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American Artists and the War

The Effort That Is Being Made to Create and Stimulate Propaganda Through Art

By FREDERICK JAMES GREGG

IT must be admitted frankly that, considering the number of artists of distinction in the country, they have not been brought adequately into the work of imaginative war propaganda. The need has existed, and will go on existing, for stirring the minds of the people by means of appeals through the eye. For some reason or other, good artistic material has either not been worked at all in America, or has been allowed to go to waste.

The most obvious comparison of what we have *not* done is with what the French *have* done. Hundreds upon hundreds of French artists have served with the colors. But not for a single moment, since the invasion of Belgian territory in 1914, have the art activities of the French nation stopped. The spirit that underlies French art, at all times, is the very spirit in which the Battle of the Marne was fought and won. The determination not to allow Paris to fall is the spirit that has kept the French cheerfully, if indignantly, mending their bombarded cathedrals for three and a half years.

OUR public is familiar with the stirring series of posters produced in Paris amid the grinding anxieties of the struggle for national existence. "Modernists," like Duffy, have been as active as men of the older school —like Forain and Steinlen in making their artistic contributions to war service.

The British Government has announced that an official Exhibition of Lithographs, by eminent British artists, will be held in New York, showing Britain's artistic efforts and ideals in the Great War. The authorities have had no difficulty about procuring the assistance of men like Brangwyn, McBey, Pryse and Bone for various sorts of art war-work. Augustus John has been made one of the British official war painters, and the sculptor Jacob Epstein, though a soldier, has been able to keep a strong impulse of the war in his work.

NOW the puzzle is that whereas, to take only the cases of France and Great Britain, the war has produced a direct art impulse, it has had no such effect in the case of our own artists. For the most part these are going on just as usual. To judge from an Academy Exhibition, or an Architectural League show, or a Penguin show, or an Independent show of the free for all variety, or from a visit to most of our native one-man shows, there is no evidence whatever that there is a war, much less of the fact that we are in it up to our necks, and will have to stay in it until the very end.

Indeed, it is possible to go further and say that our leading artists do not give any sign of realizing that this war is one in defence of the beautiful things of the world against those who delight in their destruction.

Instead of being quickened by the great events of the moment many of our artists are actually seeking refuge in the past, as if to get away from it all. Go into a sculptor's studio and you will find him at work on a Lincoln, if he is not busy with some piece of unnecessary allegory. It was proposed recently to hold an exhibition of war pictures, by Americans, at one of the big Fifth Avenue galleries. The plan had to be abandoned for the reason that the exhibits could not be found. They did not exist. But is all this the fault of the artists or does the blame lie elsewhere?

After all it is not even necessary that Sargent, Davies, Weir, Hassam, MacMonnies, and

the other conspicuous painters and sculptors, should individually do war pictures and war sculptures. Such men as these would perform their full duty if they could only be induced by the government to serve on a committee the object of which would be to create and stimulate propaganda through art.

Many of the younger artists, who are hanging back and sticking to their routine work, might be perfectly willing to do posters—for which a great need exists—if they knew that their compositions would be passed on by persons whose eminence would afford some guarantee against futility of aims and vulgarity of execution.

In such a case everything would not be subordinated to "punch" and popular appeal. We might get things like the "Exiles from Belgium," by Spenser Pryse, which showed imagination and power, but which would never have been accepted as a poster by certain types of judges and persons now in authority at Washington.

OUR best available men have not been doing war posters. It is a fact that of twenty posters recently used by the Government, four only were approved by a New York committee of artists. The trouble is that there are certain so-called practical persons who think that if you have art in a poster, you have, to that extent, so much the less popular appeal, and, if you have popular appeal, it is not necessary to bother about art.

It is no wonder then that we have had Liberty Loan posters, and Food Saving posters, and recruiting posters, that suggested the flamboyant and obvious advertisements in which the public is exhorted to use so-and-so's breakfast food, or such-and-such a brand of soap or garters.

Joan of Arc, the peasant girl who saved France, has been represented by a "pretty girl" model from the cover of a cheap magazine, and poor Uncle Sam has been overworked to such an extent, through lack of inventive power on the part of the artists, that he would be justified in getting out an injunction. Indeed, so ineffective have most of the posters been as art, that it is ridiculous to imagine that they can have had any effect whatever in stimulating in us the spiritual side of our share in the war.

It is a great mistake to have a mean notion of the artistic intelligence of the general public, for it has been found to be an invariable rule that the best art is effective, whether you are striving to lure money from the purse, or to persuade young men to go into the army.

The finest thing in the way of war propaganda that has been done in New York in the war was the bringing of the men of the National Army from Camp Upton. Those two parades—one of 3,000 and the other of 10,000 men—had the great element of surprise in them—surprise at the transformation that had been worked between the time when the boys had shambled out of the town awkward civilians, and the time when they came back hardened soldiers. The photographs of the lines of grim and ennobled faces, with eyes front, had the qualities of good posters, for they appealed to the feelings and the imagination, as none of the bills on vacant walls had done.

If it is a case of attracting attention, it is easy to see how a sketch of a negro soldier, or of a lumber jack, by John Sargent, with an inspiring inscription, might be an effective poster. The reproduction of a marine painting by Winslow Homer might be much more to the point than most of the hard and tight representations of painted ships on a painted ocean that go by the name of posters. In a good poster there must be mystery; something more must be suggested than is said. It is necessary to get away from a trade convention as to what a poster is. And, so it is only

when our artists who have something to express, are allowed to express it, that it will be possible to get the best of what is in them out of them. If they have to be stupid and hidebound, they will be inclined to leave the work to those who feel at home in that unhappy condition.

SOMETHING is being done in the right direction. The Division of Pictorial Publicity with Charles Dana Gibson, that truly noble Roman, as chairman under the Committee on Public Information, is doing fine service, and is every day becoming more useful and effective.

The Government asked it to recommend a number of artists for special service, as requested by General Pershing. The following names were submitted to the Washington authorities, for captain's commissions, by Mr. Gibson's committee, to serve as official artists for the army with the expeditionary forces in France:—First Lieutenant J. Andre Smith, etcher, now in the Engineers Reserve Corps; First Lieutenant Walter J. Enright, illustrator, now in the Signal Reserve Corps; Harvey Dunn, painter, Chicago; George Wright, illustrator, New York; William J. Aylward, painter, New York; Harry Townsend, painter, New York; Wallace Morgan, illustrator, New York; and Earnest C. Peixotto, painter, New York. These men were accepted by a board composed of Major General W. M. Black, chief of Engineers, and Lieut. Col. James G. Streese, Corps of Engineers, with Major Kendall Banning, of the Reserve Corps, in an advisory capacity. They are to serve abroad in our army in a corresponding capacity to that of John, Pryse and Bone in the British forces. It is clear, from General Pershing's original cable message, that he believes it will be necessary for him to call for many more artists for similar work.

Artists are not irresponsible persons—that being a vulgar tradition. They are capable of exercising a great and practical influence. That the French found out long ago. The sooner everybody in authority in America finds it out the better.