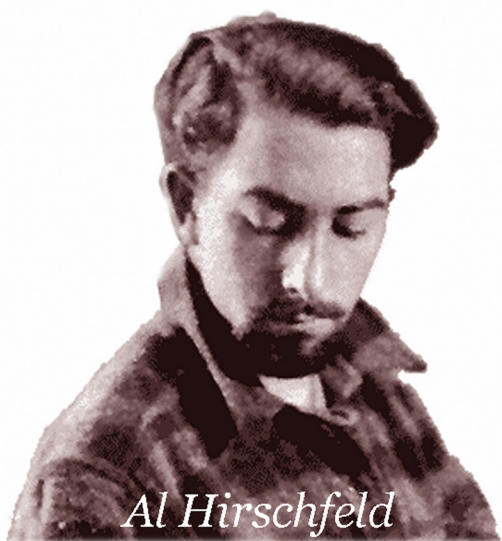


Coronet

March, 1939 : p. 134

CARICATURIST AT LARGE



Al Hirschfeld

AL HIRSCHFELD is neither starving nor an artist. He eats and he illustrates. Art has been the dereliction of his youth and the indulgence of his manhood. In view of the fact that he is only thirty-four years of age, we are popping him off to pin him down to these pages in mid-flight, so to speak, but he has done enough to establish the pattern of his biography. Examples of his pure art are in at least one museum, but the bulk of his earning life has been spent in the service of newspapers and magazines, as cartoonist and caricaturist, his special field being the theatre. He has labored also in the vineyard of moving picture promotion, and on the whole may be taken as a good example of that type upon whom the pure artist affects to look with contempt—the commercial artist.

But sometimes the commercial artist can make the pure artist's contempt freeze upon his face when he invades the pure artist's field. Regard, for example, the lithographs reproduced herein, particularly the mementoes of Hirschfeld's peregrinations abroad. They reveal somewhat the

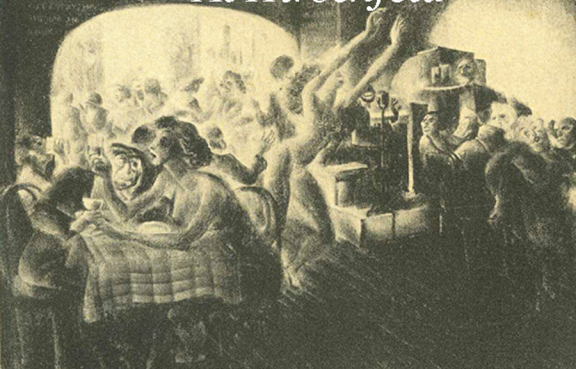


Harlem

thinness and the trickiness of the working cartoonist's method but they show also what a head start in pure art his commercial work has given him in seizing upon the elements of a setting and the quality of character.

Hirschfeld has been on his own since his middle teens. Already he has traversed a vast portion of the earth's surface and is planning to travel on the yet unvisited continents. He is interested in the civilities and the amenities of good living, in eating and drinking, in art and literature. His beard, grown in Paris days in protest against the lack of hot water in his room, sharply accents the impression that here is a man who requires civilization for the matrix of his daily living.

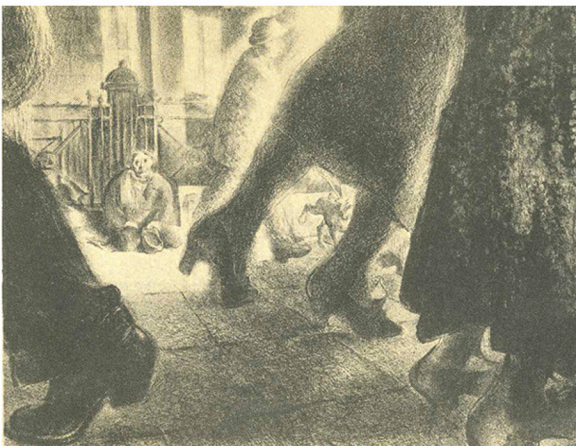
He was born in St. Louis in 1904. His career suggests extreme precocity. He was drawing and painting before he was fourteen. At that age he left with his family for New York, attending high school by day and studying art at night at the National Academy of Design. Planning to become a sculptor he found himself a part-time job in an architectural firm, for which he made ornaments in clay and plastolene. He gave up the job and sculpture after several months and at the age of sixteen left school and entered the art department of Selznick Pictures. Two



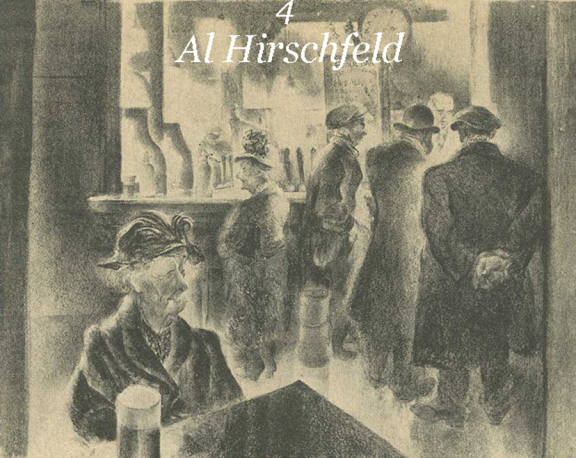
THE DIZZY CLUB

years later he was art director, the youngest even in that young business. Shortly afterward the head of the firm paternally urged young Hirschfeld to open a studio of his own, employing the same staff, and promised that the firm would contract to give him all its art work, as in the past. Selznick Pictures was going bankrupt and Hirschfeld knew no better than to follow this advice. At the end of one month, the producer owed Hirschfeld \$4000, most of which he owed, in turn, to his staff. He borrowed from every available source. The second month it was worse and then Selznick went bankrupt. Hirschfeld found work at Warner Brothers, where he remained long enough to earn the sum he owed in back pay to his own staff.

At twenty he joined the expatriate gang in Paris, where he remained for two years, working and trifling, studying at Julian's and traveling through France, Spain and Africa. He reports that those years did him a lot of good, scraping the mire from him and giving



ART AND INDUSTRY



CHELSEA PUB

him a set of values not wholly derived from the movies. In 1926 he returned to America, revisited St. Louis and gave exhibitions there and in Chicago. Several profitable portrait commissions enabled him to revisit Europe and this time he included Russia in his itinerary, staying there a full year.

While in Russia he supplemented his income by sending theatre correspondence and caricatures to the *Herald Tribune* in New York. Leaving the Soviets, he painted his way through Persia and Arabia, exhibiting the resulting watercolors in Paris.

Back in New York he did his regular stint of caricature for the Sunday dramatic sections of the *Times* and the *Herald Tribune* and made drawings for Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer promotion. In 1932 he published a book of text and drawings on New York speakeasies, *Manhattan Oases*, and in that year, having heard much about the place, set out for Tahiti. After five months, during which, incidentally, he painted several watercolors, he left in disgust; he has at times expressed an inclination to tear limb from limb the lying romantic novelists who had represented this filthy hole as a Paradise. He found no evidence whatever of native culture and every white man he met was writing a book. But Bali he found to be incredibly beautiful and culturally rich in native crafts and arts. He marveled at the tremendous sophistication of the natives and the refinement of their anonymous woodcarving and painting. He has

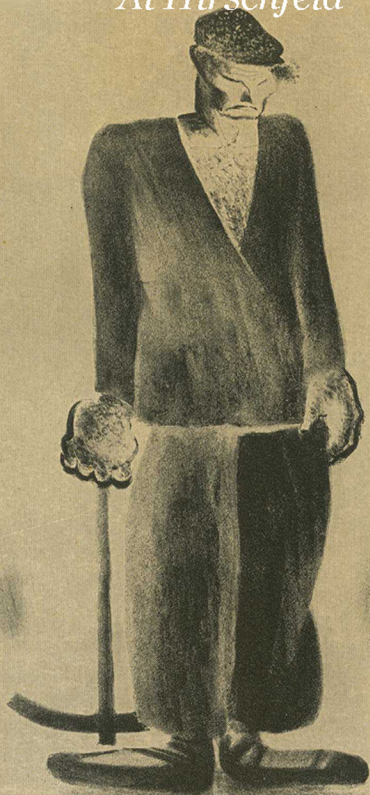


THE SUPREME COURT IN SESSION

several examples of their painting on textiles. During his Balinese stay, Charlie Chaplin came down and shared Hirschfeld's quarters. He bought some pictures and this enabled the artist to stay on a little longer.

In 1934 the world-traveler was back again in New York and back to caricature, with the magazines *Stage* and *Vanity Fair* added to the list of his customers. About this time he became interested in lithography as an art form and studied it under Eugene Fitsch at the Art Students' League. He made a number of lithographs, chiefly as experiments and exercises. In the meantime, he continued to hack out a living. Then the itch to travel came on again and he went to Russia, this time to cover the theatre festival in Moscow, corresponding for *Stage* and caricaturing for the *New York Times*, whose critic, Brooks Atkinson, he accompanied. After the festival, he went to London where he remained several months, pursuing privately his study of the lithographic medium.

Mr. Hirschfeld has visited in Europe, Asia, Africa and Australia. This summer he plans to take a look into Mexico and possibly points south. One of the reasons Mr. Hirschfeld has been able to do so much traveling is that he finds profitable chores to do in the places he visits. That is one of the advantages of working in an international medium. In England, for example, he did a series of cartoons for the *London Express* on after-hour



STUDY OF MAN

drinking places. In Russia he contributed caricatures of the theatre to *Izvestia*. Perhaps the artist's beard made him seem like a comrade, although the beard is boulevardier rather than proletarian.

—GROVER BACON SMITH