

From Pepper Martin to Molly Bloom

NYT Book Review

THE ART OF CELEBRATION

Twentieth-Century Painting, Literature, Sculpture, Photography, and Jazz.

By Alfred Appel Jr.

Illustrated. 246 pp. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. \$35.

By Nicholas Fox Weber

ALFRID APPEL JR. proposes that you devote a percentage of your bookshelves to "the life-affirming, celebrative works of the 20th century." Here you would have volumes with beautiful reproductions of the art of Brancusi, Matisse, Léger, Calder and Stuart Davis and of photographs by Walker Evans, André Kertész and Lewis Hine. There would be books of poetry by William Carlos Williams and Marianne Moore. The key fiction writers would be James Joyce and Vladimir Nabokov, with Ernest Hemingway represented by the Nick Adams stories. You would have some videocassettes as well — films with Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, Laurel and Hardy, Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton — and jazz recordings by Teddy Wilson and James P. Johnson.

Mr. Appel sees all these as vehicles to enrich your everyday life, powerful voices of affirmation. There is, however, a quicker, easier source: Mr. Appel's book, "The Art of Celebration: Twentieth Century Painting, Literature, Sculpture, Photography, and Jazz." This extolment of the multifaceted riches of modernism is itself a work of art that elates you.

The rich, larky narrative is a prose poem to a range of the finest achievements of our century. It is interspersed with quotations from Joyce's "Ulysses," Nabokov and William Carlos Williams. It is packed with nuggets of information, ranging from the physical and emotional effects that scleroderma had on the painter Paul Klee after 1935 to Alexander Rodchenko's reasons for turning from abstraction following the Russian Revolution. The text is intense but penetrable, idiosyncratic but consistently intelligent. It combines with vivid illustrations to make "The Art of Celebration" a special sort of volume. The closely integrated words

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and images jibe effectively and inventively.

To be as unabashedly enthusiastic as Mr. Appel takes courage. But he is determined in his goal of shattering the "tired half-truth" that modernism is "unfathomably abstract and obscure." He treats as the enemy "the newest academic fog banks" that obscure the more joyous, life-embracing sides of recent art. Instead, he explores the ways that certain artistic achievements of this century represent connection more than severance — their links to archaic sources and to myriad exciting aspects of everyday life.

So he leaps from Matisse's "Dance" to a rock engraving made about 15,000 B.C. in Palermo, Sicily, and from Kertész's 1926 photo of Mondrian's studio to the light in Gothic cathedrals. He pairs Marc Chagall's "Double Portrait With a Wineglass" and Jan van Eyck's "Madonna in a Church" because of the way that the human figures "dwarf the environment" in both paintings. Mr. Appel argues that the impulses behind artworks, and the magical, uplifting effect they can have on us, matter more than the less significant chronological and religious differences that distract prosaic scholars.

At one point Mr. Appel comes up with an imaginary scenario in which the narrator of a little-known 1925 Nabokov story passes the "Three Comrades" from a 1920 Léger oil and Hemingway's character Nick Adams, wearing an old Army tunic, on the street. "He'd salute and greet them as brothers, and invite them for a Löwenbräu," Mr. Appel says. This imaginative approach works; the writing is as freewheeling and devoid



Art Blakey in a 1949 photograph by Herman Leonard.

of constraints and boundaries as is its subject. In following this fantasy we are brought all the closer to the essence of the works in question.

Mr. Appel's text is often like a brilliant free association, attuned more to the soul of his subject than to less vital issues. In one paragraph he goes from Count Basie to Art Blakey to wicker chairs in Banana Republic stores to Pepper Martin of the St. Louis Cardinals "Gashouse Gang" of the 1930's (who, we are told, "didn't wear undershorts of any kind... and ran the bases with abandon") to Brancusi to Jan van Eyck's "Arnolfini Wedding" to spawning salmon. Elsewhere Mr. Appel finds his way from a Stuart Davis canvas to a Calder mobile to a Jean Arp sculpture to the television puppet named Alf back to Calder to a Muppet to a Harold Arlen song back to Stuart Davis to Nabokov (who appears throughout the book) to a Disney cartoon to a Johnny Mercer song to Krazy Kat back through a number of the images we have just encountered to Mondrian's "Broadway Boogie Woogie," and so on.

AFTER this last series of associations Mr. Appel adds, "And if these suppositions and the reference to the Muppets sound silly, then you don't understand the deep playfulness and open-mindedness of artists such as Davis and Calder." He wants his readers to partake actively of the dynamism and pulse and insouciance of much 20th-century art. The ending of the Count Basie-Pepper Martin-Jan van Eyck soliloquy is: "Question from an alert reader: 'Are Pepper Martin and the news photographer celebratory modernists?' Answer: No, you are, if you accept Pepper's race to third as it's been presented here."

That spirit of celebratory modernism is evoked above all for Mr. Appel, a professor of English and American culture at Northwestern University, by Molly Bloom's interior monologue at the conclusion of "Ulysses." He calculates that she says "yes" 87 times. When he evaluates a work of art, his main criterion is whether it belongs spiritually with Molly Bloom or with the opposite polarity he perceives in Franz Kafka and T. S. Eliot. Painting or music or photography is in the same camp as Joyce's heroine when it "accepts the life of the senses

Eros by a Landslide

Alfred Appel Jr. remembers the precise moment when he came to his distinctive conclusion about modern art, literature, music and film.

It was 1964 and Mr. Appel was a young instructor at Stanford University. "I began the lecture with some ringing phrase like, 'Modern man is isolated and alienated,'" he recalled in an interview at the Museum of Modern Art, where he was about to view the Matisse exhibit. "I said, 'We are all the denizens of T. S. Eliot's 'Waste Land,' and I built from there.'" But then, he recalled, he stopped, looked out over the students eagerly taking notes and thought, "I don't think I've ever seen so many happy, contented faces. Wait a minute, they're not isolated, they're not alienated. . . . Let me think twice about this 'Waste Land' idea. It's what we call an epiphany.

"From that day on," he continued, "I started teaching the books I had responded to, the affirmative aspects of 'Ulysses,' Wallace Stevens, Matisse, Louis Armstrong, Brancusi." Mr. Appel said he wanted his students "to think that somehow the pictures in the museum, or the prose or poetry they might have, can give them the same lift that music gives them."

Mr. Appel, 58, said his book extolling the positive aspects of modernism, "The Art of Celebration," resulted from 40 years of personal research,



MARK ROYCE/KNOPF
Alfred Appel Jr.

starting from his days as a young man roaming New York City. On the day that he saw a Matisse exhibition in 1951, he said, he might have "browsed on Sixth Avenue in the old magazine and record stores, had a grand dinner at Nedick's, gone to Birdland and heard Charlie Parker or Dizzy Gillespie and then gone home totally exhilarated."

However, he said, he did not begin writing the book until 1987, when he learned that his daughter was pregnant. He decided then to set aside work on a book about American war culture in favor of something more life-affirming.

The current Matisse exhibit, he said, is clear evidence of what people want from art. "The great popularity of this show suggests there is a kind of exit poll being taken at the end of the 20th century, and the vote is in favor of eros over thanatos. Matisse is everyone's person for celebrating the simple things that all the wars and disasters of the 20th century have not obliterated from the lives of ordinary people."

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10 December 20, 1992

quite naturally and reconciles the past and the present good-naturedly," when "instinct and desire have won." Thus, Mr. Appel applauds the "yes" of Matisse, the "yes" of Malevich and of the graphic art of Rodchenko. Down with the irony of Andy Warhol, with the cynical aspects of pop art, with critics who say "tsk tsk."

At times Mr. Appel's writing and thinking go slightly over the edge and are convoluted, such as when he maintains that an "evil-looking little green-and-blue beast" in André Derain's painting "Bathers" represents the "collective hurt and the morally attractive nature of Derain's jungle bifurcation." And there are moments when his taste and judgments are questionable, especially his enthusiasm for Photo-Realism and his contention that it is the "contemporary, vernacular version" of 19th-century Luminism, which was so much richer in its atmospheric space.

On a couple of occasions he gets his facts wrong: the van Eyck to which he often refers is "The Arnolfini Wedding," not Arnolfini, and George Gershwin died at the age of 38, not 39. But the extraordinary facts Mr. Appel does provide make up for these glitches. It is wonderful to learn that Gershwin's "last word was 'Astaire'"; that Charles Demuth's famous 1928 painting "I Saw the Figure 5 in Gold" at the Metropolitan Museum of Art was inspired specifically by lines from a 1921 poem by William Carlos Williams; that the 35-year-old Léger had refused to repair to the rear to paint camouflage during World War I because he did not want to leave the soldiers on the front lines; that the bands of Benny Goodman and Artie Shaw integrated blacks and whites before major league baseball and the armed services did.

Mr. Appel presents these facts because they en-

hance pleasure. He calls Nabokov a "prose celebrant of painterly colors"; he himself is much the same, not only of colors but also of jazz, of photography and of "the poetry of the commonplace." He makes us want to drink in his sunny yellows as well as his tankards full of beer, to be in cities, to high-tail it to museums, to listen to jazz. Other critics provide grim predictions and skeptical pronouncements; Mr. Appel offers instead some brilliant, quirky concoctions for pleasure.

You end "The Art of Celebration" looking at a fine color reproduction of "Broadway Boogie Woogie" and reading that when Mondrian painted it he liked to listen to the music of James P. Johnson. Johnson's "keyboard attack [was] so powerful, recalls Teddy Wilson, that 'sometimes the piano actually bounced.'" Reading Alfred Appel Jr., we hear and see and feel that glorious bounce. □