

The Subject in Recent American Painting

VIRGIL BARKER

DURING the last fifty years painting in Europe has been subjected to progressive purifications of subject-matter which played only too well into the hands of those annoying persons who insist on extracting morals from everything. It is not necessary, however, to be one of them in order to conclude, from that half-century of history, that painting can be purified to death.

In justified rebellion against the bad story-telling featured by salons and academies everywhere, the impressionists limited the subject to naturalistic atmosphere; yet they and the academicians had so much in common with their exaltation of craft that before long they united with the latter and set up another form of academicism. At once fresh rebellions occurred and various groups, giving themselves different labels in different countries but in historical perspective most conveniently called expressionists, commenced the elimination of natural appearances by intentional distortion; they desired both a more energetic character of design and an outright explosion of subjective emotion. A more severe asceticism was achieved by the cubists; their aim, at its purest, was to make their pictures self-sufficient by playing one tone, one texture, one shape, one plane against another in an abstract visual counterpoint. The later phenomenon in Holland of neo-plasticism went even further and transmogrified painting into a species of geometry. The naturalistic subject was as nearly as possible eliminated and painting was thus dehumanized. Propelled by successively exploding rocket-theories, art had shot to humanly insupportable limits toward the airless moon of pure painting.

Meanwhile the technically mixed and inconsistent procedures of dadaism had reverted in the direction of subject through emphasis on disgust with life. Whatever each one's conscious attitude toward pure painting, all of the dadaists subordinated their technical means to the expression of impudence and contempt; they derided the world and damned humanity. As direct inheritors came the surrealists, some of them having been dadaists before; and these currently active painters are significant in the present connection because they have brought about a violent resurgence of the subject. Their material cannot be read as one reads the narrative in Bruegel or Hogarth, but it is story-telling just the same with the limitation of being drawn exclusively from the unconscious, from hallucinations, from dreams. In consequence the layman, beyond the point of admiring the frequently amazing craftsmanship, must grope and guess his way through these psychoanalytic documents. If this proves difficult and unrewarding, he can draw one comforting moral. The painters themselves have found out what Santayana observed some time ago: "Nothing is so poor and melancholy as art that is interested in itself and not in its subject." Surrealism, however shocking or puzzling, as it frequently intends to be, is certainly interested in its subject-matter.

This telescoped account is manifestly unfair through incompleteness. Many interesting pictures, and some fine ones, were painted by those who participated in this warfare on the subject; every artist in his times of creation works with his total personality, which always embraces more than the theories and opinions of his conscious mind. To a given layman a given modernist painting may seem unintelligible, but modernism as a whole is entirely explicable in relation to the social conditions in

which it arose. Artists are the tendrils of the vine that is the civilization. If they show themselves weak or defective in any serious fashion, there is something the matter at the roots; if they are many and strong, the roots are healthy and the soil is good. What happens deepest down makes itself visible first at the utmost extremities.

Painting in America, starting in colonial days as a transplantation from Europe, has ever since been influenced by European developments; indeed, in any world view, art in this country has been either a reproduction or a variant of that in Europe, just as the civilization here has been. Nevertheless, in regard to the purification of subject just outlined, American painting engaged in no such clear-cut program. True, a few painters have from time to time emulated Europeans in this; but in doing so they have only emphasized their singularity among their fellow Americans, and only three or four have practised it consistently even when once begun. For American painting as a whole this is now proving to be one of the advantages of an unfashionable provincialism — an advantage, that is, because subject, even to the extreme of narrative when consonant with the painter's temperament, is surely a fertilizing and perhaps an integral element in the fecund earth in which great art germinates.

Where recent American painting has been strongly influenced by various European radicalisms is in the variety of its technical procedures; here all the forms of expressionism, and cubism particularly, have helped it to a liberation from narrow academic correctness and a knowledge of far older traditions never heeded by the academic mind. With these enlargements of their resources, the painters of America are trying more than ever to fill their art with all the life it can hold. They are

not concerned with the sterility of an art disinfected of subject; they are ready to take on anything, even storytelling or propaganda, that will enable their art to be more than a technical exercise. To be sure, they are concerned with encountering the content of their pictures as painters, with rendering it in pictorial terms, but they are sanely aware that medium and manner are not ends in themselves.

The mutation here described dates from almost a decade ago when the critics, obediently following the lead of such artists as Burchfield and Hopper and Sheeler, began to discuss the "American scene." With the patronage extended by the government through the Public Works of Art Project this trend in subject was intensified — not from dictation by the Project officials but from the preferences of the painters. With the further government patronage through the Treasury Department Art Program, devised as a permanent means of securing adequate decorations for public buildings, subject-matter in general has become more important than ever. For mural paintings, in order to come alive, must say something; and what they say must be relevant to the purpose of the building they adorn and to the community which the building serves.

One way of estimating the mural work being done on government grants is to examine the comprehensive anthology of studies and architectural drawings entitled *Art In Federal Buildings*, by Edward Bruce and Forbes Watson. Its more than five hundred illustrations demonstrate considerable care in choice of effective subject. This bid for popular interest is a good thing in work done for the public; the mural painter, at all events, cannot afford any perversity of pride in the smallness of his audience. The themes adopted for the buildings in

Washington which house national governmental agencies are properly generalized; but the other decorations display a strongly predominant intention to attract through sharply localized subjects. The importance of this is greatly enhanced by the fact that the majority of these decorations have been placed in towns and the smaller cities where they will meet the eyes of people who are not as yet widely experienced in the appreciation of art. Thus they are bound to influence public taste in addition to rousing public consciousness of local history and landscape and life; and this dual function is a community affair of cumulative importance.

Indeed, it is possible to discern, in much of this pictorial literature, a spirit deserving to be called religious — in the American sense of the word, at least. For religion here usually takes the form of thought and action for the community. The other conception of it as a mystical discipline for the soul in solitude has but rarely received important artistic expression here — in the prose of Thoreau, in the poetry of Emily Dickinson, in the painting of Ryder. Americans generally have been content to satisfy their religious needs in social-mindedness; this is about the best feature of our communal life, and the art that forwards it is to that extent religious. This characterizing word, moreover, is deserved by contemporary mural painting because it increasingly manifests the intention of truthfulness. And whenever it comes to the necessity of choice, truth is more important than beauty.

The frequent bluntness and occasional violence with which some painters are now expressing their ideas of truth disconcerts those who wish art to be sweetly reassuring; and the painters who exhibit such emotional prepossessions must also resort for the embodiment of them

to academic improprieties of technic which are equally upsetting to people who cherish inherited ideas of beauty. Granted that some contemporary painters, being young, are mannerists in crudity. Granted that those who adopt sensationalism either of subject or of treatment will find themselves unable to say anything else. Granted that continual shouting is as tiresome in paint as in conversation. Just the same, it is worth recalling that those traits appeared in American life long before their recent intrusion into pictures; that, having appeared in life, they have as much right to their day in art as other more conventionally noble and refined ones; that any possible transformation of them into something better will be achieved not by letting them run riot in life but by shaping and reshaping them in the forms of art.

For this reason, then, the public may rightly be glad that the painters are so freely raiding American life for subjects. Our participation could be to give them the sanction of acceptance, and ideally our attitude would be that of Cromwell saying to Lely: "I desire you should use your skill to paint my picture truly like me; but remark all these roughnesses, pimples, warts, and everything as you see me; otherwise I will never pay a farthing for it." In the end truth is the only basis on which maturity is achievable, in art as in life, by persons or by nations. If we choose the truth, we may have beauty added to us, the art not changing in itself but working a change in us who comprehend it.

Jake Boyd

WARREN BECK

MAYBE IT WAS a mistake, looking him up after all that time. I don't think it did him any good, or me either. It was just another one of those things that make the good old days seem distant and lost forever. Now I'll go on remembering him the way I found him this last time, until I'll almost forget how he used to be.

It was fifteen or more years ago, back in the early twenties, when I first knew Jake Boyd. I was barely more than a kid, and he was a man of the world, I thought, and he made quite an impression on me. I even tried to push my hat back on my head the way he did when he sat down at his desk to talk. Part of the time I smoked stogies, which I didn't really like, just so I could stick them up out of the left corner of my mouth, the way Jake did. I borrowed a lot of his Broadway slang, too, even though I didn't get much mileage out of it there in Dayton, Ohio.

He was working for the old Keith vaudeville outfit. That was before the talkies, and Keith's was quite a set-up then, with a finger in several theater chains. Jake Boyd came out from an uptown New York theater to manage the Keith house in Dayton. For a showman like Jake everything across the Hudson was exile, but the job paid him well, and he had been given a free hand, which he liked. He never crabbed about Dayton, as he well might have. He went bustling around, cocky and yet kind-hearted, like a missionary who had braved the West for a cause, and would be only too happy to die for it. A skinny, nervous little guy, quivering with zeal. But he'd talk about Broadway with tears in his voice — he even wrote the words for a song about it. He never