



NORTON MUSEUM OF ART

Stuart Davis (American, 1894–1960), *American*, 1932. Oil on canvas, 84 x 48 in. (213.4 x 121.9 cm).
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NORTON
MUSEUM
OF ART

A CLOSER LOOK

AMERICAN COLLECTION

Stuart Davis (American, 1894 - 1964)

New York Mural, 1932

Oil on canvas

84 x 48 in. (213.4 x 121.9 cm)

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ABOUT



The Artwork

New York Mural uses symbols to represent New York life and politics in the 1920s and '30s. The Empire State Building was an engineering marvel and, at the time, the tallest building in the world. A white sail indicates New York's role as a major port. The rope on the sail leads to a glass spilling liquid and a crescent moon, indicating illegal shipments of "moonshine" during Prohibition. One politician opposed to Prohibition was Al Smith, a governor of New York during the 1920s. The derby hat was Smith's trademark. Another derby hat is perched on a banana recalling a song "Yes, We Have No Bananas" used by Smith's 1928 presidential campaign. Smith's candidacy was supported by John Jakob Raskob, the vice president of General Motors. Davis expressed this political connection by painting a tire next to the derby hat. The tire also represents Tammany Hall, a political organization that had been implicated in a transportation scandal. Both the crooked tiger tail and the tiger's head symbolize Tammany Hall.

After losing the election in 1928, Smith led the company that built the Empire State Building. On the right side of the painting, Smith's connection to the building is represented by a bow tie, his preferred neckwear.



The Artist

Stuart Davis was born in 1894 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. At age 16, with the blessing of his parents, Stuart Davis began to study painting with Robert Henri.

In 1913, Davis exhibited five watercolors in the Armory Show, a groundbreaking modern art exhibition in New York. Davis responded to the works of Gauguin, Van Gogh, and Matisse; he also liked the flat planes of color and space in cubist paintings. This exhibition influenced Davis' style, which is apparent in *New York Mural*.

Two other important influences on Davis' style were the modern city and Jazz music. Davis saw a connection between art and music: "the tonal intervals of music have their counterpart in painting in intervals of tone, color, contrast, size and direction."

Above:
Stuart Davis (American, 1894 - 1964)
New York Mural, 1932 (detail)
Oil on canvas
84 x 48 in. (213.4 x 121.9 cm)
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SEE



Observe & Describe

Have students take time to look at Stuart Davis' *New York Mural*.

As they look closely, first ask students: What do you see? Have students notice as many details as possible before moving on to the next question. Ask them to describe the lines, colors, shapes, and textures. Encourage students to observe as many details as possible before giving any information about the artwork. Encourage even closer looking by asking:

- What else do you see?
- What does the artist do visually to help our eye move around the work of art?
- This artwork is a cityscape (an artistic representation of a city). What looks familiar to you? What is different or unusual that you see? Is what you see located in the foreground, middle ground, or background?

Start a Conversation

- What is one word you would use to describe Stuart Davis' city? What makes you say that?
- What are some sounds you might hear?

Left:
Stuart Davis (American, 1894 - 1964)
New York Mural, 1932 (detail)
Oil on canvas
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THINK



Let's Compare

42nd Street Times Square, Manhattan, from the series *Habitat 7*

This photograph is part of Jeff Chien-Hsing Liao's *Habitat 7* series. The artist took photographs along the 7 train line, the line closest to where he lived when he moved to New York City from Taiwan in 1999. Liao was fascinated by the various cultures and economic backgrounds of people in neighborhoods along this line, all within 6 miles of each other. He said the communities were constantly evolving, like a living organism.

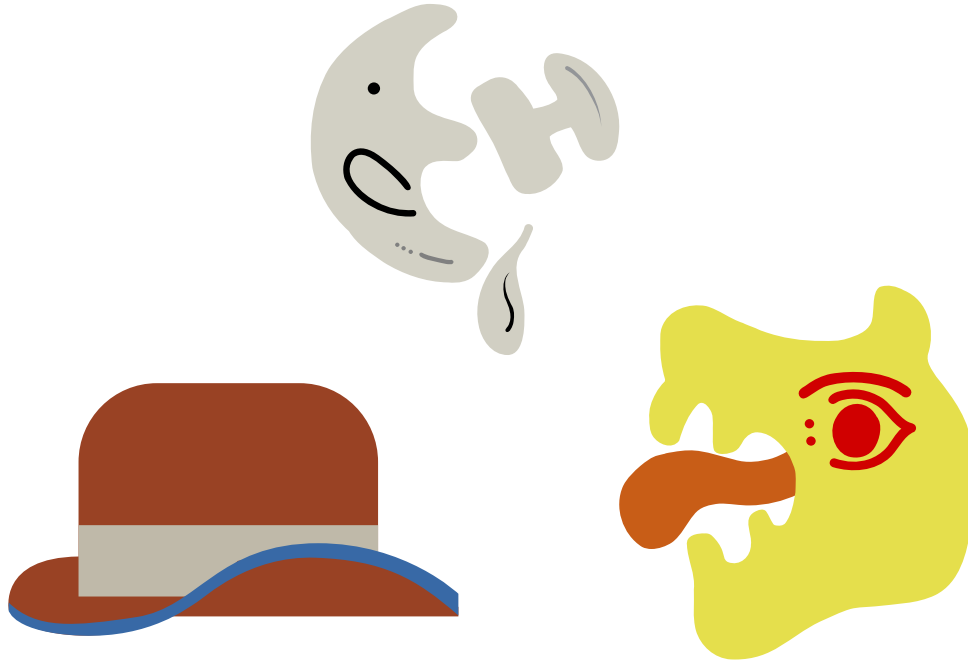
In this image, Liao depicts 42nd Street, Times Square. He features himself standing by the subway entrance. To achieve this photograph, he made several exposures between the hours of 3 and 6 pm, capturing the changing light and movement. Then, he created a composite image of the different exposures using digital software.

Ask students the same Observe and Describe questions that also apply to the photograph. Then, have students discuss the following:

- What similarities or differences do you see between the two artworks?
- If Stuart Davis and Jeff Chien-Hsing Liao could meet, do you think they would have the same views about New York City? Why or why not? What are some things they might say to each other?
- Based on the photograph, how do you think cities have changed in the years since *New York Mural* was made? How are they still the same?

Right:
Jeff Chien-Hsing Liao, (Taiwanese, born 1977)
42nd Street Times Square, Manhattan, 2005 (detail)
from the series *Habitat 7*
Pigment ink print
Edition 2 of 6
40 x 96 in. (101.6 x 243.8 cm)
Purchase, with funds generously provided by J. Ira and Nicki Harris, 2007.10
© Jeff Chien-Hsing Liao

WONDER



Classroom Discussion

For Younger Students

- If you were the artist, what you would add or take away from this artwork?
- If you could give a title to this artwork, what would it be and why?

For Older Students

- Now that you know the meaning behind the symbols in Davis' artwork, does it change your viewpoint about it? Why or why not?
- Davis created the *New York Mural* to discuss political and social issues taking place at the time in his city. If this artwork were made today, what topics do you think the artist would feature?
- More than 90 years ago, Davis used his art to criticize changes taking place in New York City. What are some ways to voice your opinion nowadays for similar purposes?

Extend it! Activity Ideas

For Younger Students

After introducing students to the meanings of mural and symbolism in art, encourage them to collaborate on a large-scale art project. Help your group create a mural related to their school. Ask students to decide what symbols and colors they would incorporate on the mural to best represent the principles and aspirations of their school community.

For Older Students

Have students practice art-related vocabulary and use art-centered strategies with the following activity. Ask your group to take turns presenting *New York Mural* as if it were their artwork. Allow students to make connections between *New York Mural*, themselves, and their world by inventing a story about what motivated them to create this piece of art. Students are encouraged to use their own lived experiences and redefine the various symbols found in the artwork. This activity can take place at the beginning or at the end of the lesson.

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1450 S. Dixie Highway
West Palm Beach, Florida 33401
norton.org

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