

One of John's many clippings!

ON VIEW

THE ART OF CONSERVATION



● When the asses are on top and the poor are at the bottom: two works by Helio Melo

The mural shows a rubber tapper leaving a thatched-roof home, heading towards a rubber tree with a knife. From its branches emerge three cloud-like balloons, each a map of the route he will follow on succeeding days as he taps rubber from the *seringeira* trees.

For Helio Melo, a 60-year-old primitivist artist from Acre, Brazil, it is a map of the first 33 years of his life. As he showed examples of his work and played original tunes on the violin – with lyrics denouncing rainforest destruction – children and adults at the Smithsonian Institution's newest museum in Washington DC watched in wonder.

The Smithsonian has mounted a massive exhibit called *Tropical Rainforests: A Disappearing Treasure*, soon to travel throughout the US. The exhibit highlights the beauty of the rainforest in Latin America, South and Southeast Asia and Africa and outlines the social and economic causes of its destruction: badly planned development projects, land tenure, Third World debt. Accompanying the exhibit was a festival introducing visitors to rainforest arts, crafts and foods.

For Melo, rainforest destruction

is not an issue but an experience, and the meat of his art. He grew up on a small *seringal*, or rubber holding. After a third-grade education, he taught himself to write, play the violin and paint. Forced to sell his small holding in Acre, he moved his family to the city, where, like many rural immigrants, he struggled to find work. First a barge operator, then a security guard for a local company, he continued to paint.

watercolours, mixing Indian ink with such forest products as leaf pulp. He paints directly on plywood, presswood, cloth and other materials he can scavenge. Most of his painting is in shades of green, grey and black, the colours of the forest he knows so well.

"People have sometimes given me bright paints to work with," he says, "but I think they aren't the colours to use for a life of such suffering. On the other hand, I

supplement a forest dweller's income. He can't resist, and breaks into a song he wrote, a paean to the Brazil nut. "Oh Brazil nut, Brazil nut," he sings in Portuguese, "you make such delicious sweets . . . But it almost seems like a war is going on, when we hear the sound of the chainsaw razing the forest."

Melo is an advocate of a growing movement, in northwestern Brazil, of rubber tappers who are pressuring the World Bank and the Brazilian government to create "extractive reserves" – land reserved for rubber tapping, which guarantees the maintenance of the forest. Aiding this movement have been US environmental organisations such as the Environmental Defence Fund, which have pressured the World Bank to develop sustainable development programmes.

Melo says: "It's very exciting. It's hard to imagine what could stop the destruction of the rainforest. But never before have rubber tappers been able to take their problems directly to Brasilia." On his first visit outside Brazil, Melo met with some of the environmental organisations involved with rainforest devastation. ■

Pat Aufderheide in Washington

“It almost seems like a war is going on when we hear the sound of the chainsaws razing the forest”

When an art teacher in Rio Branco discovered his work, it began to travel.

Now Melo has a small stipend from the Acre state cultural foundation, and his work has been displayed in Brazil's major cities, in France and in the US. He has published seven books about the history and the legends of the Amazon rainforest. His visit to Washington was his first voyage outside his country.

His paintings and murals celebrate the forest and its friends, dramatise its legends and satirise its enemies. Melo uses

don't want to paint depressing pictures, because I don't know any sad rubber tappers."

Some of Melo's paintings, all of them meticulously worked, capture the density of the forest. Others have the impact of a political cartoon. One, called *The Weeping Tree*, shows a tree crying as marauders, standing before a cleared savannah, come to cut it down.

A spry, precise man, Melo demonstrates to a visitor a painting he has made of a rubber tapper breaking up Brazil nuts, another of the forest products that