

## Mehranguise Irani relates her experience with Art at BUC

- An enterprise whose success is due to dedication.
- A reflection of the art movement in Lebanon.
- A profession which can yield bread and butter.

Founded in 1950, the Art Department at BUC (Beirut University College), went through a steady development which was in line with the progress of the art movement in Lebanon. The story of its expansion is here related by Professor Mehranguise Irani who, for twenty years, has dedicated her efforts to this absorbing task.

After a B.A. in art at the American University of Beirut, Miss Irani went for further study at Cranbrook Academy of Art, Michigan, U.S.A., where she received an MFA (Master of Fine Arts) degree in 1960. But she did not stop at that. In 1962, she spent a year on a Ford Foundation grant at Perugia Academy of Art, Italy. Since then she has kept continuous relations with Italian art centers and made several study trips to Italy.

About the evolution of the Department she says that, when it started, it was affiliated with the Home Economics Program, because it offered home decoration and design besides art history and painting. Physical expansion and independent work were possible with the erection of the Fine Arts building in 1970. Ceramics, sculpture and art education (children's art) were then introduced. A three year sequence, leading to a B.A. in art, includes the following courses: Drawing I and II, Design I and II, Sculpture I and II, Painting I, II, III and VI, Graphics and Art History. A large variety of methods are available: oil, water-color, gouache, collage, crayon, pastel, charcoal, etc.

• What schools of art enjoy more popularity in your Department?

— Our interests constitute a sort of response to the general trend, an answer to current demand. The students are a source of inspiration to us. Lately, they have shown great interest in portraits; they have been



producing them in sculpture and in painting. This fad may change after a while.

• Some time ago, the Department was invaded by the wave of abstract art, then by surrealism. How did the change occur?

— Abstract art was a temporary wave which soon gave way to all sorts of trends: the figurative, the symbolic, the expressionist. In general, the present move is toward realism.

• Of course this does not exclude other trends. Now may I ask about your criteria in evaluating a work of art?

— In my opinion, the most important aspect of an art work is its formal treatment, regardless of theme or style. By form I mean color, line, shape, light and its effect on color and atmosphere. It is a thorough knowledge of the structural elements and the manner of coordinating them.

• I remember that in 1968, the Department gained a real triumph when it obtained three prizes out of four in an inter-university contest organized by A.U.B. Now it has a well-established position. Evidently a main factor in this success is your persistent and tireless effort. Will you give us an idea about the teaching methods you apply? In other words

about the secret of your success?

— Here we first study the student's background and, through intensive training, try to wipe out the effects of a defective basis. In many cases, we have to start from zero. New students are required to take drawing and fundamentals of design as prerequisites. We emphasize drill, hard work, repetition, keen observation, creativity. We condemn imitation and copying. A lot of emphasis is also placed on direct study from nature, with the aim of promoting visual awareness. Developing the esthetic sense and the personal touch are as important as the teaching of technique. We encourage the student's freedom of expression if it is disciplined and creative.

• How do you explain the flourishing art movement in Lebanon in spite of the war atmosphere?

— Right before the war, the artistic movement in Lebanon was in full swing. It attracted many artists from outside, from the Arab countries and elsewhere, who came to settle here. The war drove away many excellent artists. But war conditions have stimulated new activities. They encouraged the production of committed, humanitarian art. You know that the same thing happened in the literary field. The multiplicity of publishing houses, especially those that publish children's literature, requires a multiplicity of illustrators. War millionaires have been financing new art and literature projects; they are paying large sums of money for art works, but they sometimes encourage poor art and pseudoartists.



• People usually think that art does not give bread and butter; that artists are generally beggars who feed on air and water. What do you think?

— The increasing number of art students in our department and elsewhere proves that this idea is wrong. Many of our art graduates occupy lucrative posts or are pursuing higher studies in Europe and America. Others have obtained recognition as painters or ceramists and presented successful exhibits of their works. Two of them are illustrators of children's books for an international publishing house. Another has created an advertising firm. One of our graduates is a fashion designer in Paris for Christian Dior. A variety of areas are open to those who are willing to work: teaching art at all levels, advertising, fashion design, industrial art, furniture design, ceramics industry, cartoons, art work for social projects. When talent and will combine, success is sure to come.

• What is your final remark?

— While I appreciate the growing interest of students of both sexes in taking art as a profession or as a hobby, at the College or elsewhere, I strongly oppose the wave of snobbishness and bad taste. In the absence of a solid culture and through the scarcity of art criticism, anarchy and fraud are apt to prevail.

