Cold to New Art?

Editor, Democrat and Chronicle:

Mr. Norman Nairn in reporting on the performance of Martha Graham and her dance company made many protestations of ignorance. These protestations are entirely justifiable. Mr. Nairn is quite clearly undisturbed by any knowledge of the basic principles by which a creative art is judged as his naive references to "dissonance" in music and "story" in ballet plainly show. If his requirements in the arts are really as simple as he implies, and if he really is as unresponsive to the intensely felt and brilliantly thought-out creations of one of the most original artists of our time, then he is hardly competent to cope at all with the intricacies and subtleties and emotional impacts of creative art.

Mr. Nairn, it should be noted, is only one of a long line of chronic resisters who have played so lamentable a role in the evolution of art. These people characteristically accept an art form about 50 years after it has ceased to have any vitality, and oppose with vehemence, ridicule, or dogmatism (often imperfectly concealed by a pretended humility) any innovation which challenges or seems to challenge the "hand-me-downs" which they have so uncritically cherished as absolute standards of art. They never seem to acquire sufficient perspective to see that the "dissonances" of one era are the suave and inoffensive harmonies of the next and that the ugliness of one era may become the bromidic prettinesses of the next. Was not Brahms hooted and jeered at for his "dissonances?" Were not the Impressionist painters in France greeted with derisive howls at their first exhibition in Paris? Does anyone today dissent from Brahms or find a Monet landscape difficult to accept?

Fortunately Mr. Nairn and the people who left the Martha Graham recital before it was over were not the whole audience. There were people present, not represented in Mr. Nairn's poll of opinion, who were interested and even stirred by the performance —people whom we talked with quite casually—a young service man who sat at my right, a young man who sat behind us, a secretary in the office of a trade union, a hospital worker, members of the Memorial Art Gallery staff—and, I am certain, many others if a real canvass of opinion could have been made.

These people, most of them laymen like Mr. Nairn, did not necessarily understand every passage in the highly complex pattern of movement presented by Miss Graham and her company; but neither would they or Mr. Nairn know the meaning of every interval in a Beethovan sonata or find themselves able to detect a story in a Bach fugue.

Mr. Nairn should not presume to speak for Rochester in his plea for "no more modern dance."

Some of Rochester's citizens are still open-minded and quite educable.

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Rochester, N.Y.
"Democrat-Chronicle"
Feb. 6, 1945