

The Art Institute of Chicago

The Worcester Gift

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The Marriage of Peleus and Thetis by Rubens.

THE WORCESTER GIFT

This issue of the Bulletin is dedicated to an event of great importance in the history of the Art Institute of Chicago. I speak of the recent gift of seventy paintings, drawings and pieces of sculpture given to the museum by Charles H. and Mary F. S. Worcester. Even more impressive than the number is the uniformly high quality and the astounding variety. The earliest painting comes from a fourteenth century Venetian brush, that of Master Paolo Veneziano, while the most recent is by Pierre Bonnard, the modern French artist who died this year. Italian and early German works are stressed along with French and American paintings from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, for Mr. and Mrs. Worcester often collected with the needs of the Art Institute in mind and purposely bought from those periods which the museum lacked.

With no fanfare and with characteristic modesty the Worcesters have helped to enrich and round out the Art Institute collections. The staff still remembers a day not so long ago when Charles Worcester strolled into the building carrying a small package which turned out to be a flawless Cranach portrait from his own home. The casualness of the donor in no way belied the importance of the gift. Over a period of forty years (though mainly in Europe during the twenties) Mr. and Mrs. Worcester have been buying works of art, and, because their taste is catholic and their visual response genuine, the collection is disarmingly varied and rich in scope. Famous names like Bellini, Caravaggio, Daumier, van Dyck, Grünewald, Hals, Matisse and Tintoretto do not crowd out lesser known but no less interesting works by such anonymous painters as the

“Master of the Hiltpoltstein Altar” or the “Master of the Krainburg Altar” or even the “Master of Nuremberg.”

It is not alone through his successive experiences as Trustee, Vice-President and finally Honorary President of the Art Institute that Charles H. Worcester has become a sensitive and astute collector; it is perhaps even more through his own long years of experimentation with the medium of painting itself. For no matter how crowded and busy his life, he has always found time to paint.

The seventy works recently acquired by the Art Institute from the Worcesters in no way represent the total number given by these donors, for over a period of years, generously and quietly, they have been adding to the museum collections. The Education of Cupid by Titian and Mars and Venus with Three Graces in a Landscape by Tintoretto are typical earlier gifts. Repeatedly Venetian paintings such as these have been selected, because the Art Institute lacked fine examples from this school, also from the early German schools. Venetian art is brilliantly represented from the austere fourteenth century through the richest Baroque and Rococo periods, whereas rare examples of fifteenth and early sixteenth century German art give the Art Institute of Chicago possibly the finest selection of early German paintings to be found in any American museum.

From the recent gift of seventy works several are so distinguished that they merit special attention. The superb tempera on canvas, entitled Two Orientals, with its almost hieratic linear quality, has a bold disregard for detail which we traditionally associate with twentieth century art, though this canvas was probably painted by the Venetian, Gentile Bellini, well before 1520. Chronologically later and

equally important is the painting from the Caravaggio School called The Chastisement of Love. This, which bids fair to become one of the most popular works in the Art Institute, is a dynamic Baroque painting with diagonal motion and exaggerated dramatic light. From the hand of Lucas Cranach, the Elder, comes a great Crucifixion, at once transcending while typifying the traditional realism of northern painting. Also extremely rare is the Portrait of a Young Painter, frequently attributed to the too-little known German artist, Mathias Grünewald. If this attribution is correct, the portrait (which incidentally may be a self-portrait) is the only known work by Grünewald in this country. The painting has occasioned considerable controversy among experts because when originally found in Sweden it had been overpainted and falsely signed H. H. (for Hans Holbein, the Younger). Not to be overlooked either is the excellent small painting, The Rommelpot Player, by Frans Hals, ingratiating and spontaneous in the best manner of this famous Dutch master. Though relatively small and informal, the picture well demonstrates how Hals' loose brush work and “candid-camera” composition (forgive the anachronism) influenced much later painters like Manet and Renoir.

My intention is not to describe all of the seventy works. The reader will find a complete list of these elsewhere in the *Bulletin*. But I would like to note in passing the extraordinary beauty of a small modern bronze sculpture, Seated Woman, by Aristide Maillol. This very fine cast with its tender and subtly modelled surfaces shows the French sculptor at his best, handling the nude female form with infallible plastic precision.

KATHARINE KUH