For Mr. Sweeney. Not proof-read

A REPORT

TO THE INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF ART CRITICS

ON THE MATERIAL AND PROFESSIONAL CONDITION

OF ARTISTS IN THE UNITED STATES

WITH MEASURES PROPOSED TO IMPROVE THEIR STATUS

By Elizabeth McCausland

1951

A REPORT ON ARTISTS IN THE UNITED STATES

THE INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF ART CRITICS has posed two major questions to its respective national sections.

1. The problem of the material and professional condition of the artists of the various member countries.
2. Measures which can be taken to improve their condition.

In regard to the United States, the questions are not easy to answer for two reasons, the lack of data collected by the fact-finding methods of the statistical sciences and the diversity of opinion which exists on both questions.

There is not exact information, for example, as to the number of professional artists at work in the United States today. The 1940 decennial census [totals for the 1950 census are not yet available] gives a total of over 60,000 artists and art teachers, with no breakdown into socalled fine artists, socalled commercial artists, and teachers of art. The latest edition of Who's Who in American Art, published in 1947, lists something more than 6,000 painters, sculptors and graphic artists who replied to the questionnaire sent out by the American Federation of Artists. Perhaps a reasonable working figure is that of about 25,000, the total of the mailing list which the Metropolitan Museum of Art circularizes for its annual exhibition of contemporary American

art. This list was collated from the membership lists of all the leading artists' organizations throughout the country and by assumption comprises the vast majority of practicing artists of recognized professional status.

There are no official government studies of artists' income as such, though the confidential income tax returns for the artists reporting taxable income would give a formal base for economic evaluation if they were available for consultation. If a personal reference may be permitted, the present writer has made several "pilot" studies of the subject, within the limits of time and finances. In 1945 a questionnaire was sent out under the auspices of the American Federation of Arts (see the reprint herewith) and the results were published in the January, 1946 issue of the Magazine of Art. From the sale of fine art painting and sculpture alone, the artists reporting averaged less than $100 a month income, while the women artists averaged less than $50 a month. Other questionnaires sent out in connection with Work for Artists (see the copy herewith), which was published in 1947, did not produce any substantial change in the economic picture. The study of alumni and alumnae of The Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art (see the copy herewith), Art Professions in the United States, published in 1950, was equally unsatisfactory. Economic data included in my Careers in the Arts (see the copy herewith), published also in 1950, corroborate the rather gloomy picture.

As would be logical, the graph of the artist's economic well-being has followed the general social surves of the period. The "boom" years of the 1920s produced considerable revenue for American artists, as the depression years of the 1930s produced great misery and vocational dislocation, alleviated to an extent by the socalled "made work" art programs of the Roosevelt New Deal. The war years of the first half of the 1940s paradoxically brought enhanced income and opportunity for artists in age groups outside of the military service ages. For persons of middle income brackets could not buy new automobiles, refrigerators or radios, and so became "new" collectors of art works. At this time industrial patronage also appeared on the scene, the great corporations allocating a part of their vastly expanded earnings to socalled "instutitional advertising" (that is, the advertising of their names rather than their products, most of which were off the market, being appropriated to military uses). The second half of the 1940s have been years of fluctuating reports, the annual auction sale totals going up and down but not reaching the "high" of 1929.

The year 1951 presents a picture of contradictory reports. Some art dealers report a new "low" in the sale of works by living artists, others say sales have never been so flourishing. The first years after the cessation of military hostilities in Europe and Japan sales were small because buyers were flocking to replenish consumer goods they could not buy during

the war years. If 1951 is good in dollar totals, this is not to say that it is good in real values. The purchasing power of the dollar today is about half what it was for the period of 1935-1939, according to the statistics of the United States' Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics, and only about two-thirds of what it was during the inflated '20s. A further factor to be considered in regard to the economic condition of the artist in our country is that with the new income tax legislation which goes into effect November 1, all brackets will find them with an increased burden of taxation. Much so called "supernumerary" income which might have been channeled into art as well as into furs, cars, and jewelry will now be absorbed by federal taxation.

It may seem a curious paradox that the United States, which has won, rightly or wrongly, the name of the richest country in the world, should show a picture of comparative austerity if not poverty, as far as its material support of the fine arts is concerned. This is not explained alone in terms of the relative newness of our culture or the habitual American attitude of cultural colonialism. There persist in American society cleavages of economic opportunity, as well as social. The sciences have proved of enormous material value to a nation which grown up almost entirely within the period of technological, industrial civilization. The arts have not been able to justify themselves as clearly in material terms. Moreover the tradition on which our first artists had to depend was an imported tradition, as our legal,

political and social institutions also necessarily were, In fact we have had few national leaders who were men of cultivation as Jefferson was or men of so profound a humanity as to transcend his lack of cultural opportunities, as Lincoln was. Our Presidents and our Congresses have found it more profitable to vote for new post offices for their districts than to worry about a very small minority like the artists.

For over a century and a half the artists of the United States have sought to establish their social worth through organizations in which they participated first, in the Academy of Fine Arts, with the sponsorship from above of benevolently minded patrons, and then in the National Academy of Design, as an automomous group of practicing professionals. [We may add here that in these titles the word "academy" does not connote official status. The organizations were private groups.] Throhghout the nineteenth century there were changes as new aesthetic forces developed. Today there are a dozen or more organizations of national scope, ranging from the National Academy on the aesthetic right to such organizations as the Abstract Artists and the Federation of Modern Painters and Sculptors on the aesthetic left. There are also a number of "splinter" groups of aesthetic cliques, which usually have a short life. A feature of the national scene, which may be unique with the United States, is the existence of local and community groups, usually called "guilds" or "leagues" which are confined for all practical effect to

their own community. In the national professional organizations the basis of organization is often a craft basis, as water color painters, mural painters, sculptors, etchers, and the like, or the basis of a social discrimination, as "women artists". During the war, organizations of all aesthetic shades of opinion coordinated their programs in Artists for Victory.

During the 1930s two organizations were active in support of economic and social programs, the Artists Union and the American Artists Congress. The former sought to establish trade union standards and conditions of work for artists, a goal which was possible of attainment as long as there was general employment of artists on a job location in a given shop and with a contractual employer-employee relation. At the height of the Works Progress Administration Federal Art Project almost ten thousand painters, sculptors, art teachers, photographers, graphic artists and allied personnel were on its roll, about half of them in New York City, where the concentration of the artist population of the United States has always been high, as one infers the concentration of the artist population of France has been in Paris. With the near approach of World War II, the New Deal programs were truncated and finally terminated. This organization no longer had art workers to organize in a specific shop and so came to an end, a historical necessity.

The American Artists Congress was an organization of "artists of standing", that is, arrivés, who sought to oppose their cultural forces to the rise of fascism in the 1930s. An early objective of the group was to persuade museums to pay rental for works of art by living American artists. Some

powerful museums opposed the rental fee policy, and it was never widely accepted, though the Whitney Museum of American Art met the standard by allocating a substantial sum each year for the purchase of contemporary American paintings, water colors, drawings, and sculpture. This organization also was a casualty of the war.

In the period after 1945 artists once more began to consider how they could best work for the improvement of their economic condition. Thus a new organization emerged in 1947, the Artists Equity Association. Other arts had organized similar groups earlier, such as Actors Equity and The Authors Guild. The former had waged a long and successful campaign for economic guarantees for theatrical workers. The latter in recent years has been notably successful in winning legal victories for writers, such as a Supreme Court Decision supporting the right of an author to pro-rate income from a book over three years, Again in 1951 The Authors Guild was successful in bringing about the deletion from the new income tax law of a clause which would have required publishers to the tax from royalties - a most uncertain and variable source of income for the writer. This would have worked a serious injustice on writers as self-employed professionals whose income fluctuate but whose deductible professional expenses remain constant. Social security benefits have also been defined. In such areas Artists Equity is still exploring the situation, but it is definitely oriented in these ways.

Since 1947 Artists Equity Association has obtained almost 2,000 members, in thirteen chapters through the country. A major area which has needed investigation has been the contractual relations between artist and art dealer. In the main the prevailing practice in the United States is for the artist to consign his work to a dealer, who works then on a commission basis. There is no standard about this practice, according to data collected by Artists Equity from a confidential questionnaire circulated to its membership. In general the commission is one-third of the sale price, though some dealers take half, in return performing commensurately greater services for the artist. Few dealers in the United States guarantee artists a regular monthly or yearly sum, and when they do, the sum is not likely to be large, according to present-day living costs here.

Artists Equity has been able to render legal services to its members up to the point where it becomes necessary to take a case into court, at which point the artist must assume financial responsibility for lawyer's fee, court fees, and the like. A large proportion of controversies are settled out of court, and to the artist's advantage.

The organization now seeks to launch out into broader fields. Its spearheading activity is the establishment of a welfare fund, whose purposes shall be to: 1) assist artists in need; 2) expand educational facilities in the fine arts; and 3) promote a better understanding of contemporary

American art through mediums of mass communication such as the newspaper, radio, television, motion pictures, and the like. In passing, one may add that dues are $12 a year.

The artists' organizations have not, however, been able to change the over-all social picture of the use and status of art in the United States. The social base for the arts is plainly a total entity, derived from the value which a culture can derive from this particular human activity. Patronage of one kind or another has always been the foundation on which the arts have builded. In turn, patronage comes from the function of art in a given society. In the bourgeois parliamentary democracies of the modern period (since, say, the beginning of the Industrial Revolution or the American and the French Revolutions) patronage hasnnecesarily been of a multiple nature, even as the power of the state has resided in multiple arms of gov_ernment rather than in the single person of the grand monarch of absolutist states. Just as the iconography of the visual arts in a democracy is still in a state of flux, so is the patronage.

In the United States in the past economic support has come primarily from private sources, namely, private collectors and privately endowed museums. The state as such has not been a generous patrons of the arts. There is to be sure, a clause in the legislation controlling the construction of public buildings which empowers the Procurement Division of the Treasury Department to spend 1 per cent of the

total appropriation for public buildings, such as post offices, court houses, custom houses, and other federal buildings, for embellishment and adornment with murals and architectural sculpture. During the 1930s this clause was carried out by the Section of Fine Arts. But the cessation of non-military building during the first half of the 1940s and the short supply of building materials since has not provided much income from this source.

Government at other levels, as state and municipal, has never provided appreciable revenue. A far-sighted director might urge that all state museums employ "state artists" as they regularly staff state geologists, state ornithologists, state botanists, and so forth; but the political administrations of the forty-eight states are not much more likely to culturally minded than the federal. Our great cities, with vast potentials of income from untaxed real estate, have been subject to the pressures of lobbies and have not used the social increment of rises in property values to underwrite a community program of social and cultural activities. Few cities finance their museums from public taxation, as public libraries and public schools are.

Dwindling patronage has been the characteristic of the first half of this century, and especially of the second quarter. The stock market crash of October, 1929, spelled the end, it would seem, of the old pattern of patronage. No longer would an American collector pay $750,000 for a Gainsborough. No longer would the modern Medici of the Morgans, the Fricks, the Altmans, the Huntingtons, the Baches, leave collections valued in the tens of millions of dollars.

A brief phenomenon of the early 1940s was the appearance of the industrial patrons before-mentioned. The Pepsi-Cola annual competition, the Encyclopedia Britannica collection, the Standard Oil Co. of New Jersey war reportage, the large collection assembled by International Business Machines, the war art program of Life magazine, the advertising campaigns of La Tausca Pearls and De Beers Diamonds, the "United Nations" series of advertisements of Container Corporation of America - these were some of the more highly publicized of the period. Today Pepsi-Cola is no more, and the Britannica collection has been dispersed. Less motive power is being put behind I.B.M. collecting, and Jersey Standard is contracting its program. Here too patronage is dwindling, or so it would seem.

In the museum world, the artist can find but cold comfort. More and more museum policy is crystallizing into the formula that the function of the museum is not to support contemporary American art by purchasing it but only to exhibit the best of contemporary achievement so that the buying public (if it exist) may be guided in its selections. The writer has sometimes called this attitude a "grade labelling" one just as the Department of Agriculture sets up standards for the grading of eggs, meat, and other foodstuffs. Supporters of the policy point out that museum funds for purchase are restricted. Almost no voice is raised, however, to suggest that American culture may have reached a

point in which public funds should be sought, as they already exist for public schools and public libraries. The proposal is greeted with the consternation that greeted the proposal made in 1820 by the New York Workingmen's Association that the state of New York contribute to the support of the school of the state. It has only been, also, about forty years since John Cotton Dana enunciated the concept of the public library as "the poor man's university". It may be another half century before museum direction understands that an historic change has taken place and that the era of private benefaction has ended.

In regard to the situation in 1951, it has been said (as stated above) that this is the best year the art market has known. This is a generalization without a great deal of content; for the totals contain much art work not by living artists. Further the statements are made on the basis of 1951 dollars, and not pro-rated. With rising food prices, rents, costs for clothing, and increasing taxes, it will not help an artist a great deal to sell twenty-five per cent more in 1951 than he sold in 1950.

To be sure there are intangible gains. First to be noted is the growing recognition for our national artists and art. The belated establishment by the Metropolitan Museum of Art of an American department to concern itself with the workof living artists as well as the work of American artists of the past is a real advance. The increased num-

ber of practicing artists teaching in our schools, colleges and universities is a healthy recognition that the practice of art can best be taught by those who practice professionally. The growth of programs for the exhibition of contemporary American art in museums throughout the country is also to be noted, as are the regional exhibitions which serve the function of encouraging younger and unrecognized artists to exhibit their work and so to mount the ladder to the major national exhibitions.

Such seems to be the general picture of the situation of artists in the United States today.

II

WHAT IS TO BE DONE to provide American artists with an organic base in society if at present they seem to lack such a base?

Two main opinions exist in regard to the question of government support of art. One is that it is the duty of the state (meaning in the context of the political structure of the United States, the federal government) to provide planned programs of employment for artists, as for all workers, as was envisioned in the socalled "Full Employment Bill" promulgated by Franklin D. Roosevelt before his death and enacted thereafter in a weakened form. The uncertainties of the years since 1945 have not seen this philosophy of planned public works to cushion economic recession in private industry put into effect.

A moderate opinion was voiced at the 1951 convention of

the American Federation of Arts, held in Philadelphia in June. Lloyd Goodrich, associate curator of the Whitney Museum of American Art and author of definitive biographies and monographs in the American field, advanced the thesis that the function of government is to aid and encourage rather than to support the artist.

A third opinion inclines to the laissez-faire attitude that the fittest will survive and that the best artists always come to the top. This position is taken by dealers who have been lucky enough to "corner" salable art-products and, also, by individuals who prefer not to recognize the inequalities and inequities which exist in many areas of life today.

One measure which has been urged for almost a century is the establishment in the federal government of a department of fine arts. Already the American National Theater and Academy has been making an oblique approach toward this goal. Students of society have suggested for some years that such a function might be included in a federal department of education. There was, also, a strong sentiment to broaden the scope of recently enacted legislation for a national scientific foundation to include the social studies and the humanities - an objective defeated, it would seem, by ideological rivalries among scientists.

An immediate measure, in order that the objective, factual realities may be assessed, would be to undertake a study of the economic condition of artists in the United States

today. The American Institute of Architects with the aid of a grant from one of our foundations, has been surveying the profession and practice of architecture. A similar study might well me made for socalled fine artists, as wellas for socalled commercial artists, cartoonists, illustrators, theater artists, related applied arts. At the same time, museum practice might be analyzed.

Such a basis of factual information would serve as a foundation for a realistic approach to the question of long-range proposals to improve the condition of the artist in the United States.

Elizabeth McCausland

Elizabeth McCausland

New York, N. Y. October 30, 1951