

# FECHIN ON ART

IT IS IMPOSSIBLE TO LIMIT ART by any definitions or requirements, deciding once and for all that the art in question is the best and none could be better. Art, like the whole of our life, submits to the eternal law of change, and any attempts to stop it at one particular level are like vain efforts to stop time itself. To argue about art is just as useless as to speak about love! Everything always boils down to personal experiences and tastes — that which is pleasing to me may be incomprehensible to my neighbor.

Art cannot belong solely to any one period or current. In the evolution of art, life itself selects that which furthers its own purpose, discarding the superfluous. This process of selection of what is necessary to life remains ever our wise teacher. The experiences collected through the ages indicate the path into the unknown future.

We cannot live by the past. The present is so transient that it almost does not exist. As a matter of fact, we live by the future; or more accurately, we are unceasingly preparing ourselves toward it, trying to anticipate it. From this flow all new ideas. It is impossible to be alive without the effort to create and to bring something new into concrete manifestation.

Artists and critics compete with each other in their endeavors to destroy the traditional approach to the fundamental principles required for the careful technical execution of any work. In their mad pursuit of novelty, they do not have enough time for a conscientious development of their ideas and, as a result, they have had to make legitimate that which I would call "illiteracy" in the arts. Such an attitude in the art of our day is harmful not so much in itself, but in that it is used by intellectuals, by means of the written word, to influence the unprepared mind of the student. Youth is infected with a careless and irresponsible attitude toward the execution of work, with a sense of easy attainment, seeking to attract attention by shallow-minded novelties instead of real innovations and discrimination.

The appearance of a truly new idea in art is always valuable, but only when it aims at fulfilling itself in an accomplished piece of work. Only that is new which is original, in the sense of being an origin; that which is created spontaneously by the artist himself. One cannot call the work of an artist original when he takes as a model the beautifully painted work of an old master, and produces an awkward copy. The superficial critic, however, with serious mien, will try his utmost to establish a parallel between the two.

Nothing "new" will be added to art by an artist's endeavor to imitate the sculpture of an African "savage," magnificent as it may be in its native creativeness, but ugly when produced by a "civilized" individual. Or the imitating of a child's drawing, wonderful in its artistic naivete, but becoming clumsy as the hands of an adult.

The term "new" applies always to the original source — which, in these instances, would be the original drawing of the child, the work of the old master, the sculpture of the African, and certainly not their imitations.

It is better, in some cases, for an artist to be an amateur than a professional. I am using the word "amateur" in its original meaning as "one who loves." The true amateur not only sincerely loves art but fills with it most of his spiritual life; whereas the dilettante is a person using art as a mere pastime.

As a rule, the professional looks upon the amateur as an adult upon a child — forgetting that even an adult can learn a great deal about sincerity, spontaneity, independence of approach from the child. Often, indeed, amateurs make great discoveries and contributions to knowledge. An amateur is mainly interested in the process of achievement and all types of art expressions have equal value to him, if he sees in them the challenge of an even higher problem.

A professional, having achieved some technical feat or twist for which he has gained recognition, often fears to leave it behind in order to move ahead. Thus he narrows down the scope of his endeavor and prevents the development of new and wider challenges. Instead of making further efforts toward self-development, he allows his very success to become a dead-end; he stops and begins to go backward.

My experiences as director of an art school gave me the chance to observe the development of many students. There are two characteristic types among others: the slow one who uses much exertion of will and stubborn labor, and the quick one, like a beautiful flower unfolding, delighting the eye during its bloom, but all too often just as quickly fading and losing its attractiveness.

The unhurried method of accomplishment usually is a more certain way toward attainment, development of discipline and a deep regard for effort. When the unfolding is too unguarded and rapid, it is apt to poorly educate the mind of the artist-to-be. The very ease with which he accomplishes his work can wean him away from discipline, cause an aversion toward labor and the acquisition of necessary knowledge. Self-criticism is lost and growth stops.

A high degree of expertness in technique always has had and always will have a predominant place in art. The subject, by itself, has value only according to the mode of the day; tomorrow it will be superseded by a new one. With the passing of time the subject loses much of its meaning, but the fine execution of it retains its value.

Before defining his own field of work, it is essential for the beginner to acquire as great a variety of knowledge as possible. The more consummate his technique, the easier it will be for him to free himself from all dependence upon a subject. What an artist fills his canvas with is not so important. What is always very important is how he does it. It is sad if an artist becomes a slave to the object he seeks to portray. He must be able to deal with it according to his own point of view. In other words, the portrayed object must serve as nothing more than an excuse to fill a canvas. Only then does his work acquire value for an artist, when it passes through the filter of his creative idea. Therefore, a beginner must always avoid the conventional, whether it is color, line or, above all of course, in the choice of the subject itself.

Any standardization is negative in its meaning. If conventional shades and colors are used, the ability to see them in reality is lost. It is essential that the artist should regard every new painting as an entirely special world of color, light, form and line. Every new canvas is a completely new challenge.

It is always a temptation for a beginner to take the path of least resistance. He usually takes as his model the reproductions of some fashionable painter and copies them, believing by so doing he acquires knowledge. Such a beginning is unsound, because it starts with the end-product of the original work — the finished results of an artist's

long and patient toil. Superficially absorbing this final expression of work, the student overlooks the process of attaining these results and does not comprehend at all the work of creating.

A beginner in art is like a traveler starting out for unknown lands. He must see to it that he has the necessary equipment to take care of his needs. The better he prepares his supplies in advance, the farther he will be able to go. Otherwise, when he has gone only part way, he will have to return, wasting precious time.

Actually the work of the artist already begins the moment he takes the prepared canvas into his hands. A canvas has dimensions and a definite geometrical form. This already set form of the canvas is the very point of departure from which the construction of his future painting commences. For example, if he draws through the center of the canvas a vertical line and a horizontal line, he pulls together the blank surface of the canvas into a unified whole and thus obtains the primary compositional lines.

The artist must not forget that he is dealing with the entire canvas, and not with only one section of it. Regardless of what he sets out to paint, the problem in his work remains one and the same: with originality, to fill in his canvas and make of it an organic whole. There must not be any particularly favored spot in the painting. It must be remembered that one false note in a symphony orchestra disrupts the harmony of the whole.

My way of drawing and painting can be taught only through direct visual perception and it is almost impossible to describe it verbally. An attitude toward painting and a few technical fundamentals can be discussed, however — always with a warning not to take my observations in an overly literal or rigidly set manner! Technique should be considered only as a means to an end, but never the end in itself. To me, "technique" should be unlimited, a constant growth in ability and understanding; never mere virtuosity, but an endless accumulation of qualities and wisdom.

At the present time art is based entirely upon the individuality of the artist, the construction of form — any type of form, natural or imaginary (realistic or non-objective). The principle of constructing a form, for an artist, remains the same no matter what kind of form it may be. Therefore, the artist should commence by learning to construct form and to "see" color. First comes the initial idea for a work — what the artist desires to portray, to bring into concrete manifestation. In order to fulfill this task he must begin to build, to organize.

One way to learn about "form" lies in the very process of constructing that form. In my opinion, in order to construct a form one cannot do so only by means of using chiaroscuro. This becomes similar to the copying action of photographic film which is sensitive to degrees of light. Thus, one actually does not think in terms of form, but only endeavors to copy the transient impression of form which is conveyed by the shaded and lighted areas.

In this manner the artist gets into the habit of mechanically copying light and shadow and forgets to think about building the underlying structure. There is the widespread false assumption that, if one copies as exactly as possible shadings and highlights, a form will somehow automatically emerge by itself — forgetting that the degree of light is constantly changing and thus also the impression of form, though not the actual form itself.

As we begin to draw we become aware of "line." A line is nothing more than the boundary between space and form. In itself it has not meaning for the artist, unless it leads to the construction of a form which he envisions and seeks to project.

Once a form is established, the lines which helped in its gradual building cease to exist or have meaning as "line"; they simply participate in the reality of the form.

In speaking about colors, I have observed that, with rare exceptions, when a student is asked what color he sees in some object he invariably answers: "Oh, that is brownish" or "it looks greyish," etc.

As a matter of fact, an artist actually has to deal with only three basic colors: red, blue, yellow (all the rest are combinations of these fundamental colors). Everyone knows this, but few pay any attention to the fact. Thus the first step is for the artist to learn to see these primary colors and to distinguish them separately one from the other.

It must not be forgotten that unadulterated paints fresh from the tube are beautiful, intense and clear, and only when one begins to mix them do they lose these vibrant qualities. The artist's problem of retaining the true pure strength of color depends on keeping the pigments separate and individually distinct. Mixing paints has definite limitations and only certain combinations of the three basic ones continue to provide clear and vital colors.

The beginner usually endeavors laboriously and literally to *match* the colors he sees (or those he imagines) by mixing endlessly the paints on his palette, and the results are dirty and dead. Everything which is alive reflects color and every reflection is a vibration. Hence, if one wishes to produce this living vibration one must resort to the use of the pure basic colors and "build" with them in such a manner as to give this living effect and vibrancy.

To avoid murky results, it is necessary to learn how to use the three basic colors and to apply them, layer upon layer, in such a way that the underlying color shows through the next application. For instance, one can use some blue paint, apply over it some red in such a manner that the blue and the red are seen simultaneously and thus produce the impression of a violet vibration. If, in the same careful manner, one puts upon his first combination a yellow color, a complete harmonization is reached — the colors are not mixed, but built one upon the other, retaining the full intensity of their vibrations.

Also for myself, I do not like to use a "medium." This dissolves the paints too much. The pigments mix up together, do not retain their individual distinctness and thus again lose much of their fresh intensity. Likewise, it is bad to use too much zinc white. This makes colors chalky, anemic; color transparency is lost and it becomes difficult to produce nuances of tone.

These are simple observations about principles of the technique which I use — and not detailed textbook rules. Oversimplification, as well as book instruction on how to paint, are very inadequate and often dangerous! This should be kept in mind whenever reading about any technique of painting!

No one can teach you how to paint and how to draw, except you, yourself. You cannot learn how to paint by watching a well-trained master painting, until you, yourself, have learned how to paint with some understanding first. Only by the path of much practice and experience can mature results be reached.

All creation is personal and belongs to you alone. The teacher must not touch upon this. His main concern is to see to it that the work of the student is well thought out and constructively organized.

I have been asked which of the Arts I considered the most important. For me, no one particular art is greater than another. I can only say this: when you find yourself in the presence of creativeness . . . take off your hat!