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The Lay Figure Women As Artists.

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The Lay Figure

THE LAY FIGURE. WOMEN AS ARTISTS.

"QUITE true," said the Lay Figure. "It is a subject about which a fine book might be written."

"What subject is that?" asked the Art Historian, entering the studio.

"Woman's mission as an artist," the Lay Figure replied.

"The word 'mission' reminds me of Exeter Hall," said the Art Historian, "but I suppose you mean that it is worth while to ask ourselves if there are not some provinces of art in which women ought to be more successful than men?"

"I mean that and something more," answered the Lay Figure. "To arrive at a clear and just opinion as to the position which women should occupy in the arts, it would be necessary to pass in review all the best art work produced by them since the dawn of the Renaissance; and if this were done honestly by a sympathetic and competent critic, I am inclined to think that the result would be a pleasant surprise to most people."

"Ernst Guhl, a German, tried to do what you suggest," said the Art Historian; "and his little volume, *Die Frauen in die Kunstgeschichte*, was of great service to Mrs. Ellet, an American lady, whose book on *Women Artists in all Ages and Countries* ran into a second edition in 1860."

"Mrs. Ellet did her best," the Lay Figure said, "but we want something more serious than her criticisms at second-hand, and I am sure that a thorough history of woman's work in the arts would be popular and useful. It would need plenty of illustrations, of course."

"So you wish to see one more volume added to the plague of books," remarked the Man with a Clay Pipe. "You may be right, but I should like to feel quite certain that you are so. Will you then tell me why a complete history of women-artists seems necessary to you?"

"There are several reasons," the Lay Figure answered. "To begin with, you cannot possibly understand the Renaissance in Italy unless you are well acquainted with the fine admiration that the Italians then had for women of ability. This admiration was a new kind of chivalry, and those who have not read about it usually believe that the Italian Renaissance was chiefly remarkable for its contrasts of hideous vice and transcendent genius. Most accounts of that period, or series of periods, convey this impression, the crass stupidity of which will be plain to anyone who has read with

intelligence the lives of the Italian poetesses, girl graduates, learned ladies, and women-artists. Every town of importance kept written record of its own great women, and the honours bestowed on those who were good painters attracted the attention of foreign princes. Thus Sofonisba Anguisciola, a sort of female Titian, became portrait-painter to Philip II. of Spain. One could give a good many other examples, but my point is simply this—that the great respect shown to women of talent must not be forgotten by anyone who wishes to understand Italian life and character during the Renaissance."

"And your point is a good one," said the Man with a Clay Pipe. "But, remember, it appeals to one's love of historic truth rather than to the æsthetic sense, and thus I want to know if your early women-artists were noteworthy as such."

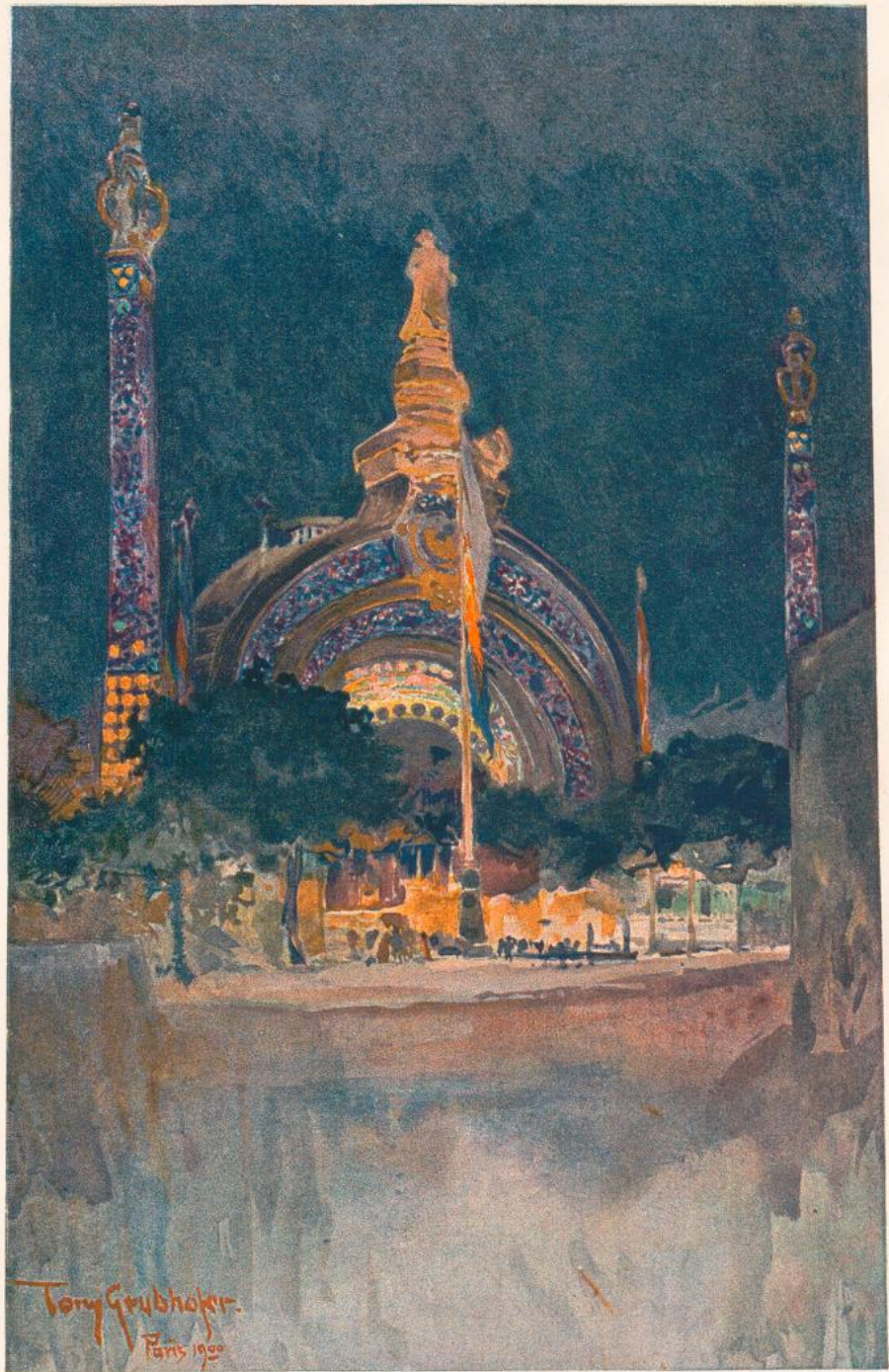
"I think they were," said the Lay Figure. "The influence that the æsthetic genius of those periods had upon women lasted from the days of Caterina Vigri, who died in 1463, to those of Elisabetta Sirani, who died in 1665; and you will find that the progress made in art by the fair was continuous between those dates. It never produced transcendently wonderful results, but it was as uniform—on a lower plane, of course—as the art progress that men made between Cimabue's time and Raphael's. Is not that a memorable fact?"

"I can't say no," said the Art Historian. "When critics sneer because the female sex has not given us rivals of the greatest Old Masters, neither we nor they gain anything. As well might they sneer because their own sex does not produce to-day such a sculptor as Phidias, or such a painter as Raphael."

"Good!" cried the poet. "There are many species of flowers in the cultivated garden of art, and the wise man is he who loves them all."

"Quite apart from that," said the Lay Figure, "it is always foolish to imply that the art of women should resemble the art of men. Each should be instinct with the charm of sex, each should be the complement of the other. But in our own time, somehow, most of the women-artists have tried their best to be masculine, while not a few of the men have turned out effeminate work. It may be useless to protest, but this kind of work is sterile, it has no future; the world soon wearies of it, and turns with joy to those men who put manhood into all their pictures or statues, and to those women whose art is charmed with their own natures."

THE LAY FIGURE.



James Aumonier

JAMES AUMONIER AND HIS WORK. BY MRS ARTHUR BELL (N. D'ANVERS)

JAMES AUMONIER, whose landscape work has only of late years been appreciated at its true value, is of English parentage, though his name is French. He was born in London, and spent his childhood at Highgate and High Barnet. At the early age of fourteen he began to earn his own living in a business house, where the work he had to do was thoroughly distasteful to him. He devoted every spare moment to learning to draw, attending evening classes at the Birkbeck Institution, then known as the Mechanics' Institute, where the conditions of work were very different from what they are now, when everything is made so much easier for the student. The Art Class was held in the old lecture room. There was but one gas jet over the master's desk, and though candlesticks and snuffers were supplied gratis, each student had to bring his own candle. By the uncertain flickering light of some dozen candles placed at wide intervals, the young student worked steadily on; and having learnt all he could in the Institute he managed to obtain admission to the Art School at South Kensington, where he attended the evening classes for some years. He now, to quote his own account of the matter, "found that he could draw a bit," and to his delight, the knowledge he had so painfully acquired enabled him to get a berth in a London house as a designer for printed calicoes. "This," he adds, "was the beginning of my art-work;" and having at last got some congenial employment, he seized every chance "he could get or make of going out of doors and painting landscapes from nature." His earliest independent work was a series of drawings of the Cloisters of Westminster Abbey, and of studies in Kensington Gardens, done when the fashionable London world was still asleep, between six and eight o'clock in the morning, before the regular work at the calico factory began. Later

the energetic young student was able to take short railway journeys to such outlying districts as Crayke and Ripon, where he spent many happy hours of quiet work, with no teacher or urgent worries. However, he was so secretive that she reveals to none but her true workmates.

She tells us that she received from Mr. Aumonier in reply to an enquiry as to his methods he says, "the strength of my water-colour at the beginning of my art career consisted of a lump of gamboge, a cake of Prussian blue, and one of crimson lake. I may," he adds, "have had a few odd bits of cobalt as well, but those were my strength and my pride. I used to go into the garden when a mere child, and try to copy flowers. I had very great delight in producing what my father called a 'good bit green' by mixing the gamboge and Prussian blue together—that was my only green.



JAMES AUMONIER

FROM A PHOTOGRAPH

"ILLUMINATION OF THE MAIN
ENTRANCE TO THE PARIS EXHIBITION"

FROM A WATER-COLOUR DRAWING BY

TONY GRUBHOFER

(Specially printed for "The Studio")

