

*The Lay Figure***T**HE LAY FIGURE: THE OLD ARTS *VERSUS* THE NEW.

“DURING the past few weeks,” said the Critic, musing, “the impassioned followers of the old in art have been very busy and belligerent. Two or three of them have also migrated from the serious weekly journals into the most popular daily papers, adding their peevishness to the multitude of little miseries chronicled every day. Poor fellows! They ought to be spiritualists, so vehement and so unreasonable are they in their concern for the dead. But I should like to know what useful purpose they hope to serve by ridiculing the contemporary arts?”

“Oh, as to that,” replied the Journalist, “you must think of the vested interests which many dealers and collectors wish to safeguard. If you, my friend, had a mass of capital invested in old pictures and bric-à-brac, I fancy you might look with a jealous eye on every favour shown to the contemporary arts, and might try to sneer into disfavour any change of taste in the least at variance with your own speculations. Then, if approached in a tactful manner, the newspaper press is not unsusceptible to influence, and you may be sure that this fact is not unknown to those who keep mortuaries for the relics of dead men’s work.”

“Mortuaries?” cried the Reviewer, hotly. “Why do you speak of mortuaries? To collect works of art is a fine thing, and to sneer is to provoke unnecessary opposition. Besides, the defenders of the present-day arts and crafts should not imitate the bad manners of many of their opponents. Let us keep cool and speak reasonably.”

“Yes,” said the Critic, “I’m with you there. It is better to be amused than indignant. There is something very comical in the belief that the new arts are necessarily hostile to the old, for what great master of the past has ever been attacked by any leader of the modern movement? Not one example can be cited. Indeed, all the leaders of that movement have been careful students of their great predecessors; their originality was not such a poor thing as to hide itself in ignorance from the stimulus of earlier greatness. You will find, indeed, that the man of true originality, like Turner or like Millet, has the historic sense—the passion for history—very largely developed in his love of art. Why, then, should the work of such original men be looked upon as hostile to the earlier masters? And if I believe in their work and give it my sympathy, why should I be accused of ‘booming eccentricity’?”

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The Reviewer chuckled with amusement.

“‘Booming eccentricity,’” he repeated. “Yes, a dozen critical pop-guns fire out that phrase every week. You see, the word ‘eccentricity’ denotes a certain something that we all fear more or less, and hence it is an excellent missile, a really good weapon for an attack in earnest. Age after age it has been hurled at the man of genius, and in every age the man of genius has been badly wounded by the sting of it; but in the long run, nevertheless, his genius has won the day, after familiarity had bred respect for its unusual merits. Take one example. In 1863, at the Paris Salon, the Committee of Selection refused the work of Whistler, of Manet, of Harpignies, of Legros, of Bracquemond, of Fantin-Latour, of C. Pissarro, of Vollon, and of Chintreuil, and the excuse given was the old one of eccentricity. Well, the Committee of Selection had its day, and now we laugh at the blindness of its self-assurance. Is not that sufficient revenge? What more do you need?”

“I don’t mind laughing,” said the Man with the Briar Pipe, “and yet, in 1863, I might have been on the side of the Committee of Selection. Work of original talent is an acquired taste, and whenever I forget this fact I am pretty certain to babble out some absurd remark or other about eccentricity. Perhaps, then, I might have been amongst those who jeered at Whistler and Daumier, who scoffed at Millet, sneered at Manet and Degas, ridiculed the exquisite art displayed in the first importations of Japanese work, and did many other foolish things for want of intimacy with the unusual in art.”

“What you say,” observed the Journalist, “reminds me of a remark once made to me by an explorer, who told me that whenever he had come upon a rare animal for the first time, he had been struck by something in its appearance that seemed abnormal—eccentric. I turned immediately to a picture-book of animals, and, upon my word, the unfamiliar ones affected me in the same way. We ordinary men cannot appreciate the uncommon in art and nature until we have infused into it through study some of our own commonplaceness. Then it becomes friendly, and we are able to be its students.”

“And are we not lucky?” asked the Critic. “It genius did not become friendly to us, if we could not be at ease in its company, we should be overwhelmed by the stupendous minds with which we now have such prolonged intercourse. We should feel what Goethe and Flaubert felt when they thought of Shakespeare—not ordinary pleasure, but an awe akin to fear.”

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