

The Zen of Painting

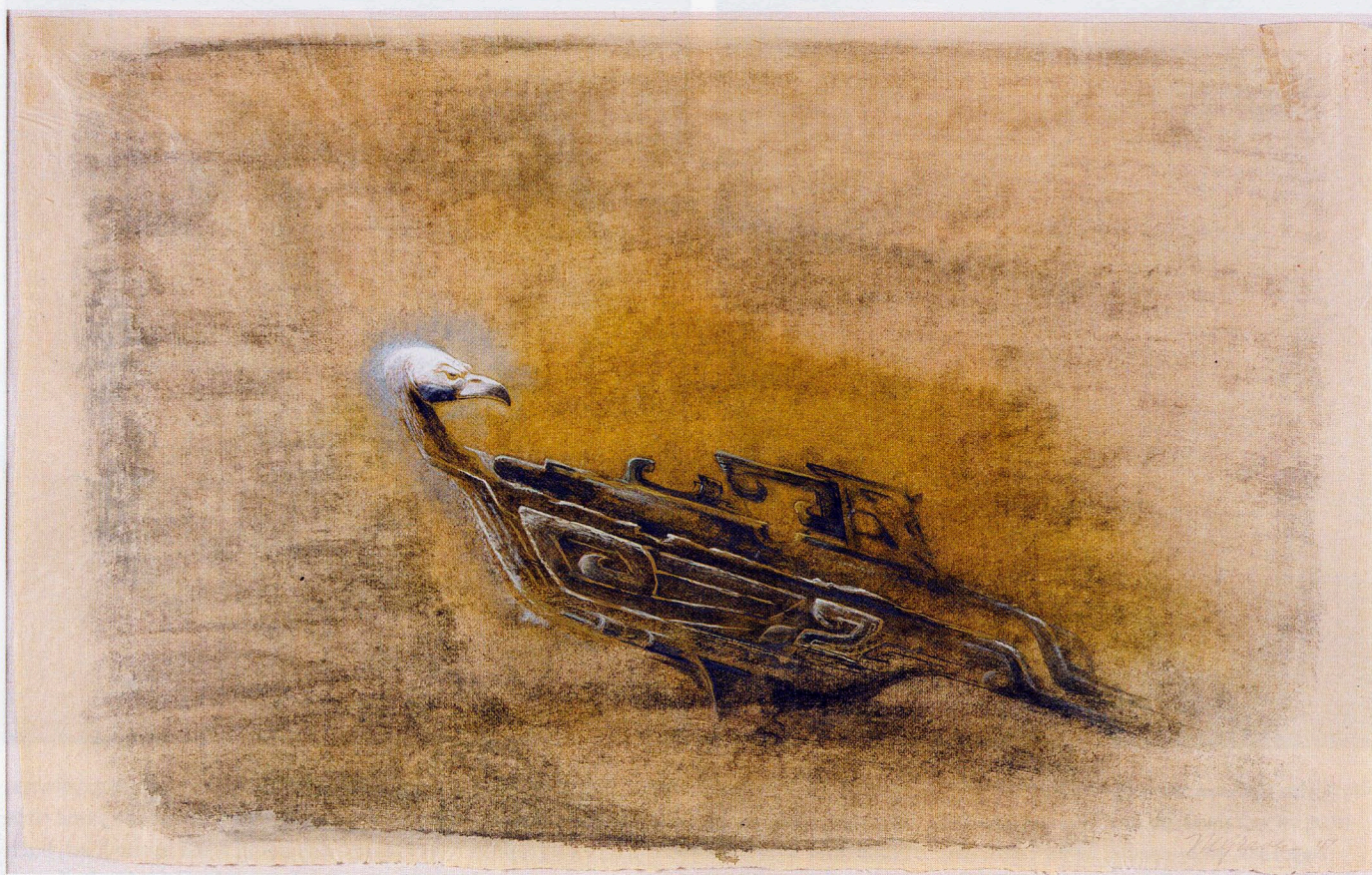
MORRIS GRAVES' MYSTICAL ART IS ON VIEW AT LACMA. BY JOHN DORFMAN



Morris Graves, *Time of Change*, 1944,
screenprint, 60.96 x 76.2 cm.

FOR A SUPPOSEDLY materialistic, mechanistic nation, the United States has produced an impressive number of visionary artists. From the early 19th century on, painters such as Ralph Albert Blakelock, Albert Pinkham Ryder, and Charles Burchfield saw nature in a light invisible to ordinary eyes. A latter-day link in this golden chain was Morris Graves, a 20th-century modernist who is surprisingly little known considering the quality of his contribution. Graves, who died in 2001 at the age of 90,

lived and worked for most of his life in the rural Pacific Northwest and chose to keep his distance from the centers of the contemporary art world. Now an exhibition in one of those centers is bringing this *sui generis* artist new attention. "Morris Graves: The Nature of Things," running through July 4 at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, is a small but intense show of early paintings and works on paper, alongside a select group of classic Asian artworks similar to those that inspired Graves both artis-



Disintegrated and Reanimated, 1947,
tempera on rice paper,
33.66 x 50.17 cm.

tically and metaphysically. (All are from LACMA's collection, except for one loan from the Hammer Museum.)

During the 1930s through '50s, Graves made many depictions of birds, animals, and flora, delicately drawn over abstract backgrounds of gently washed-on color. The debt to Chinese and Japanese painting is very clear. *Fallen Leaf*, a monochrome brown wash drawing from 1944, could almost be a Chinese painting. The stem of the leaf casts a shadow, but it's not clear whether it rests on a surface or exists in a notional space. *Spirit Bird* (1953) has intense, startled eyes that lock with those of the viewer, while its feathery body blends with the background, which is heightened with gold leaf like an Early Renaissance Italian painting. The bird is not quite solid; it could be wisps of smoke or vapor coalescing into a bird.

To Graves, these creatures really were emissaries from the spirit world, a realm of being which he sought out in the silence of Fidalgo Island, Wash., about 60 miles north

of Seattle where he built a house he called The Rock. He titled one of his pictures *Bird Maddened by Machine Age Noise*, and he must have felt that that bird was a kindred spirit. Living alone except for a dachshund named Edith, Graves meditated, listened to the surf, observed nature, and made his art. But he hadn't always been so reclusive. As a teenager he dropped out of high school in Seattle, and his parents, unsure what to do with him, suggested that he and his brother Russell sign on as deckhands on a merchant ship bound for Japan. Virtually upon arrival, he established a connection with Japanese culture that lasted the rest of his life. "There, I at once had the feeling that this was the right way to do everything," he recalled. "It was the acceptance of nature, not the resistance to it. I had no sense that I was to be a painter, but I breathed a different air."

Returning to the States, Graves finished high school in Texas, where he lived with an aunt and uncle and began drawing and



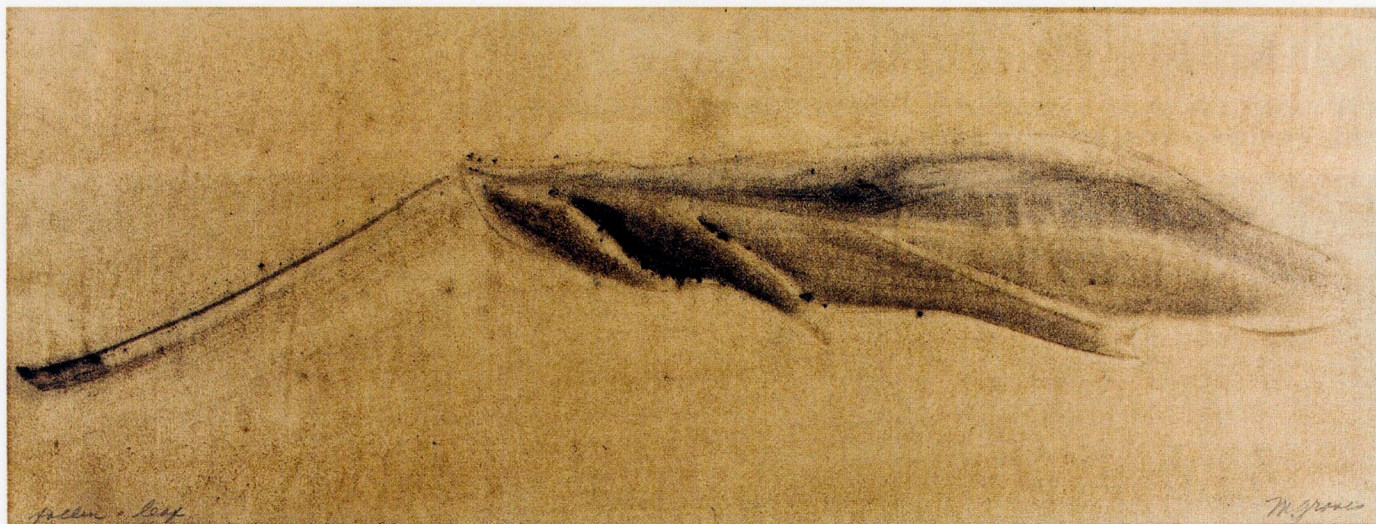
Clockwise from top left: *Cat With Red Cabbage*, 1935, oil on canvas, 99.06 x 88.9 cm; *Majestic Dog*, 1935, oil on canvas, 99.06 x 92.17 cm; Okomoto Shoki, *Birds and Flowers*, Japan, 19th century, handscroll, ink and color on paper, 30.92 x 1059.2 cm.

painting. Graves returned to Seattle, and through work on the WPA Federal Art Project he met Mark Tobey, whose calligraphic style influenced him deeply and who would remain a close friend for life. At the time, Graves shared a studio with Guy Anderson, also a close friend and eventually a fellow member of the so-called Northwest School of artists (the others were Tobey and Kenneth Callahan). Recognition came early for Graves. In 1936 he had his first solo show, at the recently established Seattle Art Museum. In 1942, Alfred Barr at the Museum of Modern Art included him in an exhibition titled "Americans 1942: 18 Artists from 9 States," and critical acclaim fol-

lowed. MoMA bought 11 of his paintings, and collectors bought 34. At the same time as Graves was being feted in the East, back home the Army was after him for draft evasion; his application to be a conscientious objector had been misfiled.

Graves' reputation remained high during the rest of the decade, but during the '50s and the ascendancy of Abstract Expressionism, he (along with the other Northwest School artists) faded from prominence, which apparently bothered him not at all. He continued to work steadily at his art, thriving on solitude punctuated by the occasional visit to Seattle, during which he would meet with friends and art-world





From top: Morris Graves, *Fallen Leaf*, circa 1944, brown wash, 22.86 x 62.23 cm; *Spirit Bird*, 1953, tempera and gold leaf on paper, 43.2 x 75.9 cm.

associates and sometimes perpetrate outrageous pranks—such as the time in 1953 when he invited the entire mailing list of the Seattle Art Museum to a bizarre and inedible banquet and watched their discomfiture from a hiding place.

Graves' was always indifferent to the dicta emanating from the art-critical establishment. His guideposts were Asian art and philosophy—especially Zen, which he practiced assiduously—and of course, his own intuitive perceptions. Susan Power, research assistant in LACMA's department of American art and curator of the present show, selected some Chinese, Japanese, and Tibetan works from the museum's collection to pair with some of the Graves works. She selected a Shang Dynasty bronze vessel (*ju*) to go with a tempera on rice paper painting of a bird of prey, *Disintegrated and Reanimated* (1947). The bird's body is made of up of angular scroll-like designs reminiscent of the incised markings on archaic Chinese bronzes; its head, depicted naturalistically, emerges from the metallic-looking neck in a deliberately incongruous way, suggesting transformation and renewal. A 16th–17th-century Tibetan Buddha sculpture goes with a 1944 print titled *Time of Change*, in which a bird overlaid by three broad bands of color in sequence—black, red, and

white—gazes at its own reflection. Power says, "*Time of Change* is about moving from darkness toward light, achieving a certain level of consciousness or enlightenment. The Buddha represents a similar idea of transformation. In this case the juxtaposition is not visual but conceptual."

Ultimately, for Graves, spiritual realization was more important than art. Late in life he wrote, "My painted images have somehow only been very minor Shinto haikus trying to communicate my mind's range of humanitarian, rational, and irrational experiences and ideas." 