

A grand city

Levy's paintings depict Buffalo on the rise

BY COLIN DABKOWSKI
NEWS ARTS CRITIC

For a booming city at the height of its power and influence, Alexander O. Levy was the right artist at the right time.

When the German-born artist arrived here from New York City in 1909 to work as an illustrator for the Matthews-Northrup publishing company, the city's population stood at more than 400,000. By the time he died, in 1947, it had swelled past 500,000 and was perched at the edge of its painful and ongoing decline.

The interceding four decades were filled with radical change, as the city built out its infrastructure, welcomed new residents from across the world and worked overtime to maintain its status as a reigning industrial powerhouse.

So it's lucky for us that Levy arrived when he did, and luckier still that he painted so prolifically.

The lucky streak continues in the Burchfield Penney Art Center's exhibition "Alexander O. Levy: American Artist, Art Deco Painter," a ravishing and often intoxicating chronicle of a grand city in the midst of a seemingly inexorable journey toward further grandeur.

Walking into this show, arrayed salon-style across the curved walls of the Burchfield Penney's east gallery and expertly curated by Scott Propeack and Albert Michaels, feels a bit like pulling some long-forgotten trunk full of family pictures from the corner of your great-grandparents' attic. The scenes are vaguely familiar, though the faces are not. Each snapshot seems to hint at a story much longer than the usual 1,000 words. By the time you've shuffled through the whole pile, the vague notion of history takes on concrete shapes and forms. You leave the attic knowing more about where



"Lady in White" is a painting from around 1923 by Alexander O. Levy. Visit buffalonews.com to view a photo gallery.

REVIEW

What: "Alexander O. Levy, American Artist, Art Deco Painter"

When: Through March 29

Where: Burchfield Penney Art Center, 1300 Elmwood Ave.

Tickets: \$5 to \$10

Info: 878-6011 or

www.burchfieldpenney.org

you came from.

That's the way it is with Levy's paintings, which range from portraits of imperious society women and others who presided over Buffalo during its greatest half-century to mock-ups for murals and illustrations for magazines and wartime propaganda posters. There also are many mysterious and inviting landscapes – impossibly huge trees dwarfing antlike humans, the outrageously beautiful spectacle of cows grazing Boston Hills in autumn – that provide a wider context to Levy's portraits and city scenes hopscotching between high culture and low.

So, what was Buffalo really like in the days when its assembly lines were at full capacity, when its outdoor markets fed a half-million souls, when its harbor was clogged with freighters and the air above it with smoke? Levy's paintings contain answers to many of those questions, and each one is an invitation into a lost world.

In "Chippewa Market," a free-handed 1928 painting, Buffalonians crowd together in a space surrounded by structures long-since demolished, prompting reflections on Chippewa's modern function as an overgrown frat row and the recent return of farmers markets to neighborhoods throughout

the city. "Seneca Street," an undated street scene, shows a bustling row of shops where now there might be empty lots: a tailor selling suit jackets outside his store, a white-aproned grocer selling cabbage, a well-dressed man leaning mysteriously in the doorway.

By far the most alluring paintings are Levy's portraits, commissioned and otherwise. "Woman With Parrot," a 1923 piece in which the gold color of the parrot is lightly echoed throughout Levy's sumptuous rendering of his main subject, is a stunner. As is a delicately rendered untitled painting of an impossibly graceful woman in the midst of putting on her glove and piercing the canvas with a stare that becomes more haunting the longer you look into it.

We also get a glimpse into Levy's wide-ranging illustration work, from a study for a mural that once hung in the famed Larkin Administration Building, where he worked as art director for 15 years, to a stunning magazine cover featuring the company's proud workers.

The exhibition's handsome and indispensable catalog spends a lot of ink pondering the ways in which Levy's work fits or deviates from the murky "Art Deco" label, a category normally associated with architecture. Those interested in erudite speculation about what makes Levy's painting Art Deco can read about it there, but I think the label we slap on his work is less relevant than the stories it tells us about its time and place.

The exhibition and catalog also shed light on Levy's trajectory as an artist, including his fierce confrontations with other major figures and an outspoken distaste for abstraction that arguably sentenced him and his astoundingly productive career to decades of obscurity.

Thanks to institutions such as Burchfield Penney and curators like Michaels and Propeack, following in the footsteps of dozens of smart local collectors, Levy no longer has to suffer for his conservative ideals. His legacy and his peerless paintings have been pulled out of the shadows and into the light. Do yourself a favor and pick one or two to get lost in.

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