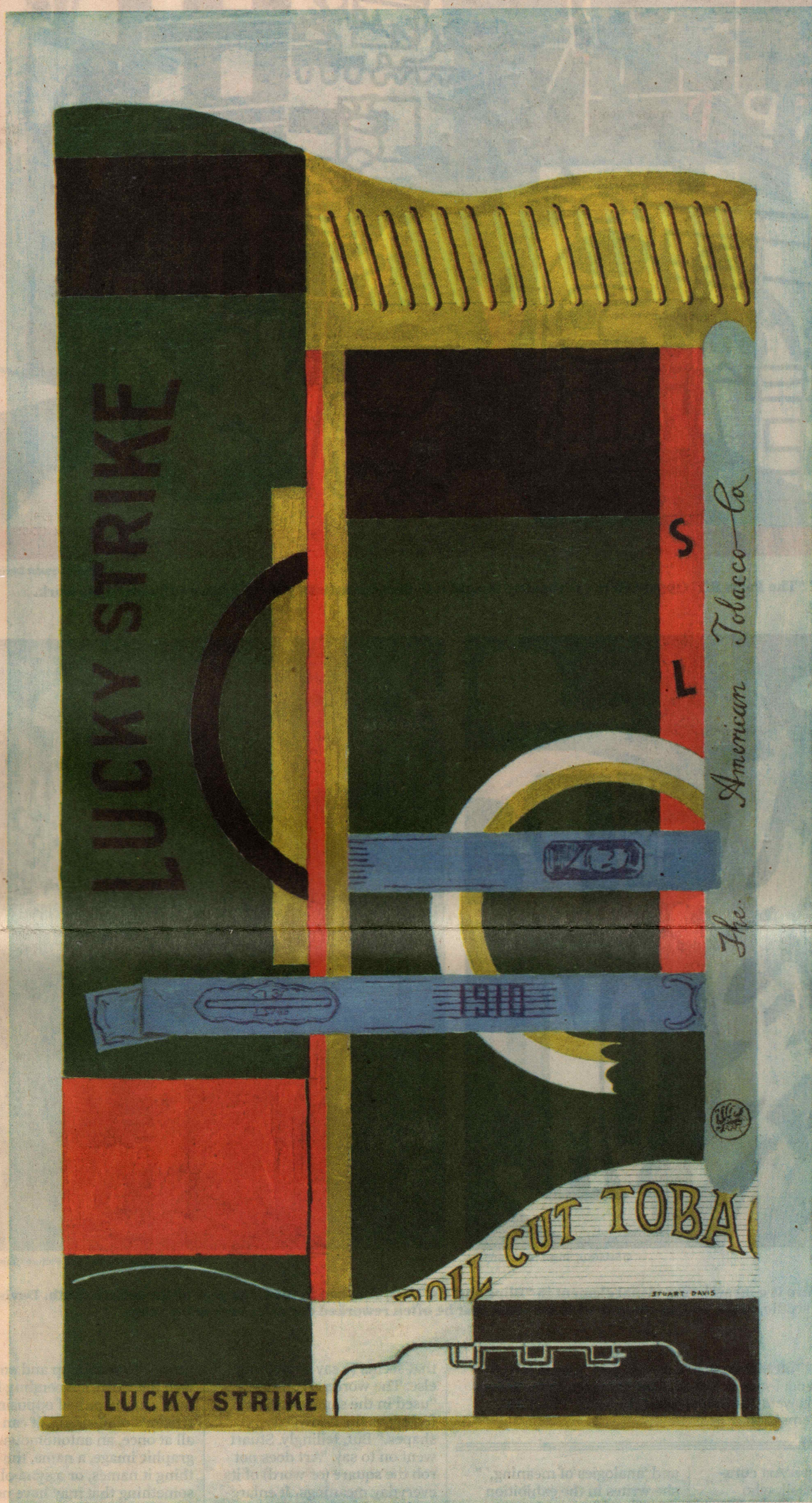




© Estate of Stuart Davis 1921

Stuart Davis' "Lucky Strike" (1921) calls to mind a tamed-down European creation of a decade earlier.

Carefully chosen words

De Young highlights Stuart Davis' role as crucial link to past, bridge to future

By Charles Desmarais

Between the Cubists of the early 20th century and the Pop artists of the 1960s, there was Stuart Davis.

A lively exhibition at the de Young Museum, "Stuart Davis: In Full Swing," is the first opportunity in 25 years to see a comprehensive selection of Davis works on the West Coast. The exhibition opens Saturday, April 1, and continues through Aug. 6.

It would not be fair to reduce the proudly independent Davis to a mere link between two of the most important movements of modern art (three, if you count Abstract Expressionism, aspects of which he anticipated and employed). He was deeply committed to his unique vision, so much so that he reworked canvases and reinterpreted

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© Estate of Stuart Davis 1951

Stuart Davis' "Owh! in San Pao" (1951)

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

Why words never failed Stuart Davis

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visual ideas over many years, and even decades.

He was also, as the informative and engaging exhibition catalog accompanying the show makes clear, an art theorist, a proselytizer for the acceptance of abstraction and a social activist. He synthesized — naturalized — ideas born on foreign soil and made them proudly American.

What comes through in this exhibition most forcefully, though, is his position as key to a puzzle that might never have been solved without him, and fulcrum for ideas that are vital in art today.

A word is generally an abstract symbol that can convey an idea, but it can also be a concrete object — an ink impression on a page, a sign mounted aloft. Cubism harnessed the word and the trademark as a way to tie painting to daily life. Pop art embraced the symbolic word-as-object — the brand — as a stand-in for aspects of modern society. Stuart Davis understood both imperatives, the formal and the social.

While this presentation wisely focuses on works made after 1929, when he returned to the U.S. from a seminal year in Paris, the earliest inclusion is from 1921. “Lucky Strike” could be a tamed-down European artistic product of a decade earlier, were it not for the classically American label.

“Odol” (1924) could pass for a magazine advertisement — or an early Andy Warhol, with its graphic centrality. The humble mouthwash bottle is depicted so worshipfully, it might as well say “Idol.”

For the most part, the appearance of verbal language in early Davis works — though significant in an overall graphic logic — can be read as lettering we might see on the street or on a package in front of us. Over time, though, text takes on a visual life of its own.

By the 1950s, words can make up the entire subject matter of a painting. The exhibition provides several examples and, driving home the point, multiple variations on text-centered themes. “Little Giant Still Life” (1950) and “Visa” (1951) are variants of what we might call a portrait of a single, powerful image-word, “champion.”

“Package Deal” (1956) is a pastiche of mostly commercialized words (“FREE,” “LARGE,” “NEW,” “100%” — but also “Cow” and “Pad”) that show up in different configurations and colorways in other works of about the same year. The Los Angeles County Museum of Art owns a particularly vivid one, “Première” (1957), along with a set of 27 ballpoint pen drawings — half are on view, the others reproduced in the catalog — that document the artist’s compositional rejiggerings of a few basic elements.

“Blips and Ifs” (1963-64), finished in the year of the artist’s death, is based upon one corner of an earlier work. As in some other late works, even his signature becomes a meandering visual element.

The eminent Whitney Mu-



© Estate of Stuart Davis 1959

Stuart Davis’ “The Paris Bit” (1959) offers provocative insight into how the artist’s year in France influenced his work.



© Estate of Stuart Davis 1963-64



Ralph Morse / Life Picture Collection

Davis’ signature is a meandering visual element in “Blips and Ifs,” left, finished in 1964, the year of the artist’s death. Davis, shown in his studio, right, was so committed to his ideas that he often reworked canvases over many years.

Stuart Davis: In Full Swing: 9:30 a.m.-5:15 p.m. Tuesdays-Sundays. Saturday, April 1-Aug. 6. \$10-\$25. De Young Museum, Golden Gate Park, 50 Hagiwara Tea Garden Drive, S.F. (415) 750-3600. <http://deyoung.famsf.org>

seum of American Art curator Barbara Haskell, who co-organized the show with Harry Cooper of the National Gallery of Art, sees this fascination with the word as primarily a pictorial matter. “While acknowledging that words possess associations

and ‘analogies of meaning,’ ” she writes in the exhibition catalog, “Davis used them less as conceptual signifiers than as abstract corollaries to the composition’s visual rhythms.”

But she follows that up with a quote from the artist

that seems to say something else. The words are, indeed, “used in the same sense and feeling as the nonword shapes.” But, tellingly, Stuart went on to say, “Art does not rob the square (or word) of its everyday meanings. It enlarges the scope of its usefulness in enriching our experience with common things.”

The continued relevance of Davis and his work has to do with his ability to hold these conflicting ideas at the same

time — to snatch up and enweb the word, suspending it between the pull of opposing tensions of meaning. It can be, all at once, an autonomous graphic image, a name, the thing it names, or a symbol for something that may have no name.

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