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Rebels in Reverse On Modern Art

WILLIAM HARLAN HALE

ARCHITECTURE, AMBITION AND AMERICANS, by Wayne Andrews. *Harper.* \$7.50.

THE EYE OF MAN: FORM AND CONTENT IN WESTERN PAINTING, by Selden Rodman. *Devn-Adair.* \$10.

Twenty-odd years ago, when Selden Rodman and I were rooming together at Yale in a Collegiate Gothic suite which we had daringly furnished with cubist prints and Cezanne color lithographs, we hatched an insurgent campus magazine called the *Harkness Hoot* which went out to battle for things modern, such as the cause of bringing modern architecture to moated, crenellated Yale.

The most that Yale did in our time was to advance architecturally from neo-Gothic to neo-Colonial. But when at graduation we struck our tents and moved on, we felt we had at least had a rousing good time of it, and I think I secretly hoped the battle would never be quite won. There would be less exuberance in life and less opportunity to lambaste the laggards if it were.

Today, of course, the battle for modernity is so fully won that it is practically *de rigueur* for leading banks and soap manufacturers to erect breath-taking glassy shafts of buildings that far outshine Le Corbusier. One substantial oilman of my acquaintance has acquired not one but twelve paintings by the non-objective Piet Mondrian, which is a lot of Mondrians.

Time to Reverse

Now comes Selden Rodman, fellow insurgent of the early 1930's, saying in his new book that things in the fine arts have gone too far in one direction, and that it is time to reverse it. The rebels against the Academy, as he sees it, have become so many academicians themselves. In their drive toward the abstract and

impersonal, they have glorified form at the expense of content, thereby leaving their art bare of humanity and "expressive language." As in previous times of cynicism or retreat from life, they have tended to detach themselves from the community, burn their bridges of communication behind them, and plunge into a disembodied world of their own. They have followed too long the advice that art should be "intransitive," stimulating no desires and appetites and never crying out from the heart. Why not cry out from the heart? asks Mr. Rodman. Isn't it time we did?

What Is Taste?

At the same time comes Wayne Andrews's keenly awaited book on American architecture past and present, which unlike Mr. Rodman's is not a call to arms but rather a survey written from a relaxed although critical point of view. Mr. Andrews is less concerned with schools and aesthetic slogans than with the broad topic of taste and the making or unmaking of it. "Form follows function" is a fine and hallowed slogan; but Mr. Andrews reminds us how often form follows the client—frequently with happy results, when the client has plenty of money to spend. His opening statement is refreshing and calculated to shock all disembodied aestheticians: "As I intend to use the word, taste is the record of the ambition which leads the architect to spend more time and energy than is reasonable, and the client . . . to invest more money than common sense would dictate."

A book written from such a point of view flies in the face of many of the categorical imperatives of modernism, under which functionalist spellbinders have tried to dictate what is the right taste for us and what simply won't do. Mr. Andrews isn't against modernists (who

fall into rival camps or schools anyway), but he is a trifle bored by some of the pretentious attitudes struck in their behalf. When a gushing critic describes a building of Walter Gropius as a post-Newtonian expression of "the conception of space-time," he snorts. When the flowery Lewis Mumford remarks of the modern American kitchen that it is "the moral flower of that long discipline of the spirit which Western man has undertaken during the last millennium under the forms of monasticism, militarism, and mechanism," Andrews thinks it's time for a belly laugh.

Dogma has fenced in many of our latter-day practitioners, Andrews suggests, quoting architect Irving Gill's imperious marching orders to them: "We must boldly throw aside every accepted structural belief and standard of beauty and get back to the source of all architectural strength—the straight line, the arch, the cube, and the circle . . ." A whole generation of streamlined, categorical designers, so dead set against frolic and conspicuous waste that Andrews calls them the Veblenites, has interpreted this teaching to mean that they must build in a cool, impersonal, unornamented, stripped-down style relying on steel and glass, admitting no love but that for the machine. These chaps are Puritans of art, and, as is the way with Puritans, absolutists.

Eventually they become bores. Mr. Andrews is too polite to say as much, but that is what I think he means—just as when Selden Rodman lights into Picasso and the Mondrians for their lack of "expressive language." The stereotype of steel and glass has replaced the older classical order of column and pediment, just as the monotonous cubes of the abstractionists have taken over from the hanging deer and sentimentalized cows of the painters in velvet jackets of 1850, leaving one asking sometimes for a new house not so flooded with remorseless sunlight as Richard Neutra's, or even for a representation of a real cow.

Jeffersonian Break-throughs

My friend Rodman, veteran of the Battle of New Haven, now speaks vigorously of the need of artists

again to "engage their expressive capacity to give effective form to a theme of meaningful human content . . ." These are pretty big words, and I am not sure whether such exhortation will do it, but the gallery of dead-end abstract scrawls beside his text shows up the need for a return from desiccation.

Andrews goes about the issue in his area of architecture somewhat differently. He contrasts the rigid, glassy cult of Veblenism against another potent tradition of our time, namely the school of modern building that devotes particular attention to surrounding sites, native materials, varied textures, and the individual tastes of the client, whose fountainhead he sees in Frank Lloyd Wright, and whose present area of flower he identifies as the California of great vistas, informal wealth, new aspiration, and redwoods.

He underscores his point, which is that of diversity and free imagination in our native building, by going back with loving attention to such wayward, long-lost, or forgotten creations in our history of architectural high art as the romanticized Greek-portico plantation manse of Belle Grove in Louisiana (1857); the brilliantly original half-timber Sherman mansion built in Newport, Rhode Island, in the 1870's; and the daring, triangle-shaped façade of the shingle summer home erected in Bristol, Rhode Island, in the 1880's by McKim, Mead & White before they went into their High Renaissance tailspin. We have always, I think Mr. Andrews means to imply, had a second or alternative solution waiting for us when the ruling canon gets too stiff—given a happy marriage of client and designer. Thomas Jefferson, who was his own best client and designer both, was a model of the free American break-through, in the arts as elsewhere. We have done it often, and can do it again today.

MR. RODMAN's brilliantly illustrated book stirred me, and Mr. Andrews's spacious compendium reassured me. I would recommend both not only to the absolutists of modernity who think they have all the answers, but also to other amateurs like myself, who have begun to wonder.

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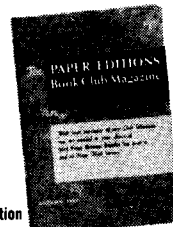
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An Ambassador's Second Report

HARLAN CLEVELAND

THE NEW DIMENSIONS OF PEACE, by Chester Bowles. *Harper*. \$4.

With so many Presidential candidates around, it is refreshing to come across a book by somebody who is merely running for Secretary of State. If the qualifications for that job are a rough-and-ready understanding of the various revolutions at work in the world, plus a willingness to regard foreigners as people, Mr. Bowles's latest book should make him a leading contender—if the electorate retires Mr. Dulles next year.

The advertising man who was Governor of Connecticut and Ambassador to India has traveled widely and understood much. He sweeps us through Europe, Africa, and the Middle East, dwells on the revolutions of Lenin, Sun Yat-sen, and Gandhi, asks whether we really understand the mighty impact on Asia of our own American Revolution, throws in some American history, and winds up with a foreign policy for the future.

WITH SUCH an assignment it would be a miracle if Mr. Bowles got far below the surface. As a quick, easy-to-read summary of the situation, his book is lucid and immensely valuable. But it helps deepen our understanding only of India, the corner of the vast canvas that Mr. Bowles knows best and excites him most. To him, India's was the key revolution; in writing of Gandhi the author manages to pass on to the reader the thrill he gets from living in the same century with the barefoot saint who was "the very soul of India."

Nehru receives once again the Bowles you-don't-have-to-like-him-but-you-have-to-listen-to-him treatment. And as usual Nehru is worth listening to, as when he warns some young African firebrands: "Even revolutions eat up their own children. . . . Because of Gandhi's insist-

ence and example all the time, an Englishman could walk through an Indian crowd without anybody touching him. That was part of the discipline and habits of mind he inculcated. I do not think you will find an example anywhere else of a national movement being conducted with so little animus.

"I should like you to think of this, because I am frightened at the prospect of Africa going through a welter of blood and thereby losing, I do not know, a generation or two of lives in this business before it starts on its constructive and creative career."

Book Notes

THE RAGGED EDGE—THE DIARY OF A CRISIS, by Marquis Childs. *Doubleday*. \$3.50.

The syndicated columnist leads the most glamorous and at the same time the most driven of lives. He is a Lanny Budd, the one who is always where the big decisions are being made. Each day he must try to capture reality and give it to us while it's hot.

It seems possible that the format of the columnist needs to be re-examined. With his compelling urge to be omnipresent, he has also felt a need to create the illusion of omniscience. Each column must have a beginning, middle, and end; each a moral, a theme, a point. The trouble is that life often can't be sliced up that way.

In his new book, Mr. Childs reveals how refreshing it can be when the veteran columnist really takes us into his confidence, notes how the weather felt and the trees looked, and intimates that the columnist too is harassed and human.

No longer hampered by the strictures of "for background only" and "off the record" which tend to dilute a reporter's copy, he describes in diary form the suspenseful win-

ter, spring, summer, and early fall of 1954. This was truly a year lived on the ragged edge, what with McCarthyism at home and failure of noble schemes abroad. Twice—in Indo-China and in the Formosa Strait—we came within a hairbreadth of war.

The Ragged Edge is a sensitive, contemplative book that is more gripping and convincing than a thousand columns.

LORD OF THE FLIES, by William Golding. *Coward-McCann*. \$3.50.

This terrifying story, in which British schoolboys are marooned on an island and promptly revert to a state of most cruel savagery, would greatly dismay Jean-Jacques Rousseau were he around to read it. On the island there are no adults, no restraints, no rules; the children are exposed to no headmasters, no priests, no judges—only to idyllic nature. Rousseau would have had them dancing hand in hand, singing nature's praises, busily and happily forming the new society. Mr. Golding presents a more realistic picture: In no time at all, he has them chattering like baboons and murdering each other.

THE BRIDGE: A YEARBOOK OF JUDEO-CHRISTIAN STUDIES. Volume 1. Edited by John M. Oesterreicher. *Pantheon Books*. \$3.95.

Tolerance is a form of politeness, and politeness can be terribly empty. Both Jews and Christians aspire to something more; they want their positions understood. Catholics—this volume of essays is issued under official Catholic auspices—have an added and terribly urgent further need: to have the Jewish faith not only understood but granted the highest respect. For unless that is done, their own faith is truncated at the base. Abraham is the father of Christians; the New Testament cannot be separated from the Old; Jews and Christians are linked in unbreakable fraternity. This very unusual collection of essays is written by people striving to serve that fraternity. We hope that it will find its way into some library frequented by Father Feeney and his young followers in Cambridge, Massachusetts.