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DIVERSE GROUPS

Drawings by Old Masters —Phases of Modernism

By STUART PRESTON

LACK of space alone precludes detailed notices of many arresting works of art to be found this week in New York galleries. The best thing, therefore, might just be to point out those which struck me particularly, to throw in a few comments on them, and let the spectator make up his own mind.

Is it heredity or environment that forms the artist? The palpable differences between two exhibitions of work by young American painters and sculptors—those who have recently been studying in Paris, at the Hacker Gallery; and those who have stayed at home, at the Kootz Gallery—put in a strong brief for environment.

Whether it be judged a prophecy or a swan song, as a whole, the Paris group stick to recognizable images. The esthetic tide, except in John Anderson's clean-cut, weather-beaten colored canvases, ebbs away from abstraction. And the voice of Picasso is heard no more in the land. It is the fauve Matisse who inspires the restrained strength of Roy Boot and of Reginald Pollack's and Donald Taitt's figure pieces; and it is Braque who stands behind Oscar Chelimsky's crisp patterns in rich dusky color. Charles Semser's shimmering paint surfaces bring late impressionist methods to serve the more introspective vision of 1950. Jonah Kingstein's apocalyptic landscape and his "Crucifixion" are out and out expressionism. It remains for Jules Olitsky to loose a full blast of bright color, though he spoils his pictures by a note of forced childishness. Of the sculptors, Sidney Geist shows an elaborate totem-pole of Miró-like shapes, Shin-kichi Tajiri, a semi-abstract figure piece, and Gabriel Kohn, a truly fine female head which has as much emotional as formal significance.

Artists of Promise

Aside from the preeminence of abstraction with the Kootz Group, another general difference is in the use of color which, here, is apt to set the tone of a picture rather than lead a life of its own. This may not be true of the exhalations of blues, oranges, and greens that float over Clement Greenberg's lyrical landscape, or of Jon Thomas' tidy, geometrical spacing of color dics, and certainly not true of John Grillo's wondrous patchwork of rectangles from which sensuous blues flash the main signals. But it is the case with Helen Frankenthaler's sandy-colored, marked-up surfaces; with William Machado's slow-tempoed rendezvous of murky inert shapes; with the warm blues of Alice Hodges' blistered "Red Symbol"; with Fred Hauck's grossly handled, color-poor "Trilogy," and with Harold Shapinsky's deft profiling of creamy shapes, waving like flames in a cross-breeze.

The sculpture, too, is as inventive. Constantino Nivola shows an aggressive, highly formalized figure in sand and plaster, and Robert Kobayashi, a restless and urgent abstract.

DRAWINGS: After such strivings, Durlacher's collection of old-master drawings—well worth a visit—seems law-abiding, distinguished, and a little remote. Here, Renaissance, Baroque, Rococo and nineteenth-century masters yield up precious bits and pieces from their treasury of observation and fancy. With certain exceptions the emphasis is on gems of good taste rather than on creations of relentless genius. Exceptions are the suggestive poetry of the Boltraffio head; the muffled grandeur of the Tintoretto figure; the bewitchingness of the Callot; the extraordinary interest for architectural historians in Silvestre's view of St. Peter's; the limpid marine in which Van de Velde beats the Impressionists on their own ground; the flicker of animation in the Guard; the strength and nobility of the Jordaens and of the Bernini, and the sheer entertainment of the Venetian sketches of a game of blind-man's buff.

HOMAGE: American nineteenth and twentieth century painting is the theme of many current New York shows presented in honor of the Philadelphia Museum's Diamond Jubilee. At the Milch Galleries is an excellent selection from the earlier masters. It ranges from the romanticism of Ryder, Blake-lock, and Robert Newman, through the impressionism of Hassam and Twachtman, with side trips into the exquisite as provided for by Whistler and Weir. Figure pieces include an over-studied Abbott Thayer head, a sober Eakins, and "Mlle. Dehan," one of Sargent's most thoughtful characterizations.

Many of these masters can be approached more intimately in the group at the Babcock Gallery. Comparing, here, Inness, Homer, Wyant and Martin with Hassam, Melchers, Eakins and Whistler, one can see how much, around 1900, the younger masters lightened their palettes. Also at this gallery are smaller works by contemporaries associated with it.

Many of the best known contemporaries are featured, discriminatingly, at the Rehn Galleries. Outstanding here are Speicher's portrait in varied shades of pink and salmon; a well-designed H. V. Poor; a concentration of the sense of Summer in Burchfield's water-color; Trivigno's "Women" who huddle like suspicious barracks; the riot of cheerful color in Watkin's flowers and Alexander Brook's dry precise still-life.