The New English Art Club II

The *Speaker*, 3 December 1892, pages 677-678, 2,069 words

Except Mr. Sargent no one in the New English Art Club comes forward with a clearly formulated style; everything is more or less tentative, and I cannot entirely exempt from this criticism either Mr. Steer, Mr. Clausen, or Mr. Walter Sickert. But this criticism must not be understood as a reproach – surely this green field growing is more pleasing than the Academy's barren stubble. I claim no more for the New English Art Club than that it is the growing field. Say that the crop looks thin and that the yield will prove below the average, but do not deny that what harvest there may be the New English Art Club will bring home. So let us walk round this May field of the young generation; and look into the future, for it is amusing to do so, though we know that the summer months will disprove, for better or for worse, but most assuredly they will disprove, all our anticipations.

Mr. Bernard Sickert, one of the youngest members of this club, a mere beginner, a five- or six-year old painter, has made, from exhibition to exhibition, constant and consistent progress, and this year he comes forward with two landscapes, both seemingly conclusive of a true originality of vision, and there is a certain ease of accomplishment in his work which tempts me to believe that a future is in store for him. The differences of style in these two pictures do not affect my opinion, for, on looking into the pictures, the differences are more apparent than real – the palette has been composed differently, but neither picture tells of any desire of a new outlook, or even to radically change his mode of expression. The eye which observed and remembered so sympathetically "A Spring Evening," over which a red moon rose like an apparition, observed also the masts and the prows, and the blue sea gay with the life of passing sail and colour and the embaying land overlooking "A Regatta." I hardly know which picture I prefer. I saw first "A Regatta," and was struck at once by the beautiful drawing and painting of the line of boats, their noses thrust right up into the fore water of the picture, two little squadrons advancing. So well are these boats drawn that the unusual perspective (the picture was probably painted from a window) does not interrupt for a second our enjoyment of the picture. A jetty on the right stretches into the blue sea water, intense with signs of life, and the little white sails glint in the blue bay, and behind the high hill the colours of a faintly tinted evening slowly fade. A picture that is strangely complete, and it would be difficult to divine any reason for disliking it, even amongst the most ignorant. "A Spring Evening" is neither so striking nor so immediately attractive; its charm is none the less real. An insinuating and gentle picture, and I like the delicacy and simplicity of the intention. The painter has caught that passing and pathetic shudder of coming life which takes the end of a March day before the bud swells or a nest appears. The faint, chill twilight floats upon the field, and above the scrub-clad hill-side the red moon mounts into a rich grey sky, beautifully graduated and full of the glamour of waning and strengthening light. The slope of the field, too – it is there the sheep are folded – is in admirable perspective. On the left, beyond the hurdles, there is a strip of green, perhaps a little out of tone, though I know such colour persists even in very receding lights; and high up on the right the blue night is beginning to show. The sheep are folded in a turnip field, and the root-crop is being

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eaten down. The month is surely March, for the lambs are still long-legged – there one has dropped on its knees and is digging at the udder of the passive ewe with that ferocious little gluttony which we know so well; another lamb relieves its ear's first itching with its hind hoof – you know the grotesque movement – and the field is full of the vague roaming of animal life, so gentle, so weird in the pity of the transitory light. A palette strictly conditioned, a little umber and sienna, a rich grey, not a bit of drawing anywhere, and still the wandering forms of sheep and lambs fully expressed, one sheep even in its particular physiognomy. Truly a charming picture, spontaneous and simple, and proving a painter possessed of a natural sentiment of values, and willing to employ that now most neglected method of pictorial expression, chiaroscuro.

Neglected by Mr. Steer, who seems prepared to dispense with what is known as *une atmosphère de tableau*. Any one of his three pictures will serve as an example. His portrait of a girl in blue I cannot praise, not because I do not admire it, but because Mr. I\lacColl, the art critic of the *Spectator*, our ablest art critic, himself a painter and a painter of talent, has declared it to be superior to a Romney. I will quote his words: "The word masterpiece is not to be lightly used, but when we stand before this picture it is difficult to think of any collection in which it would look amiss, or fail to hold its own. If we talk of English masters, Romney is the name that most naturally suggests itself, because in the bright clear face and brown hair and large simplicity of presentment, there is a good deal to recall that painter. But Romney's colour would look cheap beside this, and his drawing conventional in observation, however big in style." I did not know until I read this week's *Spectator* that Mr. Steer had as warm an admirer as myself. To go one better than this, I should have to say the picture was as good as Velasquez. To simply endorse Mr. MacColl's words would be a second-hand sort of criticism to which I am not accustomed. Besides, to do so would be to express nothing of my own personal sensations in regard to this picture. So I will say at once that I do not understand the introduction of Romney's name into the argument. If comparison there must be, surely Mr. Watts would furnish one more appropriate. Both in the seeing and in the execution the portrait seems nearer to Mr. Watts than to Romney. Of Romney's gaiety there is no trace in Mr. Steer's picture. The girl sits in a light wooden arm-chair – her arm stretched in front of her, the hands held between her knees – looking out of the picture somewhat stolidly. The Lady Hamilton mood was an exaggerated mood, but there is something of it in every portrait at all characteristic of our great eighteenth century artist. The portrait exhibited in this year's show of old masters in the Academy will do – the lady who walks forward, her hands held in front of her bosom, the fingers pressed together, the white dress floating from the hips, the white brought down with a yellow glaze. I do not think that we find either that gaiety or those glazes in Mr. Steer. From many a Romney the cleaner has removed an outer skin, but I am not speaking of those pictures.

But if I see very little Romney in Steer's picture, I am thankful that I can appreciate the distinction in the figuration of a beautiful and decorative idea – a girl in blue sitting with her back to an open window, full of the blue night, and on the other side the grey blind, yellowing slightly under the glare of the lamp. Yes, I see a remarkable and beautiful compromise between portrait-painting and decoration. I see rare distinction (we must not be afraid of the word distinction in speaking of Mr. Steer) in his choice of what to draw. But my praise must go no further. The colour scheme is well maintained somewhat in the manner of Mr. Watts, but neither

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the blue of the dress nor the blue of the night is intrinsically beautiful, and we have only to think of the blues that Whistler or Manet would have found to see how deficient they are. The drawing of the face is neither a synthesis nor is it intimately characteristic of the model: it is simply rudimentary. A round girlish face with a curled mouth and an ugly shadow which does not express the nose. The shoulders are thin, that we are told, but the anatomies are wanting, and the body is without its natural thickness. Nor is the drawing more explicit in its exterior lines than it is in its inner.

It is difficult to find the arm in that sleeve; and the waist and the lines that join it with the hips are more or less enigmatic. The hips, too, are doubtful in their length and their width, and you have only to look across the room at Mr. Sargent's portrait of a lady in white satin and you will see there a shadow, so exact, so precise, so well understood, that the width of the body is placed beyond doubt. But the most radical fault in the portrait I have yet to point out; it is lacking in atmosphere. There is none between us and the girl, hardly any between the girl's head and the wall. We look in vain for transparent darknesses, lights surrounded by shadows, transposition in the tones and in the aspects of things. The girl sits in a full diffused light, and the effect has been conveyed by what Mr. MacColl would call a symbol, by the shadow of the girl's head falling low down on the wall. Speaking of another picture by Mr. Steer, " Boulogne Sands," Mr. MacColl says: – "The children playing, the holiday encampment of the bather's tents, the glint of people flaunting themselves like flags, the dazzle of sand and sea, and over and through it all the chattering lights of noon." I seize upon the phrase, "The people flaunting themselves like flags." The simile is a pretty one, and what suggested it to the writer is the detached colour in the picture; and the colours are detached because there is no atmosphere to bind them together; there are no attenuations, transpositions of tone – in a word none of those combinations of light and shade which make *une atmosphère de tableau*.

And Mr. Steer's picture is merely an instance of a general tendency which for the last twenty years has widened the gulf between modern and ancient painting. It was Manet who first suggested *la peinture claire*, and his suggestion has been developed by Roll, Monet, and others, until oil-painting has become little more than a sheet of white paper slightly tinted. Values have been diverted from their original mission, which was to build up *une atmosphère de tableau*, and now every value and every colour finely observed seem to have for mission the abolition of chiaroscuro. Without atmosphere painting becomes a mosaic, and Mr. MacColl seems prepared to defend this return to archaic formulae. This is what he says: "The sky of the sea-beach, for example, if it be taken as representing form and texture, is ridiculous: it is like something rough and chippy, and if the suggestion gets too much in the way the method has overshot its mark. Its mark is to express by a symbol the vivid life in the sky-colour, the sea-colour, and the sand-colour, and it is doubtful if the richness and subtlety of those colours can be conveyed in any other way." This I do not understand at all. If the sky's beauty can be expressed by symbol, why cannot the beauty of men and women be expressed in the same way? How the infinities of aerial perspective can be expressed by a symbol, I have no slightest notion; nor do I think that Mr. MacColl has. In striving to excuse deficiencies in a painter whose very real and loyal talent we both admire, he has allowed his pen to run into dangerous

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sophistries. "The matter of handling," he continues, "is then a moot point – a question of temperament." Is this so? But this for next week. G.M.

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