

## BLACKFRIARS

### RECENT ART EXHIBITIONS

There is no gap so large as that which divides one generation from the next, and it is for that reason almost impossible to view with complete impartiality the work of the fourteen recently deceased academicians to which Burlington House is this winter devoted. With the exception of Orpen, whom I hope to discuss at greater length next month, these painters and sculptors as a whole represent everything against which modern art is a revulsion. To those on good terms with Braque, the naïveté of Sims' children dancing naked round Scotch firs will, of course, seem a little ridiculous: those who admire the idiosyncracies of landscape-painters like Segonzac will find Muirhead a trifle *blanc*, while a bias towards non-representational sculpture will probably discourage us from examining *The True Queen is on her Throne when her Realm is on her Lap*. But the division between us and, say, Dicksee is wider than that. To-day it is the object of the painter, of our Matisse and Duncan Grants and Utrillos, to dismiss from his work as far as possible all non-pictorial associations, and the object of the critic, equally intent on judging a picture by its qualities as a picture alone, to refuse to allow the creator of some poor *Romeo and Juliet* to ride away in a haze of Shakespearean glory. Thus by our standards a considerable percentage of the paintings shown are not pictorial at all but illustrational. Just as there is music and programme music, so there is painting and programme painting, and it is because we are at present unable to accept programme music and programme painting which does not, like *Till Eulenspiegel* and Goya's *Maragoto* series, justify itself by purely musical or purely pictorial criteria that we smile, a little condescendingly perhaps, at the election of Dicksee himself as P.R.A. eighteen years after the death of Cézanne.

To Dicksee's long literary quotations, muddy colour, inefficient technique, the direct symbolism of Sims provides in its degree a welcome contrast. At first sight, it is true, it is hard to convince oneself that the man who could paint in 1913 so badly co-ordinated a picture as *The Wood beyond the World* (No. 453), was capable fifteen years later of producing *Supplication* (No. 460) with its vehement insistence, even at the expense of clarity, on the rhythm that is so distressingly lacking in the earlier work. Such a development, indeed, would seem entirely inexplicable, were it not for the closeness of the parallel between the progress of Sims and that of the American symbolist, Davies, who also died in 1928. Davies was the better painter; he came far nearer than did Sims to achieving the symbolical clarity that was the object of both. Further, in

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Davies' earlier work there is evident the same Florentine influence (in his case Piero di Cosimo's) that can be detected in Sims, while, like Sims in his last *Supplication* phase, he too reverted in his final search for 'emotional design' to a strange, restless, rather crude, half-cubist symbolism.

The intrinsic value of Sims' work, however, is unfortunately very much slighter than the interest of the psychological problem raised by it. He was a sincere, cultured painter, who yet failed to produce good paintings, partly because he was too experimental and, unlike Blake, too receptive to outside influences, as the confused *Ballet* (No. 447) proves, and partly because the inherent mundaneness of his symbolical conceptions precluded the possibility of his ever making of them the abstract designs that Blake's remoter and more abstruse imagery inspired.

Orpen apart, the painter meriting most serious consideration is Charles Ricketts, the display of whose work, though representative, is inadequate and has been supplemented by an exhibition of his stage designs at the Victoria and Albert Museum, which all interested in the history of the English theatre should visit. The characteristic of his art both as painter and stage-designer is perhaps the unfailing good taste with which his essentially dramatic conceptions are expressed. This distinctive restraint is present even when, as in the *Ecce Homo* (No. 331) and the *Don Juan* (No. 333), two of the best pictures in the exhibition, he is expressing himself in as violent an idiom as Daumier's. The latter picture should, incidentally, be compared with the second *Don Juan* (No. 346), his diploma work, which is conceived entirely in theatrical terms and seems to show that innately the theatre was his most congenial medium of expression. Fortunately the exhibition is sufficiently comprehensive to show his remarkable successes in handling bronze, Sir Edmund Davis' *Mother and Child* (No. 329) for example, in book-binding and even more in book illustration. Ricketts was that rare thing to-day, an artist who was also a craftsman. He was far from being a great painter, certainly, but his pictures *en masse* all reach the high level of conscientious artistry that Greiffenhagen and Lambert and Tuke fail so conspicuously to attain.

The seventy-three Muirheads exhibited reveal a quiet, sensitive painter, who has nothing particular to say, but says it very pleasantly. The least impersonal of his pictures are probably the water-colours, some of which, though visually commonplace, are technically models of their kind. Of these *St. Ives* (No. 491) and Mr. D. S. MacColl's *Brightlingsea*, 1924 (No. 554) are among the best. The La Thangues are uniformly bad; the

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feeble arms of the Milletesque *Bracken Mower* (No. 186) are lamentably typical and his *Connoisseur* (No. 199) is probably the worst picture in the exhibition, though Greiffenhagen's *Woman by a Lake* (No. 311) runs it close. Lambert's *Boxers* (No. 248) has unexpected virility and a greater grasp of form than most of his work, and Tuke's startlingly pretty *Genoa* (No. 276) stands out well from a wall of monotonously sunlit boys. The statuary is uniformly awful.

All in all, results do not show the idea of holding a commemorative exhibition on quite so large a scale to have been a happy one. The Orpen and Ricketts rooms certainly deserve a visit, but, as for the rest of the exhibition, what is it but an untimely reminiscence of a very, very bad epoch of English painting? Fifty post-mortems would not change the verdict of 'Death from natural causes.'

JOHN POPE-HENNESSY.

## NOTICES

LE CHRIST. ENCYCLOPEDIE POPULAIRE DES CONNAISSANCES CHRISTOLOGIQUES. (Bloud et Gay ; 60 fr.)

One of the Manuals of Catholic Action. A truly excellent work for laymen. Not journalists' impressions of the subject, but a synthetic, co-operative survey by experts : Lemonyer, O.P., Lavergne, O.P., Hérís, O.P., Huby, S.J., Lepin, Bardy, Tricot, Pirot, Amann, etc., etc. And really complete : Christ from all aspects : the Roman and Jewish background : Christ in the Gospels—value of the evidence : the life of Christ and His teaching : history of the Christological dogma : the theology of the Incarnation : the psychology of Christ : the Redeemer. Then Christ in the religious life of humanity : this the weakest section, too much importance given to later individualistic piety, but Bardy on the Mystical Body is admirable, and Hérís enlightening on the Eucharist. An original article also by Bardy, Christ as seen by non-Christians, Jews, Pagans, Islam, of great value. Finally Christ in art, in music, in literature, in 'lives of Christ,' the crucifix in art—sound information, dim illustrations. Catholic Action demands that the layman must live on dogma : above all on the Christ-dogma. This therefore is an essential book for him.—(A.M.)

L'EGLISE A LA FIN DU PREMIER SIECLE. By G. Bardy. (Bloud et Gay ; 12 fr.)

Readers of the *Revue Biblique* will not want an introduction to Bardy. He is in the great line of Duchesne, Tixeront, Batiffol.