

FRANCE'S NEW CULTURE PALACE

With the opening of a controversial museum, Paris is making a bold bid to regain artistic leadership from New York.

When, a century ago, Victor Hugo pontificated that "henceforth the nations unanimously recognize Paris as the leading city of the human race," there may have been a stray politician or moralist somewhere who disagreed, but so far as the trans-Atlantic art world was concerned, Hugo was only trumpeting an obvious truth. Other cities -- Rome, Munich, London -- remained bustling art centers, of course, attracting not only artists but also the indispensable ranks of connoisseurs and collectors who supported them; yet, in the last decade of the 19th century Paris emerged unchallenged as the artistic capital of the Western world, It retained this position of aesthetic eminence -- and the commercial rewards that go with it -- until well into the 20th century.

It was in Paris that the transfiguring styles of the modern movement from Impressionism to Cubism to Surrealism, were conceived and developed with triumphant success. And it was *to* Paris that much of the best talent in other countries -- the young Picasso in Spain, the young Chagall in his Russian *shtetl*. the young Calder in America --was drawn for ideas and inspiration, for fellowship with other artists and a way of life in which the artistic vocation could prosper without the nagging prejudices that surrounded it elsewhere. In the great age of the *avant-garde* that began with Courbet in the 1850's and flourished for nearly a century, it was in Paris that taste was formed, that values --aesthetic, intellectual and monetary-- were established, and the enduring reputations made. Finally, it was to Paris that artists gravitated in search of a political as well as an artistic haven in the 1920's and 30's when Mussolini and Hitler and Stalin outlawed modern art.

But an era was ending and what hastened its demise was the cataclysmic event of World War II. When Paris fell to the German army in 1940, French hegemony in the arts fell with it.