

ART

by Jean Charlot



Masterworks

A public display of paintings from the Arthur Murray collection is current at the Contemporary Arts Center. It opened last Sunday and is to close soon, perhaps tomorrow.

Honoluluans should not miss this chance to get acquainted with undoubted masterworks, mostly by Impressionist masters.

I understand that problems of security and of insurance made imperative the short, short schedule. We should thank Arthur Murray for his selflessness in thus stripping his walls naked, for the benefit of the community at large.

The choice of paintings that make up a private collection is in its way a telltale clue to the owner. People collect paintings for varied reasons, some for prestige and some for profit.

In the present case, neither of these reasons holds good. Not a grain of snobishness intrudes in the choice. Not an ounce of computerization in regard to market values. It is a gentleman's choice.

Few canvases are of the obvious kind that strikes one at first sight. Vlamineck is the one exception. Most of the paintings have been chosen instead because they would prove pleasant to live with.

Century of art

The show roughly spans a century — 1860 to 1960 — with by far the strongest representation among masters of the 19th century.

Even though he follows as a whole the great lines of the history of art, Arthur Murray can be quite a law unto himself. Great names are there but also lesser names. Marie Laurencin, the gentle friend of the cubists, hangs side by side with the half-forgotten French Academician, J. J. Henner.

The picture of a pond with waterlilies — a subject reserved as a rule for Claude Monet — turns out to be instead a good Sunday painting by Sir Winston Churchill!

I would have preferred that the titles be set in English rather than in French, to avoid perhaps a touch of snobbishness. It makes me ill at ease when in a restaurant chicken is referred to as "Poularde de Bresse."

On the labels, the French used is at times awkward and seems translated from the English. Pissarro's "Jardin de la Ville" properly should be called "City Park."

Wrong emphasis

My only other reservation as regards this beautiful show has to do with press releases that are not in tune with the lender's self-effacing character. Obviously money is needed to buy this kind of art. Obviously this kind of art is worth money.

Yet money and art do not mix easily. It would have been better if the worth of the collection — estimated at a million dollars — had been



Renoir's "Tetes D'Enfants"

left out of the publicity attendant upon the opening of the show.

In Washington, the Leonardo da Vinci recently acquired by the National Gallery will never again be looked at for what it is, the lovely portrait of a lovely girl. Between the small precious panel and the onlooker shall be interposed forever brutal images of what \$5 million looks like, stacked in thick piles of greenbacks or stashed in pirates' gold pieces!

First, let us wash our eyes of contemporary sights, the better to appreciate these aging, if ever young, masters. Op and pop have accustomed us to aggressively assertive statements. We expect a picture to assault us with all the fury of a bull charging at the bullfighter's red rag.

Corot tranquility

Here nothing of the kind. Unaware of a spectator, Corot creates his own tranquil universe. A pocket of space

is boxed in between cottages. A rustic path recedes. Add a peasant woman in shawl and bonnet, doing nothing, plus the suncast shadows of trees, and silence.

These tiny Corots are choice Corots. Today's connoisseurs rate them far above the many misty "Dawns" and "Dusks" that the painter produced tirelessly to answer the demands of the collectors of his day.

The larger Renoir, a bunch of heads spread at random and of unrelated scales, may puzzle those who do not know Renoir's working habits. He did not paint on a canvas cut to size and stretched on a wooden frame.

He preferred to thumbtack an unstretched and uncut canvas on a board. In its center, in time, the picture proper would emerge. This left a margin where, at the tip of the brush, the artist improvised at will. Unique in the history of painting, these doodles with the brush are not unlike the "remarks"

that etchers scribble in the margin of their copper plates.

Again here, the casual approach is a mark of quality. Even though Renoir, when at his most formal, is far from academic, for practicing painters the rambling sketches are precious clues to what stages preceded the completion of a major painting.

The Pissarro of 1874 is a work in the discreet hues of his early manner. In the capsule history that this show constitutes, "Le Jardin de la Ville" stands midway between the delicate variations in grays of a Corot and the full-bodied chromas of a later impressionism.

Charming Rivera

Outstanding among the works of our century, the small painting by Diego Rivera is quietly charming. It will come as a surprise to those acquainted only with his socially-conscious murals.

One should question the title "Rivera's Daughter and Indian Nurse." It represents Pico, Diego's younger daughter with a little Aztec friend of the same age, probably Concha, Concepcion Hernandez, who was — who is in fact — my godchild.

The misleading title tends to void the point of the picture. The white child and the brown child are friends, in a gentle urging for racial harmony.

Gentle though they may be, these paintings by great masters are not of a kind intended to lull one into sleep. They are doubtless pleasant to have around but they are not, to put it in contemporary terms, the equivalent of the so-called "idiot box."

The peace and plenty that marks the work of impressionist masters was not achieved by treading the primrose path. Renoir's nudes, pink and plump and frankly sensuous, are poles opposite from today's sex symbols, the "bunnies."

Not for playboys

In their bulk, in their carriage one senses instead an undertow of the heroic that would make any playboy



Diego Rivera's "Rivera's Daughter"

take to his heels.

No wonder. When Renoir painted these assertions of superhuman vitality he was so crippled as to be jackknifed into a wheelchair. Every morning before work the paintbrush was lashed to his deformed hand made into a fist by arthritis.

Arthur Murray should indeed enjoy his carefully cho-

sen pictures for the lovely things that they are. I doubt that they will ever afford this sensitive man complete relaxation.

Somehow the color harmonies that the impressionist masters orchestrated on canvas are more in the nature of a muted lesson in heroism than an invitation to simple pleasures.

