TWO HUNDRED AND FIFTY YEARS OF PENNSYLVANIA ART AT GREENSBURG

JAMES D. VAN TRUMP

The recent opening on 29 May of the Westmoreland County Museum of Art, located in the county town of Greensburg some thirty miles from Pittsburgh, was an occasion of no little importance in the cultural life of Western Pennsylvania. The Museum begun in 1957 was erected by the Woods-Marchand Foundation, a corporation created under the will of a local citizen, Mrs. Mary Marchand Woods (d. 1953), for the purpose of founding and maintaining an art gallery. Appropriately, the director of the new institution, Dr. Paul Chew elected to inaugurate its activities with a large and comprehensive exhibition of the Commonwealth's artistic inheritance—"Two Hundred and Fifty Years of Art in Pennsylvania" which remains open to the public through July.

This Pennsylvanian anthology, which is well selected and impressively displayed in the bright new Museum galleries, consists of almost a hundred and forty paintings, a dozen pieces of sculpture and a fairly representative collection of the decorative arts—pottery, glass, metal work and furniture. Since art, in its most extensive, if its most mundane aspect, is the mirror of history, a review of the exhibition in this magazine is certainly apposite—indeed, such a segment of provincial pictorial history may sometimes have more to say to the historian and amateur of the past than to the art critic. This notice may also serve to convey the good wishes of the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania to a newcomer among local cultural institutions.

The exhibition as a regional unit needs no justification, but the viewer may well ask himself if the art of Pennsylvania is so wonderfully different from that of New York, say, or Massachusetts,

Mr. Van Trump, a local art historian and writer, although primarily interested in our regional architecture, has published several articles on other aspects of cultural life in Western Pennsylvania. Since this review was written while the exhibition was in progress, the present tense must be understood as the historical present.—Ed.
whose art histories are as large and varied as our own. Ours is not, of course, very dissimilar since all these sections were subject to historical influences common to eastern America. The large framework of American art has thus a certain unity of articulation, but the Pennsylvania segment has its own tone and flavor, its subtle differences and variations. It is the chief cultural function of such displays as that of Greensburg to underline these differences, to consider intensively the local variations on the general American theme. Only thus can the totality of our national art be finally assessed.

This review will be chiefly concerned with the painting shown at Greensburg—the oils and water colors, those planes of canvas or paper which reflect the past and present history of the Commonwealth. There are, here, no masterpieces, no transcendent manifestations of the human spirit—although Thomas Eakins and Mary Cassatt possessed magnificent talents—but there is in the material displayed much technical dexterity and careful observation. In all this painting from the work of the 18th century portraitists to that of Eakins and the early 20th century painters of forthright social comment known collectively as "The Eight," the dominant Pennsylvanian note is that of realism, but a realism often illuminated by the Romantic spirit, and not infrequently infused with a poetic idealism. The mountains, the rivers, the cities, the factories and houses of the Commonwealth and the bodies and faces of its inhabitants are engagingly reflected in the lively chronicle at Greensburg, which is a worthy successor to the important showing of state-wide art presented by Harold E. Dickson at the Pennsylvania State University in 1955.

The early painting of Pennsylvania is either a reflection of the European Renaissance and Baroque academic tradition, or the primitive realism of folk art, but an American vigor and freshness soon began to leaven the imported influences. By the middle of the 18th century, Philadelphia had become one of the great cities of the British Empire: a cosmopolitan seaport, it possessed a certain muted imperial brilliance of commerce and society, an echo of London on this continent. In such a city the arts flourished. Men like Gustavus Hesselius from Sweden, John Haidt from Bavaria, and William Groombridge from England brought to the new country the various national expressions of the European theme. The merging of these currents formed a necessary background against which native talents
like those of Charles Willson Peale, Benjamin West and Gilbert Stuart could develop. The general artistic ferment produced a highly interesting school of painting at Philadelphia.

Portraits constitute the main body of this 18th century work and the first gallery at Greensburg consists chiefly of a gathering of the likenesses of early Pennsylvania citizens. This room is dominated by two handsome paintings of George Washington—the earlier by Charles Willson Peale (1741-1827) and the later by his son Rembrandt (1778-1860). Around these two "set pieces" the minor pictorial images are arranged; it is as if the first president in duplicate were presiding over one of his own official receptions. The gathering is varied—those be-satined dolls, the Gatling children, by Henry Benbridge, the interesting early Benjamin West of Stephen Carmick, the youthful alertness of John Meng's self portrait, the sober elegance of John Hesselius' Samuel Lloyd Chew conjure up pleasantly the provincial brightness of that vanished century.

The earlier pictures, with all their uncertain striving for European correctness and their frequent dependence on Baroque "props," have a native vigor, a sharp wooden sincerity which is often more appealing than the technically proficient products of those later artists who were intensively trained in the European academic tradition. This latter group is well-represented at Greensburg—the rather pedestrian elegance of West's mature manner may be seen in his portrait of an unidentified English gentleman, the subtle modeling of Gilbert Stuart's macreous illuminated flesh tones is apparent in the likenesses of Judge John Young and his wife and the fluid mannerisms and easy professional competence of Thomas Sully are illustrated in his General George Cadwalader—which last is a nice piece of bravura painting. Among the 19th century portraits of historical significance may be noted that of U. S. Grant by James Reid Lambdin (1807-1889) who was born in Pittsburgh—unfortunately his canvas is a dreary "state" performance which has the bland, inflated insipidity of a bad official photograph.

It would be interesting, but impossible, in such a brief review to comment extensively on the portraits as historical documents. Many of the sitters were important in their day and a few of them should be noticed. The G. W. Peale Washington, a replica of the "Princeton" portrait done from life after the Battle of Trenton in 1779, is interesting in that it depicts the great national hero in the
prime of life and in his most military aspect. On the other hand, the Rembrandt Peale "port-hole" portrait first painted in 1823 is an idealized composite likeness which has a notable place in our national iconography. The Greensburg replica, apparently painted about 1830, was the first canvas purchased by the new museum. Although strangers to extensive fame, some lesser citizens who figure in the show are worthy of mention. Timothy Horsfield, Jr., of Bethlehem (d. 1789), painted by John Haidt, was the son of a prominent justice of Lancaster County and the father of the naturalist and explorer, Thomas Horsfield (1773-1859), while Stephen Carmick (1719-1774) was a Philadelphia merchant and importer and one of the "Sons of Liberty." The two Stuart portraits have a special interest for western Pennsylvanians inasmuch as they depict the Honorable John Young (1762-1840) who was President Judge of the Tenth Judicial District of Pennsylvania from 1806 to 1837 and his wife Maria Barclay Young (d. ca. 1811), both of whom were residents of Greensburg. General George Cadwalader (1806-1879), the second son of General Thomas Cadwalader, was a distinguished social and military figure in Philadelphia, who, after his father's death, took over the Penn family business. This is only a representative selection of names, but it serves to indicate that this section of the exhibition has the liveliest interest for the historian.

But the historian cannot alone consider the faces and honors of the famous, the near famous, the illustrious dead. The past has other facets and not the least of them is the land across which these people moved—the valleys, the mountains, forgotten houses in a calm street, a porch on a hill, a mill with smoke and flame, are all here in landscape and cityscape, the varied settings for the actions of history. There is at Greensburg a solitary echo of the grand European tradition of the battle piece—"The Monitor and the Merrymac" painted in 1874-75 by James Hamilton (1819-1878), but most of the scenic painting has a quiet realistic quality devoid of any too insistent drama. The historic "incident" has been pleasantly done by John Lewis Krimmel (1787-1821) with his "Parade Passing Independence Hall" (ca. 1812) and the English landscape tradition is charmingly recalled in William Groombridge's "Woodlands, Seat of William Hamilton near Philadelphia." The Pennsylvanian version of the Hudson River School owed much to Thomas Doughty (1793-1856), one of the founders of the movement, whose "View on the Bushkill" well represents the type which was continued so
poetically by Lloyd Mifflin's two lyrical views of the Susquehanna valley. Two vignettes of the western Pennsylvania metropolis have a special claim to the attention of the local citizenry—Russell Smith's vivid "View of Pittsburgh from the Salt Works on Saw Mill Run" (1838) and William Coventry Wall's "Pittsburgh After the Fire of 1845, from Birmingham."

Genre painting also has a claim to the attention of the historically-minded since it displays the minutiae of history, the "small change," as it were, of existence. J. L. Krimmel's "Country Wedding," Maria Peale's "Interior Showing Rubens Peale Painting," John Carlin's "Sparking," Thomas Hovenden's "Breaking the Home Ties" are quite valuable, not only as documents of bygone mores, but as records of vanished domestic interiors. David Blythe (1815-1865) who worked mostly in Pittsburgh is noted for his sharply observed scenes of everyday life which have a dry peasant humor and thumb-at-the-nose satirical quality which recommends them to modern taste. Distantly related to genre work of this type is the fractur painting of the Pennsylvania Dutch with its primitive figures such as the drawing "Portrait of a Woman Holding a Song Book" and its companion piece "A Man Holding a Hat" which last is a near cousin to Blythe's full-length wooden sculpture of the Marquis de Lafayette from the County Court House at Uniontown, Pennsylvania.

A consideration of the decorative arts displayed at Greensburg would form a separate review and the reader who is interested in them will have to consult the excellent catalogue compiled by Dr. Chew, which will be a handsome addition to the works of reference on the arts of Pennsylvania, although it is a little heavy on the hand for gallery use—there is something to be said for museum fingers as well as museum feet! The wealth of illustrative material in the book (almost every exhibited object is illustrated) cannot be sufficiently commended.

History is well served by such exhibitions as that of Greensburg and it may well set a pattern for other showings in which various western Pennsylvania institutions might take part.