

Post-Mortem Million

LESLIE READE

SALUTED by the headlines of the morning papers the liner Statendam recently arrived in New York harbor with a cargo valued at a million dollars. For once this treasure has caused a degree of pleasurable excitement not so much in the financial district as in its aesthetic annex of 57th Street, for the freight of the Statendam comprised not gold, but ninety-two paintings of Vincent Van Gogh, simply described in The New York Times as the "mad Dutch artist." Altogether Van Gogh produced over 700 paintings and an undetermined number of drawings. So it will be seen that the million dollars' worth of pictures now consigned to the Museum of Modern Art forms only a small part of his work. The artist himself once received a four dollar commission for a portrait, sold some drawings for twenty-five dollars, and at a Brussels exhibition disposed of a landscape for 500 francs, thus earning in all over \$129.

The details of Van Gogh's life—his start as an employe of Goupil's, his preaching to the impoverished miners of the Borinage, his painting career, his poverty, his madness, and his dependence on his brother Theo—are too well known to require emphasis here. Nor need one dwell on the comfortable circumstance that fashions in art, as in other things, frequently change. But the fact remains that malcontents, Communists and such like, have seen fit to make the arrival of the Statendam's million-dollar cargo an excuse for drawing a contrast between society's temperate reward to the creative Van Gogh himself and its princely recognition of the uncreative persons who now own his work. These constant croakers forget to mention that he painted for a scant ten years.

Nor, as a glance hereafter at the careers of some of Van Gogh's creative contemporaries will show, is there any truth in the wider criticism that capitalist society neglects *all* creative artists. In the case of Van Gogh it is also forgotten that he was a mere proletarian painter. When most of his contemporaries were wisely engaged in immortalizing the features of bankers' mistresses or preparing for the admiring gaze of posterity the rotundities of ducal stomachs Van Gogh chose to paint miners, peasants and workers, the people he knew and among whom he lived. In the long canon of his work there is not even the vestige of a viscount nor the commemoration of a solitary count. To the end he was as little interested in the ruling class of Europe as they were in him, but all the same they stoically awarded him more than \$129.

To restore the balance, in the month following Van Gogh's suicide in 1890 The Times of London noted—sometimes "with

regret" and sometimes without—the passing of many rich and pious men, but it gave Vincent Van Gogh not a line. One snub deserves another. Of course, one can admit to the slightest feeling of disappointment that the most intelligent newspaper of the civilized world failed on this occasion to realize that a millionaire—albeit a post-mortem vicarious one—had died, but one should not expect the financial instinct of the upper class to have been any more infallible than that it is today. They are more often right than wrong, and even Mr. Rickett's recent odyssey in Ethiopia, properly considered, is no evidence to the contrary.

In these days of loose thought and wild talk it is only just that these matters should be set forth in any discussion of the Statendam's million-dollar cargo and Van Gogh's \$129.

We turn now with relief from questions of painting, whose merits are so often questions of taste, to the cold subject of mechanics.

Some thirteen years before Van Gogh was born, that is, in 1840, Hiram Stevens Maxim saw the light in the village of Sangerville, Me. His origin was even humbler than that of the "mad Dutch artist," and as a youth Maxim was compelled to work, in his own words, "for eight hours in the forenoon and eight hours in the afternoon," being paid four dollars a month, not, of course, in cash, but in goods.

In the years following Maxim worked as a bartender, woodturner and brassfettler, and shortly after the Paris Exhibition of 1881 he opened a workshop in London. About this time Maxim turned his attention to the science of gunnery, and soon he had prepared a design for an automatic gun. Across the Channel Van Gogh was painting miners in their filth, and hungry peasants eating potatoes. The world, as has been hinted already, was not concerned with the young Dutchman's creative labors, but lest the wrong inference be drawn, consider the very different fate of Hiram Maxim. Apropos of his automatic gun we are told, "As soon as his weapon was constructed, it attracted high official notice, and was inspected by the British commander-in-chief, the Duke of Cambridge, and the Prince of Wales." Mark those words "*as soon as*." Society, led by His Royal Highness the Duke of Cambridge, positively hastened to recognize Hiram Maxim, and his gun was adopted in the British Army in 1889 and the Royal Navy in 1892.

He died, a naturalized British subject, in 1916, and besides his automatic gun had otherwise contributed to the gaiety of nations by inventing such things as the "disappearing gun," cordite, a gun for hurling aerial torpedoes, a delayed action fuse, and a

merry-go-round. France made him a Chevalier of the Legion of Honor, Queen Victoria knighted him, and he left £33,090.

In America, Hiram Maxim's brother Hudson, born actually in the same year as Van Gogh, was at least as creative as the Dutchman. His speciality, however, was powder, not paint, and he devoted a long life to the improvement and invention of high explosives. He left a large fortune, and Heidelberg University honored him with a D.Sc.

The name of Alfred Bernard Nobel is so famous for the Nobel prizes that it is needless to pause long over his accomplishment. Let it suffice to repeat that Nobel's creative instinct found its chief expression in the invention of dynamite, and in the accumulation thereby of some two million pounds sterling.

In face of this evidence from different countries it must surely be difficult still to assert that capitalism ignores its creative workers. But to complete the rebuttal of this statement, let us consider finally the case of one more of Van Gogh's contemporaries, still happily among us. It is true that this last specimen from our album was never himself an inventor, but he was so accomplished in the exploitation of the inventions of others that the achievement in itself was closely akin to creative genius.

On a winter morning in 1873 when the temporarily tophatted Van Gogh was persuading the permanently tophatted customers of Goupil to buy pictures of indiscriminately tophatted Victorian worthies, at the other end of London—to be precise, at the Old Bailey—a young merchant of twenty-two stood in the dock. At the previous session of the court he had pleaded guilty to an indictment charging him with fraudulent dealing in goods worth £1,000. He now made an offer of restitution, and the judge who tried the case, the Deputy-Recorder,

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mercifully bound over the young merchant. He bore the improbable name of Zacharia Basilius Zacharoff, but he is better known to history as Sir Basil Zaharoff, G.C.B., G.B.E., Hon. D.C.L. (Oxon.), Grand Cross of the Legion of Honor.

Although he had already been a guide to the brothels of Constantinople before he became a thief, Zaharoff's benefactions to mankind did not really begin until he met Nordenfelt, a countryman of Nobel's, and in the same business. The association seems to have inspired young Zaharoff, for he soon carried out the masterly idea of selling Nordenfelt's guns to the Turks, and then to the Greeks, who were fighting the Turks. Thereafter Zaharoff went from masterpiece to masterpiece.

His best known work, however, was his part in the Great War. It was 67 percent of Vickers' net profits, or about twenty-three million pounds sterling. Accordingly, soon after the conclusion of hostilities, Zaharoff's genius was suitably acknowledged with a knighthood, the Legion of Honor and an honorary degree from the University of Oxford.

It must now be clear that one common factor appears in the lives of all these men,—the Maxims and the rest. Instead of dissipating their time, as did Van Gogh, in immortalizing the proletariat, they dedicated themselves diligently to massacring them, and so were all inevitably rewarded. Those who offer death for sale are very properly among the knights of capitalist chivalry.

At the coming exhibition of Van Gogh's million dollars' worth of pictures it is to be hoped that this fact will be borne in mind. Among the scented frou-frou of pretty debutantes and the gasps of gaping amateurs there is certain to be heard the opinion that a system which rewards its Zaharoffs with millions and its Van Goghs with starvation is rotten and should be overturned. The opinion should be dismissed for what it is worth: either the disgruntlement of a disappointed dealer, or the inflammatory chatter of an irresponsible chatterbox.

The correct conclusion to be drawn from the contrast in the fates of Van Gogh and the munition makers is far different. Many writers, painters and musicians are known to have died in penury, but there is yet to be discovered the name of a single inventor of an improved method of killing his fellows, who went to his grave unhonored and unsung. It follows that Van Gogh merely chose the wrong profession.

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The Theater

"Porgy and Bess" and "Mulatto"

THERE is a stock formula, hallowed by tradition, which is almost invariably followed in the writing and staging of a drama of Negro life. The play must be made colorful. That quality is achieved by subordinating action and characterization to a lavish emphasis on the Negro song and dance tradition. In its vulgar form this kind of drama takes the shape of the minstrel show; in the hands of the more serious screen writers it becomes a movie like *Hallelujah*. Du Bose and Dorothy Heyward leaned heavily on the tradition when they wrote the play, *Porgy*, and it dominates the opera, *Porgy and Bess* now being produced at the Alvin Theater by the Theater Guild.

The danger in this method of treatment is that the author too often succumbs to the temptation to neglect his story and to distort or eliminate essential incidents that do not add to the colorful aspects of his play. Color is pursued for its own sake. The result has been the production of a long line of plays that gave off the easy impression that Negro life is "so quaint" and "so picturesque." The use of the opera form is an open invitation to an even more extended emphasis on pure color; the dramatist has to pause long enough to tell his story but the opera writer can indulge himself in one lavish and colorful scene after another. George Gershwin who wrote the music, Rouben Mamoulian, whose staging is sometimes exciting, and Ira Gershwin who supplied the lyrics were all too conscious of their duty to make *Porgy and Bess* a colorful production.

I think that I can make the point by calling attention to the saucer burial scene after Robbins has been killed. Death is a tragic event in the closely-knit, friendless and peniless Negro community like Catfish Row. It strikes both terror and sorrow into the hearts of the dead person's neighbors. But the opera never quite transmutes these feelings of the characters to the audience. The spectators *oh* and *ah* at the elaborate and colorful staging, setting and music in the scene—the shadows on the wall, the frenzied dancing and the religious shouts—but they do not feel the emotions of sympathy and sorrow for the bereaved. *Porgy and Bess* is a succession of such scenes, almost one grand revival scene, from the opening crap game until the curtain falls on Porgy mounting his goat-cart to go in search of Bess.

Langston Hughes breaks with this tradition in his play, *Mulatto*, which opened at the Vanderbilt Theater last week, only to escape the pitfalls of melodrama by the narrowest of margins. He drops all attempts to make his drama colorful and strives for a realistic description of the relations between

an illegitimate mulatto son and his white planter-father. Captain Tom Norwood, "the richest man in this part of Georgia," has four children by Cora, his Negro housekeeper. At the story opens, Bert, the son who has inherited his father's color, has just returned from a northern college. He happens in at a time when Captain Tom, who is sympathetically drawn, is on the verge of fulfilling his life-long political ambitions.

Bert ruins his father's chances by declaring far and wide that he is Captain Tom's son. He gets in more trouble by refusing to knuckle to the village postmistress; he walks in at his father's front door and defies almost every tradition of the deep South. The end is inevitable after Bert strangles his father in self defense. Bert escapes lynching by committing suicide but he has stirred up a tempest that leads to the raping of his sister, driving his mother mad and inciting a mob.

It is evident that Hughes hoped to depict the manner in which the racial set-up in the South damns both whites and Negroes. Unfortunately, *Mulatto* was written several years ago when his grasp of the situation was not as complete as it is now and the play does not offer a well-rounded picture of the phase of southern life with which it deals. But the primary weakness of the drama is its internal construction.

Through an inadequate use of drama technique, Hughes fails to get his action on the stage and relies on the device of having the characters explain what is happening. The

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