

THE FINE ARTS

REPORT ON PARIS

DURING the winter of 1946-47, the Whitney Museum of American Art held an exhibition of paintings by the new generation of French artists. The show had been selected in Paris by a committee, and it was occasionally condemned as giving an inadequate report on what had been produced by younger French painters during the war period. I had this exhibition very much in mind while visiting Paris this summer. Indeed, the show was difficult to forget, since the artists and dealers who had been excluded from it were quick to say why, and not always in the elegant phrases of the Versailles court. Yet after four weeks in the Paris galleries, I came to the conclusion that the Whitney exhibition had supplied a pretty fair idea of what the new school of Paris is like—neither conspicuously better nor worse than at the Whitney.

I think of one or two exceptions to this statement, chief among them being the fact that the Whitney show contained no work by Balthus, perhaps the most decisive artistic personality to have emerged in Paris just before the war. Balthus's strength is even more apparent today, for he has resisted completely the tendency of his contemporaries to eat their Matisse and have their Picasso too. Balthus has always run counter to fashion. Thus in seeking a more mature technique, he chose to emulate André Derain; he did this at precisely the moment when the latter's place in modern art's high consulate (with Matisse and Picasso) was becoming glaringly insecure. Moreover, Balthus found his central inspiration in Gustave Courbet, whose mid-nineteenth-century doctrine of realism—"art in painting should consist only in the representation of objects that the artist can see and touch"—was anathema to the surrealists and other advanced painters of the 1920's and 1930's.

Balthus flew still more directly in the face of modern esthetic dogma by declaring: "I wish to do surrealism 'after' Courbet." His statement seemed absurd to a number of critics, for how could one reconcile Courbet's faith in "objects that the artist can see and touch" with surrealism's exploration of the subconscious mind, intangible and mainly unseen? But Balthus had understood that Courbet's art was sometimes replete with psychological

tensions that the swaggering, dropsical realist would have been the last to recognize as such. He had presumably looked at Courbet's extraordinary portrait of the Socialist P.-J. Proudhon and his family (see cut). In the awkward intensity of Proudhon's children, enclosed in their separate world of reverie and play, Balthus must have found a sympathetic model for his own angular depiction of adolescence's ecstasies, secrets, and gloom. The affinity is stylistic as well as emotional. In fact we may easily imagine that the Courbet infant with a pitcher has grown into the young girl who reads on the floor in the foreground of Balthus's painting "Le Salon." Yet Balthus's originality of vision is so decided that it seems only heightened by comparisons of this kind.

The children in Balthus's picture first appeared in one of a series of drawings he made to illustrate "Wuthering Heights" (like Charles Demuth's illustrations for "The Turn of the Screw," the drawings were not intended for publication, but as private interpretations of a revered literary work). It is scarcely an exaggeration to say that Emily Brontë's novel has been a mainspring of Balthus's imaginative life. The painter's own personality has Heathcliffian elements; his respect for the macabre

vein in English literature has been immense. And at this point, perhaps, we can discover another reason for Balthus's vigor in relation to the current Parisian art scene—his capacity to nourish his expression on alien sources.

The French pictorial tradition has been powerful for so long, that we tend to forget how consistently it has been revitalized by other cultures. The sixteenth-century Fontainebleau mannerists outgrowing their provincialism through contact with Italian artists, Poussin raptly heeding the mythological echoes of Rome, David and Ingres exclaiming amid the monuments of Mediterranean antiquity. Watteau and the romantics looking north to Rubens a hundred years apart, Delacroix and the impressionists revaluing the English landscapist Constable, the post-impressionists excitedly collecting the prints of Japan—these all were signs of a chronic need for foreign excursion, in thought or fact, to keep the French stock hardy and fresh. The leading artists earlier in our own century journeyed spiritually even farther afield—to Africa and the South Pacific, to the Far East, to the Sumerian realm and Macedonia, to the quite denationalized territory wherein are created the images of children, primitives, and the insane.

Perhaps it is unfair to say so on the basis of a month's survey, but it seems to me that the present generation in French art, on the contrary, is imprisoned in its parental home, that the new school of Paris's great weakness is that it has become too Parisian. The school includes many gifted artists. Yet I cannot think of one whose work has the unmistakable



Portrait of P.-J. Proudhon by Gustave Courbet.

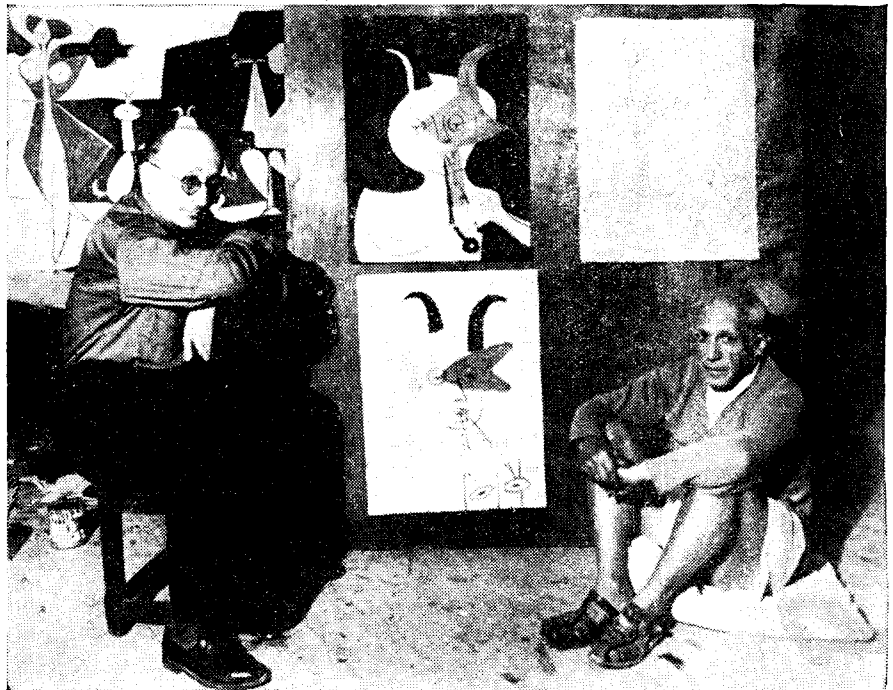
character of a Balthus, a Miro, a Tanguy, a Giacometti. The newer painters seem to produce isolated pictures rather than to expand a recognizably settled style. Among these pictures, from time to time, are images of astonishing brilliance or even of impressive emotional depth. But the spectator seldom carries away from the current exhibitions an impression of totality; he remembers spasms of talent instead of the convulsion of will and longing which has rent the man and produced the artist. The situation is aggravated, I think, by a certain semi-official eagerness to assert and prove a continuing vitality in the Paris school. No nation's art moves easily forward under too many banners, and culture itself can become a dictatorship if it falls into the habit of daily ceremonial robes.

A far more serious handicap to the young in France is the unsettled economic condition of that country. Before the war, the Left Bank was a place where artists managed *not* to starve on starvation funds, with tragic exceptions. Given today's inflated franc, any sort of workable Bohemia is virtually impossible, and many of the younger artists work at their profession only in their spare time, supporting themselves as bakers, clerks, and so on. The price of pictures by unestablished painters has gone up, of course, but not in full relation to such essentials as food, clothing, and shelter. The reason is simple: the poor will pay inflationary prices for what they need, the rich for what they crave. In neither case does the unheralded work of art qualify for many people, and the Paris market is not active, except for occasional speculative runs on the art of a few men.

"Why," I was asked by a number of Paris dealers; "does not America do something to help us promote the young generation?" I frankly do not see that we have a duty in this matter unless we can believe in this generation's talents, as I thus far cannot. Nevertheless, it is still too early to judge fairly what the postwar art of France will be like, and certainly we should not expect a new crop of masters every ten years. We must wait a little, I think, until the present eclectic confusion has settled. Meanwhile there is Paris itself, more beautiful than ever. If I felt there an uneasy disappointment beneath a great admiration for this magnificent city and its people, it may have been for the reason that Gertrude Stein once gave: "Paris is never quite itself unless painting is its subject." By this she meant new and authoritative painting, and that kind of painting is not the subject of Paris just now.

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Genius Sans Gossip



—Photograph by Sima from the book "*Picasso à Antibes*," published by René Drouin, Paris.

Sabartés and Picasso . . . "punctuation marks are the loincloth concealing the pudenda of literature."

PICASSO, An Intimate Portrait. By Jaime Sabartés. New York: Prentice-Hall, Inc. 1948. 230 pp. \$5.

Reviewed by JOHN REWALD

JAIME SABARTÉS emerges from this book as a pleasant and modest companion, intelligent and sensitive, an amiable fellow always nice to have around. It seems easy to understand that Picasso should value his presence and find in his self-effacing devotion a certain support and a stable element in his apparently erratic but at times also quite indolent life. But while Sabartés traces—unintentionally, it must be emphasized—a sympathetic likeness of himself, he fails strangely to give us that "intimate portrait" of his celebrated friend which one should have expected from one who knew the painter in his early years and who, since 1935, has seen him almost daily.

There are several reasons for this failure. First, Sabartés has limited himself strictly to what he saw and heard; or would it be more correct to say: to what particularly struck him? This accounts for an incompleteness and oneness that appears at times incomprehensible. There is, for example, not a single mention of Picasso's mural "*Guernica*," although it was executed while Sabartés acted as the painter's secretary. Second, Sabartés has systematically refrained from any

allusions to his friend's sentimental life, although Dora Maar's role, for instance, is attested by numerous paintings, and he would not have violated any secret had he supplied his readers with some dates and facts. Such information, after all, is not necessarily gossip. Third, Sabartés has built his text around the portraits which Picasso drew and painted of him, and these are by no means among the painter's most important works. But fourth, and this is the most decisive factor, Sabartés worships Picasso with a naive tenderness that sees in his least gestures a deep significance, if not a manifestation of genius.

It is difficult to share Sabartés's emotion when he relates how in 1901 Picasso came to the station in Paris to meet him upon his arrival from Spain. Sabartés was surprised to find the painter there at 10 A.M., well knowing that he usually got up much later, and he reports the event:

"Why did you get up so early?"
"To come to meet you."

Perhaps I was expecting some banality, but his only reply, which left me stupefied, was the simple truth: "To come to meet you."

There is indeed very little among Sabartés's direct quotations of Picasso that sounds interesting or particularly original, unless one considers important such utterances as "punctuation marks are the loincloth concealing the pudenda of literature." The reader