

## The Wadsworth Atheneum: Accent on Specialties

YOU ENTER the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford with pleasant anticipation; you leave with unmitigated admiration. Here is an art museum where high quality is channeled into interesting specializations, proving once again that cumulative collections can be more rewarding than even the best samplings. Though the Atheneum includes frequent illustrious names — Rembrandt, Rubens, Goya, Van Dyck, El Greco—it is not because of single and often excellent examples by towering artists that we remember the collection. No one will deny how much these individual works have enriched the museum, but one does not go to Hartford to see the best-known old masters; these can be found more profusely in nearby New York or Boston. One goes there to see the finest and most extensive group of baroque paintings in America (with the possible exception of the Ringling Museum in Sarasota), the most impressive collection of seventeenth-century American furniture in existence, and an outstanding concentration of porcelain with particular emphasis on Meissen. These are Hartford's unique specialties. In this brief survey I purposely limit myself to the field I know best—painting.

And let me add immediately that though seventeenth-century canvases may prove the most conspicuous surprise at Hartford, there are also important works from other periods, notably from our own century. At the time some of the latter were acquired, almost thirty years ago, it took more than prophetic discrimination to buy them. High courage was also required to purchase definitive canvases by Miró, Mondrian, de Chirico, and the Surrealists very nearly the same year they were painted. One of Max Ernst's most distinguished masterpieces is here—his famous "Europe After the Rain," a minutely designed composition filled with frozen death and foreboding desolation. Not even Picasso's "Guernica" is a more devastating indictment of war. And rarely does one find Salvador Dali or Ben Shahn so discerningly represented. At the Atheneum, too, one repeatedly comes on smaller works—watercolors and drawings—often modest but almost invariably offbeat and interesting. A perverse Demuth illustration, a fugitive drawing by Gorky,

an intensely lucid tiny Tanguy, a watercolor by the rarely seen English vorticist, Wyndham Lewis—these are a few of the characteristically perceptive minor works that nourish the collection.

Never dutiful, never second-rate, never nondescript, the choice throughout can be ascribed chiefly to two men, the late A. Everett Austin, Jr., director of the Wadsworth Atheneum from 1927 until 1945, and Charles C. Cunningham, who has been director since 1946. "We try to maintain the highest standards of quality in everything we do," the latter said recently. "Where acquisitions are concerned, we don't buy a picture because it's by a name we're lacking; what we hope to do is buy what would be outstanding for any museum in the world. We let our income accumulate and concentrate on major purchases. The seventeenth century is our strength and we build to that strength."

During the late Twenties when Mr. Austin set his sights on the seventeenth century, he wisely realized that the

Atheneum might have difficulty competing with larger and more heavily endowed institutions. With the eye and knowledge of a true connoisseur, he turned to a neglected but nonetheless productive period in art. There is little doubt that single-handed he did much to acquaint this country with the magic of baroque painting, a school, by the way, that is even more in demand today than the recently resurrected and highly fashionable mannerist movement.

Mr. Cunningham has continued the same tradition with the result that now Hartford boasts a sequence of seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century canvases from Italy, Spain, Holland, Belgium, and France that is a focus for students of the period and a delight for anyone interested in art. Emphasis, as a rule, is on the unusual rather than the typical. To attempt a résumé of this concentration would be foolhardy, but there are certain paintings that particularly underline the collection. One thinks immediately of the arresting portrait of his mistress by the Neapolitan Salvador Rosa, a painter



—Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford.

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—Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford.

Portrait of the Artist's  
Mistress—by Salvador Rosa.

better known for his turbulent landscapes than for his occasional figures. One thinks of the wistful "Boy with a Hat" by Michiel Sweerts, an artist who in this one rare case seems almost as evocative as Vermeer. One thinks of the "Fish Market" by de Witte, an unusual subject for a painter generally remembered for his church interiors. One thinks of the superb white-robed Saint Serapion by Zurbarán; of a heroic composition by Gian Domenico Tiepolo, great enough to be mistaken for his father's work; of a splendid Nicolaes Berchem; and of many, many others.

The Atheneum includes earlier works, the most extraordinary and rarest of which is a composition by the Florentine Piero di Cosimo dated around the end of the fifteenth century. Considered one of this artist's masterpieces, the picture is the more fascinating for its enigmatic half-awkward figures set in a touchingly dewy landscape.

Moreover, it seems fitting that the Wadsworth Atheneum, America's first public community art museum, should have, as indeed it does, an exemplary collection of early American paintings. The museum is almost 120 years old, a hoary age for art institutions on this continent, and many of the important American paintings—the Trumbulls, the Coles, the unforgettably beautiful Bierstadt of Yosemite Valley, and the even more unforgettable "Portrait of Mrs. Seymour Fort" by Copley—came to the museum as very early bequests and purchases. In fact, these, acting as the original nucleus of the painting collection, set a formidable standard.

The entire history of this museum should be reassuring to other moderate-sized American communities. If it can be done in Hartford, why not else-

where? A few dates from the early Thirties are enough to indicate how over a quarter century ago this institution was already acting as a spur to the rest of the country. In 1931, Dali's work was shown here for the first time in America. Two years later Georges Balanchine arrived in Hartford to found the American Ballet School under the auspices of the Atheneum. In 1934, the first retrospective exhibition of Picasso in America was held at the museum, and that same year the institution sponsored the world première of the Virgil Thomson-Gertrude Stein opera "Four Saints in Three Acts."

The Wadsworth Atheneum is only a short detour for motorists en route to New England from New York, but a visit here is far too important to consider as a detour. For anyone seriously interested in art, a special trip to Hartford is more than worth the effort.

—KATHARINE KUH.

## In August Don't Miss:

*The Controversial Century* (1850-1950) at the Chrysler Museum, Provincetown, Massachusetts. The "ins" and "outs" of art during the last hundred years are shown in an astute selection of works from Walter Chrysler's vast collection.

*The Wertheim Collection* at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, includes renowned paintings, drawings, and sculpture by Gauguin, Van Gogh, Matisse, Picasso, and other important artists from the School of Paris.

*Sculpture from the Pacific* at the Museum of Primitive Art, New York. Fifty handsome carvings, predominately wood, show the amazing range of native art from the islands of the Pacific.

*New Art of Brazil* at the San Francisco Museum of Art. The first full-scale survey of modern painting, sculpture, and graphics by Brazilian artists, organized by and originally seen at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. Opens August 22.

*Five Special Art Shows* at the Seattle World's Fair including contemporary European and American painting and sculpture from the last decade and a superb exhibit of North Pacific Indian art.

## Self-Interview with Granville Hicks: Part II

**INTERVIEWER:** Now that we have reassembled, the first item on our agenda, I believe, is a statement Edmund Wilson makes in his self-interview in *The New Yorker* about contemporary American fiction writers. He says that the only ones he reads regularly are Salinger, Edwin O'Connor, and James Baldwin. How do you feel about this?

**HICKS:** I understand and share his admiration for Salinger and Baldwin. O'Connor, though I find him readable enough, doesn't seem to me to belong in that league. What really astonishes me, though, is Wilson's saying that there are only these three that he reads regularly. There must be at least twenty novelists, of the generation since Faulkner, Dos Passos, and Hemingway, that I look forward to reading—and, of course, do read.

**INTERVIEWER:** Would you care to name them?

**HICKS:** All right. I'll start off with Robert Penn Warren, Wright Morris, and Saul Bellow. Then Eudora Welty and Carson McCullers. Then, in no particular order, Bernard Malamud, Norman Mailer, James Jones, Herbert Gold, Vance Bourjaily, Mary McCarthy, Truman Capote, Jean Stafford, Flannery O'Connor, John Cheever, Baldwin, and Salinger. Then there are some of the real youngsters: John Updike, Philip Roth, Shirley Ann Grau, and now Reynolds Price. Well, there are twenty-one; and I know I've omitted names that belong on the list.

**INTERVIEWER:** But you have said unkind things about some of them.

**HICKS:** Of course I have. I'm not suggesting that they're always at their best, or that their best is flawless; I am merely saying that each of them has, at one point or another, shown enough talent so that I am interested in whatever he writes. I might lose interest. After James Jones had written "Some Came Running," a stunningly bad book, I had little interest in his future, but then "The Pistol" gave me a modicum of hope.

**INTERVIEWER:** You believe, then, that there is a good deal of literary talent in the United States?

**HICKS:** I believe that we have more talented writers of fiction at the present time than at any other period of our history except possibly the Twen-

ties. Take any other decade you want to and round up all the writers who can reasonably be called gifted; you won't get a list as impressive as the one I have just made.

**INTERVIEWER:** But are there any great novelists?

**HICKS:** Ah, that's a different matter. There haven't been so very many great novelists in the literature of the whole world. There are just five American novelists that, at this moment, I should be willing to call great: Hawthorne, Melville, James, Hemingway, and Faulkner. Literary greatness is a rare phenomenon, and we know little about it. Talent, on the other hand, can be recognized without much trouble, and I believe it should be cherished.

**INTERVIEWER:** I have heard it said that you tend to take a rather generous attitude towards contemporary fiction.

**HICKS:** I plead guilty. If a writer has convinced me that he is gifted and serious, I try to give him the benefit of any doubts there are. For instance, take James Baldwin's new book, "Another Country." I was astonished when Stanley Edgar Hyman, whose reviews in *The New Leader* I have greatly admired, charged Baldwin with deliberate sensationalism for the sake of sales, and then compounded the insult by putting the blame on the publishers, which would make Baldwin a weakling as well as a knave. I shouldn't want to make a charge like that against a writer who has shown as much courage and as much ability as Baldwin has until I had thought for a long time about other possibilities. "Another Country," to be sure, is full of sexual scenes of the most candid and brutal sort, and the language is violent in the extreme. The book is intended to shock, but the intention, it seems clear to me, is honorable, not cheap. Baldwin writes brutally about brutal people because he believes that brutality is at the heart of our civilization. Let me read you the epigraph from Henry James: "They strike one, above all, as giving no account of themselves in any terms already consecrated by human use; to this inarticulate state they probably form, collectively, the most unprecedented of monuments; abysmal the mystery of what they think, what they feel, what they want, what they sup-

pose themselves to be saying." That is the kind of people Baldwin is writing about. He may be wrong in believing that the fault lies not in the characters themselves but in society; but, having this belief, he is right in trying to express it by whatever means he finds effective. I agree with Hyman about some of the book's faults, but his attack on Baldwin's motives is unwarranted.

**INTERVIEWER:** Speaking of Hyman, what did you think of his review of Herman Wouk's "Youngblood Hawke"?

**HICKS:** I thought it was a lulu.

**INTERVIEWER:** You do not feel impelled to give Wouk the benefit of the doubt?

**HICKS:** Not the edge of a benefit. I haven't read "Youngblood Hawke," and I don't intend to. I read "The Caine Mutiny" and "Marjorie Morningstar," and they both seemed to me thoroughly dishonest. I don't expect that leopard to change his spots, especially when they're so profitable. Wouk deserved a hatchet job, and Hyman did a beauty.

**INTERVIEWER:** How do you feel about hatchet jobs in general?

**HICKS:** In general I'm against them, not only because they're often unfair but also because they tempt the reviewer into smart-aleckism, which is one of the major curses of book reviewing.

**INTERVIEWER:** Would you say, as many people do say, that reviewers in America are too lavish with praise?

**HICKS:** Some are. That bothers me, however, less than the fact that so many reviewers don't seem able to read a book. This is true not only of the reviewers who find masterpieces every week or two, but also of some of those who have or want to have a reputation for severity. These latter are so interested in showing off how much they know, and what terribly high standards they have, and what nasty cracks they can invent, that they never get around to discovering what the author was trying to do. Nothing a reviewer says matters if he doesn't understand the book he is reviewing—and a lot of reviewers pretty consistently don't.

**INTERVIEWER:** Thank you.

**HICKS:** I thank you, and also Mr. Wilson. —GRANVILLE HICKS.