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## ART; Miniatures That Make a Diary

By WILLIAM ZIMMER

BY 1910 Arthur Dove was referring to his paintings as abstractions. He was the first American painter to use the term, and only the Russian-born Wassily Kandinsky, whose work Dove knew, could challenge him for the title of first abstract painter in Western culture. Dove (1880-1946) is also seen as a decisive influence on the Abstract Expressionists, but for all his influence, his work itself isn't as well known as it should be.

"Reflections on Nature: Small Paintings by Arthur Dove," organized by the Wichita Art Museum and currently at the New Britain Museum of American Art, offers something of a remedy. The 28 paintings in it are miniatures, and from a distance lined up on a single wall, they don't promise to be much more than footnotes to Dove's oeuvre. But on examination they reveal themselves as concentrations of his major themes and a pretty complete lexicon of his characteristic shapes. He was always rooted in nature (an earthy brown is a favorite color), but as the series progresses there is a definite movement away from the suggestion of organic life toward what he called "clean, clear-cut" geometry.

Being a modernist in this country in the early years of this century meant that Dove, like many of his peers, had a hard-luck life. He tried to make a living as a farmer, but it seems that as his life continued, he occupied smaller and smaller plots of land with correspondingly smaller houses on them. By 1942-1943, when the paintings in the show were made, he and his wife were living on a mill pond in Centerport, N.Y., in a cabin not much bigger than Thoreau's on Walden Pond. Dove was recovering from a heart attack and suffering from Bright's disease, a kidney disorder, which meant that he could only work comfortably in the small format seen in this show. The paintings, each with the exact date of its making, form a diary, and as Inez S. Wolins, director of the Wichita Art Museum, says, they are a rare opportunity to examine an artist's cognitive process.

The exhibition at New Britain includes a time line of Dove's life and career. Until he reached his prime as a painter in the 1930's, he seems somewhat bewildered at what he had wrought when he declared himself an abstractionist (he would sometimes call his works "extractions"), but he's always firmly on the path. By the time of these small paintings, he was very fluid in his idiom. The size of the images in the exhibition averages 3 inches by 4 inches, and they are on pieces of paper about 5 inches by 7 inches. They are done mostly in oil paint, often in combination with a wax emulsion, on durable paper; a watercolor or gouache crops up occasionally. It has been known for only a few years that Dove enlarged some of these miniatures by magic lantern or projector, and that they provide the literal basis for the major paintings with geometric underpinnings that Dove painted in his few remaining years.

Dove's irrepressible pictorial inventions and eccentricities, as well as his characteristic and resounding sense of the spiritual in nature, have nothing to do with Surrealism, which was flourishing at the time. His

imagery is more in the American grain, exemplified by Albert Pinkham Ryder. Dove certainly found support and example in this direction from his close friend Georgia O'Keeffe. Her husband, Alfred Stieglitz, was his dealer and confidant.

Throughout his career Dove intuited that color could be the equivalent of sound; he shares this tendency to synesthesia with Kandinsky and it may account for the bold trumpeting of color in all of his works, including these stepping stones to the flurry of large canvases he painted in his last years, which exhibition curator Charles C. Eldridge calls "a late flowering of his talents."

The museum's recent innovation, a gallery devoted to one-person exhibitions of emerging artists, now has the paintings of Mark Strathy. They are energetic amalgams of sharply realist images derived from, and mimicking, the frantic pace of the current American scene. They make a potent contrast with the permanent installation of Thomas Hart Benton murals nearby in the museum, which are a fascinatingly disparate brew of American images from an earlier generation.

Arthur Dove's description, "clear and clean-cut," might also apply to the paintings of another artist, one who has led an entirely different life from Dove's.

Aaron Birnbaum, now 102, began to paint in 1960 after he retired from his prosperous business, the manufacture of women's sportswear. He did so out of loneliness, he says, he evidently found enchantment as an extremely adept naive painter or Outsider artist. Outsider artists usually come from the margins of society, but Mr. Birnbaum, in a show of paintings from 1960-1996 at the Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art in Ridgefield, proves that a condition of prosperity coming after humble beginnings, might also breed them.

Touchstones of Outsider art are biblical scenes, and Mr. Birnbaum has painted many of these; he also has painted groups of rabbis. But often his paintings are vignettes of daily life full of figures, and with these charmers he is a sort of Grandpa Moses.

Often a single, centered image veers toward abstraction, such as a boldly outlined ship. A trio of self-portraits is startling. He is in a trenchcoat and fedora and lighting a cigarette seemingly against the wind. This fluid painter intriguingly might see himself as a gumshoe; he certainly is an able private investigator.

"Reflections on Nature: Small Paintings by Arthur Dove" is at the New Britain Museum of American Art through Nov. 30.

The paintings of Mark Strathy are on through Nov. 9.

Paintings by Aaron Birnbaum are at the Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art through Nov. 9.