



An American Painter In Paris:

Gerald Murphy

Dallas Museum of Art

Cover

Razor, 1924

Title Page

Villa America, c. 1924



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by Rick Stewart

Today the paintings of Gerald Murphy (1888-1964) occupy a very special place in the history of American art during the 1920s. Even though he painted for only a brief period

and produced few finished works, the surviving examples epitomize the artistic aspirations of the generation of intellectuals who came to maturity after the First World War and journeyed to Paris in order to experience its heady atmosphere of artistic freedom. Despite the fact that Murphy was older than many of his fellow expatriates, he was an active participant among a group of American artists and writers who produced some of that decade's most significant and lasting work. The eight paintings in this exhibition, which Murphy executed between 1924 and 1929, are not only outstanding examples of modern art in general, but they also effectively mirror an aesthetic that can be seen as particularly American. To his European contemporaries, Gerald Murphy was the prototypical American in Paris.

In 1930 a young American poet, Archibald MacLeish, published a collection of works titled *New Found Land*. One of the most interesting poems, titled "American Letter," was dedicated by the author to his good friend, Gerald Murphy. MacLeish, like Murphy, had traveled to Paris in order to develop his art, and to discover something about himself and his background. The poem is worth quoting at length because it articulates the particular dilemma that MacLeish felt was a part of the expatriate experience, and of his generation:

*The wind is east but the hot weather continues,
Blue and no clouds, the sound of the leaves thin,
Dry like the rustling of paper, scored across
With the slate-shrill screech of the locusts.*

The tossing of

*Pines is the low sound. In the wind's running
The wild carrots smell of the burning sun.
Why should I think of the dolphins at Capo di Mele?
Why should I see in my mind the taut sail
And the bill over St.-Tropez and your hand on the tiller?*

• • •

*How can a wise man have two countries?
How can a man have the earth and the wind and want
A land far off, alien, smelling of palm-trees
And the yellow gorse at noon in the long calms?
It is a strange thing — to be an American.*

• • •

*Neither a place it is nor a blood name.
America is West and the wind blowing.
America is a great word and the snow,
A way, a white bird, the rain falling,
A shining thing in the mind and the gull's call.
America is neither a land nor a people,
A word's shape it is, a wind's sweep —
America is alone: many together.*

*Many of one mouth, of one breath,
Dressed as one — and none brothers among them:
Only the taught speech and the aped tongue.
America is alone and the gulls calling.
It is a strange thing to be an American.
It is strange to live on the high world in the stare
Of the naked sun and the stars as our bones live.*

• • •

*This, this is our land, this is our people.
This that is neither a land nor a race. We must reap
The wind here in the grass for our soul's harvest:
Here we must eat our salt or our bones starve.
Here we must live or live only as shadows.
This is our race, we that have none, that have had
Neither the old walls nor the voices around us,
This is our land, this is our ancient ground —
The raw earth, the mixed bloods and the strangers,
The different eyes, the wind, and the heart's change.*

Gerald Murphy at Saranac, N.Y. in 1935.



*These we will not leave though the old call us.
This is our country-earth, our blood, our kind.
Here we will live our years till the earth blind us —*

*The wind blows from the east. The leaves fall.
Far off in the pines a jay rises.
The wind smells of haze and the wild ripe apples.*

I think of the masts at Cette and the sweet rain!¹

MacLeish's poem is many things, but it is predominately a thoughtful meditation on the condition of those young men and women whom Gertrude Stein first labeled the "Lost Generation." For many of them, America seemed to be a place where individuality and creativity were stifled by conformity and materialism. In the period following the First World War, this issue was hotly debated, and many young intellectuals decided to leave the country in order to seek freedom of creative expression. By the early 1920s Paris had become a center for many aspiring writers and artists, as well as a large number of professional bohemians. "The Jazz Age," so vividly evoked in the literature of the period, had begun. For Archibald MacLeish, Gerald Murphy, and many others, being Americans abroad actually intensified the sense of "Americanness" in their work. Their journals and letters reveal a common desire to evoke the country they had left behind; like the speaker in MacLeish's poem, they felt an ambivalence about being American, but also realized that it represented a special source of strength in their work. Today one may admire the poems of MacLeish or E.E. Cummings, the stories of Ernest Hemingway or F. Scott Fitzgerald, the music of Aaron Copland or Cole Porter, as well as the paintings of Gerald Murphy reproduced here, without realizing that their collective vision of the American experience was formed at a distance, in a European setting. In the end, being away from America gave these artists the ability to understand it more fully.

Gerald Murphy was destined to become one of the more legendary figures of the expatriate era. He was born in 1888 in Boston, the pampered son of a successful leather and luggage merchant. Murphy attended Hotchkiss, Andover, and college at Yale, where he was voted best-dressed man in the Class of 1912. There he made lifelong friends with Archibald MacLeish and Cole Porter, both of whom would later join Murphy in Paris. After graduation Murphy spent five years working for the family business, which had relocated to New York. He married Sara Sherman Wiborg, who was strikingly beautiful, intelligent and independent of mind, and very well traveled. But Murphy grew disinterested in the family business, and decided to pursue a career in landscape architecture. The young couple spent two years in Cambridge while he studied draftsmanship, botany, and other courses at Harvard. Despite his enthusiasm for the subject, Murphy's restlessness continued, and both of them felt an increasing dissatisfaction with the demanding social pressures of their respective families. They therefore determined to move to Europe and live there for a time, in order to allow Gerald Murphy to pursue his chosen career out of the immediate range of the Murphy or Wiborg family influence. In the spring of 1921 Gerald and Sara Murphy, with their three young children, Honoria, Baoth, and Patrick, sailed for England. There he spent the summer months in the verdant countryside, visiting gardens and making notes. Within a short time the family crossed the Channel and settled happily in an apartment in Paris. The city captivated them, as it did all the creative people who arrived there in the early years of that

vibrant decade. Almost immediately, Gerald Murphy's career took a new turn, when he discovered modern painting.

Murphy visited several galleries in Paris, particularly the Paul Rosenberg Gallery on the Rue La Boetie, and saw the work of Georges Braque, Juan Gris, Henri Matisse, and Pablo Picasso. He was astounded by these works, with their radically new approach to color and form. He was exhilarated by the discovery of an art that seemed to be comprehensible yet wholly new; he felt inextricably drawn to this new language of expression. Almost immediately Murphy decided to become a painter, although up to that point he had not had much experience as an artist, save the mechanical courses one would expect in architecture school. Nevertheless, he told Sara, "If that's painting, that's what I want to do."² He began lessons with Natalia Goncharova, a Russian artist who had come to Paris with the famed Diaghilev Ballet. The choice of Goncharova as a teacher had a profound effect on the development of Murphy's art. She was a peripheral member of the Russian Constructivist movement; like many of those painters, her art embodied a synthesis of traditional and modern sources, but was oriented towards abstraction and abstract theory as applied to modern life. Murphy was introduced to the elements of a tightly controlled formal language, where color, line, and form determined the meaning of a work of art. Murphy was encouraged to arrange shapes on his canvas drawn from objects in everyday life, but those shapes were to exist in and of themselves, with an artistic life of their own. Murphy's limited training in design, as it turned out, enabled him to understand the nature of this new visual language.³

Murphy's relationship with Goncharova put him in contact with the avant-garde theater and dance circles in Paris. He helped repaint the Ballets Russes scenery that had been damaged in a fire. On June 17, 1923, following the opening performance of Igor Stravinsky's *Les Noces*, with sets designed by Goncharova, the Murphys hosted a memorable reception for all the principal participants on a barge in the Seine. Perhaps the most notable occurrence in this period, however, was the premiere of an "American Ballet" by Murphy himself, with a score composed by his college friend, Cole Porter. The scenario, which has to do with the arrival of a Swedish immigrant in the United States, is a humorous send-up of popular stereotypes:

A millionairess, bedecked with immense strings of pearls, ensnares him; but a reformer frightens her away. Then a Colored Gentleman appears and does a vaudeville dance. He is driven away by a "dry agent" who immediately thereupon takes a nip from his private flask and disappears, to the immigrant's increasing astonishment. The Jazz Baby, who dances a shimmy in an enticing manner, is also quickly torn from him. A magnificent cowboy and a sheriff appear, bringing in the element of Western melodrama. At last the European is greeted and kissed by "America's Sweetheart"; and while this scene is being immortalized by a movie camera, the dancing of the couples present sweeps all the troubles away.⁴

The ballet, titled *Within the Quota*, opened on October 25, 1923, at the Theatre des Champs-Élysées, as an opener for the main ballet, *La Creation du Monde*, with sets designed by Fernand Léger. Murphy's own set was a striking blow-up of a newspaper page, complete with sensationalist headlines in garbled syntax, such as "Ex-Wife's Heart-Balm Love-Tangle," or "Throngs At Deal Shoe Magnate Party Split." Several captions were a kidding reference to foreign views of Americans, as in the main headline,

"Unknown Banker Buys Atlantic." Murphy's interest in collage, montage, and the incorporation of words in such work was soon carried over into his easel painting, as well as a corollary interest in advertising, typography, and graphic design.

The incorporation of such elements into modern painting was hardly new. It was an influential legacy of both the Cubist and Futurist movements, and was rekindled and carried forward by the Constructivists during the period of the First World War. The constructivist approach to a work of art from the standpoint of an American artist like Gerald Murphy was effectively summarized by the painter Louis Lozowick in an article written for the October 1922 issue of *Broom*, an important "little magazine" of the arts which Gerald Murphy certainly would have known. Throughout the 1920s little magazines like *Broom*, *Secession*, and *The Little Review*, which contained many avant-garde writings on art and literature, were well-known to Murphy's generation and were avidly read. *Broom*, in fact, was one of several short-lived magazines published by expatriates abroad. In his article Lozowick praised the legacy of Italian Futurism, especially its recognition that advertising and typography, which had been dominated by American influence, was an integral part of modern expression. He also attempted to describe in general terms the stylistic progression of a new form of art that wedded technology with abstraction. "Construction borrows the methods and makes use of the materials common in the technical processes," Lozowick wrote. "Hence iron, glass, concrete, circle, cube, cylinder, synthetically combined with mathematical precision and structural logic. Construction scorns prettiness, seeks strength, clarity, simplicity, acts as a stim-



Gerald Murphy, Ginny Carpenter, Cole Porter, and Sara Murphy in Venice in 1923.

ulus to vigorous life."⁵ This was the point of view that Murphy had been exposed to in his studies with Goncharova. Another article in *Broom* that appeared at about the same time as Lozowick's essay was titled "Painting, Past and Present". The author, Emmanuel de Fayet, hailed the arrival of what he called "a proud and simple art" that was based on plastic (or formal) terms. This meant that the new art was to be seen as having dispensed with the old "necessity of documentary representation," in favor of a "completely intellectual and speculative" meaning based upon the abstract variables of line, form, and color.⁶ This is essentially what Natalia Goncharova had conveyed to Murphy during his instruction, and it was to be one of the dominant artistic issues of the time. Waldemar George, a noted contemporary historian, felt that such an aesthetic was already present in the work of the American painters. For him the nature of the new art resided in the arrangement of the elements where "conventional meaning matters not at all." The resultant art was honed and refined to the smallest element, as each component was fully exploited for its "specifically plastic import."⁷ These precepts conditioned Gerald Murphy's development as a painter.

Such was the artistic atmosphere of Paris as Murphy established a studio and began to paint. Not surprisingly, given the literary nature of the Parisian milieu, Murphy began keeping a notebook where he would jot down entries that included quotes from his reading, brief observations, and ideas for paintings. The latter took the form of lists of motifs that would be used in the compositions. Occasionally he would make a very small sketch alongside the notation, when he had a fairly clear notion of the appearance of the projected work. In separate jottings he would indicate certain ordinary details that fascinated him, such as "dots around form such as in Italian papers," or "corks of filet on water scalloped by currents."⁸ In every case, quotidian yet disparate objects such as insects, books, birdcages, shakers, or cigarette holders were to be transformed into a schematic rendering of shapes of color arranged on the surface of a painting. For example, one such entry reads:

Picture: razor, fountain pen; etc. in large scale nature morte big match box⁹

This of course was the germinal idea for *Razor* (Plate 1), now in the Dallas Museum of Art collection, which was painted in 1924. An early work in Murphy's oeuvre, the painting depicts, in heraldic fashion, a fountain pen and a safety razor crossed before an emblazoned matchbox cover. The colors and shapes are direct and hard-edged, fragmented and overlaid as individual elements. The feeling of space and depth is in constant flux, as Murphy has skillfully modulated his colors and shapes so that their relationship to each other is continually changing. The three stars on the matchbook cover, for example, go from one simply outlined on the left to one fully shaded to appear three-dimensional, on the right. In the overall composi-

tion we notice the squares, circles, and rectangles as readily as we apprehend the objects. The technique of overlapping forms suggests the printing process, rather than conventional painting procedures; the cap threads on the fountain pen, for example, seem "off-register," but also more animate and spatial. The obvious dependence on advertising and design in a painting like *Razor* is well in keeping with the artistic interests at the time, as has been cited. Indeed, in the years following World War I, a major transformation had occurred in American typography and design that had a subsequent effect on European design. A cursory glance at some of the illustrations in a general magazine like *Vogue*, for example, shows a far more abstract approach to color, form, and composition in the early 1920s, similar to the effect that Murphy achieved in *Razor*. By that time several writers had extolled the aesthetic significance of everything from American graphic design to the aesthetic quality of store window displays. In fact, Murphy was known to have studied the latter while walking the streets of Paris, and the objects in *Razor* most certainly seem to be on display, as in a window or beneath a glass counter top. The safety razor, fountain pen, and sulphur matches were new technological objects themselves, everyday yet beautifully designed products of a new industrial age.¹⁰

This attitude towards the subject in *Razor*, as well as the painting's fastidious, carefully demarcated style, bears a close resemblance to some of the work produced slightly earlier by the French Purists, whose aesthetic outlook was much in keeping with Murphy's own. Formed by Amedée Ozenfant and Charles-Edouard Jeanneret ("Le Corbusier"), the ideas of the movement were articulated in the pages of its magazine, *L'Ésprit Nouveau*. In 1920 a manifesto of Purism appeared in this magazine, which called for a style of painting as "an association of

purified, related, and architected elements." Ozenfant and Jeanneret claimed that "the highest delectation of the human mind is the perception of order, and the greatest human satisfaction is the feeling of collaboration or participation in this order." Against the background of a postwar world in chaos, they asserted, there could be order and harmony. The Purist aesthetic therefore echoed the prevailing ideas of the period concerning the role of art, most notably with regard to the idea that the artist needed to derive his sources from the industrial and technological world around him, and transform them into a new vision, a new order of beauty, that would lead to a better way of life.¹¹

Razor was warmly praised by Murphy's friend Picasso, who noted its qualities of simplicity and directness, which he felt were particularly American traits. These ideas were carried still further in Murphy's next painting, *Watch* (Plate 2) painted in 1924-25, and exhibited in the Salon des Indépendants in March. The painting received favorable mention in the pages of *L'Art Vivant*, where Murphy was labeled a "poet and painter" who had convincingly demonstrated that the interior workings of a watch were as rich for an artist's eye as apples had been for Cézanne.¹² This large canvas depicts a well-ordered array of a multitude of components, both within and without, that are contained in a large pocket watch. Gears, springs, screws, levers and fragments of the case, dials and face are overlapped and schematized as in a series of technological blueprints seen simultaneously. The painting celebrates the precision, complexity, and overall technology of an object. Again the shapes and forms predominate, rhythmically accented by colors of silvery grays, dull blues, and burnished yellows. Here Murphy's

draftsmanship training comes to the fore; the interior workings of the watch are presented as a series of overlapping, transparent production renderings. Murphy's obsessive concern with celebrating the technology in a painting like *Watch*, where every detail is fastidiously mapped, sets his work apart from the more disinterested subjects of his European counterparts. More than any other of his later works, *Watch* reflects the artistic aspirations of the machine age, and the work of one of his closest friends, the French painter Fernand Léger.

Léger's paintings had been shown in an exhibition in Paris in 1923, and his work was very well known by the time Murphy had decided to become a painter. Ezra Pound was one of the many American visitors to that exhibition who was struck by the French artist's pronouncement that the machine would one day be more highly regarded than a work of art.¹³ Gerald Murphy had met Léger during the period of his work for the Russian ballet, and they had become good friends. Murphy was fascinated with Léger's outward enthusiasm for ordinary objects, and accompanied him to railroad yards and factories to view the elements of industrial design, or to observe the latest store window displays on the Paris streets. John Dos Passos, an American writer who became one of Murphy's lifelong friends, left a vivid description of one of these walks. "As we strolled along, Fernand kept pointing out shapes and colors," he recalled in his autobiography. "Gerald's offhand comments would organize vistas of their own . . . we were walking through a freshly invented world. They picked out winches, the flukes of an anchor, coils of rope, the red funnel of a towboat . . . The banks of the Seine never looked banal again after that walk."¹⁴ Léger, like Murphy, created paintings that celebrated the machine-made object, but the French artist's works were more painterly and oriented further towards abstraction, at least in



Plate 1
 Gerald Murphy
Razor 1924
 Oil on canvas
 H 32 $\frac{7}{8}$ " $\times$ W 36 $\frac{1}{2}$ "
 Dallas Museum of Art,
 Foundation for the
 Arts Collection, Gift of
 the Artist



Plate 2
 Gerald Murphy
Watch, 1924-25
 Oil on canvas
 H 78½" × W 78⅞"
 Dallas Museum of Art,
 Foundation for the
 Arts Collection, Gift of
 the Artist



Plate 3

Gerald Murphy

Still Life (date uncertain)

Watercolor on paper

H 11½" × W 9"

Estate of the Artist,
courtesy of Salander-O'Reilly
Galleries, Inc., New York



Plate 4

Gerald Murphy

Villa America, c. 1924

Oil and gold leaf on canvas

H 14½" × W 21½"

Estate of the Artist,

courtesy of Salander-O'Reilly

Galleries, Inc., New York



Plate 5
Gerald Murphy
Doves, 1925
Oil on canvas
H 48 $\frac{3}{8}$ " $\times$ W 36"
The Regis Collection,
Minneapolis

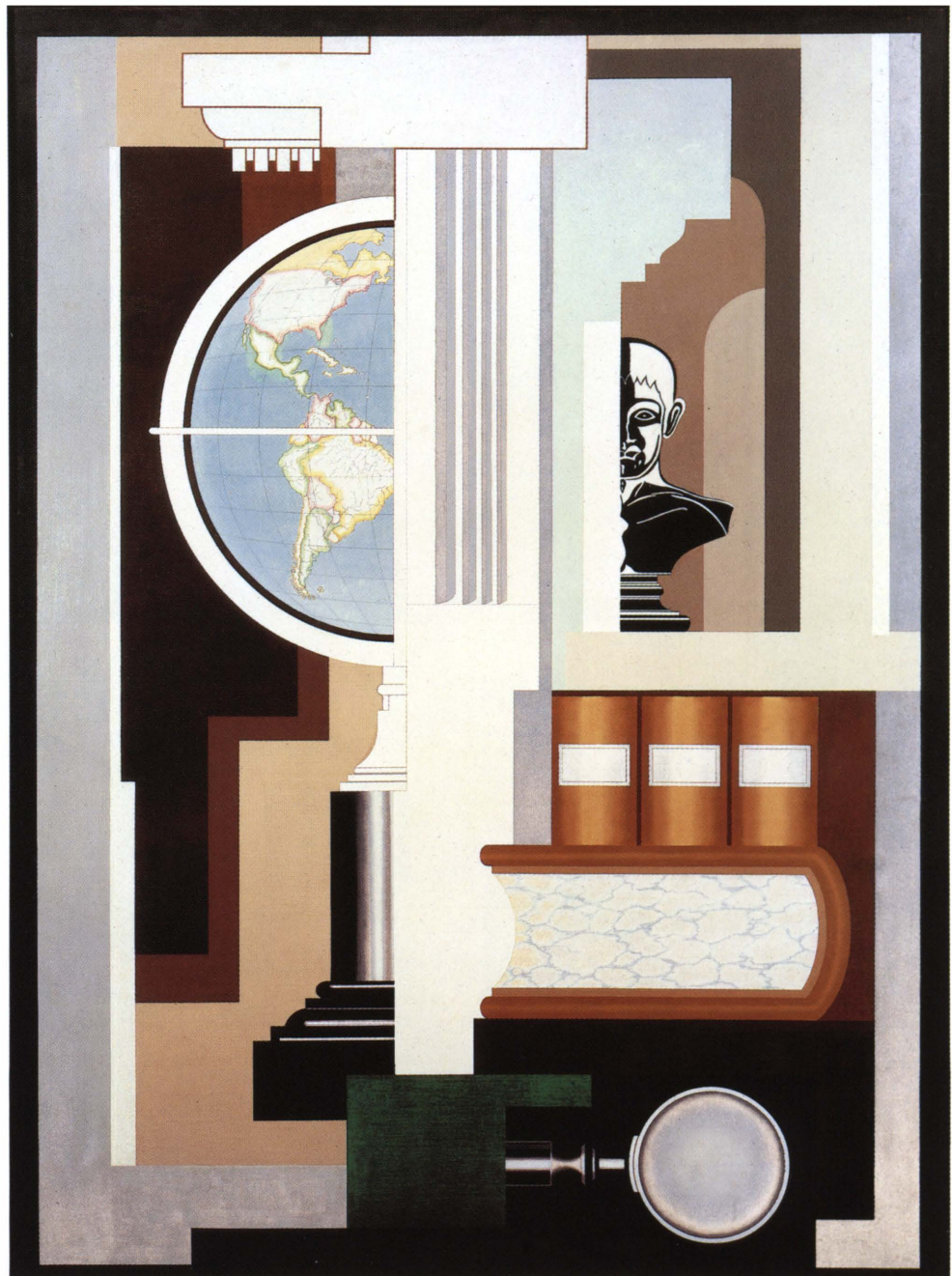


Plate 6

Gerald Murphy

Library (Bibliothèque), 1926-27

Oil on canvas

H 72 $\frac{3}{8}$ " x W 53"

Collection of Mr. and
Mrs. William M. Donnelly



Plate 7
 Gerald Murphy
Cocktail, 1927
 Oil on canvas
 H 28" × W 29"
 Collection of Mrs.
 Philip Barry



Plate 8
 Gerald Murphy
Wasp and Pear, 1927
 Oil on canvas
 H 36 $\frac{3}{4}$ " x W 38 $\frac{5}{8}$ "
 Collection, The Museum
 of Modern Art, New York,
 Gift of Archibald
 MacLeish. 1130.64.

theory, than those of his American friend. Léger commented upon his own artistic direction in an influential essay published in *The Little Review* in the latter part of 1923, which Murphy doubtless read. Léger maintained the position of the artisan, not the artist, as the true creator. The objects in his paintings were not real objects in a conventional setting, but abstract components of a higher order of perception. "I consider that plastic beauty in general is totally independent of sentimental descriptive or imitative values," he avowed. Every object, picture, piece of architecture, or ornamental organization has a value in itself, strictly absolute, independent of anything it may happen to represent. Every object, created or manufactured, may carry in itself an intrinsic beauty just like all phenomena of the natural order admired by the world, through all eternity."¹⁵

Léger's words moved the modern artist from the world of apples to the face of a watch, and from there to the universal perfection of the circle itself. Murphy felt a kinship to this, and indeed it seems that Léger's ideas were a catalyst for his own work. The French painter's work was first shown in New York in a one-man exhibition under the auspices of the Société Anonyme, Inc., in November 1925. Reviewers were responsive to his ideas, since they all felt that America itself was the most complete expression of the new technological age. Léger himself viewed America this way, as did many French intellectuals of the period. He also greatly appreciated the work of his friend Gerald Murphy as the embodiment of an American's ability to see the world anew, in modern terms. Perhaps Léger had a painting like *Watch* in mind when he wrote about the effect of seeing objects transformed on a movie screen, in an article published in *The Little Review* in 1926. "The technique emphasized is to isolate the object or the fragment of an object and to present it

on the screen in close-ups of the largest possible scale," Léger wrote. "Enormous enlargement of an object or fragment gives it a personality it never had before and in this way it can become a vehicle of entirely new lyric and plastic power."¹⁶ Certainly this is the case with Murphy's *Watch*, and the painting enjoyed much notoriety. Léger is known to have proclaimed Murphy "the only American painter in Paris."¹⁷

In America, too, there were signs that art, trade, and industry were closely allied to a degree that was enviable to European observers. There were, for example, a number of exhibitions held in this period in the major department stores of cities like Boston and New York. Shoppers were able to view fine art alongside the latest examples of design, and to compare them openly. One American museum director was moved to proclaim that "a great city department store of the first class is perhaps more like a good museum of art than are any of the museums we have yet established."¹⁸ There were many who were inclined to agree with this assessment. In 1923 one exhibition, held under the auspices of an artists' organization called The Salons of America, featured pieces of machinery displayed alongside paintings and sculpture on an equal basis. Henry McBride, one of the more astute art critics of the period, wrote that "some of our contemporaries have recognized the artistic beauty of machinery and have introduced its plastic expression into painting knowing that a piece of machinery contains all the qualities of a modern sculpture, as it shows invention of form, quality of material, and beauty of design."¹⁹

One of the most important artistic events of the period, against which we may examine Gerald Murphy's painting, was the Machine Age Exposition held in New York in 1927 which brought artists and designers together from many

countries. The catalog for this exhibition was printed in the May 1927 issue of *The Little Review*, and one of the best essays was written by Louis Lozowick and titled "The Americanization of Art." Like Murphy, Lozowick was an informed observer and a synthesizer of ideas drawn from many sources. Lozowick wrote that since American artists were conditioned by an environment of "gigantic engineering feats and colossal mechanical construction," they were thus well equipped to reconstruct the elements of that environment into statements of "aesthetic form" that conveyed its essential character. "The artist cannot and should not, therefore, attempt a literal soulless transcription of the American scene," he warned. "Rather give a penetrating creative interpretation of it, while including everything relevant to the subject depicted, [and] exclude everything irrelevant to the plastic possibilities of that subject."²⁰ Such art was the embodiment of an overall order, conveyed by means of an "accomplished craftsmanship." Lozowick closed with a statement that fully describes Murphy's artistic approach in a painting like *Watch*. He asserted that the true artist

*... will note with exactitude the articulation, solidity and weight of advancing and receding masses, will define with precision the space around objects and between them; he will organize line, plane, and volume into a well-knit design, arrange color and light into a pattern of contrast and harmony and weave organically into every composition an all-pervading rhythm and equilibrium. The true artist will in sum objectify the dominant experience of our epoch in plastic terms that possess value for more than this epoch alone.*²¹

Of course, Lozowick was influenced by the climate of ideas then current on Gerald Murphy's side of the Atlantic. His words closely parallel those of Leger, as well as those of Le Corbusier, who published an influential machine-age

treatise titled *Le Peinture Moderne* in 1925. Murphy was familiar with all these sources.

After their first season in Paris the Murphys spent a summer at Antibes, on the French Riviera. They liked the area so much that they purchased a small villa with an exotic, lush garden that was situated on a hillside. They had the house remodeled and redecorated, adding one of the first sun roofs seen on the Riviera, and a beautiful outdoor terrace of gray and white marble tiles. Inside, the decor was



Sara and Gerald Murphy with Pablo Picasso (right) at Cap d'Antibes on the French Riviera in 1923.

severe and simple, with black satin furniture and white walls, but brightly accented with the fresh arrangements of oleanders, mimosa, heliotrope, jasmine, roses or camelias brought from the garden. Murphy kept a studio in an adjoining gardener's cottage, and worked on his painting at regularly appointed hours. He was very methodical and painstaking, according to those who watched him work. He would produce a small version of the projected work in tempera, which was then squared off and transferred to a larger canvas, actually airplane linen on plywood. The small and delicate *Still Life* (Plate 3), which dates from this period, amply demonstrates Murphy's ability on a smaller scale, and it is a pity that this is one of the only works of its type that has survived. Murphy

and his wife named their idyllic retreat "Villa America," and Murphy created a small painting that served as its well-recognized signpost. Like Murphy's earlier painting, *Razor*, the words and motifs are simplified, emblazoned, and made clear, as in packaging design. The five stars at the left of *Villa America* (Plate 4) on the blue field likely represent the five Murphys, while the two halves of the composition, consisting of one-half of a large gold six-pointed star on the left and a field of eight red and white stripes on the right, could allude to the "two countries" which Archibald MacLeish identified as the dilemma of the expatriate in the poem, which he dedicated to Murphy. There is little doubt that much of Murphy's imagery in his painting was derived from personal sources. He was a sensitive man, brooding at times, and altogether romantic. This is the period, made famous in the literature on the Murphys, when the couple befriended Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald and watched helplessly as the latter sought to destroy themselves. Leger and Picasso were frequent visitors. Archibald MacLeish, Cole Porter, and the playwright Philip Barry came more fully into their lives. Ernest Hemingway was a friend and visitor, and the Murphys aided him at a crucial juncture of his career. There was a constant interchange between all these gifted people, as Murphy sought to find himself in his work. "I'm working all the time and feel that I've knocked one or two things on the nose," Murphy wrote Hemingway in 1927. "Before I die I'm going to do one picture which will be hitched up to the universe at some point. I feel it now and can work quietly."²² In a way, the tranquility and peace of a work like *Doves* (Plate 5), painted in 1925, reflects this quest. The painting came about as the result of something Murphy had seen on one of the family's trips around the Mediterranean in their yacht, when they stopped in Genoa. An evening walk in the town led

Murphy to an ancient chapel, where doves nestled amidst the darkening columns and architraves. He took notes, and produced a painting that is a harmonious arrangement of forms in somber grays and gentle pinks. The "plastic beauty" of the curvilinear shapes of a dove's head or an Ionic volute are given a poetry of abstract language. An entry in Murphy's notebook perfectly describes the work: "profile shapes, tender colors, sure graceful forms, ghosted."²³ The painting seems to evoke a remembrance, a sense of nostalgia and feeling that remains personal.

In October 1926 Murphy visited New York and filled his notebook with observations of the city. One typical entry reads, "shot down Madison getting lighter (silhouette gradually with Met tower lightest value & gold cupola on it)."²⁴ Such imagery was common at the time in American avant-garde photography and painting, and Murphy was reacting to the modernist appeal of New York as a subject, just as his contemporaries were to do in the Machine Age Exposition the following year. Shortly after his return to Antibes Murphy made another entry which described another painting project:

*Picture: Globe blk fond with objects of library, books (gilt edge, stamped levant titles)*²⁵

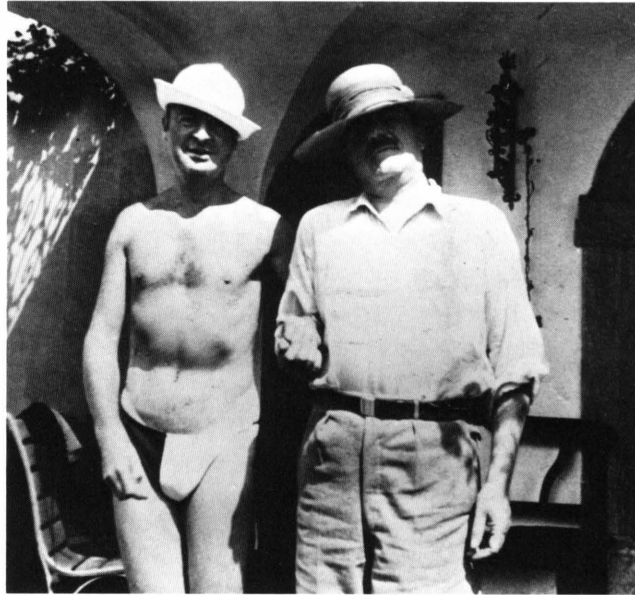
Occasionally Murphy's notes are difficult to interpret; "blk" may simply mean "black", but "fond" could mean "found", or "fond" in the sense of his recollections. Murphy was always interested in the play of words, so his notations could just as well indicate several meanings. At any rate, this description evolved into the painting titled *Library* (Plate 6), which represented Murphy's recollection of his father's library. Over six feet in height, *Library* suggests a feeling of gravity and melancholy, unlike the more sensitive and muted configuration of *Doves*. The composition of *Library* is more rigid and geometric, everything arranged at right angles, and the coloration is more severe, in greens

and browns and shades of black and white. Again the feeling seems achingly autobiographical; one is drawn to the brooding visage of the bust, cut in half, as is the globe, which shows North and South America. Perhaps Murphy, like his friend MacLeish, was experiencing the conflicting feelings of life as an expatriate.

Cocktail (Plate 7), painted in 1927, has a similar geometric rigor but the subject is far lighter in feeling. Again Murphy's notebook entry for the painting reveals the extent to which he pre-conceived his compositions before beginning work:

*Picture: nature morte cocktail tray, shaker, glasses, stemmed cherries inside lemon knife corkscrew plate bottle red white black grey (cut by lemon yellow?)*²⁶

As in *Library*, the various forms are arranged in profile views, at right angles to each other. The cigar box label, which supposedly took Murphy four months to duplicate on canvas, seems to be a commentary on the life that is represented by the rest of the objects in the painting. Was Murphy being self-critical? Did he perhaps feel that his art was being undermined by the life that he was living at the Villa America? Was he having doubts at this time as to his career as a painter? A year earlier, in a searching letter to Hemingway, Murphy had spoken of those who lived in a "region all their own — and alone each, somewhere between art and life," as if he felt himself to be one of them. "To want to do a thing well even at first is still one of my complications," he wrote.²⁷ The year *Cocktail* was completed, Archibald MacLeish wrote Hemingway of his partial disappointment with Murphy's direction, and their relationship. "Simply that the whole business is on the plane Gerald has chosen to live on — viz, Amusement."²⁸ Whatever the answer to these questions, there is no doubt that works like *Cocktail* possess a strong undercurrent of



Murphy with artist and friend Fernand Léger in 1931.

the personal turbulence Murphy was then experiencing. The exuberance and confidence embodied in his earlier works had given way to a more inward and self-searching vision.

In October 1928 Gerald and Sara Murphy and their three children sailed for America. King Vidor, a Hollywood movie producer who had met Murphy through Scott Fitzgerald and who had visited the Villa America, invited Murphy to come to California to help in the production of the music for a film set in the nineteenth-century South with an all-black cast, titled *Hallelujah*. Murphy, among his other talents, possessed a considerable knowledge of early Afro-American music, particularly folk songs and spirituals. "My God, what a place this is," Murphy wrote his friend, the writer John Dos Passos. "The wealth of it all takes the heart out of you." Murphy, however, strenuously objected to Vidor's desire to cater to racial stereotypes. "When they got Lionel Barrymore to coach these Negroes in the use of dialect, I resigned."²⁹ By May of the following year the family was back at the Villa America.

Almost immediately following their return their youngest son, Patrick, fell ill and grew progressively worse. By October it was diagnosed as tuberculosis, and the worried parents made plans to transfer their household to the colder, healthier air of Switzerland. The halcyon period at Antibes was at an end, and so too was Murphy's brief career as a painter.

Amidst these developments, it is difficult to assign an exact date to what appears to be Gerald Murphy's last painting, *Wasp and Pear* (Plate 8). Whether it was done before or after the Murphy family's trip to America remains uncertain. The painting is identified by the following entry in the artist's notebook:

*Picture: hornet (colossal) on a pear (marks on skin. leaf, veins, etc.) battening on the fruit, clenched . . .*³⁰

The painting depicts all these elements in a complex way, but without the rigidity that characterizes an earlier work like *Library*. The organic, biomorphic shapes of the pears, leaf, and insect recall the gentler, curvilinear outlines in *Doves*. However, *Wasp and Pear* also displays a more aggressive, predatory feeling marked by sexual allusions. The swelling forms of the center pear, the erect stem, and the manner of the hornet "battening" on the fruit leaves little doubt as to the implications. It is apparent that the imagery in this painting stands for something else; the arrangement of the objects, their identity and juxtaposition, evoke deeper, more inaccessible feelings. "My last things are a moving mass of looseness and liberation for me," he wrote John Dos Passos in August 1928.³¹ *Wasp and Pear* moves toward the illusionistic side of Surrealism, a movement that was well chronicled in the artistic and literary magazines of the latter part of the decade. In 1928 André Breton, the leader of the Surrealists, wrote that "the plastic work of art, in order to respond to the undisputed necessity of thoroughly revising all real values, will either refer to

a purely interior model or cease to exist."

Murphy's painting reflects this spirit, with images which seem to depart from reality, where, as Breton observed, "the attained and the desired no longer mutually exclude one another."³² Late in his life Murphy spoke of this painting as one of his best, an indicator of a new direction that his painting was taking. Unfortunately, that was never to be.

With nine-year old Patrick Murphy's condition precarious, the Murphy family moved to Montana-Vermala in the Swiss Alps, where they stayed until 1932, with intermittent periods of travel. The writer Dorothy Parker, who was very close to them at this time, wrote that Murphy had "absolutely isolated himself" with his sick child, and did little else. "After all these years, I find myself pried away from life itself by the very things that went to make up my life," Murphy wrote his friend Archibald MacLeish in January 1931. "The process has left me impoverished — spiritually — as it should."³³ Despite the comforts of a rented chalet and the constant visits by many friends, it was a very hard period. Fortunately, Patrick responded to the treatment and was able to leave the mountains for brief excursions with the family. By July 1932 the Murphys had returned to America for good, although subsequent summers were to be spent at Antibes. With the arrival of the Depression, Murphy became much more involved in the family business and in the management of the company in New York, becoming its president in 1934. Then tragedy struck. Baoth Murphy, who had always been robust and athletic, died suddenly of spinal meningitis in March 1935 while attending private school in Boston. The family was devastated, as were all their friends. "You know there is nothing we can ever say or write,"

Ernest Hemingway responded from Key West, where he was staying with John Dos Passos.³⁴ In the meantime, Patrick Murphy was confined at a sanatorium in Saranac Lake, where his health continued to deteriorate. The long battle ended on January 30, 1937. "Fate can't have any more arrows in its quiver for you that will wound like these," Scott Fitzgerald wrote from North Carolina. "The golden bowl is broken indeed but it *was* golden; nothing can ever take those boys away from you now."³⁵ Many years later, Ernest Hemingway recalled the Murphys and their grief in a passage that he eventually excised from his bittersweet reminiscence of the Parisian period, *A Moveable Feast*: "They were bad luck for people but they were worse luck to themselves and they lived to have all their bad luck finally; to the very worst end that all bad luck could go."³⁶

Murphy had abandoned his painting career in 1929, and the works were put in storage in Europe. It was not until 1947 that he was able to recover some of the works, with the help of friends including Archibald MacLeish, who eventually acquired *Wasp and Pear*. It was not until 1960 that Murphy's painting was again thrust into the limelight, and it happened in Dallas, Texas. Murphy was approached by Douglas MacAgy, the director of the Dallas Museum for Contemporary Arts, who was organizing an exhibition of the work of five American modernist artists whose work had been neglected. Besides Murphy, the exhibition included the work of Tom Benrimo, John Covert, Morgan Russell, and Morton Schamberg. It was titled *American Genius in Review*, and represented not only the "rediscovery" of Gerald Murphy's work, but his first comprehensive exhibition in America. "I've been discovered," Murphy is reported to have told a family gathering. "What

does one wear?"³⁷ This initiated a rich correspondence between MacAgy and Murphy that has provided subsequent scholars with a wealth of information concerning his career as a painter. Near the end of his life, Murphy reflected on his creative achievement and its all-too-brief flowering. "I was never happy until I started painting," he wrote MacAgy, "and I have never been thoroughly so since I was obliged to give it up."³⁸

The exhibition opened in Dallas, at the museum on Cedar Springs Road, on May 11, 1960, and continued until June 19. "Several of the artists represented here have received some notice in recent years," MacAgy wrote in the catalog, "but earlier, when the paint was fresh and when, for a while, the bare canvas was a field for the next day's adventure, they and the others had been accorded the briefest of nods by all but their friends."³⁹ The exhibition became an occasion for Murphy to reflect on his work, and its importance to him. "I wonder how many aspiring American artists have been claimed by the harmful belief that if a business is your 'inheritance' that it is heresy not to give up all in favor of it," he was quoted in the *Dallas Time Herald*. "I hope not too many. We need real American artists."⁴⁰ He was moved and thrilled to see his paintings, done so long ago, receive some public recognition at last. "I like so much the feeling of their finding such happy asylum after their years of confinement in a dark attic," he wrote MacAgy. "I had never been able to submerge entirely in my consciousness their existence. It is good to think of them now as observed — and alive."⁴¹ In gratitude, he offered two of his six surviving works to the museum, in a letter to MacAgy dated September 19, 1960:

I'm very gratified that you wanted the 'Watch' in your exhibition and the innocent 'Razor' in your office. Should you care to have either or both permanently, I should be glad to have you keep them. Should they prove, on the other hand, a juggernaut or an incubus I shall have them rolled up (again, poor dears!) and put to sleep in the attic.

I cannot tell you what a satisfaction it has been to feel that these paintings of mine have come alive — even if for such a short time. Not all painting should die. (I talk like a disinterred pope!).

I have you to thank for having the courage to reveal unknown paintings to the general public.⁴²

Following the Dallas exhibition, Gerald Murphy's life became equally well-known. In 1962 a memorable and beautifully written account by Calvin Tompkins of their years in Paris — “the era,” as Sara Murphy called it — was published under the title, *Living Well Is the Best Revenge*. Once again Murphy was approached to exhibit his paintings, but he refused. “I was alive those seven years that I was painting,” he wrote Tompkins. “Alas, I find myself unable to rise to all this and am temporizing. All of that is if in a sealed chamber of the past and has become somehow unreal.”⁴³ At this point Murphy was fighting cancer, and was near the end. He lived long enough to learn with satisfaction that his painting of the *Wasp and Pear* had been given by Archibald MacLeish to the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and that it had been accepted. He would have been even more gratified to see the exhibition of his work that would be held there ten years later, but it was too late for him. He died on October 17, 1964, and was buried in South End Cemetery in East Hampton. It was his lifelong friend Archibald MacLeish who proposed the inscription for his tombstone, three words from Shakespeare's *King Lear*: “Ripeness is All.”⁴⁴

Gerald Murphy left an enduring legacy to American art. Despite the fact that he was never very certain about the level of his accomplishment, he may have understood at the very end of his life that it had not been in vain. He was part of the “Lost Generation” who created a lasting contribution to American culture, and so doing, found themselves as well. Years before Archibald MacLeish had eloquently summarized the feelings of that generation when he wrote an evocative poem in 1939 titled “America Was Promises.” The beginning lines of the poem also serve as a fitting epitaph for Gerald Murphy, and for his artistic aspirations and achievement:

*Who is the voyager in these leaves?
Who is the traveler in this journey
Deciphers the revolving night: receives
The signal from the light returning?*

America was promises to whom?

*East were the
Dead kings and the remembered sepulchres:
West was the grass.*

*The groves of the oaks were at evening.
Eastward are the nights where we have slept.*

*And we move on: we move down:
With the first light we push forward:
We descend from the past as a wandering people from
mountains.*

We cross into the day to be discovered.⁴⁵

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NOTES

1. Archibald MacLeish, *The Collected Poems of Archibald MacLeish* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin Co., 1962), 72-75.
2. Calvin Tompkins, *Living Well is the Best Revenge* (New York: E. P. Dutton Co., 1982), 25.
3. *Ibid.*, 26.
4. William Rubin, *The Paintings of Gerald Murphy* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1974), 24, 28.
5. Louis Lozowick, "Tatlin's Monument to the Third International," *Broom*, III (October, 1922), 232-34.
6. Emmanuel de Fayer, "Painting, Past and Present," *Broom*, III (September, 1922), 154-55.
7. Editorial, *Broom*, No. 4 (February, 1922), 383.
8. Murphy's notebook is unpublished, but several sources quote extensively from it. See especially Rubin, *The Paintings of Gerald Murphy*.
9. *Ibid.*, 14.
10. See, for example, Lewis Mumford, "Beauty and the Industrial Beast," *The New Republic*, XXXV (June 6, 1923), 37-38.
11. Kenneth E. Silver, "Purism: Straightening Up After the Great War," *Artforum*, XV (March, 1977), 60-61.
12. Rubin, *The Paintings of Gerald Murphy*, 35.
13. Ezra Pound, "Paris Letter," *The Dial*, LXXIV (January, 1923), 88.
14. Honoria Murphy Donnelly and Richard N. Billings, *Sara & Gerald* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1982), 224.
15. Fernand Léger, "The Esthetics of the Machine," *The Little Review*, IX (Spring, 1923), 45.
16. Fernand Léger, "A New Realism — The Object," *The Little Review*, XI (Winter, 1926), 7.
17. Rubin, *The Paintings of Gerald Murphy*, 30.
18. Quoted in the *Art Digest*, II (October 1, 1928), 13.
19. Henry McBride in the *New York Herald*, May 20, 1923; The Henry McBride papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, roll NMcb2, frame 428.
20. Louis Lozowick, "The Americanization of Art," *The Machine-Age Exposition*, (New York: *The Little Review*, 1927), 19.
21. *Ibid.*
22. Linda Patterson Miller, "Gerald Murphy and Ernest Hemingway: Part II," *Studies in American Fiction*, XIII (Fall, 1985), 3.
23. Rubin, *The Paintings of Gerald Murphy*, 36; actually the description in Murphy's notebook relates to an earlier lost painting, but the words are just as applicable to this work.
24. *Ibid.*, 15.
25. *Ibid.*, 14.
26. *Ibid.*
27. Miller, "Gerald Murphy and Ernest Hemingway: Part I," *Studies in American Fiction*, XII (Spring, 1985), 134.
28. Miller, "Gerald Murphy and Ernest Hemingway: Part II," 5.
29. Donnelly and Billings, *Sara & Gerald*, 41.
30. Rubin, *The Paintings of Gerald Murphy*, 42.
31. Donnelly and Billings, *Sara & Gerald*, 227.
32. André Breton, *La Surrealisme et La Peinture*, quoted in Herschel B. Chipp, Ed., *Theories of Modern Art* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968), 406.
33. Donnelly and Billings, *Sara & Gerald*, 57.
34. *Ibid.*, 93.
35. *Ibid.*, 119.
36. Miller, "Gerald Murphy and Ernest Hemingway: Part II," 9.
37. Donnelly and Billings, *Sara & Gerald*, 226.
38. Douglas MacAgy, *American Genius in Review: No. 1* (Dallas: Museum for Contemporary Arts, 1960), unpaginated.
39. *Ibid.*
40. Donnelly and Billings, *Sara & Gerald*, 229.
41. *Ibid.*
42. Letter, Gerald Murphy to Douglas MacAgy, September 19, 1960; Courtesy of the Curatorial Division, Dallas Museum of Art.
43. Donnelly and Billings, *Sara & Gerald*, 225.
44. *Ibid.*, 237.
45. MacLeish, *Collected Poems*, 359.

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