

CLIVETTE 'THE ETERNALIST'

Ten paintings by the late Merton Clivette now hang in a gallery beyond the Preston Harrison French collection at the Los Angeles Museum. Tight rope walker, acrobat, gambler and—so he often hinted—hold-up man, in his time, Clivette was one of the earliest American "modernists."

As an acrobat his life depended on his ability to realize balance in motion. In his spare time he painted to express the same factors. Toward the end of a fantastic career (he had even figured in medicine shows) Clivette was "discovered." Eminent artists of diverse American schools made robust statements of his esthetic worth.

Clivette—wise in the show business—knew how to capitalize on these statements and John Sloan, Maurice Sterne, Edward Bruce and other painters were doubtless astonished to see their laudatory comments on his painting worked into the Clivette broadsides which proved a sensation in the American art world a few years back.

"Clivette—the Eternalist!" would scream in six-inch letters at the top of a long blue paper in which the acrobat-painter would reduce all Christian art to a camp-meeting awaiting the advent of himself as the messiah of painting. One read him and said "charlatan." One saw the paintings and thought much the same, but with reservations.

The present group of Clivette's paintings contain some of his best-known ones. The gold fish picture, the self-portrait for instance. What about him?

With all his showmanship the man carried something over from his acrobat knowledge that com-

pels admiration. As painting it is nothing, but how many a fine painter would not sacrifice much to have on tap the energy that animates such a picture as his still life, or the ferocious tiger who grows alive as you look, or that gives such magnificent finality of composition to the picture of two cats with a bowl of milk? Look at the speed of his race horses and, finally, study the motion in the gold fish picture.

Clivette is one extreme end of art practiced not as a craft, but as a means to instantaneous expression. How history will weigh him remains to be seen. He will stand or go down with a number of modern French and German painters though Clivette was born in Wisconsin and painted in New York. Henry Rankin Poore, in his "Modern Art," gives large space to Clivette. When his paintings were shown in Paris they were instantaneously acclaimed by the modernist critics and some were purchased for the Luxembourg. Whatever his paintings lack—and in many of them one feels only this lack—the best of them have force, movement and balance.

It is interesting to compare them with the paintings of another New York modernist, Jan Matulka, hanging among them. Matulka organizes spots of light, dark and color in landscapes in a manner made familiar by Andre L'Hote and other Frenchmen. Beside Clivette's his seems a cerebral and rather small performance, as though he were cautiously working out a system. Clivette steps out on the wire confident of his power to move and balance. We repeat, the old acrobat has something many better painters lack—and let it go at that.