

THE ROYAL ACADEMY

A FEW years ago, to speak of the progress of the Royal Academy would have been a contradiction in terms ; but a perusal of this year's exhibition shows that the apparently impossible has happened. As I had not visited the Academy for six or seven years, the improvement was probably more apparent to me than it would have been to those who consider a regular attendance to be part of their duty as Englishmen. The stirring to life of this stagnant institution is partly due to the enlightenment of its members ; but to a greater extent to a series of accidents.

The chief sign of grace in the Hanging Committee is shown in a definite attempt to exhibit pictures so that they may be seen ; and to limit the number of exhibits to that end. The old way was to stop hanging only when the last inch of wall-space had been covered. Let us hope that the Committee will carry this practice of selection a step further in the future. Before the war the average number of exhibits exceeded 2000 ; this year there are 1477, of which a number cannot be seen properly, and a larger number no one wishes to see. The Augean stables are only very partially cleansed. The exhibition might with advantage be considerably reduced if more good work were not sent in. Rather should the good pictures be spread thinner, than that space should be filled for the amusement of that type of vulgar mind which delights in drunken monks and mawkish sentimentality.

Another improvement is the arrangement of the sculpture. This is now distributed throughout the exhibition, instead of being piled in a central heap which resembled the yard of a monumental mason.

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This much is due to the Academy itself ; and perhaps chiefly to its new President. The fact that many of our best painters are showing their best work there may, I think, be largely attributed to other causes. The annual output of good painting used to be distributed amongst a number of exhibitions. The New English Art Club, the International Society and the National Portrait Society secured the larger share ; and the vast wall-space of the Academy was the dumping ground for mediocrity which was encouraged by its official sanction. The Suffolk Street Gallery has been occupied by a Government Department. The New English Art Club and the Royal Society of British Artists have thus been homeless. The closing of the Grosvenor Gallery has forced the International Society and the National Portrait Society to suspend their exhibitions. The result is that the Royal Academy has had the pick of the work.

Thus even the arts have not escaped the difficulties of the housing problem. Adversity makes strange bedfellows ; in this case it has made a pleasantly varied exhibition. Some of the painters driven to shelter at Burlington House have been welcomed by its inmates, and their allegiance has been secured by the title of A.R.A. Let us hope that they will not take the honour too seriously. It is a common saying that a painter's originality ceases from the date of his election. I wonder how far this is due to ambition satisfied. I am inclined to think that in most cases it is due to the Academy's tendency to elect those men in whose work they fear no change—that is to say, men whose originality is spent, and who are content to reproduce more and more feebly the work of their youth.

The striking exception to this phenomenon has been Mr. George Clausen. In past years it could be safely predicted of the works of Academicians that one would be duller, that another would be more facile, that a

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third would be greener, a fourth browner. Of Mr. Clausen alone could one prophesy that his work would be better. I know not how many years it is since he took the dangerous bait of Academic honours ; but he has never disappointed us. To strength of realism he added strength of design. In recent years he has become a great colourist. He continues to show himself each year more mature in judgment, more scholarly in technique, and withal more inspired as a poet.

I am not writing a guide to the Royal Academy, or I should draw attention to many pictures worth a close study. I leave it to the reader's judgment to find them—to respond to the infectious gaiety of Mr. Connard's portraits and to rejoice in his consummate handling of fluid paint ; to enjoy the thoughtful stillness of Mr. Harold Knight's " Miss Gladys Hynes " and of Mr. Arnesby Brown's small landscapes ; and to pass by with a shudder the great panel destined for the Royal Exchange and other prosaic records of war-time ceremonies on the home-front.

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