

David Lax (1910-1990) was a well-known American painter and art educator; he was regarded as one of America's most outstanding combat artists in World War II.¹

Background & Personal Life

David was born May 15, 1910, in Peekskill, NY, to Benjamin Lax (1881-1916) and Sarah Davidson (1881-1963).² The couple emigrated to the U.S. from Russia/ Poland around 1903³ and, after a few years in Brooklyn, NY, purchased a farm in upstate Putnam County.^{4,5} When Lax was about six years old, his father fell out of an apple tree during a harvest and was killed. His mother was forced to sell the farm, and the family moved to the East Harlem section of New York City [NYC].⁶ Widow Sarah scrabbled first as a door-to-door peddler, and then as proprietor of a pastry/coffee shop, to support her three young children.⁷

David was free to roam the scary East Side streets, becoming a bit of a scrapper, gambler, street urchin, and hooligan.^{8,9} He recognized early on, though, that he had artistic talent,¹⁰ and by the time he finished grade school, he knew what he wanted to do with his life.¹¹ He won an art scholarship to one of New York's most prestigious high schools and was a student of several scholars of note.¹² David's mother remarried when he was sixteen, and about the time he graduated from high school, he moved out into his own scantily furnished room. The description of his meager quarters and his existence therein gives one a good hint as to what would become his personal life for most of the next 22 years. . . "a little room too small for painting, and there was no daylight to speak of... I could, however, work on book illustrations." . . . "Those were never published, but the doing of them served to keep intact the tenuous thread of my hopes to paint at a time when the possibility of being a serious artist was beyond reach."¹³

In his remarkably moving 1976 autobiography, *One Man Show: A Personal Adventure in American Art*,¹⁴ David recounts one intense survival story after another... dwelling in often ramshackle—or even dangerous lodgings, living just hand to mouth... scraping together a few dollars here and there to have a decent meal or pay some bills, at one low point even shoplifting art supplies¹⁵ ... and throughout all that stressful existence— capitalizing on every opportunity—meeting and grooming an extensive coterie of acquaintances, friends, sponsors, and benefactors who enabled him to move onward and upward. There were **delays** along the way, but no circumstance could ever **stop** this determined, innovative man from exercising his genius— all he lived for was to be able to paint and paint well.

David's first marriage in August 1935 to the daughter of a friend of his landlord in Florida ended within two years in a bitter divorce.¹⁶ Lax waited until he was about forty to marry again. He wed an attractive girl from Greenville, Mississippi whom he met at a friend's cocktail party.¹⁷ Kathleen Tatum had served as a Navy WAVE in the WWII Pacific Theater and had earned a B.S. degree in social studies at Columbia University.¹⁸ They had a very happy marriage— traveling to diverse locations and enjoying a host of close friends in the art and entertainment world.¹⁹ Kathleen succumbed to cancer and died in October 1973.²⁰ David survived until July 1990. They had no children.²¹

Education & Early Career

It was recognized when he was quite young that David had artistic talent. By the time he was ready to enter high school, it clearly showed. He first came to the attention of the public via a newspaper photo taken of a nude snowman that he sculpted on the street near his home.²² At age 15, he won a scholarship to NYC's prestigious [Ethical Culture School](#) and eventually became an

apprentice of Victor Frisch, an Austrian sculptor and portraitist who was once court sculptor to the [Hapsburg](#) monarchy and a one-time assistant of [Auguste Rodin](#).²³

After graduation from the Ethical Culture School in 1928, David served six months as an art department assistant in the newly opened Fieldston branch of Ethical. Bored with academic life, he moved on.²⁴ In 1929, after about six months in a no-future job as a “display man” doing window cutouts of fashion figures and movie lobby displays, Lax was hired by Alfredo Valente, part owner of a glass carving studio in Brooklyn.²⁵ While at Glass-Craft, he became an expert designer in the art of sandblast glass carving. Some productions from Glass-Craft ended up in the [Waldorf Astoria Hotel](#), the [Chrysler Building](#), and the [Empire State Building](#).²⁶ David spent most of his spare time painting and became a student of famed artist [Alexander Archipenko](#)²⁷, who was running a small school in NYC. After two and a half years of his working at Glass-Craft, the firm fell victim to the Depression and folded.

1931-1942: The Painter Matures

To live as cheaply as possible, in about 1931, Lax took the remnant of his savings account (\$500) rescued from a failed NYC bank and journeyed south to be a boarder on the Florida homestead of a friend.²⁸ He stayed at a farm near Tallahassee for more than a year soaking in the South and painting everything he saw—including many unique portraits of African Americans. He then returned to New York City to replenish his funds by selling off what he had painted. At that time, he made the acquaintance of [Irving Mills](#),²⁹ NYC theatrical impresario and owner of various musical enterprises. Mills, who was to become one of his long-time sponsors, hired David as art department director for Mills Artists, Inc. This company acted as business manager and publicity/advertising agent for many popular and up-coming orchestras and performers: [Duke Ellington](#), [Cab Calloway](#), [Ina Ray Hutton](#), [Lucky Millinder](#), and others.³⁰ In eight months of exciting work with Mills Artists, Lax became acquainted with many musicians and show people who were to become close friends and supporters in later years.

Before returning to Florida, Mills offered to provide Lax his living expenses (\$50 per month+ frames and supplies) in return for half interest in any portraits he produced and sold.³¹ This arrangement proved very satisfactory, and David produced more than a hundred-fifty creations in the next few years in Tallahassee. He prospered in his southern environs, which he called the “Sweet Country,” and even bought a piece of land on which he built a studio/cottage.³² A short-lived romance and unfortunate divorce brought his creativity to a low point.

Heartsick, in 1937, he moved back north to the [Gaspé Peninsula](#) of Quebec, Canada. There he painted prolifically for about a year along with Boris Chezar, a friend he had met at Glass-Craft.³³ After a short time back in NYC and consultation with Irving Mills and gallery owners who were showing/selling his work, Lax moved to [Quebec City](#) where during 1938-39 he painted alongside Irving Mills’ son Robby.³⁴ It was during this time that he produced his “Waiting” and “Dreaming” paintings, “famous among connoisseurs” and of which his famed former teacher [Alexander Archipenko](#) said: “Lax, like [Rembrandt](#) uses shadows not simply for their effects as form or pigmentation, but as a composer creating melancholy melodies. He creates the music of the shadows.”^{35,36} In spring 1940, Lax had his first “one-man show,” which opened at the Grand Central Gotham Gallery run by NYC dealer [Erwin S. Barrie](#). The show was mostly successful—not as much financially as it was with critics; he finally began to be noticed in the art world.^{37,38}

In spring 1941, after Lax returned from short painting forays to Louisiana and rural Pennsylvania, Irving Mills set him up with an assignment to do portraits for Hollywood notables.

He was off to the West, with his stipend raised to \$75 a month. Mills set him up in a studio in Hollywood's [Laurel Canyon](#), and there David painted portraits of the rich and famous³⁹ -- in the off-hours living quite the wild life as a bachelor ("our lives were a round-robin of dreams, food, and women").⁴⁰ Lax did not "have his heart in" the portrait mission, however, and by mid-1942 he joined many other patriotic and adventurous young men by enlisting in the U.S. Army.⁴¹

World War II: Combat Artist

After induction and some basic training, Lax was initially assigned to a Military Police battalion with jurisdiction over the New York City port area. After an on-duty altercation in which he was injured, it became obvious that his light weight and slight frame put him at some risk doing typical MP work. David had been drawing the whole time and soon became a big attraction among his fellow GIs who were quite impressed with his ability to render caricatures with little effort. His popularity with the men soon came to the attention of his superiors, and they gave him a place and supplies where he could provide this entertainment.⁴²

David had more ambitious ideas. During leave time, he used the NYC Public Library to do research on the history of artists in wartime. He was surprised to discover quite a legacy dating back through all the wars in which the United States had been involved. Soon, he said, "More than anything, I wanted to carry on in my own way this tradition of the artist and war."⁴³

Early in the War, the government, from the President on down, had come to realize the importance of military art and photography for morale and propaganda purposes. A War Art Advisory Committee was formed with prominent artists and the military recommending the establishment of an "Artists Corps." This effort received a lot of opposition from Congress, and the military finally had to sidestep the legislative thicket by assigning qualified art-talented draftees into Historical subsections attached to the various Services (Quartermaster, Ordnance, Engineers, Transportation, etc.) or Combat Arms (Infantry, Armored Divisions, Air Force, etc.).⁴⁴ Lax assembled a portfolio of his recent soldierly art as well as some of his civilian work. Blessed by his commander, that sampling was sent off to the Army Historical Section in Washington, with a request for assignment overseas as a combat artist.⁴⁵

The overseas assignment did not come through, but stateside assignments did. He was first transferred to the [Fort Dix](#), NJ Special Services command to paint wall murals and decorate service clubs.⁴⁶ Lax's art work at Fort Dix and later [USO](#)-like work coordinating entertainment for troops at Camp Shanks, NY, was so impressive that it got him promoted to Corporal, then Sergeant, and eventually it came to the attention of people recruiting artists for the [Army Transportation Corps](#).⁴⁷

By serendipity, though, not art, Lax managed to get an overseas assignment because he had a working knowledge of French he had learned from his step-father and step-brothers.⁴⁸ He arrived in England aboard the then-troop-ship *Queen Elizabeth* in the early summer of 1943. Shortly before his departure, he again impressed his superiors by substituting for an ill soldier and, in jiffy time, producing a large, raised relief plaster model of all the ports and rail lines of Western Europe. He was promoted to Staff Sergeant.⁴⁹

After a few months in Britain doing routine Transportation Corps trucking and delivery missions in and out of London, Lax capitalized on some connections he had made during his Ft. Dix work. Senior officers helped him wangle an appointment with Brig General Frank S. Ross, Army Chief of Transportation, [ETO](#), headquartered in London. General Ross told him that he understood from his aides that he wanted to do paintings of Transportation Corp operations. "How will that

help us win the war?" he asked. Lax answered, "You know we're going to win, sir, but history will want to know how, sir." "Sharp answer," Ross shot back, "Colonel Decker will write up your orders." David had won his "commission" as the Transportation Corps Historical Branch artist. He became who General Ross referred to as "the sonofabitch who paints."⁵⁰

Over two years, in multiple European Theater combat and support locations, Lax produced hundreds of canvases depicting all sorts of Transportation Corps activities^{51,52}---to name a few: "Barge Building" (the assembly of Knockdown (BK) barges on England's Totne's River), "Harbor Craft" (square-nosed motorized floating boxes attached to barges to facilitate their movement around ports and harbors), "Sea-Train Operations, ETO" (loading of specially designed LSTs with rails in their holds); "Railway Workshop" (military roundhouse-locomotive repair facility); "Casualty Before Aachen," (wounded soldier on the battlefield); "Hospital Train," (evacuation of the battle wounded); "Incident at Coutances" (explosion of a gasoline tanker truck); "Motor Convoy" (truck convoy entering battle scarred town); "Port Clearance, Le Havre" (mine and harbor debris removal); "Railroading in the ETO," (railway train under attack); "Arrival in England" (debarkation of American troops from the troop ship *Queen Mary*). Scores of these scenes were shipped back to the States for display in war bond sales, recruiting publicity, etc.

Just before D-Day, Lax teamed up with Corporal (later S/Sgt. and Lieutenant) Irwin Swerdlow, who was writing popular stories about Transportation Corp activities for the widely read [Yank, the Army Weekly](#). In one issue, they published a three page spread of David's combat art captioned by Swerdlow, and it was an immediate success. Lax became a frequent contributor to *Yank* and was given the distinct honor of being its front cover artist for the [VE Day, Victory Edition, May 13, 1945](#).^{53,54}

For his extraordinary WWII service, David Lax was awarded the Bronze Star, the ETO Operations Medal, five battle participation stars, a Certificate of Merit, the U.S. Defense Command Medal, the Good Conduct Medal, and a General Communication Award. He mustered out as a Technical Sergeant, and was later commissioned to be a Major in the U.S. Army Reserve.⁵⁵

Back From the War: The Humanist View

Shortly after his return from the War, David had a good chance to catch up on the art world he had left behind and to evaluate what others had been producing. He met up with his old Glass-Craft associate Alfredo Valente, who had become one of NYC's leading photographers. Valente had arranged with *Promenade* magazine to do a series of illustrated monthly stories about the work of contemporary artists. Lax agreed to collaborate to help write the stories and evaluations while Valente focused more on the illustrations.⁵⁶

David Lax was an avid proponent of [humanism](#) in art. "All painters basically are observers," he thought,⁵⁷ but to him art was pointless unless it could represent "the human condition, man's hopes, dreams, fate."⁵⁸ He was very critical of his contemporaries, most of whom he felt had failed to meet his standard of what art should be. Throughout his autobiography, laced with much self-criticism, one can watch Lax strive toward meeting that high standard himself. "During those years in the Deep South... I painted almost two hundred canvases, none of which caught the character of the land and its people as they seem in retrospect... Immersed in life there, yet intellectually apart, like [Gorki](#) in the Russian Revolution, I remained a bystander, painting by rote."⁵⁹

Of his work in Pennsylvania coal mines, he wrote, “I painted and painted but never once was able to capture what I saw and felt. Again I was trapped by liberalism. Portraits of the seamed faces of the miners told nothing of their lives or my responses as humanistic revelation. How could I show the feelings of a strong-man, hands in pockets, laid off from work by an economy that didn’t even know he existed? How could I tell in paint of the violence of one man to another... how men, driven by hopelessness and discontent, frustrated by poverty and ignorance, battered each other in drunken brawls? What visual forms would tell the whole tawdry story? After six months work, frustrated by my own inadequacy, I destroyed every canvas.”⁶⁰

And, upon his return from WWII, he said-- “Originally it had been my intention to paint the war from the soldier’s point of view, how a man in the ranks would see it, but my observation of Europe put another light on things. I did succeed in painting a military operational record of the Transportation Corps activities. Now an ex-soldier free to paint anything, I would work on a series of canvases stigmatizing the evils of man.”⁶¹

1945-1949: “Denunciation”

Such was the backdrop for “Denunciation,” a grim and controversial series of Lax paintings⁶² concerning man’s fate and the moral degradation of war. The paintings were first conceived about July 1944 while David was recovering in a military hospital from a serious eye injury he suffered in London in an on-duty accident brought on by a [V-1 rocket](#) attack.⁶³ Later, in 1945, he personally witnessed and, particularly as a Jew, was absolutely traumatized by the “human toll of the [Holocaust](#) while riding on a train with 1,500 survivors of the [Belsen](#) concentration camp, and passing [Dachau](#), where thousands of bodies had just been discovered in railroad cars.”⁶⁴ About Normandy, he reminisced--“Walking through the U.S. graveyard at [Ste. Mere Eglise](#), I experienced spasms of self-pity and sorrow. Tears flowed when I read the familiar names [and hometowns] on the dog-tags attached to the markers... There but for the grace of God, lay I. My jeep hit sixty as I fled.”⁶⁵

Upon his return stateside, he was also repulsed by America’s lack of knowledge of, and concern about, what had really happened to the world since 1939. Economic disruption, housing shortages, unemployment, greed, corruption, and, generally, people’s various struggles to get back on their own feet distracted them from absorbing the meaning and lessons of the war.⁶⁶ Here was Lax’s chance to truly shake things up with his art— to say it like he felt it was. “How could I paint pretty pears and peaches after what I had seen? I was sick of art which doesn’t concern itself with humanity and our times.”⁶⁷ “Before me was an America preying on itself— an obvious sequel to events abroad... I was naively convinced that the art connoisseurs of America could hardly await my pictorial conceptions and commentaries.”⁶⁸

His four years’ work on “Denunciation” was largely sponsored by the generosity of a good friend and associate, Irving Grossman, owner of Laurel Process Company, which printed most of the advertising material used by Mills Artists in promotion of bands and show personalities. Grossman and others in his family made sure that David’s savings did not run out while he toiled in completing 15 of the 20 paintings originally conceived.⁶⁹ In return, David painted family portraits and provided considerable assistance to a Grossman printing project-- re-publication of all Philippine grade-school textbooks— most of which had been systematically destroyed by the Japanese.⁷⁰ In May 1949, toward the end of Lax’s work on the “Denunciation” paintings, Grossman suddenly died of a heart attack. Just a short time later, Irving’s brother, Lester, died. David was absolutely devastated.⁷¹

The “Denunciation” exhibition opened at NYC’s [Grand Central Art Galleries](#) on Armistice Day, Nov. 11, 1949. Newspaper ads, special press releases, subway/bus placards, and individual invitations abounded to announce the event. Even though the canvases were controversial and decidedly anti-war, no show in the gallery’s history had aroused as much public interest and attendance.⁷² Earlier in 1949, he had told the press, “These paintings have been wife and child to me. I nurtured them, petted them, spanked them, and watched them take on form and substance. I’ve poured myself into these canvases. I suppose you might call this series a work of love—almost at first sight.”⁷³ But the love of artists was pretty much David’s alone—or he certainly felt that way. He reported, “while the ordinary people, who came in unprecedented numbers, were concerned with the human condition depicted in the canvases, the cognoscenti of the art world were looking for something else.... my intention to force the direction of art into channels which would focus on man rather than on form, was far from realized.”⁷⁴ Before it was shipped to Chicago and then to Los Angeles, the exhibition was held over a week to accommodate public pressure for it to stay in New York, but to Lax the verdict was in—in his opinion, he had not succeeded in his goal to “humanize” the art world. A major Chicago newspaper criticized “Denunciation” as a “chamber of horrors.”⁷⁵ Two decades later, though, due largely to “Denunciation,” Lax became regarded as an art hero by some—a true master of relevance.⁷⁶

Quite depressed by the feeling of failure and the recent death of his Grossman sponsors, and lacking funds to pay the next month’s rent, David quite bitterly shrank away from notice. He completely withdrew from the “rat race,” as he termed it. He promised himself that he would no longer “pay any attention whatever to the esthetic values or opinions of the art world.” He was through with private backers, patrons, art investors or galleries. “Engaging myself heavily in commercial assignments,” he said, “my art activities at this time had but one purpose—money.”⁷⁷

1950-1977: Art Educator

Fortunately, David’s spirits rebounded a bit, and fairly soon he obtained employment as an art therapist in the Curative Workshop at the NY Regional Office of the Veterans Administration. There, for the next six years, Lax worked closely with GIs, using the arts to help them rehabilitate from mental and physical wounds they had received in the war he had documented so well. He also managed to do some important painting—several large wall murals for the V.A., and a series of canvases depicting street life in New York City.⁷⁸ He worked some for Mills Music, Inc. and was also a consultant for Caltex’ International Publication Service. His finances improved significantly.⁷⁹

In the mid-fifties, David and his new wife decided that they might want to move out of New York City. They found a small mountaintop cottage on eleven acres near Red Hook in rural [Dutchess County](#). For some time they lived there only temporarily, on a seasonal basis, but they looked for an opportunity to make the move permanent. In 1956-57, Lax got wind of the possible establishment of a new community college in Poughkeepsie, NY, only 25 miles south of his mountaintop. In the spring of 1958, he met with the President of the soon-to-be-opened [Dutchess Community College](#) (DCC). The DCC administration had plans for an arts program—both for technical/practical applications and for the fine arts. David, of course, felt more comfortable with the fine arts concept, but he knew right off that DCC was a place in which he could make a big difference.⁸⁰ He was hired as an assistant professor, originally “a one man band teaching all aspects of fine art (the commercial program came a few years later) to a student body of several hundred young people and a group of adults who worked in a nearby [IBM](#) plant.” Instruction went on day and night.⁸¹

By the early 1970s, under Lax's dedicated leadership-- having built from scratch both a physical infrastructure and a curriculum, the DCC arts program—one of the first in a State University of New York community college, had become well-established and much respected. It was employing a faculty of nearly a hundred and fifty members and serving the needs of thousands of students.⁸² Lax became Chairman of the Arts Department soon after its establishment, and by the time of his retirement in 1977, he was a much loved Professor Emeritus.^{83,84}

Showings, Memberships, Honors, & Donations

By 1971, Lax had participated in more than 65 different “one man shows” including the [Corcoran Gallery of Art](#) in Washington DC and New York's Gallery of Modern Art.^{85,86} David was a Member of the following: [Grand Central Art Galleries](#), Washington Irving Gallery, [Associated American Artists](#), Dutchess County, NY Art Association, Dutchess County, NY Council of the Arts, and the Tallahassee Art Association. He was a Fellow of the International Association of Artists & Letters.^{87,88} Special honors included: Ethical Culture School of Art Prize (1928); Mills Painting Fellowship (1932-42); Grossman Sponsorship (1945-50); *Who's Who In American Artists* (1940-1970 inclusively).⁸⁹

Lax donated the “Denunciation” series of 15 canvases to the State University of New York in 1972. In 2010 when SUNY decided to decentralize its art collection, DCC President Dr. D. David Conklin requested that they be given to DCC, citing Lax's long ties to the College. It is currently displayed in DCC's Hudson Hall.^{90,91} David also made a donation of more than 100 of his paintings to the [Rochester Institute of Technology](#) in 1983.⁹²

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