

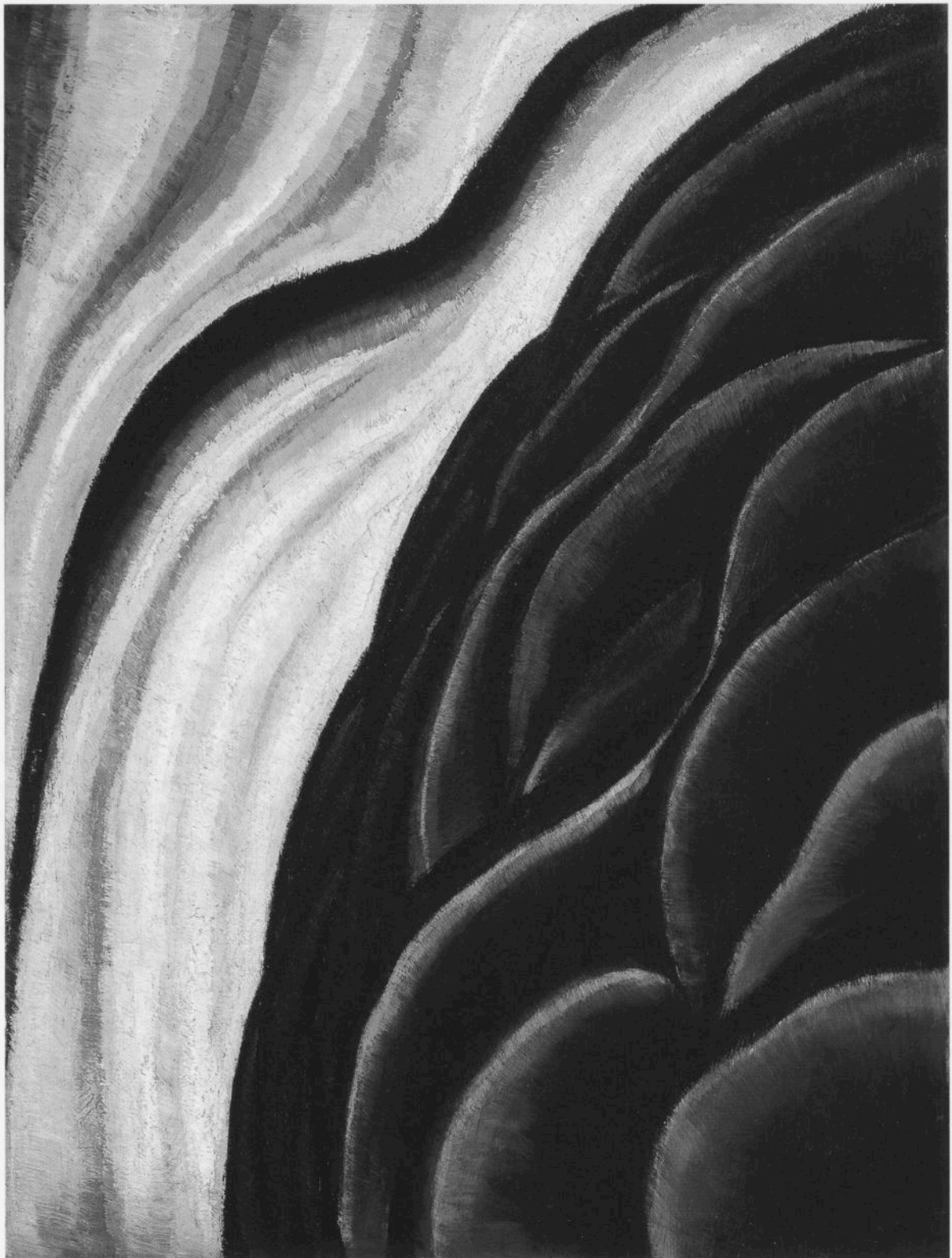
## SPIRIT OF THE SEA

When Arthur Dove arrived at the doorstep of Alfred Stieglitz's gallery in 1910 with examples of his recent work in hand, he was an artistic unknown. The thirty-year-old Dove (1880–1946) had been born and raised in an unremarkable middle-class family in western New York State.<sup>1</sup> While at Cornell University, he studied to be a lawyer, following his father's wishes, but he much preferred his art classes. As a form of compromise between the financial security of law and his passion for art, Dove settled on a career as an illustrator and after graduation moved to New York City, an important publishing center. He soon became disillusioned with the commercial nature of illustration work, however, and began to study painting in earnest. In 1908 he embarked on a yearlong trip to Europe, where he was exposed to recent trends in avant-garde painting, and it was on his return that he brought his work to Stieglitz, the well-known photographer, art dealer, and champion of American modernism. Stieglitz immediately recognized Dove's potential. He encouraged Dove to paint in a modernist style and included him in the elite group of painters he represented, eventually putting Dove in the company of such American artists as John Marin (1870–1953), Charles Demuth (1883–1935), Marsden Hartley (1877–1943), and Georgia O'Keeffe (1887–1986).

Stieglitz's importance for Dove cannot be overestimated. He was the artist's promoter, friend, and, after Dove's own father rejected him because of his choice of career, surrogate father. Stieglitz was especially important to Dove because he maintained his faith in the artist even though Dove's paintings were not strong sellers and were unpopular with most critics. As the artist once reflected: "I do not think I could have existed as a painter without that

super-encouragement and the battle he has fought day by day for twenty-five years. He is without a doubt the one who has done the most for art in America."<sup>2</sup> Still, it was clearly the originality and force of Dove's paintings that Stieglitz recognized, including *Sea Gull Motive* (1928), which Stieglitz acquired for his private art collection.

*Sea Gull Motive* was first shown publicly in New York in April 1929 at Stieglitz's the Intimate Gallery, in a one-man exhibition of Dove's recent work. On that occasion, Stieglitz produced a pamphlet listing the paintings on view and a short text, "Notes by Arthur G. Dove." As the title suggests, the text was a selection of informal notes written by the artist, their diaristic nature emphasized by the fact that month and day designations precede each entry. Throughout his life, Dove was reluctant to explain his works, but these "notes" can help us elucidate his artistic intentions.<sup>3</sup> Reading the pamphlet, we learn that "Anybody should be able to feel a certain state and express it in terms of paint or music. . . . [F]or instance, to feel the power of the ground or sea, and to play or paint it with that in mind, letting spirit hold what you do together rather than continuous objective form."<sup>4</sup> In this passage, Dove asserts that an artist should learn to represent the emotional experience of nature—he uses the word "power"—in such a way that the "spirit" of the experience structures the representation. In other words, the artist should render the raw emotional experience of nature as he actually felt it, using a personal—not academic—set of artistic conventions. Yet Dove was uninterested in pure abstraction, unlike so many early-twentieth-century artists who believed arrangements of color and line constituted a universal language. In the same "Notes" we find Dove boldly proclaiming: "THERE IS NO



82. Arthur G. Dove (1880–1946), *Sea Gull Motive (Sea Thunder or The Wave)*, 1928. Oil on wood panel, 26 × 20 in. (66 × 50.8 cm)  
Museum purchase, Richard B. Gump Trust Fund, the Museum Society Auxiliary, Museum Acquisition Fund, Peter and Kirsten Bedford, Mrs. George Hopper Fitch, Art Trust Fund, and by exchange of Foundation objects, 1990.19

SUCH THING AS ABSTRACTION.”<sup>5</sup> Thus, the artist sought to steer a middle course between academic illusionism and modernist abstraction, and instead render an emotional experience of place in an altogether new, but recognizable, formal language.

The title of this painting, *Sea Gull Motive*, is an important clue to understanding Dove’s working method and his intentions. The artist inscribed the title on the back of the painting, but when Stieglitz exhibited it, he called it *Seagull Motif*.<sup>6</sup> *Webster’s Dictionary* defines “motive” as “in art, literature, and music, a motif,” and it defines “motif” as “a main theme or subject to be elaborated on or developed” or “a repeated figure in a design.”<sup>7</sup> For Dove, motive or motif meant all of this and more. At a time when European and American modernist painters took their design vocabulary from industrial forms, Dove did the opposite and turned to nature, in part because he disliked mechanized society but also because he saw a correlation between art and nature.<sup>8</sup> In a 1913 letter he explained: “One of the principles which seemed most evident [in art] was the choice of the simple motif. This same law held in nature, a few forms and a few colors sufficed for the creation of an object.”<sup>9</sup>

For Dove, nature could be reduced to a vocabulary of simple forms and a handful of colors. Throughout his life he searched out these laws of nature and used them as the principles, which he also called “motives” or “motifs,” to compose his paintings.<sup>10</sup> That he should use the same word for the forms and colors in nature and those in his paintings can be explained through his equation of the latter with the former.<sup>11</sup> In “Notes by Arthur G. Dove,” the artist provided a more concrete example of the relationship between artistic motifs and the subject matter of his paintings when he wrote that “two or three motifs,” each consisting of specific colors and types of lines, could render the theme of “ruggedness.”<sup>12</sup> He did not elaborate what a painting whose

subject was “ruggedness” would actually look like, but his comment underscores that his paintings represent an emotion, not an illusionistic rendition of the visible world.

Arthur Dove’s *Sea Gull Motive* is thus an economical representation of the artist’s nature-induced emotions distilled into a few colors—plum, white, blue, and black—and two simple forms—rounded masses and arcing lines. Dark mounds emerge from the lower right corner of the composition and spread across the panel. Deep plum in color, their contours are illuminated so that they look like a bubbling or roiling mass. In the upper left-hand corner, alternating arcing bands of pastel blue and white flow toward the plum-colored mounds. As the light-colored bands descend toward the dark mass, they edge nearer to one another, suggesting a deep spatial recession, like that of a distant horizon. Finally, from near the lower left corner, a black, double-arc’d form stretches diagonally across this cloud-streaked “sky,” silhouetted against its wispy bands of white. Seen this way, Dove’s painting calls to mind a seagull wheeling toward the earth’s horizon. Alternatively, we could read the painting as projecting into a downward, rather than outward, space, if we see the dark mass as pushing against the white bands, which respond by spreading out like ripples on a pond. In this orientation, we are looking down on a gull as it swoops over waves that wash against a rocky shore, its “wings” echoing the shape of the waves as well as a similar double curvature of the rocks. In making a painting that can be read simultaneously in two different ways, Dove was able to move beyond rendering solid forms and instead convey the sensation of their movement. By creating a visually dynamic composition from basic forms and a limited palette, the artist depicted the profound power of nature at the ocean’s edge, where wind and water and flight come together. [KM]

so much for its ability to "create abstract evocations of music and emotional states as advocated by Fenollosa and Kandinsky. These works represent some of the most advanced abstraction of the time, through their relative simplicity and their suggestions of a type of organic vitalism." Bowman, in Lynes and Bowman, *O'Keeffe's O'Keeffes*, 17.

12. Stieglitz left his wife, Emmeline Obermeyer, in 1918 to live with O'Keeffe when she moved to New York City. Stieglitz and O'Keeffe were married on 11 December 1924.

13. Her first exhibition of paintings with bones opened at Stieglitz's An American Place on 27 December 1931.

14. Stieglitz's estate included not only his own photographs, letters, and papers but his extensive collection of more than 850 works of art and thousands of photographs. Most of his collection was given to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, which held two memorial exhibitions, one of his art collection and one of his own photographs. O'Keeffe also gifted a master set of Stieglitz's photographs (known as the key set) to the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. Montgomery, *Georgia O'Keeffe*, 16–17.

15. In 1940 O'Keeffe bought her house at Ghost Ranch, near Abiquiu, New Mexico, which had been her summer home since 1936. In 1945 she purchased in Abiquiu a ruined *casa grande*, which she restored, principally with the help of her lifelong friend Maria Chabot. Beginning in 1949, she spent the winter and spring in Abiquiu and the summer and fall at Ghost Ranch, until health required her to move to Santa Fe in 1984.

16. Over her lifetime, O'Keeffe painted more than 200 flower works, the majority of them from 1918 to 1932. See Nicholas Callaway, "Afterword," *Georgia O'Keeffe: One Hundred Flowers* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989), n.p.

17. Anna Chave has summarized this view and critiqued it in light of contemporary feminist challenges to male constructions of women. See her "O'Keeffe and the Masculine Gaze," in *Reading American Art*, ed. Marianne Doezema and Elizabeth Milroy (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 350–352.

18. Quoted in Eldredge, *Georgia O'Keeffe*, 82.

19. Statement from *Georgia O'Keeffe: Exhibition of Oils and Pastels* (New York: An American Place, 1939), n.p. Quoted in Lynes, *Georgia O'Keeffe: Catalogue Raisonné*, 2:1099.

20. Whitney Chadwick, *Women, Art, and Society*, rev. ed. (London: Thames and Hudson, 1996), 306.

21. O'Keeffe joined at the urging of her friend Anita Pollitzer. Eldredge, *Georgia O'Keeffe*, 15.

22. Barbara Buhler Lynes, *O'Keeffe, Stieglitz and the Critics, 1916–1929* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI Research Press, 1989), 135.

23. Eldredge, *Georgia O'Keeffe*, 16.

24. *Ibid.*, 15.

25. O'Keeffe's resistance in the face of her critics is discussed in Chadwick, *Women, Art, and Society*, 305–307.

*A Collective Portrait*, ed. Waldo Frank et al. (1934; New York: Aperture, 1979), 245, quoted in Debra Bricker Balken, *Arthur Dove: A Retrospective* (Andover, Mass.: Addison Gallery of American Art, 1997), 20. Dove's second wife, Helen Torr Dove, herself an accomplished artist, also played a significant role in the development of his art and career.

3. Dove once stated: "As to going further and explaining what I felt, that would be quite as stupid as to play on an instrument before deaf persons. The deaf person is simply not sensitive to sound and cannot appreciate [it]; and a person who is not sensitive to form and color as such would be quite as helpless." Arthur Dove, in Arthur Eddy Jerome, *Cubists and Post-Impressionism* (Chicago: A. C. McClurg, 1914), 41, quoted in Balken, *Dove: A Retrospective*, 22.

4. Arthur Dove, "Notes by Arthur G. Dove," *Dove Exhibition* (New York: The Intimate Gallery, 1929), n.p.

5. *Ibid.*

6. See "List of Paintings," in *ibid.* The painting has also been known by other titles. In the 1930s it was twice reproduced as *Sea Thunder*; for example, see Elizabeth McCausland, "Water Color by Arthur G. Dove Presented Museum; Life and Work of a Fine American Abstractionist," *Springfield (Mass.) Sunday Union and Republican*, 21 May 1933. In the 1980s it was entitled *The Wave*; for example, see Morgan, *Dove: Life and Work*, 151–152. It may have been retitled because it was hung sideways, as if it were a landscape; see Marc Simpson, "Arthur G. Dove's *Sea Gull Motive*," *Tryptych* 53 (November–December 1990): 18–20.

7. *Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary*, 2nd ed., s.v., "motive" and "motif."

8. Dove's dislike of mechanized culture is noted by Balken, *Dove: A Retrospective*, 17. On Dove's artistic theories, see Morgan, *Dove: Life and Work*, 73–82; and esp. Sherrye Cohn, *Arthur Dove: Nature as Symbol* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI Research Press, 1985).

9. Arthur Dove to Arthur Eddy Jerome, 1913, quoted in Cohn, *Dove: Nature as Symbol*, 12.

10. According to Dove's second wife, "when he returned [from Europe in 1908] he spent much time in the woods analyzing tree bark, flowers, butterflies, etc." Helen Torr Dove, "Notes," *Dove Papers*, AAA/S1, microfilm reel 4682, frame 63, quoted in Balken, *Dove: A Retrospective*, 20.

11. For an extended discussion of Dove's interest in nature, see Cohn, *Dove: Nature as Symbol*, 19–43.

12. Dove, "Notes," in *Dove Exhibition*.

## B2. ARTHUR G. DOVE,

### *Sea Gull Motive (Sea Thunder or The Wave)*

1. The most comprehensive biography of Arthur Dove is Ann Lee Morgan, *Arthur Dove: Life and Work, with a Catalogue Raisonné* (Newark: University of Delaware Press; London: Associated University Presses, 1984), 11–37.

2. Arthur G. Dove, "A Different One," in *America and Alfred Stieglitz:*

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