

THE FAVORED FEW

OPEN THE MODERN MUSEUM'S SEASON

BY ALINE B. LOUCHHEIM

An invitation to dine at Mrs. Vanderbilt's is no greater accolade in the social world than is an invitation to exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art in the art world. Whether it likes it or not, the Museum places a nationally recognized imprimatur on the occasional American artists it elects to show. Thus, its long-planned group, "Fourteen Americans," may be approached in two ways. It can be visited as fourteen solo performances conveniently housed under one roof, representing, as the catalogue foreword states, "widely different aims and inspirations." As such it is a provocative and lively show with several extremely rewarding moments. But it should also be examined in its entirety as an indication of a line of taste, for, despite the qualifying explanation that the group is presented "not as a definitive selection of the outstanding talents of 1946 . . .," the fact remains that *these* are the "talents" which the Museum has favored. From this point of view the show is an affirmation of the Museum's admirable interest in the experimental and forward-looking. But it also confirms a rather special and at times almost eccentric prejudice for work which is fashionable and avant-garde, though frequently unresolved, over that which

is more traditional and less spectacular, though still progressive and integrated.

"Fourteen Americans," however, must also be considered one of a series in a continuing survey of art in the United States in our time. It follows those devoted to a specific trend—"Realists and Magic Realists" and "Romantic Painting"—and the "Eighteen Artists from Nine States" held four years ago. Whereas the latter was devoted to artists little or scarcely known in the New York arena, the present show has no such arbitrary limitations. With the exception of the comparative newcomers — Honoré Sharrer, Alton Pickens, and Ben L. Culwell—readers of these pages need no introduction to the chosen few or even to most of the paintings exhibited. Nor has youth been a determining factor: the age level ranges from twenty-three-year-old David Aronson to seventy-two-year-old C. S. Price. This time geography has played no rôle: ten of the fourteen live or work in New York, two in the Pacific Northwest, one in Boston, and one is a native Texan. Their idioms range from the precise geometries of I. Rice Pereira's experiments with materials to the clean, unwavering lines of

Theodore J. Roszak has abandoned early, familiar "constructivist" style for organic forms made of welded, hammered, and brazed metals as *SURGE*, 1946, 10¾ inches high.

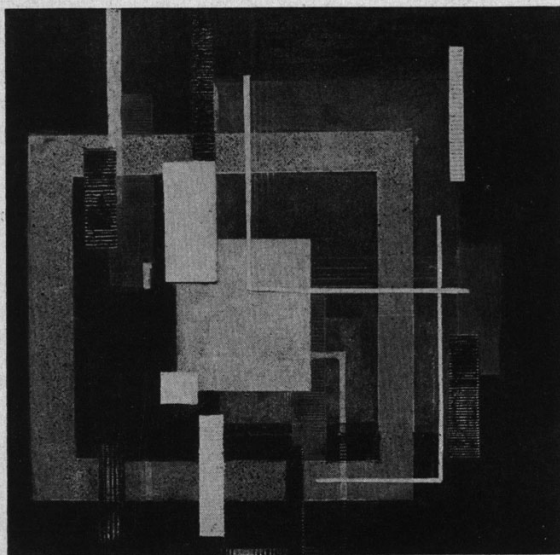


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Saul Steinberg's witticisms. Common denominators are only mastery of techniques and originality of approach.

At the realist end of the painting group is Honoré Sharrer. Her inclusion should come as no surprise, for the Museum indicated its approval of her imaginative-and-super-real genre when it acquired the study for a mural, *WORKERS AND PAINTERS*, in 1944. Along with this finished painting are two small panels. They are projected as part of the sixteen which will form two sides of a triptych whose central panel will be a figure of a worker. This young New Yorker has held no one man show, but the prize awarded her in La Tausca Pearl competition (*ARTNEWS*, Jan. 15-31, 1946) introduced her to a large audience. Her paintings lose enormously in reproduction. Their greatest charm lies in the felicity of the actual painting, in the arrangement of tones and colors (the greens in *IN THE PARLOR* and the whiteness of the little boy's suit with his piercingly blue hat), and in the ordering of space (where the figures are set like signposts within it). Sharrer's antecedents are the fifteenth-century Flemish painters who like herself gloried in the minutiae of the world and its meticulous, magnifying-glass representation. Yet her rich surfaces are neither as smooth as theirs nor as slick as those of most twentieth-century "magic realists." Her somewhat wooden figures and spatial construction recall most vividly the paintings of Dirk Bouts. These tiny paintings are indeed glorification of the Common Man, but the language is a painter's and not a pamphleteer's.

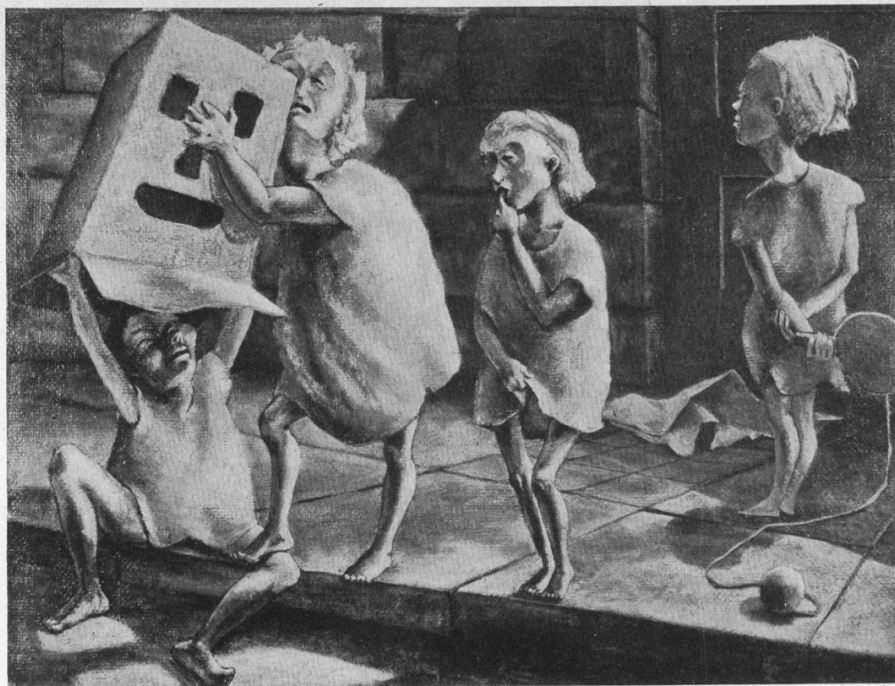
The everyday world is the point of departure, too, for



Pereira's precise non-objective style, as in *COMPOSITION IN WHITE* (oil on parchment with mica, marble dust, etc.), contrasts with abstractions by Gorky and Motherwell; lent by Newark Mus.

Realist Honoré Sharrer, comparative newcomer, plans *IN THE PARLOR*, 1946, as a side panel of a projected triptych. A winner in La Tausca Pearl competition, she has had no one man show.





Alton Pickens exhibited in St. Louis and Carnegie annuals in 1945, has had no one man show. He paints a "fantasy of distortion" as in *THE GAME OF PRETEND*; lent by Buchholz.

Alton Pickens; but here the resemblance ends. Outstanding among the lesser-knowns and for this reviewer star of the whole show, Pickens was born twenty-nine years ago in Seattle and has traveled and studied in many places. He has had no one man show, but his appearances in the St. Louis annual and the Carnegie in 1945 were noted by many. *THE CARD PLAYERS*, now at the Museum of Modern Art, was reproduced in *ARTNEWS*, Feb. 15-28, 1945, when it was shown in Missouri. The Museum of Modern Art bought *THE BLUE DOLL*, one of his best works, in 1943. Almost Bosch-like is his vision which sees phantasmagoria in reality and reality in hallucination. Each gesture and each human being is examined with an intensity which is both pitying and pitiless. All outer defenses are peeled away, leaving the implicit essence and the tragic fallacy laid bare. This leads, as Pickens himself so succinctly puts it, to a "fantasy of distortion." For these revelations he has developed a haunting technique: crisp, linear outline; full-bodied forms described in blended tones of rather hushed color; and an eerie and dramatic chiaroscuro.

A personal inner world of tormented fantasy motivates the painting of yet another of the show's debutants, Ben L. Culwell. The twenty-eight-year-old Texan has had a one man show only in his native state, and his art training consists only of a brief period of study under Walter Pach. The work in the current exhibition was born from the caldron of Pacific warfare on the U.S.S. *PENSACOLA*. Yet these paintings made for the most part on shipboard, are no naïve primitives. Done in a mixed technique—as necessity played mother of invention—of watercolor, ink, egg tempera, and encaustic, they betray a sophisticated eye which must surely have known the metamorphic [CONTINUED ON PAGE 51]



Ben L. Culwell, little known outside his native Texas, painted in a mixed medium aboard the U. S. S. *PENSACOLA* such expressionist interpretations of war as *ADRENALIN HOUR*.

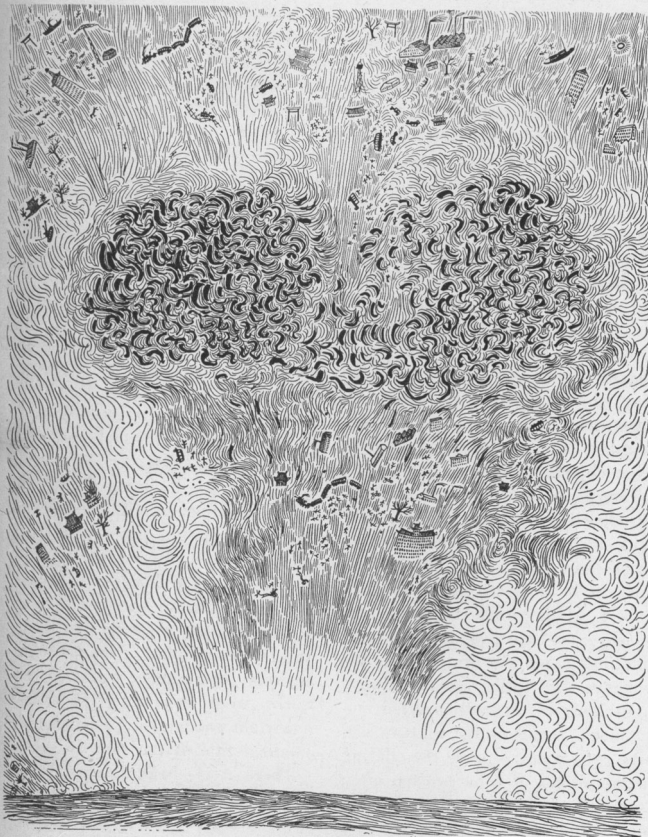
has forged the uncreated conscience of his race—humanity. He has realized his dream of universal intelligibility. He deserves to decorate the endless spaces.

In America today, where sculpture is the most unpopular, misunderstood, and least practiced of arts, where the great majority of sculptors rely upon eccentricity or compromise, Noguchi has built an experimental art on the traditions of the past which is relevant to both present and future. Like Zadkine, he is conscious of the "golden river

of the history of art" and has made himself a part of it.

It is safe to prophesy that popularity will surge back to him. His constructions will stand in the gardens of the rich and in public parks. But one may also prophesy that when his discovered idioms tend to become formulas, when understanding becomes fashionable convention, he will, with the great courage which has characterized his whole career, return to exile, and with his tools of silence and cunning create sculpture in the dual reference of art and life.

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Saul Steinberg's pen drawing *HIROSHIMA, 1946*, is included in the exhibition "Fourteen Americans" current at the Museum of Modern Art.

double images of Tchelitchev, perhaps the expressionist fervor of Zerbe. Color is searing; forms in flux; the mood at white-heat intensity. Even without the pretentious and self-conscious explanatory captions the paintings expose the raw emotions for which the war was stimulus. Whether Culwell will develop from what is now still a derivative and uncertain style remains a question and one suspects that the Museum has, at best, bestowed its honors prematurely.

Religious, mystic, and subjective mood are the variations played on the expressionist theme by three painters whose work needs no introduction here—David Aronson, Mark Tobey, and C. S. Price. The meteor-like success of the young Bostonian, Aronson, has been recorded in these pages and his paintings of the time-

less mysteries of the Torah and the Bible have been described. Yet his recent work now on display evokes a warning. There seems a danger that he may fall, on the one hand, into a technical cul-de-sac born of his easy handling of the rich encaustic technique and, on the other, into a cliché of subject-matter where his means outstrip his statement and emotion. Mark Tobey's explorations into an inner world in terms of calligraphic improvisation also need no recapitulation. Parenthetically, REMOTE FIELD and NEW YORK seem redundant. Lovely as is the lacy, spider-web spinning of the white-writing technique, why should there be two examples where it is carried to the *n*th degree? Familiar, too, are the subjective visions of the solitary, Ryder-like Northwest painter C. S. Price. They are disclosed in blurred,

somber planes and forms wherein the heavy pigment is bluntly spread on the canvas with a palette knife.

Loren MacIver's magic loses nothing of its spell in this energetic company. Mastery of pure painting, lustrous color, a subtle sense of design, and a contagious and spontaneous delight in the world transform her subjects (whether ash cans, city pavements, votive lights, or the starry spring-time laurel) into enchanting and evocative images. She is by far the best painter in the show.

Whereas MacIver falls in love with the beauty of the commonplace and the casual, Saul Steinberg dissects the whole animal, mineral, and human worlds with his facile wit. His uncanny sense of the incongruous and his ability to exaggerate the salient are matched by skill in direct, incisive line. His tour de force is the fifty-foot-long scroll of *THE CITY* (made especially for this show), which automatically unrolls one architectural delight after another. Steinberg's genius as draftsman and his status as an artist as well as his keen caricaturist's eye were recognized in these pages (*ARTNEWS*, July 1-31, 1945) before the art world had begun its lionizing. There is no let-down: look for instance at the elegant *HORSE AND SULKY*, the dazzling white and Oriental pattern of *HIROSHIMA*. But perhaps the Museum overplays him by including twenty-seven objects on this occasion.

The non-representational orbit is introduced by Arshile Gorky. His fluid, inchoate, somewhat surrealist forms now spin over thinly-sized surfaces in decorative meanderings. Robert Motherwell's vigorous and splashy non-objective collages and paintings assail the eye by their vehemence. His forms are not always controlled; his expression often monotonous. Somehow the bravura display of textures and the daring juxtapositions of color are too often "sound and fury, signifying nothing." In striking contrast are Pereira's expert investigations into constructed space and planes and into varied textures and networks of intricate lines. Here the appeal is the result of formal, ordered patterns and impeccable craftsmanship.

Three of the fourteen are sculptors, and all belong to the non-representational group. Most accomplished of them is Noguchi, brought again to public attention after a long absence. His disciplined and beautiful relations of form and space (discussed in detail, page 34) somehow serve to negate the importance of the more surrealist work of David Hare. Seeking to evoke an image rather than to define one, and essaying motion as another dimension in sculpture, Hare's often somewhat obscene and skeletal plaster and magnesite forms seem as yet tentative and trivial.

Theodore J. Roszak, the last of the glyptic trio, is one of the pleasant surprises in the show. Two works

of 1939—meticulously engineered definitions of space—illustrate his early "constructivist" period; another of 1943 reveals a transitional development in freer spatial construction; five disclose his mature and personal style. A clue to Roszak's intention lies in the several large watercolor studies, which he explains are "points of suggestion and departure." In these, organic forms writhe in controlled movement, their expressive power heightened by color. In the free translation of these studies into three-dimensional sculpture the tensions and dynamics of form are strengthened and clarified. The color is maintained by an ingenious method. Different metals and alloys are welded, hammered, and brazed (or soldered with a hard solder) so that the surface, now smooth, now rough, glows with molten, flowing color.

Surprise was a by-product of the opening—as spectators discovered in a corner of the backroom the inclusion of a "fifteenth American." A last-minute entry (who was too late for the catalogue), George Tooker is represented by two small paintings. Weird and macabre, in the same spirit as Pickens, these curiously magic-and-sur-realist panels are composed with architectonic certainty, their detail eerily precise. Tooker manages to remain frighteningly objective in such scenes of horror as *CHILDREN AND SPASTICS*. His work is a far-cry from Reginald Marsh and Harry Sternberg, with whom the twenty-six-year-old Brooklynite studied briefly in a career interrupted by service with the Marines. He is a protégé of Lincoln Kirstein, Director of the School of American Ballet and former member of the Museum's advisory committee, and his two works were apparently considered important enough to upset the mathematical title of the show.

There it is—handsomely installed with the good taste, understanding, and sense for the dramatic which ever marks those exhibitions arranged by Dorothy Miller, Curator of Painting and Sculpture. What does it add up to? On the credit side: it is an exceptionally good show, with variety and spice, especially valuable in lifting from partial obscurity such promising talents as Noguchi, Roszak, Sharrer, and Pickens. On the debit side: it presents a somewhat unbalanced diet. One cannot argue with empiric choice and personal taste in individual cases, for it would be a fruitless and worthless task to query: "Why David Hare instead of David Smith? Why Motherwell instead of Pollack? Why either instead of Karl Knaths?" and so on down the path of personal preference. But it is surely within the reviewer's task to ask an institution whose choice carries so much weight why the emphasis is so "special" and why so large a part of American painting—its more straightforward phase—is entirely overlooked?