

## The Wanderer

"Painters should be rootless," says André Masson. "I have never belonged to any fixed school. I am not a painter in the true French tradition." But perhaps Masson has been too French - for the French - passionate, spontaneous, yet also methodical, rationalistic. In any case, Frenchmen have ignored him most of his career, although that career, from cubism to abstract surrealism, is itself the story of modern French art. "They don't claim I have no talent," Masson says. "But they like chicken eggs, and I was laid by a duck."

Thus, when France's Minister of Culture, André Malraux, commissioned Masson, eighteen months ago, to paint a new ceiling for L'Odéon - Paris's most important theater and the home of

(Foto : Masson with design for ceiling: New sun for the city of light)

Jean-Louis Barrault's troupe - the critics groaned. Figaro Littéraire even invited ten leading painters to explain why the duckling was unfit for the commission.

Unveiled last week, the 180-square-yard circular panel is a bright wheel of fortune loaded with theatrical symbols - from an anguished Agamemnon and a pursued Lysistrata to a jovial, red-faced Falstaff. "At last," reacted Barrault when he saw it, "we have a sun over our heads." Explained Masson calmly: "It is the synthesis of all my various periods."

**'Poor Renoir':** Masson had gone through so many periods that even as a young man, he recalls, "a big critic looked at my work and said, 'This poor Renoir doesn't know what he wants.' What Gertrude Stein called 'the wandering line' is probably a key characteristic of my work. But it wasn't the line that was wandering, it was me."

André Aimé René Masson was born near Paris in 1896. He fought in World War I because he wanted to experience the "Wagnerian aspects of battle," was  
106a

wounded and still cannot raise his arms higher than his shoulders. "The war left me nervous, with nightmares that have never gone away."

By 1922, however, he repressed his nightmares long enough to adopt cubist discipline, but "my cubism had a noncubist content." Said Picasso after Masson's first one-man show in 1923: "This boy has taken our forms but he's put feelings into them that none of us thought of." Adds Masson: "Influences are the nourishment of artists. The lion eats the sheep but remains a lion."

**Vertigo:** The lion ate another sheep in 1924. He called it "automatic drawing." Otto Hahn, critic for L'Express, explained: "By giving a form to vertigo, Masson was the first to create an expansive space." Three years later, Masson started tossing real sand into his automaties - and was hailed as a surrealist,

until he suddenly decided surrealism was "a closed system."

But in 1936 he changed his mind and was a surrealist again. "I was like a man who has left the church and returns to it with twice the ardor." Five years later, as a refugee in Connecticut, he switched once more. "American energy fascinated me," he says. "I painted the power of the earth. The magic. The climate." He also had his first retrospective, at the Baltimore Museum of Art, and influenced Jackson Pollock and a batch of young painters who, a decade later, would be known as The New York School.

"By contrast," he says, "my homecoming after the war was very cold, so I moved to Aix-en-Provence and went back to nature studies. In the daytime, I worked from a model, like Renoir. But at night, I'd wake up from terrible nightmares and paint strange surrealistic grotesques. This went on until 1950. I call it my 'Loss of Imagination' period." "Masson," wrote Jean-Paul Sartre, "is re-

106b

tracing a whole mythology of metamorphoses; he transforms the domain of the mineral, the domain of the vegetable, and the domain of the animal into the domain of the human."

After that, Masson's fame spread rapidly. He had a retrospective exhibition, in Basel in 1950, another in London in 1955. "A Swiss critic called me the Sisyphus of painting. It's true there is a lot of suffering in my work. I adore it."

Finally, last March, he exhibited 237 works in Paris's Museum of Modern Art ---his first retrospective in his own homeland. The critics applauded. "The art of Masson," wrote Hahn, "is a perpetual flight forward, in quest of total possession." Added Raymond Cogniat of Le Figaro: "There is never a failure."

There is. "My logic has always been to find unity in diversity," says Masson. But that logic, like his ceiling, circles about an open center, and the white-haired, gentle old lion, now 69, is still looking for that center for, as he says, "my tranquillity."

106c