

GEORGE AULT









G E O R G E   A U L T

**Exhibition Itinerary**

Whitney Museum of American Art at  
Equitable Center, New York  
April 8–June 8, 1988

Memphis Brooks Museum of Art,  
Memphis, Tennessee  
November 13, 1988–January 1, 1989

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April 29–June 11, 1989

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*New Moon, New York, 1945 (Fig. 35)*

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G E O R G E A U L T

S U S A N L U B O W S K Y

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York



*Hudson Street, 1932 (Fig. 25)*

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

George Ault left no journals or papers. In 1978 his widow, Louise, compiled her reminiscences of their life together in a book entitled *Artist in Woodstock. George Ault: The Independent Years*. This publication, along with her preparatory notes, on file at the Archives of American Art, are the primary sources of information on Ault's life. Those acquaintances still living in Woodstock, New York, provided firsthand knowledge of the artist: André Ruellan generously shared her insights into his personality; Lillian Fortess and Sam Klein kindly gave me access to the files and collection of the Woodstock Artists Association. Equally valued is the information supplied by Suzanne Vanderwoude, who represents the Ault estate and was a close friend of Louise.

The contributions of my staff were invaluable. Research assistant Cara Keegan assembled the majority of the research data, aided by interns Sonya Rubinow and Helen Sitaris (whose senior thesis for the State University of New York, Purchase, was on George Ault). I am also indebted to Erika Wolf, who coordinated various aspects of the exhibition, prepared the bibliography and exhibition history, and typed the manuscript.

Finally, I am deeply grateful for the generosity of the private and institutional lenders who participated in this retrospective.

S. L.

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1. *Construction Night*, 1922

Oil on canvas, 25 x 20 in. (63.5 x 50.8 cm)

The Regis Collection, Minneapolis

## GEORGE AULT

George Ault's urban and industrial scenes are commonly associated with those produced by the Precisionist painters from the 1920s through the 1940s. Like Ralston Crawford and Charles Sheeler, Ault focused on the abstract geometry of city buildings and factories, reducing their forms to basic shapes defined by sharp-edged areas of flat color. But his viewpoint was often perverse—colored by the dark pathos that dominated his artistic and personal life. While Precisionism glorified America's rapidly growing metropolises, Ault was at best ambivalent about city life, referring to New York as "the Inferno without the fire."<sup>1</sup>

The reductive style of Precisionism was a direct outgrowth of European vanguard art movements—primarily French Cubism. Precisionism's focus on machine technology was informed both by Italian Futurism and by the burgeoning industrial landscape of the new American city. But Precisionists also looked backward to the simplified forms of American primitivism, which provided inspiration for an indigenous art form. Ault, however, also greatly admired Giorgio de Chirico, the Italian Surrealist, and Albert Pinkham Ryder, the American romantic, identifying with their visionary tendencies. Ultimately, he combined elements of these discrete artistic movements to develop his own unique style. From the cityscapes painted throughout his career, to the rural scenes of Woodstock, New York, and the dream-inspired landscapes of the 1940s, Ault merged the conscious world with the unconscious to express his own psychic disquiet.

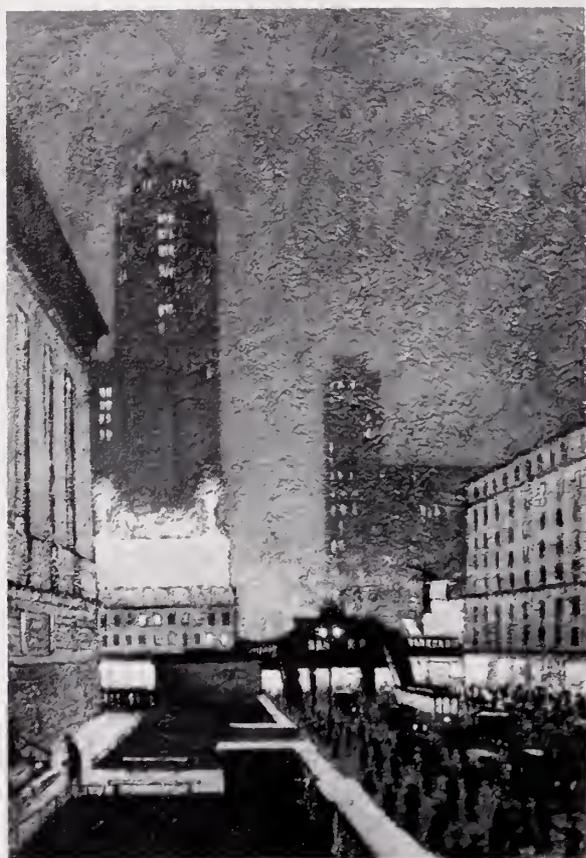
Born on October 11, 1891, into a prosperous Cleveland family, George Ault was the third son among four boys and a girl. His introduction to art began with his father, an amateur painter. A scion of the academic art community, Charles Henry Ault socialized with prominent artists such as William Merritt Chase, who painted his portrait. He served as president of the Western Art Association (forerunner of The Cleveland Museum of Art) and was among the founders of The Saint Louis Art Museum. Later, in New York, he was a founding member of the National Arts Club of Gramercy Park, and a charter member of the Salmagundi Club and the City Club.

Although the Ault family represented a paragon of conservative values, almost all its members were later troubled by physical ailments and by depression and other psychological disorders. Rheumatic fever prevented George from attending school until the age of eight. It was perhaps this early confinement with his doting mother, who referred to him as "the flower of her flock,"<sup>2</sup> that set the stage for later years of self-imposed isolation with his second wife, Louise. In 1915 his favorite brother, Harold, died in a suicide pact with his spouse and, five years later, his mother, both mentally and physically debilitated, died of pernicious anemia in a New Jersey mental hospital. When the senior Mr. Ault succumbed to cancer in 1929, the year the stock market crashed, the family fortune had already been greatly diminished. Distraught over their meager inheritance, George's two remaining brothers took their lives. This tragic family

history may underlie the sense of despair or pessimism in much of Ault's imagery; it surely affected the disturbed course of his own life—and his death, also probably by suicide.

Yet in 1899, when Charles Ault became the European representative of his cousin's ink manufacturing firm and relocated his family to London, George began "the happiest years of [his] life. . . . For those who could live in comfortable circumstances in England or France, probably it offered the best life in the history of western man."<sup>3</sup> His father encouraged his artistic pursuits and acquainted him with the works of the Old Masters in London and Paris. Formal training began at the University College School, then continued at the Slade School of the University of London, and finally at St. John's Wood School of Art, where his first paintings were publicly exhibited. While these works—*Vauxhall Bridge*, *London Street*, *On the Thames*, *Landscape*, and *Moonrise*—typify popular themes of the time, they also prefigure the urban street and harbor scenes, rural landscapes, and moonlit views that dominated Ault's mature oeuvre. In 1911, when he was twenty, the family reluctantly returned to America so that his father could establish his own printing business. They resettled in the New York City suburb of Hillside, New Jersey, near the new plant. Three years later, George Ault married Beatrice Hoffman and established a home and studio in the same town.

During the early years of his career, Ault relied on the traditional disciplines of his British schooling, such as the technique of "visual memory training," to retain an image without the aid of photography or sketches. The canvases of the teens generally depict idyllic rural landscapes of the genre that he later referred to condescendingly as "the 'winter brook and birch tree' subjects of the National Academicians."<sup>4</sup> During these formative years, he showed no interest in the vanguard art movements he encountered in England and on the Continent, an apathy apparently due to the conservative influence of his father no less than to his own academic training. Under the tutelage of conventional British painters such as George Clausen (1852–1944), William Quiller Orchardson (1832–1910), Philip Wilson Steer (1860–1942), and Henry Tonks (1862–1937), Ault was immersed in an anglicized version of Impressionism. Upon returning to the States, the family took part in New York City cultural activities,



2. *42nd Street Night*, 1920

Oil on canvas, 18 $\frac{7}{8}$  x 13 in. (47.9 x 33 cm)  
Collection of Roy R. Neuberger

but within a conservative milieu. Even the historic 1915 Armory Show in New York, which presented to the American public the most revolutionary art of the time, seemed to have little effect on Ault until the next decade.

In 1920, Ault exhibited his paintings in America for the first time at the fourth annual exhibition of the Society of Independent Artists in New York. The works were rather conservative and attracted little attention. But in that same year, he also produced his earliest nocturnal cityscape, *42nd Street Night* (Fig. 2). Its subdued palette and heavy brushwork belie Ault's awareness of the abstract quality of architectural forms—a departure from the conventions that had engaged him during the teens. The painting signals the beginning of his lifelong obsession with the colors, lights, and dynamic forms of the urban landscape. Here, on the Great White Way, the innovative use of neon to illuminate the Broadway marquees and advertisements created a visual ambience unlike any in the world. Transformed as well by the skyscrapers that made New York City the ultimate twentieth-century metropolis, 42nd Street proved fertile ground for experiments with the new modernist idiom that glorified progress and industry. Ault's painting depicts the street as seen from Fifth Avenue looking west to the Sixth Avenue El, to which hordes of workers head at the end of the day. In the tremulous glow of dusk, artificial lights from an advertising billboard flash yellow and orange. At the lower left, the terrace of the New York Public Library is reduced to a hard-edged arrangement of light railings and walkways against dark shadows, while the steel girders of the El are silhouetted against a blaze of lights from the neon signs and shop windows. The monolithic form of the recently completed Busch Tower rises overhead. An identical view of the street by the academician John Taylor Arms—a 1920 etching entitled *West Forty-Second Street (Corner of Fifth Avenue Toward Sixth)* (Fig. 3)—appears dated when compared to Ault's vibrant, atmospheric representation.

As Ault's mature style emerged, he abandoned this impasto technique for an increasingly flatter application of paint. And the predominantly brown tones that distinguish earlier works like *42nd Street Night* were soon supplemented with livelier colors. In *A New York Skyline* (Fig. 4), painted a year later, the vibrant blue evening sky glows with yellow light. Among the earliest of Ault's



3. John Taylor Arms (1887–1953)

*West Forty-Second Street (Corner of Fifth Avenue Toward Sixth)*, 1920

Etching: image, 13 x 10 $\frac{1}{4}$  in. (33 x 25.7 cm)  
Hirschl & Adler Galleries, New York



4. *A New York Skyline*, 1921

Oil on canvas, 18 x 24 in. (45.7 x 61 cm)

Collection of Dr. Thomas Folk

experiments with architectonic compositions, it was featured in the fifth annual exhibition of the Society of Independent Artists, and subsequently included in *The International Studio's* "Our Choice of Independents" at the Anderson Galleries in New York. For C. Lewis Hind, the British critic affiliated with the magazine, the exhibition "promised that there was a future for American art away from the stereotype of the moribund academic productions of the day."<sup>5</sup> Even when compared to *42nd Street Night, A New York Skyline* dramatically illustrates Ault's artistic awakening. Here, the vantage point is raised above the street, and the canvas is framed at the bottom by the ledge of a darkened building. This work anticipates Ault's rooftop scenes of the thirties and forties and introduces the device of streetlights as pinpoints of illumination. The juxtaposition of the façades of the skyscrapers with their bright yellow windows forms an abstracted grid pattern across the canvas. Rising in the distance at the center of the composition, the steel skeleton of a building under construction symbolizes the dramatic evolution of the urban skyline. A towering symbol of prosperity, the skyscraper heralded a new era of progress in a changing world, an era that artists were eager to embrace. When the French Dadaist painter Francis Picabia visited New York in 1915, he saw "the cubist, the futurist city . . . stupendous skyscrapers . . . mammoth buildings."<sup>6</sup>

Picabia's call for an aesthetic based on the visual and psychological impact of modern technology strongly influenced the American painters who were later identified as Precisionists. But the Americans used the architecture of their cities to develop an indigenous modernist movement. Reacting against the conservatism of artists such as Chase, who taught Sheeler, Morton Schamberg, and Georgia O'Keeffe, these Precisionist painters merged European abstraction with American realism. When Ault moved to New York City in 1922 on a limited stipend provided by his father, he further embraced the urban experience as well as the Precisionist style. The clean, hard-edged forms of the buildings that he saw from his studio window became the focus of his work.

Two variations on the theme of skyscrapers under construction, both titled *Construction Night* (Figs. 1, 5), illustrate Ault's growing experiments with abstraction. In the first version, painted in 1922, steel beams and girders create a series of triangular configurations. Ault



5. *Construction Night*, c. 1923

Oil on canvas, 29 $\frac{3}{8}$  x 21 $\frac{1}{2}$  in. (74.6 x 54.6 cm)  
 Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven;  
 Gift of The Woodward Foundation



6. *Loft Buildings, No. 1*, 1922

Oil on canvas, 20 x 14 in. (50.8 x 35.6 cm)

Collection of Gail Chesler Lippe and Richard Lippe

counterbalances these intricate patterns of form, line, and shadow against the clean façade of a moonlit factory. Depicted as massive geometric blocks, in somber tones of green and beige, the buildings are surrounded by a black night sky. The dramatic chiaroscuro of lit surfaces and cast shadows is also the predominant theme of the c. 1923 *Construction Night*. A closer view of the same scene, it is among Ault's most radical departures from naturalism. By focusing on the triangular shafts of light from two pinpoints of illumination in the foreground, and a third unseen light source in the background, Ault creates a composition of intersecting triangles cast against the flat rectangular surfaces of the buildings. With the exception of two vertical rows of windows, repeated from the earlier view, all architectural detail has been omitted.

*Loft Buildings, No. 1* (1922; Fig. 6) and *Loft Buildings, No. 2* (1925; Fig. 7), more typical of the analytical realism of Precisionists like Crawford and Sheeler, have no atmospheric light to create a mood or elicit emotion. Painted in the same years as the two versions of *Construction Night*, this pair of severely simplified daytime scenes repeats a similar sequence of viewpoints—buildings seen from a distance in the 1922 version, and from closer range in 1925. A vibrant palette distinguishes both paintings. The bright, flat blue of the sky—a favorite hue that Ault called “spiritual blue”<sup>77</sup>—and the creamy beige and brick red of the buildings appear continually throughout his oeuvre. With their light-saturated intensity, the *Loft Buildings* canvases provide a startling contrast to the subdued tones and cool quietude of Ault's nocturnal scenes.

Ralston Crawford's *Vertical Building* of 1954 (Fig. 8) offers a provocative comparison with Ault's *Loft Buildings, No. 1*. Crawford's focus is closer and his subject is seen from a higher eye level, but both artists use a tall central structure against a brilliant flat sky to dramatize the upward thrust of the composition. Although this device was used by other Precisionists, the nearly identical palettes are highly unusual; they represent a departure from the softer, more naturalistic colors associated with this group. It is unlikely that Crawford saw Ault's painting: according to extant records, it was not exhibited after 1925, at which time Crawford was a high school student in Buffalo, New York. But a comparison between the two works does suggest Ault's influential role in the Precisionist movement.



7. *Loft Buildings, No. 2*, 1923

Oil on canvas, 24 x 18 in. (61 x 45.7 cm)  
Collection of Lawrence J. Goldrich

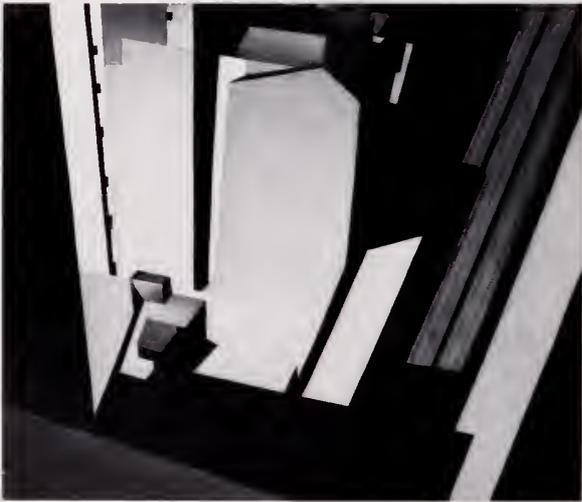


8. Ralston Crawford (1906–1978)

*Vertical Building*, 1934

Oil on canvas, 40 $\frac{1}{8}$  x 34 $\frac{1}{8}$  in. (101.9 x 86.7 cm)

San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; Arthur W. Barney Bequest Fund Purchase



9. Charles Sheeler (1883–1965)

*Church Street El*, 1920

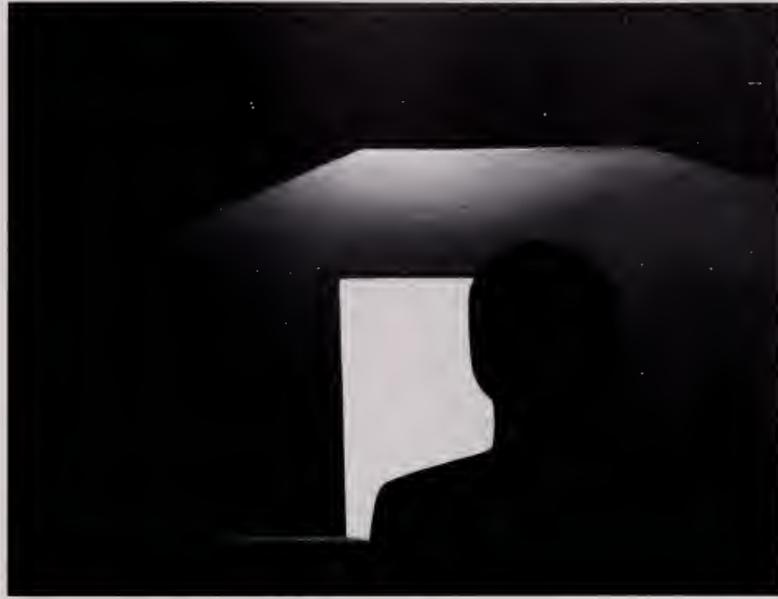
Oil on canvas, 16 $\frac{1}{8}$  x 19 $\frac{1}{8}$  in. (41 x 25.2 cm)

The Cleveland Museum of Art; Gift of Mr. and Mrs. William H. Marlatt Fund

*Loft Buildings, No. 2* has other compositional affinities with the Precisionists. It shows something of a bird's-eye view, popular in more explicit form in the works of Georgia O'Keeffe (beginning in 1925) and Charles Sheeler. In *Church Street El* (Fig. 9), Sheeler zooms in from a point high above the scene. Although Ault's vantage is much less extreme, he too frames the sides of the canvas with angled buildings to heighten the cavernous effect.

By 1925, Ault was showing regularly at the Whitney Studio Club and was invited to participate in the Bourgeois Gallery's "American Painters and Sculptors Annual." Sparked by the Anderson Galleries exhibition, Stephan Bourgeois, a prominent New York dealer and a vocal proponent of modernism, chose five paintings by Ault, including *Loft Buildings, No. 1* and *The Pianist* (1923, Fig. 10). Among the nine exhibitors were the Precisionist painter Stefan Hirsch, Oscar Bluemner, and O'Keeffe, as well as two of Ault's friends, Vincent Canadé and Emile Branchard. Like Lewis Hind, Bourgeois envisioned a renaissance by these "'primitives' of a new modern school of painting in America."<sup>8</sup> *The Pianist* was an appropriate selection to represent Bourgeois' aspirations. In this abstracted nocturne composed of only five basic shapes, Ault uses chiaroscuro expressively to heighten the romantic solemnity of the scene. Executed in a limited palette of black, brown, and creamy white, it was inspired by a concert Ault attended at the Century Theatre in New York.<sup>9</sup> Although *The Pianist* was a first and, as it turned out, an atypical attempt to integrate the human form into an abstract composition, Ault always considered it one of his best paintings.<sup>10</sup> Brooding and mysterious, *The Pianist* anticipates Ault's later representations of the figure as a disquieting presence.

The dark moodiness that set Ault apart from his fellow Precisionists reflected his personal condition as well. Both his brother Harold and his mother had died, his marriage was troubled, and he was in poor health, his childhood bout with rheumatic fever having left his heart permanently weakened. Although his recent move to New York City—away from his wife in Hillside, New Jersey—was financed by his father, Charles Ault was still critical of modernism and the life-style of an unemployed artist. "Because George wouldn't paint the way his father wanted him to, the father gave him little to live on. . . .



10. *The Pianist*, 1923

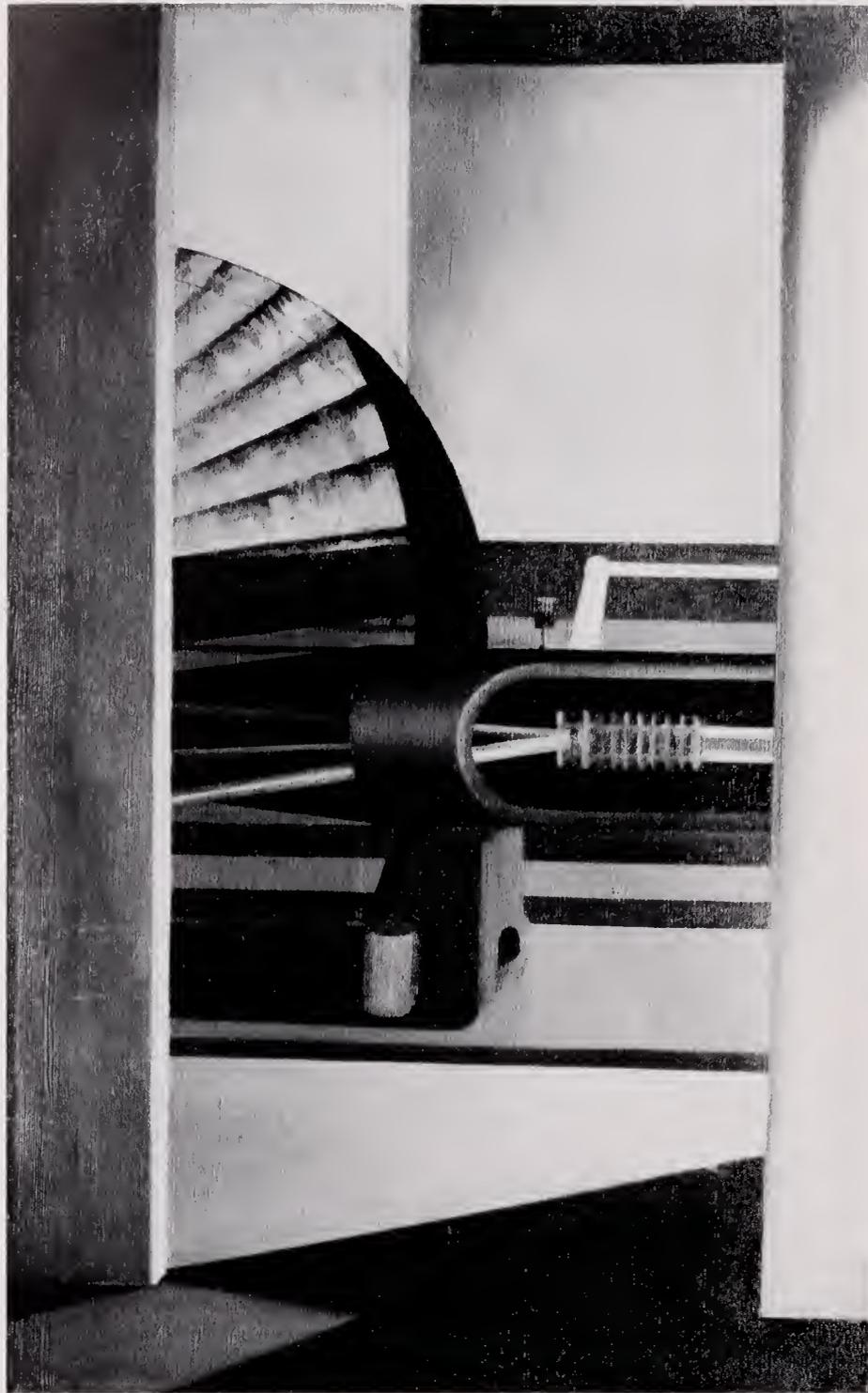
Oil on panel, 12 x 16 in. (30.5 x 40.6 cm)  
Nebraska Art Association, Nelle Cochrane Woods  
Collection, Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery,  
University of Nebraska-Lincoln

George suffered terribly. He had too much feeling.”<sup>11</sup> Efforts to force his son into the printing ink business had failed. After a brief stint in the factory, learning about the recently developed rotogravure ink, Ault “went home to paint and never returned to the plant.”<sup>12</sup> Yet the industrial locale, a key focus of the Precisionist idiom, made a lasting mark on the impressionable young artist. By immersing his son in such a setting, Charles Ault had unwittingly compromised his own purpose. For the Precisionists, the machine, like the skyscraper, was an icon of industrial America—Henry Ford’s “new messiah,”<sup>13</sup> whose temple was the factory.

*The Machine* (1922; Fig. 11) and *The Mill Room* (1923; Fig. 12) were inspired by Ault’s experience at the New Jersey ink plant. As he did in the loft buildings and construction series, Ault alternates between a close, highly detailed vantage point and a more distanced view. In *The Machine*, a configuration of piston and flywheel is seen through an open doorway. Somber tones of gray and pale blue define areas of light and shadow. A comparison with Sheeler’s famous *Rolling Power* (Fig. 13), painted

seventeen years later, reveals how Ault’s picture, with its sparse detailing and almost eerie light and shade system, furthers the concept of machine as a spiritual entity. Though the Sheeler has thematic similarities, its photographic presentation lacks the emotional resonance of Ault’s solitary machine. In *The Mill Room*, a lone figure operates a press within a shadowed interior. The worker, like the pianist, personifies the solitude of his surroundings; he is painted in the geometric style of his machine. Through an arched window and doorway in the background, the mill is glimpsed in sharp daylight, each brick distinctly detailed.

The dreamlike ambience of *The Mill Room* and its compositional structure foretell the Surrealist influence that would soon make its mark on Ault’s work. He returned to Europe for several months in 1924, during which time André Breton’s *Manifesto of Surrealism* was published in Paris. Ault’s output during this trip—primarily watercolors and drawings produced on site in Brittany and Paris—reflect little of the radical spirit articulated in Breton’s treatise. He relied on familiar



11. *The Machine*, 1922

Oil on canvas, 26¼ x 16 in. (66.7 x 40.6 cm)

Collection of Mr. and Mrs. I. David Orr

forms of expression, exemplified by the drawing *Jockey Bar, Paris* (1924; Fig. 16), a Precisionist-inspired nocturne. But as the painter Andrée Ruellan recalls, he spent most of his time “looking and going to exhibitions. In Paris he was conservative. . . . He told me that he loved Paris like a grandmother, like an old thing, but America was to him the new, the future.”<sup>14</sup> It is this attitude that perhaps explains why the Surrealist process of tapping the creative power of the unconscious only entered Ault’s work upon his return to America—as if he could only experiment with radical ideas in what he perceived as a modernist environment.

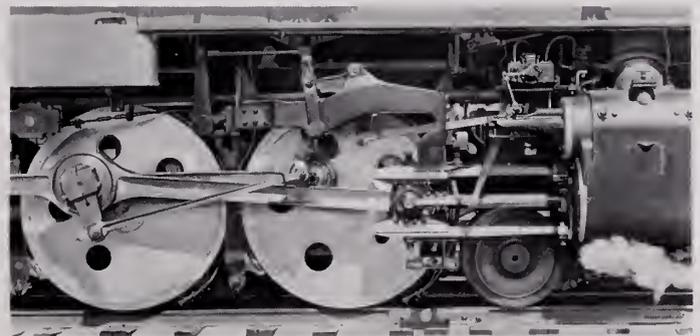
*Factory Chimney* and *Sullivan Street Abstraction* (Figs. 14, 15)—two of the three oils painted that year in the States—illustrate Ault’s personal definition of Surrealism as “part of life that does not find expression in the usual course of events.”<sup>15</sup> American artists like Ault, inspired by de Chirico’s imagery, focused on distortions of the real world rather than the fantastic or the irrational. Consequently, their art was labeled Magic Realism, a sub-category of Surrealism. While Ault’s paintings take up the nocturnal theme found in his earlier works, they remain within the confines of the Precisionist style only in their urban subjects, hard-edged manner of drawing, and reductive geometry. What dominates our experience of *Factory Chimney* and *Sullivan Street Abstraction* is the perplexing moodiness of Surrealism. Ault’s progressive involvement with Surrealism is dramatically revealed by a comparison of *Sullivan Street Abstraction* with *42nd Street Night*, painted only four years earlier. Both the palette and the composition of the two nocturnes are similar. Deep brown-black sidewalks, roads, and buildings converge at a horizon line below the center of the canvas; horizontal elevated structures connect vertical buildings at the sides; and brilliant bands of orange punctuate the darkness. But where the earlier work is illuminated by signs and shop windows, in the later painting six sharply rounded lights from postless streetlamps hang in space like a constellation.<sup>16</sup> The end of the work day, a mundane aspect of city life, is revealed on 42nd Street. But on Sullivan Street, in the solitary depths of night, a dream city emerges.

In *Factory Chimney*, Ault realistically renders the industrial structure that appears throughout the Precisionist genre. Yet its haunting conception, looming in the



12. *The Mill Room*, 1923

Oil on canvas, 22 x 16 in. (55.9 x 40.6 cm)  
The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco;  
Gift of Max L. Rosenberg



13. Charles Sheeler (1883–1965)

*Rolling Power*, 1939

Oil on canvas, 15 x 30 in. (38.1 x 76.2 cm)  
Smith College Museum of Art, Northampton,  
Massachusetts



14. *Factory Chimney*, 1924

Oil on canvas, 30 x 16 in. (76.2 x 40.6 cm)  
 Philadelphia Museum of Art;  
 Gift of Dr. Samuel W. Fernberger

night sky above a deserted residential street, is again rooted in de Chirico's interpretation of Surrealism. For the Italian painter and his American disciples, the isolation of the urban scene motivated disquieting architectural landscapes. During the next decade, in the wake of the Great Depression, Magic Realists and Social Surrealists like O. Louis Guglielmi addressed issues of poverty, injustice, and "the darkness of industrial enslavement"<sup>17</sup> in cityscapes (Fig. 17) that bear a striking resemblance to *Factory Chimney*. Although Ault had deep political convictions and later referred to skyscrapers as "tombstones of capitalism,"<sup>18</sup> the message of his art was always one of personal unrest rather than social outrage. *Brooklyn Ice House* (1926; Fig. 19) reflects this lonely despair. The low structure resembles a guardhouse, so that the simple industrial buildings can easily be mistaken for a prison compound. A chimney emitting ominous black smoke and the bleak landscape heighten the overwhelming desolation of the scene. An odd synthesis of the styles that shaped Ault's vision, *Brooklyn Ice House* combines Precisionist subject matter, Surrealist ambience, and the naive rendering techniques associated with American folk painting.

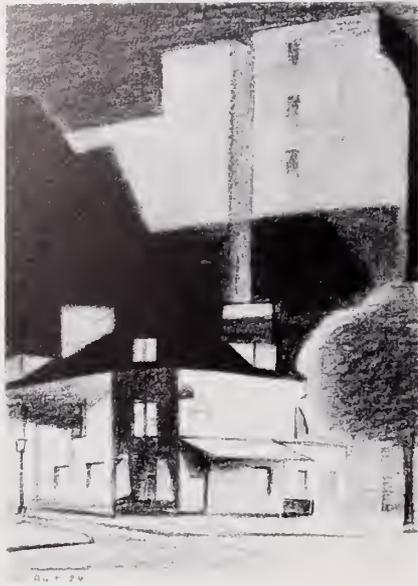
During the 1920s, indigenous primitive art was rediscovered by modernists like Elie Nadelman, Yasuo Kuniyoshi, and Sheeler. While their European counterparts turned to Africa and Oceania for inspiration, American artists looked to their native cultural heritage. Artists' colonies, such as Provincetown, Massachusetts, where Ault had vacationed, were rife with artifacts, available for prices that even a painter could afford. The artist's second wife, Louise Ault, recalls that he "was among those enthusiastically collecting 'early American.'"<sup>19</sup> *Early America* (1927; Fig. 18) is among his first mature attempts to depict the rural landscape in the simple style of the naive genre. Ault focused on the juxtaposition of the farmhouses clustered around a white country church. As a Precisionist, he reduced the architecture to basic geometric shapes, the brick-red and white buildings recalling his earlier factories and lofts. The affinity between Precisionism and folk art is apparent here in the spare forms of the architecture, the geometric patchwork of plowed fields, and the clean, flat application of color.

Personal as well as aesthetic connections may have motivated Ault to explore the folk milieu. According to



15. *Sullivan Street Abstraction*, 1924

Oil on canvas, 24 x 20 in. (61 x 50.8 cm)  
Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; Art Center  
Acquisition Fund'



16. *Jockey Bar, Paris, 1924*

Charcoal on paper, 9 $\frac{3}{4}$  x 6 $\frac{3}{4}$  in. (24.8 x 17.1 cm)  
Private collection



17. O. Louis Guglielmi (1906–1956)

*Hague Street, 1936*

Oil on canvas, 30 $\frac{1}{8}$  x 24 in. (76.5 x 61 cm)  
The Newark Museum, New Jersey

Louise Ault, *Early America*, along with later works that expanded this theme, “undoubtedly referred back . . . to the days of his mother, a pioneer woman in Illinois (for he quoted often the things she had to tell, using the colloquialisms of the time).”<sup>20</sup> While such homespun sentiments also inspired Regionalists like Grant Wood, who painted similar panoramic views, Ault and his peers used the folk idiom for the advancement of the modernist aesthetic.

By the late 1920s, Ault was exhibiting in New York’s major progressive galleries: those of Stephan Bourgeois and F. Valentine Dudensing, J.B. Neumann’s New Art Circle, and Edith Halpert’s Downtown Gallery. Although the artist credited Bourgeois and Neumann with providing the most guidance and support, it was through Halpert that he received the greatest recognition. Yet he was never comfortable with what he felt was Halpert’s commercialism. “When this dealer, with a keen sense of the market, attempted to influence him toward producing a series of canvases in the vein of an earlier two or three which had had success, he suffered shock and recoiled in suspicion to a distance not again breached. ‘She wanted me to make a “line” out of my work,’ he exploded indignantly.”<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, Ault exhibited at The Downtown Gallery almost every year from 1927 through 1934.

For Ault’s premiere at The Downtown Gallery in 1927, his dealer selected watercolors and drawings of Provincetown, Bermuda, France, and New York. The following year, a second solo exhibition included nine oil paintings, among them *Sullivan Street Abstraction* and *From Brooklyn Heights* (1925; Fig. 20). The show received widespread critical attention. Henry McBride, writing for the *New York Sun*, commented that “Ault may be called one of the true American artists—one whose work shows a definite connection with the development of an American tradition of design. . . . The American school of painting which is now in a fertile period of development . . . has in this artist a strong and important contributor, with an individual approach and a very personal sense of the relation of form and color.”<sup>22</sup> William B. McCormick’s observations in the *New York American* were equally laudatory: “His color has achieved an ingratiating quality of sheer solidity . . . his technique has achieved a suavity that delights appreciation of sheer painting, and his pictorial sense is keener than ever.”<sup>23</sup>



18. *Early America*, 1927

Oil on canvas, 18 x 16 in. (45.7 x 40.6 cm)

Collection of Marcia Lucas



19. *Brooklyn Ice House*, 1926

Oil on canvas, 24 x 30 in. (61 x 76.2 cm)  
 The Newark Museum, New Jersey;  
 Purchase 1928, The General Fund

Although McCormick's review singled out *Sullivan Street Abstraction*—"in which he takes that term of the modernists and makes of it a lovely and striking urban nocturne"<sup>24</sup>—other critics applauded what they perceived as Ault's move away from abstraction with paintings like *From Brooklyn Heights*. "This artist, like many of our young modernists, has had a decided flair for the abstract, building up his design in somber tones with architectural precision of structure. Now his world appears less like building blocks skillfully fitted together, for he begins to turn to more representative work with decided development of three-dimensional design."<sup>25</sup>

Set against a background of skyscrapers, such scenes of waterfront industry were natural subjects for Precisionist painters like Ault. From the roof of his Greenwich Village studio, he could see the harbor, with its terminals and boxcars, smoke-spewing oceanliners, freighters, tugboats, and barges. Nostalgia for his own sea voyages intensified the experience of witnessing passenger ships such as the *Queen Mary* docking in the Port of New York. Ault considered *From Brooklyn Heights* the successful culmination of other harbor studies made that same year: a preliminary drawing (*Study for From Brooklyn Heights*) and *East River* (Fig. 21). The painting was purchased from The Downtown Gallery (along with *Brooklyn Ice*

*House*) by The Newark Museum and appeared in that museum's 1928 "New Acquisitions" exhibition. Ault later provided his own analysis of the painting: "In this picture I have, I think, demonstrated adequately those essential things that go to make a pictorial composition: the scene that excited my esthetic emotion reduced to the simple forms of which it was composed, leaving out all unessential detail; distortion of those forms when necessary, and the modification of color values. Each component part of the picture thought of in relation to the whole and not for itself alone."<sup>26</sup> Although this statement adheres to Precisionist principles, *From Brooklyn Heights* and the previous harbor studies nevertheless transcend such theoretical limitations. The American primitive influence is apparent in the naive patterning of waves, shrubbery, and curvaceous smoke and clouds, yet one feels an eerie presence in the strange mountainous shape that hovers above the *East River* skyscrapers, or appears as a cloud bank in *From Brooklyn Heights*. The very irrationality of this triangular shape reveals the continuing influence of Surrealism in Ault's work.

With the Whitney Studio Club on 8th Street and The Downtown Gallery on 15th, Greenwich Village had become the hub of Ault's artistic world. Charmed by its



20. *From Brooklyn Heights*, 1925

Oil on canvas, 30 x 20 in. (76.2 x 50.8 cm)

The Newark Museum, New Jersey;

Purchase 1928, The General Fund



21. *East River*, 1925

Oil on canvas, 21 x 16 in. (53.5 x 40.6 cm)  
Collection of Alan and Paula Schwartz

small-town ambience and early American architecture, and by the bohemian life-style of other “lost generation” artists, Ault felt as comfortable in the Village as he had in his favorite neighborhoods of London and Paris. But as the twenties drew to a close, he grew increasingly depressed. When Andrée Ruellan returned to New York in 1927, she found a changed man from the one she had met in Paris in 1924. She was shocked to find that “he had become reclusive, was drinking heavily, and had almost lost his eyesight from bad alcohol during Prohibition.”<sup>27</sup> By 1929, following his father’s death and the suicides of his two brothers, Ault’s behavior had become so neurotic and bizarre that he alienated his onetime friends and fellow artists in the Whitney circle. Alexander Brook, Kuniyoshi, Louis Bouché, Maurice Becker, and William and Marguerite Zorach would no longer associate with him. His few remaining friends predicted that he would not live much longer. Although gallery records indicate that he continued to exhibit with Mrs. Halpert until 1934, Louise Ault recalls that the relationship had become troubled by about 1930. “As he told it, ‘The gallery got excited; they began phoning me to get a picture ready for this and a picture ready for that—I can’t work that way.’”<sup>28</sup> Ault’s hostility toward Mrs. Halpert was motivated by a self-destructive impulse that thwarted the progress of his career. His perception of her as a strong-willed and aggressive dealer was not far-fetched, but those characteristics were softened by her commitment to the artists she represented. During the twenties and thirties The Downtown Gallery stable included Stuart Davis, Charles Demuth, Arthur Dove, Marsden Hartley, Georgia O’Keeffe, Max Weber, and William Zorach, pioneers of American modernism whose company Ault might have pursued in a healthier state of mind.

For diversion, Ault frequented a local bar on Seventh Avenue, and the still extant Grand Ticino’s on Thompson Street. To “rest his eyes” and “look into distances”<sup>29</sup> he habitually escaped to the roof of his building at 50 Commerce Street, once the Mary Garden perfume factory. While his sixth-floor studio commanded an unobstructed view of Lower Manhattan, an even broader vista could be seen from the roof. On damp, hazy days, when the air was redolent with old perfume, Ault embraced the romantic fantasy of New York that had inspired a previous generation of artists. For Ashcan School painters like John

Sloan, Greenwich Village rooftops were public stages on which the working classes acted out the dramas of their lives. The Precisionists, in turn, refined and abstracted—and depopulated—the architectural panoramas spread before them. From his own roof, Ault could observe typical Ashcan School denizens from the tenement across the way: “He watched the emergence of a figure onto the roof of the tenement building opposite, an old woman who stepped out tiredly from the doorway of the stairhead weighted down by a loaded laundry basket. . . . ‘How beautiful she is’—he peered intently—‘the line of her body as it molds to the wall.’”<sup>30</sup>

But it was the architectonic Precisionist style with its preference for unpeopled vistas that would dominate Ault’s work. In 1931, Ault began a series of paintings that look down at the adjacent roofs. His proclivity for studying the same scene from different vantage points is particularly apparent in the numerous rooftop views of Jane Street painted during the 1930s. Most of these works manifest little evidence of a Surrealist spirit, although some reveal the dark side of Ault’s experience of urban life. A subdued palette and cool gray sky set the mood for *Village Roofs* and *Jane Street Roofs* (Figs. 22, 25), both dated 1931. “The Village . . . is never romantic at noon. . . . The city needs haze. In this harsh light you see all the ugly details—you see the city crumbling to pieces.”<sup>31</sup> Painterly brushwork and softly modulated surfaces complete the atmospheric illusion. But the flattening effect of the cables and power lines that segment the sky affirms Ault’s Precisionist stance. *Jane Street Roofs, No. 2* (1935; Fig. 24) adheres more closely to the Precisionist formula. Paralleling Sheeler’s technique, Ault applied his paint to the canvas with meticulous care, creating a silky surface. The vantage point shifts to focus on a turquoise water tank that appears seamlessly adjoined to the surrounding building masses, whose smooth façades are bathed in sunlight.

Meanwhile, Ault continued to paint from the studio window, incorporating its structure into his imagery—the clearly delineated brick jamb in *Hudson Street* (1932; Fig. 25) and the glass itself in the psychically charged *Greenwich Village Nocturne* (1934; Fig. 26). In these window views, certain Surrealistic features are apparent, but with a diversity that illustrates Ault’s broad aesthetic range. He rendered the view in *Hudson Street* (purchased



22. *Village Roofs*, 1931

Oil on canvas, 10 x 12 in. (25.4 x 30.5 cm)  
Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; Gift of  
Mrs. George Ault



23. *Jane Street Roofs*, 1931

Oil on canvas, 15 $\frac{7}{8}$  x 12 in. (40.5 x 30.5 cm)  
 Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden,  
 Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.;  
 Gift of Joseph H. Hirshhorn

from the Whitney Museum's first biennial of contemporary American art in 1932) in harsh daylight, articulating the forms with clarity and control. Only the dark shadows cast upon a deserted cityscape evince de Chirico's influence. But in *Greenwich Village Nocturne*, wispy apparitions of clouds and ceiling beams from the studio's interior are reflected across the picture plane. Superimposed over distant rooftops, the effect of these reflections is abstract, romantic, and surreal. Isolated areas of light punctuate the darkness, glowing under the hazy moon. The same view inspired Ault to comment later: "How beautiful it is . . . that ghost moon and tank. It looks exactly like a bubble rising out of the tank."<sup>32</sup>

After breaking with The Downtown Gallery in 1934, Ault rapidly closed off other channels of artistic commerce. Unwilling to work within the gallery system, he was also hampered by an inability to cultivate patronage on his own. And he alienated fellow artists who might have provided sympathy and emotional support. Rather than join his peers in the left-wing political activities of the Depression era, he suppressed sympathetic convictions and appeared apathetic. By 1936 invitations to exhibit were scarce, and his only activity that year was a talk he gave on "Subject Matter in Art" for radio station WEVD's program "Through the Art World." He kept in contact with the art community primarily through his participation in the Federal government's New Deal work projects: first in the Treasury Relief Art Project, and later the Works Progress Administration (W.P.A.). Although his stipend provided a means of support, he grew increasingly frustrated by the demanding production schedule. Furthermore, program guidelines stipulated that subject matter be limited to a loosely defined category which became codified as the American Scene—a nationalistic, grassroots movement that realistically recorded aspects of American life. Surrealistic imagery and abstraction were considered inappropriate. Ault did manage to complete a total of sixty-seven works for the W.P.A., but often under strained physical, as well as psychological, conditions. His correspondence with the Regional Director, Juliana Force (also Director of the Whitney Museum), reveals the difficulties he had in completing a painting scheduled for delivery by the end of February 1934. On February 26 he wrote: "I will have to undergo an operation very soon for

my complaint. The picture I will deliver will be one of my best.”<sup>33</sup> On March 2 he continued: “I am supposed to stay in bed as I now have the grippe to add to my other troubles, but despite that I managed to paint five hours yesterday.”<sup>34</sup> Although Ault is not specific about the nature of his illness, the combined effects of heart disease and alcoholism accounted for the majority of his ailments. In the required Progress Report, he remarked rather irritably: “I thought the commission was given to me . . . on January 2. Enclosed a letter to the chairman. I said nothing about my work being finished to anybody.”<sup>35</sup> It is obvious that Ault responded poorly to pressure, even when he desperately needed money—his income was supplemented only by sporadic teaching jobs and handouts from his sister, Esther. But in addition to these psychological motivations, he was also rebelling against stylistic dictates that conflicted with his own sense of artistic freedom.

When Ault encountered Louise Jonas sunbathing on his Commerce Street roof during the summer of 1935, he was an embittered alcoholic with a waning career. Estranged from his wife Beatrice since 1922, he had grown paranoid and “on guard against encroachments by women.”<sup>36</sup> Soon, however, he was deeply involved with Louise, an aspiring young writer, and began to petition for a divorce. After years of refusal, his wife relented, and in 1941 he remarried. In her memoir, *Artist in Woodstock*, Louise Ault describes their early relationship and the warnings she ignored: “George’s New York City physician had told me in private, ‘you can’t change him, you know. . . . Try to stop the drinking and he’ll only build up resentment against you.’”<sup>37</sup> As Ault’s emotional illness worsened, the doctor urged psychoanalysis. “George Ault’s answer took the form of drastic action. He wanted no palliative, no adjustment to those things that seemed to him wrong in his life. He wanted to get things right—for painting. Virtually overnight he made the arrangements for leaving New York to take his chances for what they might be worth in Woodstock.”<sup>38</sup>

Whether as a repudiation of the New York art world that had rejected him, or as a final grasp at stability, Ault’s move in 1937 to Woodstock, New York, where he had spent the previous three summers, marked a new phase in his artistic life. The moody rural landscapes he produced indicated a further shift toward Surrealism, primitivism,



24. *Jane Street Roofs, No. 2, 1935*

Oil on canvasboard, 15<sup>15</sup>/<sub>16</sub> x 11<sup>15</sup>/<sub>16</sub> in. (40.5 x 30.3 cm)  
New Jersey State Museum, Trenton; Purchase



25. *Hudson Street*, 1932

Oil on canvas, 24 x 20 in. (61 x 50.8 cm)  
Whitney Museum of American Art, New York;  
Purchase 33-40

and romanticism, and a renewed appreciation of natural subject matter. Inspired by the beauty of the countryside and the drama of the surrounding Catskill Mountains, a new vision was crystallizing in Ault's work.

But Woodstock was an incongruous choice for a painter seeking isolation. Established as an organized art colony in 1902, by the 1920s about a quarter of its summer population was made up of artists,<sup>39</sup> who were beginning to purchase land and homes. Ault's former friends, Brook, Kuniyoshi, and Ruellan, were residents at various times and active members of the Woodstock Artists Association. During the Depression, Woodstock artists received more government funding from Roosevelt's programs than artists elsewhere, with the exception of New York City.<sup>40</sup> It was to this socially engaging and artistically fertile community that Ault and Louise Jonas escaped. Though its relaxed environment might have facilitated Ault's re-entry into the art world, Woodstock instead marked his final rejection of artistic society. "He held to his resolve . . . to take no part in art colony life. He had had 'enough art colony nonsense in Provincetown,' he said."<sup>41</sup>

Nearly destitute, the couple rented a house at the foot of Mount Overlook, a mile from town. For ten dollars a month, the dwelling was modest—a studio, loft bedroom, and lean-to kitchen, devoid of electricity and indoor plumbing. A wood stove provided the only heat. "I believed there was no one else like us in Woodstock," Louise Ault wrote. "No one else would keep on living as we did. There was something wrong with us, both of us."<sup>42</sup> Totally dependent on Louise for emotional support, Ault receded further from his peers. Long-term residents like Lillian Fortess, currently Director of the Woodstock Artists Association, remember an impoverished recluse with a volatile personality. For companionship, Ault turned to the local farmers—his neighbors and fellow patrons at the village bar. Likening them to the English countryfolk of his childhood, he romanticized their simple way of life and their daily presence in the bar as a means of rationalizing his drinking problem. Alcohol, he believed, "takes up the slack in the unwholesomeness of so-called civilization, relieves the ordeal, the strait jacket of modern life; it has saved many a man's sanity."<sup>43</sup>

Without gallery representation, painting sales dwindled, and the couple needed further support. Louise took a job as a journalist in Kingston, New York, commuting



26. *Greenwich Village Nocturne*, 1934

Oil on canvas, 22 x 18 in. (55.9 x 45.7 cm)

Private collection, courtesy Vanderwoude

Tananbaum Gallery, New York



27. *New York Rooftop*, 1940

Oil on canvas, 26 $\frac{3}{8}$  x 20 $\frac{1}{4}$  in. (67 x 51.4 cm)

Collection of Raymond J. Learsy

six days a week until the newspaper folded. To qualify for W.P.A. funds, Ault was required to report to project headquarters in New York City on a regular basis. Although the expense of these trips severely reduced his meager stipend, he used them as half-hearted opportunities to re-establish gallery connections. In 1958, with the hope of purchasing the property on which they lived, Ault approached a dealer, whom he believed to be sympathetic, with his new canvases. When these were rejected, he withdrew once more, commenting that “New York is unfit for human habitation.”<sup>44</sup> Discouraged and debilitated, his visits there became excuses for alcoholic binges away from Louise’s watchful eye. But the city still figured strongly in his imagery. Louise recalls his reaction to a group of O’Keeffe paintings they saw at The Museum of Modern Art: “Standing in front of one of her large canvases of city buildings . . . after a moment’s silence he said only, ‘We must get back to New York’ . . . and from his quiet vehemence I sensed that he was restlessly aware of what *he* could yet do with that kind of material.”<sup>45</sup>

The visionary tendency to imbue reality with a dreamlike ambience became the focus of Ault’s mature work. This Surrealist approach underlies the varied range of styles and subjects that Ault produced during the forties. He continued to explore the expressive possibilities of the rooftop genre, but now incorporated unexpected imagery. Painted in Woodstock from memory, *New York Rooftop* (1940; Fig. 27) depicts 50 Commerce Street—its black stairhead and parapeted wall silhouetted against a “spiritual blue” sky. Dark, hard-edged shadows cast across the gravel surface of the roof are suggested, atypically, by textured paint. But it is the discordant presence of a high-heeled, nude woman in an otherwise standard architectural composition that gives this work a Surrealist presence. With her inclusion, Ault emphasized the irrational character of the mundane. Her stance, her shoes, and the distant cross that appears to sit upon her hand determine the peculiar nature of *New York Rooftop*. As in most Surrealist work, its symbolism remains enigmatic, although Louise Ault has suggested a biographical inspiration:

*A high and sequestered world walled in as privately and securely as were the English gardens he knew during the happy days of his youth. In the corner, relegated to the*



28. *Sculpture on a Roof*, 1945

Oil on board, 20 x 16 in. (40.6 x 30.5 cm)  
The Butler Institute of American Art, Youngstown,  
Ohio; Gift of Mrs. George C. Ault



29. *The Plough and the Moon*, 1940

Oil on canvas, 22 x 30 in. (55.9 x 76.2 cm)

Collection of Mr. and Mrs. I. David Orr

background as it was his determination that any woman in his life henceforth must be, an impersonal nude young female, turned away, looking beyond the wall; the figure calligraphic, abstracted enough to play a counterpoint to the larger geometric forms. In the far distance above the unseen city was the just-discernible cross of a church spire, reminiscent of his mother's religiosity, and a plume of smoke from a factory chimney, reminding of the father.<sup>46</sup>

Regardless of its strangeness, *New York Rooftop* gave a temporary boost to Ault's dormant career when it was included in the prestigious "New Directions in American Painting" exhibition at the Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh, in October 1941. *Art News* reproduced it in their November issue under the caption "Our Own Choice for the Carnegie Awards" as "one of the four most distinguished inclusions."<sup>47</sup> Other critics also praised Ault, among them Jeanette Jena, writing for the *Pittsburgh Post Gazette*: "an excellent canvas . . . it is so good to see his paintings again."<sup>48</sup>

Five years later, Ault referred back to the same incongruous mixture of images. In *Sculpture on a Roof* (1945; Fig. 28), fragments of classical nude sculptures—a head, the lower half of a male figure, and an extended female torso—are carefully arranged along the parapet. Such statues and the arched windows of the building behind are endemic to de Chirico's version of Surrealism. Although the architectural setting is imagined, since Ault no longer had access to the roof, the torso is based on a marble Aphrodite Ault's father had bought in London.

Ault's forays into the uncharted realm of the unconscious were more adventurous when he took up non-urban themes, as in the series of "desert landscapes" painted from imagination. The perplexing imagery of *The Plough and the Moon* (1940; Fig. 29) again affirms de Chirico's influence and the disparate artistic genres to which Ault continuously referred—Precisionism, romanticism, and folk art. Under a full moon, an arched tower and gracefully rendered plow rise from a vast plain of clouds. Like *New York Rooftop*, these landscapes represented the protected territory that Ault sought in the real world. "I like deserts, with nothing in them but monuments, because all is peaceful and quiet. There are no human beings to disturb and annoy; only art is left—the freedom to make



30. *Black Night: Russell's Corners*, 1945

Oil on canvas, 18 x 24<sup>1</sup>/<sub>16</sub> in. (45.7 x 61.1 cm)  
The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts,  
Philadelphia; John Lambert Fund



31. *Bright Light at Russell's Corners*, 1946

Oil on canvas, 20 x 25 in. (50.8 x 63.5 cm)  
National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian  
Institution, Washington, D.C.; Gift of Mr. and  
Mrs. Sidney Lawrence



32. *January Full Moon*, 1941

Oil on canvas, 20 x 26 in. (50.8 x 66 cm)

Collection of Raymond J. Leary

it. The desert picture becomes a peaceful world in which to work."<sup>49</sup>

Ault's desire for secluded tranquility found fulfillment in his Woodstock surroundings. "He relished D.H. Lawrence's comments on a world devoid of human beings 'where only the ears of an occasional rabbit would protrude above the high grass.'"<sup>50</sup> With an almost Regionalist sentiment for the symbols of heartland America, Ault painted a series of barns, based on that of a farmer known as Old Rick, as "a labor of love." "More than anything else," he felt, "they represent the old agrarian life."<sup>51</sup> Yet one of his interpretations of Rick's barn, the nocturne *January Full Moon* (Fig. 32), also offers revealing evidence of his increasingly strong penchant for Surrealist visions. It is almost otherworldly. Conceived during a walk on a bitterly cold night, the painting, like *The Plough and the Moon*, evokes the circumscribed world of the imagination. Illuminated by moonlight, the snow is cloudlike and the icy roof, spectral. The stylistic devices of patterning and chiaroscuro are common to both works, as is a palette of white, deep blue, and ebony. In May 1941, *January Full Moon* was included in the Annual of the Albany Institute of History and Art, but was returned unsold. Traded a few years later to pay for Louise's dental work,<sup>52</sup> it was not shown again until the Whitney Museum's exhibition "George Ault: Nocturnes" in 1973. Illustrated in *The New York Times* review of the show, *January Full Moon* was lauded by their critic James Mellow as being "among the real masterpieces in this exhibition. . . . The subject is dangerously banal. . . . It is, nonetheless, a powerful and brooding image, saved from any trace of sentimentality or nostalgia by Ault's analytical skills."<sup>53</sup>

Although Ault was not immune to buckeye sentimentality, his most successful works, as Mellow perceived, overcame the limitations of subject matter and the neo-primitive style he sometimes favored. Between 1943 and his death in 1948, Ault produced four nocturnal views of Russell's Corners, a well-known Woodstock locale, situated a quarter of a mile from his studio. He focused on the abstract planar qualities of three barn groupings intersected by a road and the linear patterns of electric wires crossing overhead. The piercing light source and the limited palette of red, white, and shades of black conform to Ault's format for painting nocturnes, while the intersecting wires recall the Jane Street roof series. Mellow



33. *Night at Russell's Corners*, 1946

Oil on canvas, 16 x 30 in. (40.6 x 76.2 cm)  
Private collection, courtesy Vanderwoude  
Tananbaum Gallery, New York



34. *August Night at Russell's Corners*, 1948

Oil on canvas, 18 x 24 in. (45.7 x 61 cm)  
Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha, Nebraska



35. *New Moon, New York*, 1945

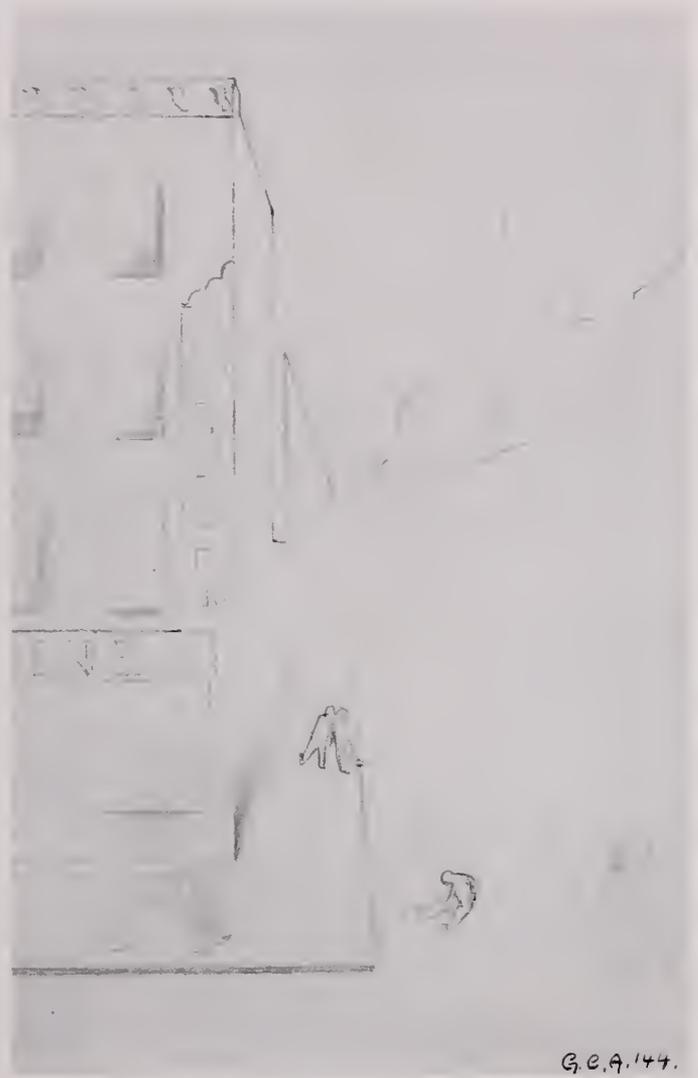
Oil on canvas, 28 x 20 in. (71.1 x 50.8 cm)  
The Museum of Modern Art, New York;  
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Leslie Ault

noted the almost mystical effect of the Russell's Corners paintings, grouping them together with *January Full Moon*: "Ault has summoned up the poetry of darkness in an unforgettable way—the implacable solitude and strangeness that night bestows upon once-familiar forms and places."<sup>54</sup>

Beginning in 1943 with *Black Night: Russell's Corners* (Fig. 30),<sup>55</sup> in each succeeding version Ault appeared to move closer to his subject, and with this proximity the images became more and more like desolate dreamworlds. In the 1946 *Bright Light at Russell's Corners* (Fig. 31), a crucifix composed of power lines intersecting a pole divides the composition at its center. Ault's central placement of the light and his deliberate use of the same religious image that appeared distantly in *New York Rooftop* invoke a symbolic interpretation. In *Night at Russell's Corners* (Fig. 33), painted the same year, the white barn is obscured by dimmer and more simplified structures.<sup>56</sup> The light appears larger now, competing with the barn as a focal point. *August Night at Russell's Corners* (1948; Fig. 34), Ault's last signed painting, was intended as a "potboiler" that would sell quickly and finance a trip to New York City.<sup>57</sup> Repeating the vantage point of *Night at Russell's Corners*, he focused on the old blacksmith shop at the left, the illuminated road, and the intensely bright light in the center. The intricately patterned wires in the earlier painting have been reduced to two thin lines, partially submerged in darkness. This final work in the Russell's Corners series is the blackest and most somber—a final contemplation of an emotionally potent scene.

Although the Russell's Corners series was motivated by Ault's intense emotional connection with the country, he had also begun to crave the cultural and visual stimulation of New York City. With the recovery of the national economy at the end of World War II, the art market revived, and proceeds from painting sales financed celebratory trips to the city, where Ault sketched, attended exhibitions, and formulated ideas for new works. He delved further into the Surrealist idiom, and its impact on his urban landscapes became increasingly apparent.

*New Moon, New York* (1945; Fig. 35) evolved from studies made in the city the previous year. In a series of three drawings, Ault's sequential progress toward abstraction and Surrealism is revealed. The cartoonlike *Sunday Morning, New York* (Fig. 36) borders on the conical, an



36. *Sunday Morning, New York*, 1944

Graphite on paper, 14 x 9 in. (35.6 x 22.9 cm)  
Vanderwoude Tananbaum Gallery, New York

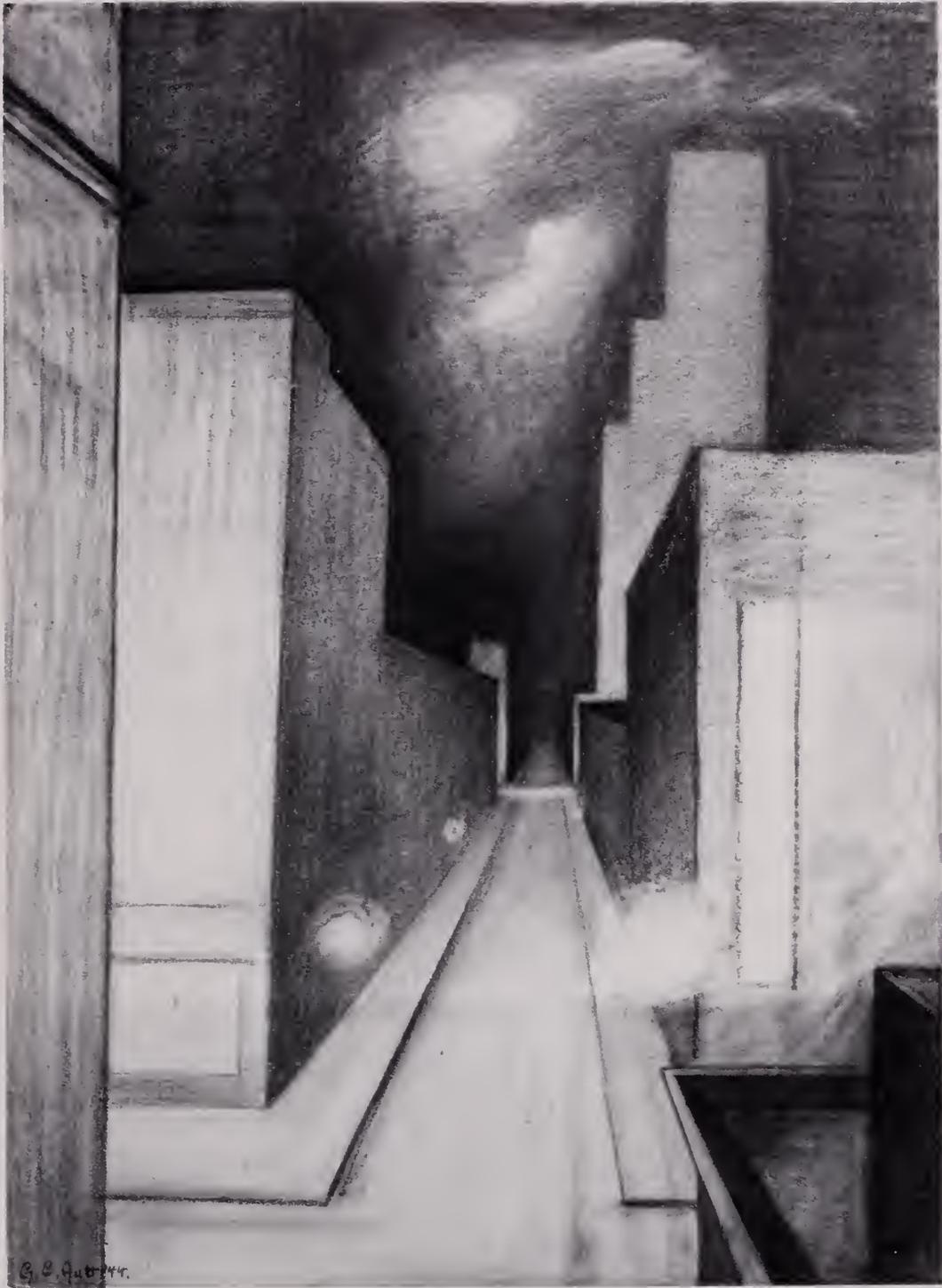


37. *In the West Forties*, 1946

Oil on canvas, 30 x 24 in. (76.2 x 61 cm)  
Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Irwin L. Bernstein

unusual trait for Ault. In the early hours of the morning, under a crescent moon, drunken patrons stumble from the corner bar. While the establishment's façade is rendered with attention to certain details—the ornamental cornice, windows, and neon signs advertising wine and beer—figures and buildings are reduced to basic geometric components. Another study, *Waning Moon, New York* (present whereabouts unknown), is closer to the final painting: devoid of people, moody, and abstract. The final and most careful rendering, *Study for New Moon, New York* (Fig. 38), accentuates the surreal atmosphere that would characterize the painting. The original neon sign, now shifted to the right, reads as an abstract, mysterious emanation. The horizontal WINES sign has reappeared in its original place, but as an empty shape. The clouded sky and the two bright lights in the foreground were created by erasures, indicating they were afterthoughts; yet they remained in the painting as eerie focal points, like disembodied headlights rushing out of the night. The painting synthesizes Ault's earlier experiments with mood, light, and geometry. Compositional ploys, such as the diminishing perspective of the road and its cavernous effect, had been used twenty-one years earlier in *Sullivan Street Abstraction* (Fig. 15),<sup>58</sup> while the cloudy blue sky and areas of bright orange suggest *Greenwich Village Nocturne* (Fig. 26). But no matter how abstracted, the objects in the earlier works all signify real forms. In *New Moon, New York*, however, Ault approaches the irrationality of Surrealism by transforming the neon signs into inexplicable elements floating on the surfaces of the buildings.

*In the West Forties* (1946; Fig. 37) was developed after a trip to New York from preparatory sketches of the view from Ault's hotel window. Less abstracted and surreal than *New Moon, New York*, it also relates to earlier works in which architectonic compositions are infused with organic and emotive elements. The pyramidal arrangement of buildings culminates in a water tower surrounded by a halo of upswept clouds and curling black smoke. As in *From Brooklyn Heights* (Fig. 20), the sky is transformed by an unusual configuration of clouds, which, like those in *Greenwich Village Nocturne*, appear spectral. The graceful, upward movement of the composition is further enhanced by the crook-necked ventilation pipes at the water tower's base. Like the curved fingers of the clouds, they seem to be animate.<sup>59</sup>



38. Study for *New Moon, New York*, 1944

Graphite on paper, 14 x 10 in. (35.6 x 25.4 cm)  
The Museum of Modern Art, New York; Gift of  
Mr. and Mrs. Maurice Vanderwoude

During the Aults' 1946 visit to New York, they met their old friend J.B. Neumann at his gallery. Noting Ault's exhaustion, Neumann commented: "You're tired because there's so much to struggle against." His advice to Louise was to "keep him painting, just keep him painting."<sup>60</sup>

From Louise's reminiscences of their years together in Woodstock, a picture of quiet desperation emerges. Both husband and wife suffered from debilitating heart ailments, exacerbated by their impoverished condition. Ault's greatest aspiration, apart from his career, was to provide a home for his wife. In 1941 he purchased a small parcel of land, halfway up Mount Overlook near an area known as Shady Valley. To keep building costs down, he designed a house without modern conveniences. But aborted attempts to finance a mortgage delayed construction, and in June 1945 the couple moved to a rented studio. Electricity was too costly to use and, once again, there was no plumbing. Louise became ill from exhaustion and remained bedridden over the summer. With no source of income beyond occasional painting sales, Ault was forced to sell his property that winter to purchase coal, shoes, and art supplies. Nevertheless, Louise marks 1945 as the year of her husband's social reawakening. For the first time since their arrival in Woodstock, the couple made tentative forays into community life and forged new friendships with artists such as Henry Mattson and Alfeo Faggi. They began to attend openings and cocktail parties, where Ault met local dealers such as Rudolph Siolic, who briefly exhibited his work.

After her recovery, Louise posed in their studio for *Nude and Torso* (1945; Fig. 39). With her back to the viewer, she is a soft and modest counterpart to the marble Aphrodite on the floor—the same statue used in *Sculpture on a Roof* (Fig. 28). The back view denies the portrait character of the model, but the meticulously rendered braided coiffure and blue slipper-socks identify the nude as Louise, as does the setting—the couple's pink bedroom. Ault's awkward emergence from isolation, fraught with conflicts about his own vulnerability, may explain the composition: while the statue confronts the world, the human presence turns away.

Suzanne Vanderwoude, the current representative of Ault's estate, relates a distressing story about the Aphrodite torso:

*Louise told me that when they were trying to build a house in Woodstock [i.e., in 1941], the only thing of value that they owned was this piece of sculpture. They went to New York to have it appraised and were told that it had no real value; that it was merely a copy of a copy. Their hopes were dashed. After George's death, Louise began to divest herself of their possessions, and decided to give the torso to a university, which later informed her that it was believed to be Greco-Roman, 250 A.D., and was appraised at about \$30,000.<sup>61</sup>*

The poignant irony of this story is magnified by the years of penury that preceded Ault's tragic death. In April 1944 Louise had returned to her father's home in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, to convalesce. Ault's correspondence with her reveals the impact of economic hardship compounded by separation:

*The past week has been a week of anguish and torture for me, much as I've hardly been through in my life before—and I mean every word of that. Everything seems to be broken down—my hopes and faith in a future—my urge to paint, and even my desire to go on living. I don't blame this on you—I blame it on our fool attempt to live in the country without the means to do so comfortably. The pitiful little money you were able to make was only about one third of what we needed—and we went on wish-thinking that "something would happen" to make everything fine for us—I'd win a prize or sell a picture or we'd get a lot of money somehow or other."<sup>62</sup>*

*The Artist at Work* (Fig. 40), painted two years later, displays little of this sense of desperation. Instead of the dark isolation of *New Moon*, *New York* or the contemporaneous Russell's Corners works, we are shown a bright, homey interior, more obviously realist than Surrealist. The picture, however, does not reflect any improvement in Ault's state of mind or his finances—both were as bleak as ever. It is as if he had relegated despair to works with literally impersonal themes. Yet, as in *Nude and Torso*, Aphrodite alone confronts the viewer, and the identification of the artist at work resides in details—Ault's fur-trimmed slippers or the studio setting itself—since his facial features are obscured. Apparently, he chose to portray himself not in the rented studio—a one-



39. *Nude and Torso*, 1945

Oil on canvas, 26 x 16 in. (66 x 40.6 cm)

Collection of Virginia M. Zabriskie



40. *The Artist at Work*, 1946

Oil on canvas, 20 x 26 in. (50.8 x 66 cm)  
 Whitney Museum of American Art, New York;  
 Gift of Mrs. George Ault 73.38

story building with no stairway—but in the old cottage. Whether this decision represents nostalgia for what seemed in retrospect to have been happier days, or whether the angles of the stairs, stairhead, railing, and stovepipe simply provided stimulating compositional possibilities cannot be determined. Whatever the case, the interior architecture dominates, while the artist is relegated to far left, his foot cropped by the edge of the canvas.

In the years between Ault's self-portrait and his death in 1948, he was invited to participate in twelve national exhibitions. Yet he was unable to achieve recognition in New York. Thwarted attempts to engage a dealer there were demoralizing, but the city continued to provide stimulation as well as access to current aesthetic trends. Like certain other artists of his generation, Ault began amalgamating Surrealism with non-objective abstraction in experimental works such as *Universal Symphony* (Fig. 41), painted in 1947. Its selection that year for the Carnegie International signaled the art world's acceptance of this new style.

But for Ault, this and other small successes were undermined by the ceaseless difficulties of survival. Louise

recalls that they “were the only artist couple left in Woodstock now without a bathroom.”<sup>63</sup> By December 1948, with the termination of their lease, the Aults were faced once again with relocation. Although the owner had decided to sell, the asking price was beyond their means, and Louise “knew before he did that we were never going to have a home of our own. But he knew, and it made a difference. Also he seemed to feel that time was short.”<sup>64</sup> On the night of December 30, 1948, at the age of fifty-seven, Ault drowned in the Sawkill Brook during his evening walk. The body was not recovered for five days, and with no witnesses the coroner's verdict was “suicide by drowning.”<sup>65</sup> The art world accepted the verdict as yet another tragic example of the difficult position of the artist in society. Louise Ault, however, claimed that her husband's death was probably accidental—that he was in poor health and, in the rain and darkness, tripped into the brook at a point where there were no guard rails.<sup>66</sup> Moreover, she denied that Ault's problems reflected society's attitude toward artists: “In George Ault's case, frustration, disappointment and economic insecurity were largely the result of personal troubles that originated early in his life.”<sup>67</sup>

Louise Ault's allusion to her husband's troubled family history probably speaks more strongly for suicide than she intended. But there is also no doubt that Ault never received the professional recognition he sought. He hovered on the periphery of the avant-garde, overshadowed by his contemporaries. Early recognition earned him a place in the modernist galleries of the 1920s, but difficulties with dealers curtailed his success, removing him from the mainstream for the remainder of his career. And by the late forties, with the emergence of Abstract Expressionism, the art world lost interest in Ault's work. In one sense, Abstract Expressionism, based on an uninhibited expression of the unconscious, represented the culmination of Surrealism in America. But its highly praised abstract character was devastating for Ault's generation of realist painters, overshadowing their achievements and obliterating them from memory. Sporadic attempts to reexamine these artists generated little enthusiasm, and it is only in the past decade that their accomplishments have again been recognized by the art establishment.

After Ault's death, memorial exhibitions were held at the Woodstock Art Gallery under the auspices of the Woodstock Artists Association, and at the Milch Galleries in New York. In 1960, the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, organized the first major presentation of the Precisionist group in an effort to define the movement. *The Precisionist View in American Art* included noteworthy painters such as Crawford, Davis, O'Keeffe, and Sheeler. While critical response was mixed, Hilton Kramer singled out Ault: "For myself, I would say the most interesting artist in the show—the most moving and poetic, and the one with the most compelling fantasy—is George Ault."<sup>68</sup> Despite this acclaim, it was not until 1975 that Ault received his first and, until the present, his only one-artist exhibition organized by a museum: *George Ault: Nocturnes* at the Whitney Museum of American Art.

Today, Ault remains an anomaly. Unwilling to work within the parameters of a specific style, he was never fully identified with one particular movement. But although the diversity of his stylistic range impeded recognition, it reflected that independent spirit which was his greatest strength. Unencumbered by the dictates of style or commerce, Ault forged a unique and poetic vision that still endures.



41. *Universal Symphony*, 1947

Oil on canvas, 30 x 24 in. (76.2 x 61 cm)

Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Barney A. Ebsworth

## NOTES

1. Quoted in Louise Ault, "Questions and Answers," George Ault Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., p. 4. Unless otherwise indicated, the Ault papers are the source for all material cited in subsequent notes.
2. Quoted in Louise Ault, "Louise Ault Writings," p. 1.
3. Quoted in Louise Ault, *Artist in Woodstock. George Ault: The Independent Years* (Philadelphia: Dorrance & Company, 1978), p. 66.
4. Quoted in Louise Ault, "Questions and Answers," p. 1.
5. Quoted in "Biographical and Vita Information," p. 1.
6. Quoted in Arthur Jerome Eddy, *Cubists and Post-Impressionism* (Chicago: A.C. McClurg, 1914), p. 96.
7. Quoted in Louise Ault, "Questions and Answers," p. 4.
8. Quoted in "Biographical and Vita Information," p. 1.
9. Louise Ault, *Artist in Woodstock*, p. 129.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 128.
11. Louise Ault, "Louise Ault Writings," p. 17.
12. Louise Ault, *Artist in Woodstock*, p. 70.
13. Henry Ford, quoted in Marianne Doezema, *American Realism and the Industrial Age*, exhibition catalogue (Ohio: The Cleveland Museum of Art, 1980), p. 74.
14. Interview with the author, September 1987; Andrée Ruellan met Ault in Paris in 1924.
15. Quoted in Louise Ault, "Questions and Answers," p. 3.
16. The similarity of these forms to those in contemporary works of Georgia O'Keeffe is striking. In 1925, when O'Keeffe moved into a room on the thirteenth floor of the Shelton Hotel, she began a series of moody Precisionist nocturnes, inspired by the view. An identical light appears in her *City Light* (1926; Minneapolis Institute of Arts). But since no records indicate a public showing of *Sullivan Street Abstraction* before 1928, it is unlikely that O'Keeffe was influenced by Ault's work.
17. O. Louis Guglielmi, quoted in John Baker, *O. Louis Guglielmi: A Retrospective Exhibition*, exhibition catalogue (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Art Gallery, 1980), p. 12.
18. Quoted in Louise Ault, "Questions and Answers," p. 4.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 1.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
21. Louise Ault, *Artist in Woodstock*, p. 52.
22. Henry McBride, "Attractions in Local Galleries," *New York Sun*, November 17, 1928, p. 7.
23. William B. McCormick, "Ault and Others Return to Local Art Galleries," *New York American*, November 25, 1928, p. 10M.
24. *Ibid.*
25. Margaret Bruening, "George Ault," *New York Evening Post*, November 24, 1928, p. 10M.
26. George Ault, "From Brooklyn Heights," in *A Museum in Action: Presenting the Museum's Activities*, exhibition catalogue (Newark, New Jersey: The Newark Museum, 1944), p. 89.
27. Interviews with the author, September and December 1987. Mrs. Ruellan explained that Ault's loss of eyesight was only a temporary, but frightening, condition.
28. Louise Ault, *Artist in Woodstock*, p. 70.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 100.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 101.
31. Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 104.
32. Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 106.
33. George Ault, letter to Juliana Force, February 26, 1934, Records of the Public Works of Art Project (P.W.A.P.), Record Group 121, National Archives, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

34. George Ault, letter to Juliana Force, March 2, 1934, *ibid.*
35. George Ault, Project Progress Report, January 17, 1934, *ibid.*
36. Louise Ault, *Artist in Woodstock*, p. 70.
37. *Ibid.*, p. 103.
38. *Ibid.*, p. 75.
39. Tom Wolf, et al., *Woodstock's Art Heritage: The Permanent Collection of the Woodstock Artists Association* (Woodstock, New York: Overlook Press, 1987), p. 23.
40. *Ibid.*, p. 26.
41. Louise Ault, *Artist in Woodstock*, p. 35.
42. *Ibid.*, p. 86.
43. Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 58.
44. Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 35.
45. Louise Ault, "Questions and Answers," p. 1. O'Keeffe was given a major retrospective at The Museum of Modern Art in May 1946. It is unclear whether or not the incident occurred during this exhibition.
46. Louise Ault, *Artist in Woodstock*, p. 38.
47. "Our Own Choice for the Carnegie Awards," *Art News*, 40 (November 1941), p. 10.
48. Jeannette Jena, *Pittsburgh Post Gazette*, October 23, 1941.
49. Quoted in Louise Ault, *Artist in Woodstock*, p. 13. Although the rooftop scene, painted the same year, was widely exhibited and reviewed, records indicate that *The Plough and the Moon* was only seen publicly after Ault's death.
50. Louise Ault, "Questions and Answers," p. 4.
51. Quoted in Louise Ault, *Artist in Woodstock*, p. 27.
52. *Ibid.*, pp. 128–30. The dentist was unsatisfied with the painting: "People don't like it; they say it's lugubrious."
53. James R. Mellow, "A Successful Escape into Night," *The New York Times*, December 16, 1973, p. D25.
54. *Ibid.*
55. *Black Night: Russell's Corners*, painted in 1943, was the most recent inclusion among the ten works shown in Ault's first one-man exhibition since 1928, mounted at The Little Gallery in Woodstock that July. Although nothing sold, the painting was selected three years later for the 141st Annual of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, and purchased by them for \$450.
56. *Bright Light at Russell's Corners* was sold privately in 1947, after its inclusion in "Painting in the United States" at the Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh, the previous October. While that work appeared in other exhibitions during Ault's lifetime, *Night at Russell's Corners*, which also sold, has not been shown publicly until the current exhibition.
57. Louise Ault, *Artist in Woodstock*, p. 171; she also notes that once he had finished the painting, Ault realized it was one of his best works.
58. In 1947 Ault recreated this work in a larger format: *Sullivan Street Abstraction*, No. 2.
59. Louise Ault, *Artist in Woodstock*, pp. 135–36, attributed an autobiographical meaning to *In the West Forties*. While some of her associations seem obscure, her interpretation of the five pipes as representing the Ault children is supported by comparisons with the artist's immature paintings, in which he presented similar groupings of five small objects around a larger form. A year later, Ault produced a sketch entitled *New York Rooftops*, which appears to be a different view of the same scene. Only one of the chimneys is visible, the others having been replaced by five rectangular projections along the parapets.
60. *Ibid.*, p. 111.
61. Suzanne Vanderwoude, interview with the author, September 1987.
62. George Ault, letter to Louise Ault, April 1944.
63. Louise Ault, *Artist in Woodstock*, p. 172.
64. *Ibid.*, p. 170.
65. Reported in Ault's obituary, "George C. Ault Funeral Services Will Be Private," *Woodstock Daily Freeman*, January 5, 1949.
66. Louise Ault, *Artist in Woodstock*, p. 174; and Louise Ault, letter to Emily Genauer, December 10, 1949, Emily Genauer Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.
67. Louise Ault, letter to Emily Genauer, *ibid.*
68. Hilton Kramer, "The American Precisionists," *Arts*, 35 (March 1961), p. 37.

## SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

An asterisk (\*) indicates a one-artist exhibition.

1908

St. John's Wood School of Art, London. Student exhibition. December (checklist).

1920

Society of Independent Artists, New York. "Fourth Annual Exhibition." March 11–April 11.

1921

Waldorf-Astoria Hotel, New York. "Fifth Annual Exhibition of the Society of Independent Artists." February 26–March 24.

The Anderson Galleries, New York. "Our Choice of Independents." May 10–21.

1922

Waldorf-Astoria Hotel, New York. "The Society of Independent Artists Sixth Annual Exhibition." March 11–April 2 (checklist).

Whitney Studio Club, New York. "Annual Exhibition of Painting and Sculpture by Members of the Club." April (catalogue).

\* Austin Dunham's Sea Chest, Provincetown, Massachusetts. "Exhibition of Water Colors, Oils, and Monotypes by George C. Ault." August 2–16 (checklist).

The Anderson Galleries, New York. "Salons of America Exhibition." October.

1923

Bourgeois Gallery, New York. "Nine Americans: American Painters and Sculptors Annual." March.

Whitney Studio Club, New York. "Annual Exhibition of Painting and Sculpture by the Members of the Whitney Studio Club." April 2–30 (catalogue).

The Galleries of The American Art Association, New York. "Salons of America Spring Salon." May 21–June 9.

1924

Whitney Studio Club, New York. "Portraits and Religious Works." April 13–26. Works selected by Yasuo Kuniyoshi.

Whitney Studio Club, New York. "Annual Members' Exhibition." May 1–25 (catalogue).

Salon du Montparnasse, Paris. July.

1925

Waldorf-Astoria Hotel, New York. "The Society of Independent Artists Ninth Annual Exhibition." March 6–19.

Salons of America, New York. "Spring Salon." April.

The Anderson Galleries, New York. "Whitney Studio Club Tenth Annual Exhibition." May (catalogue).

1926

Corona Mundi International Art Center, New York. "American Painting and Sculpture." January. Organized by Samuel Halpert and Robert Laurent.

The Anderson Galleries, New York. "Whitney Studio Club Eleventh Annual Exhibition of Paintings and Sculpture by Members of the Club." March 8–20 (catalogue).

J.B. Neumann's New Art Circle, New York. Three-artist exhibition with Edwin Booth Grossman and Clement Wilenchick. May.

F. Valentine Dudensing Gallery, New York. "Young American Art." October 4–30.

The Downtown Gallery, New York. "The Christmas Exhibition." December.

1927

Whitney Studio Club, New York. "Paintings and Drawings of Women by Men." January 5–22 (catalogue).

Whitney Studio Club, New York. "12th Annual Exhibition of Paintings and Sculpture by Members of the Club." February 16–March 5 (catalogue).

\* The Downtown Gallery, New York. "George C. Ault: Exhibition of Water Colors and Drawings." March 1–19 (checklist).

Grand Central Art Galleries, New York. "Multi-National Exhibition." March 5–26.

The Downtown Gallery, New York. "Portfolio Selection." May 10–June 10.

Provincetown Art Association, Massachusetts. "First Modernist Exhibition." Opened July 2.

F. Valentine Dudensing Gallery, New York. "Contemporary Americans Selected from the 'Independents' Since Its Beginning." October.

1928

The Downtown Gallery, New York. "Spring Flowers." April 25–May 13 (checklist).

The Newark Museum, New Jersey. "New Acquisitions." Fall–Winter.

\* The Downtown Gallery, New York. "George Ault—Recent Work." November 17–December 8 (checklist).

1929

Cincinnati Art Museum. Annual. May.

The Downtown Gallery, New York. June 1–14.

Portland Art Association, Oregon. "Contemporary American Artists." October.

1930

Grand Central Art Galleries, New York. "The Downtown Gallery Exhibition of Paintings, Sculpture, Watercolors, Drawings and Prints by 33 American Contemporary Artists." January.

The Newark Museum, New Jersey. "Modern American Water Colors." January.

Albright Art Gallery, Buffalo Fine Arts Academy, New York. "24th Annual Exhibition of Selected Paintings by American Artists." April 27–June 17.

Montclair Art Museum, New Jersey. "Artists of Northern New Jersey." October.

F. Valentine Dudensing Gallery, New York. "40 Americans." Closed November 9.

1931

The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia. "The 126th Annual Exhibition." January 25–March 15 (checklist).

California Palace of the Legion of Honor, San Francisco. "Paintings by Contemporary Americans." February–March. Traveled.

Milwaukee-Downer College, Wisconsin. "Watercolors Made by Americans." April. Organized by the College Art Association.

American Art Association, The Anderson Galleries, New York. "Salons of America." April 20–May 9.

Frank K.M. Rehn Galleries, New York. "40 Modern Americans." Closed October 24. Sponsored by the American Federation of Arts. Traveled.

The Downtown Gallery, New York. "Artists' Models: Figure Painting by Leading American Artists." October.

Montclair Art Museum, New Jersey. "Artists of New Jersey." November.

1932

The Downtown Gallery, New York. "Small Paintings by Outstanding Americans." May.

The Downtown Gallery, New York. "Exhibition of New Paintings and Sculptures by American Contemporaries." October 4–22.

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. "First Biennial of Contemporary American Painting." November 22, 1932–January 5, 1933 (catalogue).

1933

The Downtown Gallery, New York. "\$100 Show." May 23–June 30.

Montclair Art Museum, New Jersey. "New Jersey State Annual Exhibition." October–November.

1934

The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia. "129th Annual Exhibition." January 28–February 25 (catalogue).

The Forum, Rockefeller Center, New York. "First Municipal Art Exhibition." February.

Rockefeller Center, New York. "No-Jury Exhibition of Salons of America." Spring.

The Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. "National Exhibition of the Public Works of Art Project." April.

The Downtown Gallery, New York. "Paintings and Sculpture: Selected Works by Leading American Contemporaries." May 15–June 15.

The Downtown Gallery, New York. Hamilton Easter Field Foundation exhibition. October 1–14 (catalogue). Traveled.

Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester, New York. "48 Living American Painters." November.

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. "Second Biennial Exhibition of Contemporary American Painting." November 27, 1934–January 10, 1935 (catalogue).

### 1935

The Brooklyn Museum, New York. "American and Foreign Artists: Watercolors, Pastels, and Drawings." February.

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. "Abstract Painting in America." February 12–March 22 (catalogue, with introduction by Stuart Davis).

A.C.A. Gallery, New York. "American Artists Congress Exhibition." November.

### 1937

The New School for Social Research, New York. "Waterfront Art Show." February.

American Artists Congress, New York. "First Annual Membership Exhibition." April 16–29.

### 1938

Collectors of American Art, New York. "Third Exhibition: Paintings and Watercolors Exhibition." April 6–May 6.

### 1939

The Society of Independent Artists, New York. April.

New York World's Fair, New York. "American Art Today." April 30–October 31.

### 1941

Albany Institute of History and Art, New York. Sixth annual exhibition. May.

Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh. "New Directions in American Painting." October 23–December 14 (catalogue).

### 1942

Albany Institute of History and Art, New York. Seventh annual exhibition. May.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. "Artists for Victory: An Exhibition of Contemporary American Art." December (catalogue).

### 1943

Albany Institute of History and Art, New York. "Artists of the Upper Hudson 8th Annual." May. Works selected by Gifford Beal.

The Art Institute of Chicago. "The Twenty-second International Exhibition of Water Colors." May 13–August 22.

\* The Little Gallery, Woodstock, New York. "Oils and Gouaches by George C. Ault." July 26–August 7 (checklist).

The Art Institute of Chicago. "The Fifty-fourth Annual Exhibition of American Paintings and Sculpture." October.

Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh. "Painting in the United States." October 14–December 12 (catalogue).

### 1944

The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia. "139th Annual Exhibition of Painting and Sculpture." January 23–February 27 (catalogue).

The Newark Museum, New Jersey. "The Museum in Action: Presenting the Museum's Activities." October 31, 1944–January 31, 1945 (catalogue, with introduction by Holger Cahill and statement by George Ault).

### 1945

National Academy of Design, New York. "120th Annual Exhibition." December.

### 1946

The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia. "The One Hundred and Forty-first Annual Exhibition of Painting and Sculpture." January 26–March 3 (checklist).

California Palace of the Legion of Honor, San Francisco. "Spring Annual." April.

Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond. "Contemporary American Painting." April.

Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh. "Painting in the United States." October 10–December 8 (catalogue).

1947

Albany Institute of History and Art, New York. "12th Upper Hudson Annual." May.

Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh. "Painting in the United States." October 9–December 7 (catalogue). Traveled to the Columbus Gallery of Fine Arts, Ohio.

California Palace of the Legion of Honor, San Francisco. "Second Annual." December.

John Herron Art Museum, Indianapolis. "60th Annual Exhibition of Contemporary American Paintings." December.

1948

The Butler Institute of American Art, Youngstown, Ohio. New Year show. January.

Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh. "Painting in the United States." October.

1949

The Butler Institute of American Art, Youngstown, Ohio. New Year show. January.

The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Philadelphia. "The One Hundred and Forty-fourth Annual Exhibition of Painting and Sculpture." January 25–February 27 (checklist).

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. "Juliana Force and American Art. A Memorial Exhibition." August 29–November 9.

\* Woodstock Art Gallery, Woodstock, New York. "Memorial Exhibition: George Ault." September 9–23 (brochure, with essay by John Ruggles).

1950

\* Milch Galleries, New York. "George Ault Memorial Exhibition." January 30–February 18 (catalogue). Version traveled to the Mint Museum, Charlotte, North Carolina.

1955

University of Nebraska Art Galleries, Lincoln. "Nebraska Art Association Sixty-fifth Annual Exhibition." February 27–March 27 (catalogue). Traveled.

1957

Zabriskie Gallery, New York. "The City." June.

\* Zabriskie Gallery, New York. "George Ault 1891–1948." October 28–November 23 (catalogue).

The Museum of Modern Art, New York. "New Acquisitions." November 13, 1957–January 5, 1958.

1958

Nebraska Art Association, University of Nebraska Art Galleries, Lincoln. "Sixty-eighth Annual Exhibition." March 2–30 (catalogue by Norman A. Geske).

1959

The Gallery of the Woodstock Artists Association, Woodstock, New York. "Fifty Years of Woodstock Art." Fall.

1960

Zabriskie Gallery, New York. "Early Twentieth Century Art." October.

Walker Art Center, Minneapolis. "The Precisionist View in American Art." November 13–December 25 (catalogue, with text by Martin L. Friedman). Traveled.

1963

\* Zabriskie Gallery, New York. "George C. Ault: Drawings." May 6–25.

1964

Zabriskie Gallery, New York. "New York, New York." June 2–26.

Robert Schoelkopf Gallery, New York. September.

1965

Gallery of Modern Art, New York. "The Twenties Re-visited." Summer.

1966

Flint Institute of Art, Flint, Michigan. "Realism Revisited." April 27–May 30.

1967

University Art Museum, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque. "Cubism: Its Impact in the USA, 1910–1930." February 10–March 19. Traveled.

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. "The Artist's New York." October 2–November 5.

1969

- \* Zabriskie Gallery, New York. "George Ault: Watercolors of the 1920s." February 11–March 8 (checklist).

1971

Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha, Nebraska. "The Thirties Decade: American Artists and Their European Contemporaries." October 10–November 28 (catalogue).

1973

University of Nebraska Art Galleries, Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery, Lincoln. "A Sense of Place." September 24–October 28 (catalogue).

- \* Zabriskie Gallery, New York. "Drawings." December 4, 1973–January 12, 1974 (checklist).

Zabriskie Gallery, New York. "The Edge of the City." December 4, 1973–January 5, 1974 (checklist).

- \* Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. "George Ault: Nocturnes." December 7, 1973–January 6, 1974 (brochure, with essay by John I. H. Baur).

1974

Whitney Museum of American Art, Downtown Branch, New York. "People and Places." February 7–April 4 (brochure).

1977

Vassar College Art Gallery, Poughkeepsie, New York. "Woodstock: An American Art Colony, 1902–1977." January 23–March 4 (catalogue, with essay by Karal Ann Marling).

Everson Museum of Art, Syracuse, New York. "Provincetown Painters: 1890's–1970's." April 1–June 26 (catalogue, with essay by Dorothy Gees Seckler). Traveled.

Zabriskie Gallery, New York. "American Art Fifty Years Ago." May 24–June 18.

Arts Council of Great Britain, Haywood Gallery, London. "The Modern Spirit: American Painting and Photography 1908–1955." September 27–November 27. Traveled.

1978

Heckscher Museum, Huntington, New York. "The Precisionist Painters 1916–1949: Interpretations of a Mechanical Age." July 7–August 20 (catalogue, with essay by Susan Fillin-Yeh).

1980

Neue Gesellschaft für Bildende Kunst, West Berlin. "American Realism 1920–1940." November 9–December 28. Traveled.

1981

Minnesota Museum of Art, St. Paul. "American Style." October 24–December 27 (catalogue, with essay by Thomas S. Holman).

1982

The Gallery of the Woodstock Artists Association, Woodstock, New York. "Eighty Years of Woodstock Art: Selections from the Permanent Collection of the Woodstock Artists Association." May 8–26.

The Parrish Art Museum, Southampton, New York. "The Long Island Landscape 1914–1946: The Transitional Years." June 13–August 1.

San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. "Images of America: Precisionist Painting and Modern Photography." September 9–November 11 (catalogue, with essay by Karen Tsujimoto). Traveled.

Sierra Nevada Museum of Art, Reno. "1931 America: The Artist's View." September 12–October 30 (catalogue, with essay by Merle Schipper). Traveled.

Terra Museum of American Art, Evanston, Illinois. "Solitude: Inner Visions in American Art." September 25–December 30 (catalogue).

- \* Vanderwoude Tananbaum Gallery, New York. "George Ault: 1920s–1940s. Works on Paper with Related Paintings." November 16–December 11.

1985

Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris, New York. "The Surreal City." May 3–July 11 (brochure, with essay by Susan Lubowsky). Traveled.

Historical Society of Woodstock Museum, Woodstock, New York. "Woodstock Artists and the Federal Arts Projects of the W.P.A. Era." August 24–October 5 (catalogue, with essay by Fridolf Johnson).

1986

The Brooklyn Museum, New York. "The Machine Age in America: 1918–1941." October 17, 1986–February 16, 1987 (catalogue, with essays by Dianne H. Pilgrim, Dickran Tashjian, and Richard Guy Wilson). Traveled.

1987

Whitney Museum of American Art at Equitable Center, New York. "City Life: New York in the 1930s. Paintings and Prints from the Permanent Collection of the Whitney Museum of American Art." April 17–June 6 (brochure).

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Until recently, most of the literature on Ault's work has been in the form of relatively brief exhibition reviews which are available in the George Ault Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. Only after his death has Ault's work received sustained critical analysis through the publications and articles listed below.

Ault, Louise. *Artist in Woodstock. George Ault: The Independent Years*. Philadelphia: Dorrance & Company, 1978.

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WORKS IN THE  
EXHIBITION

*Dimensions are in inches, followed by centimeters; height precedes width.*

Paintings

*42nd Street Night*, 1920

Oil on canvas

18 $\frac{7}{8}$  x 15 (47.9 x 35)

Collection of Roy R. Neuberger

NEW YORK ONLY

*A New York Skyline*, 1921

Oil on canvas

18 x 24 (45.7 x 61)

Collection of Dr. Thomas Folk

*Winter Moon*, 1921

Oil on canvas

13 $\frac{1}{2}$  x 11 $\frac{1}{2}$  (34.3 x 29.2)

Collection of Mr. and Mrs.

I. David Orr

NEW YORK ONLY

*Construction Night*, 1922

Oil on canvas

25 x 20 (63.5 x 50.8)

The Regis Collection, Minneapolis

*Loft Buildings, No. 1*, 1922

Oil on canvas

20 x 14 (50.8 x 35.6)

Collection of Gail Chesler Lippe

and Richard Lippe

*The Machine*, 1922

Oil on canvas

26 $\frac{1}{4}$  x 16 (66.7 x 40.6)

Collection of Mr. and Mrs.

I. David Orr

NEW YORK ONLY

*Back of the House*, 1923

Oil on canvasboard

15 $\frac{1}{2}$  x 11 $\frac{1}{2}$  (39.4 x 29.2)

Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture

Garden, Smithsonian Institution.

Washington, D.C.: Bequest of

Joseph H. Hirshhorn

TRAVELING EXHIBITION ONLY

*Loft Buildings, No. 2*, 1923

Oil on canvas

24 x 18 (61 x 45.7)

Collection of Lawrence J. Goldrich

*The Mill Room*, 1923

Oil on canvas

22 x 16 (55.9 x 40.6)

The Fine Arts Museums of

San Francisco; Gift of

Max L. Rosenberg

NEW YORK ONLY

*The Pianist*, 1923

Oil on panel

12 x 16 (30.5 x 40.6)

Nebraska Art Association,

Nelle Cochrane Woods

Collection, Sheldon

Memorial Art Gallery,

University of Nebraska-Lincoln

*Provincetown #1*, 1923

Oil on canvas

24 x 16 (61 x 40.6)

Collection of Mr. and Mrs.

Irwin L. Bernstein

*Provincetown #3*, 1923

Oil on canvas

16 x 20 (40.6 x 50.8)

Hirschl & Adler Galleries, New York

*Construction Night*, c. 1923

Oil on canvas

29 $\frac{3}{8}$  x 21 $\frac{1}{2}$  (74.6 x 54.6)

Yale University Art Gallery,

New Haven; Gift of

The Woodward Foundation

*Factory Chimney*, 1924

Oil on canvas

30 x 16 (76.2 x 40.6)

Philadelphia Museum of Art;

Gift of Dr. Samuel W. Fernberger

*Ninth Avenue*, 1924

Oil on canvas

23 $\frac{1}{2}$  x 18 $\frac{3}{4}$  (59.7 x 47.6)

Southwestern Bell Corporation

Collection, St. Louis

*Sullivan Street Abstraction*, 1924

Oil on canvas

24 x 20 (61 x 50.8)

Walker Art Center, Minneapolis;

Art Center Acquisition Fund

*East River*, 1925

Oil on canvas

21 x 16 (53.3 x 40.6)

Collection of Alan and

Paula Schwartz

*From Brooklyn Heights*, 1925

Oil on canvas

30 x 20 (76.2 x 50.8)

The Newark Museum, New Jersey;

Purchase 1928, The General Fund

*House in Brittany*, 1925

Oil on canvas

22 x 18 (55.9 x 45.7)

Hamilton Easter Field Art Founda-

tion Collection, Ogunquit, Maine;

Gift of the Barn Gallery

Associates, Inc.

*Brooklyn Ice House*, 1926

Oil on canvas

24 x 30 (61 x 76.2)

The Newark Museum, New Jersey;

Purchase 1928, The General Fund

- Early America*, 1927  
Oil on canvas  
18 x 16 (45.7 x 40.6)  
Collection of Marcia Lucas
- Leaving Port*, 1927  
Oil on canvas  
20¼ x 24 (51.4 x 61)  
Collection of Mr. and Mrs.  
I. David Orr  
NEW YORK ONLY
- Fruit Bowl on Red Oil Cloth*, 1930  
Oil on canvas  
24 x 20 (61 x 50.8)  
Collection of Mr. and Mrs.  
Barney A. Ebsworth  
TRAVELING EXHIBITION ONLY
- Jane Street Roofs*, 1931  
Oil on canvas  
15⅞ x 12 (40.3 x 30.5)  
Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture  
Garden, Smithsonian Institution,  
Washington, D.C.; Gift of  
Joseph H. Hirshhorn  
TRAVELING EXHIBITION ONLY
- Roofs*, 1931  
Oil on canvas  
25½ x 19½ (64.8 x 49.5)  
Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth  
College, Hanover, New Hampshire;  
Gift of Abby Aldrich Rockefeller
- Village Roofs*, 1931  
Oil on canvas  
10 x 12 (25.4 x 30.5)  
Walker Art Center, Minneapolis;  
Gift of Mrs. George Ault
- Greenwich Village Rooftops*, 1932  
Oil on canvas  
16 x 12 (40.6 x 30.5)  
Private collection, courtesy  
Vanderwoude Tananbaum  
Gallery, New York
- Hoboken Factory*, 1932  
Oil on canvas  
20 x 22 (50.8 x 55.9)  
Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture  
Garden, Smithsonian Institution,  
Washington, D.C.; Gift of  
Joseph H. Hirshhorn  
TRAVELING EXHIBITION ONLY
- Hudson Street*, 1932  
Oil on canvas  
24 x 20 (61 x 50.8)  
Whitney Museum of American Art,  
New York; Purchase 33.40
- Greenwich Village Nocturne*, 1934  
Oil on canvas  
22 x 18 (55.9 x 45.7)  
Private collection, courtesy  
Vanderwoude Tananbaum  
Gallery, New York
- Jane Street Roofs, No. 2*, 1935  
Oil on canvasboard  
15⅞ x 11⅝ (40.5 x 30.3)  
New Jersey State Museum, Trenton;  
Purchase
- New York Rooftop*, 1940  
Oil on canvas  
26⅞ x 20¼ (67 x 51.4)  
Collection of Raymond J. Learsy
- The Plough and the Moon*, 1940  
Oil on canvas  
22 x 30 (55.9 x 76.2)  
Collection of Mr. and Mrs.  
I. David Orr  
NEW YORK ONLY
- January Full Moon*, 1941  
Oil on canvas  
20 x 26 (50.8 x 66)  
Collection of Raymond J. Learsy
- Black Night: Russell's Corners*, 1943  
Oil on canvas  
18 x 24¼ (45.7 x 61.1)  
The Pennsylvania Academy of the  
Fine Arts, Philadelphia;  
John Lambert Fund
- Old House, New Moon*, 1943  
Oil on canvas  
20 x 28 (50.8 x 71.1)  
Yale University Art Gallery,  
New Haven; Anonymous gift
- New Moon, New York*, 1945  
Oil on canvas  
28 x 20 (71.1 x 50.8)  
The Museum of Modern Art,  
New York; Gift of Mr. and Mrs.  
Leslie Ault
- Nude and Torso*, 1945  
Oil on canvas  
26 x 16 (66 x 40.6)  
Collection of Virginia M. Zabriskie
- Sculpture on a Roof*, 1945  
Oil on panel  
16 x 12 (40.6 x 30.5)  
The Butler Institute of American  
Art, Youngstown, Ohio;  
Gift of Mrs. George C. Ault
- The Artist at Work*, 1946  
Oil on canvas  
20 x 26 (50.8 x 66)  
Whitney Museum of American Art,  
New York; Gift of Mrs.  
George Ault 73.38
- Bright Light at Russell's Corners*,  
1946  
Oil on canvas  
20 x 25 (50.8 x 63.5)  
National Museum of American Art,  
Smithsonian Institution,  
Washington, D.C.; Gift of  
Mr. and Mrs. Sidney Lawrence
- Festus Yayple and His Oxen*, 1946  
Oil on canvas  
24¼ x 36 (61.6 x 91.4)  
The Cleveland Museum of Art;  
Hinman B. Hurlbut Collection
- In the West Forties*, 1946  
Oil on canvas  
30 x 24 (76.2 x 61)  
Collection of Mr. and Mrs.  
Irwin L. Bernstein

*Night at Russell's Corners*, 1946

Oil on canvas

16 x 30 (40.6 x 76.2)

Private collection, courtesy  
Vanderwoude Tananbaum  
Gallery, New York

*From the Ninth Floor*, 1947

Oil on canvas

16 x 8 (40.6 x 20.3)

Collection of Alan and  
Paula Schwartz

*Manhattan Mosaic*, 1947

Oil on canvas

31 $\frac{7}{8}$  x 18 (81 x 45.7)

The Brooklyn Museum, New York;  
Dick S. Ramsay Fund

*Sullivan Street Abstraction*, No. 2,

1947

Oil on canvas

26 x 20 (66 x 50.8)

Collection of Mr. and Mrs.

I. David Orr

NEW YORK ONLY

*August Night at Russell's Corners*,

1948

Oil on canvas

18 x 24 (45.7 x 61)

Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha,  
Nebraska

*Head of a Young Woman*, 1948

Oil on canvas

17 x 14 (43.2 x 35.6)

Collection of Tom and Gill LiPuma

*Rape of the Sabine Women*, 1948

Oil on canvas

18 x 30 (45.7 x 76.2)

Private collection, courtesy  
Vanderwoude Tananbaum  
Gallery, New York

## Drawings

*Highland Light, North Truro,  
Cape Cod, Massachusetts*, 1921

Graphite on paper

17 $\frac{3}{16}$  x 13 $\frac{5}{8}$  (45.2 x 34.6)

The Ackland Art Museum,  
University of North Carolina  
at Chapel Hill; Ackland Fund

*Dory Abstraction*, 1922

Graphite on paper

9 x 12 (22.9 x 30.5)

Vanderwoude Tananbaum Gallery,  
New York

*Jockey Bar, Paris*, 1924

Charcoal on paper

9 $\frac{3}{4}$  x 6 $\frac{3}{4}$  (24.8 x 17.1)

Private collection

*Shipboard*, 1924

Graphite on paper

9 x 6 (22.9 x 15.2)

Private collection, courtesy

Vanderwoude Tananbaum  
Gallery, New York

*Smoke Stacks*, 1925

Graphite on paper

13 $\frac{7}{8}$  x 9 $\frac{7}{8}$  (35.2 x 25.1)

The Carnegie Museum of Art,  
Pittsburgh; Patrons Art Fund

NEW YORK ONLY

*Study for From Brooklyn Heights*,

1925

Graphite on paper

10 $\frac{3}{4}$  x 7 (27.3 x 17.8)

Collection of Audrey S. Ratner

*Ship*, 1927

Graphite on paper

8 $\frac{3}{4}$  x 5 $\frac{3}{4}$  (22.2 x 14.6)

Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture  
Garden, Smithsonian Institution,

Washington, D.C.; Bequest of

Joseph H. Hirshhorn

TRAVELING EXHIBITION ONLY

*Still Life with Pipes*, 1932

Graphite on paper

9 $\frac{3}{4}$  x 9 $\frac{1}{4}$  (24.8 x 23.5)

Private collection, courtesy  
Vanderwoude Tananbaum  
Gallery, New York

*Commerce Street, Greenwich Village*,  
1937

Graphite on paper

12 $\frac{3}{4}$  x 11 $\frac{1}{2}$  (32.4 x 29.2)

Vanderwoude Tananbaum Gallery,  
New York

*Study of Moon Effect*, 1941

Graphite on paper

10 x 14 (25.4 x 35.6)

Vanderwoude Tananbaum Gallery,  
New York

*Study for New Moon, New York*,

1944

Graphite on paper

14 x 10 (35.6 x 25.4)

The Museum of Modern Art,  
New York; Gift of Mr. and Mrs.

Maurice Vanderwoude

*Sunday Morning, New York*, 1944

Graphite on paper

14 x 9 (35.6 x 22.9)

Vanderwoude Tananbaum Gallery,  
New York

*Moon and Clouds*, 1945

Graphite on paper

6 $\frac{7}{8}$  x 10 $\frac{3}{4}$  (17.5 x 27.3)

Private collection, courtesy

Vanderwoude Tananbaum  
Gallery, New York

*New York Rooftops*, 1947

Graphite on paper

13 $\frac{3}{4}$  x 10 (34.9 x 25.4)

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Arkansas







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