MODERN BRITISH ART, AS SEEN AT THE ROYAL ACADEMY AND AT THE GRAFTON GALLERIES: BY M. IRWIN MACDONALD

The several exhibitions of pictures held in London during the past summer offered exceptional opportunities to the student of conditions and tendencies in modern British art, for, in addition to a large and very representative showing at the Royal Academy, and the innumerable minor exhibitions by single men or small groups, there was on view at the Grafton Galleries a notable collection of significant work done by the younger men,—the daring and revolutionary spirits who for the most part are outside the sacred precincts of the Royal Academy.

For this reason the group of more than three hundred “Chosen Pictures” shown at the Grafton Galleries was acknowledged by the art critics to be the most important exhibition held in London for many years. It carried the greater weight because it was partially a retrospective exhibition, including not only canvases fresh from the easel, but examples of the most characteristic paintings, drawings, etchings, engravings and sculpture done by the exhibitors during the past ten years. The idea of holding such a retrospective exhibition was borrowed from the Council of the Royal Academy, which a short time ago held a similar exhibition of the work of well-known academicians. This was considered at the time to be a vindication of Academic art, and also somewhat of a challenge to the revolutionists, but it was not regarded as an unqualified success, as a showing of the past efforts of those officially high in British art circles resulted in a display of weakness rather than of strength.

But the indirect effect of it has been well worth while, for the men of the International Society of Sculptors, Painters and Gravers and of the New English Art Club took up the gauntlet which had thus been thrown down and gathered together a thoroughly representative collection of their own work, which was opened to the public simultaneously with the opening of the Royal Academy, and continued until the close of that official exhibition.

As a matter of course, people interested in art matters went from one to the other again and again, observing, comparing and judging respective merits according to the measure of their own critical powers and their predisposition toward one or the other expressions of the national art feeling. The revolutionaries most assuredly did not lose by such comparison, for, although it was admitted everywhere that the level of the Academy was unusually high this year, it was still very much of a level, and nothing was offered that was either new
From the recent exhibition of "Chosen Pictures" at the Grafton Galleries, London.

"THE GRAY FEATHER": JOHN Lavery, Painter.
From the recent exhibition of "Chosen Pictures" at the Grafton Galleries, London.

"SUPPER TIME": WILLIAM STRANG, PAINTER.
or specially significant. It goes without saying that it was very much more the vogue than the exhibition at the Grafton Galleries, for the Royal Academy is a time-honored institution, and society would no more omit visiting it a certain number of times, than it would omit the Ascot or the yacht racing at Cowes. And it was undeniably attractive and charming, the technique uniformly high,—otherwise the pictures would not have been admitted,—but it was the same well-bred, conservative, optimistic, thoroughly conventional British art which has held its own for so many years, serene in its placid consciousness of superiority, and undisturbed by the efforts of the many succeeding groups of revolutionists.

The element that predominated,—if any one element in so large an exhibition could be said to predominate,—was portraiture. There were hundreds of brilliant, well-painted canvases and smooth well-modeled statues and busts of distinguished men and women, slender, high-bred young girls and beautiful children,—a most aristocratic and charming display of conventional and presumably charming people. There were landscapes in almost equal number, showing bits of the lovely, prosperous, well-groomed English country, delightfully quaint and mellow old villages, stately castles, rugged Scotch and Welsh mountains and gorges, and richly colored glimpses of Italy, Switzerland and the Riviera,—all painted from the English point of view, which is as unmistakable anywhere in the world as the Englishman himself. The lower classes were by no means neglected, but in these pictures they were all comfortable, prosperous and well-behaved,—sturdy plowmen going home at twilight, bare-footed lassies tending sheep or picking buttercups, and nice old women knitting in pleasant cottage kitchens. Ragged, gaunt, desperate poverty, such as may be seen any day in Whitechapel, does not gain admission to the Royal Academy, unless indeed it may lend itself to such dramatic handling as robs it of all its misery and sordidness and lends it a sentimental charm that is pleasantly exciting to the emotions. Of course there were mythological and historical pictures by scores and hundreds; so many “Judgments of Paris” that one grew to look for them and to recognize them from afar, almost as automatically as one spots another “Susannah and the Elders” in the Continental galleries. But even here the British viewpoint prevailed to such an extent that the Greek goddesses, nymphs and Andromedas, clad only in their own loveliness, were all nice pretty golden-haired English girls unmistakably conscious of the indecorum of appearing in public without the customary skirt and blouse. The knights and ladies, gay young squires and pretty pages with lutes and
lovelocks, were more convincing, because although they happened a long time ago, they still belong to the soil and in their time were members of the very best English society. In fact the entire exhibition was a complete revelation of the life, opinions and viewpoint of the upper and middle classes,—sleek, prosperous, well-bred and very pleasant to look upon, because so irreproachably presented, but not of a character to grip either mind or heart with profound conviction or compelling emotion, because it so systematically ignored the rugged facts of life.

WHEN one went from the Academy to the Grafton Galleries, the first impression was that here one was face to face with the work of men who are doing real things,—revealing honestly what they see and think and feel; struggling for true and vivid expression, often without much regard for beauty or grace, and boldly experimenting with methods which in some cases have not as yet become entirely familiar, but which are always vigorous and sincere. This exhibition showed the spirit of unrest,—transition period,—as clearly as the Academy showed the preponderance of the established order, but in the latter case the evidences were all of an awakening art spirit. The pretty picture with a story in it was not to be found; the portraits were vigorous, truthful and convincing, and the excursions made into the past resulted in a bringing back of the feeling that belonged to the times depicted.

The influence of Whistler was very strong, and there were also traces of kinship with Puvis de Chavannes, Manet and Monet, as well as the modern Dutch School. The Glasgow men were very much in evidence, showing some of the strongest canvases in the exhibition. Naturally, the leader among these was John Lavery, who combines great vigor and sincerity with a most subtle and delicious color and a delicacy of handling that emphasizes the poetic side of his subject. One of the most striking of the group of pictures shown by Mr. Lavery was entitled “The Gray Feather,”—a portrait of a dark-eyed, dark-haired young woman in a black frock. She wears a gray hat with soft gray plumes and a filmy veil and leans on a dull yellow cushion, the color of which accentuates the olive tone in her clear dark skin. The high notes of color are given by the roses lying on the cushion and by the sparkle of the jewels on her throat and lifted hand. Quite as interesting, and much more delicate and elusive in effect, is another portrait called “The White Duchess,”—an excellent example of Mr. Lavery’s astonishing skill in handling the varying tones of white combined with the faintest gray and pale tints of yellow, pink and violet. The whole picture is like an opal.
From the recent exhibition of "Chosen Pictures" at the Grafton Galleries, London.

"THE BETRAYAL": CHARLES RICKETTS, PAINTER.
"THE MAN IN THE BLACK SHIRT" : A PORTRAIT OF CHARLES SHANNON, BY HIMSELF.
From the recent exhibition of "Chosen Pictures" at the Grafton Galleries, London.

"THE SCULPTRESS": CHARLES SHANNON, PAINTER.
"End of the Morris Dance":
William Nicholson, Painter.
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Still another portrait, called “The Gray Horse” shows a favorite and most characteristic subject with Mr. Lavery. A slim young woman in a black habit sits on the back of a gray horse of which only the head and back show in the picture, the figure of the rider being given all the prominence, while the horse is merely an accessory to make possible the pose. This picture is full of sunshine, which sifts through the leaves of an overhanging tree and dapples horse and rider with splashes of dazzling light.

Another Scotchman who shows a notable group of paintings is William Strang, who has strayed from his original place in the Academy,—because he is an A. R. A. in spite of his revolutionary tendencies,—and he seems much more at home here than in the decorous assemblage of the immortals. Mr. Strang derives his methods of color and treatment from the Venetians, and his inspiration from the Golden Age. The pictures are full of rich mellow sensuous color and a certain full-blooded daring joy of life. Most of them are groups of nymphs, satyrs and delicious little plump sun-browned babies tumbling and playing about on the velvet grass in the warm sunshine of the South. They are not modern women and children bereft of clothing, but real pagans and forest creatures belonging to the days when the world was young. Mr. Strang also has a more serious vein, for he shows one or two forceful portraits, one of which, the “Rouge-Croix Pursuivant,” is handled with heraldic severity and very flat tones. Perhaps the most charming of the group, however, is the little domestic scene reproduced here. It is called “Supper Time,” and shows the pause of the simple peasants for grace before meat. They are true children of the soil, young and lusty and content with life. The young mother, with her fair rosy skin and hair of ruddy brown, throws back her gown of dull pink cotton to nurse the plump sleepy baby, whose little yellow head nestles against the soft gracious shoulder; the young father with his jet black hair and bronzed face and arms, white shirt and russet waistcoat, forms a delightful contrast in color, and the scheme is completed by the dull blue of the cloak thrown over the end of the table, the blue porringers and the brilliant oranges that lie against the cloak.

Also rich and luscious in color and whole-heartedly pagan in feeling, is a portion of the group of paintings shown by Charles Shannon, who has forged rapidly to the front within the past few years, and is now one of the leaders in this little assemblage of strong men. “The Wounded Amazon” is here, the picture which won the Gold Medal at Munich ten years ago. She is a magnificent creature, a splendid savage woman-warrior sitting in a forest glade, apart from
the battle, to examine a wound in her leg, which is revealed by the removal of her brazen greave. Her expression is that of impatience rather than pain, and she plainly intends to give very little time to her hurt beyond what is needed to stanch the flowing blood. Another picture in this gay pagan manner is the "Wood Nymph," a lovely forest creature sleeping with a baby faun beside her and a group of graceful deer examining her curiously. In choice of subject and in feeling these pictures have about them a strong reminiscence of Böcklin, but they are less weird and more human and therefore much more alive and delightful,—also much better painted.

There is, however, another side to Mr. Shannon’s art, which one cannot help feeling is more characteristic of the man. This is shown in the two pictures reproduced here, which are both painted in a very low key, with a skilful use of black against a flat neutral background. They are severe and almost melancholy in effect, showing a restraint as marked as is the abandon of the pictures we have just described. "The Sculptress" has just been purchased by the French Government to be placed in the permanent collection at the Luxembourg. The other, which is entitled "The Man in a Black Shirt" is a portrait of the artist by himself. In some ways this picture is the most interesting of all, because of the quiet strength with which the fair, finely modeled head is handled, so that it is given due emphasis and yet brought absolutely into key with the somber tone of the rest of the picture. Another portrait in the same manner and almost equally interesting is called "The Man in the Inverness Coat,"—a portrait of Charles Ricketts, another artist who is doing work that absolutely commands attention. This portrait shows a man with a thin spare frame and the head of a mystic and a dreamer,—a man who craves for nothing except the power to represent what is in his mind, and who would starve sooner than sacrifice his ideal.

One of the most striking of the group of Mr. Ricketts’ pictures selected for this exhibition is illustrated here. It is called "The Betrayal" and even in the reproduction it is possible to gain some idea of the breadth and simplicity of its treatment. It is a strange and highly imaginative piece of work, done with great sweeping strokes of the brush and very little detail, as if the man were so filled with his subject that he grappled with the spirit of it regardless of all else. The coloring is all somber, representing the night as stormy, with a dark murky sky, streaked with livid driving clouds; the men who have come to take Him are huddled to one side, shrinking back in unexplained fear, and the flame of their torches, held high in air and blown by the wind, streams toward Him.
like banners of fire. His pale robe is flushed with the ruddy light from the torches, but the garments of the traitor kneeling at His feet to give the kiss of betrayal are dead and dull. In the background, against the faintly glimmering cliffs, is seen the fleeing figure of the young man who left his garments in the hands of the soldiers and ran away naked. The figure of the Christ is full of sorrowful dignity, with a certain stern majesty that is absent from most conceptions of Him. Altogether an unforgettable picture, to which one turns again and again, drawn by an ever-increasing fascination. All the work shown by Mr. Ricketts has this same strange compelling quality. There is one picture called “Christ before the People” that is heart-searching in the tragedy it suggests, and another, “The Good Samaritan” that is compassion itself,—as well as a wonderful piece of painting. His sculpture is equally remarkable, the most striking being two small bronzes, one of which shows Herodias holding Salome on her knee,—the tigress mother and strange cruel voluptuous young; the other is called “The Sphinx,” and shows a creature that is half woman and half lioness, padding with long sinuous steps down to a stream, to which she bends her beautiful head to drink. Until one sees this bronze, one does not realize how seldom the sphinx is thought of as a creature that might have life, and the bronze itself is the most uncanny and the most attractive thing imaginable.

Another man who leans far toward the unusual is F. Cayley Robinson, who, in his own way, is one of the best. Some of his pictures are strongly suggestive of Puvis de Chavannes, showing chalky flat tones and archaic severity of composition. One of these, called the “Deep Midnight” is as purely Egyptian in feeling as if it had been done in the time of the Pharaohs. It represents a group of priests and priestesses standing on the flat roof of a temple, studying the stars that burn whitely in the deep blue tropical sky. The clear darkness is wonderfully rendered and the whole picture is pervaded with a sense of stillness and deep reverence. Another picture, called “Dawn,” shows a boat moving slowly through the gleaming pale waters of a river, in which it is faintly mirrored in the early morning light; a woman standing at the prow holds a lantern, which forms a glowing spot of light amid all the pale dim tones of the rest of the picture. It is said that Mr. Robinson lived for two whole years in a small yacht, sailing from place to place or lying at anchor,—a thing that can easily be believed when one sees his deep understanding of the unearthly pale light that lies between sea and sky at dawn.

Very different in feeling is the robust joyousness of William
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Nicholson’s “End of the Morris Dance.” This shows the burly hero of the village festival carried high upon the shoulders of his fellow dancers, and in composition and color the picture is a very characteristic Nicholson. In the background are dun-colored clouds, and the dull green and brown tones of massed trees and buildings. The dancer is clad in a white smock and everyday corduroys, but his high hat is garlanded with bright flowers and stuck with feathers, and a bright green sash crosses his broad chest. On his legs are leather greaves, like those of a cricket player, hung with sleigh bells and ornamented with bunches of red and green ribbons. Another and similar picture of the same group shows the dancer in full career down the village street, but this one is the more exciting because it represents the supreme moment of a contented simple existence.

The organization of this exhibition was largely due to the exertions of Francis Howard, Honorary Secretary of the International Society of Sculptors, Painters and Gravers, and himself an artist of note. His own work is represented by several pictures, of which the most attractive is the portrait of his wife, a slim, dark-eyed young woman in a brown velvet gown, plume hat and fur boa, painted in a manner that was plainly inspired by Whistler. Although he has lived in England for many years, Mr. Howard is an American, and it is perhaps due to his native heritage of “hustle” that he was able to “achieve the impossible” and bring this amazing exhibition together within the space of three days. Although extended notice can be given only to the artists whose pictures we reproduce here, the remainder of the exhibition is equally interesting, containing as it does such pictures as “The Sons of God and the Daughters of Men,” by Maurice Greiffenhagen,—who also shows some brilliant portraits; a group of landscapes by David Muirhead which are veritable gems of big work within small compass; several interesting pictures by William Orpen and Harrington Mann, and some notable paintings and drawings by Augustus John, who is a master draughtsman of pitiless realism and almost brutal power. The etchings and engravings shown by such men as Max Beerbohm, T. Sturge Moore, James Pryde, Muirhead Bone, Francis Dodd and Edward J. Sullivan, as well as Charles Shannon and William Nicholson, are of a quality to deserve an article to themselves, and the sculpture also would furnish ample material for separate treatment. There is talk of bringing the whole collection to New York this winter and if it comes it is safe to predict that it will be found most valuable in suggestion and inspiration to those of our own men who are working along the same lines of sincere endeavor to express direct vigorous thought and to compass the interpretation of life as a whole.

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