

# AMERICAN PAINTING

BY CHARLES L. BUCHANAN

PERHAPS the most valuable and unquestionably the rarest of mortal faculties is the instinctive, instantaneous and occult ability to detect and to appreciate the essential gist of things. To apprehend from the thousand and more deceptive, contradictory and inconsequential indications the significant indication is a knack possessed by about one human being out of every half million. When all is said and done, this supreme acuteness of perception is the animating component of all vital criticism (which remains at best mostly a felicitous and inspired hinting), and compared to the clairvoyant accuracy of this kind of second sight, so to speak, the most profound demonstration of a literal nature appears a mere futile waste of effort. A dominant attribute of genius, it is warred against persistently and vehemently by collective stupidity. Collective stupidity hates and fears it because the possessing it makes for power. It is inarticulate. It cannot explain the unconscious process by which it reaches its conclusions and convictions. It is a blind, unreasoning bump of locality. If you look for a manifestation of it in Wall Street, you find it buying Steel Common at twenty-two when the community in general is buying government bonds. In the art world it buys Corots at fifty dollars apiece. When the rank and file have recognised Corot's merits, and conventional competition is boosting his prices to unheard of heights, it turns its attention to Monet, Manet, Degas, Pissarro. In this country, Mr. Thomas B. Clarke conclusively demonstrated his possession of this superlative prescience when he stocked his house from cellar to garret with the paintings of one George Inness, paintings accumulated at an average price, I believe, of anywhere from two hundred and fifty to three hundred dollars apiece.

Irrelevant as these few remarks may at first sight appear, I am, nevertheless, compelled to urge them upon the attention of the reader. I am trying to throw into sharp and unmistakable relief the capacity of accurate and original discernment as opposed to the average poverty of imagination and lack of inspirational insight. It is this latter condition, apparently inherent in the scheme of things, that must be appreciated if we are to understand and to combat the abysmal and incredible short-sightedness that we encounter in any consideration of American painting. I confess I am at times almost discouraged at the enormous amount of obtuseness and perverted preconception that obstructs and obscures a clear and comprehensive revelation of this subject. Not only must the critical faculty exert itself in its accustomed task of discrimination, but the press agent must justify the critic's efforts by first proclaiming and demonstrating the fact that such a thing as American painting really exists. It does not exist for eight out of every ten persons. It may have existed once or it may be going to exist in some miraculous and problematical future, but the possibility that it is right bang in front of them now never by any chance enters their heads. The duck takes to water no more inevitably than the human mind takes to fallacy; but in the matter of American painting it is more than fallacy that we encounter, it is sheer, inexplicable ignorance. Persons whose one and only distinguishing characteristic appears to be a total unreceptiveness to what is going on directly under their very noses are allowed to write about the conditions of art in this country. Apparently they know absolutely nothing about the conditions of art in this country. They are either congenitally unsympathetic to the point of view of

American painting—therefore obviously unable to accord it an equitable consideration—or they are completely out of touch with the concrete and demonstrable trend of things. I say concrete and demonstrable advisedly. Whether for good or ill, the physical and external aspects of the art of painting are almost inextricably woven into the question of an intrinsic artistic merit, and in recording them one is merely dealing with the impersonal and unprejudiced matter of statistics. There may properly exist a difference of opinion over the abstract question of æsthetic merit. Later, when I shall indulge a few estimates of my own regarding the individual significance of certain American painters, I shall accept the possibility that my preferences may be wrong and that yours may be right. But there must be a common meeting ground even for the widest subsequent disagreements, and this meeting ground can be none other than a mutual recognition of existing actualities. I would put the following questions to the professional disparagers of American painting: Are you acquainted with the conditions about you? Why have you ignored the consistent and unmistakable significance of the American auction-room records of the last ten years? Have you even so much as followed them? Why do you suppose that houses of fundamental foreign affiliations like Knoedler and Company and Scott and Fowles are considering it advisable to advertise their participation in the handling of American paintings? You do not suppose that they are doing it for love, do you? Do you know or care a row of beans about any of these things, or are you concerned merely in maintaining your idiosyncrasies of personal prejudice and inclination?

It is not my habit to speak disparagingly of the writings of others, but I cannot resist using as an illustration, a sort of text, so to speak, an article that very recently appeared in one of the most prodigal of our popular magazines. The article was really pre-eminent for the

consistency of the misinformation that trickled through it. It was one of those kinds of articles that make a facile appeal by utilising the line of least resistance. Human beings readily assimilate the sort of thing they have been hearing for years; offer them a new point of view and you come perilously close to offending them. In this case the line of least resistance consisted in calling attention to the lack of an artistic atmosphere in this country, the inability of the native painter to make a living, the fact that there was no American painting and never would be under the circumstances, the fact that we had no patrons of contemporary native talent, and so on and so on. Well, after we have satisfied ourselves that we are really awake and have not dreamed this remarkable statement, we ask ourselves, seriously and a little bewilderedly, where this person could have come from who writes on American painting and yet has apparently not progressed beyond the point of view of a quarter of a century ago. An anecdote is included of a Frenchwoman who purchased a painting by Claude Monet for two hundred francs when that painter was struggling obscurely through the early stages of his career. Speculation being the most alluring and popular side of art, we have heard this sort of thing from time immemorial. But the same thing has repeatedly taken place in the art of this country. Our writer instances this lady as an example of a class of dilettanti indispensable to the encouraging and maintaining of each oncoming generation of artists. The gentleman's contentions, proclaimed with the royal irresponsibility of utter ignorance, touch their high-water mark in the monstrous and incredible statement that we have no such class in this country, that we have only collectors of assured and redoubtable works of art, that, in other words, we have no supporters of contemporary native talent.

One cannot help wondering what Mr. Thomas B. Clarke, Mr. William Evans, the late Mr. George Hearn, the famous Mr. Freer of Detroit, Mr. Burton

Mansfield of New Haven, Dr. Alexander Humphries, Mr. Alexander Hudnut and fifty other collectors of American art would think of this remarkable statement. No supporters of contemporary American painting! What kind of American painting? Could our friend have had in mind those innumerable young gentlemen of extreme and exotic predilections whose acutest reactions to art are secured over a café table? Our friend may very possibly have mistaken some frustrated effort of Macdougall Alley for the conditions obtaining in the authentic and nation-wide activities of American painting. Obviously, his intelligence and his sensibilities have not been quickened into an ability to distinguish between those kinds of American painting that are substantial and permanent, and those kinds that are transient and inconsequential. That dominant continuity of purpose and achievement, that is as clearly discernible in our painting as the backbone in the human anatomy, does not exist for our friend who writes as though this country had never known an Inness, a Winslow Homer, a Blakelock, an Alden Weir, a J. Francis Murphy among its painters, and a Freer, a Hearn, an Evans and so on among its collectors. As a matter of cold fact, it is open to question whether any nation—even the French nation—has shown a more inspired capacity for appraising the future possibilities of its native talent than this nation has shown. What shall our friend say of Mr. Freer's anticipation of Whistler's prestige at a time when Whistler's reputation was founded on idiosyncrasy rather than on intrinsic merit? What shall he say of the score of Dwight W. Tryons owned by Mr. Freer, of the score of J. Francis Murphys owned by Mr. Hudnut? What shall he say of the original impulse given to a native art by the extraordinary perspicacity of the aforementioned Mr. Thomas B. Clarke? It has been estimated that Mr. Clarke possessed, at one time, over a hundred pictures by George Inness, pictures purchased direct from the artist. If this is

to any degree an exaggeration, it is so slight a one that it may well pass for the truth. If our friend will go into the house of William Macbeth, dealer in American paintings, he can very probably secure a list of a half hundred names of persons in the city of New York alone who are acquiring, and have been acquiring for years back, paintings by American artists at prices ranging from four or five thousand dollars down to two hundred and fifty dollars or less. Supporters of American painting! Market for American painting! I should not be surprised if there were two collectors of American painting to every one collector of foreign painting. How else shall we explain the obvious prosperity of the house of William Macbeth, a house that has dealt exclusively in paintings by American artists? How else shall we explain the fact that a hundred or two hundred American artists who need to sell, at the very least, a dozen paintings a year in order to make a living, manage to make a living? Evidently there is a market for American paintings.

I emphasise the following facts: For a score or more of years now we have seen a certain class of American painting consistently increase in market value, artistic prestige and popular appeal. I wish to underline the fact that this statement is not an expression of an individual opinion. Whatever my own personal feelings may be as regards the subject of American painting (for that matter, whatever yours may be), I merely say: Here are the records, the cold, concrete, impersonal, ascertainable records. And these records demonstrate beyond the faintest shadow of a doubt that there is such a thing as American painting, that a certain distinct trend is observable, and that this trend is accorded by the American people the kind of recognition and patronage that makes for permanence. A quarter of a century's steady, sure, natural growth has secured the position of Inness and Winslow Homer. Veritable giants, both of them, we do not hesitate now to ask whether

the kind of painting they represent has ever been more successfully exploited. Allied to them in breadth and nobility of vision, although falling indubitably short of them in technical facility and beauty of handling, we have Martin, Wyant and Fuller. In our immediate time the tradition of these men has been exquisitely ramified by the notable activities of Hassam and Weir, the fluent if somewhat mellifluous charm of Tryon and the really remarkable subtlety of Murphy. There can be not the slightest doubt that the increasing popularity of the American painter has been the feature of essential significance in the auction-room records of recent years. A price brought by a certain picture, interesting though it may be, cannot be accepted as conclusive. In the present instance, however, the thing we simply cannot get away from is the slow, sure, inevitable growth of a substantial appreciation in the market values of the best kind of American paintings. During the last year a Winslow Homer sold for twenty-seven thousand dollars, an Inness for forty thousand dollars. Among living painters J. Francis Murphy led with his "November Greys" bought by Mr. Palmer, of New London, for seven thousand five hundred dollars. In the famous Alexander Humphries' sale (the conspicuous feature of the last winter's art activities), Murphy's "Approach to an Old Farm," for which Dr. Humphries had originally paid nine hundred and some odd dollars, sold for five thousand dollars. The famous Fuller, "Girl with Turkeys," bought by Dr. Humphries for two thousand five hundred dollars, sold in this sale for fifteen thousand six hundred dollars. These prices are not sporadic. They are not the work of a clique. They are not the result of a spurious manipulation on the part of one house or a group of houses. They have simply just happened. Twenty years ago Martin, Inness, Wyant, Homer and Blakelock could have been purchased for two hundred dollars up to a thousand. A half dozen years ago Murphy could have been bought for one-

third the price he consistently sells at to-day. His "Misty Morning," purchased in 1911 for eight hundred and fifty dollars, sold in 1917 for three thousand five hundred dollars, a profit of over two hundred per cent. for the purchaser. And before we take leave of this rather barren matter of statistics, let it be emphatically recognised that American painting has done what it has done in the face of an almost overwhelming foreign competition, the prestige of continental precedent, the prejudice of stupidity or dishonesty and the obtuseness of critic and press. There has been no press agent working for the American painter in this country; the press agenting has all been in the favour of the foreign goods, counterfeit or legitimate, that have been literally dumped into this country from abroad for the last fifty years. If American painting has done what it has done under conditions of so adverse a nature, we may safely assume that it possesses an inherent strength of unquestionable significance.

Now how shall we reconcile these indubitable and demonstrable realities with the vast amount of a seemingly ineradicable prejudice, ignorance and extremity of opinion that we encounter among the younger set of painters and critics? Perhaps the following few suggestions may be not altogether impertinent:

By the very nature of the case, America has always been a kind of enormous receptacle for the art of Europe. A young land, loosely cultured, stupendously wealthy, it has been looked upon, consciously or otherwise, as a legitimate prey by the salesmen of exotic wares. Now it is perfectly obvious that, in the beginning, whatever art we had must, of necessity, be imported. We were able to pay any price for art. There was no limit. Art values rose to such exorbitant heights that Europe simply could not or would not compete with us. Foreign art dealers concentrated their attention on this country. Branch offices were opened. Corots, Daubignys, Diazs and so on *ad infinitum* came pouring

into this country. Then we had the Dutch landscape men, Israels, Mauve, the Maris brothers. Then came Monet, Manet, Pissarro, Degas, and so on and so on.

Now it should be recognised beyond the shadow of a dispute that in acquiring the works of foreign painters the American millionaire is acting quite within his rights. If an extraordinary Hals, Rembrandt, Turner, Corot and so forth is on the market, there is no reason why Mr. Frick or Mr. William Clarke should not buy it. The trouble is that in the beginning this overwhelming flood of foreign art swept the critical equilibrium of this country clear off its feet. Instead of our native painting being accepted and judged impartially and dispassionately, it was either completely ignored by the class of persons that ought to have known better, or fatuously and indiscriminately patronised by a class of persons that knew absolutely nothing. To this day—although conditions have materially improved—the outstanding characteristic of artistic activity in this country remains the lack of unprejudiced perceptions and appraisals on the part of contemporary discrimination. A publicity and emphasis that might better be accorded any one of a score of our men is too often accorded to infirm Whistlers, Monets of feeble quality, indifferent Barbizons, and so on. Our reporters of painting—too seldom do they merit the once honourable appellation, critic—are lacking that poise of perception which instantaneously and inevitably distinguishes between a spurious originality and a genuine progress, a transient prettiness and a valid beauty. They are so fearful lest they be considered parochial that they go to the extreme of a persistent preoccupation with alien activity and excess. They have not achieved an indispensable neutrality between the sentimental claims of a local talent and the fallacious lure of exotic prestige, the stultifying influence of precedent and the illusion of modernity. Of course exceptions must be made. Reviewing the exhibition at

the Carnegie Institute some years ago, the brilliant and fearless art critic of *Town Topics* (yes, I said *Town Topics*) had this to say of Murphy's "Brow of the Knoll," a picture now owned by Mr. Alexander Hudnut: "But even contemporary French and English landscape fails to compete with the kind of work J. Francis Murphy is doing." Honourable mention should also be made of the efforts of Mr. Caffin, Mr. Royal Cortissoz of the *New York Tribune*, a man of wholesome common sense, nimble wit and gracious susceptibility, and Mr. Duncan Phillips, cultured and disciplined aristocrat of æsthetics. I advance and recommend the point of view of these gentlemen not because their estimates of individual merit agree with mine (as a matter of fact, I deplore Mr. Caffin's wholesale endorsement of Tryon, and Mr. Cortissoz's protuberant predilection for Alden Weir), but merely because they are aware of conditions about them and because they respond sympathetically and intelligently to these conditions. Criticism has never sold pictures to that legendary character, the bloated bondholder, but it can and should induce a favourable and intelligent receptivity on the part of the public. That is all one can ask of it. And yet, curiously enough, if the American painter need no longer die in order to make a living, thanks are due to the sagacity of the American business man and to the common sense of the American people. The Thomas B. Clarke sale of American pictures, held in New York City February 14, 15, 16 and 17, 1899, directed the attention of the American people to the fact that pictures were being produced in this country that were not only selling for real money, but were bringing, proportionately, the kind of prices that Barbizons were bringing. A buying movement set in; the future of American painting was secured. In these days when the contemporary painter—Dewing, Tryon, Weir, Murphy, Dessar, Dearth—asks thousands of dollars for a painting, and, what is



more, gets it, it is sad to think that Martin, Wyant, Robinson and Twachtman were fortunate if they could dispose of their paintings at all, and that Blake-lock, undernourished and harassed beyond endurance, was consigned to an asylum for the insane. This, however, is one of art's eternal platitudes, a platitude more common perhaps to painting than to any other of the arts.

Unfortunately, while all these developments were taking place, young America, identifying art with a smoking jacket and a bow tie, abandoned the frugal and necessitous isolation of its homeland to seek its fortune in the inspiring environment of continental æsthetics. It was assumed that one could express one's self in Paris more easily than in Perth Amboy. Of course there was something to this, but not everything. So it happened that during the time George Inness was putting the soul of this country on canvas, and Winslow Homer was absorbing the rugged, stark, spray-spattered spirit of the Maine Coast, and Wyant and Murphy were absorbing the spirit of the Catskills, our young men were absorbing the spirit of Montmartre. These young men were painting very much like other young men. They gathered together in precious and exclusive conclave. They became active partisans of "movements." They learned how to do it very much as the other fellows did, but in gaining a cosmopolitan facility they lost their æsthetic soul. There can be absolutely no question over the fact that sometimes they justified themselves by improving upon their models. Our Mr. Childe Hassam, for example, is a hundred times a stronger painter than Mr. Claude Monet. Unfortunately, the spirit back of the work of these men has lost something of what one might call an original integrity. In a word, it is not an indispensable point of view. Unfortunately again, it is too often this sort of thing that foreign critics see when they come here. They do not see Fuller's "Girl with Turkeys," Inness' "Tenaflly Oaks" or "Midsummer Foli-

age," Murphy's "Brow of the Knoll" or "Upland Pastures, Morning," that noble, luminous apotheosis of homely, naked, native soil owned by Mr. Adolph Lewesohn. As for our younger men, both painters and critics of painting, I repeat that their reaction to the spirit of our native atmosphere has been perhaps irremediably impaired and adulterated by influences fictitiously and, I dare add, cheaply ultra. They have facts to their finger tips on Matisse, Cézanne, Van Gogh, Gauguin, but they know next to nothing about Weir, Tryon, Murphy, Wyant, Inness, Homer, Martin, Blake-lock. They plead for a national music and ignore a national painting. They do not realise that an authentic æstheticism reveals itself through its ability to recognise and appraise, each for their individual inherent worth, things widely, even totally, dissimilar. A supreme capacity for the appreciation of "Tristan" need not preclude an enjoyment of "Butterfly"; one may yield upon occasions to the hypnotic ecstasy of Debussy's harmonic system, and yet retain a vigorous response to the rugged, primitive energy, humour and pathos of a folk-song. But our younger set holds a fine scorn for the kind of painter that I have endorsed in these pages. Apparently, said younger set is unaware of or indifferent to the fact that for a quarter of a century now the pictures painted by the American painter have been steadily increasing in value, and that a steady accumulation of these pictures by collectors and museums scattered throughout the country is in progress. Why should our professional progressives, our chronic malcontents, react favourably to a wistful, rural, sentimental and spiritual point of view that, however much it may reflect the essential gist and pith of this country's innate identity, yet remains incomprehensible to their complex and supersophisticated organisms? We may feel that a Murphy and a Wyant, with their affectionate response to the arid pathos of naked and isolated areas, are the equivalent to a verse of Burns or

a folk-song; our friends who are out of touch with the stark humanity, the frank, sweet winds and wood odours that permeate these pictures, fail to see that a characteristic American spirit has been perceived and permanently recorded. Who of them could recognise, for example, the chill, chaste, reticent New England spirit that Mr. Alden Weir places so consummately upon canvas? Why should they recognise a thing that they have not felt? Art is not altogether—as so many would have us think—a detached, impersonal thing; at its greatest it is experience miraculously welded into patterns so sheerly beautiful that we should enjoy them if for nothing more than the beauty, and quite regardless of the significance of their contents. But if we would receive the full import of the work of art, we must be in a thorough sympathy with the actuating spirit back of it. Here is one of those obvious things so obvious that it is constantly ignored or forgotten. A mere exposition, no matter how earnest, honest and intense, of a mood, experience, racial characteristic and so on must not detain us if it falls short of a certain measure of artistic facility. For example, that vastly overestimated work "Boris Godounoff" is a curiosity, if you will, but hardly a work of art; and no one in their senses would urge a consideration of parochial or national artistic activity if, from a technical standpoint, that activity were incompetent. We can maintain, however, that in the best work of the American painter a

perfect co-ordination is accomplished between a veracious representation and a superb and satisfying craftsmanship. That we hesitate to believe in the excellence of our painters is, as I have repeatedly pointed out, a survival of that time in our history when we valued European art not dispassionately and on its merits, but, instead, with a kind of wholesale, take-it-for-grantedness now happily a part of the past. Even yet it is a little difficult for us to acknowledge that an *Ethan Frome* is a piece of literature that may hold its own in any company, or that an Inness such as was on exhibition last season at the gallery of Messrs. Scott and Fowles may be the equal of any painting of its kind that the world has so far seen.

Much to my regret, the space at my disposal has not allowed me to attempt a sheerly critical estimate of the collective and individual work of American painting. As to this collective and individual worth opinions differ. Many will dismiss American painting for a negligible thing scarce worth an argument, a mere sterile replica of the art of the past. Others, besides the present writer, believe that it possesses an integrity of its own, and that it may even represent an inestimable development in the art of painting. However this may be, this article has attempted merely to emphasise those features of the matter that are susceptible to an actual demonstration, and to record certain saliences of an unmistakable sequence and significance.

# THE MASQUE OF POETS\*

EDITED BY EDWARD J. O'BRIEN

## AN APRIL SEQUENCE

### I

#### *Premonition*

WHERE does the wind from the wilding blow  
Troubling the dream-caught woods of dawn  
With hushed remembrance of woven music  
Out of the shadowy gates of horn?

Under the still-fringed water-meadows  
Colour is veining the grassy ways.  
Over the dove-clad clouds of winter  
A lark's cry falls through the ringing haze.

Wind and water and star-paled heaven  
Mingle in colour and whisper of wind.  
Earth and air call unto the Father.  
Can April wonder be far behind?

### II

#### *Tiding*

When all the tides of April  
Are rising in the air,  
And flowing grass and cloud  
And sea are fair,

Light circles in the flower  
And flesh and foam,  
And body unto body  
Now turns home,

\*"The Masque of Poets" is made up of the following contributors: Thomas Walsh, Witter Bynner, Margaret Widdemer, Amelia Josephine Burr, Anna Hempstead Branch, William Rose Benét, Sarah N. Cleghorn, William Alexander Percy, Christopher Morley, Vachel Lindsay, Carl Sandburg, Vincent O'Sullivan, John Gould Fletcher, Grace Hazard Conkling, Sara Teasdale, George Sterling, Harriet Monroe, Edgar Lee Masters, Arthur Davison Ficke, Bliss Carman, Edwin Arlington Robinson, Lincoln Colcord, William Stanley Braithwaite, Conrad Aiken, Josephine Preston Peabody, Amy Lowell, Charles Wharton Stork, Edward J. O'Brien. The series will continue throughout the year, and, probably in the November number, the poems, given hitherto anonymously, will be listed with their authors' names. In the meantime, correspondence regarding the poems and their authorship is invited by the Editor.