

## OBITER

FRENCH PICTURES FROM AMERICAN COLLECTIONS. This summer Paris has been enjoying a 'Salute to France', a series of art exhibitions, concerts and plays designed to acknowledge America's debt to French culture and at the same time to remind France that America has cultural achievements of its own. It is a little ironical that by far the most popular event has been the exhibition, 'De David à Toulouse-Lautrec' at the Orangerie, which has brought together nearly a hundred French pictures ordinarily in American collections. Enthusiastic queues of Frenchmen have stormed the galleries as though re-discovering their own artistic achievement in this carefully arranged monument to American discrimination—and to dollars wisely spent.

There are some surprises. A David portrait of Napoleon, a Cézanne variation on Mont Ste Victoire, a Douanier Rousseau 'Sleeping Gypsy'—these are fine examples of the styles and the achievements we know. And perhaps the most glowing of all Renoirs, 'Lé Dejeuner des Canotiers' (already well-known in reproductions), finds an appropriate—if temporary—home in the Orangerie. But such a picture as Gauguin's 'Old Women of Arles' is a sharp reminder that the lazy ecstasies of his South Seas paintings are not to be wholly identified with his genius: here, in a startling evocation of grief and accepted pain, old age achieves a nobility that is new to us. Again, Toulouse-Lautrec's 'Jane Avril leaving the Moulin Rouge' reveals an understanding pity that is too rarely thought of in the usual judgment of his gas-lit satires of café life.

A collection such as this, American though it be in its ownership, enables us to reassess the genius of the nineteenth century in French painting. One thing that emerges at once is the absence of the sacred: save for an 'Entombment' of Delacroix, no picture is consciously devoted to a religious theme. And that could scarcely be true of any other century—including our own. But the immense achievement of French Impressionism was never more impressively displayed, and one may hope that the exhibition may be seen in London before it returns to the United States. And the idea of cultural lease-lend is one that deserves to be extended in a divided world, which may at least be one in its acceptance of beauty.

I.E.

COURTS MÉTRAGES. Most of the sessions at a film festival begin with one or more short films, sometimes submitted by countries which are not showing feature films at all, and this year at Cannes these *courts métrages* might almost have outstripped the ingenuity of a Polonius in the tabula-

tion of their variations on the themes of tedious-instructive, instructive-imaginative, imaginative-tedious, as well as those recognizably comical, pastoral or historical. You will not be surprised, for instance, to learn that the Swiss showed us an instructive film about watches, with minute ball-bearings re-winding automatically every time there was a movement of the wrist; it hardly seemed worth the trouble somehow. The Austrians showed a long and undoubtedly tedious-instructive piece about the Hapsburg crown jewels and regalia, boringly photographed and conventionally displayed, which indeed gained its only interest from the surprising fact that it had been banned in Vienna; but only, it appeared, lest it should seduce the young into becoming monarchists—on the face of it, unlikely. There was a very long Japanese short on swimming: endlessly the square muscular gentlemen plunged into the water and swam very fast up and down baths which might just as well have been in Marylebone or Hampstead from the look of them, and though there was some clever freak underwater photography we quite soon became used to the bubbles. But it was not all like this. There was an exciting French documentary called *Grande Pêche*, in which we saw the fishing fleet at work, and presently battered under the onslaught of a tremendous gale, with deck-level camera work of huge seas rearing and plunging alongside as the wind howled through the rigging. It might have been made specifically to illustrate *Captains Courageous*.

In the pastoral vein, nothing could have been more peacefully agreeable than a Norwegian film called *Autumn*, and what is more it really was short. Fiery leaves drifted sadly down against a thin blue sky, and though it was not particularly original it was very pretty. Britain showed what seemed to be a surprisingly political and witty picture called *Bow Bells*, all about the East End, which began and ended with fog over the river and so pleased those people who knew that London was always like that; it had a lively and amusing background of songs like 'Any Old Iron' and 'Knocked 'em in the Old Kent Road', sung by artists from the Players Theatre in the broadest vernacular which baffled but delighted the audience who clapped it warmly at the end. It was much better than the other British short called *Black on White*, which was a history of British caricature, and contrived to make it dull. A Russian cartoon about a golden antelope seemed oddly derivative, and though of course one would not like to suggest that it owed anything to *Bambi*, the unworthy suspicion did seem to have crossed a fair number of minds. However, this Indian fairy tale was certainly charming in a muted kind of way, and there was one splendid sequence of the antelope charging up and down the terrace with golden coins spurting out at every spring; once again we noted how wonderfully good the Russians are at tigers.

It was the Czechs who provided what was perhaps the most brilliantly exciting contribution, and this not the Trnka cartoon of *The Good Soldier Shweik* which somehow was not up to the master's usual standard, but a colour film called *Opici Csar*, or *The Emperor of the Monkeys*. Made by Czech technicians though mimed and danced by Chinese actors, it told the legend of the Monkey Emperor who set out in search of the most powerful weapon in the world. He came at last to the Emperor of the Dragons, who gave him the choice of several magic weapons—sword, baton and finally a great pike or halberd which seemed to meet his need. The trial of the sword between monkey and the Dragon king's son was a miracle of intricate sword-play, half juggling, half ballet and wholly acrobatic, with sudden characteristic fits of boredom on the monkey's part. But finally the monkey snatched the Dragon Emperor's great pike, and danced in triumph all round and through and over and under the hieratic figures of the Dragon court until the time came for his return home. And here came the climax, providing one of those unforgettable sequences that make the cinema truly a seventh art. For the monkey had to cross the sea on his journey home, and the sea was not to be dominated. It swept across his path, it curled menacingly over him, it surged up under his faltering feet, it banked and loomed and broke over him until, to the exhalation of our long-held breath, the Monkey Emperor skipped nimbly out of reach and the sea gathered itself together for a fresh assault. And all this swirl and roll and weight of water was conveyed by a great blue silken banner, magically manipulated by a masked wizard so that it was impossible to believe it was not water we were watching. The camera made of this virtuosity something so essentially cinematic in its visual and dynamic power that even if the feature picture that followed had been a masterpiece we could hardly have given it our full attention: as it happened it was the worst film of the week and many of us walked out before the end.

MARYVONNE BUTCHER

ARTISTS IN SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY ROME. (Wildenstein Gallery, June-July 16.) Rome in the seventeenth century occupied an artistic position comparable to that of Paris today. Similarly she exercised an attraction for artists of divers nationalities and aesthetic impulses. Thus formal problems were analysed and experiments made in a period of artistic uncertainty when individual genius achieved a rare integrity and schools floundered, and when the cult of novelty led to a rapid change of manner in the work of lesser artists. Caravaggio's *tenebrosso* was as eagerly adopted as the forms of Aztec and African cultures earlier in

this century—for instance in Saraceni's 'Judith and Holofernes', which makes us regret the exclusion of early Honthorst from the exhibition. And then Bor's 'Enchantress' owes a debt to Caravaggio's treatment of the 'Penitent Magdalene'. But among his immediate Roman followers the latter remains a lonely disciple of true originality with that innate capacity for renewal and experiment. His 'Boy with a Ram', so blatantly alive and yet saved from vulgarity by the beautiful arrangement and the insistent rhythmic exchange between larger and smaller forms, bears the stamp of visual authenticity. So, indeed, does Elsheimer's 'Tobias and the Angel'—one of the smallest exhibits and easily overlooked—where the delicate handling and the use of a single diagonal to give momentum to the design induces a mood of tender mystery.

Inevitably Poussin's large machines, Van Dyck's Shirley portraits, the refined intimacy of Bernini's self portrait, or Annibale Carracci's 'Coronation of the Virgin' dominate the show. But some of the lesser names reward scrutiny, and throughout the exhibition it is often a detail which proves most exciting, when the artist's enhanced curiosity is translated into paint. Then there are northern romantic transcriptions of nature like Pynacker's shining bedewed mountainside, or a ragged latin version of Dutch genre painting. Nonetheless if these northern artists could not command that unique harmony of vision and form which was Poussin's secret, all reflect in some measure the *genius loci*.

M. SHIRLEY

## NOTICE

The next issue of BLACKFRIARS will appear in September, and will include 'The Authority of Doctrinal Development', by Henry St John, O.P., 'The Arrival of the Resident Diplomat', by John Hale and 'The Green Baize Door' (A Study of Graham Greene), by Ian Gregor.