

ART and FASCISM

—V. G. O'Connor

"Cubism, Dadaism, Futurism, Impressionism, and the rest have nothing in common with our German people. For all these notions are neither old, nor are they modern; they are simply the artificial stammering of people whom God has denied the boon of genuine artistic talent and given instead the gift of prating and deception. . . ."—Adolf Hitler.

"It (Modern Art) sets itself up outside nature and human experience. This flight from life and reality into a realm of theory and puzzlegrams sprang primarily from the inability to represent and draw well, which cannot be acquired without years of study."—Sir Lionel Lindsay.

The first of these statements was made by Hitler on the opening of the Nazi exhibition of "Degenerate Art" (in reality, an exhibition containing the finest works of the last sixty years of German Democratic art), held at Munich in July, 1937. The second was made by Sir Lionel Lindsay in his recent book, "Addled Art."

Modern Art is not the only topic on which these two gentlemen think alike, as a further remark of Lindsay's will show: "Artists raged, protested, watched the spread of the epidemic (Modern Art) with dismay as they saw their legitimate market invaded by the charlatan sponsored by the Jew."

This statement reflects the main theme of the book; for the author would have us believe that all Modern Art is a gigantic hoax, unrelated to traditional European art; foisted on the unsuspecting public by the Jew. This cannot be taken seriously historically, but of the philosophy it betrays, I will have more to say.

Because Lindsay alleges that his book contains a criticism of Modern Art, let us first examine it from that aspect.

What does Lindsay mean by Modern Art? Although the term is usually intended to cover the last hundred years of European art, Lindsay cautiously excludes the Impressionists, and states that Van Gogh, Gauguin and Cezanne are not Modern artists, but "representational" painters of the 19th century. He does not make any attempt to justify this arbitrary division.

Lindsay soon demonstrates that, in addition to being a vague historian, he is also a very dishonest one; for he makes incorrect statements which could not be made in ignorance by a person of his experience.

Presenting his criticism of Matisse, he says, ". . . he started with a sound enough training, and has copied the Old Masters in the Louvre; but he found himself nearing middle age and unsuccessful. Quick to read the signs of the time, he quitted the hard road of good draughtmanship for the easy down-hill track of novelty." Having set the painter in a discreditable light, Lindsay then criticises his work in terms calculated to exploit this implied lack of integrity: "glamour of charming colour . . . childish and arbitrary." The truth is that Matisse began to paint the pictures which occasion Lindsay such discomfort when he was in his early twenties. "My Room in Ajaccio" was painted when he was twenty.

To Lindsay's accusation that Modern artists cannot "represent and draw well," the work of artists like Matisse, Picasso, Derain, Kisling, Stanley Spencer, Grosz, Segonzac and Gropper presents an adequate answer. We are reminded continually of the "distortion" practised by these modern painters. Is distortion new to art? What of the work of such masters as Goya, El Greco, Bosch, Grunewald, Daumier?

Lindsay, like all critics who are capable only of slandering Modern Art, cannot resist the temptation to sneer at the "crapulous" existence of Modigliani. When we learn that Modigliani was a Socialist, and anti-Imperialist, and although dying of consumption and in the direst need, consistently resisted attempts by rich collectors to popularise his work, we understand the basis of Lindsay's dislike for him. Augustus John and Epstein were both great friends of Modigliani, and purchased his work. Epstein considers him a master. I do not think it is unreasonable

to accept their opinion of Modigliani in preference to Lindsay's.

Lindsay's main theme is to exaggerate and make sinister the role of the Jew in Modern Art. He denies the Jewish people artistic ability or integrity, and states that their participation in art is due only to love of money, and a desire "to take down the Goysher." He attempts to cover his racial prejudice with the innocent garb of "defending his art." However, we know that anti-Semitism is not new to the Lindsay family, and Lindsay soon reveals that he does not confine his abuse to Jewish artists. Anti-Semitism is the hall-mark of the lowest and most bestial philosophy that the world has produced—fascism; and to accept it any way, is to accept it with all its implications. Lindsay cannot shed this responsibility, on the innocent pretext that he is "defending his art." Because of the seriousness and the falseness of the charges which he makes, it is necessary to examine this aspect of Lindsay's book in detail.

To support his argument, Lindsay refers to an article by a French critic, Vanderpyl. "Pay a visit to the Louvre," says Vanderpyl, "and from the 13th to the 20th century, you will not find one Jewish painting," except, "if you care," two paintings by Camille Pissarro, "connected by ascent from the Portuguese Jewry." Then . . . "but suddenly Israelite painters swarm." In the "after-the-war period," the "salons" are filled with the work of painters with Jewish names. Before going further, I would like to point out that there are four Pissarros in the Louvre.

The passage paraphrased above is unscrupulously designed to imply that there were no Jewish painters before the 20th century. This then suits Lindsay's purpose, for he can attribute the increase of Jewish art to reasons other than artistic impulse. However, the statement is quite untrue. Some of the outstanding artists of the 19th century were Jews: Liebermann (until he was expelled by the Nazis, President of the Prussian Academy) and Lesser Ury in Germany; Josef Israels, the founder of the Hague School; Pissarro in France; and the Russian sculptor, Antokolsky. Among the famous miniaturists are the Jewish artists Bachi, Fiorini, Polack, Barlin and Ezekiel.

However, there is a better answer to Lindsay's mis-

representation. Before the 19th century, when the part played by Jews in Art and other social activities began to increase, two factors restricted the number of Jewish painters. Overshadowing all other reasons, is the position in society which the Jewish people have been forced to occupy through the centuries, and still occupy in the fascist countries of the world. Confined to the ghetto, and forbidden to take part in the normal social life of the cities, the opportunity for Jewish painters to develop was limited. One other influence which played a large part in the lack of Jewish visual art, was the religious prohibition against the representation of the human figure or of religious subjects. This had the effect of confining Jewish artistic inspiration mainly to the art of the decorator, and Jewish artists have been famous as gem-setters, seal-cutters, etc. Some of the most beautiful jewellery of Europe has come from the hands of Jewish artisans. With the disintegration of the ghettos of Europe, beginning after the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars, and the gradual "official" emancipation of their people, there was a corresponding broadening of religious outlook, which has made it possible for Jewish artists to use their new freedom unhampered by religious restrictions. Jewish painters, musicians, and men of all arts and professions began to appear in greater numbers in the 19th century. Liebermann, Israels and Pissarro provide adequate proof of the artistic talent of the Jewish people. As the century proceeded, this band of artists increased, and we see Picasso, Chagall, Modigliani, Zadkin, Kisling, Epstein, and many other Jewish painters and sculptors, all playing a leading part in European art. This is the true story of the sinister "invasion" of the arts which Lindsay so viciously misrepresents.

Jewish participation in the life and culture of society has increased, but this increase is not confined to art, nor did it begin in the 20th century. Lindsay and Vanderpyl dishonestly give this date, as it dovetails their racial prejudice with their respective ideas on art. Both, incapable of an objective attack on Modern Art, look for someone on whom they may place the blame; and like that other "eminent" painter and "leader" of culture—Hitler, they blame it on the Jews.

In an attempt to bolster the theory he has put forward, Vanderpyl again distorts history: there can be no Jewish painting, "since it possesses no primitives." As so much of the primitive art of Europe is anonymous, how can Vanderpyl be sure that none of it is the work of Jews? In any case, this statement is not correct, as there are Jewish primitives. In many of the cities of Europe, e.g., Leningrad, and the catacombs of Rome, have been found the remains of primitive Jewish religious art. In the city of the Euphrates, Dura-Europos, there has been found a well-preserved Jewish Synagogue rich in ornaments and frescoes. Apart from this, there is little validity in Vanderpyl's argument. Why should there be a school of Jewish painting? The Jews of Europe were spread over every border and, despite their segregation, they have been influenced by the countries in which they lived, and their art has naturally been expressed in the terms of the art of their environment. Picasso has his roots in Spanish culture, Modigliani is considered an Italian artist, Israels is undeniably a product of Dutch life and painting.

To expose the extent of Lindsay's anti-Semitism and reaction, and to provide an answer to this type of charge against Modern Art, was my main reason for writing this article. However, I think that this is a convenient time to examine the position which the Lindsay tradition occupies in Australian art.

The role of the Lindsays has been that of the provincial anarchist and exhibitionist; disdaining social restrictions. The decadence of Petronius, and the reactionary Aryan-myth, "Superman," aspects of Nietzsche and Wagner provided their philosophic background. They quickly became a "fashion," and, in time, the spearhead of chauvinism and cultural reaction in Australia. Their association with the "Bulletin," and Norman's derisive attacks on those who sought to intervene in the first fascist ventures in Spain and Abyssinia, indicates their position. Sir Lionel continually deplores the fact that art is getting beyond the control of the cultured few; that artists are enlisted "from the gutter," and not "from the artisan and middle classes."

Sir Lionel accuses Modern artists (we note that he is careful not to name any Australian artists) of flight from reality. Where in the works of the Lindsays do we find

any attempt to come to grips with the life and problems of their own country? Not in Norman's pornographic procession of moronic blondes, or his cut-throat pirates and brigands. Not in Lionel's woodcuts, or water colours of Venice. In their writings we see only their miserably thin and warped conception of Mediævalism. They cannot see or depict its life and gust, but conceive it only in terms of vice, decadence and the exploitation of women—a trait entirely consistent with their petty anarchism. The artistic bankruptcy of the Lindsay family cannot be better demonstrated than by the fact that, after a lifetime of work, they leave no important work of art, and they leave no important pupils. I suggest that Sir Lionel has no right to raise his voice to save Australia, "in its cultural backwater," from the invasion of "foreign" art.

It is from this position of reaction that Lindsay attacks Modern Art. One thing that has characterised all the schools of Modern painting has been the spirit of examination and criticism with which the artists have worked. Men like Courbet, Daumier, Van Gogh, Modigliani, Picasso, Gropper and Grosz have not confined their criticism to the realms of art. It is not for their "distortion," that Modigliani is hated and vilified by the reactionaries, or that Grosz is the artist most hated by the Nazis.

It is not coincidence that the fascist propaganda dodge of "blaming it on the Jews" is employed by Lindsay, and that to support his contentions he quotes such people as Renan, or the French fascist, Camille Mauclair. While mentioning Mauclair, it is important to observe the similarity of Lindsay's book to a pamphlet from which he quotes—"Painting Gone Mad," written by Mauclair and translated into English in 1931. After reading this pamphlet, it is apparent that Lindsay, unable to formulate even an abusive attack on Modern Art, has simply rewritten Mauclair's pamphlet.

At a time when complete unity is absolutely essential to Australia, the appearance of Lindsay's book, echoing as it does, not only the whole vile Nazi outlook on art expressed by Hitler and Goebbels themselves, but also their views on racial discrimination, performs no service to Australian art, to the unity of our cultural workers, or to Australia's war effort as a whole.