PENNSYLVANIA'S CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE ARTS: A SYMPOSIUM*

Introduction

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The conscientious general historian must range over many fields of subject matter, some of which may be far removed from his primary interests, and he must be prepared to deal with all of them with a passable semblance of authority. That he should feel less at home in some areas than in others, and that his written products may at some points show that he is crossing unfamiliar ground, is to be expected. However, it has been my observation that on few topics is he found to be so consistently ill at ease as in the case of the fine arts.

Granted that his schedule in college and graduate school is full to the brim, leaving no time for frills, it may be interjected that some sound training in art history could be of real service to every historian. The trouble is, he so often appears to nod a bit and to relax his historical standards when compiling those sections on the arts that go into the inevitable chapters on “Cultural Developments.”

As a rule these chapters are dull. No reader can experience delight in the arts or sense their relationship to a living culture from a perfunctory roll call of names and examples, accompanied by trite, unperceptive commentary. Less excusable from the historian’s standpoint, however, is a fuzzy and distorted organization of materials that can usually be attributed to careless selection and little use of sources.

In one recent popular history of Pennsylvania half a page is devoted to the painting of Edwin A. Abbey, while Thomas Eakins is allotted a half-sentence and Mary Cassatt no more than the mention of her name. To me, an art historian, that is absurd—cock

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eyed—in the light of current art knowledge and opinion. Had the authors of the book been at all aware of trends in art publications and exhibitions they would have perceived that Mr. Abbey has not gained acceptance as a major artist, whereas Eakins and Cassatt have advanced steadily into the foremost rank of American painters. Whatever the merits of the book otherwise, any discussion of the arts permeated with such false estimates is worthless.

American architecture suffers in the historian's hands, as it does in those of many a specialist in the field, from a prejudiced antiquarian attitude. Things "Colonial" and "old" receive affectionate and uncritical approval; building developments post-dating the "Greek Revival" are likely to be ridiculed or ignored. If a history text were to approach any other matters with a similar slant, were to imply, for example, that the American Revolution deserves more sympathetic study than the Civil War because it occurred in a period which historians happened to favor, scholarly critics would unlimber their typewriters for blistering reviews.

It is only stressing the obvious to insist that the writer of history, and the teacher of it, too, should make his presentation of the arts as vital and informative as possible; that here as elsewhere he should exercise rigorous care in choosing and winnowing his materials; that he should whet his own esthetic judgments against good contemporary art criticism, while striving always for objective impartiality in tracing significant developments.

But after all, the best practical corrective for shortcomings such as I have briefly indicated, and perhaps have exaggerated by oversimplification, is the spread of common knowledge and appreciation of the arts. Within the Pennsylvania region there are promising unmined veins of art lore from which will come future studies and interpretations. And here, too, are possibilities for disseminating and understanding of our art wealth, not only through publications but through exhibitions, films, talks and demonstrations, in public places, in schools, and over the air waves. These afford inexhaustible opportunities for enriching the life of the Commonwealth.