

F O R E W O R D

In recent years the Federal Government has undertaken, on a scale never before attempted, to decorate public buildings with paintings and sculpture designed for the purpose and executed by the most distinguished artists in this country.

The Government has thus become the most important patron of contemporary painting and sculpture and, by giving official recognition to the artist as one of the great creative forces in our national life, has succeeded in bringing about a better understanding of art and has encouraged its development in every corner of the United States.

To promote such a development of art is one of the fundamental purposes of the National Gallery also. Great art has always had an important influence on artists and their work. By giving the artist and the public an opportunity to study and enjoy works of art which have stood the test of time, both of the distant and more recent past, the National Gallery is helping to build up a wider understanding and appreciation of art, so that the public will be better prepared to recognize and enjoy the work of our own creative artists, as it is presented to them.

It is very fitting, therefore, that the first loan exhibition to be held in the new National Gallery should be the work of contemporary American artists. It is a cause for additional satisfaction that these paintings should be representative of all sections of the country and selected as a

result of a national competition conducted by an agency of the Federal Government -- the Section of Fine Arts of the Public Buildings Administration, created, as was the National Gallery, for the encouragement of the Fine Arts.

David E. Finley,
Director, National Gallery of Art.

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Under the Federal Works Agency, directed by Administrator John M. Carmody, is the Public Buildings Administration at whose head is Commissioner W. E. Reynolds. Since the Public Buildings Administration supervises the architecture and construction of most Federal buildings it is logical that the Section of Fine Arts, which decorates Federal buildings with murals and sculpture, should be attached to it. This plan brings architecture, painting and sculpture together in a harmonious working whole.

The aim of the Section of Fine Arts is to secure murals and sculpture of distinguished quality appropriate to the embellishment of Federal buildings. To this end the Section holds open anonymous competitions, national, regional, state or local, to which all American citizen artists are eligible. A different jury of painters or sculptors, unattached to the Section, judges each competition. The jury members are selected on the basis of experience and knowledge. They are called upon to judge the intrinsic quality of the painting or the sculpture and its relationship to the architecture.

Supplementing its mural and sculpture competitions, the Section has held one national Water Color Competition from which the pictures in this exhibition have been selected.

They were purchased by the United States Government for the decoration of a Federal hospital. They are being circulated throughout the country in the hope that they will interest local communities in decorating their own hospitals in a similar manner.

The terms of the Competition called for 300 Water Colors to be sold to the Government at the uniform price of \$30.00 - 200 to be purchased by Government funds and 100 to be bought with funds made available through the generosity of the Carnegie Corporation. While one-third of the selection is being sent directly to the Carville, Louisiana, Marine Hospital, 200 are reserved temporarily for exhibition.

The advisory jury, which selected these Water Colors out of 10,000 entries, was composed of John Marin, Charles Burchfield, Buk Ulreich and Eliot O'Hara. The members noted in their report that: "little of the work was derivative, that the artists did not merely picture the 'American Scene' but that they went deeper and interpreted the spirit of their own land."

Edward Bruce
Chief of the Section of Fine Arts.

N O T E

It has long been the belief of Edward Bruce, Chief of the Section of Fine Arts, that hospital rooms are much pleasanter for the patients if some good pictures hang on their walls. He tried the experiment himself once and found that half a dozen paintings made his stay in the hospital much happier. Following this experiment he resolved to do something about it. Finally, in November 1940, he organized the first Water Color Competition held under the program of the Section.

From this Competition were purchased the Water Colors which make up the present exhibition. They remind us again that to do a good water color requires as authentic a talent as to do a good oil. Water color seems a slighter medium only because apparent spontaneity is essential to it. By spontaneity I do not mean anything slap-happy or formless. On the contrary, the very fact that the medium admits of less repainting makes it necessary that the artist should do his thinking first -- before he puts anything on paper. By spontaneity I mean absolute freshness and clearness of touch.

The conventions within which the art of water color painting exists preclude, even more than those of oil painting, any exact imitation of nature. It is more a short-hand statement of painting. Freshness and clearness of touch are never the result of thoughtless impulse. The water color painter had better be right before he puts anything down, as subsequent repentances will not save him.

These remarks apply especially to pure transparent water color painting rather than to the heavier, opaque medium of gouache. With gouache there is a greater range and less need of the transparent niceties required by the right handling of pure water color.

Taking the exhibition as a whole, it seems to reflect in a rather broad way the varieties of outlook which have special appeal for American artists today in all the different regions of the country where productive activity flourishes. Realism, humor and freshness prevail over romanticism, conventionalism and skill for its own sake. The brook by moonlight is replaced by the barnyard by sunlight. Travel subjects, quaint streets, foreign cathedrals, palace gardens, subjects common to water color painters of generations past, are now replaced by back street views, clustered shacks and straight landscapes showing native territory.

Few of these water colors rely upon the accumulation of romance suggested by historic places. Their interest depends upon a fresh point of view. Speaking of art, a famous painter once said: "the job of the painter is not to put down on paper a subject obviously beautiful, but to give such interest to the unbeautiful that through him it becomes beautiful." But I do not think that any particular theory applies to this exhibition. Its interest lies in its sense of freedom. Running through it is the unaffectedly free expression that more and more is becoming the keynote of contemporary American painting.

Forbes Watson,
Special Assistant, Section of Fine Arts