BOOK REVIEWS


This recent publication by the University of Pittsburgh Press is a welcome one, both as a contribution to our special knowledge of American art and as an intriguing glimpse into the life of mid-nineteenth century Pittsburgh. It is the result of a thesis, suggested by Professor Walter Read Hovey, and written for the doctor of philosophy degree in the department of fine arts at the university. It is especially fitting that this work on a regional artist be brought out in Pittsburgh, in whose Carnegie Institute his paintings were first introduced to the public in an exhibition held in 1932. Miss Miller has here accomplished most creditably a thorough study of the work of an important artist, outstanding and individual in nineteenth century painting in America. Although Blythe is an artist of some unevenness he has produced sufficient good painting to warrant him a definite place of standing in the history of American art. More specifically what that place is Miss Miller has endeavored to show. This work indicates a careful, detailed study, and persistency in amassing a large amount of factual material not easily available, and considerable ability to organize, arrange, and interpret these facts. To be sure one does not always agree with her interpretations.

In her final critical evaluation, for example, it is interesting to observe some general comparisons with old masters. One wonders what basis there is for comparison to Chardin, or to Terborch, or what the author's reason is for mentioning Brueghel since she attempts to explain at some length how different he is from Blythe. Surely Blythe is closer to his American contemporaries, such as John Quidor, Richard Caton Woodville, or Alburtis Browere, than to any of these. Miss Miller is not always so clear as she might be in her stand on the originality of Blythe. It would almost seem in some instances that she has built up a case for his dependence on others in both ideas and style—a case which could possibly be made more convincing were there time or reason for doing it. One has a feeling one could find prototypes in composition, stylistic treatment, and in idea for many of Blythe's paintings. Similarities in spirit and composition of "Libby's Prison" to certain etchings and paintings of Rembrandt, attitude toward subject in "Pitts-
burgh Piety” and Hogarth’s “Sleeping Congregation,” stylistic treatment in “General Doubleday Crossing the Potomac” and landscapes of Thomas Cole, are only a few examples which come to mind.

But on the other hand her analysis of Blythe’s own style of painting without reference to period or to other artists is at once penetrating, sympathetic, and objective. It indicates a first-hand knowledge of the medium of paint. Obviously she enjoys this artist’s work and has enjoyed analyzing it.

In addition to her understanding of Blythe as an artist, a more defined evaluation of his place in American art would perhaps have given greater significance to this work. A more concise and specific presentation of the status of American art between 1815 and 1865 might have helped to accomplish this. How much was he actually affected by the American genre coming into vogue at this time? One is curious to know more concerning the presence of Art Union prints in Pittsburgh. How does he compare, for example, with George Caleb Bingham, Richard Caton Woodville, William Mount, or John Quidor? How do his portraits compare with other portrait paintings of his time—those of Chester Harding, Charles Loring Elliot, William Page, John Neagle, Thomas Sully, James Lambdin?

But in spite of certain mildly persisting questions, one reads this book with great interest. Miss Miller reveals a detailed and sound knowledge of American history, especially the period covering the Civil War. Particularly appealing is the account of Blythe’s panorama painting, its production and its spectacular career of showing.

Of special interest to readers of this magazine is the material devoted to Pittsburgh. Miss Miller’s descriptions of the city during Blythe’s sojourns here are excellent and recreate scenes for us that cannot fail to appeal to strangers and old Pittsburghers alike. Occasionally one runs into minor inaccuracies concerning early nineteenth century artists of Pittsburgh, tolerantly perhaps since it is a subject not as yet explored with any amount of thoroughness. James Lambdin and Russell Smith, for example, were more active in Philadelphia than in Pittsburgh in the 50’s and 60’s. Occasionally one disagrees with her esthetic evaluations. I find the allusion to the Schoenberger house on Penn Avenue as a typical example of the “great hodgepodge mansions” . . . “an imposing pile of stone” an unfortunate one. This house, heavily severe and actually a very simple Greek Revival style of
architecture, was, on the contrary, far from hodgepodge. Concerning this house, Talbot Hamlin in his authoritative work on the Greek Revival style in America writes: "Time and progress have dealt harshly with old Pittsburgh, but enough remains—or has remained until fairly recent times—to enable us to distinguish that quality of almost heavy good taste, of excellent proportion, of severity which characterized its Greek Revival buildings, as for example in the exterior of the Schoenberger house (1847). Yet this house shows also the tremendously lavish interior work that was often hidden behind these dignified, almost stark exteriors. It is one of the richest Greek Revival interiors anywhere and comparable to any of the contemporary work in Boston or the South." But Miss Miller is not alone in her apparent disregard for this recently destroyed example of early Pittsburgh architecture. Our city planners enthusiastically thinking out the ideal arrangement of Pittsburgh's buildings for its future have not thought it worthy of preservation even in our historically enlightened day.

Miss Miller's thesis that Pittsburgh is one of two factors influencing Blythe's work, and that it reflects with "amazing insight the lives and background of the men and women of Pittsburgh," might be open to question. Sometimes our glimpses into early Pittsburgh are more tantalizing than satisfying. While several of his paintings are certainly scenes of Pittsburgh, often the setting is too vague to be convincing. I think it is difficult to be certain that "Art Versus Law" shows the top floor of the Denny Building on Fourth Avenue in spite of Mr. Wolff's ledger. There does not seem to be any sound basis, for example, for believing that "Pittsburgh Piety" is an interior scene of the First Presbyterian Church in Pittsburgh. Actually that title was only very recently, and somewhat wishfully, given to the painting. On the other hand, it seems to me there is no need for speculation concerning the identification of the church tower in "Pittsburgh Horse Market." But local history and early place identifications are always a matter for controversial discussion and ghosts of our earlier days can rise up too easily to challenge definite and dogmatic statements. Certainly there is a universality to the paintings of Blythe which give them greater value than any precise local significance could attach to them, and Miss Miller's understanding of this is unquestioned.

One is conscious throughout the book of a great deal of conjecture as the author herself points out. One wonders if a more specific chap-
ter bibliography, or some arrangement of reference notes might not have given her work greater conviction. To insure more interesting reading, much of the detailed description of individual paintings could have been assigned to each work in the appended list of pictures and their locations. This is true especially of the section given over to his various versions of street urchins, whereas the elaborate discussions of some of Blythe's more complex projects of the Civil War period and after seem fully justified and are intensely interesting.

The book is pleasantly printed with generous margins and is comfortable to read. Its text has been set, as one reads in the colophon, in linotype Caledonia. The design is appropriately simple with a certain interest achieved in boxed chapter headings. It is amply illustrated by offset lithography, although it is unfortunate that so much detail has been lost in the reproductions. The binding in dark red buckram, with the signature of Blythe printed in gold, its only decoration, reflects the simplicity and straightforwardness of both the subject and its literary presentation. Altogether this work is most worthy of recommendation and one with which both author and publisher might well be pleased.

University of Pittsburgh

Virginia Lewis


Here, in approximately one hundred pages is the simple, unadorned, and statistic-less story of an average American industry. It began in a modest way in 1850, when a distinguished Baltimore chemist, Dr. Richard A. Tilghman, who, while studying in England, discovered two important chemical processes, returned to the United States and obtained patents for them. The patents covered a process for manufacturing caustic soda, ash, and chlorine-bearing compounds, such as bleaching powder. It was known as "The Strontia Process."

A group of prominent Philadelphians, most of whom were Quakers, organized a small company to develop the process. At that time