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Archives of American Art

Celebrating 175: Prentiss Taylor, Typescript "Three Sentences on Art in Washington," undated

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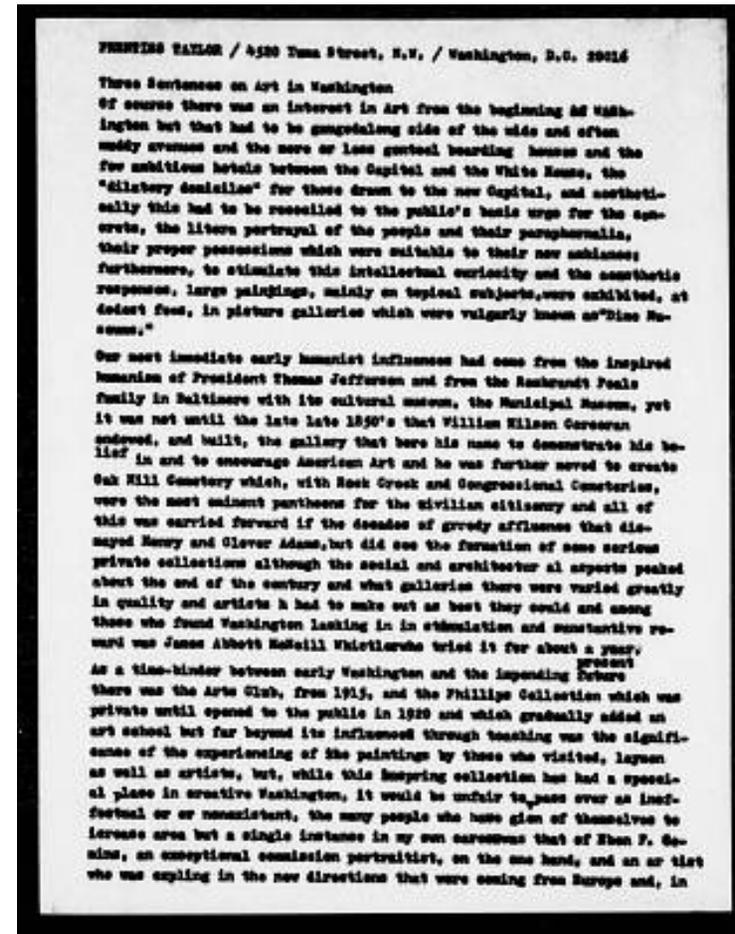
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Three Sentences on Art in Washington

Of course there was an interest in Art from the beginning of Washington but that had to be gauged along side of the wide and often muddy avenues and the more or less genteel boarding houses and the few ambitious hotels between the Capital and the White House, the "dilatory domiciles" for those drawn to the new Capital, and aesthetically this had to be recodated to the public's basic urge for the concrete, the literal portrayal of the people and their paraphernalia, their proper possessions which were suitable to their new ambience; furthermore, to stimulate this intellectual curiosity and the aesthetic responses, large paintings, mainly on topical subjects, were exhibited, at modest fees, in picture galleries which were vulgarly known as "Dime Museums."

Our most immediate early humanist influences had come from the inspired humanism of President Thomas Jefferson and from the Rembrandt Peale family in Baltimore with its cultural museum, the Municipal Museum, yet it was not until the late late 1850's that William Wilson Corcoran endowed, and built, the gallery that bore his name to demonstrate his belief in and to encourage American Art and he was further moved to create Oak Hill Cemetery which, with Rock Creek and Congressional Cemeteries, were the most eminent pantheons for the civilian citizenry and all of this was carried forward in the decades of greedy affluence that dismayed Henry and Clover Adams, but did see the formation of some serious private collections although the social and architectural aspects peaked about the end of the century and what galleries there were varied greatly in quality and artists had to make out as best they could and among those who found Washington lacking in stimulation and substantive reward was James Abbott McNeill Whistler who tried it for about a year.

As a time-binder between early Washington and the impending future (present) there was the Arts Club, from 1915, and the Phillippe Collection which was private until opened to the public in 1920 and which gradually added an art school but far beyond its influence through teaching was the significance of the experiencing of the paintings by those who visited, laymen as well as artists, but, while this inspiring collection has had a special place in creative Washington, it would be unfair to pass over as ineffectual or nonexistent, the many people who have given of themselves to increase area but a single instance in my own career was that of Eben. F. Comins, an exceptional commission portraitist, on the one hand, and an artist who was exploring in the new directions that were coming from Europe and, in



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