

Art and Society

By AMI MALI HICKS

MOST people are naturally shocked by the wanton destruction of the great masterpieces of art and architecture now going on in Europe. But perhaps we would not feel as keenly about this specific kind of vandalism if we had any reassurance that art as great or greater could be created in our present civilization. We would not have the same feeling of helplessness or futility. We realize, of course, that art or architecture created now would be of a different type but we do not believe that any art in present times could reach the perfection of that older workmanship or have the intense feeling for beauty it expresses. So it is true then that when we deplore the destruction of these masterpieces we are thinking rather in terms of art than in human values.

But how was it possible to create this art of the past? In the centuries when it flourished, particularly in the period of the Renaissance, there were wars followed by and preceded by conditions of poverty, destruction and famine. Then, as now, there were hordes of vandals relatively as terrible in kind if not in numbers who swept through the existing civilizations. And then as now, art had no part in the life of the average human being. The great artists of that time lived on a superstructure of want and misery. There was tyranny, poverty, besides actual human slavery which held the mass of the people in the most miserable conditions of living. But the great artists and craftsmen, Leonardo, Michelangelo, Raphael and many others almost as famous were assured of a certain economic security by royal and princely patronage. The rulers, kings and princes of both the state and church drew their incomes from the lesser nobles and the people by taxes and tribute through force and fraud. The art and architecture of those periods were created under these conditions. The monasteries where painting and sculpture were practiced by the monks were subsidized by royalty and nobility—because as they upheld the church, the clergy in turn, upheld the state. Both drew their incomes from the poor and ignorant who feared their power.

Now when we are shocked by the destruction of this great art of the past we are emphasizing the wrong values. What should really shock us is the existence of conditions in our so much later and supposedly advanced civilization which still produces hordes of vandals who increasingly destroy both life and art. So while there can be no ignoring of what is happening in Europe, we need not include ourselves emotionally in the general chaos, if we think now in constructive terms. What has happened now will continue to happen until we change conditions. It is not the result

of something which has occurred this year or last year; it is the result of world conditions which have existed for centuries, and could have no other outcome.

But there is still possible another condition of society based on economic cooperation which, through equal freedom for all, will raise the level of human values. With such a change will follow the opportunity for the expression of beauty in painting or architecture which we call art. For though our standards of beauty may change there will probably still be the necessity for some expressions of values which reach beyond the actualities of life and relate each of us to a more general consciousness.

Until we have such a society, the artist has little more than a choice between the mob and the ivory tower; between being a tool of the forces of despotism and destruction or the socially protected artist who gets a living from those who exploit the mob.

Mexican Art

IN few other countries is art linked so closely with the life of the people as in Mexico.

With the ancient pre-Columbian Mexicans, art was a direct expression of their ideals and religion. Among the concepts which were important to them were those of fertility and maternity. An oft-recurring theme in the ancient statues and reliefs was the mother and child motif. As with most other faiths, the Mexican religion held that procreation and increase in population were a blessing, not a curse.

The Spaniards brought with them the European tradition of art, as of everything else. The paintings and sculptures of the period 1600-1900 are mostly wearisome, stylistic, academic works. A refreshing relief from this art is the spontaneous and vital art of the peasants—the "Folk Art". It is the expression of those close to the soil. They painted and moulded things real to them—the abundance of nature, the life of the workers, the simple family life, their deep religious faith. Oppressed though they were, their art is now recognized as superior to that of their masters.

In the Folk Art there are hints, now and then, of discontent at the prevailing contrast between rich and poor. This murmur becomes loudly articulate in the twentieth century. It is heralded by Posada's bitter protest against oppression in his powerful wood-cuts.

The famous group of modern Mexican artists—mostly muralists—is closely associated with the Mexican Revolution. Their art bespeaks the prime importance of the land question. Diego Rivera, most prominent of the group, concentrates on the sufferings of the landless peons in his murals, and the words *TIERRA Y LIBERTAD* flare across his frescoes. His painting, "Sugar Cane," portrays clearly land-ownership as the basis of the exploitation of the peon.