

Sweeney
Mercredi

Mr. President, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to speak very briefly on a point in the general conception of the International Association of Art Critics which to me, as a delegate of the United States of America, appears the most important for the lasting efficacy of this organization.

I refer to the insistence on the fact that the Association should be regarded as a group of "individuals" - "personalities", not representatives of different nations, or different parties. We have seen in certain meetings of this session - particularly the most intimate, closed ones - the tendency of national interests to obtrude themselves. In the world of art, once a national interest succeeds in getting a foot in the door, the liberty of the artist, or writer is potentially menaced. This, I regret to have to confess, is a fact that we writers in the U.S.A. within the past year, in particular have become painfully aware.

At last year's Congress, in a brief sketch of the state of painting and sculpture in the United States, I pointed out the progress towards a more independent, venturesome and personal expression made by the younger American artists during the war years. The United States had been cut off from the distractions of a wide variety of foreign influences. After some time, however, we had the good fortune to play host in several leading European artists throughout that period. And the younger generation of painters and sculptors had the opportunity to become familiar with the work and the work-approach of these artists through daily and informal observation. In emulation of the plastic explorations of their guests these younger Americans soon began to find their own way into new fields. The result, as I pointed out last time, was an intenser and wider boldness than had ever been displayed by a similar group in American painting up to this time. And the character of their work was quite as unconventional, unacademic - even as drastically abstract as that of the most uncompromising of their contemporaries in Europe.

There was, however, a further consequence. The vitality and fertility of this development was enough to awaken alarm in certain quarters. And the reaction set almost at once. It was already evident a year ago June last in the hysterical response aroused from Congress by an Exhibition of Modern American paintings bought and circulated by the State Department. This exhibition was entitled Advancing American Art. It had been brought together at the request of several foreign governments whose citizens were genuinely curious to see what the United States had been producing in modern art. It was constituted of 79 pictures embracing, as the critic of the New York Times put it "extreme expressionism, fantasy, surrealism and abstraction." The exhibition had inspired a mud-slinging campaign by the Hearst press. Various conservative artist organizations promptly joined their support to

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the newspaper attacks. Finally, the campaign became so bitter that Secretary Marshall called a halt to exhibitions in Prague and Haith and ordered the pictures home.

A congressional investigation was called. The Assistant Secretary of State, William Benton, tried to explain the purpose of the exhibit and submitted evidence to the effect "that most of these artists were not only nationally known but also represented in our major Museums." - In fact, the entire group had been exhibited in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New-York before being sent abroad. When Mr. Benton wrote a letter to President Truman setting forth these facts, he received the following reply, as quoted in the press of June 4, 1947 :

"I do not pretend to be an artist or a judge of art, but I am of the opinion that so-called Modern Art is merely the vaporings of half-baked, lazy people. An artistic production is one that shows infinite ability for taking pains and if any of these so called modern paintings show any such infinite ability, I am very much mistaken. There are a great many American artists who still believe that the ability to make things look as they are is the first requisite of a great artist - they do not belong to the so called modern school. There is no art at all in connection with modernism, in my opinion."

While our Congress of last year was in session, these 79 paintings were put up by the Government Authorities for auction by sealed bids and sold as "War Surplus"!

And this attitude of official hostility to modern art has not diminished in the course of the year. Actually, it has taken a more definite political and ingoist color.

In the course of the past Spring, Representative Dondero of Michigan has made three lengthy speeches in Congress in which he has attacked not only the modern artists as political subversive factors but also the art writers and critics. He based his salutation of these letter on the fact that they have not condemned as bad art the art-work which he, Mr. Dondero, sees as politically subversive. He named many writers specifically - one, for example, who as he said "has written several booklets, especially that on the Spanish Communist artist, Picasso".

"This matter of favorable press for perverted art," the Congressional Record quotes him as having said "is to my mind a very serious matter indeed. For some reason, art critics seem to enjoy complete freedom from directional supervision. Many of them have gone overboard for Marxist art and have given aid and support to an enemy which is undermining the traditions of our academies. With many of them it has become the fashion to sneer at that which is long established and of high quality, or to ignore it completely and to give great space and laudalious comment to an influence which is principally destructive."

And further : "It is not my purpose to suggest that

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Letter

newspapers should clap censorship on their art critics, but I do not say that, if this condition of over emphasis and an attempt to glorify the vulgar, distorted and perverted has come about due to neglect and lack of proper supervision, then it is high time that some of our newspapers start cleaning house in the smaller compartments of their great organizations." } English

I bring these conditions of the American art climate before you primarily to stress the importance of maintaining the Congress attitude towards its members or "individuals" and the avoidance of national involvements. Again through an organization such as this, much can be effected towards the moral support of your colleagues in the United States and the amelioration of conditions there while things have not yet gone too far to be remediable. And finally, from the warning we have through this development in the United States of America, we critics may be prepared and ready to combat potential similar developments in ~~the~~ other parts of the world.

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