

5120

Stuart Davis, *The Mellow Pad*

Jon Vassos, *RCA Victor Special, Model K*

Dominic Carter: This painting plays with paint the way jazz musicians play with sound—*that*, at least, was the intention of Stuart Davis, painter and jazz lover.

But what could be more different from jazz than a rectangular painting hung on a wall? Stuart Davis answered that question with his own brand of cheerful chaos. Colorful shapes vibrate and move on the canvas as if it's a crowded dance floor, and all this jazzy energy is contained by a light blue border—which, you'll notice, is broken here and there, as if the party might just spill into the next room.

Stuart Davis was deeply impressed by Cubism, collage, and other techniques of the European avant-garde. But he didn't want to paint like a European. He wanted his work to be about America. This painting deliberately mixes up the high cultural tone of formal abstract painting with American popular culture. *Mellow* and *pad* were hipster words of the era. Maybe they're included as subtle jokes that only an American in the know would understand, because it's hard to imagine what's mellow about Stuart Davis's colorful pad.

Maya Pritzker: Oh, it's very cheerful, it's very dynamic.

What makes it for me very American is the colors, because, you know, the intensity and brightness of colors—you just cannot find it anywhere else.

Dominic Carter: Like a lot of colorful, abstract art, you might almost see this painting as a lively swatch of wallpaper. As it turns out, Stuart Davis was intrigued by the design of everyday things, says curator Linda Ferber.

Linda Ferber: I think frankly, he would be complimented that it somehow reminds someone of a kind of wallpaper. It is an all-over design. Every part of the canvas is as finished as every other part. But I do think that the energy of it is what really would distinguish something like this.

Dominic Carter: Stuart Davis would probably have enjoyed playing his beloved jazz records on the RCA portable phonograph behind you. The sparseness of this little aluminum machine seems to share Davis's taste for sleek, modernist design.