

ART — I GIVE IT UP

(Written for "The Listener" by T. D. H. HALL)

I CAME late to the appreciation of pictorial art. It was a valued reward of my soldiering in the First World War. New Zealand provided few opportunities for first-hand study. Of the other arts, I was little further advanced in music but I was susceptible to melody and rhythm and had a hearty desire to sing. I was, however, early fascinated by words, and loved to note in the masters those apt for the thought, singing in quality and rhythmically arranged. My chief pleasure in any work of art is the sense of kinship it gives me with the "maker." I believe in the communion of saints and I like to think that my joy in my masters has its counterpart in their awareness of their disciple whose apprehension they awakened.

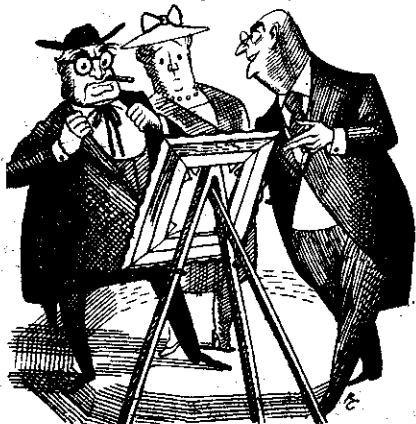
I was trained in logic and the law. I have drafted some of our statute law, prosaic stuff but requiring exactness. I have had to tear from departmental recommendations for Bills any fallacies lurking in them.

I could recognise from contacts and scraps of conversation the American end of a Paris liaison, designed to unload works of art by the latest genius on a class of American making money easily and thinking to acquire culture in the same stride. "Remember Monet and the rest." "Rembrandt was not appreciated in his day." "Buy now." These were the almost whispered admonitions to a likely purchaser.

I came across also the strong American reaction against the domination of their art by foreign influences, but I was not so sure that some of the protagonists cared for glory.

THE power of the press was also manifest. The relief given to unemployed artists by finding them work in their own specialities and not with pick and shovel was much publicised. It was sound enough and possible in a big country but to find genius amongst them would be a great Party scoop. The publicists found it. At the Museum of Art of a great city I saw one masterpiece and travelled through the shuddering length of its fourteen feet.

And I saw in America some of the greatest masterpieces of all times displayed in magnificent buildings with a lavishness and skill beyond imagining. I met courteous and learned directors and their assistants, proud of their collections and fulfilling with considerable success their aim of making them available to the widest possible public.



"The American end of a Paris liaison"

AS in literature the germ of the romantic may be found in an episode in the classic, and a description in the romantic may point the way to the bizarre, the mysterious and the realistic, so in the great galleries I was able to see a little of the development and of the relationships which make for an essential continuity in art. It was a fascinating if bewildering pageantry to a newcomer. An influence was turned by genius to something new and arresting. Insight and a new technique could make the leap across the centuries from one masterpiece to another drawing largely from it. There were, too, eccentricities and experimentation which might be turned by the novelty-monger into banality.

I do not believe that genius is necessarily found in the near lunatic and the licentious, or that poverty is an infallible guide to the quality or even the integrity of an artist. I was taught that the head should check up on the heart but I mistrust this late flowering of intellectual approach to art. The fully endorsed choice of Virgil by T. S. Eliot

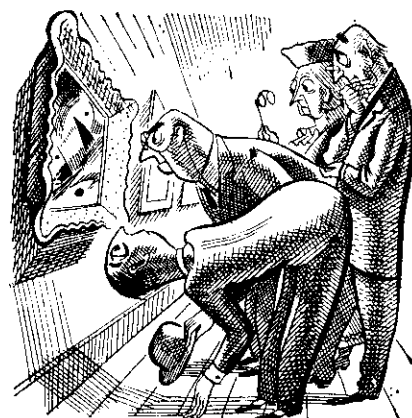


"She uses colour emotionally"

as the only classic may be too exclusive but I mistrust this late flowering of genius, even in New Zealand. May it be the swarming of flies above carrion?

I OWN a water-colour by Frances Hodgkins dating probably from the late twenties. It is a broadly treated study of sunlit buildings and trees viewed from the dark interior of a barn and shows magnificent technique. Whatever the ultimate judgment on her later painting she will remain perhaps the greatest woman painter we have produced. I accept without reserve the testimony of the late Miss D. K. Richmond, her fellow-student and one-time companion in France, as to her artistic integrity, but my water-colour marks for me the point of departure from understanding of and acquiescence in any later work that I have seen.

She has had a retrospective exhibition in London recently and I have been shown the catalogue and some of the criticism. I was eager for instruction. Eric Newton, who seems to be someone, wrote a foreword. "Almost everything that counts in Frances Hodgkins is beyond analysis, is a mystery beyond the reach of words." A bad start for a learner. "She thought in terms of colour." "Form and pattern could not exist for her except in terms of colour." "Her system of colour vision is Venetian, the flavour of it is not. That



"A mystery beyond the reach of words"

is where her genius lies." That is a piling up of pregnant words capable of a vague suggestion but as incapable of explaining and instructing as a nonsense rhyme. "She has had to evolve almost a new language. Until one has used it consistently and copiously for 20 years no one understands it except oneself." God ha' mercy! And I am over sixty. El Greco was not so exacting. "A lyrical painter, her works are more like songs than symphonies." "Her strange discoveries snatched from the muddle of visual experience but never logically built up of its elements puts her in the company of poets like Donne or Herrick." That does not explain the paintings to one who likes his Herrick and Donne. To take from a muddle but not to build up the elements logically is beyond me. That is not the same as a poet's coherent expression of different and contrary moods. "She can juggle with colour orchestrally." To apply directly to a visual art the terms native to one which carries its message through the ear seems to me to result in vagueness and unreality. If I might apply an illustration from the orchestra by way of analogy I would say some of her pictures and of those of other moderns are like the tuning up of an orchestra. Techniques developed in the representational field of nature are applied to paper or canvas haphazardly. They sometimes achieve harmony but are not applied to their natural purpose of interpreting a coherent work. Of course there was a Shah of Persia who preferred the tuning up to the piece on the programme—a pioneer of criticism.

THERE was also a long review in the BBC Listener by Myfanwy Piper, the reading of which was a humbling experience. I could only follow the biographical details. Miss Hodgkins painted in Morocco "a few comparatively conventional water-colours. These experiences gave point to the fauve practice and the fauve practice gave them point." Surely not a suggestion that she is a female Tarzan. A gouache of a farmyard "is like something dropped from the skies with no past and no future." Shades of Mormon! "A long brush stroke of cobalt blue is stridently mournful." "She does not use colour decoratively or descriptively, but emotionally." It will be an economy when we can convey sympathy by wearing a blue tie. This is a new language indeed, but of an esoteric mystery not of common speech. After most bewildering changes of style and viewpoints and use of material, all somehow linked, Miss Hodgkins, we are told, has abandoned all her jugs, bottles, eggs, etc. She no longer builds her picture, but finds it

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