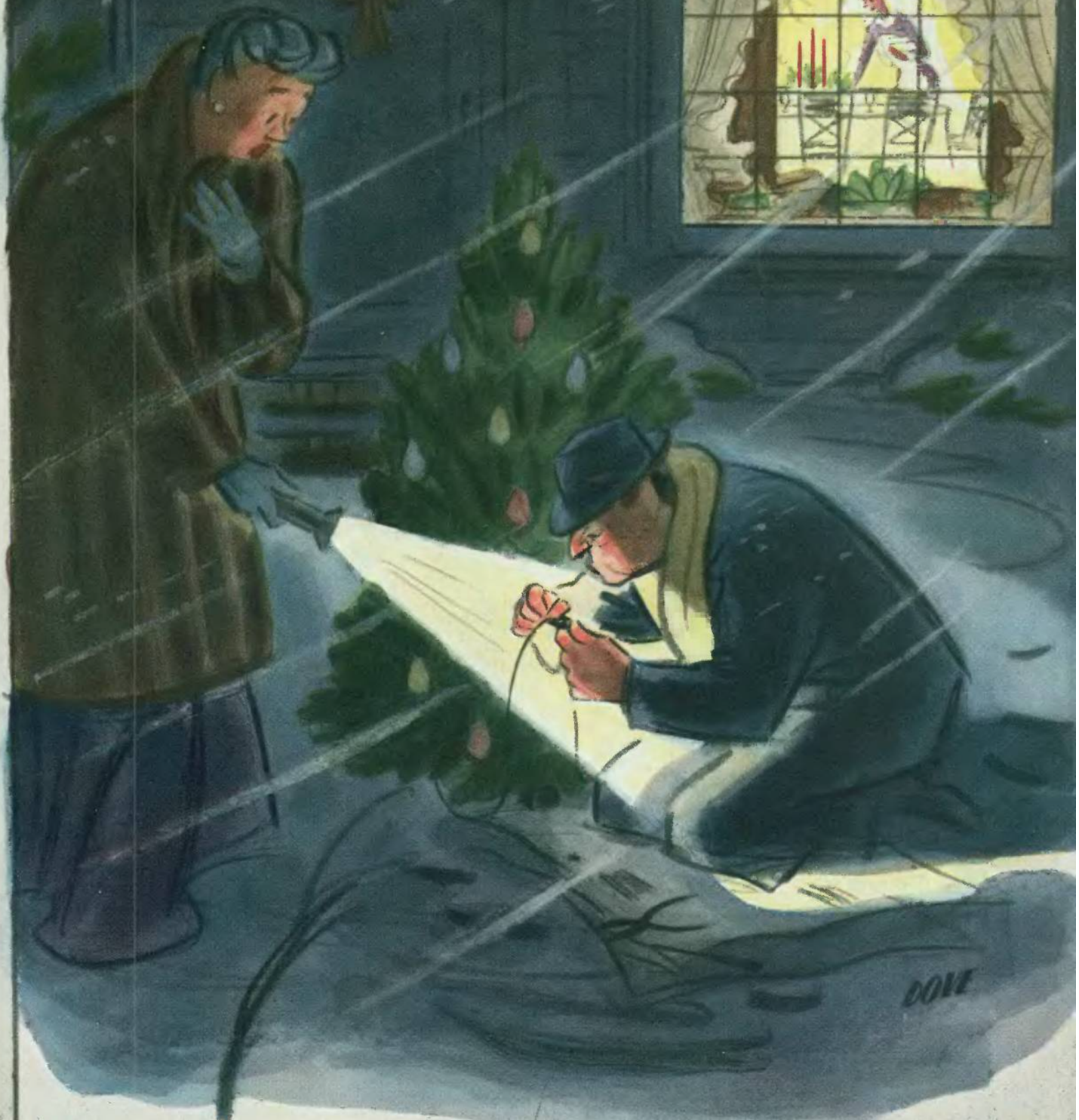


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## Charivari and Confetti



BEFORE saying all the hard things I feel must be said about the new Olivetti showroom, on Fifth Avenue between Forty-seventh and Forty-eighth Streets, I shall preface my remarks with a paean to modern Italian architecture. Even in the period of Mussolini, a reasonably perceptive eye could detect, amid the official architectural nullities of the period (none of them more deplorable, however, than our classic Triangle in Washington), a considerable amount of able modern work in Italy, and some conspicuously good engineering, such as Nervi's stadium, and especially its grandstand, in Florence. There was a moment when even Mussolini, before he was taken in hand by the Austrian house painter, cast a beneficent eye on modern architecture as an expression of that love for the mechanical and the violent that Marinetti had celebrated in his Futurist manifesto. It was a bad reason for approving modern architecture, but at its empty worst, under Fascism, Italian architecture nevertheless had the cold order of an urban background in a painting by de Chirico, and at its best, under the guidance of men like Alberto Sartoris and Ernesto Rogers, it promised to outstrip what the Germans had been doing in the twenties and the French in the thirties. That promise has been more than made good in the last decade. The main hall of the railroad station in Rome—I am not fond, though, of either the restaurant or the attached office building—is one of the most dramatic and aesthetically satisfying interpretations of function and construction that can be seen anywhere.

Among contemporary Italian works of industrial art, the Olivetti typewriters and adding machines, by consensus, deserve a high place, and they also deserve a showroom that has some of their qualities and is correspondingly free of affectation and of visual violence. That is what the newly devised Olivetti foothold, on the ground floor of the remodelled building at 584 Fifth Avenue, is not. The most important feature of the bowed-in show window that additionally serves as an entrance is a wooden door that reaches from the floor to the high ceiling and yet is so nicely hung that it opens easily. But this door is pretty well hidden from the outside by the mas-



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sive exterior building column that punctuates the façade of this slightly preposterous venture. At that, the two best touches are exterior ones. The first is the horizontal metal sign, slung between this column and the north wall of the structure, and placed lower and nearer the eye level than most Fifth Avenue signs; the firm name is spelled out in clean letters punched out of the metal. The second is the typewriter mounted on a conical pedestal of malachite, out in the open—a friendly invitation for anyone who passes to try the machine. This fully justifies the otherwise not especially legitimate device of the bowed-in show window.

Once through the door, one is in a high room with a blue ceiling (could this be the sky?) and a green malachite floor (could this be the ocean?). And if the answers are yes, what are the sky and the ocean doing, even symbolically, in this emporium? Between ocean and sky hang a number of lamps whose large glass sugar-loaf shades bear broad, smudgy horizontal stripes; these lamps are neither lovely to look at nor congruous with the rest of the décor. Two other objects compete here for attention—a rather clumsy flight of stairs (placed at an odd angle, for no discernible functional or aesthetic reason) leading to a mezzanine that hovers over the rear of the shop, and the south wall, which is of sanded plaster extensively and elaborately modelled in low relief by Constantino Nivola and is, considered as a detached work of art, an effort of considerable interest. Such a wall could be the making of many rooms, but this does not happen to be one of them. Unlike the great gilded screen toward the rear of the second floor of the recently completed Manufacturers Trust Company, a couple of blocks farther down Fifth Avenue, this decoration puts the rest of the room in its shadow.

And where, among all these schemes for bewildering the seeking eye, are the typewriters and adding machines? Those for prospective customers to try out are ranged on a shelf along the south wall. A few are mounted on conical malachite stands distributed about the room, or on a low, crescent-shaped table toward the front of the shop, or on a sort of Ferris wheel placed at right angles to the north wall. This wheel is fed by a conveyor belt that ascends from the basement. All in all, the architects have managed to put into one small showroom specimens of all the main epochs of modern architecture—Victorian mechanism, arts-and-crafts



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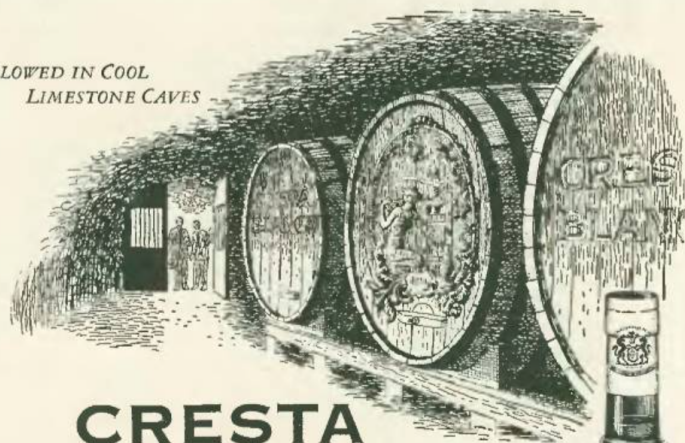


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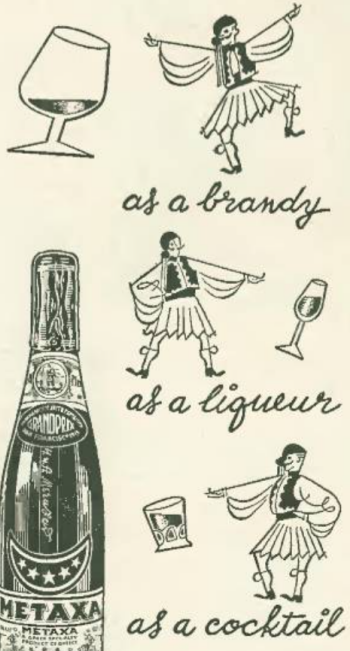
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decoration, International Style purism, and even Surrealism. Strangely, the architectural group that produced this mélange is, by reliable report, one of the best in Italy, and the only plausible explanation of these aberrations is that its members imagined they were doing justice to the spirit of New York in the modern age but had confused Manhattan with Coney Island. As a mere show-piece, the shop has, as I have been pointing out, a variety of features that capture the eye. Even the moving belt, though a childish device, claims one's attention, and so do the conical pedestals, growing as smoothly out of the floor as they would in a Dali landscape. But these features do the wrong thing for the wrong purpose. The one purpose of this showroom should be to give a buyer a chance to study the Olivetti machines in peace, without the nervous competition of many other objects.

The problem of designing the room was not essentially different, apart from differences in scale, from designing the Manufacturers Trust Building; they are both, in essence, showrooms, and both seek to attract attention to their products and their services. In the bank there is a formal and a functional harmony between its various parts; however pleasing the ranks of green foliage, however glorious the golden screen, they do not unduly divert one's mind from the business in hand. But there is nothing in the Olivetti showroom that provides so much as a hint of the singular combination of technical skill, productive efficiency, aesthetic taste, and social responsibility that makes this firm one of the most interesting industrial enterprises in the world. Perhaps the architects were not at fault; quite possibly, the design was a publicity director's concept of "humanization," and the Olivetti company merely repeated the mistake made by the Penguin Books people when, coming to America, they temporarily abandoned their distinctive covers for the tawdry, nondescript jacket they must have thought was typical of America and attractive to Americans. In a way, the conflict between the simple functional requirements of this showroom and the aesthetic hodgepodge it actually is could do honor to the architects. It could indicate the uneasy belief—becoming more and more widely shared by at least the younger generation—that no architectural design is complete that does not recognize certain feelings which are omitted by the calculus of the machine. Unfortunately, the human touch cannot be achieved with a simple slice of decoration; that was the

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serious mistake of the old Art Nouveau movement, half a century ago. To find the human key to the Olivetti design, the architects would have had to say to themselves, "If I were buying a typewriter or an adding machine, what would make it easy for me to try out the various models and come to a decision?" There is presumably a pleasant architectural answer to that problem, and I am confident it involves neither colored lampshades nor conical display stands nor sophisticated sand modelling.

THIS indecision as to what constitutes the "human" and the "organic" in architecture was apparent at the beginning of the Victorian period, and because the problem was never posed in its fundamental terms by either the traditionalist architects or the progressive engineers, that period remained a mass of unresolved contradictions. Professor Henry-Russell Hitchcock's new two-volume "Early Victorian Architecture in Britain" (Yale) gives an extensive and detailed analysis of the Victorian dilemma, or at least provides the material needed for the analysis. These two volumes—the second consists entirely of illustrations—are perhaps the first work that does not attempt to treat Victorian architecture as a grim joke or as a guide for amateur decorators intent on a revival of "The Ottoman and the Whatnot," to recall Roger Fry's prophetic essay. That Hitchcock turned to this subject after a long career concerned with the development of modern architecture is not a mere caprice of scholarship, for many of the problems the architect faces today date back to the very beginning of the Victorian period. As the author wisely remarks at the end of his introductory chapter, "The twentieth century certainly has no right to patronize the nineteenth."

"The richness and vitality of the total Victorian story" is what interests Professor Hitchcock, and he tells that story with the lavishness of detail that belongs to the Victorian novel. This tale must increasingly concern the present generation, if only because the architectural parallels between the two periods have lately become almost as striking as their divergences. The first experiments in iron and glass for office buildings and railway sheds raised problems similar to those posed by recent structures that have atavistically gone back to these materials. The Victorian experiments with polychrome decoration, in painted metal and colored tiles, have been repeated in

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such buildings as the ones Eero Saarinen has designed for the General Motors Technical Center and Brandeis University, and who can say that these newest results will seem more satisfactory than the earliest a hundred years hence? Meanwhile, many Victorian Gothic churches have ripened beyond the stage of crude post-Victorian design, and in the course of time their fake historic forms have mellowed into something very like the real thing; witness churches like the English architect Dawkes's St. Peter's, in Cheltenham. These buildings now have a claim to our interest, little though they contributed toward solving the problems of a new form based on a rule "so broad as to admit of no exceptions." Though Mr. Hitchcock's monumental study is meant primarily for the scholar, it should add considerably to the enjoyment of visitors to Britain, who too often confuse the "historic" with the merely moss-covered and dilapidated. For the rest of us, the rich confusion of the Victorian mind, torn between the pieties of a Pugin and the technical innovations of a Paxton, wanting the best of both worlds yet incapable of bringing them together in an organic form, has likewise something to tell us about our own state, or at least about the unsatisfactory nature of a purely one-sided solution.

Sigfried Giedion's new monograph, "Walter Gropius: Work and Teamwork" (Reinhold), is the first full-length study of the man who as teacher has had as much to do with the development of the modern movement as Le Corbusier has as its publicist. Giedion is the writer of two books that are already classics—"Space, Time, and Architecture," which has undergone many revisions and additions since it came out in 1941, and "Mechanization Takes Command," in some ways an even more important book—so one expects much of him both as critic and as historian. But this time, I feel, he has let us down. By now, the great leaders of the modern movement deserve more than just publicity and eulogy; they have reached a point in their historical development where they deserve a rigorous critical treatment—one that will not simply extoll their virtues but that will candidly discuss their shortcomings. This is all the more necessary because it is the weaknesses of a master that are usually imitated by his followers. Gropius's resolute consistency made him indispensable as moral backbone for the post-1918 architectural movement, yet surely a critic should at least have raised the

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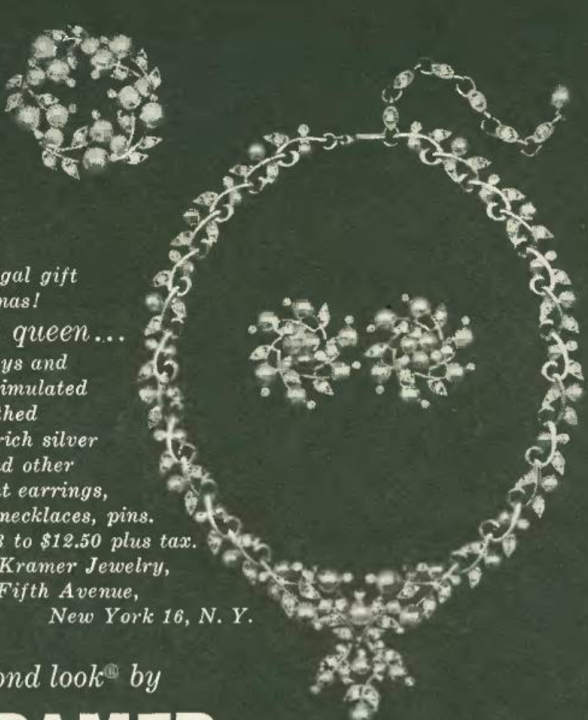
question of why his first buildings, done in collaboration with Adolf Meyer (the Fagus factory, of 1911, and a group of buildings in the Cologne Deutsche Werkbund Exhibition, of 1914), show him at a peak of achievement he never surpassed. That is important for the evaluation of his development as architect. Again, Giedion, though he includes the Expressionist woodcut, by Lyonel Feininger, that was used as the title page for the first Bauhaus prospectus, in 1919, does not mention Gropius's Expressionistic interlude, directly after the First World War—as if that were a disgraceful episode instead of, perhaps, the master key to his thenceforward strict, puritanic discipline. Too often, in this monograph, as in his references to slab buildings and the forms of the modern city, I find Giedion echoing fashionable slogans instead of critically examining their contents. This is a pity, for Gropius's unshakable probity, his moral and aesthetic earnestness, would have come out all the more clearly if they had been shown against the superficial currents of stylistic change that have been eddying around him. For all that, a complete picture of his work appears in these pages, and the reader can learn for himself why the architect of the Dammerstock workers' housing project in Karlsruhe, and the Deutsche Werkbund exhibition in Paris in 1930, and the Ford house in Lincoln, Massachusetts (to cite three of his best works) could never by himself have made the mistakes that the architects of the Olivetti showroom have made. No one has done more than Gropius to further the impersonal, the standardized, the anonymous, the rational, the collective aspects of modern architecture, all essential components of modern form. By demonstrating how far a sincere mind can go in his designs by these means alone, Gropius has also indicated, to his more intuitive successors, what remains to be done.

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