



EDWIN ZOLLER

**SORDONI ART GALLERY
WILKES COLLEGE**

Oct. 31 — Nov. 29, 1981

THE LATER PAINTINGS

Funded by a grant given
in honor of Roy E. Morgan

"15-60" (1960)

"5-66" (1966)

Edwin Zoller (1900-1967)

The works in this exhibition represent the later phase of Edwin Zoller's distinguished career as an artist and teacher. They extend from about 1952 until the last days of his life in 1967, and reveal an artist who refused to stand still, but continued to discover and experiment. Although Zoller's career was mostly centered in Pennsylvania, his awareness and his art were cosmopolitan. He fashioned a style which was formally abstract, and contemporary. Nevertheless, in mood and form, his paintings were never far from earth, sea, or air. He was essentially a landscapist, following, in modernist terms, the venerable American tradition of landscape painting. Whether his manner was cubistically angular or Orientaly calligraphic, nature remained the source. Edwin Zoller was born in Pittsburgh in 1900. At an early age, he took a lively interest in the arts, as well as in athletics. He studied art at the University of Pittsburgh and at the Pennsylvania State University, where he received his B.A. in 1921. He also pitched for the University baseball team. He continued his art studies at the Carnegie Institute in Pittsburgh. In 1925, he spent four months in Italy, and following his marriage to Lucille Lang, he spent two years (1928-29) in Paris, where he painted and attended classes at l'Academie de la Grande Chaumiere and l'Academie Colorossi. After his return to America, he studied with Russell Hyde at the Carnegie Institute.

Always a "loner" and an individualist in his art, he followed no trend or school. He was, however, influenced by several painters, past and contemporary. He greatly admired Leonardo's work in all its aspects and read and studied with great absorption his notebooks. Among the moderns he was deeply interested in the ideas and the painting of Cézanne and in the Cubist theories of Braque, Juan Gris and Picasso. His own early work was given great impetus through the friendship and encouragement of two of his artist friends, Donald R. Dohner and Alexander Kostelow. The latter introduced him to the techniques of plastic recession which had an

important influence upon the development of his later work.

One of his most significant contributions aside from his painting was the tremendous impact his personality exerted not only upon the work, but upon the lives of his students throughout his teaching career. He taught art in the Pittsburgh secondary schools from 1921 to 1931, then joined the faculty of the Pennsylvania State University where, as professor of fine arts, he taught painting and design. He also served as Administrative Head of two of the undergraduate centers of the University and later was appointed Associate Director for the Arts in the Center for Continuing Liberal Education, a Ford Foundation project at the University, in which capacity he served until his retirement.

His academic and artistic activities were interrupted from 1942 to 1946 by service in the Army Corps from which he retired as Lieutenant Colonel.

In July 1960 he retired from the faculty of the Pennsylvania State University with the rank of Professor of Fine Arts Emeritus in order to give his full time and attention to painting. From 1960 until his death, October 25, 1967, he devoted himself to painting and study in his studio at Hundred Springs, near Tyrone, Pennsylvania. In spite of the constant pain and ill health which followed major surgery in 1964, his last years were his most productive and rewarding ones.

When he was not painting or working in his shop or garden he was writing, reading or studying. Always interested in promoting the arts in the community, he served on the Board of Directors of the Associated Artists of Pittsburgh, the Civic Arts Society of Du Bois, Pennsylvania, the Altoona Summer Theatre Board and the Blair County Arts Foundation. He was a devoted and enthusiastic member of the Governor's Council on the Arts of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and served in that capacity until his death.

He organized and directed the Ivyside Gallery at the Altoona Campus of the Pennsylvania State University. During his work as a member of the

Center for Continuing Liberal Education he was co-author and editor of several manuals and study guides for courses in liberal studies for adults. Among these were: "Prints and Print-making," "Attending the Theatre: Enjoying Contemporary Drama" and "Design at Work: Its Forms and Functions." His name was listed in "Who's Who in the East" and "Who's Who in American Art."

He exhibited in Florence, Paris, New York, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Youngstown, Ohio, St. Paul, Minnesota, as well as in numerous smaller towns in Pennsylvania. His work was shown in the Third Annual Exhibition of American Art in New York, where he was one of twelve artists from Pennsylvania, Annuals in Philadelphia, The Butler Institute of American Art in Youngstown, Ohio, the Columbia Museum of Art Biennials in Columbia, South Carolina, the Associated Artists of Pittsburgh at the Carnegie Museum in Pittsburgh and the Westmoreland Museum of Art in Greensburg, Pennsylvania.

Zoller had numerous one-man shows at the Pennsylvania State University, the Everhart Museum in Scranton, the Carnegie Museum in Pittsburgh, and elsewhere. A posthumous retrospective exhibition was held at the William Penn Memorial Museum in Harrisburg.

Zoller's approach to painting can best be described in his own words, taken from a statement he wrote for *The Art League News* (Hazleton, Pennsylvania, September, 1967):

"Like most artists, I am more comfortable when I am making paintings than when I am talking about them. This is not to imply that my creative activities come easily to me, for often much time is consumed in the struggle to come to terms with my ideas and to express them as coherent wholes. But the essential characteristic of a successful work for me is that it presents those ideas directly in plastic terms without dependence on the use of recognizable symbols to give them significance in the mind of the viewer. Often such symbols may act only to confuse rather than to clarify its intent. For this reason I use numbers for my paintings instead of titles, for if you want to learn about a

painting, titles can very easily become blocks to understanding. They tempt you to read messages not there. It is much less difficult to use the painting as a springboard to dive into the pool of memory or wishful thinking than it is to strike out into the unfamiliar sea of visual signs and plastic relationships. So, if my painting had value for you, or for anyone, I don't want you to miss it because of some literary subterfuge that I have appended to it.

What is my procedure, then, in an attempt to achieve this end? First of all I spend a great deal of time in contemplation, not only before I begin a painting, but at intervals as it develops also. Sometimes I work directly on the canvas without any preconceived plan; when using this approach, the work progresses rapidly at first, slowing down as it requires the readjustment of its parts to the demands of the whole. At other times, when I use material from drawings I have made, the work proceeds more deliberately. I keep several paintings going simultaneously. As an idea evolves, a painting may pass through several states; it rarely retains much of that from which it began originally — especially when I have started without any prepared notations or preliminary draft to follow. If forms with which I began are lost, or if others appear during the evolution of the piece, it is of little concern to me; it is the activity itself and my involvement in its evolution that counts. The value for me is found in the process by means of which the emotional impulse is made manifest in the structural coherence of the finished work.

In the shaping of my present style my painting has changed a great deal during the past twenty years. Formerly I used particular nature symbols to depict, on the one hand, my protest against the ugliness surrounding us in our urban complexes and on the other, the loveliness inherent in our landscape when unmarred by man's destructive hand. Today I have become what is generally referred to as an abstract painter. I do not like such labels; they are not only misleading or even false, but they are confusing to those who try to understand what paintings are intended to express.

It is the word 'abstract' that causes all the trouble, because we are prone to associate the word with a certain kind of work and so we tend to be preconditioned unfavorably toward it. Actually, in one way, *all* painting is abstract. Even when an artist reproduces objects that he sees as faithfully as he can, the very transfer of three dimensional forms to a flat surface is an act of abstracting; and when he rearranges these objects to achieve more unified composition, this abstracting procedure is carried one step farther. As the study of the underlying anatomical makeup and the common qualities of structure and pattern of individual objects, together with their interrelationships in space, lead to greater understanding, it becomes apparent that a synthesis of these common features is more significant than those observed in specific examples of them. That is, to abstract is not to avoid but to interpret nature's specifics. To generalize is to free the elements of life, color, texture and shape from the limitations to invention called for in the depiction of individual forms and increases the possibilities of expressing more universal images to the eye. In this process the object in any recognizable form may disappear entirely. When this occurs, the result may be labeled as 'abstract', 'non-figurative', or 'non-objective'. Essentially, however, this is not the important criterion in determining the quality of a work; it is good or bad in terms of the expressiveness and unity of the whole which is realized only in its effective use of the language of vision. Currently, this is my own aim and in striving to achieve it I find that the problems involved become more numerous, more complex, and so more difficult to resolve.

Beyond the specific difficulties arising from this working method as such, I find myself strongly influenced by the changes affecting our rapidly changing environment today, remolding the direction of my thoughts and reshaping my feelings. Among these, some of the most infusive are the reinterpretations of old concepts in contemporary philosophies, the recent appearance of a host of unprecedented hypotheses and

formerly undreamed-of products in scientific fields such as medicine, space exploration and the increasing use of computers in our lives. There is the need also of meeting the challenge arising from the marketing of an increasing variety of new artist's materials and the search for new guideposts to replace the discarded traditional ones which were once the canon of standards by which the quality of a work of art was measured. These directions in our culture put one more and more on his own in finding a suitable framework of symbols and methods by which he can cope with his thoughts and feelings in plastic terms.

More generally, as these conditions redirect the artist's concepts and inspire him to explore new directions, the unfriendliness of society to him and his work are definite deterrents to his wish for acceptance as a contributing member of the group and often lead to his complete withdrawal from it. Nevertheless, in the artist's make-up there is a basic compulsive drive that requires him to continue to probe the phenomena constituting his environment and to find suitable forms with which he can present his reactions to them. In this creative activity he moves from intention to realization through a succession of steps involving the acceptance of some solutions and the rejection of others which help to crystalize the meaning of his environmental influences and offer some reward for his way of life. I find solace in the fact that existence would be shallow indeed if I were to quit the search for fulfillment through painting.

Perhaps all men have creative urges, but in some the compulsion to satisfy them is so strong that it cannot be denied; this is what separates them from all others and compels them to commit themselves to this way of life. For me, at least, painting is a necessity; it is my only hope for realizing the full flowering of my existence. It is my way of achieving my aspirations and of dreaming dreams."

Thanks are extended to Lucille Zoller for the use of her biographical notes and for her gracious cooperation in loaning works from her collection. We also thank Professor Jerrold Maddox, Director of the College of Arts and Architecture at the Pennsylvania State University, for his kind assistance in securing the loan of numerous pictures. The loaning of works by Mr. and Mrs. Albert Margolies, the William Penn Memorial Museum in Harrisburg, and the Everhart Museum in Scranton is also greatly appreciated.

"6-64" (1964)

"11-67" (1967)

