

REALISM AND ROBERT HENRI

ROBERT HENRI, HIS LIFE AND WORKS. *Edited by William Yarrow and Louis Bouché. 4to. 35 pages. 40 reproductions. Boni and Liveright. \$10.*

NONE but the most envious of modern malcontents would attack the editorial judgement which named Robert Henri as the painter entitled to introduce a new library dedicated exclusively to American art. We must not forget, in the deluge of strange things begotten of Cubism, and of other movements not easy to catalogue, that Mr Henri, too, was once a radical; that he appeared when the solemn stagnancy of Innes and Chase reigned unassailed; and that he brought life and energy and immense enthusiasm to this country when our art seemed fated to unending dullness. He has not been denied honours and official recognition—he is represented in the Luxembourg, and he is well known in Dallas and Kansas City; it is true that his work is the fruition of the art of yesterday; but we must remember that he has faced the modern uprising cheerfully, sensible of his own abilities and consistently giving us the best that is in him, and that his attitude towards the younger men who have ridiculed his pictures has been one of commendable tolerance, instead of that angry recrimination so characteristic of painters as they inevitably drift into the Academy.

Mr Henri has been a force both for good and for ill in the pictorial life of America. With his personality and his blithe activity he has been able to promote the interest of many students and amateurs to a serious consideration of art. During a long period he was regarded as a man of advanced ideas and rebellious opinions; he had the qualities of a leader; he established a school and his pupils, now numerous and productive, were fascinated as much by the engaging audacity of his convictions as by his technical cunning. His doctrine, that of the realist, is sound in so far as it concentrates attention on the concrete world, and provides the student a tangible point of departure. Its limitations arise from its lack of depth. Mr Henri's principle is for the beginner, and particularly the struggling young American who, in most cases, is totally devoid of cultural equipment, and who demands the original stimulus of broad surface ideas.

At present realism is a necessity that cannot be over-emphasized. Something impressive and strengthening by its actuality is imperative in modern art; but ideas clearer, more comprehensive and more profound than the postulates of Mr Henri must be inculcated upon the student to carry him beyond his initial concern with objectivity. A true realism, not a mere presentation of surface aspects, is primarily and intrinsically constructive. Its logical progress is towards a complete realization of the thickness, the fulness, and the space-filling character of the forms emotionally stirring to the artist. The expedients of correct natural tones and the accidents of texture are imitative devices, and too frequently end in cheapness to be of service to a world that clamours for a meaning in pictures. Mr Henri's methods terminate in illusion, and while it is but just to say that he is endowed with a sincere vision that is realistic rather than decorative, he fails, in the true artistic sense, to distinguish between realism and appearance.

In the light of aesthetic validity the semi-decorative, non-representative painting imported to-day from France is not different from a conception which makes possible the extension of form into spaces larger and freer than practicable in sculpture; but in either case the imagination must intervene to insure a result that is significantly expressive and beautiful. The genuine artist reconstructs the world, and a veritable realism is fundamentally an abstraction, and as such must be appraised in the same terms as the French art just referred to—both are conceptions and not literal representations. Mr Henri, first and last a portrait painter, has been occupied with naturalistic accuracy; he limits himself to one figure and the sitter is delineated with a love for pigmental sensations; in place of imagination, which binds the constituents of a picture into a firm synthetic structure, we find a liberal sentiment in search of types—gipsies, Indians, Irish—characters attractive to the spectator largely through the adventitious interest of literary illustration. His world is a world of vision and not of mind.

We have already noted Mr Henri's respectful patience and sympathy with the iconoclastic art emanating from France since the death of Cézanne. He has found himself, in a measure, dispossessed, but he has had the wisdom to continue in his own course and not to undertake problems which his temperamental leanings would make impossible of solution. In this connection it is a pleasure to call attention to the reciprocal consideration with which he has been treat-

ed in the text of the monograph. The editors, young men of distinction in the later tendencies of painting, ambitiously opposed to practically every tenet that Mr Henri stands for, have been neither bigoted nor limited, and have presented their subject with justice and understanding. The biography is complete and satisfactory; Mr Henri's aims and ideals analysed; his work estimated for what it successfully accomplishes and not flouted because it does not happen to be "modern"; and his position in contemporary art stated in the admirable spirit of fairness.

This volume is important: its appearance marks the beginning of a new library of art. It takes courage to found a series of books devoted to men who are neither dead nor European, and it is gratifying to record that the publishers feel that an audience awaits their venture. The reviewer, in writing the foreword to the undertaking, said: "The literature engendered by recent art has been abundant and often brilliant, but it has been concerned with psychology and technique, and its specialized dispersions have confused the general movement. The American public, bewildered by so much theorizing, has come to regard its own art as an unintelligible imitation of the French, and its artists as an inhuman class of men blind to the life surrounding them." This condition has led to the establishment of the American Art Library:

"Artists of unquestionable accomplishment will first be represented, followed by the younger men as their work takes maturity. I am convinced that a succession of monographs will show that modern American art, while inferior in magnitude, is equal to the European in variety and interest."

The book is handsomely bound and its general appearance one of dignity and taste, but the reviewer's copy bears evidence of hasty printing. A more agreeable type than old De Vinne might have been used, Bookman, for instance; the text should have been set in closer for nice spacing and printed on laid book-paper; the engraving is exceptionally clear, but any one of the newer gravure processes would have added to its quality, to say nothing of a few reproductions in colour.

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