# THE GUILD OF BOSTON ARTISTS

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TWENTY-EIGHT YEARS AGO a group of artists working in Boston decided to form a professional group which they would call the Guild of Boston Artists. The primary purpose of this move was to enable these painters and sculptors to maintain a gallery of their own in which they could exhibit their work. Expenses ‘were to be met by deducting a percentage from the sales made,in the gallery, by dues from the active members, and through a group of associate members as well. For active membership there was to be one essential qualification, the professional competence of an artist in his particular field. To he a member of the Guild of Boston Artists a painter or a sculptor. must know his trade. This, at least, was the intention of the founders.

That was in 1914. The concept of making professional knowledge-and skill the common denominator for an association of artists seemed then, less eccentric and subversive than it would seem to many people today. It was, in point of fact, merely trying to do in Boston what had been done in Europe for several hundred years, wherever artists congregated in sufficient numbers. Organized first as confraternities or guilds, later as academies, these groups of professional workers in the arts had always tried to maintain certain standards of craftsmanship as well as to cooperate for their own mutual protection and advancement. Conditions in twentieth century Boston were very different from those which had made the earlier guilds necessary in their day. It would have been impossible to pattern the new institution after its predecessors. But the name made an appeal to the organizers because of its association with high professional standards. And it was to the painter’s guilds of seventeenth-century Holland that the founders of the Guild of Boston Artists looked with the greatest sympathy. This orientation was due to a marked affinity between the aims of many of the Boston painters and the aims of the Dutch painters. Indeed, the traits common to these two groups of artists, so widely separated by time, geography, and racial origins, have been frequently pointed out and are likely to hold the attention of art-historians in the future.

It was not that the Boston men were imitating the painters of Holland. But a similarity, in taste. presumably the result of some deep-seated similarity in the cultures and social conditions which influenced their development, led both Dutchmen and New Englanders to seek the material of their art at much the same sources. Both schools were fascinated by manifestations of beauty to be found in the world immediately about them, a beauty which they discovered in the routine of daily existence at home and on the street, in the landscape outside of their doors, or in the objects which lay on the tables of their parlors and kitchens. By and large, Bostonian and Hollander alike had little interest in the literary or symbolic elements in painting and seldom drew upon the world of imagination. Though the Boston painters, unlike those of Amsterdam or Leyden, did occasionally grapple with the problems of monumental mural painting, these were exceptional cases. Dutchmen and New Englanders found their best expression in the painting of portraits, of landscapes, and of still life, and, perhaps most characteristically of all, in depicting the interiors of rooms in which one or more figures were represented engaged in some familiar occupation.

This similarity of subject matter and pictorial material may have been responsible for another point of resemblance between the two schools. This was an intense preoccupation with workmanship, with those qualities of observation, rendering, and execution which are the principal elements of the painter's art. For no form of painting makes greater demands upon the painter's professional equipment than the beautiful rendering of what he sees. The artist who sets out to make.a work of art with. material that is intrinsically matter-of-fact and commonplace is moved to do so because in this subject matter he perceives elements of form and. color which give it distinction. He finds such elements in the patterns created by the interplay of lights and shadows on these familiar objects, in the combination of tones resulting from the juxtaposition ot colored materials in everyday use, in the silhouette which unexpectedly gives a monumental quality to a simple gesture. To translate these things onto canvas requires sensitive and highly trained powers of observation and the ability to state accurately in paint the peculiarly significant facts which the artist has observed. The very familiarity of the subject matter makes any error or exaggeration of statement immediately apparent to the most untrained eye. On the other hand, the total effect of such a subject is apt to be ,commonplace unless the subtleties which give it distinction are observed and stated with great taste and skill. The effort to create art by rendering the appearances of the every-day world made the seventeenth century Dutch painters the greatest craftsmen of their time, perhaps of any time. And it may be that the craftsmanship of the best Boston painters in the early years of the nineteenth century will be thought by future generations to have been superior to that of their contemporaries.

The Dutch painters and the Bostonians, then, frequently found their inspiration in like subjects and both were deeply concerned with beautiful workmanship. But here the resemblance ends and the differences between the two schools are both more important and more interesting than the resemblances. The most striking difference lies in their observation of color. The experiments of the nineteenth century greatly increased the sensitiveness of painters to color. This was largely due to the intensive study of out-of-door effects and the effort to render in paint the brilliance of sunlight. This intensive study gave painters an awareness of delicate relationships and color-shifts which were seemingly invisible to the earlier masters. The Dutch painters obtained their effect by a fine rendering of values rather than of color, resorting to a conventional tone for most of the transitional areas lying between the lights and shadows and making the shadows themselves a more or less uniform brown. Only the great Vermeer seems to have observed that these half-tones and shadows were subtly colored. Now it was precisely the exact degree of coloration of these half-tones and the quality ofthe color that persisted in the shadows which fascinated the New England painters at the beginning of our century, and, in order to register these shimmering and evanescent color-shifts, they necessarily adopted a technical method very different at every point from that of the old masters. It , would be idle to compare the respective merits of the two techniques, devised as they were to attain widely different ends. At their best both methods achieved their very difficult objectives.

Another difference between the two schools is to be seen in the vastly greater emphasis the Boston painters gave to arabesque as an element in their composition. The outstanding Dutch painters often composed admirably, balancing their masses of light and dark and the placement and action of their figures. But none of them, again excepting the amazing Vermeer, showed much awareness of the additional beauty attained when the silhouettes of the dark masses are studied to make a pattern that is in itself entertaining to the eye. It is precisely the study of this

abstract patterning which, when it is successful, gives to the Boston interiors a liveliness and a distinction of composition rarely found in those of Holland.

Other differences are equally notable. The modem tempo of execution is more rapid, if not in actual, fact, certainly in appearance, and intentionally so. The modem painters habitually work with color schemes both higher in key and cooler in tonality than the brownish basic tone ofthe older masters permitted. And at times the New England artists express a subdued lyricism which is all their own. Indeed, the differences are so great that a comparison of the two schools is only useful insofar as it serves to bring into relief the predominant artistic objectives of the painters who made Boston one of the outstanding centers of American painting at the time the Guild was founded.

Sculpture has been an important element of the Guild from the start and is an important element in it today. But the painters have been numerically preponderant and have been chiefly responsible for giving the association its distinctive character. This character was largely established by the most influential of the founders, painters who received national recognition and played an important part in the development of American art. The present exhibition gives especial prominence to the work of these men. Many of the artists are no longer with us, but their pictures remain, and there can be little, doubt that the best of these will take their place as a part of our national heritage.

Meanwhile the Guild of Boston Artists has carried on through turbulent and difficult years. Some of the younger members have been interested in types of painting quite different from those to which the founders devoted their talents. But throughout its twenty-eight years of existence the Guild has tried to maintain its principle, that professional skill should be the prerequisite of membership. If recently fewer members have been elected it is solely because professional skill has become increasingly rare. To no one is this more a matter for regret than to those whom a life-time devoted to the practice and study of painting has convinced that no work of art can have lasting value or enduring value unless it is competently executed.