

SIGHTS AND SOUNDS

Artists' Congress' Second Show

"THE growing social awareness of American artists" brought the American Artists' Congress into being almost three years ago. Since its first meeting at Town Hall in February 1936, the congress has been able to exert an influence in American life far greater than its numerical size, fighting in defense of cultural agencies and values, standing shoulder to shoulder with other progressive artists' groups in the common struggle for peace and democracy. In the midst of so active an existence, esthetic values might easily be overlooked. On the contrary, the current exhibition at Wanamaker's fifth-floor picture-galleries is heartening proof that it is possible for artists to be socially aware and at the same time creatively fruitful.

Over 250 oils, water colors, prints, sculptures, and photographs make up the American Artists' Congress' second annual exhibition. A no-jury show, open to members on payment of a small entry fee to defray expenses, the exhibition provides a cross-section of contemporary American creative ability. To be sure, the academicians are not represented; but neither were they represented in the first *Salon des Refusés*, from which sprang the Impressionist movement and the whole impetus of modern art. A number of excellent painters have, indeed, absented themselves from the felicity of joining with their fellows in the defense of culture. But a greater number of excellent painters have joined. That is the exciting thing in viewing this exhibition and exhibitions like it: they represent not the dead acclaim of academies, not the sterile awards of museums, but the living effort of living men and women to be active, fertile contributors to their age.

The new social awareness of artists has had an interesting effect. It has opened the artists' eyes, as well as the public's, to the richness, depth, and variety of life. Not only the horrors of slums, drouth, flood, war, disease, poverty are seen with this new vision, but the more impalpable and delicate nuances of the world in which we live. In the first awakening of artists to the knowledge that they are members of society, organically one with society, not exiled and disfranchised outcasts, there was a sudden fervor of conversion which made the bum, the derelict, the tenement, the only proper theme for art.

That phase was a passing one, and one through which artists seem to have made a safe voyage. It is clear now that everything about us is the product of the interplay of social forces and ideas, that every tangible object tells its story of social progress or de-

cay. Not only the objective perceptions of social meaning are significant, but also the subjective factors. As artists have become more experienced in their social functions, they have reached out in all directions, broadened and enhanced definitions. The results are to be seen in the exhibition.

It is no longer taboo, for example, to paint a landscape. The taboo operates with regard to the spirit in which the picture is painted, not with regard to its theme. Similarly, one may point a picture in which there are no human figures, and the result need not be anti-social. In other words, art has weathered its necessary period of over-simplification and passed on to a more realistic and complex understanding of its own possibilities. The broader attitude is revealed in the fact that an able group of paintings in the exhibition are abstractions. Another indication of this ripener and more advanced conception is that, at least among the painters, there is a greater richness and interest in the painting itself. This is a healthy sign; for, as the writer has had occasion to say frequently, the most impeccable social intentions do not make a good picture alone, technical expression must be wedded indivisibly with conceptual content.

Healthy, also, is the fact that the exhibition is being held in a big modern American department store, instead of in a dingy hired hall

or in an even drearier museum. Art wants to reach the people, artists say. Certainly people move in and out of stores, railroad and bus terminals, skyscraper foyers, as they never do in the more conventional and academic of art institutions. Art is a useful public service, artists declare. The artist is worthy of his hire. Holding the exhibition at Wanamaker's gives these abstract truths reality. For the intelligence of this choice and for the constantly rising level of quality of its exhibitions, the American Artists' Congress deserves sincere congratulations.

THE ONE-MAN EXHIBITION of paintings by Judson Briggs, on view at the Uptown Gallery during the month, is a concrete example of how artists are putting their social awareness to work. Briggs left the easel division of the Federal Art Project to go to Spain for the Medical Bureau. Of his ten months there, eight were in front-line and other ambulance service and two months of leave were devoted to painting. The canvases shown represent, however, only a part of the work he did in Madrid; for as he was leaving Spain, his paintings suffered the fate thousands of Spanish people have known, they were struck by a bomb and many of them destroyed. Enough survive to make the show interesting and significant, as may be deduced from the fact that the work was exhibited both in Madrid and in Paris. It is being shown here under the auspices of the Medical Bureau and the North American Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy.

The quality of Briggs' work is romantic and direct. Before his Spanish war service, he had held one-man exhibitions here and had exhibited in group shows. The Ryder-esque attributes of his style were commented on then. This deep, brooding sense is still to be felt, and logically, since it is a harmonious expression of his subject-matter—the ravaged and devastated land of Spain. To evoke vigorous protest against the horror of war is the function of such art. Within the terms of his definition Briggs does this. As he continues his advance along the path of social art, it will be interesting to observe if the romantic pre-occupation yields to a more documented and realistic method. ELIZABETH NOBLE.

Political Satire and Shaw Revival

IMAGINE if you will the street-corner scene when a dozen or more boys decide to play stickball. They gather in the center of the New York pavement, armed with the broomhandle which is to serve as a bat. Two captains are chosen, and then begins the



Painting by Tschabassov (American Artists' Congress)

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rhythmic process of shimmying the stick. Fist upon fist to a magic rhyme:

Mister Goldberg lost his hat
Skigetty skigetty skigetty scat!
One, two—one, two. . . .

And the winner begins to choose sides.

Apparently John Boroff and Walter Hart, playwrights of *Washington Jitters*, the satiric novel of politics written by Dalton Trumbo, never played stickball. True, they wish to lambast bureaucratic politicians. True, they choose to awaken American voters to their elementary responsibility, which is to check closely the actions of elected and appointed office-holders. In general, they must have had in mind a progressive play, one which would find support among audiences of the liberal and working-class organizations.

But Messrs. Boroff and Hart, as well as the forward-looking members of the Actors' Repertory Company have come a cropper. They have failed to choose sides, with the result that the play at the Guild Theatre is not only weak and ineffectual; it is, in certain scenes, politically vicious.

The tale, told in a mildly comic manner, is of a sign-painter, one Henry Hogg, who accidentally becomes, in the public mind, an official of one of the "alphabet agencies" of the New Deal. Mr. Hogg is nothing of the sort. He merely sat at a "coördinator's" desk one day when a bright-eyed columnist passed by, and when he blasted the administration, the scandal-monger splashed the story all over the front pages. As a result, Mr. Hogg, naïve, vaguely libertarian, and certainly an opportunist, develops into a prodigious newspaper story. The New Deal and the opposition, impersonated by caricatures of Jim Farley and Senator Borah, woo him hotly. When a ghost writer sells Hogg the idea of signing his name to a book which the false "coördinator" has neither written nor read, Hogg becomes a best-selling author whose approval is sought for an important administration measure. The rest of the story is sheer farce save for the climax, in which Hogg cries for a plague on politicians of every shade of Washington thought.

Even in its present mild and emasculated

form, *Washington Jitters* is a muddled and sometimes dangerously anti-progressive play. It contains no measure of appreciation for the humanitarian aspects of the New Deal program. Nepotism, flagrant graft, cynicism, and downright ignorance are the qualities of the Democratic politicians presented by the authors. The off-stage "Fireside," obviously the President, is a stooge for the patronage-dispensing "Mahafferty" (Farley) and is a coward who goes fishing whenever a difficult problem besets his administration. The goal toward which our minds are directed is of an America in which this "little man," Henry Hogg, will become the standard-bearer in 1940 of the united Republican-Democratic forces.

At best, criticism of bureaucracy in politics is a stale and outworn dramatic subject. The impending realignment of forces, in anticipation of the struggle to establish a democratic front in the United States, broadens not only the political perspective but the dramatic scene as well. Even if Messrs. Hart and Boroff had written a good play—which they decidedly have not—they would have gone aground in shallow waters.

Today it is the reactionary who supports the cry: "A plague on both your houses!" When the Roosevelt administration falls into the very same position of self-chosen neutrality, it is at its weakest. There is no middle road in politics today. The Tories attempt to lure unsuspecting liberals into their camp with the cry, "Neutrality—fair-mindedness—*au-dessus de la bataille*!" Almost into this camp have strayed Boroff, Hart, and their associates of the Actors' Repertory Company, unsuspectingly, of course.

Another mild affair is *Eye to the Sparrow*, at the Vanderbilt. Milton Selser's comedy is about a Social Registerite *grande dame* and her family who take the economic tailspin. Chief interest in the play for those of leftist persuasion is the characterization of the Communist girl with whom Sonnie Boy falls in love. She is sympathetically limned and, for a brief moment, places the tale on an even keel. But God watches over the Thomases, and what chance Mr. Selser's little theme had of developing into a meaty affair withers away. Ma marries a judge, Polly spends the night with a rich man but returns to the legalized arms of the rising young lawyer, and Sonny Boy, who fell for the Red, walks out on her when he discovers that she spends her nights not in sin but with a committee, discussing improvements to be made on old Mother Earth.

CHARLES E. DEXTER.

In 1921 the youthful and enterprising Theatre Guild of that day presented an appreciative New York with Shaw's *Heartbreak House*, begun before the war and then not produced in England. At that time Shaw's disquisition on the bankruptcy of "leisured, cultured England before the war," its "utter enervation and futilization," was both relevant and piquant. Today, on the occasion of the Mercury Theatre's revival, his phrases retain their pungency

Recently Recommended Plays

Prologue to Glory (Maxine Elliott, N. Y.). Federal Theatre production of E. P. Conkle's play about Lincoln's early life, the affair with Ann Rutledge, and his first steps away from the life of the New Salem country store.

Haiti (Lafayette, N. Y.). Rex Ingram plays the lead in this stirring tale of how one of Toussaint L'Overture's generals foiled Napoleon's attempt to restore slavery in Haiti.

One-third of a Nation (Adelphi, N. Y.). The current issue of *The Living Newspaper*, headlining the lack of adequate housing for President Roosevelt's 33 1-3 percent, and emphasizing the need for action. Thoroughly documented, witty, and admirably produced.