

The Work of Byam Shaw

"SLEEP"

FROM A DRAWING IN LEAD-PENCIL BY BYAM SHAW

THE WORK OF MR. BYAM SHAW. BY GLEESON WHITE.

To write an appreciative notice of a living artist is not so easy as might appear at first sight. If, indeed, the qualities most admirable in his work chance to be capable of logical demonstration the task is less difficult, but also infinitely less interesting. For what you can prove mathematically in art is usually too obvious to require any justification. Appreciation, however guarded, is after all but another form of criticism; and praise is, even more than censure, largely a matter of personal taste. The final court of appeal in all questions of aesthetics is merely the opinion of that majority whose taste you prefer to believe is based upon the truest principles. Even the verdict of such judges is by no means final. The present reputation of Albert Dürer, Terburg, Botticelli, or Velasquez is quite different from that awarded to each by connoisseurs of a century ago. Indeed, our recognition of their merits is largely based on the opinion expressed from time to time by those we consider qualified experts. It is evident therefore that there is no fixed standard by which all reputations could be adjusted; otherwise the fluctuations in the market value of old masters, which in a way roughly indicate the taste of any period, would never show aught but an upward tendency. For did a reputation once made preserve its contemporary appreciation, it is clear that as years passed by, with increased publicity, and a larger body of purchasers waiting to bid against each other for such specimens

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as came to the hammer, prices would go on rising. A certain percentage of losses by fire and shipwreck, and the gradual absorption of the best works into national collections would still further affect them. But the market value is not fixed. It is possible that the £70,000 paid for the *Ansidei Raphael* would be realised to-day were the picture re-sold; but hardly if its purchase were controlled by a committee of artists. Else were Raphael to-day not merely the "record-breaker" of picture dealers' lists, but the supreme idol of painters, which he certainly is not. That he was may be granted, that he will be again is possible, if not probable, but that he is not at present is quite certain.

Yet because appreciation is subject to the law of change (which Ibsen by the way did *not* discover), there seems no reason why we should therefore remain silent respecting contemporary work. Opinions may be modified; but one thing remains sure, that the temperament of the artist is helped by the open appreciation of his fellow-workers, and so the result of contemporary approval may give him renewed energy to accomplish the schemes he has planned. It is true that undue praise is supposed to turn the head of its victim; but this seems to prove also in such an instance that the man himself was not strong enough to work out his appointed task. If praise has ruined many, neglect has failed to save others, so it would seem as if the true artist must prove himself sufficiently self-contained to disregard both the applause of the public and its total indifference. No doubt there are many feeble folk who turn to their books of press-cuttings and attach quite ridiculous weight to the

209