11-25-1944

Paul to Dario Nov. 25, 1944

Paul Sargent
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Dear Dario,

My guess is that when you read this you will be far from central Illinois.

This time of year I am very busy as you guessed in your letter. I am always glad when the Christmas rush is over—it gets on one’ nerves after awhile, working against time. But this time I am not quite as ruffled as last year, not for some small pictures anyhow.

I went painting with Donnell down by Carlyle. I was there nine days. I left better painting material here around Charleston than I found by Carlyle. We are in a cottage 5 miles from the Kaskaskia River. The place is a summering place with half a dozen cottages. There were big trees in the bottoms with no brush to bother, elms, sycamore, soft maple, pecans, etc. but no hard maples. I missed the hard maples as they were flaming when I left Charleston, seldom are they better than this fall. Out of the bottom were a lot of white oaks of rather small size. They were brilliant, but one needs the large ones to make pictures, different thicknesses of trunks, large ones have character not just straight up and down.

My pictures were of two kinds, wood interiors or river scenes. There were no hills of consequence as at Charleston. But way along the river were bluffs 60 ft or so high. I painted several of river, looking down and some looking up at the bluff. In all I worked on 16 pictures large and small, two 30X36. One 30X36 was the best perhaps. I was on a sand bar, river low, looking up the river, trees on bank brilliant yellow—red. In foreground was a riffle with blue-purple sky reflections in rough water which came against red-yellow reflections of trees on bank. I like that kind of a composition. I think I got more breadth and simplicity of statement in it than heretofore. I may doctor it a little by the addition of a rock or two in the rough water.

This fall, as you may have noticed in Missouri, was a fine painting season. We have had none as good in four or five years. I was somewhat disappointed at first, some of the early hickories were not up to par, but some later ones were very good. The white oaks and maples were the best in years. The only thing
about the maples I noticed as compared to other good years, they were more yellow and not so red, but that is a minor objection—there is always more color than one can paint. I think perhaps that I did not get as many pictures as last year, but plenty to keep me busy.

Soon after I got back some people came to the studio and wanted a sketch I made at Carlyle, one of the best I ever made. It was one I made away from the place, where we drove one day, on top of a long ridge. It was three white oaks by a road. I sold it to them with the understanding that it would be delivered after I had had time to make a large one from it. I have a 32X40 started. I got $50 for the sketch, size 18X22. Last spring I revised my prices upward, mostly on the larger sizes. I work on the theory that people appreciate what they pay for.

This has been my best year for sales. If I could be sure it would continue in the years ahead, I would feel better. The worst part of is that it took a war to bring a little prosperity to some of us. That is certainly a condemnation of our lop-sided so-called civilization.

Before I left home this fall I worked around Charleston, and several times I went east to paint with a fellow from Casey, a student, named John Collins. Have a 20X24 sketch I made on one of those trips of a larger oak tree about half turned in color. I am considering making a large one from it. It is in a wood lot, a road, rather open woods. I have troubles getting canvas, which makes me consider more than a little. Have had an order for a roll of canvas with a big art store for six weeks now but haven’t yet received it, likewise a half order for stretcher strips since early last summer. Lack of lumber and help, I guess.

Donnell did some good painting this fall. He had a bunch of large sized canvases, backside prepared, and he filled all of them with one or two times on each. He works fast with large brushes. His main fault as I see it is getting the pictures in too low a key, but he got rich color. I worked close to him one day and watched his procedure. (I tell you this because it can help you in the future when you get to painting again.) His first painting (after sketching main maples) were the shadows. He put in three main rather large purple shadows first, which is o.k.
with reservations. He keyed his picture in that way with those heavy shadows. Instead I think he should have put in one shadow then started with the light (sky) and gone darker only as far as necessary to get the range of values. He asked my advice and I told him about the low key and how to avoid it. His later ones were better. I got pointers from his work. He wouldn’t say much when I asked his opinion of mine.

The mild weather of the fall still persists in spots. So far we have had ice only a night or so, and not much. Still very dry. Read that our deficiency of rain fall was 5 inches for the year. Today light rain. Water at dam barely getting over.

I was glad to hear that you and Danny finally got together. He told me about it in his last letter.

You and Danny will make good at painting if you can take it seriously and study. You are both much farther along that I was at your ages. You should try to go to art school if you can manage it after the war. I think you both should have another job to pay the bills and paint on the side, until you get further along. It is tough going I can tell you to get to the place where sales of pictures will be enough to pay the bills. But you both have a good start along the way. Too bad that a war has to be fought before you can get going on the painting.

The last Newsweek magazine has an article about a picture in Australia. It is a portrait, modern kind, if such things can be called a portrait. I would say it is “caricature.” It got into court and stirred up a rumpus. It is the kind I would not have near me. I may not be able to prevent bad dreams at night that I certainly can do so in the daylight.

Whenever you land in the old country, you will no doubt see some art, certainly some old buildings, and historic ground where thousands of people have lived and worked and gone.

With your restricted writing you remind me of something I read during the other war. While it was going on a small boy was writing to this soldier. He wrote that his older brothers in the army had lots to tell but couldn’t tell it, while he was free to say what he pleased but couldn’t think of anything to say.

I read at times in your book. As I read I feel that the writer is so biased in favor of the modern that I don’t trust his opinion
on anybody. He spends pages on such queer personalities-- Van Gogh, Cezanne and Gauguin, and only line for John Singer Sargent. I don't suppose he will more than mention Droug Wyn, if that.

It is 1 A.M. so I better get to bed. I don't feel so spry tonight.

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Well it has been several days since I started this letter. There has been a decided change in the weather. Tonight the temperature stands at 22 degrees and may be colder. There is a snow about 1 inch deep--guess Old Man Winter is still at hand.

I haven't any class yet. I am not clamoring for one but won't turn down any eager students that want to learn. Won't be any until after Christmas anyhow.

I am going to try a new style of frame, new for me. I see my supply of metal leaf going and no chance to replenish it, so I'll try painted frames before long. I have a book on painting "Studio Secrets" by Touber in which he describes how to make painted frames with only a little brightness in the of bronze powder and leaf. I have seen such frames in the exhibits—and they look first rate. A frame, as compared to the picture, should have a faded look. I'll have to experiment with gray paint and a little powder. One can mix the powder gilt with oil paint. I have done so.

When I get some pictures back home that have been away in an exhibit nearby, always they are somewhat scratched and need a refinish. It is all the more discouraging now that my supply of leaf is running low. Well, that is it, the only discouraging thing in the world today. Maybe.

I should try the method of a painter friend of mine. He has a few frames in which to show the customer how the picture looks, but he lets them furnish their own frames. That does save a lot of worry about frames. I wonder if some customers do not go elsewhere for picture and frame. I don't like to make frames; it takes too much time. If the time ever comes when sales are as good as now and frames in number can be had, I am going to invest in a bunch of them. But now the frames are hard to buy, lumber is rationed yo know.
Masonite can be had now.
You spoke about fine scenery on your way east. Yes, in New York or Penn. you can find it. I painted one fall in western Penn. at Aliquippa, 20 miles northwest of Pittsburg. I have had others tell about the scenery in N. Y. I suspect the eastern mountains are better for painting than the western ones. I have painted in both. The Appalachians are smaller, covered with trees mostly and on the whole finer in color. The Sierras in California are cold gray granite with cold green trees on them. Well, that is o.k. for them but to try painting a fall season among them with the cold grays would sort of put a damper on one’s enthusiasm. The eastern mountains with the fall color would be exhilarating, purple and blue shadows crawling across from peak to peak. Of course there are colored mountains in the west, I have seen some of them in Arizona—red and yellow rock with some eroded away leaving a red mountain. I didn’t get to paint them.

Well, to sum it up, we need a change. Any one place will pall on us if we paint too long there.

Griffith, one of the painters in Nashville, Ind., said that during the fall painting of brilliant reds and yellows he got fed up on rich color, so he would sometimes go out and look for the grayest scene he could find, as a pleasant reaction from the strong colors.

Well, Dario, I hope this letter finds you somewhere well and happy as the circumstances permit. Let me hear from you when you can write.

Sincerely and best of luck,

Paul