

Urban Larsson

# Painter of Timeless Tranquility

BY PETER TRIPPI



The Amsterdam-based oil painter Urban Larsson (b. 1966) does not exhibit often, so it is just cause for celebration that his latest show will occur this season in his native city of Stockholm (October 14-23 at Skajs Antikhandel). Larsson has remained busy this year painting his usual array of portraits, figures, still lifes, and landscapes, and has also been pleased by the steady sales of a second handsome book about his work, produced a year ago by the Dutch publisher Bekking & Blitz.

Though he studied art history and architecture as an undergraduate in Stockholm, Larsson never lost his childhood passion for painting and drawing. Somehow an inner voice led him to the only atelier in Europe where what he now calls “traditional realism” was being taught in the late 1980s — operated by the American-born painters Charles H. Cecil and Daniel Graves in the onetime church converted into a studio by the 19th-century sculptor Lorenzo Bartolini. Larsson

spent nearly three years here, happily learning “to draw and paint from life as one would have at the academies and independent ateliers of Paris in the second half of the 19th century.” In 1991 he followed his Dutch girlfriend (now his wife) to Amsterdam, where he has worked full-time as an artist ever since. Represented there by Lara Wijsmuller Fine Art, Larsson remains fascinated with Holland’s culture and regularly sharpens his eye by examining its museums’ painted masterworks, most especially Rembrandt’s *St. Paul* in the Rijksmuseum.

Working in the north-lit studio once occupied by the well known Dutch artist G.H. Breitner (1857-1923), Larsson says his art is based on

*VIEW TOWARD SAN CASCIANO FROM QUATTRO STRADE*  
2000, OIL ON CANVAS, 7 3/4 x 13 IN.  
PRIVATE COLLECTION, FRANCE





**WOMAN IN KIMONO**

2010, OIL ON CANVAS, 23 1/2 x 19 3/4 IN.

SKAJS ANTIKHANDDEL, STOCKHOLM

“the study of nature, the visual language and techniques of artists of earlier centuries, and the concept of beauty.” This approach starts with the “logical” (e.g., draftsmanship, values, and coloring, which must be learned) and is then transcended by the “irrational” (the intuition, mood, feeling, and spirituality residing within every artist). This second aspect cannot be taught, of course, but in Florence Larsson eagerly acquired the sight-size method, through which painters continually stand back to compare their canvas with the subject. Thoroughly documented by the British artist Nicholas Beer in his book *Sight-Size Portraiture* (Crowood Press), sight-size’s significance to Larsson is epitomized by the long, runway-like floor mats he wears out striding to and from his easel.

Surrounded by the inspiring artworks made during Holland’s Golden Age, Larsson believes “that artists in all art forms, from visual to music to literature, hope to create something that will outlast our lifetimes.” He says, “We have a need to ‘mark’ our presence in this life, which consequently gives life a meaning.” Marking one’s presence these days could result in a flickering video installation or a giant fiberglass rabbit, yet Larsson has opted for the more traditional format of oil on canvas. “People have, I believe, a need for reflection,” he says. “In our time, when we are overwhelmed with high-speed images ... and often spectacular, attention-seeking contemporary art, it is, in a way, anachronistic to paint something

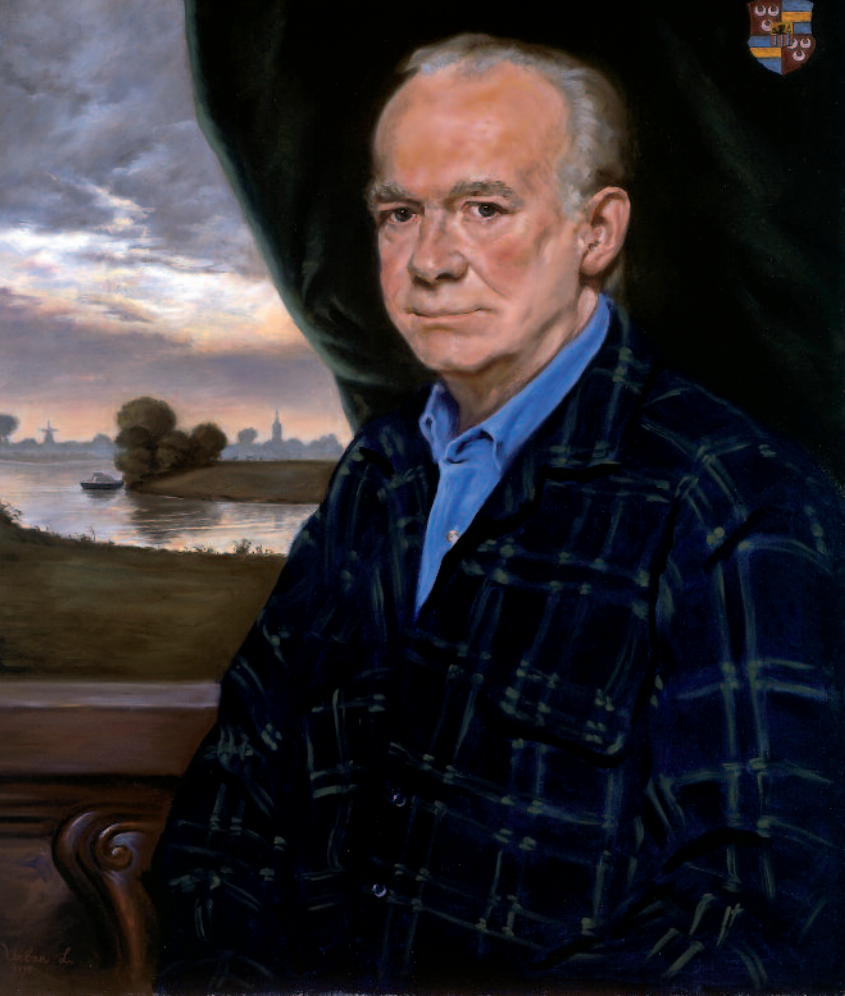
**STILL LIFE WITH WHITE VASES**

2011, OIL ON CANVAS, 15 3/4 x 31 1/2 IN.

SKAJS ANTIKHANDDEL, STOCKHOLM



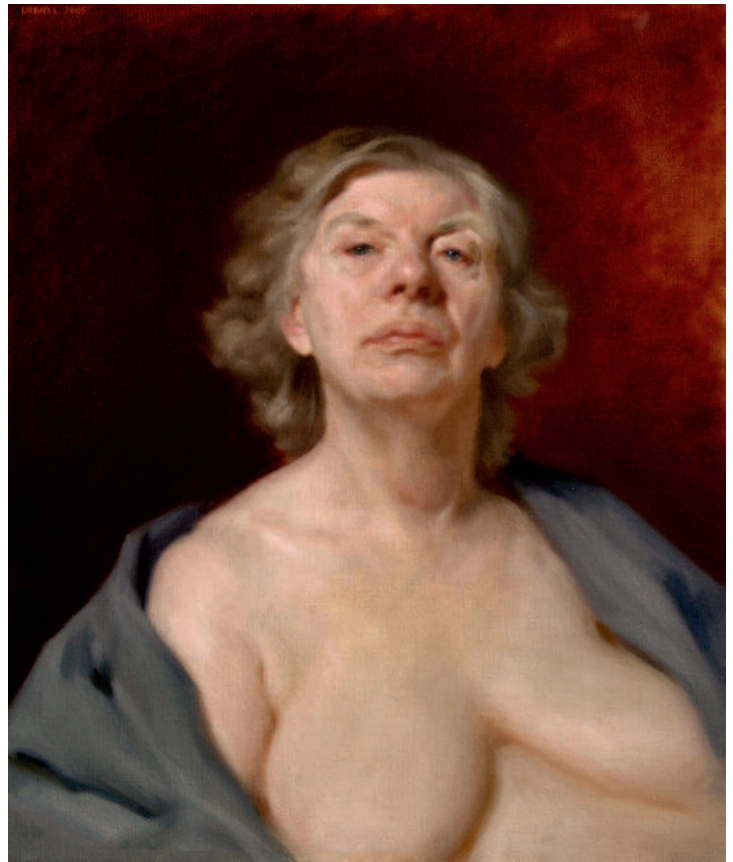




**PORTRAIT OF M.E.L. BARON VAN WASSANAER VAN NEDERHEMERT**

1995, OIL ON CANVAS, 27 1/2 x 23 1/2 IN.

PRIVATE COLLECTION, NETHERLANDS



**PORTRAIT OF LENIE (AN ARTISTS' MODEL SINCE THE 1950s)**

2005, OIL ON CANVAS, 23 1/2 x 19 3/4 IN.

PRIVATE COLLECTION, U.K.



which is trying to be subtle, silent, and apt for contemplation, but maybe just because of this anachronism it is important and meaningful.”

For instance, says Larsson, “There is nothing as interesting and challenging as painting the human being.” He particularly enjoys what the American painter Joseph De Camp (1858-1923) called “portrait pictures.” These are, Larsson explains, “paintings of people — often dancers — in certain poses, expressing introversion, moods, and contemplation, and, hopefully, conveying a sense of beauty.” A superb example is *Woman in a Chair* (2004), which figures prominently in the eloquent essay (see opposite) written for Larsson’s latest monograph by Jonkheer Jan Six XI, who grew up in the Six family’s Amsterdam house surrounded by their renowned art collection. Now a leading dealer in Old Master paintings and drawings, Jan Six is uniquely qualified to set *Woman in a Chair* into the broader contexts of art history and theory. ■

**Information:** *Skajs Antikhandel*, Nybrogatan 3, 114 34 Stockholm, Sweden, 46.08.611.76.80, [skajsantikhandel.com](http://skajsantikhandel.com). *Urban Larsson: Paintings & Drawings* contains 240 color illustrations spread over 160 pages and can be purchased via [bekkingblitz.com](http://bekkingblitz.com). *Amsterdam’s Jan Six Fine Art* ([jansix.nl](http://jansix.nl)) and *Lara Wijsmuller Fine Art* ([larawijsmuller.com](http://larawijsmuller.com)) are both open by appointment only.

PETER TRIPPI is editor of *Fine Art Connoisseur*.

**PORTRAIT OF NIKOLAJ (THE ARTIST’S SON)**

2009, CHARCOAL ON PAPER, 17 1/4 x 13 3/4 IN.

COLLECTION OF THE ARTIST

# The Peaceful Combat of Light and Shadow

BY JAN SIX XI

“So benumbed are we nowadays by electric lights that we have become utterly insensitive to the evils of excessive illumination,” wrote the Japanese aesthete and poet Junichiro Tanizaki in his acclaimed, though not widely known, essay *In Praise of Shadows* (1933). Mankind took control of artificial light when Edison invented the light bulb in 1879. Before then, we lived in darkness with simple means to find our way, such as candles, oil lamps, and fireplaces. Inevitably, Edison’s invention has had a profound impact on the way we look at art, and on how art has evolved.

Whenever one has the great pleasure to visit Urban Larsson’s studio, the first thing Larsson does, almost unconsciously, is turn off the light, then close part of the windows with a handy curtain system and let the nearly perfect northern light work its magic. Instantly, something changes. The first time I could not put my finger on it. It took me by surprise and has kept me thinking of that wonderful moment. Now, a few years later, I understand that it was the moment when I, as a spectator, became a player in the play I have come to call *the peaceful combat of light and shadow*.

For me, most of Larsson’s works have a tranquil, almost serene appearance that gives great pleasure to the eye, but also reveals a deep and thorough understanding of the many ways light can be used to divide, change, cut, and filter shadows or darkness. Fortunately, Larsson has almost never used the sharp chiaroscuro methods of his illustrious predecessors of the late 16th through late 17th centuries. Instead, he has set out to develop a distinct and wonderfully soft way to catch this interaction of light and shadows. The serenity of most of his accomplished compositions takes the spectator to a world of thoughts. I call it a play, as well trained painters conventionally try to emulate the perfect character of nature by changing just a tiny bit to keep the observer alert. Most of Larsson’s works are not easy, however; they follow a path of struggle to retrieve the right composition and especially the placement of light.

One of my favorite examples in this respect is the painting I’m inclined to call the *Portrait of a Neck* [officially, *Woman in a Chair*]. Here a young woman dressed in burgundy sits in a chair facing away from us. Although fully lit by tranquil northern light, she is set in different strengths of shade, moving from pitch-black passages in her dress and hair to calmly disturbed shadows due to the reflection of the light in the lacquer of the wooden chair. My eyes are drawn, most importantly, to the gradual frontier between the full bright light on the woman’s neck and towards the elegant hidden lines of her jaw and right ear. On top of this, the clever but careful touch of full light falls on the rim of her left ear. Wherever the eye leads you through this amazing composition, light and shade play with one another, confronting each other in pure calm, in peace.

Another amazing aspect is the placement of the sitter in the space around her. We cannot see any shadow cast by her figure on what might well be the wall beyond. The longer we look at this smooth, soft, brown-toned surface, the more it gives the impression of something that actually doesn’t reveal itself by characteristics: there are no corners, no shadows, and no defined elements of a particular structure. In fact, we assume

automatically that the woman looks at a wall, without our ever having been told or shown this. Although I am not a huge fan of comparing paintings by different artists, I discovered a similar moment in Jacques-Louis David’s monumental portrait of Marat lying dead in his tub. Though rendered in greater chiaroscuro, that artistic icon offers a similar non-definition of depth and, at the same time, an incredible depth around the protagonist. To the eye, it seems that the lower left and right corner are painted slightly darker, but still there is a lack of definition of any possible form.

A third element is the choice of colors. A set characteristic in Larsson’s work is softness of colors, and also the immense, deep, and strong form they reveal. His use of lead white, hand-ground in the 16th- and 17th-century manner, brings these gradient shades of red, brown, pink, and gray-green to a form. A brushstroke is actually graspable, creating a highlight, like the one on the chair’s rim. This has a form; it is not only painted, but also actually present. The incredibly difficult process of grinding and mixing oil paints to the right consistency is something I cannot witness often enough. It is unbelievable how many variations and possibilities exist, and also how quickly the

depth or richness of the desired shade of color can be foiled. One can imagine how relieved the Impressionists were when premixed tubes of paint were invented, yet the obtaining of that one right color, with the right softness and structure, is a victory of its own, and for me personally almost a reason to start learning how to paint in oils.

More than once, my visits to Larsson’s studio have ended with day becoming night. As we enjoy a good glass of wine, candles are lit and I notice how the paintings change. During the day, the lighter tones prevail and the highlights direct the eye. Nightfall not only changes these highlights but gives a far more subtle meaning to the shaded areas. It is as if these shades house a mysterious depth. Clinical electric light, so familiar to our modern eyes and so detested by Tanizaki, can never reveal such hidden treasures. Only the dancing, living light of a candle can facilitate true seeing, rather than mere looking. In Tanizaki’s eloquent words, “Ultimately it is the magic of shadows.”

As a dealer in Old Master paintings and drawings, I am truly pleased to know that the methods of painting perfected by our forefathers are still alive and available through the hands, the mind, and — above all else — the eyes of my dear friend and fellow *l’amante delle arti*, Urban Larsson.



WOMAN IN A CHAIR

2004, OIL ON CANVAS, 27 1/2 x 21 1/2 IN.

PRIVATE COLLECTION, U.S.A.