

MASTERWORKS OF  
AMERICAN PAINTING  
AT THE DE YOUNG

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## MYSTERIOUS ANCESTOR

Charles Howard garnered national and international acclaim in the 1930s and 1940s for his surrealist-inspired abstract paintings. Surrealism, originally a literary and artistic movement founded in France in the mid-1920s devoted to investigating and representing the unconscious, inspired artists on both sides of the Atlantic to take an interest in the psychoanalytical writings of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung, the latter especially popular among artists in the United States. Although Howard did not state any particular allegiance to Jung's theories of the collective unconscious, he believed that by fusing the radical content of Surrealism and time-honored methods of composing and executing paintings, he could create powerful abstractions that held a universal meaning. "I am dealing with material which is the possession of all people," he explained in an article he published in 1946, "presenting it with the fundamental anonymity of a human being on the face of the earth. I make pictures with shapes common to man anywhere, of any race, of any generation, regardless of time."<sup>1</sup>

Charles Houghton Howard (1899–1978) did not set out to become a modern painter. He grew up in Berkeley, California, where his father, a professor of architecture and architect-in-charge at the University of California, and his mother, a former art student, instilled in him and his siblings a love of literature and the visual arts.<sup>2</sup> Howard studied journalism as an undergraduate, followed by graduate course work in English. In 1924 he traveled to Europe, where he experienced a career-changing epiphany. While journeying by train from Venice to Milan, he stopped at a picturesque village to see a painting of the Madonna by the Italian Renaissance master Giorgione. Howard later recalled that Giorgione's synthesis of "the somber, analytical, philosophical approach of the Florentine painters" and the

"free, warm, romantic fervor" of the Venetians came as such a revelation that it made him "violently ill."<sup>3</sup> From that day on, Howard devoted himself to becoming a painter who, like Giorgione, brought together the two great impulses in art: the rational and the romantic.

In 1926 Howard moved to New York City, where he lived for seven years before moving to London in 1933 with his wife, the English painter Madge Knight.<sup>4</sup> During the 1930s his abstract paintings were praised by critics, art dealers, and museum curators, and his works were included in a number of important exhibitions on both sides of the Atlantic.<sup>5</sup> With a war being fought in Europe, in 1940 he and Knight moved back to the United States, settling in San Francisco, where they were welcomed into a vibrant art scene that, at least according to one contemporary, surpassed that of New York.<sup>6</sup> In 1946, after the war ended, the couple returned to England and eventually moved to Italy.

*The Progenitors* (1947) is a painting of biomorphic and spiky forms rendered in a flat, hard-edged style. Looking very closely, one sees a primitive life form silhouetted against the work's steely blue ground and surrounded by jagged shards of light and shadow. A purple-and-black insectile head, sprouting black ribbonlike antennae and kinky black feelers, appears at the top center of the painting. This head rests atop a thin neck composed of a pair of calligraphic black lines that descend, swell, and separate to become the two halves of a skeletal torso. Bladelike shoulders, connected internally by three irregularly shaped ribs, narrow to form a wasp waist. Below, red-and-white propeller or insect wing shapes balloon out to reveal a puckered orifice, its opening crisscrossed by twisted filaments forming a filter through which we see a blue void. Around the edges of the propeller/wing forms, black spiky fins line up,



97. Charles Houghton Howard (1899–1978), *The Progenitors*, 1947  
Oil on canvas, 24<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> × 34<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> in. (62 × 87.7 cm)  
Mildred Anna Williams Collection, 1948.13

their leading edges oriented toward the orifice, the focal point of the composition.

The imagery of *The Progenitors* originated in the artist's study of both nature and the man-made environment. For Howard, making a painting was a process that began with "many small drawings, automatic and otherwise. I make a lot of these drawings in my head. It isn't a question of copying, *but of remembering*."<sup>7</sup> He discovered the subjects for these drawings everywhere, but rather than focus on the obvious, Howard trained himself to pick out the minuscule and the marginal, in his words, the "waste things, the amiable objects that people throw away, the shapes left over after the fine, neat arbitrary palaces of our civilization have been made."<sup>8</sup> Thus, we can imagine that the insect imagery, the biomorphic shapes, and the orifice in *The Progenitors* came from the artist's informal but passionate interest in insect and mammalian physiology, from which he selected forms that are either so small we do not usually notice them or those that remain out of sight.<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, the cool metallic colors, the propeller shapes, the irregular beams of light, and the flat, spiky forms—which evoke the scraps of sheet metal that might litter the floor of a machine shop—may have had their origins in the shipbuilding yard where Howard worked during World War II.<sup>10</sup>

Needless to say, Howard did not represent the objects and forms in *The Progenitors* exactly as he saw them or as he remembered them. Nor did he represent them in a context remotely similar to the ones in which he must have encountered them. Instead, he was able to distill from particular objects their salient forms by pursuing a multistep process. Howard did not sit down and deliberately start a painting; rather, the idea for one came to him in the form of "a tiny spark, a flash, [or] a momentary passion" in which the many different forms he had seen and remembered coalesced into a meaningful composition.<sup>11</sup> With his composition in mind, he then made "literally hundreds" of preparatory drawings, in which "every line, shape, color, gradation is screened and caressed."<sup>12</sup> Only after he had a blueprint for the finished painting in hand did he apply paint to canvas, employing the meticulous, hard-edged style we see here. Precisely because he employed a process in which the forms he had observed in nature and the man-made world came together intuitively, and because he edited and massaged his imagery until he approved of it, did he succeed in breaking the normative associations we have with specific forms and reconfigured them within a new and, for Howard, more meaningful visual syntax.

This working method drew on surrealist techniques, yet it enabled Howard to create paintings with more universal themes than his Surrealist counterparts. One of the major objectives of Surrealism was to represent the unconscious, and European Surrealist painters sought to achieve this goal by employing a form of automatism, which often led to abstract paintings, as seen, for example, in the work of André Masson. Other painters, most famously Salvador Dalí, worked in a highly illusionistic style and represented familiar objects in unfamiliar or illogical compositions. In Howard's view, when these techniques were the sole means used to create a painting, the resulting work was "merely the presentation of illustrative notes or disparate objects in a precalculated fashion" and could, at best, only represent something that is "strange but not mysterious."<sup>13</sup> Howard made use of automatic drawings, and he represented objects found in everyday life, but unlike his European Surrealist counterparts, he subordinated and subsumed both to what he called "the natural problems of pure painting."<sup>14</sup> The result, he explained, was that "the objects (which are too abstract to be regarded as literally as objects), as such, become secondary, as I paint, and serve only as a departure. The painting itself becomes of primary importance."<sup>15</sup> In the case of *The Progenitors*, familiar objects have been abstracted and resolved into something entirely new, creating an image that does indeed appear mysterious.

Howard once stated that the title of one of his paintings was meant to be "allusive, not descriptive," and the same could be said of the title of this painting.<sup>16</sup> *Webster's Dictionary* defines a "progenitor" as "an ancestor in the direct line; a forefather" and notes that the modern word stems from the Latin *progignere*, "to beget."<sup>17</sup> The painting's title thus implies and confirms that we are seeing a primordial life form—with its insect's head, primitive skeletal frame, and finlike shoulders. The evolutionary lineage implicit in the painting's title is visualized by its birth imagery. The propeller-like blades project toward us from the dark to reveal a rudimentary birth canal through which we can see the dimensionless void of the distant past, but through which we also sense the present that has been born. Painted just two years after the United States dropped atomic bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in an effort to end World War II, at a time when traditional beliefs were called into question and existentialism was on the rise, Howard's *Progenitors* posits a new, if not ambivalent, take on an age-old subject in the history of Western art, the subject of creation itself.<sup>18</sup> [KM]

97. CHARLES HOUGHTON HOWARD, *The Progenitors*

1. Charles Howard, "What Concerns Me," *Magazine of Art* 39, no. 2 (February 1946): 64. Howard's achievement, as well as that of other American painters like him who built on the innovations of European Surrealism but did not go on to paint in an abstract expressionist style, has been generally overlooked in the prevailing narratives of twentieth-century American art. For an overview of the many American painters working in surrealist-inspired styles, see Jeffrey Weschler, *Surrealism and American Art* (Camden, N.J.: Rutgers University Art Gallery, 1977). Two recent discussions on Howard in the context of his immediate artistic peer group include Susan M. Anderson, "Journey into the Sun: California Artists and Surrealism," in *On the Edge of America: California Modernist Art, 1900–1950*, ed. Paul J. Karlstrom (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996), 181–209; and Susan M. Anderson, *Pursuit of the Marvelous: Stanley William Hayter, Charles Howard, Gordon Onslow-Ford* (Laguna Beach, Calif.: Laguna Art Museum, 1990).
2. The artistic achievements of the Howard family are chronicled in Stacey Moss, *The Howards: First Family of Bay Area Modernism* (Oakland, Calif.: The Oakland Museum, 1988). Biographical accounts of Charles Howard include *ibid.*, 52–56, 95–97; and Douglas Dreishpoon, "Some Thoughts on the Enigmatic Charles Howard," in *Charles Howard, 1899–1978: Drama of the Mind* (New York: Hirschl & Alder Galleries, 1993), 5–11. A partial biography, written at an early stage of the artist's career, is "Charles Houghton Howard," *California Art Research* 9 (1937): 40–53.
3. Howard, "What Concerns Me," 63.
4. The life and work of Madge Knight are briefly discussed in Moss, *The Howards*, 56–57, 105. While in London, Howard associated with a group of surrealist-inspired painters who called themselves Unit One. See Dreishpoon, "Some Thoughts," 6.
5. For example, *New Super Realism* (Joseph Cornell, Charles Howard, and Man Ray), Julien Levy Gallery, New York, 1931–32; *International Surrealist Exhibition*, New Burlington Galleries, London, 1936; *Americans 1942*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1942; *Abstract and Surrealist Art in the United States*, San Francisco Museum of Art, 1944; *Annual Exhibition*, Whitney Museum of American Art, 1944, 1945, 1946; *Abstract and Surreal American Art*, The Art Institute of Chicago, 1948; *Abstract Painting and Sculpture in America*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1951. For a complete list of exhibitions, see Charles Howard Group Exhibitions, in Charles Howard artist file, AAD/DEY/FAMSF.
6. See "Abstraction Wins San Francisco Honor," *Art Digest* 15 (1 January 1941): 21.
7. Howard, "What Concerns Me," 63 (emphasis added).
8. *Ibid.*
9. While living in San Francisco, Howard pursued an informal study of biology by reading books on the life sciences; see Anderson, "Journey into the Sun," 194.

10. Anderson notes Howard worked in a shipyard and was inspired by scraps of metal cast off in the ship-building process; see *ibid.*

11. Howard, "What Concerns Me," 63.

12. *Ibid.*, 63–64.

13. Charles Howard, quoted in *San Francisco News*, 4 May 1935, quoted in "Charles Houghton Howard," 48.

14. *Ibid.*

15. He concluded, "I suspect the Surrealists, such as Dali, Ernst, and Miro, would scorn me as still being a painter." See *ibid.*

16. Sidney Janis, *Abstract and Surrealist Art in America* (New York: Reynal and Hitchcock, 1944), 75. Two years earlier Howard stated, "The titles appended to these pictures are supplementary and allusive. They have no other function." See Charles Howard, in *Americans 1942*, ed. Dorothy C. Miller (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1942), 76.

17. *Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary*, 2nd ed., s.v., "progenitor."

18. In response to Howard's 1946 statement that he was "dealing with material which is in the possession of all people," Douglas MacAgy wrote, "I venture to suggest that the possessions he reveals, though they may haunt our innermost thoughts, are not ones we can name. The experience of elusiveness is not the sort that comes to an end, as the feeling of groping for a word dissolves the moment the word is discovered. Howard's form does not grope; it probes. It seems to reach into a realm of human drama where feelings have not yet been differentiated and circumscribed by a nomenclature." MacAgy, "Charles Howard," *Magazine of Art* 46, no. 4 (April 1953): 156.