

Art: Coptic Mysteries

Show at Delacorte of Ancient Works

By DORE ASHTON

ONCE again the Delacorte Gallery, 822 Madison Avenue, offers New Yorkers an opportunity to see the strange and compelling creations of the ancient Copts.

This early Christian sect established its church during the first century A. D. in Egypt and has remained active ever since. It produced an art that assimilated a baffling number of influences (Greco-Roman, Byzantine, Persian, Syrian and Palestinian) and yet consistently maintained a character of its own.

Adherents of the sect were at various times considered heretics, their theologians banished or killed, their art destroyed. But yet, enough Coptic art of the third to eighth century has survived to give an indication of the vivid artistic impulse of these people.

The mysteries attendant on the study of Coptic art seem legion. Why, for example, are the little fifth- and sixth-century bone sculptures in this show related in their geometric simplicity to archaic Greek sculptures while the textiles of the same period seem to reflect trends in Byzantine art? What is the significance of the swaying-hipped females whose springy walks and smiling tosses of the head hardly support the thesis that they are carrying liturgical censers? How did the Coptic artist—whose background undoubtedly included knowledge of Roman realism—come to make asymmetrical abstractions of the human figure that occur in the fifth- and sixth-century weavings?

Of course, there is not a history of art extant that can describe the evolution of Coptic art, or interpret the strange juxtapositions of pagan myths and deities with original Christian symbols. Historians have made their suppositions, but it remains for the individual viewer to draw from the brilliant textiles (as rich in color as Peruvian textiles) and schematized carvings the esthetic pleasure the works warrant, and possibly, interpretations.

William Gropper's small water-colors at the ACA Gallery, 63 East Fifty-seventh Street, are in a tender key—far from the sharp critical drawings for which this artist is famous.

These water-colors are mostly quick linear studies with a few tones added. Most often they are notations of character. There are portraits of a wrinkled-browed philoso-



An ancient Coptic figure

phere, a wide-eyed child, a cellist, an old-school musician from the old country, and other characters Gropper has seen. His memory of foreign markets on open squares is recorded in a summary and softly colored impression that carries with it a deep nostalgia.

In "The Vision of Jeremiah" by Luise Kaish at the Sculpture Center, 167 East Sixty-ninth Street, a great, flattened, squarish form above the angular prophet balances occultly and gives the sense of mystery and revelation this artist seems most interested in conveying. In her cast bronze and welded works the themes are predominantly Biblical, and frequently handled with originality. Smaller studies of rangy camels racing over the desert are particularly strong. Some of the prophet figures, however, are strained in their semi-abstract conception.

Miguel Ocampo is a younger artist from Argentina having his first one-man exhibition in the United States at the Roland de Aenlle Gallery, 59 West Fifty-third Street. He works with softened geometric forms—small circles, bulls-eyes, straight lines and occasional rectilinear forms. They are painted in a thin, meticulous technique in which light is graded off sensitively, giving his compositions a mysterious cast.

Pictures

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Mar. 24-Apr. 11
K A I S H
SCULPTURE CENTER
167 EAST 69 ST., N. Y. 21

LUISE KAISH has brought to the Sculpture Center forty-six recent religiously based, expressionistically handled, sculptures. This is exciting work: most of it cast bronze in soaring shapes; typically a series of prophets, great Biblical figures in long robes waving their arms while above their proud heads. Mrs. Kaish has concretized in thin handsomely worked bronze the descent of angels. There are several versions of the Blessing, the solemn figure of the rabbi hooded with a tallis. Among the many attractive smaller

pieces are Greek goats in welded copper and the *Seven Trumpeters of Jericho*.
J. G. B.

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Art Exhibition Notes

It is more than rare color that gives imaginative life to the paintings Robert Knipschild is showing at the Alan Gallery. Here, the artist whose growth continues apace, strikes new romantic chords of feeling in some of his most perceptive work done to date. As shown in his catalogue titles, natural experience admittedly guides his process. But this experience is rarely up to full focus and remains in depth, not altogether hidden, but obtaining poetic direction by subtle means. Thus the new abstracts, while belonging to a familiar trend in contemporary art, give impressions of lakes, sea and autumn countryside with much of the rich feeling of our best romantic artists—artists such as Inness, say, or George Fuller.

Religious Sculpture

Luisse Kaish, who has an impressive sculpture show at the Sculpture Center, is a young artist from Georgia. Working in bronze, or other metal, she is not satisfied to be gay and zestful in creating youthful figures full of movement and animation, traits which her work exhibits so well, but has allowed her art to grow expressive, more serious. Thus in her figures from Old Testament themes a deep religious interest shows. Nevertheless, modern ideas characterize much that she does, and she seldom illustrates so much as interprets. In "Vision of Jeremiah" she thus attempts to create the vision as well as the prophet. This is not easy in sculpture. But Miss Kaish is adventurous, as well as young and talented.

Coptic Art "Modern"

Ancient Coptic art from Egypt has the singular importance of reflecting inspiration from one of the oldest of Christian cultures. But it is not

essentially a religious art that is seen in the wonderful textile decorations, mostly, of course, in fragmentary form, and small sculptures on view at the Delacorte Gallery. Concerned with human figures, birds, animals and flowers the designs reflect Byzantine and Greco-Roman influences which seem modern today. Only the dry climate of Egypt made possible survival of woven fabrics such as these. And many are remarkable indeed for the liveliness and animation of their subjects, for the mysterious charm pervading them. C. B.

White at A. C. A.

Charles White, showing his latest drawings and prints at the A. C. A. Gallery, is one of the strongest draftsmen around. He uses his curious, etching-like, cross-hatched drawn line to model figures as solid as sculptures. For the most part portraits of Negro folksingers, they are done with compassion, perception and great vitality. White is not, however, a colorist. His pigment is used as an afterthought to his drawing, not as its substance. It is, in any case, almost chrome in its obviousness.

Out of Bauhaus

Werner Mayer-Gunther, exhibiting at the Van Diemen-Lillienfeld Galleries, is German-born, and obviously influenced by members of that country's famous Blue Rider and Bauhaus groups. He is, however, somewhat more conservative than the best-known members of those pioneering organizations. He paints landscapes and still-lives, for the most part, employing intricate, faceted composition and brilliant color to achieve an effect somewhat reminiscent of stained glass. He is an artist of sharp discipline, high skill, appealing wit, but not a great deal of originality. E. G.