

The Search for Masterpieces

PEOPLE generally think of art curators as lecturers, writers, or entrepreneurs of popular exhibitions, but though these are pressing duties, they are not prime responsibilities. To add astutely to an already existing museum collection and at the same time to be responsible for the care and preservation of its works of art are the two chief functions of any curator. As a rule, American museums add to their collections through purchase or gift. What imponderables establish the buying policies of a given institution depend on many factors: on its physical size and wealth, on the magnitude and character of its collections (with lacks and concentrations carefully noted), on the possibility of future gifts from devoted patrons, and—most persuasive—on the availability of outstanding works for purchase.

No museum in America (except private institutions established as self-con-

tained monuments and usually endowed by an individual or a single family) are worth their salt if the refining and, in many cases, the expanding of their collections are not paramount objectives. For in this country our museums are comparatively young, having enjoyed neither adequate time nor opportunity to cover fully the whole gamut of art. During recent years there has been a tendency to overstress certain extracurricular activities like temporary exhibitions, wholesale educational devices, attractive lunch rooms, and publicity gimmicks, but in the long run nothing ever compensates for the quality and scope of a great collection. Works of art are the core of our institutions; everything else, no matter how enlivening or illuminating, must be subservient, or what purports to be an art museum is in fact only an art center. It has become suspect these days to consider museums as repositories for works



of art. This, however, is precisely what they are, though there is no reason to exclude other more palatable activities, provided these do not interfere with the necessary research, expense, and time required by an intelligent purchase and conservation program.

THROUGHOUT the world today there is strong competition for paintings of the last hundred years. Though the old masters are less widely sought after by private collectors, museums vie strenuously with each other in this field. But there are very few institutions in America or abroad that can hope to challenge Manhattan's Metropolitan Museum when it goes after a work of importance. Moreover, because of this institution's stature and wealth, it is frequently approached first when a rare and costly masterpiece is available. Yet this advantage does not make less admirable the imagination and courage with which the Metropolitan has recently been acquiring illustrious paintings.

Theodore Rousseau, Jr., curator of paintings, has wisely observed that his museum need not compete in what presently is the most sought-after field, referring, of course, to the impressionists and postimpressionists, both of which are amply represented at the Metropolitan, thanks particularly to the Havermyer collection. He has fortunately been free to expand an already enviable group of old master paintings, judiciously stressing superlative quality rather than expedient quantity. To buy one great work of art is more memorable than to fill numerous gaps with typical but often innocuous examples of well-known names.

In the last few years three works of consummate importance have been purchased by the Metropolitan: the Merode Altarpiece, which certain experts consider the finest single art buy of the last several decades; "Saint John's Vision of the Mysteries of the Apocalypse," by El Greco, and Georges de La Tour's spectacular "Fortune Teller." Each of these costly acquisitions presented a different problem, and each, it seems to me, answered a positive need. Of the three, the peerless fifteenth-century triptych by the Master of Flémalle, which was acquired for the Cloisters, is

Lapse

By Horace E. Hamilton

I'D gone in that bright first Saturday
Forgetting there was no class, nothing
Except vacation. I felt tricked, packing
My notes again, yet content to sit and hear
Steam bang in pipes behind the empty chairs.

Jays screamed from elms, pigeons stared
Aslant from whitened sills, and I teetered
In the lecture chair rung-deep in brainish
Drifts of bygone labors. I kept thinking
Someone might be coming up the stairs.

In offices below, pedagogues were stirring,
Cultivating rewards in heaven, or dodging
Home sweet home. Was it my will or God's
Prepense, tilting there: to scoff, free as
Any jay, or muse how papers sapped my rest?

It wasn't peace so much as an abating
Of tired machinery to a trembling pause,
Stillness without cessation. In the street
A motor coughed in someone's cold jalopy;
Pigeons whirred about their weekday mating.

Classes would have emptied with the bell
Across the frosty mall, and soon the step
Beyond the door, ambiguous seekers, waiting.
If the phone should ring, should I say—
Sorry, this is just an empty hall?

unquestionably the choicest plum. It would be difficult to imagine any museum with adequate resources foregoing this masterpiece. In America, where medieval paintings of high quality are so rare as to be almost unknown, its acquisition by the Metropolitan was doubly arresting and doubly rewarding.

A more precarious problem was presented by the possibility of buying the El Greco—precarious only because the museum already owned six other works by this artist. However, if one is willing to admit that concentrations are valid and valuable, then this feverish late canvas of "Saint John's Vision" is more than merely a seventh important El Greco in the Metropolitan, for its presence enhances and enriches the other six works, adding new luster to their sequence as it also underlines this painter's ability to unleash the most fervent emotions. The tendency of museums to seek one outstanding example by a noted artist is understandable, but the joy of comparing a well-selected series by a single painter cannot be overestimated. Think of Basle with its wealth of Holbeins, Munich with Rubens, Haarlem with Frans Hals, and you immediately realize that to know one artist is sometimes more enlightening than to sample many.

Perhaps the most courage was needed when "The Fortune Teller," by Georges de La Tour, was recently purchased. Though this seventeenth-century French artist is highly regarded by modern eyes and though authentic works by him are extremely rare, he does not have the stature of either Robert Campin (usually considered the Master of Flémalle) or El Greco, both of whom occupy exalted niches in the history of art. The Metropolitan paid a huge sum for this painting, many times more than has ever been considered for a work by de La Tour. What might have been a grave error for almost any other American museum became for the Metropolitan a wise decision. Most art institutions in the United States (the National Gallery in Washington excepted) still lack important works by many great artists of the past. Without definitive paintings by Rubens, Rembrandt, Titian, Bellini, or, let us say, Tiepolo, it would seem folly to dissipate funds on even the most extraordinary work by an engrossingly interesting but not necessarily world-shaking artist. Because the Metropolitan does not face such lacks, because it has lavish purchase funds, because a work by Georges de La Tour is not represented in its collection, and because this particular painting is a unique example of the artist's early work, its acquisition becomes a peculiarly impressive addition.

—KATHARINE KUH.



"The Fortune Teller," by Georges de La Tour (1593-1652).



—Illustrations courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1956.

"St. John's Vision of the Mysteries of the Apocalypse," by El Greco (1541-1614).



Today and Tomorrow on TV

A PROGRAM executive at CBS-TV was talking about the recent Walter Lippmann program on "CBS Reports" a few days before the video-taped Howard K. Smith interview was telecast. Across the luncheon table, the executive said he had seen the show in advance and "it was tremendous and pulled no punches." The egg-heads would be excited about it, he continued, but it wouldn't get a rating; and anyway, what was so important about an interview with Lippmann on TV, even if it was a whole hour during prime time? Friday morning, he asserted, following the Thursday night show, the program would have changed nothing either in the country or in the industry. What the executive was looking for, he said, was something really big in the way of a program idea.

No doubt "Lippmann on Leadership" did not outrate the eight repeats that were shown by the assorted competition during the hour the program was available for viewing (including "Bat Masterson," "Highway Patrol," and "Steve Canyon"). But it's also very likely that the few million people who watched "CBS Reports" that night went to bed with a more lucid grasp of world affairs and a more hopeful feeling about them than they had experienced in a long time.

Although Mr. Lippmann's views on foreign and national affairs are familiar to regular readers of his syndicated newspaper column, and also to those who follow his books, it was a considerable novelty to have the Lippmann perspective on a TV summit, as it were, ranging rapidly and broadly over the substance of a monthful of columns. To have the sage of Washington up close at his ease, and ad-libbing, revealed not only his urbanity, which was to be expected, but yielded a bonus in the impression of kindness and personal warmth never apparent in the intense concentration of his logical, impersonal prose. Mr. Lippmann's man of the twentieth century is Winston Churchill, and like Churchill, who changed political sides twice during his career in the House of Commons, the American journalist exhibited his valuable quality of critical detachment in assessing contemporary Presidents. He originally thought Eisenhower would be a good President; he now thinks he has failed to lead. Mr. Lippmann had an early

cool estimate of Franklin D. Roosevelt, but came to regard him as a great wartime leader.

Supporters of Adlai Stevenson must have relished the Lippmann description of the requirements for the next President—"the ability to see what matters in the excitement of daily events, a judicial mind in making decisions, the ability to talk in language which the nation's best minds will understand, and experience as a governor of a state." Kennedy and Nixon backers could take comfort in the Lippmann view that the old leaders are passing and younger men are coming to the front. Mr. Lippmann's emphasis on calendar youth, however, was hardly convincing in view of his own vigor of ideas at threescore and ten. "It is in old age that power comes," Sir Charles Dilke wrote, with Gladstone in mind, but there is Churchill and here is Mr. Lippmann himself.

Howard K. Smith also got his guest to talk of West Berlin, Red China, and the U-2 affair. Mr. Lippmann pointed out that among the neutral nations, fear

of the U.S. diminishes when we stop using them exclusively as military bases. He had things to say about education, a favorite subject of his, about national purpose and public spending. He was in favor of deflating government's big bureaucracy but not its big purposes.

In all this he was not a "hollow man" crying havoc or cutting off reasonable hope. He was doing his best to help us see ahead, to correct our parochial and narrow personal concerns. Mr. Lippmann, in short, is on "man's side." He cares about the better of probable worlds. "Ideas have consequences," the columnist has said in one of his books. The world we act upon depends upon the world we believe exists. This being so, I would say to the CBS executive who scorned the importance of the "CBS Reports" telecast: "Mr. Fred W. Friendly's production of 'Lippmann on Leadership' was big." It did change the nation and the industry because it changed a few men's beliefs about today and tomorrow—for the better. In integrating and rendering more positive the private worlds of its collective viewers, the program made an important contribution to the preservation of the society in which the CBS executive and his colleagues can continue to have the freedom to appreciate "Bat Masterson" and "Highway Patrol" and "Steve Canyon." Can anything be bigger? —ROBERT LEWIS SHAYON.

Trinity Churchyard: Spring

By May Swenson

THIN shoulders of the old stones.
Rude weathered signals of the dead.
Armless. As if wearing square robes.
Some with an outcrop rounded as the head once was.

Some dark and marred as charcoal. Slices broken.
Frail torsos rugged earth holds steady here,
perpetual in rain and wind and under
the shrill file of the years.

Are they gaunt slivers of one great skeleton?
Rude remnant signals of the erased dead,
the marrows riddled but undestroyed,
that wait for assembly by the church's side?

Their shadows grow, are longer than themselves,
repeat them on their worn and ancient grass.
Some that were white have yellowed in the sun,
bent back in a stasis tipped by time,

as candles, lopped, are shortened with their use.
The names have run awry as melted wax.
Their burning has been opposite to green
and flame-shaped buds exploding now.