PAINTERS IN PASTEL, MEDIEVAL AND MODERN: BY BAYARD BIGELOW

MONS. DENIS DIDEROT once addressed Latour, the pastellist, thus: "Memento, homo, quia pulvis est in pulverem reverteris." There is in this melancholy reminder of human frailness an evident allusion to the fragility of the pastel. Nevertheless, the pastels of Latour, like those of Carrier, Chardin, Greuze, Boucher, Louis Tocqué, Perronneau, Vivien, Liotard, Mmes. Lebrun and Guirard are to this day as fresh in color as they were two centuries ago, while many paintings by well-known masters—paintings done, as often as not, "after" the light pastels of those artists whom I have just mentioned—have turned black or have lamentably cracked.

The names which I have quoted above constitute a brief but dazzling list of the old masters of the pastel. Among these honored names those of Latour, of Carrier and of Perronneau stand out with a special luster.

Rosalba Carriera apart, (an artist who has remained Venetian although she had as her first master Jean Steve, and was admitted by the Paris Academy of Painting in Seventeen Hundred and Twenty), all belong to the French school. For who would dare assert that Roslin, the Swede, and Liotard, the Wandering Turk—or, rather Swiss—did not gather all the force of their talent, all the skill of their technique, from the counsels of the French masters? Moreover, were they not real Frenchmen by adoption? And did not Liotard himself turn to Parisian life for his liveliest and subtler artistic sensations? As for Roslin, he lived for more than half a century at Paris, and never showed the least desire to see again the sad skies of Malmö.

One may be allowed to declare, therefore, that the art of the pastel is essentially a French art, although in certain learned expositions its paternity is attributed to Alexandre Thiele, of Erfurt, or to Mlle. Heid, of Dantzig. Certain it is, too, that at the opening of the twentieth century, although the French masters claim to hold the lead in this art, yet America is beginning to dispute this claim, for our painters in pastel are rapidly forging to the front.

Up to almost a score of years ago, when there was held "The Second Exhibition of American Painters in Pastel," pastel painting had been forgotten, except by the few, who found it an easy medium for preliminary sketches. Today, as we look back across the period of inertia to the brilliant career of this medium, we find its beginning in the old, red-chalk drawings of Frederico Barrocchia, done in the early quarter of the fifteenth century and still hanging in the Dijon Museum in Italy. We see it later become the plaything of Leonardo
A mes chers amis et mes meilleurs compliments.

William Carey Brazington,
New York, 1905.

YSAYE: PASTEL BY
WILLIAM CAREY BRAZINGTON.
"MRS. C.," OF NEW YORK: PASTEL
BY WILLIAM CAREY BRAZINGTON.
da Vinci in his experiments in every medium from tempera to oil, and then finally pass by the hand of the artist, whose significant name of Rosalba Carriera testifies to the delicacy of her work, into the brilliant circle of Augustus the Strong. From its success as a recorder of the courtiers of the Saxon monarch, it was but a step to become the royal medium of France. Thenceforth Charles Le Brun painted in it until he was dubbed the “Louis Quatorze” of art, and Maurice Quentin de Latour from producing cheap portraits for five francs apiece on the street corners of Paris, became, under the patronage of Louis Quinze, the portraitist of the king, his favorites and generals. In the succeeding reign the art of Mme. Vigée Lebrun rose and fell with the life of her patroness, Marie Antoinette. Throughout the entire cycle of the last days of the French monarchy it was the medium, par excellence, “of the feminine, the dainty, the courtly.”

With the subsequent “Reign of Terror,” came Mme. Labille Guiard, who formerly a friend of the nobles, “turned her muse to the spirit of the times,” and made portraits of Beauharnais, Robespierre and Talleyrand. Later Paul Prud’hon painted himself into fame and fortune with allegorical pictures of “Vengeance and Justice Pursuing the Criminal.” But with the “Reign of Terror,” the joyous court had disappeared and with it the spontaneity and activity of its painters, not again to be resumed until the time of Millet and then with a new note of force from which the careless gaiety of the preceding century had fled.

Today, we are carried again on the crest of a tidal wave of pastel painting. In the work of the Frenchman, Charles Melcendeau, we see the lean, hard faces, the obstinate, suspicious eyes and the stiff, bent frames of the peasants of his own race, those of Brittany; in the pastels of Raffaelli, the poor, the dirty, the rickety; and in the soft-toned portrayals of Frances Keyser, the touch of sunlight on hair and flesh. In the span of one score years and ten, pastel in France has played over a field of life and activity wherein appear in tangible form “the dramas of Wagner and Schumann, the flowers, flesh and fruit of Latour, and the graceful panels of Jules Charet, the figures of which recall the grace of the decorations of the Trianons.”

With such antecedents did pastel painting make its first appearance in America. In the intervening years since the four or five artists cooperated in making up the list of the sixty entries in “The First Exhibition of the Society of American Painters in Pastel,” it has played a part in our national art development as varied, if not
as extensive, as it has in France. In the work of Mr. Chase and Mr. Blashfield, it has been the artist’s experiment in a new field; to Mr. Blum it meant the medium by which that man of sudden artistic conceptions and equally fleeting ones, pinned his thoughts before their escape. Eastman Johnson realized in it a medium for making preliminary studies for genre and portraiture, as well as for completed drawings. In no one’s hands, however, has it resumed more of the character of the early French pastel than in the hands of William Carey Brazington. In the work of Mr. Brazington, pastel is the medium for the delicate femininities of drapery and color, and in the portraits of children, he rivals the “Dauphins” of Mme. Lebrun. The charm of Mr. Brazington’s drawings is quite unlike that of any modern artist. In truth, his sheets seem to present little of the present day technique, but rather bear the impress of a past century, so delicately reminiscent are they of old world romance and poetry. And yet, as is often the case with the awakening of talent, the beginning came by chance—an odd moment given to a trifling sketch of a child, a cursory experiment in trying the effect of soft touches of color on a chalk drawing, and almost before the artist realized it there had opened for him a fresh and altogether enchanting field for his labors.

True to the traditions of genius, born in a log cabin in the backwoods of Indiana, the artist commenced his first work, like many of his confrères of the early school, in retouching prints and photographs. From retouching, the step to portraiture is, for an artist, but a short one, and after his return from Paris, where he was a pupil of Lucien Simon and Charles Cottet, he established a studio in New York. Here he entered upon a phase of work which has the two-fold claim to the interest, being a revival of the ancient French pastel and at the same time a departure in its application of a slightly different style of composition.

IN COMMON with the French school, the artist has made use of color as a means of expressing individuality to such an extent as to give rise to the expression that his work is interpretative of character in its tonality. Portraits of men are done in a low key and with a breadth of technique suggestive of the subject, while children are represented in values of a lighter tone and in all the beauty of encircling ringlets, which pastel reproduces with a realism denied to any other medium. The power of the artist’s application is his recognition of its possibilities in portraiture, notwithstanding the superiority of the lighter medium, when certain effects are to be desired. In its chalky softness, the pastel is adapted to the repro-
“POLLY”: PASTEL BY
WILLIAM CAREY BRAZINGTON.
"CHARLOTTE": PASTEL BY WILLIAM CAREY BRAZINGTON.
duction of flesh tones which lose under the gloss of oil, and in its very delicacy permits the almost imperceptible drop of the lid or the latent meaning in the eyes to be suggested rather than painted.

But one thing which is most prominent in Mr. Brazington's studies is the impression given that the artist holds himself secondary to his study, a gift which few men possess.

What an eminent author has said of Melcendeau can, with equal truth, be said of Mr. Brazington. "The fact is, that Brazington, skilful draughtsman that he is, will not make models for his drawings. He essays to fix the life as it presents itself to him with a movement, a respiration which he strives to make visible. To see his figures one would think that either their hands had just shifted; that the expression of their features had just changed; that they had started walking, or had suddenly taken an attitude of repose. Very often he presents his creations in full light, and it is only by means of a certain manner of his in tracing their features and outlines, in sketching their attitudes, and in hesitating over their form, that he succeeds in producing the illusion as of life caught by surprise and transferred immediately to paper."

It is, however, in the portraiture of babies and children that Mr. Brazington achieves most. On the days in which a small person is to appear, out from mysterious corners of the studio dolls and tops are brought forth, and the artist is never happier than when the attendant mother or nurse relinquishes the small sitter to his care. Then, with the child on a long settee by the side of his wife, stories of fairyland and Br'er Fox follow, which in their magnitude overcome even the artist's arodor, and the author has seen him drop his crayons to lean forward and help with the defeat of Br'er Fox or illustrate the death of the giant.

But one must add, that this whole-souled, large-hearted, genial man, a man yet fifty summers young, is an artist enamored of his work, living for that alone, and in no hurry to advance the hour of fickle public success, strong as he is in the approbation of some of the best judges of Paris and America as well as in that of certain writers who grasped the meaning of his earliest efforts.