



JAMES BOSWELL

seriously. They've put on a show of the paintings, with photographs of them in their previous state, and X-ray photographs. There are cleaned, uncleaned, and partly-cleaned paintings showing together, just to let people see the contrast. Some of the older artists don't like what's been done. I suppose they're so used to seeing the paintings as they were."

"And what about the general public?"

"I don't think there's any doubt about their attitude. They're delighted. If you could see the crowds in the National Gallery you'd soon realise it. There are regular lectures, and you see people turning up with camp-stools and bundles of sandwiches. The Gallery is a much brighter and gayer place than it used to be. The thick coats of varnish have been making a mystery of these pictures for years past. The artists sometimes glazed the surfaces of their paintings, but they certainly didn't mean them to be looked at through a thick yellow fog."

"COMING back to contemporary painters," I said, "what sort of prices are they getting for their work?"

"If they're any good at all they have little or no difficulty in selling pictures. A young painter will get, say, from 25 to 40 guineas for a medium-sized oil. Well-established modern painters get from 70 to 250 guineas. And, of course, the leading Academicians collect more than that—sometimes up to 1,000 guineas. A first-class modern painter such as Matthew Smith will sell a picture for 250 to 300 guineas."

"Who buys the Academy paintings at such prices?" I asked. "For example, those pictures of racehorses that get shown year after year?"

"Well," said Boswell with a smile, "wealthy bookmakers haven't much else to spend their money on, you know."

"Are there any really good young painters coming on in England?"

"There's one who is, I think, outstanding—Adrian Ryan, who is 27. On the work he's done, he should go very far indeed. Of course, there's a fairly big group of youngish painters whose reputations are firmly established—Moore, Sutherland, Piper, Colquhoun, Francis Bacon, Keith Vaughan, Michael Ayrtton and John Linton, for instance. There's a great deal of fine work being done in

England at the present time. There's been a remarkable revival of the English tradition. Twenty years ago we were completely overshadowed by the French. Not so now. It's very heartening."

I WALKED round the Auckland Society of Arts current exhibition with Boswell, and afterwards pressed him to tell me what he thought of New Zealand painting.

"I wouldn't dream of saying anything about New Zealand painting in general without seeing a lot more of it," he said, "but if you want my first impressions of this show. . . . Well, there are a lot of things that are painted quite skillfully and intelligently. But one thing that strikes me is the very sombre colour of nearly all the paintings. It seems to me that in most cases the artists have just set out to copy the colour of the landscape, or whatever the subject may be. The best painters in all ages have never copied colour. Good painters *organise* colour—and that means, to quite an extent, inventing it, or imagining it. Whether it's Rubens or Constable or Picasso, the same thing holds good. Art isn't just an imitation of nature—it transcends nature, and becomes a thing in itself. That idea must be grasped hold of very firmly—that a painting is a *thing*, existing in its own right, and not just a representation of something else. The 'subject' of the picture isn't completely unimportant, but it provides only the starting-point, or a sort of 'springboard,' for the artist. It's what the artist does to the

subject, in terms of design, rhythm, texture and colour-organisation that really matters. Art must be more than just a plagiarising of nature. It's an activity of the imagination."

Boswell pointed to a water-colour drawing of some back-street houses by Elise Mourant. "That's one sort of thing New Zealand artists might devote more attention to," he remarked. "There's a stronger emphasis there, of course, on the subject itself. There's any amount of local material here in Auckland—old houses, and so on—that is a necessary part of any sort of New Zealand tradition. Both the architect and the painter should be interested in recording these things—and they'll have to move fairly fast, because these buildings will be pulled down soon or later. All the things that New Zealanders have made or built in the past are essential to the realisation of a New Zealand tradition. There's room for a great deal of documentary painting, I think. I suppose it's hard for local people to objectify their environment, and realise its importance as history, and to see its unique qualities. It's easier for me, coming back and looking at all this stuff afresh. Perhaps you don't realise that there are things about Auckland architecture that are not found anywhere else. They're not all necessarily good, from a purely aesthetic point of view, but they're all significant. In Australia they've woken up to this. There are some enthusiastic painters and photographers working on documentary records of Australia's past—and I'd like to see the same thing get under way here in New Zealand."

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