

# Stuart Davis: 30 Years Of Evolution



*New York Under Gaslight* (1941). Estate of Herman Shulman

**STUART DAVIS'** creative goals during a period of more than thirty years are best described in the painter's credo as recorded by Director James Johnson Sweeney in the comprehensive catalogue accompanying the retrospective exhibition of Davis's work, currently on display at the Museum of Modern Art. We quote:

"In my own case I have enjoyed the dynamic American scene for many years, and all my pictures (including the ones I painted in Paris) are referential to it. They all have their originating impulse in the impact of contemporary American environment. Some of the things that 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 of 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 has brought new and multiple perspectives; electric signs; the landscape and boats of Gloucester, Massachusetts; 5 & 10 cent store kitchen utensils; movies and radio; Earl Hines' hot piano and Negro jazz music in general, etc. In one way or another, the quality of these things plays a role in determining the character of my painting; not in the sense of describing them in graphic images, but by pre-determining an analogous dynamics in the design which becomes a new part of the American environment."

The above is clearly the testament of a man in tune with his times. A man who does not, like Edward Arlington Robinson's unhappy artist, long for other days. He has seized the world about him, felt its pulse and strength, and successfully synthesized it through a medium, as is clearly demonstrated by the pictures here seen. As the painter's understanding enlarged so did his work, becoming less and less derivative and finally culminating in a highly personal metier that he owes no man, and through which he has enriched our contemporary aesthetics.



ABOVE: *The Red Cart* (1932). Lent by Alice D. Laughlin.

One of the earliest canvases on view, bearing little resemblance to what was to follow, is a *Self Portrait* dated 1912, in which the then youthful painter depicted himself in a high, stiffly starched collar and bowler hat. A water color of the same year titled *Negro Saloon* shows the artist's early interest in New York genre. *Gloucester Terrace*, 1916, reveals an early affection for Gauguin. By 1921, forms and space become of more immediate interest than objective considerations as demonstrated in his arrangement titled *Lucky Strike*. Modeling per se appears briefly in *Two Trees*, 1925.

Maturity seems to have come with Davis' *Eggbeater* series executed in 1927-28 and in his Paris series painted during the same years. In these later views of the City of Light, as in all of his later works, Davis never neglected nature, though at times it may so appear to the layman. In his own words: "In abandoning the weighty apparatus of the outdoor painter I did not abandon nature as subject matter. My studio pictures were all made from drawings made directly from nature."

Davis, as colorist, is seen to advantage in *House and Street*, 1931, in which has been employed a brilliant palette that would have defeated many another painter with less knowledge of control; in *Mural for Studio B*, 1939, where whites, greys and blacks are adroitly balanced; and in *Red Cart*, 1932, where black as a valid color in its own right has been understood.

An important facet of the artist's talents is his ability to handle large and small areas with equal facility. *Swing Landscape*, a mural dated 1938, monumental in proportion, loses nothing through its size.

This exhibition is not only a tribute to an important American artist, but also to a progressive Museum that has not, in this case, waited for rigor mortis to set in before so honoring a native talent. (Until Feb. 3.)—BEN WOLF.

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