# 58: Arthur G. Dove *Cars in a Sleet Storm* (1938)

Elizabeth Hutton Turner

Arthur G. Dove began *Cars in a Sleet Storm* in the fall of 1937 and completed it in the winter of 1938.[1] He installed and photographed it on a sixty-foot wall of his apartment along with some twenty-five other paintings finished that season, including *Motor Boat, Flour Mill,* and *Old Boat Works.* At the time Dove was living in a huge third-floor space of a commercial block built by his father near Seneca Lake in Geneva, New York, Dove's boyhood home. He had only reluctantly returned five years earlier to settle his family's estate. In April 1938, soon after finishing *Cars in a Sleet Storm,* the fifty-eight-year-old artist left Geneva for good.


The Dove Block, Geneva, New York
Photograph courtesy of the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution

The region was familiar to Alfred Stieglitz and his circle of American modernists in New York City, where Dove was known as America's first abstract artist. The story of how Dove, after his return from Paris in 1910, had gone camping in the Geneva woods, was often told around Stieglitz's American Place gallery.[2] This seminal experience had caused Dove to limit his palette and improvise with the simple shapes and earth tones that resulted in distinctively nonrepresentational works. (Stieglitz kept the small paintings at the gallery as proof positive of Dove's early conversion to abstractionism.) Dove's unflinching demand for authenticity in nature led him to abhor and for the most part abandon his lucrative career as illustrator and to work with perfect integrity as an impoverished farmer or waterman while painting as a modern artist.

Until his death in 1946, Dove continued to develop an abstract rhythmic vocabulary—rotating saw-toothed triangles, swelling circles, and soaring diamonds of color—while stimulated by a direct contact with nature. Dove himself deemed the process "not abstraction but extraction," believing the artist to be especially equipped to apprehend patterns of seen and unseen forces in the universe. This decidedly unconventional outlook was matched by an equally experimental approach to medium and method. For a time in the 1920s, Dove gave up painting altogether to work with found objects. In so doing he effectively shed the last vestiges of descriptive pictorialism and thereafter constructed compositional space with a new awareness of the relationship of shape and texture to color field and frame. By July 1933, when Dove returned to Geneva, he had reconciled with easel painting but continued to research unusual oil mixtures.

Initially Dove and his wife Helen Torr ("Reds," also a painter) set up their studios in a house without electricity or running water on farmland bordering Exchange Street just north of the Geneva city line. The physical demands of handling his father's estate—repairing, inventorying, and ultimately liquidating the highly mortgaged properties—were mitigated by the the luxury of a large studio within which to foster new ideas about painting. In 1935 he bought a copy of Max Doerner's *The Materials of the Artist* and began grinding his own colors, mixing his own medium, and preparing his own canvases. In particular he was drawn to the properties of wax emulsion and tempera to enhance the depth and vibrancy of his surfaces and colors.

Dove and his wife lived for four years in the old farmhouse before moving, in the fifth, to the large third-floor apartment near Seneca Lake where he painted *Cars in a Sleet Storm*.[3] During his years in Geneva Dove developed a seasonal rhythm of work to accommodate his restless and inductive approach. During the spring and summer, whether walking in the Loomis woods or fishing to the northwest of Holbrook's Bridge, he scouted for images to commit to watercolor. Late in the year when storms rolled in from the north these watercolors became records of what he called "a condition of light" from which to build up the color of his compositions. In the winter, snowed in on the farm, he concentrated on easel painting. In March and April there remained the physical chores of framing and packing the paintings for shipment to New York.

Having grown up fishing and hunting in and around the waterways that feed Seneca Lake, Dove knew every highway and byway and was no stranger to the elements. Visual incidents and accidents of location and weather in particular—so evident in *Cars in a Sleet Storm*—had always excited him. Checklists of Dove's annual exhibitions at Stieglitz's American Place reveal the range of his discoveries each year. For example, in *Electric Peach Orchard* (1935) the open wiry branches of spring trees march like so many telephone poles across the banded colors of Geneva's landscape. Wet and shiny foliage emerge dolphin-shaped in the midst of a composition called *Summer* (1935). *Autumn* (1935) stretches a rhythmic score of elastic bubbles and commas into a variegated panorama of ecstatic color. Such animistic portrayals defied categorization in the eyes of most reviewers, leading Elizabeth McCausland, for instance, to locate Dove somewhere near a crossroads of Mark Twain and Miró:

> *Gaity, spontaneity, big hearty jokes are in Dove's character, as they are in the American character, witness Mark Twain's jumping frog....As far as we can find out, Dove never saw a Picasso, though he has seen some reproductions. Probably he never saw many surrealist canvases, though we seem to remember that he has expressed a liking for Miró....The Mirós seen the past winter at the Pierre Matisse gallery had this vibrating color; but they did not seem to be articulated to have a skeleton under their skin of color. In this Dove there is all the madness of the best surrealist view of the world; but with a strength and vigor...that redeems the picture from decadence. A superb clairvoyance into the structure of matter and the function of light seems to operate in this painting.*[4]

Arthur G. Dove,
1880–1946
*Cars in a Sleet Storm*, 1938
Oil on canvas, 15 x 21 in.
Marion Stratton Gould Fund,
51.4


*Cars in a Sleet Storm* derives from this misunderstood aspect of Dove's imagination and humor. What Dove saw along the highway in Geneva is part poetry, part mechanomorphic fantasy. Dove's vision of three gritty awkward diamond-shaped cars with headlight- and windshield-eyes piercing the gloom came to life in his usual watercolor way, as the preparatory sketch of the finished painting demonstrates.[5] Fluid lines of gouache loop around to suggest a clutch of reptilian shapes side by side and variously head to tail.

Suffering the strains of ill health on leaving Geneva in 1938 and relocating with his wife to a deserted post office in Centerport, Long Island, Dove abandoned his playful manner and gravitated toward a cooler, cleaner geometry. That earlier aspect of his art had, after all, been close to caricature and seemingly distant from abstraction. Did he have misgivings about the work of this phase? Dove once privately confessed to Stieglitz that, in fact, "Weather shouldn't be so important to a modern painter—maybe we're still 'too human.'"[6] Nevertheless what Duncan Phillips recognized in Dove's 1938 show at An American Place (which included MAG's painting)[7] and noted with appreciation was "the bliss of a boy in his first liberties with nature's elements....[To] enjoy his art it is only necessary to have something of that first ecstasy left in one's heart and head."[8]

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