

SOLOMON LERNER

The following account is based on my personal contacts with Solomon Lerner over a period of about ten years. From the age of ten to twelve (1941-1943), I studied painting with Lerner in Havana, Cuba, and continued to receive sporadic instruction from him in New York until 1951.

—Francis Mechner

LERNER'S LIFE

Solomon Lerner was born into a Hasidic family in approximately 1890 in Kiev in the Ukraine. Young Solomon attended *cheder* (Jewish school) and then began rabbinical training. When he demonstrated a great talent for art, he entered the Kiev Art Institute. In his late teens, Lerner found that he could neither accept the doctrinaire teachings of Rabbinic Judaism nor conform to the strict academic orientation of the art academy. At age 20 Lerner went to live and work in Romania.

Liberated from the constraints of his religious upbringing and of the academy, Lerner began to paint in an expressive post-impressionistic style. His brushwork became free and vigorous, and his color schemes veered away from academic realism. He began to paint expressive portraits, as well as Jewish *shtetl* scenes and themes derived from the Baal Shem Tov legends.

In Romania, Lerner married Paula whom he knew from Kiev. After he gained recognition and praise in Romanian art circles, he and Paula left for Paris to further his career, and settled at 18 rue de l'Atlas. In the 1930s Lerner began to achieve prominence in the Parisian art world through a series of very successful exhibitions and glowing reviews of his work. A painting he made of a *shtetl* wedding won first prize in a Paris art competition, in which a Chagall painting won second prize. A French art critic who wrote about him at that time called him "one of the great colorists of the century."

In 1940 Lerner's Paris career was interrupted by the war. He and Paula fled to Havana, Cuba, and settled in the Vedado District along with many other European Jewish refugees. In Havana Lerner painted some portraits, landscapes, and Jewish themes, but mostly still lifes—usually of flowers—and sold these as fast as he could paint them. Inspired by the tropical sunlight and abundant flora, he developed a new palette of saturated, vibrant colors. Although Lerner did not have any full exhibitions during his three-year stay in Havana, he found ardent admirers within Havana's small artistic community, including the Cuban painter and poet Samuel Feijóo, the German-born painter Robert Altmann, and the Romanian-born sculptor Bernard Reder.

In the fall of 1943, the Lerner family moved to New York where they had relatives and friends, including his sister and her two children, his brother, and various friends they knew from Kiev, Paris, and Havana. The Lerner family lived at 448 Central Park West in Manhattan, and their living room was Solomon's painting studio. Paintings were stored in floor-to-ceiling racks in all of the rooms.

Lerner continued to support himself and his wife by painting portraits, still lifes, and landscapes, and selling these, mostly to a small circle of art lovers. When Isaac Friedlander, an acclaimed American painter who had high regard for Lerner's work, introduced him to his cousin, Joseph H. Hirschhorn, in 1943, Hirschhorn immediately bought six of Lerner's paintings for his collection. These are now housed at the Hirschhorn Museum in Washington, D.C. But aside from one exhibition at the Jewish Museum on Fifth Avenue in New York, Lerner's work received little exposure in the United States.

The power and drama of Lerner's Jewish scenes and legends, and the emphasis he himself placed on these, tended to deflect art critics' attention from his equally remarkable landscapes, still lifes, and portraits. Lerner never promoted his own work, and his shy and reclusive nature contributed to his obscurity. Being relatively non-verbal, he failed to learn the languages of his several adopted countries—Romanian, French, Spanish, English, and later Hebrew, and up until his death in 1963 spoke only Yiddish and Russian, plus a few words of German. His humble, quiet, and self-effacing personal style, combined with his almost total indifference to fame or success, stood in the way of his receiving the widespread recognition he deserved.

Some cognoscenti and discerning art critics in Paris and Cuba nonetheless recognized Lerner's genius. But the war, and Lerner's resulting displacement and refugee status, prevented that recognition from taking hold. The two New York art critics who visited Lerner's exhibition at the Jewish Museum pigeon-holed him as a painter of Jewish themes without commenting on the few landscapes and still lifes that were also shown, although they did express admiration for his colors. One reviewer described his work as "Chagall-like."¹ In general, the preponderance of Jewish themes in Lerner's work encouraged critics to view him as an ethnically specialized painter.

Lerner's artistic life took a tragic turn in a freak accident. In 1960, while walking on 104th Street, he was hit in the head by a baseball and fell unconscious. He suffered a concussion that required several months of convalescence. When he started to paint again, his virtuosity as a colorist seemed to be gone, along with his energy and enthusiasm. His color schemes consisted mainly of repetitive pinks and purples that had never before appeared in Lerner's work and were incomprehensible to admirers. Either he had taken a giant step in a new aesthetic direction, leaving all of us behind, or the concussion had damaged his perception and judgment at the central level. In some instances, Lerner attempted to "correct" some of his previous paintings, with results that, to me, seemed tragic.

Sometime after the accident, Lerner moved to Israel with the belief that ending his life there would increase the odds of his paintings ending up in Israeli museums, where he felt they belonged. He moved to Tel Aviv in 1962 and died there within a year of his arrival. He had previously sent three of his paintings to the Ein Harod museum, and a wonderful landscape to the Museum of Tel Aviv.

¹ In fact, Marc Chagall and Chaim Soutine were born near where Lerner was born, at around the same time, and went to the same schools in Kiev. They, too, emigrated to Romania and then Paris, and their styles show striking similarities.

Lerner's widow outlived him by several years. She lived in Tel Aviv with the Hen family, relatives of her husband, at 28 Gordon Street. In spring 1965, I visited her. The apartment was filled from floor to ceiling with Lerner's paintings. I went to Jerusalem and arranged with the Israeli Ministry of Education and Culture to display some of them in the museums of Elat and Bat Yam. When Paula died a few years later, there were still between 50 and 100 of Lerner's paintings in her room. These found their way to the Ministry of Education and Culture, which distributed them to various *kibbutzim* and other institutions.

LERNER'S ARTISTIC ORIENTATION

Lerner held strong and clear convictions about the essential attributes of great painting. He considered the visual aesthetic attributes—color, form, texture, movement, and composition—to be the *sine qua non* of great painting, regardless of whether the particular style was objective or non-objective, representational or abstract, or other. “Beautiful” was the adjective Lerner applied most often to paintings and effects he liked.

When Lerner discussed forms or shapes, he used the terms “weak” and “strong.” For brush strokes he used the term “free” as opposed to belabored or constrained. He considered colors only with regard to their function in a “play of colors” (*Farbenspiel*), and never in isolation. If an effect in a painting successfully combined the elements of color, form, and brushwork, Lerner described the effect as *mahlerisch* (“painterly” is the best way to translate this brimming German word), as distinct from “decorative.” To Lerner, “decorative” meant facile, superficial, and reliant on formulaic or otherwise unoriginal devices. Compositions, too, could be decorative when they were too symmetrical.

Just below a painting's visual aesthetic attributes in Lerner's hierarchy of importance was the visual impression of the subject matter—the feeling or emotion it conveyed. In a flower painting, this might be a flower's texture; in a landscape, the light of the late afternoon sun, the autumn chill, or the freshness of the early morning air; in a Hasidic legend, the drama and emotional content of the scene; or in a portrait, the subject's character, personality, or mood. In his portraits Lerner subordinated photographic likeness to emotional likeness.

Absent from Lerner's criteria for greatness in art was naturalistic fidelity or realism. Like the impressionists and post-impressionists, Lerner felt that realism, as in a photograph, had to give way to the aesthetic attributes and to the overall visual impression and essence of the subject matter. He felt that capturing the visual essence generally made it necessary to take liberties with the subject matter and to deviate from realism.

The visual essence, feeling, or emotional impact of a subject had to be achieved exclusively by visual means, that is, through the interplay of form, movement, color, and brushwork—and not by verbal devices or intellectual/literary means. According to Lerner, the only legitimate function of a painting's intellectually mediated message, story, or content was to support the emotional impact, which in turn had to be subordinated to the aesthetic attributes.

A distinctive characteristic of Lerner's renderings of scenes, mostly scenes from Hasidic legends but sometimes also landscapes, was his violation of perspective and gravity — primitivist stylistic devices also seen in works of Mark Chagall and Chaim Soutine. These devices feature the distortion of correct perspective, and the tilting of buildings, structures, and human forms at sharp angles to the vertical, as if floating and defying gravity. The resulting effect is one of mystical and unearthly spiritual detachment.

And yet, the dominant impact of a Lerner painting, regardless of subject matter, is visual, reflecting Lerner's primary emphasis on color, form, movement, and composition.

HOW LERNER PAINTED

Solomon Lerner lived to paint. He began to paint every morning at seven o'clock and continued until sundown, breaking from his routine only when necessary. Lerner painted only during daylight hours because he believed that artificial light distorted colors, especially the blue end of the spectrum. Similarly, he felt that paintings should be viewed in the same light in which they were painted.

On the occasions when I saw Lerner paint, he seemed almost possessed, filled with energy and passion. After each brush stroke, he would run two or three yards back from the easel, study the result for a moment, and then run back to the easel for the next brush stroke. When he painted he was silent, intense, and totally consumed. "When I paint I become a madman," he sometimes said.

Lerner began a painting by indicating the composition and layout with a few long, angular brush strokes, using a minimal amount of a dull, brownish, thinned pigment. Next, starting from the center and without concern for detail, he would fill the entire canvas with a rough rendering of his intended composition and general color scheme. He sometimes left large, non-critical areas bare when he felt that the burlap color of the canvas would not interfere with the overall color scheme. (Lerner sized his burlap canvases with carpenter's glue and shunned white-sized canvases, explaining that the whiteness of bare areas would interfere with his ability to see and evaluate color schemes.) Once the entire canvas was mostly covered with paint, Lerner began to elaborate the areas and fill in detail, again moving generally from the center of the canvas to the periphery.

As he continued to work on a painting, Lerner would view it, or portions of it, by squinting through his curled hand, so as to create a virtual frame. He explained that this "framing" technique helped him make judgments and decisions by eliminating and blocking out visual distractions in the surrounding environment. Lerner would also often stand two or three yards away from a painting, close one eye, and use his hands and fingers to block out various areas of the painting to test their interaction with other parts. He always looked for what he called "disturbance," which could be a dissonant color, an inappropriate form, or brush strokes that led the viewer's eye in the wrong direction. During my instructional sessions with him, he often encouraged me to use this blocking-out technique, saying,

“Block out this area; do you see how it disturbs?” He might point out that a certain color, color scheme, or form “competes” with or detracts from another one. “It shouts,” he would sometimes say about a color, meaning that its loudness interfered with other desired effects.

Occasionally Lerner completed a painting in a single session. In those instances, he would not touch the painting again out of concern that further efforts would corrupt its “freshness” or spontaneity. But most of Lerner’s paintings represented several sessions of work, often separated by days or weeks. Some areas of his Hasidic legends had thick layers of paint that reflected the work of many sessions over a period of years. One legend, entitled *Lillith*, was always up on the easel in Lerner’s apartment in New York. Almost every time I came to visit, it was different.

Lerner’s Style as a Colorist

One of the most notable aspects of Lerner’s style was his use of color, and some critics regarded him as one of the great colorists, in the same lofty category as Renoir and Monet. Lerner had a few basic precepts regarding color.

First, a color used in any part of a painting must reappear, though somewhat altered, in at least two other parts of the painting for the sake of balance, harmony, and rhythm. The color may not reappear *unchanged*, lest the effect become “decorative.” Besides pigment, the types of alteration that avert a decorative effect can be in the texture of the brushwork, the size of the area covered by the color, and the surrounding context.

Second, all colors in a painting must be part of the same “tonality.” The most straightforward way to achieve tonal consistency, according to Lerner, was to use no more than five different pigments (excluding white), and additional pigments only very sparingly. The five pigments Lerner favored are described below. Lerner used white only when mixed with other colors, and he never used black. Pure white and black, he said, “don’t exist—even the brightest and darkest areas contain color.”

Third, a “color play” or “play of colors” (*Farbenspiel*) involves not only color but also form and movement. Color plays could be small and local, or they could encompass the entire canvas. For local color plays, the brushwork must lead the eye into the movement and rhythm of the “color dance.” The desired eye movement might be a dance or a sweep, and would be determined by the precise direction of each brush stroke. In addition to leading the eye through the play of colors, the brushwork must also convey form.

These precepts, while “authored” by Lerner, are, in fact, applicable to most great painting—most clearly to that of the impressionists and post-impressionists, even at the level of each brush stroke’s function and purpose—and are helpful in understanding how all the great painters achieved the effects we admire.

Lerner’s Technical Approach to Color

Lerner’s staple pigments were zinc white, cadmium yellow (light), alizarin crimson, ultramarine blue, light ocher, and viridian emerald green. In Cuba, he also began to make

extensive use of bright red. He believed that any desired color could be mixed from combinations of these. Lerner also used cadmium blue and barium yellow, but only rarely and sparingly.

Lerner's primary dictum was that colors must be "clean" and never "dirty." A clean color was one that had been mixed from three or fewer pigments, in addition to white, which is neutral. Adding in a fourth pigment made the mixture dirty or "heavy." To ensure that no fourth pigment was ever mixed in, even inadvertently, Lerner wiped his brush clean before every color change, using newspaper scraps or turpentine. He usually alternated among several brushes, using different brushes for different colors and different levels of detail. At the end of each workday, Lerner washed his brushes with soap in the palm of his hand and scraped his palette clean.

When Lerner applied new paint on top of wet paint, he would first scrape off the old paint with a palette knife before applying the new paint, so as to avoid creating a muddy mix of four or more pigments. Scraping was unnecessary only when the old paint consisted of the same pigments as the new brush stroke, or when the old and new pigments together would then comprise three pigments or fewer.

Lerner's Brushwork

Lerner liked brush strokes to convey vigor and spontaneity, and for the brushwork to be "free." He rarely used large, homogeneous areas of color, like those sometimes seen in the works of Van Gogh or Gauguin. Rather, he made extensive use of small and local "color plays" produced by his distinctive, elaborate brushwork that applied multiple colors in relatively small areas, one of the distinguishing characteristics of his style.

Lerner usually applied more than one color with each of his brush strokes—a technique that requires great skill and control in the application of paint to the brush. The effect is a single brush stroke with stripes of different pigments within it. Lerner was able to control the width and intensity of such stripes, so that a stripe might fade in intensity from its beginning to its termination, while the colors in the rest of the brush stroke retained their uniformity and density. Lerner used his compound brush stroke technique to accentuate the shape and direction of individual brush strokes, and to give them the appearance of spontaneity and "freedom." He sometimes gave a brush stroke an edge or outline by placing darker or brighter colors along one edge of the brush stroke, or by creating a gradient from its edge to the middle.

Lerner often applied fresh brush strokes on top of dry paint. Since dried paint is generally somewhat bumpy, a new brush stroke on top of dried paint—using just a small amount of fairly viscous paint—would cover the bumps only, without getting into the crevices between the bumps. The old paint in the crevices would remain visible. This technique leaves it to the viewer's eye to mix the old paint with the newly applied one. It accentuates the direction of the new brush stroke and conveys an impression of spontaneity.

Lerner often used the palette knife to modify a brush stroke by scraping off some of its paint to reveal the dry paint or burlap canvas color beneath it. To accentuate a brush

stroke's directionality, he might scrape along its length. To attenuate its directionality and force, he might use a series of small scratches across it. These palette knife techniques were also used extensively by Van Gogh.

Lerner generally strove to convey “rhythm” of form, color, and movement. To produce rhythm, he sometimes used several parallel brush strokes side-by-side, each successive one weaker and sparser than the previous one. He generally did this without refreshing the paint on his brush between strokes. The second and third strokes used up the paint left on the brush, but because of their diminishing opacity, gave increasing prominence and weight to the previously applied dry paint beneath it. At other times, Lerner used up any paint still left on the brush by applying it to remote parts of the painting to achieve overall color balance and rhythm.

Lerner's brush strokes were often somewhat angular, with a slight elbow in the middle. Curved outlines might be painted as straight lines joined at angles, and rounded surfaces sub-divided into flat planes joined at their edges. He explained that these techniques could convey “strength” and clarify shape or form by revealing essential underlying visual structure, suggesting a slight nod in the direction of Cubism. Lerner employed this device decreasingly over the years, and hardly at all after his arrival in the United States.

Lerner's Technical Virtuosity

Viewing one of Lerner's finished paintings does not reveal the technical virtuosity that went into its creation. Even while watching Lerner paint, which I was able to do from time to time, I generally found it difficult to gauge what effect he was trying to achieve or how faithfully his brush strokes matched his intentions. An effect he sought might only become evident to me after he actually achieved it, which was usually after he had completed an entire area of a painting, and only rarely after a single brush stroke.

But my daily coaching sessions with Lerner gave me more direct opportunities to witness his fabulous technical skills. Such opportunities occurred when I had been struggling for a while to achieve a certain effect in one of my little still life studies. In those cases, I generally knew what the problem was but was having trouble solving it. After watching me struggle for a while, Lerner would get up from his chair and gently take the brush and palette from my hands. With lightning speed—too fast for my eyes to follow—he would mix the required pigments on the palette and, with a few deft brush strokes, solve my problem in a brilliant and unexpected way. I watched in awe as he created wonderful plays of color by adding a few simple brush strokes to what was already on the canvas, turning chaos into beauty. It looked like magic to me.

LERNER'S VALUES

Lerner placed great emphasis on intellectual and artistic “honesty.” To him, that meant always striving for truth—what *you* perceive to be the case and what your senses tell you—rather than what you or others believe based on prior knowledge. In painting from nature, whether landscapes, still lifes, or portraits, Lerner insisted that I suspend any

preconceptions I might have (for example, that the sky is blue and grass is green). “Ignore what you know about the subject,” he would say. “Paint what you really see. Look again and look carefully. Be objective.”

On the surface, this might sound like an urging toward Realism, but it wasn’t. It was a caveat against succumbing to cultural preconceptions and prejudices.

When Lerner said, “That’s the way I saw it,” he often meant that he actually discerned a certain color in the subject and perhaps chose to exaggerate it for the sake of a desired effect. But for Lerner, the phrase “what you see” encompassed not only what was really there, but also what *one could see* in the mind’s eye when visualizing a desired effect. When he wished to achieve a certain effect or create or enhance a color scheme or composition, he might introduce a color that wasn’t really there, or distort a shape, explaining that he “saw it that way.”

Lerner distinguished between “honest” and “fake” art. He considered art fake if its primary goal was to convey a literary message or shock the viewer, especially if either of these goals was pretentiously cloaked in some of the superficial, but not the essential, trappings of true art.

People, too, had to be treated according to who they really were rather than preconceived notions or biases regarding their occupations, race, age, or status. In some of my lessons in Cuba, Lerner had me paint portraits of Pilar, our cleaning lady, and her two young children, Blas and Juanita. He urged me to examine their personalities and facial expressions as deeply and sensitively as I would a member of my own family.

Lerner applied his insistence on honesty and truth not only to art and people, but also to knowledge, cultural institutions, and religion. He rejected ritual and ceremony as hypocritical and disingenuous, and decried any form of dishonesty or pretense. He said these were the “false” values that had driven him away from organized religion in his youth.

Lerner’s Personality

Lerner was kind and gentle with everyone he met. I once observed him giving a raggedly dressed teenage Cuban boy fifty cents—the equivalent of an average day’s wage at the time—as a tip for helping him carry a package, even though Lerner himself was quite poor. “He has to eat too,” Lerner answered when I asked him why he had given the boy so much money.

Lerner was always rather indifferent toward money. If a customer wanted a painting badly but could not meet Lerner’s asking price, Lerner would adjust the price to the customer’s means. He adamantly refused to take any money from my father for the two- to three-hour painting lessons he gave me almost daily for one-and-a-half years in Havana. “My reward will be the paintings Francis produces some day,” Lerner said. And yet, not being able to afford the five-cent bus fare, he walked forty-five minutes each way to and from my house.

Lerner was humble. One time in New York, after I had become more familiar with the works of the great painters, I asked him if he didn't agree that his work was in the same class, as some newspaper clippings of French critiques seemed to imply. "I don't compare myself to others," he responded. "I care only about how *I* paint, and will be satisfied if I leave behind a few good paintings."

Lerner loved children but didn't have any of his own. When I once asked him why he didn't have any, he responded, "But I do. My paintings are my children."