

THE FINE ARTS

THE TEMPTATION OF SAINT ANTHONY

AN exceptionally interesting exhibition of contemporary painting on the "Temptation of Saint Anthony" theme was held recently in New York and is scheduled for national tour. The eleven pictures in the show were contributed by six American and five European artists to a competition organized by the Hollywood film producers Loew-Lewin. The object of the competition was to provide a prize-winning canvas to be shown in a film of de Maupassant's "Bel Ami," wherein an oil painting of "Christ Walking on the Waters" figures dramatically in the plot. Since film censorship forbids the portrayal of Christ on the screen, the subject of the painting—and the competition—was necessarily changed. For once censorship was on the side of the Muses: No sacrosanct theme can excel the substituted "Temptation of Saint Anthony" in imaginative possibilities; none seems better suited to the introspective bias of modern art. But as though to redress this right, censorship once again intervened. In Boston, the exhibition was at first banned on religious-moral grounds, but has since been allowed to open.

Let us hope it will not be banned elsewhere.

For the exhibition is serious, distinguished, possibly even prophetic. Obviously no profanity was intended by any of the contributing artists. Indeed, what may be most remarkable about the show is the conviction with which the theme has been treated, though our era is often described as completely indifferent to religious subjects.

The history and terms of the competition, together with reproductions of the paintings and comments by the artists, have been published in a booklet. The booklet also furnishes statements by the three jurors which make clear their difficulty in choosing not only the winner—Max Ernst's canvas—but in deciding on the three or four best pictures in order. The jury's dilemma is understandable. The top entries are very even in quality. But the jury declares that quality was not its only consideration, a fact which indicates a waning of the purely hedonistic standards of criticism peculiar to the 1920's and 1930's. One of the jurors, for example, mentions "psychological pertinence" as an im-

portant factor in his judgment of the pictures, and it is of psychological content that I should like to speak particularly here.

The nature of St. Anthony's ordeal is variously described in the eleven paintings. Dorothea Tanning, Stanley Spencer, Ivan Le Lorraine Albright, Salvador Dali, and Paul Delvaux interpret his temptation primarily in sexual terms. The most forthright illustration of this conception is that of Miss Tanning. Her handsome picture portrays the saint tormented by a sea of voluptuous nudes which, to quote the artist, "take shape even in the folds of his own wind-tossed robes."

There are nearly as many nudes in Spencer's version of the scene, but here the sexual tension seems to attach to the painter himself rather than to exist between the saint and his temptresses. St. Anthony is shown as a reclining puppet, relatively unmoved by the surrounding turmoil of frenzied, Mannerist figures.

WHILE Ernst depicts women as remote witnesses of St. Anthony's torment at the hands of delirium's creatures, Albright's nudes lay physical hold of the saint. They wrestle with him amid an incredible slime, peopled with a bestiary of crawling things, most of them natural in form and not hybrid-fantastic as Ernst's animals are. There is no sense of seduction whatever in this scene; temptation has already assumed the bitter color of St. Anthony's remorse; there remains only his nightmare effort to free himself from a viscous chaos. The picture is opposite in conception to that of Miss Tanning, where woman's seductive power is formidable and real, not yet overcome.

Another version is supplied by Dali, whose imaginative canvas belies the creative exhaustion of which he is now often accused. In his picture, temptation does not directly touch the saint, as it does in the paintings of Albright and Tanning. Instead, it appears from afar as a *tableau vivant*, a procession moving across desert sands, propelled by elephants with fantastically long and spidery legs. The tableau is a mirage, soon to be exercised out of existence by the cross which St. Anthony brandishes in its path; the horse leading the procession has already reared in defeat and fear. Dali's saint is triumphant, in full control of his powers. And if woman still figures largely in the attempted beguilement, she does so with the aid of elaborate properties: she postures lasciviously from the top of an urn; or her nudity is framed by the portico of a baroque building.

In Eugene Berman's canvas, woman



—Courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art.

"The Temptation of Saint Anthony," by Max Ernst.

disappears entirely and only ornament remains. Not sex but art seems to be the temptation offered. The saint kneels before the pedestal of a sculpture, and behind him rises a neo-baroque monument covered with decorative forms which sometimes take a human or reptile configuration, but are intended as capriccios rather than as serious threats to sanity or faith. Still Berman, though his usage is the most extreme, is not alone with Dali in giving architecture or ornament a leading iconographical role. In Louis Guglielmi's painting, a nude with reversible buttocks and hollowed torso vies as temptress with an architectural rendering of a city—"possibly Paris," Guglielmi writes, "with all its corruption, power and glitter." And in Paul Delvaux's picture, an intricate stage setting of late nineteenth-century panelling is provided for the three ample nudes imagined by the saint. These are the frankest nudes in the exhibition, yet they are not so much worldly sirens as symbols of conjugal felicity, recalling Athanasius's theory that St. Anthony was tortured first by a remembrance of the pleasures of family and home.

Miss Leonora Carrington has given a personal fillip to the use of decorative motifs by clothing both the saint and his temptation through surrealist dressmaking. In her picture, the Queen of Sheba and her attendants slowly approach St. Anthony. But it is the Queen's parachute gown, rather than the Queen herself, which seems likely to distract him; Sheba is certainly the opposite of nude. Miss Carrington's poetic work is incidentally the only one in which food appears. The painter summarizes her belief that frippery and victuals would have haunted the saint, by declaring: "The bald-headed girl in the red dress combines female charm and the delights of the table—you will notice that she is engaged in making an unctuous broth."

Both Ernst and Albright have interpreted the saint's offering in a present, physical sense, playing down the self-inflicted griefs of memory and longing. Ernst, especially, follows the Northern tradition of chimerical violence, showing St. Anthony plagued by unlikely beasties. The tradition

LITERARY I.Q. ANSWERS

1. Wilkins Micawber. 2. Tony Weller. 3. Jonas Chuzzlewit. 4. Sairey Gamp. 5. Mrs. General. 6. Tiny Tim Cratchit. 7. Alfred Mantalini. 8. Mrs. Gummidge. 9. Harold Skimpole. 10. Uriah Heep. 11. Captain Cuttle. 12. Mark Tapley. 13. Mr. Bumble. 14. Sydney Carton. 15. Mr. Barkis. 16. Jerry Cruncher. 17. Oliver Twist. 18. Joe Gargery. 19. Dick Swiveller. 20. Thomas Gradgrind.



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*HENRY W. SIMON (former Chairman, Music Critics Circle of New York, editor)
WILLIAM STEINBERG (distinguished operatic conductor—music supervisor)
ALBERT SIRMAY (music editor and composer—arrangements)
GEORGE MEAD (Translator and organist—translations)
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found brilliant adherents in the North during the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, but reached its climax in the "St. Anthony" panel of Grünevald's Isenheim altarpiece at Colmar, a picture which prefigures Ernst's canvas in important particulars. Yet Ernst's painting is exceptionally fine, and what is surprising about the exhibition as an entity is the vitality displayed by traditional conception in modern hands. One may claim in fact that they show more vitality than the strictly modern approach exemplified by Abraham Rattner's painting—a subjective, expressionist work in which, says the artist, he "avoided any attempt at realistic illusion of the representation of the images incidental to the particular elements involved. . . ." To those who would close modern art to all forms of impetus except those which come from a self-contained modernism, Rattner's canvas may well seem the most successful. For me it proves, on the contrary, that the true present has as much to do with the past as with its separate, own self.

The exhibition as a whole supplies unusual evidence as to the richness of contemporary art. We had come to assume that modern painters could work only to inner order. Yet here they have painted brilliantly on a prescribed theme. The subject was admittedly evocative, but there is no reason to believe that others might not prove so, too. And that is what I meant at the beginning of this article when I said that the "Temptation of Saint Anthony" exhibition may prove prophetic, as it is assuredly both distinguished and serious.

JAMES THRALL SOBY.

JAMES T. FARRELL ON AN 'AAA'

(Continued from page 10)

of the author. But neither the Screen Writers Guild nor the Radio Writers Guild has, as yet, made an unequivocal statement in which they tell us, categorically, that they will not use their position as a means of boycott against writers. They could do this separately from the plan. The members of the editorial board of *The Screen Writer* stated in their note presenting Cain's article that they had "unanimously approved the plan in principle." This means that they then approved of Cain's idea of coercion, even though the Guild, according to Cain, later voted this down. This shows us that an important part of the leadership of the Screen Writers Guild originally found this idea of coercion acceptable. When I asked Mr. Cain why he had originally favored coercion (from the floor of the meeting at the Henry Hudson Hotel mentioned above), he answered that he had had in mind the coercion of corporations buying the material of writers. But this is unsatisfactory. For the quotations of his show plainly that the idea in mind was to coerce other writers. The originators of this plan had authorization and coercive ideas in mind when they first worked it out. This fact can only cast suspicion on their later revisions.

ONE of the major advantages of this plan—according to Cain—will be that the author will be given legal defense by the AAA. But this provision is, if anything, the most

menacing in the entire proposal. For it means that the author stands in excellent chance of losing his right to select his own counsel, and to have a decisive voice in how he is to be defended, if he is brought into court. This danger remains even with the present co-trusteeship plan for joint holding of copyright between the Authority and the author. Inasmuch as the Authority will then have joint control of the copyrights of authors, it means that the author stands an evolving an author, and can act on its own, if the author disagrees with it concerning his case. It is obvious that any political organization or pressure group can gain influence if not control over a five-man board much more easily than it can over a rank and file of an authors' organization. Already, political issues which are of world significance have been introduced into this controversy. American writers are split, bitterly split or these political issues. There are many writers who do not even speak to one another because of issues such as those connected with complicated political questions involving Stalinism. There are factions in the Authors League, already formed, or else, in the process of formation. It is more than clear that these factions are going to struggle with might and main to pick men they want on this proposed Authority, if it is established.

Any plan such as the AAA cannot be interpreted correctly if it is dealt with solely in terms of the organizational and the directly economic problems of writers. Control over copyrights is the basis of control over the written word. The AAA will be highly centralized, and if it is worked out successfully, it will, also, be rich. In *The Screen Writer* of last July, Cain visioned this AAA as "a massively powerful organization" which would have "a \$1,000,000 kitty and a full-time tough mug at the head of it." Consider this, and consider what can be done if and when the war danger, the tensions of war bitterness become intense. A centralized organization with money, power, and partial ownership of copyrights is at the disposal of whoever can capture a board of five men.

One of Cain's major complaints concerns the laws by which writers are taxed. There are certain inequities in these laws, and because of these inequities, Cain considers the writer to be a special victim of injustice, and to be in a situation which, as we know, seems to him to border on des-



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peration. While alive, an author's earnings are classed as income. If an author dies, his copyrights and works are classed as property, and subject to an inheritance tax. This question involves complicated matter of taxation, of economic theory, of law. It also involves the principles of taxation according to the conception of ability to pay. These need not be discussed here.

But the following point is relevant. What logical or practical connection can be drawn, in a *necessary* sense, between the proposal that the AAA own copyrights, in full or in joint trusteeship, and Cain's plan to make the AAA into a lush lobby, using "every means" to have changed the tax laws, and other laws affecting writers? Neither Cain, nor any one else in favor of the plan, has to my knowledge as yet explained this connection.

Cain has stressed that the whole issue here is money. No one with the least sense of equity will complain of efforts which writers make to get money which they ought to have as a result of their own efforts. But what comes first for writers? What principles are to be our guide? What criterion is to be applied to the questions and issues raised in the controversy over the AAA? Cain calls for "a united front" of writers. But it is a united front to make money. The call comes from a large proportion of the most financially successful writers in America.

It is additionally supported in the Stalinist press, and by known

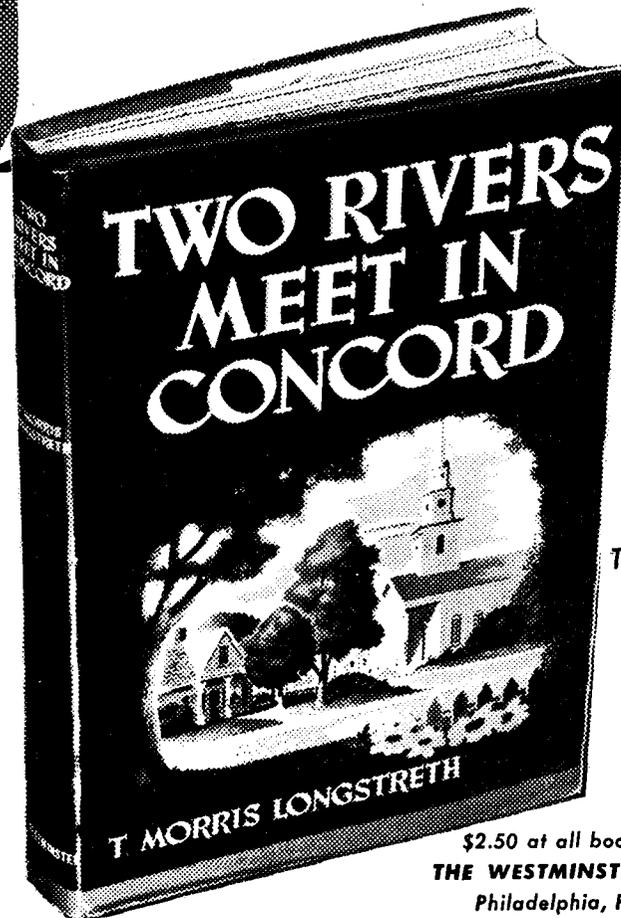
Stalinist writers. This united front is to be formed on economic lines. Concerning these matters, we can lay down the following principle. Organization, collectivization is good on the economic front: but only anarchy, freedom, struggle towards untrammelled freedom in the expression of ideas and the creation of art can be our guide. In the present period in particular this principle comes first, and must be prior to principles of an economic united front if there is any

danger of contradiction between them.

The principle shows us that when the question of the writer's individuality is introduced into this controversy, it has a dual meaning. There is, here, economic individuality and artistic-intellectual individuality. Proponents of the plan talk with a certain contempt of individuality. They say (one feels almost with sneers) that the writer prides himself with an illusory individuality.

(Continued on page 47)

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