

ART

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by Jean Charlot



At the East-West Center, on the second floor of Jefferson Hall, the works of Theodore Wores are on exhibition until May 9. Roughly covering a span of 20 years, 1890-1910, the collection of paintings was lovingly gathered by two brothers, Ben and A. Jess Shenson, both doctors from San Francisco.

To their collection have been added pictures owned in our Islands, mostly portraits, done during one of Wores' stays in a Hawaii that, alas, with hindsight, we may now, characterize as the pre-highrise Hawaii. His widow, Caroline Bauer Wores, came to Hawaii to be with us for the inauguration.

Art means many things to many men. Its accepted meaning when these works were painted at the threshold of our century was vastly different from meanings found fashionable today.

One imagines the modern artist as engaged in esoteric

pursuits. It is believed that he dives deep into self to surface with subconscious images, dark trophies that he will clothe with form and color.

These safaris into the subconscious were not always synonymous with art. Only recently, in a post-Freudian world, has the definition acquired currency. Undoubtedly, artists who lived in other centuries felt inner stirrings that spurred at times their craft. They failed to boast about it.

IN MY understanding of the role of art, I rather side with the past. I wholeheartedly doff my beret to these colleagues who thought of themselves primarily as artisans.

I feel a special fondness for the itinerant portrait painter of Colonial America. He occupied his winters painting on canvas headless busts, male and female, with

hands holding suggestive accessories—for the man, a gold-headed cane or a book of accounts, for the lady, a Bible or a rose.

Come spring, the jobber packed his stock in trade and drove from townlet to townlet industriously fitting individual heads to the vacant shoulders—the heads of citizens solid enough to pay cash for being thus ushered into timelessness.

There were other ways in which the artist could lawfully cater to the needs of the nonartist. The townsman longed for the peace of the countryside. An image of cattle grazing filled his pastoral need.

Suppressed romantics wished for castles in Spain. Painted vistas of exotic lands peopled by innocent savages help them firm the vagueness of their dream.

To speak of art as a merchandise prefabricated to fit a need seems to some of us

today an irreverent paradox. And yet great art often has come into being sprung from such simple premises. Such a primitive as Douanier Rousseau and such a sophisticated as Paul Gauguin sought unabashedly the picturesque and, in so doing, shook to the roots our preconceptions concerning art.

As did Gauguin, as did Rousseau, Theodore Wores searched a lifetime for strange sights in strange lands. He was among the first Western artists to work in Japan, to observe in situ its sights. Already a knowledge of this closed land had reached European artists. It was a very limited one.

As the story goes, Manet and Monet discovered at their grocer that cracked seeds or an equivalent were wrapped in the frail sheets of ukiyo-e prints. Carefully smoothing out the wrappers they delightedly discovered a Japan of cursive brush-lines and watercolor tints, a dream Japan that perhaps never was.

Knowing much more now than was known then about the Orient, it is easy for us to smile our wisdom when looking at the Japan of Manet and Van Gogh. Whistler also was well served in his art by incomplete knowledge when, in his Nocturnes, he arched over the Thames what Japanese bridges he had discovered on fans and screens.

PERHAPS ALONE at the time, Wores squarely faced the reality of a factual Japan. He could not accept, through added knowledge, the shorthand versions proposed by Impressionists.

Yet Japan freed him from the yoke of sheer realism. Cherry blossoms and plum blossoms taught his brush their own version of a pointillism that, at the same time, Seurat had launched in the abstract, basing his discovery on a marriage between art and optics.

In this show, pictures on Hawaiian subjects dating from the first decade of our century hold for us—naturally—an additional interest.

"Diamond Head by Moonlight" lent by Richard Smart, is especially telling.



Model unknown. Photograph . . . 1902

Sighted from Waikiki Beach, it shows a few huts and cottages, not enough to challenge the undoubted supremacy of the crater, none bold enough to climb its slopes. A few torchlights procure enough of an orange glow to underline the blueness of the moonlit sky.

"Lizzie the Lei Maker," best-known among Hawaiian themes, indeed is a lovely painting. Its colors are bold, a harmony of red and orange, orange lehua lei set against the scarlet of a mu'umu'u. Its drawing too is bold, freed for the once of academic scruples, outlining the body with a line as simple and swaying as a hula motion.

Though Lizzie is spectacular, I prefer a smaller picture, "Hawaiian child with Kalabash". The model is quite unaware that he is being painted. He squeezes in one hand a fish and, with the other, caresses the fine-grained edge of the family poi bowl.

WORES' VERSION of Hawaii sets one to sighing for "the good old times." The regret may be tempered by perusing old clippings thoughtfully made available by the Shenson Brothers.

When Wores landed here in 1901, he was told that he had come too late to capture "the fast vanishing spirit of old Hawaiian life." Wisely, he did not believe it. But when he left a year later, his farewell was somewhat pessimistic. He had witnessed, or so he thought, the end of the old Hawaii: "The curves of the road with the pencilled coconuts against the sky are all gone. The lily pond is gone. The town has been given the appearance of a third-rate American city instead of preserving the quaint charm of a semi-tropical town."

Perhaps 70 years from now, someone, straining to visualize the quaint Hawaii of 1971, in turn will sigh for the good old times, always more real as a memory.



Hawaiian child with calabash . . . 1901



Lei vendor . . . 1902



Japanese woman by a bridge . . . 1890s