

MODERN ART MAKES HISTORY, TOO

BY ALFRED H. BARR, JR.

IN THE history of art there are many periods worthy of careful attention, but for most undergraduates, many graduate students, and at least a few teachers, the period for most thorough study should be the last hundred years, and particularly the twentieth century.

I should explain that by "history" I mean to include what happened yesterday as well as decades or milleniums ago, an inclusion made practicable by the extraordinary acceleration of both critical and documentary processes in recent years. And by "art" I mean, as is usual in these pages, the visual arts (which, in the twentieth century, include the film, photography and industrial design, though for the sake of brevity I shall keep principally to the fine arts in this discussion).

My belief in the cogent importance of twentieth century art lies not so much in the greatness of its achievement as in this one simple, obvious, and overwhelming fact—the twentieth century happens to be the period in which we are living. It is our century: we have made it and we've got to study it, understand it, get some joy out of it, *master it!*

How absurd this exhortation would be if addressed to our university physicists or economists, astronomers or psychologists, political historians or biochemists. Most of them take the twentieth century for granted and work in it and upon it as a matter of course. Yet isn't it true that our art historians *as a whole* still do not seem to be at home in the art of our own time?

Of course I may be mistaken about this, for times have changed since I was a student between fifteen and twenty years ago. In those days I heard all told three professors in three leading college art departments lecture to undergraduates on modern art. One was querulously resentful, a second wittily condescending, the third dismissed painting from Cézanne to 1925 with a glib retelling of the donkey's tail legend. All three knew several times as much about Sano di Pietro as Picasso. About the art of the previous fifty years they were either complacently superficial or profoundly ignorant.

But today a great university offers an annual graduate fellowship in modern art; a second devotes several undergraduate courses to the twentieth century alone. Frank Lloyd Wright and Giedion have

given honorific lecture series at universities; and, inspired by the chairmen in their art departments, one college commissioned Orozco to paint murals, another held a competition for a modern college building, and several others have acquired excellent modern works for their museums.

Up to a decade ago, so far as I can recall, the learned magazines such as *The Art Bulletin* and *Art Studies* published between them only one article on modern art and that was hostile. But this year under an enlightened editorship, *The Art Bulletin* has published articles on post-first-World-War German art, on Seurat's style, on Picasso's "negro" period.

Yet in spite of these and other praiseworthy academic activities I can't help feeling that college art historians are not even now generally and deeply interested in modern art. Isn't far more time given in their undergraduate courses to the early fifteenth or seventeenth centuries than to the early twentieth? Does not Brunelleschi get more serious attention than Wright, Chippendale than Breuer, Ghiberti than Lehmbruck, Coptic iconography than Futurist iconography? Aren't the aesthetic consequences of Gothic engineering more thoughtfully studied than those of structural steel? Isn't Rembrandt's development examined more thoroughly than Picasso's even though the modern master is incomparably more dominant and influential a world figure in our period than Rembrandt was in his? Aren't the theories of Neoclassicism or Impressionism analyzed more carefully than the urgently significant implications of Surrealism or the American Scene movement?

Isn't it possible that his own academic training focused the attention of the average teacher of art history almost exclusively on the past, on the Baroque, Italian Renaissance, or Greco-Roman (depending on when and where he took his degree)? He understands one or more of these periods because he has studied them hard and, because he understands, he loves. The art of the recent past he has not really studied: he loves it little and regards it with suspicion as too ephemeral or too new, too untested by time, or too trivial or eccentric to be worth the serious study of graduate students, let alone undergraduates who he feels should concern themselves with the classics, the values of which seem dependably permanent.

But we all know that such values are not permanent. When Aldous Huxley asserted that the Borgo San Sepolcro *Resurrection* was the world's "greatest picture" many of us applauded but who would even have heard of Piero della Francesca in 1725? Will Matisse or

Miro or Burchfield seem important in 2041? I can answer your question if you can guarantee the future importance of Vermeer or Brueghel, Caspar David Friedrich or George Caleb Bingham.

The values of both old and new masters fluctuate. But I maintain that for us *today* Vermeer, Brueghel, Friedrich, Matisse, Miro, and Burchfield are *all* significant historic figures fully worthy of the considered attention of the college art historian. Possibly the modern three are not such great artists but the study of their work may prove more valuable because they are living men with experiences and feelings which translated into art may help us understand or endure our complex modern world.

I believe furthermore that the student would actively welcome much more attention to modern art even of the vanguard. Some undergraduates are timid and conservative but those most worth teaching have a natural curiosity which with some soundly critical and informed instruction would develop into a real interest in contemporary art, an interest which of course should be tempered and deepened by continual references to the art of the past. From these undergraduates will come the patrons of the living artists of the future. These future patrons, *amateurs*, museum curators, will thank the college teacher who sends them out in the world with a taste in art, recent *and* ancient, which is not twenty or thirty years behind the times. Wasn't it von Tschudi who said, whispering behind his hand: "Do you know why we admire El Greco so much? It's because he makes us think of Cézanne!" That was forty years or so ago when interest in either artist was considered radical.

Even more obvious and urgent is the need for *graduate* work in modern art. The field is wide open and crying for scholarly research but how many candidates for Ph.D. or M.F.A. are doing theses in twentieth century art? Or even in the late nineteenth century? And if they were would they receive the profoundly learned guidance available to them in Medieval or Sumerian archaeology? American scholars have made important contributions in the modern field but they are with a few distinguished exceptions not connected with university art departments.

And what opportunities are being lost! Graduate students can't correspond with John van Eyck, Masolino or Vasari to clear up scholarly problems but they can air-mail Maillol or Siqueiros and write or phone for an appointment with Wright, André Breton, Stieglitz, John Sloan, Balanchine, or D. W. Griffith. (It is already too late to ask art historical questions of Klee and Vuillard, two of

the best painters of our time—they died within the year.)

To avoid misunderstanding let me repeat: I have not said that modern art is greater than that of any other period; nor have I said that it should be studied exclusively. But I do think that our own period in art history urgently needs and should be given more thorough and critical study and more thoughtful and extensive exposition than that of any past period.

Have I been unjust to college art historians? If so, I apologize, for my own debt to them can never be paid. I intend not a rebuke, but a challenge—and a cry for help.

Museum of Modern Art

CALL FOR PIONEERS

BY ELIZABETH WILDER

A GOOD many people suspected that the earth was round before Columbus came back with his Indians, and I realize that many scholars in the field of art are aware of the existence of Latin America. Two facts, however, stand out when we consider this field of study.

First, only four colleges out of four hundred in the United States report any courses dealing specifically with the arts in Latin America (if we except archaeological subjects). According to statistics for 1939-40, three colleges offered the following courses: University of Minnesota, *Modern Mexican Art*; University of Texas, *Latin American Art*; Yale University, *Colonial Art of Latin America*, and *The Art of America*. The returns for 1941, from some three hundred colleges and universities, have thus far yielded only one additional course: *Spanish Colonial Architecture* at the University of Southern California.

The other fact is this: Latin America offers for study one of the richest, most fascinating, and most rewarding complexes of culture which has ever existed. Every interest of a student of art can find fresh and stimulating material there. Magnificent renaissance and baroque architecture, painting, sculpture, silverwork, weaving, furniture, ceramics, and folk-art lie awaiting us.

It is hard for anyone who has seen Mexico, Central and South America, and the Islands, to understand the lassitude of imagination