

ANDERSON
COLLECTION
AT STANFORD
UNIVERSITY

COMPACT PORTRAIT

FOCUS ON DAVID PARK'S *TOM JEFFERSON*

FRONT COVER: David Park, *Untitled (Portrait of Tom Jefferson)* (detail), 1957, Oil on canvas, 24 x 8 in., Anderson Collection at Stanford University, A gift from Keith Jantzen and Scott Beth '82 in honor of the Anderson Collection's staff and volunteers, TN.2020.1

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David Park, *Untitled (Portrait of Tom Jefferson)*, 1957, Oil on canvas, 24 x 8 in., Anderson Collection at Stanford University, A gift from Keith Jantzen and Scott Beth '82 in honor of the Anderson Collection's staff and volunteers, TN.2020.1





FIG. 1: Photograph of Tom Jefferson, Santa Monica, January 3, 1956. Courtesy of James Nichols

CAPTURING THE ESSENCE IN PORTRAITURE

NANCY BOAS

It is exciting news that the Anderson Collection at Stanford University has received the gift of an oil painting by David Park. *Untitled (Portrait of Tom Jefferson)* (1957), which had disappeared sometime after its last public display in 1977, reemerged at a 2013 auction. (In fact, when I wrote my 2012 biography of the artist I could not track it down, but chose to use a photograph of it as an illustration.)

David Park began teaching at the University of California at Berkeley in the summer of 1955. Tom Jefferson, known as Jeff, was a business major at Berkeley; he took a class in drawing with Park, who invited him to model between January 1956 and June 1957. Jeff greatly admired his teacher's work and at one point thought he wanted to be a painter, but Park pointed out he might have a problem since he was colorblind and couldn't distinguish between green and red. After graduation Jeff worked in a Jaguar dealership, where he met his future wife, Mary Elizabeth Elston, a graduate student at Mills College who ran the school's art gallery.

Charming and good company, with a tall, athletic physique and classical proportions, Jeff was an excellent model. (FIG. 1) His broad shoulders and heavy thighs and calves offered a nice contrast with his lithe midsection. As his roommate at Berkeley, Jim Nichols, recalled, "He was big and bouncy and friendly and knew how to hold a sculptural pose." Elston underlined Jeff's regal presence, pointing out that "he carried himself like a king."



FIG.2: David Park, *Untitled (Portrait of Tom Jefferson)*, 1957, Oil on canvas, 24 x 8 in.

Jeff posed alone for Park and for the regular Wednesday night life-drawing sessions held by Park, Elmer Bischoff, and Richard Diebenkorn, who were sometimes joined by Theophilus Brown, Paul Wonner, and James Weeks, as well as Nathan Oliveira and Bruce McGaw for a limited time. Park's upstairs studio in his house on La Vereda Road in Berkeley was the preferred gathering place in 1956–57. The artists sat on easily movable chairs and stools scattered about the room and worked on drawing boards held on their laps. Because they could not afford to hire professional models, Park—who usually arranged for the model—often asked friends and acquaintances to pose. Although one can identify Jeff in Park's sketches from the group sessions, such as *Nude Male*

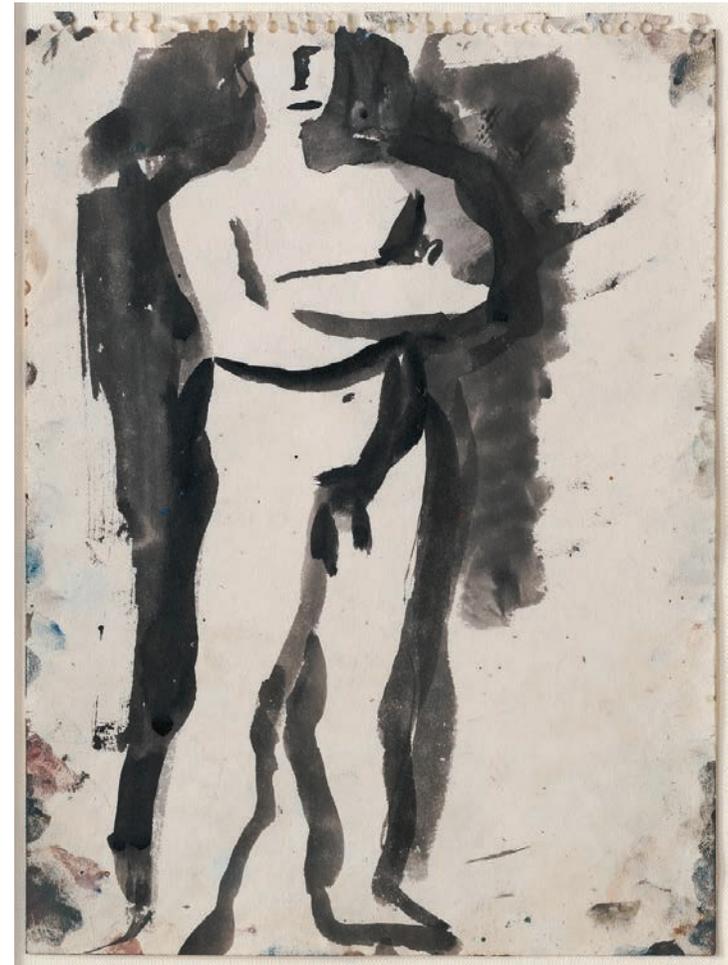


FIG.3: David Park, *Nude Male (Standing)*, n.d. (c.1950s), Ink on paper, 12 x 8 ¾ in., Collection of Jason Langkammerer

(*Standing*) (c.1950s), the drawings do not exactly match the portrait (FIGS. 2–3). As Bischoff explained to me, “The drawings that we did when we drew from a model were a kind of building up of memories of the figure. We didn’t use them as preliminary to painting in a direct sense. The painting process was much more in line with the process for nonrepresentational work, where you just invent stuff.”

With the knowledge that came from his many sketches of Jeff, in March or April of 1957 Park painted this portrait directly on canvas and then gave it to Jeff as a gift. Despite its small size—24 ⅝ by 8 ⅝ inches—the painting conveys a sense of

grand scale. In part this is a result of its tall, narrow format, which accentuates the bulky solidity of the figure within the limited space. Playing lights against darks, Park brushed in the lush skin tones in strokes that articulate the body's form. White highlights call attention to the jaunty pose and to the thickly pigmented ground around the feet, which establishes the floor plane. The folded arms and sideways gaze enhance the sense of the figure's unapologetic frontal nudity. With broad, bold brushstrokes, Park captured the essence of his subject—"zip, zip, zip and there you are," Nichols commented. "It's a portrait and it looks like Jeff—the ears, the kind of nose, the stance, the chunkiness of the body versus the head, the folded arms." It seems to sum up everything Park knew about Jeff—the self-confidence, the beautiful youthful body, the majestic stance.

The knowledge Park gained from drawing Jeff is also apparent in his oil painting *Two Figures* (1957; Faye S. Sarofim Collection, Houston) (FIG. 4), in which the male figure has Jeff's distinctively bulky form and strikes the same pose as in the 1957 portrait. Park was clearly fascinated by Jeff as a model but wasn't close to him, although there were occasional social exchanges. Jeff and his roommate invited David and his wife, Lydia, once or twice for dinner at their student apartment. After Jeff married, the Parks invited him and his bride to a few gatherings, as the Jeffersons had moved to a place up the hill from David and Lydia's house in Berkeley.

David Park's use of knowledge gained from the life-drawing sessions can also be seen in *Four Women* (1959) (FIG. 5), the other Park painting in the Anderson Collection. The far-left figure in *Four Women* is based on a model Park drew frequently in the group sessions, Bergliot Bornholdt, known as Bergie, who is identifiable by her ponytail and distinctive pear-shaped silhouette. But *Four Women*, which is one of Park's largest oil paintings, seems a work of imagination in contrast to the much smaller Jefferson portrait, which appears to be a work of observation. The degree of personalization differs between the two, in that the painting of four women seems intentionally generic while the portrait identifies a specific individual. *Four Women* is also differentiated by its links to art history. Although there are only four rather than five figures, the composition calls to mind Pablo Picasso's great *Les Femmes d'Alger* (1911–1914; The Museum of Modern Art, New York), a resemblance many have noticed. In addition, the white-highlighted figures in Park's painting are set before a striated ground that suggests one of Clyfford Still's abstractions (FIG. 6). In



FIG. 4: David Park, *Two Figures*, 1957, Oil on canvas, 58 ½ x 50 ½ in. The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Faye S. Sarofim Collection

the end, though, both the portrait of Jefferson and *Four Women* reveal Park's ability to convey the humanity of the people he depicted, what curator Henry Geldzahler described as "their radiant energy." As Geldzahler said, "He remade the human presence for his generation, a generation that was full of despair at man's inhumanity, and full of hope that man's noblest values would prevail."

Note: The quotations from Jim Nichols, Mary Elizabeth Elston, and Elmer Bischoff are from interviews with the author on July 31, 1994; February 12, 1995; and January 29, 1990, respectively. The comments from Henry Geldzahler appear in *David Park (1911–1960)*, exh. cat. (New York: Salander-O'Reilly Galleries, 1985), n.p.



FIG. 5: David Park, *Four Women*, 1959, Oil on canvas, 57 x 73 $\frac{3}{8}$ in. Anderson Collection at Stanford University, Gift of Harry W. and Mary Margaret Anderson, and Mary Patricia Anderson Pence, 2014.1.007



FIG. 6: Clyfford Still, *PH-1072*, 1952, Oil on canvas, 112 x 154 in. Clyfford Still Museum, Denver, CO © 2021 City & County of Denver / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

PORTRAIT OF TOM JEFFERSON

HELEN PARK BIGELOW

As one of David Park's daughters, I met the young painter Tom Jefferson, often called Jeff, at a party at my parents' house in Berkeley. It was 1958 and I was almost twenty-six, hugely pregnant with my third child. At the party without my husband, I found Jeff to be quite attractive, and I recall driving home to my babysitter with very mixed feelings. Always reluctant to leave my parents and their friends, I wondered if, had I not married when I did, I might I have ended up with a painter like Jeff and remained in the art world into which I had been born.

Throughout the late 1950s, Jeff frequently modeled at evening drawing sessions held by my father, Elmer Bischoff, and Richard Diebenkorn. Jeff was a student in a drawing class of David's. He was tall and good looking, with solid, strong musculature, and he instinctively knew how to take a pose and hold it.

In 1957, David painted Jeff's portrait. The startling first impression of that painting, *Untitled (Portrait of Tom Jefferson)*, is its small size. Even knowing the dimensions ahead of time, it's surprisingly small—only 24 $\frac{3}{8}$ inches high by 8 $\frac{3}{8}$ inches wide. Knowing David, my guess is that the size came about because he had a scrap of canvas and decided to use it. But what intrigues me is that David filled his small canvas with such a massive figure—massive in strength and stature, and perfectly proportioned. Look at those legs! I wonder if David chose Jeff's unusually powerful physique for this unusually small painting to take on the challenge of creating a painting that, despite its size, is somehow large and

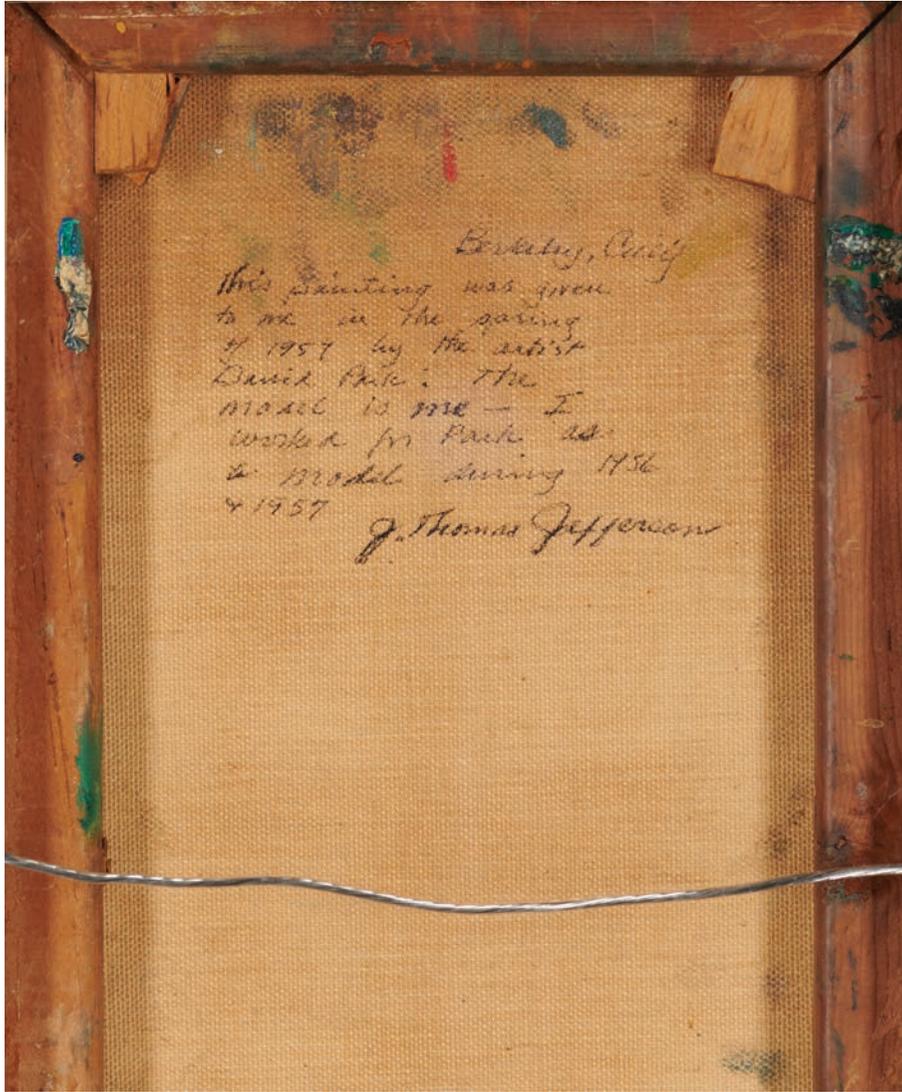


FIG.7: David Park, *Untitled (Portrait of Tom Jefferson)* (verso), 1957, Oil on canvas, 24 x 8 in.

heavy with strength. There is even a good deal of open background space at the right of the painting. Big, firm brushstrokes have plenty of room on this very small canvas. I think of it as a mostly gray and white painting, but a closer look reveals many colors—rich ochers, tans, browns, deep yellow, cream, blue, black, and white.

Long ago there was a short *Time* magazine article about David; its heading announced, “Up with Goopiness.” All over David’s paintings went that luscious, wet, multi-colored goopiness in strong, sure brushstrokes. Often the paintings, even when very large, look as if they had been done quickly. Not so: David painted, looked, walked back and forth in his studio, scowled, smoked, scraped paint off, and put on some more. Sometimes a canvas would stand on the floor facing the wall for days or weeks while David’s mind cooked up what he wanted it to become, or maybe it ripened by inattention, or however the process of creation works. That David’s paintings never look labored was one of his strengths—but they do look richly, fully, realized. *Portrait of Tom Jefferson* is a good example.

David gave the painting to Jeff. I know nothing of Jeff’s reaction, but he had to love it. Who wouldn’t?



FIG. 8: David Park, *Untitled (Portrait of Tom Jefferson)* (detail), 1957, Oil on canvas, 24 x 8 in.

DAVID PARK'S *PORTRAIT* OF TOM JEFFERSON: AN IMAGE OF SHARED VITALITY

JOHN SEED

When David Park painted *Untitled (Portrait of Tom Jefferson)* in 1957, he was suffering from chronic pain, the result of a near-fatal industrial accident fifteen years earlier that had crushed several of his vertebrae. Park's injuries, however serious, must have seemed minor compared to the problems of many men he knew. When he joined the faculty of San Francisco's California School of Fine Arts in 1945, the majority of his students were veterans who had been scarred by the traumatic experience of war. Park must have felt fortunate compared to his athletic brother Dick, who never fully regained the use of his arms after contracting polio during wartime service in the Solomon Islands.

The physical pain Park lived with did not detract from the progress of his art. In fact, it may have provided a challenge that he conquered by channeling all of his remaining energies into painting. The style Park had developed by the mid-1950s combined recognizable imagery with the spontaneity of "action painting," an athletic approach to painting most often associated with abstraction. Park, who once said he thought art should be a "troublesome thing," relished the challenge presented by oil paint, which is heavy and viscous. Moving it around on canvas to represent human flesh is physically

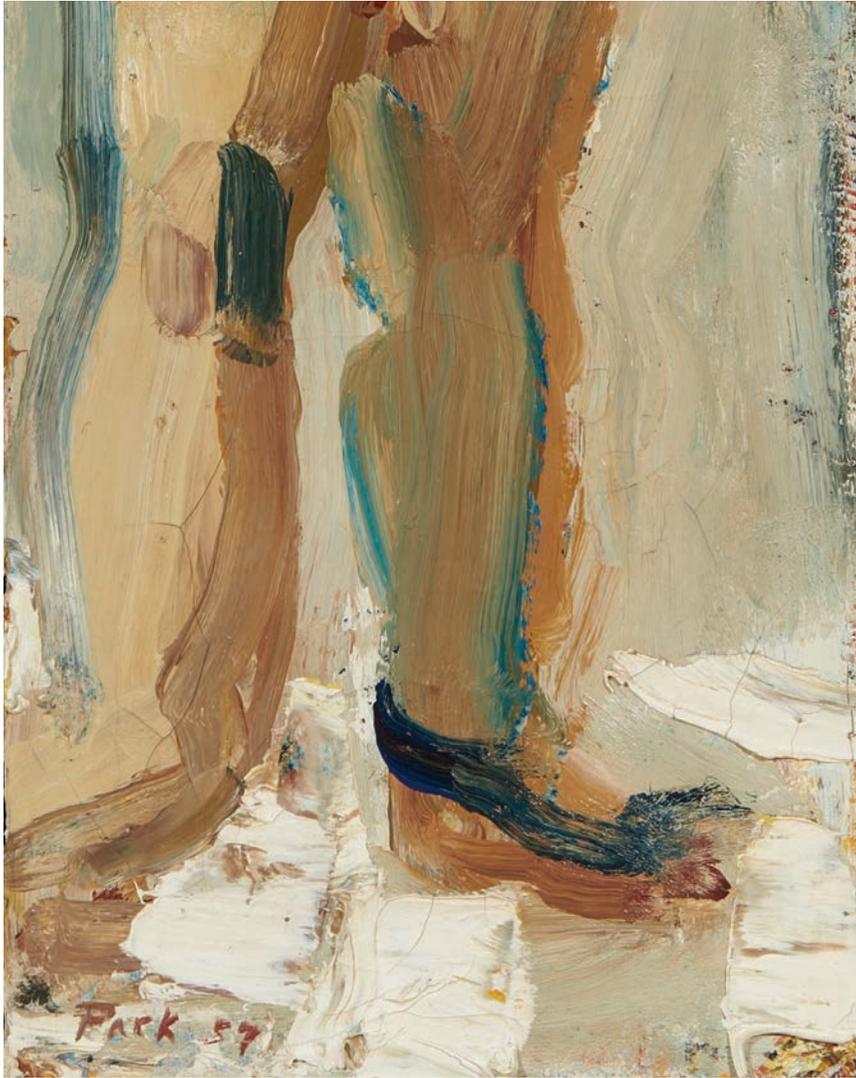


FIG. 9: David Park, *Untitled (Portrait of Tom Jefferson)* (detail), 1957, Oil on canvas, 24 x 8 in.

taxing, and he relished the effort. The heavy blobs of white paint at the bottom of his portrait of Tom Jefferson are evidence of artistic struggle, a bit like chips of marble at the base of a finished statue.

Park's gestural brushwork, which animates Jefferson's turning pose, is masterful and perfectly complements the masculine self-assurance of his model. His use of wide, sinuous strokes of paint—which both form and outline Jefferson's thick arms and stocky calves—demonstrates the way that gesturally applied paint can stand for muscularity. The figure, endowed with a sense of weight by Park's substantial application of paint, seems ready to burst out of the narrow canvas. Strikingly abbreviated contrasts of light and dark, created with blunt, wet-on-wet applications of paint, add to the immediacy of the finished work. There is something pared down in Park's style that could only be achieved by a fusion of knowledge, experience, and physical confidence.

Park was not interested in depicting a subject's particulars, and Jefferson's features are reduced to perfunctory dashes of paint. Instead, Park concentrated on Jefferson's dynamic pose and emanations. When he gave the finished painting to his model as a gift, Park did not intend it as a traditional portrait. Instead, it captured something more profound than mere resemblance: the unbroken body of a young man, full of potential, alert to life's challenges and ready to face them. In that sense, it has qualities in common with Michelangelo's *David* (1501–04) and the Classical statues of nude athletes it was derived from. Rendering his model's swagger and confidence in a style that displayed his own artistic vitality, *Untitled (Portrait of Tom Jefferson)* stands as a reminder of the energy and sense of possibility that prevailed in postwar American culture.

BIOS

NANCY BOAS is an art historian, author, and curator. Her biography *David Park: A Painter's Life* (2012) chronicles the life and art of the founder of Bay Area Figuration. She formerly served as adjunct curator of American painting at the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco and is the author of *Society of Six: California Colorists* (1997). Boas was co-curator of the 1995 Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco exhibition *Facing Eden: 100 Years of Landscape Art in the Bay Area* and co-author of its catalogue.

HELEN PARK BIGELOW, born and raised in Berkeley, California, has also lived in New England, Pennsylvania, and Hawai'i. A daughter of David Park, she has published many short personal essays in newspapers and magazines such as *House Beautiful*. Her books include *David Park, Painter: Nothing Held Back* (2009), a family memoir in its second printing, and *Given Time* (2014), an end-of-life love story. Now in her late eighties, she writes, hikes, and gardens on the San Francisco Peninsula.

JOHN SEED is Professor Emeritus of Art and Art History at Mount San Jacinto College. He is also a writer and independent curator whose writings have appeared in *Arts of Asia*, *Hyperallergic*, and *The Huffington Post*. Seed's most recent book is *Disrupted Realism: Paintings for a Distracted World* (2019). While earning his BA in studio art at Stanford University, Seed served as one of the Anderson Collection's first interns, in 1978–79.

CREDITS

This collection of essays is published in celebration of the inaugural installation of David Park, *Untitled (Portrait of Tom Jefferson)*, 1957 at the Anderson Collection at Stanford University, opening September 22, 2021.

The Anderson Collection at Stanford University is extremely grateful to Keith Jantzen and Scott Beth '82 for their generous gift to the museum and the opportunity it provides for expanded scholarship and teaching.

Jantzen and Beth share “We are thrilled that *Untitled (Portrait of Tom Jefferson)* by David Park is entering the Anderson Collection and becoming available to the community for all to enjoy. We are dedicating this gift to the museum's staff and volunteers in honor and recognition of all they do to share their passion with others for modern and contemporary art. We feel strongly that the Anderson Collection is the perfect home for this wonderful painting, reflecting Park's artistic vision and his lifelong embrace of learning and teaching.”

The museum thanks Helen Park Bigelow, Nancy Boas, and John Seed for their enthusiasm around this project and insightful essays. Thank you to museum staff for your collaboration on this publication and the exhibition of the painting in our galleries.

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BACK COVER: David Park, *Untitled (Portrait of Tom Jefferson)* (verso), 1957, Oil on canvas, 24 x 8 in.

Berkeley, Calif
This painting was given
to me in the spring
of 1957 by the artist
David Park. The
model is me - I
worked for Park as
a model during 1956
& 1957
J. Thomas Jefferson

