

ANDREW DASBURG: RECOLLECTIONS OF THE AVANT-GARDE

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Andrew Dasburg, compellingly drawn to the innovations of Cézanne and Cubism in the century's second decade, draws today from the bench mark of Cézanne and the formal experimentation of European art and American artists in Europe in the second decade.

Fig. 1. Andrew Dasburg in his studio, November 1977. Taos, New Mexico. Photo Gail Levin.



Andrew Dasburg (Fig. 1), now ninety-one, lives in the village of Talpa, adjacent to Taos, New Mexico, which he first visited from New York over sixty years ago in the early part of 1918. Dasburg still rises early seven days a week to work in his studio; he now concentrates on drawings inspired by the surrounding landscapes that are so familiar to him. Even today, Dasburg's drawings reveal his early interest in the work of Cézanne and Cubism.

By 1902, Dasburg had begun to study at the Art Students League in New York. He soon became acquainted with Morgan Russell who by 1913 would become known (along with fellow American expatriate Stanton Macdonald-Wright) as the founder of Synchronism. By 1907, Russell visited his close friend Dasburg at the League summer school in Woodstock, New York. Russell traveled to Paris in 1906 and 1908 before he settled there in 1909. He corresponded frequently with Dasburg, sharing the revelation in the new art that overwhelmed him there, particularly the work of Monet, Gauguin, Cézanne, and Matisse. Just before he left for Paris in 1908, Russell, Dasburg, and the sculptor Grace Mott Johnson (whom Dasburg married just over a year later) walked from Boston to New York stopping at farmhouses along the way.¹ By the summer of 1909, Dasburg and Johnson had joined Russell in Paris where Dasburg lived through July 1910, although Johnson left that January. Another of their friends from the League, the sculptor Arthur Lee, was also in Paris, and evidently it was he who first introduced Dasburg to Leo and Gertrude Stein.

A surviving photograph (Fig. 2) of a now lost painting by Dasburg depicts a Romanesque-style church on a hillside. The short choppy brushstrokes and rows of light-dark contrasts indicate that Dasburg may have been painting a proto-Synchronist work under Russell's influence. This painting might be dated as early as Dasburg's travels in France during 1910 (yet possibly as late as his second trip there during 1914). It was probably painted before Dasburg's participation in a group exhibition at the Macdowell Club, November 13-23, 1913.² This may have been one of the works he exhibited there that Willard Wright later referred to as merely "feeble imitations of Synchronism."³

Writing to Johnson in January and February 1910, Dasburg mentioned that he was painting apples every day. On April 24, 1910, he wrote that he was making copies of a small Cézanne owned by Leo Stein:

To me the original is infinitive. It will rest in my mind as a standard of what I want to attain in my paintings. . . . I wish that Stein would let me copy another one which he has. A figure composition that is a beauty.

Dasburg's versions of Cézanne's *Apples* made under the direct inspiration of the original which he and Russell borrowed from Leo Stein are lost. Yet one such copy is visible in a photograph of Dasburg's Paris studio, on the far left above a striped chair (Fig. 3). Also noteworthy is the male nude sketched on the large unfinished canvas. Dasburg has recalled that he and Russell used to share a model occasionally in Paris. Russell's early Synchronist paintings (most of which, like this unfinished Dasburg, are now lost) included several large figurative canvases. These were often based on the heroic forms of Michelangelo whose art Dasburg also admired.

Like his friend Russell, who was studying sculpture in 1909-10 under Matisse's guidance, Dasburg also experimented with three-dimensional form. Two photographs are all that remain of Dasburg's efforts in sculpture. The earliest, that of a female figure, was taken in his Paris studio (Fig. 4). Dasburg's figure is similar to Russell's work of the time in its play on contrapposto curve, although his forms are more delicate and the pose more subtle than Russell's robust figures, all of which appear to have been male.

Dasburg would also have known Matisse's sculpture in Paris from his visit to the artist's studio with Russell. On his return to New York, Dasburg had an opportunity to see the first exhibition anywhere of Matisse's sculpture held at Stieglitz's gallery "291" from March 14 to April 6, 1912. This show featured six bronzes, five plaster casts, and a terra-cotta as well as drawings.⁴ Among the sculptures included were *La Serpentine* of 1909, and plaster casts of states I, II, and III of his portrait of *Jeannette* done in 1910 and 1911. Dasburg was quite taken by the Matisse exhibition, so much so that, as is evident in the letters he wrote to Johnson, he visited it at least three times. He

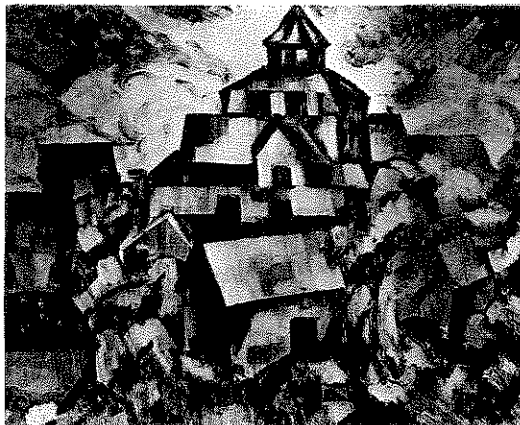


Fig. 2. Andrew Dasburg, *Landscape with Church*, c. 1910-14. *Lost oil painting.*

Fig. 6. Andrew Dasburg, *Lucifer*, 1912. Plaster. Lost.



Fig. 3. Andrew Dasburg's studio, Rue Notre-Dame-des-Champs, Paris, 1910. (His canvas of *Apples*, after Cézanne, hangs on the wall on the left side over the striped chair.)

went to see the exhibition on the same day it opened, no doubt because he had admired Matisse since his visit to the artist's Paris studio two years earlier.

Writing to Johnson, he admitted:

Even I was a little startled and amused at first. There are several portrait heads and a figure that will haunt the minds of N.Y. sculptors for sometime to come. They will create nothing less than a sensation. Paintings that are not of the usual brand are quite a thing of the past but such a treat N.Y. has never had of sculpture. There will be many a warning to the younger generation from the old and wise advisors, to avoid the land of France for such teachings as one receives there lead not to the kingdom of heaven and Kenyon [Cox] will say if this be art (pointing to Matisse) the gods have deceived me and mine.⁵

Dasburg promised to send her "all the interesting and amusing comments" relating to the exhibition and two days later wrote that:

[Arthur] Lee likes the thing (of which I enclose a memory sketch [Fig. 5]) so much that he has written to Matisse to see if he can't buy it. It is beyond me to understand how he could have said what he did of the [Max] Weber show and yet seem to like this to the extent he does.

His own comment on Matisse's *La Serpentine* which he dubbed "Lady Macaroni" and sketched from memory was "startling at first but beautiful after one comprehends the design." The very next day he wrote to Johnson of his amusement that on his most recent visit to the Matisse show, he had learned that his sketch was incorrect: "The actions should be reversed and her leg crossed in front of the leg she stands on instead of in back."

Certainly this exhibition and Matisse's head of *Jeannette III* in particular inspired Dasburg's sculpture *Lucifer* (Fig. 6) which he entered in the Armory Show the next year. *Lucifer* has pronounced, deep-set eyes and heavy brows similar to those of *Jeannette III*. The chin of *Lucifer* is squared off much like Matisse's sculpture and the forehead plane protrudes in a similar fashion. The fact that Dasburg modeled *Lucifer* in the studio of Arthur Lee who shared his admiration of Matisse's sculpture further suggests the impact of this enthusiasm. Only

the exaggerated angularity hints at a second source of inspiration—that of a *Woman's Head* by Picasso in 1909. This Cubist sculpture was certainly known to Dasburg from its publication by Stieglitz in a special issue of *Camera Work* in August 1912. Dasburg would not have missed this issue devoted to Matisse and Picasso with essays on these artists by Gertrude Stein.

Lucifer was selected to be represented on one of the official Armory Show postcards and Dasburg was proud of his work which was so prominently displayed in New York. He must have been disappointed that it was not to be exhibited in Chicago or Boston, for he wrote to Johnson telling her that "none of the American sculpture goes to Chicago."⁶ In addition to his sculpture, Dasburg had three paintings—two called *Still Life* and one *Landscape*—in the Armory Show. Only the latter work was chosen for exhibition in Chicago and Dasburg complained of this decision to Johnson: "It seems to me that if they were going to let me send one of my things they might have asked me if I cared to and had any preference as to what would go. I can understand why [Solon] Borglum got sore at them."⁷ His reference to Borglum, a sculptor, may also indicate that his own preference was for *Lucifer* to be included in the Chicago exhibition.

Dasburg received a great deal of attention in the press at the time of his inclusion in the exhibition "Contemporary Art" held at the National Arts Club from February 5 through March 7, 1914.

He again showed *Lucifer* along with a *Still Life* and three pictures dedicated to Mabel Dodge whose avant-garde salon in Greenwich Village attracted a diverse group including artists, revolutionaries, and suffragettes. The *New York World* reviewer described her as "not only literary, aspiring and a charming hostess, but she also appears to wave a mesmeric wand over Mr. Dasburg."⁸ These pictures were called *The Absence of Mabel Dodge*, *To Mabel Dodge No. 1*, and *To Mabel Dodge No. 2* (Fig. 7). One reviewer referred to them as "strenuous assaults on the optic nerves," while another claimed that the artist revealed "the vaporings of a calf-infatuation." The *World* article made fun of *To Mabel Dodge No. 2*, claiming that it could be hung in

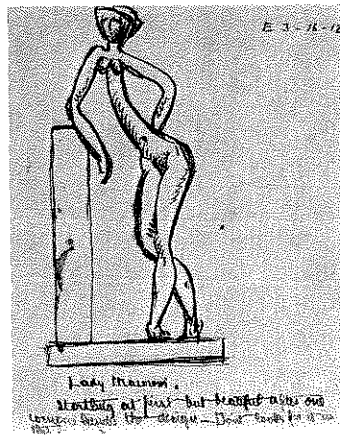


Fig. 5. Andrew Dasburg, Memory Sketch after Matisse's *La Serpentine*, 1912. Ink on paper.

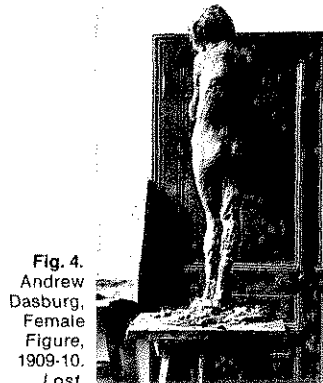


Fig. 4. Andrew Dasburg, Female Figure, 1909-10. Lost.

Fig. 7. Andrew Dasburg, *To Mabel Dodge No. 2*, 1913. Lost.



Fig. 8. Andrew Dasburg, *Improvisation*, c. 1915-16. Oil on canvas, 35 1/2 x 29 1/2". Collection Mr. and Mrs. Henry M. Reed.

four different ways and reproducing it in each orientation with a big question mark in the center. The same reviewer interpreted the painting's symbols as "the unfolding of the torso and the exposure of the artist's heart in blossom as a tulip, with an amethyst shining in place of the navel." This reviewer found *Lucifer* and Dasburg's *Still Life* more comprehensible: "They prove that he knows color and form, that he has mastery of line, and that he can be perfectly intelligible by means that appeal to normal comprehension." He particularly praised *Lucifer* because "it looks right from the front, from the rear or from whatever other angle it may be seen." Reviewing the exhibition at the National Arts Club on February 8, 1914 in *The Sun*, Henry McBride wrote:

Two works here are sure to rival the celebrated Lady who went downstairs last spring as a topic for social debate. They are by Andrew Dasburg. One is entitled "To Mabel Dodge," wonderful convolutions in scarlet in the midst of which a little tulip blooms. The other is called "Absence of Mabel Dodge," and the lines of scarlet have gone plumb to smash, as though shrivelled by lightning.

Dasburg continued his experiments with abstraction and by 1915 had produced a remarkable series of Improvisations, only one of which exists today (Fig. 8). This example and the lost works known only in photographs (Fig. 9)⁹ indicate that Dasburg had developed an impressive facility with abstract shapes and colors. He showed these Improvisations in the Forum Exhibition of Modern American Painters in March 1916 at the Anderson Galleries in New York.¹⁰ His statement in the exhibition catalogue reveals his knowledge of color theory and his involvement with other avant-garde concerns such as "pure aesthetic emotion, based alone on rhythm and form." Clearly, Dasburg was conversant with the ideas of the Synchronists, yet his palette was even more closely related to the work of Cézanne. He had also been influenced in his abstractions by his close friend Konrad Cramer.¹¹ Cramer's own work involves a bold, experimental approach to color which he would already have developed when he arrived from his native Germany in 1911. His contacts there with the avant-garde including Wassily Kandinsky and Karl Schmidt-Rottluff provided many impor-

tant ideas which he then shared with his new friends in America.

Although Dasburg returned to representation in 1916, he never forgot the lessons of Cézanne and Cubism. In 1923, he published an article "Cubism—Its Rise and Influence" in which he noted that "the influence of Cubism, with that of Matisse, resulted in a greater liberation from tradition than even Impressionism achieved."¹² He noted that Synchronism "at one stage of its kaleidoscopic career borrowed from Cubism a scaffolding on which to support its color theories while at the same time denying its aesthetic validity." Dasburg, like so many American artists in this period, chose to turn away from his daring experiments with color abstraction to find an art in which "the canvas will have a form interest of its own in harmony with the associations we, through common experience, bring to it."¹³

The interview that follows was recorded on videotape for the exhibition "Synchronism and American Color Abstraction, 1910-1925," organized by the Whitney Museum of American Art and supported by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. The exhibition will also be seen at The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; Des Moines Art Center; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; Everson Museum of Art, Syracuse; and Columbus (Ohio) Gallery of Fine Arts.

GL: Where did you first study art?

AD: In New York, at the Art Students League. And on Sundays, my mother used to take me to the Metropolitan Museum.

GL: How old were you when you started at the League?

AD: I should think that I was fifteen, fourteen . . .

GL: And who were your teachers?

AD: Well, in the antique class it was Kenyon Cox and in life class Frank Vincent Du Mond and of course at Woodstock it was Birge Harrison (Fig. 10).

GL: Were you in Woodstock just one summer or were you with Birge Harrison several summers?

AD: Several.

GL: What sort of subjects were you painting in Woodstock?

AD: Landscapes.



Fig. 9. Andrew Dasburg, *Improvisation*, c. 1914-15. Lost.

Fig. 10. Birge Harrison's Class, Woodstock, New York. (Dasburg is the fourth man from the left. Grace Johnson is the woman on the far right.)



GL: Did Morgan Russell visit you in Woodstock?
 AD: In later years, yes. He stayed for a few weeks.
 GL: Did he study with Birge Harrison?
 AD: No, he didn't. He wasn't in the class. He just came up for a few weeks in the summer. We had rented a house.
 GL: Where did you first meet Morgan Russell?
 AD: Frankly, I don't believe I can remember that. In one of the art classes, I think, that he came to occasionally at night. He posed during the day . . . painted at night, you see.
 GL: Who did he pose for?
 AD: Different sculptors, Fraser . . .
 GL: Did he ever pose for Arthur Lee?
 AD: Very possibly.
 GL: Morgan Russell went to Paris before you did. How was he able to go?
 AD: I haven't got the evidence, but I think that it was Mrs. Whitney [Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney]. She did some sculpture, didn't she?
 GL: Yes she did, she was a sculptor.
 AD: He posed for her, and she encouraged him, I believe, and sent him to Paris because he didn't have the means of going there without help. I have no evidence that she sent him there, but I believe she did.
 GL: Before he went to Paris, how did he support himself?
 AD: Posing, and working at night in a restaurant.
 GL: Mrs. Whitney lived on Macdougall Alley. Did you ever visit her studio?
 AD: Yes, but not while she was there. James Earle Fraser, the sculptor, had a studio on Macdougall Alley, also; a few of us had sketch classes in it with him at night.
 GL: The first time you went to Paris, did you go by yourself?
 AD: No, I went with Grace Mott Johnson, the sculptor.
 GL: Did you meet any important French artists?
 AD: Yes, of course, Matisse . . . Picasso . . . I met him at the home of Leo and Gertrude Stein.
 GL: How did you happen to meet Matisse?
 AD: Well, Morgan Russell had been working; apparently Matisse had a class for a short time and Morgan was one of the attendants. Morgan knew Matisse and he took me over to his studio.

GL: What was Matisse like? What was he doing?
 AD: He was working on the shoulders of one of the figures of that group of people, I've forgotten what the title is. If you had the exhibition catalogue I could pick the reproduction [Matisse's *Music*, now in The Pushkin Museum, Moscow]. It was an important one. He let us look through a folio of his drawings, which Morgan showed me. But I was more interested in watching him at work. He was working on a large canvas with three figures in the center of it—working on the shoulders of one.
 GL: Did you happen to see any works by Cézanne in Paris?
 AD: Yes I did, and I've forgotten the name of the boulevard or the street or where I'd been, but on my way back to where I lived—Rue Notre Dame-des-Champs—in a window were these pictures on the street level. They fascinated me so I went to the door and looked in and there were more, and the elderly gentleman who owned the gallery (he's well known) invited me in. I spent a good deal of time looking at what was on the walls and then, after a while, he invited me to come into his back room where he showed me others which were not on exhibition. It turned out to be Vollard.
 GL: Did Leo Stein ever lend you a painting to study?
 AD: Yes. Leo lent Morgan and me a Cézanne still life of a row of five apples which he let us take to our studio, and I made copies of it (Fig. 3). Morgan copied it in an analytical way whereas I copied it literally. That was the only one we ever borrowed from him.
 GL: Had you met Stanton Macdonald-Wright in Paris?
 AD: I'm trying to recall whether I met him there or later in New York. He and Morgan had had an exhibition in Germany. I met him briefly, was introduced to him.
 GL: That must have been the first Synchronist exhibition in Munich in June of 1913.
 AD: Various pictures which they called Synchronists, Synchronism.
 GL: What does that mean, Synchronism?
 AD: It seems to mean "with color."
 GL: How did you happen to meet Leo Stein in Paris?
 AD: I was introduced to him either by Arthur Lee or by Morgan. I think Arthur Lee (Fig. 11) introduced me to the Steins.



Fig. 11. Andrew Dasburg (left) in his Paris studio, 1909-10, with Arthur Lee (right) and unidentified artist.



Fig. 12. Andrew Dasburg, 1914. Porch of Mabel Dodge's cottage, Provincetown.

GL: Did Leo Stein speak to you much about his ideas on art?
 AD: Not about his ideas, but about the pictures he had. Yes, he talked a great deal, not just with us but with many other visitors. He got into conversations. They had quite a collection, including Picasso.

GL: Did you speak with Gertrude Stein?
 AD: No, I never was interested. For some reason I never took an interest in her when she developed into the more interesting of the two people.

GL: She would have been a friend of Mabel Dodge.
 AD: Yes.

GL: Was it at the Macdowell Club that you met John Reed for the first time?
 AD: Yes.

GL: Did he introduce you to Mabel or had you already known her?
 AD: Well, a couple of fellows and I had an exhibition at the Macdowell Club and I went in one afternoon after lunch to see it; there was another fellow in there looking around and we got to chatting and his name was John Reed. It was he who told me about Mabel's evenings that she had and invited me to come to the next one, which I did, but she wasn't there. He had gone off on an assignment to Mexico and she had followed him as far as she could; it was after that that I got to know her—or because of that.

GL: Is that when you painted the canvas *The Absence of Mabel Dodge*?
 AD: At that time, yes, because he had invited me to come to one of her evenings and meet her, which I did. I went but she wasn't there and that is how one of my abstractions happened to be called *The Absence of Mabel Dodge*.

GL: Since you and he both used the term *Improvisation* for your paintings, had you seen the improvisation by Kandinsky in the Armory Show that Steiglitz bought?
 AD: I must have seen it because I was in the show myself.

GL: That's right. What did you exhibit in the Armory Show?
 AD: I think I had five paintings and a piece of sculpture (Fig. 6).

GL: How did you happen to exhibit a work of sculpture when you were primarily a painter? Your sculpture from the Armory Show is the one you called *Lucifer*. It was reproduced on a postcard which they sold. Where did you happen to sculpt it?
 AD: In Arthur Lee's studio. I went there one morning and he had a lot of clay in the general shape of a head. I saw the possibilities of a head.

GL: Do you remember participating and showing your work at the Anderson Galleries in the Forum Exhibition? It was a very lively exhibition.
 AD: Did I have something in it?
 GL: Yes, here is the picture of your *Improvisation*. Were you very interested in theories about color?
 AD: Naturally. Anyone that was doing anything was interested in method and origin.

GL: Have you ever heard of Chevreul and the laws of simultaneous color?
 AD: Yes.

GL: Morgan Russell came back from Paris in March of 1916 when the show was on at the Forum Exhibition.
 AD: Yes, I remember that. That's when he said "the hell with Synchronism." "I am through," he said. "I am through." And from then on I think he did realistic things.

GL: Yes, he did. I wonder why he said that. Did he give you any indication of what was the matter with Synchronism?
 AD: I guess he was just fed up with the commentaries that he had to read. He was annoyed, I know, with Macdonald-Wright. I do recall that he said, "I'm through with Synchronism," and I said, "I am also."

GL: Had you been experimenting with Synchronism?
 AD: All Synchronism meant is "with color."

GL: You'd been experimenting with abstract color. In your improvisations?
 AD: Yes, exactly, this is a good one (pointing to Fig. 8).

GL: You decided to give it up though, even though you liked it? This was done 1915-16 or '16.
 AD: Yes, I said it and then went back to nature. You know, to get a fresh start.

GL: Did it matter to you how the critics accepted your work?

AD: I don't think I was ever disturbed by them. They laughed at everything which was not academic. I could have taken them seriously because they meant what they said. Whatever the critics said, they must have meant to themselves, but that doesn't necessarily mean that I agreed.

GL: Did you know any of the European artists at the Armory Show? You met Matisse in Paris, but did you know the ones who came to this country?

AD: I don't remember which ones, but let's see . . . who was it who did the woman walking downstairs [*Nude Descending a Staircase*] that made such a sensation? I used to play chess with him in New York.

GL: Marcel Duchamp.

AD: Duchamp, Marcel Duchamp. We played chess together, occasionally.

GL: What was it that made Mabel Dodge so appealing to the artists?

AD: I suppose it was because of her interest in their work and what they were doing.

GL: Did she paint? Was she any good? Did she collect art?

AD: Yes, I would say she was good because everything she did was interesting (Fig. 12). I can't say she collected art, no. She collected what her friends gave her.

GL: How did she happen to come out to Taos?

AD: Maurice Stern worked on the island of Bali (I've forgotten whether for a year or more), and he got to New York. He couldn't adjust himself and someone said that he might be interested (because of his interest in the island of Bali) in the American Indians, and so he came out here. What he wrote Mabel was interesting enough, I think, to make her come posthaste to Taos in December 1917 to see what it was all about. Bobby Jones [Robert Edmond Jones, the set designer] and I got a telegram from her: "Taos is a wonderful place, you have got to come; I am sending you tickets, go to such and such an agency and bring me a cook." And here I am.

GL: Did you like what you found when you got out here?

AD: Dasburg: Oh, yes.

GL: What did you like about it?

AD: The vastness of the landscape, the things that don't exist anymore: the buildings, the adobe houses, the Indians, the Spanish people. Anyway, I liked it. Bobby Jones liked it, but never came back.

GL: But you came back.

AD: Oh yes, here I am. That's why I'm here now, because of that telegram. Or Maurice's discontent, if you want to attribute it to that.

I wish to thank both Andrew Dasburg, who in the course of several days in November 1977 in Taos, New Mexico shared with me memories of his early career, and his son Alfred Dasburg who provided invaluable help, including various letters and other documents referred to below. Further information on the artists discussed here is available in Gail Levin, *Synchronism and American Color Abstraction, 1910-1925*, George Braziller in association with the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 1978.

1. Since the catalogue of the exhibition went to press, I have uncovered documents (including Johnson's diary) indicating that this hike took place in the spring just before Russell left for Europe.
2. Exhibition of Paintings and Sculpture by: Oliver Chaffee, Konrad Cramer, Andrew Dasburg, Grace Johnson, Arthur Lee, Henry Lee McFee, Paul Rohland, William Zorach, The Macdowell Club of New York, November 13-23, 1913.
3. Willard Huntington Wright, "Impressionism to Synchronism," *Forum*, 50, December 1913, p. 770.
4. William Innes Homer, *Alfred Steiglitz and the American Avant-Garde*, New York Graphic Society, New York, 1977, p. 66.
5. Andrew Dasburg to Grace Mott Johnson, unpublished letter of March 14, 1912, from Yonkers, New York.
6. Dasburg to Johnson, Armory Show postcard of *Lucifer*, March 11, 1913, sent from New York to Johnson in Dinsmore, Florida.
7. Dasburg to Johnson, unpublished letter of March 13, 1913, from Yonkers, New York.
8. "News of the World of Art: 'Post-Futurists' Having Fun with Themselves and with the Public in Several City Galleries," *The World* (New York), Sunday, February 8, 1914. This and the other unidentified clippings cited in the following quotes are from the Mabel Dodge Luhan scrapbook, "Many Inventions 1914," in the Luhan Archives, Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut.
9. Another of Dasburg's lost improvisations is reproduced in *The Forum Exhibition of Modern American Painters*, Anderson Galleries, New York, March 13-25, 1916. Reprint, Arno Press, New York, 1968, n.p. and in Levin, *Synchronism*, p. 34.
10. *Forum Exhibition*, check list.
11. For additional information on Cramer, see Levin, *Synchronism*, and Sandra Gail Levin, "Wassily Kandinsky and the American Avant-Garde, 1912-1950," *New Brunswick*, N.J., 1976. A forthcoming article will provide much needed information on Cramer's important contribution to the American avant-garde.
12. Andrew Dasburg, "Cubism—Its Rise and Influence," *The Arts*, IV, no. 5, November 1923, p. 279-284.
13. Andrew Dasburg, quoted in Alexander Brook, "Andrew Dasburg," *The Arts*, VI, no. 1, July 1925, p. 19-26.