



PRELLER'S "GREAT KING"

*Symbol of the mystic past*

## ART

### Master of the timeless myth

It is four years since Alexis Preller held his last one-man show — a show which blazed with customary colour and sparkled with luminous symbolic images. Then he retreated into the seclusion of his farm on the Magaliesberg's northern slopes, and while the art-world seethed with surging energy, and new galleries, erupting like mushrooms in every major city, proclaimed familiar names and introduced a troop of newcomers, his name cropped up in conversation only. For Preller had foresworn all private work while he concentrated his creative talents on a giant mural for the new Transvaal Provincial Administration Building in Pretoria.

**The long retreat.** As one of three artists commissioned to provide similar embellishment, he had set himself the task of unfolding the spirit of Africa across the 42 by 9-foot canvas. For two-and-a-half years he laboured meticulously, and gradually there emerged, in crystalline form and brilliant colour, a great labyrinth of images and symbols — an opus on the grand scale, such as few modern artists have the opportunity to tackle. On a morning in March this year, the mural was at last completed. Draping it, to dull its insistent domination of the studio, and without so much as a

pause for jubilation, he plunged immediately into preparations for the first easel-painting he had permitted himself to contemplate in all this time.

**Triumphant return.** Preller came out from his seclusion at the end of last month, with an exhibition, at Johannesburg's Pieter Wenning Gallery, of 21 canvases. The show was opened by Harold Jeppe, whose recently completed monograph on the artist is soon



ALEXIS PRELLER  
*Back from seclusion*

to be published. The immediate observation was an increase in breadth and grandeur. On the debit side, the heightened colour contrasts, dramatization and decorative emphasis demanded by the mural had been carried over into the first few easel-paintings, and this tendency was jarring. Also, some of the works were no more than virtuoso exercises, which appealed only because sheer skill and sound design is always satisfying. But if two-thirds of the show could be faulted, the remaining third shone with such excellence as to cancel criticism and proclaim that here was a creative artist, uniquely communicative amidst the welter of obscure pattern-makers who inhabit the contemporary art scene.

**Images and symbols.** Preller's unusual and individual art is a blend of diverse elements. Primarily, he is not bogged down with stylistic experiments: style for him is not an end in itself, only a language through which to say the things he has to say. He crystallized his pictorial approach quite early in his career, and has continued with little variation. Essentially, he is a 20th Century painter, who uses a 15th Century convention, for making statements that are timeless. The strange, symbolic nature of his images occurs because he does not paint the object as it is seen in light and shade, but defines it as a conceptual entity — he depicts what is, rather than what is seen. No shadows fall to blur the tight-edged precision of his forms; they are crisply moulded in luminous colour, and bathed in all-pervasive light. However, though his images are figurative, the relationship between them is highly abstract, and the effect of unreality is heightened by the absence of landscape or any common physical surroundings. This irrational relating of recognizable images is epitomized in the surrealist themes, typified by *The Apotheosis of the Mozartian Fish* (see cut).

**The legend of Africa.** The other major theme — the dominant theme — of Preller's work is Africa. In the artist's personality there has always existed a powerful mystic affinity with the lost past of this inscrutable continent. He is haunted by images of god-kings and hieratic castes, such as may have peopled the unexplained citadel of Zimbabwe. Out of this obsession he has created a mystic race, which he has endowed with primeval origins, wrapt in primitive mythology — as are the beginnings of all races. He has even attempted, as the tribesmen themselves might have done, to depict the story of their origins and their beliefs, in a superlative canvas, which rids itself of the tautness of the



"APOTHEOSIS OF THE MOZARTIAN FISH"  
*Surrealist dream of unrelated images*

mural style and introduces a new stylistic tendency. With this new direction Preller promises to underline, perhaps outstrip, the achievements which have placed him in the front rank of Southafrican art.

### Threshold

Every artist, in every local stream, dreams of international recognition, of swimming in the larger ocean of world art. In this dream, London represents the brink of the big sea — but a barrier reef looms large in the form of the resistance of London gallery owners to unknown little fish.

**Footslog and Frustration.** Few know better than Southafrica's Frank Rosen the humiliation of having to persuade an impatient dealer, practically cap-in-hand, to pause long enough at least to look before he indicates the exit. The foot-slog, the frustration, the self-doubt and the natural need to eat are enough to daunt the stoutest ambition. But Rosen has dogged determination and an almost obsessional will to succeed. His first one-man show of poetic coloured etchings had sold out in Johannesburg in 1959, and his subsequent successes in Israel in 1960 had given him the confidence to take the big step to London.

**Reward.** His determination, and the heightened inspiration of his work were rewarded last Monday, when an exhibition of 30 of his large canvases was opened at the Qantas Gallery, on the corner of Bond Street and Piccadilly, London.

**Abstract lyricism.** When he transferred his talents from etching to painting. Rosen carried with him the meticulous craftsmanship, the poetic

imagery, and the floating, dream-like forms. The freedom of the new medium led him into larger conceptions, and the need for colour in the pale London light resulted in a strengthened palette. The canvases are abstract and ambiguous; they allow the viewer individual interpretation, and communicate at different levels, dependent on the state of mind which greets them. They have little body or bulk, but the sensitivity and refinement which might have seemed a little precious in this age of angry young men, comes at a time when reaction to the slap-dash sloppiness and brutal daubs of abstract-expressionism and action painting is overdue. The noted English critic, Pierre Rouve, had this to say: "... in this age of unashamed worship of naked energy he decants the torrents of impulses, controls with cautious touch the organic blossoming of his works . . . where lines become nervous shivers of ecstatic stillness and snowflakes are sprinkled . . ." As to the appeal of these trembling reflections of a lyrical mind, Rouve concludes, "Suddenly, the traditional relation between painting and onlooker is reversed: instead of testing the painting, the spectator is being tested. It is up to his sensitivity, rusty with practical preoccupations, to awaken at the cryptic song of these conjured shapes and syllables."



ROSEN'S AMBIGUOUS IMAGE  
*Shivers of ecstatic stillness*