

Levin analyzes the life, work of artists

Dr. Aldemaro Romero Jr. *College Talk*

For many, the history of art is a recounting of names and dates. For Dr. Gail Levin, it is about the human stories behind great pieces of art. “I became interested in art because my mother had gone to art school and her parents made her drop out, because they thought art was sinful,” says this native of Atlanta, Georgia. The reason was that, as orthodox Jewish immigrants, her grandparents became alarmed when her mother began winning prizes for painting male nudes.

Levin not only defied her grandparents’ traditions but took her studies very seriously, thanks to her mother who taught her how to paint “almost as soon as I could walk,” she says.

Levin pursued an academic career that allowed her to obtain a doctorate in art history from Rutgers University in New Jersey and ultimately to become a Distinguished Professor of Art History in the Weissman School of Arts and Sciences at Baruch College of the City University of New York.

Like any art historian, Levin studied the Renaissance classics but soon showed an interest in twentieth-century artists. While studying for her master’s degree at Tufts University, she became interested in the British sculptor Henry Moore and in the influence of the Italian Renaissance on this artist and on modern British sculpture in general.

“I wrote him for an interview and he didn’t write back, so I took a student flight to London. I called everyone who had published on Henry Moore and this wonderful critic told me, ‘Oh, he never answers his mail. Send him a telegram.’ Well he responded to mine, and I had my interview, and that was pretty magical.”

She also became interested in the life and work of the American realist painter Edward Hopper, on whom she has written several books. She is considered the world’s leading authority on this artist.

“He was born and raised in Nyack, New York in 1882, but by 1913 he had moved into Washington Square. Today that building is the New York University (NYU) School of Social Work, but in those days, it was owned by Sailors Snug Harbor, a kind of mariners’ union. It’s been landmarked now with a plaque



Dr. Levin at work.

Photo by Yulia Rock

by the city,” says Levin.

Despite his fame, he was almost evicted from his study.

“For years NYU tried to evict the Hoppers to take over the space, and then some years ago, the very wonderful dean of the School of Social Work decided that the Hoppers’ studio space and one of the offices which was their bedroom had to be preserved, so the old floor boards are gone, the whole building has been renovated, the stairwells have been taken out, but the space that was the Hoppers’ is preserved.”

Another artist Levin has studied is Theresa

Bernstein, a Polish-born American artist and a contemporary of Hopper’s. Levin knew about her through her work on Hopper and realized that this painter needed to be researched. “She had been a friend of Hopper’s, and they were shown together at an artist-selected group at the MacDowell Club Gallery in New York in 1918,” recounts Levin. “And all of a sudden it’s the mid 1980’s, and Theresa Bernstein is having a show at the New York Historical Society, and she’s being interviewed, and I go, ‘Oh my God, she’s alive,’” exclaimed Levin.

Hopper had been dead since 1967, so Levin

“immediately got an appointment to interview Bernstein. She was already in her mid 90’s, and she seemed so old to me, but you know that was the mid 80’s.” She died in 2002, two weeks short of her 112th birthday, but Levin got to know her quite well. “Visiting her was like going on a trip in a time machine. She had a vivid memory, and she could talk about going to the Armory show. She wasn’t in it, but she went in 1913, and she could tell you how the paintings were hung. It was amazing. I learned a lot from her.”

Levin was intrigued not only by Bernstein’s works but also by her personal life. “Typical of that generation, she would have never called herself a feminist, but she was campaigning for suffrage, for women’s right to vote and she’s one of the rare artists who depicted the women’s campaign for the right to vote. She painted an outdoor suffrage meeting in 1914-1915. She painted suffrage parades at the same time.”

Levin’s passion for this artist is being passed on to others. “One of my doctoral students who worked on this project with me, Elsie Yung, is just finishing her dissertation on images of women’s suffrage in the fine arts, and Theresa’s in it. So I’m so pleased to be passing on that torch to the younger generation,” says Levin.

Levin has also studied other twentieth century artists who may be unknown to many but whose works have been significant in the history of modern art. One of them is Wassily Kandinsky, a Russian painter who later moved to France and who is credited with painting some of the first pieces of abstract art.

“His first abstracts are filled with symbolism, especially apocalyptic symbolism from the Bible. So Russian Orthodox Christianity is embedded in those early paintings.” And Levin adds, “He certainly knew about that, and he certainly knew Russian icons and was very influenced by the icons of eastern orthodox Christianity.”

When talking about these and many other artists she has studied, Levin says, “I think that combining biography with my interest in art history has led me to look at research as a kind of detective work.”

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