

Views and Reviews in the World of Art

By HENRY McBRIDE.

The following address was read in Philadelphia at the Academy of Design at a time when we did not seem likely to enter the war and when compulsory military service was but a dream. In the few months that have elapsed much history has been achieved, and it has already been remarked in these columns upon several occasions how much our art may expect to profit by the active

participation of our young artists in the battles in France for democracy.

Under the circumstances I had thought to edit the rather crude statement of my vexation at the divorce that seems to have come about between affairs and art in America—but just at the moment of going to press it appears that the announced "exhibition of patriotic paintings" at the National Arts Club has been abandoned "owing to the insufficient number of important pictures sent in for the exhibition," and as this illustrates the point of the argument I have decided not to soften my "before the war" aspersions. I ought to add, however, that I am not seeking to lay the blame on the artists, either for the National Arts Club failure nor for the minor position that artists now occupy. Society gets the kind of art, politics and justice that it deserves. With a more enlightened public we will get a stronger art.

Present Day Conditions of American Art

I was about to begin my paper with the stereotyped phrase: "In the great days of art," a phrase that is frequently used in lectures upon art—a phrase that is tacitly accepted as referring to other days than these.

These days of the present may be great days—all days are great if you only know it—but they are certainly not great days for art. To one who believes that there is an intimate connection between art and public health it is only sufficient to recognize that these are not great days for art to find the warrant for inquiring why these are not great days for art. When some part of the system that is necessary to life—either to the physical life of the individual or the spiritual life of the nation—ceases to function, it is time to look about for remedies. Art is the mirror in which spirit reflects itself. The individual that has no spiritual life is a beast; the nation that has no spiritual life is a confederation of beasts. To allow me or any other essayist to refer to the glorious art epochs of the past in a tone of patronage toward the art efforts of the present is to admit that in being merely content to be animals you forfeit the right to be human.

That is, perhaps, insulting to begin with. But I have not come over here to pay you compliments. No New Yorker thinks it worth while to go about to neighboring cities whispering terms of endearment. It is only because I think there is something particularly rotten in the state of Denmark that I venture upon the little railroad journey necessary to get here. To be frank, I am quite disgusted and discouraged with the state of art in America. By speaking aloud my dissatisfaction perhaps I shall induce some of you to speak yours aloud, and together we may find the way out.

To that end I wish to say a brief word about our art institutions and the public attitude toward art, a brief word about art patronage in general and a brief word about our younger artists and their ideals. The chief merit of this essay, in fact, is that it will be brief.

I am disgusted in the first place because our artists—I mean our living ones—are not very highly considered abroad. I am disgusted in the second place because they are not very highly considered here. Our artists have become so tame, so namby-pamby that none of them any longer realizes the grand roles to which they should aspire. They have been relegated into a little niche apart, they are suffered to exist like clergymen, but they have no real voice in affairs. They are caressed by ladies, with the full consent of husbands, being now generally considered quite harmless.

No disrespect to the ladies, you understand. Heaven knows what would become of the churches in America without them, and heaven knows what would become of the artists. The women constitute our elite, and our elite are not allowed to vote—not in this neighborhood.

But what a contrast to those glorious days to which we are constantly compelled to look back when we search for undeniably great art! When artists were not little lapdogs, but openly acknowledged by every one to be the intellectual equals of the princes of the earth. When Michelangelo argued the matter out face to face with the Julius II. who wielded a temporal power beyond that possessed by any individual in this year of our Lord; when Leonardo was so great as a statesman and so great as a scientist that some scientists even to this day regard his marvellous paintings as the mere relaxations



"Mrs. Carwardine and Child," engraved by J. R. Smith from the portrait by Romney; shown in the Knoedler exhibition of mezzotints.

of his idle moments; when Benvenuto da Cellini acted as a leader in the battles attending the sack of Rome, and great artists were invited to and actually did design the battlements for Florence and other cities that were threatened with attacking armies.

Fancy President Wilson inviting any of our artists to assist him in solving the problems that confront him now! Fancy our artists undertaking to build defences for New York! Do you suppose that President Wilson has any but the vaguest ideas as to who our artists are? For that matter, do you suppose your Mayor of Philadelphia has? What sort of an examination in art could our public officers pass?

I am reminded of a story that is told of Mr. William J. Bryan. Mr. Bryan, as retiring Secretary of State for Mr. Wilson's Cabinet, had the right to have his portrait painted. Secretaries of State, I believe, have their portraits preserved somewhere in Washington. In an effort to discover a suitable artist for this important commission Mr. Bryan called at our Metropolitan Museum of Art to see the examples there on display. In the course of a tour through the rooms it chanced that the official who was Mr. Bryan's guide confronted him with the portrait by Frans Hals—one of the greatest masterpieces of art in the country—and, wishing to be facetious, said:

"Too bad, Mr. Bryan, that you can't have Frans Hals do your portrait!"

"Why not?" replied Mr. Bryan, quite innocently.

Former American Art Enthusiasm

However, we must not be too severe upon our great public characters. It is merely a sign of the times, of the sort of thing it is our business to correct. The pity of it is that there was once a more general feeling for art and a greater comprehension of it in this country than at present. To this day no essay upon art written by an American gives me such pleasure as Emerson's. Not that I agree with it altogether. On the contrary, I take exception to almost every other word when he touches upon technique. But if Emerson had limited opportunities to learn the processes of art he had opulent chances to learn life itself—and life is the one thing by which art is tested. I laugh at him when he says, "The best pictures can easily tell us their last secret." Transpose that to "The best poems can easily tell us their last secret," and see how ridiculous the assertion is. It may have been a mere slip of the pen, or perhaps Emerson was thinking when he wrote it of the "Madonna della Sedda" of Raphael, for it was rather the fashion in Emerson's day to admire the most stu-

pid things that Raphael did. Emancipated and wonderful as Emerson was, it would have been inconceivable to him to openly disregard the dictums of the experts and calmly avow, as the Frenchman Stendhal once did, his preference for the obscure Volterrano above Correggio and Raphael. From the point of view of art appreciation Stendhal was infinitely in advance of Emerson, because the thing depends not so much upon being right as being sincere.

And besides Emerson we had Hawthorne and Margaret Fuller. The studio jargon written by Hawthorne into his "Marble Faun" is lively and true even to-day, and nothing he says about art makes you creep, as most of the stuff written to-day does. Margaret Fuller was just as genuine and even more enthusiastic. It was very likely her initiative that led Emerson to Raphael. The picture of those two blithe spirits turning over engravings in the portfolios—they did most of their study from print—is one I never can quite get out of my head. Emerson, Miss Fuller and Hawthorne were simply glorified examples of the spirit that was rampant, at least in intellectual circles, before the civil war. It flames up constantly in all the literature of that period.

After the civil war in a subtle but sure fashion a change took place. Possibly it was because those ardent youngsters who might have been our poets and thinkers of to-day were snuffed out in battle—or possibly because the confusion the country was left in by the war demanded organizers rather than artists—certainly the rough pioneer is the type that takes precedence in the life of to-day. There is a great deal of nonsense talked about people being born this or that, but the fact is that Lincoln was not born President and Grant was not born a General. The truly virile souls who regard the earth as their inheritance no longer look upon the Church, as did Julien in "Le Rouge et le Noir," as the peculiar province of the ambitious man, nor try to elevate themselves into the heaven of enduring fame by means of some great lady's apron strings, as did Jean Jacques Rousseau. No, the truly virile soul of to-day who wishes to have something for his pains becomes a pork packer in Chicago or a manipulator of stocks in Wall street. Mr. Gustav Schwab and Mrs. Otto H. Kahn are better known and more widely admired in this country than any artists that I can think of—and probably President Wilson has heard of both of them.

The quality of the patronage that is meted out to our artists and the attitude of our institutions toward artists are exactly what might be expected of such a period as this. True patronage, direct relation-

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