

## ART REVIEW

### DE SWART PLEASES WITH POETIC VISION

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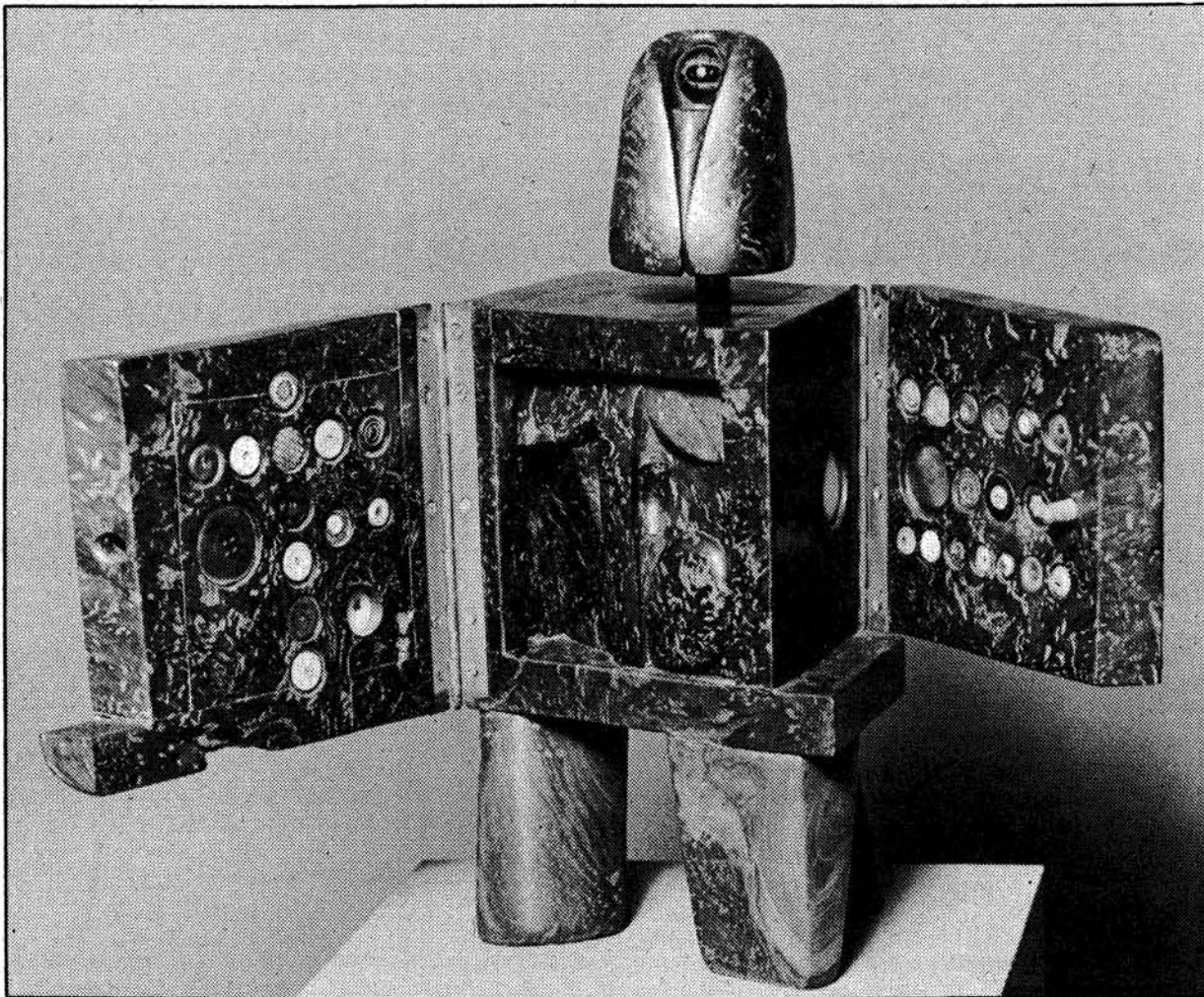
For those who are unconcerned about how artists' efforts fit into the flow of art history, Jan de Swart's sculpture can be an unadulterated pleasure. In an exhibition of 68 works at the Laguna Art Museum the 78-year-old California artist proves himself a craftsman and a poet.

Several rooms overloaded with De Swart's works in wood, plastic and metal contain craggy reliefs, spindly towers, chunky figures, wavy columns and magical creations with doors to be opened and treasures to be discovered. A one-eyed "Button Man" of highly polished manzanita has a hinged chest that opens to reveal a boxed body and rows of inlaid buttons. "The Last Ark," a skeletal sailing vessel with a skull and crossbones atop one mast, delivers a message of death with such charm that it might be an illustration for a fairy tale.

Ghosts of Surrealists—Miro, Dali, Ernst, Arp, Brancusi and Picasso—are such a strong presence in De Swart's work that purists may discount the whole lot as derivative. All those liquid shapes, dreamlike scenes and abstract personages are overly familiar from the annals of modern art history, while the pods, eggs and other growth forms that crop up repeatedly in his art have become ubiquitous design motifs.

But to dismiss De Swart is to disregard an individual of uncommon integrity and achievement. A self-sufficient loner, he has been mindful of mentors but not of fashion. Though he's not a member of a school, he does belong to a category—that of craft-conscious artists who are also successful in such exacting fields as dentistry, architecture and computer science.

In his other life De Swart is an inventor. "He has to his credit the invention of familiar fasteners for aircraft, appliance shelves and doors, the design of innovative container tops used in food and medicine packaging, airplane joint seals, and many other items in



GARY AMBROSE

*Jan de Swart's "Button Man" displays the artist's technical precision and fanciful imagery.*

continuous and widespread use," writes Susan C. Larsen in a catalogue essay.

Though he works intuitively at his art, technical precision is as much a part of his aesthetic as imagination. His ability to juggle art and industry and come up looking like an artist is probably a result of his independence from both spheres of influence.

De Swart, born in Holland and orphaned at 11, came to the United States in 1929. Trained neither as an artist nor an engineer, he based his art career on an apprenticeship with a liturgical sculptor and on work with an Italian furniture maker. His success in industry came from an innate ability to solve mechanical problems.

His show at Laguna (through Jan. 24) merges childlike wonder with sophisticated craftsmanship. Constructing fanciful people and odes to nature, De Swart proves his facility with difficult materials by casting aluminum in wooden molds,

fashioning complex joints and carving delicate ribbons of wood. Such works as "Cain and Abel," "The Confessional" and "Ship of Fools"

introduce a moral tone, albeit fleeting. This art is essentially about the joy of working and making discoveries.