

TERMS SCULPTURE COURT INSPIRATIONAL

A Guest Abstract Painter Delighted by Center Tour

By Lillian McLaughlin

A two-generation abstract painter this week spent a six-weeks' residency as guest artist at the Des Moines Art Center.

He is George McNeil, widely known as a stimulating contemporary painter and teacher, winner of a 1966 National Council on the Arts Award, a 1969 Guggenheim fellow — and something of a pioneer explorer of the depth and tensions behind the familiar forms of nature.

"It's a bit unusual," he says of his career. "I've worked in abstract art since the late 1920's — a ghastly long time when I think about it — from the beginning, when there were few abstract artists in the United States. I was one of the founders of American Abstract Artists."

In a leisurely tour through the Art Center from upper sculpture court to basement maintenance shop, guided by William Loebel, education director, McNeil answered questions about his career, spoke of what he hopes to accomplish in Des Moines.

From time to time he broke off to exclaim with delight, almost to himself, over what he saw on the tour.

Part of the itinerary was in deep gloom — a power shortage just east on Grand avenue had left the Art Center — its school wing alive with young people reporting for their first day of summer classes — in semi-darkness.

Peers Through Shadows

McNeil peered through the shadows, recognizing styles of artists represented in the permanent collection, nodding with approval as he heard of the concerts, dance programs, lectures programmed in the Levitt Auditorium.

In the sculpture court, lit by sunny skies, its great glass expanses framing a June-green Greenwood Park, McNeil exclaimed:

"This is tremendously in-



GUEST ARTIST ON THE SCENE

On his first visit to the Des Moines Art Center, where he will be guest artist-teacher for the next six weeks, George McNeil checks on paintings being moved to the main gallery and hung for an exhibition of his work which opens to the public Saturday. McNeil comes to Des Moines under a grant from the Gardner Cowles Foundation in memory of Florence Call Cowles.

spirational, this great central space with the open effect overhead. It's a museum of

architecture in itself. There is nothing in all Europe like this."

The I. M. Pei-designed addition to the original Eiel Saaren structure, and the pro-

gram of "interexpression" of the arts it houses, McNeil pronounced "wonderful."

His pleasure continued as he strolled through classes of youngsters, swaddled in their father's shirts and smocks. Instructors greeted him with admiration.

"Please excuse my clay handshake," said one, and McNeil replied, smiling, "That's the way it should be."

Views Youngsters' Works

A few works by youngsters in the lower corridor got as much attention from McNeil as some of the old masters upstairs.

He paused a long time in front of a painting of a vigorous black-limbed tree topped with exuberant green leaves.

"I'd be proud to paint that myself," he said.

Invited to stroll through the student exhibition of student work later at his leisure, McNeil said: "I certainly will. I may steal some ideas."

Studied With Patriarch

Born in New York in 1908, McNeil studied at the Pratt Institute, the Art Students' League, and from 1933 to 1936 with Hans Hofmann, acknowledged as "the prophet and patriarch of the new American painting."

He joined the Pratt Institute staff in 1949 and has been there since except for a one-year leave to teach at the University of California at Berkeley.

He now teaches at Pratt two mornings a week. His studio and home are in Brooklyn, within walking distance of the institute.

His wife is associate art director for Simplicity Patterns. They have a daughter, 26, who teaches English at Hunter College in New York City and a son, 19.

Hard Worker

McNeil is a hard worker (paintings in the exhibition of

his work which opens Saturday for the public at the Art Center are largely production of the past three years). McNeil will lecture at 7 p.m. Friday in Levitt Auditorium at a members' preview.

McNeil will teach Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday mornings and Wednesday evenings at the Art Center, and also conduct a seminar Mondays and Fridays at Drake University.

Of his students, intermediate to advanced, in Des Moines, he says:

"I want to give them some kind of insight into my values, knowing these are only my own. I come from a great center of activity and hope to answer questions some of the artists here may have."

"It isn't as if I were going into the provinces, bringing the good word," he went on. "Great artists, like myself, on the other hand simply bring the flavor of a different view, and this enriches a community. The more varied the points of view the better."

Surprised at Talent

The experience is also enriching for the visitor, he said.

"I am always surprised at the talent I find out of town. I like to travel, to come to Des Moines, find how the people live here. A city is an artificial creation. I feel that this is the real country."

McNeil reads a great deal, travels widely—to Yugoslavia last summer, this year Portugal. He once traveled to see museums, the Parthenon, the "great monuments" but now "more for release," he says.

In Des Moines he will be painting as well as teaching.

"I'll paint outdoors, mostly go out in the country. Do you have any woods around?" he asked. "I'll work quite hard, as I do at home."