

THE MATURED ART OF RUSSELL CLARK

RECENTLY the Architectural Centre Gallery in Wellington invited Russell Clark to hold an exhibition of his recent work. The show was a success—not just because the public bought his oil paintings and sculpture, but because many hundreds of people who viewed the exhibition felt they had undergone a new experience. The medium varied from terracotta to water colour and wax, from limestone to wood; but the total show had a unity and an impact which suggested that a master had been at work.

Russell Clark is a mature and experienced painter and still a comparatively young man. He is making new discoveries and is already in the forefront of New Zealand artists as illustrator, sculptor and painter. This is a rare combination in any country. But before discussing the Russell Clark as an artist, let us consider him in the field where he is most known to us—in the pages of *The New Zealand Listener*.

People who are used to communicating with each other by using smoke signals would find difficulty if presented with a letter containing written symbols; that is to say, before a certain kind of communication can be made between people, the symbols or the code must be learned. The non-literate people of the world (the majority) communicate with each other in spoken language by pictures and by various kinds of signals. All have their own conventions about the symbols they use, but, because we use printed books in our world, we tend to imagine that the symbols used, the words, have a common value to everybody. This is not true, of course, and for that reason if for no other, the printed page has to be supported by illustrations. Generally, the illustrator is chosen for his ability to interpret and add to what is in the writer's mind. For example, Dickens was illustrated in the last century by Cruickshank, and many of us today picture some of the Dickens's characters as much by what Cruickshank drew as by what Dickens wrote.

The Listener uses illustration to heighten and complement the text. Sometimes illustrations are straight photographs, but whenever the material being presented is work of the imagination then photographic representation is usually inappropriate. What is needed in such cases is an illustrator who will in fact not do what a photograph will

by W. B. Sutch

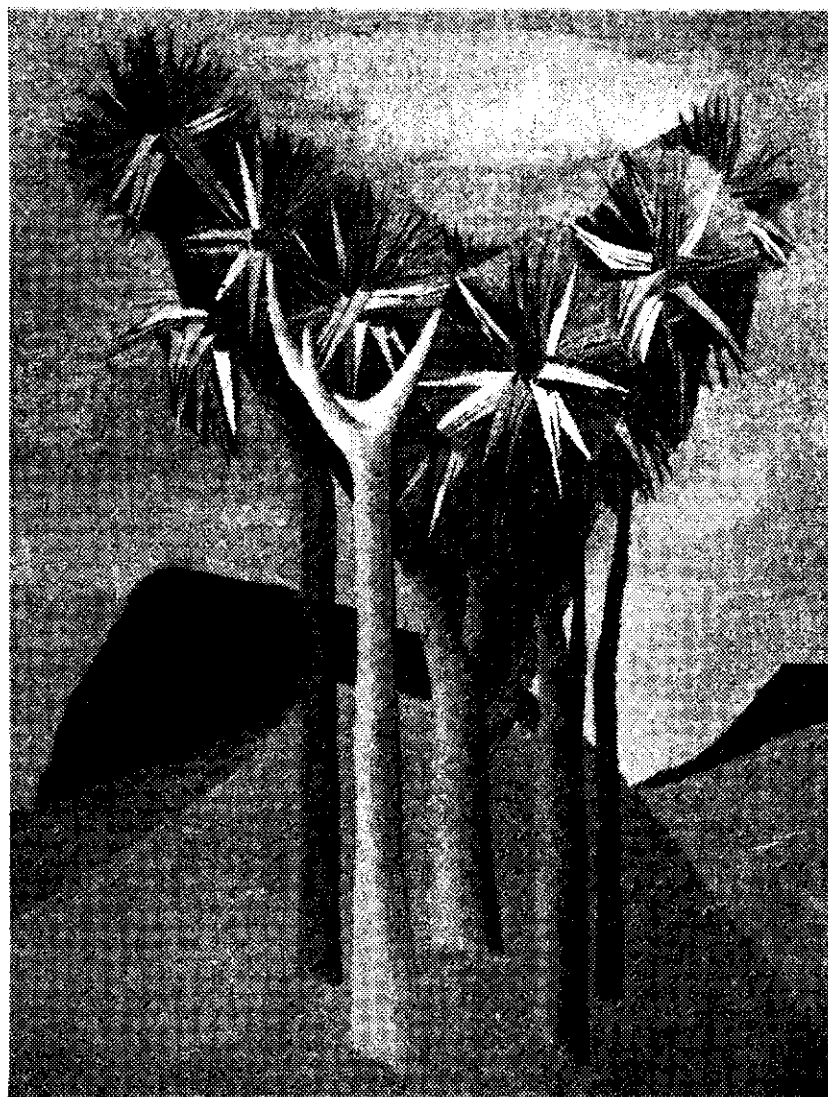
do, but who will expand and sometimes make more concrete what the writer has said. Illustration becomes therefore a separate art in itself. Often it has some of the elements of a caricature where some particular characteristic of a person is emphasised, just as Low emphasises eyebrows and moustaches, and Searle makes the girls of St. Trinian's into a cross between a stick insect and a spider.

When I first saw the drawings of the girls of St. Trinian's I was somewhat repelled, but I got used to it. At first a new method may seem strange, but as we get used to the form of communication or the symbols used (that is, having learnt our ABC), we begin to appreciate the fact that the illustrator has added something to our understanding—if he is a good illustrator.

This brings me back to Russell Clark. Let us recall his drawing of Professor Ian Gordon [see page 9], who is a genial, be-spectacled, sturdily-built Scotsman, with a good head of hair. The drawing drops some of the geniality, makes the hair unruly, emphasises the spectacles, exaggerates the weighty forehead by making the hair recede, and altogether conveys an impression of a professor of English actively burrowing through his heavy tomes with a fanatical attachment to his research. This is what Mr. Clark wanted to convey, not Professor Gordon at a cocktail party or putting the children to bed.

After his art school training Russell Clark illustrated advertisements and designed jam labels. Advertisements, of course, do have their own conventions, and the women who appear in them are not women as we know them, but even so, we accept the fact that advertising has its own symbols. Mr. Clark learned this very quickly, but the work did not enhance our understanding of the world, and for that reason it was not satisfactory to him. It was the two years when Russell Clark was a war artist in the Pacific that gave him the opportunity to do this—to convey the feeling in a scene that photographic representation could not give. In this, as we know, he was successful.

Today Mr. Clark makes his living from teaching art, and this enables him to use his undoubted talent to explore means of conveying what he feels about



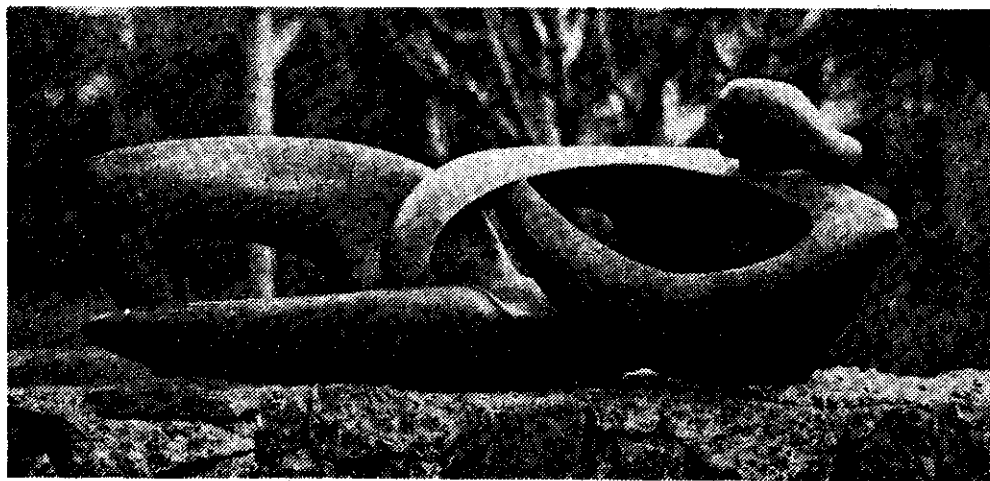
"The painter has shown us the character of a New Zealand tree"

a subject. His illustrations for *The New Zealand Listener* are good examples of this. At one stage of his career Mr. Clark made his illustrations in pure black and white and used few lines. This probably was a carry-over from the advertising days. But while Mr. Clark can well do this kind of drawing, he probably feels that the blocks of black and white are inadequate to convey what he requires. So we now note his use of a series of fine lines and elongated figures. It would seem that Mr. Clark has made a close study of British artists who work in three dimensions in wire and has sensed the character and movement that fine lines in space can convey.

When an artist like Russell Clark is making a picture or a drawing, he almost inevitably makes sure that the total pattern pleases him and that the various shapes in the picture are so related that the viewer is not distracted by inharmonious forms.

This often means that, in drawing a picture involving people, the people are so represented as to convey their character, the lines are arranged to make an harmonious pattern, but the representation is not photographic; for example, some human beings may appear to be heavier about the hips than they are in life. In some of his drawings, and, indeed, in his recent terracotta work, Mr. Clark has so arranged his shapes that in emphasising the heaviness of the body inevitably the head is made smaller. If the head were not small, the whole effect of the work would be lost and it would be a failure. This is no new thing in art. The lack of emphasis on the head has been known for many centuries—it can, for example, often be found in religious pictures of the Middle Ages and earlier. In other countries and societies, too, it is quite conventional for purposes of pattern, balance or emphasis, to have a small head in a carving, sculpture, or a drawing.

The question whether this is distortion, therefore, becomes irrelevant. The artist is not doing a photographic impression of a human figure: he is illustrating the story, using the figures as symbols and drawing them in such a way as will heighten the impressions conveyed by the written word. When one studies other illustrators in this or



"Clark's shapes have an 'acid' or 'sharp' quality"