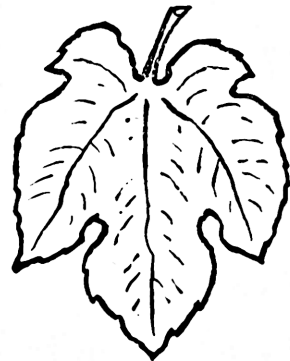


ART

by Jean Charlot

Jean Charlot welcomes questions on art from readers. Write to him in care of the Star-Bulletin, Box 3030, Honolulu 96802. Selected questions will be answered in his Wednesday art commentary.



A question on nudity in art

Q.—Would you kindly discuss nudity in art?

A.—Now, sir or madam, is it kindly of you to ask that particular question?

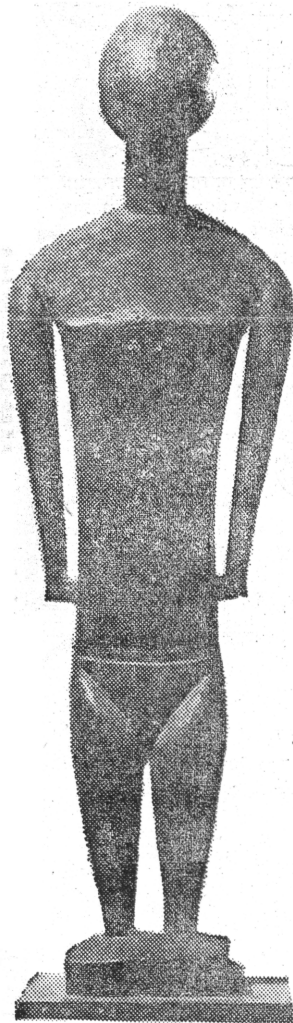
When I accepted to write for this newspaper, one of my new bosses proudly cautioned me, "... and remember that 125,000 families read what you choose to say!"

The numerical estimate left me skeptical. Though I thumb twice daily through newspapers, I have yet to read once the sport section. Likewise the art section must be read, if at all, with varying degrees of eagerness.

What of nudity in art? Sensuousness is only one of the many reasons that justify the use of the nude in art. For most of us, it is the one obvious reason. It is also the most superficial.

The primary subject is art, not sex

And what of sex? 36-22-36, 33-19-33. This terse way of



A Nukuori Island figure carved in wood by a Polynesian group living in a Micronesian area.—Photo by Honolulu Academy of Arts.



"Death Victorious"—a woodcut from about 1500.

describing the female body beautiful shall suffice for our purpose. Let us bypass beauty contests, naughty pin-ups and postcards sold sub rosa. This is a column about art.

Art is permanent. Fashions in clothing come and go. When the Spanish master Velasquez portrayed princesses decked in iron stays, giant wigs and bell-shaped hoopskirts, he situated them forever in his own 17th century.

When the Frenchman Seurat, in the 1880's, painted Parisiennes modishly embellished with bulging false bottoms, even his genius could hardly justify in terms of eternity the fleeting fashion.

An essential in western art

Compared with its covering, the human body acquires permanency of a sort. The nude is an essential of great art, at least of great

art as Western man understands it. On reflection, the fact is rather odd.

Since homo sapiens — or a reasonable equivalent — started eons ago to roam this earth, the human body has been the most puzzling of beasts. Nude, man comes closer to the man in the moon created by science fiction than to any being on earth.

Only his brain is fully developed. The rest of him exhibits foetus-like stigmas. The sparse fuzz will never mature to become sturdy hair covering. "Haole" skin retains through a lifetime the sickly pinkish hue that it shares with newborn mice and suckling piglets.

The flesh is weak

Since prehistoric times that brainy fellow, man, has learned to resign himself to his weakling body. In fact, he never had any other choice.

Oriental artists wisely pre-

fer to dwell on more irritating topics. For beauty, the cherry blossom. For grandeur, the mountain.

To the human body, the Far Eastern painter never gave more than a half-hearted interest. Courtesans at work, wrestlers in action, abalone fisherwomen, were represented as they were, half-naked, and that was that.

The primitive sculptor, be he from Africa or Oceania, went further in his disdain. Surrounded as he was daily by nude fellow men and women, he took refuge in stylization. He carved human bodies in terms of the cylinder, the sphere and the cube.

To keep sturdy the wood he carved meant more to him than to successfully ape the complex of bones and muscles we refer to as anatomy.

The body is immortalized

Only in Western art does the nude play a major role. The ancient Greeks, with a bravado gesture, denied our bodily frailty. Their sculptors invented the body immortal. They metamorphosed flesh into marble.

They reshaped its indecise bumps and hollows into a container fit to house a god.

Thanks to the Greek genius, bodies assumed esthetic permanency. Western man, heir to Greek culture, enthusiastically adopted the flattering lie. Michelangelo's giants are strong enough to hold death at arms' length and forever away!

When we weigh this artist's performance with brush and chisel against the pessimism that oozes from his sonnets, we realize an inner contradiction.

Michelangelo was like the lonely traveler who boldly whistles in the dark as he hurries along a deserted cemetery plot.

Another opinion about the body

Not all artists accepted the Greek version. Some reacted violently against it.

Medieval muralists created the theme of the Dance of Death. In so doing they



"Galatea Reclining on a Shell"—an 18th Century Italian carving in pear wood at the Academy of Arts.

presented us with nudes more than any Playboy magazine would ever dare to print.

The men and women seen in the Dance have shed not only their clothing, but their skin, and as well most of their flesh!

In the 19th century, the Romantic artists resurrected the Gothic theme. Gericault, in his "Raft of the Medusa", paints the nude as a symbol of suffering and of death.

Today, the nude remains an indispensable ingredient of much of modern art. Picasso's work is a telling example.

Art tinged with sadism

To achieve his own irritating brand of beauty, the Spanish master relies on distortions. Those he favors are tinged with sadism.

His art parallels the bloody ballet staged in the arena by the matador and the bull.

Disembowelling with a twist of the horn, wounding with pike or sword, the death of either man or beast, these are the means used to achieve beauty.

Picasso understands well this art, even though he deals only in images. He

forcefully removes an eyeball out of its socket to graft it on the other side of a face. He jumbles together breasts and buttocks, multiplies toes and slices off fingers.

Looking at Picasso's nudes, the spectator wards off the visual blow as if it were his own body that was attacked.

This violent reaction to a violent art gives swiftly diminishing returns when faced with any other subject matter. When the painter similarly distorts a rooster, an owl or a tomato plant, the mayhem touches us not at all.

A summation on the subject

To sum up: Classical art put together for our prideful contemplation a god-like body, beautiful, immortal.

Both medieval and Romantic art said, "Correction, please," and underlined instead suffering and death.

Even though it does violence to its model, much of modern art cannot achieve its magic without the human body for a start.

In Western art, the nude remains the one constant that links together all styles.



"Seated Nude"—an oil on canvas by Amedeo Modigliani (1884-1920) of Italy. It is in the Honolulu Academy of Arts collection.