

ART

by Jean Charlot

Drawings by Edward Stasack

Pen-and-ink drawings by Edward Stasack are currently shown at the Academy of Arts. The artist has written an introduction to his own show. Quotes follow.

"These drawings are not about anything . . . Instead, they are.

"They have several dimensions: Esthetic, historical and art historical. Philosophical, psychological, religious and humorous. However they are pre-eminently esthetic in function."

I had already looked at the drawings before I found the written explanation. This helped me to enjoy without extraneous thoughts their visual orchestration.

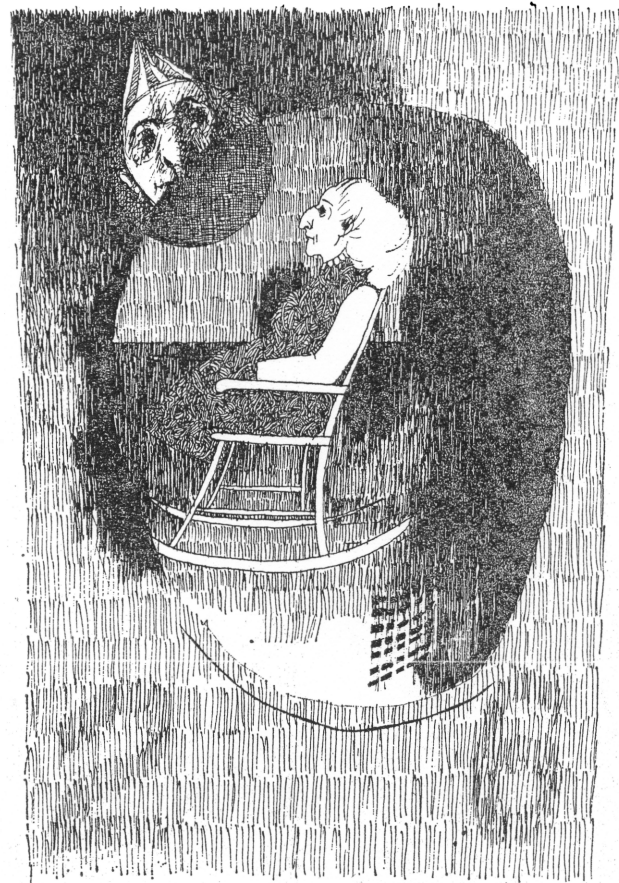
The 28 drawings form a single set. Though each is a complete entity they should be seen as a whole. Contrasting textures, shifting moods, complement each other. To find a parallel, one should go back to the 1790's, to the "Caprichos" of Francisco Goya.

The artist's use of words is something else again. Words may dampen one's innocent enjoyment. Yet words are needed as a warning that one trespasses here on very private ground.

Had I read the foreword first, I would have approached this visual adventure with a conscious intent to dissect each drawing into its intellectual components.

I am glad I did not do so. An amateur may take a watch apart, only to find it impossible to put it back together again.

I suggest that the art lov-



Stasack: Number 26

er, on his visit to the Academy, search first for the somewhat remote room where the Stasack exhibition is, minus fanfare, tucked. Then he should look first at the drawings as I myself did. Let him cast aside conscious thoughts, be they of the historical kind or of the art historical kind. Let him ruthlessly bounce out of mind philosophy and psychology. As to religion and

humor they are here to stay, so tightly woven are they with each inked line.

Even though I have just now dutifully put on the magic cap that transforms me into an art critic, I feel qualms at judging this show. To use a purely esthetic approach would be impertinent.

The drawings did not come into being with an eye to display. They lack all symptoms of this stiffening of the backbone that ails the artist who works with a public in mind. They are totally free from the consciousness of a potential spectator. In these involuted and masterly scribbles, the artist comes close to the unbounded freedom of automatic writing.

The show is unique

It is this very fact that makes this show unique. Probing deeper than could the written word, lines and values are clues to what makes the true artist tick.

Since ever, that question has intrigued sociologists, art historians, psychologists, psychiatrists, medicos. Even university deans, whose lot is to hire artists as professors of art. Deans dutifully prod the professor who is a

non-artist towards fields of research. Contrariwise, deans wonder if they should allow the professor - artist to research at all. He seems to have such a good time doing it!

Rather than an affirmation of self, these drawings are Stasack's way of unburdening himself of self. From deep down, bottled-up stuff — neither organized thoughts nor explicit moods — rushes to the tip of the ball-point pen and spills its blacks onto the white paper. A simple device of ovals and rectangles cages the outflow.

A master at printmaking

Stasack is an acknowledged master at printmaking. The beautiful chiaroscuro characteristic of his prints lingers in the more intimate drawings. With his pen, he realizes as complex and adroit a range of rhythms and textures as would an Oriental master with the more flexible brush.

Stasack is also acknowledged as a master painter. When he is not dealing with pure abstractions this born figure painter uses the figure cautiously. So cautiously that, at times, even his figures approach abstractions.

Stasack paints in terms of the monumental and of the eternal. As a painter he feels his responsibility to a posterity who up to now — as a disillusioned artist once remarked — has felt no responsibility towards him.

Drawings have humor

Stasack's painterly style bypasses the transient and the anecdotal. In his oils, drama is more clearly spelled out than comedy. In the drawings however, he permits himself linear guffaws and visual puns.

The plot of these small skits is in no way trite. Here, in intimate scribbles, it becomes clear that villains and heroes alike are hand puppets that the artist uses as his scarecrows and his mouthpieces.

All through the centuries, artists have wondered at the role they play in a society made up of non-artists. On the one hand, they are despised as clowns, as beat-nicks. On the other, they are revered as men of genius, supermen. This bankrupt bum, Rembrandt, by the simple expedient of dying,

becomes a Dutch national hero.

Hieronymus Bosch, Peter Breughel, Goya, Lautrec, all have commented on this bizarre ambivalence. Now it is Stasack's turn to have his say.

Mother wonders about her son

In one of his drawings, Whistler's mother rocks in her rocking chair, sadly puzzled that her son, dressed as a clown, is playing peekaboo at the edge of her frame.

How could he have turned out so different from her own dignified self?

A recurrent theme is that of Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, the lean knight on his lean nag paired forever with the fat peasant astride a donkey. Which is the hero and which is the villain? In the present versions neither one, for Death overpowers both, stripping men and beasts alike to the bone.

In other drawings monsters thrive: men who are part birds of prey, witches who thrive in flames, bawds who change men into beasts.

Observed through a magnifying glass by some philosophical super-sleuth, man and woman are spied upon as they exchange edible gifts, the half-bitten apple of Eden for the donkey's favorite, the carrot.

Allusions to the old masters

There are conscious allusions to the art of the Old



Detail from "The Adoration of the Magi" by Lucas van Leyden, 16th Century Dutch painter.—Photos by the Honolulu Academy of Arts.

Masters: Whistler, Durer, Goya, others. Here is a modern artist who reveres his ancestors and, figuratively speaking, burns joss sticks at their altar.

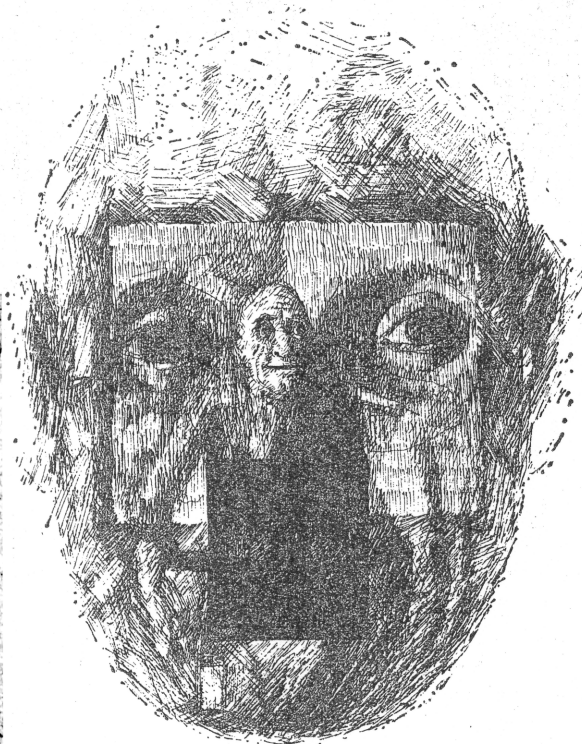
For those who wish to check the filiation, it happens that the adjoining room exhibits prints by some certified Old Masters. There is no let down as one walks from one room to the other.

Instead there are affinities aplenty.

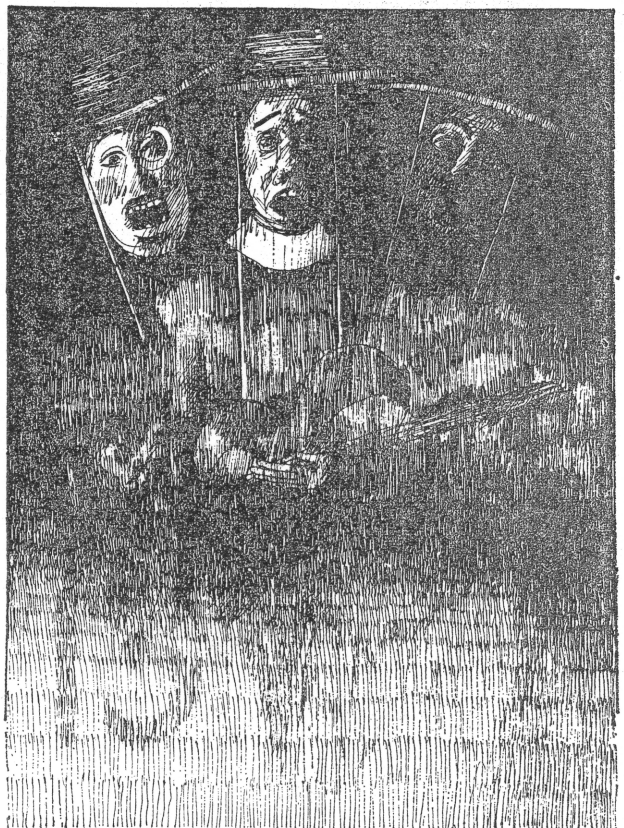
Especially Lucas van Leyden's "Adoration of the Magi" is on the whole very close to Edward Stasack. Starting from objective observation, the 16th century artist soon spills into a vi-

sonary world of his own.

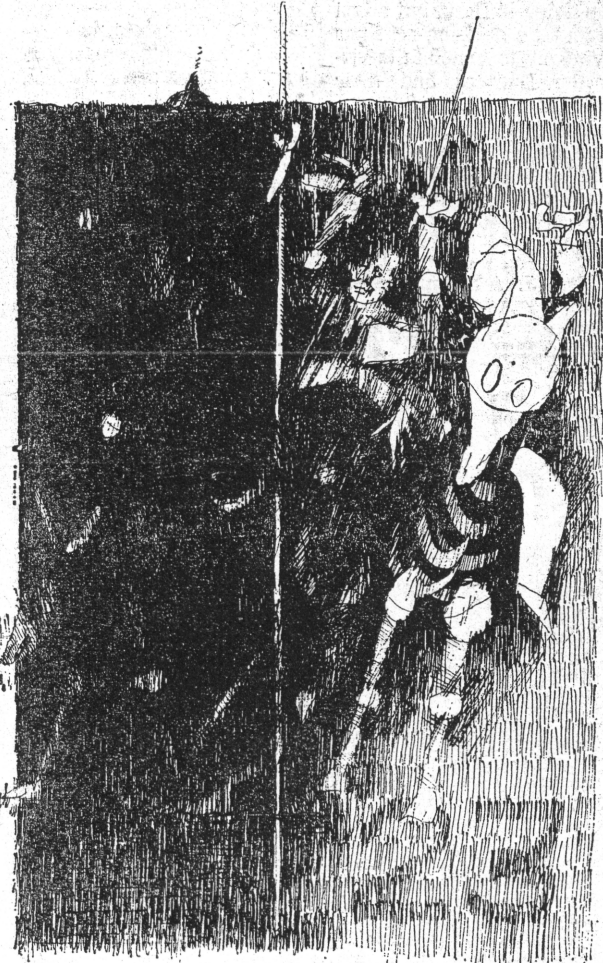
A group of heads, presumably those of the three kings' courtiers, extravagantly plumed and set in Machiavellian grimace, could take its place without a false note among the inmates of Stasack's private zoo.



Stasack's Number 16



Stasack: Number 13



Stasack: Number 23