ART

by Jean Charlot

Jean Charlot welcomes questions on art from readers and will answer selected questions each Wednesday on this page. Write to: Jean Charlot, Star-Bulletin, Box 3080, Honolulu 96802.

Q—Are there historical precedents for the removal of fresco murals away from the buildings they were intended to decorate? And what are portable frescoes?

A—Your question is topical. Fresco painting has been "in the air" these days. As to the removal of frescoes there are precedents aplenty.

A famous stanza by the French poet, Theophile Gautier, runs approximately thus, "All other things fade away. Art alone is timeless. The scuptured marble outlives the city."

Gautier could have included fresco painting among the immortals. Frescoes are astonishingly delicate while in the making, as long as the lime mortar is fresh. They are, however, astonishingly tough after the hardened mortar has been given time to season.

One used to speak of horses shot from under their riders in battle. One may speak of buildings "shot" from under their murals!

In Yucatan I participated in archeological diggings for the Carnegie Institution of Washington. Our task was the restoration of a temple in Chichen Itza, the sacred city of the Mayas.

We named this particular building the Temple of the Warriors because of the hundreds of bas-reliefs representing armed men that adorn its courtyard.

Once dug out from the tropical growth that hid it, the building emerged in the shape of a truncated pyramid. Steep stairs led to an upper platform where once had stood the holy of holies.

The wall of the chapel had collapsed centuries ago.

Stones lay scattered like dominoes. They had fallen, overlapping each other in what could be termed an orderly disorder.

This lightened our task of fitting each stone with the original building sequence.

We were helped further by the fact that the inner walls of the chapel had been embellished with painted murals. On each of the fallen stones, frayed at the edge but otherwise intact, was a fresco fragment.

To reconstruct the murals in their wholeness was in the nature of assembling a giant jigsaw puzzle.

Shuffling the stones about was no light task. The result was well worth the effort.

Battles on land and sea, temple rites that included a human sacrifice, emerged vividly alive after these many centuries.

Because of Yucatan's humid climate, we used stones newly cut to the size of the originals to rebuild this inner temple. The ancient stones with their delicate polychromy are now sheltered in the State Museum, in Merida.

Similar fresco finds in Crete and Assyria, in Italy and Turkey, can be seen in museums the world over, having outlived the buildings they were originally intended to decorate.

Buildings are destroyed not only by erosion of time. Wars and revolutions may also contribue a share to their destruction with, as a side product, more wandering frescoes.

In the mid-nineteenth century, a French master, Theodore Chasseriau, decorated the walls of the City Hall in Paris.

His large mural decorations were executed in true fresco. They were drawn beautifully, gathering into oneness both Romantic and Classical elements, the unique mark of Chasseriau's art.

In 1871, as a backlash of the French defeat at the hands of the Prussians, a revolution raged in Paris. The French Emperor hastily sought refuge in England.

The communards, as the revolutionaries were called, vented their distaste for the fallen emperor in a number of violent ways. The column Vendome was demolished. Scattered in the gutter were its bronze fragments, including the statue of Napoleon I that had topped it.

Next the mob rushed to the City Hall and put it to the torch. Its insides were thoroughly gutted. An empty shell, the ruin remained standing for many years as a testimonial to the democratic fury of the people of Paris.

Chasseriau's frescoes, darkened by the fire and unprotected after the collapse of the roof, nevertheless survived. When a new City Hall came to be built, substantial mural fragments were saved. They are now exhibited in the Louvre.

Violence, war, and ruin are some of the reasons for displaced frescoes. Lucre, the love of money, is another.

Chinese frescoes are to be seen in many an American museum. Originally, the frescoes were meant as liturgical decorations. Eventually, the temples that sheltered them fell into disuse.

To remove these murals implied adventure and daring, sometime legally achieved, sometime bordering on the piratical. Our own Academy of Arts owns two such fragments, from Turfan in Central Asia.

A more licit reason for removing frescoes from an architecture is for the purpose of their preservation.

In previous centuries the method used was on the primitive side. The fresco suffered from the move, regardless of the intentions of the esthetic do-gooders.

Two very great masters, Giorgione and Titian, painted in their youth the outer walls of Venetian buildings. The artists must have been in need of a job, for the craft of painting outer walls was reserved usually for daubers.

The life span of such murals, exposed as they were to the elements, was bound to be short.

In the eighteenth century what remained of these works was piously removed to the safety of a shelter. Today, only the ghost of one of Giorgione's panels may be seen, ever so faintly.

In our century, Italian experts have devised sophisticated and expensive ways of literally peeling a fresco off a wall. After the painting has been treated and restored, it is put back in its original position.

Old masters laid their frescoes in two layers. The first one was tough and rough. We call it the brown coat.

The second layer, called intonaco, contained finely sifted sand or marble dust. It could be polished to paper smoothness. It is on this intonaco that the painter did his work.

In the process of restoration, once the top layer is removed the brown coat is exposed. This method has provided us with many an esthetic surprise.

On this brown coat the muralist made his first researches in composition. These vivid full scale sketches, resurrected after laying dormant under opaque mortar, are exciting to look at. More so, in fact, than is the final fresco, done with orderly craftsmanship to please an exacting patron.

Bodies are sketched in motion. Two or three possibilities are probed, some quite different from the final solution. Instead of a set masterpiece that rates two or three stars in a guidebook, we are confronted anew with the mural in the making.

The old master comes down from his niche as it were. He rolls up his sleeves, climbs on his scaffold, and goes to work spattered with lime right under our eyes.

As to the second part of the question—what are portable frescoes?

The name could imply that such frescoes may be carried about, as one would a portable typewriter. In practice, as we know from experience with portable typewriters, they are better left at home, since they are seldom light enough for comfort.

Yet, some portable frescoes were intended to be just that from the start.

When a gang of artists warmed to the job of painting a mural, it was tempting to lay the ready mixed putty lime on a small panel, and to limber one's hand and fingers with the brush, before attacking the wall itself.

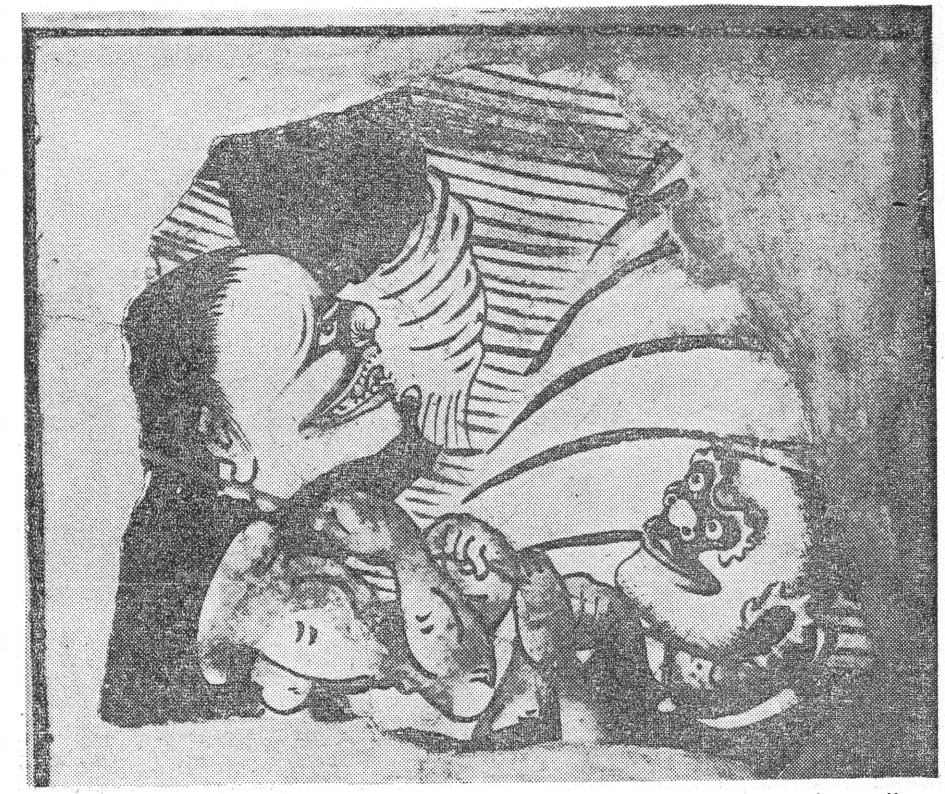
In Detroit, the Museum of Art owns such a panel—a self portrait by Andrea del Sarto, if I remember rightly. It probably was made as a gift for one of his assistants.

Such portable frescoes may be lovely pictures. However, regardless of the unusual technique, they are planned and executed as easel paintings.

More typically mural, in my opinion, are fragments of larger works pared down to easel size. The muralist that paints a thousand square feet of wall, uneasily perched on a high scaffold, brings to his work a very special point of view.

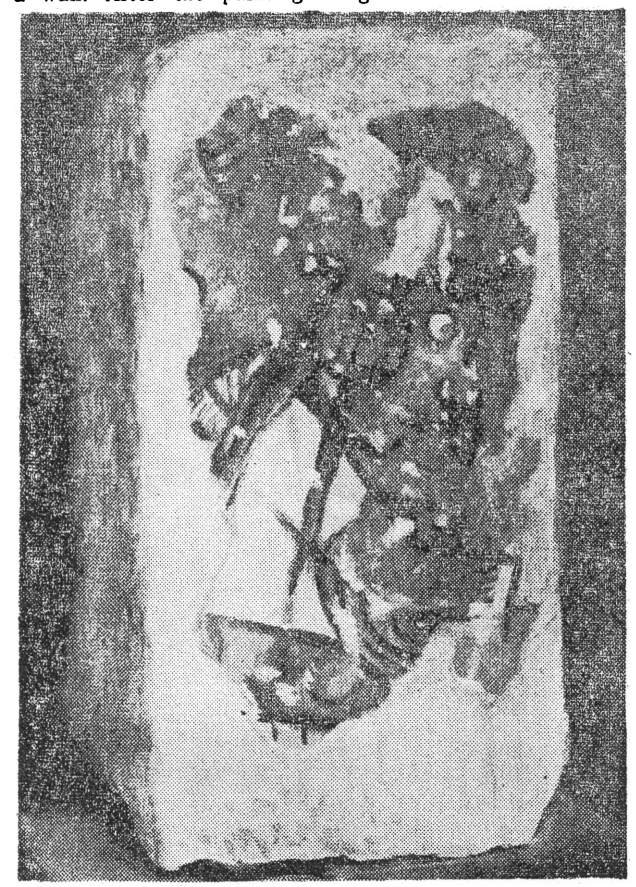
Any detail from the larger work and, if one wants to slightly overstate the point, any brushstroke, are bound to reflect a bigness of intent.

However small the fragment, however wrenched out of place and of context, such a portable fresco is undoubtedly a mural.



Demons from Buddhist Hell, a fresco fragment from Japan.—Charlot Collection.

"Bodhisattva," a fresco fragment from Turfan in Central Asia, dating from 600-800 A.D.—Academy of Arts Collection.



Chieftain in war array, fresco fragment from the Temple of the Warriors, Chichen Itza, Yucatan.—A tracing by Jean Charlot.