



CALIFORNIA ART CLUB NEWSLETTER

THEODORE NICOLAI LUKITS (1897-1992)

PART II

Note: In the previous issue, "Part I" described the early life and student days of Theodore Lukits in St. Louis and Chicago.

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AN EXHIBITION AT MISSION SAN JUAN CAPISTRANO:
In the Spirit of the Missions

and

AN EXHIBITION AT CARNEGIE ART MUSEUM:
Theodore N. Lukits: An American Orientalist

ALTHOUGH the renowned artists Alphonse Mucha (1860-1939) and Edwin Blashfield (1848-1936) inspired Lukits to dream of important mural commissions, Lukits realized that he needed to establish himself as a professional painter before he could hope to garner ambitious commissions. He began his artistic career at the age of seventeen, initially working as an illustrator for regional publications in the Midwest. Eventually, he created illustrations for prestigious national magazines including, *Saturday Evening Post*, *Colliers*, and *Harpers*. His work for S&W Illustration Service provided Lukits with commissions for various commercial opportunities. Meanwhile, he took his teacher Wellington Reynolds' (1866-1949) advice and gradually worked to establish himself as a portrait painter while exhibiting in Chicago galleries and entering regional exhibitions.

During the years he spent establishing himself as a professional artist in Chicago, Lukits began to think of moving to California. Dozens of Chicago trained painters ventured west, most of them settling in Los Angeles and its eastern suburb, Pasadena. These artists were drawn to the temperate climate and the

La Fiesta, circa 1931
59" x 31 1/2" oil on board
Collection: Lukits Art Trust



Sea Fantasy
Collection: Lukits Art Trust

11.6" × 9.5" Gouache

prospect of painting landscapes out-of-doors year-round. It was while Lukits was painting the silent film star Theda Bara (1890–1955) in Chicago, that he was encouraged to move out West. Miss Bara told him of how rapidly the motion picture industry was growing and how few portrait painters there were in Los Angeles.

IN THE FALL OF 1921, Lukits moved to Los Angeles. He immediately set out for the surrounding mountainous regions. This subject became the first of a series of pastel sketches that would dominate most of his time for more than a decade. His

first recorded California landscapes were a series of pastels capturing Big Bear Lake and its environs.

Lukits chose pastel as his outdoor medium for a number of reasons. As pastels are lightweight, they are easy to transport, and pastel paper takes up much less space in a backpack than do canvasses or panels. Furthermore, the pastel medium is inherently dry, while oil-based paints take a great deal of time to dry. Once on location, Lukits could get right down to work, since the pastels required no mixing or elaborate set-up time. These practical advantages grew even more important for Lukits when he travelled to the Sierras. His mountain climbing ventures took him to increasingly perilous locations. To capture the ethereal effects of light and the swirling mists around the pinnacles, Lukits painted from the peaks and saddles of the Sierras. This dangerous process nearly took his life in several situations.

MOST OF the plein air pastels that Lukits painted were done on trips he took between portrait commissions and the commercial work he did during his early years in Los Angeles. He believed that pastels were ideally suited for moody and highly atmospheric works. When looking at a group of these sketches, the observant viewer will realize that only a few of his works were created during mid-day, the time of day when most of the California painters chose to paint. Instead, Lukits preferred to paint out-of-doors at sunrise, in the late afternoon, and at sunset.

Lukits especially enjoyed recording unusual natural phenomena, an interest he eventually passed on to a number of his students. In his landscapes, he always stressed that "capturing the mood of

nature" was his most important concern. During his trips throughout California and Arizona, Lukits painted about one-thousand plein air pastels. These outdoor works sometimes served as the preliminary studies for a number of larger, more ambitious studio oil paintings. Although many of the American Impressionists used pastels, there are probably none who used the medium on location as widely as Lukits did, and few if any who used it more effectively. In his works one can see a mix of many nineteenth-century art movements.

Evident in his pastels are the poetic qualities and subtle gradations of the *Luminists* and the grandeur of the *Hudson River School*. In addition, his works reflect elements of the mood and harmony of the *Tonalists*, as well as the *Impressionist's* concern with the fleeting effects of light and use of broken color.

ASIDE FROM his pastel landscape painting, Lukits briefly worked for Foster & Kleiser, the outdoor (billboard) advertising firm. However, one of his most significant contributions to the art world was when in 1924 at the age of twenty-six, he opened his own art school, the Lukits Academy of Fine Arts. At his school he insisted on the same type of "atelier-style" instruction that he himself had received. This meant that students had to begin drawing from plaster casts before they could graduate to painting. Since the cast study and tonal drawing had been the crux of the academic method, they were also the foundation at the new academy.

Although Lukits was a staunch *traditionalist* and was opposed to many of the modern movements that were beginning to dominate the art scene, he was very broad-minded in the artists whom he rec-

ommended as role models for his own students. Lukits revered Adolphe-William Bouguereau (1825-1905) for his flawless depiction of the human figure, and he recognized the British muralist, Sir Frank Brangwyn (1867-1943) for his bold sense of composition and design. The Spanish artist, Joaquin Sorolla (1863-1923), was venerated for his brilliant use of outdoor light. In addition Lukits admired many illustrators including Edmund Dulac (1862-1953), Howard Pyle (1853-1911), and N.C.



Theodore Lukits at Mission San Juan Capistrano, 1931.

Wyeth (1882–1945). The greatest innovator of the *Art Nouveau* movement, Alphonse Mucha, was used as an example for his skill in two-dimensional design work. Among portrait painters he particularly admired John Singer Sargent (1856–1925), and Giovanni Boldini (1844–1931). However, he cautioned students not to get caught up in imitating Sargent's or Boldini's "bravura" brushwork as only an artist with their knowledge and facility could carry it off, for lesser artists it would look contrived and overly mannered.

After less than five years in Los Angeles, Lukits was successfully building a reputation on the strength of his major portrait works. One painting that was widely heralded was his 1926 full-length portrait of the famous Mexican screen beauty, Dolores del Rio. This painting was exhibited in the Carthay Circle Theatre, and reproduced in Los Angeles and Mexico City newspapers. It was also the centerpiece of his solo exhibition at the Montmartre Galleries in Hollywood.

LIVING IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA Lukits became inspired with the Hispanic culture that surrounded him. Sometime in the 1930s he received a commission, evidently from the eccentric millionaire Howard Hughes, to paint a large mural of a Mexican fiesta scene. Although the commission fell through, the process of attending *fiestas* and painting dozens of colorful studies of male and female Mexican models became a passion for Lukits.

From the mid-1920s Lukits was active with the California Art Club and many other Southland artists' groups. He frequently participated in exhibitions that traveled to Europe, and sent paintings to Eastern venues including the Corcoran in



Rising Mist, Pomona Valley
Collection: Mr. & Mrs. Russell Shears

20" × 30" oil on canvas

Washington D.C. and the Carnegie Institute in Pittsburgh.

IN 1930 he had a solo exhibition at the Ainslie Galleries in Los Angeles, and in 1931 at the Stendahl Galleries in Hollywood. About that time he met Eleanor Merriam, a young actress who began taking painting lessons from Lukits. They married six years later in 1937 when they eloped to Santa Barbara.

Although the Great Depression devastated the fine art market, forcing many painters into commercial work, Lukits managed to earn a reasonably steady income through art sales and portrait commissions. Along with his friends, Frank Tenny Johnson (1874–1939), and Jack Wilkinson Smith (1873–1949), Lukits became a lifetime artist member of the Jonathan Club of Los Angeles. (The Jonathan Art Foundation continues to maintain a large collection of his works.)

During the 1930s, Lukits forged a warm relationship with the famous Boston art dealer, Robert C. Vose. His paintings were hung with the works of the Old Masters and the American Impressionists in the Vose Galleries. By 1940 Lukits had earned

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THEODORE NICHOLAI LUKITS

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enough income through his art sales to purchase a house on South Citrus Avenue in the Hancock Park section of Los Angeles. Eleanor Lukits became active in the community and in charitable work. During World War II, she and Theodore brought art students to the **Veteran's Hospital** to sketch portraits of the wounded soldiers as gifts to send home to their families. After the war, the Lukits Academy won approval for the G.I. Bill, enabling veterans to study at a very low cost.

IN 1948 there was a terrible tragedy involving stored gasoline in the basement of the Lukits household. In the explosion he and his wife were severely burned. Eleanor died in the hospital after clinging to life for several days. Lukits received second and third degree burns on his hands and arms from attempting to rescue his wife from the fire. The tragedy was a turning point in the artist's life, and he withdrew from the social atmosphere that Eleanor had helped create.

Three years later, artist **Lucile Greathouse** (b. 1909) began studying at the Lukits Academy of Fine Arts. The attractive Lucile came from an artistic family herself, and had been a student of **Walter Moses** (b. 1874-?). She was a **Disney** artist who had worked on animation classics including *Fantasia* and *Snow White*. After they were married in 1952, Lucile set out to turn the painter's life back into a productive career. However, the world of art that was familiar to Lukits was rapidly declining and giving way to *modernism*. Throughout the 1950s the newlyweds were active in the languishing traditional art arena. Lukits judged shows, lectured to art groups, and occasionally found opportunities to exhibit his work. Frustrated by the decline in the quality of the remaining traditional painters, and angry at the near total takeover of artistic institutions by those who were hostile to the traditionalists, Lukits gradually withdrew from the art scene.

In the 1950s and 1960s, Lukits was discretely exhibiting in galleries in Carmel, Palm Springs and La Jolla, and periodically receiving portrait commissions. The paintings he exhibited and sold were primarily landscapes he worked up from his plein

air pastels of the 1920s. He also sold a number of still-lives that juxtaposed Oriental antiques with American art glass from the turn-of-the-twentieth-century. However, the steady constant in his life was his many students.

VIRTUALLY ALL of those who studied with Theodore Lukits had been searching for classical instruction. By the 1950s, there was little rigor left in most of the American art schools, as artistic principles and standards of the past had been abandoned. In Lukits, students found a teacher who was a real painter and who was, therefore, able to give them a firm grounding in the great traditions of western art.

Because his students were not *Photo Realists* or progressive painters who were favored by the "cutting edge" galleries, the vast majority of them made their living in the commercial field of art. Many of those who studied with Lukits worked for the large outdoor advertising firms or for the Hollywood film studios. It has only been his last generation of students from the 1970s who have begun to enjoy success in the *traditionalist* revival that has taken place over the past decade.

As he reached his eighties, Theodore Lukits continued teaching even though his memory began to slip. He became, in this author's opinion, the last remaining figure from the golden era of California painting. Lukits began to have dizzy spells and was finally forced to retire from active teaching at ninety years of age. The fervor and fire gradually disappeared from the old painter. In 1992 Theodore N. Lukits died at the age of ninety-four, one of the last links to the heroic history of American painting.

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