

Corcoran's 30th Exhibition Proves Value of Experiments

By Andrew Hudson

IT'S A SIGN of the times, of the vital interest in art today, and also of Washington's growing stature as one of the leading and liveliest centers of art in the country that "great designs" carefully nurtured and brought to maturity in two separate museums in this city burst into the news in the same week. One of these "designs" now accomplished is the National Gallery's acquisition of Leonardo's portrait of "Genevra de' Benci" (which will go on public view on March 17, the Gallery's anniversary day). The other is the Corcoran Gallery's "30th Corcoran Biennial Exhibition of Contemporary American Painting" (on view through April 9).

The Corcoran Biennials, started in 1907, sprang out of a desire to show to the country that there was art being produced here to be proud of, to prove "the just claim of American art to rank with the best art in the world and to . . . encourage its further development." Whether or not the claim to be on a level with European art was as fully justified then as it is today, the exhibition, dubbed by the press the "American Salon," attracted the attention—and the paintings—of many of the best American artists of the time. The 25th Biennial in 1957 celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of the exhibition by simultaneously showing all 24 previous First Prize award paintings, together with a selection of other work shown in past Biennials. This retrospective glance at the history of the Biennial contained paintings by Blakelock, Ryder, Homer, Cassatt, Sargent, Glackens, Henri, Feininger, and Marin, with paintings by Eakins, Demuth and Hartley exhibited as memorial tributes.

DURING THE COURSE of the years, many experiments have been tested out, in an attempt to improve the mechanics and the quality of the exhibition, though its over-all shape is determined by conditions written into the bequest of money that makes the show possible.

Four prizes, of \$2000, \$1500, \$1000 and \$500, have to be awarded; there has to be an Open Competition section; there have to be three jurors, from outside the Gallery, to award the prizes and select works for inclusion in the Biennial from the Open Competition. There can, however, be an Invitational Section, whereby artists selected by a Gallery staff committee submit work without having to compete for inclusion.

As it turns out, the show stands or

falls, as a survey of contemporary American painting, on the quality of this gallery-chosen Invitational Section. For few artists who consider their work of worth, like to submit it to the whims of a jury and to have to compete with every Tom, Dick and Harry of amateur painting for inclusion in an exhibition. (In 1955, the Corcoran experimented by having a Biennial without an Invitational Section, and the jurors, who selected only 64 paintings out of the 2101 submitted in Open Competition, declared themselves "troubled and perplexed that more painters of stature have not contributed entries," and urged the re-institution of the Invitational Section.)

Other experiments have proved more successful. Naturally, a competition open to all painters throughout the country resulted in a large, unwieldy number of submissions. To help cut down on the expense of sending all of these paintings to Washington (most of which would arrive, only to be rejected) the Corcoran began to send its three jurors across the country to make selections prior to the judging. In 1961, the Gallery streamlined this process by asking artists to submit color slides of their work rather than the paintings themselves. These slides were sifted through by the Corcoran staff committee; artists selected on the evidence of the slides were then asked to send in their paintings for the jury's final selection. This method proved vastly more efficient, and has been continued since then. This year, 3574 slides from every State in the union except Idaho, Mississippi and South Dakota were viewed by the Gallery committee; 96 artists were selected to be asked to send in work, and the jury chose 21 of these artists' paintings for the Open Competition section.

A second innovation, to do with the Invitational Section chosen entirely by the Gallery staff committee, was tried out in the 29th Biennial of 1965. Instead of asking for one painting each from a large number of invited artists, the Gallery decided that work of the small number of painters shown in depth would make for more enlightening, and perhaps more valid, exhibition. It was agreed to limit this small number of invited artists to not more than thirty. Since this method proved successful in practice, it has been repeated this year, in the 30th Biennial. However, artists shown

The Biennial

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in quantity in 1965 were not invited in 1967.

SO, GRADUALLY, a certain type of exhibition has evolved in an attempt to present a survey of the most important and interesting painting being produced in the country. The Corcoran's trial-and-error approach, the various experiments and alterations in the way the show is put together, have finally proved themselves, for this year we have at the Corcoran what I think must be one of the most acutely perceptive survey shows of American painting to be held in the last ten years.

Most of the painters whose work ought to be in such a show are there, represented by handpicked examples (the Corcoran staff committee chooses actual paintings, as well as the painters, for the Invitational Section). Thus we have a unique opportunity in Washington to see what is happening today in American painting.

ABSTRACT PAINTING predominates in the show—as it should, for it is here that the present strength and vitality of American painting lies. The “abstract expressionist” generation is represented by Stamos and by Gottlieb, one of the major figures of the movement. (One hopes that future Biennials will show the new work

of Newman, Still, Rothko, de Kooning and Motherwell.) The post-“abstract expressionist” generation is represented by Olitski and Noland (the two artists who are at the forefront of the experimenting that is going on in today's painting), by Frankenthaler, Downing, Dzubas and the younger artists Poons and Stella. There is also the work of Sander, an older and little recognized artist, which was, for me, the surprise discovery of the show.

Side by side with the work of these artists, paintings by Johns, Dine and Raffaele are examples of the type of figurative painting and assemblage that we associate with the word “pop.” The more serious attempt to develop a kind of representational painting that's valid today is exemplified by Pearlstein's nudes.

The Corcoran is to be congratulated on its initiative and on the general high quality of this year's Invitational Section (far higher than any Whitney Annual I've seen—another survey show that's selected by the museum staff). If the Corcoran can maintain the caliber of the present show in subsequent Biennials, it will not only dispel rumors of the Corcoran's moribundity but also, perhaps, give Washington a little edge over New York as far as the museum showing of contemporary American painting is concerned.



Adolph Gottlieb's "Glow" in the Corcoran Biennial.