

Sullivan Goss

AN AMERICAN GALLERY

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THE INCREDIBLE TRUE STORY OF HARVEY LEEPA

NOVEMBER 1 - DECEMBER 29, 2019

OPENING RECEPTION:

1ST THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 7 | FROM 5-8pm

SANTA BARBARA, CA - Somehow, it seems a quintessentially Santa Barbara story in the retelling: A son is born to a highly-placed Russian General in the Tsar's Army. His education in Russia, at Oxford, and in Paris is first-class. He studies with some of the most famous painters of his day, including Joaquín Sorolla. In 1919, he immigrates to the U.S. Fabulous – some would even say *incredible* – adventures in the art world as a dealer and artist land him in Summerland at the age of sixty-five. He becomes deeply reclusive. There are even rumors of alcoholism. In the late sixties, he emerges as a bearded, eccentric octogenarian with an idiosyncratic – perhaps even psychedelic? – body of watercolor paintings that he exhibits at a string of California museums. A Continental character with a mysterious background who seems financially comfortable without visible means of support? *That* is a Santa Barbara story. And *that* is the broad outline of The Incredible True Story of Harvey Leepa.

Harvey Leepa's very birth date remains a point of contention. Was he born in 1887 as his lifetime museum catalogs state, or was he born in 1892 as certain artist dictionaries report? Yet another date appears on a Naturalization document. The Gallery currently cites the contemporaneous catalogs which list his birthplace as Lepaya, Russia. Following an education in Riga, Russia and with private tutors in England, he was accepted to Oxford. He reports having been pulled out in 1905 to accompany his father to sign the treaty ending the Russo-Japanese War, which was his first trip to America. He records, in fact, a trip by train through Summerland that same year. He continued on to study at Academie Julian under Jean Paul Laurens, at the École des Beaux Arts, and the Académie de la Grande Chaumière. He had even more study under Sorolla in Spain and under Hugo Von Habermann in Munich. Following his immigration to the U.S., there is scant information on what Leepa was doing. He apparently taught at Columbia University. He reports owning galleries in New York, Los Angeles, and Washington D.C.

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Reliable sources show that he had a Rudolph Schindler designed beach house in Los Angeles in the 20s and that he owned a gallery in the Mann's Chinese Theater in 1931. He showed both contemporary works and historical European art. In 1942, he moved to Summerland and became what nearly all of his future biographical write-ups describe as "a Santa Barbara recluse."

Harvey Leepa reported having discovered "Fluxism" in 1937. It is a style of painting in which paint is poured as much as brushed to create luminous abstractions in watercolor. His catalog essay for his solo exhibition at the Santa Barbara Museum of Art by Director Thomas Leavitt noted that this is independent of the work of L.A. artist Knud Merrild and years before Hans Hoffman or Jackson Pollock experimented with pours and drips to make a whole painting. Nevertheless, this work did not get exhibited until 1967, when he had a solo exhibition at the Phoenix Art Museum entitled *HARVEY LEEPA: Fluxism*. That exhibition traveled in one form or another to the Santa Barbara Museum of Art (1967), the Fine Arts Museum of San Diego (1968), the Palace of the Legion of Honor (1968), and then the L.A. Municipal Gallery at the Barnsdall House in 1969. A few other group exhibitions are known here and there. He won a prize in 1969 with the California Watercolor Society.

After that, Harvey Leepa slipped into obscurity. His story leaves plenty of questions, but the work itself is vivid, beguiling, and seems very much a product of its moment.

Come to the opening. Explore, acquire, network, and celebrate!