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What did Eugene Ludins think of himself? This is "Self-Portrait With Pipe," created during the heart of the Great Depression.

*Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art/Eugene Ludins*

Always proud to showcase significant regional work, the Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art at SUNY New Paltz will present a retrospective of an American original, painter Eugene Ludins. Curated by art historian Susana Torruella Leval, the exhibit offers a comprehensive view of the 70-year career of the inspired painter whose creative mark endures, though he died in 1996.

"It's wonderful to give a newer look to a fascinating artist, a person emblematic of a certain artist in Woodstock, who was full of integrity and whose dedication included a social conscience," said Leval.

A celebrated painter, draftsman, master framer and avid baseball player, Ludins was largely concerned with the human condition, in all its subtlety, glory

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and frailty. Like so many influential painters, Ludins studied at the Art Students League in New York City in the '20s. In 1929 he moved to Woodstock, committed to the creative life in the Hudson Valley as a resident of the Maverick Artist Colony. Following a lengthy teaching stint at the University of Iowa, he returned to Woodstock as a permanent resident in 1969.

Stylistically, Ludins was variously described as a romantic, an expressionist and a fantasist. Sara Pasti, director of the Dorsky, explained, "There is an element of the imagination in all his work. His landscapes have inserted scenarios — as a backdrop for human activity and the experience of being alive on the planet."

Ludins' paintings cover a wide range of subjects and genres, from the romances of characters in the Woodstock scene to dramatic pictures of social upheaval in which "you feel the rumblings of a looming war," said Leval. Ultimately, his paintings fall into two major categories: the landscapes, which put him in direct contact with nature, and his studio work, "what he called his problem pictures," added Leval. These often focused on a political world that concerned him. "Eugene was a very striking figure of his time," said Pasti. "He was a father figure to a number of artists, responsible for bringing awareness to art and artists of the region."

Indeed, Ludins' creativity extended beyond the canvas. From 1937-39, Ludins was the Ulster County supervisor of the Works Projects Administration, a huge federal program to put artists to work, said Leval. Woodstock had a considerable participation in the program, and Ludins played a pivotal role. He created an "Arts Caravan," a decommissioned ambulance put back into circulation and outfitted with art. The caravan traveled throughout New York, New Jersey and Pennsylvania, spreading its cultured message. The ambulance would set up in the town green, and local residents would weigh in with a ballot box to vote for their favorite paintings.

"In some ways, it was an early form of social media in its use of interactive strategy," explained Leval.

Ludins' activism continued into World War II, in which he volunteered with the Army Ambulance Corps, serving in Okinawa. Upon his return, he remained plugged in politically and was endlessly prolific as an artist. Ludins often made his visual statements with a wry sense of humor.

"The joy of life, of being alive, was shown in his work," said Pasti.