

Stuart Davis —

American Modernist and Jazz Enthusiast

© Estate of Stuart Davis/Licensed
by VAGA, New York, NY

Stuart Davis, American,
1894–1964, *Gloucester
Harbor*, 1938, oil on
canvas, mounted on panel,
23 1/16 x 30 1/8 inches, museum
purchase with funds provided
by the Agnes Cullen Arnold
Endowment Fund, 77.330.

Stuart Davis's work is characterized by:

- Recognizable imagery transformed into lively abstractions with simplified shapes and brilliant colors.
- Dynamic and rhythmic compositions that reflect the artist's interest in jazz music.

Artist

Stuart Davis was raised in an artistic environment. His mother was a sculptor and his father—a former pupil of the artist Robert Henri—was the art editor of a Philadelphia newspaper. In 1913 Davis visited the Armory Show in New York, the first major American exhibition of avant-garde European art. It was, he recalled, “the greatest shock to me—the greatest single influence I have experienced.” By the time he visited Paris in 1928, Davis already was employing Cubist structure and Fauve color. He also was interested in words and images from advertising, which he incorporated into some of his paintings.

Subject

Between 1915 and 1934, Davis spent his summers in the picturesque town of Gloucester on Cape Ann in northeastern Massachusetts. The area inspired a number of his paintings, including this vibrant view of the bustling harbor. Boats, piers, houses, and even smoke are arranged in a complex composition of flat shapes and vibrant colors. The painting itself takes the shape of a ship's flag, a motif found throughout the artist's work. Like many of Davis's paintings from the 1930s, this work celebrates the urban American environment.

Style

Combining an interest in Cubism with an insistence on realism, Davis searched for abstract patterns in everyday scenes. In this lively painting, he transformed a bustling harbor into a rhythmic arrangement of color and shape. Like the Cubists—whose work he first saw at the Armory Show—Davis reduced his objects to simplified geometric forms, then reassembled them to create a composition that is emphatically two-dimensional. Although he used overlapping to suggest depth, the mountains and buildings in the background are as brightly colored and as precisely outlined as the objects in the foreground. The use of color for its expressive rather than descriptive qualities recalls the work of the Fauves, especially Henri Matisse—whose work was included in the Armory Show. Davis was among the first painters to appreciate jazz, and *Gloucester Harbor* is alive with the energetic syncopation and improvisation of this uniquely American music.

Context

Davis resolved to become a “modern” artist after visiting the Armory Show in 1913. Named after the building in which it was housed, this landmark event featured approximately 1,300 works of art. After opening in New York, the show traveled to Chicago and Boston. About two-thirds of the exhibition was devoted to contemporary American art, but the real impact of the Armory Show was in its bold attempt to trace the development of modern European art. The exhibition included paintings by leading Realists, Impressionists, Post-Impressionists, Fauves, and Cubists, as well as works by avant-garde artists such as Marcel Duchamp, Wassily Kandinsky, and Constantin Brancusi. Approximately 300,000 people visited the Armory Show, which marked the true beginning of modernism in the United States.



Stuart Davis, American,
1894–1964, *Gloucester
Harbor*, 1938, oil on
canvas, mounted on panel,
23 1/16 x 30 1/8 inches, museum
purchase with funds provided
by the Agnes Cullen Arnold
Endowment Fund, 77.330.

**The Museum of Fine Arts,
Houston
Kinder Foundation
Teacher Resource Center
713-639-7588
resource@mfa.org
www.mfa.org**

*This Art Card is made possible by
generous grants from the Edward and
Betty Marcus Foundation and the
National Endowment for the Arts,
a federal agency.*

Discussion Questions

- Examine this painting and list as many elements of a harbor as you can find. Can you think of anything that Davis may have forgotten? What would you include that Davis did not?
- What do you think it would feel like to be part of this scene? What noises would you hear? Where would you be standing? What would you do?
- In *Gloucester Harbor*, Davis has reduced the scene to geometric shapes and vivid colors. How would this painting appear if the shapes were organic and painted only in black, white, and gray?

Classroom Ideas

- Davis often referred to his works as “Color Space Compositions.” Using white or black paper as your background, arrange colored pieces of paper to create your own interpretation of a Color Space Composition. This painting is made in the shape of a flag. What shape would you want your composition to be?
- Davis often said he was influenced by the cool sounds of jazz music and “Earl Hines’s hot piano.” Research this style of music and its influence on the visual arts. Can you find the connections between *Gloucester Harbor* and jazz?
- Examine this painting while listening to jazz music. What words would you use to describe *Gloucester Harbor*? What words would you use to describe the music? What words describe both? Develop a Venn diagram illustrating your choices.

For Further Study from the MFAH Kinder Foundation Teacher Resource Center

VC950

*20th-Century American Art:
Highlights of the Permanent
Collection of the Whitney
Museum of American Art*

Video: 30 minutes

H/A

This video explores the
Whitney Museum in
New York, from its
fascinating history
to its rich collection of
20th-century American art.

SP601

*American Images:
Selections from the
James and Mari Michener
Collection of 20th-Century
American Art*

15 prints, text

E/M/H

Using works by artists such
as Marsden Hartley and
Helen Frankenthaler, this
program helps children look
at and understand modern
American art.