

Impotent America

The Trouble with the Arts

by **RALPH M. PEARSON**

MRS. FRANKLIN ROOSEVELT, in her privately supported Val-Kill furniture shop, copies Colonial styles.

The Supreme Court of the United States has just completed the vast project of housing itself in a magnificent adaptation of a Greek temple.

Colleen Moore has spent ten years of energy and four hundred thirty-five thousand of her hard-earned dollars to build a miniature fairy castle of medieval design.

Al Smith, product of the sidewalks of New York, lives with the furnishings of some long-dead king — I forget at the moment exactly which one.

These are leading citizens. Why do they do these peculiar things?

They do these very peculiar things because they are the more or less innocent victims of inherited attitudes of mind which are typical of our civilization and which insure in them and in society a divorce from the creative art experience.

These attitudes, which today prevent the functioning of the creative mind in fields associated with the plastic arts, are the practical mind, with its absorptions in the concrete and its starvation of the senses; the unbalanced intellectualism, which *knows* but cannot *feel*; habits of passivity and the resultant fears of ignorance expressed so effectively by our love of the antiquarian; the acquisitive instinct, with its go-getting distractions from the experiencing of quality; and the overweening prides and snobberies that try to compensate for spiritual poverty. The profit motive in business and its servant, the commercial press, cater to and thereby encourage these weak spots in the national mind, for devious greedy reasons — thus proving them to be majority phenomena.

THE PRACTICAL MIND

THE PRACTICAL mind believes in tangibles instead of intangibles. It approves hard work, not as experience but as a means to some practical end, such as accumulating a competence for the future. Busy-ness has an inherent virtue, regardless of its results. Idleness or mere contemplation is sin. As it hardens with age or the set patterns of a circumscribed life, it becomes increasingly intolerant of all deviations from its own type.

The natives of a New England village dependent on summer boarders for their living ran out of town every tearoom that stayed open late at night. It was wicked to have noisy music and laughter that interfered with sleep. And one village housewife, renting rooms as her only business, asked an artist grandmother to leave her virtuous roof because she came in from a party at midnight. It is the emotional frigidity of this widely prevalent practical mind which starves the arts as it starves itself.

When pilgrims were coming hundreds of miles to see the new Orozco mural at Dartmouth, the native who had walked a few blocks to see this national masterpiece was hard to find. He knew about it, yes; there had been a lot in the papers; but this was art, and why go to see a work of art? The sense of remoteness was so ingrained, so complete that no vestige of an idea that this work might mean something was present.

The materialistic mind sees pictures materialistically. The practical matters of faithfully recording known facts are important. Skill, as the means to this practical end, is the chief virtue of the artist. All invention, creation, reorganization are taboo. The emotional values of design are "frills" or, in the case of an intellectual like Craven, a "means to an end."

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The modern movement is "insanity" or a "passing fad."

It was this state of mind, together with its concomitant intellectualism, that was mainly responsible for the gradual decline of art into naturalism typical of the past four hundred years of art history. It is this attitude which makes the recovery so slow, merely because it is incapable of assimilating and understanding the art of the picture. It is this limitation at work in the minds of the advisory committee to the government in the selection of artists to paint murals for the Department of Justice and Post Office buildings in Washington that is responsible for the usual confusion of the plastic and naturalistic schools in the approved list of eleven artists. Six of the eleven — Benton, Biddle, Poor, Robinson, Sterne, and Wood — know modern plastic design in varying degrees and so, in spite of other limitations, have the basic equipment for the art of mural painting. Four — Curry, Kent, Kroll, and Marsh — are naturalistic artists innocent of this knowledge. Also they are easel painters. On both counts they are basically unequipped to paint a mural. Savage, as a decorative naturalist, can be called a muralist, if one is not too critical, thus giving seven with the minimum artistic equipment. Perhaps one should be satisfied with such an advance over former government requirements. But the confusion of elemental standards is so needless.

INTELLECTUALISM

THE UNBALANCED intellectualism which knows but cannot feel is rarely recognized as the preventative of sensory experience that it is.

An adult with the usual accumulation of contemporary habits will be trying to mold clay into interesting forms freely and with emotional abandon. In order to segregate the experience of sensing form as form, and formal relationships as such, from all extraneous interferences, subject is forbidden. Form for its own sake is the goal. Hands squeeze the clay aimlessly while waiting direction from mind. Mind remembers rules about contrast, balance, dominance, or what it has been told about planes, etc. and begins consciously, with strained effort, to apply. Results are stiff, labored, tight, and uninteresting. The individual is tired, cross, and bored.

Revolt flares. "Guess I have no talent. I

don't like modeling" — these are the normal reactions. "Of course you don't get anywhere," answers the creative teacher. "Of course you are bored. Your attitude is intellectual. Creating must be a feeling process. Let yourself go so fast and furiously that mind has no chance to direct. Then see what happens."

With constant encouragement and no end of brutal demolishings and restartings, the clay begins to mold itself into unpredictable shapes. Surprisingly, they become actually interesting. More surprising, the process becomes easy, the strain disappears, spirit rises with use. Sensing has taken the place of thinking. Feeling of knowing. Hands flying into and over the clay, punching, rolling, molding, seem to be released from all control, seem to be freed to be themselves. The mysterious power that leaps into them is uncanny. Where does it come from? We can't tell. Forces are at work that are beyond those of conscious mind. The whole body, instead of only the consciously thinking part of mind, seems to be functioning. All faculties have come awake. Boundaries have disappeared. Rules and instructions are forgotten. There is direct contact between the whole person and the clay. In two brief hours the habits of a lifetime have been broken and the normal creative powers of the individual released.

The process can take place with any medium — paint, sound, movement, words. It can happen in the field of appreciation just as in the field of practice. The art historian, the archaeologist can be blind to the art in the works each studies and describes so thoroughly. This points the fallacy in all art-appreciation teaching based on the archaeological approach. It can teach intellectual appreciation of matters of fact but it cannot deal with or "get" the *feel* of qualities, because these cannot be realized through thinking. The prevailing preoccupation, in pictures, with subject is an intellectualizing and therefore a denaturing of what should be primarily an emotional or sensory process. The intellectual attitude of mind is not an aesthetic misdemeanor in itself. It is rather a distraction, a curtailment. It distracts from the full, deep, rich experience. It builds a fence around a part of the art experience and limits the aesthetic adventuring of its addicts to that part. Its cure is an excessive emotional abandon.

ANTIQUARIANISM

ANTIQUARIANISM is a state of mind that has been exceedingly useful to our civilization because it has filled the gap between the crude but honest backwoods culture of the pioneer and the mature, complex, indigenous culture available to the truly civilized individual adult of today. At its healthiest, and rarest, it is history, with its rewards for research and scholarship and its interest in the preservation of the distinguished works of the past. At its unhealthiest, and commonest, it is romance, daydream, and a welcome escape from the responsibility of making contemporary decisions. Antiquarianism, in its present profit-stimulated popularity, is an impediment that clutters up and slows down the march of progress. It is the safety-first motto of the parvenu and the aesthetically illiterate. It is the jailer of the mind who locks out the new and unsafe aesthetic adventure.

Antiquarianism is mental insulation from new ideas and new productions. It is the death warrant of the creative mind, the dispossession notice which dumps the creative worker into the street and leaves him there to starve. As a state of mind affecting the individual and his national environment, it is a rather tragic affair.

Mrs. Roosevelt, our first lady of the land, as already noted, has for many years fostered a furniture workshop on her home estate, where, with sturdy and honest craftsmanship, copies of Colonial furniture are produced for sale. The booklet describing the enterprise has this to say:

VAL-KILL FURNITURE

Consisting of

Reproductions and Adaptations
of Early American Furniture.

"When you secure a piece with the Val-Kill hallmark you have an heirloom by which your Great-Great-Grandchildren will still remember you."

But *will* our great-great-grandchildren remember us, the *copiers*, when they gaze at these beloved heirlooms? What is to prevent their minds from slipping back to the source, from forgetting the relatively unimportant matter of the reproducing and remembering the producing in Colonial days? No, Mrs. Roosevelt is backing the wrong horse. Honest craftsmanship is not enough. If she would only forget both the past and the future — remembering

and being remembered — and deal creatively with the problem of evolving furniture that is an expression of our needs, ideals, and tempo, then she would be adding to, instead of mimicking, our inheritance.

Genuine antiques of distinction are often true works of creative art, demanding unstinted appreciation. They should be valued and preserved. They should not be lived with, for the simple reason that they are not, as expressions of the spirit of an age, in harmony with us. Our age — our tempo, thoughts, ideas, occupations, beliefs, and environment — is not that of the courtiers of Queen Elizabeth or Louis XIV. Nor is it that of our Colonial forefathers. To resurrect their furnishings from the graves of their civilizations and sit, lie, or walk on them as the most intimate parts of our everyday environment is grotesquely discordant. This discord shrieks at us, in spite of the "charming color harmonies" that are the stock in trade of the decorating profession.

The interior decorator, in our present economy, is a sort of licensed purveyor of affluent respectability. As a professional expert, he serves in person only the upper classes. In his pseudonym of "stylist," he serves (through the manufacturer, the retailer, the women's page, and the Ladies Home Magazines) the millions. It is sufficient to read his creed as stated officially in his own words:

Before the change from drabness to the colorful, livable homes of today could successfully be made, guidance was needed — guidance from those who had made a study of the art of past ages in order that the best from all ages could be reproduced to make the modern home lovely.

Business, quite understandingly, has seized on antiquarianism as a stabilizer of profit. A manufacturing concern cannot be forever experimenting with new ideas and evolving styles. Designing new modes is costly and uncertain. Quantities of buyers can never be satisfied. The great public does not like the new and different. It is distrustful of its own judgment. It wants to play safe, to buy something which is of such acknowledged correctness that the neighbors cannot smile at its selection. Hence the inevitable standardizing of taste and production, through the promulgation of styles — period for furniture and architecture, Parisian for the more contemporary fields of dress and modern art. When business is forced out of an-

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tique safety by any volume demand that cannot be ignored for reasons of prestige, it must in self-defense, which means profit defense, try to stabilize that new demand. Paris is such a stabilizing refuge. In the last few years the wider understanding of modern design has forced a business swing toward American styles — a swing which will reverse itself at any pull of profit gravity.

THE ART MUSEUM

THE ART MUSEUM is another concrete illustration of our national state of aesthetic impotence. Supported mainly by gifts from the barons of finance (conscience-salving gestures of absolution from the sins of using private power to extract wealth from their less aggressive fellow citizens), the art museum is the votive offering stuck on the walls of the shrine of some St. Peter, in grateful acknowledgment of the magic and privately tapped fountain of gold. In other words, the bequests to the art museums are neither gifts to art for its direct, firsthand value nor to the living, creative minds which produce it but to the Olympian goddess remote in time and space who can grant the magic favor — if only of respectability.

Art is the measure of civilization; let us then import great art of the past, house it in copies of majestic Greek temples, and presto! we become certainly civilized.

There will be no doubts about it, as there might be if we financed contemporary art and possibly made mistakes in judgment. The old mistakes are certified. Incidentally, of course, in these endowments of art, a monument is being raised to a Mr. Morgan, a Mr. Frick, a Mr. Havemeyer which will outlast his money-gathering fame and confer cultural distinction thereon.

So sired, and mothered by a universal (even if smothered) craving for a satisfaction of the visual sense such as cannot be granted by the chaos of the natural scene, the art museum was born, and grew lustily among us. As a social expression of our stage of cultural development, it is the perfect evidence of our divorce from art. Not only do its copied buildings and antique collections — with their attendant assumption that “appreciation” of art is caught, like a germ disease, by exposure to an outside source of contagion — testify to

this divorce; so does the personnel of control and management.

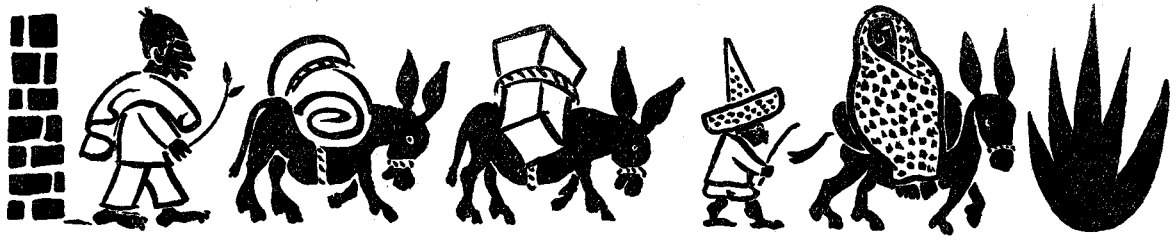
Since the museum is the child of finance, the depository of large cash endowments, and the home of costly works, it must obviously be managed wisely by practical men — men who know money values and can conserve them, who will inspire the confidence of wealthy patrons and so attract more endowments. The fact that such financiers, even though they may have learned something about art, normally have no perception of the meaning of art as an experience does not disbar them from the board of directors; it invites them to membership. And they choose the actual director — usually a man trained in this school of divorce, to satisfy cautious specialists in profitable investment and to infect the public with the germ of preserved art. The fact that some directors humanize and modernize this setting by adding art schools (usually of the naturalistic type) and exhibitions of contemporary work and so bringing the thing alive mitigates the falseness of the whole but cannot change the basic fact.

As a storehouse for the preservation of the great art of the past and as a reference library where the specialist or the student may observe and study, the art museum has a very great value, and should be preserved. The assumption that it is the source of the art experience is a delusion and a snare. It deludes the public by deflecting it from participating experience into the romance of hero-worship. It is a snare because the social eminence and prestige conferred upon the museum by the general opinion that it is the seat of culture, that its directors are the Delphic Oracles of the world of art, that it is the source from which art appreciation flows tend to clinch the deflection and so stabilize our pathetic state of divorce.

The forces of negation, then, are rampant in our midst. They are entrenched in positions of power. They dictate what we can see and buy wherever products closely or remotely related to art enter the domain of trade. They stifle adventure. They discourage the self-realizations of creative practice. They crucify the creative mind.

And they all root merely in a lack of knowing, feeling, and sensing and in the fears instilled by that lack.

Mexico on \$20 a Month



by MARION LAY

TWENTY DOLLARS a month have covered my expenses for the past six months, and I've been having a wonderful time because I live in the City of Mexico. It's better than the Left Bank, when a dollar bought a lapful of francs, or Bali, wangling dinners with better-off friends and borrowing postage stamps to write home. It's better than managing, perilously, on a dollar a day in the States, even in panic times. And I've never seen the month anywhere that twenty dollars would maintain an independent man or woman away from the soil in physical and mental sanity, particularly one who combines, as I do, a passion for cleanliness with insistence upon open country and gardens near at hand, a mania for outdoor sports, and a yen for a little good wine and good theater. The little budget I'm about to describe does not require you to go old-hat Bohemian or even to live like a beachcomber.

My poverty is fairly commonplace, except that instead of tying me to one spot it forces me to travel. Traveling to write for publication means writing in order to travel. But this high-sounding machinery of my existence sometimes slips a cog. There was this year, for instance. Only one check, and six months to go.

If there are many different ways of spending twenty thousand dollars a month, be assured the variety is even greater in disposing of twenty. Even in the perpetual sunshine of Mexico, where you can open a green coconut, half fill it with rum, and shake up a milk punch, self-discipline is supremely important.

In a tiny budget there must be perfect balance between necessities of the body and those of the spirit. I feel a little pharisaical, offering my budget as a model, yet here I am, feeling marvelously fit and refreshed, and what I have done anyone, I am sure, can do. Only learn your Spanish better than you did your French that year in Paris or your German in Munich. One failure to trill a double "rr" will betray you in the market place for the American zany you are, and you'll be overcharged accordingly. I live as a native, not a tourist. That means that when an Indian offers me anything for fifty centavos I say thirty. When he says forty-eight I say thirty-two, until he leaves off haggling and the bargain is struck at thirty-five.

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DIRECTLY I changed my monthly stipend for seventy silver pesos at a *casa de cambio*, I bought a part of a ticket in the National Lottery from a pretty, barefooted seller with a baby strapped to her back by her scarf or *rebozo*. This set me back twenty-five centavos, or about seven cents. For the same price I bought three streetcar tickets and journeyed on one of them, fifteen minutes by my watch, into the Colonia Roma.

After some tramping about, I found rooms with board in a Mexican family. One for myself and one for my husband, who was to follow. My room, spacious, painted beige and white, is furnished with almost beautiful economy. A bed, a pigskin chair, a wardrobe, and a small