



EXHIBITION OF WORK BY

Syracuse University Art Galleries  
**HANS ERNI**

In the galleries of the Joe and Emily Lowe Art Center, School of Art  
SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY  
April 13 through May 15, 1958

A great artist need not have any knowledge of the sciences or of logic, may take little interest in major problems, and may be without literary or philosophic culture. It is, of course, inconceivable that he should not be intelligent in his own art. But he may limit his art to mere expressive craftsmanship. This is something that Hans Erni rejects and refuses completely. One can imagine him at eighteen in much the same frame of mind as the young Victor Hugo, who said: "I shall be Chateaubriand or nothing." I see the adolescent Erni proclaiming with pride: "I shall be da Vinci, Picasso - or nothing."

He is on the way to succeeding. He is, so to speak, a complete athlete in the arts. A native of the mountains, a partaker in many sports, Erni is also a man with a lively interest in all branches of knowledge calculated to widen his vision and enrich his sensibilities. He began studying architecture, but stopped in order to absorb more completely the influence of the great exponents of abstract art: Mondrian, Calder, Kandinsky, the Blaue Reiter group. He has looked long at the painters of the Renaissance and Picasso, who was and remains the master through whom he found himself - a master in his turn. He has not restricted his apprenticeship to the arts. He also studied Greek literature and mathematics, biology and the social sciences.

Many-sided in his own work (he is equally at home with the lithograph and the fresco, the engraving and the poster, the mural and the illustration, the oil painting and the pastel drawing), he is no less versatile in his culture. Hans Erni is a man who has accepted his own era with enthusiasm and method, and is achieving in himself and in his work something very like a modern humanism.

In the slightest of his drawings and the least ambitious of his pictures, I seem to find a vision of the world which is specifically his own. The tiniest and most fleeting of his sketches could take its place in the vastest and most carefully thought out of his compositions - it would not appear foreign or heterogeneous. Just as the great painters and poets of the end of the Middle Ages were obsessed with the theme of the "triumph of death", Hans Erni is inspired by an eternal "triumph of life". He may illustrate Sophocles or Maeterlinck, Pindar or Jules Renard, he may design a poster for a Festival of Music or paint the portrait of a biomathematician or a Hellenist - whatever he does, he is always pursuing the same vital thought. He is a painter writing the epic of life, perpetually reborn, perpetually in the ascendant. He writes it with a lucidity nourished by precise ideas, but without coldness, without abstracting or "cerebralisizing" his message. His drawings are packed with energy before all else, with a healthy and joyful violence, with carnal high spirits. He is the great graphic poet of germination and blossoming, of flowers and their fructification, of the espousal of creation and its perpetual birth. This character of constant glorification of nature and of man gives his work a typical aspect that sometimes appears unusual, sometimes, one might almost say, anachronistic. Erni seems not to have been touched by the tragedy of his time, the great nightmares that besiege a man like Picasso. He lives in a universe like that found in Giraudoux or in part of the work of Paul Eluard, a universe spared by original sin, by decline and fall and by the atomic bomb. This is perhaps his limitation, but it is also his greatness. What Hans Erni formulates is truth - even if he does not face and formulate the whole truth.

- Claude Roy  
in Graphis, Vol. 10, No.53, 1954  
p. 174-175.

## B I O G R A P H I C A L     N O T E S

(From the catalogue of an exhibition of paintings by Hans Erni, held at the Main Street Gallery, Chicago, in 1956.)

Born in Lucerne, February 21, 1909; seven brothers and sisters. His father, a mechanic on a lake boat, had a talent for drawing. Erni as a child introduced to the world of machinery and encouraged to draw.

Primary school; apprentice to a land surveyor, 1915-1923.

Apprenticeship in architectural draughting, 1924-1927; first contacts with the literature of art.

Student at Ecole des Arts et Metiers, Lucerne, 1927-1928.

First stay in Paris, 1928-1929. Academie Julian; after two months won first prize; given studio to work in independently; Louvre. No contact with contemporary French paintings.

Return to Lucerne; advertising art.

Stay in Berlin, 1929-1930. State School of Art, Klewer's class; technical studies.

Painting under the pseudonym Francois Grecque.

Frequent trips to Paris; acquaintance with contemporary French art, much impressed by Picasso and Braque.

Frescoes in the Club de Sport, Lucerne, 1933.

Joined the "Abstraction--Creation" group in Paris; exhibited non-objective paintings with Arp, Brancusi, Calder, Gabo, Kandinsky, Mondrian, Moore.

Took part in the exhibition "Thesis, Antithesis, Synthesis", Lucerne, 1935.

Became member of the "Schweizerischer Werkbund", 1935.

Won first prize for commission of a fresco in the Central Station of Lucerne, 1935.

Fresco of the Virgin Mary and Child in Hirschenplatz, Lucerne, 1935.

First travels in Belgium and Italy; discovery of classical antiquity, 1936.

Development of the abstract in commission for murals. Three frescoes for state exhibitions in Italy and Switzerland, 1936.

Spent year in London, 1937-1938. Exhibited with the "Abstract and Concrete" group in London, Cambridge, Leicester.

Mural for the Swiss National Exposition, Zurich, 1939. Experiments in synthesizing abstraction and realism. Point of departure for his later work. Beginning of public recognition.

Struggle with the complex problem of technology and modern society, man and the machine.

World War II. Service in Swiss army motorized corps and camouflage painting.

Commissions for posters and book illustrations. Deep interest in economic and social problems.

Chosen by scientists, doctors and engineers to execute "The World of Chemistry", the CIBA mural in Basle, 1944.

Mural commissioned by the Zurich Art Museum on the subject of lithography, 1944.

Mural, "Man and the Machine", for the Basle Fair, 1945. Travels in England, Belgium, Holland and France.

Commissioned by the Royal Institute of British Architects to paint the mural, "Creative Energy", London, 1946.

Licensed as airplane pilot; flying for sport.

Designed sets and costumes for Prometheus by Aeschylus in the Roman amphitheatre at Avenches, 1946.

Eight large murals for the international exhibition of city planning at the Grand Palais, Paris, 1947.

Costumes and sets for Mozart's Titus, Salzburg Festival, 1949. Large mural for the Montana Sanitarium in Valais.

Twelve symbolic panels for the UNESCO Exhibition, Zurich, 1949.

Mural for the World Health Organization, Zurich, 1950.

First work in ceramics.

Expedition for research and exploration in Africa with Prof. Jean Gabus, Director of the Museum of Ethnography, University of Neuchatel. Four months in Mauretania and French Guinea, 1951.

Return from Africa, March, 1951. Exhibition of paintings on African themes, Galerie 16, Zurich.

Beginning of a series of exhibitions in the major cities of America, organized by the Main Street Gallery, Chicago.

Extensive work in lithography with a view to popularizing the medium and making art available to those with limited means. Series of portraits of philosophers for "Plaisir de France", 1951.

Opened studio in Paris; travels in England, 1952.

Guest of the city of Rimini (Italy) for the "Biennale del Gente del Mare". Won International First Prize for Painting, 1953.

Work in Paris studio and contacts with French poets and painters. Film of Erni at work made by Koenig-Film, Munich, with Cocteau and Severini.

Giant fresco to cover facade of Museum of Ethnography of Neuchatel, "Conquests of Man"; autumn 1954.