PIONEERS IN MODERN AMERICAN ART: A GROUP OF MEN WHOSE INFLUENCE HAS GREATLY AIDED ITS DEVELOPMENT: BY GILES EDGERTON

American art has become a legitimate subject of conversation in Paris and Munich, and even in New York and Boston. Having secured recognition, it has begun to awaken curiosity. The most practical among us have commenced to say: "It could not, of course, have become good all at once; crude yesterday, and technically interesting this morning; futile and imitative last spring, but vital and individual this fall." And thinking thus, it is natural that our interest should be stirred toward the men of power, of patience, of courage, who for some decades past have been setting the example of good painting in this country,—men of culture and critical judgment developed by wide travel and study; men with vast confidence in the art possibilities in America, which they have fostered more by deeds than words. One marvels not a little at the greatness of these workers and their apparent obliviousness to the press agent's broad and smooth path to fame.

But evidently fame was not the question with them, nor the greatness of American art, nor any definite self-conscious motive. Their own best development was what they were aiming for in the first place, and in the second place the most convincing expression of that development in their art. It was their relation to the progress of this art that they considered, not the relation of their art to the world. The latter point of view is not to be despised however in the progress of a country, for the more national and, in a way, insular, art becomes, the more historical and definitely valuable it proves to a nation. This however is wholly a different story, and one that has often been told in The Craftsman.

But of these men, who by their quiet greatness have helped to build up the sturdy, permanent foundations of our art, there is another tale to tell, one in which neither the nation nor the individual pre-eminently figures—but rather an objective art, through which each man has striven for his highest achievement. Some of these men have held close to the traditional greatness of foreign lands, already established for centuries, both in subject and expression; others, holding to the classic in technical expression, have chosen subjects from their immediate environment or from historical events of significance in their own lands. The tremendous pull of the picturesque
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conditions of America in the process of strange and swift development has not appealed to them as a whole as it has to our younger men, who find the very big crudeness and infinite variety of our nation a constant inspiration. These older men have painted or modeled as the desire came, in Florence or New Hampshire, in Munich or Boston, seeking only to reach the, to them, supreme goal in art, their own highest standpoint of perfection.

There is one man whose portrait appears among the illustrations for this article, yet who may not properly be ranked as one of the group of objective workers. Gutzon Borglum, while in one sense he belongs with the men who are beginning to influence American art, is nevertheless essentially subjective,—a sculptor of natural environments, a man who is contributing largely to the present awakening of a national spirit in our art. He is neither an idealist nor a dreamer,—rather is he a seer of visions, a prophet, a worker in the midst of vast surroundings and extraordinary conditions, yet one who sees beauty always in the real and poetry in all truth; and also he is pre-eminently of the present, with fresh and vital power to convince other workers of the force and truth in which he himself believes.

The man who will step into the future quite alone in the rare quality of his influence on American art is Childe Hassam, an artist who has in turn been both an intensely vivid individualist, and a classicist without apology. In his younger days he unaffectedly reproduced the technique of Monet, but quickly evolved from it a method of his own, at once new and brilliant, as definite a forward step in art as Monet’s own creative methods had been. He saw color in mighty, splendid volumes, and discovered a new way of holding it to the canvas,—not the splashes of deep, rich color which Paris had always been crazy about, but color put on in so vivid, so sparkling a fashion that the wonder of his sea and sky and flesh tint has made an overwhelming impression upon the art in his own time the world over. Naturally such work as Mr. Hassam’s has brought forth scores of imitators, good and bad. He has indeed unconsciously come more nearly to establishing a school of American landscape-painting than almost any other of our artists, with possibly the exception of the late John Twachtman. And he is undoubtedly more imitated than Twachtman because the style which he has created is more noticeable, more brilliant, though not more creative.

To many of our artists here in America, our critics, our laymen, John H. Twachtman ranks as the greatest of our landscape painters. Certainly as a dreamer of mysteriously beautiful dreams, as a lover
From a photograph by Jessie Tarbox Beals.

CHILDE HASSAM, AMERICAN PAINTER.
From a photograph by Jessie Tarbox Beals.

GUTZON BORGLUM, AMERICAN SCULPTOR.
From a photograph by Jessie Tarbox Beals.
From a photograph by Jessie Tarbox Beals.

Daniel Chester French, American Sculptor.
J. ALDEN WEIR, AMERICAN PAINTER.
of nature in every spiritual mood, as a painter of fine, gray thoughts, of fleeting memories, of atmospheric conditions that carry to the observer tenderness or sadness, and all those very subtle joys and sorrows that nature brings or withholds as a man is poet or plodder, Twachtman is without peer in America. He was one from whom artists young and old sought inspiration as well as knowledge.

It is hard to tell to what extent this painter of nature thrilled consciously to the sights and sounds of sea and sky and woods; or how much of the poetry of his canvases is due to pure genius that sees color and form only, but sees it so finely and sensitively that all else is included therein. Only a painter’s dearest friends or most intimate pupils may give us the solution of this problem. But of one thing we feel sure, that the greatness of Twachtman we, as a nation, are just beginning to realize and his influence has but commenced to fulfill its task.

The definite effect of the work of a man like Irving Wiles is already noticeable in the portrait work of the younger school of American portrait painters. In many ways Mr. Wiles’ method is more often imitated than those of Sargent or Whistler, for it is less whimsical in technique, more reasonable in composition than these men who rank as the greatest in our country. Hence his methods are more actually at the service of the students who are striving for the best possible results for their efforts. Mr. Wiles’ own progress is not at an end; from year to year one finds in his exhibited work added beauty of color and simplicity of brush work.

Daniel Chester French’s sculpture has one quality in common with Augustus Saint-Gaudens’—unerring good taste and almost faultless execution. He is essentially an intellectual sculptor, a man who never forgets the standards and art histories of all times and peoples. Whatever his subject, his personal impression of the work is always more or less classical. But what splendid conceptions of greatness in all its human manifestations French has given us—national ideals to attain to and hold to for our country’s permanent uplifting! And always given with enduring beauty!

Karl Bitter is another one of America’s sculptors, the power of whose achievement has reached men and women who are working in our schools and studios. He is less conspicuously modern and national than Borglum, and on the other hand shows distinctly less classical influence than French and Saint-Gaudens. There is a fine spontaneity about his figures and groups, coupled with originality of feeling and a certain real suggestion of very vivid temperament in the
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artist. Although still a distinctly young man, Mr. Bitter is a force in all matters of national art development.

In all gathering of artists in this country for the discussion of important art matters; wherever the real beginning of American art in landscape work is known; whenever one remembers the founders of our successful art societies; when one wishes to refer to the first of our painters of serenely beautiful landscapes, the name of J. Alden Weir is registered. Mr. Weir was among the first of our landscape men (after the time of Inness and Martin) who painted familiar country as he felt and saw it. He listened to no other man’s message, nor sought to evade the straightforward honesty of his own at a time when there was much fear and confusion in the native art expression of our country.

Although the seven men presented in this group of artists in no way form a school of art, nor are they related in any technical expression, they nevertheless are so significant, as representing a particular period of our art development, that it seems natural that they should be presented in one article as being more or less pioneers at a time when their work was of widest significance to the nation.

THE MIDNIGHT LUNCH ROOM

WITH little money one may enter here,
     And yet those haggard faces watch outside
     The frosty window—and the door is wide!
The clatter to my unaccustomed ear
Of dishes and harsh tongues, is like a spear
     Shaken within the sensitive, wounded side
     Of Silence. Soiled, indifferent hands provide
Pitiful fare and cups of pallid cheer.

In my warm, fragrant home an hour ago
     I wrote a poem on the peace they win
     Who worship Beauty. Let me breathe it low:
What would it mean if chanted in this din?
What would it say to those out in the snow,
     Who hunger, and who may not enter in?

—ELSA BARKER.