

ART GALLERY, OCTOBER 8th, 1921.

*Perce E. North*

Ladies and Gentlemen:

It is with some uncertainty that I venture to address you, while appreciating very greatly the compliment of being asked to do so. Whether one can say anything that will contribute to the enjoyment of an evening to be spent in a Gallery, looking at paintings, is very uncertain. There is, in spite of the picture books, really no such thing as illustration, because the finer savours of what can be put in words cannot be translated into form and colour, and conversely there is, I think, infinitesimally little that can be said about a picture, or a wrought iron grill, or a Persian rug, or a Greek statue, or a stone house, that will enhance the inherent essence of the thing in the way a touch of pepper brings out the flavour of a ripe strawberry. The Arts are, after all, untranslatable among themselves. Things spiritual can, for instance, be danced that cannot be built, or painted, or printed. I may, however, be permitted to warn you of the kind of speaking and writing which, however good and interesting in itself, not only does not help, but often hinders, what we call enjoyment, or appreciation, or understanding of the productions of the Fine Arts.

Aesthetic theory, when rightly understood, is the key to the garden in which the spiritual life is lived, but the key should not be jangled on its chain in front of each flower. The clink on the ear will neutralize perception of the balms and tints of lavender and musk. Moreover, the garden can be entered so easily over the wall that the key is not really essential, except as a symbol of possession.

The intellectual perception of technical artistry is often a source of intellectual delight, but it is through sharpened senses, not sharpened wits, that such raw stuff



as white lead, vermilion, ochre and indigo may so function, on occasion (when mixed with oil and brains), as to bring the spirit of a dead painter and of a living charwoman en rapport for a moment.

All which was put far better, and in fewer words, by a great philosopher, nearly two thousand years ago, in commending to his hearers the frame of mind to be cultivated before seeking entrance to the Kingdom of Heaven. For, if little children sometimes have sharp wits, they always have sharper senses.

And some of us approach the things of Art bearing a lamp of learning. But to get good use of this yellow light the white light of day must be excluded. A knowledge of how they painted in Athens in 300 B.C., or in Tuscany in 1400 A.D., or in Vienna in 1914, and what their names were, and who taught them, constitutes a series of fascinating marginal notes on history's page. On this rather inconsequent material we found the polite accomplishment of connoisseurship. And nothing is more fatal than connoisseurship to that childlike directness of vision of which we spoke. The interest in classifications and appreciations of what is typical, and the familiarity with techniques, (in which the expert is himself not adept), and all this biological knowledge of the evolution of the schools - the equipment of your connoisseur - leads almost inevitably to the appraisal of values by the sign manual of the brushwork or the signature in the corner. This ends in the vulgarian expression of appreciation in terms of filthy lucre and a speculative interest in picture values. Do not mistake me. Connoisseurship may be a reputable profession, or a benignly innocuous hobby, but it is not a "Gift of the Spirit", and your connoisseur is ever slow of appreciation outside the range of his special knowledge.

The Arts, however, are infinite, and painting itself has a scope as wide as literature, and an eclectic response is no criterion either of depth of of fineness of feeling. Twenty years ago, Professor Santayana, of



Harvard, pointed out that "a taste for landscape blinds us to what is best and most finished in the Arts." Some of us will take keen delight in the consummately scribbled impressionism of Mr. Morrice, who will feel unutterable boredom on straying into the Museum of Craftsmanship downstairs where Mr. Cleve Morgan has done such good work in assembling ceramics and textiles and metal work from a score of civilizations. I have no quarrel with the connoisseur, with his limiting specialization, but as an artist of sorts myself I have some quarrel with the present fashion of the less uncultured in over-rating the importance of connoisseurship as a pre-requisite of appreciation.

But of this "taste for landscape" which has become so characteristic of our culture, there is more to say. We have landscape under the blue vault, and landscape in a gold frame. Some of us - I am loath to believe it is only those who can handle a pencil with credit - see Nature first and painting afterwards, as a representation of Nature's moods as already known to us, and take delight especially in paintings of familiar country. But there are innumerable picture lovers who are, to all intents and purposes, blind to nature. So to one, any hour of the day or night spent anywhere so that a patch of sky be discernible and the mind be secure, is to be accounted a spiritual blessing; while to another, such opportunity appears merely in terms of creature comfort - fur coats or sunshades. But it would be a great mistake to assume your Nature-blind friend to be picture-blind as well, for many who, face to face with Nature experience little more than heat or cold, can and do appreciate the moods of Nature as a revelation in the night, through the medium of cunning brushwork within the four sides of a frame.

Golden waters rippling over red gravel and flickered with the reflections of green Maytime birch trees, and streaked with the zenith blue of Summer's first hot day, can hardly be rendered metrically, even by a Keats working in terms of the peacock's tail, but can be very adequately



represented in touches of paint. Now, it is extraordinary how few people can see these spots of glowing, scintillating, dancing colour, while the river sweeps around the bend before their eyes, yet many of these very people will glory and revel in this thing (seen after all at secondhand, as in a glass, darkly) when painted on canvas. To them the painter is indeed a magician, an interpreter, Nature's high priest, through whom they apprehend realities against which, in the open air "their eyes are held that they may not see."

Then, there are those of us who see Nature quite well, but prefer Art, and not in the least because Art shows them Nature, but just because, perversely enough, they are made that way, and these are often great critics. Take the familiar colour scheme of a Quebec valley in the magic of still late afternoon in March, turquoise and dove in the sky, and primrose lights on the snow, and salmon and gold on the wooded hillside, and the whole gamut of blues in the shadows holding the singing colours to their tune. To some, a thing like this, be it never so truly rendered, in paint, revives no scent of the thaw of an hour ago, and balsam newly come to life - No, to them it is a colour scheme, a piece of craftsmanship, a fabric of brushwork, and they can be just as elated about it all as some of us Nature lovers, but in quite a different way.

I have spoken of three kinds of picture lovers, and there are many more - for some it is the painter, for some the painting, for others again the thing painted, and for those with hearts as well as eyes and brains there is the sentiment of the thing, the infectious mood in which it was accomplished.

But perhaps you do not labour greatly under this taste for landscape, but take your delight in the character of men and of women as you see it in their faces, so that when their features are wrought on canvas, as in an unchanging mirror, you love to look that man or woman in the eye as you never could look them in the eye in the

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flesh.

Or, do your feelings quicken in response to the apparatus of life with all the craft and skill and love and care that men have bestowed on things of use, and marked thereby the spirit of their times as the race has progressed and retrogressed in this and that manifestation of spiritual need.

In such a treasure house as this you will then find the things you seek, and if you are inclined to look on them as on flowers of delicate pattern, hue and perfume, do not forget that the aesthete's key should stay in your pocket, and the connoisseur's lamp be left outside for the smell of its wick will surely militate against your delight.

A healthy eye, and an untired eye, are as necessary to the seeing of what is to be seen, and the getting of what is to be got, in a picture, as is a sound and hungry digestive apparatus where a dinner is concerned. A comfortable light is usually to be found in a gallery, and rarely in a house, but otherwise the house is to be preferred as a casket, on the ground that there will be fewer pictures in it. The worst thing about galleries is the fatigue they engender. Only one or two pictures can be appreciated in the course of a visit, and for real delight the picture, like anything else that is exquisite in any sense, should be seen again and again, and alone. For there is a fine art in seeing things, as well as in making things to be seen. The aesthetic fact is not accomplished without the beholder to see and live again that textured moment which was lived by the artist and so share with him in the warp and woof of visible life.

The carrying of keys and lamps is all very well in its way, but the taking off of shoes in token of the nature of the ground to be trodden is more effective when good painting is our quest.

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galleries is perhaps in order. The collection is a mixed one, both as to kinds of pictures and the goodness and badness of the several kinds represented. Twenty years ago, modern Dutch painting had a great vogue among collectors here, and the Gallery is strongest in work of that school. One result is the over-representation of Weisenbruck, with his dull reiterations in the matter of a certain Dutch fishing boat and a North Sea sky, but we may be truly grateful for the fine Tholens which came to the Gallery in the same era. Strangely enough, this great master is known only in a few of the picture loving communities in Europe, and many of his best works are scattered in Montreal. Among the Dutch pictures, we also have something far more interesting than dingy landscape in Simon Maris' exquisite painting entitled "The First Born".

The modern French school is also well represented on these walls, and more particularly what is known as the Barbizon school - we all remember Stevenson's delightful excursions into their woodland stronghold.

But we must not be misled by an august name and heavy framing of large canvases with respect to the two Daubignys. I see that our catalogue seeks to explain away the bad drawing with the euphemism "he arrived at charming results more by colour tones of varying value than by line" - whatever that may mean - but nothing can explain away the turgid pigmentation before us. Daubigny did paint quite magnificently on occasion, but not always. Corot's "Ville d'Avray", on the other hand, is a picture of real importance, in spite of his fame and its size. Fanton Latour's "Dawn Chasing Away the Shadows of Night" is exquisitely beautiful in theme and technically miraculous. Then, take a look at Cottet's "Seashore in Brittany", if raw Nature interests you as much as the finer imaginings, and you can take delight in the illusion of a Westerly gale blowing through the roots of your hair and a yeasty sea pounding the rocks below you. There is also a Normandy interior by Maignan, which is,



I think, as well and lovingly painted as that sort of thing can be. And before leaving the Frenchmen, we must pay our respects to Bail's very splendid picture entitled "The Sisters", wherein all the harmonies are manifest, for the ivory wall and the sage green screen, and the needlework frame, and the two dear girls are all of a piece in revealing a discreet and gracious kind of life that was lived till quite recently.

As to the great masters, there is very little to see here beyond a Madonna by Botticelli, which owes its interest to other nobler Madonnas of the same kind elsewhere rather than to intrinsic merits, and there is a very sketchy sketch by Rembrandt, somewhat ostentatiously mounted.

Of the modern British school we have nothing of any importance except Reviere's "St. George and the Dragon", a very English theme, treated in a very English way, with that considerable insight into mediaevalism which the English attain beyond other peoples.

Our Eighteenth Century is represented by a Turner, a Reynolds, a Raeburn - all fair gallery specimens, but not of compelling interest.

But the great live modern Scottish school, and the new Englishmen are not represented at all - Orpen, Cameron, Johns, Wingate, Reid, Lavery. As far as Montreal is concerned, these might never have been.

And in the matter of the Canadians, the situation is little better, for many of the notable Canadians are not represented at all, and of those represented I cannot aver that we have of their best.

Probably the most masterly piece of painting in these Galleries, in a strictly technical sense, is Tugel's "Sheep Returning from Pasture". If you want to know all there is to know about sheep on a hot day, you have it here - uncanny insight on the commonplace. And there is a head by Roybet of very great power in the matter



of brushwork, and not a commonplace head at all.

And this brings us to what is undoubtedly the greatest picture in the collection, in the matter of the technicalities, in the matter of theme, and what is after all far more important than either in a work of art, the cogency of sentiment. Of course it is thoroughly unfashionable, for the brushwork completely covers the canvas and is not laid on in chunks with a knife. It is also thoroughly unfashionable, being a presentation of a symbolic and dramatic moment, and most unfashionable of all in that the sentiment is religious - "The Raising of Jairus' Daughter", painted by Max. But while I recognize the greatness of this work, I very much prefer to refresh my spirit by looking at a quite different kind of picture, Monticelli's "Garden Party", to wit, in which we find depicted all the most delightful kinds of things going on, and on an area  $11\frac{1}{2}$ " x 18".

Conclusion.

Now, if I have been betrayed into judgments, like Paris of old, and said, as it were, 'this is more beautiful than that', you must understand that I have not in fact predicated anything of any of these pictures. Like Paris, in my judgment I must have revealed nothing but my foibles, for beauty is not something that one finds in an object of Art, but something that the object of Art sometimes enables us to find in ourselves.



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