

# William R. Davis Open to All, Yet Always Himself

By CHARLES RASKOB ROBINSON



Observation is critically important in art, especially in the arena of traditional painting that William Robert Davis (b. 1952) chose to pursue nearly 30 years ago. The successful career he has enjoyed since then brings to mind the pioneering scientist Louis Pasteur's belief that, "In the field of observation, chance favors only the prepared mind." Transcending his limited education in fine art, "Bill" Davis has developed a truly "prepared mind" while remaining open to the occasional impulses and risks that can lead to success.

Early on, Davis closely studied the 19th-century artists he admired most, particularly the relatively few who painted portraits of ships; soon he had earned himself a reputation for depicting 19th-century steamboats with great accuracy. He then broadened his horizons, taking on *trompe l'oeil* (fool the eye) still lifes, as well as coastal and harbor scenes in the

Luminist tradition. Having attained success again, Davis then challenged himself by tackling more atmospheric still lifes, and then plein air landscapes. At each stage, he could have opted to go no further, as he was already comfortable financially. Yet Davis did not, and instead remains prepared for that next chance. Therein lies the excitement of his story.

## 20th-CENTURY MIND, 19th-CENTURY MODELS

When Bill Davis graduated from Cape Cod's Barnstable High School in 1970, his formal education in art ended. He had excelled in

*BOSTON HARBOR AT SUNSET*  
1994, OIL ON CANVAS, 26 X 42 IN.  
PRIVATE COLLECTION



drawing from an early age; at school he enjoyed lessons in drawing and painting, and also four years of mechanical drawing — a discipline that later helped him render steamships adeptly. Although Davis enrolled in the local community college, it did not hold his interest, so at 19 he joined his father’s heating and air-conditioning company. For the next dozen years, Davis learned his trade, earning his fitter’s license and working as a journeyman.

In the late 1970s, however, Davis began painting again after work, using acrylics because they “dried quickly and were easy to clean up.” Within a year, he was selling pictures to his friends. Encouraged by these sales and his revived passion for art, he began to split his day between painting and pipefitting. After the success of his first exhibition in 1983, he shifted all of his energy to art-making.

Fortunately, Davis knew just what he wanted to do — “to capture the spirit of the 19th century,” a period in history that produced the glorious ships, art, and architecture that Cape Codders still enjoy today. Davis developed a two-pronged strategy to achieve this goal: He would learn as much as he could about the artists he admired, and he would become a dealer of their works. He visited museums to analyze how his favorite artists achieved their effects, and gradually built a library of more than 1,000 publications. Fortunately his gallery work led him

**EVENING APPROACH, WHITE MOUNTAINS**

2008, OIL ON PANEL, 10 x 20 IN.

PRIVATE COLLECTION



**TWO LETTERS**

1986, OIL ON CANVAS, 20 x 12 IN.

PRIVATE COLLECTION

to Judith Allen, who already had more than a dozen years of relevant experience on the Cape. The couple married and eventually left art dealing so that Judith could manage her husband’s affairs, allowing him more time to paint.

Although born a Bostonian, Davis grew up in historic Barnstable admiring its beautiful marshes and water views. Not surprisingly, he skippered Beetle catboats and other wooden craft even when very young. This longstanding love of sailing explains Davis’s interest in marine art, while his anachronistic love of steamers may well have passed down from his great grandfather, a steamboat engineer who operated out of Portland, Maine.

In planning his pictures, Davis consulted the ship portraits made by dozens of American artists in the 19th century, when a new ship figured as both an economic engine and cutting-edge technology. Quite logically, marine images were well integrated into the contemporary art scene then, not the niche specialty they became as the 20th century wore on. Among Davis’s heroes were New York City’s Bard twins, James (1815-1897) and John (1815-1856), who collaborated on naïve paintings that document the steamboats of New York’s harbor. (James himself produced more than 4,000 such works.) Another hero was the New York-based Dane, Antonio Jacobsen (1850-1921), estimated to have painted over 6,000 ship portraits. His clients were not connoisseurs, but ship owners and operators more interested in faithful replication of every detail than in artistic innovation. Finally, James Edward Buttersworth (1817-1894), an Englishman who



*THE ARTIST AT WORK, WASHINGTON VALLEY, NEW HAMPSHIRE*  
2008, OIL ON CANVAS, 18 x 36 IN.  
PRIVATE COLLECTION

also settled in New York, furthered the marine genre by making his scenes more dramatic. Through these forerunners, Davis saw and absorbed the significance of accuracy, detail, and drama.

This fascination with detail and accuracy partly explains Davis's delight during an unexpected encounter with trompe l'oeil painting. While visiting Boston's Museum of Fine Arts one day, he noticed the attention other visitors were paying to works by William Michael Harnett (1848-1892), the Irish émigré to Philadelphia and New York who painted astoundingly life-like arrangements that people still try to rearrange today. Davis went home and challenged himself to produce a series of mounted postage stamps (one depicting his own profile), crumpled letters, and the like. His commercial success with these demonstrated to Davis that he could "break away from ships and do something else — and then get a good, strong response to it."

#### THE 19th-CENTURY PAINTERS OF LIGHT

In fact, the 19th-century marine paintings that Davis admired celebrated two worlds: the world created by man (e.g., ship portraiture), and the world created by God — as seen in the Luminists' Transcendentalist scenes. Perhaps the artist who bridged these worlds most successfully was Fitz Henry Lane (1804-1865). In Boston, Lane developed a loyal clientele

for his lithographs of harbor scenes, which he rendered in vivid detail. From 1840 he began painting them instead, deploying light as the dominant element while de-emphasizing minor details. Davis admired this strategy, and also Lane's use of the newly available chemical dye pigments, especially warmer ones. Through careful study of the paints used by Lane and his contemporaries, Davis eventually developed a palette of 30 colors closely matching theirs. Having seen the advantages that oil offers — especially in manipulating paint — he abandoned acrylics, taking him back still closer to the 19th-century aesthetic he sought to emulate.

Another detail-oriented Luminist marine painter, Francis Augustus Silva (1835-1886), attracted Davis through the warm colors he used to intensify the effects of light. And still another 19th-century giant, John Frederick Kensett (1816-1872), inspired Davis, having been a detail-minded engraver before painting his famous landscapes and seascapes in a subdued palette. His fellow traveler Sanford Robinson Gifford (1823-1880) described the Luminists' achievement as "painting air," something he did often himself. Following their lead, Davis has also attained this level of mastery by using transparent yellow and red oxides, then applying a series of glazes over several weeks or even months.

#### HEADE, CHASE, AND PAINTING OUTDOORS

One of the artists Davis has admired most is Martin Johnson Heade (1819-1904): "His world is my world. I grew up close to the salt marshes and coastal inlets that Heade immortalized." Yet it was also the breadth of Heade's oeuvre — landscapes, portraits, exotic birds and plants, still

lives — that first impressed Davis, especially the latter. Davis decided to pursue this genre and found it a “refreshing change”: For the first time, he could literally see the colors of what he was painting. By definition, the colors of his historical ships had to be imagined, since all his etched or photographic references were black and white.

Still lifes exposed Davis to yet another hero, William Merritt Chase (1849-1916). Like Heade, Chase could have rested on his laurels, yet was always soaking up new imagery, incorporating styles and techniques that caught his attention. Davis gladly follows this path, and a very important outcome has been his recent capacity to see the world in a new way, through plein air painting.

It was actually Donald Demers and Joseph McGurl who introduced their friend to painting outdoors. (Not coincidentally, all three are Fellows in the American Society of Marine Artists.) Having worked only in his studio heretofore, this was truly a challenge for Davis: “I was suddenly surrounded by objects that had

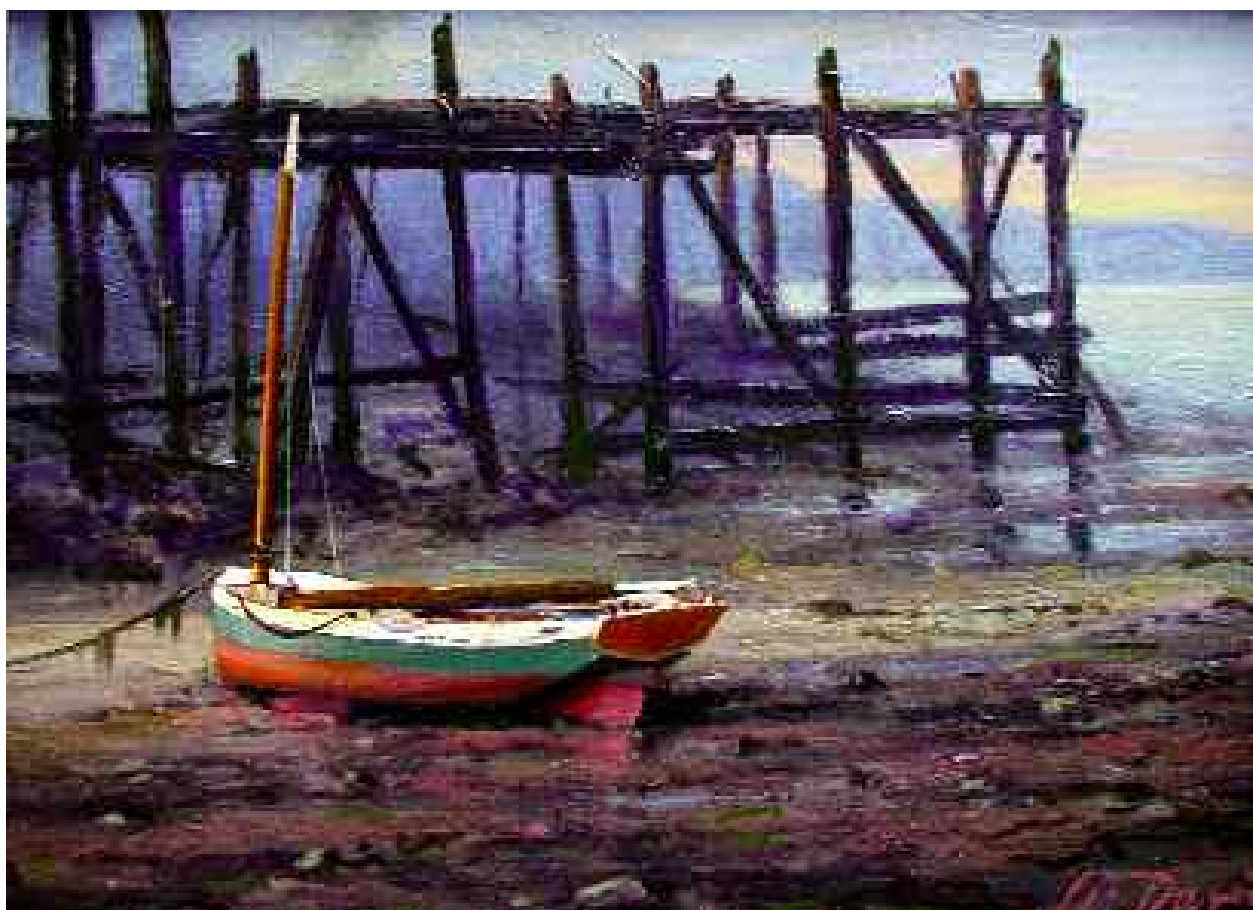


**HUMMINGBIRD #2**  
2006, OIL ON PANEL, 24 x 12 IN.  
PRIVATE COLLECTION

their own colors! As I observed nature first hand, my palette became more sophisticated and limited — more tonal and less garish. Speed was another thing I came to learn. No time to draw the bark on the trees with a pencil; in fact, no time for drawing anything with pencil. Use the brush!” Eventually these three fellow travelers were dubbed the “New American Luminists” by Dr. Julian Baird, the dealer who represented them at Tree’s Place on Cape Cod.

Today, Bill Davis declares, “Although my work might still reflect aspects of 19th-century American art, I no longer strive to stay in that timeframe.” It would seem that the busier and more successful Davis has become, the more comfortable he is with experimentation, and the less interested he is in “gallery-safe work.” One thing has not changed, however: “I have and I enjoy the luxury,” Davis says, “of being able to challenge myself while painting what I want.” A lucky man, indeed. ■

CHARLES RASKOB ROBINSON *is a charter member and Fellow of the American Society of Marine Artists.*



**Low Tide**  
2004, OIL ON PANEL  
6 x 8 IN.  
PRIVATE COLLECTION