

Recent Portraits by Mr. de László

RECENT PORTRAITS BY
MR. P. A. DE LÁSZLÓ.

THERE are at the present time a great many painters who never seem to remember that an oil picture does not remain through the lapse of years without undergoing a ripening process which gives to it an appearance very unlike that by which it was distinguished when it first left the easel. They forget apparently that the old canvas, as we see it now, owes almost as much of its impressive effect to time, dirt, and varnish—the greatest of the Old Masters, as they have been called—as it does to the long dead craftsman by whom it was produced. So little do they think about the inevitable changes which their work must sooner or later undergo, that it is common enough to find them painting to-day pictures which have all the sombre obscurity of the ripest old age, and which are so difficult to decipher that they might almost have come from the prehistoric past. When time, dirt, and varnish have worked their will on these pictures, what will remain? The colour will be gone, the artist's handling will be unintelligible, the labour he has expended in realising his ideas will be wasted and thrown away.

How much wiser are the men who work with an eye to the future; who are mindful, that is to say, of the influences by which their paintings will be affected as time goes on. These men arrange their technical methods with a wise prevision of what is to come; by judicious forethought they avoid the risk of having the artistic intention of their productions prematurely obscured, and by intelligent application of executive processes they keep their art alive for the satisfaction of posterity. They know what allowances to make for the maturing of their work, and this knowledge guides them in their practice, leading their effort always in the right direction and saving it from any waste of purpose.

It is because he has in a very high degree this power of looking ahead that Mr. de László holds so prominent a position among the artists of our time. In all the qualities of his work there is evident the intention that his pictures shall live, and that they shall be as convincing in the future as they are to-day—that in all matters which he can control they shall be permanent evidences of his capacity and lose none of their authority when they are tested by time. There is nothing haphazard about his methods; always deliberate and carefully considered, they are directed inflexibly towards the realisation of a pictorial aim which is

unusually consistent and in which a full sense of the responsibility he owes to his art is invariably displayed. Always, too, they are pointed at an ultimate result, not at some momentary achievement which may or may not have the possibilities of permanence.

Look, for instance, at the manner of his brushwork—it is very expressively displayed in such portraits as those of *The Duchess of Wellington*, *General the Earl of Cavan*, and *Colonel E. M. House*. The sharpness and clear-cut decision of his touch, the almost uncompromising directness of his handling, and the clean directness of his executive treatment will remain as salient features of his paintings so long as any of the paint he has put upon the canvas is left. Time, the darkening of tones, chemical changes in the pigments, all those happenings which attend the maturing of a work of art, will never destroy the vitality of his initial statement. At most they will only soften and make more suggestive the pictorial definition upon which he insists; the meaning of what he has done will not be lost and the strength of his intention will continue to be apparent through all the modifications that years may cause in the original aspect of his work.

There is not a little satisfaction in the idea that the art of Mr. de László has this solid foundation of mechanical fitness—that its mechanism is rightly directed and its method inherently sound—certainly he is too important an artist to be easily spared. It would be a serious loss indeed if the same fate were to overtake him which has already befallen some of our modern artists, whose paintings through want of foresight and technical understanding have in a few years suffered a full measure of the decay that centuries only could bring to a properly handled performance. For he has played during his career a rarely distinguished part as a pictorial commentator on contemporary history and he has painted an extraordinary succession of portraits of great personages and of notable people who have taken their fair share in the affairs of the world. It is very greatly to be desired that these portraits should last and continue to be available many generations hence for the information of students of humanity and for the enlightenment of the historian. There is much that gives food for thought to be read in the faces of men who have shaped the fortunes of a nation, and it is only by the art of the portrait-painter that the chance of summing up a personality in this way can be prolonged after the man himself has disappeared from the stage.