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Paul to Dario Oct. 22, 1943

Paul Sargent

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P to Dario  Oct. 22, 1943

Dear Dario,

Glad to get your letter some days back.

I am very busy these days as you may guess—working against time as usual. The fall color lasts but a short time. Up to date I have worked on about 25 pictures large and small, and the small ones can be potential large ones if I think they deserve it.

I am staying at home this fall. Had thought of visiting my friend Donwell at Donnellson but so many things conspired to prevent my going last month. One can waste a lot of time from painting if he travels too much. Also the tire and gasoline questions discourage any unnecessary goings. I have heard of the serious troubles of others away from home and a tire quits. I would have made my trip to D. on the train and that is some job too. Try carrying enough canvas stretchers and boards, etc. etc to last a week of painting. So I am staying at home and hoping that in another year conditions may be better for trips.

Since I did not hear from you for so long I suspect that you might be flitting from camp to camp. You will no doubt be very busy as my grand nephew was when he was getting his training in radio. He is now teaching, just what I don't know, between trips across the Atlantic in the big planes.

I can guess your job after your schooling is over. My guess is you will got to Italy to do work, not physical, in that part that is occupied by the Allies, which may not be distasteful to anyone.

The summer and fall have been too dry for best color, but it could be much worse, the maples have been really fine and some individual trees still are. The early color, the hickories and some others, were disappointing, turned brown (some) before summer was over and fall. Some few in certain places in woods, where they got more moisture, were as good as other years, but were mostly in impossible places for painting them. So I got few pictures of the hickories.

The maples have been wonderful—their time is almost over. The oaks are getting color now but will not be their best, many of them so brilliant other years are browning without color, yet other oaks (a few) seem to be as good as they ever are. I guess
it is a matter of moisture available to each tree. Anyhow the fall painting season is about 2/3 gone.

For three days or four I have been going to the woods which is a 13 minute drive away—east. Several years ago I was told of this woods by a friend who paints in spare time. It covers 15–20 acres, in a valley with low hills and a paintable creek when it has enough water which it hasn’t now. There are the finest trees here I have seen around in this part of the country, burr oaks, sycamores, elms, maples, walnut, hackberry and others. This woods, according to the owner, has never had any trees cut in it except dead ones, so it is practically as the Indians knew it, big trees in mixed groups which are a delight to the mind and eye of a painter, and a disappointment to a lumber man, because he cannot destroy them. The land has been pastured for years so there is no excess underbrush or two feet tall loose weeds in the way as along our Ambraw.

These very tall and large trees are not easy to get into a picture, as I discovered. I found what appeared to be the perfect composition, a large leaning sycamore with some large straight elm and sycamores in front. I made a 12X16 sketch of it and am studying to see if it is as first appeared. I think it is.

I don’t find much more difficult things than very light maple trees in the woods with sun spots on them. Today I stayed at home and tried a large maple tree that ranges from light yellow to strong orange. I used a 25X30 canvas, was close up, looking under the tree at our old house, showing about 2/3 of the bright of the tree. I worked hard and rapidly for I feel sure the leaves will be gone before I can get back to it. It is perhaps the best direct painting in a good sized picture that I have ever done. The foliage (close up) in strong sunlight from right is pure color out of tube with very little white as white coots and grays. I think I have the secret of this foliage. The light shining through the leaves makes them very warm and rich, and the direct reflections from the leaves are nearly pure white, glints of light they are. Going to the big woods tomorrow I think. I usually get painting there by ten o’clock and do three pictures at 25X30 maybe and two smaller 16X20 or 18X22. But you work fast to do that these days. The last sketch I did day before yesterday was
in about one hour, as 16X 20—and it was the best of the three, late afternoon. Easier to work fast there as the shadows are larger and effect more concentrated than at noon.

These pictures large and small are not finished of course, but are far enough along so they can be, indoors.

When the fall season came on, I was much discouraged; it did not seem that there would be much color with the ground so dry. But as the color kept coming it became better, the first leaves fall off and that helps in a way, as one can see through places where before it was solid, and also the bare branches of bushes and trees give the purple and cool grays to offset the brilliant color nearby and make it more brilliant. If one could just freeze the landscape now, as it is, it would be fine, even with half the trees bare or nearly so. I like the brilliant color in masses of warm gray of this place of the fall. But it doesn’t stay put, it is a dying condition and temporary.

One can get tired of brilliant color. I have begun to show it. I took one other day that had only a yellow sycamore in color (the perfect composition I spoke about). Griffith, one of the painters in Nashville, said one day that in the fall he often gets ged up on string color so he goes out on the hills and paints the grayest thing he can find—I guess that is as it should be. You perhaps haven’t yet got your fill of bright color—but you will.

Since few minutes ago planes seemed to be going over all the time. I went out and watched 3 or 4 go by. They were coming from the north, Rantoul perhaps, and going a little east of south. They were headed to a certain place and spaced in Indian file a mile of so apart. There must have been about a dozen as many went by before I went out. This is at 10:30 at night. Boys are getting practice in night navigation. Hardly a period during the day when one cannot see one or hear one. We seem to be on several direct routes between fields.

A boy, whose folks live a few miles away, has been reported missing in a big bomber flight over Germany, killed or captured.

At the University you may have a chance to look into some art books of which they should have a large supply. And get all the painting practice you can, either in a class or out of it.
I have read two biographies of Jack London. The university and the country roundabout is his old stomping ground. He didn’t do much in school as I remember. He was too vigorous of mind to be held to the conventions of educational institutions—professors don’t want anybody to take objections to what they teach.

So far no Saturday class in sight. If the members of last spring don’t urge me I will not bring it up as I would rather paint. Teaching, even in that Saturday work, is somewhat nerve-racking; you won’t think so until you try some of it. It is so much easier to do the painting myself than to tell another how to do it—and some resent my taking the brush although it is clear they can’t follow my instructions.

If the sales keep up I’ll be very busy. Got a check for $200 from Indiana a few days back, from Nashville. It was a 30X36 picture I did at the waterworks. “Trees by the River” Also have sold some small ones at Kings and another from studio larger—the prospects seem good to sell some. The great question is frames, can’t get the lumber at Mattoon, or (here) are too busy to make the molding.

I have thought of you many times this fall while painting and wished you cold be painting too. When I think of the many square miles of brilliant trees to paint and only myself and a few others miles away to get any of it down in paint—I feel very weak and useless, comparatively.

You have the right idea, I think, in believing that you will never be satisfied with any art work you ever do. The artist who lets himself be satisfied with his progress will not progress. John Carlson says he is satisfied somewhat on completing a picture, for a short time. We should not be that way long, and only the person with an exaggerated opinion of himself will feel that way. Sorolla, the big Spanish painter, said when visiting the art saloon when I was there, that he considered himself still a student. At that time he was classed as one of the four great living painters, Sorollen, Zoru, Sargent, and Bernard. How different his attitude from that of our American painter, Waugh. Waugh, before he died a few years back, said he did not need to study the ocean and its ways, as he know all there was to know
about it. He was a painter of the sea. By this time next year I feel sure the Germans will have been disposed of, but there can be much hard fighting before that time. There was no warning in 1918 when the Germans decided to quit, and the chances are they will stop as suddenly this time. They cannot prevent the bombings but just as last time they will surrender when we are ready to invade Germany as they will know it will be easier for them—their country won’t be fought over. They know of course if we can get to the borders of Germany there is not way to prevent our armies going in. This is all a big guess.

Too bad so many million of you young fellows have to spend valuable time in this dirty business, but it seems there is no other way. Your only recourse is to do as much drawing and painting as you possibly can, even a pencil drawing of a few minutes. Make all the drawings you can of anything at hand, chairs, tables, corner of rooms, people, anything in fact to keep in practice. Remember there is nothing more important (or as important) as the large proportions. Practice on simple objects you will learn proportions and perspective which will be of great use to you when you get started painting seriously.

Well, if you have made it this far you will probably make it to the end of the letter.

Best wishes,

Paul T.