

ART

by Jean Charlot

Two Indians

Through May, the Ewing Krainin Gallery in Waikiki presents works by the Indian artist B. Vithal, among them metal sculptures. In the same gallery a show of paintings by his wife, Prabha, preceded the current offering.

This young couple left their home in Bombay for a goal both indefinite and grandiose: to see the world. Australia was their first stop. In Melbourne, Vithal executed a sculptured mural on an area of some 150 square feet.

When at home in India, Vithal had been impatient for novelty. In Australia he already longed for India.

The relief, modeled in clay and cast in concrete, depicts the marriage of the Lord Shiva. Its style paraphrases that of the cave temples of Elephanta, dating from the Eighth Century.

When they leave Hawaii, Vithal and Prabha plan to go to New York, then to London, Paris and Rome. Their trip should last three years.

Not long ago, the Government of India sent abroad a well chosen collection of masterpieces of national art. Those who saw it displayed at the Honolulu Academy of Arts realize that the essence of Indian art can hardly be summed up in a single formula.

Tradition

Both Vithal and Prabha acknowledge in their works their national tradition. Yet it is a tradition with so many facets that their works are in no way similar.

Vithal's home ground, Bombay, is neighbor to famed temple halls, Ajanta among them, carved a millennium ago inside rocky cliffs.

Their architectural greatness implies a physical effort as sustained as that needed to build the Egyptian pyramids. The technique and the thought that ushered in the technique are, however, different.

The Egyptian builder achieved his goal by addition — brick piled upon brick, stone block upon stone block.

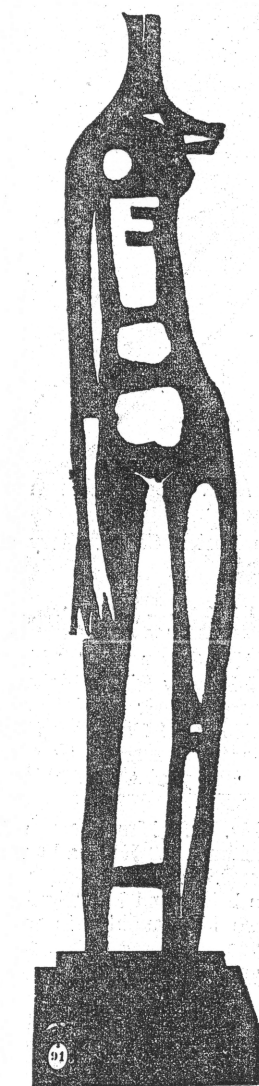
The Hindu brought into being his temples by subtraction, by gouging out of the raw rock pockets of space.

Air is the positive element that conjures in the dim light of the man-made caves great halls, columns, and the concave height of domes. Air encircles stupas with its active void.

Masculine

These sturdy rock temples embody in Indian art a masculine element. It would be unfair to expect from a single artist achievements to equal these, that took generations and centuries to perform.

Yet Vithal is a contemporary exponent of the masculine.



Vithal nude, an iron sculpture.

lar and monumental quality that marks this ancient art.

Vithal has the sturdy physique of a sculptor. Had he studied in an American college, he would have been a football coach's delight!

His taste naturally tends toward heroic sizes. In his garden in Bombay the artist erected for his own satisfaction statues over 12 feet high. His preference is for materials that are intractable, that will give him, as he manipulates them, a good fight. His favorite is iron.

In the present show, to fit the Procrustean bed of American interiors, Vithal has toned down this instinct for bigness. The walls of the gallery are hung with studies of the nude, paintings as gentle as they are atypical.

His iron sculptures are the hard core of the show.

Iron sheets

From cave temples, he borrowed the concept of the positive role of air. He punches out of iron sheets one inch thick irregular areas. Circulating through the hard metal, air brings his cutouts to life. His themes are women and horses.

Vithal gently complains of the relative thinness of the sheet of iron used in his work. In Bombay he could buy sheets four inches thick. To cut through them was exhausting. But the added thickness did bring to the statue, as one moved around it, the fullness of a third dimension.

The sculptures shown are impressive. When Vithal handles them or speaks about them, one has the feeling that, definitive though they are, the artist considers them to be trial pieces for something big, something that neither walls nor ceilings could contain, something that could be set at ease in some tropical outdoors.

In our days, it would be problematical to expect a commission to eviscerate a rocky cliff and transform its insides into a temple. It is nevertheless obvious that Vithal is geared, physically and mentally, to create monuments!

Wife is painter

Vithal's wife, Prabha, is petite and sari-draped. Vithal is a sculptor. Prabha is a painter. Without premeditated effort, like Vithal, she fits within that national tradition that is hers by birthright.

But the facets of Indian art are many. Her frankly contemporary esthetic feeds on the feminine vein of Indian miniatures, poles apart from the severe strength of rock architecture.

Never were Indian miniaturists hampered by the problems that plague the Western artist: anatomy and perspective. What we Westerners proudly call the freedom of modern art was theirs from the start.

Elongations and distortions, a Matisse-like flattening of space, the use of color for color's sake alone, created enchanted gardens, with parrot-filled foliage and tame gazelles prancing down flowering slopes.

In this setting, gods and maidens, princes and their beloved, acted the pangs and rewards of every phase of love.

In the oil paintings that Prabha brought with her from India it would be a delicate task to disentangle contemporary brands of distortion from the traditional ones found in ancient miniatures.

Ancient, modern

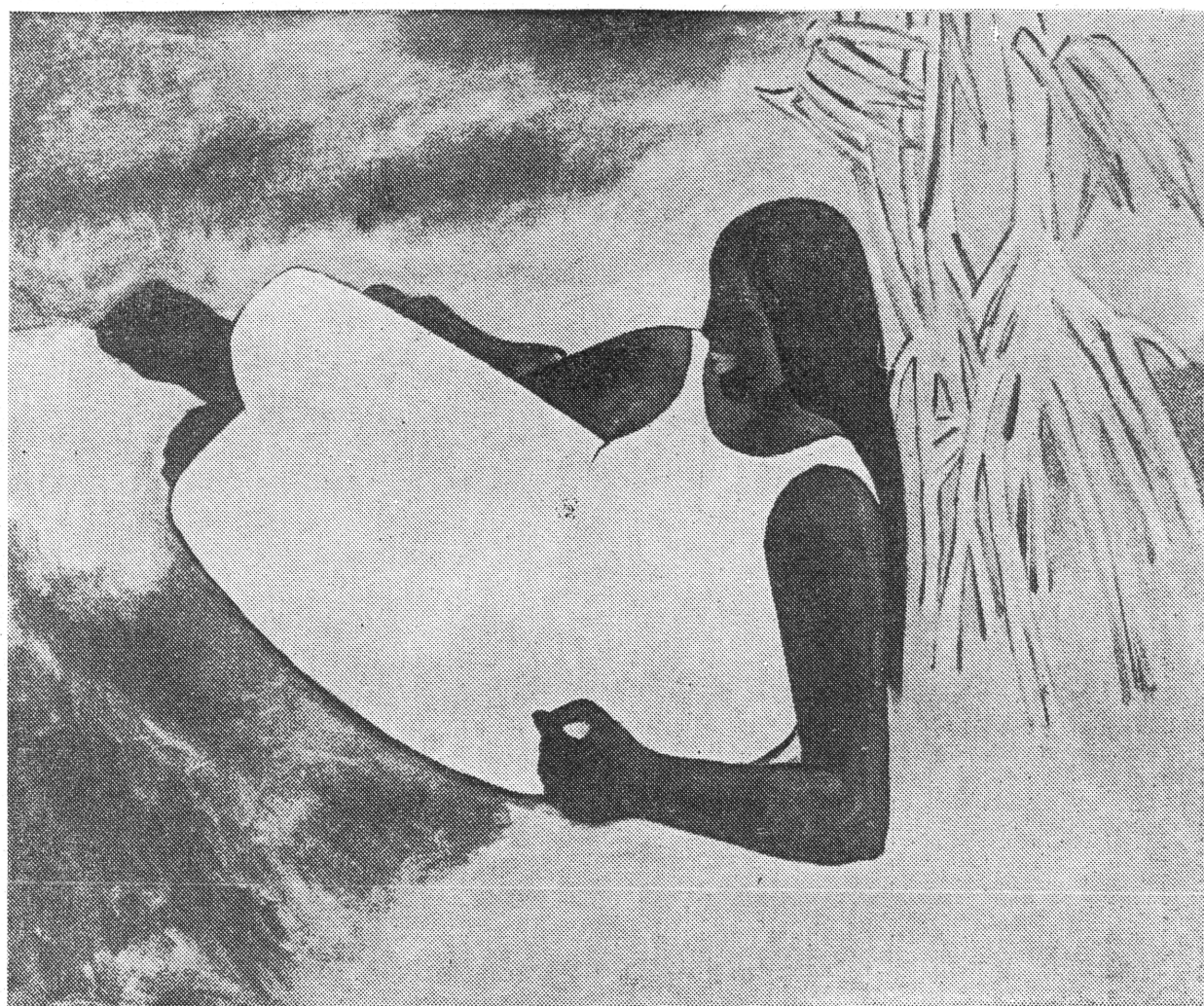
Like her style, her themes are both ancient and modern: women gracefully elongated, squatting, selling fish, fondling a pet bird, waiting by a hedge for their beloved.

The people Prabha paints project a mood, mostly of silent introspection. Shapes and colors pay homage equally to the calligraphic elegance of Rajput miniatures and to a subdued influence of Western art.

Indeed, Prabha's departures from natural sights are infinitely discreet when compared with Indian folk paintings where almond-eyed bus-



Prabha's "Woman Selling Fish"



Prabha's "Pandanus Farewell"

ty milkmaids eager to please crowd around the Lord Krishna, his body painted a brilliant blue!

In Hawaii, Prabha has not been idle. Her Hawaiian themes neatly dovetail with her Indian themes. For a setting she favors the pandanus, our own minute banyan tree.

As her women change from saris to mu'umu'us, as Indian props are replaced by Hawaiian ones, one feels in Prabha's paintings a faint tinge of Gauguin.

This is not as simple a statement as it seems. We now know that Gauguin, expecting an earthly paradise, found instead in Tahiti a tightly ruled French colony.

Disillusioned, the artist took refuge in a mythical Pacific past that no archaeologist, no ethnologist, would care to vouch for.

His invention

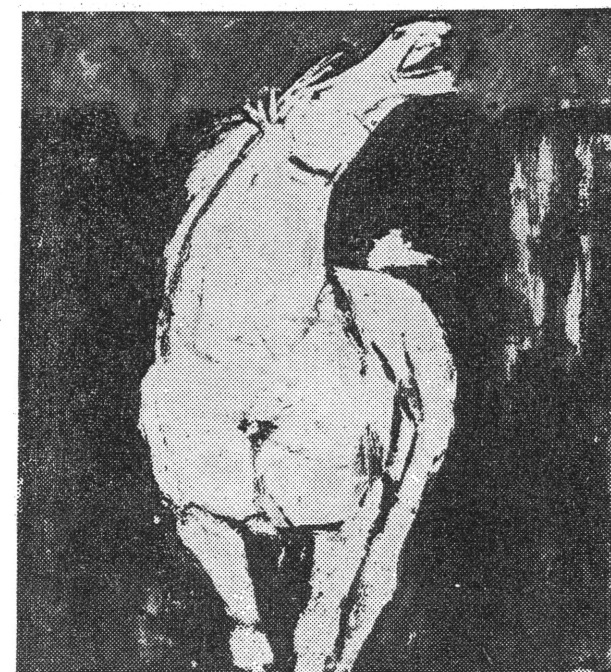
The colossal idols that dot his antique landscapes, the contrived attitudes of the faithful who bring offerings of fruits, are a world of his own invention.

This dream world is based in part on a sublimation of

everyday sights. In greater part it is adapted from photographs of works of art that Gauguin had brought from Paris to Tahiti.

Among these were details of sculptures from Angkor Wat, strongly Indian in their esthetic!

If Prabha's Pacific paintings have a faint flavor of Gauguin, it may well be because Gauguin's own have a faint flavor of India.



Horse by Vithal