

The Sunday Spotlight: A Guest Column

An Art Show Worth Seeing

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The exhibition at the Madison Free Library, "Three Hundred Years of American Art" is a complete show worth seeing. It consists of three elements: The textual basis provided by a series of illustrative panels prepared by State Historical museum staff members to depict periods in American art development, and secondly of several paintings on loan from American museums chosen to serve as examples of these periods. The third element of the exhibit is the mounting of the panels and paintings each in a setting of furniture and furnishings more or less characteristic of the period.

An exhibit of this sort is found to have a multiple appeal. Historically minded viewers will start with the panels, reading the somewhat lengthy text as carefully as the library gallery's inadequate lighting permits, and studying the accompanying pictures.

A greater number of visitors will inevitably be attracted to the properties assembled in the groups. Fine old chairs, military weapons, old school books and desks from country schoolhouses, early cylindrical record phonographs, clothing, and assorted household bric-a-brac always become more absorbing when organized in definite period groupings.

The paintings on loan are apt to be passed by as accessories to the main show, and that would be unfortunate. While there are no pieces of the most spectacular quality, several are familiar to even the casual student because they have so often been reproduced in periodicals and books. Winslow Homer's "Crack the Whip" is perhaps the most valuable and interesting of the group. It is of his early period in painting when he continued to illustrate for Harper's Magazine, and it has the naive freshness which we like to think was characteristic not only of the painter but of the people and places of the first three-quarters of the 19th century.

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Everett Shinn's painting "Reverie" in the group designated as "Mop Pail and Ash Can" is one of the better paintings to be seen. George L. K. Morris' abstraction in "The Abstract Present" is easily the most decorative and successful unit in that grouping. The other paintings all possess some interest, though many are more useful for their relevance to a period of aesthetics than for their inherent worth as works of art. But it is rewarding to be reminded once again of the virtues and limitation of Benjamin West, Charles Wilson Peale and his son Raphaelle Peale, George Caleb Bingham, Eastman Johnson, John G. Brown, George Luks, Robert Henri, and Kenneth Hayes Miller.

The last three men in particular are well represented and are of special interest to students who should be aware of their place in the growth of American painting in the twentieth century, but who have not often seen the work of the artists in the original.

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An exhibition of this nature presents more facets for critical observation than more limited displays. The panels from the museum staff are visually well organized and lettered, and the decorative motifs serving as symbols set up each unit. I would have welcomed approximate dates for the periods represented as subtitles to the titles. The photostated white letters on black text plates are too lengthy in all, and the typewritten lines are too long, especially for scanning when the viewer is standing.

A further qualification does involve expenditures and the museum staff does not operate on any abundance.

any budget. But so much of the illustrative material chosen is recognizably gleaned from current magazine reproductions overly familiar to all of us. Greater funds would make possible the use of photographically reproduced material from documents of each period. There is some research material on each panel but a great deal has been borrowed from recent numbers of Life magazine.

Occasionally one is aware too of rather sloppy inclusions of material not appropriate to the period.

On the panel "Gilt and Glitter," one of the quite

severe Gothic houses of the pre-Civil war period is featured, while the text refers rather to the much

more hideously and diversely eclectic mansions such

as used to grace Chicago's Michigan ave. and Milwaukee's Grand ave.

One more exception to the panels could be taken because relatively little Wisconsin material has been included. We have increasing numbers of publications these days reproducing such monuments of American architecture as Jefferson's Monticello and the Boston State house. On work produced by a State Historical group we welcome an emphasis on cultural developments as they have manifested themselves in our own area.

The general tenor of the text emphasizes relationships of social and economic life with the artist's forms in painting, design, and architecture. The editor tends toward the high-pressure, "Time Marches On" emotional level of commentary so thoroughly exploited by writers like Sheldon Cheney, Thomas Baer, and Van Wych Brooks. Cultural historians lately give some indications of developing a less spread-eagle approach, a less defensive attitude toward their efforts at public education, and this does not necessarily involve any loss of color or spark. It does permit the suggestion that works of art are usually accomplished in an atmosphere less strident than a Fourth of July parade.

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The environmental groupings assembled are necessarily highly selective since space is at a premium. Most of the objects selected are of interest and more poverty stricken and inappropriate than any to their period. The unit on "The 20's" is typical of the others, providing only a dressmaker's dummy draped with a length of cloth and an Edison phonograph of 1906 vintage. This for the period which produced over-stuffed furniture, the radio, the electric refrigerator, and the flapper seems poorly handled.

The "Mop Pail and Ash Can" group is inconsistent with the direction of the rest of the show, for here the title and the casual introduction of the items making up the title is a reference not to cultural era but to a comment made on the paintings of Luks, Henri, and the rest of their group. There is no real effort made in this instance to make use of the property grouping in such a way as to suggest the environment in which these men lived and worked.

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Museums and art groups all over the country turn often to this kind of a display. The one at the library is worth the time and work put into it, and it is because exhibits of this sort are more intent than others upon creating public attitudes that I feel it deserves a close critical scrutiny. The persons who assemble and edit the work have a responsibility for careful scholarship, for the exploitation of local resources wherever possible, for the refinement of display techniques, exceeding that involved in more limited efforts.