THE MURAL PAINTINGS BY ROBERT REID IN THE MASSACHUSETTS STATE HOUSE. IRENE SARGENT

The men chosen to decorate the enlarged, one might almost say the reconstructed Massachusetts State House, have received signal honor. With their smaller achievements, they yet invite comparison with those artists of ancient times whose names, and fragments of whose creations have come down to us, associated with the building of the most important public monuments. The hill upon which rises the Capitol of the old Bay State finds but two rivals in the whole course of profane history, if its political memories be considered. As Cicero said of the Roman Forum, here also: "Wherever we turn, we tread upon some trace of history." The son of the Commonwealth approaching the Pilgrim City by land or by sea, turns in love, pride and reverence to the mountain home of the old beacon of liberty, which now shows a crown of gold by day and a wreath of fire by night. Even the stranger, however traveled he may be, acknowledges that the site of these legislative halls is one of the most imposing in the world, and that it commands the finest outlook of city and ocean in America. To commemorate by art in such a place the action of certain of the most enlightened, the purest-minded, and the most zealous of the founders of the nation, has fallen, as was fitting, to natives of the State, who are also three of the five most experienced mural painters of the country. Having therefore their sectional patriotism, as well as their artistic conception, to kindle their enthusiasm, they gave themselves heart and soul to their tasks, similarly to those Frenchmen who are called to aid in the decoration of the Panthéon or the Sorbonne.

As the visitor, entering from "the Bulfinch Front" of the State House, before devoting himself to specific study, casts an inclusive glance around the great staircase vestibule, and then, beyond, into the memorial hall, he is convinced of two facts. First, of the exceedingly rapid rise of American mural painting, and of the excellence of the men who now represent it. Second, of the deep indebtedness of this phase of art, as evidenced in its present stage, to Puvis de Chavannes. Before the time of that master, the creation of certain of these mural pictures would have been impossible, and even had they...
been created, they would have been condemned, rather than admired. This is especially true of Mr. Reid’s work in the vestibule, as well as that of Mr. Simmons in the Memorial Hall. Both artists, like Puvis, when he painted the “Genius of Light acclaimed by the Muses,” the poets, and the philosophers, in the staircase hall of the Boston Public Library, have studied the architectural scheme and scale of the spaces with which they have dealt, the colors of the marbles by which their pictures were to be framed, and all details which could possibly affect them. By this means they have attained results quite different from the artists of a few years ago, who executed mural paintings largely after the manner of easel pictures; trusting to Fortune to place them in congenial surroundings of light and color. The fact of this minute study of conditions was received with interest when the decorations of the Boston Library were placed in position, and it is plain that this great example has produced fine results. Therefore, we find here, as in certain other recent instances, something more, something less than pictures: that is, true decorations, creating in the great spaces focal points which are produced as by natural gathering, increase and culmination, at certain spots, of lines, color and light; which are never aggressive, and become pictures and narratives only when closely questioned by the eye. We also find that Mr. Reid’s decorations preserve the plane surface of the wall, instead of apparently cutting it by window-like openings, through which the pictures are seen; as is often the case, even in the work of excellent artists: For example, in the decorations of the Panthéon, Paris, including the panel by Bonnat, and excepting only the Legend of Sainte Geneviève, executed by Puvis de Chavannes. The wall in Mr. Reid’s pictures is never dissolved. It is there in all its solidity; the pictures simply arresting the progress of the eye with agreeable episodes, as it travels up the vertical surface to seize the dimensions of the place. The artist has understood his task as one which could not be judged alone and was not to be accomplished by a brilliant tour de force; but rather as a work undertaken to continue, support and complete the architectural scheme; so that the first thought of one entering these spacious rooms is not commanded by the pictures, more than by the staircase, or the color-play of light, as it falls through the glazed opening in the ceiling of the circular Memorial Hall to glance upon the polished facing and floor. Thus the pictures prove that they are no ornaments detach-
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able from the structural plan, and that in rupture from it, they and it would suffer equally.

From the foregoing facts it does not follow that Mr. Reid has subordinated himself to the detriment of his individuality. On the contrary, his known qualities as an artist were never more prominent than they appear in these difficult problems. He has come to be easily recognized by the frequenter of exhibitions as a painter enamored of the color blue, of cross lights, of reflections that displace local color, of the movement of shadow, of every effect and function of the atmosphere as a medium of transmission; of sunlight, moonlight and firewall.

In these subjects selected by the State House Commissioners, and pronounced unpromising in decorative possibilities by accomplished artists like Messrs. Walker, Simmons and Thayer, it is interesting to see how Mr. Reid has changed his restrictions into advantages. Indeed, he seems by both aptitude and experience to have been the one painter fitted to unify and harmonize this peculiar and complex scheme composed of elements apparently hostile to one another. Even to him the first subject assigned—that of James Otis arguing against the Writs of Assistance—seemed unattractive, until he was shown the letter written by John Adams to his friend and former law-student, William Tudor, in which the patriot describes the scene and the details of the great historical event, fifty-six years after its occurrence. The letter, written in order to serve as notes and basis for a commemorative painting, the artist for which Mr. Adams desired to find, is a proof of the dramatic quality of the scene; since the picture remained undimmed in the memory of the writer of the letter, from youth to old age. In this description two points were seized by Mr. Reid as capable of picturesque development: the fact that an open fire was alight in the Council Chamber, at the time of the argument, and that the five judges upon the bench were robed in scarlet. The first point gave opportunity for the emphatic use of his cross-light system of illuminating his canvases; while the second demanded the introduction of a leading color which he had successfully employed with a blue undertone lurking in the shadows, in such pictures as his “Red Coat” and “Gladiola.” He foresaw a congenial task, and accepted the commission, which must be here quoted because of the clear explanation given by it of the actual frieze picture.

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In the quaint formal English of the period Mr. Adams writes:

"Whenever you shall find a painter, male or female, I pray you to suggest a scene and a subject for the pencil.

"The scene is the Council Chamber in the old Town House, in Boston. The date is the month of February, 1761, nine years before you entered my office in Cole Lane. As this was five years before you entered college, you must have been in the second form of Master Lovell's school. That Council Chamber was as respectable an apartment as the House of Commons or the House of Lords in Great Britain, in proportion, or that in the State House in Philadelphia, in which the Declaration of Independence was signed, in 1776. In this chamber, round a great fire, were seated five judges, with Lieutenant-Governor Hutchinson at their head, as chief justice, all arrayed in their new, fresh, rich robes of scarlet English broadcloth; in their large cambric bands, and immense judicial wigs. In this chamber were seated all the barristers-at-law of Boston, and of the neighboring county of Middlesex, in gowns, bands, and tie wigs. They were not seated on ivory chairs, but their dress was more solemn and pompous than that of the Roman Senate, when the Gauls broke in upon them.

"In a corner of the room must be placed as a spectator and auditor, wit, sense, imagination, genius, pathos, reason, prudence, learning, and immense reading, hanging by the shoulders on two crutches, covered with a great cloth coat, in the person of Mr. Pratt, who had been solicited on both sides, but would engage on neither, being, as chief justice of New York, about to leave Boston forever. Two portraits, at more than full length, of King Charles the Second and of King James the Second, in splendid golden frames, were hung up on the most conspicuous sides of the apartment. If my young eyes or my old memory have not deceived me, those were as fine pictures as I ever saw; the colors of the royal ermines and long, flowing robes were the most glowing, the figures the most noble and graceful, the features the most distinct and characteristic; far superior to those of the King and Queen of France in the Senate Chamber of Congress, these were worthy of the pencils of Rubens and Vandyke. There was no painter in England capable of them at that time. They had been sent over without frames in Governor Pownall's time, but he was no admirer of Charles or James. The pictures were stowed away in a garret, among rubbish, until Governor Bernard came, who had them cleaned,
PAUL REVERE'S RIDE

MURAL PAINTING BY ROBERT REID IN THE STAIRCASE HALL, MASSACHUSETTS STATE HOUSE.
THE BOSTON TEA PARTY
MURAL PAINTING BY ROBERT REID IN THE STAIRCASE HALL, MASSACHUSETTS STATE HOUSE.
JAMES OTIS ARGUING AGAINST THE WRITS OF ASSISTANCE

MURAL PAINTING BY ROBERT REID IN THE STAIRCASE HALL, MASSACHUSETTS STATE HOUSE. CENTRAL PANEL.
superbly framed, and placed in council for the admiration and imitation of all men, no doubt with the advice and concurrence of Hutchinson and all his nebula of stars and satellites."

Judged from this quotation, it is no wonder that the letter inspired the peculiar genius of Mr. Reid, who has given body to its indications, with the exception of the one regarding the royal portraits: a suggestion which, artistically impossible to follow—since the portraits would have made insignificant, trivial "spots" upon the canvas—is yet retained in the quotation, in order to show the artistic quality of Mr. Adams's description as well as the spirit of the times: the conflict of tyranny and insurrection, which produced a scene so truly dramatic and thrilling, so worthy of dramatic action.

Thus the letter was fitted to become the inspiration of a really modern picture: that is, one which is complete and attractive by reason of its composition, its color-scheme, its system of lights and darks; one that is not dependent upon the scene represented or the story told. But as the theme is here vitally patriotic, the picture gains an interest for Americans quite different from the sensuous pleasure which is excited by the masterly treatment of a difficult artistic problem. Therefore, to make clear the historical significance of the picture, and the reason for honoring it with a place in the State House a second quotation from Mr. Adams's letter is necessary. Regarding the events which occasioned the scene, he writes:

"When the British ministry received from General Amherst his dispatches announcing the conquest of Montreal, and the consequent annihilation of the French Government in America, in 1759, they immediately conceived the design, and took the resolution of conquering the English colonies, and subjecting them to the unlimited authority of Parliament. With this view, they sent instructions to the collector of the customs in Boston, Mr. Charles Paxton, to apply to the civil authorities for writs of assistance, to enable the customs officers to attend and aid them in breaking open houses, shops, ships, trunks, and packages of all sorts, to search for merchandise which had been imported against the prohibitions, or without paying the taxes imposed by certain acts of Parliament, that is, by certain parliamentary statutes, which had been procured to be passed from time to time for a century before, by a combination of selfish intrigues between West India planters and North American royal governors. These acts
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never had been executed as revenue laws, and there never had been a time when they would have been or could have been obeyed as such.

"Mr. Paxton, no doubt, consulting with Governor Bernard, Lieuten­tenant-Governor Hutchinson, and all the principal crown officers, thought it not prudent to begin his operations in Boston. For obvious reasons, he instructed his deputy collector in Salem to apply by petition to the Superior Court (November, 1760), then sitting in that town, for writs of assistance. Stephen Sewall was then chief justice of that court, an able man, an uncorrupted American, and a sincere friend of liberty, civil and religious. He expressed great doubts of the legality of such a writ, and of the authority of the Court to grant it. Not one of his brother judges uttered a word in favor of it; but as it was an application on the part of the Crown, it must be heard and determined. After consultation, the Court ordered the question to be argued at the next February term in Boston; namely, in 1761.

"In the meantime Chief Justice Sewall died, and Lieutenant-Governor Hutchinson was appointed chief justice of that court in his stead. Every observing and thinking man knew that this appointment was made for the direct purpose of deciding this question in favor of the Crown, and all others in which it should be interested. An alarm spread far and wide. Merchants of Salem applied to Mr. Pratt, who refused, and to Mr. Otis, who accepted, to defend them against the terrible menacing monster, the writ of assistance. Great fees were offered, but Otis would accept of none. 'In such a cause,' said he, 'I despise all fees.'"

Mr. Adams follows with a description of the opening of the case; noting, in his usual pictorial style, the impression made by the advocates of each side. Finally, referring to the final speaker, he exclaims:

"But Otis was a flame of fire! With a promptitude of classical allusions, a depth of research, a rapid summary of historical events and dates, a profusion of legal authorities, a prophetic glance of his eye into futurity, and a torrent of impetuous eloquence, he hurried away everything before him. American independence was then and there born; the seeds of patriots and heroes were then and there sown to defend the vigorous youth. Every man of a crowded audience appeared to me to go away, as I did, ready to take up arms against the writs of assistance. Then and there was enacted the first scene of the
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first act of opposition to the arbitrary claims of Great Britain. Then and there the child Independence was born. In fifteen years, namely in 1776, he grew up to manhood, and declared himself free.”

Guided by this letter—in itself an enduring flame of patriotism, since it enabled an old man to pierce the gloom of a half-century and to see, as if still beneath his youthful eyes, the beginnings of our history as a nation—Mr. Reid has revealed himself sensitive to both the political and the artistic aspects of the scene. In subordinating his own art to that of the architect, or rather in associating decorative with structural principles, we have seen that he has been exceedingly successful. Considered independently as a decorative painter, without regard to the architectural scheme of the surroundings, he has in this case, shown himself to be no less effective. As may be seen from the illustration, the background of the picture represents a white wall broken only by a window, an open door, and the tall back of the judge’s seat, behind which appears a breadth of drapery. What can not be inferred, however, is the warm reflection of an unseen open fire which is projected against this wide expanse. Nor can the play of the pale blue shadows cast by the figures, be described by mere words. At the right of the picture occurs a mass of scarlet created by the judges’ robes: a rich and splendid color recalling that used by Veronese, in such compositions as his “Venice Enthroned,” and his “Battle of the Giants.” The faces of the judges, sharply defined against the extreme whiteness of the wigs and bands, show variations of the aristocratic type, the true judicial countenance. They are refined, haughty, thoughtful, or scornful; while the hands of these figures are equally expressive, as they are folded, clinched, or pressed against the cheek.

This part of the composition formal, dignified, stately in arrangement, carries the idea of silence. It leaves also upon the spectator an indefinable impression approaching the sinister, as if a Pontius Pilate were here portrayed as sitting in judgment.

The comparatively large space occupied by the judicial group, the opposition of upright and vertical lines made by its projection against the background, contrast admirably with the compactly massed figures of advocates and citizens standing at the left, and extending outward from the doorway into the space of a second room, as far as it can be seen. The firelight casts a ruddy glow upon certain figures of this
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group, and the white of the judges’ ermine, bands and wigs is echoed in the window with frosted panes, one of which, rubbed clear, shows a bright, red light coming evidently from a house opposite. This echo of color, and contrast of line and mass, added to that other more subtle quality resulting from the opposition of malignant calm with sympathetic interest, end by holding the spectator in suspense, as his eye, ceasing to sweep the canvas, fixes itself upon the figure forming the focus of the picture, which is so admirably placed in the foreground, and toward which are turned the two groups so different one from the other in massing and in color treatment. The orator, represented in profile and wearing gown and wig, receives upon his garments a complex play of light. His fine face, its muscles tense with emotion, and its sternness sharpened by high-bred delicacy, is directly contrasted with the inscrutable countenances of the judges; while it is supported by the faces of the group at the left: notably by that of the invalid leaning heavily on his crutches and skilfully placed directly behind the speaker at a proper distance to emphasize his strength, effort and exaltation by a relaxed frame and a drooping head. Otis is supposed to be pronouncing the words: “I will to my dying day oppose with all the powers and faculties God has given me, all such instruments of slavery on the one hand, and villainy on the other, as this writ of assistance is”: a declaration which is made by the pictorial elements of line, mass and color so eloquently and simply, that its sense can not be misapprehended even if its detail be ignored. Therefore, whether considered as a feature of an architectural scheme, as an illustration of history, or yet in a purely pictorial aspect, the picture is worthy of its honorable position. The best appreciation of its value as yet offered lies in the words of the critic who said:

“It were easy to make of such an episode a melodramatic schoolbook illustration, or conventional historical ‘machine’ of academic quality, but these mediocrities have been tactfully evaded, or, rather, it is but justice to say, the historical spirit of the occasion has been well expressed in its typical aspect, without any trace of literal and commonplace realism, and, better still, expressed in monumental and decorative terms of great purity and distinction.”

The picture of Otis pleading against the Writs of Assistance, was placed in its present position in December, 1901; there remaining on either side, three narrow spaces, enclosed by Ionic pilasters.
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Three years later, that is, during the month of December of the year just past, through the removal of two of the pilasters—one on either side—four of the six narrow spaces were thrown into two: thus making room for two additional paintings, and leaving, between the latter and the central panel, ample place for conventional ornament which should complete and unify the frieze.

The principal subject being treated under the conditions of fire-light, it followed that in the others no daylight effects could be employed. But these were almost as strongly prohibited by historical, as by artistic, requirements; since the Boston Tea Party and the Ride of Paul Revere are the two facts in the colonial history of Massachussets best emphasizing the progress of the spirit of liberty which germinated in the plea of Otis. These subjects again afforded Mr. Reid wide opportunity for the use of his favorite cross-lights and the illumination which proceeds from a concealed source; also, for a free use of blue, in the moon-lighted atmosphere, which he has rendered—especially in the Paul Revere panel—in a way recalling the tranquil night-effect in Puvis de Chavannes’ “Sainte Geneviève Watching over Paris.” In both panels, the deep peace of Nature is strongly contrasted with the mad activity of the figures; the color aiding the line, and the sentiment completing the idea to be conveyed. What may be called the “fire motive” of the central painting is repeated in the left-hand panel by the lantern light coming from the house of the Middlesex farmer, catching the garments of the two figures as they advance from the door, and streaming upon the horse and rider. To define the course of this motive winding through the intricacies of the entire frieze is as interesting as to follow a Wagnerian music phrase through the changes of the orchestration. In the central painting, we find the red light playing against white, and casting over it a ruddy glow; also, refining the otherwise too great mass of scarlet by casting silhouettes of certain figures in cerulean blue; while, in the side panels, the same red light appears in such concentration as fits the general decrescendo of decorative effect, reaching the faintest pianissimo everywhere outside the immediate space, which is lighted, in the one case by the supposed lantern, and in the other from a source concealed in the hold of the ship. The flat treatment noted in the central picture, suffers no detriment in the side panels, and the frieze as now completed, in the opinion of those most familiar with the
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place, adds apparent solidity to the wall. To quote the words of an accomplished local critic: “The tonal character of the decoration carries out the light and shade of the hall as conceived by the architect, prolonging and sustaining the interesting lights and darks of the marble columns around the upper part of the room, and the shadowy backgrounds of the corridors beyond.”

Apart from the pleasure awakened by their technical success, these two subjects have a sentimental value for American spectators of all ages and conditions; since they deal with episodes more popularly known than the facts associated with the plea of Otis, and, further, they have each been treated by a beloved American poet. To the purely classic dignity of the central panel and the dramatic intensity of the Paul Revere, the Tea Party adds a note approaching the humorous, which completes and unifies the whole; rendering it “not too high or good for human nature’s daily food.” Mr. Reid’s treatment of his theme is intensely modern. It is destined to become more and more pleasing as time shall pass. It fits admirably with its simple surroundings of black and white marble; the whole scheme—architecture, structural material and decoration—serving as a prelude to the rich coloring of Siena marble and peacock hues of glass, together with Mr. Walker’s Raphael’esque rendering of the “Pilgrims Sighting Land,” seen in vista beyond in the Memorial Hall.

The word of the Lord by night
To the watching Pilgrims came,
As they sat by the seaside,
And filled their hearts with flame.

God said: I am tired of kings,
I suffer them no more;
Up to my ear the morning brings
The outrage of the poor.

My angel—his name is freedom—
Choose him to be your king;
He shall cut pathways, east and west
And fend you with his wing.

—Ralph Waldo Emerson: Boston Hymn.