

andré masson

"My idea of America, like that of so many French, was, and perhaps still is, rooted in Chateaubriand. Nature: the might of nature - the savagery of nature - the feeling that nature may one day recover its strength and turn all back to chaos.

"The squirrels in Central Park are for me a symbol. Here, they are tame, unlike those in Europe. In spite of that they remain a symbol of wild nature - a tiny reserve of it. And it always seems to me that one day they may overrun New York. Again in Central Park I was struck by the bison kept there as a sort of totemic beast. There is a rich American mythology awaiting exploitation.

"Here I keep imagining a virgin forest about me. This has had its psychological influence on my painting in America. There has been no influence of the cities. What characterizes my American work is rather its manner of expressing this feeling for nature. Such pictures as *Printemps Indien*, *Paysage Iroquois*, *Le Grande Melle*, *Les Gens de Mais*, *Meditation sur une Feuille de Chêne*, embody a correspondence - express something which could never have been painted in Europe. Nocturnal aspects, aspects of revery; savage aspects - *Emblematic Landscapes* of my life in the countryside of the United States. None of them ever could have been painted in the Ile de France - the wickedness, the violence of nature - the hurricane, the tempest, the fury of the storms.

"All this is evidently a romantic's position. Of course I exaggerate the ferocity of the climate. But this feature attracted me. I felt I could most effectively cultivate it in my new environment.

"Naturally I had already enjoyed the romantic outlook in France before I came here. But this aspect of the United States made a deep impression on me. I would be an idiot to speak of the city. Naturally a city like New York could be stimulating. For me it was a constant surprise. But I have never really been long enough in the city. I was stupefied by the traffic. I always told my friends that if they wanted to talk with me they had to come to the country. Consequently I know nothing of city life in your land. Perhaps I am temperamentally better fitted to understand the life of the pioneers, their struggle with the elements. In fact I think I understand the life of the past and the problems of the past in the new world better than the city life of the present.

"Just a few weeks ago I saw a rodeo for the first time - it affected me like the drawings of Gericault: in which I feel the relationships between man and beast stripped bare. Symbolically, I saw the man as America, and the steer as Nature. This again is an echo of the America of the past. But in addition to this an American rodeo seems to me the best form of 'music hall.' My last work in the United States was an etching called *Rodeo*.

3

"It was a shame I did not see a rodeo during my first year here. But I became

cloistered as it were in New Preston. I had always wanted to go to Arizona to the ranch country.

"Yes, I was associated with surrealism. With me surrealism has been a cyclic affair. I was one of the first group of surrealists. Then in a manner of speaking I became separated from them.

"But I am actually more a surrealist in my illustrations than in my painting. Perhaps it is really that my romanticism appears surrealist.

"Fundamentally I am more a sympathiser with surrealism, than a surrealist or a non-surrealist. In the beginning I tried to satisfy myself with the automatist approach. It was I who became the severest critic of automatism. I still cannot agree with the unconscious approach. I do not believe you can arrive by this means at the intensity essential for a picture.

I recognize that there are intense expressions to be obtained through the subconscious, but not without selection. And in that I am not orthodox.

"Only so much as can be reabsorbed esthetically from that which the automatic approach provides should be utilized. For art has an authentic value of its own which is not replaced by psychiatric interest.

"It is perhaps more difficult for a Frenchman to be an orthodox surrealist than for artists of other races. I like Chardin too much ever to be a surrealist. In Chardin we find no association with things outside the representation itself or at any rate, a minimum of them. Plastic rigour cannot be replaced by even the richest literary imagination. A painting or sculpture does not have a survival value if it lacks this plastic rigour. The literary imagination in such work is never anything but a pretext or excuse for it and must be absorbed into the plastic form. If it is not, the literary imaginative element soon becomes dated.

"As a consequence I am solitary: I am too surrealist for those who do not like surrealism, and not surrealist enough for those who do. I accept the ambiguous situation much as Delacroix did - I do not compare myself with Delacroix, but I believe I understand Delacroix. If he had not the strength of plastic rigour Delacroix would have been a Redon.

"The surrealist movement is essentially a literary movement. Its leaders are exacting in literary matters. The surrealist theoreticians are writers; there are no painters among them such as those theoreticians of Impressionism as Seurat and Cézanne. In literature the surrealists are as insistent on the exact word as Boileau; but when it comes to painting they are very liberal in matters of structure. The spiritual directors of surrealist painting are not of the profession. They are writers, very brilliant poets who thoroughly recognize the demands of their own profession, but in the case of the plastic arts are not consistently as strict in their requirements. What makes such a complaisance possible is an elasticity of judgment which can lead to deplorable aberrations.

"In 1938 in *Painting is a Wager* which was originally published in *Sur* I already

explained my

4

position in relation to surrealism; and again in 1944 in *Horizon* in '*A Crisis of the Imaginary*.' These represented an examination of conscience. Perhaps it would now be well to say that during the last few years I have gone even further and turned to the human face - the portrait - with the aim of approaching portraiture with the greatest possible freedom. And as I undertake it I see this as quite a new departure.

"Now on the eve of my departure - and one never sees so clearly as on the eve of a departure - my work in the United States seems to form a definite cell with walls: studies after nature accepting any object whatever without any a priori intentions, without an attempt at analysis, without any esthetic preconceptions - in short an application of the automatic approach to whatever object comes up. I showed these drawings to Sartre. He is interested because he is a phenomenalist. Francis Ponge did the same thing in literature in works like *La Lessiveuse* and *La Pomme de Terre*. Fernand Léger had tried to do this. In contrast to Léger's approach I feel that to be pure one must respond freely to sensations; and discipline them later.

"This is actually counter to the practice of orthodox surrealism. It constitutes a new esthetic. Georges Bataille was one of the originators of the point of view, primarily on an erotic ground, in his writings in the Paris reviews *Documents* and *Messages* during the late 'twenties. It was his group which first recognized Kierkegaard offers no preoccupation with the senses.

"But in contrast to this point of view which I see illustrated in my American work, and which I feel relates it to the outlook first championed by Bataille and his colleagues, the backbone of the surrealist attitude is 'Beware of the visual sensation.' For the surrealists appearance is an illusion - one can with as much justification depict the opposite of what we seem to see.

"Matisse sees a lemon as if one had never seen a lemon before. Still if an idea associated with this lemon comes to Matisse while he is painting, he will reject the idea. These men, Bataille and his friends, on the other hand would accept such an idea. Nevertheless in this approach, in painting or sculpture just as in every other approach, plastic rigour must be respected. Marie de Medici, for Rubens, was not just a news item.

"One could found a new school on this point of view. If there is a novelty in France today this is it. Such a new school would not turn its back on fauvism, cubism or surrealism. It would not favor the one, or the other exclusively. After all, the real danger to art lies in evasion and shuffling excuses. In the end the only important thing is to make an interesting *painting*."

5

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

The Bed of Plato. View (New York) 1 no 7-8:3 O-N 1941. Also in New Road

(London) 1943: 214.

Life and Liberty. Art in Australia (Sydney) 4 no 5: 11-17 Mr-My 1942.

Re "*Minotaure*": a Letter. View (New York) 2 no 2:20 My 1942. Mallarmé,

Portraitist of Baudelaire & Poe. View (New York) 2 no 3:16-17 O 1942.

Mythology of Being. New York. Wittenborn, 1942.

Painting is a Wager. Horizon (London) 7 no 39:178-83 Mr 1943. Reprinted from Cahiers du Sud, 1942.

Page from a Notebook by André Masson. View (New York) 3 no 1:9 Ap 1943.

Anatomy of My Universe. New York, Curt Valentin, 1943. *Nocturnal*

Notebook. New York, Curt Valentin, 1944.

Crisis of the Imaginary. Horizon (London) 12 no 67:42-4 Jy 1945. Reprinted in Magazine of Art 39:22 Ja 1946.

Unité et Variété de la Peinture Française. Renaissance (New York) 2-3:

217-23 1944-45. (Text of lecture given at Mount Holyoke, August 1944.)

ILLUSTRATIONS:

Cover for catalog of exhibition at Baltimore Museum of Art, 1941.

Three portraits for *Vertical*, New York, Gotham Bookmart Press, 1941.

Several Have Lived, by Hugh Chisholm, New York, Gemor Press, 1942. (Three reproductions of works by Masson.)

Mythology of Being, a poem; eight pen and ink drawings, and a frontispiece; New York, Wittenborn, 1942.

Cover for View (New York) ser. 3, no. 3, 1943.

Anatomy of My Universe, 34 illustrations, New York, Curt Valentine, 1943.

La Pieuvre, by Victor Hugo, 8 pen and ink drawings, Buenos Aires, Editions des Lettres Françaises, 1944.

Nocturnal Notebook, 14 pen and ink drawings, New York, Curt Valentin, 1944.

Le Serpent dans la Galère, by Georges Duthuit, 8 drawings on collotype plates, 20 drawings in the text; New York, Transition, Curt Valentin, 1945.

Cover for View (New York) ser. 5, no. 5, 1945.

(Continued on page 38)

MASSON: *Bison au Bord d'un Gouffre*. 1944. Ink.

MASSON: *Portrait of Claude Duthuit*. 1944. Tempera.

MASSON: *Legend of the Corn*. 1942. Tempera.