THE GROWTH OF A COLLECTION

By ROBERT BEVERLY HALE
Associate Curator of American Paintings and Sculpture

The Edward Roots say that they have a passion for collecting all sorts of things—early American furniture, iris rhizomes, daffodil bulbs, stones, sea shells, phonograph records of chamber music, first editions, various trees—and that Edward Root's collection of pictures is but one phase of this amiable mania. This, of course, is a vast understatement, for the pictures now gathered in the open exhibition galleries of the Museum reflect not only the pleasure of collecting but the fortunate meeting of taste and the dominant interest of a lifetime.

Indeed, for the successful creation of a collection of contemporary art the stars must be most auspicious. As the values are uncrystallized and the books have not been written, there must be courage to form opinions. There must be a great understanding of character and a weighing of words, a wide acquaintance among artists, critics, and collectors. There must be particularly a wide acquaintance among artists, for they are shrewd judges of the work of their fellows, if not always of their own. There must be an understanding and knowledge of the art of the past, but not a mind that has aged and closed, for there must be sympathy with the experiments and aspirations of youth. Above all, there must be an awareness of the moment, and a willingness to observe and delight in the pageant of contemporary art for its own sake, and a most discerning eye, able to recognize among the all too human actors the few immortals in the cast.

Edward Root says that his collection really started on a trip to Europe in 1902. This was the time when posters were so excellent and popular; the walls of Paris were bright with them. Particularly admiring the posters of Jules Cheret, Edward Root acquired a number of them. Thus he began fifty years of collecting, which has resulted in the gracious and varied group of pictures now on display at the Metropolitan. Some years later (1907), in New York, he went to work in the editorial offices of the Evening Sun. It was there that he met James Gregg, the art critic, and Charles Fitzgerald, the editorial writer. These two had forsaken Dublin for New York, and many still remember their charm, their incredible wit, and their vast interest in the arts. They dominated and illuminated a table nightly at the old Mouquin's restaurant, a table as fabulous in its day as the later round table at the Algonguin. Artists such as Ernest Lawson, George Luks, Robert Henri, and John Flanagan were often there, as well as James Huneker, the critic, and Booth Tarkington, the novelist.

This was the beginning of Edward Root's large acquaintance in his field. It was in this group that he first became aware of the problems and poverty of the artist, and he says that it was largely through sympathy that he purchased his first oil painting. Having been told by Gregg that Ernest Lawson was in difficult circumstances, Root withdrew his entire savings from the savings bank, the sum of $250, and purchased a Lawson. He remembers that Lawson first displayed it to him unframed, unmounted, propped against the leg of a kitchen table. Slowly thereafter he purchased pictures by Davies and Prendergast. In 1908 he acquired the Pawnbroker's Daughter by George Luks, which has been on permanent loan to the Metropolitan since 1919. Jack and Russell Burke, the Luks hanging in the present exhibition, was not bought until 1930. However, Edward Root first saw the picture in 1911, and he says that at the time there was a pumpkin in the lower left-hand corner which was subsequently painted over. It was largely through the awareness and enthusiasm of Edward Root's friends, Davies, Kuhn, and others, that the Armory show of 1913 was...
organized. It was from this exhibition that he purchased the Prendergast Landscape with Figures. This he subsequently lent to the Metropolitan, and for many years it was the sole Prendergast in the Museum.

After the First World War, the Roots moved to Clinton, New York, close to the campus of Hamilton College. There they lived in the Root homestead, which had been acquired by Edward's grandfather, Oren Root, in 1850. Oren Root taught mathematics and mineralogy at Hamilton; meteorology, arboriculture, and orchidology were among his interests. He was an enthusiastic member of the Clinton Rural Art Society, which watched over the planning of the town of Clinton. He also planted the campus of Hamilton College; and for this purpose he obtained more than two hundred varieties of trees from all over the world.

It is evident that an understanding of artistic matters has long been in the family. The splendid old trees that were planted at the Homestead by Oren Root show great sensitivity to the requirements of the land, and the red shale paths he laid form a splendid contrast with the rich green turf. And one can sense too in the trees, and in the gardens of the Glen, the artistic hand of Edward's father, Elihu Sr., who was an amateur painter in his youth. The tradition has been carried on by both Edward and his brother, Elihu Root, Jr., who has lately painted a portrait of Arthur W. Page for the Harvard Club of New York. This portrait hangs well there among the many portraits by professionals; in its strong sense of design it is superior to a number of them.

From 1920 until 1940 Edward Root conducted a course for the students of Hamilton in the appreciation of the fine arts. His students tell of how, through a series of highly original and effective experiments, he opened their eyes to the color and order of the world around them. They tell of his catholicity of taste and of the ability he gave them to understand the aims and intention of artists of today and the past. The collection was occasionally shown to the students and was greatly enlarged during this period. The Demuth water colors were acquired, the abstractions of Dove, the extraordinary square portrait by Carroll, the McFees, the Mangravite, the Hoppers, and several Speichers.

It was in 1929 that the Roots first met Charles Burchfield. It was natural that his work should have appealed to Edward, for they both have great love and understanding of the land and architecture of central New York. It was Grace Root who first discovered the many portfolios of Burchfield's early water colors. There are five of these water-color sketches in our exhibition. It is evident that the artist has lately drawn much from those made in 1917, that he has returned to his youth for his present highly personal and exuberant style. When the Roots first met Burchfield he was designing wallpaper and was loath to leave this rewarding pursuit. Though he was already quite well known as an artist, he felt that his early water colors would interest no one. Edward, however, persuaded him to bring them to the Rehn Gallery. Their extraordinary popularity enabled Burchfield to devote himself to painting alone.

Since the beginning of the Second World War Edward Root has become more and more absorbed in the nonobjective phase of abstract painting. Undoubtedly this particular type of painting is now in the ascendancy in the United States. It takes an extraordinary flair to move surely in this unsettled phase of contemporary art, for the artists and their devotees are often full of loud claims couched in a language unbelievably obscure. Edward Root is one of the few American collectors who has had the courage to enter this field.

In company with another most perceptive collector, Duncan Phillips of Washington, Edward Root was one of the first to recognize the talent of the young Greek-American artist Theodoros Stamos. Our exhibition includes five of his pictures, notable for their delicacy of texture and their dreamlike content. William Baziotes, who paints much in the same vein, is also represented. It is interesting to compare these two with Jackson Pollock, whose formidable calligraphic conversations
have caused such a sensation of late. He is represented by two small examples. They tell much of his style, but at times he prefers to work on very large canvases, and on such his enormous vitality is more easily perceived. Another calligraphic artist is Mark Tobey. Tobey, together with Morris Graves and Kenneth Callahan, represents a talented group of artists from our Pacific Northwest, whose work is in gentle key and influenced by the Orient.

There are some interesting new mediums in the exhibition. One of the most charming is Sue Fuller’s opalescent String Construction No. 32, done in silk threads. We also find one of William Congdon’s atmospheric and metallic pictures, a delicate experiment in plastic by Emil Hess, and a handsome geometric design on black gesso by Joseph Albers. It would perhaps confuse the reader should we attempt to describe and classify the many diverse talents in this advanced section of the exhibition. However, the inventiveness of Jimmy Ernst should be noted, as well as the surrealistical shapes of Bradley Walker Tomlin, the curious and personal color of Lee Gatch, the relaxed and vital quality of Willem de Kooning, and the incredible texture of Joe Glasco.

In recent years Edward Root has collected a number of British and Irish pictures of the abstract school. It is interesting to compare them with the American work. One remarks instantly that they are quieter and more at ease, reflecting, as they do, an older and more contemplative civilization. John Tunnard presents us with mysterious shapes, built plane beyond plane, reminding us of a surrealistical stage set. The Devil’s Kitchen by John Piper reveals his grasp of the romantic, the gracious, and the delicate. Again we see extraordinary inventiveness in the forms of Graham Sutherland, in John Wells, gentle color and gentle mood, and in Ben Nicholson, serene and classic purity. Thurloe Conolly offers us two strong and dark abstractions.

It may be safely assumed that the majority of the most talented artists of America and Britain now working in the abstract and non-objective idioms are assembled in this exhibition. As it is known that the average man is unfamiliar with works of this type, it should perhaps be explained that they have been shorn of many of the attractions that formerly led him into a picture. They do not, for instance, attempt to ensnare him by associating themselves with his love of history, of anecdote, or even of women and children. But as yet, perhaps, the average man has not attained such transcendental detachment. They demand only that he appreciate such refined and basic elements as form, color, texture, and design. Edward Root has written in his excellent monograph on Philip Hooker, the nineteenth-century American architect, ‘... nor has civilization in this country yet reached the point where the individual man looks beyond his own fireside for evidence that his life is part of a vast process and not an isolated, almost intolerably lonesome phenomenon. . . .

“To some future generation, wiser than ours, let us hope, in its philosophy of existence, we must consign the task of answering Shakespeare’s question: ‘How with this rage shall beauty hold a plea, whose action is no stronger than a flower?’

Jack and Russell Burke, by George B. Luks. 1911. The Root Collection is currently on exhibition at the Museum.
Susan, by Eugene Speicher. 1936. Oil on canvas
Landscape with Figures, by Maurice Prendergast. About 1912. Oil on canvas

Skyline, Washington Square, by Edward Hopper. 1925. Water color
Paris, by Lyonel Feininger. 1950. Ink and water color

Polar Space, by Jimmy Ernst. 1951. Gouache
String Construction No. 32, by Sue Fuller. 1951. Construction

High Tension Tower, by Lee Gatch. 1945. Oil on canvas
Summerhill, by John Piper. 1946-1947. Oil on canvas

Cornwall, by John Tunnard. 1944. Gouache