

ART

by Jean Charlot



Questions, answers

Questions have accumulated unanswered. I always am grateful to those who send them. This week, I shall try and answer a few of these queries.

Q—Marcel Duchamp says, "Art is a mirage." Brancusi says, "Art is a fraud". Would you please explain.

A—One could add the saying of the Impressionist master, Edgar Degas, "To achieve a painting takes more cunning than the commission of a crime".

Artists devote their life to art. They love art with passion. For them to call art names is in the nature of a lovers' quarrel. And the non-artist had better not interfere.

These quotes illustrate the unease that grips the maker as he attempts to glue together, so to speak, what could be called the soul and the body of art.

Granted that art is sublime, the manipulations through which art is achieved are on quite another plane.

At the start, sculptor Brancusi has an intense vision of what he aims to do. He faces the tree trunk or the block of stone. He rolls up his sleeves, ties on his apron and, with mallet and chisel, goes to work as any carpenter or stonecutter.

Weeks may be needed to liberate the form he envisaged from the wood or the stone in which it is imprisoned. And weeks more to texture the block to the sculptor's taste.

While the work is in progress, the vision that sparked it originally is put in cold storage, and replaced by manual patience.

The artist becomes artisan.

The work done, chance is that the sculptor, faced by the objective version of his vision, will be as surprised as any onlooker.

At last, the finished sculpture is exhibited. Brancusi goes to the opening, his hands washed, his beard combed, his body set in a clean business suit.

Art-lovers congregate around him and acclaim him

as a master. He may well feel a fraud.

Men of genius are not geniuses 24 hours a day. And the precious moment, that made the work feasible is now for Brancusi a thing of the past.

The classical concept of the artist as a channel through which godlings act, be they daemons or muses, is a valid one.

And the story of Pygmalion falling in love with the statue he carved of Galatea, a maiden, illustrates the inadequacy that seizes the sincere artist when faced with the end product of his task.

About money

Q—Should the artist accept fellowships and grants, or should he go it on his own, battling the world, etc. . . .

A—I like the wording of the question. "Etc. . . ." alas, stands here for the one thing that the artist is good at, namely art making.

As a rule, the artist is not fit to battle the world, which is indeed a tough adversary and a most unethical one.

Artists, do not enter the

ring with the world as your opponent. At best, you would get your nose bloodied.

Van Gogh died in such an unequal bout. Gauguin hid from the world in his chosen hide-out, the Marquesas Islands. But the world pursued him there anyhow and defeated him, in the grotesque shape of a single, anti-artistic policeman.

For the reason that I do not encourage the artist to battle the world, I urge him to accept fellowships and grants, should they be offered to him.

From my experience, however, grants and fellowships are not offered to an artist. He has to ask for them.

And even after he has filled and mailed sundry forms — blue ones, yellow ones, salmon ones, all in quintuplicate — even then the anxious wait may not be rewarded with a grant.

In my case, I applied in vain a number of times. Were I not endowed with a pleasant disposition, I could nowadays with justice be that unpleasant character, the embittered artist.

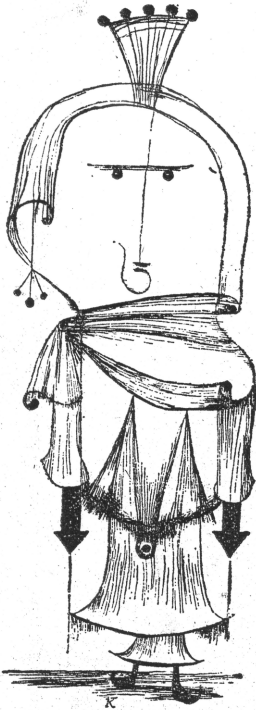
My first try was when I realized that being a full-time professor had changed me into a Sunday painter.

I wrote to Robert Oppenheimer, head of the Institute of Advanced Studies in Princeton, asking him for a "chair" in the institution.

The idea came to me after perusing a magazine that showed the members of the Institute, mostly mathematicians and atomic scientists, in varied degrees of reclining postures, eyes closed and a finger to their high forehead, thinking.

I, too, could recline. I, too, could think. Great art would doubtless come out of my thinking.

Oppenheimer answered me with a friendly, chatty letter of refusal. The institute had given grants concerning the arts, that was correct, but only to art historians and art critics. To grant a grant to an artist



Paul Klee's "The Witch With the Comb."—Photo from Honolulu Academy of Arts.

would be an unheard of precedent!

My second try, or rather tries, was with the Guggenheim Foundation. Twice I innocently applied as a painter, only to be refused.

The third time, knowing better, I applied as a writer. My petition was promptly granted — in fact, renewed the following year.

To answer your question: if any help in the form of money comes your way, grab it! If you are a true artist, much money will go after your death to many middlemen as your pictures change hands. What money comes your way in your lifetime is yours without qualms.

Ugliness

Q—What is the role of the ugly in art?

A—A puzzling haze sets upon words when one tries to pinpoint their meaning. Here, of course "ugly" implies its counterpart "beautiful," and that one, too, is hard to define.

I illustrate with three works of art. All three have a similar subject matter, a standing woman.

One is a Hawaiian sculp-



Thomas Gould's "The West Wind." Gould is the sculptor who made Hawaii's King Kamehameha statue.

ture in the collections of the British Museum. It is carved out of hard wood, with a wig of human hair and a loin-cloth of tapa.

The next is a marble statue dating of the 1870's. Its author is Thomas Gould, better known in our Hawaii for his monumental statue of Kamehameha. His contemporaries rated this marble, "The West Wind," as his masterpiece.

A maiden daintily tiptoes on a sand-textured pedestal, meant as a beach. Topless, she gestures with her arm upraised in a modest equivalent of the missing brassiere.

Her other hand pulls side-

wise, away from her thighs, her soggy wet skirt. Her wet hair curves in innumerable ringlets.

Gould, a Bostonian who lived in Florence, shows the flag" by spattering its stars all around the maiden's waist.

The third illustration is a 20th century lithograph by Paul Klee, "The Witch with the Comb." A suggestion of mantilla and of course the high tortoise shell comb give the work a Spanish flavor.

We deduce that the witch is a witch from the fact that her hands are no hands at all, but two hexing arrows that point straight to hell.

Of the three, which is ugly



Hawaiian female figure in wood, with human hair. — Photo from the British Museum.

and which is beautiful?

Ca. 1870, the popular consensus for beauty went to "The West Wind." The two other works would have been dismissed as repulsive.

In the 1960's a reversal of taste occurs. There is for us something arrestingly beautiful in the unabashed distortions of both the Hawaiian sculpture and the Paul Klee print.

In its calculated daintiness, the marble statue seems to us repulsive. Fit on top of the maiden's head a lampshade. As a lamp it may pass!

Perhaps there shall be yet another reversal of taste. Gould's "West Wind" will again be seen as beautiful. Klee and the anonymous Hawaiian carver will be laughed at as childish.

But not in my lifetime, and not in yours.