ART FOR THE LAYMAN

By Robert Cortes Holliday

AN exceedingly interesting thing to observe is the highly sophisticated acquaintance with all the arts displayed by so much of the first rate fiction now current. The almost unassailable artist in prose in the history of our American literature, Hawthorne, was quite naive, and decidedly amusing, in his efforts to reflect a sensitive appreciation of such cultural subjects as painting and sculpture. As W. C. Brownell has noted, he seemed to think that sculpture was a matter of marble, and, of course, it had to be something classical. The urbane Autocrat, too, gave little indication of being at all up on such matters. And our purest æsthete, Poe, was seemingly indifferent in this respect. Nowadays, however, one is tempted to fancy that the very considerable audience for the most intelligent novelists of the day is a remarkable society of connoisseurs of the whole field of arts and crafts. Hergesheimer, Van Vechten, Aldous Huxley, Michael Arlen, Elinor Wylie, to mention just these — is there any æsthetic erudition too esoteric for them to call upon the reader to savor? The rather diverting idea occurs to one that the elegant author of "The Picture of Dorian Gray" would himself be perhaps a bit stumped by this rampant cosmopolitan sensitivity to the delicate nuances of everything precious, from priceless gems to exotic viands. And if the reader cannot when he sees it recognize such an obvious thing as a Pont-Aven canvas, or some such thing, how can he get on at all?

Well, in connection with the various praiseworthy educational activities now going which should aid in equipping the popular understanding to follow the strikingly enlightened fiction of the time, is the happy fact that art books designed for the general reader are all in all of a much better character than they were a few years ago. At the moment, it is agreeable to note the appearance of a new series of monographs dealing with modern painters, which, indeed, may be highly recommended "to those who wish quickly to be introduced to the life and work of these

artists without having to peruse long and complicated treatises" — and, further, to students as well.

We get our most authoritative styles in men's clothes from London, most of our standard children's toys from Germany, our smartest women's fashions from Paris. And France is the prime source of art criticism. Thus a piquant interest may be felt in the circumstance that, as a flyleaf line states, these little volumes in English have been "made and printed in France". The subjects of the four volumes of the "Masters of Modern Art" series now issued are French painters, the authors are Frenchmen. The general theme, which may very loosely be termed Impressionism, has been a very ticklish one.

Camille Mauclair, who writes the "Claude Monet", is one of the most sensitive, charming, thoughtful, and penetrating writers on painting anywhere to be found today; his little study of Watteau, published a number of years ago, stands as a gem of art criticism of the first water. A good deal has gone under the mill since Monet first opened the windows of painting and let in the sunlight. From being attacked as an insane radical he has come to be questioned as an established master. M. Mauclair presents with admirable clarity and justness both the case for Monet and the truth of great painting which preceded him.

Any real appreciation of Cézanne is necessarily bound up with more than a little comprehension of the processes of painting, and so it is quite appropriate that the brief essay on him here, by Tristan L. Klingsor, should stress, in language not overtechnical, this aspect of a painter who "drew by color", whose method of work was quite unsuitable for the expression of contours, and who, at the same time, was much more of a realist than an Impressionist, recording "the solidity of things". The value of the text on Renoir, by François Fosca, unfortunately is pretty negligible; about the only thing given the reader worth taking away is the recognition of the affiliation between Renoir and the painters of the eighteenth century, such as Fragonard and Boucher.

Though that strange genius Gauguin had some picturesque affiliation with the Impressionist group at the beginning, he later turned into very much of another story, being deeply of the decorative temperament, "classically minded without knowing it". The essay on him, by Robert Rey, is both decidedly illuminating as a study and highly colorful as a biographical narrative. The reader becomes increasingly aware that the trouble with Gauguin was that he had too much to say to be a painter only.

Each volume of this series contains a bibliography and includes forty illustrations in colotype.

Masters of Modern Art. First four volumes. Dodd, Mead and Company.