

## Jon Serl

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**Jon Serl's (1894-1993)** brightly colored oils are blatant, in-your-face portrayals of mid-20th-century society. Much of his work, featuring elongated, ethereal figures and bright colors, has been compared in color, style and expressive brushwork to work of modern artists Paul Cezanne, Henri Matisse, Arthur Dove and Edvard Munch.

While painting from his subconscious, from his memories and from his perceptions of the world around him, Jon Serl depicted the idiosyncratic and politically left-leaning people he spent time with. About the fluid characters who appear to dance on his canvasses, he wrote: "You never walk, you dance. You don't run, you dance! How are you going to tell movement except to make it move?" He also said, "The painting is inside, I just find it." He also said, "I have a way of painting that is mine

His paintings of hip West Coast characters include: *Comedians* of a colorfully clad skinny couple roller-skate gracefully; *The Balloon Man* of a man in a hot pink suit and

sombrero who sells balloons; *San Francisco* of two hippies; and *Old Lovers* of a woman admiring her many portraits, possibly of her old lovers.



### **Theatrical and Movie Career**

Born in New York State to a theatrical family, Jon Serl performed onstage from an early age with his sisters. He attended Texas Christian University, later acted and wrote screenplays in Hollywood, and moved to Laguna Beach in 1937. As an anti-war advocate, moved to Canada during World War II and worked there a fire-lookout. In his spare time, he painted using a variety of cast-off materials as canvasses. After the war, returned to Laguna Beach, worked at odd jobs, and devoted his spare time to painting.

For the next 40 plus years, he painted more than 1,200 works, often making his own paints from plants and the earth, again working on cast-off materials as wood scraps and old signs. He refused to sell or exhibit any of his paintings initially, but began to exhibit his works in 1970 at age 76. The Los Angeles Municipal Arts Department organized a touring display of 41 of his paintings, described as "California primitives, authentic and of great importance."

Jon Serl exhibited work at the Newport Harbor Art Museum, at San Diego's Oneiros Gallery, and at the Laguna Art Museum, among other venues. Two of his works are in

The Smithsonian Institution's folk art collection. In 1990, the *New York Times* described his work as "complex and sophisticated in both meaning and style" and wrote that his images are "cartoonishly buoyant yet emotionally weighted, spiritual yet worldly and sexually aware."

Whitney Museum curator Susan Larsen said in 1989: "Jon Serl has a highly sophisticated mind and an extraordinarily broad perception of reality. He never takes anything at face value and is always searching for the deeper reality of things. His work encompasses everything from small-town parades to mystical interpretations of after-death experiences, but the theme that seems to color all his work is the intermingling of the spiritual and the physical."

*Liz Goldner*