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ART FRONT



ON THE AMERICAN SCENE

BENTON ANSWERS 10 QUESTIONS
BURCK—BENTON SEES RED
A LETTER FROM CURRY
KANE—HONORABLE BUSINESS—BOLING
CONTRADICTIONS in ABSTRACTIONS—WEINSTOCK

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A Letter From Curry

Editors of ART FRONT:

I have read the article by Mr. Davis in the February *Art Front*. It is very apparent that Mr. Davis does not like my work. I do not know what I can do about it.

May I explain to readers of *Art Front* something of my idea of what a painter should paint and how?

Every artist reacts to his environment. The most personal and simple translation of this is the most powerful. I feel that in this day and age, when millions of people are looking forward to, and struggling for a new economic and spiritual life, that it is the duty of the artist graphically to portray the humanity of the present day in relation to this environment.

This is not a law, and this does not mean propaganda in the narrow sense of the word. The feeling and symbolism of painting are not in any specified set of props. As for my own work, I made my statements in work before I had either friends or foes.

A great many readers of the *Art Front* are interested in social propaganda. In my lecture at the League last year, I made some criticisms of the way this was presented. I asked that these artists so interested be more careful in-portraying the life and character of their humanity.

I cited Jacob Burck's painting of strikers and mine guards fighting. In this work is portrayed the viciousness of life. And the characters are real. The mine guards are alive and vicious. The striker being slugged is alive and real, and not a stuffed anaemic dummy of virtue. I cited the subtle characterization in the work of Thomas Benton. They are the type and the character of the people, of the place and the country.

In closing, I will say that my painting is based on the best science of the day. I have gone to the best in European art for my guidance because it is in my tradition. I do not lift designs, colors and mannerisms bodily from some contemporary.

Whatever my design, color, mannerism may be, it is my own, and with it I tell my story and my own story.

Sincerely,

John Stuart Curry

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THE UNION

THE rapid growth of the Artists Union has demanded a change in its organizational form. It has recently been found necessary to departmentalize the Union into various sections so that each section (sculpture, teaching project, mural project, commercial and unemployed) could solve its own immediate problems and together form a strong organization that could best serve the interests of all artists.

Pink Slips and College Art

THE College Art Association, in its role of benevolent despot to the artists on work-relief, consistently proclaims that its powers are used solely for the interests of the artists. The Artists Union and its sections have a vital concern and interest in the exercise of these powers. On frequent occasions, delegations of the Artists Union have tested the character of these powers by their presentation of artists' grievances.

Recently two artists, Laredo and Sanders, on the teaching project, were given pink slips, the official notice of lay-off. Victor Laredo was discharged because the Home Relief Bureau investigating his old address, found that he had moved, concluded that he was a non-resident and therefore not entitled to work-relief. Laredo had handed in his change of address to Mr. Trantum, a College Art Supervisor. This information was not forwarded to the Home Relief Bureau. Mr. Trantum, knowing the true facts of the case, failed to correct the Home Relief Bureau interpretation of Laredo's case but proceeded to oust Laredo from his job.

Bernard Sanders* was given a pink slip because his sister, who is not living at home, earns \$15.00 a week. The Home Relief Bureau claimed that it did not wish to break up families and ordered Sanders' sister to return home and support the family.

The Grievance Committee of Project 259, the teaching project, sought the responsible authorities to remedy these unjustified lay-offs. The College Art Association blamed the Home Relief Bureau, the Home Relief Bureau blamed the Works Division. After an administrative run-around, it was discovered that Mrs. Pollack and Mr. Trantum had the authority to stop these lay-offs and effect reinstatements. When approached by a delegation they denied their responsibility, but when faced with the threat of a picket-line that week, they reconsidered, and said they would do something about it. Two or three days later, Laredo was back on the payroll.

The presence of a few persistent facts weigh against the alleged paternal concern of the College Art Association for the artists' welfare. They disclaimed their authority and powers by acquiescing to the La Guardia administration policy of cutting down the number of workers on relief-rolls. In fact, each administrative body of the Relief Division gives its whole-hearted support to this policy. The justifiability of artists being laid off was not the concern of the College Art Association.

On the teaching project, the College Art Association is trying to break down union organization by

* A picket line on Saturday morning, March 10th in front of the College Art Association forced the reinstatement of Bernard Sanders.

various devices. They are pointing out the active union members to the head workers of settlement houses, and instructing these directors to request transfers for these artists on the basis of "personal reasons". They are trying to prevent the project paper from being sold so that no exposure of the College Art Association's role will be made to the working artists. Timekeepers are encouraged to keep check on union members so that they can be docked at the slightest pretext.

The Artists' Union, comprising a large section of New York artists, can best see to it that their interests are protected by building their organization. Artists must keep alert against the danger of an intermediary role being played by the College Art Association, which claims to represent both the artists and the administration.

Sculptors

The recently formed Sculptors Section of the Artists' Union has many problems to meet. Not the least important is the fight they are putting up against the degradation of art and artists. It seems that the Park Department is under the impression that one must pass a test as a skilled stone-carver before he can effectively scrub a monument. The sculptors recognize the worth of all forms of labor, but when cynical and vulgar politicians demand that the sculptor be a skilled stone-carver, go through miles of red tape, to do work that others can handle without special training, then we denounce this action.

Surely enough projects can be developed to utilize the creative talents of all unemployed sculptors. Sculptors, as well as all artists, want to do work in their own creative fields, and this cultural necessity together with the struggle for economic security is the basis of the Artists Union organization.

The Unemployed

Of the various sections of the Artists' Union, the unemployed comprises the largest. It is there that the issue is clearest and the struggle sharpest. The struggle to secure jobs for unemployed artists involves the active support of every other section of the Union. It is only through a continuous fight for the unemployed, that the employed can keep their jobs. There is need in hundreds of public building for decorative sculpture and murals, and there is the desire of thousands of children for art classes. Artists should be employed to satisfy these needs. Appropriations must be made for such employment.

The unemployed have been content to sit and wait too long. It is necessary now to begin and maintain constant demonstrative action to call attention of the public and the city administration to the desperate need of the unemployed artists.

On Saturday, March 10, a picket line was started in front of the offices of the College Art Association for jobs for all unemployed artists. As an immediate demand for these artists until placed on jobs, we called for \$10 a month for art materials for all artists on home relief. This picket line will be continued every Saturday morning at the C.A.A. offices, 137 E. 57th St. The picket line must be supported and extended.



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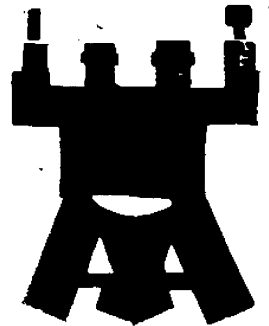


NEW CHINA CAFETERIA



ART FRONT

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Official Publication of the ARTISTS' UNION, 60 West 15th Street, New York
Editorial Office, ART FRONT, 54 West Eighth Street, New York City

Wages For Artists

WHILE Washington politicians debate about whether it is more dangerous to risk the Administration's displeasure by recognizing prevailing wages in the new \$4,880,000,000 Relief Bill, or to flout organized labor by undermining its hard-won wage rates, it becomes apparent that the answer lies with labor itself.

Present developments indicate that the prevailing wage clause will not be written into the Work Relief Bill, but that the Administration will make whatever concessions are necessary in the face of union pressure. That is, wherever relief workers are organized in strong unions they have some chance to retain the union wage scale.

Artists now on art projects receive \$24.00 weekly for from 30 to 39 hours' work, that is, about \$4.80 per day. It is interesting to compare this wage with that of other skilled workers. Union plumbers, for instance, receive \$12.00 per day, house painters receive \$11.20, plasterers, \$12.00, stone carvers, \$14.00. The Artists' Union, after careful consideration of comparative wages, has determined on \$2.00 per hour as a fair wage for artists, for a maximum 30-hour, and a minimum 12-hour week. Artists who now receive \$24.00 for a 30-hour week will, under the new rate, receive the same sum for 12 hours of work.

It is vital at the present time that artists organize for the creation of new art projects, for the maintenance of desirable working conditions, and for the recognition of the Union wage scale.

Hearn Plan

INVITATIONS were recently sent out by the "Lower New York Art Council" to artists for an exhibition which opened March 4 at Hearn's Department Store. On the eve of the opening, the artists were surprised to learn that this exhibit was being sponsored by Mayor LaGuardia's Municipal Committee of One Hundred, which body had refused to admit duly elected delegates of New York artists to its first and only conference at City Hall.

Artists protested against the first municipally sponsored exhibition last year because it was held in Rockefeller Center where a work of art was destroyed by the owners of the building. After withdrawing their works, the artists sent a delegation to Mayor LaGuardia and presented him with plans for a permanent Municipal Art Gallery and Center.

We protest against this exhibition at Hearn's. It is one precisely of the character that the creation of a Municipal Art Center would prevent. In no way does it serve the interests of artists but is merely instrumental in providing free publicity for a department store.

This time our protest has been effective. On the opening day of the exhibition, six paintings were removed by indignant artists.

During the first week of the exhibition so many more have been removed that the sponsors of the show, in order to cover the bare spaces, have had to resort to hanging the work originally thrown out by the jury as unfit.

Why Mr. Benton!

Editors of Art Front. February 14th, 1935.

Dear Sirs:
The copy of Art Front which, according to your letter of February 12th, was mailed to me, has not yet arrived.

I am always interested when people criticize me, so I hope you will yet mail me your sheet.

I am not, however, interested in answering criticisms or in defending myself.

I am in the first place in too strong a position to make that necessary, and in the second place am too sceptical of the nature of critical motives, in general, to take the critical findings of my contemporaries with much seriousness.

The criticisms of artists are unconsciously controlled, for the most part, by impulses that are defensive rather than inquiring.

In the case of an "imitator of imitations" like Stuart Davis, the motives for a criticism of my work or of that of Curry, Marsh or Wood are plain.

No verbiage can disguise the squawks of the defeated and impotent.

Yours sincerely,
THOMAS H. BENTON.

But the next day Mr. Benton read the article. He telephoned—would he ask him ten questions and give him three thousand words? We did. Several days later we received his answers, he telephoned again. Were we answering him in the next issue? If so, he must have five hundred more words of rebuttal. *Art Front* is limited for space and we could not tell him definitely. Mr. Benton became panicky. He "scooped" us and delivered our questions and his answers to them to *Art Digest*.* THE EDITORS.

Treason Is Treason

WHEN the sluices of the Panama Canal opened in 1912, there rode to fame on the famous waters, Jones Lie, a little known painter who had set himself the task of immortalizing the great engineering feat.

Never distinguished for the quality or the profoundness of his work, he has nevertheless risen steadily in the world of art. He painted pretty sailboats and became an Associate N. A. He painted more p.s.b. and became a full N.A. He painted still more p.s.b. and became president of the N.A.

He then gave up his struggles with the brush to become painter member of the New York Municipal Art Commission. In normal times the duties of this office would be to choose the proper design for subway kiosks, lamp posts, park benches and garbage cans. But these are not normal times. Under the desperate enterprises of hard-pressed politicians, Mr. Lie finds himself in a key position. That is to pass or reject the murals designed by some hundred and fifty artists working on the mural projects of the F.E.R.A.

Recently Mr. Lie unbosomed himself before the society of mural painters.

He confessed that of the many murals that he had passed during his year in office, he had "passed them with a smile, but there is an awful lot behind that smile." He did not like the murals, but he remembered that the walls could always be whitewashed. Beside, the work was going into "old decrepit buildings that are coming down anyway."

Mr. Lie dislikes modern trends in painting. "If academic painting is on the skids," he cries, "God help American art!" But if he dislikes modern painting, he abominates work dealing with social subject matter. He does not think, for instance, that the achievements of medical science have a place on the walls of hospitals. That prison walls should speak of the injustices of prison life, or depict ideal prison conditions, that the walls of schools should tell children of a better life, or a different form of society is to Mr. Lie propaganda and not art. "Treason is treason," he shouts, "whether in literature or paint!"

To an administration that has been a paragon of economy, that has balanced its budget by the sales tax, by flying squadrons that descend upon the poor and jerk them off relief rolls, that has twice given the excuse of economy to cut the artists' wages, Mr. Lie seems an unusual luxury. We feel that the city cannot afford such a luxury.

There is a move among the artists of New York to demand Lie's resignation, a move which we heartily support.

[As we go to press, a rumor reaches us that Jonas Lie is to be made curator of paintings at the Metropolitan Museum. If this is true, then we can indeed say, "God help all painting!"]



* Our compliments to *Art Digest*, who has twice capiously quoted *Art Front*, once after publication, and once before.

Ben Shahn



ART FRONT



Wages For Artists

Why Mr. Benton!

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ON THE AMERICAN SCENE

Following are the original ten questions solicited from the editors of *Art Front* by Mr. Benton, with the answers.

1. IS PROVINCIAL ISOLATION COMPATIBLE WITH MODERN CIVILIZATION?

This involves two further questions. What is provincial isolation? and what is modern civilization? The first question is tied up with the meaning of the word "province" which is a division of a state or empire—an area which is dependent. Now dependence is a relative factor and the degree of dependence of any area would determine its provincialism. If the degree is large, the element of provincialism is large and the status of an area, quite apart from nationalist ties, could be set within the meaning of the word province (as, an economic province). This would not do for the United States, to which the reference here seems to be directed. The United States is not dependent on any state or empire, even though it imports goods, mental and material, from states and empires. (Note the plural). It is true that there are provincial areas within the United States. The Communist Party, for instance, as it is presently constituted, inhabits such an area. This area is not physical but psychological. It is none the less an area—an area of thoughts and beliefs. The provincial character of that area is determined by the degree in which it is dependent upon a body of centrally-controlled thought—an empire of ideas and beliefs. The Communist Party at present is an isolated mental area in the United States. It is a dependent, a province of certain kinds of thought, and it is set in a region where the sort of social behavior and instrumentation which actually objectifies that thought is checked and frustrated.

Is this kind of provincial isolation compatible with the existence of a kind of civilization where Communist behavior is presumably unchecked? The question here seems, when the factual side is considered, to need an affirmative answer. This does not, however, cover the whole of our question which is complicated by the concept, modern civilization.

A civilization, in fact, is a thought and behavior complex. Factually regarded, there are at present a number of modern civilizations which think and behave quite differently though they possess the same tools. The question here deals with something which has no factual existence. It deals with a concept. Though it refers to observable fact (use of like tools, for instance) this concept sets up a unity which is not in observed fact itself but in the verbal techniques that describe it.

Our question, if it is to be realistic or intelligible, now reads: "Are areas of provincial isolation compatible with modern civilizations?" The word "compatible" involves "beliefs" about relations which are too complex for discussion here, so I am forced to answer this question by saying that areas of provincial isolation do exist and that modern civiliza-

tions do exist and that as long as they are able to exist, there must be congruities present which allow for that co-existence. In view of "what is" my answer to this question is "Yes." May I say, however, that I regard the question as fundamentally nonsensical. It does not deal with observable things but with notions.

2. IS YOUR ART FREE OF FOREIGN INFLUENCE?

This is a straightforward question, free of devious intellectualities. The answer is "No."

3. WHAT AMERICAN ART INFLUENCES ARE MANIFEST IN YOUR WORK?

This question can only be answered by defining "Art Influences." Art influences are historically of two kinds. There are instrumental and perceptive influences. (Perceptive is regarded here as that psychological process which sets up relations between the individual and phenomena external to him. The artist's perception is regarded here as it is directed to the world which exists apart from the *specific instrumentalities of artistic process*—to the 'real' world.) The instrumental influences of art are the 'ways of doing' that are *known* to the artist. The more that is *known* of the history of art process, the greater the body of influence. The less is *known*, the more limited the body of influence and the more obvious any particular influence. American practitioners, for the greater part, look like French practitioners, because they *know* (have learned) only French practice. With a wider knowledge of historic process as a whole, they would have escaped the sort of provincialism which is involved in the imitation of French process. This provincialism is analogous to the sort of provincialism touched upon in the first question. It indicates dependency. French process was and is influenced by the French practitioner's knowledge of a considerable body of historical process which is not French. French processes, nevertheless, give results which are French. Why? Because of the entrance of influences which are not instrumental but perceptual— influences which come, not from process but from perceptions of things and relations of things in the French environment. These perceptions have forced modifications in historically known traditional practices. These traditional practices were developed in other French environments where perception dealt with other than French phenomena. These practices could not, consequently, without modification 'cover' the 'stuff' of perception in the French environment. It is in this forced modification of process by the 'stuff' of perception that forms are developed. Forms, that is, which are not imitations of other forms. There is apparently no other way of doing it. Any study of Symbolism, of the 'read in' meaning in its connection with art, will show that meanings, when they are transferred from be-

liefs to forms do not effect changes in forms. Forms are changed only by the effects on *process* of perceptions that processes fail to cover. Perceptions are the contradictions to the form thesis when it (the thesis) is taken to a new environment—these contradictions are 'resolved' by a new form which 'covers' the contradictions involved in perceptions. The new form is in actuality a synthesis. If this seems too material a view of art, remember that it is in harmony with the pragmatic aspects of Marxist thought, to the whole body of which your beliefs are committed.

The answer to this question is in the form of my actual work, where my perceptions of the American environment have influenced my historical knowledge of processes (French and other) and set up a new synthesis which no one can confuse with other syntheses, French, Mexican or what not.

4. WAS ANY ART FORM CREATED WITHOUT MEANING OR PURPOSE?

An art form is a complex of practices. First, it is practice which is learned. Second, it is practice undergoing modification through the pressure of perceptions which the learned practice does not 'cover.' It is, third, a new "statement of relations" between the elements of practice after these have been modified. This new statement involves a new logic (formal relations) and has generally new associations. This is true whether practice deals with geometrical forms which represent nothing or with geometrical forms which represent something. All art form elements may be reduced to geometrical or sensational factors. An art form is then in the last analysis a material thing. To translate a picture or other form into its geometrical and sensational components, is however, an intellectual feat. It is not necessary for setting up those relations which in practice, for instance, make a picture. It is not necessary or in my opinion, advisable to cut away the associative content of the perceptually affected elements of form-making. Where this is done, symbolic meanings are 'read in' to the form to make up for the lost content. Art forms are involved with purpose even when they are simply embellishments. When they are representations they are involved with the meanings of our perceptions—which involve, again, a great body of associated meanings. The answer to the question, with the information I have at present is, "No." This question cannot be answered as if 'aesthetic' values were separate from human ways of perceiving and doing.

5. WHAT IS THE SOCIAL FUNCTION OF A MURAL?

This is for society, as it develops, to determine.

6. CAN ART BE CREATED WITHOUT DIRECT PERSONAL CONTACT WITH THE SUBJECT?

If I am to understand the word art to denote an original form type and the word subject to mean what the form type represents rather than what it symbolizes, the answer is "No."

7. WHAT IS YOUR POLITICAL VIEWPOINT?

I believe in the collective control of essential productive means and resources but as a pragmatist I believe actual, not theoretical, interests do check and test the field of social change.

8. IS THE MANIFESTATION OF SOCIAL UNDERSTANDING IN ART DETRIMENTAL TO IT?

"Social understanding" is simply the outcome of a body of beliefs which are more intellectual than directly perceptual. "Proof" for such beliefs is afforded by submitting perceptual stuff to ideas which explain it—to rational conceptions. Rational conceptions impose orders on the flow of experience and remembered experience (history). Conceptions become theses, when, for any of a dozen reasons, they are regarded as true. When a thesis is accepted as true, it becomes an object of belief and gets involved in all the emotional accompaniments of will. Many various kinds of "social understanding," forms of the "will to believe" have, through history, undoubtedly affected artists. Beliefs *do* affect the relations that are set up between things which are perceived, but it is actual perception of things in their environmental settings which finally determines the nature of a form. Beliefs may themselves be read into any traditional and stereotyped form—they may also accompany or affect highly original ones. Belief, when it becomes dogma, has been historically detrimental to the evolution of artistic practice because belief as an intellectual attitude, is satisfied with symbols and resents discoveries in perception which might force modifications in belief structures

(Continued on page 8, col. 1)





From *Asso. to Esso*

Kuniyoshi

"BENTON SEES RED"—Burck

In Mr. Benton's replies to the ten questions which he solicited from the editors of the *Art Front* he makes certain references to Communism and Communist artists which we feel call for a reply.

Art Front is the official publication of the Artists' Union. Like the Union, it is non-political and non-sectarian. We, therefore, feel unqualified to answer Mr. Benton, and have submitted the questions, with his answers, to Jacob Burck, a Communist, and one of the outstanding revolutionary artists.

A SPECTRE is haunting Thomas H. Benton—the spectre of communism. On returning from an extensive lecture tour throughout the Middle West recently, in an interview with the *New York Times*, Mr. Benton had hardly answered the reporter's first question before he saw the spectre's shadow and immediately switched off the interview to an attack on communism.

Out of some inner terror, it seems, he constantly reassures himself that what he sees is only an apparition—a product of the mind—i.e., "The Communist Party at present is an isolated mental area in the United States." And—"This area is not physical but psychological. It is none the less an area—an area of thoughts and beliefs." Benton would have us believe that Communism is only an hallucination of the mind—the mental product of "crack pots," if you please, who would rearrange the "natural" order of things to conform to their "deranged" notions, such as:

Notion 1. That people should not starve, that they should get (fight for) living wages,

Notion 2. That people should get all they produce and produce for use not for the profit and enrichment of the few who own the machines, the means of production.

Notion 3. That our government is only the tool of these few rich and is used to crush any workers who threaten their profits as witnessed by the murder of 65 workers by the "authorities" and troops in the strikes last summer.

Notion 4. That the American flag and other symbols of patriotism are used to send workers to die, to save and make profitable the investments of these

few rich wherever these investments happen to be, at home or abroad.

Notion 5. That only those who fight against these few rich and for the interests of the workers (nearly the entire nation) are the real patriots.

Notion 6. That these few rich will not hand over the country to the workers (nearly the entire nation) out of the goodness of their hearts; that it will eventually be necessary by force of arms to dispossess them, and produce all the things necessary to enjoy life for ourselves and not for their holy profits.

What has Communism to do with Mr. Benton's art, or the work of the artists who read *Art Front*, for that matter? All of us are thoroughly acquainted with the "art for art" art, which, like the National Academy, is today dead and doesn't know it. Only a few short years ago any other art was inconceivable to almost every functioning artist, with the exception of a few "Reds"—George Grosz and Otto Dix in Germany, Jean Charlot, Orozco, Diego Rivera in Mexico, and John Sloan, Boardman Robinson and Robert Minor in the United States.

Shortly before the Communist Party was organized in the United States (1918-19), Tom Benton came back to these shores, a disillusioned youth—a Parisian failure. "Pure" art did not agree with his organism, used to wheat cakes and ham and eggs. In the old Lincoln Arcade he licked his artistic wounds and tried to find a new "art" sweetheart to take the place of the one which had just rebuffed him. He starved and discoursed with the other recluses dwelling in those morbid, gas-lit halls.

The conversations must often have turned to social and economic problems, as well as to art. Revolution swept Europe; the post-war unemployment situation here was keen. The old *Masses* magazine, suppressed during the war in the form of the *Liberator*, was engaging the energies of the best artists in the country, Boardman Robinson, George Bellows, Maurice Becker being among its frequent contributors—not to speak of Robert Minor, later its editor. John Reed was regularly sending in from the new Russia his

brilliant articles on the successful Bolshevik Revolution.

Benton read and theorized. He theorized mostly about art. Eventually Thomas Benton began to perceive a glimmer of a new art. The talk and work of his radical friends about revolution—strikes—workers—was much closer to him than the blue smoke he had inhaled on the Left Bank. He strapped a knapsack on his back and struck out with sketchpad in the direction of his native home—Missouri—the Mid-West.

This was a grub-stake venture. He put away in his knapsack chunks of artistic ore which he stole from the natives in the form of innumerable sketches, only to return to "smelt" the stuff down in New York for appraisal by the art dealers.

The art dealers finding Benton's specimens decent, Benton contented himself with other "surface-mining" expeditions. Deeper mining would have entailed hazards. A "pragmatist" takes as few chances as possible.

Benton at that time painted and exhibited a series of murals on American history. Here was an artist whose art concerned itself with much more than the forms and colors of his favorite nude or interesting arrangement of his victuals. Benton was portraying the life of a nation. How little of real American history these paintings showed can be seen by even the slightest comparison with Diego Rivera's panels on the same subject.

Benton's scenes of American history were no more revealing than the average public school primer histories, although artistically they contained much more than the material found in such books. The "pragmatist" expressed himself again in these works.

Benton's art today is simply his earlier American history brought up to date. Not a glimmer of an attempt to understand the material he paints. That, Mr. Benton would say, is "contained in the mind"—"read in," i.e., "meanings, when they are transferred from beliefs to form, do not affect changes in form." Let the reader or spectator "read in" what he wants to see. If you care to see the brutal oppression of the Negro in America, read it in Benton's Negroes shooting crap or his Negro in the New School of Social Research shaking out a bag of cotton with the grace

(Continued on page 8, col. 2)



From Asso. to Esso

Kuniyoshi

"BENTON SEES RED"—Burck

brilliant articles on the successful Bolshevik Revolution.

Benton read and theorized. He theorized mostly

A Perfectly Honorable Business

ON a rainy day last summer a dozen men carried John Kane's tubercular body to the grave. O'Connor and Balken from the Carnegie were in the procession, a New York art dealer had arrived for a day, the rest of the world hardly knew nor cared. The few weeks on his deathbed, while Kane fought against death to finish his last picture which he considered a masterpiece, had made exciting copy for the local papers. They could elaborate on a success story of the poor and simple ditch digger and house painter who had made good: from obscurity to gilded fame. They could not add, however, the old standby: from rags to riches. Kane died in poverty as he had lived his seventy-four years.

Little cognizance was taken in these reports of the tragic story of a man who sweated away a lifetime in coal mines and steel furnaces, who built the bridges and tunnels and paved the streets of Pittsburgh, and never was given an opportunity to paint the pictures for which Pittsburgh will be famous as time goes on. And surely no report will follow of what happened with the innocent canvasses when they became a matter of investment and speculation for greedy art dealers and shrewd collectors who profess to be "in business" and not interested in the creation of art. If Kane were alive today, he could have witnessed in his own case the decline and degradation of our "art lovers," who for profit's sake would reverse their vocabulary without the slightest scruple. He could have felt the hollowness and incincerity of those art "dealers—they who stamped him an amateur, a dilettente and faker, while he was alive; who flared up into a glorifying ballyhoo making of him "the Pittsburgh Primitive" and "the American Rousseau" before the soil on his grave had barely hardened.

John Kane was a strong and husky man. He referred to himself as "frosty but kindly" like the winters of his youth in Scotland. He had a zest for living, although torn between the religious opposites of good and evil. Years of hard drinking followed periods of chastening abstinence; he alternated between bar-room fist fights and gentlemanly courtesy. All his life he wanted to attend an art school and learn how to express his nostalgia for pastoral scenes, the frustration of his own existence. This escape found a release later in the canvases of idyllic patches of nature amidst the hell hole of smoky Pittsburgh.

His Puritan background accounts for a conscientiousness and diligence, which was interfered with in his eternal fight against the devil who came to him in the temptation of liquor, the fitting opiate for paralyzing misery. His children left him, his wife left him. Old and crippled, jobless and starving, he was thrown out of his home. Several years later his landlord, Father Cox of Pittsburgh, advertised himself as patron of John Kane, American genius of the industrial scene. This happened after the glorious illusion of a Carnegie acceptance. Kane was swamped with press releases and photographs but his situation remained as desperate as ever. After ten years of separation his wife saw John's picture in the papers. She returned to him who had been a "drinking bum," was proud of him as he had made good, and hardly grasped what John had been doing nor what the world had acclaimed him for. John was still in no position to devote his time to picture painting—except in those rainy days when he was prevented from earning a livelihood brushing freight cars, barns and housefronts with weather-proof pigment.

Before it is too late, the legendary myths of Kane's discovery and admission into the art field should be destroyed. A number of his pictures and "colored photographs" have been removed from circulation; it is doubtful whether we shall ever see his diaries full of homespun philosophic remarks and religious drawings reminiscent of Blake. Already a biography has been prepared, which not only omits dramatic facts of his life but attempts to cover up the tragic background of his idyllic pictures of escape with a patina of rose-colored saccharine. It already has become quite uncomfortable to remind the directors of the Carnegie Institute how old John used to peddle his bundle of canvases wrapped in newspapers to the museum. At the age of sixty-five he limped up the marble stairs to the offices of John O'Connor and Homer St. Gaudens to hear their

repeated formula of hope. The doormen knew him already and hesitatingly let the shabbily dressed man pass the bureaucratic portals of that charitable institution of art.

Then in 1927, serving on the Carnegie jury, Andrew Dasburg in a rage of fury threatened to vote every picture down unless one of Kane's loveliest canvases would be admitted. When the show was opened John's "Scottish Highlands" became the hit of the exhibition. The child-like simplicity of this picture, the subtlety of colors, the primitive conception and execution fascinated the critics who had grown tired of the prevalent sophistication and accepted mannerisms. Dressed up in his Sunday suit, John stood nearby his picture surrounded with reporters and photographers. The museum directors benevolently patted his shoulder: "Well, John, how does it feel to be a famous artist?" Kane was embarrassed, did not know what to answer. "I always thought my pictures were good . . ." he said quietly. To this day, however, no museum or institution in the city which is glorified in his pictures has a canvas of Kane in its possession.

No trail-blazer of artistic expression in America, John Kane will probably remain the American Rousseau of an industrial era. A Catholic with Puritan background, he was a man who never knew life in the vibrating sensuous way the Frenchman lived and expressed it. Kane's primitive approach, his naive composition, his astounding sensitivity in pigmentation, are as genuine as his lack of life and movement, his crudeness of figure anatomy, and the repetitious pattern of sheepish little clouds in a placid blue sky. Never did he paint the torturous hell of Pittsburgh and McKeesport as he had experienced it himself, never the sweat of work nor the industrialization of the country as he saw it. He viewed the city architecturally, certain buildings within the static frame of the settlement, typical little houses of the suburbs without stamina or character, two or three trains puffing against each other. A makeshift world into which the drawn-in pattern of every single cobblestone and blade of grass fitted perfectly. He had a great love for these streets and railroads which he had helped build himself. He worked slowly with painstaking attention to every detail and accumulated hundreds of sketches before he would begin work on a canvas.

We shall probably have the opportunity of seeing the few dozen pictures Kane left behind in several exhibitions. We shall see the Pittsburgh pictures and those escape canvases into the dream world of a sunny youth in Scotland which he never had. So little reality is attached to these pictures that the annual Scotchmen's gathering in Pittsburgh's Kennywood Park had to serve as model. He elaborated his wish-dreams in painting himself into the kilts and bagpipes, his adored brother Patrick, some of his relatives. . . . But there is one picture we shall probably never see. It is of great importance in Kane's life for he worked on it for many, many years and considered it his masterwork. It is a fair-sized canvas depicting Jesus in the Temple surrounded by the wise men of the land. Strongly reminiscent of the five and ten-cent holy pictures that soul-saving missions are keen to distribute, it represents one of the trashiest concoctions of every imaginable style and mannerism, completely out of line with Kane's entire work. John loved these prints and had large quantities around him. They are the source of his inspiration, the secret of his originality.

Yet rarely has there been an opportunity offered to view within so short a period the complete prostitution of an artist and his work. His victorious crashing of the gates of the "Carnegie International" had brought no relief, but petty jealousy instead, from the local boys and academicians. They found occasion to expose Kane as a faker when he innocently sent a few colored photographs along with his canvases to an exhibition the Pittsburgh Junior League gave him. Everybody knew that Kane had been selling and coloring photographs for years. In fact, it was this preparatory brushwork on delicate little photographs that gave him courage enough to tackle a canvas. Yet the local papers swallowed the new sensation. Artists and collectors from all over the country voiced their faith in Kane's sincerity and genuine qualities.

This unanimous credo, however, proved of little

help with New York's shrewd dealers of art. Always sensing a commercial possibility, Valentine Dudensing had arranged for a first one-man show of Kane's work. As soon as he heard of the scandal at the Junior League, however, he dropped the show, furiously stating that he would not exhibit "such baloney" in his gallery. None of the other galleries would sponsor Kane's debut.

In 1931 Manfred Schwartz returned from Europe and opened a gallery at 144 West 13th Street. He saw a picture of Kane's at the Museum of Modern Art and at once negotiated with Kane. Schwartz deserves a great deal of credit for repeatedly showing Kane's pictures and courageously fighting the many obstacles and handicaps which were put in his way. There is, however, an incredibly wide gap between showing and selling good work. Again Kane had good press notices but nobody would consider a Kane worth a hundred dollars. The fame and glory Kane had received through the Carnegie and through the exhibitions in New York could not help him to earn a living as a painter nor get him a much-needed job even as a laborer.

During the summer of 1931 Kane fell from a street car and injured several ribs. A few weeks later he slipped and broke another rib. He returned from the hospital a sick man. Schwartz came to Pittsburgh and found him in a dark and cold flat, desperate and starving. Impressed with the poverty of a painter he loved, Schwartz began to telephone the collectors and art lovers. They all answered that they were in no position to buy pictures. He called the Whitney Museum, told them about Kane's condition and advised them to buy a Kane now if they ever intended to buy one. Schwartz finally told his father about the situation he had found Kane in and persuaded him to invest some money in Kane pictures. Schwartz returned to Pittsburgh and paid what he considered a "market price" for nineteen pictures of Kane. Three years later Kane was dead. Schwartz came to the funeral as he had come several times before to visit Kane.

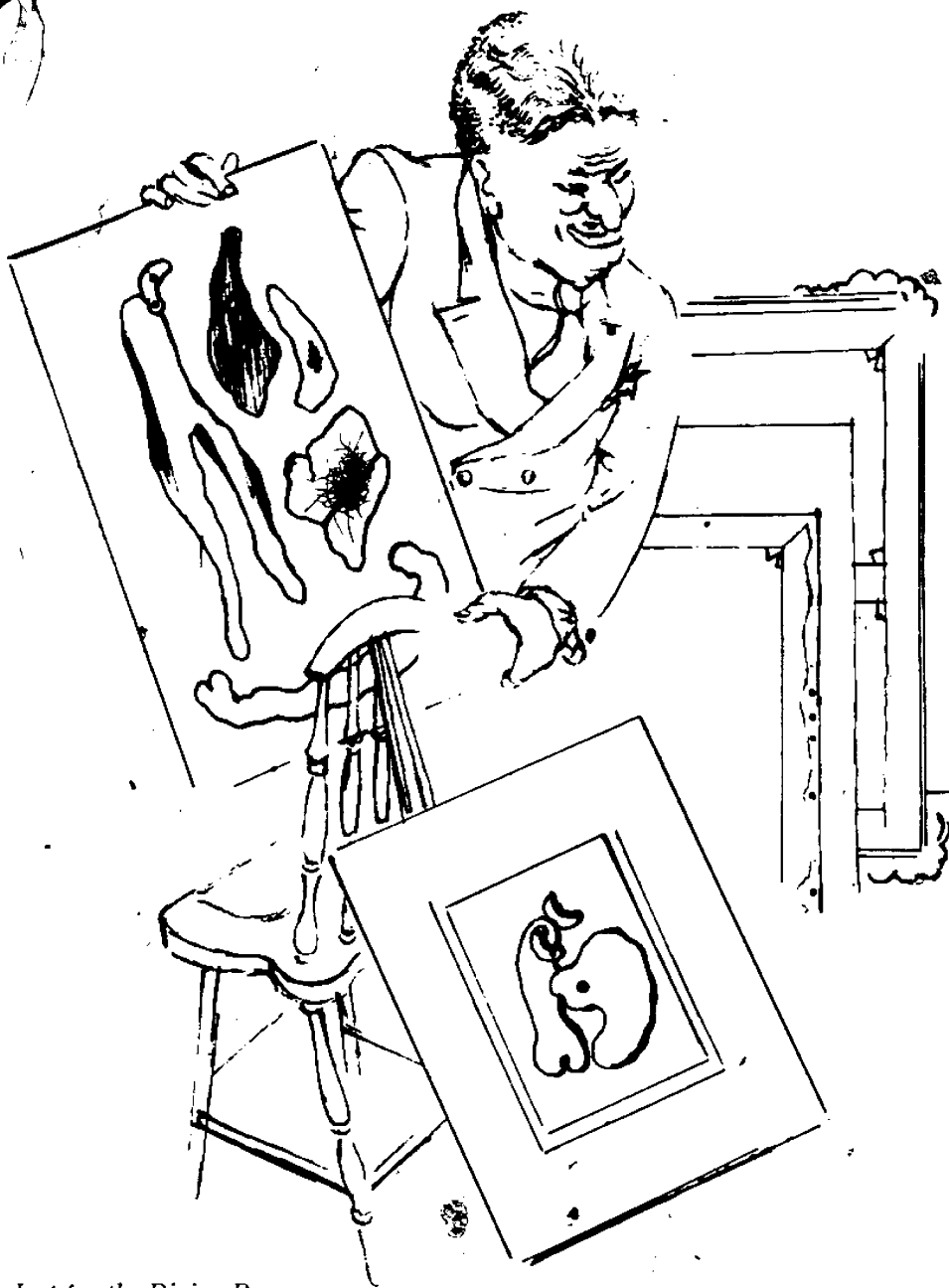
Since last fall when Schwartz gave up his gallery no other gallery has made any effort to handle Kane's pictures. Not even the Downtown and the Rehn galleries who specialize in handling American artists, considered Kane worthy of their patronage.

Macbeth and Valentine were the only bidders. Under conditions which are as straight and clean as most business dealings are today, Schwartz sold nineteen pictures to Valentine at a profit. Valentine at once began to establish a monopoly in buying up every Kane in the market.

While Kane was alive he could hardly get \$50 for a picture. Today with sufficient ballyhoo as the "original sponsor of Kane," Valentine went into speculation at the rate of \$7,500 per picture. He contradicts himself when he tells some people that he has sold two, and others that he has sold four pictures to Albert C. Barnes. There are also many conflicting rumors as to the stupendous prices Barnes is supposed to have paid for the Kanes. The truth is that Valentine, in order to whip up the publicity attracting big collectors, practically gave the pictures away to Barnes. Now that Kane is dead the Whitney Museum has bought one of his canvases. They paid less than \$1,000 to Mr. Landgren who in turn paid less than \$100, an amount larger than the Whitney Museum would have had to pay to keep Kane happy and alive.

All these deals and profits, the starvation of the artist to the benefit of the dealers and collectors, of course, are perfectly legal, perfectly honorable. It is, no doubt, less honorable to state that Kane would have lived his last few years far more happily, and that he would have been able to paint many more of these pictures with as little money as his "original sponsor" demands now for one picture. It is time that we become fully aware that our society permits and honors those men who not only let the artist starve but indirectly wait for his death in order to boost so-called prices and market values, "plowing under" and destroying the surplus of his work following the set example of our government. The only difference may be that our government at least partly pays for the destruction. So there is really no case against Mr. Dudensing, who belongs to the honorable art dealers of our city.

John Boling.



Just for the Dining Room



Grass

CONTRADICTIONS IN ABSTRACTIONS

I COME from the Whitney Museum show of Abstract Painting in America feeling like those Puritans of whom it's said that they opposed bear baiting, not because it hurt the bear, but because it amused the audience. My mind distrusts what my eye enjoys. Now this contradiction in my experience must be accounted for by a parallel contradiction in abstract painting. I shall try very briefly to outline the essential contradiction and show why it imposes a limitation on the power of abstract art to influence a modern spectator.

First, I am concerned only with that "pure" kind of abstract art which Stuart Davis describes in his catalogue introduction. For this kind does not claim merely to abstract the essential from nature, but actually to parallel nature with a new set of formal color structures. By this emphasis it becomes not "art for art's sake," but an "art within art" as opposed to ordinary painting which is art within nature. However, that this distinction holds only for the intention of the artist, and not for the result may be shown by the following consideration. Any painting may be considered abstract at a certain stage of analysis, that stage in which only the color-form categories are being studied. The rankest illustration has that privilege. On the other hand, the most abstract painting may be looked at as though it were the most concrete representation of imagined objects, simple or complex, in arbitrary space relations.

Mr. Davis says a painting is a "two-dimensional plane surface, and the process of making a painting is the act of defining two-dimensional space on that surface." This seems an extremely mechanical definition in that it is confined only to the physical description of a canvas; and to the act of composition. It is like the behaviorist's description of a thought as covert mouth muscle moving. It is also an anti-dialectical definition, in that the emergence of quality is in no way suggested, not even by the next statement, which is, "Any analogy which is drawn from our two-dimensional expression of three-dimensional nature will only be forceful in the degree to which our painting has achieved a two-dimensional clarity and logic." But how can an analogy arise between the merely parallel systems

of art and nature? As to two-dimensional clarity and logic, the poet fulfills the same demand when he objectifies his similes and metaphors, makes them stand on their own legs as things in their own right. But just as the poet's metaphors could not exist unless there were some element in common between the things to which they apply and themselves, so this two-dimensional clarity and logic could never produce analogies to three-dimensional nature unless the systems of art and nature were not parallel but continuous, unless there were a dynamic relation between the experience of events and aesthetic experience. Meaning is the element in terms of which nature and art are united, and just meaning is omitted from this abstract conception of painting. Thus, abstract art is produced by an intention founded on a limited definition of painting in general. Its pursuit demands of the artist a fiery passion for form, in fact, one might say it can be justified chiefly only when this passion exists. But this passion is too confined, it burns only in one corner of the eye. Form becomes like so much monopoly capital to which the society of art is sacrificed.

The absence of meaning, that is, of an apprehension of objects, in much more than their visual character, determines the fatal contradiction of abstract art. It makes this art like the intellectualist philosophy of scholasticism, based on a faith in God. Here all the clarity and logic are based on faith in the spectator, on a naive hope that he will make the same interpretation of the color forms that the artist did. That this hope is not valid is proven by the frequent question of simple people and workers, "What does it mean?" They are not prepared to take the liberties with an artist's work at which no lognetted art lover hesitates.

No meaning is the equivalent of any meaning. Thus an abstract painting is at the mercy of whatever physical associations the spectator has in mind, which may make alterations of planes and masses running directly counter to the intention of the artist. A good example of this is an arabesque from which the eye can extract dozens of completely different configurations by a shift of intention producing a shift in optical adjustment. Also the painting

is open to any ascription of meaning that anyone wishes to give it, reactionary, sur-realist, mystical, rebellious. And all this by the very definition which excludes meaning. The very artist who sets out to create an intellectual scientific art exposes himself to every possible quirk of psychological and psychopathic interpretation—to the ravages of the unconscious. On the other hand, if he abjures all interpretation he becomes a solipsist. He has a world into which no man can enter, and which dies with him.

Therefore, when the abstract artist, in the person of Mr. Davis asks, "Does this painting convey a direct emotional and ideological stimulus, the honest spectator must answer, "Very little. I must convey it to the painting. It's mostly up to me." An art in which emotion and ideology are so random must lose out amidst modern conflict. It can exist only in relatively undisturbed societies, or where an artificial stability has been temporarily built by a small section of society, rich patrons and dependent creators. This breakwater, leaky at all times, is now washed away.

The modern artist, more specifically the revolutionary artist, confronts an altered world. His experience includes not only the forms of nature, but the meanings of events. He cannot mistake one phase of his painting for the painting itself. He sees that the conflicts of classes of society, insofar as they are embodied in individuals, are as much a part of his normal, and consequently aesthetic experience, as the lines and colors of a tree trunk, or two planes, grey and yellow, intersecting at a precise angle. With this world in advancing motion before him, with men breaking through cruelty, hunger, imperialism, fascism, war to a consciousness of them, for power over them, can the modern artist deny the claim of all meaningful experience to be subject for him? He can, but not very lightly.

Clarence Weinstock.

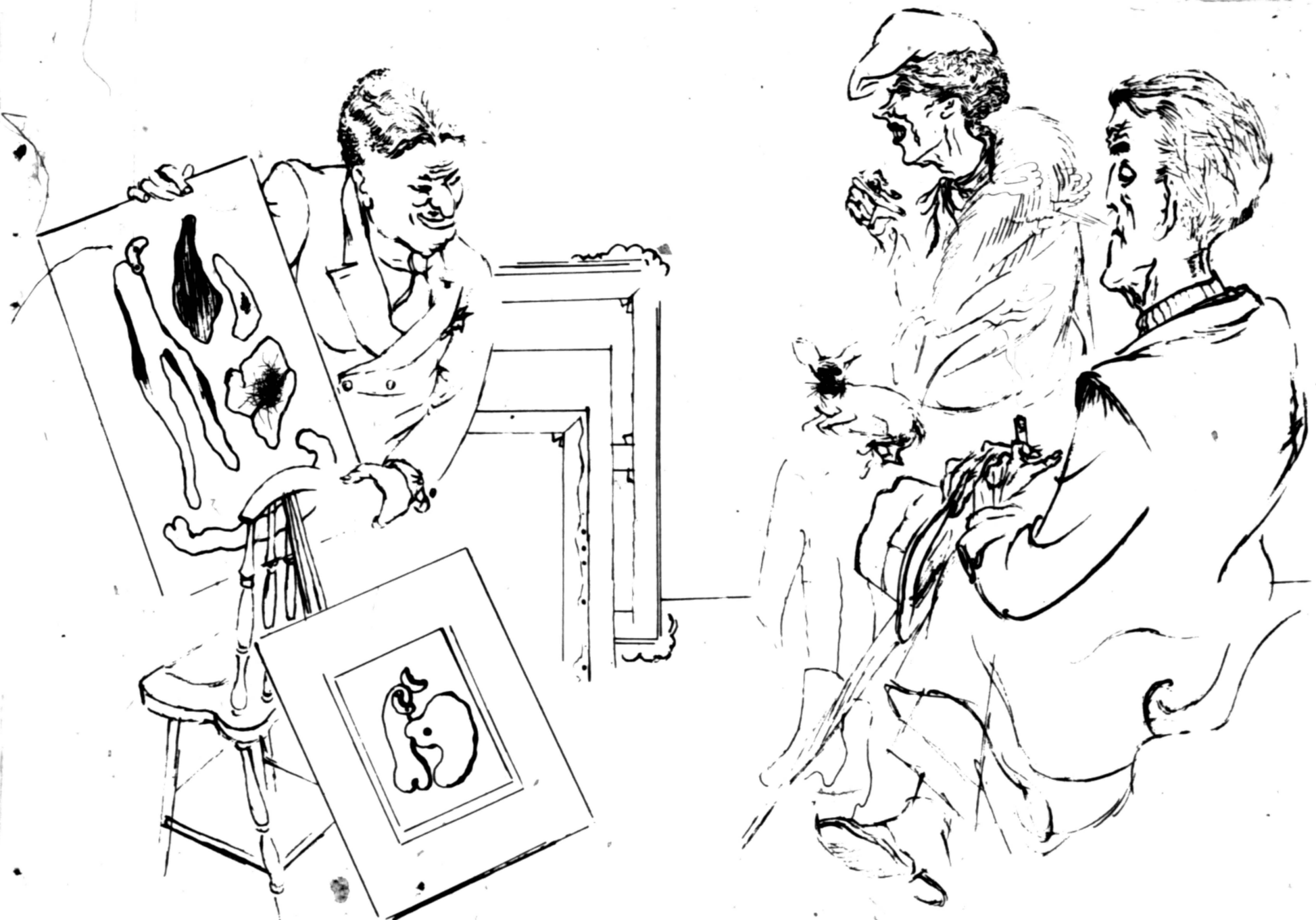
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"ARTISTS' MATERIALS FOR PERMANENT ART"



• Just for the Dining Room

American Scene

(Continued from page 4)

(as well as form structures). I refer you to the History of Early Christian Art—to Navajo Sand Painting—to any area where form making became crystallized in a style (way of doing) dominated by belief meanings. Particular historical references, however, cannot make us sure that beliefs are always detrimental to the development of form types. Evidence indicates only that they are, generally so. I will say then that "social understanding" as a belief form is generally detrimental, though not necessarily so. The "social understanding" of Daumier and Thomas Nast did not keep them from being great artists, any more than Marx's conception of history ("systematic unity of the concrete world process" progressively unrolled as an "ought to be" in a dialectical movement) kept him from making intelligent statements about his perception of fact. (Greater part of Chapters 12 and 13 of "Capital")

9. IS THERE ANY REVOLUTIONARY TRADITION FOR THE AMERICAN ARTIST?

The answer here lies in the history of America where the "turns" of affairs have a form not to be confused with 'turns' in other areas, though they may develop structures which are similar in intellectual analysis to structures in other areas. (The case of private ownership structures in the United States and throughout the world is here to the point).

Intellectual analysis is a reducing process of thought which takes the individual and characteristic (the real) from forms in order that they may, as abstractions be logically related in theory. Theory is directed generally to imposing "meaning and purpose" through logical orders on the flow of phenomena.

In the current Communist sense, there is no revolutionary tradition for the American artist. In the sense which I have developed above, which declares a necessary relation between perception (of phenomena) and original form making, there is plenty of revolutionary tradition. It began with the first effects of the frontier upon provincial forms in the East and South and continues to this day in the actual moves of conflicting interests.

The answer is "Yes" if you know your America.

10. DO YOU BELIEVE THAT THE FUTURE OF AMERICAN ART LIES IN THE MIDDLE WEST?

Yes. Because the Middle West is, as a whole, the least provincial area in America. It is the least affected, that is, by ideas which are dependent on intellectual dogmas purporting to afford "true" explanations of the flow of phenomena—those rational schemes which arise in and with groups who do not labor with things but with verbal abstractions supposedly representing them.

Because in that area the direct perception of things, since it is less weighted with intellectual conceptions of meaning, purpose and rational progression, has a better chance to modify "ways of doing" in an unstereotyped and uncategorical manner. Because unlike the East, as a whole, it has never had a colonial psychology, that dependent attitude of mind which acts as a check on cultural experiments motivated in the environment.

Because in spite of the crudities and brutalities inseparable from its life and heritage of frontier opportunism it has provided the substance for every democratic drive in our history and has harbored also the three important collective experiments in the United States. (Rapp, Owen, Amana). These experiments are important, even if untimely and utopian, because they attempted in fact the realization of a profound human dream and provided thereby, if nothing else, an illustration of the error of trying to make dreams come true through "the mere holding of idealistic conceptions."

Because of the rapidly contemporary growth of interest in artistic construction and expression which is now providing the rising Middle Western student of art with magnificently equipped schools and libraries in which he can find illustrated and exemplified the whole history of aesthetic practice. Here

Benton Sees Red

(Continued from page 5)

of an orchestra leader—or another Negro in the same murals relaxing in a subway car—or his Negro church scene at the Whitney Museum.

In the tradition of his grandfather, Senator Thomas H. Benton of Missouri, Thomas H. Benton, the painter, employs deep sounding verbiage culled from books (John Dewey) to give a pretense of dignity to his "mental area" and, with an inner smirk, throws in a little of Marx for good measure.

"What is the social function of a mural? That is for society, as it develops, to determine," says Benton—not for Benton. It would endanger some unborn commission for Benton, were Benton to have anything to say about what Benton's work should say. What he really means is that it is for the men who hire him to decide what function his murals are to have. His attitude toward the destruction of Rivera's works by the Rockefellers is answer enough.

In discussing Benton and his work, it should be remembered that he is not working alone. Benton and his equally verbose, though more lucid, pal, Thomas Craven, are the leaders of a new school which menaces the health of American art.

This school "dedicates itself to the proposition" that what this country needs is a national art, free from "foreign" esthetic "tyranny." With that as a basis, it declares that the Mid-West is the only area unconquered by "colonial psychologies"—that is, a "dependent attitude of mind" resulting from foreign immigration. Feeling that all good (Mid-West) Americans should come to the aid of their country, Craven and Benton have been doing some heavy recruiting.

These two have mapped their "campaigns" with a keen sense of strategy, almost military in conception. (Probably in preparation for a future esthetic "putsch" to save America from its coastal "oppressors.") The set-up so far is: Benton—Missouri, Grant Wood—Iowa, John Steuart Curry—Kansas. Thomas Craven is the recruiting sergeant. The rest of the Middle West remains to be divided among the new talents whom Craven expects to entice with his honeyed pen.

For the sake of gaining a common objective—the impending federal jobs—an alliance has been consummated with an eastern power—the National Academy. The hostilities, which had existed between the two camps for more than a year, have ceased. The fat federal money bags are about to be surrounded.

Benton's art, according to Craven, defies description. "He depicts the antics of a chorus girl with the same gusto and dramatic power which he bestows upon a momentous historical episode." Like the *New York Times*, Benton paints only what is "fit" to paint.

This curious concurrence of the viewpoints of Mr. Ochs and Thomas Benton recalls a conversation with a friend who brought out the striking similarity between this painter's compositions and the front page layout of a tabloid newspaper. On the same page of the newspaper will be found a tempting picture of a chorine. Next to it a picture of troops embarking for strike duty, the launching of a battleship or the picture of some unemployed house painter (or sandwich man) who is handsomely rewarded for his

in a large field of choice he will find his instruments, his knowledge of historical "ways of doing" without having them so conditioned by subservient attitudes that he can never use them in reference to his real experience.

Because the Middle West is going to dominate the social changes due in this country and will thereby determine the nature of the phenomena to which the artist must react if he is to make forms which are not imitations of other forms.

And because there is among the young artists of the Middle West as a whole less of that dependent, cowardly and servile spirit which in a state of intellectual impotence and neurotic fear is always submitting itself to the last plausible diagnostician "just to be on the safe side."

Thomas H. Benton.

honesty. There may be three or four more pictorial items unrelated to each other within the area of the same page, leaving the reader to "read in" what may please him.

There can be no doubt as to this art form's being "American." This country has given the world the picture-tabloid. But Thomas H. Benton, it seems, prefers to do it by hand and call it art.

Benton attacks revolutionary art. He eagerly seizes upon the weakest examples of this art and deliberately uses them to illustrate his attack on the school as a whole. Whenever he is confronted with any really fine revolutionary works, he pretends to be innocent of their revolutionary content, and will have a good word for them as art.

As Benton would say, "All that revolutionary artists do is illustrate verbal messages falling from the lips of Joseph Stalin." His aim is to give the impression that revolutionary art is merely a cult art, limited to a "mental area," and has no significance for anybody outside that specific area, "no more than Navajo said painting."

It is necessary, at this point, to clear away some of the mud slung at revolutionary art by Benton and his colleagues. Revolutionary art is still in the process of defining itself. Those who strive to produce it already know its character and see it as the full expression of the richest human experiences.

The revolutionary artist is not satisfied with mere surface appearances—these "facts" which Benton accuses the revolutionaries of ignoring. The revolutionary artist knows that these surface "facts" usually tell very little of the complete story. That profound probing into life is not a characteristic of tabloid art is well known.

This art may be an undeniable document of life, but understanding this document is exactly their function to avoid.

Benton and his followers see a real menace to their shallow (and, in the revolutionary sense, unreal and false) mirror representations of American life which they avow so much to love. Revolutionary art aims to tear off the surface veil of things and expose the thing itself in its naked reality. How successful the revolutionary American artist has been in achieving this is another question. But this revolutionary art has already created artistic giants in our time. And among them cannot be numbered Thomas H. Benton.

Jacob Burck

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