

Art

Joe Jones

COMMUNISM, as we all know, is imported. While Hearst calls for the mobilization of the country's armed forces to repel the Red Menace at the city's gates, Thomas Benton talks and writes columns of words to prove that Communism is so utterly foreign to the American temperament that it cannot possibly take hold here—at least not in the Middle West. Unfortunately for the Bentons, Cravens and other varieties of jingoists, the red virus seems to crop up everywhere. Right in the heart of this same Middle West, for instance. This supposedly immune section of the country, which should by their theories breed only good staunch unquestioning patriots, turns up a Joe Jones.¹

Born and reared in St. Louis, Jones learned the trade of house painter from his father, and at the age of fourteen was helping to support himself and his family. He earned his living as a journeyman painter until "enforced leisure" provided him with more time to devote to study and painting (he has never had an art school training). Jones is no new-comer to the art world. Although quite young (twenty-six), he is well known in the Middle West, where his original talent has been recognized in numerous prizes, awards and mural commissions. He attracted wide attention about a year ago for his "Court-House" mural, a collectively-planned-and-executed work which aroused a storm of protest from St. Louis's reactionaries, who tried to evict him and his class from their working quarters.² Particularly did they resent his insistence upon fair treatment of and no discrimination against Negroes, numbering about half the class. Jones and his co-workers had to fight off vigilante gangs bent on destroying the mural and beating up the artists. By arousing various workers' organizations (Unemployed Councils, John Reed Club, Y.C.L., etc.) to their defense they were able to defeat the local fascists. Jones has come by his Communism as naturally as he has come by the normal heritage of the average worker, manual or intellectual, today—that is, through insecurity, unemployment, class justice and the terrific struggle for existence. His art is a living expression of his participation in this struggle and grows organically out of the environment and the people he knows. Meyric Rogers, director of the St. Louis Art Museum, has described it succinctly in the foreword to the catalog:

He paints what he has lived with and among and knows in so living.

The stuff of America is deep in these

pictures. Jones loves his country and his people, and has written his feeling for them into honest paintings. You will find here none of the slick waxen lies of a Grant Wood prettying up the Middle West in overmantel pictures for drawing rooms. When Jones paints a landscape it is a straightforward, honest observation ("Red Earth," "Wheat"). But he does not stop at simply giving a faithful visual report. It is when he adds a class-conscious mind to a trained hand and eye, that he achieves his most significant expression. It is in his portrayals of the important aspects of the life of his people, the working class, that we find the measure of Joe Jones. In his impressive panel "The New Deal" he has strikingly dramatized the meaning of the N.R.A. for the workers. (Compare this architectonic composition with the St. Vitus-like chaos which pervades the form and content of Benton's murals.) "Roustabouts" has a fine mural quality, and achieves dramatic intensity from the excellent characterization—a skillfully conceived portrayal of Negro exploitation. Anyone who knows the Mississippi levee will recognize the truth of this pictorial statement. (Again, compare this painting with Benton's patronizing attitude toward the Negro, whom he views as a picturesque "native," in his crap-shooters, holy-roller meetings, etc.) In "Demonstration" and "We Demand," Jones has given effective expression to the increasingly militant fight of the organized working class. Particularly in the latter, I believe, he has created one of the most powerful canvases in the whole group. Plastic distortion is used so skillfully here (it is hardly noticeable at first glance) that one is struck by an increasing intensity of the total effect.

In this group of splendid paintings Jones

gives eloquent testimony to the growing vitality of revolutionary art, which is as inexhaustibly fertile as the working mass of humanity, from which it stems and derives sustenance.

STEPHEN ALEXANDER.

Between Ourselves

ANNOUNCEMENT of the prize winner and publication of the prize essay in the Students' Essay Contest will be made in THE NEW MASSES next week. The prize, \$100, was contributed by Ruth Fitch Boyd, in memory of her husband, Thomas Boyd. Corliss Lamont, Henry Hart and Granville Hicks were the judges in the contest, which closed May 10.

A special five-week course in Current Events, sponsored by the Friends of the Chicago Workers School and the Friends of NEW MASSES, is being held every Friday night 7 P.M. to 8:30 P.M. (May 17 through June 14) at the Chicago Workers School, 505 S. State Street. Hugo Folliard is the instructor.

New Masses Lectures

Friday, May 24—A. B. Magil, "The Truth About Father Coughlin," 8:00 P.M., Hillhouse High School, New Haven, Conn. Auspices: New Haven Branch American League Against War and Fascism.

Friday, May 24—Michael Gold, "Culture Under Fascism," 8:30 P.M., 683 Allerton Ave., Bronx, N. Y. Auspices: Allerton Workers Club.

Sunday, May 26—A. B. Magil, "I Interview Father Coughlin," 8:30 P.M., 1813 Pitkin Ave., Brooklyn, N. Y. Auspices: American Youth Club.

Wednesday, May 29—A. B. Magil, "Truth About Father Coughlin," 8 P.M. High School of Commerce, State St., Springfield, Mass. Auspices: American League Against War and Fascism.

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¹ A. C. A. Gallery, 52 West 8th St., New York.

² See article by Orrick Johns, "St. Louis Artists Win," in March 6, 1934 issue of THE NEW MASSES.

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