

—Jacket photograph for "John Singer Sargent."

Sargent with "Mme. Gautreau"—"most sought-after portrait painter on two continents."

Sympathetic Cher Maître

"John Singer Sargent," by Charles Merrill Mount (W. W. Norton. 464 pp. \$5.95), is an admiring and affectionate portrait of the painter of "Madame Gautreau," "Judith Gautier," and other well-known works. Holger Cahill, our reviewer, is the author of "New Horizons in American Art."

By Holger Cahill

THE story of painter John Singer Sargent's early life was the *donnée* for Henry James's short novel "The Pupil." James said he got the hint from a conversation in a railway carriage, but he may well have had it from Sargent. In any event, Sargent's early years as James tells the story were not unlike those of the pupil Morgan Moreen, a boy who saw through the shoddy devices of his too openly aspiring family.

Now a new (and non-fictional) biography of Sargent has been published, and it is a portrait of a painter done with affection and admiration. It gives us an intimate glimpse of the

young Sargent (and of his European-trotting family, which always lived on the precarious edge of a small income from America).

After some youthful art studies in Italy Sargent entered the atelier of Carolus-Duran in Paris. Mr. Mount gives a good picture of the artist as student, of his easy acquisition of Carolus-Duran's technique, which he carried to a mastery greater than that of his teacher, and of his first promising years as a portrait painter in Paris. This early period of success came to an end in 1884 with the rather silly scandal caused by the exhibition of his portrait of Madame Gautreau, and in that year Sargent moved to London and began building up the reputation which made him the most sought-after and highly-paid portrait painter on two continents. In England and later in America he was introduced in magazine articles by his friend Henry James, who saw in him the "slightly uncanny spectacle of a talent which on the very threshold of its career has nothing more to learn." This statement, meant as flattery, may in time stand as Sargent's epitaph.

Sargent carried to perfection the technique of Carolus-Duran, which one may call a popularization of methods that Manet derived from the later paintings of Velasquez and Franz Hals. With this technique when he was at his best Sargent turned out first-rate portraits, among them "Madame Gautreau" (Metropolitan Museum of Art), "Robert Louis Stevenson" (John Hay Whitney collection), "Judith Gautier," whose subject was the daughter of the French poet (Detroit Institute of Arts), and "Mrs. Charles Gifford Dyer" (Art Institute of Chicago). From these one may agree with the judgment of the late Frank Jewett Mather that at his best he is a portrait painter of the first order. (And that at his worst his work was flimsy and specious, and that the average run of his work shows him as a picture manufacturer "merely dextrous.")

BUT Mr. Mount sees Sargent as a dynamic innovator who "created a portraiture such as had never before been seen." He believes that Sargent went beyond Carolus-Duran by incorporating in his work everything of value in impressionism and bringing it "back into the mainstream of art," though neither Sargent's portraits nor the landscape watercolors of his later career do anything to support this belief. Sargent's understanding of impressionism did not go beyond Carolus-Duran's popular version of Manet's "dark impressionism." As an American impressionist he is outranked by Mary Cassatt, Theodore Robinson, and John Twachtman. As a portrait painter he does not equal his contemporary Thomas Eakins or the American masters of the eighteenth century. As a watercolorist he is not in the same class with Winslow Homer. His murals in the Boston Public Library and the Boston Museum of Fine Arts cannot stand comparison with the mural painting of his contemporary John La Farge in the Church of the Ascension, New York. As a book "John Singer Sargent" has about it the twilight mood of history which is lived in its own penumbra without any of the unsettling illuminations of hindsight. It is Sargent as his contemporary friends and admirers saw him, lifted above European and American masters who outranked him and endowed with stature and timelessness which the years have subjected to the inevitable bleak erosion of critical opinion. But one may still sympathize with Mr. Mount, who sees Sargent as a *cher maître*, and thank him for new insights into one of the most fabulous of American success stories.

Humanist's Messages

"The Letters of Peter Paul Rubens" (translated and edited by Ruth Saunders Magurn. Harvard University Press. 509 pp. \$10) is a collection of the great artist's correspondence on the subjects of both art and politics. Here the collection is reviewed by Wolfgang Stechow, professor of the history of art at Oberlin College.

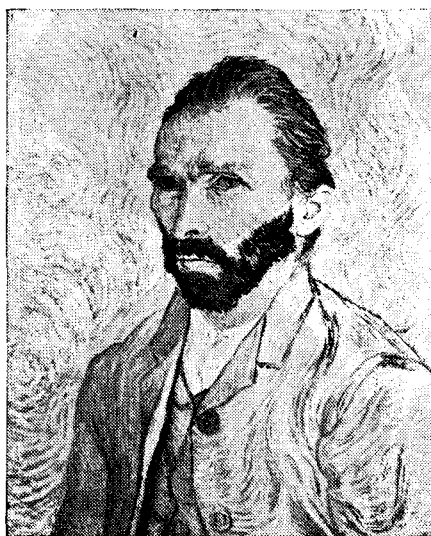
By Wolfgang Stechow

ALL the known letters of Peter Paul Rubens contain no more than two or three pages on his art. Yet their publication makes one of the finest contributions to our understanding of a great artist to have come out in a long time. They present to us a comprehensive image of his mind and his heart, which is set against but never merely conditioned by the fascinating background of his time.

One could argue, somewhat paradoxically to be sure, that we are more in need of Vincent van Gogh's views on his art than we are of Rubens's, even though van Gogh is, roughly speaking, of our time and Rubens was of a period that flourished more than three hundred years ago. Through van Gogh's letters we seek access to an *oeuvre* conceived by a tortured mind: works which often betray the travail suffered at their birth and which need sympathetic understanding that can be enlightened by the artist's own words. The monumental optimism of Rubens's art does not call for such guidance; we have not lost the ability to appreciate their sweeping grandeur or their glowing intimacy; their formal excellence, exemplified by immaculate and seemingly spontaneous solutions of complex problems of composition and color, is readily grasped.

Yet what we have lost is the understanding of the roots of Rubens's work, of the soil in which they grew to such commanding height and healthy stature; and with this loss we have lost a full understanding of their very content. Goethe once said of our relationship to all artists, "He who would understand the artist must go into the artist's land," and this advice applies not only to the understanding of the artist's technique and style but also—as Goethe did not have to remind the public of his time—to the understanding of his subject matter. The essence of Rubens's subject matter was humanistic, and today we need the illumination provided by his own letters.

The letters were written by one of the great humanists of his time. By stressing the importance of the messages which the artist sent to enlightened scholars and co-humanists like Nicolas-Claude de Peiresc, his brother Valavez, and Pierre Dupuy (the three recipients of the majority of his private letters) I do not wish to depreciate those which he wrote in connection with his diplomatic efforts. Even of these there are few which do not offer us at least a glimpse of that part of his mind which had been trained by humanistic studies to learn from the past and to discover and stress the human element within the crazy maze of seventeenth-century politics. The letters referring to his tireless and wholly successful efforts for peace between Spain and England contain many passionate appeals to cut through red tape in order that the hopes of all the European people should not be jeopardized; and those referring to his equally tireless but tragically vain efforts for peace between his Flemish homeland and the Northern Provinces reflect his profound disappointment and his compassion with the victims of the political inertia and blundering of the Madrid clique—a clique which he fully recognized and occasionally characterized with amazing frankness. His admiration of the Infanta Isabella because "politics aside, she respects and honors" the Prince of Orange, his complete and very frank lack of religious orthodoxy as well as of all caste prejudices, his unique blend of self-esteem and sincere modesty, and his insistence on completeness of pertinent information ("It does not serve brevity to say one thing instead of another")—all these are manifestations of a great humanist's mind and heart.



—From "Passionate Pilgrim."
van Gogh self-portrait—"a new dimension."

Genius in Minutiae

"Passionate Pilgrim: The Life of Vincent van Gogh," by Lawrence and Elisabeth Hanson (Random House. 300 pp. \$5), is the newest of an increasing number of popular biographies of the celebrated painter. Our reviewer, Eduard Buckman, has been a student of the life of van Gogh for twenty years.

By Eduard Buckman

THE writers of today have had a habit of interpreting the artist Vincent van Gogh along routine, tabloid lines, most of them sensational and melodramatic. They also have had a habit of seeming self-satisfied with their results, and now Lawrence and Elisabeth Hanson sound complacently self-satisfied, too, in their latest book, "Passionate Pilgrim," a book which has to its credit the distinction of being the longest, most detailed, relatively correct (and almost rational) biography yet to appear in English on Vincent van Gogh. Unhappily, however, this is a rather dubious distinction.

In the preface of their book the Hansons say: "We should perhaps add—and we have in mind particularly the beginning and end of the book—that everything we have written is solidly based on ascertained facts. This assurance will not be necessary to previous readers; we make it only to those who may come to this as the first of our works." And yet at the very beginning of their biography the Hansons tell of the first child born to the van Goghs—a boy who came exactly a year to the day before Vincent and who was also named Vincent. The Hansons say this child lived only a few weeks but was thereafter cherished in memory by both parents and held up to the second Vincent as the shining example, thereby producing a neurosis in Vincent. Yet according to the van Gogh genealogical data published in the new Dutch edition of van Gogh's collected correspondence ("Verzamelde Brieven," 4 vols., Wereldbibliotheek, Amsterdam, 1952-1954) the first Vincent was stillborn, and the theory that he was ever made the example for the second Vincent is a recently propounded psychoanalytic theory for which there is no confirmation in fact.

Near the end of the biography the Hansons' Vincent threatens his doctor with a revolver. The story used to be that Vincent reached in his pocket