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The Lives of Artists

REFLECTIONS on the situation of the artist in New Zealand were included recently in a review of E. H. McCormick's book, *The Expatriate*. The subject, too interesting to be left alone, has been taken a little further in a letter on the opposite page. It may be true, as Mr. McCormick suggested, that New Zealand has not earned the right to be proud of Frances Hodgkins; but this sort of charge can be laid against older societies than our own. Unless the artist is able to face loneliness and neglect, he is clearly unequal to the struggle before him. That at least is the impression to be taken from biographies of writers and painters.

Artists are valuable members of any community; but many aspirants are rejected in the rather cruel process that leads to occasional achievement. No talent is clearly recognisable until a body of work has been produced which demands critical attention. The public is blamed for apathy, but a shallow and dispersed interest in the arts is a feature of our whole civilisation, and not just of life in New Zealand. Even among the educated minority there is inevitably a gap between critical and public approval. Neglect has the look of tragedy when it is seen in retrospect, against the full story of effort and performance. In some minds, however, it is an element of the creative process. Recognition is often withheld for many years, perhaps a lifetime; yet the true writer does not cease to write, or the artist to paint. Creative minds seem to require conflict, and in New Zealand, where material goods are highly regarded, it may be no accident that writers often take their friction from a society which ignores them. In doing so, they are closer than they realise to the people they sometimes condemn.

There are, however, various kinds of artists. Some are stimulated by a feeling of "apartness": they look down upon the crowd, and every new instance of neglect merely confirms their self-approval. Others are nervous about the people with whom, presumably, they are trying to communicate. They conceal themselves as much as possible, and after disclosing their inmost thoughts are alarmed if any interest is shown in their private lives. Others are morbidly dependent on public notice. If they are being discussed, with approval or censure, they feel again a reassuring sense of their own identity. There have even been writers and painters with neuroses so deeply hidden that the world has mistaken them for shrewd men of business, calm in judgment, and with no more than their fair share of vanity. Some of these people, known collectively as artists, are not easy to help: they are sensitive and proud, and inclined to go astray in their private fantasies. In the past there was not much hope for them in New Zealand; but today they have better prospects.

Their main handicap, the smallness of the market, is one for which the country itself is not responsible. Even so, poets have been known to sell several hundred copies of their books; and poets in England, writing for a large population, cannot do much better. Complaints are made that our dramatists are not heard often enough in radio, and there is an implication that playwrights of great potential merit are being turned away by a callous Broadcasting Service. The simple truth is that very few plays of any value are offered. Scholarships in music and painting are now plentiful; and if expenditure is not as large as some people would like it to be, it can be claimed that the principle of State patronage is firmly established. Men and women can make their way in the arts—not easily, but with advantages that would have delighted their forerunners. And in the meantime it may be wiser to forget the dream of an eager and responsive public. There would be something very much wrong with our artists if in thought and expression they were not a step ahead of everyone else.