

Science and Nature

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be attended to by a technician. But in his crude observation blind, standing on a borrowed table stabbed into the mud and slanting toward a stream full of ferocious little fish and dangerous crocodiles, Zahl had to do everything for himself. His table-top, his jungle hammock, and his dugout canoe (powered by the outboard motor) were all springboards for his mind. And each incident set him off to considerations of parasites, of toads that lived in privies, of the relationships between crocodiles and egrets, of nesting group behavior, of land migrants between the Americas, of lungfishes, and of the significance of individual life.

It would be hard to find a more complete change of environment for a scientist engaged in cancer research in a metropolis than to put him down in the tropical rain on the muddy streets of San Fernando de Apure and ask that he find ways to explore the local swamps for birds of no apparent importance. The contrasts in sanitation are appreciated the more as Zahl tells of his gradual adaptation in viewpoint until he could feel perfectly at home under the trying conditions he found. And in retrospect the expedition was certainly a valuable experience. He made first-hand acquaintance not only with the scarlet bird he sought but also with many men he could admire as friends. In longer perspective his sympathetic understanding for people with a different way of life may far outweigh the personnel satisfaction over photographs of the blood-red bird.

"Coro-Coro" touches so satisfyingly upon a variety of aspects in the tropic scene that it brings to the arm-chair adventurer a vicarious familiarity with the land and its plants, its animals and its native citizens. Bird-lovers will delight in Zahl's account of the young hoatzins, clinging to the shrubbery by means of reptilelike claws on their wings, or swimming underwater—apparently immune to the hungry caribes. Fishermen will find new lore on the habits of these famous fish—known in Brazil as piranha, in British Guiana as perai. Naturalists will see fresh relationships between the abundance of caribes and the nitrogen-rich droppings of the nesting water birds, fertilizing the swamp waters until they become a rich culture medium for plants and small creatures upon which the meat-eating fish can thrive between opportunities to attack larger victims. And in Zahl's thoughts while lost in the

grass-filled lagoons between two rivers the thinker of any creed will follow a scientific mind through the gamut of personal introspection—from fear and despair to the conclusion that "what distinguishes man from the other animals is not so much the greater capacity of his intellect but his enormously greater potential for hope. . . . For a believer or a philosopher hope is the essence on which life feeds, the essence before which death flees."

Notes

READABLE ASTRONOMY: Astronomy has long held first place as the most popular of the physical sciences, a fact indicated by the large number of books which discuss recent advances for laymen. Although such books include a great deal of interesting material, they can rarely be recommended as examples of good writing. They are almost always presented in the simple but stiff style of well-intentioned experts trying hard to be informal. Ernest Agar Beet's *"The Sky and Its Mysteries"* (British Book Centre, \$3.25) is an exception to this tendency, and therefore a welcome addition to the list of popular astronomy books. Mr. Beet is an accomplished writer, as well as an active teacher and secretary of the British Astronomical Association. Furthermore, he resists the temptation to go all-out for theories that have not yet been proved, something which has proved irresistible to other writers in the field.

An early chapter describes the instruments used to gather, measure, and analyze light rays which reach the earth from outer space. The photometer, for example, translates the light falling upon it into electrical currents and is so sensitive that it can detect the amount of light emitted by a candle burning several miles away. These instruments, 200-inch telescopes, and other devices furnish the facts which astronomers piece together to build an ever-changing picture of the universe. Dr. Beet outlines established notions about the sun and other stars as atomic furnaces, producing energy by a process similar to that being applied in the development of hydrogen bombs. According to a recent theory, these seething bodies may be refueling themselves automatically by picking up fresh matter as they pass through great clouds of interstellar dust. The book closes with a list of some other vital problems which have not been explained: how the planets formed, the origin of the craters of the moon, and the possibility of life on other

solar systems in an expanding universe.
—JOHN PFEIFFER.

PSEUDO-SCIENCE'S PAST: Although modern science started only three centuries or so ago, men had been gathering basic knowledge about nature for thousands of years before that. Recent studies in the history of science are unanimous in giving credit where credit is due—and dispelling the notion that the sages of ancient civilizations were superstitious children compared to our own investigators. In *"Astrology and Alchemy—Two Fossil Sciences"* (Philosophical Library, \$5) Mark Graubard of the University of Minnesota uses many of these studies as sources for his own analysis of alchemy and astrology, branches of pseudo-science whose development is closely bound up with science's long past. Astrology is the older of the two and probably originated during the third millennium B.C. in Chaldea and Babylonia. Detailed predictions based on the motions and positions of the planets, the forerunners of the horoscopes which are published in magazines and newspapers today, were the contribution of the Greeks.
—J. P.

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Bullish Days in the Art Market

IN NEW YORK a short time ago a painting by Henri Matisse was reported on excellent authority to have sold for \$75,000. This was not a large picture nor was it one of Matisse's revolutionary early works which have had a world-shaking effect on the evolution of twentieth-century art. It was an odalisque from the relaxed series painted at Nice during the mid-1920s, exceptional in quality, but nevertheless the kind of picture that would have been offered twenty-five years ago for a maximum figure of \$20,000. The price of \$75,000 was set by the dealer before the artist's recent death, and Matisse's demise cannot therefore be considered the usual melancholy factor in the rise of his paintings' values.

Also in New York this winter, a Bonnard has changed hands for \$42,000, and some months ago a remarkable Soutine landscape brought \$20,500 at public auction. At the same time a Modigliani figure piece was held by a dealer at \$45,000. The Picasso prices are naturally on a par with those for Matisse, and a number of less eminent or younger European artists have moved up into the \$10,000-or-over category for outstanding pictures. Indeed, the most phenomenal rise in the modern art market has taken place outside the top hierarchy of contemporary masters. If the prices for Matisse, Picasso, Rouault, and Bonnard have tripled or quadrupled since the war, those for some of their less overwhelming colleagues have soared in far greater proportion. To cite three almost random examples, a Kandinsky costing less than \$1,000 in 1930 would now fetch about \$8,000; a Mondrian actually bought by an American museum for \$400 twenty years ago would be almost \$10,000 today; some of the finest Miros of the brilliant 1933 series were sold in New York soon after their completion for around \$600 each, and a fair current estimate of their value would be between \$7,500 and \$10,000 apiece. Paul Klees, which used to be less than \$500, are now ten times that price and going up steadily.

The rise in the modern-art market has been staggering, and the end may not be in sight. We must remember, however, that this applies primarily to outstanding examples. Lesser works by even the present market's favorites go up more slowly and with effort,

though there is a good deal of "name" buying among inexperienced collectors, particularly in the case of post-impressionist masters like Cézanne and Van Gogh. Moreover, works of minor quality are helped to rise in price by being identified with successful and influential schools of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Thus *fauve* and cubist works tend to be more expensive than later pictures of comparable scale. The turn of the surrealists for market appreciation is probably next, and the question of historical importance, once ignored by almost everyone except museum curators, now seems to count heavily among private as well as public collectors. There is much talk these days of "best periods" for a given artist, and many of the newer collections are formed by head as much as by eye.

But what has caused the incredible boom? The frequent answer given by laymen in this country is that there is a great deal of money around, that we are in a period of inflation with the stock market back to 1929 levels, and that we Americans simply cannot find enough things to buy. The theory sounds plausible but is quite erroneous. To begin with, all the leading New York dealers are agreed that the prices for the international figures in modern art are established in Paris rather than on this side of the Atlantic. In 1952, for example, the Cognacq sale in Paris brought such staggering sums that, as one New York dealer put the matter, "if we had been in the stock market, the next day we would have posted outside our door doubled or tripled prices for Cézanne, Van Gogh, Picasso, and Co." Since that time other Parisian auctions have increased the price level. And this level has held or gone up in recent auctions at Christie's in London and at Ketterer's in Stuttgart, to mention only two public sales outside France.

WITH regard to the international art market centering in Paris there are several factors to be considered. First of all, Europeans are used to buying modern paintings and sculptures as an investment. The French are the most inveterate plungers in this regard, but among their neighbors only the Swiss almost never sell any works of art acquired, no matter how great their appreciation

in value. We Americans are like the Swiss in this respect, and very few of our leading private collections have been formed with the idea of future profit in mind. The Germans on the other hand, sometimes for pleasure but also sometimes because they favor transportable assets, have come back into the market with extraordinary funds at their disposal, buying a number of the most highly-priced post-impressionist and School of Paris paintings available. The Germans have been rivaled in bidding by the Swedish and the South Americans, not to mention the ubiquitous Swiss. As another factor in the art boom, the British Government lately has removed its stiff restrictions on the expenditure of pounds abroad for works of art to be taken back to England. The result, as an eminent New York dealer told me recently, has been a flood of letters from British museums and collectors asking for lists of pictures in stock. The English are used to high prices even for strictly contemporary works; the Pre-Raphaelites sold in their lifetime for sums that make one goggle in retrospect.

Since the war it has not been uncommon for collectors from all over Europe to acquire works of art offered here, and some of the powerful international dealers, with galleries in Paris and London as well as New York, have returned to their foreign offices certain masterworks, in the knowledge that they will sell more readily abroad. It is therefore nonsense to claim that pictures by the most celebrated artists from the time of impressionism to the present are expensive because we Americans have gone hog wild. To prove my point, let me cite a recent occurrence. A few months ago two later nineteenth-century paintings of the rarest quality appeared on the New York market at prices in excess of \$300,000 each. They found no takers among our richest art patrons, but were pre-empted by cable from a foreign collector.

A basic reason for the present boom is that paintings of exceptional distinction are scarce. The market has been drying up, and only rarely nowadays does an authoritative work by one of the leading masters from Manet to Picasso appear in the salesrooms of dealers and auctioneers. Many of the best paintings (and sculptures) have been acquired by art museums here and abroad and permanently removed from the market. This and other factors have helped extend the boom to artists of lesser stature than the modern old masters—to Dufy, say, as opposed to Matisse, to Vlaminck or Segonzac as opposed to Braque. There are not enough five-star works of art to go around. But important pri-