have been more helpful? We may assume that the manuscript was substantially completed and a complete revision would have been daunting. Nevertheless, there must have been a conscious decision to retain the original style and tone.

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[67] Ibid.

[68] Ibid., 39.

Porter wrote this article at the height of the Cold War, when the use of the term "Stalinist" to describe Graham's writing style would have been highly charged. Graham actually dealt little with the state of art in the Soviet Union but in the last paragraph of *System and Dialectics of Art*, he did provide an overt paean to social realism: "The birth of the machine has laid the foundations of a new society. This new society will develop a new culture and new art, an art rooted in sturdy, heroic wisdom of the soil and work, an art pungent and relevant."[69] And his concluding sentence predicted: "The destinies of future civilizations will be solved along the lines of Moscow and New York, Moscow supplying the ideology and New York the materialization."[70]

1926–1936

Taken as a decade-long endeavor, *System and Dialectics of Art* must necessarily be read against the backdrop of those years. Key moments and influences shaped the course of the production. An overview of significant events in this period shows what compelled Graham to persevere in the extended effort to write and publish the work.

Letters to Duncan Phillips

The letters that Graham wrote to Duncan Phillips in this period allow the most access to the artist's thoughts. In these letters we learn of Graham's ambitions as far as

[69] *SDA* (1937), 127.

[70] Ibid.

his writings on art. He admired Phillips's criticism and in April 1931 sent his patron an article he had written.[71] Graham described it thus:

> In this article some of my older ideas are incorporated and some new ones added and all put in a definite form. This is an attempt to define questions on art in an exhaustive way. All definitions of art from Goethe, Tolstoy, Baudelaire and others were (to my mind) incomplete and vague. Do whatever you wish with this article.[72]

Phillips responded enthusiastically to the submission, sending him fifty dollars for the "excellent manuscript."[73] Graham wrote back:

> Of course I will be very glad if you publish my questionaire [*sic*]. . . . I have answered in an exhaustive way and to the point questions that no one has ever answered. Goethe, Tolstoy, Leonardo, Baudelaire, made poetic, amatautish sentimental allussions [*sic*] to art. Picasso has never formulated in words any conception of art, nor did Ozenfant, Leger [*sic*], W. George, Zervos and others.[74]

Graham added that his background in the law had provided him with the rigorous training necessary to approach a subject from all sides before forming opinions.

> My legal training has helped me to formulate postulates clearly and to the point. In law, any specific crime or obligation is recognized as such only when that particular crime or obligation satisfies *all characteristics* of that particular legal definition. I am sure no one has ever defined: art; work of art; purpose of art; painting; etc. At least, that much I can claim. I would like to write a history of art, which to my understanding has never been written. All so-called histories of art are partly arbitrary groupings based on personal preferences of people who themselves have never produced a work in any domain—and partly based on

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[71] Phillips may have solicited the article for his journal *Art and Understanding*, envisioned as a vehicle for his own and like-minded writings about art. Only two issues were published, in November 1929 and March 1930. In the inaugural issue, Phillips wrote: "There is nothing esoteric and beyond the comprehension of the average man in that incessant spiritual activity, almost as old as the human species, which we call art." *Art and Understanding*, November 1929, 4.

[72] John D. Graham, New York, to Duncan Phillips, Washington, D.C., April 21, 1931, The Phillips Collection Papers, Archives of American Art, Microfilm reel 1941, frame 11.

[73] Eleanor Green, *John Graham: Artist and Avatar*. (Washington, D.C.: The Phillips Collection, 1987), 139.

[74] John D. Graham, New York, to Duncan Phillips, Washington, D.C., May 23, 1931, The Phillips Collection Papers, Archives of American Art, Microfilm reel 1941, frame 29.

> habitual conventions. I would like to write more a logical history of art than a chronological history. I would like to write a logical and a comparative history of art with comparative tables attached. Ely Faure [*sic*] history of art is nothing but a piece of beautiful literature, French at that, but he knows absolutely nothing about painting.[75]

It is likely that this "questionnaire" was the same manuscript Graham would subsequently submit to William Sener Rusk for his *Methods of Teaching the Fine Arts* (1935). We can assume that the manuscript was tendered at some point between 1931, when he sent it off to Phillips, and 1933, when Graham's hasty departure from Wells College may have ruptured his relationship with Rusk. The version Rusk published was only fourteen pages long, with only fifty-nine questions; it was certainly more terse than the final book.[76] The title of Graham's article, "The Dialectics of Art," indicated that he had yet to articulate his idea of a "system." The text that appeared in 1937 incorporates that published by Rusk, with seventy questions added and the responses expanded throughout. The Rusk version is surprisingly jargon-free and contains few mentions of Picasso compared with the 1937 edition. What transpired in the intervening years to shape the text into its final form may lead to conclusions about Graham's revisions and why, by the mid-1930s, the measured cadences of the earlier publication had given way to a more extreme voice.

By the end of 1933, Graham was writing in a desperate tone to Phillips, describing how he had returned from a trip to Paris in the fall and discovered that Elinor

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[75] Ibid.

[76] There were 129 questions in the published version of *SDA* (1937).

had left him.[77] "I don't need any money, I want to earn some. I will be glad to lecture, to teach or to do any kind of work, labor including [*sic*]."[78] In a postscript he apprises Phillips of his progress on the book. "I have finished my book on art, called –System and dialectics of art. It is so far in a short form. Is there any publisher I could show it to?"[79]

The next month he wrote to Phillips not about the book but about the possibility of some employment on one of the Federal art projects, bemoaning the fact that he had not been able to register with the Public Works of Art Project. He enclosed an article from *The New York Times* about an artists' protest and scrawled across the top, "I am *not* [underlined three times] in it. Just read it."[80]

> This clipping may give you an idea of things here. I have registered in the right place. I went to see Mrs. Force [chair of the New York Regional Committee of the Public Works of Art Project], but I was sent to one of the branches. I certainly would like to paint *murals from American Life* and will be grateful if anything could be done in this direction. If you would be so good as to write the letter to Mrs. Force it might bring results. And I certainly need work.
>
> I have moved now to a little Russian monastery where I can live practically on nothing, address 345 East 19th St. I am very anxious to paint murals in a conservative style. If you would mention to Mrs. Force that I give up abstract painting, it may help. Things certainly are gloomy.[81]

Nearly a year elapsed before he mentioned the book to Phillips again.

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[77] According to a recollection by Dorothy Dehner, Graham was infatuated with a student at Wells, the daughter of a trustee. Dorothy Dehner records, AAA, Microfilm reel D298, frame 1533.

[78] John Graham, New York, to Duncan Phillips, Washington, D.C., November 27, 1933, The Phillips Collection Papers, Archives of American Art, Microfilm reel 1944, frame 201.

[79] Ibid.

[80] "Jobless Artists Protest PWA Methods, Charging Favortism in Selections Here," *The New York Times*, December 28, 1933, clipping in The Phillips Collection Papers, AAA, Microfilm reel 1944, frame 490.

[81] John Graham, New York, to Duncan Phillips, Washington, D.C., December 29, 1933, The Phillips Collection Papers, AAA, Microfilm reel 1944, frame 290.

> I am coming to my senses after the shock of the last year[82] and perhaps enriched immensely by it. I started to work seriously trying to get in direct contact with my inner self and bring out of there an unadulterated reaction.
>
> I have worked a good deal on my book on art and it is nearly finished. I will send you a copy as soon as I can have it typed.[83]

A Critic's Words and a Determination

For Graham, as for most artists, and indeed most Americans, the 1930s were difficult years. He sold very few works of art but, as we have seen, dealing in African art provided a reliable source of income. From 1931 through the spring of 1933, he held a full-time position at Wells College and his wife was also employed as a teacher. When he was in Paris in the summer of 1930, Elinor stayed in Bolton Landing, a village on Lake George in upstate New York, with their friends Weber Furlong and her husband, Tomas.[84] In 1931, Elinor bought a house in Bolton Landing and according to Dorothy Dehner's recollection, the summers of 1931–1933 were relatively happy ones for the Grahams and their young son. But his painting production during this period diminished and he did not return to Wells to teach in the fall of 1933.[85]

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[82] Graham's divorce from Elinor was finalized in August 1934. "Two Ex-Baltimore Artists Reach Parting of Ways," *Baltimore Sun*, August 4, 1934.

[83] John Graham, New York, to Duncan Phillips, Washington, D.C., October 24, 1934, The Phillips Collection Papers, AAA, Microfilm reel 1944, frame 300.

[84] (Wilhemina) Weber Furlong was an administrator at the Art Students League. Dorothy Dehner and David Smith had spent their first summer at Bolton Landing as guests of the Furlongs in 1929 and subsequently bought an eighty-six-acre farm there.

[85] Dehner's also recounted another story from Wells. Graham had assigned a still-life drawing to a class and one young woman protested that she couldn't draw "an old guitar." Graham responded, "You can draw anything, a guitar, a lamp, a bottle or a water closet." This remark, combined with the earlier dalliance (see fn 77 this chapter), seems to have sealed his fate at the women's college, and he was dismissed. Dorothy Dehner records, AAA, Microfilm reel D298, frame 1533.

Although his writing and business dealings in Paris occupied much of his time, the 1930s were not without critical reception for Graham's work. The early years of the decade were significant, as we have seen in Chapter Three. An exhibition at the Eighth Street Gallery in 1933 included twelve of his paintings and a series of drawings.[86] The banner headline for Edward Alden Jewell's column announced "Two Paintings in the Exhibition Here by John Graham Win High Praise." The review accurately conveyed the discourse in the contemporary art world.[87] Jewell, whose conservative tone echoed the tenor of the times, opened the review by pointing out that John Graham was not the artist's real name. At this stage in Graham's career, his exotic biography was less an asset than a professional liability. The name change was suspect—an act of duplicity. There was more than a hint of xenophobia. Jewell explained that upon marrying an American, the artist "changed his name—a very long and difficult one, it is said—to John Graham." Jewell continued:

> But art can prove less tractable and does not necessarily concern itself with citizenship papers. Certain enthusiasts, it is true, assert that in Mr. Graham's paintings we may find an apotheosis of modern America. Can this art have something to do with the new Technocracy? We shall probably have to know something more about Technocracy before we can be sure.[88]

By equating abstraction in art with theories of technology that were gaining currency in the United States in the early 1930s, Jewell insinuated that Graham needed to be kept under surveillance.

> The artist still uses thick paint and still turns out designs that, whatever else they may be called, are redoubtably abstract. Subjects such as *An American Youth*,

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[86] John D. Graham papers, AAA, Microfilm reel 3895.

[87] Edward Alden Jewell, "Art in Review," *The New York Times*, January 26, 1933, 15.

[88] Ibid.

> *Lunchroom*,[89] *Vox Humana*,[90] and *Rapport* seem to be abstracted beyond recall. There is no particular reason why an abstraction should have to be recalled, should have to be resolved back into its naturalistic genesis. Only why, having performed these feats of white magic, do artists feel that they must cling to the bewildering titles?[91]

Jewell concluded by dredging up Graham's remark about Picasso. "The artist . . . used to admit that, besides himself, there was a fellow named Picasso who could paint. Now, this relationship one can understand, daring even to wonder, it may be, whether but for Picasso there could have been a Graham as we know him today."[92] Jewell's comment may have cemented Graham's determination to confront head-on the issue of Picasso's influence.

Graham and Picasso

Graham's state of mind in 1934 would certainly have contributed to the tone of the final *System and Dialectics of Art* manuscript. His earlier critical reception, his comparisons to the School of Paris, and most particularly the art of Picasso, were a boon for an artist just starting his career. As time went on he came to be plagued by these comparisons with Picasso. Jewell's review may have crystallized the problem for him.

Graham had been thinking of this circumstance and what it meant for a while. Against the background of the early thirties, the roots of his dialectical approach are

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[89] This painting may be *Lunchroom Coffee Cup* (c. 1930)

[90] This painting (Fig. 4.3) was exhibited at the Whitney Annual as *Painting* in 1930 (see Fig. 4.4). The painting was given to Katherine Dreier in 1935–1936, according to the Société Anonyme catalogue raisonné. The alteration and subsequent title change evidently date from 1932 or early 1933.

[91] Jewell, "Art in Review." *The New York Times*, January 26, 1933, 15.

[92] Ibid.

revealed in a series of letters to Phillips in the spring of 1931. He described his recent work and then set himself up as the antithesis of the Spanish painter:

> [Some of the paintings] are based on the idea of incorporating several compositions in one. For instance—composition of objects; compositions of form and design independent of composition of objects; composition of color independent of the two previous ones, and composition of substance or mattiere [*sic*] independent of the three preceding. Some objects are presented simultaneusly [*sic*] in vertical and horizontal position and in some third position. It has challenge [*sic*] to all established laws. This all I say to stress the difference between my paintings and Picasso's.

Graham went on to liken the inevitable comparisons between himself and Picasso to the last century's assessment of Manet and Cézanne.

> Outside of slight superficial resemblance they are mutually opposed to each other, while Picasso's painting is analytical mine is synthetic; while his, from emotional manipulations slides into an intellectual statement, mine starts out with an intellectual concept, and accumulates emotional values on the way to its realization. My painting is neither better nor worse, it is entirely different than his. It is the same story as with Cezanne [*sic*]—his contemporary critics called him the immitator [*sic*] of Manet (of all people): "the ape of Manet," and now every school boy sees that there is no similarity even between Cezanne and Manet. Goethe said: "we see what we know." Contemporaries do not know and they do not see the difference, but twenty-five years from now, some clear-thinking critic will write that Graham and Picasso were two mutually opposed forces and then the people will know and will not see any similarity between us two. It is our ideas that count and not their ouward [*sic*] manifestation and one who can read ideas in symbols of paint will be amazed at their opposition. One more thing that separates us is that Picasso is still a romantic, sentimentalist (even in his most daring, weird and abstract things) of the soft Victorian era, while I am all of our iron age, am all of steel.[93]

Although Phillips was no longer providing regular financial support, he continued to advocate for Graham, and the artist was grateful. Graham closed his letter with a compliment:

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[93] John D. Graham, New York, to Duncan Phillips, Washington, D.C., May 13, 1931, The Phillips Collection Papers, AAA, Microfilm reel 1941, frame 109.

> I hear much praise of you, mostly in artists' quarters—as the only collector in America that is neither crank nor speculator, the only collector who wants to buy quality and not names; and the only man who writes scholarly and poetically about art in America.[94]

In his own mind, then, though perhaps in no one else's, Graham was the equal of Picasso and Graham set himself in opposition to him. For every move on Picasso's part, there was a response from Graham, and with this Graham hoped to finally best his competitor. Picasso is mentioned by name some thirty times in *System and Dialectics of Art*, and Graham's attitude toward Picasso's work is a strong subtext in the book, perhaps even a motive for writing it in the first place. For American artists, even more than for artists in Europe, Picasso's presence loomed large, and anyone writing about contemporary art had to take him into account.

Phillips must have responded to Graham's letter with interest, for the artist wrote again on the topic of Picasso:

> When I spoke about Picasso's method of work I was not sure it would interest you, now, I would like to make it clearer. According to his own words and Jean Coctau's [*sic*] article, Picasso starts on the canvas without any preconceived idea, he just paints and if there presents itself an opening he slides into the situation. When the canvas is covered with a maze of lines and patches he can see in that maze a certain design or composition running through, obvious here and there, interrupting itself, running into wrong tracks, reverting itself, etc. and with his power of vision, he digs it out with a simple gesture like an expert jeweler [who] out of a heap of gems picks out masterly the best diamond.[95]

The image of Picasso's canvas as a "maze of lines and patches" calls to mind one of his illustrations for Balzac's "Chef d'œuvre inconnu"; "The Unknown Masterpiece"

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[94] Ibid.

[95] John D. Graham, New York, to Duncan Phillips, Washington, D.C., May 23, 1931, The Phillips Collection Papers, AAA, Microfilm reel 1941, frame 250.

(Fig. 4.5). In 1926, Picasso was commissioned by the art dealer Ambroise Vollard to illustrate a special collector's edition of the story, which was published in Paris in 1931.[96] Graham knew this volume, and he refers to it in *System and Dialectics of Art* as an "example of perfect illustration."[97] (There was a copy of the volume in Frank Crowninshield's library, which Graham would have known.[98]) Whether Graham's reference to the "maze of lines and patches" was based on having seen the etching in Paris before its publication or simply his own projection of how the image emerged is not clear, but his intuition is correct.

Balzac's story has gained celebrity as the years have passed. It is the tale of the painter Frenhofer, a man of genius who has spent his whole life trying to make the perfect painting. He tells two younger painters, including the young Poussin, who come to his studio: "The aim of art is not to copy nature but to express it. You are not a servile copyist but a poet! . . . otherwise a sculptor might make a plaster cast of a living woman and save himself all further trouble."[99] The younger artists resolve to bring a beautiful young woman to pose as a model for him, and Frenhofer works feverishly for days.

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[96] William Rubin, ed., *Pablo Picasso: A Retrospective* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1980), 277.

[97] *SDA* (1937), 108–109. This is in response to question No. 24: "What is illustration? *Illustration in its best form is a parallel pictorial speculation on the romance of the text.* Essentially it is a subsidiary art. There have been illustrators of great understanding and recreative ability. Example: G. Doré, Wroubel [Vrubel]."

[98] Crowninshield in fact owned two copies; they were auctioned as lots 604 and 604A in the 1943 Parke-Bernet sale of his collection of *livres d'artistes* (see footnote 36). Both lots were annotated as follows: "With 13 full-page original etchings, and 67 designs engraved on wood of works of Pablo Picasso. . . one of 305 copies. A superb example of bookmaking and probably Picasso's greatest achievement as an etcher and illustrator."

[99] Honoré de Balzac, *The Unknown Masterpiece (Le Chef d'œuvre inconnu) and other stories*, Ellen Marriage, trans. (London: J. M. Dent & Co.; Philadelphia: The Gebbie Publishing Co., Ltd., 1896), 7.

When the "masterpiece" is finally revealed, they see only a maze of lines. Poussin exclaims: "I can see nothing there but confused masses of colour and a multitude of fantastical lines that go to make a dead wall of paint."[100] The next day the two find that Frenhofer has burned all his paintings and died. Cézanne, Picasso, and other artists identified with the older artist and his struggle, and sensed in the tale a profound metaphor for the creative process and the artist's anxiety and doubt.

In his letter to Phillips, Graham further describes Picasso:

> He works emotionally. If there is any planning done, it is done subconsciously, which he admits, and, as I said, as Jean Coctau [*sic*] writes about. It does not detract from his greatness, for he is by far the greatest painter of our generation. Leger [*sic*], Arp, Mondrian are more up to date, more modern but he is greater than all of them taken together, though he is the last vestige of romanticism. His influence is enormous, and his influence cannot be escaped as he could not escape the influence of his predecessors. All painting after Leonardo was chronologically after Leonardo; all painting after Cezanne [*sic*] was chronologically after and could not be before. Everybody was influenced by Cezanne, including Picasso. Artists who denounce Cezanne are influenced by Cezanne, artists that never have heard of Cezanne are influenced by him, academicians, commercial artists, everybody who came after Cezanne to some extend [*sic*] at least. All painting after Picasso is *after* and cannot be before, such is the law of time. We all use the discoveries of the past as we all use brushes and canvas. We use the painters of the past as we use paint, so much per tube, so much per magazine reproduction.[101]

Graham reaches this conclusion:

> May be [*sic*] all I say here is not very interesting, but at least I made my point clear. My own way of working is to have a set idea, a posed problem which I attempt to solve. Each painting is a different problem posed and solved. I set myself an aim and I march to it, if on my way different little beauties creep in, different charms try to seduce me –I brush them aside and keep on at my original aim. Picasso's method is Latin, indolent, rich, Meditarenean [*sic*],—mine is Nordic, more austere, clearer. His spirit is a mixture of Spanish Christian martyr

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[100] Ibid., 29.

[101] John D. Graham, New York, to Duncan Phillips, Washington, D.C., May 23, 1931, The Phillips Collection Papers, AAA, Microfilm reel 1941, frame 250.

> and medieval demoniac, mine is closer to Russian conception of Christianity, which many people think is the only conception of Christianity (Russian—Christ bearing people) with all its striving for martyrdom and sorrow-worship, Dostoyevsky's Christianity with frantic quest for God.[102]

Of fifteen illustrations in the original *System and Dialectics of Art*, five were of Picasso works.[103] By the time Graham wrote the article "Primitive Art and Picasso" in 1937, he was no less under his sway. "No artist," Graham observed,

> ever had greater vision or insight into the origins of plastic forms and their ultimate logical destination than Picasso. . . . Other artists observed the beautiful prehistoric painting and primitive sculpture, but Picasso alone graphically penetrated and brought out the real meaning of this art. He delved into the deepest recesses of the Unconscious, where lies a full record of all past racial wisdom. The primitive artists, on the road to the elucidation of their plastic problems, similarly reached deep into their primordial memories. All Picasso's work from 1927 on discloses the most profound insight into the problems of space and matter, into the origins of forms and their ultimate, logical destination.[104]

Graham was not the only artist who looked to Picasso in this period[105] but Graham is the only one to depict himself in equal terms.

The Steps to Publication

Graham alluded to his need for help typing the manuscript at the end of a letter to Phillips in October 1934. This was resolved in late 1934 or early 1935, when, during a

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[102] Ibid.

[103] *SDA* (1937), 8.

[104] John Graham, "Primitive Art and Picasso," *Magazine of Art*, Volume 20 No. 4, April 1937. 239.

[105] Michael FitzGerald's recent catalogue and exhibition, *Picasso and American Art*, gives a thorough chronicle of these influences, particularly on the work of Gorky, de Kooning, and Pollock. Graham would in fact repudiate his admiration for Picasso in an invective written in the mid-1940s.

visit to Frank Crowninshield's Condé Nast offices, Graham met Constance Wellman, a receptionist. They married in January 1936,[106] and her intelligence and estimable secretarial skills would prove invaluable to Graham over the next several years.[107] It is due in no small part to her assistance that the manuscript was readied for publication.

The couple spent much of 1936 in Paris and this is undoubtedly where the manuscript was prepared and arrangements for its publication were made.
The publishers were Jacques Povolozky[108] in Paris and Delphic Studios in New York. It has been erroneously recorded that Katherine Dreier published *System and Dialectics of Art* "through her [Dreier's] press, Delphic Studios."[109] Delphic Studios, a gallery founded by Alma Reed in New York in the early 1930s, also functioned as a publishing house. The gallery name most likely came from a patroness of Mrs. Reed's, Eva Sikelianos, the former Evalina Palmer, whose husband, the poet Angelos Sikelianos, founded the modern Delphic movement that sought to "reestablish a centre of world culture in Delphi."[110]

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[106] *The New York Times*, January 7, 1936, 26. The headline read "Constance Wellman is Married to Artist/Adopted Daughter of Prominent Attorney Wed to John Graham in Municipal Chapel Here." The article described the bride as the former "Constance Warde, [who] has passed most of her life in Europe. She attended the Stella Viae School in Rome and was presented to society here in 1931." The article noted that this was "Graham's fourth marriage, his previous marriages having ended in divorce" and that Graham and his wife planned to "divide their time between this country and Europe."

[107] The painter Jacob Kainen recalled that Wellman later moved to Washington, D.C., where he lived, and worked for the Voice of America. "She spoke a beautiful English. A very forceful woman." Jacob Kainen, interview by Avis Berman for the AAA, August 10–September 22, 1982. http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/oral histories/kainen82.htm. Accessed July, 2006.

[108] Erroneously cited in Allentuck's introduction as Povolsky, *SDA* (1971), ix.

[109] Anne Edgerton, "John D. Graham 1886–1961," Ph.D. diss., University of California, Santa Barbara, 1984. Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI Press, 134. The misconception probably stems from a letter that Dreier sent to Graham in July 1936. She had reviewed the manuscript for *SDA* and welcomed its publication; she feared any comments she made might be coming too late. As will be seen, she used the phrase "as one publishes more books," and Edgerton took this to mean that Dreier was responsible for the publication.

[110] "Seeks Funds to Aid Greek Renaissance," *The New York Times,* May 8, 1928, 16.

Reed was a fervent promoter of the art of Mexico, including contemporary artists José Clemente Orozco and Diego Rivera as well as pre-Columbian art.[111] She and Dreier had become acquainted at least by the early 1930s, when Reed was sponsoring Orozco in the United States.[112] "When you write to Orozco, please remember me to him," Dreier told Reed in 1932. "And someday I hope that we can spend an evening together—maybe before I sail—should he be back by then."[113] Archival photographs show a gathering in Reed's Delphic Studios with Orozco in attendance (Figs. 4.6 and 4.7).

In 1936, Reed asked for Dreier's advice about publishing *System and Dialectics of Art.* "Monday 20th would be fine for the meeting with Mr. Graham here, at the house," Dreier replied. "I shall read the manuscript meanwhile."[114] Despite their exchange of letters in 1929 (see Chapter Three), Graham and Dreier seem to have never actually met, at least not beyond a casual introduction. The meeting that Reed arranged went well, and

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[111] This is doubtless the reason that, of the meager fifteen illustrations included in *SDA* (1937), two were of Orozco murals, though the artist is mentioned nowhere in Graham's text.

[112] Orozco's early reception was not as heralded as Rivera's. As revealed in a series of letters written to the French-born Mexican muralist Jean Charlot in 1928, Orozco felt he was constantly (negatively) compared with the other Mexican muralist Rivera, or, as he referred to him, "Diego Riveritch Romanoff." Jean Charlot, "Orozco in New York: Based on His Letters to the Author," *College Art Journal*, 19, no. 1 (Autumn 1959), 48. By September of 1928, Orozco had made the acquaintance of Reed and Sikelianos and was on more solid ground. He wrote enthusiastically from New York to Charlot in Mexico City about a function he had attended: "Indians from Greece shall be introduced to civilization. Same as in Mexico, the same worn-out cliché. . . . Their serapes are just like ours. . . . All of that will happen in Delphi, plus Olympic Games, and for a finale, a play, Prometheus. Thus plans an aged lady, an American millionaires, wed to the poet Sikelianos. . . . A beautiful woman, Miss Alma Reed, is active in the goings-on. She admires me and bought one of the tragic drawings." Charlot, 51.

[113] Katherine S. Dreier, New York, to Alma Reed, Delphic Studios, New York, September 7, 1932, Katherine S. Dreier Papers / Société Anonyme Archive, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke, Box 10, Folder 290.

[114] Katherine S. Dreier, New York, to Alma Reed, Delphic Studios, New York, April 7, 1936, Katherine S. Dreier Papers / Société Anonyme Archive, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke, Box 10, Folder 290.

a firm friendship between Graham and Dreier was established.[115] Two weeks later Graham was writing to her from Paris:

> Just a line to tell you how much I appreciate your kindness. Wanted to write on the boat but the general ambiance of the place is not conducive to collecting one's thoughts. Red [*sic*] part of your remarkable book "Western Art and the New Era." Some marvelous daring thoughts in it. Will speak later more comprehensively about your book. If anyone would ask me to characterize Katherine S. Dreier in one word, I would say: "Fearless" with all that the word implies. To be fearless is the privilege of the few, especially to be fearless in spiritual and not physical way.
>
> We have a warm recollection of our last meeting.
>
> Our best to you/Affectionately/ John & Co[nstance]
>
> P.S. Why have you not taken that other drawing of mine? In the excitement of our discussion I forgot to offer it to you again. Anyhow you are welcome to any of my drawings, past and future/ Graham[116]

In June, Reed wrote to Dreier with some concerns about the publication, but she ultimately decided to proceed. "I have just received another letter from Graham with all the printing details connected with his book. I have decided to go ahead with it, as I am assured that the copyright matter can be adjusted upon the payment of ten dollars, and that the duty would not be prohibitive. I thought you would like to hear this nice news."[117]

Evidently Graham was himself arranging for the printing with Povolozky at the Imprimerie Crozatier in Paris. Povolozky, a Russian émigré, was active in art publishing and in translations of Russian material. Graham's introduction to him may have come

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[115] Constance, who was a part of the meeting, played an important role in Graham's relationship with Dreier.

[116] John Graham, Paris to Katherine S. Dreier, New York, June 6, 1936, Katherine S. Dreier Papers / Société Anonyme Archive, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke, Box 15, Folder 423.

[117] Alma Reed, Delphic Studios, New York, to Katherine S. Dreier, New York, June 6, 1936, Katherine S. Dreier Papers / Société Anonyme Archive, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke, Box 10, Folder 290.

through General Anton Denikin, who was in command of forces in the Crimea when Graham rejoined the Russian army in 1919 and set out with his wife Vera for Sebastopol.[118] After the revolution, Denikin lived in Paris, and Povolozky published his memoir, *Ocheri ruskoi smuty,* in 1926.[119] Povolozky also ran a commercial gallery with his name (Fig. 4.8), and later another, La Cible. He was well known for his art publications, including Walter Pach's *Raymond Duchamp-Villon, sculpteur 1876–1918* (1924) and Gino Severini's *Du cubisme au classicisme* (1921).

By early July 1936, Dreier had formulated her thoughts on Graham's manuscript. She wrote to him with some advice:

> I am awfully glad the book is appearing—but I did want to make a few suggestions which may now be entirely too late—but if not think them over before accepting or rejecting them.
>
> As one publishes more books one becomes more conscious of the Public which is of such importance, for one becomes conscious that one sometimes blocks one's message through being too sparing with words and throwing a bomb without going into sufficient reasoning [about] why one has the right to throw it.[120]

Dreier hit on what she sensed might be the incendiary nature of the book and pointed out the very different character of their projects. She was a proselytizer, always thinking of how best to persuade "the public." Graham was speaking to a very discrete audience: those whom he hoped to equip for their exchanges in the art world, most especially fellow artists. Dreier found him

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[118] As mentioned in Chapter One, Vera's uncle was commander of the Russian fleet in the Black Sea and they had gone down to the Crimea in an effort to improve their circumstances.

[119] Published in English as *The Career of a Tsarist Officer* by the University of Minnesota Press in 1975.

[120] Katherine S. Dreier, New York, to John Graham, Paris, July 7, 1936, Katherine S. Dreier Papers / Société Anonyme Archive, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke, Box 15, Folder 423.

> making assertions which would be quite proper if you went into greater detail but which will confuse—in my judgment—many a mind who wants to know and appreciates what you have to give.
>
> And so I would not give names as examples—as for instance—calling Manet a talent. I know what you mean but unless you can explain in detail you will block others from listening to you [for] to whom you have a very important message.[121]

Dreier was bristling at the passing reference to Manet in Graham's response to question 11, "What is a genius, a talent, a virtuoso, a craftsman, an erudite, a specialist?"

> A talent is a man possessing an intuitive ability to attack and solve problems *better* that others. Example: Manet and Tchaikovski.[122]

She was probably no more pleased with the reference to Oswald Spengler, whose *Decline of the West* she had recommended to the New School Library:

> An erudite is a man of fine understanding and taste but without creative ability. Example: Anatole France and Spengler. The mind of a genius is of an intensive nature while that of erudite is of the extensive.[123]

And thus, she counseled Graham, "I would not give any examples—but let your definition stand and sink in—planting it like a seed. . . . In my judgment it will strengthen your book."[124]

One wonders what Dreier made of Graham's response to the query "What is genius?" in *System and Dialectics of Art*. Perhaps she thought this sounded a bit like Graham himself. "Genius," he said, "devours ideas, space, time, paint, canvas, paper,

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[121] Ibid.

[122] *SDA* (1937), 18.

[123] Ibid., 19.

[124] Katherine S. Dreier, New York, to John Graham, Paris, July 7, 1936, Katherine S. Dreier Papers / Société Anonyme Archive, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke, Box 15, Folder 423.

women, wine, etc. Fire burning in him scorches everything in his vicinity—wife, children, friends, animals, objects. Examples: Aristotel [*sic*], Gogol, Dostoyevski."[125]

By midsummer 1936, the manuscript would have been in final form. Graham's method of discourse by example was fundamental to his concept of the book, so it is no wonder that he did not take Dreier's advice on this point. Numerous examples can be found in the text.

Question 37 asks, "Why is modern art inacceptable [*sic*] to many people?" The response tells us:

> Goethe expressed this idea when he said: "People *see* what they *know*." They do now see the thing until they know it to be seen.
> Sky was never seen as blue by humanity until an artist came and painted it blue in his painting or poem.[126]

Dreier's reaction was direct on this. There was, she said, always

> the danger of being dependent upon translations. Take what you say about Goethe. The reaction to a mind like mine is that you could not have read him in German and that you were reacting to what had been given out at school—not what you had read yourself and studied. Goethe opened the door to Modern Art to me through his metamorphose of the plant and his symbolic flowers which he created. There is a famous scene where he shows one of these to Schiller—creating it with his pen. To Schiller it was only an idea not an experience. It is this quality of Goethe which the German people understood and valued and which lifts him out of his Time. That is why—with all its faults I value [John] Dewey's book so much—for through his title he gives Art its rightful place—Art as Experience.

This may be Dreier's Teutonic chauvinism coming to the fore, but she was evidently not pleased with Graham's cursory treatment of Goethe.

As she suspected, her advice came too late to be heeded:

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[125] *SDA* (1937), 17.

[126] Ibid., 37–39.

> This letter may come far too late to be of any value. But if it is in time—think over what I have written. I place it at your disposal because I value so truly your contribution. There is one more suggestion that I would like to make and that is—is it not possible to divide the book into four sections? I think it would be easier to handle mentally. It may be just a notion.[127]

This was sound editorial advice, and one would agree that some signposts throughout the book would have helped. But perhaps this is not what Graham had in mind. Perhaps he wanted the momentum of the questions and answers to propel the reader right through to the end—without any breathing space. The energy of the text can sustain a quick reading.

Reception of *System and Dialectics of Art*

There is frustratingly little to uncover about the reception of Graham's work. It was dismissed by the academic community, and over the head of the casual reader. Graham's main audience was artists themselves, some of whom were skeptical. Jacob Kainen recalled that he gave Graham his frank reaction to the text: he felt that it had very little chance of being published or seriously considered.

> [Graham] came to my studio with the manuscript. He said, "Tell me what you think." But when I read it, I said, "This is impossible. You'll never find a publisher." Such violent judgments. I was used to a more reasonable tone. . . . It is quite terrific, but the title—System and Dialectics—it's not grammatical. "System of Art" I can understand. I can understand dialectics. He said, "Well, that's the way I see it," and he didn't budge. . . .
>
> It was so much of a piece. I wanted to say that condensation is splendid, but you don't explain your terms. It was a little arbitrary to say the least. He has all the background . . . and if someone else did it . . . it would lack that kind of boiled-down quality. And that very arbitrariness made it more provocative. But I thought it couldn't be published.[128]

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[127] Katherine S. Dreier, New York, to John Graham, Paris, July 7, 1936, Katherine S. Dreier Papers / Société Anonyme Archive, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke, Box 15, Folder 423.

The painter and writer Nathaniel Pousette-Dart published a substantive piece on the book in his short-lived journal, *Art and Artists of Today*. Under "Art Books Reviewed" in the September–October 1937 issue, he titled the review "A Tract That Should Have Been a Bible."

> The book that Mr. Graham has written [is] not content . . . with trying to settle every question in the field of art. [He] also tries his hand at laying out a chart for many other things in life, and the surprising thing is that he has done a very unusual, if biased, job. This is the most stimulating book that has appeared since Ozenfant, in his lordly way, wrote his exciting exposition of life and art.

Pousette-Dart found Graham's espousal of two-dimensional art as the only valid form to be blatantly prejudicial.

> This book could have been really great if Mr. Graham had written about all art without prejudice. Instead, he writes about one kind of art: two-dimensional, abstract functional art. . . . I strongly disagree with Mr. Graham's assumption that the only great art is two-dimensional. . . . Organization of all the aesthetic elements is the most important thing in a work of art and it is ridiculous to try to limit great art to that confined to two-dimensions.

Pousette-Dart had the last word and closed the review with a particularly incendiary comparison. Thomas Craven epitomized the anti-modernist voice in art criticism and being lumped in with him, however cursorily, would have been disturbing for Graham.

> First, we have Thomas Craven throwing a gigantic fit about abstract modern French art; and now, we have Graham, in a similar manner, harping on another string—two dimensional art. They are both right and they are both wrong, because great art cannot be limited to one form of expression. Art may be two-dimensional, three-dimensional or four-dimensional.

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[128] Jacob Kainen, interview by Avis Berman for AAA, August 10 and September 22, 1982. http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/oral histories/transcripts/kainen82.htm. Accessed February 3, 2006.

> Both Craven and Graham are fine, courageous fellows—they make us think and feel—but we cannot let anyone go uncensored who tries to lay down the law and tell us that there is only one kind of art.[129]

Jackson Pollock had a copy of *System and Dialectics of Art* among his books in Springs,[130] and many other artists, including Lee Krasner and Willem de Kooning, found much to engage their interest. In the end, artists responded most intensely to the book. Graham named names when he responded to the question "What is American Art?" and noted these "Young outstanding American painters: Matulka, Avery, Stuart Davis, Max Weber, David Smith, W. Kooning [*sic*], Edgar Levy, Boardman Robinson, S. Shane and a few others. Some are just as good and some are better than the leading artist of the same generation in Europe."[131]

* * * * *

Coda

In September 1940, John Graham opened a gallery space in his apartment at 54 Greenwich Avenue in Manhattan (Fig. 4.8A).[132] The first show at his Primitive Arts Gallery was of African art, featuring, as one reviewer described it, Graham's "own

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[129] Nathaniel Pousette-Dart, "A Tract That Should Have Been A Bible," *Art and Artists of Today,* September–October 1937, 14, 16. A full-page advertisement for the book in this issue (Fig. 4.15) suggests a (not surprising) link between editorial and economic concerns.

[130] Author's conversation with Helen Harrison, Director, Pollock-Krasner House and Study Center, East Hampton, New York, February 2007. Apparently the copy was given away by his wife, Lee Krasner, after Pollock's death.

[131] *SDA* (1937), 75–76.

[132] E. Green, 142.

collection reinforced with examples from the collection of Frank Crowninshield and supplemented by a group of paintings by Mr. Graham—canvases in which the primitive spirit is adapted to the medium. Various parts of Africa and of Oceania, including Easter Island, are represented among the figures and masks."[133] Graham announced that his next exhibition would be *Abstract and Semi-Abstract Painting by French and American Painters*, but there is no record this actually took place.[134] A little over a year later, in January 1942, he arranged for the exhibition *French and American Painters* to open in the galleries at McMillen, Inc., a decorating firm headed by Eleanor McMillen Brown, at 148 East Fifty-fifth Street. Graham's introduction to Mrs. Brown doubtlessly came through Crowninshield, whose own impeccable Social Register connections would have connected him to the Upper East Side business. The McMillen exhibition space was often used to display antique interior furnishings (*XVIII and XIX Century Crystal Mirrors* in 1936; *Painted Italian Furniture of the XVIII Century* in 1937), but there were frequent art shows as well. A 1941 exhibition that assembled "work by Negro artists of today" and "primitive African sculpture from the Crowninshield Collection"[135] may well have been the brainchild of Graham.

French and American Painters was notable not only for its gathering of works from Europe and the United States, but also for the mix of established artists and younger unknowns, some of whom were being exhibited for the first time. There were works by

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[133] "Three Galleries Offer Exhibitions," *The New York Times*, September 25, 1940, 37.

[134] Green, 142.

[135] "A Reviewer's Notebook," *The New York Times*, October 19, 1941, X10. "Among the contemporary American painters represented are Charles Sebree, Romery [*sic*] Bearden, John Carlis, Eldzier Cortor, William Carter, Frank Neal and Buford [*sic*] and Joseph Delaney. Some of the artists have college degrees yet earn their living in such occupations as janitor, elevator operator and domestic."

Bonnard, Braque, de Chirico, Derain, Matisse, Modigliani, Picasso, Rouault, and Segonzac, and David Burliuk, Graham himself, Nicholas Vasilieff, Stuart Davis, and Walt Kuhn. This was the first "real" exhibition for Jackson Pollock, Lee Krasner,[136] and one William Kooning.[137] Other young American artists included Pat Collins, Virginia Diaz, and H. Leavitt Purdy.[138]

Graham made it his business to see what younger artists were doing, and he received enormous energy from these contacts. A postcard from Graham to a young Lee Krasner (kept by the artist; see Fig. 4.8) mentioned the exhibition he was planning:

> Dear Lenore:
> I am arranging at an uptown gallery a show of French and American paintings with excellent publicity etc. I have Braque, Picasso, Derain, Segonzac, S. Davis and others. I want to have your last large painting.[139] I will stop at your place Friday afternoon with the manager of the gallery. Telephone me if you can. Ever, Graham.[140]

The exhibition brought about the meeting of Krasner and Pollock for the first time. In a later interview, Krasner verified that it was Graham who first really acknowledged Pollock. "John Graham was the first to mention Jackson Pollock as one of

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[136] Krasner was then known as Lenore.

[137] Stevens and Swan, 141–142. "In 1937—perhaps inspired by Gorky and Graham—de Kooning dropped the "de" from his name. Willem de Kooning suddenly became William Kooning in letters and in the references of some friends (including John Graham's spelling of his name in *System and Dialectics*). . . But the change in name did not last for long—at most a year or two."

[138] Virginia ("Nini") Diaz was de Kooning's girlfriend in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Her *Portrait of Bill* and *Portrait of Rudy* [Burckhardt] date from the period de Kooning and Burckhardt were neighbors on West Twenty-third Street. Graham had known de Kooning since 1927, when the latter visited the Dudensing Galleries exhibition and introduced himself to Graham. Diaz also worked as a vaudeville tightrope walker. Stevens and Swan, 73.

[139] See Fig. 4.10. Also Fig. 4.10A, from the same series, shows the palette that she was using. A sketch of Krasner by Graham from this time also survives. See Fig. 4.9.

[140] John Graham, postcard to "Lenore Krassner [*sic*]." The Pollock-Krasner Foundation.

the greatest painters America has produced, and he called it at a time when the name of Jackson Pollock was barely known. [Graham] fully acknowledged him. And said so to anyone who cared to listen."[141] As noted in Chapter Three, Pollock may have looked Graham up after reading the 1937 article "Primitive Art and Picasso." Nicholas Carone, a young painter friend of Pollock's, recalled what he had heard of the meeting:

> Jackson told me, "I went to see Graham because I thought he knew something about art and I had to know him. I knocked on his door, told him I had read his article and that he knew. He looked at me a long time, then just said, 'Come in.'"[142]

The Pollock work that Graham selected for the exhibition, *Birth* (c. 1941; Fig. 4.11), exhibits many resonances with the Eskimo mask that Graham used as an illustration for his 1937 article (Fig. 4.12). Pollock received his first art review for this work from James Lane in *ARTnews*; Lane found that "Pollack [*sic*] resembles [William Stanley] Hayter in general whirling figures, while [H. Leavitt] Purdy is more restful. But a tight-rope walker, Virginia Diaz, walks off with the show in a brace of thoughtful little canvasses [*sic*]."[143]

A review in *Art Digest* found much to admire in the exhibition:

> Further proof that all kinds of works, as long as they are good examples, mix well together is offered by McMillen, Inc., New York, where a combined show of French and American painters is in progress. . . . Most of the Americans, however, have French leanings, or, being primitives, have a naïve approach often typical of the School of Paris. John Graham fits in well between Picasso and Rouault, while Walt Kuhn's fresh bouquet of pink roses is harmoniously compared with an early and surprisingly naturalistic pink rose still life by Picasso.

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[141] Lee Krasner, interview by Barbara Rose for AAA, July 31, 1966. http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/oral histories/transcripts/krasner66.htm. Accessed August 12, 2006.

[142] Nicholas Carone interviewed by Jeffrey Potter in Jeffrey Potter, *To a Violent Grave: An Oral Biography of Jackson Pollock* (New York: Pushcart, 1985), 56.

[143] *ARTnews*, 40, no. 19 (January 15–31, 1942), 29.

> Other surprises are also found for, with the exception of Kuhn, Graham, Burliuk and Stuart Davis, the American section is given over to unknown painters who haven't shown before.[144]

A pamphlet was produced for the show and included the names of the artists and the titles of the works. If the *Art Digest* reviewer's comment about Graham fitting in can be taken literally, then the order of the checklist may well represent the hanging order of the show since Graham's *Portrait* is listed after Picasso's *Portrait of Dora Maar* and before Rouault's work.[145]

When de Kooning was asked some years later about the exhibition, he had vivid memories. "It was a very little show—not outstanding. The critics liked it and were sympathetic so it was written up nicely. The Americans looked very good." When asked if he thought Graham discovered Pollock, de Kooning responded emphatically: "Of course he did. Who the hell picked him out? The other critics came later—much later. Graham was a painter as well as a critic. It was hard for other artists to see what Pollock was doing—their work was so different from his."[146]

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[144] "Congenial Company," *Art Digest*, 16, no. 8 (January 15, 1942), 15.

[145] *Exhibition of French and American Painters*, McMillen, Inc., 1942. The artists and paintings are listed as follows [all errors and inconsistencies are in the original]: 1. John Graham, *Still Life*; 2. William Kooning, *Memories of a Poet*; 3. H. Leavitt Purdy, *Le Cagnard*; 4. Nicholas Vasilieff, *Landscape*; 5. Pablo Picasso, *Portrait of Dora Mare*; 6. John Graham, *Portrait*; 7. Georges Rouault, *Pierrot à la collerette*; 8. David Burliuk, *Blue Rider*; 9. Amadeo Modigliani, *Portrait of Madame Zborowska*; 10. Dunoyer de Segonzac, *The Garden Table*; 11. Lenore Krassner, *Abstraction*; 12. Henri Matisse, *La jeune femme en rose*; 13. Stuart Davis, *Autumn Landscape*; 14. Dunoyer de Segonzac, *Nude with Umbrella*; 15. H. Leavitt Purdy, *Solitaire*; 16. Virginia Diaz, *Portrait of Rudy*; 17. Virginia Diaz, *Portrait of Bill*; 18. Georges Braque, *Still Life*; 19. Jackson Pollock, *Birth*; 20. Nicholas Vasilieff, *Girl in White*; 21. Pablo Picasso, *Femme au fauteuil, deux profiles*; 22. Pat Collins, *Life—Its Substance and Fantasy*; 23. Pablo Picasso, *Roses*; 24. Walt Kuhn, *Pink Roses on Black Background*; 25. Pierre Bonnard, *Large Interior*; 26. Andre Derain, *Bust of a Woman*; 27. Giorgio de Chirico, *Trojan Warriors*; 28. Stuart Davis, *Arch Hotel*.

[146] James T. Valliere, "De Kooning on Pollock: An Interview with James T. Valliere," *Partisan Review*, Fall 1967, 603.

In a recollection of their friendship, Dorothy Dehner aptly described how Graham came to be, in those first decades, such an important member of the artistic community:

> Russian born and bred though he was, Graham had an amazing capacity for fitting himself into what must have been an environment totally alien to the life he had led in Russia. He was completely at home in New York, Paris, or anywhere else he chose to go. Unlike [Pavel] Tchelitchew, who came from a similar aristocratic Russian background and who chose as associates the rich, the elegant, and the fashionable, Graham gravitated instinctively to the artists rather than the patrons, to the creators rather than the appreciators.[147]

His own path would diverge and his later paintings, replete with allegory and allusion, have become the work for which he is best known. The year 1942 proved to be a pivotal one. Graham produced a series of paintings of soldiers that were strongly reminiscent of Mikhail Larionov's 1909–1911 depictions of the same subject (See Figs. 4.16–4.19). Graham may have been looking back at the Russian Neo-Primitives as a way of reenergizing his own floundering style; it is, perhaps, not surprising that he would have seized on this moment in his history when he first became aware of what it meant to be a modern artist.

In the twenties, the notion of "experiment" was key to the discourse. The Matisses and Picassos Graham saw in the Cone sisters' apartment in Baltimore would have been greeted as old friends; his prior encounter with those artists in the houses of the Moscow merchant-princes no doubt accelerated his own early artistic probings. By the time he met Davis and Gorky, Graham, the self-styled American artist, knew the workings of the Parisian art world as well as he knew that of New York. His engagement with African art in the 1930s was another strategy for participating in the modernist discourse. Gertrude Stein wrote that Matisse was affected by African Art "more in his imagination than in his

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[147] *SDA* (1971), xv.

vision. Picasso more in his vision than in his imagination."[148] In his art and in the dissemination of ideas, Graham responded to both the expressive and the formal qualities he found in African art.

The McMillen show in many ways summed up the first two decades of Graham's artistic career. His commitment to American art, and his belief in its parity with what was being produced in Paris, was validated and established, setting the stage for the efflorescence of American art that began in the 1940s and 1950s. And it was in this crucial role in American art in the 1920s and 1930s, when the quest was for a new art and one that would be distinctly American, that he made his greatest contribution.

[148] Gertrude Stein, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (New York: Vintage Books, 1960), 78. Quoted in Ellen C. Oppler, *Fauvism Reexamined*, (New York: Garland Publishing, 1976), 158.

Appendix A

"Sources Consulted"

The original list of "Sources Consulted" was an alphabetical list of eighty-five names included as an appendix to *System and Dialectics of Art* (1937), beginning on page 152. The names are given here exactly as they appeared in Graham's text, with his spelling errors and inconsistencies throughout.

Anissinoff

Apollinaire

Aristotel

Arp, Hans

Bandinelli

Basler

Bauman

Clive Bell

Breton

Carré, Louis

Cocteau

Crevel, R.

Davidson, Morris

S. Davis

T. van Doesburg

Delacroix

K. Dreier

C. Einstein

S. M. Einstein

Eluard

de la Faille

Elie Faure

S. Freud

Leo Frobenius

Fry, R.

Buckmister Fuller

Fuhrmann

Gauguin

Waldemar George

Gleizes

Goethe

Grabar

H. Grimm

Grohmann

Vincent Huidobro

Ingres

Jung

Kant

Kiesler

Kjersmeier

Koechlin

Kuhn

Lavachery

Leger

Leonardo

Lessing

Loucomski

Lübcke

Luschan, F. von

Marinatos

Mayakovski

Metzinger

Meier-Graefe

Mondrian

Hans Mühlenstein

Dr. Opitz

Ozenfant

Picasso

D. Phillips

Plato

Plechanov

Otto Rank

Max Raphael

Maurice Raynal

G. Rodenwaldt

André Salmon

Alfred Salmony

F. Sarré

Schopenhauer

O. Schürer

Seller-Sachs

de la Serna

John Sloan

Philippe Soupault

Eckart von Sydow

Thode

W. Uhde

Vasari

Ernst Vatter

W. F. Volbach

Max Weber

Wilenski

W. H. Wright

John Xceron

Christian Zervos and others

Appendix B

The following list re-presents John Graham's "Sources Consulted" with the names arranged alphabetically within categories devised by the dissertation author. The names are given here exactly as they appeared in Graham's original *SDA* (1937) text, with spelling errors and inconsistencies throughout.

Architects

Buckmister Fuller
Kiesler

Art Critics

Basler
Clive Bell
Cocteau
Fry, R.
Waldemar George
Lessing
Meier-Graefe
D. Phillips
Maurice Raynal
André Salmon
Wilenski
W. H. Wright
Christian Zervos

Art Historians

Anissinoff
Bandinelli
de la Faille
C. Einstein
Elie Faure
Fuhrmann
H. Grimm
Grohmann
Kjersmeier
Kuhn
Lavachery
Loukomski

Lübcke
Hans Mühlenstein
Plechanov
Max Raphael
Maurice Raynal
G. Rodenwaldt
Alfred Salmony
F. Sarré
Oskar Schürer
Eckart von Sydow
Thode
Vasari
Ernst Vatter
W. F. Volbach

Artists

Arp, Hans
Davidson, Morris
S. Davis
Delacroix
T. Doesburg
K. Dreier
Gauguin
Gleizes
Grabar
Ingres
Léger
Leonardo
Metzinger
Mondrian
Ozenfant
Picasso
John Sloan
John Xceron
Max Weber

Dealers/Collectors

Carré, Louis
Wilhelm Uhde

Ethnologists/Archaeologists

Bauman
Leo Frobenius
Luschan, F. von
Marinatos

Filmmakers

S. M. Eisenstein

Philosophers

Aristotle
Kant
Plato
Schopenhauer

Poets

Apollinaire
Breton
Cocteau
Eluard
Vicente Huidobro
Mayakovski
Philippe Soupault

Psychologists/Psychiatrists

S. Freud
Jung
Otto Rank

Writers

Crevel, R.
de la Serna
Goethe

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—Dorothy Dehner Papers
—Adolph Gottlieb interview by Dorothy Seckler
—John Graham Papers
—Jacob Kainen interview by Avis Berman
—Lee Krasner interview by Barbara Rose
—The Phillips Collection Papers
—David Smith Papers

Art Students League, New York, N.Y.
—Student Registration Records

Baltimore Museum of Art, Baltimore, Maryland
—Dr. Claribel and Miss Etta Cone Papers, Manuscript Collection

Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut
—Katherine S. Dreier Papers / Société Anonyme Archive

Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris
—art gallery catalogue archives
—periodicals

Guggenheim Foundation, New York, N.Y.
—Archives

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, N.Y.
—Museum Archives

Museum of Modern Art Archives, Long Island City, N.Y.
—John Graham Papers

The Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.
—Museum Archives with Duncan Phillips Correspondence
—John Graham Artist File

Roerich Museum Archives, New York, N.Y.
—Museum Scrapbooks

Wells College, Aurora, New York
—College Archives

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, N.Y.
—Museum Archives
—John Graham Artist File

B. John D. Graham Published Works

Have It. (self-published, 1923)

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