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Dorothy Dehner, The Creative Process

Rarely viewed drawings and watercolors from 1930 to 1950 showcase the artist's early work

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Dorothy Dehner (1901–1994) never really achieved the recognition she may have deserved while she was an active artist, but today, her inclusion in several museum and gallery exhibits reassesses her career and legacy. Her ex-husband, sculptor David Smith, overshadowed her own artistic endeavors, including sculpture, drawing and watercolor. Today, at Kraushaar Galleries in New York City, a collection of her works on paper shows off her early years as an artist, exploring her development as a student of The Arts Student League of New York and her time spent during a 1925 trip to Paris. Her

relationship with Smith also infiltrates her work, as their residences in Bolton Landing, New York City, and the Virgin Islands served as influences for pieces such as 1933 watercolor on paper *Bolton Landing Highway* and circa 1943 ink on paper *Untitled (Still Life with Hands, St. Johns)*.

The Dorothy Dehner Foundation for the Visual Arts, represented exclusively by Kraushaar Galleries, provided the dozen rarely exhibited works in the gallery's current exhibit, *Dorothy Dehner, The Creative Process, 1930-1950*. Works in the exhibit were made during the rise of abstract expressionism, which is evident in the music-inspired 1947 ink on paper *Balloon Ascension #3: Dithyrambe Played by the Ashraf* and 1948 ink and watercolor on paper [*Abstraction*]. As someone known primarily for her sculptures, the assortment of drawings gives collectors unique insight to the artist, who also often included sea motifs, in works such as 1946 ink and watercolor on paper [*Shells*] and 1944

gouache on paper *Sea Forms in Rock*.

"I think this work indicates she was capable of experimentation," says Joan Marter, art historian and president of the Dorothy Dehner Foundation for the Visual Arts. "She had ideas that fit very closely with the leading interests of the abstract expressionists groups, such as spontaneity and improvisation."

Dehner's drawings strongly informed her sculptural work, says Katherine Degn, director at Kraushaar Galleries, noting many of the drawings have three-dimensional qualities that anticipate sculpture. Degn says the use of line and form is also consistent in Dehner's work.

Dehner, who showed an interest in modernism, studied with Jan Matulka, known for his own version of cubism. Marter says the drawings in the exhibit are in good condition and are surprisingly fresh-looking, showing the whole range of Dehner's skills, featuring pen and ink and watercolor mediums.

Linda Lichtenberg Kaplan, a trustee at The Phillips Collection in Washington, D.C., with more than 50 years of professional museum experience, purchased Dehner's 1949 ink and pastel *Drum Beats* from Kraushaar Galleries. She says while Dehner was not a giant in the art world, she was a very competent artist who made beautiful personal drawings.

"I like the movement and interesting gestural images [in *Drum Beats*]," Kaplan says. "I think she was compromised by the fact she was female at the time [she was an artist], but she was really productive. If you like that kind of narrative, then she's definitely worth looking at."



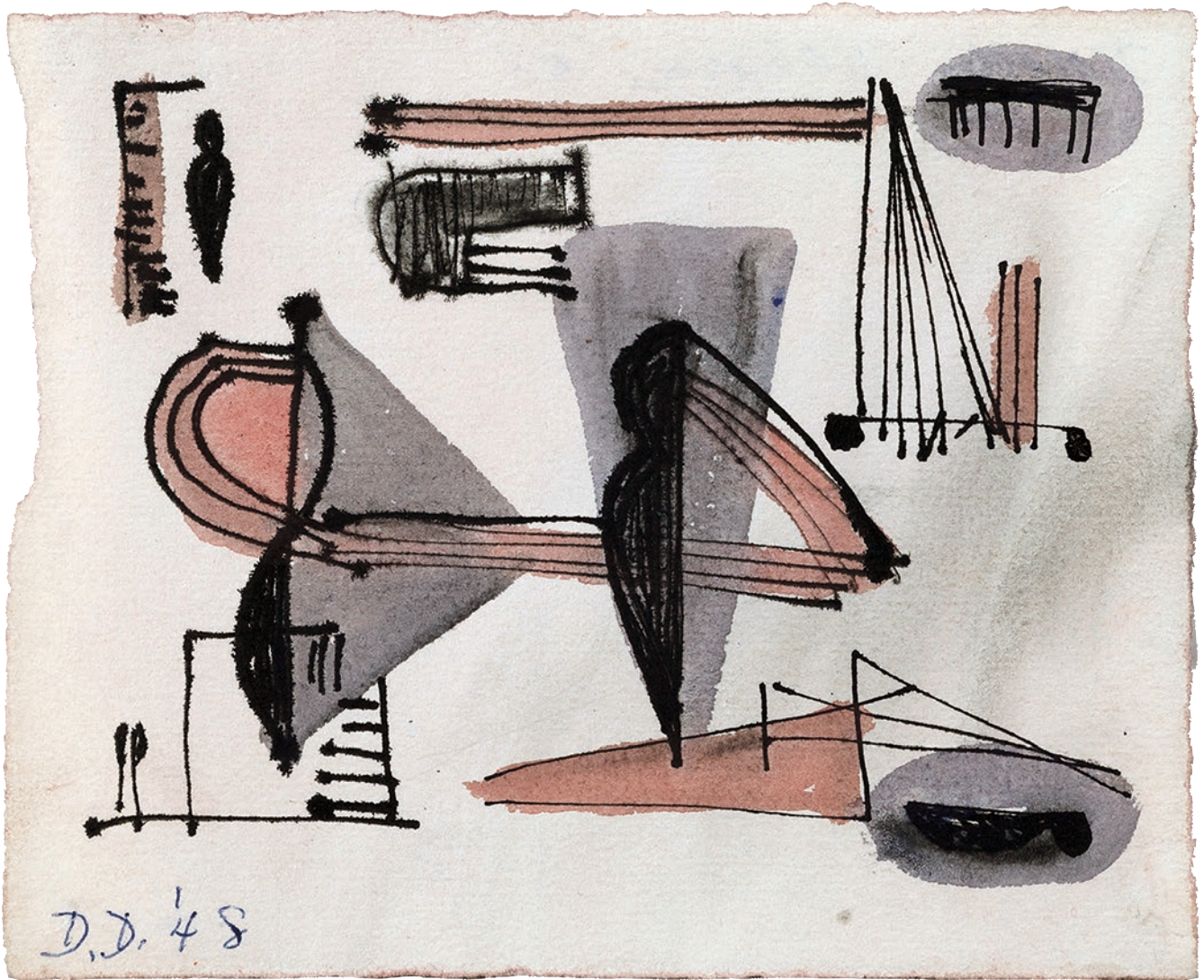
Dorothy Dehner (1901–1994), *Bolton Landing Highway*, 1933.
Watercolor on paper, 6 x 13¾ in.



Dorothy Dehner (1901-1994),
*Untitled (Still Life with Hands, St.
Johns)*, ca. 1943. Tempera on paper,
11½ x 14 in.



Dorothy Dehner in her studio at 41 Union Square, New York City, surrounded by her bronze sculptures, circa 1965. Photo courtesy the Dorothy Dehner Foundation for the Visual Arts.



Another gallery currently featuring Dehner's drawings is Valerie Carberry Gallery in Chicago, Illinois. The exhibit *Compositions and Constructions*, running through March 14, includes eight works on paper from the '70s, many of which were exhibited in The Betty Parsons Gallery in New York City in 1979. Carberry says Dehner's work has a strong visual aesthetic that has lasting influence and relevance today.

"For anyone who appreciates work on paper, her composition have an elegance and subtlety to them," Carberry says. "The drawings have a quiet power to them, and while the interplay is something we enjoy in the exhibition, any one drawing on its own can communicate quite well."

Degn points out Dehner's influence by her mentor, modernist painter John



Graham, whose 1937 book *System and Dialects of Art* resonated with Dehner's own artistic philosophy. Degn says the Kraushaar Galleries exhibit gives collectors a unique view into Dehner's artistic evolution.

"Collectors should see the show

because many of these works have either not been seen or not been seen in a long time," Degn says. "The context and the story is important in the history of Dehner's work and is an enriching visual and emotional experience." ■

Dorothy Dehner (1901-1994), [Abstraction], 1948. Ink and watercolor on paper, 4½ x 5¾ in.

Dorothy Dehner (1901-1994), *Balloon Ascension #3: Dithyrambe Played by the Ashraf*, 1947. Ink on paper, 17½ x 26 in.