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Dear!

Art in Australia

The Art World's Outer Rim.

Submitted by Alan McCulloch of Melbourne, Australia.

The author was formerly the art critic of the Melbourne "Argus" and art editor of "The Australasian Post". He was a joint founder and editor of XXX the only extant Australian art journal, "The Australian Artist", whose overseas representative he now is, and a joint author of a large book "Masterpieces in the Melbourne National Gallery" (to be published late this year).

He is also well known in Australia as a draftsman and a caricaturist.

For the past year he has been touring America with his wife, studying American and Latin American art. He is at present in Paris planning an extensive tour of Europe.

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THE ART WORLD'S OUTER RIM Alan McCulloch AUSTRALIA

In considering the art development of a country such as Australia where traditional European standards were transplanted by the earl--y artists to a point of geographic isolation, we naturally expect anomalies of all kinds. And even the most cursory sketch of Australia's brief art history reveals them in abundance.

For the history of Australian art is the history of the art produced by a succession of rugged individualists, pioneers, who, returning from Europe with the standards which their natural abilities and training rendered them capable of assimilat--ing, fought for the recognition and subsequent maintenance of these standards like covenanters seeking converts to a new faith. Theirs was a land completely barren of recognisable indigenous culture, the native art, the art of the aboriginal was remote and unknown to them and exerted no influence.

European traditions, therefor, established a strong bridghead with the first painters. It was manifested in the lithographs of the topographical artists of the goldfields, and later in the painting of the first landscapists, notably that of Louis Buvelot, a Swiss emigré who applied 'the brown period' of European landscape painting to become the first real painter of the Australian scene. A more sympathetic interpretation came with the influence of impressionism.

Impressionism reached Australia through the work of Tom Roberts, a capable and sincere painter who spent three years of study in Paris at the time when the French impressionists were achieving their first real recognition. Roberts was accompanied by another Australian painter John Russell, whose well known portrait of Vincent Van Gogh was reproduced by the Museum of Modern Art, New York, in their catal--ogue of the museum's Van Gogh exhibition , and as a frontispiece to 'Vincent's letters to his brother Theo'.

Later the portrait was loaned by the Van Gogh family to the Chem-

-menté Museum in Amsterdam. It is interesting to also note that R Russell's first wife posed for the sculptor Fremiet for his equest--rian statue of Joan d'Arc. Russell remained in France and went to live at Belle Isle where he painted with various members of the impressionist group.

Roberts, however, returned to Australia and founded a series of artists camps around Melbourne. The group he thus formed painted direct from nature and concerned themselves with problems of atmos--phere and light after the manner of the French impressionist painters. They used a palette whose basic colours of blue and gold were in fact the true colours of the Australain landscape. The public yielded its patronage to local impressionism only after a stiff struggle, but this patronage was followed by popularity, and with popularity came deterioration. Paradoxically, the influence of the Barbizon painters arrived in Australia much later, through the studies abroad of Max Meld--rum, a Scottish born painter who still propogates the cause of this school with great vehemence.

Even later came the influence of the old masters. It came through the work of George Lambert, an accomplished draftsman who achieved a reputation at the Royal Academy and brought back the influence of his English contemporaries together with a penchant for painting in the grand manner.

The effect of these aesthetic anachronisms was greatly modified when the National Gallery of Melbourne commenced the administration of a magnificent bequest donated by the late Alfred Felton which made the institution one of the richest privately endowed galleries in the world. The subsequent collection soon became the most important in the Southern hemisphere, the general activi--ies of the gallery expanded and provided the student with real

opportunities for study.

Meanwhile, influences from current movements in Europe continued to flow into Australia. They came with returning students, recipients of travelling scholarships, with emigré artists, through reproductions, and, very occasionally, through travelling exhibitions.

The belated arrival of non-representational art, in the late twenties, evoked much hostility from the public, and the artists, always sensitive to an infringement of their right to express themselves freely, formed themselves into societies for the propogation of contemporary thought, and fought back.

Then a very curious event occurred. The Archibald prize for portraiture, the richest annual art award in the Commonwealth, was awarded to William Dobell for the portrait of a fellow artist named Joshua Smith. Dobell, whose painting reflected, technically, the combined influences of Rembrandt, Hogarth and Renoir, had an unusual talent for characterisation. He saw this particular subject as an extremely 'ordinary' man, and he made this 'ordinariness' the subject of his painting. The award caused a furore and a group of reactionary painters, who had hithertoo regarded the Archibald prize as exclusively theirs, brought legal action to restrain the judges from awarding the prize money, on the grounds that the successful work was not a portrait at all but a caricature.

Thus it became the business of a court of law, to decide a question of aesthetics. The affair caused a terrific stir in art circles and had the effect of bringing a new art consciousness to the people. The case lasted for two years, and, as in the Whistler v Ruskin case, much irrelevant evidence was submitted. In the end it was decided that whether Dobells work was a portrait or a caricature a court of law was not authorised to

upset the decision of the judges appointed. So Dobell retained his prize and became more famous than a Prime Minister.

The avante guard had rallied round him as one man and in the eyes of the reactionary section of the public he became the symbol of the ultra modern in Australian art, a position that he occupied with some discomfort. He was a rallying point, as Manet had been a rallying point to the early impressionists. . . . .

At the present time the general tendency of contemporary art expression in Australia is towards romanticism, expressionism and social realism rather than abstraction. The terms may be loosely applied in that order. The strongest and most active art groups are centred in Sydney and Melbourne and in each of these cities young artists are constantly experimenting in seeking new ways of expressing the problems of our time. There is considerable influence from the school of Paris, from the contemporary English school, and from the modern Mexicans.

Important factors in shaping these trends have been : the activities of the Melbourne National gallery, the publications of Ure Smith Pty Ltd in Sydney, the high tone of the art criticism in the same city, the interest stimulated by the Dobell case, and the publication of a new art periodical, 'The Australian Artist ", in Melbourne. . . . . .

The economic status of the Australian artist is comparatively good and his climate and living conditions are ideal. One feels that before long he will be standing on his own feet. For he is becoming increasingly aware of the potentialities of his own country, of the rich material of its terrain and of its primitive past.

It is not unduly optimistic to say that he is an eager and intelligent child, full of unexploited resources, promising to add a strong and vibrant note, to the art of the New World.

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