

the last realist



Painter Burt Levitsky champions an out-of-fashion style

Story by **WALLACE BAINE** Sentinel entertainment writer

Photos by **DAN COYRO** Sentinel staff photographer

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As a teenager in the 1950s, Burt Levitsky had something that kids his age growing up in Michigan or Texas or even California did not have.

Levitsky was a New Yorker, which was fortunate because he was also an aspiring artist, and New York is nothing less than — with apologies to Paris — the art capital of the Western world.

The New York Metropolitan Museum of Art (the Met) was a short subway ride away, and young Burt would often find himself on that train, then in those galleries, drawn to the work of Rubens and Velazquez, Vermeer and Ingres.

"It was the detail," says Levitsky, now 62 and living in Santa Cruz, looking for the words to describe what brought him back

to the Met again and again.

"The figures, the contrasts between dark and light. I couldn't take my eyes off those paintings. Here were these great works of art, and they were right there at the Met, just a train ride away from home."

There is a certain man-out-of-his-time wistfulness to Levitsky's musings on art. When he was a young artist during the late '50s and '60s, young artists were being swept away in the Warholian tenor of the times. Modern art was working hard to push the classicists Levitsky so admired to

the creatives

Portraits of talent in Santa Cruz County

Open Studio Arts Tour

Burt Levitsky is among 289 local artists who are taking part today and Sunday (and over the next two weekends) in the annual Open Studios Art Tour.

Get yourself a map and catalog — available at bookstores, museums, art galleries and cafes around the county — and enjoy a look inside the working studios of a tremendous variety of talented artists.

This weekend features artists (like Levitsky) who are located north of the Small Craft Harbor.

irrelevance.

Now 40 years later, classical realism has yet to regain the influence it once had on young artists.

But Levitsky, in his Santa Cruz studio, continues to practice the style of painting that shaped European art for centuries.

"It's been out of fashion for a long time," said Levitsky amid a room full of his paintings: landscapes, cityscapes, still lifes, nudes, even elaborate fantasy studies.

The room is golden with late-afternoon sunlight, which falls across a blank easel. Next to the easel is a carefully arranged tableau of a wine bottle and some fruit. There's something old-world about the stillness of the studio.

It's one of the few contemporary environments that Caravaggio might recognize.

Please see **LEVITSKY** on **Page B2**



ABOVE: Burt Levitsky sits in his home studio, surrounded by his paintings.

LEFT: Burt Levitsky's paintings, like this roof-top cityscape, display a near photo realism.

Levitsky

Continued from Page B1

Classical realists are often referred to, in vaguely derogatory tones, as "illustrators," as if rendering the world to painting in minute detail was all craft and no vision.

Levitsky takes such prejudices in stride, defending even such notoriously square "illustrators" as Norman Rockwell as masters of their trade.

"Michelangelo was an illustrator, basically an illustrator of Bible stories" he said. "He used to cut up cadavers to study anatomy, not that I would go that far."

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BURT LEVITSKY

Certainly, Levitsky is not hung up on photorealism; he's just

as apt to call Picasso or Chagall influences as any of the old-world masters. There is vision in Levitsky's work. His cityscapes are washed in a Hopper-esque stillness.

And he is capable of swinging back and forth. The dramatic clouds in his "Fields of Imishturk" border on the impressionistic. The gentle fade of blue to white in the sky in "The Cliffs of Davenport" suggest a meticulous craftsman rendering the light as he sees it.

Levitsky studied his craft in New York under the guidance of renowned illustrators such as Frank Reilly and Burne Hogarth. His work in those days was straight out of the Ashcan School tradition, images of city life, often dour images in muted grays and browns.

In the world of pop art, where painters like Warhol, Robert Rauschenberg and Larry Rivers were celebrities, Ashcan-style realists couldn't get a sniff from galleries.

"The galleries didn't want to touch art from artists like us," said Levitsky. "We were invisible."

Levitsky worked hard to get noticed in the New York art world. But by 1973 he found himself in California. By 1978 he was a single dad raising his son Lucas in Santa Cruz.

"My style has really evolved," he said. "Back in the '70s, I was doing a lot of fantasy, Tolkien stuff, for a while."

"It's weird, but I never wanted to be in the West. I just came out here on a whim and ended up staying."

Even now, Levitsky admits to a longing for the cities of the East, particularly New York. He paints cityscapes of San Francisco, but he talks most fervently about his New York landscapes.

One painting features a view from New York from across the East River in Brooklyn. Two fiddlers are playing in a grassy field with the Manhattan skyline in the background. In that skyline is the shape of the World Trade Center, though it is one of Levitsky's most recent paintings.

He says that he didn't put the towers in for any kind of political statement, but because they were familiar elements in a skyline he had looked at with an artist's eye many times before.