

New World Problems

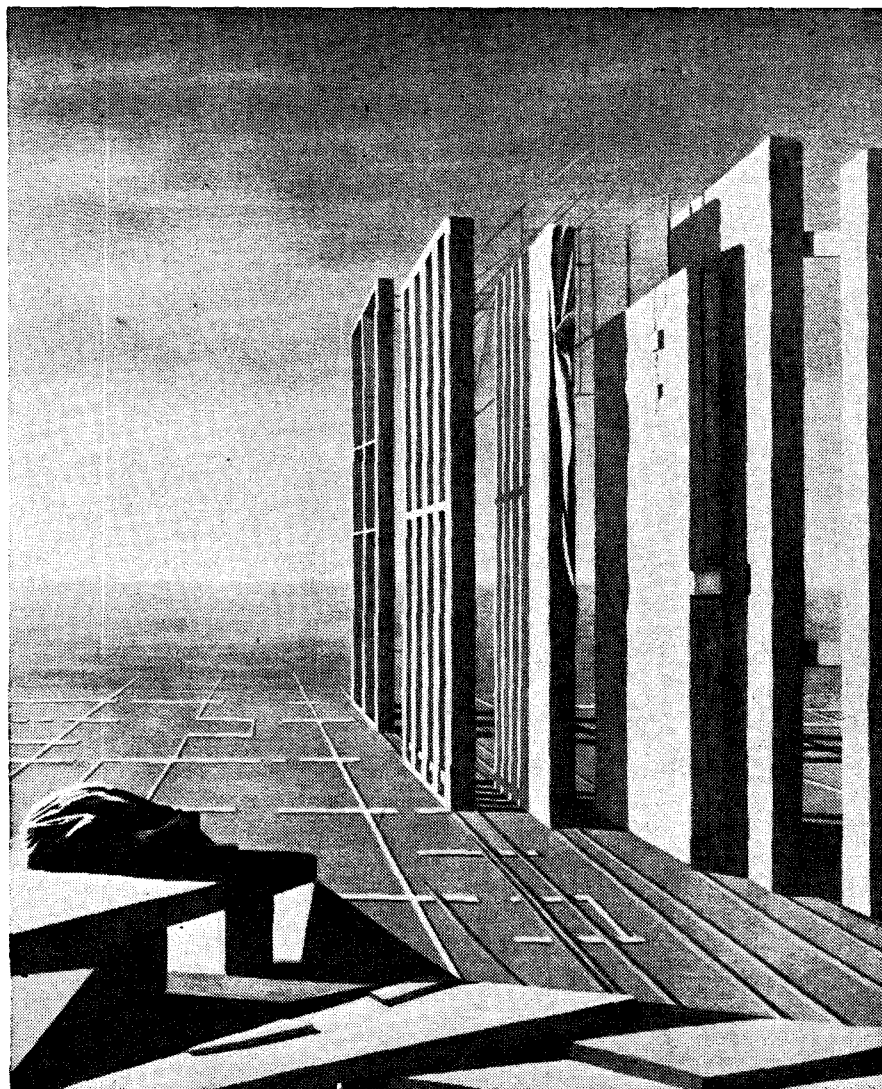
MODERN ARTISTS IN AMERICA.
Edited by Bernard Karpel, Robert Motherwell, and Ad Reinhardt. New York: Wittenborn, Schultz. 198 pp. \$5.50.

By S. LANE FAISAN, JR.

IN THE interest of putting first things first, I am happy to cite the black, white, and orange envelope which Robert Motherwell has provided for this volume on modern art as a sensitive and beautiful design in the curvilinear and fluid idiom of today's advanced work. When the cover is opened the reader finds the editors' foreword in cursive script on the front end-papers. The informal manner of the presentation is thus established visually from the outset. The intention is clearly stated: "to convey the sense of modern art as it happened." In this purpose the editors have succeeded admirably. It would be difficult to imagine a documentary anthology of greater usefulness, assuming, of course, that the reader is in agreement as to what is modern as against what is merely passively contemporary. Even the antagonist will welcome the convenience of this assemblage of data concerning painting, drawing, graphic arts, and sculpture in the years 1949-50 and 1950-51, together with critical discussion, pro and con, thereof. Architecture and industrial design are not included in the scope of this volume, which is announced as the first of a series. A second volume is projected for the two seasons just past.

The text is primarily devoted to an intelligently edited transcript of two critical talkathons, one held in 1950 at Studio 35 in New York, the other at San Francisco in 1949. As far as possible, the actual dominance of New York is played down in order to present modern art in America as the national phenomenon which the majority of large exhibitions proves it to be. The discussion at Studio 35 was engaged in by artists, with Alfred Barr soberly presiding as moderator. The Western Round Table of Modern Art, on the other hand, combined critics, writers, two composers, a cultural anthropologist, a painter, and an architect, with a philosopher-esthete (George Boas) gamely attempting to keep the conversation moving consecutively. Both meetings

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"Point of Intersection," by Kay Sage.

—Whitney Museum.

would have been twenty years ago. At any rate, nothing now seems so unfantastic as fantasy-for-its-own-sake—unless this fantasy is suggested by abnormally gifted hands. Most of the magic realists at the Whitney simply are not up to their task in terms of imaginative fervor. The road they have chosen has not, of course, yet come to its end. It is not a road closed to the American temperament, as the paintings of Andrew Wyeth, currently being exhibited at the Macbeth Gallery, tend to prove, despite their being fairly straightforward. Whereas Wyeth creates an iconography within which the idiosyncrasies of given subjects are separate and clear, many of his realist colleagues appear to be dabbled with metaphors that do not even result in a cumulative effect.

By comparison with the magic realists, the postwar American abstract painters continue to show considerable vitality (I use the word "abstract" here in its broadest possible context). Their number grows, and the relative newcomers, Samuel Adler, Morris

Kyle, and Fritz Bultman, contribute richly painted works at the Whitney. Perhaps the most arresting personality among the younger men is Herbert Katzman, a prize-winner at the Chicago Art Institute a year or so ago, whose "Two Nudes Before a Japanese Screen" has an aggressive certainty and is sumptuous in color. I like, too, the courage of Maurice Douek in reducing to quite abstract patterns the intricate façade of the Doge's Palace at Venice—a subject which would panic most painters into niggling redundancy. In this picture and elsewhere in the Whitney show one senses some influence from the late Niles Spencer, an artist whose careful honesty has not yet been fully appreciated. And finally, I need not point out that the Whitney's galleries also include works by more established stalwarts of the modern movement, among them Davis, Kuniyoshi, Marin, Salemme, Shahn, and that admirable artist Bradley Tomlin. These works will command attention.

—JAMES THRALL SOBY.

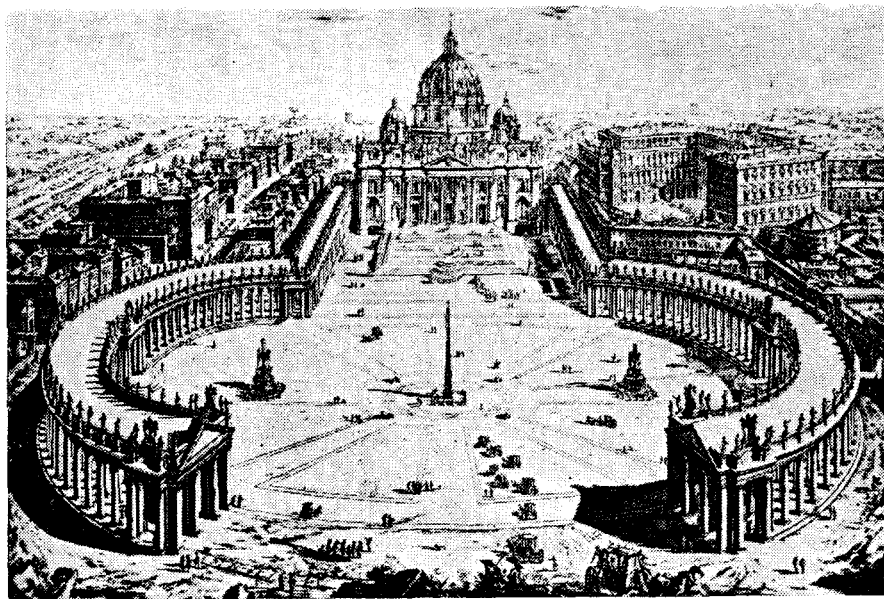
produced lively discussion, though sometimes as tenuous as the deliberations of an academic body.

Among the incisive remarks made at Studio 35 are two by the painter Wilhelm De Kooning: "It seems to me that in Europe every time something new needed to be done it was because of traditional culture. Ours has been a striving to come to the same point that they had—not to be iconoclasts." And, after a series of rather inchoate exchanges on what emotions go into the making of a work of art: "If you are an artist, the problem is to make a picture work whether you are happy or not." Obvious as the point may be, it seems constantly necessary to remark that Beethoven did not work on the slow movements when he was sad and turn to the *scherzi* when he felt gay or mischievous.

The reader of the San Francisco round table will have what I consider the rare privilege of observing the most incorrigible pundit—I was going to say the Ingres—of our day face a withering barrage of skepticism and so effect a strategic withdrawal into negative-interrogative terrain. But even when Frank Lloyd Wright asks polite and hesitant questions, he is greeted by a chorus of nays.

The usefulness of this volume may be suggested by listing its remaining contents. There are nearly 150 illustrations of painting and sculpture (only fifteen of the latter, however). These come from New York galleries and museums and from centers as widely distributed as the Virginia Museum, San Francisco, Berkeley, Sante Fe, Chicago, and—lest we forget—Brooklyn. The editors take a documentary rather than a personal-critical approach, but freely admit there is "perhaps too much of the non-figurative" in their selections. They have included, however, such relatively conservative modernists as Sheeler, Niles Spencer, and Charles Howard. An exhaustive list of exhibitions held in New York City includes, among the Motherwells, Pollocks, and Hans Hofmanns, such genial entries as Grandma Moses, Wyeth, Fausett, and Pleissner. It also includes Van Gogh, Munch, Demuth, Degas, and Toulouse-Lautrec among the departed.

There is a friendly report for a Paris audience by Michel Seuphor on painting in New York in 1951; a special section on the Arensberg Collection, exhibited at Chicago, but donated to Philadelphia; a list of modern works added to American public collections; a calendar of critical excerpts, and an exhaustive bibliography compiled by Bernard Karpel, librarian of the Museum of Modern Art.



—Bettmann Archive.

St. Peter's Church at Rome, by Piranesi.

Treasures, Dungeons & the Church

GIOVANNI BATTISTA PIRANESI.

By A. Hyatt Mayor. New York: H. Bittner & Co. 138 pp. \$12.

By CARL ZIGROSSER

IN HIS new book on Piranesi, A. Hyatt Mayor continues the exploration of eighteenth-century Italian graphic art that was begun by his monographs on "The Bibiena Family" and on "Baroque and Romantic Stage Design" (in collaboration with Janos Scholz). The three books, all published under the same imprint, supplement one another, for there is an element of stage décor in Piranesi's work, and conversely one can find in the other two books the kind of drawings that sometimes masquerade under his name. The new book is a handsome quarto volume with excellent full-page plates and a well-written text which sums up the esthetic merit and historic importance for us of the "Rembrandt of antique ruins."

The Bibiena book was in a sense pioneer work, being the first study in English on the celebrated family of stage designers; whereas the Piranesi is the latest contribution to a fair-sized bibliography in English that includes at least three books and considerable periodical literature in our era. Piranesi, thus, is not a forgotten name today. The frustrated architect, perhaps, and the archeologist with his crotchety controversies (both ably discussed in the book) have faded into oblivion, but the

artist still remains—the artist, par excellence, of architecture. His etched oeuvre was stupendous, approximately a thousand copper plates, many of them large in size and involving laborious archeological research, yet etched with verve and inspired draftsmanship. Legrand records Piranesi's reply to Pope Clement XIII, who expressed astonishment at his facility: "It is as easy for me to engrave a plate as it is for Your Holiness to bestow a benediction."

Tourists bought Piranesi prints in his day; and impressions taken from the sadly worn coppers can still be bought at the Calcografia Nazionale. They have become part of the world's cultural heritage. Our concept of Roman monuments and antiquities is largely based on Piranesi's interpretation: we still see them through his eyes. Basically accurate as most of his delineations are, they are always heightened by the peculiar qualities of his fiery temperament, or permeated with a romantic mood of melancholy and dilapidated grandeur. It is this suggestion of mood, the imaginative element in them, that has continued to keep his prints memorable. For all his ardent devotion to the ancient classical style,

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