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THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

NEW YORK

11 WEST 53rd STREET
TELEPHONE: CIRCLE 5-8900
CABLES: MODERNART, NEW-YORK

SARAH NEWMAYER, PUBLICITY DIRECTOR

February 23, 1943.

TO Art Editors
City Editors

Dear Sirs:

You are invited to come or send a representative to

Press Preview of

NEW ACQUISITIONS

Tuesday, March 2
2 to 6 P.M.

at the Museum of Modern Art
11 West 53 Street.

The exhibition will open to the public Wednesday, March 3.

For further information please telephone me at Circle 5-8900.

Sincerely yours,


Sarah Newmeyer
Publicity Director

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

11 WEST 53RD STREET, NEW YORK

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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MUSEUM OF MODERN ART PURCHASES BLUME'S PAINTING OF ROME AND MUSSOLINI

A remarkably prophetic painting of Rome and Mussolini, Eternal City by the American artist Peter Blume, has just been purchased by the Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53 Street, and will be put on exhibition in the New Acquisitions Gallery of the Museum Wednesday, March 3. It is an infinitely detailed canvas which compresses into an archeological medley the Catacombs, the Colosseum, an early Christian shrine and a violent green jack-in-the-box head of Mussolini which bounces out from the right foreground of the picture to scowl with jutting chin and starting eyeballs over the ruins of Rome.

With the Ides of March fast approaching and the doom of Mussolini becoming more and more certain, this painting begun in 1934 and finished in 1937 may indeed presage the final attempt at terror by the discredited Fascist leader. But as the painting shows, the people of Italy are beginning to rise from the ruins of their country right under Mussolini's bulging eyes. In the background Fascist soldiers are shown breaking away from their officers to join the people.

The painting was purchased by the Museum from the artist through the Mrs. Simon Guggenheim Fund. With the painting, two of the four extant study drawings were acquired: the Jack-in-the-Box head of Mussolini, and the Insurrection in the Fascist Army. A third, Elemosina, the study for the Christ shrine, was given the Museum in 1935 by Mrs. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. These three drawings, with the fourth The Beggar Woman owned by Lieutenant Edgar J. Kaufmann, Jr. and on extended loan to the Museum, will be exhibited with the painting Wednesday.

James Thrall Soby, Assistant Director of the Museum, comments on the Blume painting as follows:

"The Eternal City was inspired by a journey to Italy which the artist made as a Guggenheim Fellow in 1932, the tenth anniversary of the Fascist March on Rome. Characteristically, Blume did not finish the picture until 1937, after a long period of meditating upon its imagery and nearly three years of continuous work on the painting itself, from October 1934 to July 1937. The picture was shown in New York upon completion and provoked an uproar, largely unfavorable in temper, which reached a climax when the Corcoran Gallery refused to admit the painting to its biennial exhibition of 1939. A number of leading critics condemned the Eternal City because of the anti-esthetic intent of the Mussolini head, whose green and harsh contemporaneity stood in rigid contrast to the lyricism of the remainder of the picture.... Today, Blume's courage and conviction deserve thoughtful reappraisal.

"The conception of the general subject of the painting came to the artist one afternoon in January 1933 as he stood in the Roman Forum near the Arch of Septimus Severus and was moved by a strange light illumining the ruins.... The fragments of sculpture in the foreground are painted with that extraordinary precision of technique which Blume adopted in reaction against the stark, mechanical forms of his earlier works. Re-assembled, they would become two lovers.

"The fragments are grouped on a ledge overhanging subterranean corridors inspired by the Catacombs and the underground passages of the Colosseum through which animals were driven to the arena. The jack-in-the-box head of Mussolini springs out of the rubble, staring pop-eyed and unheeding. This jack-in-the-box motif was probably derived from Blume's reaction to a papier maché image of Mussolini which thrust out at the traveller from a wall of the Exhibition Hall in the Dicennial Exposition in Rome.

"Beneath the head of Mussolini the common people of Italy file through the underground corridors of the Colosseum, away from the Duce's henchmen, the capitalist and the Black Shirt gangster, upward toward the sunlit Forum where the armies of Fascism are beginning to break ranks. The men of Italy exhort the troops from a distance, but the women crawl to them under the bellies of the officers' Uccello-like horses, as they did in St. Petersburg according to Trotsky's 'History of the Russian Revolution' which Blume had read. Beyond the Forum is the landscape of Italy, yet the mountains are not the Appenines but the Rockies, which the painter saw on his return to America.

"The light of the sky is held in firm yet subtle distinction from the light which falls upon the Christ-shrine, but appears at first glance to provide the over-all illumination for the rest of the picture.... The sky was the last section of the picture to be painted, and the values of lighting had largely been determined when it was added. Mention of the lighting reminds us that the picture as a whole was inspired by the curious illumination which flooded the Forum as Blume stood amid its ruins. Here his own words are more than pertinent: 'There always seems to me to be a curious process or alchemy by which a number of diverse ideas out of the accumulation of images and experiences are suddenly brought together into a unified picture. The keystone of the whole structure may be quite incidental and external, such as the peculiar light which flooded the Forum that afternoon.' Not many painters are given to see such a light, nor with eyes so clear, fresh and strong."

Born Russia 1906. To U. S. 1911. Application to National Academy of Design rejected; studied Educational Alliance; Art Students League, New York, Beaux Arts at night. Supported himself running subway newsstand; worked in jewelry factory and as lithographer's apprentice. One-man show, Daniel Gallery, New York, 1930. To Italy 1932 on Guggenheim Fellowship; fellowship renewed 1936. Represented Columbus Gallery of Fine Arts; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; Newark Museum; Metropolitan Museum, Whitney Museum and Museum of Modern Art, New York. Lives in Gaylordsville, Connecticut.

From the beginning of his career Peter Blume has worked independently, though the evident fantasy of certain of his works--notably of Parade and South of Scranton--has related his art in the public mind to Surrealism, with which he has actually had little association.

Mr. Blume is represented by 3 oils and 8 drawings in the Museum's current exhibition of Americans 1943: Realists and Magic Realists on view in the Museum's second floor galleries through March 21.