

# Arthur Dove (1880-1946) and Helen Torr (1886-1967)

## American Modernist Painters

In July of 1924 when Arthur Dove and Helen Torr sailed into Huntington Harbor aboard their 42-foot yawl, *Mona*, they could not have anticipated the extent to which Long Island's North Shore would inspire some of their greatest paintings. Dove, a native of Geneva, N.Y. and a Cornell graduate, had achieved early recognition in the avant-garde art world for the totally abstract paintings he had created 14 years earlier, the first by an American artist. An accomplished illustrator, Dove had spent several years farming in Westport, Conn., finding little opportunity to paint. Born in Philadelphia and trained at Drexel Institute and at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, Helen Torr met Dove in Connecticut around 1919. Recognizing kindred spirits in each other, the two artists eventually left their unhappy marriages to sail the waters of Long Island Sound together. Although they endured many periods of hardship and deprivation, they shared a commitment to making art.

Mooring their boat in Halesite, the artists remained for nine years. While their decision to move here was a pragmatic one, based upon the desire to live inexpensively in order to have greater opportunity to paint, they fell in love with the area. Dove created numerous works inspired by the harbor and its environs. Deeply committed to his search for "something new," and his desire to evolve as a painter, he painted oils and watercolors for annual solo exhibitions at the galleries of the great photographer, Alfred Stieglitz. Although the abstracted nature of Dove's paintings was difficult for the general public to appreciate, they were much admired by the American avant-garde. Stieglitz's advocacy enabled him to eke out a living, augmented during the 1920s by commissions for illustrations.



Helen Torr  
*Oyster Stakes*, 1930  
Oil on panel, 18 x 24"  
Collection of Heckscher Museum of Art, Gift of Mary Rehm

Torr (known as Reds for her auburn hair) was less fortunate. Retiring and prone to intense self-criticism, she struggled for recognition and even the opportunity to show her work. During her lifetime her paintings were exhibited on only two occasions, in a group show organized in 1927 by Georgia O'Keeffe, and in an exhibit with Dove's work in 1933.

By 1929 the artists were living year-round on the top floor of the Ketewomoke Yacht Club as winters on board ship were too uncomfortable for Reds. The couple's finances worsened with the onset of the Depression, but Dove's lyrical paintings reflect his own innate optimism, not their dire economic straits. Works from 1932-33 are among their most compelling, infused with the palette and texture of ramshackle vessels and their cargo, worn waterfront buildings, and ephemera of daily life.

At the height of the Depression, from 1933 to 1938 the couple relocated in Geneva, N.Y., to settle the Dove family's modest estate. While they disliked upstate New York, this sojourn did help to ease their precarious financial situation.

In 1938, settlement of the estate enabled Dove and Reds to move back to Long Island and to purchase their first home, a former post office and general store on Center Shore Road in Centerport. Their tiny, one-room cottage stood on locust posts at the edge of the Titus Mill Pond. Almost immediately, Dove was stricken with pneumonia; he eventually suffered a heart attack and was subsequently diagnosed with a debilitating kidney disorder. In frail health for the remainder of his days, he lived quietly, finally able to devote himself entirely to painting, and focusing on nature-based abstractions inspired by the immediate surroundings of his home. Some of the most powerful paintings of his career, including *Indian Summer*, were painted in Centerport. So that "the work" – as both referred to Dove's painting – could continue, Reds largely abandoned her own artistic endeavors to assume the role of caregiver, but a few drawings and sketches by her from this period remain. At the end of Dove's life, when he was too weak to hold a paintbrush unaided, it is said that Reds helped support his hand as, together, they made certain that "the work" could go on.

After Arthur's death in 1946, Reds became reclusive. Remaining in her cottage surrounded by her memories, she survived him by more than twenty years. She bemoaned the fact that he was only recognized after his death as a pioneer of American abstraction. After Torr died in 1967, her sister, Mary Rehm, inherited the cottage and her paintings. Instructed by Reds to throw them away, Rehm asked Eva Ingersoll Gatling, then director of the Heckscher Museum of Art, for advice. Believing the work had merit, Gatling mounted the first museum exhibition of Torr's work. Since that time, the Heckscher has continued to document and exhibit the work of both Arthur Dove and Helen Torr; a new retrospective exhibition of Reds' work opens at the Museum in early 2003 and will travel to several institutions nationwide.

In 1998 the Dove/Torr cottage was purchased by the Heckscher Museum of Art with the assistance of a New York State Historic Preservation grant and support from the Times-Mirror Corp. on behalf of *Newsday*. Placed on the New York State and National Registers of Historic Places, the property will eventually be restored to the period that Dove and Torr lived there together (1938-1946). One of only twenty historic artists' homes or studios nationwide to be accepted in 2000 into the pilot *Historic Artists' Homes and Studios Program* administered by the National Trust for Historic Preservation, the cottage was also named in January 2002 to *Save America's Treasures*, a White House Millennium Council initiative.

In keeping with more than 30 years of scholarship on their lives and art, the Heckscher Museum of Art has established the *Newsday Center for Dove/Torr Studies*. Its collections include important gifts from the artists' estates: Dove's personal art library containing his color studies and hand-written notes; his paints, painting materials, powdered pigments, palette, and examples of early and late work; and a group of 38 sketches and color studies by Torr. These materials will eventually be housed in the Dove/Torr cottage in Centerport – their artistic and spiritual home. Dr. Charles Eldredge, former director of the National Museum of American Art, writes of the site, "I can think of few properties with as singular an importance for the rich history of modern art in America."

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Arthur Dove  
*Indian Summer*, 1941  
Oil on canvas, 20 x 28"  
Collection of Heckscher Museum of Art, Museum Purchase