Fine Arts.

MEISSONIER.

BY WILLIAM C. WARD.

THE exhibition at Mr. Tooth's gallery in the Haymarket, of several hundred paintings, drawings and studies by Meissonier, has given to many people a welcome opportunity to improve their acquaintance with the work of the most successful, if not the greatest, French painter of his time. The collection may be taken as adequately representative of the entire range of Meissonier's art. It included famous historical pieces, such as "Jena" and "1807"; masterpieces of genre, such as "*La Rixe*" and "*Le Peintre d'Enseignes*"; examples of minute execution as wonderful, perhaps, as anything in the productions of Teniers or Gerard Dou; sketches, in their way hardly less interesting; works in oils and in water colors, in pen and in pencil, each of its kind admirable. For, certainly, Meissonier was an artist to the backbone. No one ever lived more thoroughly absorbed in his profession, more earnest and conscientious in its practice. The trials and privations of his youth did not damp his ardor, nor (stranger to tell!) did the riches and honors lavished upon his later years cause him ever to grow languid in the pursuit of excellence. Whatever his native genius may have been, he believed, like Turner, in the "genius of hard work." "In everything that he did," writes his friend, Alexandre Dumas, in a singularly interesting and even touching notice of the artist, prefixed to the catalog, "he always saw something that he wished to do over again. Only some actual necessity, a date, a promise, could tear his work from his hands and prevent his working upon it forever."

There is surely something instructive, as well as entertaining in M. Dumas's account of Meissonier's habits of life after he had achieved fame and prosperity:

"Rising at daybreak in summer, and in winter before daybreak, he lights his lamp, he mercilessly revises that which he did yesterday, he prepares his palette, while breakfasting on a crust of bread and an apple; and there he is, fixed at his easel till dinner time, without any other companion than one of those big greyhounds which during thirty years came to him from me. At noon he lunches quite alone, like a true anchorite, off a sardine or two, or a slice of ham, and a cup of tea which he makes for himself; and during this frugal meal he reads Shakespeare, Byron, Dante, Saint-Simon, or some book of military or other history, or of philosophy—always something serious, which he thinks over, which excites him, and which he will discuss with the friends who come to see him. For the family dinner there are generally one or two friends come down by the evening train, and afterward his daughter plays while he takes up his pen or his pencil, and, by lamplight as of old, draws one or more of the thousand figures that haunt his imagination. For rest and refreshment there is riding in the forest of St. Germain, or boating, or swimming. When age comes upon him, and the doctor forbids riding or cold bathing, he works two or three hours more a day: that is all."

Meissonier, at least, came very near to being a great artist. Indeed, if we allow that title—as most of us do without question—to such a painter as Teniers, I know not how we shall deny it to Meissonier. His execution, in its crispness and sure dexterity, is hardly inferior to that of Teniers, at its best. In the expression of human character he occasionally attained a higher success than Teniers ever attempted, or was capable of conceiving. And further, if Meissonier failed, to some extent, as a colorist, neither was the art of coloring one of Teniers's least disputable excellencies. I think it must be admitted that such merit as Meissonier's coloring possesses, is mostly of a negative order. The never perhaps actually discordant, it is never delicious, seldom even pleasurable. The best that we can say for it is that it does not offend.

Of beauty in its finer manifestations, he has little to tell us; but his pictures abound in that lower kind of beauty which we denominate "the picturesque." He loved picturesque costumes, the quaint military uniforms of the first Empire, the wide hats and loose mantles of the seventeenth century. His painting has always the charm of inimitable skill, but it is apt to suggest the costume class. In some respects he recalls a far less able artist, our own Cattermole, who chose continually to represent subjects of the days of Charles I, not indeed from any sympathy with the lives and strivings of men in those days, but simply from a liking for brave attire and picturesque circumstances. Yet Meissonier has a merit beyond this. If he sometimes makes us feel that he has cared more for the top-boots than for the figure that stands in them, that figure, at least, is admirably painted. Nor, usually, does it want for life and movement. Meissonier excelled in scenes of animal excitement; witness that wild rush of cavalry through the trampled grain in the picture known as "1807," that frenzied struggle of gamblers in "*La Rixe*." Passion and tumult he could render, the animal life in many aspects; but only on rare occasions does he penetrate more deeply, and paint in the face the soul of man.

These rare exceptions, however, are very noteworthy. We recognize them especially in his pictures of Napoleon, in which to the minuteness of genre-painting he never fails to add the dignity of history. Napoleon, indeed, seems always to have had a great fascination for Meissonier, who has painted him, both in his triumph and in his downfall, with insight and profound feeling. The large painting of "Jena," perhaps the most important historical piece in the collection, wants nothing of being a really great work but a finer sense of color on the part of the painter. It is a battle-piece treated most realistically, but with no attempt, such as we too often find in modern battle-pieces, to stir the languid sensibilities of the spectator by a display of ghastly incident. The interest is centered in the figure of the Emperor, who sits, motionless as a statue, on his white horse, watching, with fixed, unflinching gaze the movements of the armies.

The accomplished painting of the horses in this picture, and, indeed, in many others, will not escape notice. In this particular, I suppose, no artist ever surpassed Meissonier, who was evidently fond of horses, and studied them with intense care and sympathy. The knowledge and spirit displayed in the treatment of the galloping steeds in the foreground of "1807" are almost without parallel, in their way, in any works of art with which I am acquainted.

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