

Art

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ART VIEW

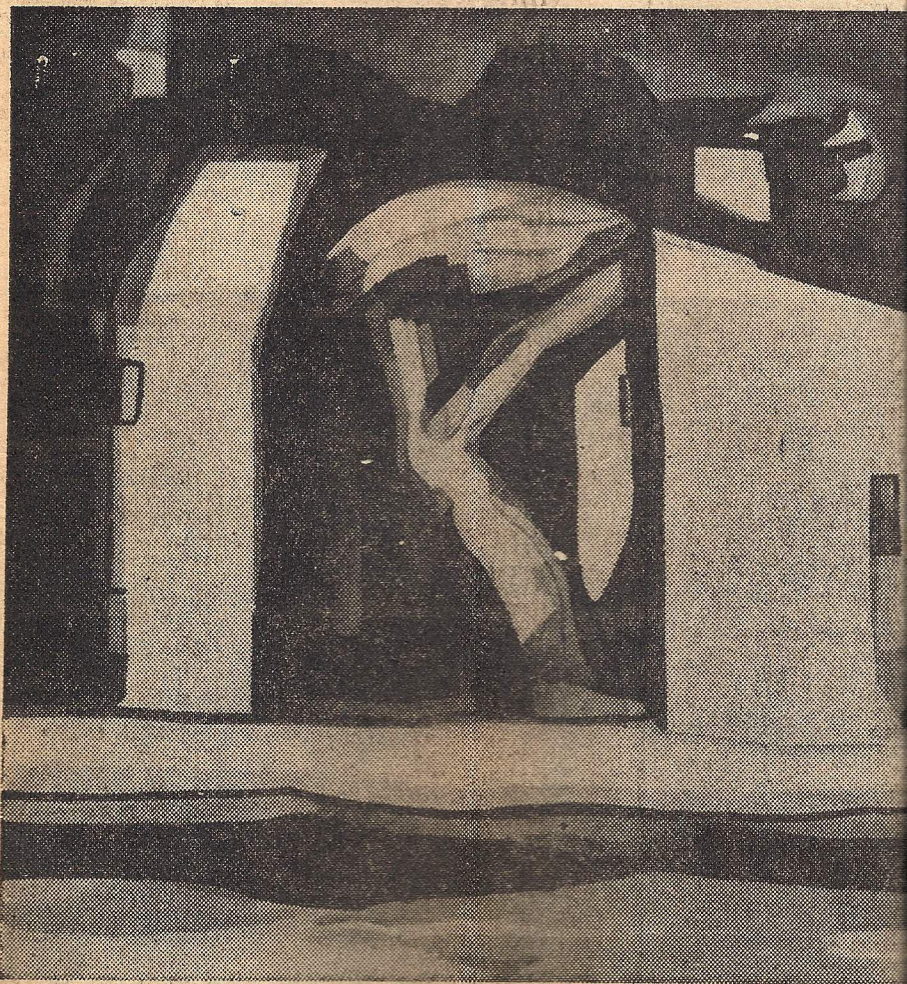
HILTON KRAMER

The Whitney Rediscovered Itself

After a period of considerable confusion about its basic aims and programs—confusion, indeed, about its very identity as an institution—the Whitney Museum of American Art appears at last to be undergoing a much needed reorganization of both its staff and its objectives. It is too soon to feel anything like optimism about a museum that has had such a consistent history of disappointing even modest expectations, but it is good news, all the same, that some fundamental revisions of policy are now going into effect.

Perhaps the best news of all is that the Whitney has rediscovered a fundamental fact about itself—that it is, after all, a museum, an institution with a sizable permanent collection of works of art that need to be studied and nurtured, that need, above all, to be augmented and exhibited and thought about. It is only common sense, you might think, for an art museum to give pride of place to its permanent collection—to what it permanently is, and permanently represents to the outside world—but common sense of this sort has somehow become something of a rarity at the Whitney. There were times when it seemed as if there were a conspiracy to pretend that the permanent collection did not exist.

The fact that the Whitney is the only museum in New York specializing in the American art of this century and therefore has a major function to perform in the cultural life of the city—and thus, since New York remains the art capital of the nation, in the country a whole, and in other countries



Oscar Bluemner's "A Situation in Yellow," in the Whitney

the Whitney's new intentions." [Hilton Kramer]. Right, self-portrait by Edward Hopper.



"Situation in Yellow," in the Whitney collection

too, perhaps—has never been sufficiently appreciated, I think. Certainly not at the Whitney itself. The task of researching and rethinking the achievements of American art has been forfeited, in recent years, to the National Collection of Fine Arts in Washington. A new idea or a fresh perspective, not to mention a major work of art historical scholarship, is the last thing in the world we have come to expect of the Whitney. As an intellectual force in the life of art, the Whitney could scarcely be said to exist.

Now, with a view "toward making the Whitney's permanent collection a central focus of its activities in the future" (according to the official statement), the museum has announced the appointment of two new curators—Patterson Sims and Gail Levin. Mr. Sims will hold the title of associate curator of the permanent collection, and will be responsible for organizing exhibitions drawn from or based upon the collection. (The first of these exhibitions is scheduled for February 1977.) The new policy calls for some part of the permanent collection to be on view at the Whitney at all times—a concession to common sense long overdue.

Miss Levin will hold the title of associate curator of the Edward Hopper Collection, and, with the aid of a grant of \$150,000 from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, will produce a catalogue raisonné of the entire Hopper oeuvre and organize a major Hopper exhibition to take place in 1980. That event will mark the 60th anniversary of the artist's first one-man show at the old Whitney Studio Club and the 50th anniversary of the founding of the museum.

The Hopper project is particularly interesting as an index of the Whitney's new intentions. The bequest of over 2,000 watercolors, drawings, prints and paintings by the artist's widow, the late Josephine Hopper, in 1969, was the largest single gift of its kind the museum had ever received, and it seemed at the time to throw the museum into a great state of confusion. It was first announced, and then denied, that the museum would disperse this bequest after selecting a certain number of works for its own permanent collection. No one seemed to grasp the idea that Mrs. Hopper's gift might be made the cornerstone of an ambitious campaign to attract other sizable collections to the Whitney. Certainly no artist or private collector or estate executor had any reason to think of the Whitney in this regard when, the first time around, a major bequest was met with such a curious display of professional bafflement.

This lesson has now, apparently, been learned. Miss Levin's assignment is important, then, not only to the fate of the Hopper bequest but to the future of the Whitney

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as a significant repository of American art, and to the museum's reputation as a place where the standards governing the study of American art will be based on something beyond the seasonal turnover of temporary exhibitions. It is almost enough to inspire some hope, especially as Miss Levin recently demonstrated, in the small but illuminating show of "Morgan Russell: Synchronist Studies, 1910-1922," which she organized at the Museum of Modern Art, that she brings both a keen eye and a scholarly intelligence to the very large task that awaits her.

Mr. Sims comes to the Whitney directly from the O. K. Harris Gallery, where he has worked as assistant director since 1969. This may not be everyone's idea of an ideal apprenticeship for a major curatorial post in a field where standards are still amorphous and basic discriminations remain to be made. It will be interesting to see what he does with this difficult job. One of his first projects at the Whitney does sound very promising—an exhibition, now scheduled for September 1977, more or less based on the book, "Skyscraper Primitives. Dada and the American Avant-Garde, 1910-1925," by Prof. Dickran Tashjian of the University of California at Irvine and published last year by Wesleyan University Press. Mr. Sims will be collaborating with Professor Tashjian on this show.

Professor Tashjian's book is a study of the writers as well as the painters of this period, and the exhibition is expected to follow a similar plan, with particular emphasis on the work and the ideas of William Carlos Williams, who was closely associated with many of the painters of his generation. There will be a shift of focus, however, to the art of the 1920's and 30's, with much of the work drawn from the museum's permanent collection.

Reviewing "Skyscraper Primitives" in The New York Times Book Review last year, James R. Mellow called the book "an obligatory text for anyone interested in the period," but observed that the author "is invariably more interesting—more at ease, perhaps?—in dealing with the literary aspects of American Dada than in considering works of visual art." It will be Mr. Sims's task to bring a fresh eye to the art of this period, and one looks forward to the result. An exhibition that is unafraid of ideas and the larger cultural context in which art is created, and that takes a fresh look at the art itself—that would indeed be something new for the Whitney.

Meanwhile, the museum is entering the field of international exhibitions. Last week a show of "Three Decades of American Art," consisting of work produced since 1945 and organized by Barbara Haskell mainly from the museum's permanent collection, opened at the Seibu Museum of Art in Tokyo, where it will remain until July 20. In the fall, another exhibition, of "American Painting 1900-1940," will be shown at Tokyo's Isetan Art Hall (Sept. 23-Oct. 11). And Mr. Sims will soon be at work on two exhibitions to be shown in French museums in the spring of 1978.

It is pleasant to think that the American art of this century—and not just the latest rage, or outrage, either—may be about to receive the kind of museological attention it ought to have in the city where so much of it has been created.