

**MEMORIAL RESOLUTION OF THE FACULTY
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON**

ON THE DEATH OF PROFESSOR EMERITA RUTH DANIELSON DAVIS

Professor Ruth Danielson Davis died on January 5, 2011 in Carlsbad, California. Over her 101 years of life, she was artist, designer, environmentalist, teacher, world traveler, and dedicated faculty member of the design studies department within the School of Human Ecology. As a faculty member in the department from 1943 to 1975, Davis's contributions speak to the growth of design majors starting in the 1950s and '60s, the establishment of a strong curriculum, a commitment to design scholarship and extensive service to the State of Wisconsin.

In reflection, her contributions remain true for today's design thinking, forming, and pedagogy as when she graced the campus. Professor Davis taught Design Fundamentals I (DS 120) for which she also wrote a textbook. Each semester over 32 years, she lectured on Monday and Wednesday and coordinated studios and quiz sections from Tuesday through Saturday morning. Class enrollment grew from 75 to 210 students and studio sections from four to ten. As a humanities-credit course, Davis served students from a variety of campus majors in addition to the expected design majors, including those in occupational therapy and landscape architecture. In the 1960s, she pioneered offering the class at the Fox River Valley Center-Green Bay, recording fourteen live lectures with illustrated slides and working with a teaching assistant at the Green Bay campus. This mirrored her workshops and programs given around the state; a commitment she deemed warranted in upholding the Wisconsin Idea and UW-Extension.

Davis also taught a fall class in three-dimensional design (DS 520/220), with a prowess for designing and structuring objects and environments from readily available materials. She complemented this with expertise in exhibit design. Her course in environmental design sensibilities was a forerunner to today's sustainable design, and exhibit design was the seed that grew into the eventual Design Gallery. Such expertise is observed in her graduate seminar and their exhibitions. For example, exhibit "Tempo, 1969" featured visual spatial effects and motion achieved through the use of overlapping images, multiple projectors of the day and light sources. In spring semesters, she lectured on the history of American furniture and design. She built an extensive slide collection (many her own photographs) and procured historical and contemporary pieces for the department. She noted that both classes were energized through her extensive study travels. She documented forms-in-place that comprise American genres from eastern to western states and Native American reservations. She traveled to Europe, Central America and world fairs starting in 1934 to record contemporary design and to expand her skill and knowledge of display technology. Davis was known for being extremely complete in covering depth and breadth of topics, espousing a deeply held value that "Everyone expresses his or her artistic and aesthetic understanding in the environments they create and in forms of re-creation and entertainment." As true to her role of art teacher in Fond du Lac and Madison from 1931 to 1943, she built her career and life around knowing and appreciating the art elements that surround humans and the importance of experiencing arts to stimulate creativity from early age through adulthood.

Professor Davis's body of work evolved steadily from 1931 to 1975. Her exploration of "Surrounds" as abstracted form and space included motifs of sand, bark, reeds, rocks, and village motifs of roof lines and buildings. She juxtaposed such motifs in a pattern with interruption and flow, capturing the spontaneous reality of light and depth of complex color. These were central in her watercolors, graphics and an original technique she developed of applying watercolor, synthetic dyes and inks directly to large panels of sheer fabric. The wet medium with precarious control allowed seeing anew. She sought to break the expected regularity in pattern. Surprise effects of new shapes and suggestion of new design ideas were always part of her search, part of her finding, and deeply embedded in her passion for art and design and its role in the world.

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She received local and regional awards from Wisconsin Painters and Sculptors exhibitions, Wisconsin Salon of Art, Watercolor Wisconsin, and Wisconsin Designer Craftsman shows, plus other invitational exhibits of Madison and Milwaukee Art Centers. She was commissioned to complete paintings and murals for workplaces, schools and clinics; from 1956 to 1969, she mounted one-person shows each year. Nationally and internationally, her work was selected by Objects U.S.A. (sponsored by the Johnson Collection of Contemporary Crafts) for an exhibition at the Smithsonian Institute (1969), for a two-year North American tour (1970-71) and for a subsequent tour of European galleries (1972-73). In 1970, she was one of two UW-Madison professors to have their work chosen for the annual Religious Arts Exhibition in Washington, D.C.

Ruth Danielson Davis always walked to a unique, clear rhythm in life. She and her husband Willis enjoyed a contemporary home on Lake Mendota that exuded her lessons. Living just west of Eagle Heights, she biked to the university everyday with her hair in its typical ballerina knot high on her head and wearing a dress in a favorite color of purple. Upon retiring in 1975, Ruth returned to the university to complete an MFA in painting, adding to her degrees in art education. She cherished growing up near Horicon Marsh and the environmental teachings of her parents. She was close to her brother and sister throughout her life, and upon the death of her husband moved to California to be near them where her walks on the ocean beach could continue her love of searching and finding beauty in what each day brings. Ruth was not an academic that sought recognition of her accomplishments—a trait she strongly felt right for her. Yet, we think that she would accept and enjoy her colleagues' tribute for her many gifts and contributions to students, to the school, and to the university. As a University of Wisconsin faculty member, her teachings and work have stood the test of time. Her legacy is accurate and valued.

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