

VISUAL ARTS

By Robert Taylor

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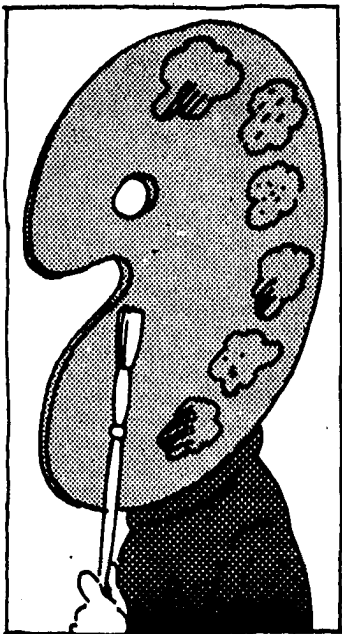
It was a year of blockbuster museum shows — Pompeii, Tut, Dresden, Early Irish Art. Pompeii broke attendance records at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, but the sumptuous Irish treasures (through Jan. 24) have been a box office disappointment. Tut and Dresden didn't play here, of course, still have done well on the road, a not inappropriate term, since if anything can be said to represent a trend, in the visual arts 1978, it is certainly the evolution of museums into enclaves of show business.

Otherwise the year is harder to assess. There were exciting debuts like the watercolors of Catherine Bertulli at Brockton, "breakthrough" shows like the painting of Gregory Amenoff, which acquired a fresh and powerful dimension at the Nielsen Gallery, successful appearances from established artists like James Wilson Rayen at Wellesley, David Aronson at Pucker-Safrai, Michael Russo at Brockton, James Weeks at Brandeis. There was memorable work in run-of-the-mill circumstances, like the drawings of Hyman Bloom, blazing forth from an un even drawing group at the Boston Athenaeum.

On the sociological side, the gallery circuit acquired new outlets (the Atlantic, Cutler/Stavaridis, Helen Shlien) in the Fort Point Channel area, which could become an alternative to Newbury Street. Artist collectives were still as popular as ever, particularly among women and minorities. The notable group of Afro-American artists (Dana Chandler, Ellen Banks, Stanley Pinckney and others) at Northeastern, demonstrated how viable the concept could be. And Artweek, the studio-visitation program organized by Kyra Montagu, appeared to be launched successfully: 400 artists greeted some 8 to 10,000 people during the fortnight of studio visits last fall.

The year almost past was a good one for historical perspectives. The Stuart Davis show at the Fogg last spring was long overdue. The "Milton Avery, American," at the Lamont Gallery of Phillips Exeter (it opens, by the way, at the Farnsworth in Rockland, Me., starting Thursday) supplied a beguiling glimpse of pictures the artist kept for himself. "Alex Katz in the '70s," at the Rose Art Museum, demonstrated how rapidly even the present dec-

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Museum blockbusters dominate art shows

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ade dissolves into a bygone style; and, more traditionally, the Frederic Church display, the first fruits of Theodore Stebbins' stewardship of American art at the MFA, indicated how much remains to be discovered in artists who have long been categorized and neatly filed.

The year included many groups and retrospectives worth mentioning, however. "Four," at Boston College (Michael Mulhern, Lee Newton, Robert Rohm and Anthony Thompson) used a wall or floor as an essential part of their sculpture, and carried on a dialogue between the pictorial and the sculptural. The Gyorgy Kepes show at MIT covered an exceptionally abundant and varied career in painting, photography and environmental art. The Fritz Wotruba exhibition at the Currier Gallery of Manchester, N.H. was a memorial to a European artist who, throughout his work, valiantly placed the figure of man at the center of creativity.

At the Institute of Contemporary Art, the influence of the new director Stephen

Prokopoff began to evidence itself. Prokopoff's aims for the institution, including fiscal stability and a level of consistent quality in exhibitions, began to achieve reality. The first shows under his tenure were the interesting, if controversial, Rafael Ferrer exhibition in September, and the equally interesting Roy Lichtenstein sculpture following, and while I deemed the Lichtenstein predictably repetitive, it nevertheless deserved the attention of anyone serious about the visual arts.

I cannot say the same for a dismal collection of San Francisco rock posters, feeble and derivative, which somehow got entangled with the sculpture.

The Boston Museum of Fine Arts began excavating for what will be its impressive new wing, the "mini-museum" designed by I. M. Pei. Incidentally, 1978 can be said to have been The Year of Pei, since his East Wing of the National Gallery in Washington, opened to an alleluiah chorus of critical praise. Later the revisionists were heard from, but on balance, Pei seems to have triumphed. The MFA's capital fund-raising drive proceeded cheerfully under Howard Johnson, and at year's end accepted a \$1.5 million gift from the Japanese government. This will help preserve the Museum's Japanese treasures as the institution commences a period of consolidation and the installation of climate control.

Finally there were the unclassifiable shows, like the Busch-Reisinger's Adolf Wolfli exhibition, a look at the links between madness and creativity embodied in the life of a Swiss schizophrenic. The Days Lumberyard show at the Provincetown Art Association celebrated a time and place when some of the most distinguished artists of America painted in a strange rickety studio complex. The Gustave Nyman show at the Museum of Our American Heritage was a poignant saga of immigration and assimilation, recorded by a Swedish-born woodcarver; and the current "Ethiopia" at Salem's Peabody Museum brings to light a style of art in ancient icons, a style unfamiliar to the west.

Oh yes, the highlights I've overlooked — Kathy Porter's loosely-handled, imaginative drawings, the Ray Elman-Richard Pepitone exhibition on the Cape, the Busch-Reisinger's 75th anniversary group, and the Masterpieces (through spring) of Harvard University's Peabody Museum, the bulk never shown before. For those omissions and others, I must plead nolo. The majority of Americans, after all, are conscious of 1978 in art as the year Norman Rockwell died; and though it would be possible to compile a necrology of corresponding names, again it could never be comprehensive. The business of art is life: Happy '79.



Wallpainting of a girl in Museum of Fine Arts exhibit "Pompei."