



## Death of a Valiant



"The Shade," from the top of Auguste Rodin's "Gate of Hell" (Bronze, 1880).

**I**N THE spring of 1937 in New York the Buchholz Gallery opened its doors with an exhibition of sculpture and drawings, chiefly by German artists of the stature of Lehmbruck, Barlach, Kolbe, and Marcks. The show announced the arrival on the American art scene of a dealer who was to devote much of his immense energy and talent to promoting an interest here in sculpture and the graphic arts. The dealer was Curt Valentin, owner and director of the

Buchholz Gallery, which he later conducted under his own name. His recent death in Italy from a heart attack was one of the worst losses of a black year which has cost us the lives of many of the leading figures in the international art world.

Valentin began his career as an assistant in Paris to Henry Kahnweiler, like himself German-born and the dealer who most consistently championed the cubists during the first, difficult years of their move-

ment. After several years in Paris Valentin returned to Berlin in 1927 and there worked for a second remarkable dealer, Alfred Flechtheim, whose taste in contemporary German and Parisian art was far more advanced than that of most of his colleagues. It was at Flechtheim's gallery in 1932 that I first met Valentin. With that fast, springy walk which many of us later came to fear in terms of his health, he hurried in and out of a room where at least a hundred of the finest Paul Klee paintings and drawings were stacked against the walls and where stood Lehmbruck's huge "Standing Youth," now one of the proudest possessions of the Museum of Modern Art in New York. I remember that Valentin showed me copies of the gallery's imaginative yearbook of the arts, entitled "Omnibus," edited by Valentin among others.

In 1937 Valentin came to this country to open his own gallery. Two of his countrymen, J. B. Neumann and the late Karl Nierendorf, were already established here as dealers. Both had done a great deal to further the reputations of the outstanding Central European artists of our time. Both were interested in publishing. Neumann's "Art Lover" was, as its subtitle declared, an anthology of this devoted dealer's wide preferences in the art of the past and the present; in 1941 Nierendorf issued a fine album on the paintings and watercolors of Klee. It is no reflection on the attainments of these men to say that their struggle for the recognition of artists whose work was then outside the range of most collectors' taste in this country was immeasurably helped by the arrival of Curt Valentin.

For Valentin was a born salesman who made almost no effort whatever to sell. He was a trusted friend of many of the top-ranking museum curators and private collectors from coast to coast. He showed these clients everything that came into his gallery—paintings, sculptures, watercolors, drawings, prints. He loathed the customary mystification of his profession. He talked frankly about prices and never attempted to bargain. His enthusiasm for the works of art that passed through his hands was utterly genuine and was not affected in degree by the question of profit involved; I have watched him on many occasions become as excited about an inexpensive print as about a major work in oil or bronze.

The basic characteristic of Valentin's taste was strength. He liked robust artists like Beckmann, Moore, Lipchitz, and Marini, among others. But he also cherished sensitivity and

wit; I think I have never seen him more rapt than when looking at a group of Klee drawings he had just acquired. He talked little, never in jargon. He paced incessantly through the rooms of his gallery, too restless to pause for more than a few moments and eager not to distract visitors' attention from the works on the gallery walls. But his sincerity was so pronounced that those who knew him well could judge his reactions instantly. When he would pat a sculpture and murmur "marvelous" one knew that this was a man for whom art was the whole purpose of life.

AT THE end of each season it was Valentin's pleasure to send friends bound sets of the catalogues of the shows he had held during the year. By melancholy coincidence my set for 1953-54 arrived only a few days after his death. It reminded me again how distinguished and useful these catalogues are—uniform in size and containing many illustrations as well as illuminating short texts by the artists themselves or by writers qualified to know their work best. During the past season Valentin held one-man exhibitions of Klee (one of paintings and another of drawings), Marini, Picasso, Beckmann, Arp, Feininger, Rodin, and a group show of sculpture and sculptors' drawings. The list in itself is impressive. It becomes more so when one remembers how well selected and arranged the exhibitions were and how many eminent artists from the gallery's stable are missing because they had been shown a year or two before—Calder, Lipchitz, Masson, Moore, Léger, Maillol, Sutherland, and Piper, among others.

An indefatigable traveler, Valentin flew to Europe several times each year to visit the foreign artists he represented. He was one of the first to appreciate the resurgence of creative activity in postwar England, from which country Moore, Sutherland, and Piper were regulars on his exhibition schedule. He loved Italy, where the sculpture of Marino Marini was one of his fervent enthusiasms and where, just before his death, he was assembling an exhibition of paintings by the quiet master Giorgio Morandi. There can be no doubt that soon he would have held a show of younger German artists, considering his lifelong veneration for earlier stalwarts like Beckmann, Kirchner, and Klee. He was steadily on the lookout for American painters and sculptors of promise, and many of these were included in his exhibition of newcomers held last year. He was unreserved in his admiration for certain native artists like Ben Shahn who were represented by

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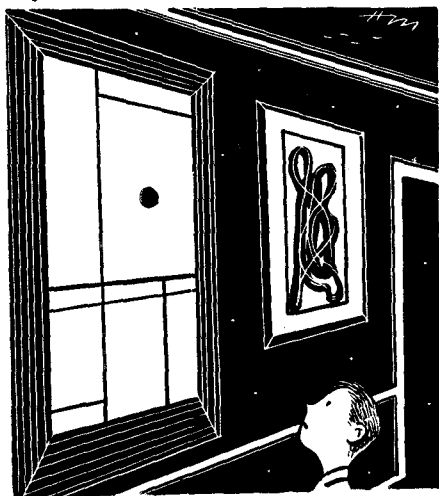
other galleries. He did not handle the School of Paris as an entity, but Juan Gris he championed always, Miro he esteemed, and Picasso he praised on every possible occasion.

For him art transcended questions of nationality. I remember him once shaking his head and asking: "How can anyone buy *only* American or *only* French or *only* Chinese pictures. I like to see what art is, before even asking where it came from."

NOT only did Valentin choose his artists with exceptional perceptivity, but he was courageous in exhibiting work which had temporarily become unfashionable. His Rodin show this past season was a case in point. Many people had come to think of Rodin as outmoded by more recent developments in sculpture. Valentin showed him as a vital precursor of these developments, and selected the exhibition with such acumen that many of us felt we were seeing the great French master for the first time. Similarly, he rescued Lovis Corinth's paintings from semi-oblivion (in America at least). His exhibition of Matisse's sculpture made clear that this world-famous painter has also been one of the most forceful and inventive sculptors of our century.

There is no space here to deal at length with the many art books published by Valentin over the years, often when he could ill afford to invest so much money in the impeccable printing of texts and plates on which he insisted. But these publications are respected and treasured throughout the civilized world. Their existence is one more proof of Valentin's taste, devotion, and energy. And all his many attainments aside, he was in himself an unforgettable human being—loyal, direct, gay, and kind, a man to whom the word "lovable" applies with all its original meaning and force.

—JAMES THRALL SOBY.



## The Beauty in Tools

*"Art and Industry," by Herbert Read (Horizon Press, 239 pp. \$6), an amply illustrated volume, offers the considered views on the implications of daily art to daily life of a distinguished British critic who has been considering the matter for more than three decades. Here it is reviewed by Martin James, member of the design department of Brooklyn College.*

By Martin James

HOW reassuring to be able to quote oneself on as many issues as Sir Herbert Read can after some thirty years of looking at art in its daily implications! In "Art and Industry," published in 1934 and now revised and generously reillustrated, he can flashback to "Art Now," "Education Through Art," "Grassroots of Art," and "The Philosophy of Modern Art." If it remains the classical introduction to the subject, it is that Mr. Read in England, like Lewis Mumford here or Siegfried Giedion in Switzerland, views esthetic events in their historical meaning and in the many-faceted light of our century's quests.

The grandeur and misery of which our worldly goods are susceptible form a problem of human bondage that has lodged with us these several generations past: industrial man is born unto beauty, but dwells everywhere in ugliness. Since 1850, from the eloquent Ruskin to the admonitory William Morris to the explosive Frank Lloyd Wright, a line of "reformers" and "prophets" have tried to set the world aright, until even the middlebrow common man waves the banner of pure design.

Much trouble, Mr. Read finds, comes of two false antinomies: the first, Fine Art versus Applied Art, began with the birth of easel painting in the Renaissance, when the artist came to see himself as a humanist and to lord it over the humble craftsman. The second, Machine Art versus Handicraft, came about with the Industrial Revolution. The difference lies in "one man using a tool with his hands and producing an object that shows at every stage the direction of his will and the impression of his personality; and a machine which is producing, without the intervention of a particular man, objects of a uniformity and precision that show no

individual variation and have no personal charm." Do serially made objects lack the esthetic qualities of the custom made? Mr. Read demonstrates they do not: "every tool is a machine . . . and every machine is a tool."

From the first, however, "Fine Art" was used to veil the mass-produced object's purity and mask its anonymity. The industrial genius Josiah Wedgwood, born as early as 1730, in his own lifetime converted a peasant craft into an industrial manufacture. He was the first potter to "think out forms which would be thoroughly well suited to their purpose and at the same time capable of duplication with precision in unlimited quantities." (Of Goethe, Novalis said: "His works are like the Englishman's wares—extremely simple, neat, convenient, and durable.") Yet Wedgwood was to allow the classicizing painter John Flaxman to design "ornamental" wares in imitation of Greek pottery—which in turn relied somewhat heavily on painters for surface and on costlier examples in metal for its forms.

When what Giedion calls "Mechanized Adornment" blossomed in the 1830s Parliament met the challenge of foreign competition by injecting the public with massive doses of Fine Art via museums, schools, and examinations, forming a taste in the humanist tradition, but alien to the abstract character of useful objects.

EVERY well-designed article that leaves a factory, Mr. Read maintains, is designed by an abstract artist, whether its creator thinks of himself as such or not. Rapidly, but informatively, he surveys the industrial arts by materials (inorganic: pottery, glass and metals; organic: wood and leather), by mode of working (molding, casting, blowing, weaving), and by function of the object. Thus when clay or glass are formed into utensils the geometric norm for the vase is a hollow sphere; halved to admit the hand it becomes a bowl; quartered and provided with a horizontal plane it is the dish or plate. Handle and spout, foot and rim are further elements of balance, rhythm, and accent. "Such analysis may seem elementary, but it is only by realizing the essential elements in form that we arrive at the beauty of its variations."

Mr. Read covers briefly the fas-