

AN ENGLISH PRIMITIVE

By NORMA COUPER

THE ability to recall on canvas the features of an opulent age and to give them a haunting, improbable quality, make Eden Box the most talked-of artist in London today. She is an untrained, unorthodox painter whose "primitives" are sought eagerly.

Eden Box (in private life, Mrs. Marston Fleming, the wife of a London University lecturer in metallurgy) began painting six years ago, when she heard that a friend was holding an exhibition by Sunday painters. Curious as to what constituted a Sunday painter, she was told that anyone could be a Sunday painter, without necessarily being a publicly successful one. The idea thrilled her and she bought canvas and equipment. It was a creditable first effort, but she was reluctant to own up to it. Consequently, the devised signature, E. Box, was put at the corner of the painting and off went Mrs. Fleming with her picture and the explanation that it was done by "an acquaintance in Norfolk."

Of all the paintings in the show, hers excited the most interest and was sold immediately. She was asked if any more by the same artist could be produced in a hurry, and she made the truthful reply that she'd soon find out! She sped home and in two days had two more paintings ready. Close friends knew that Mrs. Fleming had not been out of London and suspicion of the paintings' origin soon became fact.

The knowledgeable of the art world say that when general conditions of

living are violent, controversial, inconstant and bewildering, public feeling turns to simplicity. The realists of painting still reflect the times, but contemporaries whose imaginations rove in a more gentle era pass to an eagerly benevolent public a soothing memory.

That could be the answer to Eden Box's tremendous appeal, for in her paintings it is a sense of tranquillity more than of simplicity that charms the viewer. She is classified with French and American primitive artists and yet she has gone a step beyond the naïveté of the simple childhood scene or the uncomplicated depiction of the family portrait. Eden Box conjures up a nostalgic vision of an age that she never knew.

In her early forties, she has childhood memories of a post-war era hastening into ragtime and angular furnishings. It is her mother's world of Victorian and Edwardian comfort that comes alive through her paintings. There is the opulence, the plushness of architecture, the complicated gracefulness of trained gowns, the extravagant suggestion of servants on every hand and the 12-course dinner on the Sunday table. Eden Box uses no reference books; her paintings stem from a rich imagination and suggest a selective subconscious forever observing the trappings and trivia of a bygone age.

Into these static, peaceful pictures she puts the animals of the jungle; brings lions and tigers to sit benignly by a tea table, leopards to loll at the

feet of children in scenes of domestic calm. Animals fascinate her endlessly. She is so susceptible to their influence that scarcely a picture is without them. Legends or stories of animals evoke the desire to depict them on canvas, and friends habitually (these days) gather stories they think she could use. One of her most famous is "St. Mamas of Cyprus," depicting the legend of Mamas, the shepherd, carrying a lamb in his arms, riding on the back of a lion to answer the summons of the emperor.

Eden Box has been asked to exhibit her paintings in many distinguished shows, and one of her triumphs was to have an entire collection for show in the ultra-modern Parsons Gallery in New York. This gallery is known the world over for its policy of presenting only the most daring and, therefore, controversial, abstract and impressionistic paintings of the 20th Century. Eden Box thinks that there was a momentary aberration in their accepting her work, and in recalling the surprise and bewilderment of regular patrons, she neglects to mention that most of her exhibits were sold.

One of her paintings was bought in London not long ago for the Dunedin Art Gallery, and she believes that there may be one or two others in private collections in New Zealand.

Dr. Fleming spent a year in Uganda recently on work for the British Government, and his wife was delighted to have the opportunity of living there in proximity to wild animals. While there she also studied the legends and stories of the country and has many plans for picturing them on canvas. She is working at present on a picture inspired by the true story of an African tribe where many of the women keep pet leopards. Travelling in Zanzibar, she was fascinated by the air of mystery of harem and palace life, and this has inspired a number of richly-coloured pictures.

Eden Box also accompanied her husband (who is a Canadian) on a trip to Canada and the United States, where she was able to meet one of her most appreciative "patrons"—the film director Jean Negulesco. He already has a large collection of her originals, and follows her progress with keen interest.

Many famous magazines have been bewitched by the strange quality of Eden Box's paintings, and she has been featured several times as the most significant colourist of the present day. One picture, "The Lion on the Pavement," which illustrates perfectly her turn of fancy and which was used as the cover picture of a glossy fashion magazine, inspired a story of the same name by the writer Nancy Spain. The picture shows a richly-dressed family leaving for church from a tall, comfortable Victorian mansion and with them is an amiable, honey-coloured lion.



★ ABOVE, Eden Box, and (top) "Into the Wilderness," her impression of the expulsion from the Garden of Eden

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the telephone rings and Mr. Scott talks for a moment, then replaces the receiver.

"That was Paris," he explains. "The second unit working on location over there have used the wrong coloured wheels on one of the carriages. So we'll have to change the colour on the duplicate we use for scenes shot over here."

That is one of the incidents used by Jack Dobson to record on tape from the studio lot how Hollywood sets about making an historical film, and especially the care taken to remove inaccuracies and keep the settings and costumes historically accurate. The documentary is entitled *Film City*. It is the first of three programmes (selected from a series of seven recorded by Jack Dobson while touring in the United States last year) to be broadcast in the Sunday National link—*Film City* at 9.30 a.m. on Sunday, March 6, with *Hawaiian Interlude* and *Shasta Daylight* at the same time on the following two Sundays. In addition to taking listeners round the various departments concerned with *Désirée*, Mr. Dobson interviews two of the most important people involved, the director, Henry Koster (his favourite film is the one he is working on—it always is), and Miss Simmons herself, who closes the programme with a message to her New Zealand fans.

All seven of the talks in this series, entitled *North American Journey*, will be heard from the ZB stations on Sundays at 2.0 p.m., and 2.2A at 10.45 a.m., starting on Sunday, March 6. The first programme from the ZBs is *Floating City*, which takes listeners from the propeller tunnel to the bridge of the 28,000-ton liner Oronsay. Here, about 90 feet

above the sea, Mr. Dobson interviews the "Old Man," Captain Burnnand. Nor is the title, *Floating City*, an exaggeration, for on the 14 decks over 2000 people are housed and fed. The programme *This is San Francisco* comes next, followed by *Hawaiian Interlude*, with an introduction by the Governor of the Hawaiian Territories. After that, *An American Sunday*, as seen by a New Zealander, is described, and then *Shasta Daylight* tells the story of the American train of that name en route from San Francisco to Portland, Oregon.



JEAN SIMMONS is interviewed by Jack Dobson for his programme "Film City"