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Women
of today
and
yesterday



The painter is the eye-witness of his age. An imaginative or poetic eye-witness perhaps but a very accurate one too, who always transfers to his canvas what he sees or feels. Even the abstract painters of today, if we forget for a moment the snobbery surrounding them, reflect the period in which they live. There is a certain community of ideas between Bernard Buffet's gloomy lines and the coloured squares of other fashionable painters of the day. Half close your eyes and take a look yourself at the architectural blocks we live with, for which, by the way, Switzerland can be said to be largely responsible through her Le Corbusier (the work of a genius say some, a lot of nonsense say the inhabitants of Marseilles who live more closely to it). Transfer the blurred, myopic view you get onto canvas and you will have a modern abstract painting.

Therefore, to get back to the subject, in the days before colour photography enabled every Tom, Dick and Harry to make his own pictures, the one who recorded the fleeting moment for posterity was the painter, or perhaps the black and white artist.

It is he who has captured the past for us, better even than literature, and enables us to follow our ancestors or distant forebears in the pursuits of their everyday life and into the intimacy of their homes and boudoirs.

Flemish primitives who, with love in every delicate stroke of the brush, linger over the tiniest details of lace and the lightest folds of lingerie, and who are equally successful at rendering the profusion of ruffles and the folds of heavy draperies. Dutch painters who show woman in her home, illuminating her dress with subtle rays of light filtered through narrow windows.

French artists of the Fontainebleau School, court painters like Clouet who, with the refined austerity of their lines, revive for us the vestimentary splendour of the Valois. Spanish masters, like Velasquez, whose huge canvases hardly suffice to show, stitch by stitch, minute detail by minute detail, the sumptuous dresses of a proud era of great wealth and ostentation. The whole array of the Italians, all equally gifted at reproducing for us the lovely courtesans and the wives of the condottieri. French artists of the 18th century, who lovingly portray their sugar-sweet belles. English painters of the beginning of the 19th century whose entrancing fair-haired, fair-skinned beauties remind us that at that time England led the world in fashion. Painters of the Second Empire — and I am thinking more of Constantin Guys and Boudin than of Winterhalter — whose vigorous brushes succeeded so well in depicting colour. Painters of the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th, who, all the way from Alfred Stevens to Boldini and Gandara, have dedicated their talents to the glorification of man's fair counterpart.

Thanks to all these artists we can still see these beauties of the past in all their glory, whether thin or positively plump, straitlaced or loose of morals, lovable or imperious, roguish like Madame Vigée-Lebrun loved them, or generously endowed by nature in the manner of Jean Fouquet, licentious in the style of Boucher, provocative after the manner of Goya, of an almost unreal innocence of a Botticelli or a brittle hardness of a Lucrezia Panciatichi by Bronzino...

But we must call a halt because this list could go on and on for ever. However for those who love to linger over the past, who lose themselves in dreams before the « Woman and a Letter » by Vermeer of Delft, painting is not only a means of escape, a form of nostalgia but also a direct evocation of the past. That is why a number of Parisians and visitors to the capital regretted that the exhibition organised by Madame Rochas at the end of October last at the Musée Galliera on behalf of the Children's Villages lasted so short a time. All thanks are due to Madame Rochas who, not content with lending her beauty and her name famous in the world of couture, had devoted her talents to collecting 119 paintings by 119 painters. All periods, all styles were hung side by side.

Thus, down through the centuries, we were able to share the artist's fond vision. What a display of dresses, a riot of colours, and a profusion of soft curves attractively clad in silks and finery. I was reminded of the title of the film « And God created woman ». It was undeniably a most successful work of creation, which

from the very beginning of the world has never ceased to enchant the dull beholder, woman's drab shadow, man. And this fascinating exhibition was also a tribute to all those who, from the very beginning too, have made it their profession to embellish woman by clothing her — whether going by the name of dressmakers, milliners or couturiers.

The suggestion of a gesture, shy or forward, two rounded arms, expressive hands sparkling with precious gems and gently fluttering a fan, welcoming or repulsing the adversary; bosoms modestly swelling or brazenly provocative, hair cascading in sparkling waves, heavy skirts with stiff pleats or wide travelling coats, panniers or Greek tunics, mantillas and shawls, gaily coloured sunshades, huge hats, beplumed and befeathered, crowned with bouquets, staid Flemish bonnets or impudent little Parisian hats, tiny satin-clad feet peeping shyly out from under a dress or the long, leggy look of 1925, skirts high above the knee, or sweeping the ground as in 1900, crinolines of 1860, 1880 bustles, huge Marie Stuart sleeves, turn of the century leg-of-mutton sleeves, short or low waists, they were all there on display, inviting the onlooker to dream, to lose himself in reverie.

Even the impressionists were well represented, and yet, with all their intoxication with colour, one could not really say that they took much interest in depicting woman. Even Picasso, in his early days... Side by side hung Gustave Courbet and Yves Brayer, Greuze and Modigliani, Baron Gérard and Van Dongen, Largillière and Villon, to mention but a few, the other 111 being just as exciting.

This hymn to the glory of woman as seen through the eyes of the painter faded away almost as soon as it started. And it is a pity. But with a little time, patience and a love of art, anyone interested has only to stop for a moment and visit the museum in any big town he happens to be in. Whether the Royal Museum in Stockholm, the Prado in Madrid, the Pizzi Palace, the National Gallery, in Amsterdam, the Hague or Antwerp, Basle or Winterthur, Chicago, or the Louvre, in Rome or Moscow, or at Lille or a hundred and one other galleries, he will be surprised to discover that paintings in which women's beauty and attire is given pride of place can be counted in their thousands.

Permanence of the role of Woman, permanence of her setting, permanence of her beauty, this is the link between the woman of yesterday and the woman of today that painters have succeeded in capturing with their brushes. — A delightful exhibition. *GALA*