

# Universality at the first Paris Biennale

THE Paris exhibition which opened on October 2 differs in some respects from what is expected of a "biennale": it takes place in a comparatively small space in the museum of the Ville de Paris, was assembled within a few months instead of the years devoted to other biennales, and will last for a mere three weeks. In spite of this it is a most passionately interesting show: a magnificent transformation of the unfortunate building has been carried out by Pierre Faucheux, and the limitation of scale still provides some two thousand paintings from 40 countries—surely as many works as any visitor could want to see.

The ingenious idea of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs and the Association Française d'Action Artistique (somewhat resembling in its functions our Arts Council) was to restrict the invitations to works produced in the last five years by artists under 35 years of age. To anticipate the inevitable complaints of those omitted, three different methods of choice were applied to the selection of the French section. Seven younger writers on art were asked to nominate a score of painters and four sculptors; a jury of ten artists under 35 from different schools chose sixty works from a huge entry; and the administrative council invited some fifty more, and again invited certain groups to execute works together. Almost one in five of those invited were foreigners working in France: English as Hamilton; American as Mitchell, Downing, and Levee; Austrian as Hundertwasser.

In spite of limited time and difficulties of organisation 40 countries replied to the invitation, some of the more remote being represented by artists or works already present in France. The absence of Spain, Canada, Australia, Austria, and perhaps Russia is regrettable, but the opportunity to see contemporary works from Poland, Hungary, Yugoslavia, and Bulgaria serves as compensation.

Certain general aspects of the show are clear. Either the most original and powerful work of our time is being done by artists over the age of 35, or those artists under 35 who are doing work of sufficient power and originality to compare with their elders have somehow not been shown. Perhaps the attempt in the French section to cover the whole gamut of contemporary painting from "primitive" to "informal" has caused a certain confusion and lack of clarity, but it seems clear that those younger French painters who still cling to compromises with obvious figuration lack force when seen beside the more general statements of such painters as Arnal, Dmitrienko Coudrain, and Guitel. The United States section, chosen inevitably by the New York Museum of Modern Art,

WILLIAM STANLEY HAYTER, a painter living and working in Paris and one of three artists chosen to represent Britain at the Sao Paulo Biennale, gives his impressions of the first Biennale to be held in Paris.

demonstrates clearly that, as in France, either the burden of the movement is borne by the older painters or that the strongest of the younger painters have not been chosen. In fact, Joan Mitchell, chosen by one of the younger French critics, represents American painting more worthily than the generally oversized works of the section.

The British section, on the whole well chosen and well exhibited in one of the upper galleries opposite the Swiss, includes Bell and Denny, who both show a powerful underlying implied structure which may well anticipate the next development of the informal; however, both Rumney and Smith suffer from comparison with more adept handling of similar material by French exhibitors.

It is the Polish section which will attract great interest, for few advanced works have been seen from this country. Although much of the work is still in evolution from obvious figuration the "Climat" of Pagowska and the obsessive figure of Jan Lebensztejn are original and arresting. Of the Italians Licata is subtle and evocative; Virduzzo shows curious hypnotic prints, but the sculpture of the Pomoloros seem to depend too much on the corrupt quality of archaeological remains.

German, Swiss, and Dutch sections are lively and, of the Belgians, Vandercamp, already seen in Paris exhibitions, has perhaps the most striking exhibit. Both Hungarian and

Yugoslav sections show the strong ferment among the younger painters, but the authority of the small, beautifully presented Japanese section is beyond question.

Domoto and Imai show paintings which, if related to tachism, suggest that this direction has centuries of calligraphy behind it; and if the sculpture of Yasuda is of an idiom difficult to penetrate it is perhaps more real and concrete than most Western production.

Lack of time and difficulty of transport has militated against the sculptors, who are less well shown than the painters. Perhaps, too, it is an art in which major works are seldom produced by artists under 35. However, among the French Delahaye and Hiquily have already mastered their means; Guino has vigorous concave forms; and Poncet an excellent polished bronze.

The print-makers, so often the poor relations, are less impressive, although this may simply reflect incompetent selection. Lars Bo, a Dane invited with the French, Reinhold, and, among the Americans, Carol Summers's enormous colour woodcuts give evidence of present vigour in the medium.

Of course, in the minds of the organisers of any exhibition of this character there is always an intention to show the merit, even the superiority, of the work of their own countrymen. It is perfectly normal that in a Venice biennale there shall be emphasis on

Italian artists; in Sao Paulo the actual quantity of work by South American artists should predominate. But in Paris we have the seat of the Ecole de Paris, international in scope, which has been so far identified with the modern movement.

It is indisputable that nearly all of the great masters of the present have been associated with France, and the organisers here have had the excellent idea to add, under the title "The Youth of the Masters," an annexe in which a selection of works of those masters executed before they were 35 is presented in three sections: the generations of 1900, of 1914, and of 1930. Thus, while recalling the bases of the Ecole de Paris, they offer at the same time a comparison for visitors who wish to spot the masters of the next generation among the younger painters. Although very comprehensive there are two quite incomprehensible omissions—Marcel Duchamp and Kandinsky—both undisputed masters whose influence is clearly visible throughout the remainder of the exhibition.

But if the predominance of the Ecole de Paris is undeniable, there exists to-day a rivalry with a general movement known variously as Tachist, Informal, or (regrettably in the country of its earliest appreciation) Abstract Expressionism, and in this exhibition almost every section demonstrates the universal exchange of influences. It might have been planned to show the domination of one or another, but happily its effect is, rather, to show the continuity of effort and universality of the art of our time, and by profusion testify to an enormous expansion of appreciation of idioms so recently labelled "difficult."

Paul. B. S. J. P.

41

12