

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

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ETERNAL CITY

The Museum has recently announced and is now exhibiting what may well be its most important American acquisition to date - Peter Blume's Eternal City, bought from the artist through the Mrs. Simon Guggenheim Fund. The four extant drawings for details of the composition are also being shown. Two of these drawings were acquired with the painting, the third was given to the Museum several years ago by Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr., the fourth is on extended loan from Lieutenant Edgar J. Kaufmann, Jr. The Eternal City is the fourth major painting by Blume to enter a New York museum collection. Parade (1930) was purchased with the Museum in mind by Mrs. Rockefeller when first exhibited and was transferred to the Museum in 1935; Light of the World (1932) was acquired by the Whitney Museum in 1933; South of Scranton (1931), recently awarded second prize in the Metropolitan Museum's "Artists for Victory" exhibition, became that museum's property by the terms of the award.

The Eternal City was inspired by a journey to Italy which the artist made as a Guggenheim Fellow in 1932, the tenth anniversary of the Fascist March on Rome. Characteristically, Blume did not finish the picture until 1937, after a long period of meditating upon its imagery and nearly three years of continuous work on the painting itself, from October, 1934 to July, 1937. The picture was shown in New York upon completion and provoked an uproar, largely unfavorable in temper, which reached a climax when the Corcoran Gallery refused to admit the painting to its biennial exhibition of 1939. A number of leading critics condemned the Eternal City because of the anti-esthetic intent of the Mussolini head, whose green and harsh contemporaneity stood in rigid contrast to the lyricism of the remainder of the picture. But time has forced this objection out of bounds in the minds of a number of these same critics. Certain narrow critical standards of the 1920's and early 1930's, based almost exclusively upon formal relationships and evolved from the predominantly abstract art of the preceding years, have been steadily broadened. Today, Blume's courage and conviction deserve thoughtful reappraisal.

The conception of the general subject of the painting came to the artist one afternoon in January, 1933, as he stood in the Roman Forum near the Arch of Septimus Severus and was moved by a strange light illumining the ruins. In the final composition of the painting, however, this view of the Forum supplied only one element in an archeological medley which was deliberately free in choice. The iconography includes references to the Catacombs, the Colosseum and an early Christian shrine, and abounds in transmutations of architectural style. The composition as a whole is organized on the traditional principle of dividing the picture diagonally into a light and dark triangle.

The shrine at the left of the painting was actually seen by the painter in the church of San Marco in Florence and became the subject of the only one of the four drawings of details to have been executed in Italy. Throughout his stay in Italy Blume had been disquieted by the casualness and venality of worship as practiced by some of the people. The Christ-shrine bedecked with swords, epaulets and jewels - symbols of man's cruelty, vanity and avarice - reflects this disquiet, as do the figures of the novitiate and the woman who kneel before the shrine, their attitude something less than reverent. Behind the figures the peeling wall of the church is slowly yielding the imprint of its history, image by image, century by century. Before them is a beggar woman who is the subject of perhaps the finest of the four preparatory drawings; her head alone required more than a month to paint. The vines growing over the shrine are an invention of the painter, and were chosen for their romantic connotation, without regard to botanical accuracy.

The fragments of sculpture in the foreground are painted with that extraordinary precision of technique which Blume adopted in reaction against the stark, mechanical forms of his earlier works. (This reaction was undoubtedly stimulated by the paintings Blume saw in Italy, notably the Fra Angelicos, Mantegna's fresco, Death of St. Christopher, in Padua, and by Hugo van der Goes' Adoration of the Shepherds in the Uffizi). Reassembled, the fragments of sculpture would become two lovers. Their dissolution is explored by the artist's cocker spaniel - admittedly the wrong kind of dog for this solemn function, but included for sentimental reasons and supplying acute evidence of Blume's bold, inventive irreverence when confronted with an antiquity which has reduced countless painters to conceits or pedantry.

The fragments are grouped on a ledge overhanging subterranean corridors inspired by the Catacombs and the underground passages of the Colosseum through which

animals were driven to the arena. The jack-in-the-box head of Mussolini springs out of the rubble, staring pop-eyed and unheeding. This jack-in-the-box motif was probably derived from Blume's reaction to a papier maché image of Mussolini which thrust out at the traveller from a wall of the Exhibition Hall in the Dicennial Exposition in Rome. The head itself took its present form after a series of experiments in presenting the dictator as a composite of Italian ruler-types. In the painter's words, these experiments were finally abandoned because he felt he was "resorting to subtleties and subterfuges to depict something about which the Fascists had no embarrassment whatever." Painting the head in its present form cost Blume more anguish than it afterwards caused the most hostile of his critics: "I made the red lips clash with the green of the head, the color of the head strident and like nothing else in the picture: antithesis, dissonance. It hurt me to paint the head, but no compromise was possible. I felt that in doing this picture the question of harmony was superseded by other considerations...." In a word, the meaning of the picture seemed to Blume more important than esthetic relationships.

Beneath the head of Mussolini the common people of Italy file through the underground corridors of the Colosseum, away from the Duce's henchmen, the capitalist and the Black Shirt gangster, upward toward the sunlit Forum where the armies of Fascism are beginning to break ranks. The men of Italy exhort the troops from a distance, but the women crawl to them under the bellies of the officers' Uccello-like horses, as they did in St. Petersburg according to Trotsky's "History of the Russian Revolution" which Blume had read. Beyond the Forum is the landscape of Italy, yet the mountains are not the Appenines but the Rockies, which the painter saw on his return to America. The sage green tree in the right background - the sharpest note of cacophony in relation to the acid green of the Mussolini head - is a willow from Blume's own land in Gaylordville, Connecticut. To the right of the tree is a building extremely composite in architecture and bent to reflect the curve of the Colosseum's ruins. On its balcony priests are fleeing the disaster spreading below, leaving behind a woman tourist who watches the scene with an eye greedy for extra-guidebook attractions.

The light of the sky is held in firm yet subtle distinction from the light which falls upon the Christ-shrine, but appears at first glance to provide the over-all illumination for the rest of the picture. Gradually, however, the observer becomes aware that the source of light swivels with the curvilinear form of the inner composition within the light and dark triangles, falling on the left of the beggar woman's face but squarely from the opposite direction to light the profile and forehead of Mussolini. The sky was in fact the last section of the picture to have been painted, and the values of lighting had largely been determined when it was added. Mention of the lighting reminds us that the picture as a whole was inspired by the curious illumination which flooded the Forum as Blume stood amid its ruins. Here his own words are more than pertinent: "There always seems to me to be a curious process or alchemy by which a number of diverse ideas out of the accumulation of images and experiences are suddenly brought together into a unified picture. The keystone of the whole structure may be quite incidental and external, such as the peculiar light which flooded the Forum that afternoon." Not many painters are given to see such a light, nor with eyes so clear, fresh and strong.

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