WHO WAS WHO IN AMERICAN ART

Compiled from the Original Thirty-four Volumes of AMERICAN ART ANNUAL: WHO'S WHO IN ART
Biographies of American Artists Active from 1898-1947

EDITED BY PETER HASTINGS FALK

SOUND VIEW PRESS
1985
SUMMER CLOUDS

Charles Harold Davis (1856-1933)
oil on canvas, 40" x 50"
Widener University Art Museum, Gift of
A. Carson Simpson and Mrs. Peggy Simpson Carpenter, 1954

Charles Davis was born on January 7, 1856 in Amesbury, Massachusetts. His father was a school teacher and librarian and his mother a cultured woman, including the poet John Greenleaf Whittier among her close friends. Davis developed an early interest in art and, although he apprenticed himself to a local carriage maker at the age of fifteen, he continued to spend much of his free time painting and drawing. By the end of his four year apprenticeship he had grown dissatisfied with the carriage making trade, and decided to devote his entire time to art.

In 1877 Davis left Amesbury to enroll in the newly founded school of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. He remained there two years studying with the German artist, Emil Otto Grundman. In September of 1880, Davis sailed for Paris with the help of a one thousand dollar gift from Jacob R. Huntington, a wealthy Amesbury carriage manufacturer. He enrolled in the Academie Julian and studied under Jules Lefebvre and Gustave Boulanger. However, Davis did not stay at the Academie Julian for very long after he discovered the Barbizon Forest near Paris. He fell in love with the area and settled in the village of Fleury, near Barbizon. It was here that he met Angele Genevieve Legarde, whom he married in 1884.

He spent the next decade painting independently in France where he was undoubtedly brought into contact with the
Impressionists. Davis exhibited regularly at the Paris Salon and, at the same time, sent works home to exhibitions in Boston and New York. Recognition and financial success increased during the time he spent in France.

As the artist's two children approached school age, Davis and his wife decided it was time for the family to return to America. They first went to Amesbury, Massachusetts in the spring of 1891, and finally settled in Mystic, Connecticut early in the following year. There were no prominent artists residing in the Mystic region when Davis arrived. Several of Davis's artist friends began to join him in Mystic to paint during the summer months. Meanwhile, the long and costly illness and subsequent death of his wife forced Davis to take on a heavy load of students in order to pay medical expenses. As a result, Mystic began to evolve into a summer artist's colony with Davis as its leader. In 1913, the artist along with two of his friends, founded the Mystic Art Association, an organization that is still very active today.

In 1900 Davis married Frances Darby, a former student. He spent his later years painting, teaching, writing and lecturing on art. He died on August 5, 1933.

Davis considered his cloud paintings an important aspect of his work and submitted several of these compositions to major exhibitions. Out of approximately 200 paintings which span the years 1901-1915, 39 were cloud compositions with low horizons.
CHARLES HAROLD DAVIS N.A.
1856 - 1933

MYSTIC ART ASSOCIATION, INC.
Mystic, Connecticut
CHARLES HAROLD DAVIS N.A.
1856 - 1933

A monograph based upon a retrospective exhibition held at the gallery of the Mystic Art Association
June 25 - July 18, 1982

Text by
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Foreward by
NELSON C. WHITE

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Mystic, Connecticut
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The board of directors of the Mystic Art Association wish to thank all who have made this retrospective exhibition and memorial monograph possible.

To Thomas L. Colville, author of the text, for much scholarly research and a critical evaluation as well as invaluable assistance in arranging for the loan of his own and other Davis paintings and memorabilia. The author wishes to express his gratitude to Charles Davis's great-granddaughter, Dixie Peaslee, for providing him with the essential records which made this text possible. He also wishes to thank Esther Smith and R.W. Smith for their help in preparing the manuscript.

To Stone Ledge Studio Art Galleries of Noank, Connecticut for designing the exhibition and the catalogue.

To Nelson C. White for writing the foreward and for the loan of paintings owned by him.

Many institutions and individuals have helped in the realization of this endeavor. Specific mention must be made of Edgar deN. Mayhew, director of the Lyman-Allyn Museum, New London. Also the National Museum of American Art, Washington, D.C.; the Boston Museum of Fine Art; the New Britain Museum of American Art; The Vose Galleries of Boston; and Richard P. LeClercq, photographer.

All who loaned paintings cannot be included here but they are noted in the catalog listing.

FOREWARD

Nearly fifty years have passed since the death of Charles H. Davis in August of 1933. In his prime, Davis ranked as one of our foremost landscape painters, his work in steady demand.

As the influence of Impressionism yielded to principles of abstraction and non-realistic painting, Gauguin, Matisse, Picasso, and especially Cezanne (whom Davis admired), began to hold the center of the stage, Davis's style became broader and freer in conception and execution. Living on the upper branch of the Mystic River in Connecticut, the artist spent those last years of his life contentedly and occasionally traveled to New York and Europe. He enjoyed his status as unofficial dean of the artists in Mystic, providing a strong influence for the young artists who universally revered him as both mentor and friend.

Davis once said that, "A successful artist is like a three-legged stool. He must have three qualifications: talent, character and industry. He can succeed partially with any two but not completely without all three . . ." By "character" he did not mean the copy-book virtues but what the Romans meant by "gravitas" which can signify weight and dependability, sincerity and truth. The present exhibition, covering the breadth of Davis's work from the early paintings in France to the later ones in America, demonstrates how well he lived up to the requisites of talent, character and industry.

In Walden, Thoreau commented that, "one generation abandons the enterprises of another like stranded vessels . . ." But we can now observe how, as has been written, elsewhere, "Every generation quarrels with its fathers but makes friends with its grandfathers." Grandchildren are now beginning to recognize the value of Davis and his contemporaries. It seems that at last Davis's place is secure in the history of American Art. For this we should be forever thankful.

Nelson C. White
BIOGRAPHICAL

Charles Harold Davis was the second of four sons born to James H. Davis and Elizabeth Coffin Davis on January 7, 1856, in Amesbury, Massachusetts. His father was a school teacher and librarian and his mother a cultivated woman who counted the poet John Greenleaf Whittier among her close friends. Young Charles's varied interests included music, art and literature. By his early teens he was an accomplished clarinetist and enthusiastic draughtsman. Although Charles apprenticed himself to a local carriage maker at the age of fifteen, he continued to spend much of his free time painting and drawing. At the end of his four year apprenticeship, having grown dissatisfied with the carriage making trade, he decided to devote his entire time to art.

His first contact with contemporary European paintings came when his mother took him to Boston to view an exhibition of Old Masters at the Athenaeum. In an adjoining room he chanced upon a collection of works by Millet and other Barbizon painters. Davis writes of this formative experience in his unpublished manuscript on Millet:

*I did not like them at all, I was, in fact indignant that such common place things should be thrust upon me as attractions in what I expected was to be a high class affair and for which I had paid my entrance fee of fifty cents. However I did look at the drawings in spite of myself and a little miracle was then and there being wrought -- for they were quietly taking me into a relationship that has continued ever since.*

In 1877 Charles left Amesbury to enroll in the newly founded school of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, taking with him his father's limited financial support and reluctant blessing. He remained there two years studying drawing under the German artist Emil Otto Grundman. This training enabled him to return to Amesbury and earn a living as a portrait draughtsman. Not entirely satisfied with a career as a portraitist, he desired to further this studies in Paris. Jacob R. Huntington, a wealthy Amesbury carriage manufacturer, having heard of Davis's ambitions, gave him one thousand dollars thus enabling him to sail for Paris, via Scotland, in September of 1880.

Upon his arrival in Paris, Davis stayed temporarily with Edward Simmons, a fellow student from his Boston school days; later he found a permanent residence and enrolled in the Julian Academy under Jules Lefebvre and Gustave Boulanger. The dry tasks of a first year student in figure drawing at the Academy did not appeal to his romantic nature. On a visit to the Barbizon Forest outside of Paris he was so enthralled by the region that he decided to become a landscape painter and returned there to work foregoing his studies at the Academy. The ardor with which the artist regarded the region is conveyed by him in a quote from his essay on Millet. "My first morning in Barbizon was spent in finding, one by one, the spots and characteristic things I actually knew by heart from the years of devoted study of Millet's drawings." Davis continued to relate how one evening at twilight he lingered too long in the woods and lost his way home. Finally he recognized a stand of trees from a Millet painting, oriented himself and found his way back to the village.

Davis immediately set about painting a major landscape for submission to the Paris Salon in 1882, which to his amazement and delight was accepted for exhibition. He settled in the village of Fleury, near Barbizon, where he was joined during the summers by
some of his old friends from Boston. It was here that he met Angele Genevieve Legarde, a French woman whom he married in 1884. The couple had two children, Angele, born in December of 1884, Robert, born in February 1886. During his ten years in France, Davis exhibited regularly at the Salons, receiving critical acclaim. He was awarded an honorable mention in the Salon of 1887, and a silver medal in the Exposition Universale of 1889. Meanwhile, he continued to send works home to exhibitions in Boston and New York. Recognition and financial success increased during these years. The American collector George Seney purchased Davis's *Evening,* and donated it to the Metropolitan Museum where it was a popular attraction. The two leading landscape painters of the day, George Inness and Alexander Wyant, praised Davis's *Deepening Shadows* exhibited at the National Academy of Design that same year and purchased by the influential collector and promoter, Thomas B. Clarke. Clarke subsequently became a major supporter of Davis's art. In addition to regularly sending entries to important international expositions, Davis was given yearly one-man exhibitions at Doll and Richards Galleries in Boston from 1882 onward. He enjoyed frequent showings in the New York galleries as well.

There were no prominent artists residing in the Mystic region when Davis arrived; Henry Ward Ranger's discovery of nearby Old Lyme was seven years away. Some of Davis's artist friends joined him in Mystic to paint during the summer months. Meanwhile Angele's long and costly illness and subsequent death had been a grave financial blow to the young family and Charles was forced to take on a heavy load of students in order to pay medical expenses. As a result of an influx of students and fellow artists, Mystic began to evolve into a summer artist's colony with Davis as its leader. In 1913, the artist together with two of his friends founded the Mystic Art Association. In the early years they invited outside artists to submit works for their exhibitions but gradually they were able to draw on enough material from the colony itself. By 1931 the association was sufficiently established to build the gallery which houses the present exhibition.

In 1900 Davis married Frances Darby, a former student. The two shared a quiet life in Mystic, making occasional trips to dealers and museums in New York and Boston. They also made five trips to Wales and Europe between 1908 and the outbreak of the First World War. During that period Davis enjoyed a high degree of critical and popular success under the management of the Macbeth Gallery.

He spent his later years painting, teaching, writing and lecturing on art. Whenever he could be induced to leave his beloved Mystic, he served on the juries of major expositions throughout the northeast. His death, on August 5, 1933, was given prominent coverage by the New York and New England press and his Memorial Exhibition at Macbeth Gallery the following year was regarded as a major artistic event.