BRONZE SCULPTURE IN AMERICA: ITS VALUE TO THE ART HISTORY OF THE NATION: BY GILES EDGERTON

IT HAS taken us long in America to create and identify an art which has finally achieved honest, fearless, national expression. And it is not singular that this should be so, when we consider the component parts of our civilization, its beginning and its development. Usually, the primitive art of a country faithfully represents the rudimentary stages of its civilization; but this could only hold true with the art of races indigenous to the soil, whereas the people who have evolved into the American nation (as it is classified today) were usurpers from the start, destroyers of primitive conditions. And furthermore they were not of any one land or tradition, but came laden with the confusing social characteristics of practically every nation of the globe. It has thus of necessity been a slow process to secure a composite of these nationalities which would prove the evolution of a new nation having sufficiently marked and definite characteristics to stimulate an art expression that would be essentially native.

For not only did our early conditions preclude all possibility of an original primitive art, but also quite naturally each nationality and its descendants claimed in turn the superiority of the methods and inspiration of their own artistic forefathers, endeavoring to create out of an hereditary and yet alien point of view a standard of art for this vast new country. And so from time to time our young people were sent to Paris, or to Munich, or to Antwerp, as the vogue happened to be, not consciously to plagiarize, but rather to gain what their home environment had taught them was the only true art education—this could not be otherwise when each newcomer to the nation remained loyal to the insular tradition of foreign art culture. And as these traditional dogmas from the studios of the European world become scattered abroad in America, no one prevailing, and all influencing, it finally seemed as though harmony could only be secured
by a general enthusiasm for anything foreign. And the word "imported" became the hallmark of all excellence, from oil paintings to coat buttons.

There was much tumultuous stirring over fierce heat in the crucible of time before anything like a type of people or conditions could be found in the sediment. For a nation must be hardened into a mass of definite outline, however primitive or unfinished, before it can furnish to art a genuine inspiration sufficient to control imagination already thrilled by the accomplishment of other lands. Thus it is not difficult to realize that until very recent years we had not, as a matter of fact, been entitled to a distinctive national art, because we had not yet actually a distinctive national flavor. For an art to be truly national must spring from the irresistible desire of the artist to depict conditions about him which overwhelm him with their truth, an understanding of which must be born in a man's blood—an understanding, a comradeship no alien could experience. And now that our nation has crystallized into more fixed social and industrial outlines, our art must find greater and greater inspiration from the conditions which surround the daily life and are a part of the intimate knowledge of men with imagination. Strangely enough the very confusion of interests, that for centuries meant mere bewilderment and discouragement, have in the fusing produced conditions of limitless variation, in which the human qualities of every nation on earth find with us a modified expression. And now at last America is no longer wholly at the mercy of every new or old imported art impulse. We are learning to do the modifying ourselves; and are adapting and absorbing foreign conditions for our own digestion. There is no decrease in our immigration, and foreign settlements are multiplying over the face of our earth; in New York alone there are specialized theaters for Germans, Italians, Russians, Chinese and Syrians, and foreign pictures still flood the galleries of our dealers; yet, in spite of all, we are becoming definitely established, and are growing to regard these conditions as one piquant phase of American civilization. Thus by irresistible logic we would today call a painting of foreign children dancing in the Bowery an example of American art, supposing, of course, that it were painted with the point of view (the humor, the audacity, the kindness) which an American artist would bring to the study of such a scene. On the other hand, the same artist might paint a funny little gamin kite-flying on Montmartre, which would be interesting to artists and valuable to himself, but not significant to America in relation to her art history as a nation.
AMERICAN BRONZE SCULPTURE

And partly because it is logical and honest, it so happens that the most significant of our sculptors, and particularly the men and women who are working in bronze, are presenting American life in all stages of its contemporaneous development, and also almost invariably modeling with the intimate sympathy born of kinship with the nation whose greatness and degradation they depict.

It is doubly to the credit of the younger American artists that through the miasma of dullness, egotism and superstition which has surrounded art growth in this country, at last there has sprung into existence a vital, significant home-made art—an expression of truth and beauty that could only be the product of an American art impulse because presenting with frankness, honesty and force the conditions which in combination are alone characteristic of this nation. And not only are these younger and more virile painters and sculptors filled with interest and joy in the strange, erratic, picturesque civilization which surrounds them, but into their expression of this life they have infused the qualities of mind and soul which are temperamental to the nation. Where we are audacious, humorous, unhampered by tradition, frank yet keen, so they feel must be eventually the attitude of the American artist toward the life he expresses on canvas or in marble, and indeed so already is becoming the feeling of the most significant of our artists in the best and most creative of their work. You notice this absolutely original American quality in the paintings of the “contemporaneous school” and more particularly in the workers in bronze. And incidentally there is no bronze sculpture of this century so forceful, vivid, so interesting in conception and individual in craftsmanship as the achievements of our own sculptors, whose work is instinct with the characteristics of the civilization of their own land. Already in America (in spite of the fact that Rogers groups are still cordially accepted as art standards in many of our smaller towns) bronze sculpture has attained a spontaneity and unconscious truthfulness that renders it a significant phase of American art, not afraid to bear the national label. These artists express the life of all interesting conditions about them. It is a human art that thrills and stirs, the art that finds a dancing street child as fruitful a subject as the heroine of a Greek poem, and a foolish, grubby, tumbling bear cub as full of inspiration as the horses of Hercules.

It is this impulse which started Frederic Remington west to model Indians and cowboys, and which impels Edith Woodman Burroughs to hasten to her studio to model the old woman she has just passed
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around the corner; which forced Solon Borglum away from the Beaux Arts back to the prairies; which enters into the figures of Abastenia Eberle when she models the little girls of the slums whirling in a fine ecstasy to tinkling hand-organ tunes; which Carl Haag, although a Swede, expresses in his miners and immigrants and in his “Universal Motherhood.” modeled from a man’s memory of his great and good peasant mother: this development, which is also expressed in bronze sculpture in the work of Eli Harvey, MacNeil, of Albert Humphreys who does animals, and Albert Humphriss, who models the Indians of poetry, of Louis Potter with his great sympathy and tenderness toward the crude Northwest, of Anna Vaughn Hyatt, Gutzon Borglum, of F. G. R. Roth, of Proctor and Bartlett and Niehaus, is almost wholly within the past decade.

Prior to this, with the exception of a few great men bound by the conventions of foreign traditions, our art in bronze was but a history of confused experimenting, either wholly under the domination of foreign criticism or crudely with unfinished technique expressing revolt that but met with laughter. Clark Mills was practically the first bronze sculptor whom we count in our history, and his equestrian statue of General Jackson still stands in front of the Capitol at Washington, the metal hoofs ineffectually pawing the air, work faulty in composition and technique and without joy for the beholder, but worthy of respect because of the rich audacity, the fine courage and high heart that dared to embody a conviction so fearlessly.

Following this period was a long list of bronze public atrocities erected in helpless parks and squares. Some of the bronze decoration in Central Park, for instance, can still cause the serious art lover to mop his brow, and the smaller parks of the west and south courageously present spectacles of naive and grotesque celebrities, evidences of unthinking and painstaking toil in imitating whatever may have been impressively rococo in foreign art conditions.

And then came, without art ancestry or herald, a new group of bronze workers, wholly remote from this period of landscape crudities, men of genius, wide culture, fine appreciation of the art universal; men with the great gift of imagination, who reverenced their work and gave lavishly their health and strength and courage to further a beautiful, impersonal scholarly portrayal of an art which was a cross between Greek inspiration and English pedantry. Saint-Gaudens, J. Q. A. Ward, Olin Warner, Daniel Chester French, Herbert Adams, MacMonnies, all Americans, but their art, however
“THE MOUNTAIN CLIMBER;” FREDERIC REMINGTON, SCULPTOR.

“THE BRONCHO BUSTER;” FREDERIC REMINGTON, SCULPTOR.
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"THE PRIMITIVE CHANT:"
H. A. MACNEIL, SCULPTOR.

Courtesy of Theodore B. Starr.

"THE SIGNAL:"
ALBERT HUMPHREY, SCULPTOR.
"Pursued": Gutzon Borglum, Sculptor.
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BRONZE DOOR OF BOSTON PUBLIC LIBRARY:
DANIEL CHESTER FRENCH, SCULPTOR.
"BOY AND HERON;" FREDERICK MACMONNIES, SCULPTOR.
"INDIAN WARRIOR:" A. P. PROCTOR, SCULPTOR.

"THE GREAT GOD PAN:"
GEORGE GRAY BARNARD, SCULPTOR.
"PRAIRIE COURTSHIP:" E. W. DEMING, SCULPTOR.
PANTHER: ANNA VAUGHN HYATT, SCULPTOR.

"DANCING GIRLS:" ABASTENIA EBERLE, SCULPTOR.
"SURPRISED:" ELI HARVEY, SCULPTOR.
"THE AUK MOTHER:" LOUIS POTTER, SCULPTOR.

PORTRAIT BUST OF RICHARD HOVEY:
ROLAND H. PERRY, SCULPTOR.
distinguished in subject and execution, could never figure as significant in the actual development of art that is constructively national.

If the foregoing paragraph remotely suggests that the greatness of men like Saint-Gaudens or MacMonnies is in the smallest degree undervalued, it misrepresents the point of view of The Craftsman. The fact that a nation craves historians intimate and personal, who record her own development in the arts, need not necessarily indicate that a great universal expression of art lacks the most genuine enthusiasm. Whistler, Sargent, Saint-Gaudens, all stand for colossal achievement, but the point is that this achievement might without a single variation as appropriately owe its inspiration to France or Germany or England; it is truly the final expression of the art universal, and yet, if the inspiration had been by chance owed to Germany or to England, American art in its struggle for individual growth would not suffer seriously at the loss. What these men have accomplished for us nationally is mainly in developing the standard of public taste; for art that has grandeur of thought and strength and beauty of expression is a good thing indeed for the public to recognize, and has a profound significance to a nation ethically, if one may use ethics in relation to art as opposed to vulgarity. But the real value of the work of these men has already achieved a national recognition, and it would be a banality to dwell upon it in this article if it were not for the danger of the unthinking misunderstanding already stated.

The utmost that The Craftsman seeks to do is to present whatever there may be of genuine homely art in this country, and everywhere to seek for a new expression of it, leaving the public to praise, criticize or reject—a feat which it not infrequently performs consecutively toward a single phase of art.

AN INTERESTING contrast in modern bronze sculpture is presented at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. In the same room, side by side, are characteristic exhibits of the English and American schools. The English, severe, classic, conventional, over-exquisite, unhuman, typical of mental reticence and a fear of audacity and originality in expression that amounts almost to eccentricity, respectable ornaments for dreary British drawing rooms. Nearby and less conspicuous in size and numbers are the American models, men, women, children, animals, vivid, gay, reckless, alive with the everlasting restless energy of turbulent American life. They reveal the frankness of a land still edged with pioneer habitation; the vast, clean, empty spaces of the prairie have
touched the spirit of these bronze sculptors; tradition has not pressed
upon them and so their expression of life is spontaneous, audacious;
and the sense of humor which tinges all existence in America finds
delightful freedom of expression, bringing about a certain whimsical
handling of subject, a suggestion of picturesque philosophy that,
among many other by-results, incidentally saves this phase of art
from mawkish sentimentality or effeminacy. And as one glances
from the smooth, futile, tidy British bronzes, to the American work,
thrilling with the life of the land which produced it, one realizes
afresh the unprofitable character of drawing room ornament as a
source of art inspiration.

The better understanding of out of doors which has come to
America within the past few years (brought about by our overcrowded
metropolitan conditions, and the writings of a few wise men who have
grown weary of walls and roofs) has touched also the spirit of our
artists and sent our men, sculptors and painters, out to our mountains
and plains to bring back to our inhospitable academies records of
phases of life big and splendid, raw, magnetic and temporary. Rem-
ington has felt the rhythm of those long, slow prairie days and wide
empty blue nights; he knows the exultation of galloping mile upon
mile from nowhere into the unknown, and his bronze work as well
as his painting thrills with the inspiration of the great new-old West,
with the life of the Indians who are leaving it, cowboys who vivify
it and with the memories upon it which a crass, flippant, commercial
spirit is obliterating as swiftly as possible. MacNeil, too, and the
Borglum brothers trekked swiftly away to the west when they grew
to man’s estate in their work. Out of doors and the primitive people
and conditions of our land seemed to have been the first reaction from
classic conventionality and the dull imitation of the art of a generation
ago. Later on, other men found a vivid interest in the picturesque
conditions all about them, in Boston even as in the Bowery; but at
first the revolt was so heartwhole, so aggressive, so sweeping that
nothing short of the most typical American condition seemed to satisfy
the thirst for self-expression of the nation.

E. W. Deming is another of the men who from the beginning of
his work has never swerved from the things he knew best,—the West
and the poetry thereof, the folklore which the old Indian chiefs told
him, the spiritual side of the races which Remington knows in color
and legend. In Alaska Louis Potter found the primitive surround-
ings that furnished him with zeal for great work. What stoicism,
what strange breadth of maternal solicitude, what heroic repression
he found in those crude remote people who seem born to inspire monuments. Proctor’s interest is rather in the life which first claimed the woods and the underbrush, the plain and the river brink. This is true also of Albert Humphreys (in his bronze work, at least).

But leaving the forest and the plains for the city, still keeping to the intimate understanding of life and the whole rich expression of it, we find the work of Abastenia Eberle, of Janet Scudder and of Bessie Potter Vonnoh. Just what life is doing now in welding people into a new civilization is of sufficient importance to these people, but their interest lies in what it is doing to all the people, young and old, gay and sad, rich and poor.

And still beyond the groups of people already mentioned are the individual men and women whom one may not classify and yet whom one cannot ignore in the presentation of this phase of our art development. The work of George Grey Barnard, for instance, is American in feeling, in interest, in emotional quality, and yet in expression it is much more closely allied to the modern French school of art with Rodin as the master, and the work of Roland Hinton Perry again does not place itself with any one group of men, for he began modeling with a strongly classic predisposition, but as he works from year to year, he develops his own individuality, which shows itself in an infinite variety of subject and in a variation of technique. In his recently finished study of Salome, he is much closer to the school of Saint-Gaudens and MacMonnies, for there is grace and spirit and classical expression, and some symbolism,—if that is essential for one’s interest in art,—while in his various statues and portrait busts the technique is essentially individual and there is a presentation of temperament at once subtle and elusive. Clio Bracken is another artist of an interest difficult to label. She, too, can capture in bronze portraits the quality of the sitter which makes for individuality, which is neither feature nor color but expression that belongs to mood or whim. And yet anyone who is familiar with Mrs. Bracken’s poetical work, as, for instance, the decoration of the Omar Khayyam punch bowl, cannot fail to realize her gift of imagination and idealism which is much more closely related to art in its universal application.

That the trend of bronze sculptors appears thus more and more toward a national expression both in inspiration and technique seems the inevitable conclusion of those who are seeking to understand what actual progress art is making among us, and what hope we have of a final achievement that will be commensurate with our success in science, commerce, war and beauty.
ALTER EGO

The work of the western sculptors has not been treated at any length in this article, as it is our purpose to give later in The Craftsman a complete presentation of what is being accomplished by the more significant sculptors of Chicago and that vicinity.

In this article we have said very little about the work of the distinctively western sculptors, who form a group quite separate from the sculptors who choose western subjects. In a future number of The Craftsman we purpose to give a number of examples of the work of men and women who are doing rarely good things out in Chicago and other western cities, for the tale of American sculpture is by no means complete without such men as Lorado Taft and the school he has gathered around him in the West. Oddly enough, with the exception of Charles J. Mulligan, whose sympathy with the working-man gives to his single figures and groups a rugged human quality that has the strength of Meunier without his tragedy, the western sculptors, men and women alike, seem to turn away from the portrayal of the western life as it actually surrounds them to subjects more dreamy and idealistic, such as is shown in Lorado Taft’s superb “Fountain of the Great Lakes.” The quality of pure imagination is very marked in these sculptors, who are gaining every day in artistic stature and whose work is interesting to a degree.

ALTER EGO

IN SOME strange way I do not understand,
You seem to be another self of mine
Newly discovered. At the hidden shrine
Where none save me has ever made demand,
I found you worshiping; and hand to hand
You met my challenge with the countersign.
What magic weaver did our ways entwine
In what long dead and unremembered land?

And when I sang to you my secret song,
The yearning heart-cry known to only me,
At the first bar you joined the melody,—
Bass to my treble, confident and strong,—
And firmly touched the one elusive key
In the grand chord that I have sought so long.

—Elsa Barker.