

THE SEVEN ARTS



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The Art of Kahlil Gibran

By Alice Raphael

THERE are certain words which one approaches with hesitancy because their meaning has become somewhat clouded, and in this heyday of its vogue symbolism has been so subject to misuse that when we apply it to painting our mind flashes instantly to a certain group that once bore its name and then to the satirical lyric about the man "walking down Piccadilly, with a mediaeval lily in his hand."

We can get no clearer picture of the real value of symbolism than by recalling that period which gave every appearance of it and yet had none. The Pre-Raphaelites attempted to recreate in their time, in their manner, that which was forever past, just as many of our modernists attempt a simplicity of form which this sophisticated world can never again acquire.

The early Primitives were imbued with the spirit of the idea and they cared little for the manner of its presentation. They covered the walls of Assisi because they wished to tell the story of Jesus that others might know and profit by it. That which has given Santa Maria Novella its luster is the power of a feeling visioned, experienced, grasped and then put forth again.

In the minds of the Pre-Raphaelites the vision was most assiduously cultivated, not the vision of England but of Italy with the dust of three centuries upon it to blind the eyes. For the Pre-Raphaelites sought not their own spirit but that of another, not the meaning within but that lying as far away as possible; in fact the more remote it was the more they sought it. They have given us beautiful stories, beautiful pictures,

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beautiful ideas, everything except that which can never be recaptured, the true spirit of the age.

Symbolism in art is the spirit of an age expressed through its artists. It is in the conception of the symbol that the East divides itself from the West. For the East does not ask, What does it say, what does it represent, but what does it mean, what does it signify to us?

To the East the Lotos is a flower but also a symbol of divinity; to the West it is a flower developing into the acanthus design and so only a decoration, only a flower. Again the earth, the sun, the sea, that which is above and that which lies beneath are to the western mind materials of study to be touched, understood and grasped; but to the East it suffices that these things are and will be eternally and that behind these realities which we visualize lie other forces and experiences, other suns, other seas, melting mysteriously into one another as the leaves of the Lotos.

It is at the dividing line of East and West, of symbolism and representation, of sculptor and painter, that the work of Mr. Kahlil Gibran (exhibited last month at *Knoedler's*) presents itself as an arresting force in our modern conception of painting.

When Mr. Sargent wishes to express himself symbolically, he has to have the vast walls of the Boston Library at his disposal. For to represent the Christos, let us say, it is essential for minds of his type to transcribe every incident in the birth and death of Christ or to portray the whole of religion.

Mr. Gibran needs only a small sheet of paper to give us the meaning of the human spirit and he says what he has to say as simply as possible. We see the body of a woman who rises out of the vast form of the *Erdgeist* carrying in her arms man and woman; only the head of the enfolding mother with its mysterious smile is drawn in the ordinary sense of the word. There is the story, interpret it as you will. Erda, Amida,

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Ceres, Mary, it is a matter of choice and of temperament. The meaning is universal.

Mr. Gibran's art is symbolic in the highest sense because its roots lie not in ideas but in those truths which are fundamental for all ages and all experiences. He senses the meaning of the earth and her productions, of man, her final and finest flower, and the unity of man with nature. He shows us man evolving out of the beast in a struggle with a centaur. He shows us the recumbent mother crouched against a centaur who holds the child in his arms, the child who is already one step beyond. He shows us man driving or being driven by a horse divinely frenzied.

His centaurs and horses have a charm utterly apart from their natures, so that they are never wholly animal in character. They have a grace in their slender feet which is reminiscent of the Chinese statuettes of horses with their square nostrils and delicate hoofs, hoofs that paw the air rather than the ground and suggest to the mind the finest qualities of a horse, its fleetness, swiftness and strength. So in these centaurs we sense the beast that is yet man and again that in man which is and must be animal, that evolution upward which is in itself a miracle but which will forever prevent us from clutching the stars.

Mr. Gibran is not interested only in the story of man, he is interested in the story of life. He is not merely concerned with its portrayal, he shares its struggle. He is impelled by that force which lies behind all things animate and inanimate, that force which produces, destroys and recreates with the same intensity, the same purpose, and, to his eyes, the same beauty. His art is as modern as the spirit of our age and as old as Cronos; it rises out of the past but its appeal is to the thinking minds of today, and it foreshadows the future.

Like Rodin, Mr. Gibran is a master not only in symbolism, but in the technical grasp of his material. His exhibited work

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consists mostly of wash drawings and only here and there does the pencil work with the brush, to suggest and to complete the theme. The level of his painting is for the most part very delicate, each plane suggesting another plane in the most subtle gradation so that while at first sight there seems to be but little color one comes to realize that it is all color. Here and there in the studies of eastern types there are darker and more vivid reds and blues, and a certain greenish blue wholly of the East which seems to hold much meaning for him. He uses his color to reveal his form, not, like most painters who study form, to display his color; and that is why all his work so strongly suggests the sculptor.

This impression is most powerful in the painting of a woman's head which is in my opinion the most beautiful picture in the exhibition. The head is thrown back and seems to rest upon a white background that is yet not exactly white. It is the color of the sea at an infinite distance when color is no longer color, but merely light. The head lying upon this luminous ground is so delicate that the throat veins seem to quiver and the pale lips to move. Actually there is no drawing in the usual sense of the word; the painting is modelled in color; and this picture gave me an intense feeling of Mr. Gibran's sculptural power. That something flowing which alone makes marble other than a piece of stone lies in Mr. Gibran's paintings. It is the very soul of sculpture and he is expressing it in a kindred form. I cannot but feel that painting is not for him an adequate vehicle and that in sculpture he could again unite his many-sided nature and attain the fruition of the symbolic root which lies at the basis of his work.