

THEODORE N. LUKITS

(1897–1992)

≡ *An American Orientalist*



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Front Cover:

Cold Command

c. 1957

Portrait of "Sojin"

38 3/4" x 29 1/2"

oil on panel

Collection:

Mr. & Mrs.

Benjamin Hayes

Back Cover:

Guanyin and Plum

Blossoms c. 1960s

24" x 18"

oil on panel

Collection:

Eugene L. Iglesias

THEODORE N. LUKITS

(1897–1992)

An American Orientalist

PACIFIC ASIA MUSEUM

Pasadena, California

October 17 – November 29, 1998

CARNEGIE ART MUSEUM

Oxnard, California

December 12, 1998 – February 21, 1999

MUCKENTHALER CULTURAL CENTER

Fullerton, California

April 3 – April 29, 1999

Foreword

Bodhisattva

c. 1960s

29" × 23"

oil on panel

Collection:

Jonathan Art

Foundation

I AM PARTICULARLY PLEASED THAT THE PACIFIC ASIA MUSEUM IS MOUNTING AN EXHIBITION OF THE WORK OF AMERICAN ORIENTALIST THEODORE LUKITS BECAUSE LUKITS WAS THE TEACHER AND MAJOR INFLUENCE ON MY GOOD FRIEND PETER ADAMS, PRESIDENT OF THE CALIFORNIA ART CLUB AND A WELL-KNOWN CALIFORNIA PLEIN-AIR PAINTER. I AM SURE YOU WILL ALL BE INTERESTED TO READ THE REMARKS IN THIS CATALOGUE BY JEFFREY MORSEBURG WHO HAS CAREFULLY STUDIED THEODORE LUKITS AND WRITTEN AN ENLIGHTENING ACCOUNT OF THIS ARTIST'S LIFE AND WORK. LUKITS WAS CLEARLY INFLUENCED BY THE GREAT ARTISTS UNDER WHICH HE STUDIED DURING HIS LONG LIFE AND PASSED HIS PAINTERLY VIEWS TO A NEW GENERATION OF ARTISTS WHO ARE STILL WORKING TODAY. HIS LEGACY IS IN THE WORK OF HIS MANY STUDENTS, SUCH AS PETER ADAMS, PAULA BACINSKI, WILLIAM GEORGE, JEAN GUAY, ARNY KARL, ALBERT LONDRVILLE, MILLY MAUER, LEONORE

RAE SMITH, AND TIM SOLLIDAY. WE AT THE MUSEUM ARE VERY INTERESTED IN AMERICAN ARTISTS WHO WERE INTRIGUED AND INFLUENCED BY THE ASIAN AESTHETIC. WE ARE ALSO INTERESTED IN PAINTERS WHO HAVE INFLUENCED LATER GENERATIONS OF CALIFORNIA ARTISTS, AND THEREFORE CONTINUE TO HAVE AN IMPACT ON THE ARTS AND CULTURE OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA.

I WOULD LIKE TO THANK JEFFREY MORSEBURG, PETER AND ELAINE ADAMS, ERIC WHITE, THE JONATHAN ART FOUNDATION, THOMAS GIANETTO, MRS. THEODORE LUKITS, AND MY COLLEAGUE MEHER MCARTHUR, AS WELL AS BILL THAYER FOR THE EFFORTS THEY HAVE MADE ON BEHALF OF THIS TIMELY EXHIBITION.

DAVID KAMANSKY
Executive Director, Pacific Asia Museum



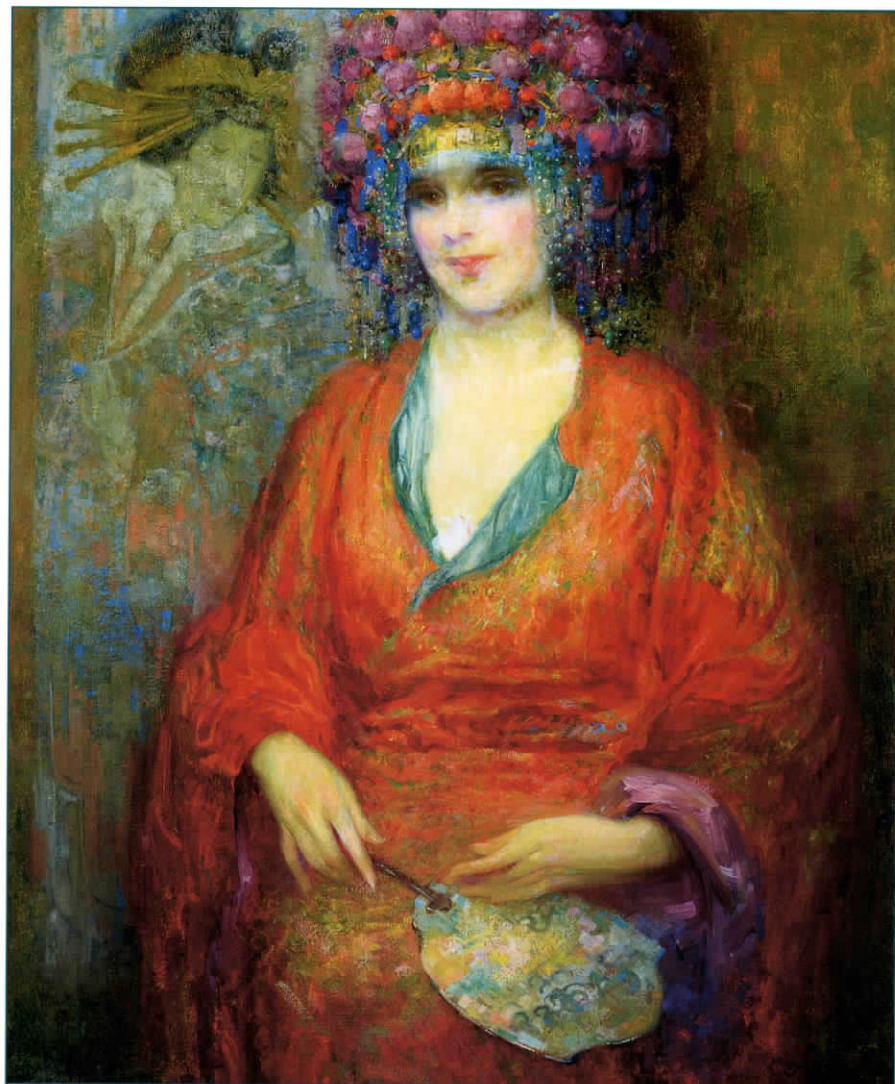
Introduction

THEODORE LUKITS IS ONE OF AMERICA'S MOST INTRIGUING ORIENTALIST ARTISTS—OF TRANSYLVANIAN ORIGIN, RAISED IN THE UNITED STATES, BUT PROFOUNDLY INSPIRED BY EUROPEAN IMPRESSIONISM AND THE RICH ARTISTIC HERITAGE OF EAST ASIA.

ALTHOUGH HIS WORK INCLUDES NUMEROUS FINE AMERICAN LANDSCAPES, IT IS HIS ORIENTALIST PAINTINGS AND SKETCHES THAT ARE FEATURED IN THIS EXHIBITION ORGANIZED BY THE CALIFORNIA ART CLUB, THE LUKITS ART TRUST AND JEFFREY MORSEBURG. IN THESE WORKS, GRACEFULLY POSED HOLLYWOOD BEAUTIES ARE DRAPED IN KIMONOS AND HOLD EXOTIC FANS AND LANTERNS, WHILE RICHLY COLORED CHINESE AND JAPANESE ACTORS ARE LIT WITH DRAMATIC THEATRICAL LIGHTING. INTERESTINGLY, LUKITS' STILL-LIFES OF CHINESE ARTIFACTS SUCH AS FIGURES OF GUANYIN AND ELEGANT CERAMIC HORSES ARE ANYTHING BUT STILL—THEY TOO ARE CAREFULLY COMPOSED TO SUGGEST GRACEFUL MOVEMENT UNDER DRAMATIC LIGHT.

PACIFIC ASIA MUSEUM IS AN IDEAL VENUE FOR THIS ARTIST'S WORK IN WHICH IMAGES SYMBOLIC OF BOTH CALIFORNIA AND EAST ASIA ARE UNITED. WE ARE DELIGHTED TO BE ABLE TO PRESENT HIS WORK HERE AND WISH THE EXHIBITION EVERY SUCCESS.

MEHER McARTHUR
Curator of East Asian Art, Pacific Asia Museum



Oriental Harmony

c. 1919

36" × 30"

oil on panel

Collection:

Mr. Thomas Gianetto

THEODORE N. LUKITS (1897–1992)

☞ *An American Orientalist*

WHEN THEODORE N. LUKITS passed away in 1992 he was the last living link to the *American Orientalist Art Movement* of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Studying the *Orientalists* and their artistic depictions of Eastern cultures, it is fascinating to consider what these works actually reveal. Do they speak to us in the way the artist originally intended? Do they reveal facets of cultures and customs that seemed “exotic” at the time? Or do these works of *Orientalism* reveal more about the European and American cultures that shaped the artist?

In actuality the art of representation is indeed a two-way street. While the artist paints, creating a “flesh and blood” world on a panel or piece of canvas, he reveals himself and his own

world with every stroke of the brush. Edward Said, the distinguished contemporary cultural historian, has advanced the idea that the Orientalists were searchers, artists and writers who were looking for elements that were either missing or long repressed in their own cultures. While painting “the exotic” in the late stages of the Industrial Revolution and the early stages of the Technological Revolution, they sought to recover something that was missing, perhaps even subconsciously, that would make them and their modern world complete. Throughout his life as a painter, Lukits looked to Asia for inspiration, hoping to find that special mystique that touches the human spirit.

In a 1960s letter he wrote to a collector, Lukits explained that he originally began collecting Asian objects as a teenage student at the Art Institute of Chicago. Thus, we know his intense interest in Asian

Carnival

c. 1918–1919

22" × 18"

oil on panel

Collection:

Mr. Thomas Gianetto



art dates back at least to his student years. Growing up in St. Louis, Missouri, one of the central experiences of his childhood was the 1905 World's Fair held in his hometown. Is it possible that the beautiful Japanese pavilion at the fair may have lit the candle of the precocious youngster's curiosity?

STUDENT YEARS

All the teachers with whom Lukits studied were art students in Paris and London during the years of the *Aesthetic Movement* and the *Japonisme* craze that was so prevalent in Europe and America. Because each of them influenced his career, it is impossible to credit any one teacher who drew his attention to Asian ideals. His first teacher, Edmund Henry Wuerpel (1866–1958), was a *tonalist* who was befriended by

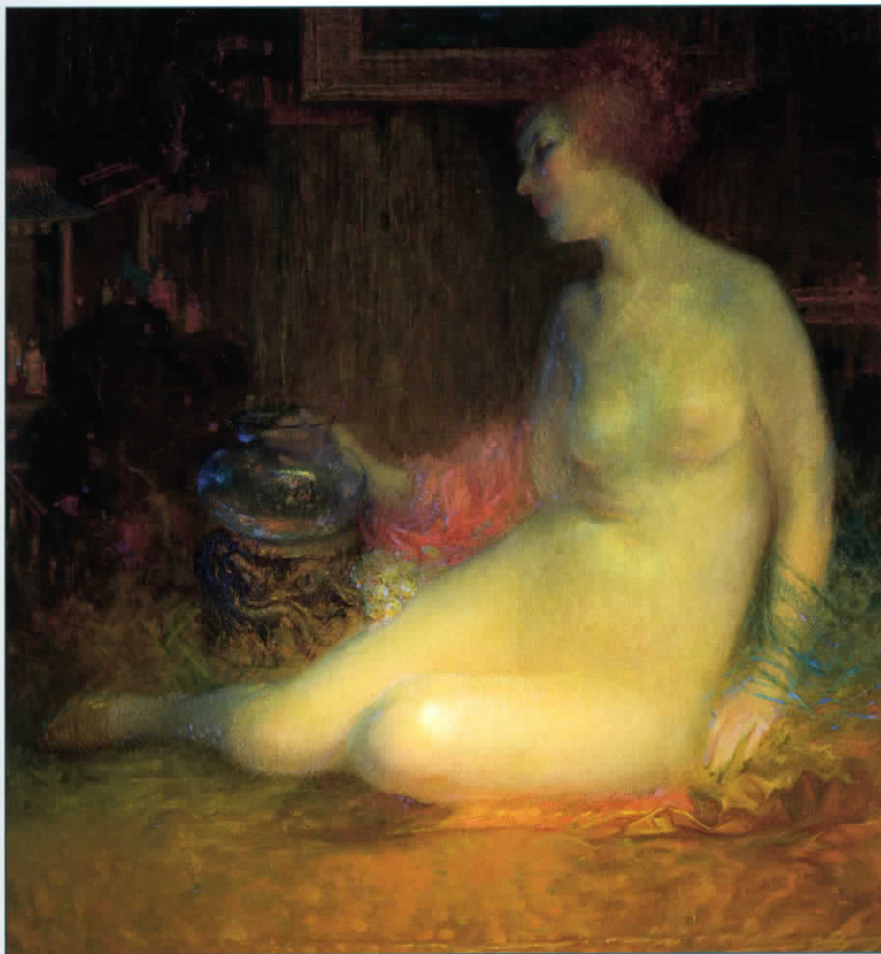
James Abbott McNeill Whistler (1834–1903) in Paris. Whistler was the seminal figure in both the *Aesthetic Movement* and *Japonisme*, and was the major conduit between these movements in England, France and the United States.

Richard E. Miller (1875–1943) was an *American-Impressionist* with whom Lukits studied. Miller used Chinese robes or Japanese kimonos in many of his sensual paintings of languid women. This subject was the accepted aesthetic mode of the Claude Monet-inspired *Giverny Colony*, of which Miller was a member. The Japanese influence on Miller's work is further evident in his strongly patterned compositions and his emphasis on the decorative aspects of painting. In a 1912 article written for the *Fine Arts Journal*, Miller declared that "Art's mission is not literary, the telling of a story, but decorative, the conveying of a pleasant optical sensation."

During his long tenure at the Art Institute of Chicago, Lukits cited Karl Albert Buehr (1866–1952) as his most influential instructor. Buehr had also been a member of the artists' colony in Giverny until war clouds began to gather, interrupting those idyllic times, sending Miller, Buehr and others home to teach in America. Buehr's paintings also made use of the kimono, and he clearly adopted the Impressionist aesthetics only after settling in Giverny. One can clearly see a Japanese influence in Buehr's work not only in his subject matter, but also in the



Theodore Lukits with classmates at the Art Institute of Chicago. Lukits is pictured with his head resting on the model's leg. February 19, 1918



Idle Hour, c. 1918

40" × 38"

oil on panel

Collection:

Mr. Thomas Gianetto

THE AESTHETIC MOVEMENT

The artistic environment in which Lukits came of age was a direct result of the Aesthetic Movement that began in the 1870s. With a growing middle class interested in art and decoration, the Aesthetic Movement set about the reintegration of the fine, decorative, and applied arts. Because the Japanese made utilitarian objects refined and the subject of beauty, aesthetes such as Oscar Wilde were naturally drawn to their culture. This strong emphasis on beauty had exerted its pull on many of those with whom Lukits studied. Therefore, beauty became a central theme in the development of his own work and the foundation for his artistic philosophy.

Lukits collected Asian antiques obsessively and spent decades buying, selling and haggling with dealers. Every corner of his home and studio showed evidence of this passion. The large Lukits studio in the Hancock Park district of Los Angeles was decorated with elaborately carved Chinese furniture. Antiques from China, Japan, Korea, and India, along with hundreds of embroidered tapestries, statues, plaster casts, and art glass covered every surface and every shelf. His huge storeroom was filled with boxes of kimonos and robes, many of them dating from the eighteenth-century. For many years, antique dealers gradually chipped away at this large collection and the last of it was only dispersed after the artist's death.

The intellectual foundation for Lukits' interest in the art of the Far East came from his

patterning and "spotting" techniques that appear in his paintings of women. Buehr strongly promoted his own decorative approach to Lukits.

Finally, Lukits first became acquainted with Hovsep Pushman (1877–1966) in Chicago, and is said to have tutored Pushman's young nephew in drawing. During this period, we must assume Lukits became familiar with Pushman's still-lives based on Asian themes. These tonalist paintings of Chinese antiques were meant to evoke the exotic and an air of mystery. By the early 1920s Lukits was painting Asian still-lives. His method of scumbling and use of broken color closely resemble the techniques employed in Pushman's work, though Lukits' compositions used more classical proportions.

teachers, the lectures he attended at the Art Institute of Chicago, and the Institute's fine collection of Asian art. As a young man, Lukits read voraciously and he assembled a large collection of books on every aspect of Asian art. Furthermore, he advocated a study of Eastern art philosophies to his own students. He stressed the fact that Chinese art had reached a high state of refinement because it had more than three-thousand years of continuous development beginning in the Shang Dynasty (1766–1122 B.C.).

However, Lukits' style of painting originated in the Academic ideals of nineteenth-century Europe. While the painters of the French academies strove for realism in form, as did Lukits, his particular interest was to harmonize color and design with the realistic treatment of the figure. The fine anatomical figures Lukits painted had a sculptural quality and were usually silhouetted against a decorative background. His goal was to create a beautiful picture, and not to simply replicate reality.

"Nature contains the elements, in color and form of all pictures, as the key contains the notes of all music. But the artist is born to pick, and choose, and group with science, these elements, that the results may be beautiful—as the musician gathers his notes, and forms his chords, until he brings forth from chaos glorious harmony."

JAMES ABBOTT McNEILL WHISTLER
Five o'clock Lecture 2/25/1885

DESIGN AND COMPOSITION

In Lukits' teachings he differentiated between "design" and "composition," terms that are often used interchangeably. He defined design as a two-dimensional arrangement of patterns, lines, and shapes. He

Pictorial

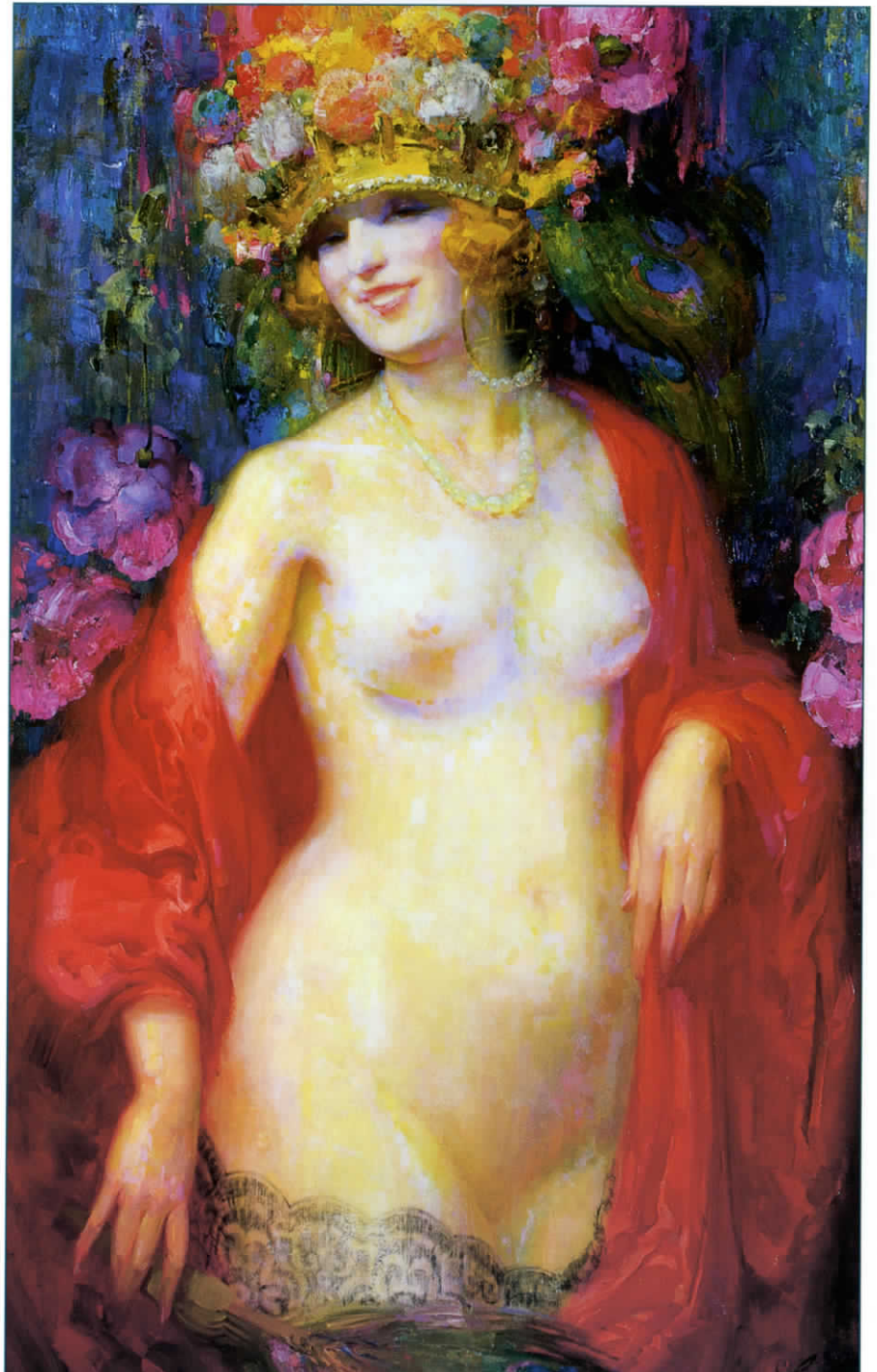
c. 1924-1926

44" × 28"

oil on panel

Collection:

Lukits Art Trust



cited a *Saturday Evening Post* cover, an *Art Nouveau* poster, or a Japanese woodblock print as examples of two-dimensional design. Lukits defined composition as the three-dimensional arrangement of large elements and masses. He taught his students that in order to create a more highly realistic picture it was necessary to modulate the gradations of light and dark, thereby emphasizing form and atmosphere. Hence, the traditional painter can paint anywhere along a continuum that moves from an enormously high degree of realism (or naturalism) at one extreme, to a purely decorative work at the other extreme.

In his Asian-themed paintings, Lukits blended the nineteenth-century emphasis on naturalism with the decorative quality that he absorbed from the study of Asian art. He boldly outlined his figures against a vividly contrasting background of flat patterns of color. These works exhibit the strong influence of Japanese *Ukiyo-e* prints, recognized for their arrangements of lines, shapes, and flat masses of color.

To Lukits the great Asian artists were masters of suggestion, and they clearly understood the importance of simplification. He felt that a work of art is more often improved by subtraction rather than addition. By either reducing the number of elements in a painting or by de-emphasizing those that are less important, Lukits was able to give his central figures a more monumental or even *iconic* quality.

The majority of the Orientalist portrait works by Lukits consist of figures that are near life-size in scale depicted against a subdued, but decorative background. *Carnival* is an unusual work for Lukits in that it depicts a small, finely modeled female nude in a Chinese headdress reaching for a hanging lantern. The painting dates from the earliest stages of the artist's professional career, and its high degree of surface finish marks it as the most academically handled of his Orientalist works.

Lukits was trained in the classical tradition. He began by drawing from plaster casts of Greek and Roman sculpture and then progressed to

Incense

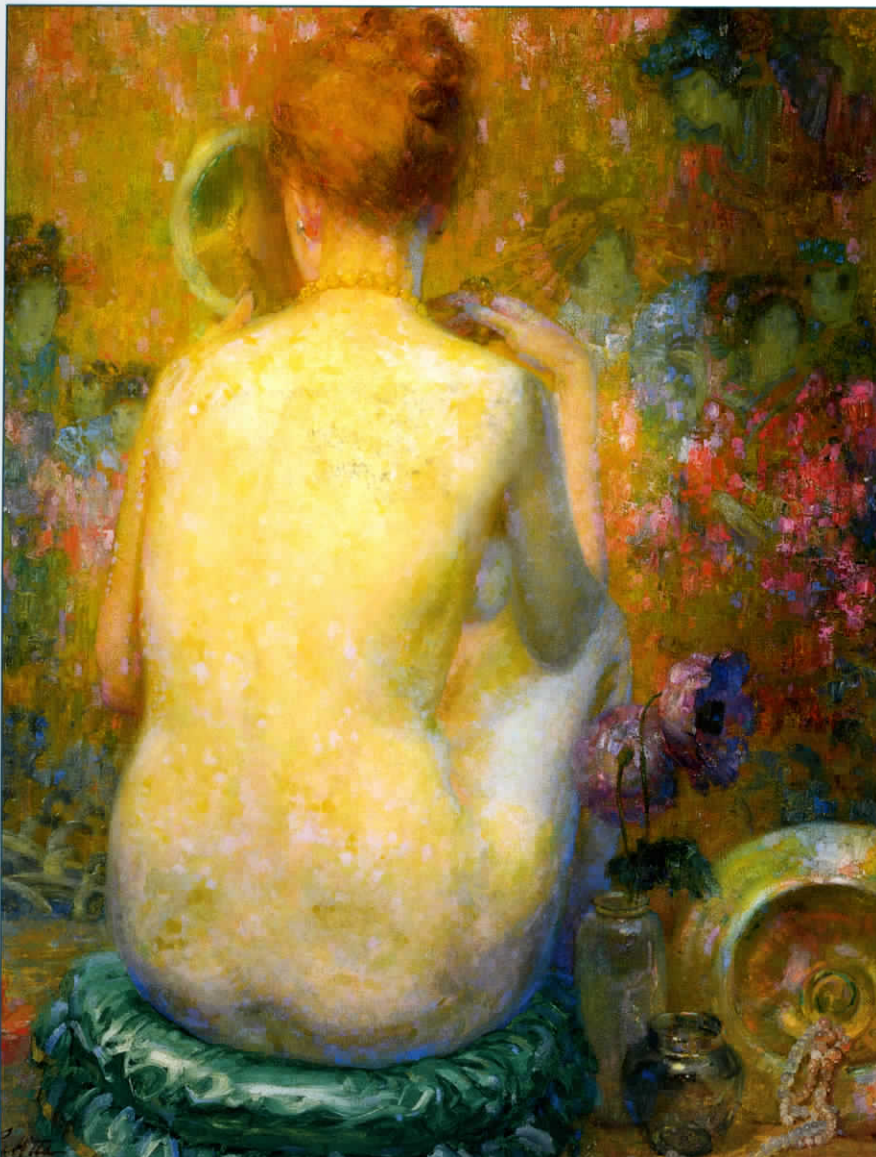
c. 1919–1920

38" × 30"

oil on panel

Collection:

Mr. Thomas Gianetto



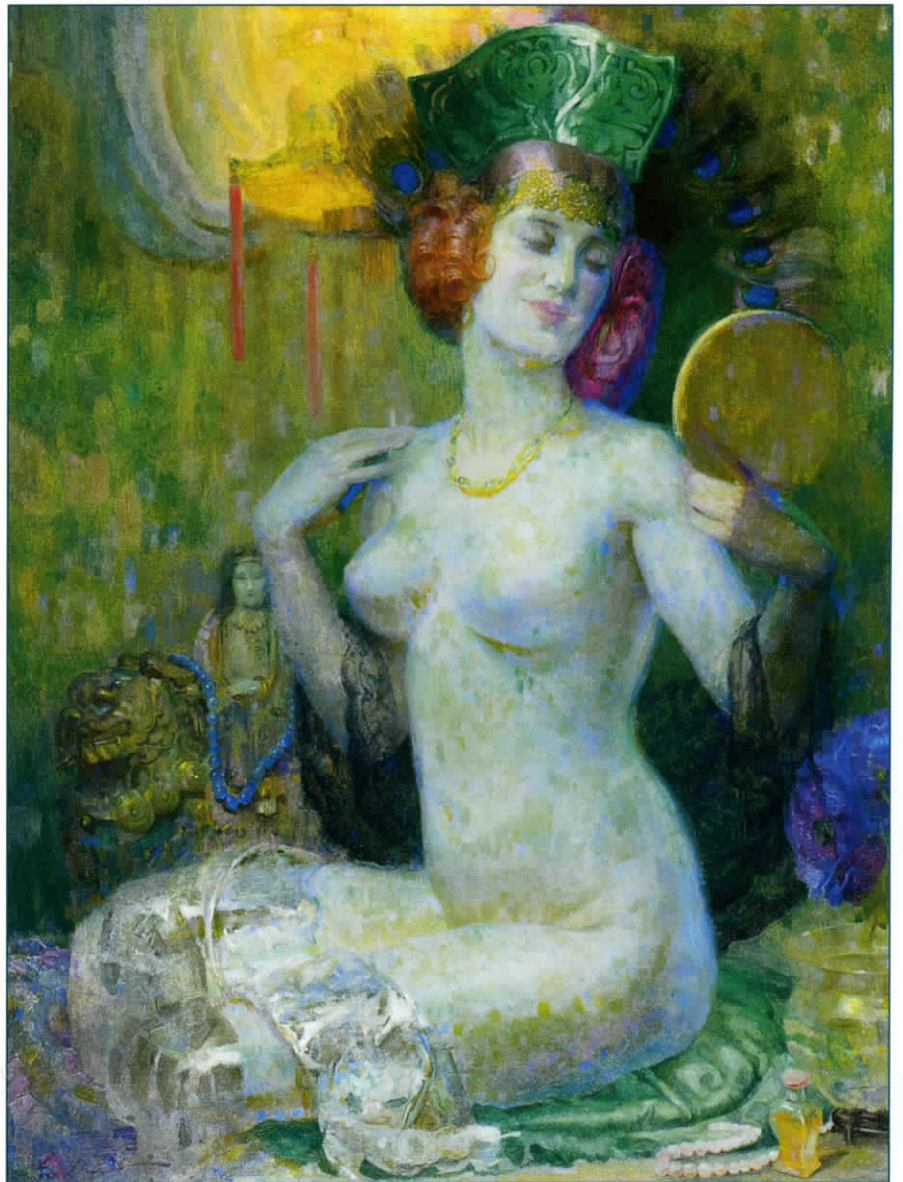
life-study, spending hundreds of hours working directly from nude models. He felt that painting the nude was an important test of the painter's skills and that the human body was the most beautiful of all living things. Because of these classical ideals and the fact that he loved painting women, nude figures made up a significant portion of his major works from his student years through the 1940s.

WOMEN IN PAINTINGS

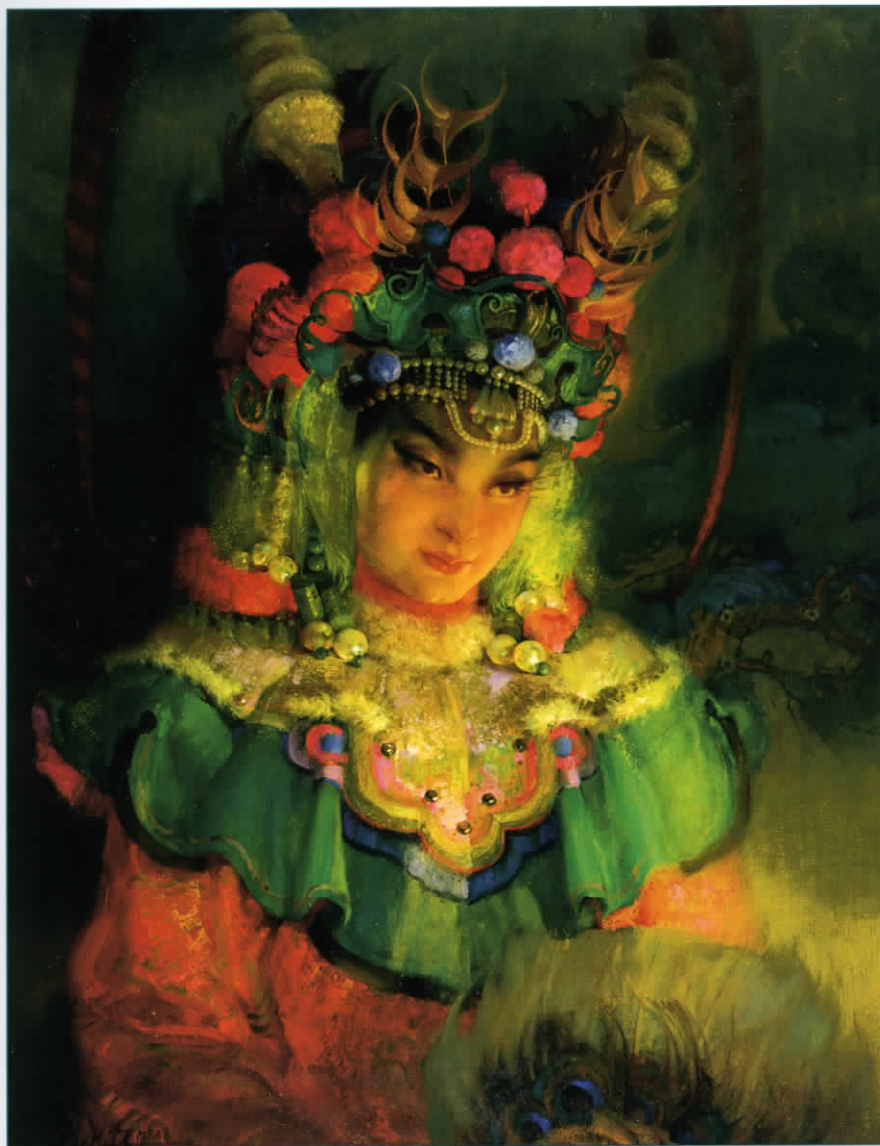
Lukits frequently returned to the theme of a woman gazing at her reflection in a mirror. This is a subject that was very popular in the late Victorian period and early in the twentieth-century. In fact Richard E. Miller, one of the two American Impressionists with whom Lukits studied, used a mirror in many of his paintings that portrayed women. A great deal can

and has been read into the mirror *leitmotif*, which appears as a recurring theme in the art and literature of nineteenth-century Europe. To the Chinese the mirror is the symbol of domestic bliss and conjugal happiness. In the West a broken mirror is symbolic of the loss of virginity, while to the Chinese it signifies the prolonged absence or death of a spouse. In *Incense* we see a woman gazing at her reflection in a mirror, while Japanese *geishas* peer at her from a background of mottled color. The laughing geishas give the work a playful sensuality. The figure, characteristic of the painter's work from the early 1920s, shows the clear influence of Impressionism with its syncopated rhythm of color.

In *Harmony in Jade and Silver*, the silent film star Mae Murray (1897–1992), is depicted gazing into a mirror. Reveling in her own beauty, she is portrayed in the nude. The portrait is painted without intimate detail, in a soft, subdued light. The sensitive handling is appropriate because the sitter was a well-known public figure and she desired a provocative, but not shocking likeness. In *Idle Hour*, painted in 1918, Lukits relied on the *tonalist* ideal to render a soft, subtle



*Harmony in
Jade and Silver*
c. 1920s
Portrait of
Mae Murray
48" × 36"
oil on panel
Collection:
Mr. Larry Camuso



Peking Opera, 1961
36" × 30"
oil on panel
Collection:
Mr. & Mrs.
Peter Adams

Chicago. It is one of several works he painted of a female caucasian model dressed in an embroidered robe. The model is seen wearing the colorful Peking Opera headdress that he frequently used in his paintings. A Japanese scroll painting of a geisha is seen over the sitter's shoulder, adding a counterpoint to the asymmetrical composition. In contrast to the more seductive works, the pastel painting, *The Chinese Maiden*, portrays a beautiful young maiden in the first flush of womanhood. She is shown in a brilliant green robe holding a peacock feather fan, symbolic of beauty.

Painted in the early 1960s, *Peking Opera* is the last known Orientalist portrait completed by Lukits. It is one of the most vivid and colorful paintings of his entire career. The model, a young woman from Thailand is wearing a Peking Opera headdress and is dressed in a brightly colored robe. She is seen silhouetted against a deep green Asian screen.

nude holding a glass bowl. The exaggerated pose with its beautiful use of curvilinear line is reminiscent of a harem scene by Jean-Auguste Dominique Ingres (1780–1867). Here again, the nude is demurely painted, and she is bathed in a warm atmospheric light.

Pictorial is a painting that is candid in its sensuality. The smiling blonde model is pictured brazenly slipping out of her red kimono. The background is a profusion of intense color that would overwhelm the figure if her torso was not a palpitating mass of broken color. Surrounding the figure are flower blossoms and peacock feathers rendered in a profusion of intense color. This Lukits painting, more than any other, reflects the relaxed social standards and unrestrained atmosphere of the "Roaring 20s."

Lukits painted the sultry *Oriental Harmony* while he was a graduate student at the Art Institute of

CASTING CHARACTERS

In some of his most theatrical portraits, Lukits actually selected models to fit the concept he had in his imagination, in the same way that a director casts a film. The famous Japanese actor, Kamiyama Sojin (1884–1954), was the subject of several of Lukits' most dramatic paintings. Sojin co-starred along with Douglas Fairbanks Sr. in the 1924 silent film classic, *Thief of Baghdad*. His unusually prominent facial features made him an ideal villain and the perfect model for what the artist described as "the imperious mandarin." Lukits liked his original depiction of *Sojin* so much that he painted at least two other portraits using the same pose with the actor staring over his shoulder at the viewer. Dressed in an Imperial robe and wearing a head-dress, Sojin is such an enduring and powerful image that Lukits depicted him simply against a background of flat green hues. (See cover image.)

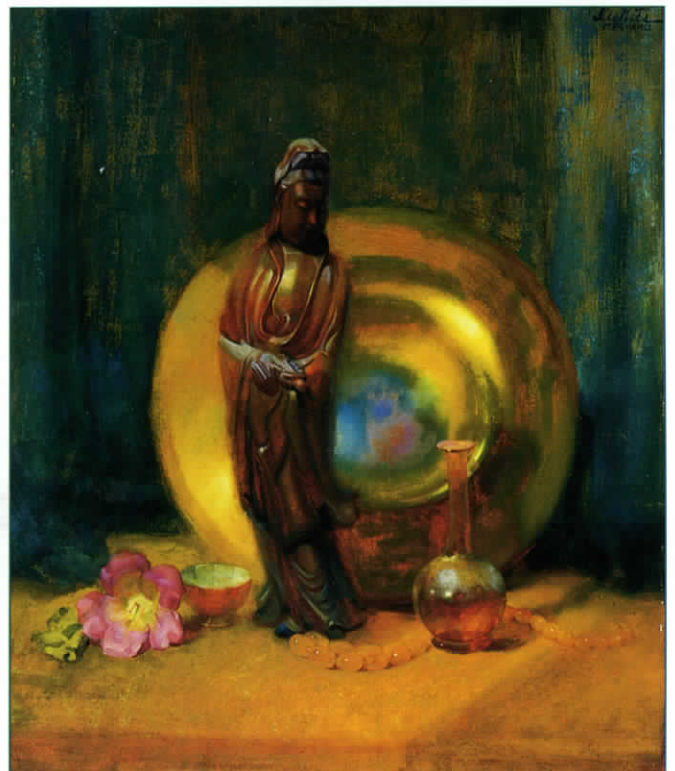
STILL-LIFES

The Orientalist still-life paintings by Lukits often consist of a simple, but elegant, arrangement of Asian antiques. He usually incorporated Chinese objects that had a symbolic value into his still-lives. To Buddhists and Daoists the *Guanyin* figure that appears in many of his compositions was revered as the goddess of mercy. He frequently counter balanced the larger objects with more delicate ones such as a string of pearls or a peacock feather. To the Chinese, the pearl was a charm thought to contain the essence of the moon. The peacock motif, which appears in many Orientalist works by Lukits, was emblematic of beauty and dignity.

Some of the most dramatic still-lives by Lukits feature Tang Dynasty horses or camels. These were from the artists' own collection and they symbolize speed and perseverance. Against these powerful objects Lukits often included a contrast of gentle plum or cherry blossoms, or a freshly picked lotus flower. The lotus flower, sacred to many cultures, was a Buddhist symbol for the perfection of the soul because it grew out of the mud and achieved purity. The plum or cherry blossoms, revered in China and Japan, were emblematic of the fairer sex or of the ephemeral nature of life.

Typically, in his Asian still-life paintings, Lukits used a dominant color key to set the "mood" for the objects. He favored dramatic lighting effects with one or two sources of colored lights. For example, Lukits would use blue or green lights to create a feeling of serenity or of romantic moonlight. This method of illuminating objects is unique to Theodore Lukits, who continued painting still-lives throughout his long career. Interestingly, it is his still-lives that comprised the majority of paintings sold in his later years.

*Guanyin and
Tiffany Glass*
c. 1950s
24" × 20"
oil on panel
Collection:
Mr. & Mrs.
Russell Shears



LANDSCAPES

One cannot evaluate the Orientalism of Theodore Lukits without a careful consideration of his landscape paintings. Unlike most of his contemporaries who used oil paints, Lukits relied on pastel for his outdoor work. While some of his open-air paintings were straight forward depictions of the actual location, it is in his ethereal, more idealized landscapes in which Lukits most successfully synthesized East and West. Working en plein-air, he reconciled an Eastern sense of decorative design, spatial arrangement, and minimal detail with the Western concept of capturing light and atmosphere.

Beginning in 1921, Lukits made a number of extensive sketching trips throughout Arizona and California. Over the course of the next fifteen years he painted more than one-thousand outdoor pastels. Some of these works were done in a serial fashion, one view after another of clouds surrounding a full moon, or various views of the same location throughout the night. This was the practice of Japanese artists such as Hokusai (1760–1849) who issued woodblock prints in series, for example, *Thirty-Six Views of Fuji* or *The Imagery of the Poets*. The serial nature

of Japanese prints is thought to have influenced French Impressionists such as Monet with his various views of the same landscape under different lighting conditions.

Unique and haunting are the plein-air pastels by Theodore Lukits known as the “Mountain Series.” These were painted high above the treeline, on the peaks and saddles of the Sierra Nevada Mountain Range, thousands of feet higher than painters are usually willing to venture. Due to an inhospitable environment given to dramatic extremes of weather, Lukits revered the Sierra as a special, spiritual place, much the way Shinto believers appreciated their own volcanic peaks. Many Japanese believed the mountains were imbued with supernatural powers, and saw them as the dwelling place of spirits.

In Western art the depiction of rugged mountains was not appreciated nor considered a fit subject

Dynasty c. 1965

28" × 22"

oil on panel

Collection:

Lukits Art Trust



for artists until the dawn of the Romantic era in the early nineteenth-century. On the other hand, Mt. Fuji has been a major subject for Japanese artists and poets for many centuries. Often these works show Mt. Fuji ringed by clouds. Lukits painted the Sierra peaks blanketed by clouds. Some of these ethereal works with snow-capped peaks appearing through layers of clouds are almost abstract in their simplicity. In other works such as *Throne of the Mountain Gods* or *Eye of the Storm*,



Lukits depicted a mountain peak so majestically that it takes on the same iconic quality which made Mt. Fuji a national symbol of Japan. In a fascinating parallel, the early twentieth-century Japanese artist Yoshida Hiroshi (1876–1950) also climbed mountains in search of his subject. Among his most dramatic works are views from high atop the Alps, looking down on the clouds, thousands of feet below.

THE ROMANTIC

While there is a strong romantic component in the works of Theodore Lukits, which he shares with the nineteenth-century Orientalists, his interest in Asia went much deeper than simple romanticism. Like Whistler before him, Lukits never traveled to the Far East. Instead, he studied the arts of Asia in order to discover eternal truths and to recover elements he found lacking in the art of his own time. In the end, the Orientalism of Theodore Lukits represented a mosaic of his artistic influences and experiences. His works interpret the rigorous academic training of his youth, the nineteenth-century Japonisme that had animated his teachers, and the theatricality of the Hollywood community of which he was a part. Ultimately, the art of Theodore Lukits embodies his own fantasy of Asia's exotic mystique that captivated him as a youth and remained his lifelong dream.

JEFFREY MORSEBURG

*Throne of the
Mountain Gods*
c. 1924
11" × 15"
pastel on paper
Collection:
Lukits Art Trust

A SUMMARY OF THE LIFE OF THEODORE N. LUKITS (1897–1992)

by Jeffrey Morseburg

AMONG THE MANY THOUSANDS of painters that comprise the short but illustrious history of California art, the career of Theodore Lukits stands out as unique in its variety, complexity, length and quality. He was a well-trained and accurate draftsman as well as a brilliant colorist. Furthermore, Lukits was a craftsman. He ground his paints, made his own pastels, created special palettes, made his brushes, and carved and gilded his own frames. By teaching for more than sixty years, he made a lasting contribution to the dissemination of the ideals and techniques of the French ateliers and academies of the nineteenth-century.



Theodore N. Lukits was born on November 26, 1897 in Temesvar, Transylvania, which was then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. When he was two years old, his parents took him and his eleven year old sister Mary to the United States. Growing up in the river city of St. Louis, Missouri, Lukits was a precocious artistic talent. Before he was twelve, his parents enrolled him in classes at the School of Fine Arts at Washington University where he studied with the tonalist painter Henry Wuerpel (1866–1958) and the American Impressionist Richard E. Miller (1875–1943).

By the time he completed the eighth grade, he had determined that his future would be in art. Lukits left school and moved with his family to Chicago, then the major art center of the Midwest. Initially he studied with the Munich and Paris-trained painter Victor Higgins (1884–1949) at the Academy of Fine Arts, before moving on to attend summer, evening and weekend classes at the prestigious Art Institute of Chicago. To support his

education, Lukits worked as a jewelry designer and, as his artistic skills improved, as an illustrator for both local magazines and national publications including the *Saturday Evening Post*.

At the Art Institute, Lukits had the good fortune to study with a faculty of exceptional painters who had all studied in the ateliers and academies of Europe. The competitive atmosphere challenged Lukits, and he progressed rapidly from drawing from the antique, to life-study, and then to composition and portraiture, winning major prizes throughout his tenure. The young artist studied primarily with the European-trained portrait painter Wellington J. Reynolds (1866–1949) and the Giverny Impressionist Karl Buehr (1866–1952). Lukits also worked closely with Harry M. Walcott (1877–1930) and with the American realists Charles W. Hawthorne (1872–1930) and George Bellows (1882–1925) who were both guest instructors.

By the time he graduated from the Art Institute in 1918, Lukits was already building a reputation as a portrait painter and exhibiting in Chicago galleries. In 1918 he won the Faculty of Fine Arts Award and the Bryan Lathrop Traveling Scholarship. He returned to the Art Institute in 1919 for post-graduate work and studied one year later with the master of the Art Nouveau movement, Alphonse Mucha (1860–1939), who was touring with works from his great *Slav Epic*. Lukits completed his studies by dissecting cadavers in medical college. While painting a portrait of the silent film vamp Theda Bara (1890–1955), Lukits was encouraged by the actress to move to Los Angeles.

Lukits did migrate from Chicago to Southern California, following a path that had been trod

*Self Portrait at
Twenty, 1918*
9 1/2" x 7 1/2"
graphite on paper
Collection:
Lukits Art Trust

by other noted painters including William Wendt (1865–1946), Joseph Kleitsch (1885–1931), and George Demont Otis (1879–1962). In Los Angeles, Lukits continued doing illustrations and commercial work as he built a following for his portrait and still-life paintings. Like many of the other painters who had moved to California, he was fascinated by what he described as “that California light” and he embarked on a series of sketching trips that took him throughout California and Arizona.

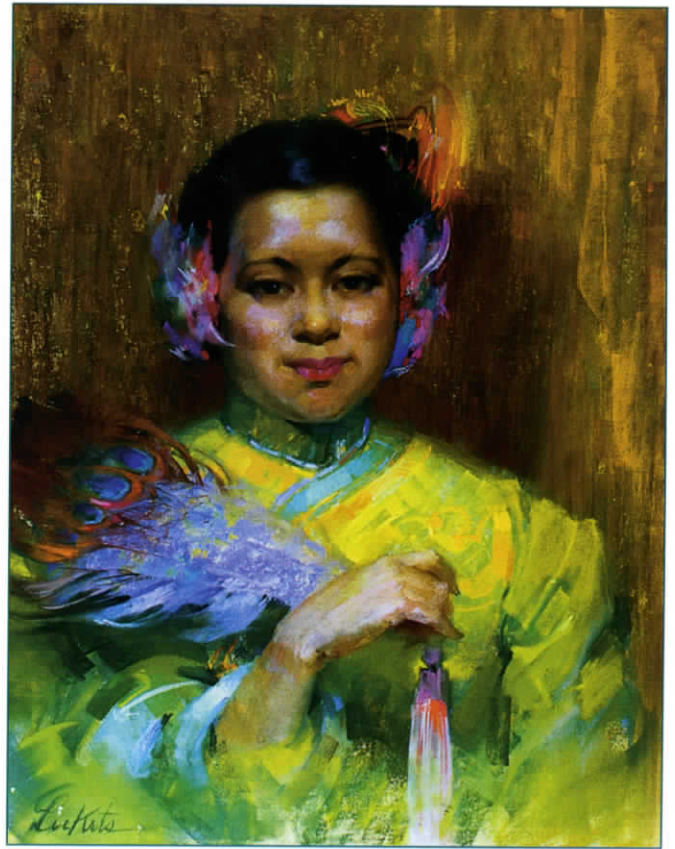
When he worked “en plein-air,” as the French described the practice of outdoor sketching, Lukits preferred the pastel medium to the oils which most painters used. While many American Impressionists used pastels out-of-doors, none used the medium as widely as Lukits. Because pastels are lightweight and require no set-up time, they were ideal for the high-altitude locations and for capturing the ephemeral conditions of light that Lukits favored. He also felt the unique “vibrative” quality of the pastel medium was ideally suited to the early morning, late afternoon, and evening moods that captivated him.

After settling in California, Lukits became interested in the state’s Mexican culture. The vibrant characters and brightly colored traditional costumes, which Lukits saw at local fiestas and rodeos, appealed to him as both a portraitist and colorist. Lukits recruited Mexican models from movie studio backlots to pose for him, often painting at the Santa Barbara and San Juan Capistrano missions. For more than a decade, Latin subjects made up a large part of his artistic production.

After less than five years in Southern California, Lukits built a reputation as an excellent portrait painter on the strength of the decorative portraits he brought with him from Chicago and on a number of successful commissions he completed for the stars and moguls of Hollywood. In 1926 he garnered great acclaim for his full-length portrait of the Mexican screen beauty Dolores del Rio, which was reproduced in Los Angeles and Mexico City newspapers and exhibited extensively. From the early 1920s, Lukits exhibited with the California Art Club, the Painters and Sculptors Club, and many other Southland art organizations. In addition he sent his works to Eastern museums such as the Corcoran and Carnegie.

From 1926 through the late 1930s, Lukits had a number of solo exhibitions at galleries, which included the Sotheby Salon, the Montmartre Cafe, the Stendhal Gallery, and the Ainslie Galleries. By the early 1930s, he had met Eleanor Merriam (1909–1948), a young actress and aspiring artist, who was the daughter of the painter James Merriam (1880–1951). Eleanor began taking classes from Lukits, and there was an immediate attraction between student and teacher. Due to her family’s reluctance and the tempestuous nature of their relationship, the couple waited until 1937 to marry.

Lukits began teaching in 1924, and devoted more of his time to it, leaving less opportunity



Chinese Maiden

c. 1930s

26 3/4" × 20 3/4"

pastel on paper

Collection:

Jonathan Art

Foundation

*Eye of the Storm*

c. 1924

15" × 11"

pastel on paper

Collection:

Lukits Art Trust

to travel and paint large-scale works. During the Great Depression, the income from teaching was welcomed and after the end of World War II, Lukits expanded his school in order to accommodate returning servicemen studying on the G. I. Bill. As an educator, Lukits was friendly but firm. He insisted on the same "atelier" style of instruction that he had been fortunate to receive. Although Lukits was a staunch traditionalist, he was broad in his artistic tastes, holding up a wide variety of artists as being worthy of study. Unfortunately for his students, as the art world changed, there was less demand for academically-trained painters and the majority of the artists whom Lukits taught earned their living in commercial work as illustrators, film studio artist, or in outdoor advertising.

Early in 1948, both Lukits and his wife, Eleanor, were severely burned in a fire in their home. Eleanor died a few days later of complications from her injuries, while Lukits received severe burns that required an extended recovery. The tragedy marked a turning point in his life and Lukits withdrew from the social atmosphere that

Eleanor had helped create around him. By the late 1940s, the ranks of the original plein-air painters who had helped forge the California art scene were thinning rapidly, and as the quality of art declined, Lukits began to miss the presence of painters such as Jack Wilkinson Smith (1873–1949) and William Wendt (1865–1946).

In 1952 Lukits married the Disney artist, Lucile Greathouse (b. 1909). She shared Lukits' commitment to art, and together they exhibited in the diminished *Traditional Art* scene. Theodore Lukits gradually withdrew from the California art world, frustrated by the lowering of standards in traditional painting and the takeover of artistic institutions by the advocates of *Modern* painting.

Through the 1960s, Lukits received the occasional portrait commission and continued to sell still-lives and landscapes through California galleries. By the 1970s the painters with whom he painted and exhibited in the 1920s and 1930s had dwindled to a mere handful. Hanson Puthuff passed away in 1972, his close friend A. G. Rider in 1974, and both Paul Lauritz and Lukits' Chicago schoolmate, Christian Von Schneidau, died in 1976. Eventually, Lukits became the last living link to the golden days of California art.

Although he was warm and helpful to his students, Lukits was embittered at the precipitous decline in artistic standards that he had witnessed in his lifetime. Lukits believed in beauty, and through his students he fought to transmute the artistic ideals of his youth to further generations. He did live long enough to see a resurgence of interest in traditional art and his last generation of students began to find widespread success as fine artist.

Through the 1980s Lukits continued to teach, even as his memory began to fade. At ninety, he began to have dizzy spells, which forced him to retire. Lukits died in 1992. He was a unique artist who left a legacy that reached far back into the heroic history of American painting.

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