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page 27

THE FUTURE OF THE WAR-ARTIST

THE AVALANCHE OF WAR-BOOKS already started and fast gaining headway may bury us beneath its weight and ruin all hope of ever understanding the great conflict. But art may succeed where literature fails, thinks a British writer. "War-bulletins, official dispatches, and even histories will give no hint of what the war really was," says Mr. John Salis, for the true value of war, to his mind, "lies in the hearts of men more than in their actions." The intention of the artist, he points out, "may not be instruction, yet he is the final teacher." He states the point of view of the average Britisher when he speaks of the prejudice against art which made its practitioners seem until quite lately an unserviceable element in such a crisis as war. England as a nation, carrying a legacy of mid-Victorian days, has looked upon the artist as not "respectable," and "what is not 'respectable' must not be recognized or allowed to be of value to the community." It has, however, been borne in upon authorities in England, so the writer reveals in *The New Witness* (London), that "in spite of the possible lack of some of the commoner virtues the artist has his place in the State, and some attempts are being made to use him." We read on:

"Naturally the first tentative essays were in literature and devoted to propaganda; then the force of the Continental cartoon having been duly noted, foreign artists were commissioned to press the Allied cause in the neutral press, making a somewhat belated attempt to balance the intelligent German efforts which were naturally started with the commencement of war, for Germany is a country which has always recognized the State value of art.

"Now, however, we have artists at the front as non-combatants sent and commissioned to view this spectacle of our struggle, artists in the Navy, artists touring the munitions-works, striving to gather together an immediate record of the whole effort from A to Z. It is, I think, an interesting inquiry what type of man should be this artist or that upon such important national business. There are roughly four types of artists from which to choose. There is the artist commercial. This man possesses a trick of the pencil, but no knack of the brain; he takes the common ideas with which a stunted humanity deceives itself, he is the artist jackdaw gathering the art garbage of centuries, translating everything to the superlative—love everlasting, courage immutable, villainy satanic, childhood seraphic. He is the novelist of the sixpenny paper-back, the poet of the sentimental ballad, the artist of the R.A. and R.I. Fifteen years ago he would have been our recorder; to-day he advertises patent medicines or soap. Then the artist objective, the eye superlative, holding a mirror to nature; but he is in competition with the camera. The mere transcription of nature's facts no longer is satisfactory. It is interesting to follow, in the history of art, the delight which the gradual discovery of the imitative powers of painting gave to successive generations. But as one surveys the whole field of artistic effort one clearly sees that this imitation is merely a by-product. It has never influenced the artistic value of any work, never added a line to its beauty or significance. The record of the camera will be a valuable one for the future, especially when the machine is used by a photographer with taste and a sense of essentials. . . .

"The analytic artist follows: and fourthly the humorist. These are the artists for the front. Our two powers most remote from the animals are that of reasoned thought and the gift of laughter, but unfortunately the one is valueless without the other. Reason without humor is as arid as humor without reason is nauseating. Our war-artist must not be artist in the ordinary sense of the word. First and foremost he is a recorder; he must pick the bare facts of war: so that, seeing, we (and they) may understand. He is separate from the artist of peace as is the portrait-painter; he is the portrait-painter of war. He must take a standpoint somewhat new in the history of art. It is possible that the analyst will be unable to achieve his aim; it is possible that humanity will be unable to receive what he has to give, for the realities of the soul of war are only possible in the madness of war itself. In cold blood many of the facts of war are bestial degradations. I think that the final record which we will treasure may be the humorous. I think the files of such a paper as the French *La Baïonnette* will be a legacy which we would barter for few modern masterpieces."