Certain American Painters

WHISTLER. By Theodore Duret. Lippincott; $3.75.
THE LIFE, ART, AND LETTERS OF GEORGE INNESS. By George Inness, Jr. Century; $4.
THE LIFE AND ART OF WILLIAM MERRITT CHASE. By Katherine Metcalf Roof. Scribner; $4.

In so far as America has produced works of permanent value in poetry it has been in one of two extremes, which are best exemplified, on the one hand, in the boisterous sublimity of Whitman and, on the other, in the exquisite avolations of Poe. The former absorbed life with passionate impartiality; the latter subtilized it in an atmosphere of dream. Our prose writers too, though they never attain the magnificent amplitude of a Whitman, show the same tendency toward an almost violent acceptation of fact; or else, like Henry James, they win their way to over-exquisite elaboration. There seems to be something in the shapeless intensity of our life that makes it impossible for a sensitive person to react to it without losing, in one way or another, his sense of values. We either gorge ourselves on actuality or turn from the table to seek Elysian fare.

What I have said of American literature is to a certain extent true also of American painting, though in this field we find a few distinguished intermediate types, such as George Inness, who assimilated just that modicum of European culture which he could make his own. Far more exponential of American character however is Winslow Homer, who, as realistic as Courbet, was even more drastic in his vision and more masterful with his brush. Like Whitman, he was wholly self-developed and always self-reliant, and sometimes crude in his expression; but he attained a greater selective ability than the poet, he saw more deeply and interpreted more adequately the tragedy in things, and in his later works his intrepid attack exposes the ultimate significance of the object. The merely skilful painters of the sea—Mr. Waugh, for instance—flatter the eye with surface patterns of foam on crystal greens; but for Homer the foam had just the same subsidiary meaning that it has for Ocean itself, and his eye sought and his hand rendered the tidal volumes of water, the sinewed ponderosity of the sea.

The reaction in the direction of the exquisite is most clearly seen in Whistler, in his whimsicality, his preciosity, his anxiety to be forever refined. Into these qualities he injected a goodly dosage of American bluff. His celebrated theo-

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ries were manufactured to fit his work, to cover its defects and emphasize its merits. A master decorator, he almost constantly lauded the decorative features of painting; and because he was never able to draw with a firm and confident line, he employed (and of course theorized about) a method which allowed him to make outlines recede or utterly vanish under the beautiful tones of his palette.

In looking at his pictures and in reading the various biographies of the man, one cannot help feeling that a deal of his life crept into his work to its detriment, that something of the finical æsthete is apparent in the deliberate arrangements, and that—to use his own words—he failed to "efface the footsteps of work." His color is usually beautiful; his patterns, always; and sometimes, though rarely, he forgets his affectations and paints simply and satisfyingly, as in the "Little Rose of Lyme Regis." But it is probable that he will come to be remembered chiefly for his etchings, lithographs, and pastels. He could catch, as perhaps no other artist has caught on copper or stone, the breathless beauties of a moment; and whether his pictures are full of detail or suggest large spaces with the slightest means, they show him always the born engraver sensitive to the limits, as well as to the possibilities, of his medium.

Most of his biographers have been so partisan that their books have little or no value except for the lover of anecdotes. The expression of his spleen, even when it was mere impertinence, has seemed to them the very acme of wit; and old truths arrayed in paradox have passed for profound discoveries. Even his writings, with their amateurish alliterations and needless emphasis, have been praised as literature. His latest biographer however falls into none of these errors. Mr. Duret's "Whistler" is nicely balanced, adequate, dignified. Yet, reading it, one feels that the author belongs essentially to an age that has passed. How strange, for instance, does it seem now to hear that with Whistler's nocturnes "painting was carried to its last degree of abstraction"! To paint, in the quoted words of Gustave Geffroy, "the prodigious portrait of obscurity," is surely not to make an abstraction; nor is abstraction obtained, as Mr. Duret suggests, by leaving "the motive undetermined under a general envelope of atmosphere." On the contrary, those artists who have come nearest to rendering the abstract have used clear, bold, emphatic line.

Exception must be taken also to the theory of criticism underlying Mr. Duret's book, though, to be sure, the same theory underlies almost all so-called criticism of art. He speaks of "a beauty, a charm of color, precious of itself and *distinct from* the subject"; and again, of *"applying* his color combinations to definite subjects." Like so many other critics, Mr. Duret finds it pleasantly easy to analyze a picture and then try to put together the component parts, instead of reliving the experience of the artist and then giving it creative utterance in the medium of criticism. In a work of art nothing is distinct from the subject: color, drawing, composition, what-not are all, in the finished picture, indistinguishable from the expression of the whole idea; and the artist is not, to quote Mr. Duret again, concerned with "the beauty of drawing and brushwork *apart from* the subject represented."

Another and very different type of American is illustrated in the "Life, Art, and Letters of George Inness," by his son. In him we see an absolutely sincere man, impatient of foibles, striving impetuously, reaching with boundless self-confidence after the highest that his mind can conceive, and yet conscious, painfully, of the limitations of his medium and of himself. "Oh, to paint a picture, a sunset, without paint! To create without paint!" he exclaims. "When I've painted one picture that's a true expression, I shall be ready to go." Fortunately that "one picture" was painted more than once.

It was Inness's distinction that the intensity of his feeling and his imagination enabled him, at his best, to re-create, not a scene only, but a season in a scene—as, for instance, in his "Indian Summer" or, even more notably, in the "Autumn Oaks." Before nature he could make only studies; or if he attempted to paint in presence of the actual landscape, he would change his picture with each fluctuating hour and eventually, having passed from one motive to another, find for all his labor but an incoherent mass of paint. Afterwards, however, the sap of the scene would move within him, exfoliate the non-essential, and bourgeoning rapidly, bring forth the finished fruit. The picture then, however powerful the color, would be tonal, since the various elements had already been fused through memory and imagination.

At such times he would care nothing for method; he would paint directly, glaze, or paint over the glaze in an effort to reproduce exactly

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what he saw in his mind. Unhappily, his sensitiveness was even more acute than his vision; and he was therefore seldom satisfied for long with what he had accomplished. In a picture which he had called, but a day before, his masterpiece he would suddenly find a new inspiration, and then nothing and no one could prevent him from painting over it again and again—regardless, by the way, of whether or not it had already been sold. This passion for perfection frequently led simply to incoherence; and many a noble landscape was spoiled by his restless search for the unattainable.

His son's criticism of his work is, naturally enough, often over-lavish in undiscriminating praise; and the book is marred by some quite irrelevant efforts to be humorous at the expense of contemporary painters, by some inexcusable typographical errors, and by a verbose introduction by Mr. Elliot Daingerfield. Yet taken as a whole it is one of the most fascinating biographies one may read. The numerous anecdotes are all illuminative of character, and there is such pleasant intimacy in the narration that one gets a fuller and more distinct impression of a great artist and a great man than may be obtained from any other biography of an American painter.

Inness, as I have pointed out, was conversant with European art; and what he took from Constable and the Barbizon painters was thoroughly assimilated and used advantageously. On the other hand, William Merritt Chase, with far wider knowledge and more natural facility as a painter, was able to become only the typical representative of the academic ideal, a master of mediocrity. The number of influences—German, Spanish, French, Japanese, what-not—gave to his work a certain cosmopolitan appearance dearly loved by those Americans who have visited foreign galleries, but they could not give to it the one thing that makes art of real importance in the life of man, the expression of a great personality greatly in contact with the world about him. Many an American wall is pleasanter for the average beholder because of a Chase that hangs upon it; but those who exact of art something more vital than pretty color prettily arranged with facile brush will prefer the bare spaces of an empty room.

The "Life and Art of William Merritt Chase," by Miss Roof, is interesting mainly because of its description of such art circles as there were in New York in the seventies and eighties. Rather dull and faded they seem today, with their self-conscious effort to be Bohemian without ceasing to be respectable. That they were wholly successful at least in the latter half of their effort the author assures us; and we are content to take her word that "though some of the artists frequented a saloon, it had a different sort of patronage from the present-day New York barroom," and that in those halcyon times "the kind of Bohemianism now characteristic of certain art circles happily did not exist."

The influence of Chase on American art has never been really important, though his influence on American painting is still to be perceived in the academies. The influence of Inness was valuable in helping to free the younger artists from the now notoriously vapid Hudson River school, but is today apparent only in mediocre sellers of canvas. The influence of Whistler dwindled rapidly, and not one painter of distinction traces directly to him. On the other hand, the spirit of Winslow Homer is still visible in our many sturdy realists. Though none of them has approached the tragic austerity and finality of his marines, many of them see with an equally unflinching eye and paint with a similar breadth.

The most significant painting in America, as elsewhere, has today passed beyond realism. What it may attain is perhaps best seen in the later works of Arthur B. Davies. Exquisite, but never finical, a dreamer rendering perfectly his treasurable dreams, he painted for twenty years or so, with profound knowledge, in singing line and modulated color, a personal vision of life as it revealed itself in the fairy land of his imagination. But today he no longer withdraws into himself; and if he now departs from actuality as men see it, he does so not because the forms of his imagining are lovelier than those of nature, but because he has seen and abstracted the meaning of forms and must remain faithful to that meaning rather than to mere outward semblances. In the result we find something different from idealism, something far higher than realism: we have sublimation through imaginative understanding. Out of so intense an attitude and in such strong adherence to the truth is the greatest art revealed.

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