Bulletin of The Detroit Institute of Arts of the City of Detroit

PORTRAIT OF A YOUNG WOMAN
VERROCCHIO OR LEONARDO. FLORENCE, C. 1475
GIFT OF MR. EDSEL B. FORD SUPPLEMENTED BY FUNDS OF THE DETROIT MUSEUM OF ART FOUNDERS SOCIETY

Vol. XVI. JANUARY, 1937 No. 4

VERROCCHIO OR LEONARDO

The profile portrait of a young woman presented to the museum by Mr. Edsel B. Ford, supplemented by funds of the Founders Society (cover and Figs. 1 and 2), is a most exceptional acquisition. The charm of the model, who combines youth and dignity, vitality and sensitiveness, gives it an immediate appeal. But it captivates no less through the composition and execution, the delicacy of drawing and modelling, and the remarkably plastic force of the form, produced by the strengthening of the light outlines of the profile against the black background and by an almost invisible shading of the darker side. A warm golden tone envelops the figure, repeated in changing nuances in the reddish-blond curls and braids and in the amber-colored eye, and strongly accentuated in the orange-brown costume. It is relieved only by the pale blue ribbons in the hair, the dark blue border of the dress, the white puffs on the shoulder and the exquisitely designed string of pearls around the throat. A light bluish-green under-paint is revealed in the puffs and is also visible on the lower border of the panel under the brown costume, over the ivory-colored stucco with which the panel is prepared. The painting is in a remarkably good state of preservation, and the all-over pattern formed by the thinly-broken crackle gives the senses the same pleasure as the surface of a fine piece of Japanese pottery.

Everyone who has even a slight knowledge of Italian Renaissance painting will recognize at once from the costume and coiffure that the picture was executed in Florence about 1475. Although the style of the costume with the shoulder puffs appears as early as the end of the '60's, and lasts to the end of the '80's, the fashion of the coiffure seems to have been of short duration. It can be found only in a small number of examples of Florentine painting and sculpture, all well known to the student of Italian art: in Domenico Ghirlandaio's *Madonna della Misericordia* in the Ognissanti (a portrait of Simonetta Vespucci, d.1476), which is usually dated about 1473; in two portrait busts attributed to Verrocchio—one in the Bargello (the *Lady with Primroses*, Fig. 3), the other formerly in the Dreyfuss collection (Fig. 4), both executed about 1475; and in the painting attributed to Leonardo da Vinci representing Ginevra dei Benci, in the Liechtenstein Gallery (Fig. 5), which can be dated about 1478.

It is to the three masters mentioned in this connection that our portrait has been attributed by the few scholars who have had an opportunity to study it. If we consider that the picture came to light only very recently—it was rediscovered in a country house in France last summer and has never before been published—we are not surprised that the discussion regarding its authorship is still in progress. The problem of determining the author of early portraits is always a difficult one, for the personality of the sitter prevents the artist from expressing the idiosyncracies of his style as freely as in an entirely imaginative composition of his own. We believe, however, that of the three names, Domenico Ghirlandaio's should be excluded from the list of possibilities. The painting has nothing of the broad and heavy realism of his fresco style, nothing of his matter-of-fact and rather obvious representation of character, nor has it the hard outlines, the clearly separated planes and the hot and glaring colors of his panel painting. The subtlety of drawing and color composition, the reserve and indefiniteness of expres-

FIG. 1

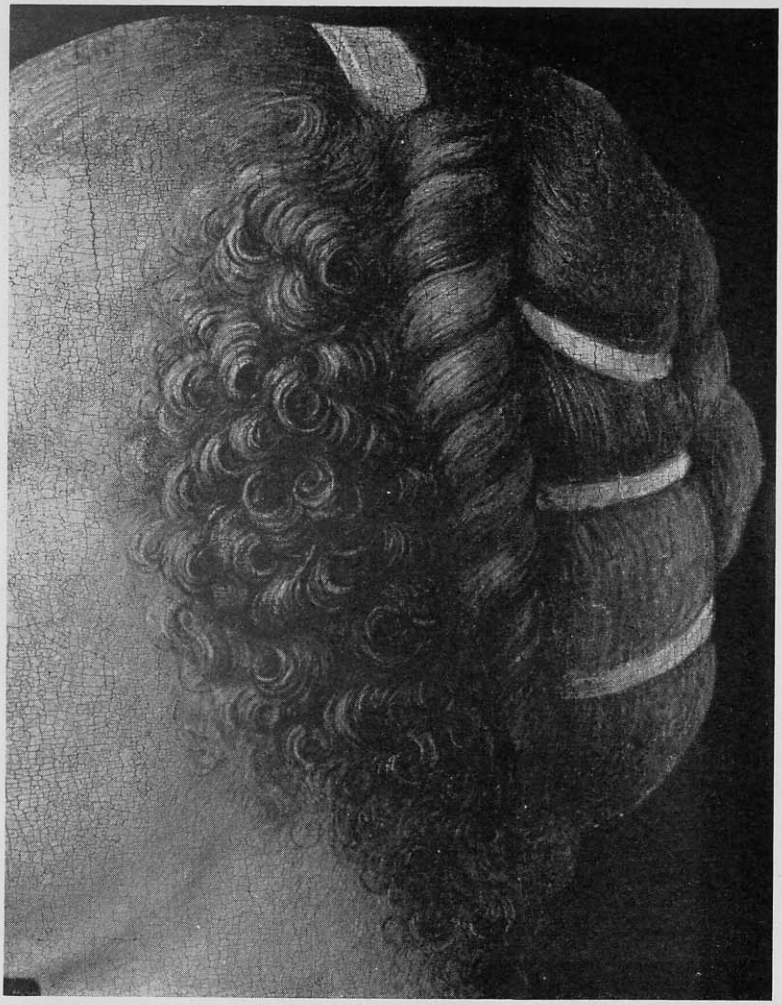

FIG. 2

sion, surpass Ghirlandaio's abilities. In our opinion it can only be a question of whether the portrait is the work of Andrea Verrocchio or of the young Leonardo da Vinci, done at the time when he worked under the influence of the older master. It has been attributed to the first by R. van Marle, to the second by A. Venturi, the dean of Italian art historians.

The separation of the early works of Leonardo da Vinci from those of his master is one of the most complicated problems in art history. Had Verrocchio been an artist of secondary importance, as the teachers of great masters often are, it would be easy to differentiate between the two artists on the strength of the difference in the quality of their work. But it so happens that Verrocchio was one of the most distinguished and many-

FIG. 3

sided artists of the early Florentine Renaissance, great as goldsmith, decorator and painter, great especially as sculptor. In this field he was the creator of some of the most admired bronze sculptures of all time, such as the *Boy with the Dolphin,* the group of *Christ and St. Thomas,* the *Young David,* and the *Colleoni,* as well as remarkable portrait busts in terracotta and marble. So far as the arts are concerned, his genius was in many ways comparable to that of Leonardo, who, indeed, surpassed him decisively in the wider range of his interests. The pupil was so carried away by the influence of his master that he adopted similar flowing, undulating curves, and almost baroque forms, the same mannerism in the proportion, gestures, garments and headdress of his figures, and in a certain measure even the expression of Verrocchio's faces. There must have been a strong bond of mutual understanding between the older and younger master, otherwise Leonardo would not have collaborated with Verrocchio years after he became an independent artist, allowing his own work to appear under the name of his former master.

Leonardo became a member of the painters' guild in Florence in 1472,

FIG. 4

when he was twenty years of age. His apprenticeship in Verrocchio's studio must have begun several years before this—possibly in 1467 or 68—and extended to that date. After 1472 he continued to work with Verrocchio for four or five years. In a document of 1476 we are told that he is living with him, and the only documented painting by Verrocchio, *The Baptism of Christ* (now in the Uffizi), in which Leonardo collaborated, painting one of the angels, was hardly executed before that year. This angel is the only work by the young Leonardo which can be identified through contemporary writers as having been done within the period of the eight or nine years in which he was connected with Verrocchio's workshop. Knowing how early he developed, we may be certain that more of his early works are still in existence. Indeed, several paintings and sculptures may be convincingly attributed to this period on stylistic grounds and for other reasons which space does not permit one to discuss here. These paintings are

FIG. 5

The Annunciation in the Uffizi (about 1475); the *Madonna with the Flower Vase* in the Munich Pinakothek (about 1475-77); the *Madonna Benois* and the *Madonna Litta*, both in the Hermitage (about 1478, the second finished at a later period); and the portrait of Ginevra dei Benci in the Liechtenstein Gallery at Vienna (about 1478-79). His works in sculpture of the same period are probably the terracotta statuette of the Madonna and Child (Victoria and Albert Museum), and the Scipio relief (Louvre), besides his collaboration in the terracotta relief of *The Resurrection of Christ* (Bargello) and in the two marble busts of young women in the Bargello and in the Dreyfuss collection.

The best critics on Italian art of the older generation, Bode, Berenson, and A. Venturi, in general agree upon the paintings. There are still a few critics, however, among them van Marle, who adhere to the opinion previously held, and give *The Annunciation* in the Uffizi and the portrait in the Liechtenstein Gallery to Verrocchio. It is quite logical, therefore, that van Marle should give our portrait to Verrocchio, since it is obviously by the same hand as the Liechtenstein portrait (Fig. 5), which we think to be by Leonardo. To judge from

FIG. 6

the expression, from the lines of the profile and from the execution—so far as a marble bust can be compared with a painting—our portrait seems to come from the same workshop, if not from the same hand as the marble bust formerly in the Dreyfuss collection, generally given to Verrocchio (Fig. 4). Not only does the style agree perfectly, but the features are so much alike that one might well imagine that the same person is represented in the marble and the painting.[1] Certainly such a degree of similarity in the arrangement of the hair can hardly be found in any other two Florentine portraits of the period. We find the same relationship between our portrait and the marble bust from the Dreyfuss collection as between the Liechtenstein portrait (Fig. 5) and the *Lady with the Primroses* (Fig. 3), in which again some critics have recognized an identical model.

That Leonardo worked in marble as well as in other media we know from his own statement. The Leonardesque subtlety in the treatment of the marble, and the connection between a study of hands (at Windsor) and the hands of the *Lady with the Primroses,* is so striking that Dr. Bode's suggestion of Leonardo's collaboration in this bust has met with general approval. But we find the characteristics of the early Leonardo to an even greater degree in the Dreyfuss marble. The delicate design of the ornaments, and the veiled expression of the eyes, especially, have a remarkable resemblance to the Liechtenstein portrait. It seems more than likely that Leonardo had a hand in the execution of this bust also, one of the most exquisite sculptures of the Renaissance.

In comparing the style of Verrocchio and the young Leonardo, we must take into consideration the drawings of the two artists. The study for an angel's head by Verrocchio (in the Uffizi, Fig. 6) and the one by Leonardo for the head of the Madonna (in the Louvre, Fig. 7) show a re-

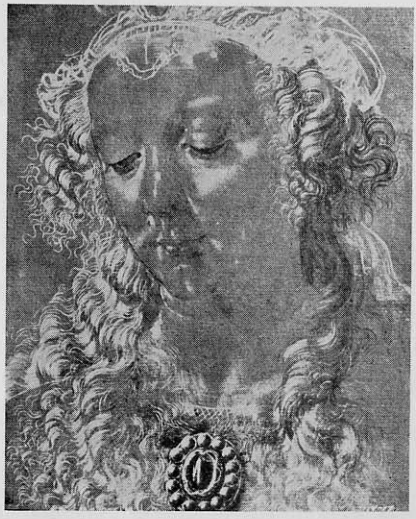

FIG. 7

[1]The difference in the outline of the nose may be due to a slight altering of its shape in the bust when the tip of the nose was restored.

FIG. 9

the long eyelashes and beautiful curls.

The curls in our painting seem to have the same intricate and curiously organic pattern as in later drawings by Leonardo (Fig. 9). One can see in this instance how a great artist expressed certain favorite ideas in the same way throughout his entire life. Leonardo loved to depict rich curly hair, deriving the pattern from and connecting it with the stormy waves of the sea, as we know from Vasari and from his drawings. If we look at a detail of our lady's coiffure (Fig. 2) we are reminded of certain late drawings by Leonardo in which he depicted storms disturbing the air and the sea and twisting the waves and forms on the earth into the most varied curly ornaments.

We have had thus far no profile portrait of Leonardo's early period, although the fact that he made so many profile drawings during this time makes it probable that he painted some. Nor should the black background speak against an attribution of the work to him. It is true that the Liechtenstein portrait and, later, the *Mona Lisa* show a landscape background. But other generally accepted portraits, such as *The Musician* in the Ambrosiana and the *Belle Ferronière* in the Louvre, show the same black *fond*. The scale of our figure is about two-thirds life size, exactly that of the Liechtenstein portrait, a proportion which certainly excludes painters like Ghirlandaio or Mainardi, who preferred the life size.

It has been rightly observed that our portrait seems to have a less primitive character than most of the portraits contemporary with it. A certain ease in the pose, the sophistication of the expression, the remarkable plasticity of form achieved by a scarcely perceptible modelling, point to the beginning of the High Renaissance. And all this would favor an attribution to Leonardo, who was first to break away from the Quattrocento and lay the foundation for the art of the coming century, although it must be admitted that Verrocchio, too, prepared the way for this development, at least in such late works as the *Colleoni*.

Whether by Verrocchio or Leonardo, our newly acquired portrait may be said to be of special importance as a creation of the city that produced the richest flowering of the Renaissance, at a moment when the imagination of the great masters around Lorenzo de' Medici launched upon a new flight that altered the character of the Early Renaissance movement and resulted in the High Renaissance. If it should represent the lady whose portrait is executed in marble in the Dreyfuss bust, we may be certain that she belonged to one of the outstanding families of Florence. She was, that is to say, close to the Medici, as it was for this family that Verrocchio and his workshop were mainly occupied at this time (about

1475-78), working upon the decorations for the tournament in honor of Simonetta Vespucci and modelling the bust of Giuliano de' Medici. No inscription on the back, no coat of arms or detail of the costume gives us a clue to her name, which will probably always remain a mystery.

W. R. VALENTINER

THREE ITALIAN CREDENZE AT RUSSELL A. ALGER HOUSE

At the very opening of Alger House it was through the generosity of Mr. and Mrs. Edsel B. Ford that the new museum became the covetable possessor of a renowned example of Italian Renaissance furniture, a fifteenth century Florentine *credenza* hailing from the original Palazzo Davanzati collection. Another *credenza* of the sixteenth century was given by Mrs. William Clay and Mr. Robert H. Tannahill. The recent gift of the Founders Society brings to the collection at Alger House a third, and still later example of this characteristic form of Italian Renaissance furniture.

No Italian interior would be complete if it lacked a *credenza,* the prototype of the modern sideboard. We are fortunate indeed to possess three, each decidedly different from the other, each the product of a different period of the Renaissance. Together they illustrate the development of this typical Italian furniture form: from the earliest, which is monumental and ecclesiastical in inspiration, to the latest, which is small, decorative, and totally domestic in form and function.

All three of the major arts were well launched in the new style of the Renaissance when furniture was belatedly looked upon as a rich field for practising the resuscitated forms of classic design. In respect to these new mobiliary forms, as in all else, Florence was the hub of the Renaissance. It is natural therefore that we turn to her workshops for the first expressions of the new movement. We must picture for ourselves this capital of the Renaissance in a ferment of artistic activity about the middle of the fifteenth century. Enthusiasm for the new style sent architects to their drawing boards to design new churches and remodel old ones. In Florence the great palaces of the Renaissance were rising in every street. The workshops of sculptors and painters were crowded with activity creating works of art to adorn the new interiors. Likely it is that some imaginative enthusiast engaged in an architect's shop first conceived of applying the recently accepted architectural formulas to the design of furniture.

A period of transition is natural to the growth of any style: to this moment in the development of Renaissance furniture we can assign the great *credenza.* (Fig. 1).

The *credenza,* or credence, as its name implies, was first made for ecclesiastical use. Placed in the sacristy or vestry room, the verger found in its commodious interior ample room for laying away vestments and sacred vessels. Because of its importance as ecclesiastical furniture, the sacristy cupboard first engaged the interest of Renaissance designers. Strangely enough the possibilities of the *credenza*

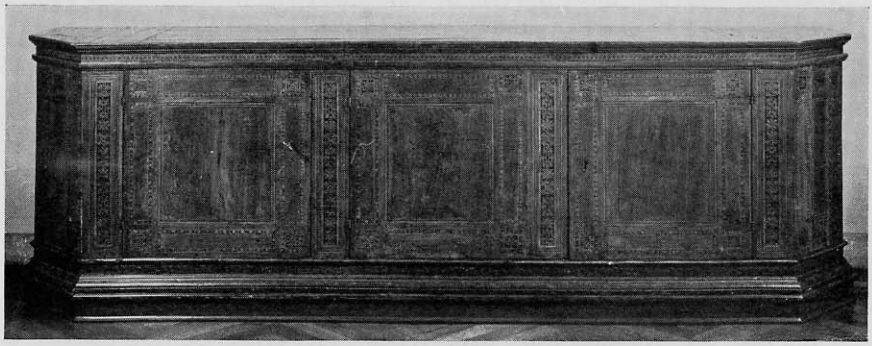

FIG. 1
GIFT OF MR. AND MRS. EDSEL FORD

as a domestic convenience were not appreciated until after the middle of the quattrocento. Their introduction as household furniture marks the beginning of a decline in popularity of the *cassone* or chest, which alone had afforded domestic storage space throughout the Middle Ages.

It is not possible to determine whether the present example was made for church or dwelling; but it is probable that it was designed as a sideboard for a particular room in a Florentine *palazzo*. By and large, the furniture, as the architecture of the Italian Renaissance, conforms to the lines of a horizontal rectangle. The earlier designs are typified by an absence of curves in the structural lines. Quiet dignity, simple massiveness, flat surfaces, and restraint in decoration are characteristic of Early Renaissance furniture, and of our newly acquired *credenza*. Upon these qualities, together with a perfection of proportion, rests all the beauty of this first consciously modern furniture style. The Alger House *credenza*, which has come down to us in beautiful condition, is made of walnut embellished on every side with intarsia work or inlay. But chiefly beautiful are its faultless proportions. The front of the *credenza* divides itself into three square doors separated by four narrow panels bearing the hinges. The corners are canted. Simple moldings along the top and base break the severe rectangularity of the piece. These new Renaissance elements of design, however, stop short of the applied decoration. The intarsia is purely mediaeval in origin. But some uncertainty hangs over the source of these geometric motifs which are executed in light woods. The ingenious arabesque designs of the intarsia are Byzantine, or at least Near Eastern in origin. Through the great ports of Pisa and Venice came a steady stream of artistic influence from the East. Sometimes the stream was deflected in its course through Spanish and Moorish channels. Certainly the geometric patterns of the inlay in our *credenza* are strongly suggestive of Hispano-Moresque all-over decoration. But it is not entirely unlikely that the inspiration for this kind of work was found nearer home. The handsome marble intarsia which makes richer the walls and pulpit of San Miniato al Monte in Florence quite possibly suggested these patterns to the designers of furniture. At any rate such patterns were adopted by painters. An arresting example is Masolino's *Annunciation*

FIG. 2

GIFT OF MRS. WILLIAM CLAY AND MR. ROBERT H. TANNAHILL

in the collection of Henry Goldman, New York. In this painting, the doors opening into the Virgin's chamber, and the bedstead revealed beyond, are all decorated with patterns of inlaid wood reminiscent of designs at San Miniato. But wherever these motifs originated, the fact remains that they are manipulated with exquisite craftsmanship. The placing side by side of these tiny bits of variegated woods is flawless.

We have already remarked that this form of ornament is mediaeval. Only one detail in our credenza is prognostic of the Renaissance designer's complete obeissance, by the close of the century, to classic design. That is the Greek fret pattern just above the base molding. Several of the intarsia patterns which appear upon the Alger House *credenza* were used elsewhere: notably in the superb panelling of the sacristy of Santa Croce in Florence, and in a rare *cassone* and a sacristy cupboard formerly in the Bardini collection, Florence. Precise dates even for important examples of furniture are impossible to determine; but it is not unreasonable to confine the date of this *credenza* to the years between 1460 and 1470.

If the designers of furniture had lagged behind the masters of the major arts in adopting classic formulas, they were not slow to catch up. Before the sixteenth century was far advanced, all mediaeval traits in the enrichment of furniture had been abandoned. The delicate beauty of intricate intarsia gave way to the more robust and classic expression of carving. While intarsia had necessitated the use of walnut veneer over a common wood, the succeeding phase of Renaissance furniture called for carving of the solid walnut. So in our second *credenza* (Fig. 2) which dates from about 1530, a variety of carving, instead of the now old-fashioned intarsia, complements the fine proportions of the piece. Gone too are the square subdivisions so pronounced in the earlier *credenza*. We find in their place an equally consistent repetition

of various sized rectangles. A utilitarian measure has been the introduction of three drawers beneath the top. The classic elements are obvious: across each drawer front has been carved a neat band of laurel leaves; the drawers themselves are interrupted by carved modillions derived from classic architectural forms; while the ends of the cupboard are accented by fancy pilasters which taper towards the bottom and are carved with imbricated designs. The garland *motif* of the drawers is repeated to form the base molding. The doors are elaborated with a carved bead molding. In Renaissance architecture no element of design is more constant or characteristic than the overhanging cornice. This trait was readily transferred to mobiliary forms. Far more pronounced, more architectural, more classic than the simple molding of the earlier *credenza,* is the deep, and closely carved cornice of the early sixteenth century cupboard. The quiet substantiality of the Early Renaissance, and its earnestness of purpose have passed away. Thoroughly in keeping with the rather pompous and self-conscious character of the High Renaissance is this handsome *credenza* in which is sought for and achieved a richness of effect and a conscious display of familiarity with antique Roman forms.

So completely has all trace of its ecclesiastical ancestor disappeared in the worldly design of the third little *credenza* (Fig. 3) that it scarcely warrants the name. No thought of the original purpose of the *credenza* has hampered the designer of this small sideboard or *credenzino,* which is typical of the furniture of the Late Renaissance. Its modest size is essentially domestic. The furniture of the last half of the sixteenth century made free use of antique forms. A good example is the coupled pilasters of this cupboard, which are really inverted consoles. But there is no relaxing of the high standard of wood craftsmanship established in the Early Renaissance. Among the finest examples of wood carving at Alger House are the consoles of this *credenzino* ornamented with a delicate acanthus motif. In a number of other respects the small *credenza* is true to the form of late sixteenth century design: the piece rests upon a deeply gadrooned base; lion's paw feet take a prominent place in the scheme; showy heraldic escutcheons interrupt the panelling of the doors; the single drawer is concealed in a classic cornice of triglyphs and rosettes.

A word about the finish of Italian furniture may be of interest. Almost without exception the finer pieces of Italian furniture were made of walnut. It was customary to finish the wood by rubbing it liberally with olive oil. Towards the beginning of the sixteenth century the blond walnut finish, such as that of the great *credenza,* was supplanted by a vogue for a darker and richer-toned walnut. Both of the later *credenze* are examples of this deeper color, which was achieved merely by adding a dark pigment to the olive oil. When a glossy surface was desired, the piece was polished with wax.

The study and appreciation of Italian furniture in this country has lapsed in recent times; but this does not affect its historical nor aesthetic value. It is a decorative art of the highest importance. Not only can we enjoy Italian Renaissance furniture as an artistic expression in itself, and appreciate the way of life it echoes, but we can know that its importance further issues from the fact that it was the first conscious furniture style in Europe, and that the rest of the continent found it a worthy model for their mobiliary forms for three centuries.

The living background which Alger

FIG. 3
GIFT OF THE DETROIT MUSEUM OF ART FOUNDERS SOCIETY

House affords these three *credenze* makes them doubly significant to the observer. Only in the warm atmosphere of a domestic setting, such as the rooms at Alger House, can the full significance of this furniture be grasped. There it eloquently reflects the life which it was made to accommodate and enrich: the life of the Italians during the Renaissance.

In a subsequent Bulletin, the recent important gifts of furniture from other generous donors will be reported. With so auspicious a beginning, the collection at Alger House bids fair to become the finest of its kind in America.

PERRY T. RATHBONE.

References: W. M. Odom, *A History of Italian Furniture,* 2 vols., New York, 1918; F. Schottmuller, *I Mobile e l'Abitazione del Rinascimento in Italia,* Turin, 1921; Eberlein and Ramsdell, *The Practical Book of Italian, Spanish and Portuguese Furniture,* Philadelphia, 1927.

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CALENDAR OF EXHIBITIONS AND LECTURES

EXHIBITIONS

January 1—31 Paintings, Watercolors and Wood Cuts by E. L. Kirchner.
Paintings by Cézanne.
Eighteenth Century Color Prints.

January 22—February 12 Paintings by Georges Dumesnil de la Tour and the Le Nains.

RADIO TALKS

(Sundays at 1:00 p. m. over WWJ, by John D. Morse)

January 3 "Christianity in Western Art: The Middle Ages."
January 10 "Paul Cézanne."
January 17 "Kirchner and Kandinsky."
January 24 "De la Tour and the Brothers Le Nain."

GALLERY TALKS

(Tuesdays at 8.00 p. m. and Wednesdays at 2:30 p. m.)

January 5 and 6 "The Great Men of the Renaissance."
January 12 and 13 "Artists of Northern Europe."
January 19 and 20 "Art of the Italian Mediæval Towns."
January 26 and 27 "France and the Greatness of the Middle Ages."

WORLD ADVENTURE SERIES

(Illustrated lectures)

January 10—3:30 "New Explorations in Alaska"—Father Hubbard.
January 17—3:30 "Ten Thousand Miles Around the Mediterranean"—Howard Brenton MacDonald.
8:30 "Modern Scandinavia—Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Finland, Iceland"—Howard Brenton MacDonald.
January 24—3:30 "Black Tents of Arabia"—Carl R. Raswan.
January 31—3:30 "Japan—Her Strength, Her Beauty, Her Destiny"—Pherbia Thomas.

RUSSELL A. ALGER HOUSE

EXHIBITIONS

December 13—January 22 Paintings and Drawings by Gericault.

DETROIT GARDEN CENTER

January 7—3:00 p. m. Lecture, "House Plants—Their Care and Propagation"—Ruth Mosher Place.
January 21—3:00 p. m. Lecture, "New Flowers for 1937"—James Fisher.