

ART

By JEAN CHARLOT



Dr. Charlot welcomes questions from readers on all aspects of art. Write to: Jean Charlot, University of Hawaii Art Department, Honolulu, Hawaii.

How Hawaii's beauty affects art

Q.—Does an area such as Hawaii, with its outstanding natural beauty, tend to stimulate more representational art among resident artists?

A.—As a rule, the more average types among countries are the ones more lovingly described by native artists.

The lowlands of Belgium and Holland inspired one of the greatest schools of landscape painters. Perhaps because of the challenge of flat plains stretching to the horizon, the dominant horizontal barely relieved by the diagonal wings of windmills or the distant vertical of a steeple.

In the nineteenth century, great landscapists, be they Corot or Monet, chose unassuming corners of nature to weave great art.

Impossible to duplicate

Speaking from my close acquaintance with Mayan art, set in the lush tropics of Yucatan, painter and sculptor clearly realized how unattainable a goal it would be to attempt a duplicate of its jungle.

Our present Hawaii is far from being the Hawaii that early explorers exclaimed about. Even so, its residue of natural beauty remains overpowering. Rather than attract a sensitive landscapist, it could well frighten him into inarticulateness.

One should remain grateful for the handful of contemporary realistic painters who succeeded in brushing on canvas our Hawaiian cliffs and our Hawaiian surf.

One can readily understand those other artists who prefer to tune in their output to the modern styles. Indeed, abstract art is an ideal "out" from the nearly insoluble dilemma of duplicating

in paint the richness of our Hawaiian sights.

Big cities and their effect on art

Q.—Do big cities tend to produce more "way out" art and rebellious schools of art than less pressurized environments?

A.—Those born in big cities are scarcely conscious of the unusualness of their environment. A born New Yorker will take it for granted that New York is as a fact the most natural setting to live in and to feel in.

More essential to the formation of such an artist is the proximity of a thriving art market and of its middleman, the art dealer.

Such neighboring goings-on pressurize the artist into coming into the open at an early stage. If he is ambitious he learns quickly the rules of the game.

A comparison with horses

Art dealers refer to the men they handle as their "stable" of artists. The curious expression is more than a figure of speech. Many start the race. Few are winners. Another few



Guadalupe Posada's 1913 revolutionary scene, a relief etching.

are marked early for the glue factory.

Meanwhile the artist is fed dollars en lieu of hay. As occurs in the publishing business, quality is not the

touchstone. To be a best-seller equals fame.

To sell well, the merchandise must be readily identifiable as one of the advertised brand products. The dealer will grow the young artist in a hothouse atmosphere, forcing on him a premature originality.

These rebels are obedient

Paradoxically, it is just such an obedient fellow whose output is spoken of as rebellious. For those who are not strong enough to shake it away as they mature, the mask may stick on them through life.

A quota of artists, repulsed by the gross machinery needed to sell art, refuse to play the game. Such artists work in the big city as isolated as if they lived in a desert.

Dealers may discover them when they are close to dying; that is, as far as profits are concerned, in the pink of their condition.

Some comments on 'disrespectful' art

Q.—What do you think of the sudden interest in the disrespectful art which is in the news recently? Locally

we have had such works on view in several places at the University. The issue has come up in a public trial, and letters appeared in the newspapers. Is this art?

A.—This is somewhat of a loaded question. You are tossing me a hand grenade with its safety pin off. The only safe answer is to toss it back in a hurry.

Your question refers to two separate events: Kent Watts's exhibition in George Hall, and the trial whose verdict revolved around an image of the flag, unorthodox in its composition.

The Kent Watts show met with reserved approval. An irate letter to the newspapers compared the items exhibited to the obscene scrawls one may observe on the walls of public toilets. Rushing to the defense of the young artist a well-esteemed painter pulverized in his turn the outspoken critic as Victorian.

A man with serious intent

Young artists are sensitive, as sensitive as those who look at their works. Those acquainted with Kent Watts vouch for his serious intent.

The show seemed to me premature. The artist still goes through a transitional period of esthetic teething. My only conversation about it was with the charlady who keeps the floors of George Hall clean.

We both arrive about 6 a.m. She and I found ourselves one morning alone in the great hall, surrounded by these unusual objects.

My own favorite was a chest of drawers whose drawers could neither be pushed in or pulled out, as there were no drawers after all. The charlady's own choice was what appeared to be the fruit of the mating of an old fashioned stove with the revolving fans of a cooling system.

To her question, "Does it work?" I fervently answered, "I hope not!"

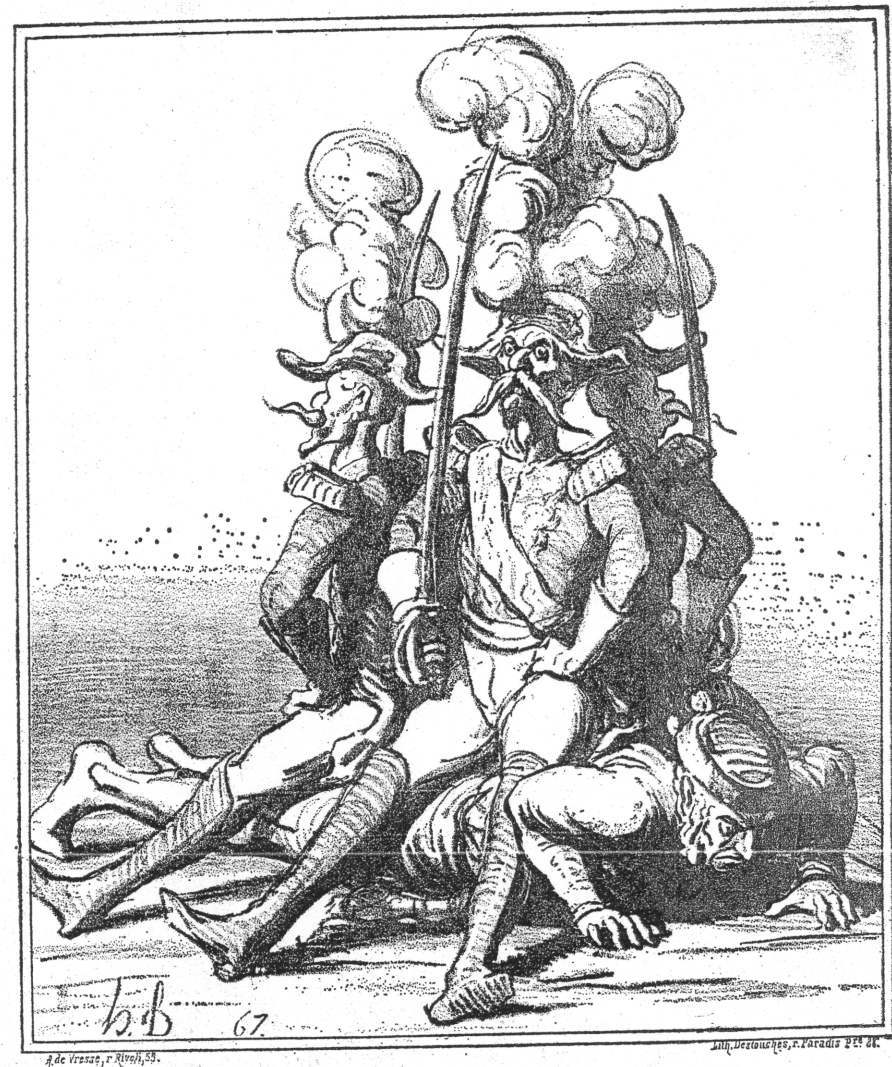
It was an exceptional trial

The second point raised refers to the trial involving an image of the flag.

Trials that revolve around an image are indeed exceptional events. One that comes to mind is the Whistler-Ruskin affair.

Ruskin, an art critic, spoke of a picture painted by Whistler as being "a pot of paint flung in the face of the public by a coxcomb." Whistler sued Ruskin. This was in 1878.

Even though the painter



ANGRY ART—Daumier's "Those Who Call Themselves the Saviors of Spain," published in France December 24, 1868.

won the suit, what came out most clearly in that trial is the impossibility to point out to an untrained eye—be it that of the judge or of the jurymen—the peculiarly elusive essence of true art.

An adjective is questioned

Your question mentions "disrespectful art." It is a curiously chosen adjective. To whom does art owe its respects?

Art for the drawing room is one kind of art. It should fit agreeably with the general scheme, be it Louis Quinze or Danish Modern. It should flatter and relax its owner.

Another type of art may be tuned to the streets and even, in times of stress, to the barricades and the revolutions. This art pays its respects to the people at large. It is made to irritate all others. Its theme is "against it"

whatever the entrenched "it"

of the day may be.

It was this kind of art that surrounded me when I was a young painter.

In those insecure days, Rivera's holster and cartridge belt were menacingly displayed on his muralist's scaffold. Nothing silenced a conservative critic as quickly as when the bulky muralist, astonishingly agile for his girth, would confront the objector with the muzzle of a loaded gun.

Such beginnings explain my lingering affinity for the painters to the people, as opposed to painters to kings and connoisseurs.

I chose to illustrate here the work of Daumier. In his day, he proved a gadfly to every succeeding government, from that of King Louis-Philippe to that of Emperor Napoleon III. He was sent to jail to atone for the biting wit of his disrespectful cartoons.

In Mexico, the engraver Guadalupe Posada played a

similar role. He illustrated penny sheets popular with city folks and country folks alike. His cartoons sent into exile the aging dictator, Don Porfirio Diaz, and ushered in the Revolution of 1910.

As an example of local polemical art, I chose a print by Ben Norris, its medium color woodcut and rubbings. One of a set suggested by Kipling's "Recessional" it is, in spite of its sophistication, as outspoken as the tougher, rougher works of a Daumier or of a Posada.

Primary blues and reds suggest the armorial bluntness of a flag.

From the outsized hand nestled on top of mountains (In God we trust?) trickles a shower of coins and of stars. Each one, the idealist or the realist, may pick the object of his choice.

I have seen the "flag" that was the kernel of Noel J. Kent's trial only in news