PENNSYLVANIA PAINTERS:
An Exhibit for Historians

BY HAROLD E. DICKSON*

THERE is a regrettable yet general tendency among historians, in particular those who write text books, to relax the standards of their scholarship when it comes to dealing with the arts. Pennsylvania's chroniclers have proven all too fallible in this respect. It is startling to find, for example, that John Singer Sargent and William Merrit Chase have been treated as Pennsylvania figures. Cursory examination of several fairly recent state histories reveals evidence such as the following:

Number one, printed in 1945, contains a chapter on literature and music but nothing whatsoever on painting, sculpture, or architecture. There is one incidental reference to Benjamin West, but no other artist—no Peale, Sully, Eakins, Cassatt—is listed in the index.

Number two, revised in 1948, conscientiously mentions every Tom-Dick-and-Harry of a painter, but its handling of them is lugubriously unbalanced and inaccurate. Edwin Austin Abbey, referred to as "the greatest of Pennsylvania painters," receives 23 lines of text as compared with eight for Thomas Eakins, who surely would be listed first among Pennsylvania painters by today's informed art opinion. Eakins' "principle works" here are cited as "The Operation [which might be either The Gross Clinic or the Agnew], Christ on the Cross, Chess Players, and Professionals at Rehearsal [leaving an element of doubt as to whether these 'professionals' are instrumentalists, vocalists, pugilists, oarsmen, or a kind of medley of the lot]."

In number three, published in 1950, a section covering the arts

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through the preceding hundred years, a rich period indeed, is entitled in bold-face type *THE FINE ARTS DECLINE*. Here again Abbey receives more than triple the space allotted to Eakins, and the index lists no Cassatt, Sloan, Luks, Glackens, Demuth, Kane; there is no Peale other than Charles Willson, no Edward Hicks, Catlin, Blythe—of course, Blythe worked in *western* Pennsylvania, and so far as can be gathered from any of these books the arts have yet to make an appearance in that rugged frontier territory.

It would seem obvious, then, that something ought to have been done long ago to alert people in and outside the State, including historians who are inclined to shrug off the arts, to the very substantial contribution that Pennsylvania has made to the artistic heritage of the nation. Even *art* historians at times have given this less than adequate attention.

Therefore, when in planning an exhibition to be held last fall in observance of the Centennial of the Pennsylvania State University we chose the theme *Pennsylvania Painters*, our purpose was at least in part didactic.

The basic scheme was simple: to let a selection of painters born in or in some special ways representative of this region, ranging from colonial times to our own century but not including those now living, be shown each with one painting—two, it was decided, in the cases of Benjamin West and Thomas Eakins. Each picture, however, was to be a first-rate and characteristic example of the artist’s work. In some instances, as with *The American School* by Matthew Pratt, it was the painting among the artist’s existing works and one of the familiar classics of American painting. In all, forty-six painters were represented by forty-eight paintings.

Around this group of pictures, actually chosen as though they were to be illustrations for a book, could then be written a catalogue which might help to bring into focus the often blurred outlines of the development of painting in Pennsylvania.

What in general was learned or clarified in the preparation of this exhibition and its catalogue? Since the latter is available (at one dollar, postpaid, from The University Library, University Park, Pa.), it would serve little purpose here to expound its contents, even were space to permit. Nevertheless, a sampling of a few pertinent observations can be made brief and painless.
WOMAN WITH A DOG
By Mary Cassatt
Courtesy The Corcoran Gallery of Art
Growth of the arts in Pennsylvania naturally has centered in the metropolitan areas of Philadelphia, and, only within the past little more than a century, in Pittsburgh. It is in these two places that painting has been fostered by patronage, strong art institutions, and facilities for exhibiting. The historians should have noted in particular the series of annualls at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, the international art exhibition of the Centennial of 1876 at Philadelphia, and the series of “Internationals” begun in the 1890s at the Carnegie Institute in Pittsburgh, each a milestone of its kind in our cultural history.

The profession of painting was brought to Philadelphia during the first half of the eighteenth century by Gustavus Hesselius, whose portrait of the Indian Tishcohan, commissioned by John Penn in 1735, was the earliest in our selection of paintings. Before the Revolution, Penn’s colony in turn had made its contribution to the art world of Europe—and Americans were very conscious of and emphatic about this—in the person of Benjamin West, who incidentally had left behind him in this country a charming portrait of Thomas Mifflin, later first governor of the Commonwealth, that might well adorn the dust jacket of any book dealing with the arts in Pennsylvania.

But it was in the period after the Revolution, when Philadelphia, for a decade the capital of the new nation and a focus as well of its cultural and intellectual life, entered upon its first artistic Golden Age. The painting Peales, Charles Willson and his younger brother, James, and their sundry relatives and progeny, staged the most fascinating family act in the annals of American art. Thomas Sully returned from England to Philadelphia, filling a gap left by the departure of Gilbert Stuart. Next to Stuart, Sully probably influenced his profession of portraiture more than any other American of the time—witness the work of Jacob Eichholtz, John Neagle, and James Reid Lambdin, the first native Pittsburgher to become a painter, to cite only those included in our exhibition.

In these years the range of pictorial subject matter, hitherto centered in portraiture, broadened rapidly, and visitors to early exhibitions at the Pennsylvania Academy saw landscapes by Thomas Doughty, seascapes by Thomas Birch, humorous genre by the German John Lewis Krimmel, and still-life by several of the Peales—all pioneers in their respective lines.
Presumably because pictures of fruit and vegetables in tidy arrangements would seem to have less historical significance than most kinds of painting, our historians have ignored the interesting fact that American still-life painting began with a Philadelphia School—or should we say, a Delaware-Schuylkill River School? Moreover, the sort of trompe l'oeil rendering of objects seen in Raphael Peale's *After the Bath* and in the run of Peale still-life painting continued to flourish in eastern Pennsylvania through two succeeding generations in the practice of interesting artists such as John F. Francis—seen in our exhibition in one of his characterful portraits, of Governor Joseph Ritner—and into the seventies with the popular trompe l'oeil of John F. Peto and William Harnett, who though not born in Philadelphia began his career there, and whose affinity to this well rooted Pennsylvania school of still-life is as real as that of the Umbrian Piero della Francesca to the company of the Florentine scientists. To this garnering of meticulously realistic painting and painters we added a nosegay of apple blossoms by Martin Johnson Heade, a native of Bucks County.

Realism is a word that appears as often and inevitably as a television commercial throughout any treatment of painting in Pennsylvania through the nineteenth century. The return of Thomas Eakins in 1870 to his native city of Philadelphia marks the real beginning of the phenomenally independent career of America's most distinguished scientific naturalist. And, thanks in large measure to the dedicated research, publishing, and just plain talking of Lloyd Goodrich, there remains no need to enlarge on the ripening of the fruits of Eakins' objectivism, in the canvases and teaching of the Pennsylvania Academician Thomas Anshutz, and in the anti-estheticism of the "ash can" realists who burst like grains from a popper in the bustling atmosphere of the Philadelphia newspaper world of the nineties—John Sloan of Lock Haven, George Luks of Williamsport, William Glackens, a distinguished alumnus of Philadelphia's Central High, and others.

Our representative among the late nineteenth century expatriates was the Impressionist Mary Cassatt, whose Pennsylvania roots went deeper than the American ones of Whistler or Sargent. And modern painting in this country has been enriched by the sensitivity of Charles Demuth of Lancaster and by the stirring color of
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CORYELL'S FERRY, 1776
By Joseph Pickell, c. 1914-1918
Courtesy Whitney Museum of American Art
Arthur Carles, surely a better abstractionist than the present ebb of his fame would seem to indicate.

For every Cassatt, Eakins, Peale, West—the sturdy framing timber around which an exhibit such as ours is constructed—there are numerous and intriguing lesser figures. In searching for these it is rewarding sometimes to uncover a worthy lost soul. There is the forgotten Lloyd Mifflin, who in the seventies of the past century was painting landscapes on the Susquehanna below Harrisburg that pleasantly reflect the teachings of Thomas Moran and the painter's acquaintance through travel with the European scene. Few students of American art can identify John Valentine Haidt, a German of the Moravian faith, whose portraits and paintings of religious subjects, done in a baroque figure style and dating from the third quarter of the eighteenth century, are rarely to be seen outside of Bethlehem, Nazareth, and nearby communities.

A few painters of Western Pennsylvania are well known. Certainly the caustically amusing David G. Blythe has cut a figure in American art if not in our state history texts. Even before the Civil War charming landscapists such as Russell Smith, William G. Wall, and, a little later, Jasper Lawman were painting in and around Pittsburgh.

Let me close with one final cast into a pool left quite undisturbed by the non-art historians of Pennsylvania. Our "primitives," so to speak, have been prime.

Edward Hicks, the Bucks County Quaker, is one of the masters of popular painting in the United States. His contemporary, John A. Woodside, according to Virgil Barker was "probably the most competent artisan painter of the Federal Era." A hundred years ago Linton Park of Indiana County pictured in lively terms the life of his day in the lumbering section of the upper Susquehanna. In our own time we have discovered and honored the natural gifts of such exciting painters as Joseph Pickett, Horace Pippin, and Pittsburgh's own John Kane.

Our Pennsylvania Painters exhibition now is being toured for a year throughout the country by the Smithsonian Institution. Lest the omission be noted, it might as well be openly confessed that somehow that "greatest of Pennsylvania painters," Edwin Austin Abbey, failed to pass the entrance examinations to the show. We hesitated, after all, to move a mural, particularly one which, as Thomas Craven once remarked, "should have been knitted."
AFTER SIR CHRISTOPHER WREN

By Charles Demuth

Courtesy Worcester Art Museum