

# Does America Discourage ART?

## *A Socratic Dialogue*

**PLACE:** The Home of Henry Goddard Leach

**TIME:** After Dinner

**M**R. LEACH. I have it on good authority that we are living in an age of machines. Everyone seems willing to admit that. But I haven't found any two people who could agree on the question of what the machines are doing to American art. The critics have been hurling articles at each other from a distance without succeeding in settling anything, and I thought that by getting you all together, where you could contradict one another face to face and pull each others' noses, we might get a decision.

MR. YOUNG. Or a knock-out.

MR. STIEGLITZ. Well, if you want to know what I think . . .

MR. LINDSAY. I don't know anything about art, but I know what I . . .

MR. PACH. In comparison with the art of Greece . . .

MR. WATTS (jumping to his feet). I am so sick of being told that the hand-made civilizations of the past are superior to ours! There are people over here who seem to think the only thing you can do with your country is abuse it. I don't see anything the matter with American art. The detractors say we haven't any, but what about our great skyscrapers that have sprung up here like mushrooms . . .

MR. SIMONSON. Like toadstools!

### *Persons of the Dialogue*

HARVEY WILEY CORBETT — Architect

WILLIAM M. IVINS — Curator of Prints, the Metropolitan Museum, New York

HENRY GODDARD LEACH — Editor of THE FORUM

VACHEL LINDSAY — Poet

LEWIS MUMFORD — Writer

WALTER PACH — Artist and writer

WALTER B. PITKIN — Associate Editor of the *Encyclopædia Britannica*

LEE SIMONSON — Scenic designer, critic, and Editor of *Creative Art*

ALFRED STIEGLITZ — Photographer and director of "The Intimate Gallery"

HARVEY M. WATTS — Writer and lecturer

ART YOUNG — Free-lance artist and writer

MR. WATTS. What about our magazines? The illustrations and the color work in the advertisements are often of such character that you hate to throw the magazine away. But what can you do? You can't keep them any more than you can keep Christmas cards.

MR. PACH. Who wants to keep them? Spiritually and aesthetically they're worthless — that's why we don't save them. In spite of all the wonders of your four-color printing, it hasn't produced anything worthy to be called art. It isn't a matter of quantity; Rembrandt etchings were printed in quantity.

But the man behind them made them supreme things.

MR. WATTS. Well, after all, how many Rembrandts are there? If, in our brief history as a people, we have had painted two very unforgettable portraits — the Gilbert Stuart portrait of Washington and Whistler's portrait of his mother, the most reproduced picture in the world — what is the matter with American art? All the other civilizations stand on one or two pictures, on one or two great achievements, on one or two men. Under the circumstances, I don't see any reason why we should get so excited about it and put on sackcloth and ashes and scream about how little we have done and find fault.

MR. MUMFORD. We are not finding fault. If that were our only object, there would be no purpose in discussing this question at all. The real reason for discussing it, it seems to me, is to find out where we stand. We must ask ourselves what are the things that are preventing the arts from going to full swing in America. One of the great difficulties is that we lack leisure.

MR. PITKIN. Hear, Hear!

MR. MUMFORD. We not only lack leisure but we lack the very notion of leisure. The idea of repose from all external activity, of a concentration upon the inner life, upon the things that take place merely in the mind — all that is distinctly lacking in America.

MR. PITKIN. The best proof of it is the way people fritter away their vacant hours in some form of mechanical activity. They hop into a motor car and run out into the country, or they turn on the radio and keep up a banal conversation and maybe play bridge — all at the same time.

MR. MUMFORD. We are afraid of ourselves; that is what is back of it. We keep up all this mechanical activity in order to avoid confronting our inner life, one of the reasons being that our mechanical civilization allows us no inner life worth talking about. Most people are profoundly lonesome when they are with themselves and when they see just what is in their own mind, and they are indifferent to the things the artists, the poets, the people who have concentrated upon imagination, have to give them.

MR. WATTS. I don't believe people to-day are any less attentive to the arts than . . .

MR. STIEGLITZ. *Attentive?* I have been trying for thirty-eight years to find out what an American sees when he stands in front of something. Do you know what my answer is? . . . *Nothing!*

MR. MUMFORD. We voluntarily make ourselves deaf and blind — and for a good reason. We are surrounded by ugliness. We live in a world full of unpleasant sounds. We walk along the street and are assailed by the foul odor of gasoline. We raise our eyes to the buildings



*Mr. Watts  
Has much to say*



*Leisure Mumford*

and with very few exceptions they are ill designed and meanly proportioned. And living in this brutal environment, assailed by sounds and sights and odors which would wreck any sensitive personality, in sheer defense we have to resort to a sort of automatic anæsthesia. We deliberately close our senses to the impact of environment around us. And yet we boast that we have one of the greatest civilizations ever seen.

MR. WATTS. I insist we don't boast.

MR. MUMFORD. Then we admit it, but it is just the same thing.

MR. WATTS. There never was a time when all the people were artistic and all enjoyed the arts, not even in the days of the Greeks. The appreciation of art is just as widespread now as it ever was.

MR. IVINS. Is it your idea that art can be applied like a coat of whitewash?

MR. WATTS. I am not thinking that it can be applied at all.

MR. IVINS. Can you imagine anything coming out of one of our modern architects' offices that isn't applied? Aren't they big machines in which, by definition, personality is impossible?

MR. WATTS. I assert it isn't impossible. How was it in the days of Michelangelo?

MR. IVINS. There was one man doing it.

MR. WATTS. That doesn't mean anything necessarily.

MR. IVINS. I think it's the whole thing.

MR. WATTS. It wasn't true of St. Peter's. One man didn't do that. Each man did his own particular part — Bramante, Bernini, Michelangelo . . .

MR. IVINS. That is just what is wrong with St. Peter's — that they did have three men on the job. And that is what is wrong with our modern architecture. It all comes down to that one fundamental fault — that you haven't got the personality. I don't know of any great art that is anything but a one-man show.



*from Mr. Evans Jr.  
— enlivens —*

MR. WATTS. I don't see any essential difference between the methods of architectural designing in the past and in the present.

MR. IVINS. If you would look at some of Michelangelo's architectural drawings and compare them with the plans of modern architects, the difference would be obvious. Michelangelo's drawings were wash drawings conceived in terms of volume, not thin outline drawings like those we see to-day.

MR. CORBETT. The organization of a modern architect's office is built up primarily to relieve the artist — the designing member of the firm being referred to as the artist — of all the complicated engineering details which are necessary in modern building. I don't know where you get the idea that the architect doesn't draw in terms of three dimensions.

MR. IVINS. Walking down Fifth Avenue.

MR. CORBETT. I will admit that.

MR. IVINS. By walking up to Columbia. By going to Harvard, to Yale.

MR. CORBETT. There isn't a modern building under our present zoning law that it is possible to conceive of without creating a model at the very start. The man takes his mass and goes right to it in clay like a sculptor. The architect of to-day is nothing but a sculptor in building masses. Detail is merely incidental to that.

MR. IVINS. That has only been true in the last ten years. The emphasis on design as distinct from gingerbread work came in when the price of stonecutters got high, that was all.

MR. MUMFORD. No matter how the modern architect goes about his designing, the fact remains that he rarely has the opportunity to leave the indelible stamp of his personality on his work, as the Greeks did. The work of a real artist, like Bertram Goodhue or Frank Lloyd Wright, is an exception — almost a defiance.

MR. WATTS. Remember, in Athens only a few buildings were beautiful. Athens was a hideous city. It was almost like a collection of adobe huts, with narrow, dirty alleys.

MR. MUMFORD. Not necessarily hideous. That is a sanitary condition.

MR. WATTS. I am not talking about the sanitary business. You dragged that in.

MR. IVINS. You said dirty, Mr. Watts.

MR. WATTS. I said dirty in the sense that the streets were dirty. Oh yes, I said dirty; I will accept that. They were wretched little one-story things.

MR. MUMFORD. You are confusing the matter of size and importance. You are saying because the cities were small, because the buildings were mean, little one-story buildings, therefore they were unimportant buildings.

MR. WATTS. I said they weren't beautiful.

MR. MUMFORD. Beauty has nothing to do with size. A one-story building can be just as beautiful as a much larger one.

MR. WATTS. You put words in my mouth I never said. I know a one-story building can be beautiful. . . .

MR. MUMFORD. But you were characterizing these buildings contemptuously because they were small.

MR. WATTS. If you hold a brief for the small houses of Athens, you are the first writer on art that I know of who ever did.

MR. MUMFORD. Nobody knows what the small houses of Athens looked like.

MR. WATTS. We know from Pompeii what they looked like.

MR. IVINS. Do you know what New York looks like by looking at Coney Island or Long Branch?

MR. WATTS. Archæologists know what Athens was like. It was a city of small, mean houses.

MR. SIMONSON. You said "small, mean houses." Why were they mean? Because they were small?

MR. WATTS. So far as we know, they were of that type.

MR. SIMONSON. You mean, Mr. Katz, that they . . .

MR. WATTS. "Watts" is the name.

MR. SIMONSON. Mr. Watts. I am not trying to antagonize you. I am trying to get at the



*Lee Simonson*

logic of this thing. You say "small, mean buildings." Why were they mean — because they were small?

MR. WATTS (defiantly). What do *you* think about it?

MR. SIMONSON. I don't think meanness and smallness have any connection, just as I don't think bigness has any connection with beauty in skyscrapers.

MR. WATTS. After all, that is a description of the character of the houses of Athens in the Periclean period.

MR. SIMONSON. Whose description?

MR. WATTS. So far as we know them.

MR. IVINS. I think you are making a rather small and mean issue of this.

MR. SIMONSON. I just chose the "small, mean" combination because it seemed to me to hitch up with the skyscraper. Your tendency when you characterize Athens is to say small and mean, just as our tendency is, when we talk about American buildings with their fifty-six stories, to think because they are big, they *must* be magnificent, and because they are magnificent, they *must* therefore have æsthetic value.

MR. WATTS. That isn't what I said.

MR. SIMONSON. You did say "small and mean."

MR. WATTS. Well, I stick to "small and mean" about the Athens houses!

MR. SIMONSON. I simply cite that as a tendency to connect small and mean with our present way of evaluating American architecture. It is the converse of the tendency to say big, therefore imposing, therefore magnificent, therefore art. I think that our doing so much and doing it in such a big way is just excess of energy. It isn't inevitably inspired by any artistic impulse.

MR. WATTS. Very competent authorities have called the skyscraper America's great contribution to architecture — and they meant it in an artistic sense.

MR. SIMONSON. To me there is very little architecture about most skyscrapers. The

point is that American architecture isn't architecture. It is the easiest way out. The father of the modern American style is the Board of Aldermen, or whoever it was that made the law that you must step back every time you go up so many stories. I don't say that our architects would not like to build beautiful buildings if they were allowed, but their hands are tied. They are caught between the demands of owners and real estate agents for every inch of rentable space that can be squeezed into their property.

MR. CORBETT. You can look at it that way if you like. As an architect I am really just a manufacturer of a commodity known as building space, and my job, as I see it, is to make as attractive a package as is physically or æsthetically possible for me to make in view of all the conditions imposed.

MR. WATTS. Don't you think the architects did that from the days of the Babylonians?

MR. CORBETT. I have an impression that is exactly what they did. I don't think human actions to-day are different in the slightest degree from what they have been ever since the beginning of civilization.

MR. IVINS. The fact is that we spend so much time on the very occasional great successes of the past that we have rendered ourselves incompetent to judge the average figure of the present. You can't compare the present

with past times because the passage of the years has hidden all the average work of antiquity and left only the masterpieces.

MR. MUMFORD. I disagree with your notion that the level of art in other times has not been much higher than it is at present.

MR. IVINS. I have to spend a great deal of my time looking at old art and comparing it with new. And I have found that there was just as much bad art produced in the old times as there is now. For instance, in the Royal Collection at Munich they have a perfectly genuine collection of fifteenth and sixteenth century paintings, and there isn't one of them that wouldn't turn milk sour at a thousand



*Walter Pach  
makes a few remarks*

yards. They are the most incredibly awful things that were ever made. And I can assure you that the same sort of stuff was pulled off right under Michelangelo's nose, and pulled off by the ton, just like our *Saturday Evening Post*.

MR. MUMFORD. I do not say that there were not other periods quite as bad as our own.

MR. IVINS. From our point of view to-day. But remember that you are speaking from the point of view of New York in 1929. Each age has its own particular problems and its own preferences. What an age judges good is merely an eclectic reflection of its own self and the stuff that answers to its own problem.

MR. PACH. Greek art has been called good by every people since its time.

MR. IVINS. The worshipful appreciation of Greek art was nothing but a fictitious literary tradition up until the nineteenth century. People didn't know Greek art when they saw it. When it was proposed to the British Government that they should acquire the Elgin Marbles, the greatest authorities got up before the Parliamentary Commission and announced that the Elgin Marbles were in all probability late Roman, and certainly very bad. And when one of the greatest Hellenists of his time wanted to decorate his study with pictures of the Muses, he went down to the Rathskeller and got the nine swellest dames that there were shoving beer around to come up in their Sunday best, and he had them painted around the walls. He put the names "Cleo" and so forth under them. He thought he was being very classical.

MR. WATTS. That is what comes of imitating another period and assuming it is better just because it is older.

MR. PITKIN. There is one aspect of our modern civilization that has an important effect. To-day we have an unsettled condition, not merely in the economic sense but in a general sense. The whole public, because they have wealth as they have never had it before, are independent; they don't know what they

are going to be doing to-morrow. Why, then, should they be interested in putting all of their personality, or all of the architect's personality, into the building of a house? The United States is in a constant state of flux. Who knows, twenty years from now, where any of us may be, or where our children or grandchildren may be? Feeling that, people hesitate to put the devotion and intensity of personal effort into things that good work requires. I am conscious of that feeling myself.

MR. IVINS. But can you do anything and leave your personality out?

MR. PITKIN. You can do anything and change your personality in the doing of it by your act of will.

MR. IVINS. You can change your individuality by going to a beauty shop, but I doubt if you can change your personality—except with an axe.

MR. CORBETT. I think, as Mr. Pitkin says, that we are in a transitional stage, and in the history of the world those periods were not apt to be productive of outstanding works of art.

MR. WATTS. Do you feel, then, that we are doomed to be inferior, artistically, to other periods in the past?

MR. CORBETT. No. It is just a question of adjusting ourselves to a new social condition. I don't think that with the individual there is any less love of the beautiful than there ever has been. I

think it is the strongest instinct in man, next to survival and reproduction of his kind. I think it is the one thing he turns to; and if you give him leisure, no matter how temporary and momentary, he will immediately begin to seek beauty.

MR. PACH. And where will he find it?

MR. CORBETT. The form that it takes may be the worst taste in the world. If he tears off a magazine cover for a picture and pastes it on his wall, the motive that inspires that act is the same that inspires the greatest artist to create the greatest piece of work. It is inherent in human nature.

MR. IVINS. What about that castle full of hideous pictures that I mentioned? You know



Cartoons by Art Young

that if they could get them out of that castle and bring them to New York, they would be sold immediately for fabulous sums, irrespective of what they look like. Is that the instinct for beauty?

MR. CORBETT. That is just what we have to fight against. It seems to me that we are in a bad plight until we get people into the frame of mind of thinking for themselves and taking only what they like. I would rather have a man buy something that showed the worst taste in the world because he wanted it, than have him buy the best in the world because I told him it was good. Until we can develop our natural instinct to demand something that is a satisfaction to us, we won't have much that can be called art.

MR. SIMONSON. Along with that we need a development of community effort, if we are to get anywhere in such arts as architecture. I don't know whether it is possible to get a civic sense in a city as large as New York, but that is what we need. The community should get together, as it has in Frankfort and many Dutch cities, and decide what it needs, and then send for the architect and say to him: "This is our problem. You can do anything but sidestep the problem and fake it. Now go ahead and find the ornament that expresses that." Every time that has been done in Europe it has been successful. Whereas here, every time you haven't a community that is clearly conscious of its real problem, that isn't free to give a mandate to the architect and say, "Light, air, leisure, recreation, and don't you dare funk one of those," then you get this crazy mixture we have of part magnificence, part borrowing, and part Renaissance palace, Roman bath, or Greek temple.

MR. LEACH. This discussion seems to have narrowed down to architecture. I think it would be interesting to hear something of the effect of the American environment on other forms of art, such as poetry. There is Mr. Lindsay, who has hidden in the corner and not opened his mouth for the last hour. How about the poetry business, Mr. Lindsay?

MR. LINDSAY. There are more good poems written than I have the strength to read.

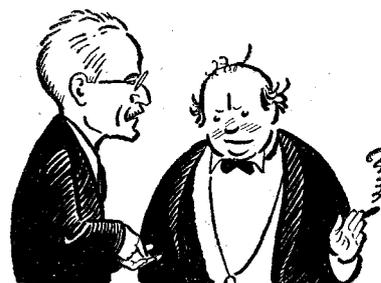
MR. MUMFORD. Me too, Mr. Lindsay.

MR. LINDSAY. I should say any high school of about twelve hundred students will have at least five seniors who are writing good poetry. And when you look at the appalling number of colleges and high schools in this country, I think I may safely say that we have more good poets than United States Senators, even from an exacting point of view. (Laughter)

MR. LEACH. What is your idea of a good poem?

MR. LINDSAY. I think a good poem is a poem that pleases three educated people. If Willy writes a poem that pleases his teacher, his chum, and his maiden aunt, it is a good poem. The trouble is, they will not be satisfied with that. Instead, they will advertise in the *Poetry World* and try to persuade one hundred and twenty million American people that Willy not only writes good poetry for Waterloo, Iowa, but the whole world should know about Willy. Now there is the rub, and none of you have touched on it — the falsely assumed necessity of pleasing the total population of the United States, as though we were electing a President, no matter what piece of art we are undertaking.

MR. CORBETT. If I may tell one small story before I leave, perhaps it will outline the problem for us. An immigrant came to this country and was met by another immigrant who had been here some time. They were discussing the coinage, and the new immigrant took a coin out of his pocket and said, "What does *E Pluribus Unum* mean?" The older immigrant replied, "Don't you know? That's Latin. It's the national motto — 'Where do we go from here?'"



Alford Sturgis and Art Young  
In animated discussion after it's all over

Next month, Professor Irving Fisher, Mr. Fabian Franklin, and others

in a Socratic Dialogue —

"CAN PROHIBITION SUCCEED?"

# Our Lock-step Culture



*Drawing by R. P. Tristram Coffin*

by **STUART CHASE**

**T**HERE ARE many machines in Western civilization. There are many standard behavior patterns. It is argued that there is a connection: that machinery is standardizing human life. There are practically no machines in China, although behavior patterns there are so rigid that they have persisted with little change for four thousand years. Here is an even stronger connection — save that it is upside down.

The Jeremiahs, notwithstanding, have prepared a moderately impressive exhibit. The machine-made character of George Folansbee Babbitt has been set before us in immensely documented detail. Mr. Mencken delivers one hundred pages of additional material every month. Mr. Upton Sinclair flings the goose step at our heads. One distinguished foreigner after another visits Mr. Ford's assembly line and a Rotary Club at its luncheon ceremonies, and from thence departs on the next liner, impatient to put upon a rotary press one more volume announcing that machines are reducing Americans to automata. And many native philosophers, with ample time for observation, are, like Mr. John Dewey, disturbed at what seems to be a growing regimentation in social life.

They are our last frontier.  
They shot the railway-train when it first came,  
And when the Fords first came, they shot the Fords.  
It could not save them. They are dying now  
Of being educated, which is the same.  
One need not weep romantic tears for them,  
But when the last moonshiner buys his radio,  
And the last, lost wild-rabbit of a girl  
Is civilized with a mail-order dress,  
Something will pass that was American  
And all the movies will not bring it back.

Thus Mr. Stephen Vincent Benét chronicles the passing of the Kentucky mountaineer, and brings five specific mechanisms into his bill of charges.

This alleged leveling down, moreover, does not apply to the United States alone. Mr. W. Redpath-Scott, writing in the *London Daily Mail*, notes that a generation ago it was fairly easy to guess a man's occupation by his appearance. Now the silk-hatted city clerk is as rare as the smock-wearing farm laborer. The horsey-faced hostler has given way to a garage man, with just a face. John Bull landlords with rosy gills are hard to find. Where is the Durham miner with his shiny black broadcloth and queer little round tasseled cap? Where is the shawl of the Lancashire mill girl? Where is the navy with his white felt hat, velveteen coat cut square, spotted waistcoat, and blackened cutty clay pipe? Only his kerchief, and that more subdued, survives to-day.

**O**NE COULD quote this sort of thing indefinitely, until a case of the first magnitude had been compiled to prove the regimentation of Western peoples. Nor am I disposed to doubt the general outline of the case. But certain additional questions are in order before any final conclusion can be drawn. Is the machine primarily responsible for this regimentation? Is it more drastic than the regimentation enforced by the *mores* in other civilizations, or among primitive peoples? Are the forms it enforces better or worse than other historical forms?