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Paul to Dario March 15, 1943

Paul Sargent

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Dear Dario,

Your letter came today and as I like to answer a letter when it is hot on my mind I’ll answer now.

Yes, I like the salutation, Paul, better than the others among people I know well.

I had one more chance at the snow last Mon. over at the river. I went down by the river from the lookout point along the paved road. I tried to find a place to work away from that cutting east wind. I worked on two, and nearly froze. I forgot to get some new cloth gloves as I came through Salisbury and the ones I had had holes on thumb and fingers and that wind found the holes. That was the coldest March temperature I can remember, minus 5 degrees. I wasn't much pleased with either sketch, but think I can use one for a large one. They were both 16X20.

When you paint oil in the cold remember to put some kerosene in the turpentine and oil and the paint will work as if the temperature were warmer. You can use pure kerosine if you like, no damage to the paint will result—only that kerosene is very slow dryer. So only a little will do to make the paint mix well.

Am glad to hear you are working up courage to try a larger one. Maybe you need a war dance like a savage to produce the necessary intestinal fortitude then go in and clean up on the picture fight. I think it a good plan to prepare for the appeal to them. A nearly as I can figure out from what he said and my own experience most people like what I call an open landscape; that is, trees not going out the top, a space of sky but not too much as they don't like cloudscapes at all; some foreground and especially a stream if possible not too large, and the best of all they like red-yellow trees reflected in water. So you can guess what is liked and paint accordingly. I have known what they liked best these years but I am stubborn enough to ignore what others like in preference for what I like. But if we paint pictures and have no other income we have to cater to some extent to the whims of the buyers. So I try to have some water pictures “to keep the pot boiling” as the saying goes. But I have also found that when I do my best work in whatever kind of composition someone will buy those too. There are not as many in this last
class as in the main large one. So if you follow the creeks you will find the compositions that most people likek and are likely to sell; the kind we worked on last, the river and the boat. However, as I said, they don’t seem to like a closed in composition, but a more open one.

Many big planes going over these days, one just now. Yesterday one came over that look as closely as I could I could not see it although it sounded near enough. There were a few clouds. A few minutes later another came along which I was able to see in the sky spaces and I then knew why I missed the first one. The second one was very high, one mile perhaps, going very fast, and light in color. The speed was something to startle me. I had a double tail like sketch (sketch in letter). Seldom two hours of the day that one or more don't go over. This seems to be the short way between Indianapolis and St. Louis. I think that one time some years ago before the way when a big “plane-fest” was going on in Cleveland, Ohio, I saw Jimmy Doolittle’s plane go over the house here. I guess because it came along on a time schedule he was following, was a small race, and was very fast.

Let me know when you get back to school and if you have the time we will get out painting some more. You spoke about in letter how much I had helped you. I am glad it is true and hope I can help you a let more. With proper instruction at your age and natural ability you will be painting as a professional one of these days. You are much farther along than I was at your age, and I am trying to balance up with you and other students what I did not get when it would have been very valuable to me. At 20 I started at the college and had help in and outside class by Miss Piper, the head of the dept. and only teacher then. She had gone to Art Inst.. But I didn’t get much instruction that counted until I went to Art Inst. when I was 26.

You have head of Ralph Wickiser. He was one of my best students and last year taught art at Univer. of Louisiana, now in army, I hear. He went east one summer and got in as a student on some scholarship down there.

It seems some rich man (as I remember) furnishes a place for advanced students to work, not a school, and keeps them in supplies. Well, Wickiser was there one summer. He told me a
fellow student had said to him that Wichiser had been getting the right instruction—what he had from me.

I like to get students started on the right track, then they can work out their own salvation, which they must do in any case. If I can get you started with the correct principles of painting it will save you years of floundering around. When you have the fundamentals ingrained in you, you can change your method of painting to suit your inner desires. We must base our work on nature, for if we get too far away from nature we will not be understood. We can’t create a world entirely independent of nature, in spite of what some of the moderns say they can do. My idea about picture making; have a great deal of nature plus some imagination, let the balance if you like swing either way with a larger amount of each—but don’t eliminate either or a person is lost. I claim that a bright noon-day picture in bright sunlight must have mysterious shadows or it will never appeal.

As I have told you the matter of planes in painting is a fundamental of good work. The three big planes in nature should never be lost right when one is painting indoors or not. A knowledge of the imperative of these will get us out of all sorts of difficulties. The three planes must not interfere with each other, neither should details in each interfere with each other. When and if you get to act ???? you will hear much about being careful not to break up the “big light”. That is another way of saying don’t spoil the light in a plane by too many details.

Next most important thing is structure. There is structure of a tree, or an animal or a human body—any live thing, organic nature. Trees follow the laws of growth, as does a blade of grass. Certain trees vary in this makeup, yet all have the same structure, that is a trunk, branches, leaves, etc. Have each of these vary in different trees becomes character.

Structure in animals, man, etc. is the skeleton underneath, a framework that holds the external features (skin, flesh) in place. Think of a collapsed tent with the poles and other framework holding it up. An artist once said (and rightly) that drawing or painting that left out structure made him think of “boned turkey.”
Keep in mind planes as you paint—it is the greatest technical help there is. Again and again go back to testing the planes of your picture. You haven’t been in my classes but if you had you would have remembered the emphasis on planes. Without the planes well expressed there can be no feeling of solidarity or substantial reality.

You know the three big planes of nature, the land, the sky, and the trees or buildings upright on the land. They usual big values of these are sky lightest, then land, then trees and blids. With snow, the land and sky values reverse.

You asked for a “map” or “plan” of the premises. Find it enclosed. This is the “front elevation:. This was taken some 12 years or so ago at a time when I was taking life very seriously. The reason was I had in process of separation from one of my best beloved girls, hence the very solemn expression you see. Yes, I recovered as you see, and am now glad things went that way. A long sight of things years later as we look back makes the going seem smoother but not so at the time. Well, you will not doubt have had or will have such times—but my advice is don’t let relatively small matters like than get you down.

The picture that I had intended to give you I have misplaced. I liked it better than this one. I had this one taken at a time when I was considering taking a steady job and that alone is enough to make me to have serious thoughts—well anyhow when nothing seems to count unless I am free to paint.

You asked for names of paint firms. All or nearly so for some years I got of the Permanent Pigments Co. I am including their water color pricelist as I haven’t any of their oil blanks. I have marked prices of the oils that I have. You should write to them for their price list. They may not want to sell to you direct by mail s they have firms selling their colors in certain territory. No doubt there is a firm in St. Louis selling P.P. colors. I get 25% discount and could order for you and would give you the benefit, but the extra postage would not save much. I am sending an order in a few days, let me know what you want and you can have it at cost to me. Any how write to them for their literature.

Artists Supply Co. Martinsville, Ind. Is another place for colors and other things, write to them. Cariann uses these
colors. I have used some. About same price as P.P. I get no rate from this firm.

Many years I bought of F. Weber Co. 705 Price St., St. Louis, Mo. They are high, but have about anything.
Sincerely,
Paul