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INTRODUCTION

REMARKS UPON EGYPTIAN ART

THE controversy that has stirred around the art of the ancient Egyptians, has made it clearer than ever it was before that the aim of all worthy criticism should be to attain a truthful judgment, uninfluenced by the claims of passing fashion, and untrammelled by the habit of crude comparison.

An art which has a standard of its own cannot be justly measured by the values of another brought into being by different national conditions and religious influences. Some of the criticism called forth by the æsthetic activities of this ancient people has been derogatory and unfair in character, and this must be my excuse for the following preliminary and, as it might seem, digressive remarks.

When we are considering this question in all its forms, I trust that if I speak of it with reverence, I may not be understood to infer that this art admitted of no further refinement in its developments, for that is not my meaning. What I do mean is this. Although it may need certain superadditions, it can, in the real sense, be little improved. With all its failings—and to us its apparent incongruities—the real message is there for all who can take it, and perhaps the stronger because it has been kept within its own limits, and has never been purely imitative in character.

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It has been asserted by those who have never adequately considered the subject, or who have perhaps wearied of it, probably because their judgment has been warped by the absence of perspective, or the obvious remoteness from our conventions, which, to the unaccustomed eye, may give it an aspect of monotony, that on that account Egyptain art is repellent. Such an argument—or may I be pardoned if I use the word subterfuge ?—should be regarded as beneath the uses of sound criticism. Every art has its own language. On similar ground the French word *homme* might be objected to because it is not the English word *man*. Unfamiliarity with a subject is a blind and most dangerous guide. Such critics have been known to exclaim " What a splendid woman ! " when looking at a finely made young male Bisharee—a justifiable mistake on the part of anyone unacquainted with the physique of that race.

Now when alleged absence of action has been deplored—is it that action is really lacking ? No; action of every kind will be found in the Egyptian reliefs and paintings, as a whole not exaggerated action, but action sober and restrained. Can it be said that there is no grace of line ? Simple grace of line is one of its features. What, perhaps, certain critics really mean is that, owing to the lack of perspective, qualities such as the foreshortening of line which they expect, are unexpressed. If absolute action is sought, any modern instantaneous photograph will produce the undesirable and painful result. From our point of view the fault, if it be a fault, is simply the absence of foreshortening of line due to visual perspective, but as this does not exist in the Egyptian convention—an art complete in every other

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way—why seek for it? Add perspective to it and we have no longer Egyptian art.

There is no doubt that an enormous amount of Egyptian material labelled "art," was manufactured to meet the demands of religious superstition. This demand naturally created a mass of work of small æsthetic merit which not only ceases to attract, but may even, in many ways, become actually repellent. But when one learns to differentiate and to select the nobler examples, we discover how full they are of dignity and serenity. In fact, we find in the master-pieces, a certain feeling and a *finesse* within simplicity —simplicity rising to an astounding degree—which have never been surpassed.

We must never forget that, with the Egyptian artist, each object depicted in his subject is from a separate point-of-sight, and that the objects are treated individually, and not relatively to one another. Therefore the true function of the lines of sight in linear perspective is eliminated, and its introduction into such a convention as that of the ancient Egyptian would give even a falser impression.

To apply to an art so well-balanced and complete in itself, though it have peculiarities and may even exhibit incongruities, as well as lack certain qualities of its more fully developed European offspring, the same critical methods by which modern art is judged, is to deviate from the principle by which all useful criticism should be guided.

There are, however, excuses for some at least of the loose criticism of which I am now venturing to complain. Egyptian paintings or bas-reliefs are being copied for archæological and Egyptological purposes more and more every day. A great many of these

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copies might be supposed to embody their principles, but by being archæological records only, they unfortunately serve merely as accurate records for Egyptological study. From the æsthetic point of view, art is dishonoured when its soul is left out. It is therefore clearly unfair to judge Egyptian ornament from such examples. These works must be studied from the originals if the criticism is to have value.

Speaking of Egyptian ornament, Ruskin, with his eye evidently on the art student, eloquently and justly exclaims :—" the whole mass of it is made up of multitudinous human figures in every kind of action—and magnificent action; their kings drawing their bows in their chariots, their sheaves of arrows rattling at their shoulders; the slain falling under them as before a pestilence; their captives driven before them in astonished troops; and do you expect to imitate Egyptian ornament without knowing how to draw the figure?"

It is often asked why Egyptian art never developed as did European art which imbibed its essentials —a question answered collaterally when we inquire why the inhabitants of the Nile Valley never become westernized. There is here a dominant fact that stands out. A culture can be imported into the Nile Valley, but it will never permeate the Nile Valley which colours, as history shows, all it touches. Your importation will be impregnated by that Valley. It is curious to note how, during the Greek domination in Egypt, the Ptolemies accepted, rather than influenced, the Egyptian tradition, not only in art but in religion.

But another reason for absence of progress can

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be given. It may be because this art was chiefly concerned with the after-life that the chance of development of the germ was therefore brought within a minimum degree of limitable growth. It was not so much intended to live with as to lie hidden in the subterranean soul-chambers, and thus it came under greater superstitious bondage. Had Egyptian art been relieved of its priestly influence, and been dominated by a pure and more natural study of greater nature, it would probably have broken out into broader fields.

A third and possibly truer reason for its traditional conservatism was that those ancients copied and repeated themselves, a practice which must necessarily lead to a descending rather than to an ascending scale. And it will be noticed that only when new schools or centres arose offering their art fresh life by leading it back to nature, that it escaped from the priest-ridden convention. Leonardo da Vinci says: "The painter will produce pictures of little merit if he takes the works of others as his standard; but if he will only apply himself to learn from objects of nature he will produce good results. This we see was the case with the painters who came after the time of the Romans, for they continually imitated each other, and from age to age their art steadily declined." Or again to quote Ruskin on the same subject:—" . . . having thus reached a singular perfection, she begins to contemplate that perfection, and to imitate it, and deduce rules from it, and thus forget her duty and ministry as the interpreter and discoverer of truth. And in the very instant when this diversion of her purpose and forgetfulness of her function take place—in that instant, I say begins her actual catastrophe; and by

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her fall, so far as she has influence she accelerates the ruin of the nation by which she is produced."

A fourth reason may also be seen when we compare Egyptian and Greek art: Greek art and religion are one artistic ideal. With Egyptian religion and Egyptian art, the one is the motive of the other. "Take a Greek work—the Venus of Melos. That is in no sense a symbol, a suggestion, of anything beyond its own victorious fairness." But take such an Egyptian example of which the Karnak figure of Khensu is a beautiful specimen, this, in a sense, is a symbol of a certain conception or even superstition. One is the love of the fairness of the being; the other the expression of certain attributed powers, which, by being abstract, have not pure nature as the model.

The ancient Egyptians were undoubtedly great observers of nature, both of its phenomena and in its organic form. Upon it their religion, art and architecture, were assuredly based. But, it should be noted that, although they evidently studied nature, when depicting her they nevertheless produced memorized accepted types, rather than made direct copies. This, I think, would account for the accepted characteristic forms to which they adhered by set rules. This practice, which seems to have been the custom of the race, is more likely to lead to greater conventionalism, than to the absolute or direct interpretation of nature, and such a practice must also influence the art concerned. But here it is as well to recall Walter Pater's words: "The artist is the child of his time," and "every intellectual product must be judged from the point of view of the age and the people in which it was produced."

A very important question is—what are the great

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qualities of Egyptian art? They are the sense of pure feeling that creates an element of serene dignity—and herein lies its supreme essence—and the extraordinary degree of truth, form and character portrayed within such absolute simple and minimum line, by which it stands alone.

Having found in Egyptian art on the one side degrees of excellence, and on the other certain deficiencies, to estimate their value we must now endeavour to discover its purpose. It must firstly be remembered that this decorative ideographic art is a limited art. It was created to form part of the chapel, tomb or temple, wherein it is found—it is fitted for a definite purpose and place, and in both purpose and place it forms part of a great harmonious whole. Its convention therefore is subordinate to a purpose. A great error is to consider this art as pictorially imitative, when in reality it is purely decorative, with religious ideographic meaning; and had not this idea been kept in view with its statues, no matter how well they might have been executed, incongruity would have been the result.

This art was for the god and the dead to look upon—to show that they were not forgotten, and to perpetuate their memory eternally.

Many of its representations were symbols of an idea, the subject of their faith accepted and adhered to. And to have changed them would have been as, with us now, if we changed the accepted types of our Lord and the Divine Mother. Such designs were regarded by consent as naturally typifying the Being in fact or thought; and should repetition seem irksome or repellent, such as the frequent representations of the king before numerous divinities, or the deceased

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before many gods of the dead, directing to them his prayers and justification for his earthly life, it must be remembered that, to a people who believed in this complex theological art, these pictures were of interest and that they were, at least, thoughtful representations that had their uses. To understand this perfectly requires the power of forgetting our own train of thought, and some knowledge of the inner mind of those ancients.

Herodotus tells us that " the Egyptians are religious, far beyond any other race of men,"—a characteristic manifestly displayed in all their records. They believed in an after-life, and on that after-life their thoughts were chiefly bent. " Such, then," says Leighton, " being the mental attitude and such the custom of a race with strong plastic and building instincts, what sort of art should we look for in it ? Should we not look for an art in which the temples of the gods and the abodes of the dead were the most salient features ? And should we not further expect of such a people that whatever connected itself with the glorification of those gods, or with the exhortation of earthly rulers scarcely less divine, or with the service of the departed, would be the inspiring motive of their graphic and plastic art, as well as of their architectural production ? And this art being entirely spontaneous and the sincere expression of the national temper, should it not convey to us a sense of strength, of dignity, of stability, and of repose ? " That was the " intention." The " accident," far from " intention," was the necessity of almost unlimited production, and thus the artist or sculptor often suffered by becoming more the manufacturer and purveyor, than a servant of the close and thoughtful study of nature.

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When Egypt was the reigning power of the age of copper and bronze, her great periods are generally known as the Old Kingdom, the Middle Kingdom, and the New Empire; and those periods were just as distinguishable in her art as in her history. In her art they were the Classical Age, the Transitional Age, and the Modern Age. During the Egyptian New Empire her sculpture and painting were never more modern. But, throughout those ages, there was one united convention, a noble convention, not a false convention. Take for example, the beautiful beaten and burnished gold mask of Tut·ankh·Amen found in this tomb covering his head (Frontispiece and Plate LXXIII). Though it retains all the ancient conventions, the moment we become familiar with them, —the strangeness of the head-dress, the conventional beard which in the illustration has been removed—we have a perfect portrait of the young king at the age of his death. Such evidence as this immediately shows that were these conventions not less alien to us we should be better able to recognize individuality, not merely in this one outstanding example, but in all.

That the prevailing Egyptian conventions were noble, cannot be better expressed than in Ruskin's own words, written half a century ago: "The two noblest and *truest* carved lions I have ever seen are the two granite ones in the Egyptian room of the British Museum, and yet in them the lions' manes and beards are represented by rings of solid rock, as smooth as a mirror!"

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THE TOMB OF TUT·ANKH·AMEN

CHAPTER I

Tut·ankh·Amen

WHENEVER an archæological discovery lays bare traces of a remote age, and the vanished human lives it fostered, we turn at once instinctively to the facts revealed to us with which we are most in sympathy. And these are invariably human in their interests. A withered lotus flower, some emblem of tender affection, some simple domestic trait, will bring back the past for us, on its human side, far more vividly than the sentiment can be conveyed by austere records or pompous official inscriptions boasting how some dim "King of Kings" overwhelmed his enemies and trampled on their pride.

This is, to a certain extent, true of the discovery of the tomb of Tut·ankh·Amen. Of the young boy king we know very little, but as to his tastes and temperament we can now make some shrewd guesses. As the priestly vehicle through whom divine influence was transmitted to the Theban world, as the earthly representative of Re—the great Sun-god—the young king scarcely takes for us clear or realizable shape, but as a creature of ordinary human dispositions, a lover of the chase, as an eager sportsman, he becomes easily and amiably intelligible. We have here

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