

ART

Southafrican Art since 1900

There are said to be 40,000 artists living in Paris at the moment. Southafrica, during her whole short history, has produced no more than 500 professional practitioners of the fine arts. Nevertheless, the past 60 years have seen a tremendous upsurge of artistic activity in this country. Every contemporary European trend, including the most avant-garde, is represented in Southafrican galleries. Whether this necessarily implies progress is of course a matter which most laymen find debatable.

New horizons. The fact remains, however, that particularly since the war—and possibly as a result of Southafrica's participation in the campaigns in Egypt and Italy, where many encountered for the first time the world's great treasuries of art—people have begun to look and buy, and to want to know more about both the work and the individuals who create it. This information has been by no means easy to obtain: to this day, no official index of Southafrican artists is to be found either in libraries or museums.

Recent reference. Both Dr A. C. Bouman's *Painters of Southafrica*, published in 1948, and *Our Art*, produced in 1961 by the SABC in conjunction with the Southafrican Association for the Advancement of Knowledge and Culture, were inadequate for various reasons. When, therefore, it was learned last year that the publishers, A. A. Balkema, had commissioned a



"THE DUSTY SHELF"—COETZER 1930
The old order changeth . . .

Courtesy Johannesburg Art Gallery

well-known critic to write a comprehensive survey of the field, the book was more than eagerly awaited.

Anti-climax. Unfortunately, enthusiasm did not outlast anticipation: *Southafrican Art since 1900* by F. L. Alexander is a sore disappointment. Its presentation leaves much to be desired: inaccuracies, mis-spellings and typographical errors are inexcusable at any price, certainly at the lofty R8 demanded for this book. Lay-out is unnecessarily awkward. Afrikaans and English texts are printed alongside each other, and are repeatedly interrupted by lengthy commentaries on the colour-plates. The book's greatest virtue lies in the excellent quality of these plates, and the general high standard of black-and-white reproductions. There are aberrations in selection, unaccountable omissions and the comment is confusing. Author Alexander is critic on *Die Burger*, and is well-acquainted with art-activity in the Cape, but a hurried tour was not an adequate means of familiarising himself more than superficially with the dynamic developments elsewhere in the country, and particularly in the Transvaal.

Artists' names are sprinkled in the text, and a list of sketchy biographies is inserted at the end. These slivers of information are useless in the absence of critical comment or illustration. Some artists are included incognito—Lionel Adams (Abrams), Marsha Braugner (Braunger), etc.—but the serious omissions would make another lengthy list.

Rush-job. It also seems that in his haste to get done, Alexander photographed the works most readily available, and did not seek the characteristic or the best. The text, really a longish essay, is interesting. But after all the trouble he has taken to identify local art with the mainstreams of European expression, it comes rather oddly that he should nevertheless set his sights on a narrow, "national" form of art. A publication of this kind requires more research and more considered critical assessment, followed by meticulous correction of the proofs.



"THE YELLOW BOOK"—BOONZAAIER 1948
. . . yielding place . . .

Johannesburg Art Gallery



"WINE AND VIOLIN"—ERASMUS 1962
. . . to new

It would appear that the publishers applied unwise pressure on the author in order to reach the Christmas market on time. Southafrican art of this century still awaits an adequate review.