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JAN 31 1943

Surrealist Circus

(Condensed from the February issue of the American Mercury.)

By Klaus Mann

(Noted writer, son of Thomas Mann and brother of Erika Mann.)

Not everything defamed by Hitler as "cultural bolshevism" is necessarily culture. Surrealism, for instance, is not. Indeed, in the writer's considered opinion, surrealism itself shares the spirit of illogic, negation, vandalism that has found expression politically in Hermann Rauschning's phrase, is a revolution of nihilism, surrealism is the revolution of nihilism in art.

The average reader may be inclined to confound surrealism with modern art in general. Neither is it correct that surrealism is the personal hobby of an ingenious young man named Salvador Dali. The talented Catalan is in fact not even a genuine surrealist. We have the word of the high priests of the cult for that.

The point of the matter is that there is no such thing as surrealism. There are only surrealists—a coterie of poets, journalists, painters, sculptors and suckers who stick together, purport to ad-



This is simon-pure surrealism, exhibited by Artist G. G. Benno in Paris just before war broke out. Its title, "The Great Misfortune, or Looking Forward, Backward, High and Low." Artistic double-talk, n'est-ce pas?



"The Birth of Venus," by Federico Castellon . . . the surrealists go in for weird fishes and hacked torsos.



Father Divine, surrealist by adoption . . . others "claimed" by the cult are Jonathan (Gulliver's Travels) Swift, Pythagoras, Phineas T. Barnum and Comic Character Superman.



More fishes, more torsos . . . but this "Scene on a Plane" by Californian William Hesthal must have a bit of Hollywood corruption in it, the torso is intact and not badly proportioned.

far more colorful and interesting than the real surrealist clique.

The whole affair started back in the 20's. It was the period when the radical artistic movements launched shortly before or during the first world war gradually lost momentum.

From 1917 to the early 20's, "an attitude of disrespect became universal," Andre Breton tells us in his preface to Art of This Century. He adds:

"The negation of previous values was complete. In New York, Marcel Duchamp affixed his signature to a reproduction of the Gioconda which he had decorated with a pair of handsome mustaches. The only entrance and exit to an exhibition of the works of Max Ernst in Cologne was through a urinal. . . . Picabia, in Paris, conceived a "picture" composed of an empty frame riveted to the ground and stretched from side to side with strings to which a live monkey was chained."

That was Dada, the direct ancestor of surrealism.

II

The surrealists believed in the creative functions of paranoia, practical jokes and publicity. They excelled especially in the domain of pranks which seemed both but were in reality brutal and insipid.

Dali, with his sharp instinct for publicity, was the first to sense that they could not get away with continued horseplay. In search of new hunting grounds, he discovered the United States, hither he imported not only the surrealist tricks but also the surrealist muse—a fabulous female by the name of Gala, a Russian of unusual imagination and energy. She has been a faithful devotee of the surrealist movement, first in her capacity as Madame Paul Eluard, subsequently as an assiduous promoter of Max Ernst's talent, and finally as Madame Salvador Dali.

Dali's American career, started as far back as 1934, flourished impressively. The dashing young man from Catalonia proved himself a master in arousing scandal and whipping up curiosity. Whatever he did became the talk of the town.

His experiments in window dressing and window smashing, his dream pavilion and fantastic films, his ballets Bacchante and Labyrinth—both produced by the Metropolitan Opera company—and his jewelry ("designed in collaboration with the duke de Verdura")—all his poses and paradoxes touched the imagination of a naively responsive audience. At the same time, however, his solid craftsmanship has been recognized and well paid for by exacting collectors.

His inordinate popularity on this side of the Atlantic gradually got on the nerves of the real surrealists, those who remained in Paris.

III

In 1938 and 1939, Breton's position in Paris was becoming des-

Joslyn Acquisition



Portrait of Bruce Crane . . . by Louis Betts.

THE Joslyn Memorial has recently acquired a splendid portrait of Bruce Crane by Louis Betts, a gift to the Memorial from the artist. It was displayed here in one of the Grand Central Art Gallery shows, and was greatly admired.

Mr. Betts is one of the most distinguished of American portraitists. He is well represented in important collections throughout the country. Bruce Crane was another American artist of note, but of a slightly earlier generation. The picture is excellent example of the impressionist school of portraiture.

parate. Nobody was any longer startled when the intense and now aging young men darted their rabid invectives against God and the French academy, the League of Nations, the Russian ballet, Cezanne, and the Bank of England.

Little by little, the most talented writers withdrew from the club. One committed suicide, leaving on his chaotic desk this terrible note: "I am disgusted with everything."

A disaster of apocalyptic dimensions threatened Europe and the world. But Breton and his depleted following continued to concoct and publicize their unsavory mixture of Marxism and paranoia, music hall and psychoanalysis. The surrealists kept on gushing insults and paradoxes. The unflagging parlor anarchists stuck to their lurid games, clamoring for even more chaos.

They got it. The Maginot line proved as chimerical as a specter evoked by Ernst or Dali. But the surrealists manage to dodge tragedy. Their good luck seems surreal. Millions may die and worlds may crash, but the Breton coterie will be carried to safety and com-

fort on the wings of benevolent angels.

In this case, the friendly wings were spread by Peggy Guggenheim. They sheltered not only the surrealist messiah and his prophet, i. e., Breton and Ernst, but a batch of their friends. The party occupied most of the seats and beds in a transatlantic clipper.

Shortly after Marshal Pétain signed his agreement with Hitler, the American lady signed a check and the surrealist family rose into the skies. Ernst married Miss Guggenheim and the American phase of surrealism got off to a start with one of the great American fortunes at its disposal.

IV

Why shouldn't these people have as good and gay a time as possible? There is nothing terribly wrong with a surrealist exhibition of their "first papers," under auspices of the Co-ordinating Council of French Relief societies. Consider the essential innocence of "his twine: Marcel Duchamp." "His twine" is a very intriguing surrealist trick—a kind of labyrinth through which the visitors have to find their way. M. Duchamp, the inventor of this device, introduces himself as a "French painter, Cubist, Dadaist, artist and anti-artist."

The tipoff is in the last word. I am against surrealism because I am in favor of art. The world is being wrecked by anti-artists. Hitler and Goering are anti-artists. Surrealism is not the disease but another of the symptoms. The disease is fascism, the revolution of nihilism. The surrealists are the nihilists in art.

"That was really the trouble with the surrealist crowd," says Gertrude Stein—not conservative, on the whole, in esthetic matters—"they missed their moment of becoming civilized . . . they wanted publicity, not civilization, and so really they never succeeded in being peaceful and exciting."

Far from being peaceful and exciting, the surrealists become increasingly dull, while remaining noisy and truculent. Nothing could be more tiresome than the clichés of madness. The Venus of Milo may be a bore when presented as the obligatory norm of beauty and the surrealists have a right to sneer at her. But what do they offer to supersede the debunked ideal? The Venus with three profiles, a fish tail, her eyes teeming with vermin and a pianoforte instead of a bosom. Just another stereotype, a new bunk.



Salvador Dali and his "soft self-portrait" . . . although Dali's name is synonymous with surrealism in the public's mind, he has been excommunicated or exorcized by surrealism's patron saints Mr. Mann comments that Dali is too good to be true surrealist.