

art

## Stuart Davis: Cubism, Jazz, and American Painting

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Since the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, American painting has occupied a place in world culture, most notably in the middle years of the century preceding ours, when abstract expressionism held sway. But, even then, dissenters occurred: for example, it is just as easy to characterize the work of Arshile Gorky as surrealist as it is to find his work abstract and expressive in nature. In the case of the remarkably gifted, remarkably accomplished painter Stuart Davis, the idioms of cubism and jazz were internalized in a manner that was flat, billboard-like, and more than a little indebted to the style of advertising at that particular time. It could be said that Davis's art, which he pursued until the end of his life in 1964, acted as a precedent for the advertising paintings of Andy Warhol, whose activities began more or less as Davis's ended. This may be stretching the case a bit, but clearly there is a pop element in the paintings of Davis, who took up the visuals of business communications even as he was politically active on the left in the 1930s and '40s. The distinction to be made is that such a vernacular was established within the composition, at least in Davis's example, for mostly formal reasons, whereas Warhol brought in ads to indicate content, the easy pleasures of the American lifestyle.

But a popular bias was not the only angle Davis followed. He spent a year, from 1928 to 1929, in Paris, taking in the cubism that had been so major an expression there only a few years earlier. At their best, Davis's paintings also include the heady urban abstraction of jazz, whose golden age Davis gave voice to in the intricate contrapuntal rhythms of his art. Jazz's improvisatory, free-wheeling reading of city life provided Americans with an extended metaphor for the joys of the street, the melancholy loneliness endemic to metropolitan experience, and the deeply exciting presence of a new kind of musical voice. In a similar fashion, the artists of the early middle 20<sup>th</sup> century made clear a vision of the inner city, its asymmetric cadence established in the expressive colors and forms found in the fabric there. But even so, there was a place for a more stabilized, more structured language, one that Davis became famous for, despite his affiliation with the emotionally charged art that held sway during his time. In truth, his pictures of Paris streets and buildings while he was in France seem a bit decorative and even pretty, in the manner of Raoul Dufy. But his American work evinces a toughness and an energy that links him to the booming industries and construction of the time.

It is important to remember that the years that Davis was in his prime, from the late 1920s to the 1940s, were also a period of political activism in the arts. The left meant something; it spoke out not only for the worker but also for the artist, whose efforts were not paid well, and who was marginal to the concerns of business and the state. In a way, the visual language Davis developed was, in its economy of motif and embrace of a vitalism in accordance with the spirit of the time, the esthetic equivalent of the political demands being made simultaneously. Davis himself was highly politically active: in the 1930s, he

vigorously opposed the forces of fascism, becoming the national chairman of the progressive American Artists Congress in 1938 (he resigned his membership when Russia invaded Finland the following year). At the time when Davis was active, one had the choice of genuinely aligning with causes that embraced the worker and the dispossessed. His commitment stands as a tribute to a time when taking a stand was not seen cynically, and the ideas being discussed in regard to opposing a burgeoning right were real.

But it wasn't as if Davis were isolated or ignored as a painter. As early as 1913, he showed five watercolors in the year's Armory Show. Arshile Gorky was a close friend. Now, when the art world is overwhelmed by artists who have become redundant in light of a very, very narrow upper-echelon market, it might be hard to imagine how small the community was when Davis was working. People suffered from poverty, but offsetting the difficult economic conditions was a sense of belonging—based on the feeling that art had a purpose. In the early to mid-1920s, not far into his career, Davis concentrated on the creative interpretation of the advertising surrounding him. It is possible to see this in *Lucky Strike* (1924), a casual but striking still life of a Lucky Strike tobacco pack, Zig-Zag cigarette papers, a pipe, and a sports page of a newspaper that has some readable text. The viewer notices, above all, that the components of these commercial materials are treated neutrally—they form elements of a description that concentrates on the newness of design. Notions of content, for example, the triumph of a consumer society, do not play a role in the galvanized life of the painting.

Instead, what happens in *Lucky Strike* is a journalistic portrayal of items local to city life. The things portrayed by Davis are not there because he has chosen them so much as he has come across, in a chance-driven manner, articles of current, mostly urban existence. No editorializing exists beyond the presentation of artifacts in use at the time. It may be that this period was the beginning of the communications industry and its emphasis on the direct transmittal of visuals meant to sell a product. Whatever the reasons for a new visual parlance may have been, it is clear that Davis committed himself to a kind of reportage, a realism that would develop into increasingly complex visual terms informed by his experience of European art. Such a melding of “high” European pictorial values and “low” American business images are not easily visible in *Lucky Strike*, but the roots are there, both in the sophistication of the composition and the reliance on everyday consumables.

On a cultural level, this work is obviously determined by democratic values. An interesting question comes up: Can we accept the idealism of the painting, or rather its innocence, in light of our experiences now? Davis actively accommodated the left, yet his career seems not to have been damaged in any way. Today, we tend to view such an outlook as naïve, with the result that we treat his political stance as separate from his output. But is that in fact true? When Davis was making art, cubism and jazz and American painting were accompanied by progressive political values—to the point where it was part of the texture of the time's experience. Politics could not be separated from the esthetics of the period. If we consider the logic of postmodern cultural understanding, beginning with the early art of Warhol, and continuing with the appropriations of Richard Prince, it proves hard to see Davis's work without prejudice. But the idealism, implicit or explicit, of his paintings stands. When Davis began, a pop approach to painting was very new. He stands out because he successfully joined the commonplace to the not-quite-so-exalted pursuit of

painting. Doing so kept his art alive. People were not being continuously bombarded with business imagery, as happens now; instead, they were facing its first proposals, in a way that appreciated its verve and excitement.

As time went on, Davis would become more and more excitingly complex, with abstraction merging with commercial goods and words. Language, interestingly, plays a fairly important formal role in his art. Letters or parts of words appear in his paintings; they are part of the random visual noise of the time. It was not a matter of cultural theft; rather, the letters underscored the use of literary communication in public exchanges governed by commerce. The flat surface plane Davis so effectively used not only was a nod to the billboard, it was a recognition of the actual attributes painting has always been made of: the submission of a two-dimensional exterior that, in Davis's case, rejected any suggestion of depth. Working on a level plane enabled him to portray a world of interactive but also discrete shapes, generally geometrical in nature. Cubism, so transformative to painting in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, also provided Davis with exactly the language he needed—a rolling out of three-dimensional form into an essential flatness. At the same time, it allowed him to quote a phrasing that brought the European invention into a realm of bustling streets, saxophone solos, and the visual attentions of the market.

A few words should be said about the merger Davis effected. Appropriation of style and even content in contemporary art is a present given. But the word implies cultural larceny—it is no longer easy to tell apart one artist's work from its influences, or even one nation's art from another. In Davis's case, what we come across is an actual fusion of two different ways of seeing, rather than a petty theft. It is of course true that artists always borrow, and often steal, from other cultures; Picasso's great painting *Les demoiselles d'avignon* clearly adopted African influences to transform his pictorial content. But Davis was after something else, namely, a synthesis in which the sophistication of cubism might be incorporated into an American ambience both artistic (jazz) and commercial (publicity). We have to remember that cubism itself was based on the recognition of the enjoyments of everyday life: a newspaper, flowers, guitars, a bowl of fruit. But the implications of the visual language were extremely high and radically innovative. This new energy established a revolution that changed the course of five hundred years of painting. Davis deftly worked up a scheme in which cubism was transported to a different milieu; in his hands, it became more purely a formal device. A kind of American vulgarity, enthusiastic and not without charm, formed the setting that received Davis's ideas about then-current art in France.

*Swing Landscape* (1938) was produced by Davis in response to a commission from the WPA's Federal Art Project, whose New York mural division was headed by Burgoyne Diller, the abstract painter. The painting was part of a series of 12 works to be installed in basement meeting rooms in a lower-income housing complex in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. For the composition, Davis made use of imagery derived from sketches of the harborfront in Gloucester, Massachusetts; as the accompanying exhibition information on the Internet points out, "he transformed masts, rigging, lobster traps, and striped poles into a vocabulary of overlapping, brightly colored shapes, all of equal intensity." Colorwise, reds, blues, and oranges predominate, and the mostly geometric, often highly abstracted imagery is woven together into a puzzle of considerable achievement. According to Davis himself, this inspired jumble of forms and hues represented "modern America." Despite the excited and

positive reaction of colleagues in the field, the picture was not installed and remained in storage until 1942, when the government passed the painting on to Indiana University (details of this painting's story are taken from the Whitney Museum's Internet site on the show).

The real point about *Swing Landscape* is that it encapsulates and illustrates the mature skills of Davis, who put heart and soul into the painting. The imagery is recognizable but also abstract, with items crowding into each other in ways that emphasize the general coherence of the painting's structure, without which the picture would simply be a mass of unattached objects. Modern painting tends to balance between the fragment and the whole, with the tension of the two serving to secure the interest of the work. In this piece, Davis brilliantly brings together a large array of materials, in which the items of a fishing town are reduced to simple forms that nonetheless reflect their original work function. The mostly primary colors can even be said to quietly suggest the celebratory aspects of the American flag. While it is a jingoistic image, something of the high spirits and functional force of American society comes through. Everything is flat but seems to pressing up against the viewer, who gazes at an exciting puzzle of interlocking parts, whose actual purpose remains visible despite the idealization of the forms.

Usually the question facing the abstract artist, once he or she has mastered a particular idiom, is: What to do next? In the case of the abstract expressionists, whose output was more or less entirely intuitive, one can see a repetition of imagistic form—sometimes to the point of excess. Something slightly different occurs in the work of Davis, whose disciplined sense of structure resulted in a position that marked his efforts as discrete more than they were continuations of each other. To be sure, stylistic repetition occurred; however, there were also consistent variations in one painting to the next, unlike for example, the close duplications of forms in Mark Rothko's art. Cubism gave Davis an *intellectual* complexity not regularly found in the work of his colleagues. There is a distancing, and even a rationality, to his work that separates it from the high-strung emotional style of the abstract expressionists, who for reasons of notoriety and publicity have received more attention than Davis. Not truly a painter's painter, he nonetheless scripted a scenario in which rigor won out over expressiveness, the favored idiom of the moment. This gave his art a structure we don't find so easily in other artists of the time.

It is consequently quite important to recognize the quality of Davis's achievement. Craft became a primary element beyond inspiration, yet the latter was not dropped in any way. Davis became a chronicler of the spirit of the time, presciently bringing into painterly discourse a sense of community between Europe and America, as well as an emphasis on just what made America tick. His paintings embody both realism and romance without succumbing to flashy rhetoric. It is not so easy to put one's finger on the period's exuberant spirit, but Davis's hard-edged realities, made intricate by a kind of idealized abstraction, made clear to his audience the extent to which American culture could be transformed by French cubism. Truly he belonged to the origins of the New York School, whose broad spectrum of styles occurred under the aegis of a New York City geographical location. While the situation in New York is too complicated to easily generalize about, it can be said that Davis initiated a vernacular that was essentially innocent in nature, before the deliberately jaded excesses of full-fledged pop art.

*Owh! In San Pao* (1951) is a work occurring later in Davis's career. A kind of still life, based on a study of a coffee pot done more than twenty years earlier, the painting blazes forth colors and forms and language in ways that highlight exuberance and lively communication. Reducing the words to abstract forms was not necessarily Davis's intent—as the exhibition notes indicate, it may be that the word “now” refers to the present version of the painting, taken up two decades after the study that inspired it. A bright yellow background supports a series of blue and mauve planes, with words and bits of calligraphy decorating the composition. At first glance, the juxtapositions appear random, but on inspection over time, there is a cohesiveness to the seemingly discrete components of the picture. One has the experience nearly that we are seeing a pack of cards, precarious in balance but somehow balanced nonetheless. The real point of a work like this is its structured expressiveness, in which the art dances to its own drummer. Davis's independence of style cannot be overemphasized, and he has a lot to teach painters who are working today. His combination of rational organization and emotional force achieves a merger that is rare in modern or contemporary art.

As time goes on in contemporary art, many painters move in the direction of entropy—that is, a slow decline into disorder—as a way of their showing feelings for the chaos of esthetics and society facing them. This may be accurate as reporting, but it does not necessarily result in good art. Davis found a language that would do justice to the complexities of mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century life. But cynicism was not part of his outlook. The main effect of his work is that of celebration, not in a commemorative sense, but with the idea that his milieu—modern life—was exciting and free form without descending into tumult. In a Davis painting, the elements are in balance, building a formal tableau that is both abstract and figurative. He stands out, in a good way, from the deliberately inchoate stylizations of the abstract expressionists he painted alongside with. In producing his style, he refused to reject the civilizing influence of art of his time—its remarkable ability to summarize and enhance the texture of experience embedded in modernity.

It may have been possible, even then, to view Davis's buoyant, cultivated style as slightly anachronistic—both cubism and Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917) had taken place in France a full generation before the American artist had gotten in full swing. Perhaps the decade of the 1930s was the last possible moment before the need—indeed, the necessity—of a truly American art came about. One is reminded, in a different medium, of the influence of French poetry on the early writings of T.S. Eliot, who internalized the voice of Parisian symbolist poet Jules Laforgue. By incorporating the insights of cubism into his American explorations, Davis was both remaining open to influence outside his own culture and using French painting to organize an American impulse that was becoming consciously messy and unorganized. Of course, it is impossible for analysis to determine if one style or the other is better, but Davis does stand out in a group of otherwise disheveled painters. His neatness of execution remains one of his great strengths.

Unlike the final work of many artists, Davis's late production remains at an unusually high level. The flattening effect continues, and the experience of his work as a kind of modernist billboard remains steady. In *Blips and Ifs* (1963-64), completed the year of Davis's death, we can see the influence of the cut-out paper works of Matisse, done in the last decade of

his life. Almost completely composed of language and calligraphic forms, the painting reduces—or rather, transforms—letters into stylistic constituents that tend to abstract the words' literary meaning into formal artifacts. But not completely: the words remain completely intelligible as terms; the words “comp” and “tight” and “pa” are easily read in a space that emphasizes their visual weight in addition to their legible meaning. As happens so often in Davis's art, flat planes of color organize the overall balance of the picture. His is a *public* and even a rational persona, as opposed to the mystical, privately oriented visions of many of his colleagues.

Art like Davis's not only needs to be understood as something done in the past, it also needs to be addressed as a way of understanding the present and future. What is it that Davis can teach us now? For one, his openness to influences other than his own can be seen as a far-sighted appreciation of the increasingly international exchange of information, which has become so ubiquitous as to border on cliché. In his case, though, cubism became a prism through which Davis saw a way of joining apposite visual influence, even if it didn't seem necessarily so at the time he was working. The other influence, jazz, broadens our experience of art through a medium that is musical rather than visual. This brilliant accommodation to a major art language of his time seems to me to have the perception of genius; to translate the achievements of one medium into equally accomplished visuals is to intuit how one kind of expressiveness may connect with another—even when the two seem distant. Davis had the great good luck to live at a time when this sort of mixing was made possible by the extraordinary achievements of art and music.

Finally, the political elements of Davis's life need mentioning. We are now living in a period of catastrophic indifference to the way money is made and handled. Most of our political sensitivities are dedicated to social change in the spheres of gender and sexuality. Progressive thinking needs to open up to the kinds of concerns that Davis met in the 1930s, namely, those ideas that addressed profound inequities in wages and wealth. Davis's life and art proves that one concern needn't yield to the other, and that politics can be about big public issues as well as smaller personal ones. At a time in New York, when the art market has seized control of careers and prices, rather than an increasing critical agreement on a work's quality, Davis's career makes a great statement. Interestingly, there is no obvious intrusion of politics into his visual output. Davis thus stands out as a leader at a time when there was need for one in art. His integrity, evident from the start in his remarkable paintings, also took place in life decisions that were true to the milieu he lived in. Such attainments in both work and living are no small thing.