

ART VERSUS LICENSE

SOME IMPRESSIONS OF CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN PAINTING

BY CHARLES L. BUCHANAN

THE other day, opening at random Lilli Lehmann's interesting and instructive autobiography, *My Path Through Life*, my attention was suddenly arrested by the following significant passage:

To the question I put to him (Gustav Mahler) he replied with scornful laughter, "What are you thinking of? In a century my symphonies will be performed in immense halls that will hold from twenty to thirty thousand people, and will be great popular festivals." I was silent, but I thought, involuntarily, that the more music is deprived of intimacy, the more it will be lacking in true genius. It is so, also, at the theatre, for when the stage and auditorium exceed a certain size, there can be no more art for the artist and art lover. Then the circus begins, where the actors appear in dead masks, because the individual gestures, eyes and physiognomies cannot be distinguished, and not a word can be understood. In a great orchestra, every individual instrument is lost, as is the personality of each single picture in a huge exhibition of a thousand or more paintings, where one kills the other.

FF A thousand or more paintings! Well, according to the advertisements, the Independent Exhibit, recently concluded in New York City, numbered anywhere between two and three thousand paintings. "Art Exhibition Extraordinary" (I quote the *Herald's* proclamation of the event) it certainly was. Picture to yourself the Grand Central Palace literally cluttered with what is euphemistically termed "works of art." If you recall the hurly-burly that accompanied

last spring's Allied Bazaar, you will probably feel a sense of the excessiveness of the undertaking. True, there was no megaphone and (surprising omission for these times!) no dancing. But there *was* space, plenty of space; so much so, in fact, that I found myself wandering about in a kind of stupor, not quite certain of where to go next. The affair had something of the sardonic and enigmatical deviousness of a maze; and I should imagine that if one found one's self there in a crowd all æsthetic sensation would be obstructed and destroyed by the uncomfortable anxiety of wondering whether one could find one's way out of the place and home again.

Now I do not mean to be flippant or cheaply and inconsequentially humorous. I should like to write of the exhibition of the Society of Independent Artists in a temperate and comprehensive fashion; or if not in a temperate and comprehensive fashion, I should like to write exuberantly, to tell you how wonderful it was to see the Art Spirit emancipating itself from the fetters of an artificial exclusiveness, breaking out into the great universal sunshine of unfettered effort (something about Democracy should perhaps be inserted here), and so forth. No doubt others can do this sort of thing. Frankly, I cannot. The magnitude of the affair literally dumfounds one; and I really do not see how a conscientious discrimination is possible under circumstances of so gigantic and complex a nature. It must be obvious to the most cursory consideration that *fine distinctions* and precise preferences are rendered null

and void in such a hodge-podge of activity. I attempted to jot down a few notes, but in looking back I realise that my observations were, by the very nature of the case, invidious. One thing struck me—the fact that nine times out of ten when my attention was arrested by a picture, that picture was painted by a woman. Is there, I wonder, or is there not any significance in this? At all events I congratulate Adèle Klaer for her excellent and exquisitely framed “Ravella,” and Margaret Kleinwell for her still life, a really big, massive, memorable production. Who these people are I do not know and I suppose I shall never hear of them again. If the art of the future is to be presented to us under conditions of so enormous a nature, we shall be compelled to develop a new capacity for appreciation. For the present, the appeal is a futile one, an appeal that defeats its own ends just as the sheer noise of the contemporary orchestra defeats its own ends. In all sincerity, I really think that the essential and ultimate reaction to this sort of thing is an unfavourable one. Someone once said—possibly Oscar Wilde—that views were dreadfully overdone. At the Independent Exhibit it takes a superabundant flow of good spirits to combat the unhappy suspicion that art is dreadfully overdone.

I am keenly dissatisfied with these very desultory generalisations. On the other hand, it is not easy to distinguish and to emphasise the salient and significant features of an art exhibition that loses itself in its own vastness. The sensitive observer cannot fail to suffer distractions and indecisions of judgment. Personally, I think that the importance of such an affair resides in its remote implications rather than in a specific and easily definable merit. Is it possible to disentangle from the thousand and more conflicting cross-currents of the matter those aspects of it that exceed a merely transient and local significance, and apply with a pregnant appropriateness to the condition of

things in general and of contemporary art in particular?

In a foreword printed in the catalogue, the aims of the Society of Independent Artists are lucidly and succinctly summed up as follows:

The Society of Independent Artists has been incorporated under the laws of New York for the purpose of holding exhibitions in which all artists may participate independently of the decision of juries. The need for such a society must be clear to all who are familiar with the conditions of the art world. On one hand we have the frank statement of the established art societies that they cannot exhibit all the deserving work submitted to them because of lack of space. On the other hand, such exhibitions as take place at private galleries must, by their nature, be formed from the ranks of artists who are already more or less known; moreover, no one exhibition at present gives an idea of contemporary American art in its ensemble, or permits comparisons of the various directions it is taking, but shows only the work of one man or a homogeneous group of men. The great need, then, is for an exhibition, to be held a given period each year where artists of all schools can exhibit together—certain that whatever they send will be hung and that all will have an equal opportunity. For the public, this exhibition will make it possible to form an idea of the state of contemporary art. No such survey could be obtained from a dozen visits to the exhibitions of former years, when none could claim to be thoroughly representative. The governing principle of the Society permits a member to exhibit *whatever he wishes on the payment of nominal dues.**

At the outset of any consideration of the above text, a grateful acknowledgment must be made. The Society of Independent Artists distinguished itself at its first exhibition by the all-inclusiveness of its point of view. The importance of this fact cannot be over-estimated. There was lacking that exorbi-

*The italics are mine. C. L. B.

tant emphasis of the ultra note that disgusts us with and stultifies the conventional innovation. There was no cheap, vulgar, ostentatious sticking out of the tongue in the face of precedent, no flouting of the greybeards (God bless them for their cheerful indifference!), no attempt to draw arbitrary and artificial distinctions between a new art and an old art. The attitude of vehement assertiveness that marked the Armory exhibition of some years ago was lacking. Futurism and cubism hung side by side with the lisping innocence of the immemorial still life (flowers and fruit). Eccentricity represented by a perfectly good piece of Armour and Company's soap transfixed by a nail to a canvas that purported (I suppose) to indicate the troubled waters of a bathtub, found itself in abrupt juxtaposition to the rather tasteless subject of a young girl levelling a rifle at a somewhat too urgent admirer. Such well-known names as Crane, Lawson and Hassam—Hassam at his best in two exquisite pictures—were in evidence.

All of which is as it ought to be. On the other hand, it is questionable if the public can "form an idea of the state of contemporary art" from an exhibition of this nature. To turn the public loose among three thousand pictures and expect it to form *any* idea at all is, it would seem to me, to ask the impossible. I wonder what, precisely, is the sum total of the impression carried away by the average observer of this sort of thing! Something, I should fancy, of the impression created in a four-year-old child by its first visit to the circus. This is not meant in disparagement of public taste; it is merely a recognition of the infinite difficulty that confronts even the trained observer of æsthetics. A great musician was telling me the other day of his inability to register upon a first hearing an accurate appraisal of a new musical composition. One of the astounding discrepancies in this world is the failure of the majority of persons to realise that a work of art requires for its appreciation a thorough,

an intimate and a sympathetic study. Art is not a common revelation like sunshine, a common accomplishment like eating. Now conditions at the Independent Exhibit were, I should think, directly inimical to the forming of any valid impressions whatsoever. Of course we all acknowledge that the world thinks, feels and exerts itself to-day upon a larger scale than heretofore. To say that Bigness is the order of the hour is to state a banal and self-evident truth. But it is not yet demonstrated that we can successfully reconcile art—or rather that thing that we have hitherto called art—with this contemporary vastness. To view art at the Independent Exhibit demanded a cyclopean capacity. I should as soon think of asking Leo Ornstein to play me a prelude of Debussy's at the Madison Square Garden, or for Olive Fremstad to reveal her Isolde to me at the Polo Grounds. Moreover—and this is important—it is more than doubtful whether contemporary American art at its best *was* represented at the Independent Exhibit. Masses and organisations do not make or represent an art period; individuals do. Art is a spiritual outlawry—a thing that flees the patronage of five o'clock teas, a thing that slinks with averted eyes into a corner at Poetry Societies. Nine times out of ten organisation spells mediocrity. Contemporary American painting at its top notch reveals itself only to the acute and discriminative observer of individual effort. Its loveliest and most valuable manifestations are not thrown at you in great chunks of activity. With the possible exception of George Bellows there was perhaps no painter of an indispensable and easily distinguishable significance included in the Independent Exhibit. Even Bellows was not at his characteristic best. The exhibition of his work at the Milch Galleries some months ago registered a more powerful and prolific impression than I received from the twenty-five hundred or so "works of art" on view at the Independent Exhibit. In fact the funda-

mental weakness of this tendency toward an all inclusive, come-one, come-all kind of attitude is glaringly exposed in this particular instance. Whatever one may think of the validity of his work, however little pleasure one may receive from its crude physical exuberance, the fact remains that Bel-lows, whether you like him or not, supplies us with the most powerful and, it may be, characteristically native note that is shown by contemporary American painting. He, more than any of his contemporaries, throws into high relief the gross absurdity of the popular contention to the effect that we have no "characteristic" American painting. Bel-lows is to American painting what rag-time is to American music. I am neither advocating the one nor the other—I merely say, There they are, take them or leave them as you choose. Now this muscular, shirt-sleeved vision was not represented by the picture on view at the Independent Exhibit, interesting though that picture undeniably was; and we may well question the validity of a scheme of things that would pretend to represent a contemporary national art and yet fail to offer us an adequate example of one of the most salient, one of the most dynamic painters that that art has to show us. Again, it is obvious to any sympathetic and discerning observer of American painting that no exhibition of American painting can accurately describe itself as representative that fails to number among its contributors such names as Murphy, Tryon, Weir, Dearth, Dessar and a dozen others of like calibre. If one were attempting to select and to reveal American painting at its noblest, finest and most representative best they could far better avail themselves of such an exhibition as has been on view recently at the Montross Galleries in New York City. To go from the Independent Exhibit to the exhibition on view at the Montross Galleries is to go from a veritable bedlam, an inarticulate chaos, into the sober, reticent seclusion of an æsthetic aristocracy. Here one would

find in unobtrusive evidence the spirit of all that is highest and loveliest and most ideal in our painting maintained and disclosed with varying degrees of facility and with an unfailing uniformity of discretion, dignity and delight. The time will come—has come to the perspicacious few—when one of these painters—J. Francis Murphy—will be acknowledged the most adroit manipulator of his material that American landscape has so far produced, and, precisely, one of the most exquisite painters of landscape that the world has so far seen. It is questionable if half so much may be said for any painter represented at the Independent Exhibit.

The Independent Exhibit possessed little intrinsic significance. As I have previously said, any significance it may have possessed lay in its indication of various tendencies, some of them disquieting, some of them impertinent, a few of them injurious and destructive. The emphasis laid upon mere bigness is characteristic perhaps of a modern tendency. I refer you to Mahler's point of view proclaimed in the opening paragraph of this article. Well, perhaps this trend is legitimate, necessary, unalterable. There are not lacking those who think it a disastrous trend. On the one hand, we have the temperament that considers art an exclusive and very individual preoccupation; on the other, we note that tendency toward a levelling of all artistic effort, an intruding upon its older aloofness, a democratising of its various efforts. To anyone to whom the inviolability of art has been a vital thing, the idea of conducting an art exhibit on the principle that anything that is sent in will be exhibited, is simply preposterous. It would seem that less room and less painting rather than more room and more painting was the thing to be desired.

No doubt those who are in favour of Independent Exhibits will probably say: "Who shall judge what should or should not be hung? Give us the opportunity to do the kind of work we

want to do, and let the public decide for or against us." It seems to me we touch here close to the essential gist of the entire matter. Is there something inherently negligible and invalid in the art of painting that allows it to become so readily the medium for inconsequential and undisciplined effort? One does not like to think so, but, with the best intentions in the world, one is forced to concede that no art (unless one dignifies free verse with the name art) contains and appears to encourage so arrant a licentiousness, so facile an activity. George Moore rated acting the lowest of the arts, and he would no doubt quarrel with the suspicions I am compelled to cast upon the art of painting. One hesitates to take issue with Mr. Moore on a point of æsthetics—he is so uncannily accurate in his appraisals. It would appear, however, that the art of the actor demands at least a certain constructive application, a certain consistency and continuity of effort. The appeal that he makes to us is the result of a cleverly calculated simulation; he is compelled to compete with a standard (our conception of Reality), and he gains or loses in proportion to his ability for reproducing through the tangible, concrete medium of action the various characteristics of human emotion. But the modern painter has found a way to evade the restrictions imposed upon the actor, the musician, and the conscientious worker in words. He has established himself a law unto himself by the simple process of denying the validity of the senses. According to the contemporary painter there is no standard of line, of bulk, of colour. "The way to learn how to paint," I once heard George Bellows say, "is to paint." Imagine telling a ten-year-old child that the way to learn how to play the piano is—to play. It is perfectly obvious that the acceptance and application of such a doctrine opens the way for an endless chain, a vicious circle, if ever there was one, of speculation, theory, undisciplined effort, irreverence and demoralisation. Let us accept for

the sake of the argument the hypothesis widely held and proclaimed by the artist to the effect that there is no reality, that, in other words, the world is not what it *is*, but what it *seems*. Well, the point of view is obviously not an irrational one. No comprehensive and universally satisfying standard of beauty, no criterion by which we may measure beauty has so far been formulated. The critic may claim that a work of art is either good or bad; he cannot *prove* that it is either good or bad. In the last analysis, beauty remains as undemonstrable and indescribable as taste, sound or odour. But granting all this, one feels that there must be *some* restriction imposed upon the worker in æsthetics. We must discriminate, even though we discriminate badly. Intolerance, I had almost said, was less injurious to the growth of a valid art than that dreadful thing, a too great tolerance. An interest in everything in general almost invariably means a lack of interest in anything in particular. Personally, I think that we can count on the fingers of our two hands the painters who will emerge from the chaos of contemporary paint, and be known to a future generation. The unthinking will call this attitude a prejudiced attitude. Well, on an average, how many individualities emerge from the contemporary competitions of any branch of activity? Genius does not grow on trees. Your selection might differ from mine—well and good, but at least you will agree with me that a certain selection is necessary. The standard of general excellence may be—is, at the present time—unprecedentedly high. But if some one or two or a half dozen painters at most are not superior to the rest, the present epoch is a departure from the whole scheme of things. For my part, I should pick Murphy, Tryon, Bellows to represent our present time, and I should do so because of reasons that were to me clearly defined and adequate. Bellows typifies the hurry, bustle and shirt-sleeved activity of young lands and new

peoples. His vision may concern itself with a too transient aspect of things; it is at least incomparably vigorous, cyclopean, sardonic and of a mordant characterisation. Incidentally, it reveals a very beautiful colour sense. Tryon—the Tryon of ten years ago, not the meretricious and apocryphal Tryon of to-day—appropriates a characteristically native point of view, and handles it with a delicately sensuous and ingratiating facility. True, his note is a slightly facile one, the quality of his paint is always a little cloying, a little too pretty, the structure of his picture is always a little lacking in stamina. Just here he is indubitably the inferior of Murphy. Tryon's pictures are nature painted, Murphy's pictures are—nature. A tree trunk of Murphy's, for all its exquisite grace, weighs a ton; a foreground of Murphy's, for all its exquisite intricacy and subtlety of indication, is solid earth. A consummate draughtsman, a master of the material of his trade, Murphy combines the decorative and abstract poise of a Corot with that sense of the soil, that affectionate response to the homely and frugal aspects of isolated areas that we find in the Dutch landscape painters. The veteran Dutch painter, Bloomers, ranking him (mistakenly, I think) above Inness, said to me, "Depend upon it, he is your greatest painter."

Am I digressing? I think not; I am calling attention to these men because I wish to emphasise that whatever in art is absolutely necessary, precious and original is contributed by the few, is a distillation, so to speak, of a protracted series of intellectual and spiritual birth-pains. If we have no criterion by which we may judge the art, let us impose, at least, the searching scrutiny of a more rigorous initiation upon the artist. Can we admit the right of the artist to express merely because he wants to express? Shall we give space in our publications to the five or six hundred thousand poets in this country who think they are Tennyson, Swinburne and W. B. Yeats rolled into one?

Will the Independent Exhibit allow a young gentleman I know to play them his musical interpretation of the Grand Canyon? What, one asks, can be the result of this growing encouragement of any and every effort? Is it for the best that the legendary Tom, Dick and Harry be allowed to purchase the opportunity for expressing themselves? Will this emancipation from the drudge and routine of intensive preparation, laboured vigilance, arduous competition result in a freer flowering of the art spirit, a keener receptivity on the part of the public, or will it result in a gradual blurring of the finer lines of discrimination, a gradual blunting of the sharper edges of good taste? Will it throw into higher relief extraordinary and inestimable merit, or will it submerge such merit in a great overwhelming flood of mediocrity?

Perhaps there is no need for pessimism. No doubt the rare and the beautiful in art will always distinguish itself from the spurious, the inept, the non-essential. In the face of our present perilous and unhappy times, a recent sale of pictures in this city showed the highest average price on record for Corots. The last season has seen an increase of a hundred per cent. in the value of Murphy's pictures. His "Road to the Old Farm" brought five thousand dollars in the Humphries sale. Dr. Humphries paid somewhere around nine hundred dollars for the picture. Obviously, these indications are happy ones. But what is going to be the effect on the art of to-morrow of this enormous opportunity for facile expression? Will it supply us with something more valuable than we have received from the patient, plodding, laborious record of a J. Francis Murphy? Art, that had once been a gradual acquiring of means of expression, a gradual building of effort upon effort, a never-ceasing self-inspection, becomes in our modern manner a sort of free-for-all, rough-and-tumble, indiscriminate mess of half-baked talents and unbridled idiosyncrasies. It would

seem that however unfair the exclusion, a certain amount of exclusion was necessary for the refining and perfecting of the work of art. It is questionable if a straight-jacket can warp, impair or destroy the genuine and the indispensable ability, and for anything short of a genuine and an indispensable ability there should be no tolerance, no encour-

agement, no preservation. A hard theory, perhaps, but surely a sound one. It would seem a good thing if, for a time at least, the production of art could be curtailed. That is to say, one kind of art. What is needed is not more art, but an infinitely higher, keener standard of public taste and critical perspicacity.

THE SETTLEMENT OF THE MAP OF EUROPE

BY JOSEPH MCCABE

It is sometimes complained by American observers that the parties to the great European struggle have exchanged their rôles. Germany, it is said, set out with a boldly avowed intention to over-spread her neighbours. For decades her professors had insisted that it was precisely the function of a high civilisation to oust decaying neighbours, absorb little peoples which were too small for the tasks of the world, and impose its loftier *Kultur*. Germany must take up the historic rôle of Persia, Macedonia, Rome. . . . And myriads of lesser oracles proclaimed the stern duty in the first decade of the twentieth century, until all Germany braced its nerves for the advance. By a natural antithesis, Belgium, France, England, and Russia played, in the great tragedy, the part of disinterested defenders of their goods.

As time went on, it is suggested, the parties changed sides. Germany began to pose as an heroic defender of its hearths and homes against a flock of aggressive wolves, while its opponents put forward designs of seizing territory. Japan speedily absorbed its bit of China. The British Empire annexed the remainder of the German colonies. France swore upon the grave of 1870 that it would have Alsace and Lorraine. Italy fought for the possession of "*Italia irredenta*." Serbia wanted Bosnia and

Herzegovina. Rumania wanted Transylvania. Russia must have Posen and Galicia. It looked to many an outsider as if they who had set out to draw the dragon's teeth would finish by sowing in the soil of Europe a fine crop of dragon's teeth.

America is interested. She wants no man's territory. She has plenty, and can afford to be virtuous. But could she join in this comprehensive partition of the territory of the Central Powers? Has she, hoping to end war, entered a war which inaugurates a long series of wars for the recovery of lost territory?

Let us first see how far there has been a real change. On the part of the Allied Powers there has been little or no change. The war, we now know, was foreseen, and every party to it entered upon it with at least one definite idea. Great Britain being, like America, sated with territory and therefore very virtuous, desired and desires no acquisitions. The suggestion that she might try to keep one foot on French soil is too childish to be considered. But Great Britain probably knew that her colonies would keep the German colonies they occupied; and she learned long ago that it is not wise to attempt to dictate to colonies. France and Russia, on the other hand, proclaimed from the start that they would "free" Alsace and Lorraine and