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## Taking Senses to the Extreme

### Morris Graves: Falcon of the Inner Eye, A Centennial Celebration

By LANCE ESPLUND



Morris Graves (1910-2001), *Falcon of the Inner Eye*, 1941, tempera on paper, 20 3/4" x 35 3/4"

Morris Graves (1910-2001) was a naturalist who shunned civilization and modernity, an American mystic and Zen Buddhist who saw in Asian art "the acceptance of nature, not the resistance to it." His most compelling pictures are earthen-hued depictions of lone fish, fruit, leaves, serpents or moons and of nesting, walking or wounded birds. These subjects are the heart of a six-decade retrospective of 27 works on paper and three rarely exhibited abstract sculptures.

In "Surf Birds" (1940), a hillock of angular blue and white—into which tiny birds fold like origami—stands like an emblem on sandy ground, suggesting flag and picture. In "Falcon of the Inner Eye" (1941), a nesting bird looks like a single large oval eye. The picture feels primitive—scratched in the mud. "Chalice" (1942) is painted ghostly white within blackish wash. Its contour reads as vessel and bird, and its central form shifts among egg, nest, stone, womb and gibbous moon. In "Waning Moon" (1943), Mr. Graves encloses within an oval a corkscrew in black and bluish white. The coil, sprouting flippers or wings, is both energy and organism.

Some of Mr. Graves's birds—drawn in ink or watercolor on thin, crinkled paper—though Chinese in spirit are closer to Audubon than Asia. At his best, however, he provided vistas that teeter mysteriously between inner and outer, object and essence—East and West.

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MICHAEL ROSENFELD GALLERY LLC

24 WEST 57TH STREET, NEW YORK, NY 10019  
TEL 212-247-0082 FAX 212-247-0402  
INFO@MICHAELROSENFELDART.COM  
WWW.MICHAELROSENFELDART.COM

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