

# Bolling Show to Open

## Richmond Negro Artist Carves His Wood Statuettes Still With Old Knife, Finds Clay Too Yielding; Academy Exhibit Starts Sunday.

By JULIA SULLY.

THE Academy of Arts, 1110 Capitol street, will open on Sunday afternoon for a period of two weeks, an exhibition of the wood carvings of Leslie Bolling. There are about twenty-one statuettes in this exhibition, the largest collection of Leslie Bolling's work to be shown in Richmond, as well as the first one-man show of the work of a Negro artist to be put on at the Academy of Arts.

The artist's own account of his early attempts is interesting. He began by cutting figures out of paper, then the impulse came to try cardboard, then paste-board, and then sheets of carton board fastened together, one layer on top of the other, and finally wood in which he has undoubtedly found his medium.

Koun Takamara, the great Japanese wood carver says: "Now in order to sketch spirit in wood, one must develop what the Japanese call *kino aji*," literally, "taste of wood," as not all wood will serve. "Only those who understand wood with the heart of an artist," says Takamara, "are able to become good wood sculptors." Leslie Bolling loves the wood—he has for the poplar wood this deep and understanding sentiment. Something in its close knit fibre finds an answering thrill in his strong, spatulate fingers.

It is a mistake to call the long-fingered, narrow and concave palm the artistic hand; that type is apt to betray the poetic or psychic temperament. The hand of the artist is broad in the palm, flat and closely knit, with short, firm, spatulate fingers. Such a hand has a sureness of touch, a steadiness, that is impossible with the conformity of the slender nervous type.

It seems impossible for Leslie Bolling to model in clay; he finds that it offers no resistance, that it is like butter, that a mistake is too easily rectified and he is led to carelessness, lack of concentration, and the result is never satisfactory. His favorite material is the wood of the female poplar which he finds softer than the male, not so brittle and apt to splinter or crack.

ALL of his carving is done with a large jack-knives, "frog-stickers," and he found to his keen regret that when a friend presented him with a full set of gouges and chisels he could not use them. This love of old tools is a significant mark of the true artist. How often they persist in the use of an old worn brush or chisel, using it almost secretly as though ashamed of their affection for something so worn and decrepit. Sculptors see their work in different ways.

Some model in clay, and the small model is enlarged and copied by measurement with the assistance of a pantograph; others see in a boulder of rock, or a block of wood the image that is crying for release, and carefully gouging and chipping bring into form the figure that they have felt was there. The old Greeks believed that the dryads lived encased in the trees and only through the love of a mortal could they be brought forth into the world. This feeling of the pre-existence of a figure in wood or stone gives to the statue so conceived a

vitality, a spirit, that is unmistakably in these small statuettes by this self-taught Richmond artist. It is this feeling for the living stone that makes the Lion of Lucerne great. It would be commonplace on a pedestal in Paris even though it were erected on the very spot where the Swiss guards gave their lives to protect the royal family. The gigantic statues of Rameses II that guard the portal of Abu Simbel on the Nile, would be only huge meaningless figures of stone, but that they are cut from the living rock, and bear still, after centuries, the marks of the chisel of the sculptor who brought them forth from the mountain of stone to face the rising sun.

MICHAEL ANGELO chiseled his "David" from the marble—and miscalculated so that one shoulder lacked marble for its proper completion. It is likewise true that the sculptor who supplied details for many of Ralph Adams Cram's churches, carved them in wood with his own hands. It almost seems too that an artist reaches his heights only when he is restrained as to space—the great Raphaels in the Vatican—or some ancient Japanese carving of Kwannon from the tusk of an elephant, where the curve of the ivory has given an exquisite swing, almost a compassionate gesture, to the figure of the Goddess of Mercy.

This exhibition of statuettes must be taken as a whole. A detailed description or appreciation is well nigh impossible, but in all or nearly all of them, will be found this feeling of the release of the image rather than its creation. Leslie Bolling says of his art "It is a mystery. I do not know where it comes from."

HIS work is strong and sensitive, sometimes falling short of his vision, but again realizing it in a mood that is compelling, sincere and imbued with that gift of the true artist that transcends mere technique.

His gift lies in motion, rather than in emotion; in rhythm rather than pattern. There is no symbolism in his work, nothing of the dramatic or even the sentimental. It is strongly racial, yet not grotesque; modern rather than primitive. It has no link to the examples of African art that are so extensively copied. It is to art what the Negro spiritual songs are to music, something that has come to the race in later years. While it seems to have no link with African art there is a strong racial tendency towards the original standard of African beauty in his impulse to represent his statues of women with large hips. Why he prefers this he is unable to explain, and in a few of the statuettes in this collection, there will be found figures in which he has attempted to correct what well meaning, but mistaken critics have told him is a fault, with the result that these thin and anemic figures lack entirely the racial coherence that so strongly marks his best work.

The whole collection is unusual and interesting, and among these small figures will be found some that have in them the evidence of a rare gift, and some of the elements