

# ART

by Jean Charlot



## The works of Lam Oi

Feast succeeds feast. No sooner are Christmas and the New Year over than spring is with us. Sponsored by our citizens of Chinese ancestry, the Narcissus Festival begins today. Its initial event is a one-woman show of the works of Lam Oi, at the Contemporary Arts Center.

For China, the narcissus is what the cherry blossom is for Japan. If so inclined, one could philosophize about the contrasting auras cast by these two flowers.

The cherry blossom, its complexion flushed a delicate pink, its clusters attached to rugged branchlets that slant tortuously downwards.

The narcissus, radiantly yellow and white, its leaves and stem straight as spears, boldly thrusting out into the sun from under the last snowfall.

However contrasting the blooms, both festivals have in common an awareness of natural beauty, of nature as a creator of matchless forms and color harmonies.

No need to insist on the East-West blend that makes unique our Hawaii. Esthetically speaking, our two halves may clash. The haole way is to overlay the land with a web of speedways, and to erect legions of towers of Babel. Admittedly, they too can be beautiful.

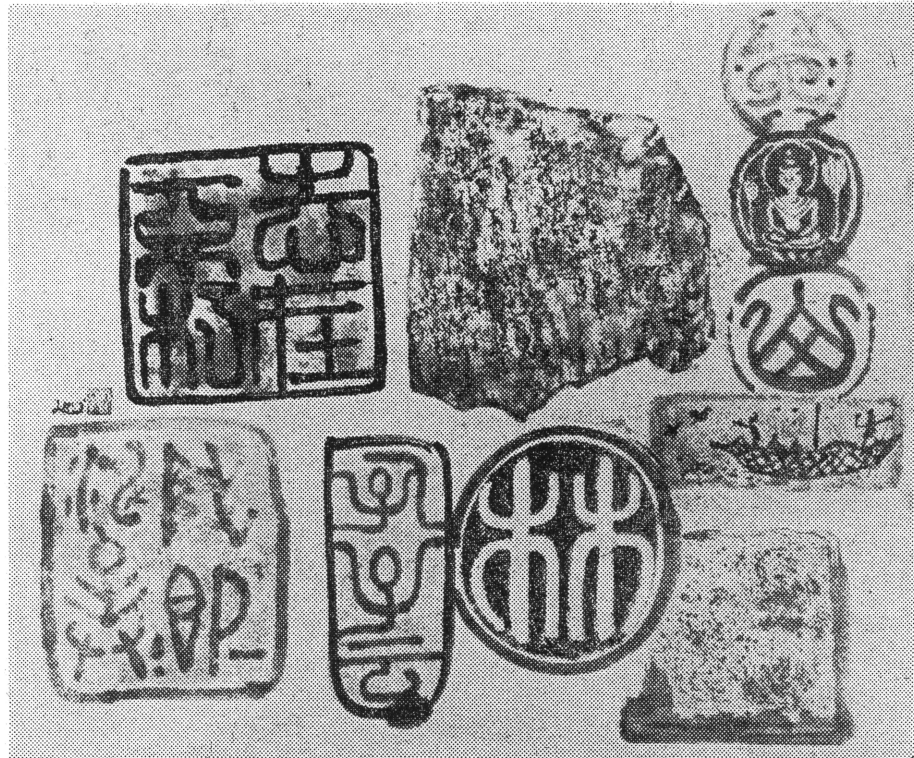
Yet it would be a healthy thing for us to pause a mite in this self-imposed and never-ending task.

### Time to see, time to think

Why not pause long enough to hold in our hand and consider at leisure a lily of the field—cherry blossom or narcissus.

To halt a while the pouring of concrete and the raising of steel skeletons would do us good. Instead, for a whole day, why not meditate on the beauty of a single flower.

Born in Kwangtung, Lam Oi graduated from Hangchow National Art College. She perfected her art studies under Wong Bung Hung, skilled practitioner of



"Composition" by Lam Oi

the traditional methods of Chinese brush painting.

In 1960, the artist went to Paris, enrolling as a student at the Academie Raspail. There, Professor Henry Goetz introduced her to the technique of painting in oils, and to the style of Western art current in the School of Paris.

The present show is hung so as to underline these biographical facts. One half of the hall is given to works in the traditional Chinese manner. The other half is hung with works still Chinese in flavor, but with School of Paris affinities.

When Lam Oi came to Hawaii, she exhibited in her own small gallery works by her first master, Wong Bung Hung, together with some of her own oil paintings conceived entirely in the Western manner.

The story of her evolution would be further clarified if a few of Lam Oi's Parisian oils were included in the present show.

### Two great cultures

The burden of two great and contrasting cultures is a heavy one to bear for any

single being. East and West approach art with distinct attitudes.

For the Chinese, the first step on the road to art must be to pay obeisance to the Old Masters. Contrariwise, the School of Paris puts a single-minded emphasis on the cult of personality.

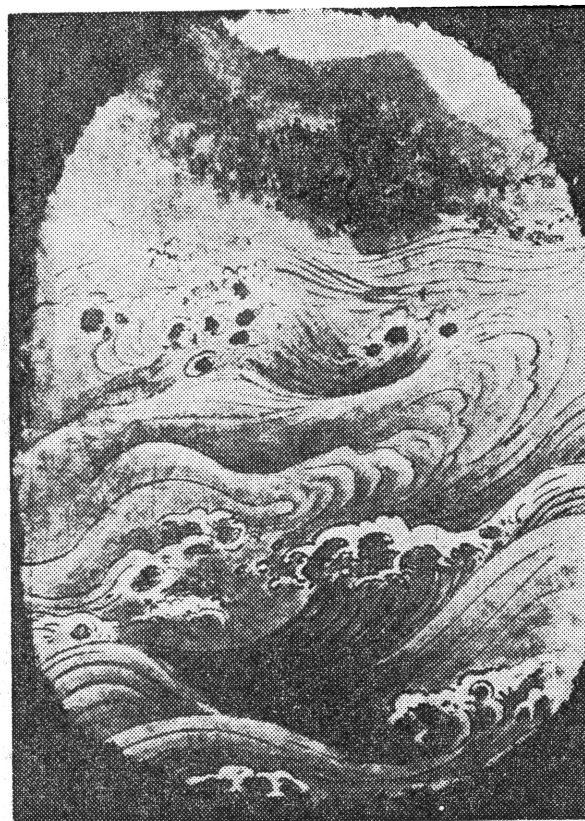
The Chinese art student la-

bors at his task of memorizing categories of brush strokes, duly recorded in treatises such as "The Album of the Ten Bamboo Hall," or "The Mustard Seed Garden Summary," both published in the 17th century.

He learns the many ways of holding the brush, the se-



"Fruit on a Branch, Painted in the Manner of the Sung Dynasty."



"Molokai Channel"

crets of ink mixing, the proper use of dry strokes and of wet strokes.

In the end, these minutiae of the craft prove to be the very narrow door that opens on a vista of mature freedom!

Copying the Masters, either stroke for stroke or in free renderings, seems to the Occidental artist an abomination of the desolation. In practice it works otherwise.

To know what others have achieved is to better realize what there is in oneself that is latent, dormant, and that craves in its turn to come to light.

### Differences of East and West

In the Occident, the study of Modern Art begins where the Chinese study ends. The would-be artist is bid to develop an instant personality, and is urged to do so in a hurry.

He lacks time, even were he willing, for a thorough study of the Old Masters, although Occidental art has its fair share of them.

Closing his eyes to the sight of ancient art, and as well to the lessons of nature, the art student has no other recourse than to look inwardly into self. What he finds therein may be genius. It may also be less than genius, at times sheer emptiness!

Lam Oi has learned her lessons well, both as a Chinese and as a Parisian.

In her works in the Oriental manner the whole gamut of styles is displayed in historic sequence, from prehistoric bone writing to ripened Sung still life and landscape.

Technically, she ranges from black and white curvise strokes, especially free in "Mountains and Clouds," to the full color range and rendering of volume displayed in the circular "Fruit on a Branch, Painted in the Manner of the Sung Dynasty." Both are illustrated here.

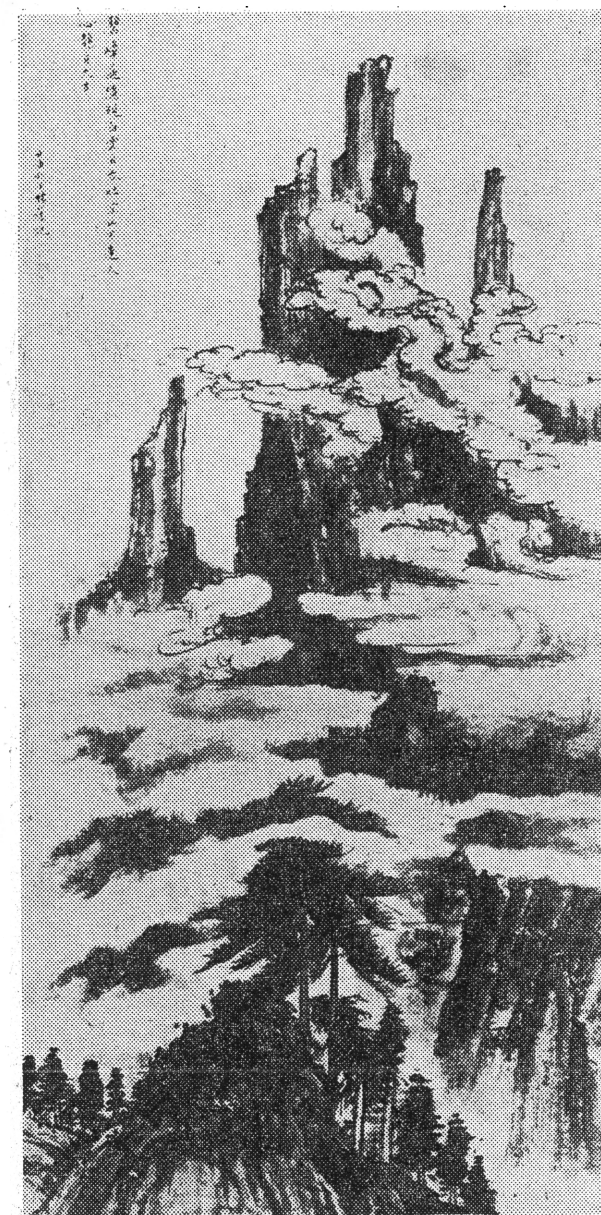
### Shaken by European ways

Safe as she was in her Chinese ways, Lam Oi's European contacts must perforce have proved a jarring experience. Chinese esthetics are close to timeless. Like the being from another planet come to visit this earth, she could just as well have fallen into the 19th century.

To contact pre-Raphaelites or the realism of a Courbet would have been even more of a shock. In its way, 20th century art was kinder to the Chinese artist.

Modern art approaches the objective world with reservations. Realism is no more an ingredient of modern art than it is of classical Chinese art.

European sights, however helped the artist bridge the gap between East and West. German castles, tucked on a



"Mountains and Clouds"

high peak, reminded her of the isolated abode of an Oriental sage. "On route to Interlaken," "Rhine River Scenery," are Europe seen through Chinese eyes.

### Hawaii is added

Now that Lam Oi lives here, Hawaii could hardly fail to add its own note to her already varied repertoire. It does so with a grandeur all its own. It gave the artist the drama of its lava flows, the roar of its surf, the jagged walls of its cliffs.

"Makapuhi. Aftermath" and "Wetness over Pali" have a sober intensity more telling than the sought-for picturesqueness of the European scenes.

Lam Oi's Hawaiian dancing girls, curiously Chinese despite their flowing hair, leis and hula skirts, add a light touch to the majestic scenes.

The lesson of undiluted abstract art was not lost either on the artist. It is in the Chinese art that she found the closest affinities with this kind of art.

Calligraphy proved to be the common denominator. Her artful display of antique Chinese seals in "Composition" is also her most Parisian picture. And the detail of a canoe with fishermen and flying birds, executed in petroglyph style, adds to the whole a touch of Hawaii.