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VLQ No. 358a"AUSTRALIAN CULTURE"

by

Vance Palmer.

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ANNOUNCER:

Australia is a young country, and has not yet had time to develop a cultural tradition comparable with that of the older countries of Europe. But in her short life as a nation, a beginning has been made. Here is Vance Palmer who is going to talk about "Australian Culture".

Perhaps I had better say in the beginning that if you find me talking about culture in Australia, rather than Australian Culture, it is because we have not yet, unfortunately, got a recognizable culture of our own, in the sense that Europeans use the word. In the last hundred years or so, we have been engaged in introducing cultural ideas from the great common stock in the outside world, and have made little progress in adapting them to our special conditions; still less in achieving such a synthesis that we could talk of having an Australian Culture. But the period of absorption is an inevitable one in every new country: even America is only beginning to pass beyond it.

What does a visitor notice when he first arrives in Australia? I think he is usually surprised by the modernity of our buildings, the extent and efficiency of our public services, and the general atmosphere of civilized living. Often he has come to this country thinking of it as a huge, empty continent, dotted here and there with wheat-farms and sheep-stations, and inhabited by scattered groups of men and women living very primitive lives. But distances have shrunk in the last thirty years; the human voice carries everywhere; and just as it is possible for the most remote communities in our Bush to enjoy the symphony concerts broadcast

from our cities, so is it possible for our great towns to get the latest ideas in architecture, in the Arts, and in applied science, from overseas.

But the visitor, after remaining awhile, is perhaps a trifle disappointed to find how little of our culture is distinctively our own. In architecture, for instance, though our city streets and suburbs are full of pleasant homes and fine buildings, we have not evolved any form peculiar to our own climate and conditions. Nothing so individual and characteristic in domestic architecture as the Dutch bungalows you see in South Africa; nothing so striking in street-buildings as the American skyscraper. We are still experimenting with modern ideas from Austria and California; the time for achieving a type of home, definitely our own and suited to informal living in a semi-tropical climate, has not yet come.

Similarly with what are called the Fine Arts. In music we have been chiefly concerned with the interpretative side. We have gone to a great deal of pains, at first through private entrepreneurs, latterly through our national broadcasting commission, to bring the finest singers and conductors here from all over the world. Really good orchestras have been built up in all our great cities, and their renderings of both old and modern masterpieces would give satisfaction anywhere. We have also produced famous singers like Melba, Austral, and John Brownlee - singers who have a world-reputation. But in creative music, the composition of songs or symphonies, we have yet as little to offer.

Painting is an art in which we are more at home. Few of our painters are known abroad, but they have done a great deal to reveal to us the beauty of our own landscape - this strange, fascinating Australia, with its splendour of austerity and its rare beauty of mass, colour, and line. Through them, painting has become a popular art. People, even those of limited means, actually buy pictures and treasure them, and we have passed the stage when a distinguished visitor could say (like Lord Roseberry did) that in a typical Australian home you would see a lady sitting on a thirty guinea ottoman looking at a thirty-shilling oleograph. This

development of painting in recent years, and its general appreciation, has been made possible by the provision of national galleries in all our great cities - galleries in which the public could become familiar with the masterpieces of the past. The Melbourne gallery is outstanding, in this way, Through the legacy of a public-spirited man - the Felton Bequest - it has been able to secure, over the last thirty years, a large number of fine pictures - Rembrandts, Titians, Raeburns, Corots, as well as those of more modern masters.

'The time is coming when every real art-connoisseur will have to visit Melbourne,' an American writer said recently, after looking at the priceless Van Eyck that the Melbourne gallery had lent to a New York exhibition.

But the most fruitful means of spreading culture over a wide area of national life is through books, and here Australia has taken a lead. In the amount of money it spends upon books, per head of population, it is far ahead of any country in the world, except New Zealand. One reason for this is that, over a long period of years, governments have aimed, through their educational systems, at making the whole people literate. In this it has entirely succeeded. It would be almost impossible, searching the length and breadth of Australia, to find a person born in the country who could not read and write; and though our public-library system lags behind that of some countries its deficiencies are less noticeable because of the widespread habit of buying books.

When an audience of readers can be taken for granted the impulse to create literature grows, and writers have done a great deal to reveal, in works of fiction and poetry, the life of this country. From Lawson's popular stories about shearers, miners, and bushworkers, to the great trilogy by Henry Handel Richardson that deals with a sensitive immigrant-doctor who could not adapt himself to his adopted country, nearly every phase of our life has been imaginatively explored.

But in general, as I said in the beginning, we have been mainly engaged up till the present in absorbing cultural ideas from the outside world - that is to say, in laying a sound basis for the Australian culture of to-morrow.