

# ARTISTS

## Past and Present

ALTHOUGH portrait commissions have been scarce these lean years of the depression, Antonin Sterba hasn't flagged in industry.

### No. 32 Antonin Sterba

If he can't always find sitters who can pay, he can go on painting "interesting people" for his own satisfaction, for "exhibition pieces" and against the day prosperity comes back. On that day, reasons Sterba, the race will be for the strong, the experienced and the industrious. He is keeping up his "momentum," and every race runner knows how important is a fast and vigorous "get-away."

Sterba believes, moreover, that the period of the "isms" is past—that the "isms" sank into the slough of the despond of the depression. When painting "comes back," it will have the grace and the taste of the Italian Renaissance.

He is far from deploring the crudities and brutalities of the masters among the "moderns"—the real masters, not the army of four-flushers that followed in their wake. He even goes so far as to employ something the much-betrayed "Cubists" learned about "planes" in his own true-to-life portraits. But he has no use for precocious youngsters who imitate surface mannerisms, whether of "moderns" or "old masters," without mastering the fundamentals. Here's his advice, which is worthy of being engraved above the portals of every art school in the land:

"Build a foundation to hold a cathedral, not a chicken coop."

Sterba, while a successful portrait painter, whose work hangs in the halls of two universities and numerous other places, is even better known among artists of Chicago and other America as an instructor—competent, sympathetic and courageous. He is teaching nights at the Art Institute of Chicago, of whose faculty he has been a member since 1910 and of afternoons at the American Academy.

Sterba's advent at the Art Institute school was to the accompaniment of drums and "fanfare," as Shakespeare would say. He had been an instructor for eight years, since returning from Julien's, Paris, at the old Smith Art Academy, on Wabash, just north of the Auditorium, where he had received much of his own pre-Paris training—there, and in the school of the Art Institute.

Francis Smith, the academy's proprietor, was something of a "rebel" in the days when the "Fauves" in Paris were making it hot for the "Galon of Bouguereau" and the Beaux Arts school. Rebellion was fashionable in all art centers—Paris, Berlin, Munich and New York.

Smith, while no "Fauve," Paris fashion, believed in something more flexible than the "official" instruction of the day, represented in Chicago by the school of the Institute. Among his students were Walter Ufer, Hovsep Pushman, Ossip Linde, Chauncey Ryder, Carl Sheffler and some more who have since distinguished themselves nationally and internationally.

Sterba, after two years in Paris under Laurens and Constant at Julien's (surely no "bolshevists") returned to Smith's as an instructor. Smith, a talented painter himself, was losing interest in his school, and, upon going to Europe for an extended sojourn, sold it. The new owners operated for a while, but, without Smith's personal touch, the school quickly declined, and suddenly and without warning the students they sold it overnight to the school of the Art Institute, then under direction of William M. French.

The students were notified by an official of the institute school that their easels and effects had been hauled to the new location, and that their classes would assemble there.

Great was the indignation of the students, particularly Pushman and Linde. They would have nothing to do with "the academy" (not meaning Smith's academy—"the academy" was a term applied to "official" art the world over, in recognition of the Paris revolt against the French "academie").

A committee headed by Linde went to the Art Institute and demanded possession not only of the easels and personal effects of the Smith students, but also of "Jerry." "Jerry" was the skeleton that had been at Smith's from time immemorial, the "model" who posed for the classes in drawing.

Carrying "Jerry" triumphantly at their head, the Smith students paraded noisily through the streets as a protest against being delivered body and soul, to "the academy." Then they met and decided upon a "republic." They would operate their own school, with Sterba as instructor.

This school went on for awhile. But "rent days seemed to come every week instead of every month," as Sterba remembers with a shrug, and heat and light bills and model hire had to be paid. Finally, after repeated demand for his rent, the owner of the building locked the doors.

The students were forced to capitulate. They reopened negotiations with the Art Institute, which willingly took them in as a unit, setting off a classroom for them, and hiring Sterba as their instructor.

"Mr. French and his associates treated us royally," says Sterba, "and I was glad to see some money again for my work."

Gradually, of course, the Smith students went away, through graduation and various causes, and Sterba continued on, to this day, as a regular instructor in the school.

Sterba is a Bohemian by birth, but he has been in Chicago since he was 5 years old, and unlike most members of the Bohemian Arts Club of Chicago he has no nostalgia for his native land, now Czechoslovakia. His parents brought him to America, severing sharply their own

# CHICAGO

By C. J. Bulliet

"Mrs. Robert L. Huttner."—Antonin Sterba

connection with Moravia, and Sterba grew up an American with the idea of remaining here and not going back "some time" to Europe. He has been back once to Bohemia, during the two years he was studying in Paris, but found it a "foreign land" and didn't penetrate so far as the town of his birth, Hermance. He was then in his middle twenties, having come into the world at Moravia, Feb. 11, 1875.

"Hard work," as Sterba now remembers, it, characterized his art student days in both Chicago and Paris—indeed, "hard work" seems synonymous to him with "the romance of art." He tries to instill into the minds and even into the enthusiasms of his students the idea that through hard work lies a royal road to success, not a thorny path.

From the start he has been a portrait painter. He has a vivid memory of a painting he did of a little girl in France in his student days for 200 francs, on commission from her mother.

He was spending a two weeks' vacation at Dieppe sketching when a well-dressed French woman and her two daughters came along. The woman looked at his sketch, then invited him to her home to see some drawings of the elder of her two daughters. During the rest of his stay in Dieppe she engaged him as drawing instructor for this girl, and when she came to Paris later she had him paint the other daughter. Sterba is prouder of this commission than any he has had since—his woman "discovered" him, wholly unknown, and had him do the portrait because she liked his work.

More important, perhaps, if less thrilling portraits he has done since are of Dr. H. A. Gobin, a former resident of DePauw university, now hanging in a special chapel on the campus at Greencastle, Ind.; Prof. Albert Wyness Millar of the faculty of the law school of Northwestern university, hanging in the faculty room on McKinlock campus; Wilbur D. Nesbit, Chicago poet; Dr. George Craig Stewart of St. Luke's, Evanston; Henry Kitchell Webster, novelist; Arne Old-



Characteristic of Sterba's style of portraiture.

berg, composer and pianist, and Frederick Victor Poole, painter.

On a sojourn of a year in California, 1929, on leave of absence from Chicago, he did, among other pictures, a portrait of a beautiful Russian refugee, the Baroness de Stackelberg, against a background of dreamy pepper trees and red poinsettias. He lived and worked in an adobe house that year in the outskirts of Los Angeles.

Three years ago he visited the interior of Mexico, where he found people wholly unlike the hard revolutionists of Diego Rivera and

Orozco. They were peasants who loved flowers, carrying home at night bouquets. These he has etched—three etchings, his first experiments in that field, and softly beautiful.

His Evanston home overlooks Lake Michigan. His wife is Mabel Messenger, poet and composer of music for the harp, on which she is an expert player. One of her published poems celebrates an evening twilight over the lake. It is called "Upon an Inland Sea." Sterba sketches the moods of the lake she writes about.

Next week: Eugenie Glaman.