

For *P. Laszlo*  
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**PORTRAITS IN OIL AND VINEGAR.**

**From Dicksee to Epstein.**

Works of art are not precious to us for one trait or quality which they all have in common; there are a hundred different qualities which any one of them may have, and the possession of a single quality in a superlative degree may give to that particular work lasting beauty. Hence arise the controversies of criticism, hence arises the piquancy for the lay reader of James Laver's most interesting volume, "Portraits in Oil and Vinegar" (Castle, 10s 6d), in that Mr Laver is neither hide-bound nor theory-obsessed, but of a delightfully Catholic turn of mind. He can be as sympathetic to the revolutionary ideals of a Wyndham Lewis as to the pastel harmonies of a Lucien Pissarro, and can pour as much scorn on the old-fashioned sentimentalism of Sir Frank Dicksee as on the senseless mechanism of a rabid Cubist. If Mr Laver has a bias at all it is for the progressiveness of the Slade School and the New English Art Club as against the unimaginative stagnation of the Royal Academy, and the individual conviction—however mistaken it may be—of the modern artist who sticks to his principles as against the nauseous complacency of the Victorians. Sir Frank Dicksee, lately elected President of the Royal Academy, comes but badly off in this volume, being stamped as "the typical survivor of a now almost prehistoric school," which Mr Laver epitomises, more in its literary than in its artistic aspect, in this slashing commentary of "The Academy Illustrated":—

shaggy dogs gazing mournfully at the coffins of their masters, angelic children, a bloom upon their cheeks like that of wax fruit, giving away their dolls to ragamuffins, the wives of fishermen or the mothers of prodigals . . . eternally peering out of windows into the darkness, or lighting moderator oil lamps to guide the wanderers return . . . pink angels, their lips frozen into the fixed and vacant smile of idiocy, old women in church, gamblers' wives, fallen idols, thatched cottages, dying children; in fact, the whole torrent of mawkish sentiment, smooth paint, and anamio flapdoodle which goes so far to justify the worst excesses of the most eccentric of the modernist schools.

Certainly Mr Laver is not sparing of the vinegar that he mixes with his oil! Yet he himself is by no means a modernist, but a calm, impartial, and very accurate judge of modern art. One wishes at times that he had not confined himself so closely to oils and sculpture, as in doing so he occasionally gives a one-sided view of some particular artist. Take Brangwyn, for instance. The powerful lines of his etchings and the massive dignity of his decorative work are not touched upon, with the result that the commentator has to confine himself to the tapestry-like flamboyance of the oils, the richly heaped colours of which are really less characteristic of Brangwyn than the magnificent arches of solid masonry, the sheer wall and immense girders in which has architectural soul delights.

This method, however, of concentrating on oils works out exceedingly in the case of our great modern portrait painters—Sargent, Lavery, John, M'Evoy, and the like. Each of these painters in his turn receives a chapter of discriminating criticism, but one correlated passage contrasts their work in a nutshell:—

If I were a young and charming woman (writes Mr Laver), and somebody offered me a portrait of myself as a 20th birthday present, no one should paint me but Mr Ambrose M'Evoy. Mr John makes his women look too tigerish, and, besides, they have such abominable dressmakers and wear no corsets. . . . I should not go to Mr

Sargent lest he should show that I had drunk champagne the night before and had a headache, nor to Sir John Lavery, for he would flatter my "modiste" and not me. I do not think that I should employ Sir William Orpen lest I should be nothing but a high light amid my own bric-a-brac, nor Mr Roberts, because I dislike being draped in wet tissue paper, nor Mr de Laszlo, because it would bore me to look distinguished, nor Mr Brockhurst, for I should never have the patience to sit to him. . . . I should certainly never allow Mr Mark Gertler to compress me into a triangle, and Mr Wyndham Lewis would paint me sharp-featured, which I am not (which I should not be if I were a young and charming woman).

We cannot all be young and beautiful and thereby do credit to Mr M'Evoy's exquisitely flattering art, one reason possibly why Lord Leverhulme thought Augustus John would do completest justice to his self-made personality. Unluckily for him, John is never anything but almost savagely truthful. The wonder is not so much that Lord Leverhulme cut off and returned the hands from his picture, but that he retained the head.

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Despite the fact that to Mr Laver Augustus John is "perhaps the greatest painter of our time," he compares him most unfavourably with the older master, El Greco, who with all his faults was eternally sincere, while his imitator has at times too obviously his tongue in his cheek. It is not always possible for us to agree with Mr Laver's judgment, and in none more notably than his enthusiastic verdict of Wilson Steer as "the greatest flesh painter of modern times and the greatest English landscapist since Constable." It is pleasant, however, to find Walter Sickert in his art compared with the late Anatole France; in both there is the same sceptical detachment, though Sickert is perhaps the more reticent of the two. Never does he betray himself, yet, as Mr Middleton Murry finely puts it somewhere—"He can get as much, and enable us to get as much, out of the end of a cheap iron bedstead as Cuvier did from the fossil bone from which he reconstructed the mammoth." That typical etching of his, "Jack Ashore," depicting a sailor in a boarding-house bedroom with his temporary wife, makes no concession to sentimentality or to caricature. It is little more than an outline, and yet it encloses a life-history, an epoch, and a civilisation.

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Among artists, in the jealous coteries and suburbs of art, the literary critic is ever "suspect." A certain amount of artistic training he is supposed to have, but too often he lacks that—for the artist—divine possession, "temperament," with the result that artists are more or less always denouncing against those who rip up their canvases in print. There are exceptions to the rule, however. Few artists can write well, but not a few writers have the true artistic flare. Of such Messrs Clive Bell and Roger Fry are perhaps our most up-to-date and discriminating in this country, and Mr James Laver may now, by his "Portraits in Oil and Vinegar," be added as a third. N.T.