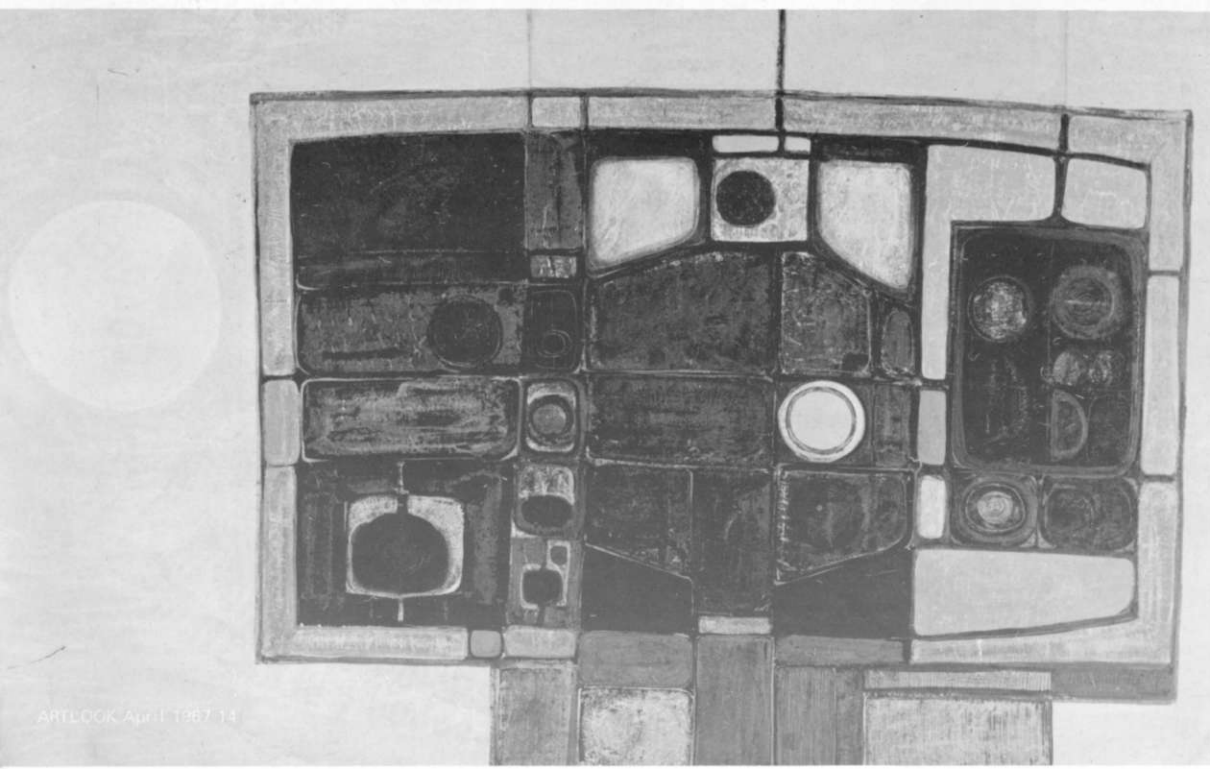
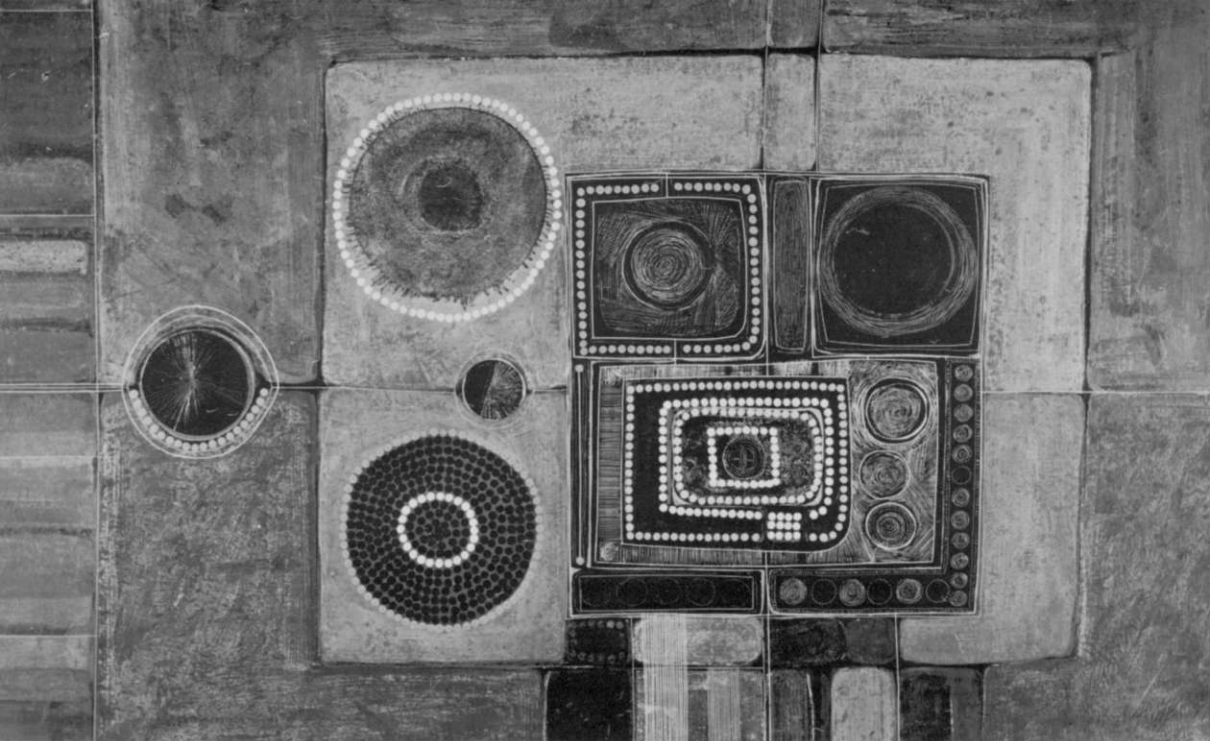


# ARTLOOK



ERNST DE JONG 67



# Ernst de Jong

It seems the perfect combination of painting and personality. The paintings are bright, fashionable and gay, singing to themselves in gold and silver foil. The personality of the painter seems to match: easy-going, throwaway, casual, the very opposite of any 'seeker after truth'.

This is the public front that Ernst de Jong and his paintings present to the world.

It is a facade that satisfies many — probably most — of the numerous people who have bought his paintings since he first began exhibiting seriously in 1958. And it is one which certainly squares with the view his hundreds of admirers throughout the country hold, the admirers who flock to the opening of his one-mans which have become synonymous with gay, swinging affairs with way-out fashions and with-it conversation. But it remains a facade.

Below, under the surface, both of the man and his paintings, is something quite different, another current altogether.

To understand the dichotomy of de Jong, the artist on whom fortune smiles, who seems to create without effort and pluck his glittering creations out of the air, it is necessary to know the facts of his life.

De Jong at 33 is one of the country's most successful industrial designers. He owns his own studios in Pretoria (where he lives) and Johannesburg, his work is sought after, it has set a standard recognized throughout South Africa, and abroad (examples have been published in *Graphis*, the international journal of graphic and applied art). He is an Olympic diver, is married to a vivacious American wife, lives in a house of unusual and elegant design and is the well-loved father of two small children. So, with all these appurtenances of success, what is de Jong's dark obverse?

It is simply stated. He believes in his art. Listen to him in action putting up the screen he presents to the world. He will mention casually that for his last one-man he executed all the paintings the weekend before the show opened. He will say: 'I'm just an intermediate in art, I point out the way for others to

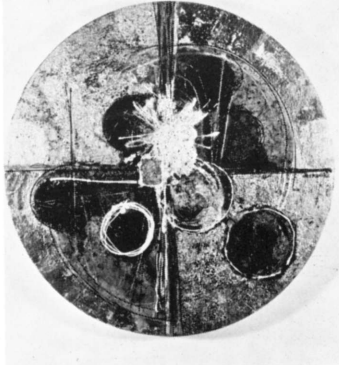
go; I stand midway between Tretchikoff and Portway'. Or, pointing to his paintings: 'Very elegant, of course. But all they do is fill up the wall'. But this is the public face of de Jong. It is his defence against the thoughtless and the ill-intentioned who are ready to dismiss him simply as a talented industrial designer who has strayed into 'pure' art. Underneath is a very real craftsman who — even though he would never admit it — takes great trouble and pains with his materials and methods, who constantly experiments to find new ways of expressing himself, who meticulously records the progress of each painting and who cares deeply — although again he would admit it only reluctantly — what happens to them and whether they continue to give satisfaction and pleasure to their owners.

And there is more. There is in de Jong a deep concern about the painter's purpose, an obsession about what art is really *for*. It is only after one has known him for a long time that the play-boy mask is dropped and he will admit to his conviction that there is more to art, his art, than the elegantly decorative.

It is only with these things at the back of one's mind that his paintings begin to show their other side. Simply stated: they seek to change the world. This may seem a boastful claim to make for these paintings with their groupings of gold and silver, their well-proportioned patternings, their rich, chic colours. Most of the buyers of his work would probably doubt it. And de Jong, certainly publicly, would rear up and deny it. Yet there is no doubt at all for the thoughtful viewer that this is the paintings' real reason for being.

This purpose, to see the world anew and to persuade it by one's vision into a new direction of light and intellect, to give it a new meaning and to give the viewer a new dimension of seeing and so, fundamentally, to change his life, is in fact what painting is *for*.

That Ernst de Jong is capable of facing and wrestling with this central problem in all art, makes him the interesting and rewarding painter he is. There is more to his gold than merely glitter. DAG



Opposite page: Top — 'Carnival,' 1966; Below — 'Untitled,' 1966 (both polymer tempera). Above — 'Circular Abstract,' 1966 (gold leaf)