Arthur B. Davies adapted this painting’s title from a line in “Atalanta in Calydon,” a poem by Algernon Charles Swinburne written in 1865: “O fair-faced sun, killing the stars and dews and dreams and desolation of the night!” [1] The poem concerns a tragic figure in Greek mythology; likewise, the painting exudes an air of melancholy. Like its title, the composition of **Stars and Dews and Dreams of Night** is lyrical and rhythmic. It features a nude woman against a backdrop of dark, dense vegetation. Turning to gaze over her left shoulder, she cranes her neck. This action creates a curving line that is continued by her right arm and leg, culminating in a delicately arched foot. The extension of the head and the toe mirror each other, defining the curve that is in turn bisected by the vertical line of her left arm and standing leg. The artist cropped the top of the figure’s head and her standing foot, a decision questioned by at least one critic, who noted, “**Stars and Dews and Dreams of Night** is arbitrarily—rather perversely, one may feel—cut into by the top and bottom of the frame.” [2] Yet the cropping introduces an element of tension. This pushing back against the borders complicates the muted reverie of the scene.

The nude’s creamy skin tones are subtly and richly modulated, and the pale figure appears luminous against the shadowy background. The subject of the painting does not connect with the audience, rather she gazes downward with a faraway expression. Contemporary critics wrestled with Davies’s mystifying compositions while lauding his technique: “the strange attenuated nude figure . . . arrests attention and one feels that the ‘American poet painter’ has visions and dreams that we cannot always follow except to appreciate the delicacy of flesh tints and...
American artists of the late 19th century, including Abbott Handerson Thayer (American, 1849 - 1921) and Thomas Wilmer Dewing (American, 1851 - 1938), favored depictions of woman as ethereal creatures, pure and untouchable. However, Davies’s interpretation owes more to Continental sources, including Pierre Puvis de Chavannes (French, 1824 - 1898), whom the American artist admired for his subtle allegories that integrated figure and landscape. The symbolic landscapes and Arcadian pastorals of the Renaissance Italian painter Giorgione (Venetian, 1477/1478 - 1510) also left a strong impression on the artist. Perhaps Davies looked to his own art collection for inspiration when conceiving this painting. Among his two hundred drawings, paintings, and watercolors was a small painting of Venus then attributed to Giorgione featuring a profile of a woman gazing over her shoulder against a backdrop of dark vegetation [fig. 1].

Davies’s art collection and his love of antiquities resulted in a collaboration with the archaeologist Gustavus Eisen in the early 1920s. The two men developed a “theory of inhalation,” which maintained that ancient art achieved its vitality by depicting the body at the moment of inhalation. [4] Davies attempted to render this moment repeatedly in his own work. Stars and Dews and Dreams of Night visualizes inhalation through the figure’s raised chest and ribcage as well as her outflung arms.

Davies’s romantic leanings were out of step with his contemporaries, though he was very supportive of the new directions of his fellow artists. He was, for instance, largely responsible for bringing modernism to America through his role as the chairman of the committee that organized the infamous Armory Show of 1913. Walter Pach once wrote that “modern art in America owes more to [Davies] than to anyone else.” [5] His advocacy of modernism extended to advising major collectors like Lillie Bliss, whose collection was pivotal to the formation of the Museum of Modern Art, New York. His own collecting practices were highly eclectic; he amassed Etruscan vases and Egyptian relics as well as works by Constantin Brancusi (Romanian, 1876 - 1957) and Paul Cézanne (French, 1839 - 1906). Davies briefly experimented with cubism immediately after the Armory Show (see, for example, his Great Mother of c. 1913 [fig. 2]). However, for the remainder of his career he returned to his deeply personal and evocative vision. Davies was both of his time and removed from it, finding equal inspiration in Pompeian murals and Picasso’s drawings. With otherworldly works like Stars and Dews and Dreams of Night, Davies makes quiet demands of the viewer, rewarding patience and

Stars and Dews and Dreams of Night

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Four days after Davies died while abroad in Italy, the 11th Corcoran Gallery of Art biennial exhibition of contemporary American paintings opened to the public. Among the offerings of 1928 were *Stars and Dews and Dreams of Night* and the landscape *Umbrian Mountains* [fig. 3], both of which were purchased by the museum. The artist was no stranger to the Corcoran: 17 of his paintings had appeared in 11 biennials, and he had received the First William A. Clark Prize and the Corcoran Gold Medal at the sixth biennial in 1916. In 1930 Davies's career was commemorated in a large exhibition organized by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, which traveled to the Corcoran. Despite recognition earned during his lifetime and immediately after his death, the artist's critical standing diminished dramatically in the decades following his death. In later years his reputation was resuscitated, as scholars and critics began to recognize the complexity and singularity of his artistic vision as well as his formative role in the introduction of modern art to America.

Kerry Roeder
August 17, 2018
fig. 1 Estate of Arthur B. Davies, Works by Picasso, Derain, Cézanne, Degas, Rivera, Max Weber, Matisse, "Pop" Hart, Dickinson, Laurencin, 1929, National Gallery of Art Library, David K. E. Bruce Fund

fig. 2 Arthur B. Davies, The Great Mother, c. 1913, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Corcoran Collection (Bequest of Lizzie P. Bliss), 2015.19.54
fig. 3 Arthur B. Davies, *The Umbrian Mountains*, 1925, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Corcoran Collection (Museum Purchase, William A. Clark Fund), 2015.19.51

NOTES


TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The wax resin-lined painting was executed on a fine, plain-weave, medium-weight canvas and was stretched onto a modern, five-member replacement stretcher. The tacking margins have not been retained. A thin, off-white ground was probably
commercially applied, but since the tacking margins have been removed it is
difficult to be certain. The painting was built up in multiple layers alternating
between opaque paint and fluid semitransparent glazes. It appears that the artist
sketched the figure first and then surrounded her with the blue and green
background. The flesh tones were built up in multiple layers as Davies made
modifications to the modeling and drawing of the woman’s body. There are many
changes in the outline of the figure—particularly in the proper left leg, the proper
right hip and thigh, and the proper left arm—that are now apparent because the
flesh-colored paint has become more transparent over time. Although the foliage
was painted freely, wet into wet, the artist waited for the paint to dry before adding
the final details of the woman’s face. The painting has old natural resin varnish
layers as well as several more recent layers of synthetic resins that have an even,
moderate gloss. The painting is in generally good condition, although the woman’s
pubic area has been scored by vandalism. The texture of the paint layer has also
been significantly flattened by lining. The surface is slightly yellowed, probably
from the discoloration of the varnish.

According to the Corcoran Museum’s conservation files, in 1949 the painting was
treated by H. F. Cross after it was vandalized. He removed grime and pencil marks
and then varnished the painting with Dammar followed by a coat of wax. The
painting was vandalized again in 1970 and treated by Robert Wiles in 1971. Wiles
removed an old glue lining and replaced it with a wax resin lining (with an interleaf
of polyester web). Ballpoint pen marks were removed, the old varnish was re-
formed, another coat of Dammar followed by two coats of different synthetic resins
were applied, and the damages were inpainted.

PROVENANCE

Acquired from the artist by (Ferargil Gallery, New York); purchased 1928 by the
Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington; acquired 2014 by the National Gallery of Art.

EXHIBITION HISTORY

1928 The Eleventh Exhibition of Contemporary American Oil Paintings, Corcoran
Gallery of Art, Washington, 28 October - 9 December 1928, no. 100.


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