

ART

By JEAN CHARLOT



Drawings at the Academy of Arts

Drawings are "in the air" at the Academy of Arts. No sooner has the large show of contemporary drawings closed than another show opens.

This one is a sampling of works from the extensive Academy collection. Its accent is on the works of old masters.

Paul Claudel, the French poet and diplomat, had made long stays in the Orient, in his youth as a consul in China and later as ambassador to Japan.

What most impressed him in Asia was the cult of the ancestors. No move of importance was made, be it by an emperor or a nobody, without asking succor and paying homage to family ancestors.

When he became ambassador to the United States, Claudel missed the Oriental custom. It would be difficult, said he, to picture an American business man, before tying up a deal, burning joss sticks of sandalwood in front of the portrait of the founder, the inventor of Campbell soup cans or a defunct director of General Motors.

Things are, or should be, somewhat different as re-



Hubert Robert's "Figures in a Landscape"

gards the American artist. Even though he is hell-bent or heaven-bent towards the future, if a true artist he must realize the crucial im-

portance of the past.

To know what has gone on in other centuries shields the living artist from many a faux pas.

If only in the matter of precedent, it will show him that the art of our century is neither more nor less creative than the art of any other century.

Expressionism, abstractions, surrealism and all other isms thrived in the past as lustily as now.

When I was teaching the history of art, I took care to explain to my students things obvious and yet somewhat difficult to believe.

However remote, our past had been someone's present. The men we call old masters were young once, and older men grumbled at what they considered unbearable innovations.

The great ones were violent

Men remembered in the history of art are those who made violence the accepted art of their times and were pursued by the hue and cry of conservatives.

The current show makes this point forcefully. There is no slackening of creativeness when we review the works of centuries.

Most of the drawings are done in the heat of inspiration. They are intimate records done without even an inkling of showing off or of

presenting a brave countenance to the world.

To our taste, they are easier to appreciate and to admire than would be the finished paintings for which they are a first try.

Most old masters were split between two poles of achievement. Genius commanded them to break new paths.

Artisanry, most often deeded by father to son, counseled technical caution.

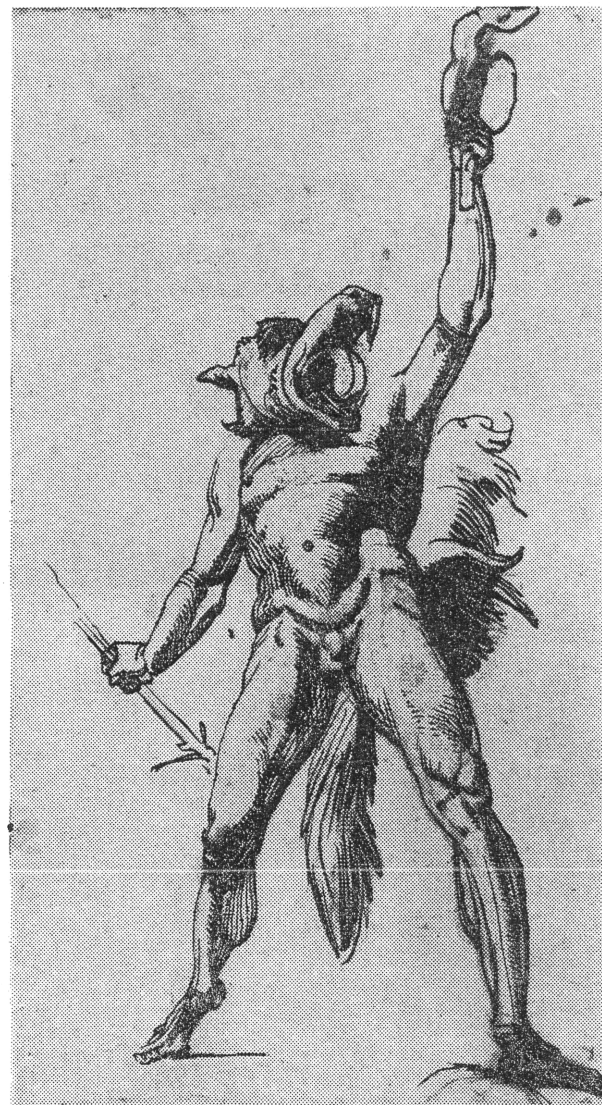
Passion is shown in the drawing

In the finished painting, artisanship of a high order cools off, more often than not, the initial passion. In the drawing that passion is laid bare.

Modern man, with his nerves also laid bare, naturally prefers the drawing to the finished painting. And being always in a hurry, modern man, realizing that some of these sketches were done in a few minutes, approves of the artist also in a hurry.

Throughout the centuries runs a thread of surrealism, of distortions and of nightmarish visions. The helmeted nudes of Abraham Bloemaert, born in the 16th century, are as twisted and flame-like as are the nudes of El Greco, whose life overlaps his in time.

From the 18th century, the rococo "Figures in a Landscape" of Hubert Robert shows that a master always escapes from too strict definitions.



"Fantastic Figure" by Heinrich Fuseli

Rococo is said to be pleasant. Robert's twisted and gnarled trees have something ominous. One is re-

minded of other trees, equally distorted and ancient, from the brush of Chinese masters.

Henrich Fuseli, in brutally strong pen and ink, evokes a werewolf as frighteningly alive as is the nightmarish "Ghost of a Flea" of the better known William Blake, who may have learned from Fuseli.

And among contemporaries, Eugene Berman in "Fantastic Landscape" piles up mountains shaped like frozen giants.

In contrast with the theatrical approach of the above masters, my own taste goes to very quiet, very unassuming and at times barely visible sketches where the artist, quite sure that he is alone, talks to himself "sotto voce."

A Modigliani, a study for a caryatid, barely grazes the paper with the thinnest of hairlines.

This is the masterpiece

The masterpiece of a show not lacking in masterpieces may be the most unassuming drawing of all. Done in charcoal on tracing paper, it is a study by Degas of a gentleman jockey on a horse.

It is said of some wise men that they have forgotten more than others have ever known. This drawing illustrates the fact.

Proportions, anatomy, foreshortening, of these Degas was a master. And yet in this simplest of drawings, he lets go of all knowledge to hesitantly render a split moment of equine motion.

Medieval cathedrals: Propaganda machines

Jean Charlot welcomes questions on art from readers. Write to him at the Star-Bulletin, Box 3080, Honolulu, Hawaii 96802.

Q.—Can art convey a social message, become propagandistic, and still retain all the qualities of great and enduring art?

A.—Your wording discloses where your heart lies. People who like contemporary art speak of it as modern art. Those who dislike it—or have substantial reservations—label it modernistic art.

Despite the awkward sound effect, let us speak of propaganda art instead of propagandistic art. Thus shall we keep our likes and dislikes in abeyance until the conclusion.

Present day art heavily underlies self-expression at the expense of communication. It is as if the artist had focused so intensely on self—as did the yogi of the fable on his navel—that the rest of mankind vanished into a fog.

To be great and enduring, art should have a mean-

ing. This meaning should be wrought in terms clear enough to constitute a message. Other men, besides the art maker, should be able to decipher it.

Our choice is between art as propaganda and art for art's sake. Of the two, the latter formula is famed as being the more sophisticated. But perhaps it is not as deep as it is made to be. To construct another formula on an identical basis, let us speak of eating for the sake of eating. There is something moronic about that one!

Art is not entirely different from eating. True art should be as essential to man as is bread.

More often than not, great art has sought a meaning outside of self. The artist was not always thought of as an intractable superman. For centuries, for millennium even, he was respected mostly as a craftsman, an extremely skilled and a specialized one.

Such times saw the rise of medieval cathedrals. Architects, sculptors, stained glass makers, fresco painters, teamed together to realize involved and detailed programs. These programs were dictated by theologians, by vocation the least gifted of men in regard to

the visual arts.

Cathedrals were conceived and were realized, from bottom to top, from crypt to steeple, as propaganda machines. So efficient were they that the weathering of centuries has hardly weakened their message.

In the medieval world, the religious message was as well a social statement. Christianity and art had natural affinities. Art by its nature transcends time and space as does religious faith.

Marxism and Christianity have little in common. Marxism deals calculatingly with this world exclusively. The true Marxist slights religion as the opium of the people.

However intensely different its creed from that of the builders of cathedrals, Marxism too puts the artist to work.

Byzantine mosaicists could rise to heights of inspiration in depicting the mystery of the Trinity. Medieval illuminators believed in the torments of Hell that they delineated in horrendous detail.

The Mexican muralists, Orozco, Rivera, et al, felt passion, emotion, inspiration, at the sight of the plight of the proletariat. They felt horror at the hellish he-

donism of the capitalist. Sincerity was their salvation as artists.

Many medieval representations have lost their original devotional meaning. Much of their subject matter was fabulous to begin with. Such is the story of the eleven thousand virgins believed to have suffered martyrdom at the hands of the Huns, together with St. Ursula.

In the fifteenth century, the Flemish master Memling believed the fable to be true. As a result, his painted shrine of St. Ursula remains his masterpiece.

In their turn, fables though they may be, Marxist attitudes and prejudices may inspire masterpieces, as did happen in Mexico.

There is of course another type of propaganda art, one that may rightfully be called propagandistic. It was the official art of both Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia.

In this case, the painter saw propaganda art as just another chance at a paid job.

The art proved as despicable as the artist.

Bootlicking and genius never were found to be on speaking terms!