

SALUTE TO FRENCH ART

"The Acknowledged Leader, The Generous Teacher, And The Fearless Experimenter"

SO great has been the contribution of France to western art during the past century that one could almost say that the history of French art is synonymous with the history of European art. For every painter's name of any other country, the average Englishman knows the names of half-a-dozen French artists. What pre-Nazi Vienna has been to the world of music, Paris has been and still is to the world of painting. Paris has long been the art school of Europe and America. Even the most unsophisticated know of the famous Latin Quarter through Du Maurier's "Trilby," or Puccini's "La Bohème." Art is there the very spiritual life-blood of the people—it is a way of life; not, as with us, a mere spasmodic occurrence.

A Cultural Meeting Place

France is the geographical meeting place of the culture of the Mediterranean with its formal basis of classical antiquity, and the more realistic culture of the northern countries. It is the battle-ground upon which has been fought many a stern encounter between the colder idealism of the south with its insistence on logical "form," and the more vigorous naturalism of the north, with its more direct psychological appeal. The artistic gods of the Mediterranean are coldly perfect statues calmly seated in the hard light of a clear sky; the wild gods of the north speed through earth and air on cloudy steeds picked out in violent silhouette by the fitful light from sun-breaks or lightning flashes. And in France the war between these gods goes on.

Influence of England

It is in this warfare that England has played a quite conspicuous part, and the interaction of the artistic forces of Britain and France provides a fascinating study, the result of which is to leave us with a deep feeling of gratitude for what we owe to our gallant ally.

In the Middle Ages, the south of England and the north of France formed one artistic province, and many works of art remain to us about which we are doubtful as to the side of the Channel where they first saw light. Gothic architecture, which was born in Paris, grew and flowered most prolifically in England; and perhaps its most beautiful attendant feature, stained glass, "stained the white radiance of eternity" more completely in France and England than anywhere else.

After the northern victory of Gothic, the tide of battle turned, and the Mediterranean Classicism had its day. England and France had little essential connection in art. However, there was a certain amount of royal

and aristocratic commerce in artistic things, especially in medals and sculpture. It was a Frenchman, Hubert le Sueur, who made the most admired statue in London—that of Charles I in Trafalgar Square; and another Frenchman, Briot, designed the Coronation medal of Charles I when he was crowned in Edinburgh. French engraving, too, was patronised in England, but for a vital interaction of the two countries we have to skip to the end of the eighteenth century, when the dispersal of many collections during the turbulent days of the Revolution caused an influx of French art into England.

Putting Sunlight in Pictures

The works of the seventeenth century Claude and Poussin inspired the English Wilson, stirred the enthusiasm of Reynolds and Gainsborough, Constable and Turner. Constable says "Claude has been deemed the most perfect landscape-painter the world ever saw, and he fully merits the distinction" . . . Turner in his earlier days seemed to count it his life's work to imitate and outstrip Claude, and left his collection to the nation on condition that two of his own works should for ever hang near two famous Claudes.

But what 17th century Claude gave to English painting—the putting of the real light of the sun into pictures—the English gave back to France again in the nineteenth century. The exhibition in the Paris Louvre of Constable's "Haywain" in 1824, seemed to burst the shutters of the artificial gloom of French art, and let in the fresh air and laughing sunlight again. It had an astounding effect on Delacroix, Corot and the whole outlook of the French School. And yet the full burst of English influence was not to be felt till 1870, when Parisian artists were forced to leave France during the Franco-Prussian War, and went to London. Monet and Pissarro, among others, saw the blaze of Turner's late works, and the dewy freshness of Constable's colour; and true to the French logical mind, they evolved the practice and theory of Im-



REPRESENTATION OF FRANCE
In the monument to Champlain, by Rodin

pressionism, which has revolutionised the whole world of art.

Impressionism

However dead Impressionism as an artistic aim may be, its researches into the luminous values of colour are now the cherished property of all painters. After which excursion into the scientific realms of realism, the individual spirit burst through again and demanded insight into the structure and purpose of nature with Cézanne, Van Gogh, and Gauguin. So France gave to the world the spiritual stimulus of Post-impressionism. After which came Cubism, and other -isms, which in themselves may provide little but puzzled bewilderment to the average citizen, but which provide the necessary artistic liberation to the painter; they are in the nature of laboratory experiments that are meaningless to the uninitiated, but which later may bring to pass inventions that change our whole life.

To laud a few of the multitude of French artists would be futile, since there is a plethora of hand-books one may consult at will, but we salute France as the acknowledged leader, the generous teacher and the fearless experimenter of the world of art.

—J.S.