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THE ARTICLE
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE, SUNDAY, JANUARY 7, 1951
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ART AND ARTISTS

The Whitney's Memorial Exhibit And the Arshile Gorky Tragedy

By EMILY GENAUER

"Composition With Head"

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THERE is one picture in the Whitney Museum's new memorial exhibition of paintings by Arshile Gorky called "Diary of a Seducer." The title might be applied to the whole show, except that possibly Gorky was more seduced than seducing.

That, as I see it, is the great tragedy of Gorky, and a fact I find sadder than his suicide two years ago, and more disturbing than the spectacle of his near-canonization by a small but influential group of art-world impressarios [[impresarios]] who may or may not have been so genuinely ravished by his work that they are already hailing him as the greatest painter America ever produced. After all, in this period of what Yale's Prof. Henri Peyre has called "accelerated obsolescence," the day of deification will soon pass. A few years ago Dali was the darling of the dillettantes [[dilettantes]]. Then Klee took his place. More recently their platform has called for a Pollack in every parlor, until young museum directors in the smaller cities began to fear that not to present a Pollack show was to court oblivion.

Well, it's going to be Gorky now, kids, and Pollack might just as well move over and make room for him. The process of apotheosis began a few years ago. Last year it received impetus when Gorky was one of six artists chosen by a committee of three to represent the best contemporary American painting at the huge international exhibition held in Venice. Now it's the Whitney memorial. The ball's rolling fast, and headed for the ninepins. Inevitably they'll be bowled over——until some one set them (the collectors, museum directors, et al.) up again to await the next roll for the next artist.

None of this really matters too much, distressing as it may be to those who look for sounder criteria from our cognoscenti. What does matter is that a man of Gorky's considerable talents, talents which the Whitney Museum show makes clear along with his shortcomings, should have been driven by some strange twist of temperament to conceal his gifts under those of others. For Gorky, the show proves, could use color as sensitively as any one working today. He could compose a picture so skillfully that, amorphous and haphazard as its floating, fragmentary shapes may seem, they hold magnetic attraction for each other. Whether he piled his pigment on in globs or used it so sparingly that half the canvas is bare (these pictures, says the exhibition catalog, have "the ascetic virtue of vacancy"), he was able to secure opulent textural effects.

Was Blatant Imitator

What, then were Gorky's shortcomings? There is hardly a picture in the large exhibition which isn't a blatant parroting of some one else's style. If it were conceivable—which obviously it is not—that one could know

modern art well enough to enjoy this kind of abstract and surrealist painting and yet not be familiar with the work of Picasso, Braque, Gris, Leger, Miro, Matta, Kandinsky (the men who made modern art), then one could derive real pleasure from the show. Viewed in a vacuum, as it were, most of the pictures would be handsome indeed.

The extraordinary thing is that Gorky's supporters readily admit his persistent use of other artists' idioms. But on him, they say, it's becoming. It was justified, they insist, because it was deliberate, because he made no attempt to cover his tracks. All artists, they say, are influenced by other artists. And indeed, they are. Early Cezanne pictures show the marks of Courbet, early Manets recall Hals and Velasquez, Renoir admired Rubens and Boucher, Gaughin's Brittany pictures bring Picasso to mind, and Picasso borrowed from everybody. Each of these men found in predecessors or contemporaries of similar temperament, technical solutions to specific problems. In each case the lessons were thoroughly absorbed and fused into an expression which soon became completely personal.

This was not the case with Gorky. The earliest picture in the show, a 1922 portrait of his sister, is straight blue-period Picasso. "Still Life With Skull" is a handsomely composed work in the manner of Cezanne. the stiff, archaic but attractive "The Artist and His Mother" is by Picasso (in his rose period) out of a picture postcard. Then follow a flock of abstractions which are mirror images (those distorting Coney Island mirrors) of Picasso abstractions.

Miro a Persistent Influence

In the late '30s the Catalan surrealist Joan Miro began to gain wide popularity. Suddenly Gorky's pictures blossomed with Miro motifs, his prickly linear patterns, wedge-shaped flat color areas, even the identical shapes (the recurring thorny sun-flower, for instance). Early Kandinsky abstractions began to interest Gorky about this time, and "Waterfall," of 1943, reveals the same rivers of rich color employed by the Russian artist. Came a Tanguy phase, and presently a Matta one (note, for instance, the vaporous, melting color washes in the picture called "The Leaf of the Artichoke Is an Owl"), and even a period when,
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[[image]][[/image]]
A painting by Arshile Gorky (1935) at the Whitney Museum
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commissioned to design a mural for Newark Airport, Gorky turned to "inspiration" to another and more original artist's treatment of machine-age themes, Leger.

So I say it was Fifty-seventh Street, the studios, the exhibitions, the art world coteries, and, as part of all this, his need for the applause of these coteries, which seduced Gorky. Yet, toward the end of his life he began to break away from all that. He spent more time in the country. And his work began to show the results. The late pictures, like "The Plow and the Song" and "The Limit" still show such Miro-esque cliches [[clichés]] as fragmentary forms and linear tracery which, in the midst of elusive symbols and unidentifiable shapes, suddenly describe parts of the anatomy as specifically and obscenely as dirty words emerging from the scribbling on back fences.

But they also reveal a spatial depth ("The Plow and the Song" does, particularly), an assurance in the handling of fragile and limited color, a decorative grace which might, in time, have evolved into a truly personal and even distinguished expression.

But Gorky, on July 21, 1948, at the age of forty-four, afflicted with a serious illness, hanged himself in his barn. The tragedy was complete. It is a pity that now a high-pressure post-mortem promotion program should be turning it into a tragic-comedy. After all, Gorky was around for a long time. For almost twenty years his tall, saturnine figure, his droopy mustache and dark eyes, and, most important of all, his pictures, were familiar sights in the galleries of New York. It isn't as if time has determined that he was good. Why, if his supporters believed in him so thoroughly, was he not able during his lifetime to enjoy wider sales and financial support?

I'm beginning to think that the only thing worse than the idolatry of second-rate artists while they're living is idolatry of them after they're dead.

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