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The Lay Figure On Imitation And Originality.

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## The Lay Figure

### THE LAY FIGURE ON IMITATION AND ORIGINALITY.

“YES, I believe that,” said the Art Historian; “but have you ever fully realised how dependent civilisation is on the pride which men take in imitating good things.” For instance, when we talk about a tradition of public spirit, a tradition of administrative science, we simply draw attention to one organic result of the pride in question. Each self-respecting generation of citizens tries in its great public affairs to repeat what was best in the civic actions of its predecessors; and you will find that there is but little constitutional security in those countries where this form of imitation is interfered with by the impetuous character of the people.”

“How serious we are!” laughed the Journalist. “Why, you seem to be proving that imitation is the soul of progress. What heresy! Are we not living in an age of strenuous and fussy individualism?”

“Certainly we are,” replied the Art Historian, “and hence it is an age of cranks and of mediocrities. There is a lack of discipline, a want of co-ordination, in nearly all our national efforts, both in peace and in war; and we chatter so much about our individualities that we are morbidly self-conscious in everything but trade.”

“I’m glad to hear you say that,” said the Art Critic. “Nine artists in ten are laughably anxious lest their special brands of originality should be parodied in imitations. To make them quite happy, we must give them the protection of a stringent Act of Parliament. What amusement this bickering anxiety would have caused in the ancient art guilds of Italy and Flanders!”

“Yes,” said the Lay Figure, “those old guilds were not friendly to peevish egotism; and they proved that the discipline of traditions was invaluable, especially to young artists. It forced every youngster of talent humbly to master the traditional ways of work peculiar to his guild. By this means he became a good craftsman, and his originality went to enrich the language of art in which he had learned to speak correctly as an apprentice. To-day, on the other hand, a boy of original genius is so petted by his teachers, and is made so conscious of his originality, that he is tempted to play the artist before he has learned to employ his tools. How much better it would be if he could be grounded in some fine tradition of workmanship, or if he were encouraged to imitate good masters, just as Raphael did when young!”

“You remind me of two good lines of old poetry,” said the Art Critic. “They run thus:—

As in olde felde come fresh and greene grewe,  
So of olde books commeth our conning newe;

and the cunning, or knowledge, of to-day, wherever we find it, certainly springs from seed sown in the past. Hence, originality has been described as a singular personal charm, showing through and modifying the influence of culture, contemporary thought, and birthright traditions upon a fine mind and a sensitive temperament.”

“We are all at one to-day,” said the Man with a Clay Pipe. “Very few young artists have given a moment’s serious thought to the originality about which they talk so much. How many of them know that even Shakespeare, the most original of men, was the product of a school? Besides, there is always something petty, something trivial and self-conceited, in an artist who has never felt the joy of being a sedulous ape.”

“But there is another side to this question,” observed the Journalist. “Why are modern artists so afraid of being imitated?”

“The reason, so it seems to me, is frankly commercial,” the Art Critic answered. “They believe that the market value of their work is depreciated by those who repeat its peculiarities.”

“That’s odd,” said the Lay Figure. “I have never yet seen an imitation of any fine work that equalled its original, nor can I think that an artist gains anything when he cries out against his imitators. For how is he to avoid them? His art can be studied for hours in public exhibitions, and it is easy for a good workman to reproduce from memory the forms and qualities which he has skill enough to imitate. This one fact should teach a man of genius that his art, once sold or exhibited, becomes a public influence which he cannot control. If, therefore, contrary to the example of the old masters, he objects to be a model to lesser men, let him keep his productions from the public eye, for he cannot at the same time win fame and secure himself from imitation.”

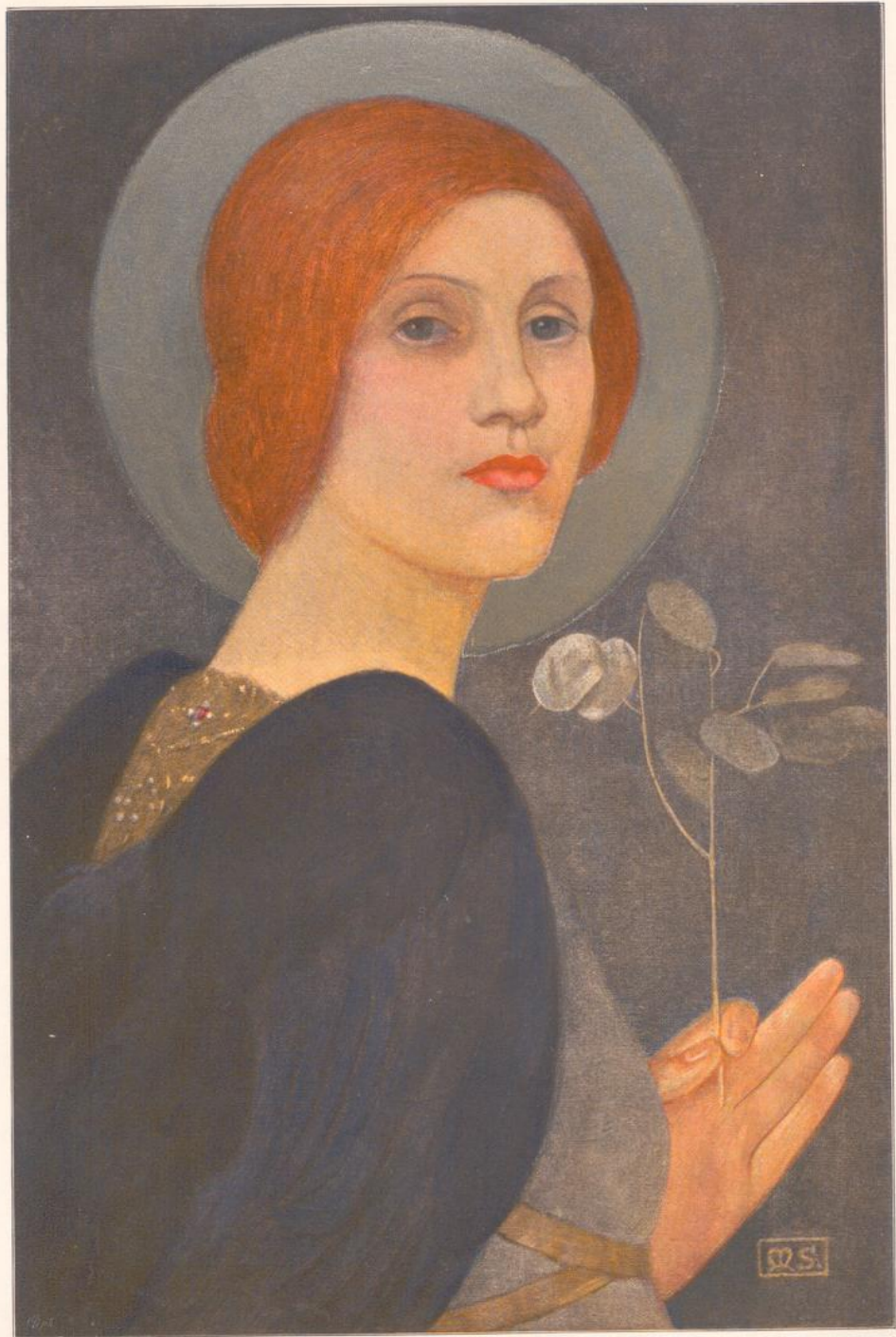
“One other point should be mentioned,” said the Art Critic. “I have noticed that the greatest fear of imitation is shown by those who have themselves been influenced by some modern artist.”

“That arises partly from want of self-confidence,” said the Lay Figure. “But, whatever the cause of it may be, this is certain: that true art was at its best when the spirit of discipleship—another term for imitation—was encouraged by all great men.”

THE LAY FIGURE.



1818



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*The Work of Mrs. Adrian Stokes.*



(By permission of George McCulloch, Esq.)

BY MARIANNE STOKES

THE WORK OF MRS. ADRIAN STOKES. BY HARRIET FORD.

"The impressions of childhood put later into criticisms and pictures make themselves felt by a strange depth of emotion, and are precisely what give delicacy and life." I was glad to come across that passage in a translation of Sainte-Beuve's "Essay on Balzac," the other day, because it gave me a direct authority, as it were, for the idea with which I wanted to begin this notice of Marianne Stokes. It seemed to me that if it were possible to trace to their source the special characteristics marking the work of individuals, we should generally find the influence directing them lay in the, often unconsciously, treasured-up impressions received in early youth. Such apparent anomalies as the fact of Turner being a Londoner, and the environment of the small Parisian shopkeeper being the uncongenial atmosphere in which Corot lived for thirty years,

do not contradict the generalising statement. For what do we know of the impressions—their very unusualness, perhaps, adding to their force—which first placed their abiding seal upon the minds of these men? Some flash of sunset among the barges and shipping, burnishing the sluggish river, and glorifying the enveloping mist, may have set the Cockney boy a-dreaming before the conscious effort had arisen in his mind. Or a Sunday spent with his family at St. Cloud, in the Bois, or among the grey and silvery reaches of the lower Seine, may have sunk so deeply into the soul of Corot that while still measuring tape and putting up shutters the influence lived and bore its fruit. These men were the rich soil upon which the good grain fell; to them the accidental, the occasional, were the more important. But we all know how we are constantly troubled by the jarring note of what we know to be false, which nevertheless rings in our ears with the insistence of long

"HONESTY"  
FROM A PAINTING BY  
MRS. ADRIAN STOKES.

