'Modern' exhibit avoids old quarrel

By REGINA HACKETT
PH ART CRITIC

No discussion of Northwest art is complete without a rancorous fight about the Northwest School.

For those lucky few who have managed to miss this edifying spectacle, the Northwest School was the first group of local artists — largely painters — to emerge on the national scene and give the region a signature style.

That style tended to mean paintings that were muted in color, modes in size and dreamy in content. Its leading figures were said to be influenced by Asian rather than European art and moved to express life forces in spiritual terms.

Thanks in part to a 1953 feature in Life magazine, the catch phrase for the movement became Northwest Mystics. Everyone's idea of who was part of it includes Mark Tobey, Morris Graves and Guy Anderson. After that, dissent sets in.

Senior Henry Gallery curator Sheryl Conkelton decided she wanted to look back without stirring up the same old issues in the same old pot. Instead of subjecting artists to a Northwest School loyalty oath — are you now or have you ever been a mystic? — she looked beyond intentions to the results.

Her exhibit follows E.M. Forster's famous dictum, to "only connect." She sidestepped the tricky issue of the Northwest School by concentrating instead on the broader range of artists working in the region from 1932 to 1952 who were attempting to make something new and hence be modern.

"What It Meant to Be Modern" at the Henry showcases the work of 44 artists committed to shuffling the dead hands of the past off their shoulders and moving with confidence into a new

ART REVIEW

What It Meant to Be Modern, Seattle Art at Mid-Century. University of Washington's Henry Art Gallery.

Through Jan. 23. Admission: $3; $3.50 seniors; free for members, students and children younger than 14; free for everyone Thursdays, 5-8 p.m. Hours: Tuesdays-Sundays, 11 a.m.-5 p.m.; Thursdays till 8 p.m. 206-543-2280.

age. The results are occasionally startling. Conkelton hung pro-mystic Leo Kenney's painting next to anti-mystic Margaret Tomkins', revealing that Kenney's "The Inception of Magic" from 1945 is closely akin to Tomkins' "Anamorphosis" from 1944. Both paintings are rooted in European Surrealism, the same force that was having such a strong influence on New York painters of the same period.

Although the two best paintings in the show are Graves' "Untitled (Bird and Snake)" from 1945 and "Chalice With Moon" from 1938 — Tobey dominates overall, largely because Conkelton found great Tobes to represent him in all his styles. She presents Graves to good advantage when he's doing his Zen bit, his potent empty space charged with figurative tranquility, but fails to capture the surreal relish and antic vulgarity of his early work.

Kenneth Callahan, a somewhat neglected figure of late, comes on strong here, particularly with his tender yet precise

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"Portrait of Morris Graves" from 1936 and his monumental tangle of figures from the 1940s titled "The Races of Man," 12 feet high by 8 feet wide. Big, blunt, fleshy bodies colored in rose, blue, yellow and green tumble weightlessly through space, as if made of dry ice.

Anderson became a great painter late in his career; nothing here suggests what would come. William Ivey was just beginning to hit his stride in 1961, when he produced "Landscape," his sole contribution.

Far better represented is Paul Horicuhi, with his elegant "Edge of Time" from 1960 and his small, delicately blue "Sentinel in the Night," also from 1960.

Many will be startled by Hemi Juvonen's gleeful fusion of Krazy Kat and Tobey's white writing. Her work looks better and better all the time, down to the messages she embedded into her paintings written in proto-hip-hop spelling employed later by Syl Stone and Jean-Michel Basquiat.

Aiden Mason's early landscapes in this show hint at the bounce and vitality that would distinguish him later. William Cumming's small watercolors of workers have a stark grace, and George Tsutakawa's paintings and sculptures seem to be imploding with energy.

There isn't nearly enough Walter Isaacs, although his "Family Group" from 1939 suggests how much he had learned from Matisse about deepening color without losing its light and bringing form alive through decorative patterning.

"What It Meant to Be Modern" has the first two stone sculptures carved by James W. Washington Jr., a potent bird and a human head, both small enough to be rolled together in the palm of a hand. They were given by Washington to Tobey, his teacher, in gratitude.

Also a first is Wesley Wehr's "Skykomish (Totem Beach)" from 1961, the foremost of his line of tiny landscapes — fog gathered around a horizon line.

Some artists rarely seen are a real pleasure here, from Wendell Brazeau, Kenjiro Nomura and Louis Bunce to Richard Gilkey, Ambrose Patterson, Boyer Gonzales and Peter Camfferman.

In spite of their wish to be modern, there are a few artists famous locally who were as profoundly provincial as Missouri's Thomas Hart Benton, hooting in derision at anything contemporary made beyond their borders. Enough time has gone by to forgive Benton his bluster and look at what he painted without his voice spoiling its rhythms and energies.

Similarly, "What It Meant to Be Modern" offers us the chance to forget all party-line dogma and take a new look at the art produced by the Northwest's modernist pioneers.

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