

## Why They Came to Buffalo

**I**N BUFFALO on January 19 an international art audience of distinguished VIPs listened to Governor Nelson Rockefeller dedicate the new wing of the Albright-Knox Art Gallery. Visitors poured into the city from all over the United States, from as far away as California and Texas, from Canada, and even from Europe and Japan, for this was a notable event. Now, with hanging space doubled, a full survey of the Buffalo museum's impressive art collection could be seen for the first time.

Over the years an extraordinary sequence of modern art, interspersed with fine but infrequent earlier works, has been quietly assembled here. The names of two donors immediately come to mind, for without the knowledge, enthusiasm, courage, and generosity of Seymour H. Knox and A. Conger Goodyear the Buffalo museum would be little more than a representative provincial art gallery. Now, on the contrary, it is a dazzling affirmation of Western art during the last hundred years, a "must" for anyone interested in this field.

One is repeatedly impressed by a pageant of outstanding masterpieces, not merely good examples of a man's work but often *the* definitive climax of an entire career. Rarely have I seen a better painting by Arshile Gorky than the ambiguously titled canvas "The Liver is the Cock's Comb," nor a

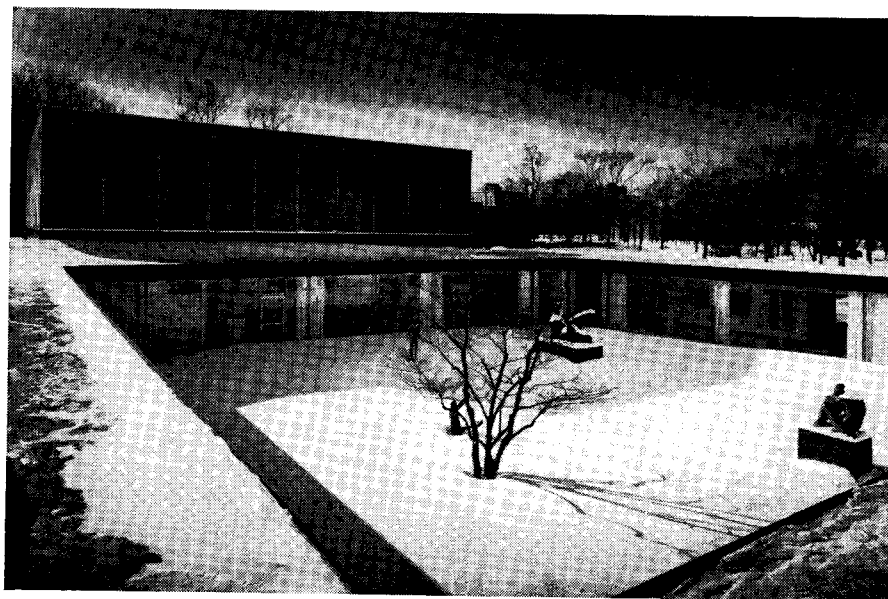
greater sculpture by Henry Moore than his heroic wood carving, "Internal and External Forms." Where can one find a Motherwell that challenges this somber "Elegy to the Spanish Republic" or paintings by the rarely seen Clyfford Still that more fully express his special brand of reverberating music? And where is there a canvas by de Kooning that better sets the pace for the future than "Gotham News" of 1955? If the future seems to include a host of imitators (some few of whom are unfortunately sprinkled around the walls of the Albright-Knox Art Gallery) this does not mitigate against de Kooning's fine painting or others of similar caliber hanging nearby. The tendency to acquire an example of each young avant-garde artist as he emerges on the New York gallery scene is less disturbing in Buffalo than it would be in a more static institution, for here one senses that re-evaluations are constantly taking place and that a thoughtful weeding-out will eventually follow.

During the past seven years Seymour Knox has given the museum no less than 165 works, almost all of recent date and many of astonishingly high quality. He and his excellent colleague Gordon Smith, director of the Albright-Knox Art Gallery (Mr. Knox has been its president for twenty-four years), have organized a bold and imaginative acquisition program. Working as a team, these two men are willing to

make mistakes, to take chances, to lead rather than follow. That works of the past are overshadowed by the scale and scope of modern acquisitions is undeniable, but lack of balance is a danger that often accompanies specialization. During recent years, in return for the same funds, it would have been virtually impossible for Buffalo to have concentrated as successfully on art of the past, what with current prices and the increasing rarity of old masters. This is not to suggest that the museum limit itself to the present; after all, parents are quite as important as children. And it is true that minor examples are still frequently available in many fields, but what makes the Albright-Knox Gallery unique is its insistence on top works. Typical are three superlative paintings by three lesser cubists: a vast composition by the American Morgan Russell (for my money, the best canvas of his I've ever seen), and equally outstanding works by the Frenchmen Albert Gleizes and Jean Metzinger. At Buffalo, characteristically, all three artists surpass themselves.

When Mr. Knox noted at the dedication that "the glory of a museum is its permanent collection," he was right. And this attitude is not new to Buffalo. Already in 1926 and 1927, A. Conger Goodyear in his capacity as chairman of the trustees' acquisition committee was guiding the gallery with the eyes of a true pioneer, and not always with the full understanding or enthusiastic support of his more conservative fellow trustees. It took courage those days to purchase works by Matisse, Brancusi, and Picasso, to arrange exhibitions by Lachaise, Bourdelle, and Noguchi. Mr. Goodyear not only advised the museum but gave it many of its finest modern European masterworks. Buffalo suffered an irreparable loss when he left for New York, where appropriately he became the first president of the Museum of Modern Art. It is greatly to his credit that few if any mediocre nineteenth- and early twentieth-century paintings are hanging on the Albright's walls, no "charming little" samples to blur our vision or depress our spirits.

Not to be overlooked is the architecture of the new wing, also of the sensitively renovated old building which was originally erected fifty-seven years ago. Without sleek gadgets or banal "modernisms," Gordon Bunshaft of Skidmore, Owings & Merrill has designed a modest, flexible, human addition where works of art are not forced to compete with architecture but live sympathetically in their surroundings. James Johnson Sweeney put this aptly when at one of the opening ceremonies he said, "The new building and auditorium speak in the same provoca-



View of Buffalo's Albright-Knox Art Gallery—"a dazzling affirmation of Western art."  
—Ezra Stoller Associates.

tive contemporary vocabulary that the collection does—a self-effacing but pioneering addition to the original classic structure.” As for the auditorium, it is a triumph, intimate, open, and inviting. Even though the procession of dedication speeches seemed endless and too often empty, one did not feel trapped in this beautiful glass room where a pleasant parklike view neutralized the droning voices of city, county, and state officials. The two museum buildings are unified by an outdoor sculpture patio, again conceived as a human and unpretentious setting for works of art. Henry Moore’s “Reclining Figure” and Maillol’s famous “Night” never before showed up to better advantage.

For Buffalo’s two farsighted art donors and for its series of able museum directors, the way has not always been easy and it must have often seemed lonely. But their work has paid off; the city and the entire state are far richer for their undaunted resolution. All American art museum presidents and trustees would do well to ponder Mr. Knox’s statement that “a man can’t be president of an art gallery unless he is enthusiastic about art.”

—KATHARINE KUH.

#### ***In March Don't Miss:***

*English Drawings and Water Colors* at the National Gallery of Art, Washington. A fine loan exhibition of 200 English drawings and water colors, representing seventy-eight artists and emphasizing the years 1750 to 1850, when the British were outstanding in the field of water color.

*Fernan Léger's Late Work* at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. Five large culminating canvases with about 100 preliminary and related works show what this great French artist was doing during the last eleven years of his life.

*Jean Dubuffet* at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. The first major museum retrospective exhibition in America of one of France’s most interesting living artists. More than 200 works are shown, including paintings, assemblages, drawings, and sculpture from the last twenty years.

*Willem de Kooning* at the Sidney Janis Gallery, New York. An exhibition of recent paintings from the last three years covers work done in New York, Rome, San Francisco, and Easthampton.



## **TV AND RADIO**

### **An Interview with James Baldwin**

**J**AMES BALDWIN, the novelist and essayist (“Nobody Knows My Name,” “Go Tell It on the Mountain,” “Giovanni’s Room,” and the forthcoming “Another Country”), was interviewed recently by Studs Terkel, on the latter’s “Almanac” program over WFMT, Chicago’s fine arts radio station. The thirty-eight-year-old Negro author recalled playing two Bessie Smith records over and over again—when he was in Switzerland writing a novel—learning from the blues singer the beat, the cadence of his childhood’s Negro speech, which he had buried under “a whole fantastic image of myself which wasn’t mine, but white people’s image of me.” The tone of the blues helped him to finish his book in the mountains where the Swiss people, who had never seen a Negro before, thought he “had been sent by the devil.” Listening to the records also helped him to dig down into himself and to decide who he, a black man, is in a white man’s world. The text of the hour-long Baldwin-Terkel interview was printed in the December, 1961, issue of *WFMT Perspective*, the new magazine and listener’s guide published by this highly successful FM station.

I borrowed a tape of the interview from the station; and I have played it several times for myself and friends. It is an extraordinary aural document, a very moving experience—one that has much to say of great importance to all Negroes and whites in this country, indeed to people of all nations. I cannot help but think how valuable it could be in every primary and secondary school in the United States. The commercial and educational radio broadcasters should do what they can to radiate the penetrating, healing insights of this biographical-confessional revelation as widely as possible. This is a rare event, a Haley’s comet lighting up the darkness of racial tensions in the understanding of one man who has suffered, forgiven, and now can express what he thinks and feels not only as a writer of prose but also as somewhat of a poet, a sociologist, and a philosopher. Mr. Terkel, the interviewer, merely touches the right buttons perceptively and sensitively in their dialogue, and out of James Baldwin’s intense, often reluctant responses come 300 years of the African’s pain and wisdom gained in his American wilderness of the spirit.

The hearer sees, very deeply and with fresh impact, not only into the black man’s but also into the white man’s inner world. The author speaks of twice viewing “The Defiant Ones,” the Hollywood film about a Jim Crow chain gang, with Sidney Poitier and Tony Curtis. Downtown in New York the white liberal audience clapped with a sigh of relief when Poitier jumped off the train to rescue Tony Curtis (it meant being captured and returned to the Jim Crow chain gang). “Then I saw it uptown. When Sidney jumped off the train, there was a tremendous roar of *fury* from the [Harlem] audience, with which, I must say, I agreed. They told Sidney to ‘Get back on the train, you fool.’” Baldwin speaks of the humiliation of the Negro male in America, in the matriarchal setup of his family, “since, after all, the wife can go out and wash the white ladies’ clothes and steal from the kitchen.” He warns that “unless the situation is ameliorated, and very, very quickly, there will be violence.” Although some of his remarks are still tinged with bitterness, he can say—and evidently mean it: “I’m not mad at this country any more; I am very worried about it.”

Baldwin sees hope for the West in the fact that, unlike European colonial powers, “we had our slaves on the mainland. The whites here are not invaders to be driven out by the blacks.” We are tremendously involved with each other, and “if we could turn about and face this, we would have a tremendous advantage in the world today.”

**S**O the opinions pour out during the hour—about Puritanism and paganism, about the inadequacies of the education we give our children, about our Cadillacs, refrigerators, IBM machines, and psychiatrists, about the dangers of freedom, the artist as a disturber of the peace, the sense of tragedy, and the need for “the black boy and the white boy to see themselves as they are these present days, these sad and stormy events”—if the people are not to perish.

This is about a radio program that is over and done with. But we still have the words and their sound. I have written about them so that others perhaps might read and listen and think. As James Baldwin says at the end when he talks of the future: “You just have to play it by ear . . . and pray for rain.”

—ROBERT LEWIS SHAYON.