LILLIAN **ORLOWSKY** the signature is in the work

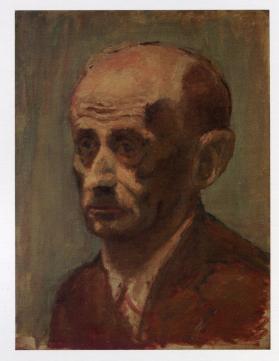
LILLIAN ORLOWSKY: Keeper of the Flame

April Kingsley

illian Orlowsky considered herself "fortunate" to have experienced the 1930s and 1940s in New York as a poor young art student. For her it was not only a "very passionate" time, but "one of the most important periods of art in this century." Why? Because of the Works Progress Administration (WPA), which supported artists financially to make their art and gave them public projects to work on as well, and because she found her way to the classes of Hans Hofmann who "taught her to see." There was much discussion and ferment in the 1930s, which she called the "happiest time of my life." The Artists Union was formed, according to Orlowsky, to protect the WPA, which conservatives in the government thought was full of subversives. The WPA gave artists a voice, even abstract artists. Orlowsky first "got on the Project" in 1937 in the mural division under Moses Soyer. She fondly remembers the conversations among artists when they went downtown to pick up their weekly stipends. There were many schools of thought, from Ashcan to Social Realism, but abstraction was not considered acceptable because it was apolitical — until Picasso's Guernica came to town and the new art married social comment. Mayor Fiorello H. LaGuardia encouraged the arts by establishing a City Art Week during which artists would form groups and show their work in one or another of the 57th Street galleries and at City Center. Hilla Rebay opened her suite at the Plaza Hotel for monthly artist get-togethers and the Artists Union showed their work. There were many juried shows and round table talks. A rapport existed between artists of all ages and schools of thought and endless discussions went on into the night at the Waldorf Cafeteria or Riker's in Greenwich Village — all this in addition to jazz at the Apollo and the Vanguard, lectures, and the theatre.

Doll Series Late 1980s, ink and mixed media collage on paper, 17 x 14 inches Orlowsky had been studying with very conservative, socially-concerned realists like Rafael² and Moses Soyer, and Anton Refrigier. Her paintings of the early 1930s are simple, solid still lifes and landscapes with hints of Paul Cézanne or of Milton Avery. Politics can come in, as it does in the presence of the capped worker in a landscape. Sometime in this Orlowsky acquired decade Guatemalan yarn doll that she included in her still lifes many dozens of times over the next sixty years. One might be tempted to tie personal implications to the doll as a child substitute for a woman who never had children, except for her frustration, even anger, when looking through a stack of sketches of the doll. "The g-dd-mn doll, I can't solve it! Practically, I just can't solve it." Apparently she didn't really want to, as she told her interviewer.³ Perhaps its soft floppiness offered a spatial challenge to translate into two dimensions. But, like her teacher Hofmann, all of Orlowsky's imagery is based somewhere in reality, whether the doll, a vase, or a woman in a chair is identifiable or not.

Her first oil painting (p.19) in Hans Hofmann's class, in 1937, is an abstraction that has the overall form of a standing figure, but lacks any specificity concerning identity. One is tempted to read the white rectangle in center right as a newspaper. The colors — red, green, ochre, blue and yellow — give no hints, and the only specific shape is an oval resting on white in the lower part. There is a



Portrait of Raphael Soyer 1934, oil on canvas board 15¹/₄ x 11¹/₂ inches

looseness and freedom about this painting that doesn't seem to recur in her work until the 1950s. It is as though she was, at least for a time, totally liberated and enjoying painting. She was still capable of the extremely subdued and restricted painting of Neo-plastic rectangles in tans and blues arrayed in a balanced field, but this tendency was ultimately left behind as she became increasingly Hofmannized. As she put it, she studied with him for the rest of her life. Actually she took his classes for about ten years in New York and on Cape Cod, where she and her husband William Freed built a home and studios, but afterwards she continued to drop in to hear his weekly "crits" and she became something of a historian or keeper of his legend.

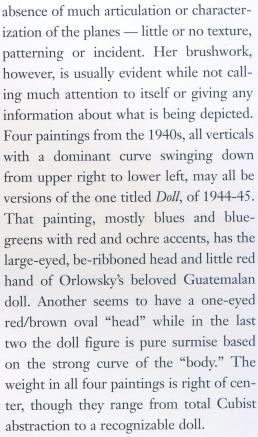
Orlowsky's Blue and Yellow Still Life, circa 1939, is very Cubist in a sedate Georges Braque kind of way, but in two paintings from the 1940s thick black lines vigorously enclose the forms the way Hofmann's often did. Red and green dominate both artists' paintings, which is not a



above: Blue and Yellow Still Life ca 1939, oil on board 22 x 16 inches

below: *Doll* 1945, oil on canvas 22 x 20 inches coincidence. Yellow ochres and blues are of secondary importance, and Orlowsky used them more than Hofmann. They are important in two abstractions of the late 1940s, one clearly a still life with a yellow candle or bottle on the right of a table that has a sculptural object on the left. The colors are rich and full-bodied here, but a

little toned down in the painting, which could be based on a figure since it seems to occupy a room setting or interior with a wall and perhaps a moon or the sun outside. Not relying on the black lines here to organize the space into a flat plane, and not having the security of using the table top convention, this painting has something of a surreal quality. In all these paintings you might note the



Most of Orlowsky's seated female figures are also drawn on the page in the same manner, curving down right to left. Her early Cubistic drawings in pen and ink or charcoal of seated women utilize Hofmann's axial structuring and, in their repeated specifics, provide clues to the presence of such figures in what otherwise seem at first glance to be still lifes both drawn and painted. In her ink drawings on paper of the doll, it is usually (miraculously) standing head tilted to the left, body curving slightly right to left on the way down. Her ink drawings are powerful things, bold and gutsy, never finessed and always a bit shocking in their childlike, yet highly sophisticated, brutalism. Her rude



black curves cut great chunks of imaginary matter out of pictorial space. She learned her Hofmann lesson well about the space between objects being at least as important as the object. Color enters the drawings in the later years and some become quite elaborate as do some of her paintings, with tendrils and massed dots, crosshatchings and other doodle-like marks.

Around 1950 Orlowsky's palette lightened and rosy pinks, lovely light blues, white and yellow took over the work red/green/ochre had formerly done. Abstraction, 1950, might be the beginning of this with orange replacing red, light blues instead of dark, lemon yellows and light greens with patches of white interspersed. Sometimes, particularly in the beginning years of the decade, these hues were simply distributed abstractly around the canvas, not seeming to denote any particular thing in the world. Morning Glow, 1952, seems more specific than most, perhaps a view through a window onto a summer landscape "framed" by straight edged, possibly architectural fragments in orange, gold and green. At other times the rectilinear fragments comprising the paintings seem paled in the white light or almost to disappear into the white heat of the sunlight being generated. In an untitled abstraction of 1956-57, the familiar patches of light colors seem to coalesce into human form in a highly generalized way. The area of most activity is definitely foregrounded, and the margins it leaves all but ignored. By 1958, the red/green/ochre is back, and so is subject matter. The Doll, 1958, features the

Guatemalan doll outlined in black on the left, its body and legs extending across the center of the canvas on what seems to be a table. The transparency that characterized the light-filled paintings earlier in the

decade has given way here to opacity and greater painterliness.

Orlowsky's new-found freedom to compose ad hoc in the call and response manner of Abstract Expressionism, which really seemed to emerge in her 1950s paintings, also brought her other new ways of working. She began adding collaged-on elements to her oils by the end of the decade in works like *Complex*



above: Dancing Doll early 1990s, ink on paper 24 x 18 inches

below: *Morning Glow* 1952, oil on canvas 30 x 24 inches



Movements, circa 1960, an oil and fabric collage on masonite. She had been a textile designer for many years to support her life as an artist, and now her love for textile patterns finally found an outlet in her work. Even though *Complex Movements* is ostensibly abstract, the plaid encircling orange could indicate a head and we might be looking at another ver-

sion of the doll still life. The white ground is a new development as well. A 1962 pastel and ink demonstrates two other new outlets for her free expression — pastel and calligraphy. The blurry underlying pastel planes are a departure for her, and the linear activity, which is both deliberate and accidental and

seems both Asian-inspired and musical, is new. So is the overall spontaneity. In some of the 1960s painting/collages Orlowsky achieves almost complete formlessness although one continues to assume a still life underpinning. And if there is a curve and a dot (for a head) with some material trailing off to the side below it (like a body and limbs) an abstraction can morph into a doll painting before your eyes, as happens in the untitled circa 1960 oil collage on masonite with pink, lavender, and orange passages around the "body" which is "dressed" in patterned fabric.



Complex Movements
Late 1950's/Early 1960's,
nixed media collage on masonite
21³/₄ x 22¹/₄ inches

Orlowsky remade herself once again late in life through the medium of collage. She rediscovered Matisse's late collages and used his freedom to achieve her own in a new area. As her oils became less concise and structured, collage stepped in to sharpen edges and clarify pictorial form. It is a joyous medium, perfect for abstract expression, since the artist can keep moving pieces of the form puzzle around until it suddenly "comes together" and "works." And, unless you deliberately use or create distressed materials, collage always has a clean freshness that feels young and new.4 As Orlowsky put it, "Collages are for me musical phrases in a kaleidoscope of visual experiences of plastic and pictorial expression."5 Written in 1989, it is clear that half a century later, Lillian Orlowsky was still keeping Hans Hofmann's flame burning.

Notes:

- 1. In all her interviews and profiles Orlowsky talks at length about these crucial and exciting years of her life. Her statement in the catalogue for her 1995 retrospective at the Provincetown Art Association and Museum is one of the last instances. During these years she also met William Freed, the man who would be her husband until his death in 1984.
- 2. She painted his portrait in 1934. (p.48)
- 3. Adam Gamble, "Portrait of an Artist: Lillian Orlowsky," *Provincetown Magazine* 6/22/95, 39, 41.
- 4. Collage on paper or masonite was also easier for her to do than painting as she grew older, and especially after losing her husband's help with the mechanics of stretching and preparing canvases.
- Lillian Orlowsky, "Artist's Statement," The Assembled Image: An Exhibition of Collage and Construction (exhib. cat.) PAAM, Provincetown, MA, 1989.