

The Lay Figure

THE LAY FIGURE ON BEAUTY AND THE CHOICE OF PICTORIAL SUBJECTS.

"BLAME my temperament," said the Journalist. "I suffer—I know not why—from spasms of liberality. Hence I gave you my opinion when you asked for it."

"But a man should speak his mind without being insolent," replied the Idealist, bristling with indignation.

"Yet insolence may be useful at times," the Journalist answered. "Remember, you were praising the remarks on Beauty which an English painter of some repute has made to an interviewer; and the manner in which you praised them was unwise, for it implied that your own work ought to be accepted as beautiful evidence in support of the English painter's opinions. Now, when an artist begins not only to theorise, but to throw out sneers at the aims of those who differ from him, he cannot expect to have it all his own way. If your own pictures were really beautiful, would you have any inclination to chirp to us about beauty and the choice of pictorial subjects?"

"A rude question," remarked the Critic. "Nevertheless, a modest artist usually speaks with enthusiasm about those qualities which his own work does not possess."

"Nor is that surprising," said the Philosopher. "He who fails to be great, and is modest enough to profit by his education of vain effort, is brought intellectually in close contact with the essentials of greatness; he becomes a critic, and solaces himself with the art of talking well on the good things which he cannot himself achieve. This is why men of inferior talent are often very successful teachers."

"There are plenty of exceptions, of course," said the Art Historian. "For an instance, take the English painter to whom reference was made a few moments ago. He is one of those men who are fond of dainty subjects, and who mistake prettiness for beauty. As such, in hot haste, he makes an attack on the forms of realism which offend his delicate sensibility; and he is bold enough to think that certain artists have discovered that misery is easier to make impressive than gaiety, and that ugliness can be reproduced with much less labour than beauty."

"If those statements mean anything," said the Philosopher, "they mean that certain artists do not choose gay and attractive subjects because they find it easier to win success by painting misery and

ugliness. Was there ever in the world such prodigious nonsense? To do what Millet did—that is, to make beautiful pictures out of sadness, weariness, and ugliness—is an achievement far and away more difficult than that of painting a subject which is generally recognised to be attractive and beautiful."

"True," said the Critic. "Some fine subjects are so engaging, so charmed with loveable human interest, that any painter of talent feels at home in them at once. It is very different in the case of the toil-deformed subjects that Millet elevated into art, making them as impressive as Greig's Funeral March."

"That seems right enough," said the Man with a Clay Pipe. "Yet I fail to see what good we can gain from this conversation. Is it not best to take with thankfulness and admiration from each man that which he has to give?"

"Unquestionably," the Critic replied.

"It is not an easy thing to do," continued the Man with a Clay Pipe, "and I am sure that we cannot hope to do it if we befog our minds with theories on beauty and the choice of pictorial subjects. The principle of beauty, according to the good old Roman definition, is multitude in unity; and I am happy to believe that every artist is free to re-discover this principle in the way that seems best to him."

"Whatever subject he may choose," said the Philosopher, "many of his critics will find fault with his treatment of it. That is inevitable. Even the greatness of Meunier, that Michelangelo of the Flemish factories and collieries, seems hideous to certain artists among my friends. They are men who live in 'an isle of dreams,' and have narrow and romantic opinions as to what beauty ought to be."

"Such men are common everywhere," said the Art Historian. "They love a few manifestations of beauty, and then persuade themselves that the objects of their love are the sum of beauty. They have no inkling of the truth that beauty, a primeval phenomenon, is as various as nature."

"For my part," said the Lay Figure, "I don't care what erroneous opinions a true artist may chance to have. I take what he has to give me, and I go elsewhere for other kinds of excellent work. Beauty in a thousand different forms may be thus enjoyed; and I, for one, cannot but wonder at the rich variousness of the work produced by modern artists."

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