

THE ARTIST IN SOUTH AMERICA

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THE Argentine Government has thrown out Juan José Castro, probably because he signed the petition for the maintenance of certain essential freedoms. In Bolivia, there was no one comparable to throw out. In Bolivia, the only music is that of the nostalgic Indian pipes; it never was in office, as it were, so cannot be thrown out. You cannot excommunicate a humming-bird. Almost all the Paraguayan musicians, like Flores, or like several ex-presidents, two generals, fifty-two officers, and most of the intellectuals, have crossed the borders into foreign lands. Chile, Uruguay, Colombia, and even Brazil, remain in good musical health.

Now, there is far more to this than the obvious fascism and military dictatorships that begin in Ecuador and, via Peru, Bolivia and Paraguay, cross the Andes and terminate in Buenos Aires. Primarily, there are the birth-pangs of modernism, entering stages familiar to us. We too have had our communistic period, our colonial period, our anti-colonial period, and our Huey Long period. South America, by the contracting and speed of modern movement, is having several of its periods simultaneously. Vestigial slavery, nascent labor unions, poverty, diet, a primarily borrowed culture – all these are important factors which have little to do with the war or with the fact that perhaps one per cent of the ruling classes have been pro-Nazi.

Curiously enough, in some of the better Argentine quarters, a nationalist revival was desired – a *nationalismo* wherein Spanish tradition, French thought and Anglo-American business would be relegated to a secondary place; wherein for example, the visiting firemen from the Metropolitan Opera would give place to homegrown, lovely Sara Menkes, or the robust tenor Mirasou. Both these native artists, and many other excellent ones have been neglected in favor of imported performers. Unfortunately, now instead of King Log they have got King Stork. Now, native talent can perform – in chains.

Another equally curious off-shoot of nationalism is the unwillingness of South America to exclude us from her own self-depreciation. When Menuhin toured below the equator, he was constantly billed and reviewed as a Russian. He is not even Russian trained; yet such a talent could not be credited to a mere American nation. An exhibit of North American paintings, because it contained about one percent of British work, was treated as a European show. Unfortunately our diplomats are told to ignore these snobberies, whereas a little integrity and firmness of tone would set matters right in short order. We are largely responsible for the disrespect in which we are held.

Another factor, most important in the Andean countries, is the overwhelming preponderance of Indians. From them comes the talent, in them is the true native tradition. But the snobbery of the *hidalgo* lies like a mortmain upon them; they are despised, looked down upon, poor and consequently poorly educated, and only with difficulty can they rise to academic standards. The only Indians accorded recognition in Peru are those long-dead Incas, progenitors of the present nostalgic longing for glory and empire, forebears of the present spread-eagle Fascinaism. A live Indian is a peon. Yet the only great native archeologist is Indian, so also Peru's best composers, or Paraguay's, or many of the painters, and many of the intellectuals in whatever part of the Andes.

As an aside to Messrs. Paul Rivet and Robert Redfield, the great anthropologists, I would suggest to them an Index of Andean Music, because I am convinced that the historian and ethnologist would profit thereby. Scientists investigate migrations, origins and race-divisions, through shards or ruins or geology or language. But I am not unconvinced that musical traditions have remained truer than the language traditions, and that racial movements might be traced more accurately by the note than by the word. To date, as far as an Indian is concerned, we do little but examine his teeth or dig up his dead.

If I harp on the Indian problem as the root of disturbance in South America, I am still aware that the Argentine has not got that particular problem herself. The Argentine is the least South American country; and just because she must be considered separately, and so considers herself, she has become a synthesis and exaggeration of all South American problems. This is true in this connection because the Indian problem is primarily a labor problem, and the Argentine enjoys *that* to the full.

The Latifundia – the great landholdings of the ancient Romans – are

the Latin curse, the hemophilia handed down from Italy, through Spain, to the New World. In the United States we dodged even the English minor version, primogeniture, but Latin America inherited it, as part of the hidalgo's mental equipment, as one of the reasons for his exploration, and also because the great undeveloped continent, sparsely populated by heathen, seemed to demand it. But the fate of Rome hangs over our sister-republics. The great haciendas, at some of which I stayed, are measured by the league rather than by the acre – which makes the unit begin with a cozy *pied à terre* of nine thousand acres.

When we consider that in the Athenian republic of 500,000 people only nine thousand owned enough property to qualify for voting, and that the conditions were even worse in the Roman Empire; when we consider that the great strikes, fomented by the *eranoi* or guild-unions, enlisted as many as two hundred thousand freedmen and slaves, or that the fall of Athens was partially due to the strike of twenty thousand miners who hoped to better their miserable lot, and that Plato himself allowed that a working man possessed but half a soul, the terrible analogies of history are born in upon us.

Now my contention is that these matters concern the artist more than almost anyone else, and that great art flourishes in periods when it is possible to fight for freedom. Independent thought is the indispensable air for the artist. A strong labor movement surrounded Pericles; a strong labor movement accompanied the great Gothic upsurge and lasted until after the Renaissance and Reformation; and a new labor movement got under way coevally with the modern age.

Another Old Man of the Sea, who hangs about the shoulders of South American art like a desiccated antimacassar, is a borrowed culture: *Hispanismo* and Francophilism.

Hispanismo is largely a question of religion and blazonry. It is an aura rather than a reality. It is also somewhat shamefaced as it is forced to acknowledge that the great Hispanic collections, museums and, above all, studies are in the unrefined United States and not in South America at all. The Latin American art-student must come here to see his first good Velasquez, or Greco, or Goya. In the same way, musically, Latin America returned more to Spain than she received; the galleons were full of gold only on the eastward passage.

The French influence is different. For a thousand years France kept the torch of true civility alight and many another nation warmed its heart

there. For the South American, Paris was classic thought as against the exigences of a rude, instinctive frontier; it was science; it was gaiety and charm, as against countless cities where women looked out through a lattice by way of communication; it was orchestras and art. It was Mecca.

But the hold is weakening. Recently, of course, the collapse of France was a heart-breaking shock. Yet, before that, the creative minds had felt that it was time for Chileans to be Chilean and Peruvians Peruvian. The novel not modeled on Stendhal or Balzac or Proust, made its appearance; the epic poets had long ago delved into their own soil; gaucho songs became the basis of operas at the Colón or the Municipal; and the painters are now struggling out of the brush-work of former Paris Salons. This is the happy and fruitful side of *nationalismo*. But the road ahead of them is a long one.

A touchstone of change is the new regard for folk art. And it is pleasant to know that our own WPA has served as an incentive and model. Here at last is a field where the Indian is indispensable. Here is something native to be proud of. Buenos Aires only lately opened a Rosas museum, filled with historic relics of the people, from slender silver matés to elaborate combs, and a gaucho museum filled with the homemade accessories of the pioneer; Santiago had its first folk art show, under our supervision. The music of the Indian, along with his weaving and pottery, is coming into its own, over the languishing memories of Murillo and Sèvres and Debussy.

Good art is essentially a craft. Good craft is essentially manual. The hidalgo avoided manual labor; the Puritan not only hardened his hands in the name of God but, also, he knew that with soft hands he would starve. His conscience and the laws of the forest were in accord. South America was won by the edge of the sword, North America by the sweat of the brow. One was more elegant, the other more biblical. When South America achieves a classless respect for labor, then her artists will be free and her creative faculties released, and her voice will be great in the concert of nations.