

WHAT DOES THE NEW ART MEAN?

M. T. WOOLLASTON

AS a painter geared to paint pictures and earn a living not by painting, I have neglected to develop the art of explaining my pictures too. I think others find themselves in similar difficulties, or else painting absorbs them quite, and so has arisen the habit painters have of leaving art critics and connoisseurs to talk to the public about their pictures. It is enough, surely, to paint them.

Most of the questions I think people would ask, who are perplexed about the new painting, would be such as these: "Why is it uncomfortable to us?", "Why is it distorted?" Or they might add those two together to make one: "Why is it ugly?"

And there is always that other: "Why is it not like nature?" This last is asked especially about portraits. Why are they so unflattering? (They often tell me I insult my wife in her portraits.)

To me the idea that nature and people are things that must be flattered in pictures is all wrong. I was brought up in that belief, and so I had at one time to learn to distort things (or so it seemed) to get them right in painting.

Such distortion simply means that you draw or paint with some inner vision strong enough to make you take charge

EVERY week we receive letters expressing some kind of bewilderment over the new painting, the new music, or the new poetry, and asking us to explain what the producers of it mean. It is however for the producers themselves to say what they mean, and we decided the other day to ask them. To begin with, we wrote to three painters asking them to say briefly what the new art means. Two have replied, and we give their answers on this page.

The first, M. T. Woollaston, was born 38 years ago on a farm in Taranaki, and now lives in Upper Moutere, Nelson. As he has not been able to live by painting, he takes any work offering in the neighbourhood to keep himself afloat economically. The second, Eric Lee-Johnson, lives at present in Opononi, Hokianga County, but was born 39 years ago in Fiji. After training at Elam he went to London, and did not return to New Zealand till 1938. He, too, has found it difficult to survive on his earnings as a painter, and is at present trying the simple life on the shore of Hokianga Harbour.

of the casual everyday appearance of things, and re-cast it so as to show your inner vision through your picture.

The painter's toil and training is to learn the right technique to enable him to do this in his own special way. If you do this, and your inner vision is yours by right, then your picture is new.

Every good picture was new in its day, and is still new really. Every new picture must look new and not like an old picture, to be worthy of the old pictures, in which it has its roots.

The old and the new are not at variance. It is not a feud, but a relationship.

Take Constable, for instance, a painter upheld by those who are perplexed by or who dislike the new way. Yet the real Constable is obscured in countless minds behind a barrage of small, bad reproductions of his pictures such as appear on chocolate-box lids and calendars; and worse (if worse were possible), of similar pictures not even by Constable, making him appear sentimental and innocuous. To minds spoiled by such fare, the real paintings of Constable, could they be seen without prejudice and sentiment, might appear uncouth and fierce. Constable is in fact a father of the modern movement.

Your inner vision by which you see everyday things in a new way must not be vague, or your pictures will be weak and sloppy or empty and showy. It must be tough and durable, and a goal you have sought through all sorts of confusion and difficulty, or else it cannot be trusted. Nature is not something to be used in place of vision, and the virtue of nature is not a sort of magic that ensures safety to a picture that copies her exactly.

Nature is God's order, and we are a part of nature; and it is our nature (God-given) to have inner vision; and we must paint by that and not by appearances, or our work is dead.

"Yes," you say, "but why do you try to paint people and scenes (especially people) uglier than they really are?"

I don't. I am all out after beauty. But beauty is never second-hand, and often does not even look like beauty at first.

Once we decide that there is only one sort of beauty, and that a picture is good enough if it is like something else, we begin to pay the destructive penalty of mistaking unknown beauty for ugliness.

The climate of art is hard, and its rigours are salutary. If the spectator refuses to share these with the artist, if he will not have adventure and hazard, he runs the risk of demanding that his art be easy and good for nothing.

ERIC LEE-JOHNSON

AS the question applies to New Zealand painting there is, of course, no such thing as a new art. Up to the present, Dominion painters with few

exceptions have offered us little more than pale reflections of the less alarming European experiments of the past 50 years. What I have found most people are referring to when they express bewilderment or indignation over "This new crazy stuff" is some mild example of Cubism they have come across. Cubism, broadly speaking the reduction of form into terms of simple cones, cubes and cylinders, is not new. It had been almost fully exploited by Picasso by the end of the first World War.

Sometimes the exploration or exploitation of unfamiliar subject matter is mistaken for a new type of art. And it is true that there is always the chance that something new, something unique to express about this country will develop a new technique or method of expression. But enterprise in this direction, I have found, is often confused by the layman with Surrealism. A painting of a still life of sticks and stones is not necessarily Surrealism. It is merely unusual to find such things the subject of a painting. Surrealism is an inquiry into what reactions are roused by assemblages of incongruous but relevant objects; the juxtaposition of normally unrelated and often disturbing images, usually drawn with extreme realism to heighten the shock. Sticks and stones are not unrelated objects; their association is in fact an everyday occurrence. In any case there is now nothing new about Surrealism, or about the less deliberate and more wanton and automatic expressions of the Surrealists' predecessors, the Dadaists.

Abstractionism, or you may call it Constructivism, is also old stuff now. Jan Gordon defined Abstractionism as the investigation into the emotional properties of shape, form, line, and colour freed from all representational bondage. But others would have it that Braque's patterns of dismembered stringed instruments and other half recognisable objects are abstract paintings also. Be assured, however, that there is no need to look learned in front of the abstract. Not often is there any deep meaning to be drawn out of the normal run of painting in this category. Usually it is purely a question of colour, texture, pattern, and composition. And it should be easy enough to accept these qualities alone in a frame just for their inherent decorative values. Non-representational pattern is accepted without question on the floor, so why shouldn't we let it brighten up the wall? As a matter of fact it should be more widely appreciated that the whole field of modern domestic design owes a tremendous debt to the Abstractionist and Cubist experiments of Picasso and company.

One of the commonest misconceptions about so-called "Modern Art" is that it can all be dismissed as the work of hot-headed irresponsible youth, or that the artist has had his tongue in his cheek. But it happens that the hot-headed moderns who come in for special abuse were mostly born in the last century, before 1890—Braque, Picasso and Leger in 1881, Chevico in 1888, Ronault in 1871, Klee in 1879, and so on. It is not reasonable to decide that these men would all waste their lifetime in pulling the public's leg. The creations of these genuine explorers

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MY MOTHER—Ink drawing by M. T. Woollaston