



*"WATERVILLE RAILROAD TRACK," a black-and-white ink wash Dehn painted in 1940, is one of many scenes he did of his home town and the surrounding rural area after the 1930s.*

# ADOLF DEHN

## *The Minnesota Connection*

Richard W. Cox

AT THE PEAK of his career, Minnesota-born artist Adolf Dehn was called the American George Grosz for his satirical drawings and "the Debussy of the lithograph" for his brilliant, semi-abstract landscapes. His satires of European café society and his technically intricate landscapes of Bavaria, Haiti, India, and other faraway lands brought him international acclaim in the 1920s and later. In mid-career in the 1930s he mastered the art of water color, and his paintings of scenes in Minnesota and other areas soon added to his renown. He was featured in *Life*, *Esquire*, and *Coronet*, as well as in professional art journals and newspapers.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Carl Zigrosser, *The Artist in America: Twenty-four Close-ups of Contemporary Printmakers*, 15, 18 (New York, 1942); Harry Salpeter, "About Adolf Dehn," in *Coronet*, 2:138-146 (June, 1937); Harry Salpeter, "Adolf Dehn: Happy Artist," in *Esquire*, May, 1941, p. 94-95, 162-164; "Golden Wedding," in *Life*, July 19, 1943, p. 57-62.

<sup>2</sup>All the letters to and from Dehn cited here are in the possession of Olivia Dehn Mitchell of Woodstock, N.Y.; Erle Loran, "Artists from Minnesota," in *American Magazine of Art*, 29:25 (January, 1936); Donald R. Torbert, "A Century of Art and Architecture in Minnesota," in William Van O'Connor, ed., *A History of the Arts in Minnesota*, 30 (Minneapolis, 1958).

<sup>3</sup>Richard W. Cox interviews with Olivia Dehn Mitchell, Woodstock, N.Y., May 30, 1975, and with Viola Dehn Tiala (Adolf's other sister), St. Cloud, June 15, 1975; Salpeter, in *Esquire*, May, 1941, p. 94, 162, *Adolf Dehn Drawings*, 9 (Columbia, Mo., 1971). Dehn simplified the spelling of his first name from Adolph (or Adolphe) sometime in the 1920s.

Mr. Cox is American art historian in the Department of Fine Arts at Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge. His earlier article, "Wanda Gág: The Bite of the Picture Book" (Fall, 1973), won the Solon J. Buck Award as the best published in Minnesota History in 1975.

He was also well known in Waterville, Minnesota, and Minneapolis where he grew up, began his career, and developed attitudes that were crucial to his cosmopolitan life in bigger cities. A close look at the role Minnesota played in his development is long overdue, especially since his sister, Olivia Dehn Mitchell, has compiled more than 150 unpublished letters Adolf wrote to his family between 1916 and 1941. In them the artist reveals his great expectations, his struggles, poverty, disappointments, and, finally, triumph. These letters also give fresh evidence of the raucous nature of Minnesota political life between 1916 and 1921 and spark new interest in the vital force that was the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, which sent Dehn, Wanda Gág, Arnold Blanch, Lucile Lundquist Blanch, Harry Gottlieb, John B. Flannagan, and Elizabeth Olds off to fame in the New York City art world during World War I.<sup>2</sup>

Dehn was born November 22, 1895, at Waterville in Le Sueur County, the only son of Arthur and Emilie Haase Dehn. Besides Olivia, Adolf had another sister, Viola. His parents were second-generation German-Americans and free-thinking iconoclasts, and Adolf was reared on baseball, hunting, fishing, and Thomas Paine's *Age of Reason*. He impressed his family and the local townspeople alike with his wit, intelligence, drawing ability, and independence. Adolf won a scholarship to the University of Minnesota on the strength of his selection as valedictorian of his high school graduating class, and his mother wanted him to accept it. His father was enraged when Adolf turned down a job at the Waterville bank after graduating from high school. Neither parent was keen on his decision to go — without scholarship — to the Minneapolis School of Art in the fall of 1914, but, mindful of their own preachings about independence from authority, they eventually relented.<sup>3</sup>



ABOVE: Dehn grew up in this simple frame house.



ABOVE: A costumed Adolf, Stella Gág, and Wanda playacting at Waterville, summer of 1916.



UPPER RIGHT: Adolf and Wanda share a log on Tetonka Lake, on which the Dehn home was located, on a sunny summer day in 1916.



LEFT: "A safe hit" is the questionable caption under this photograph of Adolf playing baseball.



RIGHT: Wanda in about 1914-15

At the School of Art, Dehn took conventional instruction in life and cast drawing. Later, when he entered the progressive school, the Art Students League of New York, his principal instructor, Kenneth Hayes Miller, took one look at his drawings and brusquely told the young student to "forget Minneapolis." The Minneapolis Institute was an academy staffed by teachers trained in conservative institutions, not a reform-minded art school. Students received little exposure to Fauvism, Cubism, Futurism, and other modern art movements just taking root in Europe. Art history classes focused on the pretwentieth-century great masters. The sensational Armory Show, which brought the European *avant-garde* painters to American attention in 1913 (the show opened in New York and traveled to Boston and Chicago later in the year), did not reach Minneapolis, and it received scant notice from any Minnesota artists or writers. The most "modern" paintings to receive a full exhibit at the institute during Dehn's years there as a student were from the Barbizon school, a movement that predated French Impressionism and included landscape painters like Corot and Rousseau. The Minneapolis Institute of Arts *Bulletin* recorded the purchase of works by late nineteenth-century artists such as Winslow Homer, Sir Edward Burne-Jones, and Robert Henri but none by the more advanced continental artists of the same era.

Other galleries where students might have kept abreast of the latest styles did not exist near the institute or in downtown Minneapolis. "We went downtown to work, drink, and hear political speeches, not to look for art," Harry Gottlieb remembers.<sup>4</sup>

Despite the apparent lack of a vital art life in the Twin Cities and the conservative academic structure of the institute, the Minneapolis School of Art nevertheless produced several important artists in just a few years — Dehn, Gág, and Gottlieb, to name only a few key figures. There are tentative answers to this seeming paradox.

For one thing, the school probably was not as rigid as

<sup>4</sup> Miller was quoted by Dehn in an interview with Dorothy Seckler at the Archives of American Art, Detroit, January, 1968. Richard Cox interviews with Lucile Blanch, Woodstock, N.Y., May 30, 1975, and with Harry Gottlieb, New York City, June 3, 1975. Minneapolis Institute of Arts, *Bulletin*, 4:39-42 (April, 1915), 4:46 (May, 1915), 4:85, 94 (September, 1915), 6:15 (February, 1917). The Art Students League was always an independent school, and, especially after 1906, its teachers and former students were often involved with "anti-establishment" and radical art movements. See [Lawrence Campbell], *Kennedy Galleries Are Host to the Hundredth Anniversary Exhibition . . . of the Art Students League*, 21 (New York, 1975). For the best account of the Armory Show, see Milton W. Brown, *The Story of the Armory Show* (New York, 1963).

it first appeared to the incoming student. The instructors could bend a little, as Dehn discovered when his unorthodox satirical style met qualified approval from two of his teachers, Gustav F. Goetsch and Lauros M. Phoenix, and from the director emeritus himself, Robert Koehler. They "encouraged . . . my tendency towards caricature, exaggeration, [and] wildness, cautioning that I should be careful not to ignore good drawing and good modeling at the same time."<sup>5</sup>

It is, of course, not unusual for students to complain about the drudgery of basic drawing, modeling, and copying, only to concede the value of these disciplines later on. This is especially true of figurative artists. And except for John Flannagan, the flamboyant and troubled artist most impervious to conventional instruction, there was not a budding modernist in the Minnesota group.

<sup>5</sup>Dehn to Emilie Dehn, January 12, 1916.

<sup>6</sup>Why so many important artists emerged from the Minneapolis School of Art in these years is a complicated subject, and the full workings of the institute and the school deserve fuller study than is possible here. Ziggrosser, in his essay on Wanda Gág in *Artist in America* (p. 37), wrote: "It was not that the art school was so extraordinary or so far in advance of its time. It was a good school — above the average — but its ideal did not extend beyond Whistler (the impact of the Armory Show of 1913 had not yet penetrated the West)."

<sup>7</sup>Dehn to Emilie Dehn, January 12, 1916. In 1915, during Dehn's first year there, the school was moved from its home of thirty years in the Minneapolis Public Library to rooms in the newly completed Minneapolis Institute of Arts. The next year the school moved to its own building nearby on Twenty-fifth Street.

Koehler, who had headed the school for twenty years, became director emeritus in 1914–15 but continued to give instruction. He had been educated in Munich, Germany, and at the Art Students League. Gustav Goetsch had attended the Atelier Julien in Paris, and his fellow teacher, Lauros Phoenix, was a graduate of the Chicago Art Institute. The teachers' academic backgrounds provided "leavening" influences to the school's conservative structure. See Minneapolis Institute of Arts, *Catalogue of the Minneapolis School of Art, 1914–15*, p. 7, 8, 11. See also Torbert's comment in O'Connor, *A History of the Arts in Minnesota*, 28, that "although Koehler was trained in and practiced the Munich tradition, with emphasis on technique, exacting draftsmanship, and strong modeling, he was a liberal in his art attitudes, sympathetic to and fostering student interest in the new and, at that time, radical forms of art."

<sup>8</sup>Lucile Blanch, who roomed with Wanda in Minneapolis and New York City, says Wanda carefully cultivated her gypsy look, associating it with her Bohemian ancestry (May 30, 1975, interview). Wanda and two of her sisters spent the summer of 1916 in a tent on the Dehn property, acting out Charlie Chaplin and other movie routines (Viola Dehn Tiala interview, June 15, 1975). For numerous references to her friendship with Dehn, see Wanda Gág, *Growing Pains: Diaries and Drawings for the Years 1908–1917* (New York, 1940). Dehn is mentioned with increasing frequency from p. 330 on. For more on Wanda and her work, see Richard W. Cox, "Wanda Gág: The Bite of the Picture Book," in *Minnesota History*, 44:238–254 (Fall, 1975).

The human figure, the primacy of representational objects, remained important in the later paintings and prints of Dehn, Gág, Gottlieb, Arnold Blanch, and Olds. Moreover, Koehler's "spellbinding" lectures on Rembrandt, Velásquez, Michelangelo, and Daumier, the great ethical painters of the past, impressed these young artists, all of whom would make humanitarian concerns a major part of their artistic expression. Dehn's graphic satire, Gág's celebration of the peasant folk tradition, and the social-realist paintings of the 1930s by Arnold Blanch and Harry Gottlieb all reflected the influence of Koehler's humanistic bias in art.<sup>8</sup>

Even without galleries, the young artists found stimulation beyond the limits of the institute's location at Twenty-fourth Street and Third Avenue South. If art was not widely accessible, other cultural events were. Opera and symphony performances as well as motion pictures attracted the young artists. Eugene Debs, Margaret Sanger, Emma Goldman, and other radical advocates gave talks in Minneapolis during the prewar years, and, encouraged by institute teachers, Dehn and his fellow students attended many of these lectures. Writing to his family in January, 1916, Dehn related one of his busier, but not extraordinary, days: In the morning he attended a rationalist lecture at the Lyric Theater on the "survival of savages in Biblical history." At noon he rushed back to the institute to a new exhibit, where he engaged Ada Wolfe, a "well-known artist and anarchist," in a spirited debate for more than an hour. Professors Goetsch and Koehler remarked favorably about his "wild drawings" in a late afternoon class, and, to finish the day, Dehn went with Wanda Gág to the Unitarian Church to hear Allen Broms lecture on "free love."<sup>9</sup>

THERE WAS an exhilarating camaraderie among these young artists, banded together in a big city, growing up and growing apart from the "bourgeois" upbringing that prevailed in their small, midwestern home towns. "There was a special feeling among us," Lucile Blanch recalls. "We had a separate make-up from people who expected us to work in a store or do this or that. When we got to Minneapolis, the old life seemed empty, dry, barren, and dull." Especially exciting to Dehn was Wanda Gág, the talented young student from New Ulm, who had the look and flair of a gypsy. Dehn and Wanda would be practically inseparable for the next five years (1916–21) in Minneapolis, St. Paul, and New York, although their art eventually went in very different directions. Together they studied, went to the ballet, playacted in Waterville during the summer, and attended political rallies.<sup>10</sup>

They also became artists for the University of Minnesota humor magazine, *Minne-haha*, in 1915 and 1916. Wanda's covers and other illustrations were mostly elegant, coquettish drawings. Dehn's work already revealed



A DEHN cover drawing in 1916 for the University of Minnesota humor magazine

a satirical sting that would be his trademark in New York and Europe. A cover drawing for the February, 1916, issue of *Minne-haha* bore the style of German Expressionism: the decadent, oversophisticated scene highlighted by the abstract, angular distortions of the human figure. Other drawings demonstrate his gift of caricature and sometimes rowdy and outrageous satire. Dehn would develop this acerbic manner further in his cartoons of the 1920s.<sup>9</sup>

Dehn was the political ringleader of the Minneapolis art students. Physically impressive with his broad shoulders and shock of black hair, gregarious and sociable, he was the one who contacted the socialists, anarchists, Wobblies (members of the Industrial Workers of the World), and other dissidents. With his usual persuasive powers, he talked Wanda Gág, Arnold Blanch, and Lucile Lundquist into subscribing to *The Masses*, the famous Greenwich Village journal of art, commentary, and politics. It was in *The Masses* that Dehn first saw the great political satirists George Grosz, Boardman Robinson, Art Young, and John Sloan, and it was in *The Masses* that one of his own drawings was first published professionally.<sup>10</sup>

Dehn's political consciousness had not, however, sprung full-blown into being in Minneapolis. Christian utopian socialism was part of his intellectual heritage.

Emilie Dehn went to the German Lutheran Evangelical Church near German Lake and held unconventional political ideas. An extraordinary woman by all accounts, the daughter of dirt-poor farmers, she was fired with a sense of social mission and actively participated in functions of the Minnesota branch of the American Socialist party between 1917 and 1922. Arthur Dehn shared his wife's ardor for social change, although he eschewed any participation in group activities. A loner and a sullen individualist, he made a living as a trapper so he "wouldn't have to knuckle under to a boss." He rejected Christianity, and Adolf Dehn's strong anticlerical sentiments (the first drawing he sent to *The Masses* condemned Christian materialism) bore the mark of his father, just as his concern for the class struggle derived from his mother. Early on, Adolf was a nonconformist, bookish, politically thoughtful, and, except for baseball, not much concerned with normal pursuits of small-town adolescents. During that heady period of social reform (1910–17), Dehn had no trouble finding political companionship at the School of Art, the University of Minnesota, in the John Ruskin Club, and in various other social and political groups.<sup>11</sup>

It was one thing to banter Marxist ideas about within his family and among Bohemian-minded students, but it was quite another to put such convictions to the test of fire. For Dehn, that opportunity came soon enough. As the United States entered the Great War in April, 1917, against the Central Powers, Dehn was, like many young American socialists, faced with an unenviable choice between prison or service in a war he considered a capitalist conspiracy. As early as August, 1916, before America declared war, Dehn mulled over his options if

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"Before World War I, the University of Minnesota had no art department, and most of the artists for *Minne-haha* were recruited from the Minneapolis School of Art. Dehn said in his January, 1968, interview with Dorothy Seckler that he became "slightly aware" of German Expressionism through art magazines. *Minne-haha* sometimes was not hyphenated.

<sup>10</sup>Salpeter, in *Coronet*, 2:138–146 (June, 1937); Gág, *Growing Pains*, 362, 369, 374, 375, 413, 457, 464, 465; Ziggrosser, *Artist in America*, 19, 23.

<sup>11</sup>Mary Anne Guitav, 22 *Famous Painters and Illustrators Tell How They Work*, 47 (quote) (New York, 1964); Olivia Dehn Mitchell interview, May 30, 1975. Emilie Dehn delivered a petition from the floor of the 1918 Minnesota Socialist party convention. In anticipation of this, Adolf wrote excitedly from New York: "So our mother is getting into politics. Great! I think the Dehn family will go down in history yet" (Dehn to family, February 19, 1918). Viola Dehn Tiala told Richard Cox in the June 1, 1975, interview that boys of Adolf's age group "would go downtown and sit on the bank steps and watch the girls go by. I don't think Adolf did that much. He would rather stay at home and draw and read and go fishing. He sent away for a subscription to the great classics, including works, I believe, by Walt Whitman, James Fenimore Cooper, and Plutarch."

he should be drafted. Adopting a brave front, he tried to convince his alarmed mother that the war would probably end before United States soldiers were dragged into battle. In any case, he said he had an alternate plan: "I mean, I'd readily go with the Red Guard consisting of radicals here who want to get permission from [President Woodrow] Wilson to go to Russia to help fight Germany."<sup>12</sup>

Nothing came of this scheme, and by November, 1917, Dehn faced certain conscription. Discouraged, he wrote home from New York City, where he was then living, that only the "Bolsheviki" gave him hope. Wanda Gag commiserated with him, and Dehn sought the counsel of other political activists facing the same predicament. On December 7, 1917, he still seemed undecided: "I waver continually on the war business. It is so easy to yield. I don't know what I'll do. If I could only come to a decision it would be so much easier."<sup>13</sup>

Several days later he seemed a little more resolute: "I am so pleased Pa wants me to decide as I wish. There are so many things to consider. I may go to prison or may yield to non-combative service. And, of course, I might change my mind and yield altogether. But I doubt it." On February 19, 1918, he typed a letter stating his pacifist convictions that was handed to a staff sergeant on July 29, 1918, his first day at the Spartanburg, South Carolina, boot camp.<sup>14</sup>

Inside the camp guardhouse Dehn was ridiculed and spat upon by nonconscientious objector prisoners, and told he would be sent to the federal prison at Leavenworth, Kansas. Only his tact and well-developed charm saved him from the beatings delivered to many other prisoners. Even allowing for an understandable desire to assuage his mother's distress, Dehn wrote letters bome during this period that were neither morose nor bitter. Ever alert to "human folly," he seemed to thrive on the crowded company of the odd assortment of conscientious objectors, most of whom, unlike Dehn, had refused to drill on religious grounds. He wrote of

"intellectual atheists and sixteenth century Puritans who think checkers nearly as sinful as adultery. All sure of the one fact that they will not kill. Sonorous hymns are sung by a group of zealots. . . . I feel a charm akin to the one I feel when listening to the Salvation Army's Rock of



*DEHN poses in his army uniform as he reads a German newspaper, The Weekly View. He spent four months in an army guardhouse for his pacifist views and another eight in nonmilitary service, teaching painting and drawing to tubercular soldiers in an Asheville, North Carolina, hospital.*

Ages — it sends my mind back to Aunt Ellen's funeral. Isadore and the Baptist minister are deep in things Biblical and Hebraic. One of the colored C.O.'s snores. The Ethical Culturist and Socialist are delving into the forbidden intricacies of sex. My stomach gurgles from too many prunes. Taps have been blown."<sup>15</sup>

Dehn clowned with the guards and sketched local Black workmen chanting songs as they built highways near the camp. Later, Dehn attributed his amazing perseverance and good cheer in the guardhouse to the discipline he had developed back in Waterville defying relatives who ridiculed his attempt to conquer a teen-age acne problem by turning down enticing German sweets at the many family get-togethers. One wonders how the complexion of history has been changed by other major figures struggling with mundane adolescent anxieties. In any event, confinement in the South Carolina guardhouse failed to dampen his spirits.<sup>16</sup>

More bothersome were the repercussions back in Waterville pertaining to his imprisonment. War fever swept the town and many other small Minnesota communities in 1917. It was fanned by newspaper editors like Edward M. Lawless of the *Waterville Sentinel*, a member of the America First Association and well known in local circles as "a one hundred per cent American and

<sup>12</sup> Dehn to Emilie Dehn, August 4, 1916.

<sup>13</sup> Dehn to Emilie Dehn, November 26, December 7, 1917.

<sup>14</sup> Dehn to Emilie Dehn, December 10, 1917, July 29, 1918.

<sup>15</sup> Dehn to Emilie Dehn, August 11, August 31, 1918.

<sup>16</sup> Dehn to Emilie Dehn, August 11, November 6, 1918. Dehn said in his interview with Dorothy Seckler that the idea of fasting came to him after he read several books by Upton Sinclair, who wrote of the value of this discipline.

then some." Week after week Lawless thundered against war slackers, "Hun" editors like New Ulm's "Herr" Albert Steinhauser, the "disloyal and seditious" Nonpartisan League, and the "yellow-spined Robert La Follette," who voted against war appropriations in the United States Senate in 1917. Lawless painted a dark picture of sinister spies (probably of German descent) on the loose in rural Minnesota and endorsed an idea by an Iowa editor for dealing with these internal enemies: "We need less interning and more shooting."<sup>17</sup>

EVEN BEFORE Lawless helped whip Le Sueur County into near-hysteria, Dehn warned his activist mother to be circumspect regarding his impending conscription. But he had been in the South Carolina guardhouse for less than a month when the dam broke in Waterville. The *Waterville Advance* first made public note of Dehn's refusal to serve in the armed forces.<sup>18</sup> Then, on August 16, 1918, editor Lawless, without mentioning specific names, lashed out unmistakably at Adolf and the Dehn family in a lengthy editorial. Citing the number of Waterville boys who eagerly went off to war to serve their nation in "the historic struggle for the rights of mankind," Lawless wrote:

"[I]t is therefore humiliating and enraging to have this record of the community marred by an ignominious scion of a socialist family here who . . . has been reported to be in the guard house since arriving at camp for refusing to obey orders. Persistence in such a treasonable course will undoubtedly mean a long prison term. It is to be hoped that the misguided youth will come to his senses in time to avoid such a result, but he will be entitled to no sympathy in case he brings upon himself such a fate."

Adolf was not solely to blame for this humiliation to Waterville, according to Lawless, who then turned his invective upon the parents:

"We have known families of pro-German sympathizers who have been bitterly opposed to their boys going to fight against the Fatherland, and yet when the time for those boys came to go the pro-German parents had the honor and sense to tell their boys to do their duty and be men worthy of their flag and uniforms. Not so with the socialists, however, as they prefer to see their sons face court martial and prison terms rather than give evidence of recognizing any duty to country, any spark of patriotism, honor or manhood. This nation has work to do in safeguarding its existence besides winning this war and the body politic must be purged of the poison of 'class-conscious' socialists. A mad dog is not permitted to run at large infecting with rabies all he can come in contact with."<sup>19</sup>

On the heels of this editorial, a band of vigilantes planned a midnight raid on the Dehn home, intending to paint the house and family cow yellow. Arthur Dehn sat up all night with a lantern in one hand and a shotgun in the other waiting for the intruders, who never came. What did arrive was community ostracism of the entire family, particularly of Emilie Dehn. Friends stopped visiting the house, and the Dehn mail was opened by the local postmistress. Even relatives did not offer much moral support. It did not help to be of German descent, and Emilie Dehn could persuade few people that she opposed all wars, not just the present one. At first, Adolf Dehn took a perverse delight in the attack: "So there is scandal. Great! Tell me more about it. And do send me those editorial 'gems' from our local editors. You must. Do write about all the little things about town."<sup>20</sup>

As he realized the grief that his situation had visited on his parents and his sister Olivia, however, Dehn's amusement turned to angry contempt. In a letter to his mother, Dehn snarled at his Waterville antagonists:

"These narrow-minded 'provincials' with their petty opinions matter so little to me that I can scarcely write about them seriously. I would much rather laugh at them and let it go at that. They seem to think I have grown up like their sons: to go to the same church, sit in the same pew, sing the same hymns, to drink the same beer, vote the same party ticket, read the *St. Paul Daily News*, etc., etc. If I should ever return to Waterville, I will be looked down upon, ostracized by many as a coward, slacker, merely because I did not live up to their ideals, not realizing that perhaps I too had to fight for my ideals."

"Let them go their way. I will go mine, and without regrets in losing their good opinions of me."<sup>21</sup>

Matters on the home front did not improve markedly right after the 1918 armistice. Dehn was still not discharged, and socialism and communism replaced Prussianism as the main enemy in the eyes of many. The Red Scare hit full force in 1919 and 1920 and caught the Dehn

<sup>17</sup>*Waterville Sentinel*, January 11, February 1, February 15, March 1, March 15, March 29, April 6, 1918. (All these newspaper citations are on p. 4.) Lawless frequently published comments from other newspapers — if they agreed with his own views. The quote about Lawless was reprinted January 11, 1918, from the *Mankato Free Press*.

<sup>18</sup>By August 11, 1918, Dehn had already been informed by his parents that the news was out about his confinement (Dehn to Emilie Dehn, August 11, 1918).

<sup>19</sup>*Waterville Sentinel*, August 16, 1918.

<sup>20</sup>Interviews with Olivia Dehn Mitchell and Viola Dehn Tiala; Dehn to Emilie Dehn, August 23, 1918.

<sup>21</sup>Dehn to Emilie Dehn, October 23, 1918.



family in the whirlwind of repression. In Waterville, as elsewhere, the siege mentality of World War I dealt a crippling blow to the socialist movement. Editor Lawless, one of the early red-baiters of Le Sueur County, warned citizens to keep an eye out for local revolutionaries, followers of "the slimy and ugly monster of socialism," and lamented that there was not some way to impose harsh "reparations" against such traitors — at the very least, denying them the vote.<sup>22</sup>

In another veiled threat to the Dehn family, Lawless raged in early 1919:

"The country is infested with a horde of bolshevik sympathizers who regard the cut-throat murderous despoilers under Lenine [sic] and Trotsky in Russia as their ideal for ruling the world[,] including this country. Any man holding such views is not an American. He is an enemy of America and should be dealt with as such. And this class can be found everywhere. We have them right here in Waterville. It is too bad that the mask of citizenship prevents the deportation of these fellows along with the alien bolsheviks that are being sent back by the government."<sup>23</sup>

Fortunately, cooler heads prevailed. Lawless retired as editor of the *Sentinel* in late 1920, and Adolf Dehn and his family were not deported, even though some harassment persisted for several months. (The local postmistress, for example, continued to open the Dehn mail and gossip about its contents.)<sup>24</sup>

Of course, the Red Scare was not just a rural Minnesota phenomenon. It touched down on all centers of American culture, even upon cosmopolitan New York, and Dehn could not escape it. When he returned to New York in 1919, he was surprised to find that two of his cartoons, one dealing with "Christianity" and the other

called "Democracy, the League of Capitalist Nations," were rejected by his close friend Boardman Robinson, editor of *The Liberator* (the socialist successor of *The Masses*), as "too blunt and frank." Radical publications had to be careful in view of the vigilance of the Lusk Committee, appointed by the New York state legislature to investigate "seditious activities." But the national hysteria subsided almost as quickly as it had begun. By late 1920 passions had cooled, and the nation began to slip into an era of "normalcy" proclaimed by President-elect Warren G. Harding.<sup>25</sup>

Dehn was discharged from the army and even planned a visit to what he thought would be the hostile home territory of Waterville. His expectations were fulfilled. When he arrived in Waterville in February, 1920, the tension was still heavy. Some of Dehn's relatives who had been "disgraced" by his actions refused to speak to him, rumors spread that he had been imprisoned in the Leavenworth penitentiary, and children on the Waterville streets threw rocks at him, Dehn said. He would have to wait until well into the 1930s before he would be forgiven by the town and some of his family. Realizing the discomfort of the situation, Dehn returned to New York and resumed his art career.<sup>26</sup>

DEHN HAD first gone to New York in September, 1917, on a partial fellowship to the Art Students League. Between working long hours as a watchman for the Acme Security Company and worrying about the war, he was

"*THE PETROLEUM AGE*," which Dehn did for *The Liberator* for the July, 1921, issue, is fresh and relevant commentary more than fifty years later.

<sup>22</sup>*Waterville Sentinel*, November 29, 1918. Robert K. Murray, in his *Red Scare: A Study in National Hysteria, 1919-1920*, p. 20 (Minneapolis, 1955), wrote: "The general public, which heretofore had tolerated the Socialists, now unleashed a wave of hatred for these nonconformists. The Socialists' opposition to the war was universally regarded as irrefutable proof that they were either spies or pro-German and wanted the enemy to win."

<sup>23</sup>*Waterville Sentinel*, February 21, 1919.

<sup>24</sup>Dehn aimed some of his bitterest sarcasm at Waterville's postmistress: "When she goes to hell enjoying the fruits of her veracity, religion, and her patriotism, may God bless her. And beside her will be sitting upon a pile of *Sentinels* a certain editor." (Dehn to Emilie Dehn, February 16, 1919.)

<sup>25</sup>Dehn to Emilie Dehn, March 1, April 2, 1919. The committee, named for chairman Clayton R. Lusk, was formed in March, 1919, and soon became one of the most notorious such investigating groups in the country. See Murray, *Red Scare*, 98-102, 171, 238.

<sup>26</sup>Sometime in 1921 Dehn wrote a statement for a Waterville paper that he had been honorably discharged and had never been in Leavenworth prison (Seckler interview).





not able to attend many classes. By the time he was discharged from the army in late 1919, Dehn had little patience with formal art instruction, although he did begin to develop lithographic skills with the aid of Boardman Robinson, one of America's premier cartoonists and lithographers. Dehn did not try to paint at this point and, in fact, would not take up the brush until 1937, "being intimidated of color," as he put it.<sup>27</sup>

Dehn continued to contribute drawings and lithographs to *The Liberator* and to cultivate friendships among New York political radicals like Max Eastman, Michael Gold, Floyd Dell, and William Gropper until he left in the summer of 1921 for an eight-year stay in Europe. With its rich culture, uninhibited mores, and incredibly cheap prices, Europe lured many disillusioned writers and artists during the 1920s. Even for expatriates like Dehn with very little money, the inflated currency of postwar Europe made living and traveling abroad cheaper than staying home. Dehn fit in well with other traveling intellectuals — poet E. E. Cummings was one of his best friends in Vienna, for example. As Carl Zigrosser put it, Dehn "became intimate with the capitals of Europe — Vienna, Berlin, Paris, London. He absorbed experience and lived life to the full. What incomparable illustrations he could make for *The Sun Also Rises!*"<sup>28</sup>

During the formative two decades of Dehn's career (1916–36), his drawings and prints were mostly spoofs of human behavior; later, art historians would judge him to be one of the leading satirists of the Jazz Age. Showing little interest in small-town sins that obsessed other satirists like Sinclair Lewis and H. L. Mencken, Dehn lampooned people he observed in New York, Vienna, and Berlin: businessmen and their whores, blues singers, down-and-out clowns, pompous clergymen, and nuns posturing in the park. Often he simply took delight in the incongruous and comical meeting of opposites, as in his "The Sisters." But at times his long-standing, bitter anticlerical sentiments burst forth in works like "The Confessional," Dehn's view of hypocritical priests presuming to administer to the souls of common people. In "All for a Piece of Meat" (1928), Dehn lambasted the boorish, insensitive, wealthy classes he saw on both sides of the Atlantic.<sup>29</sup>

Dehn never lost interest in politics as he traversed Europe, climbing mountains, visiting museums, and sketching. He wrote friends in America about the approaching political revolutions in Austria and Germany, planned a visit (perhaps a pilgrimage) to the Soviet Union to see for himself the glories of this new socialist "utopia," as so many were heralding it, kept in close touch with editors of *The Liberator* and *New Masses*, and drew strong political cartoons of Welsh striking miners in 1926 that got him into hot water with British officials.<sup>30</sup>

Yet, Dehn's satire was always more social than politi-

cal. He preferred the rapier to the sledgehammer. Even as he advocated socialism to his Minneapolis schoolmates before World War I, his own drawings in the *Minne-haha* ridiculed social types and attitudes rather than political ills. Not that his opinion of the moneyed people was a temperate one. He wrote in 1926 to Zigrosser from a Karlsbad, Germany, spa:

"No. Carl, I am not exactly taking the cure in this god-damned place full of creeping cringing robbers and lackeys. I really can't think of a more disgusting place than this — full of fat toads and jaundiced ladies trying to get back youth and beauty and health. Sometime I hope to present you with a lithograph which will tell you more than my words can about this place!"<sup>31</sup>

Even in these bitter denunciations of the leisure class, Dehn rarely connected his biting satire to any specific political cause or struggle. Mitigating his social commentary were his generous nature, "happy-go-lucky" personality, and sensuous love of life that his Marxist inclinations could not turn into disciplined political art.

Although he was in Europe throughout much of the 1920s, Dehn reached out in his satire to the human frailty he had seen in America. In one of his more pungently satirical prints, "Beethoven's Ninth Symphony" (1928), Dehn lashed out at the boorish, ludicrous pretensions of the New York elite he had observed at Carnegie Hall. In a 1934 lithograph, "The Art Lovers," wealthy vulgarities wrench their bodies in rapt attention while others seem more honestly puzzled as they try to divine the significance of the lines and colors of the works on

<sup>27</sup>In his interview with Dorothy Seckler, Dehn said: "I loved black and white. But I had some strange phobia about painting. I was sort of frightened about it. I tried to figure it out, and I never could."

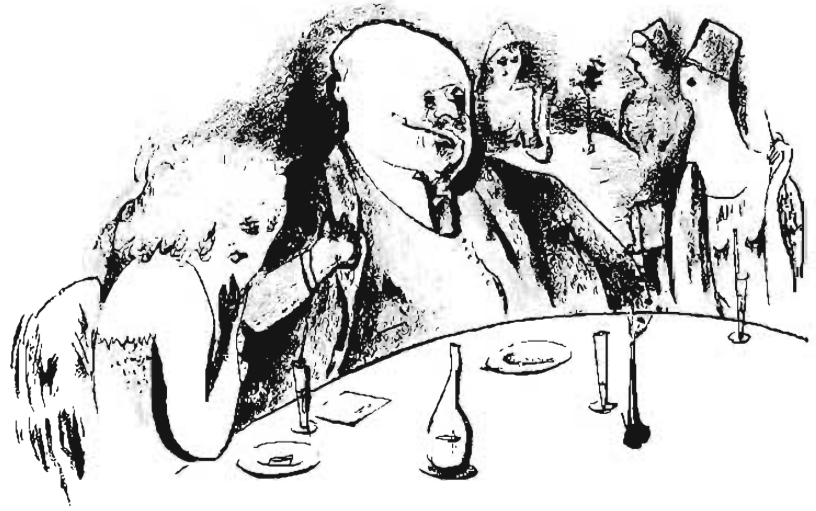
<sup>28</sup>Dehn to Emilie Dehn, May 26, 1919, May 2, June 2, 1920; Richard Cox interview with Mura Ziperovitch Dehn, Adolf's first wife, May 27, 1975, in New York City; Zigrosser, *Artist in America*, 16.

<sup>29</sup>Milton W. Brown, *American Painting from the Armory Show to the Depression, 187–188* (Princeton, N.J., 1955); Adolf Dehn *Drawings*, 47–61.

<sup>30</sup>Dehn sent several drawings to *New Masses* about a major labor strike in the coal-mining district of Wales. He may also have been in the hire of the English *Daily Worker* to do strike drawings. In her May 27, 1975, interview with the author, Mura Dehn said she remembers Scotland Yard officials coming to the Dehns' London flat in 1926 to "look through all the drawings and his writings and his mail, and [they] finally told us to leave [England]." Her Russian refugee parents had been involved initially with the Soviet government in 1918, which did not sit well with the Conservative-dominated British officials, and Mura believes the Dehns' expulsion was connected with that, too. Dehn himself referred to the incident only obliquely: "I took a side trip to England in 1926. They kicked me out for some unknown reason." (Seckler interview.)

<sup>31</sup>Zigrosser, *Artist in America*, 19.

"ALL FOR A PIECE  
OF MEAT," 1927.  
Philadelphia Museum of Art:  
Estate of Carl Zigrosser



"ARTISTE'S CAFE," 1923

"THE LITTLE SINNER" is the caustic title Dehn gave to this lithograph, which he did as a gift for artist Cameron Booth in 1928. Booth gave the print to the Minnesota Historical Society in 1973.



"HEILIGE NACHT" ("Holy Night") is one of George Grosz's better known works. Dehn's satire was sometimes compared to the German caricaturist's. Estate of George Grosz, Princeton, New Jersey; permission to publish granted by Mrs. Peter Grosz.



"BISTRO," 1928



"THE ART LOVERS," 1934.



"SHE SAID, THAT  
YOU SAID, THAT I  
SAID, THAT THEY  
SAID," 1947

the museum walls. Dehn's Minnesota experiences told in both these prints. "Beethoven's Ninth Symphony" was reminiscent of various Honoré Daumier "opera prints," and Daumier was one of Dehn's early heroes, one of the few nineteenth-century masters widely discussed at the Minneapolis Art Institute. "The Art Lovers," meanwhile, probably owed its origin to a 1917 exhibit opening at the Minneapolis Art Institute where Dehn and Wanda Gág acted as ushers and sneered at the Philistine behavior of the Twin Cities' upper classes passing rapidly by the paintings.<sup>32</sup>

During the 1920s and 1930s, Dehn kept in close touch with Harry Gottlieb, Wanda Gág, Arnold and Lucile Blanch, and other Minnesota friends, in addition to the new circle of friends he made in Europe, including E. E. Cummings, George Grosz, and painter-critic Guy Pene du Bois. In retrospect, it is clear that Dehn's skepticism

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<sup>32</sup>"We had all enjoyed seeing silks and satins and throats glide by us," Wanda wrote. "their owners doing their best to say something intelligent or non-committal about the pictures." See Gág, *Growing Pains*, 334.

<sup>33</sup>Cox interviews with Lucile Blanch and Harry Gottlieb. Dehn met Grosz in 1923, the year that the controversial German satirist published his series of savage lithographs, *Ecce Homo*, in Berlin. Writing Emilie Dehn, December 14, 1929, Adolf described Grosz's approach to art and propaganda and was instructive as to his own resolution of this problem: "I have been with George Grosz and his crowd several times. He has changed much — he was the pride of the communists, their greatest propaganda artist. Now he may do things which can be used as propaganda but he does not deliberately set about doing propaganda. In other words he is an artist, and as far as his way of life, very much bourgeois. He is really a tremendous person and I like him much better than I did." Dehn's lithographs were occasionally used on the pages of *New Masses* along with captions with revolutionary messages that had been added by Michael Gold and other editors of the magazine. See also Cox, in *Minnesota History*, 44:245, 247 (Fall, 1975) for more on this issue.

<sup>34</sup>Wanda Gág had taken a dim view of this Parisian scene, both in terms of Adolf's art and his life, as early as 1921, when they were still sweethearts. It was bad enough to have him sketching the French prostitutes who frequented the cafes, she wrote, but kissing them would bring unspeakable consequences. Adolf had told Wanda he could not help but "ogle" the French women, thus provoking the desired response: "Please do not let them kiss you," she wrote. "O please, because, supposing you should kiss the wrong one — I mean one with a disease, and then you could never kiss me again. I don't see how I could stand that." (Gág to Dehn, November 12, 1921.)

<sup>35</sup>Dehn to Emilie Dehn, December, 1929; Mura Dehn interview; Zigrosser, *Artist in America*, 15 (Grosz quote).

<sup>36</sup>Seckler interview. William Gropper, the American political cartoonist who knew both Robinson and Dehn well, confirms that Robinson was not pleased with the Parisian set of drawings and lithographs when he saw them in 1928 (Richard Cox interview with Gropper, Croton on Hudson, N.Y., June 2, 1970).

and mocking of affectation came not just from his familiarity with the jaded, high-brow society of New York, Vienna, and Berlin but from the tensions of his youth in Minnesota as well. An edge of social criticism in his art in New York and Europe emanated from the socialism of his parents, a liberal education in Minneapolis, and the uproar over his pacifist stance during World War I. His family and Minnesota friends always exerted leverage on his personality that kept his skeptical approach to people from becoming bitter hatred.<sup>33</sup>

In only one series of works did Dehn stray far from his Minnesota heritage. Just before he returned to the United States in 1929, he produced a set of Parisian lithographs and drawings that provoked controversy among his followers and helped him decide to end his stint as an expatriate artist. His views of the Montparnasse *café monde* were not entirely new material, since the artist had been in and out of Paris many times during the 1920s. Dehn lingered in the French capital on a 1928 trip, producing wire-thin ink studies like "Bistro," in which the images are set forth boldly with a slender line that swells and tapers in defining the forms. Scenes of elegant decadence — an almost Dionysian display of jaded members of this overripe civilization — were typical of this Parisian set of drawings and prints.<sup>34</sup>

Grosz, Cummings, Guy Pene du Bois, and Frederick Kuh admired Dehn's pungent studies of the *café monde* scene, feeling that Dehn had transcended the pedestrian, bourgeois realism of his American art background with these Parisian studies. Grosz, one of Europe's most famous and brilliant pictorial satirists, told Dehn after viewing these works: "You will do things in America which haven't been done, which need to be done, which only you can do — as far at least as I know America."<sup>35</sup>

But others across the Atlantic were not so enthusiastic. Boardman Robinson had told Dehn earlier that his line was "getting too goddamned thin" and that he was deviating too far from the broad masses of the lithographic style he had shown his young protégé shortly after World War I. Clearly, Robinson did not like the 1928 works any better.<sup>36</sup>

Carl Zigrosser, who had become Dehn's dealer and loyal supporter through the lean selling years, 1921–30, also rebuked Dehn for what he termed "superficial" interpretations of Parisian cafes and boulevards. Answering a Dehn inquiry about the suitability of the Paris works for the Weyhe Gallery in New York, Zigrosser wrote:

"You are right in sensing a certain lack of sympathy with your recent work, an attitude that is shared by such old friends as Wanda Gág and John Flannagan. I was hoping to have a heart-to-heart talk with you in Paris, but the fates decreed otherwise. . . . I think that for the time being you are on the wrong track in the cafes and boule-



#### A BEMUSED

Dehn leans on his interpretation of the Biblical reference to the harlot of

*Babylon (Revelations 17:3-18), riding on a seven-headed beast and carrying a cup filled with "abominations and filthiness."*

wards of Paris. Frankly, I don't see . . . how you can work in such an atmosphere. It is marvelous for a holiday, but for serious work — well, I don't know. To some of us it seems as if you had been on a holiday for a number of years. What do you really think is the dominant art passion of your life? If it is to be a landscape painter and draftsman, then the city is not the only place to stay. If it is to be a social critic and caricaturist, then you ought to touch *all* walks and modes of life and all countries. In either case, the Paris of Montparnasse is not the exclusive background of research. I should like to see you engaged on a piece of real research — wrestling with a big problem and not resting on researches of the past."

Zigrosser's criticism about his lack of resolve and his frivolity rankled Dehn — although more than once he admitted there was some truth to the charge.<sup>37</sup>

But the criticism that cut deepest came from Wanda Gág, his long-time friend and confidante. Sometime dur-

ing 1927 or 1928, she complained to Zigrosser, Flanagan, and Dehn's closest friend, Arnold Blanch, about Dehn's decline as an artist. His work, she said, had become a watered-down version of Jules Pascin and George Grosz (whom she and some others considered decadent). Wanda added that Dehn was even beginning to imitate her own lithographic style. Dehn was livid when he learned of this gratuitous judgment of his work and wrote his mother that Wanda's criticism was "preposterous" and "grew out of a deep jealousy, I fear," that had its roots in their earlier stormy relationship.<sup>38</sup>

ADOLF AND WANDA first met in 1915 at the Minneapolis School of Art, and the mutual attraction was strong and immediate. Wanda wrote in her diary: "Mr. Dehn is German, brilliant, and has much charm." She also noted that "He really can draw."<sup>39</sup> Adolf felt sparks as well. Later, he reminisced: "Wanda had a great talent and a great ego, and she was sort of cute and exotic looking, sort of a gypsy type. I was fascinated."<sup>40</sup>

Both young artists emerged from provincial Minnesota towns with sizable German immigrant populations, both were obviously talented, and both were fiercely ambitious. In the Twin Cities they became constant companions at the institute, in the offices of *Minne-haha*, at movies, political rallies, rousical productions, and in social and intellectual groups. During the summer they spent considerable time at each other's homes in Waterville and New Ulm, sketching, swimming, and clowning. Wanda frequently gave the ever hungry Dehn her lunch, and he lent her his copies of *The Masses*. Dehn generally assumed the role of the sophisticated cynic, the man of the world, and undoubtedly he did sway Wanda's political views. He had less success in persuading her of the virtues of free love and

<sup>37</sup>Zigrosser to Dehn, January 13, 1928. Zigrosser tried to cushion his criticism by telling Dehn that "Beethoven's Ninth Symphony" was an outstanding print and that he had already sold two editions for \$12 each. Dehn had admitted having "lazy habits" many years before. See Gág, *Growing Pains*, 413.

<sup>38</sup>The particulars of this criticism are not clearly remembered and were never written down, but the gist of Wanda's opposition comes from several sources, notably Lucile and Arnold Blanch, who passed along Wanda's comments to Adolf when they went overseas in 1928. Zigrosser also mentioned her criticism in a letter to Dehn on January 13, 1928. Dehn angrily alluded to Wanda's remarks in a letter to Emilie Dehn, January 15, 1929.

<sup>39</sup>Wanda also wrote: "I like to talk to him because he does not agree with everything I say, because he has ideas of his own to put into a discussion, and because he is broadminded enough to look at the other person's point of view." See Gág, *Growing Pains*, 330. Two weeks later, she wrote (p. 341): "Mr. Dehn took me home. Pretty soon I shall grow tired of him. I think, although he is very nice, indeed, and is original, and a man with big possibilities."

<sup>40</sup>Seckler interview.

birth control favored by some social radicals of that era. Wanda's firm Victorian sensibilities were not shaken by her flirtation with the Bohemian life in Minneapolis and New York.<sup>41</sup>

Both won scholarships to the Art Students League (they were two of only twelve selected in the entire country), and together they took the train to New York where they lived within a block of each other, Adolf paying \$20 a month for a spacious apartment. Since neither had outside sources of income, they could not afford to stay in school full time for long. They did what aspiring but impoverished young artists in New York perennially do — they took menial jobs to make ends meet and tried to increase their art education through

visits to museums and *avant-garde* galleries such as Alfred Stieglitz's "291," where they were first introduced to the works of Cézanne, Picasso, and Matisse.<sup>42</sup>

Wanda was Adolf's constant companion and crying shoulder during the nerve-wracking nine months of waiting out the draft, and her steady letters helped him survive the wrenching experience in the army guardhouse during 1918. After he was discharged in 1919 (and perhaps because she stood by him so steadfastly during his hard times), their friendship ripened into romance as the two young struggling artists resumed working, studying, playing together, and dreaming of a European trip (and possibly a honeymoon). Adolf set sail in September, 1921, in a third-class steerage berth on a freighter. Wanda planned to join him in several weeks after she disentangled herself from Happiwork, a toy factory where she painted decorations on small dolls and toy soldiers. The two artists exchanged love letters steadily for several months,<sup>43</sup> but nine months after Dehn left she was still working at Happiwork. She had actually bought into the small company, which she had no way of knowing was near bankruptcy.<sup>44</sup> Four younger sisters and one brother depended on her partly for support (both parents had died). Her New York friends kept her entertained, including her "dance man" (never identified by name), a man much older than Wanda who paid for the privilege of taking her to dances. The handy arrangement was cut short in 1922 when he died suddenly of a stroke. Finally, her lithographs of subway stations, skyscrapers, stairways, lonely apartments, and Connecticut

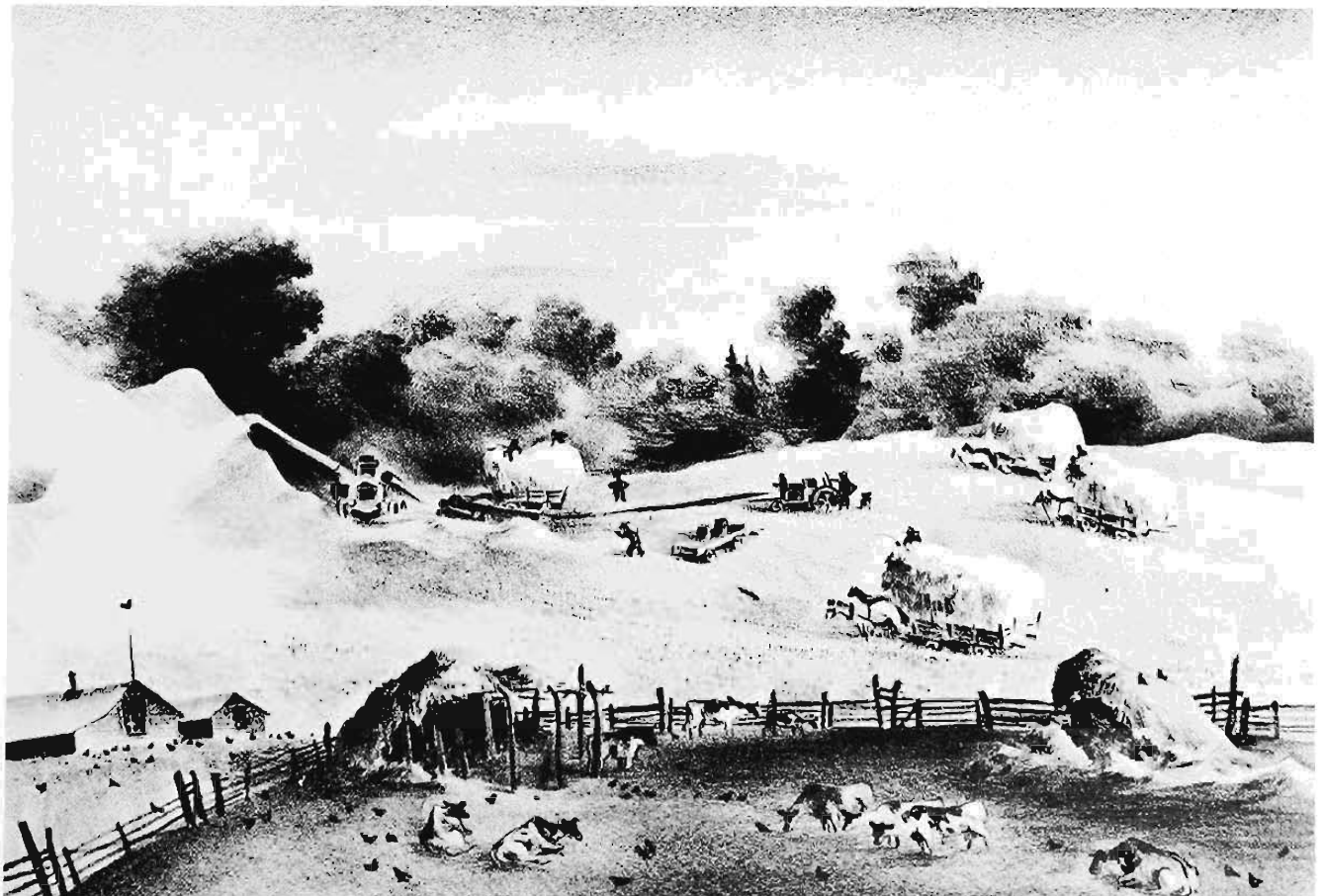
<sup>41</sup> Cox interview with Olivia Dehn Mitchell; Gág, *Growing Pains*, p. 330 on. Lucile Blanch confirms the high standard of moral conduct Wanda held to (and expected of others) even as she embraced other unorthodox ideas after World War I.

<sup>42</sup> Seckler interview. At Adolf's first drawing show in 1922 at Zigrosser's Weyhe Gallery, photographer Alfred Stieglitz, one of America's most influential art collectors, promised to buy one of the drawings. But he never came back to claim it. (Zigrosser to Dehn, May 3, 1922.)

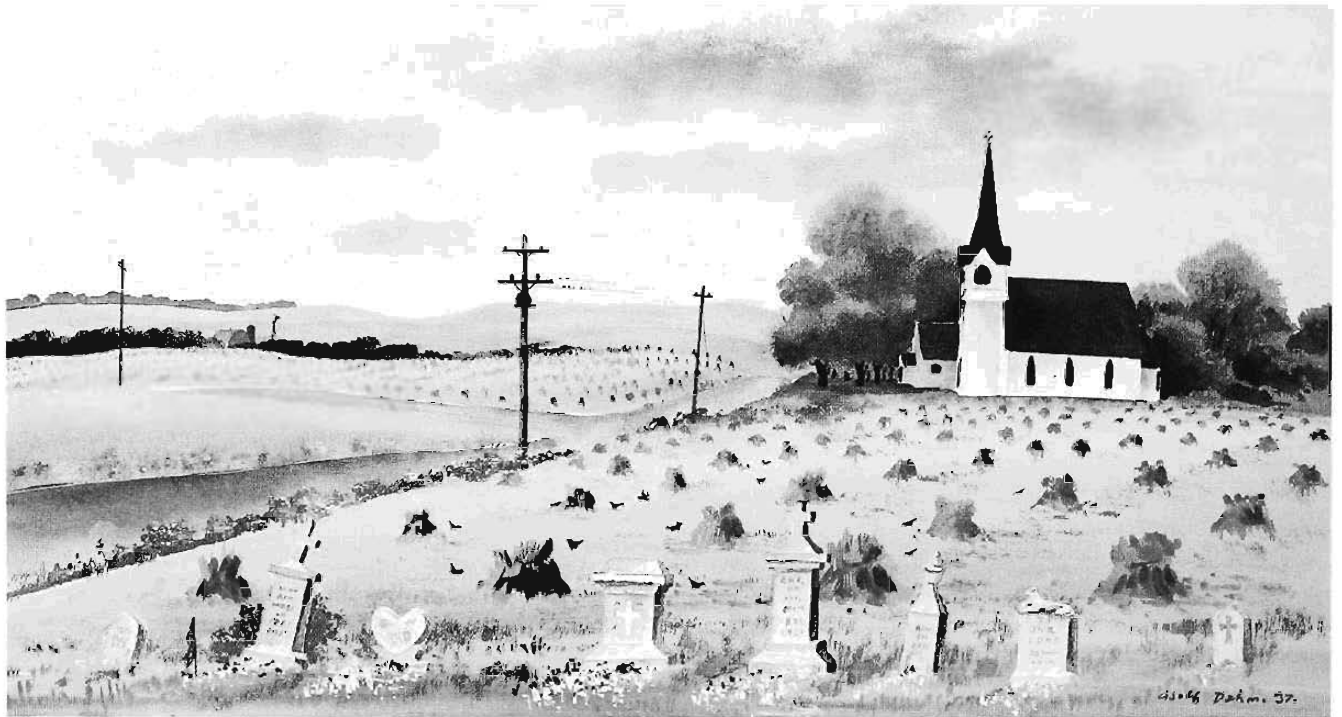
<sup>43</sup> Gág, *Growing Pains*, 458, 462–463, 44; Dehn to Emilie Dehn, August 2, 1918, February 22, May 26, 1919; Gág to Dehn, November 2, December 8, 1920; Cox interviews with Lucile Blanch and Olivia Dehn Mitchell.

<sup>44</sup> Gág to Dehn, December 27, 1921. The company went bankrupt in the fall of 1922, and Wanda lost \$600, leaving her "very bitter about the business world." (Gág to Dehn, December, 1922.)

### "THRESHING," 1940







*"CHURCH AND CEMETERY" (1937), featuring listing tombstones in foreground and a typically white frame rural church, is one of Adolf Dehn's earliest water colors of a Minnesota landscape.*

*"COUNTRYSIDE OF MINNESOTA" (1960) is an example of Dehn's late style of rural landscapes. Cows graze against a backdrop of a farm and the still more distant background of two lakes amidst rolling hills.*

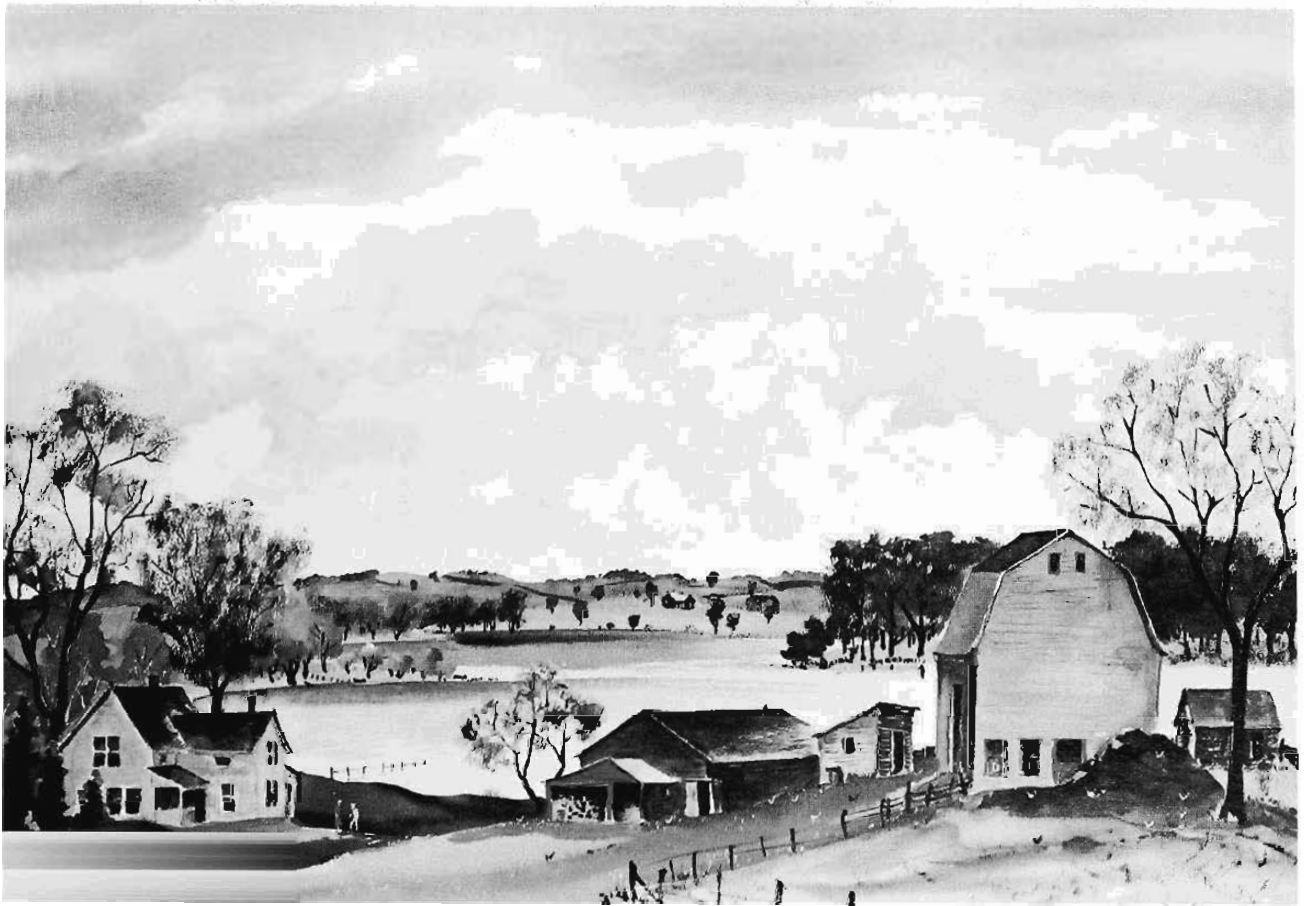






*"AUTUMN REFLECTIONS" (1947) is a rather common northern Minnesota scene of burned-out pine trees and other vegetation. Some trees are uprooted. In center are a few haystacks and various log buildings.*

*"MOOSE LAKE FARM" (1953), with a farmhouse, barn, and outbuildings on the shore of a small lake, actually depicts the farm home of Dehn's sister, Viola Dehn Tiala, near Moose Lake, Minnesota.*



farmlands were beginning to sell briskly at Carl Zigrosser's Weyhe Gallery, and she was understandably reluctant to remove herself far from the New York art market.<sup>45</sup>

Dehn, meanwhile, was not exactly pining away for his Minnesota girl friend as he moved about the capitals of Europe. Attracting women was never difficult for this charming "ne'er-do-well with that special twinkle in his eye," as his first wife once described him.<sup>46</sup> He befriended a number of women, including the glamorous Mura Ziporovitch, and finally penned a "Dear John" letter to the increasingly tense Wanda, who was fast becoming unnerved over the infrequency of his letters in early 1922. This is not the place to publish Dehn's rambling, passionate letter or her equally intense reply. Suffice it to say that the exchange and subsequent letters were filled with pathos, anguish, self pity, rationalizations, and recriminations that often accompany the breakup of a first romance. Adolf wrote that he tried in vain to keep from falling in love with Mura, that nothing would come of the romance, and that he still wanted Wanda to come to Europe: "look me up when you come to Paris, have no plans. When Mura leaves it won't matter where I go."<sup>47</sup>

The thunderstruck Wanda wrote of her despair ("some of my breakfast is still unfinished") and the humiliation she would soon face when word got out to their mutual friends. "What will become of me, who cares: whether I mean anything to you, whether I become an artist, an intelligent mother, or a famous courtesan," Wanda wrote in typically melodramatic fashion.<sup>48</sup>

Fortunately, their correspondence did not end on this soap opera note, and in subsequent months and years her judgments of Adolf moved from his romantic indiscretions to his art work. She always believed he had wasted his considerable talent, was lazy, and easily diverted by material pleasures.<sup>49</sup> Dehn's "blustering pagan" nature seemed both to attract and disgust this strait-laced, enterprising, young woman artist who worked very hard for her own success. Art was their common passion and bond (along with their feeling for the Minnesota landscape), and Wanda sincerely felt deeply the loss of the chance to work with Adolf in Europe and to "wrangle with the big forms of the mountains which were to bring us more closely together," as she put it in her mystical manner.<sup>50</sup>

Wanda always admired and encouraged Dehn's social-critical art like "Beethoven's Ninth Symphony" and even his political cartoons for *The Liberator*, which she could never bring herself to draw despite her involvement with that socialist magazine. But she scorned his barbed-wirelike Parisian series as too decadent and imitative of the bitter satire of George Grosz, for which she had no sympathy. Her taste was more to grand, mystical, rhythmic landscapes - undulating, sensuous, and uplifting forms - that differed significantly from the

mocking spirit of Dehn's severe, wiry studies of Left Bank whores. Even Dehn's spare landscapes of the French and Austrian countrysides - reminiscent of Chinese art with their thin patches of wash and ink, large empty spaces, and abstract organizations - ran counter to Wanda's billowing views of the Connecticut countryside.<sup>51</sup>

By 1929, Dehn felt he must return to America to get

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<sup>45</sup>Gág to Dehn, February, 1920, October 21, November 30, 1921, January 8, March 18, October 24, 1922. The "dance man," sometimes referred to as "Foot," took Wanda to first-rate dance ballrooms - the Claridge, the Astor, and the Palais Royal. She learned of his death from a friend "just as I was drawing a picture with a coffin in it. . . I drew no more that day." (Gág to Dehn, October, 1922.)

<sup>46</sup>Mura especially remembers Adolf's complete dedication to "his woman of the moment" and the elaborate lengths to which he would go to prove his devotion. "He was completely dedicated to his loves, like some incredible knight subjecting himself to the queen on the throne. In women he looked for some exotic trait; they all had to be exotic princesses, extraordinary in some way, especially in their figure." (Cox interview with Mura Dehn, May 27, 1975.)

<sup>47</sup>Dehn to Gág, March, 1922. Dehn met Mura Ziporovitch, a Russian immigrant from Odessa, in Vienna in 1923, and they were married in 1926. Mura was one of the finest free-form dancers in Vienna at the time, and the Dehn family thought "she was one of the most beautiful creatures alive" when Adolf brought her to Waterville in 1932. (Cox interview with Olivia Dehn Mitchell.)

<sup>48</sup>Gág to Dehn, March 23, 1922.

<sup>49</sup>In a letter sent September 23, 1919, to Dehn in Waterville, Wanda rebuked him for his flirtation with an unidentified Minnesota girl: "Since your discharge, you have been wasting time and money. You have been inconsiderate in the past but never trivial."

<sup>50</sup>Waxing poetic about the "aborted harvest" of their relationship, Wanda wrote poignantly: "So we are not to be the companions we tried for seven years to become. We are not to wrangle with the big forms of the mountains which were to bring us more closely together. To think of our going hand in hand is to infringe on the fragile past. That indefinable thing between us does not exist at all. I had organized my life about an illusion. We do not belong together. You are Adolf Dehn and I am Wanda Gág, a separate thing." (Gág to Dehn, April 5, 1922.)

<sup>51</sup>Wanda once wrote (Gág to Dehn, December, 1921): "Perhaps I worship rhythm as some worship the sun, a God, or the body. All about me there is a glorious fitting together of things, round, smooth forces and corresponding sockets, sharp, painful angles into their complementary shapes; long, vivid jags into crevices that hold them perfectly and calmly, so to restore the equanimity and rightness of things, and most of all perhaps, long tendrilly juttings-out to receive and organize all the helpless fringes and frayed edges of our groping lives. From these abstract manifestations emanate actual projectives such as works of art, dancing, musical compositions, rare ecstasies." Dehn's landscapes were much more technically oriented. He wrote at length about his innovations in this area - "washes, ink washes, crayon, crumbling, erasings, scraping, razorblading, etc." - rather than the emotional character of the European landscape. (Seckler interview.)

his art career back on track after the adverse comments of Wanda and Zigrosser. Wanda and Dehn later reconciled their differences in New York, but the scars left by their broken romance and her criticism of his art did not easily heal.<sup>52</sup>

WHEN DEHN returned to America to settle in March, 1929, the poverty he had tolerated as an occupational hazard of a young artist began to be less endurable. Contrary to his expectations, his sales prospects did not improve from his living in New York amidst American dealers and buyers. The Great Depression had gripped the art market by the throat. Letters home to Waterville during the 1930s bear witness to Dehn's economic struggle and attendant psychological miseries for the next seven years. The gulf between youthful anticipation and almost middle-aged reality ("I really did not make a 'living' as an artist until I was over 40")<sup>53</sup> weighed on Dehn

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<sup>52</sup> Dehn looked up Wanda shortly after he returned to New York in 1929 and told her how pleased he was that she had become "very successful." They never became fast friends again, although they remained cordial during the 1930s and 1940s. Wanda married Adolf's former roommate, Earle Humphreys, in 1930. Both Wanda and Adolf looked back on their early friendship and romance as "puppy love." See Gág, *Growing Pains*, xvii; John Chambers interview with Dehn in Woodstock, N.Y., October, 1965, in possession of Olivia Dehn Mitchell.

<sup>53</sup> Chambers interview.

<sup>54</sup> Dehn to Emilie Dehn, April 12, 1920.

<sup>55</sup> Dehn to Emilie Dehn, April 13, 1930.

<sup>56</sup> Dehn to Emilie Dehn, April 18, 1930.

as he tried explaining to a disgusted father and a patient but worried mother that his break would soon come.

Back in the spring of 1920, just after his release from the army, Dehn had written exultantly to his mother: "Up till now I have always been a bit uncertain regarding my ability to do anything very remarkable. I am becoming more certain all the time that I can, for I can see my things on the same walls with those other artists who have big reputations, and I know that I can stand beside them, if not now at least in the future. Through Kenneth Hayes Miller, I learned that [Boardman] Robinson had said that my stuff was the best in the whole exhibition — that's pretty strong. Pa ought to hear that."<sup>54</sup>

Ten years later, just after his 1930 one-man show opened at the Weyhe Gallery, Dehn sounded another optimistic note: "Tell Pa I'm making money hand over fist — two hundred fifty dollars before the show began, and the Weyhe people have bought \$375 worth of lithographs."<sup>55</sup> But five days later he passed on the bad news that, while the critics liked the show, "the sales are slow now, not so good as in the first day."<sup>56</sup> By October, 1930, Dehn's depression had deepened, as he explained to his sister, Olivia:

"There is so goddamn little to tell that is good. The season's bad, everyone is depressed and I am too. Broke as hell. This week I will take stuff ready to a couple of magazines. I was invited to Philadelphia to Mura's opening and was so broke I couldn't go. Got drunk one night. Had a good

"NORTHERN LAKE," 1940





"BOULDER," 1960s

time for two hours, then the Weltschmerz descended on me again."<sup>57</sup>

During these years, when Dehn's career seemed to be going nowhere, he occasionally lost the power of discipline and concentration that had been his hallmark before. He would say later that he had become lazy. His art problems were compounded by his marriage to the beautiful Mura Ziporovitch, Russian-born Viennese dancer, who was herself struggling to establish a career on the East Coast where American producers and audiences seemed to regard her *avant-garde* performances as too esoteric. Dehn worried about her stymied ambitions, and finally the various strains of thwarted careers and other pressures led to their amicable separation in 1932. They were later divorced. In 1947, Dehn met an aspiring young artist, Virginia Engelman, while she was working at the Associated American Artists Gallery in New York, with which Adolf was also affiliated. They were married in November of the same year.<sup>58</sup>

In the 1930s Dehn also seemed to lose some of the social and political fervor that had fired him in the earlier years. This is ironic, because for many artists the convulsion of the economic depression brought them to political art. But, as Mura Dehn insists, Adolf was always ahead of his time in America. As other artists became embroiled in political activism of the 1930s — marching to demonstrate against capitalist abuses, fascism and ra-

cial injustice and arguing over the role that communism should play in American art — Dehn grew nostalgic for Minnesota. He visited Waterville often and made increased references to his home in letters after 1930.<sup>59</sup>

Dehn did not feel the sense of alienation from his Midwest roots that underlines the satire of artists George Bellows and Charles Burchfield and novelist Sinclair Lewis. Only during the anxious months of his confinement in the South Carolina guardhouse did Dehn ever use words like "provincial" to describe Waterville, and even then he was hitting at certain townspeople who had made life so difficult for his family during World War I.<sup>60</sup>

<sup>57</sup> Dehn to Olivia Dehn Mitchell, October 11, 1930.

<sup>58</sup> Chambers interview; Cox interview with Mura Dehn. Mura's failure to gain dance recognition in the United States that had been hers in Vienna perplexed Adolf: "Mura has trying times with her show. I am on pins and needles. They simply don't know what she drives at. It's all over their heads!" (Dehn to Olivia Dehn Mitchell, October 11, 1930.) For more on Virginia Dehn and her work, see Mary Carroll Nelson, "Virginia Dehn Paints Inscapes," in *American Artist*, March, 1977, p. 50-53, 67-70.

<sup>59</sup> Harry Gottlieb and Arnold Blanch are two examples of artists who turned to social commentary in their art in the 1930s. See Harry Gottlieb, *Harry Gottlieb Retrospective Exhibition, 1920-1956* (Cold Spring Harbor, N.Y.) and Arnold Blanch, *Arnold Blanch* (New York, 1946).

<sup>60</sup> Dehn expressed more anger toward some of his relatives

For all their cultural offerings, cosmopolitan centers like Vienna, Paris, and especially New York never entranced Dehn. He frequently expressed distaste for crowded, blighted, poverty-stricken New York. One rude flat after another, a series of menial jobs, and the day-to-day grind of the impersonal city soured him on Manhattan. Upon returning to New York from Europe in March, 1930, he noted: "The big city depresses me and I'm longing for our quaint life at Waterville. But here I am and must go after things." Occasionally he slipped away to friends living at Martha's Vineyard, and after one visit to the Massachusetts island said it was "good for my system. I sleep late, have a good tan and weigh 177, my nerves are quiet. In New York I could not sleep and had bad nerves." As early as 1920, Dehn had produced drawings that mocked the pervasive celebration of modern urban technology and implied criticism of machine-age New York City.<sup>61</sup>

THE MOST significant result of Dehn's renewed feeling for Minnesota was the lithographs and water colors he began doing in the mid-1930s of scenes around Waterville. Works like "Threshing" (1940), "Church and Cemetery" (1937), "Waterville Railroad Track" (1940), and "Gray Lake Near Waterville" (1937) (all owned by the Minnesota Historical Society) captured the artist's feeling for the lakes, farms, hills, and small-town scenes of rural Minnesota. They also reveal the full fruit of his technical mastery of lithography and his new command

than he did toward Waterville townspeople. In late 1917, he tried to console his sister Viola, who had been criticized by some aunts and uncles for moving to Minneapolis to attend the University of Minnesota and becoming involved in politics. He apparently never felt estranged from his parents. Comparing the relatives' attitudes with those of his parents, he wrote: "It is remarkable how tolerant pa and ma are. We are so used to it we don't think of it. But think of other parents." (Dehn to Viola Dehn, December 7, 1917.)

<sup>61</sup>Dehn to Emilie Dehn, October 8, 1917, September 29, 1919, March 30 (first quote), October 31, 1930, December 4, 1932, October 16, 1934 (second quote). Ralph E. Shikes, *The Indignant Eye: The Artist as Social Critic in Prints and Drawings from the Fifteenth Century to Picasso*, 333 (Boston, 1969).

<sup>62</sup>Richard Cox interviews with Viola Dehn Tiala and with Cameron Booth, the latter on October 16, 1976, in Minneapolis. Booth was born in Erie, Pennsylvania, in 1892, studied at the Chicago Art Institute, and moved to Minneapolis in 1921 to accept a teaching position at the Minneapolis School of Art. Since then he has taught at the University of Minnesota (he is professor emeritus) and as a visiting artist and lecturer at schools ranging geographically from Berkeley, California, to New York City, although Minnesota has remained his home for more than fifty years.

<sup>63</sup>See Harry Rand's essay, "The 1930's and Abstract Expressionism," in John Wilmerding, ed., *The Genius of American Painting*, especially 251-254 (New York, 1973), and Matthew Baigell, *The American Scene: American Painting of the 1930's* (New York, 1973).

<sup>64</sup>Cox interviews with Lucile Blanch and Mura Dehn.

of the water-color medium as he strove to capture the unpredictable moods of Minnesota weather. When Dehn visited his home town between 1929 and 1934, he fished, trapped, and generally found ways to unwind in the country from the art pressures of New York. But when he visited in the mid-1930s and thereafter, he brought along his printmaking tools and water-color brushes. Viola Dehn drove her brother around back roads of Le Sueur County so he could look for good subjects. Cameron Booth, the well-known Minnesota artist who was then doing representational paintings of landscapes, horses, iron mines, mills, and other familiar scenes from rural and urban life, lived nearby in a summer home, and he and Dehn became steady companions on these drawing excursions.<sup>62</sup>

These rural scenes were a far cry from the razor-edged drawings of lecherous businessmen and their corrupt women Dehn did in the 1920s. Only occasionally did he turn his barbs on Waterville society, as in the lithograph captioned, "She said, that you said, that I said, that they said," an indictment of town gossips that needs no explanation. Despite the abuse he had suffered earlier from his home town, he was generous in his judgment of Waterville after 1930. Most of the satirical touches in his Minnesota landscapes are to be found in the animals — the sway-back horses, strutting chickens, bemused pigs — again showing Dehn's sharp eye for comic detail and his fun-loving spirit.

Dehn's decision to paint the Minnesota landscape involved several factors. For one thing, he was not oblivious to the American public's demand for local scenes from the artists during the depression. In a time marked by fear of European political and economic contamination, many American painters known as Regionalists produced scenes of small town and rural life and celebrated the mythology of the agrarian past. Although Dehn was not intimately connected with such major Regionalist painters as Thomas Hart Benton, John Stuart Curry, and Grant Wood, he nonetheless shared some of their aims. He felt the tug of the serene rural life and, rightly or wrongly, tended to associate the malaise of poverty and injustice of the modern world to the growth of industrial cities.<sup>63</sup>

During the 1930s, as Dehn settled down in this country, such artist friends as Benton, Robinson, Lucile and Arnold Blanch, and Zigrosser helped persuade him it was time to develop a more American style and subject matter — not an easy task for a man who had spent most of the 1920s in Vienna, Berlin, and Paris, working in the manner of the European satirists.<sup>64</sup> So, he drew, painted, and printed rural Minnesota with affection but never to the exclusion of other subjects. He continued to produce works dealing with New York and Europe (he returned several times during the 1930s for relatively short trips). Dehn's Minnesota subjects were never ag-



COLOR PRINTS of four Dehn water colors of rural scenes (none shown here), called "The Seasons" (each 13" x 19"), are for sale in the MHS Gift Shop and Bookstore. The portfolio sells for \$7.95; single prints are \$2.00.

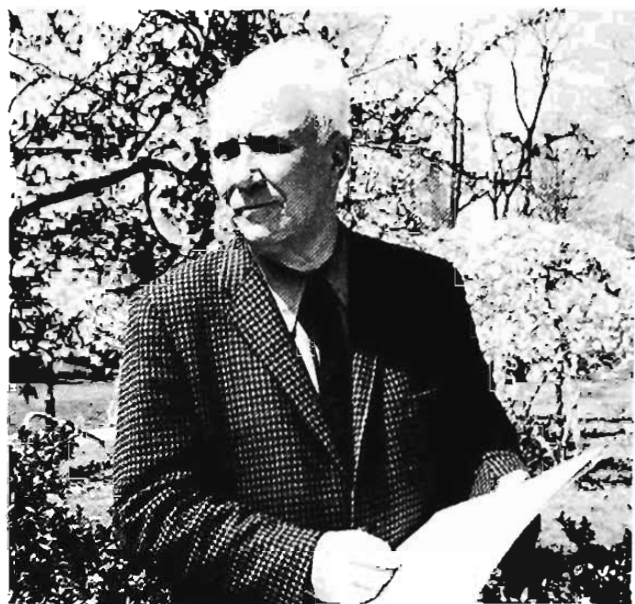
gressively antiurban or jingoistically American, qualities that weakened many artists' Regionalist works. Cameron Booth and Dehn had long discussions about the "universal" character of their landscapes in the 1930s, refusing to associate it with any parochial spirit even as they took inspiration from the Minnesota landscape.<sup>65</sup>

Dehn also had to think of making a living. Throughout the 1920s he lived precariously on earnings from his magazine drawings and the meager sales from his few shows at Zigrosser's Weyhe Gallery. As other American artists discovered, pictorial satire attracted critical raves but few buyers, and the depression did not help matters. Thus, as the enthusiasm for "local art" soared in the 1930s, it was tempting for the long-underpaid artist to turn to this genre. Those who knew Dehn acknowledge that pecuniary considerations played a part in the new direction his art took, although some place more weight on this factor than others. None begrudged him financial success after years of struggle and sacrifice, least of all his father who became reconciled with his "wayward" son after many years of tension between them.<sup>66</sup>

Yet, correspondence reveals that Dehn's regard for the Minnesota scene was not sudden and did not just develop from a cynical sizing up of the art market. His personality had always been gentle and sympathetic toward his family and most of humanity but sarcastic and even savage toward the privileged few who violated his sense of fair play. Therefore his art would continue to have two sides, landscapes and satire, "nature and human nature," even as he moved beyond specific locations in Minnesota, New York, and Europe during the 1940s and until his death in 1968.

The crucial years, however, were the formative ones from 1915 to 1936, when Dehn's loyalty to friends, family, and, in some respects, the life-style of Minnesota, held firm through all his travels and emotional changes. Old resentments of wartime Waterville faded. Dehn's love of the lakes, fields, and farms near his home town at first found expression in his letters of the 1920s and early 1930s. In regard to his art, these feelings merely lay dormant until the proper circumstances brought them out in the paintings and prints in the middle of the Great Depression.

WITH the exception of those water colors and prints which belong to the Minnesota Historical Society, or as otherwise noted, all works of art by Adolf Dehn are published with the permission of Mrs. Adolf (Virginia) Dehn. All except "All For a Piece of Meat" were copied, with Mrs. Dehn's permission, by Eugene D. Becker from *Adolf Dehn Drawings* (Columbia, Mo., 1971) or from Thomas Craven, *A Truancy of American*



*IN PARKS all over the world, from New York to Vienna, Dehn found a vast range of subjects, in both nature and human nature, for both brush and stone.*

<sup>65</sup>Dehn trips to Europe included one to Berlin in the winter of 1929-30, to Paris in the winter of 1931-32, and to Austria and Yugoslavia in the summer and fall of 1936. Most of the rest of the time he lived in New York, with numerous extended stays in Waterville. Although the subjects were different and the locale changed, Dehn used many of the same lithographic techniques in his Minnesota landscapes as he had in his European ones. He disliked being labeled a local or a regional artist, although he never denied the lure of Minnesota on him, especially in the 1930s and thereafter (Cox interview with Cameron Booth; Seckler interview with Dehn).

<sup>66</sup>Mura Dehn believes that Adolf's heart was always in satirical art and that the Minnesota scenes were a distant second choice. Most other observers, members of his family, and Carl Zigrosser see the two directions of his art as a logical outgrowth of his upbringing and character. (Cox interviews with Olivia Dehn Mitchell and Viola Dehn Tiala; Zigrosser, *Artist in America*, 34-23.) The best source, of course, is the artist himself. In the 1968 interview with Dorothy Seckler, he said "my landscapes were gentle, bucolic, lyrical." Seckler asked if they were related to his childhood experiences in Minnesota. He answered: "Well, maybe, to some extent. I, as a child, always had a great love of the water. I grew up on the water. We had lakes everywhere, and I loved the hills. I was very sentimental about these places. I mean, just a terrific sentimentalist about the place, my home town, the fields, the barns, everything. That was my feeling, so naturally, when I painted, this feeling did come through."

*Art Prints* (New York, 1939). Photographs of the Dehn house, of Adolf playing baseball, of him in uniform, and the portraits on p. 178 and p. 186 were lent by Mrs. Dehn. All other photographs and prints and water colors are in the collection of the Minnesota Historical Society. A special thanks to Mrs. Dehn for her kind co-operation in loaning photographs and in granting permission to publish art works in her possession.



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