

1962

## Art and Industry (1962): Article 05

Thomas Hart Benton

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An "action" critic confronts "action painting."

Drawing by Abner Dean.

## Random Thoughts on Art

A famous American painter and inveigher against 'borrowed esthetic standards' reflects on Federal patronage of the arts.

By THOMAS HART BENTON

**N**OT long ago I was given a homecoming celebration in my birthplace—Neosho, Mo. It was a considerable affair. One commentator said, "It was of the kind usually reserved for national heroes." Returning at night by train to Kansas City, I talked about what had happened with the reporters, photographers, lawyers, businessmen and others who had accompanied me. How was it that such a celebration should be given for an artist? Why should a small city in a far corner of Missouri take the work of a mere picture painter so seriously? Was a new appreciation of uneconomic creativity—artistic creativity—rising over the country? Were we entering a new period in American culture where concerns of the creative mind would be

given the same respect as that traditionally accorded only to practical concerns?

A number of ideas were batted about. And then the inevitable question arose: Were President and Mrs. Kennedy riding a popular wave or were they setting one in motion with their attention to the arts and their apparent moves toward a national cultural policy? "What do you think," one reporter asked, "of White House parties for artistic people?"

**I SAID:** "I know little about them, but from what I have read they seem like typical dilettante affairs—good maybe for exhibiting the artists, but of doubtful good for art."

"Why not good for art? Isn't honoring artists good for art?"

"The best way to honor an artist," I replied, "is to put him to work. President Truman honored me ceremonially when I finished the mural in his library but he gave me the job of painting it first."

"But wouldn't you feel honored if

you were invited to one of the White House parties?"

"Undoubtedly," I said. "But I wouldn't go if I could properly get out of it. I prefer creek bank and barroom society to the higher varieties, where there are likely to be too many over-cultivated attitudes for my taste."

My reporter friends picked up all this banter and it so went over the country that people wrote me letters congratulating me "for showing up the phonies in the White House." There was even editorial comment in the same vein.

Now I don't want to be saddled with this partisan nonsense. There are no phonies in the White House. A dilettante attitude toward the arts may not be workmanly enough for my tastes but that does not make it phony. One of the eternal appurtenances of power, in this country as in others, is a high society of fancifully-dressed women and well-mannered gentlemen who stand around on appropriate occasions and exercise their wits. Why shouldn't they talk about the arts as well as

the latest political scandal or the behavior of their associates? Our Presidents have always had such societies and I suspect the Kennedy one is more endurable than most.

The appearance of performing artists in the White House must surely have enlivened the atmosphere there. There is nothing phony about Casals' cello playing wherever it is heard. Nor was there anything phony about President Kennedy's giving Robert Frost a part in his inaugural ceremony. This was a great gesture toward an art which, for all its potency in the life of man, is generally practiced without public honor. The Kennedys may not be stimulating as much artistic activity as did the White House under the less esthetically inclined Franklin Roosevelt, but it has obvious ambitions along that line.

**T**HERE is unquestionably a rising curiosity about the arts throughout the United States. It is as if our mechanistic world, with its ever more strict disciplining of behavior, were beginning to wear on the soul and people were seeking some escape. All sorts of moves are being made to turn that new curiosity into real appreciation and support of the arts. There are "friends of art," art associations, art schools, art appreciation courses and conducted museum tours all over the land. The Kennedy interest is by no means unique.

However, there is yet something unreal, highfalutin and a little naive woven through most of this crusading. Its propaganda is almost wholly based on esthetic views utterly unfamiliar to general American experience. It is absurd to stick a Cezanne watercolor in the face of an average intelligent American citizen and expect him to find much in it. The same goes for a Braque or a Kandinsky pattern. While I admit that such works are proper acquisitions for a museum devoted to preserving a phase of art history, most Americans on seeing them will say: "If that's art, to hell with it."

Public attitudes toward the arts are indeed changing—but our borrowed esthetic standards must change also before we can hope for much public participation in support of artists.

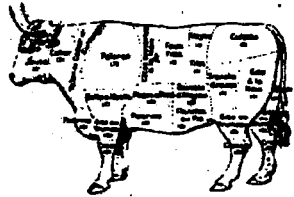
**T**HE creative arts today are in a peculiar position. With the general exception of literature, their cultural connections are, for the most part, exceedingly obscure. The separation of visual art from any but the most stilted public usages, and thus from public interest, has proceeded steadily since the industrial revolution of the last century and played havoc with the visual artist's life. New mechanical methods of all sorts have knocked out his economic props—those bread-and-butter trades where he learned his skills and on which his higher performances rested. He has been forced to retreat into a world apart where he has set up a compensatory pattern of very special values to live by. This is true everywhere—in Europe as well as America.

Even in France, where art maintained more public prestige than elsewhere as our cultures changed under the impact of mechanization, artists tended to con- (Continued on Page 47)

THOMAS HART BENTON has been producing paintings and making headlines for 50 years. His murals are on view at several institutions, including the Whitney Museum and the New School for Social Research.

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## Thoughts On Art

(Continued from Page 42)

gregate in closed areas, in esthetic Bohemias. Although 19th-century Impressionism kept a lively contact with French life, later schools tended to lose more and more of this cultural connection. By the first decade of the 20th-century, the art of Paris had become very largely a studio art playing to a studio audience.

Art itself, rather than observation of contemporary life, became increasingly the chief source of inspiration. Dominant tendencies were eclectic, inventive and theoretical. On the simple fact that harmonies and dissonances of line, color and shape exist independently — apart, that is, from associative



**KUDOS**—"The best way to honor an artist is to put him to work."

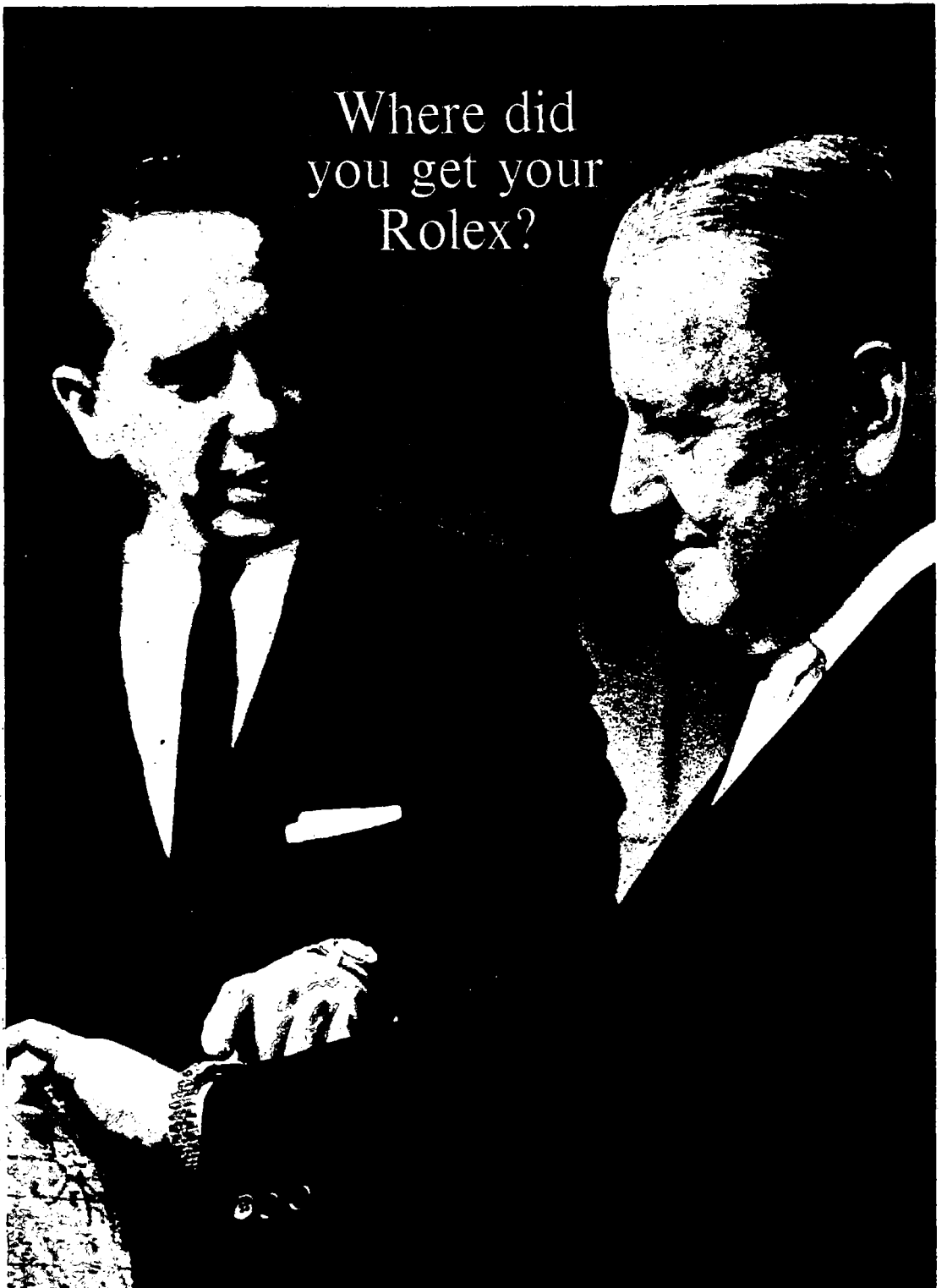
meanings—a cult grew up whose tenets declared such meanings useless and even detrimental to art's full development. "Progressive" art thus became a progression of "abstract," non-associative patterns. And what remained of representation was "over-formalized."

**W**HILE some artists rebelled against the esthetics of the "School of Paris"—as in the revivals of subject painting in Mexico and the United States during the twenties and thirties—its influence is still strong. The "abstract expressionism" currently touted in our country is a direct offshoot. Although regarded by its devotees as an especially American contribution, this free-swinging art offers no change from esthetic attitudes which grew up in Paris and other European centers before the First World War. As it is completely devoid of associational content, it provides no American meanings. It is a kind of loose play with materials, in line with Kandinsky's "improvisations" in the early days of abstract cultism.

The movement does have its native genius, however, in

(Continued on Page 49)

# Where did you get your Rolex?



Caleb Hammond (left), president of C. S. Hammond & Co., renowned mapmakers, puts the friendly question to Edward O'Connor, president of Thos. Cook & Son, the firm who made "Cook's Tours" an international byword.

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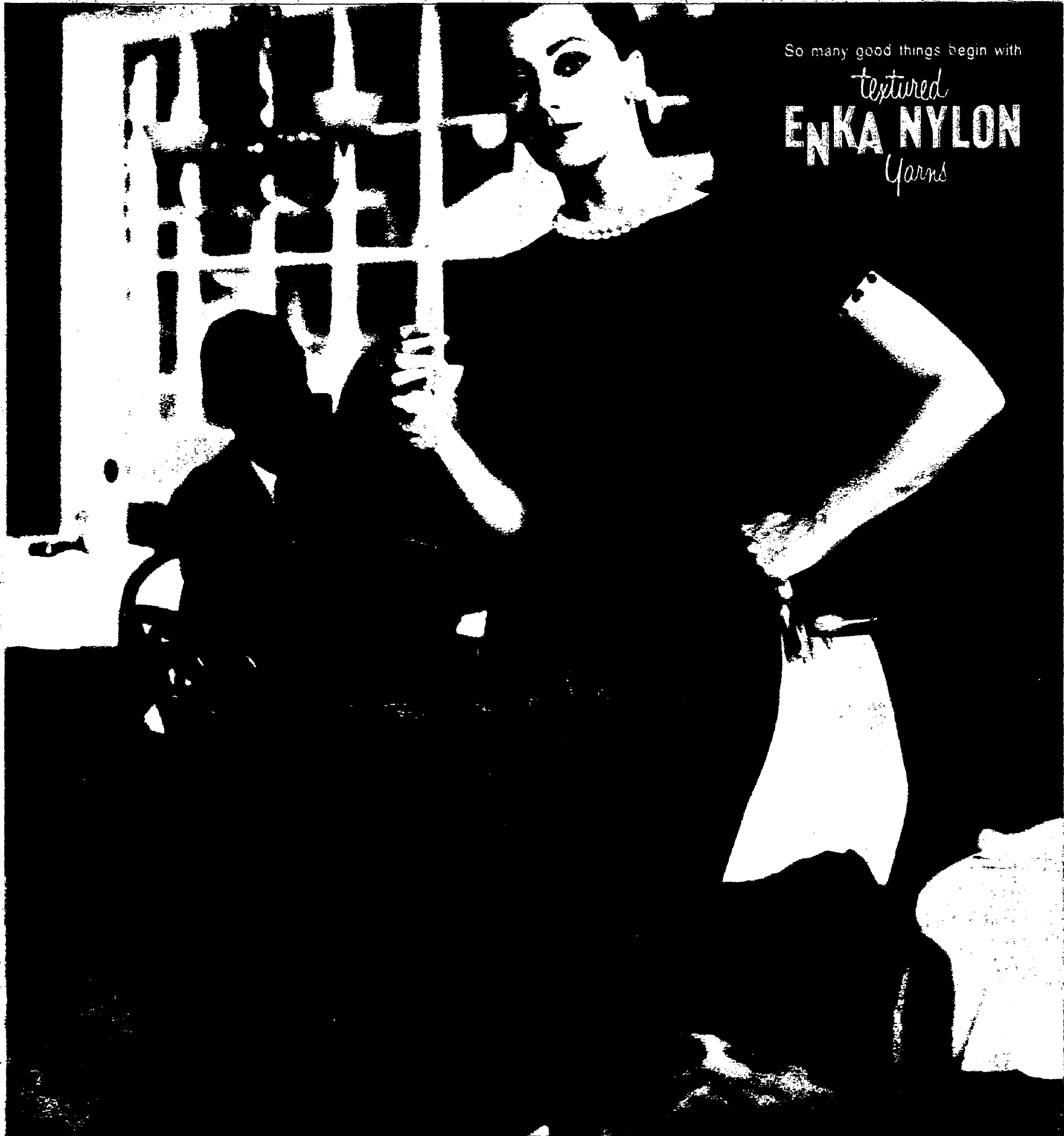
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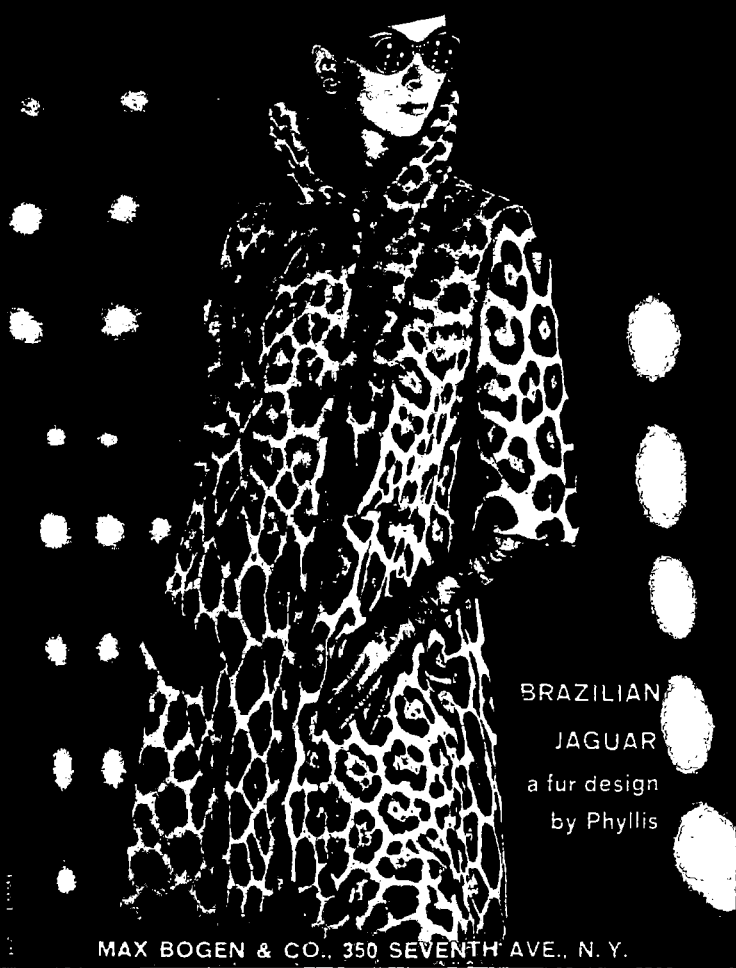
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(Continued from Page 47)

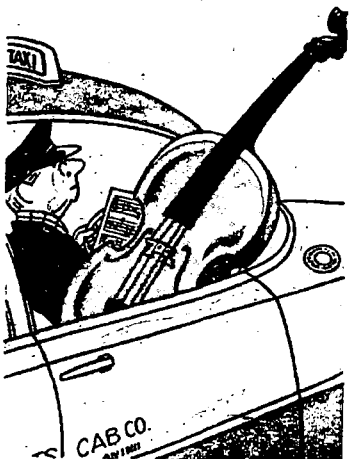
Jackson Pollock. One of my former students, he was blessed with a very acute sense of color and an instinctive flair for visual rhythms. His paint-slinging binges always ended attractively in decidedly original and agreeable decorative patterns—but completely without human significance, American or otherwise.

There is, of course, nothing reprehensible about pattern-making. It has had a place through all of art's history. Put to architectural or other decorative use, modern patterns might find a function. As arbitrary personal expressions, however, they appeal only to a very limited esoteric audience.

**N**EVERTHELESS, as far apart as they are from publicly shared meanings and as separated as are their works from the ancient communicative functions of art, most American artists who have any talent can get by. With the dearth of "gold bond old masters," their productions, along with those of modern European artists, have become a kind of prestige commodity where difficulties of understanding are assets in playing on the gullibility of aspiring rich folks. Fortunately there are still enough of these to keep most matured artists at least moderately well fed, once they have learned to accommodate themselves to current fashions and sales methods.

Just the same, the outlook is far from satisfactory. Art is directed to a much too limited audience. The scope of our artistic activity has not begun as yet to compare, for instance, with that of Mexico. Art is used in her national life, while we keep it for museums and collectors. But in view of the potential artistic interest in our changing national attitudes—of which the Neosho honor given me was certainly an indication—it is time to take just the kind of thought the Kennedys are taking.

Underneath the White House party affairs, practical moves are shaping up for  
(Continued on Following Page)



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(Continued from Preceding Page) some kind of institutionalized recognition of the arts—including, apparently, a certain amount of subsidization. I don't think these moves are phony and I am not against them. We have had Federal subsidies in one form or another for nearly every sector of our society through all our history. I see nothing against help for the arts, provided we agree they can produce an important social contribution. And this, in the face of history, is surely indisputable.

The plight of performing musicians, for example, is outrageous. At a time when public interest in music is

excellence similar to those, for instance, in instrumental playing which may be applied to painting, sculpting, writing or the composing of music. Achievement in these fields is judged *after* performance and technical facility may or may not be a significant factor. A technically inept painter like Albert Ryder could produce great works of art. If it were a question of awarding financial aid among young people with creative aspirations, therefore, it would be very hard to determine who had the best creative potentialities.

Let us assume, however, that the Kennedy Administration does get some quasi-Federal



**SUBSIDY PROBLEM**—"Creative art differs from performing art in that it cannot be judged in progress."

greater than ever before, many trained professionals are forced to take odd jobs to make a living. And only too often they find themselves dropping back to amateur status through lack of time for study and practice and finally losing their positions. If we are to sustain the musical arts, much more must be done in the way of public support. There is no sense going in for the glamour of symphonies when the players bungle the music.

Similar problems are found in the other serious performing arts, but it is in the creative field that the most difficult questions of official attention arise. Here the problem is neither so clear nor so compelling. Individual artists may, and often do, work on low budgets. But if they have to take on side work the time lost from practice is not devastating.

The creative arts are also different in that they cannot be judged while in progress. There are no standards of ex-

institution for subsidizing the arts. Who would run it? Who would give out the jobs? Who would determine which hopeful deserved a subsidy? Some politician? This would not be too bad if you could get an experienced politician to stick his neck into the business.

I am not the least afraid of mixing art up with politicians. I have done so quite successfully. What is to be feared is the mixing up of art with a bureaucratic system controlled by esthetic eggheads of some sort.

**M**Y experience has shown it is easier to deal with the toughest kind of politician who has fought for power and had the wit to hold it than to come to terms with some cultivated gentleman to whom power has been given. If you talk back to the former, you have at least a running chance of being understood. With the latter, you make an enemy.

Amateurs who have seriously cultivated a knowledge

(Continued on Page 52)



## Rob Roy

(in the days of the Knights)

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1. Silken banner displayed the coat of arms of a knight. The banner was a knight's best identification, and when he planted it outside his tent or room at night, everybody knew who was sleeping there.  
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3. Crossbow has a trigger and was shot something like a rifle. This one, set with pearls, was probably used for hunting, but arrows of the burlier war

bows could penetrate a shirt of mail nearly 380 yards away.

4. Shield called "heater-shaped" because in outline it resembles a flatiron.  
5. The sword was a knight's favorite weapon. He thought so much of it that he gave it a name and hoped to keep it all his life.  
6. Helmet with a hinged vizor. Besides being extremely heavy, the only way to see out of one once the battle was on was through the eye slits.  
7. Tankard and plates made of pewter. Dishes which the most important guests used at a dinner were either pewter, silver or even gold, according to the host's wealth.  
8. A dagger was used in close combat to stab an unhorsed knight right between the plates of his armor.  
9. A mace made completely of iron was used to smash and break up armor at close quarters.  
10. Hauberk, or hooded shirt of mail, weighed about 30 pounds and was worn over thick padded underclothes.  
11. Morgenstern or "morning star"—

a flail with a wooden staff and a heavy spiked iron ball which was swung around on the end of a sturdy chain before it crashed down on its victim.

12. Longbow, used particularly by archers of England, and made either of yew wood or hazel. The best bows were those that were exactly the same height as their owners.

13. Pewter ewer and goblet in which wine was served to wash down about five courses of dinner that started off at 9 a.m. with venison, bear, peacock, cuckoo and eel-pie, and ended two hours later with pastry, sweetmeats and a variety of spices.

14. Suit of armor made of smooth metal plates was so heavy, if a knight was knocked off his horse someone had to put him back on his feet again.

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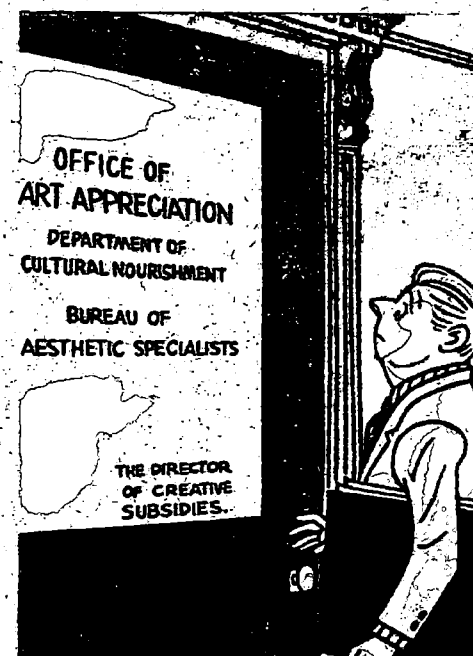
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**NO AMATEURS —**  
"What is to be feared is the mixing up of art with a bureaucratic system controlled by esthetic eggheads."

(Continued from Page 50)  
of art are always likely to know more about it than its practitioners. But this knowledge is not of art coming into being but of art already created. There is an intellectual kind of vested interest. The cultivated amateur who, often laboriously, has accumulated his knowledge and formed his judgments, is going to resist anything that seems to flout them. Why shouldn't he? A man must stand by his convictions. But when he has power to squelch other convictions without, as it were, any kind of public trial of their value, serious questions can arise because vital art forms coming into being are very likely to break with his established views.

**W**HEN the Roosevelt Administration set up its so-called Treasury projects, for example, the artists who were commissioned were asked to make no public statements except through the project's controlling committees. This was obviously designed to keep dissident artists from publicly testing their ideas against those of the committeemen. But with the well-known touchiness of esthetic committeemen, it was difficult to get anywhere. I couldn't. So I went home to Missouri and painted a mural in the State Capitol where I had to battle only with state legislators—a less esthetic but more manageable crew.

President Roosevelt's artistic encouragements were squelched. This was partly because his moves were tied so largely to relief programs and partly because the people who ran them were unconvincing to our political representatives. Mr. Roosevelt's appointees were well-meaning, but attached as they were to recently imported esthetic views, they spoke a language too withdrawn from American life to get much support. They couldn't even get my support—and I understood their language.

And this problem of esthetic attitude and exotic speech is

still with us. Too many of our artistic people still cling over-tenaciously to the apron strings of our mother cultures. They accept as valid only the last ideas fashionable abroad and only such art forms as are in harmony with them. In a way this is understandable, for ours is a continuation of European cultures which, since colonial times, have given us most of our patterns of thought. But just as we adjusted European political thinking and gave it a specifically American content, so must we readjust European esthetic values if we want them to be effective in our national life.

It would be a great accomplishment if the Kennedy Administration could raise our creative arts to the level reached in Mexico in the twenties and the thirties. The example which Mexico then provided is preferable to any European one because the officially supported art which has survived in Europe is generally vapid and overconventionalized. Whatever may be thought of some of the political motives of Mexican art, they were expressed in a distinctly Mexican imagery. And it is this vital indigenous imagery, full of the pulse of life as Mexicans live it, which provides the true content of the Mexican "renaissance." Sustained official encouragement of our own artists to seek a like imagery for our own life, history and mythology might well give us an American "renaissance."

**I**T is more fashionable to buy a Parisian dress than to make one yourself. This is all right where it is fashion that counts. No harm in it. But art and fashion, in spite of appearances to the contrary, are but superficially related. Following the fashion is not likely to originate any very meaningful American art, nor is it going to provide the kind of thinking about art in general which the Kennedys will need to expedite their plans.