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# American Artist

NOVEMBER  
1958

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# American Artist

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EDITORIAL

The Familiar Can Be Painted

Recently we talked with an art director who had planned to take his vacation at a popular painters' colony. Circumstances, however, obliged him to stay at home. As he unpacked the materials he had so carefully collected for his trip, he admitted to a wave of self-pity. What, he asked, was there worth painting around here?

And then it came over him; he had never *really* looked about his own town; his motif, he believed, was always at least fifty miles away. But you have guessed it: our artist "found" more good subjects to paint than he had vacation time, and as a result he plans to continue his exploration of his own neighborhood.

Andy Wyeth, who is the subject of a feature article in this issue, has painted some of his finest works not more than a few rods away from his own doorstep. The same can be said in general of Charles Burchfield, Thomas Eakins, and George Bellows. Nor must we forget the celebrated Rembrandt who found in his beloved Amsterdam all the inspiration he needed to draw, paint, and etch one masterpiece after another.

Certainly this testimony is not offered to disparage travel or to suggest that artists would do better work if they *always* stayed at home. A change of scene is as beneficial to the painter as it is for the school teacher. But we do say that in art at least, the truly familiar need not breed contempt. By and large, a grass-roots tradition gave Italy, France, Germany, Holland, and England much of their greatest flower, and while the masters may have gained inspiration from other nationals, they did not seem to consider provincialism a limitation on their *artistic* vision.

—Norman Kent

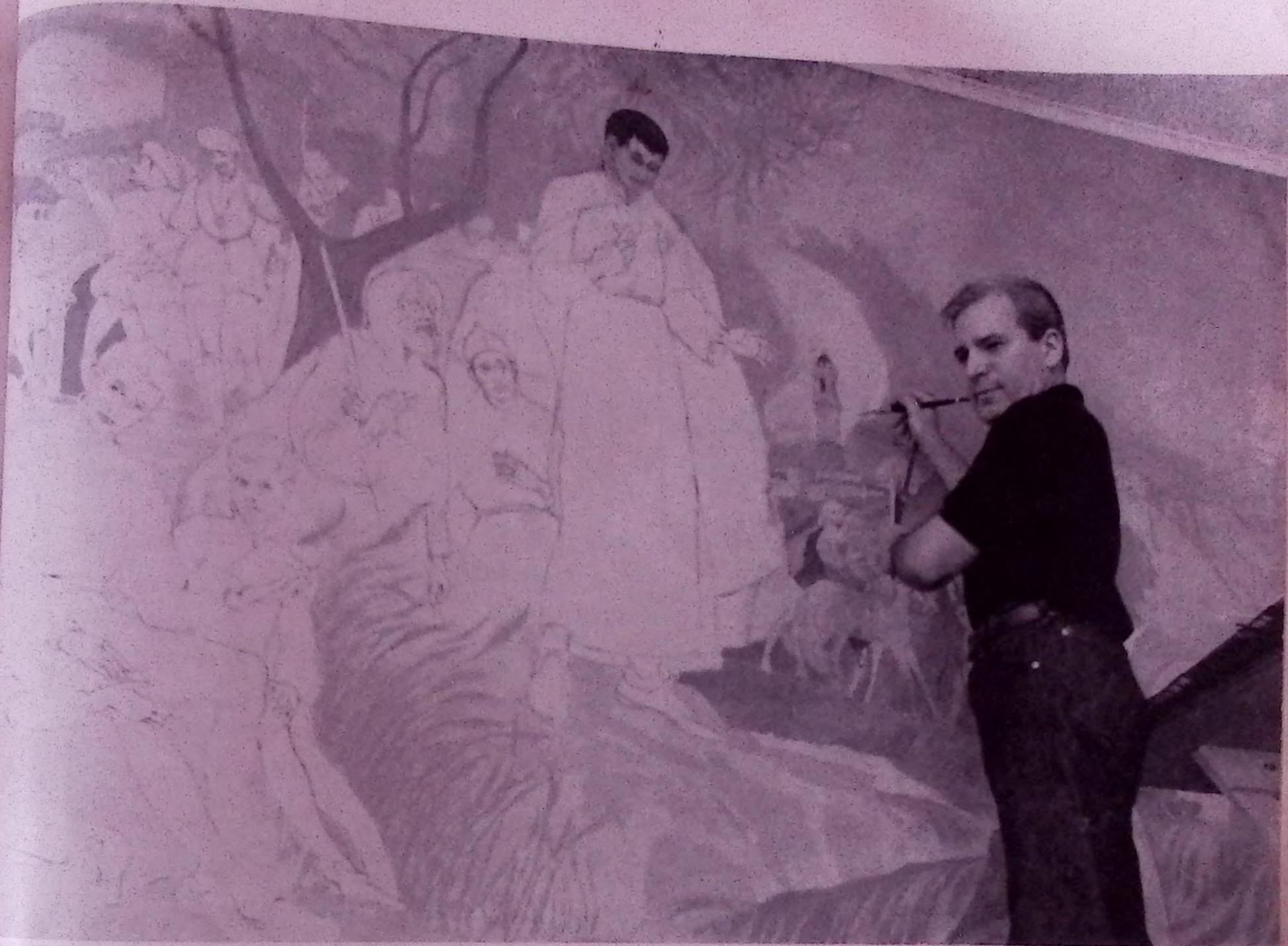
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LARGEST ART MAGAZINE CIRCULATION



*The artist at work on the central section of his mural (7 x 28 feet) for Fairfield University*

## BERNARD RILEY

*an intuitive painter*

BY FREDERIC WHITAKER

WE ALL HAVE OUR OWN WAY OF DOING THINGS, and if we are sufficiently human, we wonder how other people can possibly accomplish anything without following our methods. Although we are often surprised to find that other systems work, we are prone to believe secretly that the success of the other fellow's system is surely the result of a fluke.

I am reminded of this tendency as I interview various artists and learn of their many contrasting techniques. In the past few years I have analyzed and described quite a number of procedures — most of which, despite their variety, appear logical and well

thought out. However, now we are confronted by Bernard J. Riley, an artist who has no "system" — or *apparently* none that tells him in advance what his finished work will turn out to be — yet he achieves artistically powerful and definitely concrete results that need no interpretation. However, reason tells me that order doesn't proceed, undirected, from chaos, and if an artist gets significant results consistently, there must be some method to his painting essays, though he himself has not analyzed it. Let's consider Riley's "aimless" course.

Starting a painting, Bernard Riley makes no pre-



J. STREET OIL 29½ X 35 BY BERNARD RILEY

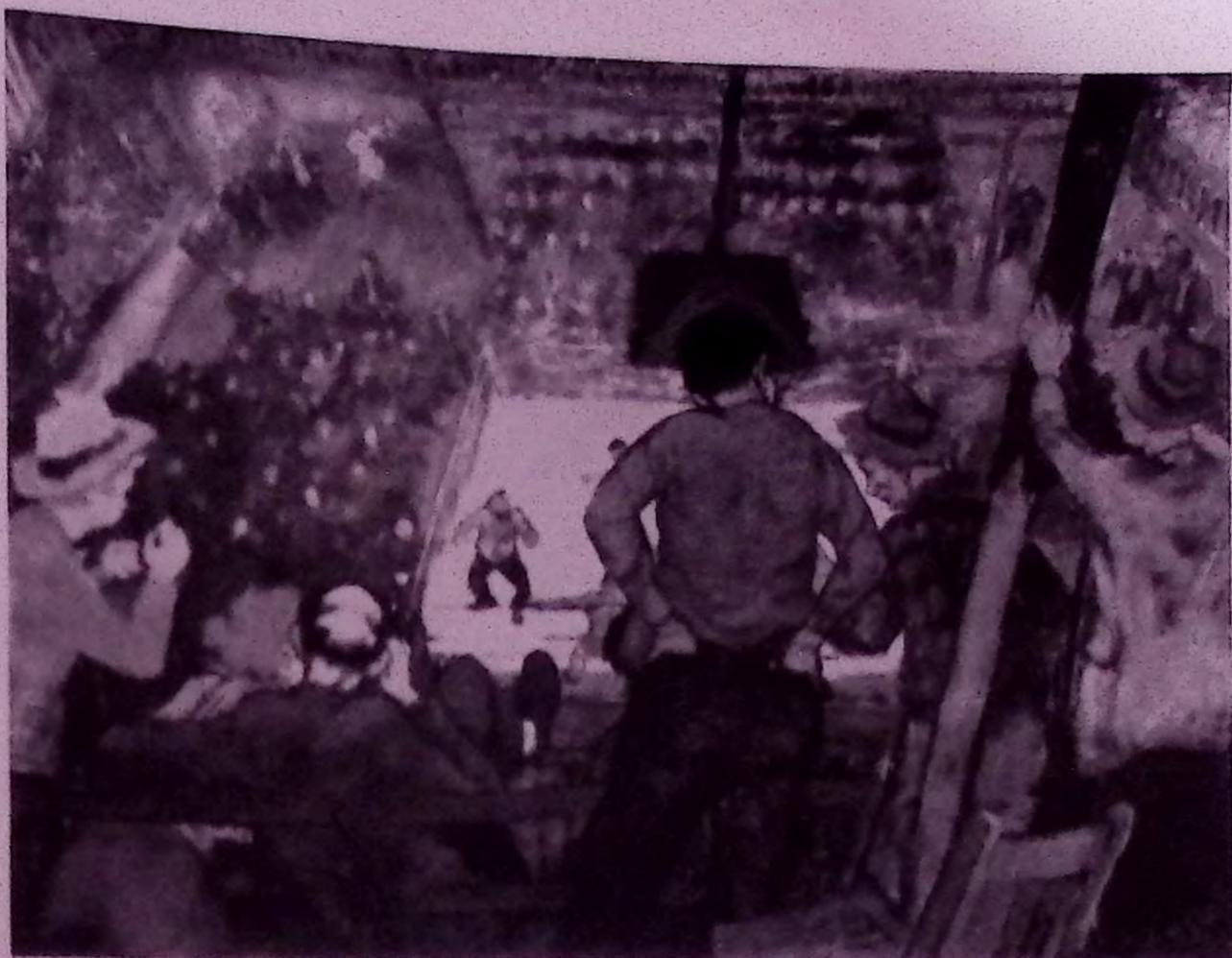
*Two awards: New Haven, and Milford, Connecticut*



GRANDPA OIL 46 X 31½

liminary sketches, and in his own mind he may have no knowledge of what he expects to compose other than, let us say, a single figure or "character." Riley is essentially a genre painter and most of his works have been suggested by the people or settings in the old-time factory section of Bridgeport, Connecticut's West End. Assuming that a certain picturesque individual fires Riley's imagination, he will make a mental note of that person's characteristics. In the studio, he will choose a canvas — usually large, up to six feet in length — and with no other preparation will carefully draw the figure with charcoal or brush. Only infrequently does he use a model, except perhaps himself reflected in a mirror. How he knows just how large to draw the figure or where to place it in the rectangle of canvas is a mystery to me. I doubt that Riley himself could explain it easily. He appears to work by intuition. With the figure precisely registered in strong line, he then decides what else the canvas should include, and after probing the possibilities, as one feels out an adversary, he draws the additional material in outline.

Bear in mind that this artist is not doodling on a scrap of paper for a layout or an inspiration as most of us do; he is attacking a five- or six-foot canvas and a lot of work — and almost invariably he wins! Color is not even considered until his drawing is completed in detail — and Riley is a consummate draughtsman. A favorite next step is to cover the canvas with a light coat of very dark pigment, possibly a warm gray with greens, reds, and browns intermixed. This application



DURWIN'S ARENA OIL 15 X 21 BY BERNARD RILEY  
*Critic's Award, Connecticut Contemporary Show*



WORCESTER POOLROOM OIL 40½ X 46  
*American Award, Silvermine Guild of Artists, 1957*



NOT BY BREAD ALONE OIL 48 X 36  
*Two awards in New England regionals*

is so dark it is difficult to see the lines of the drawing unless one views them slantwise against the light. When this is dry, Riley is ready to begin the actual painting. Needless to repeat, he paints from dark to light, and with lighter color he paints the figure or, in the case of a composition containing numerous figures, he develops what he considers to be the key character, which may or may not be the largest in the picture. This figure is carried virtually to completion, and it then serves as a prototype against which all others are worked out and related as to color and value. After the painting is finished—finished, that is, according to all customary requirements—Riley still returns to it frequently to change areas, never satisfied as long as he considers any part, large or small, can be improved. Like George Inness, he never really “finishes” a painting until someone (usually Mrs. Riley) takes it away from him.

Reverting to our artist’s systemless “system,” it is clear that this apparent absence of formula does not proceed from lack of planning ability by any means but from an express determination to avoid formula—a deliberate desire to be uncommitted as to the final pictorial effect. Riley says: “When I have reached a point where all compositional details are clear to me, then my interest has disappeared and any additional

## BERNARD RILEY



TATOOED MAN OIL 42 X 18½



NEWSBOYS OIL 30 X 36½ BY BERNARD RILEY

application represents just so much routine work. Each painting is an adventure for me. I paint solely for the joy or excitement of painting and, as we all know, enjoyment comes almost entirely from anticipation or expectancy, rather than from realization. I like to feel that as I proceed I may encounter open doors to unknown painting possibilities. Entering these doors and exploring the territory within, feeling my way about through experimentation, I am accorded the delightful thrill that comes of discovery. Thus each painting becomes an entirely new venture, and the pattern of achievement may vary in each case.

"In my daily work at the metallurgical laboratory, everything conforms to a perfectly planned order. There is no room for guesswork and little for imagination, really, for one knows in advance what he is expected to achieve, and the means of arrival are all known to the expert workers. This is scientific routine, but art is something else, and this knowledge accentuates the advisability of keeping my two endeavors separate. My desire for pure imagining is increased by the exactions of my remunerative vocation. Incidentally, my extended observations convince me that the artist who is tied to the workaday world through a job is likely to have a sounder over-all judgment and clearer perception in his art work through contrast,

than he who moves only in the world of studios and galleries."

It will be seen from this evidence that Bernard Riley is definitely individual, a statement which can justifiably be repeated for emphasis; and this is offered as a cordial compliment. He is modest, sincere, and solid. He is a prodigious worker, actually carrying on two full-time jobs. By day he works as a technician in a metal assay laboratory, and by painting at night, on week ends, holidays, and vacations, he piles up in a year as many painting hours as he devotes to his assay work. He has calculated that of the 8,760 hours that there are in a year, we spend 2,920 sleeping (at eight hours per night). That leaves 5,840 waking hours per annum. Working forty hours weekly, with five holidays and two-weeks' vacation, we give our employers 1,960 hours (or less if we count illness, etc.), which leaves us, to arrange as we please, 3,880 hours — or virtually double what we spend in the office or factory. With the exception of time for meals and other routine essentials, Riley works at art.

This preoccupation with occupation is undoubtedly the key influence in Riley's procedure and outlook. Art is his life. His full-time concern with this muse began when he was a small child, when he worked ex-

*continued on page 69*

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**KNIVES** (from page 68)

tween the knife and the canvas, the easier it is to leave a thick layer of paint (illustration 2). When the knife is held in a flat position, paint can be blended more efficiently than with a brush. And when the blade of the knife is sufficiently large and elastic, a perfectly smooth surface can be produced easily. Note the position of the fingers while holding the handle of the knife (illustrations 1, 2, and 3).

In the other illustrations, the use of a palette knife by Rembrandt and Goya is exemplified. Impetuous knife work is often in evidence on the late paintings by Rembrandt. Goya used this instrument with zest throughout his career. His painting, *The Forge*, at the Frick Collection, measuring 71 $\frac{7}{8}$  x 49 $\frac{1}{2}$ , is, as far as I could verify, painted almost exclusively with knives and with considerable impasto. As for myself, I would prefer to forego the use of any other tool but a palette knife — and one round sable brush. Ah! The round, soft brush, the paradisiacal delight! About this instrument I shall rhapsodize in the not-too-distant future.

**RILEY** (from page 61)

clusively with pencil. He was born in Bridgeport, Connecticut, and his permanent residence has always been within five miles of his first home. (With the exception of his three years of naval war service.) His present home, which he built largely with his own hands, is in Fairfield. Riley's studio is in the basement where he works always under artificial light! So intense is his application to painting, he finds little time for widespread association with other artists or even for the art research through literature that he would like to pursue.

Hence we have an artist unique in many respects. Unlike most painters, he has no special idols among the masters. His method cannot be closely likened to that of others. He seems to know clearly the kind of thing he wants to paint, he desires simply to be left free to do it.

As already stated, as a child Riley was found drawing at every opportunity. In high school many calls for his self-developed talents presented themselves, including the painting of

(continued on page 70)

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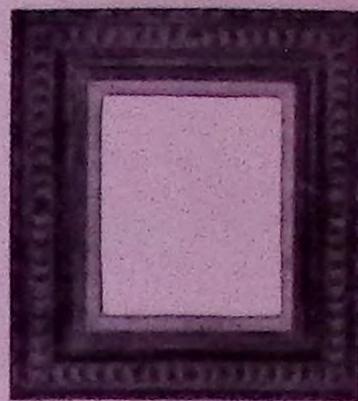
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RILEY (from page 69)

stage scenery. During the early thirties, he landed a job painting sets for a three-act play which netted him and an associate \$500. A second similar assignment came from another producer, who absconded without paying after the work was finished! Riley kept himself busy with commercial painting of a general type until called upon for war service. In the meantime, he had married and taken employment in the assay office. His real understanding of fine art arrived while he was in the navy. For a time he had charge of amputees in rehabilitation work at the Philadelphia Naval Hospital, where he was paired with Adams Wirt Garrett, an artist from Texas (now resident in New Jersey). The latter had set up a studio in the hospital, which Riley shared. Both were fired with enthusiasm by a \$500 prize Garrett had just won in a Pepsi-Cola painting exhibition. The Texan painted from memory the people of his West, and Riley was inspired to picture similarly the factory workers he had known and admired. The composition that might be called his first serious esthetic attempt won acceptance in a Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts exhibition—and Riley was launched. When, later, a single painting won awards for him both in New Haven and Silvermine, he found himself irrevocably committed to fine art. He has won a number of painting prizes—though he seldom exhibits outside Connecticut or the New York area—because after-hours painting leaves little time for crating and shipping large oils.

Bernard Riley has had no academic art training, but studied briefly with James H. Daugherty, Tony Balcom, and Carl Anderson, and he learned much about color from Revington Arthur of Silvermine. His compositions are essentially drawings, with color applied later. As I mentioned earlier, all his planning is done in line. When I inquired about the source of his unusual drawing ability and knowledge of the human figure (which, as I have said, he depicts mostly without the aid of models), he replied, "The Bridgman books on figure drawing." He has never owned the books, but from the library copies he has absorbed all they had to offer. (Incidentally, in my interviews with artists I am astonished at the regularity with which Bridgman's books are mention-

(continued on next page)



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RILEY (from page 70)

ed and the important influence they have had on contemporary American art.) Riley continues: "Bridgman's books taught me to draw the figure and gave me a clear perception of the appearance of its various parts, though I must confess that the most valuable lessons on detailed human anatomy came to me fortuitously. While at the Philadelphia Naval Hospital I was sent to the Temple University Medical School for a course on surgical anatomy for information needed in physical therapy and rehabilitation of the wounded. This concentrated study included participation in the customary medical-school dissection of cadavers. After my natural repugnance had been overcome, muscular anatomy took on for me a significance and fascination that had never resulted from the study of anatomical drawings. I remembered that surgical classes had provided the only source of knowledge of human construction for many of the old masters of painting and I must confess that the artist in me concentrated on the dissectional work at least as energetically as did the therapist. While I do not advocate lessons of this sort for artists in general, I will say that for me the knowledge gained has been invaluable."

Riley paints only in oil. As might be surmised from his technical procedure, most of his pictures are done in a very low key and this, combined with his choice of factory-worker subjects and sunless factory-district dwellings, might prompt the average citizen to call them "gloomy." It really takes an artist to appreciate their value. He is not a propagandist and implies no "social protest." He just likes people and is entranced by the picturesque aspect of grime-soiled workers and antique structures. Like Brangwyn, he clearly understands the nobility of labor and strives to emphasize its essence in lasting art form.

In composing, Riley builds up masses in the manner of an abstraction, but always in outline. Inherently he perceives the beauty of abstract design, though he considers many abstract paintings to be simply pictures in an unfinished stage. Says he: "Now that the pattern has been so well designed, why not make it understandable as well?"

Recently Riley has completed a mural for Fairfield University, a Jesuit institution. The whole panel measures

(continued on page 72)

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#### RILEY (from page 71)

seven by twenty-eight feet and depicts the life of Saint Aloysius. It was painted in oil on canvas mounted in place. In conformity with his custom of painting by instinct, he developed this work entirely from a pencil cartoon. No preliminary color sketch was prepared, and his whole color scheme was worked out as he painted from the scaffolding. The project was completed outside regular working hours - week ends and every night until ten o'clock.

Fairfield University, with its many splendid new buildings, has ample room for additional mural decoration. Without doubt, the Riley accomplishment will induce individual donors to offer the means.

#### BOOK NOTES (from page 25)

*The Louvre* by Germain Bazin. Harry N. Abrams, Inc., \$7.50.

This anthology of the most famous paintings in the Louvre is intended as a work of reference. The opening chapters provide a detailed history of the building and its contents beginning with the collections of the French crown in the sixteenth century and the stages in the construction of the palace of the Louvre. A major portion of the book is devoted to 101 color plates of famous paintings accompanied by brief descriptions which detail the circumstances of the creation of each masterpiece, its subsequent ownerships, and how it finally became part of the Louvre collection.

#### Recently Received Books:

*Creating With Paper* by Pauline Johnson. Seattle: Univ. of Washington Press, \$6.50. *Drawing Dogs* by Gladys Emerson Cook. Pitman, \$1.00. Mexico: *Pre-Hispanic Paintings*. Preface by Jacques Soustelle. Greenwich, Conn: New York Graphic Society, \$18.00. *The Gothic Image* by Emil Male. Harper Torchbook, \$1.95. *Ambrogio Lorenzetti* (2 vols.) by George Rowley. Princeton, N. J.: Princeton Univ. Press, \$20.00. *Graphis Annual, '58/'59* edited by Walter Herdeg. Hastings House, \$14.50. *Arthur G. Dove* by Frederick S. Wight. Berkeley, Calif.: Univ. of Calif. Press, \$7.50. *Poliakoff* by Michael Ragon. Arts, \$2.95. *American Folk Art* by Ellen S. Sabine. Van Nostrand, \$6.95.

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