

From Ash Can to Cataclysm

"American Painting from the Armory Show to the Depression," by Milton W. Brown (Princeton University Press, 244 pp. \$15), offers a history (and some interesting interpretations) of U.S. art from 1913 to 1929. Our reviewer is Professor Robert Goldwater, chairman of the Department of Art at Queens College, New York City, and author of *"Primitivism in Modern Painting."*

By Robert Goldwater

MEMORIES of the Twenties abound in the world of art, and many of its masters are still painting in styles whose main features they had developed during that time. Yet in an esthetic sense it is a period twice removed from the present: once by the realistic tendency (and WPA battles) of the Thirties, and once again by the increasingly abstract and symbolic painting of the last fifteen years. Thus, despite brilliant survivals, the art of pre-1929 appears as a story that ended with the impact of the Depression on the artist, and it is in this way that the author of *"American Painting from the Armory Show to the Depression"* quite properly tells his story.

His title tells us that he begins with 1913, when the Armory Show (that exhibition conceived in enthusiasm and generosity but born into vituperation and ridicule) presented the United States with a sudden kaleidoscopic view of the then shocking progression of European art from impressionism through cubism. Actually, however, he dwells at some length on the dozen years preceding the Armory show—years during which American art broke away from the pallid tenuousness of the nineteenth-century academic tradition. He is obviously fond of Henri, Luks, Sloan, Shinn, and their friends, of their energetic delight in scenes of city street, backyard, and tavern, and of their generous concern with the picturesque spectacle of their fellow men, most of whom, like themselves, were poor. Mr. Brown writes of these men, for whose sake (love giving license) he has expanded the name of the Ash Can School, with a detailed enthusiasm that he gives to no sin-

gle part of the ensuing two decades.

This is the key to an understanding of his two terminal dates. One is an artistic event, the other an economic cataclysm, and he is at some pains to explain their relevance by his belief in the double reference, esthetic and social, of all art—a belief with which there surely need be no argument. But it becomes apparent that he sees the period 1913 to 1929 as an interlude in a realistic tradition, which his turn of phrase constantly suggests is the proper direction and true character of American art. To him realism and "modernism" are opposite if not equal; the one public and socially useful, the other isolated, esoteric, and eventually meaningless.

Yet Mr. Brown has unraveled the complicated and interwoven events of thirty years of American painting to tell a clear and fascinating story. All these elements emerge with precision: the fight of Henri against the academy, Stieglitz and the *cenacle* of "291," George Bellows's athletic figure, Max Weber's immersion in the modern movement, Hopper and Burchfield as romantic realists, and Marsh's virtuoso draftsmanship. He has done pioneer work in gathering the documents that tell the tale of changing critical tastes from Frank Jewett Mather to Duncan Phillips, and of the education out of conservatism of some of the outstanding

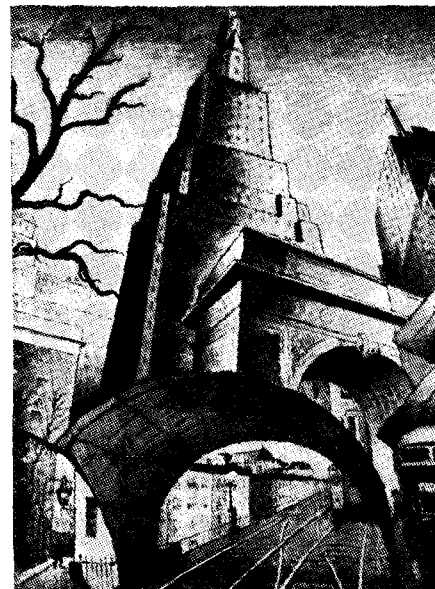
"modernist" collectors. His account of the "pseudo-scientific" theories of Maratta and Dow is among the most valuable sections of his book.

This is admittedly a broad history of the development and interaction of the general artistic tendencies of a time. Into it have been fitted short characterizations of a very great number of individual artists, and the result is a rich and well-filled chronicle. In many cases these descriptions are excellent, though in others the author's recurrent tendency to equate style with subject-matter and his strong preference for realism have altered a true perspective. Sympathy for backwoods "buck-eye" cannot save Walt Kuhn's posed figures from emptiness; and, whatever the initial impulse and influence, the Sovers' sentimental renderings have little to do with Degas. Similarly, Hopper's vision is much more penetrating than "snapshot," and Marin does not portray New York (much less Delaunay the Eiffel Tower) as "a fearful and oppressive social force." The significance of *collage* is hardly to be reduced to a "manipulation of materials," nor is love for the "esoteric" the outstanding quality of the Arensberg collection, centered as it is on cubism.

Though it is outside his theme Mr. Brown writes as though he regrets all that has taken place in American art and taste since 1940. Do we today still believe that "modernism" (sic) is a passing excess? I think most observers of today would give to the facts of the esthetic history a very different set of values. But Mr. Brown has written an important book, and it is good to see American art dealt with in a historical fashion.

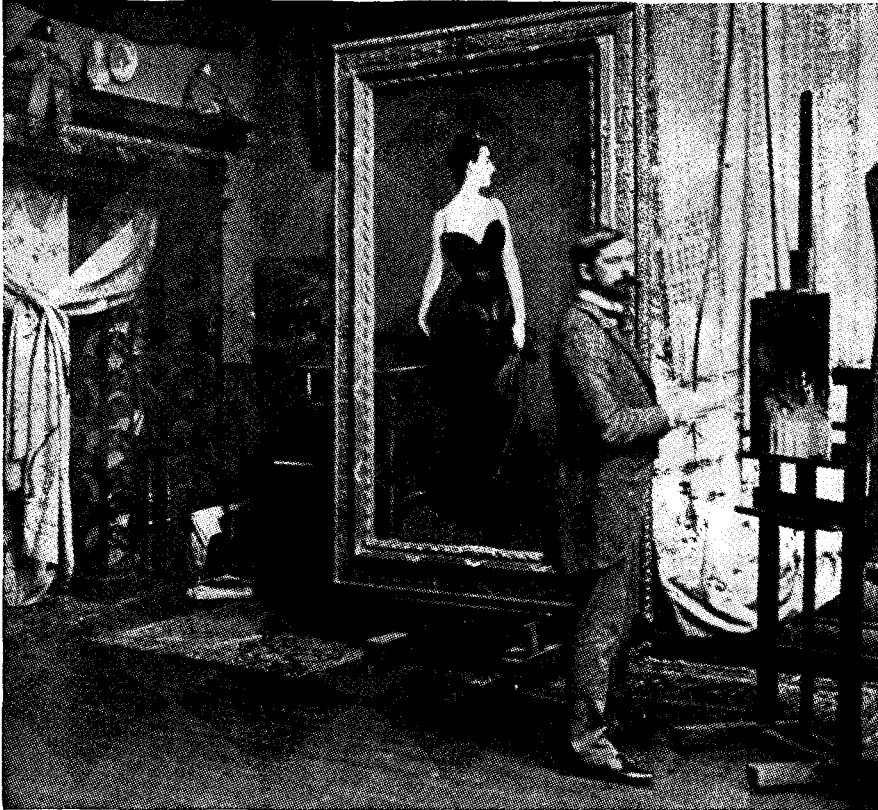


William J. Glackens's "Washington Square."



—From the book

Glenn O. Coleman's "Bus View."



—Jacket photograph for "John Singer Sargent."

Sargent with "Mme. Gautreau"—"most sought-after portrait painter on two continents."

Sympathetic Cher Maître

"John Singer Sargent," by Charles Merrill Mount (W. W. Norton. 464 pp. \$5.95), is an admiring and affectionate portrait of the painter of "Madame Gautreau," "Judith Gautier," and other well-known works. Holger Cahill, our reviewer, is the author of "New Horizons in American Art."

By Holger Cahill

THE story of painter John Singer Sargent's early life was the *donnée* for Henry James's short novel "The Pupil." James said he got the hint from a conversation in a railway carriage, but he may well have had it from Sargent. In any event, Sargent's early years as James tells the story were not unlike those of the pupil Morgan Moreen, a boy who saw through the shoddy devices of his too openly aspiring family.

Now a new (and non-fictional) biography of Sargent has been published, and it is a portrait of a painter done with affection and admiration. It gives us an intimate glimpse of the

young Sargent (and of his European-trotting family, which always lived on the precarious edge of a small income from America).

After some youthful art studies in Italy Sargent entered the atelier of Carolus-Duran in Paris. Mr. Mount gives a good picture of the artist as student, of his easy acquisition of Carolus-Duran's technique, which he carried to a mastery greater than that of his teacher, and of his first promising years as a portrait painter in Paris. This early period of success came to an end in 1884 with the rather silly scandal caused by the exhibition of his portrait of Madame Gautreau, and in that year Sargent moved to London and began building up the reputation which made him the most sought-after and highly-paid portrait painter on two continents. In England and later in America he was introduced in magazine articles by his friend Henry James, who saw in him the "slightly uncanny spectacle of a talent which on the very threshold of its career has nothing more to learn." This statement, meant as flattery, may in time stand as Sargent's epitaph.

Sargent carried to perfection the technique of Carolus-Duran, which one may call a popularization of methods that Manet derived from the later paintings of Velasquez and Franz Hals. With this technique when he was at his best Sargent turned out first-rate portraits, among them "Madame Gautreau" (Metropolitan Museum of Art), "Robert Louis Stevenson" (John Hay Whitney collection), "Judith Gautier," whose subject was the daughter of the French poet (Detroit Institute of Arts), and "Mrs. Charles Gifford Dyer" (Art Institute of Chicago). From these one may agree with the judgment of the late Frank Jewett Mather that at his best he is a portrait painter of the first order. (And that at his worst his work was flimsy and specious, and that the average run of his work shows him as a picture manufacturer "merely dextrous.")

BUT Mr. Mount sees Sargent as a dynamic innovator who "created a portraiture such as had never before been seen." He believes that Sargent went beyond Carolus-Duran by incorporating in his work everything of value in impressionism and bringing it "back into the mainstream of art," though neither Sargent's portraits nor the landscape watercolors of his later career do anything to support this belief. Sargent's understanding of impressionism did not go beyond Carolus-Duran's popular version of Manet's "dark impressionism." As an American impressionist he is outranked by Mary Cassatt, Theodore Robinson, and John Twachtman. As a portrait painter he does not equal his contemporary Thomas Eakins or the American masters of the eighteenth century. As a watercolorist he is not in the same class with Winslow Homer. His murals in the Boston Public Library and the Boston Museum of Fine Arts cannot stand comparison with the mural painting of his contemporary John La Farge in the Church of the Ascension, New York. As a book "John Singer Sargent" has about it the twilight mood of history which is lived in its own penumbra without any of the unsettling illuminations of hindsight. It is Sargent as his contemporary friends and admirers saw him, lifted above European and American masters who outranked him and endowed with stature and timelessness which the years have subjected to the inevitable bleak erosion of critical opinion. But one may still sympathize with Mr. Mount, who sees Sargent as a *cher maître*, and thank him for new insights into one of the most fabulous of American success stories.