Come Back, Michelangelo!

By JOHN CANADAY

FOR the opening of its new library, the Metropolitan Museum has installed a couple of small shows in new areas allocated to the exhibition of books and graphic arts. Around two sides of the balcony arcade of the Blumenthal Patio, adjacent to the library, 50 of the museum's prize drawings are hung for your delectation, and from there you go into a small gallery where early illustrated books are accompanied by some enlivening explanatory material.

There comes a time when you have nothing left to say about drawings, having said again and again that these most intimate expressions of the artist's convictions, and frequently his most brilliant demonstrations of technical control, are the final joy for anyone who is interested in art as something more than an incidental accessory to the business of keeping alive and sane. A Rembrandt drawing (Rembrandt is included in this exhibition), compared with a Rembrandt painting, is a spontaneous comment made to a friend rather than a prepared statement designed for public consumption. Although the painting may be more elaborate than the drawing, it is not necessarily more complete. And there are lesser artists, like Pietro da Cortona, whose prepared statements in the form of painting tend to grow hollow and prolix, as opposed to their drawings, like the one illustrated here, where everything this artist had to say is said fluently and without hampering ornamentation.

And yet this particular exhibition, which runs from late medieval drawings to Picasso, did not quite come across at full strength to this visitor for a reason that has nothing to do with its quality—for the quality is superb — but with a circumstance that is enough to scare the daylights out of a critic who would like to maintain something like an even keel. I found myself standing in front of Michelangelo's sheet of studies for the Libyan Sibyl and waiting for a response to one of the great drawings of the world, and failing to receive it.

Not only that, but th other drawings, one by one, stirred nothing much more than the secondary pleasure of renewing old associations with them. Obviously something was wrong with me, since my companion, a non-professional art lover, was in the state of illuminated bliss that such a collection of drawings should have produced in me, oto.

So Why?

When something as disastrous as this happens to you, you ask yourself some desperate questions, beginning with a few escapist hopes such as "I'm just a little tired today." (No good. You can be exhausted, and art can refresh you.) "I've seen these too often." (Absurd. You can see second-rate art too often, but not first-rate art.) "The light isn't very good today." (It wasn't. But the light in the Prado is always terrible, to take one museum as an example, and the Prado is inexhaustibly rich no matter how hard you have to work at the job of seeing.)

What it finally came down to, after a dozen other questions and refutations, was that the drawings were simply too good to seem true. They could no longer be quite believed by anyone who spends the major portion of his waking hours looking at and thinking about and writing about the second-rate painting of the 20th century.

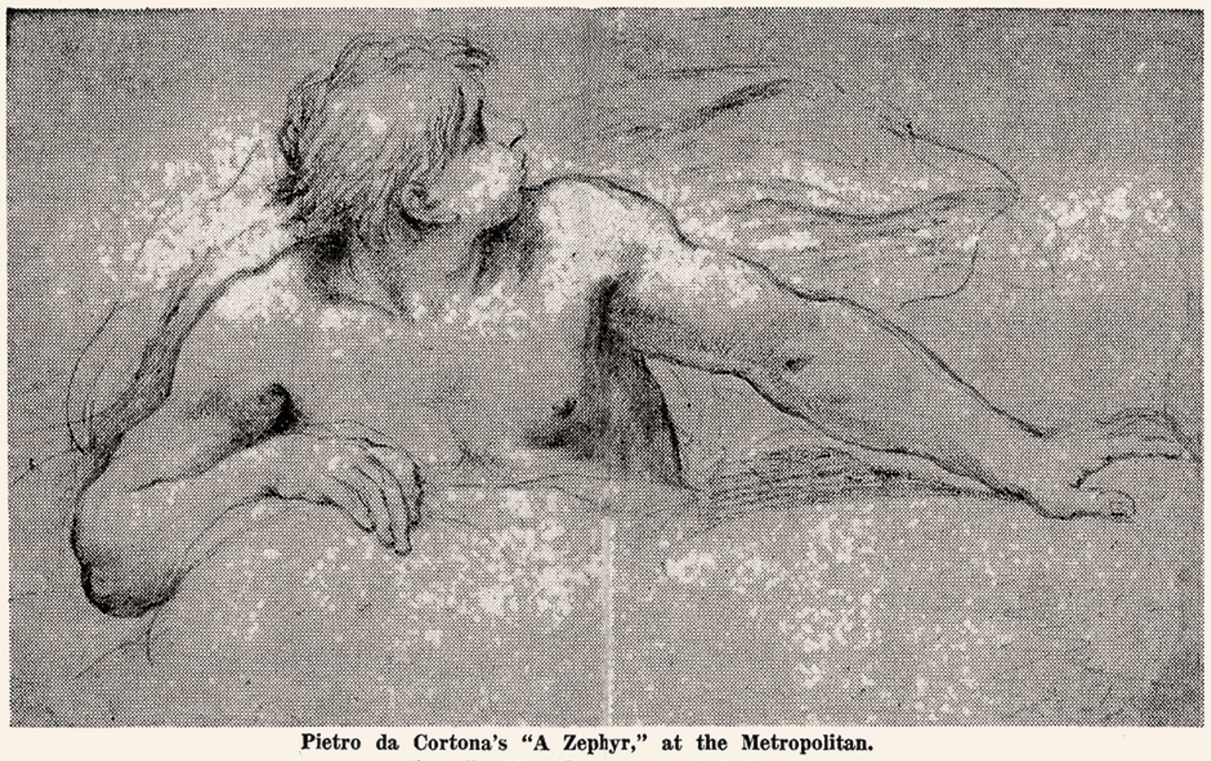
In the face of hundreds of competing novelties, the eye becomes debauched. The intellect, unwilling to admit that contemporary art is 99 per cent junk, tortures itself into believing that 10 per cent of it is worth the trouble of looking at, thinking about and writing about. The spirit, starved by the constant ingestion of synthetic nourishment, is no longer able to assimilate the real thing. We forgive every excess and every deficiency in contemporary art simply because we want to believe that we have an art. Enthusiasm for what goes on must be based on the blind acceptance of the premise that if it goes on, it goes on for a valid reason. It is the only air we have for breathing, and we must breathe it or smother, no matter how rancid it may be.

Since newspaper columns are not remembered for any great length of time, we may repeat here something reported four or five years ago, that after one cocktail too many, a vigorously proselytizing writer on contemporary art was heard to say that of course it is a lousy time for painting, but since it is, the best you can do is to pretend that it isn't.

In more considered terms, the art historian Alfred Neumeyer concludes a new book called "The Search for Meaning in Modern Art" with the statement, "It is right that we should make up our minds about political and ethical systems, that we should either accept or reject them. But when it comes to the esthetic statements of a period, we can only empathize with them or exclude ourselves from them."

Mr. Neumeyer is absolutely right, but he has the advantage of living in an atmosphere (at Mills College in Oakland, Cal.) where he is not assaulted by the 30 to 80 vaudeville acts that open every week in the New York galleries. As a reporter of these shindigs, I plan to empathize like anything, but I am renewing a resolve to visit the Metropolitan (and the Frick) at least once for every —say—20 visits to the novelty houses.

Come back, Michelangelo, come back! Come back, come back, come back! I don't want to lose you, Michelangelo. Come back! Come back! Come back!



Pietro da Cortona's "A Zephyr," at the Metropolitan.
"... all said, without ornamentation"

Jean Arp's bronze, "Torso," at Galerie Chalette.
"... sleekly sensuous, anti-intellectual..."

THE BODYBUILDER

By STUART PRESTON

CONFIDENT sensuousness and exalted physical animality not being qualities we expect to find emphasized in advance guard art of the present day, it should surprise no one that their greatest modern exponent, the French semi-abstract sculptor, Jean Arp, is within two years of his 80th birthday. For, with his overriding concern with smoothly streamlined surfaces and with metamorphic shapes that intentionally mean several things at once, he belongs, root and branch to the interwar period.

This is not for a moment to consider him "dated" in any perjorative sense. The vitality that radiates from his recent bronzes at Galerie Chalette, 9 East 88th Street, effectively contradicts this. But in their individual way they add superb sunset touches to the grand figurative tradition central to European art from the Renaissance to the 20th century. Granted that his approach to figure sculpture is abstract; granted that he has banished from his work the trivia of naturalism, there should be no mistaking the fact that his sleekly sensuous, anti-intellectual bronze and marble "nudes" would feel more at home in Rubens's or Renoir's studio than in Giacometti's.

Purists may extoll Arp's vital form, or even condemn it for being occasionally overblown or for being over-luxuriant in its use of rounded curves. They have their points. Yet they would thereby miss the wit of his art, particularly that of the collages and of the cunning constructions (Arp was, after all, a founder of Dada). And they would, more seriously, fail to take account in his larger pieces of their "promises of pneumatic bliss." For Arp's art is one great hymn of praise to the feminine principle of the universe.

A Minor Talent

It would be doing Everett Shinn's attractively decorative paintings a disservice by claiming for them more than their due. Rewards in visiting the exhibition of his theater and street scenes, in oil and mixed media, at the Graham Gallery, 1014 Madison Avenue at 78th Street, will go to those who don't expect too much. Shinn's slender but genuine talent is not what it was. The generation of sensitivity appears to have vanished with his youth. It lent the romantic, darkling views of pre-1914 Paris and New York a distinct charm and promised an esthetic fulfillment that was not to be.

Romanticism

The three-man exhibition at the Alan Gallery, 766 Madison Avenue at 66th Street, delves deeply and rewardingly into the vast realms of minor 19th-century talent. Jean-Pierre Dantan's clever caricatural statuettes sharply and unkindly focus on major and minor personalities of the reign of Louis-Philippe. John Brett was an accomplished literal English landscapist who had early connections with the Pre-Raphaelites and earned the admiration of Ruskin, while John Martin explored in his epic Biblical landscape and figure reconstructions the madder shores of romanticism.

An increasingly feverish and equivocal romanticism was part and parcel of the late Carlyle Brown's paintings now being shown in a memorial exhibition at the Banfer Gallery, 21 East 67th Street. Whatever this work, much influenced by Tchelitchew, dealt with, be that eggs and bottles; Mediterranean landscape quivering in the heat or youthful Italians, it managed to radiate a mysterious sort of eroticism that, on the surface, seems to be little more than an affair of light caressing surfaces.

Nonobjectivity

After such "impure" pleasures, the impersonality of nonobjectivism. At the de Nagy Gallery, 149 East 72d Street, are some glacial geometrical paintings by Darby Bannard, just about the most cool and calculated performance seen in a long while, as if done by slide rule and scalpel rather than with the brush. However this scientific approach to conjugating color and form by no means excludes sensitivity. In fact the latter quality abounds in the way the razor-like shapes fall artfully into place and in the chilly play between the colors. All these elements warm up ingratiatingly in paintings by Fukui at the Daniels Gallery, 17 East 64th Street, where irregular shapes of warm, bright color are dappled so as to catch, and hold, the eye.

Hidai: Ancient Ink in a New Guise

By ELISE GRILLI

THE swirling black ink paintings by Nankoku Hidai at Mi Chou Gallery are called "abstract calligraphy," for want of a better term in English. The artist would prefer to use the Japanese word *sho,* and thus dissociate himself from the misconceptions imbedded in our word "calligraphy", as a sort of super-beautiful, perfected model writing, often embellished with grace notes and curlicues. The Orient would have none of this.

In China and Japan the worship of expressive writing goes back to the dawn of history. The key word here is *expressive,* as contrasted with merely pretty or harmonious or decorative forms. As a modern calligraphic artist, Hidai insists that his abstract forms derive from his apprenticeship in a long stream of historical theory and practice and that his work cannot be fully evaluated from a sheerly pictorial or plastic standpoint. Hence we must dip back into an Oriental lore of some 4,000 years' development, in order to approach Hidai, the founder of the most modern "abstract calligraphy" in Japan.

Tradition

The transformation of an early pictorial script in China into a type of ideawriting with thousands of letters, each composed in its own space and built with all the refinements of a subtle abstract design, forms the basis of Hadai's intuitive assurance in space arrangement. His vivid patterns in black and white go back ultimately to the daily training with a delicate and flexible brush given to Japanese children as the rudiments of a great art. Learning to place the complex forms into their prescribed space, without any geometrical divisions and without rigid symmetry, is a step far ahead into artistry. Ideograms offer the East that exercise in proportion, in rhythm, and in formal relations, that the Occidental artist derives from study of the nude. It is at this point that the diverging philosophies of the Greeks and of the Oriental sages assumed different externalizations in their respective art forms.

All the above statements apply to Everyman's heritage in the Far East and may explain, in part, the strong power of Oriental design that has been enchanting Europe and America at least since the days of Manet, Whistler, Degas, and Toulouse-Lautrec.

East-West

But Oriental calligraphy as an art form beyond the reach of Everyman, as an art placed on the very pinnacle of Oriental aesthetics, is a phenomenon almost incomprehensible in the Western world. How can we accept the Chinese dictum that from the hands of their greatest poets, priests, statesmen, and painters there flowed an "art of expressive writing" greater than all the other arts? Again, the clue to the mystery lies in the word *expressive.*

For design excellence alone would not be enough to elicit the ecstasies of an Oriental critic. What we in the Occident admire in a fine page of our medieval manuscripts is not enough. Nor do we come much closer in the work of modern painters in the "calligraphic" manner of Tobey, Franz Kline, Hartung, Picasso, Matthieu, and some others. Perhaps the linear quality of Miro, Munch, and Klee approaches it at times. But this remains very rare in the Western world, because our very tools and materials preclude a direct and uninhibited flow of the whole personality into each line and stroke.

The flexible Oriental writing brush and the fluid ink interpose absolutely no obstacle to the direct and immediate emergence of the artist's whole personality. Every tremor of the pulse beat and every nuance of thought are revealed — can, in fact, not be concealed — before the eye of a sensitive and trained observer. Whatever is in the whole man, all his past and present achievements, all this flows directly into the moving brush. And it flows into every dot and stroke, whether the movement be legato or staccato, andante or scherzo, maestoso or furioso. (Musical terms serve us far better here than any terminology drawn from visual design analysis.) The movement goes in one direction only (no corrections or reworkings are possible), in a path as carefully prescribed as that of a formal choreography.

Nankoku Hidai's "Work: 64-2," Mi Chou Gallery.
"... intuitive assurance"

Personality

Almost tyrannical in its unshrouded revelations, Oriental brush writing demands the greatest personalities and achieves its greatest triumphs on a level of the most subtle artistry. It produced a "personality cult" among priests and statesmen and men of letters, among men who were artists and critics, at the same time that they carried out various professions in their daily life.

So much by way of historical and theoretical explanation. But now come the moderns, with their radical transformations and distortions. What is happening to calligraphy in Japan may well be compared with the free handling of the human figure since the days of Cezanne. Words and letters are used as starting points, as stimuli for flights into illegible new patterns. Or entirely new and abstract images are created by a brush like that of Hidai, who does not have any ideograms whatever as his point of departure. And yet he insists that his work is rooted in Oriental calligraphy.

Shifting Course

Nankoku Hidai is the son of a famous traditional calligrapher of the past generation. He inherited his father's lore, as well as his treasures of ancient inks, rubbings, books, seals, and other materials. The father had watched the new deviations that were shifting the course of a very ancient art and he had not objected at all, since he wanted this art to remain close to life and to the pulse of today. Actually, every stroke in the modern calligrapher's images can be derived from his formal training in the ancient tradition. Only the literary associations have been peeled away, leaving the expressive line to stand revealed in its naked purity.

The work of Hidai is strong enough to withstand the scrutiny of the "innocent eye" of an Occidental critic who is not deeply versed in the historical background and who seeks mainly for plastic values. For full understanding, history and practice with the brush may add a larger dimension, but Hidai himself thinks that a sensitive Westerner has almost an advantage in a more direct approach to the heart of the design.

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