

The painter, Pranas Lape was born on January 11, 1921, in Klaipeda, Lithuania. From 1941 to 1943 he studied at Kaunas Institute of Applied Arts. In 1944, ahead of the threatening Soviet Russian Occupation, he left Lithuania and moved to the West. Through Germany, Finland and Norway, he reached Sweden. In 1945–1946 he continued his studies at the private Anders Beckman School in Stockholm. From 1946 to 1949 Lape taught life drawing classes at the same school. Christmas 1949 he emigrated to the United States of America and settled in New York City.

From 1950 to 1956 he worked as a free lance artist, mostly designing and illustrating books for the largest publishers in New York: Doubleday, Scribners, Random House, Grosset & Dunlap, etc. After several years working in the commercial art field, he realized that commercial work was a negative influence on his own art work. Meanwhile, he was offered a position to organize and lead the art program at a private high school. Consequently, in 1957, Lape moved to Rowayton, Connecticut where he took the position as Art Director at the Thomas School. In 1971 The New England Commission on Independent Schools evaluated the art program, designed by Lape, as "...not only an unqualified success, it is one of the outstanding strengths of the Thomas School". In 1972 Lape signed a five-year contract to design a similar program for the Belmont Hill School in Belmont, Massachusetts. In 1978 Lape left educational work and moved to Chamberlain, Maine where he devoted his efforts exclusively to painting. Painting has always been of great interest in his life. He was especially inspired by his early art teacher, Vytautas Kairiukstis, who himself greatly admired the painter Pierre Bonnard. Later in Sweden, while working on murals, the beauty and the act of painting deepened Lape's interest and commitment to the art of painting.

As a book illustrator Lape designed over 300 book covers for American and Lithuanian publishers. He has illustrated *The Forest of Anykščiai* by Antanas Baranauskas (1961), *Ballades* by Maironis (1966), *The Land of Foster-Children* by Algimantas Mackus (1984), *On the Way to the Promised Land* by Antanas Gustaitis (1986), etc. He also worked on set designs for indoor and outdoor theatrical performances. While residing in Stockholm he designed murals for The World Sport Exhibition, Stockholm (1948) and for The World Congress for Nurses, Stockholm (1949). Lape began to exhibit his work in 1953 in New York. Since then he has participated in numerous group exhibitions with both Lithuanian and American artists. He has had only five solo exhibitions: 1965 Long Island, 1969 Chicago, 1980 New Canaan, 1981 Brooklyn and 1985 Boston.

Lape kept close contact with Lithuania during his exile. In 1964, he visited the occupied Lithuania, for the first time. When Lithuania restored its independence, after numerous previous visits, he returned permanently to his native land.

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LITHUANIAN ART IN AMERICA

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Can Lithuanian art in America be defined? Attempts have been made but a consensus is hard to reach on just what constitutes ethnic — or Lithuanian, as in our case — art. For the sake of discussion, one can probably say that ethnicity in art is that element in the creative process of an individual or group which shows the influence of past traditions. There is no such thing as Lithuanian art in America, if one expects to find some kind of identifiable, common Lithuanian style. But there is such a thing, if one grants that the cultural and social experience of Lithuanian-Americans, their history, memories and imagery differ to some degree from Americans of other ethnic backgrounds.

Lithuania as a nation has a long history dating back to the twelfth century. The traditions of its artistic endeavors are also deeply rooted in its people. The "authentic" elements in this tradition are considered to be those which have originated with the practitioners of folk art. Those intuitive artists were "unspoiled" by exposure to foreign influences or higher education but relied for their inspiration on natural talent and belief systems.

In compiling this survey of artists of Lithuanian descent living in America, I found that many of them still possess a definite connection with their ancestral background. Often they are influenced by its traditions and boldly incorporate its best elements into their universal art. Some of them have achieved recognition just because they have adopted a method, a subject matter, or a feeling for color and composition which is uniquely theirs as ethnics. This, of course, does not diminish the stature of others who work well outside their ethnic dimensions. Ethnicity is not a must for artistic expression, but where it is an important element, it is interesting to discover what it is and how it works.

Pranas Lapė has recently illustrated two books of Lithuanian poetry — "Augintinių Žemė" (The Land of Adopted Children) by Algimantas Mackus and "Pakelėje į pažadėtąją žemę" (On the Way to the Promised Land) by

Antanas Gustaitis. He also has been working on themes based on Donelaitis' poetry. When asked about the influence of Lithuanian ethnic traditions on his art he wrote the following: "Without doubt our art is different from that of the Latvians, Estonians, Russians, Poles, or Germans. Why this is so it is difficult to explain in a short statement. The differences between these nationalities are affected in part by differences in geography, living conditions, and national character. All of this is mixed in a complicated weaving which is hard to decipher. Artists do not learn from nature but from one another. Thus artists living together with the confines of the same nation, in the same territory, and being exposed to the same historic circumstances, have a natural tendency to form groups, units, and 'schools' through which unique art forms emerge. If this tendency continues to develop and grow over a longer period of time, it deserves to be called tradition.

"We Lithuanian artists living in the United States of America have not reached the point where we could say we have formed our own school or a Lithuanian tradition. We are scattered and separated by long distances; each is exposed to different types of experiences, ideas, and circumstances of life, was born and raised in Lithuania. I am conscious of being Lithuanian, not necessarily in a political sense or as a member of some insignificant 'ethnic' group. Just how much of Lithuanianism there is in my paintings I do not know. When I paint, I do not paint with patriotism but with a brush and paint. In my art I do not try to solve any 'ethnic' problems, but I do my best to adhere to the axioms which are required of good art. I live in natural surroundings, in a climate similar to that of my native Lithuania, where the seasons change exactly as they did in my home country. It is obvious to me that most people feel the changes of seasons in nature. These changes affect me even more. I organically feel them in my bones. I personally experience the different moods they bring and, of course, depict them on my canvases. I do not mimic nature. Since a 'mood' is said to be abstract, it naturally calls for the same treatment in art. But I have no intention of painting pure geometric 'squares' to express my emotions. Geometric abstractions are more akin to speculations which should be left to philosophers. I am inspired by Lithuanian poets who depict the landscape of my homeland. I enjoy reading the classic poetry of Donelaitis, Baranauskas, Maironis, and also modern poets such as Henrikas Nagys, who now lives in Canada. Sometimes the poets give me a push, other times I allow their moods to play on my canvas. Thus, as the Lithuanian saying goes, 'one who jumps into a puddle, does not come out of it dry,' so it is with me. I was born in Lithuania, and will always remain Lithuanian, even when I happen to be living on the other side of the lake."