

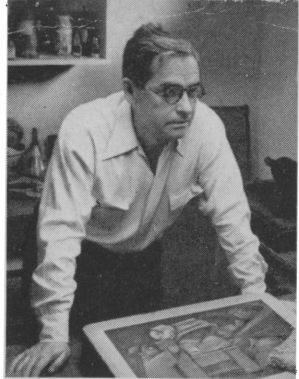
ART-
MAKING
FROM
MEXICO
TO
CHINA

JEAN CHARLOT

THIS VOLUME is a sequel to *Art from the Mayans to Disney*, a first collection of essays and it shares with its predecessor a quality unusual in art criticism, since it is criticism from the point of view of the art-maker. Jean Charlot is a practicing artist, a specialist in that most difficult of mediums, true fresco, and the breadth and scope of these essays suggest a transference to critical writing of the technique of the muralist, giving play to his brush over large wall surfaces. His subjects range from the Haitian Renaissance to Chinese ink painting, from El Greco to Tseng Yu-Ho, with the main stress on art-making in the Americas. His former book reprinted articles that represented pioneering recognition on Charlot's part of men now acknowledged as masters—Guadalupe Posada, Franklin C. Watkins, Louis M. Eilshemius, Edward Weston, Ben Shahn. In the present collection, artists already known are grouped with artists as yet unknown, on the sole basis of quality.

Charlot believes that if art is to have international validity, it should be solidly rooted in a given locale and culture, and it is this often neglected principle of the relationship of the art-maker with everyday life that is the leit-motif of his essays. The quandaries which assail the practicing artist are treated with feeling—though with no lack of humor. Scholarly subjects are dealt with without the impedimenta of dates and footnotes.

At present the author is in Honolulu painting Hawaiian murals; standing, as it were, on the threshold of Asia, he has added an appreciation of Chinese painting to an already extensive knowledge of art.



JEAN CHARLOT
was born and educated in Paris and studied art at the Beaux Arts. He boxed for recreation, and was once schoolboy lightweight

champion of France. Before coming to America, he served in the first World War, but since then most of his life has been spent on this side of the Atlantic. For some years he lived in Central America, where he painted a large group of frescoes for the Mexican government. From 1926 to 1929 he was with the Carnegie Institute's archaeological expedition to Chichen-Itza in Yucatan. Since then he has done murals in many parts of the United States. Mrs. Charlot is the former Zohmah Day, and they have four children. At present the family is living in Honolulu, where Charlot is doing murals on ancient Hawaiian themes.


His last book, *Art from the Mayans to Disney*, published by us in 1939, is now out of print, but we shall be delighted to reprint it if we receive sufficient requests to justify our doing so.

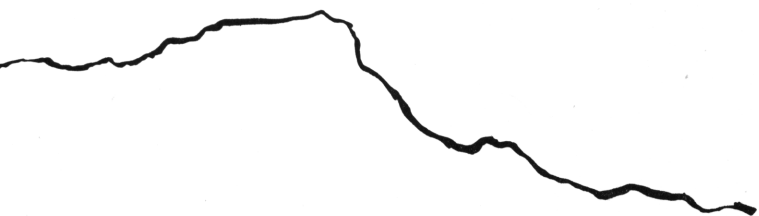
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***ART-MAKING FROM MEXICO
TO CHINA***

Tseng Yu-Ho: Riverscape. 



Art-Making from Mexico to China

by JEAN CHARLOT

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By the same Author:

ART FROM THE MAYANS TO DISNEY

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*ART-MAKING FROM MEXICO
TO CHINA*

1. THE ARTIST AS COPYIST

There is a maxim of Delacroix's that has helped lead astray many an artist, and that defines to a great extent the shortcomings of many of our "moderns": "The artist should use nature as a dictionary." This representation of natural vision as a phenomenon which, if not actually to be despised, is nevertheless to be considered as a means only, has imbued many a painter with a disrespect for the world as we see it and an exaggerated admiration for the shapes and fancies that dwell only in the artist's head. Yet if, before using nature as a springboard for inspiration, the painter would examine and analyze the nature of this accessory, he would perhaps, as other masters have before him, become so engrossed in his analysis and full of admiration for the results, that there would be no need to spring, that he could paint what he sees, and replace the sense of his own importance by a sense of awe before nature.


The world we paint is a different one from the world we live in, for it is already a photo-

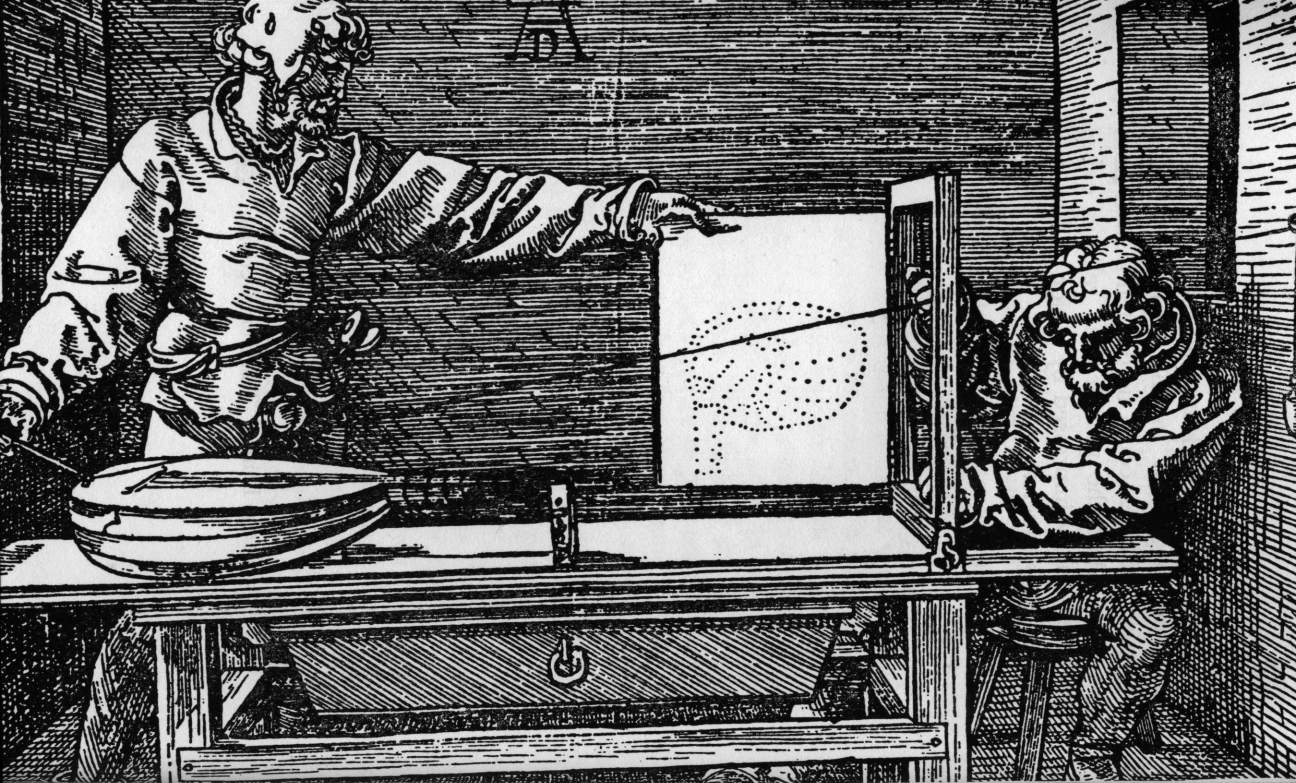
graphic image inverted on the sensitized inner coating of our retina. So that this problem of translating a three-dimensional world into two dimensions is a theoretical one, for the world we see is in reality already flattened on the concave surface of the inner eye.

It is a world which lacks many of the properties of the real world, for its objects, though recognizable, are deprived of the qualities we know them to have in our everyday life. A painted chair is not made to be sat upon, a fruit made of pigment to be eaten, or a picture of a woman to be made love to. Which explains the indifference of a lot of people realistically inclined for this world of the artist in which their senses find no meat. This lack of actual usefulness of the subject matter in pictures is a handicap to an extent, but the object, emptied of the meanings we know well, acquires new and unexpected ones.

The artist deals mainly with the physical, for as Poussin suggests, "There is no painting without solid." He will tend to classify the different objects in the world according to their shapes and relations of shapes, with utter disregard of established conventions: Thus when Velázquez went to Rome to paint the Pope, he first did a portrait of his negro colorgrinder, to prove to His Holiness how well he would paint him. For features in painting are a problem independent

of the majesty or lack of majesty of the sitter. Cézanne, engrossed in the representation of spherical surfaces, could hardly tell a skull from an apple. And the painter who relishes cubes may be equally impressed by a pair of dice or a pile of skyscrapers.

Albrecht Dürer: "The Perspectivist." 



2. *THE PAINTER SEES THE WORLD*

The theme of this article is the artist's description of the optical world in its most naked sensorial state, before this description becomes loaded with the emotional or mathematical computations bred in the artist's brain. The assumption that the painter who "merely" copies does an inferior job may arise from a failure to discriminate between the world as we know it and the world as we see it; for it is, in fact, when the artist copies most closely that he is furthest removed from the commonplace. When he copies through the eye alone he not only shuts out all the knowledge arrived at through the other senses and through scientific research or usage; he also denies the common ground between art and science—the preconceived postulates of mathematical or geometric composition. We could go further and say that the act of copying even precludes the many compromises between vision, the properties of pigments, the wrist and arm movements—all that in painting concerns craft and craftsmanship.

Putting nature on canvas is an activity similar to that of the botanist drying flowers between the leaves of his herbarium; to change live things into dead ones, to flatten things that are round, may seem to an observer of dubious usefulness. Yet the botanist, classifying the weeds of the dishevelled garden of nature, superimposes order and thereby adds to nature. Perhaps there is a similar vocation that spurs a painter to paint; his addition to the world's knowledge is bound to be of an esoteric kind, for if it could be expressed in words, the slowness, cumbersome and limitations of paint would make it the least desirable of mediums for the communication of this knowledge.

Vermeer sits before his easel. That the model is Fame the trumpet attests. The artist has started to paint the leaves of a coronet of laurels. The rest of the canvas is untouched as yet. Insect-like his brush will cover this plain surface stroke by stroke as with a *petit point* stitch. He has no plan, if we discount the humble personal opinion which explains the choice of a model and a light. If there is logic, if there is beauty, even emotion, in the finished picture, these traits will come from the outside, seized upon by Vermeer's attentively cool eye. A Tiepolo may astonish us with a Fame flying enveloped in a rustling train of varicolored scarves, a picture whose reference to the actual optical

world is as slight as the toe-marks of the diver against the springboard. The painter alone is responsible for whatever beauty there may be in the Italian picture. But the Dutchman astonishes us even more with his Fame solidly planted on both feet, the logic of his work emerging from the outside, just as it does when the jigsaw puzzle addict fits together tidbits and completes a picture whose effect he had not had in mind at the outset. Yet the plastic spectacle, gathering on the sensitized mirror that is the painter's eye, testifies in terms of optics to the ordered scheme of the world.

The painter who uses his brain to check on natural vision is greater than the painter who accepts a commonplace version of the world. Poussin beautifies his pictures with much knowledge of other arts, antique canons of beauty, poetical fables, musical *tempi*; he reenforces this knowledge with the rules of geometry and a philosophic climate that bind firmly together the too fluid elements of vision. One must also admire the terrific impact of a Tintoretto or a Greco, shattering the optical world and reforming it into another world after their own image. But perhaps greater than both types is the painter whose whole struggle lies in the effort to coordinate this inverted image on the inner eye and the man behind it, without reference to other sources of knowledge and without the

interposition of personality. This start from rock bottom, this primary struggle featuring man and his senses naked, may be the only discipline out of which the permanent metaphysics of paint can emerge.

Whereas the outer world is in three dimensions, a conglomeration of bulks that can be impacted, circumvented, felt or built, the world which the painter knows is different; it is an optical world, smashed flat, and upside down on the dark coating of his retina. Or rather, not truly flattened, it curves along the concavity of the inner eye, is received on this spheroidal screen which corresponds in the realm of optics to the factual shape of the universe. Out of the interrelationship of these twin round worlds, the physical macrocosm and the optical microcosm, grow a series of identities, overlapping, displacements and transformations which may yield a clue to the validity of the painter's language.

If one magnifies a newspaper photograph the better to see a detail, this detail vanishes further and is replaced by the meaningless dot-and-blank of a printer's screen. Similarly the man who plumbs natural vision finds that a blur gathers, muddling the neatly labeled things. Neither the line nor the color of the world as seen can stand a curious approach. The optical world is dependent on physical bodies only insofar as they are revealed by light. Light is its

most solid possession. The sleeper and the blind are conscious of things unseen but to the painter the unseen are as if they were not.

The eye gathers the meaning of the shape not from its silhouette but from inside. All modelings lead to this backbone of form, the frontier where light meets dark. Centrally located, this backbone of form draws to itself all the subsidiary, component forms, as the spine controls the web of the ribs. The outline proper, drained of power, expresses the illusiveness of matter rather than its boundaries; the form seen turns into the form unseen; the indistinct junction of solid and space affirms the sponginess of matter, as full of air as an expanded lung.

A house, a wall, a tree, are given definite colors by laymen as easily as if they were children's toy blocks; in the painter's world such local colors are modified by aerial perspective, slashed into contrasting hues by light and dark, suffer metamorphoses that transcend the limitations of our vocabulary. The seen world (of which color is the articulation) has no use for those generic terms that suffice to the man who is color-conscious only as he protects steel from rust, daubs a barn door or inspects the bill for his wife's new dress.

No body can stand optically isolated, as it is isolated by reason or by anatomy. Each affirms its affinity to its surroundings until the whole

is a unity, as is a straw matting or a shingle roof, each unit dovetailing into the next. The optical outline is not free, as in a mechanical rendering, but receives impacts from lines outside itself, is sucked in by tangential movements, is thus anchored securely to things far and near which it need never physically touch. Local color also reacts to its surroundings as edge meets edge. The apple, which the fruiterer knows to be solidly round, yellow and red, in Cézanne's eye magnifies its yellowness against a purple cloth, reddens to deeper hue against the green of a bottle, is dragged out of both shape and tone by the magnet of a wallpaper design. The object is tied further to its surroundings by the shadows cast; they transcend the object that casts them, ooze over neighboring objects like tentacles. The scientist has to explode the things we know into particles heretofore unknown before he reaches their common denominator. But the visual world, retaining the image of things as we know them—a table, a bottle, an apple—commingles them into a oneness to which common-sense experience offers no clue.

Optical objects, unlike factual ones, are not capable of measurement. With calipers and rod the anthropologists can subtract from man enough to equate him with a row of ciphers. But the shifting relationships in space of bulk and limbs make such a job impracticable for the

painter. When Dürer attempts numerical formulae he enters the realm of anatomists; if his etched Adam and Eve, instead of cautiously imitating a bas-relief, behaved with the reckless gusto of the leaves of the trees about them or the blades of grass at their toes their postulated measurements would collapse. The painter must reconcile himself to scientific monsters. A model extends his hand forward and it becomes as large as his torso, drags a foot back and it shrinks to the size of the big toe of his forward foot. There is more than a joke in Parmigianino's self-portrait, distorted in a concave mirror, for this bizarre and unscientific relation of limb to limb within a single body is of the essence of the optical world.

Such a world reacts in a most unEuclidian manner to objective spatial truth. When Raphael scorns perspectives as "those measures that seem to be and are not" he brings a fresh wonderment to the somewhat jaded view we take of scientific perspective; it is an incredible world where all parallels meet, where horizontals foreshorten into verticals; an architectural scene, drawn in perspective, opens and closes its right angles with the reckless dash of a señorita maneuvering a fan. This rendering from a single point of view is only half of the optical truth, for the fact from which the painter starts is not a single image in the camera obscura but twin images,

one on each of his retinas. Twins, but not identical, for if we shift our emphasis from one eye to the other, backgrounds slide sharply in relation to the object; the object, as we look at it through one eye and then the other, will expose, if it is close enough, more of one side and then of the other, as if it were pivoting gently. This primitive triangulation achieves computations in depth which the cubist tried to emulate—through both eyes used simultaneously we can see both sides of a sheet of paper, five facets of a die.

The distances involved in optics are relative, not measurable by yardstick but created anew in each picture. In a Cézanne landscape the pine-tree in the foreground is related to the Mont St. Victoire in the background by a pocket of space that may be no wider than (in his "Mardi gras") the space between the harlequin's right and left foot.

The relative importance of things in the objective world is graded according to man, his hobbies and his needs. The optical approach upsets this egocentric order. Snapshots of a great man may focus candidly on the creases of his trousers rather than on the pose he strikes. Inasmuch as the painter-copyist, too, functions as a camera he creates a new order based on shape and colors rather than on ethical, social or religious values. Paintings which attempt to pre-

serve the order based upon the laymen's usage can present only a useless world: painted chairs cannot be sat upon or sketched houses entered, etched beggars gather no alms, frescoed kings cannot rule.

When an astronomer computes the orbits of planets, man disappears from the landscape. When a scientist makes researches on the colloidal scale, man's body dissolves into cells, becomes unrecognizable. With his vision of the known world upset, man loses his supremacy and even his identity. Without changing the scale of vision but by shifting his point of view from routine knowledge to pure optics the painter also faces a revolution.

Thus, born of this new vision, paintings which are great plastic organizations glorify the inorganic rather than the human body. Giotto lavishes care on buildings and rocks. To strengthen man's body into the equivalent of a plastic tool he must needs cover it with heavy all-hiding cloaks which bring it closer to his beloved mountain forms. Raphael's bonneted pope is dwarfed by the upholstered tassel of his throne. Velásquez juggles in one picture with three spherical shapes: an apple, a dwarf, a prince. The human body can hardly compete with purer geometric forms or his fleshtone with that of flowers and skies. With man dethroned, other bodies assume

dictatorship, as do those candle-flames to which Greco dedicated a prose-poem.

However aloof the new-found hierarchy which governs his choice, the painter is no floating spirit but a severely anchored body. The world he discovers from his ambush is conditioned by the elasticity of the eye-lens and the varying length of the visual ray. With each given focus he finds himself at the core of a hollowed sphere with a range of visibility coinciding with its periphery. This spherical grasp of the outer world, which Cézanne refers to in a letter as "concentric vision," brings what we see of the universe out of a state of infinity and apparent disorder to a state limited, orderly, and as such within the range of human purposes. The classical concept of the world apparent in Raphael or Poussin is not wholly a mental construction but an echo of the humanistic order reigning within the optical sphere. The painter, having through candid vision upset the established hierarchy of things, finds in this "concentric vision" a new dignity. His becomes a pre-Galilean universe, with man again at its hub.

This assumption of a rigid focus is adopted for clarity's sake. But when we observe a scene our eye changes its focus according to the range of the objects successively sought. This gives a quasi-tactile reality to the selected details while the marginal areas become indistinct. Vermeer in

his "New Testament" at the Metropolitan Museum focuses on his background and fills the foreground with an amazing rendition of a tapestry seen in blurred vision. Titian in his neutral backdrops solves the Gordian problem in a dictatorial way by wiping the unfocused planes out of optical existence. To make everything in a picture equally sharp or equally hazy, no matter how far apart from each other in space, is to establish a composite image—which in painting is the equivalent of time. Successive focuses in the act of seeing collapse into simultaneity in the painted result. In terms of physics, the world that ebbs and flows inside the painter's eye justifies styles ranging from the sharpness of Mantegna to the fogs of Monet.

The gentle light, the amiable scenes favored by Vermeer, the humble objects Cézanne paints, are the wilful choice of men heroic enough to be copyists yet wise enough to channel natural vision into problems that are relatively simple and capable of solution—Cézanne's apple, Vermeer's bare walls, approximate laboratory conditions. Thus the man who copies finds that a style has been imposed on his work through the extreme chastity deemed wise in the choice of subjects—a simplicity such that beside it the purest antique groups of Puvis de Chavannes seem ambitious exertions. Others may relish stranger moods in nature, fantasies in optics tinged with

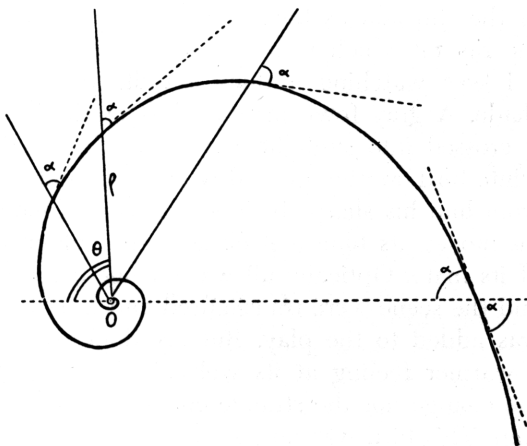
a content that is demonic, one is tempted to say Germanic. Such a scene confronted Leonardo, according to his own record—an old woman in black whose head, bonneted in white, seemed in the sunlight twice its natural size. Rembrandt seized upon the optical prestige of night devouring bodies; Grünewald recorded the miracle of their vanishing into intense light.

However candid the copyist's approach, his choice of a "motif" will tend to harmonize the physical fact that is his canvas with the optical facts of vision. Into Vermeer's optical world the canvas itself with its four square angles attracted square window panes, chessboard floor patterns, rectangular pictures that hang within the picture; this affinity translated into depth explains the cubed space of Vermeer's rooms, the cubical constructions of Cézanne and Giotto.

Concentric vision produces a taste for spherical forms. Again Vermeer illustrates the point in his astonishing picture at the Metropolitan Museum which bunches together those spheres—the mappamundi, the crystal of a celestial globe, the apple, the breast to which the hand points. For him the common denominator of vision is the globule of light and color dropped from the brush tip—to his painting as vital as the round cells in its blood are to a living organism. In "The Milkmaid" it transforms a loaf of bread into a star-studded universe. It is spherical

as the sun and as the eyeball, the two ends of the ray on which it is threaded, pearl-like.

I was watching a duck waddle out of the shade. A gray fowl on gray dust at the outset, it crossed into sunlight and became a dazzling white bird on pink ground while at a right angle from him his sharp shadow, just born, followed his moves, its blue feet close to the golden feet of its mate. Optically all was changed; the bird and the scene were transfigured and a dark bird was added to the play. But my duck, save for a warmer feeling at its webs, had not noticed the change nor the strange companion aping its step. This bird was no painter but, secure in its tactile experience, upheld a layman's faith in things as they are.



3. *ABSTRACT VS. CONCRETE*

In a world so topsy-turvy that labels are far from describing the goods they cover, where, for example, “peace mediation” means an act of war, we must not be surprised that in our own smaller world of art, similar double talk exists.

Thus the artist who refuses to tell a lie, who wants pigment to be no more than pigment, lines to mean only lines, and pictures to proclaim that they are but gesso or canvas daubed with a coat of paint, this artist becomes "abstract," with all the nebulous, spiritualistic and ectoplasmic innuendos that such a word suggests.

On the other hand the man who, far from calling a spade a spade, wants to pass his blob of paint for a cow, or a sunset, or the likeness of Aunt Mary, this man who tells you that flat is round, and near is far, is labeled a "realist."

If the issues remained in practice as clear-cut as that, there would be no doubt that the abstract painter is the more reasonable of the two, for he deals in reality instead of mirage. But one cognizant of all the "isms" knows that they span the gap between concrete and abstract by imperceptible transitions, so that they may all be covered by the juggling of two percentages, those two ingredients that are to be found in all works of art, Nature and X. Even within the purest non-objective art subject matter raises its ugly head, and even the most photographic performance differs from Nature's achievements.

The philistine who enters the portals of the museum where the Art of the Future is stored, finds that instead of enjoying such pictures as "frozen music," he speculates on such idle facts as whether circles are not intended as balloons,

moons or cheeses, verticals as trees or gutter-pipes, diagonals as rain or Jacob's ladder, and whether free-hand scribbles are not in fact frozen microbes. If pictures could exist without an onlooker, the pristine purity of abstract art could be guaranteed; but alas, the human eye that catalyzes the painting is an impure channel, trained by daily habit to interpret colored areas in function of subject matter, to judge distance in terms of change of scale as well as dimming of hues, to sum up in the ever-changing arc of a mouth all human emotions from laughter to drama.

The optical projection of a painting is the *sine qua non* of its being a painting at all, and automatically means the introduction (valid or not) in all paintings of problems in subject matter. It is better for the painter to deal with this truth instead of denying it. Once acknowledged as a factor always present, subject matter can be mastered for plastic purpose, as one deals with the other chemical and optical ingredients of the picture.

On the other hand, however perfect the illusion in a "realistic" picture, it remains quite distinct from reality. To the riddle, "What is it that has ears and cannot hear, eyes and cannot see, legs and cannot walk?" an answer as true as the accepted one is "A painted donkey." It illustrates the fact that art breeds, willy-nilly, abstract mon-

sters, abstract inasmuch as they are unfit for practical purposes. No man could be so singularly naive as to confuse a cow by Cuyp with one that could be milked; only the birds fancied that there was nourishment in the grapes of Zeuxis.

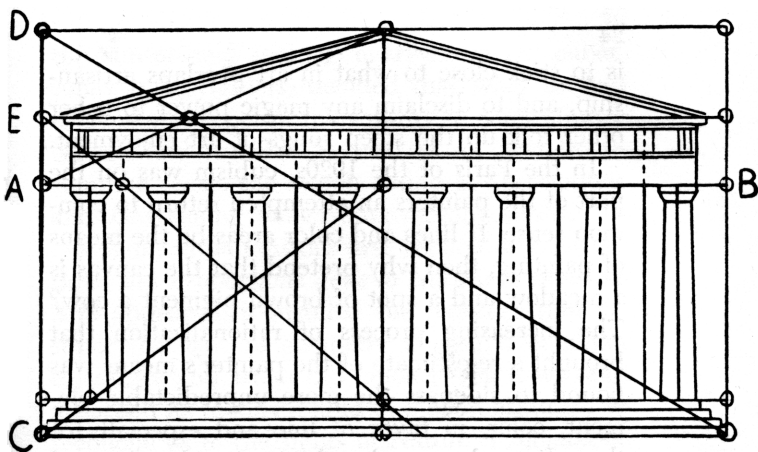
The gap between abstract and realistic painting exists only in our reading of them. Pictures the most ridden with subject matter, let us say the "Austerlitz" of Meissonier, are made of exactly the same plastic elements as pictures most devoid of it, for example, Malevich's "White on White." Both are a complex of lines, areas, colors, values, textures, the only difference being qualitative, one of size, number, affinity and contrast. But one thing happens in this particular case that happens also to humans: the one that was intent on spinning a heroic yarn neglected his shape, and thus became a comical sight.

The old masters have proved that one can perfect both a dream and a shape, that there is no incompatibility between formal balance and heroic thoughts, that in fact a great idea is more fittingly clothed in plastic impeccability. The man who looks at their paintings hurdles the problem of subject matter at once because of the clarity of exposition and the lack of equivocation. He is then cleansed, and free to appreciate the picture for its plasticity only.

Modern art, when it tackles subject matter at all, favors its most invertebrate categories: a bowl

of fruit, a napkin, a guitar, a nude, and does so with such deviations from natural appearances that most of the time we look at the picture is passed in comparing our own optical experience of the model with its esthetic "deformation." One is thus made prisoner of the subject matter that should be but a prologue of esthetic enjoyment.

Rarely does modern art aspire to what the ancients proudly called "historical painting," that is, the telling of great events and exalted fables. It may be that the trivial content and equivocal treatment of contemporary subject matter justifies as logical its total disappearance, and that abstract art is fated to be the art of the future. The other alternative is that subject matter must increase in interest, complexity and emotional content, that there will be a re-emergence in modern terms of the higher genres represented in the past by the St. Francis series of Giotto and the Loggias of Raphael.



4. THE GEOMETRY OF ART AND LIFE

When a Greek painter, heady with success, signed his pictures "He whose works are divine," a wag, by the change of a few letters, made it read, "He who shakes a hot stick," in derisive allusion to the cuisine of encaustic painting. As in antiquity, the modern artist remains split wide between the physical job of art making and the spiritual heights of esthetic contemplation. Probably the safest attitude for the practicing artist

is to stick close to what in art overlaps artisan-ship, and to disclaim any magic power to usher other folk up the steep rungs of art enjoyment.

In the Paris of the 1920s, cubism was on the part of the painters an attempted return to common sense. If lines and color areas be the means of painting, then why pretend that the canvas is a meadow and a spot of brown pigment a cow? The increasing process of rationalization that brought a re-estimate of the painter's means was bound to sidepass the more unpredictable element, color, in favor of line and especially of those lines that can be obtained with ruler and compass, and that are thus drained *a priori* of the personal idiosyncrasies that it was the cubist's aim to shake off.

Thus geometry appeared to the painter to be the possible common ground where the rationality of science could permeate art, its temperamental and repentant brother. The scientific training of most painters is shaky, but with the help of mechanical aids artists managed to introduce in their pictures enough straight lines and related angles to give them a geometric flavor.

Naturally, the cubist looked at nature to find a justification for his doings, but what he saw was disappointing. With the strict state of mind to be expected from a convert, nature seemed to him a very loose affair. The painter frowned at the old standards of beauty—the swan, the rose,

the sunset—and looking everywhere for cubes, cones and cylinders, decided that what he had in mind was superior in its purity to what Mother Nature had to offer. Started as an exercise in common sense, the search ended in abstractions and the weaning away from everyday optics.

When Matila Ghyka's first version of *L'Esthétique des Proportions dans la Nature et dans les Arts* appeared, it justified the painter's dim instinct that saw in geometry a ground common to science and art. It did much (even if we only absorbed its text by a kind of mental osmosis) to reconcile us to the sights of Nature. I remember with what surprise I discovered that the sun flower—made by Van Gogh into a kind of expressionistic soul-mirror and rejected as impossibly romantic by the cubists—grows along a pattern of logarithmic spiral. To learn that the decreasing size ratio of the vertebrae of the neck of a swan can be interpreted mathematically made us humble, as it suggested that the foundation of beauty, even postcard beauty, went deep into this Pythagorean realm of numbers at whose threshold we stood, Ghyka's book in hand and a duncecap securely screwed over our bohemian wigs.

An important section of the present book refers to the geometric *leitmotif* that links the different periods of art making. Under the skin of style—classical, gothic, renaissance, modern—a few

choice proportions, a few mathematical beats constitute the common denominator.

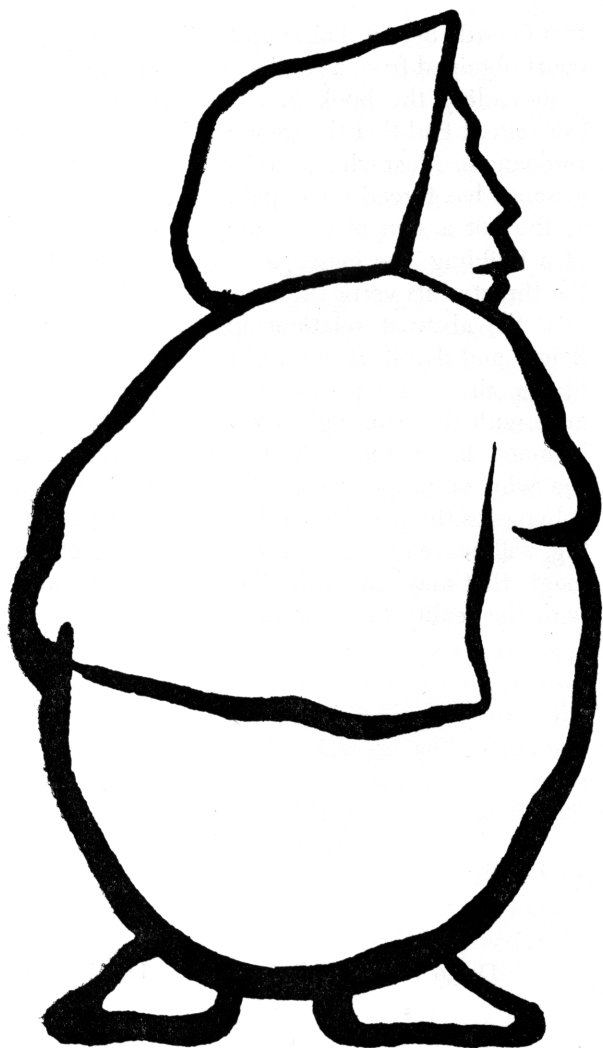
The faithful who kneeled in a gothic cathedral, the metallic assertions of an Ucello painting, the French finesse of a Seurat, all owe something to the golden proportion. As this is not an obvious element of the work, one is justified in speaking of esoteric knowledge. But one should be careful not to mistake the hidden for the obscure, and not to attribute to numbers supreme spiritual qualities. This may be right in the case of a Pythagoras who deals in metaphysics, but the painter is at work only when his hands are at work. To be fruitful his meditations must be short and to the point, and a certain mumbo-jumbo that has crept over art geometry, saddling it with quasi-mystical properties, will perforce leave the practicing artist unmoved. Golden proportion, harmonic door, Egyptian triangle, furnish him with a set of handy recipes no more mysterious than those to be found in a cookbook. A good cookbook put to action procures substantial delight, and the painter who uses the diagrams proposed by Ghyka will commune through these mechanical means with ways whose soundness is already proved by the flower, the crystal, the sea-shell, etc.

That the method is not foolproof is shown by some of the illustrations. That it is an open channel to mood appears from the dissimilar results

that Guardi, Seurat, Dürer and Villard de Honne-court obtained from a similar preoccupation.

Rereading the book in its new form and at this date, I find that the same truths acquire new resonances. Meanwhile, an American mural renaissance has forced many painters to experience, as they fit a skin of color over the inner space of a building, the inescapable order inherent to the thrust of its verticals, the level of its horizontals, the abstract relationships between width, height and depth. If at all gifted with a sense of fitness, the mural painter will work in accordance with the painting's permanent habitat, feel hemmed in by the resistancy of materials and the why of proportions. Ghyka's book, though it bypasses the peculiar problems of mural painting, will prove useful to muralists in search of the magic that may match the illusive painted world with the reality of an architecture.

Diego Rivera: "Market Place." Detail. 





5. TWENTY CENTURIES OF MEXICAN ART

On my way to the Mexican exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art the words of an elderly Indian came back to me. Speaking of the Spanish conquest, he said: "It was fated. If it had not been the Spaniards it would have been some other tribe." He was thinking, perhaps, of the U. S. tribe. I also remembered an experience in a museum library where I was looking in vain for slides of the magnificent stelae of Copan. At last, approaching the librarian I was told to look for them "under P, for Primitive."

The exhibition now in New York may help in smoothing over some similar misconceptions in other quarters. It is well nigh all-inclusive, but leans heavily on both "primitive" and "folk" art. To enjoy it to the full, the Yankee spectator need not stoop to what he may assume to be the level of the Indian and the peasant, for those dead Indians, Aztecs, Mayans, Olmecs, were good Indians; indeed they were great. And the Mexican peasant is heir to an unbroken tradition dating back a few millenniums. Nor should a desire for a short cut to better understanding result in shaping a roly-poly image of Mexican art closer perhaps to the optimism of our Elmers than to the more important truth.

Through the course of Mexican esthetics, a subjective *leitmotiv* recurs, linking together the three great epochs, pre-Spanish, Colonial, and Modern, in spite of outward differences. Totally unrelated to the cult of physical beauty which is the mainspring of our own tradition in art, it deals with physical pain and with death. The skull *motiv* is equally dear to Aztec theogony, to the Christian hermit who fondles it lovingly in his cell, and it still runs riot today in those bitter pennysheets sold in the streets of Mexico on the Day of the Dead. It is, however, but the outward sign of a mood of deeper significance.

Lips drawn in an unanesthetized rictus, eyes glazed, teeth clamped in torture, her body spent

and strained, a woman gives birth. The sculptor carves the hard stone with furious precision into a symmetry that makes the basin arch and open with the dignity of a church portal. To the Aztec, birth-giving was the privilege of woman. The same goddess who hallowed soldiers killed in battle threw her heroic influence over women who died in child-birth. Pain as a positive asset in the building and cementing of the world is one of the Aztec dogmas, consistent with their belief that the universe has come to maturity through the Four Destructions.

To our deodorized minds, such bold facing of the biological is distasteful. Yet the Church of colonial times insisted, as did the pagans, on this carrying of a cross. We see here the saints, lips drawn and teeth clamped in anguish, ejecting through bloody martyrdom their own soul to be born into eternity.

Again today the great Mexican murals depict undainty subjects—the flagellation of a stripped agrarian tied to a pole, the opening of wounds with pistol and knife, women again weeping, this time over the dead. Those pictures deal with the birth, through revolution, of a new social order, with the tortured parents wishing it god-speed.

The section of pre-Spanish art is especially strong in Aztec sculpture which more than any illustrates the loving intercourse that should

exist between the sculptor and the material he chooses, a problem of peculiar actuality to the modern partisans of direct carving. The Aztec standard for good sculpture is identical with that of Michelangelo: to be proclaimed beautiful, the statue should roll intact from the top of a mountain to the valley below.

Most admirable are those egg-shaped stones that lack a base and refuse a pedestal as if the sculptor had carved them not for any static display, but to nestle in the palm of a giant hand. In the same degree that the russet "locust" and the green "gourd" mimic a bug and a fruit, they emphasize their quality of being stone, as if the tools of the artist, however successful in their description of the subject, were as naturally attuned to the material as is weather erosion. The same respect for organic laws accounts for the beauty of the Teponaztle carvings, the *ocelotl* as ready to spring as a stalking feline, yet so truly wood that the roughened grain and split trunk do not subtract from but add to the sculptor's achievement.

In the representation of gods and humans, fingers and toes, plumes and fringes cling close to the core of the stone as if sucked in by centripetal forces. Elbows and hands push into the torso, the knees and soles of the squatting females telescope into the main bulk as do the wings and wing-shells of a beetle after flight.

Aztec sculpture is self-sufficient, not intended to convince or to please. It acquires the natural quality of boulders long under water, as if the metaphysical stream that shaped it used a working logic akin to hydraulic forces. Its emotional power remains crammed within an outer shell as cool and smooth as an engineer's maquette; this sculpture does not require a spectator. To handle its textures with eyes closed is to gain a knowledge keener than what comes through the eye. It seems that, overlooked in a jungle, it would still breathe a kind of hibernated life like a cocoon, that buried underground it would continue to exude a silent existence like a bulb.

The Mayans are well represented by small objects and temple models but—especially after the strong showing they were given at the San Francisco Fair—one misses the grandeur of their bas-reliefs, the elevation of their stelae. To round out his knowledge of them the New Yorker would do well to go to the Museum of Natural History and walk among these towering monoliths that opposed to the forest that were their habitat an army of trunks carved in stone.

Those who consider the Colonial section of the show Spanish have probably never been to Spain. A Spaniard is most puzzled when confronted by this "provincial" development and Mexicans are likely to find Spanish architecture dull.

If Aztec sculpture is self-contained, colonial art is, on the contrary, a theatre. Its sculpture preaches to the congregation; its force is centrifugal, radiating from the dummy heart and soul of the effigy through extensions of contorted limbs, up to the very tips of the extended fingers, into space.

To know such sculpture through tactile tests would be no more of an esthetic experience than to frisk a window dummy, for the baroque taste of the colonial masters favored a choice of mixed materials. Wooden statues are gessoed, lacquered, and painted, with eyelashes and wigs made of human hair, teeth, and ribs of true bone, often beribboned and dressed in damasks and velvets, their wooden feet shod in silver. Some of the sculptors, still unsatisfied by the static limitations of their materials, dabbled in cinematography: the skull of the saint was emptied, the orbits gouged out, and eyes on ball-bearings, as impressive as doll's eyes, bulged and rolled in mystic agonies, moved from behind the scenes by a discreet tug at hidden strings. The man who is a purist as concerns technique can only feel indignation at such license, but one should rather admire the strength of an impulse that did not shy at using such bastard means, this art that broke all the rules of good art in its desire to stir, to expostulate, and to convert.

Colonial sculpture may look weak when com-

pared with the Aztec, but one could hardly call it squeamish. Souls sizzling in purgatory, with a pope or cardinal thrown in, windlasses unrolling the guts of martyrs, eyes served on a plate and breasts ditto, Christ after flagellation, skinned to the ribs, bleeding on all fours in his cell like a wounded animal in its lair—such are the favorite subjects of their art. It is strong stuff compared to the sugar-saints sculptured today, sporting their sanctity as a kind of social accomplishment.

The section reserved to folk arts is especially complete. In its quaintness and color it is also the one that needs less training to approach. It may be viewed as decorative art if one forgets the soulless, fashionable connotations of the word. Out of humble materials, clay, straw, gourds, thousands of objects are made, exquisite alike in their shapes and colors. Such objects are rather bartered than sold and in any case will bring only a few centavos. The ingenuity in planning and pleasure in executing them is matched only by the indifference of the artist to the problems of distribution and of gain; they belie the theory that man works spurred only by the profit motive. Rather do those Mexican crafts illustrate Verlaine's opinion that the last vestige of divine freedom left to man, driven from Paradise, exists in his creative capacity for work.

To know what folk art really means to the folk who make it needs as much objective research as to scan the puzzle of Aztec relics. Those bright masks with comical beards and horns which connote for us a gay mardi-gras are to the man who wears them more akin to a priest's surplice. The impetus of muscular exertion that seizes the faithful on the day of the feast of Guadalupe, uses the peacock's splendor of the bouquet of feathers implanted in a grinning mask as if it were on an optical prayer. The rattles held and shaken rhythmically through the dance acquire a propitiatory meaning, as does a Tibetan prayer-mill. The "Arab" masqueraders, topped with huge horns should be seen in action when the danced pilgrimage of Chalma proceeds—hundreds of devils spring in ordered bedlam in front of the main altar, as if exorcised into sight by the powers of its life-size crucifix.

Even the pottery, to us charming or quizzical, may be heavy with feeling for its Indian owner. A little girl was passing through the streets of Acapanzingo holding a jug of water, a plain jug, egg-shaped with the gullet sideways. Suggested a tourist, "It looks like a duck." She answered indignantly, "It is a duck," hugged it tighter and ran. They have no dolls to love in Acapanzingo.

Folk painting is painting done by people that some well-to-do critics would not enjoy meeting

socially. Out of this anonymous limbo of folk art have emerged already such artists as Posada, Manila, and Estrada, that will rank as old masters in the eyes of the twenty-first century. Thus the distinction made in this show between both species of painting—the popular and the professional—should be taken with some grains of salt. There is a lovely portrait in white, done by one of the folk, that the artists in the next rooms have good grounds to study and envy. There are among the *milagros* or ex-votos, pictures of consummate art and great depth.

Among us, people give thanks for graces received: health, money, ambitions satiated. But the Mexican devout pray for less obvious gifts. There exists a *milagro* representing a lonely room and a bed, and in it a woman very dead and green, dedicated as follows: “Mrs. . . . having left her village and come to town wished to die. Her family erects this picture to give thanks in her name that her wish has been happily granted.”

After Murger wrote his *Bohème* and it had become a bestseller, a number of elderly bums, once his friends, nourished a lively controversy as to which one of them was the original bohemian he had been writing about, and made a few pennies lecturing on how picturesquely they had once sowed their wild oats. Whenever I talk or write about Mexican modern art I am re-

minded of this incident. What was once alive, strong, and seething has now faded into club talk. What we created that was without precedent has established, only too well, its precedent.

There was a heroic scope to the gesture of those men who, turning their backs on both art dealers and patrons, and their minds away from the Parisian novelty shop, planted their works indelibly on the walls of Mexico's buildings, with no incentive to do so but that of an inner urge synchronized with the social unrest, with no assurance that they would ever be noticed by the "cultured," but with the positive belief that they had ceased being artistic and were now artisans, companions to the carpenters and plasterers who were collaborating in the work. At this stage, Rivera would smash the camera of a press photographer that had sneaked up on him, with orders to expose the spending of government money for things people considered ugly. Siqueiros, receiving the news that a friend had just been assassinated, painted in tribute his "burial of a worker," secreting in the wall behind the painted coffin a bottle with a message of adieu. Orozco, his works stoned and maimed, would with superb indifference ask his mason not only to patch, but also to repaint the work. Such intensity of collective creation could not last long; as an attempt at erecting a painted monument in the anonymous mood with which


the ancients had built cathedrals, the Mexican experiment comes to a close before the end of the 'twenties.

Another group was in the meantime indulging in a more restrained painting, with the accent on pure plastic values. Let us say that while the full orchestra of Mexican muralists was blaring, for those who had keen ears some chamber music was still to be heard. The best of those easel painters have been able to ply to their ends the influx of modernisms, and yet retain genuine style and scope. The impetus they gave gathers force with the 'thirties, spreads the reaction against monumentality. A new emphasis is laid upon the qualities that mural work lacked perforce: the full rainbow range of chemical pigments, a variety of textures, a lighter mood. Steady eyes and hands perform on a miniature scale pictures as astonishing as the *Our Father* inscribed on a grain of wheat.

The discreet portion of the Museum of Modern Art allotted to the modern art of Mexico does not tell this story in full: for unexplained reasons, the decade 1930-40 is featured, thus glossing over the important period before. Even though murals cannot be transported for exhibition purposes, there exists a body of works closely related to them: geometric diagrams, studies of details from nature, full-scale tracings used on the wall. Much of this material is now

lost, thrown from a scaffold and trampled at the end of a work day; much that remains could have been reassembled and shown. Even the painters that opposed in style the school of muralists, would have increased in significance against this historic background. The oversight of a bare five years (1921-26) punches a gigantic hole into the close-knit trend of those two thousand years of Mexican art.

Releases given by the Museum to the press suggest that the arts of Mexico are characterized by "gentleness and a love of fun and play." The emphasis put by the display on the tender innocence of Mexican toys, the colorfulness of peasant costumes, the amused exercises of sophisticated artists, comes dangerously close to proving this point. It is as if the vast Mexican panorama had been surveyed through a rose lorgnette. Considering the world today, so cruelly different from the optimistic world of yesteryear, the art of Mexico at its most severe scores a prophetic point; it would have been a more responsible performance if the present show had had courage enough to underscore it.

Mayan culture. Detail of Stele 10, Xultun. 



6. *THE ANCIENT MAYA*

This fat book is beautifully illustrated with photographs and diagrams that confront the ancient Maya with the living Maya who lives today off the harsh Yucatan soil. It gives us a knowledge of and a respect for both. Dr. Morley is a great specialist, whose enthusiasm for his subject orchestrates into a unity of mood the many facts assessed. The volume manages to review most of the available evidence concerning a civilization as strangely complex as that of any lost Atlantis. It adds clues and parallels taken from the present folklore of the descendants of ancient kings, warriors and pagan priests, who, stripped of the paraphernalia of plumes, jewels and embroideries that clothed their ancestors, still retain a regal courtesy and sophisticated manner.

Dr. Morley's personal interest is primarily concerned with chronology, with the finding and refining of a correct correlation between the Mayan and Christian calendars; and yet this book rightfully comes within the scope of an

art review because the maze of evidence through which the researcher wades before attributing a date to a stela, interpreting a codex, or rebuilding a ruined temple, is mostly a conglomerate of art objects. Even though the codices be filled with mathematical and astronomical computations, each letter and each figure is a pictorial glyph pregnant with esthetic values. In the Mayan texts, painted or sculptured, reigns the unmistakable Mayan profile, with hanging lower lip, beak nose and receding forehead, retaining humanistic content despite the strange markings that identify each personage as a sound or a number.

This strongly characterized standard of human beauty is as far evolved from nature and as noble as the Greek, and bespeaks an ideal as rich. It is also to us more mysterious and more poignant, because while we still partake of Greek literature and philosophy and can appreciate hellenic marbles against this framework of thoughts, the only spokesmen left for the ancient Maya are their plastic remains. The physical bulk of building stones and the grooves chiselled out of hard jadeite are our only approach to the understanding of a people whose inclinations were mainly metaphysical.

When the *conquistadores* crossed through the Yucatan jungle in the sixteenth century Mayan ruins were already half-digested by the stone-

eating flora. For a few more centuries Mayan cultural witnesses remained secretly stored in this giant deserted greenhouse, to emerge in our days as a timely esthetic revelation.

Mayan art is well appreciated from the peculiar vantage point of our modern art. It puzzled rather than excited enthusiasm in its Victorian discoverers, being an art form totally disdainful of beauty as they understood it, innocent of the concept of Italian perspective and of the muscle parade known as anatomy. Such zealots were the Mayans in their belief in their own peculiar ideal of beauty that artists were called upon to produce it not only in stone but in living flesh. With a set of planks and a twist of rope they tampered with the new-born to force its growth along the lines of slanting forehead and elongated skull that alone seemed beautiful.


Mayan art passes through a complete stylistic cycle, from archaic to baroque. It is only in its last gasps of life that it approaches the anecdotal or the photographic. At its height it was wilfully abstract. As social arrangements increased in complexity, as the means of execution were enriched—an important consideration for men working in a Stone Age—the Mayan artists dealt increasingly in abstractions. Through sheer sophistication, the proportions of the human body became as unrealistic as those of an African

fetich. Limbs and torso were hidden under a vine growth of symbols and ornaments. The face itself, modelled already after an unnatural ideal, hid under a mask even further removed from nature, perhaps beastlike, godlike perhaps, but notably lacking in those safe standbys of occidental art, the speaking mouth and soulful eyes. As Mayan art reaches its peak of grandeur in the eight century A.D., in a blaze of geometric forms blended with the writhing frozen flames of an acute baroque, not even a toehold is left for the two Victorian art standards, ideal beauty and photographic realism.

The great stelae still standing can no longer be read according to the theogonical content woven into them by their builders. But with the fading out of the stiff theocracy that commissioned the works, the personal message of the artist is released from its official bondage in a purer form than before. Our epoch feels unusual kinship with the point of view of the Mayan sculptor. Modern art has also shed the fetichistic cult of the "form divine," and even though the artist does not attempt to impose his plastic ideal on living beings and by surgical means, deformations are again held in high esteem. Taking advantage of the present day's unfamiliarity with the gods and godlings that crowd the Mayan pantheon, surrealists too have made it a field day for interpreting the many striking

symbols along most subjective if unorthodox lines.

Better than an art treatise confined to a single theme, this book illustrates how art becomes the common denominator of the many pursuits of man in any highly evolved culture. Having read the carefully factual relation and consulted the plates that clarify a custom or check a date, the sensitive reader would do well to wash his mind of all previous connotations and to look again at the plates to receive this time only the artist's message. Despite the diversity of mediums, periods and subjects he will thus familiarize himself with an undercurrent, the spirit of Maya, that vies in power and in depth with the best of Greece and of China.

"Saint Christopher." Mural painting. Ca. 1610. 



7. THE SAINT CHRISTOPHER OF SANTIAGO TLATELOLCO

The Church of Santiago Tlatelolco was reopened for worship in 1944 after a lapse of sixty years, and its forgotten mural paintings were rediscovered. These murals are painted in a variety of styles, ranging from raw primitivism to a very provincial variety of rococo. The panel that dominates all others—if not for its beauty, at least for its great size and stylistic strength—represents a Saint Christopher. It is painted directly on the wall, over the lateral exit from the temple.

The same subject in a similar location was painted in many a church in the Middle Ages. According to a pious tradition, one who looked upon Saint Christopher would not die a sudden, unrepentant death that day: "*Christophori faciem die quacumque tueris, illa nempe die non morte mala morieris.*" As a corollary to this belief, both the size and the place of the image were chosen in terms of function, to insure for the faithful all the benefits mentioned, to be received, consciously or unconsciously, as he walked out of the church.

New Spain adopted the belief at an early date. Don Manuel Toussaint mentions a Saint Christopher painted in the sixteenth century in the stairwell of the Dominican convent of Yanhuítlán, a painting that, in his opinion, shows a survival of Byzantine style. In Mexico City, Don Bernardo Couto mentions a giant Christopher frescoed by Baltazar de Echave over the main portal of the church of San Francisco, and yet another Christopher, painted by José Juarez, at the side entrance of the church of St. Augustin.

As happened in the case of many another custom transplanted from Europe, the cult of Saint Christopher acquired a distinctive flavor in the New World. A parallel came to be drawn between the Saint and his modern namesake, the discoverer of the Americas. Whereas the original Christopher forded a river carrying the Child Jesus, but found even his giant strength no match for the miraculous weight of his Burden, the modern Christopher crossed an ocean bearing on his shoulders the weight of the whole Catholic Church. He too succeeded, but became a martyr in the effort.

Another detail that struck American consciousness was the fact that, before discovering Christ, the Saint had been a servant of the devil. In the opening centuries of European Christianity, the moral of this had found ready application. In the sixteenth century, however, the episode

had lost some of its aptness, at least in the Old World. It recovered its initial apologetic value in Mexico, a land barely emerging from paganism. The episode spoke forcefully to crowds of brown converts such as those that Father Motolinia described in 1540: "Whenever the doors open in the early morning, there are the Indians already waiting. Having neither to put clothes on nor to shave, they start for church at the first sign of dawn."

Despite its primitiveness, the Saint Christopher of Tlatelolco is not a true contemporary of these, the earliest converts. The first chapel built on this site, circa 1530, was destroyed before the present church was built and opened for worship in the first decade of the seventeenth century. This constitutes the earliest time, and also the most probable one, for the date of this painting.

The gigantic figure, close to forty-five feet in height, is a true mural, painted directly on the lime mortar in a technique resembling that found in the sixteenth-century churches of Acolman and Actopan. These murals are usually spoken of as painted *al fresco*, though the Mexican walls lack the visible joints between day-by-day areas found in the orthodox *fresco buono* of Italy. In the case of Tlatelolco, the medium appears to be *fresco secco*, in which the whole wall is surfaced at once and left to dry. It is

painted afterwards with pigments mixed with *leche de cal*, or water-thinned lime. The addition of lime to the pigment results in light values and a generally chalky effect. In Tlatelolco we meet a range of values wider than that obtainable in the *seco* medium, which suggests an all-over retouching in distemper, probably glue-tempera.

The iconography is mostly orthodox. Christopher walks through the shallow waters leaning on a makeshift stick to match his giant size, a tree trunk cut whole. His torso is moulded in the skin-tight armor of the Roman legion, of which he was once a soldier. He has rolled his trousers over the knee, as the Indians do to this day with their *calzoncillos* to keep them dry while fording a stream. To protect him against the cool of the night, the Saint is bundled in a huge windblown cape. Perched on his mountainous shoulder is the Divine Child, tiny as a humming bird. To clarify the spiritual meaning of the scene, a discus-halo levitates over Christopher's curly wig, and light shafts radiate from the blond curls of the Child. Rustic surroundings are suggested by the grotto from which emerges the hermit, the only human witness of the prodigious sight. The nocturnal hour is emphasized by the horn-lantern carried by the hermit. A moon and its attendant star, celestial witnesses, nestle in a hammock-shaped cloud.

Three distinct styles overlap and blend imperfectly in this plastic palimpsest. It appears probable that this seventeenth-century image is based on a still older one, either a mural that decorated the primitive chapel, or a folk *santo*, perhaps a crude woodcut from which the muralist derived his inspiration. Such an assumption is suggested by the fact that, in this image, a kind of military aggressiveness dwells together with the religious spirit; a fact that hints at the generation of the *conquistadores* rather than at the cultural clime of the following century. This puzzling throwback in style may be simply one of the stylistic anomalies often found in both colonial and provincial works.

Whatever the reason, there is a striking unbalance of body proportions. The legs are strong, and knots of muscles give them a resemblance to the rugged tree trunk by their side. The Saint is as solidly based and as pyramidal as is the neighbouring Aztec temple, or *teocalli*. His bulk shrinks and tapers towards the top, with the tiny head of the Child as its apex. Perspective deformations add to the painted ones, since the unusually high wall is sighted diagonally from underneath, increasing the pyramidal illusion.

A second stylistic stratum consists of elements incongruously borrowed from the Italian Renaissance. The plastic counterpoint achieved by the contrasting circular folds of the two mantles is

in its essence, if not in its realization, at the opposite pole from the primitive. The Roman armor reveals all the muscles of the strong torso in an exaggerated folk version of the pride of the age that discovered anatomy. We also taste the somewhat theatrical archeological knowledge of the Renaissance in the scalloped fringe of leather tongues that ornaments the belt.

Concerning the third, and more modern, stylistic stratum, we have concrete data. Nearby the Saint, a rococo shield is inscribed with this proud statement: "With money raised and dedicated to the task by our most Reverend Father Manuel de Najera, then provincial of the Order for New Spain, this image was retouched and the whole church cleaned and whitewashed both inside and outside. The main altarpiece was gilded anew, as well as the pilasters of the two side-altars. The year 1763."

Though not specifically mentioned in the inscription, there are inside the church small decorative murals that can be safely dated as of the same year as the renovation. Painted inside niches and meant as backgrounds for statues now disappeared, they are mainly *semis* of floral motives in imitation of rich brocades. They are an index of the taste of the Tlatelolco burghers in the eighteenth century, a taste so different from that shown in the Christopher, painted a


century and a half before. These later people were enamoured of roses, ribbons and garlands, and must have found the ancient image truly coarse and ugly. They may have been strongly tempted to include the mural in the thorough job of whitewashing then in progress. That they resisted the temptation and respected the old mural must have meant a compromise with their esthetic principles for the sake of religious convenience. It is the deeply rooted cult of the image on the part of the more rustic parishioners that saved it from the wrath of the more cultured folk; saved it from being destroyed, but not from being retouched.

Not even in periods that aim at historical objectivity can ancient paintings be retouched in the spirit in which they were originally painted. Consciously or not, the brushwork of the restorer will be an expression of his own period. No such problems were even raised in an eighteenth century exclusively engrossed in its own exciting novelties. The painter of 1763 conscientiously gave the Saint a new skin, prettiness to the two heads and orderly curls to their windblown hair.

To the three centuries—sixteenth, seventeenth, eighteenth—to which this mural is related, we should add still another. Indeed, few periods of history could appreciate the merit of its colossal size, its brutal force, its obvious awkwardness

and far from academic proportions. Yet our twentieth century feels a special gratitude towards the Saint Christopher of Tlatelolco, a precursor that unconsciously embodies some of the characteristics of modern Mexican murals.

A expensas solicita
das y aplicadas por
N.M. R. P. Fr. Manuel
de Naxera fiendo Comº.
Gral de esta Nueva España
se retocó esta imagen: se Bafeº
y blanqueó toda esta Iglesia
por dentro y fuera y se doraron
de Nuevo el Retablo. Ma=
yory los dos laterales
de sus Pilastras
Año del 763



8. MEXICAN HERITAGE

Mainly an album of photographs, this book is beautifully put together. The halftones are especially successful in rendering the vast scale of grays that are the palette of Hoyningen Huene. Captions are printed at the end of the volume, so that the plates are free to tell their plastic story unhampered by written data, however pertinent.

The rambling, deceptively casual text of Alfonso Reyes stresses nuances, takes for granted the main lines of the story, and thus may puzzle North American readers intent on factual estimates. Its virtue lies in its mood, based on the spiritual qualities and racial traits peculiar to the Mexican. This text gives an insider's account of a story that the photographs retell through the eyes of an experienced traveler.

In the pre-Hispanic section the plates of archeological specimens accomplish miracles of rescuscitation. They never show the chunk of clay or carved stone alone, against the neutral ground of a showcase and with a label remi-

niscent of the number in a rogues' gallery. Even when his subject is lifted out of a museum case, Hoyningen Huene suggests what climate, what landscape, and often what spiritual mood concurred to produce it. Architectural fragments are caught in the process of being digested by green leaves that soon remake temple into hill and mock the meanders of gesso ornaments with webs of roots not a whit less baroque.

The dosage of mystery in these photographs deepens in the same ratio as the sunlight increases. Sunlight brings out, from the core of the carved stone, marks even more ancient than those left by the pre-Hispanic chisel, the mottled volcanic texture, the congealed geological fierceness that matches (and perhaps in the beginning inspired) the fierceness of the theogonical concept. The tropical zenithal rays that beat upon the ancient remains, by disclosing every trail of the tool as well as every chip of erosion, make all the more clear to our Greek-fed, routine taste the uniqueness of an esthetic that could just as well have evolved on another planet as on this continent that had not yet tasted of Europe.

Hoyningen Huene is at his best in a make-believe world where he may use the technique of the show window, with its pretended scale and elusive depth. When his model is really colossal, like the staircase at Teotihuacan, crawl-

ing with pagan gargoyles, the photograph lacks the conviction evoked by tinier spectacles. To his camera, truth is not quite as convincing as the white lies of ingenious fiction.

Of the landscapes, which show the configuration of the Mexican earth long before the most ancient civilization had intruded upon it, the best are the close-ups of leaves and rocks, modeled by the sun with the same precision with which it heightens the quality of pre-Hispanic sculpture. When the lens takes in larger vistas, the tendency is to eschew substance for filigree, to cut out artful black silhouettes against a backdrop of clouds. Nothing is trite and postcardlike; there is instead a certain "Vogue" impeccability, and a curious suggestion of perpetual moonlight at variance with this arid earth which sows the spiked maguey over the sharp volcanic rock, and in the tropics engineers a *machine infernale* which none has yet conquered.

A third section, concerned with colonial remains, is the one in which Hoyningen Huene adjusts more easily to his subject. The Catholic architecture that fell upon Mexico as a spread arras of liturgical embroidery is now in tatters; it fits only loosely over a land churned deep by successive revolutions. It is this metamorphosis of one era into another, this tension between past theocracy and present laissez-faire that here informs the sensitive camera vision. The mon-

astery steps smoothed concave by the long traffic of sandaled feet, the deserted refectories and fireless kitchens are as much ruins in these plates as the pagan temples that served forgotten cults; and the planners who had the faith and muscle to build these *machines à prier* are present as a mound of skulls piled in a niche of the splendid habitat which their brains once conceived and wrought.

Here again, Hoyningen Huene is at his best in close-ups. A single tortured face of a saint with enameled doll's eyes convulsed in ecstasy, its nose eaten by time's leprosy, revealing a core of gesso and wood, tells more about colonial *mores* than a battalion of saints drilled to stand in the beehive of a baroque altarpiece.

A view of a whole carved and painted ceiling ornate with angels, birds and curlicues, is no more rewarding as concerns human values than a patch of jungle vine. The camera must come closer, catch a unit of the artificial forest to release its stylistic and spiritual flavor. One naked *putti* with his suggestion of flesh pink, of blueberry magenta lined with gold for a flying scarf, fluttering in his childishly holy way among thick-stemmed buds as gaudily daubed as he, magically concentrates in a single plate the anachronistically medieval fervor with which churches were built in Mexico from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century, with the compact crudeness

and sincerity that in Europe one associates with the twelfth century.

From colonial to folk art the borderline wavers, and Hoyningen Huene includes ex-votos and clothed sculptures that carry us straight into the nineteenth century. So intent are the sacred dolls, attired in velvets and damasks and moth-eaten linens, on performing convincingly their sacred mimicries, that it is difficult to think of them in terms of *objets d'art*. Blood oozes lavishly from wounds in all-over patterns whose brutal and holy meaning is neutralized by the photographic refinements of an unusually selective eye. Beautiful as are some of these plates, one may feel that the deviation from the original exegetical meaning towards decorativeness has been only too successfully realized. As one appreciates the delicate tracings drawn in red on white by the martyr's blood, one remains callously unaware of the meaning of martyrdom.

Only a very few people are pictured in this book and these furtively. Live Indians are the heirs of this "Mexican Heritage." But they would intrude in this world which is not so much their native land as it is a vision the artist has engendered from delicate balances of shapes and refined textural contrasts. The plates also stress a clash of two cultures, but fail to indicate how both cohabit in their common heir, the Mexican of today. The mixture is dynamic, as witness the

many flourishes of social changes, and the few modern works of art that would rate nobly, placed alongside the best of pre-Hispanic and colonial works. A few such plates are needed to take us from past into current life, and to justify in plastic terms what use modern Mexico has made of its contrasting heritages. It would also correct the sense of lethal split, of frightful bilocation which—after the plates have yielded the kind of abstract delectation that Hoyningen Huene's trained shutter finger rarely fails to convey—emerges from a survey of the two Mexicos described.

Posada: “Artisans in Purgatory.” 🖐️



9. JOSÉ GUADALUPE POSADA: PRINTMAKER TO THE MEXICAN PEOPLE

The Mexican pictorial renaissance of the 1920s and the rebirth of Mexican fresco coincide with the rediscovery of a Mexican tradition, an adventure that proved to be fully as exciting as the making of the pictures themselves. Part of this tradition had always been in plain sight, but some of it had to be hunted down the burrows of the past and especially of the near present. The muralist claimed affinity with Mexico's public monuments which bridge a stupendous time span from archaic Totonac terracottas to the walls that Tres Guerras frescoed in Celaya in 1810, at the moment that Hidalgo shook the Spanish yoke from a proud neck. Just weaned from cubism, the young artist looked with loving awe at the work of those Toltec and Aztec sculptors who plied cube, pyramid, sphere, and cylinder with a taut passion beside which Cézanne's own brand of geometry retains something

of the pedagogical mustiness of the classroom.

The statues and *reredos* of the Hispanic period also proved masterly models of plastic elocution for the fresco painter of the twenties groping towards a formula for public speaking in paint. He now dared, as had the Colonial sculptors, to offend the rules of good taste and of plastic propriety in his urge to preach, to convert and convince. The would-be painter to the people undertook to forge a secular 'equivalent to the full plastic vocabulary used in the church: filigree halos, stuccoed fingers that point, bless, or damn, glass eyes bulging with ecstasis, clotted blood, flayed skins, gold damasks.

Paradoxically, the period of national independence ushered in a meagerness of taste that makes most nineteenth-century art, at least the art taught at the Academy, discussed in cultured circles, and hung in drawing rooms, little more than a provincial reflection of Europe. To the casual eye, the link with the past snaps. However, the great national tradition did not die, but went underground. Branded as folk art, a label that made it unpalatable to collector and connoisseur alike, Mexican art humbly persisted in the church *retablos* that were the people's pictures, in the *pulqueria* paintings that were the people's murals, and in the graphic works of pennysheet illustrators, rich in political and human implications.

While murals and ex-votos remain veiled in anonymity, graphic works conjure up the name of one man. Guadalupe Posada, who appears placed at the narrow neck of an hour glass which every grain of sand must pass as it slides between past and future. The bulk of an ancient and rich tradition funnelled through his work at a time when it was fated to leaven modern formulas. That Posada's stature proved equal to this task is one reason why the painters of the 1920s failed to collapse into antiquarianism as had the Pre-Raphaelites and the men of Beuron.

Artists of the generation of Rivera and Orozco acknowledge their debt to Posada, although he was not a teacher and would have been mildly skeptical had anyone addressed him as "Master." In the 1890s his open studio, or rather his workshop, was tucked inside the disused carriage entrance of a private house in Santa Inez Street. Posada worked in plain sight of the passers-by, housemaids on their way to market, urchins astray from grade school, even loitering art students from the nearby San Carlos Academy. To this day Orozco, then ten years old, remembers the fat brown man in an ample white blouse, who drew and carved on metal plates with a single motion of his engraver's tools such perennial best sellers as "The Man Who Eats His Own Children," "The Two-Headed Still-born," "Lovers Go to Hell on Account of a Dog,"

"Woman Gives Birth to Four Lizards and Three Boys." At times the shy lad would summon up enough courage to enter the workroom and purloin pocketfuls of the master's metal shavings.

A little further on as he ambled to school, young Orozco passed the shop where publisher Vanegas Arroyo sold Posada-illustrated penny-sheets—wholesale to city newsboys and rural peddlers—retail to houseservants and schoolboys. The plates, now become pictures, were hand tinted in sight of the customers by the women of the Arroyo clan, armed with stencils and gaudy glue pigments. One could admire in the final display such exciting subjects as "The Massacres of Chalchicomula," piles of pink corpses gashed with scarlet wounds, trampled under the *guaraches* of stretcher bearers, faces averted under yellow *petate* hats. Hero of the guerrillas against Maximilian, a maroon charro lassoed an orange gun and galloped away with his booty, leaving behind him discomfited French Zouaves who blushed to match their scarlet pants. Skies remained ever serenely blue.

The bold, brusque line of Posada, all the more muscular for being dug in metal, the blatant color patches smeared on a black and white web, made so strong an impression on Orozco that later years of studying anatomy and perspective at the art school could not disroot them from his mind or from his hand.


In contrast, the Academy of Fine Arts offered the young painter art of a far weaker character. Its halls were hung with lithographed charts of feet and eyes, clusters of ears and noses that he was enjoined to duplicate neatly in charcoal. One graduated to copying plastercasts, first in low relief, then in high relief, and lastly in the round. Relaxation was provided by a class in landscape drawing—after prints and photographs.

Such methods reached a zenith under the Catalan painter Fabres, imported by Diaz. His prideful tenure whipped Mexican artists into self-assertion at the very time when Spanish overseers were unwittingly driving Indian peons to arms. The revolution was a Posada “still” come to life. Scenes he loved to portray—anti-Diaz meetings with bricks and bats flying, skulls bashed in, stabbings, shootings, chained prisoners hemmed in between men on horseback—what had been but a line inked on paper found its consummation in a true depth and a true bulk. This monstrous Galatea moved in a quick staccato akin to the tempo of early newsreels, with a dubbing of deafening sound effects, pistol shots, bullet whizzes, clanking of chains, screams, sighs. Arms, till then frozen in the delicate balance of an engraved design, let fly the stones hidden in their fists. Paper machetes became steel dug into the “wicked rich,” easy to spot in the cowardly uniform that Posada had devised for him, high

collar and high hat, gold chain dangling on a comfortable belly soon eviscerated.

The revolutionary themes of Orozco paraphrase Posada not only because of his youthful affection for the master, but much more because the revolution was first rehearsed within this balding brown head, and its tableaux charted by this able brown hand before it had even begun. In 1922, as the scaffolds of the muralists mushroomed against the startled walls of ancient San Ildefonso, Orozco (who was far from knowing that he too would soon paint murals) smiled at the juvenile enthusiasm with which we denounced ivory towers and groomed ourselves for the role of painters to the masses. "Why paint for the people? The people make their own art." This aphorism of Orozco's, which we did not relish at the time, remains the most straightforward appraisal of Posada's function.

Posada's work falls logically into three phases, conditioned by the three mediums that he adopted in turn: lithography, wood and metal cuts, relief etching. The blandness of lithographic crayon permeates his youthful provincial manner, marks its accurate drawing and delicate half-tones. These stones are often political cartoons, big heads on spindly bodies in the taste of the French caricaturists of the 1860s. A critic ignorant of the true sequence could point to Posada's first manner as an obvious refinement

Posada: “The Prisoner.” 



and elaboration of the cruder second manner. One expects a stylistic cycle to go from simple to complex, from archaic to baroque. Posada's lithographs are valued witness to the fact that he was one of the few who consciously order their lives from complexity to simplicity.


In the coarser second manner, he cut most of the illustrations made for the plebeian tracts of publisher Antonio Vanegas Arroyo. In the meantime Posada had suffered much. The widow of Don Antonio, a charming and able matriarch who used to call me with a twinkle "El Francesito," liked to recall Posada's often-told story: How in the floods of Leon in 1887, many members of his family drowned, how they would be carried past him by the churning waters and cry "Save us, Don José," until they sank.

The role of Don Antonio in the formation of Posada's new manner was crucial. As in the middle ages when the *Biblia Pauperum* edified countless humble souls, so did the penny pamphlets of Arroyo in Posada's Mexico. With customers to whom reading was slow work, the picture had to state the story in terms intense enough to smoke the Indian's penny out of his knotted kerchief. Horrifying, edifying, or comic anecdotes, broadsides on love and war, recipes for cooking and witchcraft, librettos of rustic plays, reached the remotest crags of the republic in the haversack of the peddler and the saddle-

bag of the pilgrim. Anthropologists who spy on remote Indian festivals and take down in phonetic shorthand the chanting, the pastoral skits, the cruel and lengthy Passion speeches, the Mystery plays that evoke a world of sharp hierarchy, man sandwiched between Heaven and Hell, might rather politely ask the coach or prompter for his book, much thumbed and yellowed, where the imprint of Vanegas Arroyo may still be deciphered.

The firm catered to the city mestizo as well as to the Indian peasant. Arroyo's *Gaceta Callejera* startled the city with extras as hot as the handsetting of type and the handcutting of the pictorial reportage allowed. Recurring deadlines forced Posada to cynical economies. A standard picture "doubles" for every *Horrendous Fire*, a sign on the burning house being recut each time to fit the latest and best-selling conflagration. Another print shows a street demonstration. Men shout, women scream, fists fly, banners and streamers are displayed—left blank to allow the type-setter to dub in whatever rightist or leftist slogans, whatever religious or anti-clerical grievances would transform the well-worn block into the news of the day.

These uninhibited short-cuts often result in extravagant fantasies. In the first state of "The Death of General Manuel Gonzales, Ex-President of The Republic" the bearded corpse, elegantly

Posada: "Skull of a Coquette." 



clad in black, lies in state against a sober background of thick draperies. A few days later a second state and a new title bring the subject up to date. In "The Burial of General Manuel Gonzales, Ex-President of The Republic" a plumed hearse and high-hatted mourners, hatched out of the dark curtain, slowly cross the background of the funeral parlor with their burden and fade into its wall, watched by the corpse itself, a relict of the first state.

Each year, for the Day of the Dead, while children teased their appetites with sugar skulls and their elders prepared buffet suppers to be devoured on the family tomb, Arroyo's press let fly by the thousands broadsides known as "*calaveras*," the Mexican Dance of Death. With high glee, Posada conjured up the skeletons of politicians with tortoise-shell glasses and celluloid collars, of generals whose ribs sag under medals, of coquettes hiding their bald skulls under the funeral flowers of imported chapeaux.

The medium of this second manner is wood, or more often, type-metal. The direct cutting with burin results in a white line on black ground. While in the making, the block was coated with *azarcon*. Digging into this red lead composition helped Posada to evoke all the more easily the flames that heat and the blood that splashes his visions. The furrowed line acquires a musculation the lithographed one lacked. Journalistic

deadlines, improvisations in a hard medium, and an adjustment of his plastic vocabulary to a special audience, combine to give a primitive flavor that earned for this manner the approval of Paris.

Posada's third and last manner coincides with his discovery of relief etching, made in an effort to compete cheaply with the increasingly popular process of photo-engraving. In this unusual medium, zinc is drawn upon with an acid-resisting ink, all exposed parts hollowed in an acid bath. Unlike orthodox etching, the plate is inked with a roller like a woodcut. The only other well-known relief etcher is William Blake, who claimed to have received the secret of its process in a vision from above. The result is a black line penned on white ground, and Posada, in a swagger of calligraphic arabesques, celebrates his release from the exacting bondage of the burin.

Showing no trace of naiveté, this last manner tends to irritate devotees of Posada who like to think of him as a Mexican Rousseau. Whereas the aging French master played "Clochettes" of his own composition on a three-quarter violin, we can picture the aging Mexican slapping his thigh and belching a Rabelaisian laugh as Death, his favorite model, tip-toes in.

Not all of Posada's works are prints. The widow of Don Antonio knew of two large ledgers in




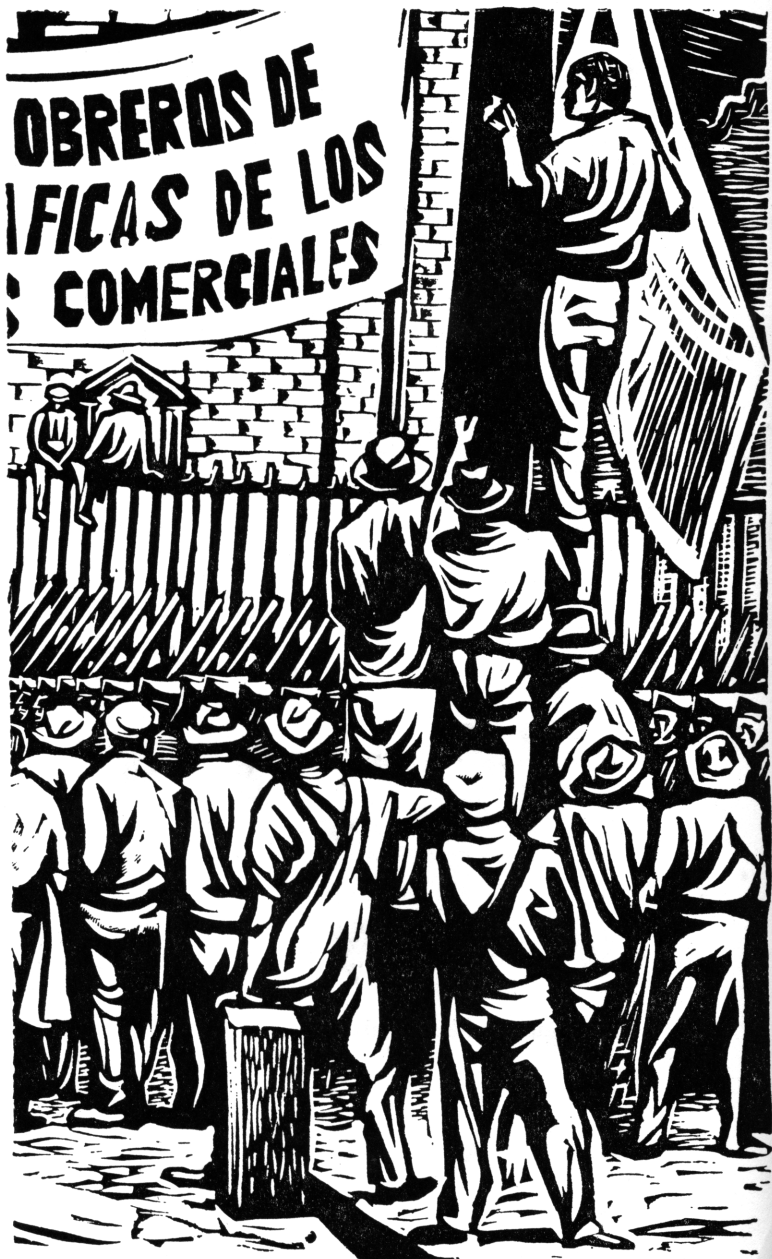
which the artist had sketched many scenes, "Some very nice, some very horrible," as she remembered them. A humble man, Posada did not scorn such menial tasks as came within the scope of his craft. I saw one of his circus signs still in use in the 1920s. Painted on unsized canvas and fully signed, it represented the floods of

Leon with his own people drowning. This use of a personal tragedy to drum crowds under the big top is a reminder of how deeply different good neighbors may be.

It has become trite to remark that Mexican murals export badly, that they need for a frame Hispanic patios and arcades, and for lighting effects the crystalline silver of Mexico's plateau or the golden pathos of its tropics. But Mexican graphic art, uprooted, labelled, priced, caged behind glass, fares none too well either. Will the visitor to an American museum understand Posada's prints proven function? Will he believe that the guns shoot, the blades rip, that the ink is blood?

And if he does, will he not feel cheated of an expected esthetic delight?

Leopoldo Mendez: “Labor Meeting.” 



10. PORTRAIT OF LATIN AMERICA

Latin America encompasses such a variety of lands, climates, men and tongues that one would need to rise to stratospheric heights to survey it as a unit. And unity would only come with blurred vision, with all details levelled to foggy oneness. As varied as the land itself are the graphic arts of Latin America, and here also an attempt at inclusiveness in the space of a short introduction is bound to fail. Because I write from Mexico, I will instead speak of the qualities in this land which echo those of its neighbors, try to uncover what common denominator, if any, permits the handling of the graphic arts of the twenty-one republics as "Latin American prints."

In Latin America as in the world over, beautiful prints have been made with an eye to esthetic values alone, that hold their own on exhibition walls without clue to a special birthplace. One can appreciate these prints with ready-made universal standards, and there is no need here to expatiate on their obvious beauty.

Other prints, rather than being a frosting on the cultural cake, are so strongly rooted in Latin American soil that, to appreciate them, one must be aware of the milieu from which they spring, often quite divergent from the twentieth-century norm. I would rather speak of these, of what may not be readily learned by the northern neighbor, keeping silent as regards the aims, arts and culture equally shared by both Americas.

Despite affinities, basic differences mark two distinct concepts of art, north and south of the Rio Grande. The United States started its art career as a buyer, and art definitions and evaluations are even now colored by the peculiar problems of an art market. Latin America, only an indifferent buyer, has always been a lusty producer, and its concept of art, being the point of view of the maker, differs from that of the northern neighbor.

To give an obvious illustration, the murals of Latin American modern masters, though steadily labeled great art, cannot find their way into the United States art market, but remain worthless because of their bulk and their anchorage to an architecture. Nor can the genuine lighter output of the same men, geometric compositions for odd-shaped walls, broad, hasty charcoal studies of details from the model, three-dimensional maquettes of vaulted ceilings and domes, fit the Procrustean bed of museum requirements.

As regards graphic art, similar basic differences also breed awkwardness. In the United States print collectors are usually men of wealth, who hoard their treasures in portfolios that open only on rare occasions, and keep a sharp watch on what other collectors buy. They are happier when their own prove exclusive, or nearly exclusive. To the collector, the rarest print will have a tendency to be also the most beautiful, being certainly the most desirable. A top example of this trend was a piece included in a New York print show, a drawing on paper with this proud caption, "Crayon portrait prepared for lithographic transfer, but *never* transferred." This may have been the rarest print in the world, rarer even than Goya's "Giant," rarer than unique proofs, for here was a print with *no* proof.

Less learned in the wiles of *incunabula*, less interested in what others have or have not, sometimes even less skilled in the three childish Rs, the Latin American print-lover knows that graphic arts are the arts of reproduction, of the multiplication of an image, and cutting through the Gordian knot of sophistication, would affirm bluntly that "the rarest print in the world" is no print at all.

The North American collector dotes on etchings and drypoints. Let us not deny that some are magnificent, but it is on these mediums that the parasitic fungi of trial proofs, states, margins,

avant-la-lettres, etc., grow thicker. When Rembrandt's son tried to peddle his father's abilities as an illustrator to a publisher, this level-headed merchant answered that he had no use for them, as Rembrandt was only an etcher; and the son, eager for a sale, answered that this was a slander, that Rembrandt was indeed an engraver. This episode, which means less than it seems to as regards publishers' esthetics, preserves for us an ancient and sound hierarchy of mediums in the ratio of plate fitness to stand a trade edition. What interests us in this anecdote today is that collectors have reversed the scale, and that its very unfitness for the job puts etching at the top, *because* the plate tires easily.

For that very reason, etching is not a favorite medium with Latin Americans, who prefer block-print and lithograph. The former will stand a pull of thousands of proofs before being smashed into illegibility. The latter, contrariwise from etching, gets better and better as more proofs are made. The professional printer knows that it takes some five hundred pulls to bring a design on stone or zinc to a state of clean perfection.

Where plate presses are still in current use, blockprint is favorite because of its technical identity with type. Raised to type level, the cut can be printed with no extra effort together with a caption, political or sentimental, whatever will

tug at the public heart, for it is to the people at large rather than to a select minority that the print more often addresses itself. And the differences between *bois de fil* and *de bout* are of little concern to men who, following the logic that equates cuts and types, prefer to engrave typemetal rather than wood, to equalize throughout stresses and erosion.

Through the nineteenth century, revolutions have been prime movers of the graphic arts, for the hundreds of opposition sheets aimed at the liver of their political victims with the lithographic crayon. American Daumiers, men of the scope of Villasaña and Escalante, ground, grained, etched and inked their stone, week after week. As with Daumier, political police smashed press and skulls into silence, or political victory whisked the tyrant to limbo, and both failure and success spelled a stop to the Philippic. Thousands of lithographs, some of them great works of art, were born of anger, of love of justice, of cussedness even, but rarely of an artistic urge. With the coming of the rotative press, the lithograph goes to metal, a zincograph now, but just as biting, just as fierce and crammed with unwonted art.

Come photo-engraving, the photographic process removes the print from the range of graphic arts, unless, making the same allowance that had to be made in the case of Daumier's

late gillotyped, one decides that it is the standard classification that is wrong, for the artist's claw-mark is still there.

Even more than in France, where most Toulouse-Lautrec posters rotted on damp Parisian walls, benign Latin American climates call for outdoor displays. To this day posters are cut from wood or linoleum, at times by the hand of a master. Half-tones and four-color processes being too expensive for most, a dearth of economic lever enriches Latin American graphic art with some of its most impressive examples.

To understand better some of the print forms more exclusive to certain countries of Latin America, one should remember that there exist local traditions that shape modern graphic arts into century-tried molds. Not always the work of popular artists, these prints patterned after local standards can best be understood by digging deep to their popular roots.

Let us admit that it is in part backwardness that keeps handicrafts going in Latin America, where handlooms and potters footwheels are at work long after machinery has replaced them in the North. But let us add that, as far as esthetics are involved, the slickest four-color illustration spewed at the rate of hundreds of copies per minute out of roaring gigantic presses lacks what the rough, tough pennysheet still retains of

medieval candor. Only in Heaven and in art-making are worth and cost unrelated. Museums treasure not only for their rarity but for their beauty what *santos* remain of the tens of thousands that were sold at the fairs and pilgrimages of the waning European Middle Ages, grotesque, stencil-daubed, innocent images that opened Heaven to dazzled peasant eyes. Not knowing that he was creating beauty of rare vintage, the level-headed craftsman saved time and labor by carving headless bodies, shifting heads and names on the anonymous shoulders as the time of the year and the calendar of saints required. Because they were cheap, the woodcuts were not allowed long life. Those we treasure now were saved by being glued as cardboard stuffing inside bookbindings, or pasted in a trousseau box or sailor's chest.

Still medieval are the penny publications of Latin America, printed to answer similar needs. A popular publisher's dynasty, for example that of Vanegas Arroyo in Mexico City, keeps the originality of author and illustrator corseted in a stiff, time-hallowed cycle of popular, political or pious needs. Each pilgrimage, each revolution, brings into being what sheet, what poem and what print fills the need of the pilgrim or the rebel, often the same man.


Don Blas, present head of the firm, listed for me some perennials still a "must" in the year of

grace 1946, describing better than any theory what objective springs move the Mexican print-maker.

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| New Year. | Prayer and thanks to the Supreme Being. |
| January 6. | Feast of the three kings. |
| February 2. | Oration and praise of the Virgin of the Candelaria. |
| Lent. | The seven utterances of Jesus on the Cross.
Condolences to the Virgin of the Seven Dolors.
Praises of the Virgin of Loneliness. |
| May 5. | Patriotic pennysheet. |
| July 13. | Prayers and praise to Saint Anthony of Padua, revered in Calpulalpam.
Leavetaking from same. |
| August 15. | Leavetaking and praise to Mary on her Assumption. |
| September 8. | Leavetaking, good morning, prayer, praise and miracles of the Virgin of the Remedies, venerated in her sanctuary of Cholula. |
| September 16. | Mexican National Hymn, Commemoration of the Dolores uprising, and poem to the Flag. |



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 "The Man of Sorrows." Folk santo. XIXth C.

- October. Leavetaking, salutations, praises of Our Lord of the Three Falls, revered in Jalacingo, State of Vera Cruz.
- October 12. Prayers, praise, visits and good mornings to the Virgin of Guadalupe.
- November 1. *Calaveras* (skulls) for the Day of the Dead.
- December 16 to 24. Pilgrims and Posadas, Mary and Joseph in search of an inn.

Politics and revolutions do not follow as steady a course as does the liturgical year, yet they swell the annual graphic output with most pungent fare. One year, the print-maker cuts President Madero making a triumphal entry into his capital as savior of Mexico, a smiling top-hatted giant in a coach dragged by tiny white stallions. Three years later, Madero is pictured as a skull alive with maggots.

Latin America is also Amerindia, and print-making, even though originally imported from Europe, takes after a while a more mysterious countenance than it ever had at its source. Unknown to the wood engraver or lithographer, some of the sturdy, stocky quality of the pre-Hispanic Indian esthetic creeps into his composition. There is a racial accent on blood and death in many prints, ancient or modern, popular

or sophisticate. A similar streak links the Mayan frescoes of Chichen Itza, depicting human sacrifices, the Aztec tiger vessels made to receive the hearts of human victims, the flagellated Christs skinned to naked bloody ribs, and today's cartoons that pile corpses under the boot of some local dictator with a realism that makes of the subject matter more than a figure of speech.

I have stressed recondite differences, racial, stylistic, rather than the most obvious one of subject matter. As I write this introduction, placing myself on the borderline of two vast civilizations, the word picturesque loses its meaning, or acquires a *double entendre*. To be sure, the tourist finds most of Latin America picturesque and delights in what seems quaint and colorful. But he should beware of prints and albums that stress the regional curio, peg on men and women *sombreros*, *rebozos*, *guaraches*, *sarapes*, peasant embroideries, and tropical accessories to the point where they lose all human meaning. One should not forget that Saxon America is a willing art buyer, and that the temptation is strong, even among good or great artists, to manufacture prints that will look the way prints from Latin America are expected to look.

My Latin American artist friends, immune to the sights of their native lands, find New York extremely picturesque in their turn. For who would choose to live in vertical bee-hives—men

piled on top of men up to the reach of the clouds—when bush and pampa offer open spaces on an invigorating horizontal? Or who would fight his way through piles of snow when a plentiful sun spreads over half a continent? Most picturesque of all for the Latin American artist is 57th Street, where art is caged in rooms lined with wine-hued velvet and made to sing by neon lights, where *santos* just like those that sell at Indian pilgrimages for a few cents are chained to mats, jailed in portfolios where their devotional message is silenced, clipped of their function and prized for rarity.

Some print-makers of today switch from the praise of God to Marxist social topics. Still cheap, still printed *en masse* to reach numberless consumers, the prints are the work of the same masters who paint walls with the same purpose. Such newspapers of the 1920s as *El Machete* printed woodcuts that are masterpieces of the new mode, already hard to get since their very cheapness has scattered them to the ashbins. Some may have been used to strengthen a book binding or decorate a chest, to be rediscovered for the delight of unborn museum curators.

After centuries, the pious function of medieval images is forgotten by the collector who admires instead the plasticity of the thick black line that shapes draperies in abstract zig-zag folds, while his eye tastes the carmine of a stenciled blood-

splash on the split pate of a martyr, without seeing the martyrdom. The Marxist message of some of our modern artists will fade out even more thoroughly, dealing as it does with earth and "*Das Kapital*," not with a timeless Heaven—and naked plastic qualities will come to the fore.

All such prints born of a non-esthetic purpose raise the old argument of *l'art pour l'art*, and answer it all at once. Truly felt emotions leave lines, values and colors etched all the more deeply to match a warfaring purpose. The war over, win or lose, lines, values and colors keep imprisoned the vibrant heat of the message long after its topical meaning is lost.

Any attempt to define what makes Latin America tick in the graphic field on another rhythm than the United States, is bound to puzzle Latin Americans and paint to Saxon eyes a picture of forced quaintness. There are of course more points of contact between the Americas than there are differences, and besides art, a pioneering philosophy of the open spaces links north to south more closely than either to Europe.

I like to think of the Americas in terms of the Biblical episode of Mary and Martha. Martha was practical, handled her pots and pans with "Saxon" efficiency. Mary was "Latin" and mystical, and her mind wandered far above the regions staked by the rules of good housekeeping.


Martha muttered at the apparent uselessness of her sister, and Mary probably was bothered by the clash of crockery from the kitchen. Contrasts in temperament and in activities can be stressed, but we should not forget that Martha and Mary were sisters, sisters living under one roof.

11. MEXICAN PRINTS

The power of the graphic arts lies in reproduction, multiplication. This very multiplicity points to the people at large as the potential users of prints, with which they, at least, share the quality of being many. This broad premise is attacked by a few print-lovers who advance, in dubious Malthusian fashion, that rarity is more desirable than plenty. Perhaps both theories may be reconciled if we admit two levels of art-making. Limited, numbered editions of prints are all very well for the kind of graphic art that is *de luxe* in truth or in pretence, and thus declares itself expendable. Another kind of art may be a true necessity that it would be as senseless to ration as bread.

The story of the Mexican graphic arts parallels that of Mexico, whose history is not all pleasure and leisure. Mexican art was never meant to be a hothouse flower, coddled in the rarefied air of the studio for the delectation only of connoisseurs. Since the pre-Conquest days of the *tlacuile*, who brushed painted magic on lime-coated paper to



 “Our Lady of Solitude.” After an XVIIIth C.
etching.

influence the conjunction of planets and insure the fullness of crops, Mexican esthetics have remained enmeshed in practicalities.

The birth of a Mexican art, as distinct from a purely Indian art, was attended by bloody travail. Yet the term "conquest" used to describe the forceful entry of the Spaniards in Anahuac, none too accurate even on the military plane, is even more misleading if extended to describe the clash and the resulting blend of the two civilizations it involved. A cultural conquest required as its first step a taking stock of the Indian heritage. Of the men who were brave enough to run the gauntlet of this mental hazard, none emerged intact.

The Spanish Crown and its representative in Mexico, the Viceroy, labored hard to smooth over the rough colony culturally. When Baron de Humboldt visited Mexico in 1803, this cultured European marvelled at the collection of Greco-Roman plastercasts housed at the Mexican Academy of Fine Arts as a gift from the Crown. Humboldt also witnessed how Aztec sculptured temple fragments, when accidentally unearthed, were speedily buried again. This was perhaps because they were pagan, but more certainly because, for a taste attuned to eighteenth-century rococo, they were ugly. Baron Humboldt voiced a mild reproof, "Why not, side by side with the Apollo Belvedere or its plaster counter-

feit, admit the exhumed monsters reminiscent of the art forms of Hindoos and Egyptians?" What the German Baron visualized as a curiosity—the chance meeting of violently contrasting esthetics—does in fact plague the inner eye of all Mexican artists. They hardly need see side by side Apollo Belvedere and Coatlicue to realize what potent tension results from the churning of bloods that begat them and their art.

Their quandary is illustrated by the career of the first graphic artist of authentically mixed parentage, Fray Diego Valadez, born in Mexico of a Spanish father and an Indian mother. Trained to be a Franciscan missionary, well-travelled both in Europe and in his native land, Fray Valadez engraved a set of plates meant for visual aids to teach Christian doctrine to unlettered Indian converts. Through his origin as well as his calling, the artist had familiarized his eye only too well with the squatting figures to be found in codices, hugging the earth, knees to their chin, in the manner of his savage parishioners. Having tasted Indian humility at the sight of these geometrically defined human figures, their folded bodies inscribed in the cube or seemingly gathered back into the sphere of the womb, Fray Valadez, though possessed of great technical proficiency and keen anatomical knowledge, could no longer, in his engravings, be con-

tent with the display of swollen muscles and the extrovert gestures stamped on art by the European Renaissance.

The human form is at its loveliest skin-deep, awaiting only the added health and glow of Greek genius to become a Narcissus or a Galatea. The Aztec, immune to the sight of religious autopsies performed with a sacrificial knife, preferred to observe the same human body piecemeal—a necklace of steaming hearts, or a basinful of blood, or a hill of skulls. Unnice as is death in its plastic manifestations, it has nevertheless inspired great art. In Europe, bones, shrouds and worms were the *leit-motiv* of medieval dances of death. In the America of the sixteenth century, the rattling of the imported Catholic skeletons was to find its perfect match in the staccato rhythm of the *teponastle*, the Aztec log-drum. In colonial times, Death triumphed in the showy funeral pyres that Mexicans, with outward sorrow and perhaps secret pleasure, erected at the death of emperors and kings whose absentee power they had experienced only at second hand. Crowned skeletons loom big in the engravings that adorn the resulting *pièces de circonstances*.

Early in the nineteenth century, Fernandez de Lizardi, nicknamed "El Pensador Mexicano," assisted at the birth of Mexican political inde-



HIDALGO E ITURBIDE.

pendence with a rash of pamphlets—from four to eight pages each, on cheap paper—that he wrote, set to type, and distributed single-handed. A woodcut of a plain skull and crossbones modelled with deep chiaroscuro which embellishes one of his “Dialogues of the Dead,” between the shade of hero Hidalgo and the freshly-laid one of ex-Emperor Iturbide, marks the rise of the modern, wholly irreverent, comical *calavera*. It is dated 1824.

This graphic *calavera* (skull), passing through ever more complex forms, reached a climax in the metal cuts and relief etchings of Guadalupe Posada, undoubted master, versed in the low-

brow art of illustrating pennysheets. His *oeuvre* was realized in a sharp black and white that spurned nuance, and, indeed, little nuance was needed, as the engraver separated the goats from the sheep with a kick. With anarchistic gusto, the brown-skinned master lined before his graphic tribunal the mighties of this world, generals and bandits, and coquettes as well, making of all a savoury mess of mustachioed jaws and blunderbusses, of necklaces and collarbones, of ribs and ribbons. As the Revolution, begun in 1910, entered into its giant stride, it raised measurably the number of sudden deaths among the mighties. Death and Posada then entered into friendly contests to see which one could first transform a live potentate into a grinning skull.

Another rich source of graphic art is the political cartoon at large, quite as far removed from the concept of art-for-art as the more specialized *calavera*. Mexico has a strong tradition of political newspapers, backed by the disinterestedness of men who have gone to jail, seen their presses smashed, and had their skulls cracked and their papers suppressed, all for the sake of keeping an opposition alive. When official art tended to freeze into decorum, when marble Venuses tickled the taste of the bourgeois, cartoonists kept alive the quota of dynamism and unnicety without which Mexican art would

quickly wither. Equally doomed by the success or failure of their endeavor, these pennysheets could not outlast the issues they raised. Only their names have kept a sting: *The Mustard Plaster*, *The Black Widow*, *The Gut-Grater*, *The Tickles*, *The Shark*, *The Carving Knife*, *The Loose-Mouthed*, *The Whip*, *The Scorpion*, *The Blind Man's Club*.

Mild-named and longer lived than most was the far from mild *La Orquesta* that featured Constantino Escalante's masterly lithographs. These cover the Juarez Reform, the French invasion, Maximilian's empire, the two Juarez Republics. Escalante was as a rule "against it." He lovingly dwelt on the picturesque Zouave's uniforms, but their unhappy owners were impaled on the spikes of maguey, drubbed by barbed cacti. General Zaragoza funnelled horse pills into a sick Napoleon III; a comical Maximilian lent his imperial foot to be kissed. Juarez was a tuna, the tasty fruit of the nopal, protected from French appetites by bristling vegetable bayonets. Mexico was a bronze-skinned, plume-skirted Indian maiden who lolled in a hammock tied to palm trees. She greeted the landing of the diminutive, pompous Frenchman with a smile, and a popular refrain, "Here come the monkeys."

Through this vast graphic work, as a kind of

hieroglyph that stands for the mechanical progress featured in that mid-century, Escalante drew variations of the iron horse. His locomotives, their valves and pistons rearranged in quasi-organic fashion, chug and puff with an animal life all their own. In 1868, as the artist and his wife were returning from a party in Tacubaya, they both slipped under the wheels of the local train they were to board, dying soon after.

Heir to *La Orquesta* was *El Ahuizote*, named after a *nahuatl* monster whose voice lured men to an aquatic death. It published Villasaña's great lithographs of the seventies. Truly a "blind man's club," it helped crush a democratic president, Lerdo de Tejada, and boosted as a hero young General Porfirio Diaz. A generation later, *El Hijo del Ahuizote* (*The Ahuizote's Son*) undid, in three decades that bridge the centuries, what its father had done. It swatted mature Don Porfirio until his senile exile.

In 1911-1913, a new *Ahuizote* kept its cartoons aimed at President Francisco Madero up to the minute when he was actually shot in the back. In this paper, José Clemente Orozco cut his milk teeth to razor sharpness on the future martyr, Madero.

The Mexican mural renaissance in the twenties was especially concerned with true fresco, the mural technique par excellence. But its art-

ists had not turned muralists primarily through a love of fresco, but rather in their desire to bring art to the people. In sharp contrast to what were then the tenets of the School of Paris, the Mexicans were bent on creating a didactic type of art aimed at a wider circle of men than the esthetes. It is natural, then, that they would also try their hand at the graphic arts in an effort to reach an even wider public than could be touched by murals. With this purpose appeared *El Machete*, financed by the Syndicate of Painters, an irregularly issued, blatant newssheet of extra-large format. For it, muralists Siqueiros and Guerrero literally carved planks into brutal woodcuts. These were inked and run together with the type on a commercial plate-press, minus the niceties of special inking, graded pressure, and rag paper that one associates with artwork. Poor as the resulting proofs undeniably are, these few woodcuts remain as a precious testimonial to a moment of heroic endeavor. They were done in between mural work by men familiar with scaffolds and mortar and totally disdainful of the finer points which constitute the pride of collectors' portfolios. As a result, there is a bigness in them that no later work by these same men could quite recapture.

In the next decade, the pioneer muralists affirmed their technical proficiency and esthetic maturity, mostly by hard, sustained work. An-



👉 José Clemente Orozco: “The Flag.” Detail.

other generation that was then born to art found itself hemmed in, as it were, between the walls where their elders had frescoed brown giants shaking fists and holding banners loud with slogans. Naturally enough, adolescent scruples shied away from these hardened displays. The young artists took refuge from the very big in the very small. Leopoldo Mendez and others learned to cut wood so fine as to squeeze a content equivalent to that of hundreds of square feet of *buon fresco* into prints the size of an *ex-libris*. Mexican graphic arts then branched towards exquisiteness as a natural antidote, a phase perhaps best expressed in the few prints of short-lived Julio Castellanos.

In today's Mexico, it can be said that the function of public speaking so ably performed by murals in the twenties has been taken over by the printed poster. Perhaps simply because photo-engraving remains more expensive than obsolete methods, posters in Mexico are still mostly hand-made process or relief cuts. The print-lover would do well to follow the over-alled man who walks the streets with a pastepot, a brush, and a sackful of new posters that he slaps all over the walls of the Capital. The yellow, pink or purple sheets, apart from advertising a sportfest or denouncing a politico, may also be first editions, strictly unlimited, of the original graphic work of some famous artist.

Another branch of the arts to which, indirectly, the revolution gave a boost is book illustration. It started with the same practical intent as many another endeavor of which art constituted, so to speak, no more than a by-product. Modern book illustration was linked early with the campaigns launched by successive Presidents to teach an increasing number of citizens how to read and write. Typical is Rivera's childish primer, *Fermin Lee*, with its exquisitely primitive line drawings. Printed by the State, it was distributed free to rural schools.

More sophisticated and aimed at a smaller circle, the best of the later books still hold that technical excellence and human values are interdependent. Such is *El Sombreron*, illustrated by Alfredo Zalce, shown here together with the preparatory studies that preceded the final linocuts. It may come as a surprise to some to see how the artist's mind worked; how complexity meant for him only a first step towards simplicity.

In the effort to single out of Mexico what will seem to an outsider the most Mexican trends, there lies a danger of distortion. It is true that in the twenties much Mexican art was clashing with much Parisian art as to the why of art-making. It is also true that Mexican artists contributed their share to rounding out the international school. Rivera could hardly have be-


come as convincingly the local realist that he is were it not for his earlier valid attachment to analytical cubism, which later on checked all backward glances towards Paris. In the work of Carlos Merida, of Mayan Indian stock, cohabit the knowledge of modern art acquired in Paris, when he shared a studio with Modigliani, and racial lore, with which he can communicate simply by closing his eyes. Such are his wash drawings on stone for *Popol-Vuh*, which represent besides a complex technical feat.

If I had to choose, out of the whole panorama of the Mexican graphic arts, a single print, it would not be one by any famous master. Personality is often emphasized as the paramount ingredient of art; but, on the other hand, the better defined the personal idiosyncrasies of the artist, the more restricted the public that the art work reaches. I do not speak of the outward marks of appreciation that can always be conjured up by published critical estimates and the attendant publicity drummed around big names, but rather of the inner conformity felt before the art work when one is alone with it, and just looking. For the same reason, I would not choose either the biggest print or the loudest, impressive as is the Mexican version of both.

Of all the plates in the Mexican collection of the Museum, the ledger of samples of printer

Murguia moves me most, and in it, the set of saints, or rather of *santos*, as stylized, as geometrized, as an ABC. These images, pyramidal Virgins or beribboned Crucifixes, are anonymous chips from a truly functional form of art, rich in didactic clarity, and meant for the people at large.

One of these would be my choice.

José Clemente Orozco: "Self-portrait."
Ca. 1916. 



12. JOSÉ CLEMENTE OROZCO

In an epoch when hearts were stouter—or purer—than now, Flemish justices saw fit to decorate their courts with murals warning against the dire punishments meted out to unjust judges. A favorite was the story of the magistrate who was skinned alive, and his pelt used to upholster the judicial bench. When José Clemente Orozco was commissioned to decorate the Supreme Court Building of Mexico City, had he known this anecdote, he would have rejected it as too mild. As it stands, his painting is more disquieting than the ancient ones, being a sweeping indictment of all human justice rather than that of a single scoundrel. To the doubtful enjoyment of Mexican judges, who must pass the murals every day on their way to court, Orozco chose to literally broil human lawmakers and justice dispensers on a set of divine spits.

The walls are painted in a kind of *buon fresco* pressed into the service of untried ends by a powerful and esthetically lawless personality.

Orozco's technique has only its chemistry in common with the delicate washes of ancient Italian frescoes so blanched by the centuries as to meet spinsterish tastes. His come closer to the opaque, lime-thick Slavonic murals; and the modellings, contrasting dynamically active hatchings of black and white, could be a muscular free-hand adaptation of the delicate webs of gold that highlight the veils of Byzantine Madonnas. But the little that remains of the routine wisdom of ancient recipes is done violence to by sustained inspired improvisation. Seen at arm's length, the disjointed brushstrokes are only a puzzling giant calligraphy. A far greater distance is needed before the walls are ready to disgorge their searing message.

As to subject matter, compact diagonal columns of Heaven-sent fire are the one flaming accent in an otherwise colorless world, conjured up mostly with moss green and corpse gray. A timid, vitiated echo of this burning red are the Phrygian caps with which respectable-looking masked bandits attempt in vain to deflect the well-aimed lightnings. Massive bookshelves, raised like skeletal skyscrapers, and shaken by the attendant earthquake, pour out books and stacks of legal documents as if they were wounded innards. On a high pedestal in front of a tottering, half-split palace of justice, Justice herself lolls through the conflagration, sword and neck limp, snoring

mouth agape. A giant empty closet opens, and before its disclosed vacuum, a kitchen table parades as a legal bench. The Chair, stuffy with plush and gaudy with gold, lies upset, buried in a mounting sea of notaried papers curled by the flames. The inhabitants of this, Orozco's private planet, hide their judicial features behind safe-crackers' kerchiefs, give false weights on the scales of justice, pronounce loaded decisions, or, less subtly, sock and bind poor adolescent orphans, gag and rope night watchmen, stuff a hastily gathered loot inside bulging knotted sheets.

One of Orozco's latest mural ensembles, this one, like all the others, has the power to irritate layman and art critic alike. The former resents the indecency latent in the totally unabashed exposure of romantic inspiration, fears the nugget of truth latent in the gross indictment. The latter, whose delight is to burrow a sniffing way under the surface of an art work and retrieve with canine fidelity what influences, trends and comparisons are hiding in there, is stopped still in his tracks by an originality not yet catalogued in history.

José Clemente Orozco was born in 1882, in Zapotlan, State of Jalisco. His family mapped out for him a career as an agronomist, and the willing youngster went to the Capital and won a diploma as an agricultural engineer after three

hard years at the Escuela de Agricultura de San Jacinto.

Six years later Orozco, deciding belatedly upon an artistic career, entered the Fine Arts School of San Carlos, sitting in class with moppets of seventeen. The art academy was a forbidding place, its courses devised as an elaborate set of rungs and traps to smooth to academic polish whatever individual asperities were in the initial make-up of the student. Orozco remained Orozco, yet remembers with gratitude the conventional grind that forced him to take stock of his innate capacities. After having drawn from the cast and from lithographic prints his share of noses, toes and ears, he was admitted to life class. An elaborate stand could rotate the model, or raise her to successive levels, bathed in alternating layers of diffused and reflected lights by a panoply of bulbs and screens. Each pose lasted a month, and a photographer was then called in to take a picture, against which paragon the students could correct deviations from nature in their drawings.

The academy was only the more sedate half of Orozco's art education, important inasmuch as a thorough knowledge of perspective and anatomy was the one safe way eventually to throw both overboard. More easily traceable in his present work is the other broader lesson that he gathered from the many sights of Mexico

City, either taken in the raw, for which Orozco already showed a fondness, or transmuted, digested into an esthetic alloy, by the masterly buril of the popular engraver, José Guadalupe Posada.

Retailed by street peddlers, each one of Posada's four thousand prints illustrated some paroxysm of passion meant to smoke the penny out of the poor man's knotted kerchief. Sophisticates and the well-bred turned up their noses at his art in disdain. His street gazettes, gaudy color sheets, ghastly depictions of horrendous crimes, emotional renderings of passionate adventures, gave Orozco a feeling of delight as acute as the tug at the heartstrings of the servant girls who were Posada's more constant buyers. To this day, Orozco shares the older man's esthetic philosophy, which rated emotion above craft, cared little for the delicate balancings of abstract art and much for the intricacies of the human heart.


Orozco's further esthetic training spans in time the bloodiest era of the armed Revolution. The harsh unartistic succession of political and military incidents supplemented with lead and iron the academic knowledge gathered at the Art School and the romancing of the pennysheets. The unseating and exile of Dictator Diaz, the enshrining of Madero as Savior and President, the uprising of Felix Diaz, backed by artillery

belching its shells on the Capital, the treason of Huerta, Madero's assassination, the comeuppance of Huerta, who tumbles from the Presidential chair to a sick cot in a United States jail, the royal battle between Carranza, Zapata and Villa, the whole newsreel with its *obbligato* of slugging, looting, shootings, rape and arson, is the paradoxical background against which the delicate springlike unfurling of Orozco's genius asserted itself.

Poet José Juan Tablada recorded in 1913 a visit to the painter's lodgings: "The studio was a small room furnished with the accessories indispensable to working and living—an easel, a table for colors, a bed, a washstand. On the walls and in portfolios the watercolors, pastels and drawings that are up to now the whole work of Orozco . . . Woman is the perpetual theme of all these works . . . Young women meet and kiss endearingly, furtive looks and affected gestures rehearse nascent perfidies, weapons are being tried and sharpened for the coming duels of passion . . . It is with reluctance that I close the portfolio of Claudines, with a last look at childish heads made larger by the coquettish note of a knotted ribbon, at bodies where svelteness and plenitudes express a first try at the mature form."

It is true that, if his watercolors of schoolgirls were all tenderness, Orozco was already sharp-



 José Clemente Orozco: "Schoolgirl." Ca. 1910.

ening boar-sized tusks in another genre. His Rab-elaisian and Falstaffian cartoons printed by successive opposition sheets, hounded impartially whichever man happened to sit in the Presidential chair, up to his customarily violent unseating. Another set of early works are the series of bordello scenes, midway between the tenderness that informs his sketches of schoolgirls and the tiger claw with which he lunged at the powerful.

All this work, the sweet with the sour, was thrown pellmell in his first exhibition, held in Mexico City in 1916. The usually silent Orozco was moved by the resulting scorn and critical fury to publish one of his few recorded rejoinders: "I have supported patiently the flood of epithets which the public let loose upon my head on account of this hapless exhibit but . . . I cannot remain quiet any longer . . . I am far from believing myself a genius. I am merely an observant young man presenting humbly and modestly the small fruit of my studies. I live in misery. Each sheet of paper, each tube of paint, is for me a sacrifice and a sadness. Is it fair to subject me to scorn and hostility and furthermore to insult me publicly?"

A trip to the United States where necessity forced him to accept menial jobs, such as the tinting of photographs of Old Masters, did little to increase Orozco's faith in a world he could

hardly stomach. Back in Mexico, 1920 is his low ebb. He confided then to José Juan Tablada that "Those people have even ceased to insult me." It seemed as if his career as a painter was at an end.

When the mural renaissance started, idling Orozco watched with cynical amusement his overalled brothers painting with a socially conscious brush. Perhaps because of a past political affiliation with Carranza, once the foe of Maecenas Vasconcelos, perhaps because he was pigeonholed as a cartoonist, it seemed at first that Orozco would be by-passed by the renaissance. But in mid-1923, Vasconcelos relented, and gave him the walls of the Preparatoria School to decorate.

Orozco came to mural painting late—close to forty—and possessed of a strong personal style. Newspaper cartooning, with its deadlines on wit and its political, quickly fading allusions, water-colors depicting gestures and postures surprised with a snapshot eye keyed to translate emotion into plastic playacting, had been up to then his trademark. They contrasted sharply with the manner of his fellow muralists, come to walls via cubism. The cubist treated each easel picture as an architecture, built it patiently from the initial rectangle of the canvas, with a faith amounting to fetichism in its four straight angles and four straight lines. When cubist Diego

Rivera turned muralist he did not have to change his point of view but only the scale of his operations. Even the muralist's scaffold proposed a well-known theme: verticals and horizontals and diagonals ordered as rigidly by function as a Juan Gris by logic. Instead of the somewhat meager postulate of the rectangular canvas, complex Mexican colonial architecture offered more intricate canons, but the geometric principle remained the norm.

Orozco had never been to Paris, had not experienced Parisian training, could not validly lean in his mural work against the architectural tenets that ruled the modern art of the twenties. As is true of his whole life, he was not eager to learn either, and somewhat skeptical of what his colleagues erected with a great show of giant compasses and stretching chalked strings in lieu of giant rulers.

When Rivera unveils his first mural in March 1923, Orozco writes pertly, "Some verses are spelled very nicely and polished magnificently, yet they are worth a peanut. Some paintings boast of the golden proportion and that famous cubistic technique, they are worth another peanut."

Discounting the flippant wording, the comparison between painting and poetry comes naturally to Orozco at a time when the more advanced critics and painters preferred to compare

painting to scientific endeavors. To his Paris-anointed colleagues, proud of being in the know, his romantic approach seemed a provincial flaw. And yet the element of Parisian fashion present in some of those other Mexican murals dates them as of the first third of the twentieth century, while the frescoes that Orozco painted at the same time escape dating; so subjectively engrossed was he as to be impervious to the chant of the cubist siren.

The negative creed expressed in face of a Rivera is soon complemented by a positive one. On the eve of beginning his career as a muralist (July 1923) Orozco writes: "My one theme is HUMANITY; my one tendency is EMOTION TO A MAXIMUM; my means the REAL and INTEGRAL representation of bodies, in themselves and in their interrelation."

So severely noble is this program as to seem incapable of human fulfillment, or rather let us say that Orozco, the budding muralist, installs himself guilelessly in Michael Angelo's private pew.

In his first frescoes painted in 1923-24, now mostly destroyed, the artist elaborated this statement. The human body was their one subject matter, stripped of racial tags, stripped of clothing, stripped even of those nondescript draperies that classical masters were too prudent to shun. "Time, the present," was waved aside as just

another pettiness. Landscape and accessories were x'd out.

However classical Orozco's intent, to the eyes of most outsiders, to the grumblings of students and parents, the patio walls of the austere Preparatoria School became covered with giant rust-red heroes bulging with excessive muscles. In 1924 critic Salvador Novo described with scorn the "repulsive pictures, aiming to awake in the spectator, instead of esthetic emotion, an anarchistic fury if he was penniless, or if wealthy, to make his knees buckle with fright."

In his first set of murals, Orozco progressively took stock of the possibilities of *buon fresco*, of the requirements of public plastic elocution, and deepened as well his philosophical slant on the world. With great conscientiousness, he would scrape one morning what he had done the day before, rework entire panels to insure the paroxysm of emotion that was his avowed aim. The more expressive of his thoughts, the more did the frescoes run counter to what college students should believe of life.

The original state of his first panel represented the Sun, depicted as a naked athlete, sprinting in zenithal position over an Eden-like earth, where a graceful sprite made flowers bloom at the touch of her fingertips. Soon after, Orozco knocked down fairy, sun and all, replacing them with a single inverted torso, "Tzontemoc." A

striking change of mood contrasts the succeeding versions. The latter, borrowing from Nahuatl mythology, pictures earth as a rocky abyss, and the moment as the fearful one when the rising evening star forces the waning globe to dive into the nether regions below the horizon, to consort there with the dead. Orozco must have understood this theme as a parable of genius at bay, as he did when he later painted Prometheus and Icarus, Greek counterparts of the Mexican myth.

Begun as a paeon to the Revolution, another panel ended as its bitter condemnation. In its first state, a faceless spirit personifying Democracy arouses humans to revolt, like the Republic that Delacroix saw sprinting over the barricades. An aged thinker and a young worker stand by, ready for the planning and the action needed to make the revolution a fact. In their hands, square and blueprint, wrench and drill are tools to forge the new order. A radical change of mood and partial scrapings and repaintings soon modified the theme to what it is now: As the spirit of civil strife hovers over them, the worker exhibits the stumps of his mutilated arms, while the older man, having dropped blueprint and square, clasps his hands to his head in inarticulate despair.

On a morning in June 1924, one year after Orozco had turned muralist, a mob of students

armed with rotten eggs, sticks and stones, assaulted and defaced the Preparatoria murals. Public opinion was largely with them. The newspapers, and even the critics excused the gangling iconoclasts on the ground that they were "lovers of the beautiful driven to fury by the sight of these monsters." To make sure that such outrage would not be repeated, an indignant government official dismissed the painter and talked of white-washing the unfinished murals. Now past forty, Orozco once again sought his livelihood in newspaper cartooning, and once again his career as a "serious" artist seemed at an end.

From this forced interlude in his government-sponsored work date the wash drawings on revolutionary themes. Critics who assume that this famous series is contemporary with the events depicted discount both the working habits and the mood of the artist. At the opposite pole from the impressionist painter hunting for a motif and bagging it on the spot, Orozco needs to turn his back on the model to see it clearly. This unphotographic strain made him paint delicate watercolors with women for a theme while before his eyes the revolution staged its bloodiest tableaux. In 1925, with peaceful reconstruction deemed just around the corner, while politicians exchanged pistol holsters for fountain pens and their horses for swivel chairs, Orozco's paradoxical retina chose to relive in brusk black and

white the colorful episodes of an earlier decade.

Of the same year is the mural that he entitled "Omniscience," painted for Francisco Sergio Iturbe, owner of the ancient and beautiful Casa de los Azulejos. The climax of his classical period, it is also an important statement on esthetics. It complements with forms what the artist had already said in words, "Art is first of all GRACE. Where GRACE is not, there is no art. GRACE cannot be conjured up by so-called cubistic recipes." The core of this saying is a belief in old-fashioned inspiration to be achieved only by spiritual experience. In the fresco, Grace, with commanding gesture, orders both Force and Intelligence, while her upturned face receives in turn the light from above. Her expression implies a mediumistic state of passive expectancy, suggests that all effort to press a conscious logic upon the work in gestation can only injure those imponderables more vital to art than articulate laws.

In 1926, Orozco returns to the Preparatoria School to finish its decoration. In a chastened mood, he abandons the gigantic scale that he affected as a mural beginner, casts aside an earlier pride in craftsmanship and anatomical display. Instead of relishing godlike nudity, Orozco's men now keep their shirts on. Once-swollen torsos exhale their lungful of pride and cave in. The shrunken heroes go through valiant

motions, strike, revolt, kill and die, roll their sleeves up for peaceful reconstruction, but the gesture lacks reach before, and fruit after, its apparent consummation.

Abandoning accidentals, drawing and palette became audaciously simple. Orozco's only model for this series of murals was the stout elderly mason that elbowed him day after day on the scaffold. His semblance, multiplied, mans a world of gray, vine-black, terra-rose, ochre, and blueing blue.

This superb series closes Orozco's first period. Soon after, his provincial innocence suffered severe jolts. Feted in New York, touring Europe, being commissioned to paint in Pomona and Dartmouth, the painter now took conscious stock of idiosyncrasies in his work hitherto rationally unperceived, paid tribute to Byzantine mosaics and puzzled over the Saxon world. Foreign respect forced recognition at home, where a substantial series of frescoes in Mexico City and Guadalajara round out his oeuvre to date.

To state that Cezanne painted apples is a somewhat meager clue to his art, for his scruple built a high China wall between what he painted and the confidences a scopolamine shot could have induced. But a description of Orozco's subject matter is relevant to a study of his esthetic, for in his case, ideation, composition and execu-

tion succeed each other so quickly as to be practically simultaneous. Where the Frenchman's wisdom isolates subject matter from art, and light from form and color, Mexican Orozco is quite satisfied to let nature and inspiration, means and ends, agglutinate in the same monochrome, shapeless mess in which living organs are revealed under the surgeon's scalpel, so unlike the red, blue and yellow wax organs that stuff anatomical dummies.

When Orozco is at work, hieroglyphs of passion pour forth from his inner recesses onto wall or canvas, with not even a pause after birth for them to get accustomed to the new climate and new milieu, to be slapped and bathed and decently swaddled, as are statements, in words or forms, that are meant for public exposure. The strength of his work does not come from any strangeness or keenness of idea, but from its lack of make-up. Orozco's system of plastic thought is a chain of clichés forcefully expressed. I do not know if great poems can be made on themes as simple as "the world is in a mess," "things are getting worse," but Orozco's great pictures are built around a similar core.

Because of such negative emphasis, many a critic, and more keenly his communist colleagues whom he alternatively raises to hope and sinks into despair, brand his thought as anarchistic. It would be, and an old-fashioned bomb at that,


thrown haphazardly and scattering its small shot on such an expanded radius as to prove mostly ineffectual, if Orozco was only a scoffer and a denier. The closest literary approach to his work is that of Léon Bloy, who could impale his victim on hot words as efficiently as any devil on a cherry-red fork. If Bloy is recognized today as great, it is not because of his attacks on personages now mostly forgotten, but because his constructiveness so immeasurably transcended his aggressiveness. Bloy's—and Orozco's—positive faith and positive vision are so radiant, even though jealously kept to themselves, as to make them dust and vacuum and scour, with an excess of muscular vigor, their private universe of the stains and specks of all persons and things that fall short of an ever-pulsating ideal.

Orozco the cartoonist could represent man in his variety, from president to pimp, from school-girl to prostitute. Man is still the theme of his later work, but the mature Orozco forgets the many masks, plows under the motley moral and psychological nuances. His murals are peopled with generalized men, as clustered, as naked, as intertwined as putti in a Fragonard cartouche, but of a more bitter hue. So intense is Orozco's preoccupation with man that landscape is reduced to a shorthand version, even in country scenes, and his few still-lives are anthropomorphic. A large tempera of late date features a

kitchen cabbage that somehow becomes a human cranium, while the curling edges of leaves mimic a crown of laurels, and the whole becomes a comment on the perishable nature of fame.

This obsession with men is not eulogistic, for the artist admits, in fact relishes, the shortcomings of his subject. Yet he is not a true pessimist, for in his paintings man, however cruelly frustrated, never ceases to declare his potentialities of grandeur. In the Martyrdoms and Golgothas that he paints today, Orozco's affirmation of faith is none the less impressive for being unconsciously uttered and consciously denied.

One should not assume that a belief in God would soothe the artist's frenzy. Far from a salve, faith is for him a means of enlarging man's distresses to God's size, a point of view that coincides by instinct with the one cogent reason advanced by theology in explanation of the Passion. On the type of faith that is conceived as a social appendage to gracious living, Orozco gives an unflattering comment in his "Father God," who holds a geographical globe instead of the medieval macrocosm, winks the rich into Heaven and shoos the poor off to Hell. Translating the Magnificat into Mexican terms—"He has humbled the proud and exalted the meek"—Orozco expects to witness in a next world the last and best of all revolutions.

Xavier Guerrero: “Indian Courtesy.” Drawing. 



13. XAVIER GUERRERO, AZTEC ARTIST

Xavier Guerrero was born in northern San Pedro de las Colonias, whose native name is Cachuila. His Indian ancestry makes him by blood an Aztec, the one undiluted Indian of the original group of Mexican muralists who recreated Amerindia on modern terms.

To describe the warm ochre of the Chilean soil, poet Pablo Neruda wrote that it was of Xavier Guerrero color. This elliptical image holds true both ways. The painter melts into a landscape as readily as its rocks or flora. He resembles the boulder-textured Aztec sculpture, squatting men apparently as immobile as the volcanic stone they are carved from. Compared with the Discobolus, these figures seem idle; feelingless, matched against the writhings of a Laocoon. The white man's eye must get accustomed to their vegetative twilight, made to measure with the dense green of an underbrush. Once in focus, he realizes that Aztec sculpture is as alive as the Greek, only less blatantly. Belying the impassive features, the symmetrical fists of a figurine will

press amorously to its flanks two half-hidden ears of corn, as a miser counts his gold.

Quiet Xavier Guerrero is the uncommon common denominator of the individual trends that weave into a Mexican Renaissance. He helped shape the medular marrow of its works by evolving most of the unusual techniques that did as much towards defining national forms as the painters' personalities.

In the 1910s, Paris cubists talked of sign- and house-painters as being truer masters than many an academician, for they alone kept alive wise traditions long forgotten by fine art schools. A little late in life, Picasso and Braque proceeded to experiment with the recipes of the trade, and to handle its specialized tools. In Mexico, Xavier Guerrero tapped the same vein by birthright, as the son of a skilled master house painter who rated crews of his own.

Xavier learned to toddle his winding way between paint pots and ladders; the fat or flat brushes of the trade were his toys. The future muralist watched his father at his job of painting walls, learned of a plastic alphabet before he was introduced to A B C. Soon, he tried his hand at it, challenging with juvenile exercises in make-believe woods and *trompe l'oeil* marbles the paternal *chef d'oeuvres*. The training of hand and eye was rounded out by practical experience as an architectural draftsman, and the fourteen-

year-old branched south, trekking from Chihuahua to Jalisco.

In Guadalajara, a rich milkman, Don Segundo, was building up to his fancy a house that came to be known, from the source of his fortune, as the House of the Cows. Said loitering little Xavier to the master house painter, "I am a painter too."

Said the master house painter, without slackening the swish of his brush, "Well, put a river here."

Said Xavier, "I will, and with a sky too," and he did.

Said master painter, "Good, now put rocks here," which he did.

That done, "Put a child by the river."

That done, "Make him cry."

Once proved, little Xavier rated a scaffold of his own. He milked the milkman for his worth, selling him on the idea of a renaissance frieze, hand-stenciled at so much per yard, full of people that ended in fishtails, a feature that greatly surprised Don Segundo.

By 1912, a decade before the best-known Mexican muralists thought of painting walls, Guerrero was a seasoned mural painter. He did among others a ceiling in the chapel of the hospital of San Camilo, its theme a Resurrection. That was in mid-year, and there was a string of earthquakes that shook the high scaffold

where he worked, while the nuns huddled and knelt underneath.

His participation in the military revolution began with a *quid pro quo* that caught him quietly at his job. "I was asked to paint a mural in a hacienda, that is to paint a new map of the grounds to replace one become obsolete. Such good meals they served there, large pitchers of creamy milk, and two desserts to choose from. But it did not last long. Came a troop of armed men and they invited us outside, to witness the shooting of hacienda hands. Said the chief when he saw me, 'You will be my secretary. Get us some medicine.' Naturally I agreed, 'You can get some at Chapala.'

"They gave me a huge white horse, and I galloped at the head of the troop, and because I knew most people in town, I took my cavalcade all through the main street to the outskirts and back again. And people gasped and said, 'We did not know that you had been promoted to general!'"

Come 1920, the revolution was top-dog, mural painting was in the air, but not yet on the walls. Roberto Montenegro was first to receive a mural commission from the Federal Government, the decoration of the former church of San Pedro y Pablo, now become a hall of free discussions. He was wise enough to give Xavier Guerrero the post of technical adviser. The advice given

by the young veteran muralist was eminently practical: let Montenegro do the backwall in oils, as his fancy dictates, and Xavier would see to the rest.

The beautifully preserved decoration, painted in distemper on a white plaster ground, strews garlands of stylized pomegranates, blue birds, black birds, cornflowers and camellias over walls, pilasters, and cupolas. Guerrero also painted the dome of a lateral chapel with the signs of the zodiac.

When Diego Rivera returned in 1920 after a twelve-year stay in Europe, he received for his mural assignment the auditorium of the Preparatory School. Montenegro presented Guerrero to the cubist master, who also asked him to be his assistant. The new mural would be painted in encaustic, a wax method that Rivera had practiced in Spain on a small scale. His European trials included rare and expensive materials, *resine eleme* extracted from lemon trees, and *essence d'aspic*, a wild lavender base used in perfume making. These ingredients could not be bought in Mexico, and their importation in the quantities needed for making a mural was prohibitive. Xavier sensibly adapted the overseas technique to local purse and conditions by suggesting plain wax, turpentine, and the copal rosin still used by Yucatan natives as incense to propitiate jungle gods.

The job started from scratch, that is from the wetting and grinding of the dry pigment; but even the tools of this disused craft had to be made. A marble slab was chosen for a first grind; a glass slab for the final one. Xavier drew a plan and profiles of a marble pestle and had it carved to specifications. Carlos Merida, Xavier, and I were a willing team of colorgrinders, and came to know pestle and slabs intimately, widely in excess of union hours.

Other mural chores were the incising of the line in the cement ground, the pricking and pouncing of detail drawings, the priming of the wall with hot rosin at the instant of painting, and the synchronizing of a blowtorch lick with each stroke of the brush, to vitrify its load of pigment.

Rivera's conversion to mural painting occurred in front of Byzantine mosaics in Ravenna, and his first mural retained the hierarchic flavor of its source, gold backgrounds and gold halos, that presented another technical hurdle. Only Xavier could use the gold leaf with success on the roughly chiseled cement. We watched in awe as he rubbed the brush on his wrist to charge it with electricity, and how the incredibly thin leaf would leap to it and flatten itself on the wall as if by Indian magic. When I attempted the same, the leaf just crumbled into uselessness.

Rivera moved to the Ministry of Public Education in March 1923, to begin there a job that

was to continue for years. This time he would paint in fresco. I offered what help I could from the experience amassed in making my first fresco, but the switch of techniques proved too much of an ordeal for Diego. Late one of the first evenings that we were on the job, as I walked through the dark court, I noticed that his scaffold shivered as at the start of an earthquake. Climbing up to investigate, I found the master crying, and viciously picking off his day's job with a trowel, as a child will kick a sand castle in a tantrum. Guerrero came upon similar tableaux in these first hectic days.

The whole work threatened to wither at birth. It was imperative to find release from this mental and technical emergency. Happily, Xavier remembered how his father would trowel a coat of mortar, lay on top a coat of plaster mixed with marble dust, then paint, then press the surface smooth as glass with a hot iron. He started from there, changing the plaster for lime, experimenting cautiously on portable fresco samples with mortars of distinct contents. Meanwhile, Rivera was sent on a farflung trip to sketch and rest.

Siqueiros wrote of Guerrero, as he remembers him at the time, "More than the fine art artist, he was a worker in practical painting, a studious searcher for autochthonous technical material, a good finder of traditional landmarks. A good walker, he ambled through the most remote of

our regions, unearthing past plastic secrets. He was both the worker and the scientist of our group."

Says Xavier, "I made trips to Teotihuacan to compare my results with pre-Hispanic murals, then matched mural samples in the Ministry. At last I made a successful sample and showed it to Diego, who said, 'We will save this sample, imbed it in the finished work and paint by it your portrait, with the date of the discovery.' I suggested that Diego let me take the sample out myself as he is somewhat clumsy with his hands, but he insisted on doing it himself. He hammered the sample to bits, and the last, rather large fragment to fall, he crushed absent-mindedly underfoot and spoke no more of painting my portrait."

As he already had done with encaustic, Guerrero thus streamlined fresco to fit the Mexican milieu. One of the minor features of the modified technique was the use of nopal sap as an agglutinant. This picturesque touch stirred the newspapers into eloquence, and they dubbed Guerrero's method "The Secret of the Mexica."

In June 1923, *El Universal* said: "The artist painter Diego Rivera has rediscovered, in the opinion of certain technicians of painting, the process used by ancient Mexicans to produce their splendid frescoes, such as those that we admire today in the monuments of San Juan Teotihuacan. . . . It consists in mixing nopal juice

with the preparation, completing the work with a special polish, adopted after numerous trials by the assistant of Diego Rivera, Señor Xavier Guerrero."

And in July Rivera praises, in an interview, "Xavier Guerrero, well versed in the craft of painting, who discovered in his noble approach to it as a laborer, a procedure that resuscitates the manner of painting of the ancient Mexicans. I use this technique,' adds Diego modestly."

By then the danger of failure had waned. Bucked up by his esoteric share in "the secret of the Mexica," Rivera gathered courage, and in a few weeks fresco had no terrors left for him.

In the chapel of Chapingo, Guerrero also worked with Rivera and painted panels of his own, among them monochrome floral decorations that prove the care with which the Indian observes nature. Not content to look at a flower, he memorises its anatomy, sampling inner shapes with lateral and longitudinal slices from tip to roots, after the manner of his Aztec ancestors, the *tlacuiles* who left us exquisite botanical albums.

The decoration of the house of the director of the Chapingo agricultural school is entirely his work, important as an isolated example of private decoration from that early period. Here, but *a sotto voce*, are the usual symbols customarily flaunted on public walls on a colossal scale.

When the "Syndicate of Revolutionary Painters, Sculptors, and Engravers of Mexico" was created, Guerrero was the only one of the painters to take the move for granted. His father had been a devout union man, and would take him by the hand as a child, to walk in street demonstrations of the painters' union. Unlike his artist friends, Xavier had thought of painting as a communal affair since the days he trotted on short legs behind the unfurled, hand-painted banner of his father's guild.

As a member of the new syndicate, he shouldered the responsibility for its organ, a newspaper that carried more woodcuts than news, the wrathful *Machete*, its name borrowed from the curved blade, half hunting knife and half scythe, that the Mexican peasant knows how to use in war and peace. Its slogan read:

"The machete is used to reap cane,
To clear a path through an underbrush,
To kill snakes, end strife,
And humble the pride of the impious rich."

Left of the left, its contents were such that neither right nor center nor left could find any solace in it; and it was butted in turn by enraged politicians. Guerrero, Orozco, Siqueiros, contributed to it some of their most mordant works, got fired from their mural jobs in retaliation.

The paper was paginated in reverse, the contents of the first page being printed on the verso of the last sheet, an apparent artistic oversight that allowed the paper to be read straight as a poster. Siqueiros and Guerrero, loaded with a pail of glue and a roll of *Machetes*, used to sally forth at four A.M.—after the street lamps were extinguished and before the first stirrings of day. They stealthily pasted the paper at strategic street corners, where its illustrations, cut in wood on a mural scale, at last settled on an architecture.

More than a decade of travels interrupted Guerrero's technical researches and art realizations, taking him to eastern Europe and western Asia, to live among Caucasians and Kirghiz, Cossacks and Tartars.

Most important of the murals executed after his return are those he did in Chile, as a cultural ambassador of the Mexican Republic. The town of Chillan had been destroyed by a lethal earthquake in 1939, and help came from the sister republic. Mexico donated a school and its decorations. While Xavier painted the hall in fresco (two floors, a staircase, and ceilings, an area close to four hundred square meters), Siqueiros decorated the library in Duco.

No sharper contrast could exist between two stylistic temperaments. Siqueiros recreated the bloody dynamism of the catastrophe under guise

of the maimed, shrieking figure of a semi-mythical Indian hero. Guerrero, with selfless respect for a people sated with tragedy, painted symbols of reconstruction and hope. Wrote Chilean Pablo Neruda, "An outer harsh grandeur, an inner clear core of medular freshness. The peasants of my country will detain their horses alongside the decorated school, and look long at Guerrero's figures, obscurely conscious of the secret roots, the hidden waters that link our nations under a vast continent."

Before painting on it, Xavier observes an architecture with the same oriental minuteness with which he dissects a flower. The standing building is, unlike its blueprint, a fragment of a larger habitat, ruled remotely by sea, sun, and stars. The painter encourages natural phenomena to intrude upon his geometrical schemes and to propose optical accidents that he will make his norms. Outside the Chillan school, a pool of water strews shivering slivers of sunlight through the windows and on a ceiling at certain hours of the day. Guerrero slanted figures in movement after their diagonal play, in contrapunto to the ceiling square. This obeisance paid to the immaterial is repaid when, every late afternoon, the figures swim in reflected light.

His other Chilean mural is inside a modern hall, used as a recreational club for workers. A man and woman, each over thirty feet long, fill

walls whose strong inner slants join at the top in a V barrel vault, where a child levitates in zenithal position. Of a sustained, fruity *goyava* pink, the fresco is painted on a mortar rich in cement, modeled in part with thin airbrushed films. The mood is one of lassitude after an exertion that may be work or war.

Guerrero usually does not paint on a scale that fits exhibition walls, nor subjects flattering to a period drawing room, and yet he has experimented in small scale, subdued, non-didactic, surprisingly intimate easel pictures that contrast with his public style. These he paints in Duco over *costal de ixtle*, a local gunny sack that comes in graded textures, from the tough, hairy fiber of the common *magueye pulquero* to the medium roughness of the Yucatan *hennequen*. He coats the coarse stuff with a mixture of fine plaster, sulphur, zinc white, glue and varnish, that hardens with the paint to wall hardness.

We learn from Guerrero how an Indian visualizes Indians, and that is not as plumed, chanting, dancing natives, caught by the tourists (be they foreigners or Mexican citizens) disgorged by motorcades on a given village, on the one day of the year when it does not look or act like itself.

Xavier succeeds in painting silence and repose, eminent characteristics of his race, so forgotten by artists who specialize in painting Indians. To open a vast store of Amerindian knowledge, he

needs but to close his eyes to disturbing exterior spectacles, of which he has so often and so forcefully been an actor, and let an ancestral voice speak. That his easel pictures are so surprisingly quiet proves that they are the unadulterated echo of such a wordless meditation; they do not attempt to "put anything over." They are simply the essence of a nature more finely attuned than most to that which is of wide human worth in a given heritage and locale. The deep root nurtures a calm blossom, like the black spears that stretch against a white moon in one of his finer flower-pieces. Far from modeling itself after a Fenimore Cooper yarn, the Indian art of Xavier Guerrero treads on padded feline paws.

Rufino Tamayo: "Girl Standing." Ca. 1930. 



14. RUFINO TAMAYO

Twenty years ago a small group of Mexican artists, eschewing the international style centering in Paris, brought forth an essentially local esthetic. The travail entailed shows in the results, especially the murals frescoed in the twenties. The magnitude of the areas covered, the scope of the heroic subject matter, bespeak a gigantism that jarred certain sensibilities. A Mexican witness writes in 1924, "This itch to paint decalogues, transcendental symbols, philosophical concepts, revolutions and revelations, is either a joke or childish delusion. . . . Riverism says 'I yearn for monumental painting, easel painting is petty. I wish to brush great frescoes and leave behind something to rival Michelangelo's "Last Judgment." What of it if the bourgeois shrieks or if I get ruptured trying.'"

Though a youthful prize-winner at the San Carlos Academy in 1918, Rufino Tamayo came of age as a painter about 1926, when the first energy of the mural movement was already spent, when some ears, sated with the routine of pipe organs

going full blast, sighed for chamber music. He, and others of similar mind, witnessed with amused awareness the sport of fellow painters pushing Sisyphean rocks uphill. Surrounded by red banners, closed fists, open mouths, clanging chains, and eviscerated money bags, it was a most natural thing for the dissidents to rediscover for themselves with delight *l'art pour l'art* with its exquisite soul searching, and the aristocratic monologue of a subconscious talking aloud to itself.

Indianism was a major note of the renaissance. Whatever his inclination, Tamayo could hardly discard a racial heritage that was not for him a cerebral option but a biological fact. His colleagues had picked the most gigantic of antiquities as touchstones against which to assess their muscles—the monolithic moon-goddess from Teotihuacan, the geometric serpent heads dug up in the Zocalo, the colossus *Coatlicue* girded with snake rattles, displaying baubles made of human hands and hearts. But a whole valid vein of Mexican art remained closed to the muralist intent on size and scope—the archaic terra cottas of people making music, holding hands, giving birth, delousing each other's manes, yet remaining minute pellets of clay stamped with the functional thumbmark of the potter. Tamayo adopted them as stylistic ancestors, and also the Tarascan fat men sculptured in baseball attire, raising their

bats at equally fat dogs with shamrock-shaped ears and wagging stubby tails. Instead of the grinning mask of the death god, he warmed to smiling Totonac heads, halfway between the Mona Lisa and kewpies.

The dualism of mood of pre-Hispanic times held true of our day as well. While the self-appointed painters to the Indians frescoed brown giants with thunder on their brow and lightning in their fist, the Indians themselves produced their own art as usual: they embroidered or lacquered arabesques bearing a crop of buds and birds, patted black clay into the shapes of monkeys and owls, dressed fleas, wove straw horsemen astride petate horses, painted pigs, and exvotos where people suffer, pray, are cured, all happening in silence within cloistered hearts, with not a fist, not a flag, not a streamer in evidence.

All this was in accord with Tamayo's own life. Born in tropical Oaxaca, he lived in Mexico City in the quarter of La Merced, the district of markets and wholesale fruit dealers. His adolescent eye took in mountains of bananas—of green gold, yellow gold and copper—heaps of mangoes—the whole gamut of cadmiums from lemon to purple, their bloom enhanced with leopard spots of black—of still more lush papayas, *chirimoyas*, and round brown *zapotes*. At home, genteel baskets smothered with ribbons displayed paper

flowers and fruits again—wax fruits this time.

The early muralists had solved the relationship between local and international art by turning their backs on the School of Paris, on which most had been nurtured. Their hearts set on plastic oratory in the grand manner, they felt an affinity with such old masters as Giotto and David, masters of propaganda in paint, and could seek no compromise with the Parisian attitude that tabooed substantial themes as subject matter. For Tamayo no such harsh choice arises. There is a kinship between those he loves, gentle Indian “old masters” and folk artists, and the brittle masterpieces of Dufy and Laurencin. In his early work, traditional Indian and modern Parisian styles coexist in peace, with an easy grace and an unassuming relaxation that contrast sharply with what is usually understood by Mexican style.

While his fellow painters favored heroic themes, Tamayo chose humbler models. His early still lifes heap childish wonders—mangoes, ice cream cones, electric bulbs—juggle with them for the sake of color in a palette not intended to be soaked through the eye, but gustatory as it were, not in the esoteric sense suggested by Rimbaud, but as if the motor reflexes of childhood experience remained miraculously alive. André Salmon holds that painters’ climates should be common human currency, suggests the weather report:

"Today Tiepolo skies, tomorrow Rembrandt clouds." In turn, Tamayo greens and Tamayo pinks equate celestial pistachios and raspberries.

Born to it, Tamayo is one of the few who can validly claim as his the picturesque subject matter of tropical Mexico. With postcard splendor, native Oaxacanian markets display, besides their colorful wares, bronzed Tehuana types with naked feet hugging the ground, full-pleated skirts, embroidered blouses, natural flowers braided with their hair. Add palms and parrots, varicolored houses, and mangy dogs. All this subject matter is to be found in the artist's work, but used with a tremulous sense of responsibility to the rules of good taste and good painting. This race of women that started many an ethnologist babbling of a lost Atlantis roams through his canvases as bell-shaped pyramids, with a flaring starched ruffle at ground level weighing more heavily in the painter's hierarchy than the featureless heads. His curiosity clarifies the nameless shapes that peeling coats of paint produce on an otherwise plain wall. The hot sun is culled and sieved into color patterns that studiously avoid the rendering of sculptural bulk. The tropical scene is "recreated" if you wish, "abstracted" if you want.

Artists are often tempted to play the Peter Pan, inertia suggesting caroling and carousing in collegiate fashion as an easy way to grow up. En-

dowed with a personal style, shown and sold by New York dealers who appreciate the affinity between his vision and that of the School of Paris, Tamayo could have hardened his early success into the mold of a well balanced formula: enough sophistication to intrigue the layman, with enough naiveté to delight sophisticates.

No such fate awaits this painter, whose evolution steers its able course equally far from the somersault turned stale and from the paunch grown at the Academy. A break in style, esthetic *pedimento* or plastic *mea culpa*, is nowhere in evidence, and yet the difference between the early and present work is emphatic. A change of psychological approach signals a shift of seasons, as the slow summer fullness of maturity takes its hold. The long residence of Tamayo in New York results paradoxically in a depurated inner comprehension, a sifting of racial quintessence. The picturesque allusions in modern guise that his northern public had come to expect, the toy shapes, the candy hues, fall short of this new urge whose far-flung motors feed on more disquieting strains. Distortions of the human figure are no longer meant for purposes of wit—as plastic puns. They are bona-fide distortions of passion. While Greco's mark holiness, Tamayo's liberties with man's frame suggest a ripper's surgery, or the craft of the Mexican village witch baking bits of hair and nail filings from the in-

tended victim inside a clay doll, with deadly purpose. In these later pictures, certain dogs or dragons open jaws as barbed with teeth and as ravenous as the vampire-headed beings that sit, Buddahwise (but with none of Buddah's static acceptancy), on the Zapotecan funeral urns dug up in the painter's native Oaxaca.

In the twenties, taking no part in the mural movement, Tamayo pitted purification of means against sheer size and scope. Later, perhaps because he felt secure enough in his acquisition of pure plasticity, perhaps simply because he is a Mexican painter, Tamayo painted murals. That of the Academy of Music of Mexico City, frescoed in 1933, is close to his easel pictures in mood, if not in physical size. With the same relaxed subconsciousness, the same delight of the brush, and the same racial validity, it also shies from didactic purpose. Indian angels pluck stringed instruments and play at being but still lifes—if not Cézanne's apples, at least Tamayo's *zapotes*.

His 1943 mural in the library of the art department of Smith College signalizes, however, a wish to tell a complex story in terms of giant size and in collaboration with the architecture. In this fresco the artist tackles unafraid a theme that some of his non-objective colleagues would irreverently call a hoary chestnut. In Tamayo's own words, "The first panel is entitled 'Nature

and the Artist' . . . the group representing Nature is composed of five figures . . . the figure of Nature is of heroic size. It has four breasts and lies in an attitude of surrender, to symbolize abundance and generosity. From the rocks . . . there springs a blue female figure from whose hands flows a stream of water. This figure symbolizes Water. . . . Above Water is a male figure in red, symbolizing Fire. . . . Another female figure, coffee colored and representing Earth . . . is represented as holding in its arms the figure of Nature, to show that it is in the Earth that we see Nature in all her magnificence. At the right a blue male figure . . . represents Air. The whole group is capped by a rainbow which . . . symbolizes Color, the basic element of painting.

"Another male figure represents the Artist engaged in producing the Work of Art . . . between the Artist and the group representing Nature there are a lyre and a compass, to show that the Artist, when he looks at Nature in search of plastic elements, should do so through the medium of poetry and knowledge . . ."

This description may conjure up for those who have not seen the actual wall, ladies in Greek veils toying with operatic accessories, such as a seventeenth-century *peintre d'histoire* bent on moralizing could have conceived. The chosen subject implies the representation of three different degrees of reality: the artist, his vision, the

work of art, in decreasing order. Such a program would tax even a realistic painter, though he could lavish on the figure of the artist all the tricks of his trade and taper toward lesser realism. Tamayo manages to carry his complex program to completion without once falling into photographic vernacular, as he doses with sagacity diverse degrees of abstraction.


In the microcosm that the artist orders to taste on those 400 square feet of wall, geometry rates over anatomy—shapes elbows, knees, and shoulders after the rigid fancy of ruler and compass. Bodies as we know them are done violence to, breasts are multiplied, fingernails swell to the size of heads, heads shrink to thumbnail size—while prismatic hues sally forth out of the rainbow, seize on any skin as their prey, or fight for possession in a piebald melee.

While Nature is given true weight and a sculptural mass, Fire and Air remain buoyant, their two-way traffic streaking diagonally the dense earth-colored sky. Patches of brown on blue mark Water's subterranean origin. Earth emerges between the mountainous hip of Nature and the prismatic fluorescence of the rainbow, like a star-nosed mole, claws clamped at the egress from its shaft, as it senses the unwanted sky. Observing this semi-abstract vision from the side, the painted painter abstracts it further in a geometric scheme that deliberately sheds what

still clings to the model of bulk, weight, texture, and story-telling. Style shifts by imponderable transitions from the massive Nature born out of the steaming Mexican loam, to the international style in which the artist is working.

In spite of its size, its brilliancy, its eloquence, this fresco affects the observer more through the handling of the brush than through its intellectual planning. One is prone to overlook the didactic purpose and to relish instead modulations of color, especially those passages from red ochre through darker ochres to burnt cork, culminating in the figure of Earth.

This huge mural should put Tamayo's mind at rest as to his ability to produce the kind of full-throated pipe-organ music that he questioned twenty years ago. It should not make us forget his other, major claim, staked in more recondite grounds of Mexican esthetics with those easel pictures that strike two contrasting chords, the white magic of his early toyland and the brown magic of his maturity.

Lola Cueto: design for tapestry. 



15. LOLA CUETO

The Tapestries

To appreciate the needlework panels of Lola Cueto, no other effort is needed than to open our eyes and let them be saturated with the flow of colors and nourished on the wisdom of designs. The patient, countless bee-pricks of her knowing needle imply in their minutiae no smallness of heart. What stroke of pigment-loaded brush could compete with the variety of this magic petit-point in which the thread streams around form and space with liquid ease, or forcefully breaks its rhythms against their outlined boundaries? This technique is a natural one to match spiritual expression, wherein the thread is present, not so much in its physical concreteness, as in its function as a snare to hold and to hoard light, and to master its prism in the same impalpable way that a copper wire curbs and channels electricity.

The artist has pitted her unique technique against another, older one, whose principle is also that of ensnaring light, the technique of the stained glass in medieval windows. Her set of

panels embroidered after Biblical histories from Chartres is far from being slavish reconstruction. What she brings to the fore may lack archaeological pulchritude, but stresses heroic inspiration. Rather than adhering to the letter of line and color, she evokes the spirit, that is, the sun rays that transform each chunk of colored glass into a chromatic universe. She tells how each blue, transfixed by sunlight, ranges from cerulean to an ultramarine so saturated that it bleeds with carmine overtones; how the play of each red is from the shade of a faded rose petal to a hue so deep as to become colorless, the same colorlessness that dyes the ocean's depths.

Truly a feast for the eye, these embroideries also reach further than the senses, even further than would a quest for objective beauty or for subjective exaltation. The concept of art for art remained unknown to the artisans that built the cathedrals. Glass and lead, the stones used in building, all were respected servants of theology. The stories that art told were meant to touch and to edify even the smallest or the roughest of pilgrims. When we refer today to art as propaganda, we think of closed fists and red banners, forgetting that other kind which, for centuries, disseminated the lessons of martyrdoms and miracles.

In the time we live in, many a Catholic, however heroic he may happen to be in his personal

life, believes that there is a kind of virtue in preserving mediocrity in esthetics. In the century when Chartres was conceived, the faithful clearly saw how it was his duty to forge an esthetic language to fit his own devotional clime. Of course, the builders of cathedrals were familiar with the works of past cultures. Villard de Honnecourt—a great medieval architect—sketched antique marbles in his notebook. Goldsmiths enriched reliquaries with Hellenistic cameos. Yet, all felt how the arts of Greece and Rome, despite good drawing, anatomical correctness, and the stress put on physical beauty, lacked the power to express sentiments that pagans had never experienced. Discarding as obsolete a tradition that he knew to be capable of masterpieces, the medieval artist was brave enough to turn to modern art, then as now the only way of expressing new truths.

Lola Cueto has recaptured the intensity of emotion still latent in the distortions of twelfth-century drawings, when draftsmen discovered the emotional power released by twisting the line of a nostril, changing a convex cheek to concave, or half gouging out of place the circle of an eyeball. There was a surge of drunkenness as the artist, using color for its symbolical intensity, pinned saints against skies impossibly purple, or painted flesh yellow or green, but never a flesh tone. Then as now, these experiments were no

idle pastime, but represented an earnest search, at times stuttering, at times disoriented, as has always been the way with genuine discoverers.

For two milleniums, the Church has managed an understanding of art and of art-makers. Throughout, she has mothered the slow and continuous transformation of style that parallels cultural changes. God has been served by artists who worked in styles as dissimilar as those of Byzantium and Chartres, of Raphael, of Cabrera and Rouault. It is only in our day that a timorous critical approach attempts to deny this unity clothed in diversity, and would impose as the only Catholic art a synthesis of mediocre traits filched out of context from the arts of the past.

Blending a modern approach with a true understanding of ancient models, this show is proof that Catholic art is alive enough to make impossible the task of those who wish to force it into the narrow mold of naturalism. Anyhow, religious painting, whose role is to make the invisible visible, is the genre least suited to such a form.

Besides her tapestry versions of stained glass, Lola Cueto presents an original composition dedicated to Our Lady of Guadalupe. On this day—the Feast of the Indian Virgin—we artists should apprehend with devotion the lesson taught by the miraculous image. Its esthetic, conceived in Heaven, in its linear purity so close

to geometry, in its flat hues so delicate and yet so pure, has little in common with photographic realism, and even less with the lessons taught in art academies.

The Cut-out Papers

Since Lao-Tse stated that the most active part of the wheel is its hub, made to receive the axle, a philosophy of the vacuum has underlined the fact that it is not only by addition that things and people are bettered, but often by subtraction. The extra matter flung from the matrix block transforms the raw stone into a statue; Diogenes is enriched the moment he throws away his wooden drinking bowl. This notion is in harmony with the *mores* of the Mexican artist, in a land where the uses of art are as widespread as those of bread, where art-making is not the privilege of the few but the birthright of all.

While only a few can afford expensive materials, it is generally recognized that art value does not depend on the rarity of the original material. What humbler material than paper? And to subtract from it should make it still humbler—and yet what splendid results!

For the true artist, the pleasure of art resides in its making. Its permanency, its appreciation for generations, its enshrining in a museum—all


are very good, but have nothing to do with creativeness, with the one luxury that the artist knows: art-making, that is both a collaboration with and a mastering of his material. The brittleness of paper is not easier to master than the hardness of marble. It may be the Asiatic strain latent in the Indian race that made the native artist try his hand on paper, as the Persian warrior essayed his scimitar on a floating feather. Also Oriental and Amerindian is the resigned understanding that, time being short of eternity, a work of art made to last a day is not much more ephemeral than one created to last for centuries.

Codices have preserved the features of pre-Hispanic arts that were not made to last. To play its role in lay and religious feasts, a paper made of agave fiber was dyed and cut into fringes and rosettes, as splendid for a day as *de luxe* head-dresses and standards; its garlands beautified temple and palace.

Come Colonial days, paper vies with lace to ornament churches. Impoverished by the Conquest, Indian master hands turn forever from the shaping of gold and of quetzal feathers to that of the humble paper, with as great a creativeness.

Today paper has an important place in folk art. There are pre-Hispanic survivals. In villages paper is still made from the fibers of traditional local plants, its use limited now to sorcery and agrarian incantations. Cut-out silhouettes of gods



 Lola Cueto: cut-out paper.

are buried in the soil to insure its fertility. Other cut papers, on display, add beauty to the opening of a *pulqueria*, or, made into fringes and flowers, will be stretched from house to house, often filling the air over a whole village to celebrate the visit of a famed religious statue to the local shrine, or even the homecoming of a politician.

The cut-outs of Lola Cueto are a valid quintessence of the ancient art traditions which have merged into folk-forms. Paradoxically, the mosaic of colored papers is made into the solid expression of Mexican modes. The grave religious images, the kneeling devout at the feet of a scourged Christ, remind one also of the Mayan reliefs, in which the pagan faithful perform blood rites. The hieratic Virgins, stiff in their brocaded robes, facilitated the religious transition long ago by their imitation in shape of ancient *teocalis*.

Lola Cueto preserves a deep understanding of what constitutes the essence of each medium when she transfers to cut-out papers the stylized birds that nestle in the leaves of Michoacan lacquers, or the popular engravings of Posada, which range in mood from a comical tourist whose umbrella is no defense against a Mexican bull to sensational dramas in which teeth, hearts, and *machetes* are bared.

The last show of Lola Cueto was that of her needlework, tapestries of rich and heavy material


competing in splendor with stained-glass windows. The versatile artist turns to the humbler paper cut-out as one relishes a glass of water after too rich fare. Her pictures, as light in weight as they are heavy with tradition, preserve for a while childish enchantments, all the more exquisite for eschewing the permanency that marbles and bronzes rarely deserve.

The Etchings

It is often stated that art must confine itself to the esthetic realm; that to make it serve other ends is to drag it down from its high pedestal. Do we forget that, once upon a time, art was an indispensable accessory of everyone's life, and especially the graphic arts? Woodcuts and metal engravings instructed, edified or amused. Art's main worth was its helpfulness to the people at large as it spread its delights and furthered practical or pious knowledge.

An exception to this commonsense attitude was the etching medium, whose physical blandness could hardly resist the pressure from the press needed to print trade editions. Making a virtue of necessity, etching came to play the aristocrat among other, tougher mediums. To this day, it is the darling of collectors and the prize of museums. Its weakness has become its pride, and



 Lola Cueto: Puppet musician. Etching.

what few good proofs can be pulled from a plate soon disappear in collectors' portfolios to be aired only on counted occasions.

Thus, it was fated that etchers in their turn, catering to the elegant and somewhat melancholy reputation of their medium, would adopt for their subject-matter models of equal refinement, and display flourishes of technique much in demand from their over-specialized public. The theologians of old assigned a guardian angel to each nation. If we postulate in turn a guardian angel for each technique, we may well pity the one assigned to etching, closeted for ages with artists most conscious of being artists, familiarized with distraction by the schemes of dealers and the feuds of collectors who love rarity above beauty, its flight jailed within the confines of the esthetic and the exquisite. Doubtless, after perusing this refreshing set of etchings, both wise and innocent, this angel will smack a hearty kiss on the cheek of their maker, as the Sleeping Beauty did when the hero awakened her!

These plates attain to art all the better in that they were conceived without thought of making art. Their aim is to translate faithfully and respectfully the appearance and essence of these tiny constructions of rag, clay, wire and cardboard; these statuettes whose worth in terms of material does not exceed a few cents; whose style was never described in art encyclopedias;

whose destination, once their stage days are over, is not the showcase of a museum, but organic disintegration. Being alive like us, the puppet is no more built to resist time than we are, and its motley parts last no longer than our own flesh and bones.

The etched line is thin as a spider thread, and like it weaves webs paradoxically strong. Lola gives to her puppets the dignity of monuments. Through her eyes, we see them as of heroic size, worthy of being raised on pedestals where they would, in truth, look better than many a one among their big brothers.

Lola's line captures so successfully both space and volume, that the aquatint washes limit themselves to suggestions of local color; the kind of unabashed color that raises the puppet from the status of statue to that of a living being. The many grays of the aquatint function as the rungs of this Jacob's ladder that bridges black to white, and evoke besides prismatic contrasts that range from lime green to magenta dye.

To reach those eyes that miss the magical chromas latent in the range of grays, Lola adds to some of her prints hand-painted touches of water-color. In so doing she breaks the rule of purity of medium held dear by etching-lovers; she also intensifies the spirit of play and further cleanses these charming plates from the stigma of art for art.

As heretofore in her embroideries and cut-out papers, the personality of Lola Cueto proves, in these plates, that it is in good enough health to rejoice in its own creativeness without worries as to uniqueness. The typical amateur of etchings may feel somewhat cheated in the presence of so much simplicity. Others will communicate through these prints with something rarer even than exquisiteness or abnormality; and that is the very spirit that puppets breathe, compounded of contraries, cynical and tender, innocent and ironical, infantile and wise.

Zalce: "Mestiza." Detail of a lithograph. 



16. THE LITHOGRAPHS OF ALFREDO ZALCE

Try as they may, neither archaeologist nor ethnologist has pinned down by statistics of factual minutiae the spiritual complexities of the Mayan, as intricate as his own jungle flora and fauna. In this album, Alfredo Zalce, in true artist fashion, does what the scientist fails to do, reconstructs whole breath-taking vistas from the one legible modern glyph, the Indian body, naked or swathed in white, busy at rustic activities or relaxed in rustic leisure.

Dating from another millenium, Yucatecan bas-reliefs embody an ideal plastic concept as far abstracted from realism as the Greek. Eagle noses, caved-in foreheads, skulls shot backwards, bulging eyes—the ingredients of Mayan beauty—while they seem strange to the lover of classical art, please the modernist, hell-bent on esthetic deformations.

The scenes sculptured and frescoed on ancient monuments are enacted daily in Indian huts and Indian fields. In Chichen-Itza, in the Court of the Thousand Columns, a stuccoed name glyph

shows a hand kneading dough over a stone metate. In nearby huts of twig-woven walls and thatched with palms, living hands perform the same task daily, their cinnamon arms issuing from the short sleeve of the *huipil*, immemorial raiment of the land, white square blouse loose over a loose white square skirt—a costume that removes the female body from the indiscretions of artistic anatomy into the severe realm of geometrical forms. In no sense a frill, Indian beauty exists in terms of function—as when the mother, a few weeks after giving birth, offers her substantial hip for the infant to ride ceremonially, as an initiation into childhood.

The traveler that brands as lazy the plateau Indian, squatting with his knees to his chin, bundled block-like in his *sarape*, may also wish to pep up the bush-born Mayan, long and lean muscled, elegant to the point of ambiguousness, who moves in a slow motion synchronized with the lazy rhythm of hammocks rocked by the motor of one big toe, alone watchful in a siesta-relaxed body. Yet the stone platforms on which temples sit, as large as modern city blocks, the pyramids that raise to skyscraper heights the frescoed altar rooms, were put together by men like the Mayan stone mason whom I watched once, lifting a heavy block to a flat-shaped forehead with misleading languor.

In this album, Alfredo Zalce also does what

the tourist fails to do, by substituting esthetic intuition for bonded fact. He weaves anew in this superb set of lithographs on Mayan themes rustic present to imperial past, the intricacies of jungle shapes to those of spiritual meanings as local, and not a whit less complex.

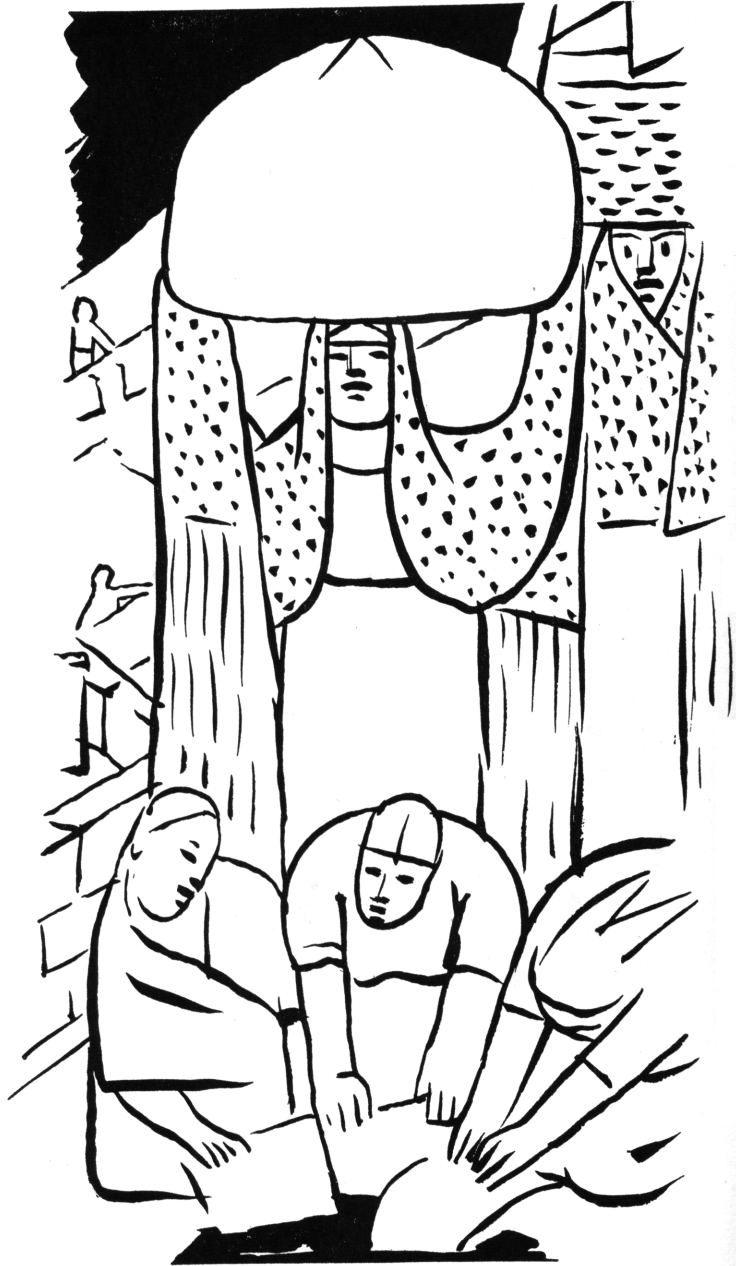
To read these beautiful prints correctly, one must realize the cleavage between the pretext, physical sights, and the deep spiritual insights that are at the core of the work. A jungle is picturesque, but for the painter it is also a place of awe, where the deer hunter still propitiates with copal incense stelae erected by kings long dead. The worker bent over the spiked maguey leaves, booted like a knight in rags, the fisherman pitting his eagle profile against a changeless ocean, may themselves be of the royal blood of Xu, whose coat-of-arms is the blue bird against azure skies. These rustic women, who glide past jungle flora which dip finger-like roots into black swamps, think thoughts that in their turn dip roots into a past as splendid and as long-forgotten as that of the lost Atlantis.

The technique used is symbolical of the subtle process of osmosis by which the artist came to learn all by refraining from asking specific questions. These lithographs are in the black manner of which Zalce is a master, the light being scraped off from a black inked ground, so that even the more dazzling whites—crystal salt

mounds drying under a zenithal sun, starched *huipils* in the white heat of noon—gather enough gray between scratched lights to make clear that the lithographer's goal is not at all that of reproducing the tropical sheen, nor of duplicating its gamut of leaf greens against strong magentas, even though he succeeds in doing this *en passant*.



Jean Charlot: "Lavanderas." Fresco. 1923. 



17. RENAISSANCE REVISITED

Mexico has never offered the traveler the patented and framed tableaux that await him in lands that pride themselves on a well-packaged tourist trade. Mexican sights are in a continuous state of mutation. As early as 1840 the Marquesa de Calderon de la Barca, a pioneer sightseer from the United States despite the *hispanidad* of her husband's title, complains of the changes, and deftly notes what she believes to be the fast disappearing traits of lovely old Mexico.

Lovely old Mexico is still fast disappearing today, and will as long as Mexicans insist on following their own counsel, regardless of what the tourist says. Even painters are more concerned with today's work than with past successes. Though their murals are listed as a must in traveler's handbooks and provide a modest living for a few garrulous guides, the artists refuse to feel enshrined; as a result, Mexican painting is far from static.

The mural renaissance started some twenty-five years ago in June 1920, when José Vascon-

celos, then President of the University and later Secretary of Education, commissioned Roberto Montenegro and Xavier Guerrero to decorate the walls of the former church of San Pedro y Pablo. Painted in tempera, the mural extends charming garlands of stylized birds and flowers over arches and pilasters. Rivera called it "potted" rather than painted, as the scheme leans to the curlicues found on much Mexican pottery.

Diego Rivera returned to the *patria* in July 1921. Painted in encaustic, patterned after the Byzantine mosaics he had admired in Italy, his first mural was completed by March 1923.

In May 1922, Lombardo Toledano, Director of the Escuela Preparatoria and future labor leader, commissioned a group of younger men, de la Canal, Revueltas, Leal, Cahero, myself, to paint murals in the school. That of Cahero, an encaustic, and mine, a fresco, were completed by the end of 1922.

In September 1922, de la Cueva and Siqueiros arrived from Europe. Siqueiros set to work in the same staircase of the same school, beginning to paint in encaustic, later switching to fresco. In July 1923, Orozco began his first mural, a fresco, on the walls of the main patio. Both works were violently brought to a halt by an uprising of students in June 1924 that left them stoned and mutilated.

The brand new Ministry of Education was

turned over to the artists in March 1923; Rivera was ordered to paint the first court, while de la Cueva, Guerrero, and myself were given the second court to decorate, a first try at communal work.

With an urge to brush time against the grain, I revisited the buildings where the movement started. To point the changes, this short survey describes the present state of the walls painted over twenty years ago, contrasting them with the latest crop of murals, mostly still in the making in the winter of 1945-46.

San Pedro y Pablo, dedicated by Vasconcelos as a public hall, has been transformed again, this time into a public library. This new function has blocked the decorative walls of the nave with tiers of bookcases and superimposed balconies of dark wood that slice the verticality of the polychrome columns, still rich with garlands of pomegranates, bluebirds, blackbirds, cornflowers, and camellias.

The workshop of the mural group was the cubicle of the back of the auditorium of the Preparatoria. On the low thick round columns, patches of discoloration on the gray stone still mark the spots where our first fresco trials were made in 1922. In the auditorium proper Rivera's first mural, "Creation," is scarcely any longer a truthful witness of the seething *élan* that saw it born. The distinguished geometric planning is

still perceived, but the wax mixed with the pigment has opaqued, dulling the once intense chromas.

The Orozco patio is of course beautiful, only it seems that time has frozen to a stop what once had depth and movement. To recapture the thrill of the work in the making, one should be able to discern under a mortar become translucent the layers of superimposed subjects that succeeded each other on the same stretch of wall as the artist worked, wrecked the work, and tried again, bent on an expedition to reach the *toison d'or* of style. Only "The Strike" obeys the rules of a plastic palimpsest, disclosing over the red banner held by two workers a fragment of the earlier theme, the giant head of the destroyed "Christ Burning His Cross."

Going up the main stairs, I pass the fresco that I painted there twenty-four years ago; I can look at it objectively as it is not mine anymore, but rather the work of an adolescent who dreamt long and deep before the battlepiece of Ucello, hidden at the time in the small room where Italian primitives were side-tracked by curators of the Louvre, who far preferred Carlo Dolci.

The fresco is intact, except for the exertions of unkind students. The light washes and reserves of white mortar proved too much of a temptation to scribblers. A generous quota of mustaches and eyeglasses has been added to faces; the

despair in the eyes of the massacred Indians is underlined by a Niagara of teardrops coarsely sketched in chalk.

On the top floor the Orozco frescoes on revolutionary themes are as maculate with *graffiti* and doodles as if they were not revered by critics, widely reproduced and admired. On this visit "Rearguard" and "Adieu to the Mother" were disfigured by blatant slogans to insure the election of a college queen, "*Pompeia para reina*". A zealous janitor rubs off such offending additions, but not always with the light hand of a mural devotee.

The staircase of the last court still testifies to the action directed against the first Siqueiros frescoes, when enraged students bent on championing "beauty" stoned the ugly giants. Today the more mutilated portions have been neatly chiseled out. What remains of the mat frescoes, delicately modeled brown on brown, contrasts with the oily and varnished texture of the make-shift repairs.

In the Ministry of Education, the open archway that divided the inner court into patios is being torn down to make room for an opaque box-like partition that will hide elevator shafts. It is as awkward as it must be exceptional to see architecture shot from under the mural that rides it. Because sound mural painting obeys the optical rules that the architecture dictates, the

change will negate originally correct formulations of scale and color.

The ground floor frescoes, painted "*à la mode Teotihuacana*," by Rivera—brushing pigment mixed with nopal juice on a thin film of pure lime—have suffered from this unusual technical departure. The sand packed underneath has burst through the film of painted lime, each grain leaving a microscopic patch of white. As a result, the early Tehuantepec and mining scenes fade as if seen through a thickness of tracing paper. The later *Corrido* series on the top floor, done in the sounder Italian medium, have suffered in turn from the weakness of the architecture. The walls are rent with cracks that also split apart the painted personages. To add confusion, each crack is scientifically recorded, bridged by dated paper stickers, some already burst as the cracks widen.

These walls have also met with doodlers, would-be wits, and plain defacers. A crop of scratched-in swastikas answers the painted crop of red stars; jokes of the privy type thrive on nude allegories.

The second patio, originally given to Amado de la Cueva, Xavier Guerrero and myself for a first attempt at communal painting, is crammed with building material, just as it was when we were at work. Scaffolds sprout from eviscerated floors, planks, crates, and rolls of *petates* pile

high against the frescoes. I rather liked the implication: people feel more concern for a near future than an academic interest in the near past. And, at least the day I was there, not a sight-seer besides myself.

Among the plentiful crop of new murals, those of Orozco, Rivera, and Siqueiros can be singled out, their names being best known in the United States.

In Boston the Lowells talk to the Cabots and they only to God. In Mexico, "*Los tres grandes*" scream at the top of their lungs in a contest to see which can outshout the others, in the three neighbouring panels that fate, or a witty sponsor, commissioned for the Palacio de Bellas Artes. This execrable building put all three in bad humor. A polychrome artnouveau interior, with enameled orange cupolas and peacock blue skylights, it reeks of the blatant assertions of world fairs long ago sold to the wreckers. The building offers only cramped mural space, behind pilasters and balconies, finely visible only at arm's length.

Ciceroni lie in ambush before the murals, tempting the tourist with chairs strategically facing the wall and a memorized patter. Favorite is the Rivera, a shrunken replica of the destroyed Radio City Fresco, in front of which the New York scandal is rehashed. The many careful portraits, pyramiding like apples on a tray, the skimpy bodies hiding behind loquacious

streamers and slogans, remind one of nineteenth-century French political cartooning. Despite the size, the craft remains exquisite. In a public lecture held on the premises this past August, Rivera disclosed to his baffled audience that the panel contains a detailed prophecy of atomic power. As to frescoes of his colleagues, not denying their artistry, he dismissed that of Orozco as representing "men without shirts clubbing men with shirts," and that of Siqueiros, "Democracy Breaking the Chains of Fascism," as "one giant commonplace."

The bulk of Orozco's mural work is to be seen in Guadalajara, capital of his native state. The major ensemble is that of the ancient *Hospicio*; the robust architecture cringes from his brush as from an earthquake. From the cupola falls a flaming cadaver Prometheus or Icarus. On the vault, a colossal Cortez embodies mechanical war and conquest, on the walls savage redskins and mechanized robots pound the ground, gray monochromes more blatant than flags. In twin half-lunettes, caravels glide over a turquoise ocean, blown by an unearthly wind towards the black void ahead.

This terrifying sermon addresses itself paradoxically to the only lodgers on the giant premises, state-endowed orphan children who pay no heed to the loud Cassandra, but instead lazily people the old patio, pile pebbles, chew fingers,

scratch their heads, or merely lie in the bountiful sunlight.

In Mexico City Orozco has, for lack of an inclusive contract, left unfinished the decoration of the Church of Jesus, annex of the ancient hospital that Cortez himself endowed. On its vaults the scarlet Prostitute rides the apocalyptic Beast, the monstrous grasshoppers with manes like women's hair chew the world naked. Desiccated limbs, headless torsos, shrouded and desperate forms crawl under a sky become heavier than the earth, pregnant with a hail of twisted steel girders scattered by the hoofs of the four horses, their riders hidden by the animal bellies distorted as storm clouds.

Rivera has staked for himself the whole of the National Palace, and, with a caution born of previous mishaps with buildings that split apart and patrons in revolt, chosen to do true fresco on false walls. The mortar is trowelled into shallow metal troughs, half sunk into the wall, but movable if the need arises. As they fail to fit the scalloped outline of the door frames, the panels, despite the compositional care of the painter, suggest a show of easel pictures, beautiful ones, huge and heavy ones certainly. The main drawback is that this precaution opens the way for the future removal of the frescoes from the walls, and their eventual disposition, shorn of their natural habitat, in a mere museum.

In the staircase of the same palace, painted over a decade ago, the artist modeled in black before applying the local color; now the film of gray comes through to disturb the polychrome balance. Today Diego Rivera paints with pure color, the transparent washes made more intense as the mortar hardens to marble white. For contrast, the high dado of the new work is of cement of a normal putty value, painted with monochrome false bas-reliefs.

What Rivera is painting in the National Palace keeps the archeologists breathless. The first two panels relate to archaic cultures, of whose remains the painter has a copious collection, preferring them to the sophisticated Mayan culture, and to the later socially stiffened theocracies of the Mexican plateau.

Just finished, the third panel, breath-taking in its scope, effects the resurrection of the merchants and buyers who thronged the market of Tlatelolco, after data furnished by recent excavations of the site. The background is a panorama of the pre-Hispanic capital, based on aerial photographs of the modern city, so close is the identity of plans from a height where a church cannot be told from the pagan temple it supplanted, nor a main artery from the antique waterway.

A motley crowd mills in front of the risen Tenochtitlan, herb merchants, dog butchers, witch doctors, tattooed prostitutes and cannibal

priests. Lower still, at our eye-level and most exquisite of all in treatment, are tiny objects and shreds of refuse that litter the foreground, bitten, spat out and trampled fruit pulp, a toy clay dog on wheels, the only use known for this device in an otherwise wheel-less civilization.

Rivera is so bent on completing his record of Mexican history, that story-telling has no more plastic terrors in store for him. Paris may frown on his present work, sophisticates sniff at its matter-of-fact craft, fans of abstraction sneer that photography is just around the corner. Rivera doggedly pursues his way to a conclusion that may mean a truly American style.

Siqueiros has published much of late; his opinions may be summed up by the statement that murals are closer to moving pictures than to easel painting. While the latter presumes a single point-of-view, films move in front of an immobile onlooker, and murals, though immobile, attract a spectator in motion. Thus, the idea that the mural is serf to architecture is replaced by that of the mural as a dynamic unit that forcefully provides itself with room in its otherwise inert habitat.

Siqueiros is practising his theories in the Treasury Building. In spite of its moneyed title, it is an old colonial palace, of a stylistic simplicity that borders on the primitive with marks of a soothing *laissez-faire* everywhere. The painter

has fallen heir to a vaulted ceiling between two open courtyards, curved both in width and in length, that promises perspective deformations aplenty, to be countered by drawing deformations. The two end walls are V-shaped to fit a floor plan that is a maze of diagonals, a staircase with ninety-degree turns and bifurcating slopes that blur both plumb and level. The plan lends itself ideally to further twisting and the optical illusions that are the means of Siqueiros' modern baroque.

At this stage, the walls are upholstered with celotex, rough side outwards, none too rough for the rough treatment still to come. A small model that duplicates in scale the complexities of the architecture is painted concurrently with the mural—added to, subtracted from, complete one day and whitewashed the next, in accord with a pioneering optical research that recognizes no precedent. A rickety ladder takes one to just under the high ceiling, to a false floor of planks so widely spaced that a body might easily fall between them to certain maiming on the stone staircase, way below. A device with two advantages, it allows the daylight to filter in from underneath and keeps out chicken-hearted admirers after their first visit.

Siqueiros does not use the much advertised Duco anymore. A need for authentically mat surfaces, essential to the great size and double cur-


vature of the wall, leads him to prepare his own paint, blended with sugar cane fiber to intensify the roughness of the texture. This search for tactile strength removes Siqueiros from his early heroes; Masaccio and the uniform smoothness of *fresco buono* he deems archaic, and tags Ingres as too exclusively an intellectual planner.

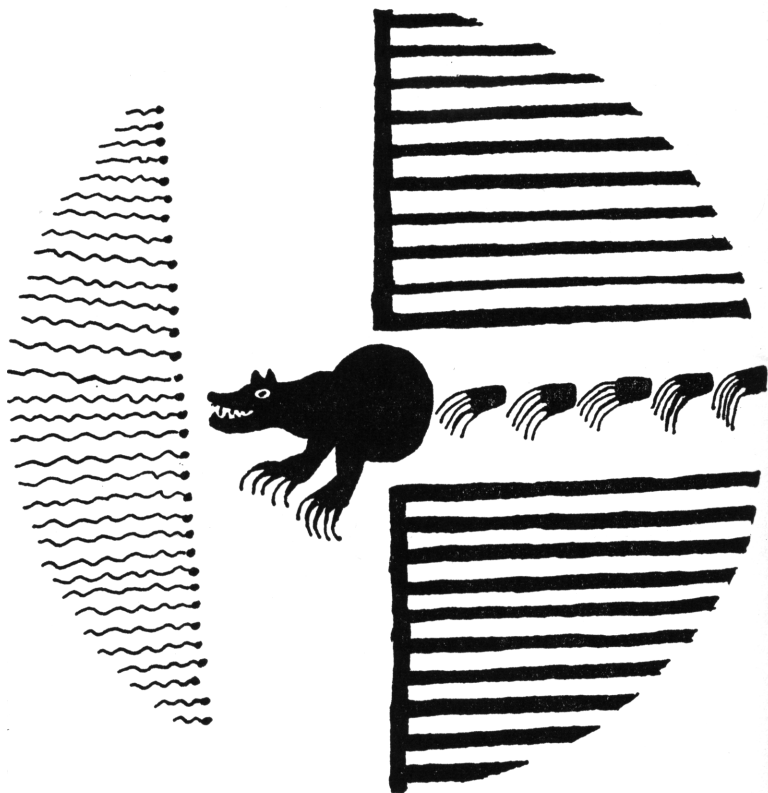
The rape of the architecture is begun; the ceiling is split in two by compositional lines and, hinged at the end walls, opens skywise to prolong their vertical towards an infinite. From this illusive stratosphere down one side falls a hail of crystal shapes and cylindrical forms outlined in white on the red background. Bold color strokes begin their metamorphosis into a maze of men entwined with horses, the roll call of Mexico's traitors and collaborationists doomed by the painter to an unspecified hell. On the opposite wall another mess of manes and torsos speeding upwards will symbolize the national heroes that the artist ushers to some Marxist paradise. The completed subject thus will function when the two contrasting currents are joined, like a gigantic wheel of fortune, to carry vertically, in water-wheel fashion, the *personae* of Mexican history, horses, swords, epaulettes, loves and hatreds and all, to a zenith of glory, and dump a corresponding load to an underworld.

For Mexicans, news of the art season is not the frescoes being painted, a routine long since

taken for granted, unless they be by foreigners, as in the case of George Biddle, whose new fresco in the Supreme Court Building has raised an animated controversy. The rediscovery of the mid-nineteenth century muralist Juan Cordero also has aroused much comment. A show of his easel work at the Palacio de Bellas Artes led to a reappraisal of his tempera murals in the churches of the capital, painted with zest on walls and cupolas as large as those painted today. Like all important work, that of Cordero divided the critics. Rivera championed it in a public lecture, while Siqueiros attacked it in magazine articles. The fact remains that his work bridges with honor one of the weakest moments of Mexican tradition, when the magnificent crop of colonial murals had long been gathered in, and the modern renaissance was not foreseen.

Thus, adding a new stratum of murals to an already substantial sum of works, this year adds also to the woes of critics who think it is high time for the renaissance to stay put, so as to give them a chance to utter definitive estimates.

American Indian shield. XIXth C. 



18. *ALL-AMERICAN*

The pioneer Tribal Arts show of 1931 marked a turning-point in the appreciation of United States Indian arts. An effort was made to assess their esthetic value rather than to tolerate them as scientific specimens or as tourist curios. The new show current at the Museum of Modern Art finds Americans stranded on their own continent in recoil from a beset world; the patriotic angle may well weigh the scales in favor of these hundred-per-centers of American art, beside whom even Thomas Craven's roster of Americans acquires an immigrant flavor. However genuine our pride in the esthetic achievements of the Indian, it should be tinged with introspective compunction: some of the objects now on exhibit were "collected" by our War Department, presumably as spoils, while the cover of the extensive catalogue is a shield design that pictures a bear charging fearlessly into the thick of a salvo of United States bullets.

Lest we be accused of sighing for bygone days, let us add that the coming of the white man

had also its beneficent influence. The sculptors of the Northwest boomed into a renaissance with the importation of metal tools; to the paleface the plains hunter owes his horse, the forest Indian his beadwork, the Navajo his silver-smithing.

That a museum dedicated to modern art stages this show is no haphazard event, for Indian crafts are one of the sources of our own modern style. Amédée Ozenfant, whom I met at the opening, suggested mischievously that Indians were imitating Picasso; but it is a fact that Chilkat blankets were admired by early Cubists as the living tradition onto which their own plastic inventions were grafted, while the distorted spirit masks of the Eskimos, conceived in visions induced by fasting or by drugs, receive today the praise of orthodox surrealists. The élite of each succeeding generation may flirt with what in the vast and complex body of aboriginal art approximates most its fancy of the day, yet, at its best, it far transcends such modish standards.

As is the case in our own art history, where the golden age lies in the past, Indian Michelangelos have long been dead. Unlike its modern counterpart, struggling in a morass of folklore, pre-historic Indian sculpture exhibits a beauty of form strikingly set forth against an unfocused background of ritual pageants that no explorer scooped. Its might is at its best in the group of

eastern pipes for the most part made from hardened clay, a material that suggests in spite of direct carving the caress of the modeling thumb. Some artists, relying on texture and geometric shape alone, root the cylinder of the bowl into the leaf shape of the stem at an angle evolved through centuries of use; such specimens match in their functional purity that other great civilized achievement—an English briar pipe. For those less puristically inclined, pipes adorned with animal shapes combine uniquely the observed vivaciousness of animal life, the Egyptian dignity of monolithic masses, with details of minute refinement; for example, the interplay of crossed wing tips and tail feathers on the back of a crested duck, or the wet ripple of muscles on the otter catching its prey.

For the critic who can measure an artist's size only as he matches his skill, Greek-like, against the proportions of the human body, a pipe from Adena Mound erects a chanting warrior whose eight inches of height have been enlarged by the impresario of the show into a photo-mural of heroic size, without losing a mite of its compact humanness. A Mexican influence has been advanced for this piece, but it shows none of the loss of power that provincial art is bound to show, so far from its center of civilization.

All Indian fine arts came into being as side-products of some utilitarian instinct, if one pos-

tulates the practical validity of religious instinct. Owing to this lack of cleavage between fine and applied arts, one is dragged imperceptibly in this exhibition from the consideration of the sublime to a limbo of moose-hair embroidery, porcupine-quill mosaics, ribbon appliqué, that prove the squaw a potential subscriber to the *Ladies' Home Companion*.

Indian artists have an amphibian gift of moving at ease among abstract as well as realistic pursuits. In its rare bona fide examples, realism is used for purposes of farce, fable, or history, but most often is a not undignified pandering to the taste of the paleface. Objects classed by our standards as great examples of Indian art—the bear woman suckling her child, the mask of a maiden, the dancing medicine-man—were pot-boilers in the eyes of their makers. The deepest thrust of the Indian mind, the language it chooses to exalt its clan pride, wield magic power, or address the gods, is the language of abstract art: thus the Zuni amuse their children with dolls that are acceptable sculptures by our standards, while the fearful image of their war-god is hewn in such austere primitive style that we despise it as childish; the Eskimo humors his baby with teething-toys that we treasure as ivory statuettes, while his religious masks, carved to perpetuate lofty visions, remain for us shapeless.


One must discard such labels as realistic and abstract if one is to share further the Indian point of view. To illustrate without departing from the organic world: the "abstract" art of the Northwest is more deeply realistic than is the formula for reality in our art. The Haida painter splits the creature he paints and exhibits its innards—heart, liver, stomach. For not only has he seen the bear and the whale, but he has hunted both, has killed, quartered and cooked them, and his painting sums up the knowledge acquired through all senses and his brain; while the white man is satisfied that he represents a creature when all he describes is its outer bag of skin. One is reminded of the visitor who asked Picasso, apropos of a "still-life with fish," how the fish kept while the work was in progress and of the artist's admission, "I ate it first."

Unfamiliar as we are with the Indian mode of life, our natural reaction to this show is to stress its picturesque and romantic connotations; but the Indian artist manages to assert his greatness within an accepted frame of tribal norms. The pipe-carver, basket-weaver, or sand-painter does not seem to suffer from the infirmity of our own artists who strengthen their personality insofar as they weaken the thread between their work and tradition. The spiritual content that loads the Indian work, a manual perfection deepened by technical impediments, the balance

obtained between objective conventions and the personal quota of individual genius, mark the attitude of the Indian artist as one of classical integrity. It is on such a plane that this show may bear valid fruits, rather than in a shop-window revival of feather-work and leather tooling.

Though the choice of individual specimens is impeccable, one would wish to admire with more confidence the murals from Awatovi; the original fragment exhibited, as sensitive as a Paul Klee, does not jibe with the cocksureness of the restoration.

The show is staged with ingratiating versatility, even if inverted lighting increases the Hallowe'en note of the collection of masks, rather than furthers an understanding of their beautiful carving. While most will justly delight in the surprises strewn in their path, the serious student may grumble a bit as he is made to grope his way through dim-lit detours. But serious students have already visited the Museum of Natural History and the Heye Museum of the American Indian, where many of the treasures exhibited here managed, up to now, to escape popular adulation.

Max Weber: Figure. Woodcut. 1918. 



19. AMERICAN PRINTS: 1913-1947

This show aims at being a review of the changes which have occurred in the American graphic arts within the last twenty-five years. Thus its starting year is 1913, when the esthetic thunderbolt of the Armory show, having shattered the one accepted faith, replaced it by other creeds, sapling-like, bud-hard, dynamic, which now (a time-span sufficient to launch a generation having elapsed) have become routine in their turn.

Thus, if this panorama in retrospect succeeds in being representative of the trends that the period involves, it should suggest the light-hearted unlacing of a corset of academic traditions and the resulting gambol in the pastures of modern art; and, on the edge of the era now opening, it should disclose, as the arteries of the once-young moderns harden, a revulsion of the truly young men from the subjective doings of their elders, a gradual swell of yearning for a recaptured collective idiom, like the nostalgia of the prodigal for his father's house.

For a better understanding and enjoyment of prints, one must take exception to a certain concept of fine prints that parallels in the graphic field the apocryphal golden legend concerning the sacredness of the "Old Masters." Far from being that of building Chinese walls to protect fine prints from the people, the task of the expert should be to bring both together. Before writing about such a show, one should pledge oneself anew to a truth which so much specialized literature about prints has obscured: It is self-evident that the essence of the graphic arts is this property of spawning, of multiplying, and thus of pulling down the barriers of rarity and expensiveness that stand between the everyday man and art originals. Such a postulate infuriates in its simplicity a certain type of print-lover who shares with the hoarder of postage stamps a belief in the mysterious qualities inherent in rarity. Fineness, an imponderable that remains essential for art enjoyment, is in no way impaired by multiplication; only the price the art object will fetch, only its desirability for collectors. Meanwhile its enjoyment spreads until it at last reaches *hoi polloi*, a fate observed with mental reservations by those who hold art to be a proper pursuit only for an elite, and with joy by those others who deem art to be as useful and beneficial as bread, not to be taxed or denied to the many.

Before the advent of photography and photo-engraving in relatively modern times, all prints were technically fine prints, in the sense that a hand-made design had been cut or engraved or drawn on wood or metal or stone. The topical vignette published with stop-press speed in a nineteenth-century magazine barely a week after the event—the siege of a town, the queen's displacements, the arrival of foreign ambassadors—was hand-drawn and hand-cut, indistinguishable, so far as the impeccability of its autography is concerned, from the woodcuts of Holbein and Dürer.

The distinction could not then be made that is now drawn between newspaper and magazine illustrations on the one hand and fine prints on the other, as it is based wholly on the introduction of photography somewhere in the process of reproduction. The collector of fine prints had no other valid touchstone than quality to separate the fine art sheep from the commercial art goats. And it would hardly have proved safe to attempt a judgment by a simple rule of thumb, by treasuring "idle" art, done with strict subjectiveness in the confines of a studio, and rejecting that other kind of graphic art, commissioned to quench the curiosity of magazine subscribers as to how many horses dragged the queen's carriage, or how Malakoff fell. For among the hack draftsmen sent to far-flung battlefields, or

grinding out cartoons week after week—and grinding their own lithographic stones also—there happened to be some of the topflight artists of their epoch—Daumier, Constantin Guys in Europe, Winslow Homer and Constantino Escalante in America. After the passage of time, with the pressure of publication wiped away and deadlines long since erased, with the topics that were once the toast of the day forgotten, the residue of art in these topical prints vies for beauty with the subjective Biblical musings of Rembrandt, or with the no less subjective pastime exercises of the aged and half blind Goya in Bordeaux when, propping a litho stone on an easel, he smudged on it, with the aid of a magnifying glass, bulls as live as those other Spanish bulls also smudged on stone in the caves of Altamira.

The one graphic field where photography was bound to supplant the hand-made product was that of reproductions meant to multiply the semblance of famous or salable works. Unswayed by emotion, the camera performs a job of undoubted authenticity; and yet, when genuine artists deserted the field of reproductive prints, we lost a chance at seeing the work of one master filtered through another trained eye. When the Kings of Spain commissioned Goya to engrave the masterpieces of Velásquez, they acted like Museum curators bent on procuring

postcards of exhibits as souvenirs for visitors. The result, a composite exposure of two equally great personalities, states by contrast the limitations of today's camera, dreamed of by some as unlimited.

It is of importance that, within the period allotted to this show, an authentic American master of reproductive wood-engraving was still active, Timothy Cole, who gallantly fought and lost his rearguard skirmish against the machine.

It remains true today, as it was true yesterday, that we should exercise ample-mindedness when mapping borderlines between fine and other prints, so as not to miss the Guys's and Daumiers and Homers of our day. The graphic arts are today so widespread and so widely enjoyed in the United States that they have become the indispensable daily fare for the man in the street, the subway commuter, the business man relaxing in his office, even the child in the nursery. I refer, of course, to the American cartoons that stud dailies and weeklies, some in the Nash tradition of a single, telling, political drawing, some that display the inner workings of fantasm worlds, "funnies," the impertinent contemporary version of the strips of holy vignettes—illustrating successive slices of time—that Italy called "*predelle*."

Today's cartooning has all the earmarks of a living art, being so widely consumed that it is

not thought of as art anymore. Its prints, left to the small mercies of children's hands, stained, torn, and thrown away as rubbish, are fated to turn into collector's items, like the medieval woodblocks and blockbooks that were also once much in demand and thoroughly consumed, both spiritually and physically. Only a ruling on the fact that Herriman's pen-and-ink originals were multiplied by a photo-engraving process could keep his *oeuvre* out of this show; for included in the definition of what constitutes a fine print is that it should be hand-cut and hand-printed. So let us raise an eyebrow at cartoons, our country's most live expression of the art of black-and-white; let us attempt to interpose the flaming sword of Fine Art between "Krazy Kat" and immortality.

Photography withered a whole generation of reproductive engravers and snapped the *raison d'être* of graphic mediums that brought a dignity and autographic purity even to the meanest magazine of the pre-camera era. But also, by an automatic shift of gravity that could be translated into an esthetic law of compensation, photography itself became in turn an imposing new branch of the graphic arts. In its combination of factual veracity, strict chemistry and austere palette, photography is well suited to the idiosyncrasies of the American approach. Its few masters could hardly be omitted from this show.

However, a cautious criterion allotted their works only antechamber space, so to speak, for they lack the doubtful blessing of being hand-drawn.

Having shoved into exterior darkness, because they either are not drawn or else not cut by hand, important and peculiarly modern manifestations of the graphic arts understood in their wider sense, this show features prints hand-drawn, hand-cut or hand-engraved, a not inconsiderable residue of today's U. S. graphic arts. Even when so rigorously delimited, the field is thick with split-hair rulings that may puzzle the intruding layman. The good technical health of a plate—that is, its potentiality for reproducing a design *ad infinitum*—is frowned upon by many a connoisseur. King of the portfolios remains the drypoint, its prized velvet burr good only for a very few proofs. Etching comes next, that yields its good proofs only in short pulls. It has become proverbially synonymous with other coveted things, lollypops, mink coats, and such, that may lure unwary innocence into danger. The word even grates on the hardened ears of Hollywood censors. Otherwise how could one explain the following line—doubtless chastely edited—spoken by a film roué to a blond stenographer: “Do come and see my Rembrandt lithographs!”

Theoretically, all prints of museum standard should be hand-printed. It is a catchy term,

redolent of Ruskin's try at an artificial pumping of health into sick handicrafts. Of course, the printing of proofs from an original block does not require a complex paraphernalia. Perhaps closest to true hand-printing are the Chinese rubbings from stone bas-reliefs, and in the occident, the casual proofs made without benefit of a press, when the paper is laid over the block and pressed into its grooves with fingerball or thumbnail. Thus would Millet and Gauguin check the state of a work, often a single detail, before cutting any further. These undoubtedly hand-made proofs are usually quite deficient as concerns inking and pressure, could not stand on quality alone. Despite this they are precious, inasmuch as they are relics of the artist, like his shirt or pipe.

Most prints are made with the intromission between the artist and the artist's proof of a printer and a press. As far as wood is concerned, it is futile to distinguish between Gutenberg's archaic press, hand-manned, but worked at top speed in a most businesslike fashion, the more complex plate-press that pulled circa 1850 the engravings of *The London Illustrated News*, and the small artists' presses of today. Only naive souls sighing for the fiction of the good old times could detect a difference. All that is needed to insure a decent proof is correct inking and pressure.

In lithography, delicate hand and brain work is indispensable at the stage of etching the stone, and this is where great printers are made. All that should be expected of an ink-roller is uniform inking, equally possible when the stone is hand-rolled or inked by a roller mechanically moved, or when the hand-drawn zincograph is stretched over the drum of an offset press. Offset printing exposes the fallacies of attempted definitions of fine printing. At first it seems removed one step further from what is called hand-printing—composition roller inking the plate that inks a rubber pad that inks the paper—and yet it achieves an important forward step in autography, in that the print is identical with the model instead of its mirrored image.

Intaglio printing is perforce hand-done. Perhaps unjustly, Joseph Pennel represents in this show a kind of tail-end of the Whistler tradition—or was it only mannerism?—which attempted personal artistry at every stage of print-making and especially at that of inking and pressure. Fame hallows the Whistler proofs that he also signed as printer. The film of ink that the master's unequal wipe left on metal, and thence on paper, is revered by the collector; and in truth some of his waterscapes would vanish in the sunlight of a clean pull. Signed, numbered, limited editions, marginal remarks, states, go with this type of approach. In the stylistic battle still

raging between conservatives and moderns, I would check as a point in favor of modern prints the fact that such fine and refined traits, most of them collectors' bait, are more often found as a kind of fungus that thrives on conservative plates, of which modern works are relatively free.

Even the simplest press may interpose a rusty turn of its screw or the wobbliness of its plates between an inexperienced printer (who may very well be the artist himself) and the beauty of a final proof. Even the most intricate of offset presses may be made to conform to the lightest indication of a skilled printer and yield the proof supreme. As in other fields of endeavor, it is not the accessories used that guarantee fineness, but in the last analysis, a craftsman's hand and the brain that motors the hand. In that sense, and in that sense only, all fine prints are hand-made. One should mention among the few fine printers of our day, George C. Miller of New York City, Lawrence Barrett who works in Colorado Springs, and Lynton R. Kistler of Los Angeles. Their skilled enthusiasm has assisted at the birth of many a graphic artist.

The United States witnesses a heartening revival of the use of hand-drawn prints pulled in unlimited editions, which is where the definition of what the graphic arts should be acquires its full meaning. They are illustrations for trade books, more often children's books. In mid-nine-

teen century, when tired printers' devils snapped the jaws and pulled the levers of the press that inked the five thousand copies of the weekly *Charivari*, their thoughts through the long twelve-hour day were not on esthetic pursuits. Yet it is their hack labor that made Daumier's *oeuvre* possible. Had it been submitted to the restraint of limited editions for collectors only, had it been cut off from contact with his fall guy and constant admirer, the French bourgeois at large, Daumier's opus would have withered. Today, offset presses that run without fatigue as many as 200,000 copies of one hand-drawn zinc doubtless launch some of the more vital prints of our era.

In their democratic way of reaching the people, the graphic arts play more than an esthetic role on the American scene. They blend well with a tradition that rebels at the exquisite and the rare. With the gradual shrinking of the *terra incognita* which blanked the map of the United States, the interest in pioneering and the open spaces that the works of Homer and Jackson typify thinly petered out into the duck prints of Benson. The new wilds were in the city, and the American tradition snared another generation of draftsmen trained in the tough school of newspaper graphic reporting, who had the street for a studio, and for a drawing board an ash-can lid. At its deepest, their work matches the

mood, humanity-packed, of Stieglitz' great contemporaneous photograph, "The Immigrants." At its rowdiest, it is as high-pitched as the rowdiness of beef-eater Hogarth, another great graphic reporter. John Sloan succeeded in capturing in a web of etched lines a whole metropolis and its motley inhabitants, a New York that is not today's New York and is now sunk as far as any Atlantis; already Sloan's etchings have outlived his city. As in the days of Constantin Guys, Boardman Robinson jobbed as a war correspondent whose graphic reportings from the field will outlast many a studio job.

This art of the "ash-can school," so close to the people, illustrates Lincoln's saying, "God must have loved the common man; he made so many of them." It could have spilled easily into the social-consciousness that marks the art of the thirties without need of, or reference to, the very different brand of art that was being done in Paris at the time. It probably would have done so were it not for the Armory Show. While a majority of puritan laymen were shocked by Marcel Duchamps into believing in a European cultural decadence, while a minority of liberal laymen cheered modern art hobbling on its zig-zag way as anarchistic, American artists understood the lesson of Europe in its purest and highest sense. They felt it as a heroic and painful reappraisal of means, a conscious restating

of problems of style, a shying away from the herd thinking and the cliché solutions that had served so well so many that came before. Each artist started heroically to build his own personal universe from scratch, its art form perforce archaic.

Max Weber comes to mind as the American paragon of good moderns, and also the remark of his friend Henri Rousseau in a letter to Picasso, "We are the two masters of the day; I in the naturalistic manner, and you in the Egyptian one." The purest expression of that moment are Weber's early woodcuts, which paradoxically capture a symbolist's sensitiveness in planks roughly adzed with African bluntness.

A rising flux of art books and reproductions was to give the next generation of American artists a moment of drunken elation as they surveyed world cultures and art forms from the vantage point of photogravure. Great was the temptation to feel heir to all those kingdoms. The panoramic view measurably strengthened the range of stylistic choice open to eclectics, but perhaps not their innate strength.

There is a certain horse-sense that spices American taste, and purely intellectual roots are a somewhat brittle channel for healthy sap. Soon, a group of critics and artists confessed, with a *mea culpa*, that, even though modern art might be dressed in gossamer-fine raiment, as far as

their eyes could see, it went naked. A general sigh of relief went up at this admission, and the American Scene put in its appearance. For me, Grant Wood personifies the return to Arcadia, the candid search for earth, blood and roots. A chance meeting in Cedar Rapids, a visit to his workshop, where murals on rustic themes were team-painted, impressed me with the fact that in Iowa at that time, murals and land and people were as closely interwoven as were the land and people and murals of Mexico. Even in Grant's lithographs his mural affinities may be felt, his patience, and a flair for architectural balance.

At the same time that Corn became the *leit-motiv* in the country, city art focused on the Worker. Socially conscious artists now called themselves plastic workers, and attempts at artists' unions patterned after workers' unions were made. Here, perhaps, an inspiration nurtured by the depression at home borrowed its ideography in part from the Mexico of the 1920s, where engravers had shared in the renaissance with a loud crop of illustrated posters and broadsides cheaply printed and retailing for a few pennies. But in the States, the logical role of the graphic arts as a ready medium of art for the people never quite dovetailed with the making of an art about the people. Prints that canonize the worker were pulled somewhat paradoxically on

china paper, in limited editions, and priced accordingly. Nevertheless, the new faith, or the remodeled faith, infused many a fine print with a breath and a breadth that a preoccupation with style alone had never produced.

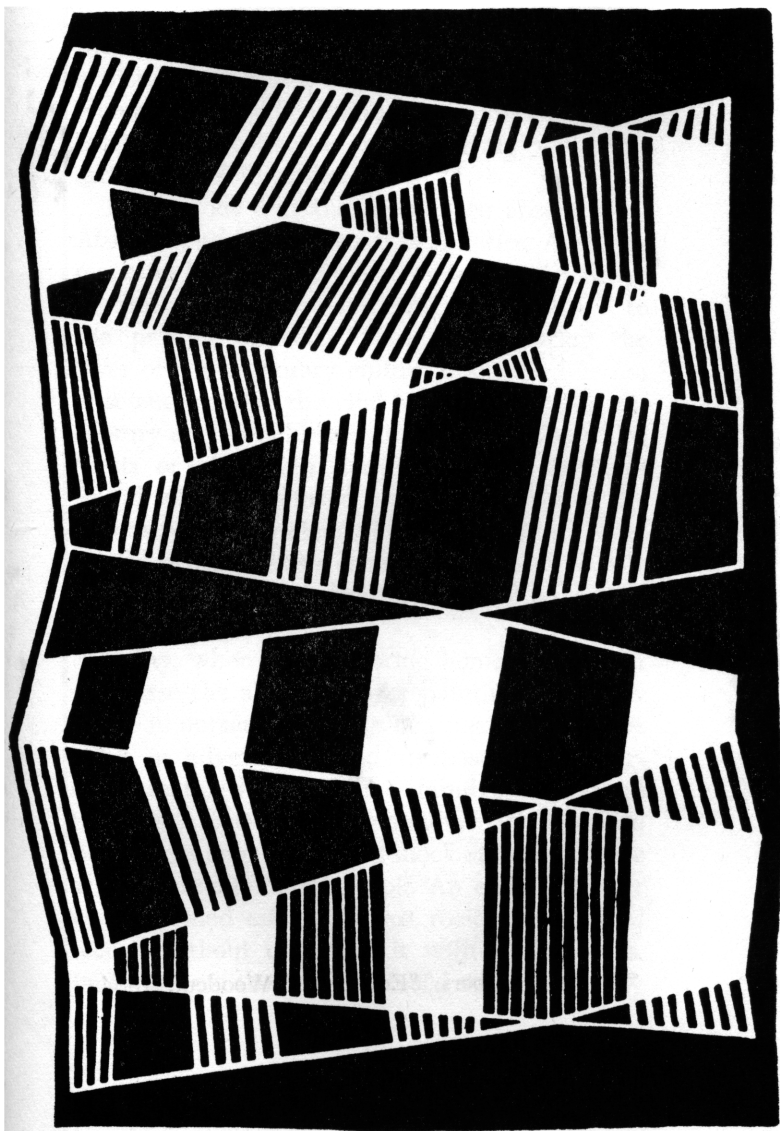
Within the range of time that this show encompasses, many new techniques have been tried in the graphic field, made possible by increasingly complex technological resources. Some are variations on classical themes—the use of sandpaper and gasoline in the making of a lithograph, the sandblasting of a woodcut—and others are materially new departures—serigraphs, celloprints, etc. If progress resided in variety we should indeed rejoice. The graphic artist should not, however, rely unduly on technical inventions to solve his problems, any more than the painter on his brand-new synthetic pigments. No shortcut can make art appreciably easier of attainment. Despite the many manual steps involved, printmaking, inasmuch as it is art at all, “*e cosa mentale*.”


20. OLD MASTERS FOR TOMORROW

It is told that "Alice in Wonderland" having found favor with Queen Victoria, Her Majesty graciously allowed Lewis Carroll to dedicate his next work to her. This happened to be *The Fifth Book of Euclid Treated Algebraically, So Far As It Relates to Commensurable Magnitudes*. Some similar mischievousness rules the sequence of publication of the two books that Sydney Janis dedicates to contemporary painting.

In the first, *They Taught Themselves*, he presented with a keen outlook and refreshing respect for the artists concerned, the wonderland sight of men who succeeded in lifting themselves by their bootstraps and were caught in this levitating act. Many of the pictures analyzed were of the story-telling type, monkeys upsetting fruit trays, cops in pursuit and such. Accused of favoring Sunday painters over professionals, Janis was suspected by purists of being somewhat of a practical joker.

His second book is so at variance with the first that it could mean an esthetic *mea culpa* for



 Josef Albers: “Edged II.” Woodcut. 1934.

those who do not know that Janis has long been a pioneer champion of non-representational art, who acquired difficult and mature Picassos when most other collectors were flirting with this artist's "Blue" juvenilia.

The riotous and the quaint are absent from *Abstract and Surrealist Art in America*. Austerity marks its text from the first sentence, "Science is the open sesame of twentieth-century art . . ." to the parting tableau, "Man, manipulating the lever of contemporary culture upon the fulcrum of science, attains the vital balance for twentieth-century art." Would scientists care to uphold this thesis or choose to deny it, as did Sigmund Freud when he refused a proffered stake in the expensive subconscious of Dali? It matters little, for the attitude exists as an aim, a spring, a passion—and in esthetic matters, will often equals fact.

Today, when children bring home as a matter of course the abstract finger paintings that they smear in nursery schools, when surrealism proves a hit in advertising, and stroboscopic photography featured in magazines familiarizes us with the plastic patterns of time-movement, it would be disingenuous to pretend shock or even surprise at the contents of this book. An extraordinarily well-informed and lucid text recites the factual record without crowding it with irrelevancies. Janis taps worthwhile provincial sources scarcely

touched by New York galleries, gives their chance to the very young, while denying space to deans among practitioners, George L. K. Morris and Albert Gallatin among them.

To match in art today's globe-circling activities, stylistic relationships between continents are emphasized at the expense of national flavor. After reading the opening chapter, "Sources in 20th Century European Painting," that suggests an America dependent upon Europe for its art forms, one sighs for a complementary chapter on American sources. Europe freely acknowledges the role of America in the formation of abstract and surrealist art. Gleize and Metzinger mention and illustrate in 1912 American Indian totem patterns as forerunners of cubism. Pioneer American skyscrapers, pioneer American machines, inform both the dynamics of futurism and Bauhaus functionalism, while Mack Sennett cinema comedies with their fantastic plots prefigure Dada. If, as Janis says, it be true that "to participate in today's culture it is only necessary that a country be infused with a modernization of its physical equipment," one understands why an American plumbing fixture dated A.D. 1917 was exhibited by Marcel Duchamp as an *objet d'art*.

Janis asserts rightly that non-objective painting is the legitimate exponent of its era, which is undeniably a noble enough place for any type of art. But the price to be paid for such genuine-


ness is the merging of individual works into period homogeneity. Where the artists are long dead, like those of Egypt and Byzantium, we expect single achievements to agglutinate into one communal mass. In this book we surprise a similar metamorphosis in the making. As one goes through the plates of the abstract section, paint acquires a hieratic quality in the ratio that it shuns the incidents of natural vision. Picture after picture falls into the groove as discs to an automatically fed phonograph. Abstract works, intended as exasperated affirmations of uniqueness, melt their already faceless features into a still deeper sediment of dehumanization— anonymity.

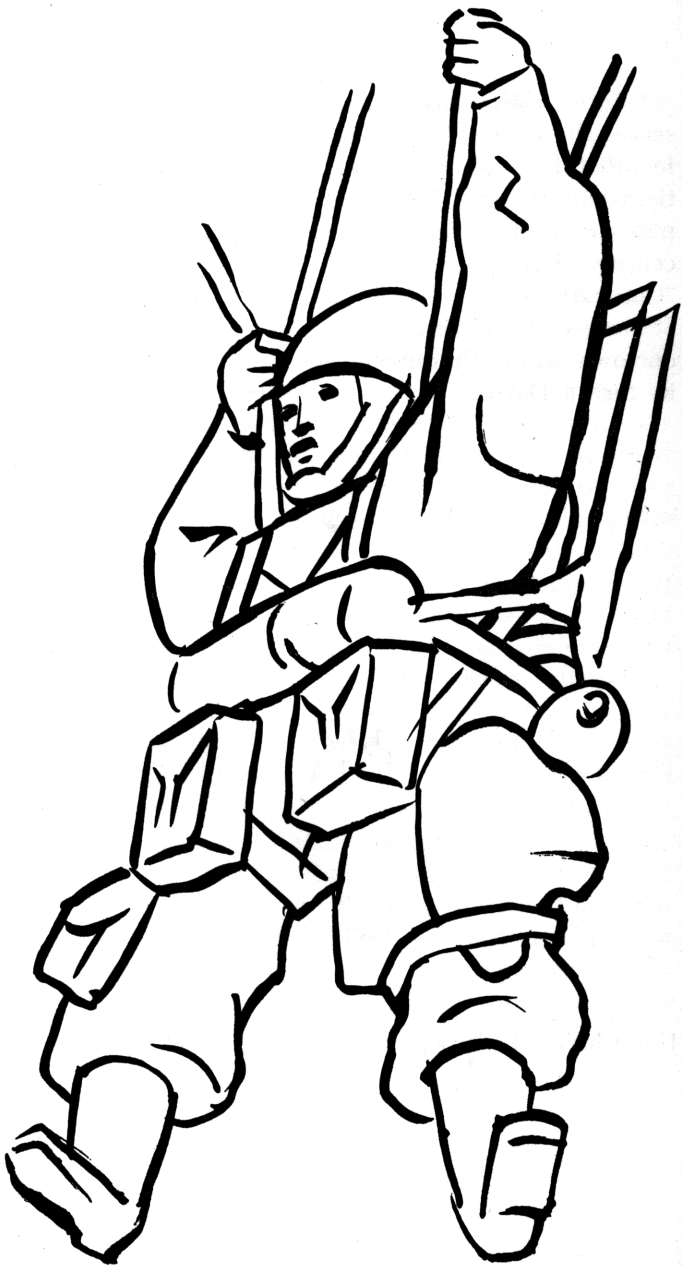
To the layman, surrealism diverges sharply from abstractionism, and should present a bric-a-brac of unrelated objects, watches, rags, organs, ants, patiently rendered in make-believe style. It has thus become synonymous with the reappearance of subject matter, a change of mood, deep as a chasm, that splits modern art circa 1930 and gives to the second third of the century a complexion far different from that of the first. The Picasso of 1915 shied from representation. To quote loosely a contemporary text of Cocteau, having built a scaffold of planes and lines around a lady or a bottle, the artist made bottle or lady vanish from the finished picture. Fourteen years later, Dali crowds unabashed thirty-eight bicycle

riders in three square inches of "Illumined Pleasures" as an answer to the challenge of his paragon, Meissonier, who could fit in one picture a whole Napoleonic army down to the last brass button, gaiter and moustache. The surrealism that Janis sponsors in this book is more abstract in hue than is its popular version, inasmuch as it inclines to the orthodox line of the surrealist party that favors automatism over patient rendering, and anathematizes Daliism for vernacular.

This first corpus of American non-objective art, impressive both in quantity and quality, needs no strengthening at the expense of realism. One regrets what Janis says of abstract painters turned realists: "... artists who could not survive without support, approval and companionship turned their backs on the difficult path of abstractionism . . ." Not all conversion to representation need be venal and cowardly. Heroic was the attitude of the cubist Rivera, leaving behind him in 1921 the economic security guaranteed by a Paris dealer for what seemed then esthetic exile and meagre rewards—Mexican walls and a laborer's weekly pay. Héliou, justly recognized as a successful master of abstract art, links his recent turn towards nature to what he experienced as a soldier in this war. And Dali was yielding to another spur than weakness when he changed from early abstractions to what he calls "hand-done color photography."

I agree with Janis that non-objective art deserves the name of "twentieth-century art," but feel that it would be safer to term it "early twentieth-century art." Esthetic quakes write complex graphs in a hundred years, as in the last century that opens with the pomp of David's "Coronation of Napoleon" and outlasts Van Gogh. Starting with Fauvism where Van Gogh left off, our own century has ample time left to breed in its turn a David.

Jean Charlot: Paratrooper. Fresco detail. 1944. 



21. MURALS FOR TOMORROW

To raise a flag in battle is heroic. "Raising the Flag on Iwo Jima" is a superb news photograph, a possible poster, an impossible mural and, begging pardon of Congress, an atrocious sculpture. In any branch of art, subject matter alone, however moving in real life, is a very weak lever with which to raise the work to grandeur. Each of the media has laws of its own, material and psychological, by which solutions are ratified or proven invalid.

The Mexican "Coatlicue" still stands, surviving the wreck of its temple, the death of its cult, the sinking of its culture. Time has skinned the monolith of gesso and paint, weather has eroded it like the flank of a mountain, but the derelict, inasmuch as it follows the logic of the matrix boulder and the proportions of an architecture now returned to dust, retains the same power to move us that it had in its polychrome prime.

Let us hope that the war memorials that will soon mushroom across the land may prove of such sturdy vitality. A future United States may

be incapable of feeling in retrospect the dynamics of today, the collective resolve that drives us towards one goal. A generation will be born for whom this war would be mainly a few pages of statistical logistics in a text book—if it were not for art. Only art may attempt the feat that the Indian sculptor once performed: to harden topical emotion into permanence.

Man, the little engineer, plays with blocks, sorts and piles them with the fierce concentration and vital intent of a child, and of course he also colors them. They are blocks to live in, to crawl into, as the hermit crab protects its soft body behind the armor of a borrowed shell. Each species of creature has its housing taste, its geometric affinity. The snail takes its ease in a spiral, the bee favors hexagonal shafts, man is partial to cubes. Though his body be far more complex in shape than are Euclid's solids, man feels it a good thing to be born, to live, and to die within a neatly packaged cube of space, its verticals and horizontals standing for the intellectual logical orderings that are his own.

It is the fate of mural painting to be a corollary to buildings, these rigid geometric complexes. Murals are the skin-thin, vari-colored garment made to reveal architectonic *dessous*, as clothes bulge at the chest and pleat at the hip. A mural should answer the spatial cubes of rooms with a corresponding quartering of illusive painted

space. If it is to be a mural, not just a painting on a wall, it needs to accept this subservient position to architecture, suck its strength from the main body as a remora from the shark. No passionate improvisation, no luscious brushstroke, can take the place of plain mural fitness, or explain the impact even today of Uccello's style.

A mural that "plays ball" with an architecture accepts in its makeup ingredients that could be called abstract—Vitruvius' canon of proportions finds in it an equivalent; its horizontals match floor levels, its verticals share the burden with columns, its diagonals ascend or descend with the stairs. The mural echoes the mesh of mathematical relationships that underlie even a mediocre architecture.

But the painting on the wall needs also to be the funnel through which much besides art is relayed to the onlooker. For its intended public, any man liable to enter a church, a ministry, a postoffice, art can be only the side dish—to be savoured imperceptibly as it were, while a major theme, patriotic, social or religious, is digested. The muralist must cater to this very real need of laymen for a familiar aperture to bring into focus the revelation of esthetics. Styles that do not allow of story telling lack certain mural requirements. The muralist must indeed be humbly prepared to deal with "Washington Crossing the Delaware," "Lincoln Freeing the Slaves." The

backbone of mathematics should remain embedded in the flesh of an obvious subject matter, computations relay emotions. Artists too proud to do this need not adopt a genre so publicly displayed.

Critics would be wise to keep this popular element in mind. Venturi, in the follow-up to his *History of Criticism*, damns Mexican painters for academicians because of their obvious interest in social themes. Modern art, says he, probes problems of form by painting apples, has done so for the last eighty years and should continue to do so. Cézanne knew better. Distinguishing genres, he painted fruit pieces, but remained haunted through life by mural themes, an epic vocabulary of nude bodies.

All through history form and content cohabit in peace. Duccio and Giotto, Raphael and Michelangelo, Tiepolo and Goya, Delacroix and Daumier, all tell stories. The contemporary muralist need not excuse himself for being a story teller.

Murals are the personal *apport* of the Americas to modern art. Marcel Lenoir, Gino Severini and others contributed frescoes to Europe in the early 1920s, but scarcely on the scale and at the pitch that marks their surge in Mexico, where murals smoked the artist out of his ivory tower and educated him to team work. In fresco painting, painter and mason elbow each other on the same scaffold. As the mason mixes mortar, trowels

it in daily areas, the painter is reminded of the fact that his art is also manual work, that he should be at least as efficient as the mason. The successive manipulations inherent to the fresco technique—tracing, squaring, pouncing, dividing in daily jobs—check would-be flights of genius into good craft, which is safer.

Fresco is an ideal communal means. The word conjures up guilds and medieval workshops, sand and lime, pestles and mortars, scaffolds rather than easels, overalls instead of smocks. Its executant learns not only a technique, but moreover an esthetic. The shift of values and colors that takes place as the mortar dries into permanency precludes a visual checkup of the work in course. This forces one to replace the sensuous means, overworked by Impressionism, by the classic discipline of mental planning. Felibien, praising Poussin circa 1670, wrote that his pictures were not pleasing to the eye; but that this is an animal tool on which the thoughtful artist need not rely, an organ unfit to pass judgment upon masterpieces.

To insure in practice the worth of the finished mural, a system of traps and sundry obstacles has been devised in this country by well-meaning people, to slow, brake, dam the course of the artist's inspiration, in an attempt to cure him of a suspected case of bohemianism. The poor man is bidden to flex his muscles, jump through hoops

so often before the start of the work, that he reaches the wall with little breath left, and less will. Suggestions, objections, and pressures submit him to an ordeal by despair. Competitions inflict what Villier de l'Isle-Adam called the ordeal by hope. The artist does sketches, perforce faked, to make sense to outsiders. In order to reach the wall, he runs the gauntlet of color schemes, reduced models, full-scale details wrung out of context. Finally he starts painting—while the man with a bucket of whitewash waits behind him, poised to spring forth into action.

Why not give the muralist the same confidence shown a plumber? Why use such archaic devices as that of the executioner with axe raised which insures the correct diagnosis of doctors called to the sickbed of some barbaric chieftain?

That I plead for fewer fetters from the outside does not mean that I believe art is at its best when most free. It is the artist who should stake his own limits.

Long identified with sanctimonious tableaux of ladies draped in cheesecloth, plucking, bestowing, blowing such operatic paraphernalia as lyres, crowns of laurel and gold trumpets, mural painting in the United States suffered in the last decade a life giving jolt. Patterned in part after the example of government-sponsored murals in Mexico and partly to round up this deal of a

brave new world, murals have rejoined the trends in easel painting with seven-league leaps.

Its new patrons, government agencies or labor organizations, will have none of the clammy stuffiness that catered to conservatives. One does not question the soundness of the change, but perhaps that of its extent. The liberation of mural painting is a revolution on the esthetic plane, apt to be messy as revolutions will be. The Victorian standards have been lynched with gusto. Surface finish, static dignity, nobility of theme, Classicism (even though it be only Neo-Classicism) are strung from lampposts. The new standards, much alive and with the kick of a giraffe, are the same that reign over average modern art: individuality at the core, distortion as the means, much pain taken to make the thing appear effortless. Slices of life, local incidentals, are favored over outmoded allegories.

Is such a style adequate for the murals that will vie with sculptures to commemorate this war? We may trust that a global war, fought in standard uniforms with standard weapons the world over, for aims that transcend the boundaries of a state, a nation, even a continent, will breed its own ample style, perhaps closer to the older point of view, now so thoroughly despised.

A return to a kind of classicism, even to the depiction of ladies draped in cheesecloth, need not prove a tragedy. Many allegorical tableaux

painted in this century are esthetically worthless, but theirs is nevertheless a proud lineage. The beauteous muses, draperies, wreaths, lyres, that make us smile today were once hallowed by the genius of Raphael and Poussin. The modern formula of avoiding formulas is rich in passion but short of breath. And a brave return to tested recipes may breed works that match Raphael's "Acts of the Apostles" and Lebrun's "Battles" in long sustained inspiration and inventive dignity.

The best guarantee that war memorials shall be worthy of their dedication, does not lie in the small irritants of routine supervision, but in allowing free play to the heart, brain, and conscience of the artist. The intricacies of the craft, the exigencies of the genre, the seriousness of the purpose, are censors he scarcely could escape.

22. *EL GRECO AS MYSTIC*

This book presents on an equal billing "Three Mystics," Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross, and El Greco. Thus, it equates boldly the two Saints whose holiness is certified by the Church with a painter who never has been thought of as saint, but who must, on some plane not obviously connected with the routine of his known life, have kept an inner eye fixed at least on the velvet-black background that framed the two others' radiant visions; on the "dark night" both feared and cherished by the Spanish mystics. Otherwise, how could his paintings furnish so apt a commentary to their meditations?

This suggests an investigation of Greco's stature within the Church. As a first-hand witness, there is Pacheco, father-in-law of Velázquez, an expert on the rules of liturgical art, and a mind modern enough to achieve scoops in the journalistic sense. Out of his interview with the aging Greek master, Pacheco emerged willing enough to publish the sayings that concerned esthetics, but the rest, which we may surmise to have

tended to the theological, he admitted that he did not dare repeat. Was it the shadow of the Inquisitors that stopped him from making copy out of Greco's confidences? In the painter's portrait of the Grand Inquisitor—now in the Metropolitan Museum—the name of Theotocopuli is found scrawled on a sheet of paper thrown on the tile floor, open, but still creased along four-fold lines. It could be a letter, a denunciation perhaps, opened, read, and discarded, by the somewhat awesome Cardinal.

Some infer that the fancy of the artist was not accidental in putting thus publicly his name under the foot of the sitter, very much in obeisance, but also very much under his protection; Greco, who in his youth had been so familiar with Eastern rites, may have been closely watched when in Spain to insure Roman orthodoxy.

Two more details, the one all night and the other all light. In a letter written from Rome and concerning the Italian sojourn of El Greco, Giulio Clovio, no mean artist himself, stated how, on a visit to the painter, he found him sitting awake in absolute darkness, all draperies drawn over the high windows, so as not to let in even one filtered ray of the fine morning sun. The authenticity of the letter is now contested, but whatever experts may say, the anecdote is too finely woven with the trends of the work and of the man not to

remain filed in his dossier, even if only as an apologue that shows his anticipation of the mystical night with which he was to come into contact in Spain.

The other clue, one that deals with light, is of undoubted authenticity: Greco, with the tip of his brush, jotted down on one of his pictures, concerning the heavenly court that surrounds an apparition of the Virgin: "Angels are like candle flame; they seem of great size at a distance, but are actually small when seen in close-up." These words capture the dynamics of a true vision, swooping forwards from afar. Was El Greco accustomed to come nose to nose with angels, or was he only reporting at second hand? There is a matter-of-factness in the wording that inclines one to the first surmise; no other eye saw these angels but that of a master of optics; an eye still busy with clinical analysis at the time that heart and head may have conversed with heaven.

A fact that few critics care to remember is that the man big enough to still be "in the news" after a few centuries or even a few decades from his death, probably surpassed in height and depth the critic who attempts belatedly his psychological autopsy. As a result, each generation takes hold of a genius by a single hair, and proclaims that it holds the whole man. Among modern masters, more and more does Cézanne prove his scope as beyond that niche in art history pre-

pared for him by his early apologists, that of a precursor of cubism. Likewise, El Greco contains—but far exceeds—what the modern critic acclaims him for, a prophetic encouragement of the pioneers of expressionism. His famed distortions may give consolation to moderns who likewise distort; but the juxtaposition of text and pictures in this book suggests how, to his contemporaries, these were more than subjective statements. To Spanish souls steeped in the vertical theology of his times, these distortions appeared as dogmatic exercises, pious variations on the theme of resurrection; of what will happen to our bodies when violently thrown overboard from the what-we-know, into a world shorn of space and time.

Then as now, not all clerics were art-minded. To decorate churches, there existed in Spain a safe brand of art, closest equivalent for that period of today's Barclay Street. These easel pictures were the watered legacy of the divine Morales, panels with soft shadings reminiscent of Leonardo, of a craft that hid the brush-stroke as if it was shameful, and attained enamel-smooth polish. Though it had not reached by far the degradation apparent in our day, liturgical art was fast entering a routine path and the blood painted on flagellation pictures took amiable hues of rubies.

We may sympathize indeed with the first curate to blunder and commission a picture from

Greco in Spain. On receiving the masterpiece the good man was so puzzled that he withheld payment. Many a priest today would leave it at that, adding probably that he felt sorry to have caused the painter trouble but that the picture was unfit for the cult. The Spanish priest, however, knew that he was no expert, and had the humility to gather a commission of local artists to pass on the matter. These in turn had the humility to state that no picture of this merit had as yet been painted in Spain; which soothed the ecclesiastic.

Perhaps El Greco was a mystic. If so, this gift never hindered its recipient from a gift of practicality, as proved also to be the case with St. Teresa. El Greco devised a way of avoiding the sales tax on commissions. We find a similar commonsense in his compositions: a crystal-sharp, crystal-clear, geometrical web is drafted with machine-made lines, straight lines or segments of circles. It is over this wholly rational core that the famed flame-like torsions of the brush-strokes spiral like vines cling to a building, both hiding and suggesting it. After all, in the inventory of Greco's library, the only books concerned with art were treatises on architecture.

Soon after El Greco became established in Spain his shop prospered. The painting of a commission became in fact, as in the case of another successful painter, Rubens, a kind of studio or

family affair. An uncle, a son, and boarding students, all were busy brushing in the underpainting, or painting *in toto* El Greco's. At least we know of one case in which the master saw one of his mural commissions only after its completion, and then only because of a squabble concerning its price.

When we state that Greco was a craftsman who sold his pictures as the cobbler sells his shoes, all we say is that his outlook on art was in keeping with the times. The more exquisite theory that his subconscious ruled his brush, and at that rather with frenzy than reason, is more flattering to contemporary taste but lacks in historical perspective.

It is the same with this fetich that we make today of personality, a preoccupation that would have proved as incomprehensible to Greco and his contemporaries as the theory of a ruling subconscious. It was then wisely taken for granted that a man is so much part of his times, with roots so secure in the past, that, at most, he achieves deviations rather than creations. Greco's elongated proportions, original as they may seem, were adapted from Cretan formulas that were in turn but a provincial branch of the Byzantine. These conventions ruled fresco painting in the island where El Greco was born. To the end, with the same tenacity with which he signed his name in Greek characters and boasted of

being Cretan, El Greco cherished the traditional types of orthodox Eastern devotion; the gaunt, bearded, cadaverous elders that he had seen, and perhaps even helped to paint, on Cretan walls when he was but a lad in his teens. In Spain, these figures shed their eastern names, Athanasius or Cyriacus, to masquerade as St. Jerome of Latin fame, and even as the pagan Laocoon.

Δουκηνριχος
 Γεοργιος
 ε' ποιη.

As to Greco's females, swaddled in draperies of undiluted local color, with fleshtones of a green no more than mottled with faint terra-rosa, their life seemingly concentrated in the agitation of their fan-spread, needle-thin fingers, they help to prolong into the over-ripe times of the Baroque the archaisms of the slavic icons that represented the three Marys at the Tomb.

This familiarity with Eastern rites and modes makes us believe that Greco was never much at his ease as a parishioner in Toledo or in Seville; that his swashbuckling manners, noted by contemporaries, hid the unease of the D.P.

He was buried in the parish of Santo Domingo, the same that had commissioned his first Spanish picture. Just before he died he willed to the parish money to buy tapers, long and thin, with haloed heads like the figures of Greek patriarchs that had formed his style. As he made this, his last wish known, did he also remember how once he had regarded the fact that, to his trained eye, now tired and straining already towards the sight of the resurrection, tapers and angels behaved alike?


Our present dilemmas with painting are all concerned with shop matters: abstract or concrete; surrealism or cubism; new romanticism or primitivism, we speak of all as if it was our freedom to choose. This is so because we have half forgotten how the terms of art criticism are more than juggling balls; each drags in gigantic chunks of human knowledge and of human emotion of which historical style is but the visible fringe. Too often does the critic, if he feels at all that there is in these terms more than sound, refer through them only to means, the choice of palette, the line straight or distorted, the spatial rendering deepened or squashed. Those are or-

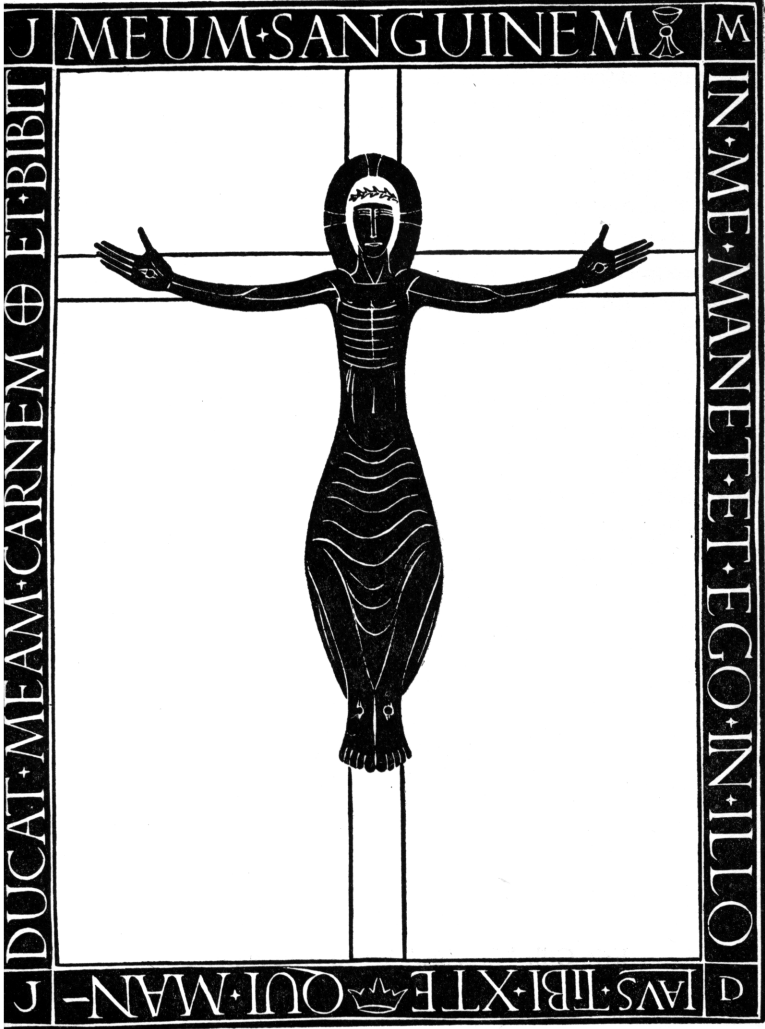
ganic to the painting and worthy of study, but the means, like the picture itself, have materialized only because of the centrifugal pressure of a definite type of spirituality that churned them into personalized being.

To speak of a conflict between forms of art becomes meaningless once the link between material and spiritual is severed. A style is as great as its power to translate—with only a minimum of physical veils—the impulse that forced it into visibility. The same style, industriously copied from the outside, frozen into mannerisms, is dead though the means remain the same. The claim of today's champions of progress that modern art has at last triumphed means little more than the fact that a majority of art practitioners rely for effect on abstraction or distortion. In Greco's case, we see how, once his means were divorced from their live springs, his art died, within the next generation, at the hands of his well-practiced followers.

Looking in this book at the close harmony between text and plates reinvigorates a faith in art that too much insistence on details had weakened. More than words, that drag in with their rigid symbols a superfluity of horsesense, art is set at the pulse of emotion with its never-codified and ever-changing symbols. It is its spiritual content that makes art great, just a step removed from the sacramentals.

If the publishers plan to enter the art field, where their Catholic approach has already, with this book, reopened old beautiful vistas nearly forgotten, a little touch of the scholarly could only help. The plate on page 140 is miscaptioned. It is not a Greco, and not even Spanish. But how thankful we should be for a reproduction of the crucifix in zenithal flight sketched from nature by John of the Cross. Here perhaps, in a complete denial of self, intent only on recording the vision, do we find at last true originality. As René Huyghe points out in his clear and cautious analysis, the stylistic ingredients are as miraculous as the occasion, being prophetic rather than retrospective. One may only question Huyghe's opinion that this drawing "belongs less to art than to mysticism." Would it not be truer to state that, in art as in other pursuits, there is no substitute for sanctity?

Eric Gill: "Crucifix." Wood engraving. 



J MEUM SANGUINEM



M

IN ME MANET ET EGO IN ILLO

DUCAT MEAM CARNEM ET BIBIT

J

JAVS TIBI XTE QUI MAN-



D

23. *ERIC GILL*

A leader among the pitifully small group of Catholic artists, Gill has aroused as much opposition as he has found loyalties. His detractors are usually people of gross taste who pray as well in front of a "photographic" daub as they would before a masterpiece, clerics who gladly cram their churches with the gaudiest plaster saints that mass production markets; while on the other hand those who unconditionally worship Gill and his work are the faithful of enlightened taste, instrumental in building and decorating churches in the modern style that slowly pushes aside the monstrosities of a phony gothic. Thus to give Gill's work only restricted praise is a somewhat perilous affair, a partial strengthening of dubious allies against their esthetic betters.

Under the egis of Saint Paul was this book of confessions written; having completed it, its author, with finely clocked timing, laid himself to sleep robed in the Dominican habit of a tertiary. Clearly soaked in an atmosphere of Grace, the telling of his life brings to literature the

precise horse sense of a craftsman accustomed to carve hard materials, wood and stone, whose grain and density make short work of attempted nonsense. The plastic thought of Gill the carver that ponders the angle of the chisel and weighs the stroke of the mallet informs with both caution and confidence the articulate thoughts of Gill the writer. His style, clothed in worker-like simplicity, can also pack the wallop of a worker's fist. His thinking apparatus is so earthy that it seems conditioned by touch and smell rather than logic, so salty that the pen moves impelled by the loins as well as the brain. Gill the stonecutter digs into things of thought as a mole into the black soil, carving patient tunnels that open at the end on true blue vistas.

Coming from the mind of a man accustomed to think and feel in images, this book can be summed up in a picture more easily than in an abstract train of thought. Reading it conjures a penny sheet with gaudy coloring, a Currier and Ives in robust style: wearing the leather apron proper to stonecarvers and the folded paper cap that printers sport, a bearded patriarch holds the chisel of the sculptor and the burils of the wood-engraver; surrounded by cases of sans-serif, he stands silhouetted against the bulk of a screw-press that assistants slowly feed with hand-made sheets; one sees through the door the women baking bread, tending cattle, giving the breast to

their brood under the arches of a crumbling monastery. It is a composite image that superimposes reminiscences of the patron saints of many trades—Saint Luke the icon maker, Saint Eloy the smith, Crispin and Crispinian in leather aprons working at their bench, Saint Isidore, who watches over the farm chores, and a kind of Tobias, who cares for the dead by lettering their virtues on tombstones.

From the man that the book evokes, artisan rather than artist, shorn of theories, hot-blooded and hirsute, an unknowing reader would expect works as good, as imperfect, as humorous and as sanguine as himself. Indeed it is hard to reconcile Gill the man, as seen through the eyes of Gill the writer, with the mannered and somewhat bloodless productions of Gill the artist; the author somewhat clarifies the paradox by detailing the influences that concurred in shaping his style.

At the start of his career he specialized exclusively in carved lettering on monuments and tombstones. A carved letter is most peculiar among sculptured beings because, in spite of beveled uprights and incised serifs, it has no real volume or existence in space; its members are rigidly flush with the frontal plane of the slab. Thus Gill became familiar with this paradox: a sculpture in calligraphic terms that depend neither on volume nor on space. Nature offers no subject matter as unsubstantial as man-

created letters. Even a blade of grass pressed between blotters suffers violence as it is thus ushered into two dimensions; though paper thin, the helicoidal torsion of its live body already postulates space and volume.

Gill well realized the limitations of his calling. He dared carve garlands of leaves and flowers in the margins of his text; but when his design included embellishments in the round, such as cheeky cherub's heads, the young letterer would wisely give the job to a sculptor, as it seemed to him then outside the range of his craft. He soon hardened his heart to such adolescent scruples, came eventually to carve not only heads but bodies, whole clusters of personages in action. In spite of the applause this more ambitious work received, one may question at least its influence on many a younger artist. The flatness that letters possess by nature, that leaves and flowers may acquire (still retaining a measure of their former entity), does mortal violence to man; in his bas-reliefs the volume gives way to the slice, the human body with its elbows and knees painfully profiled appears crushed into the surface of the stone slab.

To be sure, Gill, the skilled letterer, often weaves his silhouettes into calligraphic purity, spins a line as precisely stream-lined as the profiles cut by a tooling-machine; one may, however, question the propriety of transmuting man,

and especially the Man-God, into a pattern. Gill worked, perhaps unknowingly, closer to the "modern" movement of the Parisian abstractionists than he would have cared to admit, but while Braque and Picasso humbly worked their magic on a guitar, a pipe or a package of tobacco, Gill collected and pressed into his strange herbarium the most sacred objects that his faith grasped.

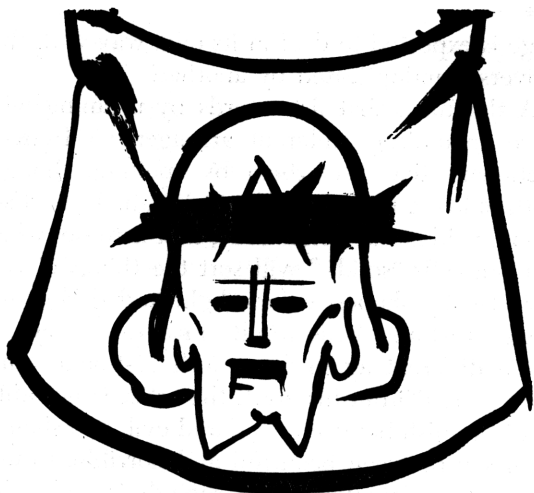
Gill submits candid and lucid explanations for his other activities: how he came to carve a nude woman as a kind of sexual outlet, how he adopted an "unnatural" style because it was the only one he knew. Such humbleness relying more on artisan's sweat than on higher logic contrasts with the assurance of some of his followers, who stoop from metaphysical truths to the physical problems of art, who show a tendency to solve esthetic dilemmas by wielding the "Summa" as if it was a tomahawk.

All his life Gill remained suspicious of theorists, and yet he attracted them in swarms. There is a wistful portrait of his friends (page 168) penned apropos of his doing his first sculpture in the round; we give it here in full as it is also a brisk sample of his style:

My friends in the arts and crafts circles rather looked askance at me. I seemed to be deserting their homely fireside and going into brothels and dance-halls. They really are like that; they're terribly strait-laced and prim . . . there was something very emasculate and lacking in

guts as well as other appurtenances about most of the products of the arts and crafts movement. You can *see* the boys don't drink; you can *see* they're not on speaking terms with the devil.

Gill put into his work all he knew, all he loved, with most intense concentration. One would like to say that the results of such life-long devotion were truly important. But are reforms as essentially good as they are novel? Of the Impressionists Renoir used to say, "They boast that they paint the shadows blue while others paint them black." Of the portion of the liturgical art movement that Gill leavened it may be similarly said: They rejoice at having replaced in their churches the neo-Gothic style by the pseudo-Byzantine.



24. *CATHOLIC ART, ITS QUANDARIES*

The world man has been put into to enjoy as his own has been inventoried in many unrelated ways—astronomy, microscopy, dictionaries, etc. Each results in listings so unrelated to those obtained by another way that only God can fill the gaps between them, and thus observe His Creation as a unit. No one considers one science invalid because its findings are independent of some other science. In fact each branch of knowl-

edge is expected to deal in its own way with the universe, unduplicated by another.

A thesaurus that lists words by meaning will have an entirely different arrangement from a dictionary that lists them by spelling, though both follow a thoroughly logical plan. The artist, whose field is the visible only, that is to say what Poussin calls "solids," will sort the things of the universe by shapes, colors, light and dark, suggested textures. This results in a new encyclopedia different again from both dictionary and thesaurus. Within his craft, the artist is not able to distinguish between good and evil, one should even say between beautiful and horrible, to use layman's terminology. But though it lacks the benefit of other traditions, the physical has a logic all its own, and one not devoid of horizons.

We must consider that the Creative Act took into consideration the shapes of things and that, in the same way that man (body included) was made in the image of God, all creatures reflect in their shapes some particular virtue of His substantial thought. Thus it may not be accident, as Delacroix remarks in his Journals, that the cracks to be observed in dried mud have a shape and logic similar to the formation of tree trunks and branches. It must mean something, for example, this insistence on the sphere—spherical cells, spherical eye, spherical planets. Or this relation of a pine branch lovingly mimicking the

outline of Mount Saint Victoire, miles away, as observed by Cézanne. Innocent of other terminologies, the artist does pick from all fields and gather together within his own plastic scheme things up to then unrelated.

One should not try to impose outside standards to the artist's own world; true in everyday experience, they become falsified in his case: giving to sculptured or painted bodies the biological and moral attributes of real bodies has resulted in much iconoclasm and witch-burning. One should rather proceed by respecting the laws peculiar to this plastic world, which, possessed of a hierarchy all its own, presents an orderly image of the universe as "decent" as, though different from, other interpretations.

The dictatorship of man and of man's thoughts in literature is hardly to be matched within the plastic arts, for while literature can delve into psychology and metaphysics, painting and sculpture are bound to "think" in terms of solids.

Thus in painting it is not the story itself that communicates its drama. In this specialized sense, one may say that the clothes are more than the body, the accessories more essential than the hero. In the martyrdom of Saint Andrew or Saint Peter, in the Crucifixion of our Lord, the human shape remains subservient to the carpentered cross. A Deposition needs the pyramidal ladders to acquire plastic existence. The

Resurrection, the Assumption, to acquire flight need as a starter the square, stolid shape of the tomb. Giotto, steeped as he is in Saint Thomas, paints a world at peace under the guidance of God, but it is not through soulful expressions on people's faces that he achieves this mood. He prefers to use the great architectural backgrounds to the monastic scenes, the solidity of conical mountains poised as a proposition of the *Summa*. Mainly through those inanimate things does he communicate the equivalent of men's thoughts. Man's body as Giotto portrays it is disguised into the semblance of trees and mounds under the heavy folds of cloaks whose texture is nearer to bark and soil than to any known cloth.

It is not always possible to keep equally intact both illustrative and plastic proprieties; their relative importance shifts with time and fashion. When Greco tucks his personages into bodies which medical science pronounces in the last stages of exhaustion, when his brush distorts the face of our Lady as if it was made of ectoplasm, he sins against story telling, and this made his work a scandal for at least three centuries. Yet if one pays attention to his line and color, one gets the full impact of his mysticism.

Most of the devotional images used today in churches depict pious attitudes, eyes rolled into ecstasies, but the choice of shapes and colors often tells an entirely unrelated story of bad art

and of mercenary aims, which is sinful, at least within the craft.

Why should the churchmen of today sponsor such a photographic art? A representation of the saints that would be wholly satisfactory to the senses, suggesting their actual presence, would be puzzling to the faith, because of this lack of differentiation between original and copy. Few of the miraculous devotional images have stuck close to realism. The black log Virgins of old world sanctuaries, those of Spain and Mexico hidden under stiff pyramids of brocade, the axe-hewn, blood-drenched Santos of New Mexico are but the thinnest of veils between *orans* and Recipients of the prayers.

When Rubens painted our Lady fat and Greco painted her thin, the Inquisition did not pounce on them (for that reason at least), for it was then well understood that this was not our Lady but a symbol of her; a German will paint her Germanic, an Italian as Italian: the Chinese paints her Chinese with specific approval of the Holy See. There are besides this racial geography individual stylistic climates for which allowances must also be made. If we may pry into our Lady's own opinion on the matter, it may be pointed out that she herself, in her apparitions, modifies her appearance according to the recipient.

The world we paint is not the world we know, but only its mirrored reflection within our eye.

It is perhaps a not negligible point for those who are sticklers for nature's ways that this image in fact is upside down. The illusiveness of such a vision dovetails strikingly with Saint Paul's allusion to "things seen in a mirror and symbols." Only a crass materialist would check on the correctness of the mirrored image and overlook this other assertion, that it must also stand as symbol. Were art as real as the model itself, it would mean a thickening of the walls around us, the closing tight of this material prison; it would sink art into matter. Rather than reflecting barrenly back the object of its reflection, the work of art must open a passage for mortal things to the spiritual world.

It is the very difference between the painted object and the natural object that best expresses its spiritual import; here are things detached from their everyday uses: plants without growth, people without action, light without twilight. Time ceases to exist. From our transient world we move into the perennial. It is as if Judgment had already been passed and all values were arrested into timelessness. This permanency is in itself a spiritual asset, as if all the busy Marthas of this world, all those creatures, animate and inanimate, whose reason to be is to serve, each in its capacity, were suddenly freed from this servitude and transformed into so many immobile, contemplative, God-loving Marys. It is then a Catholic's duty to respect the artificiality of

art and to orient his pictures toward a greater goal than successful make-believe.

Such a well-rooted scruple should not be magnified so far as practically to annul the creative instinct. Some Catholics cling timorously to well-tried styles, Byzantine or Gothic, or to their modern revivals. Their abhorrence of photographic art becomes an artistic phobia of things pertaining to the third dimension. Their creed may be summed up thus: How is it licit to take a material true to its own identity and to transform it into the pretence of other illusive materials and objects? Is not this postulate so against nature that no positive addition in the final result may outweigh the initial subtraction? Is not the magical assumption on the canvas or wall of a sense of depth a lie, and as such, evil?

Laudable as those tenets are, there is bound to be discordance in the results. If a love of truth forces us to keep our picture within two dimensions, how much of Saint Peter (if such be the subject) will remain after we have steam-rolled him flat upon our canvas? Is not the disservice shown the Saint as bad a feature as the disrespect one would have shown the material, by painting enough space into it to make place for a more rounded Peter? Why not let the artist create as much depth as he may? Be he Raphael or Bosseron-Chambers, painted means are so limited that none will take the result for a

reality. If it be a lie, it remains a very white one.

When God gave the world to man for his own use, the gift was intended also for the artist. The work of art must not be cut too harshly from the outer logic and beauty. A picture that reflects liberally God's creation must reflect also some of His good. Asceticism is nonsense within the craft of sculpting and painting, for both deal with bodies, and their maker cannot shut up his senses without weakening the usefulness of the result. It may be, it is even probable, that the higher reaches of spiritual life have no need for the plastic arts; but at our imperfect level sensuousness remains for the plastic artist the one proper approach; an animal gusto, not metaphysics, is what makes the craft tick.

The world is not only a dry nomenclature of things, fit for the statistician; when all and each is weighed, counted, and labeled, what better than paint can express the admirable residue? One cannot imagine the convincing portrayal of a butterfly's wing in words. In that sense, though the thought be paradoxical, Rubens is an eminently religious painter. He endows the objects he paints with those supererogative attributes which God intended for each—sheen of silks, lusciousness of fruits, sensuousness of bodies. There is in his lack of inhibition a truly Catholic attitude, attuned to his profession.

However engrossing are theoretical considera-

tions, Catholic art is so tied up with practical problems that its artist cannot afford to rent an ivory tower or suffer a pathological inflation of ego. The art-for-art artist proceeds on his own, brushes his pictures as he wants, let the chips fall where they may. But the Catholic artist is at one end of a kind of tug of war, the Catholic worshipper at the other—or, to be realistic, the ecclesiastic that handles the parish money. If these were the only participants in the sport, the artist would have no choice but to bow abjectly to the esthetic ideas of the non-artist; but it happens that this is a three-cornered proposition, with God as the referee. Before serving the Catholic flock or its pastor, the artist must give obeisance to God: he must not break the rules of sound esthetics under penalty of ceasing to be a good man.

25. TO THE EDITOR OF LITURGICAL ARTS

Dear Friend:

You write me that many readers disliked my frontispiece, and to please tell them why I did it "ugly." It is an embarrassing question that should not be asked, or would you ask a father why he made his children ugly? Whatever they are to the outside world, children multiply in flesh and mind the idiosyncrasies of their begetter and thus seem beautiful to him. I coo and bill over my maligned frontispiece with as much conviction as a father toad cooing and billing over his toadies. Indeed the whole outer world and the outer world's children seem somewhat deformed to me.

What you ask of me is to fly out of my skin, as Georgia witches are wont to do, and from this outer vantage point give your readers an unbiased analysis of what makes me and mine tick.

Some of your friends, as quoted by you, find that in my opus Mary is not "as beautiful as they dream her to be." "Beautiful" is a term so debased today as to require further elucidation.



Much pietistic literature, many pious images give of our Lady a version not unrelated to the professional beauty of gown-models and bathing beauties. I despise such achievements wholeheartedly, and indulge a creeping belief that unknown to them the musings of devout people in front of such images are not wholly devoid of what gives savor to the musings of more rowdy gents in front of pin-up girls and Petty *femmes*.

The beauty of our Lady was and is wholly devoid of what America bluntly terms "sex-appeal" and thus is not for us sinners to apprehend. When our Lady appeared at Pontmain to small children and babes-in-arms exclusively, it was certainly no ill-will of hers that denied her sight to the good curate and his well-meaning parishioners, but rather the touch of sin that soiled their make-up. Mary's appearance that soothed and edified babes would have seemed to grownups that were not saints "fearful as an army arrayed for battle."

If an artist received the miraculous gift of reproducing our Lady as she is, it would be accompanied no doubt by a corresponding gift of prudence to stop him from ever flaunting his foolhardy accomplishment. In my "Nativity" the sketchiness of Mary's features is the only decent kind of homage that I know how to pay.

What line and color may portray without trespassing on forbidden ground are the trails along which the painter's devotion carries him, the mental and spiritual climate of his prayer with the brush. The more individual this delineation of one man's devotion, the stranger to the many perhaps, but also the more edifying for a group of people with like affinity.

In my case, my work is much concerned with Indian Mexico. At birth and throughout life and in death, Aztecs hug the earth with an intensity

of comprehension unmatched by that of people who sit on chairs and not on the ground, sleep in beds and not on mats. This peculiar chumming with earth crept into this Nativity scene: all three members of the holy family stoop close to the ground to form a low-lying shape that people familiar with Indian mounds and Aztec pyramids may readily recognize. What could be a mere compositional device has also moral meaning. These attitudes rejoin beyond centuries and continents the Italian "Madonnas of Humility" that squat on the bare earth, for example Masaccio's in the National Gallery at Washington. Perhaps because a Madonna of Humility par excellence, this Italian Mary looks and acts like a Mexican Indian mother as she gravely fondles the Divine Papoose.

Besides racial considerations, style comes into play; that is the ingredient that differentiates art from nature. In his wonderful picture "A Joust Between Carnival and Lent" Breughel touches other matters besides Church and kitchen, presents unwittingly a summary of the history of style. The lanky tribe that pelts its foes with boiled leeks and salted herrings could stand for the masters that elongate the verticals—Byzantines, Greco, Gill. The fat folk that repulse the attack with cannon balls made of capons and fatted geese are the cartoon equivalent of the masters of spherical bulk—Giotto,

Raphael, Rubens. The only type lacking is one of which Breughel had no concept, the photographic artist that despises all styles. Nowadays Barclay Street art steers joylessly its naturalistic course away from both thinness and fatness. It reminds one of the case of a mental patient that divided womanhood in two types: the broad ones, too animal to be wooed, the lean ones, too ethereal to be desired. Psychoanalysts rescued him from suicide.

My frontispiece is in kinship with the low and wide figures that Breughel's revellers stand for. The few people who are nowadays both conscious of style and concerned with liturgical arts favor rather the "lenten" tradition, the Eric Gill type of saints, underfed and oblivious of the pull of gravity. Because this bony art hovers much higher than do realistic plaster saints, its exponents are prone to claim that all saints in Heaven *do* watch their weight, and fulminate interdicts against other types of art. If true, us fat ones would be left in outer darkness—not only Charlot, but Giotto whose forms are as pregnant with grace as they seem pregnant with child, and Raphael who rounds breasts bursting with peasant milk, and Rubens whose painted mess of bosoms and hocks is a fearless tableau of the gifts of God.

May these lines allay some of the suspicion with which your thin friends view my work.

Tseng Yu-Ho: landscape. Brush and ink. 🖌️



26. *REFLECTIONS OF AN OCCIDENTAL PAINTER ON CHINESE INK-PAINTING, AFTER LOOKING AT THE WORKS OF TSENG YU-HO*

Occidental art history has its myth, that of the Old Masters. It pictures them as bearded elders; the hand that holds the brush emerges from a cuff of old lace strewn over a sleeve of wine-colored velvet; the brush is dipped in mellow gold to better match the glow of an expensive gilded frame. Often we see a king or emperor in attendance, eager to retrieve the tools the Master, weakened with age, may have let fall.

Only in appearance is this folk tale innocuous, as it furnishes the touchstone against which the living artist and his work are subconsciously assayed, and unjustly found wanting. Few indeed are the art-lovers who like their dish caught fresh, before the gamey stench of history, or of fable, has had time to set in. Centuries hence, when dirt, varnish, fakers, and restorers, will have obscured his achievement, the once-alive artist may be raised in his turn to the status of myth.

Oriental art, too, fosters similar midwives' tales. There also, an assumed golden age is

safely tucked way back into the past, with this added advantage over the Occident, that fabulously few authenticated works remain as the basis for a formulation of esthetic criteria; in this field, art-lovers may proceed to *extasis* practically unhampered by facts.

The European Old Master sports a beard; a beard figures also in the Oriental myth. For the many, it amounts to a seal of authenticity that raises an ancient ink-wash to the rank of a masterpiece. This magic beard should adorn the chin of the lone philosopher—properly the size of a chick-pea—who gapes at a make-believe waterfall, or else gazes at a make-believe moon.

As to the yellow varnish that both hides and makes an Occidental Old Master, it has a Chinese substitute in accumulated grime, disintegrating silk, and faded ink. An English amateur of the eighteenth century summed up an attitude that applies equally well to the appreciation of the art of the East and of the West when he stated smugly that a masterpiece should be well-browned all over, just like a lovely old violin.

Practicing artists will forever remain unsatisfied with this attitude, however *distinguée*. For them, rather than manna from Heaven, the work of art is a man-made object. The approach of the painter to another's paintings can be as matter-of-fact as that of a carpenter surveying

the joints of a colleague's table. For the art-maker, what mystery has been superimposed upon the original work by the smoking process of Time and the patter of commentators hath little charm. An unobstructed view of a single brush-stroke could tell him more.

We should be grateful to Tseng Yu-Ho for helping us raise this and assorted queries, simply because of the fact that she is alive, young, as yet unhallowed by the myth of the Old Masters, and that she paints on clean white paper with clean black ink. To look at her ink-paintings clarifies the true meaning of tradition, as against the phony myth of an unmatchable past. Indeed, these mid-twentieth-century pictures are firmly rooted in tradition, from the choice of subject matter—mountain peaks, gnarled pines, river falls—to the slightest brush-stroke that charts the curve of one single blade of grass.

Chinese ink-painting is an exacting medium. It admits of nothing hidden, nothing stated twice, and no possible stutterings. It is a heroic medium that deserves the same praise that Michelangelo reserved for *buon fresco*. The spirit of both media contrasts with that of oil painting, wherein ruse may masquerade as inspiration, where scumbles, glazes and retouching varnish conspire to doctor a weak initial concept, or to heal a deficient start. Matured by unhurried thoughts and repeated communions with

nature, the execution of an ink-picture must be nevertheless lightning-quick. The plastic rhythm grows on paper at the same time that the brush flashes its curves and zigzags, musically, but swifter even than music. No craftiness, no conscious thought even, has time to deflect the motion of wrist and fingers. Here, unlike what may happen in less exacting techniques, the artist can fake neither knowledge nor greatness.

One whole portion of man is cast aside in free-stroke brush painting, this part midway between body and soul that we call rational. All too rarely does the Occidental artist understand this need to shush reason at the time of painting. He is loath to let go of this, his safest faculty. In his work, reason battles at each step with inspiration. The artist's rational self plots to hide from the spectator its master's weaknesses and shortcomings. If the Occidental painter is at all "at home" in his picture, it is only as the perfect host, hand stretched, shirt front starched, hair groomed. To know eventually the whole man, we must look at his sketchbooks, or better still, his telephone booth doodlings.

Not so with the Oriental ink-painter. A mystical disposition, or the winebibbing praised in biographies as a trusted aid to inspiration, or both, lock reason out in darkness, at least for the time necessary to picture making. Otherwise, reason would engage in a pointless dialogue

with inspiration, distract her certainly, convince her perhaps of helplessness as, of the two, only reason cares to follow an argument to its winning conclusion. Once reason is rendered harmless, the Chinese master has no choice but to display on paper or silk his spiritual self as relentlessly as a farmer nails an owl to a barn door. The act of painting becomes a total spiritual disrobing, both shameful and glorious, in the manner of a public self-confession. From depths that words may never probe, the brush brings up subconscious moods, innermost states, for which pine, bamboo, plum tree and orchid act as species of tuning forks, to prove or disprove harmony between the painter and the universe. It is this paradoxical selflessness in the assertion of self that explains how the lives of the hermit-painters are replete with Franciscan anecdotes. What true artist, alone with his vision before the blank area of the picture-to-be, has not already renounced the world.

However spiritual art may be in its final draft, it is not at the metaphysical plane that it starts. Its beginnings are located close to sensuous perceptions. Perhaps too much has been made of the similarities between ink-painting and brush-writing by literary critics who, in so doing, felt that they honored painting all the more. There are conceptual incompatibilities between ideographs and pictorial subject matter. It is the



1. Inspiration (spark of genius).
2. The technique (includes composition & brush work).
3. The study of the old masters.
4. Personality and creation.
5. Knowledge (culture).
6. Nature.

business of the sign that stands for "tree" to propose to its reader an image so devoid of personality that it will fit all possible kinds of trees. It is true that the tree that the painter brushes on paper is not nature's own either. He fills it with autobiographical innuendos; it suffers a radical metamorphosis the better to fit into the strange world—two-dimensional in fact and monochrome—of ink-painting. Yet the model remains personalized, endowed with physical substance; with its own height, girth, and density; and growing a web of branches as unique as finger tip whorls, only valid for this one tree.

Other senses than sight are also put to work. It is tactile experience that moves the brush when it renders the asperities of rocks or the furrows of tree trunks as convincingly as would actual ink-rubbings lifted from the surface of the object. The mottled, streaked, or splashed areas that pass for foliage lean on texture more than on form; beyond texture, they capture the smell of dew-damp shoots or of the dry leaves in autumn. So close to the senses remains the realization as to suggest an inception incubated at leisure within the senses before it grew vertebrate enough to acquire a visible body.

With the brush lashed to his paralyzed fist, Renoir stands as a symbol of the complete unity of an artist with his medium. They should not be separable any more than are horse and man

in a centaur. It is not with the inert brush that man paints, but with wrist, elbow, and shoulder. In the Occident, the intellectual planning of a picture often comes into conflict with the muscular function of picture making. The kind of painter who uses a mahlstick is patient enough to tame muscles and nerves to the point of organic inertia. The stroke of the academic brush is proudly laid dead. Effaced—as if they were obscene—are the clues to the live initial impact of the brush as it strikes the canvas, and as well of its final flight away from the painted plane and back into space. The gymnastics that discipline the hand of the academician are doubtless admirable, because they are so difficult; but this kind of training forfeits a whole world of beautiful lines never meant to obey the requirements of cold intellect. Taking after the combined articulations of knuckles, wrist, and elbow, these freehand lines record circular motions laid within circular motions. They look free when compared with lines made with ruler or compass only because the tool that makes them is immeasurably more complex, but they too are laid along terms of logic and function.

In the ink-stroke of Chinese painting, two extremes are thus fused: the complex animal machinery of the skeleton, with the tensions and extensions of its attached muscles, is on display as nakedly as is the spiritual note. A mystic with

a sluggish body, or a body only loosely teamed with its soul, is a deficient tool for painting. It is this rare near-miracle of the spiritual putting bone and sinew directly in motion that alone accounts for great ink-painting.

As to subject matter, the squadron of old pictures that represent a sage gazing at the moon postulates at least a link between picture making and natural sights; to be exact, between this mirrored image of nature that hangs reduced and reversed at the inner lining of our eyeball, and the man-made image of paper and pigment. The theme of nature in Chinese painting is often stripped of its seriousness when it is presented by the kind of speaker who is at his best when lecturing to garden clubs. Perhaps certain blossoms displayed in full-color paintings hold interest for the flower-lover; and entomologists may approve of the bugs that suck or chew the plants, fireflies or praying mantises; but the subject matter is not all-important, even though stressed and bolstered by the addition of literary colophons. Like the best Occidental paintings, the best ink-paintings are themselves rather than slices of nature. In ink-painting, beauty does not depend on that of the subject matter. In fact, an ascetic disposition imbues nature in many a masterpiece with spectral undertones. The residue of nature that filters through in these paintings is as often a shorthand of decay as it is of

spring. Ink-trees remain beyond the ministrations of well-meaning tree surgeons; ink-flowers hardly ever do rate florists' ribbons. Pine, grass, men and rocks, all are ruthlessly equated to the common denominator of ink. To appreciate these painted sights, it is well to remember how the reality of stains and splashes rates as high as whatever it is that they purport to represent.

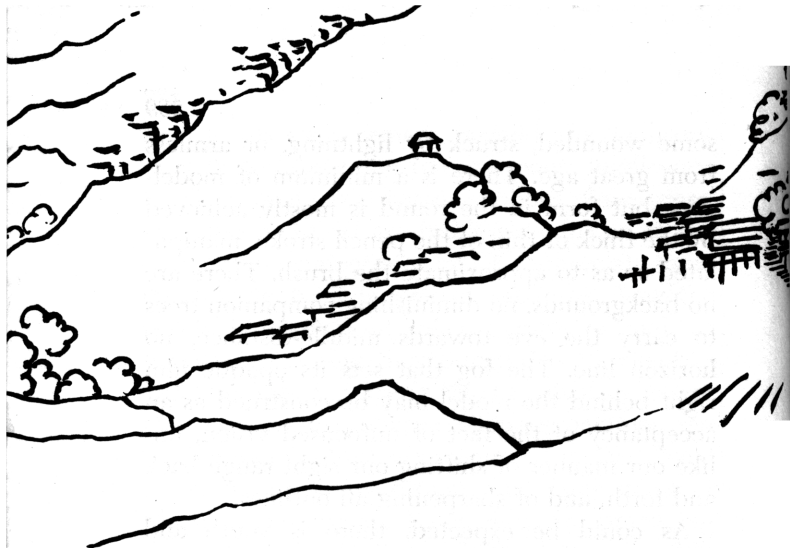
Before meeting Tseng Yu-Ho, what I knew of the relationship between Chinese painters and Nature was twofold and meager: (a) they loved it dearly; (b) they turned their back on it at the time of painting. Being myself a practicing artist, I readily believed both statements, but suspected that they were presented all too simply. Thanks to the readiness of Tseng Yu-Ho in opening for me her notebooks and portfolios, I now realize more clearly the similarities that attend the craft of picture making, the world over.

Her first steps toward a picture are shown in a series of lead-pencil drawings that are, she assures me, done directly from the model. Made in a medium with which the West is familiar, as yet only faintly marked by the timbre of formal style, these drawings are of value for an Occidental, to help isolate what is art from the *chinoiserie* that, regardless of quality or intent, spells its own picturesque magic. Motives are mostly tree trunks, some thin, erect and budding;

some wounded, struck by lightning, or armless from great age. There is a minimum of modelings, but form in the round is mostly achieved by the thick or thin of the pencil stroke, manipulated so as to approximate the brush. There are no backgrounds, no diminishing companion trees to carry the eye towards middle-distance, no horizon line. The fog that sets its opaque film right behind the model may be construed as an acceptancy of the fact of unfocused vision, unlike our manner of shifting our sight range back and forth, and of sharpening all outlines.

As could be expected, there is youth and charm in these attentive notations, coupled with a lack of preoccupation with all-over effect, and a submissiveness to the model that reminded me of sketches made by the young Corot, at the same age and in the same vein.

Other pencil notations order together the separate elements in tentative compositions. Already here, formats differ sharply from Occidental ones. The sketchbook itself, made in Peking, has long thin pages that encourage the concept of a scroll. Occidental formats may deviate only moderately from the square because we are accustomed to view the parts of a picture simultaneously and from a centralized point. In the case of the Chinese, the implied mechanism of successive viewings makes away with a center and breeds panoramic formats. An Oriental composition



uses, as we do, space and solids, but juggles them after the principle of change that presupposes, as does movement, a reading of the picture along a stretch of time instead of in a single moment.

One of the slightest sketches is a striking project laid down along a thin strip of paper, three inches wide and four feet long. In accord with the cinematic principle, it sums up the sights of a two-day boating party along the banks of a river. The artist makes use of a system of dots and dashes so slight that it barely disturbs the whiteness of the paper; this pencilled shorthand of the projected shorthand of the brush already carries the meaning of the complex subject matter and its load of subjective values.



A third type of sketch uses the brush only, is based on areas rather than on lines. There is no attempt at formal balance, or rather the sketch is composed in vignette fashion, inscribed loosely in an irregular oval shape. Such a sketch is that of the fishing barge seen through the hanging foliage of a river bank, and is a kind of ink-play. The wet-looking surface of the paper is modulated, rather than divided, by the sliding of values that ooze into each other as a testimonial to the speed that moved the brush. More than the previous ones, these works technically escape Occidental parallels, as they spring from grounds as yet unstudied in our own brand of art criticism. Fattened at will by the twist of the wrist, line expands to area or thins again into line. Darks fade imperceptibly into blacks,

and outlines are blotted out by washes. The one quality that a painter recognizes at once is *la fuerza del mango*, the strength and assurance that attended the manipulation of the brush.

Next come album leaves in which pencil and brush notations fuse into all-around compositions. Elaborations along traditional lines add to the well-observed tree trunk its ragged ink-foliage, and to the bare rock its spattering of moss. Perhaps because these album leaves are wider than they are high, the themes are based on the horizontal, and pastoral in mood. In these tranquil notations of the countryside, charm of tint and the inviting slope of low hills suggest a morning stroll through mist, whose slow rising reveals translucent suggestions of solids, gathered from out of the ever-present reality of space.

In the large-scale vertical scrolls, we rise from pastoral charm to epic grandeur. Over the earth-bound scene, beyond the trailing clouds that are reserves of paper whiteness, peaks loom that stretch the relationship of objects to verticality. A torsion imbued with elements akin to those of our baroque style wrings the shapes of nature like wet cloth. Grass tufts acquire a quasi-organic animation as each blade folds under in mimicry of spider legs, or rises like scarab's feelers. Tree trunks now pattern their restlessness after animal trunks. The slopes of mountains

are vertical walls pocked with erosion, suggesting imminent cave-ins. Even the architecture of pagodas and pavilions leans askew.

In spite of the different medium and exotic paraphernalia, these torsions and elongations strike a memory. I have seen and felt them before, when looking at Greco's "Toledo."

In their successful balance between a willing obeisance paid to the past and the release of individuality inherent to the free-stroke ink-style, these impressive works raise for the Occidental critic a query. They hint at the possible confusion that exists among the partisans of our contemporary art between originality and greatness. A modern American painter has raised an objection to the work of Tseng Yu-Ho that may be stated thus: "How can an artist who lives in our own age sacrifice her birthright of freedom and of individuality, and prefer instead subservience to a tradition now proved obsolete, unrelated to our present *mores* and conditions?"

Many confusions mingle here. Occidental artists, and among them the objector himself, follow the lines of their own tradition no less obediently than do the Orientals. Our publicized esthetic freedom is far from being a shattering reassessment of norms; at most, it is a twist given to the basic approach. Now, as it always has, a "modern" picture will conform to the style of its century, its country, even its home town.

Why should the Oriental artist feel that the past constitutes a shackle, when his objector works with a feeling of perfect freedom? Properly understood, the relationship of the individual to tradition is like that of a babe to his mother, one that can hardly be described as confining. True, there are nuances that differentiate Orient from Occident in this regard. Occidental styles obey the clock; chronology and history remain of their essence; they live short lives that can be counted in decades. A more elastic understanding of time, peculiar to the Chinese, allows an artist to slow or to reverse its course, and to become at will the contemporary of a master whose work he cherishes. Chinese styles run rather against the grain of time, like parallel streaks that course along and bridge over the centuries without dated birth or certified death. Chinese styles are more in the nature of spiritual affinities than after the generations of the flesh.

To state this basic difference in the nature of style between East and West is to answer those who belittle Oriental tradition as *passée*. It is true that the Occidental painter who attempts to work in a style of the past courts failure. An addiction to troubadour gothic hindered the Pre-Raphaelites. In Occidental art, the original style of a master perforce dies with him, radically so if he held the mirror to his age: Goya's *goyesques* and Lautrec's *cancan* can only

be revived today as fiesta costumes. Even the spirit of artists who stood aloof from their period—Michelangelo or Cézanne—fails to live in the works of imitators intent on mastering the letter only of their achievement.

Doubtless, period pieces exist in Chinese genre and the minor arts, but period hardly ever intrudes in the nobler style of ink-painting. As restricted as is the cast of archaic drama, its repertory of forms was purified of its everyday context—already long ago—by meditative minds impatient of ephemera. The range of subject matter extant in ink-painting is as limited and as timeless as are the severe geometries that underlie a Cézanne still-life. Nevertheless, plum tree, pine and bamboo are no exact counterparts of the cone, the sphere, and the cylinder praised by the master of Aix, that are inorganic and scarcely mutable. Even though lifted out of all calendar years to spiritual significance, the heroic ink-flora of the Chinese painters still affords a continuum of metamorphosis in the pulse-beat of its seasonal cycle.

It is conceivable that, in a frightening future, a man-made landscape constructed all of plastic, steel and cement, will cover the globe and render obsolete at last the basic choice of motives that govern Chinese ink-painting. By then, however, man as we know him would have ceased also to exist.

27. RENAISSANCE IN HAITI

As our speed of communication increases, it is said that the world grows smaller, that, as the many local differences are minimized, trends tend to become global. These facts may be glad news for the publishers of mail-order catalogues, but what holds true of success in plumbing and in kitchen accessories is not so certain to prove a boon on other planes. A philosopher once said that he could see no ground for objecting to a law that would dictate the shape and color and texture of hats—provided that the head underneath remained free to be itself.

Art is perhaps made of a stuff closer to heads than to hats. Should modern architecture mushroom its cubes over the whole planet? Should modern painting, permeating like an oil stain, spread unchecked from Paris to the farthest outposts? Whereas there is undoubted beauty in physical uniformity on a grand scale—in collective gymnastic exhibitions, in drills of regiments and Rockettes—one may doubt the virtue of similar collective demonstrations in the realm of art-making.

For example, we would do well to check the triumphant and routine assertion that modern art has at last won its battles, a statement based on statistics, on the wholly arithmetical consideration that an increasing number of men in smocks practice distortion or abstraction. Alas, we know only too well what happened to impressionism when its rainbow spread from the palettes of a handful of pioneers to those of an army of painting practitioners, proud to translate in their turn natural sights into a mosaic of cadmium sunspots and cobalt shadows. These late-comers were furthermore inclined to be curt with colleagues who still clung to a different creed.

Today, it is forms of art derived from those of the School of Paris that the sweet pressure of taste and fashion plants like so many billboards over the art panorama. Paradoxically enough, given that its banner is personality, modern painting is in danger of becoming a mechanized drill performed by painters in global unison.

In ancient Italy, dissimilar and even incompatible concepts of art cohabited all at one period, changing from bishopric to bishopric, with standards shifting from townlet to hamlet. Yet, a few centuries later, critics are agreed that the art produced under these conditions was good. A similar breaking-up of contemporary painting into local schools would be a healthy move, one that would state anew the differences

inherent in what constitutes correct behavior on the physical plane and on the spiritual. However, this breaking-up of the international school into smaller ones presupposes also the discarding of the imperial assumption that guides many a happy art critic, that a few rules of eye and thumb, easy to memorize, are a sufficient touchstone to separate forever the academic goats from the pictorial sheep.

The attempt made by Grant Wood in Iowa to relate painting to local activities and the local landscape proposed in the United States a vital policy that came close to taking healthy root. Eventually, the movement fell under the thrusts of an adverse criticism that failed to find in Grant the qualities typical of French and of German expressionisms. Though efficiently destructive in practice, this was of course a quite irrelevant inquiry.

Another local school grown on this continent, the Mexican, formed in the twenties and stressing the mural accent, did take root and flourish, and is today a recognized national asset of Mexico. Yet, how close it came to failure in these early days because of similarly disoriented criticisms! When Orozco had just completed his frieze on revolutionary themes on the top floor of the Escuela Preparatoria, I took a foreign visitor of great culture to view the magnificent set of still fresh frescoes. As we walked along the corridors

smelling of damp plaster, my companion was quite silent. The tour over, he mused reprovably, "I wonder what they would have to say about *that* in Paris!"

The latest local movement, just started in Haiti, constitutes still another attempt to slow the mechanization of the spiritual. It is all the more impressive in that, to the dream of one art in one world, as beautifully deceiving as the countless repeated images of a single object placed between facing mirrors, it bravely opposes a much smaller image, the works of a handful of culturally isolated men whose geographical portion is confined to only half a not very large island. Here as in previous attempts to decentralize art, critical acumen will fail to focus properly unless it sheds the current postulate that only one kind of art may thrive in the world at one time.

This unassuming and charming book is convincing because it is written in a plain human vein and does not even attempt to separate art from its makers. Would that we had documents as human as this one on the beginnings of other art movements—for example, the following passage, describing a time when only the artists themselves were aware of what was afoot, before outsiders had stumbled onto their doings, "A book-keeper in Cap-Haitien was spending his nights painting scenes from Haitian history for a Masonic temple. An overworked taxi driver

was precisely modeling some Chinese roses on a cracked tooth-mug. An apprentice airplane mechanic wondered how he could improve . . . if he had paint and brushes. A half-starved 'voodoo priest' . . . was agreeing to paint flowers and birds on a barroom door for a couple of bottles of ceremonial wine. A cobbler was sketching chickens and palm trees on discarded Esso calendars."

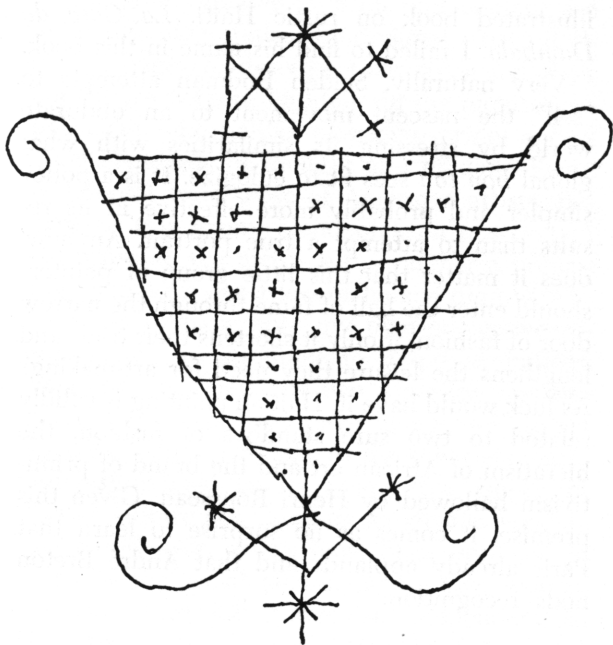
Especially valuable in form and content are the minute biographies of individual artists. Rodman manages to describe their lives and their motivations without building up the picturesque for its own sake, neither glossing over nor underlining standards of thought and of daily living so different from those of American artists. Because of this happy blend of keen observation and restraint, the artists suffer neither a premature apotheosis nor a loss of human dignity.

This is perhaps only my own subjective reaction, but, in straining to avoid prejudices, Peters and Rodman, the two American apostles of this movement, may have "gone over" somewhat too wholeheartedly to the other standard, underestimating, in so doing, the quota of Haitian culture not based on jungle and voodoo. The world over, artists have been born on all rungs of the social ladder, as the two worlds, society and art, are scarcely interdependent. In Haiti, throwing overboard artists that fail to meet

the exacting standards of popularism set by Peters and Rodman might result in a kind of snobism in reverse. When I was teaching fresco painting at the Art Students League in the thirties, one of my students, who became class monitor, was a Haitian blue-blood, painter and writer, Petion-Savain. I do not know what he did later, after his return home, but I remain grateful to him for having introduced me, in impeccable French, to the art of *vevers* and *voodoo*, in his illustrated book on rustic Haiti, *La Case de Dambala*. I failed to find his name in this book.

Very naturally, Selden Rodman attempts to "sell" the nascent movement to an obdurate world by stressing its similarities with what global *bon ton* sees fit to eulogize. It is a policy simpler and probably more effective in its results than to attempt a true portrait. Anyhow, does it matter that this little group of painters should enter the hall of fame through the narrow door of fashion, if only it shortens their trials and lengthens the leisure they need for art-making? As luck would have it, Haitian painting is validly related to two sure standbys of fashion, the hieratism of African art and the brand of primitivism hallowed by Henri Rousseau. Given this premise, it comes as no surprise to learn that Paris already applauds and that André Breton nods recognition.

If I may judge in this case by what I know of Indian Mexico, Haitian life, in all its humility, may be lived on a more permanent basis of mood and of taste than life in Paris. The final test for the budding movement will be the viability of the relationship between Haitian art and the Haitian people, a kind of proof that is more slowly forthcoming, but much more relevant, than the passing accolade bestowed by surrealists.





Dieudonné Cédor: "Crucifixion"

LIST OF FIRST PUBLISHERS

TITLE	FIRST PUBLISHED
1. The Artist as Copyist	<i>The League</i> , Vol. XI, No. 4, April 1940.
2. The Painter Sees the World	<i>The American Scholar</i> , Winter 1940-41.
3. Abstract vs. Concrete	<i>The League</i> , Vol. XII, No. 3, April 1941.
4. The Geometry of Art and Life	A review of Matila Ghyka, <i>The Geometry of Art and Life</i> , Sheed and Ward, 1946. <i>The Magazine of Art</i> , January 1947.
5. Twenty Centuries of Mexican Art	A review of the show held at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. <i>The Magazine of Art</i> , July 1940
6. The Ancient Maya	A review of Sylvanus G. Morley, <i>The Ancient Maya</i> , Stanford University Press, 1946. <i>The Magazine of Art</i> , January 1947.
7. The Saint Christopher of Santiago Tlatelolco	Originally published in Spanish, in <i>Memorias de la Academia de Historia</i> , Vol. IV, No. 3. Sobretiro in <i>Tlatelolco a traves de los tiempos</i> , No. 5, 1945.

TITLE	FIRST PUBLISHED
8. Mexican Heritage	A review of Hoyningen Huene, <i>Mexican Heritage</i> . Text by Alfonso Reyes. J. J. Augustin Inc., New York, 1946. <i>The Magazine of Art</i> , January 1947.
9. José Guadalupe Posada: Printmaker to the Mexican People	<i>The Magazine of Art</i> , January 1945.
10. Portrait of Latin America	Introduction to the book <i>Portrait of Latin America as Seen by Her Printmakers</i> . Edited by Anne Lyon Haight. Foreword by Monroe Wheeler. Hastings House, 1946.
11. Mexican Prints	Introduction to the show held at the Metropolitan Museum. <i>Metropolitan Museum Bulletin</i> , November 1949.
12. José Clemente Orozco	<i>The Magazine of Art</i> , November 1947.
13. Xavier Guerrero, Aztec Artist	<i>The Magazine of Art</i> , January 1947.
14. Rufino Tamayo	<i>The Magazine of Art</i> , April 1945.
15. Lola Cueto: The Tapestries	Catalogue of the show held in Mexico City, October 1945.
The Cut-out Papers	Catalogue of the show held in Mexico City, 1947.
The Etchings	Foreword to the album <i>Titeres Mexicanos</i> , published by the artist. Mexico City, 1947.

TITLE	FIRST PUBLISHED
16. The Lithographs of Alfredo Zalce	Foreword to the album <i>Imagenes de Yucatan</i> , Talleres de Grafica Popular, Mexico City, 1946.
17. Renaissance Revisited	<i>The Magazine of Art</i> , February, 1946.
18. All-American	A review of the show held at the Museum of Modern Art. <i>The Nation</i> , February 8, 1941.
19. American Prints: 1913-1947	Catalogue of the retrospective show arranged by the American Institute of Graphic Arts at the Brooklyn Museum of Art, 1947.
20. Old Masters for Tomorrow	A review of Sydney Janis, <i>Abstract and Surrealist Art in America</i> , Reynal and Hitchcock, 1945. <i>Kenyon Review</i> , Spring 1945.
21. Murals for Tomorrow	<i>Art News</i> , July 1945.
22. El Greco as Mystic	A review of Bruno de J. M., <i>Three Mystics</i> , Sheed and Ward, 1949. <i>Sheed and Ward's Own Trumpet</i> , No. 22, February 1950.
23. Eric Gill	A review of Eric Gill, <i>Autobiography</i> , Devin-Adair, 1941. <i>The Commonwealth</i> , September 12, 1941.
24. Catholic Art, Its Quandaries	<i>Liturgical Arts</i> , October 1940.
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TITLE	FIRST PUBLISHED
26. Reflections of an Occidental Painter on Chinese Ink Painting, After Looking at the Works of Tseng Yu-Ho	Unpublished.
27. Renaissance in Haiti	A review of Selden Rodman, <i>Renaissance in Haiti</i> , Pellegrini & Cudahy, 1948. <i>The Magazine of Art</i> , March 1950.