Abbott H. Thayer

A Tribute to Him At the Museum

By Royal Cortissoz

When modernism goes down the wind—as we firmly believe it will—its votaries may hardly claim that it did not have its chance. All the varieties of it have been brought into the foreground here this winter. The French types were pretty thoroughly exploited in the Kelekian sale, and several of them have been seen upon other occasions. At this moment the Sculptors' Gallery is filled with the works of certain English modernists. As for our "local talent," everything that exhibitions could do has been done, and at the Waldorf-Astoria, in the big picture fair of the Independents, it displays itself without restriction, no hard-hearted jury intervening to put a curb upon its wildest dreams. The fanatic sees in all this something like public ratification of the cult he follows. In a favorable sale he beholds the writing on the wall which is forever to discomfit the "conservatives." The disinterested observer recalls that fads have come—and gone—before this. And he notices with a certain satisfaction that if the season of 1921-'22 has been marked by a lot of modernism it has nevertheless demonstrated its fidelity to art. The affirmation of the sterling principles of our forefathers, Copley, Stuart and the rest, has gone on month after month at the Union League Club. The Brush exhibition has been opened at the Century Club. At the Metropolitan Museum the memorial exhibition of the work of the late Abbott H. Thayer will be accessible to the public on Tuesday. The hide-bound conservative may be pardoned if he surmises that these affairs, too, have a certain significance.

A Man of Genius

His Contribution to the Art of Painting in America

The exhibition at the museum performs for Thayer the service that the exhibition at the Century performs for Brush—it shows at full length, for the first time, the art of a great American painter. Important things have been lent for the occasion from public and private galleries. The Boston Museum sends its "Caritas," perhaps the most famous of all of Thayer's productions. A portrait and a flower piece come from Worcester. The Metropolitan itself adds from its permanent collection the beautiful "Young Woman" and the noble landscape "Monadnock," which it owes to the late George A. Hearn. Mr. John Gellatly contributes about ten canvases, a group of such value that the exhibition is indeed practically unimaginable without it. His is the magnificent "Virgin Enthroned," and besides this he lends the big "Stevenson Memorial," some of the finest of the portraits, and a coast scene, "Saint Ives," that is unique. Numerous other collectors, who have had fewer treasures to send, have, on the other hand, brought to the surface little known and, in some cases, altogether unexpected masterpieces. Miss Clara Stillman's two canvases, for example, come upon us like works rescued from oblivion. It is especially for its richness in unfamiliar pieces that the exhibition is to be welcomed. Some outstanding paintings are, inevitably, missing. Unbreakable rules made it impossible for the Smithsonian Institution to lend any of the Thayers in the Freer Museum. But absent examples are fully counterbalanced. No one who wants to know what manner of painter Thayer was need look for his secret beyond these walls.

Portrait of a Girl in White

(From the painting by Abbott H. Thayer at the Metropolitan Museum)

In its documentary, biographical aspects the collection is instructive. The aptitudes of the naturalist which were to crop out in Thayer's work on protective coloration, constructively affecting the development of "camouflage" in the great war, were active in him in his youth. Fortunately the committee has been able to borrow the little "Nature Morte" which figured in a sale at the American Art Galleries only the other day, the study of pigeons which he painted in 1868, when he was but nineteen. It is a curious souvenir. Evidently he began with an instinctive leaning toward good workmanship. Evidently, too, his contact with nature was direct. There is something remarkably fresh and forcible about this picture. So there is about the big, freely painted head of a tiger. But the curious thing about this, as about the "Nature Morte," is the manifestation of a purely painter-like talent which does not, in general, mark the early animal pictures he produced. There is one small pair of companion pictures of the same dog, "Playing Sick" and "Who Said Rats?" which not only seems uncharacteristic because of its anecdotic vein but because it suggests nothing of the peculiarly personal technique which was to come. Judging from the evidence here gathered together we should say that Thayer was a very personal type of painter at the outset and then, when he went to Paris, was quite naturally for a time submerged in a foreign method. The market scene done in Paris in 1875, the farmer's cart dating from the following year, the "Cloudy Afternoon on the Mosel," which belongs to 1875, all point to a student more or less conscious of the Salon. All that differentiates the Mosel picture, with its landscape and cows bathed in a studio light, from the conventional French composition is a particularly gifted draftsman's exact definition of forms. But there is a pasture scene dated only a year later in which one begins to feel the stirring of individuality. It prefigures, vaguely, yet conclusively, the grasp upon landscape which ultimately gave us the two majestic paintings of Monadnock.

The inquirer who is in search of the secret aforesaid, however, will clarify the subject if he will recognize in it the operation of what we can only call destiny. Nominally Thayer had more than one string to his bow. He began as an animalier. He painted flowers, and, as it happened, painted them superbly. The "Bowl of Roses" from Worcester is an exquisite interpretation. The "Water Lilies" is another. He could make a sea piece an enchanting study in color. The "Saint Ives," of 1898, has a Whistlerian purity and simplicity and a beauty solely expressive of Thayer. In the pictures of Monadnock he turns another page in what one feels, momentarily, must have been a singularly varied life. Technically these two landscapes are of the highest interest. The mountain is for him no distant peak, "lost in mist." On the contrary, his vagueness, his broad generalization, is all in the sylvan foreground. Far beyond the obscurities of foliage, in both cases, he draws the topmost contour of the mountain with the sharpest linear precision, silhouettes it against a sky untessed by cloud forms. "How versatile he was," one murmurs, considering the animal pictures, the flowers and the rest. "If he had dedicated himself entirely to landscape he would have made himself one of the great masters of the art." But something else pulled at his heart strings, the destiny to which we have alluded.

It is the source of everything that eternally endures in art. The real revelation of a painter's genius comes when he pours into his work, artlessly, spontaneously, not only the resources of the technician, but the qualities of his innermost soul. Thayer first thus declared himself when he got his stride in the painting of portraits of women. There are a few portraits of men here, including two studies of himself. They are interesting. He could not be dull. But men never inspired him. Nor did women, for that matter, immediately release the powers of his genius. There is no genius at all in the "Mrs. Milton," of 1881. It is careful, polished, the work of an uncommonly good journeyman. One would never divine from it the presence of a master. There is another "Portrait of a Lady," of the same period, an example lent by Mr. Gellatly, in which he seems more at his ease, more flexible, yet still somewhat in thrall to his old Parisian training. Then, in this very period of the '80s, he finds himself, the true Thayer steps forth, and henceforth he is the creative master. The "Portrait of a Girl in White," the one lent by Miss M. A. Greene, offers a key to the whole mystery. With it we would cite the "Miss Bessie Stillman" and the double portrait, "Sisters," which is its companion. These canvases are primarily, no doubt, portraits, characterizations of specific sitters, but they are even more to be regarded as the vehicles for the spiritualized æsthetic emotion which was Thayer's gift to American art. Technically, by the way, they indicate not only a capable but a courageous hand. Thayer was not afraid of white, which so often [illegible] to disaster. The dress in the "Miss Bessie Stillman" has the [illegible] depth of old ivory. Above it the rose-flushed tints of the sitter are miraculous, regarded simply as making so much tone. But technique, as is the way with Thayer, scarcely holds us. It is an inner flame that gives the painting its life.

In previous analysis of his work in these columns a letter of his to the present writer has been quoted. Part of it is so apposite that we must cite it again:

"The violin, whose strings ring whenever their note is sounded by an outside instrument, is pure symbol of the poet. In the poet cumulative images of every form of beauty begin in earliest infancy to occupy the brain, till, in his early maturity, these have become true touchstones, like the violin string. Let the painter once look upon a person who has no matter how many surface defects, one dominant greatness—purity at heart and fiery love of truth and beauty—and in his own heart the image of such a personality wakes into brilliant ringing clearness and takes the helm."

Caritas

(From the painting by Abbott H. Thayer at the Metropolitan Museum)

The painter, on this hypothesis, is a clairvoyant type. That is what Thayer was. He was a reader of enigmas of femininity, the solution of which consisted in the expression of his own ideal of beauty. In his work in pure portraiture he was not neglectful of his sitter, as this saying might seem to suggest. It was rather that womanhood roused in him a profound imaginative sympathy, which in turn enveloped and saturated the object of his study. The outcome was, as we have said, both a portrait and "a Thayer." We have pointed out before the realistic truth which was consistent with this spiritualization of his themes. In rising from portraiture to the celebration of impersonal figures he steadfastly preserved his hold upon life as he observed it here in our twentieth century. As we have said on another occasion, if we look strictly to the angelic sweetness of the type he loved to portray we might be tempted to say that he painted Madonnas, but nothing could be further from the truth. The word connotes suggestions which do not emanate from his canvases. He painted woman pure and simple. The great picture loaned by the Boston Museum is called "Caritas." A kindred composition in the Freer collection is called "The Virgin." In the Gellatly group there is a "Virgin Enthroned." Thayer was fond of the strictly descriptive title "Winged Figure," and it is affixed to more than one of his designs. Yet these profoundly imaginative conceptions of his are nothing if not studies of humanity. That is where he is most intensely an American. No tradition, no convention comes between us and his raciness. The truth of life is in everything he painted—the truth lifted to a higher power, enriched by the beauty which flowed magically into his work from his natural habit of thinking and feeling.

We may repeat here what we have previously said of the notable picture in this exhibition, the "Figure Half Draped." It is nominally what might be called in the old French phrase "an academy," a study of the nude which might or might not have been carried forward into the expression of some symbolical idea. One can imagine it, when finished, sent out into the world to be associated in our minds with the "Caritas" or the "Stevenson Memorial." As it is, accompanied by no allegorical or other accessories, it concentrates attention first on Thayer's technique and then on the mysterious beauty to which we are constantly referring. The head and torso are gloriously painted, with a positively grand breadth and with a refinement that seems to go into the very grain of the workmanship. The drapery has the simple dignity and the everlasting rightness which only a master can achieve in handling so difficult a problem. The low tones show Thayer in his most individual key. But the essence of the painting eludes description. One feels it again as an affair of the spirit. The serene beauty of this painting is like the beauty of poetry and music, of noble thought.

Two points remain to be stressed in the explication of Thayer's charm. It is a singular phenomenon in his work that, while it is concerned so devotedly with the mystery of womanhood and childhood, with an almost unvarying theme, it still possesses remarkable diversity. These fakly mystical portraits of his are always and forever new. The second and kindred virtue in him to which we would direct attention is his strength and range as a colorist, albeit he is never glowing and is content with a few restrained notes. Apprehend the dark green to which he was addicted, the passages of deep wine-red which occur in him now and then, his pure blues, his romantic purples and the white of which he was especially fond, and you have practically exhausted his gamut. The wings of one of his angels have the golden splendor of beaten bronze. The robe of another is of a grayish brown he did not often use. He had his adventures, his new flights, as a colorist. On the whole, however, he confined himself to a comparatively narrow scale—and worked wonders with it. Individuality was at the bottom of his color. By intensity of refinement he translated it into terms of beauty. His canvases have, in the main, a striking solidity, but there is a loveliness of tone in them sometimes which is as fragile, as exquisite as that of a rose leaf.

Genius won him his victories, that and a passion for artistic perfection. In a room by themselves a quantity of his drawings may be seen, studies of heads and hands, ideas for compositions and so on. They reflect his ardor and his conscience as a workman, his curiosity as to form, his command over line. He never made a fetish of craftsmanship. In a private letter that lies before us he says, apropos of a painting he had just finished: "It is always silly to think or say that one's last work is progress. So many traits are at work maturing themselves, especially in the attempts of a man advanced in years. He may gain, as I seem to, in accomplishment, while his earlier things remain the most valuable, sweetest flavored, perhaps." This attitude of his accounts for what seems unfinished or hasty in some of his paintings. Technical accomplishment was not as important in his eyes as the spirit of things. He followed the seemingly capricious path of the man of genius. But, being a man of genius, he took technical accomplishment as he went along. One of the lasting lessons of this exhibition is that only a powerful painter, in the strictest meaning of the phrase, could have produced the pictures in it. But the chief lesson those pictures enforce is that they sprang from creative inspiration, and, coming from such a source, are works of elevation and of beauty.

The Independents

The Sixth Annual Show at the Waldorf-Astoria

The commentator on exhibitions is sustained in a task which is not always an unmixed joy by the hope of encountering good work. We have never approached the Society of Independent Artists without this stimulus. The movement for which it stands began with auguries not unfavorable. There were good things scattered through the mass of freakish stuff assembled in the famous armory show of eight or nine years ago. It would seem to be impossible to hang a collection of more than eight hundred pieces without exciting some grateful appreciation in the beholder. Yet that is about what happens in the present instance at the Waldorf-Astoria. We have gone carefully and open-mindedly through the numerous galleries set up on the roof. We have found a few mildly attractive works of art. But they are so few that they seem almost negligible in a wilderness of crudities.

It might be supposed that the repellent character of this exhibition would be traceable to wild fantasticality, to this or that ism. The isms play, it is true, their devastating part, but they do not by any means account for all of the prevailing dullness. Much of it is explicable only on the hypothesis of flat mediocrity. Evidently the dabster who here finds his opportunity by the simple process of paying for the wall space assigned to him is not affirming himself through any play of ideas, ideas too new and recondite to be understood by the ordinary jury of artists. All that he has to tell us lies quite obviously upon the surface. It reveals just the dabster, desiring to paint, with little if any training, and making rather a poor fist at it. The show resembles nothing so much as that which a flock of young students might make—with the difference that a show at a well conducted school would probably develop signs of a little more sifting. At school there would be less leeway for "temperament." Fearful and wonderful are the disclosures of that volatile element in the exhibition under review. The pictures range from the hard glassy chromo to the design which is nothing if not mystical. The only point on which most of them unite is the avoidance of anything like thoroughgoing personalized craftsmanship. Personality, of course, is what your dabster invariably thinks he is after. He forgets that no artist can effectively express himself until he has mastered the technique which constitutes his vehicle for the job.

It is the low average of workmanship that is depressing here. Consider, for example, the many nudes. Some of them offend through vulgar taste, through blatant ugliness; but what we miss most in the lot is nothing more nor less than journeyman painters' ability, good drawing and modeling, an efficient way of defining form. Beauty? We would not be so naive as to ask these exhibitors for anything of the sort. With the fact faithfully and competently presented we would be well content. We get, instead, uncouth or feeble fumblings, pictures that are at the best drearily commonplace. After the point of saturation in the prosaic atmosphere of the show is reached one grows very thankful for small mercies.

(Continued on next page)

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