ART

by Jean Charlot

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A superlative print show, "The Hidden World of Timothy Cole," is at the Honolulu Academy of Arts to Oct. 24. All items come from the collection of C. Montague Cook Jr. While his mother accumulated the ancient Oriental treasures that made the academy famous, he modestly collected contemporary American graphic arts.

It would be grossly unfair to state that time has turned the tables on values, but it is true that while the field of Asian art that Mrs. Cooke favored is full of rising question marks concerning delicate problems of authenticity, the prints of Timothy Cole and other American masters all have, naturally enough, unimpeachable pedigrees.

When, close to 25 years ago, I was asked to plan the 25th anniversary show that celebrated the founding of the academy, I took care to feature side by side, to the raised eyebrows of some, what I deemed two typical masterpieces. From the East I chose the scroll of Lohans, gold on indigo blue, and from the West choice examples of the art of Timothy Cole, singling out the portrait of Abraham Lincoln, stiffly seated, his high hat set on a table top, engraved on wood after the well-known photograph!

UNCONSCIOUSLY, each generation lives its span through a maze of customs, taboos and mannerisms so taken for granted that we hardly realize their latent illogic. In turn, each coming generation turns inside out or drops by the way something the previous generation had revered.

Musicians may be composers as well. And from time to time, carefully watched by an audience that does not wish them to bypass the well-bred rules of modesty, they are allowed to present their own original compositions.

A touch of the contemporary is in fact expected in a carefully balanced musical program, but hardly more than a touch. Every ticket holder expects the musician, from soloist to conductor, to give him, for his money, mostly tried and true music of other centuries and, at that, only works by a very few hallowed masters.

The mannerisms that guide orthodox doings in the world of the visual arts are quite opposite from those of the musical world. Originality, uniqueness, or as some unversed in the esthetic lingo simply call a kick in the pants, is expected of each and every practitioner of the visual arts. In fact, even a slight allusion to what has gone before, unless artfully dressed in the kitsch of a harlequinade, is frowned upon by juries and thrown into outer darkness.

AS REGARDS copies from the old masters, unless they be poor enough to be called folk art, these are relegated in attics where attics still happen, or are offered, at Christmas time or any time, to the refuse collector.

It is acknowledged then that, in music, men at times of immense talent perform a community service by giving us still another chance to contact past masterpieces. By contrast, should the visual artist devote his art to a similar endeavor, he would forthwith be labeled a weakling, aping others because he cannot "find himself."

Underlying this paradoxical situation is an unspoken faith in what is far from a basic truth. And that is that photography can multiply visual masterpieces so perfectly that the hand of man, and his heart as well, need not get into the act.

It is as if a mechanical piano, once cranked to a correct rendering of a musical piece, would, once for ever, annul the efforts of any musician who would wish, in his own way, to commune with the spirit of a great composer. It would be a loss, an immense loss, for art if a dictator, with enough power to do it and not enough brain to deny himself this power, would impose on the world, for each musical chef d'oeuvre, a single official version.

YET THIS IS what happens today in the world of the visual arts. In the 19th century, equating the visual arts to music, art lovers were extraordinarily fond of the individual interpretations of the masterpieces of the past. Photography already was known. True, for most of the century, halftone reproductions did not exist. Here we touch on the delicate problem of another taboo, the barriers that some attempt to raise between original prints and reproductions.

Great masters of the past — Holbein, Durer, Breughel — bent on making their living at their art, could hardly take time to learn the laborious process of cutting their own drawings on wood. It was in fact the legal privilege of the guild of carpenters to do this delicate and consuming task, and the artist bold enough to break the rule would have incurred a substantial fine.

In the 19th century, wood engravings still illustrated magazines and newspapers. At times, they were drawn by hacks whose names are forgotten; at times by masters, the Frenchman Constantin Guy or the American Winslow Homer. Speed was of the essence in news reporting and legions of wood engravers made their living at transposing the original sketches onto wood. Though the medieval guilds were not anymore, these engravers still felt their trade closer to that of the carpenter or cabinetmaker than to that of the artist.

TIMOTHY COLE once depicted himself "in my old workday clothes and with my bumpkin manners." Conscious as he was of his genius, he has left us a biting vision of the fine-art artists, "vying with each other in decorating their studio with costly ancient draperies, elegant vases of palm and such humbugging paraphernalia. A fellow affected very high ladies' heels to his shoes, painted red to attract the eye, and long flowing locks capped with a Rubens chapeau."

Cole never learned nor wished to learn the lingo of the fine art artist. In his 20s he apprenticed himself as engraver with Scribner magazine. His skill was such and, within the limitations of reproductive engraving, his creativity, that his publishers and admirers paid his way to Europe to make wood engravings after the old masters of European galleries.

Within his lifetime—he died in 1931—photoengraving displaced his craft and impressionism, post-impressionism, fauvism and cubism were born. Yet Cole never de viated from his chosen path.

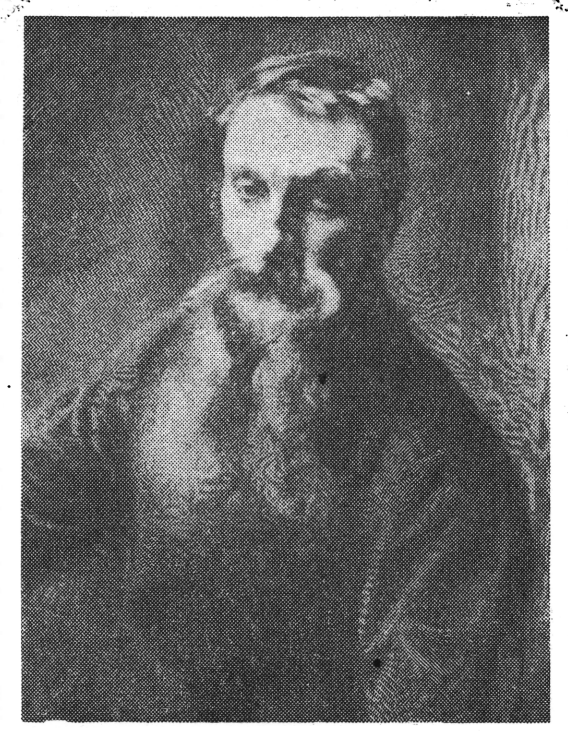
This show gives us a key to the beauty of his work. The more you blow up a halftone the more does the mechanical monotony of dots and screens destroy the autographic uniqueness of the model. The more one enlarges a Cole wood engraving, the more astonishing the originality of his solutions.

SHYLY AT times, Cole adopted means that much of modern art flaunts high but, artisan that he was, he meant to keep these his trade secrets.

For example, observe Cole's rendering of John Singer Sargent's portrait of the sculptor Auguste Rodin. Even though his subject was a man of genius and looked it, Sargent's brush describes face, beard and working clothes with the same elegant flowing strokes with which he depicted the silk, satin and pearls that adorn his usual socialite dowager portraits.

By contrast, if one enlarges Cole's engraving of the Sargent painting, there lies the essence of Rodin's art as seen by an understanding fellow craftsman. The gloss of Sargent gives way to whirls and furrows that have the impact and the strength of thumbprints, these large spatulate thumbs that Rodin dug deep into the soft clay, their impact forever eternized in bronze.

"The more one enlarges a Cole wood engraving . . . . ."



" . . . The more astonishing the originality of his solutions."

". . . engraved on wood," after the photograph.

Engraved on wood from Fra Angelico's Last Judgment.

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When, close to twenty-five years ago, I was asked to plan the twenty-fifth anniversary show that celebrated the foundation of the Academy, I took care to feature side by side, to the raised eyebrows of some, what I deemed two typical masterpieces. From the East I chose the scroll of Lohans, gold on indigo blue, and from the West choice examples of the art of Timothy Cole, singling out the portrait of Abraham Lincoln, stiffly seated, his high hat ~~wet~~ set on a table top, engraved on wood after the well-known photograph!

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