Thank you for supporting your students’ visit to the exhibition Stuart Davis: In Full Swing, on view at the de Young museum.

This exhibition is the first major display in 20 years dedicated to Davis, a key figure in American modernism. Featuring 73 works—spanning from the artist’s breakthrough series in the 1920s focusing on tobacco packages and household objects to the painting left on his easel at his death, in 1964—the exhibition highlights Davis’s unique ability to assimilate the visual languages of European modernism, the imagery of popular culture, the aesthetics of advertising, and the rhythms of jazz into colorful, complex works. Blurring distinctions between “high” and “low” art, between abstraction and figuration, and between text and imagery, these paintings reflect both the excitement and turbulence of the artist’s times.

Davis was a lifelong jazz enthusiast, and his working method of appropriating and reworking his own earlier compositions shares with that musical genre the concept of variations on a theme, and similarly conveys a distinctly modern sense of dynamism and vibrancy. This is the first major exhibition to install works from different periods of the artist’s career alongside one another to explore their persistent thematic and visual interconnections. Davis’s innovative works paved the way for major developments in American postwar art such as Pop, and they remain resonant, relevant, and influential today.

These resources include five basic elements:

• Words to Know
• Exhibition Themes
• Artist Biography
• Images and Questions for Viewing
• Pre-Visit Activities

While these materials are written to support the visual and language arts standards of the intended grade levels, you may want to adapt them to meet the particular needs of your classroom.

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“My early landscapes showed enthusiastic emotion about the color-texture-shape-form of associative entities such as sky, sea, rocks, figures, vegetation. The purpose was to make a record of things felt and seen so that the total associations of the moment could be experienced. Today I disassociate the painting experience from general experience and attain a universal objective statement that transcends . . . time and place.”

—STUART DAVIS TO WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS

**Words to Know:**
permutation
simultaneity
modernity
expansion and contraction
repetition
subjectivity
multiple-view perspective
Social Realism
Cubism

**Exhibition Themes**

**American modernity:** Davis captured American modernity by examining motion, speed, transportation, technological developments, and urban life. He represented these elements through a unique combination of abstraction and place imagery emphasizing simultaneity through subject matter, text, and allusion to sound.

**Expansion and contraction of proportional space:** By depicting multiple perspectives simultaneously, Davis created views that reflected the entire experience of being in a place. He challenged the principles of perspective, encouraging the eye to move around the canvas and into depth and surface space.

**Repetition:** Davis sometimes repeated the subject matter and compositions from his early works in his later works, causing the original subject matter to be completely changed or lost entirely.
Biography Overview: **Stuart Davis (1892–1964)**

“His genius was to invent a third path, one that harnessed the grammar of abstraction to the speed and simultaneity of modern American life.”

—Barbara Haskell

Born to parents who were artists, Stuart Davis at age 16 left school to train under Robert Henri and John Sloan, leaders in the so-called Ashcan school, a New York–based group that advocated for capturing the realism of everyday life. Sloan became a lifelong influence and comrade, providing Davis with monetary assistance and a place to live at different points throughout his early career. It is with the Sloans that Davis first visited Gloucester, Massachusetts, a place he would return to often.

Davis transformed his painting style after visiting the Armory Show of 1913, where he viewed Cubist works and their stylistic precedents by Pablo Picasso and Paul Cézanne. Despite being drawn to Cubism’s abstraction, he continued to be inspired by direct observation of his surroundings and began to include subjective use of color and multiple-view perspective in his compositions. He combined the vocabulary of modern art with the modernity of urban life.

In 1927, declaring himself “dead broke,” Davis received sponsorship from Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney, who provided Davis with a stipend of $125 per month for a year. Living off of this income, Davis painted every day for that year, developing what is known as the *Egg Beater* series. In it, Davis drew inspiration from everyday household items—an electric fan, an egg beater, a rubber glove and a percolator—to produce compositional studies in which he observed and deliberately deconstructed the objects’ forms into Cubist-inspired abstractions. The *Egg Beater* series sparked Davis’s interest in stretching the limits of drawing from observation, and in experimenting with color and multiple perspectives while sticking with familiar subject matter.

In 1928 Davis went to Paris for thirteen months. Influenced by the style of Fernand Léger, who painted everyday subjects with great clarity, Davis painted pictures of Paris based on direct observation while emphasizing the layers, motion, and signs of the city. Upon returning to New York at the start of the Great Depression, in 1929, he was struck anew by the city’s modernity and speed, which he attempted to capture in his art.

Davis’s finances, which were always precarious, plummeted after the 1929 stock market crash. Like many others in similar circumstances during the Great Depression, he turned to collective action, throwing himself into political activism on behalf of artists’ economic rights and freedom of expression. Between 1934 and 1940, he served as a leading member of the Unemployed Artists Group and of the Artists’ Committee of Action, as vice president of the Artists Union, as editor of the left-wing journal *Art Front*, and as vice president and ultimately president of the American Artists’ Congress. Combined with his prolific writing, his activism left little time for painting. Murals were Davis’s primary artistic output during this period. This art form enjoyed widespread popularity during the Great Depression, thanks to the various government agencies established under President Franklin D. Roosevelt to provide financial support to artists by commissioning murals for public buildings.
By the 1940s, as funding diminished for public works, Davis and his wife, Roselle, continued to live in poverty in a variety of one-room apartments in New York City. Davis began to have health problems stemming from his poor financial situation as well as a habit of heavy drinking. But as a painter, he never stopped innovating. Looking back at his sketchbooks, studies, and previous works, he began to reuse imagery in new paintings, toying with the color, the perspective, the picture plane, or the symbolism to create transformative works.

In 1945, Davis had a breakthrough exhibition at New York’s Museum of Modern Art, a survey of 53 works that helped to propel Davis’s career, leading to subsequent exhibitions, sales, government purchases, and greater attention from the press. He continued to work slowly on his paintings, despite deteriorating health, and in 1950, after a hospital stay, Davis finally gave up drinking and returned to the art scene with renewed energy.

At this time, Davis purchased a television for his home, and his subsequent work reveals the influence of advertisements and movies, as well as the evolving signifiers of urban life at mid-century. Works such as *Little Giant Still Life* (1950), the similar *Visa* (1951), and *Blips and Ifs* (1963–1964) contain portions of text inspired by commercial packaging and signage. Beginning around 1950 he would focus on words and letters as subjects, using a limited color palette and repeating shapes and lines from his earlier works. By his last decade, Davis increasingly painted subjective information gathered from his own history of mark making and note taking.

“More intensely than any painter in our history, [Davis] offers a specific, objective, national experience. It is the experience not of our natural landscape but of America as man-made. The brittle animation of his art relates to jazz, to movie marquees, to the streamlined décor and brutal colors of gasoline stations, to the glare of neon lights, to the flamboyant sweep of three-level parkways, to the fool-proof shine of stainless steel diners, to the big bright words that are shouted at us from bill-boards from one end of the country to the other . . . he expresses in his work the concept that one glance should be enough to see what you’re looking at, since the chances are you’re going someplace else fast.”

—Elaine De Kooning on Davis, *Art News*, 1957
Images and Questions for Viewing


**Background Information:** Davis painted this work upon returning to New York City after spending thirteen months in Paris. He depicted his urban surroundings through direct observation of buildings, signage, patterns, and textures. He divided the picture plane into two distinct perspectives, emphasizing simultaneous viewpoints. The entire image is framed as if it is a window that the viewer is looking through, thus further abstracting the perspective.

**QUESTIONS:**

**4th–5th Grades:**
What textures, patterns, and signage does the artist provide to give clues about the details of the city? What are the differences between the two halves of the painting?

**6th–8th Grades:**
What is the viewpoint or vantage point of each part of the painting?
How does the artist’s framing device of the piece alter the perspective?

**High School:**
Davis repeats the dual-perspective format many times throughout his career. Why do you think this format interests him?
If you wanted to create a painting that shows two different viewpoints, what compositional methods might you use?
Stuart Davis: In Full Swing

2. For Internal Use Only, 1944–1945. Oil on canvas, 45 x 28 in. Reynolda House Museum of American Art

Background Information: In this work, Davis references an earlier work, *House and Street* (1931). This painting is one of Davis’s many paintings that he based on earlier subject matter and compositions. In it he has repeated the dual perspective but oriented the composition vertically. The grid-like format of the painting suggests the style of his friend, painter Piet Mondrian, who had recently died. The patterns and forms within the composition are based on observations of his surroundings.

QUESTIONS:

4th–5th Grades:
What textures, patterns, and shapes did the artist provide to give clues about the details of his studio?

Compare this painting to *House and Street*. Are there similarities between the structures of the two paintings? Can you recognize any references to similar forms or places? Do you see repetition of patterns and textures?

6th–8th Grades:
How did Davis provide an entry point or perspective in each half of the painting? What clues did he give to describe an interior space?

Compare this painting to a late work by Mondrian. How did Davis pay homage to his artist friend in this work?

High School:
What actions and emotions are expressed in the content of this painting? How do the lines, forms, and patterns encourage your eye to move through the composition?
3. *Rapt at Rappaport’s*, 1951–1952. Oil on canvas, 52 x 40 in. Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution

**Background Information:** Davis derived portions of this piece from one of his earlier Cubist-style compositions, *Landscape with Saw* (1922), which he came back to years later and borrowed from multiple times. The composition is reinterpreted in *Semé* (1953) with a very different outcome. Here he limited the color palette, eliminating depth from the picture plane as he emphasized shapes, symbols, and text. “Rappaport’s” refers to a toy store known for its polka-dot wrapping paper (perhaps making “Rapt” a pun on wrapped) that was closing its doors that year. Davis might have been included this reference because of his toddler son.

**QUESTIONS:**

**4th–5th Grades:**

What recognizable lines, shapes, letters, and symbols do you see in this painting?

Davis used a limited color palette in this piece. How does the color encourage your eye to move around the composition?

**6th–8th Grades:**

What does the limited color palette do to alter the senses of perspective and space in the painting?

Davis referenced his favorite toy store in this piece. What forms do you recognize as possible references to the toy store?

**High School:**

Davis reinterpreted this composition multiple times with different outcomes. What do you think interested him about this composition?

If you were going to create a composition that you planned to repeat later, how would you arrange the shapes to keep it interesting?

**Background Information:** This work is one of Davis’s earliest paintings focused on text that he would spend the last phase of his career exploring. He began with the word “champion”—taken from a matchbook-cover advertisement for Champion Spark Plugs—for a variety of possible reasons. Davis had finally achieved recognition in the art world and perhaps saw himself as a champion of American art. There was also a 1949 movie titled *The Champion* related to boxing, one of Davis’s own pastimes. Davis has positioned the word within a frame, a common perspective technique for the artist, to appear as if it is standing inside a room or on a stage.

**QUESTIONS:**

4th–5th Grades:
- How did the artist frame the word “champion” within the space of the composition?
- Why might Davis have chosen the word “champion” to be the focus of his image?

6th–8th Grades:
- Other than “champion,” what is the purpose or meaning of the other lines, shapes, and words in the composition?
- Why did Davis paint lines and markings across the word “champion”?
- How does this alter the meaning of the word?

High School:
- At this time, Davis was interested in product labels, advertisements, and movies. What familiar references to any of these do you see in this work?
- If you were going to create a work that focuses on one word, what word would you choose?

**Background Information:** The subject matter of this piece includes text derived from television advertisements and urban signage. Davis limited his palette to green, yellow, red, black and white, to push the picture plane forward and emphasize the placement of shapes and letters. The words are turned on their sides or cut off in the middle, emphasizing their structure rather than their written meaning.

**QUESTIONS:**

**4th–5th grades:**
Why do you think Davis was interested in letters, words, and texts? How are the letters here similar to letters in advertisements? How are they different? How are the letters here similar to the letters that appear in earlier works such as *Visa* (1951)? How are they different? Why might Davis have changed the way he worked with letters?

**6th–8th Grades:**
How does Davis use text to create reference in his painting?
Why do you think Davis turned words around, cut words off, distorted letters, and cropped the composition?

**High School:**
In the last phase of his career, text became the subject of the work. Compare his progression in the use of text between 1951, (*Visa*) and 1963, (*Blips and Ifs*). How does Davis develop his use of text as subject matter for his work?
How does he use the shapes and forms of text to continue to tell his story of urban life?
Extra: If you were going to create a work about your life what words would you use? Which words would be emphasized and which would be disguised as abstract forms?
Pre-Visit Activities

4th–5th Grades: Color Copy Compositions

Art Reference: *Rapt at Rappaport’s* (1951–1952)

Vocabulary: inside, outside, overlap, depth, perspective, palette, pattern

Materials: Pencil, paper, black and colored markers, rulers, protractors, variety of tracing objects in different shapes

Background Information: Davis sometimes repeated his earlier compositions, changing the colors, patterns, symbols, and arrangements of shapes. In each new composition the overall theme, meaning, and emotion of the piece changed as well. In this project students will experiment with methods of creating their own compositions and completing them in different manners.

STEPS:

1. Imagine you are designing a busy city, and draw it using a variety of overlapping shapes. Trace many objects all over the page; consider the frame, the placement of objects, the directions and types of lines and shapes, and the way they overlap. Use a ruler to add diagonal perspective lines to define the space and depth of the composition.

2. Examine your drawing, squinting at the forms to see which come forward and which recede. Think about the lines that are necessary to define the shapes and how these lines overlap. With a black marker trace over the important lines of your composition. Trace only the lines you want to be visible, not those that are unnecessary to your final composition. Erase all pencil lines.

3. Photocopy or trace your image twice on two separate sheets of paper.

4. Add colors and patterns to one of the two designs, using a limited palette of just three colors plus black and the white of the page. Fill in one of the drawings with solid colors and patterns to complete the composition.

5. Now look at the first complete composition and decide what you will change or do differently for the second one. Change the choice or arrangement of colors, swap patterns with solid colors or vice versa, add or take away lines or shapes. Complete your second composition using three colors plus black and the white of the page.

6. Compare and contrast the two final compositions.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

Of the two compositions that you created, which one works better as an overall design, and why? Which is more pleasing to the eye?
Where do you see depth? What shapes come forward or move backwards?
Where does a pattern that you added help define an area of the image?
What makes sense and what does not make sense in your composition? Explain.
What colors work, which don’t work, and why?
**6th–8th Grades: Dual-View Perspective**

**Art Reference:** *House and Street* (1931) and *For Internal Use Only* (1944–1945)

**Vocabulary:** cityscape, interior, exterior, one-point perspective, two-point perspective

**Materials:** pencil, paper, rulers, color pencils, eraser

**Background Info:** In *House and Street* (1931) and *For Internal Use Only* (1944–1945) Davis began repeating compositions and dual perspective techniques to explore different kinds of spaces on a canvas. These works refer to Davis’s home, studio, his love of Jazz music, and hanging out in music venues in New York. In this project students will explore ways to utilize and develop space on a canvas by creating multiple-view perspective.

**STEPS:**

1. Draw two large horizontal rectangles on a sheet of paper, one above and one below. On the first, put a dot in the middle of the rectangle and, using a ruler, draw diagonal lines from each bottom corner to the dot.

2. Draw a rectangle representing building inside the rectangle, on one side of it and parallel to its side. Connect the inside corners of the building to the dot in the middle of the rectangle to create an illusion of the side of the building receding into space.

3. Continue to create a cityscape using the top rectangle as a frame and using one-point perspective. Shade in the sides of the buildings to create dimensional shadows. Try drawing windows on the sides using the dot as a perspective point for converging angles.

4. In the lower rectangle draw a vertical line, dividing it in half. In one half, create a one-point perspective cityscape again.

5. In the other half, draw two dots, one above the other, to create focal points for a two-point-perspective drawing. Connect each dot with diagonal lines to the corners nearest to them. This will create the structure of an interior space. Fill in the space with furniture, windows, and a door, using the dots as perspective points for converging angles.

6. Continue to add details and colors to both sides to complete your first dual-perspective composition

**REFLECTION QUESTIONS:**

- Compare the space of the first drawing and the second. How does your eye move around and through each scene?
- How does one-point perspective help you create space on a flat surface?
- Where can you see one- or two-point perspective in real life?
- How does the dual-perspective image make you feel?
- Do you think you could create more images using the one- or the two-point perspective technique?
- Can you create realistic imagery using these techniques? Can you experiment with distorted, cubist or surreal imagery using these techniques?
**High School: The Repetition of Subject**

*Art Reference:* *Rapt at Rappaport’s* (1951–1952) and *Landscape with Saw* (1922)

*Vocabulary:* inside, outside, overlap, depth, perspective, palette, pattern, landscape, repetition

*Materials:* pencil, paper, black and colored markers, still-life objects, card stock, watercolor paper, gouache or watercolor paint

*Background Info:* Davis sometimes used the working method of creating groups or “families” of related paintings, often based on the compositions of his own, much earlier works. The arrangement of forms in his Cubist-inspired *Landscape with Saw* was repeated in later pieces, including *Rapt at Rappaport’s*. In each work the placement of the colors, patterns and perspective lines creates a completely new result. In this project each student will create their own composition through observation and then reinterpret it to change the results.

**STEPS:**

1. Choose an everyday object that resonates with you to draw; choose from a selection provided by the teacher or bring one from home. Draw the object from observation, adding details of the space it occupies, and any diagonal perspective lines that help define the space—for example a table edge or parts of the room.

2. Examine the drawing and decide which lines are essential to the composition. These might be outlines and perhaps also some interior lines and details. Outline the essential lines of the drawing with a marker and erase the pencil lines.

3. Trace or photocopy this drawing two to four times onto separate sheets of paper; if painting, use a transfer process to trace onto cardstock or other heavy paper. You will approach the same line drawing with up to four different ideas selected from those below. Or try a few of the suggestions then think of your own alterations.

4. Color the composition with solid colors using a limited palette of three colors plus black and white.

5. Complete the composition by adding colors, patterns, and textures to different areas.

6. Create a landscape or cityscape inside of one of the objects or shapes of your composition.

7. Add text and letters to the composition.

8. Add perspective lines to the composition, both for the total image and for the individual elements within it, to play with perception of space.

9. Add one-point perspective to your composition to create space and depth.

**REFLECTION QUESTIONS:**

- How does the meaning of each composition vary depending on how it is completed?
- How does color affect the meaning of the composition?
- How does adding perspective(s) change the way your eye moves around the composition?
- What other methods can you think of to vary the outcome of your composition without changing the immediate outlines?
Extra Project, All Ages: Wild Words


Vocabulary: text, font, thesaurus, synonym, antonym, definition

Materials: pencil, paper, black and colored markers, rulers, stencils, font samples, dictionary, thesaurus

Background Info: Davis spent the last phase of his career working with text in his compositions. He began with entire words, and as his compositions developed he cut the words short, turned them around, and made them into symbols that no longer held the same meaning as the original word. Davis chose words that may have held personal meaning to him. In this project, students will learn how they can alter the meaning of a word by the way it is presented.

STEPS:

1. Choose a word that has some significance to you, to your peers, to your family, or to current events. Brainstorm a few choices, then narrow them down until you have one that resonates.

2. Look up your word in the dictionary and write down your chosen definition. Also look up your word in the thesaurus and write down a few other words that have the same meaning (synonyms), and a few words that have an opposite meaning (antonyms).

3. Create a composition framed with perspective lines and with your chosen word in the center. Consider what font will help define your word.

4. Write other words around the page that reinforce the meaning of your word. Add symbols, drawing elements, and anything else that you want to help define the meaning of the word and composition.

5. Complete the composition with a limited palette of three colors plus black and white.

6. Repeat the exercise, but try to change the meaning of the word by changing parts of the composition. For example, the meaning might change from a positive to a negative connotation. Rethink all of the compositional elements to emphasize this new meaning of the word.

7. Compare the two compositions. Try sharing them with someone and see if they can guess the intended meaning of the two pieces.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

- How did the original definition of the word change in each of your compositions?
- What compositional elements did you use that helped define the word and the meaning of your composition?
- How does the use of color create meaning in a work of art?
- How does the use of pattern and line add meaning?
- How do words create meaning in an image? Can you express the same meaning without using words?
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