IS THERE A SEX DISTINCTION IN ART? THE ATTITUDE OF THE CRITIC TOWARD WOMEN'S EXHIBITS: BY GILES EDGERTON

An exhibition of paintings at the Knoedler Galleries, New York, during the month of April, brought forth many extended press notices and a good deal of argument of a kind; not because the paintings heralded a new school of development in American art, or even advancement along established lines (if we except a most unusual and distinguished portrait called "The Miniature Painter," by Ella Condie Lamb), but frankly because it was a women's exhibit. The reviewers apparently entered the galleries with a point of view at once tolerant and sentimental; as if to say, "The poor dears; why shouldn't they play around with their little feminine art? Who are we, the great of the world, to discourage or criticise their harmless amusement?" and then they went away and wrote long foolish notices, praising some work that was distinctly poor and dipping their pens in treacle where criticism was inevitable. After a careful summing up of the different reviews, I cannot see that any man approached the subject with the honest frankness, the open mind, alert brain, the willingness to see in a dignified way the unpleasant thing, if necessary, which he would have taken to an exhibit such as the National Academy, or the Ten American Painters, or any individual studio showing of work, where men and women face the public definitely seeking honest opinion.

This Exhibition of Paintings by Women Artists was presented to the public with a sentimental plea, and the critic, the usual arbiter of the destiny of American art, took a fair new pad and a soft pencil and went forth to it as a knight-errant, with powers of analysis laved in chivalry. The gentler sex should receive no blow at his hands; not if real courtesy knew its place. Now this Chesterfield-Bayard-Raleigh attitude toward accomplishment in art is honestly about the last thing in the world that the genuine hard-working women artists—who are striving just as men are for the best that they can express
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about the truth of things—want. On the contrary, they are humiliated by it. They resent a sex distinction in art (not in the variation of art, but in the quality) and they honestly prefer just discriminating criticism to this attitude of tender-hearted masculine protection.

Such painters among the exhibitors as Charlotte Coman, Alice Schille, Rhoda Holmes Nicholls, Elen and Lydia Field Emmet, are accustomed to face the juries of the Pennsylvania Academy, Pittsburgh, and the National Academy with no more heart palpitation than any good artist must experience. Their work is judged side by side with Sargent’s, Chase’s, Wiles’s and Lathrop’s, and they expect and are entitled to the same dignity of criticism. They belong to the art world of America. They are not afraid of a trial by jury, and they are accepted and hung or rejected, as the case may be, without sentiment or chivalry. And this leads us back to exactly the point we wish to make in this article: that a “women’s exhibit” is something out of the past. It is Eighteen-Thirty in expression and belongs to the helpless days of crinoline when ladies fainted if they were spoken to with undue harshness; when a sampler, at least in America, was the only field for feminine artistic endeavor.

IT STANDS to reason, if one thinks at all about these things, that there must forever be a wide differentiation between the painting that men do and that women do, because in all the civilized world there is such a tremendous variation in the outlook on life of men and women. As long as society decrees this radical sex difference in the attitude of men and women toward the world and of the world to them, there must follow along the same lines exactly a corresponding difference in the art expression of men and women. Composition, technique, color may be taught by the same master in the same studio to a group of boys and girls, but when these boys and girls have grown up and have gone through the essential experiences of life, they will inevitably paint the same subjects differently, the work of women being so classified by the woman’s outlook that inevitably there would ensue comparison, an interesting appreciation of certain qualities that women have expressed and a different sort of enjoyment for the feeling that men have painted into their canvases. Each may be progressive and each great in achievement, but under present social conditions there must be the fundamental difference.

It is not once in a generation that a woman so subverts her essentially characteristic outlook on life to her work that her art impulse becomes universal, as that of the greatest men often is. One feels
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that Cecilia Beaux has done this in her portrait work, as George Eliot did in her stories. One feels, too, something of the universal quality in the work of Charlotte Coman, but one is not quite sure whether it is the result of achievement greater than personality or whether it is born from a certain attitude of delicate reserve toward Nature, a certain tender courtesy toward all the illusions that cover the land for every season of the year. One cannot tell quite whether it is the universal quality of genius or whether it is just a fine sort of reticence that will not obtrude one’s own personality upon Nature.

One of the most impersonal of the women sculptors is Miss Abastenia St. Leger Eberle. Her work does not suggest an effort to overcome a feminine point of view or to ape the masculine ways of achievement. She just seems to present people, little children, old beggar women, Indians, more absolutely than individually. Especially is this true of children. It is not just that she makes you feel that she loves children; it is rather the way she presents her babies, chubby, grubby little girls especially, that awakens in you the sensation that you love them, without any regard to her sentiment. However, Cecilia Beaux and Abastenia Eberle are not in the women’s exhibit, and so we are wandering far afield.

But grant, as a rule, a compulsory sex difference in art. Look for it; admire it; classify all art by it; all this is just, but it is equally just to go a step farther and rank both the expressions as of equal interest; demanding equal technical excellence, equal standards of perfection in composition, color values and sympathetic understanding of life, and the same courage in facing the attitude of a usually unsympathetic, unappreciative public. No one has a right to ride a steeplechase who cannot keep a quiet saddle for the hurdles. It is fatal that women should accept rejection at the hands of big exhibits with a feeling of hurt vanity, turn about and decide “to have an exhibit of their own anyway, and just hang any picture they want to.” Not that Academy decisions are final toward art, for the juries often reject very important and significant work and hang very dull and inadequate pictures. Indeed, at times this threatens to become the rule, and men have this matter to face as well as women. All that is necessary to point out in this connection is that women should never for one moment admit that the rejection is made because it is women’s work. The somewhat revolutionary young American artists called “The Eight,” by chance all men, did not go away from the Academy last fall pouting and fretting. They gathered up their rejected pictures with apparently a light heart, expressed a few pointed
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opinions as to the stupidity of the jury that could reject them; were promptly invited by a very understanding and sympathetic art dealer to hold a little academy of their own, which turned out the most successful art exhibit of the year.

NOW in spite of some very excellent work at the Knoedler Galleries, and a few paintings of exceptional value, the exhibition as a whole would not have secured half a column press notice if it had been a mixed exhibit. It would then have been taken seriously, praised highly in some instances, moderately in others, and vigorously condemned where the work deserved it. And the women who were poor craftsmen would have learned some valuable truths, and would not have been permitted the poor satisfaction of thinking that “a woman’s feeling in art is so interesting that it does not matter whether she understands drawing, or perspective, or composition, or technique.” Fancy an intelligent art critic feeling justified in saying as praise of an exhibit that there was “a soprano note in the work,” and that the pictures were “evidently painted for women, with that straight march to the central sentiment which characterizes the ‘intuitional’ artist.”

What utter rubbish that is! In the first place, women do not paint for women, any more than they dress for women or do anything else for women. The genuine woman works for her own self-esteem, or to win out with the world, or, as a by-product of her own effort, to win praise and appreciation from men. And why in the world should not painting “which has tenderness, grace and appeal” (to quote the same authority), interest men as well as women, or men even more than women? But here is the difficulty. The minute that you label any sort of exhibit as exclusively “women’s” you have let loose the flood gates of masculine sentimentality, and an honest point of view apparently cannot obtain. As for instance the phrase “intuitional art!” What could have a more sentimental ring to it? and what possible meaning can it have as applied to women’s work? Does it suggest that women are not expected “to mark, learn, and inwardly digest” their craft, that they can guess at success, that they may jumble in a heap oxen and a woodpile so that the whole suggests “After an Earthquake” (and this done by a woman who can paint), that they may draw a face so impressionistically that it looks as if the model had been interrupted in an operation for the sitting; that an Art Nouveau-Burne-Jones girl can be drawn with a neck a quarter as long as her body and then be exhibited as a siren? If
"LATE AFTERNOON—QUAKER HILL"

CHARLOTTE COMAN, PAINTER.
“THE GOOD STORY,” PORTRAIT STUDY:
CLARA MAC CHESNEY, PAINTER.
"A PORTRAIT": LYDIA
FIELD EMMET, PAINTER.
“GAMINS,” VENICE: RHODA HOLMES NICHOLLS, PAINTER.
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this is "intuitional art," then there was some of it at the women's exhibit, the "art" that moves without care or study or logical preparation to its work. It is hard to know whether this phrase is silly or wise, kind or cruel, or just intended to be pleasantly mysterious, because truth is not usual in such criticism. But it seems to me that this sort of talk, and much besides that was published immediately after the press day of this exhibit, is far more seriously a handicap to any real progress of women in art than the most unjust or prejudiced point of view that an Academy jury could possibly show. We have already granted a difference in art expression for men and women, but these expressions can never move along in parallel lines without identical standards of self-esteem, of willingness to work for success, equal desire for honest and dignified criticism, and the courage to benefit by it.

I think not all but many of the greatest men and women artists agree with this point of view. That a number of significant women did not exhibit at Knoedler's would confirm this impression. For there are some women who neither care to be segregated in an exhibition or to contribute to the rather popular impression that this segregation in art is essential or even reasonable.

Not a universal point of view, however, this, for there was work at the women's exhibit of rare attainment which had been hung in the past at some of the most judicial homes of art, which had won honors at Philadelphia, Paris and New York, and other work which undoubtedly could have won honors had it courageously faced the jury. Two of the best of Mrs. Coman's landscapes were shown, wonderful misty blue hillsides, views of the Harlem Valley seen from Quaker Hill. They are a curiously poignant presentation of July hills, miles of beauty spread out before you and all wrapped in a delicate poetical haze that somehow shut you away, and yet stirred your imagination toward their beauty. A woman's feeling about nature, but of equal appeal to all sympathetic men and women, and presented with a technique sure and subtle. In most of the press notices Mrs. Coman's work did not appear.

ONE of the first paintings to hold one's attention (for Mrs. Coman's paintings you did not always see first) was a delightful portrait of an old artist called "The Good Story," by Clara MacChesney. It is admirably painted, full of life and good cheer; a happy old man with a radiant spirit, no nerves, a keen zest for life, regarding a glass of beer still a pleasant adventure. This work of
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Miss MacChesney's is done inevitably, no tricks of technique, no personal whim about it, but vigorous, direct work and a most interesting management of black surfaces. Just near this friendly old artist a dear little girl is walking out of a frame. She looks a bit surprised, but rather pleased on the whole and very much alive, as Lydia Emmet's children's portraits always do. The background for the little girl is very simple, as backgrounds should be in the portraits of children, and there is no effort for pose, as one so often sees in the imitation "royal children" in our National Academy.

Two canvases of Alice Schille were hung at this exhibit, both of children, and one, "The Study Hour," full of charm in composition and done with the most interesting loose brush work. Wherever I have seen this artist's work I have been impressed with its beauty; a delightful sympathy with life expressed through trained eye and hand.

The most inescapable portrait shown was a life-size painting called, "The Miniature Painter," which was managed so simply, so directly, the delicate creams of the dress, the pale yellow of the scarf and the rich, sensible brunette head so admirably handled and contrasted that it was a pleasant refreshing experience to turn to it again and again. It was made beautiful by the management of lights and shadows and the great simplicity of treatment. And one felt grateful that it evidently did not intend to symbolize "Youth," or "Work," or even "Youth at Work;" it was just a serenely painted portrait of a very wholesome, capable, charming young woman, who looked as though, having decided to paint miniatures, she would do them extremely well and with a great deal of pleasure to herself. One man who is much interested in painting was overheard to say, "That white study is done so honestly and naively, it seems almost like a new school of portrait painting." And it is needless to say that the result is beautiful enough to encourage Mrs. Lamb to hold to this standard in all her portrait work, no matter what the medium.

The name of Rhoda Holmes Nichols almost inevitably suggests the shore of some bit of ocean, yellow sand dunes or blue harbors and fishing smacks idling about in sunlight or mist, the home edge of the sea, full of color, of dreams and contentment. But at this exhibit her two canvases were quite different in subject. One was a slender girl holding a bowl of roses, the roses and the girl's hands charmingly painted, but the figure uninteresting in line and color. Far more sympathetic was a Venetian water color sketch; "Gamins," it was called. A group of gay, picturesque little Italian boys lounging about and laughing in the sunlight; very lightly and delicately painted, yet full of expression and vivid the effect of tones.

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The "Canal at Lisieux," by Emma L. Cooper, one remembers to have seen at the Pennsylvania Academy this past winter. It is a pleasant rendering of a picturesque scene, sluggish water reflecting mossy old houses, which simple architecture, time and nature have made so alluring to the artist. The study lacks poetry or any faint touch of the wild strange mystery which Turner portrayed on his Venetian canvases, yet in color and texture, as it were, it is a pleasant scene.

There were a number of portraits besides those already mentioned, a delightfully frank vigorous study of C. Gilibert by Ellen Emmet, done with an easy pose and a cheerful expression which somehow does not antagonize, which you feel that the great French baritone would not resent. Still other portraits less significant but not without quality, were by May Lewis Close, Janet Wheeler, Mrs. Charles Melville Dewey, Adele Winckler, and Marion Swinton. Two seashore sketches by Lucy Scott Bower, without being wholly satisfactory in technique, nevertheless held the attention because of a certain breadth of treatment and appeal to the imagination, as though the artist had seen things in a big way and caught what was possible of space and strange barrenness and even night on her canvases.

And besides these pictures were sixty or more canvases, some with very distinct merit of one kind or another, but few with any effect of complete mastery of craft—as if a woman with an interesting sense of color values must deem drawing unessential, or, knowing how to draw well, what matter if the color goes muddy and suggests damp pools instead of objects of art, or, the idea being good, why pay the least attention to detail; and over and over again appeared the strange delusion that vagueness or dullness of color was atmosphere, that the uncertain stroke was impressionism; and, worst of all, that the eccentric was creative, and the startling, brilliant.

In spite of the good work which has been noted, there remained, after a sixth inspection, the impression that the exclusive women's exhibit is out of harmony with present-day growth and development, that women need with men but one standard of art progress, though there may be a thousand expressions of it; that an exhibit cannot be representative of good work without a committee of examination, whether of men or women. Better an unfair jury than none, and that the press will cease to be amusing, supercilious, patronizing toward women in art when these matters are adjusted, and will extend to them the dignity and seriousness in criticism which the right progressive situation would demand.

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