

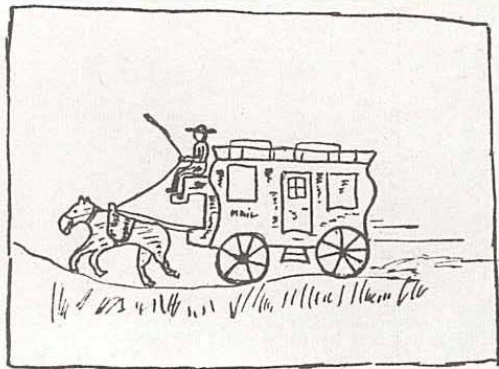


Smithsonian
*Donald W. Reynolds Center for
American Art and Portraiture*
Smithsonian American Art Museum

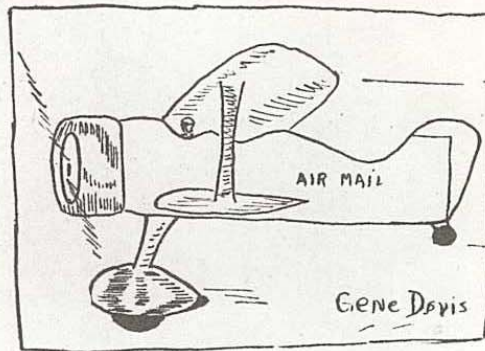
MY SKETCHBOOK

FOR THE EXHIBITION
GENE DAVIS
NATIONAL MUSEUM
OF AMERICAN ART
27 FEBRUARY–17 MAY 1987





YESTERDAY



TODAY

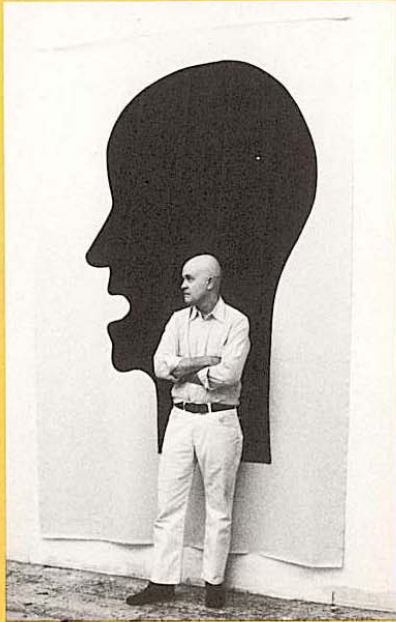
In the 1920s, when Davis was a student at Langdon Elementary School in northeast Washington, the *Washington Post* published these drawings by him in the Sunday "Junior Post" section.

DEAR STUDENT

Gene Davis spent many years of his life "painting himself." He said: "Every artist must do his best to create art that accurately represents him." During your tour of his exhibition at the National Museum of American Art, you came to know Davis, both the artist and the man. He told you what he looked like through his profile silhouettes. You saw that he liked order and simplicity but also liked to experiment with color and the size of his paintings. You saw that he could be serious or witty and fanciful, that he liked to "surprise himself."

You learned that Gene Davis was fascinated with the expressive quality of music, that he tried to make paintings through which, like music, you could "hear" beat, melody, rhythm, and harmony. He improvised with color, shape, and the spacing, or intervals, of his stripes much like a musician improvises on the strings of a guitar; he described himself as "playing by eye" the way some musicians play by ear.

You, too, can "paint yourself." In this sketchbook you can represent yourself, as Gene Davis did, with profile silhouettes, symbols, and stripes. Use crayons, pencils, paint, or felt-tip pens. Experiment. Follow your own ideas. But most of all, "surprise yourself"!



Gene Davis

GENE
DAVIS

(1920–1985)

Gene Davis was born in Washington, D.C., where he lived and worked most of his life. As a young boy, he enjoyed sports, writing poetry, and playing the trumpet. He also often submitted his drawings to the *Washington Post's* children's page.

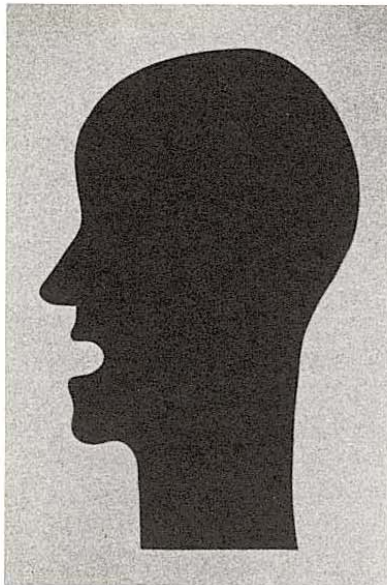
At nineteen, Davis became a sportswriter for the *Washington Daily News*; six years later, he was assigned to the White House, covering President Truman. During those years, Davis often escaped to the Phillips Collection, where he enjoyed looking at the paintings. In 1944, he met an art collector, Alfred Auerbach, who introduced him to modern art. These influences led to the creation of his first painting.

Davis was particularly pleased with painting and began to pursue it more rigorously. He sought out artists for discussions, attended exhibitions, and read art-related material. A self-taught artist, he was very experimental and painted abstractly from the beginning. In later years, Davis gave up journalism and devoted his life to painting and to teaching art in his Pennsylvania Avenue studio as well as at area schools.

Davis was fascinated with the simplicity of children's art, and engendered great community, as well as individual, support for aspiring young artists. He encouraged his students to work hard, but to proceed at their own pace; to study other artists, yet to follow their own ideas. Gene Davis was and still is an influential painter in our world of art.



George Washington (Collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art; all rights reserved).



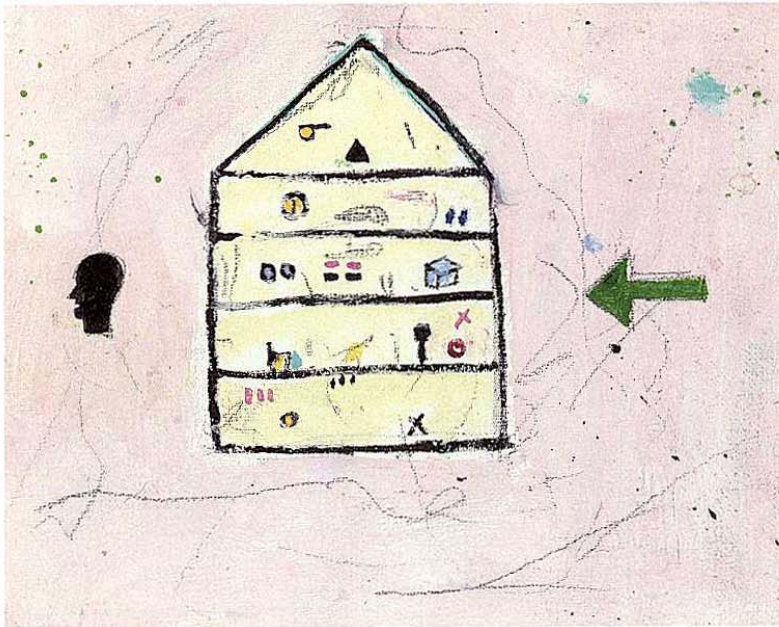
PROFILE SILHOUETTES

A profile is a representation of something seen from a side view. A silhouette is an outline drawing, indicating the shape of a person or object. It can be left open, filled in with a solid color, or patterned.

Profile silhouettes have a long history. In ancient art they are found in Egyptian wall paintings and on Greek vases. In the 18th century they were a common form of portraiture in Europe and America. Silhouettes became less popular with the invention of photography in the mid 19th century, but their simplicity and clarity still appeal to artists.

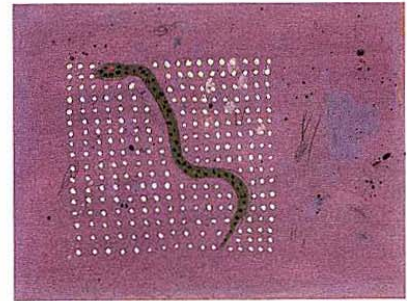
When Gene Davis made his profile silhouette he was not trying to achieve an exact likeness of himself. His main interest was in exploring different ways to artistically arrange a single, interesting shape—such as his head. He painted his profiles singly and in groups, with measured spaces, or intervals, between them. Some were larger than life, others fit in the palm of his hand. In one large profile work, Davis arranged 210 miniature heads on horizontal lines!

In the first frame, create your own profile silhouette. Guide your fingers over your face and note the shape and size of your head, nose, mouth, and chin. Notice that Gene Davis has his mouth open, as if he is talking or shouting. You, too, may want to make your silhouette portray an emotion. After carefully observing one of your classmates, draw his or her profile in the second frame. Try to draw your silhouettes with one clean, unbroken line. Your profile will represent only you!



Untitled

SYMBOLS



Untitled

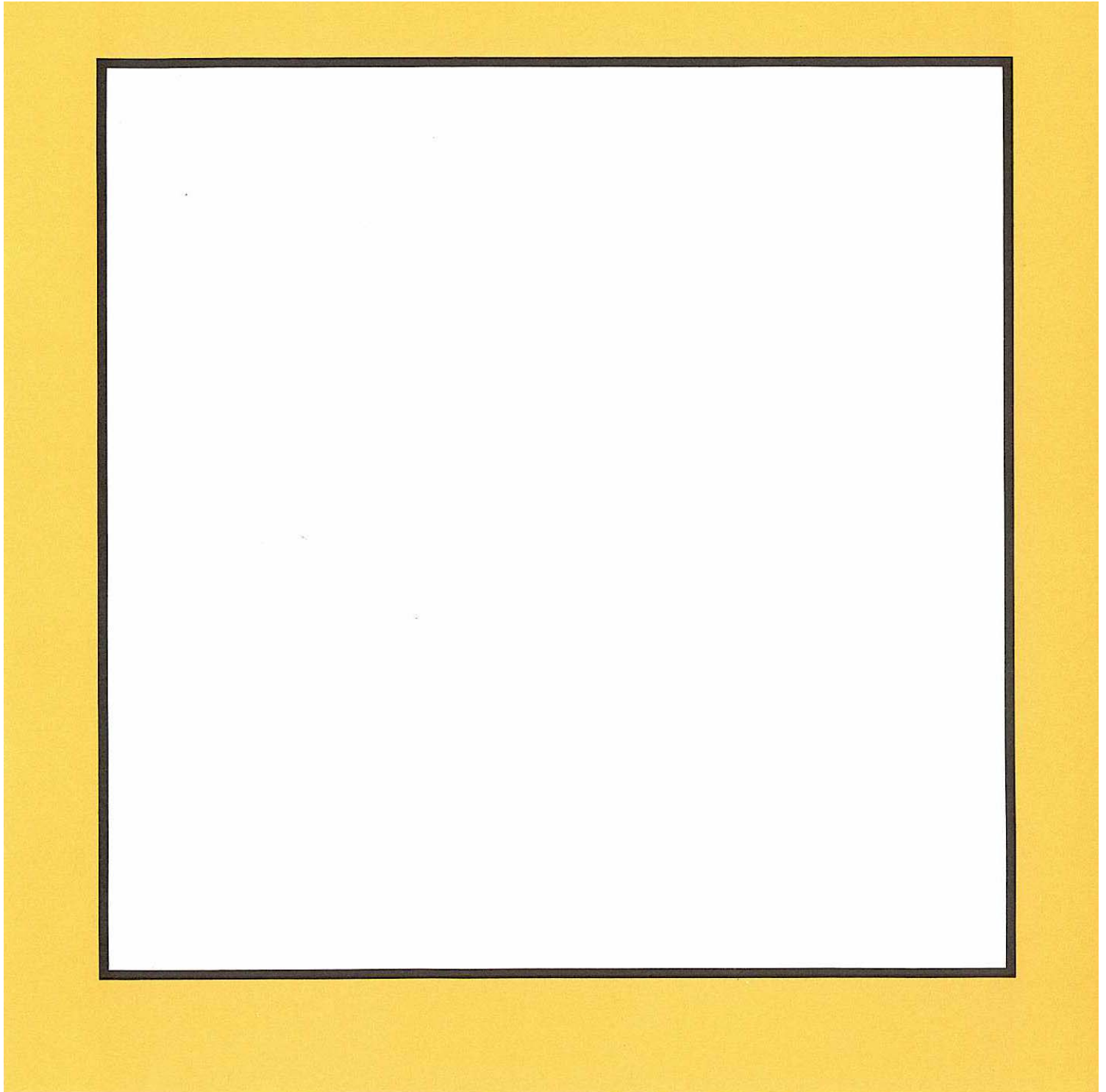
A symbol is something that stands for or represents something else. Symbols are often physical objects that represent intangible things like ideas, feelings, or experiences: a dove can mean peace; a lily, purity; a skull, death. Symbols have been used as a means of communication since prehistoric times, when early man drew on cave walls. They are also the basis for certain written languages, including ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics, Chinese, and Japanese.

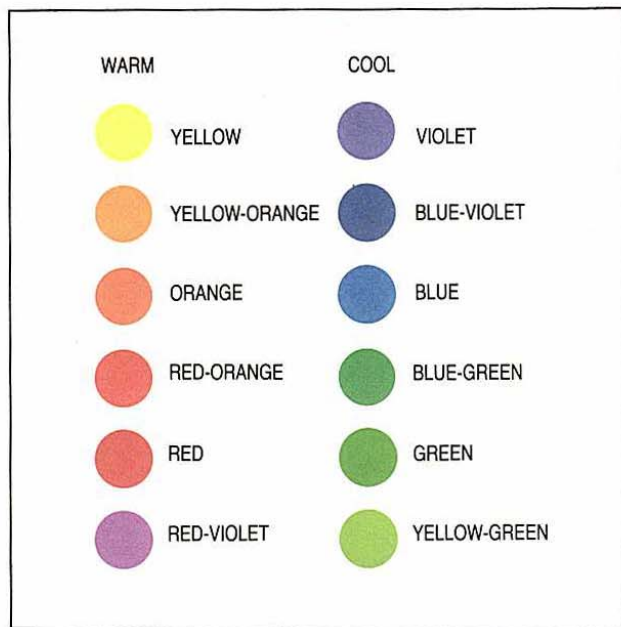
Gene Davis painted symbol pictures to tell us about himself. He used dots, dashes, arrows, and “x’s,” and even personal possessions like his dog, to communicate. Sometimes it is difficult to read his messages because he included things that had a special meaning just for him or he did not title his works, as with the paintings illustrated here. Look at them and try very hard to understand what Davis was saying.

Create your own symbol painting. Choose one of the following themes that Davis once suggested to a class of students like you. Think about how you feel about your subject, then through symbols and signs tell something about yourself.

	HOME	VACATION		
LOVE	ANIMALS OR	DREAMS OR	ANGER	WAR
HAPPINESS	PETS	SLEEP	FLOWERS	CARS OR
HATE	FRIENDS	WISHING	DEATH	BOATS

Show your picture to your classmates. Can they “read you”? Your symbol work of art will represent only you!





COLOR

Try to imagine a world without color. Color is one of the most expressive elements in art because it affects us immediately. We all respond to color in our own way. To some people yellow is a happy, lively color, while to others it seems soft and quiet. Some people might be reminded of a sour-tasting lemon, others the rich, smooth taste of butter.

The effect of a color can change depending on its intensity, its proximity to other colors, and the mood of the person seeing it. It is important to remember that each color also has different values, from light to dark. Each different value of a color has a different name: baby blue, light blue, royal blue, navy blue, midnight blue.

Colors can do many things. Light colors seem to come forward. Dark colors seem to recede. Colors opposite each other on the color wheel clash with each other, but they can also add drama and excitement to a picture. Colors that are next to each other on the color wheel are similar and create a sense of harmony.

Colors can be loud or quiet, happy or sad, weak or strong, young or old, sweet or sour. Colors can be warm or cool. What things do warm colors remind you of? What moods or feelings do you associate with these colors? What do the cool colors suggest to you?



Raspberry Icicle

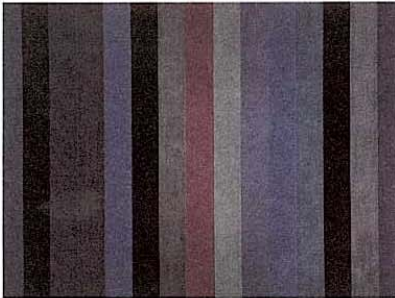
STRIPES

Gene Davis selected stripes as a simple format for his experiments with color. His color choices were intuitive and sometimes emotional. To him they “felt right.” He said that one should “enter the painting through the door of a single color” and see how it operated across the painting. Look at *Raspberry Icicle* and *Voodoo*. What colors did you choose as a door to each of the paintings?

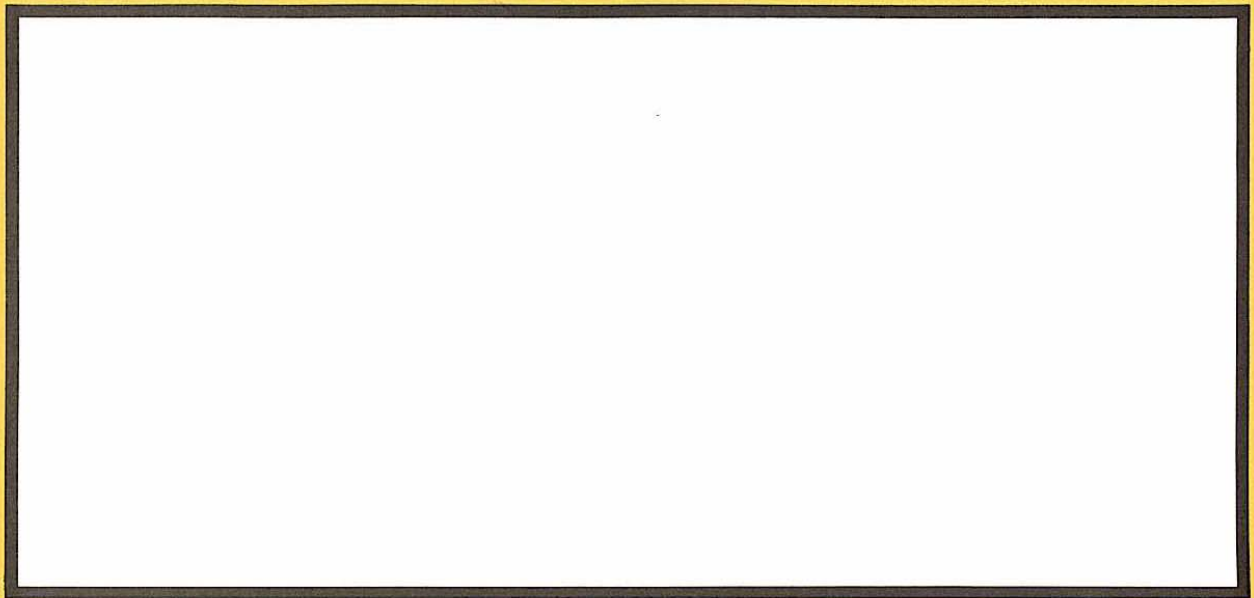
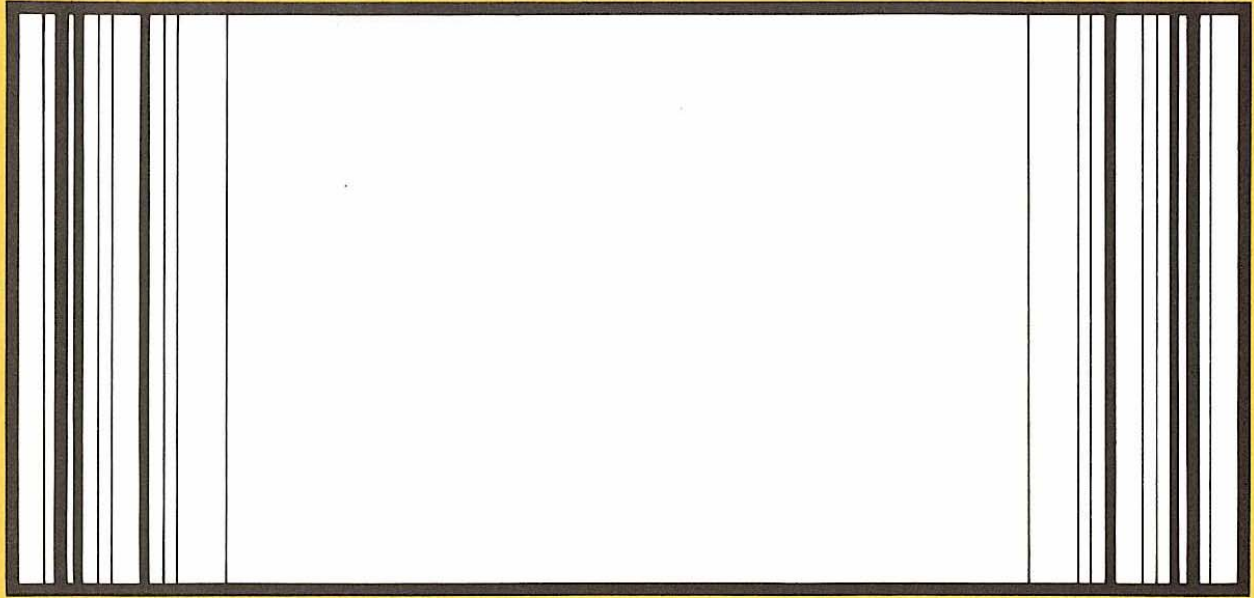
Gene Davis looked for just the right color the way a musician listens for just the right note. Then he improvised with variations on the widths of the colors and the intervals, or spaces, between the stripes. Through repetition of colors and intervals, he produced visual rhythms that lead our eye quickly or slowly, smoothly or erratically, across the painting.

The word *rhythm* comes from a Greek word that means “to flow.” It is the rhythm in music that causes us to clap our hands and fall in step when a band plays. There is rhythm in our bodies and in our environment: our breathing, the change of seasons, the tick-tock of a clock. Both of the paintings shown here have their own distinct rhythms.

Create your own stripe pictures. First, in the small frames, experiment to see how different colors relate to each other. Try out various widths and intervals to produce different rhythms and feelings. Then choose a color, your “entrance” to your picture, and create your own large stripe painting. Give your stripe picture a title. Your work of art will represent only you!



Voodoo



*The exhibition is made possible
by The Washington Post
Company and the Smithsonian
Institution's Special Exhibition
Fund.*

National Museum of
American Art
Smithsonian Institution
8th and G Streets, NW
Washington, DC 20560