WILLIAM MORRIS HUNT
ART PIONEER

By Helen Appleton Read

"BOSTON DAYS OF WILLIAM MORRIS HUNT" by Martha A. S. Shannon is in the way of a centennial tribute, inasmuch as Hunt was born one hundred years ago the thirty first of March. Its being a tribute explains the too eulogistic estimate of everything pertaining to Hunt. Tributes and memorial volumes have a way of presenting their subjects in terms of unrelieved superlatives.

The real significance of the book does not, however, lie in its critical estimate of Hunt, the painter, but in that it gives us a vivid portrait of William Morris Hunt, makes us realize his personality, his energy, his magnetism, his trenchant picturesque phrase, and the catholicity of a taste which included Barbizon as well as Japanese art. There are also entertaining anecdotal pictures of what were known as "The Yeasty Years" of Boston, those days when Boston was called not only the "hub" of the universe but the Athens of America, when the most eminent men of science and letters, Emerson, Prescott, Hawthorne, walked the streets. In this galaxy of intellectual stars the artist alone was missing. How Hunt aroused the interest and enthusiasm of his fellow Bostonians in matters of art, how in the popular estimation he raised the artist to an equal footing, intellectually speaking, with the author and scientist, forms another absorbing feature of the book.

Although Hunt's limitations as an artist are never hinted at, to the reader who is familiar with Hunt's œuvre the reason for his never quite attaining his goal — the fact that his vision ever exceeded his grasp — may be read between the lines which tell us the conditions and circumstances of his Boston days. Had Hunt not been the only painter, had he entered into competition with others, had he had to sharpen his perception and technique by means of unfriendly criticism, he perhaps would never have made his famous remark, "In another country I might have been a painter." Although to Hunt must always be given the credit of being one of the most vital factors in the development of American art as teacher and trail blazer, nevertheless the major portion of his own work must be looked upon as that of an inspired amateur. Like his talented pupil John La Farge he had great gifts of feeling and imagination, but lacked the proper technical equipment to carry through.

A quotation from a letter of Fanny Kemble to Lord Leighton is cited in the book as a picture of the art conditions prevailing in the United States of the Fifties: "Here people exhibit their pictures at a shilling a head, put them in a room hung round with black calico, light up a flare of gas above them, and take a quarter of a dollar from every sinner who sees them. Pictures of very high pretensions are exhibited like scenes in a theatre by gaslight, advertised in colored posters all over the streets, like theatrical exhibitions." Such was the state of mind concerning art and artist which

Hunt, fresh from the atelier of Couture and a three years' companionship with Jean François Millet, found when he returned to Boston in 1855. The Copley-Stuart tradition had been lost sight of. American art was dormant, waiting for some revivifying outside influence, which Hunt, through the animus of his personality and European training, was able to supply.

In the chapters devoted to Hunt's Barbizon days, Miss Shannon brings out very clearly the point — and it is one which many of us have forgotten — that Hunt was the pioneer in starting a movement of the greatest importance in American art, an abiding French influence as represented by the Barbizon School. Whatever may be said for and against Hunt, it must never be forgotten that he discovered Millet for the United States as well as for France. Quotations such as this are what give the book its picturesque personal note and which lift it out from the dead level of merely laudatory opinions: "Carolus Duran, twenty years after Hunt's death, at a reception given by the French Ambassador at Washington, asked to be presented to Mrs. Hunt Slater, a daughter of the painter. 'I wish to know', he said, 'the daughter of the great American to whom France owes a deep debt of gratitude for having recognized and brought to our notice that splendid bouquet of our own painters who formed the Barbizon School.'"

Hunt, who left Couture's studio to become a disciple of the inspired peasant, Jean François Millet, was able not only to absorb and benefit by Millet's philosophies of art and life, but through his many purchases of Millet's canvases to keep the painter from actual want. The majority of these pictures were later brought by Hunt to the United States. As Miss Shannon says, "There is in Boston a sentimental feeling and reverence for Jean François Millet and a feeling of personal enthusiasm about his paintings which is one of Hunt's most valuable legacies." Little did Hunt realize the far reaching and long lasting influence of the Barbizon spell, which for good and for evil held the United States in its sway until it was obliged to make way for Impressionism. Strangely enough Hunt, simultaneously with the rise of the Impressionistic School in France, discovered for himself similar principles of light and color in landscape painting. In fact so far had he deviated from the dark shadows of Couture's studio that when La Farge, another Couture pupil, came back to the United States to continue his studies (at Couture's recommendation) with one of Couture's favorite pupils, he found that Hunt had completely abandoned the Couture formula and was flooding his canvases with light.

Miss Shannon devotes one chapter to reminiscences of Hunt's famous art class for women. Art classes for women were a daring innovation. The lady art student is one of Hunt's legacies. His trenchant and enlivening criticisms were recorded by a Mrs. Knowlton and were later published in a book called "Art Talks". Through all the changes of art fashions this remains one of the most important and stimulating discourses on the study of art. Miss Shannon also clearly brings out through pertinent quotations the fact that Hunt, although stressing the importance of European training and a study of the old masters, always believed in the future of a native American art. He had, despite his foreign training, that same rugged, sincere, and sane American quality, always with its accompanying tinge of spirit-

uality and idealism, which makes him one of the brotherhood of, let us call them "all American" artists, which numbers among its members Homer, Inness, Eakins, and Thayer.

The book is well illustrated with family photographs as well as reproductions of Hunt's work. The latter include the romantic canvases of the Couture period, those painted while he was under the Barbizon spell, and portraits selected from his long list of illustrious American sitters. The names of Hunt's portraits read like the roll call of an American Hall of Fame. Many of these portraits perished in the great Boston fire of 1872, when his studio with everything in it, including an unfinished portrait of Emerson and one of Lincoln, as well as a collection of Barbizon treasures, was destroyed.

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