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Paul to Dario April 22, 1943

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P to Dario April 22, 1943
Dear Dario,

I was glad to hear from you.

Tonight is steady slow rain, too much of it for the farming and gardening to do best. But the plowing is far ahead of last year at this time. This afternoon with the garden tractor I went over my garden—what I have planted so far. The tractor makes gardening a light chore now and I don't mind doing it, which is something I could not say heretofore. I have two gardens and a rather large potato patch to tend this year and do my bit toward the war. I had the same last year, except the potatoes. Altogether, perhaps an acre of ground. I will have most of the work to do but Sam will help some with the potatoes. I like gardening, except that there was too much hoeing to be done before I got the tractor a year ago. And I could not keep ahead of the weeds if there was much rain.

I have been so busy getting the garden functioning that have done very little painting for several weeks. Nothing as yet to paint outdoors and I was getting fed up with indoor painting. This time of year I sort of lay off the painting for awhile. I will get going again just as soon as the vegetation is far enough along.

We have another worry now in painting pictures. Masonite board is hard to get. It is being used in planes and gliders I guess. I can use gypsum board if necessary or I did up to about 10 years ago. It is not as good for strength but if painted on both sides in one operation and the rough side made rougher with paint, it will do.

I am glad you were not too badly discouraged over your pictures just finished. With large ones a person learns things they never would learn on a small one. So no matter if they are not a success one has learned something that will crop out in later ones to make them successes.

Without seeing your pictures I can't very well tell you what to do except in general terms. You will find as you work that the knowledge of planes will help you more than anything else. Always test your three big planes, let them, as more or less simple masses against each other, be distinct, distinct as to
values and also as color—but values are of most importance. The sky, the land and the trees of bldgs, or both—one, two, three values. Next, these big planes (if large) must be broken into with lights and darks. These will get complicated and break up the big masses so be very careful what you do. These lights and darks must hold to and belong with the planes, too light or too dark or off color will destroy or weaken the strength of the big planes. Better far to leave too few than too many. You can’t possibly paint all these lights and darks you see—so choose the ones that seem to tell the most and put those in.

In your picture, you say the foliage up front is too warm and the back trees too cool. Well, in that case you need to put some of the cool color front and warm color back to make the colors interlock. I have found after much struggle that whatever color is in the light parts must be repeated in less strength in the shadows somewhere. I have some pictures of mine of bright yellow hickory trees in the woods against cold green and purples farther away. That was the way it was in nature (or the way I saw it). I found that to harmonize the front and back I had to get some of the orange of the hickory into the shadow, not the same bright orange but muted so that it looks like a similar tree in shadow. And these echoes of the keynote color can be introduced along the edges of the bright tree as to soften the contrast in color and value, mostly color. Some years ago I painted a brightly colored maple tree along a creek with dark and colder trees against it. Indoors I struggled long and hard to get some harmony. When I finally ignored what I had seen there in nature, I began repeating in the big shadow (warm color in shadow) some of the color of the maple, I began to get results that pleased me.

There is another way of doing the same thing—to harmonize a front and back. Usually one get discouraged when he has a harsh set of colors and hard edges. When this is the case you can do what is called a “scrumble” over part of the picture or all of it. Mix a gray, best to leave it light in most cases and not very cool, but cooler than the reds and yellow of fall trees. Can use pure white but it is cool, just a little green perhaps or a little light cadmium red with the white. Paint this on over the whole or part
of the picture not covering entirely so you have much (half of the color left. Now you can let this dry or you can paint into that colors that are rich and warm being careful not to let the scrumble and these colors mix too much. I have brought many pictures out of the doldrums this way. The gray scrumble being in all the planes and colors brings a harmony. In nature there is always some gray that pervades the whole scene and we must try to see it and paint it into the picture. This scrumbling is one way of doing it.

I promised you a picture. I did not have one ready made to send you so today I worked on one I think I will send. It is from a sketch I made one fall along the Mississippi River north of Chester a ways. And it is red and yellow! I will send it in a frame I have. I made a mistake one day in making a frame and did not discover until too late that this frame is 12X17 instead of 12X16. The frame is one of my best for finish, better than the one you have. I want to get rid of this odd size frame as it will do very well on the wall but not to use on other pictures. You keep the other frame for your own pictures.

I don’t know how soon I can get this picture to you but it will be coming. I have it, I think, about finished—but can't always know .

You should turn your pictures to the wall and don’t see them for awhile, days or weeks so then when you see them your eye sees the worst defects at once. Now remember when you first see them note what need to be done or your eye will (and mind) will get accustomed to the defect and you will not think it important—the first thing that strikes you is the important one, I claim.

I was considerably disappointed over the Decatur exhibit that turned all of mine down. It is this way. Being turned down affect more than just one’s feelings—it hurts the pocket book. I, as one of the painters of central Ill. Wanted to be represented there. People with money to buy pictures but with no real appreciation of them will be persuaded that my pictures are not good enough. They know probably nothing about the politics of exhibitions and assume that everything is on the square. The older I get in knowledge of such things the more I am convinced
that the art juries are very often not on the square. When I was at Art Inst. an art student friend of mine sent in a portrait to the jury of the American Artists Ex. It was accepted, not only, but given a prize. However, the Pres. of the Art Inst. then persuaded the jury to change their minds, as the painter was just a student in the school there. This wasn’t hearsay.

I think perhaps, I have you my ideas about the state of art at present, in another letter, which is that art as well as governments, education, business, etc. is in a state of degeneration, we are at a low mark after hundreds and thousands of years of downgrade.

The biggest war of historic times is proof enough of profound evils in human relations, so it is fair to suppose that all the other things of human activity are likewise at low ebb. We have nothing in art since the Greeks that compares with their works, and we have nothing in our time comparable with the work of the Renaissance. I hardly think many will consider the modernists anything but a degeneration from the impressionists. I am sending you, if I don’t forget, some photographs of recent modern art. There are typical examples of what modern art is not. Most modern art examples can be described by the one word—MORBID.

I used to know in Chicago a young long-haired sculptor who sculpted some of these monstrosities similar to these reproductions. When he was examined for the army in other war he was declared by the doctors as sub-normal and turned down. He married a rich Chicago girl and I haven’t heard of him for years. His name was Zukaliki, that is the way the name sounded.

In these reproductions, the upper right of the two figures certainly is a right mess. Just what goes on in the mind of the person who made it is beyond me. I believe in plenty of freedom of thought but I can’t see anything of attraction in this. I am reminded of what Mr. Shulz of Indiana said of the modernist, “If anything resembling beauty should creep into their pictures, they would feel disgraced.” Summing up the modernist trend it certainly is a great field day for those who are technically incompetent, and those who missed the instance anyhow and took to painting.
Before long you will be one among the 8 or ten million in the armed forces. Well, it is a sorry pass the world has come to that so many young men ready to do something worthwhile in the world have to stop their progress to put down the international gangsters who planned to make slaves of them. All this misery of life and death because a crack brained individual thought he could harness the world to go his insane way. If he had stuck to his painting, while bad enough, as we see in the modernist, he would not have brought so much suffering to a world.

I have two grand nephews in the army. One is radio man on the big ferry command planes. He hasn’t said just where he has been but some gifts sent home indicate he has been to Indian since his furlough in January.

Jack Branson is in Colorado camp. He gets instruction in drawing figures at Colorado Springs two nights each week. Watch your step when you get in, you may find something similar. I could help you a lot in painting if we could work together. But war puts away any chance of that now.

Sincerely,

Paul