

ART NEWS

FOUNDED 1902

October 1950

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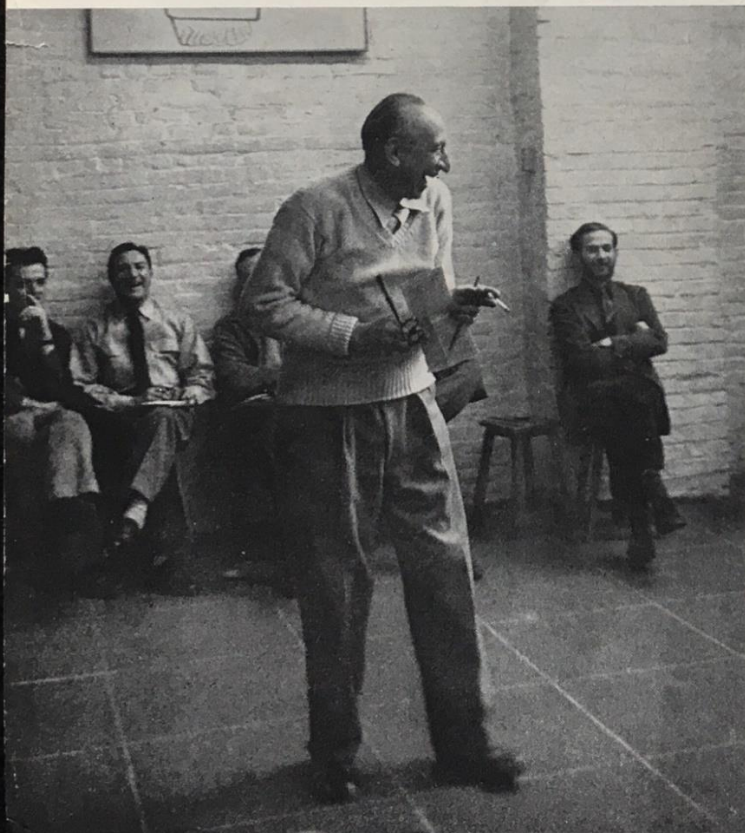


By Dorothy Seckler

Can painting be taught? Ozenfant

The methods and ideals which
are forming our young American artists:
the first in a series of articles

Once a week Ozenfant, like a European *maitre* holds court in his atelier on New York's east Twentieth Street. Students enjoy his probing, often caustic comments on everything from world events to Egyptian art and contemporary avant-gardism, even though their own role is apt to be a rather passive one.



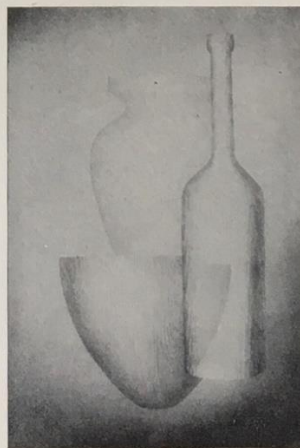
I guarantee that, given a student of normal health, sufficient intelligence, great love of working, able to go to sleep early and control his drinking—I guarantee making him at least a reputable professional master," states Amédée Ozenfant. "I mean," he adds, "a master of his technique and respectable in his art."

As a painter, Ozenfant is best known for having founded, with Jeanneret (Le Corbusier), the artistic reform movement known as purism, launched in 1916, which Alfred H. Barr has called "a methodical kind of cubism." A man of commanding personality and phenomenally broad culture, Ozenfant soon establishes himself as a person of indomitable will. When he came to this country in 1939, he immediately set about transforming some buildings on New York's East Side, almost in the shadow of the El, into an island of purist calm and order, fashioning two low buildings into a well planned school with an adjoining studio and gallery for exhibitions of his own and student work. The garden which thrives on the rooftop and the "cloister" provided in the back yard are evidence again of a personality which turns every opportunity to advantage, tolerating no waste and enjoying the most refined control of environment.

In the high-ceilinged, immaculately ordered schoolrooms, the new student begins a process which Ozenfant describes as a "moral building up." This expression might surprise anyone observing the class since the students—generally in their twenties with a sprinkling of more mature men and women—appear to be a particularly well-behaved group, working in silent concentration and, even in the corridors speaking only in hushed tones:



Rudolph Burckhardt



Cecily Hogg

in fact the European formality of the student-master relationship is a striking quality in the conduct of the school, contrasting as it does with the casual atmosphere of most American studio classrooms. Dismissing whatever notions he may have had of quickly-realized self-expression, the novice learns that art is purposeful and a matter of strict disciplines. There will be little distinction made between his life inside and outside the school. Indeed there is little time left for outside interests in a school day where the morning session begins at eight (Ozenfant's device for insuring early retiring and discouraging any bohemian carousing). Basic to the philosophy of the school is the concept that art and life are inseparable. "The great artist is the man who organizes his whole life, physical, mental and affective, as a good work of art. As life is the mold, so art is the cast."

The first project the student undertakes, usually a constructed composition, will be pursued for months, with no quarter given to "lazy improvisation." It will be finished when the master agrees that the problems of composition have been solved and that the student has eliminated "what is not his own." Abstraction is discouraged at this stage: "It is very easy to do a bad abstraction and too difficult to do a good one!" Imaginative compositions are tolerated, but to most students, especially beginners, Ozenfant will suggest a still-life. The still-life itself may never be actually set up. Objects may be consulted separately, indeed they must be familiar in every aspect, but they may not be drawn in an observed relationship. Elaborate or conspicuously appealing objects are rejected in favor of potatoes, eggs, simple glasses

and jugs—forms which reveal an easily apprehended structure.

Ozenfant exhorts the novice to give his forms breathing space and warns against crowded and uncomfortable corridors between shapes "as oppressive of our psychological need for liberty." He carries on a relentless campaign against chance effects and the exploitation of facility.

After the first design, which the beginner executes in a clean, crisp line, he is introduced to tone. As a means of refining sensibility, Ozenfant favors the use of fine line textures—stippled effects, delicately cross-hatched or wavy lines—which are carried out with the tip of a hard pencil or fine pen on hard-surfaced papers. Student work representing these first problems does appear professional in the effects achieved of precisely controlled surfaces. A tendency toward very static effects is the fault most often encountered in these carefully executed compositions, while the best examples show a Seurat-like devotion to subtle variations of contour and simplified tonal patterns.

In all of this struggle with the spaces of a composition, the student has not been indoctrinated with any one formula for representing the third dimension, either by perspective, cubist or other devices. Reminded that some teachers regard toleration of perspective as encouraging a tricky, academic illusionism, Ozenfant replied: "If a student uses perspective to make a good painting, it is not a trick, but if he uses it and makes a bad painting, then it may be."

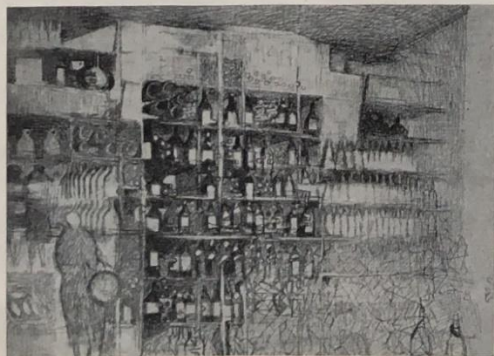
Ozenfant's school is probably the only one in the world where the student is asked to turn his back [Continued on page 61]



Malcolm Anderson

Ozenfant's students' work: still-lives by Cecily Hogg and Paul Mori recall Ozenfant's own paintings of his purist period, especially in their cultivation of surfaces, exclusion of atmosphere and isolation of forms in undefined space. Their timeless and impersonal quality extends also to Malcolm Anderson's schematically gradated landscape and is particularly marked in the nude, the product of months of exacting work by Rudolph Burckhardt, whose photographs have frequently appeared in ARTNEWS. Even David Byrd's informal cellar eludes specific reality by dissolving into patterned, linear webs.

David Byrd



Paul Mori

1875



1950

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Guild, a comprehensive organization that includes members of a dozen other societies of differing artistic persuasions. It was at the Guild galleries that Milovich, who does not exhibit in New York, recently held what Guild officers declared was, from the sales viewpoint, the most successful show in its fifty-year history.

At the Museum, St. Louis artists are to rotate through the year in thirty-day displays by groups. Newest to be formed is the Missourians, not regionalists à la Benton by any means, but an avowedly experimental band. It includes Fred Dreher, whose mobiles have won the latest prizes here and in other cities, and Marie Taylor, one of several St. Louis women recently successful in direct carving.

Ozenfant continued from page 45

on the living model. Actually the figure must be drawn from memory with the model referred to only at brief intervals. "Memory," says Ozenfant, "keeps only the causes of emotion, forgets the accidental and always acts as a sieve which retains only what is our own. Memory creates an architecture of essentials." The student is urged to dismiss both actual and classical proportions and to regard the model as if she were a potato, or anything else but the model. "You must create a mental image of what was evoked in your mind by the vision of phenomenon!"

Composing in color is the prerogative of the advanced student, and then only after certain preparatory steps have been taken. While Ozenfant does not stress abstract theories of color, and he scorns the color harmony wheels so popular in most schools here, he does believe that the artist must know his "color keyboard," just as the pianist knows his "ivories." To this end he has his students prepare a precisely divided grill, arranged in columns of rectangular boxes. In each vertical column one hue is carried from its pure state to white, in clearly separated tonal changes, and then, in the same way, it is darkened until a value indistinguishable from black is obtained. Ozenfant believes that with the resulting variations of color, adding only certain violets and greens, the student could reproduce any painting from Poussin to Picasso. He demands that a color combination shall be not only visually appealing but also associatively correct and convincing. Referring to a landscape he said, "we cannot go contrary to what we have experienced in these things, making houses in butterfly colors!" In an abstraction in which sharp, arrow-like forms predominated

Of the year's coming shows, two hundred in all, great popular interest attaches to the Missouri Exhibition, to open in November at the Museum. There, if current trends prevail, abstraction will gain ground, with personal idioms of Beckmann, Conway, Burlin, Guston, Greene, Milovich and other strong teachers appearing with modifications in work by scores of adherents.

The show will be cried up as proof of progress in art; it will be cried down as Sunday painters' ineptitude; amateurs will prove they are taking Churchill at his word on audacity as the only ticket; and old-master imitations will jostle shockers as modern as 1951. Perhaps, if the city runs true to its new form, there will even be a controversy not over nudity or money, but over art.

he considered pink a color "which could never, never be!"

Students agree that the high point of the school week is reached at its end when the main lecture is given. Ozenfant, who follows an exacting schedule of painting, teaching, writing and study, enters the classroom with dramatic punctuality, and launches into a spirited talk which may touch on philosophy, life, contemporary problems and events as well as on art and aesthetics. Cutting across chronological divisions, sometimes working backwards through time, he is anything but the conventional art historian. If he is sharp with certain trends today, which he regards as accidental and undisciplined, he is amazingly catholic in his enthusiasms for works of other periods. His lecture on the Parthenon is famous, and for "the great anonymous Egyptians" he reserves a special devotion. These periods provide a splendid precept for the kind of universal art form which is the goal of his school's program—an art of carefully determined forms entirely devoid of accidental or impulsive effects.

Throughout these discussions of every period, one theme is reiterated: art is the result of life and its by-product; art is purposeful; it cannot be taken easily. The student who perceives the history of art as a constant manifestation of man's intelligence and his sense of order will develop a certain humility, Ozenfant believes. Foregoing the foibles of erratic, would-be genius, the lure of chance effects and the hope of quick financial return, the artist should accept his place as a part of a larger stream in which each contribution is important—"a master of his technique and his art, even if a minor artist."

How England met modern art continued from page 27

imagine that every child is a potential Piero della Francesca. It was well to appreciate the paintings of Rousseau; it is a mistake to suppose that anyone who paints on Sundays only must be a genius.

The effect of the Post-Impressionist exhibitions on painters is easily seen. Since 1910 I doubt whether a single serious artist has emerged in this

country who has not been influenced, directly or indirectly, by Cézanne. What young painters have now to learn is that to borrow at third hand, through Picasso and Central Europe, forms, distortions and simplifications that Cézanne brought to life, is just as stupid and academic as to borrow the dead mannerisms of Raphael or Ingres.

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