

FINE ARTS



—From the book.

"The Lascaux murals . . . are the most overwhelming of prehistoric paintings."

Prehistory in Image

"Lascaux, Or the Birth of Art," by Georges Bataille (translated by Austryn Wainhouse. Skira. 149 pp. 68 plates. \$16.50), is an album of and commentary on the prehistoric cave paintings in southern France that have greatly illuminated our knowledge of the evolution of art. Our reviewer is Robert Goldwater of Queens College.

By Robert Goldwater

IN SEPTEMBER 1940 four boys from the town of Montignac, France, exploring a hole left by an uprooted tree came upon what, since 1945 when their findings could be published to the world, has become the best known of all prehistoric sites. Somehow it seemed correct that once again, as sixty years before at Altamira, which produced the first reve-

lation of prehistoric painting, the find should have been made by children. This time, to be sure, adult vision, long since educated to a freshness and directness it could not admit at the end of the nineteenth century, and familiar with its subject, needed no convincing by childish clairvoyance. Yet in the popular mind there is still a connection between the art of children and that of prehistoric man.

The Lascaux murals, in their concentrated volume and brilliant preservation, are the most overwhelming of prehistoric paintings. As such they have fortified our understanding of the art of the "Reindeer Age." But fascinating as they are in themselves—and no one who has seen them is likely to underestimate their power and beauty—they have not altered our knowledge in any fundamental fashion. Indeed, their very impressive-

ness comes in part from the fact that they reinforce a vision which the evolution of modern art, in part under the prompting of this very kind of painting, has inclined us to accept and receive. To find united so many and such fine examples of what had been known in bits and pieces joined the pleasure of recognition to the recognition of grandeur.

Besides, archeologically the Lascaux site is in a not unexpected situation. The valley of the Vézère (to the east of Périgueux) is a region long known to have been inhabited by prehistoric man. In it were many famous dwelling spots where the progression of man's artifacts should be observed, and others, such as Font de Gaume, Laugerie Basse, Les Combarelles, where some paintings have been preserved. Lascaux is somewhat removed, but it is in the same general region.

The pictures and text of Georges Bataille's "Lascaux, Or the Birth of Art," like those in most of the volumes of Skira's Great Centuries of Painting Series, are of equal importance in the presentation of this "chapel" of prehistoric art. M. Bataille's rather broken-up text is essentially in two parts: a description of the cave and its decorations, very much like a very learned guided tour, and his evocation of the psychological setting of these works, what called them forth, and what they still mean to us today.

Descriptively both text and illustrations are most faithful in the details. The brilliant colors of the paintings are hardly exaggerated in the pictures, their texture can be seen, and the author carefully calls our attention to the variations in style, the overlays, and the different techniques employed. He knows how to make us look at everything, and the illustrations bear out his enthusiasm. But the wide-angle shots of the ensemble of the cave cannot do it justice, cannot give the sense of claustrophobic enclosure, of being surrounded on all sides by powerful images. Nor does the metaphor of the chapel suggest how different the continuously curved surface of the rock is from any constructed walls and ceiling. The effect still felt today must have been greatly enhanced when the stream that ran through it had not performed its millennial work of erosion, and the whole was probably so low that nowhere could one stand upright.

FOR Georges Bataille, Lascaux represents not only the birth of art, but the birth of man; indeed in his eyes the two are synonymous. He refers to the immediate purposes of sym-

pathetic magic in the service of the hunt, for which these pictures (like those elsewhere) were carried out. But he finds their real significance—and this is the theme of his text—in their documentation of man's self-consciousness, his recognition of his own essential qualities, and his differences from the animals he so magnificently depicts. The beasts are everywhere, naturalistically portrayed; man is rare, and is usually shown disguised and highly stylized. Here is revealed a self-consciousness that betrays a growing humanity. Thus the author finds the history of man—as man—suddenly pushed back from the “noon” of Greece to the “early dawn” of Lascaux. This is an interesting if somewhat speculative thesis, and the author develops it with eloquence. It would have been well if it had been buttressed by a discussion of some of the more tangible problems concerning this art: the reasons for its naturalism and why it disappeared, only to be reconquered in such hard fashion at a later date; just how the Lascaux cave was used, whether by the priestly caste alone or by the whole tribe; how long it was used and the time span and evolution the overlays imply. The Abbé Breuil and the other authorities the author generously mentions as his scientific support (with the important omission of Burkitt) could have been put to good use here.

Translation being the ungrateful task it is, it seems unkind to mention that this one might, in spots, be improved. When such sentences as “This unique message gives us strongly to pause” are scattered through an otherwise readable text one can only wish that the publisher, by having more monetary respect for his translator, had given him a chance to do a better job.

August Moon

By Gerhard Friedrich

ACROSS the hill and by the
cedared brook
The crickets chirp their midnight
serenade.
Earth, like a poem in a
precious book,
Is finely woven out of light and shade.

All things have lost their weight, and
rest and dream,
And while they dream, they smile
mysteriously.
And higher climbs the moon above
the stream,
The rounded symbol of eternity.

Monastic Art

“The Canterbury School of Illumination, 1066-1200,” by C. R. Dodwell (Cambridge University Press. 140 pp. with 274 photographs on 73 plates. \$15), is a revealing scholarly study of the product of a major British monastic art center. It is reviewed below by Harry Bober, associate professor at the Institute of Fine Arts, NYU.

By Harry Bober

WITH C. R. Dodwell's study of the illumination at Canterbury, from the Conquest until about 1200, we are at last in a position to advance from superficial judgment to well-balanced perspective in appraising this major school of British monastic art. His new book is a model of thorough scholarship and clarity of presentation. In it is brought together every significant item of historical and artistic evidence, coordinated with important original paleographical data; the whole intelligently oriented to Continental and insular centers. Nor is the author's style cramped by the overwhelming inhibitions which the unwieldy behind-the-scenes apparatus of cautious scholarship might be almost expected to produce. Dodwell's warmth for his subject never abandons him and his pace develops in sympathetic response to the history for he is always sensitive to the essence of the styles. The plates include hundreds of illustrations which afford particular pleasure as well as an unusual degree of enlightenment. They are reproduced from clear and sharp photographs; the discriminating choice of details and comparative material communicates a sense of the devoted intensity with which he has followed the problems.

Dr. Dodwell has been able to distinguish the character of each of Canterbury's two centers, Christ Church and St. Augustine's, assigning and dating some seventy-five manuscripts to the former, and forty to the latter during the period from about 1050 to 1200. Forming a leit-motif through the history, and nicely accenting each of the three main phases, are the successive copies of the famous Utrecht Psalter which were made in Canterbury. In the first of these, the Harley Psalter, the derivation of pre-Conquest Anglo-Saxon “impressionistic” style from its Carolingian model is demonstrable. Yet even here English preoccupation with “pattern” begins to transform the nervous calligraphic quality towards the severity and rigid-



—From the book.

The Paris Psalter “leads to the foredawn of the new, international Gothic style.”

ity of Romanesque. In the mid-twelfth-century Eadwine Psalter the process by which “suggestion had been giving way to definition, impressionism to Romanesque,” is accomplished. This mid-century climax is better exemplified, however, by the two great Canterbury Bibles: the Dover Bible from Christ Church and the Lambeth Bible from St. Augustine's. Each represents the high-point in Romanesque for its house, each a masterpiece of English twelfth-century style. The third and last copy of the Utrecht Psalter, a manuscript in Paris, brings the history to a close. The second half of the century marks a decline in quality and number of the Canterbury manuscripts, yet even as the local peculiarities of style become blurred the Paris Psalter leads to the foredawn of the new, international Gothic style.

This book is thus more than a study of one center. It gives an important cross-section of the character of English Romanesque painting with an illuminating interpretation of the assimilation and transformation of Anglo-Saxon and Norman, Continental, Byzantine, and classical sources. The publishers tell us that the author has kept in mind the unspecialized reader who might be interested in art. But even the English reader would probably admit that the level is strictly Third Programme. Dodwell has done better for us than to coin new categorical slogans. He has brought together a rich and living chapter in the history of English art.