Astrit Schmidt-Burkhardt:
“Trees of Art”

in: Eric Hounshell, Ruth Amstutz (eds.):

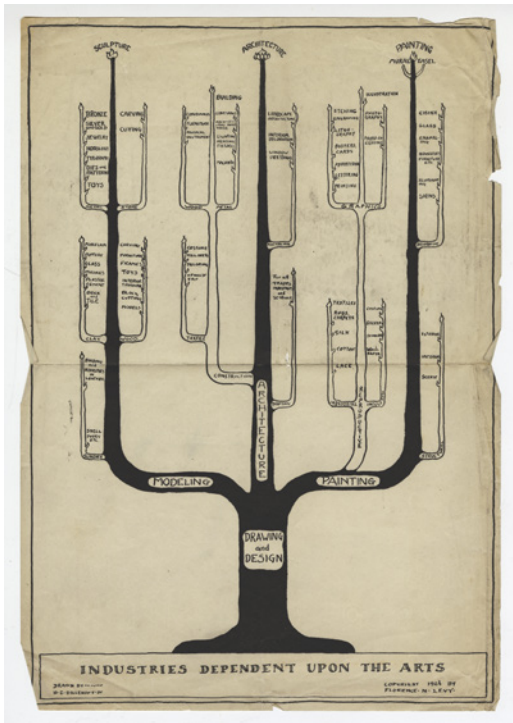
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SHADOW OF THE TREE

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TREES OF ART Relating the Arts

When Nathaniel Pousette-Dart (1886–1965) and his family moved to Valhalla, New York, in 1918, and a short while later he was appointed artistic director of an advertising agency, no one imagined that the landscape painter from Minnesota would make a name for himself in a completely different genre, the genealogy of art.[1] This diagrammatic genre was a product of the scientization of art history and emerged during the seventeenth century as a means of charting the fundamental relationships, derivations, and affinities that exist between the arts. The avant-garde era saw more and more artists making use of the method. In the 1920s and 1930s Pousette-Dart counted among the most ardent champions of commercial graphic design as an art form in its own right, whose efforts to establish a recognized course of training in the discipline were thwarted only by the Great Depression. Fired by his ambitious goal of assuring graphic artists of proper professional standing in the world of business, he wielded both pen and brush. As a writer he adapted the terminology and rhetoric in which art criticism was couched, and as an artist he rendered his arguments visible by availing himself of the model of the family tree.



Florence N. Levy (inv.), H. C. Dillenunt, Jr. (del.): *Industries Dependent upon the Arts* (1924), Suffern, NY: The Richard Pousette-Dart Foundation. Pen and ink on paper, 36.5 x 25.5 cm.

Industries Dependent upon the Arts can be traced back to an idea by arts administrator Florence N. Levy. The figurative chart takes the form of an analytical trident, whose three main branches shoot up vertically as if trained on an espalier. While the branches certainly divide making for diversification at the different taxonomic levels, there is never any intersecting. At the level of "drawing and design," for example, Levy differentiates between "modeling," "architecture," and "painting" on grounds of the very different contribution that each makes to the various branches of industry.



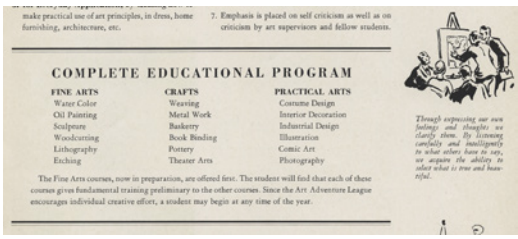
Nathaniel Pousette-Dart: *AAL Tree of Creative Art*, in: *Art Adventure League,* New York (1936), p. 8. The Richard Pousette-Dart Foundation, Suffern, NY.

"Everything in our courses is the logical outgrowth of the fundamental principles of art. True creative joy springs from an understanding of truth and beauty. Art is one of the greatest adventures life has to offer."

Pousette-Dart's own caption. In: *Art Adventure League,* New York (1936), p. 8.

In 1936, seven years after Black Thursday and all the dire consequences that would follow in its wake, Pousette-Dart founded a school called the Art Adventure League (AAL) in New York. To attract talented would-be designers, he published a slim promotional prospectus promising an approach akin to Florence N. Levy's practice of bringing art principles to bear in all walks of life: at home, at work, and at play. The subscription-based training school at 55 Fifth Avenue was initially aimed at amateurs, and Pousette-Dart himself was one of its six teachers.[2] Among his own contributions to the prospectus was the *AAL Tree of Creative Art*, a work that visibly calibrates the potential benefits of the creative arts for both business and society.

Here, the bald, analytical style of Levy's conception yields to the illusion of a colorful picture in which everything seems to coalesce in perfect harmony. Rooted firmly in the fertile soil of "harmony," "balance," "rhythm," "contrast," and "unity," Pousette-Dart's spreading, leafy tree gives us no inkling of the existential battles with which craftsmen and autonomous and applied artists were confronted in real life. Only a fraction of them were eligible for the safety net of the Federal Art Project initiated by Franklin D. Roosevelt as part of his New Deal to stabilize the precarious social and political situation.



make practical use of art principles, in dress, home furnishing, architecture, etc.

7. Emphasis is placed on self criticism as well as on criticism by art supervisors and fellow students.

COMPLETE EDUCATIONAL PROGRAM

FINE ARTS	CRAFTS	PRACTICAL ARTS
Water Color	Weaving	Costume Design
Oil Painting	Metal Work	Interior Decoration
Sculpture	Basketry	Industrial Design
Woodcutting	Book Binding	Illustration
Lithography	Pottery	Comic Art
Etching	Theater Arts	Photography

The Fine Arts courses, now in preparation, are offered first. The student will find that each of these courses gives fundamental training preliminary to the other courses. Since the Art Adventure League encourages individual creative effort, a student may begin at any time of the year.

Through expressing our own feelings and thoughts we clarify them. By listening carefully and intelligently to what others have to say, we acquire the ability to select what is true and beautiful.

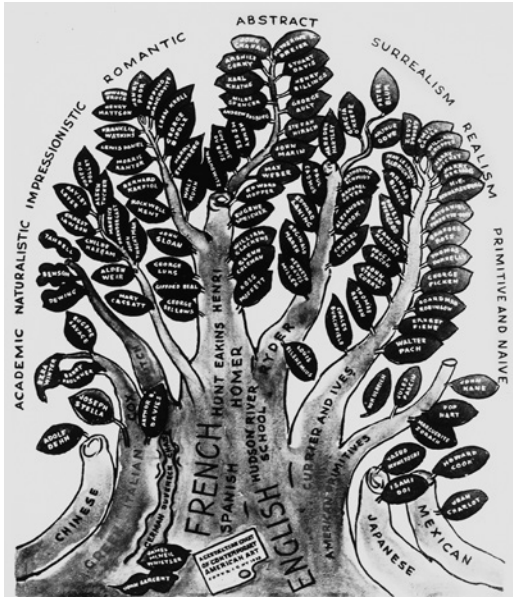
"Complete educational program", in: *Art Adventure League,* New York (1936), p. 3. The Richard Pousette-Dart Foundation, Suffern, NY.

Teaching at the Art Adventure League, here presented in the form of a table, was based on Gestalt theory, which first conceptualizes a problem in its entirety before any concern with details. This applied to all disciplines listed here. Before an artistic idea could be realized, a plan or concept had to be created.

Viewed against this backdrop, Pousette-Dart's tree chart of art looks naive. Informed solely by the aesthetic sensibilities of the short-lived AAL, it shows the basic structures of its underlying training concept: the creative fields that build on "form," "color," and "design" are shown blossoming under the conceptual umbrella of the "visual arts." The "fine arts" forming the central axis of this arboreal scheme are flanked by "crafts" on the one side and "practical arts" on the other. As these are mutually complementary, "weaving" is shown opposite its practical application in "costume design," just as "metal work" is raised to new heights by "interior decoration" and "basketry" similarly enhanced by "industrial design." Among the more contentious claims made by Pousette-Dart is his ranking of "watercolor," which he himself taught, as second only to "oil painting" as the highest of all the artistic disciplines. How ironic, therefore, that the teacher of the painting class, the "eminent" German immigrant George Grosz, should have become far better known to posterity and enjoyed far more posthumous recognition than Pousette-Dart himself, whom the AAL prospectus introduces as "one of America's most successful artists."

TREES OF ART Freedom of Expression

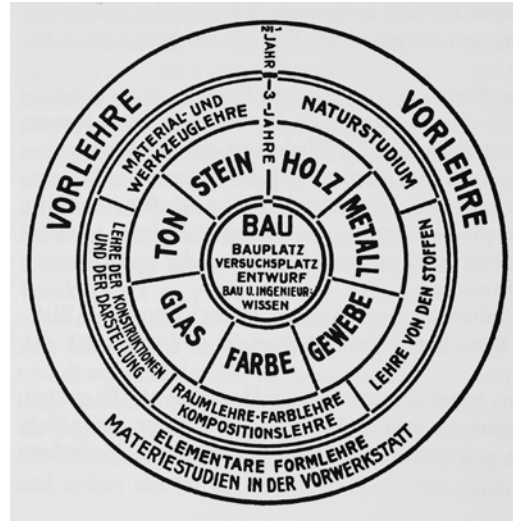
When Pousette-Dart's school of art and design, which although conceived as a national campaign failed to get off the ground even in New York, closed its doors for good in 1938, its founder tried to salvage his didactic objective of "freedom of expression" by producing nothing less than a tree chart of world art. His *Gestaltian Chart of Contemporary American Art* shows all the "fine arts" of the AAL in full flower, while the marginal "crafts" and "practical arts" have disappeared without trace. The former teacher had apparently placed his faith in a broad-based stylistic system premised at once on parity and pluralism, in which no one branch of art and no one artist would ever predominate.
A Gestaltian Chart of Contemporary American Art was published together with Pousette-Dart's plea for "Freedom of Expression."[3] The text is prefaced by Voltaire's famous motto: "I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it." Only by applying that principle could Pousette-Dart safeguard his views on the vital importance of freedom in all aesthetic matters – views that were in part a response to the idea that architecture should be given the "leading role" in art and art training. This was what Walter Gropius had demanded – in "Hitlerian tones," according to Pousette-Dart[4] – and Levy, true to the Bauhaus tradition. His strikingly bushy tree chart can therefore be read as symbolic of the unbound striving for self-fulfilment that motivated most American artists, especially after learning of the Nazis' touring exhibition of *Entartete Kunst* – "degenerate art" – that opened in Munich in 1937.



Nathaniel Pousette-Dart: *A Gestaltian Chart of Contemporary American Art,* in: Nathaniel Pousette-Dart: "Freedom of Expression", in: *Art and Artists of Today* 1/6 (1938), p. 2.

"It is imperative to create conditions which help every artist to make a good living, but in seeking to solve this problem we must be careful not to create a situation wherein politics, prejudices and favoritism may ultimately destroy FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION."

Nathaniel Pousette-Dart: "Freedom of Expression", in: *Art and Artists of Today* 1/6 (1938), p. 3.



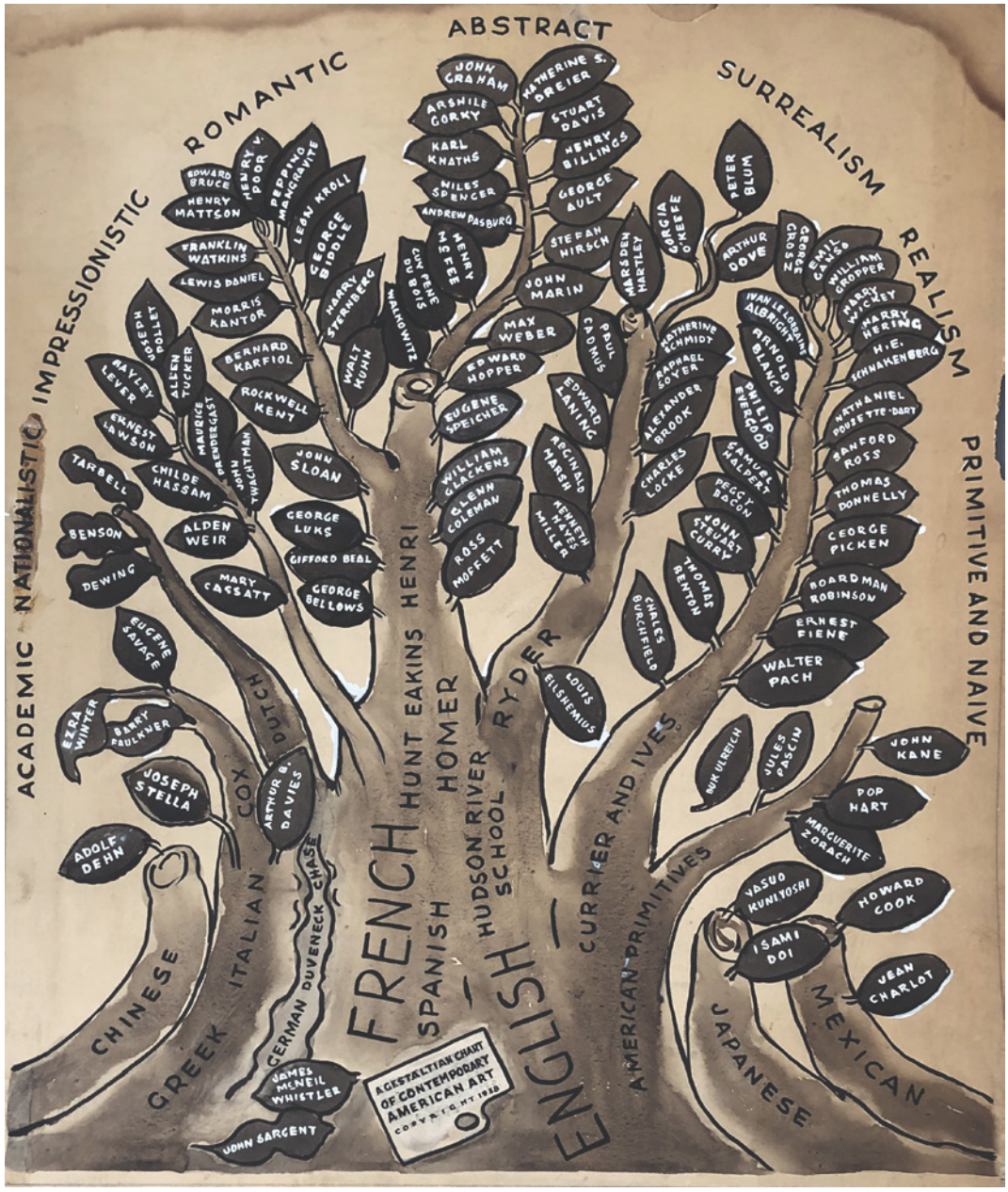
Walter Gropius's diagram of Bauhaus teaching, in: Staatliches Bauhaus in Weimar, Karl Nierendorf (eds.): *Staatliches Bauhaus Weimar 1919–1923*, Munich: Bauhausverlag (1923), p. 10.

The circle symbolizing a hermetic model is Gropius's way of emphasizing the self-contained quality of the Bauhaus training program, all of whose units were geared to one central goal, namely "building," which here is a synonym for architecture.

"There are both individuals and groups in this country who would like to saddle American Art with one definite style. Some of them would make all our art academic; others would prefer it non-objective or abstract or surrealistic and still others, adherents of the American-Scene school would have it realistic. Walter Gropius, in his Chicago Bauhaus experiment, has worked out a plan which if carried out would make painting and sculpture 'mere handmaidens' of Architecture. [...] American Art at the present time is in a very healthy condition for the simple reason that it has no one individual or group dominating it. In America the artist still has FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION and it is the one thing that we must fight to retain."

Nathaniel Pousette-Dart: "Freedom of Expression", in: *Art and Artists of Today* 1/6 (1938), p. 3.

Just how sensitively Pousette-Dart reacted to the latest developments in Europe can be gauged from the fact that shortly before his tree chart went to print, he retouched the "nationalistic" branch of his original ink drawing to make it read "naturalistic," thus turning it into a politically neutral category. The array of styles fanning out to form the crown of the tree is a robust riposte to the "one definite style" then being instrumentalized for propaganda purposes by the Nazis in Germany, the Fascists in Italy, and the Stalinists in the Soviet Union.[5]



Nathaniel Pousette-Dart, *A Gestaltian Chart of Contemporary American Art* (ca. 1938), Suffern, NY: The Richard Pousette-Dart Foundation. Pen, ink and pencil on cardboard, 62 x 53 cm.

"A tree chart suggestive of the diverse and complex influences and developments in Contemporary American Art. It is not possible to make such a diagram accurate as to historical fact because one artist may have stemmed from several roots or branches. Because of the complexity of this problem important artists may have been overlooked or misplaced."

Nathaniel Pousette-Dart's own commentary. Nathaniel Pousette-Dart: "Freedom of Expression", in: *Art and Artists of Today* 1/6 (1938), p. 2.

The diversification of art, Pousette-Dart believed, marked the apogee of a development which had long been inherent in the European tradition but which there was doomed to die out, as were the Asian and Latin American art that his tree chart treats as mere "side shoots." By the same token, "realism" is cast as just one aesthetic style among many, even if its branch is the longest and sturdiest of the whole tree. And as if that were not evidence enough, Pousette-Dart provides another leaden hint by including his own name on the realism branch – an attestation of allegiance that ironically implies a stylistic standpoint not so unlike the official "one definite style" being propagated in Europe.

Notes

1 This chapter was translated by Bronwen Saunders.
2 The school's annual tuition fees of $32 were the equivalent of six weeks' rent for a two-room apartment with full-size bath.
3 Nathaniel Pousette-Dart: "Freedom of Expression", in: *Art and Artists of Today* 1/6 (1938), p. 3.
4 Nathaniel Pousette-Dart: "Freedom of Expression", in: *Art and Artists of Today* 1/6 (1938), p. 3.
5 Nathaniel Pousette-Dart: "Freedom of Expression", in: *Art and Artists of Today* 1/6 (1938), p. 3.

Further Readings

Michele H. Bogart: *Artists, Advertising, and the Borders of Art,* Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press (1995).

Charles H. Duncan: "Absence/Presence: Richard Pousette-Dart as Photographer", in: Charles H. Duncan (ed.): *Absence/Presence: Richard Pousette-Dart as Photographer,* Utica, NY: Munson-Williams-Proctor Arts Institute (2014), pp. 8–25.

Charles H. Duncan: "Rock, Paper, Brass: Richard Pousette-Dart in the 1930s", in: The Drawing Center (ed.): *Richard Pousette-Dart: 1930s*, New York: Drawing Center (2015), pp. 10–20, https://issuu.com/drawingcenter/docs/drawingpapers122_pousette-dart.

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