

VISIONS OF THE NUDE

CONTEMPLATING a Greek statue, may it be the Venus of Knidos, the Hermes of Olympia or the sandal-lacing female figure of the Parthenon, we become conscious that it is the representation of an ideal type of the human form; that the artist has concentrated the highest faculties of his mind to produce the most perfect vision of life, as he comprehends it, in a supreme work of art. The beauty of these ancient masterpieces is so triumphant, that it excludes whatever strange thoughts or discordant images may enter our minds. Their forms appear isolated and intangible, outside of common life, resembling rather a supernatural materialization than a creature of our species. All esthetic possibilities converge in them as in a centre, and they enchant us by the mere sovereignty of their presence.

The modern artist has no such power. The light and riant nymphs have fled from our life. It is a dream gone forever. Christian asceticism killed the fair temptresses centuries ago. As much as we may wish to summon them, we cannot recreate their forms. The body has become disgraceful and passion a shameful thing and it is difficult for our materialistic mind to image those blithe old skies under which the stately figures walked in beautiful, unconscious nudity. Our morals, our climate, our mode of life have turned the nude into a phantom and it leads, alas! a phantom-like existence in the arts. The chasm between pagan and modern conception can not be better expressed than by one sentence of Herodotus, who to his great astonishment had heard that "among certain barbarous people it was considered shameful to go naked."

Our passions have remained the same. Our hearts still swell with a confused aspiration towards physical force, towards robust health, towards an almost savage joy of life, towards simple and primitive love, towards the great primordial liberty. Yet few of us dare to proclaim the purity of the nudity and the frank nobility of human passions. We peer at them peevishly through the spyhole of a curtain. A false modesty oppresses our mind, and under its tyranny we find it difficult to separate passion from art, and prefer to trick the human body in all the shamelessness of sought and subtle apparel. Even the greatest artists can not evade the problem. No matter how frankly non-moral they may be, they can sing no pæans of the flesh or recapture the fresh, sublime wonders of Greece and the Renaissance. It has become technically impossible. The nude body no longer is seen in free and natural motion. The knowledge of muscular structure and action has become a myth. One human form never represents perfection, and the opportunities to create an ideal type from observation are too scarce.

We see the nude only as physical appearance, despoiled by its most bewitching charm of spontaneity. This may suffice for the expression of facts, like the cold, classic demonstrations of a Bouguereau. They possess the ordinary charm of line and modeling, but they lack all the subtlety of color, the suggestion of motion. They are lifeless. Makart with his supple, long forms and flowing lines realized serpentine elegance with a semblance of pleasure that recalls Venetian opulence. The Pre-Raphaelites with their love

29