



Treasures of the Snow, 1987. Ink.

Lewis Rubenstein: The Hudson Valley Fusion of Eastern and Western Art

Carol Scarvalone Kushner

A tall, spare man, his red hair now white, strides purposefully toward his home and studio, his sketchbook, ink, and brushes tucked under his arm. Ignoring the cold wind and the snow falling around him, he thinks instead about the frozen landscape he has been drawing. The man is Lewis Rubenstein, an artist once described by Agnes Rindge Claflin, Vassar College Professor Emeritus of Art, as “the kind of painter who looks out upon the world and there finds the occasion for painting in his ranging eye.”

Since 1939, when he came to Poughkeepsie as an instructor in the art department at Vassar, Rubenstein has been a respected and well-admired member of the community, exhibiting his work widely throughout America and abroad as well as in Dutchess County. As an artist who believes in the integrity of working outdoors, even in the most severe weather, Rubenstein creates many paintings and graphic works that celebrate the familiar vistas of the Hudson River and the surrounding valley.

Rubenstein has described himself as “essentially a representational artist and a realist” whose aim is lyrical composition. Yet, while his work portrays familiar scenes of the Hudson River and the Catskill Mountains, it is not limited to literal representation. Instead, what is important and striking about his work is its ability to tran-

All photographs by Eric Lindbloom.



Lewis Rubenstein, Greystone, Wappingers Falls, 1989.

scend its subject matter and forge an evocative connection. As he, himself, has said, “The artist’s job, I believe, is to give form to his own view of life and thereby to touch the spirit of others.”

Rubenstein’s themes of people in relationship to their surroundings, as well as places without people that express space and mood, are derived from what he sees. Perhaps the reason this artist’s personal expression is so readily communicated is that, as he has stated his credo, “I like living form and I aspire in all my work to realize something of the life spirit.”

The artist’s work comes out of a personal fusion of two traditions—European and Far Eastern—which takes elements from the wash drawings of Rembrandt and Goya, Italian fresco painters, Seurat and Cézanne, as well as Oriental ink and scroll painting. This melding of traditions has become so central to Rubenstein’s work that, in his words, “After many years of painting in both Western and Eastern modes it’s now pretty much one world for me.”

Rubenstein’s interest in art began in childhood. Born in 1908 in Buffalo, New York, he recalls that he was always drawing, attempting to capture his impressions of people and his daily activities. After school, he attended sketching classes at the Albright Art School, believing at the time that he might pursue a career as an illus-

trator. His father, however, sent him to Harvard to become a lawyer, but once there, and after receiving a first prize in painting as a sophomore, Rubenstein decided instead to pursue his art studies. As a student of Arthur Pope's at Harvard, he was introduced to the Asiatic collection of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston; this was the beginning of a lifelong fascination with Oriental painting.

After college, while on a Harvard traveling fellowship, Rubenstein studied painting in Paris with Fernand Léger and Amédée Ozenfant in 1931, and in the following year he and Rico Lebrun studied fresco together in Rome with Galimberti. In 1938 Rubenstein studied lithography with Emil Ganso in New York City, and he continued his education by studying composition with Hans Hoffman in 1948 and plastic painting techniques with Jose Guttierrez in Mexico in 1951.

According to Rubenstein, the three main threads running through his work are drawing, a preference for water-based technique, and the horizontal scroll form. Although he paints in oils as well, the decisiveness of water-based media appeals to the artist. "I always keep changing in oil," he explains. "But watercolor, true fresco, and ink or *sumi* painting are really performances in rapid time."

After studying true fresco painting in Italy, he taught the technique at the Boston Museum School of Art. During that time, he practiced Oriental brushwork with



Lewis Rubenstein, Greystone, Wappingers Falls, 1989.



Every Valley, 1959. Ink. Collection of Alan Doft.

Chie Hirano in the museum's Asiatic Department. In the mid-1930s, Rubenstein received a commission for a series of frescoes based on mythology for the Germanic Museum (now the Busch-Reisinger Museum), housed in Adolphus Busch Hall at Harvard. Additional mural commissions were completed for the Wareham, Massachusetts, and Riverton, New Jersey, post offices, the Wolberg Community Center in Chicago, the Bureau of Ordnance of the U.S. Navy, and the Buffalo Jewish Center.

During World War II, when Rubenstein served as a lieutenant in the Navy and had little time to make art, he began to do watercolors seriously. In the late 1940s he also began painting with ink on canvas, and then in 1957 he was awarded a Fulbright grant to go to Japan and study scroll (*emakimono*) and ink (*sumi*) painting. In Japan Rubenstein worked with various masters, and especially enjoyed a good working relationship with painters Maida Sesson and Keigetsu Matsubayashi. A film, jointly sponsored by the United States Information Service and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, was made of Rubenstein and Matsubayashi working together. However, explains Rubenstein, "I soon realized that no Westerner could ever achieve the technical mastery of such traditional painters, so I tried to use *sumi* like any other medium, for my own expressive purposes."

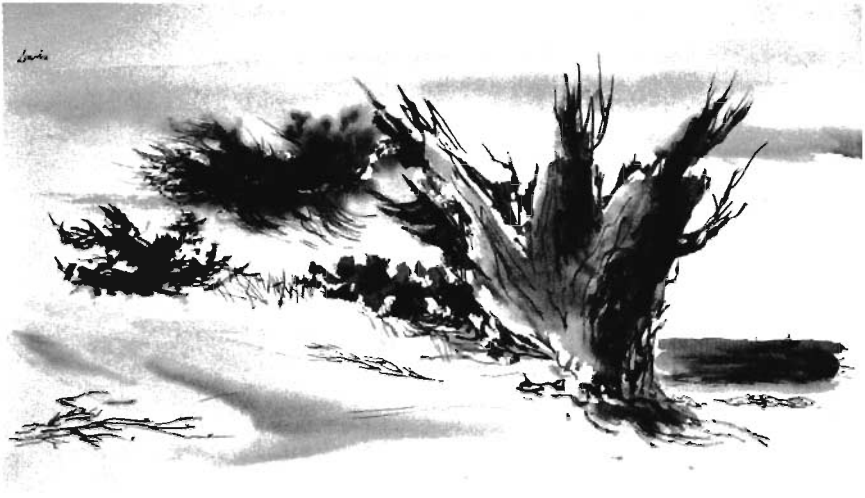
This study of formal Japanese ink technique brought to Rubenstein's work an increased emphasis on what he had already been pursuing in his watercolors—the Far Eastern concept that the unpainted areas of a painting are just as important as the painted ones. “The Japanese have a word for the unpainted area: it's *kukan*—literally ‘sky-space.’ But it really means more than that. It's a space to be filled by the imagination of the sensitive observer.”

Another concept of Far Eastern painting incorporated by Rubenstein was the idea of identification, becoming so immersed in the subject that one becomes the subject. Rubenstein further explains, “*Sumi* painting demands a combination of great discipline with maximum spontaneity.” In a recent interview the artist added that sometimes, when he has been working outdoors for hours, he suddenly feels as if he has been “in direct contact with whatever it is that is ‘out there’ beyond our immediate perception.”

The Japanese influence on his work has been noted in many reviews of Rubenstein's exhibitions. In the catalog for a 1990 exhibition of mid-Hudson paintings shown at Barrett House in Poughkeepsie, Rebecca Lawton, Curator of



Noh Dance, 1958. Sumi. Collection of Agnes R. Claflin.



Dune Improvisation, 1959. Ink.

Collections at the Vassar College Art Gallery, noted that recent compositions, particularly *Coming Storm* and *Boat House, New Hamburg* (both 1988), clearly rely on *sumi* painting. “These compositions, with their airy, light touch, appear improvisational, but are in fact deliberately planned and executed. In these works, the relationship between sky, water and land, and the formal arrangement of space, demonstrates the basic tenor of his sensibility. They are the result of an artist who has spent years roaming this region, studying its features and translating personal feeling into observations of light, movement and form.”

The third thread of Rubenstein’s work, the horizontal scroll form, has been described by the artist as the form “most sympathetic for my objectives in painting,” and has become the basis for what the artist calls the “Time Paintings.” Over the past forty years, Rubenstein has executed more than thirty of these “Time Paintings,” which incorporate the characteristic themes and techniques of his work.

Rubenstein’s concept of “Time Painting,” a continuous scroll painting designed to be seen moving through the window of a special viewing frame, was created in order “to develop a sustained visual theme in time as well as space—to do something like music.” While its format is influenced by Oriental scroll painting, it also borrows from the Western framed picture, and it differs from traditional scroll painting as it is composed within the viewing frame as the scroll moves through the window and is made to be seen at eye level in frames.

The “Time Paintings” also demonstrate the artist’s predilection for water-based media and the underlying principle of drawing throughout his work. Indeed, these paintings begin as drawings, because the completed “Time Painting” is actually an evolution of a series of sketches, each of which depicts a central motif within the general scheme, eventually becoming a continuous flow of images in the scroll. When completed, the entire scroll not only flows continuously but also achieves a complete and satisfying composition at each and every separate point within its frame.

“Scroll painting is essentially an art of transition, of shifting in scale and space, of continuous flow,” notes Rubenstein. “You can’t cut rapidly, as in movies. The change has to be gradual.” He adds that he paints these on specially prepared fine white linen and executes the final painting just as he once painted murals in true fresco. “I finish a section a day, day after day. Like fresco, the scrolls can’t be changed, so in doing a thirty-foot scroll it requires considerable discipline in order to sustain the spirit of the painting throughout.”

The subjects of the “Time Paintings” include the recurrent themes evident in the artist’s watercolors, ranging from landscapes and seascapes—which demonstrate Rubenstein’s “love of water in just about every form and mood: sea, storms, streams, reflections, snow”—to biblical stories and documentaries. Several of these works depict local scenes, such as *Winter Walk*, which records a snow-covered Vassar Lake, and *Main Street, America*, which is based on the Poughkeepsie street. A number of the “Time Paintings” are based on biblical passages, including *Psalms 104*, the psalm of faith that Rubenstein says represents his own credo; others represent both abstract motifs and documentaries of people in their surroundings, including *Mining Town*, based on observations of life in an Arizona copper-mining community.

But in spite of their diversity in theme and subject, Rubenstein’s “Time Paintings” are unified in their ability to transcend the literal and to evoke emotion. Developed as a format to incorporate the themes, techniques, and influences that have shaped his artistic vision, the paintings are strongly rooted in the artist’s appreciation for the natural world and reflect the movement of both time and space through repetition of image, form, and color. From this very personal means of expression of a continuously changing world, one can sense both the importance of the fleeting moment and its place within the whole, a metaphor for the transience of the temporal.