

I. L. UDELL



It is difficult to come to grips with the legend that is Udell. In the Taos Valley of New Mexico, where for nearly twenty years he was a physician, obstetrician, chiropractor, spell-remover and magic healer, he still is a subject of controversy and regarded with a strange and confusing mixture of emotions running the gamut of response. But, above all, he is regarded as a special man who has given of himself to his people and environment and as a man who, in doing so, learned to understand his milieu and transmit in words and pictures the Taos mystique which evaded the novelist D. H. Lawrence and countless painters of great technical skill and distinction.

Historians, artists, philosophers and writers often are burdened with the necessity of transmitting and

thereby preserving spiritual values and ways of life that seem to be passing away. It is not sufficient for them to record, relate or explain, because too often pictures, words and theories desiccate, even destroy, the vitality of experience and seldom convey the underlying spirit. What is essential is the ability to share or, at least, to have insight and sympathy in order to transmit past experience into the present without losing the essential spirit. I. L. Udell has been burdened with the necessity and blessed with the ability of transmission.

Basic to an understanding of Udell and Taos is Los Hermanos Penitentes, an order of Catholic laymen who practice penance and charity with a severity like that once practiced by the Mendicant Franciscan Friars who accompanied the conquistadores into the



Burial

New World. The Penitentes practice self-flagellation as penance for their sins, and, each year during the Lenten period, re-enact the Passion of Christ. As late as the 1940s, these crucifixions were enacted with great exactness or severity, often concluding with the Christos player dying. Needless to add, perhaps, the practice was forbidden and condemned by church and state. In 1947, by Papal decree, the Penitentes were accepted into the Catholic Church but militant restrictions were placed on the severity of their activities.

Udell knew the Penitentes in the old days, witnessed the processions, flagellations, and the Penitente Crucifixions. He understood the deep religious convictions which moved these people. His book, "In the Dust of the Valley" (published by the

"South Dakota Review" in 1969), and many of his paintings are concerned with the Penitentes and their families, and in these works Udell transmits their very personal, mysterious, frightening, but always deeply spiritual heritage and convictions. He produced these works not out of a desire for fame or any other type of exploitation: his manuscript was written and known to a select number of people thirty years before he allowed its publication; his Penitente paintings were first shown publicly after the Church recognized the Order. He says of his paintings, and the same could be implied for his writings: "If they claim merit as an historical documentation of a phase of Americana, if they give pleasure and insight to the observer. . .then a gift will have been returned to a land and people I cher-



Deposition

ish, and whose memory is part of my daily life."

Ben Shahn, artist, critic, and for a time Udell's teacher, wrote of his reactions to Udell's Penitente paintings: "In every area of the canvas, one recognized the authority of a person who is no sightseer but a careful student and participant." Shahn also stated that "...these Penitente paintings of Udell stand on their own feet as a great and moving epic. However weak they may be technically...I prefer them a thousandfold to the technically glib and humanly empty work which we see in such profusion today."

The power of Udell's paintings derives from the urgency he has to transmit the understanding and compassion he has for man and nature. In the past two decades his work has improved technically, just

as his subject matter has been expanded to include nature studies, international wars, and universal and basic human relationships. His landscapes often have a tactile solidity similar to those of Hartley, and his still-lives and figures sometimes display the decorative surety and compactness associated with the best icon painters and Picasso. In the last analysis, however, it is useless to compare Udell with those painters, or with Tamayo and Matisse with whose works his have some obvious similarities, for Udell is at once primitive and knowledgeable of contemporary art styles. His strength as a painter comes not from his professional training or lack of it, but from his ability to transmit the emotive and spiritual aspects of the human condition in any form he chooses.



Plastering the Old Church Ranchos

Udell freely admits that he is a religious man, a confession that today usually is considered romantic or gauche. Despite the fact that a religious spirit infuses his work and is a basic reason for its success, it is difficult to describe what kind of religious man he is. This problem is well answered by Udell:

"I have been called a Puritan. Well, perhaps. But again, not within the adhesive connotation of customary inference. Religious purity is a commodity dispensed by God within the system of barter and exchange—too wide a bargaining area, we become enmeshed—I believe in a purity of mind and intellect, of concept and execution; I believe in Man's

dignity to Man measured by the excellence of his individual profound endeavor for the benefit of Collective Man; I believe in the purity of Man's human relationship to Man—and to his environment and resources."

Need anyone say more?

Here then are the paintings of Udell. Look at them, enjoy them, and find not only the spirit of Taos and art, but also that of a man of remarkable insight, sympathy and creative ability.

Rudy H. Turk
1971



Sea Scape and Rocks Dreaming

CATALOG

I. "Penitente Series" on loan from Helene Wurlitzer

Foundation:

1. Official Seal of the Order
2. Beginning the Procession
3. Penitente Procession
4. Calvario
5. Penitentes Around the Cross
6. Whippers at Night
7. Raising the Cross
8. Penitente Crucifixion
9. Procession with Carreta del Muerto
10. Tinieblas
11. Procession with Gallery
12. Death Came During Penance
13. The Last Cross

II. On loan from the artist

14. Death Mask
15. Design for the Coming In and the Going Out
16. Night Closing In
17. Deposition
18. Innocent
19. Parade
20. Social Judgment
21. Ascension
22. Christmas Card
23. Sea Scape and Rocks Dreaming
24. The Sacrifice
25. Searching in Three Worlds
26. Phoenix at Night
27. Flat Irons at Boulder, Colorado
28. Mountain Church
29. Plastering the Old Church Ranchos
30. Black Birds and Storm!
31. Market Place (*Illustrated on Cover*)
32. Old Couple in Church
33. The Artist's Easel
34. Fish
35. St. Francis with Black Birds
36. Burial

III. On loan from the Rick Jason Collection

37. Adam and Eve
38. Untitled (birds)
39. Untitled (old man)



Exhibition of Paintings by I. L. Udell
University Art Collections,
Matthews Center,
Arizona State University, Tempe
November 28, 1971 through January 9, 1972