THE SHIPS OF ALL AGES IN F. D. MILLET'S
MURAL DECORATIONS IN THE BALTIMORE
CUSTOM HOUSE: BY LEILA MECHLIN

R. F. D. MILLET, in his recent decorations in the
Baltimore Custom House, has avoided the conven-
tional allegorical themes and employed instead a com-
plete representation of the ships of the world from
about one thousand B. C. up to the present time; these
he has set forth with artistic feeling and historical
accuracy. A record has been made in the sim-
plest language and the most straightforward manner, which, pre-
supposing the permanency of the medium, must prove of value to
succeeding generations, but it has been made primarily to serve a
subordinate object by lending dignity and beauty to the room in which
it has been placed. Furthermore, these decorations manifest in-
herently that they were designed for a particular purpose and not
merely fitted to a chance need. They obviously belong where they
are, and could no more be removed and replaced without loss of effect
than, let us say, the walls and ceiling whereon they are set forth.
And of how few mural paintings can this truly be said! Of Puvis de
Chavannes' beautiful paintings in the Pantheon, in Paris, to be sure;
but, as we all know, they are brilliant exceptions. The great trouble
has been that the majority of modern mural paintings have been
merely pictorial canvases fastened to a wall, and that painters and
architects generally have not sufficiently appreciated the interde-
pendence of their arts. This may explain a good many things,—
why, for instance, we have today, comparatively, so little good archi-
tectural sculpture, as well as so few really noteworthy mural paintings;
and, to a great extent, why the decorations in the Custom House at
Baltimore are so eminently successful.

It was the architects of the Custom House—Messrs. Hornblower
and Marshall—who gave Mr. Millet the commission for this work,
and it was in order to have the benefit of their suggestion that he took
a studio in Washington and executed the paintings there. In other
words, in this case, the architects and the painter worked together,
respecting each others' prerogatives, but striving for the same end.
In this way Mr. Millet was able to comprehend the spirit of the build-
ing which he was asked to adorn, and found it possible to take up
and carry on the work from the point where the architects had left
it to completion. This was, of course, a tremendous factor in his
favor, but that he recognized its importance, and made excellent use
of it, is, at the same time, worth noting. And what is still more, it
should be known, that Mr. Millet was not simply asked to design and
A ROMAN GALLEY.

A CHINESE JUNK.

A LIVERPOOL PACKET.

THE RELIANCE.

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Panels in the cove frieze of the Baltimore Custom House: designed and executed by F. D. Millet.
EGYPTIAN AND GREEK GALLEYS SIXTEEN HUNDRED B.C.; THREE HUNDRED B.C.

SAXON, DANISH AND NORMAN VESSELS: FOURTH TO TENTH CENTURIES.

ENGLISH WAR VESSELS OF SIXTEENTH AND SEVENTEENTH CENTURIES. THREE PANELS FROM THE COVE, THE LARGEST AND MOST IMPORTANT DECORATION.
AMERICAN WAR SHIPS: LATTER PART OF EIGHTEENTH CENTURY.

AMERICAN WAR VESSELS OF THE EARLY NINETEENTH CENTURY.

MODERN UNITED STATES WAR SHIPS.

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ADDITIONAL PANELS FROM THE COVE: AN INTERESTING HISTORICAL SEQUENCE.
MILLET’S MARINE DECORATIONS

execute a certain number of paintings to occupy certain spaces, but to completely decorate one great room and evolve a color scheme for an entire building—to make, as it were, a finished composition, and provide for it suitable setting.

THE “Call Room” in which Mr. Millet has set forth the history of the ship is on the main floor of the Custom House in the center of the building, its doorway facing the principal entrance. In form it is rectangular, and in appearance it does not differ materially from a banking establishment, its floor space being divided off by screens, and the center occupied by writing tables similar to check desks. It is to this room that all must come who have custom-duties to pay, claims to be adjusted, bonds to sign—all, in fact, whose business is primarily with ships and shipping. It seems, therefore, peculiarly fitting that the history and evolution of sea-craft should have been chosen as the theme for its decoration. The character of this room, architecturally, was determined by a series of large windows, extending around its three sides and recalled on the fourth by inset panels, which form a regular wall arcade, against the piers of which are coupled Ionic pilasters supporting a paneled and bracketed frieze surmounted by a dentil and medallion cornice. Above this cornice is a depressed cove of considerable width which gently merges the wall into the ceiling—a single panel strongly enframed. There are no great wall spaces, no broad subdivisions—all the opportunity for decoration is afforded by the cove, the frieze, and the ceiling—or so it would seem. In fact, however, the entire space not occupied by the windows, the pilasters, and the moldings, has been utilized, and each inch cleverly. There are ships in the lunettes which form the arch of the inset panels; ships in the tiny little spandrels that peep not only over their shoulders but over those of the windows similarly shaped; ships in the frieze, in the cove, in the border panels, and finally on the ceiling—dozens of them in all and yet none too many. The eye is not confused nor the senses bewildered, for the composition as a whole has orderliness and unity. And the way all these many motives have been tied together and properly related is this—they have been treated not realistically but semi-conventionally, decoratively. Because the moldings and ornaments which serve as frames for these paintings were frankly plaster, Mr. Millet made his decorations manifest the inherent quality of this medium. For the cove, the frieze, the spandrels and the border-paneling, he selected flat tints of blue and green and on these as backgrounds wrought his designs in white like cameos cut in chalk or alabaster. This gave latitude for historical accuracy and yet insured
decorative effect. The combination of the blue and green in juxtaposition lent variety, and the uniformity of treatment prevented confusion of interests. Mr. Millet went to no end of pains to get correct data, searching records at the Navy Department, looking up old illustrations, examining coins, in fact, making as careful research as for a written history; and when it came to execution no detail was slighted, no spar or rope forgotten or misplaced. But not once does it seem that the decorator has yielded to the chronicler, or the historian got the upper hand of the artist.

A SHIP is always fascinating to the beholder, and in this room, as the eye passes from the transcription of one to another, and another, on and on, there is a pervasive consciousness of keen delight. In each set of illustrations the scale is so well adjusted, the color so nicely placed, the effect so gently merry. And each ship shows such clear cut, graceful lines, such fine construction, such sensitive modeling! One need not study them out singly, and yet if the temptation to scrutinize proves strong, how interesting they are! In the tiny spandrels are all manner of small craft, from a Chinese “sampan” to a Chesapeake Bay “skipjack;” in the narrow panels over the arches are little boats of various periods, among which will be discovered a Dutch scallop, East India barge, Western river flatboat and Alaskan canoe; in the cove, on alternate large and small panels, the largest and most important series of all is found, an historical sequence, beginning with an Egyptian galley and ending with the transatlantic steamship St. Paul; while in the border around the ceiling is illustrated the origin and development of the steamer up to the year 1845, and in the five lunettes are set forth special types influencing the evolution of shipping.

The ceiling, however, is the consummation of the whole—that to which the eye is purposely led and upon which it willingly lingers. Here, covering the entire area, is a great picture showing a fleet of ten sailing vessels—ships, barks, a barkentine, a brig and a schooner—entering a harbor on a hazy summer morning. Like huge birds with their wings outspread they seem to be drifting in through a curtain of mist scarcely troubling the glassy surface of the silent harbor. Soft, cumulous clouds cross the sky diagonally, lazy gulls hang in the air, and long, tranquil reflections rest upon the water. Here are suggested all the poetry and mystery of the sea, all its witchery and none of its awe, and one gazes upward and onward as though looking afar, realizing a fair dream. To produce this effect the work has been done broadly and simply. The treatment is naturalistic, but by no means usual. The drawing has been done with accuracy but color
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has been sparingly used. Soft browns with ivory tints prevail, and through them all a violet note, more rose colored than blue, asserts itself. The illusions of atmosphere and distance are admirably given; there is no suggestion of paintiness, no tightness of technique, no evident limitation of medium. Perfectly does the color scheme accord with the cornice decoration; excellently does its spirit accord with its style. It was a daring experiment, putting ships of this size on a ceiling, and, if truth must be told, the painter and his assistants were probably the only ones who were sure of its success, but if any still have doubts let them see for themselves—one visit to the Custom House at Baltimore will assuredly be sufficient.

A N EMINENT pedagogist has said, “a child can be taught anything if it is taught in the right way,” and, after all, is not this equally applicable to painting? Cannot, most truly, anything be painted if it is painted in the right way? Too much the painters of our day have feared a fact; too often do they get lost in a maze of uncertainty and symbolism. Mural paintings that signify without being inherently literary are far to seek, and until the end of time, no doubt, the majority will go on retelling the same old, stupid story. To be sure the day when a pictorial language was necessary for the enlightenment of the people is long past, but still it has its uses, and as there are always new truths to be told, why not tell them? If the art of this age is to survive it must reflect, if unconsciously, the spirit of our time though built on tradition. This, it appears, Mr. Millet has realized. He has ventured a new thought and happily; he has recorded history decoratively; he has artistically combined fact with fancy. Indeed, even the smallest detail in his Call Room decoration will be found to have some special significance. The plant forms in the border paneling on the ceiling are those native to Maryland—the Indian corn, the magnolia, dogwood, pine and oak. Sea-horses and scallop shells are used as motives in the little frames enclosing the pictures of early steamboats, and the borders of the panels in the frieze, if examined closely, will be found to simulate ropes. And yet all this, which in the hands of a less skilful painter might have been insufferable nonsense, is here made subservient to effect, dignified and pleasing. One has to seek it out, and so, upon discovery, shares, as it were, the laugh with the painter. To be sure it might be considered trivial, but again, it is all in the way it is done.

Passing out of the Call Room and before leaving the Custom House it will reward the visitor to take note of the general color scheme employed for the office rooms and corridors—of the environment created through the medium of journeyman-painting. The
walls of the stair hall, from the main floor to the roof, have been
tinted a gray-green, and given, above the marble dado, in darker
color, a stenciled border of little conventionalized dolphins. The
walls of the corridors, on the first and second floors, have been painted
a vibrant vermillion, on the third a burnt orange, and on the fifth,
gray; the borders on each being varied but deriving their motives from
sea forms. The walls of the office rooms have been finished in gray-
green above the chair rail, with green dados, the one used by the
Collector of Customs, which is decorated in rich shades of metallic blue
and green, being the only exception. No gold has been used save
in the Sub-treasury where the light was inadequate and the walls and
woodwork were painted white. The effect throughout is delight-
fully harmonious—the decoration simple, unpretentious, and appro-
priate. Indeed, some persons aver that the paintings in the Call
Room demonstrate no more patently the genius of the designer than
do these flatly tinted walls for which the color has been so wisely
chosen and so skilfully combined.

But there was still another factor which contributed to the
success of this work. Mr. Millet was given plenty of time in
which to do it. Whereas Mr. LaFarge was allowed just four
months to design and execute the decorations in Holy Trinity Church,
Boston (the only other important building I can recall which has been
intrusted to a single mural painter), Mr. Millet was able to take two
years for his work for the Baltimore Custom House. This meant time
for study and experiment, for historical research, for painting in and
painting out, and it is not, I am sure, a betrayal of confidence, to
say there were plenty of both. No work, no matter how brilliant, is
accomplished, as the world commonly thinks, offhand, but is wrought
with patient labor in addition to inspired zeal, art merely erasing
the traces of struggle. The *modus operandi* of mural painting is
much the same in all studios, and not very different today from what
it was in the time of Michael Angelo, or of Paul Veronese. Small
sketches are made first as experiments, and from these, when satisfac-
tory, full-sized drawings are executed on huge sheets of manila paper,
from which, in turn, the outlines of the composition are finally trans-
ferred to the canvas, or wall. There is no hit or miss system, every-
thing is accurate and definite, and only when these steps have been
taken does the actual painting begin. Often great surfaces have to
be covered mechanically, and this commonly is done not by the painter
but his assistants, he superintending the work and putting on the
touches that tell. The small panels for the Baltimore Custom House
were painted with little technical difficulty, but the great ceiling panel
was a big proposition. After careful consideration it was determined to do it in three sections which, when completed, could be perfectly joined, and thus it was accomplished. Each of these sections was in reality a huge piece of canvas and all three received their first painting stretched on the floor, the artist and his assistants working upon them on their hands and knees. This has to do more with craftsmanship than with art, I am aware, but after all are not the two necessary one to the other? Is not much of the trouble with modern art due to the unwillingness of the “gifted few” to labor—to serve an apprenticeship—to master their “trade?” Because I believe this, I have been tempted to tell not only of the finished product, which in itself seems more than commonly notable, but of the several factors contributing to that end; namely, the sympathetic cooperation of the architects, the privilege of designing the decorations not for one room alone but for the whole building, the generous allowance of time, and the unstinting gift of toil, not forgetting, of course, the skill and experience of the painter. Truly, indeed, may Baltimore be proud of these decorations, and well may they serve as a mile post in this particular field.

CONTOURS

I am glad of the straight, downward lines of the rain;
Of the free, blowing curves of the grain;
Of the perilous swirling and curling of fire;
The sharp upthrust of a spire;
Of the ripples on the river
Where the little wave marks quiver
And sun thrills;
Of the innumerable undulations of the hills.
But the true line is drawn from my spirit to some
infinite outward place . . . .
That line I cannot trace.

Zona Gale.