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NEW MASSES

Hollywood Art Auction

FULL DETAILS
ON PAGE 27

when they returned to America. However, the historic plane of 1902 is now on display in a British museum because the learned scientific pontificos, directing the Smithsonian Institute, were hornsogged into crediting Professor Langley with the invention. Glenn Curtiss, desiring to avoid payment on patent claims, improved the Langley model with many Wright devices and was instrumental in getting his agent appointed as an investigator by the Institute. Despite proof offered by the brothers, the Institute's annual reports have always listed Langley as the inventor. The author ends this long controversy with a statement published by the secretary of the Smithsonian in October 1942, to wit: "I sincerely regret that the Institution employed to make the tests of 1914 an agent who had been an unsuccessful defendant in patent litigation brought against him by the Wrights . . . I point out that Assistant Secretary Rathburn was mistaken when he stated that the Langley machine without modification made successful flights and . . . that Langley succeeded in building the first aeroplane capable of sustained free flight with a man . . . and should he [Orville Wright] decide to deposit the plane in the United States National Museum it would be given the highest place of honor, which is its due."

The modern Kittyhawk has proved its worth in the battles over El Alamein and Tunisia. Its counterparts, the Spitfires, Stormoviks, and Flying Fortresses will be the umbrella that shields the ground forces of the United Nations in the coming two-front warfare of 1943.

JAMES KNIGHT.

The Human Family

THE HILL, by David Greenwood. Illustrated by Charles B. Wilson. Duell, Sloan & Pearce. \$2.50.

WABASH HILL is a ghost of an old gold-mining town. It houses around forty-odd people who live a truly communal life. Everything is shared. Even the author's old car is gradually borrowed away. And when he leaves, he seems to be flying back to civilization with some fear that he goes now or never. He had left San Francisco one night to escape from himself and his writing. He comes upon this community by accident, the backwash, maybe, of civilization, and he finds a group of people living very normally, completely unconditioned by desire for property.

Our writers often tend to treat backward peoples either as Tobacco Readers or sentimentally. David Greenwood does not even treat them as backward. They are symbolic and they are real. The citizens of Wabash Hill live by mining just enough to get along. The rush for wealth is the past. They are the present. Sommers, once a mining foreman, runs the ruins of the old hotel. He is assisted by the town drunk,

Blackie, everyone's charge. Sometimes, just as the author did, people drive by. The better ones stay awhile, the snobbish and too wealthy soon feel unwanted.

The post office is run by the village widow. She is no glamour girl, just very womanly, and every man in town loves her and every man's wife understands this and knows the widow can be trusted. The entire village gets together at jamborees in the old ruined ballroom. These dances are attended by the "100-year-old" Chinese woman, the town's most honored citizen. She had been brought to Wabash Hill, a "pleasure" girl when young. Her wisdom and long view are respected. The village cares for her. When the county takes her to the poor house, she is brought back; when her house burns, they build her a new one.

The townspeople enjoy the sunsets, the mountains, and meadows in their own way, without benefit of poets. They compose their own hymns:

*When the rains wash the mountain
We'll see the Lord accounting
All the nuggets in the paydirt
For his ring.*

The boardwalk of commercial days becomes the front porch; racial distinctions, politics—nothing can keep these people apart. David Greenwood's delightful humor and very sensitive penetration of normal human lives makes the reader, too, a citizen of Wabash Hill. He says in a foreword "The background [for this book] was chosen as one well suited to highlight certain human values which in American life are indestructible." Actually these sketches of life stories show us that, once free of competitive violences, people are one big family. You may argue that this is very individualistic and utopian. It could be. Mr. Greenwood's stories could slop over into sentimentality. They don't, because to him all people are complex enough and intelligent enough and just plain contrary enough to find life a pretty good thing on the whole. For this writer human life is sufficiently rich to be portrayed without drama. One does note, to be sure, that *The Hill* is settled mostly by the middle-aged and the very young. The one young couple there seems frustrated.

Naturally this book offers no solution for our present day complex problems. It is based, however, on the one important conception that people not made violent by competition for jobs and money, are fundamentally decent—that the human family is one. I think the author has seen that in order to get even *this lesson* across, one has to choose a simplified pattern of culture.

The book is very interestingly illustrated by a talented artist, Charles Wilson, who knows the types of characters well. He is, I understand, himself part Indian.

EDA LOU WALTON.



CANVAS AND FILM

The young Negro artist Jacob Lawrence depicts Harlem in a series of paintings, reviewed by Mayer Symason. . . . Joy Davidman reports on some of Hollywood's lighter productions.

EACH of the thirty gouaches which Jacob Lawrence, the young Negro painter, exhibited at the Downtown Gallery last week had its own artistic interest. But it was the cumulative effect of all of them as a study of Negro life in Harlem, which made the exhibition an artistic event of prime importance. Just as in his "Migration" series, which was reproduced in *Fortune* in 1941, Lawrence has created under the title of "Harlem" a set of illustrations which constitute a sociological study of an important aspect of American Negro life. This is the first time that a Negro artist—or for that matter any artist—has given us a coherent picture of everyday life in New York's Jim Crow ghetto.

"Harlem" is presented as a sociological panorama based on the facts of normal existence, not the surface aspects which have become zoot-suited cliches in the hands of too many American artists. Lawrence tells a vivid story of a people living, working, playing, and dying amidst poverty, squalor, and oppression. But he tells his story without sentimentality. As a Negro, Jacob Lawrence feels and understands more deeply than can any white painter

the sufferings of his people, yet the outstanding characteristic of his style is restraint. He does not wear his sympathy upon his sleeve. His hope and his understanding are inherent in the project itself, in the story which is so simple and telling, and in the complete truth with which it presents his people, not as irresponsible children, or criminals, or objects of charity, but as human beings with economic, social, and cultural problems.

It is, of course, not entirely Jacob Lawrence's fault that the critic of the *Sun* was charmed rather than horrified by his treatment of fire-traps and funerals. Apparently delighted by the impression that Lawrence is more interested in color and pattern than in the tribulations of his people, that critic magnanimously promises him a kind of immortality. "It is," he writes, "because Mr. Lawrence rises so triumphantly above his subject matter that success is conceivable for him. Long after the poor whites of *Tobacco Road* have been eliminated by starvation and all the residents of Harlem have risen to affluence because of the present interest in their welfare, these water colors may continue to give pleasure just because

of a certain handsomeness they have." One cannot expect the *Sun's* critic, who has always shown a blind spot for social art, to understand the significance of Jacob Lawrence's work. So it would probably be useless to point out to him that Lawrence's artistic life blood is his social attitude—and that just those aspects of his style which our colleague finds so pleasing tend to limit the consummation of the artist's purpose. However, the critic, by his very misunderstanding of the artist's intention, has stumbled upon Lawrence's basic weakness.

For the abstract quality of the artist's style serves, unfortunately, to obscure the inherent human warmth. While his objectivity is a source of strength, it is also a wall that limits his effectiveness. The sociological foundation of Lawrence's art creates in itself a condition of objectivity, a framework of factual statements. True, Lawrence visualizes these facts in deep and simple human terms. The statement, "Most of the people are very poor; rent is high; food is high," is translated into a stark and tragic composition of a Negro woman seated alone at the table in a bare room, contemplating her meager funds. Here is



"This is Harlem" and "Most of the People Are Very Poor." Gouache paintings by Jacob Lawrence from his recent exhibit at the Downtown Gallery, New York City.