

THE MOB AS ART CRITIC

THAT THE COMMON PEOPLE can be stirred by art has been proved by New York twice within half a dozen years. It was less than that time ago that such crowds went to the Hispanic Museum to see the Sorolla pictures that policemen were required to organize them into a marching line outside the building and move them into, around, and out of the Museum again in martial order. On Saturday, March 15, the International Exhibition closed, and during its month of tenure 100,000 people saw the exhibits. Not only this, but 235 of the pictures were sold, the sales being about evenly divided between the foreign and the American artists. Practically all the exhibits of "cubist" art—about thirty—found purchasers. So, on the principle that "money talks," there has been much said in support of the newest phases of artistic expression. Of course it has been averred that purchases have been made with speculative intentions, not through genuine admiration, but that remains to be proved. It is further remarked that the crowd have constituted themselves art critics to an unprecedented extent—the professional critics, outside of one or two outspoken conservatives, having taken a cautious attitude. The newspapers have been bristling with spirited art critics who have felt obliged to relieve their overcharged anger or enthusiasm. A technically-minded one of these writes to the New York *Tribune* to put a quencher upon the scientific pretensions of the new school. At least he points out the unscientific use of language to which the insurgents are prone. What his real feeling is may be found in his use of the old proverb that "it is a waste of lather to shave an ass"; yet he is "tempted to waste a little lather, if only for fun":

"These amorphous conceits, we read, aim to 'pictorially represent' the 'cellular and nervous reactions which carry the messages of sense perception to the brain.' Right here let us see whether we are in the realm of sense or nonsense. 'Pictorial' means nothing else than presentation over again—hence representation—of visual experiences. It can mean no other experiences than visual ones, because vision is the only sense by which we can become cognizant of a design on canvas. Non-visual experiences are therefore impossible of representation, so that to talk of reproducing 'shivers,' 'emotions,' and 'thrills' is nonsense, and the same is true of the claim to represent 'the cellular and nervous reactions which carry messages to the brain.' Do not laugh—merely recall that obviously all expression is of some element of consciousness, and that 'cellular reactions carrying messages' are no more elements of consciousness than is the growth of one's toe-nails—nor a bit more important to his neighbors.

"And it is further nonsense to talk of 'carrying messages of sense perception to the brain,' because 'perception' takes place only in the brain itself, and hence there is no such thing as a 'message of sense perception.' This whole farrago of jargon of scientific language empty of scientific knowledge is nonsense. These 'sensations' we hear about 'reproducing' are impossible of reproduction—even in the mind, still more on canvas—for

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THE SENSATION OF THE SHOW.

Crowds daily stood before this picture by Marcel Duchamp called "The Nude Descending a Staircase" trying to make out the figure or the staircase or, by good luck, both.

when they are gone they are gone forever. What takes their place is not a sensation at all, but a memory, and a memory is not a sensation. The sensation experienced upon being outside of a good dinner is gone for keeps when the dinner is gone, and it can not be reproduced by remembering it (nor painting its portrait), luckily for cooks. And just as a memory of the sensation—or 'thrill'—of a dinner presents none of the satisfactions of the sensation itself, neither do the memories of any other sort of thrills."

Another writer to the same paper is more tolerant to the would-be scientific painters, only she—with feminine nicety—feels they have missed the right nomenclature. Also she feels these pseudo "pictures" would be "more appropriately placed in the lecture-room of a professor of psychology than in an art-gallery." Instead of dubbing the new movement "post-impressionism" she suggests the descriptive term "sensationalism"—"not in the popular sense, but in the scientific application of the term":

"For these artists are endeavoring to give us a pictorial representation of the physical reaction to sense stimuli, the cellular and nervous reactions which carry the messages of sense perception to the brain. They attempt to diagram the shiver which indicates to you that you are cold; the nerve shock and accelerated heart action which mean fear. Do not mistake: they do not picture cold and fear, but they diagram the physical sensation which accompanies the mental recognition of cold and fear.



Marcel Du Champ, 1917
(image added)

"From this point of view, M. Duchamp's painting, 'The Nude Descending the Staircase,' at once becomes significant. It is the diagram of a shudder, and a most clever suggestion of the thing, too. The downward, slightly swerving effect is unmistakable. Moreover, it is safe to assume that the shudder is reproduced in at least 99 per cent. of the persons who have seen the work.

"M. Picabia has a perfect right to depict sensations or anything else in any mode which pleases him. The question is, Can these paintings be properly designated works of art? Does art imply beauty in some manner? Is it not necessary that there be beauty either of form or of thought expressed in masterly fashion? We will grant to the 'sensationalists' the credit for masterly expression. Have we not stated that M. Picabia's diagrams seem to carry over the footlights, so to speak? In his 'Procession,' for instance, one can not evade the bumpy sensation of the head-on (we think it is head-on) progress, with the occasional shock of the glare of rose-red fire.

"But is it beautiful? Would a Bonci be able to fool us into thinking that a pantomime suggestion of the physical sensations incidental to his tone production would be a satisfactory substitute for his song? It might be interesting, but would it be worth while?

"It is doubtful if the diagram of a sensation could ever be really beautiful, even tho it represented the intimate zigzags of the anatomical reactions of an artist."

A doctor writes to *The Evening Post* with absolute convictions concerning the mental states of the artists. "One could easily recognize the germ of value which had been forced into perform-

ing capricious pranks by instigators with ocular aberrations and hallucinatory obsessions." And he goes on:

"The salient color-key was conspicuously at the lassitude end of the spectrum (violet end). Whenever the red end of the spectrum had been employed, a garish effect was the result. The staring presentment of drawing was of the sort done by children and Indians, whose response to impression finds a primitive sort of expression in crude outline drawings. There was none of the simplicity of great art, but rather the simplicity of arrested development, or of the infantile type of consciousness.

"I had always supposed that the poetry of art held mathematics to be a sort of hereditary enemy, yet here, right upon the very escutcheon of the Post-Impressionist, we find emblazoned cubes, higher curves, and comic sections.

"We saw the Futurist sculpture. It left as much to the imagination as would have been left by wooden idols. This idea of suggestion through the

influence of symbols has fundamental *raison d'être*, but it leads the sculptor to sell the stock of an unworked mine. It allows him to shift responsibility to the intellectual apprehensions of his public, and thereby avoid the trouble and expense of any long artistic training. I would call it a sort of labor-saving sculpture, representing the simplicity of artistic indolence."

The doctor's most amusing elucidations concern themselves with the few extant specimens of Futurist literature:

"A certain authoress is doing with words what Picasso is doing with paint. She gives us these lines: 'It is a gnarled division, that which is not any obstruction, and the forgotten swelling is certainly attracting. It is attracting the whiter division, it is not sinking to be growing, it is not darkening to be disappearing, it is not aged to be annoying. There can not be sighing. This is this bliss.'

"Now, wait a minute—if you can. Is this new? To me it sounds much like the words of a man who is suddenly called upon to make an after-dinner speech. Such a postprandial speaker will often give a post-impressionist display of things which he has in mind, but leaving the matter of coherence in idea to an audience which is presumably sober, if not serious. What a speaker does hurriedly and with more or less valid excuse, the post-impressionist writer does deliberately with malcoherence aforethought, transcending the conditions of useful activity of the mind."

Again, we quote another non-professional art critic, who, in his personal capacity, found the opening night of the exhibition an "exciting adventure":

"The opening night of the International Exhibition seemed to me one of the most exciting adventures I have experienced, and this sense of excitement was shared by almost every one who was present. It was not merely the stimulus of color, or the rise of sensuous appeal, or the elation that is born of a successful venture, or the feeling that one had shared, however humbly, in an historical occasion. For my own part, and I can only speak for myself, what moved me so strongly was this: I felt for the first time that art was recapturing its own essential madness at last, and that the modern painter and sculptor had won for himself a title



THE DANCE AT THE SPRING.
From the painting by Francis Picabia.

An example of the "cubist" art which may be found not so difficult of elucidation as most.



Francis Picabia
(image added)

of courage that was lacking in all the other fields of art.

"For after all, tho it needs repeating in every civilization, madness and courage are the very life of all art. From the days of Plato and Aristotle, who both shared the Greek conception of genius as a form of madness, to the Elizabethan poet who said of Marlowe:

For that fine madness still he did
retain
That rightly should possess the
poet's brain;

and from the sturdy and robust Dryden, with his

Great wits are sure to madness
near allied,

to the modern poet who writes

He ate the laurel and is mad,

all who have given any real thought to art or beauty have recognized this essential truth. The virtue of an industrial society is that it is always more or less sane. The virtue of all art is that it is always more or less mad. All the greater is our American need of art's tonic loveliness, and all the more difficult is it for us to recapture the inherent madness without which she can not speak or breathe."

Finally an irate writer to *The Evening Post* reports among other things:

"A hundred onlookers spend the entire period of their visit in fatuous attempts to solve the riddles before them, or in amusing themselves over the 'funny' points of the monstrosities facing them at every turn. . . . One [art student] was seriously perturbed, and apparently took it for granted that it was his pre-professional duty, however much his inclination recoiled from the task, to make a profound study of the squirming abnormalities glaring at him from the canvases. . . . As for the giggling damsels, their intuitions apparently stood them in better stead."

