

# Basic Detail Report



## **Title: Wounded Scoter**

Date: 1944

Primary Maker: com.gallerysystems.emuseum.core.entities.RecordXPerson@3e3c5

Medium: Watercolor and gouache on pieced rice paper on linen

Description: The oeuvre of the reclusive Graves can be broadly placed in an American tradition of romantic and visionary artists that includes Albert Pinkham Ryder, Marsden Hartley, and Jackson Pollock; more precisely, it belongs to the late 1930s and 1940s regional tradition of the Northwest School of Visionary Art that includes Mark Tobey, Kenneth Callahan, and Guy Anderson.(1) "Wounded Scoter" belongs with a number of meditative pieces created by Graves when he was living at his wilderness camp at Fildalgo during World War II. Using the bird image central to his work and a Zen-like approach to art making, he created an image characteristically marked by an elusive balance of naturalistic observation and a mystical state of mind. Whereas in his early work Graves sought to capture the spirit of the American Northwest by depicting its birds, vegetation, and primitive

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agricultural utensils using earth colors and a heavy impasto in a mildly Expressionistic style, the latent mystical dimension of his feeling for nature started to coalesce when he met Dorothy Schumacher, at the Buddhist Temple in Seattle, in 1935 and the composer John Cage in 1937. Most important for his art, however, was his meeting with Mark Tobey in 1938. While Graves never formally studied with the older, more established artist, their common bond was a Zen Buddhist approach to art stressing the meditative, which "stills the surface of the mind, and lets the inner surface bloom."<sup>(2)</sup> Inspired by Tobey, Graves began to translate Oriental philosophical ideas into a pictorial language and to use the watercolor medium favored by Tobey, making his own distinctive use of the technique of "white writing" pioneered by Tobey in the mid-1930s.<sup>(3)</sup> But while Tobey resolved the calligraphy of "white writing," symbolic of "higher states of consciousness,"<sup>(4)</sup> into the picture plane, Graves most often used "white writing" as a magical visionary habitat for now-symbolic creatures. Graves articulated his visionary goals in 1942: "I paint to evolve a changing language of symbols, a language with which to remark upon the qualities of our mysterious capacities which direct us toward ultimate reality / I paint to rest from the phenomena of the external world--to pronounce it--and to make notations of its essences with which to verify the inner eye."<sup>(5)</sup> The first works Graves produced after his World War II ordeal were the 1943 paintings "Wounded Gull" (Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.) and "Wounded Gull" (Detroit Institute of Art). Bold white calligraphic strokes in gouache over dark washes of gray and white spontaneously render "nature's simple creatures confronting life's experience and their own destruction."<sup>(6)</sup> At this juncture Graves's New York dealer and friend Marian Willard challenged the despairing artist: "The world is suffering beyond compare today. It desperately needs a new spiritual reality, in order to cast off the destructive use of science and the machine. Can you help in this?"<sup>(7)</sup> This challenge helped to precipitate one of the strongest bodies of Graves's work, of which the "Wounded Scoter" is a powerful example. The artist returned to the wilderness home he called the Rock and converted the one-room shack into a camp. He began undertaking his quest with the Journey Series, in which he made use of the image of a chalice. Graves himself explains that in the drawings "Time of Change" (1943; private collection) and Emergence (1944; private collection), he used the bird as a symbol of "searching beyond the three-dimensional experience in the extension of the journey."<sup>(8)</sup> In "Bird in the Spirit" (1943; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York), we see the bird engulfed in a spiritual light; in "In the Night" (1943; Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.), it is immersed in darkness. Sometimes the darkness is simply that of the night and nature's night sounds as Graves experienced them at the Rock. But the darkness is also that of the war. The despair that arose as the war dragged on gave rise to "War Maddened Bird Following Saint Elmo's Fire" (1944; private collection), and to two versions of "Wounded Scoter", of which the New Britain work is the first. In Wounded Scoter, one long sweeping gesture suggests the head, neck, and wing of the bird and activates the golden brown ground of the

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paper. Thus Graves set a range of visual rhythms into play. Conveying sensations of both stasis and flight, he used the short vertical of the bird's stoic balance on its webbed foot and the upward sweep of the diagonal from lower left to upper right, joining the static body to the upward thrust of the head. The diagonal of would-be flight is emphatically broken by the pink of the wounded black wing at the center of the composition. There, paradoxically, Graves generated another, even stronger sensation of flight: the beautiful but only imaginary flight of the purposeful "white writing" of feathers blown back and to the upper left of the composition. Center, symmetry, and crossing visual rhythms amplify the inscrutable paradoxes of desire and reality, of wound and vision. These forms and themes were to be repeated in the watercolor "Wounded Scoter No. 2" (1944; Cleveland Museum of Art), asserting more clearly the visionary dimension of the image. With striking formal power these works can be said to communicate moments "in the process of consciousness transforming itself to higher levels of realization or knowledge."(9) ELL Bibliography: Kenneth Rexroth, "The Visionary Painting of Morris Graves," "Perspectives USA", no. 10 (winter 1955): 58-66; Frederick S. Wight, "Morris Graves", exhib. cat. (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1956); "Morris Graves: A Retrospective", exhib. cat. (Eugene: University of Oregon Museum of Art, 1966); Ida E. Rubin, ed., "The Drawings of Morris Graves, with Comments by the Artist" (Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1974); Ray Kass, "Morris Graves: Vision of the Inner Eye", exhib. cat. (Washington, D.C.: Phillips Collection, 1983); Theodore F. Wolff, "Morris Graves: Flower Paintings" (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1994). NOTES: 1. The broadest tradition of modern mystical art in which Graves can be placed is surveyed in Maurice Tuchman, "Hidden Meanings in Abstract Art," in "The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting, 1890-1985", exhib. cat. (Los Angeles County Museum of Art: Abbeville Press, 1986), pp. 17-61, esp. p. 51. On Pacific Northwest Coast Visionary artists, see "Northwest Traditions", exhib. cat. (Seattle: Seattle Art Museum, 1978). 2. George M. Cohen, "The Bird Paintings of Morris Graves," "College Art Journal" 18 (fall 1958): 4. 3. Kass, "Morris Graves", p. 30. 4. Mark Tobey, "Mark Tobey Writes of His Painting on the Cover," "Art News" 44 (January 1-14, 1946): 22. 5. Quoted in Dorothy C. Miller, ed., "Americans 1942: Eighteen Artists from Nine States", exhib. cat. (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1942), p. 51. 6. Ibid., p. 38. 7. Marian Willard to Morris Graves, July 14, 1943, quoted in ibid., p. 39. 8. Quoted in Rubin, "Drawings of Morris Graves", p. 74. 9. Kass, "Morris Graves", p. 40.

Dimensions: 25 x 30 in.