

PAINTED BY PUVIS DE CHAVANNES.

PHOTOGRAPHED BY BRAUN CLEMENT & CO.

FRESCO ON THE STAIRCASE OF THE BOSTON LIBRARY.

PUVIS DE CHAVANNES.

TO the many Americans who have seen and who will see the great mural painting which the venerable president of the Champ-de-Mars Salon has recently completed for the Public Library of Boston, the old town of Amiens should henceforth have a new interest. Of all the thousands on their way to or from Paris who stop for an hour or two at that city to see her glorious cathedral, how many know that the little provincial museum there contains another treasure of art almost as interesting and instructive as the cathedral itself? Your guide-book, if it is Baedeker's «Paris,» tells you only that the museum contains some antiquities, and «about 250 French paintings, chiefly of the beginning of the present century (David, Gérôme, etc.)»—a description not likely to stir enthusiasm in you,—and fuller guide-books tell you little more. In the shop-windows of the town you will find no photographs of this treasure, and inquire at your hotel, or in the shops and

streets, will convince you that the inhabitants of Amiens are unaware of its existence. Yet nowhere else in the world will you find such material for the study of the aims and methods of one of the two greatest artists in a great branch of art that this century has produced. The two supreme decorative painters of our time are Baudry and Puvis de Chavannes; and whoever would understand Puvis must study him in Amiens. Much of his finest work is in Paris, and many other French cities possess great paintings by him,—even an American city possesses one now,—but only in Amiens is there a series of great decorations by him, beginning with his earliest effort in this line,—the first trying of his wings,—following with the rapidly maturing works of the next few years, in which the formation and growth of his method and style are plainly to be traced, and ending with a work of his full maturity.

I have called decoration a great branch of



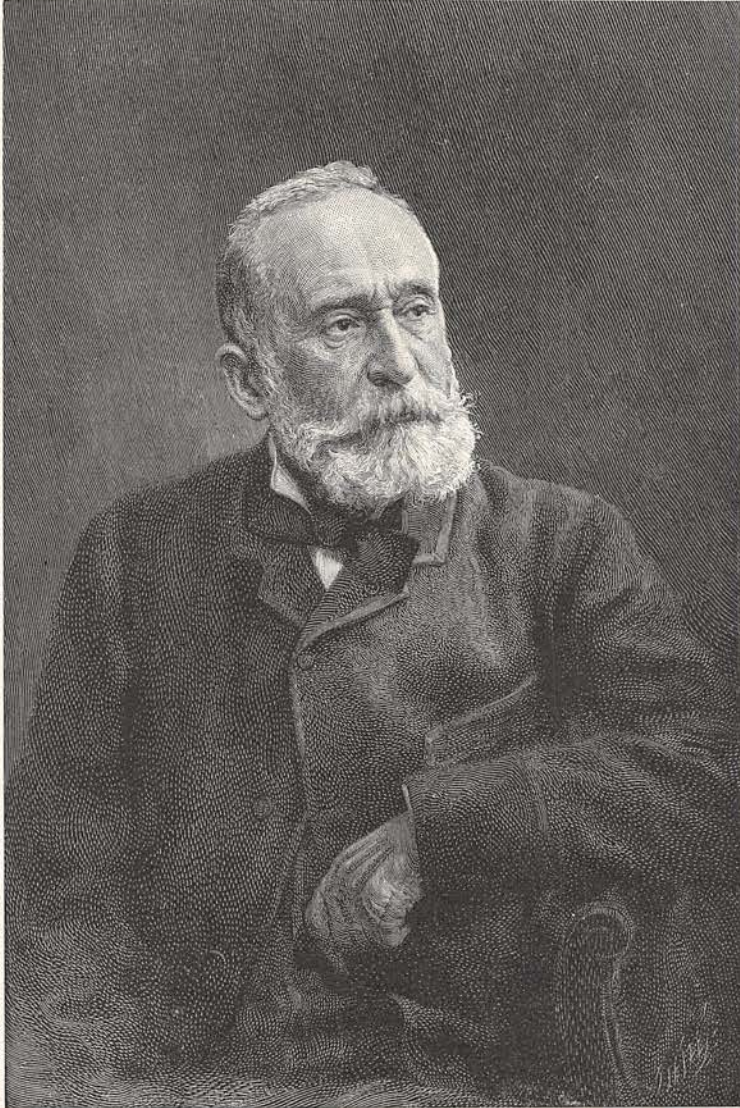
PAINTED BY PUVIS DE CHAVANNES.

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«THE SACRED WOOD, DEAR TO THE ARTS AND TO THE MUSES.» MUSEUM OF LYONS.

art; but to me, as to many others, it seems the highest art of all. This is a realistic age, and the easel-picture is its most marked artistic production. A painting has come to seem for us a record of fact, differing only a little from a photograph, and we think of it as a

where each one swears at all the others, and a thousand conflicting relations are at once established. It was not so that art was understood in the ages of great production. In Greece each statue was destined for a given pediment or a given niche; in



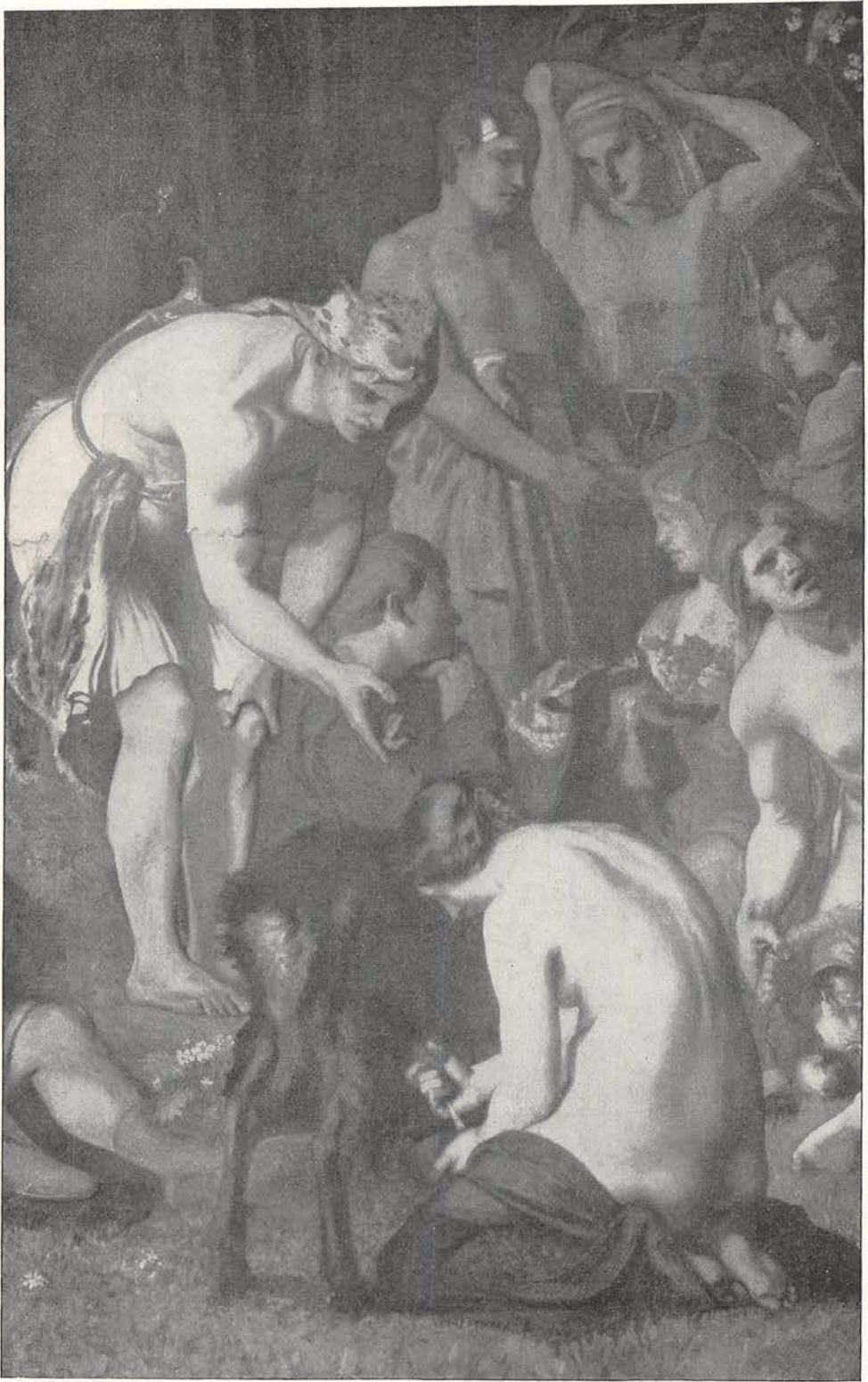
ENGRAVED BY R. G. TIETZE.

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PUVVIS DE CHAVANNES.

thing isolated and portable, a thing *per se*, and only degraded when it is forced into service and subordinated to an architectural whole. We expect our painters to produce for us works of art which shall have no relation to anything else, but shall be whole and self-sufficing; and then we proceed to put these works of art together in a gallery,

Italy each picture frescoed a given wall, or was an altarpiece for a particular altar. The artist might carve the front of the Parthenon or paint the ceiling of the Sistine; or he might, as Benvenuto did, ornament a salt-cellar or twist the handle of a dagger or a spoon; but his art was always art in service—it was always the decoration



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«PEACE» (DETAIL). AMIENS.

of something which might exist without its aid.

Indeed, all art, so far as it is art, is decorative. Facts and the record of facts are but the raw material of art; the art itself is in the arrangement. It is harmony and order that make art, whether the harmony be that of line or color or light and shade; only to-day we give the artist a piece of canvas to decorate with ordered lines and colors, and limit his harmony to that, with such help as his gilt frame may give him,—he must trust to chance for everything else,—whereas in the good old days a whole church or a whole palace was one great work of art, of which the picture was a part only; and instead of limiting himself within his frame, the painter had to harmonize what he did with the whole about it. A more difficult problem, but surely a nobler one, and the result how much more satisfactory! For, the work once done, there it was forever in the light it was painted for and in the surroundings it was meant to fit, and not at the mercy of the chance contrasts of the exhibition or the gallery, where each musician plays his own tune, with the natural result of clash and discord. Fortunately for us, all of our modern painting has not been of this isolated, picture-making kind, and we have had artists who have understood decorative art, and have been given the chance to teach us what they knew. The paintings in the foyer of the Paris opera-house, by Paul Baudry, form a complete scheme of splendid ornament, comparable in extent and in beauty to the great works of the Renaissance; and in his altogether different manner Puvis de Chavannes has given us—is still giving us—more than one noble page of chaste and lofty decoration.

Pierre-Cécile Puvis de Chavannes was born at Lyons on December 14, 1824. His family is a very old one, which can trace its authentic history as far back as 1152. One of his ancestors married Catherine de Coligny, who belonged to the same family as the great admiral. He is the second artist of his race, for the Louvre contains a landscape (No. 105), called «The Shepherds,» by Pierre-Domachin, Sieur de Chavannes, who was received into the Academy in 1709, and died in 1744, at the age of seventy-two years. The family would seem to be a long-lived one. They take their name from their place of origin, Chavannes-sur-Suran, commune of the canton of Tréport.

At what age Puvis began the study of art we are not told; but his masters were Henri Scheffer (brother of the more celebrated Ary Scheffer) and Thomas Couture—an artistic

pedigree one would never have guessed from his mature work. He probably began late, for he was in his thirty-fifth year when, in 1859, he made his first appearance at the Salon with a «Return from Hunting,» which one would like to see. It probably bears little resemblance to the work he has since produced. His career as the great decorator we know began in 1861, when he exhibited two large canvases, in something like his present style, entitled «War» and «Peace.» They were much criticized, but found an able defender in Théophile Gautier, who, with a discrimination which he often showed, praised them warmly. These pictures received the award of a second-class medal from the jury, and were bought for the museum of Amiens, where they now are. Like all his work, they are done on canvas with a medium of wax, and were fastened to the wall with white lead. For Amiens, also, was done most of the work of the next few years—«Work» and «Rest» in 1863; «Ave Picardia Nutrix» in 1865; and two small grisailles, «Vigilance» and «Fancy,» in 1866, thus completing this magnificent series of early works. In 1864 he exhibited at the Salon an «Autumn,» for which he received a third-class medal. At the Universal Exposition of 1867 he was represented by reductions of «War,» «Peace,» «Work,» and «Rest,» and by another canvas, «Sleep.» Here he gained another third-class medal, and was given the red ribbon of the Legion of Honor. From that time his position was assured, his victory gained. Since then he has been constantly a member of Salon juries and art commissions, and his life is a series of new triumphs and of new commissions for the decoration of public buildings. Let us pass his work rapidly in review: 1868, «Play,» for the Cercle de l'Union Artistique; 1869, «Massilia, Greek Colony,» and «Marseilles, Gate of the East,» for the staircase of the museum of Marseilles; 1870, «The Beheading of John the Baptist» and «Magdalen in the Desert»; 1872, «Hope»; 1873, «Summer»; 1874, «Charles Martel's Victory over the Saracens,» for the Hôtel de Ville of Poitiers; 1875, «St. Radegonde protecting Education,» for the same building, and a «Fisherman's Family.» In 1876 and 1877 he painted his well-known decorations for the Panthéon, dealing with the infancy of St. Geneviève, and for these he was made an officer of the Legion. In 1879 he exhibited «The Prodigal Son» and «Girls by the Seashore,» and in 1880 «Ludus pro Patria,» for Amiens again, where it stands opposite the «Ave Picardia Nutrix,» painted fifteen years



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«WAR» (DETAIL). AMIENS.

before. In 1881 came one of his rare easel-pictures, «The Poor Fisherman,» which now hangs in the gallery of the Luxembourg, where it was placed in 1887, his «Sleep» being bought for the museum of Lille at the same time. In 1882 he exhibited «Doux Pays» (a title I shall not try to translate), painted for the house of M. Léon Bonnat, and for this work he received the medal of honor by vote of the majority of qualified exhibitors. In 1883 he showed «The Dream,» «A Woman at her Toilet,» and a «Portrait of Mlle. M. C.»; and in 1884 the first of his series of decorations for the museum of his native city of Lyons, the lovely «Sacred Wood, dear to the Arts and the Muses,» followed in 1885 by «Autumn,» a variation on the earlier picture of that name, and in 1886 by «Antique Vision,» «Christian Inspiration,» and «The Rhone and the Saône,» symbols respectively of the form, of sentiment, and of force and grace. The next two years were occupied with the great hemicycle for the Sorbonne, probably his finest work, which was completed in 1889, in which year he was made commander of the Legion. In 1890 came the schism out of which grew the new Salon, known as the «Champ-de-Mars,» but properly called the «Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts.» Puvis was one of the promoters of this movement, and, upon the death of Meissonier in 1891, became its president, which office he still holds. At this new Salon he has exhibited: in 1891, «Inter Artes et Naturam» for the Rouen museum, two smaller panels for the same, «Pottery» and «Ceramics,» and «Summer» for the Hôtel de Ville of Paris; in 1892, «Winter,» also for the Hôtel de Ville; and in 1894, a whole series for the Prefect's Staircase in the same building, the ceiling representing «Victor Hugo Offering his Lyre to the City of Paris,» while allegories of «Patriotism,» «Charity,» etc., fill the ten pendentives. In 1895 he also exhibited there the great panel now in its prominent place at the head of the main stairway of the Boston Public Library. To this bald list of his exhibited work one must add the exhibition, in many cases, of the cartoons of his great decorations before the color was added; the «Victor Hugo,» for instance, having been exhibited thus at the Champ-de-Mars in 1893. It is only in this state, as pure outline, that the present writer has been privileged to see it.

The position which Puvis de Chavannes now holds is a singular one. A veteran of more than seventy years, and having attained almost every honor that a painter may hope

for, he is yet one of the leaders of the young school of to-day, one of the most living and vital influences of contemporary art, one of the most discussed and criticized of artists. His art is certainly of a sort to be «cavare to the general.» It has been said to be the negation of everything that has always been counted art, and to be based on the omission of drawing, modeling, light and shade, and even color. On the other hand, his admirers think him a master of drawing in his own style, and certainly a master of color. To explain these seeming contradictions; to show the reason of the omissions in his work, which do not arise from ignorance, but are distinctly wilful; to exhibit his qualities, and give a reason for the hearty admiration that many of us feel for him—this is the difficult task before me.

To begin with, one must remember that Puvis is above all things a decorator, and that his work cannot be properly judged except in place. It does not show to good advantage in an exhibition, where it is necessarily placed in contrast with works done on radically different principles. I have often felt disappointed with a canvas by him when I saw it in the Salon; but I have seldom seen one of his decorations in the surroundings for which it was intended without being struck with its fitness and the perfection with which it served its purpose. His «Poor Fisherman,» hung as an easel-picture among other easel-pictures in the Luxembourg, seems almost ludicrous. It was said of Millet's peasants that they were too poor to afford folds in their garments; here the poverty seems even more abject, and drawing and color seem equally beyond its resources. Transfer the contest to his own ground, however, and see how Puvis in his turn triumphs over those who, in a gallery, utterly crush him by their greater strength and brilliancy of technic. Go to the Panthéon and look at the mural pictures executed there by many of the foremost of French painters, and I think you will feel that there is just one of them that looks like a true decoration, exactly fitted for the place it occupies and the architecture that surrounds it, and that that one is Puvis de Chavannes's. By contrast with it, Cabanel's looks affected and Bonnat's brutal, and many of the others become entirely insignificant. By dint of sheer strength and severity of style Laurens holds his own better than any one else; but his great compositions do not keep their place on the wall, as do those of Puvis, but cut through it. In color some of these decorations look bright and gaudy,



PAINTED BY PIVIS DE CHAVANNES.

« REST. » AMIENS.

PHOTOGRAPH LENT BY MISS POLLY KING.

PIVIS DE CHAVANNES

some look black and heavy; in form some look pompous and turbulent, some coarse and realistic, some slight and languid. Puvis's drawing, with all its omissions, is austere and noble; and his pale tints, which have been called the denial of color, look here like the only true color, absolute in harmony, a part of the building itself—the delicate efflorescence, as it were, of the gray walls.

Then go to the Sorbonne and look at the hemicycle (see page 566), and compare the effect of its dead tones and rude drawing with that of Galland's apparently much more learned work in the lunettes of the ceiling, and ask yourself if the result is not the same. Of course it would be easy to explain this in the way of the average critic by loose talk about feeling and sentiment and the rest, much as some of them would have us believe that Millet could neither draw nor paint, yet was a great artist all the same; but for those of us who believe that there is no result without means, that the important thing is not what the artist feels, but what he expresses, and that all expression must be by technical methods, so that there is no good art which is not technically good—for us such an explanation is no explanation. The feeling and the sentiment are there, and I shall have something to say about them presently: but they have not got upon the wall by miracle, but by the use of means to that end; and when we find Puvis magnificently successful where others fail, we begin to ask ourselves if it is not, perhaps, *because* of his apparent shortcomings, rather than in spite of them, that he succeeds, and whether what seem like technical defects are not really, for his purpose, technical merits.

If this is the case, one would expect to find that the extreme simplicity of his present style is acquired, and that he has reached it by a series of eliminations; and one has only to go to the museum of Amiens to convince one's self of the truth of this surmise. «War» and «Peace» his first trials at grand decorative art, are in many ways singularly unlike the Puvis of to-day. They show little or nothing of the stiffness, the lack of accent, the flatness and the paleness of color, that we associate with his name. They are the work of a good pupil of the schools, showing already something of decorative talent, but rather turbulent in composition, well drawn in an academic style, and painted with full modeling and with an almost over-strong light and shade. They are not the work of a master of realism, but they are realistic in method up to a certain point. There is in one of them the back of a female figure who is

engaged in milking a goat (see page 560), which is a very good bit of flesh-painting, white and plump, with redundant modeling and nearly black shadows. The *bits* are better painted, in their way, than anything he has done since, but the general effect is spotty and unquiet; the pictures *cut through*, as I have said of Laurens's, and you do not feel the flatness of the wall. The great law of decoration is that the ornament should set off and embellish, but never disguise, the thing ornamented; and in mural painting this thing is the wall, and its essential qualities of flatness and extent should be accentuated, not concealed. Look now at the pictures painted two years later, «Work» and «Rest,» and see how Puvis is learning this lesson. The drawing is even more able than in «War» and «Peace,»—look at the foreshortened arm of the wood-cutter or at the herculean figures of the blacksmiths in «Work,» or at the man with the skin about his loins in «Rest,»—but the light and shade are much more subordinated, and inside their outlines the figures are nearly flat. The landscape, too, is kept in simpler and flatter masses, though with some beautiful detail. Individual figures are singularly lovely. The mother with her child in «Work» is one of these, and the half-nude stooping woman in «Rest,» and the other one who is seated with her back turned to the spectator, are as classically beautiful as the work of Ingres, not to say of Raphael. If you have once studied and understood these compositions, you will never believe that the apparent absence of form in Puvis's later work is other than intentional. Take one step more, and regard the vast composition called «Ave Picardia Nutrix,» and you will begin to see that the individual beauties of «Work» and «Rest» are too prominent, that you have noticed too much this back and the other arm, and that things charming in themselves may nevertheless be prejudicial to the general effect—that it is possible for the decoration to be better while the details are less noticeably perfect. In this great composition Puvis reached, in a way, the perfection of decorative style. Nothing could be finer in large decorative effect and general balance, and no one part forces itself upon your attention, yet individual figures are exquisitely beautiful in their slightly simplified but adequate drawing. The color is quiet and less strong than in earlier work, but not without fullness and beauty. Opposite it stands the «Ludus pro Patria» of fifteen years later, and, looking from one to the other, one may be pardoned for wondering if the process of



PAINTED BY PUVIS DE CHAVANNES.

DETAIL FROM THE HEMICYCLE OF THE SORBONNE.

PHOTOGRAPHED BY BRAUN, CLEMENT & CO.

simplification and omission has not gone too far. The effect is as fine, perhaps, as in the «Ave Picardia Nutrix,»—it could not well be finer,—but one misses the charm of detail and the refinement of form. Discarding our modern realism, Puvis has gone back as far as Raphael. Was it necessary to go further? Simplicity is good, but does it entail so much sacrifice? Perhaps not; for there is more than one way of attaining decorative effect, and Veronese and Raphael were great decorators as well as Giotto. But Puvis de Chavannes had to work out the expression of his own artistic personality as well as to form a decorative style. In 1865, at the age of forty, he certainly had not yet entirely expressed himself, even if his artistic character was then fully formed. He was slow of development, and had been a recognized and exhibit-

ing artist for only six years. He had done beautiful work, but his most characteristic work was yet to do.

The titles of two of his great paintings at Lyons give a hint of the elements of his artistic nature: «Vision Antique—Symbol de la Forme» and «Inspiration Chrétienne—Symbol du Sentiment,» as the catalogue of the Salon of 1886 has it. A desire for Greek simplicity and grandeur, a desire for Gothic sentiment and directness of expression—these two desires have pushed him forward to new and ever new suppressions of the useless, the insignificant, the cumbrous. He has come to leave out not only every detail that may interfere with the effect of the whole, but every detail that is not absolutely necessary to the expression of the whole. He has eliminated now for the sake of perfect clarity and

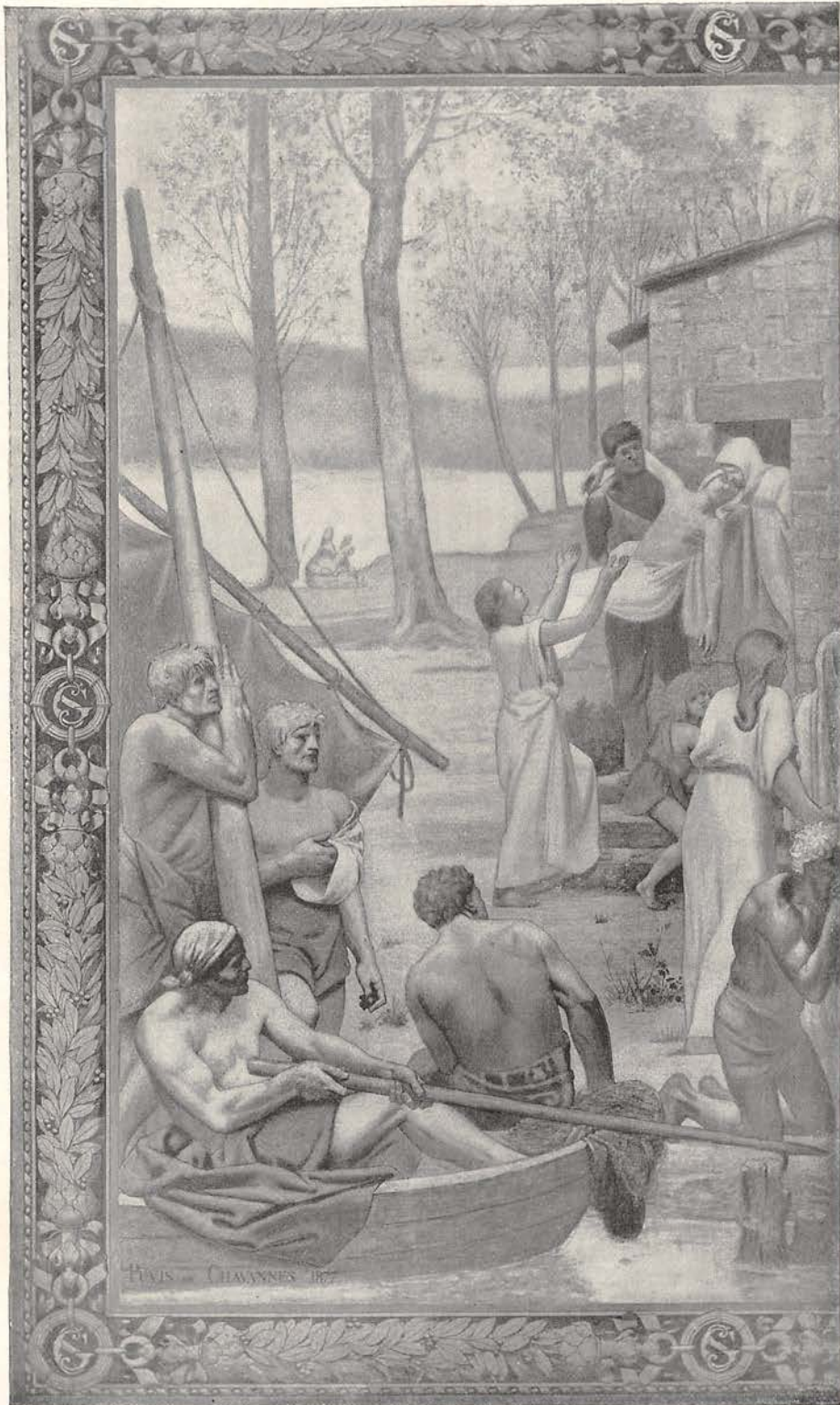
now for the sake of quaint simplicity. On the classic side his highest expression is perhaps in the «Sacred Wood.» Could the sense of idyllic peace and noble tranquillity be more perfectly rendered? A copy of the composition is here given (see page 558), that the reader may study for himself the system of artistic suppressions by which this result is attained. At first sight the drawing may seem simple and almost childish, and one may think it easy to do the like; but there is the knowledge of a lifetime in these grand lines, and they are simple only as a Greek statue is simple. There are antique figures that look almost wooden in their lack of detail and of fleshy modeling, and yet in which the more you know the more you shall find, until you are astonished at the learning which neglected nothing while omitting so much.

Giotto and Fra Angelico have also had their influence on Puvis, and he has felt, as have so many others, the wonderful effect of their rigidly simple works. Doubtless they were decorative by instinct and simple because they knew no better, and left out facts which they had never learned to put in. Is that a reason why a modern painter may not learn their lesson and knowingly sacrifice much that we have learned, and which they never knew, for the sake of attaining their clearness and directness of expression? The system is capable of abuse, as imitators of Puvis have shown us; and one must be very sincere and very earnest not to make it an empty parody. It is not enough to leave out the unessential; one must have something essential to say. Puvis, at his best, is absolutely grand and absolutely sincere; and while he sacrifices, it is for the sake of expressing a lofty and pure sentiment in a chastened but all the more effective style.

But, besides the admirer of the Greeks and of the primitives, there is also in Puvis the man of this latter end of the nineteenth century, of the epoch of impressionism and the school of *plein air*. Nothing is more curious in the history of art than the way in which the continued study of chiaroscuro has brought modern painting back by a devious route to the shadelessness of the primitives. The early painters had no light and shade, as the Japanese have none. After all other possibilities of light and shade had been exhausted, the artists of our day began to study the model out of doors in gray daylight, and lo! the effect is almost that of the early frescos, but with a difference. There is almost as little shade, but there is more study of values

—that is, of the exact relative degree of light or dark of each object as compared with other objects and with the sky. In the use of this truth of value Puvis has added something new to the art of decorative painting, and in this and in his study of landscape he is singularly modern. His earlier backgrounds are entirely classic, but gradually landscape occupies a greater and greater place in his work. In the «*Ludus pro Patria*» the landscape is the really important thing, and the figures are more or less incidental; and this is even truer of other compositions, such as the great landscapes called «*Summer*» and «*Winter*,» in the Paris Hôtel de Ville. In these the figures are relatively of little more importance than in many a painting by Corot, and they are real landscape pictures, as I have called them. Of course depth and mystery and the illusion of light are not sought by the painter, who is decorator first and landscapist afterward; the foregrounds are much conventionalized and detail is eliminated. Our painter remains the simplifier in landscape as in the figure; but the essentials of landscape are studied with wonderful thoroughness, and for tone, value, color, and large form, no modern landscape is better than that of Puvis de Chavannes. In the vast decoration at the head of the staircase in the museum of Rouen a composition otherwise not of his best is saved by the splendid background, in which the panorama of the city of Rouen and the islands of the Seine is painted with all the perfection of modern landscape art.

Of course the work of no man remains always at its highest level, and it is hard for any one to escape the defects of his qualities. After the long training in elimination, what wonder if the master sometimes seems oblivious of the things he has so striven to subordinate, and if there are passages in some of his latest work where drawing ceases to be simplified and becomes falsified? You will find now and again in his pictures an ankle or a wrist that is out of drawing, feeble and boneless, or a body that is ill constructed and wrongly put together. He who has learned to forget has sometimes forgotten too much. The «*Victor Hugo*,» shown in outline only, seemed weak and uninteresting, and one feared that the simple dignity of the hemicycle had declined to simpleness without the dignity. How far it has been redeemed by color one who has not seen it in its completed form cannot say; nor even in its completion should it be judged except in place. Has the decorator whose instinct is so sure, who has



PAINTED BY PUVION DE CHAVANNES.

«ST. GENEVIÈVE» (DETAIL). IN THE PANTHÉON, PARIS.

succeeded so often and failed so seldom, this time fallen short of his best? I cannot tell.

A classicist of the classicists, a primitive of the primitives, a modern of the moderns, Puvis de Chavannes is, above all, an individual and original artist, and to copy his methods would be to learn ill the lesson he teaches. His style is indissolubly bound up with his message; his manner is the only one fit to express what he alone has to say. It would be but an ill-fitting, second-hand garment for another. But let us learn from him that imitation is not art, that the whole is greater than the parts, and that art in service is the freest art and the noblest. All fact and all

research are grist to the mill of art, but they are not bread until ground and kneaded and baked. I, for one, believe that the day of mere fact and of mere research is nearly ended, and the day of the isolated easel-picture, too. We are already taking the first steps even here in America; and before very long we shall have come back to the old true notion that the highest aim of art is to make some useful thing beautiful. Art will again enter that service which is for it the most perfect freedom, and as the highest aim of the painter will be to beautify the walls of the temples and palaces of the people, so the highest name he will give himself will be that of «decorator.»

Kenyon Cox.

THE FISHER-MAIDEN'S SONG.

OHI! oho! the herring is coming!
 The breezes are humming!
 Aloft flies the sail!
 The sea-gulls are teeming,
 And fighting and screaming,
 Adrift on the gale!

Ohi! oho! the west wind is veering,
 The fishing-fleet steering
 Through whirlwinds of spray!
 Oho! lads, how merry
 To speed the frail wherry
 O'er the billowy way!

Ohi! oho! my heart leaps toward her;
 My friend is aboard her,
 My true love, my king!
 He feasts upon danger,
 The daring sea-ranger,
 When hurricanes sing!

Ohi! oho! now down the black hollows,
 O'er deeps and o'er shallows,
 A glorious ride!
 May good luck betide him,
 And cheer him, and guide him
 Safe home to his bride!

Hjalmar Hjorth Boyesen.