AN AMERICAN RETROSPECT

The Art Annual Offers Much Food for Long Thoughts—The Case of Museums

By ELISABETH LUTHER CARY.

A BOOK of facts is often read for the pleasure of being informed with no special purpose in view. Some one has said—probably in a cynical mood—that a man of lively mind can find all the inspiration he desires in a telephone book or directory. Most of us, however, of more indolent mentality, prefer a more generous type of fact, one that starts us off on our questioning or theorizing with some relation to a subject that interests us. This type of fact is what the American Art Annual offers.

The issue recently published gives more than the usual amount of food for reflection, coming as it does in the midst of an era of depression and uncertainty. The customary introduction of comment is this year by Frederic A. Whiting Jr., president of the American Federation of Arts. Characterizing the year 1933 as one of extreme contrasts, he calls attention to the fact that despite the extraordinary difficulties meeting the carrying on of their former activities by art museums and art societies, the opening of new museum buildings and additions compared favorably with the preceding years, and the tendency of museums to accept community responsibility gained during the year, even those most seriously affected rendering their services at much personal sacrifice, often with curtailed budgets and reduced staffs, to a public which responded by increased attendance and correspondingly increased demands.

Mr. Whiting takes as a striking example the plucky Newark Museum, evidently still inspired by the spirit of its late director, John Cotton Dana. In the latter part of the Spring its staff was cut by eighteen and the salaries of those remaining were considerably reduced. "It seemed as if the valuable educational work must largely be given up. Yet in the Autumn word came that, despite increasing difficulty, the museum's effectiveness as a positive force in the community continued to grow. As an indication of that, in the first ten months of the year (1933) attendance increased by two thousand over any previous ten-month period, despite a 30 per cent reduction in the number of hours the museum was open. A number of innovations were made: daily gallery talks, adult hobby groups, and a series of roto-radio talks was continued."

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EXHIBITIONS held up well, considering the waning of enthusiasm for buying and collecting, which spread a grim pall over the spirits of those concerned financially. And the year was made forever memorable by the greatest exhibition ever held in America, that of the Chicago Art Institute synchronizing with the Century of Progress Exposition. With the stimulating fact of the Chicago show occupying our minds, the independence of material ease displayed in centuries of magnificent painting by artists whether rich or poor, oppressed by revolution and national disaster or enjoying the luxury of peace and prosperity, beloved by monarchs or rejected by democracies, living on the dainties provided by court favorites or starving in dilapitated studios, sheltered by friends or going mad in solitude, still holding high the banner of their belief in their art and in themselves—the Goyas, the Daumiers, the Groces, the Millets and Corots and Van Goghs and Rembrants, dominate the imagination. While artists of the past or present can use their precious tools, they echo in their acts, if not in words, the dauntless cry of Shakespeare's most unhappy soldier: "Blow wind, come wrack! At least we'll die with harness on our back."

Another section of the Annual also gives to think by the indication it provides of what may be called by confident progressives a swing in popular taste, or by the conservatives a proof of the tenacity of tradition. The list of auction sales, giving the titles and prices of paintings bringing over $200 at public sale and the names and nationalities of the artists, is notable for the interest betrayed in the art of America's earlier years. Gilbert Stuart naturally leads the list; the thirst for his agreeable versions of Washington's physiognomy seems never to be satisfied. Two of these portraits are recorded, bringing in one case $10,500, in the other (the Lee-Phillips portrait) $1,750. Still another sold in May, 1933, for more than $11,000. It obviously is Washington, however, not Stuart, who captures both hearts and pocketbooks, since other portraits by Stuart remain in the low hundreds. Another Washington, by Rembrandt Peale, brought over $2,000.

The Americans of a later period showed at least a salesroom importance to be seriously considered in the early months of 1933. One of Thomas Moran's beautiful Venetian scenes, long neglected, was bought for $1,600; an Innes landscape brought over $4,000; a Thomas Dewing (from the Mansfield collection), $2,300; a Winslow Homer, $11,000; a J. Alden Weir, $3,500; a Homer Martin, $3,600, and at the Montross sale a 7-by-12 Ryder brought $2,400.

While these prices are by no means extraordinary, are, indeed, low for ordinary times and private sales, yet for the dark days of that unhappy Spring they are sufficient to reveal an appreciation and confidence that may be counted among the heartening facts of the year.

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IF we leave the field of optimism for the future and return to the art situation of the present it is difficult to do anything but grieve for the plight of the mass of artists in our country—a mass composed of individuals born and trained for one profession and finding it a profession that is the first to be disregarded in the face of existing and advancing diminution of resources. Although we have more or less abandoned the theory that art is merely a luxury to be left out of any program for increased economy, we consider the need of art from the point of view of a public that requires now if ever its reviving messages. These reviving messages are given by museum and gallery exhibitions through the unselfish and severe efforts of a number of organizers.

This, however, is not helping the artist himself with his unsold picture on his easel, his unused architectural plans on his table, his sculpture with no place to go. Are there any comforting facts on record in connection with this situation? A few, and in a class that admits of indefinite expansion. A good many schemes for large architectural undertakings were born in prosperity and in some indescribable manner have pushed through to realization in the midst of apparent chaos and certain depletion of funds for individual spending. Taking Rockefeller Center as an example of opportunities that have been realized; in spite of a number of mistakes which will at once be recalled by a great many embittered Americans; no one can go through the buildings and not realize the justification for Mr. Whiting's statement that it has been "one of the most interesting aspects of the Rockefeller development that painters, sculptors and craftsmen have been called in in great numbers."

The most recent effort toward relieving unemployment, the Public Works of Art project, needs no description, as it became known far and wide as soon as it was put into operation. Discussion and disagreement reigned through its initial stages, and all shades of opinion were expressed as to the fitness of the works displayed at the Corcoran Gallery in Wahington to be placed in public buildings. This was inevitable. There is now a fairly general feeling that whatever its merits and defects it has stirred the entire country to a new consciousness of art as something that must not be permitted to die out in any community to which it can be brought. So complex and sophisticated a writer as Henry James once spent his most intense effort upon a haunting story which he intended for a thriller. Although far removed from our present idea of a thriller, it commanded a great deal of attention, partly because its author's most characteristic traits were more than usually revealed through its pages. At any rate, he was pleased, because, he said, he believed that at last he had been able to "wake up the libraries."

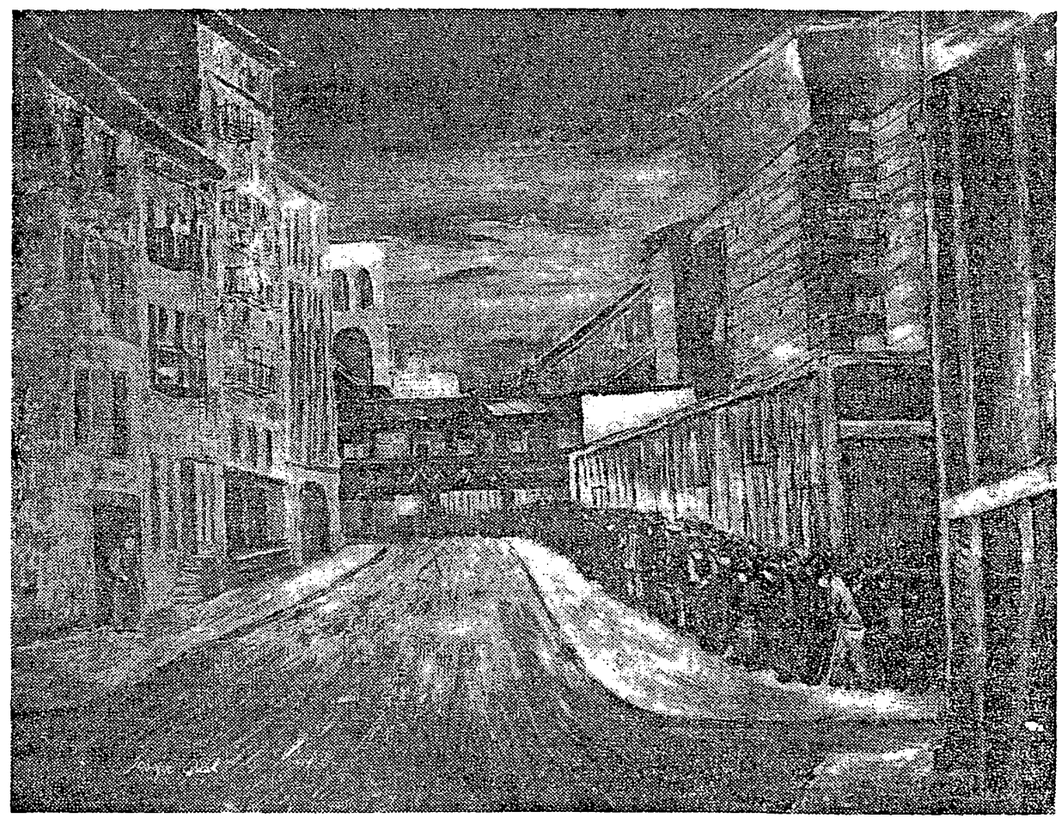
Much of the art shown in the exhibitions of the work thus started by the government has this quality of waking up the common sources of supply to consideration of it. Much of it is in a mood of hard, unimaginative realism capable of leading toward the stronger realities of life of basic interest to us all. It is, perhaps, this drop from fantasy and poetry that will bring about congenial companionship between communities far from art centres, and the type of art—creative art—that is going to outlast many generations of the human race. Probably this is what the ardent supporters of the project mean when they say that this act of our now most active government will "take the snobbery out of art." Of course, there really is no snobbery in art itself. It exists only in what we say and think about it. And what we are now thinking about the results of the project is that half a loaf is better than no bread.

IN THE EARLY SEASON EXHIBITIONS AT NEW YORK GALLERIES

"Head," by Fuji Nakamizo, at the Montross Galleries.

"Laughing Girl," by Isabel Bishop, in the Midtown's Group Show.

"The Grist Mill," by H. Goddard, in the Exhibition at the Ferargil Galleries.



"Bread Line," by Joseph Biel, at the ACA Gallery.