



The Sensuous Life of Adolf Dehn

American Master of Watercolor and Printmaking

HENRY ADAMS

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To the memory of Virginia Dehn, for preserving so well her husband's legacy on many fronts; to Clinton Adams, Richard Cox, and Philip Eliasoph for their splendid and informative writing about Dehn; and with particular thanks to Andy Lowe, as well as Ginny Lowe Connors and Derrick Lowe, for their patience and unstinting support of this project.



My attitude to life is rather sensuous—and sensual too—and only after I have filled myself with sensuous experiences can I go about working. Putting it simply: when I am fed up, I work. I am crazy about life and want to have as much out of it as I can. Take away my work and I lose interest in life, yet the work comes after my living life, or rather out of it.

—Adolf Dehn

Contents

Author's Note ix

INTRODUCTION ~ The Painter by the Sea 3

CHAPTER ONE ~ Family Background 15

CHAPTER TWO ~ Childhood and Art School 35

CHAPTER THREE ~ The Move to New York 63

CHAPTER FOUR ~ Radical Politics and Imprisonment 71

CHAPTER FIVE ~ The Sexual Awakening of Wanda Gág 97

CHAPTER SIX ~ Mura Zipervitch 115

CHAPTER SEVEN ~ Vienna, Berlin, and Paris 133

CHAPTER EIGHT ~ European Satires 163

CHAPTER NINE ~ The Paris Lithographs 195

CHAPTER TEN ~ Return to the United States and the Great Crash 217

CHAPTER ELEVEN ~ Hard Times 255

CHAPTER TWELVE ~ Watercolors, Elizabeth Timberman, and Colorado Springs 263

CHAPTER THIRTEEN ~ The Automobile, the Road, and the American Land 309

CHAPTER FOURTEEN ~ Associated American Artists and *Life* Magazine 337

CHAPTER FIFTEEN ~ The Years with Virginia 363

CHAPTER SIXTEEN ~ The Late Years 391

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN ~ Virginia after Adolf 423

AFTERWORD ~ Dehn's Place in the History of Art 427

Notes 437

Selected Bibliography 459

Index 463

Author's Note

WRITING ABOUT ADOLF DEHN PRESENTS an unusual dilemma: dealing with the sheer profusion of artistic and documentary material. His drawings, lithographs, and watercolors number in the thousands, and he also produced some notable oil paintings, although not in such quantity. His papers, most of them donated by his devoted widow, Virginia Engleman Dehn, to the Archives of American Art at the Smithsonian Institution, are also voluminous—including quantities of letters whose handwriting is hard to read and which are filled with cryptic references to people who aren't fully identified. The circle widens if we add the papers of his first girlfriend, Wanda Gág, who accumulated over a hundred volumes of her diary filled with intimate musings, and the challenges of research are widened still further if we make an effort to document the extraordinary range of Dehn's friends, many of them remarkable figures in their own right, such as the poet E. E. Cummings, the painter Reginald Marsh, or the tragic and mentally disturbed but fascinating editor of the *Dial*, Scofield Thayer.

In working through this morass of data to compile the first full-scale biography of Dehn, I've been enormously indebted to the work of earlier scholars, whose publications are listed more fully in the bibliography. Of the writers on Dehn, Richard W. Cox should be singled out for the grace of his prose, the depth and accuracy of his research, and the degree to which he seems to have connected with both Dehn's life and art at some deep emotional level—almost as if Dehn were his doppelgänger of some sort. Cox also had the opportunity to interview people who are today no longer living, such as Virginia Dehn and Mura Ziperovitch. His writings on Dehn provided the basic armature on which this book has been built, and my debt to his work is incalculable.

While this book was being written, I've benefited from lively discussions with Philip Eliasoph, the distinguished art historian and an inspiring guide and mentor, whose wonderful book *Adolf Dehn: Midcentury Manhattan* appeared as I was working on the manuscript. For decades Philip has been one of the major pathbreakers in the field of American art, and his tome is full of lively and astute observations. He's also a marvelous human being, a scholar of true generosity and breadth of vision.

For Wanda Gág I've drawn particularly from the research of Audur H. Winnan, whose catalogue raisonné of Gág's prints also contains a

superb biographical essay and an appendix providing extensive excerpts from her diary. This resource is nicely supplemented by Julie L'Enfant's fascinating account of the Gág family, with much new material about Wanda's father and siblings.

One of the surprises of working on Dehn, whose work so often focuses on urban scenes, is that he grew up in rural Minnesota as the offspring of hunters and trappers. For this aspect of Dehn's story I've drawn particularly from an unpublished compilation of family history and family stories by Lauri Dehn Tiala, Adolf Dehn's nephew: "Great Dehn Tales and Trails to a Place with Chickadees."

For Dehn's later career, an invaluable source—a sort of central reference point—has been a forty-six-page handwritten memorandum by his second wife, Virginia. Indeed, it's due to Virginia Dehn's extensive and well-considered activities in finding appropriate homes for Dehn's papers, prints, and artistic estate that it's possible to reconstruct his life and artistic activities in such detail. Others who have supplied help and inspiration at key points include Dehn's niece and nephew, Virginia Connors and Andy Lowe; James Dempsey, a superbly gifted journalist and writer, whose biography of Scofield Thayer is masterful; Nancy Keithley, an ardent supporter of the arts in Cleveland; William Siebenschuh, Oviatt Professor of English at Case Western Reserve University; and Tula Telfair, professor of painting at Wesleyan University.

While Dehn's landscapes often have a lyrical side, in his presentation of the human species he often challenged traditional decorum and good taste. His art often portrays such subjects as burlesque shows, prostitutes, the follies of the rich, and the antics of performers and comedians, including African American blues singers. In his time this was clearly a shocking thing to do; and in some regards, although in rather different ways, it remains shocking today—perhaps even more shocking—since we live in a moment when attitudes toward gender and race are going through major changes and are sensitive topics to put forward.

Dehn clearly believed that breaking through conventional standards of decorum was a worthwhile thing to do—that it would be a positive thing to explode some of the hypocrisies of the world—although in retrospect, of course, it's apparent that he was very much a product of his time and was part of a culture that held attitudes very different from those of today. While it's easy to impose moralizing judgments that are based on present-day values, and to view him as a racist or male chauvinist, or to attach some other unflattering label, I don't believe such terms accurately capture either his character or his intentions. To my mind it's more interesting to try to recover what Dehn was attempting to accomplish and to see his art as an extraordinarily illuminating record of the time in which he lived—a mirror of its social, sexual, and

moral values, boundaries, tensions, and insecurities. Surely one of the most valuable functions of art is to enable us to step outside the narrow parameters of our daily experience and to challenge our conventional notions of “good taste.”

In a key regard, in fact, this study was undertaken with an approach very different from that of much art history now in vogue. To an increasing degree, art history has become a vehicle for the expression of agendas and for the exercise of what is known as “theory”—often the exposure of alleged social, racial, gendered, or colonial hierarchies. I do not wish to dismiss such efforts, but their danger is that they can create a closed system in which almost anything can be used to confirm conclusions that have been firmly fixed in advance, to use facts only to confirm our preexisting prejudices. It can become a little like the venture of those close-minded tourists who go on trips only to complain petulantly about all the things that aren't exactly the same as they are at home.

To me, one of the fascinations of a story like this is to step into a world, and an art world, that functioned on principles very different from those of today, in which things that often seem peculiar or even outlandish now were accepted as a matter of course, and things that we take for granted (like automobile travel) were something novel and opened up new vistas of experience. Dehn and his girlfriends often crossed traditional boundaries. It's not surprising that in doing so they often erred and stumbled. In short, Dehn's life story, and his art, afford the opportunity to vicariously step out of the usual frameworks in which we live, to step outside of ourselves, and to try to imagine what it would be like to be a different self in a different era.

To raise another sensitive topic, one of the surprises of this project has been to discover the degree to which Dehn's love life, including its awkward fumbblings, is documented in some detail not only in his own accounts but in the letters, journals, and statements of his various wives and girlfriends, particularly Wanda Gág, Mura Zipervitch, and Virginia Dehn. In fact, this was a period of rapidly changing sexual mores, in which new ideas of love and marriage partnership, and new rules of intimate engagement, were being established. The constraints of Victorian marriage and gender roles were being challenged. Likewise, hitherto taboo forms of sexual expression, such as lesbianism and homosexuality, were starting to come out into the open. Humor often served as a guise—and a disguise—for exploring and entering into these arenas. At times the intimacy of this material has made me blush, but we know that Wanda Gág desired that her diary should someday be made public, and Dehn would not have kept his papers and correspondence so assiduously if he did not want their contents to be preserved—and available to future readers.

Clearly Virginia Dehn put hard work into ensuring that the full record would be preserved for precisely this reason. This book is in large degree a product of her efforts; hopefully, it will not mark the end of investigation into Dehn's life and art, including its most intimate and perplexing aspects, but will set the foundation for future studies.

Acknowledgments

Production of this book was especially complicated because of all the disruptions caused by COVID-19, which made many tasks that would usually be easy to carry out extremely challenging. I owe particular thanks to Brian Bendlin, copy editor extraordinaire, and Drew Griffith, production manager, who worked beyond the call of duty under very difficult circumstances. They both deserve gold medals for courage under fire. It's rather amazing that we've emerged from all these hassles as good friends. Thanks as well to the Press's Mary Conley, who dealt with a great number of unusual difficulties of one sort or another that might otherwise have been overlooked. I also owe an inestimable debt to acquisitions editor Gary Kass, who patiently pushed this project forward over a period of several years.

The Sensuous Life of Adolf Dehn

The Painter by the Sea

A CURIOUS WATERCOLOR BY ADOLF DEHN, executed in grisaille (that is, shades of gray), shows a woman in Victorian garb, with a pillar-like form almost like a lighthouse, perched on a high cliff, against a background of ocean and the setting sun. The overall effect is a bit cartoonlike, in a mode reminiscent of the *New Yorker*. She is looking downward, and below her, in the direction of her glance, apparently heedless of her presence, is a tiny artist on the rocky edge of the shore who is working energetically at his easel—totally, one might even say frantically, absorbed in his work, apparently rushing to complete it before the light is gone.

We can see that the lower edge of the sun has already slipped a bit below the line of water. In a moment it will disappear below the horizon. The fluffy cotton clouds are mottled by explosive rays of the sinking sun-globe. Though the painter figure is half in dark shadow, with the result that he reads as a silhouette, on the side turned away from us he is being hit by the full force of the sun's blasting rays, which form a sort of highway behind him, leading our eye on to the horizon, and beyond that to the infinite. So for the moment at least he is bathed both in sunlight and in the glow of a woman's gaze.

While not dated, the work is, in its general style, similar to the illustrations Dehn made for an edition of *Selected Tales of Guy de Maupassant*, published by Random House in 1945. But it is not among the illustrations published in the book, and doesn't correspond with any episode in the stories. While possibly made for this purpose, perhaps as a sort of decorative vignette, surely it's a concoction of Adolf Dehn's own invention—something that had a personal meaning for him, a parable or allegory of some sort.

One might propose, in fact, that it's a sort of summation of Dehn's artistic life and the impulses and psychological needs that lay behind it—that perhaps it's illustrative of some hunger he felt for a woman's benevolent guidance and support, of his desire to bask in a woman's loving gaze, and of something about the practice of art that places humankind in direct contact with the infinite which stretches out before us like an ocean. Throughout his career, Dehn created his art under the gaze of a strong woman in his life. As a child he seems to have turned to art with the blessing of his mother, Emilie, whose warm approval helped him to deal with the violent emotional outbursts and criticisms of his father. Later he sought women—the printmaker and illustrator Wanda Gág; his first wife, the dancer Mura



Fig. Int.1. Adolf Dehn, *The Painter by the Sea*, ca. 1945. Ink and wash, 16.37 x 12.87 in. Estate of Adolf and Virginia Dehn, Suffield, CT.

Ziperovitch; the poet Ilene Lake; the actress and photographer Elizabeth Timberman; and, finally, his second wife, Virginia Engleman Dehn, the one who best understood his needs—who would take on this companionable, nurturing role. Indeed, the woman bears a striking resemblance to Virginia Engleman, whom he first met around the time he created the painting.

While whimsical, there's also a feeling that this design confronts themes that are cosmic: that the ocean, the setting sun, the woman, and the frantic artist are all symbolic in some way. Oceans surely symbolize something

large, overwhelming, even ungraspable, such as sex or death. We can see that the light will fade—perhaps in some symbolic sense, life is about to come to an end and the artist’s struggle is a fight against that fact. We can’t help feeling that in this design, Adolf Dehn was struggling to sum up the meaning of his artistic life in allegorical terms. While the overall effect is humorous, there’s also something mysterious, haunting, and even slightly ominous about the piece. It feels like a confession.

Adolf Dehn: “Happy Artist”

Today Adolf Dehn is one of those curious figures who is both famous and unknown. Most visitors to the Metropolitan Museum of Art would probably not recognize his name, but over the last few decades his watercolor of 1941, *Spring in Central Park* (see the frontispiece to this book), has become one of the best-loved and most widely known of the museum’s works. It adorns calendars, greeting cards, and shopping bags in the museum store and has been widely reproduced in books. Its popularity completely overwhelms and overshadows that of many paintings in the Metropolitan by artists who are much more celebrated, such as Pablo Picasso and Rembrandt.

Perhaps part of the immense appeal of the watercolor, in fact, is that it doesn’t seem to demand that we set it on a pedestal and think of it as art. It quietly slips into our lives. We respond to it as directly and unself-consciously as we respond to New York City itself. We’re less interested in knowing who made it than we are in taking a little walk into the world portrayed in the painting and in observing, and delighting in the variety, of the people that have joined us for the stroll: the man and his little boy walking their dog, the man reading a newspaper, the strutting soldiers, the couple reclining on the grass. We’re so engaged by people watching, and by identifying the various buildings, such as the Empire State Building and the Hotel Pierre—since we, like the artist, have a touch of cultural sophistication—that it doesn’t occur to us to ask who made the painting. To look at it is like absentmindedly flipping through the pages of the *New Yorker* and entering into a delicious dream state.

Lighthearted is probably the word that first comes to mind when we think of the work of Adolf Dehn. Harry Salpeter, who wrote one of the major contemporary articles on Dehn in May 1941 for *Esquire* magazine, titled it “Adolf Dehn: Happy Artist,” and there’s a whimsical, frolicsome, gently satirical quality to Dehn’s work that suggests a relaxed, good-humored temperament. This is also a quality that often comes out in photographs of him, such as the playful picture of him and Virginia on a tandem bicycle or the smiling portrait of him reclining, taken by celebrity photographer Irving Penn in 1947 at the height of Dehn’s popularity and fame. But this is surely not the full story; far from it.



Fig. Int.2. Irving Penn, *Adolf Dehn*, 1947. Estate of Adolf and Virginia Dehn, Suffield, CT.

Born in Waterville, Minnesota, on November 22, 1895, Adolf Dehn was the descendant of farmers who had emigrated from Germany and homesteaded in the region, initially in a one-room log cabin with a dirt floor. Adolf's father, Arthur Clark Dehn, was a hunter and trapper who knew how to survive off the land, took pride in his independence, had no boss but himself, and had little regard for art. During Adolf's childhood the walls of his bedroom and the space under his bed were filled with the pelts of mink, muskrats, and skunks that his father had killed, skinned, and stretched on drying boards, as well as ginseng roots, which his father also harvested, laid out to dry on old newspapers. Adolf's mother, Emilie Haase Dehn—who was, it appears, somewhat more gentle in spirit, less rough-hewn than her husband—was socialist in her inclinations, a cautious feminist, and a faithful member of the German Lutheran Evangelical Church. It is a curious background for an artist whose signature works one day would feature the café life of Berlin, New York, and Paris.¹

Nothing in the family background spoke of cultural refinement or art, though his father was definitely a man who thought for himself and was ready to buck convention. Arthur Clark Dehn was an atheist and political radical, a supporter of the common folk against moneyed business interests, and—in surprising contrast to his distinctly irascible temperament—a pacifist who felt that wars were the creation of kings and plutocrats and



Fig. Int.3. Adolf and Virginia Dehn, ca. 1955. Estate of Adolf and Virginia Dehn, Suffield, CT.

brought nothing to the poor soldiers who fought and died in them. Such culture as existed in the home (for Adolf's father left school in the sixth grade and could hardly read) came from imbibing books and periodicals of a free-thinking radical bent, such as Thomas Paine's *The Age of Reason*, Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, and, of course, the Bible—which in the Dehn family was regarded as a manifesto for radical social change.

As a young man Adolf was also a political radical and social idealist, and was imprisoned, bullied, harassed, and spat upon during World War I—at some points even threatened with death—because of his pacifist beliefs. While he seldom spoke of it afterward, the experience was clearly traumatic and deeply affected his outlook toward humankind.

Lighthearted? The sheer volume of Dehn's production suggests a strongly driven personality, and in fact, if we dig into his biography a little, we discover that throughout his life he was subject to severe mood swings and depression—not surprising, perhaps, for an artist who suffered financial adversity for much of his career, who had to live by his wits, and whose career was marked by false starts, divorce and failed romance, and constant struggles to keep up with changes in an art world whose tastes always seemed to change just as he was on the brink of achieving success.

By the end of his career, in the 1960s, Dehn enjoyed quite a substantial income and had finally made a very happy marriage, to Virginia Engleman.

But the years had taken their toll, and his eyes were shadowed by sadness. In the weeks before his death he was afflicted with insomnia, an outbreak of shingles, and a serious neurological disease, tic douloureux, which seriously hampered his ability to work—though he continued to push himself at an almost frantic pace. His death from a massive heart attack on May 19, 1968, was apparently in large part due to seriously high blood pressure—at once a symptom and cause of emotional tension. While it would be wrong to ignore the lighthearted spirit of much of Dehn’s work, as has already been intimated, there were surely other more troubled, anxious qualities that gave birth to his art as well—qualities that he sought both to mask and to express.²

Dehn’s art possesses greater emotional depth than has been realized, and, for all its seeming casualness, was the product of much hard work.

Who Was Adolf Dehn?

At the height of his career in the 1940s and 1950s, Adolf Dehn was a nationally recognized figure. His work won the favor of leading New York art critics, and it was acquired by America’s most illustrious museums, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Modern Art, and the Whitney Museum of American Art. Some museums, such as the Butler Institute of American Art in Youngstown, Ohio, took the trouble to acquire literally hundreds of Adolf Dehn watercolors and drawings. He held a noteworthy teaching position at the Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center; he twice received a prestigious Guggenheim Fellowship; he was represented by one of New York’s foremost art galleries, Associated American Artists; and he was patronized by major American corporations such as Standard Oil and Time Incorporated. He was regularly featured in national magazines, such as *Coronet*, *Esquire*, and *Life*, and writers described him with such flattering phrases as “the American George Grosz” and “the Debussy of the lithograph.”³

In 1955 Dehn’s nephew, Lauri Dehn Tiala (it should be noted that Lauri is a man’s name, the Finnish equivalent of Larry) was dating an art student at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts. He thought it might impress her if he told her that his uncle was Adolf Dehn. Had she heard of him? “Of course,” she replied. “He’s America’s foremost lithographer and I’ve just read his new book *Water Color Painting*.”⁴

Even at this high point of his reputation, however, Dehn never quite moved into the first tier of American artists—and today his name does not appear in any general survey of American art, although it is sometimes included in surveys of printmaking or closely focused studies of American art in the 1930s. There seem to be two reasons for this.

One is that Dehn produced relatively little work in oil, which is still the most accepted medium for major artistic statements. Most of his work

was in lithography or watercolor, which are often dismissed as “minor” art forms and are also forms that are sensitive to light, with the result being that even museums with large holdings of Dehn’s work seldom place it on display.

In the nineteenth century, with the invention of the rotary press—which made possible enormous newspaper print runs and spurred the development of popular, mass-market magazines—illustration developed into an artistic realm of its own, one often quite lucrative but surprisingly divorced from the world of museums and art exhibitions. This is a realm that today remains surprisingly overlooked by most art historians. Dehn was, in many regards, a product of this world, although in an unusual way, since as a young man he produced most of his illustrative work not for popular magazines, such as the *Saturday Evening Post*, but rather for radical journals, such as *The Masses* or the *Liberator*, or artistic “little magazines” such as the *Dial*. This background established the foundation of his outlook, and led later to his unique and distinctive contribution to American graphic art. Only in the mid-1930s, when he took up watercolor, did Dehn begin to employ color in his work; and he seems to have taken up oil painting only at the end of his career.

The second reason is that, overall, Dehn’s style is difficult for art historians to pigeonhole. While his works often have early modernist, regionalist, or social realist elements, they don’t neatly fit into any of these categories. He’s a sort of chameleon figure who seems to move from one art center to the next, always fitting in harmoniously with his setting but generally not distinguishing himself as outrageous, radical, or different. Like the character of Zelig in Woody Allen’s film of that name, he always seems to be standing next to major figures of his time, such as the poet E. E. Cummings or the painters Thomas Hart Benton or Reginald Marsh—but no one quite remembers why he’s there. Often when we trace Dehn’s life his own personality seems to slip into the background and the voice that tells the story is that of his more confident, more sexually liberated girlfriends and wives. It’s almost as if Dehn was not a personality in his own right but a sort of mirror that reflected the qualities of whomever he was with. Subjects have a way of demanding their own peculiar forms of narrative. In writing this biography, I’ve often found somewhat to my surprise that I was not portraying Dehn himself but reaching for his character through a description of his friends, mentors, and associates as well as the women who loved him.

In the narrative that follows, the time devoted to Dehn’s girlfriends and wives may at times verge on the excessive but, in fact, Dehn’s artistic phases correspond very neatly with his shifting romantic relationships. Ironically, the period of his romance with the most artistically notable of his paramours, Wanda Gág, produced his least notable work. But Dehn’s

subsequent phases—the satirical prints and drawings of the 1920s, the regionalist work of the 1930s, and the faux-naive watercolors of his later career—all neatly correspond with the periods of his relationships with different women: Mura Ziperovitch, Elizabeth Timberman, and Virginia Engleman.

Curiously, all of these women come through more strongly as personalities than does the artist himself; Dehn always seems to be something of a bystander, a voyeur, someone watching intently from a distance without giving clues about his own character. Perhaps this suggests some element of passivity on Dehn's part, but alternatively one can see this as a positive thing, his sensitivity to the emergence of "the new woman" in this period, to women who threw aside Victorian constraints and were more sexually liberated, and more determined to be taken seriously and to leave a mark on the world, than women of the past. To an extraordinary degree, Dehn's artistic career derived its distinctive shape from this phenomenon.

To be sure, Dehn's attention to attractive women, his obsession with showgirls and the burlesque, has a touch of male chauvinism. We can see this as a fault, or we can be fascinated by the fact that Dehn was very much a man of his time who revealed the underlying feelings and fantasies, as well as the emotional confusions, of the period in a way that most other texts and images fail to illuminate. Sometimes art is fascinating as much for what it unintentionally reveals as for what it consciously seeks to express. With Dehn's work this is surely often the case.

Dehn made some major technical contributions that had wide influence. If there's a distinctive quality to his work, it is his skill in introducing unusual tonal and textural effects—particularly in printmaking, but also in watercolor. Jackson Pollock seems to have been one of many notable artists who were influenced by his techniques.

Such issues aside, Dehn's life story traced a remarkable trajectory, which provides insight into many of the major political, cultural, sexual, and artistic changes of the early twentieth century. The scion of a homesteading, sod-busting Minnesota pioneer family, he represents the American tradition of "Go west, young man!" in reverse, since he pursued much of his career in sophisticated art centers, such as Berlin, New York, Paris, and Vienna. Initially a committed socialist and political radical, he is best remembered today for nostalgic farm scenes, lyrical landscapes, and whimsical satires of the cafés and nightclubs of the gay 1920s. Yet if we take the trouble to trace this arc, we quickly discover that there are issues of surprising emotional depth that Dehn explored in his work; his guise of a lighthearted observer of human foibles was something of a mask. In the end, what's fascinating is the degree to which Dehn put his life down on paper as an almost daily record.

The Great God Pan

Dehn's sense of humor in his art has a particular character, a quality as distinct and unique as the expressive brushwork of a master painter or the signature on a check. In visual terms, his figures have little anatomy; he draws them with flowing, balloon-like forms. We can sense the playful, childlike rhythms of his hand. In narrative terms his humor often has to do with sexual undercurrents and our tendency to screen them out, to pretend they're not there.



Fig. Int.4. Adolf Dehn, *The Great God Pan*, 1940. Color serigraph, 9.81 x 13.62 in. Estate of Adolf and Virginia Dehn, Suffield, CT.

The most interesting works of art are those that can be interpreted in more than one way, and this is surely the case with one of Dehn's most remarkable prints, *The Great God Pan* of 1940, which deals with the theme of sex through the unlikely subject of a group of nuns in a parklike setting: a field by a pond, where they are creating landscape paintings. It must be early spring: the field is full of flowers, and the trees in the background are covered with early spring's blossoms. Three nuns with easels make up the foreground, and in the background are a considerable number of

additional nuns—eighteen in all, if you take the trouble to count. Surely it's a male fantasy, often pictured in representations of Pan, to be surrounded by a bevy of women. But usually the women are naked and beautiful—not nuns with blobby silhouettes. Something has gone bonkers; it is not what we should expect.⁵

Much has been written since the 1970s about “the male gaze” and how it objectifies and subjugates women, transforming them into objects under the dominion of male desire. As we're constantly reminded in art historical literature of this sort, many of the key landmarks of modern art, from Édouard Manet's *Olympia* to Pablo Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger*, fit into this paradigm, often in ways that are distinctly demeaning to women.

While Dehn lived long before this modern feminist rhetoric had been devised, surely he sensed these issues at some level. What's fascinating is how closely his image conforms to the terms of this rhetoric while subverting it in an intensely humorous fashion. For rather than having the woman being gazed at by the man or men, he shows the symbol of male phallic potency, the god Pan, whose body is being subjected to the gaze of women—and nuns, at that! We can interpret the image in many different ways—depending, for one thing, on whether we see the nuns as heedless or clueless about what they're looking at or as hyperattentively aware.

With beaming faces the nuns are dabbing their canvases or holding up their brushes as a visual marker, to gauge the proportion of some tree or landscape feature. But they seem oblivious to the fact that in the center of the design the nude figure of Pan, with his genitals turned toward us, is cavorting in the pond. But are they really oblivious? The humor of the piece depends on the contrast between the sexless nuns and the very sexual deity; on the seeming obliviousness of the nuns to the sexual aspects of the scene; and to the question of whether they really *are* oblivious, or are just pretending to be, or perhaps again see this sexual aspect of things very clearly but are sublimating it into the language of art. Notably, it's not only the naked figure of Pan that expresses sexual energy; the blossoming flowers and trees of the landscape possess an intensely sexual quality as well. Sex, the print seems to propose, lies at the heart of everything in life. What do you make of this if you're a nun? And, indeed, what should you make of this if you're a woman who's not a nun? Should you maintain a nunlike decorum or succumb to the power of lust? At some level, what's funny about Dehn's image is his unwillingness to decisively choose which meaning he intends, as well as his unwillingness to cast judgment.

In fact, there's also an interesting further layer of meaning to the print, easily missed by today's viewers, for the phrase “the great

god Pan” comes from a once well-known poem by Elizabeth Barrett Browning, “A Musical Instrument,” of 1860, which describes how Pan created mayhem by the riverbank, trampling lilies and plants, scaring away the dragonflies, and then breaking and notching a reed to produce song and poetry:

What was he doing, the great god Pan,
Down in the reeds by the river?
Spreading ruin and scattering ban,
Splashing and paddling with hoofs of a goat,
And breaking the golden lilies afloat
With the dragon-fly on the river.

While it never breaks through the boundaries of Victorian propriety, Browning’s poem is essentially a rumination on male lust and the ways in which it is both alluring and frightening to a woman, something often brusque, crude, and destructive but also the quality that lies at the heart of art—and at the foundation of love. By the end of the poem Pan is laughing as he makes “a poet out of a man,” but

The true gods sigh for the cost and pain,—
For the reed which grows nevermore again . . .

Dehn’s print is not only a funny image in its own right but is a sort of deconstruction of Browning’s poem—one that blows off the lid to reveal what the poem is really all about. His print is clearly a comment on sexual repression, and an attempt to lift the lid on such repression; but, notably, it also has a repressed aspect. Throughout his career, and certainly in this piece to a striking degree, Dehn’s handling of female anatomy has a perfunctory quality. He never loses himself in the sensual substance and textures of the female body. One never feels the softness of silky skin and the contrasting hardness of bone. While he liked to put forward the persona of the man of the world, the rake, when one investigates the romances of his life, his successive relationships with women, they often seem to have had a tentative quality, some mysterious fear of commitment and physical conquest. In at least one of his guises, he himself was something of a desexualized nun. The humor of the piece ultimately comes from the fact that he could recognize that about himself.

What does seem sure, for all its ambiguities, is that at some level Dehn’s print is a statement about the liberating qualities of art. Nothing could be more sensual than making a painting, which invites us to visually explore and visually caress the textures of the world around us, and then to

re-create those feelings through the caress of a brushstroke on paper or canvas. Not simply Pan, but nature itself, has an intensely sexual aspect. Art allows us to connect with this fact on every level—including levels that would be dangerous in real life.

Family Background

ADOLF DEHN'S BACKGROUND WAS SEEMINGLY an unlikely one for an artist—let alone for one largely remembered today for the sophisticated urbanity of his work. His childhood in Waterville, Minnesota, was isolated and rural and almost devoid of artistic culture. His forebears were sod-busting pioneers. As one journalist said of Dehn in the 1920s, "He was born with a pitchfork in his mouth instead of the traditional silver spoon."¹ A brief look at Dehn's family, going back to his great-grandfather, provides some interesting clues into his character, disclosing some family patterns and beliefs that he absorbed and others that he vigorously rebelled against.

Imbedded into this family history are many of the values that Dehn exhibited throughout his career: opposition to war, hatred of social injustice, suspicion of organized religion, independence of thinking and action, and even "stubbornness," which the artist George Biddle singled out as one of Dehn's most notable traits.² At the same time, the harshness of Dehn's childhood—its social isolation, its relative lack of art or cultural entertainment, its constricted expression of love or tender sentiment—was something he spent his life trying to escape. His penchant for satire was surely a quality that grew out of a family atmosphere of constant backbiting and criticism. Not least, Dehn's awareness of the dangers of sexual commitment, and that marriage and children could become a form of imprisonment, was clearly rooted in his childhood experience—in the hardships of survival and maintaining a household on the Minnesota frontier and in his parents' troubled marriage. One senses that he turned to art as an escape from all of that.

As a Midwestern art dealer has explained:

Like many artists of the period, Dehn came from a dysfunctional family mired in poverty. His creativity was a form of escape from the realities of his family life. In this he resembles my father, who was driven to be an artist without any family support or approval. My father's creativity was where he sought refuge from the challenges of growing up in Terre Haute, Indiana, with his coal miner father and mentally ill mother. I think Dehn had similar challenges and no family appreciation of artistic pursuits. I think it's critical that he came from a family outside of the cultural elite. I think it might be a consistent pattern in the lives of many artists.³

Dehn's great-grandfather, Gottfried Dehn, born in 1815, fled from Prussia in 1846 to escape military conscription, hiding in a trunk that was shipped to England, where he rejoined his wife and children, and then taking ship from Liverpool to America. His family had long been opposed to militarism, having lost two of Gottfried's older brothers at the bloody Battle of Ligny, fought against Napoleon Bonaparte a day before the Battle of Waterloo. Gottfried settled first in Wisconsin, but in 1854, when the Minnesota Territory opened up, he moved to Minnesota with his family in a covered wagon to a location near German Lake, which later became the town of Waterville. There he constructed a cabin to get through the winter and established a farm on what had formerly been open prairie. Though Gottfried and his wife, Frederika, continued to speak German, their children learned to speak English in school. According to family legend, in 1862, when an Indian war broke out, the family home was spared because of the family's friendship with an Indian named Beavertooth. When Beavertooth was captured and condemned to death, they petitioned to save him from being hanged.

Adolf Dehn's grandfather, Frederick Dehn, born in Germany, was Gottfried's oldest son and was named for one of the two brothers who were killed at Ligny. He married a local farmer's daughter, Mary Possen, and Dehn's father, Arthur Clark Dehn, born on February 4, 1871, was their first son and Gottfried's first grandchild.



Fig. 1.1. Frederika Hagenstein Dehn and Gottfried Dehn, ca. 1887. Estate of Adolf and Virginia Dehn, Suffield, CT.

Frederick and Mary initially supported themselves through farming, but in 1890, eager to increase their income, Mary decided to open a store, and they purchased a building in Waterville next to the Commercial Hotel on Main Street and only three blocks from the Minneapolis and St. Louis Railway station. The two-story structure was twenty-four feet wide and fifty feet long, and on the street level contained a store that sold candy, dry goods, cloth, and millinery; the family lived upstairs. According to

Fig. 1.2. Frederick Dehn, ca. 1887. Estate of Adolf and Virginia Dehn, Suffield, CT.

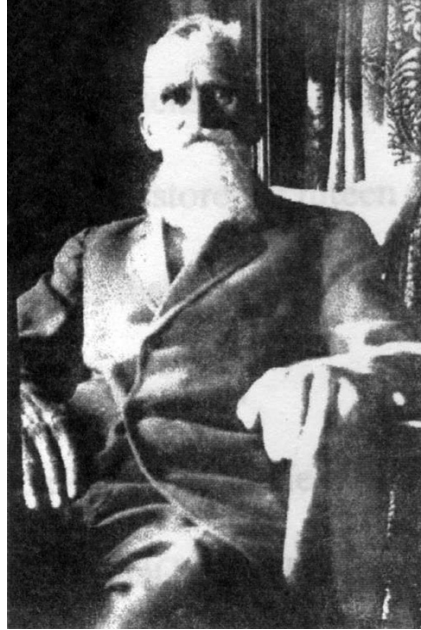


Fig. 1.3. Mary Possen Dehn, n.d. Estate of Adolf and Virginia Dehn, Suffield, CT.



accounts passed down in the family, Mary reveled in the business of the store but Frederick did not adjust well, and Arthur watched him transform from a self-sufficient farmer to a household drudge, constantly badgered by his wife, for the constant strain of childbearing, storekeeping, and household work had left Mary ill-tempered. As Arthur's grandson, Lauri Dehn Tiala, has written, "Frederick's price for his precious children was a bitter, nagging wife. Arthur was touched by the friction between his parents. He never heard them express love and thus never learned to show it himself. From his mother he discovered how to manipulate, but instead of tears and tantrums he found that feigned anger with swearing was most effective."⁴



Fig. 1.4. Mary Possen Dehn in front of her store in Waterville, 1897. Estate of Adolf and Virginia Dehn, Suffield, CT.

Adolf Dehn's Father, Arthur Clark Dehn

The area where the Dehn family lived was sparsely settled, and Arthur Dehn became a skilled hunter and trapper at an early age. His business acumen is suggested by an incident from his boyhood. Blue Earth County had a gopher infestation, and the county commissioners put a bounty of five cents on pocket gophers and two cents on striped gophers. The tails of the animals had to be presented to get payment. Business was good at first. With the help of his sisters, Arthur killed about a half dozen pocket gophers and twenty to thirty striped gophers a day. This earned him seventy-five or eighty cents, a profit of about seventy cents a day once he had paid off his sisters. This was almost as much as a hired man earned for a full day's work.

After a few weeks, however, the slaughter began to take its toll: gophers were harder to find. The profits dropped to forty cents, then thirty, then

twenty-five. At this point it occurred to Arthur to trap the gophers alive, cut off their tails, and release them so that they could continue to multiply. Profits rose once more, but unfortunately, he made the mistake of boasting about his business technique to some friends, and when word got back to the county commissioners they removed the bounty.⁵

Fig. 1.5. Adolf Dehn, *Arthur Dehn*, 1916. Lithography crayon and pencil drawing, 11.5 x 8 in. Estate of Adolf and Virginia Dehn, Suffield, CT.



Arthur, or Art, as he was known, matured into an anarchist and atheist—and a hard-bitten hunter and trapper. Adolf Dehn's first wife, Mura Ziporovitch, would later remember Art as “more handsome than any man should be, free-as-the wind, original in what he had to say, and absolutely remote and tight-fisted.”⁶ He left school early, and to support himself, worked at various jobs, although he always found it difficult to work for anyone else.

His first regular job was hitching up old Doc Humphrey's horse and buggy and driving him on his house calls. For years, Humphrey had been

the only doctor in the region. One day they passed by the cemetery where many of the first settlers were buried, and Doc told Art to stop. He then got out, thoughtfully surveyed the scene and, with a majestic wave of his arm, declared, "Look, Art, I doctored all of them." Art couldn't restrain himself and broke out into hysterical laughter.⁷

That's how he lost his first job.

Art moved on to cutting stove wood with a big bucksaw for the businesses in town, including his mother's store. But he found that he couldn't compete with Joe Warner, who had a horse-powered treadmill that drove a saw blade. Warner could produce more wood, and faster, and this undercut Art's prices.

Consequently, Art fell back on trapping and on digging ginseng, a root prized for its medicinal properties. The best time for ginseng was the early fall, since it was more sensitive than most other ground plants and changed color first, making it easy to spot. After September's ginseng harvest came the trapping, which was easiest when there was a light dusting of snow that left animal tracks. While mink pelts were the most valuable, Art also trapped muskrat and skunk, and he scattered pelts stretched on boards for drying all over the house—behind the stove and under the beds. His mother insisted, however, that skunk pelts had to be dried outdoors in the woodshed. For a time he even tried to sell skunk oil, as a medicine that made one's hair grow, but after a first success with one red-haired customer, demand evaporated and he gave up the business.⁸

One of Art's more memorable life experiences of this period occurred on the Fourth of July 1890. With his friend Albert, Art took charge of shooting off an old cannon. After each shot Art dipped a sponge in a bucket of water and swabbed out the barrel to kill the fire. Then Albert put a bag holding a pound of powder in the barrel and rammed it to the breech with an oak ramrod. They then stood clear while an older man, George Hammil, put a cap in the touch hole and shot off the cannon.

Unfortunately, after about sixty shots, the stick of wood that Art was using to swab the cannon went through the sponge, which slipped backward from the end of the stick by about six inches and consequently didn't cool the burning-hot barrel. Art didn't think anything about it, but the consequences were momentous. When Albert pushed in the bag of gunpowder, it touched the hot metal of the cannon and exploded. Hammil, who had his hand over the touch hole, had his thumb blown off. Albert had his clothes on one side completely burned away, leaving his exposed skin speckled with powder burns so that it looked like hamburger.

The defective ramrod that had been the cause of the disaster sailed out of the cannon broken into two parts. One piece was later found on a nearby hillside. The other miraculously hit the cross on the steeple of

the Catholic Church. Only happy-go-lucky Art Dehn, whose inattention had caused the disaster, was unaffected. He came through the episode completely unhurt.⁹

The Courtship of Art and Emilie

When Art was nineteen—a wiry six footer with dark hair and bushy eyebrows—he began courting Emilie Haase, the daughter of August and Albertine Haase, who had emigrated from Prussia in the summer of 1868—some twenty years later than Arthur’s parents, and in much greater comfort, since they crossed the ocean by steamship and then traveled to Minneapolis by rail. In 1870 the Haases purchased a farm in Cordova Township, where Emilie, the third of their six children, was born in 1872. They were the quintessential hardworking pioneer farmers, and August was one of the founders of the German Lake Lutheran Church.

In April 1890, when she was seventeen, Emilie worked as a housekeeper for a wealthy family in Owatonna. If one reads between the lines, a letter to her brother written at this time gives an interesting glimpse into the hardships of this sort of domestic service:

Dear Brother,

I received your letter May 26th. I am here two months now and they want me to stay for a year. I am getting \$2 per week. Kelly’s have another girl. She does needle work and takes care of the children. She is from Denmark and is also Lutheran. She gets \$2 per week also. Kelly’s have four children so we are eight all together. I have lots of work but I like it quite well for she is a good woman. It wasn’t like that for the girl from Bohemia who jumped into the cistern and drowned herself.¹⁰

The job was intensely lonely, since Emilie’s only place for social contact was the Sunday church service, where her lowly social status dampened the interest of local boys. After two years she returned home to the Haase farm, where Art began courting her, making the eight-mile trip regularly each Sunday by bicycle. As the romance progressed, they attended community functions together in Waterville and Elysian.

That summer, Art’s main income came from working for a prominent local businessman, L. Z. Rogers, who had obtained a contract to fill in a swamp to build a road and sidewalk. As it happened, Rogers owned the swampland adjoining the road and took advantage of the contract to fill in the entire swamp at city expense. When it came time to be paid, Rogers told his workers they had to trade out the money at his own Rogers’ Mammoth Store, the biggest store in Waterville.¹¹ So Art bought a suit and dress shoes but then asked for the remainder in cash since he

planned to get married. When Rogers refused, Art went to a local attorney. Under threat of a lawsuit, Rogers handed over the money—but Art never got a job from him again.

With fall came the time once again for ginseng gathering, hunting, and trapping, and Art and Emilie lost contact, since Art was roaming through the woods seven days a week and heavy snows prevented him from riding his bicycle to the Haase farm. Since he had only an eighth grade education, and limited writing skills, he never sent her a letter. In the second week of December she sent him an urgent letter saying she needed to see him, and he made plans to visit her that Sunday. Early in the morning he left home to check his traps, intending to visit Emilie that afternoon. But he nearly did not make it. Shortly before his death, Art was interviewed by his daughter Olivia, so we have an account of what happened in his own words:

I was walking on a pathway cross the lower lake [Sakatah] that was bare of snow from horse and wagon traffic. To get home quick I took a short cut. I was on a packed snowdrift when all of a sudden a whole big section of ice split off and started to sink under me. I had time to throw my hunting axe and traps. Lucky I was carrying them in my hand that day. Then I was wallering in the lake among solid bullheads. They was cracks in the ice there and the fish came there to get more air.

I quickly stripped off my sheepskin coat and let it float. When I tried to raise myself on to the ice it kep' breaking and I slipped back into the water. Well, I wallered around like an old sow in deep mud trying to get hold on something, first one place and then another, but my hands always slipped back. I was getting numb in that freezing water.

And then the damndest thing happened. The church bells in town started to toll. God, I thought, are they tolling for me? I'm a goner.

I had about give up and stayed still for a minute. Then I found out my mittens had froze to the ice. I lunged forward using the mittens as handles and by rolling over quickly I got to thicker ice.

By then the church bells had stopped tolling. I was shiverin' cold and I thought sure I would freeze to death on the way home. I started to run and in ten steps my clothes was frozen solid and creased only at my knees and waist. I was an ice man on the outside but the ice kep' the wind out and my body heat in. I run as tight as I could for home and my body heat kep' building up till I got so hot I had to quit running.¹²

When he did get home he was too shaken to go to the Haase farm that day. So he put his visit off for a week and, since he knew Emilie would be annoyed with him, invested in a peace offering: a gold locket and chain that he purchased for five dollars at Rogers's department store. The next Sunday, armed with the locket and also a handful of candy from his mother's store, he made the trek to the Haase farm. Emilie looked surprised to see him but wasn't smiling. After socializing a bit with the family, he took her to a private corner where they could talk, and pulled out the locket and candy, expecting some sort of thanks and conciliation. Instead, Emilie surprised him with the words: "I'm pregnant. I haven't told my family yet. What are we going to do?"

For a moment Art was speechless. And then he replied, "We'll get married."¹³

A few months later, on March 3, 1893, they held a quiet wedding to which only family members were invited, in the Lutheran parsonage in Mankato. To avoid future embarrassment, it wasn't announced in the local papers, although they both went through the ritual with appropriately solemn formality and ceremony. Emilie wore a fancy lavender gown, flared at the waist, with white lace trim, from Mary Dehn's shop. Art wore a dark blue suit from Rogers's department store.¹⁴

Fig. 1.6. Arthur Dehn and Emilie Haase at their wedding, March 3, 1893. Estate of Adolf and Virginia Dehn, Suffield, CT.



Earning money enough to live on was a challenge. There wasn't room to stay at the home of Art's parents, so he rented a two-room place nearby. His first job was at the Peterson Furniture Factory, where he fired up the boilers at 4:30 in the morning so that they would be ready for the first shift. When he got home at 6:30, Emilie made breakfast for him. He then worked for Doc Case as a night driver, hitching up his horse and buggy and driving him out when there was an emergency. Art later recalled the night when they drove out to the home of an old maid named Miss Mulcahey, who had fallen and broken her leg:

When we got there, Doc went inside while I blanketed the horse. Then I went in just in time to hear Doc tell her: "But Miss Mulcahey, if you don't let me set that break you'll never walk again."

She says back: "I'll have you know there's no man that has touched my leg in sixty-eight years and no man is going to touch it now."

So Doc gave her some pain pills and we left.¹⁵

That summer, Arthur Dehn fished for the market, and did carpentry for Bob Mills, who was romancing his sister, Maria. In September he worked with a threshing crew, firing up the boiler of the thresher, and sleeping outdoors, under the machine, with straw on the ground and horse blankets on top. After the threshing ended, he harvested ginseng, and then when the weather got cold joined a crew of men cutting ice, which was shipped east by railroad. They worked in two gangs of about two hundred men, with about fifty of them handling the big saws. When they stopped for lunch it was so cold that butter froze rock hard; most of them preferred coating their bread with lard sprinkled with salt.¹⁶

Raising a Family

Waterville is nestled on the thin isthmus between Lake Tetonka and Lake Sakatah, and was founded in 1855 by New Englanders who named it after Waterville, Maine. When the Chicago and Northwestern Railway came through in 1872, it became a summertime resort for city folk. Adolf Dehn later said of the place that it was "big enough that you won't know everybody, but we're not so big that you can't say hello."

Through his various jobs, Art saved enough to buy a two-story, five-room, wooden balloon-frame house at the northwest edge of town—a very basic affair with no porches, though one was added later. Behind the house was a two-hole outhouse and a large raspberry patch. There was enough ground for a garden, which Emilie tended, and for a chicken house. Art let Emilie keep the money from selling eggs. Outside the woodshed stood a chopping block for splitting wood and decapitating chickens for dinner. Two drawings by Dehn, though executed later, when



Fig. 1.9. Adolf Dehn, *Emilie Dehn Plucking Hen Feathers*, September 24, 1942. Pencil drawing, 8.5 x 10 in. Estate of Adolf and Virginia Dehn, Suffield, CT.

Art and Emilie's first child, Albert Arthur, was born just three months after the wedding, but became feverish and died in three days; they buried him at the German Lake Lutheran Church's cemetery. Emilie was particularly distraught by his death and suffered a brief nervous breakdown. She wondered if God was punishing her for becoming pregnant before her marriage.

They had better luck with their second child, Adolph (or Adolphe), born in November 1895.¹⁷ He was followed by two sisters: Viola in January 1898 and Olivia in August 1903. At that point children stopped arriving. Three children were all that the Dehns felt they could afford. Adolph and Viola were healthy. Olivia nearly died when she was seventeen months old from "membranous croup." She survived after an emergency tracheotomy and mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, although the operation was carried out so clumsily that it injured her voice box, and for four months they didn't know whether she would recover her speech.

As they saved money, they bought a Guernsey cow, and four more acres for pasture, alfalfa, winter hay, and black raspberries. Since they had no

plumbing, bathing the children was a major chore, achieved by carrying buckets of water from the well and heating it on the kitchen stove. Art considered baths a “waste of human energy,” but Emilie made him take a bath every few weeks, whether he felt he needed it or not.

Art’s first political affiliation was with the Populist Party, and he served as a delegate to its state convention in 1896. Then he shifted to the Democratic Party when William Jennings Bryan ran for president. Like the Dehns, the Haase family had fled Prussia to avoid military conscription and consequently Emilie and Art were very compatible in their shared aversion to war and big business. Both became active in the Socialist Party and voted for Eugene V. Debs in the 1908 election. Emilie enthusiastically shared her husband’s radical views, corresponded with Socialist colleagues, and one year was elected delegate to the state’s Socialist Party convention.¹⁸

A central fixture in the household was the radical weekly *Appeal to Reason*, founded in 1897 by Julius A. Wayland of Kansas City, which reached a peak circulation of 760,000 in 1914. Eugene Debs, who during World War I garnered millions of votes running for president from prison, worked there as a staff writer, and it was in the magazine that Upton Sinclair first published his famously lurid exposé of the meat-packing industry, *The Jungle*, as a serial in 1905. Though he had only a grade school education, Art laboriously read through every issue, and Emilie also devoured it. One of Adolf Dehn’s early drawings (made when he had just started art school) portrays his father reading the magazine. It surely was a central factor in Dehn’s future career, shaping his core social and political beliefs and also leading him toward illustrations and journalism, particularly in his early career, rather than toward more elite art forms such as oil painting.¹⁹

Arthur Dehn suffered from stomach ulcers. Even with a bland diet and antacid tablets he often lay facedown, doubled up in pain with a pillow beneath his stomach. No doubt this contributed to his continual ill temper. He was vigorously blasphemous, and would make comments such as “I see that God damned Jesus is making it snow again!”²⁰ But Emilie attended church regularly and Art allowed the children to attend Sunday school and be confirmed. Emilie made contributions to the church from her small hoard of coins from egg and butter sales, which she kept stashed in a coffee can.

While his wife and children attended church, Art practiced playing a secondhand trumpet, and once his skills had developed, joined the Waterville band, which performed every Saturday evening. He also had a group of cronies with whom he indulged in fist-pounding conversations about politics and religion every Wednesday evening in Murray’s Store, a long narrow building packed with farm implements, where in

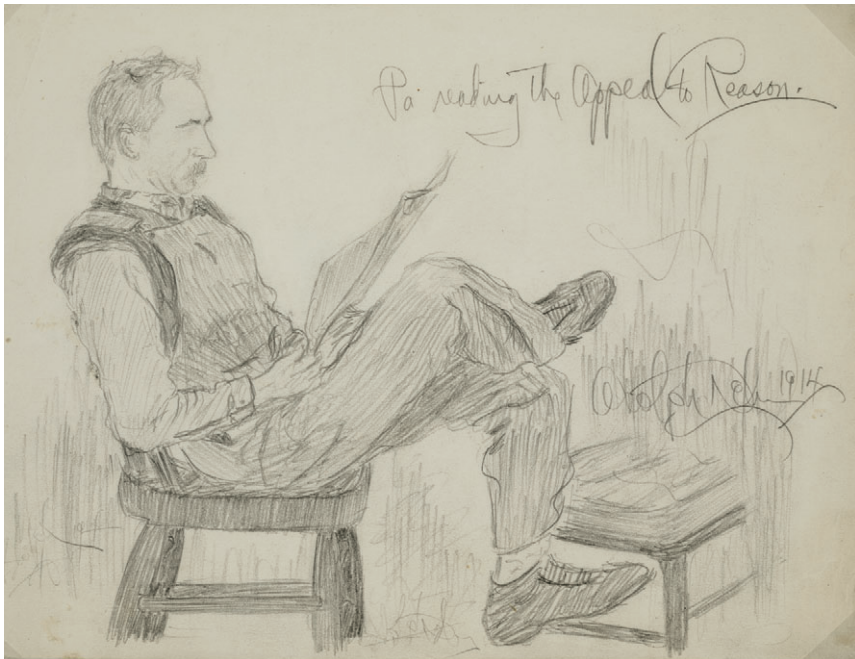


Fig. 1.10. Adolf Dehn, *Pa Reading "The Appeal to Reason,"* 1914. Pencil sketch, 8.5 x 11 in. Estate of Adolf and Virginia Dehn, Suffield, CT.

the back there was a potbellied stove, a cuspidor, a round table for the debaters, and a desk where George Murray sat, with celluloid sleeve guards and eyeshade. The regulars were Art and his father Frederick, atheists and supporters of the National Grange of the Order of Patrons of Husbandry (commonly called the Grange movement); Murray, who was a devout Catholic but whose membership in the Free and Accepted Masons barred him from church; and George Kahn, a pantheist. According to Lauri Dehn Tiala, a typical Arthur Dehn diatribe went something like this:

I don't go to church but, by God, I'll bet I'll get to Heaven before them holier-than-thou pillars of the church like L. Z. Rogers. Hell, he should be able to make those infernal big donations. He gets it by stealin' public money and cheatin' his customers with cheap goods sold at high prices. And take that pious old bastard Glotfelter. How did he get all those farms and real estate? By foreclosing on helpless widows. That's the kind of Christian he is. Just think of the money spent building the seven churches in this town. If that money was spent on people who really need help, Waterville would be a damn sight better place and God wouldn't think none the less of all them church goers if they worshipped Him from their homes.²¹

Art was similarly outspoken in his tirades at home. As Tiala has written,

Viola and Olivia, the innocent bystanders, first felt sorry for their mother. Then they would see their father wrap his feet in rags over his single pair of good wool socks before he put on his boots, then they watched as he picked up mittens, pack sack and trapping axe and went out into the frigid dawn, boots squeaking in the snow. Later in the day he would return with icicles hanging from his mustache and his mittens frozen. He would warm his hands over the stove until his fingers were nimble enough to skin his catch and stretch the pelts on drying boards. Finally, when he was through, Art would look out the window more in reflection than anger and comment, “God damn that black-hearted Jesus who makes me do this kind of work for a living.”²²

Adolf’s second wife, Virginia Dehn, would later provide an assessment of Arthur Dehn in which she compared him unfavorably with his wife Emilie: “The only life he ever knew was that of a poor hunter-fisherman who had to go out every day and ‘Make a god-damned living for the god-damned family!’ The children heard that refrain day after day. Their mother was the backbone and mainstay of that family and was encouraging to Adolf and his art work. Pa Dehn was a peasant who never learned to say thank you. This made him hard to live with.”²³

It was Emilie, not Art, who encouraged her children’s education. One Christmas when money was tight, the sole present for them all was a huge *Webster’s* dictionary, a foot tall and six inches thick. Two of her children excelled in school. Adolph became valedictorian of his class, and Viola was salutatorian of hers.²⁴

Yet, for all his gruffness, Art also had loving qualities as a father. He built the children a tree house with scrap lumber from his carpentry jobs; he often gave them a nickel to spend when they went into town; and he took them fishing, mushroom gathering, trapping, or frog hunting. In winter they went sledding down the hill in front of the house on homemade sleds or skated on one of the nearby lakes, with skate blades that clamped onto their boots. One winter Art spent considerable time making a light cedar-strip boat that he gave to Adolph, and at that point they entered a friendly competition as fishermen, fishing for the market in separate boats.

Art’s grandson, Lauri Dehn Tiala, recalls that for years he was skeptical of the stories Art told of going fishing and coming in with washtubs full of fish. Then one summer morning they went out fishing together. Arthur rowed around aimlessly looking down at the water. Lauri couldn’t figure out what he was doing. Finally, he found a spot where lots of bubbles were making trails along the surface. “Bullheads working along the bottom

here,” Arthur explained. When they lowered their lines, fish bit into them as quickly as they could pull them back up, and in a short space their tub was two-thirds full. Arthur let Lauri keep half the money they got from selling the fish, which enabled him to buy a bicycle. As Lauri later noted, “After that fishing adventure I paid more attention when Gramp told one of his stories. I noticed that he told nature stories straight and true, for, to him, animals were perfectly understandable and nature so fascinating that it required no embellishment. On the other hand, people were imperfect beings, greedy beyond their immediate need and persuadable beyond all reason. Gramp had no qualms about handling truth recklessly in his stories about people.”²⁵

Art let Adolph keep the money he earned, though after the age of thirteen he was responsible for buying his own clothes. And, at some level, Adolph’s active childhood engagement with the lake and the surrounding landscape never left him, although it was not until much later in his career that he took up landscape painting; most of his early drawings are figure studies. For all the trouble he experienced there during World War I, in his later years Dehn always spoke fondly of Waterville.

Lauri Dehn Tiala still has Arthur Dehn’s crosscut saw, as well as the hoe he used to harvest ginseng. As he recalls,

On a nail beside the saw hangs a rusty cast iron A-shaped blade four inches wide at the bottom and eight inches long. At the apex is a rectangular hole where a sturdy wood handle was once attached. I have never used the tool, yet it is one of my most prized souvenirs. It is Grandpa Dehn’s ginseng hoe which he got from his father, Frederick. I remember Gramp returning from the woods with his hoe in one hand and a bulging gunny sack in the other. Gramp carefully washed the roots and then spread them out on newspapers. He pushed them under my bed to dry.²⁶

In June 1914 Art’s father Frederick was injured when a fence blew over on him during a thunderstorm, crushing his leg. He was put to bed, but the leg didn’t heal and he developed bedsores. His wife, Mary, resented the time it took to care for him, which pulled her away from her customers at the store. He died in September. Mary lived on for another twenty years, showing no sign to anyone in the family that she ever missed her husband.²⁷

The end for Emilie’s parents was more agonizing. In May 1912 her mother Albertine had a stroke that crippled her. At the time she and her husband, August, were living with their son Albert, to whom they had given their farm, but at this point Albert’s wife flatly refused to care for them anymore. Negotiations began between the siblings. Only Emilie was

willing to take on her parents—perhaps in gratitude for the fact that they had stood by her when she became pregnant. At last a deal was struck: August agreed to foot a good part of the cost of a larger house on Lake Tetonka, with three bedrooms upstairs and a downstairs living room, dining room, and kitchen. Albert agreed to supply food from the Haase farm. Consequently, in the fall of 1914, the Dehn family moved into a larger home and Emilie took up her parents' care. But Art never adapted graciously to the arrangement and would explode at her: "Your God damned brothers. They hain't brought the food they're s'posed to again. And that God damned old man of yours—it'd serve him right to go to the poor house. How could he be so damned dumb to give everything he had to them two deadbeat sons of his?"²⁸

Albertine Haase finally died in 1916, two weeks after a bad fall that broke her leg and left her immobilized in bed. Her life had been a hard one. As Olivia Dehn Mitchell later wrote of her,

Her eyes remained clear and light blue—clear but sad as though she had known all the pain and sorrow that can befall a human. . . . As far back as I can remember her back was bent and her long large hands were bony and curved as though they had always gripped something. And no wonder since from the time she left a life of relative ease in Prussia, she kept up a house, bore eight children and reared six, milked cows and helped to shear sheep. Then she carded wool, spun it into yarn and sewed dresses and suits for her family. Besides all this it was always she who was fetched at any hour to act as midwife for neighboring women.²⁹

Fig. 1.11. August and Albertine Haase on their golden wedding anniversary, November 1911. Estate of Adolf and Virginia Dehn, Suffield, CT.



By this time August Haase had become increasingly senile and forgetful and might pour molasses over his meat and a minute later pour milk over both. In 1916 Dehn made a drawing of his grandfather leaning back in a chair, wearing the same suit that he had worn in a photo taken with his wife five years earlier on the occasion of their golden wedding anniversary. The detail suggests the spartan quality of farm life in this period, in which there were few luxuries, and the same weather-beaten clothes would serve for all occasions, both formal and informal, year after year. Two more drawings that Dehn made in 1919 show his grandfather sleeping, and the corner of the house where August slept, with its rumpled, untidy blankets and a chamber pot under the bed.



Fig. 1.12. Adolf Dehn, *Grandfather Haase in Chair*, 1916. Pencil sketch, 11.25 x 8.5 in. Estate of Adolf and Virginia Dehn, Suffield, CT.

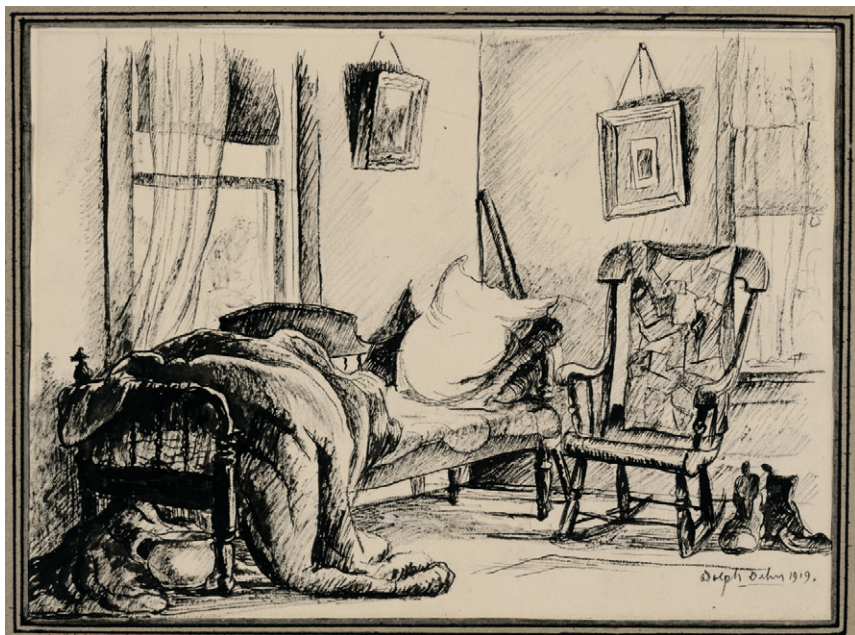


Fig. 1.13. Adolf Dehn, *Grandfather Haase's Bed*, 1919. Ink drawing, 8 x 12 in. Private collection, Cleveland, reproduced by permission.

Later, in response to Art's complaints and after more family quarrels, one of the Haase sons in Wisconsin took August from the Dehn household and cared for him until his death in 1922.

Childhood and Art School

ADOLF DEHN WAS NINETEEN WHEN he graduated from high school, but this sort of delay does not seem to have been unusual in rural communities in this period, when attendance standards were rather lax and students often skipped school to attend to farm work or other activities. (The Cleveland artist Paul Travis, roughly a contemporary of Dehn, and also from a rural background, graduated from high school at the age of twenty-one.) Once he graduated, Dehn was offered a position at the local bank; his father was furious when he turned it down. Clearly he already had set his sights higher than being a bank teller—just what to do was difficult to decide.¹



Fig. 2.1. Adolf Dehn high school graduation photograph, June 1914. Estate of Adolf and Virginia Dehn, Suffield, CT.

Gretchen Marple Pracht, who also grew up in Waterville and wrote a brief reminiscence of Dehn shortly after his death, felt that his uncomfortable relationship with his father provided the key to understanding his art: “If he did paint people, he regularly made fun of them. This in my mind seems to have been a result of his own shabby treatment at home, though

I understand that there was a reconciliation between Adolf and his father before the latter's death."²

Because he had been chosen as his high school's valedictorian, Dehn was offered a scholarship at the University of Minnesota and also at two other universities. He is said to have lined the letters of acceptance up on the windowsill and wistfully contemplated them for days. After careful consideration, he then rejected all three in favor of what was seemingly the most impractical choice he could make: the decision to attend the Minneapolis School of Art, which had not offered him a scholarship, and thus for which he would have to pay his own way.³

In many ways the decision was a surprising one, although he seems to have been unusually interested in drawing from an early age. He began sketching farmyard animals at the age of three, and at nine produced a big drawing of a train for the Waterville Festival—on a roll of white wrapping paper six feet long and a foot high—which won him local accolades. As a child of six or so he would draw animals and boats in the evening with his school pencils. There are surviving drawings of a lion; of a reindeer pulling a sleigh; of Buffalo Bill riding a buffalo; of a bison, a tiger, and a reindeer; and of an Indian riding a horse. These look like they were drawn quite early, when Dehn was still a child.⁴



Fig. 2.2. Adolf Dehn, childhood drawing of feline, ca. 1906. Pencil drawing, 6 x 9 in. Estate of Adolf and Virginia Dehn, Suffield, CT.



Fig. 2.3. Adolf Dehn, childhood drawing of sleigh and reindeer, ca. 1905. Ink drawing, 6 x 9 in. Estate of Adolf and Virginia Dehn, Suffield, CT.

As he grew older he copied magazine covers and illustrations, including a scene titled *Hiawatha*, and a drawing by Charles Dana Gibson. The idea of creating original works does not seem to have occurred to him; his focus was on acquiring technical skill.

One of his teachers told Dehn's mother, Emilie, that he deserved to have art lessons, so she arranged some with the one person in Waterville who liked to paint, which were paid for with fresh milk from the cow. They seem to have used an art instruction manual. One of Dehn's copies of this period shows a well-dressed young man and woman strolling.

In part unconsciously, Dehn was surely developing ideas about a world of luxury very different from his home surroundings, as well as training in handling cross-hatching and shading in pen and ink. Under this tutelage Dehn painted his first "masterpiece" (now apparently lost), a pastel depicting a girl ironing.⁵ By high school he was producing caricatures of local characters and dignitaries and had established a reputation as the best artist in Waterville. It was clearly a gift that made him stand out from his classmates.

No one in Dehn's family had ever pursued an artistic career. While he had been drawing actively since he was a child, at this time he had had very little exposure to art except for the illustrations in magazines. It's not entirely clear what it was he thought that artists did, since magazines pointed him in two very different directions: toward the rather innocuous popular