

## THE ARTIST'S WAY IS STRAIT

by Viktor Schreckengost

An artist must be independent, but like everyone else he must justify his place in society. Through the intelligent use of his talent and training he should make the lives of others as well as his own a bit deeper, richer, and fuller than they might otherwise have been. The medium he chooses is only of secondary importance, what he has to say and how well he says it, is what counts.

My work has been constantly involved in the struggle between fine arts and their development into some functional form of what we call the applied or commercial arts. It took many years for me to realize that they need not conflict, that a basic philosophy, conviction or understanding may be common to both. It is the application of its use and the limitations imposed which alter its final form. There is no separate set of rules for each or need there be a prostitution of one's artistic integrity. There can and must be a continuity, a basic concept in the artist's mind, which will show up in everything, which he does.

In most cases the additional limitations of mass production, volume distribution, and quantity demand place and even greater responsibility on the artist. Within these restrictions, there is still ample room for the artist to express himself and speak to a multitude of people, to affect their lives and increase their understanding, for better things.

In the fine arts of painting and sculpture I have found greater freedom to experiment with new concepts of design, new forms, media and materials. Here, without the burden of economic, responsibility I can express myself in any way I wish, get the general feeling of response and understanding from those whose opinion I respect. Ideas may be investigated, tried, or discarded to broaden the artist's understanding and expand his expressing ability.

I was born with an uncomfortable curiosity, and an insatiable desire to learn what makes things tick, of honest parents who made me understand that one must work for the things that are worth while. As a boy I had learned that if I tried a thing often enough, it became easy, that the mechanics could be learned how I used them was my problem.

After working for many years in different media, I am still not convinced which one I like best. Whether in the round forms of pottery or sculpture or with the flat surface and its illusions in painting, the problem of expression remains the same.

It is through rigid training in schools and continual practice on my own that I no longer worry about HOW it is done, but I am able to concentrate on WHAT I am trying to say.

At all times, whether drawing, carving or modeling, I am aware of forms as they are related to the space around them. The coordination of forms and the effect of light on them, how well they express the forces within their volume, their surface qualities an expressive color--these are the constant problems to be solved in sculpture and pottery. These are real, tangible values, which may be felt or changed when seen from different points of view.

In painting or drawing, these same problems of volumes in space are present. Here we have the advantage of limiting the spectator's position in relation to the objects, controlling the source and amount of light within the composition, the distinctness with which the objects may be seen. The problems of illusion and design so far as drawing is concerned are simple if one has learned to draw. I am never conscious of drawing shapes but merely using a line to define a form in the space. Value, texture, color all represent mass in its relation to the space in which I have chosen to work. Even though there is a heavy emphasis on the two-dimensional values among many contemporary painters, I want the spectator to feel that he may go into the picture and look around if he cares to.

I have always believed that to make oneself understood, one must speak in a language which is understandable. The question of abstraction or realism is a matter of who is saying what to whom. Realism at its most detailed degree is still a matter of the use of recognizable symbols, a sign language in color with an illusion of textural qualities.

In starting any design or project, I try to set down my problem first: what I want to say, to whom I am

speaking and how I will say it. To recreate in another's mind desired impression one must use all the devices of space, volume, color, texture, and line arranged in an abstract composition to carry the intent. The forces involved, the mood, relative importance of components, are placed in the abstraction.

Into this basic pattern the recognizable symbols of reality may be woven as an integral part to any extent felt necessary to clarify and heighten the impact of the idea. A good abstraction may become even richer with added detail and it gives an impression of intimate understanding of the subject presented. The abstract form is the basic vehicle of aesthetic communication.

Before I start on a piece of sculpture, pottery, or the painting of a watercolor, I make dozens of sketches of the idea. If I am painting a particular place, I never paint on the spot. I prefer to sketch it from many different positions and very often paint it from a direction other than any I have seen before. This makes it necessary to understand thoroughly the subject in its three dimensional aspects; it allows me to rearrange and rescale the Elements as an abstract design. Many irrelevant things, which seem to creep in when painting on the spot are eliminated. It is often surprising how much stuff is weeded out during the final composition.

When it comes to color and source of light, the same procedure is used. If one understands the volumes in the area, one can light them from any source to the degree needed to carry convictions.

In ceramic, sculpture, I work with the idea first, its composition as an abstract volume and the development of detail, color and texture to enhance and give impact to the idea. I like to feel that the pieces are not bisque with glaze on top but that bisque, glaze, volume and clay are all of a single entity.

In the pottery I have become interested in the pieces which justify themselves as abstract sculptural forms but have the functional value of containers as well. I have intentionally abandoned the potter's wheel in the last few years because I felt that there were many other forms which could be developed without the mechanical limitations of the wheel. My pieces have been made intentionally large primarily to have them appraised and evaluated from the sculptural point of view and free them from the bric-a-brac stigma of the Rococo and Victorian tradition. They are not for the glass cabinets but for contemporary everyday indoor-outdoor living.

It is said that I am an optimist, that little angels ride on my shoulders and look after me, that I always wear rose-colored glasses, and that I never think that things are as bad as they seem. Perhaps that is so. I do not believe that the modern artist can or should retreat from any design problem, whether it is a ten-ton printing press, a fleet of motor trucks, or a Christmas toy stamped out by the thousands. I see beauty in many forms, hidden in raw nature or clarified in the unique drawing or mass produced kitchen utensil. I look for it in nature's violent moods or man's brutality and destruction. A hurricane can leave behind it beautiful arrangements of debris, a flood can cause untold suffering and yet there is a beauty in its relentless power. A homely animal can become the most loving and sensitive mother, proud of her ugly offspring. A beautiful spray of blossoms can be enhanced in its splendor by a huge earthen pot. A child's eyes will sparkle on Christmas morning as he discovers a new fire truck. If one can pass on these experiences it is believed that an artist can justify his place in society.