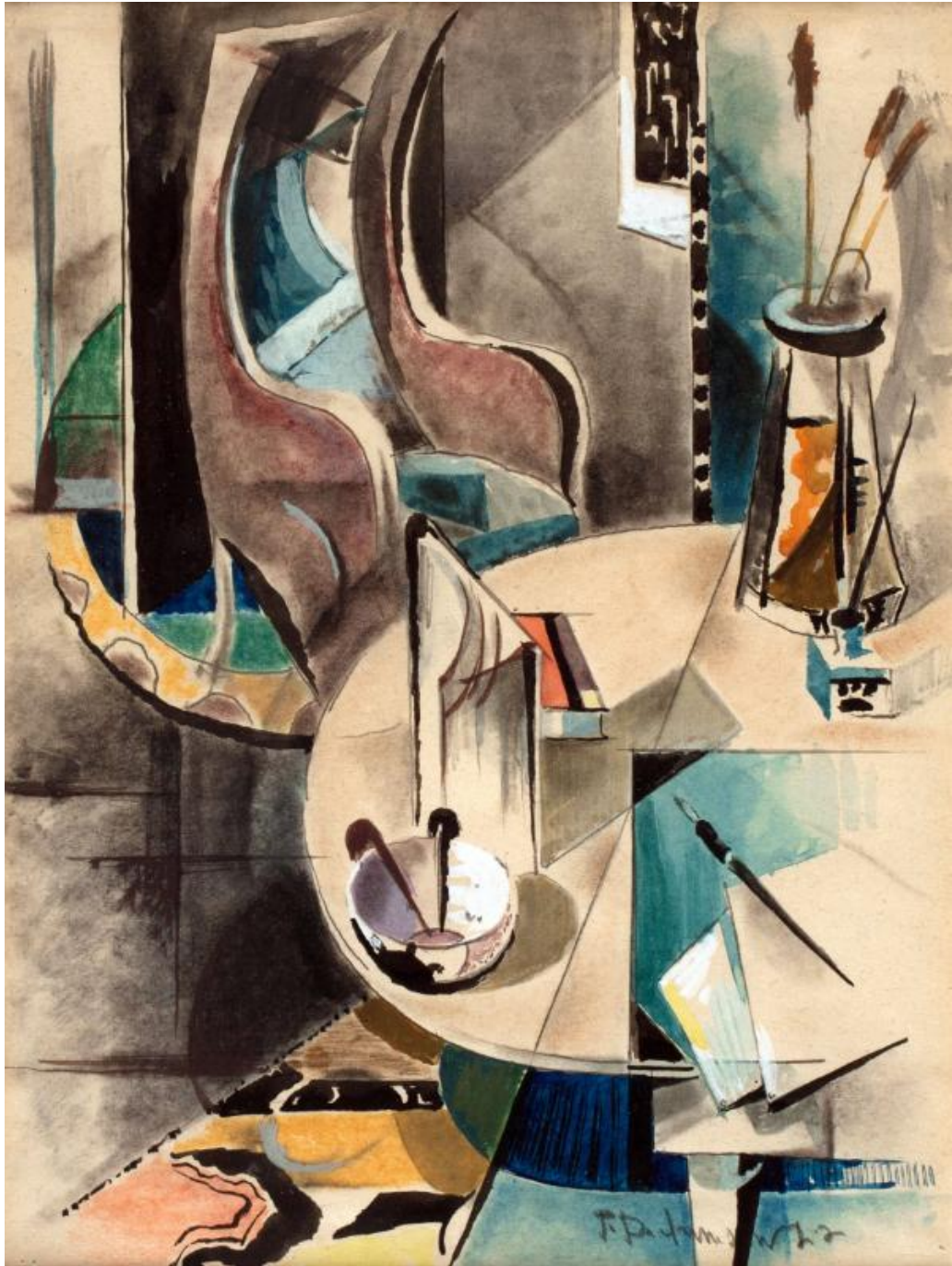


Basic Detail Report



Basic Detail Report

Title: Abstraction

Date: 1922

Primary Maker: com.gallerysystems.emuseum.core.entities.RecordXPerson@2835c

Medium: Watercolor, gouache, charcoal and graphite on paper

Description: During a period of intense exploration and experimentation in the early 1920s, Dickinson created some of his most adventurous works, such as "Abstraction". For some years Dickinson had been living with his sister Enid at her house in Valley Stream, Long Island, where she had built him a studio.¹⁽¹⁾ The interior in "Abstraction", possibly a room in the Valley Stream house, is the kind of domestic setting filled with familiar, easily arranged objects that Dickinson chose as his subject for many of his most abstract pictures during this time.²⁽²⁾ The comfortably stylish room is furnished with a matted picture on the wall, a wing chair with modernistically patterned upholstery, and what appears to be a Chinese rug. A table holds a bowl with pipes, books, a vase of cattails, an inkwell, and a blotter with pen and papers. Strong radial lines that converge on the tabletop tilt the space steeply upward toward the picture surface and impose a kind of visual logic on the multiple viewpoints within the composition. Dickinson employed faceted forms, transparent planes, and diverse light sources to further the flattening of the composition and to interrupt spatial recession. Although the analytical Cubism of Picasso and Braque was probably Dickinson's inspiration for these devices, he stopped short of employing them in a consistently Cubist manner. Rather, he adroitly arranged both abstract and realistic elements so that even the realistically rendered objects on the tabletop appear secure, despite the surface's precarious angle. In this picture, media and color become tools in Dickinson's compositional experimentation. Dickinson often inventively combined media in his works on paper. Here, the varying textures and qualities of transparency, or opacity, of pencil, gouache, watercolor, and charcoal serve to advance the dynamic interplay between reality and abstraction.³⁽³⁾ In addition, the limited tonal range of the subtle palette of ink blues, grays, peaches, yellows, browns, and blacks helps to unify the picture surface. Dickinson's highly personal drawing style is fully evident in the New Britain picture. Even in his true Precisionist works, Dickinson exhibited little interest in depicting objects with smooth surfaces devoid of extraneous detail. Instead, his lyrical sensibility delighted in small calligraphically rendered details. The cloud-band motif of the rug, the decoration on the bowl holding the pipes, and the pipes themselves all illustrate his lyrical touch. Although no images relating directly to "Abstraction" have been located, it is possible that it is preliminary sketch for another work. Dickinson's working method often involved making a series of sketches in which he developed and refined his composition. If Dickinson's development of the New Britain composition followed the same route as certain comparably abstract images from the early 1920s, the New Britain picture is less bold in its faceting and use of transparent planes than a final version of the composition would have been.⁴⁽⁴⁾ Like

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most of Dickinson's works, "Abstraction" was probably entitled by his dealer, Charles Daniel, not by the artist himself. However, as one of the most abstract and forward-looking pictures of Dickinson's career, it seems aptly named. Although this work and others like it appear only modestly abstract by today's standards, they often generated puzzled responses from critics of the period, strong evidence of just how far ahead of the taste of his time Dickinson was.⁵⁽⁵⁾ RHC Bibliography: Forbes Watson, "Preston Dickinson, The Arts 5" (May 1924): 284-88; Enid Dickinson Collins, "William Preston Dickinson," typescript, February 21, 1934, pp. 1-3, Preston Dickinson file, Smith College Museum of Art, Northampton, Mass.; Ruth Cloudman, "Preston Dickinson, 1889-1930", exhib. cat. (Lincoln, Nebr.: Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery, 1979); Richard Lee Rubinfeld, "Preston Dickinson: An American Modernist," Ph.D. diss., Ohio State University, 1985. Notes: 1. Collins, "William Preston Dickinson," p. 1. 2. Other interior still lifes showing similar experimentation with abstraction at this period include "Cubistic Interior (Abstraction)" (Georgia Museum of Art, University of Georgia, Athens); "Still Life" (1924; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York); and "Still Life with Vase of Flowers" (University Gallery, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis). 3. The media used in "Abstraction" are described in a treatment report from the Northeast Document Conservation Center, March 15, 1984, object files, NBMAA. 4. "Synphonie Domestique Americaine" (Phillips Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy, Andover, Mass.) and its oil sketch (Mead Art Museum, Amherst College, Amherst, Mass.) are good examples of movement toward greater abstraction between sketch and final work. 5. See, for example, an unsigned review of Dickinson's solo exhibition at the Daniel Gallery in 1924: "From a compositional point of view the only design that does not explain itself is one called 'Abstractions'" ("New York Times", May 4, 1924, sect. 8, p. 10). Dimensions: Sheet: 9 7/8 x 7 7/8 in. (25.1 x 20 cm)