Public art and the perils of canonization: the case of Swing Landscape by Stuart Davis

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Figure 1 Stuart Davis, Swing Landscape, 1938. Oil on canvas, 220.3 x 439.7 cm. Bloomington, IN: Eskenazi Museum of Art, Indiana University. Allocated by the U.S. Government, Commissioned through the New Deal Art Projects, 42.1. Photo: Kevin Montague.

Swing Landscape, a mural completed in 1938 by American artist Stuart Davis (1892 – 1964), is distinguished by a vibrant, high-keyed palette and an exuberant Cubist-inspired composition. [Fig. 1] Although perhaps not enjoying the same level of recognition as such icons of modern American art as Jackson Pollock’s drip paintings or Andy Warhol’s soup cans, Swing Landscape is referenced in over one hundred publications, has appeared in ten exhibitions, and has been requested for loan to eight others.¹ In 1997, the mural was identified by the popular American news magazine Time as one of the most characteristic works of American art.² Art historians and critics, too, have praised it as ‘one of the most chromatically arresting and formally sophisticated murals executed in the United States’,³ and as a ‘spectacular painting to see in person’.⁴ However, Swing Landscape’s canonization

¹ TMS database record for Swing Landscape, Eskenazi Museum of Art, Indiana University (hereafter EMA).
was by no means a foregone conclusion. Throughout its history, several factors have impeded widespread awareness and appreciation of the mural, beginning, in fact, with its failure to actually serve its intended function as public art. Rejected from the architectural site for which it was commissioned, it was instead acquired in 1942 by Indiana University. Located in the Midwestern town of Bloomington, Indiana, the university was—and remains—geographically isolated from major American coastal cities, and because of Swing Landscape’s fragile condition, it rarely leaves the university campus. Consequently, few people have actually seen the mural in person. High-quality reproductions have become available in print and online in recent decades; these, along with its appearance in numerous publications, have raised Swing Landscape’s visibility both in the United States and abroad, even though reproductions cannot convey its physical monumentality or replicate the experience of standing in the presence of its pulsating palette and dynamic composition. Nevertheless, its rejection from its intended site—a public housing project in Brooklyn, New York—has enabled a much wider range of people to view it than Davis ever imagined.

Because it is so well known to historians of American art, one might assume that Swing Landscape’s history and meaning have been exhaustively researched. Instead, I argue here that its canonical status masks the fact that its social, political, and historical contexts have been understudied, resulting in a widespread lack of knowledge of its origins and layers of meaning. During the process of its canonization, Swing Landscape was disconnected from the social and historical realm in which it originated, and it has been primarily interpreted through the lens of its formal innovations. Davis, of course, was deeply concerned with the formal arrangement and relationship of forms and colours in his paintings, as attested in his voluminous theoretical writings. Yet these same writings reveal his deep concern with the social relevance of his (nearly abstract) art, and he argued that ‘art by its very nature is a revolutionary agent’. With few exceptions, however, scholars writing about Stuart Davis have downplayed the circumstances shaping Swing Landscape’s commission, production, and rejection as a work of public art. Yet ‘for any meaningful understanding of public art’, as historians of this genre remind us, ‘it must be viewed in the complex matrix in which it is conceived, commissioned (…) and received’. Discussions of Swing Landscape invariably focus on the

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influence of jazz music on its composition, on its iconography, and on how it formally expresses Davis’s artistic theories, but pay little heed to its reception or social function. Reconsidering the mural’s intended role as a work of public art reveals that this near-exclusive emphasis on formal characteristics has not only decontextualized Swing Landscape, but has even facilitated misreadings of a work that many consider a key example of American modern art.

**Swing Landscape as public art: site, audience, and subject**

When Stuart Davis began planning the composition of Swing Landscape in 1936, it was with the understanding that the mural would be installed in the Williamsburg Housing Project in Brooklyn, New York. Built between 1936 and 1938, the Williamsburg Houses replaced twelve square blocks of tenement housing in an area described at the time as ‘virtually unrelieved slums’. Consisting of twenty four-story buildings containing 1,622 apartment units, the Williamsburg Housing Project was one of the first federally funded housing developments for low-income tenants.

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Figure 2 William Lescaze, Williamsburg Houses, 1936-38. Brooklyn, New York. Photo: Jennifer McComas.

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constructed in the United States. This ambitious project was managed by the Public Works Administration, a federal program established in 1930, and the New York City Housing Authority, which was created in 1934. American public housing of the 1930s – the Williamsburg Houses a prime example – was modelled on new forms of subsidized workers’ housing constructed in the 1920s in central European cities such as Vienna and Berlin. Frequently designed by modernist architects such as Walter Gropius and Bruno Taut, they featured vanguard aesthetics as well as modern amenities and healthful natural settings. The architect chiefly responsible for the design of the Williamsburg Houses was William Lescaze (1896 – 1969). Lescaze immigrated to the United States from Switzerland in 1920, but remained closely attuned to developments in European modernist architecture and advances in mass housing. His design for the Williamsburg Houses emphasizes clean lines, integrates color into the buildings’ tan brick façades, and incorporates ample green space into the site plan [Fig. 2].

Lescaze strongly advocated for the inclusion of murals in the Williamsburg Housing Project’s public spaces, arguing that ‘by means of colors and forms [they] would cheer up [the rooms] and continue the message of light, open air and imagination, which we have tried to embody in the buildings’. Thanks presumably to his influence, fourteen artists, including Stuart Davis, were commissioned in 1936 by the Federal Art Project to produce a series of abstract murals and relief sculptures for the Williamsburg site. The Federal Art Project (FAP) was a division of the Works Progress Administration (WPA), the federally funded work relief program created by President Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1935 as part of his ‘New Deal’ to combat the deleterious effects of the Depression. Under the auspices of the FAP, many of the American public housing projects of the 1930s were decorated with murals and sculpture. The projected scale and abstract orientation of the Williamsburg artistic program, however, was particularly ambitious. Abstraction is rarely associated with the work of FAP-employed artists, but the mural division both welcomed and encouraged abstract experimentation, thanks largely to the advocacy of its head, the abstract painter Burgoyne Diller (1906 – 1965). Under Diller’s direction, approximately forty abstract murals were installed at sites throughout New York City and its environs. Nevertheless, convincing FAP

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10 Officially, a group of ten architects, known as the Williamsburg Associated Architects, was in charge of the site’s design and planning.
11 William Lescaze to Langdon Post, 28 June 1937, Records of the New York City Housing Authority, Box 53D3, folder 10, LaGuardia & Wagner Archives, New York City (hereafter NYCHA Records).
12 In addition to Stuart Davis, the artists commissioned for the project were muralists Ilya Bolotowsky, Harry Bowden, Byron Browne, Francis Criss, Willem de Kooning, Balcomb Greene, Paul Kelpe, Jan Matulka, George McNeil, Eugene Morley, and Albert Swinden, and sculptors Martin Craig and José Ruiz de Rivera.
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authorities to approve the placement of abstract murals in a public housing project would have been challenging. The social and moral goals governing the American public housing movement encouraged the installation of representational, didactic murals – meant to convey messages about proper norms of behaviour – in those settings.\textsuperscript{13} Therefore, to secure approval for the creation of abstract murals for the communal social rooms of the Williamsburg Houses, Diller and Lescaze argued not only that abstraction complemented the site’s modern architecture, but that it would benefit the residents’ mental health. As Diller explained:

The decision to place abstract murals in these rooms was made because these areas were intended to provide a place of relaxation and entertainment for the tenants. The more arbitrary color, possible when not determined by the description of objects, enables the artist to place an emphasis on its psychological potential to stimulate relaxation.\textsuperscript{14}

The Williamsburg Housing Project – a unique site where modernist aesthetics and social goals converged – offered the perfect environment for Stuart Davis to put his own advocacy for modernist public art into practice. In the 1930s, Davis served as editor of the Artists Union’s magazine Art Front and as chair of the American Artists Congress. In these roles, he lobbied for increased federal arts funding and an expanded role for public art.\textsuperscript{15} However, he rejected the prevailing view that traditional, realist styles were best suited to public spaces, arguing that ‘the painting of today, if it is alive, must be as different from that of previous epochs as our time is different, because art is one of the forms of social expression and must change as society changes’.\textsuperscript{16} Davis asserted that the tenants of the Williamsburg Houses were already familiar with the visual language of modernist abstraction through ‘the shape and color of clothes, autos, cameras, airplanes, trains [and] cooking utensils’.\textsuperscript{17} The Williamsburg commission thus provided Davis an opportunity to bring the less familiar medium of modernist painting – the most appropriate choice for modern audiences because it ‘has a new sense of space and colour which reflect the broader

\textsuperscript{15} His stance is apparent, for example, in the undated typescripts ‘For a Permanent Art Project: Expansion Program for Greater Public Use of Art’ and ‘Federal Art Project and the Social Education of the Artist’, Stuart Davis Papers, Box 1/1, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC (hereafter AAA).
\textsuperscript{17} Stuart Davis, ‘Synopsis on Abstract Art in Williamsburg Project’, typescript, October 1937, Stuart Davis Papers, Houghton Library, Harvard University, microfilm reel 1 (hereafter Harvard).
view and experience of modern man which modern technological advance has made possible” – to the masses.

While all the murals designed for the Williamsburg Houses were aesthetically groundbreaking, ranking among the first abstract murals produced in the United States, scholars often single Swing Landscape out for special praise, even going so far as to call it ‘one of the most accomplished large-scale paintings executed in the twentieth century’. Although at first glance, Swing Landscape seems a raucous jumble of colors and shapes, the composition is carefully orchestrated. As William Agee notes, it is ‘the best possible example of Davis’s theory of color-space, in which color creates and becomes space’. Although Davis placed great importance on colour, form, and line, Swing Landscape, unlike most of the other Williamsburg murals, is not a pure abstraction. At least nominally, it depicts the waterfront at Gloucester, Massachusetts, a fishing town whose docks served as one of Davis’s most important subjects in the 1930s. Looking closely at Swing Landscape, one can detect entire passages, as well as specific motifs of rigging, buoys, ropes, and oil derricks, that recur throughout his Gloucester oeuvre. Yet while it is possible to describe Swing Landscape as ‘a fragmented, conflated view of Smith’s Cove, an inlet at the foot of Gloucester’s hills’, as one scholar does, Davis seems to have been less concerned with evoking a specific locale than with conceptually expressing the experience of living in the modern world. Indeed, many commentators have observed that Léger’s mural-scale painting La Ville almost undoubtedly served as a model for Swing Landscape. Both paintings are characterized by fragmentary compositions, an absence of negative space, and kaleidoscopic palettes, all of which suggest the visual overstimulation of modern life (that is, they evoke the very urban stressors Diller was hoping to ameliorate for

18 Davis, ‘Williamsburg Project’.
21 The many works compositionally related to Swing Landscape are identified in Boyajian and Rutkowski, Stuart Davis, vol. 3, 294. On Davis’s compositional recursions more generally, see Cooper, ‘Unfinished Business’, 22-55. Cooper argues that the ‘presence’ of the geographic location that served as the source for particular compositions diminished as Davis reworked a given theme.
https://www.philamuseum.org/collections/permanent/53928.html?mulR=106905307712
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the Williamsburg tenants). Further, as every interpretation of the mural reminds us, Swing Landscape also evokes aural stimulation through its allusions – in both title and composition – to swing music, a form of big band jazz popular from the mid-1930s to the mid-1940s. Unfortunately, the mural’s intended Brooklyn audience never had the chance to enjoy its swinging composition or puzzle over its motifs and iconography.

From artistic failure to icon of American art

Had the proposed artistic program for the Williamsburg Houses been fully realized, the site would have contained the most extensive collection of abstract murals in the United States, and perhaps in the world. However, it appears that administrative concerns over the abstract orientation and, more importantly, the cost, of the proposed murals resulted in a much reduced program. Today, only seven murals painted for the site are extant. Like most FAP murals, these are all ‘portable murals’, that is, large oil paintings on canvas. Out of the twelve or more murals originally envisioned for the Williamsburg Houses, only five – one each by Ilya Bolotowsky, Albert Swinden, and Balcomb Greene, and a pair by Paul Kelpe – were eventually installed in 1938. Two additional murals – Francis Criss’s Sixth Avenue El (now at the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington, DC) and Swing Landscape – were included in the May 1938 exhibition Murals for the Community at the Federal Art Project’s New York gallery, but they never reached their intended home.

Although extant records do not clearly illuminate the reason for Swing Landscape’s ultimate rejection, a simple comparison with the accepted murals provides the likely answer. The accepted murals all feature cool, limited palettes and serene, geometric compositions that support Burgoyne Diller’s vision of a restful, harmonious environment for the housing project’s residents. [Fig. 4] Further, they align with the more general guidelines for murals articulated by the FAP’s director Holger Cahill in 1936:

The color, the scale, and the character of the painting must have clarity, largeness, carrying power, and a rhythmic order that leads the eye easily

25 Concerns about cost are raised in some correspondence, for example, H.A. Gray to Harold Ickes, 16 July 1937, cited in Jody Patterson, Modernism for the Masses: Painters, Politics, and Public Art in New Deal New York, PhD Diss., University College, London, 2009, 205. The overall lack of clarity on the matter of rejection stems from the incomplete and contradictory nature of the extant archival documentation relating to the project.
26 The exact number of murals commissioned is difficult to determine, as some artists appear to have produced studies for two or more different murals.
27 Albert Swinden, Untitled, from the Williamsburg Housing Project Murals, ca. 1938. Oil on canvas, 283.2 x 426.7 cm. Brooklyn, NY: Brooklyn Museum. On loan from the New York City Housing Authority, L1990.1.5. 
https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/exhibitions/williamsburg_murals
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through the whole space. Mural art is suited to large, simple forms, and its color schemes are much more severely limited than those of the easel painter.\(^{28}\)

Although Karen Wilkin has asserted that *Swing Landscape* ‘admirably fulfill[ed its] mandate (...) to be public art’, because it is appealing ‘even to the visually unsophisticated’,\(^{29}\) *Swing Landscape* neither complements the other Williamsburg murals aesthetically nor fulfils the formal criteria of Cahill and Diller. It may not be coincidental either that the four accepted artists, like Diller himself, were all founding members of the American Abstract Artists, a group known for its predilection for non-objective art.\(^{30}\) Davis, who was critical of pure abstraction and argued with Diller over the aesthetics of the Williamsburg murals, was conspicuously absent from the membership rolls of the American Abstract Artists.\(^{31}\) Yet even critics who, like Davis, regarded geometric abstraction as cold and impersonal found *Swing Landscape* too visually overwhelming as a mural. In his review of *Murals for the Community*, the *New York Times*’ art critic Edward Alden Jewell appeared frankly offended by its optical boldness, complaining that ‘the color shrieks as if stricken with pain that cannot be less than acute’. Jewell made it clear that *Swing Landscape*’s dynamism would overpower its architectural setting, and in his view, a mural that ‘cancels everything else in range’ was not a successful example of public art.\(^{32}\)

Despite such pronouncements, and its ultimate rejection, *Swing Landscape* temporarily fulfilled a public art function – albeit in a location that differed dramatically from the Williamsburg Housing Project in terms of geography, demographics, and architectural significance. In accordance with regulations that allowed art commissioned through the New Deal programs to be placed only in tax-supported institutions, the FAP deposited *Swing Landscape* with Indiana University in January 1942. Because an art museum had not yet been established on campus at this time, the mural was initially displayed in a variety of public, or quasi-public, spaces. These included a painting studio and the student union building, where it served as a backdrop for a dance accompanied, appropriately enough, by Tommy Dorsey’s swing orchestra.\(^{33}\) In these settings, the mural energized educational and recreational spaces, while also introducing the student body to modern painting.


\(^{30}\) Davis disliked the concept of non-objectivity because he felt ‘it can have no meaning for the great masses of people’. Stuart Davis, ‘Notes on the Nature of Abstract Art’, typescript, 27 August 1937, Davis Papers, Harvard, microfilm reel 1.

\(^{31}\) His conflict with Diller is recorded in a memorandum dated 29 June 1937, Stuart Davis Papers, Box 1/1, AAA.


\(^{33}\) Boyajian and Rutkowski, *Stuart Davis*, vol. 3, 293.
Yet, just as its installation in a housing project would have ultimately limited its audience, and perhaps even relegated it to the art historical periphery, so too did Indiana University’s geographical isolation – exacerbated by the gasoline rationing of World War II – pose a similar risk. The mural’s portable nature now became a key factor in its continued visibility and, ultimately, its canonization. Davis’s 1945 retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) served as a critical moment not only for its canonization, but for its conceptual transition from mural to monumental easel painting, and hence from the public realm to the more rarefied (and formalist) atmosphere of the museum.

Anxious to keep his mural visible to the broader public (and to critics and curators) after its transfer to Indiana University, Davis requested its inclusion in his retrospective as soon as plans for MoMA’s show were underway. The loan duly secured, *Swing Landscape* was installed on the exhibition’s entry wall, reflecting curator James Johnson Sweeney’s belief that Davis’s murals were ‘one of the most important aspects’ of his work, and giving *Swing Landscape* pride of place among them. [Fig. 5] The mural’s placement at the exhibition’s entrance and its physical isolation from other works in the show signalled its seminal position in Davis’s oeuvre, but also set it apart as a work to be considered independently of the paintings hanging inside the exhibition galleries. And while this singular placement might have highlighted its unique identity as a mural, its recently constructed stretcher bars and new white frame physically elevated it away from the wall, transforming it from a mural into an easel painting, albeit a monumental one that has subsequently been perceived as exerting an influence on the large-scale paintings of the post-war era. For example, David Anfam, positing *Swing Landscape*’s key role in the development of American abstraction, argues that Davis’s mural ‘must count among the major precedents for the Abstract Expressionists’ mural-scale aspirations’. Anfam’s contention is supported by evidence that both Willem de Kooning and Lee Krasner likely encountered *Swing Landscape* through their own involvement with the Williamsburg mural project.

The 1945 MoMA retrospective may have marked the starting point for *Swing Landscape*’s ascent to the canon and situated it within the modernist narrative, but it also decisively severed it – with serious consequences for its subsequent reception

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34 Stuart Davis to James Johnson Sweeney, 24 August 1945, Exhibition Records for Stuart Davis, folder 298.2, Museum of Modern Art Archives (hereafter MoMA).
35 Sweeney to Henry Radford Hope, 27 August 1945, Exhibition Records for Stuart Davis, Folder 298.2, MoMA Archives.
and interpretation – from its origins in the government art programs of the 1930s. Its commission by the FAP elicited barely a sentence in the exhibition catalogue, or even in Davis’s own autobiography, published later that year. Nor did audiences first encountering Swing Landscape at MoMA have any way of knowing that Davis had painted the mural for a housing project – although a decade earlier, MoMA itself had mounted several exhibitions featuring architectural designs for public housing and studies for related murals. Given Swing Landscape’s rejection from the Williamsburg Houses, it may be understandable that Davis did not wish to emphasize this apparent failure. Moreover, advertising one’s connections to the FAP was no longer advisable in 1945, when federal arts patronage – especially if it supported modernist art – had become a contentious political issue. Right-wing opposition to the New Deal art programs factored into the dissolution of the FAP in 1943, and would soon impede the federal funding of cultural diplomatic endeavours during the early years of the Cold War. Thus, it would not be surprising if MoMA, and Davis himself, deliberately downplayed Swing Landscape’s origin within the FAP. In any event, the dominance of formalist art criticism in the post-war years encouraged readings of Swing Landscape that privileged its aesthetic attributes over considerations of any social functions Davis had intended the mural to perform.

By the end of the 1950s, Stuart Davis had been identified as a key figure in the development of modern American art, and his work was being rapidly incorporated into the canon. His second major retrospective was mounted in 1957 by the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, and his death in 1964 was commemorated by a memorial exhibition at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC. Although concerns about Swing Landscape’s fragile condition prevented it from appearing in these exhibitions, the authors of the first Davis

31 For example, the 1936 exhibitions Architecture in Government Housing and New Horizons in American Art included renderings, photographs, and site plans for the Williamsburg Houses and studies for the murals. Exhibition Records, folders 48.2, 48.3, and 52.1, MoMA Archives.
32 The most notable example of censorship was the ill-fated 1947 exhibition Advancing American Art. For a detailed discussion, see Dennis Harper, Mark Andrew White, and Paul Manoguerra, Art Interrupted: Advancing American Art and the Politics of Cultural Diplomacy, exhib. cat., Athens, GA: Georgia Museum of Art, 2012.
33 For example, the first two monographs on Davis were published at this time: E. C. Goossen, Stuart Davis, New York: G. Braziller, 1959, and Rudi Blesh, Stuart Davis, New York: Grove Press, 1960.
monographs identified the mural as a seminal work in his oeuvre. At this time, when formalist readings of Davis’s work were the norm, and with jazz’s musical innovations achieving widespread acceptance, Swing Landscape became inextricably linked to the aesthetics of swing music. John Lucas’s 1957 article ‘The Fine Art Jive of Stuart Davis’ provided the first substantive consideration of Swing Landscape’s visual parallels with the rhythms and syncopations of swing. Lucas argued that Davis’s entire oeuvre, in fact, was characterized by the artist’s creative relationship with jazz. In his view, Davis ‘began by taking jazz as a subject, sought next to appropriate its devices, and came last to approximate its spirit’. Swing Landscape, dating to an important transitional period in Davis’s oeuvre, reflects his move from the second to the third of these stages.

Another significant turning point in Swing Landscape’s post-war reception was prompted by a reassessment in the late 1960s of American art from the Depression era, which post-war critics such as Clement Greenberg had negatively compared to the accomplishments of the European vanguard. New interest in the FAP was prompted in part by the establishment in 1965 of the National Endowment for the Arts, the first federally funded arts program created in the United States since the demise of the New Deal programs twenty years earlier. The social themes and activist ethos dominating Depression-era art also seemed newly relevant against the backdrop of the civil rights movement and the escalation of the war in Vietnam. However, while social realism was most readily associated with the art of the 1930s, the Whitney Museum of American Art’s 1968 exhibition The 1930s: Painting and Sculpture in America sought ‘to demonstrate (…) that the 1930s (…) was a far more complex and diverse period than has been supposed’. Although curator William Agee actually furthered the post-war formalist agenda by positing a stylistic dichotomy between politically engaged artists and those whose concerns were primarily aesthetic, the exhibition enabled him to revive interest in many forgotten abstract artists of the 1930s, including those who participated in the Williamsburg mural project. The work of Stuart Davis was critical to his project, and because he considered Swing Landscape ‘one of the very greatest achievements of the period’, Agee was ‘willing to undertake virtually any measures to have it in the exhibition’. Following complex negotiations with Indiana University and

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45 Goossen, Stuart Davis; Blesh, Stuart Davis.
49 Beginning in the late 1930s, modernist critics were particularly dismissive of regionalist art, which typically portrayed agrarian scenes in a realist mode. For example, Clement Greenberg, ‘Avant-Garde and Kitsch’, Partisan Review, 6: 5, 1939, 34-49.
50 William C. Agee to Henry Radford Hope, 8 July 1968, registrar’s files for Swing Landscape, EMA.
consultation with conservators, *Swing Landscape* traveled for the first time in over twenty years to New York to appear in this exhibition.\(^{52}\) Previously presented solely within the context of Davis’s own stylistic development, *Swing Landscape* was now shown within a broader art historical context, ultimately establishing it as ‘the Federal Arts [sic] Project’s most outstanding public-scale abstract work’.\(^{53}\) In fact, its installation in the Whitney’s lobby near the entrance to the exhibition – recalling its placement in the 1945 MoMA retrospective – argued for its status not just as the crowning achievement of the FAP, but as the most significant American painting produced in that decade.\(^{54}\) Following the Whitney’s exhibition, the mural elicited discussion in a spate of new publications devoted to American art of the 1930s.\(^{55}\) It even graced the cover of a special issue of *Art in America* focusing on this topic.\(^{56}\)

Despite its newfound prominence after the 1960s, the rarity of *Swing Landscape*’s travels and the relatively poor quality of available reproductions impeded proper public, and at times, even scholarly, appreciation of the mural for another two decades. Tellingly, Metropolitan Museum of Art curator Lowery Stokes Sims noted that only her experience of viewing the mural *in person* during a 1989 research trip to Indiana University ‘confirmed [her] opinion of its seminal position within Davis’s oeuvre’.\(^{57}\) Sims’s research culminated in *Stuart Davis: American Painter*, a major retrospective mounted at the Metropolitan Museum and the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 1991 and 1992. This ambitious show, marking the centennial of Davis’s birth, sought to affirm his place in the canon of American art through a meticulously detailed examination of his entire career, and marked the start of a new era of serious scholarship on Davis. *Swing Landscape*’s appearance in New York for the exhibition, moreover, enabled a new generation of students, critics, and scholars to experience it in the original. Although some critics complained that with 175 works, the scale of the show was fatiguing, they recognized the groundbreaking qualities of *Swing Landscape*, which seemed conceptually and aesthetically ahead of its time. *New York Times* art critic Holland Cotter later claimed that the exhibition caused only ‘a moderate stir’, but it did shine

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\(^{52}\) Whitney Museum internal memorandum, 16 September 1968, and Richard D. Buck to Thomas T. Solley, 17 September 1968, WMAA Archives, Box 0045, Folder 25.


\(^{54}\) Whitney Museum internal memorandum, 30 August 1968, WMAA Archives, Box 0045, Folder 25.


\(^{56}\) *Art in America* 64: 5, September-October 1976.

\(^{57}\) Lowery Stokes Sims to Adelheid Gealt, 12 July 1989, registrar’s files for *Swing Landscape*, EMA.
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a new spotlight on *Swing Landscape*. Although not all reviews referenced the mural specifically, *Swing Landscape* was illustrated in many of them, attaining a new status as one of Davis’s most familiar works.

Since the Metropolitan Museum’s exhibition, *Swing Landscape* has been featured in numerous textbooks, popular surveys, and scholarly publications, and has been the central focus of two more exhibitions devoted to Davis and his contemporaries. *Stuart Davis and American Abstraction: A Masterpiece in Focus*, held in 2005 at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, was the first exhibition to give *Swing Landscape* a truly starring role. Intending primarily to reveal how Davis’s ‘drive toward simplified form, bright color, and flattened space paralleled the work of other American painters who were exploring nonobjective art in the 1930s’, curators Kathleen Foster and Michael Taylor juxtaposed the mural with paintings by nine other abstract artists, most of them members of the American Abstract Artists. A small selection of modernist sculpture, furniture, and design rounded out the exhibition. Situating a major mural by Davis among mostly non-objective, geometric paintings posed a similar problem to that faced by Diller and Lescaze in 1938. Just as *Swing Landscape*’s bright palette and frenetic composition would have dominated its fellow murals in the Williamsburg Houses, so too did it ‘outclass everything else in the show’, according to one critic. Thus, the exhibition mainly served to emphasize Davis’s artistic differences from his contemporaries, as recognized by another critic who described *Swing Landscape* as ‘the granddaddy of Jackson Pollock’s massive *Autumn Rhythm*’, one of the most groundbreaking American paintings of the post-war era. While acknowledging significant divergences in the technical approaches of Davis and Pollock, this critic noted that both mural-scale works ‘are full of an American energy, wild about saturated color and disdainful of light’.

*Swing Landscape*’s ‘sheer chromatic brilliance, ambition, invention, formal configuration, and visual impact’ also stood out in the 2016-17 exhibition *Stuart Davis: In Full Swing*. Organized by the Whitney Museum and the National Gallery

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60 Introductory exhibition wall text, Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2005, copy in curatorial files for *Swing Landscape*, EMA.


63 Adam Weinberg and Earl A. Powell III to Adelheid Gealt, 18 December 2014, curatorial files for *Swing Landscape*, EMA.
of Art, this exhibition – which even referenced Swing Landscape in its title – affirmed the attractions of Davis’s work for critics and the public alike. Holland Cotter credited a twenty-first century revival of interest in painting for giving Davis’s work a ‘sense of freshness and pertinence it didn’t project’ in the 1991 retrospective. It may also have helped that curators Barbara Haskell and Harry Cooper omitted Davis’s early works, and instead focused the exhibition around his practice of reusing motifs and compositional passages in his mature oeuvre. Because the exhibition depended on visual conversations between works, Swing Landscape was not physically isolated as it had been in the 1945 and 1968 exhibitions [Fig. 6]. In the Whitney’s installation, it was centrally positioned between a selection of Gloucester-themed paintings, with which it shares motifs, and a group of similarly high-keyed, all-over canvases from the 1940s. These later paintings, such as Ultra-Marine (1943), translate Swing Landscape’s formal innovations into a compact scale but nevertheless position the mural as ‘a precursor in scale, rhythm, and all-over intensity to Jackson Pollock’s mural-sized canvases’, as the exhibition’s organizers stated, citing a now-

64 Cotter, ‘Stuart Davis’.  

familiar trope.\textsuperscript{65} The installation also drew attention to Davis’s engagement with public art in the 1930s by surrounding \textit{Swing Landscape} with many of his other murals and mural studies. Nevertheless, the familiar jazz tropes figured most prominently in the interpretation of the mural presented to exhibition visitors, with the Whitney’s audio guide informing viewers that in painting \textit{Swing Landscape}, ‘Davis openly declared one of his greatest loves, jazz ( … ). The individual parts play into the whole like instruments in big band jazz’.\textsuperscript{66} Since the formal equation of Davis’s paintings with jazz dominates readings of \textit{Swing Landscape}, one critic’s provocative query whether this equation is ‘one of those reflexive art-history habits that delimits our understanding’ of Davis’s art offers an important opportunity to address the narrowedness – and even distortions – inherent in the standard interpretations of \textit{Swing Landscape}.\textsuperscript{67} The question also encourages us to consider how we can reorient the scholarly discourse around this mural to provide the public with a richer understanding of the work, which, though fully incorporated into the modernist canon, is lacking in context.

**Decontextualization, or the perils of canonization**

In 1960, Rudi Blesh noted that Davis’s artistic vocabulary transcends time and place, and he correctly predicted that lasting admiration for \textit{Swing Landscape} would depend upon its visual qualities.\textsuperscript{68} Yet too often – at least if we wish to understand whether and how Davis considered the interests of his audience – the conditions of its commission and creation have been ignored and its intended role as public art forgotten. Over time, the discourse around \textit{Swing Landscape} has calcified into a set of tropes centring on its Gloucester-themed motifs and its formal musical analogies. While one might excuse its reduction in a recent high school literature textbook to ‘a jazz-inspired billboard’,\textsuperscript{69} this oversimplification is indicative of the interpretive shallowness that has accompanied the mural’s canonization. The dearth of serious scholarship on the mural’s origins as a public art commission means that the FAP’s complex procedures for commissioning, approving, and allocating murals to eligible sites are rarely considered in analyses of \textit{Swing Landscape}.\textsuperscript{70} Similarly, most

\textsuperscript{65} Weinberg and Powell to Gealt, 18 December 2014, curatorial files for \textit{Swing Landscape}, EMA.
\textsuperscript{67} Philip Kennicott, ‘Stuart Davis = Jazz: An Equation that Doesn’t Explain this Chilly Modern Master’, \textit{Washington Post}, 17 November 2016.
\textsuperscript{68} Blesh, \textit{Stuart Davis}, 56.
\textsuperscript{70} The most detailed description of the FAP’s mural approval process appears to be contained in an unpublished typescript: ‘Methodology’, 1942, RG 69 (Records of the Works
commentaries mention the mural’s commission for a housing project in just one or two sentences, if they do not ignore it altogether. Yet, marginalizing the roles of the administrative process and social goals that governed the mural’s production perpetuates a view of Davis as a solitary genius, using a public mural commission primarily to advance personal artistic goals.\(^71\) Likewise, an insistence that Davis ‘scrupulously separate[ed] his painting and his political activism’ implicitly denies the potential for social meaning in *Swing Landscape*.\(^72\) While Cécile Whiting has argued that Davis ‘reconciled modernism and Marxism’ in his abstract paintings of the 1930s, she offers no insight into how he might have accomplished this specifically in *Swing Landscape*, a work she mentions only in regard to Davis’s love of jazz.\(^73\) Those who wish to examine the mural with fresh eyes – and there has been some notable progress on this front\(^74\) – must confront a body of literature that not only dismisses the critical roles played by patronage, prospective audience, and social context, but which is riddled with basic factual errors. In one example, an American art survey published in 1977 misidentifies *Swing Landscape* as the mural Davis painted for Radio Station WNYC in 1939.\(^75\) Less egregious, but also indicative of the general indifference towards the details of the mural’s commission, is the assertion that *Swing Landscape* was rejected from the Williamsburg Houses because it was deemed ‘too modern’ for the Brooklyn tenants.\(^76\) This argument fails to take into consideration the stylistically vanguard orientation of the Williamsburg project as a whole, and the fact that the five murals ultimately installed were all non-objective geometric abstractions. It further obscures *Swing Landscape*’s participation in the decade’s heated debates over differing approaches to abstraction, most of which were represented in the murals proposed for the Williamsburg Houses, but,

\(^{71}\) Although Davis did enjoy a great deal of freedom in aesthetic matters, he was required to submit multiple sketches of his ideas for approval. Further, his request to paint his Williamsburg mural in tempera was denied. Memorandum, 29 June 1937, Stuart Davis Papers, Box 1/1, AAA.


\(^{74}\) See, for example, Patterson, ‘The Art of Swinging Left’, 98-123; and John X. Christ, ‘Stuart Davis and the Politics of Experience’, *American Art* 22: 2, Summer 2008, 42-63.


\(^{76}\) For example in wall texts for the 2005 exhibition *Stuart Davis and American Abstraction: A Masterpiece in Focus* at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, copies in curatorial files for *Swing Landscape*, EMA.
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as noted, were far from equally represented in the final selection made by Diller and Lescaze.

Perhaps scholarly disregard for the mural’s intended site and audience is understandable, given that Davis did not paint the work in situ, nor was it ever installed in the Williamsburg Houses. However, to ignore the social context around *Swing Landscape* not only dismisses the critical roles of patron and audience in the production of public art, but fosters a misunderstanding of Davis’s own social goals as a muralist.\(^7\) To more fully appreciate how he might have desired *Swing Landscape* to function in the public sphere, let us consider whether the common readings of its Gloucester iconography and musical allusions have obscured potential social meanings embedded in its composition. After all, Davis himself declared that abstract art contained social content in ‘its record of the aesthetic perception of (…) nature and society in the age of industrial development’.\(^8\)

Scholars who read *Swing Landscape* as ‘an uninhibited paean to Gloucester’ have found it difficult to reconcile the mural’s ostensible subject with its intended location in a Brooklyn housing project surrounded by a dense, urban neighbourhood.\(^9\) Yet, as a vocal proponent for making modernist art more accessible to the masses, Davis was highly concerned with engaging his anticipated audience. He certainly understood that *Swing Landscape*’s audience would be urban, working class, and unfamiliar with vanguard art. Lauding the FAP for making ‘a start in bringing (…) abstract art directly to the people in modern homes’,\(^10\) he likely saw the commission as a valuable opportunity to introduce this audience to an artistic idiom which, like its presumptive model, Léger’s *La Ville*, reflected the sensory experiences of modern urban life. At the same time, its Gloucester subject would not necessarily have been deemed inappropriate for the Brooklyn site. Administrators for the New York City Housing Authority actually requested that the murals painted for the Williamsburg Houses include images unconnected with the tenants’ ordinary life in New York. They explicitly asked for fewer allusions to city life in favour of ‘more rural’ scenes.\(^11\)

Davis’s titles for the mural – both the final *Swing Landscape* and an earlier version, *Waterfront Forms* – suggest geographic ambiguity.\(^12\) Indeed, far from associating *Swing Landscape*’s composition with the Gloucester waterfront or seeing anything rural in it, evidence suggests that the mural’s intended viewers would have perceived it as an abstracted New York scene. Evidently as unfamiliar with

\(^7\) For a useful examination of Davis’s understanding of public art, see Christ, ‘Stuart Davis as Public Artist’, 65-82.

\(^8\) Davis, ‘Nature of Abstract Art’.

\(^9\) Wilkin, ‘Stuart Davis in Philadelphia’, 43.

\(^10\) Davis, ‘Williamsburg Project’.

\(^11\) Langdon Post to Burgoyne Diller, 30 October 1936, NYCHA Records, Box 53C1, folder 4.

\(^12\) On the *Waterfront Forms* title variant, long thought to refer to a separate mural, see Boyajian and Rutkowski, *Stuart Davis*, vol. 2, 626.
Davis’s larger body of Gloucester imagery as the Williamsburg tenants would likely have been, various authors have interpreted *Swing Landscape* as an urban scene or as a view of New York harbour. Some have assumed that the oil derrick at the upper left of the composition represents the Williamsburg Bridge, one of the great suspension bridges spanning New York’s East River. Other harbour motifs have been identified as playgrounds, roadways, and apartment buildings. Robert Hughes goes so far as to describe *Swing Landscape* as ‘a triptych of the port of New York, visible from Williamsburg, thematically related to the site’. These misreadings are valuable in that they hint at how the Williamsburg tenants of the 1930s would likely have responded to the mural, interpreting it through the lens of their familiar urban landscape. Perhaps the misreadings provide some insight into Davis’s own creative process as well. An entry in his 1937 calendar indicates that Davis, in fact, visited the area around the Williamsburg site and the nearby Brooklyn waterfront in search of relevant subject matter for the mural. Although he returned instead to more familiar Gloucester motifs, the art historian Jody Patterson asserts that *Swing Landscape*’s harbour imagery was, nevertheless, ‘tailor made’ for the Williamsburg residents, many of whom were employed at the Brooklyn Navy Yard. In focusing on the composition’s repetition of motifs from more explicitly Gloucester-themed paintings, scholars have missed opportunities to consider that in creating *Swing Landscape*, Davis himself may have sought to blur the lines between urban and rural, seascape and landscape, New York and Gloucester. This possibility is supported by his argument that a mural with a straightforward composition is ‘likely to lose its interest because the spectator [who sees it ‘over and over again’] knows it all by heart’.

The meaning of swing music for *Swing Landscape* may also be more complex than many have considered. Davis clearly wanted people to view his paintings as a form of visual jazz, even hiring the great jazz musician Duke Ellington to play at a 1943 exhibition opening so ‘guests would see how the irregular geometrical shapes and piebald color of his compositions (…) echo the rhythms and tempo of swing’. Davis’s avowed admiration for swing, and especially for ‘hot jazz’, a style which ‘relies upon a virtuoso embroidering of a given rhythm’, has rightly informed

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85 Davis calendars, 28 August 1937, cited in Boyajian and Rutkowski, *Stuart Davis*, vol. 3, 293.
89 Patterson, *Modernism for the Masses*, 214.
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readings of Swing Landscape. In much the same manner as a jazz improvisation, Davis composed Swing Landscape as an elaborate, and the most explicitly Cubist, variation on his Gloucester repertoire. But do Davis’s formal strategies comprise the extent of Swing Landscape’s allusions to swing? As early as 1960, Rudi Blesh pointed out that ‘Davis thought of swing as “an expression of social forces that was in itself a social force”’. However, few scholars since have asked what social forces Davis perceived in swing music or have considered the social and political roles swing music played in Depression-era America. It is widely recognized that one of swing’s attractions for Davis – who claimed that ‘all of my pictures ( … ) have their originating impulse in the impact of the contemporary American environment’ – was its status as a musical form indigenous to America. Yet as much as American popular culture was integral to his artistic persona, Davis also borrowed extensively from European vanguard art, and he insisted that modernist art was ‘unrestricted by racial or national boundaries’. Significantly, he wrote these words in 1943, not long after the Nazis’ repression of modernism in both art and music had become well-known in the United States. In fact, as he was painting Swing Landscape in summer 1937, news of the infamous Degenerate Art exhibition, staged that summer in Munich to defame modern art, blanketed the American press. Davis, whose own artistic ideology conflated modernist styles with democracy and who saw abstraction as a socially progressive force, understood that Hitler had banned modern and abstract art primarily for political reasons. Swing, considered a ‘degenerate’ musical form in Nazi Germany, likewise gained connotations of democracy, anti-fascism, and tolerance during this same period in the United States. Indeed, the cultural milieu around jazz and swing aligned with many socially progressive causes, including the labour movement, anti-fascist activism, and the New Deal itself. Some New York jazz clubs and swing bands – such as those led by Count Basie and Benny Goodman – even served as rare sites of racial integration. Despite Davis’s reticence to incorporate direct political messages into his art, the explicit references to swing in Swing Landscape’s composition and title might have been understood as coded social messages by viewers in the 1930s. Could it even be that those inferred messages played a role in its rejection by patrons who were seeking to create an aesthetic environment unencumbered by such (potentially

90 Blesh, Stuart Davis, 55.
92 Davis, ‘The Cube Root,’ 33-34. Davis also references the Nazis’ concept of ‘degenerate art’ in his article ‘Abstract Art in the American Scene’, Parnassus 13: 3, March 1941, 103.
93 Davis, ‘Nature of Abstract Art’.
95 Patterson, Modernism for the Masses, 214-216.
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In any case, the potential social and political meanings embedded in *Swing Landscape*'s swinging composition become more resonant when the work is reconsidered with Davis’s own social activism, and the social status of those for whom he painted it, in mind.

**Conclusion**

The completed Williamsburg murals rank among the first abstract murals painted in the United States, but *Swing Landscape* is the only one to have achieved canonical status. The canonization of *Swing Landscape* began as early as 1945, with its prominent placement in MoMA’s Stuart Davis exhibition, but did not conclude until the close of the twentieth century, when a reappraisal of Davis’s work aligned with technological improvements in image reproduction to direct new attention towards the mural. *Swing Landscape*'s physical separation from the Williamsburg Houses resulted in its decontextualization, but also guaranteed its survival and eventual canonization, as revealed by the fate of the five murals installed in the housing project in 1938. In the decades following their installation, these murals suffered vandalism and severe neglect, as the communal social rooms in which they were displayed were converted into offices and storage spaces. At some point, the murals were painted over, but their loss went virtually unnoticed in the art world. It was only in the late 1970s that they were rediscovered under multiple coats of paint and found to be in serious danger of disintegrating from water damage. Eventually, they were removed from the Williamsburg Houses, restored to the extent possible, and installed in the Brooklyn Museum. There, their installation in the museum’s café helps them retain their public art aura. *Swing Landscape* has clearly enjoyed a much happier fate, and it is now one of the best-known American murals painted in the 1930s. However, its disassociation from the Williamsburg Houses has been so complete that not even the rediscovery of the other Williamsburg murals altered the predominantly formalist discourse around *Swing Landscape* in any significant way. Only recently have efforts to reconsider the mural from new perspectives offered signs of a shift in the scholarship on Davis and on murals and public art more generally.

*Cécile Whiting notes that Davis’s conflation of modernist abstraction and anti-fascist ideology was not popular in 1930s America when proponents of abstraction emphasized formal values and supporters of socially engaged art advocated for representational, easily legible images. Whiting, *Antifascism in American Art*, 75.*


*Their rediscovery was due in large part to the persistence of Greta Berman, who researched their whereabouts in conjunction with her doctoral dissertation: Berman, *The Lost Years*.***
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Recently, scholars outside the United States have displayed an interest in Swing Landscape, a sign that American modernism, and Davis’s work in particular, is beginning to enter the broader canon of modern art. Historically, Swing Landscape, like most examples of American art produced before 1945, has been little known or appreciated outside the United States. However, in the last two decades, the mural has been requested for loan to several European exhibitions, but because of its fragility, it has travelled overseas only once – to the Pompidou Centre’s 2004 exhibition Sounds and Lights, which examined the role of music in twentieth-century art. Some of the European exhibitions, such as the Kunsthalle Bielefeld’s 2008 exhibition 1937: Perfection and Destruction, would have offered new interpretations of Swing Landscape by presenting it as an exemplar of American anti-fascism. Fortunately, we are not reliant on exhibitions alone to reorient the discourse around this work. Indeed, a new generation of scholars is beginning to produce scholarship that goes beyond the formal analysis that has so far dominated discussions of the mural. Art historians Andrew Hemingway and Jody Patterson, for example, have written about Swing Landscape within the context of American leftist politics of the 1930s. Moreover, the developing art historical discourses on reception and canonization processes remind us that it is not sufficient to value a work of art for its aesthetic merits alone. While the Williamsburg mural commission certainly afforded Stuart Davis the opportunity to explore his artistic theories and compositional strategies on a grand scale, it is also important to recognize Swing Landscape’s relationship to the progressive social programs and politics of the 1930s. When we have more fully come to terms with the interrelationship of aesthetics, social progressivism, and leftist politics expressed in Swing Landscape, we will in fact be better able to justify its place in the modernist canon as a work whose significance goes far beyond its relationship to Abstract Expressionism or its translation of jazz into paint.

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99 Miscellaneous loan request letters, curatorial files for Swing Landscape, EMA.