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Random Thoughts on Art

A famous American painter and inveigher against 'borrowed esthetic standards' reflects on Federal patronage of the arts.

By THOMAS HART BENTON

Not long ago I was given a homecoming celebration in my birthplace—Nasho, Mo. It was a considerable affair. One commentator said, "It was of the kind usually reserved for national heroes." Returning at night by train to Kansas City, I talked about what had happened with the reporters, photographers, lawyers, businessmen and others who had accompanied me. How was it that such a celebration should be given for an artist? Why should a small city in a far corner of Missouri take the work of a mere picture painter so seriously? Was there a new appreciation of un-economic creativity—artistic creativity—rising over the country? Were we entering a new period in American culture where concerns of the creative mind would be given the same respect as that traditionally accorded only to practical concerns?

A number of ideas were batted about. And then the inevitable question arose: Were President and Mrs. Kennedy riding a popular wave or were they setting one in motion with their attention to the arts and their apparent moves toward a national cultural policy? "What do you think," one reporter asked, "of White House parties for artistic people?"

I said: "I know little about them, but from what I have read they seem like typical dilettante affairs—good maybe for exhibiting the artists, but of doubtful good for art."
"Why not good for art? Isn't honoring artists good for art?"
"The best way to honor an artist," I replied, "is to put him to work. President Truman honored me ceremonially when I finished the mural in his library but he gave me the job of painting it first."
"But wouldn't you feel honored if you were invited to one of the White House parties?"
"Undoubtedly," I said, "but I wouldn't go if I could properly get out of it. I prefer creek bank and barroom society to the higher varieties, where there are likely to be too many over-cultivated attitudes for my taste."

My reporter friends picked up all this banter and it went over the country that people wrote me letters congratulating me "for showing up the phonies in the White House." There was even editorial comment in the same vein.

Now I don't want to be saddled with this partisan nonsense. There are no phonies in the White House. A dilettante attitude toward the arts may not be workman enough for my tastes, but that does not make it phony. One of the eternal appurtenances of power, in this country as in others, is a high society of fincely-dressed women and well-mannered gentlemen who stand around on appropriate occasions and exercise their wits. Why shouldn't they talk about the arts as well as the latest political scandal or the behavior of their associates? Our Presidents have always had such societie and I suspect the Kennedy one is more endurable than most.

The story of performing artists in the White House must surely have enlivened the atmosphere there. There is nothing phony about Casals' or Paderewski moving wherever it is heard. Nor was there anything phony about President Kennedy's giving Robert Frost a part in his inaugural ceremony. This was a great gesture toward an art which, for all its potency in the life of man, is generally practiced without public honor. The Kennedys may not be stimulating as much artistic activity as did the White House under the less esthetically inclined Franklin Roosevelt, but it has obvious ambitions along that line.

There is unquestionably a rising curiosity about the arts throughout the United States. It is as if our mechanical world, with its ever more strict disciplining of behavior, were beginning to wear on the soul and people were seeking some escape. All sorts of moves are being made to turn that new curiosity, into real appreciation and support of the arts. There are "friends of art," art associations, art schools, art appreciation courses and conducted museum tours all over the land. The Kennedy interest is by no means unique.

However, there is yet something unreal, highbrows and a little naive woven through most of this crusading. Its propaganda is almost wholly based on esthetic views utterly unfamiliar to general American experience. It is absurd to stick a Cezanne watercolor in the face of an average intelligent American citizen and expect him to find much in it. The same goes for a Braque or a Kandinsky pattern. While I admit that such works are proper acquisitions for a museum devoted to preserving a phase of art history, most Americans on seeing them will say: "If that's art, to hell with it."

Public attitudes toward the arts are indeed changing—but our borrowed esthetic standards must change also before we can hope for much public participation in support of artists.

The creative arts today are in a peculiar position. With the general exception of literature, their cultural connections are, for the most part, proceeding. The separation of visual art from any but the most skilled public usages, and thus from public interest, has proceeded steadily since the industrial revolution of the last century and played havoc with the visual artist's life. New mechanical methods of all sorts have knocked out his economic pro—those bread-and-butter trades where he learned his skills and on which his higher performances rested. He has been forced to retreat into a world apart where he has set up a compensatory pattern of very special values to live by. This is true everywhere—in Europe as well as America.

Even in France, where art maintained more public prestige than elsewhere as our cultures changed under the impact of mechanization, artists tended to con. (Continued on Page 47)
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On Art

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aggregate in closed areas, in esthetic Bohemias. Although 19th-century Impressionism kept a lively contact with French life, later schools tended to lose more and more of this cultural connection. By the first decade of the 20th-century, the art of Paris had become very largely a studio art playing to a studio audience.

Art itself, rather than observation of contemporary life, became increasingly the chief source of inspiration. Dominant tendencies were eclectic, inventive and theoretical. On the simple fact that harmonies and dissonances of line, color and shape exist independently — apart, that is, from associative meanings—a cult grew up whose tenets declared such meanings useless and even detrimental to art’s full development. “Progressive” art thus became a progression of “abstract,” non-associative patterns. And what remained of representation was “over- formalized.”

While some artists rebelled against the esthetics of the “School of Paris”—as in the revivals of subject painting in Mexico and the United States during the twenties and thirties—its influence is still strong. The “abstract expressionism” currently touted in our country is a direct offshoot. Although regarded by its devotees as an especially American contribution, this free-swinging art offers no change from esthetic attitudes which grew up in Paris and other European centers before the First World War. As it is completely devoid of associative content, it provides no American meanings. It is a kind of loose play with materials, in line with Kandinsky’s “improvisations” in the early days of abstract cultism.

The movement does have its native genius, however, in

KUDOS—"The best way to honor an artist is to put him to work."

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Men turn, women burn!

DOMANI fashions an after-five knit of Fantazio... the fantastic, new fabric that clings where it counts. The secret of its figure-beguiling fit? Textured ENKA nylon. This talented yarn gives a knit fluid ease and lasting shape—makes you the girl in view. Other Fantazio delights? Luxurious softness, a lustrous look, rich colors, shrugs off wrinkles. Sheath is trimmed with satin bubble-braid. Sizes 8 to 20, in theater black, opera red, dinner white. At $35, Bloomingdale's, New York City and branches.

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A knit fashion made of ENKA NYLON
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Jackson Pollock: One of my former students, he was blessed with a very acute sense of color and an instinctive flair for visual rhythms. His paint-slinging binges always ended attractively in decidedly original and agreeable decorative patterns—but completely without human significance, American or otherwise.

There is, of course, nothing reprehensible about pattern-making. It has had a place through all of art's history. Put to architectural or other decorative use, modern patterns might find a function. As arbitrary personal expressions, however, they appeal only to a very limited esoteric audience.

Nevertheless, as far apart as they are from publicly shared meanings and as separated as are their works from the ancient communicative functions of art, most American artists who have any talent can get by. With the dearth of "gold bond old masters," their productions, along with those of modern European artists, have become a kind of prestige commodity where difficulties of understanding are assets in playing on the gullibility of aspiring rich folks. Fortunately there are still enough of those to keep most matured artists at least moderately well fed, once they have learned to accommodate themselves to current fashions and sales methods.

Just the same, the outlook is far from satisfactory. Art is directed to a much too limited audience. The scope of our artistic activity has not begun as yet to compare, for instance, with that of Mexico. Art is used in her national life, while we keep it for museums and collectors. But in view of the potential artistic interest in our changing national attitudes—of which the Neosho honor given me was certainly an indication—it is time to take just the kind of thought the Kennedys are taking.

Underneath the White House party affairs, practical moves are shaping up for (Continued on Following Page)
Suddenly she isn't sleepy.

Gala reason: her first Trundle Bundle! Pajamas, sleepers, run-about blanket all in one—in Dyersburg fleece of 100% Acrilan® acrylic fiber. Snap-on boots, safety soles. Warm, washable, non-allergenic (our Kangaroo tag tells all). In pink, maize, or aqua. S, M, L, XL, $9.00. Also in attached foot style. Sleeper bags, $8.00. Lord & Taylor, New York; Hahne & Co., Newark; Malley Co., New Haven; B. Forman Co., Rochester.

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OCTOBER 28, 1962

11. What time was dinner served at a castle? How could you recognize a knight without seeing his face? Where were you likely to encounter the best long-bowmen? Rob Roy knows all the answers and he can also tell you a thing or two about shirts. His zip-front Rob Roy, for instance, is a 65% Dacron polyester 35% cotton blend that can take anything a knight can dish out. 4.00, in 6 to 20 sizes, at fine stores everywhere.

12. Crossbow has a trigger and was shot something like a rifle. This one, set weighed about 30 pounds and was used in close combat.

13. Pewter ewer and goblet in which wine was served to wash down a five courses of dinner that started off at 9 a.m. with venison, bear, peacock, cuckoo and eel-pie, and ended two hours later with pastry, sweetmeats and a variety of spices.

14. Suit of armor made of smooth metal plates was so heavy, if a knight was knocked off his horse someone had to put him back on his feet again.

P.S. For a free reprint of Rob Roy and the Knights and more information about the Middle Ages, send a self-addressed envelope to P. O. Box #1931, New York I, N. Y., care of ROB ROY SHIRTS FOR BOYS.

1. Silken banner displayed the coat of arms of a knight. The banner was a knight's best identification, and when he planted it outside his tent or room at night, everybody knew who was sleeping there.

2. Halberd. A combination battle-axe and spear used by foot soldiers and castle guards. The shaft of this particular one measures about 10 feet.

3. Crossbow has a trigger and was shot something like a rifle. This one, set weighed about 30 pounds and was used in close combat.

4. Shield called "heater-shaped" because in outline it resembles a flatiron.

5. The sword was a knight's favorite weapon. He thought so much of it that he gave it a name and hoped to keep it all his life.

6. Helmet with a hinged visor. Besides being extremely heavy, the only way to see out of one once the battle was on was through the eye slits.

7. Tankard and plate made of pewter. Dishes which the most important guests used at a dinner were either pewter, silver or even gold, according to the host's wealth.

8. A dagger was used in close combat to stab an unhorsed knight right between the plates of his armor.

9. A mace made completely of iron was used to smash and break up armor at close quarters.

10. Hauberk, or hooded shirt of mail, weighed about 30 pounds and was worn over thick padded underclothes.

11. Morgenstern or "morning star"—a flail with a wooden staff and a heavy spiked iron ball which was swung around on the end of a sturdy chain before it crashed down on its victim.

12. Longbow, used particularly by archers of England, and made of yew wood or hazel. The best bows were those that were exactly the same height as their owners.

13. Pewter ewer and goblet in which wine was served to wash down about five courses of dinner that started off at 9 a.m. with venison, bear, peacock, cuckoo and eel-pie, and ended two hours later with pastry, sweetmeats and a variety of spices.

14. Suit of armor made of smooth metal plates was so heavy, if a knight was knocked off his horse someone had to put him back on his feet again.

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NO AMATEURS —  
"What is to be feared is the mixing up of art with a bureaucratic system controlled by aesthetic egophiles."  

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of art are always likely to know more about it than its practitioners. But this knowledge is not of art coming into being, but of art already created. There is an intellectual kind of vested interest. The cultivated amateur often laboriously, has accumulated his knowledge and formed his judgments, is going to resist anything that seems to flout them. Why shouldn’t he? A man must stand by his convictions. When he has power to squelch other convictions without, as it were, any kind of public trial of their value, serious questions can arise because vital art forms coming into being are very likely to break with his established views.

WHEN the Roosevelt Administration set up its so-called "Treasury" projects, for example, the artists who were commissioned were asked to make no public statements except through the project’s controlling committees. This was obviously designed to keep dissenting artists from publicly testing their ideas against those of the committee men. But with the well-known touchiness of aesthetic committeemen, it was difficult to get anywhere, I couldn’t. So I went home to Missouri and painted a mural in the State Capitol where I had to battle only with state legislators—a less aesthetic but more manageable crew.

President Roosevelt’s artistic encouragements were squelched. This partly because his moves were tied so largely to relief programs and partly because the people who ran them were unconvinced of their political representatives. Mr. Roosevelt’s appointees were well-meaning but attached as they were to recently imported aesthetic views, they spoke a language too withdrawn from American life to get much support. They couldn’t even get my support—and I understood their language.

And this problem of aesthetic attitude and aesthetic speech is still with us. Too many of our artistic people still cling over-tenaciously to the apron strings of our mother cultures. They accept as valid only the last ideas fashionable abroad and only such art forms as are in harmony with them. In a way this is understandable, for ours is a continuation of European cultures which, since colonial times, have given us most of our patterns of thought. But just as we adjusted European political thinking and gave it a specifically American content, so must we readjust European aesthetic values if we want them to be effective in our national life.

It would be a great accomplishment if the Kennedy Administration could raise our creative arts to the level reached in Mexico in the twenties and the thirties. The example which Mexico then provided is preferable to any European one because the officially supported art which has survived in Europe is generally vapid and overconventionalized. Whatever may be thought of some of the political motives of Mexican art, they were expressed in a distinctly Mexican imagery. And it is this vital indigenous imagery, full of the pulse of life as Mexicans live it, which provides the true content of the Mexican "renaissance." Sustained official encouragement of our own artists to seek a like imagery for our own life, history and mythology might well give us an American "renaissance."

IT is more fashionable to buy a Parisian dress than to make one yourself. This is all right where it is fashion that counts. No harm in it. But art and fashion, in spite of appearances to the contrary, are but superficially related. Following the fashion is not likely to originate any very meaningful American art, nor is it going to provide the kind of thinking about art in general which the Kennedys will need to expedite their plans.