JOHN W. ALEXANDER, ARTIST. A STUDY IN DETERMINATION. BY P. T. FARNSWORTH

ONE day, when Charles Parsons was at the head of Harper and Brothers' art department, and Abbey, Rheinhart, Frost and the two Davises were on the staff, a slender young fellow from Pittsburgh applied for a position. He had no practical experience, but wanted to do art work. Hundreds with apparently the same qualifications had applied for the same thing, and hundreds would follow in the same way, to find there was nothing for them to do. Mr. Parsons knew this, but he happened not to be very busy at the time, and, attracted by the clear look in the young man's eyes, asked him to sit down, and talked with him for a few minutes. The story he heard was not unusual. His caller had studied drawing at home, and with very little money had come to New York, where he had no friends, to follow his chosen profession. The odds were all against him. Mr. Parsons knew this, so he told him as gently as possible that there was no vacancy, nor likely to be; but in order to soften the blow he said the young man might call again some other time. Then, as the incident was quite in the line of the day's work, Mr. Parsons forgot all about it.

It was different with John W. Alexander, the youthful applicant. He felt that, though he had failed on the first call, he had been asked to come again, and that meant something. This thought gave him courage. One of his ideas before leaving home was that the penny valentine might be vastly improved at very little expense, and he brought with him drawings showing how it was to be done. These he carried around with him to the various publishers of penny valentines, and explained his point with much enthusiasm; but he regarded it as a side issue only. His thoughts were mainly busy with Mr. Parsons' suggestion that he should call again, and he wondered what would be the proper time in which to make that call. The valentine publishers were not greatly impressed, and, when a whole week had passed, young Alexander decided it was about time to see Mr. Parsons again. The day he called the head of the art department was very busy, so young Alexander had to wait to see him. When he entered, the chief sent a terrorizing glance at him from under his lowered brows, and said, "Didn't I tell you there was no position here for you?" Young Alexander stood his ground unmoved, "You asked
me to call again,” he said very steadily. Mr. Parsons drew himself up and stared. Then, to definitely dismiss the subject for all time, replied, “Well, there isn’t any place going to be vacant here, except that of this office boy,” and he looked casually at the urchin holding that post of honor. “When does he leave?” asked Alexander. “Eh!” exclaimed the chief, surprised in spite of himself, as he regarded his imperturbable visitor. “Well, the fact is he is the son of the foreman of our composing room, and—, and—” He paused. Young Alexander said nothing; he simply looked at the chief. Mr. Parsons looked at him; evidently he was to receive no help in relieving the situation. Then he quickly made up his mind. “You can start in on Monday,” he said. That was the beginning of Mr. Alexander’s good fortune.

EIGHT long months passed before he was allowed to do any work in the art room. In the meantime his entry in the place as office boy caused a revolution in the order of small things. Places that hadn’t been swept or dusted for years were cleaned and set to rights. And on his first Saturday he was so intent on making a final thorough cleaning that he was still at work when the building was locked up and everybody else went home. An hour or two later, when the work was finished, he found the doors locked and himself a prisoner. His pounding on the glass front attracted the attention of the night watchman, who opened the door. But when he saw the young man, all covered with dust and grime, he held him as a suspicious character. He was finally persuaded to go up to the art room, where he was shown just what work had been done, and at last reluctantly let young Alexander go home.

At this time most of the illustrations for magazines were drawn directly on the wooden block from which they were printed, and reproduction by photography was just coming in. The first opportunity that came to Mr. Alexander was when he was allowed to work over the photographs for the magazine. He soon showed such undeniable talent that Mr. Abbey and Mr. Rheinhart became interested in him and had a great influence on his subsequent career. It was due to the suggestions of these two friends that his ambition turned to work in colors. Up to that time he had only hoped for success as an illustrator in black and white. Now he began saving his small
salary to have enough for study abroad. When he finally started for Europe, it was with such a meagre sum, that he found it would be impossible to live in Paris, and he therefore went to Munich.

It was in Benozoir’s Academy there that he made his first drawings from the antique. But even the living in Munich proved too heavy a drain; so, after a stay of two months, he went to Polling, in the Bavarian mountains, and began drawing from life among the peasants. At the end of that year he received a letter from Benozoir asking him to send some of the drawings he had made in Munich to be placed in the annual exhibit of his academy. They were sent and he was awarded a medal for his work. This decision aroused some feeling among the German students, who claimed he had no right to exhibit, because he had been only two months at the academy and was not attending it at the time of the exhibit; but the award stood, because the work was done while he was a student at the institution. While at Polling he met the artists Currier and Duveneck, and it was due to their friendship that he received his first commission, which was in Florence. After that he had very little trouble, for as he became better known the demand for his work grew rapidly.

Mr. Alexander works very rapidly, and to this is due the fact that he finds time for ideal sketches. An instance of his facility with the brush may be noted in his Study in Red and Brown, on which he spent little more than a half hour. Perhaps one reason for the undoubted charm of his canvases is his habit of starting all of his portraits by painting the head and face first. His initial inspiration thus dominates all the remainder of his work, as the contour and pose of the head suggest every other line as well as the tones that will bring out character. A fine example of this appears in his Portrait in Lavender and Green, where the rather peculiar shape of the eyebrow, a family characteristic of the subject, is suggested and repeated in the various lines of the pose. In this, as in all of Mr. Alexander’s work, no matter how rhythmic the lines of the pose or background may be, the attention is imperceptibly carried to the head, the chief center of interest.
“LAVENDER AND GREEN.” PORTRAIT BY JOHN W. ALEXANDER
“BLACK AND GOLD.” PORTRAIT BY JOHN W. ALEXANDER
A STUDY IN DETERMINATION

There is no doubt that to Mr. Alexander's early training as an illustrator much of the truth, force and beauty of his decorative effects are due. Trained from the start to illustrate some idea or thought in his work, in his portraits this training is felt, rather than seen, in the subtle lines and tones that tell the character story of the face he has first placed on canvas. It is somewhat remarkable that though nearly every one of his portraits has an indoor background, by his masterly handling of tone and line he secures an effect that is strongly reminiscent of the graceful charm imparted by Gainsborough, Romney and Reynolds to their portraits by the sylvan surroundings. This peculiar charm in the work of Mr. Alexander is undoubtedly due to a certain poetic quality of his temperament that unconsciously takes expression in rhythmic line and grace of contour, especially in his portraits of women.

The most important work on which Mr. Alexander is at present engaged is the decoration for the main hall of the Carnegie Institute. The larger part of this work will be a mural painting from fifteen to eighteen feet high and from sixty to sixty-five feet long. It will be divided into five panels, and the subject of it will be an "Apotheosis of Pittsburgh; or Fire—its Products and the Result." At the bottom of the picture will be seen the furnace fires of the great industrial city, and, rising from the red flames, the Genius of Pittsburgh, represented by a nude male figure bearing in his hands emblematic products of the furnaces. Surrounding him will be the allegorical figures of the nations presenting rich gifts in return for the fire products; above, in the air, processions of allegorical figures, blowing trumpets, typifying the fame as well as riches that have come to the city as the result of its great industries.

It is a far cry from the artist whose fame is known everywhere, and whose time for more than a year ahead is taken up with important commissions, to the slender youth who came to New York not so many years ago, hoping, among other things, to improve the quality of penny valentines. The same quiet pluck which caused him to accept the position of office boy, offered in jest, has brought him every year greater mastery of the technique and genius of his profession. The long list of medals and awards that have been bestowed upon him, both in this country and abroad, are too well known to need repetition here.