IMAGINATION AND THE CAMERA: ILLUSTRATED FROM PHOTOGRAPHS BY BARON DE MEYER: BY MARY FANTON ROBERTS

It is the illusion of beauty that we are seeking for in all art. The actual material loveliness that Nature has created we cannot reproduce with any kind of satisfactory charm because with all our many and infinite gifts we cannot create the sense of vital force that has furnished the beauty to the living thing. And, as a matter of fact, the more definitely and closely we strive to merely imitate Nature, the more closely we seek to follow the working of her deft fingers, the further away we are from the subtle ever-changing mystery of living beauty. It has taken us many centuries to learn that color saturated with light and quivering in the currents of air, that a flower with fresh sap pouring through every petal, that a stream of water changing every minute with the force of its current are all things that cannot be infused into canvas or marble or music, and convey, even to the listening ear, any sense of reality if we concentrate upon the physical side of Nature's beauty.

Within the last very few years, the great men in every phase of art have reacted from the purely material imitation of Nature and have sought to create through their work the wonderful illusion that Nature herself creates, and which no technical imitation of her ever brings for a moment.

The stage in the hands of a man like Gordon Craig has reached up from the material mise-en-scène to a wonderful vision of effects that stir the imagination and render it sensitive to the purpose of the dramatist. The scenery which Gordon Craig seeks for the stage is not a record of some scene painter’s intelligence; it is rather a study of certain illusions of conditions that will produce emotion. You do not look for a green garden, a blue sky, a yellow house and remain satisfied; rather you experience the emotion that you would were you actually out in some fresh green garden under a radiant blue sky. In other words, he seeks to push the effect of his stage arrangement past the eye to the soul. This is equally true of Debussy’s music, of Corot’s painting, of what MacDowell has done for us in America. With MacDowell, one never finds the imitation of Nature’s color and sound, but always through the magic of his infinite genius one responds to Nature’s wonderful moods, one’s heart beats with the melody of “The Wild Rose” and deep wistful tenderness responds to every sound of “The Indian Lodge” or “The Water Lily.”

More and more our own painters today are seeking to forget the baleful “art of imitation.” It is no longer a question of textures and
mathematical outline. We find our men, whether landscape painters or portrait painters, seeking to transfer to their audience the exquisite joy which they received from the surroundings they have placed on the canvas. If you are looking at Robert Henri’s great portrait, called “Herself,” you are not thinking of the material in the gown or the background or the kerchief; you are thinking of Ireland, the kindness of her people, the health, the unquenchable amiability, the humor that is only a part of a profound kindness toward all life, and you smile back at “Herself” glad to have known more of her people, of her race.

The same is true of Glackens’ painting of the seashore. You are not asking whether he is painting Long Island or Gloucester or Nova Scotia, you are refreshed with the wind and the sun and the joy of the children. You feel as they felt the day he painted them, as he felt while he was painting. And so art seems to have lifted itself up to that reticent edge of the infinite where man has somehow seized Nature’s own force to produce varying and wonderful emotions in the heart of the beholder.

Perhaps the last art to respond to this subtle illusory power is what has been known either exclusively as a craft or as one of the minor arts. For many years, photography was merely a convenient mechanical opportunity of securing a poor likeness of some unfortunate friend. In the last decade, the men who have known the camera for what it was really worth, who have realized that it could be made more than a mere imitation, with commonplace, obvious value, so that it held strange and exquisite subtleties, have through the power of their own genius and confidence in their insight developed, in close touch with Nature, the art of photography to a height that seems little short of a miracle.

A photograph today is no longer a map, a mere outline of related surfaces; it can carry for one the very spirit of the subject photographed. A landscape in a little photographic print can give you the delicacy of a misty, early morning, the rich warm beauty of midday, the pale haunting tang of twilight. The photographing of people is no less wonderful. The artist of the camera has achieved the power of photographing beyond the surface, of reproducing temperament, of even bringing through the lens qualities hidden from the eye of the ordinary onlooker. And today it is the avowed purpose of the man who uses light as his technique to create moods in the soul of the observer. One would think that this might be done by perhaps one or two men of genius, but one could recall with ease and pleasure a dozen men who have found the camera infinite in its capacity for stirring the emotions in response to beauty.
"ROSES IN JUNE SUNLIGHT:" FROM A PHOTOGRAPH BY BARON RUDOLF DE MEYER.
"SUNLIGHT THROUGH THE WINDOW."
FROM A PHOTOGRAPH BY BARON DE MEYER.
"CRYSTAL AND ROSES:" FROM A PHOTOGRAPH BY BARON DE MEYER.
"POPPIES IN MEADOWLAND:" FROM A PHOTOGRAPH BY BARON DE MEYER.
"TEA IN THE GARDEN:" FROM A PHOTOGRAPH BY BARON DE MEYER.
IMAGINATION AND THE CAMERA

The readers of The Craftsman will remember with pleasure the presentation of a series of studies of trees by Baron de Meyer in the March, nineteen fourteen, number. It is our good fortune to have secured a group of de Meyer’s still-life pictures which illustrate this article, or rather which are illustrated by the article. I question if the actual sight and fragrance of fresh flowers would be more powerful to stir the imagination and to touch the response for beauty than these delicate wild flowers of Baron de Meyer’s. In these few prints, he gives us the impression of flower life, seen through quivering atmosphere, and almost changing as one looks upon them. The line of flowers growing in the edge of a meadow is one of the most remarkable photographs of Nature that we have ever published. Through some intricacy of genius, Baron de Meyer has caught, in this little ledge of wild flowers, the very thing that one feels in walking through meadowlands, the lowliness, the bright beauty, the glow of sunlight over them and the wild grace which comes from growing without interference of the gardener. We feel that in these especial studies this remarkable photographer is working along the same lines for results as are our painters and our musicians and our stage artists; that he is seeking the ineffable rather than the material and that somehow, in a way beyond our understanding, he has been enabled to meet the subtleties of Nature halfway, wooing them, charged with Nature’s primitive force, through his camera out to the world.

I do not think that as yet we fully realize the wonder of the new art of photography, not only the miracle of it in color, but all that will be accomplished for us through the practical use of the black and white phase of this work in its final and fullest development. It is already being employed to secure records of historical and social conditions the world over. Probably one of the most interesting sections in the Smithsonian Institution, at Washington, is that given to the work of Mr. E. S. Curtis, the Indian photographer, who has prepared volume after volume of photographs which are not only absolute and authentic records of the life of what remains of the picturesque Indian today, but which must rank as an artistic achievement, each print being genuinely a work of art, not only in its technique, but in color, mounting, etc.

Few art exhibitions of the season in New York bring together more interesting, cultivated, enthusiastic people than those attending the studios of what are called today the art photographers.

We are hoping later on to present in The Craftsman Baron de Meyer’s photographs of modern Spain. Rare studies of temperament, of joy, tragedy, grace, of the vivid living to be found in many phases of modern Spanish life.