

'Art Is Work, It's Fun... a Way of Life'

By EDNA RAMP
Of the Register-Guard

Art, like the rain and the wind and the stars, belongs to everybody—it's not an unnecessary frill wrapped in a special package labeled for the few who have the time to enjoy it or the talent to create it.

Eugenean Ray Levra, who's established himself as both an artist and art teacher, expressed this idea as he sat down last week to talk about art. He doesn't spell it with a capital "A."

"Art is work, it's fun, it's a way of life. And the artist is a member of the community and should be pulling as much weight as anyone else," Levra emphasized.

Levra does just that. In addition to expressing himself in paintings and ceramics that have taken awards of merit in numerous Northwest shows, he nurtures that "spark of creativity" in 190 art class students at Thomas Jefferson Junior High School. He's also shared the joys of painting with adults for nine years at the Maude Kerns Art Center, where he starts teaching another class this month in oils and watercolors.

"Every child in school should have the opportunity to take art—at least to explore his range of interests," Levra noted. "Art is lots of work and if the child becomes interested he can succeed—on his own level. He gains a new awareness of his surroundings, an understanding of cultural aspects and a way to solve problems and think, non-verbally, that he doesn't get in other areas of learning and studying."

Talent, Levra feels, is an intangible thing and should not be used as the criterion for selecting art pupils. The need for expression is as basic as the need for food, and every child and adult should have the opportunity to make a statement and express an idea through an art form—be it a painting or the creation of a beautiful piece of furniture.

It's more difficult to work with adults than with children, Levra has found—they have to learn a new perceptual approach.

"I have to teach them to use their eyes all over again, and then not to paint what they think they should, but what they see and feel. And also to get over the fear that they won't achieve."

Levra, who earned his master of fine arts degree at the University of Oregon, paints any time and all the time—"I don't wait for the divine spirit to tell me to create a masterpiece," he grinned and settled back on the white leather sofa in the living room of the



RAY LEVRA
Artist and Art Teacher

Levra's hilltop house on Ridgewood Drive.

Levra paints in a roomy, light studio adjacent to the house — "It used to be the garage, but it's my abode now and the car sits out." He usually works on five or six canvases simultaneously because "I like to have them around in various stages of incompleteness and completeness."

There's no need to tiptoe about or talk in hushed tones when Levra's turning out one of his oils. He likes the sound of action, the feel of life around him—the radio plays, his wife Bette or friends visit with him, he may even get the TV repaired and let it go on as he paints—he tunes out what he doesn't want.

Tremendously interested in color, Levra often starts with just that—sometimes with a definite idea. Or he just sits down and paints. It may be a close study of an actual dahlia. It may not be so specific—then the canvas blossoms into masses of color.

"Very few of my paintings have people in them anymore," he commented. "I particularly like to do plants and landscapes. Oregon is so rich, so growing—I don't know how you can get away from painting what's around you; it's so ever-present."

Not satisfied just to paint flowers, Levra likes to make them grow. When his fingers aren't holding a paint brush, they're digging about in rich moist soil, coaxing orchids, geraniums, fuchsias and lemon trees into blooms that create the same riot of color in his greenhouse and yard that his paints do on canvas.

"My first plant was an oleander slip from the plant my great-aunt brought when she came from Italy to make her home in this country," he recalled.

That was back in Butte, Mont., where both he and Bette grew up. In his high school years there, Ray was more interested

in botany, architecture and history than he was in painting. At Montana State College in Bozeman he decided to major in architecture or interior design, but switched at the end of his freshman year to art.

At Montana State, the decision to become a painter didn't call for a Bohemian type of existence—you didn't have to be different to be an artist, Levra recalls—you were like a doctor or an engineer or anyone else.

The head of the art department, Cyril Conrad, told his students: "Art is 99 per cent perspiration and 1 per cent inspiration."

Levra still feels:

"Art is not something esoteric or divine. The more you work, the more you learn. The more you learn, the more you paint. You never find all the answers. That's what makes it interesting; that's what keeps it a challenge."

As for the "message" on his canvases, Levra says:

"If the viewer can't understand by looking at it, then why should I talk about it. The painting IS my means of expression. If I talked, then I'd be a commentator."



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