



Arthur B. Davies
American, 1862 - 1928

Sweet Tremulous Leaves

1922/1923

oil on canvas

overall: 77.2 x 46.4 cm (30 3/8 x 18 1/4 in.)

framed: 97.8 x 67.6 x 3.2 cm (38 1/2 x 26 5/8 x 1 1/4 in.)

Inscription: lower left: A.B. DAVIES

Chester Dale Collection 1963.10.119

ENTRY

Arthur B. Davies completed *Sweet Tremulous Leaves* (1922/1923) in the last decade of his career. [1] Four years earlier, after a period of experimentation with a cubist-influenced style, Davies had returned to the idealized, romantic representations of female nudes in pastoral settings that he had painted during the first decade of the twentieth century. In this work, two contemplative women hold their arms aloft and seem to drift across the composition as if in a trance. The women are positioned in the extreme foreground of the painting in front of a tree trunk and a distant landscape. The painting's somewhat cryptic title adds to the mysterious, dreamlike quality of the scene.

The figures in *Sweet Tremulous Leaves* are similar to the woman in an earlier work, *A Measure of Dreams* [fig. 1]. Brooks Wright characterized such paintings by Davies in his biography of the artist:

Typically, his paintings show figures that do not look at or interact with the viewer; their faces are veiled or averted, their eyes half closed, their expressions rapt and trance-bound. So little rooted are they to the ground they seem almost to float. Their action is a mute charade, the meaning of which is unclear. Sometimes it is violent, but more often vaguely erotic. The landscape settings often show evidence of symbolic transformation with a consequent displacement of affect, as when a part of the human body is

transmuted into a mountain, a valley, a tree, a tower. [2]

Davies studied psychology and was fascinated by dreams. He sometimes used dreams as the stimulus for his paintings, referring back to the notes and drawings that he made upon waking. [3] Davies also found inspiration in poetry. *A Measure of Dreams* has been linked to George Meredith’s poem “A Faith on Trial” (1885), [4] and *Sweet Tremulous Leaves* may have a source in poetry as well. For instance, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s “Flowers” (1839) and Edgar Allan Poe’s “To Isadore” (1845) both contain the phrase “tremulous leaves.” [5]

The setting for Davies’s figures is derived from Greek mythology. Davies had long admired Sir James George Frazer’s comparative study of mythology and religion, *The Golden Bough* (first published in 1890), and even named his farm in upstate New York after it. The manner in which the upraised arms of the nude women align with the trunk and branches of the tree in *Sweet Tremulous Leaves* is similar to pictorial representations of the myth of Apollo and Daphne mentioned in Frazer’s text (in the National Gallery of Art’s collection, examples include *Apollo Pursuing Daphne* and *Daphne Changed into a Laurel Tree*).

Davies was deeply influenced by the classical art that he saw during a trip to Italy and Greece in 1910 and 1911. This fascination took an esoteric turn in 1922 when he collaborated with archaeologist Gustavus A. Eisen in developing the “theory of inhalation.” As explained by Davies’s biographer Bennard B. Perlman, the artist determined that “the excellence of Greek art was based upon the fact that the thorax, rather than the brain, is the center of emotions, and that the figures depicted in Greek painting and sculpture were consciously shown at the height of inhaling a breath, rather than when exhaling and relaxed.” [6] *Sweet Tremulous Leaves* was painted at the height of Davies’s interest in the inhalation theory. The figures’ raised chests and ribcages and upstretched arms imply that their bodies are at the apex of breathing in.

The similarities of the women’s appearance, their friezelike positioning on the canvas, and the slight difference in their movements could be read as a representation of sequential motion. Davies was familiar with the photographic studies of Eadweard Muybridge (American, born England, 1830 - 1904), and he referred to Muybridge’s use of multiple images of the human figure as “continuous composition.” [7] Perlman traced the artist’s interest in sequential motion to the earlier pastel *Design, Birth of Tragedy* (c. 1912, Colby College Museum of Art,

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART ONLINE EDITIONS

American Paintings, 1900–1945

Waterville, ME), noting that in subsequent works Davies “tended to avoid overlapping figures so that the negative spaces between them could take on added significance.” [8] The unconventional cropping of the figures—a pictorial strategy that Davies used often, as in *A Measure of Dreams*—also reflects the influence of photography.

Robert Torchia

July 24, 2024

COMPARATIVE FIGURES



fig. 1 Arthur B. Davies, *A Measure of Dreams*, c. 1908, oil on canvas, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of George A. Hearn, 1909

NOTES

- [1] The date comes from Chester Dale’s purchase records and may have been supplied by Ferargil Galleries.
- [2] Brooks Wright, *The Artist and the Unicorn: The Lives of Arthur B. Davies* (New City, NY, 1978), 114.
- [3] For an extensive examination of this topic, see Emily Willard Gephart, “A Dreamer and a Painter: Visualizing the Unconscious in the Work of Arthur B. Davies, 1890–1920” (PhD diss., Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2014), <https://dspace.mit.edu/handle/1721.1/87536>.
- [4] Doreen Bolger Burke, *American Paintings in the Metropolitan Museum of*

Art, vol. 3, *A Catalogue of Works by Artists Born between 1846 and 1864* (New York, 1980), 427.

- [5] The full texts of both poems are published widely, including online. The sixth stanza of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, “Flowers,” in Henry Wadsworth Longfellow: A Maine Historical Society Website, accessed Nov. 14, 2023, https://www.hwlongfellow.org/poems_poem.php?pid=90, reads:
- Gorgeous flowerets in the sunlight shining,
Blossoms flaunting in the eye of day,
Tremulous leaves, with soft and silver lining,
Buds that open only to decay;
- The first stanza of Edgar Allan Poe, “To Isadore,” in “Appendix: Poems Attributed to Poe,” in *The Complete Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. James A. Harrison, vol. 7, *Poems* (1902), <https://www.eapoe.org/works/harrison/jah07z01.htm>, reads:
- Beneath the vine-clad eaves
Whose shadows fall before
Thy lowly cottage door—
Under the lilac’s tremulous leaves—
Within thy snowy clasped hand
The purple flowers it bore—
Last eve in dreams, I saw thee stand,
Like queenly nymph from Fairy-land—
—Enchantress of the flowery wand,
Most beautiful Isadore!
- [6] Bennard B. Perlman, *The Lives, Loves, and Art of Arthur B. Davies* (New York, 1998), 316. Eisen testified that the artist “actually set to work and retouched hundreds of his old paintings with comparatively few strokes of his brush, thereby magically as it were infusing new life and new beauty rivaling the best in classical art.” Gustavus A. Eisen and F. Newlin Price, “Obituary: Arthur B. Davies,” *Art News* 27 (Dec. 22, 1928): 12, quoted in Perlman, 317. For a discussion of his theory, see Robin Veder, “Arthur B. Davies’ Inhalation Theory of Art,” *American Art* 23 (Spring 2009): 56–77.
- [7] Arthur B. Davies, “Credo,” in *The Etchings and Lithographs of Arthur B. Davies*, ed. Frederic Newlin Price (New York, 1929), 19, quoted in Robin Veder, “Modern Motives: Arthur B. Davies and ‘Continuous Composition,’ and Efficient Aesthetics,” in *Modern Movement: Arthur Bowen Davies Figurative Works on Paper* (Lynchburg, 2013), 12, https://www.academia.edu/2916313/Modern_Motives_Arthur_B._Davies_and_d_Continuous_Composition_and_Efficient_Aesthetics_catalog_essay_for_Maier_Museum_January_2013. See Veder’s essay for a fuller discussion of sequential motion in Davies’s works.
- [8] Bennard B. Perlman, *The Lives, Loves, and Art of Arthur B. Davies* (New York, 1998), 226.

TECHNICAL SUMMARY

The lined, lightweight, plain-weave fabric support is heavily textured with numerous horizontal weave imperfections. Cusping is visible at the top margin. The lining fabric is double threaded and of heavier weight than the original. The artist applied paint directly to the fabric without using a ground layer. He worked in a variety of techniques, ranging from thin applications in the underlayers to a rich, fluid paste applied with a palette knife. Infrared reflectography and x-radiography reveal small adjustments to the contours of the figures. The profile of the figure in the rear was originally tilted upward at a sharper angle, the nipple of her breast was larger, and her nose was longer; the contour of the figure in the front was more curvilinear. The composition was carefully planned—several thin, unpainted lines appear between adjacent forms. The painting is in good condition with only minor paint loss at the right edge. The surface is coated with a thin layer of natural resin varnish.

Michael Swicklik

July 24, 2024

PROVENANCE

Purchased from the artist by (Ferargil Galleries, New York); sold 8 January 1927 to Chester Dale [1883-1962], New York; bequest 1963 to NGA.

EXHIBITION HISTORY

1924 An Exhibition of Paintings, Drawings, and Water Colors by Arthur B. Davies, Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh, 1924, no. 29.

1937 An Exhibition of American Paintings from the Chester Dale Collection, The Union League Club, New York, 1937, no. 42.

1943 Paintings from the Chester Dale Collection, Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1943-1951, unnumbered catalogue, repro.

1965 The Chester Dale Bequest, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1965, unnumbered checklist.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- 1931 Davies, Virginia M. "The Known Works of Arthur B. Davies." In Royal Cortissoz, *Arthur B. Davies*. New York, 1931: 33.
- 1943 *Paintings from the Chester Dale Collection*. Philadelphia, 1943; unpaginated, repro.
- 1965 *Paintings other than French in the Chester Dale Collection*. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1965: 59, repro.
- 1970 *American Paintings and Sculpture: An Illustrated Catalogue*. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1970: 48, repro.
- 1980 *American Paintings: An Illustrated Catalogue*. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1980: 142, repro.
- 1981 Williams, William James. *A Heritage of American Paintings from the National Gallery of Art*. New York, 1981: repro. 206, 208.
- 1992 *American Paintings: An Illustrated Catalogue*. National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1992: 155, repro.
- 1998 Perlman, Bennard B. *The Lives, Loves, and Art of Arthur B. Davies*. Albany, 1998: 226, repro. no. 51.
-

To cite: Robert Torchia, "Arthur B. Davies/Sweet Tremulous Leaves/1922/1923," *American Paintings, 1900–1945*, NGA Online Editions, <https://purl.org/nga/collection/artobject/46594> (accessed April 11, 2025).