

# THE ART OF HOMER MARTIN

BY CHARLES DE KAY

A NAME which recurs to one in looking back to a given period as typical of the time is certain to be that of no ordinary man. In American painting such a name is Homer D. Martin. Yet while he lived he was not widely famous, and the knowledge of him, his pictures, and their merit, was confined to comparatively few. Since his death the prices his paintings obtain when they come to auction show clearly enough that his fame is ever growing.

Martin was born at the head of navigation on that river which has furnished a nickname for a class of American landscapists—the Hudson River School, a name given in derision. He was born in Albany, within easy distance of the Adirondacks, Helderbergs, and Catskills, and his youth was passed amid the lovely scenery of the Hudson Valley. The son of a carpenter, and of a mother brought up in strict Methodism, he took his tendency to the mechanical from one parent and a certain rich, generous quality of mind, a love of color and conversation, from the other, for her nature was liberal, sociable, and gay. With it, however, his mother was not able to transmit her powers of self-restraint and industry. If she had, perhaps Martin would have been a business man or a successful artisan, a person lost in the crowd of respectable mediocrities, instead of that happy-go-lucky, talkative, and thoroughly delightful person he became.

From the start he was refractory to discipline. An evident bent toward art caused his father to interest William Hart the landscape-painter in him, but he would not drudge at drawing, and the episode was brief. In fact, Martin never went to school either in studio or academy, but made his own way through the interest various people took in his crude beginner's

work, which induced them to pay for the canvases he daubed, although they did not exactly like them, after all. What really attracted them, and made them overlook the faulty perspective and drawing of these callow efforts, was the natural color sense they showed—a color sense that never left him even in his last days, when, an artist valued highly by a small band of admirers, he had become so blind that he painted with his nose almost on the canvas. This was his gift—a gift that many painters of world-wide fame cannot emulate, and for that reason are apt to decry. In Martin's boyhood there was no art school in Albany, and his circumstances did not admit of living in New York to obtain what instruction the National Academy offered. He was cast on his own resources, and when he married in the old river town, it was evident that the city of New York was the only place where he could earn a living by way of the arts.

Like many artists who form the habit of talking to friends or models as they work, Martin was a good talker rather than a master of conversation. His views were expressed with a vigor that shocked the Philistine, and, indeed, required the presence of friends and cronies to make it pass. An associate of the Academy of Design shortly after the war, and later an academician, Martin found himself in sympathy with very few of his academical fellows. When, therefore, the Art Students League was founded because the academy was thought to be neglecting its own schools, and when the Society of American Artists came into being, Martin was entirely with the secessionists and their aspirations, believing that it would be impossible to infuse reform into the older organization. It was at the society's exhibitions that his finest works were shown.

Not only his environment made Martin

a painter of landscape, but he was led that way by the tendency of the United States, where nature is still immeasurably stronger than the works of man and even the greatest cities are puny compared with the scale on which the landscape is fashioned. Comparing the landscapes of Homer Martin with those of George Inness and Jervis McEntee and the shore scenes of Winslow Homer, we get some inkling of the essentially calm and peace-loving quality of Martin's genius. Delighting in sunsets as he did, he avoided the dramatic sunset which one often sees in the United States, when the entire western horizon seems lit by the conflagration of a world, and the eastern part seems in sympathy with the angry tones of the western sky. Rarely if ever did Martin attempt to render the fury of the wind and rain or the mystery of the fog. He was content with the beauty of tranquil nature, almost equaling in this natural selection of quiet moods the way of Sanford Gifford, a painter essentially a lover of quiet, yet a character not without a distinction of its own; and when he went abroad, it was the quiet spots he haunted, the upper Thâmes, or Bournemouth, or Normandy, where the example of his work here given was painted. These places seem to hold him so fast that he rarely went to Paris or London.

Martin had a sense for the absurdity of incongruous things that amounted to talent. His best jokes were not those which look funny in print, because they were not sparkling and witty; rather were they broadly humorous, and gained much from the inimitable play of feature and voice with which they were accompanied. His fun was rather the rebound from unhappiness at the fate that made it hard for him to succeed where others seemed to surmount all obstacles easily. Men who saw the beauty in his pictures now and then made a subscription to buy a landscape for a museum or a club. In that way the Metropolitan Museum has come to own the fine view on the River Seine, the Century Club the shorescape with lighthouse near Honfleur, and the Lotos Club the Newport landscape that was sent to the Paris Exposition of 1900.

Martin never cared for the classic; rarely did he ever try the human figure. Only one figure piece painted by him for its own sake is known, and that is an oil-sketch of a young girl on the shore at Trouville, bare-legged and shaggy-locked, equipped for crabbing. It has all his color sense, and is not ill-drawn. Neither do we ever see in his landscapes that inevitable trend toward the classic, or, rather, the renaissance, which crops out, for instance, in Corot. His "West Chester Hills," which also went to the Paris Exposition, would have been lessened in feeling if figures had been introduced.

The Catskills, the Adirondacks, and the White Mountains were long the objects of Martin's pursuit. At first with Edward Gay, and later in company with others, he sallied forth on his summer campaigns, bringing back as the spoils of the season canvases more or less finished. Occasionally he penetrated Canada. His visits to Newport were productive of many beautiful canvases, notably the "Newport Neck," at the Lotos Club, and the "Paradise Looking Seaward," owned by Mr. Frank L. Babbott. The latter is remarkable for the lush green of the meadows and the movement suggested in the light clouds above the sea horizon; they seem almost to be moving just where ocean and sky merge together. Here is very broad handling; everything is luscious and springy, as in time of rain and fog.

For many years Martin included more than is needful in his landscapes, but gradually he discovered that what he had to shun was the too much. And in the long run his artistic memory became well trained, his hand sure, his color sense matured; and so he found that it was best to return to his studio and paint from memory, assisted by the color memoranda and rough sketches he had made in the open. There he could not be overwhelmed by the number of impressions; there he would not be bothered by diurnal changes of light and shade. As if by enchantment he possessed that indefinable something which we call feeling, a rare quality anywhere, but especially difficult, it would seem, for Americans to attain.



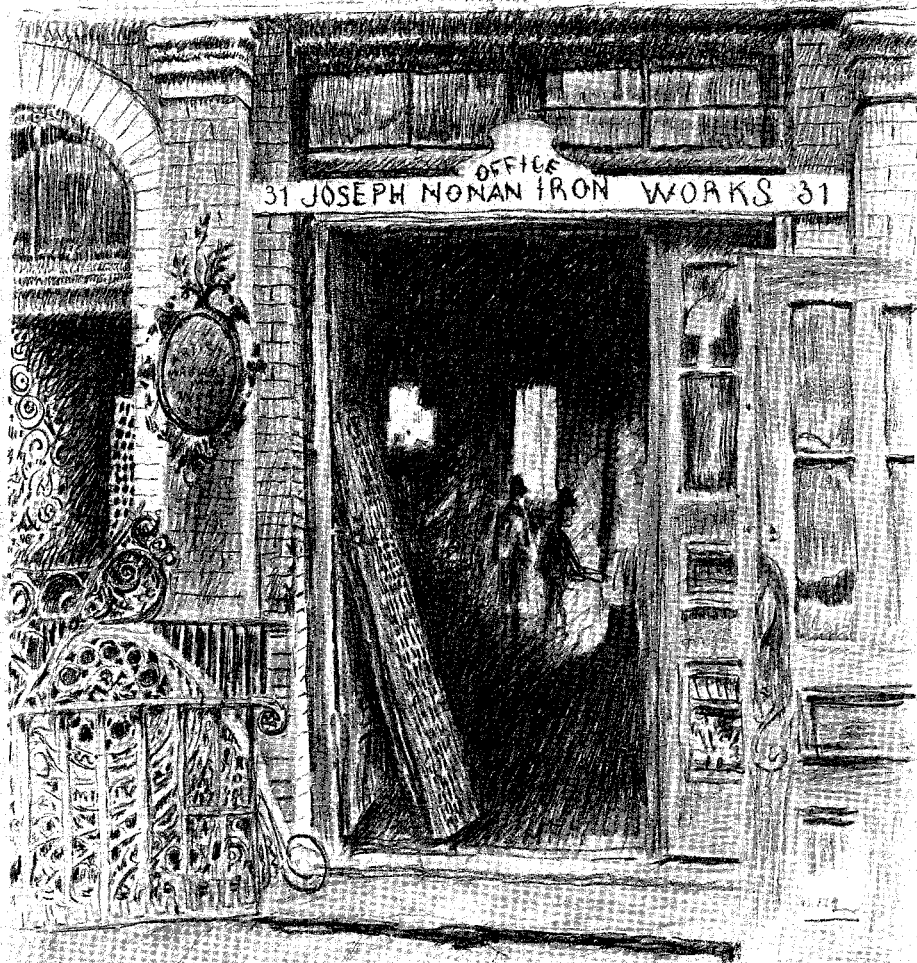
Engraved on wood by Henry Wolf. Owned by Lyman G. Bloomingdale

A NORMANDY FARM

FROM THE PAINTING BY HOMER D. MARTIN

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