EVERETT GEE JACKSON (1900–1995)

The Jarabe Dance (The Mexican Hat Dance)

Oil on canvas, 66 x 44 1/2 in.

Signed (at lower left): EVERETT GEE JACKSON

Painted in 1945

EX COLL.: the artist; to Elizabeth S Goodrich, Los Angeles, California; to her daughter, Marilyn Goodrich Miller; by descent, until 2018; to private collection, 2018 until the present

In May and June 1945, Everett Gee Jackson wrote to a patron, Elizabeth Goodrich, describing his thinking about her commission of a painting. Jackson promised Goodrich a work that was "exactly right." He described a large painting he had just begun: "two Mexican Indians doing the Jarabe dance." In June, the artist thanked Goodrich for fabric samples she sent showing some of her interior colors. He reported his great satisfaction with the work on his easel and told Goodrich that "it ... may be the best thing I have done." That picture, *The Jarabe Dance (The Mexican Hat Dance)*, pleased both painter and patron. It remained with Mrs. Goodrich and her descendants until 2018 when it was acquired by the present owner. (Copies of Jackson's correspondence with Mrs. Goodrich are in the

archives of Hirschl & Adler galleries and will accompany the painting.)

When Everett Gee Jackson first went to Mexico in the summer of 1920, he was a Texas college student on summer break, camping out with friends near the Rio Grande River. They darted across the river to check out Villa Acuña (now Ciudad Acuña in the Mexican state of Coahuila), notable then for its main street lined with saloons. The visit, though brief, made an impression. Jackson recalled it in his final memoir published in 1993 (*Goat Tails and Doodlebugs: A Journey Toward Art* [San Diego: San Diego State University Press, 1993], p. 136): "On crossing that border, I immediately felt good. I seemed to have an instinctive liking for Mexicans. They appeared to me to be exotic people. I had never believed all I had heard about them in connection with Texas History. I longed to go deep into the interior of that country." Over the years Jackson's relationship with Mexico deepened into genuine affection and a scholarly passion for its history, its people, and its indigenous art. *The Jarabe Dance* is a considered statement of Jackson's mature interest in this Central American nation just across the Rio Grande River from his native Texas home.

For more than half a century Everett Gee Jackson and his wife, Eileen Dwyer Jackson, occupied a place at the very center of cultural life in San Diego, California. From 1930, until he retired as Professor Emeritus in 1963, Jackson served on the faculty of San Diego State College in California (now San Diego State University), chairing the art faculty and teaching painting and pre-Columbian art. A member of the Contemporary Artists of San Diego as well as a founder of the San Diego Museum, in 1937, he also began a career as an illustrator, adding a substantial income source to an already comfortable life. Trained as a journalist, Eileen Jackson, presided for many years over San Diego society in her role as society editor of the *San Diego Union*.

Jackson was, however, more than a beloved teacher and pillar of his community. He was, in fact, an exceptional painter whose work served as the first major conduit for the introduction of Mexican modernism into American art. It is a common irony that financial security often works to the detriment of artistic reputation. Such has been the case with Jackson, a regional celebrity who remains little known outside San Diego and perhaps his native Texas. Jackson's art rarely comes on the art market. The bulk of it is still held by patrons in the San Diego area and by the artist's Texas and California families. Over a long career, Jackson produced images in a modern idiom that was accessible, but never sentimental.

The most accessible source on Jackson's life and art is D. Scott Atkinson's excellent 2008 catalogue produced for the 2008 exhibition, *Everett Gee Jackson: San Diego Modern, 1920–1955* at The San Diego Museum of Art. During his last decade, Jackson published four evocative, concise, and delightful autobiographical volumes: *Burros and Paintbrushes: A Mexican Adventure* (College Station, Texas: Texas A&M University Press, 1985); *It's a Long Road to Comondú: Mexican Adventures Since 1928* (College Station, Texas: Texas A & M University Press, 1987); *Four Trips to Antiquity: Adventures of an Artist in Maya Ruined Cities* (San Diego: San Diego State University Press, 1991); and the aforementioned *Goat Tails and Doodlebugs: A Journey Toward Art*. In these reminiscences, written long after the experiences they describe, Jackson recollected the course of his life as seen and understood with the benefit of wisdom born of age, distance, and late-twentieth-century mores. Additionally, a clippings scrapbook, assembled by the Jackson family and made available to Hirschl & Adler Galleries, offers invaluable contemporary reviews of the artist's career as well as personal interviews.

In October 1927, Eileen Jackson published an article on "The Mexican Movement" in the journal *Creative Art*. Writing (for obvious reasons) under her maiden name, Eileen Dwyer, she reviewed the work of Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco, and David Siquieros, among others, and then described Everett Jackson as "the most interesting of the American group" resident in Mexico. She went on to say that "the mass, not the line plane, interests him. Before other elements his work has this 'weight dimension.'" When Everett Jackson first began exhibiting his work, in 1927 and '28, it was greeted warmly by reviewers who nonetheless felt compelled to warn their art-loving audience that this artist was an "ultra-modernist." Jackson did not recoil, but happily embraced the label. In September 1930, he published his own brief manifesto, "Modernism Without Apologies:"

> The beauty of modern art has to do greatly with logical structure.... Form is the material of modernism, primarily and it is with that [the artist] builds.... Each object or shape in [the] picture must be related structurally to every other shape and there must be nothing superfluous (*The Modern Clubwoman* [September 1930], San Diego], p. 5).

While Jackson's meticulous understanding of the harmonies of form and color that create beauty in the eye of the beholder was unerring, it did not lead him to abstraction. The enduring quality of Jackson's work lies in the creative synergy of technique with engaging subject matter. Jackson's work offers a window into his East Texas boyhood, the excitement of post-revolutionary Mexico, and the promise of the American West Coast as he lived it in San Diego.

Everett Jackson was born in Mexia, Texas. His great-grandfather, Frederick Stith Jackson (1809–1863), a Virginia planter, moved south and west, eventually arriving in 1854 in Anderson County in northeast Texas. Finding rich farmland on the banks of the Trinity River, Jackson established his

plantation, growing corn and cotton on 1200 acres worked by 120 enslaved African Americans. Numerous Jackson descendants remain in the area today where the family still owns more than three hundred acres of property. The artist was the next to youngest of seven children of Fanny Eubank and Walter Benjamin Jackson (1858–1932), a grandson of Frederick Jackson. Everett's father farmed and ran a local cotton gin. Jackson relates anecdotes of his happy East Texas childhood in *Goat Tails and Doodlebugs*. He was a country boy surrounded by a large and extended land-holding family. After high school, he enrolled at Texas A & M, planning to study architecture. A drawing instructor, struck by Jackson's natural artistic ability, urged him to develop that talent. In 1921, Jackson went to the Art Institute of Chicago, where he learned to paint in the academically ascendant style there, Impressionism.

Motivated by a stubborn case of strep throat, Jackson left wintry Chicago in December 1922 and returned to Texas. In his absence, Mexia had transformed from a sleepy farm community of about 3,500 people to an oil boom town, with 35,000 people and a stint of martial law. Jackson looked elsewhere. An advertisement for The San Diego Academy of Art caught his eye and he decided to combine art instruction with California sunshine. On a casual blind date, he met a local girl, 17-year-old Eileen Dwyer (1906–1996). Smitten, the two began a romance by correspondence. They married in 1926. Still footloose in 1923, Jackson returned to Texas, where he had arranged to meet a fellow art student from Chicago, Lowell D. Houser (1902–1971), to travel to the Sabinas Mountains in Mexico, just across the Texas-Mexico border. Jackson's second foray into Mexico, though brief, was decisive. Recalling their departure, Jackson wrote, "We crossed the Rio Grande out of Mexico, a country for which I now had a strange and strong attachment" (*Goat Tails*, p. 245).

Jackson and Houser returned to Mexico later in 1923 and remained there until 1927, punctuated, for Jackson, by two trips home, in 1925 and 1926, to woo and then marry Eileen Dwyer. The two young American artists, Jackson and Houser, moved around, always seeking small, remote, scenic, authentic and hopefully undiscovered painting locales. They rented houses in Chapala and Ajijic, both small villages on the shore of Lake Chapala in the State of Jalisco in central Mexico, and in Guanajuato in adjacent Guanajuato State. At Houser's urging, they also stopped briefly in Mexico City for a quick look at the already renowned murals in public buildings there. Of this visit, Jackson wrote, "my innocent impression was that they were like funny-paper drawings, only much more refined" (*Burros*, p. 40). On Jackson's trips home, he stayed at the "Hunter's Den," "a little two-room red house set among large oak trees on what was left of our family's pre-Civil War plantation" 50 miles east of Mexia (*Goat Tails*, p. 247).

In November 1926, Everett and Eileen Jackson left Chapala for Coyoacán, then a small historic suburb, now a part of Mexico City. While Jackson was in Texas, marrying Eileen, Houser had met Anita Brenner (1905–1974) who offered him work as an archeology expedition artist. Born in Mexico to Latvian Jewish immigrants, and educated in San Antonio, Texas, Brenner was the cultural fulcrum of an international community of young artists and intellectuals based in Mexico City. A journalist and art critic, Brenner became a good friend of the Jacksons and stayed with them during her convalescence from an appendectomy. Brenner's presence attracted a steady stream of visitors to the Jackson household, including the artists Jean Charlot (1898–1979), and José Clemente Orozco. Charlot in particular, exerted an enormous influence. Of French and Mexican parentage, he learned true fresco technique in Paris and returned to Mexico where he worked alongside Diego Rivera. Charlot critiqued the work of Jackson and Houser. Jackson revisited the murals and revised his

opinion: “Seeing them again, I was surprised to find the people represented in the paintings seemed to me to be quite true to the people I was seeing in the streets of Mexico City” (*Burros*, p. 117).

In early spring of 1927, at Brenner’s urging, the Jacksons left Cocoacán for Tehuantepec, an ancient capital of the Zapotec Indians on the Tehuantepec Isthmus on the Pacific coast of southern Mexico. Two weeks after they arrived Jackson fell ill with what was later diagnosed as malaria. Eileen quickly organized a trip home to Texas where the newlyweds settled in at the Hunter’s Den. The year that Jackson spent recovering in Texas proved a period of energetic painting. Concentrating on Texas and Mexican subjects. Jackson also actively engaged in career building, sending his work to competitions and exhibitions. In 1928, the Jacksons moved to San Diego, Eileen’s hometown, where their daughter, Jerry Gee Jackson, was born. Though Jackson was offered a faculty position in Texas, he and Eileen chose to remain in San Diego, a decision whose wisdom was confirmed in 1930 when Jackson accepted an appointment at San Diego State College. The course of his life was set. After he took up his teaching position in San Diego, Jackson appears to have given up the pursuit of a national reputation.

Everett Jackson made art out of the shapes, forms and colors of the life he lived. In Mexico and in Texas, that art often entered into a dialogue with recent experience. In San Diego, Jackson found inspiration in the distinctive culture that centered on the port—the presence of the U.S. Navy, the opportunity for recreational fishing, and also on the close proximity of Baja Mexico, a rich source of landscape inspiration. Jackson also clearly enjoyed painting figures. On a number of occasions, he painted his wife, his daughter, himself, and various friends, all in his distinctive manner.

Jackson's work eludes easy labels. Certainly, at the time he forsook impressionism (which was a *retardataire* style in America) for Mexican modernism, there is no doubt of the direct influence of the Mexican modernists and of Diego Rivera in particular. The Mexican influence, however, mediated with time, and as befits a cosmopolitan artist, a variety of other labels and tendencies can be seen reflected in Jackson's art. He has been mentioned in the context of realism and as the leader of a school of San Diego regionalism. In his devotion to blocks of color, one can find echoes of the American Neo-Classicism of John Stuart Copley, while the stiffness and geometric quality of some of his figures bring to mind Pablo Picasso's own Neo-Classical figures as well as cubism. All of this is a reminder that as non-objective art increasingly gained ascendancy as the defining modern style, there remained a group of artists who were equally modern and equally concerned with formal qualities in their art without ever giving up understandable subject matter.

The Jarabe Dance (The Mexican Hat Dance), painted more than a decade later than Jackson's initial group of Mexican-themed oil paintings, combines elements of his earlier style with a strong retrospective influence of Picasso's Neo-Classical figures from the 1920s. Jackson's use of a restricted palette—in this instance, muted neutral colors—was a practice he had employed sporadically since the 1930s. The Mexican Hat Dance catapulted to international acclaim when Anna Pavlova, the internationally renowned Russian ballerina, added it to her repertoire after her 1919 trip to Mexico. The Mexican government was so delighted by Pavlova's cultural appropriation of this regional folk dance that it actively encouraged the idea that the hat dance was "the national dance of Mexico," a cultural symbol for instilling national pride and rallying national unity. "The Mexican Hat Dance," as it was popularly known, crossed the political border from Mexico to South Texas, propelled by a catchy and distinctive tune written for it in the nineteenth century. In 1938,

Aaron Copeland incorporated the dance and its familiar music into his ballet, *Billy the Kid*. By 1945, when Everett Gee Jackson referenced the dance in his picture for Elizabeth Goodrich, it was well-known and widely associated with Mexico.

The intermediary between Jackson and his patron was the architect Cliff May (1908–1989). May was a sixth generation San Diegan on his mother's side, a direct descendant of Captain José Maria Estudillo (1772–1830), Spanish-born Mexican Commandant of the Presidio of San Diego from 1820 to 1821, and again from 1827 to 1830. The family continued to be prominent in the town and were part of a world overseen by Jackson's wife, Eileen Dwyer, in her role as doyenne of local society journalism. As a young man, May hoped for a career as a musician, but discovered he could earn a more reliable living through his hobby of making and designing furniture. With backing from a local builder and from a newly acquired father-in-law, May extended his creative impulse to home design, inspired by the surviving hybrid one level homes of his mother's extended family. Over the years, the model evolved, and May became known as the "father of the California ranch house." He also moved from San Diego to the larger market of Los Angeles and joined with a banker there to become a developer himself. In 1940, May began developing an area in the west Los Angeles neighborhood of Brentwood into a luxury subdivision which he called Riviera Ranch (now the Riviera Ranch Residential Historic District). Designed around cul-de-sacs and horse trails, its large lots were marketed for custom-tailored May ranch houses complete with stables and garages. May's papers (preserved at the online archive of California) indicate that in 1940–41 the architect worked on plans for a home for Goodrich at 1525 Old Oak Road in Riviera Ranch. Ten years later he worked on a second property for Goodrich at 1550 Old Ranch Road in his adjacent subdivision (now the Old Ranch Road Residential Historic District). May's practice was to build himself a home in

the subdivision and use it as a model to encourage sales of the tracts. He lived first at Riviera Ranch and then at Old Ranch Road. May's home at Riviera Ranch was the subject of a feature spread in *The Los Angeles Times* of Sunday, May 13, 1945, "This Ranch House Typifies Western Living" (p. 61). The text notes the striking accessories including "primitive modern paintings done by Everett Gee Jackson in low tones." The accompanying picture of the May interior shows two distinctively Jackson paintings dominating the walls of May's living room. Elizabeth Goodrich didn't have to travel far to see Jackson's work or to envision how it might look in her own home.

Jackson's painting, *The Jarabe Dance (The Mexican Hat Dance)* is distinctive in that it does not confirm to the stereotypical image for the dance. "El Jarabe Tapatío," originated in the Pacific coast province of Jalisco, Tapatío is a reference to the people of its capital, Guadalajara. A courting dance, it is traditionally performed in brightly colored and richly embroidered costumes. Jackson's deliberate choice not to paint these costumes makes it clear that his interest is not in the romanticized presentation of the folkloric tradition, but rather in the impressive presence of the dancers themselves. He described his intentions in this regard in the two letters to Goodrich. In May, he said that "although the dance is lively I am working for a simple monumental effect and placing emphasis upon completeness and unity rather than upon the dynamic factor." In June, May reported again that "although the subject is one of dancer, the effect will be serene for every plane and volume is adjusted to express balance and completeness." Picasso's Neo-Classical style of the 1920s, whose figures are described in the art history literature as "dignified," "calm," "statuesque," and "monumental," thus provided a perfect match for Jackson's intentions here.

The Goodrich family was clearly well-to-do and genteel. Elizabeth Drake (1891–1966) married

Edward Switzer Goodrich (1892–1956) in 1918. Both were from Nebraska where Edward's father was involved in banking. At first Edward worked in his father's bank, which failed in 1922. According to the 1940 federal census they were living in Detroit with two daughters where Edward described himself as an automobile sales manager. They must have moved soon thereafter to California. By the time of the Second War, Edward's draft card indicated that he was disabled. Elizabeth was a member of the Daughters of the American Revolution. The family merited occasional notices on the social pages of *The Los Angeles Times*, including, in 1950, a note that "Mr. and Mrs. Edward S. Goodrich have moved into their new home, a replica, in miniature of their former ranch house.... Mrs. Goodrich is continuing her hobby of growing orchids" (July 23, 1950, p. 86).

For Everett Gee Jackson, art was, above all, deeply personal. He wrote:

> It is the contention of the modernist that, by the arrangement of forms, colors and lines considered abstractly, one may possibly express objectively his emotional reaction to experiences with nature, and that it is impossible so as to express one-self by merely reproducing what falls within one's vision ("Modernism Without Apologies," p. 5).

Jackson disdained the modernist who used "the strangest antics merely to attract notice and make use of impressive tricks." But he was adamant about the freedom of the artist to express himself in whatever way he found emotionally honest. He likened his own method to that of the sculptor: "My true work, the type I enjoy, is molded idea upon idea working more like a sculptor than an artist, seeking perfect rhythm, angles and curves and ignoring any technicalities that tend to obstruct the view of the artist." ("Modernistic Type of Art Discussed," *Houston Post Dispatch*, March 11, 1928, Clippings, p. 41.) It is easy to see why Jackson was so pleased with *The Jarabe Dance (The Mexican*

Hat Dance). Painted in a manner that was true to Jackson's firmly held creative principles, the work, at the same time, satisfied a valued patron.

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