

Art in America



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JULIO DE DIEGO: MERMAIDS, MEXICAN JOURNEY. 1942

Private Collection

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Julio de Diego

By LESTER BURBANK BRIDHAM
The Art Institute of Chicago

PAINTER of imaginative holocausts and powerful still lifes, Julio de Diego of Madrid, Chicago and New York, reminds even his best friends of an eighteenth century brigand. His fierce and mobile face, framed in jet black hair, is startlingly lighted by a pair of paradoxically compassionate forget-me-not blue eyes. It is not surprising, with his dramatic demeanor, that he acted in one of the early Spanish movies, was an extra with the Russian Ballet and a pantomimist with a Spanish theatrical company in Tampa, Florida. If you want to laugh, ask him to perform the tableau which took place when he went into Tiffany's (near neighbor to his studio) to ask about repairing a ring. Julio always puts on a good show, wherever he is.

Julio is a picture-talker, not a word-talker. When he writes a letter to a good friend, instead of words he uses pictures which go straight to the point. Julio always thinks in images. Even when not at his easel, he is painting his next picture.

During the last twenty years, Julio has created his own world in hundreds of drawings and paintings in many styles: studies in the series of constellations; cavemen hunters cornering their game in his temperas on paper; monumental oils in romantic style, based on themes he found in Mexico and Arizona; and a terrifying sequence on war. Afterwards came the Reconstruction studies in which man builds, after war's destruction; then the battle for survival of the birds and animals and the preoccupation with bugs and insects (Fig. 8), returning to the very beginnings of life. For a while Julio worked in metal, making silver jewelry, and he also designed textiles and pottery. All through these years he has applied himself to an occasional commercial assignment, which include his most successful color illustrations for Abbott Laboratories, the Capehart Collection, covers for *Fortune* and *Holiday* magazines, and drawings for *Flair*. Julio's picture-minded eye has taken him above the earth in a plane, to the bottom of the sea, and recently deep into earth's secrets with an ikon for the Atomic Age. From this short summary you can see that he never gets into a rut: Julio is always changing, doing something new and interesting.

In order to grasp the development of Julio's style during the last decade, we might turn back to the surprising *Self-Portrait* (Fig. 1) he painted in Chicago in 1938, now owned by Mr. and Mrs. David W. Stotter of High-

land Park, Illinois.* Although the expression of form here seems close to El Greco's manner, Julio has filled the canvas with a beautifully painted still life of all his personal symbols: he seems to stand in crowded ruins of the Spanish Civil War, amid the clutter of his studio, holding a frame like a window through which his expressive eyes appraise the world; the Spanish bull tramples on a fallen Fascist soldier; the fish in the pan may be a sex symbol or an allusion to his love of cooking, for an old Spanish cookbook lies on the shelf, the place marked by a paint brush. The deep space is broken by many conflicting angles; the mood is disturbed, restless, apocalyptic.

How different is the self-portrait of 1940, *The Perplexity of What To Do* (Fig. 2), awarded in that same year a prize at The Art Institute of Chicago. Julio sits in his red bathrobe, monumental as an Egyptian king, his eyes of obsidian, his face impassive. He considers the question of what he will do now that the Spanish War has been lost for the Republic. Here he seems less concerned with a catalogue of his personal symbols and more interested in presenting his current manner of painting. On the floor are his latest form studies of Mexican women in *rebosas*; in the background the fantastic erosions from Arizona replace the jagged jigsaw cutout shapes in the 1938 portrait; he says to himself and to the world, "See, this is what I am doing now . . ." A skull rests on the shelf — the Spaniard cannot forget death. The sketchbook on his knees suggests his method of working. There he sets down his first ideas, with "lyrical notes" in Spanish on the colors and how to mix them. After the preliminary drawings have fixed the basic idea, he constructs the final design by means of dynamic symmetry.

How well Julio met the challenge of this portrait of 1940 is revealed in his subsequent work. A complete summary of his Mexican and Arizona romantic periods was held at The Art Institute of Chicago in November 1942. Visitors taken on this *Mexican Journey* (Cover) commented on the flawless technique, the imaginative range of ideas. If he would continue in this style, the public would make him a popular painter despite himself!

But while his show hung at the Art Institute, Julio was experimenting in his Grant Street studio with a new technique, a technique that would change his life as a painter. He found that the brush, which had helped him to make impeccable romantic panels with deep space and monumental

* For an example of earlier, more illustrative work, done on his visit to Spain in 1930, see Fig. 3, *Tavern Spain*, collection Mr. and Mrs. Paul G. Hoffman, Pasadena, California.

three-dimensional figures, was no longer adequate for setting down his turbulent emotions resulting from the war which was raging once again in Europe. To express his new ideas he needed a different technique, one which would give the effect of surface action and unusual texture. Pearl Harbor had come a year before — we were in the war. Julio read the



Fig. 3. JULIO DE DIEGO: TAVERN, SPAIN. Pencil and Water Color, 1930

Mr. and Mrs. Paul G. Hoffman, Pasadena, California

papers, saw the combat movies. Sitting in a dark theatre, he had a terrible flashback of himself as a young soldier coming into a town in North Africa, he smelled that sickening odor of gardenias wafted from the piled-up dead! "A deep-seated aversion to war," he says, "has been in my mind since I was nineteen years of age and in the Spanish army, where I saw the corruption of the military and, in the Riff, war in all its imbecilic futility. I have always carried with me this hatred of war. Some artists may lose their feelings about war between such conflicts. I never have. So in Chicago in 1942 I began my series of war paintings, expressing an old hatred in a new way."

His new technique was tempera transfer — a kind of monotype. He found that he got much more exciting effects by dipping a piece of paper or cardboard in thick tempera and transferring it to his panel than any-

thing he could do with a brush alone. He was not depicting man romantically anymore: "I was thinking of man converted into a machine to destroy, and through camouflage this machine of destruction was more and more identified with nature. The more man looked like nature, the better possibilities he had to kill." To warm up for this series, he made fascinating action drawings, men bayoneting and throwing grenades (Fig. 4). This war series exhibited in the spring of 1943, made a big hit in New York: The *Art News* chose it as one of the ten best shows of the season, and Donald J. Bear, Director of the Santa Barbara Art Museum, wrote: ". . . de Diego in a series of pictures in oil and tempera, entitled 'Desastres del Alma,' has poured more feeling, excitement and electric abuse than usually attends any such subject matter of this kind. His pictures are spectacular but well-ordered. They are direct and they hit . . ." In gem-like colors, he painted air battles and the graveyards of ships and planes at the bottom of the sea; and armies in withdrawal *His Forces in Orderly Retreat* (Fig. 5). There are temperas on paper of war machines; panels depicting beetle-eyed men who, by calling on the telephone or radio, can destroy an enemy they have never seen.

The end of war came. Man had to rebuild what he had destroyed. That threw the responsibility on the shoulders of the peacemakers, the cloak-and-dagger boys of high politics. Julio had thought a lot about them. He sets it down thus: ". . . The machine became humanized with remarkable precision — palpitating, breathing, moving rhythmically to begin the reconstruction of that which man had destroyed, of which *The Portentous City* (Fig. 6) is an example. The Reconstruction paintings (1943-44) are my reaction to the obscure political powers which are converting the peace into something inhuman and tragic. One painting shows gold-braided diplomats behind whom green shadows whisper sibilant speeches into the diplomats' ears, machine-like human beings, and the shambles of a classical world . . ." In this idiom Julio endows with animal jaws the tools man uses to rebuild; insignificant men operate these machines. Dozens of oils and temperas on paper were made during this period. This show also was chosen by the *Art News* as one of the ten best of that season.

In 1944-45 he began a new series, illustrated by *Composition in Gouache* (Fig. 7) depicting animals and birds in their battle for survival; here his tempera monotype transfer is fully utilized — a purely personal method for setting down ideas in paint. He summarizes his program: "I thought of the eternal fight for survival in the animal kingdom, a killing to satisfy the categoric imperative of existence. Animals, birds, insects kill each

other when they are hungry. Somehow there is a certain nobility in this attitude . . ." This group begins with a battle between two fighting cocks, which he called *Flying Feathers*, full of the dust of action, and delicate in color. Then there are the humming birds which he describes: they "became a sort of bridge between my thoughts of animals and men. I painted hum-



Fig. 4. JULIO DE DIEGO: MAN BAYONETING. Ink. War Period
Collection of the Artist, New York

ming birds after I saw them flying and stopping in front of my windows in California and Mexico to suck honey from the flowers. As they stopped in space, their wings moving at fantastic speed, I saw that I would also like to stop in space and look around . . ." There were a large number of paintings in this sequence: *Guilty Cats* (collection of International Business Machines); large felines, tigers with the bones of their prey in front of them; a high point is the *California Birds* (collection of the artist), illustrating Julio's power as a designer. The monotype transfer of the tempera underpainting involves all kinds of shapes; the leaves were done by dipping the upper forefinger in thick tempera.

Experiences of his youth reappear in these pictures. For example, the paintings of bats recall an incident when he was in the army, stationed in the cavalry barracks on the estate of the Duke of Alba in Madrid. In the center of the grounds was a large park, wild as a jungle. The entrance to the stables was down a ramp and at night thousands of bats would fly out

of this dark passage. The soldiers grew frightened, and tall tales were told of evil deeds and murders.

A note of warning for art historians on the irresponsible habits of artists: in working on a catalogue for my book on Julio, I asked him about dates of paintings and found they were jumbled up. When I enquired how he dated his works, I found he started a new year in June, not January. "Oh," he said, "my year starts when the sun is warm and spring comes — not in winter when it's cold." So everything before that time was dated six months too late. I now have him back on the track, using our calendar!

The years 1944-45-46 were the most productive in Julio's life. He was handling many themes expertly: the Constellation drawings were continuing with new interpretations, often in tempera; he was working in silver, making rings, pectorals and other objects, a selection of which toured the country under the sponsorship of the Museum of Modern Art. He invented *rotiles* (from wire he found at night beside the New York newsstands), frail windwheels which move in the air current rising from a warm light bulb. During these years the form expressed in his paper temperas took on a new meaning. He made fascinating eroded grottoes — how? Your guess is as good as mine. I know he used a sized paper onto which he pressed tempera by monotype transfer; perhaps while this was wet, he dipped it or dropped on india ink so that the ink spread into the wet pools of the tempera relief. Julio is secretive and won't give away his mysteries. Try it yourself sometime and see what marvelous effects you can get. He peopled these grottoes with stone-age hunters pursuing fish or game. There is no nobility then or now in man. He is the same man just back from the wars, who has not found glory for himself. He is but a wanderer in the back grottoes of the world.

In the summer of 1945 Julio flew to Mexico. He remembered what he had said about the humming birds series: ". . . 'As they stopped in space, their wings moving at fantastic speed, I saw that I would also like to stop in space and look around.' I have realized this desire in airplane flights in which I have seen the earth from high altitudes. From the air, after making several trips by plane, I discovered a new form of landscape. There was such a remarkable variation of fantasies that I had to put it on canvas. Each altitude and each region gave me a definite feeling. From the take-off to the landing, objects, land and water, people and moving things have a definite and mysterious meaning which, translated into painting, had to be treated somehow topographically . . ." The color cover of *Town and Country*, September 1945, in which bright-colored humming birds fly be-

fore the illuminated buildings of the airports, is an excellent example of a transition between two periods. Julio made gesso relief panels, some tinted with color as in *Altitude 3,000 Feet*, others more completely painted. At the same time he did a new series of Mexican myths

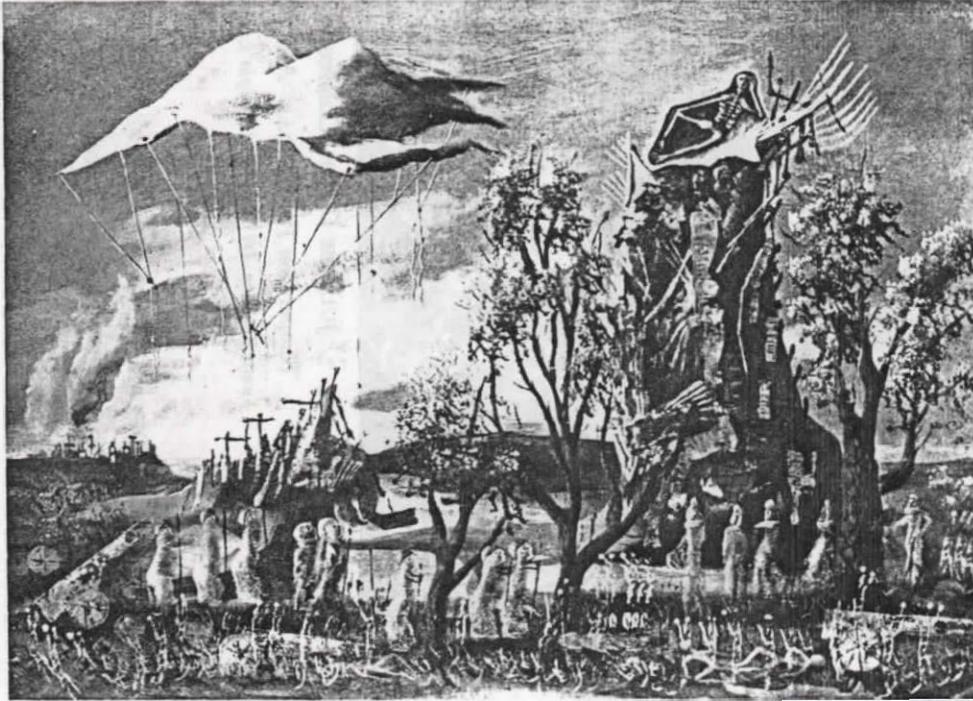


Fig. 5. JULIO DE DIEGO: HIS FORCES IN ORDERLY RETREAT
Tempera and Oil, 1943. War Period
Suzette Morton Zurcher, Lake Forest, Illinois

from stories told by the Indians in the small towns — folk lore of crickets, scorpions, of the communion of souls between man and beast. This technique was altogether new, the form modeled in charcoal with added pastel or water color.

In 1947 the Museum of Modern Art held its exhibition of the South Seas. It reminded Julio of the objects from the Colonial Museum in Madrid, which had fascinated him as a boy. It gave him ideas for a new suite of paintings, the *Nichos*, recesses in which highly decorated figures stand. One day I was in his studio, and he was hard at work, painting. I was trying to find out how he got some of his effects, peering at his bottles, hoping to make them divulge their secrets! While he painted, he talked: “. . . These keeds who want to learn to paint in three months,

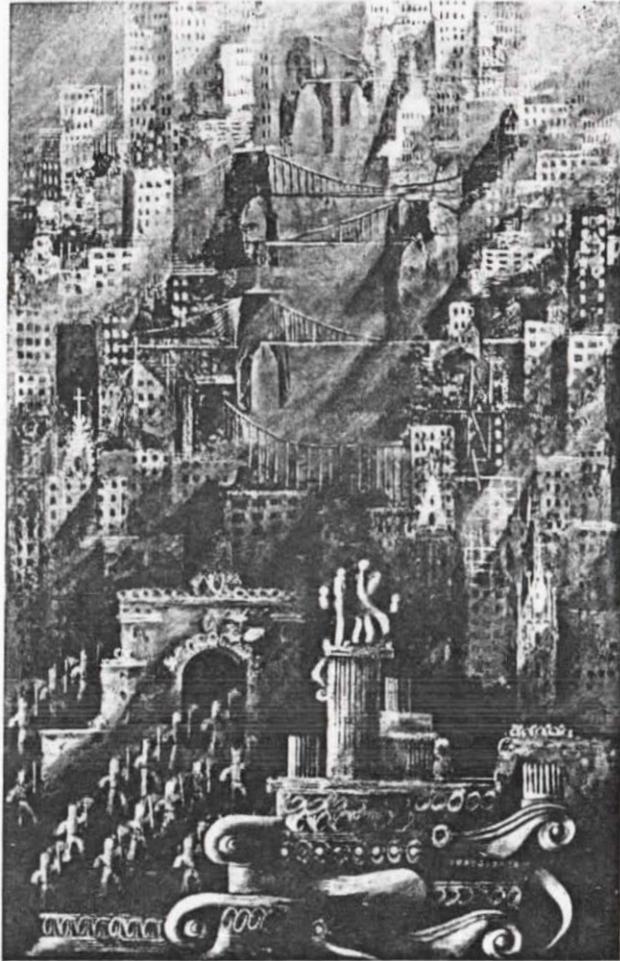


Fig. 7. JULIO DE DIEGO: COMPOSITION IN GOUACHE
Tempera on Paper, 1944. Animals and Birds
Santa Barbara Art Museum (Wright Ludington Collection)

Fig. 6. JULIO DE DIEGO: PORTENTOUS CITY
Tempera and Oil, 1943. Reconstruction Period
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

make me seek . . . they want me to give them a formula to become a great artist in no time . . . look at the years it took me to do this . . . !" I agreed but wanted to know *how* he did it. "Do you know how I made those compartments for this painting of the *michos*?" he asked. I felt I knew the answer. "Using a small piece of rectangular cardboard dipped in tempera and transferred?" I replied. "No, you are wrong, it was done really much quicker and simpler than that. Come here into the bathroom and let me show you . . ." So we went in, and he pointed to the tiles in the shower. "I painted tempera on these tiles for the compartments and rubbed the paper on the back to pick up the paint. When it dried, I was able to finish the painting rapidly." That is a Spaniard for you, always doing easily something which looks difficult.

Julio's jewelry-making compelled him to compose in terms of melted blobs of silver. A few years later this process was carried over into his painting. In the fall of 1947 he began to make some drawings of figures with simplified anatomy, in ink over a tempera-toned background. After the ink was applied, wax (probably paraffin) was poured on and maybe ironed in. This gave a new type of surface. The style carried over into a fully new technique of panels executed in tempera underpainting with oil glaze which we can call the bone period. It was later to be tied up with a new series related to the atom bomb. Julio describes the evolution of his ideas in 1947 and 1948 thus: ". . . While I was painting the earth, scientists were working secretly in the development of formidable powers taken from the mysterious depths of the earth — powers to destroy and make useless this same earth . . . I was painting and then THE EXPLOSION! . . . and another, and another, and we entered the Atomic Age and from then the New Atomic War begins . . . I read the description of the power and its results. Explosions fell all over and man kept on fighting and when man discovered that he could fight without flesh, a new army of bone-structured soldiers was born, new heroes were born, and the old legends were re-enacted by these new armies of this, our remarkable neo-Atomic War . . ."

The full bone period panels of tempera underpainting with oil glazes created a new expression of form in Julio's work, for here by thin transparent glazes of grey or black over the tempera underpainting, he was able to make his forms float, thereby getting a depth in relief he had never achieved before. The themes were many; the *Inevitable Day* (Fig. 10) shows two bone figures juggling an oval shape, the atom bomb; to the left nearby the scientist is seated with his research machines. Outside to the

right are the spies who want to steal the bomb. There is also another panel of a *Trojan Horse*, in which Julio set down the idea that even in the atom age Trojan Horse treachery can occur. In this period are several compositions of real form and delicacy, demonstrating how he has achieved success in this difficult medium.

From this Atomic series Julio wanted to produce in his *Saint Atomic*, done in the fall of 1948, an ikon for Atomists. This painting fails in the head of the saint — after all, the focus of an ikon is in the face. In this instance the face should be repainted. Another panel of this time, repeating and reinterpreting an old theme, is the *International Poker Players*. The figures are triangular and abstract, their power is vitiated by the too realistic animals and figures on the playing cards.

In the spring, summer and fall of 1949, Julio was a member of a Carnival, taking his Dream Show across this country and Canada with the Royal American Shows. It was wonderful for the carnival people to get to know a real, live, leading American artist. Julio remarked that most such undertakings start in Tampa, Florida, and the management is obliged to use the services of sign painters, no good creative artists being available for this carnival medium. How bad are the paintings for side shows! How much these shows which cater to millions all over the country need the creative living artists. Young graduates of art schools, take notice. Julio painted the frontispiece for this dream show and designed the costumes for the girls. He produced an unusual effect in his "snake pit" sequence. Four girls in a sub-stage moved draperies about, and their distorted images were reflected upwards to the audience by a stainless steel mirror. A wire recording spouted high-sounding scientific analyses of Freud's dream theories. Here for the first time living, moving color abstractions were brought to the people at the grass roots level — it was stunning! The June 1950 *Flair* illustrations are most amusing for their interpretation of this period.

For the last three years Julio has taught at the summer school of the University of Denver at Central City, Colorado. Last summer he began a new series of large panels, which for want of a better name we call the Stained Glass period: in one, a woman arranging a flower in a vase, behind her a mosaic of a religious subject; in another a large woman holds twins, and there is much movement as if the three figures were flying; other religious themes included the *Misericordia*, shown at the Whitney Museum this year; in *The Promise*, exhibited at the Pennsylvania Academy, a girl holds a cross; behind her a man and religious elements

fill the background, while a gorgeous still life of lemons and leaves burgeons the foreground. Some people declare Julio is in a new religious period — a flashback to his early upbringing. Many artists today are going back to basic religious themes. If you question him on this, he will say, "Very well, if that's your interpretation, you are welcome to it. I am only painting my emotions."

If you have studied his work carefully, you will find that in 1948 he made a series of color illustrations for the Abbott Laboratories magazine

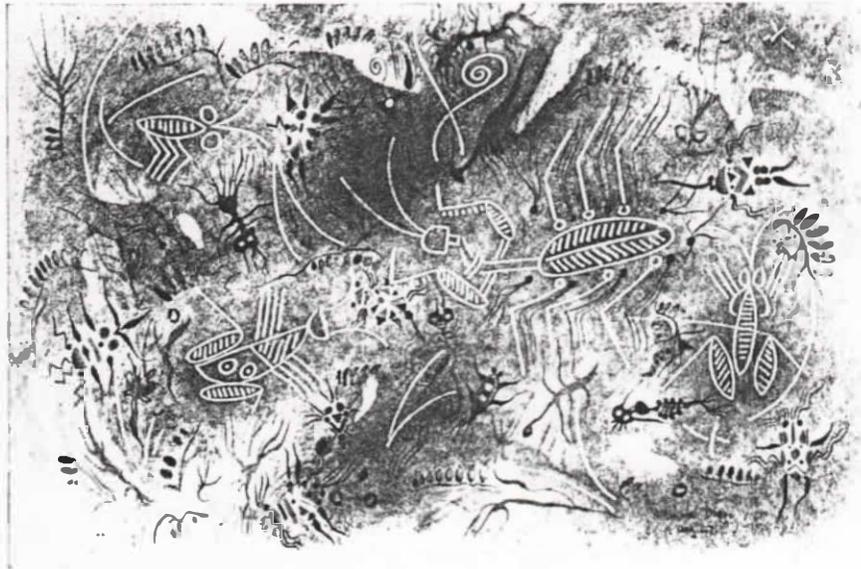


Fig. 8. JULIO DE DIEGO: PRAYING MANTIS
Pencil and Water Color, with Embossing, 1947
Collection of the Artist, New York

on Hay Fever. These are done in striking flat planes of color, somewhat cubistic in their analysis of form. Note particularly June 26, July 17 and August 14 for Thienylene. The ideas for the form expression in the latest Stained Glass period of 1950-51 began back in 1948, were by-passed by the Atomic Age bone paintings, to be picked up again in the summer of 1950 and continued in 1951. This is the way in which Julio works.

From his earliest years in painting, Julio has been vitally concerned with the best technique to use for any particular subject, so that he probably knows more about methods of painting than other American artists. He employs surprising, unusual combinations to get these powerful effects. You would be interested to know how many of our leading painters (some

of whom have written books on painting technique) humbly seek out Julio to ask him questions and express a desire to learn from him. He won't always tell. He has some definite ideas on this subject:

"Each artist has to have his own technique, the one that is the most 'simpatica' to his little idiosyncracies. Like everything in art, we have to learn well and profoundly the fundamentals, to make our technical ability a part of our subconscious. If by temperament you have to squeeze paint



Fig. 9. JULIO DE DIEGO: INEVITABLE DAY
Tempera and Oil. Bone Period
Collection of the Artist, New York

out of a tube and put it on the canvas in a hurry, it is perfectly all right, if the plastic results are satisfactory and the painting is good. If the painting is bad, no matter the technique, the painting will remain bad. I had a master scenographer in Madrid who used to tell me, with trembling whiskers, 'You can paint good pictures with pigment and saliva,' and to demonstrate, he would spit on the canvas, and with his fingers full of pigment model a head . . . !

"I am always trying *new* combinations of materials, old and *new*, and experimenting with them, solving *new plastic* mysteries. I do believe that it is more important for the artist to do things well, than just to do them.

"I do begin my ideas for a painting with a few lyrically written notes in my sketchbook. For example, from my plane window I see scarabs drinking the pink hearts of old Spanish galleons in the port of Aca-

pulco . . . ! Then I write the technique I am going to use and the approximate color scheme. Fortunately, when the picture is finished, it doesn't look like the sketch, just as a child does not resemble the streetcar conductor of his dreams upon reaching maturity."

Julio is a most inventive and resourceful artist. He paints in a style appropriate to a particular theme or mood, squeezes everything out of that style, then goes on to another phase, which has no relationship whatever with that of last week. All this confirms the vast fertility of his mind. As he expresses it: "Art should be dynamic: the moment it becomes static, it is no longer art. Nature is changeable; it changes every day, every month, every season, every year, following a wonderful rhythm. All these changes produce remarkable inventions from which we should learn, not copy."

We realize the impossibility of expressing in black and white the excitement and color of Julio's work. We urge you to see the originals in the museum nearest to you. The list is as follows: Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City; The Art Institute of Chicago; Phillips Memorial Gallery, Washington, D. C.; The Santa Barbara Museum of Art, Santa Barbara, California; San Diego Fine Arts Center, San Diego, California; The Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, Minnesota; The Milwaukee Art Institute, Milwaukee, Wisconsin; Washington University, Department of History of Art, St. Louis, Missouri; Montclair Art Museum, Montclair, New Jersey; Office of International Information and Cultural Affairs, Department of State; International Business Machines Corporation; The Abbott Laboratories; the Capehart Collection; and many private collections.

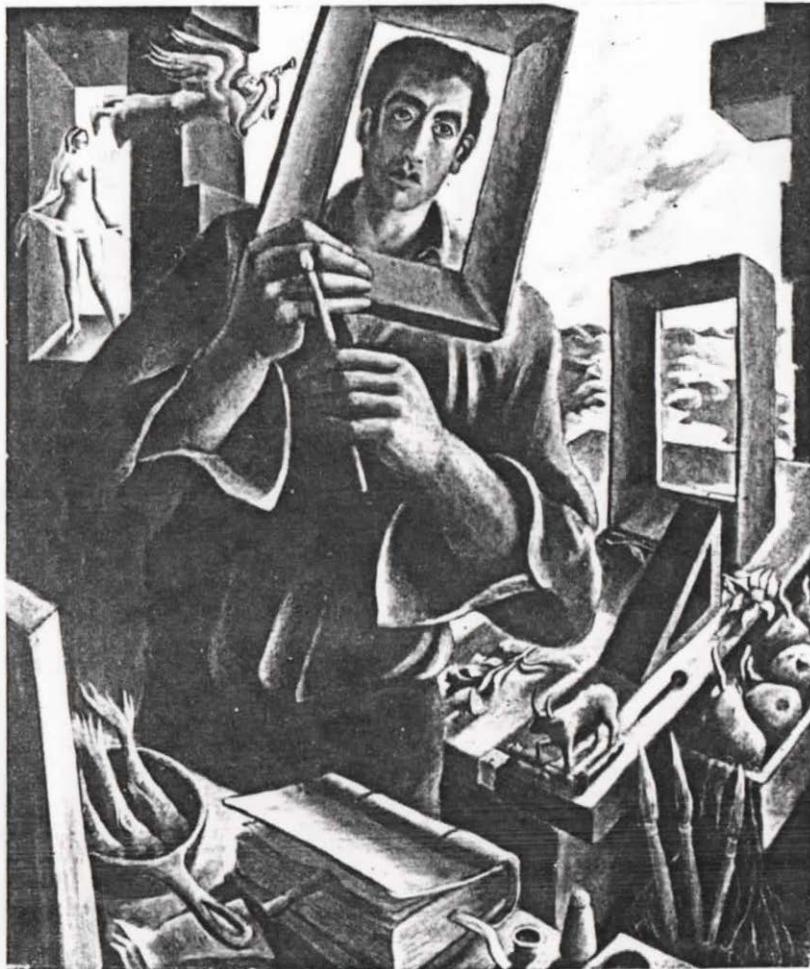


Fig. 1. JULIO DE DIEGO: SELF-PORTRAIT
Tempera and Oil, 1938. Spanish War Period
Mr. and Mrs. David W. Stotter, Highland Park, Illinois



Fig. 2. JULIO DE DIEGO: THE
PERPLEXITY OF WHAT TO DO.
Tempera and Oil, 1940.
Romantic Period
Collection of the Artist, New York