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Hans Burkhardt in Mexico

A Celebration of Form and Color

by Natalie Pashaie



Hans Burkhardt, *City at Night I, Guadalajara*, 1957, Oil on Canvas, 50 x 60 inches

Widely regarded as one of the great **Mexican** painters of all time is **Hans Burkhardt**, who, oddly, was a **Swiss**-born painter who grew up in **Los Angeles**. His **Latin American** identity, however, is granted to him through the honest and innovative ways in which he communicated the spirit of **Mexico**, where he resided for many years.



Hans Burkhardt, *Pink Sage*, 1960, Oil on Canvas, 18 x 25 inches



Hans Burkhardt, *Journey*, 1956, Oil on Canvas, 50 x 60 inches

Upon entering the gallery, viewers encounter such works such as *Journey* (1956), a mostly grey, blue and black foray into the unknown – abstract figures stand tall among the expansive, fading space around them. In that same room are pieces from his series *Silent Sounds*, including *Sounds of San Miguel* (1960), which depicts the ringing of the city’s bells in shapes that create a ghostly echo that are electric, near-sonic writhings of color. Though a constant awareness of mortality underlies Burkhardt’s works, they are not dark, but are alive in form and color and are even celebratory.



Hans Burkhardt, *Empty Houses*, 1951, Oil on Canvas, 12 x 24 inches

In *City at Night I, Guadalajara* (1957), structural forms highlight Burkhardt’s expertise in the city’s topography and his ability to render same in his own way. The work is architectural, dark and burning, though the palpability of his emotional awareness is never retired, nor is his ability to create a sense of reconciliation and hope. With *By the Candle Light* (1950), the energetic glow radiated by children transforms into blocks of red, orange, and yellow, hues of welcoming warmth.

Pieces that further explore death and the traditional processions associated with it include *Earth to Earth* (1956) and *Memory of San Miguel* (1956). Situated across from these paintings are works such as *Empty Houses* and *La Casa*, both from 1951, which depict abstract, blocky houses. The isolated compositional choices constitute a smooth glimpse into the spirit of the city’s architecture. Indeed, part of Burkhardt’s effectiveness lies in this ability to constantly reconcile the spiritual with the physical.

Also on view: paintings exemplifying the artist’s capacity to capture the essence of the culture through his own experience. Objects and people are reduced to shapes, and in this way become infinite, as in *Easter Morning* (1951) and *Flag Day* (1950), the latter a rhythmic representation of a cultural ceremony and its excitement.

Hans Burkhardt in Mexico seamlessly arranges works from 1950 and on. The piety of the people, despite the seemingly constant reminders of mortality in the city – funeral processions, ringing church bells – touched Burkhardt so intensely that these themes dominated his life’s work.



Hans Burkhardt, *Children – By The Candle Light*, 1950, Oil on Canvas, 32 x 42 inches



Hans Burkhardt, *The Dance*, 1957, Oil on Masonite, 10 ½ x 8 inches

His paintings are more than an aesthetically satiating array of abstraction – they are deeply aware and empathetic. Never shy of bold hues, these works employ coloristic techniques that communicate the honest and raw approach he took in representing his surroundings. Summed up eloquently by gallerist **Jack Rutberg**, Burkhardt had a genuine ability to “*capture a scene not only as it is seen, but as it is felt.*”

This exhibition is part of the Getty’s region-wide endeavor, **Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA**; also on view at the gallery is the exhibition **LIBERATOR: George Nama & George A. Romero**

Photos: Natalie Pashaie