ARTHUR STREETON: AN AUSTRALIAN PAINTER WHO HAS SOLVED THE PROBLEMS OF ART IN HIS OWN WAY: BY M. IRWIN MACDONALD

IN SPITE of our worship of tradition, and our belief in academic training and the infallibility of long-established methods, we are beginning slowly to realize that the man who goes directly to the heart of things and does his work in the way that seems best to him, regardless of what others have done, is the man who most surely attains to vigorous and convincing expression of his thought. And when a man has grown up in a new country, where civilization is still more or less in a formative stage, and where each problem, whether social, political, or artistic, must be grappled with at first-hand, he has the best possible chance for developing all that he possesses of capability; for if he be denied the culture that comes from close personal association with long-established traditions and with the heritage left to the world by the thinkers and workers of the past, he is also freed from the pressure of the overwhelming influences that so often cramp, as well as direct, the freedom of individual expression.

A significant example of the effect of work done under such conditions and in a new country far removed from the great art centers of the world, is found in the landscape painting of Mr. Arthur Streeton, a young Australian who is making his influence felt even among the strong men who now form the revolutionary group in London art circles. Mr. Streeton's work, while more or less uneven,—as is usually the case with self-taught men,—always commands attention, because of the artist's frank and forceful seizure of the salient characteristics of his subject, and a method of treatment that seems to go straight through the medium he employs to the soul of the thing he is striving to represent. One feels that here is a man who has lived much in the open, and who has a close kinship with Nature and a deep understanding of her moods. Whether he is painting the wide quiet spaces and mellow southern coloring of his native Australia, or the gorgeous hues and golden summer sunlight of Italy, or the watery gray-blue skies and sedate opulent landscape of England, one receives the impression that the picture has been done swiftly and in the open,—that the artist has set up his easel near the spot which he pictures on his canvas and in striving to represent the scene that lay before him has put himself into such harmony with it that he has imprisoned in his colors the very soul of land, sea and sky. Every one of his pictures, no matter where painted, is full of light and air,
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and its fresh and brilliant coloring is harmonized by the atmosphere, precisely as the colors in nature blend under the influence of the great unifier,—light. Arthur Streeton sees things somewhat in the same way that Sèvola does, and in the majority of his pictures you feel strong sunlight, the blowing of clean winds, and the movement of water under blue sky. While he falls willingly into the soberer moods of English landscape, and paints it with the most sensitive appreciation of its staid, low-toned beauty, the greater part of his work shows a natural affiliation for the warmth and sunshine of the south, and his most brilliant canvases are those painted either in Australia or in Italy.

The fact that Mr. Streeton is almost wholly a self-taught man is due to one of those priceless opportunities for development that so often come under the guise of an apparent limitation. During his most impressionable years, he had almost no opportunity of forming his standards by the study of great paintings, for he was born and grew up in Melbourne, and during his boyhood was trained for the business life that finds most favor with an ambitious, energetic lad who has his own way to make in a new country. But he had other ambitions, and a certain power that was seeking for expression. When a lad of sixteen, he joined the night class of the Melbourne Art School, where, after his day's work was done, he found a chance to draw pictures. In this way, he received some sound training in drawing from casts, and also from life, that gave him experience in handling line and form, and also grounded him in the principles of perspective; and there his art education stopped. Yet he felt sufficiently sure of himself and of what he wanted to do to give up business when he was only nineteen years old, and to devote himself to painting, working out after his own methods the technical problems that confronted him, and striving only to express as clearly and truthfully as he could the beauty which he saw all around him. Working in this way, it was natural that he should do most of his painting in the open, and this meant that he never had to outgrow the habit of depending upon the carefully adjusted lights of the studio and the striving for effects after this or that manner, but drove directly at the things he wanted to express, which were air, light and the wonderful colors of land, sea and sky seen under the full glow of the southern sun.

By dint of hard work and unwavering sincerity in expression, the young artist slowly learned a free and fluent use of his medium; mainly because he was intent always upon the scene he was trying to depict, rather than on the manner of using his brush or laying on
To Be Exhibited at Carnegie Institute, Pittsburgh, this coming season.

"AUSTRALIA FELIX": ARTHUR STREETON, PAINTER.
“SYDNEY HARBOR”: ARTHUR STREETON, PAINTER.
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"TRAfalgar Square, London, on a Misty Afternoon in Winter": Arthur Streeton, Painter.
“VENICE, GRAND CANAL FROM THE PALAZZO FOSCAI”: ARTHUR STREETON, PAINTER.
of his colors. Of course, there were hard times and many discouragements, but year by year he gained a firmer grip on his art and wider recognition from his countrymen, until in eighteen hundred and ninety-two he felt strong enough to send a picture to the Paris Salon. The result furnished an impetus which he is feeling yet, for the picture was not only accepted but was hung in a place of honor and given honorable mention,—the first time that such recognition had ever been extended to an Australian. Five years later he left Australia and went to England, not because he had exhausted the possibilities of his own country, but because he felt that it was time to turn to the older civilization and to seek the wider opportunities that are to be found in the home country, which is the Mecca of the colonial-born. But on the way he stopped for several months in Egypt, reveling in the white hot glare of the African sunshine, and in the tawny hills and plains, accented with dashes of barbaric color; finally resuming his journey with a store of new pictures and sketches which formed a valuable record of growth and experience.

IN ENGLAND the struggle began all over again, for the British mind is slow, conservative and eminently self-satisfied,—not at all given to the approval and encouragement of strong rugged young colonials who have hewn out their own ways of working, regardless of the schools. But men like Arthur Streeton are not easily defeated, and although commissions were few and exhibitions uncordial, he worked doggedly ahead, always true to his own convictions, and always painting what he saw in exactly the way he saw it. So gradually he gained a hearing. His pictures found place in the Paris Salon, and appeared more and more often at the provincial exhibitions held in England, and at last London woke up to the fact that here was a strong man, doing honest and vital work. The doors of the Royal Academy and the New Gallery were opened to him, also Guildhall, the Royal Society of British Artists, and the new English Art Club. He visited Venice, and gave his own virile and unhackneyed interpretation of the world-famed and much-painted palaces, churches and lagoons of the Queen of the Adriatic. He saw modern Venice with the delighted appreciation of the outlander who has long dreamed of her glories and has just found his dreams realized in objective form. And again he swiftly transferred to canvas what he saw, as undisturbed by the golden visions of Turner and the subtle harmonies of Whistler as he was by the hard, glittering color and merciless architectural details of Canaletto or Zeim. Working always quickly and on the spot, and dashing his colors on the canvas with big free brush strokes, he caught the very spirit of Venice.
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as she is today,—with all her opulence of color, her vividness and gaiety. He saw the buildings in the mass, and he grasped the general effect of the cream and rose tints of marble, the soft gray of time-worn stone and the sparkle of blue-green waters lapping against the steps of the palaces,—all bathed in the somnolent splendor of the summer sunshine. As the result, his Venetian pictures had a marked success in the International Exhibition in Venice, and he returned to England with wider powers and a surer grasp of the thing he was trying to do.

And in England he found that it was no longer difficult to command attention, for the vigorous sincerity of his work had begun to receive its just meed of consideration and respect. An exhibition of his work at the Alpine Club last spring made a strong impression, because for the first time it showed the full scope of his power and versatility. Here were pictures from Australia, Egypt, Italy, and England,—each canvas vital with the life and atmosphere of the country which had inspired it, and all alike evidencing the insight and honesty of the painter.

THIS year he received a gold medal from the Salon of the Société des Artistes Français for a large picture which he calls "Australia Felix," and another canvas entitled "Sydney Harbor" attracted much attention at the New Salon in the Champ de Mars. Both pictures are reproduced here, and the illustration of "Australia Felix" is all the more interesting to Americans because Mr. Streeton has been invited to send the picture to the next exhibition held at the Carnegie Institute in Pittsburgh. This will be his introduction to the American public, and it is safe to predict that he will find cordial appreciation and understanding, because he is so closely akin to the men who are doing strongly individual work in our own country. The picture shows great quiet spaces, full of the warm haziness of the southern atmosphere that in the distance takes on a tone of rosy violet instead of the blue of northern climes. Huge wide-flanked hills with softly rounded lines enclose a rich valley of farm lands, dotted with buildings here and there, and other valleys and plains stretch to the far distant horizon. The bronze-green of the heavily timbered hillsides throws into strong relief the lighter tones of the fields, and a sharp accent is given by the bare trunks of the dead trees in the foreground,—trees which seem to have risen directly in front of the artist's easel as he sat on the brow of the hill looking over mountain and valley. The coloring of the whole picture is warm, sunny and mellow,—a glow but not a glare of sunshine. It is a rich and pleasant land, as yet unspoiled by the civilization which it befriends and also dominates.
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The other Australian picture, "Sydney Harbor," shows the same breadth and freedom of treatment and the same dignity and simplicity of interpretation. There is a wide, quiet stretch of water, with low-lying hills beyond, veiled with the violet haze that allows only a suggestion of the city that covers their slopes. Even the buildings nearer to the foreground become almost a part of the landscape, and the steamers and cruisers lying at anchor in the bay and the little fishing boats skimming about give hardly more than a suggestion of human life and industry to the peace and serenity of the scene.

Mr. Streeton's English mood is shown by the picture of "Trafalgar Square on a Winter Afternoon,"—a picture painted for, and owned by the Right Honorable Russell Rea, M. P. Veiled as it is in a pale gray mist, broken here and there by shattered rifts of light which are reflected in pale gleams from the wet pavement, it is the very essence of London in winter. The whole picture is a study in grays, and its coloring is most tender and elusive. The fountains seem almost a part of the silvery mist, and the tall slender shaft of the monument appears to float above the earth rather than to rest upon its base of solid stone. The confused mass of ghostly buildings beyond looks like the city of a dream, and the only thing that brings us back to reality is the tide of life pouring through the streets and the solid mass of masonry in the foreground at the left. It is a picture to which one turns again and again, so full is it of tenderness, mystery and harmony of tones.

The Venetian pictures are painted in a different key. They show the same breadth and simplicity of treatment, and the same broad, swift brush work, but they seem fairly to radiate the light and color which fills them. In the view of the "Grand Canal from the Palazzo Foscari," the property of Dr. Ludwig Mond, F. R. S., the chief interest is the marvelous use made of the reflections in the water of the palaces on either side. These palaces, built of stone or marble, have all the soft grays and warm rosy cream tones that are characteristic of Venice and, in the opalescent green water, their reflections take on a purple tone in the shade and a shimmer of rose and pale gold when cast under the direct rays of the sun. As in all Mr. Streeton’s Venetian pictures, the architecture is treated with an eye to the general effect in the mass rather than the detailed features. It is a pity that it is impossible to give in the illustrations any adequate idea of the coloring of these pictures, for in the color, and, above all, in the atmosphere which fills them, lie their most compelling charm.