
RENAISSANCE IN AMERICAN ART

BY RALPH M. PEARSON

THE FEDERAL government has paid \$1,300,000 in salaries to 2,500 artists over a period of 5 months and now owns 15,000 works, including some 500 murals, which have been executed throughout the country. The same government now plans additional selective purchases through a special department of the Treasury to decorate buildings with, instead of the usual gold-leaf scrolls, murals and sculptures by the better artists. And New York City's Mayor announces plans for the embellishment (already under way) of the City's parks and for a municipal art center. These events are unique in American history. We had spent several hundred million dollars on plants and structures to house magnificently the works of dead artists, but never before had concern for the living artist reached a point where we would spend hard government cash to keep him, or rather his profession, alive and working.

In the beginning these expenditures were relief measures. Now they indicate, in the words of President Roosevelt, that "the progress of a country is measured by the opportunities it offers its citizens of leading a more abundant life." And this program may be evidence of a cultural flowering (such as took place in Mexico with the renaissance of mural painting) that may place the United States on a new level in the artistic world. Historical evidence points toward it.

Is this what is happening? I think it is. Without doubt we are now in the first stages of an indigenous cultural rebirth; the wave of excitement, induced by the government's program, which is sweeping the country testifies to this much. But the works so far produced do not prove the fact; they are the promise of what can happen and what will happen if this wave retains its vitality. And if the artistic value of the work which is being done rises it will

be because all the national intelligence, vision, and courage will have supplemented this excitement. There are plenty of disintegrating forces waiting to be overcome.

What is the ideal government program to assist Americans in leading a more abundant life through the medium of the visual arts? And what chance has that program of being instituted and sustained?

The ideal program is one which will jolt, push, lead, or, if necessary, blast the largest possible section of the American public into the experiencing of creative art. In other words the ideal program is one that will support the translating of ordinary human experience into pictorial drama, with the thrills, satisfactions, and challenges that come from contemplating an effectively controlled and plastically integrated expression or interpretation of subject. An interpretation is not a copy of surface facts as observed in a specific scene. It is a rebuilding into something new, with meanings and values added to the values of the actual subject.

This simple fact, true of all works of creative art, is frequently not understood. (Apparently it is not understood by the President, who is having his portrait painted by Frank O. Salisbury, an English naturalistic artist.) But it must be understood by the government before the government program for artists can give more than a promise of a cultural renaissance. For it is the values involved in the dramatization of subject and in the organization of all the elements of which subject is composed — lines, spaces, colors, and forms — into visual music that creates culture. Since our civilization has largely forgotten these values, it is with them that any rebirth must begin. It is on the reach of our creative power in these two fields that the distinction of an individual work or a national movement will depend.

THE RIGHT KIND OF REALISM

THIS SUPPORT of the creative, reorganizing artist has a corollary — the refusal to support the noncreative, fact-recording copyist even when technical skill, his chief call to fame, is superb. Pictures and sculptures of this type have no value beyond their technical and proxy values. To put it bluntly, they are not works of art in the modern and classical meaning of that much-abused word. They have none of the civilizing values of art. But the replica picture, because it allows the spectator to recognize what he already knows, thus making no new and strenuous demands upon his intelligence, is still widely popular. And the school of naturalistic artists is still in the majority. Can a democratic government get away with supporting a minority in art as safely as it inevitably does in finance?

The creative experience is a new adventure to the vast majority of American citizens. Any new experience, outside of love and physical adventure, is apt to be sturdily resisted. Governmental shoving and blasting, therefore, will be more or less unpopular. And yet if the program fails in that adventurous respect, if it leaves the aesthetic potentialities of the average citizen where they are now — starved for lack of sustenance, mired in the practical, sunk in the intellectual instead of the emotional response to art, enslaved by habit to the copying-nature school of the picture — it will have failed completely in the essentials of a renaissance; there will be no civilizing force at work. That is the impasse that imperils any genuine program — unpopularity on the one hand, devitalization on the other. Business surrenders to this block in the path of aesthetic progress with nothing more than a few advertising gestures of true progressivism. Idealistic individuals, groups, schools, associations, and so forth have their minority effects but cannot affect the vast bulk of majority stolidity. Public education falls down on its quantity job in spite of progressive individuals. Government is the last and only hope of a wide regenerative process.

Since a work of art will grip an individual or a people more powerfully if it deals with the realities of its life, the ideal program will avoid all escapes from reality into the idyllic day-

dream of innocuous romance. If, therefore, our dominant life interests are love, baseball, gangsters, public service, war, killing, kings, dictators, and bridge and if the dominant realities of the national daily life are starvation or the fear of it, misery, economic slavery, dull routine, conspicuous wealth, snobbery, fashion, greed, collective planning, idealism, and family quarrels, then these are the events that should be interpreted for us and fused into a color-and-form symphony by the creative artist. If history is the theme, as it will be in the murals planned for the main post-office building in Washington, this same contact with the realities of the past is the only possible means to a living art.

But *things* also make up our environment. Cabbages, airplanes, and hats, as well as kings and gangsters, have color and form, and there is no reason why they too should not be built into exciting creations in paint. The great enduring work will make us see these common things and events in a new way, with the added different, surprising, or maybe shocking values of creative plastic art. The major decorations at Rockefeller Center are puerile because they avoid all such contacts with embarrassing reality and escape to the perfect world of romance. The government, since it is dedicated to service instead of private gain, need not fear reality. When its decorations escape into romance, as they have done in the past, habit-ridden acceptance of a decadent tradition — not expediency — is the reason therefor.

HOW FAR HAVE WE ADVANCED?

THIS, THEN, is the ideal program. How much must it be compromised to survive the whirlpool of conflicting opinion that sets our national stage? How much is it being compromised in public projects already completed, under way, or planned? From watching the government and New York City programs at close range, from interviewing various public officials, and from knowing and talking with artists, I can draw some general and some specific conclusions. Let me briefly mention a few.

To date the most valuable social result of the public sponsorship of art has probably been the awakening of interest in it and of sense of contact with it which has taken place through-

out the country, on all intellectual and economic levels. Take the newspaper headlines as a barometer of this new life pulsing through the prematurely hardened arteries of our conventional attitude toward art. Here are a few chosen almost at random.

PWA PROJECT GIVES 2,500 ARTISTS WORK
GREAT PWA ART SHOW PLANNED
A PWA PROJECT STIRS A SCHOOL
TEN-YEAR GAIN IN ART UNDER PWA IS SEEN
STUDY OF ART RISES AS MAJOR SUBJECT
ART GIFT TO THE SCHOOLS
COST OF ART PROJECT HELD FULLY JUSTIFIED
CITY PARKS TO GET NEW ARTISTIC TONE
PUBLIC BUILDINGS TO GET NEW ART DEAL
FEDERAL BUILDINGS SEEK BEST IN ART

In the Corcoran Gallery exhibition of 500 PWA works of art, taken from the 15,000 then produced, a rough count showed those which dominantly belonged in the creative school to be slightly in the majority, as opposed to those definitely belonging in the naturalistic or copying school. This ascendancy of the creative gave a feeling of life to the whole exhibition, a sense that we were at last definitely breaking with the sterile copy of fact, at last daring aesthetic adventure. For their success in managing this venture as effectively and probably as selectively as possible, Edward Bruce, L. W. Roberts, Jr., of the Treasury, and Forbes Watson are to be congratulated.

The new government program for selecting artists of outstanding power to do specific decorations is under the direction of Edward Rowan of the Treasury, with Mr. Bruce as consulting expert. Mr. Rowan is an intelligent, alive, forward-looking young official, who knows that the cheesecloth-damsel school of mural painting is finished and that a new era is opening. Moreover he has painted creatively himself and assimilated the meanings of that experience — a prime requisite of intelligent judgment. Significant contemporary decoration dealing with the realities of American life may be expected under his direction — if intelligent official decisions are not diluted by a too-diversified advisory committee.

In New York City the park-embellishment

program is under the direction of Aymar Embury, II, consulting architect for the Park Department and the Port of New York Authority. Mr. Embury says he has the sole responsibility for decisions on the choice of artists, from those on relief rolls, for murals and sculptures in the parks.

In his bridge designs, which include the cement anchorages for the George Washington Bridge, Mr. Embury has created simple, modern, functional forms of great distinction. In his buildings, he still contradictorily favors period styles, approves decadent decorative stereotypes that are nonfunctional both as decoration and in spirit. He does not understand or value modern plastic organization in pictures or sculptures, its architectural harmonies with the building. He believes "the artist is a hired man paid to do a job, and he should do it to please his client." By these cultural lags in his conception of the architecture and decoration of modern buildings and of the function of the artist, Mr. Embury proves himself thoroughly unfit for responsibility in deciding a park decorative program. That Commissioner Moses and Mayor La Guardia have delegated responsibility to him is unfortunate and calls their own standards into question.

Finally, the Fine Arts Commissions in Washington and New York City, with Charles Moore and Jonas Lie at their respective heads, both represent the art standards of the last century and so delay the application of more advanced knowledge.

Definitely, then, an ideal government program in support of living art is in the process of realization in certain segments of the national scene. Definitely, also, there are powerful barriers to any awakening from the materialistic and romantic substitutes for true art experience which we have inherited from the nineteenth century. There is reason for hope, however, in so much breaking away from a decadent tradition and in so much experimentation in the new way. Intelligent judgment was never more timely nor more critically needed than now.

Further articles by Mr. Pearson on various aspects of American art today
will appear in succeeding issues.

BIRTHRIGHT IN ANDALUSIA

A Short Story

BY THEODORE PRATT

THIS SPANISH priest was a man. His full name was El Señor Don Vicario Miguel Torres y Calafell, but on the ship going over Kenton got to know him as the Vicario. That means priest in Spanish. Kenton didn't have any religion, but that didn't make any difference to the Vicario. They hit it off from the minute Kenton found him in the bar swigging a drink and reading his breviary, which was propped against a bottle of Seltzer water. "What'll you have?" the Vicario asked. Kenton told him. "O. K.," he said, and informed the barman.

Then they got talking.

His mission was about as crazy as any Kenton had ever heard of. Certainly it was dangerous. Only it didn't seem so to him. He never considered that. You don't think much of anything else when your birthright has been taken away from you and you're trying to get it back.

During the five years the Vicario had been attached to a Spanish church in the United States the Second Republic of Spain had come into being. The Church had been separated from the state with violent, almost indecent, alacrity. That meant priests were no longer paid by the government. Most of all it meant that their power had been shattered. They stepped down politically, were forced below socially, and even lost a good deal of ground religiously by antichurch propaganda. In the days of the monarchy what the priest of a small town said was the last and greatest word. He ranked above the mayor, above the police, above everybody.

All that was changed now. The Vicario knew it. He came from a small town himself and had once been the power there. He was going back to be the power again. He wouldn't stand for the new regime. His dark eyes gleamed in his red face when he thought of it. His stocky, well-fed body inside his black cloth shook with

resolve and indignation as he thumped his empty glass on the bar and said: "God damn them!" He meant the republicans, and what he said wasn't a curse but a solemn calling upon God to punish sin. He could make a lot of English swearwords and slang sound like prayers, and one of his greatest regrets was that Spanish didn't have much slang in it.

After a while he calmed down and found out that Kenton was a writer and had been to Spain before and was going back to find a place to live for a time and work.

"You have written about Spain?" he asked.

"A couple of books."

"Gracias," he said. "You have written well of her?"

"For the most part."

"Muy gracias. It is good in Andalusia, and you will find all you want in Cignes there. Come with me."

Kenton was tall, with fair hair and a nature that was ready for anything, and he took the train out of Alicante with the Vicario at seven in the morning. The third-class carriage was one long, open compartment with wooden seats running its width. There wasn't any corridor, and if you had to go to the lavatory you waited until you got to the next station. At Murcia they changed to the Twentieth Century, the Royal Scot, of Andalusia, a train that takes eleven hours to speed two hundred and ten miles across the province. It had, however, a corridor, and in it the other passengers stood to look at Kenton, a curious object because he was a foreigner. For hours they stood and stared. They went away, got their friends, and came back to stare with them. They didn't smile or joke or say anything but kept dead pans. Later Kenton went out to reverse the process and stare at them. They didn't get the joke.

The Vicario didn't pay any attention. He sat