

## 56: Stuart Davis *Landscape with Garage Lights* (1931–32)

Karen Wilkin

If one were to choose a paradigmatic Stuart Davis painting of the early 1930s, *Landscape with Garage Lights* might well be it. Its angular, loose-jointed structure of flat planes, its intense color, its vernacular theme, even its gasoline pumps and industrial light fixtures, are all emblematic of the artist's concerns of the time. Broadly speaking, *Landscape with Garage Lights* exemplifies the early pictures, dating from the mid-1920s through the early 1930s, in which Davis developed a personal, idiosyncratic language of form and color—"Color-Space-Logic," as he called it—informed equally by his understanding of cubist structure and his acute perceptions of the specific. *Landscape with Garage Lights*, at once inventively abstract and particular, announces Davis's double identity as an uncompromising modernist who claimed descent from the European avant-garde, and as an American painter of uniquely American experience.

If *Landscape with Garage Lights* is a typical Davis of its period, it is also surprising, since its point of departure is recognizably the streetscape and harbor of a small New England town, while its author's reputation is bound up with his evocation of urban themes. Davis spent virtually his entire working life in New York City (almost all but his last decade south of Fourteenth Street), delighting in the visual chaos, the cacophony, energy, and speed of modern city life. He insisted that his paintings were not abstractions, but rather distillations of his emotional and perceptual responses to his surroundings, captured in drawn "configurations" and made dynamic by color contrasts. In a famous description of "things which have made me want to paint, outside of other paintings," written in 1943, Davis itemized such twentieth-century urban phenomena as "skyscraper architecture" and "electric signs," as well as taxicabs, storefronts, and "fast travel by train, auto, and aeroplane." Jazz, also inventoried, was a lifelong passion, its uninhibited rhythms and unpredictable harmonies obviously reflected in Davis's brash palette and syncopated compositions. Yet he also listed "the landscape and boats of Gloucester, Mass."<sup>1</sup>—the setting for *Landscape with Garage Lights*.

It is significant that Davis named Gloucester, on Cape Ann, north of Boston, specifically. Although an artists' center since the nineteenth century (with varying degrees of relevance), Gloucester is not a traditionally picturesque or pretty seaside town like its neighbor Rockport, but a gritty working fishing port set in an austere, rocky landscape deeply penetrated by fingers of sea. The town's steep hills are lined with no-nonsense clapboard houses, punctuated by the occasional extravagant turret or church tower, with everything bathed in brilliant light. Davis first came to Gloucester in 1915 at twenty-two and returned almost every summer until 1934. His first years there were formative, following as they did upon his first serious exposure to modernist art at the great international exhibition of 1913, the Armory Show. That experience convinced him that he "would quite definitely have to become a 'modern' artist."<sup>2</sup> As the precocious star pupil of the anti-academic school run by the Ashcan school realist, Robert Henri, Davis had already learned to express feelings about modern life by employing heightened color and free drawing.<sup>3</sup> The young painter had even had several watercolors included in the Armory Show's juried American section, but seeing them in proximity to European avant garde work made him question his direction. Davis entered a decade-long self-imposed apprenticeship to the Europeans he admired, first trying out the implications of Van Gogh, Gauguin, and Matisse, then attempting to come to grips with Picasso, Braque, and Picabia, among others.

The clear light, rocky landscape, and economical architecture of Gloucester and Cape Ann probably shaped Davis's development into a "Modern artist." He found justification there for the tipped space and geometric dissection of forms encouraged by his study of European modernism; his



earliest experiments with cubism were, in fact, Gloucester images, painted about 1916, in which he “discovered” overlapping planes in rows of houses, narrow alleys, and crowded tombstones. Davis’s work of the late teens and early 1920s is characterized by its variousness as he tested possibilities, painting the cornfields of Pennsylvania as if aspiring to be Van Gogh, depicting the balconies of Havana as if taking advice from Matisse, and tackling tabletop still lifes as if competing with Braque. His elegant “portraits” of light-bulbs and percolators, like his fictive collages—meticulously painted facsimiles

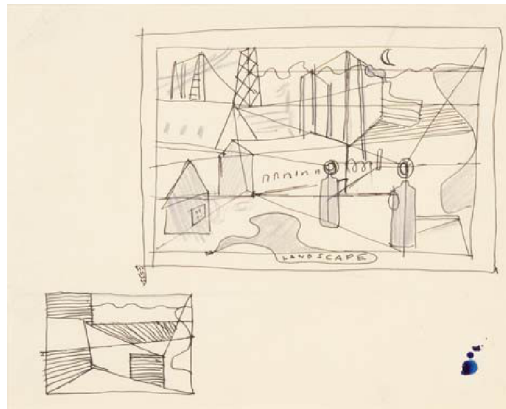
of oversized cigarette wrappers—seem to anticipate both his own late paintings and pop art. These multivalent themes notwithstanding, by the mid-1920s, Gloucester images had become major motifs in Davis’s work. He continued to explore a variety of approaches, even flirting with abstractness in the *Eggbeater* still lifes of 1927 and 1928. But as the 1920s progressed, his pictures increasingly came to depend, as *Landscape with Garage Lights* would, on schematic evocations of the streetscapes and harbors of Gloucester and nearby Rockport, treated like stage sets where gas pumps and the occasional tree, mast, or hoist become surrogate figures enacting casual dramas.

By the late 1920s, however, despite the persistence of Gloucester themes in his work, Davis had begun to spend less time on Cape Ann, definitively interrupting his summers there with a sojourn in Paris in 1928 and 1929.<sup>4</sup> In Paris, as in Gloucester, he painted streetscapes, translating them into inventive two-dimensional structures and even more inventive orchestrations of jazzy color, enlivened by shorthand renderings of details that struck him as uniquely Parisian: railings, shutters, mansards, café furniture, and more. After his return to the United States, his eye refreshed by absence and stimulated by his first-hand encounters with adventurous French painting, Davis continued to work in this mode, enhancing economical compositions of colored planes with sharply observed details of place, this time of wholly American places. Some sketchbooks of the early 1930s itemize New York subway entrances, El stations, and the Empire State Building, still under construction; others record the paraphernalia of Gloucester docks. In the *New York-Paris* pictures of 1931, Davis conflated observed American motifs and remembered French fragments in illogical but provocative relationships, like dream images. *Landscape with Garage Lights*, painted a year later, reveals both Davis’s rediscovery of Gloucester and the effects of his Paris stay. Such Gloucester landmarks as the coal derrick, the fish processing plant, and the gasoline pumps that appear in this painting had all played important roles in earlier works; the clear geometry, shifting scales, unstable space, and above all, the exuberant patterns and full-throttle hues, demonstrate a new, perhaps

European-inspired audacity, while the seductive drape and scalloped edge of the awning, like the delicately drawn, ambiguous bottles below it, recall images in Davis’s drawings of French cafés.

Another component must be considered: the popularity of “American Scene” social realist painting, as exemplified by Thomas Hart Benton’s or Grant Wood’s idealized images of rural life. Davis loathed such work, finding it sentimental in mood and

(Facing page)  
Stuart Davis,  
1894–1964  
*Landscape with Garage Lights*,  
1931–32  
Oil on canvas, 32 x 41½ in.  
Marion Stratton Gould Fund,  
51.3  
Art ©Estate of Stuart Davis/  
Licensed by VAGA, New York,  
New York



Stuart Davis,  
1894–1964  
Study for “*Landscape with Garage Lights*”, ca. 1931–32  
Pen and ink with graphite  
on wove paper, 8½ x 11 in.  
Marion Stratton Gould Fund,  
95.53  
Art ©Estate of Stuart Davis/  
Licensed by VAGA, New York,  
New York

Stuart Davis,  
1894–1964  
From Sketchbook 3, Drawing for  
“*Landscape with Garage Lights*,”  
1931  
Pen and ink on paper,  
8½ in. x 11½ in.  
Marion Stratton Gould Fund,  
95.54  
Art ©Estate of Stuart Davis/  
Licensed by VAGA, New York,  
New York



ALSO IN THE MAG COLLECTION:

Stuart Davis,

1894–1964

*Composition*, 1931

Oil on canvas, 17½ x 19½ in.

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Thomas

G. Spencer, 53.24

Art ©Estate of Stuart Davis/

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New York



reactionary in form. “The only corn-fed art that was successful,” he quipped, “was the pre-Columbian.”<sup>5</sup> Davis was a politically engaged, passionate activist who espoused progressive positions and helped found and run important artists’ organizations during the Depression years. But he always separated his social activism from his work in the studio, insisting that aesthetic concerns and propaganda were incompatible. “Art is not politics nor is it the servant of politics,” he wrote in 1936. “It is a valid, independent category of human activity.”<sup>6</sup> For practical reasons, however, Davis’s dealer, Edith Halpert, urged him to take a more sympathetic view of the social realist painters’ concerns. He responded to the challenge with the exhibition *Stuart Davis: American Scene*, held at Halpert’s Downtown Gallery in March 1932. The show, which included *Landscape with Garage Lights*, was his demonstration of how images could be rooted in the specific American experience without compromising formal daring or inventiveness. Davis’s close observation and affection for Gloucester are palpable; so are his thorough understanding of the achievements of Picasso, Miró, Matisse, and Léger, and his ability to express unexpected, evocative visual ideas in a native, colloquial dialect of cubism.

*Landscape with Garage Lights* embodies all these concerns and more. Davis himself, though, would have cautioned against over-interpretation. “Too much is expected of Art,” he wrote, “that it mean all kinds of things and is the solution to questions no one can answer. Art is much simpler than that. Its pretensions more modest. Art is a sign, an insignia to celebrate the faculty for invention.”<sup>7</sup>

Karen Wilkin is the author of *Stuart Davis* and the curator of the touring exhibition *The Drawings of Stuart Davis: The Amazing Continuity*.