A REPORT ON AMERICAN ART

The year 1949 has been one of study and review of the various aspects of the Museum’s role in the contemporary art of this country. Robert Beverly Hale assumed the position of Associate Curator of American Art in January. In July Roland J. McKinney, sometime director of the Baltimore Museum of Art and of the Los Angeles County Museum, and who has more recently had a wide experience in organizing large national exhibitions, was appointed Consultant. During the summer, in order to become better acquainted with the artistic activity in the middle and far west, Mr. Hale visited the following cities: St. Louis, Kansas City, Dallas, Austin, San Antonio, Denver, Colorado Springs, Santa Fé, Santa Barbara, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Portland, Seattle, Minneapolis, Omaha, Des Moines, and Chicago. Other trips have taken him to Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, Washington, and other centers in the South and to New England. Everywhere he had an opportunity to meet with artists and to learn from them their views on the future activities of his department.

Those views were incorporated in a series of reports submitted by the Director to the Board of Trustees on November 21, 1949, who accepted them in principle and appointed a committee on American Art to advise with Mr. Hale both as to exhibitions and the policies to be followed in regard to the acquisition of works of art by living American artists for the permanent collections. This Committee comprises three members of the Board: Elihu Root, Jr., Chairman, Walter C. Baker, and Sam A. Lewisohn. The following is a summary of the reports.

EXHIBITION POLICY

A memorandum in the form of a letter was received from a group of artists representing Artists Equity: Messrs. Kuniyoshi, George Biddle, Eugene Speicher, Henry Varnum Poor, Leon Kroll, and Hudson D. Walker. A series of conferences had been held with these gentlemen by the Director prior to Mr. Hale’s appointment. In this memorandum, prepared at the Museum’s request, it was stated that in their opinion, and indeed in the opinion of artists generally, the most pressing need was for an open competitive exhibition of a national character to be held periodically at the Metropolitan Museum.

I. A National Jury Exhibition. It is therefore proposed to hold the first national open exhibition of American Painting of Today in the late autumn and early winter 1950-1951. This exhibition would be formulated on the following principles:

a. The exhibition would be an open competition, national in scope. Paintings would be submitted first to regional juries in different sections of the United States for preliminary judging, and for final judgment of those accepted locally by a national jury in New York.

b. Local juries would consist of a representative of the Metropolitan Museum, ex officio, a representative of a local museum, and three artist members from the region.

c. The national jury would be a jury of seven people, five of whom would be representatives of the five local juries, and such additional persons as may be designated by the Museum. Notices of the exhibition, to open December 7, 1950, together with a prospectus of the conditions of entry will be mailed to a list of some 12,000 artists prior to May 1, 1950.

II. Prizes and Awards. In the matter of prizes and awards a diligent inquiry has been made into the various practices now governing the national exhibitions of this country and the advantages and disadvantages of prizes versus purchase prizes have been carefully weighed. The following practice is hereby recommended:

a. That the question of the growth of the Museum’s collection in American art be divorced from the questions of the exhibition per se, and that, although the Museum would remain at liberty to purchase any picture recommended to the committee and approved by them from the exhibition, it would be under
no obligation, actual or implied, to purchase from it.

b. That the sum of $8,500 be offered as prizes: a first prize of $3,500, a second of $2,500, a third prize of $1,500, and a fourth prize of $1,000.

III. Future Exhibitions. It is further suggested that such painting exhibitions be held every other year and that in the intervening years similarly comprehensive exhibitions of sculpture, drawings, water colors, and prints be held at the Museum.

IV. Growth of the Collections of American Art. The contemporary collections of the Metropolitan Museum are far more comprehensive than people realize. Since 1906 through the income of the Hearn Funds and from other sources there has been a steady accretion year by year. To show the public the scope and quality of this collection Mr. Hale is organizing an exhibition of American Painters, 1900-1950, which will open on June 16 and remain during the summer and early autumn. The exhibition, comprising some two hundred oils and one hundred water colors, will serve as a fitting preliminary for the large jury show to follow in December. It will further remove certain misconceptions in the critical and public mind which for one reason or another have arisen in recent years and serve to guide the committee in strengthening the collections.

Mr. Hale has summarized the matter in the following extract from his report to the Trustees:
"A large and fairly representative exhibition of the painters of our period can be arranged from our collection as it now stands. A splendid background of the so-called academic-eclectic painters active at the turn of the century may be shown by Abbey, Brush, Cox, Dewing, Duveneck, LaFarge, Thayer, and many others. American Realists such as Eakins and Homer are well represented, as well as the more romantic painters, Blakelock and Ryder. We possess good examples of the full history of American Impressionism in the works of Mary Cassatt, Childe Hassam, and others. We can trace Academic portraiture from 1900 to the present.

"The so-called 'Journalistic Revolution' of 1908 is well represented in our collections. Some of those Americans who were early in Paris and much influenced by revolutionary aesthetic ideas abroad, are, of course, included in the Alfred Stieglitz collection recently given to the Museum by Georgia O'Keeffe under the terms of his will. We can also supplement this group with examples of our own purchases. Certain American painters, some of whom were further inspired by the Armory Show of radical European art, are unfortunately missing.

"The Journalistic Revolution of course culminated in the present large school of painters of the American scene, the most widely represented group in the Museum.

"I hope very much that by means of judicious buying throughout this winter certain evident gaps in our collection may be filled and better examples may be found of artists already represented. I hope to place before the purchasing committee a sufficient number of pictures to strengthen greatly the impact of our retrospective show.

"In the coming year an important group of names should be added to our collection. I feel the collection should be broad. Certain advanced trends now missing should be represented and we should acquire certain painters who are well known in far sections of the country but little known here. As for others already in our collection, but poorly represented (and there are many), we should make every effort to acquire their best and most representative work."

The reports to the Board of Trustees to date have dealt only with the subject of contemporary American Painting. The sculpture collection will receive an equally candid examination during the coming year and the opinions and advice of sculptors will be solicited.

F. H. T.