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HOW TO LOOK AT PICTURES.

The following extracts from an article on art by Mrs. Schuyler Van Rensselaer will be of interest to the many students who are now frequenting the art rooms:

The Art-Gallery of the Pan-American Exposition contains, undoubtedly, the best collection of American works of art that has ever been gathered. Such a collection deserves to be approached in the right mood and the right manner.

The fact that a picture does not greatly please our own eyes should not convince us that it is a poor picture. We do not decide in this way about other things. No one says, "I don't care to read a book of that kind—therefore it is a poor book;" nor, "That bonnet is unbecoming to me—therefore it is an ugly bonnet." But too often we do say, "I should not care to buy that picture, to live with it—therefore it can't be a fine picture."

Rules for the discovering of true excellence cannot, of course, be laid down in words. They must be learned by educating the mind and the eye in the presence of actual works of art, and, moreover, in the presence of Nature also; for very few eyes untrained in art have ever really looked at Nature in such a way as to be entitled to trust their own testimony in regard to the question whether or not an artist has truthfully portrayed any phase of it. Nevertheless, one general counsel can be given to the inexperienced: Try to put yourself at the artist's point of view, try to understand what he has endeavored to do, before you say whether he has done it well or not.

This counsel is needed even in the most literal sense. Often the effect of a picture depends very greatly upon its distance from the observer's eye. There are many methods of painting, from the most minute and to use a general (but inaccurate term) "highly finished," to the most broadly generalized; and each method, each given canvas, appears at its best from some special distance. To walk about a gallery close to the pictures, studying each as narrowly as possible, is to misread, to misunderstand, the language in which most of them have been written.

Then it should be remembered that no kind of painting is or can be a literal and complete representation of the chosen subject, any more than a story can be a full and complete record of all that its characters did and said and felt during the period that it covers. To paint a picture or to tell a story, one must select and condense, omit here and accentuate there.

If one asks for a plainly told anecdote when a poetic suggestion is offered him, he does injustice to the painter and ruins his own chances of enjoyment. Yet this is what that many-minded creature called "the general public" constantly does in a picture gallery. It complains that all the blades of grass in the foreground of a land-scape are not defined, when the painter has cared nothing about them for the moment because he has wanted to suggest the effect of a cloud-shadow on a meadow, or a wind in the tree tops, or the glow of a sunset sky, and knew that to make his grass-blades conspicuous would distract the eye from this, the central thought, the main intention of his picture. Or in looking at a portrait the public complains that only the head is "finished," that the gown and the hands are but "roughly" or "carelessly" done, when the painter has wished, perhaps, to concentrate attention upon a beautiful effect of light falling upon the head, and has puprosely and very wisely subordinated the other portions of his work. Such instances as these might be almost indefinitely repeated. And they bring me to another point: As truly as the painter may choose what he will paint, and dwell upon some factors in his subject more than upon others if he thinks best, so he may choose the kind of treatment, or handling, of painting in the technical sense, that he will use to express his idea. And if he expresses this idea well, then his picture is well painted and is as "highly finished" as it ought to be.

This very popular term—"highly finished"—is, as I have said, an inaccurate one. It implies that every painter ought to elaborate his canvass as carefully as any brush could, and every part of it in equal measure. But, in truth, the most full and complete expression of a subject is sometimes given by means of brush-work, which is very far indeed from minute, and, when examined close at hand, seems very careless.

Look at them for a moment—not for the sake of enjoyment but of instruction—as closely is you can. Their meaning as an interpretation of Nature will almost disappear. Then go to a distance and look again. You will find them more truthful, more vividly real, and therefore in the genuine sense more skilful and careful pieces of painting than you

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