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David L. Neumann

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The Commercialization of the Arts

By DAVID L. NEUMANN

GENIUS is able to produce its best when working for money. Working for money is a privilege implying that the purchaser values the work sufficiently to be willing to give for it praises more solid than the most enthusiastic critic. Some of the greatest artistic works were produced in periods of very highly developed commercialization. At these times the greatest artists were at once business men and the heads of organized functioning places of business. Orders for work they accepted as any man accepts a piece of business. Their genius, instead of being adversely affected by their business circumstances, was triumphantly, demonstrably, stimulated by the exactions of their customers. All the world today acknowledges their creations as those of genius. Then, as now, lesser men prostituted their art to please their patrons. Good artists' works, instead of suffering from limitations imposed by the contracts they fulfilled were strengthened thereby. A man might be at once conscious of executing a work that met a need of his customer and yet expressed the best that he had within him artistically. Today one hears only disparagement of the artist who commercializes his work. It is currently held that the best creative artistic product results only from untrammelled effort out of relation to commercial demand.

It is our view that the professional, always excepting the occasional gifted amateur, has always, and will always, produce the best work in any field. The professional knows the demands of his business as a matter of course and of necessity. He understands it as only one who lives by it can understand it. To him it is no indulgence or avocation, no plaything or intellectual divertimento, but a necessary day by day pursuit, and while his view of his art may suffer from a lack of perspective, it gains by this very lack. The zealot and devotee in any field may throw sophistication and

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urbanity aside and openly acknowledge his ingenious rusticity. It is not given to the sophisticate to be possessed of creative genius. In genius there is always naiveté. We cast out then the dilettante and the dabbler, no matter how great his talent may be, and confine ourselves to the professional. Arbitrarily and for the sake of simplicity we also confine ourselves to the business of oil painting, letting the situation of the painter stand for that of any of the workers in the arts, although we grant that it is not strictly analogous in each case, particularly in the case of architecture. Architecture today in America is in many ways in far happier circumstances than painting, because it has been stimulated by a large and active demand for building. Painting is currently trammelled by the relatively modern doctrine of the artist as a free spirit, free from outside dictation and too often free of commissions as well.

Today the architect is a business man. More than likely his office is one in which many clerks and strictly business employees are kept busy. He is as much concerned with the details of contract law and the financing of the buildings he designs as with the design itself. He has in his office experts on many matters, from specification writers who investigate and purchase the various materials that go into the building and make it their work to keep in touch with manufacturers of building materials and to be informed on what the market offers, to engineers, frequently second in importance in the firm to the architect himself, who are concerned with structural problems. In the erection of a modern building, the project requires the co-operation of a large number of special contractors and a wide range of expert knowledge which begins in the office of a bank and progresses through the plants of the manufacturers of building materials, through the various organizations of the numerous special contractors, and is only ended when the completed design has the approval of the architect in all of its aspects, and when payments have been made on his approval to the parties and firms which have come to

gether to erect it. This complex business and technical organization does not limit the artistic freedom of the architect himself. On the contrary, it relieves him of an enormous, an overwhelming mass of minutiae, and releases him so that he is the better able to consider his artistic problems as such. Yet nothing so clearly marks the problem the architect faces as the fact that in all details his own intentions and artistic conceptions are rigidly limited by the nature of the project. By its purpose, the shape of the lot, the financial limits of the owner, the building code of the locality, and most pointedly by the tastes of the owner in all details, from the ornamentation to the selection of materials, the artist's concept is framed. Of course, today in the building of large buildings the owner, having employed an architect in whom he has confidence, is not apt to dictate the details, as these are too many and not in his immediate experience, nor for that matter in the immediate experience of any one individual. Out of this complex and in many respects rigid system, have come some of the world's masterpieces of architecture, and at least one fundamental and revolutionary building principle—the steel cage construction. One hears no complaint that, artistically, architects are prostituting themselves because they build for money and accept commercial transactions as the basis of their art. These comments would evaporate of their own demonstrable invalidity. The one and simple answer is that good artists, working as architects, are today, in the milieu suggested above, producing first rate artistic creations. How is it that the same atmosphere is said to be so fatal to the painter? Is his genius so fragile that he cannot do business and retain his respect as a creative worker, or is there some fundamental difference between oil painting and the art of building? There are many significant differences, but no fundamental one. Failure to recognize this allows the paradoxical reconciliation of the two attitudes, one tacitly acknowledged, that is, that architects can do their best artistically when engaged in a commercial transaction,

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and the other, vociferously insisted upon, that painters cannot.

Oil painters today are overwhelmed because they must be in themselves at once commissioner, owner, purchaser of the materials, financier, office girl, and all of the countless other functionaries whose skill they abhor and whose functions they assume in an effort to get away from commercialization. They succeed in doing just the reverse and are swamped by all of the little insignificances that the architect, on a strictly commercial basis, has taken care of by others because they do not rightly have anything to do with his art. By being a business man he releases himself from business. The oil painter, in his mistaken abhorrence of business, has swamped himself with all of the insignificant details from which business organization, frank and systematized, would release him. Had he once more, as he had in renaissance Italy, his elaborate business organization, his helpers, his color, grinders, his "owners" with their definitely shaped requirements, he would, as he seems to feel he would not, be released from the conditions which make oil painting today everything that it should not be. His genius as a creative artist would be released, and he would find his happiness where Aristotle long ago pointed out that it lay, in "proper functioning."

It would confuse our search if we began by upholding the brief that, to flourish, art must be functional. Interpreting "functional" in the broadest and most liberal possible sense we must let our search begin with this premise. And at once we discover the key to the great difference in the present situation of the oil painter and the architect. Unfortunately for painting there is no market today for a fraction of the paintings that are being made. Oil painters have come to regard it as a sacred thing that they work with no regard for the future use to which their product shall be put, making their great defect their great battle cry. "Disinterested" painters remind one of the school-boy problem of the toothache dissociated from the tooth. "Dis-

interested" painters indeed! What we have need of is interested painters, painters who have some wish to relate what they do to the artistic needs of the time, and if there is room for only a small part of the painters' work when it is related to our artistic needs, let the rest stop painting and the benefit will be general.

The whole question is inextricably tied up with the perverted but very real concept of "Bohemianism." Where once it was true that artists were tempestuous fellows because their natures were tempestuous, it is now apparently assumed that one has but to lead a tempestuous life, act eccentrically, openly lament the current conventionalities, adopt a *bizarré* credo no matter what, and one is, *ipso facto*, an artist! This tendency to the *bizarré* in conduct seems to have become inculcated further into canvas. If one is a conventional worker one is sometimes less than if one is *bizarré*. Painters seem to strive for striking effects. They elaborate on aesthetics, they arrogate to themselves the function of criticism and within themselves feel that no one but a practicing painter should venture to criticize their paintings. They become rational and will not acknowledge that their work proceeds from other than systematic principles, which principles they erect into a philosophy of art and these philosophies are as various as the painters themselves. So today painters as a body have come to be thought of as dull fellows, wordy and indignantly vociferous and all but inarticulate in the face of it; and haunting them everywhere stalks the ghost of a Bohemianism that has been left behind by the very shop clerk. All that they have left is the form and the seeming, and bewilderedly they sit at their *Dome* or *La Rotunde* with their silly beards and their pathetic determination to be devils. Those who become apostates to this view of life, who make compromises with fact, and who adopt the manners of society and the commercial basis of their art, may often be bad artists, but those who nurse their

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Bohemianism do so because they have nothing else to nurse. Among good oil painters today one should look long for the baggy velvet pants and the seedy beards and bérêts at rakish angles that serve to replace talent among the crowd who hate all that is bourgeois and adopt that hatred as a profession and a life work.

But our problem is really historical. When, in France, court painting overreached its day, when Watteau was only a great painter of a day gone by, and the things that he had painted were so far out of keeping with the life of the time that they seemed more archaic, as they do today, so far as subject matter goes, than works from many an earlier century, when the Barbizon school had really made a contribution to painting, when outline and "drawing" were seen to be only conventions tacked onto painting by the psychological habit of associating visual with tactile sensations, when the new ability to see nature was still a discovery, it seemed as if the old ways of painting were at an end. It seemed that drawing with charcoal from plaster casts, the ancient first step in the training of students, was a mistake; it seemed as if the business of painting from a technical standpoint was to be entirely remade. Then the word "academic" came to be held in the disfavour that adheres to it today. Then all youngsters in the intellectual swim were intolerant of schools where drawing was still taught and where the old masters were still held masters and mentors too. Then the technical discoveries seemed the only thing in all of painting. Then painters forgot, and have not yet begun to remember that painting was once related to a larger life outside itself. They forgot that painters sometimes illustrated books or painted portraits both on commission and for pay; they forgot that painters had once accepted commissions for decorative or mural work, subject matter predetermined. They forgot that great paintings had come out of the Dutch school, and though they may admire and defer to some of the fine portrait groups done by the Dutch masters for various guilds, they appear not to

know that the very arrangement and position of the numerous individual portraits constituting these canvases were fixed by the importance in the guild of the individuals portrayed. They forgot everything in their child-like enthusiasm for new discoveries. More than a century has nursed this mistaken devotion to painting for its own sake, a devotion to the endless painting of canvases that had only their difference from understandableness to recommend them to the spectator. Quick fame to the painter who devised the most striking, the most outlandish, the most absurd concoction. Certain intellectuals, devoted only to the admiration of what they could not understand, have given this painting a false faith in itself by virtue of critical approval. And so we have the many and confused theories of what is good painting today. We have Cubism, and we have Modernism, and we have Vorticism and, most pretentionsly and foolishly named of all, we have Futurism. But now as always we have only two kinds of painting, good and bad.

In this absurd battle of isms there emerges an unfortunately mistaken attitude, foisted upon the painter by the wholesale rejection of nonsense by the patron. This attitude compels the artist, out of defense for his essentially mistaken divorce from his job, to believe that he who takes a "job" lets himself down out of the high and rare atmosphere of "disinterestedness" and descends to the vitiating bourgeoisie earth of practical affairs. If only these fellows would understand that necessity is the grandmother of beauty.