

V A N I T Y F A I R

The Portraits of Augustus John

*Whose Visit to America has
Emphasized the Success of His
Exhibition in London*

By ALDOUS HUXLEY



MME. SUGGIA: A PORTRAIT BY AUGUSTUS JOHN
This is one of the fifty-six works by Augustus John exhibited last month at the Alpine Club Gallery, in London, where John achieved the greatest success in his brilliant career

FEW things are more pathetic than the spectacle of earnest and intelligent industry coming to nothing for lack of natural talent. The universe is not a particularly moral machine; or at any rate its morality, if it has one, is not the morality of the Sunday School. In this world the really important things are not achieved by hard work and high principles, or even by higher education. They are achieved by that native talent which is born in a man and for the possession of which he has to thank, not his own efforts, but the mere mysterious luck of heredity.

Nothing is more unfair and immoral and undemocratic than genius. There are thousands and millions of virtuous folk who thoroughly deserve the gift; they do not receive it. Of the few to whom it is vouchsafed how many can be said to have earned it? Some, no doubt; but many not at all.

The really delightful thing about genius is that, like the order of the Garter, there is "no damned merit about it". In their sermons about great men, the Sunday School teachers insist rather on those moral qualities which can be imitated than on the national gifts which, alas! cannot; they feel safer with the virtues than with the talents. If the thing were not so palpably ridiculous, they would like to put Alfieri above Shakespeare—Alfieri who, at thirty, resolved to make himself, by sheer hard work and strength of will, a great tragic poet and who came, what is more, surprisingly near (all things considered) to the fulfilment of his desire; Shakespeare who "never blotted a line" and never felt the need of doing so. Alfieri can be used, like the ant or the beaver, to point the most salutary moral. But Shakespeare—no: he is one of those exquisite monsters who have no place in Æsop.

The Portraits



LADY WITH A VIOLIN

A recent portrait canvas by Mr. John, originally intended for exhibition in the Carnegie show at Pittsburgh

One fact there is, however, on which the Sunday School teachers might dwell with a certain justifiable satisfaction: the greatest and most inimitable gifts are in many cases (I will not say all, for generalizations of this sort are altogether too dangerous) improved and developed by a systematic application to them of the ordinary imitable virtues. Schubert had perhaps a greater natural gift than Beethoven; his native woodnotes came to him almost too easily—so easily, indeed, that Beethoven's slower, more laborious methods of composition seemed to him incomprehensible. These painful efforts of concentration and selection and arrangement—were they, he could ask himself, worth while? With the most complete confidence we can answer: they were. Decidedly, the imitable virtues have scored a point.

Of all contemporary artists, Augustus John is perhaps the man to whom nature has been most prodigal with her gifts. Flowing and beautiful forms, subtle combinations of color come as spontaneously from him as melodies and delicate modulations came from Schubert. He thinks naturally in terms of visual beauty, and for him to draw or paint thoroughly badly would be as difficult as it is for the mere pedantic and laborious theorist of art to do the same things thoroughly well. John's first thoughts and fancies are always exquisitely right—witness the host of beautiful drawings in which he has recorded, with lines that have the streaming elegance of a living form, gestures of significant shapeliness and power; witness, too, the many canvases in which landscape and figures have been brought harmoniously together in brilliant and delicate combinations of color; the portraits so strikingly placed on the canvas, so livingly painted. It is a beautiful, rare and precious talent.

And yet, though the thing we have is so good—and, indeed, precisely because of its excellence—we long for something more. We should like to see Schubert turning into Beethoven. For we find that much of John's work is too like a brilliant improvisation to be completely and permanently satisfying. The improvisation, it is true, is in many cases an improvisation of wonderful power; it possesses the freshness, the spontaneity, the quality of energetic life which belong to the sketches of an artist of genius. But besides the qualities, it possesses also the defects of the sketch. Much of John's painting seems to lack that solidity, that rich elaborate logic of construction which give to the finest pictures of the masters their permanent and unflinching interest. Michelangelo, El Greco, Rubens—here are

The Portraits



L'ESPIEGLE

One of the most admired of the John pictures. A triumph of modelling and of sympathetic insight into character

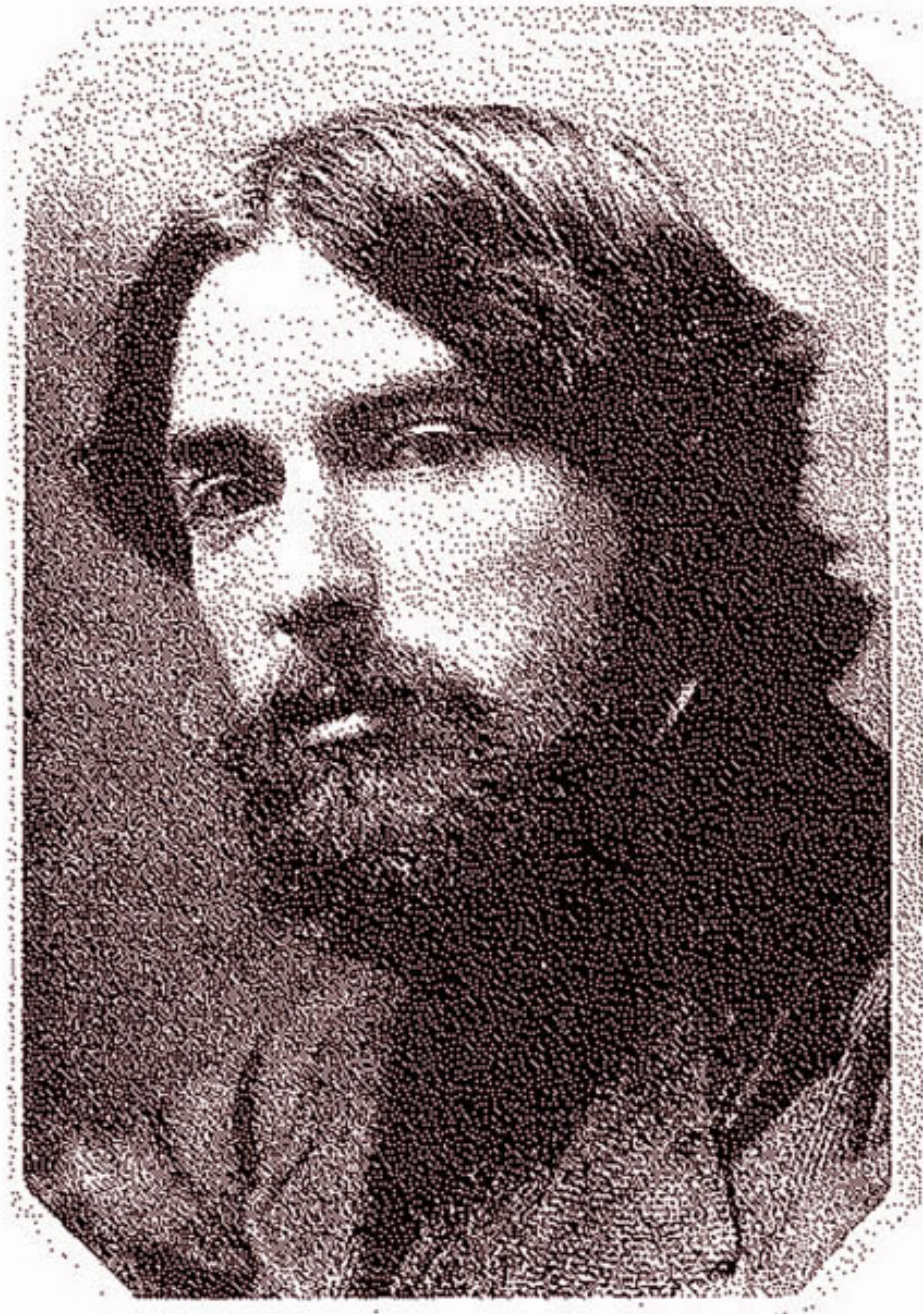
three painters about as unlike one another as three men could well be. But their pictures have this, at least, in common: that they are full of that quality of life which is the sign of a natural genius, but of a life strictly controlled, ordered, analyzed, so to speak, and composed by a great labor of thought. In the finest of John's works we see, I think, this same finely ordered vitality; the *Smiling Woman*, for instance (now in the Tate Gallery), is a noble example of the way in which the natural, spontaneous genius can be improved and cultivated and developed, somehow, beyond itself by means of the laborious imitable virtues. The pulsing immediate life of the improvisation is there; but it informs an elaborate and logical intellectual system. There is something in this picture to satisfy every part of the mind; and because this is so, it remains one of the works of art which will never grow old, will never fatigue or irritate, however often it is seen.

BUT before many of John's other pictures we remain, somehow, incompletely satisfied, or satisfied, it may be, only for a time. There is brilliance here, there is an ample life; but it is the brilliance, it is the life of a sketch. A complete, a truly finished picture should be something like the philosophical system of a mystic—at once emotional and intellectual, logical and passionate.

It is in a large and very chilly bedroom of the Albergo Fiorentius at San Sepolcro that I write these words. A couple of hundred yards up the street stands the Palazzo Comunale; on the wall of its great hall Piero della Francesca painted his fresco of the Resurrection. The best picture in the world? This afternoon, at any rate, I am ready to believe it. But whatever else it may be, it is a complete and finished picture. It contains everything, it satisfies the whole spirit. It is as passionately alive as the most brilliantly improvised sketch and it has the beautiful, inevitable logic of a proposition of Euclid. It is emotionally moving; it gives to the sense an exquisite and subtle pleasure; it presents itself to the mind as a wonderfully accurate and convincing argument. It is, in a word, beautiful in every possible way.

John's pictures are also beautiful—but not, with certain exceptions, in every possible way. Many of them are beautiful only up to a certain point, on one side,

The Portraits



AUGUSTUS JOHN

Because he has been for many years the storm centre of British art—a storm which has at last been cleared by his election to the Royal Academy; because he is one of the few living draughtsmen comparable to Leonardo, Rembrandt, Ingres, and the great masters of the past; because he is the first of British mural painters, instilling in all of them the charm and simplicity peculiar to the Romany races, of which he is an ever proud member, and, finally because, in all of his work, he is a true poet as well as an artist of the first magnitude

so to speak, of a dividing line. They delight the spectator, but not entirely; a part of him—and it is generally the intellectual, logical part of him—remains unaffected. The pictures at the John Exhibition at the Alpine Club Galleries were the last works of art I saw before leaving England. Piero's *Resurrection* has been almost the first I have seen since my arrival in Italy. Inevitably, I find myself comparing *this* with the memory of *those*. The style, the technique, the medium—all these things, of course, are vastly dissimilar. But the fundamental points of resemblance and of difference are none the less easily appreciated. Life, energy, the brilliant national gift—these are common to both the painters. But logic, but the laborious power of construction and systematisation—these are enormously much more developed in the painter of the *Resurrection* than in the painter of *Symphonie Espagnole*. And it is precisely this which makes him so much the greater artist.

But when all is said, when the Devil's Advocate has given vent to all his objections, how immensely preferable is John's rich natural gift to the drearily pedantic intellectualism which takes the place of talent in so much of the "young" painting of the present time! Life without logic may not be able to achieve everything in art; but it can at any rate go a long way. Logic without the natural talent, which expresses itself in the peculiar quality of life, can get nowhere at all and achieves nothing. If I wanted to be rude I should give a few examples, which prove this rule, from the annals of contemporary painting. I should cite the names of Messrs. So-and-So and Un-Tel as living proofs of the hopeless incapacity of intellectual theory and hard work to arouse anything but *ennui* in the mind of the onlookers. But I have no desire to be rude. I will content myself by asking the reader to think of all the pictures by earnest *jeunes* he has ever seen and remember, with as little acrimony as possible, the exact amount of boredom evoked in him by each.

More deplorable even than the pedan-

The Portraits

tic theorists, because louder and vulgarer and more pretentious than they, are the talentless painters who wildly simulate life in the hope of persuading the world that they have talent. How different again is the real talent, when one sees it in John, from this sham talent, the natural vitality from this galvanic artificial life. The futurists and their followers in England and elsewhere have almost all been of this kind—"protesting too much" that they may be noticed, wildly and violently gesticulating that people may believe them to be really alive. A picture by John, where the life comes from within and is not artificially forced into it from the outside, puts them all to shame, reveals the essential deadness of this galvanic violence.

NO, when all is said, John remains a large and important and valuable figure. He emerges from the not very noble army of contemporary artists as one of the few great natural talents of the present day. With his few fellows of genius he stands apart, reminding us in the most salutary fashion that it is the gift of God, not the correct education, that produces genuine art; that though by thinking a great man may be able to add a cubit to his stature, it is necessary to start with a respectable stature; that art is as large and variable as human genius; that most of what the theorists of aesthetics have to say is nonsense, because they try to limit art and make it fit into their particular theory.

V A N I T Y
F A I R

OldMagazineArticles.com