



CALIFORNIA ART CLUB NEWSLETTER

Theodore Nicolai Lukits Tradition and Innovation (Part I of II)

EXHIBITION AT PACIFIC ASIA MUSEUM

by Jeffrey Morseburg
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Peking Opera
Private Collection

oil on panel 36" x 30"

FOR A NUMBER OF YEARS I HAVE BEEN involved in the process of researching and writing about the late California painter Theodore N. Lukits (1897-1992). In order to prepare for a number of upcoming museum exhibitions devoted to his life and work, I have spent much of the past year reviewing his personal papers and cataloging his artwork. Because of my familiarity with his artwork and the fact that I knew the artist well and worked with him for a number of years, one would presume that writing about him would be an easy task. However, the more I studied the subject of my research, the more elusive the task of describing Theodore Lukits became. While an experienced writer can usually sum up the life and work of most painters in a few sentences, the breadth and complexity of the *oeuvre* of Theodore Lukits and his obsessive dedication to his craft defy easy description.

First and foremost, Theodore Lukits was *both* a draughtsman and a colorist. The conflict between those who hold that either drawing or color is the most important single factor in the success of a painting have long been a part of art history.

By the late nineteenth-century the gulf between the two camps had widened into a gaping chasm. Rather than choosing either draughtsmanship or color as the most important aspect of his work, Lukits chose to straddle the divide. From the earliest stages of his career, he was known for an intense, fully chromatic palette that was laid on a foundation of solid and precise draughtsmanship. In his painting, Lukits sought to "push" color in new and innovative directions without abandoning the fine drawing that he felt must undergird every fine work of art.

DURING his lengthy career, there were few aspects of the visual arts at which Lukits did not explore and excel. While still in his teenage years he was a jewelry designer, a commercial artist and an illustrator for major magazines. Lukits was a portrait painter, a muralist, sculptor, still-life painter, and the creator of an impressive series of *plein-air* pastels of the western landscape. In California Lukits forged his artistic reputation on highly dramatic portraits of motion picture business luminaries painted during Hollywood's glamorous golden age. At the same time, Lukits was drawn to the Asian and Latin cultures for his most personal paintings. He painted dozens of brightly colored and dramatically lit portraits of Asian and Hispanic models over a forty year period. These joyful, expressive paintings are perhaps the clearest manifestation of his unique artistic personality.

Throughout his career, Lukits had a deep interest in the technical aspects of painting. He sought to perfect every area of his craft. This led him to grind his own paint when he was not happy with the commercial varieties. The pastels that he used out-of-doors were created in his workshop. Lukits made his own palettes and created brushes for specialized uses. When he could not find carved frames with an Asian or Spanish motif suitable for his portraits and still-lives, he designed, carved and gilded them himself. The hazardous materials with which he worked in his technical pursuits saddled Lukits with a variety of ailments, including lead and toxic poisoning.

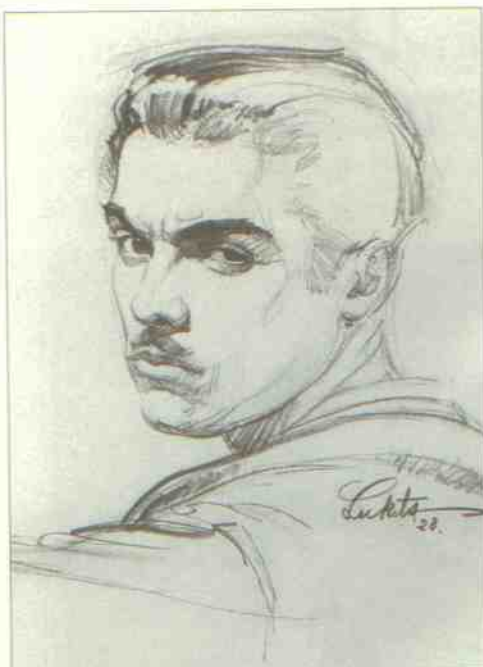
Through his hundreds of students, Lukits made a lasting contribution to the maintenance of the ideals, techniques and artistic standards of the nineteenth-century French ateliers and academies. His teaching career began at twenty-five and only

concluded when ill-health forced him to retire at ninety. Because of the tremendous changes in the art world, the vast majority of students who Lukits taught made their living in the commercial field. It is only his last generation of students from the 1960s and 1970s who are beginning to enjoy widespread success and acceptance, as fine traditional painting has experienced a revival.

THEODORE Nikolai Lukits was born on November 26, 1897 in the city of Temesvar in Transylvania, then part of the crumbling Austro-Hungarian Empire. When he was two years old, his parents, Theodor Anton and Emilie Theuer Lukits, decided to emigrate to the United States to flee an

uncertain political and economic climate. The Lukits family was part of a vast wave of emigrants from eastern Europe who came through Ellis Island in the years prior to the First World War. The small family, which included young Theo and his eleven year-old sister, Mary, settled in St. Louis, Missouri, the city from which all the early expeditions of western exploration began.

Late in life, Lukits recalled that his earliest conscious memories were of lying on the floor of the family home in St. Louis, coloring-in the mythical figures of *Androcles and the Lion* in his sister's coloring book. From the time he was small, Lukits decided that he wanted to be an artist. He received a great deal of encouragement from Mary, who was also artistically inclined. As the budding artist grew older, he copied illustrations from magazines, painted, and carved figures out of wood. Fascinated by the Native American culture, Lukits drew and painted Indians. In addition he became skilled at leather-crafting and Indian beadwork.



Theodore N. Lukits
Self Portrait, 1928 charcoal on paper

Although Lukits was small in stature, his volcanic temper and pugnacious personality earned him respect from the other boys who grew up in the rough-and-tumble environment of the St. Louis waterfront. His willingness to scrap with the gangs of boys who grew up in other neighborhoods won him the monikers, "Terrible Ted" and "TNT Lukits." However, Lukits was also extremely industrious as a boy. He worked diligently on his art and took piano and violin lessons. Even though music eventually gave way to art, he felt that his period of music lessons enhanced his artistic career. Lukits came to believe that a student of art needed to have the same dedication and discipline as a music student. He described art as "visual music" and he used musical analogies frequently during his long teaching career.

AS HE GREW, it became clear to his parents that Lukits had a rare talent for art and that he was unusually mature in his artistic approach. By the time he was twelve, Lukits had won permission to study at the School of Fine Arts at Washington University. His first teacher was Henry Wuerpel (1866-1958), a *tonalist* painter who was a student of Jean-Louis Gérôme (1824-1904) and a friend of James Abbott McNeill Whistler (1834-1903). Lukits also worked briefly under the St. Louis native Richard E. Miller (1875-1943), another Parisian-trained artist who was a member of the Giverny Group of American Impressionists.

BY THE TIME he had completed the eighth grade, Lukits knew that art and only art would be his career. Because of the dedication he exhibited, his parents allowed the young prodigy to quit school in order to pursue art full-time. In those days of

relaxed child labor laws, Lukits worked in order to help his family and to finance his art studies. He was employed first as an office boy, then he later excelled as an airbrush painter. By the time he was fourteen, Lukits and his parents decided that the best place for him to study would be Chicago, home of the Art Institute, then the largest art academy in the United States. In the Spring of 1912, he and his father left St. Louis for Chicago.

Once in Chicago, Lukits first attended the Academy of Fine Arts where he studied under

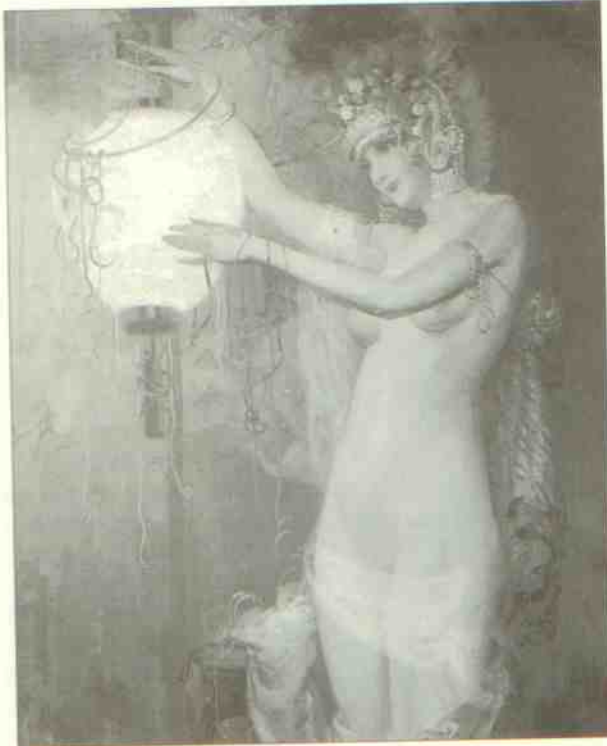
the Munich and Paris-trained painter Victor Higgins (1884-1949) (who became famous as a member of the *Taos Ten*). In 1913 when he was fifteen, he earned entrance to the Art Institute of Chicago where he initially took summer, evening and weekend classes. In order to pay for his tuition, Lukits worked as a jewelry designer. As his artistic skills improved, Lukits was employed by the Republic Department Store as an illustrator.

At the Art Institute, Lukits felt blessed to study with a host of exceptional instructors, all of them



Sojin, 1928
Collection: Mrs. Janet Lewis

oil on panel 39 1/4" x 29 3/4"



Celebration oil on panel 24" × 18"
Collection: Edenhurst Gallery

trained in the academies and ateliers of Europe. Entrance to the Art Institute of Chicago was only open to prospective artists who were judged to have the talent and drive to succeed as painters. The course of study was based on the ideals and curriculum of the French ateliers beginning with "drawing from the antique," or the study of antique casts. Students could only advance from one phase of study to another after they had mastered the concepts and techniques involved.

The atmosphere at the Art Institute was very competitive with frequent *concours* (competitions) within the individual ateliers, and major competitions were open to the entire school. Students had to choose an atelier or studio in which to study, each run by a master painter. For most of his tenure at the Art Institute, Lukits worked in the ateliers of the Munich and Paris-trained portrait painter Wellington J. Reynolds (1866 - c. 1947) and the German-born American Impressionist, Karl Bucher (1866-1952), another former member of the Giverny colony. Lukits also worked closely with Harry Walcott (1870-1944), a member of the National Academy of Design and another product of the Académie Julien

in Paris. At the Art Institute, Lukits studied with the American Realist painters, Charles W. Hawthorne (1872-1930) and George Bellows (1882-1925), who were both guest instructors during his tenure there. He was also heavily influenced by the muralist Edwin H. Blashfield (1848-1936), recognized as one of the major figures of the period now known as the *American Renaissance*.

DURING Lukits' student days in Chicago, the influence of nineteenth-century *Japonisme* continued to be a strong influence on artists. Distinct Asian influences can be discerned in the works of many of Lukits teachers and the painters that he emulated. While at the Art Institute, Lukits came to know the Armenian painter, Hovsep Pushman (1877-1966), who specialized in still-lives of Chinese objects. Pushman helped foster Lukits' interest in the Orient, and while still a teenager, Lukits began to collect Chinese antiques and costumes. By the end of his student years, he was already depicting models in Kimonos, and using Chinese antiques and Japanese screens in his paintings.

Later, when Lukits moved to Los Angeles, his interest in ethnic cultures and colorful costumes continued. He found Asian models to pose for him, and often dressed them in antique Chinese robes and headdresses from the Peking Opera. His favorite and most individual works were his highly theatrical Asian portraits. In 1924 while on the set of the film *Thief of Baghdad* (starring Douglas Fairbanks Sr.), Lukits became acquainted with the silent film star Kamiyama Sojin. Sojin was recognized for his portrayals of villainous characters, and quickly became a favorite model of Lukits.

During his time at the Art Institute, Lukits

(Continued on page 22)

OCTOBER MEETING

Special Lecture

Theodore N. Lukits (1897-1992): An American Orientalist

This first-time lecture and slide presentation will be delivered by Director of Morseburg Galleries Jeffrey Morseburg, and CAC President Peter Adams. Both speakers knew Lukits personally and will share their insights on this highly regarded artist.

Please see back page for date and time.

THEODORE N. LUKITS *(Continued from page 4)*

garnered almost every major competitive award, despite being years younger than his classmates. In 1916 he won First Prize at the Institute's annual exhibition. In 1917 he received the Magnus Brand Memorial Award and the Harry Walcott Composition Award, and in 1918, the year of his graduation, he won the Faculty of the Fine Arts Award. In 1919 Lukits was presented with the Bryan Lathrop Traveling Scholarship and was the Prix de Rome representative from the Art Institute.

After his graduation in 1918, Lukits returned to the Art Institute for post-graduate work under the supervision of Buehr and Reynolds. In 1920 he won a special opportunity to study with the renowned

Czech painter and leader of the *Art Nouveau* movement, **Alphonse Mucha** (1860-1939), who was touring with the first five works from his monumental *Slav Epic*. Although the time he would spend with Mucha was brief, the influence of the great master of decorative design on his career was substantial. Lukits finished his decade-long period of intense study at medical college where he dissected human cadavers in order to perfect his knowledge of human anatomy.

Look for Part II of Theodore N. Lukits: Tradition and Innovation by Jeffrey Morseburg in the next issue of the California Art Club Newsletter.