

How Two Artists Lived and Worked

EDVARD MUNCH. By Frederick B. Deknatel. New York: Crown Publishers. 120 pp. \$3.50.

MOHOLY-NAGY. By Sibyl Moholy-Nagy. New York: Harper & Bros. 253 pp. \$6.50.

By JEROME MELLQUIST

OFTEN it has been said that the North European artist longs for the watermelon colors and roasting suns of Sicily or other far-Southern places. Dürer, one remembers, filled his notebooks with ejaculations about his dropped chains immediately he crossed the Alps, and Goethe, among the writers, also helped to propagate this view. But the artist Edvard Munch, a Northerner if there ever was one, reflects little or none of this anticipated attitude.

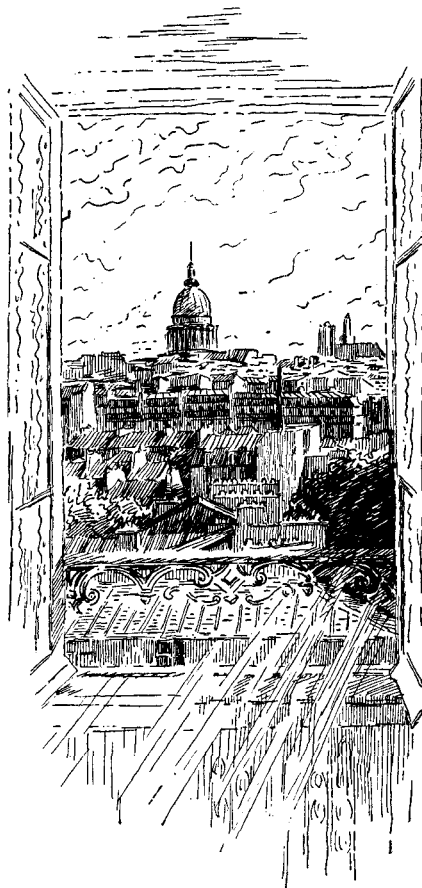
Coming from a distinguished Norwegian family and early committed to art, he suggests rather the ingoing mind and blind, bleeding pain of a Strindberg. Surely little light penetrated his childhood. Born in 1863, he lost his mother five years later and he found all too little sympathy from his father, a military doctor, who eventually neglected his profession for religious meditations. Reared by an aunt, he remained often moody and restless until starting art school at seventeen. Soon, however, he was absorbing the ideas of his more advanced teachers and showing that quickness at assimilation which never entirely left him. He liked subjects of sickness and he could portray the handicapped with a peculiar sympathy. Before departing for Paris in the late Eighties he already had collided with the same granitic morality Ibsen hated so much and sometimes been branded as not altogether a worthy fellow. He understood the literary currents of his time and readily circulated among the spouters in the cafés.

Arriving presently in France, he quit Northern heaviness for the impressionistic color-mottling of a canvas. Also he turned more to landscape. Amidst later shuttlings between Norway and other European points he not only noted Gauguin and Toulouse-Lautrec but he added much lithography and etching to his repertoire. He produced such images of torment as "The Cry" (1895) and "Anxiety" (1896), both suggesting by their repeated swirls some vortex of the mind from which there was no issue.

Gradually he won a place even among the museum collections of his

native land and early in the twentieth century was getting substantial commissions. Immoderate drinking and quarrelsome habits sometimes offended the respectable, to be sure, and once he spent long months recuperating from a drinking-bout. But he never mooned for Southern seas nor did he posture about the tinted circles he might have missed by continuing to reside in the land of his birth. Perhaps best he is to be regarded as an introspective—a type who, as he once said, resembles "a shipwrecked vessel that had half of its rigging washed overboard because it had not reached harbor in time." As such, he did both woodcuts and lithographs that can be remembered. He should always have a niche among the Expressionist painters, and his special seal of originality can hardly be doubted.

Such is the picture emerging from a perusal of this study, which has been assembled with both taste and thoughtfulness by Frederick B. Deknatel, of the Fogg Museum at Harvard University. It forms a counterpart to the large Munch show presented last summer at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and it should prove a permanently valuable repository of documents and insights on its man. Surely it plunges us



—From "All Men Have Loved Thee."

again into the fjordlike fissures and troubled silences of an intrepid artist who, like Strindberg, lived deep under the shadows and fought there to find the illumination others associate too readily with a more tropical zone.

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THE PRESSES still discharge their tonnage about modern art, but somehow good memoirs are rare. Any professor can junket about amidst dates and compile his treatise on the proliferation of geometrical quotients since Cézanne. Similarly, butcher-knife journalists can once more lop off the ear of Van Gogh and start the public into some profitable blubbering. But the tactful, concise, and revealing book of memoirs seldom gets written. Whether this is because problems dominate over personalities or because sensitive companions have been lacking to the artist might be difficult to say. But in the present volume about the designer, photographer, teacher, and painter Moholy-Nagy, by his wife, for once a book of the right stamp has been produced.

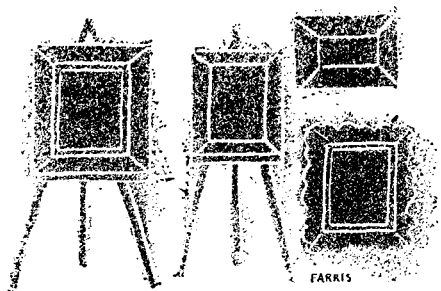
According to this account Moholy-Nagy never had many childhood advantages in Hungary, where he was born in 1895. His father appears to have been an adventurer who gambled away the family's wheat farm and then decamped for America. The boy developed a great attachment to his mother and resolved that some day he would direct life into better ways for them both. While serving as an artillery officer in World War I young Moholy-Nagy underwent several experiences that formed his future: he was wounded on the Isonzo front, he had a first apprehension of light as a creative element in painting, and he withdrew from the pot-tossing escapades of his fellow officers. Demobilized, he ardently returned to the drawing he had started in the trenches, soon saw the dross in Bela Kun's revolutionary goals, and experimented with his first collages. Quitting Hungary and Austria, he walked his way Sandburg-wise through Germany, earning bed and meals by odd jobs of lettering. He collapsed from influenza in Berlin, tottered back to health, secured much help from a sympathetic university woman, and slowly forged himself a name. After being exhibited as an advanced abstract painter (chiefly because of his so-called photograms, a device enabling him to superimpose photographic images to get startling effects of space and lighting) he was called to the Bauhaus staff in 1923.

Here this intrepid worker devised new courses of instruction, invented fresh typographical and industrial layouts, and painted. His indeed was a demonic energy. But he quit the Bau-

haus in 1928, when Professor Walter Gropius, its head and his sponsor, had resigned on a question of principle. Tirelessly he then worked on stage-sets and films. In 1931 he met Sybil, who describes with a telling reticence the circumstances of their initial encounter and the long professional association that eventually led up to their marriage. Her restrained words admirably convey the drive and the resiliency that evidently were her husband's. And she is unforgettable as she writes with a point of ice about a banquet tendered by Nazi officials to the visiting Italian apostate-artist Marinetti.

Unable to tolerate such indecencies any further the couple left Germany and settled in Holland and England and then in 1937 came to America, where Moholy had been asked to found a New Bauhaus in Chicago. The American pages, almost one-half of the book, recapitulate the hardships and the perplexities confronting many a newcomer who tries to transplant a worthy European institution into soil that is not prepared for it. But Moholy-Nagy was a fighter and though rebuffed on his original project persisted until he had established his own school of design. Unfortunately, such activities precluded his continuously devoting himself to painting, though some years before his death in 1946 this energetic man had again more fully committed himself to it.

Perhaps the book would have been strengthened if Moholy-Nagy's work in each field had been sifted in terms of what his contemporaries were doing. Yet that would have necessitated a foray into criticism, which was not the province of the present work. As it stands Mme. Moholy-Nagy has reminded the reader of what a gallant and on the whole effective personality her teacher-husband was. Her account is ably supplemented by a preface from Dr. Gropius as well as by some jottings on a vacation trip, in which Dr. Siegfried Giedion affectionately remembers his friend Moholy-Nagy. More such books would show the core and the fire of many a contemporary innovator and establish a new pattern for the memoir as a little-trying means for enlarging our understanding of modern art.



Art Book Notes

THE PAINTING OF HANS HOLBEIN. By Paul Ganz. Oxford. \$8.50. Because the name of Holbein instantly calls to mind his English portraits it is good to come across a volume that offers a complete view of his work from beginning to end: his religious paintings, his miniatures, and his decorations of Swiss housefronts that are not often reproduced. The introduction which Paul Ganz has written from a lifetime's study of Holbein is knowing but brief; the samples of the artist's work and the critical notes he has supplied is prodigious. In all there are 220 full-page plates, including many details shown in their original size. Not the least valuable feature of the book is the *catalogue raisonné*; each entry, besides furnishing descriptions and all pertinent data, contains a critical discussion that often runs to considerable length. When portraits are treated biographical material about the subject is included.

—L. R. SANDER.

JOHN MARIN: Drawings & Watercolors. Twin Editions, New York City. \$25. With etching, \$65. The addled minds who once thought to jostle the immortals by turning out illustrations of bigger and fatter Midwestern cattle now having retired to their country acres, it is possible to distinguish the profile of one who long has been depicting the American scene without the slightest bombast. Whether he has used the etching, the watercolor, the oil, or the draughtsman's pencil, John Marin, the subject of the present portfolio, has employed each of these mediums to denote his love of place. He has wandered the coasts of Maine and tramped the steeper trails of the Adirondacks, he has explored the back country of the Ramapo and the silted shores below his residence on the Palisades, and he has roamed Manhattan from the Battery to the upper reaches of the East River.

But his was not a naturalistic inspection; for to him the record must comport with some inmost shape and meaning, and even though he would say, as in his inimitable introduction to the present crop of reproductions, that drawing is but his "meandering" in such scenes, his meander, so to speak, is that of a Puck or a Mercury, and not simply a bucolic from the cow country. Thus speaking, he sets forth a new definition of his method in these thirty-seven commendably handled facsimile reproductions (twenty-nine pencil drawings, seven watercolors, one etching), and gives

the entire portfolio an added meaning. As for the drawings, these range from a sharp-cut New York shoreline caught from Weehawken in 1904 to his Manhattan hubbubs of the mid-Twenties, or to his sailing Brooklyn Bridges and Maine lobstermen of the late Forties. Each captures his glee and his exactitude and his sometimes transcendental height of observation (a success traceable to the punctilio with which these plates were prepared in France). Unfortunately the watercolors do not incorporate his wizardry with the wash, though the single etching is pulled with the extreme care befitting one of the best in Marin's *oeuvre*. Nevertheless a friendly solicitude prevails. This anthology should be accorded new space on that shelf, happily at last expanding with an almost startling rapidity, which now shows that John Marin, nearing eighty, has found that national acknowledgment to which he as possibly our greatest American painter is so richly entitled. —J. M.

CEZANNE. MANET. DEGAS. World Publishing Co., Cleveland. Three portfolios, \$3 each. Like the titles which preceded them in Skira's Masterpieces of French Painting Series, these three portfolios each contain ten large color plates, one of them on the cover, the other nine individually mounted so that they may be lifted out for tacking up, framing, or examining at arm's length. The heightened color characteristic of Skira prints, to which I have objected in the past, is present again. Mr. Skira's process does, however, possess a virtue others often lack: in reducing the size of the pictures, more colors of the original painting have been retained.

Again the choice of reproduction is fortunate, offering a representative qualitative and chronological sampling and maintaining a nice balance between the familiar and the unfamiliar. Among the unfamiliar items here is the rarely quoted Cézanne portrait of his gardener. This is one of several he did of old Vallier in a seated pose during the last days of his life. Indeed, it is believed that this is the one in which the painter worked between the time he was picked up unconscious on the road and his death a few days later. The Manet folder contains a portrait of Mallarmé seldom reproduced, while the Degas portfolio contains an early head of a young woman that reveals the influence of Moreau and Fantin-Latour. The printed matter in each portfolio is brief, consisting of a one-page introduction by Maurice Raynal, a chronology of the artist's life, and short notes on the plates. —J. R. S.