

THE FINE ARTS

THE FRENCH ART SHOWS

PARIS.
SINCE a year and a half ago, when I was here last, France seems impressively changed. The change is dramatically signaled by the sight of Caen from the Cherbourg boat train. In 1948 that distinguished town lay dusty and contorted, its terrible scars of war exposed and seemingly untended. Today, however, large new buildings are rising in its streets, and there is sound, movement, and, one imagines, hope. On the train itself the bread is whiter, and soon will be further enriched; the fixed menu includes an additional course. Arriving in Paris one senses at once a revival of energy and spirits. There are more people and cars on the streets; the shops are well stocked, even though the tourist rush is over; the city is lighter, cleaner, more aggressively its beautiful self. The food and wine are superb. There are expositions and conferences everywhere, among them a Conférence Téléphonique Internationale, whose main business, I trust, will be publicly to boil in oil one-third of the city's switchboard operators.

I began the art rounds at once, equipped with the excellent trade journal *Arts*, published by the *Gazette des Beaux Arts*. I went first, since it is closing soon, to the exhibition of Picasso's very recent paintings at the Musée de la pensée française. The display is disturbing. Picasso, clearly the leading master of our time, shows sixty-five oils, without frames, in a hopelessly crowded space. It is said that the painter himself, weary of the art trade's expensive beatification of his works, insisted on this kind of installation. He was wrong to do so, I think, but more seriously in error in allowing most of the pictures to be exhibited at all. Of the sixty-five paintings, three or four are excellent, four or five are interesting, the rest are slap-dash works which lack even virtuosity—the least of the great man's claims on our attention.

If Picasso does not try hard enough these days, as the present exhibition would perhaps unfairly indicate, his disciples sometimes try too hard. In the hall leading to his show are paintings by his young comrades in the Resistance; they seem feeble and derivative works almost without ex-

ception. But perhaps the installation and bad lighting are again partly to blame. Certainly I have never seen modern sculpture look worse than it does in the very large exhibition "Sculpture in France from Rodin to the Present," which concurrently fills the second floor and the garden of the Musée de la pensée française. There are fine works in the exhibition, but the confusion, clutter, and lack of cohesive standards are lamentable. Many of the indoor pieces are impossible to see properly. No checklist or catalogue is available and, to remedy this oversight, a number of the artists or their friends (in some cases it might well have been their enemies) have scribbled or gouged identifying names on the pedestals. I hope no neophyte will make up his mind about modern sculpture from the tawdry and careless evidence provided by this show.

Can anyone form a fair idea of the newer Parisian art by visiting the Salon d'Automne, which has just opened? I doubt it. There are 1,716 items, counting paintings, sculpture, drawings, and prints, and including memorial galleries for a number of artists lately dead. The most famous of the latter is Othon Friesz, whose international reputation seems totally inexplicable in view of the heavy and stingy talent revealed by his pictures at the Salon (and they are among his best). The chaos at the Salon is great, though with patience and strong legs one can learn much, most of it dispiriting so far as the works by the postwar generation are concerned. I found the large gallery of semi-abstract paintings by Gischia, Manessier, Marchand, Pignon, Tal-Coat, and others, the most interesting. Also notable, and by less familiar artists, were a huge romantic hunting scene by Lorjou and a rather gripping expressionist image, "The Poor Fisherman," by Antoine Martinez.

For the French public, the problem of judging this year's Salon must be especially hard in that it has become a political battleground. The war begins outside its doors on the Avenue Président Wilson, where the various art and literary journals are urged on

the visitor. The paper most conspicuously brandished on opening day was *Les lettres françaises*, a Communist-dominated organ. It has a long article on the Salon by Jean Marcenac which I wish could be reprinted in America, if only for the special edification of Rep. George A. Dondero, of Michigan, who is so stubbornly convinced that Communist art and "modern" art are one and the same subversive thing.

M. Marcenac begins his attack on "modern" (specifically, abstract) art much as Rep. Dondero began his tirade in Congress—by claiming quite falsely that nobody wants it, at least not for coin of the realm. Abstract paintings are "unsalable today," says M. Marcenac. He adds: "The abstract painters have not understood that

what one bought from them—and what one will buy less and less, because today abstraction is no longer enough—was their silence. . . . In a world where the people who are the clients of art dealers belong to a social category of which the least that can be said is that reality gives it neither reason nor hope, in such a world since painters cannot

be prevented from painting, they can at least be led to painting nothingness." Has M. Marcenac tried to buy a cubist Picasso or a late Mondrian recently? The prices are very high, the demand very active. Does he seriously imagine that these artists were "led" to create what they did?

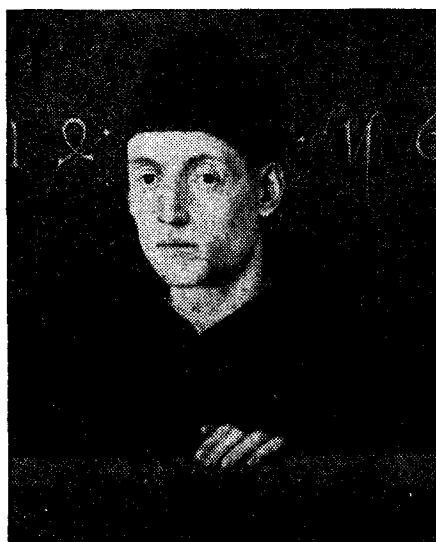
YOU can see where M. Marcenac's argument is leading—straight to the politico-social realism which he reproduces almost exclusively on his pages. Art, he says, "must be a language understood by everyone." As spearhead for his contention, he chooses a large recent painting by Fougerson—"the entire people understand it." The picture is entitled "Homage to Houllier," Houllier being, in M. Marcenac's words, "a militant Communist, veteran of two wars, assassinated at fifty-nine for having defended the peace." M. Marcenac calls the picture a milestone in French history painting, and points out that it breaks completely with Fougerson's earlier, abstract style. He does not add what seems to me evident: that the picture owes much to Balthus, who long before the war turned to a comparable, mannerist figure painting, though without political overtones.

Nevertheless, Fougerson's picture is an interesting work (I am sorry not to be able to reproduce it here, but



whereas photographs of other paintings were available at the Salon to everyone who had the modest price, this negative belongs to *Les lettres françaises* and apparently to them alone). If Balthus seems a much finer artist than Fougereon, it is not because he is less politically minded, but because what he says is stronger, more personal, and better expressed. There is nothing the matter with social realism as such in art; it has produced some of the greatest images of the past, and will do so again in the future—provided it springs from individual conviction instead of organized factional pressure. But what is dangerously wrong is its champions' insistence that it is the *only* true direction for artists to take. And today in Paris the political atmosphere among artists is so tense that values have become raucous and distorted. I find it hard to believe that the new generation will discover its own identifying style until the current political crisis has abated somewhat.

After the polemics of the Salon, it is a relief to visit the calm galleries of the Petit Palais, where the French masterpieces of the Louvre, up to the impressionists, are now installed. While there were definite advantages in being able to see these pictures in the wider context of the prewar Louvre, now at least one discovers qualities and comparison never suspected before. The jewels follow one after another, beginning with the fifteenth-century Fouquets and ending with Lautrec's "Mail Coach at Nice"—that vigorous little picture, reeling with elegance, its fashionable turbulence contrasting sharply with Géricault's romantic image of primitive brute strength, "The Race of the Wild Horses." The sixteenth-century mannerist pictures at the Petit Palais are



—Jean Fouquet.

"The jewels follow one after another . . ."

superbly chosen, the eighteenth-century Watteaus and Chardins of top rank mostly. But what makes the exhibition especially exciting is that it reveals how greatly the seventeenth century in French art has been strengthened by the fairly recent rediscovery of Georges de la Tour, the subject of a handsome new monograph by François-Georges Pariset. Whereas once Poussin and Claude seemed that century's chief French ornaments, now they share honors with De la Tour. They share them, too, with the brothers Le Nain, by whom additional works have lately come to light. Thus the French tradition becomes more and more impressive with the years. at the Musée du Jeu de Paume, its late-nineteenth-century flowering is illustrated by the "Masters of Impressionism" exhibition, inaugurated after the recent war.

At the Orangerie des Tuileries, the large Gauguin show of the summer continues, jammed to the doors at all hours of the day. For me, Gauguin has always been by far the weakest of the post-impressionist four—Cézanne, Van Gogh, Seurat, and himself. I still feel that is his rank, and that the legend about him, so largely created by "The Moon and Sixpence," has over-inflated his fame. Nevertheless, this is a fine show, and includes a number of unfamiliar works which confirm, though they do not increase, Gauguin's considerable stature. What is especially evident is his tendency to wobble at separate times toward various of his greater contemporaries. But then again he hits his own stride, and paints those flat, brilliant pictures which meant so much to innumerable artists everywhere at the end of his and the beginning of our own century. Perhaps his finest early disciples were Vuillard and Bonnard, whose large decorative panels are shown at Bernheim Jeune.

Numerous shows are scheduled to open soon, among them the Salon des Tuileries, the Salon des Surindépendants, and a retrospective Léger exhibition at the Musée d'Art Moderne, which will be followed by one for the English sculptor Henry Moore. I hope to report on these events at a later date. Meanwhile, it is to be noted that there are more art bookshops than ever before, that the Café Flore is often so crowded that not even an existentialist can be sure of a table, that magazines devoted to *la belle poitrine* and kindred subjects are reappearing on the stands as postwar austerity relaxes, that the weather is wonderful, that Paris as I said, as someone, God willing, will always be saying, is very beautiful by day and night.

—JAMES THRALL SOBY.

PARKE-BERNET GALLERIES • INC

NEW YORK

*Announces
the Opening of Its
New Building at
980 MADISON AVE*

[76-77th Street]

Saturday, November 12

ON FREE PUBLIC VIEW
FROM NOVEMBER 12

The Library of the Late
EMERY L. FERRIS

XVII-XVIII Century
English Literature

Including the
FOUR FOLIOS OF
SHAKESPEARE

Illustrated Catalog \$1.00

*Sale November 21-23
at 2 p.m.*

retreat from

likeness in

the theory

of painting

2nd edition
revised and enlarged

By **FRANCES BRADSHAW
BLANSHARD**

An intriguing approach to abstract painting which reveals its roots in the history and philosophy of past ages. Illustrated. 4 color plates. \$3.50

At all bookstores

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY PRESS
Morningside Heights, New York 27
Publishers of
THE COLUMBIA ENCYCLOPEDIA

OUT-OF-PRINT and **HARD-TO-FIND** books supplied; also genealogies, town histories, incomplete sets completed, back numbers all magazines, etc. All subjects, all languages. Send us your list of book-wants—no obligation. We report quickly. Lowest prices. (We also supply all current books at publishers' prices postpaid.)
AMERICAN LIBRARY SERVICE
117 West 48th Street, Dept. S, New York 19, N. Y.
We also buy old books, magazines, prints, letters, documents, etc. Send us your list.



— From "Modern Painters."

"The Disasters of War," by Goya.

The Mind of Goya

THIS I SAW. By Antonina Vallentin.
New York: Random House. 871 pp.
\$5.

By WALTER PACH

WHEN, because of the Civil War in Spain, the masterpieces of the Prado Museum were sent for safekeeping to Switzerland, Bernard Berenson remarked before the works of Goya, "With him you have the beginning of our modern anarchy." If that last word troubles you, try substituting dynamism, revolution, or the like. But at least you will agree with Mr. Berenson that Goya stands on the dividing line between a past and a future.

His latest biographer, Antonina Vallentin, is no new hand when it comes to the study of extraordinary personalities, for in her "Leonardo da Vinci" she had to deal with some of the supreme problems of the human mind. And in the book before us it is the mind of its subject which most interests the author. The incidents of his exciting career are retold in a way that indicates a new study of source material, and credit is due for the caution exercised as to sensational incidents. In Goya's case there is a plethora of such material, but Mme. Vallentin has had the good sense and the good taste to reject many of the early legends when they could not

be supported by real documentation. The result, especially for the earlier life of the great painter, is to show him as a steady and sober aspirant for excellence in his art, instead of the "great lover" and adventurer of the romanticized biographies, thus attaining a thoroughly credible portrait of the man. His career of eighty-two years, during which he went from poverty to wealth, from obscurity to the highest rank as painter to the kings and great nobles of Spain, is accounted for in detail which includes a dramatic recital of the effects of the total deafness which overtook him in middle life, his relationship with the soul-stirring events of Napoleon's fatal War of the Peninsula, and the final exile to France which the artist imposed upon himself when a Bourbon reactionary again mounted the throne of his country.

In giving the background against which the drama of Goya's art was enacted, the author makes searching inquiry into matters like the relationship of the painter to the politically awakening masses of mankind, to the devastating power of the Inquisition, and to the question of religion itself. If Spanish Catholicism was so deep-rooted that even a man of Goya's fierce independence habitually made the sign of the cross on the paper which was to receive his drawings

or writings, he also composed "a satire in pictures, if not against the Church itself, at least against the abuses and repressions of which the Church was guilty."

From the standpoint of psychology—that of the man and his period—the book may be read with profit. But, after all, the essential thing about an artist is his art; and it was because of the quality of Goya's painting that Berenson made the suggestive remark above quoted. Mme. Vallentin is sensitive to the quality of paint on canvas, to color, and to composition. So that, when—in his youth—her hero was not yet able to meet his pictorial problems, she says so without hesitation. The very uneven merit of his work throughout his later life is likewise dealt with in unsparing fashion, her shrewd observation being that the range of his portraits—from dull failure to dazzling success—is to be measured, in large part, by his interest in his sitters.

Granting that such preoccupation with subject matter affected the work of many artists of the past, one is indeed led to give weight to those words "modern anarchy" when one sees how much of Goya's value resides in matter of pure expression. A Titian of only mediocre appeal as a human document may still be a nearly complete gospel of painting. Not so a Goya, for it lacks the foundation of the central hearth of European art which makes Italy, and, later on, France the inheritors of the Greeks, and even of the predecessors of that supreme people.

So that Mme. Vallentin, emphasizing Goya's anticipation of the modern sense of landscape, and uttering such sentences as "Impressionism is born," is right in devoting the space she does to the enigmas contained in Goya's etchings. Often explained, they still defy complete explanation, as does a panel with which the artist, in his old age, decorated a wall of his house. "It is the essay of a painter no longer addressing himself directly to the human eye. It is suggestion: like waves of music, this painting calls directly upon human sensibility. But it is also the end of an art governed by certain immutable laws of vision: an impasse, not a road."

The statement is a bold one, as are all statements that would set limitations upon the course of genius. Who knows? If even the glorious lifetime of Goya was not enough to solve the problems which he imagined for art, perhaps "modern dynamism" (the variant I proposed for Berenson's phrase) has carried his work on to new success.