

# Edna Manley: the crisis years

By Sandy McIntosh

**A woman working to go on alone without the challenge and strengths of being one of a pair — this is Edna Manley's description of the theme of the National Gallery's retrospective exhibition of her works which opens tomorrow evening.**

**Edna Manley:** The Seventies, the 30-piece show features selections of this leading Jamaican and international artist's carvings, drawings and paintings during her first decade without the husband and friend she had been so close to since the age of 17.

Its significance, according to Mrs. Manley, lies in the credit she gives her late husband for her success. It was the National Hero's strong sense of discipline and stiff criticism, she claims, and his very wide knowledge and appreciation of the arts, which was responsible for her earlier career achievements.

"It is difficult to know just how hard it was to go on" she says, "but I think it comes out in all the earliest works of the '70s." Noting that she felt her work had become "more intense, less calm" since Norman Manley died at the end of the '60s, Mrs. Manley gave a personal perspective of the stages of development represented in this exhibition, in an exclusive interview with the *Sunday Sun*.

## Grief

Grief, the first stage — starting from the first four carvings executed during a retreat to the hills — was first poured out into her final wood carvings. Unfortunately, two of these works: *Adios* and *Woman*, have not been made available for the exhibition and will only be represented by photographs.

The *Angel*, a figure with a man about to pass through the wings into another dimension, and the abstract *Journey*, were the culmination of the artist's life-long work with wood — to her mind, the closing of an era.

Mrs. Manley describes *Journey* as "very strange, very involved with the subject of death — is it a closed door, or is it a door through which you go to go on with your journey? Something in life goes on." After this carving, she says, she gave away all her wood and



"The Wind and The Rain", one of the drawings which will be part of Mrs.

Manley's retrospective exhibition opening tomorrow at the National Gallery.

woodwork tools — "I'd pushed it as far as I could with *Journey*".

Next, she went on to "simpler and happier carvings". She started to work in clay, to be cast in fibre glass or concrete. From this period came *The Serpent*, which adorns the entrance to the Little Theatre. The second of the two casts made will be exhibited. This work brought the artist to another crisis — fibre glass poisoning, an allergic reaction which she says "nearly killed me."

After her recovery, she switched to concrete, to continue her happy period with *Man Child* — "a grandmother, mother and a heck of a manchild." Now at the Olympia Art Centre, this piece was too heavy to be moved to the show.

Happily, though, the *Message*, a special favourite of the artist, has been brought from the Commonwealth Secretariat in London for National Gallery exhibition. It represents an intimate discussion between two women,

completely oblivious to the ear-splitting din around them, which amazed the artist during a visit to the Constant Spring market.

Their complete removal from the market bustle went on for so long, she remembers, that she was able to make a fairly detailed sketch of them on the only paper she could find on her — her cheque book!

Her next stage brought forth a series which she describes as "very happy in a way, but reminiscent — the man-woman relationship, trying to recapture it in art form." These included *The Wave*, *The Trees Are Joyful* (two bronzes) and *The Ancestor*. The latter "a different kind of man-woman relationship", features a man turning back to his great great great grandmother for strength. This period also produced many drawings.

There are four pieces in the exhibition (and numerous others in her own collection) featuring the goat — an animal very dear to the artist's heart. A great admirer of the beauty

and skills of this generally ignored animal — "a really Jamaican animal" — Mrs. Manley says: "Whenever I'm in grief I always go back to the goat."

The sketch for *Once Upon A Time* (featuring two children with a mother goat and her two kids), for instance, came to her suddenly after the crisis of abandoning wood. The other pieces feature mother goats and "a really bad old ram."

Though it is her sculpture which has brought her most acclaim, Mrs. Manley does a great deal of drawings, and her latest project is a series of water colours — a move away from her earlier concentration on line drawings and pen and ink work. She sees her next six months featuring a lot of drawings — though she doesn't plan to give up sculpture.

A special feature of the opening of the exhibition will be the launching of *The Edna Manley Portfolio*, featuring silkscreen prints of six of her drawings. They will be published in two limited editions by the National Gallery in collaboration with Marco Rigau, Puerto Rican publisher of original graphics. Mrs. Manley has been working on these for the last month with two Puerto Rican artists — to whom she pays special tribute for their talent and hard work.

## Keeping on

Looking back on the seventies, her own 70th decade, Mrs. Manley sees the period as one of crisis not only for herself and Jamaica, but for the whole world. Her keynote for survival, however, whether for an artist, a widow, or a country, is that of "having the courage and the integrity to just keep on."

Of the Jamaican art scene, she says, "We are most fortunate that we've got such a band of gifted artists, and in spite of the hard times, I only hope they'll get the support from the public that they deserve. And I know they'll have the courage and integrity to come through."

*Edna Manley: The Seventies* is being mounted by the National Gallery as a salute to the Institute of Jamaica centenary and as a tribute to Mrs. Manley and her sixty years of ceaseless work, both through the Institute and privately for the establishment of the Jamaican art movement. The two-month show will be opened by Sir Philip Sherlock.

The Sunday Sun Sunday, April 13, 1980