

Arthur B. Davies  
American, 1862 - 1928

## *Stars and Dews and Dreams of Night*

c. 1927

oil on canvas

overall: 101.92 × 66.2 cm (40 1/8 × 26 1/16 in.)

framed: 118.11 × 83.82 × 8.89 cm (46 1/2 × 33 × 3 1/2 in.)

Corcoran Collection (Museum Purchase, William A. Clark Fund) 2014.136.53

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### ENTRY

Arthur B. Davies adapted this painting's title from a line in "Atalanta in Calydon," a poem by Algernon Charles Swinburne written in 1865: "O fair-faced sun, killing the stars and dews and dreams and desolation of the night!" [1] The poem concerns a tragic figure in Greek mythology; likewise, the painting exudes an air of melancholy. Like its title, the composition of *Stars and Dews and Dreams of Night* is lyrical and rhythmic. It features a nude woman against a backdrop of dark, dense vegetation. Turning to gaze over her left shoulder, she cranes her neck. This action creates a curving line that is continued by her right arm and leg, culminating in a delicately arched foot. The extension of the head and the toe mirror each other, defining the curve that is in turn bisected by the vertical line of her left arm and standing leg. The artist cropped the top of the figure's head and her standing foot, a decision questioned by at least one critic, who noted, "*Stars and Dews and Dreams of Night* is arbitrarily—rather perversely, one may feel—cut into by the top and bottom of the frame." [2] Yet the cropping introduces an element of tension. This pushing back against the borders complicates the muted reverie of the scene.

The nude's creamy skin tones are subtly and richly modulated, and the pale figure appears luminous against the shadowy background. The subject of the painting does not connect with the audience, rather she gazes downward with a faraway expression. Contemporary critics wrestled with Davies's mystifying compositions while lauding his technique: "the strange attenuated nude figure . . . arrests attention and one feels that the 'American poet painter' has visions and dreams that we cannot always follow except to appreciate the delicacy of flesh tints and

drawing.” [3]

American artists of the late 19th century, including Abbott Handerson Thayer (American, 1849 - 1921) and Thomas Wilmer Dewing (American, 1851 - 1938), favored depictions of woman as ethereal creatures, pure and untouchable. However, Davies’s interpretation owes more to Continental sources, including Pierre Puvis de Chavannes (French, 1824 - 1898), whom the American artist admired for his subtle allegories that integrated figure and landscape. The symbolic landscapes and Arcadian pastorals of the Renaissance Italian painter Giorgione (Venetian, 1477/1478 - 1510) also left a strong impression on the artist. Perhaps Davies looked to his own art collection for inspiration when conceiving this painting. Among his two hundred drawings, paintings, and watercolors was a small painting of Venus then attributed to Giorgione featuring a profile of a woman gazing over her shoulder against a backdrop of dark vegetation [fig. 1].

Davies’s art collection and his love of antiquities resulted in a collaboration with the archaeologist Gustavus Eisen in the early 1920s. The two men developed a “theory of inhalation,” which maintained that ancient art achieved its vitality by depicting the body at the moment of inhalation. [4] Davies attempted to render this moment repeatedly in his own work. *Stars and Dews and Dreams of Night* visualizes inhalation through the figure’s raised chest and ribcage as well as her outflung arms.

Davies’s romantic leanings were out of step with his contemporaries, though he was very supportive of the new directions of his fellow artists. He was, for instance, largely responsible for bringing modernism to America through his role as the chairman of the committee that organized the infamous Armory Show of 1913. Walter Pach once wrote that “modern art in America owes more to [Davies] than to anyone else.” [5] His advocacy of modernism extended to advising major collectors like Lillie Bliss, whose collection was pivotal to the formation of the Museum of Modern Art, New York. His own collecting practices were highly eclectic; he amassed Etruscan vases and Egyptian relics as well as works by Constantin Brâncuși (Romanian, 1876 - 1957) and Paul Cézanne (French, 1839 - 1906). Davies briefly experimented with cubism immediately after the Armory Show (see, for example, his *Great Mother* of c. 1913 [fig. 2]). However, for the remainder of his career he returned to his deeply personal and evocative vision. Davies was both of his time and removed from it, finding equal inspiration in Pompeian murals and Picasso’s drawings. With otherworldly works like *Stars and Dews and Dreams of Night*, Davies makes quiet demands of the viewer, rewarding patience and

introspection.

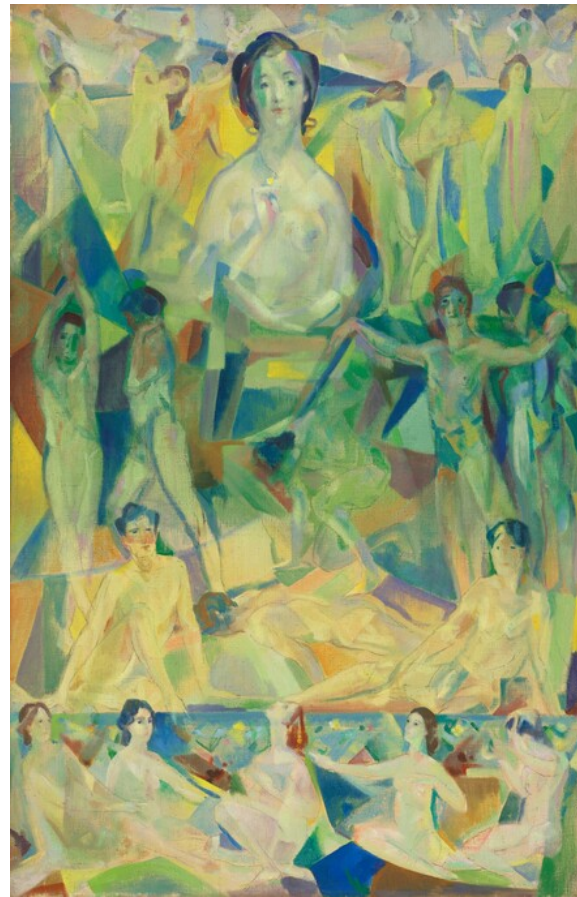
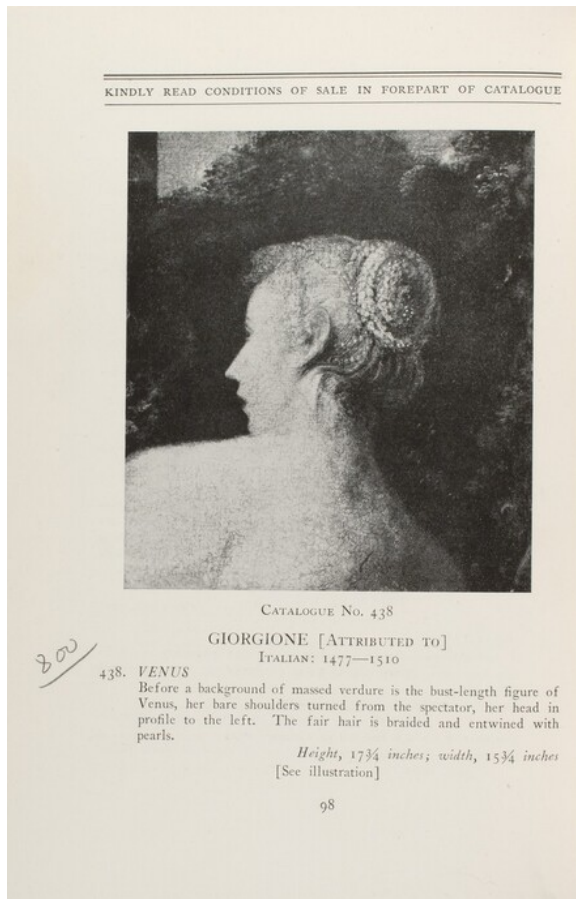
Four days after Davies died while abroad in Italy, the 11th Corcoran Gallery of Art biennial exhibition of contemporary American paintings opened to the public. Among the offerings of 1928 were *Stars and Dews and Dreams of Night* and the landscape *Umbrian Mountains* [fig. 3], both of which were purchased by the museum. The artist was no stranger to the Corcoran: 17 of his paintings had appeared in 11 biennials, and he had received the First William A. Clark Prize and the Corcoran Gold Medal at the sixth biennial in 1916. In 1930 Davies's career was commemorated in a large exhibition organized by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, which traveled to the Corcoran. Despite recognition earned during his lifetime and immediately after his death, the artist's critical standing diminished dramatically in the decades following his death. In later years his reputation was resuscitated, as scholars and critics began to recognize the complexity and singularity of his artistic vision as well as his formative role in the introduction of modern art to America.

Kerry Roeder

August 17, 2018

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## COMPARATIVE FIGURES



**fig. 1** Estate of Arthur B. Davies, Works by Picasso, Derain, Cézanne, Degas, Rivera, Max Weber, Matisse, "Pop" Hart, Dickinson, Laurencin, 1929, National Gallery of Art Library, David K. E. Bruce Fund

**fig. 2** Arthur B. Davies, *The Great Mother*, c. 1913, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Corcoran Collection (Bequest of Lizzie P. Bliss)



**fig. 3** Arthur B. Davies, *The Umbrian Mountains*, 1925, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Corcoran Collection (Museum Purchase, William A. Clark Fund)

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#### NOTES

- [1] Algernon Charles Swinburne, *Atalanta in Calydon and Lyrical Poems*, Selected by William Sharp (Leipzig, 1901), 35.
  - [2] Edward Alden Jewell, "Eleventh Corcoran Exhibit and German Primitives," *New York Times*, Nov. 4, 1928, sec. 10, 12.
  - [3] "Corcoran Show," *Christian Science Monitor*, Nov. 19, 1928, 7.
  - [4] Gustavus A. Eisen, "Davies Recovers the Inhalation of the Greeks," in *Arthur B. Davies: Essays on the Man and His Art* (Cambridge, MA, 1924). For more on this subject, see Robin Veder, "Arthur B. Davies' Inhalation Theory of Art," *American Art* 23, no. 1 (Spring 2009): 56–77.
  - [5] Walter Pach, "A Recollection," in *Arthur B. Davies (1862–1928): A Centennial Exhibition* (Utica, NY, 1962), 7.
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#### TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The wax resin-lined painting was executed on a fine, plain-weave, medium-weight canvas and was stretched onto a modern, five-member replacement stretcher. The tacking margins have not been retained. A thin, off-white ground was probably commercially applied, but since the tacking margins have been removed it is

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difficult to be certain. The painting was built up in multiple layers alternating between opaque paint and fluid semitransparent glazes. It appears that the artist sketched the figure first and then surrounded her with the blue and green background. The flesh tones were built up in multiple layers as Davies made modifications to the modeling and drawing of the woman's body. There are many changes in the outline of the figure—particularly in the proper left leg, the proper right hip and thigh, and the proper left arm—that are now apparent because the flesh-colored paint has become more transparent over time. Although the foliage was painted freely, wet into wet, the artist waited for the paint to dry before adding the final details of the woman's face. The painting has old natural resin varnish layers as well as several more recent layers of synthetic resins that have an even, moderate gloss. The painting is in generally good condition, although the woman's pubic area has been scored by vandalism. The texture of the paint layer has also been significantly flattened by lining. The surface is slightly yellowed, probably from the discoloration of the varnish.

According to the Corcoran Museum's conservation files, in 1949 the painting was treated by H. F. Cross after it was vandalized. He removed grime and pencil marks and then varnished the painting with Dammar followed by a coat of wax. The painting was vandalized again in 1970 and treated by Robert Wiles in 1971. Wiles removed an old glue lining and replaced it with a wax resin lining (with an interleaf of polyester web). Ballpoint pen marks were removed, the old varnish was reformed, another coat of Dammar followed by two coats of different synthetic resins were applied, and the damages were inpainted.

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### **PROVENANCE**

Acquired from the artist by (Ferargil Gallery, New York); purchased 1928 by the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington; acquired 2014 by the National Gallery of Art.

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### **EXHIBITION HISTORY**

1928 The Eleventh Exhibition of Contemporary American Oil Paintings, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, 28 October - 9 December 1928, no. 100.

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1962 Arthur B. Davies (1862-1928): A Centennial Exhibition, Munson-Williams-Proctor Institute, Utica; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Memorial Art Gallery, University of Rochester; Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond; Cincinnati Art Museum; City Art Museum of Saint Louis; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 1962-1963, no. 39.

1972 Conservation in the Museum, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, 1972, unpublished checklist.

1976 Corcoran [The American Geniuis], Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, 1976, no checklist.

1981 Dream Vision: The Work of Arthur B. Davies, Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston; Marion Koogler McNay Art Institute, San Antonio; Munson-Williams-Proctor Institute, Utica; The Phillips Collection, Washington, 1981, unnumbered checklist.

1998 The Forty-Fifth Biennial: The Corcoran Collects, 1907–1998, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, 17 July - 29 September 1998, unnumbered catalogue.

2004 Figuratively Speaking: The Human Form in American Art 1770-1950, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, 2004-2005, unpublished checklist.

2005 Encouraging American Genius: Master Paintings from the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington; Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; Parrish Art Museum, Southampton, New York; Mint Museum of Art, Charlotte; John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, Sarasota, 2005-2007, checklist no. 86.

2009 American Paintings from the Collection, Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, 6 June - 18 October 2009, unpublished checklist.

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- 1991 Falk, Peter Hastings, ed. *The Biennial Exhibition Record of the Corcoran Gallery of Art, 1907-1967*. Madison, Connecticut, 1991: 17, repro., 19, repro., 106.
- 1998 Dorsey, John. "Framing the Century: Corcoran Gallery Highlights the Best Works from Its Forty-four Biennials [exh. review]." *Baltimore Sun* (3 September 1998): F:3.
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- 2005 "Curator's Choice: Hidden Treasures of American Painting." *Forbes Collector* 3, no. 3 (March 2005): 4, repro.
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