LOUIS EILSHEMIUS

THE paintings of Eilshemius are laughable, that is, they have been laughed at so heartily that it takes courage to realize and confess with the unavoidable blush that he is the greatest American painter of his generation. Yet there was good ground for laughing. Eilshemius was no man of mystery. Known to all dealers, to all painters and critics for decades, and not one to think much of him or his work. So his paintings accumulated right where he lived, on East 57th Street, the heart of the art market. Not in the hands of dealers, of course, but in his own house, stocked behind sofas and washstands, in his cellar, in his attic, well varnished under a coat of dust. Year after year the pile would grow, strata upon strata, with almost undisturbed geological precision.

For all of this long time Eilshemius was the only one to believe in his work. He would publish in print this faith, force his copy on reluctant art editors. For the public, misunderstood geniuses lose interest if, first and above all, they do not misunderstand themselves. That a Van Gogh died in full consciousness of his genius is indeed a thought to make one uneasy. But at least Van Gogh was discreet about it, his brother being the only one to share his secret. Eilshemius wanted to take the whole world as witness and thus, paradoxically, brought himself to a state of the most public isolation.

The pictures themselves are, even now that all agree on their goodness, rather difficult to forgive. We pride ourselves on sophistication and nature seems to us very poor art

indeed. But not only do the paintings of Eilshemius look like nature, but like nature at its worst, when its sunsets and moonlights, lakes and ladies and gondolas remind one of artistic picture postcards or of the gilded and embossed design on a Cuban cigar box.

These are the odds. Grave as they may be on social grounds, it is evident that, esthetically, they are not even blemishes. There have been good artists who knew they were good and said so, and taste is rather in inverse ratio to greatness. Whistler had good taste. But the very great have great innocence and fall more easily into social errors. Witness the Turkish Bath of Monsieur Ingres or the daubs of that other vulgarian, Courbet. Because the good artist realizes shamelessly whatever his inner impulse bids him do. Of the critics, the public, he does not think. His struggles, his victories, are strictly fought and won in isolation. In not one of Eilshemius' pictures is there a hint or knowledge that he will not be the only one to look at them, none of that slight stiffening of the backbone of the man who knows he is being watched.

The freshness and clarity of his early landscapes are little short of a miracle when one thinks of the bitumen-loaded brush of his contemporaries. Among the best are souvenirs of his trip to the South Seas. The king and his family, and many native beauties, were painted with all the intimate seriousness with which one would paint his friends and parents. And he probably left some pictures in their huts as gifts, as I remember having seen one of them, a beautiful small jungle landscape with a woman, exhibited and much praised as a rediscovered Gauguin. Later on Eilshemius indulges in more fantastic subjects, but be they nymphs monkeying in moonlit forests or ghostly riders under majestic clouds, they all obey to the same sweeping joyful rhythms of his spiritual maturity.

The technical resolutions always inventively genuine are

of the greatest simplicity. The atmospheres, laid thin, vanish into layers of space with the airy nobility of a Lorrain, upon which foliages are spattered with the craft and zest of a house painter or a Dosso Dossi. The textures are contrived with new physical means; I remember some donkeys with all their hair engraved in pencil on the thick impasto. Figures well into the atmosphere at a distance, acquire, when you get closer to them, a wealth of details that do not somehow intrude on the whole. They are, as their author puts it in a fit of pride, as truthful and complete as a photograph. It is true that a picture by Eilshemius is not any more paint on canvas, but admits you from the start into its three-dimensional reality.

This belief in an outer world, in the existence of the object, is the proof of a good mental health even if it belies the actual trend of art-philosophy. Painting being optic and optic dealing with bodies, bodies in function of light, as Poussin has it—the more objects, the more details in those objects, the more painting you will have in your picture. Not that Eilshemius finds any problem at all in the representation of objects; they all come to the tip of his brush; the trees, the water, the nymphs, the mountains, as swiftly as the rabbit from the magician's hat. Yet in spite of all the story telling, the illustrative quality which he relishes, his pictures are endowed with a spiritual animation that far outweighs their realism. His models, often trivial, are made by the alchemy of genius to give utterances deep if disconnected with their everydayness. I recall a picture now in the Phillips Memorial Gallery called "The Rejected Suitor". A gentleman in a brown derby, some Victorian ladies amidst furniture to match. The artist had swallowed it whole, bustles, gilt and plush, without a hint at discrimination or fun-poking. Yet it was impossible to escape the sense of mystery, subdued and subtle, that permeated it, reminding one of Vermeer and Rembrandt.

Historically, Eilshemius, like Rousseau, is a freak. Which

SUNDAY AFTERNOON: CENTRAL PARK AT 72nd STREET — LOUIS EILSHEMIUS

VALENTINE GALLERY)

THE REJECTED SUITOR

(PHILLIPS MEMORIAL GALLERY: WASHINGTON

LOUIS EILSHEMIUS

CHORUS GIRL: 1890 LOUIS EILSHEMIUS

VALENTINE GALLERY)

means that it is hard for art critics to make him fall in line. Possessed of the cocksure craftsmanship of a Magnasco or a Dufy he ought to be, on technical grounds, classified beside such examples of subtle decadence. But the art of those virtuosi, humorous or exquisite as it may be, is somewhat shallow in spiritual content. On the contrary, the work of Eilshemius, though dressed up in similar garb, is all permeated by a spirit of childish innocence, of wonderment before the beauties of the world, a spirit to be described only by the word "primitive".

If the history of art does not yield readily to include Eilshemius, much less will the history of today. Unmistakably, the gargantuan good health with which he succeeds in recreating a whole world with ease, does brand our painter as unfashionable. The giants of modern art, battling forever with a guitar, the ripping feats of a Picasso in humbling the human machine, bring us more readily to our knees. But an artist paints more often for the future generations than for his own, and Eilshemius can afford to wait. His pictures exhumed, soaped, scrubbed and framed, are at last in the hands of an intelligent dealer. They are well revered by the youngest of art students who puzzle already at the fundamental distrust and discomfort that nature gave to their elders, and feel somewhat distracted in the presence of abstractions. They look back for guidance to those masters of yesterday whose realism and craftsmanship they relish. Their cruel and pious hands, to make place for Picasso, take down the shelves and dust tenderly the somewhat bruised busts of Gerôme and Bouguereau. In the days to come, much emphasis will be laid upon objective rendering and technical excellence. By then, the art of Eilshemius, blending such qualities with those of the spirit, may be a useful reminder that after all, and however real paint may look, "la pittura è cosa mentale".

JEAN CHARLOT

HOUND & HORN

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A GLASS OF WINE: TEXAN FRAGMENTS by ACHILLES HOLT
JOYCE'S EXILES, AN ESSAY by BERNARD BANDLER II
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