

# RECREATION IN NATURE

## THE ONTARIO SOCIETY OF ARTISTS.



We have heard rather more than usual this year of the exhibition of pictures by the Ontario Society of Artists. The pictures have been well praised in the daily papers, after the manner of the daily papers; and the soirées given by the Society in the Gallery, have brought it into additional prominence. It must not be forgotten, however, that no kind of prominence except that of excellence, and no kind of criticism except that which is sincere, will permanently help the Society to take the leading position in Canadian art which one would naturally expect from it.

It is sometimes questioned whether Art can expect to prosper in so young a country, where men are more concerned with the practical than with the aesthetic side of life, and where wealth is not so common that there are many men who can afford the luxury of hanging a painting upon their walls where a "good engraving" will do. As far as the question of wealth is concerned, it is perhaps valid for an architect to point to the small cost of his building as the cause of its poverty in design. Size and material are principal elements in noble architecture, and given these, the architect is better equipped for fine work than he would be without them. But with the artist it is different. A masterpiece is within his reach in a piece of any size and of any degree of slowness in execution. Indeed, it is far more within his power to obtain perfection in smallness and slowness than in the most elaborate production. An amateur can often make a good sketch, but he usually

makes a dismal failure of a finished drawing. So that we have a right to expect from our artists that though their canvasses be small and unimportant, they shall be as far as they go successful.

As regards the question of a National School of Art—what should be its characteristics and how far our conditions of life are suitable to its existence—those are questions much more easy to answer in the next century than now. There is happily left to us much subtlety in life, and this much use for genius that we cannot estimate ourselves nor read our own environment without its aid. When the light of a genius, or of a school of geniuses is shed upon the life and landscape of Canada, we shall perhaps be surprised to find how much poetry there is in it. All life is full of it. There is even a poetry of dullness. Is not the Dutch School full of life and dear to collectors of pictures? Yet what country so flat, and what people so essentially dull and tame in their manners and surroundings. Our field for art is incomparably better than that of the Dutch painters. The question is: Are our artists getting at the life of it as well as the Dutchmen did in their time? The feeling with which one comes away from the recent exhibition is, that the Ontario Society is not getting at the life of anything. The highest ideal the artists for the most part hold before them is a drawing master's ideal. Given a scene of any kind, the aim appears to be to reproduce it in exactly the same spirit as that which animates a camera.

Some artists whose work is so good as to be worth criticism, exhibit water colours done in a good, clean way that shows they know how to handle their materials, but, if they will allow us to say so, this is mere draughtsmanship. We want more from a scene than a bare representation as like it as it can stare, with the workmanship an endeavor to repeat as it were in the artist's materials every touch of nature in the scene before him. The camera can do this for us, and only the camera can do it completely. What we ask from an artist is to give us the result of the impression which nature makes upon him. This is the reason we value Homer Watson. In his fine oil painting (No. 74 in the exhibition) one might say that not one touch finds its counterpart in nature. He has set down the result upon the spectator of the operations of nature in the scene before him: No one can convey to us the scene, not even a camera. No paper is white enough to represent light, no color could repre-

sent shade and be transparent. The details of nature are impossible, and its movements. We cannot have the scene repeated to us so as to produce its own effect. What we want from the artist is to convey that to us. And inasmuch as the artist is more of a seer than the average man, we may hope to find more in the scene when he has brought his mind to bear upon it than we should in viewing it ourselves with unskillful, careless or uninterested eyes. Now Mr. Watson, without copying nature in the spirit of a drawing-master, contrives in the best way he can with his own materials to represent to us the facts that give life and beauty to the scene. We can see the fineness and flexibility of the grass, and are aware of the wind that is waving it. We trace the gradual slope of the land up to the hill, on the top of which the misty clouds are catching. We see that the clouds are moving rapidly, and also (as Mr. Watson always shows so well), that they are floating in space at a little distance above our heads and far below the upper blue. The details—the sparkling stream running away to our right, the thatched roof with its rich, soft tints, the trees throwing their branches over it, the cattle up to their bellies in the grass—are full of beauty and interest, and so selected as to give us the full spirit of the scene.

Examine close and see how all this is done. There is not a single imitative touch. Everything aims at interpretation. No camera could do this, and we may safely say no other man would do precisely the same. The scene has entered the artist's mind and he gives us the result. This is to be a poet, which one may be excused for reminding those members of the Ontario Society of Artists who have adopted the drawing master ideal, is adapted almost letter for letter from the Greek word which means "a maker." The true artist is *far excellence* a maker. It is his privilege "to throw over Nature the wedding garment or the shroud." Indeed, the poet and the artist are so much one in spirit that, in the difficulty of referring to pictures that every one knows, we may quote from the poets in illustration of the way in which a painter should inform his work with the idea of his mind. Take, for instance, the first stanza of Keats' "Saint Agnes' Eve," a poem for painters:

"St. Agnes' Eve—Ah! bitter chill it was  
The Owl, for all his feathers was a-draw;  
The hare limp trembling through the frozen grass,  
And silent was the flock in woolly fold;  
Humb were the beadsman's fingers while he told  
His rosary; and while his frosted breath,  
Like pious incense from a censer old,  
Seem'd taking flight for heaven without a death  
Past the Sweet Virgin's picture, while his prayer he saith."

There is a finished picture of a cold night. All speaks of the weather and the time of day. All the touches are in keeping, and the beautiful image of the beadsman's frozen breath rising as he says his prayers, is an imaginative touch in keeping with what Leigh Hunt calls the "catholic elegances" of the poem.

If a highly imaginative piece of work like this would be beyond the means of the Canadian market, let us try a quiet bit of English landscape by Tennyson:

"Not wholly in the busy world, nor quite  
Beyond it, blooms the garden that I love.  
News from the humming city comes to it  
In sound of funeral or of marriage bells;  
And, sitting muffled in dark leaves, you hear  
The windy clanging of the minister clock;  
Although between it and the garden lies  
A league of grass, wash'd by a slow broad stream,  
That, stir'd with languid pulses of the oar,  
Waves all its lilies and its purple crocus;  
Barge-baden, to these arches of a bridge  
Crown'd with the minister towers."

This gives us all the facts necessary to convey to us the character and the beauty of the scene. We know the extent of the landscape, the sort of country, the time of year. We get the color with a perception of how its brightness is enhanced by the dark embowered foreground; and what can be more charming than the composition—the sluggish weedy stream, full up to the level of the flat green meadows through which it winds in perspective, ending three miles away with the lovely central motive of the three arched bridge crowned with the minister towers. This, though so complete a picture, is by no means an inventory of the scene. The details, though full, are not divergent, each adds something to the essential character and the quiet beauty of the scene. Would that the skill which some members of the Ontario Society spend in giving us colored photographs could be directed with a little more discrimination so as to affect our imagination in the same way.

There is one more word to be said about the pleasure which we receive from the mere execution of imaginative art. To return for a moment to the poets—here is a sketch by Tennyson:

THE EAGLE.  
He clasps the crag with hooked hands;  
Close to the sun in lonely lands,  
Ring'd with the azure world, he stands.  
The wrinkled sea beneath him crawls;  
He watches from his mountain walls,  
And like a thunderbolt he falls.

Scientifically speaking, the poet has no right to apply either the word "wrinkled" or "crawled" to the sea; the sea does not crawl, and, as applied to the conformation of a wave, the word wrinkle is not a true description. But anyone who has seen the sea from a great height on a fine day, will accept this account of the appearance of things and enjoy the bold metaphor which brings it before us so exactly, putting us by these two words, without further description, in the lofty position of the eagle. In other words, the more mind is brought to bear on the study