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Alexander O. Levy (1881-1947)

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November
December 2014

by Scott Propeack
& Albert Michaels

The art history of Buffalo is rich and marked by sign posts some of which are established as far back as the late seventeenth century with representations of Niagara Falls or even earlier in the rich culture of the Iroquois Nation. At the turn of the century, Buffalo, New York, served as a home-base to an impressive number of professional American artists. Among them were Claire Shuttleworth, Mildred Green, Evelyn Rumsey Lord, Charles Reiffel, Raphael Beck, and the East Aurora Barbizon painter, Alexis Fournier. The commu-

nity with accumulating wealth and the new art gallery served as a magnet, bringing large numbers of professional artists to enjoy the vitality of an established center for arts and culture. Some came to paint portraits of the wealthy and to sell their work in a growing regional market while others came to teach or work commercially and paint. The rapidly growing artistic community, in turn, created an interest for others to become professional artists.

In 1909 one of the more interesting artists arrived—painter and illustrator Alexander O. Levy (1881-1947). One of the few American artists who worked in the Art Deco fashion, Levy spent his entire

career in Buffalo except for a short sojourn in New York City. Like others, he came to Buffalo to work commercially and by 1913 was established as the art director of the Larkin Company. During the 1920s Levy arguably rose to be the city's best-known artist with an international reputation, exceeding the reputation of Charles E. Burchfield, who had just arrived in 1921 to design wallpaper in Buffalo at the M.H. Birge & Sons Co.

Born in Bonn, Germany, Levy grew up in Cincinnati in the 1880s. He was a child prodigy; at age eight he won a city-wide art prize awarded by the local newspapers; at twelve, he turned down a scholarship to



Alexander O. Levy (1881-1947): *The Evolution of an American Art Deco Painter* is on view from November 14, 2014, through March 1, 2015; at the Burchfield Penney Art Center, 1300 Elmwood Avenue, Buffalo, New York, 14222, 716-878-6011, www.burchfieldpenney.org. The exhibition is accompanied by a catalogue.

RIGHT: *Untitled (woman and flowers by mirror)*, c. 1922, o/c, 42 x 42, private collection.

BELOW RIGHT: *Broadway Market, Impending Storm*, c. 1933, o/c, 29 5/8 x 29 5/8, Burchfield Penney Art Center Collection, gift of Peter A. Vogt.

LEFT: *Untitled (canal boats)*, o/board, private collection.

study the violin in Europe. In his teens, Levy studied at the Cincinnati School of Music and the Cincinnati Art School under the artist Frank Duveneck. One of his fellow classmates during this time was Daniel Garber. The two artists became lifelong friends and painted together later in New Hope, Pennsylvania.

In the 1890s Levy moved to New York City and began his artistic career by preparing Spanish-American War snapshots for publication in the Scripps-Howard newspaper chain. Between 1902 and 1908, he attended the New York School of Fine and Applied Art. There Levy took art classes from William Merritt Chase and Robert Henri, both of whose influences are apparent in Levy's work.

When Levy first moved to Buffalo in 1909, he took a position as art director for the Matthews-Northrup Company. By 1913, he was employed at the Larkin Soap Company, which was at its pinnacle of corporate growth. Hired as art director because of his artistic excellence, Levy worked with the great marketing mind of Elbert Hubbard within the design aesthetic of Frank Lloyd Wright. Levy became well known for his illustration work, which appeared in *The Saturday Evening Post*, *Saint Nicholas Magazine* and *The Century*.

Levy drew on the excellent training which he received as a student in Cincinnati and New York. Duveneck, his teacher in Ohio, taught his students to use blended colors and to stress textural unity and color. This characteristic can be found in many of Levy's paintings, particularly in the 1920s. He once told a visitor to his studio that he "limited his palette to three colors in order to give a unity to the tonality





ABOVE: *Green Mountains, VT*, 1946, o/c, 31 1/4 x 36, Burchfield Penney Art Center Collection, bequest of Frank Szuba.

LEFT: *Untitled (Peace Bridge)*, c. 1933, o/c, 24 x 20, private collection.

ABOVE RIGHT: *Portrait of Mrs. Grace Osborne*, c. 1922, o/c, 40 x 40, private collection.

BELOW RIGHT: *Untitled (Figure Sketch)*, c. 1923, o/board, private collection.

of his painting which would be otherwise impossible to obtain.”

From Chase, Levy absorbed an approach to “en plein air” painting as well as an insistence on working rapidly. Chase, it is said, would admonish his students, “take as much time as you need...take two hours if necessary” to paint a scene. Levy’s son Alan had remarked on the speed with which his father painted. Most of Levy’s canvases, the large major ones, were completed within a day or only a few hours. This influence provided Levy with colors which are strong and clean, and his brushwork is free and loose.

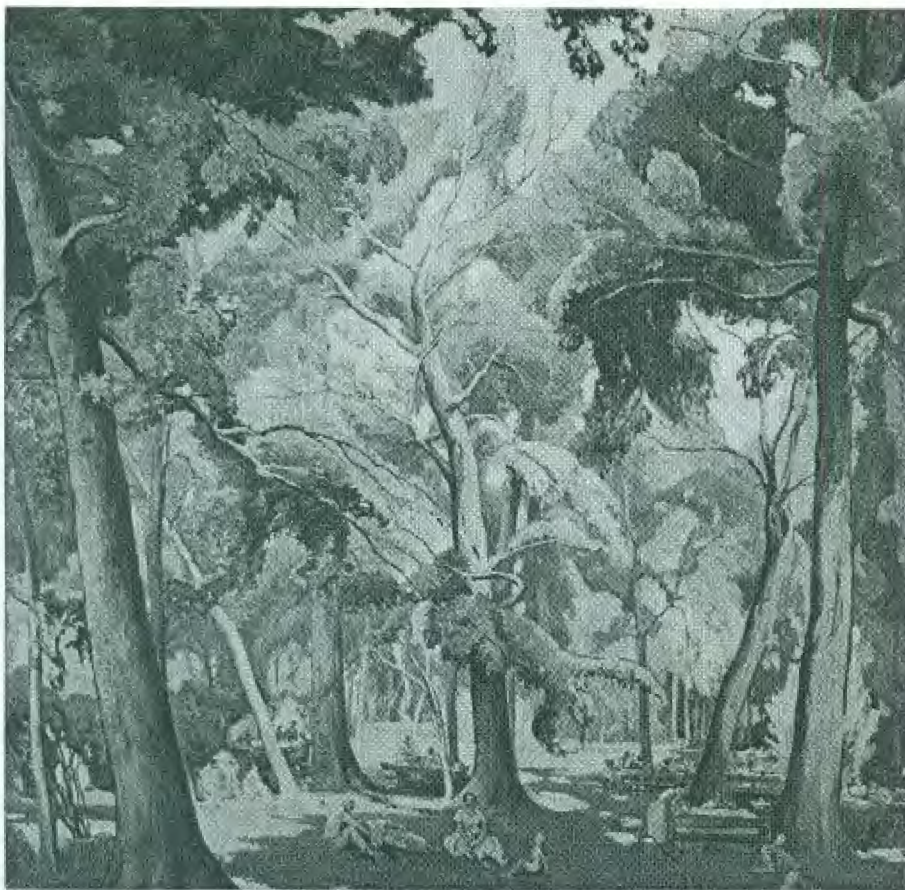


As with other students of Henri, this teacher's impact on Levy was an Ashcan-like style with mysterious, moody dark coloring. Also from Henri was a concern for painting, the less fortunate, which returned in Levy's work during the Depression years of the late 1930s.

By the 1920s, Levy was on his way to earning attention and national recognition as a creative artist. However, a strong individualist, he belonged to no school of artists and his work had a unique quality different from any of his contemporaries. He developed an Art Deco style into the composition of his paintings.



Art Deco, conceptually developed in Europe, was defining the style of many products, industrial and domestic. Although hundreds of books and a handful of exhibitions during the past century have explored this style in the world of objects, it has rarely been considered in painting. Edward Lucie-Smith was one of the few art historians to explore Art Deco in a painting context. In his book *Art Deco Painting*, he suggests we look at "style, subject matter, the relationship to the development of the Modern Movement, and...their social function." He further defines this as works that "use silhouette," and are "sharp-edged and



LEFT: *Sunday Picnic*, c. late 1920s to mid-1930s, o/c, 48 x 47³/₄, Burchfield Penney Art Center Collection, bequest of Frank Szuba.

BELOW LEFT: *Untitled (Organ grinder)*, c. 1938, o/c, 40 x 40, Burchfield Penney Art Center Collection, bequest of Frank Szuba.

RIGHT: *Rhumba Dancer*, c. 1936, o/c, 40 x 40, private collection.

restless.” Beyond these identifiers of style he looks to the subject matter for definition, including “classical allegories, portraits, genre scenes, landscape and still-life.”¹

Although including a handful of American artists working in the 1930s, such as Charles Sheeler, Georgia O’Keeffe and Ralston Crawford, Lucie-Smith relied primarily on European artists. But during the period between World War I and World War II, Americans and American imagery also captured the Art Deco aesthetic, including compositions by Levy that played on the relationships among independent entities in creating a complex whole, rather than a single thought. Although set in a field of an almost nouveau dreamy space, his figures are strong and separate. Using his commercial design and painting experience, Levy sought a style with a social awareness, grounded in a progression of art and composed of clear lines.

Levy painted women with peacocks and parrots, trees and strange forests peopled with tiny figures, shortened to emphasize their insignificance in the grandeur of nature. Some of his best paintings are his figural works, which include representations of mountaineers, market women, the poor and the occasional representations of society women. He painted everything with self-confidence, energy and originality. In these paintings, he uses color for its decorative value rather than to recreate reality. Peyton Boswell, the prominent New York art critic of the 1920s, praised Levy’s work. He described Levy as a “fantasist, expressing visions that originate in his brain and are free of natural encumbrances.” In the 1920s, contemporaries called attention to Levy’s enthusiasm, versatility and uniqueness of vision.

In 1923, Levy had his first major exhibit at the Ainslie Gallery in New York City, which led to growing recognition and further success. He had one-man shows at the Cincinnati Art Museum (1924), the Babcock Gallery in New York City (1925)





another show at Ainslie (1929) and two shows at the Albright Gallery in Buffalo (1923, 1929). He also exhibited works at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, the Art Institute of Chicago, the Detroit Mu-

seum of Art and the Carnegie Institute in Pittsburg. In 1928, The American Federation of Art designated one of his paintings as one of the fifty best in America. He sold work in Europe, particularly in France and

England. He created an Art Deco mural for the Larkin Administration Building and painted several large murals in other Buffalo business offices. *International Studio* devoted an article to his work and Levy was



LEFT: *Untitled*, c. 1924, o/c, Burchfield Penney Art Center Collection, bequest of Frank Szuba.

BELOW LEFT: *We Sketched at Walters*, c. 1930, o/c, 36 1/4 x 35 7/8, Burchfield Penney Art Center Collection, bequest of Frank Szuba.

RIGHT: *Untitled (The Bathers)*, c. 1920, o/c, 40 x 48, private collection.

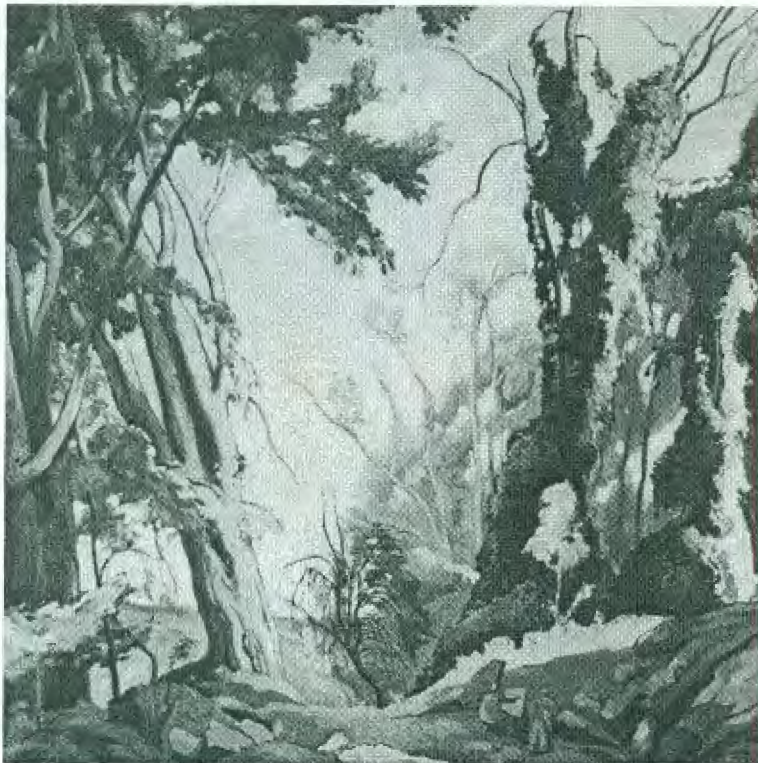
well on his way to becoming a highly successful studio artist.

Buffalo critic and now Director of the Burchfield Penney Art Center, Anthony Bannon, has noted Levy's eclecticism. Bannon pointed out that Levy's color ranged widely from a dark limited color scheme to "daring gauche hues." He also noted that Levy drew his forms from "Art Deco, Art Nouveau, Mannerism and the Ashcan School." No two of his paintings are the same, yet his work is unified by a vitality, optimism and uniqueness of style.

The Great Depression hurt most American artists, and the market for regional art all but evaporated. By the late 1930s Levy's work in national and international exhibitions was almost non-existent. Under the impact of the economic crisis, Levy changed his style. His work became more realistic, his brushstrokes tighter and his subjects more concerned with social problems. He did a series of sensitive paintings of African Americans and also painted church and temple windows, building murals on historic and religious themes.

Levy's success became the key to his failure. He never saw the tide turning; he completely opposed all forms of abstract art. His plight was ironically similar to that of the great English sporting artist, Sir Alfred Munnings. In 1949, during his farewell address as president of the Royal Academy of Arts, Munnings launched a vitriolic attack on modern art, especially Picasso. This was before an elite audience which included Winston Churchill. As a result, "he erased himself from the pages of art history, going from the pinnacle of the British arts establishment to a cultural non-entity, virtually over night."²

In 1932 Levy had become involved in a conflict with the management of the Albright Art Gallery, whom he accused of "class bias" and "ignoring the interests of local artists." This conflict, at a time of the Albright Art Gallery's growth as a center for modern American abstract art, did not bode well for the reputation of a prominent





artist. His rigid attitude led to a split in the Buffalo Society of Artists in 1933, when his position so angered the proponents of abstract art that they broke off to form the Patteran Society. He continued to be a fierce proponent of artists' concerns and exhibited in the Buffalo Society of Artists annual exhibition until his death in 1947. But outside of these salons, his opportunities had largely vanished.

Levy's work began to have a revival in the 1970s. In 1975, the United States gov-

ernment selected one of Levy's 1930s paintings to be part of a travelling bicentennial exhibition of American art. This work was later purchased by the Van Gogh Museum in the Netherlands. The next year the Everson Museum of Syracuse, New York, held an exhibit of Levy's work mainly from the 1930s. In 1982, Dan Tillou Fine Arts of Buffalo, New York, held an exhibition of paintings and works on paper that explored work done before 1930. The response to the gallery exhibition resulted

in a sold-out show on the first night.

There has been a great revival in the history of Buffalo and Alexander Levy's work has been a part of it. Now thirty years after Levy's last exhibition, this new exploration of his work and the Art Deco period is a welcomed discovery.

¹ Edward Lucie-Smith, *Art Deco Painting*, 2nd edition (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 2000), pp. 7-36.

² Bruce Cole, "Reviving Alfred Munnings," *Wall Street Journal*, July 16, 2013.