

Artnews

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**Summer events:
ROME by Milton Gendel**

Two interesting events in Rome, the organization of the Tiber Group and the International Exhibition of Young Painters, represent opposite approaches to the problem of putting the work of unknown or little-known young painters before the public. The Tiber Group is local and national, starts from the bottom, as the co-operative venture of seven painters and a poet, who have pooled their slim material resources. The Young Painters' show represents painters from eight countries, has the sponsorship of well-known international art authorities, and will receive first-class accommodations on its travels to various European capitals.

The Tiber Group

Conceived and organized by the poet and philologist Emilio Villa, the Tiber Group had the pleasant inspiration of launching its first show in a bouseboat on the Tiber [June 1-30]. The group owes its headquarters on the river, and thus its name, to the munificence of a Roman personality called Rodolfo il Ciriola, who owes his name, which means Rudolph the Eel, to his penchant for saving people from drowning. Il Ciriola operates a swimming, dining, dancing resort on a nearby houseboat. Visitors to the gallery descend the steps of the Tiber embankment at the foot of Castel Sant' Angelo, negotiate a stretch of grassy shore and a gangplank. To neutralize the tendentious picturesque setting, which would delight Magic Realists and Neo-Romantics, but does not reflect the kinds of painting shown, the group has stripped the interior of the boat to make a stark, business-like gallery. Unpainted masonite partitions divide the long interior into bays and also serve as exhibition wall space for paintings.

To Emilio Villa, the seven nonfigurative painters he is sponsoring do not represent a cohesive school but share a tendency to find their roots in such traditional expressions as the High Gothic, the Late Byzantine and the Baroque. Villa himself, a noted comparative philologist who is preparing a new Italian translation of the Bible from ancient Greek and Semitic texts, is steeped in history. The painters are less programmatic in approach; their main enthusiasm lies in the opportunity of helping one another show their paintings. Villa's historic thesis is most evident in the work of Enrico Cervelli, many of whose paintings are like after-images of Byzantine icons. A liberal use of gold paint increases this suggestion. But because Cervelli is attracted more by forms associated with ritual than by any particular moment in history, he is just as apt to refer to Mexican codices and African sculpture as to Byzantine paintings and mosaics. Mario Samona's large rich-hued canvases may recall seventeenth-century painting in their lambent play of light and dark diagonals. Of the group, he has perhaps the freest and most inventive hand; his fluid compositions just manage to avoid over-facility by their depth and subtle variety of shapes.

A case for traditional associations can also be made out in the works of Aurelio Ceccarelli, Renato Cristiano and Angelo Moriconi. Ceccarelli's firm, linear, vertical abstractions, with sharp highlights and attenuated shadows, possibly have High Gothic tabernacles as their remote ancestors. Renato Cristiano, who has shown in the United States, and Angelo Moriconi often paint reticulated structures peopled by veiled forms. Their cellular compositions appear closer to a contemporary trend than to traditional expression. Mimmo Rotella, a dedicated neo-Dadaist whose recording of

his own "epistaltic" verse is in the Library of Congress, makes torn-paper collages which have considerable insouciant verve. Paula Mazzetti's impasto whorls and criss-crosses indicate a direct passion for paint as material, unhampered by tradition. It will be evident that Villa has interpreted his historical thesis very freely and has brought together an eclectic group. The importance of the Tiber Group's effort should not, however, be measured by how well or ill it follows any program. The group has coherency in reflecting the taste and judgment of one man. All seven painters are in full development. At present they are interesting as a group because they have taken the commendable initiative of creating a new meeting ground for artist and public. This kind of self-help and mutual-support venture is very rare in Rome. Whether or not the group succeeds in achieving a high level of creative activity will of course depend on the members' individual efforts.

Young international exhibition

Another way of presenting young painters to the public is to be seen in the International Exhibition of Young Painters. This is the latest effort of the Congress for Cultural Freedom, an international private organization which in the past few years has sponsored such notable events as the Masterpieces of the Twentieth Century show in Paris and the Rome Music Festival. The Congress receives much of its support from the Farfield Foundation, which in turn owes much to the generosity of Julius Fleischmann, who also donated the three cash prizes awarded by an international jury to the three best in the show.

Organized by Nicolas Nabukov, Secretary-General of the Congress, the show comprises 168 works by forty-four painters from Belgium, England, France, Germany, Holland, Italy, Switzerland and the United States. Selections in the several countries were made almost exclusively by museum directors. The selection jury comprised: Palma Bucarelli and Lionello Venturi for Italy; Jean Cassou, France; Robert Giron, Belgium; A. M. Hammacher, Holland; L. Reidemeister, Germany; Andrew Ritchie, United States; Sir John Rothenstein, England; and R. Wehrli, Switzerland. For the awarding of the prizes, René Huyghe, Sir Herbert Read and A. Rüdinger were invited to join the jury.

The result of this formidable battery of taste, judgment and authority, shown in Rome at the National Gallery of Modern Art, is a good representative cross-section of the younger generation in contemporary painting. If there are few bursts of genius to stop the visitor on his tour through the spacious, well-lighted rooms, there is also very little that will make him wince and turn away. The show is educated, well-bred. The lessons of contemporary painting have been assimilated; taste triumphs. It may surprise students of the question that the French section does not rise above this high level of civil good behavior, but that the Italian and American sections to some extent do. Of these two, the American section, showing Richard Diebenkorn, Seymour Chwast, Joseph Glasco, John Hultberg, Irving Kriesberg and Theodoros Stamos, maintains the higher level throughout. It was thus predictable that one of the prizes would go to an American. The American prizewinner is John Hultberg, who was born in Berkeley, California, in 1922. His *Silhouette, Winter* and *Night Fantasy* are dexterously controlled, somber creations lapped in vast, cool space. The atmospheric, veiled compositions of Stamos, particularly in *Tea House*, also attracted considerable attention, as did the neo-primitive, intricately worked surfaces of Joseph Glasco.

The Italian section included Giuseppe Ajmone, Enzo Brunori, Arturo Carmassi, Leonardo Cremonini, Gianni Dova, Sergio Romiti and Ugo Sterpini, Cremonini, the best known of the group, both in Italy and the United States, was generally expected to win a prize. But his flesh-and-bone structures, splayed out or held in tortured tension, connect him with Surrealism and make him appear somewhat behind the times. Dova, who won a prize for his *Boxer Dog, Anthill, A Mouth, Animal* and *Head*, was born in Rome in 1922. His close-focus, flat, rich surfaces with enlarged

details that originate in an eye or a tooth may recall Tamayo and Brauner. He is certainly one of the most promising painters in Italy today, though his development may be hampered by the common Italian tendency to elegance. Romiti's group of canvases, echoing one another like a series of progressive color proofs, suggest the Morandian still-life world, in their attenuated color and static abstract composition. Ajmone also carries on Italian tradition, basing his subjects on fruit, fish, vegetables, dead leaves, and reflecting the blurred but vibrant colors of de Pisis.

The third prize-winner is Alan Reynolds, an Englishman born at Newmarket in 1926. Of his entries, *Hopgarden Dimension*, *Young September Cornfield* and *Winter Cornfield*, the first is the most abstract, though clearly constructed on a traditional landscape scheme. The English section as a whole cannot be described as in the full flood of contemporary abstract painting. The predominant vein in Reynolds, Adams and Middleditch is Neoromanticism. Cummings follows anecdotal Surrealism; Davie, automatism and Abstract-Expressionism. Froy, particularly in *Seated Nude*, solidly continues Post-Cubist figurative expression. It should be noted that color in the English section is for the most part subdued and well-mannered, and this is evident in an exhibition that is not marked by stridency or chromatic clarion calls.

The fact that the Young Painters' exhibition conforms to the prevailing taste for various currents of abstract art and offers no surprises is probably attributable to the composition of the selection jury. Almost all members of the jury are museum directors and as such cannot be expected to outpace the established best. Moreover, the final selections of the national entries were made in joint session, and inevitably show the leveling effect of committee opinion rather than the ups and downs of individual enthusiasms. For future exhibitions aimed at sampling the work of painters under the age of thirty-five, it would be worth trying a selection committee made up of private collectors and critics. This is the only criticism that can be made of the excellent job done by the Congress for Cultural Freedom. In encouraging the young and unknown, the events and activities sponsored by the Congress fill a specific need.

Pious painter

The comprehensive exhibition of the works of Fra Angelico, organized by the Vatican and the Italian Government, commemorates the fifth centenary of the painter's death. The exhibition is the first of its kind to be held at the Vatican and offers some political interest as one of the few instances of direct collaboration between the Church and the Italian State since national troops broke through the walls of Rome at Porta Pia on September 20, 1870. To mark the occasion and in keeping with the notable piety of the painter, the exhibition was opened by the Pope. After a month in the Vatican, handsomely and suitably installed in rooms adjoining the Chapel of Nicholas V, the show moved to the monastery of S. Marco in Florence, where it will remain through September. Both installations were planned so as to show Fra Angelico's easel painting together with great examples of his wall painting.

Although most of Fra Angelico's work never left Italy, a number of panels that had been acquired abroad over the generations have come back on loan for the exhibition from England, France, Germany, Holland, Ireland, Monaco, Spain and the U. S. Panels sent from this country include the *Meeting of St. Francis and St. Dominic*, a Samuel H. Kress gift to the De Young Museum, San Francisco; Princeton University Gallery's *Virgin and St. John the Evangelist*; and *St. Anthony in the Desert* in Fra Angelico's best narrative manner, from the Houston Museum of Fine Arts. The most important work outside Italy, the Louvre's *Coronation of the Virgin*, was not in condition to travel.

Fra Angelico of the Order of the Preaching Friars was famous as a painter in his lifetime and has continued to be so for the past five hundred years, but his biography remains incomplete. The date

of his birth, often given as 1387, is uncertain and probably should be set much later. Baptized Guido or Guidolino di Pietro, in religion he became Fra Giovanni da Fiesole, and by popular appellation, as a tribute to his amiable character and his gift as a painter, was known as “Angelico” and even actually beatified by the Church. Vasari describes him as the ideal monk led by vocation to serve God through his art.

Fra Angelico’s early work connects him with miniature painting. Included in this important exhibition are two reliquaries from the S. Marco Museum, Florence, representing the *Madonna of the Star* and the *Adoration of the Magi*; the *Madonna* of the Vatican Pinacoteca; and the splendid *Last Judgment*, S. Marco Museum, Florence. From late medieval beginnings, the exhibition traces Fra Angelico’s development towards a Renaissance expression. In the Annalena altarpiece (S. Marco Museum, Florence), solid figures are unified in a group, following the example of Masaccio, and are given a background of Renaissance architecture. Landscape details and contemporary portraits in the *Deposition* from S. Trinita (S. Marco Museum, Florence) are further indications of Renaissance development. One of the first instances of an identifiable landscape drawn from life, a view of Castiglione del Lago on Lake Trasimeno, is seen in the *Visitation* panel of the Cortona *Annunciation*. The spatial monumentality achieved by Fra Angelico in his great fresco works, such as the famous *Crucifixion* in the Convent of S. Marco, Florence, and the scenes from the lives of the protomartyrs Stephen and Lawrence in the Chapel of Nicholas V, in the Vatican, place him in the midst of Renaissance creation.

Fra Angelico undoubtedly exercised a strong influence on Tuscan painting. Certainly Domenico Veneziano and Piero della Francesca owe their limpid early-morning light to such precedents as the open-air suggestions of Fra Angelico’s clear sparkling palette. Critics disagree on Fra Angelico’s place in history. Many identify him as a traditionalist; others describe him as a transitional figure; still others speak of a hypothetical Christian Renaissance - as opposed to the proper pagan Renaissance - and assign him to this new category.

In any case, Fra Angelico emerges from this impressive show as a key figure connecting High Gothic and Early Renaissance painting. Or, as Prof. Mario Salmi, organizer of the exhibition, puts it: he is a great artist who starts as a High Gothic painter and finishes his career as one of the lights of the Renaissance. One of the big problems posed by Fra Angelico is the question of attributions. In this connection, the panoramic view the exhibition offers will also undoubtedly aid scholars in deciding what illuminated manuscripts, if any, may be attributed to the master.