

Studies in English, New Series

Volume 2

Article 29

1981

Dollarhide, Of Art and Artists

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Recommended Citation

Gross, Jeffrey T. (1981) "Dollarhide, Of Art and Artists," *Studies in English, New Series*: Vol. 2 , Article 29. Available at: https://egrove.olemiss.edu/studies_eng_new/vol2/iss1/29

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Louis E. Dollarhide. *Of Art and Artists: Selected Reviews of the Arts in Mississippi, 1955-1976*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1981. 166 pp. \$24.95

In this handsome collection of reviews Dollarhide captures the quality of life in the arts of Mississippi during a critical period. The 250 reviews were taken from over a thousand that he wrote for the Jackson newspaper. Willie Morris has praised Dollarhide's ability to reveal that this state "has long fostered a climate of artistic genius unsurpassed by any other state in the union." Everyone knows of the major writers, artists, and musicians who have come from Mississippi, but too often the emphasis has been on "from." A William Faulkner and a Leontyne Price are "discovered" in Paris or New York. *Of Art and Artists* forcefully reminds us that Mississippi is a community of people interested in the arts, and further it is a community in which artists and those who love the arts are brought together as friends and colleagues. Again and again Dollarhide's essays highlight the activity and support which artists, patrons, and friends give one another. For instance, Marie Hull devoted her life not only to her work but to teaching and to promoting the work of others. As Dollarhide writes: "My friend and yours, Marie Hull of Belhaven Street, could easily win the title of Busiest Person Around. Besides teaching as many private pupils as time will allow, she paints — sometimes for twelve hours at a run — travels, and pursues about as lively an interest in the world of art as anyone could have." On the very next page Dollarhide describes a showing of oils by Andrew Bucci sponsored by the McCartys, the best known potters in the state. Dollarhide's column, "Of Art and Artists," played no small part in putting the community of artists in touch with itself, especially as the column expanded from literature to the visual arts and music.

The sense of a friendly and active community of people emerges from reading straight through a large group of the reviews, but *Of Art and Artists* is the kind of book which entices us to turn to the index to look for discussions of particular writers and artists. The book is divided into three sections, Writers and Writing, Art and Artists, and Music and Theatre. Because Dollarhide is a professor of Renaissance literature it is not surprising that some of his best essays are found in the first section. He was one of the first critics to recognize the genius of Flannery O'Connor when other critics had confined her to "Southern Gothic." Eudora Welty is a special friend, and it is not surprising

that Dollarhide's review of *Losing Battles* is among the most perceptive of that difficult work.

Some of the strongest columns engage controversial issues. The column for 12 July 1964 deals with pornography, a difficult subject for readers of the Jackson newspaper even to contemplate in the abstract. But here as elsewhere Dollarhide shows himself a worthy successor to the greatest of all popular reviewers, Addison. Like Addison, he can help an interested but untrained audience understand works of art and major literary values.

Mississippi is undoubtedly best known for its writers, but *Of Art and Artists* records the growth of a community of first rate painters, sculptors, and potters. Included in this collection is a review of the very first show by Malcolm Norwood, who created the strongest art department in Mississippi at Delta State University. Dollarhide focuses on professionals somewhat at the expense of Mississippi's many primitive artists, but he does more than justice to Theora Hamblett, and the other primitives have found their own champions.

Leontyne Price, of course, dominates the section on Music and Theatre. One column recounts for Mississippians her smashing success in London, and another recounts her appearance at Rust College, where "she sang, the great voice swelling up, unaccompanied, in the new building, filling it, the words very simple but deeply felt by the singer and her rapt audience: 'This little light of mine, gonna shine, let it shine'."

The community of writers and artists of Mississippi shines throughout this volume, but part of the luster comes from the polish of Dollarhide's own prose. In these reviews we see the seemingly effortless grace of a writer who had to meet a weekly deadline for over twenty years. Yet always the subject, not the author, stands out. *Of Art and Artists* abounds in beautifully reproduced photographs of writers and artists which complement the elegance of the reviews. The book is handsomely laid out in double columns with a striking cover design by Bill Lester of Delta State. A bibliographer once remarked that we should treat books like mistresses and love them for their bodies as well as for their souls. On both counts *Of Art and Artists* is worth the price.

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