

Two Plain Janes Among the Pictures

*Impressions of an Art
Exhibition
by "KAY"*

WHAT a lot of paint, applied in so many different ways: smooth as silk or in blobs—although blobs are out at the moment. If only I hadn't run into Lin; and her first remark was, "Don't mention Cezanne to me or I'll scream." Lin shouts her comments so loud and you never know who's around.

The people at the exhibition interested me as well: a scholarly youth who peered and peered, leaning so close as almost to kiss the canvas. And, as if sight were not enough, he would rub an appraising finger along the brush work, for all the world like feeling the dough of a scone. Another, a bluff, upstanding man with bare feet and sandals moved serenely in his natural orbit.

They're certainly painting quite differently to-day and the old-timers are gradually being ousted. It's not fuzzy-wuzzy any longer, and they're painting less with their tear-ducts. The Maiden's Prayer and Evening-of-Life aspect is vanishing, and in its place, a tightness and wiriness as if one painted on tin with tin.

Those earlier artists probably had long hair and must have whistled and sung as they showered on their paint—but now it looks to me as if they anxiously consult their lexicons and produce each stroke with deadly intent. With all these new Isms, an artist can hardly stand still or he may petrify. Yet he must also "use his common," keep his head.

We began our tour in earnest. What's this, the big Bogy man in the corner with two predatory hands splayed out alarmingly? I headed Lin off but she spotted him and said out loud, "THE GOBLINS'LL GET YOU IF YOU DON'T WATCH OUT," and added more seriously, "It's the image of Mr. Moto."

"Mr. Moto?"

"You know—Peter Lorre. What a cheery-looking customer."

"Get away with you, it's quite an impressive thing."

We passed on, landscapes, seascapes—mostly indifferent, neither one thing nor the other. Then I saw a portrait that made me lose my caution. I nudged Lin and pointed: "Isn't she an acid drop?"

"Is she what!—and without an acid drop's compensations. Fancy digging her in the ribs—if she's got any. Have you ever seen anything like that walking round?"

I really wanted to see those paintings, so I was glad to move on by myself. A large winter scene in oils held me fast and made its neighbours suffer sudden eclipse. It was a winter scene in some foreign city, and the sombre, rich, dark colours of the buildings and streets, the adagio winter mood of it had been magically caught. What a masterpiece to have permanently in the gallery; why didn't "they" buy



it even if only to refute some of those fusty old things that were mouldering there?

On the same wall were two portraits by W. —. I knew them at once. W. is on the move, her work is original in a stark sort of way; but, like the others, she has hardened and—more fatal still—seems to be developing a formula.

"What's a formula?" Lin asked after I'd given an opinion on W.

"Well it's—it's a kind of recipe that painters find out and it saves them a lot of worrying out—a sort of brain saver."

"Yes, yes. Come here—here's a thing I like—the man might have ironed out his hat first but isn't it nice?"

"It sure is. I'll bet that's Leo Benseman. A nice bit of diagnosis. Twig the background rather like Brockhurst, and Brockhurst got the idea from the Renaissance painters."

"Awright! Don't get too history book," Lin warned, sidling off. "Once a teacher always a teacher." I owned up rather tartly, but she was out of earshot.

Good, I would get down to things in earnest and stop this fooling. I passed some rather dry landscapes (aha, who's been studying Rhona Hazard, especially her rock formations) and stood in front of a flower study. Phew!—what a whopper! Why paint flowers on such a giant scale?—as well paint Mount Cook on your thumb nail.

Here was a big canvas of a mountain peak, and no man could paint a mountain like this unless he understood and loved the mountains. It was not quite 1939 technique, but it had an essential rightness. Look at that sky, not like cotton wool or cardboard but full of depth and luminosity—isn't that the word they use?—and the incandescent look of snow was all there.

Rather like Darroch's dynamic mountain piece but here was more restraint, a deeper clarity and stillness, utterly impress—but here was Lin again, why wouldn't she leave me alone with my noble thoughts!

"Come over here—the funniest thing—arms and legs all over the place. Do come." Of course I had to.

"Now what are you getting excited for?" I said. "It's abstract, but why shouldn't it be if it wants to—?"

"But I wouldn't like to live with that."

"Makes you think. That's why. Can't you see with half an eye it's been well thought out and put together."

"All the same, I'd hate to wake up in the morning and see that."

"No danger of that—costs too much. Now look here, Lin, you understand music, you ought to be able to get this. It's built up the same way, just

like music. I think it's a jolly good piece of construction. You liked those things at the door—well, this is something the same idea."

"What idea? It's not the kind of things I'm used to seeing. I like things I just see around me. It's only natural; most people do."

"Go on, what's your imagination for? Feast your eyes on this thing by John Weeks. It's a Mozart."

"It's not Mozart, it's more like a Debussy."

"You're right, Lin. Go up one. It's a Debussy all right. You're getting the idea. Just for fun let's just think these pictures are musical instruments or music. What would Number — be?"

"A flute, dead on the note, not very loud. I give you one. Number —?"

"Not so easy. A mouth organ?"

"Don't be funny, I'd call it an accordion. Remember the winter one we saw in the first room—the big one—that would be 'cello."

"Oh no, that's a whole orchestra."

"Well, what about a harmonium for that wee chap in the corner?"

"Wheezy at that. We must find a Wurlitzer—"

We had found an interesting game and could have gone on all day, but it was closing time and they bundled us out.