

California Raises the Question of Clivette



The "Rail Splitter," by Merton Clivette.

When the New Gallery, managed by George S. Hellman, passed out of existence last fall, the George H. Ainslie Galleries of New York, with branches in Philadelphia, Detroit and Los Angeles, took over the sponsorship of Merton Clivette. Mr. Ainslie has proved to be as enthusiastic a champion of the octogenarian painter, who made his debut in 1926 at the age of 79, as Mr. Hellman, and to be just as expert in putting forward his not-young protegee.

Readers of THE ART DIGEST will remember the tremendous stir with which Mr. Hellman introduced Clivette to the art world, "the broadsides printed in large black type on a canary yellow background," as the San Francisco *Argonaut* recalls, "exactly as if it were a circus, the exhibition being so cleverly engineered by the New Gallery that nearly a hundred of his works were sold, and Clivette 'made' overnight."

The Ainslie Galleries recently sent an exhibition of Clivette's work on tour, and it was shown at the Oakland Art Gallery (which is a sort of Brooklyn Museum for the San Francisco Bay region) in connection with an exhibition of paintings by accepted modernists, including Lionel Feininger.

The San Francisco critics refused to be impressed and said some very bitter things. Junius Cravens wrote in the *Argonaut*, under the title, "The Clivette Invasion": "Why such superficial stuff should be taken seriously by the galleries, it is hard to say, for it has no value other than its sensationalism, but it is in our midst on both sides of the bay. It is hard to say just why, but it inspires in us an emotion which might most respectfully be described, for printing purposes, as being wrath."

The Oakland *Tribune* used the heading "Is Clivette an Artist—or Faker?" and Florence Wieben Lehre wrote: "Clivette is a world famous name. We have read wondrously laudatory criticisms of his paintings. New York and Paris critics have acclaimed him highly. Artists of real reputation have purchased his work for their private collections. The French government has acquired one of his pictures.

"We don't agree with the world. For, personally, we are of the opinion that Clivette is not an artist; perhaps not even a good faker. But we do admit that he is a puzzler. And we must admire his grit, or whatever it is that prompts an octogenarian with such a strange and varied past—an in-artistic past—to spread his 'art' over the world, modestly proclaiming to said world in lavishly prepared advertising sheets that he is the greatest artist same said world has ever produced. We ask, just as modestly, 'Why blame the world?'"

"Are we too severe on Clivette? Perhaps. At any rate, his former achievements are interesting. He has been a mystic, a poet (we quote this only—we have read none of his 'poetry'), an author of 'pamphlets on every subject under the sun,' a newspaper owner, a highwayman by his own confession, a world vagabond. And you know George H. Ainslie declares that he paints 'as no other man has painted and no other man not trained as a magician can paint.' We do not exactly disagree with George Ainslie."

The *Argus*, the Pacific Coast's monthly art magazine, under the caption, "Oakland 'Debunks' Clivette," said:

"As an advertiser, and one whose quickness of hand deceives the eye, Clivette deserves our boundless admiration. He is a

living proof that the idea which many artists perceive at some time during their careers is true—the idea that the knowledge and appreciation of art pretended by many of our critics and exhibition visitors is best described as being 'bunk.' That such a superficial and pretentious lot of printed nonsense could have fooled so many supposedly cultured persons into purchasing Clivettes . . . is one of the wonders of modern art criticism."

The *Argus* quotes William H. Clapp, director of the Oakland Art Gallery, as saying this: "The Oakland Art Gallery is not purchasing any Clivettes for its permanent collection. And if the gallery's showing of Clivette along with true 'modernism' has not taught discrimination to a goodly proportion of those who were exposed to them, then there is little hope for good influence through educational exhibitions in galleries."

THE ART DIGEST has printed impartial accounts of Clivette since the beginning, and now it presents "The Rail Splitter," a 30-inch bronze statue in the nude, which Mr. Ainslie declares to be "one of the most extraordinary conceptions of Lincoln I have ever seen," and to have "the simplicity and forthrightness of a medieval figure of a Christian martyr." It is on exhibition at the Ainslie Galleries in New York, and replicas will be sent to the Ainslie galleries in other cities.

"I am aware," said Mr. Ainslie, "that some will condemn it on the grounds that it is undraped. But that is unessential criticism. Only by stripping the figure could the artist tell the story he has told. I have never seen a statue of Lincoln that had the spiritual content of this bronze by Clivette. It expresses the inward idealism of the Emanci-

pator in terms of the physical—in the torso emaciated by labor but muscularly overdeveloped by the same toil. The crossed feet seem to grow out of the earth and the strange pose, at once naive and striking, suggests ancient statues of Christ."