

NOTES FOR USE AT LUNCHEON

GIVEN BY

METROPOLITAN ART MUSEUM

APRIL 2, 1946



Notes for use at Luncheon given by Metropolitan Art Museum, April 2, 1946.

We have recently emerged from a bitter conflict that long engulfed the larger nations of the globe. The heroism and sacrifice of men on the fighting lines and the moral and physical energies of those at home were all devoted to the single purpose of military victory. Preoccupation in a desperate struggle for existence left time for little else.

Now we enter upon an era of widened opportunity for physical and spiritual development, united in a determination to establish and maintain a peace in which the creative and expressive instincts of our people may flourish. The welcome release from the fears and anxieties of war will, as always, be reflected in a resurgence of attention to cultural values.

It may seem strange that a soldier, representative of the science of destruction, should appear before a body dedicated to the preservation of man's creative ideals as expressed in art, and should be urging support of the Metropolitan Museum. Even though we acknowledge that the soldier's true function is to prevent rather than to wage war, yet his necessary association with lethal weapons would seem to imply the existence of an unbridgeable gulf between his philosophy and that of the artist. Perhaps this is so - certainly I lay no claim to artistic temperament! But I do know that, for democracy at least, there always stands beyond the materialism and destructiveness of war the ideals for which it is fought. Thus, the awful test of war is primarily a testing of the spirit, and so it is possible for the fighting man to experience, in war, a definite spiritual growth. But for simpler reasons than these, I believe that many of our veterans have gained renewed interest in art and the world of the artist.

In foreign lands American soldiers have made new contacts with portions of mankind's vast heritage of culture. Many have been awakened to the permanent value of beauty as expressed in architecture, sculpture, painting, and folk-arts. Prompted by curiosity, respect and interest, thousands of America's fighting men have spent countless hours touring the art centers of Europe and the Orient.



These same soldiers have seen the destruction of priceless artistic treasures. But, and perhaps understandably, this fact has served only to increase their respect and veneration for civilizations of the past. They tried, within, sometimes beyond the limits of military prudence, to preserve and protect these products of man's creative instinct, but war is essentially destruction. An army at war must incessantly hurl destructive force at the enemy, and, in this process, much of the world's heritage in art has been inevitably damaged and lost in the late global conflict. I am grateful to the directors of the Metropolitan Museum for their generosity in having accorded me an honorary membership for my small part in protecting these monuments. The credit belongs to the officers and men of the combat echelons whose veneration for priceless treasures persisted, even in the heat and fears of battle.

Another view of the fate of art in war was presented to our soldiers when, at long last, we penetrated to the heart of Naziism. There, in caves, in mines, and in isolated mountain hideouts we found that Hitler and his gang, with unerring instinct for enriching themselves, had stored art treasures, filched from their rightful owners throughout conquered Europe. Alongside bar and minted gold were found paintings, statues, tapestries, jewelry and all else that the Nazis knew mankind would pay much to rescue and preserve. Some of this has been restored - some, not easy to identify, is still under the care of the captors.

Frequently the soldier was led to attempt to express in artistic fashion something of his own reactions to the phenomena of war. (For example - Mauldin's reaction to the "Brass Hats") Possibly none of the paintings and drawings that the American soldier brought back with him will ever find its way into the Metropolitan, but they are to him, in sum, vivid memories of filth and beauty, of hopes and fears, of suffering and mercy, of life and death. Moreover, they provide additional evidence that thousands of our returned soldiers will eagerly seize upon the opportunities offered by the Metropolitan and its sister institutions of art.



The freedom enjoyed by this country from the desolation that has swept over so many others during the past years gives to America greater opportunity than ever before to become the greatest of the world's repositories of art. The whole world will then have a right to look to us, with grateful eyes; but we will fail unless we consciously appreciate the value of art in our lives and take practical steps to encourage the artist and preserve his works. In no walk of life can man fail to find richer experience as he falls under the influence of beauty immortalized by inspired genius. Even for the roughest of soldiers there is more of ancient Egyptian history to be felt and understood in a lonely, graceful column rising against the sky in a naked field than there is in all the descriptive matter that was ever written on the subject.

The Metropolitan will be a more priceless treasure of the America of centuries hence, even than it is today. It is our privilege to pass on to the coming centuries treasures of past ages, and to add to these the artistic creations of our own. But now - today - hundreds of returned soldiers will profit by your help in creative effort, and thousands more will gain inspiration from your exhibits. They, who have dwelt with death, will be among the most ardent worshippers of life and beauty - and of the peace in which these can thrive.