

for Mr. Denys Sutton

from Walter Pach

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To my thinking, one resolution by an international congress of art critics imposes itself beyond all others, and the need for it becomes the more glaringly evident the more we consider the record of critics in the last hundred or hundred and fifty years.

I arraign them before their own tribunal for having been followers of opinion, where they should have been leaders of opinion. Splendid exceptions to this rule, like Baudelaire and Théophile Sylvestre, still leave it a rule. Today, when Picasso has imposed himself on the world through his forty years of influence on artists, collectors and museums, the flow of books about him is unceasing. ~~What is the point?~~ How many ~~books were produced at the time when he needed such defending---or rather when the public needed to have his work called to its attention?~~ books were defending Picasso at the time when he needed such defending---or rather when the public needed to have his work called to its attention?

That is the crux of the matter. The great artist nearly always finds a certain number of people to appreciate him and, somehow or other, he manages to live and go on with his work. He asks but little more. Renoir, in his old age, when he could sell everything he touched, continued to live in almost as simple a way as he did in the years of his poverty. Now as to these years, the important point is not that he suffered from them: I strongly doubt that he did, and the joyous ^{real} quality of his works offers ample reason for such an idea. The point is that the world paid a heavy price for ignoring him during that time. Had the critics directed public interest to his great art---and it was great from the beginning---the world would not have been filling its

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museums and corrupting its mind with the work of those men who, in the 1870s, '80s and '90s were ^{bringing forth} ~~producing~~ some of the worst painting and sculpture ever produced by human beings.

It is right, it is valuable that we should now be heaping up a whole literature on Renoir, on Cézanne, on Picasso. I should be the last to begrudge the great men any single page of print that the critics devote to them. But it is so easy to say "a few kind words for Shakespeare!" And it is so easy to fool oneself with the idea that continued homage to the masters is any proof of critical acumen. The best way to show that is by such writing about contemporaries as would offset that kind of poverty which we always have with us and which is called official art. How deplorably it dominates the exhibitions sent out, every so often, to foreign countries! And that is almost as true today as in the past. Thus there was provoked the remark attributed by a Mexican critic to a lady who was visiting an American exhibition in Mexico City. The visitor (I hope an imaginary one) was supposed to have asked "Are all these pictures by one painter?" However little respect I had for certain things in that show, I know that the comment was an exaggeration, ^{even more than that,} But suppose it had ~~not~~ been ~~so~~ suppose, indeed, that the individuality of each artist had been so marked as to render the question completely absurd instead of only partially absurd. The exhibition would still have been unjust to American art---and to the public striving to understand that art---because of the absence of ^{practically} all the most significant men at work in the United States.

^{say 'practically all'}
I ~~make only one exception as to that statement.~~ It is because the show did represent the work of John Sloan [^] who was over seventy

years old at the time. Even so, the picture by him included in the show dated back some thirty years---to a time when he had not given so much as a hint of the important ideas he has been developing since he has fought his way to the clearer understanding of modern art, and all art, which has permitted him to do the vastly better painting he has ^{been producing} ~~made~~ for the last decade or two. But the ^{other} ~~Americans~~ ~~who would have given to the show sent to Mexico a note of real achievement were not included at all---and our neighbors to the South were left free to think of the Yankee as producing only the school of Coca Cola, as I called it when lecturing in Mexico, where the epithet was applauded.~~ My hearers had disliked the posters by which the big American company had sold them its product, and they were genuinely pleased when a man from the North expressed his contempt for what they had been calling "arte gringo". And with their tradition of 2000 years of a really American art, they were aware that our official painting in that exhibition was as unworthy of the genius of the continent as were the Coca Cola girls on the bill boards.

But were the critics of the American papers as prompt to seize that truth as was the general public of Mexico? I affirm that they were not. Otherwise they would have protested each time that a picture by one of our mediocrities was placed in a museum. Or, if I am here considering the negative side of the matter, and may be reminded again that "the poor are always with us", I charge American critics with incompetence for not rendering their public conscious of the value of George Constant, A. S. Baylinson, M. A. Tricca and the

later work of John Sloan. Had they done so, we should not have our present record, which includes the fact that the Museum of Modern Art in New York has never ^{acquired - or indeed even exhibited} ~~added~~ a single one of the works I have just mentioned, ^{the} things which, when I have shown them to French and other foreign artists able to judge, have given them a far higher idea of American painting than they had before.

If I am right in my analysis of conditions at home, I can well imagine that similar reasoning applies to conditions in Europe. When American students came to Paris in the past, they gravitated, almost without exception, to the official painters so generally supported by the art critics. Many and many an artist, reviewing his life at a later time, has realized, and with bitterness, what a price he paid for his ignorance and the bad advice he received.

How much has the situation improved today? It has improved, to be sure, and the general level of the museums is far better than what we knew forty or fifty years ago. But if Paris (and other capitals) know the art of the recent masters, how confident may the present-day visitor be that he is seeing the essential effort ^{now} ~~being~~ being made, ^{that of} ~~by~~ the men who are to represent the true succession of the recent masters? Are the current exhibitions, and even the museums showing us such work, or are they leading us to the blind alley, the cul de sac, always prepared for those who think to follow ^{in a straight line} ~~the straight line~~ from the masters, not realizing that the very condition for arriving at a true art, in this changing world, is by turning the corner---and finding oneself once more in the line of the classics.

Nothing is harder than to follow that line at a given moment
---when it is still overgrown by weeds. But that is the chief reason
for existence of the critic. And so, far more than matters of organi-
zation, publication, and the like, I believe it is the business of
this Congress to recall to its members the reasons for humility which
criticism has, with regard to its past, and the magnificence of its
opportunity as regards the future.

Walter Paek