

ART.

EARLY DEVELOPMENT.

(from the Sydney Morning Herald, 1901)

In endeavouring to estimate the position occupied by Art in Australia at the dawn of the twentieth century the necessary retrospect cannot be extended to the early years of colonial history.

These were occupied by pioneer struggles for existence in a new country, and interest in the art of painting was doubtless at its lowest ebb. As soon as wealth began to accumulate in the colony, however, there were families of substance and refined taste who imported pictures of value from Europe. Their opportunities of purchasing to advantage on the spot were probably limited, though several famous artists from time to time visited the country.

The veteran artist, Conrad Martens, arrived here (with Darwin) in H.M.S Beagle in 1836, and resided here, painting assiduously, until 1879. Sir Oswald Brierley, afterwards Marine Painter to the Queen, came out in the Wanderer in 1812, stayed cruising about in that ship and the Rattlesnake for six years, and again visited Australia in the Galatea with the late Duke of Edinburgh in 1867. Many valuable examples of his style will be found in the collections of Australian connoisseurs, especially in Sydney. Nicholas Chevalier was also at one time known in Australia.

Thomas Woolner, R.A., and Summers (both sculptors) visited the country; and, as pointed out by Mr.E. Du Faur in his speech to Viscount Hampden at the opening of the first completed portion of the National Art Gallery of Sydney, "*Skinner Prout, E. B. Boulton, Terry, H. Gill, and a few others, also kept the lamp of art burning here during the years in which the exigencies of early colonial life left little leisure for such pursuits.*" But these scattered interests, and the disconnected episodes around which they cluster, can hardly be described as contributing a definite history of our art progress.

To estimate this the record of organised movement, and that alone, can be followed. It was this which first formed Australian opinion on the subject, first led to the public exhibition of choice works of art, and first rendered possible the establishment of a subsidised school of painting. In this way from small beginnings, started actually as late as 1871, a continuous onward movement was maintained, which finally rendered possible a federal exhibition in London of works painted entirely in Australia. This was in 1898, when these works were acknowledged to reach as high an average standard of attainment as that which characterised similar shows by English artists trained in the old world.

FIRST " ACADEMY OF ART. "

The origin of all that we now enjoy in the possession of a splendid National Art Gallery, and of Government subsidies for those societies that undertake the instruction of students, can be directly traced to a meeting convened by Mr. Edward Reeve on April 25, 1871. At this meeting, over which the late T. S. Mort presided, the New South Wales Academy of Art was formed, with the late E. L. Montefiore as vice-president,

who, within a year, was joined by Mr. E. Du Faur as secretary. These two gentlemen after a time united in leasing the premises of the Royal Society, and the first art classes for students were held there under Signors Anivitti and Simonetti.

The Government of the day subsidised the movement, which was then further extended by expenditure upon the formation of a Gallery of Art, the trustees for which were chosen from the council of the academy. This was in 1875, and of the trustees then appointed there now only remain Mr. Eccleston Du Faur (president) and Sir James R. Fairfax (vice-president). The New South Wales Academy of Art continued to foster the good work its energy had vitalised until the end of 1880. By that time the importance of the movement had impressed itself upon the Legislature of the day, and the comparatively large sum of £5000 was voted by Government for the purpose of increasing the National Collection.

The pictures were placed in a temporary building at the entry to the Botanic Gardens, and the gallery thus formed was opened by his Excellency Lord Augustus Loftus on September 22, 1880. Thereupon the academy, having accomplished the object for which it was founded, and feeling, in the terms of its final report, "*that the farther development of art culture and instruction in the community rested with the public and with the Legislature, and had passed beyond the scope of a private society,*" decided to dissolve. In this way the first chapter in the history of art in Australia may be said to have been closed.

NATIONAL ART GALLERIES.

The first purchase from public funds for the national collection in Sydney consisted of six water-colour drawings, which the curious will find still specially grouped in the gallery.

After five years of insecurity and risk in the temporary building, the trustees urged upon the Government the necessity for a more suitable structure, and on December 23, 1885, his Excellency Earl Carrington opened the "shell" building at a cost of £10,000 on the present permanent site in the Domain. The total value of the collection was then only £14,000.

It may now be estimated in round figures at £120,000, and includes about 300 oil paintings, 220 water-colours, 100 black and white drawings, 150 etchings, 50 photogravures, a few choice photographs, and a representative series of autotype copies of the old masters. The marbles, plaster casts, terra cotta, bronzes, ivory carvings, relevo work in metals and the like, comprise in all some 250 pieces additional.

With the enhanced value of the collection there has been a notable increase in the public interest taken in it, so that its educational and refining influence can hardly be overrated. Thus the daily average attendance is now 500 on week days and 1700 on Sundays, the total for last year amounting to 243,998 persons. During the 20 years of its existence the collection has been visited by four and three-quarter millions of people. Always bearing in mind that a national art gallery should be the fountain head from which springs all that can advance the love of painting throughout the colony, the trustees have successfully carried out various schemes towards that end. Students to the number of 300 have been enrolled within its walls; 44 pictures have been lent for

continuous exhibition in Bathurst, Goulburn, and Newcastle; the Wynne bequest, awarding prizes for the best picture and the best figure sculpture of the year, has been administered; and a federal art movement amongst the colonies, by which some of the finest works we possess were temporarily interchanged with the galleries of Adelaide, Brisbane, and Melbourne, was initiated on this side.

An event of importance in the art history of the colony was the exhibition of a beautiful collection of some 600 pictures from private sources in 1897. It was on this occasion that his Excellency Viscount Hampden opened the first permanent portion of the gallery buildings. The work has since been steadily continued, so that probably one of the earliest official acts of the new Governor-General (Earl Hopetoun) will be to open the completed southern wing. This wing comprises five noble courts, each about 100ft. x 40ft, and has been erected at a cost of £40,000. Mr. W. L. Vernon, Government Architect, is responsible for the design of this spacious art temple of the future, which will ultimately cost about £115,000.

Mr. George E. Layton, well known as an art connoisseur, is the esteemed secretary and superintendent of the gallery. In the housing of its works Victoria was many years in advance of New South Wales. There is a fine collection of statuary and modern paintings in Melbourne in the splendid building known at the National Gallery and Free Public Library. It is with this collection that interchanges have from time to time been advantageously made. The National Art Gallery of Adelaide is far behind these two great collections, though it includes some fine works, and has a small school of painting attached; and Brisbane has only begun to form an art gallery during the past few years. Attached to the Melbourne National Gallery is a school of painting, of which Mr. G. F. Folingsby was at one time director, a post filled since 1893 by Mr. Bernard Hall. Mr. F.M'Cubbin is instructor and master of design at this school of art, from which several accomplished painters have issued.

ART SOCIETY OF NEW SOUTH WALES.

In 1880, the year which marked the voluntary dissolution of the Academy, the Art Society of New South Wales was founded by two well-known painters, the brothers Collingwood. Exhibitions were first held at the Garden Palace, after its destruction at the Town Hall, and then at the society's own rooms in Pitt-street, where classes have been conducted for 12 years past.

Here the Art Society has spacious and well-lighted galleries, where, and in the studios attached, a vast amount of good work has been done. Since 1887 the Art Society has enjoyed a Government subsidy of £500 a year, and under its successive instructors, Messrs. A.J. Daplyn, J. R. Ashton, Gordon Coutts, and F. P. Mahony, most of the younger artists of New South Wales have been educated.

It will be noted that whereas the old Academy devoted itself chiefly to importing paintings worthy of notice, the Art Society's policy is expressed in the regulation attached to its annual shows—"*No work will be recorded unless it be the bona-fide production of the member exhibiting it.*" The public has marked its appreciation of this policy by purchasing pictures to the value of about £8000, whilst 45 pictures have been transferred from its walls to those of the National Art Gallery. Mr. W.Lister-Lister has been for many years past the president of the Art Society, which can boast more

than 200 subscribers, and which, in spite of the rivalries and the financial gloom of the latter half of its existence, has continued to flourish strongly.

SOCIETY OF ARTISTS.

From time to time kindred associations of the Art Society have arisen, such as the "*Australian Academy of Arts*" and the "*Sketching Institute of New South Wales*" (1834), but, so far, the only one that has established itself on a basis of enterprising ambition and widespread popularity has been the Society of Artists. This association, which was founded in 1895, with Mr. Tom Roberts as chairman, has since been headed by Mr. Sid. Long. The new society sprang from a disagreement with the old, the *casus belli* being the fact that the general body of subscribers was allowed a vote in choosing the committee of selection for the annual shows.

In 1897 the Society of Artists secured a Government subsidy of £400 a year-almost at once raised to £500. This enabled the young painters to rent a superb gallery in Pitt street, and also to offer a travelling scholarship of £150 a year for three years to the best student of the year, a policy from which good should result. Sub-committees are now discussing a scheme of amalgamation between the two societies, which, in the interests of both it is to be hoped may be carried out.

Here mention may be made of the fact that the idea of a travelling scholarship was initiated by the Victorian Government. The Victorian Artists' Society is a strong body, that has sent many students of first-rate talent to Paris and London; and some noteworthy pictures have been painted for the Melbourne National Gallery by the exhibitors on their travels. The Art School in Melbourne is known throughout the country. Though, in sketching this history, if little is said about the sister capital, it must be remembered that the city itself was not founded until half the entire period under review had passed away.

AUSTRALIAN ART IN LONDON.

Early in 1898 the trustees of the National Art Gallery (Sydney) invited the leading artists of both societies to assist them in the selection of pictures from Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide, Hobart, and Brisbane for exhibition at the Grafton Galleries, London, in May and June. This great project was rendered possible chiefly by the generous co-operation of Miss Eadith Walker. Rather more than 300 oil and water colour paintings were accepted from New South Wales and Victoria, with a few contributions from other colonies. In this way, for the first time, those who had striven in the good cause on this side were able to gauge the progress made.

A patronising or contemptuous attitude on the part of the public had been feared. All grounds for alarm proved needless. The "*Times*," after expressing astonishment at the great change which the past 20 years had wrought in the practice of art in Australia, reviewed the exhibition in terms of high praise, remarking especially upon the adoption of French methods, and adding finally, "*The subjects are fresh, and in technique the average work of Chelsea or Clichy is no better.*" The "*Standard*" critic pronounced that the show "*attained a far higher general average than is reached by one or two semi-official London galleries bearing time-honoured and imposing titles.*"

Here, then, and in the fairly satisfactory amount of sales, was at last some guarantee that the art of Australia was not only out of its swaddling clothes and its nursery days, but had even reached the end of its school-days, and was entering with youthful confidence the wider sphere of the world's competitive life. In this exhibition the Art Society of New South Wales completely carried off the honours, selling 22 pictures for £768, the Society of Artists sold 11 pictures for £86, and £282 was divided between Victoria, Queensland, and South Australia, making a total of £1136. With this record of auspicious achievement, this brief sketch of the progress of Art in Australia may well be brought to a close.

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