

## ARTS • LEISURE

# The kind word for such art is 'conservative'

## Traditional styles win recognition at National Academy of Design show

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New York

The National Academy of Design's Annual Exhibition, a tradition dating back to the academy's founding in 1825, is upon us once again.

This year, in accordance with academy policy that non-members be permitted to compete in even-numbered years, more than 1,600 works of art were submitted by artists throughout the United States to selection and award juries consisting of artist-members.

From these, 280 paintings, watercolors, drawings, prints, and sculptures were accepted, and 39 prizewinners were awarded cash and medals.

As usual, the vast majority of works submitted and accepted can best be described as conservative. They tend to represent traditional rather than "advanced" attitudes, styles, and techniques, and to focus more on what was successful in the art of the past than on what is particularly vital and challenging today.

Fine and good. By itself, the conservative position is neither better nor worse than the advanced. Most of the world's major artists, in fact, were as deeply committed to tradition as they were to innovation.

The difficulty arises - as it does in this Academy Annual - when tradition is not plumbed or understood deeply or clearly enough, or its lessons are applied superficially or cavalierly: when, for instance, tradition becomes static rather than dynamic, and art is produced primarily by precedent or rote, or is casually assembled as a car

might be from parts found in a gigantic junkyard.

When that happens, significant, or even genuine, art is unlikely to occur. In its place we are apt to find work that mimics the art of the past without re-energizing it, fashions a pastiche out of various traditional styles and approaches, or plays it safe by creating a hybrid out of roughly equal parts of the old and the new.

Unfortunately, one or another of these characteristics can be found in all but a handful of the works included in this exhibition, making it one of the weakest of the annuals of recent years.

**Everything in this exhibition is neat and accomplished, but hardly anything grabs our attention.**

One looks almost in vain for a painting that isn't an eclectic fusion of two or more styles; for a truly incisive, clearly thought-through landscape, portrait, or figure study; a watercolor that does more than demonstrate brilliant technique or affection for a particular place; or a sculpture that isn't embarrassingly academic or ridiculously stylized. For once (and this is an indication of how bad things are), the prints and drawings practically steal the show. Simon Dinnerstein's prizewinning conté crayon drawing "Arnold," for instance, is a real knockout, a totally committed piece of draftsmanship that cannot be matched for strength, style, or character by any portrait or figure painting on view.

Surely, we should be done by now with the clever but nonetheless derivative pseudo-modernist canvases of the sort that

filled so many Academy Annuals in the 1960s and '70s, but that, thankfully, were largely absent during most of this decade. The kind that borrowed a bit of Braque here, a touch of Matisse or Kokoschka there, and then mixed it all up under a pretty veil of color to make it look "modern" and possibly even daring.

Does Charles Cajori's lamely modernist "Garden" deserve a prize? I think not, especially when Harold Bruder's "Triumph of Virtue" and Charles Reid's traditional but effective "Sarah" won nothing, and several excellent pictures weren't even accepted for inclusion.

There isn't much one can say either for or against the major award winners in painting. Most present pleasant enough images, especially Robert La Hotan's "Wooded Landscape," David Benyon Pena's "30 Street Sta. . . ." and Morgan Taylor's "Portrait of Marie Roberts." A few, particularly Robert Rasely's "Point of Orientation" and Audrey Ushenko's "Bachus and Ariadne II," show genuine promise.

On the other hand, one cannot help wondering why such a typically 1930s piece as Philip Grausman's aluminum "Susan" was accepted, let alone given a gold medal, and why William King's wood sculpture "Connie" was adjudged worthy of a prize.

Of course, one must take account that several interesting works weren't eligible for awards, since their creators served as jurors.

Even so, there is little excuse for the generally indifferent quality and middle-of-the-road attitude of this exhibition. Everything in it is neat and accomplished, but hardly anything grabs our attention. We are impressed here and there by demonstrations of skill or imagination, and are occasionally touched by the authenticity of

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William King's wood sculpture 'Connie' won a gold medal

an artist's vision or the intensity of his or her feelings. But we are never genuinely moved or challenged - and that's a pity, since that's what art is all about.

At the National Academy of Design, 1083 Fifth Avenue, through May 5.