

The Destroyer



Artist: Arthur Wesley Dow

Life Dates: American, 1857-1922

Date: c. 1911-1913

Location: G301

Medium: Painting | Oil on canvas

Creation Place: United States

Inscriptions: Signature LLC, in purple: [Arthur W Dow]

Physical Description: view of the Grand Canyon; purples in the foreground, oranges in background; blue and purple shades in sky

Accession Number: 2009.62

Questions and Activities:

- Compare the painting to a Japanese landscape or wood block print.
- Compare the painting to an Arts and Crafts object. Identify the common elements.
- Have any of you been to the Grand Canyon? Do you think this painting captures the appearance and/or essence of the Grand Canyon? What do you see that makes you say that?
- Based on what you see in this painting and what you know about the Grand Canyon, why do you think the painting is called *The Destroyer*?
- Is the painting realistic? Abstract?
- How is it like an impressionist painting? How is it different?

- How does Dow's style in this painting compare with the styles of [other artists/works seen on the tour]?

Key Points:

Historical Background

- During the early years of the twentieth century, at the same time the United States was emerging as an important world economic and political power, it also became central to the international art scene, with New York usurping the preeminent role previously played by Paris.
- At the beginning of the century, many American painters continued to work in a style influenced by French Impressionism.
- By the nineteen-teens, greater realism prevailed in the work of the Ashcan School artists. The industrial and urban landscape that emerged in twentieth-century North America was captured by many artists.
- During the early decades of the twentieth century, American artists also became more interested in organic and geometric abstraction, and begin to embrace modernism.

The Artist / Biography

- 1857: Arthur Wesley Dow, an American painter, printmaker, photographer and teacher, was born on April 6 in Ipswich, Massachusetts.
- 1881: He studied art with Anna K. Freeland in Worcester, Massachusetts.
- 1882: Dow studied art with James M. Stone in Boston, where he met Frank Duveneck, who became a life-long friend.
- 1884: After saving for years, Dow was able to travel to Paris to study at the Académie Julian under Gustave Boulanger and Jules LeFèbvre. His fellow students included John Henry Twachtman and Theodore Wendel. He spent summers painting in Brittany, where he met Paul Gauguin and Emile Bernard.
- 1889: Dow's painting, *Au Soir*, won an honorable mention at the Universal Exhibition and two of his paintings were accepted that year for the Paris Salon and were hung on the line, i.e. at eye level.
- 1889: The artist returned permanently to Ipswich.
- 1891: Dow met Ernest Fenelosa, the curatorial director of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, and discovered Japanese woodcuts. He also taught in Boston and opened the Ipswich Summer school, which ran until 1907.
- 1893: He married Minnie Pearson, a fellow art student. He became Assistant Curator of Japanese Art at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston the same year.
- 1895: He had the first show of his color woodcuts in the Japanese corridor of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston.
- 1895-1903: The artist taught at the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn.
- 1899: He published the handbook, *Composition*, which stressed his "trinity of power"--line, *notan* (harmonizing light and dark tones) and color.
- 1899-1903: Dow taught classes on alternate Saturdays at the Art Students League.
- 1903-04: He traveled around the world.

- 1904-22: He served as the director of the art department at the Teacher's College of Columbia University.
- 1908: Dow published the handbook, *Theory and Practice of Teaching Art*.
- 1911-12: The artist traveled and studied in the American Southwest and California with photographer Alvin Langdon Coburn.
- 1915: He was awarded a bronze medal at the Panama Pacific International Exposition in San Francisco for a group of nineteen prints.
- 1922: He died on December 13th in New York City.

The Artist's Philosophy, Ideas and Influence

- Considered simultaneously a Tonalist, a Luminist and an Impressionist (a term he loathed), Dow's painting style eludes definition but falls squarely in the center of modernism.
- The artist admired the work of Jean François Millet, Camille Corot, James McNeill Whistler and Edouard Manet, among others, but maintained a cautious approach to modernism while unintentionally pushing it forward with his radical teaching of Japanese principles in sympathy with the arts of Africa, the Aztecs and other non-Western cultures .
- He was enamored of and emulated Japanese *ukiyo-e* woodcuts by Ando Hiroshige and Katsushika Hokusai.
- He abandoned Western realism early on for the flat, simplified forms of the Japanese, combining European elements with Japanese techniques of line, form, color and *notan*, the harmonious arrangement of dark and light. For him, the most important aspect of Japanese art was its use of nature as a reference point, not as an end in itself, a total refutation of his academic training.
- By incorporating Japanese techniques with the purity of design of the arts and crafts movement, Dow single-handedly changed the method of teaching art in America.
- One critic commented that he "transmuted the art of Japanese woodcuts into his own lyrical expression: unpeopled, near-abstract landscapes of stylized forms subtly infused with color".
- The critic Sadakichi Hartmann remarked on Dow's close adherence to the Asian ideal: "Look at his discriminative construction of lines, angles and spaces, his firm but exceedingly simple technique, the bold selection of harmonious colors, the blending of flat tints, the willful emptiness and lack of depth in parts, that is all Japanese."
- Over his many years of teaching, he inspired a distinguished roster of students including Max Weber, Georgia O'Keefe, Gertrude Kasebier, Alvin Langdon Coburn and Adelaide Alsop Robineau, among many others.
 - Georgia O'Keefe made a point of acknowledging Dow's influence as a teacher on her own early artistic development: "This man had a dominating idea: to fill a space in a beautiful way--and that interested me. After all, everyone has to do just this--make choices--in his daily life, even when only buying a cup and saucer. By this time, I had a technique for handling oil and water color easily; Dow gave me something to do with it."
 - Max Weber observed, "He wasn't a teacher on the pictorial side of art, of space art, flat space art, but a great teacher of design, the pattern, the two dimensional, as manifested in the greatest examples of the Far Eastern art."

The Painting

- Dow's first trip to the Grand Canyon in the winter of 1911-12 marked a turning point in his painting style. He wanted to paint "some of the big things of the world," to find a natural motif so grand that its very physical essence would overwhelm the aesthetic tenets of modern art on their own grounds.
- The exhibition of Dow's seventeen Grand Canyon paintings at the Montross Gallery in April 1913, immediately followed the closing of the historic Armory Show . The artist wanted to distinguish his paintings from the works displayed in the Armory Show, remarking that the optical distortions portrayed in his Grand Canyon paintings were a natural consequence of the physical environment itself and were "normal" and healthy, not "mad" as he thought contemporary cubist, fauvist and expressionist art to be.
- In an essay written for the Montross exhibition, Dow wrote:

You ask what attracted me to the Grand Canyon so far from my New England marshes. Color first of all--color 'burning bright' or smoldering under ash-greys. Then, line-- for the color lies in rhythmic ranges, pile on pile, a geologic Babylon. This high, thin air is iridescent from cosmic dust: shapes and shadows seen in these vast distances and fearful deeps, are now blue, now vibrating with spectral hues. at sunset the "temples" are flaming, re orange--glorified like the Egyptian god in his sanctuary.

The Canyon's color and line cannot be well-expressed without study of the structure, for this is neither "chaos" nor "hell" but orderly world-building ...

The Canyon is not like any other subject in color, lighting or scale of distances. It forces the artist to seek new ways of painting--its own ways. Its record of the world's beginning holds for us the romance of geology.
- In his exhibition catalogue for the exhibition, he wrote: "I wanted to seize the Grand Canyon's harmonies and these only. I hoped also to give the sense of the vastness--the immense scale of everything there. In line not unlike the classic subject of the Zen painters of China and Japan."
- He was quoted in a *New York Times* review of the show as follows:

These miles and miles of colored rock were made of silt and minute shells that settled to the bottom of the primeval ocean. A little later, a few aeons--the sea floor was lifted high in the air. Then the Great River, **the destroyer**, and builder, hewed out this terrible architecture--these semblances of amphitheatres, pylons, castles and spires. I cut down through the yellow and red limestone, scarlet and purple shales--down into the old granite bedrock. It's furious current, deep dyed--'colorado'--is still cutting but so far below that not a sound of its roar reaches the silences of the canon rim.

The Grand Canyon

- These 1900 square miles of rock architecture make up one of the most unique geological areas on the face of the earth. Rocks in the Canyon date to the Paleozoic Era (550--250 million years ago) and to the Precambrian era (2000 million years ago. There is a missing 225 million years of Grand Canyon history since Kaibab limestone was laid down, washed away by rain and carried to the delta by the Colorado River. Also missing are the 65 million years of the recent Cenozoic era; the missing records are indicated in the history of the nearby Vermillion Cliffs rock and the staircase plateaus of southern Utah, which do show these geologic features.

- The canyon itself is believed to have been created in the past five to six million years by the erosion of the Colorado River, which continues to shape the canyon today, along with rain, snowmelt, and feeder streams running through it. Though the canyon is semi-arid, the storms that do occur are sudden and violent.
- The shadings of color are due to minerals imparting tones of red, yellow, and green. Because of the limited rainfall, vegetation is scarce, leaving the rock exposed instead of covered with lush green foliage.
- The Canyon has over a million acres of land covering 1904 square miles. In river miles, it runs 277 miles beginning at Lees Ferry and ending at Grand Wash Cliffs. Its deepest point is 6,000 feet. Its elevations are from 1200 to 9100 feet.
- Mining settlements developed along the rim in the 1880s, but residents soon saw that tourism would become more profitable than mining. In 1893, it became protected as a National Forest Reserve and later as a National Monument. It received park status in 1919, three years after the National Park Service was established.
- In the early days, tourists made the trip to the Canyon by stagecoach. Then, in 1901, a railway was developed from Williams, Arizona to the South Rim. By 1905, the El Tovar Grand Hotel was built on the Canyon's edge. The area was further developed by The Fred Harvey Company, who was hired to make the Grand Canyon experience enjoyable for visitors.
- The park is home to 75 species of mammals, 24 types of lizards, 24 kinds of snakes, and 300 species of birds. The Kaibab squirrel with its white tail and tufted ears is native only to the North Rim. The pink rattlesnake is found only at lower elevations in the Canyon.

Transition:

Sources:

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