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The Art Of John S. Sargent, R. A. Part II. By A. L. Baldry.

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John S. Sargent, R.A.

THE ART OF JOHN S. SARGENT,
R.A. PART II. BY A. L.
BALDRY.

ALTHOUGH it is as a portrait painter that people know Mr. Sargent best, he is certainly not to be regarded as an artist who limits himself solely to one method of practice. It is easy to understand why portraiture should have appealed to him as the most engrossing occupation for his artistic capacities, and as the particular direction in which he could satisfy best his inclinations towards technical assertion. In the representation of modern types of personality, in the treatment of present-day costume, and in the expression of the distinctive atmosphere that surrounds the life of our own times, he found a peculiar satisfaction for that instinct for close and detailed observation

which is the dominant attribute of his nature. The receptivity which has from the first distinguished him is of a kind that feeds upon its surroundings, and reflects the actuality of existing things rather than those mental abstractions that imply the working of a process of digestion in the artist's mind. To ruminate, and chew over and over again the material he gathered until it assumed a character quite unlike what it possessed when he first commenced operations upon it, has never been his habit; such deliberate transformations have at no time formed part of his scheme of practice. Nature as he sees it has always sufficed for him, and though he does not limit himself to the merely superficial view he does not set himself to pervert facts by mixing with them a host of incongruous conventions.

If a comparison is made between Velasquez and

Mr. Sargent, a good idea may be obtained of the extent to which the modern painter may profit by the example of the men who have gone before him. The closeness of the alliance that links together the old Spaniard and the new American cannot be disputed, and yet it has not led to a mere imitation in the nineteenth century of what was done in the fifteenth. Mr. Sargent is not less himself because he has been to Spain and has spent many adoring hours in the galleries of the Prado; and he has not sunk the preferences that come naturally from living associations in a futile effort to reconstruct habits of thought and practice, which were part of the existence of the dweller in another country and another age. But he has, all the same, picked out of a strongly personal art what there is in it of permanent value. He has studied it so closely, that the separation of its vital principles from its local and temporary attributes has been practicable, so thoughtfully that he has



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been able to appreciate exactly when Velasquez spoke truths that will endure for ever, and when he was merely repeating the momentary gossip of the society in which he moved and worked.

To the man who is at work to-day, such an insight into the ways of a master who is an authority for all time, because when he lived he was a modern of the moderns, has a peculiarly illuminating influence. In the case of Mr. Sargent it has operated to save him from ever becoming a copyist. It has confirmed him, indeed, in the belief that by depending upon his

own intuition and his own choice of method he could most surely arrive at those artistic qualities that appealed to him as chiefly memorable in the great leaders of his profession. It has given him, as well, the courage to avoid the traditions of the schools, and to launch out into that wide sea where he must battle alone, and out of reach of any comforting support to which he could cling if the waves of opposition threatened to beat him down. He saw how others had dared to be independent, and he was fired by what he saw to prove himself no less able than they to keep afloat

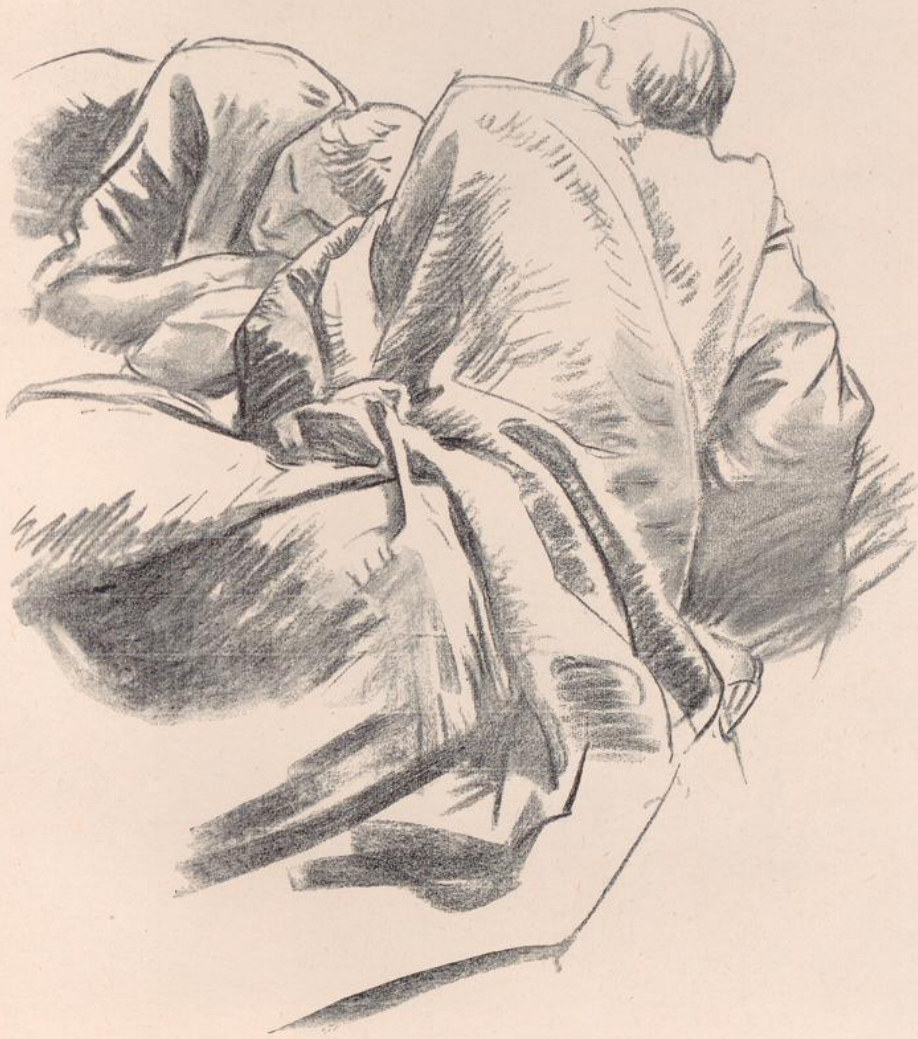
and steer in the direction he preferred. His ambition, however, was not a large and general one, too comprehensive to be workable. It was kept within proper limits by his knowledge of himself, which has been from the beginning of his career not less accurate than that which he has gained by studying other painters. With unusual discretion he has taken pains to understand the nature of his own personality, and to appreciate exactly the way in which he could apply to his own needs the suggestions that others gave him.

His preference for portrait painting unquestionably grew out of this. He realised that vivid actuality was a quality that he would gain with comparative ease, he felt the extent of his own sympathy with what was real and concrete, he knew that he was receptive to impressions made upon him by types of personality and markedly individual character; and he did not take long to decide that he could find in the modern man or



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woman more material for artistic expression than he could collect by borrowing second-hand impressions from the past. The more he trained his instinctive capacities, the more he convinced himself that he would be most at home in that class of pictorial realism which, if it is treated properly, makes the greatest demands upon the intelligence and selective power of the painter.

Yet he has not hesitated to make occasional divergences into other walks of art. At comparatively rare intervals his fancy has been allowed opportunities to show itself, or rather his observation has been exercised upon material of a less precise and definite character. Nature in the wider sense has occupied him rather than the isolated individuality of a particular person; and the more elusive truths of atmosphere and aerial colour have been used by him as pictorial motives. The few things that he has accomplished in this direction have had a peculiar value, because they have stamped him as the possessor of what is a rare faculty in a realist, a poetic feeling for beauties of illumination. His *Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose*, for instance, which was bought in 1887 by the Trustees of the Chantrey Fund, may well be taken as a typical example of the successful combination of fantastic design with supreme accuracy in the record of subtle facts. It is studied, balanced, and carefully thought out, but it is none the less spontaneous and original, an inspiration full of freshness and delicate beauty. The artist, in attempting it, showed that he had in him the imaginative perception, which finds food for thought in Nature's slightest suggestions, and in this expression of the subject he made quite evident the adaptability of his technical method.

This picture, indeed, claims a place to itself in

Mr. Sargent's record, not only on account of its own attractiveness, but also because it has a marked significance as a revelation of a side of his character that his portraits, by the very nature of the restrictions under which they are produced, cannot emphasise so brilliantly. His previous efforts in picture-painting had been surprising for the dash and vigour of their brush-work, amazing on account of the audacity with which he had grappled with problems of movement and with new ideas of arrangement, or interesting because they asserted the claim of a young man, a new recruit in the army of art workers, to a place among the best members of his profession. But *Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose* pointed clearly to the development in his mind of that high sense of decoration which is an indispensable part of the equipment of every artist who aspires to real greatness. Through the



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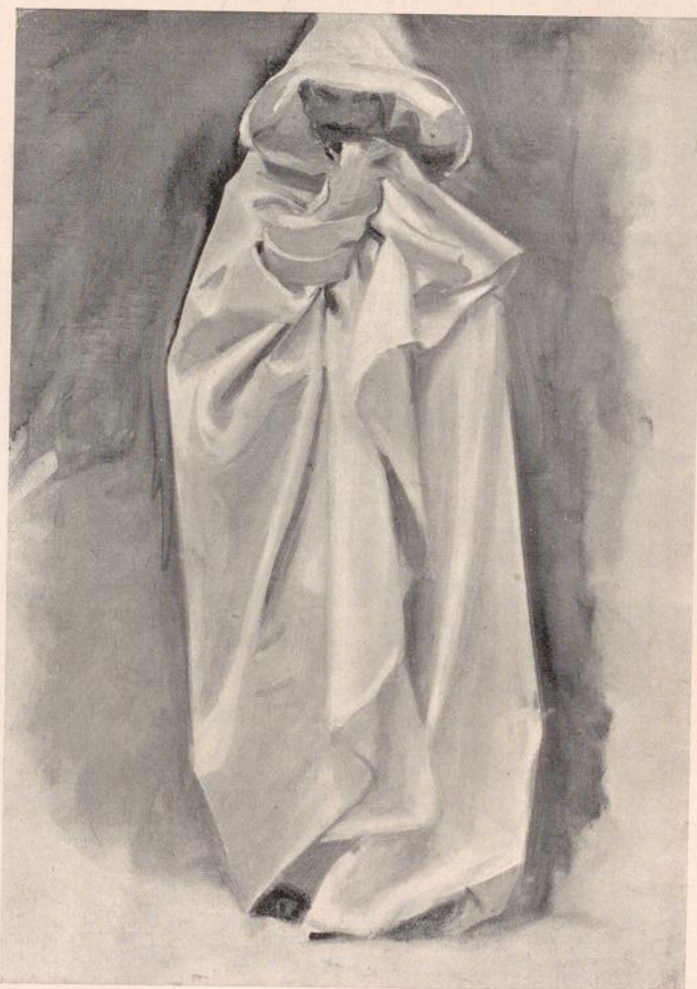
fantasy and apparent irregularity of the composition the deep consideration of exact pattern is very strongly felt, and yet it is not obtrusive. No mechanical repetition or balancing of forms, no conventional distribution of the colour masses, no laborious acquiescence with what are mis-called the laws of decoration, can be criticised as harming the pictorial illusion by their over-accentuation of the artistic mechanism, and yet the more the picture is examined the more appreciable becomes the skill with which the painter has managed his work, and the taste with which he has perfected even the smallest details of his design.

The possession of this innate and instinctive

feeling for decorative contrivance accounts for the zeal with which Mr. Sargent has thrown himself into the work which is being carried on at the Boston Library. In the wonderful scheme of adornment devised for that building a group of prominent artists is concerned, and to him has been assigned a very important share in the undertaking. That he should have been chosen may seem strange to people who are accustomed to think of him only as a portrait-painter, and have never troubled to search beneath the surface of his art to see what manner of man he really is. But everyone who knows him well and realises what are the moving principles of his practice will

appreciate the excellence of the judgment that selected a thinker of such originality and a designer with so much invention to attempt a piece of work which gave him a real chance of distinguishing himself. The commission was, perhaps, something of an experiment, but there was little likelihood that the result of it would be anything but a success of a very striking and remarkable kind.

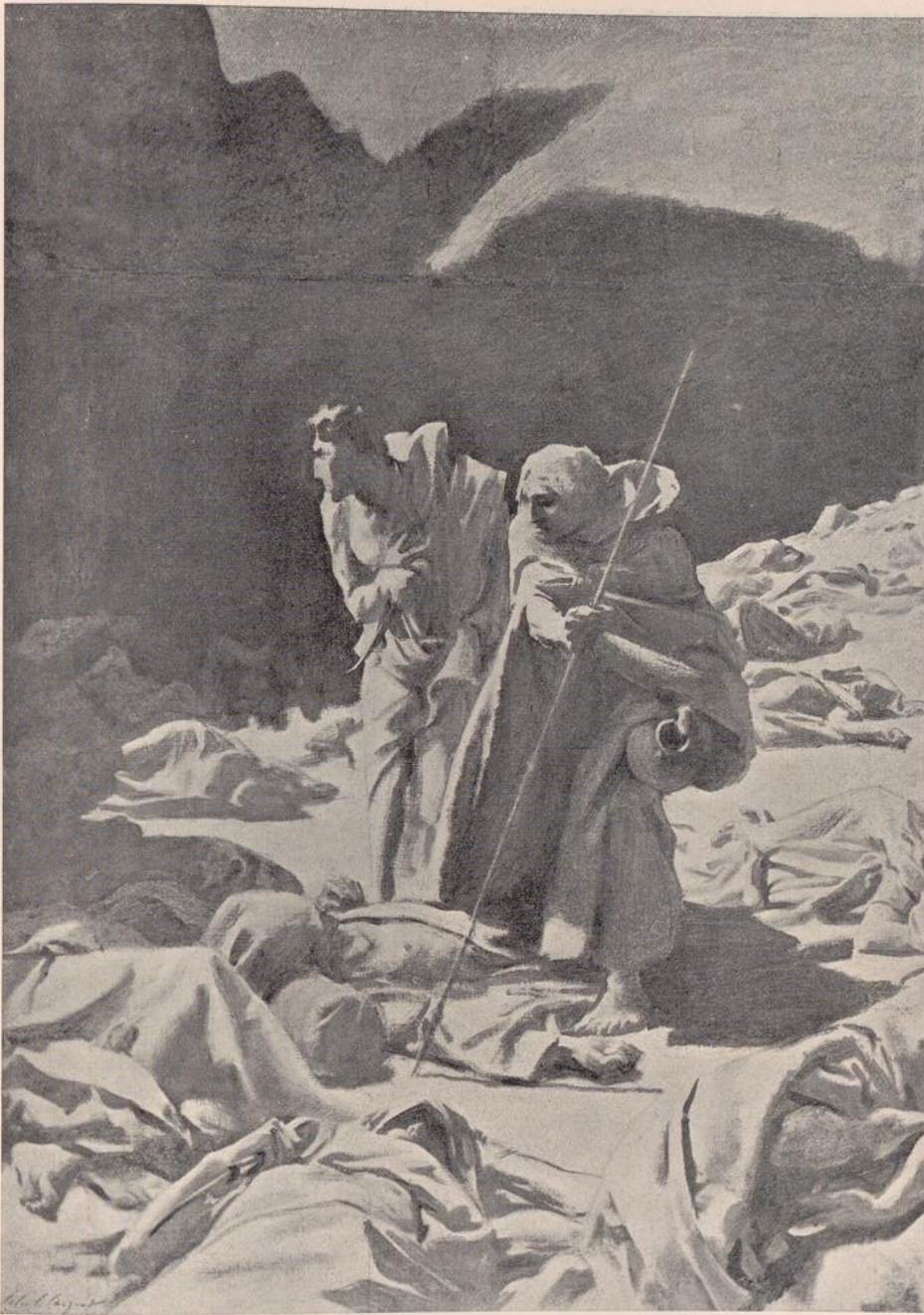
A success it most surely has been, even if it has not developed in the direction that must have been generally expected. From a painter of modern life, always keenly in touch with the characteristics of contemporary existence, the *Lunette*, and *Portion of Ceiling*, which appeared in the Academy Exhibition in 1894, came as a distinct surprise. This section of the Boston decoration was the first revelation of his intentions, with regard to the work he had in hand,



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"A JAVANESE DANCER" BY J. S. SARGENT, R.A.

that he had made public; and it was, at first sight, so out of keeping with what was popularly supposed to be the Sargent tradition that the ordinary type of picture lover was breathless with amazement. Here was the vivid portraitist, the minute observer of living men, reverting to the archaicisms of a style that was in vogue many centuries ago, and playing recklessly with the fantastic eccentricities of Byzantine art. But the more closely the design was examined the more excellent appeared to be the artist's sense of the fitness of things. He had been studying the

fundamental principles that made the Byzantines the greatest of decorators, just as he had mastered the essential elements by which the realism of Velasquez is distinguished above that of any other artist or school; and his study had been so thorough that he was handling decorative devices in a spirit of freedom and originality almost as energetic as that which he showed in his oil paintings. He had brought his archaicisms down to date, and had given them a fresh lease of existence, so that, with roots fixed firmly in the tomb of an art that died in bygone ages, they could blossom again among



"AN EGYPTIAN GIRL"
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"CARMENCITA" BY JOHN
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fresh surroundings and in the atmosphere of a new world.

To quote other instances of the complex vitality that makes his whole connection with the artist's profession so much more worthy of analysis than that of other men would be easy enough. He has many new readings to give of old truths, because he has a faculty for looking at things in his own way, and trusts his own judgment to guide him in all his efforts to arrive at results which are worth the labour of production. His enthusiasm is always an appreciable quantity, always an influence that is powerful to guard him against relapse into commonplace methods and uninspired expression. Nothing that he ever does is wanting in appropriate thought, or lacks that rightness of intention which comes from a judicious estimate of the manner in which his craft should be applied. In his drawings, even where they record nothing more than a momentary impression, there is invariably a clear

intention helped out by every touch. His attention never seems to stray when he is at work, and nothing is allowed to divert him from his initial purpose into side issues or minor matters. Finish, in the sense of surface elaboration, does not appeal to him as worthy of the toil it involves, and does not commend itself as a necessary part of executive practice, but for completeness he strives with an absolute devotion that counts no effort as too exhausting.

A comparison of some of his slighter works will, perhaps, show more exactly than an examination of his pictures what it is that he understands by completeness. In one he has been concerned with the refinements of line and the subtleties of contour of a feminine profile, and he has studied these details with the most searching observation of every curve and modelling; in another he has dealt with an effect of light and shade, an arrangement of tone masses; but in neither has he attempted any filling up of

space or elaboration of accessories for the sake of making the final result attractive to the ordinary inexperienced observer. The study of a nude figure presents quite another aspect of his manner. It is closely handled, carried to the highest pitch of surface finish, and with all the little varieties of form, colour, and texture stated at their fullest value; but then it has been painted, as a kind of exercise in art gymnastics, to train hand and eye by a struggle with one of the most exacting feats that the artist can accomplish. In this case the problem was to overcome not one difficulty but many, to summarise the whole range of technical performance in a single canvas; and necessarily every part had to be finished with the greatest care. But this elaborate study and the slightest of the outline sketches owe their existence to exactly the same motive, and express just the same idea of aesthetic obligations. Each one is in its own way perfectly complete, and finished just as far as it need be.



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"CARNATION, LILY, LILY, ROSE,"
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BIBLE ILLUSTRATION : "DAVID
PLAYING BEFORE SAUL," BY
JOHN S. SARGENT, R.A.

STUDIO-TALK.

(From our own Correspondents.)

About his actual methods of painting there is comparatively little to be said. He is not a mechanic who uses a scientific sequence of processes, and carries his pictures stage by stage to their final form. The underpaintings and preparations that many men employ as necessary aids to the building up of a pictorial composition play no part in his scheme of working, and he puts no dependence upon cartoons or sketches made to scale, in which the distribution of all the parts of his design is fixed before he begins upon the actual canvas. Slight drawings in black and white, or rough notes in colour, may occasionally precede an important undertaking; but generally the charcoal sketch upon his canvas serves as the first shaping of his intention. Over this comes a painting that is as expressive as it can be made, a straightforward statement of the facts before him that conceivably may be complete enough to need no further touches. But if it fails to satisfy him, another painting is superimposed, and this in its turn disappears beneath another until the time comes when he has arrived at a result that he can approve as truly representing his view. Each painting is made without reference to what is beneath it; he has, that is to say, no intention to use what he has already done to help in the evolution of the ultimate picture, and he does not scruple to destroy a previous day's work if it falls short of what he knows he can do.

It is this method that gives to his pictures their characteristic freshness, that aspect of having been set down in a few moments of happy inspiration, which has been from the first among the most notable qualities of his productions. Such a mode of practice is what might have been expected of him. He would not care to go through a slow evolution, during the stages of which he would be in danger of losing the vitality of handling and the frankness of assertion that above all he craves to retain. It is really inspiration under which he works, inspiration of the kind that is possible only to the man who, as he has done, has so stored his mind with accurate knowledge and understanding of art that he can be the severest critic of his own performance.

A. L. BALDRY.

LONDON.—We give two illustrations of landscapes by Mr. Theophile de Bock, long an intimate friend of the late J. Maris. De Bock was born in 1851 at the Hague, and he received his artistic education from Weissenbruch and Van Borselen. He has also studied a great deal in France, both at Fontainebleau and at Barbizon, and it has been his happy lot to win gold medals at Paris, Dresden, Munich, Barcelona, and Berlin. A fine exhibition of his work is now on view at the Holland Fine Art Gallery. It comprises some singularly good oil paintings and some bold drawings in conté crayon and water-colour. There is not an uninteresting work in the whole collection, and it is instructive to note, here and there, how



"BERKENLAAN"

BY THEOPHILE DE BOCK