

Design Materials Used by Arthur Dove in His Late Sketches

ABSTRACT

Arthur Dove created a series of intimate yet vivid color landscape sketches late in his career, between 1942 and 1944, while living in a one-room cottage in Centerport, Long Island, as he recovered from heart surgery and illness. More than one hundred ninety of these sketches now reside in collections throughout the United States, including the Philadelphia Museum of Art (PMA), the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and the National Gallery of Art in Washington D.C.

Dove often prepared his own paints for work on canvas and kept notes in diaries on his experiments mixing and layering different binding media—oils, wax emulsion, and natural resins. The 1942–44 sketches reflect Dove’s continuing interest in design materials, but their small scale represents a departure from the larger format canvas paintings and collages for which Dove is best known. In-depth study of Dove’s diaries from this period indicates that he executed the sketches in watercolor, gouache, wax emulsion, resin-oil, and/or egg tempera, often combining different binding media to achieve rich surface effects.

Given the complexities of Dove’s paint mixtures, media identification based solely on visual characteristics and microscopic examination has proven unreliable and often inaccurate. To better understand Dove’s working methods and more securely identify the design materials in the 1942–44 sketches, four of the twenty-seven held by the Philadelphia Museum of Art were examined using instrumental analysis. Techniques utilized in this study included Fourier transform infrared microspectroscopy (MFTIR), scanning electron microscopy (SEM) with energy dispersive spectrometry (EDS), polarizing light microscopy

(PLM), stereomicroscopy, and visual examination by normal and ultraviolet illumination.

The findings confirm that Dove used a wide variety of binding media—wax, protein, resin, oil and/or gums—in the PMA sketches, often in combination within a given layer. This research suggests that, in most cases, visual examination is not adequate to definitively identify the media in the 1942–44 sketches, although the major component in a given layer may be identifiable visually using various forms of illumination and microscopic examination. Future examination of additional sketches may reveal a pattern of use in his paint preparations that is yet unclear.

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