

Labels in Art Are Convenient But Misleading

By Andrew Hudson

LABELS IN ART help because they enable us to talk about a group of painters or paintings and distinguish them from others. However, they also can be misleading and hinder us in recognizing similarities or differences.

In the last resort, it's probably best to consider each artist's work as a thing in itself—but we still may be faced with changes and contradictions.

There's a painting in the current exhibition of the Block collection at the National Gallery, "The Visitors" of 1924-25 by Fernand Leger, which, even though it's by a "cubist" master, could just as well be grouped under the label of "surrealist."

Its strange perspective of disappearing buildings and its two sharply defined gentlemen, complete with newspaper, cane and bowler hat, have as much in common with the dream-like paintings of de Chirico and Magritte as with the still-lives of Braque and Picasso.

And the present retrospective exhibition of Stanton Macdonald-Wright's work at the National Collection of Fine Arts shows him to be a varied, complex artist — not just an early pioneer of abstract art, not just a "synchromist." (Indeed, it seems to me that Macdonald-Wright's large figurative paintings and murals of the late 1920s and early 1930s are much superior to his early attempts at abstraction.)

I ALSO TEND to think that the separation of Matisse and Picasso into the two categories of "Fauvism" and "Cubism," obstructs us from arriving at a clear view of what was happening in French painting between 1910 and 1920.

During that period, Matisse was utilizing some of the compositional discoveries made by Braque and Picasso, and profited by them. My conclusion, after seeing the two large Matisse shows at Boston and New York last season, was that Matisse prob-

ably painted the best "cubist" paintings of all.

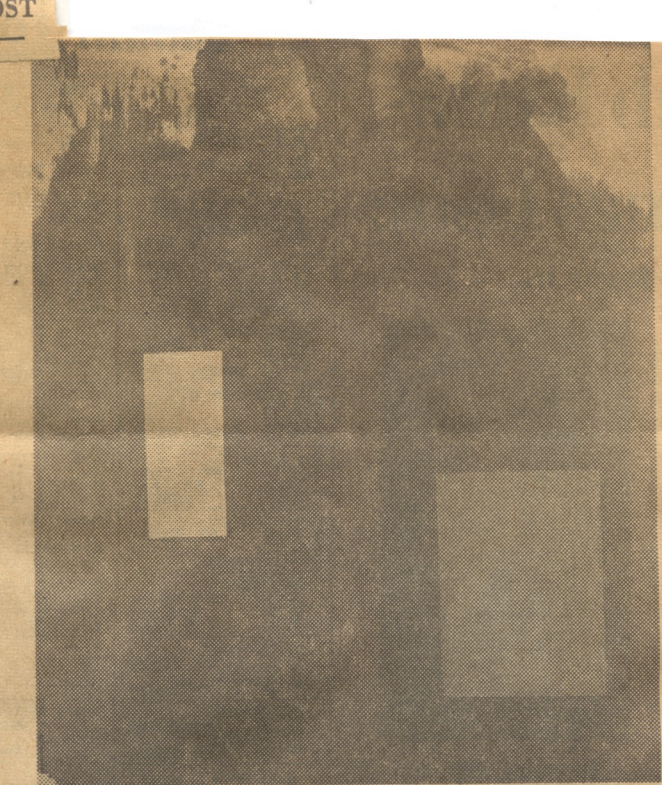
The inadequacy of labels becomes more obvious with the course of time. We no longer think of Renoir or Degas as true "impressionists": we're more aware of their conservative inclinations, their interest in the old masters, their tendency toward classical line and composition.

Monet, Sisley and Pissarro are revealed as the really "radical" artists of the group—even though Monet is the only one who stayed with impressionism and stuck it out, independently, to the end (Sisley becoming a pale imitation of Monet, and Pissarro getting carried away by the color theory and experimentation of Seurat).

The label, "Post-Impressionist," put into circulation by Roger Fry, is used today only as a vague historical term to denote artists who reacted against impressionism in different ways. Few would claim, I think, that Cezanne, Van Gogh, Gauguin and Seurat have anything else in common. Their work comes to look more and more unlike as the years go by.

The next label that is likely to suffer a collapse, in terms of its usefulness, is that of "abstract expressionism." Already many articles have been written, and exhibitions organized to show that this movement contained two or three groups of artists headed in quite different directions.

There were the more conservative artists, such as Hofmann, Gorky and de Kooning, whose work is full of echoes and references to previous art; there was Pollock, a "radical" artist in one direction concerned still with drawing and tending like Cubism, toward the monochromatic; there were Newman, Rothko and Still, who were "radical" in a quite different direction and concerned with large, flat areas of color and tending to cast aside any in-



Hans Hofmann's "Memoria in Aeternum" at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

terest in or dependence on traditional drawing.

I SUSPECT that in the course of time even these "groupings" will break down. For Hofmann was experimental (he used the "drip" technique before Pollock) as well as thoroughly part of the European tradition. While Hofmann can be described as the last master of Cubism, it's Matisse's Cubism that he's master of — as a comparison of his great painting, "Memoria in Aeternum," with Matisse's "Red Studio" at the Museum of Modern Art in New York reveals.

Gorky's color is the strong thing about his work, which today looks so well in the museums; de Kooning's virtuosity has more to do with line. Rothko's art is coming to look less venturesome than either Newman's or Still's, and in many cases, rather thin. This was my impression from a tour of the New York museum collections at the time of the new Whitney Museum's opening survey show.

And there remains the question of where exactly to "place" Gottlieb, a more conservative artist whose work seems to stand apart from that of his colleagues—even as theirs begins to appear increasingly separate and distinct from one to the other.

Gottlieb alone among the surviving "abstract expres-

sionists" has, for me, maintained the level of his art. He also seems the only one likely to branch out into a further important development.

As the museum collections are built up, and as the major retrospectives come around, the differences and distinctions between these artists — differences of personality and of achievement — are likely to become more evident.

We can look forward to assessing these differences for ourselves when the "abstract expressionists" come to be more fully represented in the six (present and future) Washington museum collections concerned with American art—the National Gallery, the Corcoran, the Phillips Collection, the National Collection of Fine Arts, the Washington Gallery of Modern Art and the Hirshhorn Museum.

Meanwhile, we shall have a glimpse of them next season, with the traveling show of Jackson Pollock drawings at the University of Maryland Art Gallery; the big Gottlieb double New York museum retrospective at the Corcoran Gallery; and a selection from the collection of the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo (probably the most important collection of "abstract expressionism" outside of New York City) at the National Gallery. These three exhibitions are all scheduled for the spring of 1968.