A REPORT ON AMERICAN PAINTING TODAY—1950

By ROBERT BEVERLY HALE
Associate Curator of American Painting and Sculpture

The planning for the large exhibition of American contemporary art, American Painting Today—1950, which is now on display at the Metropolitan Museum, started over two years ago. It had long been felt by artists and artists’ organizations, notably Artists Equity, that a recurrent exhibition of this kind, to be held in New York, would be most welcome. Such exhibitions had long been held in other cities, and it seemed almost a necessity that New York, our principal art center, should also offer its public, its many visitors, and its artists an opportunity to review the contemporary creative trends of this country. It was also felt that such an exhibition would stimulate interest in the work of contemporary artists and perhaps bring them economic benefits, which they sorely needed.

The Department of American Art was formed in January 1949 and instructed to investigate the possibilities of such an exhibition and the form it might take. In July of that year Roland J. McKinney was appointed consultant. Mr. McKinney had formerly been director of the Baltimore Museum of Art and of the Los Angeles County Museum. He had organized the American section of the international exhibition at San Francisco as well as several other large national exhibitions. His wide experience proved to be of tremendous value to our department. During the year, through correspondence and much travel, the informal opinions of artists and art experts throughout the United States concerning the various problems inherent were obtained. The questions that constantly recurred were these: Should the exhibition be competitive or invited—or half and half? If juries were to be formed, who should compose the juries—artists, critics, museum officials, or a mixed company? Should regional quotas be established? Should there be prizes, or purchase prizes, or should there be no prizes at all?

All these questions and many others were weighed and decided and the exhibition was publicly announced in January, 1950. It was felt that an open competitive exhibition would be the fairest to all, though it was realized that such an exhibition would be extremely expensive and that certain artists of established reputation were reluctant to submit to the hazards of open competition. It was decided to set up regional juries in the East, the Far West, the Middle West, the Southwest, and the South. This was done in order to give the exhibition a truly national quality, in the hope of discovering unknown talent in far places, and in order to save the artists the expense of shipping to New York. Regional Directors were appointed to encourage the artists to submit and to superintend details in their regions. They were in each case museum officials, and they and their museums gave us splendid co-operation. In order to avoid the controversial question of establishing quotas in each region, a National Jury was planned in New York so that the pictures received from the regional juries might be screened and reduced to the number our Museum might be able to display. It was the wish of the majority of the artists consulted that the juries should be composed of artists. This wish was followed, except for the appointment of William Milliken, Director of the Cleveland Museum, on the Jury of Awards. It was decided to offer prizes rather than purchase prizes. This was done because with the creation of the Department of American Art the policy of the complete separation of acquisition and exhibition had been announced. The Museum felt that the permanent collection was its own responsibility and that if the recommendations of an outside jury should be automatically accepted a part of this responsibility would be relinquished.
In April some twenty-two thousand letters announcing the terms of the exhibition and containing entry blanks were sent out to artists. As the news spread, some three thousand artists wrote, telephoned, or telegraphed requesting further blanks and announcements. Ultimately we received over nine thousand entry blanks fully filled out: these now constitute a most informative file on living American artists. Some five hundred letters and many telephone calls were received from artists who wished to comment on the exhibition. Many of the suggestions were extremely valuable, and it is hoped that some of them may be incorporated in our future exhibitions. A digest was made of these opinions which was read to a meeting of the American Federation of Arts in Washington in May.

On May 20, 1950, an open letter signed by eighteen painters and ten sculptors was received by the Museum. It stated in substance that they "rejected the monster national exhibition" to be held at the Metropolitan, that the juries chosen were too conservative to admit a just proportion of advanced art. It called upon all the advanced artists in the country to boycott the exhibition.

This letter, which appeared on the front page of The New York Times, stirred up a spirited controversy. On June 12 the Museum received an open letter signed by seventy-five artists expressing confidence in the integrity of the juries appointed, saying that it seemed unfair to attack the juries before they had met and announced their verdicts.

As it seemed necessary, for practical reasons, to have a representative of the Museum present at the various jury meetings, I was appointed a non-voting member on all juries except the Jury of Awards. Thus in September and October I traveled to all the regional centers and saw every picture submitted to the competition. This, I feel, was a unique privilege, as certainly these pictures represented a formidable cross section of the painting of our country. It very soon became clear to me that the vast majority of our artists had ceased to be conservative. They had abandoned the visible world and moved into a world of their own. They no longer painted the visible aspects of the States of the Union, they simply painted states of mind. Indeed, if tempted to paint the visible world, they would draw across it an abstract veil, and thus dissipate the flavor of the local scene. In fact, as I moved about the country and as all these pictures passed before me, it became increasingly difficult for me to remember where I was. The names of the cities changed—Dallas, Santa Barbara, Chicago, Richmond, New York—but the pictures remained essentially the same. It was evident that our artists had abandoned their regional and even the national idiom and now spoke in a universal language.

What has happened, of course, is that the United States, like the rest of the world outside the iron curtain, has succumbed to the aesthetic revolution largely promoted in Paris at the turn of the century. This adopted point of view seems most sympathetic to our artists, for their painting, in many respects, in color, vitality, and imagination, is far superior to that of ten years ago. It is possible, in fact, that American painting now equals that of any other country. Certainly this could not have been said in our academic and impressionistic days, nor in the days of our regional painters. We should realize, I feel, that this is a matter of great cultural and some political importance.

It was suggested to the various juries that it was the hope of the Metropolitan that the exhibition should be broad, that it might reflect, in proportional representation, all trends now active in the country. I know that the juries followed this suggestion, for I was a witness. If some complain that there is a small proportion of conservative work now hanging, it is because little was offered. The revolt of the few advanced artists mentioned above was of course unfortunate. But their suggested boycott was but sparsely followed and had little influence on the final result.

This report would be incomplete without a word of appreciation for the artists who composed our juries. They served with patience, integrity, and devotion and gave far more than could be asked. The task of the New York Regional Jury was particularly arduous. Some four thousand pictures were passed before them. The majority of these pictures were reviewed many times before a decision was reached. But the
problems of the National Jury were perhaps the most difficult. The pictures presented to them were the best the regions could send, and the very delicate artistic decisions required demanded the utmost in time and attention.

A preview of the exhibition was given on December 5 for the press and the artists participating. At this time the four prize winners were announced. Karl Knaths received the first prize of $3,500 for his Basket Bouquet, the second prize of $2,500 went to Rico Lebrun for Centurion's Horse, Yasuo Kuniyoshi won the $1,500 third prize for Fish Kite, and Joseph Hirsch the $1,000 fourth prize for Nine Men. Honorable Mention went to Ethel Magafan for Lonesome Valley, and to Sara Provan for Bird, Fish, Fruit. The exhibition opened on December 7.

The exhibition has been well received by critics throughout the country. They commented, as I have tried to above, on the present universality of American art. They remarked that such an exhibition had long been overdue in New York, that it had brought a number of young artists into prominence, that it presented an assurance that American art has come of age. But I feel that the most significant aspect of the exhibition was recognized and expressed in an editorial in The New York Times on December 8.

“The exhibition, 'American Painting Today—1950,' opening today at the Metropolitan Museum, has implications beyond the confines of the American art field. At a time of international gloom and foreboding, and when liberties in totalitarian nations are curtailed or suppressed, the greatest museum in the country is playing host to the work of more than three hundred artists of all phases of esthetic production.

“In the countries of the Soviet bloc, as in Hitler’s Reich, art’s free expression is frowned upon unless it can be turned to purposes of propaganda for the state. But in the American democracy the Metropolitan, with a conservative tradition, set out to obtain a nation-wide survey of the condition of American painting. . . . The work selected has been chosen for its merits as painting and for its significance, by artists themselves. The range is from old-fashioned realism to completely nonobjective painting — every phase of artistic expression in a democracy.

“The Metropolitan’s gesture at this time, in a confused and heartsick world, is in itself an affirmation of belief in the importance of culture and a further affirmation of democratic principles at a time when faith is sorely needed. Artists will not be alone in recognizing it as such.”
**Fairport Harbor**, by Carl Gaertner. Ohio

*Young America*, by Andrew Wyeth. Pennsylvania
Basket Bouquet, by Karl Knaths. Massachusetts. First Prize

Wherefore Now Ariseth the Illusion of a Third Dimension, by Ivan Le Lorraine Albright. Ill.
Goat, by Everett Spruce. Texas

Sunflowers and Goldfinches, by Robert F. Gates, Virginia
Centurion’s Horse, by Rico Lebrun. Calif. Second Prize
The Pali, by Ben Norris. Hawaii
Night of the Ritual, by Attilio Salemme. New York. Purchased by the Museum

Written over the Plains, by Mark Tobey. Washington