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‘John Graham: Maverick Modernist’ Review: Among His Many Roles, an Artist

Overlooked today, he was a monumental force at the center of New York’s and Paris’s midcentury avant-gardes.

By Lance Esplund
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John D. Graham's 'Interior' (c. 1928) PHOTO: COLLECTION OF MARY CRAVEN, NEW YORK

The complex history of 20th-century American art, though still being written, is often oversimplified into a trajectory that has Willem de Kooning, Jackson Pollock and company supplanting Picasso and Matisse, the European giants, and shifting the art capital from Paris to New York, where Abstract Expressionism is then dethroned by Pop Art, Neo-Dadaism and Conceptualism—the major pillars of today’s reigning postmodern academy. But this account, which ignores, for example, the legacy of the School of Paris, leaves out whole movements of art, and especially visionaries who bridged Europe and the U.S.—pushing these artists to the periphery or into oblivion. That is why exhibitions such as “John Graham: Maverick Modernist,” a splendid, refreshing retrospective at the Parrish Art Museum, are so vital.

John Graham: Maverick Modernist

Parrish Art Museum | Through July 30

Though sidelined today, John D. Graham was a monumental, influential force at the center of New York's and Paris's midcentury avant-gardes. He was primarily a painter—but also an important art adviser, dealer, collector, mentor, theoretician and curator, as well as a womanizer and raconteur—roles that often eclipse his art. (It's arguable that if not for Graham, Abstract Expressionism might not have happened.) “Maverick Modernist,” a balanced show of some 60 oil paintings, ephemera and a handful of works on paper, shifts the focus back to Graham's art.

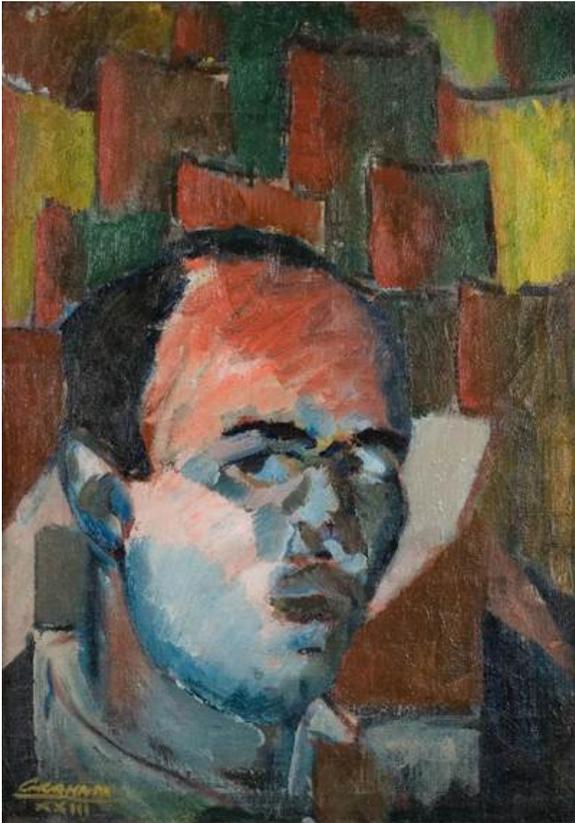
Graham (1886-1961) was born Ivan Gratianovitch Dombrowsky in Kiev, Russia (now Ukraine). After acquiring a law degree and serving in the czar's cavalry, he arrived in New York in 1920, having escaped the upheaval of the Bolshevik Revolution. Unable to find work, he enrolled at the Art Students League, where he studied with John Sloan.



Graham's “Marya (Donna Ferita; Pensive Lady)” (1944)
PHOTO: PRIVATE COLLECTION, PURCHASE, NEW YORK

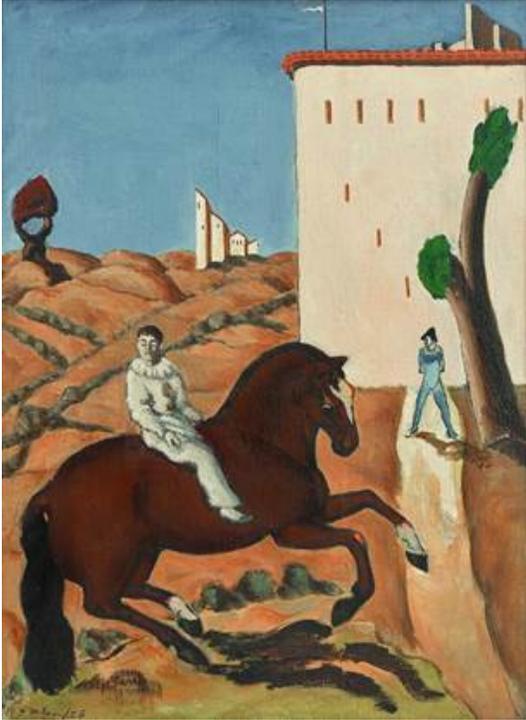
Graham befriended the Cone Sisters (early patrons of Matisse who collected Graham's work and whom he advised), Stuart Davis, Arshile Gorky and Hans Hofmann. Duncan Phillips gave him a solo show at his Collection and paid for him to live in Paris, where he conversed with Picasso and Matisse. In 1937, Graham published the groundbreaking essay “Primitive Art and Picasso” and the treatise “System and Dialectics of Art”—works that proved enormously influential. He discovered Pollock and mentored Alexander Calder, De Kooning and David Smith. In 1942, Graham curated the groundbreaking “Exhibition of French and American Painting,” a New York gallery show that put Picasso and Braque alongside Pollock and De Kooning.

Organized by Parrish chief curator Alicia G. Longwell, with art historian William C. Agee and Karen Wilkin (an independent curator and critic who frequently contributes to the Journal), “Maverick Modernist” immediately reveals a painter with American chutzpah and refined catholic tastes. Graham, who probably coined the term “minimalism,” embraced Fauvism, Cubism, Surrealism, Neoclassicism, abstraction, African primitivism and Renaissance portraiture—all of which, though not always convincingly, enter into his wide-ranging oeuvre.



Graham's 'Self-Portrait' (1923) PHOTO: COLLECTION OF JOSEPH P. CARROLL AND DR. ROBERTA CARROLL, COURTESY FORUM GALLERY, NEW YORK

The first work in the chronological show is “Self-Portrait” (1923), a boisterous oil painting combining Fauvist color and a quasi-Cubist space. Other early works, such as “Landscape With Horse” (1926) and “Interior” (1928), show the influence of Giorgio de Chirico. Others still, such as “Still Life With Saw” (1925) and “Still Life With New York Times” (1927), rely heavily on Cubists Juan Gris and Georges Braque. “Study for Ikon of the Modern Age” (1930) wavers between primitive mask and modern poster. “Red Square” (1934) recalls the flat, hard-edged trapezoids of Kazimir Malevich. Braque and especially Picasso, however, are Graham’s masters. Some pictures here remain clumsy Picasso pastiches. But Graham’s late-1920s nudes rely on, yet stand apart from, nudes by Picasso, Amedeo Modigliani and André Derain ; and the airy “Untitled (Face of a Woman; Portrait of Anni Albers)” (1939), in which a sculpturesque head stares through an acid-yellow veil, transcends mere homage to Picasso.



Graham's 'Landscape With Horse' (1926) PHOTO: COLLECTION OF JOSEPH P. CARROLL AND DR. ROBERTA CARROLL, COURTESY FORUM GALLERY, NEW YORK

In a number of monochrome still lifes, Graham employs a variety of creams and grays evocative of the close-toned gems of Giorgio Morandi, and sandy and impastoed textures reminiscent of Braque. Aligned yet standing apart is “Nature Morte” (1929-30), in which nostalgia for Greco-Roman classicism feels wrenched by Cubist space, and textures and light achieve a mysterious alchemy.

In the 1940s, Graham vehemently turned his back on Modernism, Picasso and abstraction, shifting his alliances to Neoclassicism and Renaissance figuration. But he never freed himself from Picasso, whose own earlier Rose and Neoclassical periods underpin Graham's greatest works: the elegant, enigmatic female portraits of the 1940s and '50s.

A handful of these inimitable beauties are on view at the Parrish. “Marya (Donna Ferita; Pensive Lady)” (1944) is full yet ethereal, Neoclassical yet roughened-up, as if an aristocrat by Ingres or Raphael had spent the night in a New York alley. Intrepid yet erudite, she is quintessential Graham.

—*Mr. Esplund writes about art for the Journal.*