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Art Criticism

Mr. Berenson's Books.

(Small price)

Scientific criticism, which has produced such notable revolutions in our notions of literary and religious history, has no less promising a field in the history of art. The little that was handed down on this subject was until lately the apanage of collectors and professional artists who might well be interested in gathering anecdotes and curious facts about old masters and their works as a commentary on their collections or as gossip and tradition of their studios. A few classic quotations about Apelles and a few variations on Vasari would then have constituted the connoisseur's notion of the history of painting. Meantime vicissitudes in the fortune of princes and of ecclesiastical establishments had produced many displacements in the works themselves. In the absence of signatures and of authentic records there arose a great number of false or doubtful attributions of inferior works to the greater masters. The eagerness of collectors to possess examples of the best known and most popular schools reinforced this natural tendency. Men hazarded a guess as an opinion and turned a rumour into a fact, until great confusion was produced in the galleries. The history of painting thus became involved in a double obs-

note ✓ "Italian Painters of the Renaissance," 3 vols.; "Lorenzo Lotto," by Bernhard Berenson, '87. (Putnam; New York.)

Queen's Acre,
Windsor.

curity, due on the one hand to the absence of trustworthy records about the lives of the painters and respectively on the other to the wrong attribution to them of their scattered works.

The situation offered a tempting opportunity to historical criticism, if only more or less scientific methods could be devised for the study and elucidation of the subject. One of the most distinguished pioneers in this field was Morelli, and of his disciples and continuators Mr. Bernhard Berenson is in turn one of the most distinguished. Morelli's system consisted in looking for the unconscious sign manual of an artist in minor characteristics, in not judging any longer by style or merit or any such general qualities in the appreciation of which the critic's personal equation would necessarily count for a great deal, but in judging instead by unmeaning tricks of design or execution. These would be constant because unintentional and could be studied and identified in the same way in which experts in handwriting identify a signature. X would thus have for his mark a peculiar way of placing the fingers; Y might be discovered by a constant mannerism in the drawing of folds; while a certain tricky or summary way of designing the ears would

become the common bond of all the pupils of Z. This was the method by which, starting from a few works whose origin was made certain by external evidence, the other works by the same hand could be discovered, and what is more the affinities and derivations of painters to and from one another, and of the various schools among themselves.

It goes without saying that Morelli, like all good philosophers, was greater than his method and brought to the illustration of it a personal inspiration, taste, and industry without which his theories would have borne but sour fruit. And the same may be said of Mr Berenson, whose claim to being a scientific critic may indeed rest upon his use of Morelli's method but whose power to interest and instruct is much more largely due to his personal talents. After a boyhood of prodigious application, in which he was helped by the knowledge of various languages which his Lithuanian birth and his parentage involved, he left Harvard College in 1887 with the degree of bachelor and the idea of ~~devoting himself to~~ continuing himself to the study of Oriental languages. When he found himself again in Europe,

however, his interest was drawn to the history of art, and he soon decided to devote himself in particular to that of painting. Ten years of attentive study in nearly all the galleries of Europe have since given birth to four books from his pen, a large illustrated volume on Lorenzo Lotto, and three hand books on the Venetian, the Florentine, and the Central-Italian painters of the Renaissance. The "Lorenzo Lotto," which has as a sub-title "an essay in constructive criticism" is as it were his diploma of competence as a critic. It is intended for the learned and contains an application of Morelli's method on a large scale, an elaborate attempt to make out the largely unknown history of Lotto by the internal evidence of his works. As this evidence is drawn from paintings the authorship of which must at the same time be critically revised, the problematical element in the investigation becomes very great. If the object of the book was to prove its particular theses it must in frankness be declared to have failed; yet an opposed thesis would doubtless have been as hard to prove, and Mr Berenson has displayed enough learning and acumen to entitle his opinions to as much consideration as could be given to any that might be expressed on so contentious and complicated a subject. It is a pity that the sacred thirst for science should force our men of wit to offer us their sentiments in a form that so much disguises their true nature and function. But tribute must be paid to the ruling

tendency of the hour that would have science even where science is impossible for lack of facts on which to rest, or where, even if it were possible, it would be of very subordinate value.

For, after all, the chief interest of criticism of this kind does not lie in the truth of its conclusions but rather in the descriptions appreciations and scraps of learning which occur in the course of the argument. In these things Mr Berenson is very strong. Even where he inspires little confidence — and confidence is what he least inspires — he delights by the vivacity, cleverness, and profundity of his criticisms, by his graphic or imaginative description of pictures, and by his personal verve. He dominates the field, or seems to dominate it, and while it is of little consequence to the casual reader whether Lotto painted or did not paint a given picture, studied or did not study under a given master, it is of ~~some~~ consequence to him to have gained some comprehension of the human environment of an old master, his manner of training and working, and the meaning and technical values of productions which the conscientious traveller has too often gazed at in unconsciousness of anything except a pain in his back and a muddle in his ideas.

This service is precisely that which Mr Berenson's three smaller books are intended to render, and in fact render so successfully as to be invaluable.

First he selects for mention those painters who by their salient qualities or mutual affinities can be most readily described and fixed in the mind; then he subjects these painters, as represented in a few characteristic works, to a broad analysis and criticism; finally he draws up a table of their works, giving the gallery in which each is to be found. In this way the amateur is supplied at once with a brief history, a catalogue, and a philosophical idea on which to thread his own observations. Nothing could be more helpful, and the author's skill in the execution of the plan, a skill which has increased with practice, makes him an irresistable guide. His classifications are so simple and luminous and his judgments so bold that he exercises his fascination alike over those that trust and those that distrust him. His influence as a critic bids fair to be very great.

The distinction, for instance, between the decorative and illustrative function of painting, although not at bottom original, is insisted upon and enforced by examples in such a way as to impress it indelibly on the reader's mind. Some masters, like Botticelli, excel in the intrinsic or specific qualities of the painter, they appeal to the senses by line colour movement or ornament. Others, like Raphael, excel in treating a subject with poetic or literary propriety; they appeal to us by presenting

something that already interests us in itself in a way to intensify and satisfy that interest. Thus the religious illustrators of the Renaissance ~~in general~~ had the function of rendering Biblical subjects in a classic style and thus naturalizing Hebrew and Christian traditions in the world of culture, a world from which the Protestant reaction has since tended ~~again~~ to separate them again. The decorative element in art is the more artistic, sensuous, and independent of fashion; it requires for its appreciation nothing but that openness of the eye, that capacity to enjoy the immediate, which is the essence of the specifically aesthetic temperament. Art as illustration, on the other hand, appeals to a less sensuous, less universal, but higher and more humane side of our nature. It presupposes a determinate training and some culture of the imagination or some acquaintance with real things. Different ages accordingly prefer different illustrators, because they are interested in different things, and have various forms of imagination and taste and changing literary traditions. The sensuous endowment of man, to which the decorator appeals, is constant in quality, although it varies of course greatly in intensity with the individual. But the forms of civilization change as we pass from one age or

to clime to another, and the illustrator that ministers to one religion or one state of culture can hardly expect to be valued where another prevails. Thus the charm of Raphael when it is greatest is a Virgilian charm which no one could feel who was not bred in an atmosphere of classical retrospect or had not learned to prize elegance grace and dignity and that placid kind of intelligence which is at home in a perfect body.

Less happy than these critical generalities is another element of theory which Mr. Berenson has introduced into his discussions. He has made one or two excursions into the field of psychology in the hope of defining more scientifically the qualities by which painters, as they transformed their methods, sought to interest their public and to satisfy themselves. He has obviously read Professor James's treatise and caught from it the conviction that perception is a very complex process, and that the perception of space in particular has, if we may say so, a subterraneous basis of many strata and is the product of intricate associations among the elements of sense, and of inferences from them. In describing, therefore, the appearance of relief and modelling in painting, of the ~~attempt~~ effort to render solidity and perspective, Mr Berenson tells us that the chief interest of Florentine painting consists in its representation of "tactile values." The

phrase "tactile values" is unfortunate: if we are dealing with artistic criticism "tactile values" is an obscure substitute for modelling or form, while, if we are attempting to analyze psychologically the perception of the third dimension into its elements, to speak only of tactile values is inadequate and capricious in the extreme. So with another phrase which the author uses in order to indicate aesthetic pleasure in its more imaginative ranges. A work of art is ultimately judged to be good, he tells us, if it is "life-enhancing." Now, as a French critic has said, it is impossible to be pleased by that which bores us. Stimulation is requisite for effect and if we felt no thrill, no heightening of our vitality in the presence of a picture, we should simply remain indifferent to it. But our senses and imagination may be stimulated by a thousand different means, and there is obvious truth but little profit in saying that a good picture must not be an aesthetic nullity but must be somehow "life-enhancing." The same habit of suggestive but hasty judgment appears in another idea advanced in the book on the Central-Italians, namely that the religious quality of Perugino is due to the spaciousness of his compositions — to the large skies behind the figures. Religion, we are told, is merely the sense of the infinite and the sense of the infinite is best expressed by broad expanses of

air, therefore the spacious is the religious. Absurd, we may say, and yet delightful. If we are vexed for a moment at this sort of intellectual sportiveness it is perhaps because we are taking Mr. Berenson more seriously than he would wish.

The psychology of the artist is, we understand, to be the subject of a future work by him; we should therefore not take these incidental observations ~~as~~ for a fair expression of his mature theories. Re books hitherto published are mainly historical and they should be welcomed as such, in as much as they give the beginner in this field invaluable guidance and the connoisseur delightful stimulation — for Mr Berenson's writing comes up to his own standard of artistic excellence and is "life-enhancing" in a high degree.

(over)

To [William Roscoe?] Thayer
July 14 [1898]

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Address
C/o Brown Shipley & Co
London
Queen's Acre
Windsor.

July 14.

Dear Mr Thayer

Here is my review grown to such a length that perhaps it had better appear as a signed article. I think Berenson will find the pill sufficiently sugared, and anyhow I think it will do him good, if indeed he comes by it at all which is doubtful.

I hope I have not inconvenienced you by the delay.

Yours truly
G Santayana

(over)

SANTAYANA, George (1863-1953).
Philosopher London.
A.N.S. to Mr. ...Thayer. 14 July, n.y.
With A.Ms. of an article for the Harvard Graduate Magazine, "Mr. Berenson's Books." 1op. (single quarto sheets), with note on verso of last page. On stationary embossed. "Queen's Acre, Windsor.

That Santayana intended to give Berenson a spanking is evident in the note, for he declared that he thinks the sugared pill"will do him good."

The article was titled "Mr. Berenson's Books" by Santayana, but the editor has changed this to "Mr. Berenson's Art Criticism." It is a review of Italian Painters of the Renaissance and Lorenzo Lotto. Santayana critizes the glib use of stock phrases, such as "tactile values" and "life-emhancing"; his own theory of the esthetic is brought out to some extent, and the review tells us as much about Santayana as it does of Berenson.