

lived for 10 years in buildings where they were exposed to airborne asbestos has so far turned up no increase in diseases.

At one time, the authors say, asbestos workers were routinely exposed to chrysotile at concentrations of 100 fibers per cubic centimeter. Today, at the federal standard of 0.2 fibers, even asbestos mines and mills pose no threat to health. And in

buildings with exposed asbestos, the concentration is only one percent of the workplace level. In the future, the authors argue, federal standards must distinguish between the hazards of the two asbestos families, as European regulations already do. The last thing we need is to fill the air with cries of panic—and the fibers from asbestos hastily stripped from schools.

Nature's Medicine Chest

"Prospecting for Nature's Chemical Riches" by Thomas Eisner, in *Issues in Science and Technology* (Winter 1989-90), 2101 Constitution Ave. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20418.

Even optimists now concede that plant and animal extinctions are going to occur at an alarming pace well into the next century. "We have yet to comprehend what it is we lose when species disappear," warns Eisner, a Cornell biologist. In the area of medicinal chemistry alone, he says, the implications are staggering.

Overall, nearly one quarter of all medical prescriptions in the United States "are for formulations based on plant or microbial products, or on derivatives or synthetic versions thereof."

Nature continues to provide new medicines. Recent examples include "the anti-cancer agent vincristine (isolated from the Madagascar periwinkle, *Catharanthus roseus*); the immunosuppressant cyclosporin (from a Norwegian fungus); and ivermectin (from a Japanese mold), which kills parasitic worms." The need for such drugs is not insignificant: After only five

years, annual sales of cyclosporin are nearing \$100 million.

Scientists can only guess how many useful drugs remain to be discovered. Consider flowering plants, which occupy only a tiny niche of the natural world. They are the sole source of a major group of biological chemicals called alkaloids. Of the 250,000 flowering plant species in existence, only two percent have been examined for alkaloids. But these have yielded hundreds of anesthetics, analgesics, narcotics, vasoconstrictors, and other drugs.

Conservation is obviously a top priority. But, noting that most chemical discoveries are the result of serendipity, Eisner argues for a crash program of "chemical prospecting" focused on the developing nations of the tropics, where the great majority of extinctions are occurring. The opportunities, he says, are boundless—and, perhaps, fleeting.

ARTS & LETTERS

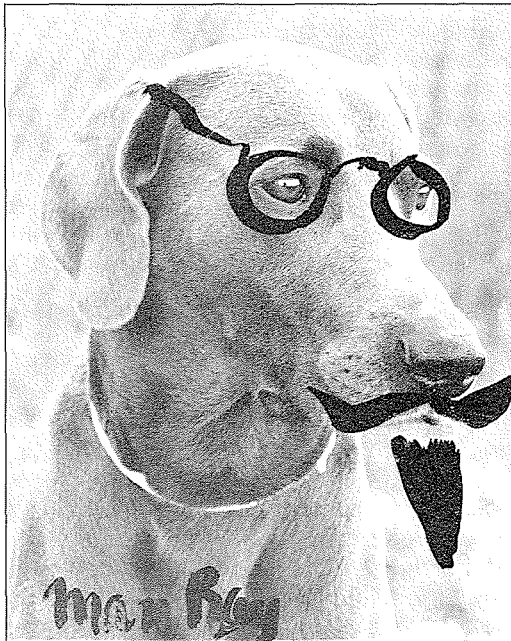
The Subversive Art

"Photography and the Mirror of Art" by Martin Jay, in *Salmagundi* (Fall 1989), Skidmore College, Saratoga Springs, N.Y. 12866.

When the painter Paul Delaroche heard of Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre's first successes in photography in 1839, he wailed that "from this day on, painting is dead." That turned out to be more than a bit premature. A full century and a half after its invention, photography has achieved acceptance as a legitimate art form. And

now, writes Jay, a Berkeley historian, it is beginning to subvert the very notion of "legitimate" art.

Artists and critics did not even begin to take the new medium seriously until its defenders elaborated the arguments put forth by the photographer Alfred Stieglitz in *Camera Work* magazine (1903-17).



Is this the future of art? William Wegman's "Untitled (Man Ray)."

Stieglitz held that photography could do much more than merely document reality, that it had its own formal qualities.

More recently, photography has benefited from what might be called "cachet by association." The critic Svetlana Alpers has argued that 17th-century Dutch artists used "proto-photographic" techniques; Heinrich Schwarz and Aaron Scharf have argued that the camera has "influenced the visual imagination of painters since the days of Delacroix and Ingres." Photogra-

phy's flattening of space and its ability to capture ephemeral movements, for example, are said to have had a profound impact on the impressionists. Finally, photographers overcame the handicap of the "infinite reproducibility" of their work by winning special status for "original" prints. Today, "masters" such as William Wegman and Sherry Levine enjoy celebrity status.

But now photography is challenging traditional notions of art from within. For example, says Jay, since photography requires no special skills or arcane knowledge, it calls into question the whole distinction between "high" and "low" art. As a British critic put it recently: "Photography makes everyone an artist." And the proliferation of photographic images makes it virtually impossible to produce images "that are disturbingly inaccessible in the manner of many high Modernist works." Above all, a photograph cannot be an "autonomous" artwork, a pure creation of the artist's imagination with no necessary connection to the "real" world.

This is precisely the kind of quality that critics such as Roger Scruton point to in continuing to argue that photography is not genuine art. But Jay believes that its hybrid qualities—its mixture of art and life—make photography well suited for "a leading role in a culture that likes to think of itself as post-modern." Just as music set the standard for the arts during the 19th century, he suggests, photography may set the standard for the 21st century.

Return to Sender

"The Rites of Editing: Letters as Sacred Texts" by Gloria G. Fromm, in *The New Criterion* (Jan. 1990), 850 Seventh Ave., New York, N.Y. 10019.

One of the most interesting trends in the literary world today is the proliferation of monumental "complete" editions of letters. The collected letters of Thomas Hardy fill seven thick volumes. Those of William Butler Yeats are expected to fill 12 volumes, and those of Thomas and Jane Carlyle no less than 40.

These tomes aim to include every mea-

ger scrap of correspondence some great (or not-so-great) personage may have left behind, down to and including thank-you notes and dinner invitations. More than the whimsy of editors and biographers is involved, observes Fromm, the author of *Dorothy Richardson: A Biography* (1977). They have come to regard their subjects as holy figures, whose every pen stroke is sa-