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Buckland Man Paints With Brush of Poet

Robert Strong Woodward Wheels About New England Countryside to Capture Its Beauties and Measure Its Strength on Canvas — Keeps Middle Course — Subjects Neither Too Detailed Nor Too Impressionistic

THE SPIRIT OF PLACE of the New England countryside is indeed potent. Effortlessly it evokes genii to do its bidding. A quarter of a century ago Ethridge Kingsley might have been seen riding about Deerfield in his sketching cart, immortalizing in black and white the region's historical and beautiful spots. Today farther north and farther west another artist pays his homage in similar fashion to the spirit of New England landscape, exploring hill and dale and high pasture in his search for the beauty which his brush would capture and set down on canvas.

In the town of Buckland about two miles from Shelburne Falls, lives Robert Strong Woodward. For 10 years now his pictures have been shown at the most important exhibitions, including the annual shows of the National Academy of Design. where he won the first Hallgarten prize for landscape in 1919. Lovers of the New England scene, its snow covered hills, its black and icy brooks, and starkly skeletal winter trees, have found increasing interest and pleasure in his work. For several years he has been sending pictures to the Springfield Art league's exhibitions, and last fall he won first prize with his landscape "When Drills Melt Fast." So well liked has his work been here that three of his canvases are now permanently installed in the Art museum.

Local Reception

But though the work has won deserved recognition, the man has remained comparatively unknown. Unlike most exhibitors he has not been a familiar figure at local exhibitions. Last week, however, Springfield had a chance to meet the artist in person at a tea given in his honor by the Junior league at the Miller galleries, where Mr. Woodward has been holding a one-man show. There sat a sun-burned and vigorous-looking man, receiving in a wheel chair. Were it not for that fact no one would guess that the painter suffers from any physical disability. Yet a hunting accident 20 years ago changed the whole course of his life.

Born in Northampton in 1885 Robert Strong Woodward set out to be an engineer. At 21 the blind gods that rule the world decreed otherwise. For years he earned a living doing fine illuminating and water colors. At 30 an inner voice spoke, and he cast the die, embarking on a career, alone and single handed, as a painter-spokesman of his native countryside. Before his accident he had drawn as a pastime. An active life denied, he turned his energies to the field still left open. Except for a brief year in Boston at the Museum art school, he had no formal training. Like so many of New England's sons, he taught himself.

Local Color

Circumstances though not the prime molder of men's lives, inevitably leaves their impress. Mr Woodward might not have become the ardent lover of his Buckland pastures,

barns and bridges, if he had wide-world to range. But that condition once accepted, it gave his work a deeper and more intimate touch than the more cosmopolitan artist possible might show. Every stone in every crumbled wall, every tree in every pasture, every frog in every brook, every wide weathered pine plank in every faded red barn—one feels that a knowledge as close and keen as this is Mr Woodward's. He has become the poet in paint of his own locale as Housman wrote of Shropshire and Hardy of Wessex.

Technically it is interesting to observe what effect the necessary concentration on subject and canvas has had on his work. He himself describes his object is to keep a middle course. neither too detailed nor too impressionistic. [first time he says this] Lest his wheel chair shine through the clear and lucent light of a New England spring day, he paints more broadly and coarsely than he might perhaps otherwise. When he first began to paint he used to ramble along the country roads of Buckland and Charlemont. When he found a promising prospect, he would stop, prop the canvas across his knees and fall to.

Now he has a motor car and can't get so far off the beaten track as formerly. But there are compensations. The front seat provides an admirable shelf on which to lay out his paints and brushes while the canvas is propped against the windshield, on an extemporized easel made of boards which fit from door to door. Whenever possible, he rides, with the top down. [This description suggest that he is still driving the 1923 Studebaker]

Though a motor car won't go quite as far into the woods and rocky pastures as a horse and buggy will. It'll go far enough to do a lot of damage. One time Mr Woodward was painting in Heath, when his chauffeur discovered a hole as big as half a dollar in the gas tank. The gas tank, curiously, was empty. The tank was filled, but kept leaking. So they coasted all the way down to Charlemont and got home before the last drop leaked out. It was 12 miles home, but luckily two-thirds of the way was down grade.

Technical Problems

Here is an immediate technical problem which Mr Woodward has had to solve. Most painters paint awhile, then step back, and regard the canvas from a distance. That obviously is impossible in this case. To allow for this fact, he paints more broadly lest the picture become too detailed. He has actually, he says, learned to un-focus his eyes so that he can get the same sort of correction that another man would get by stepping back three or four yards—with results none too good for his eye, according to his oculist, but very desirable for the canvases.

LAST SUMMER MR WOODWARD HAD ANOTHER HANDICAP TO OVERCOME. Neuritis set in in one arm and arthritis attacked the other elbow, so that he could not hold his brushes. The result, again, of necessity was a series of charming crayon sketches, which covered one wall at the Miller exhibition. [the suggestion here is that when he can't paint he draws?]

Self-taught and isolated, as he himself says, the effect has been to intensify his energies. "I live in an isolated way, and I'm not able to get at things," he says, "So there's had to be self-examination. I've been to few exhibitions. But I always cared for Gardner Symons. You know he makes Shelburne Falls his headquarters. With me it's been local country, the local scenery I've cared for. I don't know many artists personally, though Chauncey Ryder is a friend of mine and Rockwell Kent has been to my studio. But it is the spirit, feeling, the

impression of New England, I want to paint.'

Mr Woodward paints quickly and practically always out of doors. He'd rather scrape a canvas clean after he's worked on it two weeks and paint it all over again in one day than have it look as if it had been worked on two weeks. [Hmm, this is suss, we know he often worked weeks on paintings]

Likes Winter Best

Winter is his favorite season, but in some ways his hardest. The Berkshires get cold in December. Bonfires help some and soapstone, will serve partially to warm the painters fingers. But he frankly admits he can't go the limit that Gardner Symons does of painting out doors when it's 10 below zero. [surprising praise of Symons] Sometimes he paints in winter from a buggy or a sleigh, or sometimes from the windows of outlying farm houses.

He is also fond of camping out and in more clement weather will often work all day and then sleep in the pasture where he had been painting. He takes along a pup-tent, but if the weather is good, does not use it.

He loves winter scenes because he can get at the structure of trees then. There is something that eternally intrigues in those gaunt arms against clear hard sky, as Dore knew and Duerer. Snow and remote mountains, brooks cutting a wayward way through shattered ice—there is the influence of Gardner Symons, but surely legitimate, for what would New England be without its winter?

New England barns are another of Mr Woodward's loves. He does them time and time again, from different angles and in different lights. One remembers Monet's classic haystack. Sometime, Mr Woodward hopes to have a show of nothing but barns, if only he can collect enough pictures. Unfortunately, barns are also a favorite with picture buyers. And Mr Woodward is sometimes driven to conceal a barn picture in the hope that the potential purchaser will take 'something just as good.' But when he gets 25 or 30 barns ahead, he's going to have that show.

The exhibition at Miller's illustrated how Intensively he works the vein of his own countryside. There are 11 pictures of the two Keach farms. The Buckland-Charlemont back road, Heath, Chesterfield, Worthington, Town Farm hill, Dockland, Charlemont covered bridge, Leyden, Christian hill in Vermont,—these are some of his subjects. Yet though concentrated in one locale, they are all made in one mold. They have individuality and character, such as only close and loving acquaintance with a landscape will give.

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lover of his Buckland pastures, barns and bridges, if he had had a wider world to range. But that condition once accepted, it gave his work a deeper and more intimate touch than the more cosmopolitan artist possibly might show. Every stone in every crumbling wall, every tree in every pasture, every frog in every brook, every wide weathered pine plank in every faded red barn, come before him as close and keen as this is Mr. Woodward's. He has become the painter of his own locale as Housman wrote of Shropshire and Hardy of Wessex.

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Buckland's Artist and Some of His Paintings



Robert Strong Woodward, Buckland artist



Mr. Woodward's home and studio

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"South Window" interior of Mr. Woodward's studio



"Winter scene from studio window"

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