TWO PAINTERS OF CHILDREN. BY WILLIAM WALTON

It would seem to be very natural and appropriate that the artists most successful in rendering the characteristics of children should be women,—and if young and graceful themselves, so much the better. But the "obvious" things in this world are so frequently disproved that we speedily learn to distrust the pretty possibilities; and in no branch of human achievements is the plausible more frequently discovered to be unsound than in art. Nothing, for instance, would seem more proper than the prompt establishment of mutual confidence and sympathy between portrait painter and sitter, yet it is well known that some of the most popular practitioners have been not altogether attractive personalities, and one of the most distinguished of them all, Mr. Sargent, is on record as expressing his belief that no sitter ever left his Tite street studio without a sentiment of personal animosity toward his painter! Nevertheless, general truths are frequently true,—certain qualities do help the portrait painter to understand his sitter better, to see into him, and so (if aided by sufficient technical knowledge) to render more truthfully the real man in question. There are two young women portraitists living in New York city whose work is rising into deserved prominence exactly because of the qualities required by the propieties, and in whose pleasant records there does not appear to be any opening for cynical approval of contraries. Mrs. Kate Rogers Nowell and Miss Florence Wyman are both largely self taught, though both have studied for comparatively short periods in Paris and New York under various teachers,—Mrs. Howell in the ateliers of Callot and L’hermitte abroad and Chase and Zarbell at home, and Miss Wyman in the Julian atelier, beginning at the early age of eleven, for six months, and later in the Art Students’ League of New York, mostly under Mr. Kenyon Cox, to whose carefulness and ability as an instructor she believes much of her subsequent success to be due. Both of these ladies—in their care to observe the rules—began by early efforts to draw the more or less willing sitters around them, sisters and other relatives; the gradually increasing merit in these portraits was duly recognized, the appreciation of partial friends was succeeded by that of strangers, publishers, and the general public, and real commissions, with their comfortable sequence of personal independence and a career, followed.
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It is probable, on the whole, that children are more difficult subjects for portraiture than adults,—just as, broadly speaking, women are more difficult than men. The subtlety, the gracefulness of your subject make it harder to depict adequately, and while the infants of various sizes by no means uniformly represent the "Age of Innocence," nor are entirely free from the faults of their elders—selfishness, anger, jealousy, etc., and even self-consciousness—yet they very frequently present these peculiar traits in another, and, sometimes, in a prettier, way than their betters. There is a great charm, as we all know, in the appearance of a developing good trait,—as in the courage and sturdiness of a very little boy, or in the grace and coming motherliness of a little girl; for that matter, there is a curious charm and interest in the young of almost all animals, even in those which grow up to be disagreeable, as pigs and hippopotami. That complete ignorance and naïveté which we agree to call Innocence is a very pictorial quality; the great seriousness and intentness over trifles, as of a kitten with a straw or a child with a toy, which would be so repellent in the adult, is charming in the undeveloped being. While it is true that the "cherubic" infant is now pretty much relegated to that realm of primitive folk-lore in which are found Dr. Watts' birds that "in their little nests agree," and while there have been known instructors of youth, with a wide experience, who have sorrowfully arrived at the conclusion that all boys are sons of Belial, yet, for many reasons, the young of the human species is generally regarded as interesting. For the artist, moreover, there is a never failing charm in their peculiar drawing and modeling, which differs so greatly from that of the adult and approaches it only by such gradual stages, from the absurd disproportion of the baby to the lankness of the hobble de hoy. All these qualities, mental and physical, seem to be recognized or suggested in the work of Mrs. Nowell and Miss Wyman,—the un-picturesque traits being necessarily suppressed with somewhat more firmness than would be necessary with adults, and yet, in the interest of true portraiture, not entirely suppressed. It is evident that the obstinacy of the bad little boy must be indicated, the truculent suckling must be differentiated from the beaming and expansive one!

For the disconcerting restlessness of these small sitters, which makes it so difficult to catch the desired expression, or, indeed, any definite expression, Mrs. Nowell considers the only remedy to be to
never allow them to get tired but to keep them amused and interested all the time and then catch them on the wing. "For this is really the only way to catch the brightness of a child,—as it is, indeed, that of a grown person." The very young person whom it is desired to portray is allowed to chatter every minute,—by this method only can a glimpse be obtained of the inner personality. Not endowed with that respect for conventionality which obtains with his elders, the tired, or bored, child makes no attempt to conceal his condition and passes promptly into a quite unpaintable condition. Of course, a fondness for children lies at the root of the talent of both these ladies. Miss Wyman, also, draws her sitters only while talking or at play and in a condition of more or less perpetual motion. She says she always sees her picture clearly in her head, in closest detail, before she begins it, then she endeavors by careful watching to catch motion and expression and put down everything that fits into her idea. "The first idea must never be changed unless radically wrong, as I try to get the very keynote of the child's character." This artist has executed very many of her portraits, both of children and adults, in pencil before she began to paint, which, indeed, she has scarcely done as yet; her favorite medium is a very soft lead pencil with which she secures a spirited and effective drawing, as may be seen in our reproductions of her work. There is but little search for detail, the modelling is broadly done—as is, indeed, natural in these smoothly rounded countenances, there is a careful search for correct outline, and a general feeling for a more or less decorative presentation,—as in all good drawing. In contrast with these vigorous delineations are some of her earlier and smaller ones in which the vague and almost impalpable charm of expression of the tender sitter is rendered in the most delicate grays of the pencil. In her portrait painting she expects to follow the same general lines, and her color seems to be already both subtle and true.

Mrs. Nowell works in a great variety of mediums, oil, pastels, water colors and crayons, and varies her methods according to her material. Some of her most successful works have been portrait groups; in some she has even had to present the parent with the children,—a task the formidableness of which may be appreciated even by a layman. Her Parisian training in painting from life, the "true" study of the ateliers, has of course been the foundation
PORTRAIT OF A CHILD, BY MRS. KATE ROGERS NOWELL.
SKETCH OF A GIRL, BY MISS FLORENCE WYMAN
HEAD OF A BOY, BY MRS. KATE ROGERS NOWELL.
of her technical ability, but of the rest—the very important rest—but little is actually taught in the ateliers though much may be learned by close observation. In the pretty art of miniature painting—of which there are many in these later days who have essayed the restoration and only a few who have succeeded—she seems to possess that peculiar sympathy, that ability to flatter and prettify in the peculiar guarded and conventional way required by miniature painting, which the tyros and the awkward ones always miss. Any ugliness or uncouthness in these charming and mannered little ivories is almost as bad as the inane prettiness which is more common. Her crayon work, we believe, has been largely of adults, some of the more distinguished sitters, as Sir Henry Irving, appearing in “The Critic,” and others, as Mark Twain, Joel Chandler Harris and the naturalist John Muir, in “The Outlook.” Her portraits have appeared in the exhibitions of all the more important art societies of the metropolis, and many of them elsewhere.

It may be said that the quality which especially distinguishes the works of these young artists is that “modern” quality difficult to define yet very palpable. It is a sort of sophistication which professes to be quite frank while in reality not so, an apparent letting yourself go freely while you are actually conscious of a hundred things which are taboo. The modern painter, while his general knowledge is much greater than that of the eighteenth century, the seventeenth or the sixteenth, is yet forbidden innumerable privileges which were granted his forbears. To take an example from the first, and from the English school with which we sympathize more nearly (the French children, as those of the representative modern painter of children, Geoffroy, seeming to us much more mannered and alien), not only are we denied such phenomena as “The Infant Jupiter,” “The Infant Hercules,” or even “The Infant Samuel Johnson” of Sir Joshua Reynolds (declared by his biographer Stephens to be “of all artists the one who painted children best . . . . knew most of childhood”) but even the “spirituality,” the “naturalness,” the “half-shy, half-sly expression,” “the rouguishness,” the “playful archness,” of “Miss Penelope Boohby,” the “Strawberry Girl,” “Simplicity,” and “The Infant Samuel.” Even Stephens could not stomach the last; “The Infant Samuel,” he says, “turns up everywhere in England, has been engraved under more names than any of Reynolds’ pictures, and is to be
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seen in every country,—tawdry colored lithographs from Berlin; steel-plate impressions from Vienna; Parisian etchings of the commonest order; English wood cuts, lithographs, copper-plate engravings, and every other means of reproduction have been employed for it; it has even appeared on anchovy and jam pots.” (For this disrespect he has been denounced as belonging to that school of cynics whose motto is: *Vox populi, vox diaboli.*) The artlessness of the nineteenth century may be as artful as this, but it does not seem so in our eyes; it is quite certain that we cannot do things in this particular way. While the human affections cannot, generally, be cultivated beyond a certain point, the intelligence, apparently, can; our grandfathers felt as strongly as we possibly can, but they fell short of us in certain matters of taste, we believe. The heart (admirable organ!) is a very uncertain guide in these matters of taste,—as witness the first fond parent we meet. Whether it is a better way or not, the “modern” way is a very different way, as we have said; and is much more hampered by fear of bathos. It demands a certain fine simplicity and directness, an avoidance of the incongruous, the pedantic and the sham sentimental; above all, in the presentation of that ever-new mystery, the “simple child that lightly draws its breath,” it requires something that, in the words of Fuseli, the painter, shall “teem with man, but without the sacrifice of puerility.”

SINCERITY IN ART

“It matters not whether you paint butterflies upon fans or the Holy Family to adorn a cathedral, your motive must be sincere, you must be doing that which you really and honestly want to do. To be sincere is not necessarily to be serious. To be sincere is to be natural, to be honest, to be spontaneous, to be true to one’s convictions and impulses. One may be as sincere in acting as in playing a Beethoven symphony; in carving a bit of ivory as in moulding an Apollo. By nature we are all sincere; by training and association do we become false and artificial. Sincerity is a quality soon lost, a luster soon dimmed; natural to children, it disappears with age; contact with people seems to destroy it, whereas close touch with nature serves to restore it, for nature is never insincere.”

—Arthur Jerome Eddy.