

Fine Arts.

A PAINTING MASTER.

STILL LIFE.

BY SOPHIA ANTOINETTE WALKER.

DRESSED with faultless neatness, a carnation in his buttonhole, the master enters the room where his pupils are at work. His "Good-morning!" which expects no response, is perfunctory, perhaps, but its timbre expresses self-respect and courtesy.

It is not by any means a universal habit among the masters of that great art school to accord the pupils greeting. Indeed, it is from this point that the divergence between ideals of teaching begins. There is a master who puts himself in the place of each pupil, discovers if possible what he is trying to do in a right direction, and aids him to grow from the root he has, to build on the foundation laid; such a teacher inspires, encourages, sympathizes; and there is a master whose first aim is to show how much he knows and how little the pupil knows; whose criticism is destructive; who tears down ruthlessly what is built if it be not on a foundation laid by his line and plummet. But the latter is preferable to the master who charges into the studio like a bull into a field. Each attempt on an easel is a red rag which he tosses and mauls and tramples. From one to the other he goes, and the *résumé* of his most favorable criticism is something like the following: "If your lights were not where the shadows ought to be, and your shadows not where the lights ought to be, and if anything had its true color and form, it would not be so bad as it is." Helpful, indeed! So much for the inspiration of a "Good-morning."

Our master comes to his first pupil. "This is the first time I have seen you, I believe? Let me see your brushes. I beg of you to discard the small ones; get a larger palette; arrange your light colors on one side of your palette and the dark on the other, so that you will habituate yourself not to think of them as pigments. Think instead that these colors are *light*, these colors are *shadow*. Now is the time you need, if ever, the best of materials. See that your canvas is responsive, your palette inviting. Think of your brushes as tools with which you may accomplish the very thing you desire to do. I never go into a color shop without getting new brushes. Then in the choice of subject, attempt only one object; a pot or a pan, with its own shape, light, color, reflections and background, is all you should attempt for many a day. And don't attempt finish; attend simply to blocking in the masses. Work on a study only one day and confine yourself rigorously to learning to make a scaffolding. Get the essential framework right."

And the tone and the manner have made that trembling youth a friend for life.

The next pupil shows what has appeared to the rest of the class as a flat failure, indicating a hopeless case. She is a little old maid, who trembles at his coming, and has a hysterical laugh. What can he say to that effort? "Hm! I see that you have worked most conscientiously. There is conscience enough for the entire class. But you did not see the whole at once. You can never look at a single spot and say, 'It is such a tint; mix it and put it down.' You must see the whole every time you look. Remember that the eye is something like a camera. You have to choose a focus, and only what is just in focus will be clear and distinct. Your focus must be upon the nearest object. The eye is so easily adjusted! You paint a foreground object, and then you paint an object behind it; and the focus is so easily changed that you can and do see the two objects with equal clearness; and all the parts of your group stick out at you—everything is at sixes and sevens. Put your good conscience to keeping your eye at one focus—or seeing the group as a whole. Paint one object, and keep the handle on the dipper."

But the next pupil is not one of the kind that needs encouragement. "So you are painting flowers. I always suggest to beginners that they should not choose as subjects Niagara or the Rocky Mountains or flowers. After you have painted the head a few years you will know enough to begin flowers. Of course I know that every beginner paints flowers: but his work is not the roses of Thayer. Propose first to yourself to learn to handle pigments. It is not the subjects but the way they are painted which makes room for the Rembrandts and Van Dycks on the walls of our galleries. The sitter for those portraits doubtless thought himself very important; but he was

only a means through which the master expressed himself. Who cares whether the subject was a fishwife or a princess?"

Here is a youth who has spent three days in painting a bottle in the shadow angle of a shelf and a crumpled paint tube in the foreground.

"That is imitation; it is not art. It is Eden Musée work. That paint tube is as real as the tube itself. You could try to pick it up. I can do that kind of thing easily enough myself if I would. Once when a student, I amused myself by drawing out a nail where the boys used to hang their hats and painting a nail in its place, with its shadow. For three months my comrades used to come in and try to hang their hats on it. Remember that painting is the *expression* of something on a flat surface. Style is the primary thing and should be considered from the beginning. The *facture* must be something amusing. Play with your brush."

Now some one ventures to ask him what he thinks of Mr. Zorn's exhibit. "It is painter-like, fine. What sureness, what dash! I recommend you all to take this opportunity to study his work. And study it with sympathy and enthusiasm. There is too much criticism. Everybody who goes into a gallery feels it incumbent on him to find fault. If I had my way, there should be inscribed over the entrance door to every gallery, words to this effect: 'The works of art shown here are for your admiration and pleasure and instruction; not for your criticism.' When I go into a gallery you have no idea what pleasure I take in even the very bad things, in seeing how nearly the painters have attained what they were trying to do."

This was one of the precious mornings when inspiration was upon him to express himself in words with the rhythm and rush of his brush strokes. "Without reverence what can you do? People accuse me of lack of conscience and superficial quality in my work. I tell you now that sometimes when I sit down to paint my heart rises in my throat and almost chokes me. I can scarcely control my nervous fear lest I should not express worthily the beauty which I see. The love of beauty is one of the great rewards of the study of painting, even if we do not make a great success of it. This morning every tree and twig and dead grass blade was filmed with silver, hung with a blaze of diamonds. The trains hurrying into the city bore tens of thousands of people through the witchery of fairy realms. Yet I wager that not one man in five hundred lifted his head from his newspaper."

But the class work must go on. To the next he spoke hastily: "I congratulate you. I believe I have never said that to you before. This shows real painter feeling. There is a vibrating quality in paint, when it is rightly handled, which expresses atmosphere, even in a flat tint. It looks as if you had taken brass itself to paint that pan with. Now anchor it by the shadow line—not too dark—below. And put more air into the mouth of that pot. Look for air, think of the thing as bathed in air, and you will paint air. And do not paint the outside of the pot black, because it reflects so much light. It is really lighter in tone than the shadowed mouth of the kettle."

"I like the way you have placed your high light. Always in beginning place your high lights in their true colors first, making them as bright as you dare and as large. Then place your deepest dark, but remember to have air in it, and keep it far from black. For many years I carried a card in my pocket having a bit of black velvet—as absorbent of light as possible, as a frame for an aperture. Through this I looked at my object, and it is a great help, in avoiding painting things as dark as you think they are. A great difficulty is in making your high light lie on the object, a part of its surface. This you must do by studying nature and watching for connecting tints. Usually there is blue-gray between the light and the local color of the object."

"I think you must have been studying with one of those impressionists the past summer, because you put on any number of colors which aren't there. Your brush work is good enough."

"I think you are attempting too much in that row of bottles. Do not attempt more than you can succeed in easily. The saying, 'The way to succeed is through success' is especially true in art. If you have attempted something in which you have succeeded in a way, you go home light of heart and encouraged. You think of your work with pleasure, and you return to do something better another day. But if you have attempted something away beyond you, you fail, you know it yourself—you do not need to be told—and you come back with certain failure before you another day. You can't paint unless you are sure that what you are doing is right. Put down every touch to stay, a truth noted. You should be able to show something interesting if you were stopped at any stage and the first strokes should tell what you intend to do."

"Do not avoid noting what is accidental in your background. Accustom yourself to the telling of absolute truth about what you see. The result will be a surprise, a delight, not only to others but to yourself. If you find it difficult to see the whole group at once, look between your fingers, taking in a strip about two inches wide down the group and compare the lights and colors within that space carefully."

"Have you another study?" comes after each examination of the work upon the easels. The deferential tone as if the master were expecting a masterpiece is not a mockery. He may say to a pupil that her work reminds him of Manet, that a certain pitcher mouth could not be better treated, but somehow he never leaves one with the feeling that nothing more is to be attained. His most wonderful gift is to find something of value in the study which its author brings forth with mortification and reluctance.

"It has always been my aim to make much of a little thing by the way it is done."

So he makes much of his pupils—by the genius and enthusiasm of his handling.

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