

The Museum of Modern Art

11 West 53 Street, New York, N.Y. 10019 Tel. 956-6100 Cable: Modernart

NO. 21
FOR RELEASE
APRIL 3, 1975

RADIO CITY MUSIC HALL GIVES MUSEUM OF MODERN ART STUART DAVIS MURAL

A major attraction at Radio City Music Hall for more than 30 years is moving three blocks north to The Museum of Modern Art so it can be enjoyed without restrictions by a wider public. It is a 10 x 17-foot mural painted in 1932 by Stuart Davis (1894-1964), one of more than several dozen works by many artists commissioned at the time by Rockefeller Center for its new theater.

Radio City Music Hall is "pleased and proud to present this magnificent mural by Stuart Davis to The Museum of Modern Art where it will be more accessible to all the public, and more readily available to students and art historians," Alton G. Marshall, President of Rockefeller Center, Inc. and Chairman and President of Radio City Music Hall, said in announcing the gift of the mural to The Museum of Modern Art. At the Music Hall, the Davis mural was located on a wall of the men's smoking lounge with limited viewing.

Named by a Rockefeller Center committee "Men Without Women" (probably based on the Ernest Hemingway short story), the title was later considered by Davis to be inappropriate and the Museum will simply call it "Mural." The oil on canvas contains no human figures but stylized indications of activities related to recreation and relaxation. Arranged across its surface in stylized flat cubist patterns are a roadster convertible, gasoline pump, package of cigarettes, cigars, sailboat, pipe, package of tobacco, tobacco pouch, playing cards, matches, and barber poles.

"We are extremely grateful for the gift," William Rubin, Director of

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Painting and Sculpture at The Museum of Modern Art said. "It was the first large painting made by this pioneer American painter and in its size, breadth of design and iconographic richness, it is very different from any of the five paintings by Davis now in our collection."

Not long after painting Mural Davis became a member of the Easel Painters Project of the WPA and in the course of the 1930s executed a number of murals.

The original plan for Mural was to execute it in large pieces of colored linoleum, but this was abandoned because the Fire Department would not approve of that material used in such a way in a public building. The painting was finally executed in oil on canvas in a large room in Gloucester, Massachusetts, and after being rolled and shipped to New York, was mounted with a white lead adhesive to the wall of the men's smoking lounge in Radio City Music Hall.

In the spring of 1932 some months before the Music Hall Commissions were announced, The Museum of Modern Art presented an exhibition "Murals by American Painters and Photographers" which, according to contemporary press reports, was used by Rockefeller Center's Art Advisory Committee as one source for artists whose work they commissioned for the new building. Davis was one of 35 painters in the Museum exhibition. Organized by the Advisory Committee of The Museum of Modern Art, and directed by Lincoln Kirstein, it was highly controversial from its inception. Some press reports indicate that it was inspired by the fact that many American artists were angry at rumors that Rockefeller Center was going to commission foreign artists. The show was also partly the result of the desire of the Museum's junior group to promote American art. Some American artists, however, refused the Museum's invitation to exhibit and the show generally was received with either a lack of enthusiasm or downright hostility by critics.

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However, several painters in the Museum show were commissioned by Rockefeller Center. In addition to Stuart Davis, they include Henry Billings, Louis Bouché and Henry Varnum Poor who were among some 30 artists represented by more than 100 works of art throughout the Center and the Music Hall.

When the Music Hall commissions were originally announced, they were described by officials of the Center as "the most extensive and varied collection of modern American art ever planned for a commercial building." Donald Deskey, the designer who supervised the interior of the Music Hall, said the commissions marked "the first time a semi-public institution has given recognition to our progressive artists."

Removal of the Davis mural from the men's smoking lounge in Radio City has proved a complicated and expensive process as the white lead used as the adhesive proved an unusually tenacious bond fastening the huge canvas to the wall. A layer of Japanese TOSA tissue, a layer of muslin, a layer of corrugated cardboard, a framework of wood, and an additional layer of beaverboard were attached to the surface of the painting in order to protect it during the arduous process of removing it from the building. The conservators had to cut out an entire section of the wall itself weighing more than 1000 pounds and then carefully chip away from the back of the painting a layer of brick, a one-inch layer of mortar, and two thin layers of plaster. By the time all the plaster is removed it will weigh between 200 and 300 pounds. It will then be taken to a studio where a new linen back will be attached to the canvas and the cleaning and varnishing completed. The picture then will be hung in the Museum sometime this spring.

Restoration work is being carried out by the Painting Conservation Studios under the direction of Bernard Rabin and Alan Farancz and in cooperation with Jean Volkmer, Chief Conservator of The Museum of Modern Art.

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Other works by Stuart Davis in The Museum of Modern Art collection are: Lucky Strike (1921); Egg Beater (1930); Summer Landscape (1930); Salt Shaker (1931); and Visa (1951).

Additional information available from Elizabeth Shaw, Director, Department
of Public Information, The Museum of Modern Art, 11 W. 53 St., New York,
New York 10019. Phone: (212) 956-7501; 7504.
