

DIRECTION

SUMMER, 1938

an appreciation of

ART YOUNG

.. by

Gilbert Wilson



Portrait of Art Young by
José Clemente Orozco

IF A man's countenance can ever sum up the story of his life, such certainly is the case with the countenance of Art Young, the beloved old American artist whose radical cartoons have made him famous far and wide across nearly three-quarters of a century.

Art Young—indicted because of his cartoons, once for libel by the Associated Press, tried, freed—indicted again by the government, to stand trial for sedition—in spite of illness—in spite of poverty—has steadily gone on along a path which has probably remained straighter and more consistently unbroken than that of any socially conscious artist of our time.

Today, at 72, Art Young is a strange blend of childhood and ageless maturity. His face is at once both old and very young—a face worn and wearied but which persists in remaining merry.

It is a face on which the flesh sags in tired pouches when the man is reflective and relaxed in thought. At these times, the look is one of an indescribable, almost tragic haggardness. Orozco caught it in his brush drawing.

But this haggard sag in his face will miraculously vanish as Art Young smiles. Instantly all trace of the weariness is gone. The flesh of the cheeks seems to inflate, and with a rush of pink color you see an altogether different face—a gleeful expression which virtually can only be compared to that of a smiling healthy infant—in the mouth, the characteristic vibrant parting of the lips, the raised corners of the mouth, tongue moistly forward, dimples, and a sparkling twinkle about the blue eyes, the head rimmed with a sprightly, always tousled halo of white curls.

This truly remarkable child-like quality is the man's strongest fortification against the years. Likewise it has been the strongest weapon with which he has waged an over-half-century of ceaseless fighting for the cause of social justice—the blithe, airy, fresh, often impudent but determined light-heartedness of youth flung in the face of the gross brutality of the profit system.

ART YOUNG



Art Young by Gilbert Wilson

Has anyone but Art Young ever done just that? Isn't his spirit unique in the history of art as a social force?

Humor coupled with poignancy. That is the keynote of Art Young's work.

In a drawing he clothes a serious statement in a humorous garb. He catches our conscience off-guard.

Take one of Art Young's more famous drawings: The "cool sewer" picture, the one captioned: "Chee, Annie, look at the stars—they are as thick as bed-bugs." These are not simply the conventional gag-line comic cartoons.

In these drawings—Art Young will tell you himself—after all, what is so funny about the contrast of a woman standing over a hot stove all day while her husband supposedly can enjoy working in the cool recesses of a sewer? And *what* is so funny about children being able to find only the prevalence of bed bugs fit and adequate for comparison to how thick the stars are in the sky?

If one has at all in his make-up any grain of human sympathy, he laughs at these pictures only to feel a little bit ashamed for having laughed.

That is the humor of Chaplin, with whom Art Young's work might be said to have much in common.

We look at Art Young's tramp searching in the depths of a garbage can for something to eat and finding nothing gives the can a hefty kick. The drawing bears the simple caption "Protest."

Primarily, Art Young did not expect you to only laugh at that picture. He will tell you himself—again he will say (perhaps swearing), "What the hell is so funny about a human being having to paw in a garbage can for food?"

And what is so funny about the fact that "kicking at the garbage can" in a measure epitomizes the futility with which all too many of us individually register, express and give vent to our "protest" against an economic system which we know is inexcusably wrong and cruelly so?

Take the drawing called "Environment"—a wreck of a tree trying pathetically to grow propped up and surrounded by high, dirty buildings—another of pigs cavorting happily in a sunny pasture and children crowded together in their attempt to play in the dinginess of a tenement street, the irony of which is simply recorded in an excerpt from a bulletin of the U. S. Department of Agriculture on the care of pigs. Or the drawing which is a poignant appeal on behalf of the veteran's bonus: A one-legged soldier waters a little tree which he has whimsically planted in his empty shoe to grow himself a wooden leg. Or the picture of a huge blood-hound labeled "Poverty" sniffing the last of a woman's tracks which vanish on the brink of a black hole called "Prostitution."

These are not humor in the escape sense. Humor is usually just that—something to turn our minds aside from pressing facts.

Nor are these drawings the work of a man who views humor merely as an end in itself. Art Young sees and employs humor to an infinitely larger end.

We might be led to wonder if there is not something rather profound about the art of provoking a

ART YOUNG



The Profiteer: "I'm as good a friend of labor as the next man—but there's no denying that working-men do spend their money foolishly."

laugh in the face of such subject matter so pathetic as children crowded in a tenement street, a soldier desiring an artificial limb, or a young woman gone down in the slough of prostitution.

Such laughter—if these drawings make us laugh—is of the stinging sort. Humor coupled with poignancy.

Time and time again Art Young has held up one after another of countless phases of our sordid economic life to say to us, "Look at this! Ha, Ha! What is so funny about it?"

Behind such years of effort is a conscientious concern and sympathy for the lives of common people who never get much more than a pretty damnably raw deal out of life.

And Art Young does not blame the ills and shortcomings of our social order on some vague abstract discrepancy of the cosmic scheme.

That his attacks have been objectified and specific is attested to by the facts that twice he has faced serious legal indictments because of drawings he made. One charge of libel made against him by the Associated Press was brought to court but quietly dropped for what the Associated Press considered reasons of its own. Another more serious charge was brought against Art Young by the government during the war. This time it was sedition with a penalty of twenty years in prison—for drawing cartoons! The case was won by the defendants.

It is common knowledge how Art Young, on the stand had the jury, the judge, the whole court laughing—in spite of the deadly seriousness of the trial. A spirit like Art Young's carries with it a natural defiance of the pompous authority of a courtroom. It was with perfectly blameless and innocent contempt that he fell asleep and snored during the proceedings of his trial. Such a spirit is a jaunty, untamable, colt-like thing that kicks up its heels as it runs away, refusing to be disciplined or blamed.

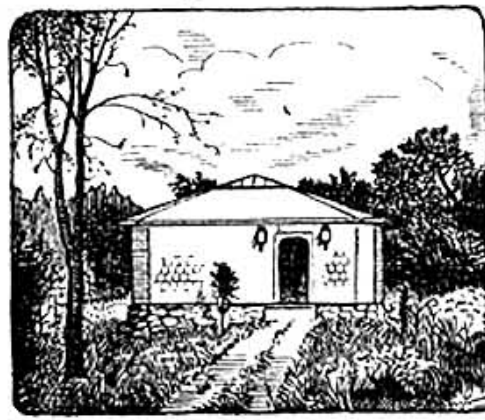
But by and large—as that expression goes—Art Young has never adopted the policy of tearing into his foe (which is capitalism) with tooth and claw. It simply isn't his way. He just isn't capable of hating anyone or anything badly enough to get that angry.

Isn't it rather the duty of a good radical, as Lenin said "Patiently to explain"?

And so Art Young's philosophy of attack has followed the line of the reasoning expressed in the old adage: "The constant dripping of water will wear away stone."

But to go back to the amazing countenance of this dean of American caricature: The tiredness you see in Art Young's face is all the combined tiredness, the hopelessly spent feeling and despondency of every worker who has ever been helplessly exploited, abused and battered down by the utterly senseless and inhuman system of economics. The buoyant child-like smile that happily lifts those features is all of the best in the common man—that inviolable spirit in the human being upon which there have been made no inroads of despair.

To keep that spirit fresh and unembittered that is what Art Young has taught us—the example he has set.



This is Art Young's studio in Bethel, Connecticut. For over thirty years, the master cartoonist has worked and dreamed here—dreamed of a bigger studio, of a better world, and all the things idealists dream of. On the walls hang many of the originals of the cartoons that have made him famous. Here are the *Trees*, those remarkable designs of faces, figures caught in the branches and gestures of bare trees blown on a winter night, which have made up his book of that title. Here, this summer, he is preparing his autobiography for publication in the fall. It will be the full story of his courageous, gay, and unusually difficult life.

OldMagazineArticles.com

ART YOUNG PROTEST



"I gorry, I'm tired."

"There you go. You're tired. Here I be a-standin' over a hot stove all day, an' you're wurkin' in a nice cool sewer!"

OldMagazineArticles.com