

THE GULBENKIAN EXHIBITION AT THE TATE

It's quite impossible to construct what Calouste Gulbenkian's reaction would have been to the giant show raised to the honour of his memory at the Tate. Perhaps it doesn't matter anyway; he just provided the money; all £35,000 of it, and more, and most probably might easily have been satisfied with the result, a kind of mammoth definitive official resumé of everything that has taken place in painting and sculpture in the last ten years. He would have overlooked individual items; he might even have not been shaken in his belief that art has a beneficent and in the long run healthy effect on society.

In a sense, of course, every large show this side of the New York Armory show is old hat, because by this time it is almost impossible to take people's breath away with revelations of modern art any more, and whatever is left in the way of showmanship in the way of piling five times the amount of picture any human psyche could digest into one show falls a little flat in such a restricted area.

Alison and Peter Smithson have done a very able best in dividing up the Tate into a rabbit warren of smaller units that open out of one another; they contain twice as many works of art apiece as they should, each work being twice as large as it should be for comfortable viewing, and the whole thing being as dimly and capriciously lit as any South American baroque church. The exhibition as a whole hasn't a chance. It should have been housed in an immense low pavilion specially built for the job by the government at a cost of a further £100,000, in say Regent's Park. Then it would have been a real contribution to our civilization. As it is the form it takes is a monument to good Old England muddling through. This is nothing to do, I hasten to add, with the three selectors of the items; on the whole they have done extraordinarily well, and to anyone acquainted with the work attached to a show of this sort it's a wonder they didn't all three die of overwork in the two years they were engaged in assembling the work. True there are a great many things that really shouldn't have been in at all, like the Tinguely, for instance, the Craigie Aitchisons (this last the only concession to religion as a motivating force in art) *four* Kemeny, *five* Soulages, to say nothing of Anuszkiewicz, Benrath and people like that. Added to that is the undoubted fact that there are very few masterpieces in the show and a lot of artists, such as Kline, de Kooning, Sutherland, Rauschenberg, are not represented by their best work at all.

British sculpture demonstrates that with the exception of Moore and possibly of Caro (both of whom could have done with three times the amount of room) it is as far behind the achievements of modern British painting as it seemed ten years before to be in advance of it. A certain section of British painting composed of artists as dissimilar as Harold Cohen, Alan Jones, David Hockney, Michael Andrews and Peter Blake, shows a tendency to be influenced by Stanley Spencer to a greater or lesser degree. On the other hand Alan Davie was very well represented with some magnificent paintings, and Francis

Bacon, in the octagon reserved for him and Germaine Richier, gave me such a feeling of elegance in his paint and colour and composition that any one of his horrors took me right back to Gainsborough; they gave one the feeling that they were so immensely more civilized than the whole of the American school with the exception of Morris Louis, who was represented by three beautiful paintings, (No. 180 ought of course to be seen by daylight, not by artificial light). Guston was dull, Ceri Richards was not up to his usual radiant form. De Kooning was represented by three pretty spasm paintings; this was a pity; his women are by far the best of his *oeuvre*. In the paintings we saw nothing remained of the girl content at all. The same can be said of Henry Moore; the landscape-women have become more and more landscape and less and less women recently. His large *Sculpture For Looking At* has the elemental strength which raises it far above the rest of the sculpture and just retains the human connotation that is so helpful in Pomodoro's *Uno*, and that still persists, to me at least, in the two sculptures of David Smith. Jasper Johns' map was a very impressive painting if Brangwynesque; the other Johns I liked but they needed to be seen by themselves (like the Rauschenbergs) for their vision to come over.

One of the most noticeable things about the whole show was the general disappearance of image into sensation on the one hand or into idea-paraphrase on the other. Britain has always been slightly suspicious of sensation, and has always fallen for the literary paraphrase, and this recrudescence of what was a high Victorian mode of painting is to me rather disturbing; it even extends to the Americans in the person of Larry Rivers. The most satisfying pictures were those where the old rules of painting had not been tampered with; the people who stood out in this respect were Morandi, Giacometti (especially), De Stael, Bacon, Davie, Jorn, Dubuffet and Ben Nicholson. Jim Dine, of whom so much has been talked and expected turns out on this showing to be a highly polished aesthete; so does John Latham. Bernard Cohen's *Into Jade* is a magnificent achievement which by some miracle just isn't decoration. The constructivist element in art was not sufficiently isolated to tell at all, but there were good things such as John Ernest's work and the tiny mobile by Kenneth Martin.

A most splendidly civilized contribution to the show was the Catalogue and the invitation cards which demonstrated the real authority of British Typography under Edward Wright. The first time it has regained the authority it had some thirty years ago.

There are many other things I would like to comment on but there isn't space. With all its drawbacks and clutter the Gulbenkian show is a major event over far longer a time bracket than the ten year period it covers, and one which could cause those with any illusions of a reconstruction of Christendom and Christian art along any of the lines we knew to think very hard.

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