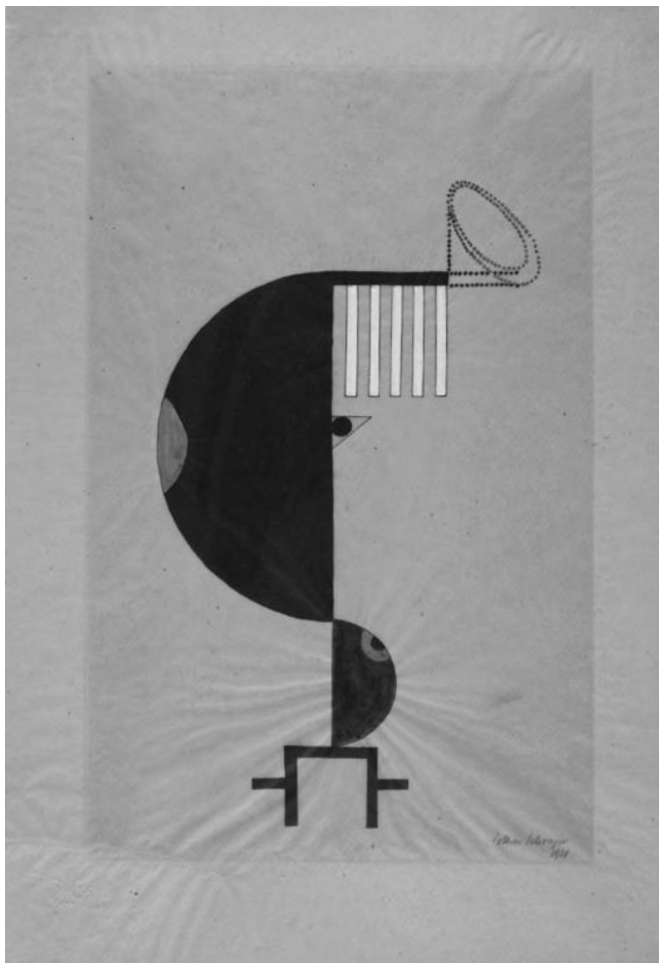


TOM LOMBARDO

# First Lady of The Grays



Lothar Schreyer.  
*Color study #6*  
for stage production  
"Kindsterben,"  
from the portfolio  
"New European  
Graphics, Portfolio I:  
Masters of the State  
Bauhaus in Weimar,"  
1921. Watercolor and  
gouache over lithograph  
printed in black ink on  
tan wove paper; sheet  
17-13/16 x 11-15/16 in.  
Harvard University Art  
Museums, Busch-  
Reisinger Museum.  
Gift of Julia Feininger,  
BR56.264. Imaging  
Department  
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THE GRAYS NEVER CAME FOR ME. I've hoped, and I've watched the skies, but they never came. I would have gone away with them, just for the adventure of it. And now, like everything else about me, my hopes have sagged into a mush of flab. If they were to come now, I doubt I'd have the energy to respond.

I believed in the Easter Bunny until I was seven when my cousin broke the news. Santa Claus, the following year. I was twenty-four when Betty Hill broke the news to me about The Grays.

But The Grays never came for me. They came for Betty Hill. They picked her up on a lonely highway in the White Mountains of New Hampshire shortly after midnight on September 20, 1961, and the experience changed her life. The Grays made Betty Hill the first and only credible alien abductee. And her description of her captors became the iconic alien in our culture.

Having never met The Grays myself, the next best thing in my life has to be meeting Betty Hill. My interview with her in 1974 was set up by Betty's niece Kathleen Daugherty, who lived next door on Ohio Avenue, two blocks from the University of Cincinnati campus.

One bright blue autumn Saturday morning, Kathleen came in through the back door with her cup of coffee, for a cheery chat, which was not so unusual, as the back doors to this duplex were always open to the patio in good weather, and we visited back and forth a lot. This particular Saturday morning, however, she made me an offer I couldn't refuse, in her uncompromising Yankee accent, "My Ahn-tie Eunice is coming to visit next week. Puh-haps, you'd like to intuh-view huh, maybe do an ah-tickle?"

At the time, I was a budding journalist, working entry-level jobs that proto-journalists do to gather clips, as editor of a small biweekly newspaper, *The Clifton-Vine Reporter*. Kathleen and her husband were among a close-knit group of friends who bonded in Cincinnati around the university life and who kidded me ruthlessly about my little neighborhood newspaper. They referred to it as *The Daily Planet*, Clark Kent's employer in the Superman comics. For my birthday the previous April, they gave me a nameplate that read "Perry White." He was the editor-in-chief of *The Daily Planet*, known for his "great Caesar's Ghost" reactions to Clark, Lois Lane, and Jimmy Olsen's exploits. That nameplate has been on my desk throughout my career as I eventually rose up the ranks to become an editor-in-chief myself.

I answered Kathleen, "Great Caesar's Ghost! Why would I want to interview your Auntie Eunice?"

Kathleen told me about her Auntie Eunice's UFO abduction experience. During the conversation, her husband Tom walked in, listened for a bit, and then rolled his eyes, and blasted her, "Your Auntie Eunice is a crackpot!" Then, addressing me, "She's crazy! Don't waste your time!" and stalked out the door. I should mention here that their marriage did not survive the Ford Administration.

I jumped at the opportunity to meet Auntie Eunice. I'd always believed in life out there. I couldn't conceive the vastness of our universe without life in abundance. The alternative—that we were the only ones—didn't seem plausible from any philosophical, physical, or phenomenological perspective. It seemed—still does—a certainty. Any kind of life: from viruses to superior races rocketing between

Camelopardalis and Canis Venetici, visiting, conquering, mating with, or feasting upon other life. I grew up on Tom Swift, Jules Verne, H.G. Wells, Arthur C. Clarke, and Captain Kirk.

A week later, I was in Kathleen's apartment having breakfast with her, her husband Tom, and her Auntie Eunice, the First Lady of The Grays. I introduced myself and turned on my tape recorder, and for the next hour, had a delightful breakfast conversation with Eunice Betty Hill, during which many eggs, cigarettes, and cups of coffee were consumed. To his credit, Tom, a usually opinionated, outspoken oaf, stayed quiet. Kathleen occasionally prompted her Auntie Eunice regarding details.

I hadn't listened to the tape of this interview in more than thirty years. I searched my basement recently and discovered it in a box that had survived six intercity moves, two of which were cross country, four more intracity moves, and three flooded basements. I held my breath as I inserted the tape into the player, and *lo!* The sound was still clear as a bell. I heard Betty's gravelly voice and a younger, naïve version of my own, and the clank of silverware on breakfast plates, along with the occasional exhale of cigarette smoke. I quit smoking a few years after this interview but not soon enough to halt the roots of asthma. Betty never quit and died of lung cancer, although she lived a full and rewarding thirty years more.

Betty described her and her husband Barney's drive home from a vacation in Québec on the night of September 19–20, 1961. Shortly after midnight, Betty said, "In the Lancaster area, we became aware of a craft in the sky. Barney saw it first as a big, bright star, moving toward us. It had the appearance of spinning, making sharp right-angle turns."

Betty dug out Barney's binoculars and followed the trajectory of the object.

"It stopped in mid-air right over our car," she said. "We slowed to a stop right in the middle of the highway. And when the craft descended toward our car, we sped off down the highway."

The craft, which Betty described as cigar-shaped, had a band of lights around its middle and V-shaped wings with red lights on the tips. "It flew off, but then swooped back down at our car," she said.

As the craft approached, Betty said, "Barney noticed a row of windows on the side. He saw humanoid figures in the windows."

At this point, Betty said, "We heard a series of loud beeping sounds." Betty described the sounds as "like someone had dropped a tuning fork." She said that they could feel the buzzing sounds vibrating their automobile.

After the beeping sounds ceased, Betty and Barney Hill proceeded south on State Route 3 to their home in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, and did not see the cigar-shaped craft again.

When they arrived home, they became confused because the drive had taken two hours longer than it should have. The next morning, Betty said that they noticed some strange metallic circles on their 1957 Chevy BelAire, and they were still confounded over their loss of two hours and other puzzling evidence: their watches sustained irreparable damage, Barney's shoes were badly scuffed, his leather binocular strap was broken, Betty's new dress was torn, they felt contaminated, and Barney's upper back was injured.

Convinced that she had seen a UFO, Betty phoned Pease Air Force Base in neighboring Newington, New Hampshire, the day after the experience to report what she had seen. She and Barney gave a general description of the craft that they observed, but Betty said that Barney did not mention the figures that he observed through the row of windows because he did not want to be seen as a crackpot.

Ten days later, Betty said, "I started having recurring dreams of a moon sitting on the ground."

And there the incident stayed for more than three years, until December 1964. "Barney developed ulcers, and he was unresponsive to treatment," Betty said. "So, his doctor sent him to a psychiatrist, a Dr. Stevens, who referred us to Dr. Ben Simon."

Dr. Simon insisted they both visit for therapy, and for the next seven months, under regression hypnosis, both Betty and Barney, in separate sessions, began to reveal explicit and intimate details of their experience on Route 3 during those lost two hours.

"After the first beeping sound," Betty said, "our car motor died, came to a stop, and we saw men on the highway. The men came in two groups, one on each side of the car, and took each of us along a path through the woods."

At this point I asked what they looked like.

"They were four-and-a-half or five-feet tall with gray skin," Betty said. "They were dressed in dark one-piece outfits with no insignias or zippers. They wore small caps. They had no hair or ears. They had very large eyes, slanted upwards, and a small nose. Only a slit for a mouth. I could not determine their gender or ages."

Did they communicate with you?

"Only one communicated with me," Betty said. "He communicated in English. His lips moved, but when they communicated with each other, it sounded like humming or tones. Barney described it as a swarm of bees."

"We were taken to their ship, like an orange-red moon. It was huge, sixty to sixty-five feet across," Betty said. "Inside the ship, we

were taken down a narrow corridor. I was taken into the first room, behind an oval, bulkhead door. Barney was taken to a different room. Inside, I was given a physical exam. They used what seemed like medical instruments. One was used to check my nervous system. They also inserted a needle into my navel, and they stopped because of my pain. They seemed quite interested in my feet and bone structure. They took pictures of our skin, Barney's [an African American] and mine [a white European]. They spent time tugging at my teeth. Barney's teeth were removable and mine were not. I tried to tell them why Barney's teeth were removable. They asked questions about time and age, but I couldn't seem to make them understand. Barney remembered that they put a cup-like instrument on his abdomen, that later caused a circle of warts to grow, and during our hypnosis with Dr. Simon, those warts became infected and had to be removed."

"I asked the one who spoke, whom I called The Leader, 'Where do you come from?' and he showed me a star map," Betty said. "I asked him for something to take back with me."

"When they took us back to our car," Betty said, "The Leader gave me a book. This created a hubbub among the others, a loud humming noise, like an argument. The Leader then came and took the book back and said, 'They decided that you would forget, so there's no need to have the book.' And I said to him, '*They* decided?' and he responded, 'They have just as much right to decide as I do.'"

Betty said, "I asked, 'Will you be back?' And the Leader responded that he didn't know, but he told us to wait in our car and watch them take off. The craft was glowing, lifted up, dipped, and went straight up without any noise. Then, we heard a second series of beeping sounds, and we were able to start our car and drive the rest of the way home."

Have they ever tried to contact you again?

"No," Betty said.

Are you glad that this happened to you?

"I don't know," Betty said. "I've never been asked that before. For a good many years, I wished it had not happened because the pressure was extreme."

Barney Hill died of a stroke in 1969.

Eunice Elizabeth "Betty" Hill died on October 17, 2004, of lung cancer. Her obituary appeared in the *New York Times* on October 23, 2004, under the headline "Betty Hill, 85, Figure in Alien Abduction Case." Her niece Kathleen Marden had become her sole caregiver and was cited in the obit. Ms. Marden continues to write articles in defense of her Auntie Eunice, debunking the debunkers.

After I turned off the tape recorder in that 1974 interview, Betty Hill lit another cigarette, drew deeply, and exhaled. Then in her grav-

elly voice, she asked: “Is that thing off now?” I assured her it was. And she said something that ruined it all for me: “I’m going to make my million off this story.” She mentioned that James Earl Jones had taken an interest in her story, and that he wanted to play the role of Barney, who was African-American.

She clearly intended her comment to be off the record, but now that she is dead, the bond of reporter confidentiality no longer exists.

The regression hypnosis revelations lent credibility to Betty and Barney Hill’s claims of alien abduction. Their story first appeared in a Boston newspaper, as a five-part series and then, *The Saturday Evening Post*, a widely circulated national magazine, published a sensational two-part series in the October 4 and 11, 1966, issues. A few weeks later, John G. Fuller’s bestselling nonfiction account of their experiences hit the bookstores. Entitled *Interrupted Journey*, the book contained transcriptions from their hypnotic sessions. In 1975, a movie *A UFO Incident* starring Estelle Parsons as Betty Hill and James Earl Jones as Barney was released for TV to very good reviews.

Betty Hill rode this publicity to the top of the UFO cosmos. She spoke all over the world to all sorts of groups, including debates with UFO debunkers, such as the famed *Aviation and Space Technology* Editor Phillip Klass and others. UFO buffs refer to her as the First Lady of UFOs. She officially “retired” from the UFO world on the thirtieth anniversary of her experience, in September 1991, although she continued to give interviews from her Portsmouth home.

Betty and Barney Hill were a media-darling couple for the times. Betty claimed to be a true descendent of the Mayflower Pilgrims. Barney was African-American, and they were both active in the NAACP, which made them a unique couple, ready-made for the Civil Rights era in the U.S. After Barney’s death, Betty continued her proselytizing as a loveable character, with her pronounced New Hampshire accent, gravelly voice, a seat-of-the-pants expertise about science and psychiatry and outer space, dismissive of critics with a “you-know-they’re-hiding-the-truth” air to her comments. UFO debunkers have poked many holes in her story, but the other side—the Believers—loved her and still do even after her death and cling to her story. And rightly so, because if Betty Hill told the truth, then UFO abductions have a leg to stand on. However, if Betty Hill told a lie, then the entire upside-down pyramid of UFO abductions, which rests all of its weight upon her, topples over. After Betty Hill, there really is no one nearly as credible.

Doesn’t matter which side of the UFO debate you stand on—or whether you care about UFOs at all—but the everlasting contribution to our literature, our media, and our culture from Betty Hill is her description of the aliens who abducted her and Barney and examined

them aboard their craft. The Grays have become the standard alien figure in our culture: the cover of Whitley Streiber's book *Communion*, the aliens in the movie *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, on TV series like *Roswell*, and even the alien cameos on the TV series *X Files*. In UFO lore, they are called "The Grays." There is some debate about whether Betty and Barney Hill saw a similar-looking alien in an episode of the TV series *The Outer Limits*, but my point is this: without Betty Hill's popularity, charm, and persistence, The Grays may have faded into the gray of distant memory. Instead, the image has permeated the world's culture. Obviously, other types of aliens occur in movies and books. The nasty beasts in the *Alien* movie series come to mind, and many other more maleficent creatures. Before Betty Hill, we had Robby the Robot in the movie *Forbidden Planet*, Klaatu and Gort in the movie *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, and other outlandish 1950s images of aliens, but once Betty Hill described The Grays, they took root. They seem to live on and on. E.T. herself was modeled on The Grays, and you can find little alien dolls that replicate Betty Hill's Grays in children's toy stores today. They are "cutified" for kids, and their very appearance lends them an aura of kindness that diminishes any sort of threat.

Those are the aliens I had hoped to meet. If only they had come for me in 1961 instead of Betty Hill, I would have volunteered to go with them, an eleven-year-old's dream. If they come now, the timing's not right for me. I couldn't leave my children, not yet. Maybe after they're in college, if The Grays come then, I'd beg them to take me. I'd love to spend my retirement exploring the galaxies with The Grays, examining all the life out there, perhaps communicating with some, seeing what's around the next bent light beam, what's on the other side of black holes.

Will you be back?

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TOM LOMBARDO's poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Oxford American*, *Southern Poetry Review*, *New York Quarterly*, *Hampden-Sydney Poetry Review*, *Pearl*, *Salamander*, *Poet Lore*, *Hawai'i Review*, *Aethlon: The Journal of Sports Literature*, *Orbis: Quarterly International Literary Journal*, as well as in many other publications. His literary criticism has appeared or is forthcoming in *New Letters*, *North Carolina Literary Review*, and *South Carolina Review*. He is currently editing an anthology, *The Poetry of Recovery*, due out later this year. He holds a master's degree in fine arts, creative writing, from Queens University of Charlotte, a master's degree in journalism from Ohio University, and a bachelor's degree in metallurgical engineering from Carnegie-Mellon University.