USL Art Center Paintings Qualify For 'Camp' Label

By FRANCES LOVE

Camp is a marvelous word that is used often currently by the "in" people. It used to be a summer word, but for the last three years or so, it has been used year round for all sorts of occasions.

When an "in" person says that something is "camp," he means that it is quaint and interesting because it is out-of-date. It is naive and archaic by 1968 standards. In other words something that is so "out" that it is "in." is camp.

Jeanette McDonald and Nelson Eddy singing "Indian Love Call" is very camp. Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire dancing on the wings of an airplane in "Flying Down To Rio" is camp. Shirley Temple singing "On the Good Ship Lollipop" is about as camp as you can get.

In order to qualify in this category something has to have been "sincere" or seriously executed when it was new. The Art Center for Southwestern Louisiana is not without its camp art.

Art Center Camp

One of the University students favorite targets for the camp label is a water color painting that hangs in the Art Center's coffee room. It is a trompe-l'oeil painting of a red fish hanging from a nail, on a knotted leather thong.

"Look! That dead fish is casting an eye over its shoulder," a student said, recently, as he slapped a purple op-art poster over the glass and frame. He is right. Every time I look at that fish now, I see that apprehensive eye.

Even so, this painting has a place in the Art Center's Louisiana collection. It was popular in the 1970's when it was painted by Achille Perelli, an Italian artist, sculptor, and teacher, who had studied at the Academy of Arts in Milan.

His still-lifes of fishes, birds, and game, painted between 1865 and 1880, are well represented in established American art galleries. This tradition of painting stylized arrangements of dead game goes back to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Italy. Perelli carefully indicated shadows cast by his subjects which increases the three dimensional illusion.

This artist worked in New Orleans for about 40 years. His studio was at 26 Carondelet Street. Probably the first sculptor in bronze in Louisiana his portrait reliefs and busts are included to the Issac Delgado Museum of Art and the Louisiana State Museum. Perelli was a teacher who inspired some of Louisiana's best late nineteenth century artists.

Clouds in the Portrait

The oval portrait of a woman by Jules Lion in one of the first floor Art Center parlors is another target for the camp label. This pastel can not be compared with the fine oil portraits in the Louisiana collection, but its historic value is valid. Lion painted and made lithographs in New Orleans between 1830 and 1845. He was an important American pioneer in the field of printmaking and he made engravings of many prominent Louisiana citizens.

A New Orleans art restoration expert told us that the clouds in the background of this painting is the kind of code that this painter and his contemporaries used often to indicate that the portrait was done after the subject's death. The clouds appear behind the head even though the painting is obviously an interior scene.

The camp value of these two Art Center paintings is obvious. It is fun to look at them.

Generations Disagree Often

Whether a thing is camp or not depends on which generation is calling it camp. Twenty years ago Spike Jones and his orchestra burlesqued "Tea for Two," "Chloe," and "Temptation" so that my generation could never again hear these ballads seriously. My parents were not nearly so amused.

Most of us can agree that coon skin coats, Alf Landon-for President buttons, 1950 Flair magazines, and Victor Herbert-are camp. Camp is what other generations have called "de-mode," or "corn," or "schnitzel." It can be charming, sophisticated, saccharine, ironic, cruel, or all of these things at once.

But watch out, because some things are sacred. Some of us are too much a part of "The Establishment" to flippantly label the flag raising at Iwo Jima, John Wayne dying at the Alamo, the P-T-A, or "Onward Christian Soldiers" in this manner. Some things are worth preserving for future less cynical periods of history.

Which reminds me of another kind of camp. A few years ago we used to watch a scout leader at Camp Thistlethwaite line up his 13-year-old "men" like a sergeant in a typical World War II movie. Every time they came marching through the woods, I thought that I could distinctly hear Nelson Eddy's voice singing, "Stout Hearted Men."