

# Head and Hand

## THE ART OF JAMES LECHAY

By Megan Hinton

WHEN I IMAGINE a painter at work, I see the painter's eyes observing the contours and shapes of the subject while the hand moves simultaneously to make a mark. The hand follows the eyes in lockstep, drawing what is seen. This obviously requires dexterity, specifically hand-eye coordination. The head and hand are the most gestural parts of the body; when their movements are in balance, a painting may appear effortless. But skill is not enough. The artist must improvise and embrace chance to create something that is drawn from life, not merely mimicking it. When a painter successfully navigates the delicate balance between artist and subject, the result both reflects and defies reality and accentuates the painter's unique mark.

James Lechay (1907–2001) was such a painter, and his work is featured this summer in the exhibition *Head and Hand* at the Provincetown Art Association and Museum (PAAM). The exhibit, which I curated, is a select career survey of work chosen from more than a hundred pieces. For many years, Lechay's art was shown locally in Wellfleet at the late Sally Nerber's beloved Cherry Stone Gallery. Additional works, complementing the PAAM exhibit, are currently on view at the Berta Walker Gallery in Provincetown.

The title is a natural one for the exhibit. *Head and Hand* is the title of multiple paintings, drawings, and lithographs Lechay made over his seventy-year career. Portraits, especially self-portraits, often portray a nestled hand below the face in gestural expression. *Self-Portrait in Red* (1991) portrays the artist in a flattened monochrome landscape where the horizon line is moving vertically, creating a charge that is very different from the serene horizontal horizon line in traditional landscape painting. The Impressionist-like brushwork adds to the intense energy of the work. The brushwork varies in tonality from deep to light reds and has an upward horizontal stroke that delivers a sense of movement that creates a charge. Lechay chose to

depict himself in a high-keyed red, which is psychologically powerful against the monochrome relationship of the pink-and-white ground. Red symbolizes life force, fire, passion, and even anger. Most importantly, this piece shows the artist's hand covering his mouth, as if there is nothing that needs to be said about the work. At



*Self-Portrait in Red*, 1991, oil on canvas, 53 by 43 inches ESTATE OF JAMES LECHAY



*Double Portrait*, 1984, oil on canvas, 61 by 52 inches ESTATE OF JAMES LECHAY

once, the artist is showing the hand that made the painting and uplifting a pictorial language that has no verbal equivalent.

James Lechay described himself as an Abstract Impressionist, and he did indeed paint with a combination of bravado and subtlety. Loose, bold contours defining an image on a flat ground is typical of his work. But he was also incredibly versatile and inventive. Works in oils, gouache, casein, and lithography show his mastery of various materials and techniques. His sculptural prowess is on display at PAAM in *Head* (date unknown), a rendering in bronze, roughly a foot high, of the artist's own head. The effect is as if his painterly mark jumped off a flat surface and took form in three dimensions.

His oeuvre encompasses the traditional genres in representational painting—portrait, landscape, and still life—but often made in unusual ways. Portraits sometimes appear within landscapes, melding genres. His landscapes include cityscapes, some abstracted to their essence in a series of pieces simply and powerfully titled *Walls*, *Buildings*, *Cathedrals*, and *Variations*. Still lifes are flattened and separated, upending the tradition of rendering objects on a tabletop with depth and a sense of space.

James Lechay's life as a painter began in earnest in 1929, when he dropped out of graduate school at the University of Illinois and headed to New York City to study



*Orange and Yellow Over New York*, not dated, oil on canvas, 33 by 43 inches  
ESTATE OF JAMES LECHAY



*Chequesett at Seven*, 1962, oil on canvas, 38 by 46 inches  
COLLECTION OF THE PROVINCETOWN ART ASSOCIATION AND MUSEUM



*Walls in Gray*, not dated, oil on canvas,  
31 by 21 inches ESTATE OF JAMES LECHAY

painting with his older brother, Myron Lechay (1898–1972). At the time, Hans Hofmann was exposing New York artists to European Modernism. Analytical, synthetic, and mechanical Cubism coupled with Surrealism and Naive/Primitive painting were heady influences, and in their midst the New York School of painting was born. Lechay was immersed in and affected for the rest of his life by the surface-oriented painting that emerged in that era. But he was never a slave to credos or trends.

At a time when artists began making works that featured staining, dripping, and rolling—exploring the process of painting as subject—Lechay maintained imagery in his own work. Even artists he admired or was close to did not overly influence him. Milton Avery, whom he knew personally, is a good example. *Chequesett at Seven* (1962), a sparse yet powerful landscape, is reminiscent of Avery’s economy of marks and shapes, combined with a limited color palette. Its flat white ground holds only three colors. A complementary relationship of toned-down

violet and yellow brushwork composes the simple form of the landscape, which appears as if it was painted with confidence in a matter of minutes. The hot mark of orange color in the sky conveys a sun, a place to pull the viewer in and a high contrast to the other two colors. It shows Lechay’s ability to convey a great deal in a single brush mark. Lechay’s painting *Icaria* (date unknown) also contains just the right three colors, three shapes, and a subtle shift in painted marks over larger color fields that brings to mind Avery. But Lechay’s use of color is the opposite of Avery’s; it is bold and rich rather than subtle and toned down. The green field in the painting jumps out at the viewer to make a powerful abstraction.

Commenting on James Lechay toward the end of his career, art historian and critic Ann Wilson Lloyd said, “Throughout the years [he] has continued to define his own agenda and stick with it, taking only what he needed from each movement as it came along. And that was very little, since he realized early on that the richest source of inspiration was inside his own persona, which brought about pure, process-driven painting, unhampered by the demons of careerism and trendiness.” In a 1990 interview during a show of his work at the Stephen Chandler Hall Gallery in Wellfleet, Lechay himself said, “I’ll take from anything at all if it can help me. I’m that kind of a thief, but basically I don’t compromise with myself.” He looks at other artists’ work, sees what is appealing and even steals a little, but does not copy. In this way, James Lechay left us a unique body of work that cannot be neatly categorized.

In the 1940s, Lechay worked for the WPA, painting street scenes and urban architecture in New York City. These early works include the undated large oil *Orange and Yellow Over New York* and a gouache on paper titled *Chinatown* (1953). Fast-forward thirty years and the same flat, loose marks that convey the essence of a window appear in paintings he made in the 1970s, during the heyday of Minimalism. Like Agnes Martin and Donald Judd, who offered a pared-down interpretation of form, Lechay’s undated *Walls*

*in Gray* is composed of just eight lines. It’s one of his most flattened paintings, but it still has depth through tonal variation in the signature Lechay gray. When I was first gaining interest in the artist’s work, I was told that Lechay was masterful in mixing gray tones and called gray a “vampire color”—when gray lies next to a more traditionally colored field it takes on the life essence of that color. For example, in *Double Portrait* (1984) Lechay put hints of the figures’ blue clothing and red sky in the gray ground that permeates throughout the surface. A closer look at the ground reveals an illusion of the color elements; subtleties of the colors meld into the gray. The most pure gray area in the top left of the canvas, overlaid with architectural marks, still picks up the presence of red and blue.

James Lechay was a professor at the University of Iowa for almost thirty years (1945–72), a position he filled when his dear friend Philip Guston left the university and recommended Lechay as his replacement. The moody, psychologically charged monochrome red in *Self-Portrait in Red* reveals Guston’s Abstract Expressionist influence on him. But Lechay likely influenced Guston as well. Guston abandoned his acclaimed style in a 1970 New York show of representational paintings that outraged his viewers. In hindsight, that show set the tone for the New Image painting that prevailed in American art throughout the ’70s and ’80s, reclaiming imagery in a painterly, lyrical, and also imaginary way without losing the process-oriented features of Abstract Expressionism.

James Lechay never stopped making representational paintings, producing works of stunning painterly reality even during the high tide of nonobjectivity and Conceptual art. Painting imagery during the time of “pure” abstraction was not avant-garde on his part, but personal. His portraits, typically titled *Head*, depicted immediate family and himself. In numerous portraits of his wife, Rose, her expression conveys the intimacy between them. He is looking at Rose, and she is also looking back at him, the

painter and her husband. Daniel Lechay and Jo Lechay Lion, the artist's children, were also constant subjects throughout their childhoods and beyond.

Lechay's signature series *Double Portraits* explores his relationships with those closest to him and their relationships with one another. The largest work in the PAAM exhibition, *Double Portrait* (1984), shows Jim and Rose touching shoulders but individually staring out beyond their gray Lechay surroundings. It speaks to their identities as a couple and as separate individuals. The painting also manages to convey their vitality, primarily through facial expression, as well as their mortality through the ghost-like color palette. Lechay said in his 1990 interview that viewers looking at a portrait "recognize something in themselves and they love it." He went on to explain that when he paints a portrait, he's seeing and painting himself as well, and that's what is most interesting to him. In working with so many of Lechay's portraits over several months, I found myself pulled into the intensity of the subjects' gaze, which moves directly into the eyes of the viewer, creating a connection with Jim and Rose and their experience of companionship.

In 1959, the couple commissioned architect Hayden Walling to design and build their home and Lechay's detached north-facing studio in Wellfleet. Walling was one of the architectural forerunners of the Cape Cod Modern style that extended Walter Gropius's Bauhaus simplicity and economy of design to the outer reaches of the Cape Cod peninsula. It was the ideal setting for Lechay, a painter who believed in a less-is-more approach. Lechay's family still owns the house and studio. His palette, brushes, image clippings, and worktable are intact. It is as if he stepped out to take a walk or have lunch only moments ago.

James Lechay's legacy is alive this summer at PAAM in his landscapes, which convey the Outer Cape's beautiful natural environment with simplicity and immediacy, the urban street scenes that transport us out of this rural place, the still lifes that reflect the quirky normality of everyday life, the portraits that encourage us to feel empathy with others, and the head and hand pictures—signature works that remind us of the artist's hand at work and the complex person guiding that hand. The great James Lechay is still bringing new life and curiosity about painting to Provincetown. I even notice some gray flattened grounds sinking into my own work. Such is his influence, giving all of us a greater awareness of how a hand makes its mark and reflects what we see and understand in the world around us. 📍

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# Downtown on the Beach

## THE PATH FROM GREENWICH VILLAGE TO HERRING COVE

By Brett Sokol

FORGING CRITICAL CONSENSUS in the present-day New York art world is a bit like herding cats. Don't expect opinions to line up in an orderly fashion. About the only thing New York's cultural arbiters agree on is that this past winter's *Inventing Downtown: Artist-Run Galleries in New York City, 1952-1965* was one of the best shows of the year, not only for the quality of its exhibited work but also for the historical lesson it offers to today's artists nostalgic for a less commercialized art world. With upward of a third of the show's works possessing an intimate connection to Provincetown's own art colony, it's a lesson that speaks as much to Provincetown as it does to New York.



*Inventing Downtown* installation view, featuring a painting by Alex Katz

Held at New York University's Grey Art Gallery, *Inventing Downtown* focused on a milieu that existed before the transformative rise of Pop, still very much in the shadow—both aesthetically and financially—of Abstract Expressionism, and reveling in its marginal status as a point of scrappy pride. The exhibition catalogue's cover image says it all: Red Grooms in 1960, fresh off a summer of washing dishes and art-making in Provincetown, delivering a massive painting to a downtown space. But who had money for a moving truck?

Grooms improvised, perching his painting in a baby carriage and dashing across traffic-filled

streets with his precariously balanced cargo—all with a pleased grin on his face. Ridiculous? Sure. But beyond personal satisfaction there was little reason for artists to show their work at any of the fourteen galleries whose exhibitions are featured in *Inventing Downtown*. The art market, such as it was in 1960, could've cared less about Grooms or the other artists he was showing alongside, such as then-unknowns Alex Katz, Jim Dine, Claes Oldenburg, and Tom Wesselmann. The moneyed action was uptown, resulting in a downtown art scene that was as much a state of mind as a geographic location. Accordingly, downtown's animating spirit owed

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