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An American Painter In Paris: John W. Alexander. By Gabriel Mourey.

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John W. Alexander

AN AMERICAN PAINTER IN
PARIS: JOHN W. ALEXANDER.
BY GABRIEL MOUREY.

A VERY special sense of feminine grace, at once most decorative and intensely modern, characterises the art of Mr. John White Alexander, and invests his works with a charm which proves irresistible even to those who are incapable of recognising his other merits. There springs from his drawing, from his colour, from his method of composition, and, to my mind, above all, from his genius for restraint, a sort of magical fascination. At once the eye is flattered and caressed, so that one feels a gentle delight which intoxicates the vision on seeing these lines and these tints of his. The sensation experienced in presence of some of his portraits of women, some of his *fantaisies*, is near akin to that produced by certain poems whose music enchants one quite apart from the significance of the words of which they are composed; and therein often lies the secret of the apparent superiority of verse over prose. A mere congregation of harmonious syllables, poor as they may be in actual meaning, will serve to inspire the masses; whereas if one goes to the root of it the nothingness will be revealed. It would be altogether unjust to level a reproach of this sort against Mr. Alexander's art, and my only reason for employing this comparison is that I may the better define the attraction his canvases have for a certain section of the public, content with a superficial impression of things. Many an artist would be well satisfied with that degree of success, even that alone; but the strange thing is that Mr. Alexander, while triumphing in this manner, remains, without making any sort of concession to popular taste, the subtle and sincere artist of refinement and delicacy we know him to be. There is nothing loud or extravagant in his vision of things, nothing excessive or violent in his execution. He delights in nothing but the most delicate and complex harmonies, all his tones being as it were veiled. Beyond

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all else he loves the effects of a dim, softened light, with something rare and mysterious in it; indeed, were it not for his sure judgment and his splendid executive skill, he would at times run the risk—such is his horror of the coarse and the commonplace—of becoming lost in a cloud of quintessential abstractions. There was a time, some years back, when Mr. Alexander's best friends had reason to feel some little uneasiness in this respect, for he was on the point—on the point only—of lapsing into eccentricity. Happily, the crisis was brief; he soon regained his self-command, and now he has only



"THE MIRROR"

BY J. W. ALEXANDER

John W. Alexander

to be himself to be truly and incontestably original.

Instead of settling definitely in Paris, Mr. Alexander, who is an American by birth, has maintained close relations with his own country, whereby his conception of art and of life is undoubtedly the richer. By this incessant contact with two civilisations, so widely differing the one from the other, he is enabled the better to know himself, and the better to know others. Six months of the year he lives in America, and the other six in France, which explains the complexity of his temperament, the keenness of his vision, and, above all, the curious strength underlying his

work, however delicate. Thus he escapes the disadvantage of complete transplantation; for he is not altogether *déraciné*, but has the benefit of periodical return to the land of his birth; and to the true, strong artist, in whom foreign influences have served only to develop his personality, there is nothing so wholesome as the atmosphere of home.

Thus Mr. Alexander has remained truly American. But would he have triumphed had he not mingled in our artistic movement; had he not become imbued with the concentrated beauties of the European galleries; had he not felt the fascination of our old French civilisation? Would he have gained the mastery he possesses over his art? One may well doubt it.

John White Alexander was born at Alleghany City, near Pittsburg, in Pennsylvania, and spent a dull childhood in a gloomy, smoky town. Left an orphan at an early age, he was brought up by his maternal grandparents. At twelve, anxious to earn his own living, and even then full of will and energy, he left his school, and served as a messenger in the telegraph office at Pittsburg. His intelligence and activity soon brought him under the notice of one of his chiefs, Colonel Edward J. Allen. The lad had already shown a remarkable inclination for art; every spare moment he spent in drawing and making sketches of his companions, and on the death of his grandfather Colonel Allen took him under his own roof, where the boy remained till he was eighteen.

Pittsburg then offered but meagre resources for an artist. The munificent Mr. Carnegie had not yet established his museum, nor started those exhibitions which to-day rank among the most interesting manifestations of the international art movement. However, the young draughtsman did several portraits in crayon which brought him a little—a very little!—money. So, with a few dollars in his pocket, he set out for New York, and straightway knocked at the door of the Harper firm. There he became employed as an illustrator, and there he remained three years. Then, the New York climate telling on his health, he sailed for Europe with another young illustrator, Stanley Reinhart. First they make their way to Paris, with the intention of installing themselves there; but neither knows a word of French, and it costs money to live in Paris! Reinhart, who knows some-



PORTRAIT

BY J. W. ALEXANDER



PORTRAIT BY
J. W. ALEXANDER

John W. Alexander

thing of German, suggests Munich; so off they go to the Bavarian capital, where for three months Alexander attends the classes at the National Academy of Fine Arts. But soon the two friends find living in towns too expensive, so they look out for some quiet rustic spot, where they can work without constant anxiety as to their very means of existence. They end by discovering in Northern Bavaria the little village of Polling, where even then there was quite a small colony of American artists.

After spending a year at Polling, Alexander went to Venice with Duveneck, the painter, who was

director of an art school there. Whistler was then living in the city of the Doges, and he gave advice—valuable advice doubtless—to his young compatriot, who, when he had come into full possession of his gifts, cannot have failed to recognise its value.

During his stay in Europe—in Paris, whither he returned, in London and in Holland—Alexander worked away assiduously. He tried everything—drawings, studies, portraits, illustrations, landscapes, still-life—feeling his way, surmounting technical difficulties, studying the great masters, ever striving for something better, ever critical and exacting

towards himself. Some of his crayon portraits, done about this period—those of Browning, Stevenson, Swinburne, and Alphonse Daudet, for example—reveal an artist expert at seizing character, and already possessed of a method leaving very little room for improvement.

So far as Paris is concerned, however, he made his real *début* in the Salon of the Société Nationale. At once he took us captive. The *Portrait Noir* and the *Portrait Gris* exhibited by him there bore the unmistakable imprint of genuine individuality, revealed a strong and concentrated artistic vision, a novel sense of female grace, and a technique almost masterly, and in any case fresh, and above all expressive. First we were astonished, then captivated. Certain curious things disturbed one at the outset—the coarse surface of his canvas, and the dense deadness of his colours thereon, producing in places the effect of distemper. But this in no way lessened the delicacy or the force of the work, and those of us who are blessed with a good memory still retain a recollection of the wonderful dress worn by the lady in the *Portrait Gris*. Such greys! Some silvery like the moon, others of twilight tone, gleaming as though reflecting polished steel, and all so fine, so rich as positively to bewilder the beholder. And the touch too! How broad and sure and free, each stroke seeming to have been done definitely at the very first attempt.



"THE READER"

BY J. W. ALEXANDER



"PEONIES" BY
J. W. ALEXANDER

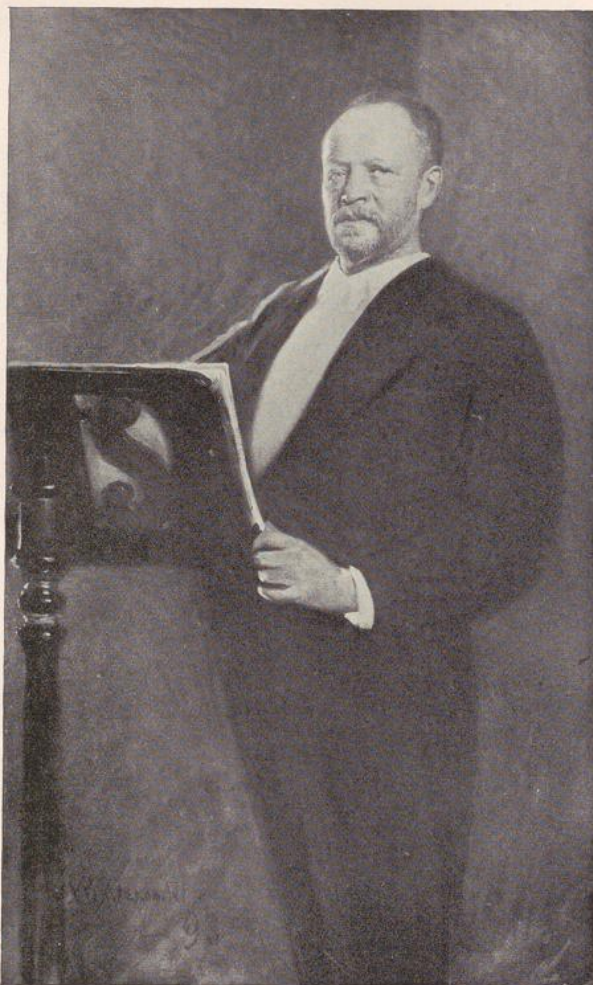
John W. Alexander

So great was Alexander's success among our artists that he was forthwith elected an associate of the Société Nationale, and in the following year, 1894, was made a member, or *sociétaire*, on the strength of his new exhibits, which included an astounding *Portrait du paysagiste Thaulow*, a *Portrait de M. Pranishikoff*, three other portraits, and two delicious *fantaisies*, styled *La Glace* and *Le Piano*.

In the succeeding year Mr. Alexander executed a set of six decorative panels for the Congressional Library at Washington. They represented *The History of the Book*, and were finally put in position in 1897. We in France know them only, alas, through the medium of photographic reproductions, but none who has seen them can do otherwise than admire without reserve the rare harmony of their colouring. The first of these six panels shows the primitive man constructing a cairn; the second suggests oral tradition in the form of an Arab relating his tribal legends; then we come to the age of hieroglyphics; next we see the Indian, writing on skin; next, the mediæval monk illuminating manuscripts; and finally we have Gutenberg reading his first printed proof. In 1897 Mr. Alexander, who, in the preceding year, had been almost unrepresented at the Champ de Mars, returned to us with a most important display, including *La Robe Jaune* (see "The Art of 1897"), *La Robe Noire*, *Le Chat Noir*, *Pivoines*, and that strange interpretation of Keats's famous poem, "Isabella and the Pot of Basil." Here he inaugurated the series of his feminine *fantaisies*, wherein he has seized so subtly, so mysteriously, the gestures, the attitudes, and the movements of modern womankind. It was his picture, *Le Miroir* (see "Art of 1898") which gained him the gold medal at Philadelphia in 1897. Other works of his shown at the same time were *Le Bol Bleu*, *Le Nœud Vert*, *Pandore*,

Femme Lisant, *La Robe Bleue*, and *Le Rayon de Soleil*, to name but a few among many examples of delightful colouring, of powerful and delicate harmony, wherein, mingled with all the fancy and the sensibility of an artist of complex nature, is revealed the absolute masterfulness of the superlative painter.

The artist delights to repeat: "Nothing is uninteresting. Every human being has his own precise and definite personality, and all one has to do is to realise that personality, to choose the proper pose, the right gesture, the appropriate atmosphere which shall serve to bring out in all its fulness the real being of the model. Sometimes, of course,



PORTRAIT OF MR. MOSENTHAL

BY J. W. ALEXANDER

John W. Alexander

that is a difficult matter, and at first sight, with certain sitters, it seems as though there were nothing to discover. If the artist become discouraged all is lost: one must watch, watch long, and carefully, and in the end one never fails to succeed."

To his observation of these broad principles is due the great variety of the portraits signed "J. W. Alexander." Whatever he does, whether it be the delightful *Fillette avec sa Poupée*, or the portrait of the great poet Walt Whitman—a work which, thanks to the generosity of Mrs. Jeremiah Milbank, is now in the Metropolitan Gallery of New York—or to that of Mark Twain's daughter, Miss Clemens, or that of Mr. James W. Alexander, President of the University Club, or that of Mrs. Randolph Coolidge, of Boston, or that, again, of Rodin, our great sculptor, one of the finest pictures in the American section of the Universal Exhibition, he ever shows the same wonderful gift of adapting himself to the requirements of his subject, while remaining absolutely himself

in every instance. Disdaining needless detail, he cares for nothing but that which is essential, and in his choice of surroundings for the figures he paints—in their setting, in a word—he shows perfect taste.

At the commencement of this brief appreciation I spoke of the decorative feeling which, it seems to me, prevails in Mr. Alexander's work. Apart from all question of colour, this attribute is clearly seen (to my eyes, at any rate) even in the photographs of his paintings. I recognise therein that sense of synthesis, that regard for simplicity, that striving to invest every figure with some special quality other than that which is apparent to all at



MUSIC CABINET

DESIGNED BY W. H. HEADY. MADE BY THOMAS PAGE
DECORATED BY J. HEADY AND JOHN BURROWS

Ascott Class

first sight, that sane logical method of composition which belongs by right to the decorative painter. It is not necessary, however, to labour this point, as the decorative aspect of the artist's work will appeal to all who are able to appreciate it; and so I pass on to my summing up. Mr. J. W. Alexander is no mere painter of *morceaux*, and, needless to say, this is not said to his discredit. Neither in his drawing nor in his colouring is he a slave of that detestable prejudice known as "Art for Art's sake." He sees his picture as a whole, sees it broadly and in all its abundance, and, for the purpose of realising his impressions, he possesses the fullest equipment.