



**JOHN COVERT (1882-1960)**

*Kabuki Tetrad/Geisha Tetrad*, c.1916

oil on burlap

two four-panel paintings, each panel: 65 3/4 x 18 inches

John Covert was born in Pittsburgh, PA and studied traditional artistic practice at art academies in Munich and Paris from 1909 through 1914. Upon the outbreak of WWI, Covert left Paris and returned to America settling briefly in his native Pittsburgh where he continued to paint throughout 1915. By the summer of the same year, however, Covert was drawn into the New York art world where his cousin, the American poet, pioneer collector and patron of the avant-garde Walter Arensberg (1879 – 1953), hosted gatherings of writers, artists and intellectuals in his Manhattan apartment. Walter and his wife Louise introduced Covert to this group, which included European painters Francis Picabia and Marcel Duchamp, American artists Joseph Stella, Man Ray, Morton Livingston Schamberg, Charles Sheeler, and Charles Demuth, as well as Marius de Zayas, owner of De Zayas Gallery, who gave Covert a major exhibition in April of 1920. *Kabuki Tetrad/ Geisha Tetrad* was included in this exhibition.

These two four-panel paintings were originally presented as a double-sided four-panel screen. Considered by Dada scholar Francis Naumann as likely the first avant-garde work of art by John Covert in which the artist departs from working in a traditional style and turns to address abstraction, the subject of Covert's two tetrads is appropriated from *Ukiyo-e* ("pictures of the floating world"), Japanese genre paintings that flourished from the 17<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> centuries and depicted popular themes such as Kabuki theater, folk tales, and courtesans. From the left to right panels, Covert's *Kabuki Tetrad* references Japanese folklore, where life begins in abstraction and develops into representational form. This arrangement can also be read from right to left, as with Japanese writing, where the Artist wittily alludes to the history of modern art which saw the transition from narrative, representational imagery to geometric abstraction and other modes of experimentation.

John Covert was exposed to modern art at Arensberg's home but his own conversion to modernism occurred suddenly when, in the summer of 1916 at Arensberg's country home in Pomfret, Connecticut, Covert went outside to paint. Covert recalled the story of the moment this most important shift in his art occurred, describing it as a truly transcendental event:

*The sun was blazing down from straight overhead so that each tree floated in its own shadow. Everything was trembling; it was like looking through molten glass; I was trembling too. I was painting without knowing it: the trees were like gallows and the shadows, the hills, were triangles. I was sopping wet with perspiration when I carted it (the painting) home. Tried to hide it – God knows I didn't know what I had. But nosy Walter saw it. "Well," Walter said, "Now we have a modern artist."*

*Kabuki Tetrad/ Geisha Tetrad* is the dynamic manifestation of Covert's artistic epiphany. This masterpiece of Covert's work reveals the artist's early integration of Cubism and Dadaism and reflects his intimate knowledge of Marcel Duchamp's futuristic handling of figurative subject matter. Duchamp and Covert were frequent chess partners at the gatherings of the Arensberg's as well as co-founding members of the Society of Independent Artists.

Covert dedicated and gifted this painting to Kathleen Lawler (1881-1951), the American coloratura soprano whom he met whilst in Munich and who remained one of Covert's closest lifelong friends. He gave Kathleen more of his works too, including seven examples that are now in the collection of the Seattle Art Museum. Covert "signed" this work with an imaginary "Japanese" signature in vertical mirror-reverse script. The inscription "*Kathlee*" on the first panel of the *Geisha Tetrad* refers to Kathleen Lawler.

In 1976 the Hirshhorn Museum presented a retrospective of John Covert's work describing Covert as a "pioneer American modernist" whose work represented a "unique fusion of cubism and dadaism." Writing about the exhibition for *The New York Times*, Hilton Kramer reminded the reader of how "lonely a time it once was to be a modernist artist in America" and that for us today "it requires a certain leap of the imagination to understand the isolation, disappointment and suffering endured by an earlier generation of modernists..." For John Covert, who, as Kramer notes, Marcel Duchamp once described as "an outstanding figure" in the development of American modernism, this dismissive, even hostile environment led to a premature abandonment of his artistic endeavors in 1923 to pursue a different path.

Hilton Kramer concludes:

*It is unusual for an artist to win so secure a place in that history [of modern art] on the basis of such a small production, but this is John Covert's distinction...Covert's was not a "big" career, but it was one that tells us much about the American art of his time...*