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Delacroix and the "Social Realists"

By William Thor Burger

THE summer slump, a relic of Impressionist days like the gallery system itself, has begun. With the exception of one new masterpiece what is left in the galleries has more of a didactic than an esthetic interest. The show of waterfront artists at the Tribune Book Store, for example, demonstrates how much more effective artists can be as a group than on their own. The group, organized by Alzira Pierce, consists of artists who went to sea during the war, and young seamen who have stayed ashore to become artists. None of them would merit a solo, yet together they have held several exhibitions.

They not only think of themselves as a workshop, but they have functioned as one. In recent months almost as much of the art work of the *Daily Worker* and the *NEW MASSES* has been turned out by them as by the cultural branches. The ex-seamen have drawn "agit-prop" cartoons both for their union and for the Communist Party. Concerned with the limited distribution of works of art, they have developed photo-printed sets of drawings at prices low enough for any market. The artists are all sufficiently young so that there is no need to be unduly depressed at their present moderate level of quality.

A more sophisticated group of young artists have taken over the 44th St. Gallery. Rather more than halfway between Fourteenth St. and Fifty-seventh St., the 44th St. Gallery has that moody and bitter flavor which marked the art of Union Square in the Thirties. Two dozen lithos by Elizabeth Catlett, Charles White, Joe Rowe, Helen Maris, Brahm Lieber and Max Zolotow have a much closer identity of style than one normally finds in a group exhibition. The lithographic medium in new hands tends to be overly black and emphatic, but it is a stylistic trait that lithography attracts all of the group.

They call themselves "social realists," but they may be more aptly described as pessimistic social symbolists. The characters in the prints are the normal protagonists of class struggle, "the worker," "the mother," "the refugee," "the Negro" and "the Priest." Their actions, emotion, and

costumes are typological. The figures are sympathetically twisted with agony or antipathetically twisted with cruelty, in a fashion as black and white as the drawing. The draughtsmanly style varies between abstract and symbolic. Some, like Catlett and White, tend towards the cubist manner by dividing their figures into planes. Others, like Rowe and Maris, distort with the rough strokes and summarize forms of expressionism. The half-dozen prints by Zolotow, on the dividing line, flow from the more naturalistic Mexican and Italian masters.

Social these artists surely are, but realists never. Of undeniable vigor and considerable talent, these young artists are so much under the influence of the forms of modern art that with the best intentions, and much conscious theorizing, they are still unable to leave the artistic boundaries of middle-class culture. To them, as to so many others, left-wing art seems to consist of injecting social content into anti-social forms. Their own intense seriousness and talent nonetheless shines through.

Not the least interesting part of the 44th St. Gallery is its director, Marc Perper, a very able artist of the 1930's who found himself a decade ago on the horns of the dilemma that faces his printmakers. Since he himself has moved from neo-romanticism to social art and back toward the abstract, he knows how to understand and sympathize with the struggles of young artists finding their way towards a new art. His gallery will be among the most interesting in New York.

THE ACA recently showed the work of a sixty-year-old mother, Julia Brestovan, who naturally and effortlessly achieves what professionals arrive at arduously. As rich in color and cuisine as Burliuk, as tender in sentiment as the Soyars, as folksy as Doris Lee, her greatest charm lies in a transparent honesty which avoids art.

Also at the ACA was Joe Leboit, a large part of whose work was destroyed in a recent fire. His work is a left-wing American variation of expressionism. Although he has been painting for only six years, his work looks as if he had been at it longer.

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NEW MASSES

For these artists trying to find a style that will express the ideals and desires of people in a language they can understand, there is available now a measuring rod. As part of its Diamond Jubilee the Metropolitan Museum has brought three masterpieces from overseas.

One of them is the "Liberty Leading the People to the Barricades," painted in 1830 by Eugene Delacroix. Obscured by atrocious lighting, it still has power to move this reviewer to tears of excitement.

"La Barricade" is propagandistic social art. It describes the anti-bourbon revolution of 1830 which placed the bon bourgeois Louis Philippe on the throne. If the 18th century outlandish costumes of 1830 were changed to zippers and slacks, and if the Parisian tenements were repainted after Third Avenue, the picture would be banned by the police as an effective excitement to revolution.

In terms of the Romanticist revolution of 1824 the Delacroix is romantic painting. That is to say, in comparison with the classicists the color is bright and warm, the movement violent, the composition active, the painter's touch visible and athletic, the characters contemporary and picturesque, the figure proportions free of classic canons, the proprieties of blood, nakedness and rags violated, and the unities disregarded. True, the figure of liberty is of classical origin, but she unclassically exists on the same plane of reality as contemporary Parisians.

In comparison to its immediate stylistic predecessors it seemed to avoid the stylistic marks of 'art,' that is to say, the geometrizing and simplifying of drawing and composition. The drawing is free and direct, and, for its day, quite naturalistic. Compared to the early Ingres, Girardet, or the late David, it seems singularly loose and free from the machinery of composition, from what were then considered the abstract virtues of a work of art. "La Barricade" spoke, and still speaks, in the warm tongue of the streets. Its language has remained direct and understandable, free from accents of connoisseurship, for more than a hundred years.

The thought occurs that revolutionary young painters of today might do well to look up for a moment from the *Cahiers d'Art* stuffed with Picasso of 1915, Klee, Matisse and Brancusi, and study the work of Delacroix, David, Daumier and Courbet.

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