

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

11 WEST 53 STREET, NEW YORK 19, N. Y.

TELEPHONE: CIRCLE 5-8900

501026 - 65

FOR WEDNESDAY RELEASE

COMPREHENSIVE EXHIBITION OF WORK BY CHAIM SOUTINE TO OPEN AT MUSEUM ON NOVEMBER 1

Seventy-five oils by the late well-known Lithuanian painter Chaim Soutine (1894-1943) will be exhibited on the third floor of the Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53 Street, from November 1 through January 7, after which it will be shown at the co-sponsoring institution, The Cleveland Museum of Art. This will be the largest retrospective exhibition of Soutine's work ever assembled, covering the whole span of his working life, from 1915 to 1942. The paintings are being brought together from many parts of this country and from numerous collections in France and Switzerland, under the direction of Monroe Wheeler, the Museum's Director of Exhibitions, who has also written a profusely illustrated monograph on Soutine to be published simultaneously with the opening of the exhibition.

"Soutine," according to Mr. Wheeler, "perfectly epitomizes the so-called 'expressionist' painting of our century - expressive, that is, of inward vision and introspective drama. The dramatic clashes in nature and human nature thrilled him; and his own ego, overcoming every vicissitude by means of art, lifted him to exaltation. The tumult of his heart is exuberantly transformed into powerful rhythms and burning hues. In all he did there is a strong trace of primitive feeling, a general notion of the malevolence of nature and of subconscious obsessive fears. These are revealed in his restless flowing line, unearthly light and iridescent colors."

Biography

(Note: The following material is from Soutine by Monroe Wheeler, unless otherwise credited.)

Born in 1894 in the Lithuanian part of West Russia, Chaim was the tenth of eleven children of a miserably poor Jewish tailor who wanted him to become a shoemaker. Impelled to paint for as long as he could remember, at the age of 7 he stole some kitchen utensils from his home to buy some colored pencils, and for punishment was beaten and shut up for 2 days in the cellar. He was once expelled from school, a poor and inattentive student. At 16 he had begun to be an artist. He made a portrait of the village simpleton and, following this, asked the rabbi to pose for a portrait. The rabbi's son beat him so brutally for what he felt was an insult that Chaim's mother threatened suit. This produced appeasement in the form of 25 roubles towards

the boy's education, with which he went to Minsk to study painting. A little later he went on to Vilna, and here a friendly doctor helped him to go to Paris in 1913 to the Ecole des Beaux Arts. Soon he established himself independently on the Left Bank in a dilapidated studio which is portrayed in an oil painted in 1915 and included in the present exhibition. Here he lived in poverty while he was working out his artistic salvation. His hunger sometimes forced him to steal empty bottles from his neighbors to exchange for bread.

A self-portrait done when he was about 23 shows him as a raw-boned, truculent but sensitive youth. He always suffered from chronic nervous indigestion probably started by insufficient nourishment and developing into the stomach ulcers that finally proved fatal. This condition was aggravated by every trait of his psychology. He became a hypochondriac extremely concerned with what he ate and drank, and identified his abstemiousness with a kind of morality for art's sake. Instead of referring to his health when declining a drink he would say "No, I must not let myself be corrupted."

Soutine's mature career did not begin until the end of the First World War. In 1919 his dealer Zborowski, whom he had met through Modigliani, offered to send him to the Pyrenees where he stayed about 3 years and worked with intense concentration and fecundity. Here he developed a vehement style that shocked all his contemporaries and that still is difficult to understand. These landscapes seem to be shaken by some cosmic force: the houses billow and careen, the trees reel, the colors whirl, all with a great emotional force. These 3 years in the Pyrenees were the most prolific of his life: he produced over 200 canvases. Perhaps the death of his friend Modigliani at the height of his career, ruined by dissipation and distress, made Soutine work harder and more tumultuously. He was obviously seeking a new style, but with great dissatisfaction. After 2 years of monthly payments without receiving any pictures, Zborowski visited him and found scores of canvases in cupboards. Soutine was in poor health and had not eaten for days. The dealer hurried out to buy food and, returning, found Soutine trying to burn the paintings, a great many of which he did destroy. He frequently cut up pictures he did not like and then sat down to do them over again. Later in life he acquired whatever he could of his works prior to 1923 in order to destroy them. We probably have left only 1 in 10 of his canvases. "View of Hills" with its almost abstract pattern, illustrates his experimentation. "View of the Village" is the most extensive and formal of this series. In all of these paintings little room is allowed for sky.

Next in Cagnes, after a fit of demoralization, he developed one of the finest phases of his art and began the great series of melancholy figure paintings which he was to continue throughout his life. Representative of this period, and differing so greatly from the Pyrenees pictures that it is like a reversal of esthetics, are "Woman in Pink," "Woman in Red," a large view of Cagnes, "Boy with Round Hat." With their fairy-tale quality of delicacy, some of these and the landscapes, actually suggest a sudden personal happiness.

After 1923 he seemed to know exactly what he sought in his art and never to doubt its value and consequence. He developed but did not change. He moved constantly from one part of France to another, goaded by despair and apathy, by neurosis or inspiration.

Reputedly his first sale was to the English novelist Arnold Bennett. But his most important fortune was the purchase of his work early in 1923 by Dr. Albert C. Barnes of Philadelphia who bought a great many. From then on, collectors were always waiting to acquire his pictures, and by 1929 when he was 35, the whole world of art had heard of him. Thus, despite the early poverty and loneliness, his career was a success story. But though this doubtless seemed a miracle to Soutine, he always thought of himself as a wanderer; he expected the worst of everyone including himself; he never achieved real self-assurance or comfort. He boasted of his hardships, made a legend of his mishaps and distrusted his collectors.

In the last decade of his work it is apparent, through changes in his painting technique, that he wanted to become somewhat less dependent upon strident color and to achieve a stronger mastery of third dimension and of linear design. This is illustrated not only in his landscapes but in portraits like the "Servant Girl in Blue," "Portrait of a Young Man" and others of this period.

Soutine refused a chance to come to America in 1940 and stayed with a friend in Touraine. Though he suffered no specific violence during the war, it surely aggravated his nervous state, with a gradual, fatal effect on his health. His lassitude and misanthropy oppressed him more and more grievously, but in the "Profile of a Lady" and in the stormy landscapes painted just before he died, all his greatness spoke out in a new way.

He died on August 9, 1943, of "the hopelessly ulcerated stomach which had fed on and in turn nourished the despair that made him so fine an artist and so tragic a human being," writes James Thrall Soby, art writer and Museum Trustee. He created "an art of slashing impasto, free emotional distortion and...gave us everything of anguish there is within him.... The heritage of Soutine was one of Slavic melancholy, rough peasant vigor, almost barbaric appetite for visual luxury...of youthful suffering as frightful as the most impassioned 19th-century Russian novelist could have devised."

Influences

Contemporary artists in Paris, many of whom he knew despite his lack of sociability, seem to have influenced him very little, although he surely knew the work of the German expressionists, Nolde and Kokoschka. In his early days he talked mainly of Tintoretto and El Greco, and later he developed enthusiasm for Rembrandt and four times he journeyed to Amsterdam to see the Rembrandts there. Although he said he disliked van Gogh, it seems apparent that this master's later work must have helped him in his early landscapes and portraits and especially in the self-portrait of 1917. He responded, but in a highly individual way, to certain ideas of the intensely French Bonnard.

The religion of his forefathers seems to have meant little to him, and he did not suffer any persecution on this account. But having left his religion behind him, he proceeded to bring to his art a kind of religiosity, and it seemed to him inevitable that he should be somewhat martyred for his art. He was afraid of becoming like others and losing his singularity as an artist. He believed an artist should remain poor, and he had an unappeasable dislike and mistrust of middle class practices and relationships. Art must be his one and only bondage. Painting served as his morality, his penance and his atonement.

During the 1930s was when he most often borrowed subject-matter from masterpieces of the past. But his taste was never eclectic; there is no intention of parody or paradox apparent. He wanted to demonstrate what he could do with the themes and problems his two or three great idols had proposed. With no general relationship to Courbet's style, Soutine painted subjects similar to Courbet's. His great shocking still lifes were prompted by the Louvre's "Carcass of Beef" by Rembrandt, his greatest idol.

Subject Matter

Still life, animals, fish and fowl were favorite subjects for Soutine's dramatic treatment. This first appears in the early but already powerful "Still Life with Fish" (c. 1917) with its intense forms as vigorous as in their wild existence under water, and fish continued as an interest throughout his life.

Hulking carcasses of animals were the subject of a number of paintings, most notorious of which, according to legend, were several canvases done in 1925 of the entire carcass of a steer procured from friends in the slaughter-house. He continued to paint long after decomposition had set in; and when the police arrived because of complaints from neighbors, Soutine harangued them on the greater importance of art.

Following this he did a series of half-plucked fowl, painted sometimes after deliberate fasting. 190

Gladioli interested him for awhile, and he occasionally painted the same vase several times, rendering the leaves and petals like little licking flames.

Waldemar George, writing in 1928 of Soutine's mature work, mentions several of the painter's favorite themes in his description of Soutine's way of painting as a certain wildness of rhythm loosed on the canvas: "It bends and shakes his figures as though they had St. Vitus' dance. Harmonious still lifes, flowers and fruits, it reduces to rags and tatters. Houses oscillate on their foundations and move ardently hither and thither in the landscape, turning it topsy-turvy as in a series of seismic shocks."

A consistent preoccupation throughout his life was his great series of romantic figure pictures. In some of these he concentrated on a single color, but more often they reveal the full range of his palette. His first rendering of large areas of white was in "Reclining Woman" (1917), a technique carried 10 years later to a higher perfection in his great figure paintings. The figure paintings of youths in the uniforms of their work gave pleasure to everyone and brought him his first real prosperity: pastry cooks and "The Communicant" in white; valets-de-chambre, choir boys and the great "Page Boy at Maxim's" in reds. A few powerful individual portraits also came from his brush, notably the likeness in pale blue of the sculptor, Miestchaninoff.

The last important series featured gyrating portraits of romantic trees, perhaps derived from his youth in Lithuania where tree worship was a cult, and arboreal rites were still practiced.