


“I Would Like to Meet Lillian Orlovsky”

A CONVERSATION

BY SUSAN RAND BROWN



Born October 14, 1914 in Manhattan, the painter Lillian Orlovsky approaches her 90th birthday with the engaged, curious spirit that propelled her to color outside the lines. She and the painter William Freed were inseparable from their first meeting in 1932 until his death 1984. She began her close connection with Hans Hofmann as his student in 1937 and became part of Hofmann's inner circle in New York and Provincetown, a link that continues almost 40 years after Hofmann's death. Then there is her own journey as an artist, with the percolating interest in her work that began a decade ago when Orlovsky was in her late 70s.

Her painting was included in the 1939 Worlds Fair in New York. Over the next 20 years she participated in a dozen group shows. Beginning in the late '70s her work was increasingly linked to major artistic movements in New York and Provincetown: the WPA, the cooperative galleries of the '50s, the avant-garde of the Lower East Side, the Days Lumberyard Studios, and of course Hofmann. In 1979 the Metropolitan Museum in New York organized "Hans Hofmann and His Students," which included Orlovsky. In 1990 she curated "The Provocative Years, 1935-45: The Hans Hofmann School and Its Students in

Provincetown” for the Provincetown Art Association and Museum, which included Fritz Bultman, Giogrio Cavallon, Robert De Niro, William Freed, Gerome Kamrowski, Lee Krasner, Allen Leepa, John Little, Mercedes Matter, George McNeil, and herself. A decade later, also for the museum, she curated “Hans Hofmann: Four Decades in Provincetown.”

Orlowsky began this conversation for *Provincetown Arts* in her Brewster Street home during August 2003. At the time she was involved in editing catalog page proofs and consulting over the selection of paintings and drawings for a major retrospective exhibition of the work of her husband William Freed. This was the first time Freed’s work had been exposed on this scale; apart from group shows, little had been shown since a 1981 PAAM retrospective. At the same time Orlowsky was also beginning to focus on her own solo show at ACME Fine Art in Boston.

Perhaps even Orlowsky’s indomitable spirit had found its limit. Almost immediately after her own opening in October, just before her 89th birthday, she became ill, and was hospitalized during the fall and early winter of 2003-2004. We resumed our conversation over lunch in February 2004, on a rainy afternoon a few weeks after she came home to her large apartment on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. She and Freed moved there in 1965.

As in Provincetown, the phone rings constantly. Orlowsky has a wide circle of friends, mostly artists. Like painters Myrna Harrison, Robert Henry (who curated Freed’s works on paper at PAAM as part of the 2003 retrospective), Haynes Ownby, Betty Bishop, Robert Fisher, and Paul Resika, many of Orlowsky’s long-time friends were Hofmann students (or Hofmann alumni, as Robert Henry characterizes the link between the master teacher and those directly influenced by his teachings).

A conversation with Lillian Orlowsky extends beyond words. Her voice is musical, her gestures open and animated, her laughter abundant. Despite assertions of shyness, Orlowsky is a natural storyteller, with sharp self-deprecating wit.

SUSAN RAND BROWN: What drew you to Provincetown?

LILLIAN ORLOWSKY: I came to Provincetown in 1939 because I wanted to continue my studies with Hofmann. I started with him in New York in 1937. Because I was on the Easel Project of the WPA, I had to appear in Manhattan to submit work and collect my salary; I would commute back and forth and somehow was able to stay in Provincetown. The Hofmann school was on Miller Hill Road. Except for that one summer I was never a student of Hofmann in Provincetown; I used to visit the class a lot. I returned again in 1944 with Freed, two years after we were married. Our first rental together was in the West End, at the former home of the Center for Coastal Studies. We had the lower floor of the cottage in the wettest summer in history. We always kept the windows open, and never slept in a dry bed! We didn’t have studios that summer. The next summer, we rented a single studio, #5, at Days Lumberyard, and rented a little cottage near the railroad tracks. The third summer, we got another studio, so now we



LILLIAN ORLOWSKY, *STILL LIFE*, LATE 1940S, OIL ON CANVAS, 36.5 x 28 INCHES, COURTESY ACME FINE ART, BOSTON
OPPOSITE: LILLIAN ORLOWSKY AT DAY’S LUMERYARD STUDIOS, #5, 1950, PHOTOGRAPH BY MAURICE BERASON

had #3 and #5. Freed and I could never work together. George McNeil shared #3 with Freed. Freed was a morning guy, George was an afternoon guy. Finally, Freed got his own studio, #7, which was very large. We had these studios until 1959. In 1960 we began to build our own studios, and moved in right away. We started with Freed’s studio, and lived there while we were building the house, from the ground up. Freed did everything but the plumbing, the electricity, and the foundation. Everybody lent us tools.

SRB: What do you mean, you couldn’t work with Freed?

LO: He had his habits, and I had mine. He could concentrate with a lot of stuff around, and he stays still; me, I have to clean everything around. I broke his concentration. I kept moving back and forth, would take something else out, put it back. He knew exactly where everything was, even though I couldn’t find it.

SRB: As a Hofmann student in New York and Provincetown, did you feel that Provincetown was on the cutting edge, receptive to new art movements?

LO: Oh no! We had big fights, trying to exhibit work at the Art Association. This was in the late ’40s. We had to go through a jury, modern or representational, and if you’d be lucky enough to “pass” with an abstract work, they’d hang it on the floor, in back of the room, where you couldn’t find it. They did everything they could to keep us out, not just to Hofmann’s students, but to Davidson’s students, Candell’s students, Manso’s. But then, other schools started to open, teaching abstract painting. The modern art movement became increasingly important. Too many abstract painters were coming in; they could no longer refuse our work.

SRB: The past two decades has brought major recognition for both you and Freed. The Art Association recognized Freed with a solo show in 1981. In 1984, shortly before he died, Freed was awarded a big grant from the Adolph and Esther Gottlieb Foundation. Then came the Freed show at the Ingber Gallery in New York, which, because he died so unexpectedly, became a memorial tribute to his life and art. After that, didn’t things accelerate for you, as your own work became the focus of interest?



LILLIAN ORLOVSKY, *UNTITLED*, c. 1952, OIL ON CANVAS, 24 x 30 INCHES, COURTESY ACME FINE ART, BOSTON; OPPOSITE PAGE: LILLIAN ORLOVSKY, 1990, PHOTOGRAPH BY NANCY SIRK

LO: I need to express gratitude to Sally Nerber of the Cherrystone Gallery, who gave me a show in 1995, and to Haynes Ownby, who introduced me to Sally. I also want to express gratitude to Paul Resika, whom I have known for many years. There was a certain kinship and still is, with Hofmann students. Paul always reminds me how he and Freed would go home in the subway from the Hofmann school, and Freed would demonstrate to this kid—Paul, who must have been 18 or 19 at the time—what Hofmann was trying to tell him. Right after Freed died, Paul and his wife [Blair Resika, the vocalist] were living in a house without a studio, and Paul was complaining that to paint inside, he needed a studio. I said he could use Freed’s. He was the only artist I ever allowed to work in Freed’s studio on Brewster Street. Soon we were talking about Hofmann, and since both of us are Hofmannites, he suggested I do a show of Hofmann students; this took place in 1990. I restricted the work to 1935-1945 because after that Hofmann changed his approach to teaching; he taught the same thing, but differently. Previously, he would not critique any work unless it was from a subject he had set up, a still life or a

nude. When the G.I.’s came [after 1945, the Hofmann school was accredited to take students under the G.I. Bill], he allowed them to bring in work done in their studio. During the time Resika was using Freed’s studio, he was looking around at Freed’s work and my work, and at one point he said to me, “You should have a show at the Art Association.” This happened in 1995. Resika curated that show, and he and [Varujan] Boghosian hung it. Everyone said they liked the show, which was very nice [*voice rising*], but me, I never like anything, so [*laughter*] it’s okay.

SRB: Lillian, weren’t you the one who introduced Freed to Hofmann’s work and teaching?

LO: Yes, I went to Hofmann first. It was all through the WPA; we used to collect our checks, so we’d stand in line, and talk about art. We’d talk about controversy, and Hofmann was controversial. They were talking about him. I thought he was still in Germany. When I heard he was teaching in New York, I called him up. Soon I went up to the Hofmann School, at 52 West 9th Street, which was in a five-story brownstone with a won-

derful studio on the top floor. This is the studio Hofmann used for his teaching. It was very exciting. I said to Freed, why don’t you visit the class and see for yourself! He said he would join for just a month. *Ha!* it never worked out that way. The Hofmann controversy has lasted until today. This is one reason Resika and I thought we had to have a show at PAAM, presenting what we were doing then, and decades later. The exhibit consisted of painters whose work was abstract and became representational, painters who were representational and became abstract, and those whose work remained the same.

SRB: It was quite a coup for the Art Association to host the Hofmann show in 2000, and a tribute to you, who was asked to curate it. How did that come about?

LO: I met Robert Warshaw, trustee of the Hofmann Foundation, at a party at Berta Walker’s. I mentioned that we should have a major show of Hofmann’s works in Provincetown. I did not know if the Foundation was funding the arts at that time. I encouraged them; I seemed to have

been a catalyst. Hofmann wanted to donate a painting to the Art Association, and they refused it. What do you know! Ten years later, he decided to give 45 paintings to Berkeley, plus money to be used for maintenance. The selection committee can make mistakes. When you see a work, you may not think it is great at the moment, but you don't know what the future will bring. You can't be dogmatic.

SRB: You and Freed both exhibited in group shows at the James Gallery in New York. Were you also the director from 1959-62?

LO: I had a solo show at the James Gallery and was also included in numerous group shows there from 1955. Freed was involved there too. *Never marry an artist!* Unless you have the talent to say, "I'm it," you will always go with the husband. I remember Lee when I started with the Hofmann School, while on the WPA. When I came into the School, I was hoping to do as well as she had. Abstract work was a new experience for me, a revelation. When Lee married Jackson Pollock, she lost a lot of that quality she had, except when it came to promoting Jackson.

SRB: Where did you begin to study art?

LO: Freed and I met in 1932 or 1933 at a social club. Someone told me he was an artist. I walked up to him, and told him I was interested in the arts, and he suggested I go to the Educational Alliance, which is where I started. I lived all the way up in the Bronx, and the Alliance was on the Lower East Side. I started then, to draw. You would start with the cast as a subject, then figure drawing. We were drawing from a model, and in walks this woman, Louise Nevelson, who is drawing "moishe kapoire," upside down. The figure she drew did not look like what we were doing then, which was imitating the model. Other students were ridiculing this woman. I can still see that drawing in my head after more than 50 years. Nevelson had just come back from Europe; later I found out that she had studied with Leger and Hofmann in 1933. Her work excited me. We became kind of friendly in that sense. We belonged to a lot of organizations together, and later the James Gallery used to invite her to show. You could buy her work for \$350. I left the Alliance after that experience, and moved from school to school, trying to find one that would teach me to see that way. I went to the National Academy of Design, the American Artist School with Raphael Soyer, Moses Soyer and Anton Refregier. Then I started with Hofmann, while on the WPA. All this time, I was developing a relationship with Freed. I would go out sketching with him, get up at five o'clock in the morning and go to Coney Island. He'd do these watercolors, boat scenes, and I would do a boat scene.

SRB: Did you paint outside in Provincetown too?

LO: In the beginning, as well as now. While in the process of working, I still am shy about exposing my work.

SRB: Tell me about the WPA years.

LO: I got on the WPA, and then Freed got on WPA. He was in the Mural Division, working with Louis Schanker and then as assistant to George McNeil. I was also in the Mural Division, and then was switched to Easel, which was considered tops, because they gave you materials and a studio. Some of the modern painters who were working on the WPA came out of the Hofmann School. After the WPA was disbanded, the government decided to auction off the work they collected from the easel painters. The lot, which included several hundred or more paintings the government owned, was bought by a plumber. He thought he was going to take these paintings, and wrap them around his pipes for insulation. When he turned on the heat, the pipes gave off this odor. To get rid of the paintings, he dumped them at auction to someone on Canarsie Street, who was selling them for \$5 apiece. Then this guy sees a lot of people picking up this junk for five dollars, so he raises it to \$10—well, he was selling Pollock, de Kooning, Rothko. In 1966 the Art Students League gave an exhibition of some of the work this guy picked up—junk!—that was wrapped around the pipes.

SRB: What were some of your first experiences in seeing abstract work?

LO: We went to the Friday afternoon teas held at the Plaza Hotel once a month. Baroness Hilla Von Rebay was using Guggenheim's floor-through apartment, to show artists her private collection, and she would invite artists up to look at these paintings. It was she who was introducing semi-abstract work when few were receptive to it. This was in the late '30s. She was showing what was called "insane art"—Kandinsky, Rudolph Bauer, Chagall. She had a forum and brought from the Guggenheim home some of these painters' works.



One of these was a beautiful Chagall that he had painted on a bed sheet. It was ridiculed! In those days, we used to fight about modern art. Von Rebay was the first person that I knew of who gave money, Guggenheim's money, to artists working in this way. During the tea parties she would walk around, asking are you an artist, are you an artist, and I said no, and ran away! This was a big mistake, since she was supporting artists.

SRB: What drew you to the new and the experimental?

LO: When Freed and I first started to go together to exhibitions, there were very few modern galleries. The most moving part was going to the Museum of Modern Art in 1938-39, when Picasso's "Guernica" was first exhibited. The mural was in black, white, and gray. The pictorial impression is unforgettable. We do not need any additional words of explanation to describe what the subject was about. There were also representational works depicting the war, and you were not so moved. When I heard that Hofmann was teaching with the idea of Cubism, I tried it. Artists are always looking for new ways of expression. If you see you are repeating yourself, you look for a reason why. Hofmann gave me a reason why. When you went into class, everyone's drawing was different. At first, you did not understand that either.

SRB: Do you remember the first time Hofmann gave you an individual critique?

LO: Oh yes! He had a gentle way of saying, *I like it, not so very much*. You felt good, yet ready to kill yourself. We would make our drawings on Mondays, and on Tuesdays he would come to critique. He would walk around the room, to the students, and we would follow him. Fridays he would also come. So we had three days to make a new drawing or to work on the same drawing.

SRB: Was a subject set up in front of you?

LO: At that time, he would not criticize you otherwise. In the morning we had models, and in the afternoon we had the still-life. Only God could imitate it; nobody else could. In the evening, we would have the model again. The model took the same pose for the entire week. The still-life would stay the same for three months. Hofmann preferred that you work on drawing for a long time, and I said to Freed, everyone's painting, I want to paint too. I remember the first painting I did in class. I took a large canvas, which had a gesso ground, which made it an acrylic bed, and painted it on Monday. He came in on Tuesday, and said, "Oh I like it very much, save it." So I put it away, and started another one. He came in on Friday, looked at my work, and said, "Save it." So I said, "Mr. Hofmann"—I would never call him Hans, though others did—I said "Mr. Hofmann, I can't save every painting I begin, I want to be able to develop it." He said, "Save it." Well, I figured that I was going to prove to him that he's wrong. What a memory! He came in on Tuesday and he said, "Is this the same canvas



ORLOVSKY AT DAY'S LUMERYARD STUDIOS, #5, 1945, PHOTOGRAPH BY MAURICE BERASON

that I saw Friday?" I was very proud, and I said, "Yes!" He turned me around, and patted me on the back, and said, "You don't know what you destroyed." I couldn't bring what was lost back to life! Now, when I look at this canvas I saved, I am aware that I really captured something that was beyond my understanding. When I look at it today, I say, "not bad, not bad!"

SRB: There's a story about your involvement in Hofmann's grave site in Truro. Can you tell me what happened? Isn't he buried between his first wife Miz, and his second wife Renate?

LO: Hofmann designed that site very carefully, like a painting. The grave is on a slight slope. There is a six-foot upright marble monument. He marked out two rectangular planes, one for Miz and one for himself. When his second wife died—I don't know who buried her there—someone made a third little square and put two bushes between Hofmann and Miz. When I went there with Jeanne Bultman [wife of artist Fritz Bultman] the bushes were little trees, and you couldn't find the gravesite. That was not Hofmann's wish. Jeanne said, "I know the gardener, and I am going to call him up and tell him to take them right out." Which he did!

SRB: Please tell the wonderful story that begins, "I would like to meet Lillian Orlovsky."

LO: I was one of the sitters in the James Gallery in the mid-'50s. This couple came in and the woman said, "I would like to meet Lillian Orlovsky." I said, "When she comes in, I will let her know." And she said, "I really like her work. When she has a show, please let me know." Naturally, when Lillian had a show, I let the lady know. She came and bought a collage. Again she said, "I really would like to meet her." I said, "The next time she comes in, I will tell her for you." She never met her. A half century later, there I am on the Collection Committee,

voting on work left by this couple to the estate of the Judith Rothschild Foundation. Someone said one of them was mine. I said, "Are you sure? I don't remember it!" I looked and found my signature. There was my collage this woman bought, as well as work of other Provincetown artists of this period, including John Grillo, Edward Giobbi, and Dimitri Hadzi. I voted yes.

SRB: And the woman who bought your work never got to meet you?

LO: No, she never got to meet me, never.

SRB: ACME Fine Art in Boston recently exhibited some of your works on paper titled "Textile Design."

LO: In the late '40s and '50s I worked in textiles and fabrics with John Little, who had a drapery studio, and with Lowensteins. When I applied to Lowensteins for a job, the director said, where did you work, and I couldn't answer, because at this point I had not worked in the field. I spoke to one of the designers, and he said, "Tell him you worked for my studio for three months." I went back with the same design, to the same director, and now when he asked me where I'd worked, I told him in such and such a place. He asked how much I wanted and I said, "\$45 a week." He said, "Will you accept \$55?" I did designing and coloring of textiles; I enjoyed the work.

SRB: Drawings of your doll are part of a series you have been doing for quite awhile. Why a series? What do you see when you return to a subject over time?

LO: I have been working on drawings of my doll for a long period of time. I started doing sketches of the same doll, in the same position, same still life. It started very happy, free and joyful. I went to

look back a year later, and I could not believe the transformation. The last two drawings are angry, wild. When there is a series, you can see the transformation that takes place as the artist is working.

SRB: Lillian, you are constantly looking at art. What do you look for?

LO: I don't analyze a work unless I am curious and want to know why. I went to Montreal to see Picasso's so-called "erotic drawings." It was the best thing I ever did. I looked to see how he arrived at the figure, and the shapes, and the different images that he created with the forms. When you look at it, you don't see the erotica, you just see shapes and forms and movement. You use shapes—a square and a rectangle and an oval. You think, why doesn't mine look like that?

SRB: So for you it has been a lifelong search?

LO: Oh yes. It is everything you experience. That is why it is never boring, why you approach a work with a certain amount of enthusiasm. It's true, you can be annoyed. Sometimes you feel as though you don't have the means of expression or an image you respond to, but then you calm down, and look again, and say, why don't I try it this way.

Or the first stroke will tell you what to do with the next. The first color you put down. Your palette is your first image and impression. Let's say I put X number of colors down, that's the beginning of my painting. If you were trying to use only a little bit of pigment, Hofmann would look down at your palette and the first thing he would say, "You have a starving palette." Then he would take your tube and squeeze it.

SUSAN RAND BROWN, a native New Yorker now living and teaching in Connecticut, began writing about the arts in the late '70s, and is currently an Arts Correspondent for the Provincetown Banner. She has spent summers in her family's Province-