



Lev Goriansky. The Poet Who Meditates Imagining He is "The Fallen Angel."

A Russian in Retrospect: Lev Vladimir Goriensky

Carl Little



*Lev Goriensky in Maine.
Undated photograph.*

Art historians and critics spend much of their time trying to make sense of the evolution of aesthetics, how the work of one artist carries on or makes a break with tradition. Even as they do their best to reckon with new artists bursting upon the scene, they must also account for those individuals who just as suddenly emerge from seeming oblivion, with a body of work that demands reappraisal.

The excitement engendered by the latter encounters can be exhilarating, for each is an act of discovery. Such an experience occurred in 1992 when I was introduced to the work of Lev Vladimir Goriensky (1894-1967), a Russian-born artist who later painted on Mount Desert Island. Here was an *oeuvre* at once astonishing and without pretension. The fact that Goriensky's paintings had not been seen by the public since a group show at the Addison Gallery of American Art in Andover, Massachusetts, in 1957, astonished me.

To state that one's art reflects one's life is perhaps to state the obvious. Yet in order to understand what is a diverse body of work, we must know something of the remarkable life of Lev Vladimir Goriensky.

The painter was born Lev Vladimirovich in Kharkov, Ukraine, in 1894, the second son of Vladimir and Anna (Savich) Goriensky. Located 400 miles south-southwest of Moscow, Kharkov had served

as a military stronghold and as a trading and industrial center. By the time of the Revolution, it was the fifth largest city in Russia.

Lev's father was an engineer with the railroads. The Goriensky family would eventually number six, five boys and one girl. Both parents came from relatively well-to-do families, and Lev's childhood was a pleasant one. Brought up in the Eastern Orthodox Church, he attended local schools, including an excellent *gymnasium* (high school), and was tutored at home.

In 1910, at age 16, Lev won a Ministry of the Court scholarship and moved to St. Petersburg to enroll in the Imperial *École des Beaux-Arts*. There he studied art history with some of the best-known scholars of the day. His knowledge and appreciation of art grew a hundredfold. The iconography of the Madonna and Child, Byzantine art, the history of Russian icon painting – these were a few of the subjects that attracted the young student, and which would leave a lasting impression on him, affecting his own paintings years later.

Lev was also exposed to Western European art. For a time he lived with an uncle in an apartment in the Winter Palace adjacent to the Hermitage Museum, which housed some of the masterpieces amassed by Catherine the Great and other Russian rulers. Canvases by the great Dutch, French and Italian painters hung there, alongside masterpieces of Russian art.

The upheavals of World War I and the Russian Revolution interrupted the young man's studies. As a Flag Lieutenant in the Russian Imperial Navy, he was given various assignments, and traveled widely inside and outside Russia. Among the most traumatic episodes of this period were the murderous mutiny aboard the cruiser *Rurik*, in which Goriensky was selected to act as go-between; his time in a detention camp in Poland; the final farewell to his parents in Sebastopol in 1920; and a rough sea passage en route to North Africa, from where he would travel to his new home, America.

If the war and the Revolution prevented Goriensky from making art, they did not deter him from seeking it out. During a stop in Constantinople in 1920, he managed to visit the Hagia Sophia, the magnificent church dedicated to Divine Wisdom, built by the Emperor Justinian in the sixth century. The youthful Flag Lieutenant was awestruck by its art and architecture, by the mystical, symbolic and religious spirit of the place. Later in his life Goriensky would publish a full-fledged study of what he called “a landmark of the culture of the East.”

In 1921, Goriensky arrived in Norfolk, Virginia, whence he made his way to Washington, D.C., New York City and Boston. In New York he was befriended by fellow Russian *émigré* artist Nicholas Roerich (1874-1947), who hired him to help remodel a brownstone house on the upper west side of Manhattan that would serve as a space to display his paintings (the Roerich Museum opened in 1924).

In Boston, Goriensky enrolled at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He received a Bachelor's of Science in 1924 and a Master's in 1925, both degrees in architecture. As a student he won several drawing and design prizes; reproductions of some of his architectural renderings from this time evidence a highly skilled draughtsman. He cherished the mentorship of William Emerson, head of the Department of Architecture at MIT, and Jacques Carlu, a well-known French professor of art and design.

Before graduating, Goriensky had joined the Boston architectural firm Cram & Ferguson. From 1925 to 1932, he worked as a professional architect. Several projects stand out in these years. The architect helped design the great frieze in the baptistery of St. John the Divine in New York City (he was with Cram & Ferguson, who worked on the cathedral from 1911 to 1942). From 1929 to 1931, while with Cross & Cross, Goriensky worked on the general exterior and design of the City Bank and Farmer's Trust building (later First National City Bank), a skyscraper at 22 William Street in Manhattan.

In 1926, Goriensky met Carola Eliot at a party on Beacon Street. She was the daughter of Charles Eliot, a noted landscape architect who had died young, and granddaughter of Charles W. Eliot, former president of Harvard University. A year later, they were married. The family eventually grew to four with the arrival of sons Michael and Alexander.

Goriensky made his first trip to Mount Desert Island the summer after he met Carola. The pair took a train from New York to Boston, then caught the boat to Rockland, ending up in Northeast Harbor where they stayed with Carola's sister, Ellen Paine, who had rented a house near the Clifton dock.

In a memoir, Carola describes how she and her husband drove to Maine in September 1928 to visit her mother, Mary Yale Pitkin



*Carola Eliot Goriensky
and Lev Goriensky in
Northeast Harbor, 1928*

Eliot, at the Coffee Pot, named for the source of the money used to pay for it: a silver coffee pot given to President Eliot by Charles R. Crane. The house was designed by Roger Pierce. Over the years changes were made to the structure, including an extension to the dining room and the addition of a “playroom” and powder room, all designed by Lev Goriensky. On the death of her mother in 1947 Carola inherited “Orrin’s House” overlooking a field above Pebble Beach, not far from Savage’s Point. The house had been built in 1883 for Orrin Donnell, a seaman and caretaker for the Eliots, who also died in 1947.

Lev and Carola Goriensky lived in Brooklyn and New York City for a time, and then moved to Cambridge, where Lev received an M.A. in Fine Arts at Harvard in 1934. Later, the couple lived in Wellesley Hills, Wellesley and Andover, Massachusetts.

Goriansky wrote *The Fine Arts* in 1938, an analysis of the teaching of art in institutions of higher learning. To support his critique of some of the "soulless" practices of modern education and his call for individual initiative, the painter cited Charles W. Eliot. "The prime object of university methods of teaching today," Eliot had written, "should be to make the individual student think, and do something himself, and not merely to take an interest in and remember other people's thoughts."

In an autobiographical afterword to *The Fine Arts*, Goriansky described the "sincere and genuine artist" as "one who is in no hurry and will not allow himself to be pushed to exhibit his work in his early years; one who does not run after some sort of recognition for the purpose of immediate material success; one who patiently and humbly works for humanity and awaits cheerfully and modestly for others to accept his message."

It was in the late 1930s that Goriansky began to turn more of his attention to painting. Lengthy travel and study throughout Europe in 1934-36 helped fire up the artist in him. He sat in on classes at various universities (including Max Doerner's seminars in Munich), visited many of the great museums, and generally immersed himself in the art and architecture of the Old World. He viewed exhibitions of Rembrandt, Vermeer, van Gogh, El Greco and Titian, the last-named in the company of Dr. Denman Ross, a mentor of his at Harvard.

Goriansky's sketchbook from this trip includes views of the Grand Canal in Venice, a depiction of a bullfight in Spain, vignettes of a Paris café, and finely wrought studies of the facades and interiors of the many churches and cathedrals he visited. He also did sketches of Pisa, Florence, Rome, Chartres, Budapest and Berlin. A number of these small studies, carefully carried back to America, served as the basis for canvases in the late 1930s.

About this time Goriansky moved to Wellesley, where he became a member of the Wellesley Society of Artists and of its Art Commis-

sion. He also taught painting and life drawing classes for the society. He began showing with the Boston Society of Independent Artists in 1937 and, over the next twenty years, he took part in exhibitions in New York, Gloucester, Winchester, Boston and Andover.

Goriansky's education and religious upbringing in Russia led to a life-long appreciation of spiritual art. Icons, portraits of saints and prophets, mystical interpretations of church dogmas and biblical legends – all held the artist enthralled.

Among his earlier work is a stunning copy of *The Virgin of Vladimir*, one of Russia's most famous and beloved icons, named after the provincial city in Russia where it was first shown. Such a canvas reflects Goriansky's passion for Byzantine art, especially as manifested in its humanistic and intimate phase. He would later paint the Madonna and Child in a looser, modern manner, as figures floating within a frame of Cyrillic letters or emerging dream-like from a wall of flowers.

Goriansky managed to transform such traditional subjects into something new, drawing on their visionary aspects to enrich his own perspective on the present. As Dorothy Graffy observed in *The Christian Science Monitor* in 1946, in his art "one feels . . . a strain of the modern coupled with Byzantine tendencies," a blend that resulted in some of the painter's most memorable images.

Goriansky was drawn to biblical themes, sometimes cast in apocalyptic terms. Among his post-World War II paintings is *Blessed Are the Innocent Victims of the Atomic Bomb*, which was reproduced in the *Harvard Alumni Bulletin* in 1947. Reviewing Goriansky's exhibition at the Stuart Gallery in Boston in May 1947, *Boston Sunday Herald* art critic Lawrence Dame made special note of the artist's "fierce sense of doom, tied to the decadence of our civilization."

While his ties to certain themes in Russian art remained strong, Goriansky was also taken with subject matter he came upon in his

new surroundings. In the mid-40s, he produced a series of paintings of American sports, including football, baseball and basketball. One can imagine the foreigner being fascinated by the enormous attention given these games.

A favorite subject of American artists at the conclusion of World War II was VJ Day. To this specific historical moment of celebration, Goriansky, too, paid special tribute. In his painting, a sailor and his female partner dance across the floor while other patrons sit at the bar. Two angels bearing laurels hover over the dancers' heads, a detail that bespeaks Goriansky's love of classical art.

Besides the cityscapes created after his trip to Europe, landscape became a significant part of Goriansky's *oeuvre* when he began visiting his mother-in-law's home in Northeast Harbor soon after his marriage to Carola Eliot. Like many artists before and after him, he was taken with the coast of Maine and painted some impressive canvases. Among these paintings



*Lev Goriansky. VJ Day.
Oil on canvas, c. 1945.*

is a view of Northeast Harbor, now in the collection of the Farnsworth Museum of Art. Other notable coastal pieces include a painting of the Bear Island lighthouse, a bird's eye view of Mount Desert Island, and a wide-angle panorama of Castine. He also painted Little Long Pond in Seal Harbor and a view of Eagle Lake.



*Lev Goriansky. Bird's Eye View of Mount Desert Island.
Oil on canvas, no date.*

The coastal fog had special appeal to Goriansky, resulting in a remarkable series of atmospheric watercolors. The artist seldom used this medium, but it proved perfect for capturing what one early visitor to Mount Desert Island called “the fog pictures.”

In the whirlwind of contemporary styles Goriansky experimented as he wished and dealt with a wide range of subject matter. At the same time he was also refining his own expressionist aesthetic, one that set his work apart from the crowd and drew significant critical response.

One of the last reviews Goriansky received, by Dorothy Adlow in *The Christian Science Monitor* in 1953, attests to his deepening introspection. “The recent paintings show a withdrawal from the contemporary world of fact and common experience,” she wrote. “The visionary side of the artist’s nature prevails.”

The three paintings Goriansky showed in the Addison Gallery of American Art’s “12 Andover Artists” exhibition in the spring of 1957 represent, in a manner of speaking, the painter’s curtain call. From a photograph of the installation one can see that *St. Christopher, The*

Bride, and *The Fallen Angel*, hung together on a single wall, made for a powerful display. On the back of the last canvas Goriensky wrote the legend, "The Poet who meditates, imagining he is the fallen angel." The angel seems unperturbed by his predicament; indeed, he seems quite at ease in his posture of descent from the heavens.

In his copy of Richard Guggenheimer's book *Sight and Insight: A Prediction of New Perceptions in Art*, 1945, Goriensky highlighted the following passage: "The artist who labors not for vanity, not for reward, but out of the impelling fervor of his love for the beautiful glory of every instant of living, is a tonic and a savior." Such a credo is not easily followed, yet Lev Goriensky pursued it throughout his career. In the end, his paintings, born of that "impelling fervor," testify to the truth of his vision.

An abridged version of this essay appeared in the Bar Harbor Times, May 20, 1993, in conjunction with an exhibition of Lev Goriensky's work at the Northeast Harbor Library. The author thanks Michael and Alexander Goriensky for providing material and background information on their father, his life and art.

Carl Little is the author of a number of art books, including The Watercolors of John Singer Sargent (University of California Press) and The Art of Monhegan Island (Down East Books). He wrote the foreword to a reprint of Rachel Field's God's Pocket (Northeast Harbor Library). He is director of communications and marketing at the Maine Community Foundation. Little and his family moved to Somesville in 1988.



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