

Albert Huie's Murals

Artists and patrons

By...Ignacy Eker

IN HIS FRESCOES at Santa Maria Novella and San Gimignano, Domenico Ghirlandaio (1449-1494) included those who commissioned him among the religious figures portrayed. Thus he became a chronicler of the Florentine society of his day and the originator of a new pictorial conception.

It would be impossible in the length of these columns to mention all the variants of the ancient custom which enable the artist to introduce the figure of his patron into a picture, of which the subject-matter is usually a narrative charged with dramatic force. Suffice it to say that the patron — or his family — have been portrayed at first in religious pictures, later as rather theatrical personages in dramatic settings, and in recent times as revolutionary leaders and architects of progress.

Thus in executing the mural which decorates the committee room of Commodity Service Company, Albert Huie has followed an ancient tradition by placing at the

apex of the composition the portrait of the late Joseph Isaac Matalon, father of the founders of many well-known Jamaican enterprises.

The first thing one notices about the mural is its colour, earthy and raked with brilliant flashes achieving an effect of warmth, so characteristic of the Jamaican scene. Next, one's vision is assailed by a complex structure, each section a distinct narrative yet fused and integrated to form a pattern as rich and involved as a Persian carpet. But the eye does not merely follow the intricate contours, for every now and then a window opens, as it were, and one is led into the picture space, a perspective which can be "read" in depth. This freedom in the manipulation of volumes is perhaps the most remarkable feature of the mural, attesting the artist's virtuosity.

Having surveyed the overall construction one is now ready to examine the mural in detail. In the lower left-hand plane an early-barter-system scene is enacted, in which pots are exchanged for corn, cloth for fruit and vegetables, and tobacco for chickens. This group supports — visually — a scene which shows a port with its mechanical facilities, intimating the profound change and development that have taken place.

Directly below the portrait the pictorial space is divided into two sections. The group to the left — a couple
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with children — stand helpless and desolate while the bulldozers demolish the old shack in which they were living, contrasting sharply with the group to the right representing those who have worked and planned for their future. The right-hand side of the mural shows a primitive method of making chocolate with the gathering, drying and roasting of beans, and the final rolling into cakes. This scene again contrasts with modern industries shown at the top right-hand corner.

Presented, then to the viewer is the story of Jamaica's progress, and who but the gloomiest of pessimists would question it. Moreover, the narrative has been conveyed in a visual language that is precise and unique, exciting, and so convincing that we believe it implicitly.

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