

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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TELEPHONE: CIRCLE 3-8800 MUSEUM OF MODERN ART PRESENTS ONE-MAN RETROSPECTIVE EXHIBITION

OF PAINTINGS BY STUART DAVIS

Stuart Davis is a painter of the American scene. Through his art he translates its spirit and its rhythms into paint. As he expresses it:

"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 on gasoline stations, chain store fronts, and taxicabs; the music of Bach; synthetic chemistry; ... fast travel by train, auto and aeroplane which has brought new and multiple perspectives; electric signs; the landscape and boats of Gloucester, Massachusetts; five-and-ten-cent store kitchen utensils; movies and radio; Earl Hines' hot piano and Negro jazz music in general, etc."

A one-man show of Stuart Davis' work will open at the Museum of Modern Art Wednesday, October 17. It will cover his production from Self-Portrait painted in 1912 when the artist was only eighteen, to paintings of 1945--showing a cross-section of the work which has caused Davis to be regarded as one of the leaders of American art. The exhibition, which will remain on view through February 3, 1946, will consist of approximately fifty oil paintings, mural panels, drawings and watercolors. It has been directed and installed by James Johnson Sweeney, Director of the Museum's Department of Painting and Sculpture, who has also written the catalog.

Unlike most artists, Stuart Davis cannot refer to his "early struggles" for he had none. As some actors claim to have been born in a theatrical trunk, Davis may be said to have been brought up in the studio. Both his parents had studied at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts and, at the time of his birth in Philadelphia in 1894, his father was art director of the Philadelphia Press, employing the early great of twentieth-century art in the United States: John Sloan, George Luks, William Glackens and Everett Shinn.

When Davis was seven years old, his father was appointed art editor and cartoonist on the Newark Evening News and the family moved to East Orange, New Jersey. Soon other members of the group also migrated North from Philadelphia and settled in Manhattan where they were to become famous as "The Eight" and--to hide-bound academicians--

infamous as "The Ash Can School."

In 1909 Robert Henri, close friend of Davis' father, who had been teaching in William Chase's school in New York, opened his own school there. Young Davis, in his first year in the East Orange High School, quit to become a student under Henri. Davis writes of this experience as follows:

"The Henri School was regarded as radical and revolutionary in its methods, and it was. All the usual art school routine was repudiated. Individuality of expression was the keynote and Henri's broad point of view in his criticisms was very effective in evoking it. 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. We were encouraged to make sketches of everyday life in the streets, the theatre, the restaurant and everywhere else. These were transformed into paintings in the school studios. On Saturday mornings they were all hung at the composition class. Henri talked about them, about music, about literature and life in general in a very stimulating and entertaining manner."

The next great stimulus in the life of the young artist was the International Exhibition of Modern Art held February 1913 in the Armory of the 69th Infantry in New York City. Although only nineteen years old at the time, he was represented in it by five paintings. Afterwards known as the Armory Show, this exhibition introduced to America the work of vanguard European painters and sculptors. The impact of the exhibition on Davis is best given in his own words:

"The Armory Show was the greatest shock to me--the greatest single influence I have experienced in my work. All my immediately subsequent efforts went toward incorporating Armory Show ideas into my work."

In spite of the Armory Show, which gave Davis a new conception of the picture as an entity in itself rather than merely a replica of another visual entity, he continued with art of an illustrative nature. He was a contributing artist to The Masses until in 1916 a split took place among the editors between "pure art" and "idea art." The propagandist party won and Davis withdrew from the magazine with John Sloan, Glenn Coleman and others.

Davis spent the Summer of 1915 in Gloucester, Massachusetts, and, with the exception of a trip to Havana in 1919 and another to New Mexico in 1923, oscillated between New York and Gloucester for twelve years. He gives an amusing description of the first step in his self-emancipation from literalism in art. This happened in Gloucester, where, he says:

"I used to wander over the rocks with a sketching easel, large canvases and a pack on my back looking for things to paint.... After a number of years the idea began to dawn on me that packing and unpacking all this junk, in addition to toting it all over the Cape was irrelevant to my purpose. Following this revelation my daily sorties were unencumbered except by a small sketch book of the lightest design."

After he had put off the physical encumbrance of the painter's paraphernalia, he began gradually to put aside conventional representation in his art.

"One day I set up an eggbeater in my studio and got so interested in it that I nailed it on a table and kept it there to paint. I called the pictures Eggbeater, number such and such, because it was from the eggbeater that the pictures took their impulse.

"The pictures themselves are not decorations. They are pictures. Their subject is an invented series of planes which was interesting to the artist. They were then drawn in perspective and light and shade in the same way another artist draws the planes of a human head or a landscape. They were a bit on the severe side, but the ideas involved in their construction have continued to serve me. In fact this eggbeater series was very important for me because in this period I got away from naturalistic forms.... My aim was to strip a subject down to the real physical source of its stimulus. You may say that everything that I have done since has been based on that eggbeater idea."

In May 1928 Mrs. Juliana Force of the Whitney Studio Club, later the Whitney Museum of American Art, bought several Davis pictures. Davis immediately left for Paris, taking with him only a suitcase and a packing case containing his eggbeater paintings. Mr. Sweeney writes of this period as follows:

"The anonymous forms in his eggbeater series of the year before had now given way to depictions of Paris streets that had a definite sentiment about them. They are distillations of the mood which he described Paris as having awakened in him. But they are this and something else. He had carried his eggbeater series with him to Paris in more ways than one. His Paris street scenes have a structural sophistication under their lyric freshness which he could not have achieved before."

On his return to New York in August 1929, Davis was "appalled and depressed by its giantism. Everything in Paris was human size, here everything was inhuman." Davis sums up the influence of European painting on him as follows:

"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.... I don't want people to copy Matisse or Picasso, although it is entirely proper to admit their influence. I don't make paintings like theirs. I make paintings like mine. I want to paint and do paint particular aspects of this country which interest me. But I use, as a great many others do, some of the methods of modern French painting which I consider have universal validity. ... Why should an American artist today be expected to be oblivious of European thought when Europe is a hundred times closer to us than it ever was before? If a Scotchman is working on television, do similarly interested American inventors avoid all information as to his methods?"

From early youth Davis had made his way as an artist with one short interval when, toward the end of the war in 1918, he was employed making maps for the Army Intelligence Department. Like most other artists in this country, Davis was badly hit by the depression of the early 1930's. When the Federal Art Project under

Edward Bruce was set up in 1934, Davis was one of the first artists enlisted. Later, when the WPA Project got under way, Davis was employed under it. During this period he was a leader in the organization and activities of the Artists' Congress. Under WPA Art Project he painted two large murals: Swing Landscape and a composition for Studio B, WNYC, both of which are in the present exhibition--the latter having been removed from the twenty-fifth floor of the Municipal Building and its original installation duplicated in the Museum galleries.

The book of the exhibition is unique in that the artist's own account of his life and work, comprised of direct statements made over the period from 1928 to 1945, is skilfully interwoven with running commentary and narrative by the editor. The book contains thirty-three halftones and three color plates.