

# Chinese Peasants Exhibit in Paris

By Michael Gibson

PARIS, Sept. 26 (IHT).—The participation in the Paris Biennale of 52 peasant-painters from the Hu-Xian district of the Shensi Province of China is not so much an artistic event as it is an event, period. The 80 works displayed at the Musée Galliera (to Nov. 2) are of interest because of the circumstances in which they were produced, the technical ability they reveal, the principles they illustrate and the gap between them and the rest of the show.

The gap is of any number of orders—the geographical distance, the political situation, the rural world the Chinese live in, the non-professional status of the painters and the ideas they have of what art is about, based on the guidelines given by Mao Tse-tung in his Yen-an talks.

The geographical distance is not only that which stands between China and Europe. It is also that which separates Shensi, far inland beyond the Gobi Desert and just under the Mongolian frontier, from Peking. Thus it happened that when a stricter policy was decided upon in Peking (in 1966) after a temporary phase of liberalization initiated in 1958, the new line was never really enforced out in Shensi and the cultural policies were apparently never modified.

## Conditions

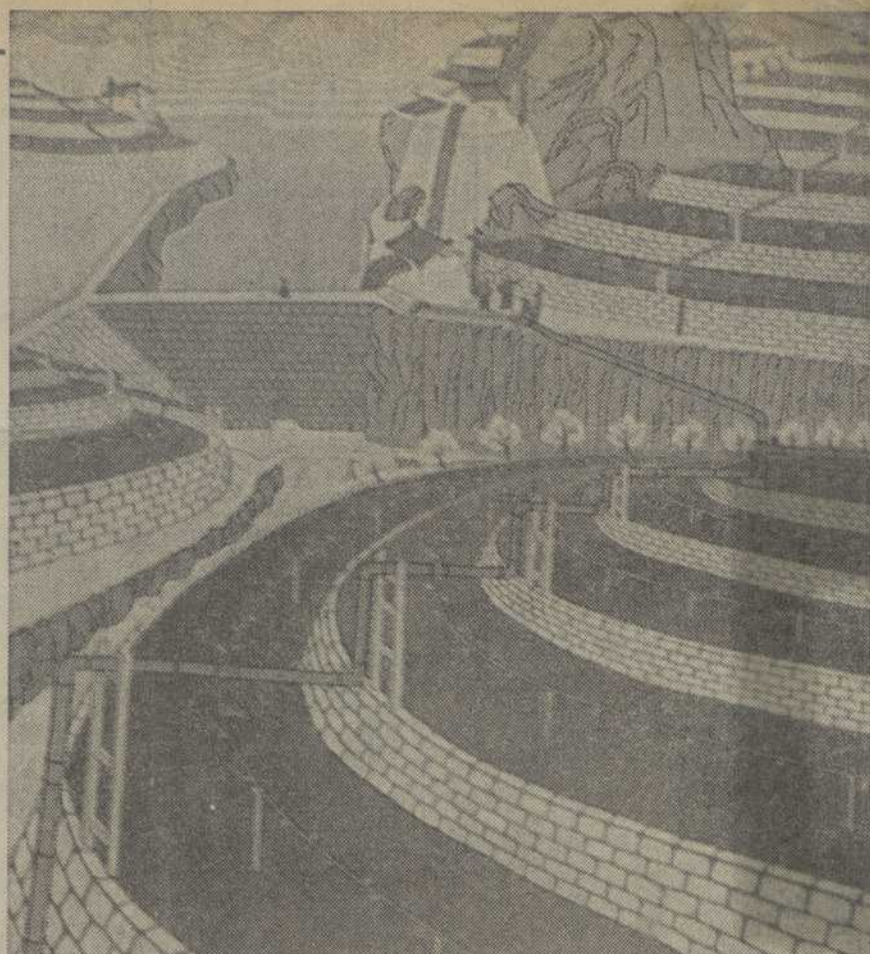
The artists themselves are all peasants working in an agricultural commune. Nearly half of them are 25 or under. They work full time in the fields and devote only their leisure moments to painting. It is perhaps also important to bear in mind what sort of living conditions peasants in China actually had until not so long ago, if one is to understand the enthusiasm of people who really are intent on improving their lot through daily hard work.

The peasants of Shensi are still in a pioneering situation and the main concerns of such a situation are those one sees reflected, sometimes with simple charm, sometimes in didactic form, in their paintings: irrigation, soil improvement, conservation, learning. All of which is rather reminiscent of the description Edgar Snow gave of the shows produced by the Red Army theater groups when he went to Yen-an in 1937 to meet Mao Tse-tung. The purpose such groups set before them then was to instruct the rural population in matters relating to hygiene and to the political situation. This is one use that can be made of theater and the visual arts, a use that was discussed by Goethe, for instance, in his "Wilhelm Meister," and which presents a number of advantages in the perspective of the situation now prevailing in China. It is all a matter of priorities, and in the course of time priorities can change.

The most astonishing thing about these paintings, if not the most satisfying, is the scrupulous dexterity of these amateur artists. One senses them striving for meticulous control of their craft, and also relying on criticism from outsiders to improve the ideological content of their work. I suspect that this concern with "correct" attitudes and such like, is a true cultural trait of the Chinese, and not something derived from their Marxism. But it has been channeled in a new direction by the fact that nobody would apparently dream of producing a work that did not follow the guidelines set out by Mao Tse-tung so many years ago in Yen-an: "Life reflected in literary and artistic works can, and must, always be sharper, more intense, condensed, typical, closer to the ideal and consequently closer to the universal than everyday reality." (My translation from the French.)

This implies, of course, that the proper subject of art can only be found in the tangible objects of daily life, to which the artist can only add some spice to

"Artificial Rain" by Tchao Pei-ho, one of 52 Chinese peasant-painters whose work is included in the Paris biennial.



heighten it and an elevated message to dignify it. Or does it? I would be most surprised to learn that Chairman Mao considers life as an agglomeration of objects and things. Conflict is part of life, and determination, which is not just a protruding jaw, and all the energy that men find in their needs and hopes. These realities of life which concern the Shensi peasants to the highest degree, cannot be photographed or made into a *tableau vivant*. They cannot be automatically expressed in a clenched fist, a smile, an earnest frown. That is the problem that makes art not just a matter of craft, but also a deeper undertaking than one may suspect.

At their present stage these artists have achieved a certain craft—a craft that sometimes calls to mind the old Saturday Evening Post—but also the expression of an authentic and naive pleasure derived from the circumstances of life and the delight of color. Confronted with the lugubrious nihilism and com-

placent self-destructiveness encountered across the street (at the Musée d'Art Moderne, where the rest of the Biennale is to be seen) this is all very cheerful and healthy. It is also singularly devoid of any sense of contradiction—a point which after all is of some importance when one happens to have a dialectical view of the world.

Finally, as one goes away, one is inclined to wonder: what do these people dream about? Well, perhaps all their dreams really are caught up in the tasks at hand. Travelers attest that they live in conditions that are in bright contrast to those that once prevailed. These people are properly fed, clothed and housed, and they are manifestly cheerful.

"Why is everybody always smiling in your paintings?" Zao Wou-ki [a Chinese painter who has been living in France since 1948] asked them when he went to Shensi to prepare this exhibition. "Because we are happy!" was the answer.

"What must we dream about?"

Lenin once inquired in a beautifully ironic essay. "I had no sooner written these words down than I was afraid. I imagined... Comrade Martynov getting up and talking to me in a threatening tone: 'Allow me to ask you this: Does an autonomous editorial board have the right to dream without prior consultation of the party committee?'... And then came Comrade Kricevski: 'I go further. I ask whether a Marxist has the right to dream at all...'"

Lenin's conclusion was that a Marxist did indeed have the right to dream, but that a point of contact between dreams and reality was desirable. "Unfortunately," he concluded, "there are too few such dreams in our movement."

But such considerations are perhaps still too remote from the preoccupations of the Shensi peasants, and it is perhaps best to welcome the clear quality of the communication this visual long-distance call affords us at last.

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## ART IN PARIS

# Nihilism, Narcissism at Biennale

By Michael Gibson

PARIS, Oct. 3 (IHT).—The ninth Paris Biennale is taking place in both Museums of Modern Art (Avenue du Président Wilson) and, for the Chinese participants, on the other side of the avenue at the Musée Galliera (IHT, Sept. 27-28).

The overall effect of this exhibition, devoted to artists under 35, is, in some respects at least, very much in the line of what was to be seen two years ago. There is almost nothing for the mind, eyes or heart to take hold of. What is offered is predominantly in the order of intellectual nihilism in pseudo-scientific disguise and a certain complacently exhibitionistic self-destructiveness. All of which is invested with arcane significance at a level which is neither art, nor psychology nor science.

New trends are flushed out of corners and soberly described as meaningful manifestations and the whole "avant-garde" as here represented is embarked upon a course that can only end with exhaustion, just like a self-perpetuating fit of hysteria, in which the hysteria of the preceding moment can only find its justification in the continued hysteria of the minute yet to come.

## 'Women Artists'

Fashionable absurdities are picked up. Thus, much is made of the fact that a number of women artists are showing their work. That some women artists make an issue of the fact that they are women strikes me as a reflection of their personal problems or of their inadequacy as artists. There is no such thing as a "woman artist." There are only artists. A woman may use "art" to express feminist themes. This makes her a feminist propagandist, not a woman artist. The point is marginal, perhaps,

but the confusion of issues is characteristic of what makes the Biennale what it is.

And what the Biennale is is merely a symptom and not the disease. The disease is that of the purposelessness of the age. It is the widely received implicit belief that the imaginary world has no dynamic connection with reality, is merely free-wheeling fantasy in its basest sense.

It is quite striking, leafing through the Biennale catalogue, to see how often the word "research" crops up in relation to some artist's undertaking. This stuff is serious, brethren, this is science. We have (taken at random) Vila, who "continues his research relative to wooden panels," Torres, who declares that "the understanding that I have of my past subjectivity allows me to objectivate my present motivations," Porter, who has devoted her work over the past seven years "to the study of the disparity between the image and reality," Permafo, who suggests that there should be "a constant development of research tending towards the creation of (certain types of) structures," Muntadas, who refers to "the artist as researcher," Mapston, who is "working on the theme of human behavior within the physico-cultural context," Export, who is bent on showing through her work that "man experiences reality by means of preconditioned structures of reference" (thanks, we'd heard) and Castelli, who, we are told, "in a first phase of his work studied the phenomena of vision and the biological processes..."

And so we have an "art" that descends to apeing science because no theory is generally received that gives art any valid field of its own (aside from that of purely aesthetic titillation) nor any significant connection with the purposes of humanity in general, such as one grants both

to science and, though to a lesser degree, to philosophy.

Another way in which artists approach the irrepressible yet unrecognized forces of the imagination leads to a display of self-assertive subjectivity that refuses to recognize any right to objectivity. This subjectivity does seem to lean towards self-destructiveness as a gesture of defiance and no doubt of self-punishment. It is aggressively narcissistic in many cases, disturbing as most morbid acts tend to be, and about as fascinating and meaningful as watching a man picking his nose and examining his finds.

All this strongly suggests that something is "out of joint" and not necessarily the artists, no matter how obvious it may be that many of them are fugitives from the couch. Such criticism does not reflect a nostalgia for "the good old days" nor a yearning to "revive old values." It means to suggest that new perspectives on perennial needs have to be found—and not by a committee ad hoc, but in the recesses of the creative fantasies and phantasms of mankind that are by no means a brood of archaic, immutable, bloodthirsty archetypes, but a sensitive, realistic mediation between "things as they are" and each man's need to reach a state of plenitude before he dies. This implies again that creativity is everyone's business, with art as a privileged focus of the general creativity within a society—one that tends in fact to anticipate a good deal on society at large—a fact that is generally observed but not understood, and which one finds reflected in the statement that such and such an artist is "ahead of his time."

The deeply problematic aspect of the Biennale is then its most significant and useful aspect too. Individual works might invite comment, but these the viewer can discover on his own.

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