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SHOULD THE NATION SUPPORT ITS ART?

Discussion of the Federal Arts Bill by the Distinguished Painter and President of the Artists' Union

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Great Art has always been a People's Art. By People's Art I mean an art which can be understood by the people, an art which means something definite to them. An art which is significant because of its broad appeal and one which is neither exclusive nor abstruse. Great Art lives because it has a universal human appeal, it lives because its creator has not worked to please an exclusive class or clique, but has put into his work the kind of bigness that still says its say to a great human audience generations after the artist himself has ceased observing, and ceased searching. There may be people who would attempt to wreck this premise by throwing this wrench into the works. "What about the great artists who starved in their day for lack of recognition? Was theirs a people's art? If so, why did not they reap their due reward?" My answer to this would be a somewhat sad reference to the social systems in which these artists found themselves. It is because Van Gogh's art has that universal appeal that it has lived—his is a people's art, despite the fact that the general public of his day was unfortunate enough not to have had the opportunity of seeing his work and being inspired by it and despite the fact that he himself received no earthly rewards—not even a living wage for all his labors and all his art's beauty.

At the height of the great period in Greece when a philosophy, a religion, a literature, an architecture, a dance, a music, a graphic art, and a plastic art had been more strongly woven together by one simple ideal than at any other time in man's history. Then, by virtue of the very philosophic principles which produced all this beauty, the people theoretically and practically participated in the search for the physical perfection of the body, aesthetic perfection and the linear perfection in art. The art of Phidias and Praxiteles is a lost people's art. But it is a people's art.

Likewise the great art of the Italian Renaissance a few centuries later. Christian ideals had taken the place of the philosophic ideals of the Greeks. A powerful church had become the potent force back of art, had subsidized the artists to create beauty for itself and because the people participated in the function of the church the artist had a direct means of contact with a large people's audience through his work for the church. Unquestionably Titian and his kin were people's artists.

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If later a miner's son, Martin Luther, by name, had not written his thesis attacking the dogmatic teaching on which the granting of indulgences by the Roman Catholic Church is based, the artist of today might still be painting Nativities, Resurrections, and Assumptions and intriguing his audience rather by the exquisite manner in which he rendered faces and familiar objects in telling the same familiar stories, than by any fresh viewpoint on life or any new ideas on life he might wish to express and pass on to others. With the Reformation in Germany, Flanders and France came the birth of so called "speculative painting." The artist no longer worked for the Church but painted pictures on the chance of selling them to the rich merchant class, the farmer and even the peasant. Pictures by living artists in those days were even bought by intelligent people of moderate means as an investment, like stupid people of moderate means buy stocks and bonds today. The artist in the great period of Dutch and Flemish art was a genre painter. He painted simple familiar scenes and objects which everybody understood—because of the comparatively simple structure of the life of his day he made an equal appeal to a rich buyer and to the public generally when he painted a peasant woman pouring milk or a farmyard scene.

In the earliest beginnings of American Art the artist was carrying on these genre traditions from Northern Europe—he was still a people's artist. The amateur craftsman or folk artists of this period—workers who made beautiful weather-vanes, chairs, or woodcarvings in their spare time—these people were producing a great folk art and it was not until the machine, the sweatshop, the factory, the mine of the industrial age claimed the artisans, that a people's art died in this country. For many years preceding the birth of the Federal Art Project the professional artist had had to depend on a very exclusive audience and a very meagre market for his work. This market consisted of the Museum, the Patron and the Commercial Gallery. The Museum and the rich Patron practically speaking bought only the work of the artists already "arrived," or "departed this life." The Commercial dealer catered to both and therefore found it impossible to encourage the younger talents sufficiently even if he wanted to, because he had to pay the rent. The average serious artist was obliged to live like Roman snails (Plautus 200 B.C. in his play "the Captives" puts into his professional parasite's mouth the words "In the summer when the rich are out of town, we parasites have to live like snails who get nourishment from their own juices"—The average artist of this period did likewise).

It was not until the economic depression created such a desperate situation for the artist and until the Federal

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Art Project came into being that the American artist received any substantial help from the people and was able to devote his energies towards the re-creation of an American people's art. Today we hear the voice of millions asking for an art that will express America and their own lives. The artist and the people want a Culture which does not exist in a precious atmosphere, but one which penetrates into the everyday life of our society. The voices of the people cry for a great American Culture. The Painter, the Sculptor, the Writer, the Actor, the Dancer, the Musician or the Federal Art ects have answered those voices. The Federal Art ect has pointed the way to an American Culture.] set a weight in motion, it has let loose a force tha affected hundreds of thousands of lives. It has these fuller, happier and better lives. Hundre murals depicting the history of our country and the of our people have been placed on the walls o schools, hospitals, libraries and public buildings ing them of greater beauty and of greater comm interest—monuments and small sculpture have added in equal numbers, easel paintings and print hang in thousands on the walls of public buildi travelling exhibitions of these works circulate c ually throughout the country opening up new vis beauty to our people.

The W.P.A. Theatre—has been seen in outlandis tricts where no theatre exists—outdoor theatres. groups and concerts play to packed audiences in summer in city and country. Thousands of classes in painting, sculpture, dance, music, crafts, puppet theatres have been and are being conducted by W.P.A. for children and adults—these have brought an untold wealth of beauty and happiness to thousands—these also have accomplished wonders as a deterrent to juvenile delinquency and I am sure to adult delinquency too—these classes have been carried on with great curative benefits also to the mentally sick in hospitals.

The Index of Design has made a remarkable historic record of design in this country; folk art and the art of the Negro people has been encouraged. This wonderful program of art has had its reverberations in the Art world—this wave of art activity has been a stimulus to the artists' private market. The collector has had his eyes opened to a wealth of new talent. The Museums also have responded to this newly exposed treasure of art expression—many purchases have been made of the work of the young and bitherto unknown artists. The Commercial Gallery has also benefited greatly by this newly developed public interest in art. All this has been great, but in proportion to the need and demand for culture it has made the merest beginnings. The artist

who has served the public faithfully on this great Government art program has done so under the constant threat of dismissal. Under the present work relief program it has been impossible to establish reasonable tenure and therefore a constant revision of plans and operations have been necessary owing to the emergency character of these appropriations—the artist has found it very hard to give the best of his creative ability with a sword of Damocles hanging ready to fall and sever his body from its sustenance and his art from the public it has served. The Nation, although it has benefited immeasurably by the work already accomplished, has, under the present emergency work relief program no assurance of the permanency of development for its culture.

The Nation is desperately in need of legislation which will assure the permanency of this culture—legislation which will make American culture a permanent impulse in the nerve center of its Government—legislation which will establish in its Government a Permanent Bureau of Fine Arts. The competent professional artist now working on the Federal Art Project and those in need of work outside the Project are desperately in need of this legislation which will guarantee them security on a permanent basis—without relief.

The Pepper-Coffee Bill H. R. 9102 public hearings on which are taking place before the Senate Education and Labor Sub-Committee this week if enacted will do just these things.

The Federal Arts Committee which was formed to perfect and support a bill to meet the needs of the greatest number of artists and the general public has already accomplished wonders in the work of getting support for this bill. The committee originally composed only of Art Project Workers, now has on its active lists a group of very distinguished celebrities, nationally famous artists, musicians, writers, actors and dancers who are giving invaluable aid in the formidable task of publicizing the bill nationally. The committee to date has done remarkable work—the salesmen are good and the merchandise is excellent. Scores of important individuals in Art, Science and Industry are sponsoring the bill. Cultural Societies from all over the country, Trade unions in all the fields of labor from the Transport Union and the United American Artists, to Newspaper Guild, and Actors Equity have joined and are daily joining in a wave of support. The bill speaks for itself—and sells itself. To give you some striking examples—the C.I.O. unions representing four million workers in their convention in Atlantic City last summer unanimously endorsed the bill in principle and the National Negro Congress in Philadelphia representing

the whole Negro race in this country did likewise. In Minnesota the highest state executives from the governor himself down are supporting the bill enthusiastically. The Federal Arts Committee with central headquarters in the Murray Hill Hotel, New York City, now operates nationally with Burgess Meredith as chairman of its Executive Board and Sub-Committees for various arts headed by Leopold Stokowski, Lillian Gish, Ruth St. Denis, Donald Ogden Stewart and Max Weber. Local Committees have been formed in Boston, Springfield, Cleveland, Cincinnati, Detroit, Pittsburgh, Baltimore, Washington, Hollywood, Chicago, Taos, Santa Fe, Minneapolis, St. Louis, Philadelphia, Providence, R. I., Newark, N. J., Provincetown, and several other important cities.

On February 20th a Conference of Cultural Organizations interested in the Pepper-Coffee Bill was called under the auspices of the Federal Arts Committee at the Murray Hill Hotel. Representatives of 50 organizations of major importance representing 40,000 artists in the various fields attended the meeting to come to an unanimous agreement as to the exact character of legislation establishing a Bureau of Fine Arts in the Federal Government. This has been accomplished.

There is to be a National Convention representing Cultural Organizations throughout the entire country called soon to secure National support for the bill.

The splendid work of the Committee goes forward daily. New waves of support for the bill from different sections of our great land roll in.

Meanwhile the artist is confident that the American People need him. He knows that his people need a Democratic Culture.

He knows that if they stand back of him and see that he gets a steady job, that he can give them a great culture and also a great Peoples' Art.

He believes that they will.

THE EVENING OF THE BALL—by James Guy. Here again, Surrealism expresses violent human emotions in strange contrast—the society girl returning from a ball, the worker shot through the head, the picture going through his mind, the sea, the broken walls, discord, gaiety, despair. Mr. Guy is a member of the of the Federal Art Project.