

# Artist of the Common Man

By Rockwell Kent

"TONO-BUNGAY," by H. G. Wells, is the story of the building of a great fortune on the magic power of a name. The product that the name was applied to was an afterthought. One day, happening to have called at an advertising agency, I was asked to attend a conference that was in progress and give my reaction to several names that were being considered for a new, low-cost cigarette that was about to be launched on the market. I gave my reactions and then, innocently enough, asked what sort of a cigarette it was going to be. My recollection is that everyone laughed. At any rate, they told me that that was immaterial and would be considered later. We have often been told by young people on the threshold of life, "I am going to be a writer—or a public speaker—or an artist," only to discover on questioning that they hadn't even thought of what they were going to paint, or speak, or write about.

I don't know what Art Young had in mind for himself when, in his teens, he left Monroe, Wisconsin, and went to study art in Chicago and New York; but when, aged twenty-three, he found himself at last in Paris and, as he records it, in the presence of the work of Dore, Daumier, Steinlen, and Millet whispered to himself, "I am going to be recognized as an artist—and nothing can stop me," he had already worked as a cartoonist on the Chicago dailies; he had already used his pen for saying things. The very masters to whose work he was drawn on his arrival in Paris are significant evidence that "The Way" which Art Young was all his life to follow had already been determined. We know the intention that was to lie behind every line that Art Young was ever to draw in his long life. It is by the light of intention that the work of artists is to be appraised.

ART YOUNG, like the masters to whom he was drawn by natural affinity was, throughout his life, to use his pen as most of us throughout our lives use speech; and to us the elements of his art—line and composition—as we use words and sentences. They were to be to him a natural medium for the expression of his thought. The direction of that thought would be determined by what, because of their commonness to people in general, are termed human qualities: by his absorption as a man in the lives and characters of people, and by his love of living beings and of the living world that is around us. His compass was his heart. It guided him along a road so straight and true that, pausing occasionally, taking off his hat and wiping

the sweat from his forehead, he was able to look backwards over a trail so unobscured by turns or wanderings afield that the whole course of his past lay revealed; and looking forward he could see, beyond the far horizon of the long, straight road that he was to follow, the rising sun that was to him the symbol of the brotherhood and peace that mankind would some day achieve.

It was on foot that Art Young traveled, and he was able to observe the world as he advanced. He was deeply moved by the landscape of the countryside. Yet, even in his love of nature, he betrayed his greater love for man. He sought for

*... books in the running brooks,  
Sermons in stones and good in  
everything.*

And in trees he found not only tongues but a semblance to living beings as the storm of life had warped and twisted them. He loved mankind. He met the rich and felt no envy; and in the poor he felt a comradeship, for he was one of them. And as his understanding ripened, resentment stirred in him at what both poverty and wealth could do to man. Offended by that desecration he came to a clear and final understanding of its social source. He accepted human nature as it is and, loving it, he came to hate the system that debauched it—this was the only hate he knew.

Art Young's work is a record, a diary one might say, of his long and leisurely progress through the world—America—that he loved. His drawings are vivid recreation of his world's people, rich and poor; and, through them, an indictment of the system that was the basic cause of their unhappiness.

Back in the days when good hand-writing was a virtue and legibility was its aim, our copy books prescribed the style. Yet the hand-writing expert informs us that no man, no matter how closely he may try to copy the form of another's writing or disguise his own, can conceal his identity. Art Young grew up at a time when the limitations of the processes of reproduction put a premium on the medium of pen and ink and the precise definition of line and form to which the medium lent itself. The great cartoonists of that day were Tenniel in England, and Thomas Nast in America. It would be less fair to say that he was influenced by these men, and by Nast in particular, than to recognize that he was himself a product of the same influences that stamp their work as of a pe-

riod. The time we live in is our copy book; and yet, no matter how rigidly we may conform to its manners, we still remain ourselves. Our characters are to be read in all we do.

THE true critical approach to the appreciation of an artist's work is not only, like the court expert in hand-writing, to identify its authorship, but, like skilled graphologists, to read in the work the artist's character and the quality of his mind and heart. In Art Young's preoccupation with form, in his obvious determination in everything that he drew—even in those drawings of his which depend on outline alone—we may read a character that views life naturally as a phenomenon of three dimensions and, being three-dimensional, as having bulk and weight. The trees he drew have substance. We can walk around them, slap their trunks, or sit between their roots as these stretch out and grip the earth. His human beings stand, sit, walk; you feel their heft; they are of flesh and blood. And of that flesh and blood their spirits are an attribute. Even in the most fantastic works of his imagination, through which he showed a kinship with Dore, he is as much a realist as in his drawings of his home town folk and congressmen. It has been said of William Blake that, whereas many artists have *imagined* the heavenly angels, Blake had *seen* them and held speech with them. Art Young, like Dante, toured through Hell. The realism of his record of that journey proves it. Yet somehow, despite the clear understanding that his drawings reveal of the evil living that had brought men there, and his observation of what monsters greed, injustice, crime, had made of them, one is not moved to hate. Did Art Young feel that there, but by the grace of God, might be himself?

One feels in all that Art Young drew his love of man; and as this love precluded hatefulness, it likewise forbade him to a large degree its corollary, pity. His poorest of the poor have dignity.

The clarity of line that distinguishes Art Young's work, its frequent hardness and the almost invariable achievement of great simplicity are clear evidence of a mind intolerant of confusion of thought and determined, even at the occasional sacrifice of artistic graces and subtleties, to make his utterance understood.

A GENERATION whose artistic circles could foster a school of art termed "Impressionism," that rejected the story and the moral as inappropriate to art, that put a premium on the "sketch," that re-

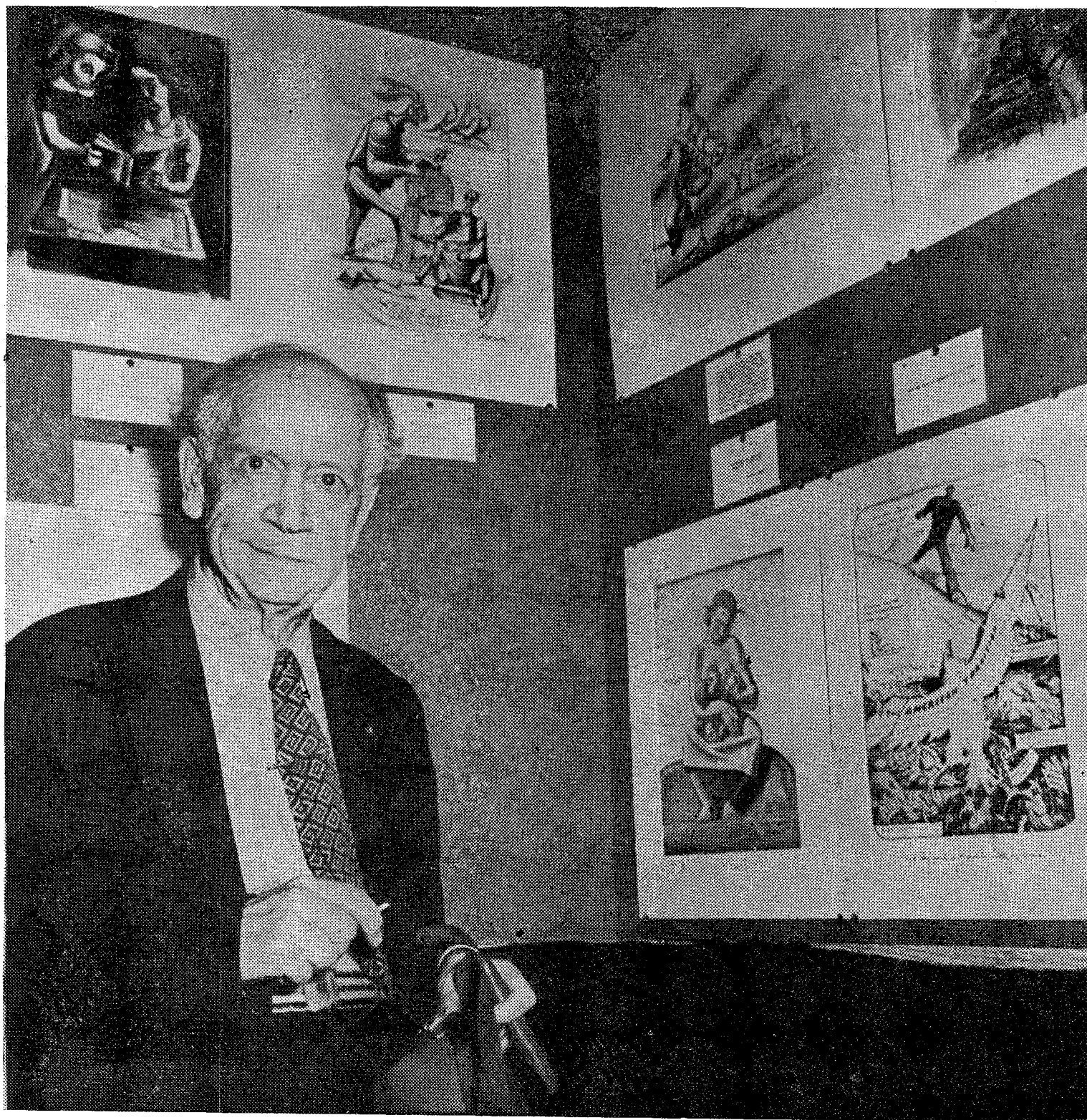


verted mentally to the dark ages of astrology and alchemy in its quest of the absolute through pure abstraction, that would fall for the obscure pseudo-Freudian symbolism of surrealism, may put slight value on the political and social cartoons and the purposeful work in general of Art Young. He has recorded his own impatience with much of the art that, for fleeting periods, was current in his life. One day, after he had made a faithful tour of the Fifth Avenue and Fifty-Seventh Street galleries, he wrote in his diary, "There are not many artists who mix brains with their paint. They paint a picture and call it 'A Man

Standing' or a 'Woman Paring Apples,' and I say, 'What of it?' That it is well painted is not enough for me, nor is a still life of a pallid lemon leaning against a banana enough, however beautiful the technique. The idea or subject matter of most paintings is banal. Lead me out into the mystery of larger thoughts. Few artists there are who can take the commonplace and glorify it with thought-compelling and poetic significance."

Art Young, all his life, took as his model "the commonplace" of America—the characters of his home town and the country, the poor and the rich of our cities, the men

and women in public life, our legislators and, not infrequently, himself. If epitomizing the significant traits in human character, and presenting forces of good and evil in vivid, not-to-be-forgotten images may be termed glorifying them, and we would term it that, we may say of Art Young that he did glorify life with thought-compelling and poetic significance. And it is quite possible that long after the precious Fine Art of today has been forgotten, the work of Art Young will still survive as an authentic and moving record for posterity of the strange period in which he lived.



*Art Young at a recent exhibition which included some of his work.*



# As Main Street Saw Him

By Virginia Gardner

TO ART YOUNG's acquaintances—and he probably had more among noted writers, artists, and radicals than any one person since the turn of the century—many of the townsfolk in Bethel and Danbury, Conn., were as familiar, through his tales, as the pine tree and the birch tree in Art's front yard at Bethel. The feeling of the townsfolk for Art, however, their way of regarding him, was something which never was set down in black and white.

After his death, then, NEW MASSES undertook to get a record of Art Young as he was seen through the eyes of the obscure folk in these twin villages in the New England hills where he spent ten years of his life after he achieved his reputation as a famed cartoonist and a fighter for a better world.

From what they said, some dozen or so of the plain people Art Young saw almost daily for long periods, and what they left unsaid, and what was supplied by Art's close artist friend, Gilbert Wilson, who visited him for months on end, there emerges a picture of the folk artist, Art Young. It is a picture which reveals his close dependence on these people, the kind of people he knew in Monroe, Wis., so little different from the common man he would know in any other American small town.

We see Art Young as eavesdropper, not because he wanted to be but because he couldn't help it. He needed it—not just for copy, in a superficial way, but because he had to have it, this close contact with the matter-of-fact daily life of the town, this identity with the homely, but to him exciting problems of people.

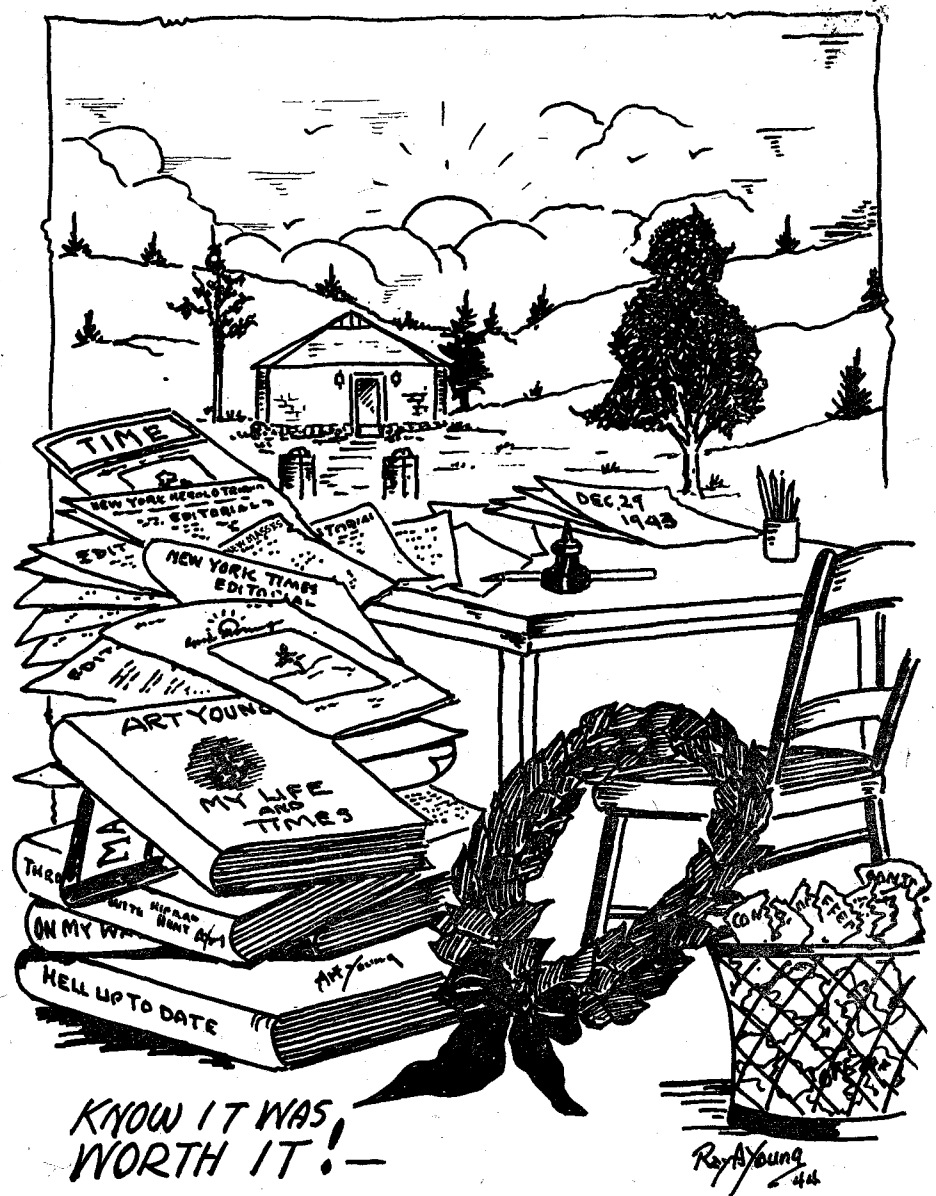
To his friends in these connecting villages he rarely talked of his life outside. He seemed to want to slip into their life, to get replenished by their friendly, almost noncommittal acceptance of him, their casual discussion, their funny stories and their humdrum talk of their own and each other's troubles and frailties.

When he'd been away from his small-town life for a time he'd miss it. He'd tire of the stimulus of meetings to address, dinners to attend—although he liked recognition, too—and go sit in Stuyvesant Park with Wilson. "What was the end of that story that woman was telling about her troubles with her landlord?" he asked one night on their way home. "I couldn't catch that at the end. Did you?" He felt bad about listening in, Wilson explained. But the fact was that, whether through sly means or otherwise, he got from people what he needed, without their ever knowing it.

So, in Bethel, we see Art Young stopping in at the post office to get his mail and speak to his friend the postmaster, Frank Hurgin. "In the last few years he's been away, he went right on using Bethel as his home address," said Hurgin proudly. "We have a rule that after a year, we don't forward mail. Not that I believe in extending special privileges, you understand—but every year I told the clerk just to extend Art Young's time another year." His mail was something prodigious. In the years when he had to count the pennies, his chief extravagance was buying penny postcards. Strangers would write challenging what he once called his "socialist-Communist" views, at the same time beseeching him for an autograph, and he would reply, Wilson

said. Mail came to Bethel for him also from such luminaries as George Bernard Shaw, H. G. Wells, and the Dean of Canterbury, from President Manuel Quezon of the Philippines, from the artist Jose Clemente Orozco in Mexico, from writers and artists the world over.

BETHEL has one main street, which rapidly becomes a country road, and a few little side streets. Near the post office is the Bethel Bank. It isn't every day that the handsome, silver-haired cashier, Howard Judd, with the tailoring of Wall Street, is interviewed by someone from NEW MASSES. Obviously he was bothered about the undeniable fact that here was a radical and yet someone who was as familiar as



His Bethel "museum," drawn for "New Masses" by Ray Young, business man of Monroe, Wis., and his favorite nephew.