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Archives of American Art

Celebrating 175: Hugo Gellert, American Artists Congress, First American Artists Congress against War and Fascism, 1936

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expenditures by American museums for purchase and encouragement of living American art are negligible. Here in New York City the reluctant and hesitant use of the Hearn Fund, a fund left to the Trustees of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the income to be used for purchase of work by living American artists, is a shocking comment on the attitude of museum administrations toward the living artist. With some few honorable exceptions, this attitude is found the country over. What is old and well known, whether authentic or of dubious authenticity, for that museum funds are poured out—but for living American art, a pittance. This is not to imply that museums should not strive to bring the art of the past, or the art of other countries, to their communities. But there is over-emphasis, unreal preoccupation with art as ART, remote in time, fabulous in price, and not as a living force. It is that which leads to the preposterous notion seriously advanced—some of you may have seen it in Mr. Francis Taylor's open letter to the Society published in the Art Digest of October 15, 1935—that general funds of museums cannot be used for the encouragement of current American art because the sacred trust which the public reposes in museum trustees demands that these funds be used exclusively for the acquisitions of objects proven throughout the centuries to be of outstanding worth. A director who violates this sacred trust, stated Mr. Taylor—and I call your attention again to the fact that this is said to apply to museum funds marked for general purposes, not funds designated for specific purposes—risks a term in jail at the instance of the outraged public.

Faced with such projections, what response can living American artists expect when they attempt realistically to better their situation? They find what the Society found when it projected the Rental Resolution: intolerance and on many sides a stubborn refusal to alter no longer fruitful customs. The resolution was not hastily adopted. For two years prior to its adoption the Society discussed the question. The terms of the resolution were carefully worked out and agreed upon only after a great deal of deliberation. The resultant additional cost to museums for American exhibitions was of course not ignored in determining upon a rental scale. This was a practical question, and the Society sought to meet it in the practical way. With a minimum of one dollar and a maximum of ten dollars per month, 1% per month of the price of a work was finally agreed upon as being tolerably fair to the artist and not burdensome to the museums.

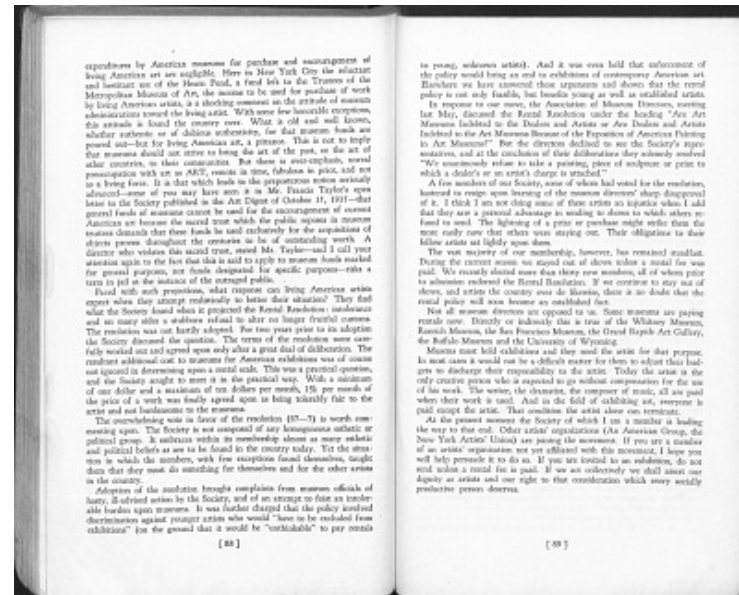
The overwhelming vote in favor of the resolution (87-7) is worth commenting upon. The Society is not composed of any homogeneous esthetic or political group. It embraces within its membership almost as many esthetic and political beliefs as are to be found in the country today. Yet the situation in which the members, with few exceptions found themselves, taught them that they must do something for themselves and for the other artists in the country.

Adoption of the resolution brought complaints from museum officials of hasty, ill-advised action by the Society, and of an attempt to foist an intolerable burden upon museums. It was further charged that we policy involved discrimination against younger artists who would "have to be excluded from exhibitions" (on the ground that it would be "unthinkable" to pay rentals

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to young, unknown artists). And it was even held that enforcement of the policy would bring an end to exhibitions of contemporary American art. Elsewhere we have answered these arguments and shown that the rental policy is not only feasible, but benefits young as well as established artists.

In response to our move, the Association of Museum Directors, meeting



last May, discussed the Rental Resolution under the heading "Are Art Museums Indebted to the Dealers and Artists or Are Dealers and Artists Indebted to the Art Museums?" But the directors declined to see the Society's representatives, and at the conclusion of their deliberations they solemnly resolved "We unanimously refuse to take a painting, piece of sculpture or print to which a dealer's or an artist's charge is attached." A few members of our Society, some of whom had voted for the resolution, hastened to resign upon learning of the museum directors' sharp disapproval of it. I think I am not doing some of these an injustice when I add that they saw a personal advantage in sending to shows to which others refused to send. The lightning of a prize or purchase might strike them the more easily now that others were staying out. Their obligations to their fellow artists sat lightly upon them. The vast majority of our membership, however, has remained steadfast. During the current season we stayed out of shows unless a rental fee was paid. We recently elected more than thirty new members, all of whom prior to admission endorsed the Rental Resolution. If we continue to stay out of shows, and artists the country over do likewise, there is no doubt that the rental policy will soon become an established fact. Not all museum directors are opposed to us. Some museums are paying rentals now. Directly or indirectly this is true of the Whitney Museum, Roerich Museum, the San Francisco Museum, the Grand Rapids Art Gallery, the Buffalo Museum and the University of Wyoming. Museums must hold exhibitions and they need the artist for that purpose. In most cases it would not be a difficult matter for them to adjust their budgets to discharge their responsibility to the artist. Today the artist is the only creative person who is expected to go without compensation for the use of his work. The writer, the dramatist, the composer of music, all are paid when their work is used. And in the field of exhibiting art, everyone is paid except the artist. That condition the artist alone can terminate. At the present moment the Society of which I am a member is leading the way to that end. Other artists' organizations (An American Group, the New York Artists' Union) are joining the movement. If you are a member of an artists' organization not yet affiliated with this movement, I hope you will help persuade it to do so. If you are invited to an exhibition, do not send unless a rental fee is paid. If we act collectively we shall assert our dignity as artists and our right to that consideration which every socially productive person deserves.

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