

Matrons (left) pause to reflect upon oddness of "Girl Before a Mirror" by Pablo Picasso. Right, Jensen's vividly colored "Clockwork in the Sky" dazzles sunglassed girl.

By RICHARD LEMON

THE HOUSE THAT ART BUILT

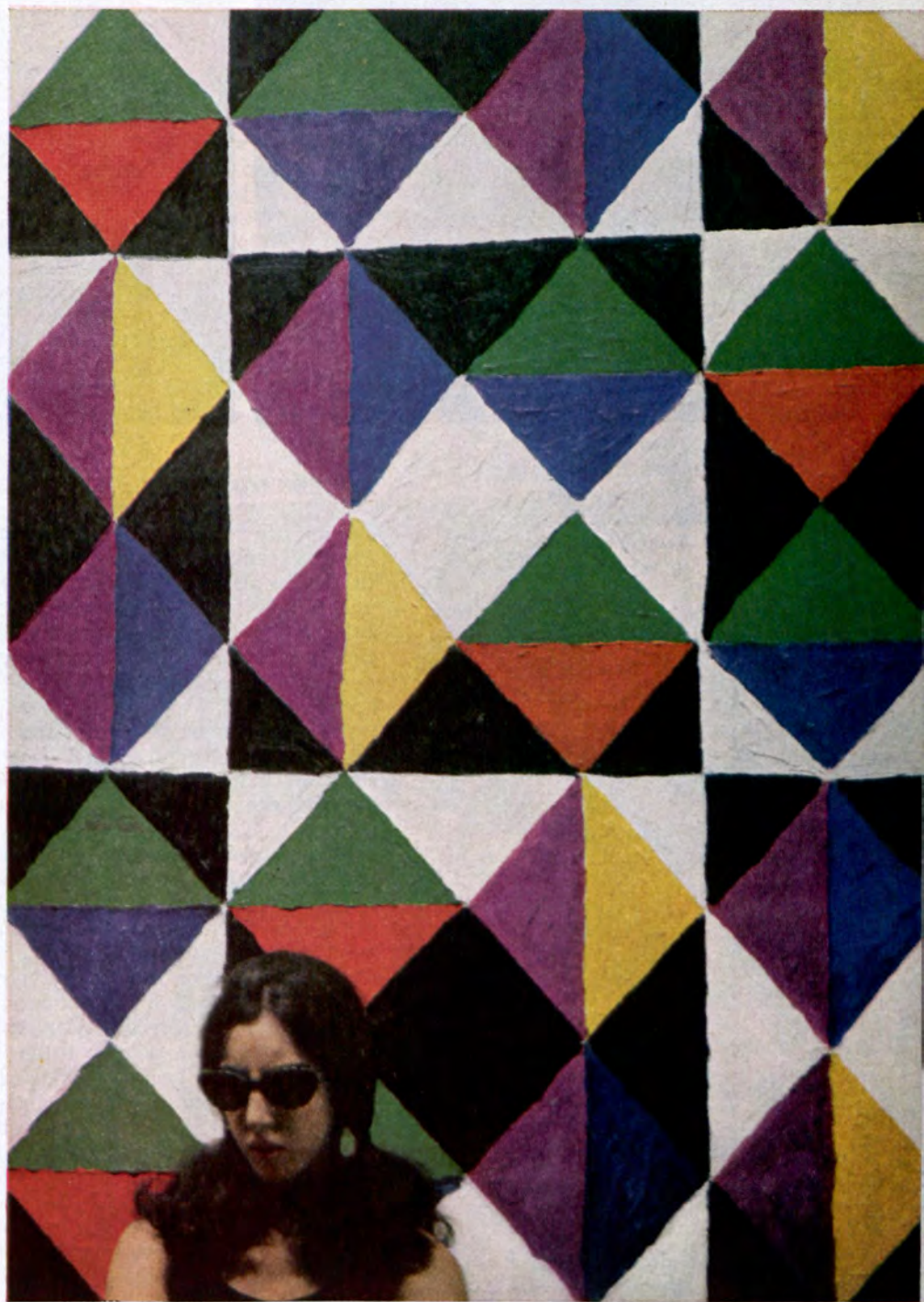
THE scene is a cool, marble-and-glass building on a quiet side street in midtown Manhattan. In an office on the fifth floor an associate curator named William Seitz is cooking up what promises to be either the next outrage or the next fad in modern art: a February exhibition called The Responsive Eye. It will feature dizzying paintings of concentric circles, 3-D compositions of metal and plastic, and diamond-pattern Plexiglas constructions. Three floors below, families and couples holding hands swirl through the bright, spacious lobby. At right, matrons rummage intently through stacks of elegant postcards, art books and reproductions, which are for sale. At left, bright-eyed young girls help people who are seeking membership or simply conversation about art. Out back, in the large, airy sculpture garden, beatniks and businessmen bask in the sun at outdoor tables, eating, and looking at the statues, rectangular pools, and gray-marble steps and walls.

This is New York's Museum of Modern Art, the capital of the art world, established, respected and popular. And, looked at objectively, the whole scene has the air of fantasy, because 35 years ago the museum wasn't there at all, and modern art in New York enjoyed a status about equal to that of bootleg gin, except that it was less respectable and much less in demand.

The fantasy, however, is not only real, but is a key part of the extraordinary success story of modern art in America. Thirty-five years ago the few modern works in New York were in private hands, and neither museums nor museum customers were much interested in them. Last year, when the Museum of Modern Art unveiled a new seven-million-dollar wing, 5,000 invited guests, including the First Lady of the United States, celebrated the event with champagne. Thirty-five years ago New York had a handful of collectors and galleries. Today the city boasts more than 400 galleries, at least a half-dozen museums which display contemporary art in varying degree, thousands of collectors, and several young painters who knock down as much as \$5,000 a picture. Modern art has disfranchised its critics by making newness a sign of respectability, not of rebelliousness. As a result, "modern" art now seems to mean most of the art of the past 75 years and all of the art from now on, and the statement "I don't like modern art" has become just about impossible.

Credit for this extraordinary change in the standing of modern art belongs largely to the Museum of Modern Art, which in three decades has grown from a brash revolutionary into a powerful institution with the largest paid membership, and the greatest influence, of any museum in the world.

The battle for modern painting is only one of many which the museum has fought and won. The museum has also battled for modern architecture, photography, good design in everything from vacuum



After 35 years, the brash and revolutionary Museum of Modern Art has achieved respectability.

But it's still diverting its patrons with snap, crackle and Pop.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY BURT GLINN



Mother-to-be contemplates two conceptions from fecund brain of Picasso, "Pregnant Woman" and "Baboon and Young." Right, Ad Reinhardt's "Black on Black" intrigues onlookers.



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cleaners to coffeepots, movies, and even TV. It has a film library with 3,000 titles. It owns some 7,000 prints, 7,000 photographs and 4,000 items of design. It has sent so many exhibits around the globe—to almost 900 U.S. cities and towns and 60 foreign countries—that it keeps a map with red pins to indicate where its shows have been. It teaches art to 1,700 adults and children a week, ships art material to 130 New York City schools a month, sends some 85 movies to schools and study groups a week, and has published 326 art books, many of them the best available on their subjects. It has an Oscar—sent by Orson Welles, who won it for writing *Citizen Kane*. He lent it to the museum a few years ago when its movie division was considering a show of his films and, says the library's Margareta Akemark, "We've never been able to catch up with him to give it back." The museum even has recognized that most maligned of creative efforts, the TV commercial, and recently put together, for loan to interested study groups, a package of the best plugs.

As a result of this large-scale reformist zeal, just about everybody in the country has felt the museum's impact. A weary housewife might be interested to know that the same Sucaryl bottle which decorates her crumb-flecked kitchen table was cited for beauty in a 1959 show on *The Package*. A secretary lunching at Woolworth's might be surprised to hear that the museum has commended the design of the "juicy" O's in the Woolworth sign. Stan Musial and Roger Maris were surely pleased to find baseball bats designed by their companies in a glossy 1962 exhibition called *Design for Sport*. Anyone who

has enjoyed *My Fair Lady* is in debt to the film library: Lyricist Alan Lerner and composer Frederick Loewe, who based their Broadway hit on Shaw's *Pygmalion*, spent days in the library repeatedly viewing the only traceable movie print of *Pygmalion*. Consumers everywhere have been affected by Piet Mondrian's once-controversial lined paintings in the museum, which have heavily influenced advertising style. The stodgiest bankers work in modern office buildings inspired by the International Style—glass walls and little ornamentation—which the museum helped bring to prominence.

But if the museum has changed the public, the public has also changed the museum. With its two restaurants, the garden and the movies as lures, more than half its 700,000 visitors each year go there for something besides the paintings. "When I was a young man in New York, people used to meet their dates under the clock at the Biltmore Hotel," Monroe Wheeler, director of the museum's Exhibitions and Publications, said recently. "Now they say, 'I'll meet you at the museum.' And the museum means this one."

This development has also brought on what might be called the criticism—namely, that the museum is box-office crazy. "It has become a fetish with them to have something sensational to hook the public with—and they don't care what public," one gallery owner said with a snort. "You go there and you see kids holding hands—instead of going to Central Park, they now go to art museums."

The criticism is a variation on an old theme. Soon after the museum was founded, the director of the Metropolitan complained that the Museum of Modern Art was turning into a

"Museum of Fashionable Art," and the alarm has been sounded regularly ever since. Today it is Pop Art—whose practitioners paint soup cans and movie stars—which is being decried both as Fashionable and Silly. Or "Op" art (paintings that create weird optical effects) or kinetic sculpture (structures that move). But today's alarms are often sounded discreetly out of the museum's earshot, because the museum, to its chagrin, has become the most powerful molder of taste in the art world.

The museum dislikes the tag of "taste maker," and it hasn't become one without a fight. In fact, its founding director and guiding spirit, Alfred H. Barr Jr., has waged a determined and patient campaign to keep its walls from becoming hallowed. In 1929 Barr warned that "the value of all contemporary art is debatable and much of it is certainly transitory, no matter how important it may seem to be to us at present." In 1942 he wrote, "The museum is aware that it may often guess wrong in its acquisitions. When it acquires a dozen recent paintings, it will be lucky if . . . in twenty years only one should survive." "In any case," he wrote in 1963, "let those who love the paintings from the Museum of Modern Art be warned, and those who don't, be comforted; they are not all 'masterpieces.'" Recently he referred to himself as "probably at least half blind."

Barr's disclaimers have been ineffective. "The art market reflects everything we do," says curator Peter Selz. "Even when we show a master like Monet or Rodin, his prices go way up. In 1960 I did an art-nouveau show [on the "whiplash" style of design popularized by Louis C. Tiffany at the turn of the century] and sure enough everything from Tiffany glass to wallpaper was suddenly back in fashion."

It is a measure of the museum's success in making modern art respectable that the public's current near-mania for art sometimes wearies even the museum's personnel. "Art is almost too popular now," one curator sighed recently. "I sometimes wish people would forget about it and get back to life."

Such a thought would have been unimaginable back in 1929, especially to the three society ladies who conjured the museum into existence.

One of the city's leading collectors of modern works then was an unmarried society leader named Lillie P. Bliss, and she had to keep her Cézannes, Gauguins and Picassos out of sight in an upstairs storeroom, because her mother forbade her to corrupt the walls of their town house with them. In 1929, together with two other collectors, Mrs. John D. Rockefeller Jr. and Mrs. Cornelius J. Sullivan, Lillie Bliss persuaded a banker named A. Conger Goodyear to head a group to raise money for a museum of modern art. Within three months Goodyear and the ladies had a museum director: a 27-year-old Wellesley teacher named Alfred Barr, who then was teaching the country's first course in modern art.

The choice was so appropriate that it now seems inevitable. "We have one great thing at the museum, and that's Alfred Barr," says architect Philip Johnson, who is a museum trustee. "He has energy, will and evangelistic

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fervor, and a sense of history and an eye so young and brilliant he makes sheep out of the rest of us."

Barr, whose Wellesley course incorporated such things as movies and design, arrived on the scene with the present museum virtually a full-blown concept in his own mind, and he even set it down in what is now known as The 1929 Plan. The only major developments he failed to foresee were the publishing division and the establishment in 1953 of a truly permanent collection; the original plan had been that the Museum of Modern Art would gradually feed its masterpieces to the older Metropolitan Museum of Art and concentrate on relatively new work.

But Barr's schemes often seemed too ambitious to the trustees during the museum's formative years, and he lost a few early battles. He was turned down on a photography show in 1930, and found some trustees reluctant to recognize the movies as art. "I understood their reasons and thought they were very wise," he says. "But I'd urge them, little by little."

Barr is a mild, precise, scholarly looking man, but he has a clear and penetrating eye, and both his father and grandfather were Presbyterian ministers. "I suppose I have a strain of reformism and proselytizing in my

blood because of my Scotch Presbyterian ancestry," he says.

The museum opened its doors in a midtown office building at 730 Fifth Avenue on November 7, 1929, and no fledgling enterprise ever had less humble beginnings. The first year's budget was \$100,000, and its first show was an exhibition of paintings by Cézanne, van Gogh, Gauguin and Seurat, an all-star lineup which created what one critic called "the event of the century." (The opening proved auspicious for another reason. It was there that Barr met his wife-to-be, art historian Margaret Scolari.) That first show lasted only a few weeks, and later in 1929 the second show, Paintings by 19 Living Americans, was panned as inconsequential, as many of the subsequent Living Americans shows have been. But by the third show, in 1930, the museum was drawing so many visitors it almost failed for succeeding: It was threatened with eviction because some of the building's other tenants complained that museum visitors were monopolizing the elevators.

Surviving this crisis, the museum proceeded to give the first U.S. exhibition of modern architecture in 1932 in a show of what Barr christened the International Style (Mies van der Rohe, Gropius, Le Corbusier and Oud). Then

the museum offered the show to other museums, and when a dozen of them put up \$1,000 each to share the cost, the first museum traveling-exhibit department was created. The country got its first look at Machine Art in 1933 with a show that offered for appreciation a ship's propeller, a cross section of undersea cable, and a gasoline pump. The Film Library was set up in 1935; the Education Department in 1937; the Photography Department in 1940—and with that, all of Barr's 1929 Plan was in operation.

It may have been too much, too soon; as though determined to prove that success hadn't taken away its spirit, the museum went on a virtual binge of broad-mindedness. In 1942 it put on display a tackily elaborate shoeshine stand which had been decorated, over many years, by a bootblack named Joe Milone. Barr called the stand "jubilant as a circus wagon," but the critics said that Barr was losing his artistic grip. Hard on the heels of the shoeshine stand came a show of crude amateur paintings by a retired Brooklyn slipper manufacturer named Morris Hirshfield, whose subjects all had two left feet. Models for slippers, Hirshfield explained, were always left-footed. That was too much even for some of the Museum's best friends. Goodyear wrote



Vasarely's "Ondho" typifies new "Op" art.

trustee Stephen C. Clark that the show was "perhaps the silliest we have ever had, and that I think is saying a good deal." Two months later Barr was dropped as director, although he remained as an "adviser."

For four years the museum was an

"To be modern, you don't have to be nuts," Dwight Eisenhower once said when confronted with a Fernand Léger like the one at left. At right, Pablo Picasso's "Night Fishing at Antibes."



**'IF IT MAKES
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uncertain, undirected place. Then, in 1947, René d'Harnoncourt was appointed director. D'Harnoncourt is an American citizen who once was entitled to use "count" before his name, is of French-Austrian descent. He stands six-and-a-half feet tall and is a primitive-art expert. D'Harnoncourt immediately brought Barr back from limbo and appointed him director of museum collections. The place has been relatively stable ever since.

But absolute stability is a state that the museum may never achieve. It is populated by ambitious experts whose opinions often clash, and, according to one friend of the museum, "everybody is jockeying for position." Its stability also is continually threatened by physical dangers. In 1958 a fire killed a workman, did \$300,000 worth of damage, and destroyed two Monets. And like any museum, it is always prey to thieves. Last year a valuable Pascin sketchbook was stolen, but subsequently recovered. The museum's only other recent theft probably illustrates its progress toward public acceptance. A van Gogh was taken in 1958, but the thief, guilt-ridden, later called to say that he had left it by the front door of the museum. It was found propped against a glass wall, and the repentant thief was never caught.

Perhaps the most hazardous of all is the withering fire the museum has drawn from a constantly changing, and thus bewildering, array of critics. It has

been picketed by abstract artists for showing realistic paintings, and by realistic painters for showing abstractions ("The Museum of Modern Nonsense!"). It has had sculptures held up by U.S. Customs on the grounds that they were "building material." Realistic painter Thomas Hart Benton once declared he would sooner see his stuff hung in a saloon than in the museum. Edward Hopper's famous *House by the Railroad* was the first painting acquired by the museum (in 1930), but by 1953 Hopper was leading a group which charged the museum with favoring "mere textural novelty" while showing "irresponsibility, snobbery and ignorance." Although Presidents salute the museum on formal occasions, two of them have expressed less than enthusiastic personal views of modern art. Harry Truman called it "the vaporizings of half-baked, lazy people." Dwight D. Eisenhower, confronted by a Fernand Léger, remarked, "To be modern, you don't have to be nuts."

The museum remains constantly under attack; many old-line artists find today's abstractions inhuman. Three painters whom the museum has bet on in recent years are Mark Rothko, who paints giant, monolithic blocks with cracks of space between them; Barnett Newman, whose canvases of solid color are broken by a thin vertical line; and Ad Reinhardt, who paints the famous "black on black" canvases. "Somebody once said to me," a fellow painter remarked, "that Mark Rothko lowered the blinds, Barney Newman closed the curtains, and Ad Reinhardt turned out the lights."

Intramural jabbing aside, the museum is catching it today on other counts. It is accused of ruling over a court of art consisting of certain ambitious galleries and painters, who have paintings and want to sell, and certain nouveau riche collectors who have money and

want social position through association with the museum's elite trustees. The museum's influence on the market is measurable. A few years ago Alfred Barr bought several paintings of targets by an imaginative young painter, Jasper Johns. Johns's reputation skyrocketed, and hasn't come down yet. Measuring the museum's effect on the painters themselves is a more difficult and intriguing job.

"I think the average artist is not venal," Ben Shahn, a realistic painter long on good terms with the museum, said recently. "What he really wants is praise—he wants adjectives. And he's going to look to the meadow that offers the greatest adjectives. A youngster today, seeing Pop Art in the museum, is going to turn to Pop Art unless he's a pretty strong individual, and not many are strong when they're young."

Many of the museum's veterans look back with nostalgia on the nice old days when it was unfashionable. "It was wonderful when it was a nice, small museum, and we all saw each other, and we were pioneers," says Allen Porter, who this month retired as the museum's assistant secretary. "Then suddenly we were famous. I hope the place doesn't get any bigger and lose all its personality."

The Museum of Modern Art is hardly nearing its dotage, however, and it still has not had the influence on American thinking that many on its staff would like. "When you say 'an artist,' at least nine tenths of the American people think of a painter," Alfred Barr said recently. "And that is very sad, because they're affected much more by the other arts than by painting."

Even in the field of painting the museum is still working with evangelistic enthusiasm. One of its happiest manifestations is the Education Department's Art Center, which encourages art appreciation in thousands of



Herbert Ferber sculpture enlivens the garden.

New York children and adults a year and is now evangelizing all over the globe. The department's annual Children's Carnival, which features magnetic picture makers and a lazy Susan offering everything from feathers to burlap for the making of collages, now has a permanent counterpart at The Children's Museum in New Delhi. The Indian Carnival drew 6,500 children in its first six weeks.

Some observers actually detect signs that the museum has been getting spryer recently. "I've always felt that the museum was a mere fifteen years behind its time, as opposed to most museums, which are thirty-five years behind the time," says Ivan Chermayeff, who designed the five brightly colored banners that now fly above the museum's entrance. "And now it's closing the gap even more. They have a much livelier and less academic view in everything."

It is undoubtedly the museum's mixture of rashness and care that has made it so successful, and the mixture often seems dazzlingly eccentric. One of the current shows, by a free-lance art expert named Bernard Rudofsky, is called *Architecture Without Architects*, and features "primitive" dwellings, all the way from the huts of nomads to complex hill towns. Rudofsky first proposed it in 1941. Recently Pop-painter Andy Warhol, at the museum's request, submitted part of a movie he had made called *The Longest Kiss*, which consisted solely of an epoch smooch that lasted two hours. After watching a 15-minute condensation, the museum curators rejected it. "They kept saying, 'Send us movies, send us anything,'" Warhol says. "And when I did, they were shocked."

Then there is *The Responsive Eye*, which the museum has been working on for more than a year. Defining the criteria for acceptance, a museum staffer said, "If it makes you almost sick to your stomach, it's bound to get in." Four years ago curator Peter Selz put on the famous *Homage to New York*, a noisy, complicated contraption by a Swiss named Jean Tinguely, which

The family circle at the museum includes the 1962 Marisol group on left and, right, "American Miner's Family" (1931) by Minna Harkavy.



played records, shot off fireworks, and finally destroyed itself in the museum's garden while an invited audience and New York firemen looked on. "It was a marvelous, marvelous event," Selz says.

Perspective on the museum will be easier to get because of its new wing, which has doubled its exhibition space. The Departments of Drawings and Prints, Photography, and Architecture and Design now have permanent exhibition room for the first time. In the past it has been easy for the public to shrug off the museum's showings of loudspeakers and propellers as temporary eccentricities. "But if they see a propeller in the permanent collection," says curator J. Wilder Green, coordinator of exhibition programs, "they're going to have to say, 'They may be nuts, but they mean it.'"

For perspective on the relationship between the museum and the public itself, there is no better authority than Alfred Barr, whose farsighted plans have brought a public reaction which surprises even him.

"What interests me about our museum, in its social and economic structure," Barr said one day last month, "is that first we have on our board half the names associated with very great wealth. Whitney. Ford. We have two Rockefellers. Under that are 3,000 people who give us \$50 a year. Under that are around 30,000 who are minimum members, at \$18 to \$22 a year. And then under that are student members, and under that are the people who pay a dollar for admission. The museum earns roughly two thirds of its income from the sale of books, admissions and memberships. I don't know of any museum that can match this support at all economic levels, and none of us in 1929 had any intimation that this would happen."

During the coming year, Lillie Bliss's paintings, which went to the museum at her death in 1931, will be seen by nearly a million people. And Lillie's painters, whom the cognoscenti once sneaked in to see, have become so established they are almost old hat. Recently, a precociously hip eight-year-old stood in the lobby and surveyed a Picasso sculpture called *She Goat*. "That's not bad," he said to a chic woman with him. "But it's still not modern art, Grandma."

But the clearest measure of the museum's achievement and its remaining challenge probably comes from Abe Chanin, a lecturer at the museum, who has been explaining art to the public for 18 years. "People are much less hostile now," Chanin said recently, after a lecture on Jackson Pollock's *No. 1, 1948*. "A lot of them still don't understand Pollock, and Mondrian's *Broadway Boogie Woogie* is always good for an argument. On the other hand, Picasso's *Guernica* used to infuriate people, and now it's accepted as a classic. And there's another sure way you can tell their opinions have changed. People used to tell me that their five-year-old child could do as well. Now," he concluded happily, "it's gone up to seven or eight." □

Sizable portion of museum patrons visit its garden to lunch, flirt, relax or just touch giant pieces like Charles Despiau's "Assia."

