

# John Graham Retrospective Launches Parrish Summer Season

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by Hamptons Art Hub Staff

[The Parrish Art Museum](#) presents “John Graham: Maverick Modernist” as the first exhibition in the museum’s summer season. The exhibition is the first comprehensive retrospective in 30 years of the provocative artist’s work. On view from May 7 to July 30, 2017, the exhibition features 60 paintings and a selection of important works on paper from Graham’s influential four-decade career.

Through the work, the exhibition explores how [Graham](#) became a significant figure in the development of a distinctly American approach to art-making in the first half of the twentieth century and in what ways his continuous self-reinvention mirrored the attempts of American artists to define a new direction.

“In many ways Graham has been a hard artist to pin down, eluding as he does the oft-told narratives of modernism, stated Alicia G. Longwell, Ph. D., the Parrish’s Lewis B. and Dorothy Cullman Chief Curator, who organized the exhibition. “His protean career as painter, theoretician and polemicist is long overdue for reconsideration and it is the aim of ‘John Graham: Maverick Modernist’ to show how this artist remains relevant today.”



“Head of a Woman” by John D. Graham, 1954. Oil, chalk, ballpoint pen, colored pencil, pencil, brush, pen, and ink on tracing paper, 24 1/4 x 18 7/8 inches. Collection of Leonard and Louise Riggio, New York. Photo by John Labbe.

Organized chronologically and featuring works from 1923 to 1959, “John Graham: Maverick Modernist” reconciles the phases of Graham’s career that defy categorization and reveals the congruence between the artist’s early and late styles.

The show illustrates the development of Graham’s style beginning with cubist-influenced still lifes, nudes, landscapes, and portraits of the 1920s that waxed more abstract in the 1930s and moved into radical stylistic change in the early 1940s when Graham veered from abstraction to make portraits inspired by Renaissance and 19th-century French artists. His later works allude to his eclectic interests such as the occult and mysticism.

The exhibition opens with *Self-Portrait*, 1923, painted during Graham’s first year of formal art study at the Art Students League. Work from the late 1920s includes ten paintings from 1928—a

particularly prolific year for the artist, when he lived in Paris and had his first solo exhibition in a Left Bank gallery. From then, Graham's style became more abstract, as illustrated in the contrast between the representational *Coffee Cup (La tasse de café)*, 1928, and *Lunchroom Coffee Cup*, ca. 1930, where his favored objects of the coffee mug and the egg are depicted through geometric shapes and angular lines.



“Coffee Cup (La tasse de café)” by John Graham, 1928. Oil and sand on canvas, 19-5/8 x 25-1/2 inches. Collection Joseph P. Carroll and Dr. Roberta Carroll, Courtesy of Forum Gallery, New York.

During the 1930s, Graham continued to push abstraction with still life paintings that employed a minimum of color and linear forms with titles that affirmed his commitment to the style, such as *Red Square*, 1934, and *Abstract Composition*, 1941. Graham's portraits from that decade include the bold *Study for Ikon of the Modern Age*, 1930, and elegant *Portrait of Elinor Gibson*, 1930.

Graham's complete stylistic reversal in the 1940s was all the more dramatic considering his decades-long dedication to abstraction in both his writings and his work. Through paintings and works on paper from 1942 to 1950, “John Graham: Maverick Modernist” reveals the shift from his allegiance to [Picasso](#) and [Matisse](#) to the figuration in the mode of [Raphael](#) and [Ingres](#). Striking depictions include three important portraits from 1944: *Celia*, and *Marya (Donna Ferita, Pensive Lady)*.



“Celia” by John Graham, ca. 1944. Oil, casein, charcoal, chalk, graphite, and ink on Masonite, 48 x 36 inches. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Hugo Kastor Fund, 1968 (68.185).

The exhibition concludes with late works from the 1950s that reflect Graham’s eclectic interests including mysticism and the occult, as in the mixed media on paper portraits *Head of a Woman*, 1954, and *Donna Losca*, 1959—portraits in a figurative style overlaid with diagrammatic grids, angled lines, astrological symbols, and nods to numerology.



“Mascara” by John Graham, 1950. Oil on canvas, 23-7/8 x 19-5/8 inches. Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy, Andover, MA, Gift of Ruth Kainen, 2010.104. Image courtesy Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy, Andover, MA/ Art Resource, NY.

“John Graham: Maverick Modernist” is organized by Alicia G. Longwell, with guest co-curator Karen Wilkin, consulting curator William C. Agee, Evelyn Kranes Kossak, Professor of Art History Emeritus, Hunter College, City University of New York, and French art historian Sophie Egly.

The exhibition is accompanied by a 176-page, fully illustrated catalogue distributed by DelMonico Books • Prestel, with interpretive essays by the curators.

### **ABOUT JOHN GRAHAM (1886-1961)**

Born Ivan Gratianovitch Dombrowsky in Kiev, Ukraine, to a family belonging to the hereditary Polish nobility, John Graham was trained in the law and served with the Czar’s forces in World War I. In 1920 he made his way to New York, fulfilling a long held ambition to become an artist through formal studies at the Art Students League with Ashcan painter John Sloan.

He became a U.S. citizen in 1927, changing his name to John D. Graham, and relocated with his third wife, Elinor Gibson, to her native Baltimore. There, Graham advised the Cone Sisters on their collection and met the collector and museum founder Duncan Phillips, his most significant early patron and advisor, who gave Graham his first solo exhibition—at the Phillips Memorial Gallery, Washington, D.C., in 1929.

Graham traveled annually during the 1920s and 1930s to Paris, where his work was included in exhibitions at Leopold Zborowski's gallery. He brought back copies of Parisian journals like Cahiers d'art, which provided American artists with their first glimpse of the groundbreaking work of their European contemporaries.

Through his work and his writings, Graham is credited with influencing a generation of New York artists including Stuart Davis, Dorothy Dehner, Arshile Gorky, Willem de Kooning, Lee Krasner, Jackson Pollock, and David Smith. Significant writing projects, both published in 1937, were the essay "Primitive Art and Picasso" in the Magazine of Art, and the book System and Dialectics of Art, which outlined his theories on abstract paintings and provided an international context for American Art for the first time.

This concept came to fruition in the 1942 innovative exhibition American and French Painting that Graham organized at McMillen, Inc., in New York. In a bold move, Graham presented work of established European artists such as Picasso, Matisse, Braque, and de Chirico alongside much lesser-known American artists including Davis, Krasner, Willem de Kooning, and the virtually unknown Jackson Pollock, whose work was shown for the first time at the exhibition.

During the 1940s, Graham studied Jungian philosophy and the subconscious as he veered from abstraction in his work, which he began to sign as the avatars Ioannus San Germanus and Magus. In the 1950s, Graham's deep interest in magic, yoga, and the occult was reflected in his paintings. The artist moved to Paris in 1959 and died in London in 1961.

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**BASIC FACTS:** "John Graham: Maverick Modernist" is on view from May 7 to July 30, 2017. The Parrish Art Museum is located at 279 Montauk Highway Water Mill, NY 11976. [www.parrishart.org](http://www.parrishart.org).

On Sunday, May 7, 2017, a Members Reception takes place, featuring an Introductory Program and Reception beginning at 11 a.m. To become a member, click [here](#), or join the day of the Reception. Advanced registration is highly suggested. Click [here](#) to register.

On Friday, June 16, 2017 at 6 p.m., curator Elisa Longwell gives an in-depth talk about the artist and the exhibition. Tickets are \$12 or free for museum members. Click [here](#) to register.

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