

Stuart Davis, *Swing Landscape* (1938)

Stuart Davis (1892-1964) was raised in New York by parents who were accomplished artists. Most of the family's closest friends and associates were artists as well, such as Robert Henri who served as a powerful influence on the young Davis. In 1901, the Davis family relocated to New Jersey, and over the following few years Henri and his colleagues moved to New York and formed an alliance known as the Ashcan School, or simply The Eight.

Davis entered the New York art world during a revolutionary time in modern American painting. Artists like the Eight were championing an art that reflected the experiences of the everyday world. Henri taught Davis to challenge the rules of academic painting and express his unique vision and experiences. The varied textures of New York culture drew the young artist to music halls where he first encountered that uniquely American form of music: jazz.

This music, with its improvisational character, exciting energy, and national roots, transformed Davis' artistic style, filling his depictions of everyday America with vibrant color, dynamic composition, and abstracted forms. Davis' style, which Karen Wilkin identifies as "a homegrown, personal brand of American Cubism" was rooted in his belief that an American artist's primary responsibility was to serve American society through his craft. Indeed, Davis worked throughout his life to create an art that reflected the culture and experiences of the American people.

The Federal Arts Project (FAP), under the aegis of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's Works Progress Administration (WPA), provided artists, musicians, and actors with much-needed employment during the devastating years of the Great Depression. Many of the public artworks commissioned by the FAP are still enjoyed today in libraries, post offices, and other civic buildings across the U.S. They are especially valued for their reflections of the values, themes, and subjects of the American people and their history.

The FAP originally commissioned *Swing Landscape* for display at the Williamsburg Housing Project in Brooklyn, New York. However, the mural was instead sold through the Federal Art Gallery in New York, ultimately finding its new home at the

Indiana University Art Museum. Hailed as “the most important painting by an American artist in the 1930’s,” *Swing Landscape* is particularly important in American art history because it challenged the stylistic sensibilities of this public art initiative. Perhaps due to the painting’s experimental characteristics—the jarring juxtaposition of contrasting colors, the fracturing of space and form into a carefully controlled chaos—the painting was rejected by the FAP. Today, *Swing Landscape* epitomizes the dynamic, disorienting, and even aggressive excitement of urban life, inspired by Davis’ love of large-scale advertising, especially the images of commercial billboards.

Here, Stuart Davis transforms the quaint seaport of Gloucester, Massachusetts into a dense, bold, and vibrant landscape mural where swing music and billboard advertising inspires the visual language of art. Davis combines the flat, interlocking color shapes of Cubism with the textures, syncopations, and rhythms of jazz. *Swing Landscape* challenges and disorients the viewer, shattering and reassembling the world from multiple perspectives, confusing the viewer’s sense of depth and almost completely abstracting recognizable forms and images.

Questions to Consider

1. How does this painting differ from what a person might see in a photograph?
2. Describe the different shapes you see in this painting.
3. Can you find any recognizable things in this painting?
4. What do you think Davis is trying to depict in this painting?
5. What is the most noticeable thing in the painting? How did Davis emphasize that area of the painting?
6. How does Davis utilize the characteristic features of jazz and swing music?
7. Find an example where Davis suggested a three-dimensional object by using relatively few colored forms.
8. What do you feel when you look at this painting? What particular features provoke this feeling?
9. What type of message might this painting suggest to people in a housing project? In a gallery? During the Great Depression?
10. How are the images of advertising similar to this image?
11. Is this painting simple or complicated? Or both?

Connections

Arts: Cubism, Modernism. Landscapes

Civics: The New Deal, the Works Progress Administration, the Federal Arts Project.

Geography: New York City (the originally intended site of this mural's display),

Gloucester, Massachusetts (the setting depicted in the painting).

Historical Connections: The Great Depression.

Historical Figures: President Franklin D. Roosevelt.

Mathematics: Geometric elements.

Music: Jazz, Swing.

Further Reading

Indiana University Art Museum. *IUAM Top 20*.

http://www.iub.edu/~iuam/online_modules/top20/ (accessed November 20, 2008).

Kelder, Diane, ed. *Stuart Davis*. New York: Praeger Publishers, 1971.

Sims, Lowery Stoke, ed. *Stuart Davis: American Painted*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art in association with Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1991.

Smith, Roberta. "Stuart Davis, Picture Builder." *Art in America* 64 (September/October 1976): 80-86.

Walker Art Center. *Stuart Davis; an Exhibition Organized by the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis*. 1957.

Wilkin, Karen. *Stuart Davis*. New York: Abbeville Press, 1987.

Teachers' Resources

Work: Swing Landscape (1938)

Artist: Stuart Davis

Location of work: Indiana University Art Museum (IUAM)

Vocabulary/Key Concept(s):

Works Program Administration (WPA) was created in 1935 to help provide economic relief to the citizens of the United States who were suffering through the Great Depression.

Federal Arts Project (FAP) was created in 1935 to provide work relief for artists in various media.

Great Depression Period of severe economic depression that began in 1929 in the United States.

Franklin D. Roosevelt Thirty-second president of the United States from 1933-1945.

New Deal Series of programs started by President Franklin D. Roosevelt to help the nation (United States) recover from the Great Depression.

Jazz

Syncopation is a major characteristic of jazz music. This is a rhythm in 2/4 time.

Rhythm is regular or irregular repetition of lines, shape, color and pattern in a work of art or music (composition).

Improvisation Customizing and elaborating on a composition – no previously devised plan.

Art Connection(s):

Mural A large image, such as a painting, applied to a wall or ceiling

Abstract Diverging from realism. Abstract refers to an idea or thought that is drawn away from the ordinary normal or real and then given an expression.

In **Abstract Art**, the artist expresses not a representation of objective forms but his or her emotional or intellectual reactions to the forms – sometimes by energetic and furious line and brilliant and vehement color, at other times through non-objective forms, strongly resembling geometric designs/shapes.

Cityscape An artwork that shows/depicts a view of a city

Geometric Mathematical shapes and forms

e.g.: straight lines, circles, squares, rectangles

Realistic Accurate representation

Geography Connection(s):
Gloucester, Massachusetts

Time Line Connection:
20th Century

Great Depression An economic depression in the United States that began in 1929

Resources:

National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) *Picturing America* website:
<http://picturingamerica.neh.gov/>

Connect to web links below by clicking on individual address or access through the NEH site for Additional Resources at:

http://picturingamerica.neh.gov/about.php?subPage=about_ad_res

http://edsitement.neh.gov/view_lesson_plan.asp?id=641

National Endowment for the Humanities, EDSITement, *Horse of a Different Color: An Introduction to Color in the Visual Arts* has two lesson plans on color; the first: In-Depth with the Full Spectrum, for Grade 9-12, introduces students to color basics, the color wheel, and how artists manipulate color to draw attention to the aspects of their work.

http://www.getty.edu/education/for_teachers/building_lessons/

Getty Museum Education department Web site, *Teachers' Programs and Resources*, is designed for K-12 teachers who wish to introduce art and art history into their classrooms. The site uses works from the museum's collection along with pages A Grade-by-Grade Guide, The Elements of Art (teaching the formal components of art such as line and color) and a PDF file, Lesson Template.

http://edsitement.neh.gov/view_lesson_plan.asp?id=620

National Endowment for the Humanities, EDSITement, *Realistic Impressions: Investigating Movement in the Visual Arts*, for Grade 9-12, teaches students about the meaning of the terms "movement" in the visual arts, and covers the major movements of Impressionism, Realism, and Romanticism, with links to other movements in the arts.

Monroe County Public Library (MCPL) Bloomington, Indiana University
(812) 349-3050 – To Reserve Resource Materials

Franklin Delano Roosevelt

Franklin Delano Roosevelt for Kids by Richard Panchyk

Call Number: J921 Roosevelt Pan (Children's Activities)

Includes: Biographical information, pictures, and student activities (teacher resources).

Jazz

Extraordinary People in Jazz by Marvin Martin

Call Number: J780.922 Ma (Children's Collection)

Includes: Biographical information., images, glossary, and additional references.

Web sites:

Swing Landscape

Indiana University Art Museum

http://www.iub.edu/~iuam/iuam_home.php

- click on Teach and Learn
- click on E-Learning
- scroll down to “Second Grade Web Module” for *Swing Landscape* image, information, and Teacher Resources,(PDF)

Great Depression

<http://www.brainpop.com/socialstudies/ushistory/greatdepression/preview.weml>

Includes: Information, images and animated movie.

Great Depression (Causes of)

<http://www.brainpop.com/socialstudies/ushistory/greatdepressioncauses/preview.weml>

Includes: Information, images, and animated movie.

Stuart Davis

<http://www.brickhau.com/amoore/magazine/Davis.html>

Includes: Biographical information

<http://www.articons.co.uk/davies.htm>

Includes: Biographical information

http://www.jasonkaufman.com/articles/stuart_davis_american_modernist.htm

Includes: Biographical information

<http://www.philamuseum.org/exhibitions/exhibits/stuardavis.shtml>

Includes: Biographical information

<http://www.onlineessays.com/essays/arts/art048.php>

Includes: Biographical information

Federal Art Project (FAP)

<http://www.loc.gov/rr/program/bib/newdeal/fap.html>

Includes: Information, online materials, and collections (images) from museum archives –
New Deal Programs: Selected by the Library of Congress Resources

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Federal_Art_Project

Includes: Definition, images and additional resources

New Deal/ Works Program Administration (WPA) Art In Indiana

<http://www.wpamurals.com/indiana.htm>

Includes: complete listing (with images) of mural art in Indiana Post Offices

<http://ww.wpamurals.com/>

Includes: New Deal Art during the Great Depression – information, images, and additional resources

<http://www.keyshistory.org/artwpa.html>

Includes: Information and images.

Jazz

<http://www.brainpop.com/socialstudies/ushistory/jazz/preview.weml>

Includes: Information, animated movie and additional teacher resources.

Indiana Academic Standards – Visual Arts Grade/Level 5

RESPONDING TO ART: History

Standard 1

Students understand the significance of visual art in relation to historical, social, political, spiritual, environmental, technological, and economic issues.

5.1.1 Identify the relationship between a work of art and the geography and characteristics of the culture, and identify where, when, why, and by whom the work was made (Focus: North America).

5.1.2 Identify and compare works of art and artifacts with similar functions.

5.1.3 Identify themes and symbols used in works of art and artifacts throughout history that portray universal ideas and beliefs.

Standard 2

Students recognize significant works of Western and non-Western art and understand the chronological development of art movements.

5.2.1 Identify and be familiar with a range of selected works of art identifying artists, culture, style, and period.

5.2.2 Identify distinguishing characteristics of style in individual artists work and art movements.

5.2.3 Begin to identify works of art and artifacts from major periods or movements of Western art and place on a chronological time line.

RESPONDING TO ART: Criticism

Standard 3

Students describe, analyze, and interpret works of art and artifacts.

5.3.1 Analyze the artist's use of sensory, formal, technical, and expressive properties in a work of art.

5.3.2 Construct meaning in the work based on personal response, properties found in the work, and background information on the context of the work.

5.3.3 Use appropriate art vocabulary.

Page 5th Grade

Standard 4

Students identify and apply criteria to make informed judgments about art.

5.4.1 Listen to multiple critiques of works of art by peers, teachers, people from the art world and identify criteria used.

5.4.2 Apply criteria based on properties found in the work and research from the historical context of the work to make informed judgments.

RESPONDING TO ART: Aesthetics

Standard 5

Students reflect on and discuss art theories and aesthetic issues concerning the meaning and significance of art.

5.5.1 Identify problems or puzzles in a work of art or aesthetic issue, construct a hypothesis,

and evaluate alternate hypotheses.

5.5.2 Identify and analyze a variety of well reasoned points of view on aesthetic issues (censorship, plagiarism) and develop a personal point of view.

Standard 6

Students theorize about art and make informed judgments.

5.6.1 Identify artwork made from the artist's philosophy that art is at its best when it moves people to act for the betterment of society (instrumentalism).

5.6.2 Understand that personal preference is one of many criteria used in making judgments about art.

CAREERS AND COMMUNITY

Standard 11

Students recognize a variety of art-related professions and careers in our society.

5.11.1 Identify the roles of artists and critics in the community.

5.11.2 Identify various responsibilities of selected careers in art (illustrator, costume and set designer, sculptor, display designer, painter, graphic designer, animator, visual editor).

Standard 12

Students understand how art experiences affect daily life and identify opportunities for involvement in the arts.

5.12.1 Identify individual art experiences and how these affect daily life.

5.12.2 Visit, analyze, and respond to art at local museums, exhibitions, performances, and exhibited by visiting artists in the school.

5.12.3 Identify ways in which the arts are supported in the community.

INTEGRATED STUDIES

Standard 13

Students identify and make connections between knowledge and skill in art and all other subject areas such as humanities, sciences, and technology.

5.13.1 Compare characteristics of a theme, historical period, or event through the multiple perspectives of different disciplines.

5.13.2 Create products or performances (debates, critiques, papers) that communicate in-depth knowledge gained through integrated study of a theme, historical period, or event.

Standard 14

Students understand the connections between many art forms including dance, theater, music, visual arts, and media arts.

5.14.1 Compare characteristics of a theme, historical period, or event through the multiple perspectives of different art forms.

5.14.2 Create products or performances (debates, critiques, papers, artwork) that communicate in-depth knowledge gained through integrated study of a theme, historical period, or event.

National Academic Standards – Visual Arts – Level 5

Content Standard #3: Choosing and evaluating a range of subject matter, symbols, and ideas
Achievement Standard:

Students integrate visual, spatial, and temporal concepts with content to communicate intended meaning in their artworks Students use subjects, themes, and symbols that demonstrate knowledge of contexts, values, and aesthetics that communicate intended meaning in artworks

Content Standard #4: Understanding the visual arts in relation to history and cultures
Achievement Standard:

Students know and compare the characteristics of artworks in various eras and cultures
Students describe and place a variety of art objects in historical and cultural contexts

Students analyze, describe, and demonstrate how factors of time and place (such as climate, resources, ideas, and technology) influence visual characteristics that give meaning and value to a work of art

Content Standard #5: Reflecting upon and assessing the characteristics and merits of their work and the work of others

Achievement Standard:

Students compare multiple purposes for creating works of art

Students analyze contemporary and historic meanings in specific artworks through cultural and aesthetic inquiry

Students describe and compare a variety of individual responses to their own artworks and to artworks from various eras and cultures

Content Standard #6: Making connections between visual arts and other disciplines

Achievement Standard:

Students compare the characteristics of works in two or more art forms that share similar subject matter, historical periods, or cultural context

Students describe ways in which the principles and subject matter of other disciplines taught in the school are interrelated with the visual arts