857

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ART EXHIBITIONS.

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American Landscapes by the Late John H. Twachtman.

The art of the late John H. Twachtman has been made thoroughly familiar to connoisseurs of landscape painting in New-York. As one of the "Ten American Painters" he always figured in the exhibitions of that organization. About four years ago he had an exhibition of his own uptown, and early in 1903 nearly a hundred of the pictures he left at his death were sold at the American Art Galleries. But it has been left to the little society of which he was so effective a member, co-operating with a number of well known art lovers, to bring forward in a memorial exhibition, now open at the Knoedler Galleries, works which enforce his claim upon the attention of the public with peculiar felicity. Never before have his gifts left quite the impression they leave in this collection of fifteen or twenty canvases. Realizing that an artist should be judged on his best productions, his friends have selected the pieces for this exhibition with jealous care, and there is scarcely a thing in it which fails to do him justice.

When this artist forsook his earlier manner, which was not without individuality, but was not deeply interesting, and turned for inspiration to the example of Monet, he took plenty of time in which to form himself. He had no intention of crassly imitating the French impressionist. His idea was rather to beat out a method of his own, in the light of that painter's principles. Much of his work thenceforth was obviously experimental and amorphous, and down to the day of his death it was curiously uneven. In the same year he would produce some beautiful pictures and some that were obscure to the point of dulness. Since he often showed the public both, he was apt to convey a mixed impression. The present exhibition, which illustrates only those moments in which he was thoroughly in control of his resources, has a kind of clarifying influence upon the question of just what his essential merits were. They were the merits of a painter who found that the best approach to beauty was along the road of truth, and, indeed, gave himself up to the apprehension of the latter with so much zeal that the presence of a subjective element in his art is rarely discovered. If it is discovered at all, it seems as if it must have got there by accident. The question of what he felt in the contemplation of a beautiful scene does not present itself. The question is simply one of what he saw in it, as a matter of visual experience alone. He saw much more than is commonly visible to the painter of his school, because his vision was extraordinarily delicate and, in its way, subtle. If he rejected "the light that never was on sea or land," it was, after all, in favor of a light so exquisite as to possess a poetry of its own. There are two pictures here of water scenes, "Sailing" and "Sailing in the Mist." Neither stands for anything more than a careful notation of natural phenomena, yet both have a positively romantic charm. The opalescent color in the second of these paintings is as potent to leave the beholder in a state of bewitchment as though the artist had deliberately set out to exercise an imaginative spell.

As a matter of fact, Twachtman never consciously dramatized or poetized the materials he found in our informal landscape. His detachment from constructive theories, in the academic sense, was complete. As we have more than once pointed out, his compositions were not invented, but divined. Whether out of respect for the freedom of nature or out of a temperamental distaste for the carefully built up design, he seems always to have sought simply an effect of atmosphere or color, looking for the happy concatenation of facts which would give him one or the other on a structural basis already existing in that concatenation. Take any one of the finer compositions in this show—the superb "Summer," the powerful "February," or the picture which breathes the very quintessence of the sentiment of winter, "The Snow Storm." In each case the sensation we receive is one as of nature surprised, of a scene suddenly disclosed by the tearing away of a veil. The effect is as truthful as it is spontaneous, and it is very beautiful. It is as though the artist had captured his picture in a flash, giving an instantaneous impression of a scene which might presently fade from view. Landscapes like these have no formula. For all that the artist stays outside them, so to say, hinting at no specific emotion, they remain charmingly personal things. They have truth, they have beauty, and they have style. It is interesting to compare them with any of those paintings through which Monet has won his world-wide repute. The indebtedness of the American to the Frenchman for a point of departure is immediately discerned. But the individuality of the younger painter lies as clearly on the surface of his work. Having borrowed the key of his great contemporary, he opened with it the door into a world which he made his own, and there labored with the sincerity of a born painter until death, all too soon, cut short his career.

need p. no.