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EXHIBITION OF MODERN ITALIAN PAINTING

Modern Italy and Italian politics have been so much discussed in the news that it is curious that modern Italian art should be almost completely unknown. There is however a very lively modern art in Italy which was shown in an exhibition held in the Art Institute during March. The sixty paintings and few sculptures were assembled with the help of the Carnegie Institute in Pittsburgh, the Comet Gallery in New York, and some private collections in Detroit. Though the exhibition was by no means a complete survey, it illustrated the work of most of the leading contemporary Italian artists. Not many artists were represented, but each was shown in a number of canvases. This seems a better system than to confuse the spectator by a mass of unknown names of little importance, each represented by a single painting only. It is after all not very likely that our times differ greatly from the past in the number of creative artists, and produce more than a very small array of outstanding artists in one country. It must be our endeavor (even if we may fail in some instances) to select the best men, and with a sufficient number of their works give the public the opportunity to judge for itself.

Stylistic tendencies in Italy are comparable with the art of other countries. We find in the main three tendencies: impressionism, neoclassicism and abstract art. But Italian painting is unique in the relation between art and the state, for every painter and sculptor is connected with a government controlled school or academy. While as a rule academic art in other countries has become atrophied, Fascism has stimulated an energetic and progressive art in the Italian academies, most of them newly founded or recreated by Mussolini. The national revival, of which Fascism is the political expression, has also produced a revival of art in Italy. During the nineteenth century Italy, weighed down by the long and firm tradition of the past, did not experience the development of Impressionism on which contemporary painting is based. The Fascist regime made possible the break with an overpowering tradition without dictating style or subject matter, although influencing national forms and themes to some degree. But in spite of the close connection between the academies and the government, Italian art is not an expression of politics. It seems, in fact, predominantly individual and subjective in character, a development which contradicts our usual ideas of art under an absolute regime.

Modern Italian painting is, on the other hand, traditional in the best sense, for without being in any way imitative of the past, it presents the same characteristics of temperament which are found underlying the old Italian art. In early Italian painting the artists were so interested in the human form that they paid little attention to landscape, which played so important a part in the North. In the exhibition just past there was only one landscape painter, Arturo Tosi (born 1871), who was also the oldest of the artists exhibited. Tosi, whose landscapes are remarkable for solidity of composition as well as fine colors and sentiment, is from North Italy, where the

ICARUS
PAINTING BY FELICE CASORATI, ITALIAN, 1885-
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Italian landscape masters of the eighteenth century also originated.

The generation of the early 80's furnished the leading figures of modern art in Italy, as it did in Germany and France. To it belong the representatives of the "metaphysical school": Carra (born in 1881), Severini (born in 1881), and De Chirico (born in 1887), as well as the neo-classicists, Carena (born in 1880) and Casorati (born in 1885).

The painters of the Metaphysical School are superficially like the Surrealists in creating arbitrary and irrational compositions of disparate elements. Their constructions are a kind of fantasia in which fragments of old frescoes, Etruscan pottery, antique ruins and classical sculpture form a revery upon the great cultural past of their race.

Carlo Carra, one of the founders of modern abstract art, has developed in recent years an impressive, monumental style, closer to nature than formerly, but poetic and mystical in effort. He was in his earlier works related to De Chirico, the founder of the movement. One of Chirico's most important compositions, "The Gladiators" (owned by the Art Institute), shows the connection with classical art, but it is also in its simplified forms in touch with the mural-like technic of the mediaeval fresco. His versatile, decorative fantasies, seen to best advantage in the original Diaghileff ballet, are too well known in this country to need explanation.

Severini belonged, with Marinetti, Boccioni and Russolo, to the first movement of Futurism in Europe (1910-12). Like many others he has returned to a style nearer to nature, preserving at the same time a mosaic-like character under the influence of Pompeian wall paintings.

Neo-classicism in this country is

a term associated with eclectic and wearisome imitations of the old schools of art. In Italy it is used to describe a return to the purity of outline and simplicity of form which were the source of greatness in the old art; it is not an imitative movement. The proof of this is to be seen in the completely fresh interpretation given to its themes, which are often drawn, as in earlier art, from Christianity and Classic legend.

The neoclassic tendencies of Felice Carena, president of the Academy in Florence, and considered one of the earliest and best known modern painters in Italy, can be studied well in the impressive composition, "Jacob Wrestling with the Angel", which was recently acclaimed in the Carnegie International Exhibition. It proves that a creative artist's mind is quite able to give new life to an old theme.

Modigliani (born in 1884) also belonged to the great generation of the eighties. Active in Paris, where he died in 1920, he was the only artist in our exhibition who is no longer living. In his conventionalized style, related to the early Picasso, he was closely associated with the modern French school; but he has been rightly claimed by the Italians as one of the leaders of their movement. His art was well represented by three examples from Detroit collections, two from Mr. Tannahill's and one from the museum's collection.

If we exclude Campigli (born in 1893), the present leader of the "metaphysical school', well known through his frescoes in the Milan exhibition a few years ago and for the International Exhibition in Paris, we find a younger group of painters characterized by a modified impressionism. The chief representatives in our exhibition were De Pisis and Fausto Pirandello. This late return to Impressionism can be explained by the fact that modern Italian art was unmoved by Impressionism, the fountain of modern style, at the time when it revolutionized the art of other countries. In these younger Italians, however, Impressionism does not lack either inspiration or decorative qualities which we so often miss in earlier Impressionists of other countries.

De Pisis, living in Paris and noted also as writer and art critic, is connected with the abstract decorative style of Matisse, and unites a delicate French color quality with Italian balance of composition. Fausto Pirandello, the son of the playwright Luigi Pirandello, is perhaps the most original of the younger Italian painters. His large canvas, *Drought*, is not only a monumental decoration in a free impressionistic technique; it shows him as an artist of temperament and invention. His still-lifes are outstanding as examples of exquisite color combination and spirited original arrangement.

Comparing modern Italian painting with other contemporary schools, we find a remarkable sureness in space composition and well balanced design, which is a heritage from the great mural painting of the past. With few exceptions (such as in the work of Cagli, in whom we find a revival of Baroque harshness of color) the color schemes of modern Italian paintings as shown in our exhibition, are subdued, subtle and refined, they form a striking contrast to what we are accustomed to see in the modern art of Northern countries like Germany, and of America also, where a deep and rich intensity of colors prevails. One may call this weakness on the part of modern Italian art, but it is better to recognize it as an expression of an art descended from old tradition in

which fresco painting with its pale and delicate shades was preëminent. We should also remember that the southern artist follows nature when he represents his forms in the dissolved, silvery tones which the brilliant sun of the South produces; while the northern artist enlivens his paintings with the rich and intense colors with which an overcast sky endows a nature lacking strong sunlight.

Unfortunately it was not possible to represent more than a few sculptures of small size. The greatest Italian sculptor of the day, Arturo Martini, is entirely unknown in this country. We were able to show four of his bronzes. One was a sketch for a larger monument representing Samson killing the Lion. Marino Marini's *Wrestler* is remarkable for its penetrating realism, while *The Amazon*, by the Lombard sculptor Mirco, shows the influence of Etruscan art, which so greatly inspired Martini's work.

In painting as well as sculpture it is a natural inclination of the modern Italian artist to study the elements in the art of the past which appeal to a modern taste and to the nationalistic tendency: Etruscan sculpture, Pompeian decorative arts, and the frescoes of the Gothic and early Renaissance. In a movement based on this great tradition, but creating an original style in connection with the ideas of our own times, after a long interval of unproductivity, Italy is developing a new art not unworthy of its past.

In the museum's collection modern Italian painting is represented by a *Portrait of a Young Woman* by Modigliani, two paintings by De Chirico, and a small still-life in fresco technique by Severini. On permanent anonymous loan are an exquisite still-life by Pirandello and another one of similar delicacy in color combination by De Pisis. To these has been added by a recent purchase through the Founders Society a fascinating work by Felice Casorati, *Icarus*, which was greatly admired in the Carnegie International Exhibition. The spaciousness of the composition, its clear construction, the fine color scheme of warm orange-brown and gray, and the charm in the treatment of the subject, make it an outstanding example of modern Italian painting.

A CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN LANDSCAPE

Henry Elis Mattson's highly subjective painting of *Fan Rock*,[1] acquired during the past year through the Merril fund of the Founders Society, is an excellent example of the new character that American painting has assumed in the present decade. For although we are perhaps still too close to our own times to view them with any very complete perspective, nevertheless it is true that American painting done during the Nineteen Twenties differs generally from the painting of today. It is a difference that becomes apparent by comparing Mattson's landscape with Preston Dickinson's *The Ramparts, Quebec*, painted in 1925, and acquired by the Institute in 1930. Each typifies the decade to which it belongs.

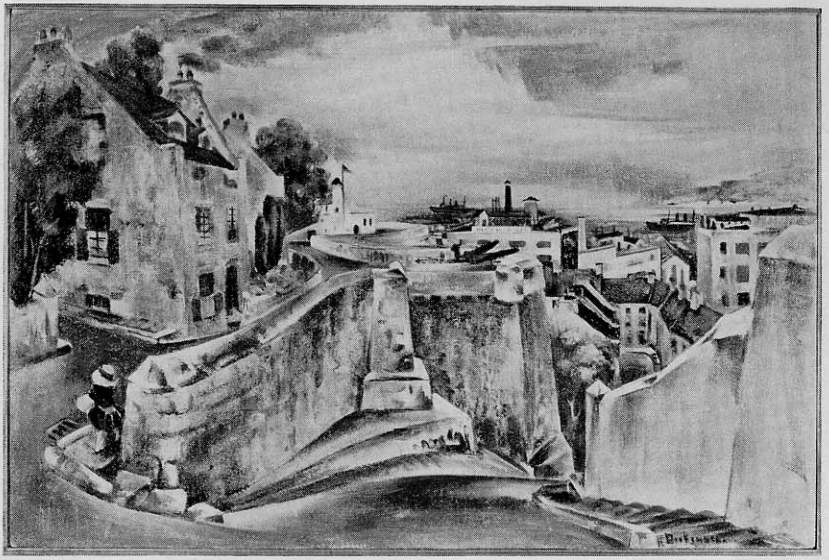
Dickinson's picture, like the majority of those painted in the Twenties, reveals an emphasis on the manner of painting rather than on the matter. The artist was primarily interested in the formal, decorative possibilities of his scene. He saw in this view of Quebec not so much an old French-speaking city, where the names of Wolfe and Montcalm still ring historically, as he saw a

FAN ROCK
PAINTING BY HENRY ELIS MATTSON, AMERICAN, 1887-
GIFT OF THE FOUNDERS SOCIETY

charming arrangement of planes and colors. One feels that almost any city built on a bluff would have provided as suitable a subject. This emphasis on style, aroused by the famous Armory Show of 1913 when American art first felt the full impact of French cubism, reached its high point in the Twenties.

The quality of clear, formal design characterizes most of the paintings of the last decade that hang in the Institute's galleries of American art. Charles Sheeler's *Home Sweet Home*, with its crisp, bright patterns of rugs and furniture, Georgia O'Keefe's *Barns*, simply a study of vertical and horizontal planes in fresh green, gray and white—these paintings are primarily decorative rather than expressive. They do not attempt any comment. And although of course each expresses the artist's individual feeling for the abstract harmony of color and line, they are, in the main, objective paintings.

How different is Mattson's landscape, painted in the Thirties! It is entirely subjective, filled with the artist's own personal enjoyment of the scene. The heritage of the Armory Show, the "significant form" so much talked of in the Twenties, is here not an end in itself, but the means of giving mass and bulk to the gray rock that looms in the background. The white band of clouds across the deep blue sky, the shimmering green of the leaves, and the cool green carpet of the ground picture not only a delightful woodland retreat where anyone might want to sit for an hour on a summer afternoon; they picture the artist's



THE RAMPARTS, QUEBEC
PAINTING BY PRESTON DICKINSON, AMERICAN, 1891-1930
PURCHASED IN 1930

own intense feeling for nature. Mattson has here expressed in paint the idea he has elsewhere said in words, "I am more preoccupied with what I feel than with what I see."[2] It is this subjective expression of emotion that chiefly distinguishes the painting of today from that of the Twenties. Formal design is no longer an end in itself; it must be used to say something.

Yet if this has been a general development from one decade to another, Mattson himself seems to have anticipated its direction from the very beginning of his career. For he has been painting subjectively ever since he bought his first box of paints in 1912 and started teaching himself how to use them. He had come to New England from Sweden, where he was born in 1887, and was working as a mechanic in Worcester when he happened to see the paint box in a store window. His first picture was a dark green lagoon, painted all in green because, as he himself declares, he did not dare combine any other colors with it.[3]

Finally, with $900 saved from his earnings as a mechanic, Mattson returned to Sweden to study painting. But in a few months he was back in America after suffering the disappointment and chagrin of being refused as a student in his native country. In Chicago he continued both his mechanic's trade and his painting, and after he had saved more money he went to Woodstock in 1916, where he studied for three months under John Carlson. Except for winters in New York he has been at Woodstock ever since, largely

1. Canvas, H. 24, W. 30 inches. Accession number 37.20.
2. Ernest Brace, *American Magazine of Art*, 1934, vol. 27, p. 648 ff.
3. ibid.
4. So far as I have been able to check, the following American museums also own paintings by Mattson: Davenport, Iowa, Municipal Art Gallery; Newark, N. J., Museum; New York City, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Whitney Museum of American Art; St. Louis, Mo., City Art Museum; Washington, D. C., Phillips Memorial Gallery; Worcester, Mass., Art Museum.

uninfluenced by the rising or waning tide of formal styles, expressing on canvas his personal reactions to the world around him. Although he sketches ocassionally when outdoors, his canvases are painted entirely from his own imagination.

And although the career of Mattson himself does not reflect the changing trend in painting from the last decade to the present, it indirectly offers striking evidence of that change. His friend John Carroll testifies that in the nearly twenty years he has known Mattson he has been painting pictures in the style of *Fan Rock*. Yet it is only within the last five years that his work has received wide-spread recognition.[4] Generally neglected in an era of emphasis on formal style, the subjective artist has today come into his own.

JOHN D. MORSE

ALGER HOUSE GARDEN

When Alger House was opened to the public it was hoped that the spacious grounds, already abounding with fine old trees and flowering shrubs, could be maintained with a care commensurate with their importance as a setting of natural beauty for the house. In time certain changes and improvements were also looked for along lines appropriate to the museum. So far the hope has been encouragingly realized. The general maintenance of the grounds is all that could be desired; the Garden Center has set out floral borders along the lakeside lawn and supplied new evergreen planting around the house; the Garden Club of Michigan has given the arbor more beauty and more interest with its memorial to Mrs. Murphy. And now, thanks to the untiring efforts of Mrs. Russell A. Alger and her committee, the work of planting the large garden area adjoining the house at the west is in progress. After plans designed by Ellen Shipman and donated by Mrs. Alger, the area is being planted in the style of an English yew garden of the seventeenth century, a type patterned after those of Italy during the Renaissance and thus appropriate to the house and to the scheme of the museum.

Towards this end, several friends of the museum have made generous donations which include the entire proceeds of a lecture given by Mrs. Benjamin S. Warren in November. Mrs. John S. Newberry has made a scale model of the garden and graciously presented it to the museum so that visitors to Alger House may enjoy an accurate idea of the finished garden while it is in the process of development.

Last year a number of Roman and Renaissance sculptures were acquired through the generosity of Mrs. Allan Shelden. These will be set up in the intricately patterned beds of clipped yew, on and along the wall, and in the pergola. Relieved against the dark foliage of their evergreen setting, standing out against the blue of the lake and the sky, or glimpsed at the end of a vista, they will persuasively evoke the atmosphere of a garden of the Renaissance.

PERRY RATHBONE

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