Pioneering in Beauty

Professor Jacobson Is Internationally Famous as an Artist

By George Milburn, '30

Pioneers usually do not have many dealings with the Beautiful. The struggle to break wild, rebellious land is an engrossing one. It has a certain stern, bitter quality which is no part of the Good Life. The vanguard of civilization knows none of civilization's benefits.

For three decades now, Oklahoma has remained a state for pioneers. That, on occasion, may be a proud utterance. Other times it is likely to be more vindictive: "... But then, Oklahoma is young," the apologist will shrug.

In the past Oklahomans have been inclined to hold in esteem their state's savagery. Today, however, they are quick to resent charges of provincialism and barbarism. The necessity for a new type of pioneer is apparent—men who can confront intellectual barrenness as bravely as other men met an earthy wilderness thirty years ago. Such a pioneer is Oscar Brousse Jacobson, director of the school of painting and design at the University of Oklahoma.

Jacobson is a patient man and a vigorous man, and perhaps he has had more to do with establishing Norman as a cultural center than any other one person. Every year students from his classes are going out into the world fitted with that most valuable of all requisites to living—an appreciation of the beautiful.

To term Jacobson a pioneer is not altogether a figure of speech. He was born in Sweden in 1882, and his youth was spent on the prairies of western Kansas, riding herd. Lindsborg, Kansas, the seat of Bethany college, is another oasis of civilization and there Jacobson had an opportunity to study painting under the famous landscape painter, Birger Sandzen. He took his bachelor of fine arts degree at Yale in 1916.

He is that rare combination, an artist who has achieved and a teacher who is successful. As a teacher he has been credited with the epigrammatic statement, "It is more important to elevate public taste a peg or two than to create new artists and dump them on an unsuspecting public." As an artist, Harry R. Burke, art critic for the St. Louis Times, writes of him, "... Oscar Brousse Jacobson, with brush and canvas ... has set forth with a bigness of conception, with a logic of color, with deep emotion, with keen perception and with an unflagging rhythmic sense his spirit's deeply poetical reactions to wide wanderings in this, his adopted land ...
Above is Professor Oscar R. Jacobson, internationally known painter and director of the school of painting and design. Below is one of Professor Jacobson's paintings, "The Painted Desert," owned by Miss Ida Z. Kirk of Norman. A great teacher as well as a great painter, Professor Jacobson is planning to issue early next year through the University of Oklahoma Press a portfolio of black and whites done by faculty and students of the university and worthy of wider recognition.

"... He envisions the flats and the gullies, the hills and the gulches, the mountains and the canyons, as the pioneers envisioned them, and he gives voice, as it were, in his paint to the fascination of those rhythms, to the vast epic of the poetry, and to the strange allurements. And curiously is his like the pioneer's reaction, who only in such vast spaces, in the mighty conflict with these elemental forces could find room and freedom in which to realize the full stature of his spirit. No pioneer could make that feeling vocal. The brush of Oscar Jacobson sings in epic measures..."

The case of the Kiowa artists is particularly illustrative of Jacobson's teaching methods. He seeks to encourage rather than to direct, to develop rather than to establish. The Kiowas have innate artistic proclivities, as have all the plains Indians. For centuries the white conquistadores have disregarded them, and the Indians came to be familiar with all the degrading features of European civilization and none of its refining qualities. That a man at this late date should come to uncover the dormant beauty which generations of white men have ignored is as wonderful an episode as the excavation of an Egyptian tomb.

What was true of the six Kiowas is true to a lesser extent of all Jacobson's pupils. They come to him with the tight little creeds of the villages, suspicious of beauty, if, indeed, they have ever taken the time to recognize its existence. His classes in the history of art are popular ones, and every year scores of university students experience for the first time the "good feeling" which an authentic appreciation of the beautiful brings. A man who defines art as "joy in labor" teaches them that there is beauty in the world, and that so long as it goes unrecognized life is a sordid affair.

Jacobson is his own example of what such teaching may bring. He has been quoted as saying that he has always "considered living more important than painting." He is a cosmopolite. He knows America from the deserts of New Mexico to the mountains of Canada. Lecture engagements have taken him to every large city in the country. He is fresh from a trip to the Sahara desert and the Atlas mountains. He has studied in Paris.

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Barrenness holds a peculiar fascination for him. His colors are never soft and compromising. They are the hard, savage color of jewels. His oil paintings are a gallery of deserts, bleak mountain peaks, jagged gulches, and prairie lakes.

A newspaper review says of them:

"Yet there is one strange thing. Great as is his grasp of the elemental, Mr. Jacobson, cannot, does not paint heat. The shimmering glare of the desert, the scorching whiteness of sand and sun, are not for him. The Norseman rebels... How he loved the desert and hill country after a rain, the flocculent white clouds, deep blue sky, mauve and amethysts, and purples on bald and rounded hills as they billow with the groundswell of the world, forests of ultramarine and emerald fields. And how he loved the moon light in the vast distances with high silvery stars and the lunar beams descending like a pentecost to re-kindle into flame a poet-soul—that 'The Garden of Allah' attests. But the desert in the sun, white and shimmering, burned and brown, dotted with cactus flower and mariposa lily, torrid, horrific, he cannot paint. Heat is not poetic to his Norseman's soul...

Thus Oscar Jacobson, painting the sun-tortured desert and the snow-patched canyons, finding exotic beauty in the wastelands. Thus Oscar Jacobson, pioneering in beauty, where there were no concepts of the beautiful before, tolerant and untiring in introducing loneliness to barren lives that had not had much time for loneliness.

Djedjelli, Algeria

Association Host to State's Teachers

Grades, former students and friends of the university will be guests of the University of Oklahoma Association in Oklahoma City at 6 p. m., February 7, during the meeting of the Oklahoma Educational Association February 7 to 9.

The banquet will be held in the new University club which recently moved into its sumptuous new quarters on the two top floors of the building on the northwest corner of Robinson avenue and Second street. The club has kindly offered to extend the association the use of its facilities. The chef in charge received his training in the culinary arts at the Monte Carlo Casino, and therefore the dinner will be no gamble. Following his service at Monte Carlo, the chef served on the staff of the king of Italy.

The program will be in charge of M. L. Wardell, dean of men of the university, a teacher who has long been in educational work in Oklahoma and who has a reputation for keeping such meetings going at a lively and humorous pace. Speakers on the program include Tom F. Carey, president of the University of Oklahoma Association, Dr. W. B. Bizzell, president of the university, Dr. Ellsworth Collings, dean of education of the university and Josh Lee, head of the department of public speaking. The university quartet will sing.

The dinner will cost $1.50 a plate. Reservations should be made with Frank S. Cleckler of Norman, secretary of the University of Oklahoma Association.

The program will conclude in time to permit those who desire to attend the Southern and Marlow Shakespeare production that night.

Holcombe Drama Secretary

Prof. Ray E. Holcombe, director of the school of dramatic art, was selected as chairman of the drama section of the National Association of Teachers of Speech at the national convention in Chicago December 27 to 29. Mr. Holcombe was also elected secretary of the directors' council, which was created at the Chicago meeting. He gave a report of the Oklahoma state drama tournament held at Norman in November.