

American Vanguards

*GRAHAM, DAVIS, GORKY, DE KOONING,
AND THEIR CIRCLE, 1927-1942*



fig. 1

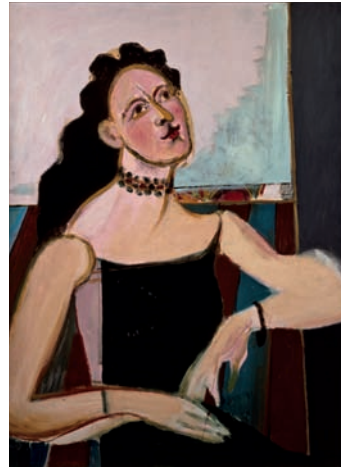


fig. 2



fig. 3



fig. 4

Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy, Andover, MA
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The Modernist Musketeers Unite

From the late 1920s until just before the advent of World War II, the United States struggled with the economic plight of the Great Depression. While this was a period of great economic and social struggle for millions of Americans, a group of forward-thinking artists dubbed the “Three Musketeers” were pushing the boundaries of America’s understanding of what painting and sculpture could be. Led by the charismatic artist **John Graham** (1886–1961), this group of artists including **Stuart Davis** (1892–1964) and **Arshile Gorky** (1904–1948), joined by **Willem de Kooning** (1904–1997) as the “d’Artagnan” alongside Dumas’ fictional heroes, inspired one another through an intellectual exchange of artwork and ideas that shaped the course of American art history. The four artists lived near one another and spent hours discussing their artwork. This tight-knit group and their larger circle of artist friends, including **Jackson Pollock**, **Lee Krasner**, **Adolph Gottlieb**, **David Smith**, **Dorothy Dehner**, **Edgar Levy**, **Alexander Calder**, and **David Burliuk**, influenced a generation of great artists.

Graham, born Ivan Gratianovich Dombrowski in Kiev, Ukraine (then Russia), escaped from the political persecution of the Bolshevik Revolution. Gorky, born Vosdanig Adoian, arrived in America in 1920, having survived the Armenian genocide, while de Kooning came to the United States from the Netherlands in 1924. Their experience as immigrants helped to solidify their friendship as they worked and studied in New York City while pursuing their interest in the visual style of the European avant garde.

Graham, the oldest and most worldly member of the group, spent time traveling in Paris during the 1920s, where he discovered the innovative artwork of Pablo Picasso, Georges Braque, Ferdinand Leger, Joan Miro, and Julio Gonzalez. Many American artists at this time had not traveled extensively in Europe, so Graham’s experiences and the copies of the French artistic and literary magazine *Cahiers d’art* he brought home opened up a new way of seeing for his younger protégées. Synthetic cubism – the painting style employed by Picasso, Braque, and Juan Gris, which broke its subjects down into flat geometric planes – inspired a new vision for form and perspective in the young American artists. While works by Graham and de Kooning (figs. 5 and 6) exemplify the sharing of ideas and inspiration that characterized this group and their work, the wire sculptures of Picasso and Gonzalez led David Smith (fig. 7) to bring his shapes to three-dimensional metal works, which echoes the forms in the work of his contemporaries.

While the American artists looked to master the abstract language of the European avant garde, they also sought to make it their own, contributing uniquely American ideas. The geometric and abstract style of their paintings reflected what Stuart Davis referred to as the contemporary experience “distinguished by flux, fragmentation, disjunction, and dynamism” and also reflected the uniquely American jazz music that often served as his inspiration.



fig. 5



fig. 6



fig. 7

American Vanguard: Graham, Davis, Gorky, de Kooning, and Their Circle, 1927-1942 connects to various learning standards in the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks.

History and Social Science: Connections to Great Depression and New Deal era programming: USII.12, USII.13, WHII.18.

English Language Arts: Multiple Speaking and Listening Standards are met through Comprehension and Collaboration.

Arts: Connections to abstraction, aesthetic languages, and artist collaboration: 6.1, 6.2, 6.3, 6.4, 6.5, 6.6, 6.7, 6.8, 7.4.

1. Sandler, Irving. “The Four Musketeers of Modernism at the Height of the Great Depression.” *American Vanguard: Graham, Davis, de Kooning and Their Circle 1927-42*. New Haven: Yale University Press. 2011. p83.

An American Perspective



fig. 8



fig. 9

John Graham and his circle adapted the language of cubism to what they saw as a specifically American characteristic: a willingness to explore new methods and experiment while looking back and learning from the work of their European predecessors.

After the end of World War I, pre-war styles of abstraction that spoke to an optimism in a modern age began to seem frivolous and unsuited for the current reality. Post-war art in Europe moved toward a clearer, more structured and defined foundation, as artists looked to old masters, to principles of time-tested composition and construction that could meet the new need for stability and clarity. For Graham and his circle in the United States, this vital, dynamic, and progressive style added new painterly vocabularies to art that could draw upon its past and say something new.

In the mid-1930s America was at the forefront of a global economic crisis, with millions of Americans out of work. Artists struggled to find employment and many used their work to speak out about social conditions and issues. Graham, Davis, Gorky, de Kooning, and many in their larger circle participated in the Federal Art Project, part of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's Works Progress Administration, giving them a renewed focus and a sense of community. Stuart Davis (fig. 8), the most politically active of the group, worked with the Artists' Union to lobby the federal government to provide aid to artists and became the national executive secretary of the First American Artists' Congress Against War and Fascism. Within their political ties, Graham and his circle maintained the importance of the aesthetic language of modernism, insisting that aesthetics transcended social issues, as evidenced by the continual impact and importance of past works of art.

By the mid-1940s, the Modernist Musketeers had gone their separate ways in artistic styles and interests. This period in American art demonstrates the unbroken chain of development and tradition that influenced the next generation of great American artists and made a powerful and indelible impact on the course of American art history.

Sample Project Ideas

For Younger Students

Modernist artists created artwork that depicted people, places, and things using a visual language of shapes, lines, color, and flattened forms that represented their understanding of the world. Choose a person, place, or thing and using collage or drawing materials, simplify it. Draw it using different shapes, lines, and forms or use paper cut-outs to recreate your choice. Then describe your subject in writing. How does the written depiction compare to the visual depiction? How do the written and visual languages compare?

For Older Students

During the Great Depression, the Works Progress Administration (WPA) employed thousands of Americans in public works projects such as constructing bridges, roads, and new buildings. The Federal Art Project branch employed artists in creating billboards, posters, murals, and teaching art at community centers. Conduct research using the internet, libraries, and local history centers to learn about WPA sponsored projects that took place in your community or a community nearby. If possible, try to visit the sites that still exist as products of the WPA. How did the project make an impact in the community? What impact could a similar undertaking have today? Share your research and ideas in an expository essay or community presentation.

Resources

Modernist American Literature

Fitzgerald, F. Scott. *The Great Gatsby*. New York: Charles Scribner and Sons, 1925.

Hemingway, Ernest. *The Sun Also Rises*. New York: Charles Scribner and Sons, 1926.

Hurston, Zora Neale. *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 1937.

Steinbeck, John. *The Grapes of Wrath*. New York: The Viking Press, 1939.

Books about Modernist Art and Artists

Agee, William, C., Irving Sandler, and Karen Wilkin. *American Vanguard: Graham, Davis, de Kooning and Their Circle 1927-42*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011.

Rosenblum, Robert. *Cubism and Twentieth Century Art*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2001.

Brommer, Gerald F. *Discovering Art History, Fourth Edition*. Worcester, MA: Davis Publications, 2006

Children's Books

Finger, Brad. *13 Modern Artists Children Shoud Know*. New York: Prestel, 2010.

Greenberg, Jan, Sandra Jordan, and Robert Andrew Parker. *Action Jackson*. New York: Roaring Book Press, 2002.

Laden, Nina. *When Pigasso met Mootisse*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1998.

Steel, Margaret, and Condy Estes. *The Art of Shapes*. Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art.

Wright, Jessica Noelani. *Come Look with Me: Exploring Modern Art*. New York: Charlesbridge Publishing, 2003.

Yenawine, Philip. *Shapes*. New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2006.

Art and History Museum Websites

Addison Gallery of American Art. www.addisongallery.org

The Museum of Modern Art. www.moma.org

The Whitney Museum of American Art. www.whitney.org

The Art Story: Modern Art Movements. www.theartstory.org

New Deal Programs: Selected Library of Congress Resources. www.loc.gov/rr/program/bib/newdeal/fap.html

Image Credits

Cover

fig.1: John Graham. (1887–1961), *The White Pipe*, 1930, Oil on canvas mounted on board, 12 1/4 × 17 in. (31.1 × 43.2 cm), Grey Art Gallery, New York University Art Collection, Gift of Dorothy Paris, 1961.

fig. 2: John Graham (1887–1961), *Portrait of a Woman Seated (Seated Woman)*, c. 1942, Oil on canvas, 48 × 35 1/2 in. (121.9 × 90.1 cm), Private collection, Brooklyn, New York.

fig. 3: Stuart Davis (1892–1964) *Radio Tubes (Still Life Radio Tube)*, 1931, 50 × 32 1/4 in. (127 × 81.92 cm), Rose Art Museum of Brandeis University, Waltham, Massachusetts, Bequest of Louis Shapiro, Boston. © Estate of Stuart Davis/Licensed by VAGA, New York.

fig. 4: Arshile Gorky (1904–1948), *Organization*, 1933–36, Oil on canvas, 50 × 59 13/16 in. (127 × 151.9 cm), National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund, 1979.13.3. © 2011 The Arshile Gorky Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

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fig. 5: John Graham (1887–1961), *Table Top Still Life with Bird*, 1929, Oil on canvas, 32 × 39 in. (81.3 × 99.1 cm), Collection of Tommy and Gill LiPuma, New York.

fig. 6: Willem de Kooning (1904–1997), *Still Life with Eggs and Potato Masher*, c. 1928–29, Oil and sand on canvas, 18 × 24 in. (45.7 × 61 cm), Collection of The Honorable and Mrs. Joseph P. Carroll, New York. © 2011 The Willem de Kooning Foundation/ Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

fig. 7: David Smith (1906–1965), *Construction on a Fulcrum*, 1936, Bronze and iron, 14 × 17 × 3 in (35.6 × 34 × 9 × 7.6 cm), Private Collection Art. © Estate of David Smith, Licensed by VAGA, New York.

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fig. 8: Stuart Davis (1892–1964), *Red Cart*, 1932 Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy Andover, Massachusetts, museum purchase.

fig. 9: Lee Krasner (1908–1984), *Composition*, 1943, Oil on linen, 30 1/8 × 24 1/4 in. (76.5 × 61.6 cm), Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C., Museum purchase made possible by Mrs. Otto L. Spaeth, David S. Purvis, and anonymous donors and through the Director's Discretionary Fund, 1987.33. © 2011 The Pollock-Krasner Foundation/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.