

MANLEY, EDNA

A NEW FORM IN SCULPTURE

THINKING ABOUT Edna

Manley's latest work, titled FAUN, which I shall describe in a moment. I am tempted to give a distinct name to what I feel is a new form in sculpture: FREE BAS-RELIEF. She has made, of course, in the past other sculptures in this technique yet the originality of the form eluded me, even though I fully acknowledge their importance. Having coined bravely a new term in art I now propose to explain how I arrived at it.

Relief sculpture, and here I quote from *A Dictionary of Art and Artists*, "is that which is not free-standing and, in having a background, approximates to the condition of painting. There are several names to indicate the varying depths of projection, ranging from alto rilievo, or high relief — which is almost detached from the ground — through mezzo rilievo to bas-relief (basso rilievo), and further still to rilievo staccato (or schiacciato) which is scarcely more than scratched." So much for the definition of relief sculpture and there is no suggestion in it of the type of bas-relief that Edna Manley has created.

Indeed, her bas-reliefs are quite different and in a class of their own, for having no backgrounds they do not approximate to the condition of painting. Although they can be hung on a wall like pictures they are really like cut-out fragments of conventional bas-reliefs and therefore free-standing to some, if not full, extent. But to call them "free-standing bas-reliefs" would be going too far, (and a contradiction in terms) while free Bas-reliefs seems just right.

BUT HOW DID EDNA MANLEY arrive at this new form in sculpture? Who was it that, consciously or otherwise, influenced her search for a new and highly personal means of expression?

I believe it was Auguste Rodin (1840-1917), the most celebrated sculptor of the late 19th century, whose statues had such lifelike quality and accuracy of anatomical proportions that one of them, Bronze Age gave rise to a malicious accusation that it had been made from a cast taken from a live model. He also created a new form, the fragment as a finished work, mainly a head and trunk or simply a pair of hands, as well as unfinished figures (in this he was himself influenced by Michelangelo) finishing only parts of them and leaving others embedded in the rough block. He thus distilled the essences of emotions and movements which could not be obtained in conventional works.

by Ignacy Eker

Nevertheless, they were all tri-dimensional sculptures and his only bas-relief, Gate of Hell, commissioned in 1880 as a door for the Ecole de Arts Decoratifs, was never completed: it was a conventional work, the door itself providing the background like in a painting to a turbulent mass of figures.

Edna Manley's bas-reliefs, on the other hand, have no backgrounds (there is only one that I can think of that has) and can be therefore regarded as unique creations. Indeed, they carry on Rodin's process of distillation of essences of movements and emotions a stage further and penetrate to the very main spring of them. This is certainly true of Growth, an early work, and The Angel, a recent one; and even more so of the Faun, her latest piece.

Carved in mahogany, it consists of head and hands only, and the hands are so placed as to form a base for the head. Their modelling is slight so as not to divert attention from the face — the face of a wild-looking yet strangely attractive young man, whose forehead is framed in luxuriant mass of hair with two somewhat ambiguous shapes on either side of it that could be horns or ears.

AS I LOOKED at it on a late

Sunday afternoon it seemed to gather to itself in a dimming light the fleeting shadows of the studio's darkening interior, and with them all the sorrow and sadness of existence. The taut face, the rigid hands with long, upward-straining fingers and especially the emotively enlarged eyes with their anxious, side-long gaze seemed to be gripped by a strange fear. But what the fear was of I could not tell: perhaps of the passing of youth, or loss of carefree innocence, or perhaps even of death. Of all of Edna Manley's works this one is, one one feels, the most romantic; and therefore the most enigmatic.

WE HAVE NO MUSEUMS or galleries in which paintings of old and modern masters are displayed for the edification of art students and the public, and this, of course, is a great pity. Indeed the situation might have been grim if it were not for the availability of reproductions which, if never completely successful, at least give the viewer some idea of what these great pictures are like. Surely the purists are wrong in insisting that only the original works should be studied; for in our

situation some compromise seems quite justified.

The current exhibition of reproductions of famous paintings (coming from the Institute Collection) at the Art Gallery of the Institute of Jamaica, bears out my argument; for not only does it offer an impressive range of old and modern works, but surprises pleasantly with a reasonable standard of prints produced by New-York Graphic Society, publishers of Fine Art.

In the traditional section I was delighted to find a great favourite of mine, Giovanni Bellini's St. Francis in Ecstasy. The saint is standing in front of his hermit's cave gazing in wonderment at the vaulting sky, his arms outstretched as if he wants to embrace the whole world. Notwithstanding the rules of perspective the entire landscape, even in the far-away distance, can be seen with marvellous clarity: the donkey and the heron by the winding stream in the middle distance; the castle on the hill and the shepherd with his flock of sheep grazing beside its walls in the background; the trees and rocks, every blade and leaf glistening, are carefully observed and painted with the

same loving care; they proclaim a mystical parity of nature.

ECSTASY, TOO, is the subject of El Greco's The Virgin with Saint Ines and Saint Tecla, though here there is no serenity or repose. The figures have elongated limbs and seem consumed by a nervous tension. Even the draperies swathing them appear to have a life of their own. On them like on powerful wings the figures are borne heavenward. By contrast, Rembrandt's Philosopher is self-absorbed in quiet contemplation and the mysterious interplay of light on his face reflects this mood. It is an extraordinarily perceptive psychological study, as well as a revelation of profound emotion.

The art of Giorgione, Raphael, Leonardo da Vinci and Tintoretto can also be studied from their finest paintings, especially Tintoretto's whose Christ at the Sea of Galilee with its overcast skies and storm-driven waves is one of the most dramatic scenes on view; and among the moderns one encounters such household names as Van Gogh, Gauguin, Matisse, Modigliani, Picasso. But how insignificant they all seem when compared with the giants of the past. Degas alone can bear comparison with their genius and his Dancers at the Practice Bar shimmer like the wings of a magnificent butterfly.

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