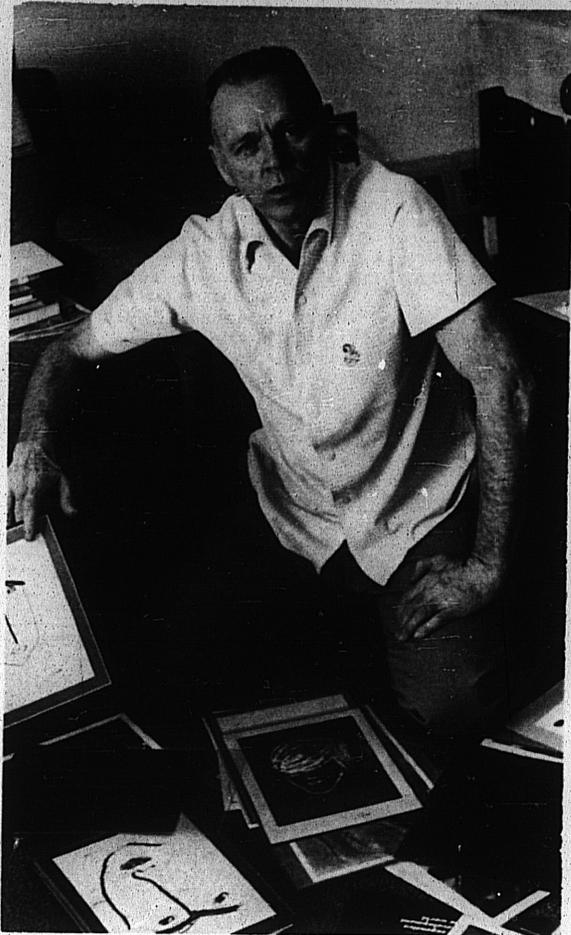


Forrer Art Magic Clicks at Kotzebue

By LAEL MORGAN
Staff Writer



PAUL FORRER discusses art amongst stacks of students work in his Kotzebue apartment. Below are samples of the whimsical drawings he inspires.

Perhaps you've heard of the little grade school artists of Eek. Fifty of their drawings recently sold in Anchorage for \$1,500. The Smithsonian Institution has requested some of their work and it has been exhibited at the White House in Washington, D.C.

The artists are students of Paul Forrer, a Bureau of Indian Affairs teacher who majored not in art but in social science and psychology. He taught in Eek four years and will tell you cheerfully he learned art from the Eek kids, not vice versa.

Experts who studied Eek art wondered if this class was unusually talented or if the whole thing was some kind of a fluke. Forrer maintained he could get any normal youngster to produce the same kind of work.

Now he's proved it in Kotzebue. For the last year he's been teaching high school classes there with equally gratifying results. Drawings from his Kotzebue pupils have been making the rounds in Anchorage and 200 of them will be shown at the Native Arts and Crafts show this summer.

Forrer's "Eek technique" is simply to let students do as they please and it also work in Kotzebue. He doesn't teach basics. He doesn't insist certain techniques are wrong or right so no one is afraid to experiment.

"I've never had an art class. Never held a formal art lesson. If you try and teach a kid how to draw a face you'll never get a face like this," he explained holding up a whimsical free-style sketch. "If you appointed a committee to teach babies to walk you'd have most of them in wheel chairs."

His Kotzebue youngsters will

tell you, without a trace of disrespect, that Forrer is crazy.

"He's a retard," one sophomore explained fondly. "But I like him. That's why I work for him."

(It goes beyond art, too. For this interview he dismissed his math class early and they didn't want to leave. Said they were enjoying the class too much.)

He was teaching academic courses in Eek when he stumbled into art.

"I ran into some kids who had absolutely no academic interests. They were bright enough but they just weren't turned on. I created a little table with art supplies on it. I had one rule in school, that everybody had to be involved in some activity.

"At first there were just crayons. That's all I had. Occasionally they'd do some nice work and I'd pick up and praise it. They tried harder and one thing led to another."

On a teachers convention in Anchorage, Forrer was assigned the bulletin board to decorate and he covered it with Eek drawings. Mary Hale, long time patron of the arts, spotted it and set up an exhibit in the Westward Hotel.

"I had nothing to measure myself against. The results we were getting surprised me but I didn't realize they would surprise anybody else," Forrer marvels.

His decision to leave Eek and come to Kotzebue was not easy.

He loves the bush, regards Kotzebue as a city living. Also, his students at Kotzebue are older and the schedule more rigid.

"One of the boys in Eek was crazy about birds. If he saw one he'd call our attention to it and sometimes we'd all go out and

look," he recalls. "You can't work like that at Kotzebue."

But he maintains an informal atmosphere in his classroom. When kids drift in from other classes he lets them participate and it's all sort of a delightful experiment.

They work with crayons on paper set on a warm kitchen griddle, with crepe paper and glue, homemade felt pens, kitchen foil, waxed and carbon paper, combs, food coloring, flat irons, dental floss, you name it.

"They horrify you occasionally with some of the things they try, but sometimes it works," the teacher shrugs.

Some of their work would be classified as Eskimo art but Forrer doesn't stress that particularly.

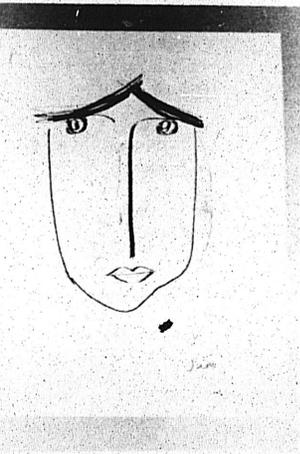
"In their imaginations they're world travelers these Eskimo kids," he pointed out. "They look at magazines and movies and they know the cities and bridges."

They draw them too ... wonderful, imagination cities with appealing lightness of spirit.

Forrer doesn't predict the majority of his students will make art a career but they are becoming aware of their fame.

The Kotzebue class knows about the Eek class and their White House exhibit, for instance, and jocularly turn in their own works for a "Kremlin exhibit." But it's mostly for fun, and that's the way Forrer wants it.

He has an occasional dream about a special class of students from around the state but he doesn't want to get pigeonholed. Next year he has a teaching assignment at St. Michael and he's looking forward to that more than he would any high-flown position in a professional art school.



STUDENTS Charlie Goodwin and Mary Davis of Kotzebue High School pause in the midst of a class. Goodwin is working with wet crepe paper and Mary with crayons on paper set on a warm griddle.

