

to have their wives or daughters selected as the royal mistress. Describing one mistress who was on her way out, Sévigné sharply observed, "So much pride and so much beauty are not easily reconciled to second place." Nor were military affairs beyond her ken: "The courtiers here seem to think the battle [the siege of Orange in 1673] will be fought out with baked apples." A close friend of the moralist duc de La Rochefoucauld and the novelist Madame de La Fayette, in whose novel, *La Princesse de Clèves*, she appears, Sévigné gained, by her own epistolary eloquence, a lasting place in French literature.

**HOW NEW YORK
STOLE THE IDEA
OF MODERN ART:
Abstract Expressionism,
Freedom, and
the Cold War**
by Serge Guilbaut
translated by Arthur
Goldhammer
Univ. of Chicago, 1983
277 pp. \$22.50

What accounts for the growing dominance of abstract expressionism in American art between 1946 and 1951? Not, as is often claimed, its aesthetic value or its "inevitability," argues Guilbaut, an art historian at the University of British Columbia, but its political suitability. Guilbaut shows how an art style expressing the impossibility of representation was made over into one that proclaimed the possibilities of a liberal version of the "American way." Left-leaning, avant-garde artists had been dismayed by political developments during and after World War II—notably the failure of Stalin's Soviet Union to become a worker's paradise and the revival of anticommunism in America. Many had been, during the '30s, Marxists and creators of "realist" paintings for the Works Progress Administration. But they heeded the postwar calls of artist-publicists such as Mark Rothko and Adolph Gottlieb for a "de-Marxized" aesthetic of freedom. Abstraction was proposed as the only artistic means of withdrawing from the madness of polarized world politics, which had already led to the Cold War and the threat of an atomic Armageddon. This vague, ambitious program of dissent happened to fit with the American art world's hopes for a new national style of painting, one that would be sophisticated but clearly home-grown and that would make New York, rather than Paris, the cultural cap-



ital of the world. Prominent New York museum directors such as Alfred Barr and James Soby and critics such as Clement Greenberg and Meyer Schapiro redefined abstract expressionism as the fulfillment of "modernism"—in other words, as a strictly apolitical, formal statement. Dealers, meanwhile, saw to it that there was no market for other modern American art. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.'s *The Vital Center* (1949) argued that the individual freedoms afforded by democracy inevitably led to anxiety and alienation, and that abstract art expressed the confusion of a truly free people. He thus placed the liberal seal of approval on this bewildering visual movement. "Consciously or unconsciously," writes Guilbaut, cooperation between the avant-garde and the liberal political establishment made abstract expressionism "the American 'style' par excellence."

Contemporary Affairs

**ROOTS OF RADICALISM:
Jews, Christians, and
the New Left**
by Stanley Rothman &
S. Robert Lichter
Oxford, 1982
466 pp. \$27.95

The tools of social science are exhaustively applied in this attack on the notion, once proclaimed by liberal and neo-Marxist social thinkers such as Kenneth Keniston, Erich Fromm, and Herbert Marcuse, that the student radicals of the 1960s were the cream of America's youth. Political scientists Rothman and Lichter, drawing on extensive interviews with former radicals, a battery of psychological tests, and a comparative look at West German leftists of the same period, find that the American New Leftists were anything but the most balanced, idealistic, or democratic members of their generation. Crypto-authoritarians, simultaneously desirous and resentful of power, they were also psychologically ill-adjusted (Jewish radicals typically suffering from overpowering mothers, Christians from "intrusive and demanding" fathers). Jewish domination of the Students for a Democratic Society, the Free Speech Movement, and other New Left groups was, according to the authors, the logical extension of a traditional Jewish alignment with radi-