

11 OCT 1959

*The Paris Biennale*

# UNDER THIRTY-SIX

By ALAN BOWNESS

**B**IENNIAL art exhibitions, like music festivals, have flourished and multiplied since the end of the war. To Venice has been added Sao Paulo and Kassel, and now the Paris Biennale is open at the Musée d'Art Moderne until October 25.

There had to be a good reason for another Biennale, and on the grounds that Paris has always attracted young artists, it was decided that this would be an exhibition exclusively for painters and sculptors aged less than thirty-six. No Grands Prix were to be awarded, instead there were provided for the French artists six modest cash prizes, and for the foreigners ten scholarships each for six months' residence in France.

In the event the first Paris Biennale is something of a disappointment, and the failure lies not so much in the work shown as in the conception of the exhibition. In the other big international art shows, whatever may be the general quality of the work on view, there are always certain paintings and sculpture that are recognisable as masterpieces of contemporary art. They give the exhibition a lift, and set the standard for the rest. In the nature of things, this isn't possible in an under-thirty-six show.

To some extent this lack of criteria was offset by a separate section, entitled "Jeunesse des Maîtres," which consisted of some thirty paintings done by the great artists of our century when they were under thirty-six. Their presence was also intended to justify the idea of having a "Biennale des Jeunes" at all.

The difficulties of making a selection among young artists are obvious, and the forty participating countries all seemed to have their own ways of choosing their artists. The large

French contribution was divided into three sections—the smallest (and by far the best) chosen by young critics, another by representatives of young painters, and a third (the worst) by the Biennale authorities.

Well over a hundred French and French-resident artists each showed a single painting or sculpture, and this is of course the worst possible way of presenting unfamiliar work. In the national sections, those countries who used the space allotted them to show a few artists well, made a much better impression than those who tried to crowd in too many. This was the reason why the German and Italian sections suffered in comparison with the British and American, which, though uneven, were to me the most interesting in the Biennale. Elsewhere, Belgium, Yugoslavia, Poland and Brazil provided evidence of groups of lively painters.

Much of the work shown was of the abstract expressionist kind. This has certainly become the common language for the younger generation, though national differences are still real and meaningful. The figurative and semi-figurative painters for the most part have lost confidence, and seem to find it increasingly difficult to say something fresh. Many of the younger French painters go on trying however, sometimes, like Rebeyrolle, on a heroic if rather bombastic scale.

The sculpture was very poor, but this is hardly surprising in view of the age limit. The three who stood out—Anthony Caro, of England, Volkos, of the United States, and Dodeigne, of France—are all in fact thirty-five or over. Caro and the painter Trevor Bell were both deservedly among the prizewinners: once again it says much for the British Council's selection that no other visiting country received two of the painting and sculpture awards.

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Date.....  
(See information overleaf)

## ART GALLERIES

# The Choice of Paris

By JOHN RUSSELL

PARIS, Saturday.

**B**EHIND the first Paris Biennale, which will be on view at the Musée d'Art Moderne till October 25, there lies an anxiety which everyone who loves Paris should by now have taken to heart. For what is at stake is not so much the future of the under-thirty-fives of thirty-two nations who have been assembled in record time under M. André Malraux's patronage: it is the future of Paris as an international art-centre.

Any rational history of modern art must have as its dominant theme the achievement, prestige, and almost universal influence of the school of Paris. This school first announced itself in the years before 1914; and around it there soon arose a sales-and-propaganda machine, which was the envy of all other capitals. But since 1950 art and the art-market have changed; the old masters of the Paris school have not been replaced. (Dubuffet was its last major innovator, and Dubuffet will soon be sixty.) Achievements and influence have moved elsewhere and big money has moved with them. Young artists from Poland and Spain seem to draw on forces of energy and daring which in Paris have dried up from excess of youth, and at the major art shows of recent years—Venice, Kassel, Sao Paulo, and the Brussels Fair—the decline of Parisian influence has been made cruelly evident.

AND yet a city which has Ionesco for its playwright, Boulez to speak for new music, Merleau-Ponty for its *maitre à penser*, and Butor and Robbe-Grillet for its young novelists, has still an incomparable climate to offer a young artist. M. Malraux, himself a creator or seer of no everyday order, is too intelligent to count on immediate returns; and his intention is rather to intensify the still-unequalled merits of Paris as a *ville d'accueil*. Over and above the permanent attraction of Paris he will present next year major exhibitions of Indian, Japanese and Latin American art; and in time, from one source and another, there may be recruited a second school of Paris, drawn like its predecessor in part from French and in part from international stock.

The counter-attack is, in fact, devised with a subtlety well worthy of French intelligence. The ten major prize-winners at this year's first Biennale (two of them, Mr. Trevor Bell for painting and Mr. Anthony Caro for sculpture, are English) will be given, not a sum of money, but a six-months' sojourn in France. And already, in the section headed "France and the French Community," we find artists like Luis Feito, a Spaniard, and Joan Mitchell, an American, who have the beginnings of an international name.

THE Biennale also tends, no doubt wittingly, to play down the present ascendancy of sculpture in favour of the traditional French preoccupation with paint; and within this general trend to play up the existence in Paris itself of more than one group of large-scale figurative painters. These manoeuvres contribute rather to the polemic interest of the Biennale than to its artistic quality. But the "Grand Design" as a whole is one which every lover of French art and French life will wish all possible success.