Old Prud'homme Portrait Is Unique

Includes Symbol of His Fortune

By ALBERTA COLLIER

In the early days of secular art, when laymen discovered the prestige of portraiture, artists must have had to struggle with their compositions.

The "head only" pose would have been easy but when the sitter demanded the more expensive half or full-length view, problems arose.

And almost the first such problem must have been the simple one, "What do I do with the hand?"

The former religious art offered no clues in this case; a Virgin was fully occupied with her Child, saints were recognizable only with their symbols, and other religious figures were always involved in some direct action. "What then do you do when a Medicis, an Orsini or a plain Flemish burgher wants his likeness limned?"

The Italian artists had it a little easier than the Flemings; they could usually rest the man's hand on his sword hilt.

But the Flemish masters were sometimes up a tree. A goldsmith was a good subject - he could be painted holding either a gold coin or a ring. And a town leader was all right because he could always finger his mace of office.

But what about the many others also clamoring to be painted?

Art history doesn't record the first artist who hit upon the "pink" or other flower as a solution to this really serious dilemma.

But art history books reproduce many quite wonderful old portraits where either a man or a woman is painted holding a carnation, a rose or some other floral form; these works are among the most delightful examples of early Renaissance art.

Just recently, a Louisiana-inspired parallel was called to this writer's attention.

The work is a portrait of Jean Pierre Emmanuel Prud'homme, a native of Natchitoches and the man credited with introducing cotton planting to the Southwest Louisiana area.

Prud'homme, who was born in 1782, was the grandson of one of the early French settlers of Natchitoches. The Prud'homme family was prominent from the first and managed to do well in rural and trading areas.

The painting of Jean Pierre Emmanuel is unique with its early Renaissance device of the floral element (here an identifying cotton boll) in the hand.

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The two paintings, which are both marked "Paris 1821," are still in the possession of the Prud'homme family.

Mme. Prud'honnne's portrait is a direct one, which shows the influence of David; the detailed delineation of the sitter's elaborate neck ruff and cap adds to its fascination.

But Prud'homme's likeness is truly unique. The proud French face tells something of the nature and drive of the man and the cotton boll in his hand is an equally proud emblem of the empire that he established.

The two pictures remained in their appointed places in the Prud'homme home, later christened "Oakland," for 150 years.

Then and the Louisiana climate, however, both took their tolls and, some months ago, the paintings were brought to the New Orleans studios of conservator Alonzo Lansford for extensive rehabilitation.

Lansford, who had known and admired them since he first came to Louisiana, was delighted to accept the commission; he is not quite finished with the job but is looking forward to the day when he can return both to pristine condition to their "Oakland" home...