

Arnold and Seena Davis have been collecting old master drawings and paintings since the 1960s, when these works were out of fashion, especially amongst American collectors. Their vision has taken them well beyond the boundaries of their cultural and religious backgrounds, art world fashions, and even personal taste. As all exceptional collectors do, they have a preference for the challenges of intriguing art works that offer a wide range of human experiences rather than easy aesthetic pleasures.



Figure 1.
Jacob Cornelisz van Oostanen
Flemish, c. 1477 – 1533]
St. James the Greater
oil on panel
3 1/4" x 6 1/2"

This exhibition attempts to reflect the wide range of the Davis collection by including religious and secular works; portraits, landscapes, and other subjects; paintings, drawings, and objects; and large and small works. The installation is designed to provide a taste of the intimate viewing experience of the Davis home setting within the larger, more neutral, and public space of the art gallery, while providing each work with adequate breathing room to ensure the optimum viewing experience. The subsequent balancing act and difficult editing have left just enough room for this curator to indulge in more subjective criteria, which are formed by experiences as an artist-painter as well as a curator. Whenever possible, the selection of works for this exhibition was made in favor of those that displayed surprising and unexpected solutions to the challenges of painting.

One such example is a small painting by the sixteenth-century artist Jacob Cornelisz van Oostanen (fig. 1). The subject, *St. James the Greater*, is depicted in half-length and three-quarter profile. The soft contour of his face rolling down his forehead is accentuated by the elongated features of his nose, chin, and beard, all directing our vision diagonally forward and downward. The rhythm created by this unusual drawing is then repeated in the contour of his right hand, which starts with his rounded wrist and leads into the elongated features of his hand and pointing finger. Even the landscape framing the figure moves with the same rhythm. The resulting inner harmony and

abstract integrity of the image leaves one with a lasting impression of mastery and perfection, while the 'imperfection' of such elongated features only serves to create a challenging and memorable visual experience.

A *Sea Battle* by seventeenth-century painter Claes Claesz Wou (fig. 2) is another striking example of mastery achieved by avoiding showmanship and the usual dramatic visual effects. In this painting there are no – expected and popular – soaring diagonals of composition, bright aquatic colors, turbulent skies, or other similar effects. Instead, about two-dozen ships are arranged horizontally on an unusually long canvas, where most of the water is covered by a long dark streak of shadow. However, this initial horizontal view slowly fades into deep perspective and a circular movement of entangled ships in and out of that deep space. There is a sense of matter-of-fact realism in this painting, even though we are always kept at a distance – even when viewing the seamen who have fallen into the water in the foreground. The cropping of the tops of some of the masts and sails create a modern, snapshot view, adding to the sense of reality – the painting may have been cut to these proportions later, to fit a particular wall space, but this does not diminish its power and appeal to the modern viewer.

The Davises' vision in collecting has given me enormous instruction and pleasure. I feel privileged to have been invited to their home and to have had a working relationship with them on this exhibition. I also am proud to be involved in their efforts to share their collection with the public, especially in the unique settings of the galleries and museums of liberal arts colleges.

Serdar Arat

Serdar Arat, *Director/Curator*, Concordia Gallery
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Figure 2.
Claes Claesz Wou
[Dutch, 1592 – 1665]
Sea Battle
oil on panel
9" x 35"