

# Theodore Nicolai Lukits /

## The Aesthetics of Beauty

By incorporating decorative motifs with influences from numerous other artistic traditions, this master artist brought his paintings to an elevated level of beauty.

by MICHAEL GORMLEY



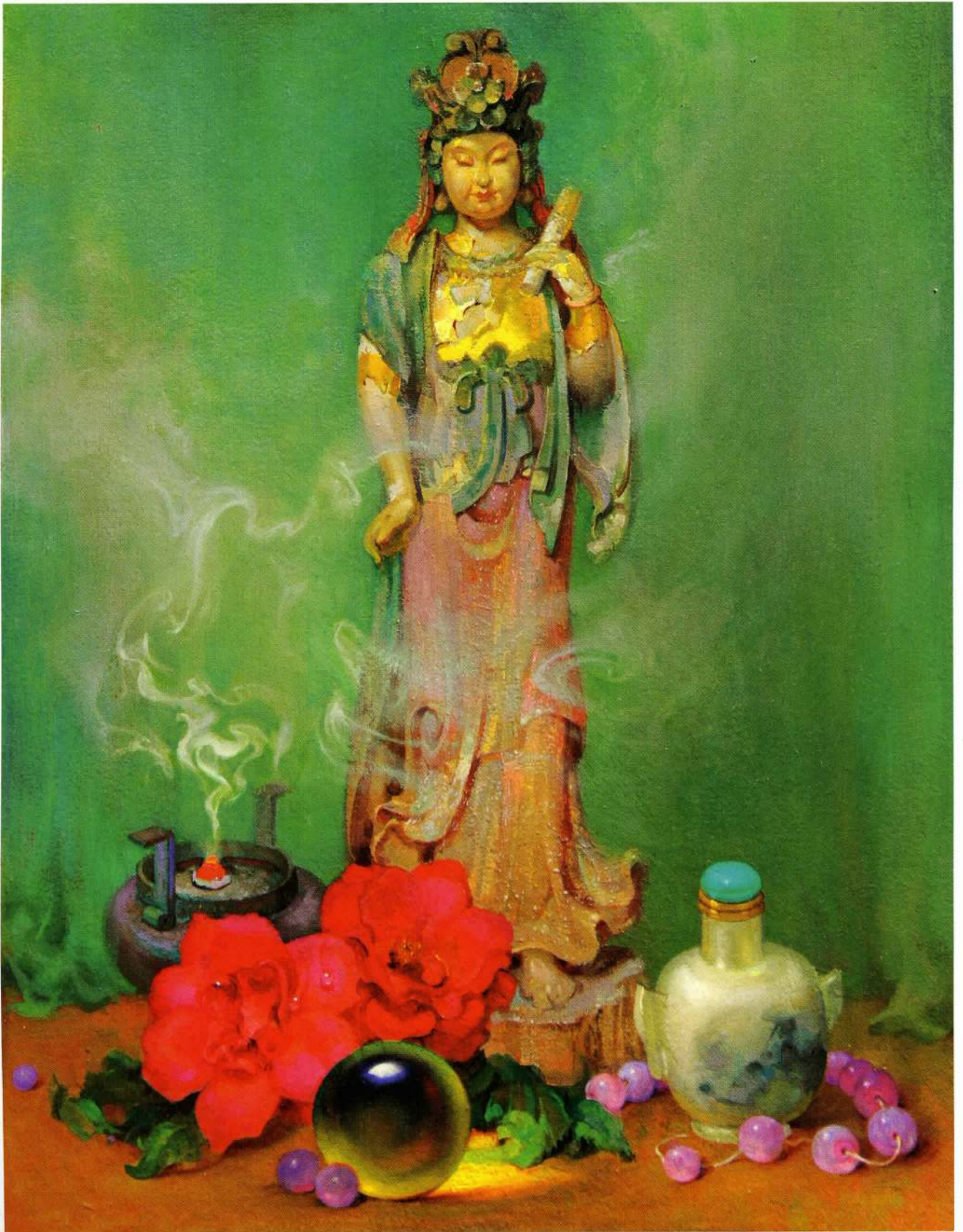
**ABOVE**  
**Peking Opera**  
1961, oil on panel, 36 x 30. Collection Peter and Elaine Adams.

**OPPOSITE PAGE**  
**Contemplation**  
1928, oil on panel, 26 x 20. Courtesy American Legacy Fine Arts, Pasadena, California.

**O**n a recent trip to Los Angeles, I visited Elaine and Peter Adams, a couple who have done much to advance representational art in California. The beauty of their home, located among the leafy rolling hills of Pasadena, stopped me dead in my tracks. The mix of antiques, fine art, and other decorative elements creates an incredible harmonious ambiance. But one item in their collection stood out—not an easy feat in this setting. It was a painting of a woman of Asian descent dressed in ceremonial attire. Dramatic lighting, rich compositional effects, and vibrant coloring lent the work an overarching decorative sensibility, but the painting also evinced a firm grasp of academic principles. This juxtaposition of the real and the unreal left me questioning the artist's intent—clearly the painter was not interested only in depicting the real world.

The painting's creator was Theodore Lukits (1887–1992). According to my hosts, he was an artist of some renown, although he was a mystery to me. But *Peking Opera*, the piece I was admiring, was more than a very good painting. It was likely the work of a master with both individual genius and an important lineage. Inspired by this painting's display of









in line with the 19<sup>th</sup>-century academic approach—and also a friend of Whistler. Lukits studied with notable American Impressionists Karl Buehr and Richard Miller, both former members of the Giverny art colony. Other teachers came from schools and traditions including American Realism and the Taos artists' colony.

This wide-ranging pedigree helps illustrate the sheer breadth of approaches and philosophies that informed Lukits' art. Most fledgling artists would have

**LEFT**  
**Cold Command**  
ca. 1957, oil on panel, 40 x 30.  
Private collection.  
Image courtesy Jeffrey Morseburg.

balked at the challenging task of choosing from this array of competing influences, but I imagine that at an early age, Lukits intuited that there is no one right way to make art,

save the way one paves for oneself. His approach, accordingly, was to take it all in and make it his own.

Hence, in Lukits' work one sees references to historical forms, fine draftsmanship, fanciful design, and sumptuous color. It's a finely tuned juxtaposition of the classic and the modern, a truly contemporary expression. Lukits was known to be a consummate craftsman, taking pains to grind his own colors from raw pigments and fashion his own paintbrushes.

"Lukits worked directly from life, or from his imagination," says Peter Adams, who studied with Lukits in the 1970s. "Often he referenced pastel drawings that he did on-site and worked them up into a larger oil painting. When he did elaborate compositions with numerous figures, his knowledge of anatomy was so good that he would draw the majority of the composition out of his head and then hire models to finish.

"He never worked from photographs during the years that I knew him," Adams continues. "His harshest

craft, aesthetic sensibility, and sensuous subject matter, I set out to discover who Lukits was and how he came to be such an accomplished painter.

**L**ukits is something of a mythic figure in California art lore. His family immigrated to the United States from Transylvania when he was 2 years old and settled in St. Louis. From an early age Lukits demonstrated a prodigious creative talent for both music and art. He was particularly drawn to Native American culture, and by the age of 12 he had mastered Native American handcrafts involving leather and beadwork. Lukits

soon quit school and parlayed his craft into work to help support his family and pay for art classes at Washington University in St. Louis. Subsequently, he began taking evening art classes in Chicago, and at the age of 16 he was he was admitted as a full-time student at the Art Institute of Chicago.

Lukits' earnest pursuit of quality education, in a large part supported by his parents who recognized his talent, proved to have a significant impact on his unique development as an artist. Faculty at several schools where he studied had links to numerous artistic traditions and masters. His teacher Edmund Henry Wuerpel was a student of Gérôme—and thus



criticism of a painting was, 'It looks like a damn photo.' He did keep an extensive file of photos that he would cut out of magazines and books—of animals, people, places, and objets d'art. However, he didn't work directly from those but rather referred to them for inspiration."

Lukits was open to experimentation and risk, and possessed an overarching desire to create art that was uniquely his own and that referenced the time he lived in. In 1919, he won the prestigious Prix de Rome competition at the Art Institute of Chicago and received

**RIGHT**  
**Pictorial**  
ca. 1924-1926,  
oil on panel,  
44 x 28. Private  
collection. Image  
courtesy Jeffrey  
Morseburg.

the prize money, but his winning painting, which protested World War I, was so controversial that it was not reproduced or listed in the records. "In that painting, Lukits was asking how Christian nations could be fighting one another," Adams says. "This message would have been particularly galling at the time, because during the pandemic of 1919, the basement of the Art Institute had been turned into an infirmary where people were sick and dying in droves. Lukits was lucky not to have been tarred and feathered."



**I**n addition to being a successful practitioner accomplished in both fine art and commercial art, Lukits was a popular teacher. "I first met Lukits in 1970," Adams recalls. "I was frustrated at the time because I couldn't find the academic training I desired. I planned to travel to Europe in search of a teacher. But when I walked into Lukits' studio, I knew instantly that this was *the* place I wanted to study. The large sunlit room had a feeling of opulence and antiquity, similar to the studios of William Merritt Chase or Mariano Fortuny."

**LEFT**  
**Carnival**  
ca. 1918-1919,  
oil on panel,  
24 x 18.  
Private col-  
lection. Image  
courtesy  
Edenhurst  
Gallery, La-  
guna Beach,  
California.

Adams ended up studying with Lukits for seven years, and many of Adams' colleagues studied with the artist, as well.

"For the first two years I studied just drawing, mostly from plaster casts of busts or statuettes," Adams says. "Many times we spent weeks or months on a drawing. Even after I started painting in color, I continued working in graphite on elaborate compositions.

"When teaching composition, Lukits often referenced jewelry design



or design motifs of ancient Egypt, Assyria, Greece, Rome, China, Japan, and India," Adams continues. "We learned to create images similar to those seen in the landscape paintings of Southern Sung Dynasty. From old prints and reproductions we made in-depth compositions that mimicked the work of famous illustrators. Most painting classes, however, were either from the model or from very elaborate still life setups. Lukits loved setting up lighting problems. He would often set up a still life with something like a polychrome bust, an oval mirror in back of or underneath it, a milky glass Lalique vase, a copper bowl, and a gilded bronze Kuan Yin, with a background of heavily brocaded silk with a dragon motif. He might then proceed to cover a part or all of the setup with a transparent yellow gauze and light it from below with a red or orange light and from above with violet, blue, or green light. He instilled in his students a love of light and particularly a keen desire to depict unusual harmonic lighting conditions.

"Perhaps the most interesting aspect of Lukits' philosophy on aesthetics was his universal approach," Adams says. "He believed and taught that there are many different categories of art and that each work should be judged within its own category. Today there are many art teachers who preach that the highest point of art was reached by Emil Carlsen, others who would say

it was Bouguereau, and still others who would say Rembrandt or Sorolla. Lukits would say they were all great but that they were each trying to say something different."

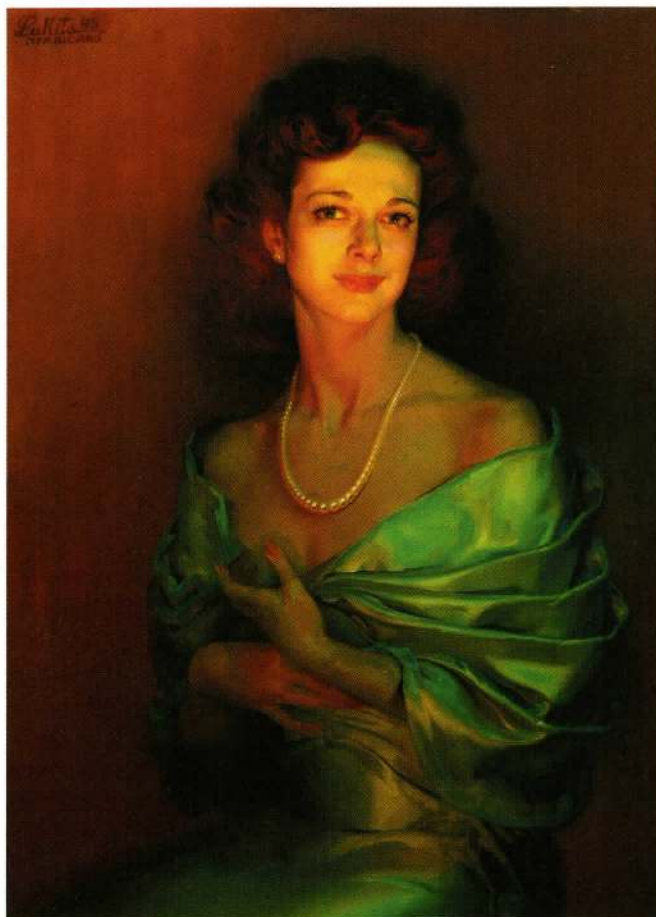
**A**nother student of Lukits was Jeffrey Morseburg, who is now a private curator, archivist, writer, and appraiser. He has published numerous essays on the artist and is currently authoring a two-volume work exploring Lukits' expansive oeuvre. He argues that Lukits' figurative work was an evolution of the work of Frederick Carl Frieseke, Richard Miller, Karl Albert

Buehr, and the Giverny painters. These artists combined well-drawn figures, which showed their academic draftsmanship, with more decorative backgrounds filled with flatter, broken color. Like Frieseke, Lukits "pushed" his color, but he also wished to keep it harmonious.

"Lukits taught all of us who studied with him in the same way his teachers learned from Gérôme, Bonnat, and Bouguereau—the French Beaux-Arts methods," says Morseburg. "He advocated solid draftsmanship—drawing was the basis of everything. Unlike a lot of plein air advocates, such as Chase, Lukits never did workshops that emphasized working out of doors

before you learned to draw. He drew with accuracy and style, and there is a strong Art Nouveau element to his early illustrations. Lukits adored Alphonse Mucha, and eventually studied with him.

"The thing we all have to realize," continues Morseburg, "is that 19<sup>th</sup>-century figurative art—whether we think of the French Salon painters or the Royal Academy artists—emphasized drawing and an extremely three-dimensional approach to picture crafting. Lukits practiced a type of figurative painting that I like to describe as 'Decorative Impressionism,' a term coined by art writer Christian Brinton early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Lukits, and other painters like him, loved the 19<sup>th</sup>-century academics but wanted to take the tradition in a different direction."







LEFT

**Sea Fantasy**

ca. 1917, mixed media, 11½ x 8½. Private collection. Image courtesy Jeffrey Morseburg.

OPPOSITE PAGE

**String of Pearls**

1946, oil on panel, 36 x 30. Private collection. Image courtesy Jeffrey Morseburg.

This “different direction” involved the influence of 18<sup>th</sup>-century Rococo painters, as well as Japanese wood-block prints and decorative arts, which in the mid- and late-19<sup>th</sup> century began to have a strong influence on European and American artists and designers—a phenomenon known as *Japonisme*. “This Asian element reintroduced the decorative approach, the

flattening of the picture plane, and the emphasis on interesting shapes to painting,” Morseburg says. “When you look at Japanese prints, even at a simple kimono and come to appreciate it, then suddenly there is less mystery to Monet’s water lilies. The Modernists eventually abandoned any hint of the old way of seeing and crafting a picture, but Lukits—along

with artists such as Miller, Buehr, and Frieske—chose to reconcile a traditional approach to painting with a strong decorative element.”

The influence of Japonisme on Lukits’ work offers us an important window into his practice. The craze for Japanese objects in the newly

*Continued on page 74.*

industrialized West originally stemmed from their inherent beauty and design sensibility, which was in stark contrast to the mass-produced items then flooding the markets. These objects' attention to line, shape, and color inspired revolutions in fine art, architecture, and particularly interior decoration. One of these trends, the Aesthetic Movement, had a strong influence on painting. Artists inspired by Eastern design and philosophy advanced the then-novel idea of creating "art for art's sake" and inspired a far-reaching cult of beauty.

"Art for art's sake" became the rallying call of the Aesthetic Movement, which arose as a reform motive in Great Britain. The movement's artists, designers, and writers believed that art was the panacea for the cultural and moral depravity of modern times. Art, they stated, needn't any utilitarian purpose. It did not need to tell stories, replicate the real world, or mythologize the rich and powerful. It just needed to be beautiful, and that inherent beauty would have a powerful and positive impact upon man's well-being. William Morris, an artist, designer, printer, and intellectual associated with the early reform motives underpinning the Aesthetic Movement said, "I know by my own feelings and desires what these men want, what would have saved them from this lowest depth of savagery: employment which would foster their self-respect and win the praise and sympathy of their fellows, and dwellings which they could come to with pleasure, surroundings which would soothe and elevate them; reasonable labor, reasonable rest. There is only one thing that can give them this—art."

The Aesthetic Movement, led by such principles regarding egalitarian availability of beautiful objects and their salient on everyday life, found ready disciples when it landed on American shores. Soon, American homes became staging grounds for beautiful design. Japonisme, in particular, became an important influence in the development of the California bungalow style.

Both the Adams' Pasadena home and Lukits' work is in keeping with this movement's philosophy. Both offer compelling examples of the spiritual power of beauty to offer transcendence and a model for life. Morris' words arguing for the restoration of beauty resonate today with the same urgency they had when he first wrote them. Artists such as Lukits and Adams, who champion beauty and quality over profit and quantity, can indeed pave the way forward to a better and more humane society. Art should not be like life. Rather, life should imitate art—art should lead the way. **A**

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