

Ukiyo-e Art Loaded With Human Values

By JEAN CHARLOT

At the Academy of Arts, where paintings in the ukiyo-e tradition are on view in Galleries I and II, it is a treat to see gathered together the rarely seen paintings of these Japanese masters of graphic art.

We can make visual contact, at first hand, with a brushline met previously only in its printed version, unavoidably tampered with by the knife of the wood-carver.

Color also, in these originals, shakes off what limitations are imposed by semi-mechanical transfer from tinted block to paper.

SUBJECT MATTER

The subject matter is the same as that of the better known prints: Street gatherings, mimicks and moods of customers of a bathhouse, beauteous inmates of houses of pleasure.

It is the privilege of ukiyo-e art to belie its subject, to transmute happenings — dynamic, disorderly and loud—into silence and timelessness.

The two Moronobus are masterpieces. Set against an absolute void, the figures achieve balance between motion and monumentality, and raise casual commentaries into undoubtedly great art.

Why is it that these paintings, skirting the decorative at times dangerously, remain loaded with human values.

The painter lavishes patient care on the patterns of woven stuff, bamboos, cranes, snowflakes and waves.

FOLLOWS THREAD

He follows the gold thread through the curve of a sleeve and the colors of the flipped corners of the many inner gowns.

Yet his model never becomes a clothes horse or a puppet. She remains a woman in her totality and, within the limitations of her profession, in her dignity.

Great art though it is, the ukiyo-e range of moods remains narrow, awkwardly poised at the edge of the "morning after" feeling discreetly hinted at in Kiyonaga Torii's "Three Drunken Women."

Other academy galleries are worth a visit to complete our understanding of Japanese painting.

As an antidote to this

lovely and enervating show one should pause before the "Bosatsu" brushed with an iron-hard line half a millennium before.

Half-guardian, half-demon, he raises his foot in a furious kick aimed perhaps at the niceties of ukiyo-e.