

The Essence of "B. B."

SKETCH FOR A SELF-PORTRAIT.
By Bernard Berenson. New York:
Pantheon Books. 184 pp. \$3.

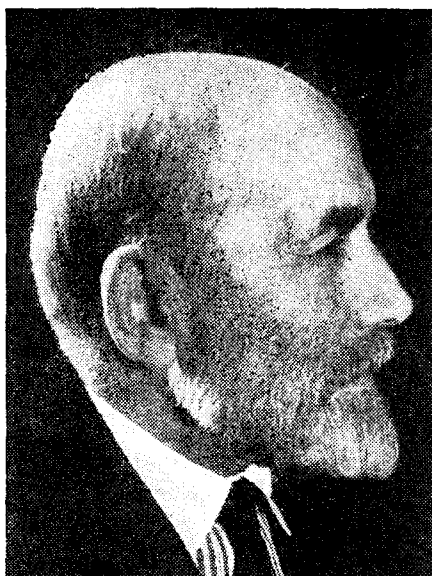
By FRANCIS HENRY TAYLOR

NO SINGLE figure in the world of art has contributed more to the taste and understanding of Italian painting than Bernard Berenson, and none has more gracefully disavowed the pedants and pundits who have boiled and frothed in his wake. "Sketch for a Self-Portrait," for which he has sat in the antiphonal role of both confessor and confessed, is a disarmingly civilized affair. It reveals the man and explodes the legend. Those who hope to find in it a formula for expertise and connoisseurship will be sadly disappointed. Here is no short cut to "the study of attribution," no Darwinian concept of the origin of art, and, certainly, no doctrine or system of art history. What the reader will discover is the essence of "B. B."—perhaps the best-read man of his day—who, having embarked in early youth upon the career of professional sage, miraculously achieved true sagacity in the process.

The most compelling thing about this simple and almost perfect little volume is its admission of faith—faith in humanity, and in what the author insists upon calling "It." His view of humanity is a reiteration of the traditional humanistic position: belief in man as someone removed from other animals, a creature of stature and of dignity. "Man is a destroyer," he writes, "but what a creator! The human past, long before history begins, is strewn with figured records of his love of beauty and testimonials to his genius as a creator."

"It," the other facet of his credo, "is every experience that is ultimate, valued for its own sake. . . . It is esthetical . . . not ethical . . . It is incapable of analysis, requires no explanations and no apology, is self-evident and right. One may sing about it but not discuss it. It is the most immediate and mystical way . . . the dream of a life lived as a sacrament."

If Bernard Berenson has come at eighty-four within sight of his nirvana, he has not done so without paying dearly for the privilege. A convinced hedonist in the sense we have not known since the Judaeo-Hellenic days of Alexandria (Berenson refers to himself as a "Christianity graduate"), his life of contemplation has been predicated on standards of personal comfort and luxury which the professional archeologist and art historian have never been willing to



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forgive. It is a pity that so large a portion of "Sketch for a Self-Portrait" should be so needlessly concerned with the justification for this sybaritic way of life. Berenson's early years were devoted to the perfection of a method which frankly brought him material rewards—years which in the case of the "Florentine Drawings" he now considers a waste of time. He is willing to leave to others the task of distinguishing between the hands of the various *Amici di Nessuno*. But the method still remains as do the incomparable collections he has formed. And, while the lesser luminaries are picking at the bones, he has passed on to the philosophical inquiries which interested him more.

The lovely villa *I Tatti*, at Settignano overlooking Florence, which forms the setting of this life, Berenson is leaving, together with its gardens, its library (one of the finest art libraries ever assembled), and its collection, to Harvard University, as a research center. The ill-concealed jealousies of the academic world may thus be assuaged by the knowledge that the vintages upon which this greatest of spiritual wine-tasters has refined his palate have not been drunk in vain.

Conspicuously absent from learned convocations of recent years, the recipient of no degree from any American university, Berenson has lived a life apart from a confraternity whose legend he became. But, if he has not been properly doctored by his colleagues, he has never allowed himself to be diluted. There flows through the pages of "Sketch for a Self-Portrait" not ordinary printer's ink but the heady wine which long ago intoxicated the gods and goddesses of Mount Olympus.

Objets d'Art

HISTORY OF WORLD ART. By
Everard M. Upjohn, Paul S. Win-
gert, and Jane Gaston Mahler.
New York: Oxford University
Press. 896 pp. \$6.

By JOHN FABIAN KIENITZ

LIKE the works of art that called it forth, this unusually handsome volume is remarkable for its content, expression, and decoration. Its purpose is the interpretation of the arts "in terms of their historic backgrounds." It is a pleasure to report that here intention and achievement are almost ideally fused into one form. The historical background serves to introduce us to the broader phases and more important places of art. But it is when it comes to grips with the individual art object that this book becomes especially valuable as an introduction to world art.

Of each art object this book gives a concise and lucid analysis, evaluating its merits and its importance in the culture from which it comes. Several of the leading concepts of criticism are applied to each object, a welcome departure from the narrow, single-formula approach too common in books of this kind. The authors know that "few activities of man offer such a variety of legitimate interpretations as his artistic expression." They assume that in understanding works of art the richest satisfaction comes to those who approach it through the greatest number of ways.

In the course of their discussion of Egypt's religious architecture, the authors comment that the deepest and most poignant motivation of artistic man is "the human craving for permanence." But, as they are quite aware, there are other motivations. There are periods of tension and release, of relaxation and chagrin. And these arise, dramatically and organically, as they should, out of the continuing heart of this book.

For the student of architectural history or for the layman that is in all of us, this book offers a complete, factual exposition of architecture. Egyptian, Assyrian, Persian, Greek, Gothic, and Renaissance architectures are recreated in words that will please both technician and poet. The various elements of building style are differentiated and measured.

The text is the product of a skilled collaboration. It is deceptively easy to read because its scholarship is tempered with mercy. Whenever it was possible to do so, objects out of American museums were chosen for

analysis. This idea works like a charm for Chinese painting and Japanese woodcuts especially. Ready access to originals makes it easy to see how inevitably the spirit moves among all men.

Nearly all of the art objects selected for analysis are illustrated. And, despite the fact that the illustrations total 654, many of them are full-page. All are black and white. We ought to take to black-and-white illustrations on a theory of least harm. For color too often gives the reader the conviction that he is confronted by the art object itself. The authors feel that these illustrations will in themselves constitute a graphic record of the

arts, and have therefore grouped them together in a separate section. This partition of text and picture has made possible the use of a special manufacturing technique, which, in turn, has resulted in a handsome book.

There is a glossary of technical terms, a list of supplementary readings (superbly annotated), art maps of Europe and the Orient, chronological charts of art periods, artists, and monuments, and an index that is itself a work of art and science.

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Directions of the Modern Movement

PAINTING AND SCULPTURE IN THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART. Edited by Alfred H. Barr, Jr. New York: Simon & Schuster. 327 pp. \$5.50.

By PERRY RATHBONE

IT IS a fact as odd as it is deplorable that catalogues of the permanent collections of American museums are amongst the rarest of the contemporary publications devoted to art. It would seem that the energetic programs of popularization that have vitalized our museums in the past thirty years have pushed aside this quiet, laborious, yet important undertaking. No museum in the country has pursued a more dynamic program than the Museum of Modern Art. In fact the freshness and vitality of its activity have provided a stimulus if not a goad to many older and more sedate institutions; it is therefore the more to be congratulated for having published this handsome volume, richly illustrated, carefully annotated, and clearly organized. The fact that this is the second catalogue of its collection of paintings and sculpture to be produced in the past five years indicates the importance the Museum attaches to publications of this kind.

In general appearance the new work resembles those other catalogues of the Museum which have grown familiar these twenty years and which now would find cramped quarters on a bookshelf of Dr. Eliot's prescribed dimensions. Indeed no less than forty-six of these publications—by no means all—are mentioned in the present catalogue. The chief emphasis of the volume is upon its lavish illustrations: nearly 400 works of art are reproduced, a great number of them in full page, and for the most part

the cuts are of unusually high quality. The catalogue listing of the collection, which is condensed into twenty-five pages at the back of the book, is a model of brevity and clarity. By virtue of the fact that the listing is alphabetical by artist and the page number of each illustrated work is given next the catalogue entry, the book is an ideal reference work. The text of the book consists of a preface by John Hay Whitney, chairman of the board of the Museum, which is a resolute and forceful statement of the Museum's philosophy and its policies in collecting; and an introduction by Alfred H. Barr, Jr., which succinctly traces the history of the collection, summarizes the scope of it, and states as plainly as the subject permits the method employed by the Museum to add to its collections or eliminate from them.

As a work of reference it would be hard to overrate the value of the new catalogue. But it is more than that; for just as the Museum itself is committed to a program that far exceeds the mere collecting and displaying of modern art, so the new catalogue fulfills a broader function. A vital part of the Museum program is teaching and interpretation. The catalogue is appropriately based upon the same philosophy. Thanks to Mr.

Barr's studious and resourceful editorship, what would otherwise have been a chaotic and bewildering picture book has been built into an orderly and instructive survey of the chief directions assumed by the modern movement in painting and sculpture. The illustrations, including both paintings and sculpture, have been grouped into twenty categories, each beginning with a lucid statement summarizing the movement illustrated, and each bearing a label that reveals again Mr. Barr's flair for apt nomenclature.

The preface to the catalogue states that the collection of the Museum is believed to be the most comprehensive of its kind in the world. This hardly seems an overstatement, and there is no question that the catalogue itself is one of the most comprehensive works in the literature of the subject. The Museum is proud of its "catholicity and tolerance." One certainly does not object to these principles, nor to the ideal of comprehensiveness. But at the same time one closes the new volume with the wish that greater selectiveness had been used both in forming the collection and illustrating the catalogue. What is truly significant and first rate in the art of our time loses its proper emphasis when it is surrounded by specimens of visual art whose appeal is primarily intellectual and whose value is that of social-historical documents before other considerations. On grounds of catholicity alone, one questions the inclusion of the youthful American group composed of Pollock, Gottlieb, Motherwell, Bazziotes, and Stamos (all of them illustrated), while the equally original Lee Gatch, Philip Guston, Stephen Greene, and Karl Zerbe remain unrepresented.

Likewise one must take exception to the Museum's claim of "balance," for this all-important precept to the Museum's collecting policy has not been observed in respect to a number of the best-known artists of our age. Where amongst contemporary Europeans lies even a semblance of balance between fourteen Tcheli-chews, twelve Max Ernsts, and three Max Beckmanns; between eight Lipschitz (seven of them illustrated) and two minor works by Gerhard Marcks and three by Laurens? And in the American field what is one to deduce from the fact that the Museum boasts nineteen Max Webers and thirteen Morris Graveses while Marin and Feininger are represented by three and four works respectively?

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