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Art

By JEAN CHARLOT

TO ACHIEVE DEPTH in this survey, being myself a painter, naturally enough I shall put the emphasis on painting. Architecture and sculpture are equally strong expressions of our national art and each rates a study of its own. However, parallels are easily drawn between the arts that illumine all three through the study of the one. Reflections on the place of the artist in our society, an important part of the cultural graph, remain valid for all art-makers.

More obviously than in other countries, a cleavage exists in our United States between the few and the many in their relationship to the arts. Men well-versed in the lore of modern art—dealers, critics, museum men, collectors—are but a minority. They constitute by far the most articulate group in matters of art. Their opinions, well published by mass media here as well as abroad, make news and make law. I feel it would be misleading to confine this survey to the opinions of these few, articulate though they may be. As a complement, I also wish to consider art's impact, or lack of impact, on the common man whom, as Lincoln musingly said, God must love most as He created so many men like that. There may be a lesson in lending an ear to the rarely heard hesitant voice of the many. As an antidote to the pronouncements from the inner sanctum, it may be fitting to gather the opinion, if any, of those we could refer to without prejudice as the esthetically unwashed.

Here in America the strain—a tug-of-war in fact—between

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expert and non-expert in the matter of art is more obvious and also more distressing than in Europe or in Mexico. Perhaps deep-rooted homogeneous traditions feed there a consciousness of art, magnified at times into a national asset. In the States the expert both bemoans the fact of, and prides in, his cultural isolation. Whatever he says is never meant to represent the people at large, nor even intended to sway a majority of his taste. Some experts, carried away by the unusualness of their calling, stress what for the uninitiated passes for mysteries. In turn, the average man, baffled and far from convinced by what he hears, takes refuge from the unknown quantity that art has become up into an ivory tower of his own, one built exclusively for lowbrows. The common man's mumbled defense, "I don't know anything about art but . . .," sounds less humble and more mulish in the ratio that art styles plunge into a stratosphere of abstraction. Despairing of ever understanding what goes on in museums and art galleries, the man in the street reacts violently. The Old Master paintings he acknowledges may be "Washington Crossing the Delaware" and "The Spirit of 1776." Norman Rockwell's covers fulfill all his esthetic ambitions.

Perhaps at this time when an impasse seems reached, a round table should be proposed, to be held between the esthetes and the unwashed, and a *rapprochement* attempted. Astonishingly, a good plea could be made at such a meeting in defense of the inarticulates. If an armistice, or even a peace, resulted, art again could be felt to be a national patrimony. It was so in the last century where artists, both major and minor ones, acted as spokesmen for the people at large. It was the century of "The Last Bison Hunt," and of "The Indian Maiden's Dream." It was also the century of true masters not a wit less popular, such as Winslow Homer. We can stretch this state of affairs to the opening of our century and the members of the ashcan school, whose models and workshops were the city streets.

The Armory Show, staged in New York in 1913, is the acknowledged turning point. Experts hail it as a capital

event that ushered in modern art for our continent. If one dared articulate the thoughts of the inarticulates, the Armory Show seen from their angle is more in the nature of a national disaster. Its diffusion of School of Paris manners onto the American scene sped the dilution of an art up to then genuinely different. The brilliancy of the show lured American painters to mimic a foreign accent. They became, if one may say so without intending a paradox, expatriates living in their own country.

One cement that may bring fast again those in the know and those out of it is what art is still created far from the great centers. Small communities manage a relation to their local artists based on an innocent awe of art. Local artists work wonders of their own to reflect their narrow milieu. Every small local show I have seen or juried has held surprises and at times beauties, come to through innocence and a lack of recipes. The fierce artificial light that beats on the brow of Grandma Moses is justified only if it is taken rather as a reminder of other amateurs, equally skillful, equally devoted to local land and local lore. All over the States, they weave a sort of patchwork quilt of art works that speak for the people, even though not all may stand up against the brutal and mysterious standard called "museum caliber."

The most intense experience I have had of our provincial resources was on a trip through New Mexico with a friend well-versed in local lore. Our tour took us through backroads from village to village among people mostly Spanish-speaking. These families had been for generations at their job of painting *santos* and of sculpturing *bultos*. The open workshops gave on the street. Works of three generations were displayed on trestled boards. Works still in the making formed a living background to the static display. What impressed me most on this trip was the all-over picture of a community where the artist still has his place, stands as an equal to the smith and to the baker. His art is rooted without violence or mishap into the communal pattern.

Similar surprises are possible as we scan the art of the

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cities. One visual art that the common man loves and that highbrows do not disregard is the art of the funnies. Here surrealism is taken for granted. It is the one form of art that is a daily fare of all, or at least a must for most. Though genius is as rare in funnies as in other forms of art, it exists. Funnies even have their genuine Old Masters: Herriman and his Krazy Kat are enshrined for keeps in the temple of fame, whereas it appears probable that many a fine-art artist of today is fated to be stopped at the threshold.

The common man is not always, or forever, in the wrong. One of the accepted forms of modern art, at least accepted by the knowing few, is magic realism. About it, around it, shows are organized, books written and the masters of the style acknowledged. By conjuring relationships rarely or never achieved in nature—a Venus of Milo wearing galoshes, perhaps—the magic realist suggests a world out of this world. The means he uses to render such heterogeneous objects, however, are not distinct from those used by a different brand of painters, men far from the vanguard, mostly anathema their names to the orthodox art gourmet. Petty realism—an appellation that fits this one tame “ism” of which the major exponent is Norman Rockwell—is shunned by sound dealers, unsung by wise critics, and certainly unsought by museums. Like it or not, it is in fact a major form of the American art of today. Its disrepute among experts is hard to justify on stylistic grounds. Its visual solutions, its patient renderings, are identical with those of magic realism. The objects and people represented, however, are scrupulously true to the average man’s everyday experience. People in coming centuries may be touched and intrigued by what were the everyday scenes of our time much more than by what neither was nor could be. The faithfulness of petty realism to objective reality may prove truly magic once our generations are gone. Lowbrows may be justified in the long run!

Let us leave these errant thoughts and these dangerous byways, and face now the more orthodox fields of art. Art

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magazines, art critics, museums and collectors, have culled from out of the diversity a few trends, a few painters. Orthodox art is that shown in art galleries of repute, collected by an elite and, for example, sent to other countries, to Paris or Venice, to represent our country. Having lived myself for decades in far-off places, my visits to New York and its galleries have been sporadic. It would be easy to try and reconstruct what it is I missed of the evolution of our modern art with the help of books and slides, but I feel that I owe you, rather than a digest, a firsthand report. I will speak only from my own experience. Spaced every seven years or so, these visits afforded me one advantage, comparative cross-sections, as it were, into the continuity of art evolution. The locus of our story shall be a New York gallery that specializes in the latest trends. The visitors in the showroom, connoisseurs all, remain pretty much the same. The style of the pictures on the walls was different at each of my widely-spaced visits.

Some twenty years ago, the main lever of modern art was distortion. Inspired by African and South Pacific carvings, painters managed in their works to pack an impact based on wilful departures from natural proportions and from what one could call organic pulchritude. To make the spectator conscious of the boldness involved, the painter could deal only with a very limited subject matter. To distort the proportions of a hippotamus or of a rose would be meaningful only for a zoologist or for a botanist. The one subject matter of which all humans have cognizance, that they know visually, and better still from inside out, is the human body. Violence made to the human anatomy, even though it be only make-believe, elicits in all humans a response. The painters of that generation had one thing in common with classical art: for very different reasons from the Greeks, they too were limited mostly to representations of the nude. It was a time when onlookers felt barbaric, tried mirrored ways to act what they saw on the canvases, patterned their gestures to the squareness of Negro woodcarvings.

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On my next visit, years later, the scenery had changed: abstract expressionism was the thing. Art was to do things to people not anymore by conjuring unusual forms, albeit illusive ones. Art contacted people directly through pigment without involving into the picture our experience of the objective world, not even to mark its violence. Allusions to humans, if any, were mere innuendos, exploded away from nature so drastically as to annul the pang of distortion that needs a modicum of realism to subsist. The pictures were heavy with pigment, freely slashed on or piled up in artfully discordant chords. Abstract expressionism spread into the spectators subterraneously, deep into what we could call their spiritual innards, dark formless regions of the unconscious and of the unrealized. All pictures then amounted to self-portraits, indeed not a mere catalogue of the shapes and colors of noses, craniums and eyes, but more subtly of the shapes and colors of souls. These and their moods were as live and varied, and of as many motley tastes as were those other souls collected by the diabolical gourmet, Bonbon, in Poe's frightening tale.

Gallery-goers, then, mimed what they saw in other ways than before. Keyed to the new style, they attempted a sort of shut-eye appreciation. The painting still had to be funnelled in through the eyes, but was better appreciated by ceasing to look outwards, and by dipping deep into self. If any gesture accompanied the rite, it was aimed between one's heart and one's stomach, to the spleen, presumably the organ of this kind of introspection.

On my next visit, some seven years later, the New York gallery featured abstract impressionism. For the uninitiated, the paintings were not too unlike the ones I had seen before. Pigments were again brushed freely, slashed and piled up, minus form. The visual summing up, however, afforded a sense of space, of air and of sunny complacency. To use a word that would have been anathema but little before decorativeness shyly peeked out in spite of the boldness displayed. A dilution of natural landscape was found rampant just un-

der the abstract skin. Catalogue titles referred to a locus on earth, and even a time of day. Monet's waterlilies were verily the canon or pattern for the new art.

Spectators, knowing that landscape was involved, had modified their ritual gestures. The old impressionist approach was revived; heads wagged and eyes half-slit as if stunned by strong sunlight. In the best of these works one could drink anew of the ancient elixir: Monet's pleasure before Nature's beauty, that at times did transcend pleasure and reach true dilection, the pleasure beyond pleasure that Poussin, the classicist of the seventeenth century, stated to be the aim and the end of true art.

Nowadays, the scenery on the gallery wall and the doings of gallery-goers are once more renewed. The boundless, patternless, featureless picture is usually achieved by means less docile than a brush moving at the beck of fingers and wrist. Thrown on or trickled, the pigment spreads blob over blob until they merge and total formlessness sets in. Often a single texture, a single color, sum up the new style in a single note, shrill or bass, but sustained to what one could venture to call a peak of epic monotony. In tune with the new style, the gallery-goers look blank.

It is not the first time that *nothing*, or to use the pregnant Spanish form, the *nada*, has seemed to fulfill all fullness for a generation. Mystics, long before artists, dwelt with the *nada*. Spanish seventeenth-century saints wrote movingly of their odyssey within the black night of the soul. Artists, being craftsmen, have more rarely felt so swayed as to forget the material object that is the picture, the grained texture of the canvas, or the four comforting straight angles of its rectangle. The Spanish mystics were denuded and waiting for their hard-to-gain emptiness to be filled. The "night" that is the new style may be rather the expression of a plenitude than of an emptiness. Only in our generation has the painter become acquainted with the art forms of all races and all times. Together with art shows, picture-books have filled his head to saturation with the untold

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wealth of a "museum without walls." The newly coined term is meant to denote progress, but walls after all are a *sine qua non* for windows and these alone may afford focused vistas. Before the present day artists are displayed the art treasures of all the world, as Satan did spread all kingdoms before Christ. It is a sore temptation for the painter to believe that all these kingdoms are his. Hence his unwillingness to choose among them. In physics, the blend of all rainbow colors results in white light. As pigments go, the blend of all colors is a black. In both cases, too much color results in colorlessness. Likewise, the painter's *nada*, his black night, may signify a surfeit, the quality of eclecticism without choice that is a unique trait of our day.

THESE FOUR cross-sections, cut within the last twenty years through the continuity of art evolution, are sufficient to suggest the richness and the complexity of the contemporary scene. May one hazard a guess at the future? Each painter believes, or at least hopes, that the evolution of styles will stand still now that a new style, his own, has been born. Of the practitioners of painting, the great majority are abstract artists. This in itself is a straw in the wind. Before it is ready to be discarded, before a violent reaction sets in engineered by a dissenting genius, a style has to be accepted, has in fact to become standard. With abstraction, this stage of saturation has come to pass.

To locate the manner in which the future revolution may happen, we should look for some element now bypassed and despised, some forgotten stuff that can be raised anew as a banner and as a battlecall. My own guess, that in no way pretends to be a prophecy, is that there will be a revival of didactic art, sequences tied together by a complex subject matter, unabashedly historical. There will be re-estimates of dead masters in the light of the new terms. Rivera, so promptly dismissed today as a mere storyteller, will come into his own as a stylist. Grant Wood also will be studied in the new light, and his "Washington Cutting

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the Cherry Tree" hailed as a forerunner. For those who look towards Paris for a needed reassurance that this will never come to pass, there as here, there are symptoms of change: Bernard Buffet, in his latest show, sorely tried his admirers by exhibiting a set of episodes from the story of Joan of Arc, complete with banners and chargers, castle-moats and knights in armor.

Let us turn from art to the art-maker, the artist. He is a notorious vagrant in any society. Plato considered him expendable and politely dismissed him from his Republic. Different is the American system of check and balance, though its purpose remains practically the same.

The difference is based on the dominantly mercantile quality of our culture. In Mexico and in Japan, art is something one does. Here the emphasis is on art as something one buys. As yet, we lack in the United States a virtue that could be more simply described as a sense of continuity. When I was a small Frenchman, each summer in Poissy I would go to Mass in the very church that Queen Blanche, mother of St. Louis, built there in the thirteenth century. The building and its art I took for granted. As I prayed, I soaked in unconsciously a vast segment of history and of art-history. In our portion of the Americas we lack such an art, alive and grown mossy with use in its natural habitat. The art we never had by birthright we bought. Our museums are like herbariums compared with parks and jungles. Plants once of sturdy growth dried out, and are flattened between the sheets of a folio.

When it comes to contemporary art, this habit of thinking of art as something one buys could be of advantage for the artist, what with a bullish art market and soaring prizes that even rate the headlines. Why is it then that the following simple syllogism amuses one as if it was a laughable paradox: Art is valuable. Artists make art. Therefore artists are wealthy.

Peculiar to the American scene is the pre-eminence of the middleman. By nature the middleman neither produces nor

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retails goods. In a card game he would be called a kibitzer. His self-appointed tasks are many. He surveys existing markets and analyzes potential ones. He proves, through the channels of mass media, why a certain brand of car should be in every garage and frozen food in every pot. The middleman increases sales by streamlining and packaging. He woos housewives with saving stamps and buries trinkets in breakfast foods. The price that the artist has to pay to be in tune with our society is to accept the manifold ministrations of the middleman for his art, treated as any other kind of goods. In the United States, between the art-maker and the art-lover, the middleman interposes hermetically his bulk.

To launch successfully any merchandise, it should be endowed with two dissimilar virtues: exclusivity and popularity. Most of the mercantile rites that are so impressively our own automatically get into gear around art. The "packaging" of art becomes an art in itself. A natural way of selling it is prestige, the very same lever that sells French perfumes and fashions. Thus, to collect art has become a guarantee of culture literacy. Museum openings may be social events as breathtaking as the unveiling of the latest couturier collection.

Much more difficult is the other facet of the middleman's task, that of creating a demand by proving to the people that they cannot do without art. The assumption is, of course, that art and people do not mix, and that hard work shall be needed to remedy this sad state of affairs. In truth, if things are to be justified by their use only, the genuine uses of art are both too vague and too transcendent to carry conviction. Art shall be made by violence then to fit the procrustean bed and the democratic mold. Art is said to be good for you. Its therapeutic effects are extolled. It increases your conversational acumen. Publications that are mostly picture books spread and popularize art along these artificial lines. Critics evaluate, compare, analyze trends. They present art as a sport, the artists as jockeys wearing contrasting silks. Bets are taken and the winner takes all. Works written in

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this mode about modern art are readable and even exciting. They make more sense to most than the subject they treat. So thick is the fungus grown over the body of art that it obscures both its essence and its primacy. When a practicing artist applied not long ago for a place at an institute of advanced studies, he was gently shoved aside: the statutes had no provision made for artists, only for art-historians.

On the totem pole of art the artist is low man. Riding him, topping him, one sees critics, museum men, dealers and collectors. That the equilibrium of the human pyramid is literally based on the artist does not mean much to most. One museum director, queried about his peculiar policies of inclusions and exclusions, published a curt rejoinder that came close to being indiscreet and, as such, illuminating, "We call the plays as we see them." A little boy's dream had come true. Was it baseball, football, or art, he was the umpire, sporting cap and whistle. Impervious as a sphinx he watched the field. The players sweated and grunted; they made or lost points; they were cheered or booed. All the time he knew that a single blow of his whistle could freeze all of them into awed immobility.

Does the cumbrous and peculiar set-up influence the art-maker and his working ways? Artists are notoriously defenseless against the inroads of society. Russia puts its painters into functional tasks by forcing them into an excruciating mold of realism. We feel free to criticize this state of affair, but fail to realize how the pressure that capitalism exerts is scarcely less severe. Many an American art-maker, for no more complex a reason than a family to clothe and feed, turns to high-pressured commercial art. For a lifetime his creative gifts, often not inconsiderable, are kept on a leash and taught to turn tricks in praise of soaps, whiskeys and toilet paper. True, some artists grow rich at this trade. The best even acquire stomach ulcers and are ranked with executives. I have little patience with those who state that this is a genuine form of American art. I have been too close to successful commercial artists. I have watched the

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death struggle of their creativity against the combined assaults of vice-presidents, publicity experts and sales psychologists. It reminds me uncomfortably of other art-makers: Pasternak, half-dying, half-subdued; Eisenstein, the movie director, or the composer, Shostakovich, debased and denuded of their genius the better to match an inflexible order.

There is a more subtle and less drastic form of surrender. Men who know what it is that makes our civilization tick work hard to transform the useless art-object into useful merchandise. The art market opens to the artist a temptation all the more enticing because there is this time no question of putting his art to crass uses. On the contrary, the dealer will insist on art for art's sake exclusively, and the painter's status remains unsullied. As is true of a boxer's manager, the job of the dealer includes the seeking and the fomenting of fame for his artist. One drawback is that pictures, once they have become advertised brand products, must not depart from expected standards. The output of each artist should be recognized at a glance, be typically "as advertised." What was once a genuine expression of a rare moment in the painter's life, when enthusiasm, passion, vision, fused into a personal style, becomes cast into a mask. The man may grow. He may change his mood and his creed. Yet he shall live and die wearing over his true features the cast semblance of what once had been himself long ago.

What of painters who have not yielded to semi-commercial jobs, and have failed to join the stable of an art-dealer? There is an insistent small voice—one could call it historical awareness—that suggests that tomorrow's recognized Old Master may well prove to be one of these men, unsuccessful on the face of it, and unpublicized. Would the situation be worst, would our culture show no interest whatsoever in art, these men would go on painting. To use Cezanne's striking simile, they make art as a snail makes its ooze. When at work, the true painter does not mean to prove a point or to launch a style, or to accumulate treasure for his heirs. He works because work is a must, the one way he knows

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to rid himself of what power churns his innards, demanding to be born.

This kind of artist dimly realizes that the game of living, as played by his contemporaries, is not one of his own choosing. He would like to be appraised for what he is, a craftsman as skilled as any mechanic, creating objects as important to man as any car, or TV set, or rocket. Instead, he finds himself pushed aside. True artists would fail in their trust if they pretended that art has any other essential reason to be than that elusive, silent, passive, timeless element that Poussin signified by the word "dilection." The core of such an art, reaching the spectator through the sense, strikes the peaks of spirituality. At such a level, the physical art object encloses a virtue close to the nature of a sacramental. No wonder then that the true artist at work—his only care that of proving to himself the validity of an inner image—remains by definition ineffably alone.

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