# ART WITH ARCHITECTURE: NEW TERMS OF AN OLD ALLIANCE

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

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OF all the accusations leveled regularly at modern art, the most serious is "lack of communication." From the do-it-yourself esthete who may not know if it's art but knows what he likes, to the intellectual who professes to know but is equally resentful, the protest is the same: today's artist creates for himself alone, wilfully refusing to share his intent or experience with the rest of us, deliberately flouting his traditional moral and cultural obligations to society.

Paradoxically, examples of abstruse contemporary art are appearing more and more frequently in public places and are being enjoyed. As perfect allies to modern architecture in New York's current building boom, abstract painting and sculpture are giving a kind of pleasure that refutes the familiar charges of arrogance, obscurity and unintelligibility.

## Natural Companionship

The reason is a sound one. The large scale, the excitement, the explosive color and the intricate, often sensuous, patterns of abstract art add congenial richness to the austerity of today's building forms. To debate moral justifications becomes suddenly pointless in the face of so natural a union. Abstract art developed with apparent historic inevitability during the same years that architecture took on an unprecedented plainness, ranging from the understated elegance of Mies van der Rohe's sleek surfaces to the depressing monotony of the stark commercial curtain wall.

This extreme plainness is enforced by technological and economic necessity, but it may be at once relieved and emphasized by the proper use of art. And whatever criticism may be made of abstract art as an independent expression, it ideally extends contemporary architectural design. To fill a need, art has come out of its ivory tower and into the office building lobby.

In recent years, New Yorkers banking at the Manufacturers Trust Company building at Fifth Avenue and Forty-third Street have received the extra dividend of an unusually handsome abstract metal sculpture, the seventy-foot-long rough golden screen by Harry Bertoia on the mezzanine floor, clearly visible through the glass exterior. Purchasers of typewriters (and those who write cryptic notes on the display machine mounted permanently outside) are treated to Costantino Nivola's dramatic sand-sculptured wall in Olivetti's Fifth Avenue showroom.

Workers or visitors entering the aluminum-faced Tishman Tower at 666 Fifth Avenue pass through an unusual elevator lobby of strange, milky luminosity, under the thin, white sculptured baffles of the ceiling lighting shaped in stalectite undulations by Isamu Noguchi. Josef Albers' "Structural Constellations," a geometric mural defined in precisely incised gold lines, punctuates the hard brilliance of one long wall of the glass and marble ground floor of the recently completed Corning Glass Building at 717 Fifth Avenue.

Patrons of the spectacular new Four Seasons Restaurant in Park Avenue's Seagram Building dine surrounded by art. In addition to such stodgy old masters as Picasso, with a huge painted drop at the glass-doored entrance (dominating the view from the lobby and even visible from the plaza outside), and Miró, with a trio of tapestries, there are Jackson Pollock, with a painting at his usual architectonic scale, and Richard Lippold.

## Spontaneous Appreciation

Lippold's twenty-six-foot square construction of 5,000 slender brass rods is suspended delicately over the bar from 10,000 hooks, reminding The New Yorker of "golden strokes of rain" and admired by more objective critics as an abstract composition in spatial intervals. Seagram's own offices are hung with works by Picasso, Miró, Mark Rothko and Stuart Davis, all large-scale architectural installations rather than pictures on the wall.

Used in this way, abstract art offers a positive and enjoyable experience to many persons who otherwise find it meaningless. At this scale, and in this kind of setting, art communicates directly with the spectator, even if its message is not literal, pictorial or personal, and even if it does so only in a passing moment of an average day.

Surprisingly, abstraction is the easiest and most rewarding form of art for the spectator on the run. In conjunction with architecture it makes no extraordinary demands on the viewer. Rather it calls forth the most direct and primary reactions, in the shortest time, at the most spontaneous emotional level.

Nor is this merely wallpaper decoration. Underlying all successful architectural painting and sculpture of the past, regardless of subject or story, are the same basic components that make up contemporary abstract work: color, pattern, surface, form and line. Today we use these components naked, without the story, in keeping with the modern vision of a stripped-down esthetic, common to all the arts of our time.

What differs, importantly, is not just the present nature of the arts themselves but the current method of combining them. The hue and cry for artistic integration, with passionate fingerpointing to the monuments of the past (Gothic cathedrals where structure and sculpture were one; baroque frescoes that daringly extended architectural space) has misdirected and doomed to failure many of the best intentioned endeavors of the present. For not only have the arts changed radically; their relationship to each other, as well, also has been transformed.

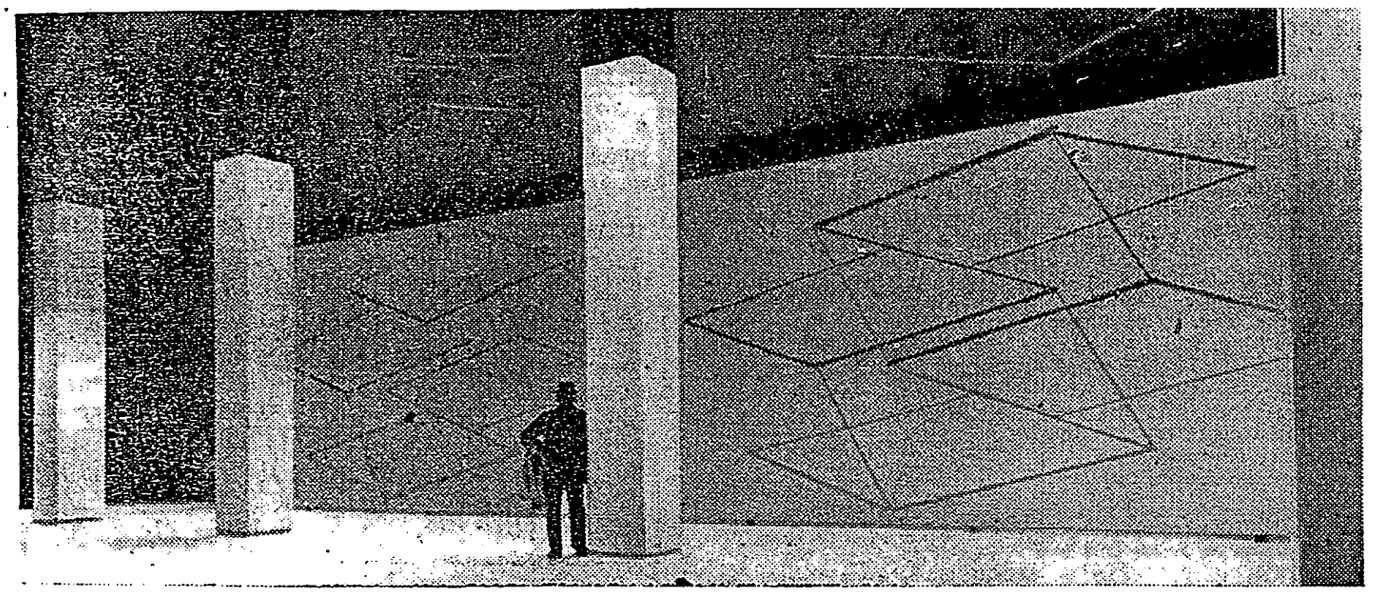
The most effective use of art with architecture today is not based on integration, or unification or oneness, but on deliberate contrast. The boldness, freedom, and individuality of painting and sculpture are calculated in sensitive apposition with the cool, mass-produced precision of contemporary building. This contrast, with one art played aginst another for mutual gain, replaces the idea of integration.

## Exceptions and Failures

There are valid exceptions, such as Nivola's sculptured reliefs forming actual curtain-wall panels, and Robert Sowers' stained-glass facades, like the one proposed for the American Airlines Terminal at New York's International Airport, which become parts of the wall. Generally, however, structural integration is not only rare but is also a questionable objective under today's changed technical and esthetic conditions. The problem should be restudied to save further well-meant efforts from failure.

Even when integration is not a problem, many alliances between art and architecture are unhappy ones. The practice of splashing "art" ostenstatiously in entrances (where it shows) after every conceivable corner has been cut in the rest of the building (where it doesn't show) is increasingly common with commercial builders. This may dazzle a gullible public, but it cannot redeem a shoddy structure. Nor can art be applied to a building rubber-stamp fashion. One of New York's largest new offices, at a distinguished address, adds an ill-considered mosaic to a distressingly fussy curtain wall, neither of which does anything to define or clarify the building's monumental scale.

The fault in such cases is not the artist's. Almost 2,000 years ago, Vitruvius said of the architect, "It is by his judgment that all the work done by the other arts is put to the test." The words are still pertinent. The total building is the architect's work of art.



ABSTRACT MURAL — "Structural Constallations," gold leaf, by Josef Albers, in Corning Glass Building.