

ARTISTIC MEDITATIONS IN THE TRENCHES

THE WAR SEEN SCULPTURALLY, or, how trench life reacts on the mentality peculiar to a sculptor, might be the theme of a little essay written by a French sculptor who lost his life at Neuville-Saint-Vaast in June, 1915. His name was Gaudier-Brzeska, and we have already given our readers in *THE LITERARY DIGEST* for August 21, 1915, some taste of his quality. The little essay printed in a memorial volume to him, recently written and compiled by the American poet, Ezra Pound, presents what an English writer, Ford Madox Hueffer, sees as "an expression of artistic ideals," than which



THE SCULPTOR WHO SAW WAR AS "A GREAT REMEDY."

Gaudier-Brzeska in his studio before his work called "The Bird Swallowing a Fish."

he knows nothing "gentler and wiser." It contains, he says, "the thoughts of an artist who had a mystical and beautiful mind and who had been long under fire." It is interesting and valuable, he further says, to observe "what such a mind selects." The little essay was forwarded to the writer's friends in London, and in the corner of the sheet was written: "I have been slightly wounded in the night of Sunday 8th, on patrol duty. I have been at rest since and am returning service within two or three days." Here is the essay:

"I HAVE BEEN FIGHTING FOR TWO MONTHS and I can now gage the intensity of life.

"HUMAN MASSES teem and move, are destroyed and crop up again.

"HORSES are worn out in three weeks, die by the roadside.

"DOGS wander, are destroyed, and others come along.

"WITH ALL THE DESTRUCTION that works around us NOTHING IS CHANGED, EVEN SUPERFICIALLY. LIFE IS THE SAME STRENGTH, THE MOVING AGENT THAT PERMITS THE SMALL INDIVIDUAL TO ASSERT HIMSELF.

"THE BURSTING SHELLS, the volleys, wire-entanglements, projectors, motors, the chaos of battle DO NOT ALTER IN THE LEAST the outlines of the hill we are besieging. A company of PARTRIDGES scuttle along before our very trench.

"IT WOULD BE FOLLY TO SEEK ARTISTIC EMO-

TIONS AMID THESE LITTLE WORKS OF OURS.

"THIS PALTRY MECHANISM, WHICH SERVES AS A PURGE TO OVERNUMEROUS HUMANITY.

"THIS WAR IS A GREAT REMEDY.

"IN THE INDIVIDUAL IT KILLS ARROGANCE, SELF-ESTEEM, PRIDE.

"IT TAKES AWAY FROM THE MASSES NUMBERS UPON NUMBERS OF UNIMPORTANT UNITS, WHOSE ECONOMIC ACTIVITIES BECOME NOXIOUS AS THE RECENT TRADES CRISES HAVE SHOWN US.

"MY VIEWS ON SCULPTURE REMAIN ABSOLUTELY THE SAME.

"IT IS THE VORTEX OF WILL, OF DECISION, THAT BEGINS.

"I SHALL DERIVE MY EMOTIONS SOLELY FROM THE ARRANGEMENT OF SURFACES. I shall present my emotions by the ARRANGEMENT OF MY SURFACES, THE PLANES AND LINES BY WHICH THEY ARE DEFINED.

"Just as this hill, where the Germans are solidly entrenched, gives me a nasty feeling, solely because its gentle slopes are broken up by earth works, which throw long shadows at sunset—just so shall I get feeling, of whatsoever definition from a statue ACCORDING TO ITS SLOPES varied to infinity.

"I have made an experiment. Two days ago I pinched from an enemy a mauser rifle. Its heavy unwieldy shape swamped me with a powerful IMAGE of brutality.

"I was in doubt for a long time whether it pleased or displeased me.

"I found that I did not like it.

"I broke the butt off and with my knife I carved in it a design, through which I tried to express a gentler order of feeling, which I preferred.

"BUT I WILL EMPHASIZE that MY DESIGN got its effect (just as the gun had) FROM A VERY SIMPLE COMPOSITION OF LINE AND PLANES.

"GAUDIER-BRZESKA."

Brzeska (pronounced *Jaersh-ka*) was a French man with a probable mixture of some Eastern race from the indication of the name he bore; but he happened to have spent much of his life in England, thus evading his military service, and there he was when the war broke out. His ancestors are said to have been masons and stone-carver for generations and had worked on the Cathedral of Chartres. One of his friends once "discovered an almost exact portrait of Gaudier, carved on some French cathedral façade." The memoir tells us that in the fateful August he went at once to the French Embassy and was informed he might return to France without penalty. Arrived in Boulogne, he was told by a "square-set captain" that his sentence was "ten years in Africa." Gaudier protested: "But I came back of my own free will to fight" and the captain retorted: "It's a very good thing you did, otherwise you'd have got twenty years in Africa." He was taken to Calais and put in a guard-house. The house had a high window and at midnight he let himself out of it and managed to escape the sentry. Good luck favored him, and he also contrived to get across the Channel to England, where he gave up the idea of soldiering and set to work on his art again. "But," says Mr. Pound:

"The bombardment of Reims was too much for him, his disgust with the *Boches* was too great to let him stay idle" He got some better guaranty of safe conduct from his Embassy and went back to his death, tho his own genius was worth more than dead buildings."