

"CUBISTS AND FUTURISTS ARE MAKING INSANITY PAY"

Kenyon Cox, Member of the National Academy, and Recognized Here and Abroad as One of America's Foremost Painters, Gives a Straight-from-the-Shoulder Opinion of the New Movements in Art.

WHAT does the work of the Cubists and Futurists mean? Have these "progressives" really outstripped all the rest of us, glimpsed the future, and used a form of artistic expression that is simply esoteric to the great laggard public? Is their work a conspicuous milestone in the progress of art? Or is it junk?

The International Exhibition of Modern Art, which has just come to a close in the Sixty-ninth Regiment Armory, with its striking array of the works of the "progressives," has during the past few weeks, set many a New Yorker to turning this problem over in his mind.

Entirely apart from the canvases and sculptures shown, this exhibition was unique among New York exhibitions. It drew an attendance from a public outside that comparatively limited one that ordinarily goes to art exhibitions.

Here was something revolutionary, something in the nature of a nine-days' wonder, something that must not be missed. New York did not miss it: the gate receipts show that.

How the Public Acted.

A good part of New York grinned as it passed along from one paint-puzzle to another. But the fact that there were so many of these paint-puzzles, that they were dignified by an exhibition, made New York, in spite of its grin, wonder if there perhaps was not something in this new art which was a little beyond the mental grasp of the uninitiated.

In circles where art had never before been discussed, one heard the question:

"Have you been to see the Cubists and the Futurists? Yes? Well, could you make anything out of it?"

The answer usually was:

"Why, I don't know much about art, but it looked to me like a mess of nonsense."

The critics who usually are willing enough to play the part of beacon light, were singularly unilluminating. Here was an artistic storm and the critic beacons all turned low!

A TIMES reporter went last week to ask Kenyon Cox, recognized both here and abroad as being in the lonely forefront of American art, to throw some light on this dark problem.

The artist was found in his handsome studio, in slippers, an old corn-cob pipe between his teeth.

The reporter put his question bluntly:

"Will you give THE TIMES a straight-from-the-shoulder opinion on the Cubists and the Futurists? Do they mean

You have no right to criticize until you learn it."

"My answer is:

"What would you think of a poet or literary man suddenly inventing a new language and saying something that sounds like pure gibberish?" "Ah," he remarks in answer to your objections, "you don't understand the language."

A Strange Kind of Art.

"If this supposititious poet or literary man were to say 'Wigglety-wagglety-wigglety,' and then tell you that that combination of letters gives the sentiment of dawn, how are you going to prove that it doesn't?"

"Though I can't prove it as one can prove a sum in simple arithmetic, it is my conviction that the Cubists and the Futurists are giving us a wigglety-wagglety-wigglety variety of art."

"Expression, no matter whether the medium be a painting, a sculpture, a novel, or a poem, must either be in a language that has been learned, or it is a pure assumption on the artist's part that he has expressed anything at all."

"These Cubists and Futurists are doing in painting what the Symbolists did in literature ten years ago. That school of writers said that it didn't make any difference what words were used; that the vowels had color, and that the desired impression could be conveyed by these."

"As you'll remember, they succeeded in making quite a few people believe that what they said was in their verse was really there."

"That movement is now as dead as



THE MUCH DISCUSSED NUDE DESCENDING A STAIRCASE

A RODIN DRAWING AT THE METROPOLITAN



COURTESY MET. MUSEUM OF ART

something in art, or do they mean nothing?"

Mr. Cox took a reflective puff or two, gazed a moment at the few embers in the broad, stone fireplace as though marshalling his thoughts, and then came the straight-from-the-shoulder opinion.

"The Cubists and the Futurists simply abolish the art of painting. They deny not only any representation of nature, but also any known or traditional form of decoration."

"A New Language."

"They maintain that they have invented a symbolism which expresses their individuality, or as they say, their souls."

"If they have really expressed their souls in the things they show us, God help their souls!"

The corn-cob pipe was out. A match was requisitioned. A few minutes of quiet puffs. Then:

"Talk to these people and they say:

"Here is a new language of art."

a door nail, and the literary men of Paris have gone back to writing French."

The puffs from the corn-cob came a little quicker:

"And I don't think these Cubists and Futurists will last much longer than did the Symbolists. Then artists will go back to writing the universal language of art."

"The only question in my mind is: Are these men the victims of auto suggestion or are they charlatans fooling the public?"

The corn-cob pipe was put aside. The artist paced the floor of his studio for a moment or two. Then, dropping again into his armchair and still ignoring the apparently beloved corn-cob:

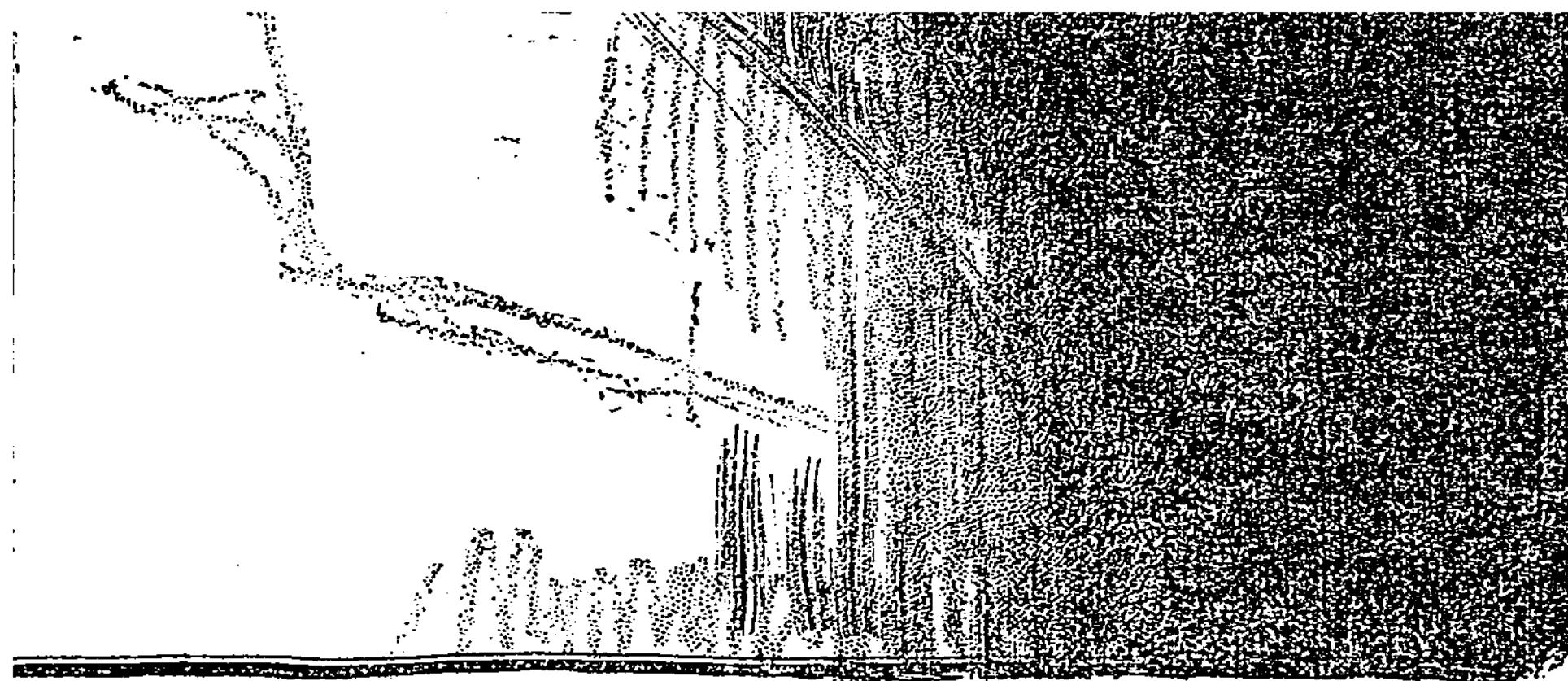
"There is one point, and one on which I feel strongly: This is not a sudden disruption or eruption in the history of art. It is the inevitable result of a tendency which has grown stronger and stronger during the last fifty years."

"It is a tendency to abandon all dis-



KENYON COX

MARGU FROM PHOTO BY P. MACDONALD



"The thing is pathological! It's hideous!"

There was a pause. Then the old corn-cob was reached for; refilled; lighted.

"There is another element that comes into it," continued the artist when the corn-cob was comfortably under way. "Up to the time of Matisse, the revolutionaries, I believe, were for the most part sincere enough. They paid for their beliefs with their lives: they made no money out of their beliefs; they committed suicide or died in mad-houses."

"But with Matisse, with the later work of Rodin, and, above all, with the Cubists and the Futurists, it is no longer a matter of sincere fanaticism. These men have seized upon the modern engine of publicity and are making insanity pay."

Back to Matisse.

"I should perhaps interpolate here that a number of the men who are responsible for the present movement have done some beautiful work, but that does not prevent me thinking that they are headed in the wrong direction."

"But, getting back to Matisse—if I wanted to mention names I could add others to the list—many of his paintings are simply the exaltation to the walls of a gallery of the drawings of a nasty boy."

"I have always championed the nude." (There are a number of large paintings of the nude on the walls of his studio.) "I am not squeamish on that side of the question; but I feel that in the drawings of some of these men there is a professed indecency which is absolutely shocking."

Again a match was needed for the corn-cob.

"Do you believe that there is any sincerity in this present development?" asked THE TIMES man.

"No, none. Of course that is only my belief: one cannot get data on such a matter. It is my conviction, though, that Matisse has his tongue in his cheek and his eye on his pocket."

"Of course, there will be many who will discount all that I have said as

being the remarks of an elderly academic painter. But if I am to speak of myself I can frankly say that I am not the type of man who is a conservative that cannot change the point of view that he had at twenty or thirty years of age."

"Apart from what I have done in painting, I have been a student of art and criticism all my life. I have materially changed from the views I held as a young man."

"What I have said to you is not the opinion of a conservative. It is founded on a lifetime given to the study of art and criticism, in the belief that painting means something."

"The basis of criticism?"

"I might say that the traditions of art, like the laws of social existence, are the outcome of human effort extending over countless centuries."

"The great traditions of the world are not here by accident. They exist because humanity found them to be for its own good."

"Art has a social function. In all the great periods of art it has spoken to the people in a language that they understood and expressed what they would have it express."

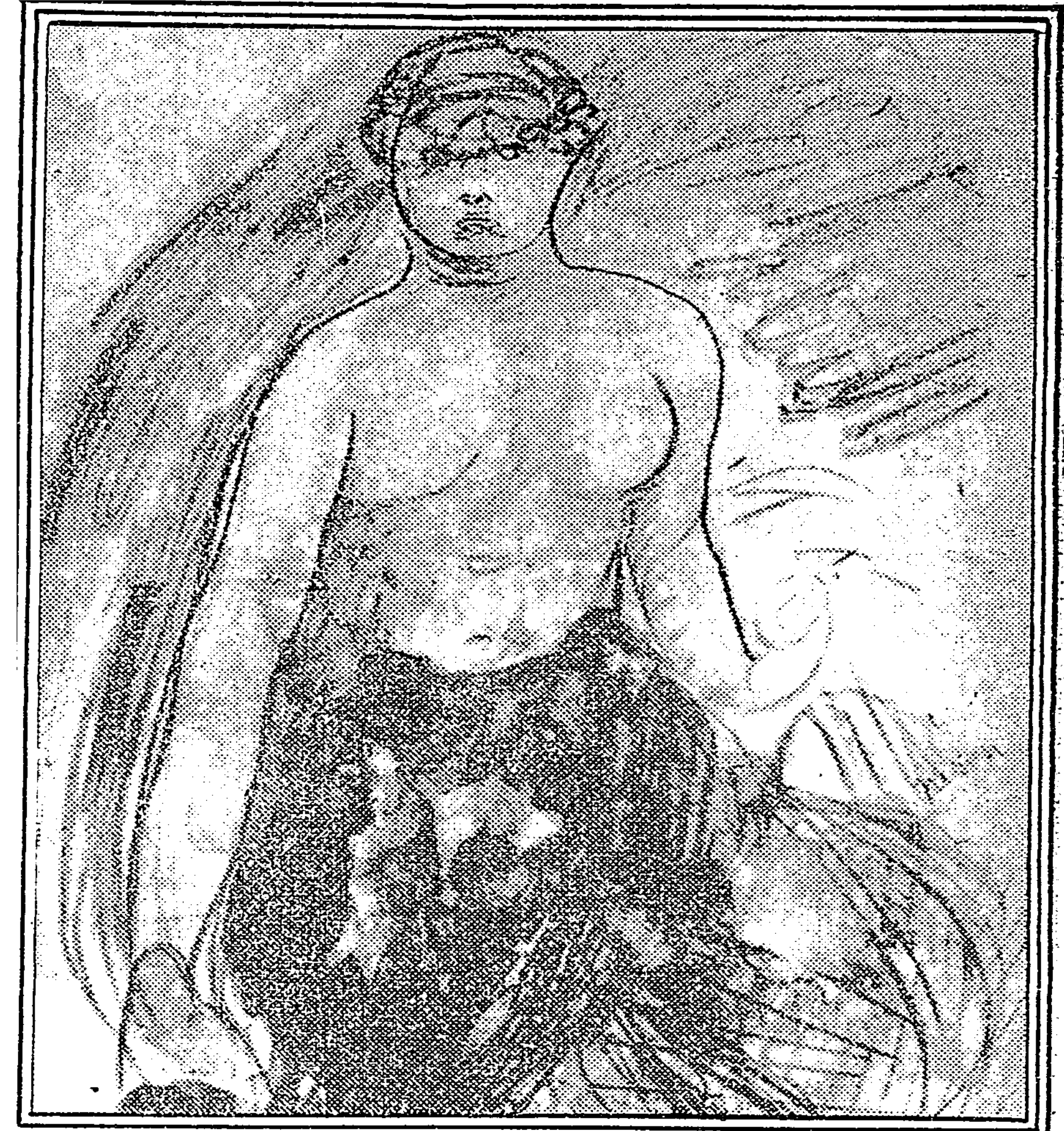
"The men who would make art merely expressive of their personal whim, make it speak in a special language only understood by themselves, are as truly anarchists as are these who would overthrow all social laws."

"But the modern tendency is to exalt individualism at the expense of law. The Cubists and the Futurists simply exhibit a very extreme and savage form of this individualism, an individualism exaggerated and made absurd for the sake of advertising."

"What it finally means is, either there will be a reaction, toward the classic and the traditional or art will cease to exist."

"Naturally, I prefer to believe in the reaction, to think that some of us who are now considered belated classicists may turn out to be the real precursors."

"A few moments ago," suggested THE TIMES man, "you mentioned the great



ANOTHER OF THE RODIN DRAWINGS



"ONE MUSE" A PROGRESSIVE BUST.

Rodin as having been an influence in the present movement."

"Yes," said Mr. Cox, earnestly, "and a very big one. That row of drawings in the Rodin gallery in the Metropolitan Museum of Art is a calamity. They have made people try to see what does not exist."

"How did they get into the Museum?"

"Simple enough. The management in trying to be broad let them in. There are some of the Directors who see nothing in these drawings; there are some others who think they do—and there you are."

This brought the talk around to the critics.

"There are two things to be said of the critics. Either" (here Mr. Cox spoke very emphatically) "they are themselves hypnotized into a belief in qualities that do not exist, or they are so frightened by what are thought to be the critical blunders of the last few generations that they dare not say any eccentric is bad for fear the eccentricity should turn out to be genius."

"We've been carefully educated to believe that genius is always misunderstood. The result is that some of us are ready to think that anything unintelligible must be full of genius."

Influence of Primitive Art.

"With some of the critics their state of mind seems to be the result of long occupation with primitive art, which has so accustomed them to finding beauty of line or mass where there is little naturalism that they cannot see these qualities where they are combined with a knowledge of nature."

"They imagine that Matisse and his followers have rediscovered the line because there is evidently nothing else in their work; forgetting that the great and really difficult task is to draw beautifully and expressively without drawing falsely, and that it is no advantage to the abstract beauty of a figure that its joints should bend the wrong way, or that it should have no joints at all, but resemble something between a block of wood and a jelly-fish."

"Has the public been fooled?"

"No, I think the bulk of the public is usually found to be sane. There are always a few 'suggestible' people, always a certain number of ready dupes for any loudly advertised quack."

"You know it is possible, just possible" (there was a sardonic emphasis put on the word "just") "it is just possible that the present activity of this movement may merely be a campaign of the dealers. I have been told

that the dealers in Paris have found the home market for Cubist and Futurist pictures worked out, and that they are now passing their wares hopefully on to the American market."

Mr. Cox reached up to a shelf, just behind his chair, and took down a volume. It was a book written by the artist: its title, "The Classic Point of View."

He turned over the pages for a moment, and then, handing the open book to the reporter:

"Here is a little story which sums up my opinion of the movement that I have just been discussing."

This is the story and the accompanying comment:

"In the tales of Hans Christian Andersen one may read how a certain monarch was supposed to be possessed of a suit of clothes of extraordinary richness and beauty but quite invisible to all unintelligent and stupid people. The King himself had never seen them, but as long as others believed in their existence he kept his mouth shut and received with complacency the glory which came to him as their possessor."

Plot of the Story.

"The Prime Minister and the Lord Chamberlain and the members of the Privy Council were all equally blind to these wonderful garments, but each thought the others saw them, and so they joined in a chorus of praises, lauding the magnificence of the stuff, the splendor of the embroidery, and the perfection of the cut. Even the little page boys solemnly gathered up nothing, and pretended to carry the tails of the robe which they thought must certainly be there if they were bright enough to see it."

"At last it was determined that his Majesty should walk in public procession through his capital, that every one might have an opportunity to behold the wonderful clothes."

"There were heralds and trumpeters making a great noise with their trumpets, and knights and men-at-arms, and Judges and clergy, and at last under a canopy, the King himself, walking very grandly with his head in the air, and followed by the three pages that bore the invisible train."

"And the people all rubbed their eyes and each one said to himself, 'Dear me! Am I so stupid? I really can't see anything'; and then they all shouted 'Long live the King and his incomparable clothes!'"

"But presently the procession passed by a place where there stood a tiny boy in the street; and the boy, not being old enough to know better and perhaps not having been well brought up, spoke right out in a loud voice, saying, 'But he hasn't got anything on!'"

"And then—well, then every one suddenly saw that his Majesty was walking through the streets in his shirt."

"Now it may be my own lack of intelligence that prevents my seeing the wonderful garment of art worn by some of the latest exponents of modernism. The rich stuff and the splendid embroidery, which others assure me they see, may really be there and I may be too blind or too stupid to perceive it. But if the gods made me stupid it rests with myself to be honest; and so I can only cry, with the little boy in the street: 'They have nothing on! They have nothing on!'"