

# STUART DAVIS WAS MODERN RIGHT DOWN TO HIS VERY ROOTS

By Bennett Schiff, *Smithsonian*, December, 1991

**It took him years to come to terms with the Armory Show; and then he let loose with joyous paintings bursting with the freedom of jazz**

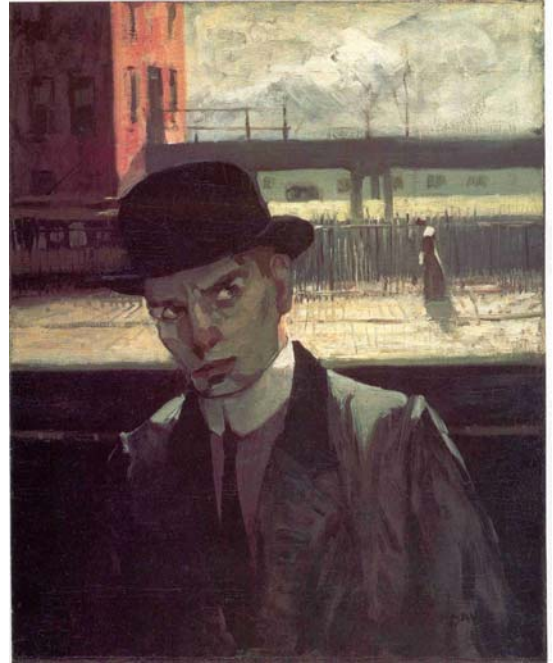
Stuart Davis may have been the least arty of the great American painters, but he was also, it becomes clearer every day, the most purely artful. He was at the very least an astringent man, and I can still, some 35 years later, see the flicker of a dry smile on his deadpan face as the suggestion was made that he was full of art. Smile or not, the evidence was everywhere.

There was no room, not a breath, not an inch, for pretension in either Davis' person or his art. Both were straightforward, decisive, pungent, inventive. And tart. Also, spare, highly charged, dynamic. And cool. Hip, too. Especially hip, since no artist was more involved, in his person and in his art, than Davis was with American ragtime and jazz, which he discovered early and which stayed with him, as he stayed with it, listening to it, living with it. And painting it—a seminal part of the authentic American scene that he so loved—right to the end in 1964, when he died at the age of 71.

It has been more than a quarter of a century since this country has brought together a show of any real size of Davis' work. Now New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art has mounted an exhibition that seeks to do him justice as one of this country's greatest painters. The show, which opened last month and runs through February 16, will go on to San Francisco's Museum of Modern Art. It contains 175 paintings, gauchos, watercolors and drawings. The fact that the exhibition celebrates the 100th anniversary of Davis' birth is less important than the refreshment it offers to the eyes of an entire generation of Americans who seem unaware of his existence.

One evening in the late '50s, at an opening at Edith Gregor Halpert's Downtown Gallery (which was by then fashionably uptown, occupying an elegant lime-stone and marble town house on 51st Street between Madison and Park), Davis and I talked not about art but about jazz and where you could still hear it in New York. He looked oddly out of place at a gallery opening, a medium-sized man on the short side, wearing a dark business suit and—the only concession to the popular idea of what an artist should look like—a plaid shirt. A cigarette was stuck into the corner of his mouth like a mobile exclamation mark. He was graying by then, but there was nothing in the least grandfatherly about him. He had, instead, the easy informality and directness of expression and manner you had come to expect. Once he thought you had something to say he made you feel right at home.

He had spanned early in his lifetime the great divide between what had been conventional in painting from its very beginning—the re-creation on a two-dimensional surface of how things looked—to 20th-century modernism, which had more to do with what things are, and more



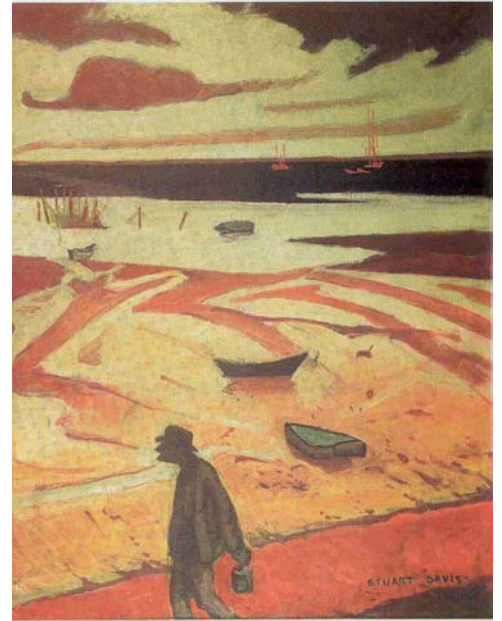
*Self-portrait* (1912) was painted the year before Davis would reel under the impact of the Armory Show.

important, with the life and autonomy of the painting itself. And he had spent the rest of his life working at it, developing it, finding the essence of it, being an artist—searching.

### It was the biggest show in town

Already a radical in the subject matter of his pictures—he was, after all, a disciple in good standing of the Ashcan School—the really big step was to recognize that subject matter had suddenly become a secondary issue. By more than any other single event in America, the presence of modernism in art had been unveiled at an opening in February 1913 at the 69th Regiment Armory in New York City. Its official name was the International Exhibition of Modern Art, but it was known forever after simply as the Armory Show.

The very idea of it was audacious, something like 1,300 paintings, drawings, sculptures, watercolors and prints ranging from mid-19th-century romantic and classical French painting to the Impressionists, Postimpressionists, Fauves and Cubists, including many of the great names of our time: Brancusi, Braque, Cezanne, Kandinsky, Maillol, Matisse, Picasso, Van Gogh, among them. There was also an American section, more than half of the entire show, selected by American painter William Glackens, which included painted the everyday world as they saw it, intimately and with sensitivity. They abjured the conventional work of the day, the academicism that called for heroics, idealization, noble themes. They abhorred the stuffiness and lack of reality of the establishment, its puffed-up visions, its lack of air. The air they sought was in the alleyways of slums. If it wasn't always exactly perfumed, at least it was real. And so, Davis wrote, "Art was not a matter of rules and techniques, or the search for an absolute ideal of beauty. It was the expression of ideas and emotions about the life of the time."



*Ebb Tide, Provincetown* (1913): Ryder, Munch, and others opened Davis's eyes to issues of color and form.



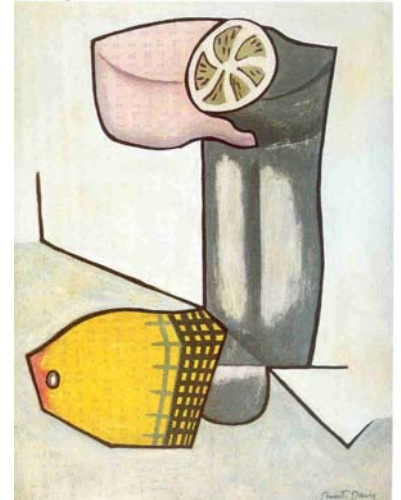
In the '20s he tackled Cubism; *Lucky Strike* looks like a collage but is a painting.

And here it is instructive and entertaining to quote Davis at some length, because artists writing about themselves have rarely been better at it than he was (mostly, they are awful when they write about their art or, sadly, anything else): "Enthusiasm for running around and drawing things in the raw ran high. In pursuance of this compulsion [some fellow students] and myself toured extensively in the metropolitan environs. Chinatown, the Bowery, the burlesque shows, the Brooklyn Bridge, McSorley's Saloon on East 7th Street, the Music Halls of Hoboken; the Negro Saloons; riding on the canal boats under the Public Market.... Coleman [another student] and I were particularly hep to the jive, for that period, and spent much time listening to the Negro piano players in Newark dives.... The pianists were unpaid, playing for love of art alone. In one place the piano was covered on top and sides with barbed wire to discourage lounging and leaning on it.... But the big point with us was that in all of these places you could hear the blues, or tin-pan alley

tunes turned into real music, for the cost of a five cent beer."

It seemed "fantastic," he wrote in later years, that stepping out of his Greenwich Village apartment and after a healthy hike of two blocks we dive into a joint where the great Earl Hines is sadistically murdering a helpless piano." He revered the musicianship of James P. Johnson, Pete Johnson, Vic Dickenson, Max Kaminsky, Frankie Newton and many others. "At one time or another, in darker mood," he wrote, reflecting on their talent, "I have questioned the possibility of cultural advance in the United States, but on the evidence here presented I guess I must have been wrong."

Describing a mural he had done in 1939 for radio station WNYC, then owned by New York City and in many ways a model of what public broadcasting can be, he wrote, "the tonal intervals of music have their counterpart in painting in intervals of tone, color, contrast, size and direction." And, in describing his painting *Hot Stillscape for Six Colors- Seventh Avenue Style* of 1940 (pp. 68-69), he said: "'Hot' because of its dynamic mood, as opposed to a serene or pastoral mood. Six colors, white, yellow, blue, orange, red, and black were used as the materials of expression. They are used as the instruments in a musical composition might be, where the tone-color variety results from the simultaneous juxtaposition of different instrument groups."



In *Lemon and Glass* and other works of the mid-'20s, Davis stripped down his forms as he studied Leger, in particular.

But all of this came later in Davis' work. First he had to get modern. It took about 15 years, dating from his encounter with the Armory Show in 1913. At that time Davis had studied with Henri for three fruitful years and had then left the Henri studio to work on his own. He was 20 and, following in his father's footsteps, he was doing covers and illustrations for *The Masses*, cartoons for *Harper's Weekly* and various assignments for *Harper's Bazaar*.

By now, already the subject of reviews in the newspapers, Davis was under way. "With this steady employment I set sail for Provincetown, Mass.," he wrote. "Provincetown was a new experience for me." For the city-bred Davis, this was an understatement. His first day there, for example, eager to get out on the water, he rowed around until nightfall and then tied the dory to the wharf behind his rooming house. The next morning he found the boat hanging perpendicular—a fact observed with good-natured glee by the local folks, who knew about falling tides. But Davis loved it there and, as he later wrote, he became a "continuing addict of the New England coast."

What struck Davis in Provincetown, and later in nearby Gloucester, which became his favorite place on the coast, was the force, clarity and brilliance of the light. It was, he wrote, "greater than I had ever seen and while this tended to destroy local color, it stimulated the desire to invent high intensity color intervals." The idea of color intervals, his way of phrasing the concept, and his realization of it, was to stay with him for the rest of his life. Later he was to expand the idea into a theory he called color-space logic. The masts of schooners in Gloucester, he found, were not only beautiful in themselves but also defined empty skies. "They make it possible for the novice landscape painter to evade the dangers of taking off into the void as soon as his eye hits the horizon."

These early landscapes, simplified, broadly brushed in places, high-keyed in color, bright with light, show the indebtedness of the young artist to painters he had discovered in the Armory Show—Van Gogh, Matisse and Gauguin. Fully realized works of art in themselves, they also served as the blueprints for Davis' work to come. Rather than completing a painting on the scene,

he developed a system of abbreviated sketches that he later orchestrated into paintings in the studio. Between 1916 and 1920 he used brushwork and color for emotional expressiveness. Cubism had its effect, as did a precisionism that might be traced in part to the French collagists and to the American *trompe l'oeil* painter William Harnett. He was now working with an entirely new syntax. He was becoming a modern painter. By the early 1920s his work was more Cubist than it was Postimpressionist or Fauvist.

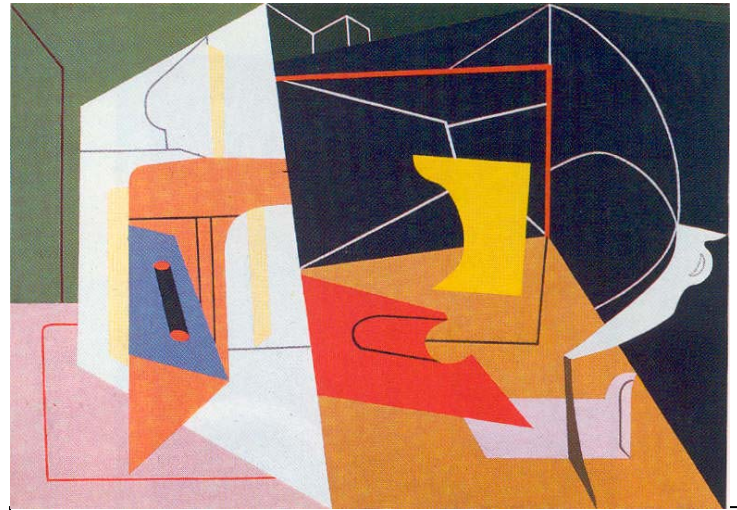
### Studying one still life for a year

By now he was seeking "a generalization of form in which the subject was conceived as a series of planes and the planes as geometrical shapes." In 1927 he hit this problem head-on, defining his art forever after. For one full year he painted the same simple subject time and time and time again, but the subject was, in itself, of little interest and importance. What was important was the relationship of line, plane and color.

His subject, if it can be called that, was a still life composed of several disparate and inharmonious ingredients—an eggbeater, an electric fan, a rubber glove—scattered on a tabletop. This simple arrangement of objects was his battleground for working out permutations of color, space and plane.



For *Visa* (1951) he was inspired by subject matter at hand—the word "Champion" on a matchbook cover. (Museum of Modern Art)



With the *Egg Beater Series* (here, *No. 4*) Davis mastered Cubism by doing variations of one still life for a year. (Phillips Collection, Washington, D.C.)

At the end of that monumental year's work on what came to be called the *Egg Beater Series*, Juliana Force, director of the Whitney Studio Club, the forerunner of the Whitney Museum of American Art, bought two of his paintings. "Having heard it rumored at one time or another that Paris was a good place to be," Davis wrote, "I lost no time in taking the hint. With one suitcase I hopped a boat and arrived in the

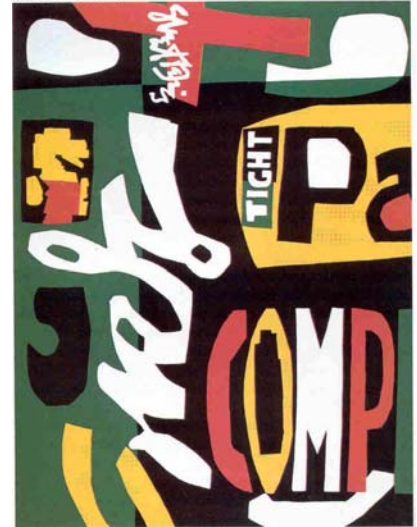
center of art and culture in the middle of June. The rumors were correct... Davis didn't, in fact, hop the boat by himself. He was accompanied by a young woman from Brooklyn named Bessie Chosak, of whom little is known except that his parents didn't approve of her. Stuart and Bessie were married in Paris in 1929, but she died three years later. (In 1938, Davis married Roselle Springer, and in 1952 she gave birth to their son, George Earl, named for jazz musicians George Wettling and Earl "Fatha" Hines.)

In Paris, Davis looked up a friend from Gloucester, Elliot Paul. An American expatriate gourmand and man-about-town, he had written the book *The Last Time I Saw Paris* and edited the prestigious avant-garde magazine *transition*. Davis fit right in with all of this. Paul wrote an article about Davis' work for *transition*, and Davis got to see Paris the way he had gotten to see New York and Hoboken.

"I had the feeling," Davis wrote, "that this was the best place in the world for an artist to live and work, and at that time it was. The prevalence of the sidewalk cafe was an important factor.... There was no feeling of being isolated from America, as I met practically everyone I had ever known at one time or another during the year." The French were all right as well, but not the language they spoke. Davis couldn't comprehend it. It was a great misfortune not to speak French, he wrote to his parents, but it was impossible to learn it in a short time: "The pronunciation is mysterious, arbitrary and obscure. In fact I don't think the Frenchmen know what they are saying half the time." Six months later he hadn't changed his mind. "Of course," he wrote, "I can't speak a word of the language and never will I'm sure. The bloody Frenchmen can't even understand each other so what chance have I got?"

### Frequenting the Village Jazz haunts

The *Egg Beater Series* had confirmed Davis' esthetic convictions, and given him a metaphysical foundation. In Paris, although he returned to a linear, cool-toned, representational way of recording the city in paintings of fluent grace, his foundation was solid for all he did afterward. Davis' Paris paintings are songs of the city, street scenes that record the spirit of a place.



In *Blips and Ifs* (1963 -64) the artist used his own signature (at top) as an element of the composition. (Amon Carter)

Above all, Davis was an urban man, and when he returned to New York he took up his work of transforming that city into art. A dedicated and furious worker, for most of his mature years he didn't stray far from Greenwich Village, where he lived, worked and listened to Jazz. He wrote voluminously about art, 15,000 pages of notes that are now at Harvard's Fogg Art Museum, the gift of his widow.

Davis combined everyday imagery—sailboat, clarinet, sax, antenna—in a 1939 mural for radio station WNYC. There is also an electrical panel; radio waves tie it all together in his depiction of radio transmission.





*Swing Landscape, 1938*

In the Depression years he found a subsistence livelihood through the federal art projects. He painted a mural for the men's lounge of the new Radio City Music Hall, which he characteristically called *Mural (Men Without Women)*, now in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art in New York; a giant mural, 45 by 140 feet, for the New York World's Fair, which was subsequently destroyed; the mural for radio station WNYC; and one called *Swing Landscape*, now at Indiana University. Done in 1938, the latter measures 7 by 14 feet and, typifying its name with remarkable exactness, must be one of the most exhilarating and lyrical walls in the United States. And there is his other mural masterpiece, *Allee*, 8 by 33 feet, more grave, more solid, perfectly tuned, keyed and pitched, a work of the '50s, at Drake University in Des Moines.

Davis knew just what he wanted from a mural. "An art of real order in the material of paint doesn't say 'Workers of the World Unite'; it doesn't say 'Pasteur's theory had many beneficial results for the human race,' and it doesn't say 'Buy Camel cigarettes'; it merely says 'Look, here is a unique configuration in color-space.' "

His subject matter was all of American contemporary life. Although he dismembered it, exploded it, dissected it, its parts were always recognizable. It was his orchestration that was so remarkably independent, innovative, specifically articulated in line, plane, color and symphonic organization. An article he wrote for *Art News* entitled "The Cube Root," in 1943, explains his aims: "I have covered the dynamic American scene for many years past, and all of my pictures (including the ones I painted in Paris) are referential to it. They all have their originating impulse in the impact of the contemporary American environment...."

"Some of the things which have made me want to paint outside of other paintings are: American wood and iron work of the past; Civil War and skyscraper architecture; the brilliant colors on gasoline stations; chain-store fronts, and taxicabs; the music of Bach, synthetic chemistry; the poetry of Rimbaud, fast travel by train, auto and aeroplane which brought new and multiple perspectives; electric signs; the landscape and boats of Gloucester, Mass; 5 & 10 cent store kitchen utensils; movies and radio; Earl Hines hot piano and Negro jazz music in general, etc. . . ."

Paris School, Abstraction, Escapism? Nope, just Color-Space Compositions celebrating the resolution in art of stresses set up by some aspects of the American scene."

Davis, from the beginning, had made clear his indebtedness to a handful of European masters. But, as H. H. Arnason pointed out in an essay for the catalog of a major exhibition of Davis' work in 1957, "his paintings of the last twenty years are not only entirely different from those of cubism or futurism or Picasso or Leger, they are entirely different from anything that has been produced in Europe at any time and, one sometimes feels, from anything that could be produced in Europe."

"I am an American born in Philadelphia of American stock. I studied art in America. I paint what I see in America, in other words, I paint the American scene," Davis once said. He also said, "I could only keep looking at a manageable hunk of the world and keep trying to twist and shape it my way."



*Hot Stillscape for Six Colors- Seventh Avenue Style* (1940) is Stuart Davis' vision of the American scene. (MUSEUM of Fine Arts, Boston)

He was a Cubist, he said, "until they threw me a curve." And he hit it, cracked it clean out of the ball park, way up there where it can still be seen, clean, pure, beautiful.

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