

# · THE FIELD OF ART ·

## MURAL PAINTING AND DRAMATIC ART

WHEN he decides to paint a picture on his easel, the artist may make his conditions—those conditions which must be complied with if the spectator would see aright what is shown. But, when he is commissioned to paint a given wall surface, there are certain conditions necessarily imposed upon the artist. A commonplace statement if you choose, but one that expresses, I think, the difference between the painter of pictures and the mural painter.

There is something of this same difference between the work of the writer for readers and that of the dramatist. The conditions in the case of the mural painter are such as are necessarily brought to the mind of the beholder by the character of the building in which the painting is placed; not merely its being a court-house or a theatre, or what not, but by the particular—the undefinable—condition of the mind, brought out by the work of the architect. The painter may surprise that state of mind, or he may treat it gently; he may even combat it, but consider it he must if he is to gratify it. There are expectations in that mind which may not be neglected by the artist.

To proceed instantly to an example, the work of Puvis de Chavannes in the Panthéon in Paris is so well known that it needs but mention to convince. Without detracting from the work of the other artists there represented, it may be said that Puvis, of all others, answers expectations. What he has done looks as easy to do as a sonnet of Shakespeare. One artist, in trying to analyze, says it is because Puvis has kept the wall surface in his painting; another, that he has eliminated unnecessary details, or that he has avoided dark spots; but I prefer to generalize and to say that Puvis has answered to the state of mind superinduced by the great work of Soufflot; by the famous church itself.

And there is a parallelism between the conditions under which a mural painter must work and those that confront the dramatist.

Voltaire said, "The only way to judge of a play is to see it played, because it is necessary to see it in place to judge it properly." Molière has used almost the same language, "It is well known that comedies are written to be played," and he would only permit those to read his plays "who had eyes to discover in the reading the play as seen on the stage." Now I question if there is a mural painter of experience who has not repeatedly used similar words in speaking of his own work. There are certain conditions that assert themselves when a painting is seen amid its surroundings that seem impossible to completely understand except when the work is seen in place.

If there were nothing but this point of similarity in the work of the mural painter and that of the dramatist, it would be interesting; but the more I read of the conditions of dramatic art the more do I see reflected those that have confronted me. It must be true, of course, that the grammar of painting is the same, whether it be applied to the style of a wall painting, or that of an easel picture. It would seem absurd to suppose that a man lacking in knowledge of the technique of painting could successfully execute a wall painting. But we all know that many painters of ability have produced wall paintings that are singularly inadequate; and we know also that men have written plays that are delightful to read and tiresome to see. How often have I seen photographs of mural paintings that attracted me, only to be followed by disappointment on seeing the paintings in place. Recently I went to see Gérôme's wall paintings in the Church of St. Severin in Paris. That Gérôme was an artist of great ability, his picture of the "Cock Fight," painted when he was but twenty-two, has proved conclusively, yet these wall paintings in St. Severin seem to me but commonplace. I should not have looked at them a second time had I not been interested in seeing just what a great painter of easel pictures would do with a wall painting. I can well believe

that, seen in his studio, they would have delighted me, for there he made his own conditions and doubtless complied with them.

And this suggests another experience I had some years ago. I was recovering from an illness, the days were long and the hospital seemed to be enveloped in an atmosphere of routine and sequence. Some essays of De Quincey fell into my hands and I recall with what pleasure I read them. Their matter escapes me now, but the easy way in which the mind was led from one paragraph to another was a delight. Later, in the activity of New York life, I found these same essays tiresome. My surroundings had changed, my mind did not respond; whereas some enchanting stories of Guy de Maupassant, with their quick turns of thought, seemed fitted to my mood; and so, too, Kipling's "Plain Tales from the Hills." He seemed to skip whole chapters, and tell me the result, just as life in New York does. Is there not a suggestion here?

I do not know how to define my expectations at the theatre—that takes a Sarcey or Brisson; but you may bore me even with beauty at the play, if it is not dramatic beauty.

I find another parallelism in reading what De Julleville said of Alexandre Dumas: "He had the sense of the theatre, and not only did he know how to compose a drama, in view of its being played, but without writing well in a literary sense, he wrote well for the stage. His language may be poor, but it seems good on the stage. It has defects which are not noticed in the representation, and good qualities which there come out markedly." Now, I think nothing is more apt to occur to a mural painter than to have just such conclusions brought to him out of his own experience. He will surely discover that certain faults of painting, when his work is seen in his studio, are not faults at all when his painting is seen in place; and certain qualities that are not apparent in his work when seen in his studio become quite evident and quite important when seen on the wall.

I take up another paragraph from De Julleville; he is speaking of a twelfth-century play, representing Adam and Eve: "This drama," he says, "is not without literary merit; we may admire the skilful management of the scene where the demon cajoles and seduces the woman. . . . The demon and the woman are real people and living; this seducer knows how to speak the

language of seduction; this woman, weak, credulous, and curious, is, if not the type, at least a sketch of the character. The scene in which they struggle is not a dialogue between two cold abstractions." These words have suggestions for us painters! Do they not imply that we should make our figures expressions of real life, which is fundamentally the same in all ages? Whether our figures represent Adam and Eve, or Ceres, or the early settlers of our own country, should we not make them living realities rather than cold abstractions? Just how we are to do this is a matter for each painter to decide for himself. But might it not be advisable for us to paint De Julleville's words on our studio walls—"Reality rather than abstractions"? Americans are keen-witted, and will never be satisfied with anything less real than what they have learned in the struggle for their own existence.

In speaking of realities and expectations, let me quote from an Oriental writer. "It is because of this secret understanding between the master and ourselves that in poetry or romance we suffer and rejoice with the hero and heroine. Chikamatsu, our Japanese Shakespeare, has laid down, as one of the first principles of dramatic composition, the importance of taking the audience into the confidence of the author. . . . 'This,' said Chikamatsu, in criticising a play submitted to him, 'has the proper spirit of the drama, for it takes the audience into consideration. The public is permitted to know more than the actors. It knows where the mistake lies, and pities the poor figures on the board who innocently rush to their fate.'"

The word expectations has not been used here, but has it not been implied? "But," the Japanese says, "after all, we see only our own image in the universe, our particular idiosyncrasies dictate the mode of our perceptions." Was it not a perception of these truths that made De Julleville admire, in the old mystery play of "Adam and Eve," the exposition of one of the fundamental relations of life?

And does not the dramatic unity of action about which we have all read so much have its counterpart in pictorial unity? If mural painting has one requisite, it is that the impression produced be one of unity; unity with itself, unity with its surroundings. Scatter my attention and you will lose it. No amount of excellence of aggregated detail

will hold my attention, if it be not also congregated. Our paintings are surrounded by architectural details which, no matter how complicated, must be conceived on a structural principle. Put them together indiscriminately, and no matter how beautiful they may be in themselves, they will not make a successful building. And, with this requirement definitely established by the architect, does not the mind of the beholder expect the same principle to run through all parts of the building, whether those parts be of marble or of paint? We will accept *des longueurs* in a novel, if they are interesting in themselves; but at the play we shall yawn. We may put down a novel and take it up again to-morrow, but once the curtain is raised the mind must be led to a conclusion, and led inevitably, until the end of the play. I will not give my attention to-morrow if it is not won to-night. And I will not look at a wall painting again unless it delights me when first seen. And remember that I shall be in a frame of mind that first time that I see the wall painting which will not be of the artist's choosing. It will be fixed by architectural conditions over which the painter can have but little control. They will rather control him, and if he has heeded their suggestion they will give him a setting which will emphasize whatever of merit he puts into his work.

But where, it may be asked, may examples of mural painting be seen that fulfil expectations? Of course, we must go to Italy; Venice first, or perhaps Rome, but that is a detail. If we will analyze the great painting of Veronese on the ceiling of the ducal palace, his "Venice Enthroned," we may see how completely the artist has marshalled his forces in a manner that might have been used by the dramatist. A great festival has been suggested; an attendant crowd, guards, horsemen, a palace—all unreal, if you choose, but all united in a way that makes the appeal one of unity. But the painter La Farge says that this picture "has only conformed to external rules; . . . if the architecture be imaginary, we are reassured by the relative reality of its inhabitants. . . . All is fancy, all is impossible, except that these are the figures of the scene, and since they are there in their proper place and perspective, the sight must be true." Veronese has complied with that desire for unity which is inherent in the mind. Abstractions he has used, the necessities of the space at his dis-

posal required him to do this, but he has made these abstractions as real, yea, more real, than the actual things and men that furnished the basis for his imaginings. And so we might discover these truths in any of the great works of mural painting with which Italy abounds.

But if we turn to Italy to see these perfect examples of mural painting we need not be discouraged and think that mural painting is definitely and immovably fixed. No art can live that does not change as peoples and conditions change, and the work of Puvis can assure us that we may paint in a manner different from that of the men of the past, and yet hold the same fundamental principle. We may express our own individualities as truly as the great painter of Verona expressed his. Perhaps the dramatist may again come to our aid. Voltaire said, speaking of the drama, "All kinds are good except the tiresome kind."

And from how many different sources may both the dramatist and the mural painter draw material and yet remain original! De Jullerville says: "Tartuffe owed something to twenty different authors: to Boccaccio, to Aretino, to Regnier, to all the old story-tellers, satirists, and moralists who have painted hypocrisy. A novel of Scarron furnished to Molière the striking scene between Tartuffe, Orgon, and Damis. . . . But in spite of these particular borrowings the play is entirely the work of Molière, and remains one of the great creations of his genius." Now anyone who has studied the work of Raphael knows how extensive were his borrowings. Everything that came to his hand he used, but in using the work of others he made it his own as truly as though he had painted from an actual scene in nature. His originality was never embarrassed because others pointed to what he saw. "He infused into manners the undefinable charm that we know by the name of Raphael."

Words of Rubens apply here, too. "There are," he says, "painters for whom each imitation is useful; others, for whom it is so dangerous that it may almost annihilate art in them. In my opinion, in order to reach supreme perfection, 'tis necessary not only to become familiar with the statues, but to be steeped in their innermost meaning. Yet such knowledge must be used with prudence and with entire detachment from the work; for many unskilled artists, and even some of

talent, do not distinguish matter from form, nor the figure from the substance which ruled the sculptor's work."

Nor is this way of working that Rubens suggests at all a difficult one. I have frequently pictured to my mind the landscape brought to my attention by the work of a Japanese artist; and I have painted from that landscape which I saw in my mind without in any way copying the work of the Japanese. Indeed, it is in no way difficult to walk about in that landscape, and to make a picture of it from another standpoint.

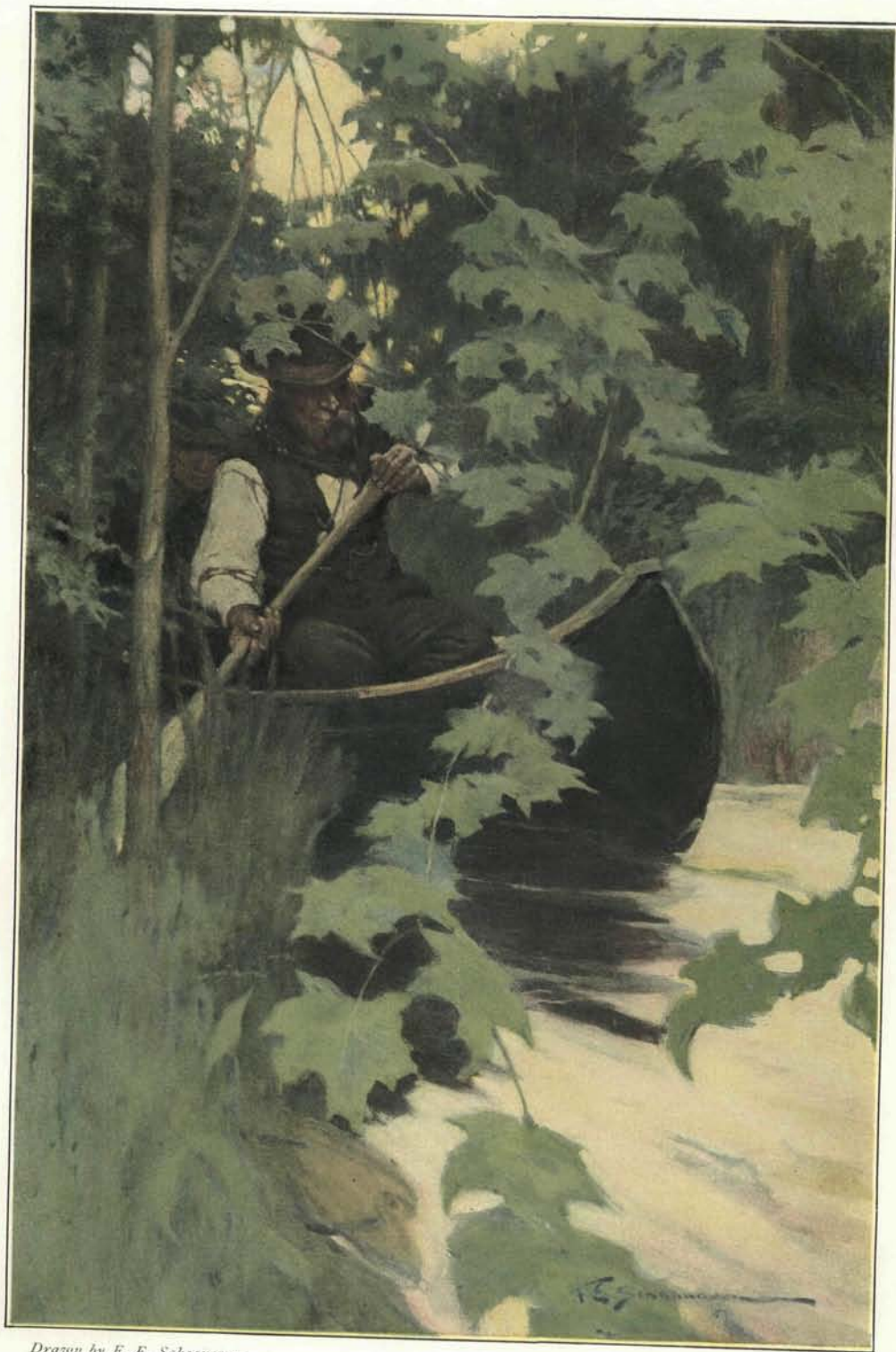
It might be well to consider for a moment the matter of the choice of subject for our mural paintings, for most wall paintings are for public buildings, and the subject-matter then becomes one of great importance. Like the dramatist, we have a public to appeal to as well as a class of refined critics, and if our work is well done we should satisfy both. Certain it is that Jupiters and Junos will not appeal strongly to audiences made up largely of those whose knowledge of the Greek gods is confined to what they have read in a classical dictionary. But suppose we represent, as Veronese did, sights that our fellow-citizens have seen, or that are real to them by the course of their natural reading. There is nothing that prevents our choice of such subjects, any more than there was anything that prevented Veronese telling his audience what they already knew something about. That Veronese had an advantage in the picturesque dress of the day may not be disputed, but a disadvantage should not be construed into a discouragement. Surely the wonderful story of the development of our own country gives us as great opportunity as we could wish for, and the fact that so many novels have been published of late in which the author has shown his intimate knowledge of the conditions in the settlement of that part of the country in which he was born should be to us painters an indication of the desire in the popular mind. There is perhaps not a State in the Union that is without a his-

tory peculiarly interesting. The hemp-fields of Kentucky played an important part in the development of that State, and California and gold-mines are intimately associated. Should we not make use of these facts? Mural painting should not make demands on the technical and artistic culture of the beholder. It should gratify that culture where it exists, but its appeals must be made to the public; nor need we have any fear that realism will rob us of our opportunities for imagination. The story of Lincoln and his development is certainly realistic, and it is as certainly imaginative to a high degree. The eternal verities, with which mural painters must deal, the verities of space and line and color, may as well be applied to the hemp-fields or the gold-mines as to the realities of Venice. Light and shade fall upon the homespun gown as truly as upon brocades and satins, and the delightful patterns they make are no respecters of materials.

And geometry, too, has laws as applicable to one kind of subject as to another. Its mysteries were not exhausted by the Italians. Gothic architecture is as truly a setting forth of the principles of geometry as is the architecture of the Renaissance.

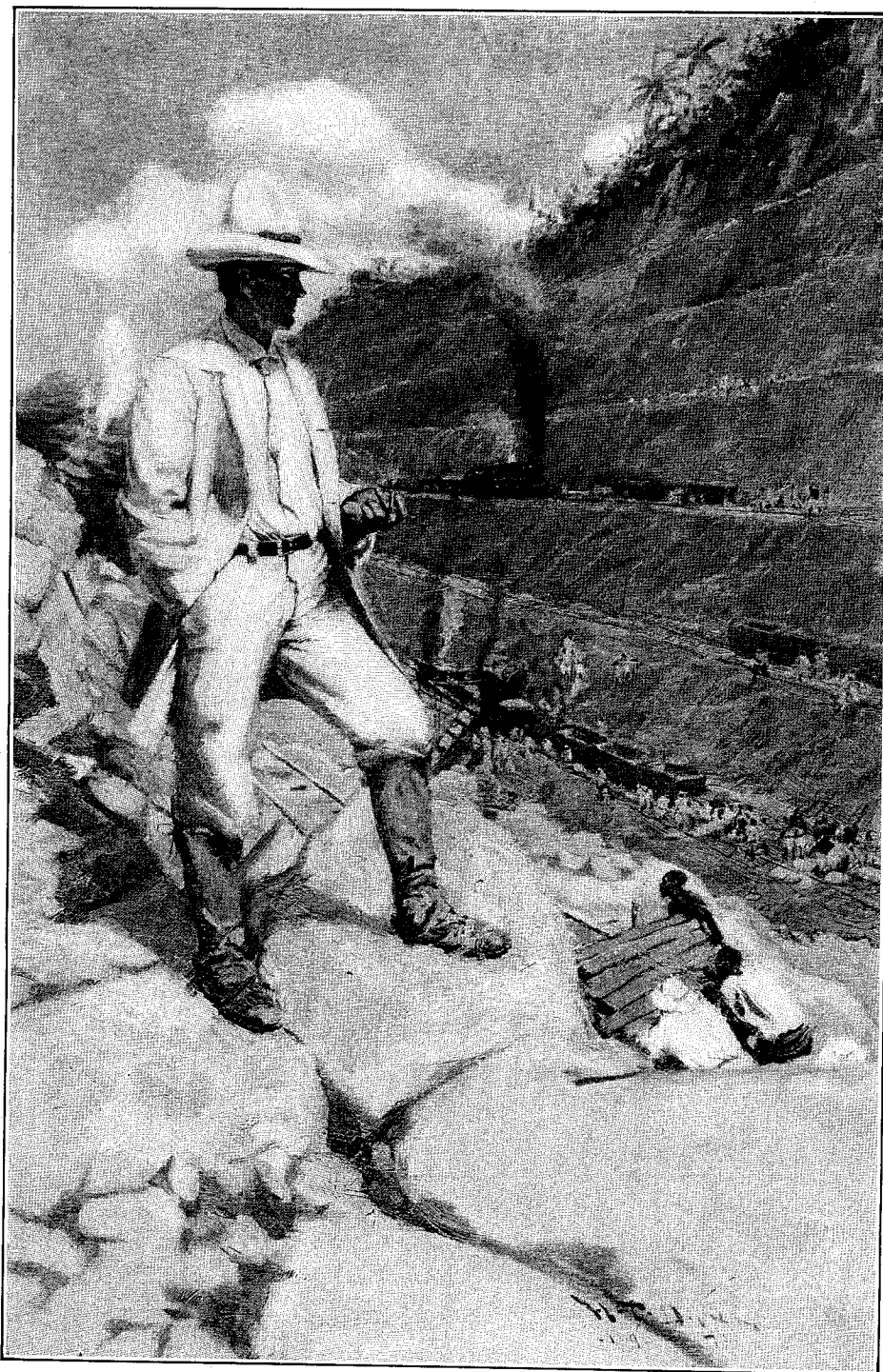
Still another matter might be worth our attention. The mural painter of to-day is made from the artist who has learned his *métier* in the usual way of painting from the living model, and his tendency, perhaps, is inevitably toward painting well what he can see before him in his studio; but this is far from a free rendition of life. Instead of painting Abundance Rewarding Labor, he may easily, though unintentionally, paint a picture of one model giving another model a cornucopia filled with wheat and apples. And here again, as a last example of the parallelism between dramatic art and mural painting, let me quote from De Julleville again: "One may interest himself even in marionettes, provided he may imagine that they represent men and women, but one finds no interest even in men and women when they are at best but marionettes."

W. B. VAN INGEN. 5



*Drayon by F. E. Schoonover.*

It was no easy task to guide the boat down the swift current.—Page 664.



*Drawn by H. T. Dunn.*

He looked back from across the cut.—Page 757.