

INTRODUCTION

THE purpose of the Festival of Britain, of which the Aberdeen Festival of the Arts forms a part, is to draw attention to the achievements of the British people, and to provide opportunities for the enjoyment, implied in the word "festival," of seeing and hearing things not normally available. An Exhibition of paintings selected from North-East Homes seemed an appropriate choice to form part of the Aberdeen Arts Festival, for it fulfils both of these requirements.

That such an Exhibition will provide the enjoyment of a rare, cultural opportunity can hardly be gainsaid. Notwithstanding the generosity of many in the North-East in throwing open their houses and collections to the public there must be many, especially of the younger generation or visitors from outwith the area, who will never before have had an opportunity of seeing some of the outstanding works of art remaining in private hands in the North-East.

The Exhibition will also serve to draw attention to the achievements of the people of the North-East as patrons and as producers of pictures. Though designed to represent local collections rather than the work of local artists, the Exhibition inevitably includes works by important painters associated with the North-East—Jamesone, Dyce, Phillip, Reid, and Brough, for example, who have not been altogether without honour in their own country. As for patronage, three main classes of pictures are to be found in the homes of the North-East.

Naturally, a prominent place is taken by the family portrait, that essentially practical form of art, a document which can also be a decoration, which permits the expenditure of money without incurring the stigma of extravagance. In the North-East, a land not naturally rich, and troubled for centuries by war and disorder, the portrait was, for two hundred years from the end of the Middle Ages, almost the only subject for painting. Landscape, rarely attempted for its own sake, had to await the stimulus of the writings of Sir Walter Scott and the Romantic Movement, and genre, the example of Sir David Wilkie.

The North-East had a strong tradition in portraiture for it had been fortunate in that, when it was enjoying a late flowering of the Renaissance during the brief spell of peace between the Reformation and the Covenanting Wars; when a more settled life and foreign trade—to say nothing of the alienation of church revenues—was making more money available and turning the thoughts of men to the arts of peace instead of to those of war; when houses were being built as suited to the civilized amenities of life as to their defensive possibilities; and the growing self consciousness of men combined with their practical bias to make them think of portraiture; then there was born in Aberdeen George

Jamesone, who was to be the first Scottish-born portrait painter of note. Furth of his time the North-East lairds and, later, the professional men, have patronised the local and itinerant face painters and, when means allowed, even the great men, Ramsay and Raeburn, in Edinburgh.

There are other pictures besides portraits. Though never wealthy, the North-East sent its foreign travellers on the "Grand Tour," from which they returned with what were, even then, "old masters," or with the contemporary views of Venice by Canaletto or his followers, which were very much the fashion in the middle and late 18th century.. In the 19th century the taste of the collector changed—it was an Aberdeen man, John Forbes White, who brought the first Corot into this country—and Scottish collectors were in advance of their Southern neighbours in their recognition of the merits of the Barbizon School, the Dutch romantic painters, and the Impressionists. In some instances the paintings represent a Scottish rather than a North-East taste, for they have arrived here subsequent to their original acquisition.

Modern painting, both of Scottish and foreign schools, forms the third class of picture. There is evidence in this Exhibition that there are those in the North-East who have not allowed a geographical isolation to keep them out of touch with the modern movement in art.

An Exhibition of this type cannot be all inclusive. Reasons of space alone dictated that the boundaries of the North-East should approximate to those of Aberdeenshire, to leave untapped important collections to North and South. Moreover, though the presence of visitors to the district makes August an appropriate month for a Festival in Aberdeen, it is a month during which the owners of country houses are entertaining their own visitors or throwing open their houses and grounds to the public and when they are naturally reluctant to denude their walls of their finest pictures. Though owners have been most generous and considerate, this explains the absence from the Exhibition of some outstanding works. Other examples may have been overlooked. No broadcast appeal was made for pictures, for limitations of space would inevitably have meant that many kind offers would have had to be declined.

C. C.

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