OUR ART BECOMES AMERICAN

WE DRAW UP OUR DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE

BY THOMAS CRAVEN

NOTHING in recent years has exceeded in vituperation and critical ignorance the controversy now raging in the field of American art. On one side we have the dying academicians, who believe that art is a conservative sport for gentlemen, and the two groups of internationalists: the purists who cling to the notion that art is beyond the effects of time and place, and the propagandists who would arrogate painting to the exclusive service of Marxian economics. Normally, the three factions despise one another, but in the anxiety of the moment they have joined forces against a common foe, and the foe is a band of specifically native painters united in the belief that art is the product of direct experiences with the actualities of American life. The controversy was precipitated by the achievements and rise to national prominence of five men: Charles Burchfield, of Ohio; Thomas Benton, of Missouri; Grant Wood, of Iowa; John Curry, of Kansas; and Reginald Marsh, of New York.

These men have taken art into the open air, away from the jurisdiction of specialists, esthetes, Bohemians, and political fanatics, and have placed it within reach of the people; they have produced a body of paintings now enjoyed by large and intelligent audiences; they are the leaders of a new movement which has swept the country, inflamed the imagination of the coming generation, and which, on the basis of accomplished work, marks the end of American subservience to foreign cultural fashions. Naturally they have incurred the enmity of the cults, cliques, and quacks, and the unreasoning jealousy of their competitors; but their good work goes marching on, and the American people for the first time are beginning to understand the meaning and value of fine painting. It is possible that the eminence of these artists, as Karl Marx said of John Stuart Mill, may be due to the flatness of the surrounding country; that they are only the forerunners of a movement which, later on, will flower more abundantly. But by all sensible reference to historical practice, they are on the right track—the only track that can produce art. Nor are they alone in their convictions.

For strange as it may seem to our gullible victims of the Marxian fantasy that art is social propaganda or nothing, the Russians, the only Communists who are not amateurs, have learned from bitter experience that art cannot be generated by didactical ukases, and have shown evidence of a sharp turn to local issues for their materials. Burdened with the machinery of centrally controlled esthetic theory, the Russians have nothing to compare with the regional developments in America; but, nevertheless, it

is plain from their latest motion pictures and paintings that they are beginning in their art to express the hopes, fears, and feelings of men and women in given environments—just as Tolstoy did when he was an artist and not a propagandist—rather than the dogmas of the Third International.

Before considering the attainments of the new American school, let us examine briefly this so-called Internationalism in art. Everybody knows that the great art of Italy was composed of a nest of intensely local schools, each with rigidly defined characteristics, and each strongly conditioned by local psychologies. Viewed at long range, this great art may be designated nationally as Italian; on closer inspection, it becomes Florentine, Roman, Sienese, or Umbrian; in the last analysis, it is the work of powerful individuals and their followers. And everybody knows that the native art of Italy spread throughout Europe and influenced the whole stream of Occidental painting, sculpture, and building. With the collapse of the city kingdoms of Italy, and with the antique blooms of the late Renaissance, the practice of art was abstracted from local settings and converted into an international business, a business having as precedent the medieval hangover of the churchmen and philosophers who continued to think and write in Latin, the international language. Art was enthroned; it became the property of aristocrats, the spoil of collectors, the concern of the cultivated, and ultimately, the plaything of the precious. A new concept came into being—an international esthetic—and with it the habit among intellectuals of regarding art as a universal practice above the references of time and locality.

Curiously enough, this attitude appeared when races and peoples were consolidating into nationalities, when the boundaries for the bitter and bloody rivalries of modern Europe were being determined. This theoretical view received its strongest official support from the French Academy, and its pictorial direction from Poussin. Later, at the time of the formation of German nationalism and the concept of Teutonic preëminence, it was accepted as gospel; and Goethe, during those first deep stirrings of the national consciousness, proclaimed that art was above local particularities. It must be noted, however, that his own work, when it was art and not just comment or rhetoric, was thoroughly Germanic. As for the Russians of the period, they swallowed the theory whole, and their art, what there was of it, was slavishly imitative of the French. For the French, with indigenous foresight, had already convinced the world that France was the repository of all that was culturally free and fine in the history of the human race. Culturally, the French were internationalists, but they made it perfectly clear that the fountainhead of the cultural stream was Paris—that is, their diplomatists made it clear.

But fortunately for France, this lip-service to internationalism was wasted upon a number of men who were artists, not theorists; and beginning with Chardin, we find that persistent, practical reference to experiences in the French environment which later produced Daumier, Renoir, and Cézanne. And looking in other directions and back to earlier times, we find that El Greco, Velasquez, and Goya, and Rembrandt and Rubens, whatever their opinions on internationalism, reflected thoroughly in their art the characteristics of race and locality.

What inference shall we draw from this? Shall we simply say that the concept of internationalism in art is so much intellectual poppycock? Certainly not. There is profound truth

in it. The division of Europe into nationalities was followed, not only by the international exchange of economic goods, but also by a brisk trading in cultural goods. Italian and Flemish paintings circulated freely in France, Spain, and England, and were lavishly admired. The cultivated people of France—and the uncultivated too, if we are to credit the reports of the crowds that gathered to behold Napoleon's art robberies—discovered that they could respond to Italian art, that its language was not altogether alien. The old Italians, of course, had discovered the glories of Greek and Roman sculpture; the Greeks had discovered the Egyptians—and so on. We see then that internationalism, in one sense, is as old as commerce between peoples; but it remained for the French Academy and such abstract theorists as Schelling and Hegel, who considered art as an accomplished fact, an esthetic object, to give the concept precise formulation.

The inference to be drawn from the notion of the universality of art is this: there are two sides to the art business, the appreciative and the creative, and what is good and true for one is not good and true for the other. From the appreciative point of view, art is indeed universal: we may enjoy and understand—to a certain extent—the sculpture of such diverse races as the Italians and the Chinese. But to the maker of pictures and statues, art is an intensely local occupation—the product of direct experiences with human beings, of the perception of things in specific settings. No matter how much an artist may admire and understand the forms of Rubens and Rembrandt, he cannot make original pictures by imitating, rehashing, or disguising those forms; no matter how learned he may be in the styles and methods of the masters, he cannot produce anything in his own right unless his technical equipment is put to work in new situations—fertilized by fresh contacts with life and transformed in the crucible of experience.

The confusion of the values and meanings contained in the completed object with the processes of generation is responsible for most of the evils and manias into which art has fallen during the past forty years. In the new French Academy, the modernist academy ruled by Picasso, this confusion has reached the uttermost limits of infantilism and absurdity. The French modernists have denied completely the value of life-experience—they do not even paint the familiar scenes of their own Bohemian playground—they paint geometrical litter and phony symbols. They have the typical academic habit of trying to make art by preying upon venerated objects of art. All that they do is to imitate the structure, or external characteristics, of the art of the past: the primitive Italians, the Persians, the Negroes, and occasionally an Occidental master. Sometimes they try to conceal their operations by reducing their venerated objects to "abstract organizations"; sometimes they resort to cryptic titles or the drivelling metaphysics of their literary dupes. They assume that because works of art have universal values, they can transmit those values by remaking, with slight changes of idiom, objects evolved by their predecessors from living experiences. This attitude, compared to that of a real artist like Daumier, is no more than an obsessional devotion to pointless and repugnant pattern-making.

But the authority of tradition is powerful, and in modern times the tradition of universality in art has been craftily maintained by France. The French have done well by their sacred trust, convincing the rest of the world that universality is really a French prerogative, and that the best the out-

sider can do is to adopt unquestioningly the theories and practices of French artists, preferably in Paris, if one has a little money to spend. And the Americans, provincially doubtful of their powers, have followed the French like so many sheep, excusing their imitations of imitations with the traditional cry that art is universal and its values eternal, that it is neither American nor French—just art. This in the face of every valid work of art that was ever produced.

II

The pioneer in the new revolt against our provincial servility, which is as manifest among the international modernists as among the sedate refugees of the National Academy, is Charles Ephraim Burchfield, a tailor's son, born in Ohio, in 1893. Burchfield is one of those grim, gifted, independent Americans who take nothing for granted, essentially a Middle Westerner with the melancholy, sharp-seeing interest in hard facts that distinguishes the novelists of the central valleys. He was brought up in a rustic background; in drab down-at-the-heels towns and monotonous farm lands that no one loved. But the life of the midlands made a profound impression upon him. Footloose, in the good American fashion, he wandered through town and country, observing the habits of men and women, the wretched architecture, the freight trains, the fields and forlorn vistas of unoccupied earth, the stern farmers and their sad, patient wives, and the social life of the shabby settlements.

In his youth Burchfield frequented an art school in Cleveland, and managed to survive it. Had he been made of the usual plastic stuff, he would have submitted to the Franco-American system of preparing young students for a postgraduate course in Parisian fads; but he had no need of Continental inspiration or training and would allow no one to tell him what or how to paint. In his late twenties he exhibited in New York a collection of water-colors of astonishing originality. At that inauspicious moment American artists were grovelling before Matisse, Picasso, and the cracked-fiddle painters, and the importance of Burchfield's pictures was not generally recognized. But the few artists and critics who were not dizzy with imported distortions and theories saluted the arrival of an authentic American artist.

This young man brought painting down to earth. He was never taken in by the flummery of Cubism, and he avoided New York and the contagion of cults. He painted the country that was in his blood, the Mid-Western environment that had matured his conception of America—and he did not romanticize it. He chose scenes and subjects that had been proscribed because they were supposed to be insular or intrinsically ugly; and his pictures outraged both the modernists and the conservatives trained to paint nature in the rosy colors of Impressionism. His experiences had taught him that life was neither charming nor classical: he had found it rich in bleakness, and beneath its loneliness and shabby monotony he had found nobility of effort and a naked, haunting grandeur. He painted villages in winter, the coming of spring, the seasons of harvests, and fall plowing; he painted the countryside with a row of false-front stores straggling on one side of the highway, farmers in T-model Fords, little towns on a Saturday afternoon; and he made special studies of local architecture from the dilapidated cottages by the railroad to the jigsaw Gothic of the quality folks. And he managed to surround these subjects with a tragic atmosphere, the tragedy of barren living,

cheap tastes, and starved ideals; to make them personal expressions of his own poetic view of common things.

Burchfield faced life, and extracted from it an art that may be justly called his own. His art is not without flaws: he is a man of a single mood and his technical knowledge is limited. He is more brilliant than powerful, and his work tends to slide into mere illustration; that is, instead of building up well-knit structures, he produces descriptive sketches, and beautiful, suggestive bits of American life. Of late years, living in a new environment near Buffalo, he has endeavored to correct his faults, and his work in oils is more substantial and more poetic, but at times, fantastic and unreal. But I do not wish to underestimate his importance: he is still a young man and his best work, for all I know, may lie before him. On the strength of things accomplished he must be called one of our best artists. He was the first of the modern group to throw off the incubus of European imitation, and his example changed the direction of American painting.

The most prominent, vigorous, and versatile of our painters is Thomas Hart Benton, of Neosho, Missouri. Benton, now in his forty-sixth year, comes by his Americanism naturally. His great-uncle, after whom he was named, was the famous Missouri senator; his father was a noted criminal lawyer in the Southwest, and for many terms, a member of Congress. The backwoods country of his boyhood was not unlike the environment of Huckleberry Finn, but he had advantages denied to Mark Twain's hero: during the winter months he lived in Washington, and very early, through constant traveling, was brought into contact with all sorts of people and conditions of American life.

At the age of nineteen Benton went to Paris to make an artist of himself. He served a five-year term in the art colony of the Left Bank, and on his return was the most dismal misfit I have ever encountered. He had absorbed, practiced, and rejected all the isms of the day and he was out of joint with his own country. For years he worked, painting with prodigious energy and frantic determination, but he did not seem to get anywhere. Slowly he recovered his athletic youthfulness, his gusto for living, and his interest in people; and a hitch in the Navy removed the last traces of French influences. But it was Burchfield who showed him the vast potentialities of the American setting and how to relate his technical knowledge to native backgrounds. It is not too much to say that without Burchfield's pioneering discoveries Benton would never have found himself. Beholding the Ohio painter's searching interpretations of the Middle West, he resolved to devote his life to the construction of a complete pictorial history of the United States, an art of and for the American people.

Since that momentous decision Benton has made himself the most widely discussed artist in America. Armed with an exhaustive technical equipment, he has made annual expeditions into the interior of the country. With a knapsack of drawing materials on his back, he has traveled by every known means of locomotion from the great industrial centers to the furthermost corners of the mountains and backwoods. He understands people, high and low, and people like him, put him up for the night, swap yarns with him, and pose for him. In the course of his wanderings he has amassed a library of notes and drawings: cowboys, mountaineers, college professors, politicians, cotton pickers, mill hands, Indians, rustic fiddlers, miners, harvest hands, poets, and preachers—and every one of them drawn from life! Eventually

these studies find their way into his finished works in oil and tempera.

Benton's vitality, diversified interests, and powers of design have been most successfully employed in mural painting. To date, he has executed three murals of outstanding significance in modern art: one in The New School for Social Research in New York; another in the Whitney Museum of New York; and the third—the most impressive wall decoration on the American continent—the History of Indiana painted for the Indiana building of the Century of Progress.

From his first exhibition, Benton has been the storm center of critical opinion. His art is a veritable onslaught against accepted traditions of painting and preconceived ideas of beauty, not so much by the nature of his subject-matter as by his method of attack. In the first place he paints actual scenes and living characters—scenes of crime and violence, agrarian occupations, industrial activities, night life in cities—and he paints them with a full-bodied, shameless, detailed treatment unknown to art since the days of Dutch genre. Second, he uses such materials in great wall paintings, in mural schemes of powerfully integrated projections and recessions in deep space. For this his enemies have called him brutal, vulgar, and blasphemous. But we must remember that mural painting in modern times has been bogged in sham heroics and symbolical blather of a literary nature. It has also been sterilized by the convention that it should be a background like wall paper, that it should not dislocate the flat surface of the wall—a convention the architects have been careful to foster in order to preserve the harmony of their borrowed ornamentations.

Against the conventional heroics of content, to which even so original an artist as the Mexican, Orozco, subscribes—with results that border on the ridiculous—Benton has thrown his perception of things in the American environment, persuaded that his subjects, by their simple, factual character, convey not only sufficient content, but all that the art of painting is capable of holding without turning into literature or illustrational philosophy. Against the fetish of flat decoration he has thrown his structural processes by means of which the wall is used as a window opening back into great distances. Both moves are revolutionary and, furthermore, typical of the American mind, which is contemptuous of grand ideas and heroics. There is no doubt that Benton's revolutionary vigor has overturned American painting and plunged it into new channels; for his most vehement opponents are now adopting both his methods and his views, and painters who have worshipped all their lives at the feet of French artists and bowed to French universality are now proclaiming America and the wide open spaces of the "three-dimensional world."

This, in my opinion, is all to the good. Benton's insistence on the superior value of directly perceived facts has made it possible for any artist to get at the roots of his original self. He has paved the way for the freedom of American expression, and men like Curry, Wood, and Marsh, who share his views, are in no way reminiscent of him. In truth, these men have no special interest in the complicated technical method which has given to much of his work preceding the Indiana mural the hard, cold appearance of problem solutions.

III

The Americanism of John Steuart Curry is of a different stamp. Curry, born on a Kansas farm in 1897, has been painting only a few years, but he has been drawing all his life. "He

began to draw," his mother confides, "when he wore skirts and curls, and like Tommy Traddles, he was always at it. He drew the things he saw on the farm, and the old Northwestern express that roared by at dusk. And one winter, after the corn had been laid by, we went to Arizona, where John's pictures of cowboys, bucking bronchos, and long-horned cattle were much prized by the pupils of the country school."

After working on the Missouri Pacific Railroad as a section hand, Curry entered the Chicago Art Institute, left his studies at the end of two years to play football in Pennsylvania, and then came to New York to try his hand at magazine illustration. Discouraged by his lack of cleverness, he went to Paris to learn how to paint, and returned to America a self-confessed failure. He went back to the farm to think it over, and inspired by renewed contacts with the homeland, painted his celebrated "Baptism in Kansas," a picture that won instant and unexpected recognition. In rapid succession, he painted "The Tornado," which was awarded second prize at the Carnegie International, 1933, "Gospel Train," "Roadmender's Camp," "Hogs Killing a Snake," and many other "Westerns." In 1932, with the permission of John Ringling, he followed The Greatest Show on Earth, a venture resulting in the finest circus pictures thus far done in America. Last year he proved his ability in mural painting and was commissioned, together with Wood, Benton, and Marsh, to decorate one of the new Federal buildings in Washington.

Severe intellectual determination plays only a small part in Curry's work. He is the poet of the American group, certainly the most poetic painter since Albert Ryder. In the best sense of the term, he is an inspirational painter, but "it is everyday human material," he says, "that has furnished his brush with its fill of inspiration." Unlike Ryder, Poe, Melville, and many other Americans unknown or forgotten, Curry is neither moon-struck nor mystical. He is the seer of things as they are, not the studio visionary: the poet of the plains, of the great green inland seas of growing wheat; of droughts, dust storms, tornadoes, and elemental terrors. Like Benton, he works from objective facts into which, during the processes of construction and experiment ending in his finished pictures, there enters a sympathy and love for those facts—the feelings, memories, and intimacies springing from childhood ties that have remained unbroken through the years.

Curry is an uncertain painter, but at his best, the most moving of American artists. His "Line Storm," painted last winter, is a convincing and terrifying piece of work from which no amount of jealous criticism can remove the stamp of greatness. This picture makes most Cézannes look faint, painfully hacked together, and emotionally empty; had it been painted by a European, it would be accepted for what it is, a masterpiece. Curry is still young, and his work is often marred by loose and confusing patches which seem to exist separately as illustrative details; but each year finds him a bigger artist with a stronger grip on his technical means. We can be sure of Curry.

Among these Americans, Reginald Marsh stands alone as a product of the city, a painter devoted wholly to urban phenomena. After his schooling at Lawrenceville and Yale he settled in New York, where in a short time he became conspicuous for his studies of the humbler aspects of metropolitan life. Benton has painted the cities but with a grinning cynicism which makes it plain that he does not love them; Marsh, in contrast, really loves

New York and all its grand vulgarity. He paints Harlem and the Bowery, the parks, breadlines, subways, and Coney Island; and he paints the Fourteenth Street shop-girls and the girls of the public beaches and burlesque shows with sensual tenderness and deep appreciation of the charms of exposed flesh. He is thirty-six years old, abhors well-bred people more and more as he grows older, and cannot paint them with any degree of success; he is interested in the vigorous sensuality of common life, which he accepts frankly and affectionately, as Renoir accepted it. This New Yorker has developed an original method of painting in transparent washes which lend a curiously vibrating quality to his surfaces; but how far this method can be reconciled to precision in design remains to be seen. Marsh has always had trouble in relating his forms, and now that he is engaged in mural painting which demands that his facts, however interesting in themselves, be subordinated to some rational scheme of composition, he faces a difficult problem.

Burchfield, Benton, Curry, and Marsh, living in the East and exhibiting regularly, have been known and watched for a number of years. But it is only within the past two years that Grant Wood who, with Benton, now occupies the most influential position in American art, has come into national acclaim. Wood was born on an Iowa farm in 1892, and has endured the extremes of poverty and hard work. A born craftsman, he has performed almost every kind of manual labor from carpentry to the making of jewelry. He has also been a country schoolmaster and teacher of art in a high school, and at present is head of the Department of Art in the University of Iowa, where, he says, "the creative student shall have his chance."

For a long time Wood suffered the agonies of cultural inferiority which afflict, and usually destroy, American artists. Four times he went to Europe in search of esthetic salvation and in search of something soft and mellow to paint—he "had not yet discovered," he says, "the decorative quality in American newness." He never fooled with Cubism or the other technical and symbolical isms of the day, but he was bound to an older regimen of conventions quite as detrimental to originality. Consciously or unconsciously, he adhered to the Impressionist formula that art is a shutter opened on appearances, and painted bits of nature which, in structure, were no better than the average academic pictures. As a matter of fact, as late as four years ago, save for a few portraits, he was still painting nice, Impressionist studies for a limited Iowa audience. The portraits were beautifully done and superior in characterization to most portraits, but too much influenced by acceptable conventions to count as original works.

Then, as if by a flash of revelation, Wood made his dynamic change and rapidly developed from just another painter of pictures into the designer of original forms which have no parallel in modern art. He painted "American Gothic," one of the most deservedly popular pictures ever produced by an American—incomparable characterization rendered with a craftsmanship of the highest order. It is not possible, of course, that Wood became a creative painter over-night. His study of the German and Flemish primitives inspired him to portray the people of Iowa with the same integrity, methodical planning, impeccable craftsmanship, and love of detail that had gone into those old European masterpieces. And it cannot be doubted that the maturity of his present style had its roots in his planned work in the crafts. For Wood, like Benton, is a planner, a man of method

who calculates his effects. These two men are closely allied, in their intellectual attitudes, to the Florentine painters of the High Renaissance. Temperamentally, however, they are opposites: Wood calm and controlled, Benton hardly able to contain his extravagant energy—the proper distinctions between the Yankee and the Southerner! These distinctions are apparent in their work.

Grant Wood is here to stay, a powerful factor in our declaration of independence in art, despite the attempts of the New York followers of international theories and French processes to treat him as a fad. His "Dinner for Threshers," a masterly piece of designing, has the constituents of great painting; and his most recent landscapes, though a little fantastic and too neatly tailored, reveal an amazing fertility of invention, and what is unique in landscape art, a sense of humor. And Wood, in addition to his attainments as an artist, is the pioneer in the regional movement of art in America. He has founded an Iowa school; won the confidence and respect of his own State by making the artist a sober workman and useful citizen; erased the circles within circles through which the artist must pass to reach an audience; and has sold, without the aid of an intermediary, more than four hundred pictures to the friendly people of Cedar Rapids, his home town!

IV

"What is this basic Americanism which you say informs the work of your chosen painters?" ask the seaboard intellectuals. "Why don't you tell us?" I shall undertake to answer the question.

The American Spirit, as it is revealed historically in the political writings of our founders, in our poetry, in the essays of Emerson and Thoreau, in the fiction of Mark Twain, Dreiser, Lewis, and Hemingway, and in the rush and storm of economic expansion, may best be described as overwhelmingly pragmatic. Though tinctured with melancholy and democratic idealism, this spirit remains essentially pragmatic. No other word so exactly differentiates the American mind from the European which, by education and habit, has come to regard "true thinking" as indissolubly bound to the methods of systematic philosophy. American thinking, as exemplified in the writings of such men as William James and John Dewey, is clearly at war with the logical structures of classic European thinking. It is, in fact, so individualistic that the average Continental student of philosophy does not esteem it as thinking in any sense of the term, and recoils from it with contempt. The American mind is predominantly experimental and suspicious of linguistic processes. As an example, I may cite our Behavioristic psychology which illustrates, in somewhat exaggerated fashion, our skeptical attitude toward systems and great truths, toward anything in the nature of logical expositions of alleged certainties.

Among the men and women of the frontier, whose lives were conditioned by the necessity for immediate action, thinking was regarded as a useless frill, a highbrow weakness. We may safely say that the American intelligence still supports this attitude in many ways, viewing with disdain the kind of thinking venerated as "true thinking"—the construction of all-embracing, logical conceptions of the world and its meaning. At its best, this native intelligence, with its core of skepticism, is a revolutionary force which may yet do more for humanity than the patterned idealism of Marx and Engel—the pure conception of a world of inexorable purpose.

The American spirit, recognizing the intricate blending of ends with means, is concentrated on factual evidence rather than on the so-called spiritual ideals. And here, I think, we arrive at an element running through every type of American life and its psychology: we find it in the talk of the garage mechanic, in the poems of Whitman, in the paintings of Homer and Ryder, and in the works of the artists just considered. But this factual intensity is not without a profound spirituality of its own, a quality present in Whitman's magnificent apostrophes and enumerations where the poetry and mystery of life seem greater and more exalting because of the very simplicity of the common things used as symbols. It is present in those lesser, nameless poets, the soul-savers and evangelists who shout the way to heaven, not in hackneyed Latinisms, but in graphic word-pictures of engines, airplanes, and race horses. And it is present in Mark Twain who, with the simile of a barrel rolling down a flight of stairs, conjures up the rumbling terrors of the thunder storm.

The constant efforts of noble-minded people to put a measure of traditional solemnity into our national life have had little success; and the schoolboy with his stock, "Oh yeah!" plays the devil with the heroisms of school history. The major concern of European thinking—the discovery of the meaning that lies beyond reality—receives consideration in America only among retiring professors of philosophy, esthetes, and the amateurs attached to the weekly highbrow sheets, all of whom count for little in the country's life.

No one can define absolutely the American spirit or isolate that common factor underlying sectionalism, psychological and political contradictions, and a thousand local prejudices; which lives in the sharecropper and the taskmaster he sweats for, and which makes the hysterical efforts of conventional radicals to stimulate class-feeling so difficult, if not impossible. Yet that spirit is real, a strange mixture of nervous emotionalism combined with, and dominated by, a realistic interest in things and the action of things. This conscious, all-absorbing interest in tangible matters is vividly represented by the new group of painters who, even in their poetry, hold certain sardonic reservations—a tendency to twist the solemn moment into a laugh. These painters, for all their differences, are concerned with definite properties—they concentrate on the particular and the characteristic.

It is no accident that the leaders of the new school have come out of the Middle West; for in that region American particularism is at its highest and the frontier heritage of thought and conduct lives on in stark realities, spreading distrust for all absolutes and preserving the hope and temper of democracy. If these painters may be said to represent any abstract content, that content may be named as an equalitarian philosophy in which one thing is as good as another, justifying its value to art by the simple fact of its existence. At the inexorable and inevitable, at all grandeurs of linguistic content, at Marxism and all social absolutes, these painters thumb their noses in typical American style. They see and paint the world of American experience undeterred by theories. They are free from two forces which, in the East, have worked to undermine objective clarity: the colonial and imitative spirit nursed in educational institutions, conservative or radical, and the evil influence of capitalistic finance which, by prolonged manipulation of essentially abstract properties, has separated the minds of men from the realities of things.

V

Burchfield, Benton, Curry, and Wood have not come from a land of abstractions, but from the great productive center of the nation, where things, the industrial and agrarian as well as the cyclonic things of untamed nature, are of supreme importance; where doing is still more important than brooding over action; where the characteristics of individual men and women are cherished, laughed at, and loved; where the pragmatic spirit of America is most vigorous, and the individualism of America most democratic in fact; and where the signs of a social movement toward a greater democracy are most promising. They are of the blood of Mark Twain, Dreiser, Lewis, and Lardner, particularists who found that the only fundamental truth for the artist lies in life as it is actually lived; and that no conception, however grand, can be made real save by attention to experienced things. Naturally, an art so concentrated on life in native localities will be different from European art; and naturally too, this American work to those trained to appreciate art in European terms will seem to be the negation of art. This cannot be helped; but conscious of their strength, these artists do not care; and Benton, to my knowledge, derives huge entertainment from the wails of his cultivated detractors.

These men, with their contempt for abstractions and their deep sense of the simple humanities, have aroused the ire of the Communists. Because they cannot be maneuvered, argued, or bullied into the Marxist fold, they are held up as Fascists, anti-Semites, and negro haters, and accused of the lowest forms of social cynicism. The Communists, by their ill-advised attacks on American artists—attacks similar to their political agitations—have not gained the sympathy of intelligent men. Art is not born of thought-patterns but of experiences. To ask the artist to paint a revolutionary American proletariat on the classic model, when there is no classic model of proletarian consciousness, is to ask the impossible. The ceaseless yapping and driving of the Communists against our artists is a confession of social impotency; but their conception of a social program to which they demand the allegiance of artists is so opposed to realistic facts and so filled with absurdities as to pass from impotency into hysteria. It is significant that the Communists have no artists worthy of the name, and more significant that in Russia there is a growing conviction that it is better to let the artist alone.

The artist, before all people, must be the individualist—or there is no art. Every genuine artist is in revolt not only against the prejudices and practices of traditionalism in his own field but in the field of society as a whole. This, I think, will always be a part of his life as an individual—under all systems and at all times—unless he is again forced to return to a slave status where, as a simple craftsman, he will do the bidding of his political master. It is better in the interests of a more abundant life such as is gained through extensions of experience that the artist be allowed complete freedom. To bind him to dogma, or to make him the illustrator of theses, as the Communists decree, is to sell him down the river; for once he is in the power of any system, no matter how idealistic, he becomes the slave to accepted symbols which, the moment they are found to be effective instruments of propaganda, are rigidly guarded.

The tenets of Communism, like the orthodoxies of official Capitalism, are too rigid for the artist, and only the weak artist can submit to them. There are a number of modern paint-

ers who, like Diego Rivera, profess to believe in Communism, but their attitude is the result of confused thinking. Rivera, when he is really effective, is like any other creative artist—a portrayer of experience, not a propagandist of doctrine. The poor quality of his History of the United States, in the New Workers School of New York may be attributed to his lack of experience with the subject-matter. The mural is simply propagandist illustration, with wooden figures, and of little value when compared to Benton's work in the New School for Social Research. It is also trivial in comparison to Rivera's best Mexican murals.

The leaders of American independence, perceiving the pitfalls of doctrine, have resisted the efforts of the Communists to involve them in their social program. This refusal, let me point out, was not instigated by a belief in the soundness of a Capitalist society nor by any faith in the power of that society to function and at the same time to provide justice, mercy, and happiness to the American Commonwealth. It was based, to a certain extent, on the knowledge that the Communist program is not tuned to American psychology and ways of life; that its language and logical formulas are too general to appeal to American industrial workers and farmers. But it was based primarily on the doctrinaire subservience asked of them, and the Communist denial of the value of individual experiences essential to art in any society. The vindictive opposition of the Communists to these Americans is aggravated by the insignificance of their own artists who can do no more than turn out stale cartoons which, in form and content, are always the same. What grieves the Communists most is their recognition of the fact that in the coming changes of American society, it is such artists as Burchfield, Benton, Wood, Curry, and Marsh, and not the propagandists, who shall represent the American Spirit.