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MCMXXXVI

A. M. Hind

Excerpt

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## CLAUDE LORRAIN &amp; MODERN ART

THE last century has been a period of astonishing progress in science and the mechanical arts, and the measure of material progress has been reflected in kaleidoscopic changes in the modes of artistic expression. Modern life is too complex and its pace too great to allow of the smooth running stream of tradition; the old practice of apprenticeship has disappeared, and mass education in the schools has taken its place. The most regrettable factor is an exaggerated individualism, which emphasises the small differences and forgets or even derides the large tracts of agreement between new and old. In fact in spite of the superficially startling novelty of much modern art, continued reflection inclines one to ask whether there *is* such a thing as progress in the arts, and whether the so-called new things are not for the most part newly emphasised old things: flux and

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reflux with here and there a new mode or manifestation.

Contemporary criticism tends to exaggerate the relative values of fresh manifestations, forgetting the experiments of the past, and often failing to recognise certain elements of expression until they are over-emphasised. This kind of criticism is the worst temptation to young painters, inclining them to attach undue importance to subsidiary things. Thus cubism is an excellent aid, but entirely unsatisfying as an end in itself; many old masters must have used it in the studio, and here and there a relic of their study may be noted, such as the sixteenth century drawing by Luca Cambiaso, a *Scene in a Hall of Justice*, which I recently saw at a London dealer's, and illustrate in a slide.

As another example of the nearness of old and new I would instance Tintoretto's picture of *Christ walking on the Waves* in the collection of Arthur and Alice Sachs, New

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York, recently published in *Apollo* by Professor Borenius; and a fine seascape by Pieter Brueghel the elder, at Vienna, shows equally astonishing analogies with modern work in its reduction of detail to suggestive shapes almost geometrically conceived.

One never hears the last of the three-dimensional character of certain phases of modern art, commonly traced back to Cézanne. But in this relation there has been no real progress since the full Renaissance, only the great painters of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries had too much to say to fall victims to a mere fetish. A drawing of *Kalkreuth* by Albrecht Dürer, at Bremen, one of his early body-colour landscapes, probably done before the end of the fifteenth century, shows as much solidity and depth as anything of Cézanne, and is surprising in its anticipations of recent artists such as Marchand.

In fact, taking a limited period of one art,

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*i.e.* painting and drawing from the time of the Renaissance to the present day, it is noteworthy how few are the essential changes, and the really novel elements. And going back centuries more in history, increasing knowledge of such fields as Chinese and Egyptian art only increases one's conviction that in art as in literature new manifestations and modes (such as the novel in literature and the easel picture in art) depend rather on local and temporary conditions than on higher or lower developments of genius.

Certain characteristics of great paintings are essentially individual and of their time, *e.g.* the mannerisms of Botticelli's work, and it may be generally assumed that the repetition of such characteristics is mere artificiality and not renewed life, the reason why so much Praeraphaelite work has not secured the permanent place that contemporary critics expected. And even in their original manifestations, qualities which can with any justice

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be called mannerisms are perhaps secondary in value to other elements of style which repeat themselves naturally at different periods in the hands of the great masters. It is possibly on this account that we can find nothing more modern than the draughtsmanship of Michelangelo, Rembrandt and Claude.

Not that these more universal elements of style are devoid of manner, for the expression of nature in art must always find its conventions entirely dissociated from photographic resemblance. Nevertheless, I think it will be found to be true that the most universally accepted conventions in draughtsmanship are those which suggest nature with as much truth as is compatible with the character of the medium used. This will certainly hold good in regard to the pen drawings of trees and foliage by Rembrandt, Claude and Turner; and in the very highest sense in regard to those by Rembrandt.

It is a salutary practice for painters and

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critics who wish to preserve their modesty and balance to look back from time to time on these comparative elements, whether in the sounder and more universal conventions, or in the more experimental modes that characterise certain periods but recur in isolated instances in others. And I have chosen Claude as my *point de départ*, because to most people during the last half-century he has become the representative of a dead tradition and a bad exponent of it at the best.

I believe Ruskin to be one of the greatest writers on art (perhaps the greatest of all), for in spite of his perversities of judgment (which are often the impassioned outpourings of a moment), his works are full of an illumination that pierces to the heart of things; and modern critics and painters would do better to search for the things they say, said better, amid the judgments they regard as false, rather than deride him for those judgments without opening his books.

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Read this before going to see an exhibition of modern French drawings (written in reference to the painting of water, *Modern Painters*, Vol. I, Part II, Sect. v, Chap. i, but it might equally refer to any part of nature): “Constant and eager watchfulness and portfolios filled with actual statements of water-effect, drawn on the spot and on the instant, are worth more to the painter than the most extended optical knowledge. Without these all his knowledge will end in a pedantic falsehood; with these it does not matter how gross or how daring here and there may be his violations of this or that law; his very transgressions will be admirable”... and he then proceeds to praise the effect of an oblique horizon line used by Rubens. He might even have approved an impossible table by Duncan Grant or Vanessa Bell!

And in face of his usual dogmatism and his manifest inability (traditional and physical) to realise certain great elements in art,

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read this disarming admission after a scathing criticism of Van de Velde and Bakhuysen (*Modern Painters*, Vol. I, Part II, Sect. v, Chap. i): “I may be wrong or they may be wrong, or at least I can conceive of no principle or opinion common between us, which either can address or understand in the other; and yet I am wrong in this want of conception, for I know that Turner once liked Van de Velde. . . and Turner could not have liked Van de Velde without *some* legitimate cause.”

With these introductory remarks to explain something of my veneration of Ruskin, I have less hesitation in attacking those of his judgments which have been largely responsible for blinding the English public to the great qualities of Claude Lorrain. And it must always be remembered that they were the judgments of a genius scarcely past his undergraduate stage.

Here is one passage in question (*Modern Painters*, Vol. I, Part II, Sect. I, Chap. vii):



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“Claude had, if it had been cultivated, a fine feeling for beauty of form, and is seldom ungraceful in his foliage; but his picture, when examined with reference to essential truth, is one mass of error from beginning to end”; and another (*Modern Painters*, Vol. I, Part II, Sect. VI, Chap. I): “It is curious that in Salvator’s sketches or etchings there is less that is wrong than in his paintings; there seems a fresher remembrance of nature about them. Not so with Claude. It is only by looking over his sketches in the British Museum, that a complete and just idea is to be formed of his capacities of error; for the feeling and arrangement of many of them are of an advanced age, so that we can scarcely set them down for what they resemble, the work of a boy ten years old; and the drawing, being seen without any aids of tone or colour to set it off, shows in its naked falsehood.”

And then you all know the definition of an ‘Ideal’ landscape in his preface to the 2nd

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edition of the first volume of *Modern Painters*, *i.e.* “A group of the artist’s studies from nature, individually spoiled, selected with such opposition of character as may insure their neutralizing each other’s effect, and united with sufficient unnaturalness and violence of association to insure their producing a general sensation of the impossible” —applying it in detail and with the most biting satire to the famous picture of *The Mill* in the National Gallery:

“The foreground is a piece of very lovely and perfect forest scenery, with a dance of peasants by a brook-side; quite enough subject to form, in the hands of a master, an impressive and complete picture. On the other side of the brook, however, we have a piece of pastoral life; a man with some bulls and goats tumbling headforemost into the water, owing to some sudden paralytic affection of all their legs. Even this group is one too many; the shepherd had no business