

LENS STUDIES of a PHOTO-SECESSIONIST

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THE great god Pan and his following of satyrs, fauns, nymphs and dryads must still haunt our western wilds, though Milton and Browning each wrote their epiphany in England long ago, for a few, temperamentally attuned, have seen or heard some of them in our higher altitudes. The poet Sill found the ancient goddesses of love and beauty wandering on the lifted hills of Berkeley and now, in the vast solitudes of our western Alps, among singing pines and eternal snows, a poet of the lens has surprised them in their retreats. Here the Spirit of Nature may be captured in her fleeting forms by a no less prosy little tool, no less familiar little clapper-trap, than the camera.

About five years ago a declaration of independence for the lens was signed by a small body of high priests and priestesses of the camera both in America and in Europe, who call themselves "photo secessionists." It has since been ratified by the public in its approval of their artistic creations. In America they are led by Alfred Stieglitz of New York, who encourages the movement by his publication of their best work and by a continual relay exhibition at "the Little Galleries" in New York. These devotees to art for art's sake, art for truth's sake, art for humanity's sake, have welcomed among them three western women, Adelaide Hanscom of Seattle, Wash., Myra Albert Wiggins of Salem, Ore., and Annie W. Brigman of Oakland.

Their aim is identical with that of the painter or sculptor—to discover under the conventional mask of nature, whether it be in guise of human being, landscape or trees, the living spirit, and to make permanent that revelation.

Here the photographer encounters difficulties unlike those of the painter, for he must be alert to catch the fleeting vision of loveliness; he must recognize the psychological moment and seize that for permanent record. With his tool—the willful, complex, even deceptive little camera—and his pigments—illusive light and shade—the artist works at a high nervous tension, which only a great emotion, a great love of the beautiful and a keen understanding of its evanescent forms can master. But that the lens has become a wonderfully obedient and sensitive medium for the expression of powerful emotion and tender feeling is proved in the wonderful compositions of this new cult. The camera is no longer a mere machine in their hands, and photography no longer a craft, but a fine art.

Every one of these artists is on a voyage of discovery. He has perfect freedom of action. He recognizes no limitation of manner or of subject. The result is that no two photo secessionists have the same manner or the same field. Every one seeks a new realm for his original work. This sometimes leads to the bizarre. But so long as he works in the true art spirit—striving to represent life as it reveals itself to him, just as all masters of art have always done, whether it be to reveal the beautiful in the commonplace or in the heroic, or in dreams of fairyland—he will master the technique and convince the public that here is a new field for creative art.

It is variously known as "pictorial photography," "impressionist photography," "emotional photography," and has even been called—O ye gods!—"art nouveaux" (art up to date). But, best of all, perhaps, is Mrs. Brigman's name, "lens studies." She is now a "fellow" of the photo secessionists.

Mrs. Brigman lives just across the bay, on an emerald green avenue, in a house embowered in lavender wisteria, purple clematis and climbing roses, or, rather, she lives all round the house, for the family spend most of their time night and day out of doors in the wisteria arbor, under the weeping willow, or on the lawn. Here, in the heart of a prosy city, she makes for herself a poetic environment for inspiration. It reminds the writer of the remark of the master of a cloisonne factory in Kyoto. During our visit to his shop, where 20 ceramic artists sat on their heels in an artistic screened room that looked out on a landscape garden with stone andons, or lanterns, carp pools, drooping pines and thatched lodges, we remarked that with its beautiful surroundings it looked little like a factory to our western eyes. And this oriental captain of industry made answer, "How could my artists make beautiful things if their eyes were not fed on beauty?"

And so in her little "garden of Allah" this California secessionist dreams her dreams of beauty. The winter and spring she spends illustrating poems and taking portraits, including studies of rising or famous men and women who live or sojourn here for a time. But during summer and fall this

poet of the lens no longer confines herself to recording personal dramas in the human face, or to illustrating the poems of other bards, but she dwells in the deep solitudes of the mountains, making pictures that are poems in themselves.

Her realm is the portrayal of the spirit of the west made visible in mystic symbolism, the west in its freest, most illusive guise, not the dynamic west, not the "woolly west," but the breezy, gleaming, singing west, where the spirit of nature by turns glooms and exults.

One of her studies most prized in the exhibit last fall at "the Little Galleries" in New York was called "Echo." It represents an illusive spirit emerging from the deep gloom of a cave, the print so deep toned that at first you see only a shadow embossed on shadow. The exquisite figure of a nymph materializes before your gaze, and you feel that she is slowly coming toward you.

Her "Dryad," a playful woodland spirit, escaping fearfully through her native pine trees from mortals who are intruding on her domains, strikes the keynote of her nature dramas—the sensitive spirit that will not be subdued. A long gaze at it reveals the inner truth. It makes one see visions, as good music does.

The more deeply tragic struggle for life in nature is shown in the conflict of the titanic forces of nature. When her "Cry of the Rocks," a silhouette of a gaunt human figure that seems a section of the great boulder broken apart and lifting lean arms to heaven, was published some said "It isn't pretty." Others, "It isn't majestic like the rocks." So it wasn't, but it had the deeper beauty of the tragic struggle of the dumb forces of nature through their evolution of a higher consciousness.

Last March Mrs. Brigman received from the Birmingham photographic society the highest award given at their exhibition, open to all photographers

MRS ANNIE W. BRIGMAN



of the world, their first silver medal, for one of these tragic studies called "The Soul of the Blasted Pine." From the ruin of a noble tree the soul of the pine rises, a beautifully molded human figure, with arms flung aloft, straining upward for the breath of life, though in the grip of death. Combating the storm wind, she appears about to fit to some higher incarnation. It is a phantasy, the spirit of nature become visible.

A little higher, above the timber line, where the purple and olive green of the Sierra change to creamy white and sky blue, this artist has found a new inspiration. Here she made use of the crystal globe to carry out her symbolism.

The "Moon Cave" shows the moon goddess crouched in the shadows of a cave under the snow, in contemplation of the crystal moon, as it floats out of the dimness into the pearl white world. Here the mystery of her crystal gazing induces a mood in the observer akin to that portrayed in the picture. "The moods of all these velvety toned broom-like enlargements with their softened outlines and mass work-effects are factitious."

"The Bubble" pictures a childish nymph pursuing on hands and knees the crystal floating on the stream of water under the dripping snow circles of the cave, out into the sunlight. "The Brook" represents a naad who has leaped into the rushing torrent and now gazes fascinated into the crystal flood.

"The Thaw," the most vigorous of this series, portrays the Spirit of Spring, a partly nude figure, emerging from a crevasse between the warm boulder and the snow mantle of the mountain. As she steps forward she bends over a small crystal, which shoots forth a shaft of light into the waste of cold. It is the prophetic advent of springtime. It makes one dream of tender velvet in the sunlit mountain meadows, starred with bright flowers.

Mrs. Brigman's work has been exhibited and praised at art exhibitions in London, in Dresden, in The Hague, in New York and in Birmingham, England, as well as here on the coast. In Germany as well as in England she is considered one of the greatest in the new art for her fearless originality and idealism.

For two weeks in the coming November the Little Galleries of the Photo Secessionists will hold their annual exhibition for members. Alfred Stieglitz, the father of this movement, has invited this artist to occupy the whole of one room.

Besides these honors Mrs. Brigman has taken high prizes in many photographic contests. Her most recent work is a series of eight illustrations of William Ernest Henley's poem, "I Am the Captain of My Soul." For a model she has posed Mme. Barre, the dramatic reader and actress. Besides, she has made use of the headpiece of a gentleman, whose identity must remain a mystery, as you cannot identify one by his grinning skull. The evolution of the poet's "unconquerable soul" from the "night that covers" to the radiant triumph over fate is dramatically thrilling.

Perhaps you wonder how this woman has done these things. She couldn't tell you. Her first artistic impulse, inherited from her maternal grandfather, who was an artist in wood cuts and a composer of music, found expression in impressionist painting and in literary sketches. Seeing a row of tiny Kodaks, which she can tuck into her shirtwaist, and which takes a picture not so large as the palm of your hand. Then, with patient experimenting, she taught herself to get artistic results by enlarging on bromide paper. But still her hope was to write stories. Her master, in this art told her that if she could put into her pictures the delicacy of perception suggestiveness that she showed gleams of in her writing she would become a great artist in this new medium. That was five years ago and the prophecy bids fair to become true.

THE DRYAD