

ART

by Jean Charlot

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The Culture and Arts Conference

The Governor's Conference on Culture and the Arts is over. Crowded as it was with major art events, it is still very much in our thoughts.

Last week I reviewed the fine display of Hawaii Crafts and Design. Today I write about the 17th Annual Exhibition of Artists of Hawaii, current at the Academy of Arts.

This annual show constitutes, in our community, a sort of official report on the state of the Fine Arts. Locally, it has become what the Paris Salon was in the 19th Century, a voice of authority that dispenses prestige.

Juried shows awake in me an urge to side with the underdog, in this case the rejected artists. Thrust into the outer darkness, shaken by their misfortune, they are bereft of entry fees, fame, and the sherbet punch poured on opening night.

Rejected artists may console themselves in reciting the names of their Parisian brothers in misfortune. In the past century: Manet, Monet, Cezanne, Whistler. . .

He was a Museum man

The lone jurymen was, as seems to have become the custom, a Museum man. By trade museum men are eclectic. This makes for a varied show.

The latest trend, the next to latest trend and, if the jurymen is adventurous, the coming trend, all should be represented. All are.

Purchase prizes are admirably chosen. John Kjargaard's "Landscape, Hualalai" is, as are all his works, essence of nature. What struggles went into the making of "Hualalai" remain hid beneath a composed appearance.

Kjargaard seeks a balance devoid of gimmicks. He is the contrary of an exhibitionist. "Cool head, main thing" sums up the style of this excellent artist.

Another purchase prize went to "Gray Painting" by



"Figure #3" By Edward Stasack.

Ben Norris. It reflects an ever increasing assurance in the handling of his chosen medium, acrylic. Means are simplified, colors assertive, the scale monumental. In this work, spatula work achieves the strength of a bas-relief.

Willson Stamper's "Barn, San Juan Islands," is another purchase prize. Hung side by side, it would contrast oddly with an earlier work, "Perfume Counter," already in the Academy collection.

Painted close to 20 years apart, both pictures sum up an evolution that moves against the currents we

loosely refer to as modern art.

The earlier picture features bold simplifications, and imaginative coloring. Leaning on seasoned craft rather than disheveled inspiration, the new picture accepts nature pretty much as it is, unashamedly.

The Kjargaard painting and the Norris painting are Academy purchases and the Wilson Stamper is a Watumull Foundation purchase.

Other works intrigued me because of their independence from trends.

Loris Faulker's "Four

Brothers," a drawing, could be a still from a Western movie. Seen from the ground to the waist, four figures, rendered with photographic tightness, come oddly alive through the meticulously rendered stuff of their cowboy breeches and overalls.

Another maverick is John Thomas, with "Afternoon Coffee," an oil. Two men sprawl at ease. One stretches his legs up on a table. The other reads a newspaper. However casual and relaxed the subject matter, the paradox of rendering a three-dimensional world on a flat surface is drama enough for the artist. It is one of the most intensely original paintings in the show.

Shirley Russell's "Roses" is another surprise. In the lower half of an upright canvas pink roses are laid down in a bunch. The upper half is sheer space and color, perhaps a sunset sky. By all the known rules of composition, the picture should part into halves. It does not. Why a flower piece should be so oddly moving, I know not. I just know that it moves me.

When art avoided literature

There was a time, my time, when art shied away from literature. Coteau proudly proclaimed that the relationship of a guitar to a bottle was drama enough for the true artist. He smiled at the old fashioned romantic who preferred to paint an Arab devoured by a lion.

Fashions change. Young artists are again involved to the marrow in matters of life and death, mostly death.

There is not much silver lining to the woes of the young. The student feels the hot breath of the draft board at the nape of his neck while he does his home work.

Math is tinged by the ghastliness of "body counts." The adolescent lives his young life with death a constant companion.

Impressive works are the result. They parallel the medieval Dance of Death, inspired by another fearful

presence, that of the Black Plague.

In frescoes and woodcuts, the skeleton was seen snatching the infant from his crib, toppling the Pope from his throne, parting the lovers in the act of wooing.

Today's plagues remain nameless but are not a whit less real. Artists create images to fit. Skulls and crossbones, ribs and elbones to quote from the moving Negro spiritual—fill canvases to the brim.

George Bennett in "Crucifixion," "From Inside Out," and in the Bronze "Metamorphosis," creates his own Dance of Death.

It would be idle to speak of esthetics in front of such works. They speak of total involvement with a world the painter has not chosen to live in. Yesterday's ivory tower, blown to bits, is replaced by a mushroom-shaped cloud.

Lee Branch's "Descent from the Cross" is death with a variance. Christ's limp body is propped upright by the hands of an unseen disciple.

Brutality with pity

Here brutality is tinged with pity. And since we know the end of the story, death is not felt as an impasse anymore.

Francis Hirashiki's "Incubation" is carved in wood. In the hollow of an hourglass shape—a stylized womb—the fetus curls up on its side with a promise of vital unfurling. Birth here, death there, inspire a new art, unafraid of literary implications.

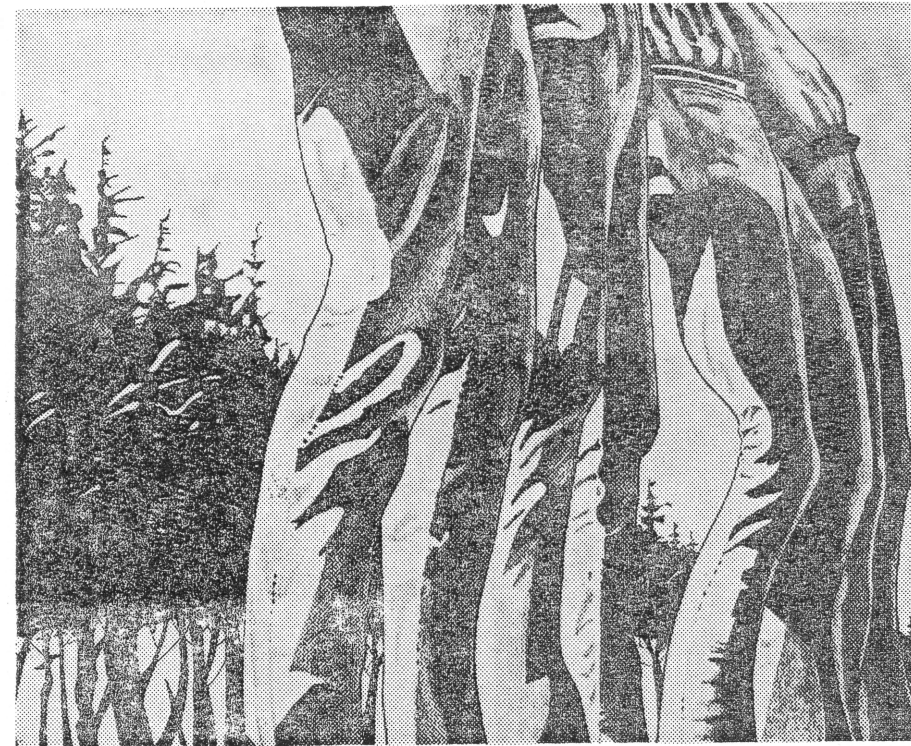
Edward Stasack's "Figure No. 3" is a bronze cast by the artist himself in the lost wax process. In its freshness and in its novelty it makes up somewhat for the non-appearance in this show of his oils, an omission not of his own choice.

The Griffing lecture

The last speaker at the Conference on Culture and the Arts was Robert Griffing, Jr., whose career is indissolubly linked with the growth of the Academy collections.

His speech was meant to close the proceedings, but its repercussions are not ready to die down.

Generalities on art, of which the whole gamut was played upon during the proceedings, are innocuous to



"Four Brothers" by Loris Faulker.

handle. Exact ideas are much more dangerous. Play ball with them and they explode.

Griffing asserted that art is in essence aristocratic and cannot fit democratic requirements. He stressed quality as against quantity.

Art as therapeutics, art as relaxation, art as a lovely

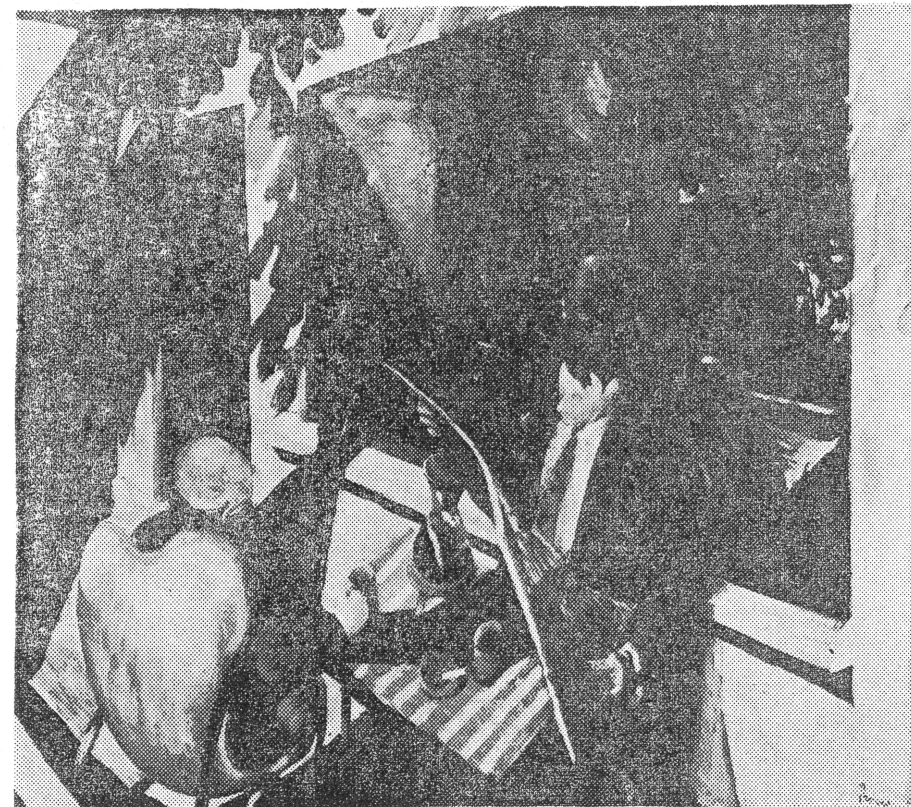
lovely thing, were thus curtly dismissed.

Though unspoken, the question of genius in art reared its fearful head. Indeed a single masterpiece weighs more in the cultural assets of a community than a thousand pictures of lesser breed.

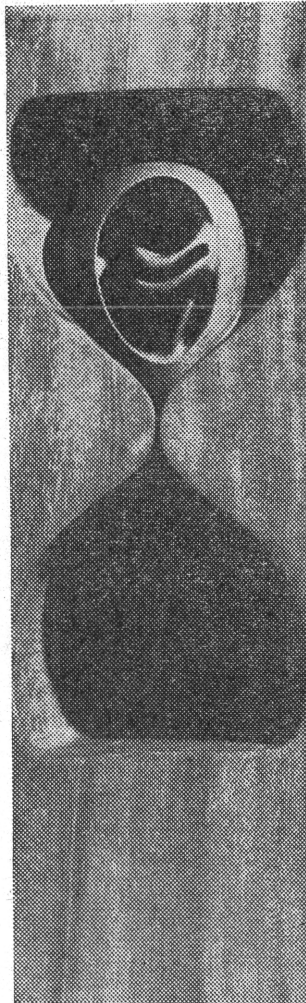
Being a creature of habit,

when I go to the Honolulu Academy of Arts, I still look on its walls for the paintings of Manet, Cezanne and Renoir. They used to be there. Where are they now?

Said Omar Khayam, "What is it that the wine merchant buys that could be half as precious as what he sells?"



"Afternoon Coffee" by John Thomas.



"Incubation" by Francis Hirashiki.