PROGRESS IN OUR NATIONAL ART MUST SPRING FROM THE DEVELOPMENT OF INDIVIDUALITY OF IDEAS AND FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION: A SUGGESTION FOR A NEW ART SCHOOL: BY ROBERT HENRI

Here has been much discussion within the last year on the question of a national art in America. We have grown to handle the subject lightly, as though it were a negotiable quantity, something to be noted in the daily record of marketable goods. And the more serious have talked much about “subject” and “technique,” as though if these were acquired, this desired thing, a national art, would flourish quickly and beautifully; whereas, as a matter of fact, a national art is not limited to a question of subject or of technique, but is a real understanding of the fundamental conditions personal to a country, and then the relation of the individual to these conditions.

And so what is necessary for art in America, as in any land, is first an appreciation of the great ideas native to the country and then the achievement of a masterly freedom in expressing them. Take any American and develop his mind and soul and heart to the fullest by the right work and the right study, and then let him find through this training the utmost freedom of expression, a fluid technique which will respond to every inspiration and enthusiasm which thrills him, and without question his art will be characteristically American, whatever the subject. For through his own temperament, coupled with the right power of utterance, he will, all unconsciously, express his own attitude toward life in whatsoever he creates, and his picture or statue or sonnet will testify to his nationality. For a man ceases to imitate when he has achieved the power to fully and freely express his own ideas; and every man with imagination who has given the best of himself to work, who has learned to think honestly and see clearly, can no more escape the possession of ideas than of ideals, and so the American painter, with brain and brush liberated by the greatest possible self-development, is just as certain to express the
quality of his country as he is in himself to present an American type or speak the language of his native land.

Thus it is not possible to create an American art from the outside in. Art does not respond to the whim of the millionaire who would create art galleries as he does libraries. It is quite impossible to start out with a self-conscious purpose of springing a ready-made national art on the public simply because we are grown up enough to realize the value of such an expression. Art is too emotional to respond to coercion or discipline; and it cannot successfully become a whim of the rich, even in America. For successful flowering it demands deep roots, stretching far down into the soil of the nation, gathering sustenance from the conditions in the soil of the nation, and in its growth showing, with whatever variation, inevitably the result of these conditions. And the most showy artificial achievement, the most elaborate imitation of art grown in France or Germany, are valueless to a nation compared with this product that starts in the soil and blooms over it. But before art is possible to a land, the men who become the artists must feel within themselves the need of expressing the virile ideas of their country; they must demand of themselves the most perfect means of so doing, and then, what they paint or compose or write will belong to their own land. First of all they must possess that patriotism of soul which causes the real genius to lay down his life, if necessary, to vindicate the beauty of his own environment. And thus art will grow as individual men develop, and become great as our own men learn to think fearlessly, express powerfully and put into their work all the strength of body and soul.

For long years we as a nation have felt that all which was required of us in art was novelty and skill. First, novelty in discovering other people's ideas; second, skill in presenting them; later, the novelty of discovering a quality of picturesqueness in our own land with skill in presenting that. And undoubtedly there is a great deal to be said in America that has never been said in any other land, but does the growth of our art so much depend upon skill in saying as upon the weight of the statement? What is truly necessary to our real progress is sufficient skill to present a statement simply and then to use the skill to show forth the great fresh ideas with which our nation is teeming.

A MAN once came to me and said, "What do you think I had better do with my son?" And in telling him, it seemed to me that I somewhat embodied my feeling about the question of the art student. "Your son," I said, "undoubtedly has some talent for art, start him in art if you like, but first of all, I'd make
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a man of him because he will then do well what he pleases.” For it seems to me that before a man tries to express anything to the world he must recognize in himself an individual, a new one, very distinct from others. Walt Whitman did this, and that is why I think his name so often comes to me. The one great cry of Whitman was for a man to find himself, to understand the fine thing he really is if liberated. Most people, either by training or inheritance, count themselves at the start as “no good,” or “second rate” or “ordinary,” whereas in everyone there is the great mystery; every single person in the world has evidence to give of his own individuality, providing he has acquired the full power to make clear this evidence.

To what wonderful extent Millet did this; yet to the people of his time and the art ideas of his century, Millet was one of these second rate or ordinary people. His contemporaries failed to recognize his individuality; they were looking for the art they were accustomed to, for the certain note of the day, and they failed to understand the greatness of the individuality before them. For Millet, instead of using his gracious medium in the expression of such subjects as the public were accustomed to, of goddesses and heroes of war, had a vision of the greatness in the life all about him, in the groveling peasant of the fields; and whereas to the public he seemed to be de-basing his mode of expression to low purposes, in reality he was finding in the muck and the dirt of the miserable peasant existence the tremendous significance of all life; he was portraying the great ideas of his country with the most absolute freedom of expression. Millet had learned how to think and had trained himself to express his thoughts, and was great enough to know that the big forces of the world were not solely among the rich or on the boulevard; he found them out in the French fields, close to the soil, down in the humblest life of the nation. In the merest peasant he discovered the beauty and the tragedy of the human soul; in spite of the sordidness of toil, in spite of the peasant’s ignorance, in spite of the wide meanness of the peasant’s existence, he still found evidences of the vital elemental conditions and expressed them in the most perfect colors and lines, in the simplest way. And for this reason we find a love and a wonderful caress in the work of Millet, whereas in the equally or even more skilled draughtsman like L’Hermitte we find more the expression of education than of deeper individuality, that is all. He could not by himself see the things that made such lines and colors and forms as dominated the vision of Millet. That is why art is so individual, because there are men who have the vision and the freedom to express it. And a man can only paint what he sees, and he can

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only see according to the individual development which liberates the vision within him.

Twachtman was one of the men in America who could see the greatness of life about him. It chanced that he lived much in Connecticut and saw it there, but he would have found it in Spain or France or Russia, and had he gone to paint in those countries his art would have still been American. To me Twachtman is one of the giants in America. Of course, you could prove that he had a whole lot of weaknesses, just as you can prove that Edgar Allan Poe was incompetent and no good, but there stands the evidence of their work in spite of all the defects, defects which were surmounted and which leave these men great in the history of America. They found the meaning in life; they got at the essential beauty of their environment; they developed for themselves a matchless technique, or a variety of technique to express these ideas, and being Americans their point of view was American. And it is thus that the art history of a nation must grow. There is no one recipe for this making of American artists, beyond affording to the men who have the gift the opportunity for supreme development and the right expression of it.

For instance, contrast the work of Twachtman and Winslow Homer. The same scene presented by these two men would be not an identical geographical spot but an absolutely different expression of personality. Twachtman saw the seas bathed in mists, the rocks softened with vapor. Winslow Homer looked straight through the vapor at the hard rock; he found in the leaden heaviness a most tremendously forceful idea. It was not the sea or the rock to either of these men, but their own individual attitude toward the beauty or the force of nature. Each man must take the material that he finds at hand, see that in it there are the big truths of life, the fundamentally big forces, and then express whichever is the cause of his pleasure in his art. It is not so much the actual place or the immediate environment; it is personal greatness and personal freedom which any nation demands for a final right art expression. A man must be master of himself and master of his word to achieve the full realization of himself as an artist.

A RULE I find artists divided into two classes: those who are willing to be caught making any kind of technical error, provided nevertheless they say the thing they have to say as well as they can, willing that their work should be open to any criticism so that they can invent a direct and able expression of the thing they wish to say. They choose to use a technique which will show their grasp of the subject, even show the insufficiency of their grasp, if
that is necessary, only so that it honestly tells the thought they have, its greatness or its inadequacy. Then there is the other class which is not willing to be found making any fault of deportment, but will gladly change or tamper with an idea to make it fit a more glib and secure technique already learned. Cleverness and skill are what they seek. The significance of expressing the truth and of developing themselves to express it is of no importance to them. Everywhere students are divided in this way, and the first class is much the smaller of the two. There one finds the frank men one has to deal with, who want their art to express their progress as far as there is progress, no farther. If there are frayed edges, the frayed edges must be manifest, until mind and technique can combine as one force to obliter ate them.

If this spirit could but prevail in all our arts, in music, in painting, in sculpture, in writing, we would have a fundamentally greater and more interesting expression, a fundamentally greater appreciation. If we could only cultivate in our students the desire to search and find for themselves the value of their thoughts and the power to utter them, we would have courageous action, we would find people rushing forward to grasp the means of expression; we would find new means of expression, we would find men inventing new techniques, techniques that would just suit them for whatever they have to say. What would be perfect for one mode of expression would be thrown aside for another mode, and men would grow as they devised this infinite variety of power of expression. As they developed in creating technique for their special thought they would gain in thought, for always they could express better and better what they had to say. Instead of becoming blabbers of pat phrases, they would have fresh phrases for fresh ideas; they would borrow from every source possible, but they would borrow only to invent.

Why, here in America we have a country filled with energetic people. We are a distinct race; we have tremendous ideas to express, and often it seems to me that I cannot wait to hear the voice of these people. And the voice must be beautiful, and the content of the voice, the thing that we have to say as a nation, that will be a wonderful thing to utter! It is a great encouragement that already fine and strong notes of this voice have come to us. We have had it, as I have already said, in Whitman, in Winslow Homer and in Twachtman, in others less well known. Sometimes we find partial evidences of it in a man's work, and the least expression of it makes one feel that it is almost impossible to wait for the fulness of the voice and the great things that it will utter. It is a healthy thing to think as much of this as possible, to help to prepare for it, to make our schools a means for such
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utterance. It has been said that our art schools are of no value; that they should be obliterated and recreated in craft schools. This does not seem to me to correspond with the practical ways of the American people. Why acknowledge failure in our art schools; why not reconstruct better art in schools which would develop first the man and then the artist, first the power to understand the quality of the nation, and then the capacity to express that greatness? It seems to me that this is essential for the development of art in this country. A man must have an opportunity to achieve technical excellence in order to express the utmost possibilities of his nation through his own individuality. What is essential to our art students is a more vital interest in work. The development of a strong personal art in America is possible through stimulating in students a profound study of life, of purpose of art, a real understanding of “construction,” “proportion,” “drawing,” stimulating activity, mental and physical, moral courage and invention in expression to fit the idea to be expressed. I think here is one of the essential points,—the purpose of the work, the presentation in art of ideas of value. There is religion to explain; there is philosophy of life to explain; there are great conditions in life to be expressed. Men who have achieved great art felt the tremendous need of raising their voices for or against the condition of life that existed, for out of a full heart comes this desire to express. That necessity is the mother of invention is true in art as in science. There is the invention of the exact specific technique that each idea requires. To express well conditions there must be the creation of specific technique—not the use of stock technique—but a method which belongs to the idea, and the idea must have weight, value, and be well worth putting forth in such permanent medium. In the development, therefore, of individuality, search for the just means of expressing the same simply and fully. This development will mean artists of mind, philosophy, sympathy, courage, invention, taking their work as a matter of vital importance to the world, considering their technique as the medium of utterance of their most personal philosophy of life, their view of the subject one that must be important and worthy of their powers of seeing and understanding. That is extremely important, that the student beginning today believes that the work he is doing is of vital importance to the world, and his view of the subject one that must be important and worthy of his powers of seeing and understanding. Drawing that is solid, constructive, fundamental, inventive, specific, adapted to the special needs of the idea to be expressed, such drawing as can only come from one who has decided and special purpose, profound understanding, a realization of the importance of his word and the evidence he has to give. We don’t want drawing that will come from
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the man turning himself into a machine, with sharpened eye and sharpened hand, the man who is a technician because he is told how other things have been made. We want a man whose purpose is so strong and whose desire is so strong that every nerve of his body, physical and mental, is concentrated on the thing he desires to express in such a way that his wits are quicker, and then with what sort of knowledge he has he gets everything; that is, he achieves everything that he is. Few people say fully what they think; few people are bright enough to use the thought of yesterday. And yet we must not make warehouses of thoughts of yesterday. We want to have the genius to use these thoughts at the time of necessity.

We need schools where individuality of thought and expression is encouraged, a school and instruction which offer to the student the utmost help in the building of himself up into a force that will be of stimulating value to the world. And in the use of the school, its facilities, its instruction, the worker should know that the instructors are back of him, interested, watching, encouraging, as ready to learn from him as to teach; anxious for his evidence; recognizing in him a man, another or a new force; giving him the use of knowledge and experience, but never dictating to him what or how he shall do, rather shoving him away from too much leaning; only demanding of him that he work both mind and body to the limit of his endurance to find in himself whatever there is of value; to find his truest thoughts and find a means, the simplest, straightest and most fit means to make record of them, to be the deepest thinker, the kindest appreciator, the clearest and simplest, frankest expressor he can be today. For by so doing he becomes the master of such as he has today, and that he is master today is the only dependable evidence that he will be master tomorrow. That he has dignity, worth, integrity, courage in his thought and action today means that he is today a student worthy of the name in its fullest meaning.

IT IS a question of saying the thing that a person has to say. A man should not care whether the thing he wishes to express is a work of art or not, whether it is literature or not, he should only care that it is a statement of what is worthy to put into permanent expression. In addition to what I have said, I believe that the people who would be brought strongly under the influence of such philosophy as would be manifest in a school like the one I have described, would be prepared to go into the world, and a school that does not prepare the student to face life is a school that does not realize its own purpose. If the student cannot go into the world he is not going to express the great ideas of the world.
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The thing today is to take our art schools and make them useful. There is no reason to give up our churches; make them useful. When they are no longer useful, do them over again. Let them keep pace with the necessity. They must always be active or else they are useless. The constant argument against such a school as this is that it is all very well for the strong ones. But what greater kindness can you do to anybody than to bring him right face up against the thing that he cannot do; we may see if he has the stuff in him or not, instead of cheating him into believing that he can do something that he cannot? I treat a man as if he were a man, and let him think and encourage him to think. Back in Julian’s Academy there were men who received the highest awards from Julian’s and the Beaux Arts, and they believed because they were getting the highest awards that they were becoming great artists, and the one who is getting the greatest awards should feel that he has accomplished the greatest things, but these men were generally helpless. They could not paint an original picture. All they had to learn was to make a life study according to the dictates of Bouguereau and others. Those who have become distinguished have not been the men who were distinguished students in the schools. That does not mean that a man should not be a good student in the schools. I propose that a man shall be a good student, not a lump of putty. He should use the school for the purpose that he has in view; that is, his personal development and the finding of the thing that is necessary for his kind of expression. We do not expect a Corot to draw like Michael Angelo. The drawing of Ingres was perfect for his type of mind, but it would not do for Rembrandt; but Rembrandt’s did quite well for himself, and which do you like the best? Which one is the greater draughtsman? The one you like the best. Rembrandt paints the miserable, dirty beggar, but the beggar seen through a wide vision of life is present to the thought of Rembrandt; and Rembrandt was a man who could think and whose thoughts were valuable, and his painting is a record of his personal thought, the thought of a man of great strength of mind, great appreciation and great philosophy. The beggar, like the paint and the canvas, is nothing but medium to him.

In my understanding of color, there is absolutely no such thing as color for its sake. All colors are beautiful and all lines are beautiful and all forms are beautiful. Colors are beautiful when they are significant. Lines are beautiful when they are significant. It is what they signify that is beautiful to us, really. The color is the means of expression. The reason that a certain color in life, like the red in a young girl’s cheek, is beautiful, is that it manifests youth, health; in another sense, that it manifests her sensibility. We have grown to
“YOUNG WOMAN IN BLACK;”
ROBERT HENRI, PAINTER.
ANTONIO POÑAS (CALERO), EL PICADOR; ROBERT HENRI, PAINTER.
"ROCKS AND SEA;" ROBERT HENRI, PAINTER.
look at it as beautiful for that reason. There are certain shades of yellow that are horrible to us because they relate to sickness, and if we search all the way through, we will find that all of the color that we declare as beautiful is only beautiful because it is the manifestation of the thing we most desire, the thing that we like most. Of course, the thing we desire is not always comfortable. A person takes pleasure in the color of a destructive flame. It is one of the mistakes, one of the big mistakes that is made, this idea of regarding color in itself as beauty. Color is no more beautiful than a line is, and the face of a woman is beautiful because of what it expresses. If it does not express a thing that we greatly like, why then it is not beautiful.

IT SEEMS to me that it is a healthy thing to think as much as we can not only of art but of all great possibilities in our nation, of all great achievement that we have before us. Take, for instance, just the recent success of the flying machine. I am sure that there have been people all over the world whose hearts have jumped with delight at its first real achievement. Down in Spain I picked up a paper and read an account of the actual accomplishing of this thing. And when I got hold of a French newspaper and found out that the Wrights were Americans, I felt my national pride spring. The first thought was that it had been done, and the next thought was that it had been accomplished by one of our people. To create and to express this is in its way also a great work of art.

And then, I could not help but look at those poor bull fighters coming into the ring, into terrible danger. (I have seen so many of them gored that all the time I am expecting to see a man injured.) And yet I said to myself, we can afford to have Orville Wright killed, even so valuable a life as his might well be lost in progress of our development. I was struck by my very difference of feeling regarding the death in the bull ring, the death without value. I felt sorry for the bull fighter, very sorry; but I would feel as if a national disaster had occurred if anything happened to the Wrights; yet if it should it would not be pathetic, for death would come through achievement, through invention. We want inventors all through life; the only people that ever succeed in writing, painting, sculpture, manufacturing, in finance are inventors. And it is the inventor in art who expresses the valuable idea. He creates his idea; he considers that the idea is important; he desires to express it; now he must invent the expression of that idea which is new in itself from the same old vocabulary that all other things have been expressed with. He may use some of the phrases if they will fit in, but no matter, he must invent, and

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even, at times, like Shakespeare, rearrange other people's thoughts to his own picture of life.

Twenty years ago there were art schools in this country, numerous art schools, numerous students in each school. There were also the great schools of Paris. Julian's twenty years ago was at its height. Every country had its art schools. Every big city, every little city, and all of them studying under the régime of Paris. There were thousands and thousands of people being trained in these art schools. Now where are the artists? We will admit killing off through death or non-continuance, but then what of that great number who must have continued and worked years and years? Nine years after I left Julian's I went back there and saw one who was a strong man in the school when I was a student—and I found him doing about as good work as he had done nine years before. What has become of all these people that have gone through that training? There must be something the matter with the training. It seems to me that there are three things essential to art training, the man must have the idea, he must have the freedom, he must create to express it. The need of inventing the necessary technique of the thing you have to express today, the technique that must be beautiful, that must be perfect because it is the only thing, the fittest, the shortest, plainest, the way of painting the idea in hand, and then the understanding that what has been invented must immediately be put aside. People say, what, throw away this precious thing? Use it and use it over again. But it must never be used again. The next day, even painting from the same model, under the same light, the conditions are different. The thing cannot be born over again. It must be a new thing that is to be expressed. It may be very close, but new conditions demand a new medium. You cannot just begin at the same place that you did yesterday. Conditions are always different, so that a new order of things must be invented, so that the real art student, the real writer is one who is in the habit of taking from all the sources he can get, and with all his experience inventing a new expression, specific; nothing else would do, and even it will never do again. Suppose you get a school of Americans studying that way, what does it mean? It means that there is a school of people studying with their minds instead of simply sitting there and drawing lines of which they do not understand the meaning.

I think that the people should have an opportunity to study art, but in the art school there should be something more profound, something that would mean an encouragement to the student to develop himself with a respect for the profession that he intends to enter, to realize that he has got to be a great man mentally, a philosopher, be-
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fore there is any excuse for him to practice art, and that in order that he may develop both as a practiser of art in that means of expression and become a great philosopher, he must develop both sides of himself personally as a man and then see to it that each day his medium as far as possible expresses his manhood, expresses his personality, his ideas, his philosophy.

THE CHRIST

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BOVE the lonely washing of the tide,
Where sea-gulls wing their way, a pillar stands,
Bearing a Christ with bleeding feet and hands:
A pious artist-fancy crucified.

Time goes; and storms have burst and raged and died;
The noon sun burns; the moonlight's silver bands
Draw coolness; and beyond the silent sands
The restless waves are never pacified.

Against the dazzling sunset's bloody gold;
In silver dawns; for months and years untold;
In happy springtimes, summertimes of flame,

In gentle autumns, winter's rough alarms,
With wasted feet that cold wave-kisses maim,
The stone Redeemer opens his black arms.

BY MAURICE DONNAY. TRANSLATED BY ROY TEMPLE HOUSE