

FORTHCOMING

"Jose Clemente Orozco," by Jean Charlot, who has spent the past year in Mexico making a study of its mural painting renaissance.

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"Cooper Union," by Elizabeth McCausland. Part Two of a series tracing the 100-year development of America's most unique school "for the advancement of science and art."

• •

"Some Notes on My Work," by Seymour Lipton, the sculptor who is also a practising dentist.

• •

"Winthrop Chandler: An Eighteenth Century Artisan Painter," by James Thomas Flexner. An appreciation based on the exhibition of the work of this all-but-forgotten artist that was held last spring at the Worcester Art Museum.

• •

"My Theories and Techniques," by Boris Margo, the originator of the graphic process he calls "cello-cut," who has also employed his principles of print-making to produce our November cover.

The American Federation of Arts

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MAGAZINE OF ART

A National Magazine Relating the Arts to Contemporary Life

JOHN D. MORSE, *Editor*

VOLUME 40

OCTOBER, 1947

NUMBER 6

Head of St. John Chrysostom, Cloisonné enamel on gold plaque, Byzantine, 11th-12th century (?). Lent by Paul L. Drey to the "Early Christian and Byzantine Art" exhibition organized by the Walters Art Gallery in the Baltimore Museum of Art (See page 239)	Cover
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"This vigorous and individual production of ceramic arts . . . reflecting daily life and fulfilling daily needs . . . is buoyant, personal, and witty."	
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"There has never existed such a thing as a painter of absolute art. We paint for our community now, hoping, as do all of the species, for a useful and therefore honored place in society."	
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PUBLISHED BY

THE AMERICAN FEDERATION OF ARTS

THOMAS C. PARKER, DIRECTOR

NATIONAL HEADQUARTERS: BARR BUILDING, WASHINGTON 6, D. C. PHONE NATIONAL 8178

The MAGAZINE OF ART is mailed to all chapters and members of the Federation, a part of each annual membership fee being credited as a subscription. Entered as second class matter October 4, 1921, at the Post Office at Washington, D. C., under the act of March 3, 1879. Subscriptions: United States and possessions, \$5.00 per year; Canada \$5.50; Foreign \$6.00; single copies 75 cents. Published monthly, October through May. Title Trade Mark Registered in the U. S. Patent Office. Copyright 1947 by The American Federation of Arts. All rights reserved.

All Mss. should be sent to the Editor, MAGAZINE OF ART, 22 E. 60th St., New York City 22. Unsolicited Mss. should be accompanied by suitable photographs (no sepia prints) of first-class quality required to illustrate them, and must be accompanied by stamped, self-addressed envelope, to insure return. The Editor assumes no responsibility for the return of unsolicited material. Payment is made on publication.

Articles in the MAGAZINE OF ART represent many points of view. We do not expect concurrence from every quarter, not even among our contributors; we believe that writers are entitled to express opinions which differ widely. Although we do not assume responsibility for opinions expressed in any signed articles appearing in the MAGAZINE OF ART, we hold that to offer a forum in our pages is the best way to stimulate intelligent discussion and to increase active enjoyment of the arts.—EDITOR.

Editorial and Advertising Offices: 22 E. 60th St., New York City 22. PL 9-7872.
 Advertising Director, Arthur Morton Good



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EXHIBITION OCTOBER 1947



FINE ART—OLD AND MODERN

FERARGIL GALLERIES

63 EAST 57TH STREET, NEW YORK 22, N. Y.

BOOK REVIEWS

The Geometry of Art and Life. By Matila Ghyka. Sheed and Ward, Inc., New York, 1946. 174 pages, 80 plates. \$4.

When a Greek painter, heady with success, signed his pictures "He whose works are divine," a wag, by the change of a few letters, made it read, "He who shakes a hot stick," in derisive allusion to the cuisine of encaustic painting. As in antiquity, the modern artist remains split wide between the physical job of art-making and the spiritual heights of esthetic contemplation. Probably the safest attitude for the practising artist is to stick close to what in art overlaps artisanship and to disclaim any magic power to usher other folk up the steep rungs of art enjoyment.

In the Paris of the 1920's, cubism was, on the part of the painters, an attempted return to commonsense. If lines and color areas be the means of painting, then why pretend that the canvas was a meadow and a spot of brown pigment a cow. The increasing process of rationalization that brought a re-estimate of the painter's means was bound to sidestep the more unpredictable element, color, in favor of line and especially of those lines that can be obtained with ruler and compass, and that are thus drained *a priori* of the personal idiosyncrasies that it was the cubist's aim to shake off.

Thus geometry appeared to the painter as the possible common ground where the rationality of science could permeate art, its temperamental and repentant brother. The scientific training of most painters is shaky, but with the help of mechanical aids artists managed to introduce in their pictures enough straight lines and related angles to give them a geometric flavor.

Naturally, the cubist looked at nature to find a justification for his doings, but what he saw was disappointing. With the strict state of mind to be expected from a convert, nature seemed to him a very loose affair. The painter frowned at the old standards of beauty, the swan, the rose, the sunset, and looking everywhere for cubes, cones, and cylinders decided that what he had in mind was superior in its purity to what Mother Nature had to offer. Started as an exercise in commonsense, the search ended in abstractions and the weaning away from everyday optics.

When Matila Ghyka's first version of "L'Esthetique des Proportions dans la Nature et dans les Arts" appeared, it justified the painter's dim instinct that saw in geometry a ground common to science and art. It did much (even if we only absorbed its text by a kind of mental osmosis) to reconcile us to the sights of Nature. I remember with what surprise I discovered that the sun flower—made by Van Gogh into a kind of expressionistic soul-mirror and rejected as impossibly romantic by the cubists—grows along a pattern of logarithmic spiral. To learn that the decreasing size ratio of the vertebrae of the neck of a swan can be interpreted mathematically made us humble, as it suggested that the foundation of beauty, even postcard beauty, went deep into this Pythagorean realm of numbers at whose threshold we stood, Ghyka's book in hand and dunce caps securely screwed over our bohemian wigs.

An important section of the book refers to the geometric leitmotif that links the different periods of art making. Under the skin of style—classical, gothic, renaissance, modern—a few choice proportions, a few mathematical beats, constitute the common denominator.

The faithful who kneeled in a gothic cathedral, the metallic assertions of a Ucello painting, the French finesse of a Seurat, all owe something to the golden proportion. As this is not an obvious element of the work, one is justified in speaking of esoteric knowledge. But one should be careful not to mistake the hidden with the obscure, and not to attribute to numbers supreme spiritual qualities. This may be right in the case of a Pythagoras who deals in metaphysics, but the painter is at work only when his hands are at work. To be fruitful, his meditations must be short and to the point, and a certain mumbo-jumbo that has crept over art geometry, saddling it with quasimystical properties will perforce leave the practicing artist unmoved. Golden proportion, harmonic door, Egyptian triangle, furnish him with a set of handy recipes no more mysterious than those to be found in a cookbook. A good cookbook put to action procures substantial delight, and the painter who uses the diagrams proposed by Ghyka will commune through these mechanical means with ways whose soundness is already proved by the flower, the crystal, the sea-shell, etc.

That the method is not foolproof is proved by some of the illustrations. That it is an open channel to mood appears from the dissimilar results that Guardi, Seurat, Dürer, and Villard de Honnecourt obtained from the same preoccupation.

Rereading the book in its new form and at this date, I find that the same truths acquire new resonances. In between time, an American mural renaissance has forced many painters to experience, as they fit a skin of color over the inner space of a building, the inescapable order inherent to the thrust of its verticals, the level of its horizontals, the abstract relationships between width, height and depth. If at all gifted with a sense of fitness, the mural painter will work in accordance with the painting's permanent habitat, feel hemmed in by the resistivity of materials and the why of proportions. Ghyka's book, though it bypasses the peculiar problems of mural painting, will prove useful to muralists in search of the magic that may match the illusive painted world with the reality of an architecture.

—JEAN CHARLOT.

An Early Manuscript of the Aesop's Fables of Avianus and Related Manuscripts. By Adolph Goldschmidt. Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1947. 63 pages, plus 61 plates. \$6.

This is fine and scholarly work devoted to the minute and revealing study of several very early examples of manuscript illumination. Until quite recently the study of these manuscripts has remained virtually neglected. The author was one of the pioneers in the study of early medieval art and iconography. The parallelism technique in this brilliant work proves a most stimulating departure from the usual research technique.