Stuart Davis had been deeply impressed by the modern art he had seen at the Armory Show in 1913, and spent the remainder of the decade patiently investigating avant-garde styles, especially the high color and thick impasto common to both Vincent van Gogh (Dutch, 1853 - 1890) and the fauves, but also certain kinds of geometric abstraction. Although he would not make explicitly cubist paintings until 1921–1922, he had certainly seen cubist works at the Armory Show, and the complex space and relatively subdued palette of Multiple Views may reflect that interest. Davis would come to consider cubism the most important of all modern styles.

In February 1918 Davis was one of 20 painters invited to participate in the Exhibition of Indigenous Painting at Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney’s (Mrs. Harry Payne Whitney) Whitney Studio Club at 8 West Eighth Street in Greenwich Village. The artists, including John Sloan (American, 1871 - 1951), George Luks (American, 1866 - 1933), William Glackens (American, 1870 - 1938), Gifford Beal (American, 1879 - 1956), and Guy Pène du Bois (American, 1884 - 1958), were asked to draw lots for prepared and framed canvases and then to spend three days painting them on-site. Whitney provided art supplies, whiskey, tobacco, food, and gingham smocks. Davis’s contribution to the raucous event was Multiple Views, an unusual composite of paintings and sketches that he had made while working in the historic fishing town of Gloucester, Massachusetts, and that he apparently managed to recall or consult while working on the painting.

Gloucester played a significant role in Davis’s career. He had first visited the town in 1915 at the recommendation of Sloan, and pronounced it “the place I had been
looking for”:

It had the brilliant light of Provincetown, but with the important additions of topographical severity and the architectural beauties of the Gloucester schooner.

The schooner is a very necessary element in coherent thinking about art. I do not refer to its own beauty of form, but to the fact that its masts define the often empty sky expanse. They function as a color-space coordinate between earth and sky. They make it possible for the novice landscape painter to evade the dangers of taking off into the void as soon as his eye hits the horizon. From the masts of schooners the artist eventually learns to invent his own coordinates when for some unavoidable reason they are not present. Another very important thing about the town at that time was that the pre-fabricated Main Street had not yet made its appearance. Also the fact that automobiles were very few and their numerous attendant evils were temporarily avoided. [1]

Davis returned to Gloucester almost annually until 1934.

In 1953 the artist recalled the unusual circumstances under which he had painted Multiple Views at the Whitney Studio Club, explaining that it was “made out of things I had been painting recently and had in my mind. . . . I had done that kind of composition before that time . . . composing things that you don’t usually see at one time. I have drawings done in that manner.” [2] John R. Lane has pointed out that combining vignettes to create a sense of simultaneity was a common technique in cartooning and that Davis had employed it in the drawing Forty Inns on the Lincoln Highway No. 2. [3]

Although the rules of the Exhibition of Indigenous Painting required artists to work entirely from memory, Davis may have secreted some previously executed sketches of Gloucester into the event. In short, Multiple Views was not an impromptu effort on his part. [4] Despite his self-professed aversion to automobiles, he incorporated a car and car-related imagery into the picture, imagery derived from two 1917 paintings: Garage No. 1 [fig. 1] and Garage No. 2 [fig. 2]. This method of using previous imagery in a new composition would become characteristic of
Davis's later work. [5] A critic for the New York Sun noted of Multiple Views: “Stuart Davis has painted all of his past life into his picture besides a great deal of mere hearsay. He has fitted countless scenes into one picture, somewhat in the style of children's puzzle pictures, and painted them in with vigor. Mr. Davis's neighbor artists at the time of the competition must surely have been splattered with much paint.” [6] However, if there was any paint splattering it would have come from the intoxicated Luks, whose efforts to add some strokes to Multiple Views had to be fended off by Davis. [7]

Multiple Views is an ambitious but awkward work that has stimulated much discussion among art historians. To quote Philip Rylands, “What appears to be a fairly straightforward realist work actually embodies modernist strategies of contradiction and ambiguity.” [8] Jane Myers has observed that “Its composition is not completely resolved; the discrepancy between illustrative space and abstract space is disturbing, and despite the artist's efforts to stress the physical reality of the whole painted surface, the various parts do not coalesce.” [9] Perhaps the tension in Multiple Views arose from the fact that Davis had only a partial understanding of cubism at this point. John R. Lane has stated that the artist “developed a solution involving a montage of vignettes to the problem of infusing the dimension of time into painting that did not rely on the cubist vocabulary.” [10] In Diane Kelder's opinion, Davis combined all the disparate images of Gloucester “in an effort to create an effect of simultaneity. The formal and procedural contradictions so evident in this painting resulted from a desire to impose a new conceptual order on the observed world, an order that Davis was beginning to identify with cubism but which he was not yet capable of expressing.” [11]

Karen Wilkin recently wrote that although Multiple Views “seems timid and undistinguished,” Davis “almost inadvertently explored essential cubist concepts of discontinuous space and shifting viewpoints, not by replicating the look of a cubist image but by juxtaposing a series of self-contained vignettes.” She also noted, “Davis's pictures of this type, while problematic, embody, too, cubism's generating idea of 'collaging' together a range of perceptions. . . . Such works might be described as a kind of conceptual cubism, intellectually inventive but still wedded to naturalistic appearances.” [12]

Brian O'Doherty, one of the best writers on Davis, sidesteps the nagging issue of cubism and the charges of irresolution. Instead he regards Multiple Views as “Davis's key early picture,” one that reveals an additive compositional habit (the juxtaposition of distinct parts) that stayed with him throughout his career, whether
those parts were words, objects, or words standing for objects. For O’Doherty, the result was a species of “concrete poetry” that foreshadowed the stenciled letters of Jasper Johns (American, born 1930) and the rebuses of Robert Rauschenberg (American, 1925 - 2008). [13]

Robert Torchia

September 29, 2016

COMPARATIVE FIGURES

fig. 1 Stuart Davis, Garage No. 1, 1917, oil on canvas, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Gift of Knoll International, 1980. Image: Cathy Carver

fig. 2 Stuart Davis, Garage No. 2, 1918, oil on canvas, private collection

NOTES
TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The painting is executed on a plain-weave, lightweight canvas. The priming is presumed to be oil-based and ranges from yellow to slightly beige in color. It is lined with a heavy fabric using a wax adhesive that is stretched on a four-member, mortise-and-tenon, keyable stretcher that is probably original. The original tacking margins are intact, indicating that the painting retains its original dimensions. Infrared examination shows no underdrawing. [1] X-radiography shows no...
significant artist changes. The paint (thought to be oil) has been applied in multiple
layers using brushes and a palette knife. The paint has been worked in a variety of
techniques, including wet into wet and scumbling. The thickness of the paint layers
varies throughout the composition. In some instances the ground can be easily
detected through the thin, scumbled layers of paint, while in other sections the
paint is extremely thick and heavily impastoed. The paint surface is generally
cracked, with wider aperture craquelure found in the most thickly painted areas.
There are only a few tiny losses scattered around the painting, most notably a
concentration of small losses in the lower left corner. The painting was cleaned in
2011 at the National Gallery of Art, when a heavily discolored varnish containing oil
was removed and replaced with a fresh, thin layer of synthetic varnish. The small
losses were inpainted during this treatment as well.

TECHNICAL NOTES

[1] The infrared examination was conducted using a Santa Barbara Focalplane
InSb camera fitted with a K astronomy filter.

PROVENANCE

The artist’s son, Earl Davis; gift 2008 to NGA.

EXHIBITION HISTORY

1918 Exhibition of Indigenous Paintings, Gertrude Vanderbilt (Mrs. Harry Payne)
Whitney’s Studio Club, New York, 1918, pamphlet no. 10.

1973 Portrait of a Place: Some American Landscape Painters in Gloucester, Cape
Ann Historical Association, Gloucester, 1973, no. 25, repro.

1978 Stuart Davis: Art and Art Theory, The Brooklyn Museum; Fogg Art Museum,
Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1978, no. 4, repro.

1978 William Carlos Williams and the American Scene 1920-1940, Whitney


1999 Stuart Davis in Gloucester, Cape Ann Historical Museum, Gloucester, Massachusetts, 1999, unnumbered catalogue, pl. 4.


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1986 Myers, Jane, ed. Stuart Davis: Graphic Work and Related Paintings with