

which stem all his other weaknesses and which stems in turn from his lack of direct contact with the masses, I am not going to deny; but that these weaknesses are fatal, or that they make it legitimate for him to be tagged fascist, I do, and very strongly, deny.

Most glaring and serious, perhaps, of all his errors is his opposition to liberal democracy such as we have in this country, England, and France. We who are Communists realize that, as Engels said, it is only in the bourgeois democratic state that the class conflict can be resolved. Shaw, who is not and never has been a Marxist, fails to see this and looks upon the parliamentary system (which he identifies with democracy) as a mere club for discussion, for intrigues of the Ins and Outs, incapable of such measures as those by which for instance, (I quote) "The Soviet government has rescued Russia from unemployment, despairing poverty, and all the other horrors which the rest of the civilized world accepts as chronic and inevitable." An extremely queer mixture of Marxist and un-Marxist thinking, but quite characteristic of Shaw! To put it another way, we cannot give Shaw a clean bill of health, but at the same time he is far too much alive to be pronounced dead.

In conclusion I want to say simply this: Shaw is, beyond dispute, a tremendous figure in world literature. He is on our side. Let's not be too quick to hand him over to the fascists.

I. ABRAMOWITZ.

Brooklyn, N. Y.

To Thomas Benton

TO NEW MASSES: Enclosed is a copy of an open letter to Thomas H. Benton which I thought would be of interest to you, and which has just been sent to him.

JOE JONES.

St. Louis, Mo.

DEAR TOM: It is high time that you—"an Artist in America"—were learning the facts of life. But it saddens me to see that you are being forced to acquire your knowledge the hard way. Of course I am referring to your dismissal as an art instructor in the Kansas City Art Institute for committing the offense of expressing in your book ideas displeasing to a real-estate peddler.

In the past we have enjoyed numerous differences of opinion; as far as I am concerned our heated discussions of these differences were valuable as artistic stimuli. However, I want to come forward now, despite these past disagreements, to say that I am not only with you in your fight against the Kansas City reactionaries, but also that I intend to do all I can to have other artists in Missouri, particularly in St. Louis, join me in defending your constitutional rights. As I see it the issue is simple—it is freedom of expression. Before this fight is over you will have learned that sophisticated censorship concerns itself with questions of art; crude censorship manifests itself in such activities as those of Mayor Hague.

Fred Shane suggests that you solve your difficulties by fleeing from Kansas City to St. Louis. When you were in New York (before you fled from there back to Kansas City) you may have heard that in St. Louis the combination of artistic freedom and the right of workers to organize was not misleading to the uncomplicated minds of our Hagues and Pendergasts. They simultaneously ejected the artists from the Old Courthouse—they denied the artists the right to study art—they issued injunctions against a strike—they broke up a demonstration for relief; they saw the relationship between these activities. At this very moment, ignorance grown arrogant has just been defeated in its attack upon Carl Milles' "immoral" fountain.

We should begin to ask ourselves why Missouri should be, culturally, the most reactionary state in the Union when it has within its borders some of the strongest and most progressive elements in the coun-

try. Only a few days ago a Missouri congressman—the dapper ex-preacher from Joplin—was responsible for the death of the progressive Sirovich Art Bill. This seems to me a good time for every creative worker in the state to express disgust with the reactionary elements that now stand behind your dismissal.

I am enlisting in your fight because I see the relationship of the attack on you and the struggle of the progressive forces in your home town of Kansas City, as well as nationally. I cannot resist the temptation, however, of reminding you that there is something more than a taste of the ironic in the fact that in your book you attacked the progressive forces in American painting as Communistic. You then found yourself—a babe in the woods—in the fond embrace of those who now call you "sensual—gross—profane—and vulgar." After the reactionaries of Kansas City have made a progressive out of you, this struggle, I hope, will end with your having taken a really progressive attitude and will thus find our old feuds completely buried.

Yours,

JOE JONES.

Soviet-German Trade

TO NEW MASSES: The June issue of *Current History* has published an insidiously anti-Soviet article entitled "Russia's Trade with Germany," by a certain Karl Van Gelderland. This article, replete with statistics and charts, purports to be highly objective and scientific. But its message is unequivocal: "German-Russian trade relations as a whole, even today, have hardly been affected by the political controversy between the Communists and the Nazis." In view of the general feeling of abhorrence among progressives in this country for any commerce with Nazi Germany, the figures cited in *Current History* seemed both distressing and incomprehensible.

Unexpectedly, some light on the subject has just been shed by Joseph Barnes in the June 19 issue of the *New York Herald Tribune*. In a special correspondence from Moscow, Mr. Barnes reports that

trade between the USSR and Germany is no state of virtual collapse. He also suggests that until this year trade with Hitler Germany was encouraged by the Trotskyist Nazi agents such as Rosegoltz, Piatakov, etc., who, as the recent trials revealed, were in close relations with Nazi officials and business firms, and who regularly received money from the latter for keeping up counter-revolutionary activity. Apparently writers in *Current History* are not aware of current news.

JEREMIAH FLINT, JR.

Annandale-on-Hudson, N. Y.

Shoes and News

TO NEW MASSES: I have just received some advice from Spain which may be of interest to many of your readers.

The article most urgently needed by the American fighters at the front is shoes. Most of the Americans are in the infantry; and infantrymen, especially when in action, are extremely hard on shoes. Very useful, also, are heavy leather jackets of the durable kind. Strong pants are likewise needed at all times. In choosing these articles, the important thing is durability and strength, not necessarily appearance.

Some of us also tend to forget that the boys are hungry for news and information from the city or organization from which they came. Within the last few months, there has been a distinct letdown in the letters received by the Americans at the front. Most of the boys were important members of organizations back home, and it is a crime to forget them. It requires little effort, certainly nothing compared with that of the American fighter himself, to send a weekly letter of information to members now in Spain; the moral encouragement of such an act is immeasurable. A good many organizations have been extremely remiss in this simple duty; the right kind of letter will do as much for a fighter at the front as a good pair of shoes. But send both—frequently.

JACK WILLARD.

Newark, N. J.



Mischa Richter

"Ex-Prince Mikhail of Russia, meet Duke Alonzo of Spain if Franco wins."

REVIEW AND COMMENT

New Forces in American Art

THERE is no stronger testimony to the growing maturity of American artists than the realization, which has already penetrated widely through their ranks, that their problems, artistic as well as economic and personal, are inseparably bound up with the most crucial issues confronting the whole American people.

The manner in which those issues affect the artist in the creative sphere can be most clearly illumined by briefly reviewing the background of the present situation in American art.

During the post-war boom years, the artist was a pariah. He did not feel at home amidst the frenzied go-getter atmosphere that swept the country. Whenever possible he left the broad stretches of America for New York or Paris. And he cultivated the esthetics of isolation. In the work of two artists representative of the most progressive wing of American painting in that period, John Marin and Charles Demuth, the human figure was either totally absent or played a purely marginal role. Likewise a sculptor like Gaston Lachaise evolved, especially in his intimate work, toward an abstraction that twisted about a sexual preoccupation.

The 1929 crash and the ensuing crisis steadily undermined the foundations of that art which had been engulfed in the immediate experience of the socially uprooted artist. By the time the depression had reached its low point, in 1933, Bohemia was no longer regarded as the capital of American art. A new generation of artists, stirred by the general social and political awakening, began to feel the need for roots, sought a positive content and a leadership that would overcome the prevailing demoralization.

Within American art there was no force sufficiently advanced to assert itself as the vanguard of a radical social art. Instead the new realism crystallized under the guiding star of the leading Mexican artists, Diego Rivera and José Clemente Orozco. By virtue of his aggressive opportunism, Rivera first took a commanding position here, but his rapid degeneration, politically and artistically, soon discredited him with progressive artists, leaving him the darling only of touring snobs, sleazy intellectuals, and a few museum directors. Orozco, on the other hand, has steadily gained in esteem and fruitful influence among American artists through his firm integrity and heroic expressive power, clouded only by

occasional shadows of a deep and brooding nihilism.

In this first period of the new movement the young artists advanced with a rush of militancy. They exalted the "social mural" over the "bourgeois easel picture" and their work resounded with the force of the big fist and the bold march of the politically awakening working class. In their work they extended the hand of fraternity to the Negro people as no American artists had done before. And in the new PWA and WPA government art projects they often underlined the revolutionary trend of their work with an unobtrusively placed hammer and sickle that caused anguish to administrators and precipitated many a bitter battle.

With rare exceptions the critics took up the cudgels against radical art. They concentrated their attack in denouncing it as "propaganda, not art." And when they shifted the argument, it was only to emphasize the crudities and shortcomings of a still groping movement. In short, hostile writers deliberately turned their backs on its already manifest potentialities.

Nevertheless, the attractive power of "social content" steadily increased. A second and higher phase of its development was marked by the emergence of national figures from the ranks of Americans, first Thomas Benton, soon afterward his comrades-in-arms, Grant Wood and John Steuart Curry.

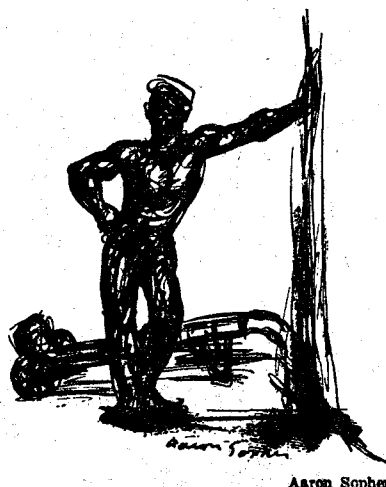
These artists rapidly rose to prominence because they were more readily prepared to pay heed to native character and traditions than the still sectarian revolutionary artists. Benton caught on with a lively jangle of Americana. Curry and Wood elaborated their

regional "stills." All three quickly exhausted their possibilities. They exposed their petty-bourgeois limitations by clamoring about American life, but refusing to study its real movement. Wood stopped with the rural tintype, Curry with the barnyard battles, and Benton, most capable of the three, created sham battles, using a confused surface excitation as a screen for his refusal to penetrate the deeper social motivations. They first won attention because they talked about the importance of our national life, and they lost their briefly held leadership because their evasions reduced their art to callow, bloodless expression, deprived of the vital force that comes from the working-class movement, which alone can humanize and stabilize a social art today.

But the struggles which had set the artists in motion, the struggles of sharecroppers and dispossessed farmers, of industrial workers and unemployed, of evicted tenants and payless veterans went on, spurring the cultural movement to a higher level. Social art entered its third and most mature period with the rise of two revolutionary working-class artists, Joe Jones and William Gropper, to nationwide prominence. How far the popular forces had advanced is indicated by the fact that although these artists developed directly out of working-class activity, museums throughout the country felt compelled to accept their work in order to maintain their own standing.

By 1936 this third phase in the growth of a social art had become clearly defined. The left wing had outgrown its primitive crudities had transformed its conception of the work as a hulking robot into a humanized credit portrayal of the sturdy American people. had come of age. And in doing so it had carried with it a large section of the most voracious artists toward a new progressive social orientation. Surrealists accepted realism, only as a shot in the arm. Studio artists too to the streets. Artists in general had become at least in some measure aware of the people. So strong was the popular radical trend that the old "art vs. propaganda" debate dropped off the agenda. It was no longer an issue. "Social content" had become the fashion, and many artists who had long remained aloof found it expedient to attach that progressive label to work of dubious import.

In this period of consolidation of left-wing gains, changes took place in the objective situation which have affected the course



Aaron Sopher