

LEONARD LESTER – ARTIST (1870-1952)

Notes from compiler:

Leonard Lester lived in Alpine in the 1930s. Compared with other San Diego County artists he was relatively unknown because his poor health prevented him from entering many exhibitions. Nevertheless, a Google search on the internet revealed that he was respected by the art community and wasn't totally unknown. His paintings won awards in the United States and abroad.¹ In April of 1937, Leonard exhibited a group of his paintings and pastel drawings at Studio 6 in the House of Hospitality, Balboa Park (Kamerling, 1991, p. 23)².

Leonard didn't consider himself a great artist. He was a modest man and shunned publicity – dismissing awards and praise as “applesauce.” He attributed most of his success to his artwork out of doors that were nature studies. He always saw the happy and optimistic in the picture before him.

According to Leonard's widow, Marian (Plummer) Lester (1893-1991), he was better as a writer and speaker than as an artist, but that is not to say he was a mediocre artist. Marian once said, “In all the years I've known Leonard, I don't believe I've ever seen him use an eraser.”

The information for this manuscript came from interviews with the artist's widow, Marian Lester, newspaper articles, and books. My grandparents, Henry and Birdie Schulte, knew the Lesters quite well. I knew Marian as far back as the 1960s and visited her at her apartment and studio in Pacific Beach off and on until she passed away in 1991. Additional information on Marian Lester may be found in the book “Artists in California, 1786-1940”, by Edan Hughes (1989), and summarized at the following website: http://www.askart.com/askart/l/marian_plummer_lester/marian_plummer_lester.aspx

Marian mentioned that she had willed most of Leonard's artwork, still in her possession, to the University of California at La Jolla. Her collection of photographs and documents relating to the Plummer family (and containing some photographs of Leonard) went to the San Diego Historical Society. For more information, see “Finding Aids” at the following web site: <https://www.sandiegohistory.org/findaid/ac066.htm>

Summary of his Life:

Leonard was born in 1870 at Penrith, Cumberland England. He attended the Akworth and Wigton Quaker schools and at the age of 13 entered a writing contest. At the age of 19 he went to Canada with his family. Some time after that they came down the St. Lawrence River and settled in Galena, Kansas. Leonard then moved to Los Angeles and Pasadena.

Leonard did drawings for the Chicago World's fair in 1893, and in 1894 Harper Brothers (magazine) paid him \$75 for exquisite photo-like drawings of Indian baskets. While in Chicago, he met the leader of the Theosophical Society and became a member (Kamerling, 1980, p. 245).³ After studying art for two years (1894-96) at the Art Institute of Chicago, the Art Students' League in New York City, and the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, he returned to California. His studio locations included Pasadena, Santa Barbara, Los Angeles, Redlands, and Montecito (Hughes, 1989, p. 275).⁴ The 1900 Federal Census shows Leonard Lester living in Montecito (Santa Barbara County) next to William Wendt, a well-known artist.

In 1901 he returned to England where he set up a studio in a castle. He got sick and became unconscious (he didn't know for how long) and was feeble with asthma after that incident. The following year Leonard went to Germany, then hitch-hiked and walked to France and Italy with a walking stick he'd fashioned from an apricot tree.

From approximately 1906 to 1916 Leonard went to Cuba where he taught at a Theosophical school directed by his sister, Amy Lester Reineman. He visited Pinar del Rio, Las Quatitas and Santiago. The schools closed during the war, so Leonard came back to the United States.

In the 1920s he lived and worked at Madam Tingley's Theosophical School (Roja Yoga College) at Pt. Loma, California. Following the 1929 stock market crash, many of the older Lomaland residents who could support themselves were requested to leave to help ease the bad financial situation (Kamerling, p. 245-246).⁵

In 1930 he moved to Alpine, California and on January 4, 1931 he married Marian Plummer a former teacher at the Theosophical school. For awhile they lived just off of Tavern Road. He and Marian had a studio at the Julian Eltenge Ranch⁶. The 1930 census shows Leonard Lester next to Dr. Roelf Barkema who died of quinsy disease, an abscess in the tonsils. Both were Theosophists. Since the Lesters didn't have a car, they rode to town with others in the community such as Henry Schulte. Leonard lived in the San Diego area at intervals totaling 35 years. His last residence was at 9519 El Granito Street in Grossmont where he continued to paint for a year or so before his death. Leonard died at the age of 82 at 3:33 a.m. on June 26th, the same time and date as his mother (she died in 1906). Fellow artists recalled him as a quiet, gentle man, who looked like a scholar and painted like a poet.⁷

His Style:

At Lomaland (Point Loma Art School), Leonard was part of a movement referred to as symbolist art. Bruce Kamerling summed it up this way in an article, which may be found on this website:

<https://www.sandiegohistory.org/journal/80fall/theosophy.htm>

Interest in religious mysticism in the nineteenth century more-or-less paralleled the so-called Romantic Movement in art. There was a shift in consciousness that caused artists and writers to distrust the growing materialism of their times, to strike out against the Age of Reason, and to question the ability of reason to govern all things. Artists turned toward their inner experience and tried to create an art that could embody their dreams and emotions in pictorial forms. Visionary artists such as William Blake and certain of the Pre-Raphaelites and their followers, particularly Edward Burne-Jones, paved the way for the Symbolist Art Movement that flourished at the end of the century. Symbolist art, by using rhythms, colors, and symbols, created visual images that conveyed ideas, emotions and moods far above the obvious level of what was actually being depicted. It was an art that appealed to those who wished to remove themselves from the materialism and boredom of everyday life, and seek a higher level of consciousness (Kamerling, 1980, pp. 231-232.)⁸

Leonard's drawings in pencil and crayon are particularly noteworthy for their delicacy of touch and sensitivity to detail (Kamerling, 1980, p. 246).⁹ His work reveals an artist who was very close to nature. His scenes have a quiet serene quality sometimes described as mystic or ethereal. In fact, his works have been described as among the most ethereal produced by Lomaland painters (Kamerling, 1980, p. 249). Especially superb are his atmospheric effects which have a beauty and soothing calmness that makes the onlooker feel at peace. Columnist Marg Loring with the San Diego Art Guild described him as a painter of the 'quiet landscape'.¹⁰ She went on to say:

He portrays nature's moods, penetrating beyond mere physical aspects to express poetic and spiritual meanings. Believing that the painter's work is to perceive as well as to present, he studies nature's manifestations deeply and imparts with his brushes emotion as well as form.

His Philosophy:

Leonard was an accomplished writer and his philosophy on art was expressed in a number of articles in a Theosophy publication called "The Theosophical Path."

Leonard encouraged his readers to seek an escape from what he termed "external realism" by looking for a deeper knowledge or Reality. He wrote the following on page 74 of The Theosophical Path¹¹:

"Where there is no vision, the people perish;" –and this is also true of Art. To be vitally creative, its vision must be open to the higher planes of Reality. The extreme reaction from so-called Realism in the art tendencies today, is, for the most part, but the substitution of other forms of externalism, equally limited in their appeal to sensation.

Leonard also wrote the following:

Seeking to gain advantage over and excel others, or to excel in any pursuit for the sake of personal profit or advantage is not a high object at all. To suffer some disadvantage, some physical handicap may then become a blessing. Less preoccupation over the personal self, over efforts to excel or shine to advantage, to gain respect or admiration from others; and more resignation to the law, sympathy for others, letting trifling ambitions alone, treating things 'large and bye'. The gradual substitution of this state for the other is a step in advance on the pathway of ordinary daily life.¹²

Part of Leonard's philosophy is revealed by the poem "The Salutation of the Dawn" by the Hindu poet Kalidasa, who lived sometime between the 3rd and 6th century A.D. and referred to as the "Shakespeare of India." Leonard made a drawing with the same title. The poem reads:

Listen to the exhortation of the dawn!
Look to this day, for it is life,
The very life of life!
In its brief course lie all the verities
And all the realities of your existence;
The bliss of growth; the glory of action;
The splendor of beauty.
For yesterday is but a dream,
And tomorrow is only a vision.
But today well-lived makes every yesterday
 A dream of happiness,
And every tomorrow a vision of hope.
Look well, therefore, to this day.
Such is the salutation of the dawn.

References

- ¹ Anonymous, 27 June 1952, "Leonard Lester, 82 Famous Artist, Dies," *San Diego Evening Tribune*.
- ² Bruce Kamerling, 1991, 100 Years of art in San Diego, San Diego Historical Society, 108 p.
- ³ Bruce Kamerling, Fall 1980, Theosophy and Symbolist Art: The Point Loma Art School: *The Journal of San Diego History*, Vol. 25, No. 4, pp. 231-255.
- ⁴ E.M. Hughes, 1989, Artists in California, 1786-1940, 637 p.
- ⁵ Bruce Kamerling, Fall 1980, Theosophy and Symbolist Art: The Point Loma Art School: *The Journal of San Diego History*, Vol. 25, No. 4, pp 231-255.
- ⁶ Naomi Baker, 12 Sep 1954, "Alpine Gallery plans exhibition in memory of Grossmont Painter," *San Diego Evening Tribune*.
- ⁷ Ibid
- ⁸ Bruce Kamerling, Fall 1980, Theosophy and Symbolist Art: The Point Loma Art School; *The Journal of San Diego History*, Vol. 25, No. 4, pp. 231-232; see also, Edward Lucie-Smith, 1972, Symbolist Art, New York: Praeger Publishers.
- ⁹ Bruce Kamerling, Fall 1980, Theosophy and Symbolist Art: The Point Loma Art School: *The Journal of San Diego History*, Vol. 25, No. 4, pp. 231-232.
- ¹⁰ Conversation with Marian Lester, around 1960.
- ¹¹ Leonard Lester, 1918, Thoughts on current art: The Theosophical path, Vol. 14, edited by Katherine Tingley, Published by the New Century Corporation, Point Loma, Calif., pp. 74-78.
- ¹² Conversation with Marian Lester around 1960.