THE ART OF ETTORE TITO, MODERN ITALIAN PAINTER: BY CHARLES H. CAFFIN

At the age of fifty Ettore Tito finds himself the most conspicuous of modern Italian painters. I use the term "conspicuous" rather than "acknowledged head" or some equivalent phrase of recognized leadership, because his vogue is a popular one and the reasonableness of it not admitted, I fancy, by all his fellow artists. Some will put the question, "And what do you think of Tito?" in a way that suggests he is, of course, to be reckoned with. But, after all, how does he strike a foreign eye? Does he really size up to the reputation that he has acquired at home? And, while the questioner is discreetly silent as to his own views, one gathers an impression that he himself could be critical an' he would, and that he is scarcely expecting an answer of unqualified agreement with the popular verdict.

It is not difficult to understand how Tito has won the regard of the public, and it is to the public's credit that he has done so. For he represents something worthier of an artist's concern than do the great majority of modern Italian pictures; he has not truckled down to the taste of the crowd, but has lifted it to his own level. What the Italian public's own level of taste has been, and still to a great extent remains, may not unfairly be epitomized by a reference to the sepulchral sculpture in the Campo Santo at Genoa. If you have seen it you were probably shocked; but so would be a great number of Italians, if you told them that you were. I am thinking of those long arcades whose walls are encumbered with a medley of portrait-busts, tablets carved in high and low relief, and built-out devices of architecture and statuary; parodies of the mystery of death and of an after life, sentimental travesties of the tragedy of grief. An abject realism has reduced everything to a monotony of unutterable commonplaceness, for it is a realism that is inspired by and relies upon the trivial ineffectualities of unessential details. Here, for example, a marbleized widow sits with her handkerchief to her eyes beside the bust of her deceased husband. His ample whiskers are rendered almost hair by hair; the lady's gown with so precise an attention to the shimmer on its surface that a person learned in such matters could appraise the quality and cost of the original material, while the lace upon the edge of the handkerchief can be identified as of such and such a stitch. Incidentally, what can one think of the taste of a woman who will thus permit the privacy of her bereavement to be paraded to the public eye? How the indecent vulgarity and hideous lack of humor appall one! And both the quality and character of the technique correspond. The lowest kind of motive and the pettiest kind
"THE LOVE STORY" : ETTORE TITO, PAINTER.
"THE START FOR THE FISHING"
ETTORE TITO, PAINTER.
“LIFE”: ETTORE TITO, PAINTER.
"THE TRAIN PASSES"
ETTORE TITO, PAINTER.
of vanity have regulated every stroke of the chisel. The sculptor has been imbued with the imitative instinct of a monkey and has expended a perverse ingenuity in displaying his almost diabolical cleverness.

As I wandered past this jungle of artistic and sentimental insincerity I thought of that figure by Saint-Gaudens in the Rock Creek Cemetery, near Washington. There is realism also; but of what a different kind! No vaporing sentimentality on the part of the bereaved; not a hint of personal intrusion on the sculptor’s part.

Instead a great abstract, impersonal realism, in the presence of which the incidents of individual loss are overwhelmed in the consciousness of the universal mystery of sorrow. It is with a shudder that I recall those ample whiskers and the genteel farce of the widow’s public parade of sentimentality.

Yet this sculptor is not to be singled out for censure. He is only one of many and his banality is not confined to his own line of work; it is shared by the painters, and originates in the public. The kind of painting and sculpture that has for some time characterized, I will not say the whole of Italian art, but certainly a great part, perhaps the majority of it, is but symptomatic of a corresponding proportion of the public taste. It is enamored of the commonplace and petty; of the trivial in sentiment and the insignificant in craftsmanship. It encourages vapid display and the meretriciousness of imitative cleverness. And, when I say this, I do not forget that these artists could not get a living if their paintings were not bought by traveling Americans. The kind of taste that has originated and been fed by this banality is not confined to Italy. It is, however, in despite of this public taste and by winning it to an appreciation of something worthier that Ettore Tito has reached his eminence.

I saw his work this summer under circumstances particularly favorable to the study of it; namely, at the International Exposition in Venice. Here he was allotted a big gallery in which a retrospective exhibition of his paintings was shown, and one could get a fairly comprehensive idea of what he stands for. Meanwhile there were neighboring galleries filled with assorted specimens of the work of contemporary Italians, so that it was possible to see how he ranks in relation to their achievement. Finally, one could compare his work with that of certain foreign artists to whom separate galleries had been assigned; notably with Besnard and Zorn and the Norwegian, Kroyer, an artist whose choice of subject is rather akin to Tito’s.

This is no place to analyze the contents of the aggregate exhibition
of Italian art; but I may suggest a general impression, if only as a sketchy background to the individual study of Tito. One is conscious, then, here and there of a picture standing out from its surroundings, because of a notable sincerity of motive or of craftsmanship. It is occasionally a figure subject; usually, however, a landscape. They are exceptions to the general average, incidental interruptions to the impression which one is accumulating of the mass of paintings as a whole. And as this becomes formulated it is not an edifying one. Elegant frippery, prettified sentimentality, meretricious allurement, a prevailing suggestion as of thin and tinkling cymbals,—such is the general impression of the subject-motive. And the quality of the technique corresponds. It is facile, but superficial; clever without artistic conviction. In fact, if one is to speak one’s mind freely, the general impression is of shallow pretense and pretentious artifice. Nor is this impression mitigated by what I have seen of modern Italian pictures in other international exhibitions; indeed, it is corroborated. In a word, there is still more than a smack of the Genoese Campo Santo manner in the background of contemporary painting from which Ettore Tito has emerged into prominence.

He is a Southerner, hailing from Castellamare di Stabia, where he was born in eighteen hundred and sixty. But the scene of his working life has been Venice. He first attracted attention when he exhibited at Rome in eighteen hundred and eighty-three a picture entitled, “Festival Morning at the Lido,” and four years later won recognition in Venice by two water colors and an oil painting, “The Fishmarket.” Of the latter, the critic, Giulio Carotti, wrote in praise, commending the “naturalness in the drawing of the figures,” and crediting the artist with “such freshness and novelty of observation that he seems to find in Nature forms and movements which have hitherto passed unnoticed. More than one figure,” said Carotti, “seems to have been caught by instantaneous photography directly from life.”

Already, it seems, his realism had singled itself out from that of his contemporaries. It suggested an independent eye and the capacity for close study; it was not intent on trifles, but concerned with such essentials as form and movement. Meanwhile the critic’s reference to photography is interesting. I take it to mean not that the figures had actually been photographed from life—as, for example, many of Sorolla’s seem to have been, but that they were as natural in appearance as if they had been products of instantaneous photography. But even this, I repeat, is interesting, since it recognizes that in the matter of realistic representation the motive of the painter is practically the same as the photographer’s; the one laboriously reaching what the
other attains with much less expenditure of time and trouble. And to recognize this is to be drawn toward the conclusion that neither a painting nor a photograph, unless it yields more than merely the representation of form and movement, is in an artistic sense a thing of much accomplishment. Both, by the possession of some other qualities, should enhance the significance of form and movement.

It was in this respect that in the beginning of his career Tito made a great advance. His drawing became more and more facile and meaningful; the sentiment of its expression fuller and deeper, until in eighteen hundred and ninety-five he exhibited in Venice a picture that displayed a marked grasp of character. Its subject was a religious procession, headed by a layman holding a candle, and the treatment of this figure was characterized by virility and reverential feeling. On the same occasion he also exhibited an allegorical subject of Fortune on her wheel. He has subsequently departed from his usual realistic vein with such subjects as “The Birth of Venice,” “Bacchanal” and “Love and the Fates.” The last was included in his exhibition of the present year. It shows three robed women, pressed one behind the other on the precipitous slope of a mountain; the foremost a middle-aged woman of determined mien, pointing forward with her finger, as she directs the aim of Love, whose nude figure leans against her. He has just discharged his arrow and is watching its flight, meanwhile resting his foot upon the nude back of a man who is lying as if dead. Beside him crouches a nude woman, looking up into Love’s face and raising a hand in the attempt to check his act. Thus the nude figures form a pyramid of flesh tones, seen against a tumultuous sky on one side, and on the other against a turbulence of drapery, the conspicuous note of which is the deep crimson cloak of the foremost Fate. In this imagined scene, while the drawing of the nudes is characterized by knowledge and refined skill and the modeling is notably supple, the composition is inclined to confusion, and the whole suggestion of the picture is rather one of asseveration than strength. In fact, in this attempt to build up a set piece in which the academic motive shall be combined with the realistic, the artist seems to be only putting fetters on his capacity; for the latter, unquestionably to my mind, consists in the fluency and directness with which he can adapt to pictorial purposes the actual incidents of everyday life.

In two of the pictures accompanying this article, one may detect such intrusion and feel it a detriment. I allude to “The Cable” and “The Train Passes.” Both subjects have been seen and studied from actual life, and quite effectively. Yet in each case the
artist has permitted his recollection of academic devices to interfere with the naturalness of the scene. In "The Cable" it is the woman; in "The Train Passes," the man with the spade across his shoulder, who strike an histrionic pose. And in each case the figure unduly fills the eye and detracts from the reasonableness as well as the homogeneity of the total impression. It introduces a false note. The action of the man's arm across the handle of the spade, the action of the other arm resting on the hip, the sort of heroic action of the torso, are not what one associates with the simplicity and directness of the toiler, still less when, as appears to be the case here, he is on his way home, tired with a day's labor. They are suggestive rather of the tricks of the academic studio, resorted to under the supposition that they will give dignity to form and movement. This man and woman are studio connections of Breton's stagified peasants; not akin to the flesh and blood of Millet's. Think of the latter's "Sower." There you have a disposition of the limbs and torso that has the rhythm of a classic statue, and for the reason that it also is based upon observation of the natural movement of the body in action. As for the handsome girl whose gestures so attract attention in "The Cable," I am not convinced, particularly when I note the elegant do-nothingness of the right arm, that she has much to do with hauling in the boat, and I find myself likening her pose of being important to that of the young lady who figures in the advertisements of mechanical pianos. You recall how she sits in front of the instrument, drawing upon herself the young man's enraptured gaze, weaving around him the combined spell of her own charms and the music's, while her actual share in the latter is limited to waggling her feet up and down on the pedals.

Having become conscious of "pose" in this girl of "The Cable," one has grown alert and begins to notice that even the horse is not living up to the strenuous demands of his job. The general action of the whole form is truthful, but there is not much suggestion of muscular tension in the legs. And, while I am attracted by the natural gesture of the horse's head, I note its bigness, with a recollection of the smallness of the head that is usual in Italian horses. This is just such a falsification of facts as would appear in a photograph, taken at the point from which this horse is viewed. Can the camera have been used to fix the action of this horse? If so, there need be no objection raised, so far as the original purpose was involved: the fixing of the action. But what, if the artist has pushed the service of the photograph further and been satisfied to take the camera's general observation in lieu of his own personal study of the various muscular strains in the beast's actual body? Well, certainly it
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would explain the lack of truth in rendering the details of the action. On the other hand, in such a picture as "Start for the Fishing," one finds no trace of these limitations. There has been no attempt to force the dramatic note. The incident has been observed simply and directly, but with an artist's eye for the possibilities that it involved. A splendid sense prevails of spaciousness and fluent movement: the stir of air, gliding undulations of the water, and the brisk momentum of the hurrying boats. Moreover, the spotting of the composition is exceedingly spirited and alertly varied, while the orange and pale buff sails make fine notes of color against the greenish, grayish and purplish blues of the sea. There is an eagerness, if I may say so, in the whole feeling of the scene that is delightfully exhilarating.

IN THE three other pictures that are here reproduced—"Life," "The Love Story," and "On the Sea Wall"—there is a vein of sentiment threaded through the anecdotal or story-telling motive. These epithets may distress some reader. I know there are also some artists to whom anecdote or story in a picture seems anathema. They start at the sound of such words as a bull at the sight of a red rag. On some other occasion I hope to return to this matter, and, meanwhile, will only remark here that in the same city of Venice in which I saw these pictures of Tito's may also be seen the work of another Italian painter whose reputation even among artists is considerable—one Carpaccio. But, if the latter's pictures are not in the line of story, I shall be glad to be told what they are. Anyhow, for my own purpose, I neither accept nor reject a picture on the score of anecdote or story, but, whatever the subject, according to the character of the way it is rendered. And the rendering of these genre subjects of Ettore Tito's is clever and agreeable. The compositions are pleasantly varied and, notwithstanding the ingenuity and inventiveness employed, they have an effect of spontaneity. Moreover, their actual disposition of the forms is in each case remarkably interpretative of the sentiment. In "Life," for example, how robust and wholesome is the suggestion conveyed by the massing of the four substantial figures. How charmingly involved are both the linear arrangement and the distribution of the light in "The Love Story," while the isolation of the girl's figure in "On the Sea Wall" is secured by a remarkable finesse of tact. The figures also in every case are natural and each has a separate quality of character. These pictures, in fact, have the virtue of seeming to be actual fragments of "the passing show," and the added value of suggesting an undercurrent of feeling below the surface of the things seen.

One stepped out of the gallery containing Tito's work immediately
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into another occupied by that of Besnard, and thence directly into an exhibition of the work of Zorn. Comparison was inevitable; it was, indeed, invited. And Tito’s reputation in Italy is so great that there is no unfairness in testing it by standards as exacting as those of Zorn and Besnard. These two differ from each other, Besnard’s subtlety of motive presenting a complete contrast to Zorn’s directness, but they agree in being unusually gifted painters. Their brushwork is substantial and at the same time fluid; facile and yet full of purpose and meaning. It has body and substance, character and charm of expression.

Compared with theirs, Tito’s technique is thin; it is a veil drawn over the forms, not part and fiber of their structure. Neither has it character and charm. Individuality it has, so that you may recognize it as his; but it is an individuality comparatively boneless, fleshless and without conviction. In a word, his technique is not that of the painter, but the draughtsman. He draws with his brush, often quite frankly, as in the portion of the rope beside the horse’s tail in “The Cable,” and in the sole of the girl’s shoe in “The Love Story.” But even where this draughtsman’s use of the brush is not so emphatic one is aware that the forms have not been built up in color, but that the color has been laid over them, and color laid on color, as in a water-color, executed with the help of body color. When, as in a certain portrait of a lady, Tito tries to adopt a painter’s method of painting, he proves himself inadequate; the effect is a fumble. He is, in fact, essentially a draughtsman, who employs color only to increase the lifelikeness of the forms.

One is inclined to go further and suspect that he is essentially an illustrator. And the suspicion is confirmed when you compare his style with that of Kroyer, who is also a painter of life, with a taste for anecdote and story. But Kroyer again is more of a painter and his work on that account is genre in the strict sense of the word. It not only represents a fragment of life, but has been treated as an opportunity for solving some of the painter problems of color and light and atmosphere. On the contrary, the impression one derives from Tito’s pictures is that they have been primarily inspired by the artist’s interest in the incidents and associations of life, and that they have been executed with a chief intent of securing a vivid and appealing representation; which I take to be the métier of the illustrator.

In consequence, while some of his larger pictures, notably “The Amazon,” interested me very much, I find him most satisfying in the smaller canvases. For in these, compression gives a certain substance to his method, and his limitations as a painter are less in evidence.