MEDICAL ART SOCIETY FOURTEENTH EXHIBITION

BY

MERVYN LEVY, A.R.C.A., M.R.S.L.

*Tutor in Art Appreciation, Department of Extramural Studies,
University of London*

The rise of amateur painting is one of the most significant social phenomena of our time. Whether indulged in as pure pleasure—as such it is the ideal form of creative relaxation—or used as a therapeutic measure in psychiatry and medicine, the practice of painting is fast becoming an integral part of the life of Western society. Social psychologists of the future may well interpret the present enthusiasm for it as the first tangible manifestation of a spiritual revolt against an era of soulless materialism. Painting is a perfect antidote to that deadly and indefinable *Weltschmerz* which nibbles at the inner man. But it must be pursued with a bold, unashamed abandon; indulged in rather as a Saturday night out than as an academic exercise. If it is to disinhibit, relax, and regenerate, it must flow like a song in the bath. Naturally a few pleasure painters will discover, as they progress, a greater flare and potential for the academic niceties of drawing and painting than was perhaps evident when they started. These few will cross the threshold into the shining kingdoms of colour theory, three-dimensionalism, and the various other technical and aesthetic mysteries which reveal themselves continuously to the serious student of painting. But for the majority the aim should be the unhampered flow of free-expressionism, coupled, as it will be, with the personal technical style and conceptual potential of the painter himself.

General Impression

How does the fourteenth exhibition of the Medical Art Society measure up to this conception of painting for pleasure? Remarkably well. In spirit and accomplishment it ranks as high as any exhibition of a similar kind that I have seen during the past year. A few works are even superlative, and one in particular—P. Tuttnauer's "The Beach," to which I shall refer later—is exceptional by almost any standard of excellence. I had wondered, on my way to the exhibition, if the medical man, so solidly schooled in fact, would find it less easy than, say, the romantic housewife to practise the exhilarating art of disinhibition. On the contrary, the exhibition fairly bubbles with lively, thrusting imagination. Colour, shape, and form have all been treated with that stimulating disregard for the "academic niceties" which makes for life-enhancing exuberance. Indeed, only one exhibitor displays an unwavering devotion to the line of duty: his classical water-colour of a stethoscope is moving evidence of an almost saintly power to resist the more luxurious and sensual temptations of art.

I would like to offer two mild general criticisms, before mentioning more pictures individually. There is naturally a great deal of landscape and still-life painting on show; much of it, however, is a little too topographically literal, and consequently too near the appearance of photography, with which art should have nothing to do. Portraiture also presents pitfalls. The struggle to achieve a likeness at all costs often inhibits the artist, so that his work becomes tentative, wooden, and drained of the smooth flow of spontaneous vigour. Far better to approach the problems of portraiture with something of the dash and cheekiness of a political cartoonist who attains a likeness through the employment of exaggeration, distortion, and satire.

Individual Pictures

Among the best portraits in the exhibition is B. N. Brooke's "Biddy Gell," a painting of a girl which displays a remarkably sensitive and searching eye for the *colour within colour*. Too many amateur portraitists summarily dismiss flesh as a simple matter of "pinkish white," whereas in fact

the element of local colour is profoundly affected by the proximity and absorption of colour and light from any number of extraneous sources. Thus, a rich profusion of blues, greens, violets, and so on often find their way into the "colour" of a person's face. Look at a Van Gogh portrait, for instance. Margaret Little's "The Dreamer" is a tremendously energetic and exciting piece of expressionism. Painted with the breadth of Jack Yeats' or Kokoschka, it depicts in violent yet well-integrated colour (savage blues, reds, mauves, and violets) a rapt figure on a couch in the depth of some personal ecstasy. This little work has terrific impact. One still-life painting was, I thought, outstanding. Margery Archer's expert placing of a red flower (an *advancing* colour) in the foreground of her picture, against a background of an open book, on one page of which is an illustration in blue (a *retreating* colour), is extremely subtle. The skilful juxtaposition of these colour elements, combined with a most refined and discriminating sense of composition, imparts a quality of air and spaciousness to a delightful picture. Of the landscapes, I enjoyed particularly the formal organization and quiet, dignified colour of A. B. Hewlett's "Italian Farm," and the crashing, tumbling waters and skies of R. A. Beaver's romantic version of "Brighton," painted with huge verve. This picture appealed to me enormously because it neither looked nor felt like Brighton; rather more, I thought, like the occasion of the death of Shelley. R. Fidler contributes two poignantly sensitive drawings of psychotic patients—"Dementias I and II"—executed in a trembling and profoundly expressive line, very economical, yet thoroughly convincing. Here are two excellent examples of the eloquence of what is left unsaid. Also on the psychiatric side are a group of absorbing sculptures by J. Rostowski. I was moved by his "Split Personality," which depicts two almost identical figures very close together; one is obviously male, the other, apparently, in the throes of an exciting sex-change. The work is conceived and executed with a quiet, intense strength.

Lastly, I would like to return to Dr. Tuttnauer's "Beach." The artist has taken a very ordinary scene, and by filtering it through the screen of his inner, imaginative eye transformed it into a dazzling arrangement of modified—and extended—shapes, forms, and colours. He has in fact used the sources of his initial inspiration simply as a springboard to the creation of a number of intensely interesting and stimulating variants. For the truly creative artist physical reality (camera reality) is merely the flashpoint of *other* realities: the other reality of art—"Through art we express our conception of what Nature is not," Picasso has said. Dr. Tuttnauer has used very bright colours, perfectly composed and balanced. The pebbles and stones of his beach wink and sparkle like some magically illuminated bath or sugar crystals. Here is a new world—a vision-invoking world—a fresh world for an old rather drab and threadbare one. What more can the artist offer?

The exhibition remains at Walker's Galleries, 118, New Bond Street, London, W.1, until April 21. It is open from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. (Saturdays until 1 p.m.).

Speaking at the annual conference of the Scottish Association for Mental Health on March 23, LORD STRATHCLYDE, Minister of State for Scotland, described the Government's building programme for mental hospitals in Scotland. Since the Health Service started in 1948, he said, the number of beds available for mental and mental-deficiency patients in Scotland had risen from about 25,900 to 26,800. There was in hand at present a new building programme of nearly £2m. to be spent on mental and mental-deficiency hospital extension schemes, starting in the period of 1956-8. When schemes already in hand and this new building programme were finished there should be some 1,200 additional beds, giving a total of about 28,000. This would mean 2,100 more beds than in 1948. It was not intended, he added, to cut this programme in any way because of the economic situation.