

Essays on spring books

The Indian beneath the skin

Pre-Columbian Art. By S. K. Lothrop, W. F. Foshag and Joy Makier.
65 text pages; 270 plates, 70 in color.
Phaidon; distributed by Garden City Books, N. Y. \$30.
Indian Art of Mexico and Central America. By Miguel Covarrubias.
393 pages, 12 colorplates, 149 line drawings, 64 halftones.
Knopf, N. Y. \$17.50.

By Jean Charlot

These two beautiful and authoritative books, newly published, suggest it is time to take stock of Pre-Columbian art in the light of today. Expectedly, they overlap copiously as regards their subject-matter with Mexico as the center of the show in both. The Phaidon volume—a catalogue of the Bliss Collection—concerned with portable objects—includes items of Peruvian culture. Choosing his examples at will, as did Malraux in his “museum without walls,” Covarrubias describes monumental pieces and great architectures that no museum or private collection could claim.

Points of view differ. Displayed in our National Gallery with proper pomp, and mostly an array of sumptuous materials—jade, jadeite, turquoise, crystal and gold—the Bliss Collection leans to the aristocratic. The foreword underlines the fact that only very few of its expensive specimens could be construed as folk-art: instead, these objects were made for the delight of a ruling class, their appeal was aimed at an elite. One is given to understand that such exclusiveness may well be an indispensable ingredient of esthetic appeal.

In contrast Covarrubias, in his concern for the people at large, freely delights in the less elaborated and, as yet, less appreciated products of pre-classical art: humble pellets of clay showing the imprint of the fingers and fingernails of their naked makers. A few inches high, some doll-like bodies, swaddled in loincloths as if in diapers, are quite devoid of the paraphernalia of heraldic shields, turquoise pendants and plumed head-dresses that blinded generations of archeologists to more homely charms. The lusty little fellows, busy at their everyday chores, dance, cook, make love, make war and make music in such lively ways that museum officials still hesitate to take them seriously, despite their undoubted antiquity.

The Bliss book has truly sumptuous colorplates, with a superb choice of assorted backgrounds: the marble mask of a jaguar, brownish against marbled blue streaks; a diorite palmate stone set on raw rocks; the Goddess of Birth, of a sickly green against clean opalescent blue; a fierce mosaic mask of green turquoise set against the pallid pink of a smear of finger painting.

Covarrubias favors “old-fashioned” hand-painted colorplates. These watercolors show obvious delight in spite of the patience required for the exacting task. They minimize, as photography may not, the meaningless erosion of time, bypass the artificial awe one feels before museum specimens. They make one forget too many learned commentaries concerning date and provenance. Cleansed of this dusty, mossy growth, the object emerges as novel, fresh and polychrome as a new-born.

For millenniums before Columbus' fateful visit, Indians created and treasured Pre-Columbian art. It is only since the time of Dürer, as art history goes, that [Continued on page 55]

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non-Indians could contact this art, mostly to loathe it or to puzzle about it. In our day, propped up by new archeological finds, more scientific dating and a more articulate vocabulary, our well-meaning wide-eyed admiration of Pre-Columbian esthetics still has far to go to become informed understanding. We can only surmise what this art meant to its makers and original consumers. But perhaps today there is a chance to gain at least a toe-hold into the mystery, thanks to the successive shifts of taste that mark our own restless art.

Our familiarity, become almost a surfeit with distortion and abstraction, has forever loosened our appreciation from the apron strings of realistic canons. In the 'twenties, Cubism opened vistas, with its emphasis on primary volumes, on Aztec and Toltec monolithic beauty. Surrealism, in the 'thirties, bravely tackled the impalpable psyche behind the carved volumes. Fingers and toes on each frightful limb of the godly countenances may be three, five or thirty. Whatever the count, it will not be deemed an esthetic blight any more, nor lauded as if it implied an esthetic manifesto.

The present classification of styles in pre-classic, classic and baroque, borrows its terms from our own history of art. Clearer than obsolete nomenclatures, this one is perhaps too clear. For Western man, the term "classic" may never shake off its European connotations nor the attendant awe, born in the classroom. The greatest of Amerindian art hardly reminds us of Apollo Belvedere or the Venus of Melos.

Yet, if we go to the springs of the classical rather than loiter on the outer form, the term is not much of a misnomer after all. Man, be he B.C. or A.D., his eyes closed and just feeling from inside what the world is about, finds himself reduced to the irrevocable denominator of his own naked body and its contact with what woven stuff swaddles it. The Greek esthetic canon—the body naked or draped—marks the limits of this basic haptic world, permanently opposed to the passing visual one made, then as now, of variety, particularities and disorder.

The Amerindian artist, with eyes closed, also took stock of himself as the one basic subject-matter of art. Linen was replaced by cotton, and peplum or chlamys by loincloth or kilt, but the body remained the norm. There are basic differences, however. The Greek cherished a sort of immortality, at least the passing immortality of good health. Fascinated by death, the Indian preferred to probe surgically into self, aware of the inner organs stacked within the cage of the ribs.

Greek athletic sports were unknown in a Mexico that thronged rather to a lethal kind of ecclesiastical sport. It made a show of the palpitating heart of the sacrificed, and turned piles of heads into triumphal pyramids. The inner cogs of man turned inside out thus became a part of every man's visual awareness. Skulls and femurs and blood basins are to Indian esthetics what soft skin and genitals are to the Greeks.

Man must be quite a spiritual animal after all to make beauty out of reeking carnage. The sculptor of masks never loses the consciousness of the bony scaffold that props up the face. Beauty for him resides in the sphere of the cranium, the ridge of the orbitae. These he tools and polishes out of the hard stone with a caressing skill that other cultures reserved for the curl and the dimple.

Marble into flesh is the Greek's barely credible tour-de-force. Hard stone into hard bone remains the Amerindian's achievement. It emphasizes the hardness and the perennality of his outlook, in tune with the dense material he chose to carve it in.