

# Museum

(Continued from Page 1B)

**"Beautiful,"** said the young woman, almost reverently. "Just incredible."

She pressed her face forward, until her breath frosted the glass.

She had been gazing into the case for several minutes, at a wooden figure perhaps eight inches high. Its human body was crouched low, feathered arms stretched out wide, as though ready to leap into flight. A strange, beaked head stared back through two black slits. The entire figure was painted with bright but harmonious colors — sun yellow, sky blue, clay red.

The doll was a glimpse of another world, unreal and yet alive. It represented the Hopi Indians' Kwahu Kachina, the Eagle Being, and it possessed a power unchecked by the many years and miles separating it from its Southwestern home. The woman's exclamation was about as close as one could come to describing the doll's effect on a casual visitor.

Indian art has a way of evoking such awe in many people. Unbound by Western civilization's conventional definitions of art, it strikes a responsive emotional chord that is often hard to put into words. *Something* is happening, but that something is as elusive as the cultures of which the art is a product.

Michaelangelo? Ah, yes. Picasso? Perhaps. Kwahu Kachina? Hmm...

But whether we fully under-

stand him or not, there he is, along with a dozen or so other kachina dolls that fill one of the cases at Eugene's Butler Museum of Indian Art. Mute in a rare moment of sunlight, standing, dancing, a vision singing songs of vision...

Just incredible, said the woman.

And she wiped the glass to gaze at him some more.

**E**lizabeth Butler knows. The Porsche, the money, the well-cut clothes, are all camouflage. The Choctaw blood has never rested, and as she moves through the museum the art objects surround her like old friends. In fact, there are times when she seems like one of them, her silver hair and face traced with the lines of a well-carved mask.

"I never had even a remote idea of starting a museum, even though I had been collecting for a number of years," she says. "But I became antagonized by people who still had medieval ideas about the contribution of the American Indian, and who would make asinine remarks about why anyone would spend good money buying stuff, buying old junk done by Indians."

"Part of my dedication is to make people realize the contribution of the American Indian. We've reached the point where recognition should be given."

By 1974, Butler had gathered a substantial collection. But as more people — primarily students —



The Eagle Kachina doll, one of several at the Butler Museum of Indian Art. The dolls represent certain spirits and powers, and are often used to instruct children in the ways of man and earth.

came to see it, she found that proper display was becoming impossible. Furthermore, the collection involved thousands of dollars, a high risk in a home without proper security systems.

The answer was a museum. She found a building on the corner of Blair Avenue and First Street, received non-profit status, and donated a large part of her private collection. She now directs the museum as a volunteer, working with a five-member board of directors and assistant John Ford.

The large, three-room building houses hundreds of art objects, divided into nine cultural areas. The pieces are selected for their quality and accurate representation of a tribe or art form, and date to the early 1800s. The collection includes work from tribes of the Northwest Coast, California, the Southwest, the Southeast, the plains, and the East Coast.

"Some pieces are not necessarily spectacular," says Butler. "But they are a part of the art."

**B**utler started with baskets, and her early prejudices still show. The museum has a large sample, from such diverse areas as the Southwest, California, and the Southeast.

Some of the baskets are unrivaled in their craftsmanship. The

weaves are as tight as fabric, using such materials as grasses, bark fibers, and roots. The designs seem to spin from their surfaces. The pieces range in size from several feet in diameter to half the size of a dime.

But, like many other Indian art forms, basket weaving is dying. Some tribes have ceased to exist, and in others the old methods have been forgotten.

"Basket weaving is a year around project, and young girls in basket weaving tribes began learning when they were eight years old," says Butler. "You can't do it three months a year."

Butler's collection emphasizes older and dying art forms. Some of the Great Lakes beadwork, for instance, can no longer be duplicated, because the beads can't be found. Other objects served functions no longer necessary, such as a beaded pouch for a mirror used to flash signals. Still other pieces, like the ghost dance shirts from the plains, represent certain periods in history.

Most of the art is very distinctive, tribes often perfecting arts unknown anywhere else. There is no mistaking a Northwest Coast mask from any other in the world. Similarly, the porcupine quill work of the Great Lakes and the Eskimo argyllite carvings are unmatched.

But regardless of their differ-

ences, most of the pieces share one characteristic: they were utilitarian.

"Despite the beauty of the art forms, the art was made to be used," Butler says. "The women did not spend months making a basket to sit it on a shelf and look at it. They wove baskets to gather food, to store food, to prepare food, and to serve and eat it."

**A** slim young man with a moustache walks into the museum, and approaches Butler's desk.

"I'm Robert; I called this morning about some artifacts," he says.

"What have you got?" Butler replies.

"Want me to bring them right in?"

"I guess so."

"There are some boards with some arrowheads on them —"

"I'm not interested in arrowheads," she interrupts.

"OK."

"I've got enough arrowheads. Arrowheads that come out of Fern Ridge reservoir don't interest me."

"These aren't from around here..."

"Well, OK, I'll look at them."

The young man leaves.

"They're probably ones made by, ah, Matt —"

"Matt and Charlie in Klamath Falls?" John Ford asks.

"And Red Bush —"

"He still does them?"

"Red makes some beautiful

(Continued on Page 5B)



From East to West, masks of the Seneca and Kwakiutl. The styles and materials differ, but all possess similar power and mastery of tools.



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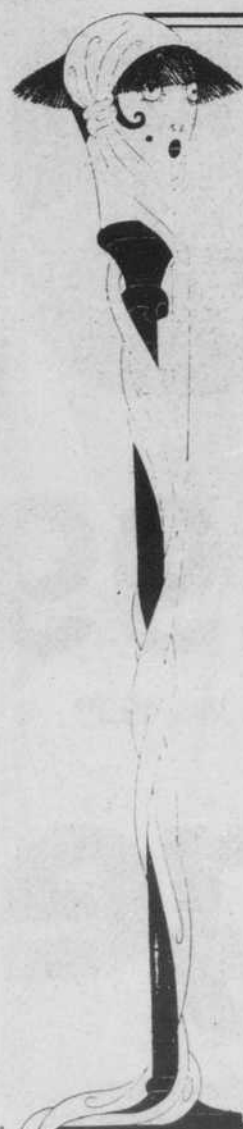
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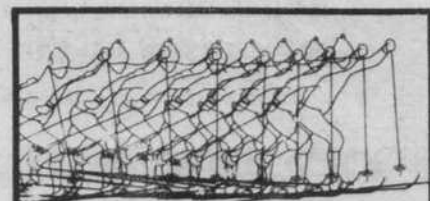
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