

THE FINE ARTS

REALISM — MACCHIAIOLI STYLE

AT Wildenstein's in New York there is a benefit exhibition of nineteenth-century Italian painting, supplemented by Donatello's newly refurbished statue of San Ludovico. The show has been sponsored by the City of Florence, and its proceeds will be used to help restore the Santa Trinità Bridge and other Florentine monuments damaged by the war. Naturally one hopes that the profits will be large. If so, credit should go to the Donatello, since the nineteenth-century pictures must be poor box office, being little known outside their native Italy. Moreover, word has gone around New York art circles, at the normal speed in excess of sound, that the painting exhibition is a bore. I did not find it that. I found it distressing at times but not a bore, though I agree with those who claim that the choice of pictures could have been better; enough better, in fact, so that American interest in the Italian *ottocento* might have been aroused instead of lulled again to sleep, as must be the present case. Boldini, for example, appears in nearly his worst guise—flashy, flaccid, and footling. Boldini's sins were grave, but he had style and sometimes dignity.

Even so, the exhibition has moments of interest and quality. Its emphasis is on the period from 1850 to 1890, a period that achieved fabulous results in French art and launched our own major triumvirate, Homer, Eakins, and Ryder. The principal Italian movement of the era was that of the *Macchiaioli*, who gathered in the Caffè Michelangelo at Florence and propounded their esthetic theories. These theories were important for Italian painting, and in some respects were prophetic of later developments elsewhere. They are not well known in this country, and it may be useful to review some of them here.

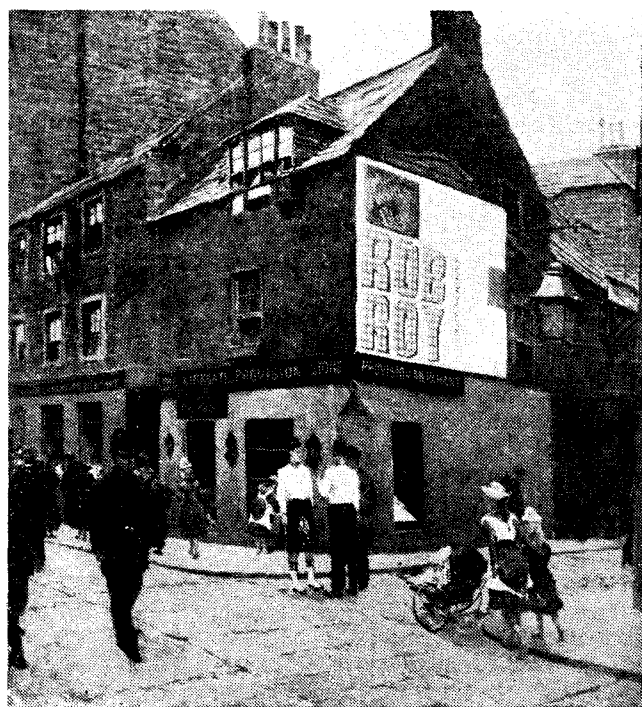
The *Macchiaioli* proclaimed that everyday reality would be the subject of their art. Like Courbet, whose doctrine of realism was evolved contemporaneously in France, they were determined to refute the tyranny of "historical" themes and to turn their backs on romanticism's dramaturgy. The *Macchiaioli* deliberately painted small pictures of scenes everyone knew (the word *macchia* means "sketch"). But unlike Courbet, they did not base their art on traditional,

realistic techniques. They painted loosely; they eschewed the use of heavy, black shadows, and relied for spatial control on shifts in tonal weight between areas of color broadly applied. In short, the *Macchiaioli* sought to convey an equivalent of reality in terms of the artist's idiosyncratic temperament; their art was subjective, and proposed a spontaneous response to the familiar in place of the later, more calculative approach of the French impressionists.

In a curious way—and perhaps this partly accounts for their eclipse—the *Macchiaioli* founded a school halfway between mid-century realism and the synthetism of the late 1880's and the 1890's. They were never as direct in their conception of reality as Courbet; they were never as boldly arbitrary as synthetism's founder, Paul Gauguin, was to become. Yet one wonders whether they should not be given greater historical credit for their part in the trend away from bald exposition toward metaphor, away, if you like, from realism toward abstraction. Certainly Giovanni Fattori's "Diego Martelli at Castiglioncello" (1867), with its flat, bright patterns of color, foretells Gauguin's earliest synthetist attempts of nearly twenty years later, while the Italian painter's little landscapes consistently remind one of Vuillard's soft-spoken art of the 1890's. The depth of Fattori's interest in the abstract potentialities of color is apparent in his picture of a white horse against a white wall: the tonal problem explored is not totally unrelated to that later reduced to its ultimate formality in Kasimir Malevich's famous "White on White" of 1918. At any rate, the *Macchiaioli's* dictum that "sentiment must be entirely represented by the technical side of expression," is right

around the corner from our own century's esthetic of pure form. It would be a mistake, of course, to labor the point of the *Macchiaioli's* precocity, but it is worth remembering that their discussions at the Caffè Michelangelo were apparently in full swing when Degas visited Florence not long after the opening of Courbet's realist pavilion at the 1855 *Exposition Universelle* in Paris.

To survive in the pages of art history painters need something more than a revolutionary program, and many of the *Macchiaioli's* paintings at Wildenstein's are mediocre in quality. This, however, is often the fault of those who assembled the show. Silvestro Lega is well represented only by the charming "The Betrothed," so startlingly like the early genre scenes of Winslow Homer. And certainly there were much better pictures to be had by Giuseppe Abbati, whose passion for a mathematically determined harmony of tone and form makes him appear as the Seurat of the movement. On the other hand, I doubt that Vito D'Ancona ever painted anything much better than "The Lady in Conversation," admirable in color and with a taut expressiveness of gesture that brings Degas to mind. Degas himself greatly admired one of the best works in the current show—Telemaco Signorini's "Room in the Women's Asylum" (1865). Quite apart from its intrinsic virtues, this picture proves how completely the *Macchiaioli* had rejected neo-classicism's insistence on "good" and "beautiful" subjects; to Signorini, Fattori, and their asso-



—Courtesy Wildenstein & Co., Inc.

"Leith," by Telemaco Signorini—"... the ugly was only that which the artist had not yet made interesting."

STAGE

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—WINCHELL

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Directed by ELIA KAZAN
Choreography by MICHAEL KIDD
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NANETTE FABRAY RAY MIDDLETON
Settings: Boris Aronson. Costumes: Lucinda Ballard
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A New Comedy by **MOSS HART**
ROYALE, 45 St. W. of B'way • Mats. Wed. & Sat.

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A play by THOMAS HEGGEN & JOSHUA LOGAN
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REX HARRISON JOYCE REDMAN
in
"Anne of the Thousand Days"
by MAXWELL ANDERSON
Directed by H. C. POTTER
with Percy Waram • John Williams
HUBERT Theatre • 44 St. W. of B'way
Evs. 8:40. Matinees Thurs. & Sat. 2:4

Life with Mother
with **DOROTHY STICKNEY HOWARD LINDSAY**
EMPIRE, B'way & 40th St. Evs. 8:30. Mats. Wed. & Sat.

ciates, the ugly was only that which the artist had not yet made interesting. Signorini showed considerable daring in this regard. In 1881 he completed the brilliant little picture of the Scottish town of Leith in which he portrayed a commercial billboard as a dominant architectural motif. In view of the painting's date, it may be almost the first instance of an iconographic practice which has become common among modern painters of the American scene.

Turning the pages of the exhibition's de luxe but slipshod catalogue, it becomes plain that even the lesser members of the *Macchiaioli*—men like Borroni and Sernesi—were on a better track than the artists who followed them by half a generation. The *Macchiaioli*, whatever their limitations, reached a workable and convincing formula, while their juniors fell time and again into the booby-trap of the picturesque, adopting a stagey pictorialism that now seems dated in exactly such measure as it tried to transcend its epoch. In Giacomo Favretto's "The Market of San Polo," for example, the impact is that of a creaky opera, sustained neither by acute characterization nor by valid plastic or dramatic exaggeration.

What happened to the men who were too young to share the *Macchiaioli*'s brave, venturesome dogma? A terrible clutter spoils most of their pictures, as if Victorianism had reached a wayward zenith in Italy. Antonio Mancini's "Children and Toys," even though painted in 1873, when he was very young, is a case in point. Its species of tired and redundant exoticism was to be mimicked by academic painters throughout the world for fifty years. Apparently Mancini and other Italian artists of the late century faced an insoluble dilemma. They could not revive neo-classicism's hard-bitten moralism or experience romanticism's fevers. Yet they were unwilling to believe in their own ability to transform and dignify the commonplace, as the *Macchiaioli* had done. All the various French solutions escaped them. They were unable to face reality "scientifically" like the impressionists; or monumentally, as did Renoir; or in a spirit of hieratic reform, as with Cézanne, Seurat, Van Gogh, and Gauguin. Deficient in formal invention and afraid of casual statement, the Italians of 1885-1910 often fell back on technical virtuosity and banal overstatement. Their excesses make the accomplishment of the *Macchiaioli* seem just that much more impressive, and not until the arrival of the futurists did Italian painting begin once more to move forward.

—JAMES THRALL SOBY.

STAGE

"A work of beauty and soaring imagination."
—Howard Barnes, Herald Tribune

ALFRED de LIAGRE, Jr. presents
THE MADWOMAN OF CHAILLOT
JEAN GIRAUDOUX'S Comedy
Adapted by MAURICE VALENCY
with
MARTITA JOHN ESTELLE VLADIMIR
HUNT CARRADINE WINWOOD SOKOLOFF
BELASCO 44th St. E. of B'way. Evgs. 8:40. Mats. Wed. & Sat.

Columbia Pictures
presents
HUMPHREY BOGART
in
"Knock On Any Door"
Directed by NICHOLAS RAY
Produced by ROBERT LORD
ASTOR B'way at 45th Street

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The Greatest Sea Picture of All!
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FICTION

(Continued from page 14)

lard's newspaper, he breaks the back of the latter's passivity; for, while Sam Ballard, with clear conscience, can throw his own principles and money to the winds to save his son's happiness, he would rather sacrifice Aaron than permit the paper, which he considers a public trust, to fall into the hands of Rudy.

The title "Tender Mercy," taken as an imperative statement, raises the question of what sort of action, moral or otherwise, would deal mercifully with the unfortunate Aaron, once Elizabeth, the object of his fixation, is taken out of his life. When Mrs. Ballard decides upon an action that conforms with what her community believes moral, paradoxically, that

type of acceptable morality turns out to be more brutal in consequence than what passes for "unethical." Since the tension with which Mr. Kaufman has carefully built up the novel is resolved by a surprise ending, it would hardly be fair to give the denouement away.

Any general conclusion about "Tender Mercy" would have to admit that it is an immensely readable novel, but not the memorable one which it might have been. Mr. Kaufman has failed to supply enough pertinent details for his characters. He has taken hold of a fascinating situation, led the reader up to a point where a problem has to be faced honestly, only to evade the solution by a melodramatic twist.

Siegfried Mandel is a member of the English faculty of the Brooklyn Polytechnic Institute.

Partisans for the House of Orange

THE TIDES OF DAWN. By E. Louise Mally. New York: William Sloane Assoc. 1949. 370 pp. \$3.50.

Reviewed by CARLO BEUF

MISS MALLY'S novel deals with the vicissitudes of two families, the bourgeois Van Wagenens and the aristocratic Chatrois, in the days when the people of the Lowlands, led by William of Orange, were engaged in a life and death struggle with the armies of Spain under the captainship of the bleak and astute Duke of Alva. The romantic theme which, more or less (rather less than more) keeps the narrative together is the love of Gerrit van Wagenen and Jacqueline Chatrois. Gerrit, aged seventeen, rescues the eight-year-old Jacqueline as she is about to be trampled to death by the mob during a popular upheaval at Valenciennes. It is love at first sight, and, in due course of time, having happily surmounted the usual barriers interposed by wars, revolutions, and social prejudices, the two become man and wife. Gerrit joins the ranks of the rebels and serves William on several confidential missions, while his wife waits for him in beleaguered Leyden. The eventual liberation of this city, in which her husband plays a prominent part, brings them once more together; incidentally, it also furnishes the title for the book, since the fall of Leyden to the partisans of the house of Orange is the tide which heralds the New Dawn of freedom for the Low-

The plot, as anyone can gather even from this brief summary, is pretty thin, and certainly not original; still it might have developed into a fairly intriguing adventure story had not the author smothered it under a veritable avalanche of historical dissertation, apparently intended to show up the knavery of the adherents of the "old faith" as compared to the honesty and the spirit of sacrifice of the Protestants. As it stands, "The Tides of Dawn" is closer akin to a tract than to a novel; moreover, it has the tract's lamentable characteristic of being blatantly one-sided. While every single Spanish papist—from Cardinal Grenville and Alva down to the last soldier—is a monster of iniquity, there are precious few among the patriots who are not models of every conceivable virtue. Tolstoy's hatred for the French invaders did not blind him to the extent of ignoring their occasional redeeming qualities. To depict men as uniformly black, or white, is to deprive them of their human attributes.

Yet, this is not an undistinguished book. Though seldom brilliant, Miss Mally's style is always fluent and clear. Indeed, some of the scenes she describes have all the local color and intimate charm of a painting by Breughel. Also, she unquestionably knows her history. The intricate pattern of political intrigue is woven by her with an expert hand. The few anachronisms—as when she has one of her characters quote Montaigne's writings seven years before any of his works had appeared in print—are of very minor import.

Florida Slave Trade

THE WRATH AND THE WIND. By Alexander Key. Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Co. 1949. 366 pp. \$3.

Reviewed by HERSCHEL BRICKELL

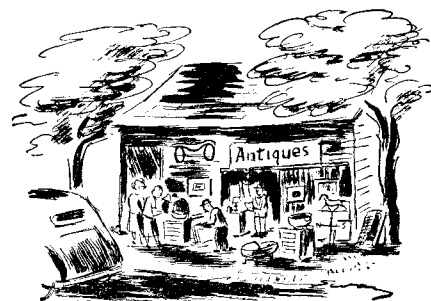
THIS is a colorful, swiftly moving historical romance set in the Florida of the 1840's, when money was to be made in contraband slaves. Its principal scene is the once flourishing port of St. Joseph, rival of Apalachicola in the cotton-boom days, and the proud possessor of one of the first railroads in that part of the country.

Mr. Key's hero is a physician named Maury St. John, who has abandoned his profession to engage in slave-running from Cuba, hazardous because of the law, and savagely cruel because of the way the blacks were handled on the seas. Many died, many more became ill or were injured.

The plot is a triangle. Homeward bound with cargo, St. John finds a schooner out of Salem in trouble, and offers his help. Aboard is a beautiful blonde, half-Salem, half-Creole, with whom he falls madly in love. The third angle appears in the person of a beautiful white girl, Zeda, who has lost her voice, and who is put up at auction with some "fancy girls" of color, to fall into the hands of St. John.

St. John brings a cargo of blacks into St. Joseph infected with yellow fever, so that the town is quickly swept by the kind of epidemic used with effect in many novels from the days of Brockden Brown's "Edgar Huntly" to the present. He tries to make amends by staying on as physician in charge, and the beautiful blonde conveniently dies of the fever, thus resolving the conflict that makes the story.

The rest of the characters are slave-traders, a madam with a heart of gold, a colored servant with a heart of gold, etc. Mr. Key characterizes by types, and is more interested in action than thought. The result is a novel that reads easily, has some good descriptions, both by sea and by land, but makes no deep impression because of its lack of originality and distinction.



The Saturday Review