

## Honest Craftsmanship

SWEDEN BUILDS. By G. E. Kidder Smith. New York: Albert Bonnier. 279 pp. \$8.50.

By FREDERICK J. KIESLER

IT WOULD be easier to glorify Sweden's inventive spirit in the field of science than in architecture. After much praise of Sweden's architectural efforts G. E. Kidder Smith sums up: "The obvious result is that too much architecture is becoming rubber-stamped, stiff, dry, unexciting, sterile, and ingrown, or to use one word—bureaucratic." Any giants of the progressive architecture of our time comparable to Auguste Perret, Otto Wagner, Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe, not to speak of the array of modern painters and sculptors, cannot be found in Sweden.

With regard to architecture and the industrial arts Sweden's strength lies, in my opinion, in her craftsmanship. Judged from that point of view Sweden builds well and with a high sense of technical and esthetic responsibility. And that applies to the planning of towns, multiple dwellings, individual housing, and right down to all interior furnishing. As a matter of fact,

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if we reverse the order and start with textiles, their design and weaving methods, their subdued coloring, all types of furniture, their exquisite tooling and restrained finishing, Swedish lamps with their sensitively controlled light we have put the right foot forward to attain some proper appreciation of Sweden's contribution to contemporary design. Next to it in importance, so it seems to me, is the land policy of the Swedish Government in providing large tracts of land for housing developments — a procedure worthy of emulation. Since 1904 Stockholm has acquired almost 50,000 acres in and outside the city limits, the uniform control of which contributes greatly to the development of decent sites, usage, and economy. As Sven Markelius points out in this book: "Swedish town planning administration differs from that of many other countries in that it is handled by municipal self-governing bodies."

One can see immediately that any temptation toward speculative profits is cut short and housing is put on a basis of needs rather than profiteering (the latter basis so often the case in our own country). Yet that cannot be called socialization but rather the honest spirit of cooperative endeavor. The *Kooperativa Förbundet*, for instance, produces goods to be sold to its consumers but builds also its own shops and factories. Its planning, design, and execution are excellent and credited to Eskil Sundahl and his associates. Another cooperative, the Tenant Saving Bank and Building Society, under its architect Sven Wallander, is exclusively a shelter project. This cooperative alone has provided approximately 50,000 apartments. Now Sweden has progressed, in adopting Le Corbusier's Radiant-city-plan (isolated skyscraper buildings surrounded by greens), to the Reimersholm project in Stockholm. A most commendable enterprise.

In "Sweden Builds" pictorial documentation on all these developments in Swedish architecture can be found abundantly and carefully laid out. On-the-spot studies and photographs form a comprehensive pictorial survey, and the underlining captions make for quick reading and absorption. But it must be admitted that there is nothing new in Sweden's architecture, and the author cannot be blamed for that. Nevertheless, to any student particularly interested in Sweden's contribution to the arts this book will be welcome for its spirit of warm devotion to Swedish integrity.

Frederick J. Kiesler, architect and author, was formerly director of the architectural laboratory at Columbia University.

## Of Man's Greatness

TWILIGHT OF THE ABSOLUTE. By André Malraux. Translated by Stuart Gilbert. New York: Pantheon Books. 275 pp. \$12.50.

By WILLIAM BARRETT

WHEN one of the most brilliant novelists of our period turns his serious attention to art the result is likely to be absorbing and unexpected in any case, but it is now quite clear with the publication of this third and last volume of "The Psychology of Art" that André Malraux has produced one of the really great works of art criticism of our time. It is, of course, a tradition in France for men of letters to write ambitiously about the plastic arts, and Malraux now takes his place beside such nineteenth-century masters as Stendhal, Balzac, and Fromentin.

But a great deal has happened to art and Western civilization since these earlier critics, and the difference between their point of view and Malraux's is perhaps even more significant than the similarity. Malraux is compelled to be much more ambitious in his aims, and the historical and cultural scope of his analysis of art is wider beyond anything these earlier writers could have imagined. The fact is that Malraux is engaging in this examination of art with an eye to another problem that only appears in the background: the problem of man and of the fate of human civilization. Thus, this long exploration of the nature of art, far from being an interruption of Malraux's career, really carries forward those themes that have long been obsessive with him.

This essay rambles a great deal, darting agilely and nervously from point to point, but fortunately the rambling is controlled by a central thesis, which is a very simple one and almost expressed by the title. Nearly all the great art of the past—from the cave drawings of primitive man up to the painting of the Renaissance—was executed under the inspiration of religion. The Absolute of religion was present in his world and therefore directly present to the artist himself. The sculptors of Chartres, to use Malraux's example, worked so directly in the service of their religious belief that they could never have thought of themselves merely as craftsmen disposing lines and colors to make a pleasing pattern nor even as making a realistic image that would represent what the Virgin might have looked like; they were making something to be the Virgin.

Malraux does not contend that religion has disappeared from the mod-



—French Embassy.

André Malraux—"affirmative faith."

ern world; it still rises to the surface in moments of crisis, supplying strength and consolation to men in battle or behind the barbed wire of concentration camps. But there is no doubt that in comparison with the past ours has become a secular world, and religion has not been the source of inspiration for any great art form in our time. The image of our age, Malraux finds, is an imitation-Gothic church tucked away amid the skyscrapers of Broadway.

But the Absolute disappears in one form only to be reborn in another, and Malraux's contention is that the whole of modern art may be defined as a search for a new vision to replace the religious one: the vision of painting as its own Absolute. The decisive step in this transition Malraux traces back to the change in style from Rembrandt to Vermeer in the seventeenth century. Where the Renaissance had been passing gradually to a secular view of the world, Rembrandt—a kind of Dostoevsky among painters, portraying the stormy soul of the Protestant Reformation—is in a way a reversion to an earlier state of artistic being in the sense that God or the Absolute is a kind of shadowy presence haunting all his paintings. With Vermeer, however, the painter's point of view undergoes a metamorphosis: the quality of the visible world itself, the sheer surface of texture, color, and pattern become the end at which his art aims. Though most of Vermeer's paintings are organized around some incident from daily life, as in the tradition of Dutch genre painting, the incident disappears into the structure of the painting and hardly counts for very much in our visual experience

of the canvas. In our century modern abstract art has carried this view of painting as its own Absolute to a final and fulfilling conclusion: a Braque still life, Malraux says, may not be exactly a holy object, but "a vaguely apprehended god, who goes by the name of Art, hallows it."

Though Malraux's point here is significant and on the whole valid, it seems to me to be inconsistent with the main tenor of his argument throughout this and the two previous essays in the series. What has dominated, expressly or not, his examination of the art of all civilizations has been the concept of Man as the creature of which all the assembled baggage of our museums is but an overflow and an expression. A work of art that claims to present no more than a visual surface would rank considerably lower in the esthetic hierarchy than the sculptures of Chartres or the figures of Giotto, which convey to us the depth and height of a whole period's feeling about God and human life. Either modern painting does more than deify an abstraction called Art or it is, as its detractors have claimed, a merely transitional or decadent form. I suspect that modern art has another meaning for Malraux but that he has merely arrested his exposition at this point. In the previous volumes in this series he has seen more, much more, for example, in a painter like Cézanne than the mere presence of Art as an Absolute.

Perhaps it is this aphoristic character of the work, stopping short in its exploration of the main ideas, that constitutes the most tantalizing but disappointing feature of Malraux's whole analysis. The fact is that Malraux, while he has the capacity to vibrate sympathetically with certain large and profound ideas, does not have that other capacity of the born thinker to digest patiently and elaborate exhaustively the ideas to which he responds. Despite all its intellectual brilliance the work leaves unanalyzed the central ideas under which its discussion proceeds: the ideas of Man, history, culture, and the Absolute itself that Malraux would put in the place of the older religious objects of worship. By way of a general conclusion we are left only with a kind of exalted glow at Malraux's affirmative faith in the heroism of Man and the greatness of his works.

The illustrations, as in the previous volumes, are chosen with great taste and are beautiful enough to be worth by themselves the cost of the book.

William Barrett is assistant professor of philosophy at New York University and associate editor of *Partisan Review*.

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