

Arthur B. Davies: Paintings & Figurative Works on Paper

by Donald Myers

Arthur B. Davies (1862-1928), a key figure in American art, was one of the group called “The Eight” from which the pivotal Ashcan School of modern American art arose. Davies was also instrumental in introducing European modernism to America through his role as the key organizer of the famed 1913 Armory Show held in New York, Chicago, and Boston. However, much of Davies’ work has a dreamy, Arcadian quality at odds with the gritty, urban realism of his contempo-

Arthur B. Davies Paintings from the Randolph College Collection and *Modern Movement: Arthur Bowen Davies Figurative Works on Paper from the Randolph College and Mac Cosgrove-Davies Collections* are paired exhibitions on view through January 26, 2021 at the Hillstrom Museum of Art, Gustavus Adolphus College, 800 West College Avenue, Saint Peter, Minnesota, 56082, 507-933-7171, www.gustavus.edu/finearts/hillstrom. Both exhibitions were organized by the Maier Museum of Art, at Randolph College, Lynchburg, Virginia, in collaboration with the artist’s great-grandson, curator Mac Cosgrove-Davies. An illustrated catalogue, produced by the Maier Museum of Art, accompanies the exhibition.

rary Ashcan artists in America and with European art of the time. Yet in his embracement of the archaic and the archetypal, and his concern to suggest motion in his works, he was fundamentally modern in spirit.

Davies was inspired by current developments in dance such as the work of renowned dancer Isadora Duncan. This relates to his stated preference of using “continuous composition,” which he described





All illustrated images are from the Maier Museum of Art at Randolph College, gift of Mrs. Cornelius N. Bliss, Jr., unless otherwise stated.

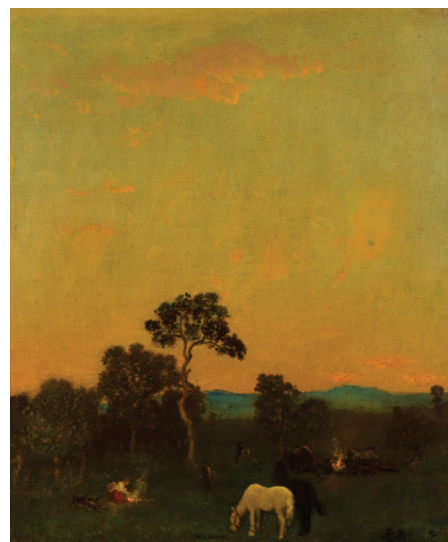
ABOVE: *Three Nudes in Landscape*, w/c on paper, 85/8 x 67/16.

ABOVE RIGHT: *Decoration*, c. 1918, o/c, 58 x 387/16.

RIGHT: *Margaret*, pencil on paper, 14 x 101/2, Mac Cosgrove-Davies.

RIGHT: *Gypsy Encampment in the Ramapo Hills*, 1896, o/panel, 1311/16 x 111/4, Maier Museum of Art at Randolph College, gift of Mrs. Robert W. Macbeth.

LEFT: *Untitled (Four Dancers)*, pastel on paper, 1013/16 x 141/16, Ashley Carlton.



as “repetition of the same motive.” The artist frequently repeated the same figure numerous times in different positions within a single artwork, indicating a range of movements. These particular poses or motives were also used in later works. Particular poses or motives were also reused for later works. Figures in the undated watercolor *Three Nudes in Landscape* were reconfigured for the artist’s 1919 aquatint print

Kingdom of the Sun.

The fluid lines that typified Davies’ graceful figures gave way to a more fragmented approach starting around the time of his involvement with the Armory Show, when he flirted with Cubism, Futurism, and other modernist manners. The large oil painting *Decoration* can be seen in this light. Fragmented planes of color form the

tripled female figure and the surrounding space in this work, which seems to echo the most infamous painting in the Armory Show, *Nude Descending a Staircase* (1912) by Marcel Duchamp.

Davies only briefly embraced this new mode, however, and soon returned to his former approach. In his oil paintings, this is typified by the tonal, romantic quality



found in the 1896 oil *Gypsy Encampment in the Ramapo Hills*. It bears some similarity to the work of George Inness, who had a profound influence on Davies after he saw, as a teen, an exhibition that featured Inness and other landscapists of the Hudson River School. The painting dates from the period when Davies and his first wife, Dr. Virginia Meriwether, had a farm in Congers, New York, on the Hudson River some twenty miles out of New York City. Not too distant from there are the Ramapo Mountains, named for the Ramapo, Native Americans descended from the Lenape. Davies followed common misnaming of the Ramapo as “gypsies” in *Gypsy Encampment in the Ramapo Hills*. It dates from the same year that the artist had his first solo exhibition, at the William Macbeth Gallery in New York, and it was shown in Davies’ second solo exhibit with Macbeth, in 1897, and bears a gallery label on its back.

Davies is acclaimed for his highly accomplished drawing skills. In the pencil image of an unidentified woman named *Margaret*, he delineates, with the most delicate of markings, the back of his seat-



ed, semi-nude model. Standing male figures, nude or nearly so, are explored in his *Two Nude Figures* and *Sketch for Tiptoeing Youth*, which is a study for the 1910 painting purchased by the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, in 1931, the year following the extensive memorial retrospective the Metropolitan Museum of Art organized after Davies’ sudden death in 1928.

The 1930 memorial exhibit included around 200 works, among them the oil painting *Achaea*, which was illustrated in its catalogue. Davies was greatly inspired by Greece, and the titles of many of his works reference this. He traveled there several times, including in 1911 with Edna Potter, whom he met in 1902 after having become estranged from his wife. Potter had met Davies when she, a dancer, served as his regular model, and her form and features are immortalized in many drawings.

Although the artist didn’t pursue portraiture in great depth, there are works that seem to portray specific persons, such as the 1920 chalk *Bust of a Woman*. Curator Mac Cosgrove-Davies



ABOVE: *Achaea*, c. 1917, o/c, 18 $\frac{1}{4}$ x 30 $\frac{1}{16}$.
 RIGHT: *Untitled (Profile Portrait)*, pastel on paper, 12 x 10 $\frac{1}{2}$, Mac Cosgrove-Davies.
 ABOVE LEFT: *Sketch for Tiptoeing Youth*, c. 1910, chalk on paper, 14 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 11.
 ABOVE FAR LEFT: *Two Nude Figures*, chalk on paper, 10 $\frac{15}{16}$ x 8 $\frac{7}{8}$.
 LEFT: *Bust of a Woman*, 1920, chalk on paper, 8 $\frac{9}{16}$ x 7 $\frac{11}{16}$.

suggests that the distinctive facial features may identify her as prominent collector Lizzie P. Bliss, one of the founders of the Museum of Modern Art in New York. This chalk drawing was given by her estate to the Maier Museum of Art in 1949 and is one of over sixty works by Davies in that collection, most of them from Bliss's estate.

The works by Davies in these exhibitions present a clearer picture of the artist's sensibilities than what comes to mind when he is invariably compared with Ashcan artists and European works shown in the Armory Show. Cosgrove-Davies aptly summarizes in the exhibition catalogue: "Davies' poetic images are not a chronicle of his time and travels, but instead spring from his dreams, emotions, intellect, and imagination." The two exhibits allow a better understanding of the artist, who had his own unique vision that combined modern ideals with a timeless appearance.

