

John D. Graham, paintings and drawings

Author

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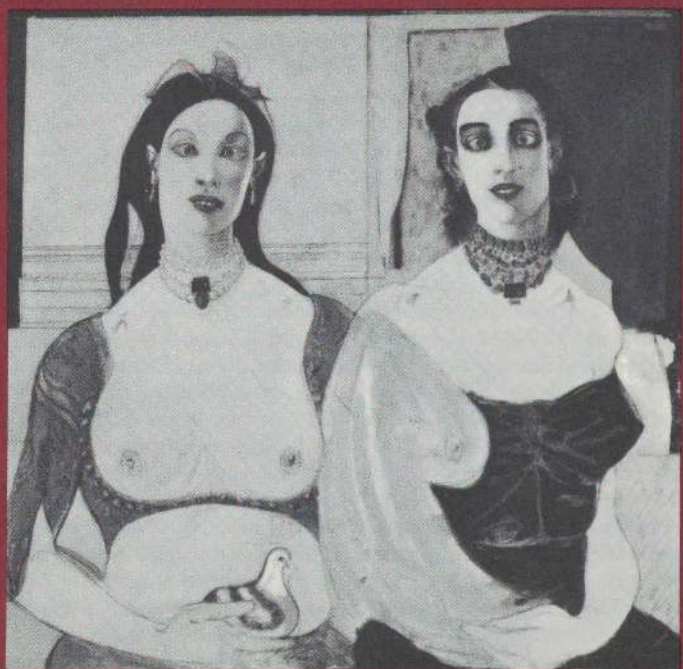
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JOHN D. GRAHAM

Paintings and Drawings

An exhibition circulated by
The Museum of Modern Art
New York



This exhibition presents a selection of paintings and drawings by John D. Graham in his unique figurative style of the 1940s and 1950s. Although Graham is not a well-known painter, there has been increasing interest in his work since his death in 1961. The unusual late painting and his complex, many-faceted personality create an enigma which cannot wholly be explained by a knowledge of his life. Graham was a connoisseur with an instinctive eye for quality and had an aggressively intellectual and obsessive turn of mind. His commitment was more to knowledge than to painting, and he left behind a small body of work. Yet he painted over a period of nearly forty years, and his late work was preceded by two stylistic periods which early in his career placed him among advanced American painters.

Born Ivan Dabrowsky in Kiev, in the Ukraine, Graham studied law and then trained as a cavalry officer, serving during World War I on the Rumanian front. Briefly imprisoned after the Revolution, he fled to Warsaw on his release and later joined the counter-revolutionaries in the Crimea. On the collapse of the resistance, he managed to obtain a passport for the United States, arriving in New York in 1920. Already in his thirties, he studied painting for the first time at the Art Students League and attracted attention to his work soon after leaving art school in 1924. During the 1930s he painted in the abstract, post-cubist manner of Picasso and was active as a collector, forming for Frank Crowninshield a collection of African art. He came to know well, and encouraged, then little-known avant-garde artists—Gorky, de Kooning, and David Smith, among others. In 1937 he published a book, *System and Dialectics of Art*, a defense of the modernist position in art.

Graham abandoned abstraction in the early 1940s for a classical style based on prototypes in Raphael, Leonardo, Poussin, and Ingres. He would startle friends by denouncing Picasso as a fraud. Paintings and drawings of Russian soldiers of about 1943 signal the change in his ideas. Consciously primitive and flatly modeled—probably done after photographs or perhaps even after sketches made during his years in the military—they recall directly scenes in his Russian past. These were followed by a group of self-portraits in the multicolored costume of a jester. In 1943 the signature "Ioannus," Latin for Ivan and John, replaced "Graham," the name he had adopted after his arrival in the United States.

By the mid-forties Graham had achieved a monumental reinterpretation of the Renaissance style in large portraits of seated women, although the broad handling of paint remained modern. Immobile and outwardly calm, the women convey in their dislocated glance a mysterious and disquieting inner state. Graham himself was not interested in the crossed eyes as an expressive device: he spoke of the staring eye as a means to anchor space to a point in the room—to create more tension. Their purpose was to make the figures more immutable, fixed, and timeless. He would say: "My paintings have more tension than Raphael, but, then, I live in a more tense age."

The structured spatial organization of these paintings changes in the portraits of the early 1950s into a flat and rhythmic balancing of concave and convex shapes. Background and figure are fused on a single plane, and strong contrasts of light and dark focus attention on the outline of face, neck, and shoulder. The figures no longer exist in a real space and have the quality of ritualistic

images. In letters Graham spoke of an admiration for Cranach, and in the stark simplicity of form the affinity can be seen.

It was probably in the early fifties that Graham devised a unique method of drawing by painting in oil on one side of tracing paper and outlining the image on the other. The garishly bright color he used shows through the reverse in a soft, even shimmer. These drawings reflect his increasing interest in occult and mystical systems. He had for years made a disciplined study of Hatha Yoga, a branch of Yoga dealing with exercise. His interest in astrology and numerology reflected the spiritualism that activated Russian intellectual life at the turn of the century. Alchemy, cabalistic thought, and black magic engrossed him during his later years, when he absorbed much of the interwoven and interbranching occult systems.

In the drawings of women astrological symbols surround the figures. Superimposed over the faces is a network of lines referring to the "golden section," a theory of proportion originating with Pythagoras, used as a compositional principle in art particularly during the Renaissance. Graham believed, however, that its proportions should be intuited rather than rigidly applied and used the system to add lines of tension to the composition. The dodecahedron from Luca Pacioli's *La Divina Proportione*, a sixteenth-century treatise on the subject, is also frequently seen. Inscriptions and signatures in Greek, Latin, and Italian multiply in these drawings. His preferred signature, "Ioannus Conte di Sangermano," was derived from the Count of Saint Germain, an eighteenth-century mystic, healer, and perhaps spy, active at the court of Louis XV. Saint Germain, and also Cagliostro, fascinated Graham, perhaps because the mystery that surrounds them makes it difficult to decide whether they were true mystics or charlatans. The swan which often is found in some part of a composition may be an image from alchemical texts, an emblem for the fusion of fixed and volatile mercury in an alchemist's retort. A remarkable group of self-portrait drawings have an iconography of their own. Between the eyes appears the symbol for the "inner eye," the Buddhist state of spiritual enlightenment. In *Apotheosis*, the heroic figure carries on his shoulders emblems of the sun and moon—in alchemical texts symbols for the soul and the spirit. The sun is the dry, airy and fiery, masculine element, and the moon the moist, earthy, female element. The spirit and soul must be fused, again as fixed and volatile mercury, to produce "gold," an inner experience of illumination. Shafts of light emanate from the head, and horns appear on the forehead in some of the self-portraits, representing both the divine and demonic aspects of man.

Because the sources from which he drew are so diverse, attempts to interpret Graham's symbols must remain speculative. However, toward the end of his life he often said that his work was not intended to be beautiful but to convey information about the occult which would be recognizable to only a few. Whatever the aims, the strongest of the works have a formal strength and eloquent expressiveness beyond any need for interpretation. E.K.

The exhibition was directed by Eila Kokkinen, Assistant Curator for Drawings, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1968. For information on Graham's ideas about his painting the author is indebted to Ronald Gorchov and Jack Mayer.



Head of a Woman, 1954. (No. 19)

Apotheosis, 1955-57



Catalog of the Exhibition

Dates in parentheses do not appear on the works. Measurements are in inches, height preceding width; sheet size is given for works on paper.

- 1 *Madame Sijou*. 1943. Oil and casein mixed with plaster, charcoal and pencil on canvas, 28 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 24 $\frac{1}{4}$. André Emmerich Gallery, New York
- 2 *Study for Sharpshooter*. 1943. Crayon and pencil on tracing paper, 24 $\frac{5}{8}$ x 19. Mr. and Mrs. John David Graham, Windermere, Florida
- 3 *Study for Soldier of Paul Regiment*. 1943. Oil and pencil on tracing paper, 24 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 18 $\frac{1}{8}$. The Joan and Lester Avnet Collection, New York
- 4 *Poussin m'instruit (Poussin Instructs Me)*. 1944. Oil, casein, charcoal and pencil on composition board, 60 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 48 $\frac{1}{8}$. Mr. and Mrs. John David Graham, Windermere, Florida
- 5 *Two Sisters*. 1944. Oil, casein, enamel, charcoal, pencil, pen and ink on composition board, 47 $\frac{7}{8}$ x 48. The Museum of Modern Art, New York, purchase, 1968
- 6 *Celia*. (c. 1944). Oil, casein, charcoal, chalk, pencil, pen and ink on composition board, 48 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 35 $\frac{3}{4}$. André Emmerich Gallery, New York
- 7 *Harlequin*. (c. 1944). Oil and pencil on canvas, 24 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 20 $\frac{3}{8}$. Harry Kahn, New York
- 8 *Study after Celia*. 1944-45. Pencil on tracing paper, 23 x 18 $\frac{7}{8}$. The Museum of Modern Art, New York, gift of Lester Francis Avnet
- 9 *Study for Two Sisters*. (c. 1944-45). Crayon, wash, pencil and brush on tracing paper, 24 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 18 $\frac{7}{8}$. Mr. and Mrs. Max Granick, New York
- 10 *Study after Seated Woman*. 1945. Chalk and pencil on tracing paper over blue-green paper, 22 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 18 $\frac{1}{4}$. Mr. and Mrs. M. Vanderwoude, Great Neck, New York
- 11 *Study for La Donna Ferita (The Wounded Woman)*. 1945. Chalk and pencil on tracing paper, 15 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 10 $\frac{3}{8}$. Mr. and Mrs. Edwin A. Bergman, Chicago
- 12 *Cheval en dressage (Horse in Training)*. (c. 1945). Oil, casein, charcoal and pencil on composition board, 72 x 48 $\frac{1}{8}$. Mrs. Hannah Fabricant Rovinsky, New York
- 13 *Fenêtre sur paysage italien (Window on an Italian Landscape)*. (c. 1945). Oil on canvas, 18 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 24 $\frac{1}{4}$. André Emmerich Gallery, New York
- 14 *Mona Anna Uxor de Adolfo Ravenato (Lady Anna, Wife of Adolfo of Ravenna)*. (c. 1950). Oil, casein, ballpoint pen, pencil, pen and ink on tracing paper, 25 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 15 $\frac{3}{4}$. Mr. and Mrs. David A. Prager, New York
- 15 *Kali Yuga*. (c. 1952). Oil, casein, chalk, ballpoint pen on cardboard, 25 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 21 $\frac{1}{4}$. André Emmerich Gallery, New York
- 16 *La Strega (The Sorceress)*. (c. 1952). Oil, casein and pencil on canvas, 24 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 20 $\frac{1}{4}$. Mr. and Mrs. Frederick R. Weisman and Mr. and Mrs. Richard L. Weisman, Los Angeles
- 17 *Figure on Horseback*. (c. 1953). Oil, watercolor, wash, ballpoint pen, pencil, chalk, pen and ink on tracing paper, 22 $\frac{3}{4}$ x 16 $\frac{1}{8}$. Mr. and Mrs. Ronald Jay Stein, New York

- 18 *Horse*. (c. 1953). Gouache, pencil, ballpoint pen, pen and ink on tracing paper, $23\frac{1}{2} \times 18\frac{7}{8}$. Mr. and Mrs. Ben Heller, New York
- 19 *Head of a Woman*. 1954. Oil, chalk, ballpoint pen, colored pencil, pencil, brush, pen and ink on tracing paper, $24 \times 18\frac{3}{4}$. Mr. and Mrs. Harris B. Steinberg, New York
- 20 *Donna Maria*. 1954. Ballpoint pen and pencil on tracing paper over black paper, $16\frac{5}{8} \times 13\frac{3}{4}$. Mrs. Muriel Bultman Francis, New Orleans
- 21 *Leda #1*. 1954. Oil, gouache, ballpoint pen, brush, pen and ink on tracing paper, $16 \times 13\frac{1}{2}$. The Museum of Modern Art, New York, John S. Newberry Fund
- 22 *Angel in Dodecahedron*. (c. 1954). Oil and chalk on canvas, $30\frac{1}{8} \times 24\frac{1}{4}$. Private collection, New York
- 23 *Head of a Woman*. (c. 1954). Oil, pencil, pen and ink on tracing paper, $16\frac{3}{4} \times 13\frac{3}{4}$. Mr. and Mrs. John David Graham, Windermere, Florida
- 24 *Woman with Clear Eyes*. (c. 1954). Casein, chalk and pencil on tracing paper, $16 \times 13\frac{1}{2}$. Mr. and Mrs. William Francis Ewald, Jr., New York
- 25 *Apotheosis*. 1955-57. Oil, pencil, pen and ink on paper, $50\frac{1}{4} \times 36\frac{1}{2}$. Mr. and Mrs. Edwin A. Bergman, Chicago
- 26 *Self-Portrait as Laureate*. (c. 1958). Oil and ballpoint pen on tracing paper, $16\frac{7}{8} \times 13\frac{7}{8}$. André Emmerich Gallery, New York
- 27 *Self-Portrait*. 1959. Oil, ballpoint pen, pen and ink on tracing paper, $17 \times 13\frac{7}{8}$. Tennessee Arts Center, Nashville

Cover: *Two Sisters*, 1944

Study after *Celia*, 1944-45

