

ART

by Jean Charlot

Today we answer some questions

Throughout the past weeks questions have accumulated. I shall try to answer a few of them today.

Q—What is the function and responsibility of those who wish to preserve and foster the fine arts?

A—As I see it, the function and responsibility of those who wish to preserve and foster the fine arts is primarily to preserve and foster the artist.

Women artists and great nudes

Q—Have women artists ever produced great nudes?

A—For the woman artist as for all artists, the nude remains an indispensable touchstone for greatness. Of course, the point of view is different. Luscious nudes, bunny nudes, are out.

Paula Modersohn, in the first decade of our century, painted some lovingly wrought nudes of German peasant girls. Her models were very young, 10 to 12 years of age. The mood is one of intense pity. The scratching of the wolf's paw is heard at the door. The ominous shadow of the rogue

male already darkens the rustic interior.

In her own life the artist could hardly reconcile her love of husband and her love of art. She died just past 30, having given birth, from a heart attack.

The case of Mary Cassatt is also relevant. Boston-born, Cassatt was a wealthy expatriate. She was a friend of the French Impressionists, closer perhaps to Edgar Degas.

All her life, she was haunted by an experience she was never to know, that of having a child.

Her pictures of mothers and children are numerous, and tinged by a close to morbid point of view.

The relation of mother to child is taken by most for granted. For her it remained a mystery. She refused to plumb it for herself.

Visually, her variations on the theme—nursing the baby, bathing the baby—are the absolute counterpart of her friend Renoir's healthy visualizations.

Unconscious distortions enlarge the child's body the better to deflate the mother. The sight of the baby feeding on the substance of its maker acquires cruel undertones.

Mary Cassatt lived and

died a spinster.

Sophistication and spontaneity

Q—Does increasing sophistication in an artist have an effect upon his spontaneous and fresh artistic vision?

A—This is mostly a problem of semantics. Sophistication can be many things to as many men.

In Mexico, some of my first American friends employed the term as a compliment. For me, it stood for something not altogether nice, a devious way, an intent to deceive. "Sophistry" I believe, still has this connotation in dictionaries.

Soon I realized that my friends, when they said I was a sophisticate, did not imply that I was the Old Serpent himself, coiled around the Tree of Paradise.

It merely meant that they admired my shortcomings, my peppering English with French words for one, as I lacked knowledge of the good old Saxon terms.

Also it took me a while to break myself of the habit of kissing a lady's hand. The resulting spasm of delight far outweighed at times my polite intent.

In New York, sophistication meant something else

again, something perilously close to my own use of the term.

To see all current plays, read all current books, visit all current art shows, these were musts. Memorizing the "Who's Who" and dropping influential names as a horse its manure—an image culled from my horse-drawn artillery days—was equally a must.

I did not quite make the grade. My English was improving and my concentration on art made it difficult for me to discourse about art; even less to be witty about it.

Whatever else he may be when he is not at work, when at work an artist should be absolutely simple and totally naive. To him, the lily of the valley must appear truly clothed in more splendor than Solomon in all his glory.

Should sophistication make the artist rate the gold of Fort Knox above the lily of the field, then sophistication must be uprooted.

About re-creating a fresco

Q—To your knowledge has a major fresco ever been re-created as you have been doing presently with yours,



This is Charlot's newest mural. It shows the return of a high chief from a visit to an English ship.

and for what reason? What were your feelings while re-creating your own fresco? How does it differ from the first?

A—You know and I know that I did not concoct that question myself, or ask a friend to ask it so I could talk about myself. Will others believe it? People are so suspicious.

Yes, I know of one major fresco that was re-created as mine was: Diego Rivera's

Rockefeller Center mural.

In Mexico, in the Ministry of Education, Rivera had caricatured old John D. Rockefeller eating Wall Street ticker tape out of a gold plate. The same illustrious model had been painted before that by John Singer Sargent.

Sargent, as he waited for inspiration, had been a guest of the Rockefeller family. He lingered a long while in these plush surroundings,

explaining that his crystal ball was cloudy. One day he exclaimed: "Now I see it. I shall paint John D. as St. Francis."

In my time, two versions of the portrait beautified the 54th Street house. Only the birds and the halo were missing.

A Rockefeller, passing through Mexico, admired Rivera's acidulous version. This led to a commission to decorate the entrance wall of the main building in Rockefeller Center.

The fresco was a carefully composed affair, and admirable its craftsmanship. Its implications were leftist. Lenin, Trotsky, Stalin, smiled from the wall.

Objections led to destruction. Secretively, in a single night, the whole mural was reduced to rubble.

Back in Mexico, embittered Rivera was offered a wall of similar dimensions in the Palacio de Bellas Artes. He had kept his sketches, tracings, mural cartoons. With the added help of photographs he re-created the Rockefeller mural.

Day after day, tourists file admiringly before the fresco. Day after day, guides recite the story of how a fresco originally painted in New York eventually landed in Mexico City.

What did I feel while re-creating the First National Bank fresco?

It was a curious feeling, that of reliving a past adventure. The first version was done 14 years ago.

My boy Peter, now in the Army, came to visit me on the scaffold when on leave. He stood there, as uneasy as I was, confronting the piece I was painting: his own self of 1952, a child of five playing with a toy war on beside a little girl fondling a doll.

How does this version differ from the first?

The new hall is spacious and well lighted. The painted wall has no functional role other than decorative. It hangs, floating and curving as would a tapestry.

As a result, sensations of weight and depth were consciously minimized. A lighter touch was required and more liquid colors. The "tapestry" is airy enough to make its floating in space appear plausible.

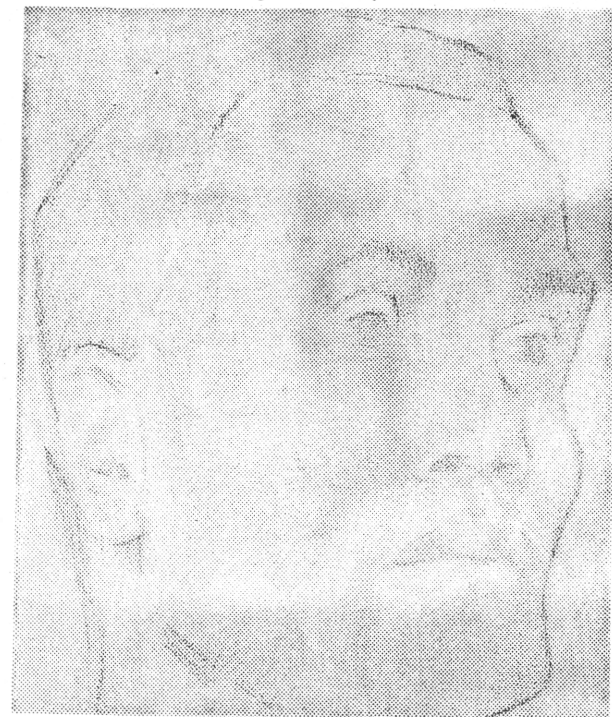
The new version is 30 feet longer than the first one. Additional subject matter was needed. The main one: a high chief's canoe returns from a visit to the English ship.

Illustrated at left is a sequence of heads in the order that they were worked out.

(a) Drawing from the model, George Kaho'ilua.

(b) A drawing of the same head, modified to meet the requirements of mural perspective.

(c) The same, translated into the fresco medium.



The development of a Charlot fresco: Left, a drawing from the model; center, modified for mural perspective; right, a preliminary fresco. Picture at top of page shows completed work.