

The Maeght Museum: Trouble in Paradise

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

ST. PAUL DE VENCE, France.

IT is a question whether the Maeght Museum in this popular town in the south of France is high style or high art; on one of two recent visits it was closed for a fashion show while frustrated art lovers made a fine French brouhaha at the barred gates. Its publicity has been glossy and chic, and it is undeniably one of the most

soigné displays of modern art to be found anywhere.

As the Maeght Foundation, this is the publicly shown, private collection of Paris dealer Aimé Maeght, who handled all of the right people at the right time, and has some smashing things of his own to show for it. A roomful each of Braque, Chagall, Derain, Giacometti, Kandinsky and Miró, for example; works that are satisfying in-

dividually and overwhelming in concentration.

Housed in a year-old group of interrelated buildings and gardens by the Catalan-born architect José Luis Sert, who is head of the Harvard Graduate School of Design, the Maeght Museum has the infallible snob appeal of money, culture and the collector's collection, in a setting that has long been the playground of the very, very rich.

It therefore came as a surprise to one visitor to find the museum far more impressive than the slick publicity or beautiful models in bikinis floating around a giant Calder would indicate. It is both a collection and an installation to be taken seriously, and in many cases, savored.

Dazzler

It would be a rich and rewarding assortment under any circumstances, but the particular liaison attempted here between art, building and landscape makes it one of the more important esthetic undertakings of our time. It also raises the question — a real one this time — as to how well the ambitious program has succeeded beyond the obvious pleasures of a dazzling show on an equally dazzling site.

The total immediate impact is superb: art wedded by architecture to a Mediterranean hilltop, rich in olive, oak, pine, cypress, fig and orange trees, overlooking breath-taking views of the Côte d'Azur from the sea to the distant Alps. But the demands on the architect have been formidable, for the very nature of his task has been to equal the quality of the art and the natural landscape, while acting as a catalyst for both. Unfortunately the buildings come off least well.

They perform their functions admirably. The galleries, with their changes in level related to the hillside site and their grouping around courts and sculpture gardens and patios, are pleasant in the extreme. The lighting, generally high and natural, comes from the rather mannered segmental vaults beloved by the architect, and is both sensitive and effective.

There are enchanting pas-

sages — a surprise outlook onto a shallow pool with a Braque mosaic of fish on the floor; a great Calder stabile seen through pines and perfectly scaled to one of the building's simpler facades; a high ceilinged gallery with a spacious unity that climaxes the smaller rooms perfectly.

And then there are the two most ambitious parts of the scheme, the celebrated Giacometti court and Miró labyrinth garden. Here the architect, artists and patron collaborated outdoors, designing settings related to the buildings for specially commissioned monumental sculptures.

But it is outdoors that the observer becomes uneasy. For if there is a failure in Mr. Sert's consistently competent work, a representative amount of which can now be seen in the Boston area, it is that his thoughtful solutions are marred by a persistent, staccato fussiness.

These are busy buildings, their masses broken by intricate sunbreaks, balconies, railings, smartly rolled shell roofs, brisk half-barrel vaults and peekaboo openings inside and out, accented with color. In this case, both the art and the site cry out for a simple largeness and architectural repose.

Materials

This, if anywhere, would be the locale for the broad, handsome sensuousity of natural concrete. Instead, there are hard surfaces, sharp details and the rigidity of brick. Brick panels fill the white-painted exposed reinforced concrete frames of the buildings, which are topped by smartly striking forms.

Walls outside the building use random local stone. In the Miró labyrinth garden, the

walls multiply, forming a series of stepped, curved terraces on ascending levels. This is the setting for several spectacular Miró works: a knobbly attractive 23-foot high triumphal arch, a fairy-tale giant egg, a wall-hung lizard, a substantial primitive goddess and a joyously soaring bronze fork suspended at the edge of a magnificent vista.

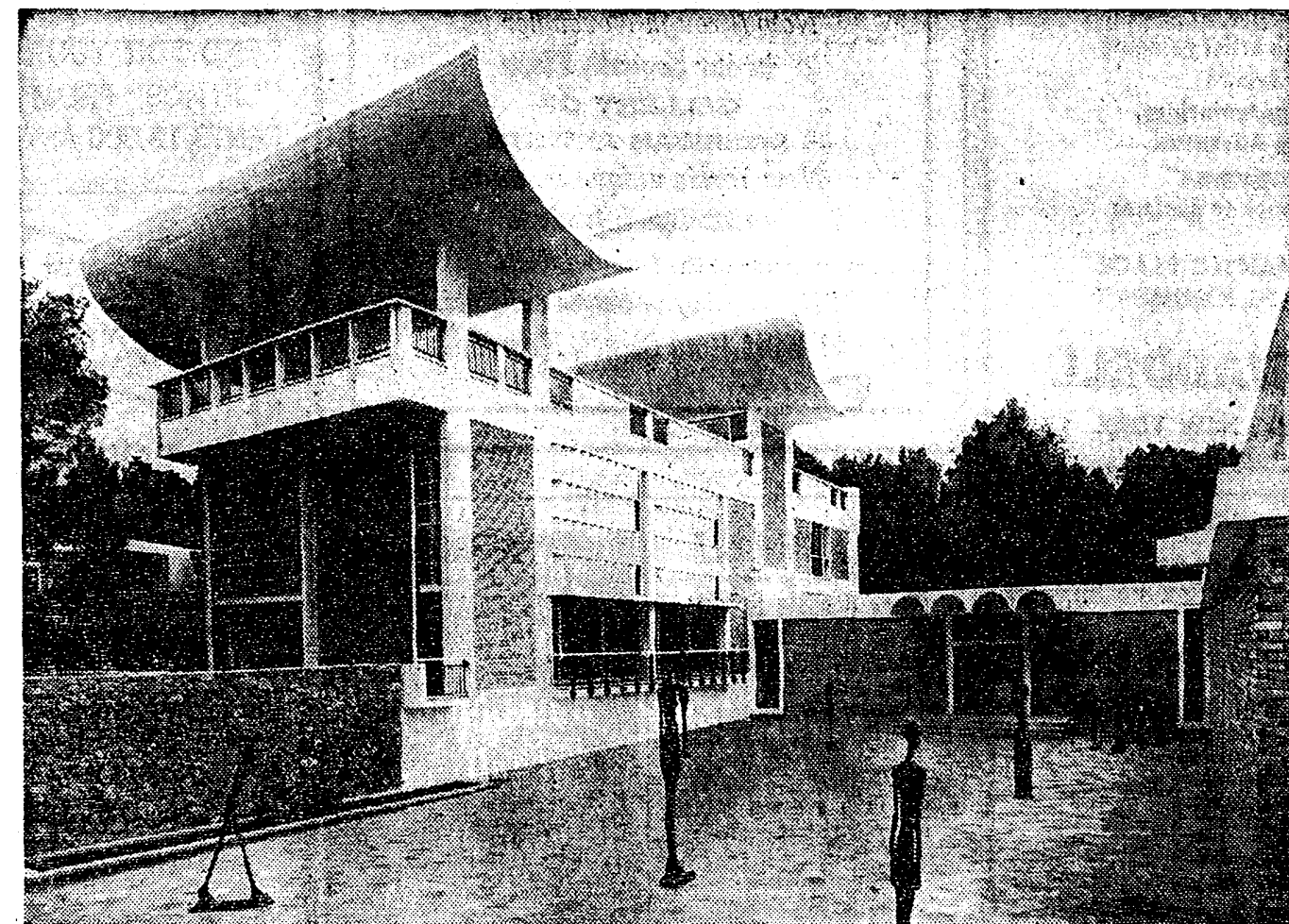
Here the transition from brick to stone is disturbing, with the stone provided in indigestibly large, jagged doses. The broken pattern of too many, too strong walls winding up and down among pools and fountains is more like a miniature golf-type obstacle course of esthetic hide and seek than the magic wonderland that the collaborators obviously had in mind.

Impact

The Giacometti court is more successful. Contained on three sides by the buildings, it has a certain grim grandeur. The frozen, stalking figures are set singly and in sparse, petrified groups on a flat tile floor against the miraculous backdrop of the view. They have tremendous presence.

Tying everything together—brick, stone, tile, sand, gravel and even, surprisingly, the outdoor Giacomettis—is carefully coordinated "midi color," in the umber to russet tones characteristic of the region. This occasionally seems less a device for artful unity than a cosmetic cover.

Framed by the pines or rolling panoramas, with a minimum of architectural interference, the art and the setting unite for an extraordinary emotional experience. The trouble is that you just can't beat nature as a background, particularly in this part of the world.



Giacometti Court, Maeght Museum, St. Paul de Vence, France. José Luis Sert, architect.
"... a certain grim grandeur ..."