

The Artist and His Dinner-Pail

IT is widely recognised that even artists must live, and this is what gives pause to otherwise proud parents when their offspring develop a talent for drawing. The only safe and reputable employment in New Zealand for one who has an art training is to train other people for art. And so we have the curious spectacle of artists teaching people to become artists so that they can teach people to become artists so that they can teach . . . etc.

The New Zealand painters who support themselves entirely on the sale of their work without benefit of teaching or private income, can probably be counted on the fingers of one hand. That need not worry us. There is nothing to prevent anyone who must paint from painting. Of three interesting

Written for "The Listener"
by HOWARD WADMAN

By Public Design I mean those arts which give grace to cities, which surround everyday life with objects of good form and colour, which enrich the theatre with the proper setting of plays and ballet.

These reflections are prompted by an exhibition in Wellington of Design for the Theatre by Sam Williams. Mr. Williams began his training at the Elam School of Art in Auckland, and skillfully escaped a pedagogic destiny by going to the Royal College of Art at Kensington, taking a travelling scholarship and plunging into stage design at the Old Vic, the Maddermarket, and other famous English theatres.



This scene from T. S. Eliot's "Murder in the Cathedral" was photographed during a rehearsal of the play in St. Paul's Pro-Cathedral, Wellington. The central figure in the group—Thomas Becket—is played by Sam Williams, who designed the costumes for the production. The artist's sketch of the Knights (below, right) may be compared with the actual costumes worn in the scene above

painters I know, one packs apples in a remote corner of Nelson province, another takes those embarrassing candid camera shots of you as you walk the streets of Wellington, while the third lives by his painting and is in consequence very poor. But as he inhabits one of this lovely land's loveliest places and is, unlike most of us, doing what he wants to do, it might be maintained that he has his reward. When our Rembrandt is born, no doubt he will know how to take care of himself.

Art is More Than Painting

But painting is not the whole of art. The painting of "easel" pictures has gathered a prestige above all other art activity which is difficult to justify. No doubt the greatest artists must speak to us through works that serve no other purpose than to report their intuitions of ultimate truth, but most of the paintings produced among us have more modest aims. We should be privately poorer without them, but no poorer than we are socially by the almost total neglect of Public Design.

What Mr. Williams knows (and apparently no one else in this country) is not only the history of costume, and how to make dyed hessian look like cloth of gold, but how to mount a play so as to underline the dramatist's intention. We recently had in Wellington a very pretty presentation of *The Barretts of Wimpole Street*. So sweet were the furnishings and so gay the costumes that it looked more like Barrie, and there was nothing left of Rudolf Besier's grim nonconformist family. The newspapers and the public applauded because they knew no better. It will be good for our drama and good for Sam Williams when his skill is widely used in our theatre.

Not that I am worried about Mr. Williams's dinner-pail. He gets along very nicely as a commercial artist (a very good one) whose work is much used by Government departments, but it is nevertheless a partial waste of a unique talent.

Those who practise Public Design need more than wages, they need a patron who will use their work. We

may, for all we know, have some sculptors among us, but as we seem to have no use for sculpture they must waste their sweetness on our desert air. I remember gathering the impression in Copenhagen that many of the art works which embellish that capital were paid for by the Carlsberg Brewery. That seems a good idea. Let our own capital city mark these years of peace and prosperity by cutting a magnificent boulevard from the Carillon down to the sea. Let it have gardens down the centre, punctuated with sculpture on which small plaques will record, for example, "commissioned by Blank's Breweries" or "given to the people of New Zealand by ABC Chocolates." Good publicity and good civics—provided always that it is good sculpture.

It is no extravagant dream that Big Business should patronise the arts. In Chicago there has just died the remarkable artist Moholy-Nagy, who founded, with Walter Gropius, the famous Bauhaus in Weimar—a centre of radical design in pre-Hitler Germany. With the coming of Nazism the Bauhaus professors went to America and Nagy was invited to set up an Institute of Design in Chicago. Here he continued his penetrating researches into the relationships of shapes, colours, materials, and our visual reaction to them. It was the most advanced art workshop in the world—and it was paid for by United Air Lines, the Marshall Field department store, the Container Corporation, and the mail-order house of Sears Roebuck.

Or to take an example nearer our spiritual home, there is the case of the London Passenger Transport Board, more usually known as "the Underground." Every activity and property of this huge organisation shows the hand of a first-rate designer, from the typography of its time-tables to the upholstery of its tube train carriages. This is due to the happy accident that the very quiet Yorkshireman who became general manager was also a man of exquisite taste. Frank Pick died in 1940, but his policy is permanent. He called in artists to design posters, and lettering, and ticket-machines, and stations. No man has added more to the visual pleasures of living in London than Frank Pick



Costume Design by Sam Williams for Orsino, Duke of Illyria ("Twelfth Night")

Where to Begin

So let us find the artists who can do the same thing for us. Our railways could be beautiful, our hotels could be gay, our theatres could be heart-moving and our cities could catch our breath with moments of grandeur, if we brought back art from its perpetual recording of landscape into the mainstream of life. Of course, the artists would have to learn new techniques, but we must assume they are in earnest and really want to serve beauty in their generation.

Until that happens, the artist will have some difficulty in filling his dinner-pail. Certainly we ought, all of us, to

(continued on next page)

