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Robert Fishko, *Director*

## **STUART DAVIS**

[1892 – 1964]

*Sketchbook 23-1 (Study for “Pennsylvania”), c.1946*

mixed media on paper

16 1/2 x 13 3/4 (13 5/8 X 12 3/8 sight size) inches

Signed upper center “*Stuart Davis*”

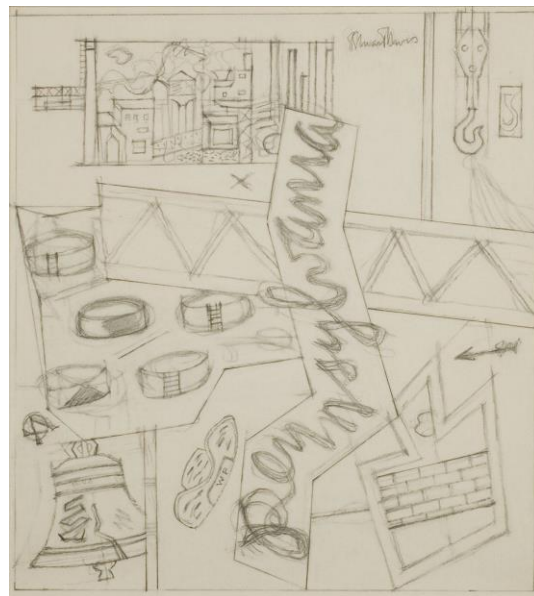
Signed in margin upper right “*Stuart*”

Inscribed in margin upper left to right: “*Not only No. of elements but of Directions, Space, Sizes & Colors / Chaos in the Form of a Landscape*”

Inscribed in margin middle right (vertically)

“*Pennsylvania*”

Catalogue Raisonné p. 334, plate 685



## **Provenance**

The Artist

Earl Davis (the artist's son)

Private Collection, New York, NY (2006 – present)

## **Exhibitions**

*Selected Drawings and Watercolors*, Salander-O'Reilly Galleries, New York, NY,  
March 2 - April 1, 1988

*The Drawings of Stuart Davis: The Amazing Continuity*, American Federation of Arts,  
New York, NY, 1992 (exhibited as *Sheet from Sketchbook #23*)

## Literature

*Selected Drawings and Watercolors*, Salander-O'Reilly Galleries, New York, NY, March 2 - April 1, 1988, no. 5, Listed (as *Drawing for Pennsylvania*)

Wilkin and Kachur, *The Drawings of Stuart Davis: The Amazing Continuity*, American Federation of Arts, AFA, New York, NY, 1992, p. 109, no. 72, Illustrated (as *Sheet from Sketchbook #23*)

Agee, William C. and Wilkin, Karen. ed by Boyajian, Ani and Rutkoski, Mark, with a preface by Earl Davis. *Stuart Davis: A Catalogue Raisonné*, Yale University Press, New Haven, Connecticut and London, 2007, Vol. II, pl. 685 (illustrated in color, p. 334)

## Essay

For thirty years (1920-1950) the art of Stuart Davis commanded center stage in the American modernist movement. Davis was, in fact, the most important abstract artist in America before the advent of Abstract Expressionism in the late 1940s, and by the early 1920s was already the nation's foremost Cubist, ingeniously and tirelessly reinventing himself within the art form. In the first half of the twentieth century no other American vanguard artist produced such a definitive and successful body of work as Davis. Born in Philadelphia, Stuart Davis grew up in New Jersey and entered high-school the year (1908) when Robert Henri organized the landmark exhibition of the work of fellow Ashcan School artists at New York's MacBeth Gallery, a show which introduced a striking new form of social realism into the American art world. The following year Davis quit East Orange High to study under Henri at his personal art school in Manhattan and, in 1913, was one of the youngest painters to be included in the American portion of the Armory Show. That same year Davis' joined the staff of Socialist magazine *The Masses* (published between 1911-17), for which he produced covers and drawings when John Sloan, the famed Ashcan School painter was its art editor. After serving in World War I as a cartographer for the U.S. Army Intelligence, in 1919 Davis painted two self-portraits, both bold and bright, introspective in nature and executed with vigorous brushstrokes. During a painting trip to Cuba (1920), his palette brightened even more, and by 1921 he was vigorously fracturing his forms as he earnestly assimilated the tenets of Cubism.

In his early cubist work Davis at times dotted his spatial planes with the same clusters of compressed paint daubs used by Juan Gris, while at others he more resembled Picasso and Braque in his experimentation with collage. Davis was the first American modernist to glue bits of printed paper to his pictorial surface, and he sometimes made paintings of his own collages (like *Sweet Caporal* and *Bull Durham*, both 1921-22) whose illusionistic qualities are nearly tromp-l'oeil. For Davis, collage was a conduit for introducing into his art the consumer-oriented messaging which flavored his own early Cubist language. To best understand the genesis of Davis' Cubism, however, one must look to the oeuvre of another top tier European modernist, Fernand Léger. Around 1918 Léger sought a fresh outlook on Cubism and aligned himself with the newly found Purist movement, transforming his completely abstract "contraste de forms" into more planar compositions whose structural clarity began to include representational motifs such as man-made objects, billboards, and storefronts. Davis found the imagery compelling and introduced advertising logos into his own work. His oils of 1924 such as *Lucky Strike*, *Odol*, and *Edison Mazda* anticipated by three decades the universally recognized style dedicated to popular and mass culture known as Pop Art.

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In 1923 Davis painted *Egg Beater*, the subject matter which four years later resulted in the comprehensive series of sketches and oils that marked the culmination of his steady progression towards abstraction and gained him recognition as the nation's foremost modernist. It was at this time (1927) that Edith Halpert began to show Davis' work at her Downtown Gallery \* and gave him his first of eleven solo exhibitions. The following year the Whitney Studio Club (future Whitney Museum of American Art) acquired two of his paintings, financially facilitating Davis' departure for Paris where he lived and painted from June, 1928 to August, 1929. While his French paintings of city streets and squares represent a brief return to more realist scenes, they represent a unique body of work in which Davis manipulated color and form in naïve-looking old-world scenes (*Place de Vosges No. 1* and *No. 2*, both 1928) in which he introduced storefront signage (*Rue Lipp*, 1928) and even mixed sand into his oil paint (*Rue de Rats No. 2*, 1929). In 1932, as a precursor to government sponsored art programs in the deepening Great Depression, Lincoln Kirstein organized an exhibition of mural projects at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Davis submitted a piece and as a result received from Donald Keskey his first mural commission, *Men without Women* (1932), for the men's lounge at Radio City Music Hall.

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The Downtown Gallery was one of America's most prestigious, influential, and long-lasting 20<sup>th</sup> century galleries. Founded in 1926 by Edith Gregor Halpert as Our Gallery, per the suggestion of artist William Zorach it changed its name the following year. The Downtown Gallery was the first commercial art space in Greenwich Village and, at the time, the only New York gallery exhibiting only contemporary American artists. The gallery lasted forty-seven years, represented some of the country's seminal modernists such as Stuart Davis and Charles Sheeler, and was patronized by some of its greatest collectors like William Lane and Abby Aldrich Rockefeller. Halpert was also an avid collector, acquiring works by many of the artists she showed. Exhibitions drawing from her personal collection include *American Modernism: The First Wave, Painting from 1903-1933* (1963; Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, Waltham, Massachusetts), *Image to Abstraction* (1967; Amon Carter Museum, Fort Worth), and *Edith Halpert and the Downtown Gallery* (1968; University of Connecticut Art Gallery, Storrs, CT). Three years after her death in 1970 her collection was sold at auction by Sotheby Parke-Bernet.

The large, abstract mural came to be a hallmark of Davis' work. As his art evolved so did his politics, the mural not only representing for him a means to explore personal artistic expression but a vehicle for proposing a new social order. Unlike the Social and Urban Realists who realistically depicted the ills of the day, Davis relied on abstraction to convey a dynamic potential for positive change. For Stuart Davis, optimism and transformation came through the vitality of his abstract murals, which he conceived as well-intentioned democratic statements in the best of the country's liberal traditions. This conciliation between non-illusionistic painting and progressive politics reflected a similar unflinching faith in democracy as did the contemporaneously espoused philosophy of the educational reformer John Dewey. And just as Fernand Léger refused to accept the notion that the French masses could not understand abstract art, Davis firmly believed that the American public would come to embrace his transcendent vision. In 1934 he joined the Artists' Union which soon elected him president, and the following year he joined Harman Baron as coeditor for its influential yet short-lived publication titled *Art Front*. In 1936 Davis became a charter member of the American Artists Congress, successor to the John Reed Clubs as part of the popular front of the U.S. Communist Party's effort to unite artists in collective projects opposing Fascism. However, in 1940 Davis resigned from the Congress and refrained from further political expression. Disillusioned by the lack of Modern Art's social impact and finally reconciled with the public's indifference towards abstraction, Davis acknowledged the new decade by turning inwards and isolating himself more and more from external influences.

In 1946 Stuart Davis executed the gouache titled *Pennsylvania* which represented his contribution to the so-called “state-series”, an advertising campaign began by the Container Corporation of America which consisted of a boxed-set portfolio of reproductions of the then forty-eight states. Founded in 1926 and a leader manufacturer of corrugated cardboard, the CCA became an important patron of graphic arts and design when it came under the management of industrialist and philanthropist Walter Paepcke, its collection ultimately entering the National Museum of American Art in Washington, D.C., as did Davis’ *Pennsylvania* gouache. The CCA reproduction of Davis’ *Pennsylvania* was published in *Time and Fortune Magazine* and used for advertisements until 1950 with the company’s name and logo (a corrugated box) appearing in the lower margin along with the words “PENNSYLVANIA—annual purchases 5 ½ billion—mostly packaged”. Around the time Davis created his gouache he also made a pencil drawing by the same title. Both pay homage to the keystone state. In the drawing vignettes of Pennsylvania’s commerce and industry are staged across the nearly square sheet of paper with a factory in the background, a crane hook upper right, and five oil and gas storage tanks center left above a rendering of Philadelphia’s Liberty Bell. What appears to be the substructure of a bridge bisects the sheet horizontally, intersected by a zigzag, vertical banderole bearing the word *Pennsylvania*.

*Pennsylvania* is emblematic of Davis’ search for new, formalistic expression in Cubism. In the early 1940s he correctly predicted that European modern art had nearly exhausted its creativity and, much like Léger two decades earlier had adopted a new cubist aesthetic based on the publication *Après le Cubisme (After Cubism)*, so too did Davis begin a private, individual search beyond the very idiom which had dominated the art world for thirty years. For artistic meaning, inspiration, and formal development Davis turned to the Gestalt theories of psychologists then lecturing at New York’s New School for Social Research, where he himself taught from 1940 to 1950.

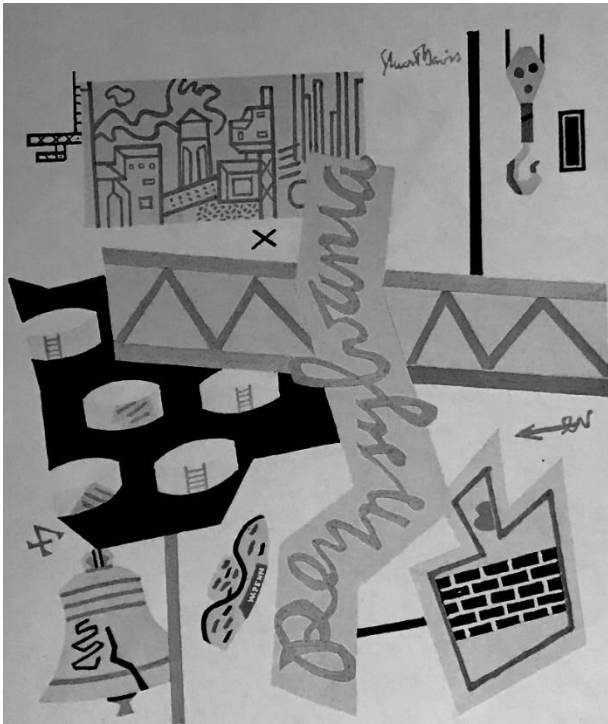
“The findings of the Gestalt psychologists helped to objectify and define how visual stimuli were received and changed from sensation into cognitions. Chief among the Gestalt tenets having implications for artists was the idea that phenomena of nature were not adequately described piecemeal because vision was a mode of perception that, instead of focusing on individual parts, integrated significant structural patterns; another important concept was that images or representations could be quite far abstracted from naturalistic semblance and still retain their affiliation with reality. The Gestalt theory of the perceptual process provided Davis with a link between nature, himself, and the work of art. It supplies an answer to the question of why, in the face of Davis’s increasingly abstract handling of form during the early forties, the salient characteristic of the content of his art continued to be its analogy to experience in the natural world. {...} The goal of his research was to develop a pictorial scheme to which the response would be a complete experience rather than a sum of discrete reactions to particular elements within the general fabric” Lane, John R. *Stuart Davis (1892-1964): Art and Theory*, Brooklyn Museum of Art, 1977, pps. 55-56)

Davis systematized his Gestalt studies into his own *Configuration Theory* in which he strove to create all-over compositions with every detail of near equal significance. In Davis’ 1943 *Ultra-Marine* theory and style merge to display an edge-to-edge evenness occupied both by florid patterns of irregular shapes and abbreviated color planes which suppress any sense of compositional hierarchy.

Once again, Davis was likely influenced by Léger who in the late 1930s executed a series of abundantly full Surrealist compositions in which spatial illusionism was supplanted by flattened pictorial planes. Unlike the concurrent geometric abstractions composed by members of the American Abstract Artists, Davis’ *Configuration Theory* fully kept his painting within the empirical realm of his perceived natural world. In the painting *For Internal Use Only* (1944-45) Davis abruptly bisected his picture plane while adopting the grid-like pattern of the modern master Piet Mondrian with whom Davis used to listen to jazz music in Manhattan and who had just passed away (on February 1, 1944). The following year Davis also segmented his

composition *Pennsylvania*, a product both of his rigorously learned Gestalt methodology and his profound love for the vivacity of jazz music.

“Davis had one more encounter with Mondrian when the latter attended the opening of Davis’s 1943 exhibition at the Downtown Gallery in New York. Jazz and boogie-woogie music were provided, and, as Davis later recalled, ‘the situation was much enjoyed by Mondrian, and he took time to compliment me on my work’ {...}” (Sims, Lowery S. *Stuart Davis: American Painter*, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1991, p. 263)



Davis, *Pennsylvania*, 1946, gouache and pencil on paperboard  
(coll. National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution,  
Washington, D.C.; gift of Container Corporation of America)



Davis, *Ultra-Marine*, 1943 (coll. Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Pennsylvania)