

ART

All-American

THE pioneer Tribal Arts show of 1931 marked a turning point in the appreciation of United States Indian arts. An effort was made to assess their æsthetic value rather than to tolerate them as scientific specimens or as tourist curios. The show now current at the Museum of Modern Art finds Americans stranded on their own continent in recoil from a beset world; the patriotic angle may well weigh the scales in favor of these hundred-per-centers of American art, beside whom even Thomas Craven's roster of Americans acquires an immigrant flavor. However genuine our pride in the æsthetic achievements of the Indian, it should be tinged with introspective compunction: some of the objects now on exhibit were "collected" by our War Department, presumably as spoils, while the cover of the extensive catalogue is a shield design that pictures a bear charging fearlessly into the thick of a salvo of United States bullets.

Least we be accused of sighing for bygone days, let us add that the coming of the white man had also its beneficent influence. The sculptors of the Northwest boomed into a renaissance with the importation of metal tools; to the paleface the plains hunter owes his horse, the forest Indian his beadwork, the Navajo his silversmithing.

That a museum dedicated to modern art stages this show is no haphazard event, for Indian crafts are one of the sources of our own modern style. Amédée Ozenfant, whom I met at the opening, suggested mischievously that Indians were imitating Picasso; but it is a fact that Chilkat blankets were admired by early Cubists as the living tradition on to which their own plastic inventions were grafted, while the distorted spirit masks of the Eskimos, conceived in visions induced by fasting or

by drugs, receive today the praise of orthodox surrealists. The élite of each succeeding generation may flirt with what in the vast and complex body of aboriginal art approximates most its fancy of the day, yet, at its best, it far transcends such modish standards.

As is the case in our own art history, where the golden age lies in the past, Indian Michelangelos have long been dead. Unlike its modern counterpart, struggling in a morass of folklore, prehistoric Indian sculpture exhibits a beauty of form strikingly set forth against an unfocused background of ritual pageants that no explorer scooped. Its might is at its best in the group of eastern pipes for the most part made from hardened clay, a material that suggests in spite of direct carving the caress of the modeling thumb. Some artists, relying on texture and geometric shape alone, root the cylinder of the bowl into the leaf shape of the stem at an angle evolved through centuries of use; such specimens match in their functional purity that other great civilized achievement—an English briar pipe. For those less puristically inclined, pipes adorned with animal shapes combine uniquely the observed vivaciousness of animal life, the Egyptian dignity of monolithic masses, with details of minute refinement; for example, the interplay of crossed wing tips and tail feathers on the back of a crested duck, or the wet ripple of muscles on the otter catching its prey.

For the critic who can measure an artist's size only as he matches his skill, Greek-like, against the proportions of the human body, a pipe from Adena Mound erects a chanting warrior whose eight inches of height have been enlarged by the impresario of the show into a photo-mural of heroic size without losing a mite of its compact humaneness. A Mexican influence has been advanced for this piece, but it shows none of the loss of power that provincial art is bound to show, so far-flung from its center of civilization.

All Indian fine arts came into being as side-products of some utilitarian instincts, if one postulates the practical validity of religious instinct. Owing to this lack of cleavage between fine and applied arts, one is dragged imperceptibly in this exhibition from the consideration of the sublime to a limbo of moose-hair embroidery, porcupine-quill mosaics, ribbon appliqué, that prove the squaw a potential subscriber to the *Ladies' Home Companion*.

Indian artists have an amphibian gift

of moving at ease among abstract as well as realistic pursuits. In its rare bonafide examples, realism is used for purposes of farce, fable, or history, but most often is a not undignified pandering to the taste of the paleface. Objects classed by our standards as great examples of Indian art—the bear woman suckling her child, the mask of a maiden, the dancing medicine-man—were pot-boilers in the eyes of their makers. The deepest thrust of the Indian mind, the language it chooses to exalt its clan pride, wield magic power, or address the gods, is the language of abstract art: thus the Zuni amuse their children with dolls that are acceptable sculptures by our standards, while the fearful image of their war-god is hewn in such austere primitive style that we despise it as childish; the Eskimo humors his baby with teething-toys that we treasure as ivory statuettes, while his religious masks, carved to perpetuate lofty visions, remain for us shapeless.

One must discard such labels as realistic and abstract if one is to share further the Indian point of view. To illustrate without departing from the organic world: the "abstract" art of the Northwest is more deeply realistic than is the formula for reality in our art. The Haida painter splits the creature he paints and exhibits its innards too—heart, liver, stomach. For not only has he seen the bear and the whale, but he has hunted both, has killed, quartered and cooked them, and his painting sums up the knowledge acquired through all senses and his brain; while the white man is satisfied that he represents a creature when all he describes is its outer bag of skin. One is reminded of the visitor who asked Picasso, apropos of a "still-life with fish," how the fish kept while the work was in progress and of the artist's admission, "I ate it first."

Unfamiliar as we are with the Indian mode of life, our natural reaction to this show is to stress its picturesque and romantic connotations; but the Indian artist manages to assert his greatness within an accepted frame of tribal norms. The pipe-carver, basket-weaver, or sand-painter does not seem to suffer from the infirmity of our own artists who strengthen their personality insofar as they weaken the thread between their work and tradition. The spiritual content that loads the Indian work, a manual perfection deepened by technical impediments, the balance obtained between objective conventions and the personal quota of individual genius, mark the attitude of the Indian artist

as one of classical integrity. It is on such a plane that this show may bear valid fruits, rather than in a shop-window revival of feather-work and leather tooling.

Though the choice of individual specimens is impeccable, one would wish to admire with more confidence the murals from Awatovi; the original fragment exhibited, as sensitive as a Paul Klee, does not jibe with the cocksureness of the restoration.

The show is staged with ingratiating versatility, even if inverted lighting increases the Hallowe'en note of the collection of masks, rather than furthers an understanding of their beautiful carving. While most will justly delight in the surprises strewn in their path, the serious student may grumble a bit as he is made to *grop* his way through dim-lit detours. But serious students have already visited the Museum of Natural History and the Heye Museum of the American Indian, where many of the treasures exhibited here managed, up to now, to escape popular adulation.

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