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MODERN FRENCH PICTURES AT THE UNITED ARTS CLUB

By ELLEN DUNCAN.

ONE October evening, eight years ago, a crowd of people—artists, journalists, authors, musicians—all that crowd of “intellectuals” which in every country is interested in the origins of a new movement, gathered in an underground room in the *Petit Palais*, in the *Champs Elysées* in Paris, for the opening of a new exhibition. The pictures were the work of pioneers and revolutionaries. The painters had definitely broken with accepted conventions and classical formulæ; they had come down from the summits; they had turned away from the heroic and the ideal to paint life—the life of the everyday world—as they saw it with their own eyes. Often they used new and strange combinations of colour; and they discarded, at their own pleasure, all recognised rules of composition, refusing to be bound by the “immutable laws.”

Thus was the *Salon d'automne* launched upon the world. It now holds its exhibitions in the *Grand Palais* opposite; in addition to the sections for pictures, sculpture, drawings, and for the decorative arts, there are musical *séances*, at which one hears the latest chamber compositions of the *Vincent d'Indy* school, and literary *conférences* at which the young poets recite their unpublished verses. In short, from the small beginning in the cellar of the *Petit Palais*, an intellectual centre has arisen in Paris which is the home of all that is new and original; the embodiment of the modern spirit in the arts, that spirit which in all the ages has found itself in opposition to the traditional teaching of the Academics.

The founders of the *Salon d'automne* realised that there must be a replenishing of ideas, that old forms become outworn, and that the artist is never more powerful or more inspired than when he is in accord with the spirit of the age in which he lives. These men are the intellectual descendants of the leaders of the Impressionist movement who, like them, achieved distinction, power and charm through their very modernity. Their watchword is art in life, not apart from it. And so, in the *Salon d'automne* one finds that no lines are drawn, and that a welcome is extended to all who desire to express their personal vision.

Most of the pictures now on view at the United Arts Club are by men whose work is familiar to visitors to the *Salon d'automne*.

MODERN FRENCH PICTURES

It is not to be expected that these pictures will at once find favour with the casual observer. The rich and gorgeous colour which seems to have been laid upon some of the canvases with an over-lavish hand will at first seem garish to the eye which has been attuned to the quiet tones of a classical landscape or the delicate brushwork of Corot or Daubigny; while the excessive simplification beloved by some of these painters will be a stumbling block to many.

But those who realise that one of the principal aims of all art is "the heightening of the vibrations," who feel that the contemplation of a fine picture brings an added sense of vitality as well as an added sense of joy, will feel that it is worth while trying to understand and respond to the painter's vision, even when that vision expresses itself in a language that to us is new and unexpected.

To most people the most attractive picture in the Arts Club Exhibition will probably be the large Flandrin, which is hung over the mantelpiece, entitled *Le Petit Musicien*. There is nothing very disconcerting about the arrangement; the figures are full of gaiety and life, and the sunny landscape is charmingly painted. Another landscape by this painter, on the opposite wall, is a poetic treatment of a sloping hillside covered with trees.

The two *Pointilliste* pictures by Van Rysselberg belong to an earlier school; one is a delightful study of sunshine effects on trees and water.

One of the most important figure subjects is the large semi-recumbent made by Manguin. The figure is posed on a green cushion against a flat reddish background. It is painted very broadly and simply; the green shadows on the flesh will seem to many people at the first glance to be wilfully eccentric; but a closer study will reveal an intentional rhythm and harmony of colour and line. The red background is perhaps the least satisfactory note in the composition. Of the two large canvases by Georges Dufrenoy, the more interesting is his study of a Venetian Palace, a fine and significant work, broadly and vigorously painted, and true in tone. Othon Friesz is always interesting; his work is brilliant and incisive; and he is a fine colourist. His Portuguese village bathed in glowing sunshine is a fresh and delightful composition.

The two large flower pieces by Madame Marval are bold and vivid studies, painted with a charming spontaneity, and showing breadth of handling combined with a dashing colour scheme. Maurice Denis is represented by two small pictures—his *baigneuse* is an attractive *plein air* study, very high in key and full of lightness and charm. The *Madonna and Child* by Paul Sérusier will recall the Italian primitives by its extreme simplicity and severity of line,

THE IRISH REVIEW

and its brooding seriousness of pose. One can trace the influence of Gauguin in the firm outline of the figures, the broad, flat painting, and the dignity of the composition. Entirely different in *genre* is the head of a girl by Van Dongen, who, like Matisse, is one of the most daring of the innovators. One cannot but admire the brilliant execution, though one may condemn the exaggerated drawing.

The *Cubist* school, of which so much has been written, is represented by several still life studies by Herbin, Juan Gries, and Marchand, and by a striking portrait by Herbin, popularly known as "the man with the green moustache"; while Picasso shows a number of delicate drawings, and a dainty study of a girl dancing. Two works by the English painter and critic, Roger Fry, display the same tendencies towards simplification and directness which characterise the work of the younger French painters; both are remarkable for a fine sense of design and a certain intensity of purpose.

One word more. I am aware that many people in Dublin, especially the painter-critics, regard these men as charlatans and *poseurs*; and look upon critics like myself as timid souls, afraid to condemn what they do not understand.

I would only remind my readers that no critics are more narrow than the painters who work according to a different method from that of the men whom they criticise.

Blake called Titian, Rembrandt and Rubens "those smudgers and daubers"; Rossetti regarded the beautiful work of Fantin as "a great slovenly scrawl," and Delacroix as "a perfect beast"; Whistler was condemned by almost all the contemporary painters of his day; the Pre-Raphaelites were condemned by the Academy, and the Impressionists by the Pre-Raphaelites.

But regardless of the mocking voices, the artist follows his vision along the path which he has chosen to tread.