

Stuart Davis



Stuart Davis, 1957. Photography by Arnold Newman

the mundane aspects of urban life and are similar to works by his teacher, Henri. But in 1913, Davis' style changed forever. The Ashcan School opened an exhibition of modern art from America and Europe in an old military armory in New York City. Dazzled by the bold colors and nearly abstract paintings of European artists such as Pablo Picasso, Davis quickly abandoned the Ashcan School's realism and began to experiment with a style called Synthetic Cubism, a technique where an artist uses everyday materials to paint objects as if they were visible from several different angles at once. For the next decade, Davis worked in this Cubist style, creating images using objects he believed symbolized modern life:

American wood and iron work of the past Civil War and skyscraper architecture; the brilliant colors on gasoline stations, chain store fronts, and taxi cabs; 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; S & 10 cent store kitchen utensils; movies and radio Earl Hines hot piano and Negro jazz music in general, etc.

In 1927, Davis created paintings he called the "Egg Beater" series. In order to make these works Davis, "nailed an electric fan, a rubber glove and an egg-beater to a table and used it as my exclusive subject matter for a year." He made works which seem to have no relation to the objects he painted. Instead of painting the egg beater, glove, and fan exactly as they looked in life, Davis used the angles and colors of these everyday materials as inspiration for abstract works. In the 1950s, "Pop" artists, like Andy Warhol, became famous for painting soup cans and advertisements, and Davis was the first American to paint these commercial objects instead of more traditional subjects.

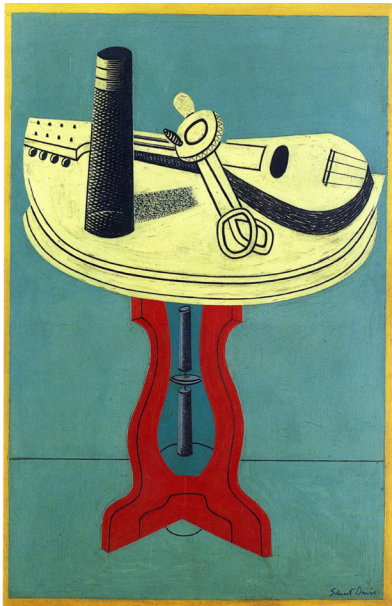
Davis' style developed slowly over his career, changing little between the 1930s and 1950s. Although it may appear that Davis painted his works in a matter of minutes, he developed a painstaking process of creation, often taking months to produce a painting. Every line, angle, and color was carefully thought out beforehand. His

Stuart Davis was born in Philadelphia on December 7, 1892, and spent his childhood in East Orange, New Jersey. His mother, Helen Stuart Davis, was a sculptor, and father, Edward Wyatt Davis, worked as the art director for the Philadelphia Press, where he worked with artists who illustrated the news with on-the-spot sketches instead of photographs. Through his parents, Davis met many artists, most notably, a group of young painters who later became the "Ashcan School." These artists were led by the painter Robert Henri [hen-RYE] and were known for scenes of everyday life in the modern city instead of popular scenes in history or literature. Surrounded by these artists, Davis soon began sketching and in 1909 he left high school to study with Henri at his New York studio.

Davis' first paintings explore the beauties of the

paintings frequently have titles that suggest places or events, such as *Arboretum by Flashbulb*, *Swing Landscape*, or *Salt Shaker*, but identifying exact objects is often impossible. Davis attempted to convey how it felt to be in modern America, not just how things looked. In order to depict the energy of a fast moving city, Davis developed an elaborate system to create his paintings, which he called "color space events." He wrote over 10,000 pages of journals containing hundreds of diagrams and studies outlining his theories about art. He believed that painting could be scientific and should follow basic laws of design.

In addition to art, Davis was interested in politics. Many New York artists were Communists during the Great Depression, and they hoped to use their art to promote Marxist ideas. Davis supported Marxist causes, but he was never an official member of the Communist party. However, while studying with Henri, Davis briefly worked for a socialist publication, *The Masses*, with other Ashcan artists such as John Sloan. In 1936, Davis helped found the magazine *Art Front* and the Arts Congress, an organization of artists, many of them Communists, who supported artists' rights in New York. But when the organization publicly supported Stalin's invasion of Finland in 1939, Davis resigned, moving on to teach at the New School for Social Research. Although Davis never abandoned socialist ideals, the effects of World War II turned him, for the most part, against Communism.



Stuart Davis, *Egg Beater, V*, 1930, oil on canvas, 50 1/8 x 32 1/4 in., Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Fund, The Museum of Modern Art, 122.1945

Between 1933–39 Davis worked for the Federal Arts Project as a muralist. Many murals produced during the '30s were often highly political, such as Diego Rivera's Rockefeller Center mural, *Man at the Crossroads* (1933-34) which was destroyed because it contained a portrait of the Russian Communist Lenin. But Davis' murals, such as *New York Mural* (1932) were never overtly political. He believed that art should be about more than politics. He wrote, "Art is not about politics, nor is it the servant of politics. It is a valid, independent category of human activity." Davis believed that by creating abstract paintings of carefully planned line and color he could inspire people to seek to better organize their own life.

By the time Davis died on June 24, 1964, he had established a reputation as one of America's most prominent painters. In 1945, he was given the honor of a retrospective exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. With the rise of the Abstract Expressionist movement in the 1940s, abstract painting was the dominant art form in America, claiming styles like Regionalism to be conservative and quaint. Although Davis did not support the deep personal meanings of Abstract Expressionist painting, calling it "a belch from the subconscious," his advocacy towards abstract painting helped gather support for future artists. Over a 50-year career, he developed an original style, which symbolized America's vitality in a rapidly growing and changing world.

American Painting is one of Davis' most famous and studied paintings. Nearly twenty years after finishing the canvas in 1932, Davis completely repainted large portions of the canvas. Davis painted the first version for the first Whitney Biennial in New York City, an exhibition which showcased the newest modern artists in America. Davis filled the painting with numerous modern objects from the '30s; the most prominent is the racing airplane in the center of the canvas. Called a Wedell-Williams Racer, it was one of the fastest airplanes in the world during the heyday of air racing. Four figures stand above the plane, their exact identity a mystery. To the right a large open hand loosely holds a gun. Below the gun Davis placed a man in a top hat. The man is Jiggs, a popular cartoon character from the comic strip "Bringing Up Father." To the left is a large horizontal head of a woman.

On the far left of the painting, Davis added the words "It don't mean a thing if it aint got that swing," which is the title of a famous song by the jazz musician, Duke Ellington. One of Davis' favorite symbols of modern America was jazz, and he wrote that "Real jazz, that is to say jazz as an Art, is characterized by complete freedom in its expression." Despite having basic rules of rhythm, jazz allowed the musician to improvise, changing with each performance. Jazz was always changing, always full of vibrancy, and thus served as the perfect symbol of modern America. His development as a painter resembles a jazz musician improvising a new part of an old tune rather than writing a completely new song. By adding this lyric, Davis suggests art is meaningless if it does not have the energy and swing of modern jazz.

Davis repainted *American Painting* between 1948–51, covering up areas and adding color. He covered up most of the Wedell-Williams air racer with a pink square, within which he wrote the word "Erasure." Below this he added the word "No." By 1948, Davis had moved away from representational painting, and these words could signify his elimination of representational objects in favor of relationships between line and color. He drew over 70 studies, and later in his career, he painted an entirely new version called *Tropes de Teens*.

Who are the Mysterious Figures?

Art historians debate the identity of the four figures at the top of *American Painting*. Extensive research has come to two possible conclusions. One clue is the image of the airplane as only three Wedell-Williams Racers were ever built and dominated the hugely popular air races of the 1930s. These racers were made for the 1932 National Air Races in Ohio, one of the biggest air races of the year. In the most prestigious Bendix Trophy Race, pilots flew from Burbank, California, to Cleveland, Ohio. Jimmie Wedell, the pilot of the Wedell-Williams Racer #92 won the race, but instead of landing, he flew low over the Ohio airfield, and continued on to Floyd Bennett Field in New York in order to set the transcontinental speed record.

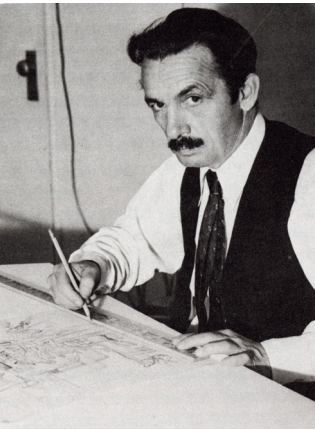
During the '30s, there were many female pilots and racer Mae Hazlip set the woman's speed record in this airplane, flying it at 255.513 mph. Art historians use this information to suggest that the four figures are portraits of the pilots of the three Wedell-Williams Racers. On the left is Jimmie Hazlip, husband of Mae Hazlip, who stands to the right, wearing red lipstick. The third figure from the left is Jimmie Wedell. Like many race pilots of his time, he was killed in a plane crash in 1934; as a result, Davis added the "X" over his body to mark his death. The large head of a woman below the airplane could be Amelia Earhart, the first woman to fly solo across the Atlantic Ocean, and some suggest that the orange cap she wears is a pilot's cap.

The second interpretation argues that these figures are not pilots, but portraits of Davis and three artists, who along with Davis, were considered to be forerunners of American art. He and the painters John Graham and Arshile Gorky were known as "The Three Musketeers" and hoped to create uniquely American art of a quality which could rival that of Europe. With this evidence in mind, the figures could be, from left to right, Davis, Graham, Gorky, and either the painter Willem De Kooning or Jan Matulka. Gorky committed suicide in 1948, the same year Davis started to rework *American Painting*, and this could explain why Davis painted the "X" over one of the figures representing the death of his friend.

a biography

A Bitter Rivalry

In 1912 Stuart Davis met a lifelong rival. Davis was looking over his drawings at a friend's New York studio when a young artist came to visit. After glancing at Davis' drawings, the artist told him, "go to Paris, and you'll learn something." This man was Thomas Hart Benton, an aspiring artist who had just returned from studying modern art in Paris. He would become one of the most famous artists of the 1930s and one of the founders of the Regionalist movement. Both men were infamous for their towering egos and rough personalities and the feud they developed represented the divide between Davis' abstraction and Benton's Regionalism.



Thomas Hart Benton in his studio, 1936. Photo courtesy of The Kansas City Star

This loose collection of Regionalist artists developed during the Great Depression and typically depicted scenes of rural American life rather than the modern city. It represented an American belief that the United States should celebrate small-town virtues and individual experience rather than international concerns. Davis loved the sights and sounds of the big city and felt that an artist's style was more important than the experiences they painted. He believed that an artist should paint "... a permanent record of an idea or emotion inspired by nature," instead of copying from nature directly. Whether or not art should focus on the experiences of everyday Americans or develop an American style rivaling the international avant-garde was a heated debate of the era.

While Davis struggled to find success, Benton's fame grew rapidly. In December 1934, he was the first artist to be on the cover of *Time Magazine*. Soon after, Davis wrote a scathing article in his magazine, *Art Front*, calling Benton's paintings "vaudeville character cliché with the humor omitted," and told his readers "... we must at least give him credit for not making any exceptions in his general under-estimation of the human race." Part of the reason for Davis' anger was motivated by politics. When a mural by Diego Rivera was removed from the Rockefeller Center in New York in 1933 for having an image of Lenin, Benton chose not to defend Rivera. Davis unfairly called him a fascist saying "Benton should have no trouble in selling his wares to any Fascist or semi-Fascist type of government that might set itself up." The fascist label would stain Benton's reputation for decades.

Davis' attacks on Benton and the Regionalists eventually damaged its popularity. As Abstract Expressionism became the dominant movement in America, representational painting was unfairly associated with Soviet dictatorships. Images of American workers appeared too similar to Soviet artworks celebrating the authoritarian policies of Joseph Stalin. His brutal rule turned many supporters against him, and the anti-Communist McCarthy hearings further tarnished the reputation of left-leaning artists. While Davis rose to fame at the end of his life, Benton and the Regionalists were increasingly dismissed as fascists, and their style was considered conservative and quaint.

IMAGES (TOP TO BOTTOM): Stuart Davis, *New York Mural*, 1932, oil on canvas, 84 x 48 in., Norton Gallery, West Palm Beach, FL; Thomas Hart Benton (American, 1889–1975), *The Hailstorm*, 1940, tempera on canvas mounted on panel, 33 x 40 in., Gift of the James A. Douglas Memorial Foundation (1971), Joslyn Art Museum, 1952.11, Art © T.H. Benton & R.P. Benton Testamentary Trusts/UMB Bank Trustee/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY

The Armory Show

The Armory Show was one of America's significant and controversial art exhibitions. It was the first time works by modern European artists, such as Pablo Picasso and Vincent Van Gogh, were exhibited in the United States. In 1911, artists of the Ashcan School founded the Association of American Painters and Sculptors, a group dedicated to supporting new artists. Two years later, the association organized an exhibition of contemporary painting from American and Europe. Not knowing the controversy it would cause, the association borrowed paintings from a German art exhibition called the "Sonnerbund," which showed some of the newest European paintings by artists such as Paul Gauguin, Van Gogh, and Picasso.

American critics were appalled by the bright colors and strange compositions of the Europeans works. Even former president, Teddy Roosevelt, criticized the exhibition, claiming that "we have to face the fact that there is apt to be a lunatic fringe among the votaries of any forward movement" and that perhaps it may be better to refer to the Cubists as "Parallelopipedonists, or Knights of the Isosceles Triangle, or Brothers of the Cosine." Marcel Duchamp's painting *Nude Descending a Staircase No. 2* (1912) was infamously called "an explosion in a shingle factory." The controversies surrounding the European works completely overshadowed the American works on display, including five watercolors by Stuart Davis. While many American painters resisted the new styles on exhibition, some, like Davis, adopted the European techniques, creating their own artwork in the dramatic European style.

Davis was fascinated by the French artists on display, writing that the works "gave me the same kind of excitement I got from the numerical precisions of the Negro piano players in the Negro saloons, and I resolved that I would quite definitely have to become a 'Modern' artist." While Davis eagerly absorbed the European styles, the dramatic quality of the European works on display signaled the end of the gritty street scenes of the Ashcan School, which now no longer looked new and shocking to the American public.



Marcel Duchamp (French, 1887–1968), *Nude Descending a Staircase (No. 2)*, 1912, oil on canvas, 57 5/8 x 35 1/8 in., Philadelphia Museum of Art, The Louis and Walter Arensberg Collection, 1950.190-134-59. ©2013 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris / Succession Marcel Duchamp

Timeline

1890

1892 Stuart Davis is born on December 7 in Philadelphia



Stuart Davis, *Viso*, 1951, oil on canvas, 40 x 52 in., The Museum of Modern Art, Gift of Mrs. Gertrud A. Mellon, 9.1953

1900

1901 Davis family moves to East Orange, New Jersey

1910

1912 Establishes a studio with Henry Glintenkamp; ends formal education & works for *The Masses*

1913 Produces covers for *The Masses* for art editor John Sloan; creates cartoons for *Harper's Weekly*; The Armory Show opens

1917 Serves as a cartographer in World War I with the U.S. Army Intelligence

1920

1919 Travels to Cuba

1923 Spends summer in Santa Fe

1925 First solo museum exhibition held at The Newark Museum

1928

Travels to Paris in the summer & establishes a studio

1930



Stuart Davis with Duke Ellington, n.d. Photographer unknown. Published in Davis's *Abstract Argot*, William Wilson © 1993.

1940

1929 Returns to New York late summer

1931 Teaches at the Art Students League of New York

1932 Exhibits at "First Biennial of Contemporary American Painting" at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

1933 Joins Federal Arts Project

1936 Helped found the magazine *Art Front* and Arts Congress of artists

1944 *The Terminal* wins first prize in the "Portrait of America" exhibition; artwork is reproduced in 1945 Pepsi-Cola calendar

1950

1948 Included in *Look* magazine's list of the ten best painters in America



Stuart Davis, *The Terminal*, 1937, oil on canvas, 30 1/8 x 40 1/8 in., Hirshhorn Museum & Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C., Gift of Joseph H. Hirshhorn, 1966, 66.1163

1960

1958 Wins The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum International Award (wins again in 1960)

1964 Dies in New York on June 24; USPS issues a commemorative stamp designed by Davis

BACKGROUND IMAGE: Stuart Davis, *Egg Beater, V*, (detail) 1930, oil on canvas, 50 1/8 x 32 1/4 in., Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Fund, The Museum of Modern Art, 122.1945

Poster © Joslyn Art Museum 2015
Art © Estate of Stuart Davis/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY unless noted otherwise

Stuart Davis

American, 1892–1964

American Painting

1932–1951

oil on canvas, 40 x 50 1/4 in.,

Lent by the University of Nebraska at Omaha, L-1974.71

Discussion Questions

Why do you think Davis reworked *American Painting*?

Which interpretation of *American Painting*'s three mysterious figures do you find most convincing? Why?

Why do you think Davis calls his paintings "color space events?"

Why was jazz important to Davis' artistic philosophy?

Whose side would take in an argument between Davis and Benton? Why?

Teachers: go to www.joslyn.org/education for this poster's academic standards and related lesson plans.

This project is supported by the generous contributions of Blue Cross Blue Shield of Nebraska, Equitable Bank, Gilbert M. and Martha H. Hitchcock Foundation, Mammel Foundation, The James C. Mangimeli Grant for Art Education, LaVista Community Foundation, Midlands Community Foundation, Nebraska Arts Council, Nebraska Cultural Endowment, Pacific Life Foundation, Amy L. Scott Family Foundation, and Wells Fargo



STUART DAVIS
American, 1892–1964

AMERICAN PAINTING
1932–1951, OIL ON CANVAS

JOSLYN ART MUSEUM OMAHA, NEBRASKA
Lent by the University of Nebraska at Omaha, L-1974.71
Art © Estate of Stuart Davis/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY