Spring 1936

AXIS

A QUARTERLY REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY "ABSTRACT" PAINTING & SCULPTURE

Editor: Myfanwy Evans

two shillings and sixpence

INTERNATIONAL EXHIBITION OF ABSTRACT PAINTING, SCULPTURE AND CONSTRUCTION

AXIS • No. 5 1936

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N.B.—The Calder Mobile and the painting by Miró are not the ones shown in the exhibition, but are reproduced here as examples of the artists' work.

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ILLUSTRATIONS

N.B.—The Calder Mobile and the painting by Miró are not the ones shown in the exhibition, but are reproduced here as examples of the artists' work.

The Exhibition with which this number of AXIS primarily deals has been organised by Nicolette Gray, in co-operation with AXIS itself, and will be open :—

February 15th—22nd at OXFORD (41, St. Giles).
March 2nd—14th, at LIVERPOOL (School of Architecture).
May 28th—June 13th, at CAMBRIDGE (Gordon Fraser's Gallery, Portugal Place).

The Exhibition will probably be held in London in April.

ABSTRACT ART

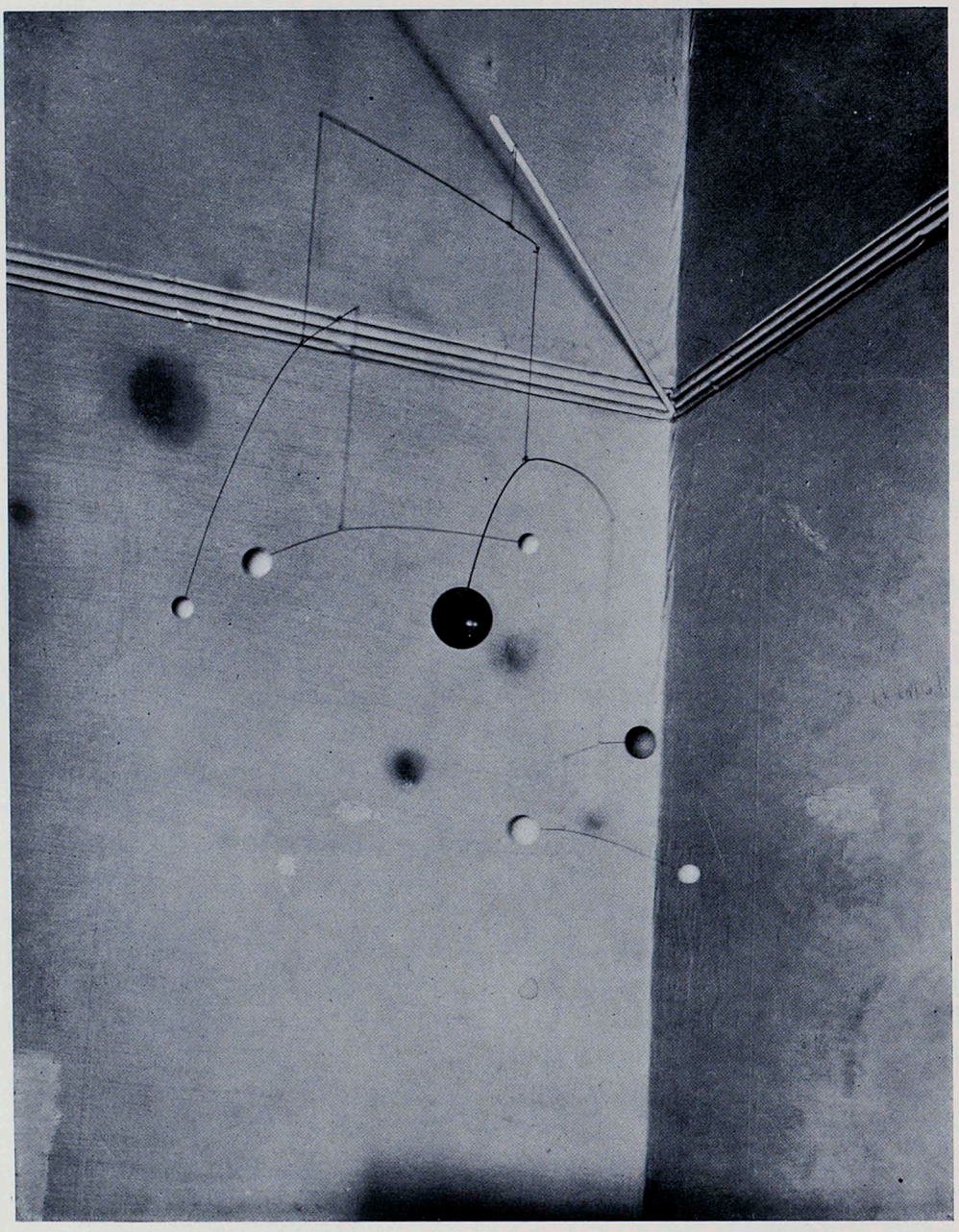
A Note for the Uninitiated

The experience which this exhibition of abstract art is going to give you is not an unfamiliar one. If you are a sensitive person—and presumably none but those who like art of some kind will take the trouble to visit such an exhibition—there must have been many occasions in your life when you have seen, perhaps a broken column in the sunlight, perhaps the façade of a house you have passed a thousand times but which you suddenly see to be subtly "right," perhaps one of those stones which peasants in various parts of the world pick up and keep because something in the shape "holds" them. On all such occasions you are experiencing the kind of emotion which abstract art is intended to give you. You may argue that on occasions such as I have cited there are predisposing circumstances: the aura of antiquity round the broken column, the "period charm" of the house, the primitive instinct which guided the peasant in his choice. But art never exists in an emotional vacuum. We approach a work of art charged with all manner of habitual modes of thought and feeling, and it is only through the thicket of our prejudices that the æsthetic light can shine. Strongest of all nowadays is the prejudice that a work of art must tell a story—a prejudice contradicted every time you look at a fine building with admiration. Unconsciously you are assuming that of all the plastic arts these two, painting and sculpture, should be segregated and confined to the business of telling a story. You deliberately ignore the illogicality of such a disintegration of the arts and of æsthetic sensibility. But art is one, and æsthetic sensibility is one—a mode of apprehension as old as mankind; and the only difficulty is the operative one—the difficulty of allowing an instinct to have expression in a world of intellectual pride.

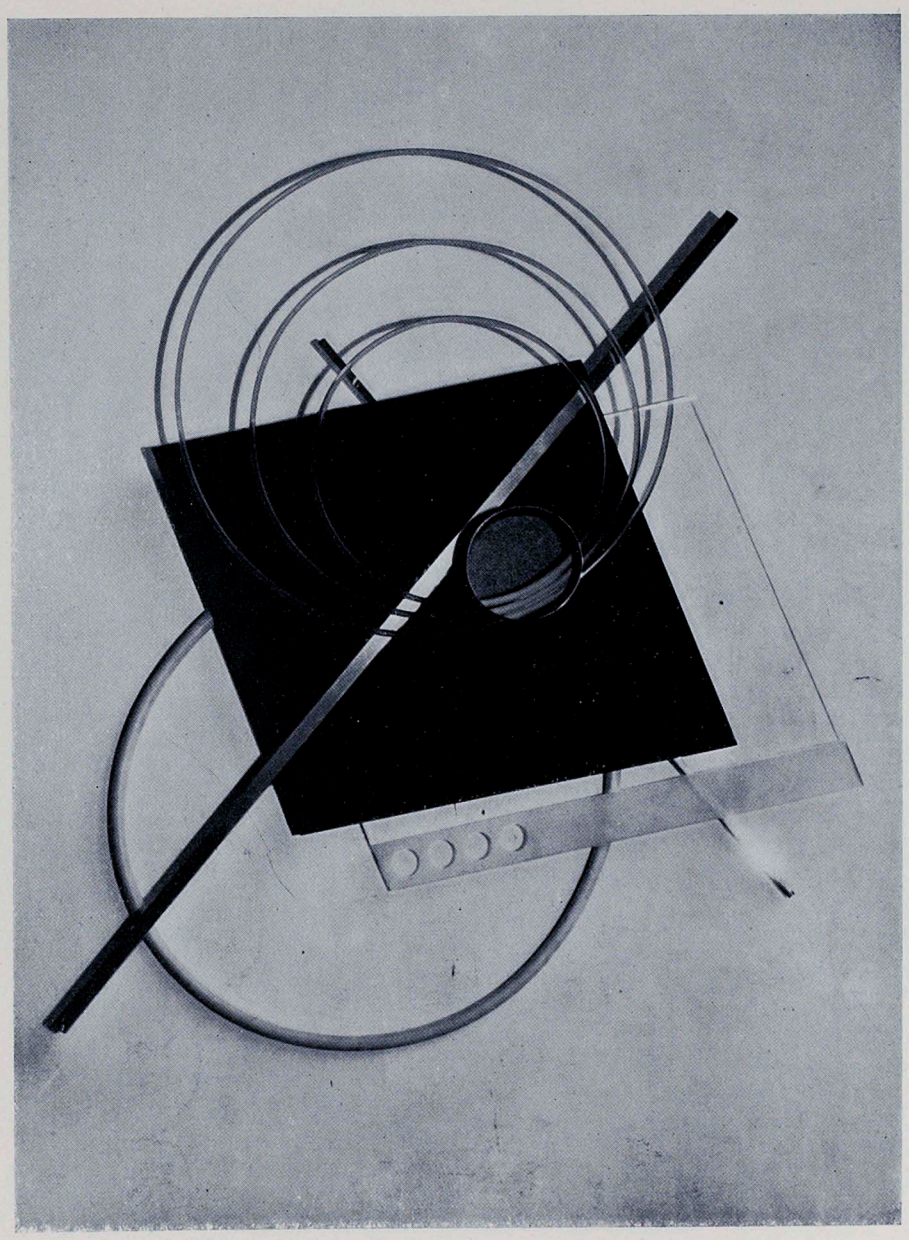
Abstract art is the art of pure form, whose appeal you readily admit in the arts of music and architecture. To extend this concept of pure form to the arts of painting and sculpture is surely a most natural and justifiable step. Thereby we deprive those arts of the adventitious aids of a story or a message, aids which music and architecture only resort to in their weakest moments; and undoubtedly the result is more "difficult." But so long as you do not object to the difficulty of Bach or of Palladio, you have no right to object to the difficulty of Brancusi or Mondrian.

Finally, abstract art is not displayed in any sectarian spirit. It emerged into consciousness early in this century and since then it has developed steadily and unremittingly. It is not a revolutionary stunt, not a "movement" in any political sense. It does not set out to destroy all other kinds of painting and sculpture, or to win for itself the fickle prize of popularity. It can only hope to appeal to the Happy Few—to those who would like to have about them pictures and sculpture which bear some sympathetic relation to the qualities they admire in other arts: harmonies of form and colour which are not beautiful relatively, but always naturally and absolutely, producing, in their own proper nature, their proper pleasures—a definition of this kind of art which is not mine, but Plato's.

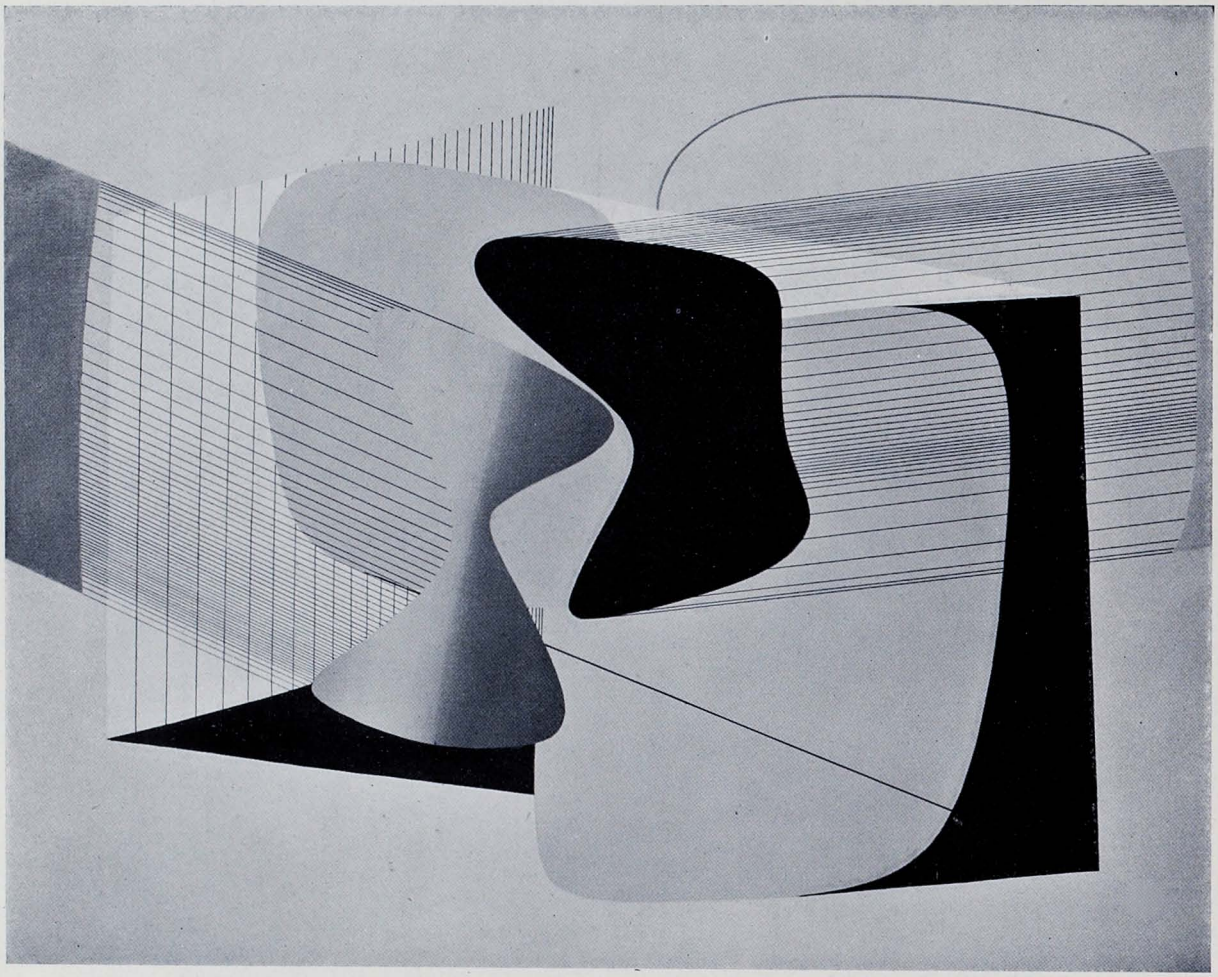
HERBERT READ.



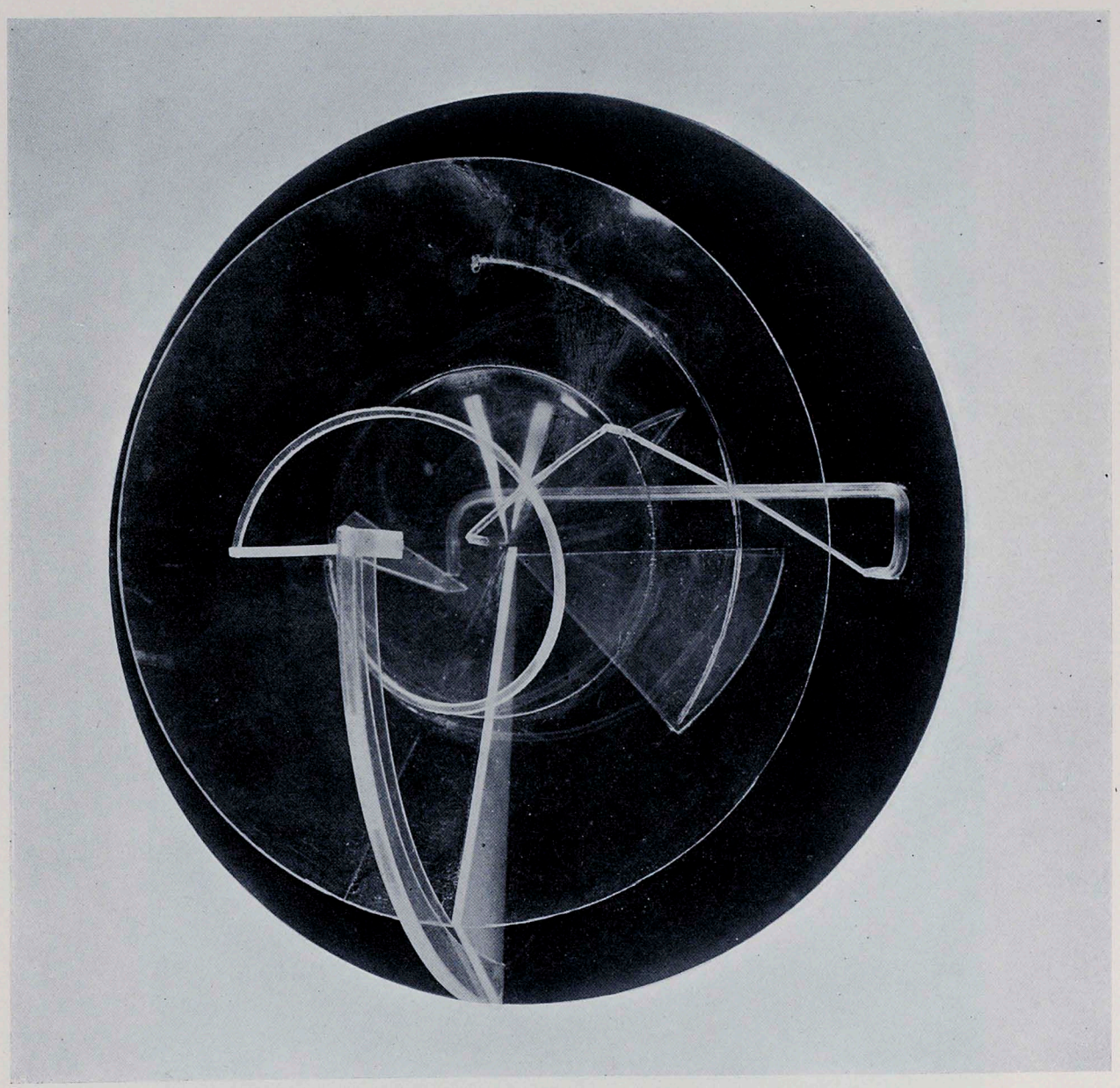
ALEXANDER CALDER. Mobile.
American.
Born, 1898.
Worked in Paris.
Now working in U.S.A.



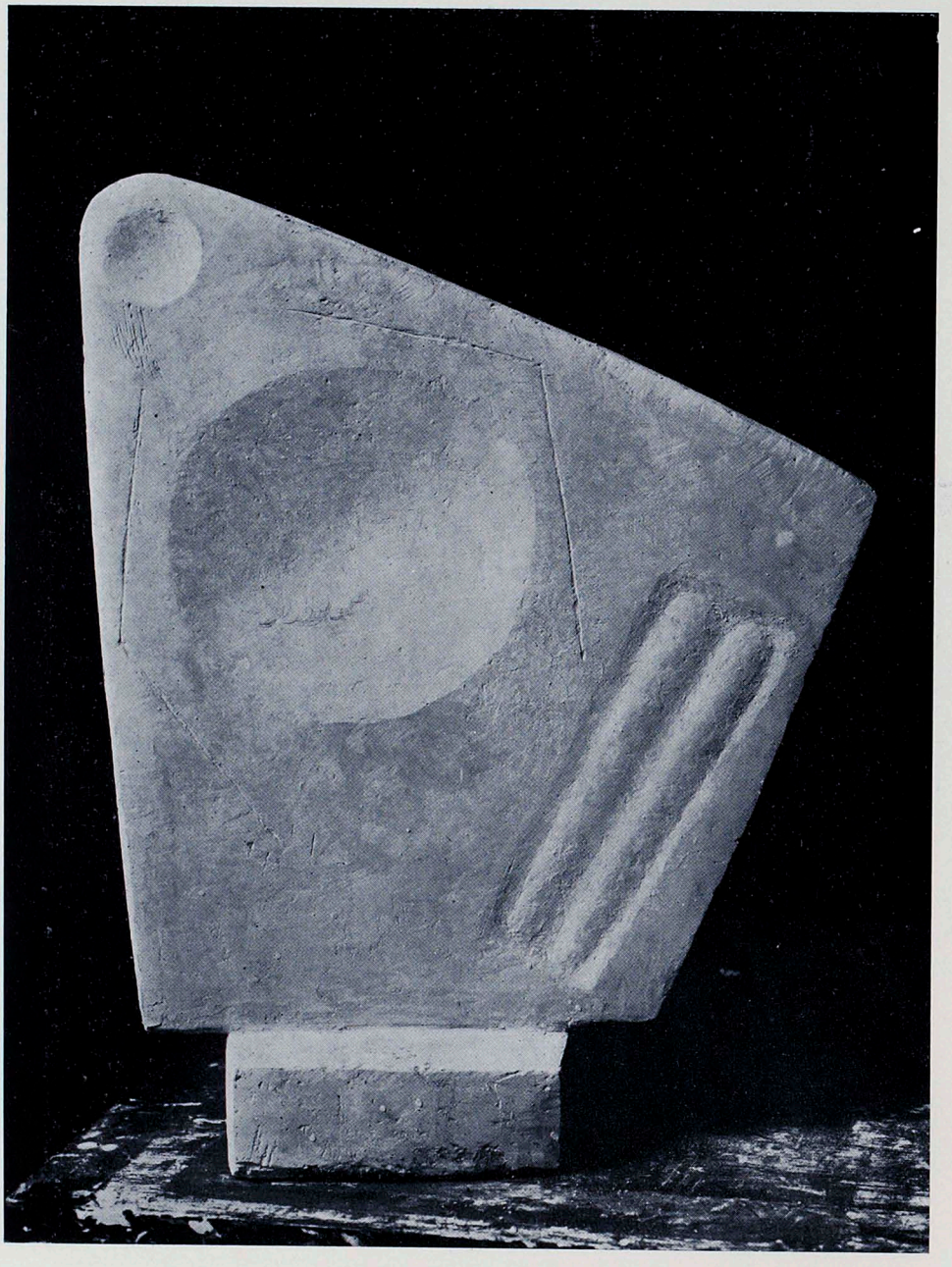
CESAR DOMELA. Construction, 1935.
Dutch.
Now working in Paris.



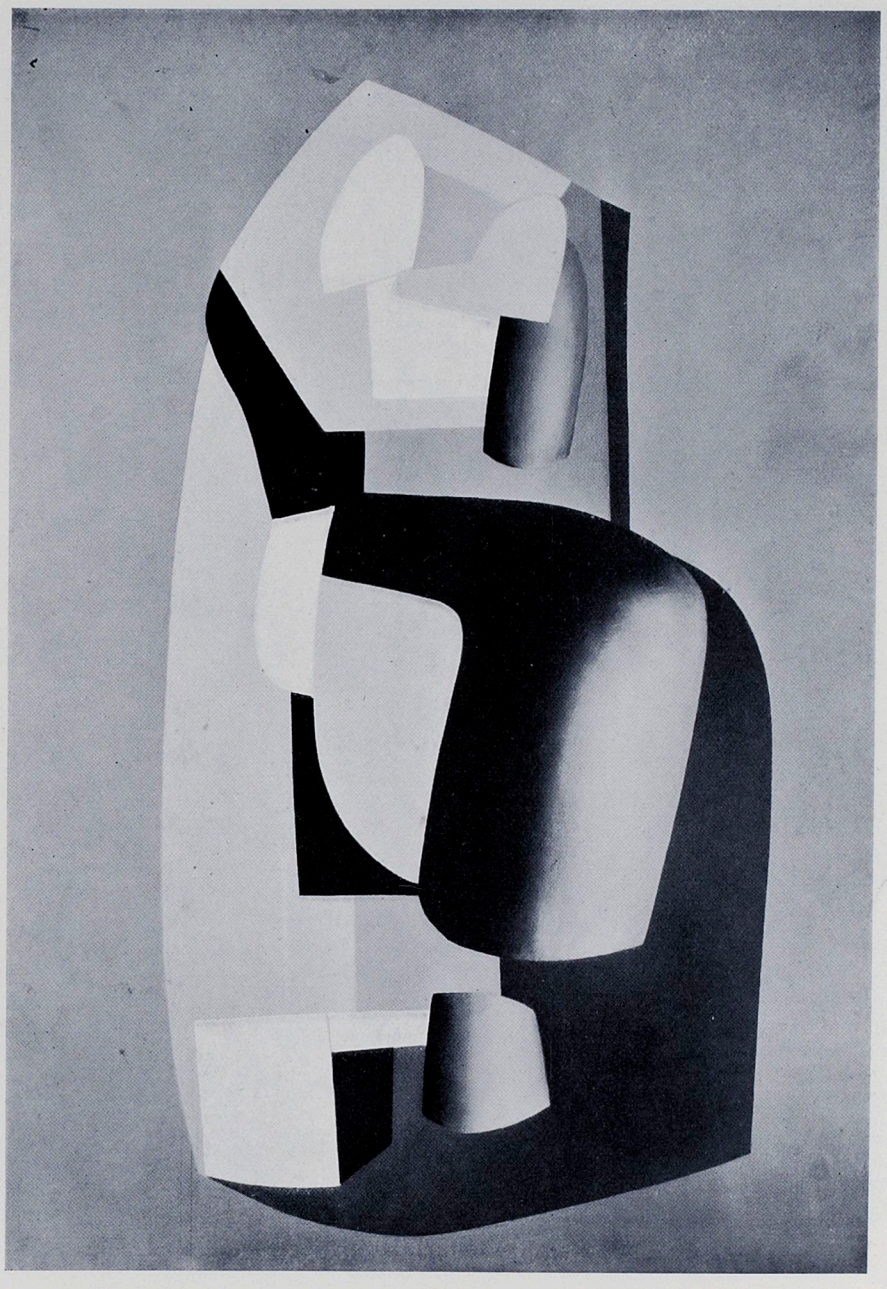
HANS ERNI. Composition No. 31, 1935.
Swiss.
Born 1909.
Now working in Lucerne.



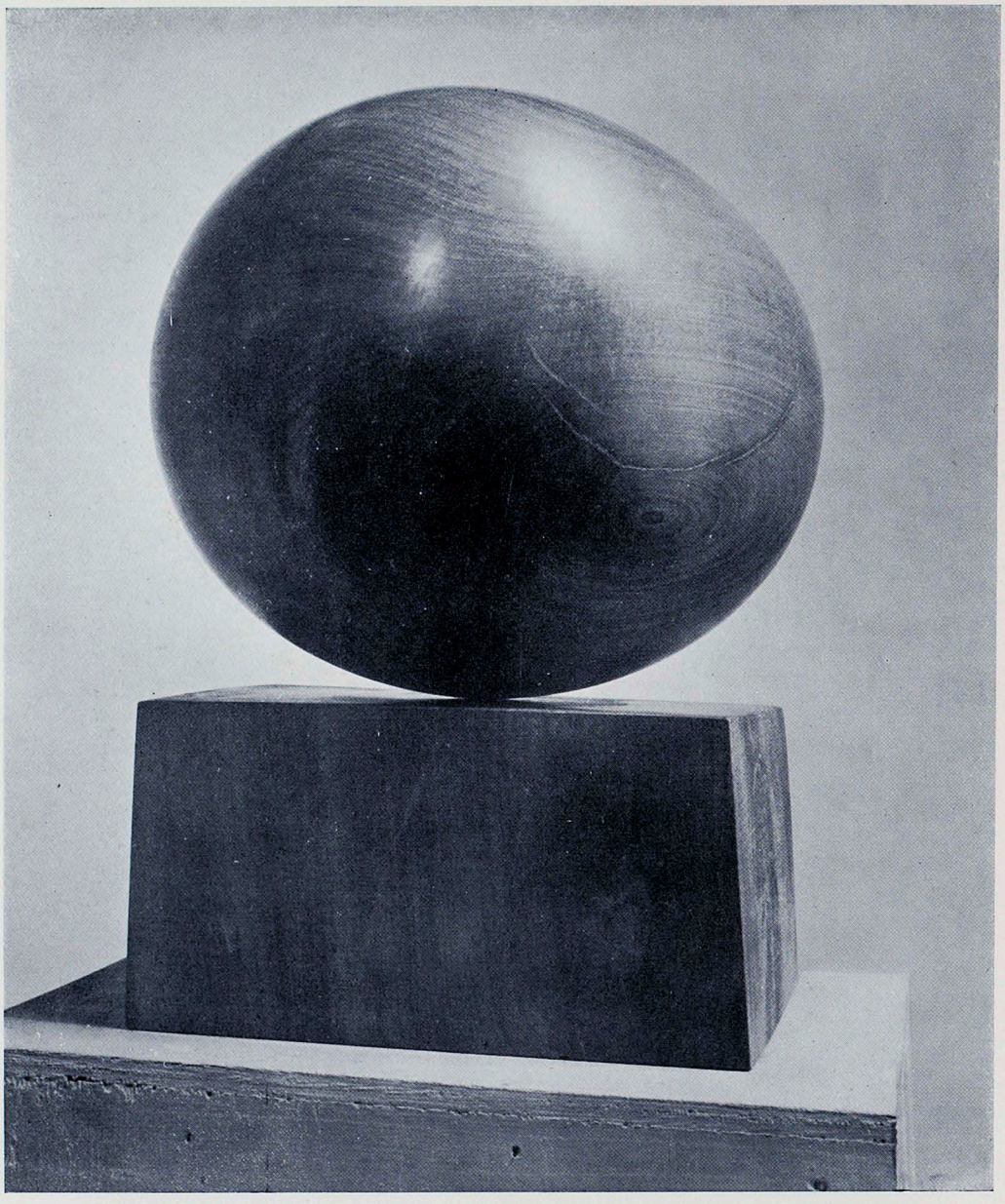
GABO. Construction in relief, 1925.
Russian.
Born, 1894.
Now working in Paris.



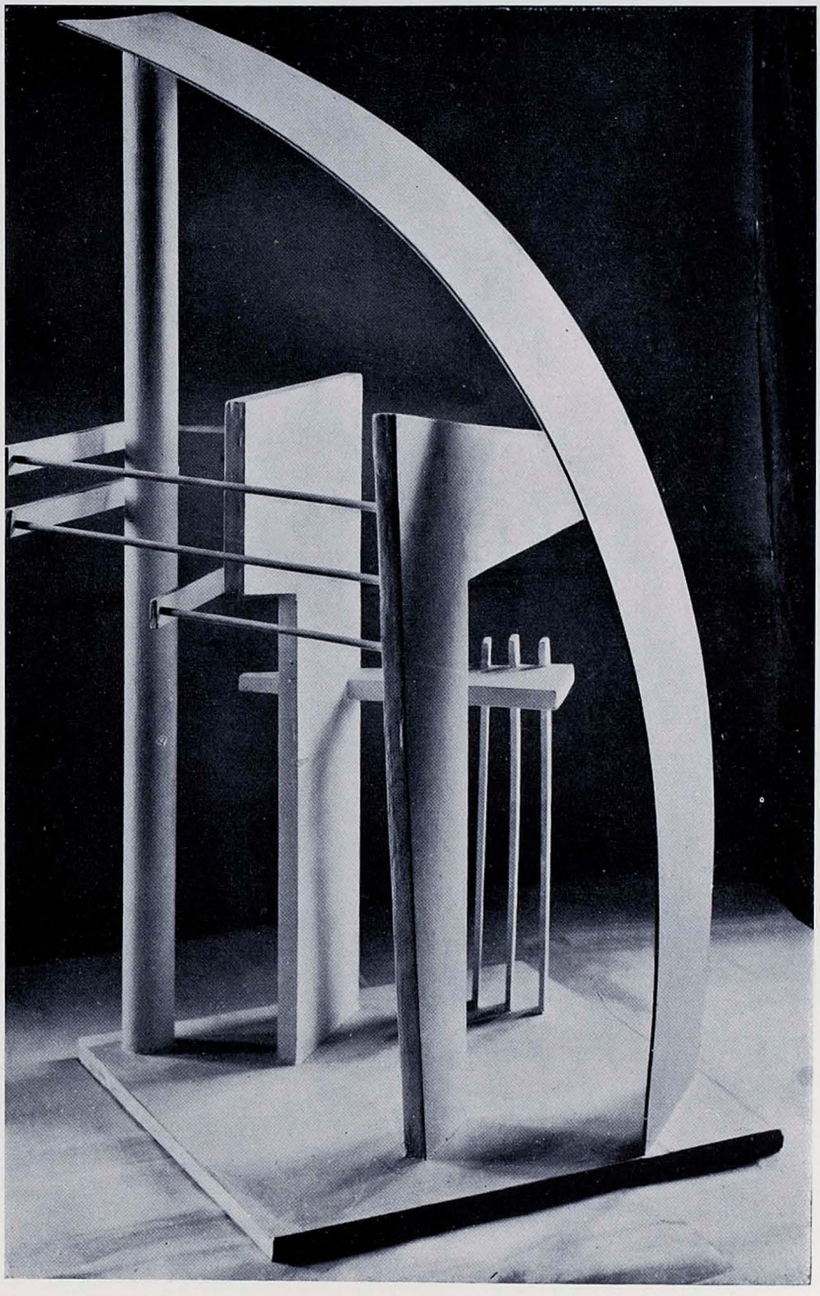
ALBERTO GIACOMETTI. *Personnage.*
Italian.
Born, 1899.
Now working in Paris.



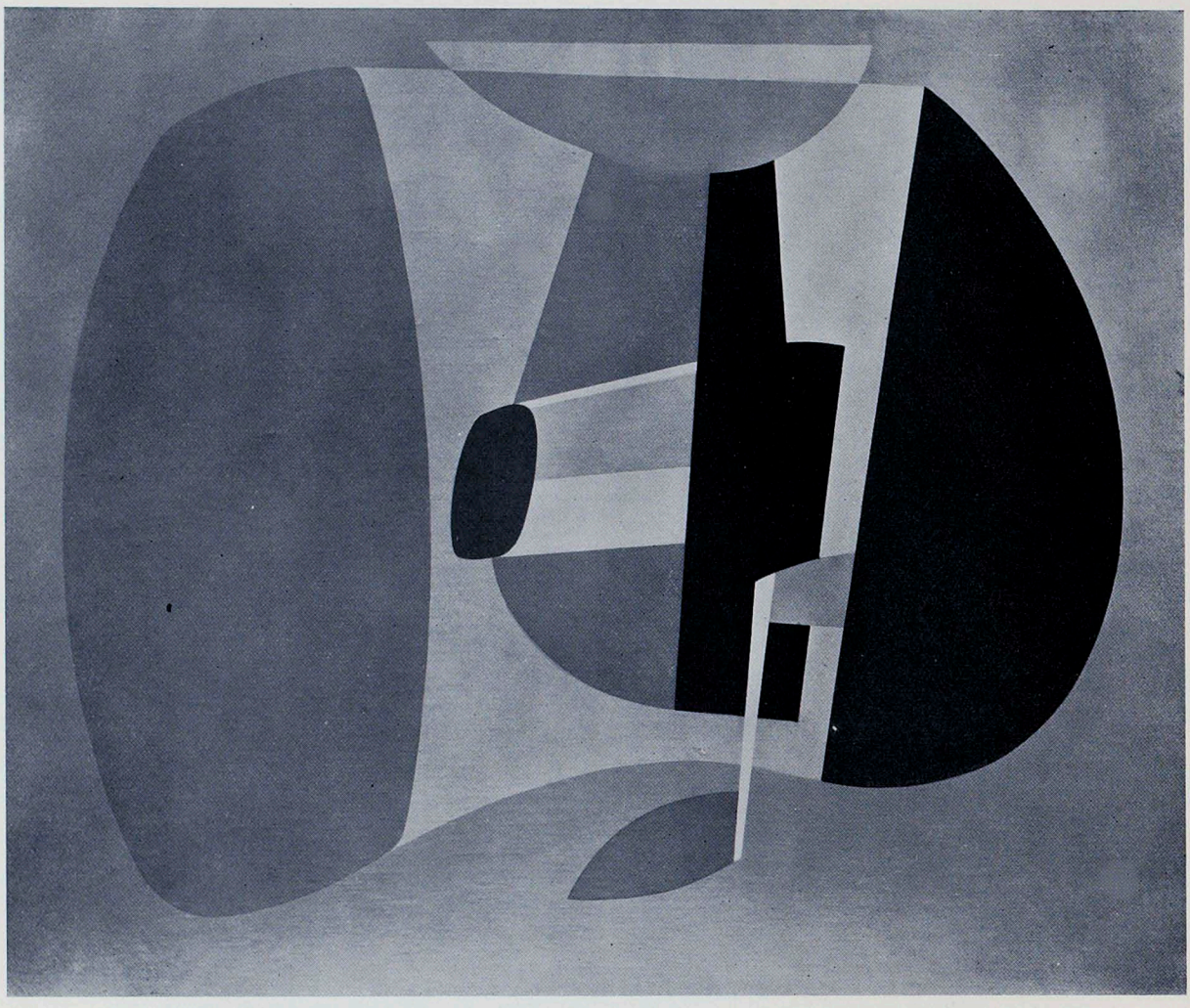
JEAN HÉLION. Painting, 1935.
French.
Born, 1904.
Now working in Paris.



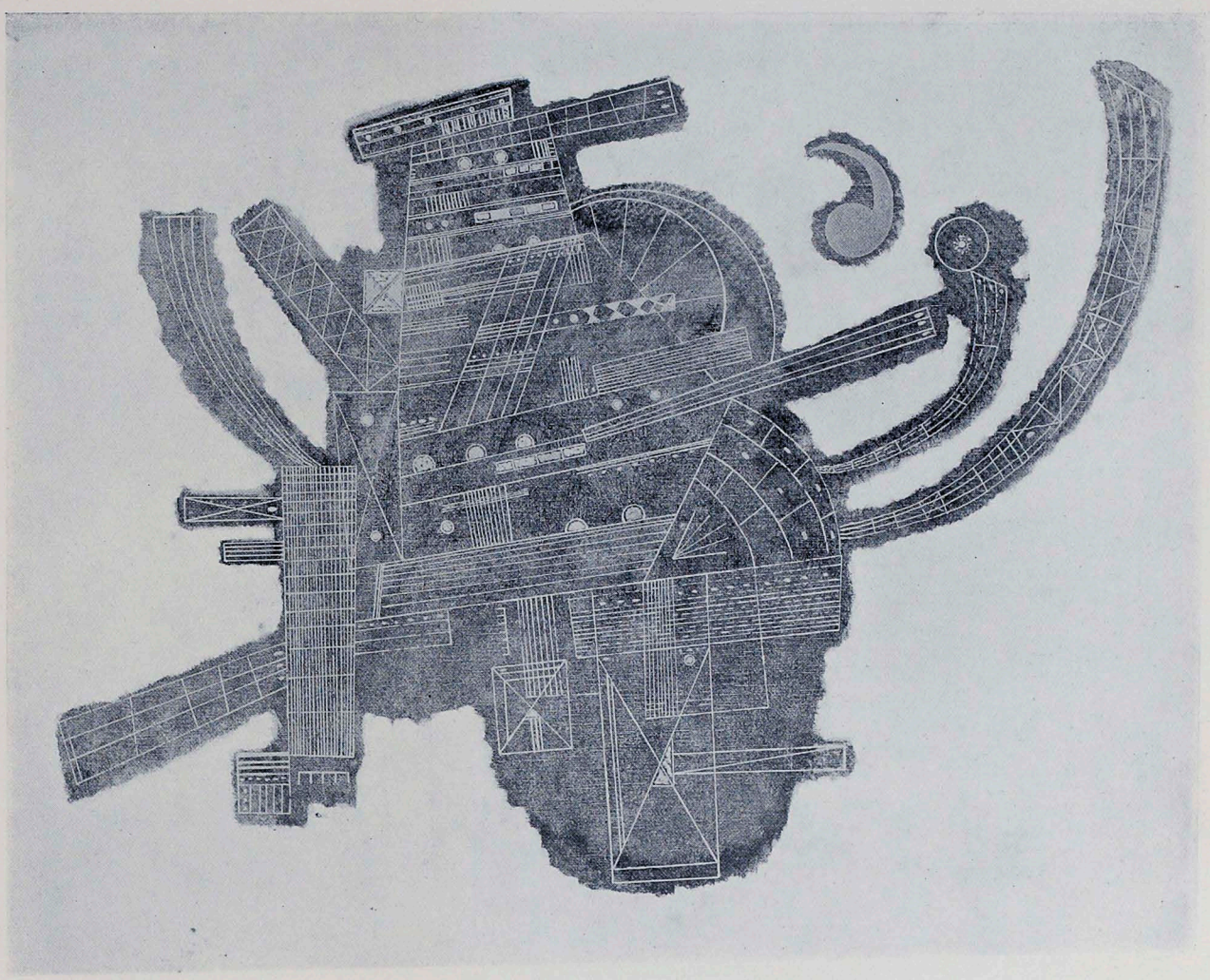
BARBARA HEPWORTH. Carving in wood, 1935.
English.
Born, Yorkshire, 1903.
Now working in London.



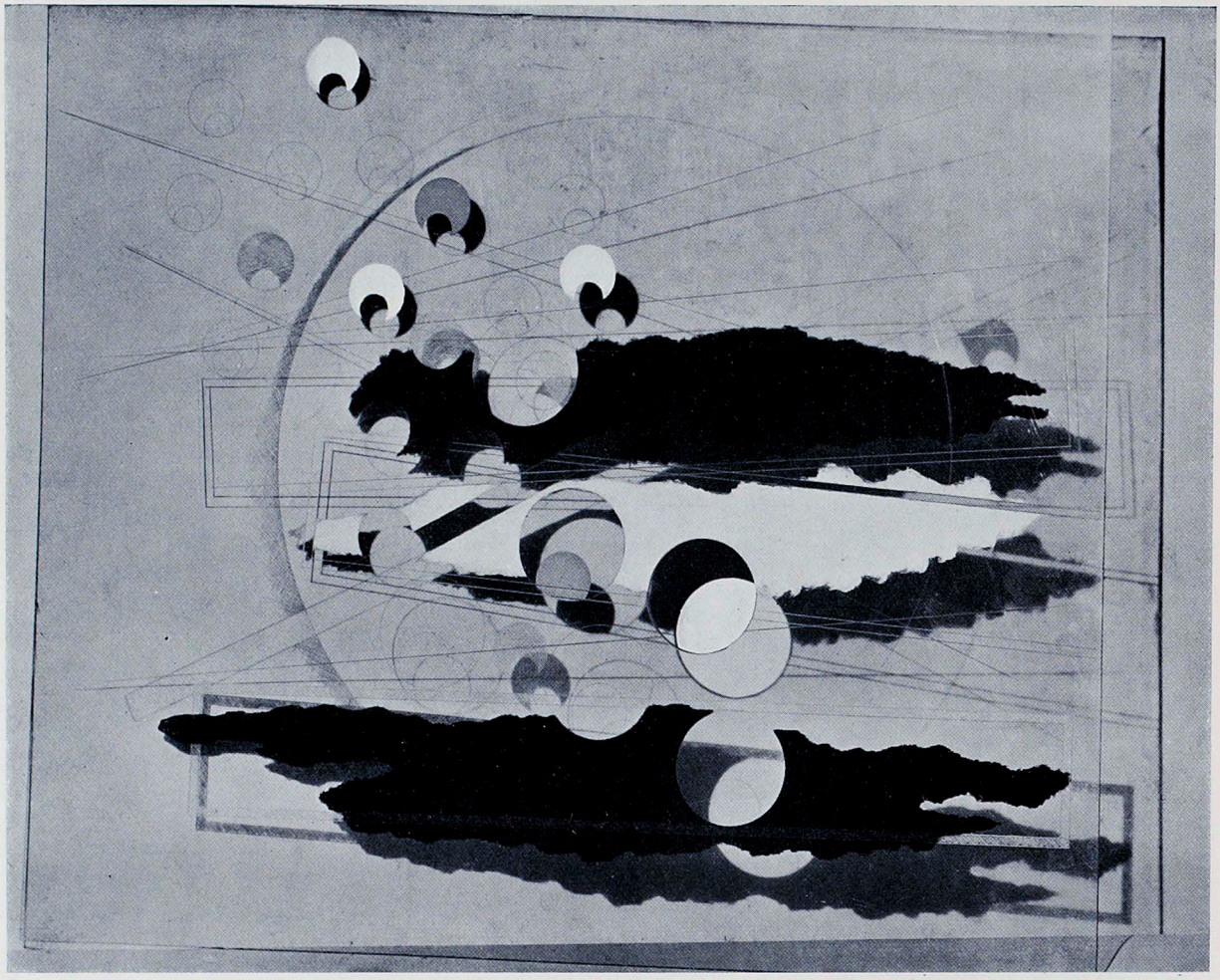
EILEEN HOLDING. Construction, 1935.
English.
Born, London, 1909.
Now working in London.



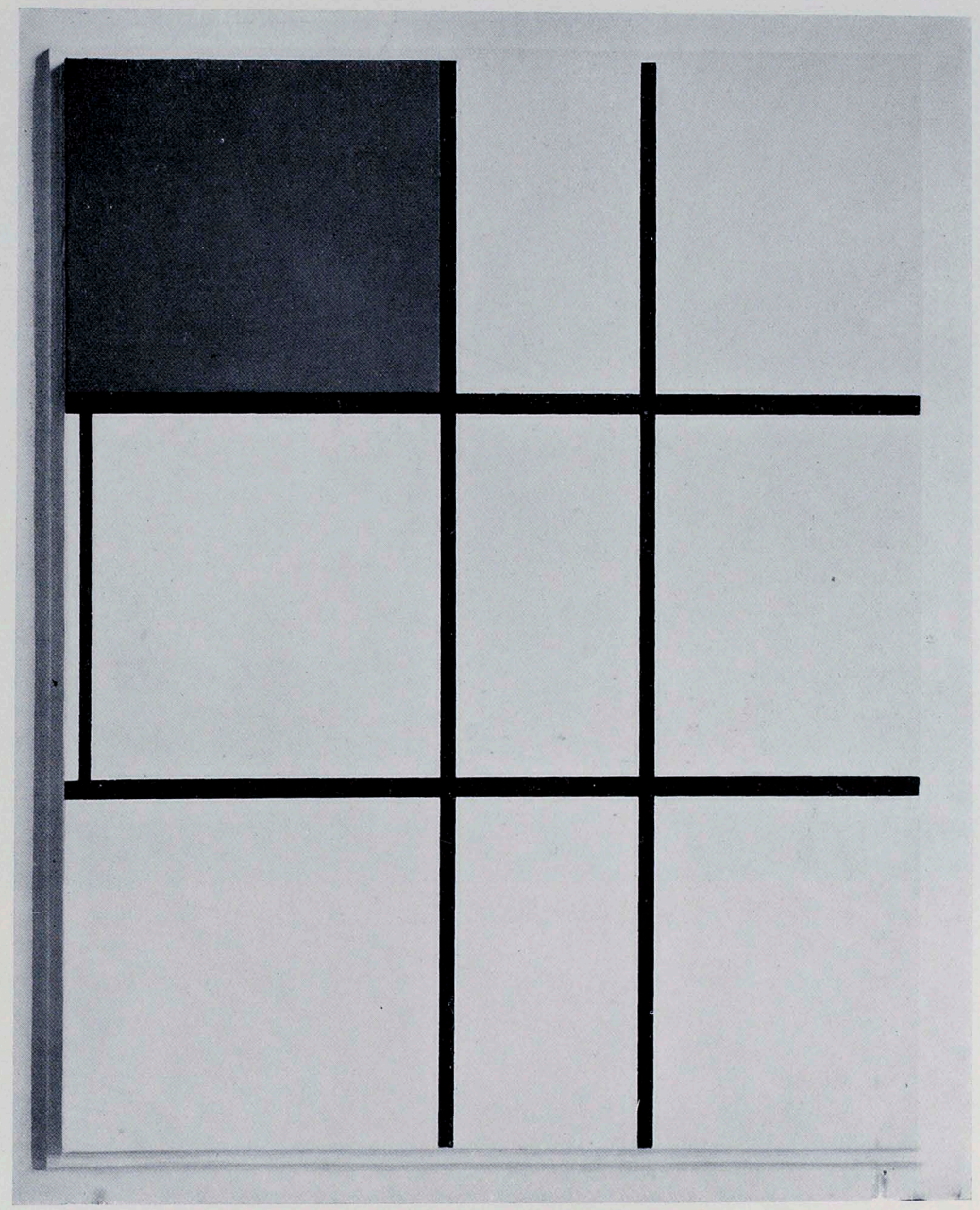
ARTHUR JACKSON. *Painting, 1935.*
English.
Born, Rotherham, Yorkshire, 1911.
Now working in London.



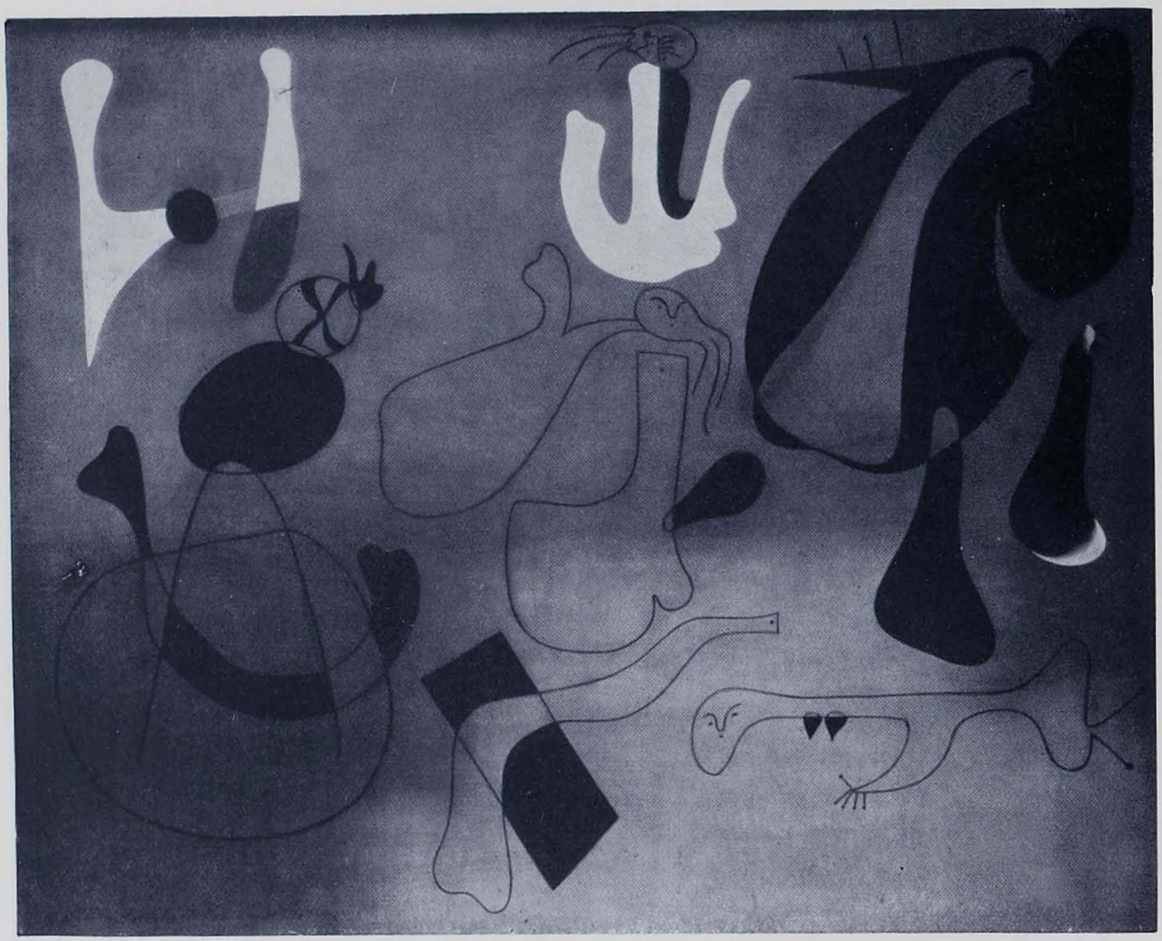
WASSILY KANDINSKY. Accent Vert, 1935.
Russian.
Born, December, 1866, Moscow.
Now working in Paris.



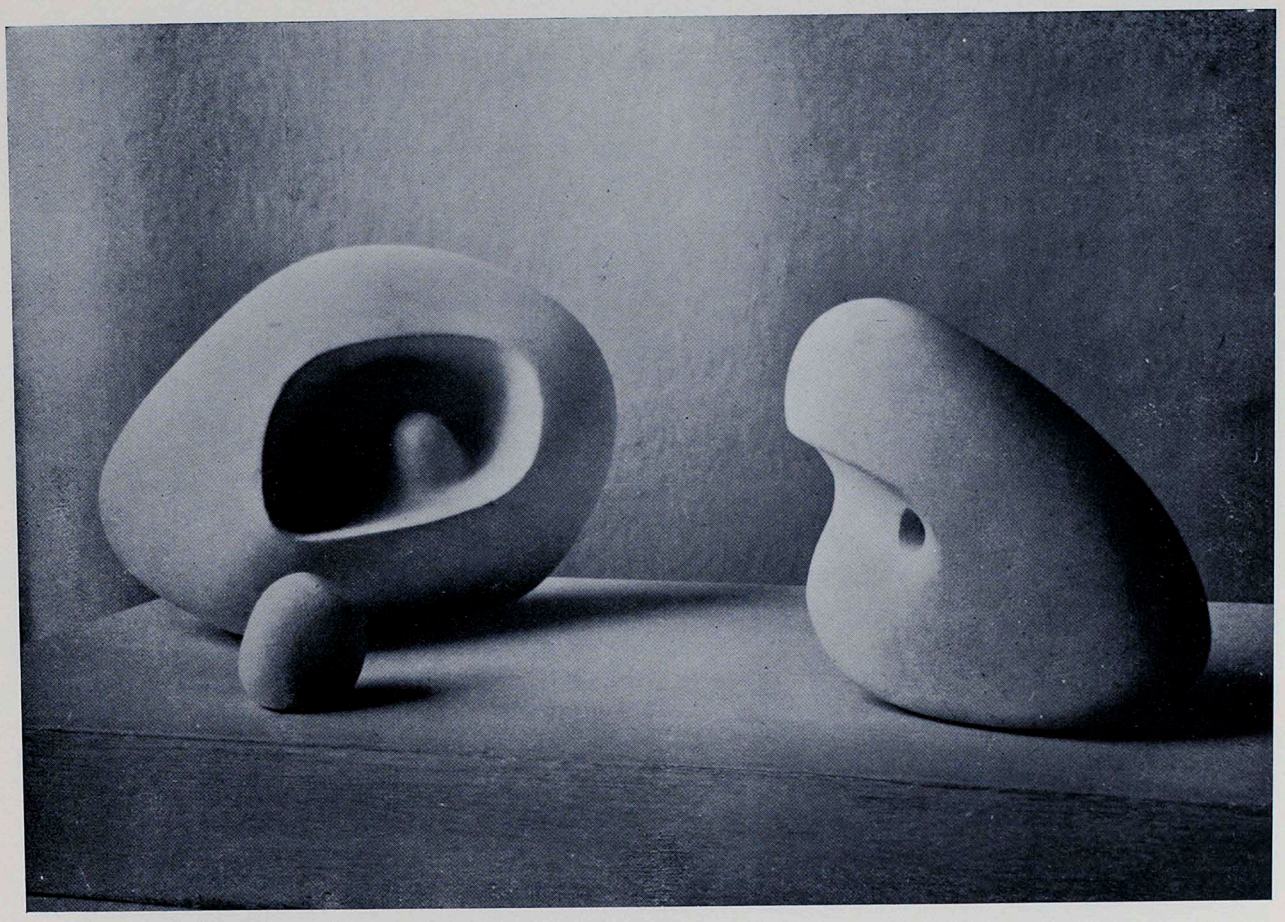
L. MOHOLY-NAGY. Celluloidbild, 1935.
Hungarian.
Born, 1895.
Now working in London.



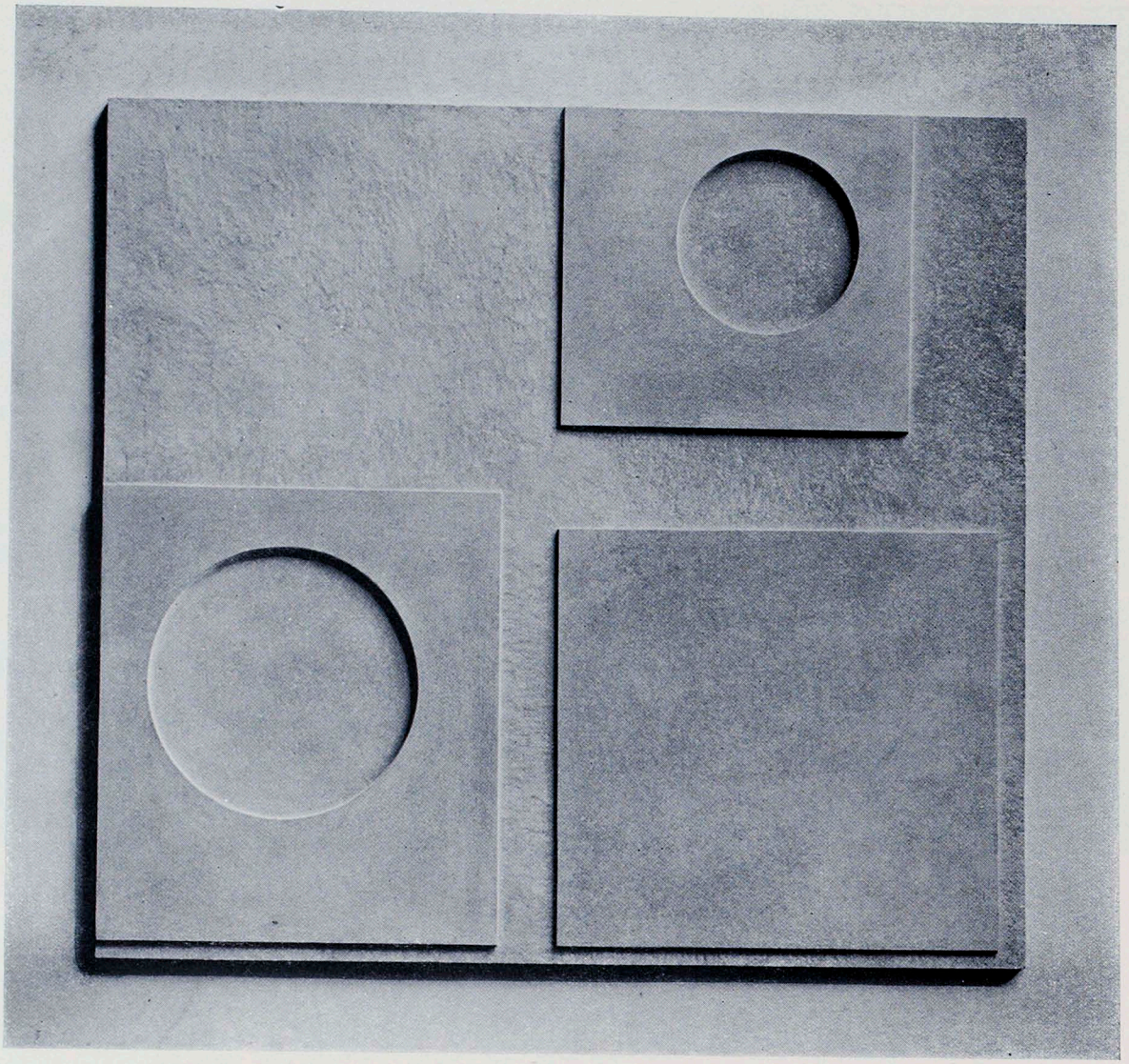
PIET MONDRIAN. Composition, 1935.
Dutch.
Born, 1872.
Has worked in Paris since 1918.



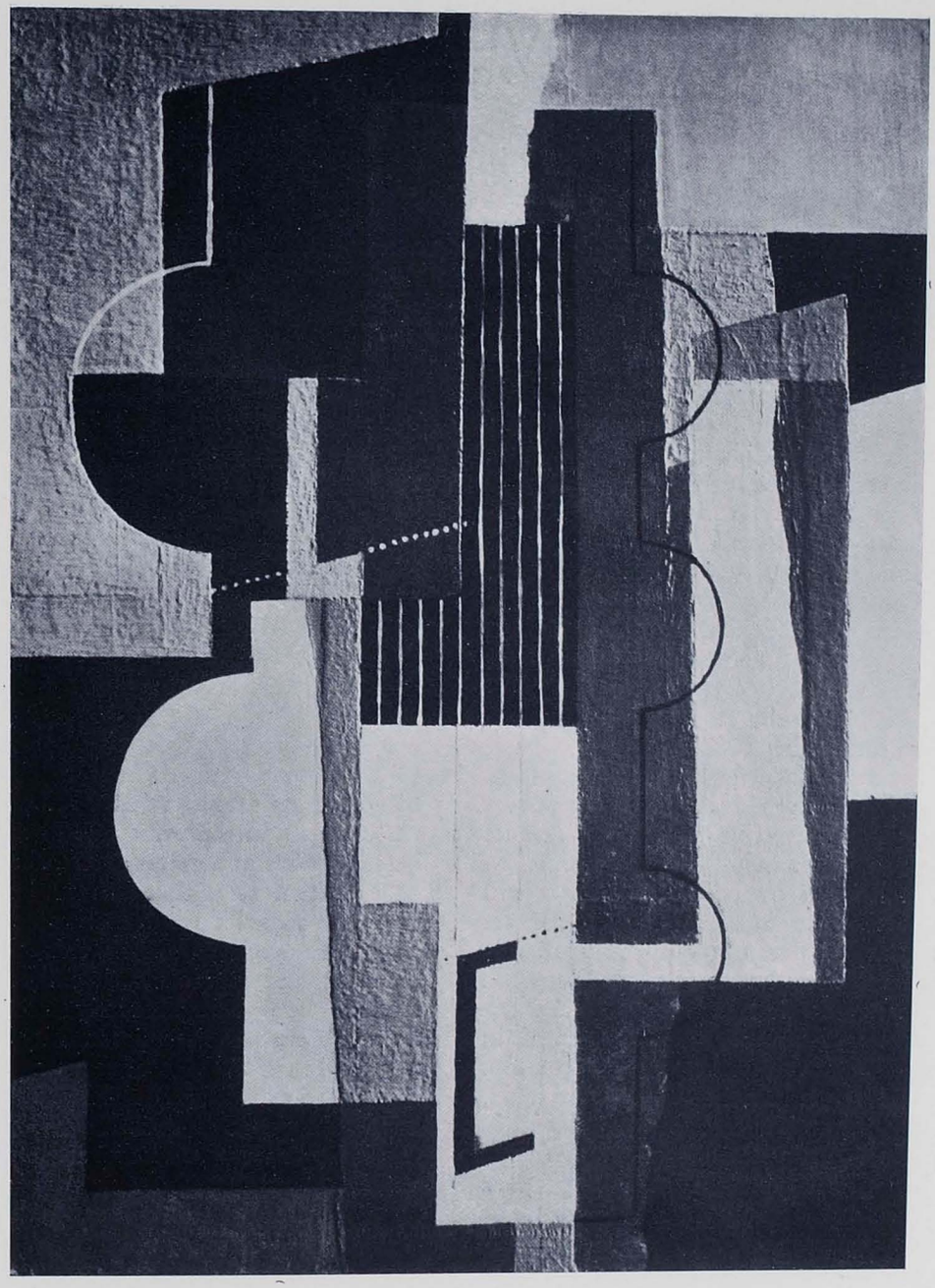
JOAN MIRÓ. Painting, 1935.
Spanish.
Born April 1892, Barcelona.
Worked in Paris 1921-30.
Now working in Barcelona.



HENRY MOORE. Carving, 1935.
English.
Born, Castleford, Yorkshire, 1898.
Now working in London.



BEN NICHOLSON. Carved relief, 1935.
English.
Born, 1894.
Now working in London.



JOHN PIPER. Painting, 1935.
English.
Born, December, 1903.
Now working in Oxfordshire.

ULTERIOR MOTIVES

" Abstract " painting and sculpture, it is often remarked, no longer need buttressing with those apologies, defensives, musical analogies, and so on, that commonly characterised the expository literature of the subject ten or twenty years ago. A public of some dimensions is supposed by now to have gathered, ready to greet, if not with understanding and enthusiasm, at least with the decency and humility of silence, the latest productions of the " abstractionist." That this public still represents a minority is true, but it is numerically a not inconsiderable minority, and qualitatively it is the only part of the public that deserves any consideration at all. The pioneering missionary literature is still there, on the shelves, accessible to any others who care to accede to it. So what, you might be disposed to ask, is all this *writing* about? It is " about Art," undoubtedly, but what is its purpose? Not, we are surely by now agreed, to persuade, to convert, to justify. Not, either, to advertise or explain; for if a painting is not its own best advertisement, or if it fails to explain itself in its own terms, no *words* will help it to find its public. And as for art criticism proper, that can only be profitable when it is restricted to technical discussion privately between those who understand the mental and manual processes implicated in the production of the works of art in question. Of course, it is evident that in Axis we have, in the main, a specialist public, such as can be addressed intimately in language that might be unintelligible to another specialist public, such as that supporting a numismatic journal or a gazelle breeders' gazette. Apart from a handful of practising artists, however, and a few actual contributors, this public is not expected to be more than " knowledgable " about modern movements and contemporary names. It has learned to distinguish between what is supposed to be good and what is supposed to be bad, it knows the reactions it is supposed to feel, and it knows (through having seen so much in print, or through having heard so much from others in the know) what to say. To this constant public there has been added this quarter, we may expect, a less knowing fringe of readers, the politely puzzled, the hesitant, the frightfully interested and the rather curious. Before writing " about Art " it is always as well to take stock of one's probable readers and that is what is now being done: pill first, jam after. It is the reader on the fringe just mentioned who is being addressed.

The question: what is the use of writing articles about art? is one which we shall reach in due course. But if you ask: why is *this* article being written? then the answer to that question would also fit the question: why are you reading this article? and the question: why do you go to see exhibitions of abstract art (or equally, why don't you)? and the question: why must artists make " abstractions "? The answer in each case is that you have agreed, however unwittingly, to participate in a ritual act, in a kind of game. I am writing this article, in the first place, to fill an empty space in a paper that has to appear at a certain time, that has to be of a certain size, that has to be " about " certain topics: it is a paper-game with fixed rules. In such games as this all kinds of complex and not altogether laudable satisfactions are being quietly consummated. Some obscure and harmless vanity is evidently posited in the authors of these signed articles that you are reading. And you, the reader, have paid your half-crown not purely with a charitable motive, or from a disinterested passion for knowledge or art.

To get the thing down to its lowest, you come to exhibitions of " abstract " art (or they come to you, in tabloid form, in this paper) in the same spirit, at bottom, that moves the village butcher, baker and candlestick-maker to patronise the village church. It is a ritual enforced by public opinion, in each case. You enter an atmosphere appropriately awe-inspiring, and you stay to get your spiritual moneys' worth. This operation can be seen most clearly in the behaviour of frequenters of concert-rooms, in musical circles. In the time of Handel there was only

the frankly social excuse, nobody dreamed of attending those grandiose displays of scraping and blowing for purely musical reasons, and a Beecham at that time would have had less excuse for gossip-hushing than the conductor of a restaurant orchestra, to-day, would have for silencing diners. It is still a thin pretence, the musical one, at Covent Garden. But music is the most democratic of the abstract arts, and the post-war sub-intelligentsia will turn up in force and stand on one leg in the Queen's Hall while Sir Henry Wood drills his troops to the engine-rhythms of J. S. Bach, or of some contemporary composer even less accessible, in the nature of things, to any but a handful of trained specialists. But it is upon this majority, not the knowing minority, that the " success " of the concert must depend; just as it is the candlestick-maker, not the theologian, that keeps the village church from closing down. Further, there is a delicate and intimate connection between God and the sales of candlesticks. By not filling his pew the candlestick-maker might be ostracised. By going to church he sells more candlesticks. The concert goer need be no more devout. It is not Love of the Lamb or Love of the Fugue that sends people to endure stuffy hours of discomfort. They are thereby enabled to sell more of their commodity, namely themselves, the personal candlestick. It is at this point, however, that a new element comes into play. Once in the trap, the victim has to make the best of it. He *projects* from the dozing recesses of his uncomfortable ego " Uplift ": he gets spiritual value for the time and discomfort he has spent; he will insist on that. What is the *rationale* of this, you may ask, and what the devil has it to do with exhibitions of " abstract " art? That, we are now in a position to see.

" Modern " art, to begin with, first got to the non-specialist public *via* the Russian Ballet, an expensive, exclusive, semi-intellectual form of cruise. Only after this baptism did " modern " painting (e.g., Matisse, Derain, Picasso) become a form of pure investment. People actually bought " cubist " work. And having bought the beastly thing, the (non-specialist) purchaser must learn, he will feel, to like it. It would be in roughly the same category as a distasteful marriage, contracted for purely financial reasons, in which both parties accepted their rôles philosophically and determined to ignore each other's baldness, warts, artificial limbs, bad breath, squints, or what not. In the case of the arts, the sentimental majority that has to contract, for obscure social reasons, a *liaison* with something as repellent, as outrageous to its prejudices, as " abstract " painting, will rapidly improvise a technique of appreciation. This is much more widespread a phenomenon than most people realise; and its physics are much less conscious than might be supposed. The end of it is that the publics that do exist for such rites as are provided by " abstract " artists (or Bach or the Pope) enjoy these performances for all the wrong, home-made reasons.

Well, you may object, what are the home-made reasons, and why are they wrong? Let us consider first the question of wrongness, and answer it categorically with a generalisation that can be exemplified in due course. " Modern " or democratically unpleasant art is disliked for irrelevant reasons; it is also liked generally for equally irrelevant reasons. What actually happens is, again, most easily seen in the case of music. A composition of some considerable complexity, demanding for its understanding the knowledge of a complete language, with its own grammar and syntax, will be disliked by the uninitiated because it has " no tune," say; it will also be admired by some of the uninitiated for the odd reminiscences of " tune " imbedded in what will otherwise seem to be a sea of aural nonsense. The sympathetically disposed will find these rare patches all the more agreeable for their rarity. Prepared for something austere and forbidding, the romantic listener—coming perhaps with an awe appropriate to the great names attached to the performance—will greet these reminiscent passages with surprise and delight. In the same manner the spectator confronted with unfamiliar " abstract " work, if he is prepared to overlook the general " ugliness " or " unintelligibility " that his prejudices will conspire to make him see, is apt to seek in the forms before him some quality that will tickle, by vague reminiscence, or by associated imagery, his own predilections. He may think the shapes " quaint,"

he may pity them for their wooden uncouthness, or they may delight his sense of neatness or boldness or richness. This is the dangerous point. It is the portion of rightness in the spurious "favourable" reaction that makes it dangerous. Abstract art that pleases the dress-sense or the sense of pity is not performing its proper function. What is the proper function of abstract art, and how is it to be approached by the uninitiate? In answering those questions it is possible also to give the *raison d'être* of such articles as this. "Writing about abstract art" can be, legitimately, either of two things: it can expose the motives or doctrines animating the conception "abstraction"; and it can provide tastes, appetisers, for particular examples of abstract work. In discussing motives our language is necessarily as "abstract" as the subject itself; in discussing actual works in words we are reduced to the kind of evocative prose employed by the advertisers of Messrs. Fortnum & Mason's commodities. You the reader, I the writer, X the abstract painter, are all playing games. But X's game is more elaborate and strict than ours. It is far more open and above-board than yours. X is also playing with magic. This makes his game different in kind from (say) "patience." Still, you may wonder, why an abstract game? An easy answer to this is, of course, why not. For all the other painter's games still flourish. The Academy admiral is still "on the line," the bare ladies, the highlands, the whole programme of "subjects" is still with us; even the camera cannot altogether oust them. The cunning manufacturers of "compositions" and colour or tone patterns still play their hardly more complex games. The public for all these things is still admirably catered for. "Abstract" painting and sculpture is for a definitely specialist and necessarily limited public, as specialist and limited as the public for fugues and quartets. In music the supremacy of Bach, Beethoven and Mozart is not seriously challenged: but public opinion sees to it that the B.B.C. (for example) doesn't broadcast "chamber music" to the exclusion of what is quite widely realised to be plain refuse. Centuries of familiarity and fame have not appreciably increased the interested minority here, so we must accustom ourselves to the realisation that "abstract" painting is destined for a public at least equally limited, and draw what cosy or sad feeling we like from that.

The artist is a man in search of the ideal game. He does not as a rule know that he is searching for it: like other people he is led by a fashion, by the rites current in his milieu, which he accepts more or less critically and only gradually modifies in the direction of his ideal game. This ideal game is the game that allows his chosen faculties their fullest expansion. (If he is deaf he will not write scores, if he is muscular he may carve blocks of stone—but by a curious paradox the forms he makes may embody just those ideals, as symbols, which in active life he cannot reach.) To-day the artist has a wider choice of possible games than he ever had before. This is only in part due to the arrival of the camera. The camera with its evil eye killed more than the highland cattle, it is true; but it did something more positive. By bringing in the reproduction it ushered in an era of unheard-of eclecticism. *All* the different artists' games, from China to Peru, became simultaneously "in the fashion."

The world had meanwhile become *one* place, instead of a congeries of isolated places. The artist could therefore do exactly what he pleased. He could invent any game he liked. In practice, very few artists outside insane asylums have entirely invented their own games. Most are naturally just as much at the beck and call of fashion as any of their most provincial predecessors—the fashion of a circle in which they find themselves enclosed. But some of the new games *as games* are far better than any hitherto available. The "abstract" games are more elastic, allow of less wasted or misplaced effort, admit of more universal and more personal manipulation. "Abstractions" cannot be liked for such preposterously wrong reasons as more naturalistic types of art. At worst they can be bent occasionally to serve some mainly decorative, or "functional," or propagandist end. But their true destination is the portfolio or album, where we keep our gramophone records and Chinese scrolls.

It is not easy to find any foolproof system of classifying abstract works yet. Types overlap, and we can see clearly only the extreme tendencies. Some of these pictures

are pure visions, re-creations of more or less recognisable forms. Some abstract artists *forge* dreams. Some are architects of purposeless buildings, engineers of functionless machines, visual mathematicians, scientific experimenters with plastic relations. Some start their pictures from the handicap of an accident, and conjure until they "get" something. Some, at the feminine end, are preoccupied with pattern arrangement merely, or colour-matching, or tactile games. Others are symbolists, knowing only a portion of what they do, people with complexes, paranoiacs, schizophrenes, the mad. The best are a little of all these and something more: they build between the vicious individualism, the private symbolism, of the insane, and the empty universality of the geometric, the decorative. These inhabit the forms they create and allow them to crystallise by their own organic laws. That was a Chinese ideal and such an artist as Hélion to-day reaches it by a totally opposite route. The spectator too, must learn to enter these forms, to be possessed by them. This is so much more difficult than to possess them cheaply. But there is always more, for the spectator addressed in this note, to unlearn than to learn.

HUGH GORDON PORTEUS.

ABSTRACTION AS WEAPON

"Nuns fret not at their convent's narrow room; And hermits are contented with their cells; And students with their pensive citadels; Maids at the wheel, the weaver at his loom, Sit blithe and happy; bees that soar for bloom, High as the highest Peak of Furness-fells, Will murmur by the hour in foxglove bells: In truth the prison, unto which we doom Ourselves, no prison is: and hence for me, In sundry moods, 'twas pastime to be bound Within the Sonnet's scanty plot of ground: Pleased if some Souls (for such there needs must be) Who have felt the weight of too much liberty, Should find brief solace there as I have found."—(W. Wordsworth.) We have not noticed the honey sour, so we may presume that present discontents have not yet spread so far afield as the kingdom of the bee. Or maybe it is because our taste is already depraved that we do not notice the taint on the honey. Be that as it may, it is certain that discontent has infected all the nations of man from top to bottom, every man jack. We are forced out of our pigeon-holes, out of the sonnet-form, out of naturalistic art, must take a bird's eye view and abstract essentials from a vast horizon. Government officials leave the nun no privacy to be a nun, even supposing she should so *wish;* hermits can find no place of hermitage, even if they would, from the North Pole's icy shores to Everest's topmost tip; Oxford's pensive citadels fall like rotten-ripe fruit into the hands of the Group, and Lancashire is on its beam ends. Somehow, despite the philanthropic prison reforms of the last hundred and fifty years, we are less willing than ever to doom ourselves.

Yet the artist would somehow find solace. He has born the brunt of too much liberty, the weight has been his to endure, Atlas upside down, bearing Chaos on his shoulders. When society was sound liberty consisted of living *within* the liberties, of recent years he who would be free has had to wander outside, beyond the pale—the difference in circumstance between Michaelangelo and Cézanne. If the artist could somehow find again the scanty plot of ground within which it would

be pastime to be bound, then he has laid the foundation of a social hierarchy adequately expressing present realities; by knowing and keeping to his own proper job he has contributed more to social sanity than he would have done by a thousand political dabblings, fiddlings and tinkerings. The significance of Abstraction is that it can take stock of any number of discrepancies and bring the problem to focus within narrow seizable limits. " To Generalise is to be an Idiot. To Particularise is the Alone Distinction of Merit. General Knowledges are those Knowledges that Idiots possess " (William Blake). Abstraction must be understood as an attempt to particularise, to find that scanty plot of ground, to build a Noah's Ark against the floods that threaten, to forge a weapon adequate to order and express present realities.

Abstract Art has often been regarded as a game. And so it is. But life too is a game, with rules that must be kept, limits that may not be transgressed. At all times it has needed the sensibility of an artist to tread a fitting course through life. The world is a stage in the sense that it requires the talents of an actor to enable one to pass muster, to handle people and situations with delicacy and discrimination. Life is so ugly and stark at the present because rules have been outgrown, forgotten, lost, limits unrecognised and transgressed. For a while audacious people seize the bull by the horns, they are the aristocracy riding the strange beast Chaos. But Chaos is a cunning beast too. He withdraws the life from that particular pair of horns, and sprouts them elsewhere. The certainties which people have held so rigidly, come away dead in the hand, perplexities from an unexpected quarter beset the proud riders. Art is a game of finding a seat again, of learning how to play with adequacy one's part amid the new realities. Though there is still much to destroy, the main effort must now be constructive, architecture must erect proud blocks of flats in which a man may be happy to live, art must be a weapon with which to order phenomena.

Take a typical scene from modern life:

To-night on my necessary way to supper I must stand on the Underground station. An outward-bound train screeches alongside the platform, lurches to a halt, the doors jerk back, the business folk, jaded after the day in town, make a relentless bee-line for their dormitory homes; it is all an affair of taut stinging wires, twitching doors and train, and people back and forwards. The burst of people hurries across my sight. The men still have superfluities. But the women, the leaders, are slimmed to thin purpose. The doors snap to, the train jerks nervously and is gone, the people are vanished.

My mind goes back to the coaching days. To leisurely contacts, when even highwaymen had a time to dance. To the multitudinous petticoats before the rose became a thorn. Of course, one must always use the past to belabour the present; the utopia of Wordsworth's sonnet never was on sea or land. How perfect the isolation of Jane Austen, my mind begins to ponder, how complete her concentration and mastery within the bounds she marked herself, why nowadays cannot each know his place and keep to it. . . .

The next train severs my meditation. Again I am confronted by the come and go. The legs twinkle. The slit of the skirt splits to reveal the glint of clockwork precision of the legs. All phenomena trip to the pace of that step. I may refuse these phenomena entrance into my mind. Nevertheless, my mind is conditioned by what is happening outside it. I would listen to the gentlest whisper of the wind in the aspens, nevertheless, admit it or not, the guns in Abyssinia are booming the bass, the wind in the aspens is no more than an ineffectual treble. I would conceive an epic—but the third train causes an abortion. . . .

Now, I must have a weapon to encounter this experience, to conquer it. The ancient Britons constructed Chanctonbury to keep out the Romans and all that. The picturesque country church was not built to be picturesque. Its belfry was really a bergfrid, a defensive place of shelter, and there the villagers took refuge against maraudering bands; more leisured ages associated the word with the bells, making of a defensive place of shelter the sweet resting place for harmonious bells. The quiet, reserved yew which one looks down upon from the belfry was planted there by royal proclamation to provide wood for bows when England's

strength was in her bowmen. Æsthetics and anæsthetics amount to very much the same thing. The Britons built their earthwork to keep out enemies, and beauty came to bless their labours.

Look to your weapons, furbish them. Select the best. What is the best weapon to counter the Underground station, to counter the stress of modern life? The best weapon to hand is Abstraction.

Why?

Unless the artist is living a life that is an anachronism he will be aware of the Underground, of motor-cars, of Communism, Fascism, of Abyssinia, of uncertainties, hesitations, doubts, of the necessity for "altering, re-stating, denying and reasserting." One afternoon in the Underground would teach an open mind so much. Civilisation is tight-drawn, stretched tight by aeroplane, wireless, pylons, big business and what not. A single individual may be aware of the pressure of world-wide problems. The artist feels the necessity of taking ken of these things and many more. Yet at the same time he needs his scanty plot of ground. The form of art best suited to express much in little is Abstraction.

Take examples.

Take Nicholson. He peers at phenomena critically, closely. He is aware of the complexities. He cuts the knots with an audacious stroke. He says: If life's complexities do not resolve themselves into a white simplicity, then I cannot cope with them. His is a gesture of desperation: from the coils and cogs of life emanates this white simplicity as a clean spark comes from the flints. The clean spark is sufficient recompense for the cogs and the coils.

Take Hitchens. Once in Hamburg I watched a jazz pianist. He was playing with consummate skill. Yet the most part of him was asleep. But the fraction of him that was awake was extracting from his environment with a mechanical perfection those elements which were necessary to nourish his playing. It is this faculty for extraction that Hitchens possesses to so marked a degree. He can avoid the full buffets of modern life and yet get what he needs. He can conserve his energy and produce paintings of a consistently high standard. He can distil from any group of objects its loveliness. This is how he himself, in a catalogue to an exhibition at the Zwemmer Galleries about two years ago, explains what he is trying to express in his painting: "To extract and show clearly in line, tone, colour and plane the unity of appearance and visual harmony of life, wherein each part is relative to the whole. This is usually a visual reaction to nature, but at times it becomes a psychological one." This is an excellent weapon for countering the stress of the Underground; it is, however, no more than a personal solution, Hitchens slips through the problems without affecting them.

Quite a different process is that employed by Piper. Indeed, what strikes one about Abstract Art is not its limitations but its possibilities. Piper swallows whole as much as he can take. It is as if a man should behold a beautiful goblet; he brushes aside its beauty to come at its truth, its value; he smelts the beauty down to a block of silver or gold. This is the Puritanical austerity of spirit. It is the very opposite to promiscuity of contact; it takes a contact in its wholeness and by earnestness and honesty reduces it to a value. The fun begins when you have the metal in block form. Most Puritans at this point have put it in the bank. Or can one re-work the metal to a beauty firm enough to conquer truth? At any rate confronted by the phenomena of the Underground it is a good beginning to boil it down, to find its worth.

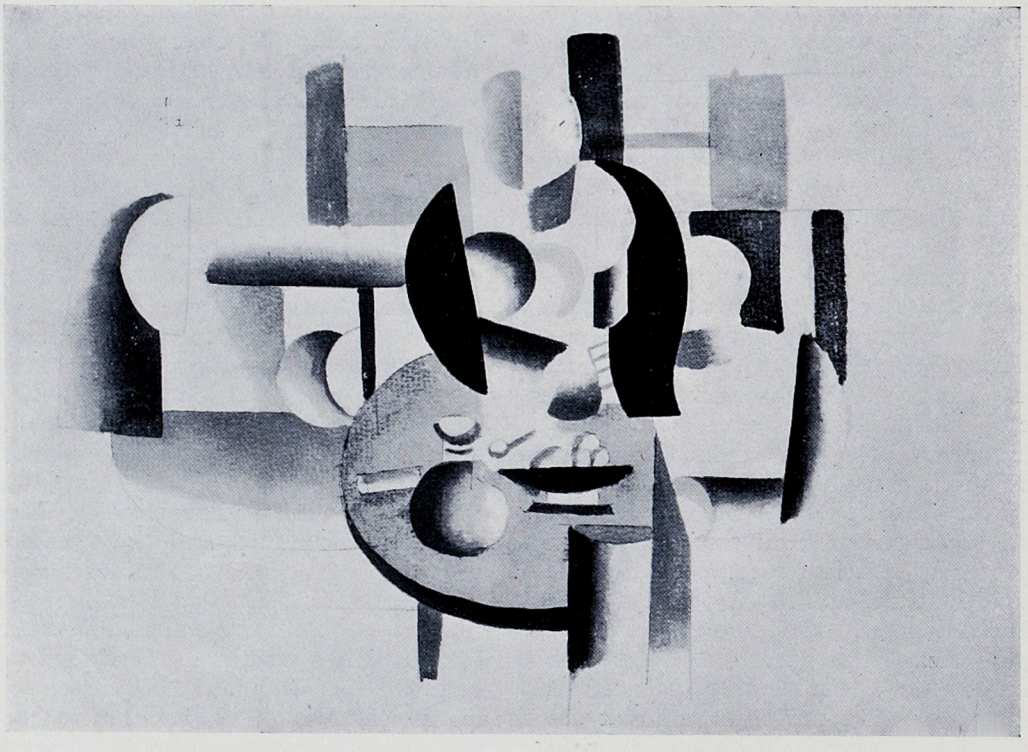
Take Hélion. In Dürer's time it was a genuine triumph for man to see things as they are. Each painting by Dürer clears the way for the onmarch of scientific man. The clarity of sight won by Dürer enabled man to manipulate Nature and to produce eventually the camera. Man is master of Nature now. But he is not master of that instrument which gave him mastery, the machine. It is of no avail to enthrone the machine as a god, to bow and scrape to it in the manner of some abstract painters; that will not melt its steely heart. Man has to learn how to use the machine creatively. Each of Hélion's paintings is a lesson in the transubstantiation of mechanistic forms into creative; the machine without ceasing to be a machine is beginning to lift itself forward

with the wings of a bird. Hélion's paintings are a revelation in the right use of machinery.

These then are some of the contributions towards the building of a Noah's Ark.

One who is going to use weapons has to be something of a craftsman. Now one of the shortcomings in people nowadays is that they have no appreciation of craftsmanship. They cannot judge the quality of workmanship which has been put into the repair of their shoes, into the articles which they buy in the shops. They can only absorb the adverts, the literary matter, and the greatest liar wins. Cézanne performed a public service when he jolted painting utterly from its affinities with literary illustration. As Bach composed music free from literary taint, so Cézanne painted pictures. As the notes of Bach sing together, and the stars of heaven, so do the brush strokes of Cézanne. This painting, this music illustrate no tale. Abstract Art jolts people away from the chicanery of literary representation, it forces them again to appreciate good craftsmanship. The painter " mixes, glues, screws, paints, plasters, washes, combs, sandpapers, files, adjusts with rules and compass." Here, indeed, he has every opportunity for learning the use of tools, for becoming skilful with his weapons.

KENNETH R. WALSH.



FERNAND LÉGER. Water Colour.
(Courtesy of A. Zwemmer.)

LONDON SHOWS

Taste, grace and good behaviour exemplify the exhibition at the Zwemmer Gallery. Owing to the associations that have corrupted such adjectives, turning them almost into terms of abuse, it is necessary to supplement them with an appreciative generalisation. The show is good. All kinds of works in all kinds of mediums, mostly bearing thunderous signatures, have been gathered together and sorted with a great deal of sympathy and appropriateness.

The names in the catalogue suggest by their diversity and importance, a certain antagonism that is not apparent in the show. Matisse, Léger, Gaudier, Marcoussis, Ernst, Picasso, Sickert and Kandinsky, artists who, if they exhibited together work that epitomised their various outlooks, would each become almost unified. For, although each shows work that is typical of his talent, none of the pictures is representative of a creed. With the charm and interest of the show so evenly disposed, it is impossible to consider the paintings and drawings as statements or as factual assertions about the condition of art exemplified by various artists. In fact, the artists in this case retire from their positions as pioneers or exponents, and become the craftsmen who produced the pictures that are to be commented upon.

The obvious target for descriptive comment is the big etching by Picasso, No. 48, *Not Yet Named.* It is chunky, and complex and part of the content of a permanent phase of Picasso's work. But far from its being a beginning, a breaking away from his own tradition, that has placed Picasso at one swoop "at the head of the Surrealist movement," it seems rather to be a conclusion, or perhaps a repetition of his past achievements. I have seen better and worse Picassos of the same kind that might at any time have answered the same purpose. A certain amount of surrealist data has been garnered from his work, as well as from other work containing the same element. In its essentials surrealism is a source, a function vital and automatic in all activity. The glorification of one dependant element into an "ism" is an extremely rigorous limitation, and the finality of the award to Picasso, captain of the corps on the strength of one etching, is decidedly questionable.

No. 49, *Unnamed Drawing* by Picasso, is an exciting and assertive display in indian ink, a thrilling example of virtuosity inverted—splashing and scratching held in perfect control. The charcoal drawing, No. 16, *Girl with Flowers*, by Beaudin, has a solid charm: a Marie Laurencin masculinised. The fantasy of touch is there, but has been substantialised. The drawings by Gaudier are all excellent, No. 9, a particularly good one, is comparable with some of the pen drawings of Matisse, it has less grace but more guts, and unites through the common attribute of instantaneous accuracy the draughtsmanship of Lautrec and David Low. Max Ernst has one beautifully mellowed and complete painting in the exhibition, No. 53, Spheres. It has the peculiar virtue of appearing to be an absolutely spontaneous creation, and of containing only incidentally all the essential traditional elements without which no work of art could come into being. Wrangling about pros and cons and might-have-beens is silenced by the delightful little upright gouache No. 19, by Léger. To describe a picture as charming is sometimes thought to detract from its merit, but this drawing is certainly charming in the praiseworthy sense, for that quality exists through a lack of mechanised violence. Charm is not convincing when it is poured over the awkwardness of a statement like sauce, but Léger in this drawing has mastered the art of pleasing by making a statement in the best possible way.

The Mayor Gallery is showing a typical and choice collection of Maillol's drawings. Most apparent in these drawings is the artist's single-mindedness. This might be the obvious conclusion from the sameness of the subject, but it is not with pictorial subject or pictorial manner that he is occupied. It is the purposeful study of how a figure works that concerns him. Through draughtsmanship Maillol is out to fend for his primary interest, sculpture. The drawings, therefore,

are not an extension of his sculptural activity, but rather a preliminary test-medium. If it were possible to set an absolute and universally accepted standard for good and bad art, to make a final definition of draughtsmanship, it would be possible to decide whether Maillol's drawing conformed with the required regulations and therefore whether they were good or bad, right or wrong. There is, perhaps fortunately, no such criterion for æsthetics, therefore, on the basis of unfounded assertion (personal reaction) it is justifiable to discuss his achievements.

The nearest approach that is made to utilisation of material for its own sake is in No. 20, *Nude Standing*, a wonderfully caressive drawing echoing and immortalising Rosetti. A number of drawings concocted from the sculptor's viewpoint, contradict the actual sculptural quality implicit in drawing. Nos. 8, 3, and 22 for example, are modelled within a thickish heavy outline and create the illusion of reliefs raised within an incised edge. Sometimes the form is achieved superbly through line, but Maillol could never escape plastic imprisonment and rejected the clear-cut line as insufficient. As a sop to the plasticity of his customary medium, he had to mould a superimposed form within what should have been an adequately expressive outline. In No. 19, *Nude*, he almost achieves the union of the two antagonistic forces.

EILEEN HOLDING.

NEW BOOKS

"*Typographische Gestaltung*," *by* JAN TSCHICHOLD.

Exhibition of Typography by JAN TSCHICHOLD *at Lund Humphries.*

If you go to an English printer and ask for Welt Antiqua you will be offered Memphis: "Just as good." If you ask for Cable you'll be told Gill Sans is "just the same." Complain because Rockwell is used instead of Beton and you'll be regarded as a pedantic idiot. English printers are type-blind; they work on a set of a priori principles and assumptions—completely non-creative. With the possible exception of Lund Humphries, who occasionally do more than import a fashion.

Look at English art books and periodicals: "Unit One" was a farcical piece of pseudo-Teutonism; "Art Now" was better, but the body-matter in Gill was difficult to read; Gascoyne's *A short survey of Surrealism* was several years out of date; *Five on Revolutionary Art* was probably the best job of typographical layout Kauffer has done, but between the covers it was ordinary; *Axis* is, to my mind, too conventional in form for its contents.

In the last twenty years progress in typography has chiefly come from Germany. Last year's exhibition of work by Koch's Klingspor Press at Lund Humphries, that of Jan Tschichold at the same gallery, and Tschichold's book *Typographische Gestaltung*, make English typography look silly.

In the past, display typography was based on the Italian hour-glass title-page; wide measure top and bottom, narrowing in the centre. Through the work of such men as Tschichold this tradition has been shaken off, asymmetrical layouts have resulted and, most important of all, the white space of the page has been realised in its true importance as a part of layout and not as emptiness to be filled. In his book Tschichold illustrates abstract works by Tauber-Arp, Ben Nicholson, Moholy-Nagy and others alongside pretty black and white diagrams of the elements of typography and their use in relation to the printed page.

Typography is an art of great flexibility. Because it reaches limitless eyes it ranks as one of the most influential fields of design. In which case the sooner Tschichold's theory and practice penetrate to England the better.

S. JOHN WOODS.

A Short Survey of Surrealism. DAVID GASCOYNE. Cobden Sanderson. 7/6.

"It is the avowed aim of the surrealist movement to reduce and finally to dispose altogether of the flagrant contradictions that exist between dream and waking life, the unreal and the real, the unconscious and the

conscious and thus to make what has hitherto been regarded as the special domain of poets the acknowledged common property of all," breaking the " chains of secondhand and second rate ideas, the preconceptions and prejudices that help to bind together the system known (ironically, as some think) by the name of civilisation." I quote from the introduction of Mr. Gascoyne's book *A Short Survey of Surrealism*, the first book to give in English an account of a movement of poets and painters which, I need hardly say, has produced valuable results in Paris since the war and is now becoming a widespread influence in other countries.

Like all such movements it has been seriously misrepresented and for this reason alone a clear and honest account of what surrealism stands for, such as Mr. Gascoyne gives, is of first rate importance and should at least serve to whet the appetite of all who still desire the long hoped for renaissance of artistic expression. No one can afford to neglect a movement which includes the names of Arp, Chirico, Ernst, Miró and Picasso among painters, and Breton, Crevel, Eluard, Tzara and many others among poets. But it is not with a long list of talent and achievements that they wish to throw dust in the eyes of the public, on the contrary " Poetry should be made by all. Not one." Surrealism will have failed in its avowed aim if it does not succeed in taking the arts out of the drawing room and studio into every-day life. It is a new mode of living, André Breton says, " one should take the trouble to practise poetry " by living in such a way that the subconscious activity of the mind merges into every-day reality and widens its horizons. In this way it is argued the " work of art " will find fresh significance, it being the link between the dream and reality.

Mr. Gascoyne gives a detailed account of the experiments made by the surrealists to record by " pure psychic automatism " the workings of the subconscious. These experiments are valuable in so far as they go, the question arises as to how far this method can succeed in itself unaided by initial consciousness. Breton qualifies part of his definition of surrealism (" . . . thoughts dictation in the absence of all control exercised by the reason ") by saying elsewhere: " If the depths of our mind harbour strange forces capable of increasing those of the surface or of successfully contending with them, then it is all in our interest to canalise them, to canalise them first in order to submit them later, if necessary, to the control of reason," and adds " there are no means designed *a priori* for the bringing about of such an enterprise," which accounts for the fact that the drawings of madmen, children and primitive peoples can awaken wonder and admiration when the laboured, self-conscious works of the " professional " artist can only find a suitable appreciation in the dustbin.

Surrealism claims that it is " not a style, it is not a school of literature or painting, it is not a system of æsthetics." It is an attitude towards reality which refuses to submit to the " chains of second-hand and second-rate ideas," and which intends " to restore to civilised man the force of his primitive instincts."

I shall not attempt here to do justice to the part of this book which deals with surrealist literature. Mr. Gascoyne describes its evolution from the nihilistic Dada Movement, an outcome of war conditions, which set out to be " sacriligious, subversive and altogether outrageous," and which cleared the ground for constructive ideas. Dada died and the surrealists developed a more comprehensive and constructive method out of its ashes. The derisive nihilism became a healthy disrespect for worn-out standards, combined with a systematic research for new means of expression to which the " collages " of Picasso and Ernst, the constructions and surrealist objects of Dali, Duchamp and Giacometti, the photos of Man Ray and the films of Bunnel all contribute tangible results. At the end of the book are to be found translations of some of the surrealist poets, among whom Eluard and Tzara merit particular attention.

A word must be said, however, with regard to the popular error that surrealism is a purely literary movement destined to bring back into painting those elements from which it has been struggling to free itself. It is true that they are more interested in expression than in perfection, so that dogmas as to what is allowable and what is poaching on a neighbouring art have never troubled the

surrealists. Their motto would rather be: poach wherever you can if it helps you to be more articulate. Technical ability and craftsmanship are not to be despised unless they cramp expression.

Representation will be found to play an important part in the painting of all the surrealists, but it is representation of the dream world and has nothing to do with impressionism or academic realism. In the painting by Chirico "The Fête day," reproduced in this book, the fact that we see clearly buildings, an arrow, a roll of felt and an egg in no way detracts from the beauty of the design, this strange assembly at the corner of an empty street speaks a visual language, its story is one of plastic and subconscious reality, the unique language of painting. In fact it is very difficult not to be representative in some degree, if the work of art is to have a life of its own it will be organic, and an abstract organism would be a contradiction in terms. The human form is conjured up by a piece of string (compare the Arp illustration), stains on walls, the face of a motor car, even the purely geometric forms insist on becoming alive, squares and circles are anthropomorphic, blue is the sky, the circle is the sun, the eye or sixpence. Therein lives the magic of associations, unconscious or conscious which can inspire joy or fear, can convey one a thousand miles or back to one's childhood, and expression will be definitely impoverished by trying to eliminate this element. Mr. Gascoyne mentions for further reference as regards the surrealist attitude, Breton's "brilliant and detailed study *Surrealism and Painting*."

Being a complete attitude towards life surrealism has also had its repercussions in politics. The overtures and disagreements between the surrealists and the Communist Party are dealt with at length by Mr. Gascoyne. It appears that the step between revolutionary ideas and their political realisation is a perilous one in which it is easy for the ideas to become distorted and abandoned completely by those in power. Breton, analysing the artists' point of view in his recent book, *The Political Position of Surrealism*, makes an illuminating comparison between David, "official painter of the revolution," whose work contributes nothing to the development of the arts, and Courbet, the revolutionary idealist, whose subjects have nothing to do with insurrection, but who "by the single virtue of his technique" has greatly influenced the modern movement."

In conclusion Mr. Gascoyne stresses the international growth of surrealism, he hopes to see it more widely understood in England and that his readers will have realised "that surrealism is not simply a way of writing or painting, but a school of thought that may very well be playing a rôle of historical importance." Let those who feel any sympathy please note that the way of the poet is not an easy path, the surrealist revolution is perpetual and for him "beauty will be convulsive or will not be."

ROLAND PENROSE.

THERE WILL BE A REPLY TO THIS ARTICE BY THE EDITOR IN THE NEXT NUMBER

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