



A group of critics admire a work by Henry Moore in the gardens of his Hertford studio. In front is M. Paul Fierens; behind, Mr. Pierre Jeannerat.

(David Moore)

A JARGON OF CRITICS

In making an introductory welcoming address to the Assembly of A.I.C.A., the International Association of Art Critics, Mr. Eric Newton, President of the British Section, suggested that the most suitable collective noun to describe a gathering of art critics was probably "jargon," and though the phrase is perhaps unduly deprecatory, it will serve well enough to introduce a preliminary account of what went on at Oxford and London between July 3rd and July 12th.

Marshals of the Diplomatic Corps and chiefs of Protocol are in many ways fortunate. To assist them in the performance of their job they can call on a large, expert and devoted staff. Even the British Council has its hospitality experts, its accommodation bureaux, its machinery for insinuating painlessly into the structure of British life those visiting foreigners whom it wishes to impress. But the Art Critics of Britain, bound for the most part to the task of earning their daily bread, can command no such resources, nor were they indeed ever given the chance of so doing. The organisation of the Assembly was therefore left in the hands of a few devoted members, and the three who bore the greatest share of unremitting labour were Pierre Jeannerat, Michael Middleton and David Cleghorn-Thomson. The imagination boggles at the problems they had to face, which ranged from cutting cakes of soap for soapless delegates, to assuring distinguished foreign critics that their location in a certain set of rooms implied no slur on them, and that the decrepitude of Oxford college rooms should be attributed rather to the distinction of historicity than to the active malevolence of academic authorities. The debt which the British section of A.I.C.A. and in an indirect sense our national culture, owes them cannot adequately be recorded.

DANGEROUS PLUMBING

Oxford was the perfect city, Wadham the ideal college for an event of this kind. The one presented a microcosm of European civilisation, in the English idiom; the other afforded such samples of the native genius as the notices affixed in many of the rooms. Dated 1952, they read "Gentlemen are warned that it is dangerous to tamper with the plumbing or the electric wiring system, until pull-down switches have been installed."

There were indeed everywhere signs of England's national addiction to Spartanism, but signs too of new sybaritic tendencies springing up amongst us. Some of the college apartments would have looked dingy in a slum; but there was a fine cocktail bar (with Audit Ale), paintings by such contemporaries as John Piper, and a wonderful series of showers, bathrooms and other "convenances modernes."

Even the weather, despite the most gloomy prognostications managed to refrain from being miserably typical of the Thames Valley, and though an initial tour of Oxford was accompanied by suitable drizzle, the sun later displayed an almost uniform benevolence.

CANINES COURAGEOUS

The selection of visitors was adequately representative of the universality of both art and criticism. There were delegates from Turkey and Jugoslavia, from Poland and from Eire. From the United States came James Johnson Sweeney, Director of the Guggenheim Foundation, and Alfred Frankfurter, editor of New York's *Art News*. There were critics with wives, and critics with daughters. It was rumoured even that the editor of a well known English art magazine was accompanied by a dog, which took up residence by night in his extra-mural car, Wadham, like most colleges, being severely anti-canine.

There could have been few academic dignitaries more suitable for welcoming to Oxford a "jargon" of critics than the Vice-Chancellor, this year the Warden of New College, who bought, and sited admirably in the college chapel, Sir Jacob Epstein's *Lazarus*. His welcome was so charming, his appearance so admirably suited to what an English don should look like that he was to be

forgiven the mild inaccuracy of a statement that Ruskin founded the Slade Professorships. There was something appropriate too in the fact that the first function which took place, was one in which musicologists and art critics assembled together for a few hours to hear beneath the white arches of Christ Church a recital of music given by the choir under the direction of Thomas Armstrong, and including works by Purcell, Blow and Orlando Gibbons.

AUX MOUTONS

These however were only the *hors d'oeuvres* of the Assembly, which exists primarily for running the affairs of the Association. First on the agenda came a meeting of the Committee for the purpose of electing new members proposed by the national sections. Amongst the English members elected were Sir Leigh Ashton, Director and Secretary of the Victoria and Albert Museum, Frederick Parkinson, Editor of *The Artist* and David Cleghorn-Thomson, to whom so much of the success of the occasion was due. As always on such occasions, there was some discussion, provoked largely by the Director of the National Gallery of Ireland, Dr. Thomas McGreevey, on what exactly constituted an "art critic." Clearly, of course, in an organisation of this kind, the qualifications can never be qualitative (as any artist would agree), but the Anglo-Saxon countries labour in this respect under a grievous disadvantage in that the attitude of most newspaper proprietors does not foster the existence of a large body of professional critics, and that many who pass as such are either amateurs or cultural *rentiers*. There was a widespread feeling that more use should be made of the category of associate member. At the outset of the meeting J. P. Hodin was unanimously elected Rapporteur-General of the Assembly.

ODDS-ON

AICA is, in a sense, the god-child of U.N.E.S.C.O. and one of the most important meetings of the Assembly was concerned with its relationship with that body. For some time now it has

been the policy of U.N.E.S.C.O. to give grants to certain bodies, not merely as a kind of free dole, but in return for that body's supplying certain information, or undertaking a specific task. The task which has been allotted to the Art Critics, in conjunction with an international body of artists and museum directors, is to draw up a list of artists whose works need the kind of international publicity afforded by colour reproduction. Each nation represented in A.I.C.A. has, or is, drawing up lists of these artists, and one of the tasks of the Assembly was to nominate from amongst its members a panel of experts who would advise U.N.E.S.C.O. on this matter. This was one of the more exciting moments of the week, and there were even suggestions that a book should be opened for the finalists. The names however were those of the favourites, and the greatest number of votes were given to James Johnson Sweeney, Paul Fierens, Sir Herbert Read, Jean Cassou, Lionello Venturi and Robert Cogniat. The rest of the field was well behind. One of the problems which caused most discussion was that of the misfortune of those nations which are but inadequately represented on AICA. This problem however was soon ironed out thanks to the skill and imaginative understanding of the President M. Fierens.

Other work sessions were concerned with the reading of various papers by members of the assembly, and perhaps most important of all, with a very important communication from Mr. Sweeney. This however was confidential, and its nature cannot yet be disclosed.

FUN AND GAMES

The stay at Oxford was enlivened by various social activities—a trip to Windsor where the critics were received by Sir Owen Morshead; a trip to Blenheim, where the critics were not received by the Duke, and a reception at the Ashmolean where moderate amounts of beer and white-wine cup were drunk.

In London however the social pace was accelerated. Wildenstein's soirée

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was the kind where all the men were handsome, all the women beautiful, and all the drink good.

American hospitality flowed the next day when *Time-Life* gave a party for the inspection of one of the most lively office interiors in London. This was followed by a rather scrambling buffet-lunch at the Arts Council Headquarters, after which the critics piled into coaches (*not* provided by the British Council) for a trip to Much Hadham. There they inspected the workshop and gardens of Henry Moore, and later, under the guidance of Dr. McGreevey, were able to extract refreshments from a local inn.

The evening saw a Government reception at the Tate Gallery, where Sir John Rothenstein was able to display some of his treasures, and the faint ghost of traditional British hospitality raised its woe-begotten head.

EXCURSION

On Friday a tour of Kent (not financed by the British Council) took place. The Piranesian dream of Mereworth, the medieval splendours of Canterbury, and finally the contemporary magnificence of Saltwood Castle, where Sir Kenneth and Lady Clark showed munificent hospitality were part of the programme. The week ended in glorious sunshine with a farewell party at Sir Colin Anderson's lovely Hampstead home.

POSTSCRIPT

The whole programme had been made possible by the generosity of the London art dealers, by the good offices of the Arts Council, by the initiative of directors like Sir John Rothenstein and private individuals like Sir Colin Anderson. Her Majesty's Government provided one party—that was the sum of official assistance.

BERNARD DENVIR.