

The Art of John Dos Passos

By Tanya Stanciu, September 10, 2001

Once in a while, an artist gives us a chance to see what he sees outside of his usual means of communicating. William Blake illustrated his poetry, John Lennon painted and, like the novelist D. H. Lawrence, the writer John Dos Passos sketched and painted.



In 1938, Jean-Paul Sartre called Dos Passos "the greatest novelist of our time," and he is still considered one of the major American literary figures of the 20th century. His was a leading voice among the Lost Generation of revolutionary expatriate writers and artists who fled America to Europe and grappled with social, political and cultural uncertainty in the wake of World War I. Dos Passos arrived on the literary scene in September 1921 with the publication of his antiwar novel, *The Three Soldiers*. Another novel, *Manhattan Transfer*, was published in 1925, and the experimental, panoramic trilogy *USA* (*The 42nd Parallel*, *Nineteen Nineteen*, and *The Big Money*) was a major literary work of the 1930s.

While Dos Passos' books are essential reading for any student of the Lost Generation, the University of Virginia Art Museum brings an additional dimension of the writer to light with an exhibit of more than 80 of his watercolors and drawings of the people and landscapes he encountered on his extensive travels. The exhibit was assembled with the help of the writer's daughter, and it represents only a small portion of the over 400 artworks that Dos Passos created during his lifetime.



Dos Passos' interest in the visual arts began in his early childhood. He began to sketch in earnest as a teenager, and while a Harvard student in Cambridge, he often visited the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. In 1913, the young "Dos," as he was called, attended the now-famous Armory Show in New York that introduced European avant-garde artists such as Van Gogh, Picasso, Munch and Duchamp to America. Modern art had arrived, and its significance was not lost on Dos Passos, who would later incorporate many modernist elements into his art and writing.

Dos Passos evidently came to see his artwork as more than a hobby, and his first public exhibition took place on January 3, 1923 at the Whitney Studio Club, where it ran for three weeks. People who knew him would remember his modesty. "Come and bring a lot of drunks," Dos Passos reportedly scribbled on the printed invitation he sent to F. Scott Fitzgerald. On the writer Edmund Wilson's invitation he wrote, "Follow the green line to the cocktail shaker. Any person caught looking at a picture will be fined for infringement of rules." Over the next couple of decades, Dos Passos continued to show his sketches and paintings in the city. While he was never a leading artist, his work was regarded highly.

The works in the University of Virginia exhibit are enjoyable in their own right. They represent a range of styles that Dos Passos absorbed from the painters of his time: he incorporated elements of Impressionism, Expressionism and Cubism into his own evolving style. Dos Passos' early works are soft and pleasing watercolors; many depict the lovely countryside of Spain, where as a young man he served as a volunteer ambulance driver. By the 1920s, he had become a part of the bohemian artist circles in New York and Paris, where he painted street scenes and the nighttime cafés and bars that he frequented with his friends. One of these friends was Ernest Hemingway. In his 1966 memoir, *The Best of Times*, Dos Passos fondly described his time spent in Paris with Hemingway: "I did enjoy going to the day bicycle races with him. French sporting events had for me a special comical air that I enjoyed. We would collect a quantity of wine and cheeses and crunchy rolls, a pot of pate and perhaps a cold chicken, and sit up in the gallery. Hem knew all the statistics and the names of the riders. His enthusiasm was catching, but he tended to make a business of it while I just liked to eat and drink and enjoy the show." The watercolor *View from the Upper Part of the Coliseum of Bicycle Racers* illustrates the thrill of sitting high in the stands of a bicycle track in Paris with Hemingway, watching the colorful crowds and racers below.

In 1925, Dos Passos traveled to North Africa to cover a period of political transition there. His paintings from this time depict the exotic dress and faces of the region's people and its distinctive geometric architecture. From 1925 to 1927, Dos Passos created posters and set designs for the New Playwrights Theatre, a New York leftist drama group for which he also wrote plays. In the winter of 1926, he traveled to Mexico City where he admired the artwork of Diego Rivera. Mexico became one of his favorite destinations, and he returned there repeatedly over the next decade. His palette turned darker and deeper in Mexico, and he created some remarkable portraits there, including the mysterious *Man with a Hat* and the striking *Men and Women Drinking from Straws*.

As he grew older, Dos Passos abandoned much of the leftist political leanings of his youth and in 1937 wrote a series of articles critical of communist ideology that effectively ended his international literary career. He continued to write on American themes until his death in 1970. Many of the paintings from his later life are still-lives and landscapes from Maine and Virginia, where he spent his later years.

The University of Virginia exhibit includes a number of paintings from Dos Passos' personal art collection; these works were created on special occasions or given to him by friends. Notable among them are two fine, bright works by the French painter Fernand Leger that the artist gave to Dos Passos' first wife. The exhibit also includes dust-jackets and illustrations that Dos Passos provided for his own published books between 1922 and 1931. Perhaps even more than his paintings, these illustrate that he was the artist who could sketch and paint as well as write—a sort of jack-of-all-trades in the business of artistic invention. His modern novels, especially the USA trilogy, will undoubtedly be read for decades to come; the paintings in the University of Virginia show are an excellent accompaniment and introduction to this vital American writer.—Tanya Stanciu