

**LUCIA WILCOX (1899 – 1974)**

Lucia was born in Philippopolis (Plovdiv), Bulgaria, on April 8, 1899, but, having grown up from a very young age in Beirut, she considered herself Lebanese. Her father, Leon Anavi, was Lebanese, and her mother, Jane, was French.<sup>1</sup> Sometime between 1914 and 1919, Lucia married Marshall Ralph Kabbaz (1899–1984), an American born in Olean, New York, who was attending the Syrian Protestant College in Beirut.<sup>2</sup> Their son, Alexander, was born on October 3, 1919.<sup>3</sup> The marriage enabled Lucia to become an American citizen, but it did not last. Lucia later remarked that she preferred to forget it.<sup>4</sup>

In 1921, Lucia applied for a United States passport at the American Consulate in Beirut in order to travel “in Syria, Egypt, France, Italy, and the British Isles while en route to the United States.” Although she may have intended to remain in Paris only briefly, she decided to stay, no doubt drawn by the vitality of the city and its affordability in the postwar years, when France was close to bankruptcy. Determined to become an artist, she frequented Café de Flore on the Left Bank, where she met other young aspiring artists. She recalled also meeting Fernand Léger and Pablo Picasso there.<sup>5</sup> Following her friends’ advice, she pursued art study in Paris, probably at the Académie Ranson, where several Nabi painters and their adherents taught.<sup>6</sup> Her mentor was the Fauvist painter André Derain, who visited museums with her. In Paris, she supported herself first as a seamstress and then as a successful textile designer.

At some point after 1926, Lucia married the Italian Surrealist painter Francesco Cristofanetti (1901–1951), with whom she and her son were living in Paris’s 8th arrondissement in 1931.<sup>7</sup> Lucia appears to have given the impetus to the Italian fashion designer Elsa Schiaparelli to establish her Parisian atelier in 1927. When Lucia designed ballet costumes for Schiaparelli in New York in 1940, a Rhode Island newspaper reported that she had “sponsored and launched the career of Schiaparelli,” suggesting that the two were close in Paris, where, in 1922, Schiaparelli left her husband behind in the United States and moved to Paris with her only daughter.<sup>8</sup> There, Lucia, along with Schiaparelli, became immersed in the Surrealist movement, including Lucia’s husband and such figures as Jean Cocteau and Salvador Dalí.

In Paris, Lucia also came to know the wealthy American expatriates Gerald and Sara Murphy—friends of F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway. The Murphys were prominent figures in the “Lost Generation,” the community of Americans in the 1920s who sought to escape perceived banality at home by becoming expatriates in Paris.<sup>9</sup> While Gerald was active as a painter in the 1920s, producing a series of semi-abstract paintings of commonplace objects with witty subtexts, he and Sara turned their attention subsequently to artistic patronage. Recognizing the thunder of the approaching war, the

Murphys sponsored Lucia's move to the United States in 1938. France was not yet directly at war, but Germany's expansionist policies and the failure of appeasement created growing unease and fear. Lucia recalled that the Murphys helped her "escape" Europe.<sup>10</sup> On September 28, 1938, she departed Le Havre for New York on the S.S. *Ile de France*.<sup>11</sup> She traveled with Léger, whose passage was also arranged by the Murphys. Before she left, Lucia likely attended the Universal Surrealist Exposition, held at the Galerie de Beaux-Arts in Paris in January–February 1938. Among the few women included was Méret Oppenheim, who displayed her fur-lined teacup (1936, Museum of Modern Art).

The Murphys offered refuge to Lucia, and in the summer of 1939, she and Léger stayed at the Wiborg estate of Sara Murphy's family in East Hampton.<sup>12</sup> Lucia would continue to spend summers in East Hampton in the years ahead, residing in Rose Cottage, one of the Wiborg estate houses. There the writer Anaïs Nin stayed with her and is said to have been writing a book in which Lucia was the leading character.<sup>13</sup> Art historian Phyllis Braff included Lucia among the modern artists who had developed an interest in Eastern Long Island as both a summer and year-round residence long before Surrealism took hold there (she was preceded there by Max Weber and Gerald Murphy). In the 1940s, Lucia was joined in East Hampton by artists who left Europe for the United States during the war, including many Surrealists. Braff writes, "The first large influx of Surrealists and others associated with their circle came in 1941 and 1942, with the wartime exodus of European artists. Among those who arrived during those years and came to stay for short or extended periods were André Breton, Max Ernst, André Masson, Fernand Léger, Kurt Seligmann, Yves Tanguy, Pierre Matisse, Jacques Lipchitz and his wife Berthe, and Jacqueline Lamba. Also part of this circle were Dorothea Tanning, Pavel Tchelitchew, and Leonora Carrington."<sup>14</sup> Despite wartime hardships, the area encouraged the artists to socialize, and they held literary salons and costume parties. At the same time, as Braff notes, the impact of the local art scene was profound, establishing a dialogue between the artists' rural studios and the New York art scene, where they showed their work at Peggy Guggenheim's Art of This Century gallery, opened in 1941, and at the gallery of Julien Levy.<sup>15</sup>

Francesco had followed Lucia to the United States in January 1939, and in 1940, he and Lucia leased an apartment at 80 West 40th Street.<sup>16</sup> In her early New York years, Lucia appears to have concentrated on costume and textile design, creating ballet costumes for Schiaparelli in 1940, who spent the War years in New York. In 1940, four of Lucia's decorative designs were featured in an exhibition exemplifying the serene atmosphere sought by American designers. An article described her patterns as a plaid in muted tones, an unrestrained herringbone design, a gay, maypole stripe, and an unconventional leaf motif on glazed chintz.<sup>17</sup> Meanwhile Lucia's husband gained recognition in the New York art world when his painting *Festival* was purchased by the Museum of Modern Art in January 1944

(deaccessioned in 2024) and a solo show of his work was held at the Valentine Gallery in December.<sup>18</sup> In that year Cristofanetti was included among American Surrealists with a work titled *Comet* (location unknown) in *Abstract and Surrealist Art in America*, a book by Sidney Janis (a wealthy clothing manufacturer who became a prominent art patron and a writer on art), in which Janis attempted to sum up the developments that led to directions in contemporary American art.<sup>19</sup> Examples from the book were included in an exhibition in December 1944 at the Brandt Gallery.<sup>20</sup> At this time, Janis, who had become Lucia's friend, encouraged her to shift her focus from commercial art to painting—although it is clear that she had been painting steadily since her arrival in the United States.

An exhibition of Lucia's work was among the first in the gallery Sidney Janis opened with his wife Harriet in October 1948. The initial show at the Sidney Janis Gallery was of the work of Léger. In November, the gallery presented the work of Wassily Kandinsky. The December exhibition featured paintings by Lucia Cristofanetti. In a review in the *New York Times*, Aline B. Louchheim identified Lucia as a newcomer, describing her works as “opulent in color. Every inch as busy with decoration as a Near-Eastern carpet, filled with mosque-like architecture, decorative trees, or geometric lozenge patterns. Her fantasy is rich and personal, from tigers with camouflaged protection which lurk in trees to couches which bear their sinuous female occupants aloft into a fairy-tale heaven.”<sup>21</sup> A review printed in several newspapers stated: “Subject matter and treatment by this shy [Lebanese] artist are a dramatic compound of Byzantine color, allegro fancy, modern treatment, and near mystic feeling. At times a dancing rhythmic feeling is evoked that gives Lucia's canvases a dancing rhythm. Her explanation: she was raised in [Beirut], thus expressed in these highly colored visionary paintings.” The article reported that five hundred people were at the opening, including “a full galaxy of critics, artists, and friends” who “waltzed around the bright new pictures.” The article stated, “In this new ‘fantasy’ show at the Janis Gallery [Lucia Cristofanetti] is a celebrity now.”<sup>22</sup>

By the time of the Sidney Janis exhibition, Lucia had not only gone her separate way from Francesco Cristofanetti, but she had remarried. In 1946, after selling a painting she owned by Maurice Utrillo, she purchased a rambling house on Abraham's Path in Amagansett. Her third husband was Roger Wilcox (1910–1998)—an artist and inventor. They married in 1947 and soon thereafter renovated their Amagansett house. It promptly became a hub for artists in the Hamptons. Artist Mike Solomon, who knew Lucia when he was young, recalls that “the reason the Surrealists came to East Hampton was to hang out with Lucia, who was among the earliest modern artists to live in the Hamptons.”<sup>23</sup> Lucia welcomed the Surrealist exiles into her Amagansett home, including Ernst, Dali, and Roberto Matta. There she also began to entertain a new generation of artists, including Pollock, de Kooning, Lipchitz, Isamu Noguchi, Robert Motherwell, and many others. Other

visitors were the critics Harold Rosenberg and Clement Greenberg, and the composer John Cage. Neighbors were Mike Solomon's parents, artist Syd Solomon and his wife Annie, a close friend of Lucia's.

Lucia had an unsung part in the crosscurrent between Surrealism and Abstract Expressionism that spawned the New York School. She recalled that in the early days in Amagansett, "Each of us lived on about 50 cents a day."<sup>24</sup> At her home, she fostered a salon-like atmosphere, uniting the artists around her superb cuisine, inspired by her childhood in Beirut and her years in Paris. In 1967, *New York Times* restaurant critic Craig Claiborne visited Lucia in Amagansett and published an article titled "An Artist Divides Her Creativity between Palette and Palate," including some of Lucia's recipes. She recalled cooking alongside the writer Colette in Paris. In the article Lucia stated, "Whenever I'm stuck in my painting, I go to the kitchen and cook. It clears my mind."<sup>25</sup> Lucia remembered intense discussions, joined by Noguchi and Gorky, while de Kooning "got excited easily."<sup>26</sup> Phyllis Braff recalls that the artists gravitated around Lucia because of her cooking, and "they were hungry!"<sup>27</sup>

In 1953, Lucia was featured in *17 East Hampton Artists*, an exhibition at Guild Hall in East Hampton. The catalogue's foreword was by the art historian and curator James Thrall Soby, who described the East Hampton community as a "sketching ground" for many of the "finest twentieth-century painters" one that lies in their "heart, mind, and nerves," producing an "incredibly rich and varied imagery."<sup>28</sup> The other artists in the exhibition included Alexander Brook, James Brooks, Elaine de Kooning, Willem de Kooning, Balcomb Greene, Gertrude Greene, Buffie Johnson, Lee Krasner, Julian Levi, John Little, Alfonso Ossorio, and Wilfrid Zogbaum. During the 1950s Lucia exhibited her work privately in an art gallery she created in her home, as *Newsday* reported in 1955. The article commented that Lucia's style, like her ultra-modern home, was unique. At the time she was "painting in relief," producing figures suggestive of sculpture protruding from her canvases; she sculpted them by applying paint with her tubes, adding it "drop by drop."<sup>29</sup> Such works took her months to create, and she often produced several at the same time.

Lucia also took part in the exhibitions at Signa Gallery which was established by Ossorio, which flourished in four summers from 1957 to 1960, showing works by well-known artists as well as some whose work had rarely been exhibited—including that of women. As noted by Helen Harrison, the artists often spearheaded Signa's shows, the purpose of which was to "increase the visibility of advanced art in the community," while the gallery provided a place for the artists to feel comfortable.<sup>30</sup> Lucia showed paintings in the exhibitions in 1957 and 1959. Among the artists in these shows were Karel Appel, Lee Bontecou, Friedel Dzubas, Perle Fine, David Hare, Grace Hartigan, Hans Hofmann, Franz Kline, Lee Krasner, Ibram

Lassaw, John Little, Motherwell, Ossorio, Charlotte Park, Richard Pousette-Dart, Milton Resnick, Miriam Schapiro, Syd Solomon, and Mark Tobey.

Lucia did not have another New York solo show until May 1961, when she exhibited new abstract works at the Lefebre Gallery, located at 47 East 77th Street. In existence from 1960 to 1986, the gallery featured many artists associated with the School of Paris in the 1950s, and John and Ljuba Lefebre were the only New York dealers to represent Cobra artists including Asger Jorn and Pierre Alechinsky.<sup>31</sup> Lucia adopted the action painting approach of many of her East Hampton friends in dynamic Abstract Expressionist works during the 1950s. Her 1961 show consisted of her abstract works limited to black and gray. A review in the *New-York Herald Tribune* stated: “Her curving and rhythmic ribbons of color and whiplash brushstrokes are exuberant in the extreme. More color would be overwhelming. As it is, without any natural content perceptible, the painting is stylishly handsome.”<sup>32</sup> In the *New York Times*, Stuart Preston remarked, “Flashing confidence characterizes Lucia Wilcox’s impetuously handled oils at the Lefebre Gallery. Considerable gusto as well animates her painting manners, whether the medium is applied in uninhibited spatters or broadly brushed strokes. And her whole repertoire of manual gestures gives reassuring proof of a distinctive response to paint.”<sup>33</sup> Lucia participated subsequently in group shows at the Lefebre Gallery. In August 1968, she showed her work at Benson Gallery, Bridgehampton, New York, along with Robert Dhaemers. In the late 1940s, Lucia and Roger began spending winters on Sanibel Island, Florida, where Lucia amassed a collection of shells, which Roger donated after her death in 1974 to the City of Sanibel.

In 1972, Lucia suffered cranial pain due to a tumor pressing on her optic nerve, and she suddenly became almost entirely blind. Nonetheless, she found a way to continue working, producing large canvases in “color depicting whirling galaxies, reflecting her interest in outer space,” as noted in the *New York Times*. Her husband Roger facilitated her work by arranging her pens according to color and developing a system that enabled her to orient herself to the image she was creating. Her work inspired de Kooning “to do a series of canvases with his eyes closed,” for which he later stated, “closing the eyes was very helpful to me.”<sup>34</sup> Continuing her career after becoming blind, Lucia painted and drew in defiance of perceived physical limitations. She first showed these works at the Benson Gallery. In May–June 1974, they were exhibited at the Leo Castelli Gallery in a show titled *Homage to Lucia Wilcox*. Although she was glad for the recognition, she felt she deserved it earlier in her career. She told a reporter for the *Washington Post*, “I am now making up for that injustice.”<sup>35</sup> Also in 1974, Lucia was included in *Artists in East Hampton: 100 Years Perspective*, curated by Phyllis Braff.

Lucia died of cancer at Columbia-Presbyterian Medical Center on September 2, 1974,

at age seventy-five. Her work was posthumously included in *The Figure Explored*, an exhibition at Guild Hall, mounted from December 1975 through January 1976. The show featured work by de Kooning, Nicole Bigar, Herman Cherry, Mabel D'Amico, Esther Gentle, Theodora Gavenchak, Robert Gwathmey, Balcomb Greene, Pollock, and Phillip Pavia. In 1980, Lucia's husband Roger Wilcox organized a show of fourteen works she created between 1943 and 1954 at a small gallery he opened in East Hampton. The exhibition was reviewed in the *New York Times* by Helen Harrison, who observed a progression in Lucia's art from the dark and rich tones of the war years to a controlled, ephemeral, and more obviously symbolic style in the late 1940s, in which she incorporated heavy impastos that turned her paintings into reliefs. The catalogue listed collectors of Lucia's work, including Léger, Sara Murphy, Sidney Janis, Bertha Schaeffer, Dorothy Newman, John Graham, and Harold Rosenberg. Lucia's work is also represented in the collection of Guild Hall. In 1990, Lucia was included in *East Hampton Avant-Garde: A Salute to the Signa Gallery, 1957–1960*, at Guild Hall, curated by Helen Harrison.

1. 1921 passport application. Lucia's father was a native of Bulgaria, and her mother, Jane, was born in Bukhara, Uzbekistan.
2. *Certificate of Registration of American Citizen*, April 24, 1915 for Marshall R. Kabazz, who left his residence in the United States on May 18, 1914, and arrived in Betroun, Mt. Lebanon on June 14, 1914, to attend the Syrian Protestant College.
3. Birth place, "Beyreuth" and birth date "October 3, 1919" for Alexander Kabazz.
4. Alden Whitman, "Blind L. I. Artist Prepares Spring Show: Fantasy on Paper," *New York Times*, April 29, 1973, p. 120.
5. Whitman.
6. Lucia recalled the school as the "Académie Ronsart." However, no such school existed, and her description fits the Académie Ranson, a private Paris art school begun in 1908 by the painter Paul Ranson and continued after his death in 1909 by his wife, Marie-France Ranson.
7. Paris census, 1931: Lucia Cristofanetti with husband Francesco Cristofanetti and Alexandre Cristofanetti on Faubourg-du-Roule, 8e arrondissement, Paris.
8. *Rhode Island Pendulum*, August 8, 1940, p. 7.
9. The Murphys were the inspiration for Dick and Nicole Diver in F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel *Tender is the Night* (1934); Sara was the model for Picasso's *Woman in White* (1923, Metropolitan Museum of Art), and Ernest Hemingway drew heavily on the Murphys in his posthumous memoir *A Moveable Feast* (1964). For a biography of the Murphys, see Amanda Vaill, *Everybody Was So Young: Gerald and Sara Murphy—A Lost Generation Love Story* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998).
10. Roger Wilcox, interview by Linda Patterson Miller, June 8, 1982. Lucia had met the Murphys in Paris, and they had helped finance her escape from that city in 1938; see Eric



Ernst, "Lucia's Woods Bear Art Again," *East Hampton Star*, July 26, 2001.

11. She is listed on the ship manifest as Lucia Cristofanetti, U. S. Citizen and artist.

12. See Robert Alan Aurthur, "Hitting the Boiling Point, Freakwise, at East Hampton," *Esquire* 77 (June 1972): 94–96, 200–18. "That summer Lucia stayed with the Murphys on what was then the Wiborg estate, Sara Murphy being born a Wiborg. The property, including a beach, extended west from the Maidstone Club and is no more, having been carved into smaller and very expensive holdings, and Wiborg Beach is now mostly known as Pink Beach. What has not been carved up is the Maidstone Club, a gothic fortress nestled in the dunes." Léger remained in the United States for five years.

13. Aurthur, p. 96.

14. Phyllis Braff, *The Surrealists and Their Friends on Eastern Long Island at Mid-Century* (East Hampton, N.Y.: Guild Hall, 1996), p. 6.

15. Braff, pp. 6–7.

16. "Apartment Rentals," *New York Times*, December 25, 1940, p. 41.

17. "'Serene Atmosphere' Sought by Designers," *Morning Call* (Paterson, New Jersey), September 30, 1940, p. 11.

18. Francesco Cristofanetti was also included in a group show at Valentine in 1946.

19. Sidney Janis, *Abstract and Surrealist Art in America* (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1944).

20. Howard Devree, "Among the New Shows," *New York Times*, December 3, 1944, p. X8.

21. Aline B. Louchheim, "4 Artists Display Works at Salons," *New York Times*, December 4, 1948, p. 11.

22. Alice Hughes, "Woman's New York: New Woman Artist Paints Pictures with Illusion of Floating," *Buffalo Courier Express*, December 8, 1948, p. 12. This writer mistakenly identified Lucia as Syrian.

23. Phone conversation, April 29, 2025.

24. Craig Claiborne, "An Artist Divides Her Creativity Between Palette and Palate," *New York Times*, July 20, 1967, p. 32.

25. Claiborne.

26. Annabelle Kerns, "The Artists," *Newsday*, September 4, 1971, p. 2W.

27. Phone conversation, April 30, 2025.

28. James Thrall Soby, "Foreword," in *17 East Hampton Artists*, exh. cat. (East Hampton, N.Y.: Guild Hall, 1953).

29. Liva Weil, "Artist's Home Is Where Her Paintings Are," *Newsday*, August 22, 1955, p. 41.

30. Helen Harrison, *East Hampton Avant-Garde: A Salute to the Signa Gallery, 1957–1960* (East Hampton, N.Y.: Guild Hall, 1990).

31. Lefebvre Gallery, <https://lefebregallery.com/about-/the-gallery-/1>.

32. C. B., "Lucia Wilcox Is Back After Long Absence," *New York Herald Tribune*, May 14, 1961, p. D19.
33. Stuart Preston, "Modern Sculptors Turn the Body into Art," *New York Times*, May 14, 1961, p. X11.
33. Freeman.
34. Stuart Auerbach, "Drawing for All Who Have Eyes to See," *Washington Post*, May 28, 1974, p. B1.
35. Helen A. Harrison, "Fanciful Figures, Lush Landscapes, and a Spiritual Vision," *New York Times*, July 20, 1980, p. 1