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A WOMAN MASTER: MADEMOISELLE BRESLAU. TRANSLATED FROM THE FRENCH OF COUNT ROBERT DE MONTESQUIOU. BY IRENE SARGENT

Editor's Note.—It is said that toward the end of the Middle Ages—say, in Chaucer’s time—a book required a hundred years in which to become popular. In our own day, a tenth part of that period suffices to bury in forgetfulness a book which is the passion of two continents. Little more than a decade since, indiscriminately the mature and the inexperienced, the prosaic and the romantic followed the autobiography of the ill-starred genius, Marie Bashkirtseff. Many there were who read the “Journal” in obedience to the passing fashion. Others were attracted by its artistic quality; fewer still by the race type which it revealed as in a picture; the smallest number of all, perhaps, by the morbid study in psychology which it offered. But all those who read it, whatever their initial motive, became deeply interested in the plot and action. For plot and action there were—complicated, moving and powerful. Love, jealousy and ambition were there seen feverishly at work and constituting a tragedy, although these three principles were represented by a single character and had their seat in a single human heart. But, as in the old Greek drama, the narrative of the chief actor involved shadowy persons upon whom a reflected interest was cast. The love of Marie Bashkirtseff centered in Bastien-Lepage, the pure-minded painter too early lost to France. Her ambition, wounded by destiny and disease, circled im-

potently about the personality of her fellow-student, Mlle. Breslau. To this patient conqueror of fame the Russian girl-painter gave the first prominence; creating for her rival a world-wide public anxious to follow her career and to know the outcome of her efforts. For the many she was long lost amid the throng of her competitors; her name alone remaining as a memory of her early existence. But to-day her reputation is a fact accomplished, and the stern goddess Justice leaves her as sole survivor to speak the last word in the tragedy of Marie Bashkirtseff.

In the course of the two volumes of her journal, Marie Bashkirtseff appears to her readers under a double aspect. She is at once pathetic and vain. Indeed, she might have figured, as a typical example, in those studies of precocious children which were recently published by a European Review with the purpose of determining the results of their gifts. The Russian girl-painter was, without doubt, a prodigy, possessing both the seductive qualities and the perversities of the type; her sad end excusing her faults to the profit of her attractions. But let her troubled spirit rest in peace!

Radically different was the childhood of the grave, distinguished artist to whom I am to devote this study. And yet early, Fame touched and assured her name, at the mention of which the writer of the memoirs already cited, “heard sounded a chord powerful, sonorous and calm.” The fame later acquired harmonized with such sure hopes. “Sonorous, calm and powerful:” the exactitude and justice of these words speak in
favor of the one who formulated them in her restless equity: that young and brilliant woman of society, ambitious to run the artistic career with the rapidity of a hare, while her prudent, patient colleague slowly, wisely, valiantly attained the successive and progressive stages of the same hard race.

Over these stages we have been permitted, by means of the Georges Petit Exposition, to cast a sweeping, inclusive glance, surprising even for those who have followed for years with deep interest the work of the painter; surprising even—it must surely be—for the painter herself. Since upon artists worthy of their title—that is, those having the necessary modesty and pride—the effect produced by the collection of their works is in itself a great surprise. And this feeling possesses a victorious, consoling quality, like the glance described by the Greek philosopher as belonging to a man who has laid up his treasures elsewhere than in the coffer hunted by the robber.

Certainly Mlle. Breslau can cast this glance upon her own work, upon herself, when relentless Time in the course of years, shall have made of her a venerable old master. For her hands will have scattered abroad many and many precious leaves inscribed with the history of as many lives. And as a legend or epigraph attached to this living, sentient gathering, the future can write:

“Here are fruits, flowers, leaves and branches . . . .”

Such will be the harvest of our woman master.

This harvest we shall shortly pass in review. But, first of all, I wish to emphasize the comparison previously indicated, which offers valuable instruction regarding the beneficial effects of rivalry.

In the second volume of the “Journal of Marie Bashkirtseff,” the name of Mademoiselle Breslau occurs more than thirty times. I have counted the passages and must have omitted some of them from my list. This name recurs like a haunting spirit, a besieging anxiety, a spectre of real existence necessary to be overcome—the representative of the genius ardently coveted for one’s
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self: a being which exists for many, if not for all of us, and whom circumstances endow with the power of making us realize our capabilities, which without this quickening influence would not reach so full a development:

“She is splendidly gifted and I am confident that she will succeed.”

“That minx Breslau has finished a composition; if one can do things like that, one is certain of becoming a great artist. It is

I quote:

“Breslau has received many congratulations.”

“How well that girls draws.”

“That rogue gives me anxiety.”

plain, isn’t it? I am jealous. It is well that I am so, for jealousy will be a spur.”

“As a matter of course, Breslau has attained a brilliant success; she draws admirably.”

“The Mirror”
“Breslau will get prizes.”

“Breslau is constantly in my thoughts, and I do not make a stroke without asking myself how she would do.”

“I ask no questions for fear of hearing what Breslau is doing.”

“In comparison with Breslau I am like a cardboard box, thin and fragile, beside a massive, richly carved oaken chest.”

“Happy Breslau: yes, truly happy, and she has not made her work very interesting (alluding to a fellow pupil), as Breslau would have done.” . . .

And so these allusions continue in a constant minor accompaniment to the themes of the writer, swelling or diminishing, gathering or losing emphasis, winding through five hundred pages, as the leit-motiv of rivalry, stimulating and effective.

The quoted words were long since written. The last page of the journal of Marie Bashkirtseff bears the date of 1884. To the experiences so widely different, yet equally thrilling, of the two young girls one might apply these lines:

“After a score of years I write again:
I listen……. No sound breaks the stillness
dread…….
There is no doubt. Already you are held
Among those silent ones the world calls dead.”

Alas! such words might be the tragic appeal of the restless Marie from the spirit world. It would seem thus that, at my appeal, she issues from the shades to bring, in the allusions cited from her Journal, the posthumous and continued homage of a faithful admiration, purified henceforth from all mundane rivalry and splendidly justified to-day by that which the companion who inspired it submits to our judgment.

BEFORE speaking of the striking collection of nearly one hundred works exhibited by Mlle. Breslau, in the Georges Petit Galleries, I wish to make mention of a trait of her character which accords with what I have already said regarding her disdain of reputation. When about to write my present article, and in
order to provide myself with facts, I asked her for the use of certain of the innumerable journalistic criticisms in which, twenty
years since, her fame first appeared as a prelude and then passed on to be accentuated in continuous, infinite variations, she made me the simple answer that:

“T had, certainly, several packages of clippings, but at the time of my last change of residence, they disappeared.”

This ingenuous reply pleased me more than I can express. It is indeed true that these superficial judgments, “not altogether candid,” as poor Verlaine, the poet, testified, lose their force at the successive and constantly more reflective stages of existence. There remains only the appreciation of certain luminous minds who have signally honored us, if they have generously infused something of sentiment into their calm judgments.

Among those who have so acted toward Mlle. Breslau I will mention MM. André Chevrillon and Emile Hovelacque. Let me quote from them:

“Mlle. Breslau possesses a psychological instinct which seeks by preference women and children. It is agreeable to linger in the presence of this serious, wholesome genius, enamored of freshness and force, of goodness and delicacy, full of sentiment and devoid of sentimentality. One must admire this sincere, thorough workmanship employed to produce scrupulously correct and complete drawing, to represent the entire physical exterior which takes its form from the inner life. Here is an art of reflection and conscience which refuses to juggle with difficulties and which the French
eye does not always estimate at a high value, accustomed, as it is, to lightness of treatment and brilliancy of execution. Mlle. Breslau is our first woman painter, at least in portraiture—the only one, perhaps, who is not the *replica* of a masculine genius. In grace. Her studies of children are often masterpieces of arrangement, of simple and sure handling, successful in expressing youth with its restrained brilliancy, its reticent strength, its plant-like freshness and the quiet of its incomplete development and bloom."

This passage is one to be proud of having inspired. The woman honored by it has not suffered by losing all other printed eulogies in the confusion caused by changes of residence. Fragment though it be, it suffices. It would be useless to cite others. It contains everything and it can serve excellently as an epigraph to that “peaceful, harmonious labor;” as, also, it may one day in the future, serve as an epitaph for her who will have gained the right to rest quietly, having realized her calm dream.

And now let us try in our turn to judge appreciatively the collection to-day exhibited, as well as the artist to whom we are indebted for it. First of all, might it not be believed that we find in the eyes of certain of these models a reflection of Switzerland, pure and powerful, in its whites and its azure tones? Mlle. Breslau is a native of Zurich.

“She descends in truth from her mountains,” exclaimed the painter Degas, in one of his characteristic sallies of wit, as he stood before a singular portrait of the artist painted by herself. Certainly, this portrait is full of meaning, sombre and forbidding as it stands, with its frown apparently addressed in reproof to affectation, pretense, display—to all that is false in what to-day is called art, and what, for the most part, is but insipid, pointless imitation. Yes, truly, something limpid and refreshing, like the atmosphere of an elevated region,
is exhaled in the dignified, tranquil room in which, among pensive flowers and sensitive animals, types of reflective men, of young women, of older ladies, and above all of real children, pursue peacefully their healthy aesthetic life. Of childlike grace Mlle. In Mlle. Breslau’s work there is no trickery or sleight of hand, no false style or even any style; no tailor-made elegance, or lay-figure mannerisms. There is, furthermore, no inverse affectation of simplicity which would be equally distasteful. The artist seeks only—and this is apparent through feeling rather than through sight—the garment, the ornament, which reveals a personality, the accessory which completes it, or comments upon it. This accessory, if
chosen by the painter, is simple and charming. It takes at times a pronounced form, and may even assume that of a peculiar hat, when such a detail of costume is able to reveal more regarding the head upon which it sits than a whole treatise upon physiognomy. But I repeat that when the taste of the painter and that of the model coincide, there follow the happiest results. As an example, I will cite as one among many the attractive portrait of M. Victor Klotz, which is a work of great distinction, and satisfying by its harmonious effect.

On occasion, the artist goes still farther in the choice of detail and we follow her with pleasure, since her sure judgment in what Carlyle named the philosophy of clothes, prevents her from leading us into error. It is thus, in that admirable portrait of Madame de Brantes, which will always rank as one of the richest works of Mlle. Breslau, the painter has conceived her subject as a figure with mitts. The conception was true and accurate—suggested even by the model. The amiable lady who sometimes drew on gloves with which to handle subjects of conversation, will henceforth, in our own imagination, wear mitts; this will be an advantage since they will leave visible the half of her lovely hands.

With perfect truth one may compare this pastel with the work of Perronneau. The eloquent eyes, the nose indicative of culture, the air of penetration, the subtle smile, the adroitness, the soft, persuasive grace so superbly rendered, reveal the distinguished psychological power of the painter.

And yet it is in the portraits of children that Mlle. Breslau most fully exercises this gift—then, with a greater tenderness. She calls to the mind of one who studies this phase of her work, certain verses which describe the child as leaving behind him at every step several phantoms of himself. A long procession of these attractive little phantoms defiles, smiling or sighing, along the walls of the Galerie de Sèze. For all these children are not gay. Some of them are far from that temper of mind. Indeed, it has often seemed to me that, in spite of the conscient melancholy, the definite sorrows which come later in life, childhood has yet one of the bitterest of lots, which resides in the impossibility of making its grievances understood by careless attendants and unsympathetic parents. I will take as an example the significant words of the model of one of these expressive canvases. The child is holding in his arms—the beloved confident of his little hatreds, of his childish spite—a thin, pugdog. And the typical phrase is added: "I like Tom. I like
Dick. I like Médor. . . . I don't like people!"

A book might be made from the reflections gathered by Mlle. Breslau from the personal secret of their future individuality, which it is her task to express and make visible. In this task how expert she is! She has within her the qualities of a Kate Greenaway, of larger mold and higher grasp than the English original; one who by virtue of a sort of artistic transposition

Portrait of the Sculptor Carriès.

lips of her young models. She excels in making them talk, rather than in allowing them to talk, in order to extract the per-
of maternal love, devotes a celibate life full of emotions to appreciate well and to describe even better the first fruits of the soul.

The reward of such intelligent, subtle application, aided by exceptional means, perfect sincerity and consummate art, resides in the fact that no one, perhaps, like Mlle. Breslau, has been able to reproduce "mortal eyes in their unveiled splendor" (to use the expression of Baudelaire), together with that which makes of them, sometimes prematurely, mirrors darkened by the breath of grief.

How much present beauty, how much future womanliness one finds in Mlle. Breslau's portrait of the little Beatrix de Clermont-Tonnerre! The eyes are two flax blossoms; the lips an opening rose; the two chubby arms have a plumpness which is already accented and modeled, just as the glance has already a dreamy quality.

As for the characteristic and infinitely varied accessory already mentioned, which the painter uses to enlighten the spectator upon what she herself is seeking to decipher, this accessory in the portraits of her little men and women is, according to the age of the subject, a map which is a steady, anchored balloon, or a balloon which is a floating world. Or again, if the accessory take a living form, we find flowers and animals whose grace and mystery are allied with sentiment or wit to those of their friends or masters. The flowers thus used as accessories, and those treated separately in panels, tell us how much and how faithfully the painter loves them: larkspurs of an intense azure; harebells of a fading carmine; velvet gillflowers; flame-like zinnias; roses of flesh and blood. I know only one other painter, Fantin, who can give the same air of thought and spirit to a handful of color notes, in a vase. These clusters of flowers painted by masters who are not specialists in this branch of art, have a brilliancy—I was about to say—a perfume which is peculiar and unique. Such are the flowers executed by Monticelli, Manet and Raffaelli.

Mme. Lemaire, that admirable flower-painter, produces faces which are like the petals of blossoms; Mlle. Breslau, the subtle painter of women's portraits, produces flowers resembling women: two processes totally different from each other, but both justified by the results attained through their exercise.

I must devote a word to Mlle. Breslau's portraits of men, less numerous, but not less remarkable. I will mention three, of artist friends: the first, a strange, fascinating figure of an English student—an early work, dating from 1880 and marking a stage in the life of the painter. For, having finished this portrait which already reveals the master, Mlle. Breslau gave up all attendance upon schools and courses. As to the portrait of Carriès—the sculptor of genius whose warm friendship is one of the proud memories of the painter who has transmitted to us his features—this work is a page of contemporary art destined to live for two reasons. It is, first of all, the final and, as I believe, the only portrait, of a master already illustrious, whose fame will continue to increase. At some future time, his native, or his adopted city will send to Mlle. Breslau's studio at Neuilly a commission authorized to obtain this priceless memorial work. Similar was the action of the city of Glasgow toward the artist Whistler in behalf of Carlyle.
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For another celebrated artist, Maurice Lobe, Mlle. Breslau has devoted her art and her friendship to produce a faithful portrait: a face wearing the expression at once affable and severe, which gives so much character to his face and so much physiognomy to his character.

To the names of such colleagues and friends I wish to add two others whose portraits it would please me to find numbered among the works of the painter. These two canvases would witness the old and continued friendship with which their distinguished originals honor the woman master, who, I repeat, owes it as a duty to her period, to preserve their features. I refer to MM. Degas and Forain. Such men as these rarely praise. Their words of commendation are worth a wreath of laurel. This wreath I would cast, with its bloom and fragrance, at the threshold of the present article, joining to it the nosegay of a sonnet. The last, less significant and valuable, is my own.

She is a master whose sagacious hand
Raises from out the grave the long dead past
And joins it with the hour now fleeing fast:
Seizing the shapes as waves do sky and land.

Her works the searching tests of time shall stand;
Since they are types of race, or person, cast
Clearly and simply, made to serve and last;
Not to adorn a court or castle grand.

Departed masters look on her below,
Her toil severe approving, since they know
The task to seek a soul demands a heart.

But woman-painter, joined with theirs, your name
In crystal clear shall guarded be, where Fame
Honors th’ eternal victories of art!

—From “Art et Décoration,” May, 1904.