

The Lay Figure

THE LAY FIGURE: ON SALES IN EXHIBITIONS

“DOES it not strike you as rather curious,” asked the Art Critic, “that though there was a very marked increase in the number of visitors to this year’s Academy exhibition, there should have been a serious falling off in the sales there? One would have thought that if a show contained so many works of interest that it would draw people by the thousand to come and see it, there would have been among these works a good many which collectors would desire to possess. It seems something in the nature of a paradox that so-called art lovers should crowd to look at things which no one wants to buy, does it not?”

“You are very fond of solving puzzles,” replied the Man with the Red Tie; “have you no solution to suggest for this one?”

“Certainly,” said the Critic; “I have a theory which I think exactly fits the case; but as I am always anxious to study new lights on any question in which I am interested, I would like to hear your view. I shall probably disagree with it; I notice that you and I hardly ever do agree, but this very fact makes our little discussions all the more instructive.”

“Well, if you really do want to know what I think,” answered the Man with the Red Tie, “I can tell you in a few words. My honest belief is that exhibitions, and especially large ones like the Academy organises, will always be useless as selling places, because the pictures which are given the best places in them are things of such very poor quality that they neither deserve nor receive any attention from people of taste. No one with any sense would dream of buying the sort of stuff that hanging committees love to honour. Just imagine, if you can, anyone trying to live with a collection of pictures all of which had been on the line at the Academy. What a torture it would be to a sensitive man to be condemned to pass all his waking hours among such painful surroundings!”

“Now you are talking nonsense,” broke in the Successful Painter. “I have sold a great many pictures which have been on the line at the Academy and other galleries, and the people who have bought them have been so well satisfied that they have come to me for more. But I quite admit that there are plenty of artists who do not find exhibitions as profitable as I do; and I am certain that they suffer because in the larger galleries there is no one to look after their interests. For instance, there would be a great many more sales at the

Academy if some steps were taken to call the attention of visitors to the fact that the works there are not merely lent by the owners. There ought to be a priced catalogue, and there ought to be some official present who would make it his business to help would-be buyers to make up their minds.”

“In fact, you would like to see a gang of shop-walkers on duty in the galleries,” sneered the Man with the Red Tie. “You want to be greeted at the turnstile by a smiling person who asks what he may have the pleasure of showing you to-day, and assures you that everything on the premises is hand-painted, and in quite the newest fashion. Well, the modern collector is a man of commercial instincts, and I daresay he would feel happier in the shop atmosphere!”

“I do not think either of you understand the position in the least,” said the Critic. “Plenty of saleable pictures can be found in good places in the different exhibitions, and the reason why they do not sell is certainly not because there is no salesman to persuade the reluctant collector. The priced catalogue I do believe in, because I feel that artists ought not to be ashamed to let the public know what they are prepared to accept for their works. But in the increase of visitors and the falling off in sales at the Academy I see cause and effect. — Of the people who go to a large exhibition the great majority are sightseers pure and simple, who are seeking not for satisfaction of their æsthetic instincts but solely for new sensations. They crowd the galleries and make foolish comments on what they see there; and they elbow out of the place the few sincere art lovers who have come to buy. Therefore the greater the mob the less the chance for the true collector. He is, if you like, a bit of a fanatic, but his fanaticism is of a quiet and contemplative kind, and only becomes effective in the right atmosphere. When he finds himself jostled by a horde of giggling school-girls, and yawning society people who are doing the show as a painful social duty, he gets cross and goes away to spend his money in a sale-room or a private gallery where he meets only men of his own order. You are quite mistaken if you fancy that the blandishments of a salesman would have any good effect upon him; they would probably merely increase the irritation he feels at being wedged into mobs that he despises for their stupidity and hates for their unæstheticism. No! the collector must be treated more discreetly than that if you want to get anything out of him.”

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