

Painting in Trinidad - Carlisle Chang

There is hardly anybody we know at present with sufficient knowledge of painting or of the art movements in the various West Indian territories, and with sufficient familiarity with the work which has been done there over the years to speak on West Indian Art as a whole. But perhaps the things which I will say to you about painting in Trinidad could be applied to, and will have some bearing on the whole outlook of painting in the West Indies.

We are accustomed to think that Trinidad has one of the most vital movements in painting in the entire British Caribbean. Whether that is so or not, I am not in any position to say, but certainly when you have seen the slides and when I recount to you something of the history of painting here, you will begin to understand the tremendous vitality and the enormous amount of work which has been done in a very short time.

Now there is another point I wish to clear up. Any talk on painting as such is a very difficult thing, because one is apt to become involved in problems of semantics. When I say 'abstract expressionism' to you it may conjure up certain ideas or images in your mind which will be quite different from what I myself may be speaking about. Then there is a third problem, that in order to refresh your memory about the pictures we are going to be discussing we will have to see some slides.

Now I want to take your minds back to 1863 when the first Salon des Refuses was held in Paris and the Impressionists first appeared on the scene. Following the Impressionists came the Fauves among whom was a man named Gauguin. After the Fauves came Braque and Picasso, and the modern movement culminated by the end of the First World War. By that time all our adherence to traditional painting and our original concepts of painting as art had become obsolete. I take you back that far because I want you to see ourselves in relation to that time and what that relationship meant to us.

In Trinidad, before 1930, there was hardly any practice of painting at all. One is left to assume that it was more a sort of genteel pastime, like sewing or embroidery for girls or lessons on the violin for a boy. Ours was a society with eyes fixed on Europe, adapting external experience willy-nilly without references to the conditions which obtained here. What was the society doing then? We were feeling the effects of the American depression. Oil was a bit stable, promising, and optimistic; sugar had begun to falter; cocoa had begun to die. Yet it was a society which only a short while before, at the turn of the century, was building mansions around the Queen's Park Savannah and had begun to show the signs of being affluent. Nonetheless, prior to 1930 there was no active participation in painting so that our painting history is really only thirty-three years old.

Now about that time, around 1930, came to live here a young Englishwoman who, bored with the general apathy and lack of activity in the arts, turned first her attention to music, for there was already a choir and orchestra attached to the Royal Victoria Institute. But this woman had much wider interests. She was interested in the drama, in handicraft, in painting to a certain extent, and batik, a form of Far Eastern painting on fabric derived from Java, Sumatra and Siam. The woman was Alice Pashley, and the reason I mention her is not because she became a painter of any great standing but because she was the forerunner, and because of her encouragement and steadfast support throughout the years, the painting movement in Trinidad became what it now is.

There was also at the same time a young lady from Princes Town. She was a Chinese who had spent some time in China where she had learnt to paint in the Chinese manner and then returned to Trinidad. At first all her work was confined to drawing in black and white and this still remains some of the strongest expressions of her work, though of course she did turn to painting eventually. These two people were supported by a few interested persons who had come from abroad - men of culture, men in the professions who had acquired a taste for painting in Europe and who now turned their attention to supporting the arts.

Then an interesting development took place. There appeared in Trinidad, also about 1930, a young Chinese girl who had studied to be an artist and who now took up a post as Journalist at the Trinidad Guardian. She wrote under the pseudonym of the White Rabbit, much like Macaw of the present day. She was pungent, witty, and forthright and brooked no opposition, and it was significant that she chose the White Rabbit because all the people at the time connected with art had expected to find some sort of wonderland here. Within a week of her arrival, a young man also re-appeared on the scene. He had shown great aptitude as a young painter and had been sent to New York to study. He hated the place and returned after only eighteen months.

These were the first actors on the stage - Alice Pashley, the English woman of Quaker descent; Amy Leong Pang, the Chinese girl from Princes Town; Ivy Achoy, the journalist, and Hugh Stollmeyer - and the first portion of this history deals with what occurred to them. The conjunction of these people, one could imagine, was something electric. Not only were they drawn together by common sympathies and a great friendship, but they were welded together by an overwhelming unsympathetic attitude on the part of the general public to anything they had to offer. Within a year they had consolidated themselves into what they called the Society of Trinidad Independents, taking their cue from Paris, and the biggest influences on their work were probably Matisse and Gauguin. Without any teaching most of them had to struggle their way through, but they were a prolific lot and possessed of a sort of missionary zeal. At one exhibition we find Hugh Stollmeyer presenting 55 works, Leong Pang 28. Their influences were drawn from Paris but their thoughts turned first of all to Trinidad.

Amy Leong Pang is important from the reason not only of her painting but because of the unabated friendship and encouragement which she gave; but really the finest exponent of the group was Hugh Stollmeyer. Stollmeyer was gifted with both talent and intellect. He had tremendous imagination, coloured with a quality of mysticism which led him to be influenced by Hinduism. His themes derived from native folklore and superstition and he produced a notable series of paintings and drawings based on the goat symbol. He was also the first person to experiment with concrete sculpture, until eventually he became absorbed with flat painting.

To give you some idea of what the group was faced with; in 1933 a Russian painter by the name of Vassilieff arrived on an Itinerant tour and was not allowed to bring his paintings through customs. Why? Because many of them were studies of the nude. This was grist for the Independents' mill, and they plunged wholeheartedly into a fight for the liberation of the artist. It was a fight which inevitably destroyed the movement.

They used to exhibit on the top floor of the Home Industries Building, at the place now occupied by B.W.I.A. building on Frederick Street, in what was known as the Garret Galleries, and tremendous controversy raged in the press about their activities. Mothers were exhorted "don't let your children cross their doors lest what they see will shock and demoralize them". I mention this because it is a fight which continued for twenty years and had the unfortunate results of destroying any attempt to inculcate drawing, particularly from life, in Trinidad. Eventually, completely demoralised by public opinion, some of these early painters exiled themselves, some turned inward never to paint again. Pashley turned again to music although she did not completely withdraw, and by 1938 the movement was almost dead.

In 1939, Miss Leong Pang, attempting to resuscitate the movement, organized an exhibition at what was known as the Tropical Trades on St. Vincent Street - a sort of handicraft shop - and it is significant that among those who attended the opening was the then Director of Education. But also on that occasion three new painters appeared. One was Atteck; the other Boscoe Holder; the third, Chang. For a time after 1939, the fortunes of painting fluctuated considerably. There was a lot of spasmodic activity and moving in cliques wherever one could find support for one's work. The Trinidad Guardian later in 1939 produced a comprehensive exhibition at the Royal Victoria Institute at which the total number of exhibitors was amazing. No one expected that only seven years since the formation of the Society of Independents such large-scale activity had begun to occur.

Came the war in 1939, and with it still more trouble for the art movement. There were, however, a number of people who patronized and encouraged the artist, people who had come in to settle or to work here during the war, not the least among them being some of the personnel attached to the Censorship Department. I mention this because throughout this little story, slightly romanticized, you

will hear time and again of the debt we owe to many who were not born in Trinidad but who loved art. The fortunes of painting fluctuated and it was not until 1945, that under the inspiration of Sybil Atteck, an Art Society was formed. There were twelve other persons connected with the formation of this Society who had met over a period of many months to discuss the situation and who finally decided that something must be done about it.

I want to read you the names of these people. There was Andrew Carr who had turned from his interests in folklore now to support the arts. There was Algernon Wharton, a lawyer, who had long supported the movement and now became a founding member of the new Society. There was a Mr. Palmer Chizzola, father of Marie Palmer Chizzola the ballet mistress. Mr. F. D. Gray, then connected with the British Council; Mrs. Robert Johnstone and Alice Pashley who had become fast friends through their interest in music; a Mrs. Faulkner from the Imperial College of Tropical Agriculture where her husband was, - I believe, the then Principal; a Mrs. Bedell, Miss E. C. Legge, Amy Leong Pang, Anne Henderson who is still actively teaching, Patricia and Sybil Atteck.

Miss Sybil Atteck, President of the Society wrote at Independence time a review of the Society's early growth and work, in which is recorded the great amount of help that was given to the Society in its formative stages. Money to establish it came largely from the British Council, some \$480.00, and from the Guardian Exhibition of 1939, \$151.00. The Society was set up in out buildings of the British Council's premises at Whitehall. Shortly after forming the Society Sybil went to Washington University, where she studied painting under the expressionist Max Beckmann. She also travelled to London, to Peru, to Mexico and her career was extremely varied. She was away for three years.

By that time Boscoe Holder, a contemporary of mine, who used to pass the time in class drawing copies of Esquire girls, had begun to establish himself. From the onset he had a sensuous interest in the figure, and these copies were the beginnings of his training in drawing as it has been for most of us today. Boscoe's work was very popular, but before long public opinion drove him from studies of the nude and he began to clothe his figures in superficial, exotic garments that were little more than traditional. During the war he turned his attention to the dance. He was an extremely versatile young man in a country where the artists have had to excel in other fields to survive. Perhaps dance afforded a more immediate public response, but also it was necessary to live, and during the war Boscoe performed regularly in various clubs without relinquishing his painting. In fact, it was at this time under the patronage of the Americans resident here that he produced his finest paintings. Finally, in 1949, Boscoe left Trinidad for the United Kingdom and thereafter devoted his attention almost entirely to dancing.

In Trinidad we are apt to refer to Boscoe as a painter. I think of Boscoe mainly as a painter of some chronological importance. He did his job well while he was here but in England his work as a painter almost rumbled into a heap because there it was necessary to survive on his own efforts, and easier in the field of popular entertainment than in art. Boscoe took his inspiration from classical painting of the nineteenth century rather than from Impressionists as is generally believed. He was a product of a mode of thought and attitude to painting current in England and France during the first half of the nineteenth century and it is for this reason that, to my mind he failed. It is true that he has produced extremely fine paintings; very charming pictures, but when you emulate a style which is past you must do it superbly well. Now we must remember that Boscoe was entirely self-taught. Although he had received some little tuition from Alice Pashley and had learnt rapidly through his association with others then painting, he had to learn from scratch, and this training was insufficient to develop more than a superficial expression.

Boscoe, however, seriously influenced the work of his younger brother, Geoffrey, who had developed in much the same way with the same eclecticism and versatile talent. Geoffrey was interested in dance, in painting and later in photography. At first it was difficult to differentiate their work and it was for that reason that Geoffrey adopted the mannerism of the long neck. Instantly there were cries of "Oh, influence of Modigliani!" Wonderful! He was following in the footsteps of a master. But basically it was because Geoffrey wished to get away from the shadow of his older brother who was then the more popular of the two. Soon Geoffrey was producing his own dance group, choreographing, costuming, and photographing, all with surprising virtuosity. Then he left for the United States, two years after his brother, where he has been extremely successful both as a painter and dancer.

These two young men are people one must watch for the simple reason that they, more than any other artists, exemplify the versatility of the Trinidadian, the facility of expression of the Trinidadian, but with the

inevitable results that one would expect. What they did was done very well, but not superbly well enough. Boscoe and Geoffrey influenced Cicely Forde and she too turned to the night club as a singer and then left Trinidad for Europe. With the departure of these three young painters that form of painting died and with it went some of the joy of painting which was in Trinidad.

Thereafter, new protagonists appear on the scene. Shortly before the two Holders left here, a gentleman by the name of Agostini had been sent away on a scholarship to study lithographic printing. In England he was influenced by a group of artist friends and when he came back he began to paint. But Agostini did not start where anyone else had begun before. He started from abstract painting; derivative, subjective, but none the less abstract. And he was the first person to represent abstraction in Trinidad. Atteck returned from her studies in 1948 and held an exhibition in these rooms. That exhibition was slated in the Press, and once again public opinion played a very severe part in destroying the artist for thereafter Atteck turned inwards in a manner from which she had not entirely yet recovered. But one of the important things that came out of that exhibition was that Chang was moved to paint with straight lines.

Now, in 1948 a young man named Alladin, who had been persuaded to exhibit with the Art Society by Mrs. Faulkner, received a British Council scholarship and went to England to study art teaching. He returned in 1950 at the same time that Agostini and Chang left, the first to New York and the other to London. I want to tell you that at that time there was a body of opinion which was searching for what it called the true West Indian painter. Even at such an early stage the federal concept had begun to filter into people's minds and with a sense of nationalism there was a great deal of controversy about who was the true representative painter of Trinidad. The discussion was as invalid then as it is today, but in the course of it tremendous hurt was caused and there was a great deal of coercion both by the critics and among the artists themselves, each one vying to be the Trinidad painter. Alladin took his cue largely from the genre themes then popular in Trinidad. He was a simple person and his subjects embraced the people of the countryside: the poor, the drunkard, and the destitute. It is a theme from which he has not moved very far and in fact may not move very far except that Alladin is wholly committed to art teaching and has begun to experiment with other forms and media.

Chang in the meanwhile had returned in August 1954. He had taken his line directly from the abstraction he had found in London at the time when spatial exercises had percolated into the teaching in art school. It was a rather mixed-up period but it had a definite drift and Chang began to turn his back more and more on the simple scenes that once he used to portray. There was too in London from 1951 a girl who had not painted previously and her name was Nina Lamming. Nina, as she signs her paintings, studied for a short while at evening classes and then returned to Trinidad in 1955. She too fell under the influence of the new movements then current in London.

In Trinidad, at the same time, there was a young man, virtually self-taught, but who had received some lessons from Atteck. His early work, like Alladin, was cast in the genre mould and he too was being sponsored as a true representative of Trinidad painting. His name was Joseph Cromwell. He left Trinidad in 1957 for England and within a few months of formal study there his paintings began to show a greater coordination and strength. Instead of the imprecise detail of much of his early paintings in Trinidad, the influence of the modern school was evident in the monumental qualities introduced in his figures. Unfortunately we have lost track of Cromwell and have had no news of his progress for some little time.

In the years following the end of the last war, a new note of optimism had begun to creep in and with it art began to move upward. The artists became associated with a group of architects, one of whom was Colin Laird. As a painter, Colin deliberately expressed himself entirely in a non-objective manner with work derived from the kitchen-sink and constructivist schools. There followed in his wake another architect, Oswald Chase. Chase had been to Ulm, to the United States and England, and at Ulm he fell under the spell of this revival of the original Bauhaus which during and since the First World War had revolutionized the field of design throughout the world. Chase became a suprematist or completely non-objective painter. At first he practiced architecture, and then he turned to furniture design. He was a restless soul but also very versatile and productive. In a short time he realised that the suprematist style or the concrete style of painting was not for him. And because of the influence of the United States, he became an abstract expressionist.

In between all this there is another group of painters which one should bear in mind — a group of painters who had set themselves apart from all movements in art — individualists, and very highly so. Leo Basso,

naive primitive, and with him, Dominic Isaac. Later there came Dermot Louison; Louison falling within that school of thought which adhered primarily to technique, who had, it seemed, a fund of mysticism too, but who could not be classed entirely as a primitive.

In the United States, in the middle of the 1940s, a young American, having got tired of painting in a manner where his work seemed to derive from everyone else, started sloshing painting around. This was the beginning of the school of painting now being encouraged in the U.S. which was at first called "action painting". Action painting eradicated once and for all every vestige of what traditional painting should be, or rather what painting should be. The modern movement which had begun in Paris in 1863 had finally come to its close. Later on action painting was given the more respectable name of "abstract expressionism", because by then the first flush of revolution had begun to settle and artists began to realise that a form of painting based only on technique and accident was not entirely valid and that there were many more kinds of painters than those who would slosh paint around.

At the same time in the mid-forties in the school of Paris, the artists, becoming tired of spatial experiments or having exhausted them, turned to calligraphy and a style of painting based on the pure sensuous beauty of the brush-stroke. This was called *taschisal* and now this school has developed together with abstract expressionism into what is known as painting of the "informel." Precisely what the *informel* is I cannot tell you, it is far too new and there is very little to be read about it. But it seems to imply, to my mind, the synthesizing of all these schools or styles of painting that comprise the modern movement. It holds open the door to objective images in painting and this perhaps is the beginning of the swing back of the pendulum from pure non-objectivism. We could never be sure at this present time because already concrete painting has made tremendous advances though it still remains a highly academic exercise.

Action painting came to Trinidad with Chase. He did not receive much local support although there is a body of opinion which feels that Chase's form of painting has yet to find its roots in Trinidad. This is to be seen. I don't think it is possible for us to say at present. Chase, it seems to me, was looking for the form of expression which would come readily to his hand. He was also very much interested in theory and once you are interested in theory and technique you are bound to go the way of the International stream.

The painters of Trinidad, when Chase came on the scene, were unfortunately going through a sort of lull or hiatus which started in 1957 and grew out of the Gulf Caribbean Exhibition — the details of which I cannot give you because much of it is hearsay and cannot properly be read in an impersonal manner. But since 1957 to now the art movement in Trinidad has become embroiled in a sort of war of attrition. Sometimes it was between the artists and their supporters, at other times it was between the artists themselves, at present it seems to have the tendency to be between the artists and government. But suddenly, in 1960, Nina Lamming opened her gallery and for the first time we saw that, apart from those of us who were embroiled in all these theories of art, a new young group of painters were coming who were trying to learn as fast as they could whichever way they could. Some of their names are Bali, Boodhoo, Chen, Chu Foon and Chee. It's very curious how these Chinese crop up every once in a while.

Chen was the first and he was almost, I think almost entirely, self-taught. But Chen took his cue from Chang and so indirectly from Atteck. Without understanding why, he started to wrestle with non-objective painting or, perhaps I should say better, abstract painting. There were evidently other factors involved. One was Chen could not draw. He certainly could not draw the sort of genre picture which required a thorough knowledge of the figure, but his sketching notes abstract directly from the landscape. The response which he gave to landscape was something refreshing and something which had not been seen before. For the first time the artist turning inward saw his environment with a personal vision.

Chu Foon followed very closely but he, unlike Chen, is not given to the same sort of *laissez-faire*, let's call it. Chu Foon is a much more worried person about his art. Chen is serious but not so worried because he has other things to bolster him: a family, a good business, hardly any time in which to paint, but none the less serious. Chu Foon followed; and like all the others, Bali, Boodhoo, Lynch, Chee, there began a sort of competitive inspiration between these young painters. For the very first time we had a group of young painters, virtually self-taught, who were able to draw their knowledge

and influences from the people who had gone before them and who were still practising among them. And it was inevitable that they should be influenced by these people and also influence each other. As an example of the sort of pressures that were being brought to bear on the artists at this stage, I'd like to mention that at one time Chen was heavily attacked for being influenced by me. In fact he was accused of copying. It did not matter whether the boy had actually begun to take these things and make them his own. And in fact, as has been proven now, Chen has already made the style his own, developing it to a point which is probably much farther than I myself have been able to take it. But one of the interesting things about this situation was that at the Independence Exhibition in 1962, all the young painters of any serious intent were painting like Chen and Chu Foon.

This is the gist of the story of our history in painting. Thirty-three years is an extremely short time in which to look at it in this microscopic fashion. Movements in art are discussed long after these movements have died and it is the problem of history to do so. Schools of art, based on influence, are an invention of the historian and what in fact I have given you is something quite similar to that. But I do not wish you to feel that any of these painters still alive and working are in anything more than a formative stage of their careers. Most of us have painted, the older ones, only about twenty to thirty years, but the young ones, in most cases, only five, and it would be very wrong to apply the standards of one to the other. And now I think we'll have some slides so that your memories will be refreshed and you'll be able to see precisely what we've been talking about all along.

(Here Mr. Chang showed thirty slides of Trinidad paintings and gave a short commentary on each).

Now I have to sum up this lecture, and it's difficult to know where to start. One of the noticeable things is that Trinidadians are largely figure painters and not landscape painters. The tendency which now occurs for the young person to turn to landscape, to my mind, stems from the fact that he is unable to draw the figure. This is probably something which could very well recommend itself to the Art Society once again in these more enlightened times to attempt the establishment of a life class. There is no doubt about it that drawing is the structure on which painting is based. We are a people who are interested in people and it is useless having to scrub them out or disguise them, hoping that the spectator will not understand or discern, because what we are doing is being false to our art. And this is why I mentioned from the very beginning the struggle of the Independents against what I called the weight of public opinion and interference.

Another thing which I want to stress is the actual lack of painting technique. Nobody is to be blamed for this except perhaps our society, - and by that society I do not mean the Art Society. We unfortunately do not have the system of apprenticeship that existed for nearly four hundred years in Europe, nor do we have a school wherein we can train our artists. And it seems that something must be done to persuade Government that a school of Arts and Crafts, or call it a School of Fine and Applied Art, should be founded in this country. *(In Jamaica, the Da Costa Institute, a school of arts and crafts, was founded in 1950 with government support. - Ed.)* If we recognize the fact that we have a vast fund of talent - and I don't think you could fail to be impressed by what you saw just now which are only thirty slides and represent an infinitesimal part of what has been done in thirty years - you cannot but be impressed. But there are reasons for having it not just a School of Fine Art, as it is hardly likely that for a long time this country can support any large number of fine artists. We will have to turn our attention to the crafts as is happening elsewhere in the world today where every painter has a craft. This will have the added advantage of inculcating the value of craftsmanship in painting.

And now I'll read you a bit which is a little high-flown, but you'll bear with me. The innovations of Picasso, the sculpture of Palozzi, the calligraphy of Mathieu, the revolutionary sweep of action painting, are expressions of the ferment and restlessness of the age in which we live. The search for a new stability and new criteria has crystallized in abstract expressionism and the informal. It has created an entirely new vocabulary of painting, a wider and overwhelming repertoire in which craft is once more an integral part of art, and it has swept away all the anachronistic ideas as to the intention of the painter. This has given rise to internationalism in art on a scale hitherto unknown. Art has never recognized national boundaries. It often flourishes where many streams of people meet. It thrives on waves of exchange and influence, and any tendency to isolation in the past has only served to stultify the native genius and has resulted in idiosyncrasy. This was the case with Russia up to the 14th century, where they only produced for several hundreds of years very charming but monotonous icons. It was also true of Egypt for a totally different reason for several thousands of years.

We ourselves are fortunate to be not as isolated as we thought. Already we are being drawn into the international current. We are in constant touch with world affairs by press and radio, cinema and television. We send abroad trade and cultural missions and the artists are supposed to help, and we have begun to envisage for ourselves a role in a larger regional sphere. But these are only the stage settings, for our achievement will depend solely on our performance. If we are to earn the respect, the quality, the dignity we all earnestly desire, it is essential that our thoughts and actions must be brought in line with the present universal direction. But mere thinking is not enough, and mere action not enough; these must spring from intellect and integrity.

It might well be said that our art is a true reflection of our society in that it displays all the weaknesses of that society. We are a people with an enviable versatility, a facility of expression, a response to song and music, play-acting and dance. In painting we have shown commendable aptitudes which presently we might also show in sculpture. And it is very curious that in a country which has produced so much wood, we never did produce sculpture. Yet our efforts and energies are most strongly directed and with considerable weight to the achievement of brilliance in the minor arts, the arts of ornament and adornment. The superficial society which thinks of culture as if it were limbo in a night club acts as a deterrent on the artist already burdened with technical limitations. It slows his development and imposes false standards of taste and judgment. It employs subtle pressures on the artist, forcing direction and embroiling him in matters totally outside the exercise of his art. It encourages a large body of painting which knows no integrity; superficiality, faddishness, ineptitude, and cleverness lay claim to art. There is at present a lot of painting without form or substance. There is more emphasis on the practice of being artists than the practice of art itself, and much confusion in the process.

Painting is a highly esoteric form, requiring long and patient apprenticeship if one would wring the utmost from the unwilling material and the awkward hand. One can only exhort the young and serious painter to apply himself diligently to the practice of his art, to minimise the gap between technique and intention, and to eradicate the sordid lack of drawing. Let him take his work seriously, himself less seriously. Let him look to his integrity. And perhaps we might be able to bring back to painting some of the joy that has left it.

N.B. Mr. Chang feels that a serious omission was made in the course of his lecture in that he did not emphasize the considerable work done by the Trinidad Art Society to foster the growth of the artist. Since the formation of the Society in 1945, all painting or sculpture has fallen under its aegis and the creative output in Trinidad reflects the continuous efforts of the Society to promote the artist. • Ed.