

THE FINE ARTS

A LETTER FROM THE NATIONAL SCULPTURE SOCIETY

"THE undersigned believe that the awards at the current exhibition of sculpture at the Metropolitan Museum epitomize a serious cancer in the culture of our nation." With these words the National Sculpture Society begins a letter of protest to the director and trustees of the Metropolitan. The Society somehow persuaded more than 600 people of varying prominence to sign the letter. It is an appalling document—one of the most ignoble and distorted in the long series of postwar attacks on "modern" art. It might have been written by Rep. Dondero, who several years ago in Congress ranted in a comparable vein against the "subversive" activities and work of contemporary painters and sculptors. The letter is in fact a classic example of reactionary irresponsibility toward truth and historical fact.

Take, for example, a sentence which occurs toward the end of the letter. "And in every country which fell victim to this insidious ideology [totalitarianism], modernistic art proved a most effective vanguard." In heaven's name how many times must the irrefutable fact be pointed out: that in the two most powerful totalitarian countries of our century—Soviet Russia and Nazi Germany—"modern" artists were considered enemies of the state and were persecuted by their governments, often at the instigation of conservative art organizations like the

venerable National Sculpture Society. The record of advanced contemporary art's suppression in Soviet Russia and in Germany is crystal clear; it has been printed and told endless times; there is absolutely no excuse whatever for a professional group such as the National Sculpture Society not being aware of it in abundant detail.

No excuse, that is, except the seductive demands of prejudice. Because the taste of our era has left the reputations of most academic artists hopelessly in arrears, the latter have fought a bitter rear-guard action, lashing out viciously with any weapon at hand. The time was when more or less "official" art circles had at least a certain dignity, pompous perhaps, but solemn and calm. Today these circles fight like Bowery thugs.

This is, I think, especially true of conservative sculptors. Too many people now understand that fine sculpture is far more than an expression of commemorative verisimilitude, and the "monument" business is at a new low. Hence the rage of certain members of the National Sculpture Society. I don't say of all of them (and one wonders how many of them were shown the letter to the Metropolitan before it was mailed, it being the long-established technique of minorities within art organizations to speak as if they had the backing of their absent colleagues), for there are good sculptors in the Society as well as bad. The good ones must shudder to read so sanctimonious a statement as that in the letter's concluding paragraph: "We not only regret that ridicule and criticism which this exhibition has brought upon the Metropolitan and sculpture, but we are deeply concerned over the far-reaching repercussions which such a policy on the part of the Museum, if continued, must have not only on art, but on our national life and character." If our national life and character can be determined by a great museum's belated attempt to catch up with developments in art that have survived and flourished throughout the world for nearly fifty years, we are in a bad way indeed.

The National Sculpture Society, however, was not content to attack the Metropolitan Museum alone. Its letter declares that modern artists

have "complete possession of the Whitney Museum for their experimental work" and have "taken over the Museum of Modern Art." The charge is thoroughly absurd. As a former staff member of one of these museums and as a witness to curatorial procedures of the other, I can promise unreservedly that neither institution has ever accepted dictation from any group of artists whatever. On the contrary, both museums have preserved their vital independence of decision and choice, often under pressures that have been exerted, to be fair, more frequently by "advanced" artists than by conservative. Some twelve years ago, for instance, the Museum of Modern Art was picketed by abstract painters who felt they were being neglected in favor of the traditionalists. Today, in the wake of its exhibition of American abstract art, the same museum is berated by artists who consider that abstraction has been overemphasized in its shows. In neither case has the Museum deviated from its predetermined policy and schedule. Nor has the Whitney Museum ever compromised in its attempt to exhibit the best American art of our time, regardless of the direction that art may take. Living painters and sculptors would, of course, like our museums to take sides in their polemic disputes. But the function of museums concerned with contemporary art is to follow artists, not to lead them, to exhibit and try to explain what these artists have done, not to tell them what they should do.

ONE of the weirdest paragraphs in the National Sculpture Society's letter has to do with the effect of the Metropolitan's exhibition on the young. The letter says: "The reaction on the thousands of children and students who have seen or will see this exhibition is a cause for great concern. In many of our schools and colleges, the students are being systematically indoctrinated in the philosophy of imaginative anarchy in the creative arts. This exhibition at the Metropolitan will do much to crown the efforts being made in this direction. Achievement, in the souls of the young, is invariably measured by success, and seeing sculpture which their younger brothers and sisters might have done in kindergarten sponsored and awarded prizes by the Metropolitan Museum will go a long way toward convincing them that the shortest and easiest method to become a nationally-famous sculptor is to produce something abstruse or sensational."

It would be difficult to imagine more arrant nonsense. In the first place, as museum documents will tell you, children mostly have an instinctive liking



"Animal Form I," by Rhys Caparn.

Avant-Garde Vistas

THE DADA PAINTERS AND POETS:
An Anthology. Edited by Robert Motherwell. New York: Wittenborn, Schultz. 432 pp. \$15.

By THOMAS B. HESS

WHAT is Dada?

"A joint stock company for the exploitation of ideas.

"Dada has 391 different attitudes and colors depending on the sex of the chairman.

"It transforms itself—affirms—simultaneously says the opposite—it doesn't matter—screams—goes fishing . . .

"Dada is against the future. Dada is dead.

"Dada is idiotic. Hurrah for Dada. Dada is not a literary school roar."

This series of answers is from Tristan Tzara, the Rumanian poet who was one of the founders of the group of painters, sculptors, writers, general-utility-type artists, agitators, opportunists, geniuses, charlatans, children, seers, and malcontents which coalesced from Zurich and New York to explode violently and happily in Paris and Germany.

When was Dada?

"Dada is ageless," wrote Georges Hugnet, manipulator of free-verse and cut-apart pin-ups who is also one of Dada's several official historians. But being an official historian, he also sets some dates. Dada is in Zurich in 1916-18; New York, 1916-21; Berlin, 1918-22; Cologne and Hanover, 1919-22; Paris, 1919-23. After 1923 Parisian Dada was turned into surrealism—the most publicized art movement in history. Why is a volume of some four hundred pages and illustrations, weighing three and a half pounds, titled "The Dada Painters and Poets: An Anthology," of interest to anyone whose name is not mentioned in it, or who is not specializing in the period?

The answer is other questions: Why has the idea of a collective avant-garde become a matter of such sensitive importance? What makes artists turn so readily to public statements of private positions? How have the elementary strategies of shock and irresponsibility become such elaborate intellectual games? Dada is one grandparent of the confusions and accomplishments of modern art as we experience it today.

Of course an anthology is not meant

Thomas B. Hess, managing editor of the Art News, is the author of "Abstract Painting."



—Photos from American Sculpture 1951 Exhibition.
 "Arise!" by Henry Rox.

for "modern" art. They have it quite apart from attempts at indoctrination, and there is no evidence whatever that it has done them harm. In the second place, achievement is by no means always synonymous with success in the minds of the young; to say that it is, is to ignore much that psychology has taught us about the complexities of youthful thought and emotion. And thirdly, it is absurd to infer that the prize-winning sculptures in the Metropolitan's show could have been produced in a kindergarten class. The word "childlike" occurs very early in vituperative criticism of the arts. In our time the phrase "a child could have done it" has been used over and

over again, but never with substantiative proof. As applied to "modern" art it is by now a completely discredited phrase, utterly without meaning, a fact which makes all the more astonishing its use by the professional members of the National Sculpture Society.

Well, anyway, there are strong indications that many of these members are opposed to the letter circulated in their name. A meeting of the Society is said to have been called, and one hopes that from it will evolve a vigorous counter-statement. Nothing else at this point can regain for the Society the respect of the art world, both professional and amateur.

—JAMES THRALL SOBY.