

Book Reviews

Selden Rodman, *Renaissance in Haiti*, New York, Pellegrini & Cudahy, 94 pp., 43 plates, 9 in color. \$4.

As our speed of communication increases, it is said that the world grows smaller, that as the many local differences are minimized, trends tend to become global. These facts may be glad news for the publishers of mail-order catalogues, but what holds true of success in plumbing and kitchen accessories is not so certain to prove a boon on other planes. Should modern architecture mushroom its cubes over the whole planet? Should modern painting, implacable as an oil stain, reach unchecked from Paris to the farthest outposts? Whereas there is undoubted beauty in physical agreement on a grand scale, in collective gymnastic exhibitions, in drills of regiments and Rockettes, one may doubt the virtue of similar collective demonstrations in the realm of art.

Today, it is the forms of art derived from the School of Paris that the pressure of taste and fashion plants like so many billboards over the art panorama. Paradoxically enough, since its banner is personality, modern painting is in danger of becoming a mechanized drill performed by painters in global unison. A breaking-up of contemporary painting into local schools would be a healthy move, stating anew the differences inherent in what constitutes correct behavior on the physical plane and on the spiritual. This breaking up of the international school into smaller ones also presupposes, however, the discard of the assumption that guides many a happy art critic, that a few rules of eye and thumb, easy to memorize, are a sufficient touchstone to separate forever the academic goats from the pictorial sheep.

The attempt made by Grant Wood in Iowa to relate painting to local activities and the local landscape eventually fell under the thrusts of an adverse criticism, as destructive as it was irrelevant; that failed to find in Wood the qualities typical of French and of German expressionism. Another local school on this continent, the Mexican, created in the 'twenties and

stressing murals, took root and flourished, and today is a recognized national asset of Mexico. Yet how close it came to failure in its early days, because of similarly disoriented criticisms!

The latest local movement, just started in Haiti, constitutes still another attempt to retard the mechanization of the spiritual. It is all the more impressive in that it bravely opposes to the dream of one art in one world (as beautifully deceiving as the countless repeated images of a single object placed between facing mirrors) a much smaller image, the deeds of a handful of culturally isolated men whose geographical lot is only the half of a not very large island. Here, as in previous attempts to decentralize art, critical acumen will fail to focus properly unless it sheds the current postulate that only one kind of art may thrive in the world at one time.

This unassuming and charming book is convincing because it is written in a plain human vein and does not even attempt to separate art from its makers. If only we could have documents as human as this one on the beginnings of other art movements, as in the following passage that refers to the time when only artists knew, before outsiders had stumbled onto their doings: ". . . a book-keeper in Cap-Haitien was spending his nights painting scenes from Haitian history for a Masonic temple . . . an overworked taxi driver was precisely modeling some Chinese roses on a cracked tooth-mug, while an apprentice airplane mechanic wondered how much he could improve the strange little genre drawings he had been making for years . . . if he had paint and brushes . . . a half-starved 'voodoo priest' . . . was . . . agreeing to paint flowers and birds on a bar room door for a couple of bottles of ceremonial wine . . . A vaguely ambitious cobbler was sketching chickens and palm trees on discarded Esso calendars."

Especially valuable in form and content are the minute biographies of individual artists. Rodman manages to describe their lives and their motivations without building up picturesque for its own sake, neither glossing over nor underlining standards of thought and of daily living so different from those of American artists. Through this happy blend of keen observation and of restraint, the subjects of these biographies do not suffer a premature apotheosis nor a loss of human dignity.

In straining to avoid prejudice Peters and Rodman, the two apostles in the United States of this movement, may perhaps have "gone over" too wholeheartedly to the different standard, underestimating in so doing the quota of Haitian life not based on jungle and voodoo. The world over, artists have been born on all rungs of the social ladder; thus in Haiti, throwing overboard artists who fail to meet the exacting standards of popularism set by Peters and Rodman could achieve in the end a kind of snobbism in reverse. A case in point is the omission of the Haitian blue-blood, Petion-Savain, painter and author of an illustrated book on rustic Haiti, *La Case de Dambala*, to whom I am grateful for having introduced me, in impeccable French, to the art of *vevers* and voodoo.

Very naturally, Selden Rodman has attempted to "sell" the nascent movement to an obdurate world by stressing its similarities with what global *bon ton* sees fit to eulogize. It is a simpler, and probably more effective, policy than to attempt a true portrait. It hardly matters, in any case, that this little group of painters should enter the hall of fame through the narrow door of fashion, so long as this shortens their trials and lengthens the leisure they need for creating art. As luck would have it, Haitian painting is validly related to two sure standbys of fashion, the hieratic African art and the brand of primitivism hallowed by Henri Rousseau. Given this premise, it comes as no surprise to learn that Paris already applauds, and that André Breton nods recognition.

Judging by what I know of Indian Mexico, Haitian life, in all its humility, may be lived on a more permanent basis of mood and of taste than life in Paris. The final test for the budding movement will be the viability of the relationship between Haitian art and the Haitian people, a kind of proof that is more slow in forthcoming, but is much more relevant, than the passing accolade bestowed by surrealists.

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