

SCRIBNER'S MAGAZINE

97271

PUBLISHED MONTHLY
WITH ILLUSTRATIONS



VOLUME XXVI JULY - DECEMBER



•CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS NEW YORK•
SAMPSON LOW, MARSTON & Co. LIMITED LONDON

THE FIELD OF ART

CONCERNING PAINTERS WHO WOULD EXPRESS THEMSELVES IN WORDS

LET us consider some of the difficulties of the artist in dealing with subjects that are to be considered in other modes than his own.

The artist is of necessity extremely stubborn, like men who have to do things; impressionable as a man who must push the tiller at the slightest warning, for he must be both rudder and helmsman. He is unjust very often, for he sees men before principles—often, alas, the man whom he sees being himself. He is unaffected to a surprising degree by criticism or advice from outside, and extremely careful of it from within the circle. He is doubtful and irresponsive in answer to reasoning not clearly put into his own terms of thinking. Like the Chinese philosopher, the artist is apt to say, or to think without saying, "What is proven by the fact that your dialectics are better than mine, and that your mind has a better use and handling of logic? Nothing more than these very facts of your powers. Is, therefore, what you say true because I cannot confute it? All this, you say, may be right in the terms of another way of looking at things, but it does not seem to be so in any arrangement that I can make of mine." "*E pur si muove*," he would have answered, like Galileo, to arguments in his own mode but based upon theological and therefore extraneous views.

Far down within him remains a dislike of a closed and finished proposition. He is Bagehot's Englishman. He does not wish to commit himself to a statement that twice two make five, but he is also extremely unwilling to pin himself to the statement that twice two make four. His mind lives in the practical, in the joining of the ideal with the real, which does not prevent his being a dreamer—in fact, confirms him in that direction. All these things he has in common with the man of practical action who, himself, in these things, recalls the attitude of mind said to be feminine.

As he works for no result outside of his work—that is to say that the emotions produced by him upon himself and upon others are not prolonged outside of the work itself—he is kept more and more within a circle of unprovable suppositions, within a method of applying thought that seems satisfactory, as it is complete in its circuit. For, as you know, he gives only a fictitious pain, a fictitious sadness—and no real sorrow or hurt comes from his most beautiful tragedy; indeed, it produces an exaltation of the mind not disconnected with joy. Confined within his own circle he generally loses the use of the methods of words; and he is often, and most wisely and rightly, unwilling to handle them; for he has the most complete and almost superstitious respect for the mastery of tools in methods of appreciation. When he uses words he finds that they are tools whose use he does not know—living tools that refuse to work, that stumble over each other, that lead him astray, that turn on him sometimes, or actually direct his path, instead of being led by him; until at length he recognizes that they are old acquaintances in new forms. They are the signs of thought, of ideas, and perceptions. *They are not these last themselves.* And he becomes both delighted and timid; pleased, because words express differently and yet like his tools; timid, because how long and difficult and endless perhaps are their full use and mastery. He sees also that each one is an abstraction; that each phrase, and often each word, has involved the consumption, the absorption, the waste of hundreds of sensations concerning still more objects. To put into record merely the impressions of nature, he has only a few notes, and he knows that these external appearances that delight him are written in an infinite gamut. Before the accurate and full description of anything that he sees could be worked out in words, it would have decayed and been born again many times. He sees that the essence of these tools is to generalize, and thereby to leave over in each thing something that is inexpressible. All this reminds him of the failures and inade-

quacies of his own art, wherein (in those moments of despair which are the consequence of passionate attachment) he feels that he has felt all, and that his miserable means only allow him to express a part. This eternal enemy—so much loved—nature, never meets him half-way for more than a moment. Just as he closes the circle of the little world he has made, in which he thinks, for a moment, that she is imprisoned, and says to himself and to us—There! she passes on making other worlds and creating continual appearances.

How is he in days like this, when the life of the seasons is beginning again, to paint the spring that delights him? He can paint some trees and a little sky, and the reflections of water. How can he paint its murmur? How can he paint the settling restlessness of the air above him? How can he paint the forgotten odors of new growth? How can he paint that "becoming" of the season, in which is also expressed the faint sadness of a past long put aside?

Surely he feels that all is inadequate, and that the only happy one is he who forgets to paint, and only looks without seeing.

He may turn to those who work in other ways, but who also—he becomes more and more sure of it—have limitations not unlike his. But those limitations are not his, and they are not responsible to him, and so far he can be happy with them. With them he can continue the dreams of a complete recall and perception. And when they fail he does not suffer; he is more willing to see that they could not look at everything from every point of view at once.

He recognizes with some amusement how words, and consequently ideas, are placed in masses, as he places forms and colors; and is occasionally even a little worried when what he considers styles are confused, and thought which he respects is brushed about for effect or for purpose, like so much paint.

And he recognizes that just as with him in the modes he knows, minds are caught in the net of imitation, and fly around and about it without escaping, so that they are even affected in their deepest soul—that this often comes from using certain manners and certain styles, "for that the matter of style very much comes out of the manner," and the outside reacts upon the inner.

He gives up asking for all sorts of truth in any one form of language, and does not lose the interest, the exhilaration that Shakespeare

gives because his Marc Antony does not include all, besides, that history has told. Science cannot wither the charm of Cleopatra.

At some such moment, when he sees thought more clearly, and is reverential toward the minds that live in ideas, he may be asked, as I have been, to express in words his beliefs and perceptions. At such a moment, forgetful of early experiences, that were both confusing and disenchanting, but are long past and faded, he may do as I have done—open some page of a writer—some person who thinks in words and who thinks about art.

He finds that that writer has asked art to tell "the truth," but has forgotten to ask of it sincerity. In reality he has forbidden the artist to express himself while expressing things. He has asked him to go out of his own humanity, out of his own thought, his own emotion, his own proper affection, and try to execute what he thinks proper to cause on others such and such an impression. Nothing can relieve this tendency from the duplicity which looks toward the public, and only lives to act upon the spectators.

This is not the painter's art of painting. In minds like that of Mr. Ruskin, the destiny thus given to painting would be certainly one of the noblest and most useful of functions, but it has the fault of being impossible. No more could music, while agitating my nerves according to the laws of harmony, teach me at the same time as from the chair of a professor.

No, never, however shocking it may sound in or out of studios, never has truth in the ordinary sense of the word been the end of art. The value of a painting as a means of making us know the nature of realities shall have nothing in common with its value as a work of art.

Truth is not the pictorial essence of a painting; it is, on the contrary, the manner or means of the painting's addressing ordinary intelligence; all the general powers that the artist has in common with other men, but which faculties and powers do not constitute his artistic side, that part of himself which he tries to please, to represent, to disengage, to assert in his painting.

He may, of course, because his profession is partly a profession or art of sight, teach how to see—how to see better and farther and more delicately; but this is only incident-

tal, and is good so far as it does not injure or detract from his own special duty. Of course he should not shock or annoy the most intelligent part of our intelligence, so that our other instincts that meet his may not be troubled in their peaceful enjoyment.

Therefore, according to time and place, in one way for the mediæval mind, in another for the Oriental, in another for us of to-day, it is advisable that he conform somewhat to the general knowledge that composes the vague ideas of a public; that he do not contradict too squarely scientific exactness that is fairly familiar.

But nothing can be falser than to measure his merit by the instruction he gives us. In the first place, if what he does is a lesson of observation, the effort to understand it is so much to detract from the spectator's emotion. Secondly, if a painter wishes to teach he will no longer be carried away by his special emotions, the one thing in which he is stronger than we. He cannot, even if he wishes—and this will explain the cause of certain blunders that have astonished us. It is for the scientific, the religious mind to remove our ignorances and correct our moral defects; it is not the duty of the artistic mind.

No more than when I am dead and have found the Reality, now vaguely seen in this world of appearances, should I expect of the divine who may preach my funeral sermon to try to decide what may have been my errors in the technique of the art of painting.

Nor, of course, can the end of art be untruth. Teachings like those of Mr. Ruskin, far more common than they should be (because of our natural want of humility and charity, and the narrowness of the fields into which accident forces us), divide absolutely our art into two kinds—those that give images of things just as they are, and those that give images of things just as they are not; such a dilemma as worries the child's mind.

"Things as they are" may mean so much as to be meaningless. If we mean things as they are in themselves, only God can so see them as to enclose them and leave nothing outside but falsehood. For us, we see but as in a mirror darkly. We have a few imperfect senses, and such moral faculties as we manage to distinguish the one from the other, and which we have to complete by making one act upon the others.

So that for us there exist many truths. We

have truths of smell, before which all things are absorbed in one or more impressions of odor. We have the truths of the eyes, for which all is appearance. We have the truths of intelligence, for which there are ideas; truths of feeling for which there are impressions; and many others in a long list perhaps exhaustless; and I only use these definitions for our momentary convenience.

Now, in connection with which of these truths must the painter represent the manner of existence of objects?

That is the question the painter must ask himself—that must be his canon of æsthetics. He cannot exile the truths that affect his specialty, however much he may care for the others. It is possible for him to let the truths of one kind affect his own, but his own must predominate, or the work of art will not exist.

Persons like Mr. Ruskin think that they are fighting the cause of truth against falsehood. In fact, they are making one truth fight another, with injury to both.

It is not possible that a work of art should define like science and still move like poetry.

It is precisely that point of which I spoke first, that tendency of the artist which makes him not a reasoner but a seer, which gives him the unexplainable power of impressing us in a way that we can only analyze afterward. It is because he can escape from the rule of his intelligence, can become a being that does not judge, can become as a little child, no longer see things through ideas, but merely feel the agitation of a love, an unexplainable passion. As if he felt the breath that animates the world behind a covering of what we call realities.

It is in this way that he is an awkward man when he tries to handle the tools which we generally call *language*—that is to say, words and phrases; in so far, at least, as he has to use them, to explain the ideas and sentiments involved in his own language. This is all the more difficult in that literature, the language of words, has not become acquainted as yet with this mind of the artist, and has not furnished to the artist special tools to define his intentions and position. It is because of the peculiarities of his work, which we have just considered, that no person can explain that work perfectly in terms of words; while he, the artist himself, grows continually more averse to handle words which seem unsatisfactory, and, naturally, becomes more and more unfit to use them.

J. L. F.