

Josef Rulof:

Painter of the Unseen

By

DOROTHY GRAFLY

WHEN William Blake developed graphically the thoughts and feelings of a mystic, few men understood the quality of his message. The material world was, to them, the only world. They could see nothing beyond the things that they could touch.

Since that time man has grown wiser and less dogmatic. He has found that there are abstract realities. He cannot, for instance, see light or sound waves; but he knows that they underlie radio, radar, and television. The strange new world of the atom and its energy also defies ordinary physical vision.

It is interesting, however, that, several centuries ago, the mystic, Blake, couched abstract thoughts in concrete terms of the human figure. Man's body, although mystically translated, remained a body. Today, the work of a Holland-born Dutch mystic, Josef Rulof, now being shown for the first time in this country, puts aside the symbolism of the human form, while seeking to express by decorative means the essence of the life force.

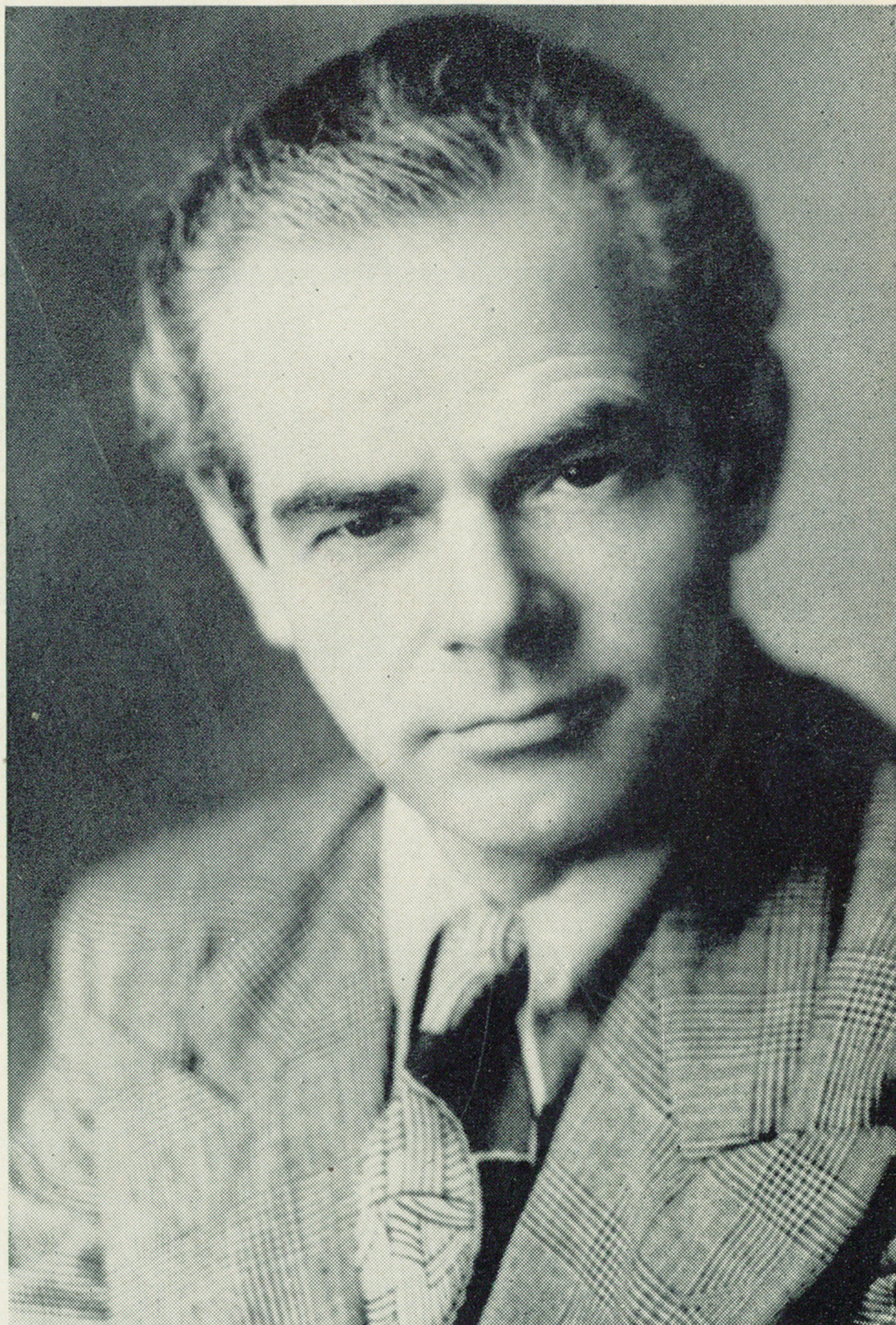
Twentieth century man is willing to concede that abstractions exist, function, and condition our lives. He knows, also, that they cannot be translated graphically in literal terms. Consequently, the painter who would express them must resort to new pictorial means. Many contemporary abstract and non-objective compositions are attempting to formulate such a vocabulary. Rulof, however, uses recognizable forms to create his design-idea. Like the abstractionist he is dreaming with his eyes open.

BLAKE UTILIZED MYSTICISM

When Blake drew the visions of his imaginative world he followed the more physically conscious Michelangelo in using the graphic phraseology of the human figure; but instead of translating the other world in terms of the earthly, he stepped over the borderline into mysticism.

Only in the Western world have art and mysticism been

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Rulof. As a child he lived in two worlds . . .

kept apart, with the result that the mind of a Blake has found itself out of step with its associates. Although scientific discovery and development have done much in our own century to keep the mind open and receptive, there is still a gap in acceptance between what we call "real", and what we term the "spiritual". We have, in fact, become self-conscious about the difference, and are loath to adjust to a visual vocabulary that goes beyond the literal.

Rulof's art is a vibrant combination of mystic symbolism and decorative design. It means much to the man who thinks or feels in terms of the cosmic, and much, also, to the less sensitive individual who derives pleasure purely from a decoration. Perhaps the man who enjoys a handsome still-life as such has little in common with the out-and-out mystic; yet, in Rulof's pictures, these opposites find a common meeting ground.

The instant you meet the man you are stirred by deep-seeing, brilliant eyes that seem to look, not at you, but into and through you. From the day of his birth, Josef has lived in a world of the imagination from which he is now materializing a series of handsome compositions. Steeped in symbolism, as they are, they may be accepted by the unimaginative as still lifes, marines, and landscapes. There is, in fact, a kinship between the mystic-

ism of Rulof and the romanticism of Ryder who brought much the same feeling to his moonlit marines, his rocks, woods, and water.

While it is true that Rulof's design sense is intuitive, and that his urge to express derives from sincere mysticism, no "explanation" is necessary in order to enjoy his pictures. His sensitive handling of color, his innate feeling for design, and for subtle special relationship of color and form, give his art *graphic* rather than *intellectual* impact. He paints first of all, because he feels. Then he tries to explain his feelings. It is, however, the emotional source of his message that establishes a common bond of understanding.

Through the magic of design he thus brushes aside irrelevant prejudices. The brusque business man to whom mysticism is anathema can appreciate the decorative beauty of such Rulof compositions as "Astral Garden Scene", "Divine Gift of The Universe", or "Harp of Life".

Rulof has developed a technique all his own. Whether he works on canvas or on a pressed wood panel there is in his application of pigment a sense of the direct touch of the hand rather than of the indirect brush stroke. Perhaps the nearest parallel might be found in finger painting.

"I always mould my brushes," he explains. "Every hair must function. I cannot work with a brush until I have shaped it."

Rulof's flowers are an exotic cross between orchid and peony, with something of the Orient in their make-up. Blossoms of the imagination, they may be subtle or vivid according to the quality of the "personality" they express. The full blown flower, with delicate tendrils reaching out from its heart, Rulof calls "the mother flower".

Never does he arrange flowers in a vase and then paint them. They grow under his hand as he paints. "Sometimes," he says, "I see the whole composition before I begin, but more often it develops as I work."

MODELS NOT IMPORTANT TO RULOF

Never does he set out with his sketch box to find a spot that is particularly paintable, even in his beloved woods, or along the shore. From early childhood he has so absorbed nature into himself that he has become identified with it. He does not need to see it through physical eyes. He feels it, and transfers his feeling to canvas.

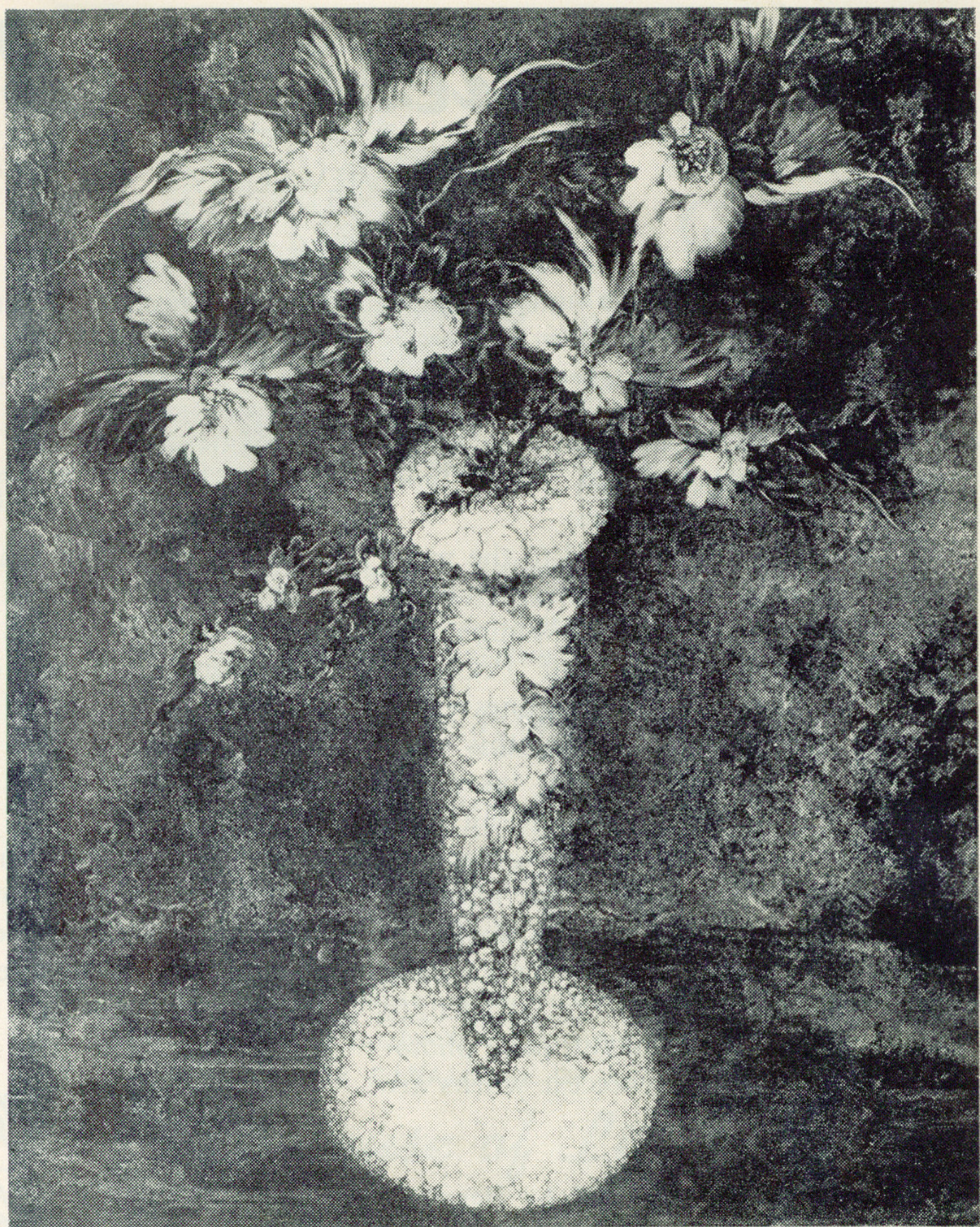
Many of his compositions possess an exotic intricacy. Everything in them is symbolic. "Vibration", to him, applies both to the manipulation of pigments and to the underlying message of the painting; for, in spite of the fact that each of his pictures stands on its own merit as a work of art, it also develops from the spiritual life of the man, himself.

So strong, in fact, is the creative stimulus of this life that years of work in the factories of Holland have only served to deepen its hold.

Until he was twenty-eight, Rulof had never held a brush in his hands. His father was a common laborer with an uncommon voice and a love for music. His mother, ostracized from her middle-class background because of her marriage, had the same mystical leaning that, in the son, has become a driving force.

As a child Josef lived in two worlds, — the world as we know it, — and the world of his mystic imagination. Often he was torn between the two. Wise beyond his years in matters of life and death, he was slow to learn in school. Always he has felt what he must express is not to be sought in books; rather has he found it in the hearts of men. And what he finds there he recreates in designs that use the symbolism of the nature he loves — flowers, trees, rocks, water, sky, sun, moon, and cosmic rays.

At times his work approaches the abstract, as in "Astral Garden Scene". "The flower colors," says Rulof, "are the
(Please Turn to Page 27)



DIVINE GIFT OF THE UNIVERSE.

Rulof



ASTRAL GARDEN SCENE.

Rulof
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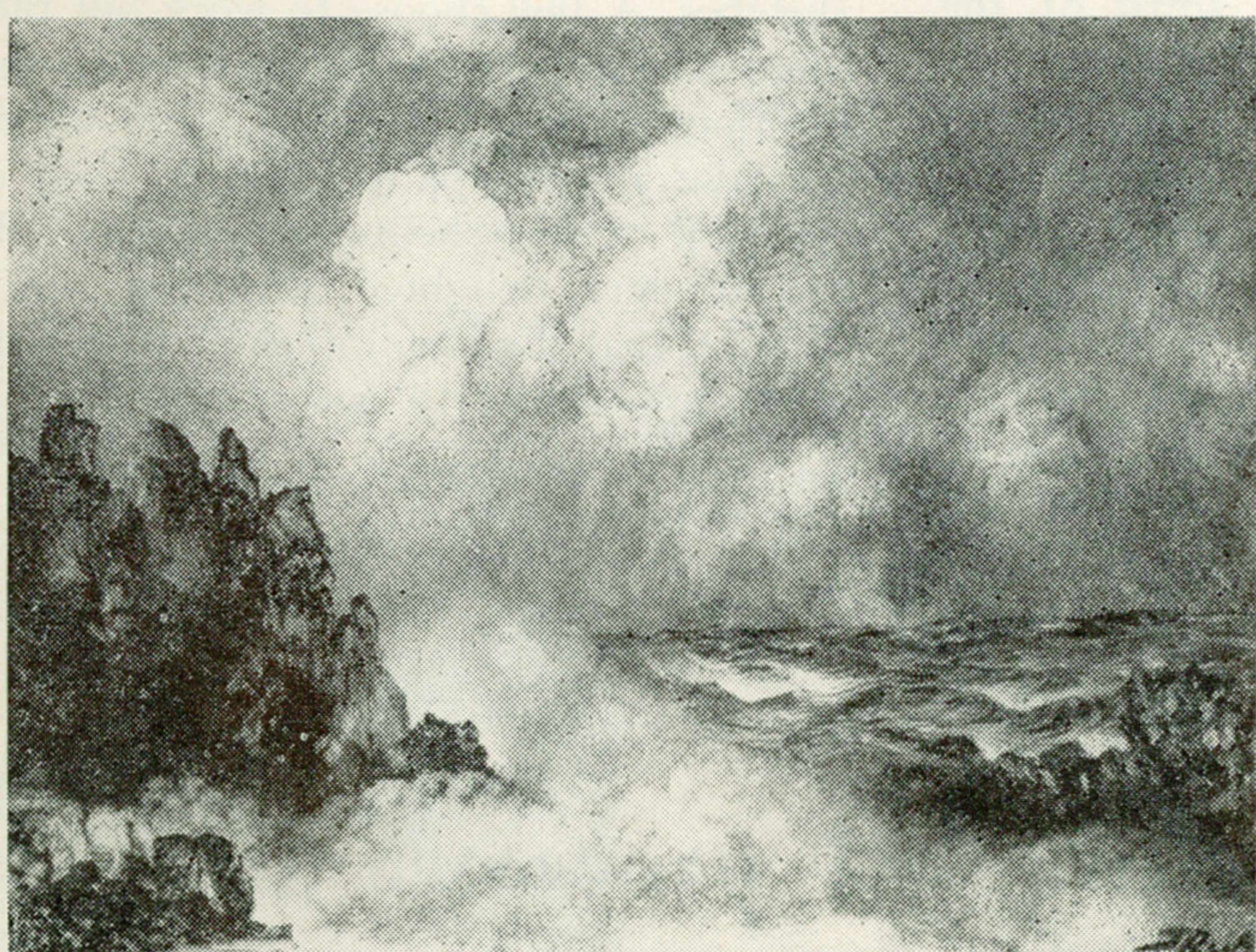
RULOF:

(Continued from Page 23)

life", and he sees them against the rich deep color-space of temple arches through which the "life" flows step by step. Thus, stairs and waterfalls, — both, to him life symbols, — appear in a number of the compositions.

Rulof works quickly. His "Harp of Life", a curve of flowers with cosmic rays for strings, was completed in two and a half hours.

"I am trying to symbolize the good and the bad in life," the painter declares. "A vase of flowers, for instance, is the human being. The flowers are its personality. Sometimes they are attacked by the serpent of evil. You see the serpent winding through the personality which may be destroyed, or, if it is strong enough, may drive the serpent away."



THE SEA.

Rulof

In one particularly intricate composition, Rulof shows a serpent attacking the full-blown beauty of mature exotic flowers. His gift to the Damon Runyon Cancer Fund, this painting symbolizes the attack of cancer on the human body.

As the "mother flower" is full-blown, with tendrils that stretch out and reproduce; so the "child flower" is compact, like a bud. "Divine Gift of the Universe" is Josef's tribute to a child who died at the age of seven. Simple, fragile, with a rising color tempo, the little bouquet has an aura of its own.

Rulof is never satisfied until he achieves a color to reflect his feeling. Thus a composition developed from his concept of creation starts by symbolizing embryonic life; works through the animal state, represented by a snake; to the final emergence of the human being and the triumph of a color that, as the artist explains it, is "not green, not gray, not blue, but a color in harmony with creation."

To attain a desired effect Rulof may use as many as fifteen colors, and fifteen or twenty brushes. What he achieves, however, is the graphic presentation of a state of mind. This fall, when his paintings start on an international exhibition tour, Rulof is going to Paris to play the part of himself—a metaphysical painter—in a motion picture to be built around the theme of spiritual knowledge.

In spite of the intricacy of his compositions; in spite of the subtlety of the color manipulation; in spite of any words used to carry the burden of his message, Rulof's art enjoys the simplicity of direct communication. It strikes through sophistication to what is primordial in all of us, and, in contrast to so much in modern art that seems born of despair and frustration, it bears a message of hope. Perhaps that is why it has a definite sales appeal to men and women in all walks of life. ●

ART NEEDS PLAIN TALK

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Editorial

IN our last issue we mentioned the fact that potential artists and art lovers were being frightened away by certain pompous writers with a flair for complicated jargon. The sad part about the whole thing is that a number of teachers, rather than standing up and exposing this esoteric nonsense, are inclined to try to develop a wall of mumbo-jumbo behind which they too may seek refuge. As a result we have a situation where thousands of interested but untrained art viewers throw up their hands in despair and say sarcastic things about "Modern Art", so that they will not be left without some sort of defense. For example, what do you suppose would be your reaction if you read the following paragraph, which appeared as a featured article in a national art magazine, a few months ago?

"... On the other hand we have the second type of space-universality: Dante's continuous, day and night, itinerary of the celestial and nether regions . . . a chronological time is naturalistically equated with the transversal of a vast panorama . . ."

Or, as a second example, here is an excerpt from a lecture given by a water color instructor at a large midwest University to his beginning students:

"... You must concern yourselves with the plasticity of movement, the mutual cognizance of spatial-plane relationships with color balance. . . ."

Now, we are no prudish, academic, die-hard publication. We have long since recognized the arrival of Modern Art, and our pages carry material concerning abstraction, surrealism, cubism, and so on, for it is our duty to report, rather than be partisan. All these things are art and must be judged on their individual merits. There are bad Picassos just as there are bad Rembrandts, and it is not necessary for a man or woman to be dead and buried a hundred years to be recognized as an artist of value. (Indeed, one of the most invalid suppositions of many art-lovers of today is that one which is based on a premise that because a piece of art or a piece of furniture is antique, it must follow that it is good!) Americans are notorious worshippers of ancestry and the antique—probably because our own history goes back so briefly. So, on the one hand we have the slaves to the cut and dried past, and on the other we have the double-talking radical. Small wonder the rest of the world has come to regard us as artistically uncouth.

The answer lies with the art teacher of today, and, in some part, by the role played by the Art Magazine, which is the greatest media for educating the public to the fact that art need not be complicated.

Plain talk is what we need. Plain talk and honest work. The art teacher of 1948 has accepted a certain responsibility with his teaching certificate. The new student has no opinions formed yet; the remarks you make, one way or the other, are all he has to go on until he has learned to evaluate. It is the instructor's responsibility then, to remain unbiased, informed and straightforward.

The Editor



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Table of Contents

DEPARTMENTS

Current Exhibitions.....	3
Editorial: "Art Needs Plain Talk".....	5
"Palette Notes".....	6
Michael M. Engel	
Latest in Books.....	26
New Wrinkles.....	29

ARTICLES

Painting on Wet Paper.....	7
Anna Dunser	
Papier Mache for Decoration & Display.....	8
Victoria Bedford Mitchell	
The Sculpture of Maurice Glickman.....	10
Myrweyn Eaton	
Educational Triad.....	13
Dean Forrest W. Murphy	
Josef Rulof, Painter of the Unseen.....	22
Dorothy Grafly	

Action Figure Sketching from Movie Film.....	28
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SPECIAL PHOTOGRAPHIC SECTION

"Thy Word Is A Lamp".....	15
Is Photography An Art Medium?.....	16
Frank Seiberling, Jr.	
Designing Your Future in Commercial Photography.....	20
Gerry A. Turner	
Abstract Designs in Photography.....	23
Dr. Fritz Neugass	

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THE Art EXHIBITIONS

THIS COLUMN IS OPEN TO ALL SUBSCRIBING ORGANIZATIONS WITHOUT CHARGE.

New York City

National Academy of Design: (1083 Fifth Ave.)

Fifth Annual Pepsi-Cola Show: The latest Pepsi-Cola collection of work by contemporary American artists will feature 156 individual pieces that will shortly be given national showing. Opens Wednesday, Sept. 29th, thru October 31st. Free to the public, daily 10-5, evenings of Tues. & Thurs.

New Age Gallery: (133 E. 56th St.)

"Art To Live With": Divided into two groups, these paintings by vigorous up and coming newcomers to the art-scene may be seen at this unique cooperative enterprise where all works are for sale at budget prices. *Group A* consists of oils and water colors, from Sept. 10 thru Sept. 25th; *Group B* features smaller oils, drawings and prints, and may be seen Sept. 27th thru Oct. 9th.

Barbizon Plaza Art Galleries: (58th St. & Sixth Ave.)

Josef Rulof Show: The delicately imaginative work of the artist whose story appears in this issue of DESIGN may be viewed during the entire month of October at this popular mid-town hotel. Free to the public.

Downtown Gallery: (32 East 51st St.)

"The American Family": Thirty distinctive paintings concerned with tracing family scenes from the cradle to the grave and encompassing the historic years from 1750 to 1850. Gathered from New England, New York and Pennsylvania, this is a portrait story of Americana. Visitors may also see the permanent collection of the galleries' own Kuniyoshi, John Marin, William Zorach, Ben Shahn, Georgia O'Keeffe, Bernard Karfiol and others. Thru September.

Alabama

Alabama Art League: (Montgomery)

19th Annual Art League Show: Housed at the Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts, this exhibition of work of Alabama artists will be exhibited during the Fall. Interested parties may submit work for prize awards by contacting *George E. Lewis, Secretary, 338 Sayre St., Montgomery.* Media desired: oils, water colors, photography, ceramics, graphic arts,

sculpture. Former Alabama residents may also submit work.

California

Mills College Art Gallery: (Oakland 13)

West Coast Artists and Students Work: Three exhibits will be held during the month of September and thru Oct. 8th, featuring recent gallery acquisitions, student work and oils by popular California painters.

New Jersey

Montclair Art Museum: (Bloomfield & So. Mountain Aves.)

18th Annual Competition Announcement: All New Jersey born or residing artists are invited to compete for awards. Two works may be submitted. Fee is \$1.00 for museum members, \$1.50 for all others. Media: no limitations. Works received up to October 3rd.

Ohio

Cleveland Museum of Art: (Cleveland 6)

Masterpieces from German Museums: These are the widely heralded works of Rembrandt, Vermeer and others which were recently brought to this country by

the Army after their discovery in salt mines, where they were placed by order of Goering, Hitler and other Nazi art-fanciers. On view Oct. 6th thru Oct. 22nd.

Dayton Art Institute: (Forest & River-view Aves.)

Bird paintings: a special exhibit of Audubon work and similar pieces will be on view concurrent with a showing of 20th Century water colors, during September.

Toledo Museum of Art: (Toledo 2)

Exotic paintings: work highlighting scenes from the island of Haiti will be shown Sept. 9th thru Sept. 30th.

Pennsylvania

Philadelphia Art Alliance: (251 So. 18th St.)

Announcement of National Crafts Competition: A show will be held from Oct. 27th thru Jan. 2nd of the work of skilled arts-craftsmen. Competition is open to all and there is no entry fee. All work will be repacked, insured and returned at the Alliance's expense as well. All hand-crafts are eligible for entry. To mention a few: glasswork, decorated trays, plastics, toys, batik, bookbinding, leatherwork and metalcraft and jewelry (but not ceramic jewelry.) Write to Art Alliance for entry blanks.

National Academy Galleries: (Special exhibit) *Audubon Artists 7th Exhibit:* Open to all artists. A prize award competition in all media. Fee, \$3.00 for entries. Among prizes will be \$250 award for best marine, \$250 for best casein. Others. For exhibition December 2-15. Write Audubon Artists, Inc., 1083 Fifth Ave., New York City for information and entries.



TEXTILE EXHIBIT AT COOPER UNION

Scarves designed by such famous artists as Matisse, Moore, and Derain, have been acquired by the Cooper Union Art School for use by classes in textile design. The 30 different designs in the collection include the work of Jean Cocteau, Dominguez, Barbara Hepworth, Graham Sutherland, John Tunnard, and others. Selected squares from the group are on exhibit, in the Cooper Union Museum. The squares were silk-screen printed in limited editions by *Ascher Ltd.*