

# FREDERICK S. WIGHT: PAINTERLY PUNCH LINES

By WILLIAM WILSON

Frederick S. Wight looked like a career diplomat. He had white hair, a distinguished nose and a slightly distracted air. He retired as director of the UCLA art-gallery back in '73. The gallery was named for him in recognition of what he accomplished there in a tenure of nearly 20 years. He also taught history of modern art and even the most inept student could impersonate his delivery. His habit of breaking up sentences with a string of *ah-ah-ah-ahs* would have been annoying except you knew he was building up to aesthetic punch lines that were either startlingly revealing or very funny. (He was great with a pun. When the gallery was about to have a landmark exhibition of fiber art he suggested calling it "Deliberate Entanglements.") If you said hello to him in the hall after a lecture he never responded. It seemed rude but then you wrote it off to professorial fog.

After all, the man clearly had a lot on his mind. One assumed it was the gallery. Under Wight's stewardship, UCLA shaped the consciousness of pioneer modern art in this part of the world. Looking

back on the occasion of his death last week at 84, it is amazing how many important artists one saw face-to-face for the first time in the UCLA galleries—everybody from Paul Klee to Francis Bacon, from Morris Graves to Henri Matisse. Students with avant-garde pretensions found Wight's program a trifle conservative and oriented to figurative art like the art faculty. The observation was as accurate as it was ungenerous. Who has a right to complain about the man who introduced them to Edvard Munch? Besides, by the time it was late in the day of Wight's gallery career, he had devoted exhibitions to the most radical artists developing here at the time—to Peter Alexander, Robert Irwin and their ilk.

Wight belonged to a generation of urbane men who gave Los Angeles an art scene linked to the international mainstream. Like the art dealer Frank Perls and critics like Henry J. Seldis and Jules Langsner, Wight stood for an image of art as high humanism worthy of the most serious intellectual respect and study. He also stood for a *Realpolitik* professionalism that



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*The late Frederick S. Wight—  
image of art as high humanism.*

knew art exhibitions exist in real time and space and come about as the result of negotiations as finely tuned and politically delicate as anything that went on at the Congress of Vienna.

Just dealing with that would be enough to account for a vaguely distracted air. There was even more. Wight was a New Englander of liberal but demanding conscience and tenacious convictions. It is a measure of the richness and complexity of his mind that he served with the OSS in World War II and published some 20 novels

before settling into art. Maybe that was the influence of his mother, Alice Stalknecht, a New England painter. She lived to 93, all the while encouraged by a son who tirelessly promoted her art. When she was finally shown here at the Municipal Art Gallery her work brought a certain gritty rigor and wintry originality to our steamy climate.

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Everything Wight did seemed to compound one's respect and affection.

Except he insisted on painting. Until he retired from UCLA, Wight's proclivity for exhibiting his own art put everybody on the spot. One year it would be figurative and borderline expressionistic, the next abstract and technically experimental. Nobody knew quite what to do with it except to praise the occasional bull's-eye, be frank about the rest and duck because Wight was not shy about telling critics what he thought about what they thought.

Gradually, once Wight had time to paint every day, his work co-

alesced into a sensibility one would scarcely have predicted from a man of the world, but that's the nice thing about art. It gets at the essential person. Fred Wight turned out to be a species of visionary, painting ghostly palms and craggy redwoods in landscapes often with halations of light like the aurora borealis. Finally, it was art about the ripened human spirit merging back into nature, its first fears turning to awe, then to wonder.

The world has reason to regret the passing of man who—as a symbol—was a living memento of an art world that once seemed more dignified and more authentic than today.

But Wight certainly cared little for all that. What might have satisfied him was leaving us a sense that all the epochs of our lives can be fully written and that the last chapter can, in fact, equal fiction by bringing it all to a satisfactory ending. In the end Fred Wight painted some moving, unmistakably personal pictures and that was really all he wanted. □

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