

# THE FIELD OF ART



Copyright, 1904, by E. H. Blashfield.

Ceiling panel in music room in the house of Adolph Lewisohn, New York City.

## RECENT MURAL DECORATIONS BY MR. E. H. BLASHFIELD

“**M**URAL painting, that which decorates large edifices, *est donc par elle-même la plus haute destination de l'artiste.*” So says M. Charles Blanc. The modern mural painter is, naturally, the heir of all the ages; but he has to select with great judgment among the bewildering treasures of his inheritance. He early learns that many of the qualities which are to be found in productions accepted as the highest triumphs of his art are not adapted to his place and season. Even in the selection of the particular great principles of decorative art which he shall follow in his work (with which he begins) he has to consider a hundred modern sophistications and prejudices. And when it comes to the details of his conception and composition, it is surprising how little outside of general principles and a few matters of technique he can find in the work of most of the great decorators of the Italian

Renaissance and the Decadence. Their tremendous creative faculty, their invention and abundance and fertility, their “certain idea of function,” as Mr. La Farge says, and their fitting temperamentally for this particular art, are full of instruction for him; but much of that of which they were the most fond, their headlong commingling of the ages, mythologies, religions, philosophies, allegories, and architectures, all more or less transformed by the vertical perspective, is not for our days. In matters of detail it can probably be said that, if he elect to follow certain great principles which bear a general resemblance to theirs—as Mr. Blashfield has done—he has less material than they—for all he comes so long after. If he elect to follow other, and “modern” lines, in which all the burdens of poor Humanity are most carefully brought in, instead of being most carefully kept out, then, of course, he has new material, such as it is. But Mr. Blashfield and the others to whom mural decoration means a beautiful creation,

in which a certain aloofness, a peculiar dignity and charm, are carefully maintained, are forbidden, by contemporary manners and customs, not only to introduce poodles and toothpicks into the "Marriage at Cana," and "Germans, dogs and other heretics" for merely "pictorial purposes," as Paul Veronese acknowledged, but also to avail themselves of a thousand other *agrément*s with which the cheerful Venetians and Cortonians and others amused themselves and the rest of the world. A greater regard must be theirs for the silhouetting of their figures; no hardy or inconsistent foreshortenings, no futile or unconstructive details of drapery, no too great originality of costume—even for the allegories. The heads must not suffer in their dignity by accidental tipplings or slicing off; there must be a certain decentish reserve in the exposure of legs, busts, etc.—particularly of legs; there must be a most careful outlook for any little awkwardnesses or misadventures among the personages themselves. Flying human figures are still permitted, but they must fly decorously—no back-somersaults in the empyrean now-a-days!

The greatly increased complexity of modern life, the vast development of science, in widening the mental horizon of the modern mural painter has not added so very much to his æsthetic possibilities. As has been said somewhere, sublimity in painting comes from thought perceived but not yet formulated. A clear intellectual perception of the interdependence of body, soul, and spirit is not an available pigment on the palette. However, the most monumental of the more important commissions given Mr. Blashfield in recent years is that of the decoration of the dome of the Congressional Library at Washington; and it is possible that it is because of the intellectual dignity of the theme selected by him for this ceiling that this work is apparently his most worthy. The works upon which he has been engaged within the last six years cover a tolerably wide range, and the list may serve as an indication of the possibilities developing in mural painting in this country. Nearly all of these works have been in public buildings. One of the earliest within this period was a ceiling and three small lunettes on the walls of the Board Room of the Prudential Insurance Company building of Newark, N. J.; the ceiling symbolizing "Industry and Thrift leading the People to Security," and the two more im-

portant lunettes, "Thrift Driving the Wolf from the Door" and "Prudence binding Fortune." In this great room of the insurance building there were also two large and three small lunettes painted by Mr. Mowbray, and by agreement between the two artists the ceiling was painted realistically and the lunettes on the lower walls much more conventionally and flatly, the figures appearing against a patterned background. For Baltimore, for two rooms in the new Court-house of the city, Mr Blashfield executed two long rectangular panels, each divided by pilasters into a larger central section and two end ones—"Washington laying his Commission as Commander in Chief at the feet of Columbia" and "The Edict of Toleration of Lord Baltimore." In these, the nature of the subject dictated the abandonment of the field of pure allegory for the much more difficult one in which realistic or historic personages mingle with these abstractions and personifications without apparent incongruity. The "Edict of Toleration" is a simple longitudinal composition set in a landscape, the end panels showing spectators between the heavy tree-boles of the primitive forest. In the centre, Lord Baltimore, in the half armor of his period, promulgates his edict (an almost impossible action to render pictorially) with the aid of a youthful winged genius who acts at once as herald and town-crier, very naturally, and we do not seem to be struck by any particular inconsistency between the two figures. The Washington panel is much more elaborate as a composition and much more crowded, far more difficult to invent and compose, and very luminous and beautiful in color, though much of this latter had to be toned down as the work approached completion to meet the exigencies of the marble wall and the general whole. In the centre, throned high against a baldachin, like many a gentle Renaissance Madonna, sits Columbia, or *Patria*, the saints and supporters below being quite adequately replaced by the various graceful personifications appropriate to the theme, among which appears, quite prominently at the right, Washington, in full Continental costume, and very dignified and appropriate. In the right and left end panels are skilfully grouped his officers, one or two of the French allies in white, and over each group flutter the very uncompromising American flags, here reduced to discreteness in color and decorative



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"Minnesota as the Granary of the World."  
Lunette in Senate Chamber of the Minnesota State Capitol.



balloonings and flutterings in form. For the Citizens' Bank of Cleveland, Ohio, a large lunette, a fine, old-fashioned, instructive subject, "Capital, supported by Labor, offering the Golden Key of Opportunity to Science, Literature, and Art," afforded the painter an opportunity to present some old friends in new and more intelligently imagined personifications, and also to give life to a new one, "Capital"—the sordid and unlovely "Capital" of the demagogues and the statisticians—here appearing as a beautiful feminine vision, gleaming like a new sunshine in the yellows of her own gold, coin and hair and robe, key and sword hilt and chased helmet, hundreds of yellows, varying, delicate, complementary colors, setting off, reflecting, and burnishing up each other in a very blaze of affluence.

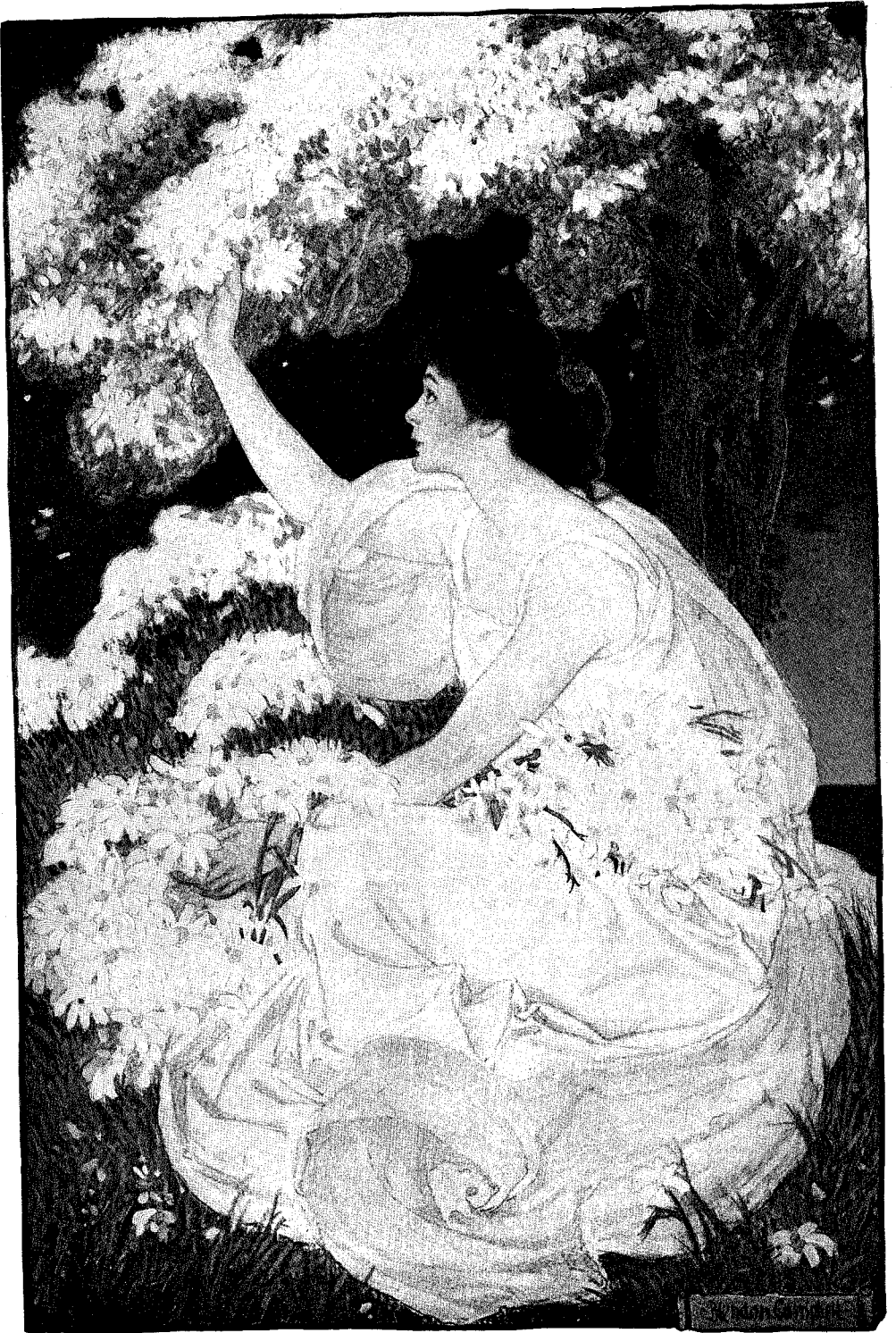
The very latest of these great mural decorations, installed in December, 1904, are two large lunettes for the State-house at St. Paul, Minn.—an aboriginal theme in which the early explorers, *courcours de bois* and *seigneurs*, break in upon the solitude of the Great Spirit of the red men, and the very large and important "Minnesota as the Granary of the World," throned on her own wheat sheaves and drawn in triumph by her white oxen. In this latter, the crowded and monumental composition was duly decided upon after examining the plan of the Senate Chamber and considering the distribution of the subsidiary decoration; "in order to fulfil properly the law of *les pleins et les vides* in relation to the room the decorations should be very full, and one, at least, rather rich and sumptuous looking," says Mr. Blashfield. When the architect of the building, Mr. Cass Gilbert, testified to the painter that the decoration seemingly enlarged the scale of the room, the success of this design seemed assured. The much greater difficulty in carrying out successfully monumental and symmetrical compositions, like this of Minnesota or the Baltimore panel of Washington, is frankly recognized by the artist; and his sympathies are with the use of free-hand composition in these ordered works as much as possible without entirely losing touch with symmetrical pattern. A good deal of the latter, in his opinion, is "essential to architectonic completeness, but Veronese and Rubens were able to make beautiful patterns without seeming to do so," and the direction they followed is that for which he would strive.

"The great and true tradition, borne out in the work of all the best practitioners, holds good to-day just as it did in 1510, or, for that matter, in 450 B. C."

In addition to these public commissions the artist has lent his talent within the last few years to the completion of the decoration of three important apartments in private houses:—the music-room of Mr. Lewisohn, of New York; the library of Mr. G. W. Childs Drexel, of Philadelphia; and the *salon* of Mr. Huntington's house, New York City. In the first the decoration consists of a long panel in which dignified youthful figures with an Italian air dance slowly and with stately progression, as at the marriage festival of that Lisa who loved the King, and a ceiling in which the music of all the ages is presented in a procession of pure gracefulness and fantasy. In Mr. Drexel's ceiling, something of the theme of the Congressional Library was carried out in a more familiar style, the figures being but half life size. In three panels, a central circular one, a lunette and a rectangle, Poetry and Prose were typified in numerous personifications, carefully imagined and executed, and eight illustrious personages of history and legend, selected by the lady of the house, presented the great things of letters, arts, and life. This was in accordance with the good Renaissance custom that the decoration of the mansion should reflect something of the personality of the dweller therein.

As a bit of technical information, interesting to others than painters, we transcribe the artist's notes of the color of the great Minnesota lunette, here reproduced: The whole centre was white. The oxen white, with a lemon-yellow character. The white in Minnesota's brocade was tempered with lakes, and that of the wings of the flying genii with orange chrome. The reds of the flying draperies were filled with orange chrome, cadmium, malachite, and with warm yellow-greenish reflections—the whole on a basis of vermilion. All through the dark blues were slashings of yellow ochre, orange chrome, and vermilion, till there was hardly any blue left. The whites at the sides were pinkish white on the Sanitary Commission nurse (with basket of bandages); white with gold on the Spirit of Patriotism; pinkish white on the Spirit of Agriculture; and white with ochres on the farmer girl standing and holding the child's hand.

WILLIAM WALTON.



*Drawn by Blenden Campbell.*

"When proud-pied April, dressed in all his trim,  
Hath put a spirit of youth in everything."