

The Californian
March 18, 1865

An Unbiased Criticism

The California Art Union

*Its Moral Effects Upon the Youth of Both Sexes
Carefully Considered and Candidly Commented Upon*

THE EDITOR of THE CALIFORNIAN ordered me to go to the rooms of the California Art Union and write an elaborate criticism upon the pictures upon exhibition there, and I beg leave to report that the result is hereunto appended, together with bill for same.

I do not know anything about Art and very little about music or anatomy, but nevertheless I enjoy looking at pictures and listening to operas, and gazing at handsome young girls, about the same as people do who are better qualified by education to judge of merit in these matters.

After writing the above rather neat heading and preamble on my foolscap, I proceeded to the new Art Union rooms last week to see the paintings, about which I had read so much in the papers during my recent three months' stay in the Big Tree region of Calaveras county; [up there, you know, they read *everything*, because in most of those little camps they have no libraries, and no books to speak of, except now and then a patent-office report, or a prayer-book, or literature of that kind, in a general way, that will hang on and last a good while when people are careful with it, like miners; but as for novels, they pass them around and wear them out in a week or two. Now there was Coon, a nice bald-headed man at the hotel in Angel's Camp. I asked him to lend me a book, one rainy day: he was silent a moment, and a shade of melancholy flitted across his fine face, and then he said: "Well, I've got a mighty responsible old Webster-Unabridged, what there is left of it, but they started her sloshing around, and sloshing around, and sloshing around the camp before I ever got a chance to read her myself, and next she went to Murphy's, and from there she went to jackass, and now, by G-d, she's gone to San Andreas, and I don't expect I'll ever see that book again; but what makes me mad, is that for all they're so handy about keeping her sashshaying around from shanty to shanty and from camp to camp, none of 'em's ever got a good word for her. Now Coddington had her a week, and she was too many for *him*—he couldn't spell the words; he tackled some of them regular busters, tow'rd the middle, you know, and they throwed him; next, Dyer, he tried her a jolt, but he couldn't *pronounce* 'em—Dyer can hunt quail or play seven-up as well as any man, understand me, but he can't pronounce worth a d-n; he used to worry along well enough, though, till he'd flush one of them rattlers with a clatter of syllables as long as a string of sluice-boxes, and then he'd lose his grip and throw up his hand; and so, finally, Dick Stoker harnessed her, up there at his cabin, and sweated over her, and cussed over her, and rastled with her for as much as three weeks, night and day, till he got as far as R, and then passed her over to 'Lige Pickerell, and said she was the

all-firedest dryest reading that ever *he* struck; well, well, if she's come back from San Andreas, you can get her and prospect her, but I don't reckon there's a good deal left of her by this time; though time was when she was as likely a book as any in the State, and as hefty, and had an amount of general information in her that was astonishing, if any of these cattle had known enough to get it out of her; and ex-corporal Coon proceeded cheerlessly to scout with his brush after the stragglers on the rear of his head and drum them to the front for inspection and roll-call, as was his usual custom before turning in for his regular afternoon nap) but as I was saying, they read everything, up there, and consequently all the Art criticisms, and the "Parlor Theatricals vs. Christian Commission" controversy, and even the quarrels in the advertising columns between rival fire-proof safe and sewing-machine companies were devoured with avidity. Why, they eventually became divided on these questions, and discussed them with a spirit of obstinacy and acrimony that I have seldom seen equaled in the most important religious and political controversies. I have known a Grover & Baker fanatic to cut his own brother dead because he went for the Florence. As you have already guessed, perhaps, the county and township elections were carried on these issues alone, almost. I took sides, of course—every man had to—there was no shirking the responsibility; a man must be one thing or the other, either Florence or Grover & Baker, unless, of course, he chose to side with some outside machine faction, strong enough to be somewhat formidable. I was a bitter Florence man, and I think my great speech in the bar-room of the Union Hotel, at Angel's, on the night of the 13th of February, will long be remembered as the deadliest blow the unprincipled Grover & Baker cabal ever got in that camp, and as having done more to thwart their hellish designs upon the liberties of our beloved country than any single effort of any one man that was ever made in that county. And in that same speech I administered a scathing rebuke to the "*Lillie Union and Constitution Fire and Burglar Proof Safe Party*," (for I was a malignant Tilton & McFarland man and would break bread and eat salt with none other) that made even the most brazen among them blush for the infamous and damnable designs they had hatched and were still hatching against the Palladium of Freedom in Calaveras county. The concluding passage of my speech was considered to have been the finest display of eloquence and power ever heard in that part of the country, from Rawhide Ranch to Deadhorse Flat. I said:

"FELLOW-CITIZENS: A word more, and I am done. Men of Calaveras—men of Coyote Flat—men of jackass—BEWARE OF CODDINGTON! [Cheers.] Beware of this atrocious ditch-owner—this vile water-rat—this execrable dry-land shrimp—this bold and unprincipled mud-turtle, who sells water to Digger, Chinaman, Greaser and American alike, and at the self-same prices—who would sell you, who would sell me, who would Sell US ALL, to carry out the destructive schemes of the '*Enlightened [Bah!] Freedom & Union Grover & Baker Loop-Stitch Sewing Machine Party*' [groans] of which wretched conglomeration of the ruff-scruff and rag-tag-and-bob-tail of noble old Calaveras he is the appropriate leader—BEWAR-R-E of him! [Tremendous applause.] Again I charge you as men whom future generations will hold to a fearful responsibility, to BEWARE OF CODDINGTON! [Tempests of applause.] Beware of this unsavory remnant of a once pure and high-minded man! [Renewed applause.] Beware of this faithless modern Esau, who would sell his birthright of freedom and ours, for a mess of pottage!—for a mess of tripe!—for a mess of sauerkraut and garlic!—for a mess of anything under the sun that a Christian Florence patriot would scorn and a Digger Indian turn from with loathing and disgust! [Thunders of applause.] Remember Coddington on election day! and remember him but to damn him! I appeal to you, sovereign and enlightened Calaverasses, and my heart tells me that I do not appeal in vain! I have done. [Earthquakes of applause that made

the welkin tremble for many minutes, and finally died away in hoarse demands for the villain Coddington, and threats to lynch him.]

I felt exhausted, and in need of rest after my great effort, and so I tore myself from my enthusiastic friends and went home with Coddington to his hospitable mansion, where we partook of an excellent supper and then retired to bed, after playing several games of seven-up for beer and booking.

The contest on election day was bitter, and to the last degree exciting, but principles triumphed over party jugglery and chicanery, and we carried everything but the Constable, (Unconditional Button-Hole Stitch and Anti-Parlor Theatrical candidate) and Tax Collector, (Moderate Lillie Fire-Proof and Fusion Grover & Button-Hole Stitch Machines) and County Assessor (Radical Christian Commission and Independent Sewing Machine candidate) and we could have carried these, also, but at the last moment fraudulent handbills were suddenly scattered abroad containing sworn affidavits that a Tilton & McFarland safe, on its way from New York, had melted in the tropical sunshine after fifteen minutes' exposure on the Isthmus; also, that the lock stitch, back-stitch, fore-and-aft, forward-and-back, down-the-middle, double-and-twist, and the other admirable stitches and things upon which the splendid reputation of the Florence rests, had all been cabbaged from the traduced and reviled Button-Hole Stitch and Grover & Baker machines; also, that so far from the Parlor-Theatrical-Christian-Commission controversy being finished, it had sprung up again in San Francisco, and by latest advices the Opposition was ahead. What men could do, we did, but although we checked the demoralization that had broken out in our ranks, we failed to carry all our candidates. We sent express to San Andreas and Columbia, and had strong affidavits—sworn to by myself and our candidates—printed, denouncing the other publications as low and disreputable falsehoods and calumnies, whose shameless authors ought to be driven beyond the pale of civilized society, and winding up with the withering revelation that the rain had recently soaked through one of Lillie's Fire and Burglar-Proof safes in San Francisco, and badly damaged the books and papers in it; and that, in the process of drying, the safe warped so that the door would not swing on its hinges, and had to be "prized" open with a butter-knife. O, but that was a rough shot! It blocked the game and saved the day for us—and just at the critical moment our reserve (whom we had sent for and drummed up in Tuolumne and the adjoining counties, and had kept out of sight and full of chain-lightning, sudden death and scorpion-bile all day in Tom Deer's back-yard) came filing down the street as drunk as loons, with a drum and fife and lighted transparencies, (daylight and dark were all the same to *them* in *their* condition) bearing such stirring devices as:

"The Florence is bound to rip, therefore, LET HER RIP!"

"Grover & Baker, how are you Now?"

"Nothing can keep the Opposition cool in the other world but Tilton & McFarland's Chilled Iron Safes!" etc., etc.

A vast Florence machine on wheels led the van, and a sick Chinaman bearing a crippled Grover & Baker brought up the rear. The procession reeled up to the polls with deafening cheers for the Florence and curses for the "loop stitch scoun'rels," and deposited their votes like men for freedom of speech, freedom of the press and freedom of conscience in the matter of sewing machines, provided they are Florences.

I had a very comfortable time in Calaveras county, in spite of the rain, and if I had my way I would go back there, and argue the sewing machine question around Coon's bar-room stove again with the boys on rainy evenings. Calaveras possesses some of the grandest natural features that have ever fallen under the contemplation of the human mind—such as the Big

Trees, the famous Morgan gold mine which is the richest in the world at the present time, perhaps, and “straight” whisky that will throw a man a double somerset and limber him up like boiled macaroni before he can set his glass down. Marvelous and incomprehensible is the straight whisky of Angel’s Camp!

But I digress to some extent, for maybe it was not really necessary to be quite so elaborate as I have been in order to enable the reader to understand that we were in the habit of reading everything thoroughly that fell in our way at Angel’s, and that consequently we were familiar with all that had appeared in print about the new Art Union rooms. They get all the papers regularly every evening there, 24 hours out from San Francisco.

However, now that I have got my little preliminary point established to my satisfaction, I will proceed with my Art criticism.

The rooms of the California Art Union are pleasantly situated over the picture store in Montgomery Street near the Eureka Theatre, and the first thing that attracts your attention when you enter is a beautiful and animated picture representing the Trial Scene in the *Merchant of Venice*. They did not charge me anything for going in there, because the Superintendent was not noticing at the time, but it is likely he would charge you or another man twenty-five cents—I think he would, because when I tried to get a dollar and a half out of a fellow I took for a stranger, the newcomer said the usual price was only two bits, and besides he was a heavy life-member and not obliged to pay anything at all—so I had to let him in for a quarter, but I had the satisfaction of telling him we were not letting life-members in free, now, as much as we were. It touched him on the raw. I let another fellow in for nothing, because I had cabined with him a few nights in Esmeralda several years ago, and I thought it only fair to be hospitable with him now that I had a chance. He introduced me to a friend of his named Brown (I was hospitable to Brown also) and me and Brown sat down on a bench and had a long talk about Washoe and other things, and I found him very entertaining for a stranger. He said his mother was a hundred and thirteen years old, and he had an aunt who died in her infancy, who, if she had lived, would have been older than his mother, now. He judged so because, originally, his aunt was born before his mother was. That was the first thing he told me, and then we were friends in a moment. It could not but be flattering to me, a stranger, to be made the recipient of information of so private and sacred a nature as the age of his mother and the early decease of his aunt, and I naturally felt drawn towards him and bound to him by a stronger and a warmer tie than the cold, formal introduction that had previously passed between us. I shall cherish the memory of the ensuing two hours as being among the purest and happiest of my checkered life. I told him frankly who I was, and where I came from, and where I was going to, and when I calculated to start, and all about my uncle Ambrose, who was an Admiral, and was for a long time in command of a large fleet of canal boats, and about my gifted aunt Martha, who was a powerful poetess, and a dead shot with a brickbat at forty yards, and about myself and how I was employed at good pay by the publishers of THE CALIFORNIAN to come up there and write an able criticism upon the pictures in the Art Union—indeed I concealed nothing from Brown, and in return he concealed nothing from me, but told me everything he could recollect about his rum old mother, and his grandmother, and all his relations, in fact. And so we talked, and talked, and exchanged these tender heart-reminiscences until the sun drooped far in the West, and then Brown said “Let’s go down and take a drink.”

(Source: Twainquotes.com, <http://www.twainquotes.com/Calif/18650318>)