

MEISSONIER'S PLACE IN FRENCH ART

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THE OREGONIAN'S HOME STUDY CIRCLE: DIRECTED BY PROF. SEYMOUR EATON

THE WORLD'S GREAT ARTISTS

Contributors to this course: Dr. John C. Van Dyke, Dr. Russell Sturgis, Dr. A. L. Frothingham, Jr., Arthur Hooper, Frank Fowler and others.

XIII. JEAN LOUIS ERNEST MEISSONIER.

BY ARTHUR HOOVER.

It has been given to few painters to live to enjoy so magnificent a personal triumph, to receive so much recognition and admiration in their lifetime and to obtain such immortality for their pictures as was the case with the most distinguished genre painter, Meissonier, the wonderful French artist, whose death occurred in Paris on the 21st day of January, 1891, at the age of 76. Revered by his countrymen, admired by the whole world, patronized by kings and queens, the resident of all the boudoirs, he died in the way the Empereur had it bestowed, receiving for his work prices greater than were ever given to any other living man, he enjoyed a position not held since the days of the old masters of history, and not excelled even by them. A stocky man, exceeding short of stature, an enormous head, full of wavy, curling hair, a great beard that reached half way down to his feet, a episcopate, a nose like a spear, with the striking characteristic of the famous draughtsman, master of detail and composition, analytical worker and altogether remarkable maker of pictures. He was a well-known figure in the streets of Paris, a potent personality in the art world, and all in all one of the most wonderful men of the century.

Meissonier was born at Lyons in 1815, on the 20th day of February, but his family went to Paris when he was three years of age. At the time of his birth, his father was a successful merchant in drugs, but he shortly met with reverses and was obliged to practice great economy. The mother was an artistic woman, said to have had, in an amateur way, considerable talent, dying, however, when the boy was but 11 years of age. Therefore he went to live with relatives in Goussainville, a town near Paris, where he received the best of education. His yearnings for art naturally manifested themselves very early. There is a school report in existence, made by one of the masters of the Lycee Charlemagne, where Ernest was a seventh-form boy in 1832—he was then nine years old—wherein the following observation occurs:

"Ernest has a very marked taste for drawing; the very sight of a picture will often make him sit for hours at a time."

But his father had little desire to encourage the boy, for, like some more modern parents, the profession of the fine arts seemed to him to be but trifling at best, and he was desirous of bringing up his son in the drug business, at which the boy's heart rebelled. In 1832 he was, in point of fact, apprenticed to a druggist, but the boy soon ran away, and, after a short time, was taken in by a rebelion, and the boy's father, so far as he could, to give him eight days in which to find a master who would vouch for his having ability enough to warrant his parent starting him on an art career.

Taking such drawings as he had made in his odd moments, he started in on the important quest, to meet with most disheartening rebuffs, for the first men who had encouraged him were embittered souls of one-sidedness that, when curried the fact that had drawn them into it. Finally he found one Jules Poillerot, to whom he showed a drawing and who immediately consented to take him as a pupil. For a whole winter he worked with him. He had an allowance of 10 cents a day for his meals, and he dined with his father every Wednesday, when the members of his family met. After a time Poillerot, for whom he had painted some drawings that had sold, took him to see Cognac, who had a class, and paid his fees in advance for five months. But Meissonier had no use for Cognac. He saw him twice only and then left the place. In the salons of 1834 he exhibited his first picture. It was called "Visit to the Burgomaster," and was bought "Societe des Amis des Arts" for 100 francs, a respectable sum in those days. He had seen one other picture, however, called "A Little Messenger," which was rejected and subsequently purchased by his own father, who now began to have a fair amount of respect for his son's talent.

In short, Meissonier's father was now so impressed that he made him an allowance of 100 francs a month with which he was to go to Rome, where he was arranged to that he should study at Grosvenor on the way to paint two portraits for his father. When these were finished the cholera had broken out and he got no farther than Lyons, where he stayed a year. On his return to Paris, although his father furnished him with a studio, he had to look about to find a livelihood, and it was not long in for a struggle, work, where he made a remarkable success, his two most important works being "Paul et Virginie" and "La Chasse à l'Indienne." It will, of course, be understood that he drew on the block, and his work created a sensation immediately, since it was quite superior to the dry, hard and unsympathetic material that was then being turned out. These were in 1836. He illustrated many other books, and, having gone on fairly well, the same year he married.

From the beginning of his career Meissonier developed that great tenacity to detail that has always been one of his most remarkable characteristics. No preparation or study was too severe to enable him to attain the desired end. He made the most exhaustive researches, perusing documents in the libraries until he had made them absolutely authentic. One may see this all through his career. Later, when he came to paint Napoleon, there was no detail of the time or the costume of which he did not make himself complete master.

Selling his illustrations for modest sums, he soon began to paint, and so instant was his success that in the early '40s he was appointed to the small army of the Emperor, New York German, in which he subsequently served until he had a respectable domain. From then on he was prominent in a remarkable degree. In due course of time he likewise acquired a stately house in the Boulevard Malesherbes, in Paris, upon the decoration and furnishing of which he spent immense sums, practically bankrupting himself. Meissonier had always a great passion for soldiering. He was seen fighting in the barricades in 1848 as a captain of the national guard, and in 1851 as a young volunteer as a staff officer. He followed Napoleon III to Italy in 1859, and from this was the beginning of the long series of military and Napoleonic pictures, for it was here that he obtained his first inspiration. His initial composition was "Death of Sardino," now at the Luxembourg, Paris, and, incidentally, in the salons of 1861. Napoleon III offering little further military inspiration, he turned to the Little Corporal, from whom he received his greatest impetus.

Three important compositions followed, with long intervals, for Meissonier worked always with great conscientiousness, and no picture, so from his studio until there was absolutely nothing left for him to do on the canvas. These were, are entitled "1856," "1857" and "1858" and represent three epochs in the life of the great general. The "1857" is owned by the Metropolitan museum of art, in New York city, and is the most important of the three. It was purchased originally by the late A. T. Stewart, the great drygoods merchant of New York, who paid for the sum of \$50,000 in 1876. It had cost the president \$10,000. It represents Napoleon I's first review of his troops after a nine-hour fight at the battle of Friedland. The twelfth outcries are galloping past, waving their swords and cheering their beloved commander. Portraits of

genian put it, most of its readers would infer either that I had seen no service or that I had been a substitute or was drafted late in the war. The facts do not warrant such an inference. That is why I hope this letter will be read by all who peruse the editorial in question. Very respectfully yours,

J. A. VATROUS.

THE SOUTH AFRICAN WAR.

A Letter in Support of the English Side of the Contention.

The following letter is offered for publication, with consent of the writer and of the person to whom it is addressed: "Mrs. John Cran, 738 West Main Street, City—Dear Madam: I beg to enclose \$5 for the benefit of those dependent upon the soldiers and sailors who are now gallantly fighting in South Africa. In consideration of my not doing so as a citizen of the United States who is neither of British ancestry nor born under the British flag, but who is profoundly grateful to Great Britain for her valiant defense of the principle of freedom in human affairs in every age and clime, and for her position in our last war with Spain, which insured a speedy and successful termination of the difficulty that confronted the people of the United States.



JEAN LOUIS ERNEST MEISSONIER.

wood, six inches square, have sold for many thousand dollars at public auction, and whenever there is anything by the man announced for sale there is always a scramble to obtain possession of the picture.

A great German art writer once said of him:

"Great Britain, however, needs no praise from any one; her truly inspiring history and her magnificent literature, which is greater than that of all other modern nations combined; her industry and perseverance, which are so well known the world over, and envied for her achievements; her noble lands, her tolerance and sense of justice, which reign in the remotest parts of this world of ours—all these proclaim her glory for more than whatever words any mortal may utter."

He was a painter of a distinctiveness which caused astonishment, but not admiration; not an artist, but a draughtsman, who, in his drawings, was equal to any master of the brush, who pay the more highly for works of art in proportion as they value their critics.

Precious without originality, intelligent without imagination, dexterous without verve, elegant without charm, refined and subtle without delicacy, Meissonier has all the qualities that interest and none of those that lay hold of one. He was a painter of a distinctiveness which causes astonishment, but not admiration; not an artist, but a draughtsman, who, in his drawings, was equal to any master of the brush, who pay the more highly for works of art in proportion as they value their critics.

This, to a certain extent, is all true. Yet the man will be accorded a high place when the perspective of time will permit an unbiased opinion of his talents. His drawing was remarkable; his color was just and attractive; his compositions were as astonishing as his technique, and he had a good sense of color.

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In short, Meissonier's father was now so impressed that he made him an allowance of 100 francs a month with which he was to go to Rome, where he was arranged to that he should study at Grosvenor on the way to paint two portraits for his father. When these were finished the cholera had broken out and he got no farther than Lyons, where he stayed a year. On his return to Paris, although his father furnished him with a studio, he had to look about to find a livelihood, and it was not long in for a struggle, work, where he made a remarkable success, his two most important works being "Paul et Virginie" and "La Chasse à l'Indienne." It will, of course, be understood that he drew on the block, and his work created a sensation immediately, since it was quite superior to the dry, hard and unsympathetic material that was then being turned out. These were in 1836. He illustrated many other books, and, having gone on fairly well, the same year he married.

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SCHOOL BOARD AGAIN DODGES THE QUESTION.

Teacher Who Soaped a Boy's Mouth Adjusts the Matter—Pie-COUNTER Indorsement Asked.

The school board held its regular meeting last night, and transacted routine business. All the members were present, and harmony was the prevailing feature at the gathering until near the close, when there was a difference of opinion.

Mr. Wittenberg stated that danger exists of children from infected districts gaining admission to the schools. "Smallpox," he said, "is prevalent at Spokane, Sprague and Cheney, and may come here at any day." He moved that the superintendent of schools be instructed strictly to enforce rules that are supposed to be in force, and was sustained by the chairman.

Mr. Wittenberg said: "With all due deference to the chairman, this is only hiding behind the stump. We are shirking our duty."

It was then suggested that the smallpox question had already been submitted to a committee, composed of Messrs. Warren and Rigler. This committee had formulated no report, and retired to do so. In the meantime, a motion to adjourn was made and it was carried. The meeting then adjourned.

Chairman Steward then called the members of the board back to take action on a matter that had been overlooked, but Mr. Wittenberg objected, and the meeting remained adjourned.

A claim of Rate & Co. against Park school, which has been before the board for several years, was ordered to be settled by paying \$100. Attorney Merges, acting for the school, said that he would not compromise the matter for that sum.

A man who conducts a restaurant near the high school, which school children frequently patronize, appeared before the board, seeking some kind of official endorsement of his pie counter. Before he had begun to speak the matter was referred to the committee on examination of teachers.

The following letter, from a fond parent living on Ellsworth street, was read and referred to the committee on examination of teachers:

"Hon. Board of Directors: Sir: I am

anxious to have you stop the soapings of

children in the school, as they are

not good for the health of the chil-

dren. I am sending you a

copy of a paper from the

New York Tribune, which says

that soapings of children

are bad for the health of the chil-

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