

# ABSTRACT vs. CONCRETE

By JEAN CHARLOT

In a world so topsy turvy that labels are far from describing the goods they cover, where for example, "peace mediation" means an act of war, we must not be surprised that in our own smaller world of art, similar double talk exists. Thus the artist who refuses to tell a lie, who wants pigment to be no more than pigment, lines to mean only lines, and pictures to proclaim that they are but gesso or canvas daubed with a coat of paint, this artist becomes "abstract," with all the nebulous, spiritualistic and ectoplasmic innuendos that such a word suggests.

On the other hand the man, who far from calling a spade a spade, wants to pass his blob of paint for a cow, or a sunset, or the likeness of Aunt Mary, this man who tells you that flat is round, and near is far, is labeled a "realist."

If the issues remained in practice as clear cut as that, there would be no doubt that the abstract painter is the most reasonable of the two, for he deals in reality instead of mirage. But one cognizant of all the "isms" knows that they span the gap between concrete and abstract by imperceptible transitions, so that they may all be covered by the juggling of two percentages, those two ingredients that are to be found in all works of art, Nature and X. Even within the purest non-objective art does subject matter raise its ugly head, and even the most photographic performance differs from Nature's achievements.

The Philistine who enters the portals of the museum where the Art of the Future is stored, finds that instead of enjoying such pictures as "frozen music," he specu-

## Student Council Symposium

Jean Charlot will be one of the principal speakers at the Symposium, "Subject Matter In Art," sponsored by the Student Council of the Art Students' League to be held on Wednesday evening, April 9, in the League Gallery.

The symposium has been designed to cover the several principal approaches to present-day art. Speakers identified with the realist, abstract and surrealist approaches have been invited to speak on that evening.

lates on such idle facts as whether circles are not intended as balloons, moons or cheese, verticals as trees or gutterpipes, diagonals as rain or Jacob's ladder, and if free-hand scribbles are not in fact frozen microbes. If pictures could exist without an onlooker, the pristine purity of abstract art could be guaranteed, but alas the human eye that catalyzes the painting is an impure channel, trained by daily habit to interpret colored areas in function of subject matter, to judge distance in terms of change of scale as well as dimming of hues, to sum up in the ever changing arc of a mouth all human emotions from laughter to drama.

The optical projection of a painting is the sine-qua-non of its being a painting at all, and automatically means the intro-

duction (valid or not) in all paintings of problems in subject matter. It is better for the painter to deal with this truth instead of denying it. Once acknowledged as a factor always present, subject matter can be mastered for plastic purpose, as one deals with the other chemical and optical ingredients of the picture.

On the other hand, however perfect the illusion in a "realistic" picture, it remains quite distinct from reality. To the riddle, "What is it that has ears and cannot hear, eyes and cannot see, legs and cannot walk?" an answer as true as the accepted one is "A painted donkey." It illustrates the fact that art breeds, willy-nilly, abstract monsters, abstract inasmuch as they are unfit for practical purposes. No man could be so singularly naive as to confuse a cow by Cuypp for one that could be milked; only the birds fancied that there was nourishment in the grapes of Zeuxis.

The gap between abstract and realistic painting exists only in our reading of them. Pictures the most ridden with subject matter, let us say the "Austerlitz" of Meissonier, are made of exactly the same plastic elements as pictures most devoid of it, for example, Malevich's "White on White." Both are a complex of lines, areas, colors, values, textures, the only difference being qualitative, one of size, number, affinity and contrast. But one thing happens in this particular case that happens also to humans: the one that was intent on spinning a heroic yarn neglected his shape, and thus became a comical sight.

The old masters have proved that one can perfect both a dream and a shape, that there is no incompatibility between formal balance and heroic thoughts, that in fact a great idea is more fittingly clothed in plastic impeccability. The man who looks at their paintings hurdles over the

problem of subject matter all at once, because of the clarity of exposition and lack of equivocation. He is then cleansed, and free to appreciate the picture for its plasticity only.

Modern art, when it tackles subject matter at all, favors its most invertebrate categories: a bowl of fruits, a napkin, a guitar, a nude, and does so with such deviations from natural appearances that most of the time we look at the picture as passed in comparing our own optical experience of the model with its esthetic "deformation." One is thus made prisoner of the subject matter that should be but a prologue <sup>to</sup> of esthetic enjoyment.

Rarely does modern art aspire to what the ancients proudly called "historical painting," that is the telling of great events and of exalted fables. It may be that the trivial content and equivocal treatment of contemporary subject matter justifies as logical its total disappearance, and that abstract art is fated to be the art of the future. The other alternative is that subject matter must increase in interest, complexity and emotional content, that there will be a re-emergence in modern terms of the higher genres represented in the past by the St. Francis series of Giotto and the Loggias of Raphael.

**JEAN CHARLOT**, League instructor in mural and fresco painting, has written extensively for publication. He is the author, "From the Mayans to Disney," published by Sheed & Ward, New York, 1939. He is widely known for his frescos commissioned by the Government of Mexico.

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THE ART STUDENTS LEAGUE OF NEW YORK

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