

VICTOR MIKHAIL ARNAUTOFF

Russia, England and Albania--these three countries so entirely different in customs and ideals--combined to produce one of America's outstanding fresco mural painters. San Francisco, because of its geographic location and because of its reputation as an art center, acquired this artist as a distinguished addition to its art colony.

War, revolution and the resulting confusion of a tottering society have been major factors in the life of Victor Arnautoff. With a background of culture and with a taste for the arts, this sensitive young man was plunged into a varied and adventurous career such as few artists have ever experienced. Plans for serious study at a famous art school were rudely interrupted by war lords, who did not consult the preferences of their talented young subject. Thus ten years were misappropriated from a well defined career. Realizing this penalty, imposed at a crucial period of his education, we can appreciate with better understanding the rapid progress made by this young artist.

GENEALOGY

Victor Arnautoff was born in the city of Mariupol (meaning the city of Mary), on the banks of the Kalmius River in the southern part of the Ukraine, on the eleventh day of November, 1896. He was christened Victor Mikhail by his

parents, whose Russian, Albanian and English ancestry brought him a heritage of talents.

His father, Mikhail Basil Arrautoff, is a priest of the Russian Orthodox Church, living in Russia now and performing religious services in one of the few churches of Mariupol. He came from the peasant class but had, by perseverance and ambition, risen to his present respected position.

The mother, Adalaid Ivan (Kravzoff), had uncles who were well known Russian architects. She numbered among her relatives a cousin, William Sherwood, the English sculptor.

BOYHOOD YEARS

The early years of Victor's life were pleasant, but uneventful. One of his happy recollections is the customary summer vacation spent on his uncle's farm, where he participated in the labor and life of the out-of-doors.

In his eighth year, in 1904, he was enrolled in the Gymnasium at Mariupol, which school requires ten years for the completion of its course. The first eight years compare with the American Grammar and High Schools, and the final two years are equivalent to college. When eighteen Victor graduated from the Gymnasium with highest honors. He also had pursued his studies in drawing and water color painting with a private teacher, as he had quite definitely decided to become an architect. It was at this time that the outbreak of hostilities began. Europe was plunged into war.

MILITARY YEARS

Therefore, after a brief period spent in the Imperial Art School at St. Petersburg, the young architectural student was ordered to enter the Military Cavalry School at Elizabetgrad, in the Province of Kherson.

A year later, in 1915, he received his diploma and was graduated a second lieutenant. Immediately he was assigned to the Fifth Lancers, in the King of Italy's regiment which was sent to Riga, Latvia. Lieutenant Arnautoff then experienced active service in the Provinces on the Baltic Sea. On the battle front between Riga and Dvinsk, at the town of Ixkul, the German army succeeded in smashing the Russian lines in 1917. But the morale of the Russian army had already received a paralyzing blow at the news of the "Revolution". It was at this time that his regiment was demobilized by Kerensky's government. Lieutenant Arnautoff laid aside his uniform, intending to return home; but civil war prevented this. Unable to return to the Ukraine, he went to Simbersk on the Volga, hoping to resume the study of painting and drawing. In April of the same year he was drafted for service as Chief of Squadron with the rank of lieutenant in the Red Army which was then in the process of formation.

Before plans could be completed and the necessary ammunition supplied, the city of Simbersk was occupied by the White Army, but the occupation happened so suddenly Lieutenant

Arnautoff knew nothing about it. He occupied a room in a private dwelling instead of the barracks, and one evening had attended the theatre and sensed nothing amiss. The next morning he saw the streets full of soldiers: upon enquiring, he found the White Army in control. This caused him anxiety as he thought of course he would be punished because the Red Army had left without him. Instead, he was absorbed into the White Army as a Captain of Cavalry and within a week he was on his way to Siberia. As war meant delay in his art studies, he was not in sympathy with either of the belligerents.

TO MANCHURIA ON HORSEBACK

The White Army finally reached Omsk, in Siberia, after many severe encounters with the Reds. As Captain Arnautoff, he covered Russia from the Volga to the Manchurian border, in the saddle. Finally Kolchak's army was disbanded in Harbin and then deported from China to the Pacific provinces of Russia. Very soon afterwards Captain Arnautoff applied for and received a discharge from the army because of his depleted health. Returning to Harbin, ill and exhausted from the rigors of war, he attempted to find work. He tried sculpture, various artistic odd jobs and even tried to be a salesman, at which he was unsuccessful because of his natural reticence. During this period of about a year he faced starvation many times. In 1922 he was summoned by Cheng Tso Lin, war lord of Manchuria, with a request that he supervise the cavalry and

establish a breeding farm for cavalry horses. Arnautoff accepted this responsible position and remained on Chang's staff until 1925.

THE ARTIST MARRIES

While traveling about Manchuria, in the spring of 1923, he had met Miss Lydia Basil Blonsky, who was the daughter of the retired Military Aide of the Imperial Russian Embassy of China. Shortly after they were married in the Greek Orthodox Church of Mukden, by a Japanese priest of this same order. They remained in Mukden until about the first of September, 1925, and two of their sons were born during this residence in China.

THE ARTIST MAKES AN IMPORTANT DECISION

It was in 1925 that Arnautoff had an opportunity to leave Manchuria and come to the United States to continue the artistic career, which had met with so many rebuffs. He arrived in San Francisco on October 13, 1925, and, not wishing to lose time, within three days had enrolled at the California School of Fine Arts. Here he remained until May of 1929. During this time he studied sculpture under Ralph Stackpole and fresco painting with Edgar Walter, famous California artists.

In Russia his intention had been to become an architect, but he had changed his mind by the time he had enrolled in the San Francisco School. Five dramatic years spent in

the war had wrought emotional changes in his art consciousness. No wonder then that his post-war view of life and art forms resulted in ideas which could only be expressed externally on large surfaces in vigorous color. At last his art began to speak as he composed progressive historical scenes on great walls in fresco. In this type of painting he has since specialized and has successfully built his reputation as an advanced California mural artist.

During his last year at the school he won the Anne Bremer Scholarship and cash prize for 1928-1929 with the sculpture entitled "Nude" which is still at his studio, at 730 Montgomery Street, San Francisco, and for a fresco at the Russian Church on Fulton Street entitled "Entombment of Christ". He had entered the United States as a student and as the allotted time was completed, and he was still desirous of becoming a citizen, he accepted a commission to assist Diego Rivera in Mexico City.

TO MEXICO

Their first combined effort in mural frescoes was on a contract from the Mexican Government. They composed a large mural entitled "The Conquest of Mexico," for the walls of the National Palace in the City of Mexico. This gigantic work took them a year to paint and they were paid for their labor by the Government.

Another commission for some fine frescoes was submitted to Rivera in 1930, by Dwight Morrow, late Ambassador from the United States to Mexico. They decorated the walls of the Palace Cortez in Cuernavaca, beautiful Capitol of the State of Morelos. Fortunately for the artist, he found some leisure time in which to do some private painting while in Mexico and so completed a number of fine oil paintings which are now appreciated by their present owners in the United States. They were mostly Mexican scenery portraying the native life. Among them are: "Streets of Cayoacan" and "Chair of Guadalajara," owned by the San Francisco Sculptress, Adaline Kent Howard; "Mexican Laundry," the property of Mrs. Roger Kent of Kentfield, California; "A Mexican Landscape," now in the possession of Dr. Winacour, of New York City and a "Portrait of Mrs. A.," in the home of the artist. It was while at work in Cuernavaca that he painted, in oil, the "Revolution of Zapata."

HE RETURNS TO THE "COOL, GRAY CITY

BY THE GOLDEN GATE"

After two interesting and pleasant years in Mexico he returned to the United States, arriving in May of 1931. In searching for a suitable studio, on the fringe of the Latin Quarter, he found what he desired at 528 Washington Street. Perhaps the reason he chose this room was because it had great bare walls--walls upon which he could paint! At any

rate, the San Francisco Examiner (Feb..15, 1932) gives nearly a half page to a description of the unique mural which he was doing at that time. The fresco occupied a space eight by twenty feet in size. It was, according to the paper:

"....a magnificent experiment in group portraiture, containing the likenesses of twenty-four prominent local artists, painted larger than life. The pity of it is that the fresco on which Arnautoff has spent a month's steady labor, not to mention the weeks during which he did portrait sketches from life of his subjects, is painted on the wall of a doomed house. Within two or three years the old building is to be removed by house wreckers. But the artist insists that he does not regret his labor of love.

"I wanted to paint a fresco to decorate my studio, and I wanted to see the faces of my friends around me" he says. "Besides, it is not every day that one runs across such an architecturally tempting space."

Twenty-one members of the Art Center (of which he is a member) and three of their friends are shown. It is very interesting to note the names of the artists presented:

Parker Hall; Maxine Albro; Soocy Wong; Julius Pommer; Michael von Meyer; Alatha Churcher; Harold Dean; Brent Carlton; Victor Arnautoff himself (to one side); Dorothy Puccinelli; Jeanette Howard; Raymond Puccinelli; Adaline Kent; Ben Cunningham, the model; Gene Kloss; Helen Forbes; Ileana Labaudt; Marjorie Dickinson; Ruth Crevath; Sigizmund Sazevich; Margaret Blessington; Eugene Ivanoff.

It was with great interest that the San Francisco and Bay region art lovers welcomed his "one-man" show at the

Palace of the Legion of Honor, in San Francisco in 1931. After this display, many students began enrolling in his art classes. He was an enthusiastic member of the San Francisco Art Center from the beginning of his residence in the city. During the year he held an additional "one-man show" in this intimate and attractive gallery on Montgomery Street.

HAVE OUR MURALS HURT OUR MORALS?

His first commission, after his return from Mexico, came from Palo Alto, California. Upon its completion, in the Palo Alto clinic, a storm of criticism arose. There were persons who objected to them on the grounds of an, "immoral display of nudity and profane modernism." A group of local physicians had erected a new building in Palo Alto, at the corner of Homer Avenue and Bryant Street and Arnautoff had been selected to do the decorations.

From the Palo Alto Times (Aug. 31, 1932) an article in defence of these murals is quoted. Dr. Henry Lanz, professor of Slavic languages on the Stanford University faculty, was the author and made the following statements:

"First of all, the artist had the difficult problem of combining his pictorial project with the given set of architectural facts"....then "It was suggested that the frescoes should represent the history of medicine"....but he had "a very limited amount of space at his disposal"...."He again solved the problem with remarkable ingenuity. The lower part of the wall was allotted to primitive medicine. As a foundation--and symbolically as a shadow of the past--it was carried out in primitive grey

without colors, in a manner suggesting bas-relief." "Mr. Arnautoff....wanted a forceful contrast between the primitive and the modern. He made an attempt to lay bare before our eyes the crude, superstitious and awful aspect of pre-historic medicine: The rite of exorcising evil spirits and the primitive treatment of wounds....as in direct contrast to one of the greatest inventions of modern medicine, the stethoscope as the central object in a group representing medical examination of a patient. The criticism was directed at the patient, a woman, and that she is half undressed."

Not long after he finished the Palo Alto Mural in 1933, he executed a fresco entitled "Adam and Eve" for the studio of Adaline Kent Howard. He found time to work in different mediums, doing scenes around Marin County, California, in water-color and portraits in pencil. The judges at the Sacramento State Fair welcomed his pictures, which were prominently displayed in their gallery at both the 1934 and the 1935 Fairs. Also, in 1934 he exhibited some of his work in Los Angeles at the Foundation of Western Art.

LARGE COMMISSIONS

It was in 1934 that Mr Arnautoff was selected by a committee to do a large fresco (35X19 feet) in the Coit Tower on Telegraph Hill, a composition called "Metropolitan Life." The Christian Science Monitor of August 1, 1934 praises it as follows:

"Victor Arnautoff's fresco composition "City Life," recording a multitude of street activities, in which one finds the elements that go toward making an outstanding fresco, rhythm and movement, achieved by a contrast of light

and dark patterns, by varying the intensity of color, and by a clever handling of masses which lead the eye from one end of the painting to the other."

Incidentally, this same year he finished an oil painting of "Sea Gulls" which is in the possession of Mr. Sherman Kent of New Haven, Connecticut.

The year 1935 brought another interesting commission. This was a large fresco, 10X35 feet in size, done in the Military Chapel of the San Francisco Presidio. Five months of study and work were required to complete the assignment, the subject being called "History of California Religion and Army."

The San Francisco Examiner (June 25, 1935) printed the following on his achievement:

"California, old and new, is the subject. Arnautoff has done admirable work. His decoration is bright, interesting, appropriate to the fresco and ideally located. It is easily visible from end to end. On the left are Indians, trappers, and missionaries. To the right is the modern Presidio, army activities of peace times, and a background of San Francisco skyline.

"Religion, represented by a figure of St. Francis, separated the two pictures, the past and the present."

Despite his busy days at work on the murals, this versatile artist did not fail to continue with his oil painting. A still life, entitled "Green Pears," now in the home of Sherman Kent, was completed in 1935.

And the San Diego International Art Museum at the Exposition, 1935, displayed his work about which there was much favorable comment.

However, in July of 1935 began Arnautoff's largest order to date--the frescoes for the George Washington High School of San Francisco. This beautiful new building was nearing completion when he was selected to paint the lobby. The work is in twelve historical panels and depicts the "Life of George Washington."

"The drama of George Washington enacts itself on the walls of this San Francisco high school dedicated to his memory; thanks to the foresight of an American architect and the genius of a Russian painter.

"The theme is executed in panels, 1600 square feet of them, requiring a year to paint and months of study and research beforehand.

"One of the characteristics of the Washington high school paintings is their sculptural quality. Figures are full bodied, full volumed as if carved from smoothly polished stone, yet the figures do not violate the muralist's canon of flatness and adjustment to the long low sharp lines of modern architecture.

"The first of the twelve panels, on the right wall of the stair case, deals with the personality of Washington. Verticals of trees and rocks creating a wilderness setting of thick foliage for the youthful surveyor, the Washington in buckskin, and coon skin cap. who carried the message to Canada and who fought the French with the Indian in the trackless forest. Indians in brilliant war paint lurking through one of the panels, their strong

bodies producing a study of the human figure. The Washington in the revolution with fury; here the panel riots with a war of color. The tea is dumped in Boston Harbor and stamps are burned. Then comes the massacre by the British. Next the Continentals respond with the Liberty pole, tant, violent figures. And next the mounted Washington who organizes and commands. Valley Forge follows with Washington in a dark cloak, surrounded by ragged Continentals. This panel symbolizes his farewell to the army. In another the First President appears at the council table between Jefferson and Hamilton. Here we see magnificence of color and genuine sense of reality. The two largest panels, Valley Forge and Mt. Vernon are two of the major frescoes on the Pacific coast."

In June of 1935 the Biennial Exposition of the California Chapter of the American Institute of Architects was held at the San Francisco Museum of Art. One gallery held an exhibit of work in various media for wall decoration and to this small but interesting collection Mr. Arnautoff contributed examples of fresco technique.

During August the Members Exhibition, which opened the Fall season at the Art Center, on Montgomery Street, received much publicity in the various San Francisco papers and art magazines on account of Arnautoff's painting called "Dance Marathon." From the News Letter and Wasp (Aug. 31, 1935) the following comment is taken:

"Arnautoff has painted a cruel picture of a dancing 'Marathon.' His keen sense of observation and his subtle implications are ruthless in the pointed annotations. It is deeply human in the measure in which it is vividly true. It is well painted and the best oil we have seen by this artist."

During his leisure time in the later part of the year, he painted in oil a "Nude," which hangs on the wall of his present studio at 730 Montgomery Street, San Francisco. The San Diego International Art Museum at the Exposition exhibited his work. Recently he began another important commission as assistant to Maurice Sterne on a mural for the United States Treasury in Washington, D. C.

KING OF THE PARILIA

"All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy," and artists are no exception to this rule. The much heralded Parilia (or artists ball) of 1936 took place in the month of January in Exposition Auditorium. The committee in charge bestowed the ruling honors upon Victor Arnautoff as King and Esther Bruton (well known Bay region artist) as queen. More than a thousand artists and their associates participated.

His family now is American by adoption; and consists of his wife and their three sons, the last having been born while the family was in Mexico.

The Russian people have the reputation of being among the world's most adaptable races. Regardless of the country in which they may be placed, they readily adopt the customs and modes of living. He speaks the native tongue of his youth, the difficult Manchurian dialect, the florid language of "old Mexico" and the English language, which he has mastered so well that scarcely an accent is noticeable. His

carefully chosen, well-phrased sentences reveal a strong personality, interested in his work and in humanity, with scarcely ever a word of war and revolution. No heroics, no boasting, just a sure dedication to his work and growth.

AN ENTHUSIASTIC MEMBER OF SAN FRANCISCO ART LIFE

He is a member and one of the council of the San Francisco Art Association and vice president of the California Mural Association.

Teaching has always been an easy task for him. Ever since Arnautoff's return from Mexico he has had numerous private pupils. He taught, too, at the California School of Fine Arts for a number of summer sessions, and in 1936 became one of the regular staff of teachers.

Arnautoff believes each of the modern art movements fulfills its good purposes, but he prefers the less abstract manner for himself. As a painter he is a "realist" and his treatment of his subject is conservative though influenced by modern thought.

ARNAUTOFF'S WORKING PHILOSOPHY

"Arnautoff believes that 'Art is the materialization of human thought and emotion' writes the critic in the Chronicle (September 1, 1935). 'Art for art's sake or 'art as perfume' has never appealed to me. As I see it, the artist is a critic of society. I have no special preferences in subject matter, however. I paint whatever challenges my interest, but I cannot say I do not care what people say about my work. My own judgment is, of course, the most important to me, but I wish to deal with people, to explain to them things and ideas they may not have seen or understood. I do

not deny the importance of Picasso and the modern abstractionists, but I regard their painting as laboratory work. Their attitude is primarily analytical. Today we have no time for analysis. It is high time we began to synthesize.

"Painting must be like a huge book, the pages embodying the creative efforts of the human race throughout the ages. 'Mexico', he states, has a definite school of native art and San Francisco can reach a native California type of art leadership in her murals and frescoes, because of the dramatic episodes in the history of California, which are so well adapted to this dignified form of decoration."

Also, he considers placing frescoes in public buildings is a forward step of great importance for the education of those who are unable to find art interest in other forms.

The casual acquaintance is at once impressed with the quality of sincerity so apparent in the man. He seems destined to become a leader in American mural decoration as it crystallizes into that synthesis of modern life and current art expression which he believes is near.

And so it happens that as this artist has thoroughly adapted himself to our life and really become one of us, we have also completely adopted his art as a valuable asset rich in vision and wide in range.

In blazing contrast to Arnautoff's contributions to the cultural life of San Francisco is his present economic status. Forced to forego his position on the Emergency Educational Program as an art teacher because of illness, he is at present attempting to obtain employment on the Federal Art Project.

VICTOR ARNAUTOFF

REPRESENTATIVE

WORKS

OILS:

Chair of Guadalajara, 1930
 Dance Marathon
 Green Pears, 1935
 Mexican Landscape, A
 Mexican Laundry, 1930
 Nude
 Portrait of Mrs. A., 1930
 Sea Gulls, 1934
 Streets of Caycacan, 1930
 Wreck, The, 1937

MURALS:

Adam and Eve, 1933
 Conquest of Mexico, The, 1929
 Decoration of the Palace Cortez, 1930
 History of California Religion and Army, 1935
 History of Medicine, 1932
 Life of George Washington, 1935
 Metropolitan Life, 1934

FRESCO:

Entombment of Christ, 1929

SCULPTURE:

Nude

PRIVATE COLLECTIONS:

Adaline Kent Howard, San Francisco:
 Adam and Eve
 Chair of Guadalajara
 Streets of Cayoacan

Arnautoff's Home, San Francisco:
 Portrait of Mrs. A.

Arnautoff's Studio, San Francisco:
 Dance Marathon

Mrs. Roger Kent, Kentfield, California:
Mexican Laundry

Sherman Kent, New Haven, Connecticut:
Green Pears
Sea Gulls

Dr. Winacour, New York City:
Mexican Landscape, A

PERMANENT COLLECTIONS:

San Francisco, California:
San Francisco Museum of Art
Albert Bender Collection
Figure Standing, Reading Book (drawing)
Hand (drawing)
Hand, Arm and Flower (drawing)
Horse (drawing)
Reclining Figure, Hand Raised (drawing)
Reclining Male Figure, Hand on Knee (charcoal)
Two Hands (drawing)
Russian Church, Fulton Street
Entombment of Christ
Coit Memorial Tower, Telegraph Hill
Metropolitan Life
Presidio Chapel
History of California Religion and Army
George Washington High School
Life of George Washington

Palo Alto, California:
Palo Alto Clinic, Homer Avenue and Bryant
History of Medicine.

Mexico City, Mexico:
National Palace
The Conquest of Mexico (assisted Diego Rivera)

Cuernavaca, Mexico:
Palace Cortez
Decorations (assisted Diego Rivera)

EXHIBITIONS:

San Francisco, California:

San Francisco Art Association

50th Annual Exhibition, 1928

Sketch

51st Annual Exhibition, 1929

Composition

Study

Study

Bas Relief

54th Annual Exhibition, 1932

Still life (oil)

Sketch (drawing)

White Cloud (drawing)

Maxine Albrow (drawing)

Sketch (drawing)

56th Annual Exhibition, 1934

Nude (oil)

Plowing (oil)

57th Annual Exhibition, 1937

The Wreck (oil and tempera)

Palace of the Legion of Honor, 1931

One-man Show

Art Center, August 1931

One-man Show

Art Center, 1933

Dance Marathon

Hale Bros. Exhibition

Head (2 pieces of head sculpture, cut direct
in sandstone)

San Francisco Museum of Art, Biennial Exhibition

Chapter of American Architects, 1935

Los Angeles, California:

Foundation of Western Art, 1934

Sacramento, California:

Sacramento State Fair, 1934 and 1935

San Diego, California:

California Pacific International Exposition, 1935

Visitation Valley

AWARDS:

San Francisco, California:

Anne Bremer Scholarship and Cash Prize, 1928-1929

Nude (sculpture)

Entombment of Christ (fresco)

San Francisco Art Association, 57th Annual
Exhibition, 1937. Anne Bremer Memorial Prize
Group, 2nd Award and \$200 for "The Wreck"

CLUBS:

Member:

San Francisco Art Association, and of its
Artists Council
California Mural Association (Vice-President)
Art Center

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February 15, 1932--June 25, 1935

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December 1, 1934--September 5, 1936

San Francisco Chronicle, September 1, 1935

Palo Alto Times, August 31, 1932

Christian Science Monitor, August 1, 1934

News-Letter and The Wasp, San Francisco
July 18, 1931--January 11, 1935
June 8, 1935--August 17, 1935
August 31, 1935--January 11, 1936
July 11, 1936

Argonaut, San Francisco, August 1, 1936

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