

# The Golden Period of Edna Manley's work

EDNA MANLEY'S love of the Jamaican mountains, especially the St. Andrew hills where she spent so many happy years with her late husband, Norman Washington Manley, is well known to all those who have been privileged to be a friend and acquaintance of the island's leading woman sculptor.



But with the passing of N.W., Mrs. Manley doesn't go to the hills anymore. And right now, she doesn't think she ever will, because memories are too painful. Yet, ironically, nearly all of the 30 drawings which she will have on exhibition at the Bolivar Gallery, Grove Road, from February 26, was done in the hills.

The collection covers the years 1937 — 1967, a span which has come to be known as the Golden Period of Edna Manley's work. A significant inclusion is an entirely new creation, "The Angel", which was created earlier this year and is Mrs. Manley's first artistic work since the October death of her husband.

All this has combined to create excitement in the local art world. None of the drawings has been exhibited before, "for sentimental reasons", says the artist. The news also that the drawings will be for sale is another source of interest for art lovers who already recognize the works as collectors items.

There have been roughly four significant periods in the artistic life of Edna Manley. Although each era is defined, it is also pointed out that each shades imperceptibly into the other.

## PERIODS

The first decade or so from 1923 witnessed her response to the Jamaican people in terms of form, beauty and their quality as people without particular reference to their situation in social terms. This period began with the "Best Seller" which is now in Canada, a bronze which was exhibited at the London Group in 1924. It included her monumental 10' "Eve" carved in 1928 and exhibited at the French Gallery in London in 1929. This work is now in England. The period ended, more or less, with "Sixteen", a torso owned by the English Author Hugh Walpole and "The Man With The Bird".

The Poet, Shelley, once remarked that the artist is the prophet of revolution. The second phase of Edna Manley's work involved an intense period of social commentary in which she seemed to sense the gathering storm which erupted in 1938 and her work became both a commentary on the conditions that created that storm and the popular awakening that made it inevitable.

Beginning with the famous "Negro Aroused" carved in 1936 and now at the Institute of Jamaica, this second period included her controversial "Prophet" owned by Eustace Myers in Nassau. The period ended with "Strike" which is at Knox College. Once the storm had happened and Jamaica was launched upon the period of political and social change which continues to unfold around us, Edna Manley's

attention turned subtly from the expression of the people themselves as a subject in itself, to the expression of the environment which had produced them.

She then entered upon 20 years of what has been called her Golden Period... beginning with her most famous piece which has been seen in many countries of the world and is perhaps the most critically acclaimed of her works — "The Horse of the Morning".

## SCULPTURE

The famous Sociologist, Madeline Kerr, writing in the prestigious *Studio* magazine quotes from a letter written by Edna Manley herself in which she describes sculpture in the following terms:

"Sculpture is the art of the archetype. It springs from the collective experience of the past and that is why sculpture, of all the arts, tends to use certain forms and certain types... This is not imitativeness but merely because the emotions that come most naturally to him to express, spring from the same source and come to him through the same archetypes. To express these emotions for his own time and society and to make them explicit will give them that new and added slant that will make the sculpture old and new at the same time..."

This third era is marked by a compulsive lyrical outpouring in which she explores with a mystic's insight, the relationship between man and nature and between nature and the universe, but above all, the processes of personal development and growth as part of the universal experience of mankind.

It is this period of her work that is best represented by the drawings in the forthcoming exhibition. The "Dying God" series explores the universal cycle of youth and age — innocence and experience. In this period, the sun and moon, men and women, the earth, the people become interchangeable symbols as the inner unity, the essential harmony of the universe itself is perceived as both the product and the author of the artist's experience. Apart from the intense intellectual progression of the "Dying God" series the Golden period was notable for works like "Sun and Earth", "The Moon", "The Land", "The Fiery Furnace" and may be said to end with "The Rising Sun", which is at the University of the West Indies.

## RELIGIOUS IN MOOD

THE FOURTH period which stretches roughly from 1957 to the last illness of her husband, was marked by a much slower output. Devoting most of her time to political work as her husband became Chief Minister, Premier and Leader of the Opposition... in turn, Edna Manley carved only on commission.

Here the work becomes predominantly religious in mood as she seeks to relate the world and experience of the Bible to her Jamaican environment on the one hand, and her personal exploration of the universal truths on the other.

The period begins with "The Crucifixion" in 1947 which is at All Saints Church and the face of which is regarded by the artist herself as her finest bit of carving. It was carved immediately after her husband's imprisonment by the United States authorities on Ellis Island and seems to express that level of anguish in which faith is tested to the limit of endurance.

This group includes "The Bush That Was Not Consumed" at the Webster Memorial Church, "Mary" at the Holy Cross Church, Half Way Tree, "Mother and Child" at the Children's Hospital, "Eve and the Serpent" which was presented to the government of Canada, "Moses" owned by Aaron Matelon and "Paul Bogle" in front of the Morant Bay Court House.

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