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## ESSAYS AND CRITICISM

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MEN OF ART by *Thomas Craven* (SIMON & SCHUSTER. \$3.00)

IN *Men of Art* Thomas Craven has revived the critical style of the nineteenth century, ousted pure art, that idealistic fiction of the modernist estheticians, replaced subject matter, and necessarily put back, along with this replacement, the old conception of right and wrong in painting. With the arrival of the School of Paris the majority of the old doctrines were discarded. A new set of rules was needed to express the more or less new realm into which art had stepped; to express or to justify. Analysis cannot come before the fact. The School, busy with experimentation, out on a truly technical debauch, could not be bothered with life or was too much bothered by it. Order of one kind or another must be restored to painting and art purified. Cézanne was greatly responsible here; so were, negatively, the Impressionists. The latter had done nothing more than to take snapshots of pieces of nature and to record scientific truths on air and light. Cézanne, himself an Impressionist, found that even in the reproduction of a piece of nature (he painted directly from her) there must be some record made of cosmic order, some method found by which the visual chaos could be brought into a permanent harmony. The artist must create or re-create.

After Cézanne, where people had talked of composition they now talked of organization. The change held dangers. Cézanne had sought his organizations in nature. "He is the solitary glory of Post-Impressionism or Modernism." His followers gradually disregarded nature altogether; went to sea, this might mean, in cockle shells. Abstract art

was born or revived. Still life painting, so long given a secondary place, was raised to the level of other painting. One department of art could not count more than another. Important painting, which is sometimes called oratorical painting in France, was done away with; academies and even tradition followed it. The artist's inventive faculties were called into play. He was asked to make a contribution of such signal originality that it could at once be separated or distinguished from anything that had gone on before. Artists could ask themselves in all seriousness "do you contribute or don't you contribute?"

Art floated in an ether so far out of the comprehensive reach of the people that the unwary began to believe in its profundity. Ignorance easily gets entangled in the meshes of the mysterious. And with this new art there went an impressive jargon, as mystifying as the paintings themselves, and a world-wide spread of propaganda, largely furthered by dealers, whom Mr. Craven hates with the violence of a reformer. He tells us that they began in Venice with Titian, "the first professional painter", and that they have been the enemies of great painting ever since, middlemen doing damage in the camps of painters and patrons alike. Art critics and estheticians must belong in this class, since they also direct visions and create fashions.

Mr. Craven has done a tremendous amount of reading. He predicts that Ruskin will come back and is still kneeling before the Olympian conceptions of Goethe. It is indeed difficult to see why, throughout his book, there is no mention of that gigantic illustrator, an Olympian also, Gustave Doré; difficult if one forgets that next to his hate

for dealers is his tremendous dislike for the French and France. He is undoubtedly pro-English—though this is inconceivable in an esthetician. He will concede that Claude Lorrain had some influence upon Turner, although Turner “had more ideas and more material for landscape in a single day than the Frenchman had in a lifetime”, and then show, in terms as exaggerated as the one just quoted, that Turner, Constable and Bonnington, who lived most of his life in France and is best described as a charming painter, were responsible for the French revolt against the Academy which began with men like Delacroix and Courbet and went on through the Impressionists to the present-day Modernist painting. Ingres he describes as a product of the Academy or of the French nationalistic propaganda, which, with Mr. Craven, amounts to the same thing. Ingres was “of the school, petty, unimaginative and over-weening”.

It is a curious fact that Puritans have always had difficulty understanding purists. An artist must have agonies bottled up inside of him. He puts Titian and Renoir in the same boat rightly enough and belittles both, apparently, because their souls or their *minds* had not been wrung by life. “Art embodies the higher reality born of mind.”

Most of his reading on art must have had an English source: his writing rings with righteousness, with the idea, not old enough for us to have forgotten it, that art must carry a message, a rather definite one, and is always greatly ennobled by the artist's suffering. It is because of this that Leonardo, whose Mona Lisa “shines out among the portraits of the world like a star”, and Michael Angelo and Rembrandt and Daumier (“it is hard to believe that he is a Frenchman”), along with Hogarth and Turner who get into this *galère* somehow or other are outstanding figures in art. With “the most magnificent of painters” he is forced on another tack; “composition is the man. With Rubens it is not a technical device acquired in Italy

but the inevitable coördination of the experiences and philosophy of an artist who never lost his sense of values and his love for opulent realities. . . . He was none of your little specialists of art; he was a wise man of the world, diplomat and scholar, poet and manorial lord, ingenuous and amiable, an indefatigable worker, free from Bohemian humbug and aesthetic arrogance”.

Mr. Craven can let himself go. But perhaps the contradictions in the book are due to the pliability of his enthusiasms and to the force of his prejudices. The artist has many characters. It is dangerous to see the final glory or its reverse in each one as it comes under consideration. It is unquestionable that the artist can have the arrogance of Michael Angelo and the amiability of Rubens, that one can be a boor and another an ingenuous and amiable wise man of the world—though this latter is a large order. But it is difficult to see why the love of opulent reality so admirable in Rubens should be so negligible in Titian and Renoir, nor why the jealousies, the superstitions and the noted miserliness of the great Mike should be neglected while Ingres's pettinesses are stressed. One man's reputation is built upon his art and the other's destroyed by his life. Mr. Craven's system is a handy one.

He has, however, done a great work in the offhand stabs he takes, throughout the book, at the meticulous little painters of still life with which the world is now overrun and at those abstractionists who go about in fear and trembling lest some breath of life muddy the purity of their machines. Bravely, for today, he writes that “all art partakes of illustration”.

It is a pity that he should have included a chapter on American art in the book, for this chapter in its inconsequentiality defeats the good in the foregoing ones, and, indeed repeats the insolence, to some extent, of that book on Modernist art which Williard Huntington Wright wrote in order, apparently, to prove that his brother and his brother's

friend had, with Synchronism, said the last word in painting. Perhaps there has been too little writing of a serious nature on American art. I do not know. Mr. Craven seems to be in a confused state when confronted by it. He mentions Wright's two heroes quite as though they had been treated with some importance outside the covers of his fantastic work. He illustrates the work of one American, Thomas Benton, who was the glorified hero of *Paint*, a novel Mr. Craven wrote some time ago. He says that John Sloan's "caustic renderings of New York life are the most distinguished specimens of the etcher's art since Meryon" (Whistler is omitted) and that Georgia O'Keeffe is "the foremost woman painter of the world", when she, whose "forms are as thin as paper or leaf metal" so obviously fails in that department in which he found Titian and Manet and Renoir a little wanting, to their everlasting shame.

He is just, in the French sense, about the late Preston Dickinson and John Marin, "Marin, a product of French Impressionism, is a nature poet whose fragile water colors express the magical play of light and color on broken waters and unsubstantial hills". He likes mural painting, especially that of the now fashionable Mexicans, Rivera and Orozco, probably, in the final analysis, because they have nothing to do with the hated dealers, and thus mentions along with Benton, though some time after, Boardman Robinson, whose set of decorations "needs only a more incisive study of actualities to rank with the best of modern mural paintings", and William Yarrow, who "after a long period of sequestration in the Renaissance atmosphere of Florence" is doing a series of murals on American sports for one of our universities. This last, apparently, does not touch his sense of humor.

However, a true perspective cannot be formed on the spot. Also there are sure to be friends among living men, and these can be, and often are, exceedingly black spots even

in a very enlightened survey. Mr. Craven's book, in any case, is sure to put some doubts in the minds of the modernist collectors who have up to the present time felt so smug about the little experiments they have hung upon their walls in the unquestioning conviction that they were masterpieces.

GUY PÈNE DU BOIS

THE PROVINCE OF LITERARY HISTORY by Edwin Greenlaw (JOHNS HOPKINS PRESS. \$1.75)

PROFESSOR GREENLAW rises both to defend the scholarly activities of himself and his colleagues against the criticisms of humanists and others, and to present the first in a series of monographs which shall, let us hope, triumphantly illustrate the virtues of literary history as he outlines them. His principles are that literary history is a learning separate from literary criticism, with its own laws and justification; that it should seek to interpret, not merely to accumulate facts; and that its "purpose is to study the history of civilization through literature rather than to study authors and their works as isolated phenomena".

As first stage in his defense Mr. Greenlaw ridicules critics who write elegiac passages "bemoaning the loss of poets and dramatists, slain . . . by the new gorgon, Procrustes of the Ph.D. trust", or who, according to him, would "make the scholar's choices for him from the list of acknowledged masterpieces", "telling a man what he shall do to be of the elect". Mr. Greenlaw is not against literary criticism, even of the variety advocated by Mr. Foerster, though the latter, in his opinion, is concerned with "not learning, not even scholarship, but on the one hand pedagogy, and on the other hand the evangelization of the world". Mr. Greenlaw wishes simply to assert the value of literary history.

That value is in the information which the literature of a period—first- or third-rate, it doesn't much matter—gives us regarding