

THE AMERICAN FEDERATION OF ARTS

BY LEILA MECHLIN

AS Robert Louis Stevenson said in one of his poems:
“The world is so full of a number of things,
I’m sure we should all be as happy as kings,”

but unluckily the multitude of interests and activities to-day, all good in themselves, seem oftentimes to bring confusion and weariment rather than joy.

With the purpose of unifying the art interests of the country and binding them together the American Federation of Arts was formed at a Convention held in Washington in 1909. As Senator Root pointed out at that time the value of team work has in these later days been so repeatedly demonstrated that it has become axiomatic. Only by pulling together can the best results be obtained. A great telephone system would be utterly useless without a central office. A national art organization was needed in order to establish connection with the various art associations throughout the United States.

Through the courtesy of the American Institute of Architects, the American Federation of Arts only a few months after it was organized was given office room in the historic Octagon, designed by Thornton, the architect of the United States Capitol, as a residence for Colonel Tayloe, built in 1800 and occupied temporarily in 1814 by President and Mrs. Madison and fortunately protected from the ruthless remodeler by friendly ghosts which were supposed to haunt the mansion. It is therefore still standing unspoiled on the corner of 18th Street and

New York Avenue, with its high-walled garden—an interesting example of Georgian architecture.

Communication was established through this office with art museums and associations in all parts of the United States. Two hundred and sixty-five of these have become affiliated and are styled chapters, including all of the art museums in the United States. These send delegates each year to a convention held, usually in Washington but sometimes elsewhere, when for three days problems concerning the development of art and the spread of its appreciation are discussed by those having expert knowledge and exceptional experience. At these meetings East meets West, North joins with South on a common footing and in a great universal cause. The little struggling museum or association on the Great Plains comes in contact with the strong successful museum or association in the great thriving cities. Both have much to give and something to learn.

Through this federation of art organizations, it has become possible to secure unified effort along any special line when need required. Occasionally some great issue touching art comes up in Congress or confronts the nation. At such time the national organization serving as a channel for widespread public opinion can effectively exert strong influence.

Soon after the American Federation of Arts was formed a request came to it from Fort Worth, Texas, for an exhibition of paintings. The request in previous years had been made to various professional art organizations, invariably without result, it being the business of none to send out traveling collections. This seemed to open a legitimate field of endeavor which should be helpful in increasing knowledge and appreciation. The exhibition was assembled and sent to Fort Worth where it was shown in an improvised gallery in the Public Library. The American Federation of Arts has sent a similar exhibition to Fort Worth every year since, and within three years a regular exhibition circuit was formed in Texas including four or five of the leading cities.

This year the American Federation of Arts has had on the road no less than forty-six traveling exhibitions, which have been shown in 130 cities and towns from New England to California, Michigan to Texas. These exhibitions are widely varied in character. The great exhibition of War Portraits assembled by the National Art Committee of New York to serve as a nucleus for a National Portrait Gallery at Washington is being

circulated under the management of the American Federation of Arts. The Metropolitan Museum and the Chicago Art Institute have both generously lent collections from their permanent possessions and the artists also have contributed. The American Water Color Society's rotary exhibition, established before the American Federation of Arts came into existence, has for some years past been sent out under the Federation's auspices. But these exhibitions are not only of paintings. There are prints, photographs, etchings, color reproductions, designs, textiles, handicraft and small bronzes. In an effort to induce persons of moderate means to take art into their homes, the American Federation of Arts has this year been circulating three exhibitions of prints, chiefly in color, reproducing paintings by the foremost artists, which are purchasable from fifty cents to twenty dollars.

The Federation has also, with this same purpose in mind, established a new service this year and is sending out portfolios to individuals remote from art centers from which selections for purchase may be made. To demonstrate the significance of art in industry it has circulated this year two collections of textiles, American-designed and made, one of printed fabrics and the other of silks and brocades. It has also circulated a Children's Exhibition made up of paintings, prints, sculpture, illustrated books and art objects of special interest to little citizens. These exhibitions are all circuited and managed from the Washington office and vary in cost to the places securing them from \$10.00 to \$300.00, according to the value of the works and hence the amount of insurance requisite.

To meet the great need of instruction on art matters, the American Federation of Arts inaugurated shortly after it was formed the illustrated typewritten lecture, which could be readily sent about by parcel post or express at a nominal sum, and be used in any place that could furnish a stereopticon, an operator and a reader. The first lectures were on American Art and were tried on Washington audiences. They proved so successful and satisfactory that others were gradually added. Miss Frances Morris of the Metropolitan Museum of Art has most generously contributed one on Lace which for several years has been constantly in demand and greatly appreciated. Mr. Bashford Dean of the Metropolitan Museum has contributed one on Armor, Mr. Bryson Burroughs one on Tendencies of the Nineteenth Century French Painting and Mr. Charles O. Cornelius one on American Decorative Arts of the XVII and XVIII

Centuries, to name but a few. The available lectures now number thirty-three, and this year one hundred and seventeen engagements were made.

With the purpose of keeping its chapters and members in touch with one another and with activities in the general field of art, *The American Magazine of Art* was established, at first under the name of *Art and Progress*, and has been published monthly since October, 1909. The endeavor has been to make it a general reader's magazine, upheld to a professional standard, to keep it simple and therefore inexpensive, to set forth those things that are most significant and to treat art within its pages invariably as a factor in every-day life as well as something very precious. Its circulation has steadily grown until it now approximates six thousand. The American Federation of Arts also publishes the *American Art Annual*, the directory of Art in America, founded by Miss Florence N. Levy.

Not least valuable of all the services rendered by the Federation is that which it is able to perform by direct contact with individuals. To the main office in Washington come innumerable letters from those seeking information in all parts of the country.

Within the last two years the American Federation has established offices in New York at the Metropolitan Museum through the courtesy of the Museum, in charge of an extension secretary, Mr. Richard F. Bach, who is also a member of the Museum staff, and a western office at the University in Lincoln, Nebraska, through the courtesy of the University, in charge of Professor Grummann, the director of the University's Art Department. These both strengthen its arm and extend its reach.

Perhaps at this time more than any other time in the history of our nation it is essential that the things of the spirit should be emphasized. Art has a distinct place in the life of the nation as well as in the life of the individual, and if we are to make permanent the civilization which we are striving to establish, we must pass on to others as widely as we can both a knowledge and a love for art, not merely as a costly product, as something rare and valuable and apart, but as discoverable in the so-called little things, through beauty of design and workmanship, in other words, a reverence for beauty and a power to extract joy from sheer loveliness, which after all goes far toward producing good citizenship, and creating freedom in the largest sense of the word.