THE NEW YORK EXHIBITION OF INDEPENDENT ARTISTS: BY ROBERT HENRI

The Exhibition of Independent Artists is not a movement headed by any one man or small group of men. I think that one of the most damaging things that could happen to the progress of art in America would be to personalize this movement in any way. Neither is it an exhibition of the rejected, nor an exhibition of people who have had their pictures accepted or refused by the Academy. It is not a gathering together of kickers of any description, but is an expression of the present tendency in America toward developing individuality. This tendency is a great underwave flowing all through America. From the North to the South, from the East to the West, there is an awakening in art matters.

This exhibition is practically an opportunity for individuality, an opportunity for experimenters. The people who got up the exhibition did so with a view to bringing together all workers old or young who have some definite direction in their work; not necessarily directions that the originators of the exhibition might care to follow or might like or even might be sure of understanding, but a direction that the artist himself really understands. For instance, if anyone in the exhibition should come to me and say, “Is this the kind of work you stand for?” I should reply, “That is not the question. This work is here because it is the kind of work its author stands for, and I am convinced that he means a definite thing in what he is doing. Therefore I consider that he is furnishing important evidence,—that he is a valuable experimenter in this means of human expression.”

Freedom to think and to show what you are thinking about, that is what the exhibition stands for. Freedom to study and experiment and to present the results of such essay, not in any way being retarded by the standards which are the fashion of the time, and not to be exempted from public view because of such individuality or strange-ness in the manner of expression. What such an exhibition desires is all the new evidence, all the new opinions that the artists have, and then their work must either succeed by its integrity or fail from the lack of it. We want to know the ideas of young men. We do not want to coerce them into accepting ours. Every art exhibit should hear from the young as well as the old, and in this one we want to present the independent personal evidence which each artist has to make and which must become a record of their time and a proof of the advancement of human understanding.

This is called an independent exhibition because it is a manifestation of independence in art and of the absolute necessity of such independence. It does not mean that it is an independent organiza-
tion, but that it is made up of the independent points of view of men who are investigating. What such an exhibition should show is the work of those who are pushing forward, who need and deserve recognition, who must have encouragement, who should receive praise for every step of their advance. They deserve it because they are thinking. The world should stand and watch their progress, not to criticize, but to be criticized by these essays. When we walk into such an exhibition we may expect to see things which we will not understand, but we should not express instantly the first idea which comes into our minds, because that idea is more apt than not to be an exclamation at the shock we receive at seeing something different from what we had expected. All important steps forward in the world have been received by critics and by the public generally as something ridiculous, impossible—until they were accepted and lauded.

As I see it, there is only one reason for the development of art in America, and that is that the people of America learn the means of expressing themselves in their own time and in their own land. In this country we have no need of art as a culture; no need of art as a refined and elegant performance; no need of art for poetry’s sake, or any of these things for their own sake. What we do need is art that expresses the spirit of the people of today. What we want is to meet young people who are expressing this spirit and listen to what they have to tell us. Those of us who are old should be anxious to be told the things by those who are to advance beyond us, and we should not hate to see them in their progress. We should rejoice that a building is rising on the foundation that we have helped and are still helping to erect. I personally want to see things advance. I want to see work done better by others than I have found possible in my life. I want to see progress. It should be impossible to have any feeling of jealousy toward those who are young and who are to accomplish the future.

It is necessary for the people in this country to understand what art is, to understand why it is, to understand that it is the expression of the temperament of our people, that it is the development of the imagination which in the end must affect not only the production of painting, of sculpture, of poems, music, architecture, but every phase of our daily existence. If art is real it must come to affect every action in our lives, every product, every necessary thing. It is, in fact, the understanding of what is needed in life, and then the pursuit of the best means to produce it. It is not learning how to do something which people will call art, but rather inventing something that is absolutely necessary for the progress of our existence.
THE EXHIBITION OF INDEPENDENT ARTISTS

Our artists must be philosophers; they must be creators; they must be experimenters; they must acquire a knowledge of fundamental law in order that those who seek them and listen to them may learn that there are great laws controlling all existence, that through the understanding of these laws they may live in greater simplicity, greater happiness and greater beauty. Art cannot be separated from life. It is the expression of the greatest need of which life is capable, and we value art not because of the skilled product, but because of its revelation of a life’s experience. The artists who produce the most satisfactory art are in my mind those who are absorbed in the civilization in which they are living. Take, for instance, Rockwell Kent. He is interested in everything, in political economy, in farming, in every phase of industrial prosperity. He cannot do without this interest in his art. The very things that he portrays on his canvas are the things that he sees written in the great organization of life and his painting is a proclamation of the rights of man, of the dignity of man, of the dignity of creation. It is his belief in God. It is what art should mean.

Another is John Sloan, with his demand for the rights of man, and his love of the people; his keen observation of the people’s folly, his knowledge of their virtues and his surpassing interest in all things. I have never met Sloan but what he had something new to tell me of some vital thing in life that interested him, and which probably was eventually typified in his work.

WILLIAM GLACKENS is in this exhibition, as usual, unique in mind, unique in his appreciation of human character, with an element of humor, an element of criticism, always without fear. He shows a wonderful painting of a nude that has many of the qualities that you notice in the neo-impressionist movement. But Glackens seems to me to have attained a greater beauty and a more fundamental truth. There is something rare, something new in the thing that he has to say. At first it may shock you a little, perhaps a great deal; you question, but you keep looking; you grow friendly toward his art; you come back and you get to feel toward the things that you have criticized as you do toward the defects in the face of a person whom you have grown to like very much. They become essential to you in the whole, and the whole with Glackens is always so much alive, so much the manifestation of a temperament intensely sincere and intensely brave.

A man whose work is beautiful because he is close to life is Jerome Myers. He is also a dreamer; he works close to the little people in this world of New York. He is a lover of people and in his pictures he tells
"ROAD BREAKING":
ROCKWELL KENT, PAINTER.
"FLYING PIGEONS"
JOHN SLOAN, PAINTER.
"THE TOW TEAM"
WALT KUHN, PAINTER.
"THE TENANT'S DOG"
HILDA WARD, PAINTER.
you what he knows of humanity's ways. You don't stop to question his technique, although that is good enough, too, but in studying his paintings you study the soul of the man and his knowledge of the world and the breadth of his kindness.

Not one of these men will talk to you of their technique or of any organization they are interested in, or of any effort to form a society. They will tell you that they want independence for their ideas, independence for every man's idea. Why, this country was founded with the idea of independence, with the idea of man's right for freedom. We do not think much about this, and yet it was the first idea that caused people to fight under the leadership of such a man as Patrick Henry.

I sometimes think that the people who are worth most in life are the babies. They have their own opinions,—and how tragic it is that as soon as they get a little older they seem to find it worth while not to force their opinions too much. The baby is the only person who knows absolutely no class. The baby likes what he likes, and the grown man must stand in front of him with his hat off. He must feel a little ashamed of himself and say, "What a coward I have been ever since I was a baby!" The man who looks at the baby, if he is a real man, must say to himself, "My little baby, if I can save you, if I can bring about the conditions which would make you able to continue in this beautiful dignity that you have, in this same self-judging power that you have, if I could enable you to retain your independence as you have it today, I would die happy." Young art students are the same brave creatures. They do not think of public opinion; they are just art students. They do not think of money. But later some of them come and say, "Those were great old days we had. But what a set of fools we were." And then all I can think of to say is, "I am just such a fool now. I hope I shall be a student as long as I live."

What a mistake we have made in life in seeking for the finished product. A thing that is finished is dead. That is why the student interests me so. He is in the process of growth. He is experimenting; he is testing all his powers; he has no thought of any finished product in his expression. A thing that has the greatest expression of life itself, however roughly it may be expressed, is in reality the most finished work of art. A finished technique without relation to life is a piece of mechanics, it is not a work of art. Some of the things that may hold one's attention in this present exhibition are possibly the very slight sketches. I recall some sketches which are the work of a girl of fourteen, and they are beautiful. In looking at these drawings I see the expression of the viewpoint of a
THE EXHIBITION OF INDEPENDENT ARTISTS

young girl, healthy, beautiful in her mind, wonderfully sympathetic, loving all the beautiful things of human association and in nature. Her work does not pretend to be an exhibition of culture. It is only a showing forth of the charm and the humor and the interest that was awakened in the mind of a girl of fourteen. What is true of the way this girl achieves is equally true of the work of Whistler; it is equally true of the work of Velasquez, and of the great masters. They saw things vitally; they were interested in them; they expressed their interest, using materials which they preferred to express their ideas.

I do not wish to convey the idea that this exhibition was planned for the work of young people; at least, for those who are young in their abilities as artists, because most of the exhibitors are not young people. A few of them are older than some very old artists that I know. Take the picture, for instance, of Julius Golz, the painter of Blackwell’s Island and the East River. What force and power is in this man’s work. He seems to be the only man who has ever painted the East River, that wonderful snowswept fence against that absolutely deep and tragic water and then beyond, Blackwell’s Island, and all done without a particle of sentimentality. As a canvas it stands as a striking piece of realism and yet in the hanging it is associated with and is a most natural accompaniment to the painting of Arthur Davies, the great imaginator. Side by side with the work of these two men is the painting showing the tenderness and bravery and the imagination of Homer Boss, and down the line is John Sloan’s “Clown,” a wonderful piece of work.

I want to speak again of John Sloan, of his painting of the backs of houses, old Twenty-second Street houses, with the boys on the roof startling the pigeons into flight. It is a human document of the lives of the people living in those houses. You feel the incidents in the windows, the incidents in the construction of the houses, the incidents in the wear and tear on them; in fact, the life of that neighborhood is all shown in the little line of houses, yellow and red houses, warm in the sunlight. And the quality of the sunlight is that of a caress; the houses, the atmosphere are steeped in its warmth.

These are some of the things that it seems to me a person will see at the Independent Exhibition of pictures. Those who are looking for exhibitions of culture in some set form or fashion in art will probably not see these things, because of the prejudice of their point of view, because they are really looking in different directions. They are looking for the signs of the acquirement of the fashion in art of the day; they are not looking for the thoughts, the feelings, the life of a man; they are not searching for a personal record in a man’s work. They seek an accomplishment in a trade.
I was at a dinner some time ago and one of the great art critics made a speech, saying, “What we, leaders, need to develop and encourage in this country is, first of all, technique.” And then the company applauded. But to me it seems that what really matters in this country is the development of mind, which will result most positively in a greater technique than could ever be arrived at by an effort to develop technique itself. Perhaps I will make clearer my meaning by telling you something about the paintings of Miss Dorothy Rice, who is one of the young exhibitors at the Exhibition of Independent Artists. Her work is surprising not only for one of her age, but for one of any age. She has a vital interest and a psychological understanding of and sympathy with the people she paints. It is because she is so intensely interested in life, all of life, and practically free from professional educators, that she has gone directly to the finding of this specific technique which she has for the expression of her ideas. Her progress has been rapid, because it has been in the direct line of her need. And so I feel if we had in this country more effort to develop individuality, we should have everywhere among our artists as a result a much greater technique. A man with great ideas will develop the necessary channel to express them adequately, but a man may dig a very wide and deep channel for the expression of ideas and find it always empty. More and more I feel as I go through the many exhibitions of paintings that the pictures known as “finished” have often been scarcely begun, because there is no great underlying structure in them. They possess no important organization. They may have had a semblance of organization, a mere semblance of structure, but that in the finished picture is plastered over with a kind of surface which in turn is closed up and all the rough edges taken off, the individuality smoothed out, the personality obliterated and the painting finished.

At this exhibition you will notice Miss Ward’s work. She is a painter of dogs and she paints them distinctly differently from the majority of painters of dogs. She has not the taste of the dog fancier in mind, although I have no doubt that all the essential points are well indicated. She does not endow them with human emotions; she has found the emotions of dogland quite interesting enough. Their fashions, their pride, their sympathy, their whims are the subjects she presents, never for a moment doing that tragic thing of endowing a dog with a human point of view. You understand the feeling and interest of her dogs from the point of view of animal psychology, not at all from the understanding of human sentimentality.

There are some prize fights in this exhibition, the work of George Bellows, which are full also of their own kind of beauty, strength,
energy, declaration of physical grace. Their value is in Bellows’ appreciation of what is interesting in this phase of life, and the work has its own beauty.

Everett Shinn is there, too, with his distinct whimsical humor. He has done some marvelous work. He is full of enthusiastic interest in life, and his works are full of the beauty of this enthusiasm. He likes the show; he understands its pleasures, and he makes you see and understand every phase of it. And his most serious work is presented with a sparkle of never-failing exquisite whimsicality. His way of seeing never fails in interest.

Of Ernest Lawson there is the love of the vibration of light, his enjoyment of life as it is, his power to see the poetry in it, his desire to express all the romance of Nature without adding to it, finding enough romance in the thing as it exists,—a greater romance than any human mind could imagine.

Glenn O. Coleman is another man to be remembered. He is represented in this exhibition by a canvas done in simple breadth, rich and deeply impersonal in color; the very spirit of an old New York street seeping in rain. Edith Dimock is represented by a series of most original delightfully humorous water-color drawings—such criticisms of the manners and appearance of people is there, yet with the amusement they evoke the heart also warms toward them. Walt Kuhn's work is full of rugged vigor. Margaret Eckerson shows a Rodin-like head. But in the exhibition of sculpture we turn first and last to Borglum's Lincoln,—the Great Independent. A distinctly new painter of snow, possessed of great virility, is Edward Keith, Jr. There is a spirit of youth in the way Stella Elmdorf has painted her flowers. They are presented as youth sees growing things, strong, courageous and sympathetic. In Amy Londoner's pictures there is a rare specialization through color and a very personal note of humor. Maurice Prendergast's work shows, as always, the happy vibration of light which suggests the vitality of life itself. The entire third floor of this exhibition is given up to a presentation of drawings by modern American artists, probably the best collection of this line of work ever shown in New York.

I HAVE been asked if this Independent Exhibition will become a permanent organization. I have not the slightest doubt but what the idea will go on, but I personally have no interest whatever in forming it into a society, and if an institution were formed and I were to become a member of it, I would probably be the first man to secede from it, because I can see no advantage to art in the existence of art societies. The thing that interests me in this is the idea of it, the idea
THE EXHIBITION OF INDEPENDENT ARTISTS

of independence, the idea of encouragement of independence and individuality in study and the giving of an opportunity for greater freedom in exhibitions.

I have been thinking for a long time what possible substitute could be furnished for the Academy idea, in what way pictures could be exhibited entirely without the jury and the hanging committee, and suggest the following scheme, which seems practical to me. A gallery that might be of great educational value and of great honor to the city of New York could be established along the following lines: It would be perhaps some three or four times larger than the present Fine Arts Building on Fifty-seventh Street, New York. It would contain many rooms of equal value for exhibition purposes, these rooms to be at the service of artists who would form themselves into groups of twenty, gaining by the formation of their body the right to use one of the rooms for a period of one month. A waiting list might occur, because there might be many groups of twenty men who would care to associate themselves in one exhibition. Such a gallery should be under the freest of direction. It should be a city institution, actually for the advancement and encouragement of the arts, a place for trying out the artists’ ideas, a place where they could exhibit and where there was no judge except the public, and the nineteen other men of the same group. This proposition seems to me to do away with any permanent organization of artists, with any board of officers, with any presidents, with any body of men who sit in judgment on other men. All that is necessary is for a man to be acceptable to nineteen other artists who are sufficiently in accord to wish to ally themselves in an exhibition. Should a man go alone to this gallery and say, “I have absolutely the greatest thing in the world so far as art is concerned, but I cannot get a chance to exhibit. I want you to give me a place in your galleries.” The reply would be, “Find nineteen other artists who believe in your sincerity or worth sufficiently to form themselves into a group and exhibit with you, and the room is yours. But you must ring true to nineteen other men thinking along your own lines and judging your work from the point of view of a fellow worker.” I have been asked what answer would be made if a group of students banded themselves together and asked for an opportunity of exhibiting. My immediate answer is, “Why not? We want to see what they are doing.” Of course, there would be mistakes, but we could not make any more than we are successful in doing today in our institutions. We should at least have groups of men who believe in each other, who are trying to understand each other, and who if they criticize, do it from the point of view of intelligent understanding and sincerity. Such a gallery as this would
THE UNTILLED FIELD

furnish New York what it should wish to have,—an open field for
the searcher, the opportunity to show what he is searching for, the
chance to be laughed at, if necessary, but at least the chance to prove
that he knows what he is aiming at. It would be a battleground
for the testing of new ideas and new intentions, and such a battle-
ground should be free from all dictatorship. Every man should find
it an open door to an open road, and it should stand for the truth
about art in America.

*Editor's Note:*—The artists who contributed interest, time and money to the organization of
this exhibition were John Sloan, Robert Henri, Walt Kuhn, Scott Stafford, W.J. Glackens, Arthur
B. Davies, Guy Pene Du Bois, Ben Ali Haggin, Glenn O. Coleman, Dorothy Rice and Clara Tice.—
The men on the hanging committee were George Bellows, Guy Du Bois, Robert Henri, Walt Kuhn,
James E. Fraser, John Sloan, W. J. Glackens.—Secretary and Treasurer, John Sloan.

THE UNTILLED FIELD

It was a field beside the way
Where only brambles grew.
Untilled forevermore it lay
Beneath the sun and dew.

But every soul that passed it by
Came under its sweet spell
And stopped to dream with softened eye
Of star and asphodel.

For there were wonders in its round
And glories heaven-blessed.
Hearts cease and joy did there abound
And herbs of sleep and rest.

The birds came daily there to feed
And there upon the sod
Forevermore midst grass and weed
There bloomed the peace of God!

Edward Wilbur Mason.