

ART EXHIBITIONS.

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MR. DE LASZLO'S PORTRAITS.

The art of getting a good likeness of a sitter is not the same as, though it is an essential element of, the art of portraiture. Indeed, some of the most remarkable portrait painters never quite acquired the special sense by which a person's character, as well as his features, is portrayed on the canvas, and it is notorious that innumerable quite minor artists whose works could not be called important artistically have a gift for observing and portraying what essentially comprises our impression of a personality. Success in this respect certainly does not depend on either beautiful or accurate draughtsmanship. Successful caricaturists, who are often wretched draughtsmen with little sense of the expressiveness of line, can often hit off a likeness inimitably, although the most cursory comparison of the subject with the caricature reveals the fact that the proportions are all wrong, that certain features that the ordinary observer would have supposed essential to a portrait pretending to be a good representation are hardly indicated, while others that appear of no importance are shrewdly exaggerated.

Mr. Philip A. de László, M.V.O., possesses the rare and precious power of making his sitters lifelike, and a large proportion of the enjoyment derived from the exhibition of his portraits at the French Gallery, 120, Pall-mall, is due to that gift. His art has little in common with that of the caricaturist, and even less with that of the orthodox portrait painter. On the one hand, there are no very apparent exaggerations or distortions; on the other, there is little attempt to describe those subtle qualities of character and feature that have a permanent value as identification, and do not change much even after many years or after several generations of the same family, any more than a person's handwriting changes, except superficially, for decades. It is not so much the "family likeness" that Mr. de László catches as the characteristics that have been more or less rapidly acquired, and which are likely to vanish or suffer some sort of modification after a time. That, however, is not to deny the extraordinarily lifelike way in which very different types of people are portrayed by him, or the fascination of recognising in his portraits the thousand mental and physical traits he has so successfully trained himself to interpret.

Mr. de László is remarkably quick and clever with his tools, and so fond is he of displaying his aptitude that he sometimes leaves his work in an annoyingly incomplete condition, so that one or two of the portraits in the exhibition come dangerously near the skilful but meretricious productions of the "lightning artist." Indeed, there is only too good reason to justify us in describing this in his case as a vice, for there is at least one picture, "The Drawing Lesson" (30), which shows how serious his work can become when he slackens and steadies his pace. In that picture he has clearly taken the necessary time to build up a genuine composition, and through it we are reminded that, except in the case of masters with the miraculous technical ability of Rubens or Velazquez, composition and haste are incompatible. "The Drawing Lesson" is not only the best composition in the exhibition, but it is the best as colour and the best in drawing. The line in it does not attract and entertain the eye by the sheer cleverness with which it is manipulated, but it is surer and more informing, the colours are not selected just to produce a vivid impression of the exact condition of the sitter's complexion and the exact intensity and hue of the illumination at the moment in which the picture was painted, but have a certain sonority, harmoniousness, and depth, altogether lacking in a picture otherwise somewhat similar, "The de László Boys" (2), and in portraits like No. 3. One wishes that Mr. de László would show us more works like "The Drawing Lesson." Of the single portraits that approach that picture in quality, that of "The Right Hon. The Marquess of Lansdowne, K.G., P.C.," seems to me to be the finest. In it, as compared with some of the other portraits, the forms are more fully worked out, the recessions somewhat deeper and better defined, and the relationship of one part to the other more fully demonstrated, the "placing" of the feathered hat and the red St. George's Cross of the Order being particularly happy.