

Andrew Dasburg

Andrew Dasburg has been called the greatest draughtsman of landscape since Van Gogh. (Alfred Frankenstein, San Francisco Sunday Examiner and Chronicle, April 17, 1966).

Born in Paris on May 4, 1887, young Andrew and his widowed mother emigrated to America 1892, where Dasburg spent his childhood in the New York City neighborhood known as Hell's Kitchen. In 1902 one of his teachers, recognizing his gift for drawing, brought him to the nearby Art Students League and persuaded the school to accept him as a scholarship student. Of his instructors, Robert Henri was most inspirational to the young art student. Henri's philosophy was to battle against tradition, and to consider every direction in art and life that led to truth. He also emphasized the importance of a well-defined substructure. This concept while certainly not new, was challenging for Dasburg.

Henri encouraged him to pay particular attention to establishing a clear sense of weight and mass for the forms in his pictures. This became one of Dasburg's major aims. He believed, like Spinoza, that God proclaimed the logic of all things in the harmonies of nature. Like Einstein, whom he greatly admired, Dasburg felt that God created structures in nature in simple rather than complex formulas. These views shaped much of his art.

In 1909 Dasburg traveled to France. His experiences there would forever change his path as an artist. While in Paris he had the opportunity to visit Matisse's studio to watch him work. Dasburg vividly recalled the sight of the great master painting the early version of a group of dancers. He noted that Matisse's line had limpidity and casualness without being forced at all. This experience gave the young artist an indelible lesson in how to invest form with the vitality of life itself without resorting to details. On another occasion, Dasburg discovered in a shop window some paintings that fascinated him. In his own words, "I came upon a small gallery where, in the window, were three or four paintings by Cézanne, whose name I had heard mentioned but knew nothing of & I was immediately impressed by the great plastic reality of the paintings & I looked for a long time. I was completely imbued with what I saw - one of those things that rarely come to one but when they do, they are forever memorable."

Dasburg would be the first to say that his life as an artist can be divided neatly into two parts: before and after the day he encountered Cézanne's work in Paris in 1910. Until he discovered Cézanne, Dasburg was slowly finding his way as an artist under the guidance of provincial American mentors. Only a few months after seeing and absorbing the lessons of Cézanne, he had adjusted his style to conform to his hero's concepts of pictorial form and space. Like Picasso, who read in Cézanne's work the same message Dasburg did, the American painter felt that he could make Cézanne's art indelibly his own while retaining the master's sense of dynamism and feeling of mass and solidity.

When Dasburg returned to the U.S. in 1910 he went to Woodstock to live and work. The stimuli bombarding him at this time led him to new intellectual formulations that he was eager to spread among his colleagues. Having discovered Cézanne and Cubism, he understood at once how together they could serve as the model for the future development of his art and modern art in general. Three years later, Dasburg exhibited his paintings at the now infamous Armory Show of 1913, which is often regarded as the single most important event in the history of American contemporary art.

Dasburg was not impressed by the American works shown in the exhibit. He was however, deeply moved by the works of Cézanne, Picasso, Matisse, and Kandinsky. By the end of fall 1913 Dasburg was painting pictures that were close to pure abstraction. His flirtation with abstract art lasted for less than three years. By 1916, he had developed his mature style out of an amalgam of what he had learned about managing abstract shapes from Cubism with a strong underpinning of Cézanne. Now he returned to recognizable subjects, with nature as a starting point. Forms were simplified but recognizable and stated in geometric terms.

In 1918, Dasburg was summoned to New Mexico by his good friend Mabel Dodge. The new environment Dasburg found stimulated him immensely. Living and traveling in the dramatic mountains and valleys of the country around Taos fortified

Dasburg's resolve to give up abstract art as an expressive vehicle. Under the influence of the southwestern landscape his pictorial language ripened. The elemental majesty and power of nature became the primary focus of his artistic expression. Pure form and color were subordinated to the task of measuring the land and people of New Mexico in pictorial terms quite different from, though related to his abstract work.

Cézanne's way of painting Provence in southern France remained Dasburg's model. The path he had begun to follow in 1918 may be said to have arrived at its destination in 1926 and 1927, by which time Dasburg had reached a high level of prominence as an artist and as an exponent of modern directions in art. He painted mostly landscapes, still-life compositions, and a few portraits. Subjects were usually placed so that light raked across them, causing the shapes to stand out in relief. In this way, shadows became interesting as semi-abstract forms that complemented the fully illuminated areas. Details were abbreviated. The mosaic quality of the pictures of this period makes us especially aware of the underlying geometry.

In the 1930s he looked with fresh eyes upon the local scene and based his pictures on an interweaving of block-like forms and calligraphic lines. He began working with watercolors in 1933, a fluid medium, which allowed Dasburg to develop a new and entirely different landscape vision. The dominant forms in his new landscapes were clusters of sweeping curved lines or bent bands of watercolor pigment. During the mid-thirties Dasburg's health began to fail.

By 1927 he was diagnosed with Addison's disease, and until he began receiving a newly developed treatment in 1943, the illness brought his artistic production to a standstill. In the late 1940s and early 1950s Dasburg had a period of depression. His health was not good and he was producing very little except ink drawings. Dasburg was revitalized in the 1950s, encouraged by the sale of his works to the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Whitney Museum in New York City.

During the fifties and particularly the sixties Dasburg often used pastels. The colors in some of these pictures were dictated by the seasons. Especially strong are some bright yellow and rust red pictures done during the fall. Often Dasburg would use a sharpened charcoal stick to emphasize a linear break between two colors or two forms. The result is a flattened and condensed sense of space. Using these new materials and new ideas energized Dasburg as well as his pictures.

In 1975, at the age of eighty-eight Dasburg began a series of lithographs. Reaffirmed for Dasburg in this new medium was his subordination of nature's details to a measured pictorial experience. The prints were such a success that the following year he completed another series.

Andrew Dasburg died peacefully on August 13, 1979 at his home in Taos. He will forever be recognized in twentieth-century American art history as one who heroically carried on the battle for modernism, primarily in New York in the early years of this century. He will also be remembered as an artist of great versatility, who brought new interpretations to the New Mexico landscape that are distinctive and lasting.

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