

# ALEXANDRE

## Independent 20th Century



**Stuart Davis: Night Moves**  
**Presented by Alexandre Gallery in**  
**cooperation with Vail Caldwell Projects**  
**Cipriani South Street at the Battery**  
**Maritime Building**  
**September 5 – 8, 2024**

Alexandre is pleased to present a selection of early works by Stuart Davis (American, 1892–1964). Insightful, energetic representations of a young artist's introduction to the world and to his own artistic identity, these seldom seen paintings and works on paper demonstrate the evolution of a distinct, articulated visual vocabulary and unmistakable American subject matter which he would continue to pursue throughout his career. These

early works, described as full of "pathos and power" by Joseph Edgar Chamberlain in a 1911 *Evening Mail* review, provide a vital window into the remarkable confluence of ideas that led to Davis's development of his singular artistic vision, and reveal his early connection to the underground emergence of ragtime and blues that would form the basis of American vernacular music throughout much of the 20th century. "Stuart Davis: Night Moves" is presented in cooperation with Vail Caldwell Projects.

In November of 1909, just shy of his seventeenth birthday and with the blessing of his artist parents, a young Stuart Davis dropped out of high school in East Orange, New Jersey, and became a student of Robert Henri in Manhattan. It was there, under the guidance of Henri and John Sloan, that Davis first began to develop his identity as an artist, engaged with the ideas of these senior members of what came to be known as the Ashcan school. This work was rooted in what was then a radical portrayal of lived reality, depicting modern life with shrewd observation and strongly resisting the romanticization of urban poverty that had previously been commonplace in the work of academic painters and magazine illustrators. In 1913, Davis began contributing illustrations to the innovative socialist magazine *The Masses*, bringing him closer to the creative community of Greenwich Village, and placing him at the epicenter of discourse surrounding the social role of art and illustration. He gained recognition—and notoriety—for his illustrations which showed a side of New York that polite society wished to ignore: one which freely acknowledged the presence of poverty and vice within a setting of decayed grandeur.

Davis, alongside his fellow young artist friends Glenn O. Coleman and Henry Glintenkamp, enthusiastically accepted Henri's mandate to observe, exploring the city's environs from Chinatown to Newark while conveniently satiating their appetites for liquor, ragtime, and the musical culture that gave birth to jazz. Davis's engagement with the underground

and avant-garde remained a lifelong passion, first formed in a young man with an Ashcan artist's curiosity for spectacle burlesque, vaudeville and the downtown scene. Places like the Greenwich Village Inn, a recognized epicenter for radical Bohemianism where the food was cheap, the decor spartan, and the mood rowdy; the Newark Barrel Houses, where up-tempo piano blues could be heard; or Minsky's Burlesque, where a particular brand of American burlesque drew crowds to shows declared obscene, are all subjects of Davis's early work. His introduction to a trailblazing musical culture which emerged in African American communities in the Mississippi Valley towards the end of the 19th century and brought north by the Great Migration, ragtime, the blues, and the work of legendary composers such as Scott Joplin, James Scott and Joseph Lamb, would instill in Davis a lifelong passion and be a source of creative inspiration. Davis's affinity for the dynamic, improvisational character of what he identified as, "the great American art expression,"<sup>1</sup> influenced his approach to form and structure, and his realization that a visual medium can accurately convey the experiential nature of a moment or sound.

1913 also brought a groundbreaking shift in Davis's perspective, when the inclusion of five of his watercolors in the Armory Show provided his first formal introduction to the work of European modernists. Although he did not seem immediately drawn to the examples of cubism there, which would heavily influence his mature style, he was greatly affected by the use of arbitrary color and the emphasis upon form and structure over content that he saw in the work of such artists as Gauguin, van Gogh, and Matisse. He would later recall this show as "the greatest single influence I have experienced...All my immediately subsequent efforts went toward incorporating Armory Show ideas into my work."<sup>2</sup> These immediate efforts included cautious experimentations with color and, crucially, the introduction of complex, compact structures and spaces within his compositions.

While Henri's dedication to realism contradicted the modernist belief in a work of art as its own autonomous creation, his emphasis on independent discovery foregrounded Davis's openness to revolutionary ideas. As a result, Davis, unlike other members of the Ashcan School, was more nimble, fluidly adapting his many passions – Ashcan, Jazz, modernism – into a distinct vision. Throughout the rest of his career, while maintaining a belief in the lived experience, Davis rigorously distilled his subject matter to ultimately develop a singular modernist vocabulary entirely his own.

Image: Stuart Davis, *Negro Dance Hall*, 1915, crayon, graphite and ink on paper 21 3/8 x 16 3/4 inches  
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1 Stuart Davis, Autograph manuscript diary, May 29, 1921, MA 5062, 39, Department of Literary and Historical Manuscripts, The Morgan Library and Museum, New York.

2 Stuart Davis, quoted in James Johnson Sweeney, *Stuart Davis* (exh. Cat., Museum of Modern Art, New York), 1945, 9.