



THE PASTEL LANDSCAPES OF

Lukits

THEODORE N. LUKITS

MARCH 15 - JUNE 30, 1991
CARNEGIE ART MUSEUM, OXNARD

FOREWORD

Theodore Lukits may be somewhat of a problem to future art historians. Is he a tonalist, an illustrator, a classical portrait painter, a plein air painter or a muralist? He has been, in truth, all of these. In the best historical traditions, Lukits may be classified as a "Master Artist", and also, in the best historical traditions, a master teacher as well.

I first met Mr. Lukits in 1976, at the reception for the exhibit of motion picture artist Reynold Brown, which I curated at the Ambassador College Art Gallery in Pasadena. Lukits briefly told me his background, which left me rather astonished, and I wanted to pursue a possible exhibit for him.

Now, some fifteen years later, I am very pleased to be able to honor him at last with this exhibit, and to put into print the vital information about the man, his art and teaching. The art world needs to know about a master who has been very quiet for the past forty years, though working diligently all this time.

My thanks to Nancy Moure, who informed me of Lukits' gift of his pastels to the Jonathan Club, and to the Jonathan Art Foundation and Jay Belloli, art consultant, for their cooperation and loan of the art. Former Lukits' students Peter Adams and Timothy Solliday provided wonderful first-hand insights, and Mrs. Lucile Lukits has helped verify our information. Carnegie Art Museum curator, Suzanne Bellah, has done a commendable job in pulling together and editing all the information. We hope this exhibit and small catalog will meet with Mr. Lukits' approval.

Andrew C. Voth, *Director*
Carnegie Art Museum
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Near Bakersfield, California pastel on paper, 12 x 6"
Jonathan Art Foundation, gift of Mr. and Mrs. Theodore N. Lukits



Theodore N. Lukits, 1977 photo



Untitled (Sierra Peaks at Sunset) pastel on paper, 11 x 16"
Jonathan Art Foundation, gift of Mr. and Mrs. Theodore N. Lukits

THE PASTEL LANDSCAPES

By Suzanne Bellah, *Curator*
Carnegie Art Museum

*Each moment of the year has its own beauty
a picture which was never seen before
and which shall never be seen again.*

---- Ralph Waldo Emerson

Theodore Lukits began his quest for the transient moments of beauty in the southwestern landscape the year after he moved to California. From 1923 and into the 1970's Lukits made numerous sketching trips, lasting a day or weeks, into the then wilderness of California and Arizona. In his early trips during the 1920's, Lukits was frequently accompanied by his associates at that time: Frank Tenny Johnson, William Wendt, Jack Wilkinson Smith, Joseph Kleitsh, Hansen Puthuff and Paul Lauritz. Many of these now prominent Southern California Plein Air painters were also his fellow members in Los Angeles art societies and artist organizations.

Lukits' pastel landscapes are startling for their acute rendering of color, vibrating with almost neon sunsets and glimmering moonrises. As he has been intensely committed to exactly observing the colors and light within a landscape, Lukits' main purpose in painting outdoors was to advance his knowledge of the "science of color". He has captured nature's moods in a range of seasons and terrains, choosing the peaceful California deserts in spring, its soothing beaches, its rugged hills dappled with chaparral, or the dominating peaks of the Sierra Nevadas and the vast sweep of the Grand Canyon.

Reminiscent of American Tonalists, Lukits' pastel landscapes show modulations of color and often have a perceptible atmosphere. The moon peeks through a cloudy night sky, mist settles between mountains or rain falls to the desert floor. Like the tonality of their paintings, one overall color tends to predominate in Lukits' landscapes. His preferred times of day for capturing a landscape's colors also parallel the Tonalists--sunrise, sunset, evening and night.



Untitled (Springtime Desert) pastel on paper, 12 x 16"

Jonathan Art Foundation, gift of Mr. and Mrs. Theodore N. Lukits

Untitled (Stream and Eucalyptus at Dawn) pastel on paper, 12 x 16"

Jonathan Art Foundation, gift of Mr. and Mrs. Theodore N. Lukits



Wearing a cap with a miner's lamp, Lukits would paint night scenes of Silver Lake and other parts of the Los Angeles Basin. These similarities to Tonalism serve to distance him from American Impressionism. However, being highly individual and solitary, the most Lukits might label himself would be as a "colorist".

The medium of pastel, for Lukits, "is essentially the art of the colorist and is adapted to the depiction of fugitive atmospheric landscape effects". He used it for outdoor landscape studies and portraits because he felt pastel had "its own distinctive qualities of luminosity and brilliance" and that its "delicate bloom imparted an elusive freshness and depth to its tones". He took further advantage of its enhancement of texture. These qualities and pastel's easy portability made it Lukits' exclusive medium for outdoor painting. Unable to purchase manufactured pastels in the hues, tones and neutrals he required, Lukits routinely made his own. Approximately an inch thick and three inches long, he packed them in specially made boxes according to color spectrums.

Executed rapidly *en plein air*, Lukits originally considered these small works as only a resource of sketches for composing and painting larger landscapes in oil later at his studio. Therefore he left most of them untitled with no indication of local or date. However, the majority were probably sketched on his first trips to the High Sierras and Southern California deserts. Of the more than twelve-hundred pastel sketches he did, just a few were sold to his students and close friends. They were never exhibited.

Fortunately, Mrs. Lucile Lukits and Theodore, who has been a "Life Artist" member of the Jonathan Club since 1932, generously donated a large portion of the collection in 1990 to the Jonathan Art Foundation of Los Angeles. In 1984, after an introduction to the Lukits by Nancy Moure, then the art adviser to the Foundation, Paul Chevalier of the Foundation's Board of Trustees realized that these pastels were an undiscovered wealth of Lukits' genius and has labored to bring them to light. At last, through the support and efforts of the Jonathan Art Foundation, Theodore Lukits' splendid views of fresh color are being spread before the public eye. A treasury of nature's moments from a once less-urbanized California are being recognized.

THEODORE N. LUKITS

The Man, Artist & Teacher

RECOLLECTIONS

by Timothy Solliday

Theodore Lukits has been dedicated to portraying beauty in its most pure and uncomplicated form. He believed that the legacy of great paintings developed in the 19th century was fundamental for the art of the 20th century. He believed in the long established principles of art that were understood by the outstanding painters of that century. Significantly, Lukits maintained this belief in a painting tradition while many new philosophies of art were coming into vogue in the later half of the 20th century and changing the face of contemporary art. Mr. Lukits, in contrast to prevalent trends, was thoroughly convinced that the viewing audience was important and should not be insulted by art that was offensive or distasteful.

I was privileged to have studied with Mr. Lukits from 1975 to 1980. Having joined him after studying art elsewhere, I found that my previous training did not compare to his teaching and the masterful way he enlightened his students. His first concern was whether the student was dedicated to the truth in art. While in our current society truth has become relative, Lukits' instruction was based on the simple yet profound belief that truth in art meant representing something faithfully.

His teaching involved two levels of study. At the first level, the student was to become completely grounded in the basic laws of art, including drawing, values, perspective and composition. These basic principles were taught as a foundation so the student could then move to a higher level of training. At this higher level the student was to realize Theodore Lukits' greatest passion--his profound love for the many beautiful and unusual moods in nature.

By setting up different conditions of light inside the studio, he guided the student to achieve an understanding of different conditions in nature. He would direct a red or orange light at a still life to simulate a sunset, bathe it in yellow light for a sunrise, or aim a blue light to imitate a moonlit sky. He would also vary the texture of the objects composing the still life. In this way the student could practice with a controlled still life, and later transfer his facility to the complexities of seeing and painting a landscape.

In short, Theodore Lukits taught the understanding of light. Once having acquired this understanding, the student would be able to convey to the viewer that breathtaking sense which most of us feel when we

experience a fleeting, beautiful mood in nature.

The pastel landscapes of Lukits do not have to be explained, for the viewer will see the true impression of what really was there. Theodore Lukits is one of the last of his kind and in his work you see a shining gift that he has left for generations to come.

RECOLLECTIONS

by Peter Adams

At the age of twenty, I knew precisely when I stepped into his studio that my long journey had come to an end. In front of me lay a most extraordinary array of Lalique, Tiffany and even rare excavation glass. There were hundreds of plaster casts and beautiful statuettes carved from marble and alabaster lying everywhere. The afternoon light illuminated some golden threads of heavily brocaded silk that fell from one wall onto a table and then cascaded to the floor. On top of the table stood a Tang horse, along side it, a standing polychrome Kwan Yin, and in back of them, leaning against the wall, a massive iridescent glass bowl that framed both Chinese figures. An assortment of beads, some abalone shells, a copper charger with a few peacock feathers lay in the foreground of the table. Around the room I noticed vases and jars crammed with paint brushes, thousands of them. Each brush had a foot and a half long balanced handle, which was obviously handmade. A skeleton hung in the corner with an extra skull and a box of bones beside it. Everywhere I looked the walls were draped with antiquity.

Entering that room, a chill came over me. In just a few short steps I had seemingly walked into Paris of the late 1880's and into the atelier of a Gerome or Benjamin-Constant. Surprisingly though, as I stood there awestruck, I felt that many years of my life had been spent in search of this very place. The studio of Theodore Lukits felt like home to me. From that moment in 1970, it was to become my life for the next seven years.

Theodore Lukits certainly has been a man's man. He has been proud, outspoken, and often grouchy. To those who have not known him well, he has appeared arrogant. In his youth he loved street fighting and claimed to have been the ringleader of more than one juvenile gang. He had the spirit of a rebel, and that iconoclastic spirit has never left him. Later, while he was studying at the Chicago Art Institute, he made a little money on the side as a professional boxer, an illustrator and as a violinist that played at soirees. I found Mr. Lukits to be a fascinating contradiction. How could this man, who on the surface seemed so rough and unpolished, produce such magnificent paintings portraying the epitome of beauty and

sensitivity?

At the age of ten, Theodore Lukits had already begun to totally immerse himself in the study of art. Although he never went to high school, his extensive studies in the art field provided him with an *applied* level of education in architecture, anatomy, history, chemistry, mathematics, literature and philosophy. He has been the most profound student of art history I have ever met. His library of books, prints, and periodicals on 19th century art and artists was one of the most extensive on the West Coast; it is now dispersed among his former students. He loved the art of different cultures. So familiar was he with the grammar of ornamentation, that he could upon request draw a spontaneous and original design in the style of the ancient Egyptians, Assyrians, Greeks, Monguls, Chinese or Japanese.

As a student of Mr. Lukits, I spent two years drawing almost exclusively in graphite pencil from plaster casts before I began my studies in color; even after that I kept drawing two days a week. Lukits believed that a knowledge of black and white values was far more important to the painting student than a knowledge of color. Like everything, he divided values into categories: true values, tonal values, out of focus values, exaggerated values, compensation values, transposed values, atmospheric values, and lastly foreshortened values.

Furthermore, he took great pains to teach about edges. Whether in drawing or painting, he believed it best to keep edges soft at first and to achieve a tonal or atmospheric key. Only in the last stages of modeling could the sharpness or roundness of edges be established. A painting done in this manner, if stopped at any point, would look finished. The earlier it was stopped, the more the painting would look like a study of light. The later it was stopped, the more clearly the objects would be rendered. Since the drawing or precise modeling came last, not first, Lukits' painting techniques were more closely aligned with Sorolla or Sargent than with those of Bouguereau. These techniques enabled Lukits to paint very quickly outdoors.

Lukits came to believe that there are laws, like the laws of physics, which govern each aspect of the art of painting. He divided visual art into distinct categories: drawing, design and two-dimensional painting, illustration, mural painting, easel painting, composition and color harmony.

DRAWING: Lukits considered drawing to be the science of explaining, through line, the artist's subject. When the human figure is being drawn, the artist's line should explain six aspects: subcutaneous bone, muscle, tendon, fat, skin condition, and occasionally, superficial veins or arteries.

DESIGN: For Lukits, the study of design entails the study of ornamentation and pattern. It is also the study of producing movement of the viewer's eye throughout the work by use of various lines, shapes or colors. It relates most strongly to two-dimensional works of art, such as Indian miniatures or the Art Nouveau posters of Alphonse Mucha, in which design work dominates. In a typical Mucha poster, the shapes of the headdress and costume along with the patterns of dots, stars and flowers keep the eye jumping around the work in a fast syncopation. Lukits believed that composition and design are different entities, but that in certain works the two overlapped and became nearly indistinguishable. The more three-dimensional a painting appeared, the less important would be the design.

ILLUSTRATION: Lukits defined illustration as the art of selling one particular product or showing a particular event clearly, concisely and quickly. "Catching one's eye" is of paramount importance, and subtlety is not of great significance. Therefore, exaggerating values or colors could be useful, where it would not be in easel painting. Since the laws of composition are intended to keep the eye moving throughout the painting, they may have to be broken to stop the eye precisely on the subject being sold.

Lukits did not degrade illustration or illustrators. Indeed, he felt that some of the illustrators of his day were among the world's finest artists. He praised N.C. Wyeth for his superb knowledge of outdoor painting and revered Russell Flint for his drawing and classical compositions. J.C. Leyendecker he admired for his designs, but even more for his mural-like ability to make his *Saturday Evening Post* covers "read" from over a hundred feet away.

MURAL PAINTING: The average person thinks a mural is just a large illustration--not Lukits. Unlike an illustration which depicts generally just one event, Lukits believed a mural should explain a whole story. Furthermore, a boldness in composition was necessary. Knowing the lighting where the mural was to hang was of utmost importance, as was knowing the average viewer's distance and eye level. The mural should complement and blend with the architecture, both in composition and color.

Since Lukits had worked with Edwin Blashfield, Alphonse Mucha and Dean Cornwall, who were among this century's greatest mural painters, he undoubtedly understood the differences between mural and easel painting. He regarded Frank Brangwyn, Dean Cornwell's teacher, the greatest mural painter of the 19th or 20th century. It is a great tragedy that Lukits did not receive more mural commissions, as his great love for working on a large scale, coupled with his speed in painting and interest in composition would have made him truly outstanding in this field.

PAINTING: Like drawing, Lukits thought of painting not as an art form, but as a science. He sincerely believed that painting from nature was exactly like reading notes from sheet music. Good painting by itself does not make good art, just as an average photograph is usually not considered good art. However, good painting accompanied by sensitivity, a knowledge of composition and color harmony, could produce a masterpiece. Lukits felt that a knowledge of painting was the most basic and essential tool for art students. For that reason, he stressed painting in his classes.

COMPOSITION: Lukits did not believe in the traditional triangular composition, often mentioned in reference to Renaissance paintings. He believed that good composition should keep the eye flowing back and forth from the foreground to the background. In order to keep the eye moving, it might be necessary to use contours or contrasting values to create "invisible" flowing lines or currents. According to the rhythm of the painting, little areas of detail, like staccato notes, could be used in greater or lesser abundance along these invisible currents. They might also be used to serve as a counter balance to break a slow or monotonous current. To take the viewer back in space, subtle horizontal lines of diminishing lengths were employed. Groupings and arrangements of figures, trees or buildings were of paramount importance, but still had to be made subservient to the balance and rhythm of the overall composition.

COLOR HARMONY: He thought of color harmony as a study involving both color composition and painting. He felt that in most fine art, color harmony played a small part, if any at all. One way Lukits taught color harmony was to flood a still life with different colored lights.

Clarity of thought was most important to Lukits in discussing, critiquing or studying art. One might say that a particular Tintoretto, Seurat or Daumier pen and ink drawing was "well drawn". Depending upon the artwork, Lukits would probably argue that it was poorly drawn, but that its appeal lay in the fact that it was well composed or well designed.

There is much that could be said about Theodore Lukits. He always has been original, talented, hard-working and dynamic. He also has had a wonderful sense of humor. Those who have known him well have loved him as much for his wit and his laughter as they have for his genius.

THEODORE N. LUKITS: A BIOGRAPHY

By Peter Adams and Suzanne Bellah

Theodore Lukits' life reveals him to be one of California's most diverse and forceful Colorist painters, despite a self-imposed isolation from the art world in his latter years. He studied and painted under an incredible array of renowned European and American artists. He has attained an uncompromising brilliance in no less than portrait, figure, landscape, still life and mural painting. He has also been an influential teacher, passing his own acute theories and a lineage of painting knowledge to subsequent California artists.

He was born on November 26, 1897 in Temesvar within the Austro-Hungarian Empire, now Rumania. In 1899 his mother and father, who was a mural painter and sculptor, brought him and a sister, nine years his senior, to the United States.

Lukits' first childhood recollection is from the age of three. He was lying on the floor with his crayons while his parents were discussing his future. He told them all he ever wanted to do for the rest of his life was to "color with my crayons".

In 1906 at the age of eight, he began his formal training at Washington University Art School in St. Louis under Edmund Henry Wuerpel and Richard E. Miller, with whom he further trained privately. He also studied the piano and violin, giving them up later to concentrate on art. Young Theodore moved with his father to Chicago in 1909. In 1911 after the eighth grade, he chose not to attend high school in order to pursue art solely.

By 1914-1915, he had entered the Art Institute of Chicago. Here he met and would eventually work with the Czech Art Nouveau designer and artist, Alphonse Mucha. Lukits' teachers linked him to a wealth of painting tradition. He studied at the Institute and privately with Edwin Blashfield, Karl A. Buehr, Frank X. Leyendecker (brother of J.C. Leyendecker), Wellington J. Reynolds and Harry Walcott. Reynolds, Walcott and Wuerpel, in St. Louis, had been students of Benjamin-Constant and Bouguereau at the Julian Academy in Paris. Likewise, Blashfield had studied in Paris at the Royal Academy and with Bonnat and Gerome. Lukits also was able to spend many happy hours in the Pushman Studio, as he tutored the nephew of Hosep Pushman in drawing. From this rewarding exposure grew his love of Oriental still life painting.

To support himself at this time, Lukits worked as an illustrator and soon became one of the top paid illustrators in Chicago. His work appeared in: *Collier's*, *The Ladies' Home Journal*, *Country*

Gentlemen, *Century Magazine*, *Harper's* and *Liberty Magazine*.

While at the Art Institute of Chicago, Lukits won all the top prizes in life drawing, design and composition, and figure painting. In 1919 after nine years of intensive study, he won the prestigious *Prix de Rome*. He won it at the age of twenty-one, the youngest recipient ever. (Bouguereau was twenty-four when he won the same honor.) However, Lukits was never to study in Rome as was customary for award winners. Lack of funding and strained diplomatic relations between the United States and the rising fascist government in Italy after World War I restricted his travel. It delayed payment of his \$7000 prize money by the Art Institute for nearly three years.

Later in 1919, Lukits returned to St. Louis to visit his mother and to work on anatomical studies at Barnes Medical College, dissecting cadavers. In 1920 his colleagues wrote to inform him that Alphonse Mucha, his old mentor, was coming to Chicago to tour his murals of the history of the Slavic peoples. Mucha asked Lukits to help him touch up these epic murals which had been commissioned by the wealthy plumbing tycoon, Charles R. Crane.

In 1921 Lukits was finally paid for the *Prix de Rome* by the Art Institute of Chicago. He also received payment for restoration of the Mucha murals and for the completion of a portrait of the famous silent screen vamp, Theda Bara. She and several other movie stars attending a Chicago convention had their portraits painted by Lukits, and strongly urged him to go to Hollywood.

He did move to Los Angeles in 1922 and rapidly became known as one of the foremost portrait artists of Hollywood celebrities. Among his many portrait commissions were Nazimova, Delores del Rio, the William Wyler family and Mrs. Ray Milland. He also painted Kamiyama Shojin, the Japanese actor who starred with Douglas Fairbanks Sr. in the 1924 silent film version of the *Thief of Baghdad*. At her insistence, he painted Mae Murray in the nude.

Lukits spent most of the year of 1923 painting outdoors. Financing sketching trips with his *Prix de Rome* money, he hired a guide and mules and spent much of his time in the High Sierras and the deserts of Southern California. Because he felt it was the lightest and simplest way to paint from nature, he worked almost exclusively in pastel. Often he would do as many as ten pastels in one day. Lukits particularly enjoyed capturing ephemeral atmospheric effects, especially those seen around dawn and sunset.

At the request of other artists, Lukits established the Lukits Academy of Fine Arts in 1924 at the age of twenty-seven. He located the Academy in his own



Skyscape pastel on paper, 12 x 16"

Jonathan Art Foundation, gift of Mr. and Mrs. Theodore N. Lukits

home and continued to teach there until 1987. In 1946 the Academy was approved by the United States Veterans Administration for study under the G.I. Bill.

In addition to portrait commissions, Lukits was employed in other areas of art. After an earthquake damaged a treasured painting of *St. Francis of Assisi* at the Santa Barbara Mission in 1925, Lukits was entrusted to restore the work, then attributed to El Greco. In 1927, Dean Cornwell hired Lukits to assist him with the composition and anatomy of his murals for the Los Angeles Public Library, completed in 1932. Lukits was also a pioneer in the early days of billboard painting. In the early 1930's Foster and Kleiser hired him as their art consultant, art director and top painter. His anatomical knowledge and technical skill made his murals greatly admired.

In 1935 Lukits' artistic career was threatened by the near loss of sight in his left eye. In a freak domestic accident, a falling coat hanger struck him at the edge of the pupil. After a month of treatment at California Lutheran Hospital, the damage to his eye was healed.

At the age of forty in 1937, Lukits married the artist Eleanor Merriam, daughter of California Plein Air

painter James Merriam. She soon became the model for some of his best portraits. Tragically, Eleanor died in a fire at their home in 1948.

In 1951 Lucile Greathouse, who was a still life painter and had been employed in the art department of the Walt Disney Studios, came to study at the Lukits Academy. Lucile and Theodore were married in 1952. Shortly thereafter Theodore Lukits became very reclusive, wishing to devote as much time as possible to his art and withdraw from art association politics. His illustration work for Pacific Outdoors in the late 1950's was already claiming time from his own painting. He rarely exhibited, although he continued to paint and teach ardently until 1987.



Untitled (Mountains through Clouds) pastel on paper, 12 x 15 1/2"
Jonathan Art Foundation, gift of Mr. and Mrs. Theodore N. Lukits



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