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# Against Abstraction

By MAUREEN MULLARKEY | December 13, 2007
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STUART DAVIS DISLIKED THE WORDS "ABSTRACT" AND "ABSTRACTION." HE BATTLED AGAINST THE TENDENCY TO divide representational painting from "so-called abstractions." They are identical, he insisted, because both represent an illusion of the three-dimensional space we inhabit.

His refusal to separate art into camps originated in his devotion to drawing, to a linear conception of form, and to Cezanne's insistence on the unity of painting and drawing. "Dynamic Impulse: The Drawings of Stuart Davis," at Hollis Taggart Galleries, exhibits approximately 60 works from between 1909 and 1964, the year of his death. It is a wonderful medley of sketches, doodles, diagrams, and preparatory studies not originally intended for viewing. Added to these are finished drawings and black-and-white linear versions of the same paintings.

Art-making was in Davis's blood. He was born in 1894 to parents who were artists, and who surrounded themselves with artist friends. An art editor of the Philadelphia Press, his father employed John Sloan, George Luks, William Glackens, and Everett Shinn, all members of The Eight. Robert Henri, standard-bearer of the group and a friend of the Davises, later exerted great influence on Davis's development as a painter.

Sloan opened his own art school in New York in 1909. After one year of high school, young Davis was allowed to enroll in his classes. Under Henri's tutelage, he absorbed skepticism of academic rules and the importance of looking closely at the world around him.

He entered the New York art world at a tumultuous time. By the age of 19, he was a practicing artist, working regularly as an illustrator and exhibiting in the 1913 Armory Show. A watershed event in American painting, it exposed Davis to the European, particularly French, avant-garde for the first time. It fired desire for new pictorial forms — not simply new subject matter — to replace the old rules. He sought these out in Paris, where a stay was obligatory for a member of Hemingway's generation.

Davis embraced Cubist analysis of line, color, texture, and shape, and its liberation of drawing, for sheer expressive purposes. At the same time, he scolded American artists for their "foolish worship of a foreign god." In a notebook entry, he declared "America is unquestionably the healthiest nation in the world today." That was 1921, when consumer culture carried the same excitement as the Jazz Age emerging simultaneously with it.

His drawings display the impact of European Modernism on a cartoonist's son, who found a moral premise for his own visual vocabulary in popular art and raucous urban culture. Davis seized upon common things met on the street or at the five-and-dime. Egg beaters, gas pumps, or a pack of Lucky Strikes were more accessible to Americans — so more credible to Davis — than the symbols of Parisian café culture in Cubist still lifes.

The earliest item on show is a narrative cartoon strip: "J.J. McSherry" (1909), a prizefighter precursor to Ham Fisher's Joe Palooka. Through the 1920s and '30s, syndicated comic strips were hugely popular, the cartoonists celebrated as spokesmen for ordinary Joes.

Davis boasted that he could make compositions out of anything and, indeed, two Popeye frames, turned vertically on their axes, provided orchestration for "G & W" (c. 1944) and the related painting "For Internal Use Only" (1994–45). The spatial games and saturated color of Davis's "color compositions" owe as much to the cartoon studios as to Modernist aesthetics.

His linear inventions perforate each other with a verve that remained part Roaring '20s, part Sunday comic section. The black/ white graphic punch of Otto Messmer's "Felix the Cat" provided an existing model for the visual syncopation Davis sought in his painting.

Davis's earliest drawings, like his paintings, repeat the concerns and postures of the Ashcan School. "Negro Dance Hall" (1915) and "Atlantic City Night" (1915) are typical of the social and economic observations practiced by The Eight. "Dancers in Spotlight" (1915) suggests Lautrec in both composition and the angular contours of the foreground figure.

From here, things progress quickly to the flat, declarative shapes that became Davis's signature. The carefully ruled "Drawing for Percolator" (1927) and the study for it on gridded paper rank among those drawings here that are beautiful in their own right. Many others are freewheeling sketchbook explorations most compelling as windows into the fertility and precision of his compositional thinking.

Davis's imagination followed a linear trajectory but, for the most part, was content with a casual, sometimes brusque line. He did not tease his kinetic squiggles into the fluent spirals of his contemporary, Joan Miró.

Even the slightest pencil study by Davis exhibits radical assent to the architectonics of art making, still a crucial measure of inventiveness. He created in obedience to Matisse's dictum: "A work without drawing is a house without a frame." The pre-eminence of drawing in his work gains it more substantive dignity than all the attitudinizing that followed him in the name of Abstract Expressionism.

*Until January 12 (958 Madison Ave., between 75th and 76th streets, 212-628-4000).*