The ADVOCATE

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# JOE LASKER

## A VENERABLE ARTIST IN OUR MIDST

### By Abby Luby

**Special Correspondent**

There is something remarkable about the unassuming nature of celebrated artist Joe Lasker.

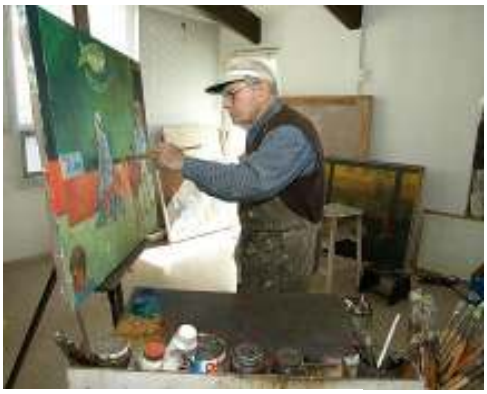


**Photo by David Lasker**

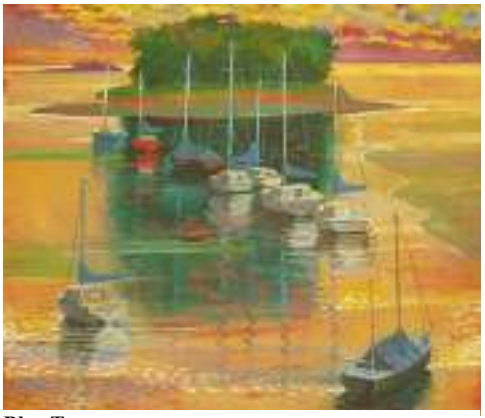
Lasker, 89, lives with his wife Millie in a modest home built 50 years ago in Village Creek at the edge of South Norwalk on Long Island Sound. It's the home where they raised their three children, where the walls are fully graced with paintings of his family he did over the years next to works by his close artist friends Raphael Soyer, David Levine, Charles Reid.

**Blue Porch**

Today, Lasker's paintings are in permanent collections at the Whitney Museum of American Art, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Hirshhorn Museum, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Baltimore Museum, Wadsworth Atheneum, Tel Aviv Museum, among others. His work fetches anywhere from $4,000 to $20,000. He has been awarded the prestigious Prix de Rome, a Guggenheim Fellowship, a residency at the prominent Yaddo artist colony, and has received numerous awards from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and the National Academy of Design.

Lasker's vibrant, illuminating colors and rich textures alternate between bold and delicate, subtle and obvious, intoning a unique, innate sense of mood. Deeply engaging, his work deftly integrates the romantic, impressionism and surreal genres. Lasker's

figurative work culls from his early childhood when he frequently wandered the streets of New York City, memorizing the energetic cityscapes, intriguing storefronts and animated people - later replaying those images on canvas. Equally expressive is his work in ink, pencil or watercolors where Lasker adroitly rendered portraits, still life, fantasy scenes and landscapes.



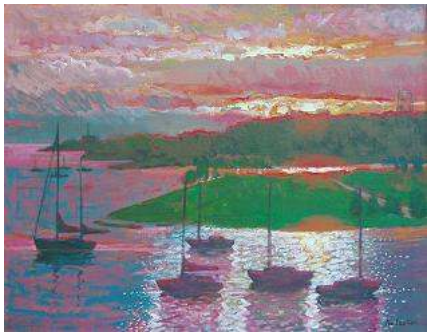
**Blue Tarps**

Born in New York City in 1919 of Eastern European immigrants Lasker says he always knew he was an artist. His father would take him to the Brooklyn Museum, steering him to the impressionist paintings.
"Ever since I could remember I wanted to be an artist, even before I could read or write. I was determined to be an artist no matter what."

This sense of self-as-artist often put Lasker at odds with grade school art teachers whose parochial approach seemed contrary to the young boy's natural creativity. Balking against formulaic instructions, Lasker remembers failing one art class for not explicitly following directions, an experience that would later stress the importance of an artist's limitless imagination.

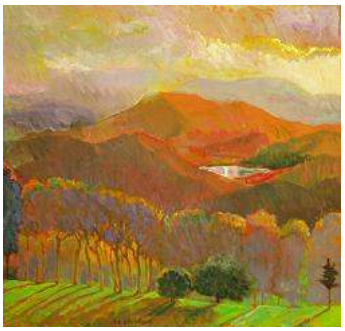
The real teacher for Lasker was the Sunday comics and pulp magazines. "As a child I really learned from those as well as from museums, magazines, art publications or anything that had terrific color illustrations."

Even though Lasker attended one of the top art schools, Cooper Union, today he says "If you want to be an artist, don't go to art school. Art is not like being an engineer, or a doctor. There are no boundaries to it, it's just you and your imagination. How do you teach that?"



**Dusk**

**Drink Up**

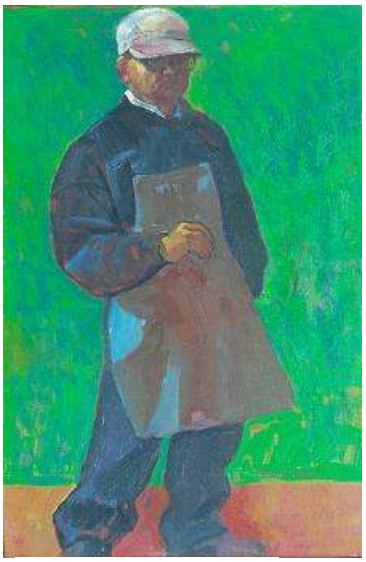


**Red Mountain**

When the Public Works Administration under Presidents Roosevelt and Truman offered artists a chance to compete to paint murals countrywide, Lasker applied. He was pleasantly surprised by being awarded contracts to paint smaller murals at two U.S. post offices: one in Calumet, Michigan, and the other in Millbury, Massachusetts. The murals are still there today.
"I began to feel that maybe I was an artist," Lasker recalls. "That was right before I went into the army."
When World War II broke out Lasker served as an expert engineer handling mines and explosives in Europe. "We built bridges and roads and fortunately I saw combat but was never in it."
After the war, picking up where he left off was difficult for the young artist.
"Re-entry was very confusing. It took me at least a year to find out who I was.
The GI bill was tremendously helpful for me and for the country. I got money for living and for art supplies. It also educated the men who then got good jobs and paid their taxes. There's nothing like it today."

Lasker remembers how small the art community was in New York City in the early 1950's. "You could see every one-man exhibition in Manhattan in one afternoon. After a while you would see the same people, nod to the famous artists. I would pass Edward Hopper several times and run into Raphael Soyer in galleries. Soyer and I started talking."

Raphael Soyer became one of Lasker's life long friends. They would discuss different approaches to painting; Soyer working predominantly from the human figure while Lasker created exterior environments. "I remember he asked me where I got my ideas and how did I know what to paint? He painted mostly models in the studio, something I wasn't interested in. But he was well on his way."
Soyer painted Lasker and his family many times and these paintings are now in Lasker's living room.

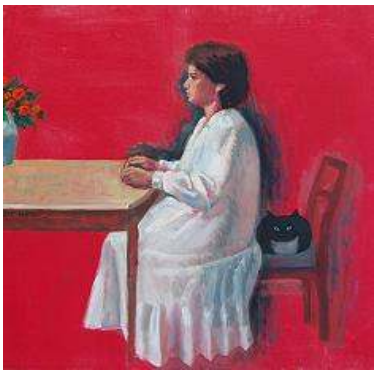

**Self Portrait**

The 1950's was a time when artists didn't make much money from their art but it was also a time when it was easier to get work shown and reviewed. When the Whitney Museum of American Art was on 8th Street in Greenwich Village, Lasker says any artist could submit paintings to be included in an annual show. "I submitted a painting and it was accepted, and the New York Times gave it a good mention."

But then, in what Lasker calls the art 'explosion,' the sale of one painting drastically changed the world of art in New York City. A front page story in The New York Times headlined the purchase of a painting by Andrew Wyeth for $34,000 by the Philadelphia Museum of Art. The painting was Wyeth's "Ground Hog Day" and it was one of the highest prices ever paid by an American museum for a work by a living, American painter. "That was in 1959 and it catapulted art into what is now a big business," Lasker recalls.

Today, Lasker is passionate about the growing gap between the singularly driven artist and what has become the big business of art. Art that now sells for millions of dollars serves more as a societal tool, he says.
"When there's big money involved there are a lot of interests. Many who are purchasing the work are not doing it for the art. It's an entrée into another level of society. You buy an abstract expressionist painter that you don't particularly care for, but can exchange if for a Van Gogh. You become one of the elite. It confirms your status in society."

As Lasker and his new wife were starting out, teaching art was another way to make a living. Although he wanted to teach in New York City, he ended up teaching in Westport Connecticut. After relocating to Connecticut he started thinking about illustrating children's books. It seemed a natural progression, his paintings seemed to tell stories, why not paint for stories already written?



**Woman in White**

"I knew a lot of people in Westport. Everybody was either a psychiatrist or an author of a children's book, and I knew a lot of those people writing children's books. I asked how to get into the field."
Lasker dragged his portfolio around to a myriad of art editors only to find it difficult to get his foot in the door. "But then I figured out the secret," he says of his eventual success in the world of children's books. "The secret was to have a manuscript that went along with the illustrations."

Lasker ended up writing stories for 10 of the 30 children's books that he illustrated. He is best known for his prize wining children's book "Merry Ever After."
"I wrote and illustrated a book based on two medieval weddings, a noble wedding and a peasant wedding and contrasted the two in the book. I got the idea from reading a lot of books about the Renaissance times."
For some of the books he created "illuminated manuscripts," art that is very colorful and bright and looks as they are being lit from behind.
"I like to write, I think if I wasn't an artist, I would be a writer," says Lasker.
"Both the writing and the art always influence each other. I get ideas from my paintings for my books and ideas from my books for my paintings."

Today Lasker's studio over looks an expanse of wetlands skirting the Long Island Sound. The view is partially blighted by the now defunct power plant on Manresa Island.
"We all fought that when it went up in the 1960's," Lasker says. "It went up and then they closed it down. Now they don't have the money to take it away."

But Lasker doesn't let the tainted view stop him. He still paints in the studio while listening to music from his large collection of mostly classical music CD's. His latest painting is a girl walking with a shoulder bag hanging off her shoulder. He saw the image in a magazine. "I want to do a bunch of these with different colored bags."

Lasker chides about the importance of being a well known painter with works in institution collections. "Having paintings in a museum collection is like icebergs, nine-tenths of it is in the basement or in a warehouse."
His advice to young artists today uncannily reflects his own experience. "Making it today depends on a lot of luck. If you exhibit a painting somewhere and a prominent person buys it, that can catapult you into another strata."
But above all Lasker reiterates what ultimately drives creativity:
"Art is a mysterious thing and the one rule is that there are no rules."