

Alfred Werner

The Painting Plague

Self-Expression on Sunday

YEARS AGO the German satirist Erich Kaestner, known here chiefly for his amusing children's tale, *Emil and the Detectives*, published a bitter poem about a certain Herr Schmidt — the equivalent of our John Doe — who fell victim to the machine age. Herr Schmidt's life was one daily round of monotonous work, with the exception of a solitary nocturnal respite when "Ein Stündchen blieb für höhere Interessen" — when there was one little hour left for "higher things." But rack his brains as he might, poor Herr Schmidt could not think what to do with this spare hour. So "in dem Stündchen, das ihm übrigblieb, bracht' er sich um" — so in this one brief hour permitted him by the murderous system, he killed himself.

John Doe would never have been

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at such a loss: he would have taken up a hobby. If, like the unfortunate Herr Schmidt, he were a member of the urban middle class, the chances are good that he would have gone in for painting — in the past twenty years or so America has become convinced that "everybody can paint."

Of course, there is hardly a country without its "Sunday painters"; but nowhere is painting the hobby of so many men and women as it is in the United States. In Central Europe people collect stamps or play chamber music. In England, only a handful emulate that most famous of all "week-end painters," Winston Churchill, in taking up "painting as a pastime."

France has produced the largest number of "Maîtres Populaires de la Réalité" of any country; but "paintitis" as an epidemic, affecting large sections of the population, is virtually nonexistent. No matter that one of the great revolutionaries of French art, Henri Rousseau, was a humble tax collector; that Rimbert

and Vivin were postal clerks; Bombois a wrestler and ditchdigger; Peyronnet a worker in a sugar refinery; Bauchant a gardener; and Séraphine a charwoman. For these gifted people were not hobbyists relaxing after hours, but geniuses whom fate had denied a formal education and who struggled mightily against a thousand odds to reach their goal. They have their equivalents — if not in talent, at least in style and outlook — in such American Primitives as Hicks, Pickett, Kane, and other self-taught masters. Chéronnet's remark about the *Maîtres Populaires* of his country can be applied to our American Primitives: "What is important is that each of these artists saw only one thing: that he was before all else a painter, that is, a man *compelled* to give actual form to his vision of the world."

I HAVE purposely omitted Grandma Moses from my list of American Primitives. This delightful but highly overrated old lady, who admitted with disarming frankness that "if I didn't start painting, I would have raised chickens," belongs to the category of amateurs. She is not one of those unschooled natural artists "compelled" by inward necessity to put paint to canvas, but rather a non-artist "taking up" painting for some sort of "reason." The critics who have praised her work so extravagantly mistake her lack of inhibition, the result of

little education, for the brilliant naïveté of the true Primitive.

Had she lived in New York City, the legendary Mrs. Moses might have started out at the Art Students League, taken courses at the nearest "Y," or gone to a private art school. In all likelihood, she would have been trained in the school of old-fashioned realism rather than in that of abstract art; at any rate, her productions would have been "academic" and no different from the work of other spare-time painters.

It is very much to her credit that she sought neither public favor nor artistic fame. Nevertheless, her name is now known from coast to coast and she is praised by the sophisticated and the unsophisticated alike; her work was sent to Europe as representing American art; and her pictures fetch higher prices than those of most of her colleagues.

This success which Grandma Moses' "healthy" pictures have won is perhaps a symptom of our unhealthy times: in a fit of self-hatred, urbanites wax enthusiastic over an elderly lady of limited talent whose life on her upstate farm has spared her any knowledge of the complications and torments, the problems and experiments, of this century.

The enthusiasm would not have outlasted one exhibition, however, if the old lady had not become a vested interest of dealers, collectors, and self-styled patriots. The investments of such men in the "paintitis"

fad transformed what was an innocent hobby for John and Mrs. Doe into a racket adding its mite of confusion to an already confused world.

There was nothing objectionable about Sunday painting as it started out here in the days of the depression. Because of it, there were perhaps fewer suicides and crimes; people forgot their troubles for an hour or so in art studios lavishly supplied by the W.P.A.; and artists without buyers were able to survive by teaching amateurs. In New York City alone, more than 25,000 young men and women turned up weekly at the free classes held in community centers, settlement houses, and other meeting places.

BUT PAINTING for one's own amusement is not the same as painting as an art. Until recently, art was a profession, learned with as much difficulty as the lawyer's or physician's. The Victorians, it is true, regarded a little water-coloring and such as a polite accomplishment with which young spinsters might improve their leisure hours; but it would have been considered absurd on both sides of the Atlantic for a grown-up male to engage in so frivolous a pursuit.

All this changed in the next century. In the thirties, middle-class Americans, employed and unemployed, discovering that their lives were empty, turned with a vengeance to "self-expression." They

did not follow the gleam of creativity in the strict solitude of the taciturn and serious-minded *Maîtres Populaires* of France. Fearing nothing so much as being alone, wanting warmth and companionship in a cold and forbidding world, they came together to learn to paint. In art classes, housewives, mothers, grandmothers, and widows hoped to escape the tedium of metropolitan life and find an outlet for self-expression a little more satisfying than cooking or home decoration. Tired businessmen, physicians, teachers, actors, and writers began new lives at seven-thirty or eight by donning smocks and setting up easels. Before 1930 or so, a housewife or salesman, leaving home with canvas and paint box under arm, would have risked social ostracism; today, if anything, there is something snobbish about it.

Sociologists noted that "the lonely crowd" — the middle-class urbanites of America — had found a new means of "self-improvement." Criminologists introduced painting as a pastime in prisons and reformatories with great success; psychiatrists found that painting was good therapy for the inmates of insane asylums; and in veterans' hospitals painting speeded the recovery of invalids.

Up to about 1940, painting was a pastime somewhat more elevated than collecting bottle caps. There are at least two sociological studies to prove that, prior to about 1933,

"paintitis" had affected relatively few middle-class Americans. In *Middletown: A Study in Contemporary American Culture*, published in 1929, the authors of this work remark that "like music, art seems somehow to drop out of the picture between the time boys and girls sketch in their high-school classes and the time they become immersed in the usual activities of Middletown." In 1932-33 three sociologists—George A. Lundberg, Mirra Komarovsky, and Mary Alice McInerney—did research in Westchester County, New York, collecting material for *Leisure: A Suburban Study*. They found that the arts were a leisure-time activity for only one out of ten residents. At the same time, the authors were pleased to report that most suburbanites were solely "interested in the avocational and recreational aspects of their activities"—commercial and professional motives did not count.

THE GREAT CHANGE took place about 1940. In that year drawings and paintings by employees of the National City Bank were exhibited in the windows of a Wall Street firm; a few lines were devoted to this event in the papers. Two years later the International Ladies Garment Workers Union came up with a show of works by cutters, pressers, sample makers, finishers, and cleaners, all of whom had studied at classes conducted by the

union. This show got more publicity, as prizes had been provided for— one-year scholarships to the National Academy and the Art Students League.

The age of innocence was over. Sunday painters gradually invaded such professional magazines as *Art News*, *Art Digest* and the *American Artist*. Dealers flung open their galleries to the amateurs. This in spite of the fact that of some 50,000 professional painters, only forty per cent have gallery outlets for their work; and even this lucky forty per cent don't necessarily make enough from their work to get along. In 1947 Elizabeth McCausland estimated that after twenty years spent in his profession, the average American artist was making about \$1,150 a year.

Under these circumstances it is not surprising that for the past twelve years or so artists have been complaining about amateurs stealing the bread out of their mouths. Chichi patrons, glad to forget the "difficult" professional artists, readily sponsor the inferior daubs of movie actresses and grandmothers. The breach made by amateurs in the walls of professional art has led to a general deterioration of standards.

In almost any other country save perhaps England, this eruption of tens of thousands of people into art would have caused a serious moral disturbance. Yet Puritan America was not affected. Children weren't

neglected because mothers flocked *en masse* to studios. Nor did husbands, emulating Gauguin, abandon their families in order to Sunday-paint all week.

WHAT HAPPENED was more in keeping with the spirit of the land. As early as 1892 the editor of the British *Spectator* declared: "All Americans agree . . . that their country is pervaded by a distaste for leisure." The new hobbyists now made the inevitable discovery that they had been indulging in a useless yet costly enterprise — one that paid no dividends. A hobby should be useful! Wherever they went, Benjamin Franklin stood before them with uplifted finger: "He that idly loses five shillings' worth of time, loses five shillings, and might as prudently throw five shillings into the sea." Few of our Sunday painters would have understood Franklin's contemporary, the German philosopher Immanuel Kant, who stuffily defined art as "a disinterested enjoyment of the beautiful." In very few cases had the arts been taken up as a hobby after a lifelong admiration for the great masters. The utilitarian spirit got the better of our week-end painters, with the result that a pleasant avocation turned shrewd and self-seeking.

People who would laugh at the idea of peddling radios patched together by themselves at home send half-baked pictures to gallery own-

ers and expect them to be sold. A friend's being coaxed into buying a canvas is worth more than a judicious critic's praise. And if they can't find anybody to buy their Sunday efforts, they can still use painting as a means of self-aggrandizement. Only a few art dealers refuse amateurs wishing to buy wall space in their galleries for a couple of weeks, nor are critics overly frank about calling an amateur's daub a daub. Both dealers and critics say that it is useless to try and fight the amateur.

You don't find shenanigans of this sort taking place in France, where painting is considered a serious occupation requiring years of study, and where even the "Moderns" spend countless hours copying Old Masters in the Louvre before launching out on canvases of their own. One of these Moderns, Matisse, warned that "you must be able to walk with assurance on the ground before you try to negotiate a tight-rope." Matisse discontinued an art school he was running when he decided that his students weren't serious enough.

In this country of pioneers the "self-made man" has long been more highly regarded than the scholar, though this attitude seems to be changing somewhat. But, unfortunately, the "self-made artist" is encouraged to aspire beyond his sphere by writers and art teachers everywhere. Churchill decades ago wrote an es-

say, "Painting as a Pastime," in which he warned his fellow-amateurs that they should not expect to become masters, but must content themselves "with a joy-ride in a paint-box." And then, eating his own words, he went on to exhibit his pictures in the Royal Academy! Though not a professional artist, he is far less untutored than the public perhaps supposes, having had the guidance of many well-known artists, including his friend, Sir William Orpen. Nevertheless, Churchill urged laymen to throw caution to the winds and plunge into art without preparation: "There really is not time for the deliberate approach." He described his first trial as follows:

Splash into the turpentine, wallow into the blue and the white, frantic flourish on the palette — clean no longer — and then several large fiery strokes and slashes of blue on the absolutely cowering canvas. Anyone could see that it could not hit back. No evil fate avenged the jaunty violence. The canvas grinned in helplessness before me. The spell was broken. The sickly inhibitions rolled away. I seized the large brush and fell upon my victim with berserk fury. I have never felt any awe of a canvas since.

IN THE UNITED STATES so much has been done to encourage amateurism that you are surprised to find artists still sweating away at their craft in school and studio. One writer linked amateur painting with

the grass-roots traditions in American art; it is "a product of our new democracy, a Declaration of Independence for the Arts." She traced this recent rise of Sunday painting to "the assumption that anyone who wanted to could paint independently without formal instruction and without overseas inspiration or guidance," and referred to the American folk artists of the Colonial and Early Revolutionary era. What she failed to say was that these humble artisans who painted portraits of farmers and their families in remote homesteads never considered themselves in the same category with trained artists like Copley, Stuart, or the Peales. Few of these "limners" would have dreamt that some day their daubs would be installed in museums and fetch high prices at public auctions.

The notion that you merely have to learn a few "tricks" ("skills") in order to paint has been spread by hundreds of cynical teachers anxious to exploit the market. Even some of the great old men who themselves had an excellent formal training forty or fifty years ago, now proclaim offhandedly that no lengthy course of instruction is needed by an artist; that, in fact, knowledge would corrupt the kind of "pure" painting now being produced by the non-objective school. "Just express yourself, follow your instincts!" Are they serious? Or is this the progressive education of art schools? The late Alfred Stieglitz once coined the

aristocratic statement: "Art is by the few and for the few"; he was a foe of amateurism to his very end. While it is difficult to draw a sharp line between the realm of the artist and that of the amateur — still, a line must be drawn somewhere.

At first, the trade papers sided with the worried professionals. When a veteran like the German surrealist Max Ernst publicly declared (tongue in cheek?) that the exhibition, "They Taught Themselves," was the finest show he had seen since coming to America, *Art Digest* sharply rebuked him — what right did he have to mislead the general public? Eventually, however, two magazines decided that it was good business to install a cozy corner for the various businessmen's, doctors', and other amateur clubs, lest their doings get mixed up with the activities of bona fide artists. In one magazine, amateur exhibitions are reviewed exclusively on an amateurs' page. Yet there are inevitable complications. Grandma Moses is now being featured among the professionals. The New York show of the wife of the Iranian ambassador to the Court of St. James was reviewed on the amateurs' page; the critic praised her for stealing time from hostessing. But in the next issue the lady indignantly retorted that she was a professional painter and expected to be treated as such.

The worst offenders are, of course, some of the popular mass-circulation

magazines. Until recently, art was scarcely one of their more pressing concerns. In the last few years, however, it has invaded their pages in the form of lush color photographs. But here again the daubs made by famous military men, actors, corporation lawyers, dress designers, boxers, and hostesses outweigh serious art to a large extent. It is true that some of them show an astonishing skill; but none of them betray a trace of exceptional talent, freshness of approach, or boldness of idea. Nobody would look at them twice if they didn't bear a well-known name. A few of them are slick portraits; the majority are landscapes, a subject preferred by amateurs because it is believed to be "easier."

ART IS NOW something that "everybody can do." Everybody has a sister or an uncle who paints. For a couple of dollars you can even buy a sketched-in picture ready for "coloring"; numbers on the sketch refer you to numbered paint pots. This kit guarantees a "genuine" hand-painted picture. It is hard to see why everybody isn't happy. The owners of art shops certainly are — they have never experienced such a boom.

Yet we are farther away from producing masters than we were twenty years ago. Twenty years is a long time. Why hasn't a single man or woman of talent emerged from the tens of thousands who put up easels? A host of copyists are produced,

slavishly imitating their teachers, and framing their own pictures as though they were masterpieces.

Some critics had hoped that "paintitis" would make better observers and better critics out of people who together represent the general taste. They remembered, optimistically, what Walt Whitman had said: "To have great poets there must be great audiences too," a sentence that applies to all the arts. But these optimists overlooked the plain fact that the new paint addicts were not genuine enthusiasts, but for the most part self-indulgent philistines interested only in getting "quick results" from paint and canvas. They do not become patrons, for they produce and have eyes for their own pictures only. If they do attend shows, it is primarily to make themselves seen and heard.

Churchill advocated painting as a hobby; it was a way to "restore the psychic equilibrium" of tired twentieth-century men. It was fun when it started, but how many neurotics now belabor the canvas with gritted teeth, their thoughts centered only on success? If they are denied recognition as professionals, they cheekily call themselves "Primitives," though this term is rightly applied only to those who, like that *coeur simple*, Henri Rousseau, never had the benefit of an education. Actually, of course, they are neither Primitives nor Sunday painters; as Manet said, "There are no amateurs, but only

those who paint bad pictures." There is nothing reprehensible in John Doe's painting a bad picture and getting fun out of it. A dangerous confusion arises when unscrupulous men who know better seek to palm it off as high art on an unsuspecting public. All standards are debased and basic distinctions blurred when daubs are considered even in the same category with the work of professionals who have given their lives and hearts to a cause they put beyond self.

MEANWHILE, the number of "culture vultures" grows apace. The deplorable result is the death of the genuine amateur (literally, "the lover") and dilettante (literally, one who "takes delight"). What remains is the narcissist who turns the "thing-in-itself" into a "thing-for-himself," who heaps confusion upon confusion from Carmel to Provincetown. This is the emotionally immature pseudo-artist, whose sole God is a fetish called "self-expression," this eternal adolescent, unable either to escape from reality to a world of make-believe, or to strike deep into the substance of everyday life. He is a freak, devoid of any responsibility toward the society upon which he thrusts his tiny creative effusions.

About a century ago Horace Mann said: "We shall perish by the very instruments prepared for our happiness."

IN OUR READERS' OPINION

THE REAL PROBLEM

» I should like to see your October number of the *MERCURY* in every American home. . . . To me it is of vital significance, especially the editorial, "In the Mercury's Opinion." I congratulate you on your insight into the real problem our nation is facing.

MRS. MARY MAURINE P. ROOT
ARLINGTON, VIRGINIA

WHAT PRICE PRESIDENTS?

» The article that appeared in your October issue by Serge Fliegers entitled "What Price Presidents?" was quite interesting and I would like to offer my congratulations to the author on the painstaking thoroughness with which he has approached the important subject of campaign financing.

Particularly of interest was Mr. Fliegers' discussion of the role played by the Citizens for Eisenhower-Nixon Committee and his statement that "this intrusion of amateurs into politics is one of the healthiest developments we have seen during the past few years."

However, I disagree with the writer where he states: "But as regards electoral financing, these groups only serve to complicate the picture and increase the cost of elections. Efforts are duplicated and overhead costs for headquarters, staff, mailing, and publicity

are often tripled." As an independent who has served as second in command of the "State Citizens for Eisenhower" since March 1 of this year, I can sincerely state that up until the convention period we financed and sustained ourselves in our headquarters at the Roosevelt Hotel through the efforts of a splendid group of volunteer workers on our Finance Committee, by getting small contributions through an "Operation Envelope" procedure which brought us from \$1.00 to \$25.00 per contributor, which was an appeal to the masses, as well as to big business. Furthermore, from the figures we have received from the National Finance Committee, certainly very few large contributions were received. Aside from this, you must understand that at our staff headquarters we had as many as 300 volunteers working daily from March 1 to convention time and since then in our new quarters at the Astor Hotel. I believe that our day and night staff comprised many more than this figure, aside from the "Youth for Eisenhower" which was also under our auspices, with a volunteer group of approximately 2,000 young men and women. This also goes for the entire State of New York where we operated approximately 400 Eisenhower Clubs, comprising a figure of close to 30,000 volunteer workers. . . .

Finally, I would like to endorse heartily the suggestion contained in