

VOX POPULI IN ART

By A. G. Simkins

ONCE upon a time, and not so many years ago, I thought I was an artist. My dictionary tells me that an artist is one who is skilled in some one of the fine arts. But to me that definition is incomplete. He also must sell his work, in most cases, or he cannot remain an artist. Rather unreasonably, perhaps, he does the thing he likes best in the world to do and is paid for his pleasure, or labor. If he could get eleven dollars a day as plumbers do, or men working in other common trades, he would esteem himself blessed of the gods. However, he is handicapped in many ways. He has no union. Can anyone imagine an artist belonging to a union? When canvases collect upon his hands, he does not resort to a gigantic advertising campaign, as do California fruit-growers and their ilk when they have an over-crop of raisins, prunes or whatever; nor does he offer prizes for best essays by school pupils as to why hell and damnation will overtake each and all who fail to buy his wares. Why, he does not even belong to Rotary, Kiwanis, or roar with the Lions. At least, I have never heard of one doing so, and the idea is incongruous. Chambers of Commerce ignore his existence, if they are even aware of it. If anyone buys his work, that person is a patron of the arts and as such is glorified. In other words, the artist is patronized: a damnable thing, and doubly damned in that a patron usually makes it a rule never to buy a picture by a living artist, contending that it is only after a man is dead that his real value can be estimated. The artist must be his own salesman, and only a double-distilled genius like Eddie Guest can develop the hermaphroditic entity that typifies the world's greatest poet and the world's greatest salesman.

My line was canvas and oils. Even now I think my work was good. Doubtless I was an awful ass, but five years ago I believed as firmly as I believed God made me that the

things would sell. In this sublime confidence, before I had ever sold a canvas or even received a commission, I took unto myself a wife, endowed her with all my worldly goods and the amphora of an artist's dreams. Later children came, two of them; where-upon, art or no art, shekels had to be garnered for the family. I hawked my wares until my heart was sick. Doubts began to assail me as to their worth. In despair I hunted up an artist friend whose work had been recognized, unburdened to him all my weight of woe; possibly wept upon his bosom. Anyway I enlisted his sympathy and he suggested that I take a bunch of his sketches, try to sell them, get what I could for them and split fifty-fifty, as he was hard up, too. They were excellent in line and coloring, so I chirked up, figuring to get rid of them in an afternoon. I saw myself triumphantly marching home that evening, waving a roll of greenbacks and driving the head of the pack from the door. Now, I know I can sell pictures, for I have supported myself and my family that way for five years. However, I carried my friend's sketches around for months and sold not one. People just wouldn't buy them. They were too good, too darn good. That is exactly what was the matter with them.

To begin with, the colors were pure. No one wants pure colors. They yearn for muddy rose or blue, or, worse still, taupe. A good, fresh green just naturally makes them shy off in a scared sort of way. Quiet colors are the thing, hence most homes run to murky brown or muddy gray furniture. Carpets resemble a rainy day in the stock-yards, without the enlivening touches of that delectable spot. Evidently all mural decoration must be lifeless and wholly lacking in atmospheric effect. To be sure, the grass may be green and the sky, even in a sunset, must be blue. But not the lush green of meadows nor the shrill green of trees in first

leaf; not the deep blue of sky that suggests immensity and eternity, but greens and blues washed out and faded.

There are two distinct schools of customers: one buys landscapes; the other, seascapes. The murky brown people buy the former and the muddy gray folks the latter. No use even showing them anything else. Each group, however, demands set patterns and local coloring. A seascape should have at least six gulls wheeling in the air, and three small boats on the horizon, their sails stainless as the robes of a vestal virgin. A rocky point with a lighthouse is highly esteemed. But a rocky point without a lighthouse, or a rocky point and a lighthouse without waves splashing halfway up its walls is never accepted.

I know a man whose vocation is cutting shoes. His avocation is dabbling with color. Especially is he entranced with the manifold humors of the sea, on the shore of which he lives. He once painted the water, calm as a breeze-ruffled millpond, as the sea sometimes is. When the work was finished he called his wife and daughter to view it. He thought he had caught the mood of the ocean at rest. Each protested the absence of white-crested billows. The picture was not true to life. They insisted upon alterations. He refused to fashion his work anew and left the canvas in his wife's sewing room. When next he viewed his masterpiece, on each tiny ripple was a splash of foam: white foam, soap-suds effect. He well knew the greatest paintings have not a speck of pure white in their makeup. This fact, however, did not perturb his daughter, who had done the retouching, upheld by her mother and friends. I believe he has not lifted a brush since. Perhaps he is a better shoecutter therefor, but I doubt it.

The people know what they want, all philosophy to the contrary notwithstanding. At least, they do in art. Certain details are essential for selling. Beach scenes call for people, stupendous unbroken waves, and whitish-gray or reddish-yellow sand. Such a combination as trees and grass coming down to meet the water is unthinkable. A popular number is the classic, "Moonlight on the Water", with the ubiquitous sailboat,

full-bellied before the wind. One furled sail would prove fatal.

Harking back to my artist friend, he had offended all the conventions in both seascapes and landscapes. One sketch was of a gnarled and twisted wild apple tree. I was enthusiastic in my admiration of this sketch and made an eloquent appeal to prospective buyers. No good. Who would pay ten, or even five dollars for just one tree? That sum should purchase at least a dozen, or a whole orchard. The leaves were not right and there were not enough of them to cover the branches. The poor tree was almost nude with all those ugly, crooked limbs exposed. Now a dozen elms or maples, perfectly graduated in height, standing in a straight row, could be called "The Harp of the Winds", and everyone would want it. In fact, a row of almost any kind of nice, straight trees, with good-sized trunks, is satisfactory. Trees budding out in Spring are not looked upon with favor, either; they must not "grow misty green with leafing buds". If a picture represents the vernal season, trees must have blossoms, and plenty of them. The anatomy of a tree is apparently inconsistent with artistic ideals. A row of trees flanked by a stone wall sells well: one of those walls which a farmer spends a lifetime building by collecting rocks as nearly spherical as possible and piling them, perfectly even, three or four feet high. Split-stone walls *non sunt*.

Mountains are all right, but they must be far away and clothed in purple shadows. "Tis distance lends enchantment to the view, and robes the mountain in its azure hue", quotes that classical pedagogical volume, "Westlake's Literature". Mountains must be just as round and free of angles as stones in walls; that is, unless the representation is Fujiama or the Mätterhorn. Great liberty is permitted in the treatment of these two subjects and of the Grand Canyon. But God's green fields and stone walls demand careful handling. Large ponds may be depicted if they display unbroken reflections. Ponds on windy days are taboo.

Whatever the subject, miles of horizon heighten its salability. A small, closed-in space doesn't offer enough for the money.

The average person would not pay more than five dollars for the most delicate miniature in the world. He would pay at least fifty for any sort of painting twelve feet square. An artist who could paint the universe to large scale should get rich *pronto*. An entire valley brings a higher price any day than does an interesting section of it. Meadows are excellent. Everybody falls for them. Cows are not so popular as they were several years ago, except on milk company calendars, and there they are fast being displaced by heads of pretty girls.

The method of manufacturing the pictures I sell merits attention. Not even Fords are more efficiently and economically made. First a photograph is enlarged on as many pieces of academy board as the workroom will hold. The "artist" takes a blue airbrush and puts in all the skies. Next, by the same process, come a few clouds, nice, white, absorbent-cotton clouds. Purple brush, and presto, there are the mountains; green brush, meadows and clumps of trees. Putting in tree trunks, perhaps a stone wall, or other details, with a real brush gives authority for the label "Hand painted". Surrounded by a cheap frame they are ready to take out and sell. People are so used to seeing airbrush technic that a painting with depth and atmosphere fails to register.

There is no set price for these wares. There is a minimum, but no maximum. The picture that sells for ten dollars in one house may bring two hundred next door. If a woman who paid two hundred mentions the fact to her neighbor who paid ten, the latter thinks she is swanking and only replies that she bought one, too. On the other hand if the woman who paid ten mentions the price first, the other will know she has been stung but will not dare admit it.

Academy board is cheaper than canvas but more is charged for it; customers are persuaded that it is the latest style and that canvas is *passée*. In fact, it is now difficult to sell a picture painted on canvas. Many people have given me good oils on good canvas to have copies made on academy board.

Not a person, I venture to say, among *hoi polloi*, would dare hang a nude on the wall.

But with a diaphanous scarf, that by some miracle manages to veil just the right spots, nudes will sell like hot-dogs. The owners will, however, apologize to all who see them.

Many women like to have their portraits painted from some kodak picture taken in a bathing suit. The snapshots are usually back-dated to the time before they acquired autos and adipose. A little coaxing is required, sometimes, though they are really all on fire to have it done. It would, however, be indelicate and unbecoming to Daughters of the Revolution, the Mayflower, the Spanish War, the American Legion, and what not, to suggest such a thing. Nevertheless, it seems that by an altogether admirable dispensation of Providence most women gloat over their shapeliness, whether it resembles a hat-rack or a box-car.

A scandal attached to an artist's name at least doubles the income from his work. If there be no scandal, the name is better omitted. There is no such person as a moral artist. The salesman hires a discarded ice-house on some rock-bound coast and wears a smock, much bedaubed. His appearance and setting stamp him the real thing. Pictures that will not sell for ten dollars, ordinarily, will command fifty across an old table smeared with water colors and a devilishly handsome "artist" behind it.

In portraiture conventions are indeed strict. A woman must smile and appear as nearly as possible like the reigning movie queen. A man, if over forty, must look stern and grim, following the national conception of a great financier. "Character, that's the thing!" If the portrait is a good likeness, they will not accept it. However, they are compelled to pay for the frame.

One of the most successful "portrait painters" in this country today is a Russian who immigrated a few years ago. He interviewed a nationally, perhaps internationally, known tobacco manufacturer and obtained a commission with a photograph. The latter he enlarged to more than life size, gave it airbrush treatment and adorned the result with a seven-fifty very ornate frame. Shortly, in the "artist's" name, an account running into four figures, was opened at a leading banking institution. The financial

magnate, highly pleased with his purchase which now affords him the *locus standi* in the directors' room, passed the word along and immediately the Russian was swamped with orders from the financially and socially elect. He now has a large factory with many assistants, and is believed to be a royal personage, incog., forced by the exigencies of Sovietism to paint portraits for an existence. Possibly he esteems himself a great artist. The powers of self-deception are unlimited.

Even so, the great artist, whether he be a Velazquez, a Shakespeare or a Fritz Kreisler, is always a person apart, made so by his genius, and often by some tragic circumstance. He may have to extort a living as a

mendicant; he may provide for himself handsomely, regardless of the spiritual loss entailed and a "branded" name. Nevertheless he is always great. The gods still sit around him. Like the poet, he is in search of a deeper truth in things than that which is the object of science. The difficulty, of course, is to expound this to those who live in a different world and speak a different tongue. Until this *pons asinorum* is crossed the world will continue to behold saucy little pictures, cheap little pictures, muddy little pictures, all making their bid to certain cells in the gray matter of sated humans. Tons of wood pulp, miles of frame, rivers of paint, volumes of sales-talk, all to feed the prevailing taste.

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By Arnold Bennett

IN TWO PARTS: PART ONE

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First walk through town with Mr. M. The apparent smallness of interior of the cathedral. Market, but no signs of any goods to be sold. Only crowds of men, some in very amusing fur coats, at N. W. corner of Piazza d. Signoria. The Palazzo Strozzi impressed me more than anything I have yet seen, and there is little doubt that it has now firmly established its position in my mind, and will remain the chief thing at Florence for ever and ever. Shops in via Tornabuoni rather disappointing. I am as interested in "the principal shopping street" of a town as in its antiquities. This one is not even equal to the Corso V. Emanuele at Milan. Cf. Kalverstraat at Amsterdam! I walked through the Court of the Uffizi without knowing that it was the Uffizi. . . . Striking sensations began as we crossed the river. First sight of Ponte Vecchio, etc. Inevitable comparisons with Bruges. And Bruges comes out pretty well; though of course inferior. We went along a street parallel to the Arno and saw some beautiful faience over a door, and also the interior of a little church of which I shall probably never know the name.

Then the Pitti: it looks like a rather expensive barracks. Then up the south slope of the Ponte Vecchio. One of the picturesque vehicles coming down it — shapeless cart, horse in shafts covered with a red cloth, and a pony at either side; the whole jingling. Crossed Ponte Vecchio. Jewellers' shops nothing in particular, but the little open space in the middle of the bridge is agreeable. I came home and made my first sketch in Florence, of a campanile opposite this window. No damned good.

What remains in my mind is the convex surfaces of each vast stone of the Strozzi; they seem nothing at a distance; but, when

you are close. . . . The whole of the grim side of Florence is in them. It is a great pity that part of the enormous eaves of this palace have been destroyed. The simplicity of the design of the palace is very telling, as you stand at one of the entrances and see the courtyard. And the torch-brackets, and iron grilles of the windows, must not be forgotten.

Afternoon. Couldn't help taking X out to see what I had seen. But first we went to S. Croce. It is the floor here that gives the warm effect to the interior. I couldn't find the Strozzi again without the map. When I did find it, it repeated its effect. Just close by was the principal tea-shop. Good tea and good cakes. Tea dear. A lack of style. I was particularly and freshly struck by the barbaric quality of these English who overrun Europe. All this time I had been thinking of a savage article for The English Review on the Palazzo Strozzi and English pensions, and the relations there-between. I got the notion for this while I was lying down with a sick-headache. After tea we crossed the river and went into Brunelleschi's San Spirito. The proportions of this place, the just simple architecture, and the simple colouring pleased me enormously. Also there was an effect of an angelic statue against pillars: which I sketched and messed up.

The tramways seem to take up most of this part of the Lungarno. I had imagined something more spacious and marmoreal for the Lungarno. And I am disappointed in that detail of the town. There is simply no room on the quays, and in some places the edge of the step of the tram is exactly over the edge of the pavement. Those red cloths on the backs of the horses don't cost much, but they add a lot to the colour of the movement in the streets. No order whatever in