BOOKS and REVIEWS

The Proud Possessors

By Aline B. Haarinen. 395 pp. New York. Random House. $5.95.

Reviewed by SALLY PARSONS

For decades America has felt culturally inferior. Only recently have our symphony orchestras and opera singers taken their place alongside their more firmly entrenched European counterparts. And only since World War II has the artistic capital of the world gradually shifted from Paris to New York.

But while the general public was for years unaware of and disinterested in our cultural position, a few isolated individuals were trying to improve the situation. As far back as 1870, when our expanding economy was causing men to amass large fortunes, a new leisure class began to buy art.

HAPPILY, along with other facets of our culture, the art collector has now come of age. Aline Saarinen has chosen 15 of these "proud possessors" as subjects for her first book, and in so doing becomes the first person to write about and publicize art collecting in America.

Indeed, her work offers convincing proof that due to these foresighted and dedicated lovers of art, Americans today need feel no inferiority about their artistic wealth.

As Mrs. Saarinen has indicated, the most difficult problem in such a survey was selection. Which collectors should be included? There were bound to be important omissions, and, in fact, some of our most famous collectors — Frick, Widener, Barnes, Mellon—are only briefly mentioned.

HER GOAL was to compile a varied, well-rounded group who "have been adventurous in their art collecting in one way or another, (whose) actions have influenced or made an impact on others (and who) reflect the cultural attitudes of different sections of America."

The resultant gallery of personages is a fascinating one. Each collector had his own motives and incentives, which varied as widely as the pocketbooks. And, as might be expected, their lives, personalities and tastes followed many divergent channels.

Two of the greatest tycoons of the era, J. Pierpont Morgan and Henry O. Havemeyer pursued art collecting on the same grand scale in which they conducted their businesses. They bought in large amounts and craved the best to be had.

IN DIRECT contrast, was Charles Lang Freer, a man of graccious bearing who led a leisurely, exquisite existence. He was irresistibly drawn to Oriental art and obsessed with the idea that art should be viewed without distracting influences.

Thus, when friends visited his refined Detroit home they had the curious experience of witnessing his masterpieces one by one as they were paraded through his gallery.

Women, too, figure prominently in this "collection of collectors." Mrs. Potter Palmer was the queen of Chicago society in the 1880s and the epitome of fashionable taste.

She would undoubtedly be surprised to find herself in the company of two such flamboyant specimens of her sex as Gertrude Stein and Peggy Guggenheim.

MISS Stein's bohemian appearance and egotistical personality antagonized many of her contemporaries, but her literary activity and her efforts, along with the rest of her family, to promote and publicize modern art do great credit to her memory.

In spite of her many love affairs and naive impishness, Peggy Guggenheim managed a unique and successful art center in New York and became an impressario for the cause of modern art.

Each reader will undoubtedly emerge from Mrs. Saarinen's exciting world of tycoons and teachers, Rembrandts and Renoirs with his own favorite collector. John G. Johnson, a blacksmith's son who became the greatest corporation lawyer of his time, will appeal to many. He was a unique and original collector; he treated his hobby as "intriguing sport — a fascinating game" in which insight and intellect were the chief weapons of battle.

THE Rockefeller family, which has felt art to be the one field in which they could morally justify spending large sums of money, and particularly Nelson Rockefeller, "the frustrated architect," will appeal to others.

Or perhaps it will be Electra Havemeyer Webb and her outdoor museum of Americana in Vermont. Or the gentle, deaf teacher named Edward Wales Root, who was the first collector of strictly American art.

Mrs. Saarinen writes brilliantly in a manner that well suits her subject; she can be poetically descriptive or journalistically factual as the occasion demands.

She has vividly captured the driving spirit which motivated her collectors; for each, the collecting of art was a passionate, all-consuming primary means of expression. These men and women "were not only possessors: they were also possessed."

Poets of Today

Selected and Edited by John Hall Wheelock. 191 pp. New York. Charles Scribner's Sons. $3.95.

Reviewed by ANN JACOBS

The good intentions of Scribners in publishing this volume are so commendable that criticism seems ungrateful, at best. The difficulties which poets face in getting their work in print brought about this series of books in which three poets, unpublished in hard-cover, are presented yearly. This is the fifth such book, as the title points out, and the poetry included is sincere, worth the reader's time and attention, but singularly cautious and unpenetrating.

O. B. Hardison Jr. leads off with his lyrics and elegies which hark back to Donne and the metaphysicals. He seems unembarrassed to use meter and rhyme (not a commonplace, these days) in the dry, often complex, exercises to which he puts his intellect.

For example, Bernini's colonnade, in the poem of that title, forms the basis for some observations on truth, logic and reason—their opposites and their relativity. To understand the poem, the reader must be able to see these columns before St. Peter's and be able to change his view as the speaker changes his point of focus.

Not all the poems are involved or problems to be solved, but all display the same detached spirit, like a gambler unwilling to show his hand. This works best when Hardison combines wit with his objectivity, as in "Descartes I" and "Descartes II", and not at all when he deals with more commercial subjects as in "Love's Hopefulness" and "The New Prosperity."

SHEILA Pritchard stands at the opposite pole from Hardison in her fertile explosions of frequently tiresome impressions. Perhaps it is a matter of an original force (Hopkins, Cummings, et al) petering out to an acquired preciousness; perhaps it is simply an inferior talent.

At any rate, the hyphenated and coined words, the weight of image upon image, the painful searching for a different adjective, an unusual effect, all conspire to almost nullify those times when the poet does succeed.

We can be thankful for such phrases as "The lone chrysanthemum leans on space/ carving a delicacy of shagginess", "the satin dark before moon time", "The rains came, pattering and pattering/ the sleep wash of the trees." But we can also wish a little discipline had displaced this hit and more often miss loquaciousness.

SAVING the best for last, Kenneth Pitchford achieves an admirable marriage between what he has to say and how he says it. Like Hardison, he uses conventional meter and rhyme, but to an entirely different purpose and effect. Musical is perhaps the best single word to describe these poems, and it is a refreshingly clear and melodic song he sings.

"The Bride's Song" is a ballad with all the economy and accumulating tension that old form requires. "Journey" is a quietly spoken lyric whose first stanza runs—"Dark are the ways of my enduring/ black is my hand against the sun./ Dark lies the heart in the live breast burning/ then it is done."

Pitchford has a wealth of variety in his selections—ballads, lyrics, sonnets, songs from a folk opera—dealing with as varied topics—"Aunt Cora," "Walk in the Garden", "Still-Life from a Packing Plant." It is a relief to find a contemporary poet who does not automatically fit the modern mold and is not afraid to resurrect old forms when they suit his expression.

WHATEVER the verdict on this particular trio of poets (and they are readable), it seems almost a duty to support such efforts. In this country, these just beginnig voices are usually smothered before they reach a sufficient volume to be heard.

No mutinies have occurred on United States Naval vessels.

Cocktail Time

By P. G. Wodehouse. 219 pp. New York, 1958. Simon and Schuster. $3.50.

Reviewed by JAMES J. DOLAN

This is Wodehouse in the traditional manner. The usual cast of hilarious characters is involved in all sorts of antics trying to get possession of a letter which determines the authorship of, and royalty rights to, a novel which has quite unexpectedly become a best seller.

Wodehouse may be 75, but his mind is just as brisk and fresh as ever, and his sense of humor has not suffered with the years. Every page is full of action and lively dialogue as the multiple-plot story develops and involves the more than half-dozen strange personalities who run in and out of the 25 chapters.

For a smile or a laugh, or just for simple, uncomplicated relaxation, this book is ideal.