

# RETURN OF A WAR ARTIST

## Austin Deans Hopes He Can Stay At Home

WHEN Austin Deans, the Canterbury artist who was a prisoner of war in Greece, Poland, and Germany, passed through Wellington the other day after a trip round the North Island on his rail warrant, it was the first opportunity *The Listener* had had to talk to him about his work, and his experience as an artist in captivity.

Before anything else he wanted to talk about the help he had received, from New Zealand and from the Red Cross, Y.M.C.A., and International Student Service that had enabled him to get colours, brushes, and books while he was a prisoner. Through the I.S.S. he had received about a third of all the books he had asked for, which was good going; they were mostly French and German productions, but there were some English ones too. With these, he made good use of his time studying European art—old masters and modern works—and tried to find out what are the continuing factors that link the best work of different periods.

"I began to discover that there are certain constants which recur in the greatest work, and I decided that photographic representation, or the lack of it, doesn't in itself decide whether a painting is good or bad," he said.

### Books Abandoned

Mr. Deans had to leave behind the collection of books he accumulated in captivity. That went hard with him because it was a better collection than any he could have made in New Zealand over the same period. But not all the paintings he did in captivity were lost. A Y.M.C.A. official managed to get some to England for him, secretly. Inquiries were still being made in Geneva to see where they had got to when Mr. Deans received word that they had reached London. Some eventually came to New Zealand and were exhibited here. About 200 drawings and paintings remain, somewhere in Austria.

### Compromise May be Needed

Now he hopes to stay in New Zealand and paint here. He has some misgivings—he wonders whether he will be able to develop his work along the lines he wants it to go and at the same time make a living sufficient to keep him here, where he wants to paint. At present he is toying with the idea of a compromise—doing seasonal work on the land part of the year, and painting at other times. The idea of doing some high-country mustering appeals to him, or perhaps it will be fruit-picking.



"In the Western Desert": A self-portrait by Austin Deans

When we asked him what he feels about what he has seen of New Zealand painting since he came back last year, Mr. Deans said he was interested to see a controversy going on at the moment. He feels we need very much to see some exhibitions of contemporary overseas work, and to know a bit more about the kind of people who produce great art—not only now but in the past.

"Very few people I've met seem to have had any contact with real artists, or any idea of what it was that made great art great—there seems to be a lot of ignorance of the history of art and the character of the 'Old Masters.' I don't say dogmatically that there's no one at all who understands—but it's difficult for us."

"Assuming we can't hope to get originals of really good stuff out here for exhibition, are there good prints available these days?" we asked.

"Unfortunately I don't think there are many at present. But the exhibition of even small collections would be getting us somewhere."

### Market for Modernists

"Is there a market in England at present for the work of what we might call the non-conforming artists? Do the modernists sell?"

"Yes, they do. There's a terrific market for the Picassoesque and the Gauguinesque, and naturally there are a lot of bloodsuckers on that market too. It's become a great racket. You see what you think is a pretty poor Picasso in a gallery and you find that it's by someone you've never heard of. The rich patron stunt is a popular one too. Young students persuade people that they are the young geniuses of to-morrow. But I met some really good ones in England who are right outside all that. Roy De Mestre is one—I think he's really first-class, and he's very sincere. He's an Australian, living in London."

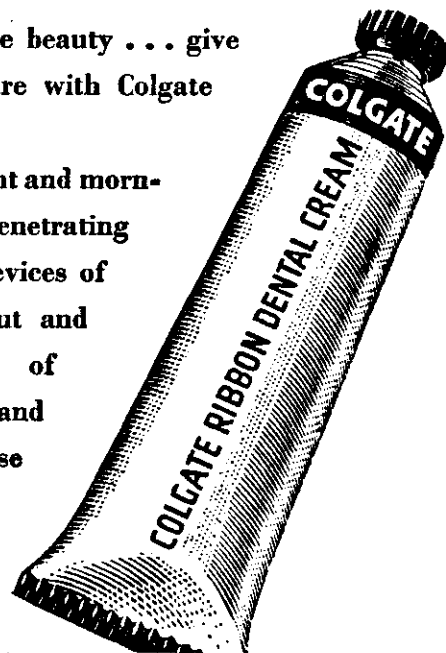
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