

Hans Erni

Henry C. Pitz discusses the work of an outstanding Swiss artist

THE CONTEMPORARY ART SCENE is much like amateur night in an old-fashioned vaudeville theater. A horde of jostling contestants crowd onto its stage, go through their little acts, sometimes to violent clique applause, and are pushed into the wings by avid newcomers. There they wait, exhausted and hopeful, for an encore that never comes.

In the audience are some, at least, who wait expectantly for the big act; for the performer of superlative endowment who will still be fresh after the thousandth appearance. The waits are long.

Too often our mid-century talents rot before they ripen. Their goal is a spurious freedom for which no price has been paid. Their creed is getting, not giving. Most of them are victims, and often willing victims, of their times. But the times are changing.

Forces have been working underground. There is a core of the younger artists who question the pat and easy solution. They sense that power and freedom emanate from knowledge and that knowledge implies discipline. The way of knowledge and discipline is not for small natures. Probably big men are on their way.

Hans Erni is an important name among the emerging new breed of artist. This Swiss artist is a man of plenty. He is one of the fully armed, replacing the dabbler and weathercock experimenter. He is tough and disciplined, equipped to deal with realities instead of shadows. He has a faith and a purpose.

He believes in art as function. His struggle is toward synthesis. His command over the old and new fit him for his task of helping to hammer out the form-language of the future. Perhaps his destiny is to be one of those who may save the brilliant

promise of modernism from the disintegration that threatens it.

He has been attacked as too versatile, too commercial, too facile, too mechanistic and too heavily burdened with philosophic and scientific thought. He will continue to be attacked by those critics who are uneasy in the presence of supreme competence and a restless and far-reaching mind.

That competence of his is an amazing thing. Many will rejoice in the spectacle of a powerful talent spilling its riches in the prodigal way of a natural force. Others may recoil at the behest of a current cliché which teaches that command of means is the eternal enemy of content. But that manual certainty is a hard-won freedom—a freedom to concentrate on the big problems; a freedom from the killing drag of manual incompetence.

Of course, Erni is a man of unusual physical and mental vitality. He not only spends long creative hours in his studio but his muscles crave other releases. He pilots his own plane and is captain of a hockey team. He drives fast cars and swims and climbs mountains.

His mind ranges. He loves books and music. He has a deep interest in contemporary philosophy, politics, and science. Another side of him craves the classics. This has led to his striking illustrations for Sophocles' "Oedipus Rex" and "Antigone" and Pindar's "Olympian Odes." And it is present in part in almost everything he does, for tradition to him is not a pulseless and enervating trickle, but a strong tide of ancestral voices in the blood. He is too intelligent to be trapped into the fallacy that the past is abolished by turning one's back on it.

During 1927 and 1928 he studied at the Arts and Craft School of Lucerne and then went to Paris for further study at the Academy Julien. After a short return to his birthplace, Lucerne, where he practiced graphic art, he entered Klewer's class at the *Staatschulen für freie und angewandte Kunst* in Berlin. Several years were then spent alternating between Lucerne and

Paris. He was then deep in modern French painting, greatly influenced by Picasso and Braque. He became a member of the Abstraction-Creation group and came to know Brancusi, Arp, Kandinsky, Moore and others.

After taking part in the great Thesis-Antithesis-Synthesis exhibition in Lucerne in 1935 he traveled in Italy and had his eyes opened to the riches of antiquity. His restlessness carried him to Belgium and London, as he tasted and tried to assimilate all phases of the modern movement and of all past decades.

Then in 1939 came his first great opportunity. He was commissioned to execute a huge mural for the Swiss National Exhibition in Zurich. Here he faced the problem of reconciling the ambivalent demands of the abstract will-to-form with the realities of Swiss life, past and present. Under the pressure of months of intensive work his style began to emerge. The completed mural attracted a great deal of attention and Erni's reputation began to spread through Europe.

From that time on his fame has grown steadily. He has been exhibited widely, with one-man shows in such large centers as Basle, London, Zurich, Rotterdam, Prague, Winterthur and Geneva, and recently in Chicago, Philadelphia and New York.

There are few art forms or techniques that he has not explored. Scale-relationships seem to be no problem for him. They range from giant-size murals down to etchings the size of a hand. He is one of the world's finest poster designers, an important book illustrator and advertising artist. He has designed costumes and stage settings. Besides the pastel and sanguine drawings, the large tempera paintings and incidental sketches that are constantly pouring from his studio, recently have come a series of large color lithographs.

One of his friends calls him the most completely organized of all artists. His studio is light, pleasant and efficient. All tools and materials have their allotted

place. There is nothing of the usual studio disorder. There is always a plan and a procedure, lost motion is reduced to a minimum.

Erni places his art at the service of the community. He is a humanist and an idealist, therefore art can have little meaning for him unless it communicates. He has passed through disillusion and defeat; they have made him into a man of hope and courage. He is fully conscious of the multitudinous problems that press upon the contemporary artist; he is equally aware of the vast storehouse of man's past that modern study and reproduction have opened up to him. He conceives it to be the contemporary artist's duty to assimilate both kinds of material and engage upon a gigantic task of synthesis.

His nature contains challenging opposites. His pictures are struggles of reconciliation. That the reconciliation is not always complete, he would, I believe, be the first to admit. Intuition and conscious creation do not always fuse. The mechanistic and the naturalistic do not always dovetail. Modernism and tradition do not always join hands. But there are victories as well as defeats.

Erni is built for a long battle. He brings to it an amazing variety of gifts. He is still young; the next twenty years should see some astonishing things.