

## “ART IS ON THE BUM”

—Bulger

Several years ago Judge Miles Bulger, at that time Presiding Judge of the County Court, impatiently remarked, “Art in Kansas City is on the bum.” It would be worth while to evaluate his opinion of Missouri Art as depicted by Thomas Hart Benton in his recent mural work in the State House rotunda. Did Benton intend his murals to be satirical or realistic? Is Benton trying to jar the moral sense of Kansas City out of its coma or is he merely holding the mirror up to nature?

The dominant figures in the picture are a butcher, a public speaker and a boss. The butcher is sledging the life out of a particularly meek and innocent-looking cow. The back and the buttocks of the speaker are highlighted—his face not being shown. The boss sits calmly and confidently dominant, his eyes toward the east where lie Jefferson City and Washington, new worlds to conquer. He disdains to look at the vista of business men, depicted as senile, who sit dejectedly fingering their goblets. The whole civic scene, flanked by a laborer skinning a beef paunch, a Jesse James train robbery, a lynching bee and backed by a naked night club dancer exudes an atmosphere of helpless futility. The background is three-fourths slaughter house, painted with a buzzard-like gruesomeness. Behind the abattoir the facade of the Art Gallery intrudes a discordant note. Still further back is the Liberty Memorial, the Power & Light Building and a couple of telegraph poles.

Not one single brush mark, save the Art Gallery, indicates a cultural or moral or spiritual interest. Not a church! Not a college or University! Not a school! Not a religious symbol! Not a child! Not a Mother—unless the frantic face of the negress in the left upper corner or the naked night club dancer is intended to symbolize motherhood. Slaughter house! Boss domination! Business men who don’t give a damn! Is this the Heart of America?

Some of us wondered when the mural was first published whether Kansas City would

not rise in moral wrath against such a portrayal of her essence. Not a chirp—not a peep. Thus does silence concede the accuracy of Benton's portrayal. No doubt the fathers and mothers of Kansas City and of the hinterland will proudly explain to their children that it is eminently fitting to immortalize heavy-jowled bosses imperishably, at public expense, upon the walls of the State Capitol. They will point out that the Alpha and Omega of life is power over their fellow men, and that the power is easiest attained by the regimentation of criminals, and based upon the utter indifference of our religious, professional and business leaders. They will moralize that in this changing world Tom Pendergast, and not George Washington, should be their youthful ideal.

This is no criticism of the artist. He saw what he saw. He has portrayed what he saw. The accuracy of his perception is attested by the complete acquiescence of his subject. But his artistic vision was circumscribed: An over-stuffed ballot-box, a \$40,000.00 underworld funeral, a Union Station Massacre, a bandit golf course, and a kidnapers' retreat surely deserve muralistic treatment—But, shucks, Art is Art.

A BUM ART CRITIC.

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