

ARTNEWS

The Eyes Have It: John Graham's Modernist Portraits Peer Out from the Parrish Museum

BY *Robert Ayers*, 06/14/17

Through July 30, in Watermill, New York



John Graham, *Nature Morte*, 1929–30, oil on canvas, 17 x 24 inches.
COURTESY MENCONI + SCHOELKOPF, NEW YORK/PRIVATE COLLECTION

Born in Kiev in 1886, John Graham was, among other things, a cavalryman in the Russian Czar's army in the First World War, a refugee from the Bolsheviks after 1917, an expert and dealer in African art, and a vital one-person link between working artists in Paris and New York in the interwar years. He wrote the legendary, influential, and often frankly delusional *System and Dialectics of Art* (published in 1937) and, according to Willem de Kooning, he was the man who discovered Jackson Pollock.

This excellent show, which was conceived, researched, and curated over the last ten years by the Parrish Art Museum's Alicia G. Longwell, documents all of that. In addition, it assembles more than 60 paintings and works on paper that present Graham as a fascinating artist on his own terms.



John Graham, *Celia*, ca. 1944, oil, casein, charcoal, chalk, pencil, pen, and ink on Masonite, 48 x 36 inches.

THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, NEW YORK, HUGO KASTOR FUND, 1968

Graham is nowadays best known for his unsettling stylized portraits of women whose eyes look in different directions, as in the Met's *Celia* and MoMA's *Two Sisters* (both 1944). These pictures are included in this show, as are more than a dozen painted in a similar vein. It's a delight to see them together.

Longwell presents a coherent account of Graham's career from as early as 1923, demonstrating his admittedly tardy but curiously eccentric obeisance to modernist Parisian art, particularly to Picasso's Cubism and his post-Cubist progression into abstraction and surrealism.

This development provides a compelling context for the later paintings of women, but, ironically, Graham's contemporaries saw the portraits as reflecting an abandonment of the modernist principles that the artist once championed. It is true that he eventually denounced Picasso as "a talented and malicious little man who can pull rabbits out of a silk hat" in a self-published pamphlet on view here, but what was seen as a cowardly volte-face has hobbled Graham's reputation ever since.

This show comes as a timely reminder that there is no reason why an artist cannot do many different things in a career. Perhaps, for that reason, it will lead to a thorough reconsideration of Graham's status. More than simply the intermediary between Picasso and Pollock, he is a pretty significant artist in his own right.