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John Dos Passos
AND HIS WORLD

September 26 to December 7, 2003
Marsh Art Gallery, University of Richmond Museums

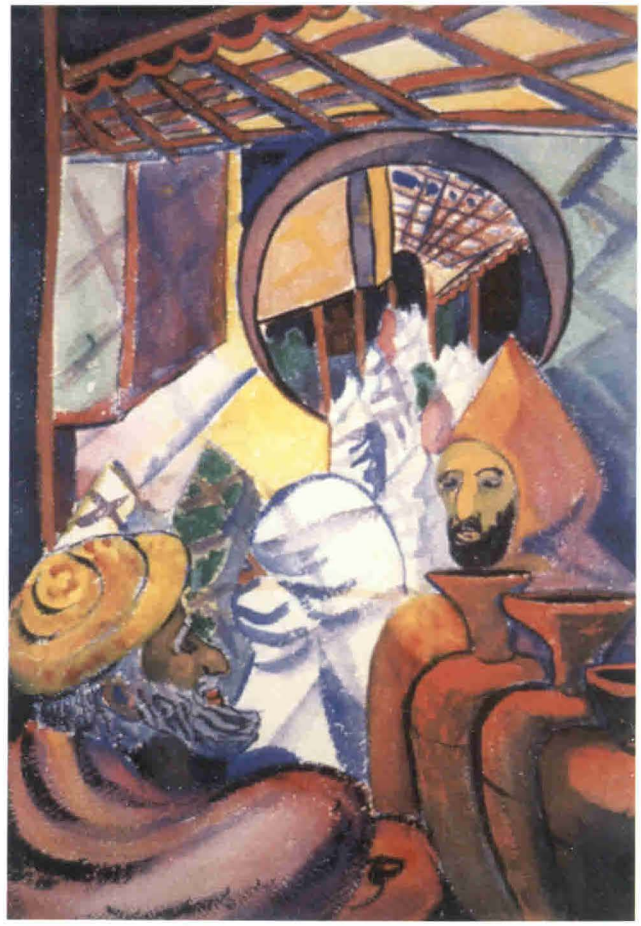
INTRODUCTION

One of America's most innovative writers, John Dos Passos (1896-1970) also completed more than four hundred paintings and drawings that chronicle his life's journeys. In fifty years, Dos Passos wrote forty-two literary works, and his novels *Manhattan Transfer* (1925) and the trilogy *U.S.A.* (published together in 1938) provide a panoramic social history of the first three decades of the twentieth century. Similarly, his paintings captured the times in which he lived and addressed the world around him, in landscapes from Manhattan, Mexico, and North Africa, portraits of friends and figure studies, and illustrations from plays and novels.

The intellectual and artistic development of Dos Passos was first nourished through his acquaintances with Picasso, Fernand Léger, and the Russian émigré Natalia Gontcharova. Included in our exhibition are artworks created for or given to the artist by his friends, such as Léger, Wood Gaylor, Yasuo Kuniyoshi, and Waldo Peirce.

The exhibition is based on *The Art of John Dos Passos,* an exhibition organized and circulated by International Arts & Artists in conjunction with Lucy Dos Passos Coggin, the artist's daughter. Curators for the presentation at the Marsh Art Gallery, University of Richmond Museums, are Lucy Dos Passos Coggin and Welford Dunaway Taylor, Professor of English, The James A. Bostwick Chair of English, University of Richmond, with assistance from N. Elizabeth Schlatter, Assistant Director, University Museums. At the Marsh Art Gallery, University Museums, the exhibition is made possible in part with the generous support of the University's Cultural Affairs Committee. In particular, we would like to thank Lucy Dos Passos Coggin for her assistance.

Richard Waller
Executive Director
University of Richmond Museums



Fez, circa 1925-1926, watercolor on paper, 20 x 13 3/4 inches. Collection of Lucy Dos Passos Coggin.

JOHN DOS PASSOS AND HIS WORLD

It was as natural for John Dos Passos to express himself in watercolors as in words. In his early twenties he placed writing and painting on a par, thinking that either might become his primary artistic medium. But throughout his life he resisted limiting himself to any single role or category. "I was damned if I'd let anybody classify me on [this

or] that index card," he vowed. As the foregoing statement indicates, in the wake of the world war and at the dawning of the tumultuous, heady 1920s, Dos Passos imagined for himself a future of limitless possibilities. Gradually, however, as "one book led to another," his plans to engage in other fields (he had considered architecture in addition to painting) gradually took a secondary priority.

In the case of painting, however, secondary status never meant obscurity or neglect. To the contrary, not only did Dos Passos paint actively throughout his adult life but modernist techniques such as Cubism, derived primarily from painting, inform the structuring of *Manhattan Transfer* (1925) and the *U.S.A.* (1938) trilogy, his finest fictional works. To view Dos Passos' paintings is to realize the breadth and depth of his interaction with the world during the period covered by these novels. However, the representative paintings in this exhibition are not the signifiers of particular times and places that his novels and other prose writings are. His masterpiece, *U.S.A.*, often hailed as the most complete fictional portrayal of American life in the first three decades of the twentieth century, is replete with biographies of luminaries and depictions of economic and political issues. The fictional characters are shaped by the influence of the mighty and by the powerful social forces of the time.

The paintings, on the other hand, are far less specific as to setting and time. They obviously spring from separate motivations and are executed with a different end in view. Whereas in his written works Dos Passos became immersed in the particular details of his subject, intent upon clarifying it and expressing an opinion, in his painting he was spontaneous – a gifted painter whose instincts prompted extemporaneous graphic expression. Moreover, painting for him was a largely personal activity, sometimes therapeutic and frequently a complement to verbal expression. Although he studied for a time at the Art Students League in New York, and occasionally exhibited his work, he generally worked outside the boundaries of studios and galleries.

It is perhaps not surprising that Dos Passos kept few records of the subjects of his paintings or the dates of their execution. Therefore, we see them more in an iconic sense than as creations with an identifiable provenance. This is at once an advantage and a limitation. We do not need to have a particular landscape, urban scene or building identified to be attracted to it on mainly aesthetic terms. Thus, it matters little whether the fishermen in *Fishermen Aboard Ship* are striving with all their might off the coast of Spain or Maine. What is important is their bodily resolve, rendered in colors as intense as their backbreaking task. Or what if the village in *Mountain Village Scene* is in Seville, Mexico, or Tuscany? It is evocative of a prototypical subject, expressed in an innovative combination of expressionist and modernist techniques.

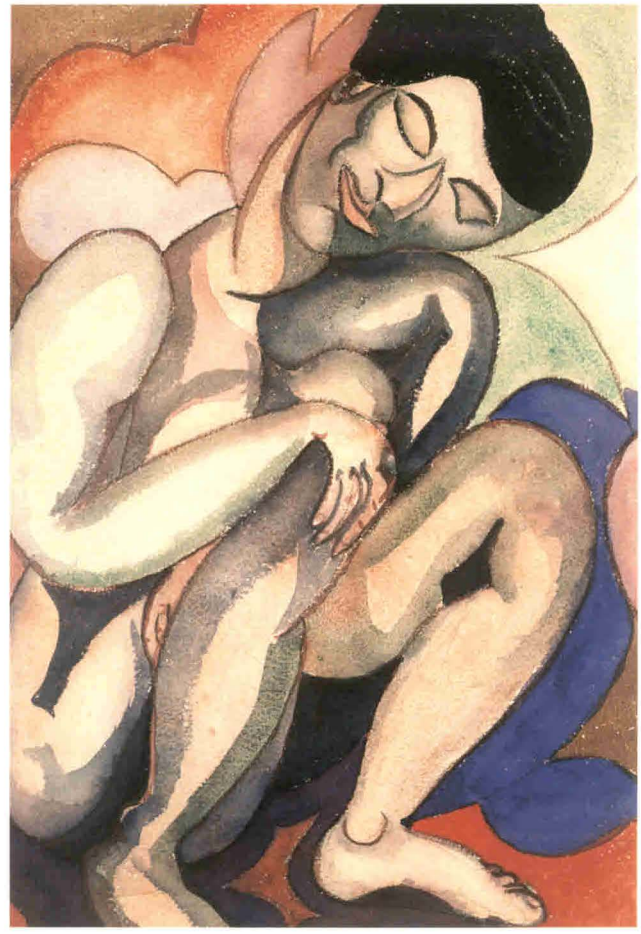
This is not to say, however, that specific connections to Dos Passos' life and written work cannot be made in many (though certainly not all) of his paintings. By arranging the current exhibition in a series of groupings, each featuring examples with intrinsic similarities, we can see patterns made familiar by a reading of his novels, nonfiction, and biographies. For instance, in the grouping "Cities and Festivities" we find examples of subjects that recall scenes in such novels as *Manhattan Transfer* and *The Big Money* (1936). "North Africa and Asia" recalls the travel accounts in *Orient Express* (1927) and in the memoir, *The Best Times* (1966). The "Art by Others" grouping places Dos Passos in the art world of the 1920s and later, by including a number of paintings by his friends; these works contain artistic values that he shared.

To encounter paintings by a well-known author may be seen by some as an anomaly. This is true to a point, but the combination of pen and brush is by no means uncommon, especially in American

literature. One quickly recalls the names William Faulkner, e.e. cummings, and Sherwood Anderson as but three examples among Dos Passos' contemporaries. However, it is fair to say that he stands foremost among them in the important place that painting held in his range of talents and in the satisfaction he derived from its practice. Moreover, he was more prolific than most others in this multi-talented coterie. With these paintings we are able to create a sense of the range of his graphic achievement, in both its breadth and variety.

Formal criticism of Dos Passos' pictorial work has been sporadic at best. His designs have been cited as lacking a sense of form while being generally praised for their bold and vivid use of color. However, they await a more methodical and rigorous critical scrutiny for, as these selections make clear, he could be highly conscious of form when the situation demanded, as in the intricately structured backdrop for his experimental play *The Moon Is a Gong*, which displays both an obvious debt to Cubism as well as a deft manipulation of color. Moreover, in more impressionistic, loosely painted designs such as *Political Convention* form reflects subject as it should. A naturalistic rendering of this spectacle might soon become tedious, just as it would in *Paco Echevaria* and *Banana Man*. These exaggerated, satirical evocations illustrate the keen observing eye and active sense of humor that are often brought to bear in Dos Passos' paintings; whatever distortions result are usually justified.

In describing his frame of mind at the close of World War I, when assessing the various paths his future might take, Dos Passos described himself in excited, restless terms: "I was running toward something . . . . It was the whole wide world. I had an insatiable appetite for architecture and painting . . . . I wanted to see country, landscape and plants and animals and people: men, women and children in city and hamlet. I had to hurry. There would never be time to satisfy such multifarious curiosity. . . ."



Nude I, circa 1927, watercolor on paper, 19 7/8 x 13 3/4 inches. Collection of Lucy Dos Passos Coggin.

Perhaps there wasn't, but we believe that the paintings in *John Dos Passos and His World* offer a good indication of how far he went toward giving pictorial form to this passionate vision.

WELFORD DUNAWAY TAYLOR
Professor of English
The James A. Bostwick Chair of English
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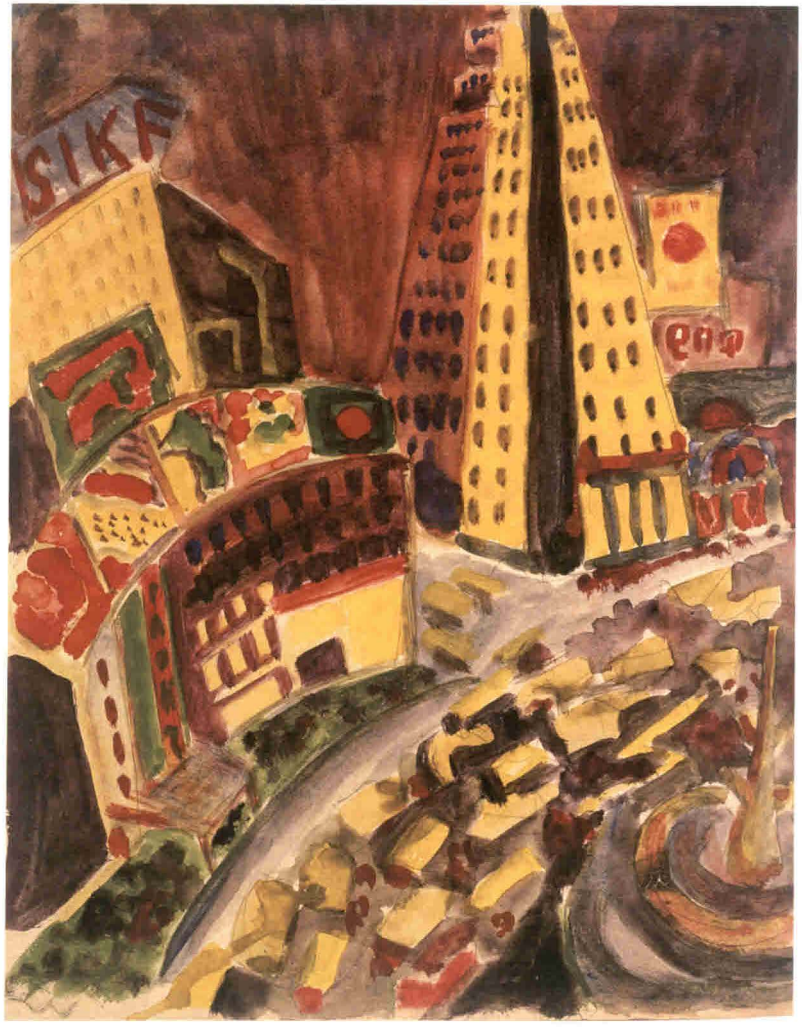

Aerial View of City Traffic and Buildings, circa mid-1920s, watercolor on paper, 12 1/4 x 9 1/2 inches. Collection of Lucy Dos Passos Coggin.

RECOLLECTIONS OF MY FATHER

I do not think my father ever took a snapshot, even though he was always traveling and always framing a scene and sensing the light. He developed the habit of sketching scenes and making vivid notes to collect his responses to the world. His reactions were fresh and immediate. He rarely lingered over one view.

He traveled light; so watercolors were the perfect medium. He would wedge a pad of heavy watercolor paper in the bottom of his suitcase and tuck a short box of Windsor Newton color tubes in the side pocket along with a few brushes. A soapdish would do for mixing colors and a water glass for rinsing out brushes. This was how he recorded the glaciers along the inland waterway from Prince George up to Juneau, Alaska, in the summer of 1966. Sometimes he would just draw a rapid sketch in pencil with balloons marked by color. He could go back to apply the color and fill in detail. Boats and water had always been favorite subjects for

painting, so the appeal of glacial ice in new unheard-of-colors and covering inconceivable volumes of land captivated his attention.

The paintings seldom included a lot of detail. His eyesight was poor from childhood. By the late 1940s he had lost an eye in an auto accident. Thick glasses did not entirely correct his vision. In compensation, he brought a masterful power of observation to bear on any moment. Not every tableau he noticed appeared as a painting. Some of the scenes are recorded only in memory. When we traveled as a family we shared these views: Toledo from across the river as a dark storm approached the domes and steeples, a parade of flowers in San Rafael on the French Riviera, the long eel-like fish in markets on the coast of Portugal wound up for sale like garden hoses.

He traveled constantly. Circuses always became part of the itinerary along with zoos, puppet shows, amusement parks, festivals, outdoor markets, wharves, fishing boats, and even a whaling station. Outdoor scenes were heavily favored, but foreign movies, art exhibits, and live performances of plays, music, and dance provided a visual feast. He was never satisfied to trade second hand experiences for immediate ones. He always remembered the day he spent in the Portuguese Archives while my mother and I visited the Lisbon zoo. The ostrich laid an egg that day right in front of us. He never could get over missing that event.

The archives are full of postcards, which my father sent. The images are a visual trail of exploration as much as the words. The postcards begin with scenes of pre-WWI Europe in grays, creams, and sepias. From cathedrals to goats pulling milk carts, they seem from an ornate and distant past. The remaining collection includes a human rainbow of expression from African masks to early Roman bronzes, French Impressionists, and antique Portuguese tiles. He picked up the postcards from decades of attending art shows, collections, museums, and galleries.

He wrote to me in a letter dated October 1968 about a trip to New York City. After a meeting with one of his publishers he "took in a show (mediocre) of Ben Shahn drawings and paintings and a huge collection of Dubuffet at the Mod[ern] Museum [of Art]. . . ." On Saturday an old friend (also a painter) came in from Long Island. "We all went to the Metropolitan to see the Italian fresco exhibition which proved absolutely marvelous. . . there was also a beautiful little show downstairs of recently dug up Guatemalan Maya items, all as fresh as if they had been colored yesterday. . . . Though I kind of wanted to take in a show of Sandy Calder's on the way [to lunch] the ladies [Adelaide and my mother] declared they couldn't see another picture."

Any household event might produce an afternoon watercolor (mornings were reserved for writing). The tree frog which turned up attached to the window screen by its adhesive toes ended up having its portrait painted reclining on a bed of curly endive from the garden. A new potted bromeliad with an intriguing gray pattern on the leaves stimulated several still life scenes with mixed produce from the garden. Life was a series of moments that could be held and celebrated by a rapid and simple expression of line and color. We are fortunate that the paintings remain for us to enjoy again when all those single moments have passed away.

Lucy Dos Passos Coggin

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Cover: *The Moon Is a Gong*, circa 1925-1927, gouache on paper mounted on board, 11 x 15 inches, Collection of Lucy Dos Passos Coggin.

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