Chapter 23

THE SEARCH FOR AN AMERICAN STYLE IN THE ARTS

INTRODUCTION

Whether the United States were to succeed in their economical and political undertakings, the people must still develop some intellectual life of their own, and the character of this development was likely to interest mankind. New conditions and hopes could hardly fail to interest mankind. Of all possible triumphs, none could equal that which might be won in the regions of thought if the intellectual influence of the United States should equal their social and economic importance.

HENRY ADAMS

He knows all about art, but he doesn't know what he likes.

JAMES THURBER

We must never forget that art is not a form of propaganda, it is a form of truth.

JOHN F. KENNEDY

"IN THE FOUR QUARTERS of the globe," asked the waspish English wit Sydney Smith in 1820, "who reads an American book? or goes to an American play? or looks at an American picture or statue?"

A century and a half later the answer is — everybody. American books are best sellers in Europe, in South America, and in those African and Asian countries whose governments allow their importation. American plays and — this Smith could not anticipate — American movies are shown in theaters all over the world, and at least one American dramatic invention, the Western, has established itself as that rare thing, a nearly universal genre. And as for painting and sculpture, New York has become the Paris of the art world, the place where new ideas and new reputations are alike broached and made.

Smith asked other indignant rhetorical questions (he was reviewing a book called *Annals of the United States,* the pretensions of which irritated him). "What new substances have their chemists discovered? or what old ones have they analyzed? What

new constellations have been discovered by the telescopes of Americans? What have they done in mathematics? Who drinks out of American glasses? or eats from American plates? or wears American coats or gowns? or sleeps in American blankets?" Here again, of course, the answer is — everybody. But with a difference.

The character of the difference is, in a way, the subject of this chapter. The utilitarian products of American industry and inventiveness are admired the world over, and every American knows it. We have a deep, quiet pride in the things we make, and we are perfectly certain that praise is our due — when it comes to things like cars and guns and computers. But there is much less certainty about our arts. Here we have tended, and still tend, to be timid and anxious. One result is that we have often been shrilly chauvinistic, which we have not had to be in other realms. We have wondered whether we had a national art at all, and if we did, whether it was as good as other peoples' — and to mask our anxiety have insisted that American art was the best in the world simply because it was ours.

For 200 years America has been the existentialist nation that had to create itself out of nothing. Having no tradition, no blueprint for a culture, it has made endless attempts to find its "essence" — in the Indian, in the frontier, in the Negro. In Europe the "essence" of art is artistic; as the French critic André Malraux once remarked, "all painting is derived from painting"; the sources of a particular style are to be found in another style of the same or an allied art. Not so in America. "The United States themselves," said Walt Whitman, "are essentially the greatest poem." But that is to make the source of art political, not artistic, and in fact when Americans talk about the sources of their artistic tradition they almost never talk about art but instead talk about almost everything else.

Another manifestation of our artistic chauvinism or self-consciousness is our feeling that an American artist must represent America on the international scene. Since World War II, for example, the U.S. State Department has numerous times exerted pressure on artists and exhibitors at world's fairs and the like. This kind of censorship reflects the nonaesthetic standards by which Americans often judge their art. Cultural or artistic chauvinism is also shown whenever an American artist wins an international prize. When Robert Rauschenberg won an important award at the Venice Biennale in 1966, U.S. officialdom responded as though an American miler had won a gold medal in the Olympics or U.S. astronauts had won the race to the moon. On the whole, the European critics present in Venice wondered why. They could see why Rauschenberg himself would be proud — but why should his government? It had not painted any paintings. All in all, the affair was counted an "American gaffe," and Americans living in Europe were embarrassed for their country.

Part of the embarrassment was caused by the knowledge that most of this distressing artistic chauvinism is not necessary. Much American art is bad, but so is much of the art of other nations and peoples; the fact is that some American art is very good. Six Americans have won Nobel Prizes for literature (Sinclair Lewis was the first, in 1930); of the six, at least three — Eugene O'Neill, William Faulkner, and Ernest Hemingway — have done work that compares with anything written anywhere in the twentieth century. American poetry, from Emily Dickinson and Whitman on down, is unquestionably one of the nation's glories. For a century American architecture has been as good as any in the world, and some of its innovations — for example, the skyscraper — have helped to create an architectural style, at least in public, commercial, and industrial buildings, that is absolutely international at the present time.

American achievements in other arts are also outstanding. Americans have every reason to be proud. But they are not — or at least many of them are not.

We will give some background for the general controversy about the development of — or the search for — a national art in the first of the following sections. We will discuss some of the often mentioned sources for this national art in the second. We will then go on to discuss a number of particular arts. In the process we will have occasion from time to time to treat various particular works of American art. But it should be emphasized that that is not the real subject of this chapter. The subject is the attempt to find a style, the more or less obsessive concern, voiced for two centuries, with this search, and the anxiety lest, if such a national style were not to be found, then American art would not be really good. [For a different treatment of many of the subjects discussed here and in the following sections, see Ch. 1: National Character.]

1. THE GENERAL CONTROVERSY ABOUT A NATIONAL STYLE

For Americans, the achievement of political autonomy, as distinguished from achievement of autonomy over their arts, was a relatively easy matter. The Declaration of Independence laid down the new political principles; the Constitution set forth the new basic laws. Military success as well as effective statecraft tipped the balance of raw power in favor of those principles and laws. Treaties and diplomatic intercourse, as well as events in faraway Europe, made political autonomy an accomplished fact. But in the arts there was no such clear development.

As a patriot, Paul Revere was undeniably American; but as a silversmith he remained in the European tradition. John Singleton Copley, recognized as an accomplished portraitist, continued to paint in the English academic style, though an American.

Almost a century after America had achieved political independence, James Jackson Jarves, voyager, critic, and art collector, lamented even at that late date the lack of a national art. One problem, he said, in 1864, was that American art had "no antecedent art; no abbeys or picturesque ruins, no stately cathedrals." There was not even a national history long enough to transform, for lofty literary purpose, mere American mortals into American hero-gods. But there were remedies, Jarves suggested, provided Americans would take the trouble to apply them. To create a new and a national art, he counseled his fellow countrymen, it was only needed to look at once to the art of the Old World for guidance and to the soil of the New World for inspiration. Only thus could the nation hope to create great and lasting art. However, Jarves, like many others who seemed to share his doubts, was not certain whether it was a practical matter to create a national art.

There were those who had previously voiced Jarves' concern. "There are no annals for the historian," complained James Fenimore Cooper in 1828; "no follies (beyond the most vulgar and commonplace) for the satirist; no manners for the dramatist; no obscure fictions for the writer of romance; no gross and hardy offenses against decorum for the moralist; nor any of the rich artificial auxiliaries of poetry." He also bemoaned the absence of those marks of social distinction on which some of his compatriots prided themselves. "There is no costume for the peasant (there is scarcely a peasant at all), no wig for the judge, no baton for the general, no diadem for the chief magistrate." In these circumstances it was hard to see, Cooper implied, how social comedy could be written at all, much less written well.

Nathaniel Hawthorne, with his penchant

for romantic tragedy, had a different complaint. "No author," he wrote in his Preface to *The Marble Faun* (1860), "without a trial, can conceive of the difficulty of writing a romance about a country where there is no shadow, no antiquity, no mystery, no picturesque and gloomy wrong, nor anything but a commonplace prosperity, in broad and simple daylight, as is happily the case with my dear native land. It will be very long, I trust, before romance-writers may find congenial and easily handled themes, either in the annals of our stalwart republic, or in any characteristic and probable events of our individual lives."

It should be pointed out that Hawthorne, though he continued to complain of the lack of appropriate materials, turned to the early Puritan days of Massachusetts for the locale of his best stories — and there found the "mystery" and the "picturesque and gloomy wrong" he sought, as any reader of his great novel *The Scarlet Letter* knows.

Jarves, like others of his time, brought to artistic appraisal a taste conditioned by European conventions and models. To these men, American artistic accomplishment had nothing to compare with the productions of Europe — to the neo-Classical architecture of the German Schinkel, to the romantic painting of the Frenchman Delacroix, to the powerful prose of the Russian Tolstoi. And while regretting the lack of American accomplishment in the fine arts, Jarves and his like seemed also to regret the achievements of the American useful arts — almost as if these useful arts were prospering at the expense of the fine arts.

A similar point had been made by Alexis de Tocqueville. He agreed that the useful arts were flourishing in America in the 1830s. This was to be expected, he wrote, for democracies tended to generate a broad demand for "luxuries," a demand that was more likely to be served by the useful than the fine arts. With regard to the latter, he wrote: "I do not believe it a necessary effect of a democratic social condition and of democratic institutions to diminish the number of those who cultivate the fine arts." On the contrary, democracy seemed to spur artistic production, at least on the side of quantity. But quality was another matter. "In a democracy the productions of artists are numerous but the merit of each production is diminished. No longer able to soar to what is great, they cultivate what is pretty and elegant, and appearance is more attended to than reality. In aristocracies, a few great pictures are produced; in democratic countries, a vast number of insignificant ones. In the former, statues are raised of bronze; in the latter, they are modeled in plaster."

This point, first made by Tocqueville in 1835 but reiterated by many others during the following century, became one of the cornerstones of an attitude toward art in this country that persists to this day. This is the view that democracy — or, perhaps, mass culture — is incapable of breeding a "refined" art, almost by definition. Democracy inevitably breeds mass art and expresses itself in the homely vernacular rather than in elegant purity. As a result, America has no refined or "high" art and can never have it, since such an art is ruled out by our most cherished political ideals.

Writing about a century after Tocqueville, the Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset, an advocate of refinement in all the mental disciplines, gave a modern inflection to Tocqueville's point. In *The Revolt of the Masses* he declared that "the characteristic of the hour is that the commonplace mind, knowing itself to be commonplace, has the assurance to proclaim the rights of the commonplace and to impose them wherever it will. As they say in the United States: 'To be different is to be indecent.' "

Both Tocqueville and Ortega suggested that refined art is a function of the creativi-

ty of an aristocracy, an elite. Both pointed to the absence of such an elite in America. Both appeared to conclude that, as a consequence, America does not and cannot have a refined, high art. But here the affinity thins out, exposing certain divergences. For, while Tocqueville noted both the lack of refined art and also a certain spurious quality in the nation's useful arts, he neither explicitly lamented the former nor condemned the latter. His view was measured, even bland; he suggested that America, having a vigorous body of useful arts, had all it needed — and all it possibly could have. Ortega went further. He despaired of a refined style in America and deplored the results of its mass culture.

Ortega's position has been supplemented and redefined by many others. T. S. Eliot, who, in effect, voted with his feet against the American style when he emigrated from his native country to England, took a doctrinaire view. He suggested that only stratified societies, heeding certain religious precepts, could breed a valid style. (He probably changed his mind about the American achievement in the arts in his last years.) And Henry James, like Eliot an expatriate, was likewise pessimistic. In *The American Scene,* published in 1907, he as much as declared the prospects for American art to be hopeless. American culture, he asserted, was doomed to exist in sterile isolation, as the American style was "more different from all other native ways, taking country with country, than any of these latter are different from each other." According to the Ortegas, the Jameses, and the Eliots among the critics, refined art in America was out of the question, as there was in its culture an irremediable lack of sound leadership and an incurable disregard for valid guidelines. The commonplace was the best one could expect; and that, for them, could not be good enough.

Modern critical pessimism expresses itself in many forms and attempts not only to explain its pessimism but also to place blame. The lack of a refined national art, one position holds, is at least partly the fault of American artists, rather than wholly the fault of "massified" American culture. Not so, contends another view; it is wholly the fault of American culture, which is commercial to the core, and against whose mass and power the "refined" American artist cannot contend. In short, commercial venality suffocates pure art in America.

The critic Louis Kronenberger is one of those who at least partly blames the artist (while also regretting his unfavorable surroundings). American art, like the art of the Romans and the Germans, is not "organic," he wrote in 1954. The emphasis in American society is on other things than art: in the past, on the development of the continent, and now, on mere wealth-getting. Hence, he declared, the American artist has been nagged perennially by the same questions.

Why paint golden pictures, or write golden words, or sing with a golden voice, when the real gold has been and continues to be there, in lodes, just for the mining? In other words — as Kronenberger put it — the trouble that the American artist, unlike his European counterpart, has experienced is in "not needing to substitute art for nature, form for substance, method for materials. At the very point where a patina might begin to appear, or mellowness to suffuse, we have abandoned what we made for something newer, brisker, shinier; and with each such act we have become a little less 'artistic' in our approach."

According to another modern critic, Dwight Macdonald, the trouble goes deeper. He saw the manifestations of "mass culture" (Tocqueville's "democracy") — mass education, mass communication — suffocating an "avant-garde" (Tocqueville's artistic "aristocracy") capable of giving form to a

refined national art. Without an effective avant-garde, Macdonald contended, no "high culture" is possible.

There is also a more optimistic body of opinion, ranging from the assertion that while there is no American national style as yet, there can or could be one, to the assertion that a valid American art has already evolved and now exists.

The keynote of this sanguine view of the matter is suggested by some verses of Goethe's.

> America, thou hast it better
> Than our old Continent,
> Hast no dilapidated castles,
> No aged columns.
>
> Thou art not tortured at heart,
> In living time,
> By useless remembrance
> And fruitless strife.

Indeed, there has been no lack of support for the position that American art, unlike that of Europe, was fortunate in being spared the encumbrance of tradition. According to this view, the old abbeys, the picturesque ruins and stately monuments of the past that Jarves, Cooper, and Hawthorne missed, were nothing but sterile forms, devoid of real meaning and lacking in inspirational qualities. On the contrary, the hope of American art lay in the slate that the new American circumstances had wiped clean — and that could be filled in with new beauty and new meaningfulness by the artists of the future.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, falling chronologically between Goethe and Jarves, partook of the views of both. Like Jarves, Emerson regretted the absence of an artistic tradition in America. But he looked not to Europe's old abbeys and picturesque ruins for inspiration suitable to Americans but, instead, to Europe's tradition of refined speculation. He deplored the loss of this tradition owing to America's materialism, to its preoccupation with "superficial institutions." Transplanted to England, the Emersonian view might similarly have condemned the Englishmen's preoccupation with abbeys and ancestral homes, in place of orientation toward intellectual and aesthetic ideals.

Despite these reservations, Emerson, writing in 1841, scanned American culture and found room in it for hope. "Beauty, truth, and goodness are not altogether obsolete," he said. "They spring eternal in the breast of man; they are indigenous in Massachusetts as in Tuscany, or the isles of Greece. And the eternal spirit, whose triple face they are, molds forever, for his mortal child, images to remind him of the infinite and the fair." The trouble lay merely with the times and with the indifference these times engendered in Americans toward the pure strain in art. "Who cares, who knows what works of art our government have ordered to be made for the capitol?" Emerson charged — but suggested at the same time that things might change for the better. For the moment, however, there was disarray. "The arts, the daughters of enthusiasm, do not flourish," he wrote. "The genuine offspring of our passions we behold. Popular institutions, the school, the reading room, the post office, the exchange, the insurance company, and an immense harvest of economical inventions are the fruit of the equality and the boundless liberty of lucrative callings." Still, the good forces in the "breast of man" might eventually assert themselves over the malignant domination of "superficial institutions"; the fine arts of America might flourish in dedication to the "infinite and fair."

Writing about a century later, John Kouwenhoven, in his *Made in America,* gave this sanguine view a different turn. America's very preoccupation with things not embraced by the genteel tradition, he

declared, had brought into existence a national style that, while differing from that of the Old World, was no less valid. The blurring of this truth, he declared, and the atmosphere of gloom surrounding American art, were the fault of historians and critics, and not of the art itself. "To the cultural achievements, and specifically to the arts, of a civilization whose dynamics originate in technology and science," he wrote in 1948, "they have sought to apply the standards which were appropriate to those of civilizations founded upon agriculture or handicraft commerce." American civilization excels, he went on to say, at doing things quickly, efficiently. America is production, not husbanding or tilling, it is supermarketing and engineering, not small-shopkeeping and crafting. An economy of abundance nurtures art in America rather than the system of patrician patronage that nurtures it in Europe. America is the better, lighter plow, the faster, plainer, sailing vessel, the more utilitarian house frame, the syncopated rhythm, the gaudy pigment. American national art is the modern, vernacular art of a modern vernacular society; it is needed by that society. Further, it is valid — though it is different from Europe's "refined" art.

But even granting that America has a national art of sorts, should it have this sort of art? The critic Gilbert Seldes applied himself to this question in *The Great Audience.* He agreed with writers like Kouwenhoven that we have a national, vernacular art. Further, he saw this art as possessing qualities earlier ascribed to it by Emerson and Tocqueville, among others. But this art of the masses is marred, Seldes asserted, though its essence is neither crude nor invalid — marred because of its crude exploitation by "the Lords of Kitsch," who have subverted it, perhaps only temporarily, to their venal commercial ends.

The question, then, of whether there is a national style in the arts may be seen as susceptible of many different answers, answers that in fact have been given during our past. The conflict among these views, together with the undercurrent of contention engendered by the distinction between traditional, "refined" art and original, "vernacular" art, mark not only the general discussion of a national style but also the discussion of the status of particular arts.

2. SOURCES OF A NATIONAL STYLE

IF FOR THE MOMENT we assume that there is an American style (we will return to the question in the following sections), then we must ask, where does it come from?

There are perhaps three main sources of a national style in the arts. The first, of course, is Europe — the artistic tradition that, willy-nilly, we have inherited and have never been able to forget. Nor have most of our artists wanted to forget it. Washington Irving recognized this more than a century ago. "None but those who have experienced it can form an idea of the delicious throng of sensations which rush into an American's bosom when he first comes in sight of Europe. There is a volume of associations with the very name. It is the land of promise, teeming with everything of which his childhood has heard, or on which his studious years have pondered."

Even today, many Americans — both young and old — have feelings that are akin to those. The journey to Europe — be it a three-week jaunt, a summer's holiday, or a "junior year abroad" — still has the capacity to thrill us with deep memories of our beginnings, of our cultural heritage. Our country, still new in our own eyes (it is older than we realize in the eyes of the rest of the world), is built on solid foundations of long duration. Few American critics have ever called for a national style in the arts that was *completely* divorced from that of our European forebears. And many of us might be inclined to agree — at least in

spirit — with one of the more comprehensible dictums of Gertrude Stein. "America is my country and Paris is my hometown," she wrote in 1936, "and it is as it has come to be."

A second main source of American style has been several groups of people who, for one reason or another, have had a special effect on our history as well as on our art. First among these are the aboriginal inhabitants of our country, the people whom Columbus, mistaking his discovery, called Indians. Indian stories and poems, Indian myths and legends, Indian artifacts and arts of decoration have all had their influence on various American artists. But the basic influence has been of a higher, or perhaps a vaguer, kind. When the first Europeans came to these shores, they found a people still living in the Stone Age. The effect of that discovery was far-reaching, not only here but also abroad.

One need not mention the "cult of the noble savage" that flourished in the eighteenth century in Europe. That has long since died out *there,* and in any event it produced few works of truly great art. (There were many sentimental poems and pictures, but on the whole they have not endured.) *Here* the effect has been more lasting. For deep in the heart of many Americans there remains the feeling — often unvoiced, often not even consciously felt — that all of our riches do not quite belong to us; that, like Jacob, we stole the birthright of another. And compounding the guilt is the lingering suspicion that the Indian we so rudely and cruelly displaced was a better man than we.

At least this feeling seems to have been shared by many of America's best writers and painters, and may account for the emphasis on simplicity, on the primitive virtues, even on savagery, that marks so much of our art. The proud and haughty Indian, with his ability to live in the great waste spaces of the American continent and to move through the forests and across the prairies like a flitting shadow, without disturbing the silence and tranquillity of nature, is a figure that has inspired many novelists, painters, and sculptors, and perhaps even some musicians.

The American Negro has had almost as great an effect, though a very different one, on our national art. His greatest contribution is probably the syncopated beat and the plaintive songs that may constitute the most distinctive American music. But his influence has been broader than that, and has reached into all the arts, especially the literary ones. For a generation few of our best writers have been able to ignore "the Negro problem" and the guilt and possibly the fear it has engendered in white breasts.

All have not succeeded so well at handling "the problem" as Mark Twain, whose *Huckleberry Finn* may, after all, deserve the title of The Great American Novel, if any book does. But the list of writers, both men and women, and (significantly) both Negro and white, who have wrestled with it, would fill a page. Injustice, after all — Hawthorne's "picturesque and gloomy wrong" — is one of the great subjects of art at any time or in any place.

A third group of persons who have had an important effect — some would say an essential influence — on American art is the Puritans. One of the leading advocates of the view that the Puritans had such an effect was the critic Van Wyck Brooks, who saw them as originating two distinct cultural lines or strains. Brooks used the terms "highbrow" and "lowbrow" to describe these two lines or traditions. "They always have divided American life between them," he declared in 1915, "and to understand them one has to go back to the beginning of things — for without doubt the Puritan Theocracy is the all-influential fact in the history of the American mind."

From the beginning, he declared, "we find two main currents in the American

mind running side by side but rarely mingling." On the one hand, there is the "current of transcendentalism," as he put it, passing through Jonathan Edwards and Emerson, and "producing the fastidious refinement and aloofness of the chief American writers, and . . . resulting in the final unreality of most contemporary American culture; and on the other hand the current of catchpenny opportunism," passing through Franklin and the American humorists, "and resulting in the atmosphere of contemporary business life."

One may question Brooks's idea that "highbrow" and "lowbrow" describe the two main currents or strains in American art and thought without denying his notion that the Puritans, and especially the Puritan morality, had a powerful effect on the American style in the arts. Such at least was the judgment of D. H. Lawrence, who produced, in *Studies in Classic American Literature,* one of the most perceptive books on the subject ever penned. "Surely it is especially true of American art," he wrote in 1922, "that it is all essentially moral. Hawthorne, Poe, Longfellow, Emerson, Melville: it is the moral issue which engages them. They all feel uneasy about the old morality. Sensuously, passionally, they all attack the old morality. But they know nothing better, mentally. Therefore they give tight mental allegiance to a morality which all their passion goes to destroy."

Finally, as the third main source of American artistic style there is the land itself, which in its vastness, its wildness, and its variety has always been a fact American artists could not ignore.

De Witt Clinton gave voice to this feeling as early as 1816. Speaking of "this wild, romantic, and awful scenery," he asked whether there can "be a country in the world better calculated than ours to exercise and exalt the imagination?" and added that "here nature has conducted her operations on a magnificent scale." William Cullen Bryant, as an old man, made a similar point. "Art sighs to carry her conquests into new realms," he wrote in 1872. "On our continent, and within the limits of our Republic, she finds them — primitive forests, in which the huge trunks of a past generation of trees lie moldering in the shade of their aged descendants; mountains and valleys, gorges and rivers, and tracts of seacoast, which the foot of the artist has never trod; and glens murmuring with waterfalls which his ear has never heard. And so," he concluded, "in every conceivable shape that can appeal to the eye of the poet, artist, or geologist, Nature has here piled up her changeless masonry on creation." And Thoreau, of course, gave eloquent expression in all of his works to this feeling; he may have summed it up in his essay "Walking," when he declared — it is a famous statement — that "in wildness is the preservation of the world."

The critic Stuart Sherman observed the effect of what might be called the spirit of place on American literary figures in an essay written in 1924. "To take any part of the earth into your heart transfigures it for you and for all men whom you can persuade to use your eyes. And the transfiguring discovery of America has, in most periods, proceeded bit by bit, in the hearts of men like Cooper who took the forest into his heart, and Dana and Melville who took the sea into their hearts, and Hawthorne who declared that New England was as large a lump of the earth as his heart could hold, and Bret Harte who embraced the red-shirted forty-niners, and Mark Twain who took the Mississippi into his heart, and Joaquin Miller who embraced the Sierras, and G. W. Cable and Joel Chandler Harris who transfigured Georgia and New Orleans by discovering them as facts for the heart and the imagination."

The list might be added to, of course — think of Faulkner's Mississippi, of Willa Cather's Nebraska, of Robert Frost's New

Hampshire, of John Steinbeck's California — to say nothing of the painters who have depicted every section of the country and every aspect of our life. The land we live in — mountain or desert, seashore or river valley, forest or prairie — has touched all our art and helped to make it what it is.

Nor is this true only of the land as such, of nature, of the out-of-doors. America's cities have also been an inspiration to many of its artists. "Boston," it used to be said, "is a state of mind"; and Oliver Wendell Holmes once boasted that "Boston has opened and kept open more turnpikes that lead straight to free thought and free speech and free deeds than any other city of live or dead men." Henry James remarked that "Philadelphia then [in the 1890s] wasn't a place, but a state of consanguinity, which is an absolute final condition" — a statement that might have served as the motto of a book such as Christopher Morley's *Kitty Foyle.* Joel Sayre claimed that "no matter what anybody says or thinks about Washington, it is us inescapably" — which may help to explain the enduring popularity of books about that city and its constant struggle for power and influence.

Chicago inspired Carl Sandburg to write some of his best poems, and it continues to see itself as it were through his eyes, as the "city of the big shoulders" — a fact that in turn may have inspired Julian Street to proclaim: "Chicago is stupefying . . . an Olympian freak, a fable, an allegory, an incomprehensible phenomenon . . . monstrous, multifarious, unnatural, indomitable, puissant, preposterous, transcendent . . . throw the dictionary at it!" Although Los Angeles was dubbed "nineteen suburbs in search of a metropolis" in the 1940s, and although Frank Lloyd Wright is once supposed to have quipped that "if you tilt the country sideways, Los Angeles is the place where everything loose will fall," the city's easy, new way of life has created a literature, to say nothing of a visual image that is known and envied throughout the world. And William Sidney Porter ("O. Henry") used to claim that "there are only three cities in America that are 'story cities': New York, of course, and New Orleans, and, best of the lot, San Francisco." He died in 1910; much that has happened since has confirmed his insight about the gleaming metropolis at the Golden Gate.

Despite O. Henry's preference for San Francisco, it is New York that for more than a century has been the greatest inspiration of American artists — in words, in music, in painting, in architecture. Washington Irving knew this as early as 1807, and Bryant knew it not much later. Whitman, living in Brooklyn Heights during the years when he wrote his greatest poems, walked down every morning to the shore of the wide bay and told, in *Specimen Days,* of what the ferries meant, and the ships, and, in the distance, Manhattan's towers. O. Henry belied his own words in a hundred stories about "little old Noisyville-on-the-Subway," with its low places and its high, from one of which his heart thrilled as "far below and around lay the city like a ragged purple dream, the wonderful, cruel, enchanting, bewildering, fatal, great city." Henry James felt it, too, calling New York "the most extravagant of cities," and writing of "its might, its fortune, its unsurpassable conditions." George M. Cohan used to say that "when you are away from old Broadway you are only camping out," and for half a century most artists agreed. Thomas Wolfe heard "the hoarse notes of the great ships in the river, and [remembered] suddenly the princely girdle of proud, potent tides that bind the city, and suddenly New York blazes like a magnificent jewel in its fit setting of sea and earth and stars." John Gunther said it as well as anyone. "New York City, the incomparable," he wrote in *Inside U.S.A.* (1947), "the brilliant star city of cities, the forty-ninth state, the Cyclopean paradox, the inferno

with no out-of-bounds, the supreme expression of both the miseries and the splendors of contemporary civilization, the Macedonia of the United States. It meets the most severe test that may be applied to definition of a metropolis — it stays up all night. But also it becomes a small town when it rains."

3. LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE

"STYLE IS AN INCREMENT IN WRITING," declared E. B. White, a peculiarly "American" writer, in 1959. "When we speak of Fitzgerald's style, we don't mean his command of the relative pronoun, we mean the sound his words make on paper." The question is, whether the "sound" that Americans make on paper is unique, or at least somehow different from the sounds made by other peoples. Thus, for some, American writing may not have the elegantly disciplined sound of Rochefoucauld's *Maxims;* it may not do especially well in hexameters; it may lack the kempt mysteries of Chinese, the natural cadence of German; it is not Shakespeare or Kipling, Chaucer or Yeats. But, for them, it has its own humors, inflections, tones, and its own approach.

For others, however, this is manifestly not true, and what is more, it would be an undesirable state of affairs if it were true. In their view, good writing is good writing anywhere, and the different, the special, the unique, is looked on as suspect.

One of the latter was James Russell Lowell. Though he could banteringly charge his countrymen with a too great subservience to English models —

> You steal Englishmen's books and think Englishmen's thought
> With their salt on her tail your wild eagle is caught —

Lowell felt that the attempt to create a national literature, entirely distinct from English literature as a whole, was absurd. "After the United States achieved their independence," he wrote in 1849, "it was forthwith decided that they could not properly be a nation without a literature of their own. As if we had been without one! As if Shakespeare, sprung from the race and the class which colonized New England, had not been also ours! As if we had no share in the puritan and republican Milton, we who had cherished in secret for more than a century the idea of the great puritan effort and at last embodied it in a living commonwealth!"

Americans could legitimately draw from the English literary tradition, Lowell was saying, because it was a part of their own heritage. But, he added, they should not follow the older tradition too slavishly, lest the material that America itself had to offer be neglected.

Edgar Allan Poe concurred, but without the last proviso. "Much has been said of late," he observed in 1845, "about the necessity of maintaining a proper nationality in American letters; but what this nationality is, or what is to be gained by it, has never been distinctly understood. That an American should confine himself to American themes, or even prefer them, is rather a political than a literary idea — and at best is a questionable point." In Poe's view, foreign themes lent themselves more naturally than native ones to great writing. It is a position that remains relevant to the discussion of later American writing — witness the contemporary notion that writers like Hemingway, who frequently used foreign themes, are not necessarily less "American" than writers like Faulkner, who preferred native themes.

Unlike Poe, many shared Lowell's notion that America abounded in potential literary material and urged, furthermore, that it be put to use by American writers. James Kirke Paulding, writing in 1820, noted that bad or mediocre writing had availed itself of native material, but serious writing tend-

ed to remain imitative and European. What was needed, he declared, was the sure and sensitive writer's ear for those "peculiarities of thought, feeling, and expression" that mark a national literature.

Emerson also urged Americans to make broader, more imaginative use of native material. "We do not, with sufficient plainness or sufficient profoundness, address ourselves to life," he complained in 1844, "nor do we chaunt our own times and social circumstances." Several years before he had made the point with a homely simplicity that inspired two generations of writers. "I ask not for the great, the remote, the romantic; what is doing in Italy or Arabia," he declared in his Phi Beta Kappa address at Harvard in 1837 (later published under the title *The American Scholar*). ". . . I embrace the common. . . . The meal in the firkin; the milk in the pan; the ballad in the street; the news of the boat; the glance of the eye; the form and the gait of the body." This declaration of American intellectual independence, as Oliver Wendell Holmes was later to call it, was conjoined with a demand similar to that of Paulding. What was needed, according to Emerson, was the extraordinary writer "with tyrannous eye," able to perceive "in the barbarism and materialism of the times another carnival of the same gods whose picture he so much admired in Homer; then in the middle age; then in Calvinism."

If the American situation gave promise of rich, new subject matter, it also, to Whitman, gave promise of an entirely new approach and literary tone. He described this tone in a letter to Emerson in 1856, calling it "electric, fresh, lusty, [able] to express the full-sized body, male and female — to give the modern meanings of things, to grow up beautiful, lasting, commensurate with America." And he asked American readers to "strangle the singers who will not sing you loud and strong. Open the doors of The West. Call for new great masters to comprehend new arts, new perfections, new wants. Submit to the most robust bard till he remedy your barrenness. Then you will not need to adopt the heirs of others; you will have true heirs, begotten of yourself, blooded with your own blood."

The uncertainty about what constitutes the American "touch" is an important component of the diffident view of men such as Poe; American writers and poets themselves, not merely the historians and critics, have pondered it. Indeed, Karl Shapiro, the poet-critic, has stated that these very doubts are a hallmark of American letters. Writing in 1960, he declared that "it is no exaggeration to say that any discussion of American poetry resolves itself into a search for the meaning of 'American.' This quest for self-definition may be said to be the main theme of all American literature. It is a unique theme: we do not find the Roman or the French or the British writer debating the question What is a Roman, What is a Frenchman, or What is an Englishman. But few American novelists and poets have been able to resist the theme What is an American." Considering the persistence of the diffident position, it is not surprising to find, particularly among the early critics, a tone of doubt so profound as almost to constitute an assertion that there is no American style in writing at all.

With the passage of time, the polarization of views about the role of and the need for a literature distinctly American seems to have blurred, or at least shifted. Two works in particular gave heart to the critics, who probably wanted above all to be able to point to a really good book written by an American, the essential "Americanness" of which they could then decide. The first of these was Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, which called forth from Henry James — by no means a jingoist — a ringing declaration of approval. "The publication of *The Scarlet Letter* was in the United States a literary event of the first importance," he wrote in 1879. "The book was the finest piece of imaginative writing yet put forth in the

country. There was a consciousness of this in the welcome that was given it — a satisfaction in the idea of America having produced a novel that belonged to literature, and to the forefront of it. Something might at last be sent to Europe as exquisite in quality as anything that had been received, and the best of it was that the thing was absolutely American; it belonged to the soil, to the air; it came out of the very heart of New England."

A generation later one of the nabobs of English letters, H. G. Wells, delivered a similar judgment about Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage.* The book was notably original, Wells declared in 1918 (some twenty years after its first publication), for "its freshness of method, vigor of imagination, its force of color, and its essential freedom from many traditions that dominate this side of the Atlantic." And although, in Wells's view, "it was clear that Tolstoi had exerted powerful influence upon the conception," the work was nevertheless altogether American in tone. And ever since the rediscovery of Melville in the 1920s, there has been a general consensus that at least in *Moby Dick* here was an author, eminently American it is true, but at the same time capable of taking his rightful place among the very greatest of modern times.

Recently, the label "American" has been applied, almost automatically, to the writings of authors such as Theodore Dreiser, John Dos Passos, Sinclair Lewis, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Hemingway and Faulkner, Sandburg and Frost — to say nothing of writers such as J. D. Salinger, Norman Mailer, Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac, Gregory Corso, and James Dickey. Furthermore, a reportorial style that may have originated with R. H. Dana's *Two Years Before the Mast* (1840) and culminated in Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* (1966) has achieved recognition by some as a peculiarly American genre.

American humor also seems to have been conceded an identity of its own. The classic analysis of this genre was that of Constance Rourke, who in 1931 defined its characteristic qualities as "quiet, explosive, competitive, often grounded in good humor, still theatrical at bottom, and full of large fantasy." However, even Miss Rourke had doubts about the aesthetic value of American humor. "Humor has been a fashioning instrument in America," she wrote, "cleaving its way through the national life, holding tenaciously to the spread elements of that life." But, she went on to say, "its mode has often been swift and coarse and ruthless, beyond art and beyond established civilization." However, if a judgment such as this was intended to be applied to Mark Twain, it must be said that in recent years critics seem to have agreed that "America's greatest humorist" was not only that, but a great writer as well.

But whatever the genre of writing — humorous, reportorial, or romantic — the modern case supporting the existence of an American style has tended to be disarmingly simple. Who but a Bret Harte could have written as confidently about the American West? What foreigner could have captured on paper, as did Hawthorne and Melville, the tone and spirit of New England? What outsider could claim a literary ear as surely attuned to Texas as, say, Edna Ferber? As John O'Hara to American exurbia? As Faulkner to the South? As Sandburg to the Midwest? Has there not, then, developed a recognizable American style in writing, as foreseen by Emerson, Lowell, and Whitman? More and more, the question has received an insistent, if sometimes implicit, answer in the affirmative — but without sweeping aside altogether some enduring doubts. For every Dreiser and Sinclair Lewis produced by America, has not Europe produced a Maksim Gorki? For every Faulkner, has there not been a Proust? For the novelistic reportage of a Capote, has Europe not offered the novelistic *Zeitgeschichte* of a Heimito von Doderer?

All of this suggests that the question of

whether there is an American style in literature has not yet been finally answered. A century ago, pessimism was much more widespread than it is today. In the past, it may have been demonstrable that an American style existed only potentially and not in fact — or, in other words, that The Great American Novel was still to be written. Now, it seems on the whole that the attempt to write it was always a little foolish. At the same time, there remains a lurking suspicion that this famous mythical work might be growing in the mind of some young writer somewhere in America — today.

Soon after America attained its independence, the position of its language came under scrutiny. Benjamin Rush, Revolutionary patriot and physician, set the tone in 1788. "The cultivation and perfection of our language becomes a matter of consequence," he wrote. "It will probably be spoken by more people in the course of two or three centuries than ever spoke any one language at one time since the creation of the world."

Noah Webster, a year later, made a further recommendation. "*Now* is the time, and *this* the country, in which we may expect success, in attempting changes favorable to language, science, and government. . . . Let us then seize the present moment," he urged, "and establish a national language, as well as a national government."

As things turned out, these admonitions were only haphazardly followed, if at all. The thicket of English spelling, for example, remains with us to this day, as both H. L. Mencken and George Bernard Shaw lamented; and the isolated efforts to put into practice a simplified spelling — as in the Chicago *Tribune,* which commits such indiscretions as "frater" for "freighter" — continue to seem quaint owing to their very isolation.

Spelling apart, the language spoken and written by Americans has long been felt to possess tones and inflections of its own. William Cullen Bryant asserted in 1825 that American English "has grown up, as every forcible and beautiful language has done, among a simple and unlettered people; it has accommodated itself, in the first place, to the things of nature and, as civilization advanced, to the things of art; and thus it has become a language full of picturesque forms of expression, yet fitted for the purposes of science."

The spoken language has undergone marked changes in the century and a half since then — changes that are partly traceable in the writings of men such as Mark Twain, Bret Harte, and James T. Farrell. Nor is there now but one American English: compare Hemingway's Robert Jordan, J. P. Marquand's George Apley, and Salinger's Holden Caulfield, and wonder whether they could have understood each other at all. And then there are Li'l Abner and Batman, who have still other ways with the tongue. This matter of differing styles — one can hardly call them dialects — of "American" was sifted and categorized by Mencken in his famous work *The American Language,* which first appeared in 1919 and was followed by supplements that brought it up to the later 1940s. Mencken analyzed what he called the two main dialects of English — *i.e.,* English English and American — and observed that while the earliest Americanisms are traceable to Captain John Smith's *History of Virginia* (1624), English merchants seeking to sell to A.E.F. doughboys during World War I displayed signs on their shops proclaiming, "*American* spoken here."

Mencken also pointed out a rather surprising difference between the two dialects. American, though spoken by more people than English, has, nonetheless, a more uniform pronunciation. Indeed, this had been observed as early as 1839. Captain Frederick Marryat, an English visitor, wrote in that year that "the Americans boldly assert

that they speak better English than we do. . . . What I believe the Americans would imply by the above assertion," he explained, "is that you may travel through all the United States and find less difficulty in understanding or in being understood than in some of the counties of England, such as Cornwall, Devonshire, Lancashire, and Suffolk."

The interesting question is not whether this was so (as it probably still is), but why it should be so. One reason, often suggested, is connected with the notion that a vernacular art — an art of the people — constitutes our national style. American art, according to this view, is deeply influenced by what seems to be our national bent for the utilitarian. If this is so, then it is worth reflecting on the possibility that Americans have regarded their language, like their art, as a tool for getting things done, rather than as something demanding style and elegance in its own right. A uniform language is obviously a convenience. In America convenience often triumphs over other, more "aesthetic," considerations.

The use of the language as a mere tool (in advertising, for example) has produced certain forms that are questioned by some Americans. In 1959 E. B. White observed that "today the language of advertising enjoys an enormous circulation. With its deliberate infractions of grammatical rules and its crossbreeding of the parts of speech, it profoundly influences the tongues and pens of children and adults. Your new kitchen range is so revolutionary it *obsoletes* all other ranges. Your countertop is beautiful because it is *accessorized* with gold-plated faucets. Your cigarette tastes good *like* a cigarette. And, *like the man says,* you will want to try one. . . . Our advice is to buy the gold-plated faucets if you will, but do not accessorize your prose."

Accessorize may be one of the less attractive inventions of modern American, but the language on the whole seems to be flourishing despite such blemishes. The average German now looks forward, after five days of toil, to a *weekend,* not a *Wochenende;* the average Frenchman frequents a *snack bar,* not a *bistro;* and the average Italian dreams of a good *job,* not just *lavore,* which has somehow come to sound plebeian and unrewarding. And even the English themselves seem to be on the point of giving in — to what may be no more than *force majeur.* An article in the London *Times Literary Supplement* declared in November 1965 that "the American language is continually accentuating its own character and its distinctness from English as it is spoken on this crowded island. Even as much of the creation of major literature has passed from England to America, so has linguistic inventiveness. The American language is growing richer and developing capacities for experiment and accretion as did Tudor and Elizabethan English. The notion that English English will one day be a subdivision, a mandarin dialect of a dominant American vulgate, is no longer fantastic."

The catch, if catch there be, is of course in the phrase "a dominant American vulgate." All over the world the American language, like the American way with the arts, is being recognized — latterly with a rush — as somehow representative of our power, our energy, our ingenuity, and our style of life. And everywhere, too, there is heard the charge — loudly trumpeted or softly mumbled — that our way is vulgar or common, and that it means the end of something beautiful and great. But it is important to remember, in this connection, the two other occasions in Western history when a "vulgate" superseded an older, traditional language. The first was the triumph, in the first centuries after the birth of Christ, of the common Latin of the Romans over the ancient, formal languages of the past — Greek, Hebrew, "high" Latin, and the like. The second was the triumph, during the Renaissance, of the national Eu-

ropean languages such as French and Italian over the Latin that, in the thousand intervening years, had become as antique and formal as the languages it had replaced.

4. DRAMA

AT FIRST GLANCE it may seem indisputable that drama in America has a distinctly American quality. The wide acceptance, even reverence, for that epitome of the American theater, Broadway, seems to certify this. There is probably no theater at the present time that is so richly endowed financially. Broadway has not lacked renowned playwrights (*e.g.*, Eugene O'Neill, Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams), or directors (*e.g.*, Lee Strasberg, Elia Kazan, Mike Nichols), or able and attractive actors. But if a certain view is to be credited, all these attributes are a mere facade, under which lies mediocrity. In other words, the diffident, pessimistic view of the American theater parallels the diffident, pessimistic view of American literature and of American art as a whole.

Our national beginnings were inauspicious for the development of a national drama. The Puritans, who had managed to close the theaters in England, were not likely to applaud them on this side of the ocean. Tocqueville reported this (as late as 1835) as a commonplace, and added that drama, though no longer hindered by Puritan morality, nonetheless continued to function in a moral climate that "little favored the growth of dramatic art." "People who spend every day in the week in making money and Sunday in going to church," he declared, "have nothing to invite the Muse of Comedy."

Eighty years later the American critic Walter P. Eaton found the situation little improved. "It is not that dramas are not written by Americans," he wrote, "or even that they are not well written. . . . Rather it is that they never get down to national fundamentals, that they have no intellectual seriousness (which does not mean tragedy, or even necessarily any lack of comedy, as our present-day audiences seem to suppose)." His complaint was echoed in 1922 — well into the Broadway era — by George Jean Nathan. "In no civilized country in the world today is there among playwrights so little fervor for sound drama as in the United States. . . . The American professional theater is today at once the richest theater in the world, and the poorest. Financially, it reaches to the stars; culturally, with exception so small as to be negligible, it reaches to the drains."

Thus the diffident, pessimistic position took the form of saying that there was no American theater worth claiming. The important lack was in respect to seriousness and intellectual tone. Undenied was a strong vernacular tradition rising, perhaps, from the minstrel show and manifesting itself, more recently, in vaudeville and musicals. But the pessimists did not applaud this tradition and, at any rate, did not accept it as a valid substitute for refined drama of the traditional kind.

The opposing, sanguine view could also, for its part, draw support from history. In 1790 the Prologue to Royall Tyler's *The Contrast* emphasized the American nature of the play ("Exult, each patriot heart! — this night is shown / A piece, which we may fairly call our own"). As tokens of its Americanness, *The Contrast* offered an American setting and an American hero, a Revolutionary officer named Manly. There followed a veritable parade of American settings and American heroes, including, in modern times, Arthur Miller's salesman Willy Loman and Tennessee Williams' truck driver Stanley Kowalsky. Of course, the insignia of heroism had undergone a change, the modern sample case substituting, as it were, for the snuffbox, the T-shirt for the toga. But to the partisans of the

sanguine view, the change of insignia did not change the essential heroic qualities, nor did the homely setting change the general dramatic validity.

In this view, the American drama, though latterly affecting a vernacular idiom, has continued to treat the traditional dramatic themes adequately and even excellently. Both Williams and Chekhov dramatized a dying culture, and who was to say which treatment was more effective? Both Shakespeare's Othello and Miller's Willy represented characters successfully developed through the vehicle of drama; who was to say which of the two was the more effective carrier of tragedy? Thus in American drama, much as in American literature, the question remains open whether an American style exists and whether the American situation permits such a style. As has been seen, the responses to these questions depend to some extent on a subsidiary question — namely, is the vernacular approach to a national style valid?

If there are serious questions about this when it comes to "high" drama or "legitimate" theater, there are none when it comes to the movies, American almost by definition. At one time coterminous with Hollywood, the motion picture in its day has done wondrous things. The whimsical tragicomedy of Charlie Chaplin struck a chord worldwide; the documentaries of men like Robert L. Flaherty demonstrated the adaptability and power of the medium in straightforward exposition; the work of directors like John Ford and John Huston showed its suppleness in converting great literary works to arresting visual forms. In addition, the movies brought the Wild West to France and the gangster to Italy where, probably, he made the Black Hand seem pale by comparison. And they created Bogey and Marilyn (and their more recent heirs), the ideals of more men and women than would care to admit it. As types, Bogey and Marilyn are solidly entrenched in the repertory cast that inhabits the world's theater of the mind. Every day, in every way, they are wooed or worshiped, dominated or served, loved or hated — and, not altogether incidentally, as Americans.

In Hollywood's heyday it seemed that almost everything about the motion picture captured the imagination of almost everyone. It was a mass medium that called forth mass identifications with the virile diffidence of a Gary Cooper, the powerful earnestness of a Gregory Peck, the sharp ebullience of a Bob Hope, the fumbling amiability of a Jimmy Durante. There was the crooning of a Bing Crosby, which even colored the style of those perennial crooners, the Italians; and today the rock-and-roll beat of an Elvis Presley echoes and pounds even behind the Iron Curtain, where "elements" called Gooligans (the English *h* turns into a *g* in Russian) go to it, to the consternation of the authorities. No wonder that some of America's best analytical minds have regarded the movies with a mixture of wonder and fear. They have seen it edify, entertain, divert, and stir — massively. Some of these analysts, indeed, have granted the motion picture not only the status of a new art form but also have imputed to it an essential social role.

The movies are no longer coterminous with Hollywood; the leading experimenters are now Swedish, Italian, French, and Japanese. But from time to time an American, even a Hollywood, movie reminds us of the power that Hollywood once had. Arthur Penn's *Bonnie and Clyde*, released in 1967, was clearly influenced by the French "new wave," which in turn had been influenced by the Hollywood gangster films of the 1930s. But the subject matter of the film was wholly American, and something about its "look" caught the imagination of the entire Western world, to the extent that Bonnie became the model for the female shape

and dress during the next year or two. The effect was felt very quickly, and hemlines fell more precipitously than perhaps ever before in history.

The question about the motion picture is not whether it is American but whether it is art. Similar doubts have been expressed about that most characteristically American of twentieth-century "legitimate" forms — musical comedy. The musical is a compound of vaudeville, operetta, circus, and folk dance, each of which is European in origin. But the combination is American to the core. The modern musical is swift and loud; the action on stage proceeds at a breakneck pace and at the top of the performers' voices. Speed and loudness are supposedly American qualities, which may be why musical comedy is thought to be one of our most typical exports.

Musical comedies, like movies, are also expensive — the cost of launching a musical on Broadway (the only place that matters) was approaching a million dollars in the late 1960s — and this fact, combined with the American insistence on immediate success, emphasizes more than ever the role of business and finance in American art. Money is not a problem in the writing of books, although it is beginning to be in the publishing of them (the proportion of manifestly unpopular books that publishers are willing to bring out grows smaller and smaller). But a film or musical comedy must give promise of making a great deal of money if it is ever to appear at all. When vast sums are at stake, men tend to be conservative — "In all the world," as historian Gerald W. Johnson once said, "there is nothing more timorous than a million dollars, except ten millions" — and this militates against the novel and surprising and for the tried and true. The result is that many American films and musicals are derivative and boring, lacking an essential quality of great art, the ability to open new doors to the imagination, to introduce the mind to new modes of thought and feeling. [For a different treatment of some of the matters discussed here, see Ch. 18: STANDARD OF LIVING.]

5. PAINTING AND SCULPTURE

FOR SHEER PUBLIC EXPOSURE, public controversy, public participation — in a word, for publicity — painting and sculpture probably lead the parade of American arts today. Indeed, considering the proliferation of art dealers and the escalating prices of their goods, it is reasonable to suggest, as many do, that art has become an important business in America. Art criticism deluges the public from the newspaper, the periodical, and the paperback; museums and galleries are swamped by a public that may or may not like what it sees but keeps coming, regardless. It all seems to suggest that art indeed exists in America today — and exists in a big way. But beneath this beguiling suggestion there runs, as in the cases of literature and drama, an undercurrent of doubt; and from this undercurrent there springs the inevitable questions: Is American art valid — and is it truly American?

One of the earliest affirmations of the existence, certainly, and the validity, possibly, of American painting came from John Neal, editor, poet, and early art critic. Writing in 1829, he described the situation of American painting in his epoch, and did so in a way that is curiously in harmony with certain outlines of the situation today. "At this moment," he wrote, "there are more distinguished American painters than are to be found in any one of what are called the modern schools of Europe. Our headmakers are without number, and some without price, our historical by the acre, our portrait, our landscape, and our still-life painters, if not too numerous to mention, are much too numerous to particularize. They

are better than we deserve and more than we know what to do with."

It is true enough that there was a plenitude of painters, a fact that has been borne out by various studies of the development of painting in America. (Several were undertaken to disapprove the once widely held view that there were practically no painters and sculptors in early, "primitive" America.) Whether much of the art was really good is, however, another question.

John Singleton Copley was perhaps the first distinguished native painter, but he left the country in 1774 for England and never returned. This was regrettable, for it left the field to Benjamin West, which made West the patriarchal figure even though his teaching meant ignoring the strong values in Copley's work in favor of plusher styles. A comparison of Copley and Gilbert Stuart points this out and also is illustrative of the contemporary lack of confidence in indigenous forms and subject matters. Copley's best portraits are pleasing for their infusion of a character that seems particularly true to their subjects. This quality has been called "literalness," but it is more than that: it inaugurated a strain in American art that is detectable down to the present day.

Thomas Cole, probably the earliest American landscapist of note, painted, apart from American scenery, Italianate landscapes and religious canvases. Many of these were ill-conceived, romantic extravaganzas in which one feels the influence of the self-consciousness of his time about the lack of a native "tradition"; he also painted Wordsworthian "evocations" of nature, the sources of which, if they were more recent, were not less foreign. Albert Bierstadt, one of the first painters of the American West, apparently suffered from the same self-consciousness. His representational canvases caused Jarves to observe that "the botanist and the geologist can find work in his rocks and vegetation"; but having achieved instant fame and made a fortune of sorts, Bierstadt too slid off almost immediately into romantic parodies of his early work.

Kouwenhoven's *Made in America* traces the literal or representational bent to the circumstance that many American artists were trained originally in the handicrafts, notably in mechanics and engraving. Hiram Powers, perhaps America's most successful nineteenth-century sculptor, engaged in the fussy craft of organmaking as a young man; later in life, when already a recognized sculptor, he is reported as saying that "he that can copy a potato precisely can copy a face precisely." Thomas Eakins, who was trained in mechanics, recommended painting as a means of conveying facts such as "what o'clock it is, afternoon or morning." And Eakins' peer among the giants of the older American painting, Winslow Homer, scorned deviation from "reality." "If a model has worn a red sweater," he wrote, "I have painted it red."

It all caused some later critics to look back without much enthusiasm on these beginnings and, at best, to congratulate the early American painters and sculptors on their fidelity to fact — or, as critic Allan Burroughs put it, on their "good eyesight." This view, however, is perhaps exaggerated. Homer was not merely a literalist, as is shown both by the main body of his work and by his great admiration for the allegorist Albert Pinkham Ryder. And Eakins was much more than a mere draftsman; he was noted for his experimentation and, though he devoted meticulous study to the problems of artistic composition, he had a genius for uncompromising character analysis that sometimes offended his sitters.

The prejudice in favor of the literal or representational could affect major works of major artists. Even Horatio Greenough, who ranks among America's greatest early sculptors, was not immune. He worked on his colossal statue of George Washington,

commissioned by Congress in 1833, for nearly eight years, and considered it his masterpiece. But the work was unpopular as well as being too heavy for the Capitol floor and wound up in an obscure corner of the Smithsonian Institution. Greenough's Washington was sculpted to the classical ideal, with the upper part of the body bared, the lower draped in a toga, and with one arm and forefinger upheld in a gesture suggestive of the rhetorical, even the elocutory. On its unveiling the statue caused consternation and was the subject of many irreverent witticisms; Philip Hone, an art patron and onetime mayor of New York, quipped that it resembled "a grand martial Magog, undressed, with a napkin lying in his lap."

Representation remained an important element in the visual arts for a long time. Visiting in 1876, the eminent German aesthete Hermann Wilhelm Vogel observed that in America the same sort of subject was still being painted that, in Europe, had been relegated to the province of photography. Furthermore, the representational habit not only stayed alive but managed to stay lively. This was partly owing to the efforts of regionalists like Grant Wood, who painted the Midwest with biting realism, and Thomas Hart Benton, who painted the Far West with a more amiable realism. Recently the representational has lost its position of dominance, but it nonetheless continues strong, characterizing the canvases of moderns such as Edward Hopper and Andrew Wyeth.

Even some of the newer, now dominant, forms in American visual art owe something to the representational. The abstract expressionist Jackson Pollock, who at one time studied with Benton, obliquely credited regionalism for the evolution of his own, very different style. Writing in 1947, he recalled his work with Benton as "something against which to react very strongly, later on." To Pollock, the conflict with Benton extended to fundamentals, for, while Benton frankly drew his inspiration from a region of the United States, Pollock insisted that "the basic problems of contemporary painting are independent of any country." Pollock's declaration, however, did not keep his foreign detractors from casting him as an incontrovertibly American painter!

After Pollock, or possibly with him, there arrived the style known as "action painting." Critic Harold Rosenberg described its evolution thus: "At a certain moment, the canvas began to appear to one American painter after another as an arena in which to act — rather than as a space in which to reproduce, redesign, analyze, or 'express' an object, actual or imagined. What was to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event." This was a new twist, and it had tremendous influence both in the United States and abroad. The painting itself was the thing, the object; it represented nothing; a painting was not *of* anything but was simply itself. As such, action painting was as far from representationalism as could be. At the same time, however, action painters and the later structuralists still talked about their painting in ways similar to those adopted by painters of the nineteenth century. Donald Judd, for example, a leading structuralist sculptor, was quoted in the September 1966 issue of *Art News* as saying that compositional effects "carry with them all the structures, values, feelings of the whole European tradition. It suits me fine if that's all down the drain," and that "I'm totally uninterested in European art and I think it's over with." Such declarations smacked a little of Whitman and even the exaggerated nativist artistic manifestos of the 1830s and 1840s, to which writers like Poe and Lowell objected.

Curiously enough, action painting and structuralism seem to have culminated in the excessive realism or representationalism

of movements like Pop art. An Andy Warhol Pop creation does not so much *resemble* a soap package as be one, while combining the (possibly outraged) disciplines of painting (there are colors and forms) and sculpture (there is three-dimensionalism). And Pop, at least, seems to be recognized by everyone as a manifestly American style in the visual arts.

Many American artists have conceded and emphasized the importance to them of the European tradition. As early as 1776 West urged his younger colleague Copley to go to England where he could obtain "a sight of what has been done by the great masters" — and Copley went. Subsequently, throughout the nineteenth century, almost every American painter of eventual note went to Europe to study, and some, like Mary Cassatt and James McNeill Whistler, stayed and did their important work there. A few, indeed, flatly asserted an essential need for artists to leave the United States, where "painting, sculpture, and the arts of ornamentation are on the whole in their infancy," as the Jesuit scholar Giovanni Grassi declared in 1819, and to go to Europe, where the arts were mature. And even if all did not recommend a European *wanderreise,* no American painter of note seems to have urged European artists to study in America. It was almost as if the American situation seemed hopelessly barren.

Nowadays the situation is very different, and European artists do come to the United States, if not to study at least to find an audience for their work (here is where the action is in more senses than one). But some of the old self-consciousness remains. Judd's remarks seem to exhibit just a little more protest against the idea that anyone might think his work derivative than one would expect in a European artist. On the whole, French painters, for example, appear to be pleased at, or at least to accept graciously, the contention that they are in a tradition, even if they may feel, as often they do, that they have extended that tradition and moved it forward.

6. ARCHITECTURE

IF THERE IS ANY ARTISTIC REALM in which American creativity can claim general validity, it is architecture. The contemporary "international" style is largely an American product, if not wholly an American invention; it is made in and exported from the United States, and U.S. architects are commissioned to design buildings all over the world. If, as some have recently claimed, all of the age-old problems of architecture have finally been solved, and the art therefore can no longer evolve, then America must be said to have been in at the kill and to have contributed more than any other nation to it.

It was not always so, of course. Most early authorities doubted the existence of an American architectural style at all. Benjamin Latrobe, writing in 1806, located the trouble in the insufficiencies of American architects, on the one hand, and of American builders, on the other. "The profession of architecture has been hitherto in the hands of two sorts of men," he wrote. "The first, of those who from traveling or from books have acquired some knowledge of the theory of the art but know nothing of its practice; the second, of those who know nothing but the practice and, whose early life being spent in labor and in the habits of a laborious life, have had no opportunity of acquiring the theory. The complaisance of these two sets of men to each other renders it difficult for the architect to get in between them, for the building mechanic finds his account in the ignorance of the gentleman-architect, as the latter does in the submissive deportment which interest dictates

to the former." This dichotomy between gentleman-architect and builder-mechanic, though undergoing shifts of definition, has bedeviled American architecture ever since.

In the beginning, architects looked to Europe for their style cues. Latrobe himself preferred the neo-Classical style then dominant in England; others were influenced by other contemporaneous fashions, such as the Byzantine, Romanesque, Baroque adaptations, and neo-Gothic. One eminent architect of the early period, Calvert Vaux, even was partial to the Moorish revival.

The builder, for his part, concentrated less on style, which he considered extraneous, than on specialized tools. Thus, when cheap, mass-produced nails became available, the American builder-mechanic invented the "balloon" frame for dwellings. Held together by nails rather than by laboriously carpentered joints, the new frame was lighter and cheaper than European house frames. In many cases the envelopes surrounding the new balloon frames were of wood rather than some more durable material, as wood was easy to find and uncomplicated to handle. Only after frame and envelope were built was thought given to architectural "refinements." These tended to consist merely of the addition of adornments: trellises, rosettes, fluting — "German noodles," as one early aesthete called them. And frequently these adornments were merely simulations of the real thing: rosettes carved from wood rather than hewn in stone; pillars wrought of iron rather than cut from marble. The question arose whether these modifications and improvisations constituted a style. If so, America clearly had one, even relatively early in its history.

But there were those who questioned the validity of such a "style." Theodore Dwight surveyed the situation in 1834 — and deplored it. "How innumerable are the violations of common sense, taste, and experience committed by every person who constructs a residence for his family!" he complained. "In fantastical ornaments and preposterous novelties, as well as in fashions condemned by everything but habit, we often see that obedience to example which ought to be yielded only to pure taste and sound judgment."

If the influence of the gentleman-architect created a muddled heritage owing to an unpracticed aesthetic, the mechanic-builder, in turn, created a heritage of guileless utility based on practical, not aesthetic, considerations. And the heritage of utility, as expressed in efficient, plain factories, built merely to shelter production facilities, and in impermanent-seeming houses, built merely to shelter a relatively mobile population — this heritage of utility has recently come under critical inspection as a possible carrier of a truly American style.

The work of the architect-builder Louis Sullivan is a case in point. To an unprecedented degree he created grand designs that made relatively small use of adornments. In 1885 Sullivan wrote: "Many who have commented upon the practice of architecture in this country have regarded the absence of a style, distinctively American, as both strange and deplorable; and with a view to betterment they have advanced theories as to the nature, and immediate realization, of such a style that evidence a lack of insight equally strange and deplorable." Sullivan's personal remedy was to build big and tall, as the technology of America had come to permit, and to build in a relatively unembellished manner, as the very grandeur of the projects seemed to allow.

A French visitor, Paul Bourget, who saw Sullivan's work in Chicago, was impressed. "At one moment you have around you only 'buildings'," he said in 1894. "They scale the sky with their eighteen, twenty stories. The architect who has built, or rather who has plotted them, has renounced colon-

nades, moldings, classical embellishments. He has frankly accepted the condition imposed by the speculator; multiplying the supposed offices. It is a problem capable of interesting only an engineer, one would suppose. Nothing of the kind. The simple force of need is such a principle of beauty, and these buildings so conspicuously manifest that need that in contemplating them you experience a singular emotion. The sketch appears here of a new kind of art, an art of democracy, made by the crowd and for the crowd, an art of science in which the certainty of natural laws gives to audacities in appearance the most unbridled, the tranquillity of geometrical figures."

Thus if Sullivan's (and Bourget's) notions are to be credited, a valid American style in architecture may have evolved by the late nineteenth century. Today, extrapolated, this style would manifest itself, as Sullivan and Bourget might agree, not only in the starkly plain skyscrapers of America's cities but also, perhaps, in its repetitive but tranquil Levittowns, in its great highways and their patterned interchanges, in its sweeping suspension bridges.

A contrary view continues to be expressed. Latrobe and Dwight were among its earliest partisans. Their main doubt — and the main doubt of the pessimists in general — seems to have revolved around the question whether Americans, who had their minds on other things, could eventually learn to live by some aesthetical code from which would spring an American style. To the pessimists, of course, the auspices for such a development have seemed, and continue to seem, unpromising. American cities were in the past and continue to be in the present a jumble of styles and quasistyles, of high and low buildings, of old and new structures, with the whole yielding an unharmonious, if not unattractive, appearance. But whether these flaws can be traced back to the dichotomy pointed out by Latrobe has never been clarified.

Nevertheless, for a long time, the embellished manner, suggestive of the gentleman-architect's approach, and the plain manner, suggestive of the builder-mechanic's approach, remained in vigorous competition and stark discord. For every plain New England meetinghouse that America produced, it also produced a highly embellished example of "carpenter's gothic"; for every Sullivan who built in an "unemotional" style, there was a Richardson who built in a "romantic" style. And in some instances — New York's George Washington Bridge is one — the dichotomy was apparent in a single structure. Originally the bridge was to have had suspension towers enveloped by an embellished casing. The effect, as planned, would have resembled a stone fortress keep. The plan was never carried out, mainly because construction delays permitted the public eye to become accustomed to the bridge's bare-metal appearance, which came to be preferred.

Even when the pessimists acknowledge a validity of style in the works of architects such as Sullivan or Frank Lloyd Wright, they are apt to turn this acknowledgement into the assertion that the Sullivans and the Wrights are exceptions to the American rule. Wright himself tended to regard the circumstance of American architecture despondently. Surveying the state of things in 1901, he wrote: "On every side we see evidence of inglorious quarrel between things as they were and things as they must be and are. This shame a certain merciful ignorance on our part mistakes for glorious achievement. We believe in our greatness when we have tossed up a Pantheon to the god of money in a night or two, like the Illinois Trust building or the Chicago National Bank. . . . In our so-called 'Sky-Scrapers' (latest and most famous business-building triumph), good granite or Bedford stone is cut into the fashion of the Italian followers of Phidias and his Greek slaves. Blocks so cut are cunningly arranged about

a structure of steel beams and shafts (which structure secretly robs them of any real meaning), in order to make the finished building resemble the architecture bepictured by Palladio and Vitruvius — in the schoolbooks."

Wright's air of gloom is still shared by many today — for example, by Lewis Mumford, perhaps the most notable contemporary critic of architecture. Mumford and others point to the garish roadhouses along our highways, to the architectural wastelands of our aging cities, where buildings are designed for commercial purposes only and have no regard for human needs, and to the monotony of our exurbs, where, once again, the spirit is ignored. And such "achievements" must also be counted elements in the modern, American, international style. The United States exports shopping centers and hot dog stands as well as plain, clear public buildings and soaring steel and glass-encased apartment houses. The important thing, however, is that the very ugliness of the worst U.S. commercial architecture is just as "American" as the best of it. Molded by the exigent demands of technology, both the good and the bad express America's commitment to a new way of life for man. [For further discussion of some of the matters treated here, see Chs. 19: RURAL AND URBAN and 24: PROGRESS.]

7. MUSIC

THE GLORY OF AMERICAN MUSIC is not its symphonies, concertos, and operas, but its popular music — from ballads to bop, from folk songs to folk rock, from Negro spirituals to modern jazz, still very much a Negro monopoly. In considering American music as an art form, therefore, the main judgment hinges on whether these various types of popular music constitute artistic styles or merely folk manners.

To some early authorities popular music did not qualify as art. One of the earliest, Thomas Low Nichols, observed in 1864 that "music is more cultivated in America, up to a certain point, than in any country in the world, except Germany. I am sure there are ten pianofortes in every American town or village to one in England. Singing is taught in the public schools, and the number of bands and amateurs is very great." But he went on to remark, "As to a national music, I can say little. The Negro melodies are nearly all we have to boast of." He added an important point. "There are American composers of operatic music, but they have the same difficulties in obtaining recognition as American authors. Why should a manager risk the production of an American opera, and pay for it, when the *chefs d'oeuvre* of Mozart and Rossini, Verdi and Gounod, Hervé, Lecocq and Offenbach, are ready to his hand?" Complaints of exactly this sort are heard today.

The sense of Nichols' remarks about Negro melodies is in consonance with a broader position that balked then, and balks even now, at accepting popular music, particularly jazz, as *the* American music. On the one hand, jazz is rejected as low, mean, or vulgar. On the other hand, it is rejected on the grounds of its supposedly non-American derivation and spirit. The latter view was articulated by the critic Daniel Gregory Mason in 1902. "The better type of American," he wrote, "combines in greater or less degree the practical power of the English, the vivacity of the French, the moral earnestness of the Germans, and many other transatlantic traits; and he adds to the mixture a certain ultimate quality of his own, an indefinable vigor and effervescence of spirit, a big, crude, ardent, democratic enthusiasm. How find the prototype of his appropriate musical expression in the sensuously emotional songs of Negroes?" In a sense, even some of the affirmations of the validity of jazz can be read as supporting

Mason's negative posture: witness W. E. B. Du Bois writing in 1907 that "there is no true American music but the wild sweet melodies of the Negro slave."

Only a few years earlier the Czech composer Antonín Dvořák had drawn on American folk themes for several of his own works. He confessed a partiality for "Negro melodies and Indian chants" and suggested that these provided a valid base for an American national music. "I was led to take this view," he wrote in 1895, "partly by the fact that the so-called plantation songs are indeed the most striking and appealing melodies that have yet been found on this side of the water, but largely by the observation that this seems to be recognized, though often unconsciously, by most Americans." It will be noted that though Dvořák was suggesting the validity of Negro music as raw material, he was not judging it to be an American musical style in its own right.

The contemporary American composer Aaron Copland urged explorers of the American style in music to look to the work of Virgil Thomson and Douglas Moore, among others, both of whom owed a considerable debt to the popular or folk tradition. The music of Thomson and Moore, said Copland, was uniquely American, as Europeans had "nothing so downright plain and bare as their . . . simple tunes and square rhythms and Sunday-school harmonies. Evocative of the homely virtues of rural America, their work may be said to constitute a Midwestern style in American music. Attracted by the unadorned charm of the revivalist hymn, or a sentimental ditty, or a country dance, they give us the musical counterpart of a regionalism that is familiar in our own literature and painting but is seldom found in our symphonies and concertos. Both these men, needless to say, are sophisticated musicians, so that their frank acceptance of so limited a musical vocabulary is a gesture of faith in their own heritage."

Even in Thomson and Moore there are inflections that clearly derive from jazz — as there are more clearly in, say, George Gershwin. To Kouwenhoven, American composers like Gershwin, whose works candidly borrow from jazz, "give evidence of an evolutionary process whereby the vernacular jazz tradition interacts creatively with the cultivated tradition, losing none of the former's vitality and immediate relevance but greatly augmenting its expressive range."

Kouwenhoven's notion about the interaction of jazz with serious music has an arresting, if oblique, bearing on the lingering discussion about the origin — American or African — of jazz. On the one hand, it is held that, as Negro slaves brought jazz from Africa with them, the music was uncontestably African; jazz is therefore different from all other music familiar to the peoples of the West, including Americans, because its forms were developed not in the West but in Africa. It is held, on the other hand, that although the provenance of jazz is admittedly African, its present form is clearly American; it has become American through a process of naturalization, of mutation through American breeding. The proof lies in the differences, which are greater than the similarities, between African tribal music of today and American jazz of today.

And although the distinctive thing about jazz, from barrelhouse to bop, remains its peculiar syncopation — either accenting a beat that is ordinarily unstressed or slurring a beat normally accented — jazz, nonetheless, has become as diverse as America itself. Thus the sound of the big swing bands of the Thirties and Forties probably owed something to the harmonies of barbershop and perhaps even, as one authority has claimed, to "the synagog in Krakow." And if some bop sounds as if it owed something to, say, Arnold Schönberg, it found its name, according to Langston Hughes, in America — in the sound of a white police-

man's nightstick hitting a Negro's head: "bop, bop, bop."

The last forty or fifty years have seen an extraordinary efflorescence of American popular music of an entirely new kind. Folk songs used to be thought of as necessarily anonymous — the spontaneous outpouring of a people, never the conscious creation of a single poet or singer. In this century, however, a number of folk singers have sung not only the traditional songs of the American people but have also written — or composed in some fashion — new songs that were thereafter associated with their names. Men like Woody Guthrie, Pete Seeger, and Bob Dylan, and women like Joan Baez, have produced songs that caught the imaginations of young people the way the sentimental productions of professional Tin Pan Alley songsters used to do, but that also express feelings about America, its promise and its faults, that seem able to endure and to bear comparison with the productions of more formal artists. Woody Guthrie, who died in 1967, was perhaps the most profound and evocative of this new breed of troubadours; and his "This Land Is Your Land" has been called the second American national anthem.

This land is your land,
This land is my land,
From California
To the New York Island,
From the redwood forest
To the Gulf Stream water,
This land was made
For you and me.

Robert Frost made much the same point in his "The Gift Outright," but despite the wide popularity of Frost, he never reached the numbers reached by Guthrie, and perhaps did not touch so many hearts so deeply.

America has had other, more formal, musicians of whom it can be proud, from Edward MacDowell on down, though their works have not always seemed to be in any way typically American. But John Cage and his followers at the present day may be said to have participated in the creation of an international musical style that is analogous to the international style in architecture. Cage has been one of the pioneers in contemporary experiments with electronic music, and some of his works have been, if not popular, then at least influential in Europe. Here again, as in architecture, is an expression — a final concession, as it were, of what many refused to concede for many years — of America's commitment to "the technological venture." The United States was the first country in the history of the world wholly to make this commitment, although England anticipated it in some respects, and others have made the commitment more recently. What began as a practical necessity may now be on the verge of becoming an aesthetic principle. Whether or not one likes music "written" with the aid of computers and "played" on instruments that, like so many other things we use and seem to love, are plugged into the wall, it must be admitted that it has a certain inevitability, perhaps even a certain naturalness, in the American context.

8. AN ART OF THE PEOPLE: THE VERNACULAR

WHETHER OR NOT the arts in America are marked by a national style, there is no denying their power and their influence in the world.

The American way of handling music is twenty-four hours a day, over radio, over TV, over Muzak; in the home, in the office or factory, in the restaurant, at the ball park, and on the beach. Record albums are sold, and bought, to dream by, to eat by, to woo by, to sleep by. Even if, as some contend, there is no truly American music,

there is an American way of living with music. And of course this American way with music is not confined to America alone. There is piped-in music in every Hilton hotel; and all over the world you can hear the American Sound.

In the visual arts the American way has been to make them serve commercial rather than merely aesthetic criteria. Intellectual appreciation still has its place, of course, but the American way is to put a big, bold price tag on everything. The thousands of commercial art studios and the thousands of art dealers affirm the status of the visual arts as big business. There is a price for a painting by a Dutch master and a price for a Dutch Master cigar advertisement — and both tend to be high. Art directors oversee the factory-like production of artists and check their output against the customers' guidelines with engineer-like precision. There are cartoonists who perhaps even excel Hogarth in attention to detail. Steve Canyon somehow manages always to look like Steve Canyon, from the front, from the back, and in the quarter view — and from frame to frame. Painting, sculpture, graphics, photography, even typography are used, often in concert, to fashion new, arresting creations for both editorial and advertising ends. Thus, for example, for every Renaissance painting of the Annunciation, originally painted to adorn a church, there is a twentieth-century photograph captioned something like "She's Expecting!" to adorn an advertisement.

Decor, furnishings, clothing, appliances, cars are no longer shaped by someone's arbitrary fancy — they are "designed," or claim to be. Thus there is an American Look in clothes, ranging all the way from the Aloha shirt to the topless dress. Among the ten best-dressed women in the world selected annually by fashion arbiters, several are always Americans. The reason for this may only be that American women have a lot of money, but it may also be Seventh Avenue's emergence as something more than just New York's garment district. In any event, the American Look has spread far beyond Seventh Avenue, even to the Champs-Elysées, where Courrèges, among others, designs garments with an unmistakably American note. And all over Europe mass-produced clothes that look casual, comfortable, and American are now sold off the rack — not made to order.

In the drama and in the movies, too, and in radio and TV, an American way has evolved that is admired and copied by much of the rest of the world. Once more we see the emergence of electronic art — or at least of electronically supported art. The subject of the greatest concern at the moment, of course, is television, an eclectic medium borrowing here from journalism, there from show business — and always, it seems, involved with commercial purposes. Indeed, the one ingredient in the concoction that appears to retain its identity is advertising — the commercial itself. Commercials "communicate" in their own inimitable way. American children recite them in lieu of nursery rhymes; and it is said that large numbers of our countrymen watch television primarily, as it is also said that some young people read the *New Yorker* magazine, for the advertisements. Somehow, also, "Winston tastes good like a cigarette should" has prevailed over traditional grammar, and to many the phrase no longer jars the ear but sounds like it should.

Writing in 1956, Gilbert Seldes observed that the popular arts "are the only ones which give to Americans a sense of ownership." This may well be true; at least we never seem to question whether these arts are "ours" in the same way that we wonder and worry about whether we have a national literature, painting, architecture, and so forth. (The outside world seems to recognize this and gives to the United States a

leading role in vernacular arts though not in the "refined" ones.) If so, there may be an American style here, under our very eyes, that we have just begun to notice ourselves.

Such at least was the view of Kouwenhoven, who has argued strongly for the position that the vernacular constitutes the typical American artistic style. "The forms we have so long neglected," he wrote in 1948, "are in reality the products of a unique kind of folk art, created under conditions which had never before existed. They represent the unself-conscious efforts of the common people, in America and elsewhere, to create satisfying patterns out of elements of a new and culturally unassimilated environment. . . . The patterns [that] evolved were not those which are inspired by ancient traditions of race or class; on the contrary, they are imposed by the driving energies of an unprecedented social structure." He added that "in their least diluted form these patterns comprise the folk arts of the first people in history who, disinherited of a great cultural tradition, found themselves living under democratic institutions in an expanding machine economy."

Kouwenhoven's words are evocative. He seemed to be saying that something like independence (on the one hand, freedom, on the other hand, disinheritance), and something like progress (which to most Americans has always been technological advance), are the essence of the American national ideal. If this is true, one would not be surprised to find it having a major influence on our art. Kouwenhoven's position, indeed, was that America has an art, and perhaps a great art (he suggested that only the future would be able to judge this), but that it does not know it. In any event, others before him had recognized the effect of America's popular ideals on its artistic productions.

Thus Tocqueville, for example, as we have seen, after carefully examining our democratic institutions, concluded that although they were strong and also benign in themselves, they were, nonetheless, unsuited to the attainment of artistic greatness. Henry James, Ortega, and T. S. Eliot, among many others, both in the nineteenth and in the present centuries, concurred. Jarves, Emerson, and others took a more hopeful view, contending that great American art was not yet, but that it was not absolutely ruled out by the "American situation." According to them, the materialism engendered by our special circumstances, by democracy in practice, posed barriers to refined art — but barriers that could be, and probably would be, overcome some day.

Still, they were far from sharing the view of a man such as Whitman, who saw in the circumstances of America not a hindrance to but rather the most potent influence toward the production of a great new art. "In the make of the great masters," he wrote in 1855, "the idea of political liberty is indispensable. . . . The attitude of great poets is to cheer up slaves and horrify despots." And in a letter to Emerson, written the next year: "Walking freely out from the old traditions, as our politics has walked out, American poets and literats recognize nothing behind them superior to what is present to them."

"We have been now some hundred years building up a state," William Dean Howells declared a generation later, "on the affirmation of the essential equality of men in their rights and duties." That fact had led, he felt, to the recognition that "such beauty and such grandeur as we have is common beauty, common grandeur, or the beauty and grandeur in which the quality of solidarity so prevails that neither distinguishes itself to the disadvantage of anything else. It seems to me that these conditions invite the artist to the study and the appreciation of the common."

Whether or not American artists con-

sciously chose to heed Howells' recommendation — to study and appreciate "the common" — that is exactly (in the view of many) what came to pass. Ever since Eli Whitney contrived to mass produce rifles during the Revolutionary War, the American arts have, as it seems, been held in thrall by the American genius for producing *things* — and of producing them "better" (*i.e.*, more cheaply and more efficiently) with the passage of time. A few examples make the point. The clipper ships of a hundred years ago, by virtue of their sleekness and their speed, swept the oceans of commercial competitors, and their beauty forced men to think of them as works of art. American architecture, by virtue not only of new techniques but also of commercial pressures, has "scraped the sky," and somehow the making of tall buildings has also become an art. American packaging, drawing on the craft of artists, some of them European, has produced marvels of business success — which are now sold, either by themselves or as imitated by Pop artists, as works of art.

Our special circumstances, both geographical and historical — and above all our particular ideals of cultural independence and technological progress — have, then, had a radical effect on our art. What is more, our living and working and creating in those circumstances have had an effect on world art, and doubtless, too, on the art of the future. Everywhere, as it seems, the American "vernacular" — it does not matter much whether one approves or disapproves of it — is infiltrating the art of other nations and beginning to displace artistic traditions of much greater antiquity. Thus may we not say that whether or not America has a national style *in* the arts, it has a way *with* art that is the most important in the world today?