

"PULL UP YOUR SOCKS, NEW ZEALAND"

An Australian's Appeal For Artists

(Written for "The Listener" by "BARC")

IT is no secret that practising artists in New Zealand are in rebellion against the Societies and Hanging Committees. But why? I think the malcontents are in error. There can be only one justifiable criticism of the selection committee of the New Zealand Academy, or of any other group that exhibits paintings to the public, and even that criticism, if resulting in reformation, would not necessarily heal sore feelings. It is reasonable to demand that the selection committee consist almost entirely of working painters.

But don't misunderstand me. If the selection committee were composed of practising painters, might not the chucked paintings be chucked faster and farther? To complain that works have been chucked is no proof that they should not have been.

I think the time approaches when the criterion for the inclusion of a painter's works without much question in a New Zealand Academy show will be that his work has received hanging space overseas. When an artist is in a position to assert that the rejected works have been hung in another Dominion or another country a selection committee might well feel that the "whites of their eyes" are in view of an armed foe. Short of that ammunition, and short of the complaint that the Academy selection committee is not composed seven-eighths of working artists, the recent clamour could be bluff.

A Row That Made History

In Australia there have been many rows among the painters. Some of the rows have made history. Here is a true story of a Boanerges in the world of art.

About 70 years ago there arrived in Melbourne from England one Julian Ashton, with his wife and a child. Somewhere over 20 years of age and trained in draughtsmanship and painting in a professional training school—professional!—in London, he came to Australia to make illustrations for an atlas. That job

finished, he visited Sydney—it was summer—it is hardly ever anything else there—and The Harbour got him. He stayed, to make a living in Sydney. But he found drawing and painting in a deplorable state. The word draughtsmanship had never been heard. (In four years in New Zealand I have not heard it). Drawing from "the life" in those far days was from a model draped in a sheet, eyes cast to heaven and a lily in the hand. The students, dear old ladies and a grandpa or two, concentrated on the eyes and the lily! The advent of the red-haired Julian Ashton tore away the sheet, cast the lily to the dust bin, yanked the students to their feet in their teens before morticed easels on four legs—not three; caused the model, instead of accepting a cup of tea and "you must be so tired" every five minutes, to ascend a model stand, take a pose, and wearing only the traditional loin cloth, hold the pose without breathing for three-quarters-of-an-hour, followed by a quarter-of-an-hour rest, for two and a-half hours in the morning, and the same in the afternoon.

The Answer to Dissatisfaction

Fifty years (approximately) later on, Julian Ashton, bald of his blazing hair, his large freckles a little faded, his prestige considerable and his battles unceasing, banged, beguiled, besought, and blazed a Government (mark you, a Government) into providing an Art Student's Travelling Scholarship, tenable for three years at £250 a year, in an art school overseas. Every two years any person under 28 years of age who had resided in the State of New South Wales for five years, whatever his or her training, could compete for this.


This scholarship, plus the fact that all the training schools that grew up in Sydney were private enterprises and so had to be on their toes and at each other's throats, resulted in the standard of work going up and up and up while the public interest in the Scholarship competitors and exhibits grew and grew. The winning students returned from Europe, and gave tongue; taught, argued, complained; the tempo increasing until, with the Scholarship winner Dobell and his detractors and the resounding lawsuit which his education won for him, Sydney art reached its majority and the blessing of Chungking, which invited Dobell to China on a Goodwill Tour. In any case the pronouncement of the New South Wales law not only gave the former scholarship winner its blessing because in the main he was "an educated painter without a shadow of doubt," but also refused to allow the defeated opponents to reopen the case.

Which is a roundabout way of saying that a Government Art Student's Travelling Scholarship is the answer to New Zealand's dissatisfied exhibitors. The Archibald prize, which provoked the "affair Dobell," is a competition in portrait painting, and is open to New Zealand entrants. Well, we are now only six hours from Sydney with a following wind. Let this sovereign State haul up its artistic socks.

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suggested, that is of any real consequence. There are dances and trolley-rides for the young people, flirtations and telephone calls, arguments about the right amount of salt to put into tomato soup, celebrations at Hallowe'en and Christmas, and what looks like becoming a minor family tragedy when father announces that he has accepted a job which will mean that the family must move from St. Louis to New York. The dialogue is ideally suited to the occasion; not wise-cracking, but with a quiet sense of domestic fun, and flavoured with family jokes and those inconsequential conversations that go on in every household, and especially in those where there are young children. My only criticism is that the film is too long: well handled though it is, the narrative does not contain quite enough substance to be stretched to a two-hour length. Still, it is not too long by much.

"A SIGHT FOR SORE EYES!"



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