

ART IN LOS ANGELES

By Elvia Feinblatt

THE FIRST half of 1948 has proved to be the most energetic and expansive period in the history of art in Los Angeles. The establishment of the American Associated Artists for the first time on the West Coast, the opening of the Modern Institute of Art in Beverly Hills, and the appearance of numerous smaller galleries, not to mention the first outdoor exhibit of arts and crafts at MacArthur Park, launched the city's increasing concern with art which was initially touched off with the reorganization of the art division of the County Museum in the fall of 1946. The new spirit which has crystallized Southern California's developing cultural activity, is one which shows that signs of outgrowing conservatism and regionalism have finally been realized and that the city is being equipped for a future of progressive art production, support and appreciation. There is yet no Fifty-Seventh Street, as there is no publisher's row, but the deplorable situation of art hungry people having to receive stimulus and satisfaction by remote control from the East, is exceedingly remedied by the solid nucleus of museum and gallery life afforded by these three main institutions as well as by the various other exhibition places.

It is only a short time ago, eight years, that the annual competitive exhibitions of local art at the County Museum were limited to dues-paying members of regional art clubs. Since then, restrictions have been lifted to include all artists living within the city and vicinity, regardless of affiliations or not. Within less than a decade, the development has been such to recognize that a wider expression than that sustained by certain orthodox bodies was necessary and that the more experimental and dynamic art efforts in an accelerated and scientifically galvanized world should be given attention and consideration. Although no one can say that artists or a style have arisen which typify or embody the significance of the day, so that it would be the undeniable crystallization, the various modes of contemporary art taken together combine in making something of this clear. The exhibitions at the Modern Institute of Art have been devoted to a retrospect of the modern movements which contain within themselves that which has germinated in present day art. At the American Associated Artists the living American artist is brought close to the public in an effort to destroy certain barriers which prevent the proper and mutual relationship of each. If this gallery is a gauge of current public desire and demand, as the Modern Institute represents the initiated's collection of art of this century, then the public taste revolves by and large about works which are still broadly representational, whether figurally or thematically.

As ever, that is the question and quarrel between

public and artist. The answer, as given by the County Museum in its 1948 annual show (May 16-June 30), was overwhelmingly in favor of works which were only secondarily representational. Of the 258 pieces exhibited, the greatest percentage, particularly in the field of painting and sculpture, were highly individual, if not private, interpretations, which was responsible for the consistently exciting tenor and "commercial" success of the show which saw a rapid sale of works. The watercolors were, on the whole, more conservative, although of uniform excellence, but a portion of the graphic work again came into the category of the original. There can be no doubt that this annual, representing the cross-section of this area, not only because of its numbers but because a great many of the exhibitors are the most highly active artists in Los Angeles and environs, showed that the tendency is towards free expression, towards imaginative and personal interpretation, and towards a continuation of the world of art which began to tilt and explode with the advent of the century, in anticipation of the many explosions to come. The exhibition demonstrated persuasively that freshness of response and infinite gamut of subject are the rewards of untrammelled modernism.

The other interesting disclosures were the rather surprising and emphatic disregard of the twin subjects



of art, landscape and portraiture. The absence of the former in a territory like Los Angeles is even more strange than the lack of concern with the lost art of the facial likeness. California, for all its natural beauty, has not stimulated its better painters nor produced a group of regionalists who belong to it as distinctly as certain artists to the Middle West or some to the Atlantic Seaboard. Landscape for itself has disappeared, whether for lack of geographical character or color, whether under the pressure of other trends which make the natural scene shrink in importance when compared to the human problems away from it. As remarkable was the dwindling interest in surrealism which was only sparingly represented in the exhibition. Again, explanations can only serve as temporary interpreta-

tions. Since Dail has himself rather departed from the orthodox fantastic, there might be expected a corresponding weakening in the ranks, but there is also the fact that the language of surrealism is harder to penetrate and imitate than the more formal styles of abstraction which can be largely attained without the content and imagination necessary to symbolical painting. Thus, the tendency to semi-abstraction and personal expression was more conspicuous in the exhibition, with a light sprinkling of social or political commentary, and one painting perhaps religiously motivated, and another, a metaphysical attempt. On the whole, the local artists were seen resolutely going their own ways, although in some instances in styles ranging from Picasso to Hobson Pittman, and the bulk treading the middle-of-the road semi-representationalism.

Among the prize winners, Rico LeBrun (*Burnt Spinner*, 1st prize, Fig. 1) and Howard Warshaw (*Golgotha*, 2nd prize) were excellent and powerful

draughtsmen, whose accomplishment could as pointedly be seen in the graphic field where Warshaw's charcoal, *Standing Figure* (1st prize, Fig. 2) and LeBrun's pen drawing, *Mary at the Cross*, revealed their dramatic and arresting temperaments. Equally impressive was Eugene Berman's second prize drawing. These three artists were more finished and in command of their art than many of the others who have yet to essay monumentality in theme and technique. Interesting works in the class of paintings were Lenard Kester's dark-toned, romantic *Sunday Meeting*, and the closely related *Uncertainty* of Carl O'Bergh, Helen Lundeberg's always sensitively felt, *The Wind that Blew the Sky Away*, Andrée Golbin's line woven, *Fishes*, Kenneth Reid's *Novice*, Richards Rubin's

Dolmatic No. 108, Val Samuelson's smouldering, organic, *Neptune Fantasy*, Ethel Sharp's delicately wrought war ruins, *Residue*, Galya Pillin's lyrically melancholy, brilliantly hued, *The Sun and the Moon Shine on Me*, Jan Stussy's

vivid, *Puzzle*, Dorothy Jordan's impressionistic, *Sidetracked*, Melvin Menkin's symbolical, *Manhunt*, and Oskar Fischinger's distinguished *The Wave*, to cite but few.

Less experimental, gayer were the water-colors, and where Robert McIntosh in his fourth honorable mention painting achieved a rather jazzy abstraction, his first prize winning water-color, *Pomegranate* (Fig. 3) was a clear, refreshing picture, although with reminiscence of Stuart Davis. Brook Willis' second prize, *Downtown Patterns*, conveyed a telling impression of the edging verticality of city buildings. To the water-color traditionally belongs the outdoor scene, and many fine varieties of this subject were included in the an-

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Below: L to R: Rico Le Brun—"Burnt Spinner," painting (Fig. 1 in story); Ralph Peplow—"Wagon Wheel," print (Fig. 4); Howard Warshaw—"Standing Figure," drawing (Fig. 2); Opposite page: Robert McIntosh—"Pomegranate," water-color (Fig. 3); Pegot Waring—"Grasshopper," sculpture (Fig. 5).

