

MUSEUM NOTES

by Andrew Hudson

GOTTLIEB AND MATISSE

Visitors to the Phillips Collection during the next few months will find a large, important painting missing. It is Adolph Gottlieb's *The Seer* (1950), currently on loan to an exhibition of his early "Pictograph" paintings organized by the Edmonton Art Gallery and travelling across Canada this season. *The Seer* is a painting that I have personally treasured since it was brought out of storage some years ago and hung in a place of honor, for its modulations of color (mostly pinks), its placement of forms, and its grasp of the format (which I like to compare to that of Ingres's small *Bather* also at the Phillips) show Gottlieb functioning at his very best.

I don't think nearly enough tribute has been paid to Duncan and Marjorie Phillips for the astuteness and courage with which they built up (without outside advice) their magnificent collection of modern art, designed to prove, through contrasts and comparisons, that the modern masters such as Cezanne deserved to be hung alongside older masters such as Chardin. What a good "eye" they had in so many instances! — and how quick they were to recognize great art, and make decisions about acquiring it. They saw the great Renoir, *The Luncheon of the Boating Party*, at a lunch at the Durand-Ruefs' in Paris in 1923, and immediately decided to buy it "as a great cornerstone to the collection" for what was then a record price. They acquired their excellent group of Bonnard's (which must be the supreme collection of his work in North America) mostly in the 1920s, just a few years after the pictures were painted. And Gottlieb's *The Seer* was bought in 1952, two years after its creation.

It is a happy thing that time has proved them right. (Duncan Phillips's printed remark in 1930 that, contrary to current opinion, he regarded Bonnard as "the most distinguished and original painter now living", may well have been a correct estimate at that time.) Certainly, the "Adolph Gottlieb: Pictographs" exhibition which I saw in Edmonton last November revealed that *The Seer* was not only one of the largest but one of the finest paintings of this period of Gottlieb's art — just as the "Henri Matisse: 64 Paintings" exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in 1966 revealed that the Phillips's *Interior with Egyptian Curtain* (1948) was outstanding among Matisse's late interiors. (An interesting footnote was provided at Edmonton by the inclusion of a much smaller version of *The Seer*, in which the imagery of the larger painting is sketched out much more roughly, and the color is more muted.)

The "Gottlieb Pictographs" show is one that I highly recommend, in a season full of great travelling exhibitions ("Matisse Cut-Outs", "Cezanne Late Works", "Kenneth Noland Retrospective", "Morris Louis Velis"). In it we see Gottlieb developing his mastery of the total canvas, exploring his gifts as a colorist, and gradually expanding the size of his paintings. It will be shown in Eastern Canada and The Art Gallery of Windsor (April 12–May 14), the Musée d'art contemporain, Montreal (June 8–July 9), and The Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto (July 22–September 3).

Meanwhile, for those who enjoyed the "Matisse Cut-Outs" exhibition and who like making excursions to see art, I suggest a visit to the new installation of the Cone Collection of works by Matisse at the Baltimore Museum of Art. On a recent visit, I was once again delighted by its harmonious, commodious "rightness". Restful, visually appealing, the opposite of boring, it fits perfectly Matisse's view of his art as "an armchair for the tired businessman or intellectual worker"; the paintings, sculptures and drawings are spaciouly and imaginatively arranged, with elegant yet comfortable square pouffes to sit on while looking at them.

Nice conjunctions include the notoriously famous painting *The Blue Nude* (1907) with the sculpture that relates to it, and the pairing of the later *Pink Nude* (1935) with a related charcoal drawing. And visitors shouldn't miss the changing mini-exhibitions behind the screen wall by the end windows and in the far righthand corner gallery. At the time of my visit, these were a group of works entitled "Despiau & Maillo: Sculpture & Graphics" drawn from the collection, and a

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panel display of the photographs recording 21 stages in the development of *The Pink Nude* between May and October that Matisse sent to Etta Cone in 1935 "with the idea of turning you away from sad things" (Events were already leading up to the Second World War and Miss Cone, who remained a lifelong friend of Matisse, realised that she would not be going again to Europe to visit him.) Such unexpected treats only add to the pleasure afforded by this worthwhile trip.



Adolph Gottlieb, "The Seer" (1950).



Henri Matisse, "The Blue Nude" (1907), oil on canvas, 36 1/4 x 44 1/8 at the Baltimore Museum of Art.

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