

eulogy at Armstrong's funeral in 1971:

He was truly the only one of his kind, a titanic figure of his and our time . . . a Picasso, a Stravinsky, a Casals, a Louis Armstrong.

Yet, after the early 1930's, this titan took to showboating, highnoting, clowning, and singing to please his wider audience. There were moments of musical brilliance in his final four decades, but his magical presence largely subjugated his protean imagination, his inventiveness, his subtlety. The beauty of Armstrong's tone, which reflected his great soul, could not be diminished, and it frequently carried him through substandard solos. His singing (he literally invented jazz singing) was a part of the "individual voice" that made him a universally loved figure. But by 1934, his development as an innovator was ended. Collier's treat-

ment of Armstrong's decline has the elements of a tragedy, in the classic sense of a basic flaw leading to a character's downfall.

Based on his stringent assessment of Armstrong's work in his final decades, Collier may feel justified in giving summary treatment to the last 20 years of the artist's life. Regardless of the level of artistic achievement, however, it was a period in which Armstrong was a dominant and influential figure in American life and around the world. Music aside, that phenomenon justifies extensive documentation and analysis. But Collier has written an invaluable account and evaluation of Armstrong's life and output up to the 1950's. It is admirable for its sympathetic weighing of Armstrong's achievements and shortcomings against the pressures on a lower-class black man who came out of one of the sink holes of his society. □

ART

Public, Political, & Private

Serge Guilbaut: *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War*; University of Chicago Press; Chicago.

Dore Ashton: *About Rothko*; Oxford University Press; New York.

Last January we noticed an advertisement on a cable television channel for *American Artist* magazine. The announcer said, in a convincing Madison Avenue manner, that the magazine is "committed to realist art." Note that he said *committed*, not merely "devoted to" or "features." Bolstering the nonsense pitch is the premium: "a really useful free gift . . . a sturdy canvas tote

bag." *Useful, sturdy*: this is the language of hammers, screwdrivers, and other hand tools, the sort of thing that Socialist Realist art speaks in posters showing the happy, strong workers busy at their benches. The sponsors of the ad probably don't have *that* in mind. Rather, they are undoubtedly trying to appeal to people to turn back the clock to a time before what Serge Guilbaut calls "the avant-garde's 1947-48 decision to abandon representative painting," to a period when landscapes had trees and cows and such, not blobs of pigment. The people who immediately leapt from their La-Z-Boys to place their magazine orders must think that the advent of abstract expressionism marked the descent of art in America. But Guilbaut argues that the creation of a "style that would avoid the trap of illustration" in America during a period that extends a few years on either side of the duration of World War II was

a coup, and that when Clement Greenberg boldly announced in 1948 that the City of Light, once the center of Western culture, couldn't hold a candle to New York (thanks, in large part, to the "sincerity" of New York's Jackson Pollock), the poor, tired French had to accede through default. It was, then, a triumphant victory, not a defeat.

The pack of artists who moved from the strictures of the Popular Front program to a new revolutionary order, Guilbaut claims, put America on the cultural landscape: American artists were derivative rubes no more. Unfortunately, this professor who is attempting to present a "materialist history of the art of the New York school" maintains many of the wonderful works of "alienation" were reintegrated into the sociopolitical fabric by bourgeois department store operators who offered the canvases, popular magazines that recommended the purchase of same for investment purposes, and by, of course, the American government that had the gall to show the works on the international scene as an expression of the freedom available to artists in this country.

Perhaps it's because they feel that they must be at odds with the status quo, or perhaps it's because they have some sort of tunnel vision when they leave the confines of their studios, but a considerable number of modern American artists have been and are partisans of the left. The Spanish Civil War . . . the period prior to Hitler's and Stalin's getting into bed . . . the McCarthy days . . . Vietnam: all of these were stages during which the artists could be *opposed*. Some mark the dropping of the first atomic bomb as the event that somehow debilitated visual artists, cast them into thoroughgoing despair, darkened their vision, caused their role to be trivialized. Yet it's hard to discern any slackening in their commitment to be *against*. For example, the cover story of the January 1984 issue of *Arts Magazine*—which isn't a clarification for "realist art"—concerns an organization named *Artists Call* that, artist Jon

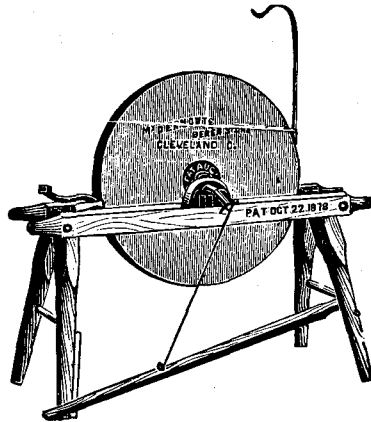
Hendricks says in the story, speaks out “very, very strongly against the inhuman, illegal, barbaric action of the United States government against Nicaragua.” Hendricks, who is apparently enamoured of useless flourishes, goes on to exclaim, “What the government is doing there is a very negative thing. It’s destructive; it’s destroying the possibility of a free culture. The United States government has a very, very bad history, or track record, of suppressing those very freedoms which are now emerging in that country.” Hendricks’s rhetoric has a cadence and terminology that makes it a contemporary version of that spouted by the artists under Guilbaut’s benign gaze, those whose formative years were partially sculpted by the tools of the Popular Front. Almost as if to acknowledge his predecessors, Hendricks mentions that it was a horrible thing that the U.S. government didn’t immediately recognize the Soviet government after the 1917 revolution and that, perhaps, the U.S. government was, consequentially, responsible for the suppression of art in the Soviet Union. If Hendricks paints as well as he thinks, he’d better send for a “sturdy canvas tote bag” and learn the basics.

Art critic Dore Ashton, a biographer of Mark Rothko (a man who was as big on polemics during the 40’s as he was high on art), makes her contribution to the Latin American issue by stating in the story:

There are many people who can be moved, people of imagination, and *Artists Call* can gather them together. They can use their imaginations to stimulate the imaginations of others who, alas, very often cannot imagine the death and terror of children in places that are being treated in such a way as we, unfortunately, we Americans, seem to be treating them.

If nothing else, Ashton is imaginative, both about what “we Americans” *seem* to be doing and about Mark Rothko’s contributions. If those who uphold

representative, or illustrative, art have a tendency to be somewhat crude in their expressions, those who are otherwise directed often suffer from too much



imagination, something that Ashton can’t get enough of. For example, about one of the large panels that Rothko painted for the Society of Fellows at Harvard University Ashton writes:

A fiery orange-red form is suspended like a flaming hoop in purple spaces, an apparition that appears in its own

theater with its own transforming inner stage lights. It too is susceptible to time, and as it is contemplated, the low rectangular knot—the plaquette suspended on a horizontal line that is repeated top and bottom in each painting—becomes a glowing coal, with thicker brush marks and vermilion splashes like lambent sparks.

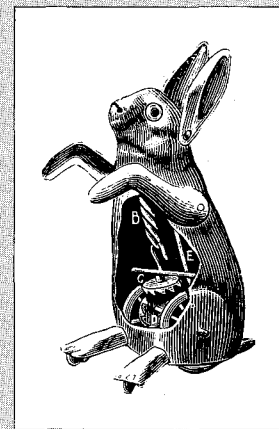
Flaming hoops, theaters, stage lights, coals, sparks: an over-heated imagination.

Rothko, a troubled man who ultimately took his own life, clearly meant to communicate *something* (values, Ashton thinks, but then she happened to be pals with the guy, and he could have slipped the word to her), *possibly* to the viewers of his work. The question about Rothko’s message stems in part from the fact that while he was a public artist (i.e., he put his canvases on display), he, during his mature period, aimed at expression through what he construed as private means. In one instance he had a falling out with architect Philip Johnson over what has become known as The Rothko Chapel in Houston, Texas,

Fleeting Truths

Katherine Hepburn, the shining icon of feminist mythology and the perfect embodiment of what certainly can be described as the best in the modern emancipation concept and independence syndrome:

Women today are in a terribly tough position. I’m all for women’s liberation. Hell, my mother was one of the first, and I carried a banner for her more than 70 years ago, when I was 4. I wore pants when nobody else did, and I’ve led a life that might be considered totally emancipated. I also believe women are superior to men in many ways—they have to be, because they have tremendously much more difficult choices to make in life—but I also honestly think they’ve gone batty today. Women simply are not men, and if we think we are, we’re making a big mistake. I think I’ve trod a more careful trail than women today because I’ve



always recognized that we’re so very different emotionally. That’s why I said that if I were a man today, I wouldn’t marry a woman with a career. I wouldn’t be that big a fool. □

a site for which he painted *Triptych*. Rothko wanted the lighting to be based on the skylight that he had in his New York studio. Johnson thought otherwise, and eventually withdrew from the project. Even Ashton thinks that Johnson's plan was superior to that which was put into place. Lighting wasn't his only concern: Rothko wanted the walls and the floor of the chapel to be

like those in his studio. The works, seemingly, could not be lifted from the environment in which they were created without suffering tremendous traumas from the dislocation. Taking these requirements into account, it's almost as if Rothko was merely talking to himself. Perhaps the viewers were, then, meant only to overhear him. Is it art or merely self-indulgence? □

God need not be compromised in any way by membership in one of the world's major religions (Christianity, Hinduism, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism); neither is affiliation with one of these a sine qua non of the authenticity of the love existing between God and his human son. The lover of God inevitably feels a strong kinship with anyone else who also loves him, and has a natural respect for the formal expression of that love, even if it differs from his own. All that is necessary is that it be sincere, and strong enough to allow the divine hand to work through it to transform one's life.

The foregoing is meant to provide a frame of reference in which to consider the objections that must be raised concerning the remarks about the Self-Realization Fellowship made by Mr. Steven Hayward in *Chronicles of Culture* (December 1983; p. 41). In his article "Self-Actualizing Mammon" Mr. Hayward fastens on the physical appearance of one of the shrines of this organization and, finding said appearance not to his liking, proceeds to draw some rather unfortunate conclusions about the real nature of the organization itself. It is regrettable that he did not try to learn something about Self-Realization Fellowship before condemning it. If he had, he would surely have sensed the depth and singlemindedness of the devotion of its members to God, and to the keeping of his laws here on earth. He would also certainly have appreciated the reasonableness and stability of its teachings, and would thus have felt the kinship that one lover of the spirit feels for another. Instead, he rather smugly tried to hurt this church, and in so doing put himself in the unenviable position of doing violence to what is holy.

I sincerely hope that Mr. Hayward will take the time to become familiar with what the Self-Realization Fellowship is really about. I am certain that after an investigation he will conclude that it is indeed an ally in the cause of righteousness, deserving of his apologies and his respect. □

POLEMICS & EXCHANGES

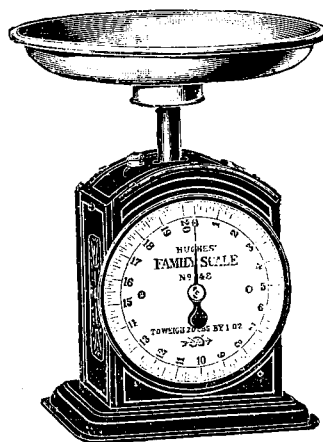
On Self-Realization

by B.J. Bryant

Anyone who contemplates life in our country today would undoubtedly concede that these are difficult and threatening times, both for individuals and for the nation as a whole. What seems encouraging is that many people are beginning to understand how outward difficulties—too numerous to mention, but all springing from selfishness and hatred—are the inevitable consequences of our inward deficiencies: particularly the loss of the moral compass resulting from not enough love for God. As a result of this realization, people are more inclined to scrutinize their own behavior as they go through the tests and trials of their lives than to simply blame others for the world's problems. If people truly loved God more, they would make ever more devoted efforts to attune their lives and actions with his will: defend his purposes against ideologies hostile or indifferent to him, and rigorously cultivate their own higher natures to please him. As people strive to develop this love for him, they come to be very protective of the values and institutions which allow our country to safeguard it, and develop

a deepening sympathy for other countries and religious heritages which are struggling, in their own ways, to do the same. Most importantly, they begin to experience an ever stronger desire for a direct, intimate, intensely personal relationship with God.

This is obviously a very private matter, and every person who sincerely seeks God does so on his own, whether or not



he belongs to one of the world's major religions, or to any other formal religious organization. Each person who is blessed with real faith, or the desire to develop it, knows intuitively that the one who created him is certainly capable of responding to his heart's call in a way that is as unique as he is. Obviously, the uniqueness of one's relationship with

Mr. Bryant belongs to the Self-Realization Fellowship.