

· THE FIELD OF ART ·

THE VALUE OF ART EFFORT

AMONG the pleasurable results of any cultivated art may be counted the problems it opens for discussion and the field it offers wherein the human mind may disport itself.

All high culture serves as a refuge from the ills of daily life. If, then, in this world there be a retreat from its banalities and cares would it not be well to discover it?

Not long ago I was brought into the living-room of a shrewd man of affairs—it was hung round with Monets—dazzling, sparkling, sunny, misty Monets. My host offered me a cigar, lighted one himself and sat down. The owner of these treasures then proceeded to dilate on the painter and his methods with an appreciation that was real. Never before had I been so convinced that art was a power outside the esoteric class with which I had too habitually associated it in my mind. Here was the artistic work of one of the boldest innovators in landscape art; of one who would have appealed only, I had supposed, to those who could follow with unblinking eyes his eagle glances into the blinding mysteries of light; without sentiment, as conventionally accepted—but stirring sentiment, as Nature does, by the blazing splendor of its truth. Still, whoever in the presence of the volume-weighted tide has been impressed by its fateful, slow but overwhelming approach—whoever on clear, sunny days has seen this sea dash joyously on wind-swept rocks, catching color from the sky, the clouds, the very reflection of itself upon itself, and has felt in any of these phases of the natural world the emotion that is named sentiment, to them Monet could supply it also; and he may not narrowly be charged with the lack of a quality which is his in a large measure. This emotion, this sentiment, had touched my friend through Monet's art. This man of affairs seemed to draw wells of refreshment from the living sources of a full, strong artistic temperament. Now, it is this refreshment of the human spirit that it is the province of art to supply. It is not alone for the pleasure of the eye that art exists, but for the exaltation of the

human mind. For is there not a joy in noting what effect Nature has had on the interpreter, and how he has chosen to explain her beauty to the world? Think what it is to trace the mental processes of a mind like that of Monet, to mark his wonderful selection, to become conscious of what he has chosen to *omit* that he may the more forcibly impress! To be capable of this is to enter into some of the pleasures that all good art affords—into some of its intellectual and imaginative enjoyments. It would be well if the public could be more fully convinced that by experimenting in impressionism, that, in vividly striking the eye in order to touch more potently the mind, Monet and others have been an influence for good. But we would also add that they have given rise to much effort which seems an abuse of their methods. It must be conceded, however, that Monet himself, who works from conviction, has done much for modern painting. We will endeavor, in a measure, to explain why this is so. I am not lauding this painter to the exclusion of other successful workers possessed of this new faculty of “seeing”—I am merely citing him as a disciple of “light,” and as one of the most brilliant accessions to the ranks of those who have given to art a new and clarified manner of using pigment to express those aspects of Nature which until recent years, have not been attained by means of color. And this reminds us that when phases of Nature are thus realized they touch the imagination, and in time become recognized as representing the natural aspect of the world by those who regarded its normal shape and color as something quite other than it is. To then go back and study what has passed for its natural appearance in the dark-brown transcripts of the early landscapists, and indeed of those of comparatively recent date, is to feel that scales have fallen from the eyes, and that these earlier painters themselves saw, “as in a glass darkly,” while we now see “face to face.” For it is undeniably true that the practice of painting in late years has stimulated the mere faculty of using the eyesight. A new and finer vision has been

developed which has made it possible for painting to touch a wider range of emotions than it awakened in the past. This is of great importance, for it adds much to the value of all painted art.

How readily the human mind responds to this new presentation of the visual appearance of Nature I have instanced, in describing the effect produced by Monet's work on a busy man of financial affairs. The outside world may be regarded as the storehouse of the painter. For it is a fact that through this great storehouse of the natural world there is a band of workers going about choosing material that they may use, adapting it to the purpose they have in mind—selecting here, rejecting there the threads they are to weave in the tapestry of their pictured thought. These threads, these facts are the words they would employ in that ordered arrangement of ideas which forms their language—a language as old, almost, as that of uttered speech—the beautiful and universal language of art.

As in literature the process of verbal change is going on, so in painting methods are clarifying, touch and color are being subjected to new tests, and from this latter-day vocabulary, so to speak, lighter, more spontaneous, more amusing effects of Nature are springing into existence by which the mind, overburdened with the complexities of modern life is diverted, refreshed, carried out of itself through the sheer delight of new sensations. These sensations are by no means superficial—the range of art has widened; and, if at times it may strike some one that this extending of the emotional gamut is gained through sacrifice in another direction, this is but the inevitable condition of a transition state, and one that doubtless in time will remedy itself. If the fascinations of light and new secrets of color have carried painters' thoughts away, for the time being, from the virtue and integrity of form, there are already indications of a return to the sincerity of the Renaissance with the added treasure of a subtler appreciation of the bewitching charm of light.

Art could no more escape this modern note than could any other field of human thought evade the stimulating effect of widening horizons. It is this modern note, which is always anticipatory, that has caused those who have sounded it to stand in the somewhat uneasy attitude of the misunderstood. It is in such periods of artistic transition that the artist is tested; for if he look for immediate apprecia-

tion he is likely to be disappointed. His consciousness at such times of the true work he is endeavoring to do is a source of joy that sustains him. It has been so in all ages. What the world of to-day esteems, the contemporary world of its creation rarely held in high regard. It is therefore with satisfaction that one can now herald the fact that so radical a producer in the world of art as Monet, is coming into wide appreciation. It is the significance of this change that cheers. No free-spirited worker need now walk the fields discouraged, but rather he may let the seasons pour through him and upon his canvas if he truly feel them himself.

The disposition of the time seems to be that of arrested judgment, and therefore of increasing attention to the production of our artists. It is not enough, the layman must remember, that the age be graphic—it must be discriminately so: Pictures are now employed as purveyors of news—they appeal to the eye; this is well, but these must not be confounded with art, which appeals to the mind. Journalistic illustration and the camera may be stepping-stones—we can see in them, indeed, the influence that all graphic portrayal must exercise on the fine arts. A greater general familiarity with the outward forms of things is one of the results of reportorial illustration. A knowledge of the common aspect and shape of the outward world is rapidly becoming the property of the layman—so much so, that the comments frequently heard on the verisimilitude of a scene or of a person strike one as very shrewd. This keenness is of modern growth and may be justly attributed to constant contact with pictured things. This increased acuteness of observation on the part of the public is a factor that the artist of to-day reckons with. This is not going to hurt his art, but will impose upon it greater exactions than those to which his predecessor was subjected. There is demanded of the artist a closer adherence to the character and form of seen things by those who to-day know, through photographic processes, the shape of the commonest objects of life, as well as the personal identity of almost every individual of note. But this which might appear as a handicap to the painter is in reality an aid. These photographic reproductions present a scene in all its unessential detail—overloaded with facts of minor importance. Nature clamors on every side for attention to the wrong things, and mechanical processes reproduce them. The true artist will avoid these pitfalls

while becoming more correct, through photography, in the general form of objects. But the inferior painter is distracted by these importunities and often yields to them—by this his art is lessened, his result is weakened, and he wonders why, when he has given so much, the “knowing” ones—the connoisseurs—prefer the synthetic rendering of another who has dared to omit. We must realize that the world of mere sight is nothing until informed by art. The artist breathes upon this world his informing spirit, and it then becomes other than it is: for it has passed into the domain of art.

A countenance of ordinary type may serve as a model by which the artist will produce a head of alluring loveliness—Why? Because the world exists for the artist as a world of symbols—nothing is precisely what he wants; but it is a world of intimation of another. These intimations, these suggestions so possess him at times, that his enthusiasm seems, to those of less insight, strangely misplaced.

Now, it is only by educating a public to follow him that the artist can expect to come into his own. The world of material interests is so much more obvious—but it is no more real! Art will not be widely appreciated until we possess a public of connoisseurs. It was the possession of such a public which so much helped the full flowering of the period of the Renaissance! That was a moment of material prosperity as well; as John Addington Symonds says: “The speech of the Italians at that epoch, their social habits, their ideal of manners, their standard of morality, the estimate they formed of men were alike conditioned and qualified by art. It was an age of splendid ceremonies and magnificent parade, when the furniture of houses, the armor of soldiers, the dress of citizens, the pomp of war, and the pageantry of festival were invariably and inevitably beautiful.”

We of the twentieth century have been, as I have said, in that bewildering situation which marks all transition times in the world of progressive thought when, in the practice of any cultivated art, the artist breaks away from old formulas and becomes experimental. This is a sign of life and progress; and as I have indicated in the case of a lay appreciator of Monet's work there are those who are grateful for this new light. That this new vision, these aptitudes of the eye are becoming general many remarks of true lovers of Nature prove. Naturally the painter should lead the way in this matter as in his work he is obliged to deal

with things of sight. Imitation is not his purpose, however, but interpretation. And I do not know how to more forcibly emphasize this truth than by quoting the thoughts of painters who have expressed themselves in words on art; for they occasionally give voice to the philosophy, so to say, of their work, and sometimes write upon their craft. How great artistic temperaments would interpret beyond the mere physical portrayal, how they would reach, if may be, into the mysteries of Nature at which her outside aspects hint, we become convinced when we note their comments respecting the way in which Nature impresses them.

Their emotions toward nature have been so strong that their language, their method of painting, has formed itself through very need of utterance. The apparently uncouth, clumsy, touch of Millet does not come from lack of skill, but rather from the very urgency of his desire to give to his profound sentiment toward toiling, rustic humanity in the fields a graphic presentation that will reveal it with power. No cock-sure technique of a Bouguereau or a Chartran would move the beholder to reflect on the benighted destiny of these human beasts of burden. Millet's drawing is powerful, significant and true; while for competency of brushwork one has only to refer to some of the really brilliant nudes to the painting of which, for a livelihood, he was obliged to resort in the early part of his career. He was great enough to sacrifice his skill to his chosen work at a later time.

Breton, with a less burdensome message to deliver, was still so alive to the splendors of the open air that he may almost be regarded as heralding the movement of the impressionists. It was in the early fifties, I think, that he gave us that sunny “Blessing of the Cornfields,” a canvas palpitating with light and air. Let us turn to what these men have to say.

Jean François Millet in speaking of what he had been painting—a shepherd in the fold at night, a weird moonlight effect, said: “Oh, how I wish I could make those who see my work feel the splendors and terrors of the night! One ought to be able to make people hear the songs, the silences and murmurings of the air. They should feel the infinite.” Jules Breton —“What is the sky to me if it does not give me the idea of infinity?” “Looking at a twilight scene it matters little that my eye should receive the impression of the view, if my spirit does not at once experience a feeling of repose,

of tranquillity and of peace. The spirit of a subject should take precedence of the letter. Force, elegance, majesty, sweetness, splendor, grace, naïveté, abundance, simplicity, richness, humility—some one of these qualities, according to the genius of the painter and the nature of the subject, should strike the beholder, in every work, before he has had time to take in the details of the scene represented. These are the æsthetic virtues." And he goes on to say: "Just as many beauties as there are, just so many defects are there which assume the appearance of the former, and, misleading the public, give rise to ephemeral fashion. At the side of Beauty is Prettiness; of Grace and Elegance, Affectation; of Naïveté, Silliness; of Force, Heaviness; of Majesty, Pomp; of Softness, Insipidity; of Abundance, Prodigality; of Splendor, Tawdriness; of Simplicity, Poverty." These substitutes are so obvious that one can hardly realize their acceptance as alternatives of finer things—but the public mind is not yet so sensitive to truth that it immediately detects false or inadequate definition. It is not critical. Some one has said: "All beauty in the long run is only *fineness* of truth."

It may be asked by what means do Millet, Breton, and others convey the sense of "the splendors of the night," and "the idea of infinity" in the sky?

Only such results are reached by rare characters who, through the strength of their impressions received from Nature beget a power of expression that is theirs alone. It is by deep thought, and a willingness to eliminate anything that distracts the mind of the beholder from the essence of the scene—even to the suppression of their natural skill which, if permitted free play would be likely to attract admiration to itself, that they finally reach this consummate power.

"Be careful not to show your skill before your work," Millet also says.

Large natures, great men only are capable of this, and it is because they are of this quality that their emotions are communicated to and touch others. Now, the art effort is of worth as it makes us fastidious in matters of taste, so that at sight of anything false certain emotions will sound the alarm; for art is a language,

and when we so understand it we shall start at untruthful statements and begin to question. We will no longer accept Prettiness for Beauty, nor Affectation for Grace. These may be as reasonably challenged as verbal misstatements, which seem always to be regarded as a legitimate field for controversy.

The artist's nice sense of proportion detects quickly whatever is overdone or outré in human intercourse. Based as it is upon truth, truth is demanded in all details of personal relations; for lapses are regarded as inartistic, out of proportion, and hence ugly. Beauty, that conformity to an ideal, is marred for them if certain canons of taste are ignored; and the ending of a tale, the construction of a play which precipitates illogically its dénouement, or any breach of poetic justice in social situations or worldly display is duly disapproved by those in whom a love of art has bred a high indifference to petty interests and petty conclusions. Hence the lukewarmness of true appreciators concerning the conventional amusements of society. They find them often not beautiful—badly planned. The Popes and Princes of the Renaissance impressed artists into the arrangement of their diversions and fêtes. A function under Leo X conceived and carried out by Raphael we may be sure was not lacking in distinction, was worth one's while to attend. A meeting of kings directed by Velasquez must indeed have made a royal picture. Such pageants were in themselves art creations. And this is a point we would wish to make—that the value of art is not confined to technical production merely. Its true worth lies in the fact that it so broadens the mind, so corrects and chastens the taste, that the mental attitude, through its influence, becomes elevated, and no room is left for narrow interests and sordid concerns—for these are warped and ugly things and find no asylum in the minds of those to whom beauty is real and all else untrue. For those who are thus sensitive life opens free and spacious, and hints, intuitions awakened by Nature and interpreted by the artist, lead up to moments quick with insight, when one realizes that he is, himself, something larger and finer than he dreamed of being.

FRANK FOWLER.



Drawn by A. Castaigne.

LIFTED HIM UP BODILY AND STOOD HIM UP WHERE WAS THE KING.

"An Olympic Victor,"—Page 366.