Our Cultural Pattern: 1929—and Today

Twenty-five years of the Museum of Modern Art reflect deep changes in the nation's taste.

By ALINE B. SAARINEN

TWENTY-FIVE years ago, on Nov. 7, 1929, the Museum of Modern Art held its inaugural exhibition in four pristinely simple rooms of the Heckscher Building on Fifth Avenue. This week, having become the most important single force in modern art in America, it begins a year-long anniversary celebration with a handsome show from its permanent collection in three floors of galleries and the garden of its marble-steel-and-glass mansion on West Fifty-third Street.

The cultural climate has undergone vivid changes in the intervening quarter-century. To a large part of the public for whom the museum has always represented *le dernier cri*, it might seem that the museum's two and a half decades provide a barometer with which to measure the restless shifts in artistic production and taste. But the paradox is that the museum was never intended to be nor ever has been an up-to-the-minute spokesman or promoter for the avant-garde. Instead, its role has been that of teacher and guide for modern art. Moreover, its relation to the cultural scene is far more interesting than that of mere barometer. What has actually happened is this: in the cultural pattern of 1929 the arts were much more advanced than the museum, but in the 1954 cultural scene the gap between the museum (at least at its alive best) and artistic production has been closed.

LET us examine the situation twenty-five years ago and the museum's relation to it. Then let us review the changes that have taken place and analyze the museum's position vis-a-vis these new conditions.

The first significant fact in the 1929 setting is that there was a sharp differentiation between the cultural scene in Europe and that in America. Europe was still the center of all the most creative artistic movements. In all the arts there was an active avant garde. Wave after wave of little bands and individuals had been striking out into new territories, usually to the fanfare of impassioned manifestoes. Quite self-consciously they were resisting a Philistine, complacent or antagonistic audience. Quite deliberately they were moving forward, away from what seemed to them academic, stagnant and too conservatively developing styles.

A common climate of thought, dedicated to change and rebellion, seemed to infect and stimulate all professions. For this one period of the twentieth century there was a real interrelation in the arts, as witness the Diaghilev ballets, which embraced the Constructivists' geometric scenery and Stravinsky's music, and the Bauhaus, which tried to reconcile esthetics in both fine and applied arts with modern technology.

What are some examples of these vanguard movements in 1929? In painting and sculpture, one encountered all over Europe the influence of the experiments of Mondrian and the De Stijl group, who sought an expression of the ultimate truth in nature by means of carefully calculated relationships of linear grids and constructions. There were the frenetic activities of the Surrealists, publishing their Second Manifesto under poet André Breton, dredging the subconscious in order to merge dream and reality into a "reality absolute, a surreality."

IN architecture, the buildings of Gropius, Mies van der Rohe, Le Corbusier and Oud—and the vital influence of Frank Lloyd Wright—were exploring new concepts of light, revealed structure and flexible, open plans. The tubular steel chairs of Breuer, Mies and Le Corbusier were glistening in these avant-garde interiors. There were experimental movies by the Surrealists, Man Ray and Luis Buñuel, with their double images and red ants crawling over hands, and Deslav, who found new beauty in the machine. There were the "little magazines," like "transition," publishing Gertrude Stein, E. E. Cummings and sections of Joyce's "Finnegans Wake," then known as "Work in Progress."

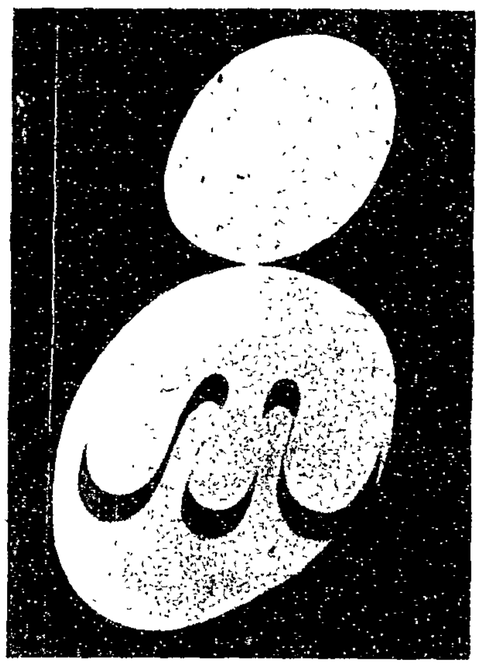
But if we turn to the American cultural scene in 1929, the picture is quite different. The stimulating activity in Europe and the élite audience which supported it still held American expatriates in their grip, almost depleting America of its potential avant-gardists. Many progressive American artists, such as Alexander Calder and Stuart Davis, were in Paris. And although there were a few individuals venturing into vanguard activity, such as Buckminster Fuller, who was already working out his Dymaxion principles, it is fair to say that there was really no equivalent in America of what could be found in Europe.

THERE was, of course, a backwash across the Atlantic. There were such men as Neutra, building houses in California that translated European theories into actuality. There were a few "little magazines," like "The Little Review," "The Dial" and "Hound and Horn." There was a handful of what could be called avant-garde collectors. James Johnson Sweeney had bought Léger and Klee, and the courageous Katherine Dreier, who owned works by such artists as Man Ray and Kandinsky, had founded the Société Anonyme which had by 1929 given New York exhibitions to Mondrian and the De Stijl group, to *(Continued on Page 66)*

ALINE B. SAARINEN is an associate art critic of The New York Times.

1929—AVANT-GARDE

MIRO: "Dutch Interior." Free fantasy was closely related to the avant-garde Surrealist movement, very active in 1929.



ARP: "Two Heads." Surrealist sculpture vied with the precise geometrics of the De Stijl and the Constructivist groups.

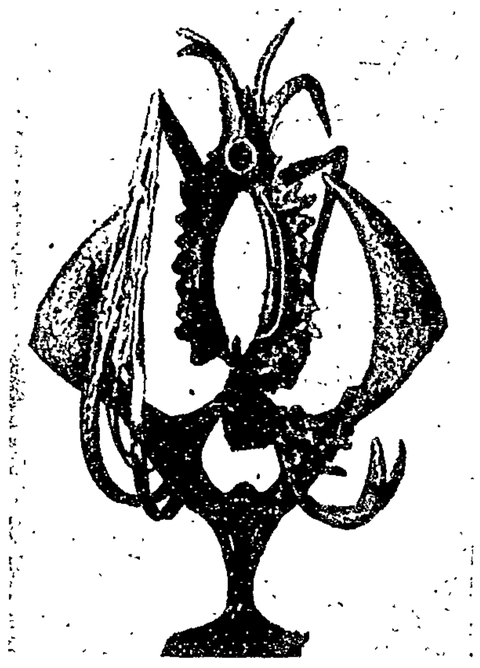
1929—"MODERN"

CEZANNE: "Pines and Rocks." In America, such Post-Impressionist canvases as this of 1895 were considered to be "modern."

MAILLOL: "Seated Figure." In the field of sculpture, collectors thought of Maillol, Despiau, Lachaise as "the moderns."

1954—MODERN

DE KOONING: "Woman I." Abstract-expressionist paintings are creative forward steps from World War I-era roots.



ROSZAK: "Invocation." New welding techniques develop personal expression from 1920 experiments in metal sculpture.

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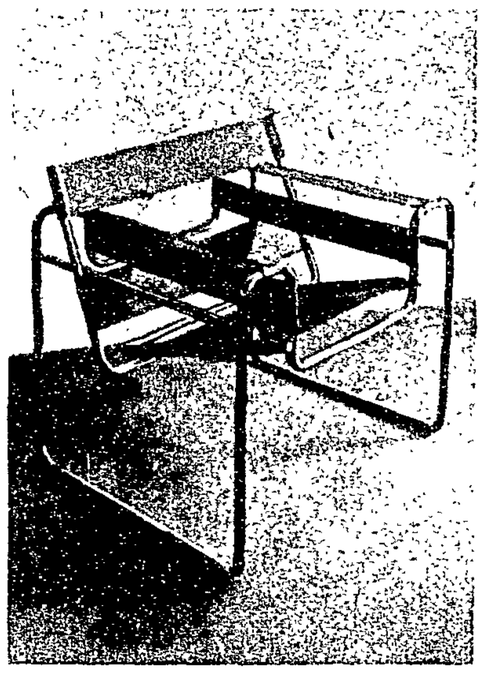
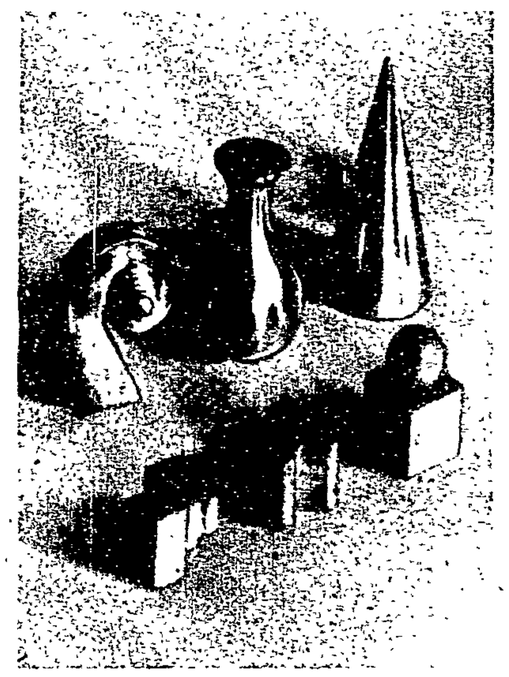
All over Europe in all the arts, small groups were still making revolutionary moves into new artistic territories, issuing manifestoes, exploring new concepts and forms. America knew almost nothing about it. At the time the Modern Museum was not yet showing this avant-garde art.

LE CORBUSIER: "Savoye House." This architect, with Gropius, Mies and Oud, pioneered the new "International Style."



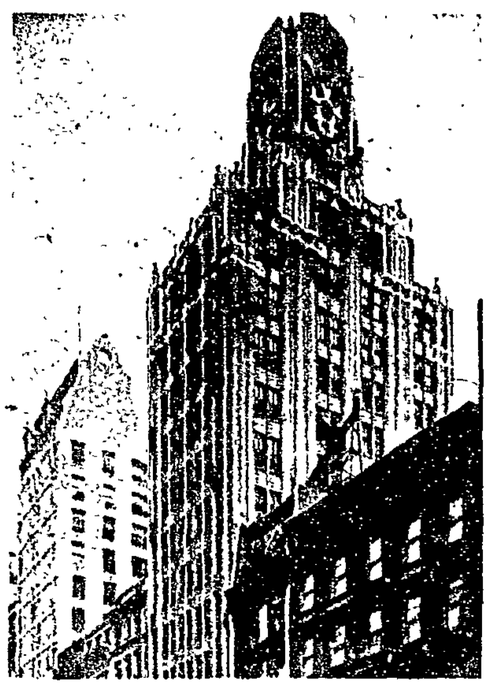
BREUER: Tubular steel chair designed in 1925, and later ones by Le Corbusier and Mies, were the avant-garde furniture.



BAUHAUS: Chess set symbolized search of the Bauhaus group for new forms related to direct expression and modern technology.

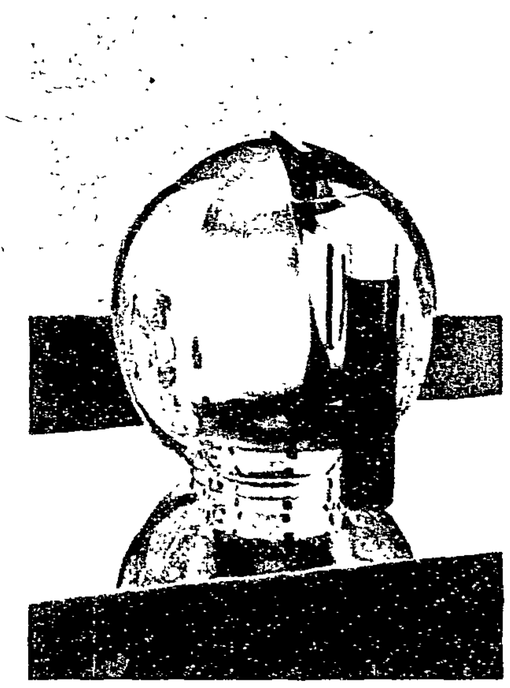
DALI: "Le Chien Andalou." Many avant-garde films grew from Surrealism, camera experiments and art interest in machines.

In America, collectors thought of "modern art" as the Post-Impressionists. The last word in architecture and design was decorative "modernistic art" derived from 1900-20 European art. The Modern Museum conformed to painting taste, but tried early to educate America in design.



WETMORE & WARREN: Aeolian Hall. Modernistic zigzags replaced Gothic finials on otherwise old-fashioned buildings.

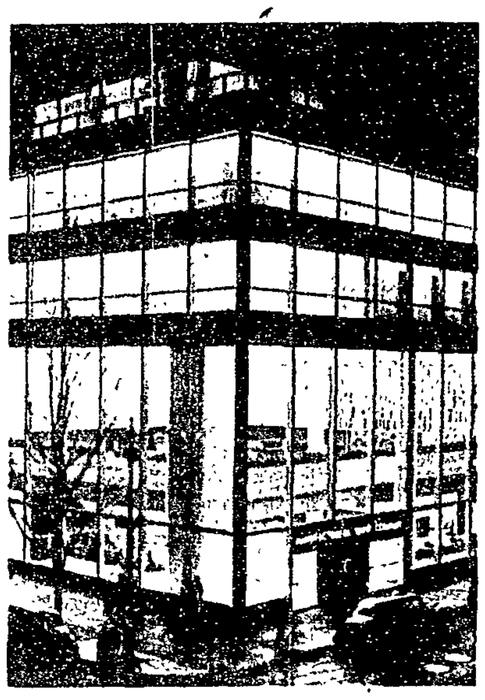
LEE SIMONSON: Piano. Typical of fashionable taste and the "last word" were black-and-silver decor, and "skyscraper" furniture.



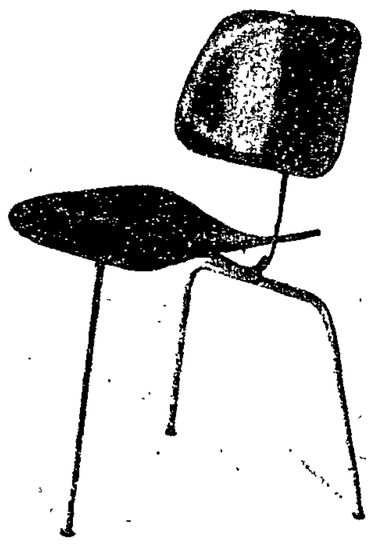
PAUL LOBEL: Teapot. Objects were decorated with geometric ornaments. Designs were based on handicraft prototypes.

KING VIDOR: The best modern films, such as "Hallelujah," were still far behind the experimental, avant-garde films of Europe.

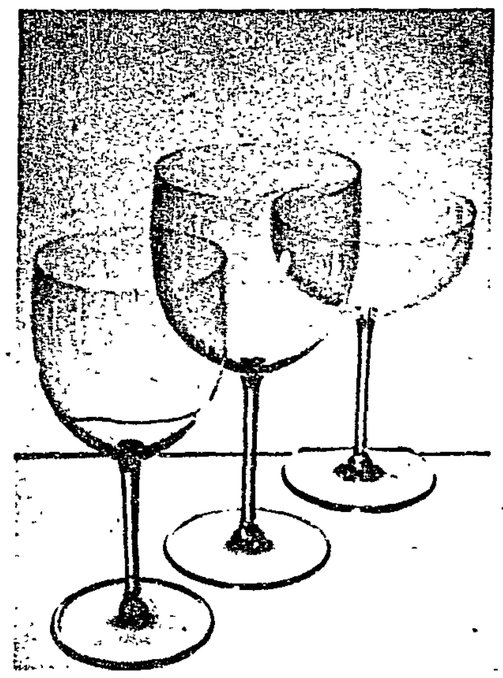
Today there is no avant-garde. There is "progressive art," based on the avant-garde work of twenty-five years ago. It moves forward without, however, breaking any new ground. The gap between the "most modern" art of today and what the Modern Museum sponsors is closed.



SKIDMORE, OWINGS & MERRILL: Manufacturers Trust Co. shows contemporary refinement of "International Style" ideas.



EAMES: Molded plywood with electrically bonded metal legs shows progressive development of design for modern technology.



BACCARAT: In glasses, china and tableware, the search for direct expression and beauty through mass production means continues.

MIZOGUCHI: "Ugetsu" is typical of modern films which are attempting to use the camera to its full artistic potential.

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the Constructivists, Gabo and Pevsner, and to Klee.

But such activities as these were few here. What Americans thought of as *le dernier cri* and "very modern" was art which was actually based on European work of the turn of the century and superficially brought up to date. It was the kind of art displayed in the exhibition of Decorative Arts at Paris in 1925, the kind of art we look back on today and call "modernistic." There were a few exceptions, such as Raymond Hood's just-building, vertically emphasized Daily News Building, but what was really admired as modern were the skyscrapers that were busily furbelowed with zigzag designs instead of Gothic finials. The last word was interiors gleaming with black-and-silver décor, filled with "skyscraper furniture," whimsical objects from the 1910-inspired "Vienna Workshops" and angular, geometrically patterned silver, glass and rugs, such as were then being exhibited at the Metropolitan Museum. In painting, an interest was beginning to be felt in Diego Rivera and Orozco (even the Architectural League gave them exhibitions) and in the Americans influenced by them, such as Boardman Robinson.

BUT what the art press and rich collectors who were buying these already gilt-edged works meant by "modern art" were paintings by Van Gogh, Gauguin, Cézanne, Seurat, Pissarro, the early Picasso, Derain, Segonzac, Matisse and Modigliani. (At the Metropolitan Museum, however, Cézanne in 1929 was a controversial figure.) The museum's own trustees owned but three cubist paintings, though cubism was already fifteen years old.

It was at this stage of affairs that the Museum of Modern Art emerged. It faced a double job in its first decade. On the one hand, it had to bring the public up to date. It had to begin with the Post-Impressionists (its first show was of Cézanne, van Gogh, Gauguin and Seurat) and then slowly introduce American audiences to what the avant-garde of the Twenties had been up to. On the other hand, it had to educate and guide American taste away from the vulgarisms of decorative modernism toward architecture and design that were truly modern in concept and form.

IT moved especially cautiously in the painting field. As Alfred H. Barr Jr., the museum's first director and continuing cardinal force, points out, about the most daring thing the museum did in its painting exhibitions in the first years was to include Miró as one of the "great" in the 1932 "Painting in Paris" show. Even though the vanguard movements were being presented at a tested distance of five, ten, even twenty years, they often seemed shocking and strange to a public unfamiliar with them. Some of the objects which most violently outraged the public in the museum's first decade—some of the abstract art in the "Cubist and Abstract Art" show of 1936 and such items as the newsworthy fur-lined teacup in the "Fantastic Art-Dada-Surrealism" exhibition of the same period—had either been made many years earlier or derived from earlier movements and were being presented in New York as part of historical surveys.

IN its architecture shows the museum was somewhat more daringly "modern." Barr believes that the exhibitions of 1932—which presented Gropius, Mies, Le Corbusier and Oud, defined "The International Style" and brought Frank Lloyd Wright to the attention of those of his fellow-Americans who had neglected him—accelerated taste faster than anything the museum did in other fields.

By its lucid early publications, its careful and attractive display techniques and its interesting, perceptively chosen exhibitions, the museum did a remarkable informative and promotional job. It was so successful that the museum became an important factor in explaining the structure of the cultural scene in America today.

That picture offers a marked contrast with 1929. In the first place the distinction between Europe and America has become negligible. There is "one world" in art. But, more significantly, there is today no real avant-garde movement. There is, instead, what might be called "progressive" or "modern" art. The distinction is clear if we think of avant-garde as meaning the discovery of new territories with totally new concepts and principles, and of "progressive" as meaning the taking of forward steps, which expand our visions and add creatively to the vocabulary of art without necessarily breaking fresh ground.

THESE are steps which indicate neither stagnation nor dilution. They are based on previous avant-garde actions. For instance, the "activist" painters of the abstract-expressionist school date back to World War I Europe; Gonzales, Lipchitz and Picasso were long ago working in welded metal sculpture; Frank Lloyd Wright, Gropius, Mies and Le Corbusier laid the roots of modern architecture. Joyce remains a fountainhead in literature. And so on.

But serious artists today have built on these foundations, finding contemporary

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Three paintings seen at the Museum of Modern Art's first show twenty-five years ago were, from left, a Cezanne self-portrait, Gauguin's "Woman of Arles," and Van Gogh's "Cypresses."

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and personal integrity of expression. Consider Faulkner in literature; some of the Phoenix Theatre productions and Tennessee Williams in theatre; De Sica in films; designers such as Eames; architects such as Nowicki, Niemeyer, Bunshaft, Rudolph, Johnson and Saarinen; painters such as De Kooning, Pollack, Motherwell, Hartung, Da Silva, Soulages and Bacon; sculptors such as Roszak, Lippold and the recent Giacometti.

WHY, it may be asked, should this progressive art dominate the cultural scene today? Why is there no avant-garde? Why have artists, especially since so many of them are disgusted and demoralized by the pressures of "mass culture," not set up new outposts? The phenomenon can be explained in three ways.

The first is that the temper of the times, unlike that of 1929, is not congenial to rebellious movements in any form. We are in a period characterized (except perhaps in scientific fields) neither by profound change nor movement nor the inclination toward them. In politics, there is virtually no radical thought and even the liberal voice is self-muffled. In the arts, there is an equivalent absence of revolutionary movements.

There is, to be sure, a fantastic and avid hunger for the new and the novel —the "young artist," "the new talent," "the fresh twist." Anything that has a "new angle" is snatched up at once. But these are novelties in the furbelow sense, offered and accepted on the most superficial levels, and can be explained as supplying the *illusion* of change or progress rather than the genuine article.

The second may be that the nature of artistic endeavor argues against the creation of another avant-garde in so short a period of time. After any period of exploration, there is a pause for colonization; after any advance action, a need for consolidation. So many new corners were turned in the first three decades of the twentieth century, so many new means and materials uncovered, that it may well be that artists instinctively feel a need to understand, analyze and develop these findings to personal culmination.

Third, there has been a rapid evolution in America of exactly that kind of patron of which the Museum of Modern Art is a splendid example and that kind of large "middle-to-highbrow" audience it creates. This group not only acts as a buffer against the "mass-culture" concussion, but at least a percentage of it provides a market, both economic and appreciative, for what serious artists are doing today.

The museum is in large measure responsible for this audience. It has used its respectability, its prestige and its purchasing power to these ends. What it offers its devotees, together with a seal of approval, is a sort of built-in selectivity. Its audience, which only twenty-five years ago hesitated to accept anything even fifteen years new, is now eager to follow its slightest cue toward what is "good." (The success of the rental library of paintings, and Retailing's report on sales of objects from the "Good Design" show are two indications of this phenomenon. The abstract-expressionist paintings in so many of the trustee collections and the trustees' taste in architecture are another.)

Having been so carefully prepared and educated in the understanding of avant-garde roots, the taste-indoctrinated audience of today responds readily to the art of today. The labels of modern styles and the names of modern artists have become household words. And, in diluted forms, they have invaded everything from advertising to wallpaper to cartoons.

The museum is no more concerned now than it ever was in promoting or stimulating avant-garde movements. Most of the time it tries to promote what it considers the best, most alive, most progressive creations of our period.

OBVIOUSLY, such an institution and its audience are less adventurous and chance-taking than the old avant-garde, élite audience. But, since artists today seem to have neither the inner nor the outer necessity to take defensive or offensive avant-garde action, the institution is, in a very real sense, as adventurous and chance-taking as our art itself. They have caught up with each other.

When the temper of the times changes and when the artists' urges and impulses make them dissatisfied with their own production, impatient with this patronage and bored with this audience, they will run out on it all and seek new outposts, taking with them a small group of supporters. The museum will then, presumably, in due course present their work to the public, slowly informing and educating it to understanding and acceptance. One can only hope that the next twenty-five years of the Museum of Modern Art will be as creatively helpful and influential as have its first.

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