"GIVE US THIS DAY OUR DAILY LIGHT" . . .

An explanation of the Leo Katz Mural in the Johns-Manville Building.

This work, which combines abstract symbolism and brutal realism, has a message, a significance which is best described in the artist's own words. We quote him verbatim in the following paragraphs—dictated as he worked in his Englewood, N. J., studio.

"Originally my theme was, 'The control of nature is the answer to the creative prayer of Genius.' But current conditions altered this. Right now mankind is sadly in need of leadership and of light. So after much thought I evolved this theme, and this is my message: Let the prayer of our time be, 'Give us this day our daily light.' Ample bread is assured in all seasons. Give us now the light!

The Cold Section

"The Monster of Cold, with its expression of hypnotizing horror, its feeling of power and age and cruelty, is a giant astride a horse that struggles to get upon its feet. In the background is a figure, floating through the air, freezing the water into enormous icicles with its breath. The other figures symbolize the human qualities capable of surviving in the presence of the Monster. These are love and charity—the mother and child—and hope and courage, symbolized in the explorer. The seals and the polar bear represent the adaptability of Life which also fights for survival in the presence of Cold.

Heat

"From time immemorial the dragon has been a symbol of the universal fire, heat, both as the destroyer and the guardian of life.

"The central group of the heat section represents its human aspects, the passions in blind, orgiastic motions. The next two figures express the inevitable infernal suffering—the man in wild despair and pain, the woman in silent agony. Heat the destroyer.

Sound

"This section concentrates upon the painful aspects of noise (sound uncontrolled). I tried to treat this from the psychological point of view by symbolizing the primitive urges to violent noise.

"The first figure in front of the microphone represents the insane screaming of the hysteric who, though he puts his fingers into his own ears, yet needs the assurance of an audience.

"The following face, near the base line, represents wailing, stupefied grief. The next head just screams. The two figures above stand for the bucolic urge to make the maximum of sound—by using the magnifying powers of the enormous horns and the three pipes.

"These primitive impulses lead over to the jungle sounds of the savage beating the drum with melancholy monotony, the trumpeting of the elephant and the open mouth of the hippopotamus. Between them is a cannon firing, symbolizing the lowest level of the jungle urge in man.

"This leads us over to the fourth section of

Mechanical Motion

"The details in this section represent different useful machines, symbolizing material progress, which, properly used, will defy the robot. Corresponding to the monster of cold on the left we find a huge artificial monster, a super-robot, symbolizing the nightmare of soulless mechanization which, without the balance of inner light, threatens to dominate humanity. These machines, by the way, I painted from studies made in the sponsor's factories.

The Central Figure

"This went through several phases during the process of execution. The idea of putting a figure, symbolizing humanity, in perfect control of the forces of nature was rejected because it was basically untrue. We have not yet reached the point where we know how to exert control for the benefit of all humanity. Obviously we are not in perfect control.

"As much as we have achieved of a certain power over the forces of nature we owe to the sacrifices of an endless chain of creative geniuses throughout the ages. So the theme became. 'The control of Nature's forces is the answer to the creative prayer of genius.' The great philosopher Kant, said: 'Genius is the individual through whom nature dictates her laws to humanity.'

"From a study of the history of genius we find that, no matter how proud and overbearing some of them may have acted in life, they received the benediction of inspiration only after humble, silent meditation.

"So, still adhering to my original theme, I felt that the Genius of Mankind had to be depicted in a heroic gesture of prayer, kneeling on hard angular ground, ready to receive some rays of light as an answer to frantic need.

"During the work a hammer and a shovel, symbols of labor, and a few smokestacks without smoke, were added spontaneously. This broadened the meaning of the figure and, as it were, brought it up to the minute so that finally its meaning grew beyond the original conception of genius. It became the personified, desperate cry of our time; the cry for enlightenment which now emanates from all strata of humanity.

"It is curious how a picture has a life of its own and evolves during the work far beyond the artist's original plans. First meant to represent that special concept of creative genius, this figure finally came to represent the universal cry of our day, when the leading minds are trembling for the very survival of our civilization. So much knowledge and technical equipment seems to turn into a fatal trap that will destroy us unless we become ready to receive those light rays which could guide us from chaos towards a true mastery of the forces within ourselves and of the instruments we have brought into existence.

"This is the message I put into the mural and which I finally crystallized into the inscription, 'Give us this day our daily light.' It is my hope that this will become a part of the standard prayer of the new era, whose terrific labor pains we are now experiencing."

The Background

The rest of the mural consists of a background shading from an intense, saturated blue at the two ends through lighter blues to the center of brilliant light above the main figure. This central light represents not only the optical climax of the picture—it is the psychological focal point of the whole room.

In the structure which houses the mural, Leo Katz, the artist, and Ely Jacques Kahn, the architect, cooperated to demonstrate the possibility of a complete symphonic composition of a room. The usual procedure is to erect a building and, after the architecture is finished and sometimes has stood for a considerable number of years, some of the empty wall spaces are covered with a picture the choice of which often is left neither to the architect nor to the artist.