

# THE FINE ARTS

## FARE ON FIFTY-SEVENTH STREET

THIS is the time of year when all but the most hardy art critics, having gorged for months at Fifty-seventh Street's board, are stricken with violent indigestion. The very variety of what is offered by the New York galleries is a trial to the critical system. The fare ranges from Cordon Bleu to Greasy Spoon, with a qualitative average supplied by the Automat. This spring, especially, the victuals have come on with bewildering rapidity. From so swift and bulging a repast how much can one enjoy? I will try to remember some of the specialties of the season now past, limiting the survey to one course per gallery, for reasons of space.

Nineteen fifty began vigorously with shows of Leonid (Durlacher), Miró (Matisse), and Rothko (Parsons). Leonid's exhibition seemed to me the best of many he has had in New York. And it proved that he has passed a difficult test for an artist dependent on the stimulus of existing reality. Trained in Paris, Leonid has developed over the patient years a lyric art of seascape whose focal point was the fishing villages of France, known to him by heart. But several years ago he moved to America and some of us waited rather anxiously to see whether he would find here an adequate substitute for the European seaside's ancient and intimate ritual between nature and man. We need not have worried. Of such American subjects as Port Jefferson and Provincetown Leonid has made once more his own elegiac world, serene, heartfelt, and deft.

Miró, I think, emerges more and more clearly as the most important painter of the European generation which began to make its mark right after the First World War. Twenty-four years younger than Matisse, twelve years Picasso's junior, Miró has evolved a marvelously fresh art from the visual revolution for which his two celebrated elders were largely responsible. As in the case of Delacroix and Ingres, it would be rank oversimplification to describe Matisse solely in terms of color, Picasso of line. Yet it was Matisse who in our era first gave color a new, autonomous vitality and it was Picasso who invented a calligraphy so powerful that its echoes slap between the walls of the world. Admiring both men, ad-

mired by them, Miró has used their discoveries as a point of departure for a thoroughly personal style in which tonal sensibility is fantastically acute, in which linear exuberance and wit are endlessly inventive. His show covered the decade 1933-43 and gave further proof of his leadership among painters of his age and tendency.

At Betty Parsons's gallery Mark Rothko showed large panels, their sole subject being broad areas of filmy color. I can scarcely remember an American exhibition of recent years which caused so much dissension among people interested in contemporary art. Nor was this a polite dispute. Those who disliked the pictures declared themselves insulted and complained specifically of a lack of humanist content. Those who liked them very much (and I was emphatically in this group) retorted that no one was forced or charged admission to see the show and added that the fifteenth-century concept of humanism cannot be applied, except sentimentally, to a twentieth-century world in which we are often propelled by "abstract" precepts and equations. (Leon Battista Alberti's 1,450 views on science or art are presumably of minimum use to the people at Oak Ridge.) At any rate, Rothko's new paintings, though completely non-figurative, for me were compelling and moving; they had, I felt, a curious transcendental radiance. And I would like to live with one, to answer the question which people ask with an air of triumph, as if they were propounding a grave enigma instead of repeating a shopworn *bêtise*.

Along toward February Catherine Viviano showed in her new gallery work by five members of the postwar Italian generation of painters—Afro, Cagli, Guttuso, Morlotti, and Pizzinato. Guttuso and Pizzinato ran off with the honors, though Afro's abstractions have a certain tender grace. I still think Guttuso the strongest young painter in Italy. But will he be able to hold off social-realist

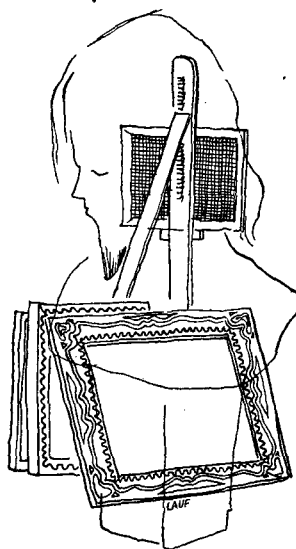
pressure from the Party of which he is an ardent member? I'm afraid not in view of photographs of his very recent paintings and of his banal drawing for the May Day issue of the Communist paper *l'Unità*. Certainly the example of Picasso's independence from Party esthetics (or anti-esthetics) will do him little good, for Picasso's stature gives him reluctant privileges.

The dominant figure in the art of present-day Italy is the sculptor Marino Marini, whose exhibition at the Buchholz Gallery evoked great public and critical enthusiasm. Indeed, with the exception of Henry Moore's 1946 retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art, it would be hard to think of another recent show of sculpture which laymen and professionals alike seemed to find so deeply moving. My own opinion of Marini's achievement has been given in this column several times and now, to fall happily into the dogmatic trap which the need for brevity invariably sets, I can only add that he seems to me the finest sculptor to have appeared anywhere during the past fifteen years.

WE OWE the Rose Fried Gallery a considerable debt for assembling a large retrospective show of the paintings of Francis Picabia, once one of the most discussed artists of the extreme avant garde in Paris and New York. It was Picabia, you will remember, who affixed a toy monkey to a canvas and called it a portrait of Cézanne. For this and more cerebral gestures against the weight of tradition, as much as by his paintings, he earned a prominent place. Then for a

long time he dropped out of sight, except in the enthusiastic pages of Gertrude Stein. Unlike many members of the Dada movement, whose spirit he typified, he did not make the fertile transition into surrealism, but remained behind, aloof, mocking, painting still but painting very badly. To tell the truth, I can't see that he was ever a good painter or that his recent abstractions are the exciting new departure that his champions claim them to be. But he will always, I imagine, have a place as a vivid

personality and as an effective catalyst of Dadaist insurrection. He invented much which other artists have used more convincingly, and Jean Arp declared in the foreword of Picabia's New York show: "The challenges and wisecracks in his paintings are innu-



merable." So they are; I wish they were better expressed.

Picabia was among the first to admire machinery's precise forms, though usually in an ironic spirit for which the constructivists, adapting industrial materials to sculpture, substituted a painstaking austerity. That the constructivist tradition is still much alive is attested by one of the most remarkable works of art produced by a young American in many years—Richard Lippold's "Variation, No. 7," which was shown alone at the Willard Gallery in March. A beautifully thought out structure of slender metal bars and taut wires, the piece is in constant metamorphosis under changing conditions of light: lacy as a cobweb and lively as a diamond. It has, too, an intense inner vibration, to use a Fifty-seventh Street phrase which until this instance has always sent me racing to the nearest wash-bowl, green and heaving. With this sculpture-construction Lippold has moved into the select front rank of American artists, regardless of age.

One of the West Coast's leading artists, Rico Lebrun, showed his recent paintings and drawings at Jacques Seligmann's in April. An extremely fluent draftsman, Lebrun is less assured with color, and pictures which looked exciting in photographs proved disappointing in fact, with one or two notable exceptions. At the Downtown Gallery, Kuniyoshi showed paintings completed since his Whitney Museum retrospective of 1948. The best of these confirmed his standing as one of the very finest living American painters but a few of them veered disturbingly close to Ben Shahn, whose influence has spread like wildfire in recent years. At the Midtown Gallery, for example, Shahn's evocative realism was reflected in Henry Koerner's new pictures. But Koerner lacks Shahn's plastic discipline and whereas the latter gives truth the poetic impact of legend, the former is too often content with anecdote for its own bright-fading sake. I turned with relief from Koerner's hard, illustrative redundancy to the fluid eloquence of Balcomb Greene's paintings at the Bertha Schaefer Gallery. Once one of our best abstractionists, Greene has now evolved a half-representational use of molten color which I thought one of the most heartening accomplishments of the whole season. His "Execution" stood out in the big Whitney annual this year; his one-man show proved that this picture was typical of his new authority.

One of my blind spots, I'm sure, is modern Mexican art. I respect the late Clemente Orozco's diagonal structure (and wish it were less plain and repetitious), I know the historical im-



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portance of Rivera, and acknowledge Siqueiros's furious strength. But I do not, to be frank, like to look steadily or often at contemporary Mexican painting—except that of Rufino Tamayo. Tamayo's show at Knoedler's in late April was superb, with added richness of color and seemingly effortless invention of convincing theme.

Some of my colleagues were greatly impressed by the exhibition "Advancing French Art" at the Carré Gallery, which included leading members of the postwar Parisian generation. The pictures were often beautifully painted, I admit. But their lack of something vital to say seemed to me obvious by comparison with the paintings in the Janis Gallery's well-selected exhibition of such prewar figures as Ernst, Miró, Tanguy, Dali, and others. The show was entitled "Twentieth-Century Young Masters" and it reasserted the quality of the later School of Paris. And that New York may now be a more promising center of painting than Paris was suggested by the exhibition "Talent, 1950" assembled at the Kootz Gallery by Meyer Schapiro and Clement Greenberg. This show contained some absolutely terrible pictures, I think. But it also included works by Al Leslie, Robert Goodenough, and, above all, Harry Jackson, which were handsome and assured. The artists in the Kootz show are part of what is apparently to be christened by its adherents the "School of New York." More power to it!

—JAMES THRALL SOBY.

## Craftsmanship Before Genius

SIX CENTURIES OF FRENCH MASTER DRAWINGS IN AMERICA. By Regina Shoolman and Charles E. Slatkin. New York: Oxford University Press. 256 pp. \$7.50.

By A. HYATT MAYOR

WE AMERICANS have liked French painting so much and for so long that some nineteenth-century painters can now be studied better in our collections than in France. But until recently we have liked paintings so much more than drawings that it comes somewhat as a surprise to see that American collections could yield the long, fine, and fairly continuous series of drawings that illustrate this book.

From the very first drawing, made about 1400, to the last, dated 1933, there is a sustained brilliance of execution, for the French have always believed (as Renoir put it) that learning to be a good craftsman does not make it impossible to become a genius. French artists have maintained such a consistent high level because a Frenchman regards himself as an individual disciplined by living in society, so that whatever he does must meet a certain intensity of criticism.

A comparable series of Italian drawings would show more surprises of genius and a greater variety of styles

and invention because they would have been produced in a dozen very distinct cities, instead of one omnivorous center like Paris. But this concentration of life in the capital, with the consequent discipline brought to bear on inventiveness, was necessary for maintaining French art in its elegance. It is an elegance that never becomes mannered because it never loses contact with the brute facts of nature, as Charles Sterling explains in his clear introduction.

The editors have provided for both the casual reader—or looker—and the student by equipping each illustration with an informative commentary and an elaborate bibliography. This text is particularly useful because many of the drawings have been reproduced, if at all, in obscure sales catalogues or periodicals. The choice of the drawings is naturally something that no two people can be expected to agree on, any more than any two people can be expected to select the same poems for an anthology. Yet much as this reviewer misses certain favorites—Mrs. Loughlin's Fragonard of the "Homage to Gluck" and her Cochin portraits, the Walters Gallery's Dauriers, and much else—there are very few drawings (aside from some obviously ambitious misattributions) that he would like to eliminate. The series can be said to represent a great tradition without unfairness. The quality of the halftones varies from brilliant (for the most part) to a gray almost as sickly as the typical French or Italian halftone illustration. The unevenness was probably in the copy given to the photo-engraver. But the size of the plates is generous enough to include most of the important detail.

As one turns over these 145 pictures one cannot help tingling with the contact that they bring with the vivid achievements of Western man.

A. Hyatt Mayor is curator of prints at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

## Art Notes

VLAMINCK, PICASSO, DUFY, VAN GOGH, introduction by Maurice Raynol. Skira-Transbook. \$3 each. These four portfolios of color reproductions, part of a newly introduced series, contain nine separately mounted prints each, plus one on the cover. The brief text consists of about a page of introduction, a chronology of the artist, and short notes on the plates. The



—From "Six Centuries of French Master Drawings in America."

Study for the painting "Mesdemoiselles Lerolle au Piano," by Pierre-Auguste Renoir.