

A SWEDISH ETCHER.

(ANDERS ZORN.)



FIVE water-colors painted by Mr. Anders Zorn, and exhibited at the World's Fair in Paris in 1889, won him a first medal and the red ribbon of the Legion of Honor; and in the same year a large painting in oils gained him a gold medal at the Salon. Another of his pictures, bought by the French government, hangs in the Luxembourg Gallery; several more are owned in Paris by Faure, the famous singer, who is an experienced collector of works of art; and certain Parisian critics have called Mr. Zorn the founder of a school of painting, although, while confessing that he can himself perceive that he has had followers, he protests that he is "a very old-fashioned person indeed," who does not give himself names or "go in for public favor," being quite satisfied if his brother artists call him a good painter. We can thus understand that Mr. Zorn is justified in saying that he is known in Europe as a painter (in England especially as a painter in water-colors), and that etching and carving are only his "diversions."

It is simply of these diversions that I have now to speak. Mr. Zorn's pictures are not yet familiar to home-keeping New-Yorkers, and I am no wiser with regard to them than the rest of my fellow-citizens. A number of them are, indeed, included in the Swedish collection at Chicago, but they were not shown while he tarried briefly in New York last spring. Only a group of etchings, four of which are herewith reproduced, and a little bust of his grandmother, carved in birch-wood, then testified to the skill and individuality of this leader among the artists of modern Sweden.

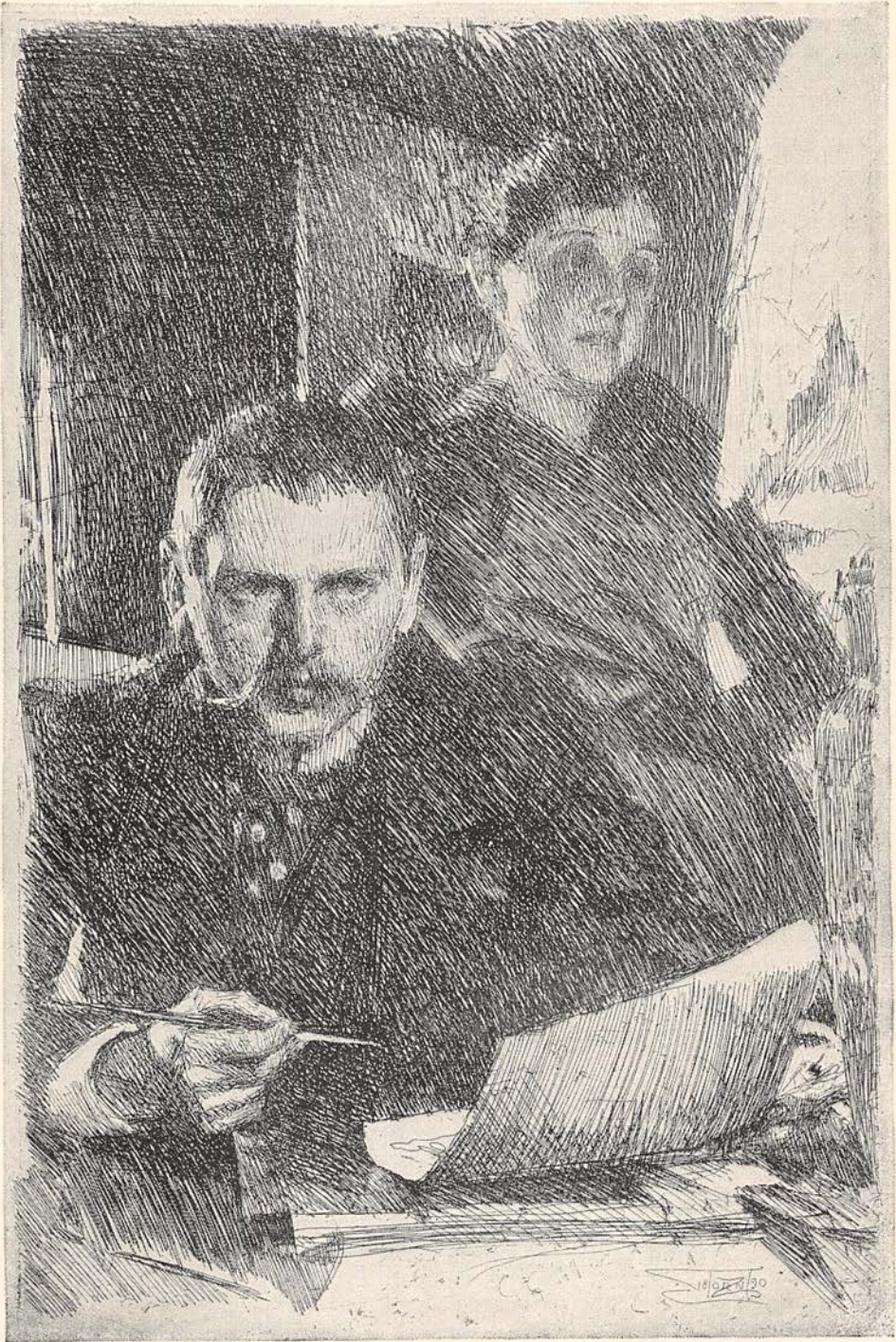
It is pleasant, of course, to be able to speak of the whole work of an artist whom one is introducing to a new public. But, on the other hand, there are disadvantages in having a large subject when what I may call one's printed canvas cannot be correspondingly wide. If I had here to comment on Mr. Zorn's paintings and water-colors, there might be little space left for mention of his etchings; and diversions though he sees fit to call them, they are works of very serious excellence, of vivid personality and singular force, well worthy of separate and special praise.

Mr. Zorn was born in Mora, in the province of Dalarna, in the central part of Sweden, thirty-three years ago. His parents were peas-

ants, but some kindly friend gained admittance for him to a school in a small neighboring town. Later he was sent to the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Stockholm, where he remained three years, working chiefly in water-colors. "I was always an opponent," he says, "disliking to be controlled. I would hoist myself up on the window-sills so that no one could interfere with me. But somehow I began to get pupils, and I made a few portraits in water-color, and thus earned a little money during the year, so that in 1881 I could make my first trip abroad. I had done military service for one month before this; and I had sold my first picture, a small aquarelle, when I was sixteen. On going abroad, I spent two weeks in London and two in Paris, and then went to Spain. I spent a winter in Seville and Cadiz, painting gipsies and little girls, in water-color only. Between 1882 and 1885 I had a studio in London. In 1883 I went to Madrid to paint the nobility, and then returned to London. I had a certain amount of success in Spain, and some one in Madrid wrote my biography. In 1885 I went back to Sweden and married. After that I traveled for two years, giving the summers to Sweden and spending some time in Constantinople, Algiers, and Spain."

During all these years Mr. Zorn painted in water-colors only. He began to use oils in 1887, when he passed two months in the south of England, not knowing whether to stay there or to return to Spain. His first painting, a large one called "A Fisherman," was exhibited at the Paris Salon of next year, and was bought by the French government. In 1889 Mr. Zorn was sent by an English gentleman to paint the children of a friend in Paris, and since then he has made Paris his home. His first commission for a portrait in oils was to paint Antoine Proust, the French Minister of Fine Arts. He has also painted Coquelin, and among his most important pictures of other kinds he rates the large one called "Out of Doors," showing women bathing on the shore, which was exhibited at the Salon of 1889, and which, as I have said, received a gold medal.

Most of Mr. Zorn's paintings have been sold in Paris, and all through private channels, a fact which probably explains why we have not yet seen any of them in New-York. Here the picture-dealer's offices are almost indispensable if a young foreign painter is to appear



ORIGINAL ETCHING BY ANDERS ZORN.

ZORN AND HIS WIFE.

Zorn

among us; and with picture-dealers Mr. Zorn will have nothing to do. In 1882, he says, when he visited London for the first time, he offered a water-color to a dealer; and after first declaring that he did not buy pictures, this gentleman offered him "fifteen dollars for a three-hundred-dollar aquarelle. I swore then," he relates, "never to enter the door of a dealer again." Many painters must have made similar vows in their youth. Mr. Zorn has been unusually fortunate in the power to keep his unbroken.

When the time came for Swedish artists to think of the Chicago Fair, Mr. Zorn was appointed their chief commissioner. He expects to remain in this country until November at least, and to paint his next Salon picture here. Let us hope that he will think better of us, from the artist's point of view, than he thinks of our English cousins. In spite of the success which he won among them as an aquarellist, "I did not care," he explains, "for their taste in art. They are in every way too heavy. Of all Europeans they are the most lacking in artistic taste. They do not feel the real art impulse. Art with them is a question of fashion. Their interest in it is only for the sake of good form. They go through a gallery paying more attention to the catalogue than to what is on the walls. Their catalogues are filled with quotations from Ruskin and Shakspeare." I do not think that in this country an interest in art is thought a matter of good form. Sometimes it may be a matter of intellectual "pose," but even affectation of this sort is better than the degradation of art to the service of fashion. And most of the interest in art which Americans exhibit—whether to Mr. Zorn it seems large or small in amount, intelligent or unintelligent in quality—is, I beg him to believe, a matter of simple and serious feeling, or, at the very least, of genuine aspiration toward a kind of knowledge and emotion which, while not really possessed, is recognized as a most desirable possession.

And now it is time to say a word about the way in which Mr. Zorn has diverted himself with his etching-needle.

Contrary to the belief of the uninitiated, etching is the freest of point-processes, for the wax through which the needle merely cuts, without even scratching the plate beneath, offers less resistance to the hand than paper offers to the airiest pencil or pen. The greater an artist's freedom of hand, the greater, of course, is his chance to express himself in a distinctively personal way; and therefore personality, individuality, distinctiveness, is the first quality we look for in an etching. If we do not find it, we wonder why the artist cared to use the needle at all. But, on the other hand,

an artist born to use the needle displays it in so vivid a way that a collection of etchings by master-hands has a variety unequaled in a collection of drawings done in any other way. Look from one of Whistler's fragile, dainty Venetian views, wrought as with a tracery of spider-webs, to one of Rembrandt's simply, incisively drawn landscapes, or one of Méryon's nervous, definite studies of old Paris, or one of Millet's pastoral scenes, done with a few broad, succint lines in what I may almost call a sort of artistic shorthand. These will suffice to show how plainly an artist may put himself into his etchings—how plainly, indeed, he must put himself there if they are to be valuable; and each additional print by any other capable hand will have almost as conspicuous a personality.

Near the extreme end of the range of the art in one direction—at the opposite pole to the subtle delicacies of a Whistler—I should put Mr. Zorn's bold, spirited, swiftly executed yet completely satisfying works. Compare, if you can, his portrait of Renan with Whistler's famous "Violoncellist," for no more instructive contrast could be studied. The figure of the violoncellist is merely indicated with a few swift lines; but the head is fully elaborated with an incomparable minuteness and refinement of touch. The more closely it is examined, the more complete and finished it appears, and the more beautiful its workmanship. We delight to study these lines for their own sake, they are so logically and harmoniously and delicately laid. We marvel how they could have been drawn; but we do not marvel that, with their aid, a beautiful, impressive head could be wrought.

Very different is the impression produced by such a figure as Mr. Zorn's "Renan." Here we do not wonder how any one could execute the lines, so much as how, with lines like these and with no more of them, so truthful, complete, and striking an effect could be produced. Mr. Whistler's method, in his violoncellist's head, attracts us in the sense that it delights the merely sensuous eye, and also satisfies the criticizing faculty by its lovely logic. Zorn's method attracts us in the sense that, while seeming hasty and almost illogical, it proves itself magnificently adequate, and therefore skilful and artful in the highest sense.

An ignorant eye may think that it must be harder to use the needle like Whistler than like Zorn. But the difficulty is as great in the one case as in the other. It would be foolish to compare the two kinds of work for the sake of trying to decide which is better. But I have a reason for contrasting them. Speedy, broad, audacious-looking work in painting is apt to be thought good to-day just because of its



ORIGINAL ETCHING BY ANDERS ZORN.

OLGA B.



ORIGINAL ETCHING BY ANDERS ZORN.

“THE TOAST IN THE IDUN.”

Zorn

boldness, but similar work with the needle is apt to be undervalued as mere sketching which “any one could do.” In both cases the inexperienced need to be told that the result is the main thing, not the method; that delicate, detailed work is worthless unless it has deeper merits, and that speedy, succinct work is good only when it really tells us all that we need to be told — when it is synthetic, not empty; when it is wisely bold, not merely reckless; when it is truly broad, not simply slipshod. One should not admire Whistler’s “Violoncellist”

for its refinement and finish only, but for its combination of these qualities with vigor, truth, and poetry. One should not admire Zorn’s “Renan” because the facts it gives were so swiftly set down and so vigorously emphasized, but because, with this bold brevity of speech, he has managed to tell us so much and in so clear and convincing a way. His portrait of Renan is not a sketch, simple though its language is. It is a thorough study. It portrays the man, in soul and body, as fully and forcibly as any portrait without color could. It is neither to

its credit nor its discredit that, as Mr. Zorn tells us, it was done in one short sitting. The fact has biographical and critical, but no purely artistic, significance. Mr. Zorn wanted to record his impression of Renan. He could hardly have done it better had he been three months about it, and his result would be no more wonderful, as a work of art, had it been finished in three minutes. Its true value is intrinsic—resides in the impression made upon the observer desirous of knowing how Renan looked.

Yet we like, of course, to know just how so fine a piece of work was done. It was done in Renan's study in Paris, in April, 1892. "His friends," says Mr. Zorn, "came and asked me to make an etching of him. He arranged for the sitting. He was very ill, but I sat studying him for a little while, then took the plate and drew him. I asked him if it was a characteristic pose, and he replied, 'No; I very seldom sit like this.' But his wife came in and said, 'You have caught him to perfection. It is himself. When he is not watched he is always like that.' She was really touched by it. Afterward his son, who is an artist, came and expressed his feeling about it. He was very much touched indeed. I agreed with him to paint Renan when I should come back from Sweden, but he died two months after. He wrote me a most charming letter.

He very seldom wrote a letter: his wife wrote for him. His letter to me is very poetical."

If, my reader, you know the poetry which resided in Renan's soul, you will be glad of this new portrait of that corporeal frame which, under the hand of less keen-sighted artists, has often seemed its almost grotesquely unfitting envelop. Here, I think, we can read signs not only of the forceful mind, but also of the idealistic temperament of the great scholar, although not so well, of course, in our reproduction as in the etching itself. No reproduction of an etching can render all its impressiveness. The mere translation of the etched lines into lines of another quality must work harm; and, moreover, as is the case with all our other reproductions, the size of the original has been much reduced, while the work of a sensitive artist is always done with a very nice regard to questions of scale.

"The Idun" (Goddess of Youth) is the name of a scientific and artistic society in Stockholm. A painting by Zorn, called "The Toast in The Idun," and showing its secretary and founder Wieselgren, Nordenskjöld, and Professors Key, Waern, and Hildebrand, was presented to the association on its thirtieth jubilee, but is now owned by the Swedish government, and hangs at this moment among the Swedish pictures at Chicago. From it Mr. Zorn made the etching



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ERNEST RENAN.



ENGRAVED BY R. G. TIETZE. FROM THE ORIGINAL CARVING IN BIRCH-WOOD (SIX INCHES HIGH) BY ZORN.
THE GRANDMOTHER OF THE ARTIST.

which we show. Here he has not worked in just the same way as in the "Renan," but his handling is even more interesting when one studies how its seemingly reckless strokes result in an effect of so much completeness and force.

Interest of this same sort, however, is still more strongly felt when we look at the portrait of the artist and his wife in their studio. Examined close at hand, in the large etching itself, these quick, bold, slanting strokes hardly seem to have definite meaning. They do not follow the contours and accommodate themselves to the modeling of the various parts of the subject as do the lines of etchers who care

greatly for obvious logic and grace of handling. Yet, viewed at the proper distance, each is found to be full of most accurate purpose. The forms of the figures and accessories define and round themselves with astonishing truth and force; everything holds its proper place in the composition; atmosphere and light are beautifully rendered; and for dramatic vividness, for expression of character, few etched portraits I have ever seen can compare with these.

When one studies close at hand the apparently meaningless broad touches in a picture by Velasquez, and then, standing back, sees how marvelously they fall into place as ren-

derings of things which could not be more truthfully, or half so forcibly, rendered by any amount of careful elaboration, one learns to appreciate that truly synthetic kind of painting which may be called interpretation rather than representation. And just so it is when we study this etching of Mr. Zorn's. Mere boldness, mere dash, the mere omission of details, can never give results like these. They imply that the artist has so keenly felt and so thoroughly understood every quality of his subject, that while laying masses or lines as they do not show themselves in nature and, taken separately, do not even seem to translate anything in nature, he can, nevertheless, so lay them that when some degree of distance blends them together, the subject reveals itself with a particularly convincing veracity. Such work, I say, is interpretative work; and an artist cannot interpret truly if he sees superficially or works recklessly. He must be master of his subject, and master also of the subtlest resources of his art.

A ball-room scene, showing a brightly lighted room opening out beyond a darker one, and two figures in the foreground, waltzing half in the light and half in the shadow, is another surprising instance of seemingly rash but most intelligently calculated workmanship; and it is also remarkable for the expression of rhythmic movement in the figures. A portrait of Faure, singing to his own accompaniment on the pianoforte, is less dashingly handled, but not less strong and interesting. Different again is the portrait of Olga B. (which is reproduced on page 585), and especially attractive because it shows—what the others might leave in doubt—that this very virile etcher has, upon occasion, a keen feeling for beauty. His hand can, indeed, be very delicate, and his spirit very poetic, as may be read in a large etching called "A Fisherman" (done from his picture in the Luxembourg Gallery).

I wish that it had been possible to reproduce this for my readers; also a small half-length portrait of a middle-aged woman wrapped in furs, which has all the dramatic intensity of a Rembrandt etching; and also another, more airily treated, but with a quite delicious spirit, grace, and humor, where a prettily audacious young woman tilts up her little nose to watch the smoke from her cigarette. But to reveal the full range of Mr. Zorn's talent one would have to show each and all of his works. His mind seems able to put itself into artistic sympathy with subjects of every kind, and his hand is equally versatile and always in nicest accord with the character of his theme and his feeling

about it. Still, to me, his boldest, bravest, most incisive etchings seem the most interesting, because the most characteristic, the most individual, the most unlike those of other etchers.

"I began to etch," he says, "in 1883, in London. Mr. Haig was a friend of mine, and he showed me something of the process. I had not been stimulated by the English etchers. I etched Haig's portrait among the first things that I did. I took up the art merely as an amusement, and worked at it only at odd times, instead of sitting at home or going about for entertainment. Instead of photographing a picture as a souvenir, I etched it. I etch directly on the plate from nature, and generally do but one biting. I very rarely have more than one sitting. The result is thus more harmonious; all my best things have been done in one sitting. I can do an etching from nature, like the portrait of myself and my wife, in three hours. This was retouched with a graver a couple of times. I never use anything but the graver to retouch a line; I never use the dry-point, and am almost alone in this."

With regard to the little bust of his grandmother, carved in birch-wood, Mr. Zorn says: "I have painted my grandmother a great many times, and the pictures have always been sold, so I made this little carving as something to keep. From beginning to end it was carved from nature and with carvers' tools. My grandmother," he adds, "is very picturesque"; but this we do not need to be told, nor that there were probably other reasons why her grandson wished to have a portrait of her; nor again, that this bust probably is a portrait in the fullest, exactest sense of the word. It is a delightful thing in subject as in execution. Every detail of the sweet, strong old peasant face is lovingly rendered, and yet one thinks most not of details or even of features, but of the soul behind them.

Although Mr. Zorn has practised art in so many forms, and has tried so many kinds of subjects, he says that first of all he considers himself a portrait-painter. I hope that we shall be able to judge him as a painter of portraits if we get to Chicago; but meanwhile his great talent as an interpreter of the human face and form can be well appreciated from his etchings alone. The boldest and most spirited of them are, I repeat, my favorites. I think he will agree with me when I say that, if you know the "Renan," the "Toast," and the studio group, you know the best of Zorn in so far as needle and acid can show it. And I am sure you will agree with me that thus a new figure, of a most interesting and impressive kind, has been added to the list of your friends in art.

M. G. van Rensselaer.